

5. Harlots and Camp Followers

Swiss Renaissance Drawings of Young Women circa 1520

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Abstract

Many young women, especially from the lower classes, were deeply affected by the violence and plunder of war during the early modern period. The two most important Swiss artists during this period, Urs Graf and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, who both served as mercenary soldiers in numerous campaigns, created drawings that reflected their experiences and expressed their ambivalence about both war and its victims. As the drawings of harlots and camp followers discussed in this essay show, the young women caught up in warfare around 1520 bore the desecrations of war in their disrupted lives and damaged bodies. In his drawings, Urs Graf expresses highly ambivalent feelings of both fear and lust toward them.

Keywords: Urs Graf; Niklaus Manuel Deutsch; Switzerland; war; female camp followers; women in war; female youth

The lives of young women in northern Switzerland during the early years of the sixteenth century became caught up in the economic turmoil and rapid societal change of a new era. The Swiss Confederacy during the period around 1520 had developed into a society largely based on mercenary warfare. A culture of ongoing war redefined work life, politics, religious habits, social norms, and the gendered experiences of women as well as men.¹ Even art itself developed in new ways that reflected the importance of military prowess in society. This was especially true in the two major centres of Basel and Bern, where the two most important Swiss artists of the period, Urs Graf and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, worked. Both had served

1 Andersson, 'Niklaus Manuel', 204–06.

Figure 5.1 Niklaus Manuel, *Scenes from Camp Life* (detail), c. 1517



as mercenary soldiers in numerous campaigns, and their artwork naturally reflected those powerful experiences.² In the case of Graf's drawings, the resonance of war coupled strikingly with the imagery of sexually alluring young women as harlots and camp followers.

As always in circumstances of war, women's lives were caught in the crossfire and young women's experiences took particular turns. Having become the victims of pillage, plunder, and rape, as recorded in the Swiss chronicles,³ many young women in the countryside were forced to abandon their scorched fields and destroyed farms and join their marauding attackers in order to survive. Often members of the lowest social class,⁴ they became camp followers and prostitutes who accompanied the campaigns, where they provided a variety of services for the mercenary soldiers.⁵ They foraged for food: in the winter they collected snails; in the summertime mushrooms, herbs, and kindling wood; and they often stole vegetables from nearby fields.⁶ As in civilian life they cooked, washed, mended clothes, and cared for the sick and injured. They sometimes took on commercial roles, like Brecht's *Mother Courage*, who sold shoes, alcoholic beverages, bread, pistols, and other necessary items. And many of them also performed sexual services. Manuel illustrated some of these activities in

2 Graf (c. 1485–c. 1529) is documented as having served as a mercenary in 1510, 1513, 1515, and 1521, and there were likely additional, undocumented forays. Indications that as a young man Manuel (1484–1530) similarly served as a mercenary are found in a 1507 drawing depicting the siege of a castle near Genoa; he later served Francis I of France (February to May 1516), as well as in the Battle of Bicocca (1522) and subsequently at Novara. See Wagner et al., *Niklaus Manuel Deutsch*, cat. no. 139, Plate 75; and Egli and von Tavel, *Niklaus Manuel Catalogue*, cat. no. 23.

3 Wagner et al., *Niklaus Manuel Deutsch*, cat. no. 189.

4 Redlich, *German Military Enterpriser*, vol. 1, 466, and vol. 2, 207.

5 Hale, *Artists and Warfare*, 34–41.

6 Fronsperger, *Kriegszbuch*, n.p.

his silverpoint sketchbook of about 1517 (Figure 5.1).⁷ The young women's sexual availability to the soldiers is suggested by their hitched-up skirts that showed their legs.⁸ In the centre of the drawing, one of them stirs food in a large cauldron over a raging fire. Next to her another young woman with raised skirt draws a soldier's attention to something she points to, perhaps giving directions. A third young woman sits inside a small hut used to lure birds; from here she could observe and catch them to prepare as food for the soldiers.⁹

Such young women living in military camps were a source of intense fascination for Graf, who portrayed them numerous times in his drawings. Some of these sketches may have been created while the artist was engaged in military campaigns, others after his return home to Basel. Graf was a highly regarded goldsmith, but almost nothing he created in that medium has survived.¹⁰ His most original and innovative body of work consists of approximately 150 drawings, most of them made with pen and ink or using watercolour. This is the medium in which he made his most lasting contribution and to which he owes his place in Western art history. When not away from Basel serving as a mercenary, Graf also designed woodcuts – mostly book illustrations for local publishers – and made stained glass, engravings, and a few etchings, but produced only very few paintings.¹¹

Graf employed drawing for two different purposes: as preparatory studies for works of art in other mediums, such as goldsmith's metalwork or stained glass, as was customary in Renaissance art, and as entirely independent works, which was highly unusual for the time. It is to the second category that his most fascinating drawings belong, because this allowed him enormous freedom of expression. These latter works, created and intended as complete works of art in their own right, played a seminal role in Northern European art by helping to liberate drawing from its traditional, subsidiary status as preparatory work. Free from the constraints of traditional image-making, Graf fully exploited the potential of his medium for personal expression. In so doing, he provided us with unparalleled insights into his times, including the lives of young women, and into his own psyche.

7 Egli and von Tavel, *Niklaus Manuel Catalogue*, cat. no. 56.12.

8 Niklaus Manuel consistently showed the raised skirt to identify young women who had lost their virginity, as for example in his drawing of a foolish virgin, c. 1514; see Andersson, 'Niklaus Manuel', 186–87 and Fig. 8.2.

9 Behlen, *Real- und Verbal-Lexikon*, vol. 3, 95.

10 Hollstein et al., *German Engravings*, vol. 11, Plate C 1–8.

11 Andersson, 'Urs Graf', 424.

Figure 5.2 Urs Graf, *Young Woman Making a Gesture of Greeting, c. 1514*



In his drawings Graf addressed both public and private issues. His sketches are not only trenchant commentaries about the world around him, but also extremely personal statements of his most intimate obsessions and fears. His focus on young attractive women is apparent in these examples. Some are rapidly sketched, whimsical records of a sudden insight, passing mood, or witty observation. Others appear to be the carefully considered products of intense contemplation. Graf's *engagé* eyewitness accounts

provide fascinating glimpses into the daily life and attitudes of early sixteenth-century Basel and its citizens. Offering visual plays on proverbs and verbal metaphors, Graf singled out the controversial and emotional topics of his day. More attracted by vice than by virtue, he held up a mirror to the foibles and failings of his contemporaries.

Graf made many highly personal sketches of the young women whom he encountered in the city or in military camps. Others were the inventions of his artistic imagination. These drawings reflect the contradictory values regarding women that were common during his time as well as his personal ambivalence toward them. He was clearly fascinated by and sexually attracted to them, but at the same time mistrustful and accusatory. Some of these sketches appear to show a realistic view of the life circumstances of the young women whom he portrayed. But more common in his work are drawings expressing his personal emotions toward them; for him, young women elicited not only fear and condemnation, but also erotic fantasies and wishful thinking.

Graf's drawings show young women, more and less eroticized, in a variety of guises and settings. A drawing from about 1514 depicting a very young woman standing in tall grass is perhaps the most conventional, but it too shows the artist's ambivalence toward his subject (Figure 5.2). She stands alone, wearing the customary dress of the lower classes and displaying the braided hair often seen on young prostitutes. The artist has drawn her with prominent breasts, despite her youth. She holds her cupped right hand demurely over her stomach as was considered appropriate for her sex.¹² But her left hand is raised toward the viewer in a gesture likely signifying an erotic greeting. The artist confronts the viewer matter-of-factly with the reality of a young woman's life: lacking in means, she has been forced into sexual dependency. Her serious facial expression and sad gaze suggest how troubled, even desperate, her existence is.

Other drawings of desirable young women that focus less on real-life situations are more revelatory of Graf's personal obsessions. These capture his wishful constructions of the ideal woman, sexually available and compliant. His large-format, pen-and-ink sketch dated 1525 contrasts sharply with Figure 5.2. This later drawing portrays an elaborately dressed young woman who looks alluringly out of the corner of her eye (Figure 5.3). While this sketch could be a portrait of someone he knew, more likely the artist has created on paper his personal fantasy of an available female, again with

12 This gesture also occurs in other drawings by Graf, for example, *Young Woman with a Wine Flask* (1514), Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. U. X. 59. See Andersson, 'Popular Lore', 73f., 116f., Fig. 140.

Figure 5.3 Urs Graf, *Simpering Harlot*, 1525



ample breasts emphasized by her décolletage. She glances coquettishly from under her lavishly adorned hat, expressing her sexual interest in the artist. Certainly, no 'proper' woman would have dared gaze at anyone in such a direct and provocative manner. The artist portrays her as a harlot, her success in her trade indicated by her elaborate costume: an intricately stitched dress, carefully embroidered fichu, fancy hairnet, and floppy leather

hat adorned with silk bows and jewellery. The metal hat ornament showing a merman and the pendant around her neck displaying the crowned initials 'MA' are the kind of decorative objects that the artist himself made in his goldsmith's studio.

The artist's erotic fascination with young women is also evident in a half-length figure with equally voluptuous breasts in a drawing dated 1517 (Figure 5.4). Graf portrays her in profile, a pose that gives power to his gaze while placing the sitter in a passive position, unable to return it. Drawing with pen and black ink, with the darker areas added with brush and grey wash, was a standard technique for this artist. The addition of red chalk to this woman's face, however, is unique among his portraits and surely served to enhance her lifelike appearance. The attempt at realism may also explain the unusually large size of the portrait: it measures 21 by 15 centimetres. Furthermore, Graf attempts to take possession of her image – and thereby of her – by inscribing the drawing three times with a symbol representing himself. He inserts his monogram, 'VG', twice with white body colour imitating the form of a beret brooch of the kind that would customarily be affixed where he has placed it, on the front of the woman's hat next to the feather. The monogram appears a third time in black ink at the right edge of the sheet centred between the digits of the date 1517. The comb and curry comb under the inscription play a role here as erotic symbols expressing the artist's sexual desire for the young woman portrayed. In Basel dialect the verb *strälen*, to comb or brush, was a slang expression for sexual intercourse, and, in some cases, for sexual assault. A popular expression from 1525 describes a victim of a gang-rape as having been thoroughly 'brushed' (*gnuog gestrält*).¹³ In the typically raucous language of German fifteenth-century carnival plays, a pun on the literal versus the sexual meaning of curry combing (*strigeln*) describes a sexually satiated man as having had 'his horse amply curry-combed'.¹⁴ Here the horse signifies the penis. The expression indicates that the erotic connotations of this instrument evolved from the suggestive movement of brushing down a horse with a curry comb.

In addition, in this highly unusual sketch, Graf took special measures to obtain a woman with whom he had become obsessed, but who did not respond to his desires. He resorted to sympathetic magic, a type of sorcery based on the premise that manipulation of an effigy would influence the person portrayed and cause him or her to act in accord with the wishes of the one implementing the magic ritual. This means of gaining power over

¹³ Andersson, *Dirnen, Krieger*, 78, n. 94.

¹⁴ Andersson, 'Popular Lore', 220.

Figure 5.4 Urs Graf, Young Woman in Profile, 1517



someone goes back at least to ancient Greece and Egypt.¹⁵ People at all levels of late medieval and early modern society had recourse to magic in matters of sex and love.¹⁶ It was used by men to render a woman compliant to their sexual desires, but analogously also by women. Indeed, a disproportionate number of women were prosecuted for the use of erotic magic. This occurred probably not because women more actively used it than men, but because female manipulation of male affections was more intensely feared, and because men could plausibly accuse their mistresses of witchcraft.

It was well known that magical images, in order to be effective, should resemble as closely as possible the person one desired to influence. Here the red chalk seems to have served Graf as a way to achieve a greater likeness. Another indication of this drawing's potential use in magical influence over the young woman is seen in the inscription in the upper-right corner: 'Oh God, let her love me or let me hate her / or else I'll die'.¹⁷ Although Graf implores God to make her love him, the incantation suggests that he did not rely on religious belief, but rather has taken matters into his own hands by using sympathetic magic. Below the three lines of text, the ends of the letter 'S' are drawn down to form a decorative pattern suggesting love knots, which Graf used often in his drawings of women, especially of those he desired.¹⁸

The drawing's use of sympathetic magic is also revealed by the piercing of the image, a procedure commonly performed on magical images of individuals whose affection one hoped to gain. The belief that piercing an image can work erotic magic appeared in handbooks, laws and treatises condemning magic, judicial records, and literary texts, and often in necromancers' manuals. When a person's image was cut with a sharp instrument, the symbolic harm to the image was believed to transform into real harm to the victim, although the affliction was temporary, lasting only until the desired person acquiesced to the perpetrator's desires. In the case of Graf's drawing, that would have meant until the woman fell in love with the artist. Here Graf slashed the portrait of his beloved in a series of 40 narrow, elongated gashes that form a pattern covering her shoulder and breast. These holes in the paper must have been made with a sharp knife and are unique in the artist's

15 Budge, *Egyptian Magic*, 16–19.

16 Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 58–64.

17 My translation. The drawing's inscription – 'Ach got lieb mich ir/ oder leyd sy mir/ Ich stirb sunst schier' – would read in modern German 'Ach gott, mach mich ihr beliebt oder verleide sie mir, ich sterbe sonst fast'.

18 See *Prostitute in Profile*, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum; and Andersson, *Dirnen, Krieger*, 16, Plate 9.

Figure 5.5 Urs Graf, *Old Fool Observing a Nude Young Woman*, c. 1515



work; among his other preserved portraits of women, none shows such incisions. They suggest more than a decorative pattern on her clothing, which he could have executed with pen and ink. A fifteenth-century German manual explains the purpose of this practice. After a man has drawn the image of a woman, he is instructed to recite: 'By this image I have drawn the heart and mind of so-and-so, and by strong invocation I arouse her to

love, desire and yearn for me'.¹⁹ The brief inscription in the corner of Graf's drawing expresses similar desires and intentions.

A young woman with some features similar to those in Figure 5.3 is the erotic focus of a drawing by Graf created in about 1514 (Figure 5.5). Also appearing in profile, she is shown wearing a braid down her back and a jaunty beret decorated with a feather, and carrying a curry comb in her right hand. In this image, however, the young woman is shown full length and nude. Wearing only slippers, a beret and some jewellery, and holding the symbolic curry comb, the artist has reduced her to a wholly sexual being. Graf furthermore portrays her being followed and observed by a lecherous old fool, identified by his short tunic and fool's cap with donkey's ears and bells. The artist portrays him as old, infirm, nearsighted, and being mocked by a bird perched on his head. Peering lasciviously at the nude young woman, the old man holds up a pair of large eyeglasses, instrument of the voyeur, the better to inspect her. It is also the symbol of his foolish blindness, and a traditional aspect of the fool's outfit.

The age difference between the two figures places this drawing among the many early sixteenth-century renditions of the 'unequal couple' theme, which satirizes lecherous old fools who fall for attractive young women.²⁰ The old man's excessively large money bag worn at the waist alludes to the mercenary nature of such 'unequal' couples; the older one will attain the attention of the younger only by means of money. As a popular proverb of the period expresses it, 'he who hopes to capture a beautiful woman must carry a heavy purse', meaning heavy with coins. The conspicuous position of the fool's dagger, a well-known phallic symbol, between his legs and pointing toward her also emphasizes his lechery. The eyeglasses, the large purse, the dagger, and even the wooden leg, which adds to the emphasis on his infirmity, display the ludicrous nature of his foolish courting. Not even his money bag can spark her interest. Ignoring him completely, the nude woman's boredom is expressed in the laconic comment inscribed on her neckband: '*OCH.MI*' ('Oh, my!'). Having inscribed his monogram '*VG*' twice into the loops of the rope forming a love knot that she dangles in the air, the artist demonstrates with malicious pleasure that he, not the old fool, is the object of her attention and her curry comb.

Graf's witty drawings of prostitutes or camp followers drew on contemporary culture to poke fun not only at old fools but also at the young women themselves. A pen-and-ink sketch of a young woman stepping into

19 Quoted in Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 102–04.

20 Stewart, *Unequal Lovers*.

a brook or lake employs an erotic metaphor to create a tantalizing image of a prostitute displaying her lack of 'virtue' (Figure 5.6). The drawing's 'come hither' tone is conveyed both by the skirt-raising gesture and the woman's coquettish glance out of the corner of her eye. It has always been assumed that the artist shows the woman stepping into water merely to justify the raised skirt and the ample display of leg. But stepping into water had a much more specific meaning in the sixteenth century; it was a commonly understood expression for having sex or, in the narrower sense, for losing one's virginity. Graf's contemporary in Bern, the artist and writer Niklaus Manuel, used this image in a carnival play he wrote in 1530. Although the play's protagonist, Elsli, has lost her virginity with another man, her fiancé, Uli, is urged to marry her anyway, reasoning that she is neither the first nor the last to have 'stepped into the brook' – that is, to be a so-called 'fallen' bride.²¹

Contemporary writers repeatedly warned men against the dire consequences of such seductive glances. Sixteenth-century body language was very specific in its meanings. A broadsheet manual of about 1509 outlining proper conduct for young women proscribes provocative glances and winking at men.²² Another forbids eye contact with men on the grounds that the eyes betray the feelings of the heart.²³ In another of his plays, *On the Pope and His Priests* (1522), Manuel gives one of the characters, a prostitute, the telling name Sibilla Schilöugli ('Sibilla Furtive-Glance'), referring to the seductive glances of such women.²⁴ Graf's contemporaries must have recognized immediately the meaning of the woman's glance in his drawing. It is just as expressive as in the large-format portrait of the well-dressed prostitute in Figure 5.3. The seductive leer was not new to sixteenth-century art, but illustrating the popular saying 'stepping into a brook' is the artist's own distinctive invention. It expresses both his wry commentary on 'easy virtue' and the male viewer's sensual enjoyment. Turning a verbal metaphor into a

21 Uli is urged to marry Elsli anyway: 'Uli, du bist jetzt ganz verwirrt / Lass dich wisen und tu das best! / Sie ist weder die erst noch letst, / Die mit dem Fuss in bach ist treten'. From *Ein hüpsch Fasnachtspyl von dem Elszlin trag den knaben, und von Uly Rechenzan, mit irem eelichen gerichtshandel, kurzwylyg zu lessen*. See Bächtold, *Niklaus Manuel*, 277, lines 535–38.

22 'Dein gesellen sych nit schertzlich an / Wann er es (tut), ker dich nit daran [...] Dein aug halt und niemandt wünck'. From a single-sheet broadside, *Aine schone lere iungen leuten*.

23 'Sie sollen das gesicht vor allen dingen mit züchten niederschlagen und bewaren / mit den augen niemand winken / noch besonder ansehen / anschilhen / oder mit einem aug anblintzen / auch nicht ungebürlich auffreissen / dann die augen seind ein warning des hertzens / und was das auge sicht / dasselb das hertz sticht'. From the anonymous *Ein sehr nutzliches*.

24 'Vom Papst und seiner Priesterschaft', in Bächtold, *Niklaus Manuel*, 61, line 797.

Figure 5.6 Urs Graf, *Young Woman Stepping into a Brook*, c. 1521



visual one offered the artist a witty formula to poke fun at a woman made to reveal the reduced state of her 'virtue' through her own action.

More typical of Graf's work than the comparatively light-hearted drawing of a prostitute walking outdoors in fine weather are images of violence done to women on the periphery of battlefields (Figure 5.7). Young women who had joined the mercenary soldiers as camp followers were not always

Figure 5.7 Urs Graf, *Victim of War Standing before a Landscape*, 1514



spared war's destruction, as contemporary Swiss chroniclers recount. So, for example, when they fell into enemy hands, they were often maimed, but intentionally left alive in order that they could return to their camp and bear witness to the enemy's violence. In Figure 5.7 the artist represents a young female victim of war blinded in the left eye, and missing both arms and her right leg. Having no other livelihood, the prostitute is shown to be still in business, with her skirt hitched up to display her legs, one flesh

Figure 5.8 Urs Graf, *Camp Follower Passing a Hanged Mercenary Soldier, 1525*



and one wood, and her one eye on the lookout for clients. The tranquillity of the sunny landscape in the background serves to heighten the horror of her condition.

A late work of 1525 depicts the effects of war on both sexes (Figure 5.8). A hanged man in the garb of a mercenary – here a victim of war, robbed of his hat, shoes, and weapons – dangles from a branch upon which crows or vultures have already gathered. One of them pecks out his eyes. The

apotropaic gesture of his clenched fists, customarily intended to ward off evil but obviously ineffective here, is a pitiful commentary on his fate. In contrast to the plundered mercenary, the attractive young camp follower who walks past, unmoved by the gruesome sight, is lavishly dressed in a feathered beret, a heavy gold chain, and a richly embroidered skirt. She carries containers for food and drink that are of no use to the soldier. Her 'booty' from this campaign is an inopportune pregnancy, revealed by the opening in the dress over her belly. Graf's succinct narrative about the inequities of war, from which camp followers may profit while mercenaries pay with their lives, is a commentary on the vicissitudes of fortune. Had the woman arrived earlier, she might have saved his life because, in Graf's day, the intercession of a pregnant woman could absolve a person condemned to death. By juxtaposing the luckless mercenary and the successful camp follower, the artist illustrates the stark contrasts of life and death which typified his own military experience.

In his highly personal drawings, Graf combined narrative with symbolic or allegorical elements to express his attitudes and feelings about young women as erotic subjects during a period of rapid social change. But Graf's drawings express much more than one remarkable artist's personal fantasies and mistrust of women. His ambivalence toward young women was typical of the wider culture in the early modern age. It was generally understood that youth in women amplified their sexual allure. Young beauty attracted and tempted, but in this culture men were also keenly aware that women tricked and rejected as well. In Graf's drawings the inflection of war as the context, sometimes implied and sometimes clearly expressed, complicated the imagery further. An ambivalence similar to that about women also prevailed about war.²⁵ Ultimately it was as harlots and camp followers that even young women bore the desecrations of war in their rough lives and damaged bodies.

25 Two drawings dated 1529 by Manuel express strong critiques of mercenary warfare: Egli and von Tavel, *Niklaus Manuel Catalogue*, vol. 2, 444, cat. nos. 80.01–80.02. Graf's drawing of the battlefield at Marignano, where the Swiss were vanquished in 1515, makes a similar statement. See Bächtiger, 'Marignano'.

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