

Henry Fuseli and the Sexual Sublime

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ABSTRACT

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Anglo-Swiss artist Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) shared drawings of a sexually charged and implied sadistic nature among an elite and intimate group of male artists. These drawings explore sexuality as a fundamental and emotionally profound human experience. This thesis approaches these drawings as studies, a demonstration of virtuosity and an experiment in visual limits, specifically the aesthetic boundaries that divide the sublime and the beautiful. I discuss the implications of the late eighteenth-century approach to the sublime and position Fuseli within an aesthetic debate. I argue that *Three Women and a Recumbent Man* (1809), *Three Courtesans Operating on the Face of a Bound Man* (1800) and *Woman Torturing a Child* (1800-1810) were not simply pornographic illustrations intended for private pleasure, but intellectual investigations into the sublime possibilities of sexuality in art.

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Introduction

“Deserve, but expect not, to be praised by your contemporaries, for any excellence which they may be jealous of being allowed to possess themselves; leave the dispensation of justice to posterity [*sic*].” – Henry Fuseli, *Aphorisms on Art* (1831)¹

“It is by his drawings that he will be remembered for their innate vigorous and sensuous appeal.”
- Nicolas Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli* (1951)²

Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) was confident that posterity would reveal the excellence of an artist, an optimistic conviction considering that although Nicolas Powell perceived the inherent value of his drawings, the very sensuality of a number of works has in fact prevented their full recognition as art. In visions of alarming drama, Fuseli revealed an imaginative impulse that was unconventional in comparison to his colleagues at the Royal Academy; I argue that his depictions of implied sexual violence were explorations of the powerful and emotionally profound nature of sexual experience.³ It was a sexuality that engaged the visceral and inhabited “the dark corners of the mind” to which scholars of Romanticism often refer.⁴ I argue that *Three Women and a Recumbent Man* (1809) (Fig. 1), *Three Courtesans Operating on the Face of a Bound Man* (1800) (Fig. 2) and *Woman Torturing a Child* (1800-1810) (Fig. 3) were more than arousing pornographic illustrations, but intellectual investigations into the sublime possibilities of sexuality in art. These specific drawings, among a greater collection of erotic works and

¹ John Knowles and Henry Fuseli, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 70.

² Nicolas Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 27.

³ Alex Neill, "The Pornographic, the Erotic, the Charming, and the Sublime," in *Pornography and Art: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Hans, Maes et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49.

⁴ Scholars who refer to the dark corners (or chambers) of the mind include Martin Myrone who entitled a chapter "The Dark Chambers of the Mind," in *Henry Fuseli* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001). *Henry Fuseli: Dark Chambers of the Mind* was the title of an exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery in New Zealand from June 2012 to January 2013 which displayed a number of Fuseli drawings alongside tribute drawings by contemporary artist Andrew McLeod. Max Browne described a “fascination for the darker corners of human drama and irrationality” which has allowed for “a resurgence of interest in the astonishing talents of Fuseli.” Max Browne, *The Romantic Art of Theodor Von Holst 1810-44* (London: Lund and Humphries Publishers, 1994), 11.

portraits of courtesans, are the central focus of this thesis, chosen for their implied, but nonetheless disturbing violence. These drawings share a sense of unresolved conflict both within the images themselves, but also within scholarship. I intend to resolve the latter conflict in the development of this thesis by situating the works within the artist's oeuvre and by drawing in examples of similar sketches, as well as Academy-exhibited paintings with visual and thematic resonances. In doing so I will prove that these drawings are not exceptions to Fuseli's creative output, but one of many manifestations of his interest in the expressive power of the body, extreme states of mental and physical being and the sublime. However, the erotic nature of these drawings, and the status of erotic material in art historical discourse requires an unconventional approach. The progression of the thesis from a discussion of the sexual sublime and the pornographic problem to eighteenth-century aesthetics is perhaps illogical, but this ordering of ideas is necessary because of the debate on erotic art and pornography. Before it is possible to argue that these drawings illustrate Fuseli's intellectual approach to art and his interest in the sublime, the ambiguous state of sexually explicit content in scholarship must be resolved. These drawings incorporate all the elements that I argue constitute studies of the sexual sublime, which I define as a commanding visual experience achieved through an oscillation between pleasure and terror; specifically, the aesthetic pleasure derived from implied violence. Of all of Fuseli's erotic works, these three drawings have received the most attention in recent scholarship, and their controversial status in exhibitions, exhibition catalogues and academic literature is integral to my analysis. The first drawing, *Three Women and a Recumbent Man*, depicts a sexual scene that is at once explicit and ambiguous. The enclosed and private space of an indistinct, but nonetheless domestic environment provides the setting for the performance of sexually transgressive acts. The space itself is confining in comparison to the enormous female figures

that populate the bedroom, and it serves to accentuate their domineering presence. The shallowness of the room, open to the viewer like a theatrical stage, is emphasized by the elbow of the woman on the far right, as it threatens to infringe upon the limits of the picture plane and protrude into our space, thereby conflating the limits of frame and flesh.⁵ The fusing of real and pictorial space allows for a sense of immediacy that heightens the sexual tone of the viewing experience. This woman attempts to straddle the recumbent man, although the wall and the edge of the bed prevent her from fully smothering his face in her genitalia. The woman on the left busies her claw-like hands in an effort to secure the phallus while the central figure, positioned above the pelvic region of the man, steadies herself with one hand on the shoulder of her companion. The facial expressions of the women available to the viewer exhibit a sense of serene pleasure, but the man is anonymous, and the viewer is given no indication of his state of mind except that his chest arches upward, an uncomfortably contorted posture indicative of a struggle to breathe. An ambiguity resides in the supine victim, his absent arms suggest they are bound beneath him, and his unresponsive legs denote, at best, consent, but at worst, defeat or even recent or imminent death. The elaborate hairstyles of the three women are beset with ribbons, transparent fabrics, braids, curls, combs and hair pins that create a visual resonance with the draperies hung about the small room. The appeal of the ornamentation to femininity contrasts with the enormity of the Michelangesque female figures. The insinuated transgression is precariously counterbalanced by the apparent composure of the nude women who have been made available to the gaze.

In the second drawing, *Three Courtesans Operating on the Face of a Bound Man*, Fuseli once more secures doubt in the mind of the viewer. The sketched lines are chaotic and the

⁵ Kelly Dennis, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 3.

absence of depth or illusionary space creates a sense of confusion. The presence of a rope-like line in the hand of the courtesan on the right and the indefinite tool wielded by the central figure suggest what art historian Camilla Smith has identified as an act of “forensic probing.”⁶ The male figure, whose face is obscured in a flurry of lines, appears bound, held captive by the same number of female aggressors that appear in *Recumbent Man*. Unlike the women in the former drawing, however, these courtesans are not objects of the male gaze; their grotesque features are unsightly and the nature of their expressions speaks of perversion.

The last drawing, *A Woman Torturing a Child*, is perhaps the most perplexing of the three: potentially illustrative of circumcision, castration, genital mutilation or even infanticide.⁷ Once more, Fuseli exploits ambiguity; the faint lines between the young boy’s legs conform to an effeminizing narrative, as the phallus is unseen or displaced. The combination of sumptuous female dress and infantile nudity heightens the discord between pleasure and repugnance.⁸ The boy, strapped to a plinth, is subjected to an odd shaped implement by a luxuriously dressed woman. It is as if Fuseli has depicted the moment before the woman drags the object downward in a sensual flourish. The pseudo-medical nature of the scene is undermined by the woman’s refined attire, more appropriate for a social engagement, and equally incongruous within the context of a surgical procedure.

⁶ Camilla Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst: Assessing the Subject and Meaning of Henry Fuseli’s Late Pornographic Drawings, 1800–25," *Art History* 33 (2010), 420.

⁷ Martin Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, (Tate Publishing, 2006), 173. Gert Schiff, *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1975), 135. Works such as *Woman with an Eccentric Hairstyle 1821* Cat. 197 in the exhibition catalogue published by the Tate in 1975 demonstrate that *A Woman Torturing a Child* is one drawing among several that explore themes of infanticide or infantile torture. The Greek inscription on the drawing translates as “child murderess” and the drawing itself depicts a courtesan with an elaborate and odd shaped hairstyle, a hair pin held between her teeth and a malevolent expression. She holds in her hands the testicles of a young boy, although the boy is very faintly sketched in.

⁸ Camilla Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 430. Smith comments on the discord between infantile nudity and female sartorial excess, although she argues that it is indicative of a combination of the Marquis de Sade’s literary works and cutting rituals in London’s sexual subcultures.

The sexual sublime activates the imagination causing the viewer to envision the worst possible scenario. The bemused viewer withdraws from the sexually transgressive act while maintaining a desire to look and participate. It evokes conflicting responses, allowing the viewer to experience simultaneously sexual arousal and visual pleasure, along with confusion, anxiety, repulsion and fear. It can be understood as a manifestation of the Romantic sublime, an aesthetic that occupied a prominent position in the visual arts and informed British Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These drawings illustrate an interest in visual expressions of pain, pleasure, the sublime and the beautiful.⁹ As Fuseli was an erudite artist who took pride in education, it is surprising that scholars have not explored the intellectual possibilities of such drawings. Indeed, Werner Hofman, author of an essay entitled “A Captive” from the catalogue of the 1975 exhibition *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*, notes that “His very scholarliness surrounds his works like some rare esoteric mist...”¹⁰ It is therefore the aim of this thesis to navigate the mist to determine the guiding intellectual interests in these drawings.

This thesis re-evaluates *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* as studies of the sublime effects of implied sexual violence and resituates these investigational drawings as intellectually profound works of art. First, I will examine Fuseli’s formative experiences in Zürich, Rome and London. Specifically, I will discuss Fuseli’s childhood in Zürich, where he was exposed to Romantic ideas and received a classical education,

⁹ The initial text that brought the sublime and the beautiful to the forefront of aesthetic criticism in the eighteenth century was Joseph Addison’s *The Pleasures of the Imagination* published in 1712. The terms beautiful and sublime were employed in this text and later in Edmund Burke’s *An Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* as a system of classification that pertained to aesthetic judgement. According to Burke, balance, smoothness, delicacy and colour were typical qualities associated with the beautiful while vastness, terror, obscurity and darkness were qualities associated with the sublime. Joseph Addison, “Pleasures of Imagination” *Spectator* 411 (June 21, 1712). Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1767).

¹⁰ Werner Hofman, “A Captive,” in *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*, trans., Sarah Twohig (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1975), 29.

experiences that would inform his intellectual and expressive approach to both literary and invented subjects throughout his career. Likewise, Fuseli studied art in Rome where he further developed an emphasis on the expressive potential of the figure, inspired by the heroic nudity, masculine virtue and sublime *terribilitá* of Renaissance painters. Finally, I will discuss Fuseli's career in Britain where, despite reservations, he became a respected member of the Academy, although remained a controversial figure, cultivating a reputation as an eccentric, rebellious and original, artistic genius. In the section entitled, *'In Speaking of Fuseli': A Survey of Recent Scholarship on the Drawings*, I will critically examine the historiography of his erotic works and argue that recent exhibitions and publications have struggled to recognise fundamental aspects of their purpose. In Chapter One, problems with genre classification are further developed, and I argue that the term pornography is presumptuous, proposing an alternative reading of the drawings as sexually sublime. In Chapter Two, I examine the sublime in the context of the eighteenth century and its associations with both the Gothic and Romantic movements. The sublime was not defined in concrete terms, and I argue that Fuseli aimed at expressing the fullness of his imagination, understood to be a prerequisite for sublime experience. Fuseli compelled viewers to utilise their imaginations in their approach to his images and, in so doing, tested the limits of visual representation, expressly body/mind and subject/object dichotomies.¹¹

¹¹Karl Axelsson effectively relates the importance of the imagination in the concept of the sublime, although his analysis emphasizes that the primary source accounts are not unanimous in their estimations. Indeed, the sublime was a slippery term during the eighteenth century, and was mainly discussed as a literary phenomena, but appropriated in discussions of the visual arts by artists who, according to Marilyn Klein Torbruegge, were interested in the grandeur of nature, its inherent appeal to the terrible and poetic sentiments evocative of Robert Blair's (1699-1746) *The Grave* and Edward Young's (1661-1765) *Night-Thoughts*. Marilyn Klein Torbruegge, "Bodmer and Füssli: 'Das Wunderbare' and the Sublime" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1968), 24. These artists, according to Samuel Monk, included Richard Wilson, Joseph Wright of Derby, Alexander and John Robert Cozens, Benjamin West, John Mortimer and Sir Thomas Lawrence. Monk also reiterates the differing conceptions of the sublime noting that "In looking back over the century of speculation, one is struck with a diversity of opinions that must always

Moreover, I discuss the influence of British statesman, political thinker and philosopher Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) canonical text, *An Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, on Fuseli's interest in circumstances of distress and the emotional potential of obscurity, ambiguity and terror in visual representation.¹² Furthermore, I argue that Fuseli's reverence for Michelangelo (1475-1564) informed his ideas surrounding sublimity and his approach to the human figure.¹³ In Chapter Three, I suggest that the drawings comment on the dissolution of traditional gender roles in British society and reflect an unchecked pessimism toward the state and projected future of public art in Britain. Industrialisation and shifts in the economic configuration of British society impacted class structure, gender-dictated social responsibilities, and cultural production; radical changes that philosophers, writers and artists responded to with unease and concern. Fuseli, a pessimist with civic humanist values, argued that art should serve the public, address the public sphere and instill patriotic values. I argue that his opinions on the state of British art are partially revealed in the drawings, where patriarchal authority is compromised through the figure of the fashionable and luxuriant woman who exposes the folly of civic humanist ideals.¹⁴

have lain behind the sublime whenever used in criticism. No single definition of the term would serve any single decade for all writers." Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A study of Critical Theories in XVIII-century England* (University of Michigan Press, 1960), 233. The sublime could therefore be an impression, a response to nature or art, a physical reaction, a judgement, a feeling or even a state of mind. For more on the debate see Christine Riding and Nigel Llewellyn, "'British Art and the Sublime,'" in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, last modified January 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research-publications/the-sublime/christine-riding-and-nigel-llewellyn-british-art-and-the-sublime-r1109418>.

¹² Edmund Burke, *An Enquiry*, 1767.

¹³ Fuseli admired Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, commissioned by Pope Julius II and completed by the artist between 1508 and 1512.

¹⁴ John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: The Body of the Public* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 261.

Zürich, Rome, London: A Short Biography of the Artist

Fuseli was born in Zürich, Switzerland in a cultural atmosphere that was sympathetic towards the *Sturm und Drang* movement, a movement that valued emotional intensity, originality, and freedom of expression in art.¹⁵ It was through his father, John Caspar Füessli (1706-1782), a painter, an antiquarian and an active member of the intellectual community, that Fuseli was exposed to *Sturm und Drang* scholars and their philosophies.¹⁶ Fuseli studied at the Collegium Carolinum in Zürich with the intention to become a Reformist Minister at a local parish.¹⁷ It was there that Fuseli became acquainted with the most influential of *Sturm und Drangers*, Johann Jakob Bodmer (1698-1783), who published a number of essays on the importance of creative freedom in art and on the aesthetic duality between the sublime and the beautiful.¹⁸ Fuseli was inclined towards drawing and showed natural artistic talent from an early age, despite being repressed by his father.¹⁹ John Caspar Füessli determined that Rodolph, his eldest surviving son, would become a painter while Fuseli was to prepare for a clerical profession, believing him to be too awkward for the mechanical aspects of painting.²⁰ Fuseli was prohibited from drawing, but continued to do so in secret by candle-light while his parents

¹⁵ Frederick Antal, *Fuseli Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 5. The German phrase *Sturm und Drang* translates to Storm and Stress in English and is defined as an eighteenth-century cultural movement or philosophy. The movement originated in Swiss criticism where the unfamiliar, terrible and wonderful in art were exalted.

¹⁶ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 5.

¹⁷ Camilla Smith, "Artist as Educator? Assessing the Pedagogic Role of Folly in the Early Work of the Anglo-Swiss Artist Henry Fuseli (1741-1825)," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 46 (2010): 562.

¹⁸ Karen Junod, "Henry Fuseli's pragmatic use of aesthetics: His epic illustrations of Macbeth," *Word & Image* 19 (2003): 139. Examples of texts by Bodmer that discuss the theory of the sublime include *Von dem Einfluss und Gebrauche der Einbildungskriffte* (1727), *Brief-Wechsel von der Natur des Poetischen Geschmacks* (1736), *Critische Betrachtungen über die poetischen Gemälde der Dichter* (1741) and *Critische Bneje* (1746). Peter Tomory, *The Life and Art of Henry Fuseli* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 10. For an in depth study of Bodmer's influence on Fuseli in terms of the sublime see Torbruegge, "Bodmer and Füssli," 1.

¹⁹ Ruthven Todd, *Tracks in the Snow* (London: The Grey Walls Press Limited, 1946), 67.

²⁰ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 8.

thought him to be sleeping.²¹ John Knowles (1781-1841), friend and biographer of Fuseli, recalled that, “He [Fuseli] passed those early days in crying and drawing: every day floods of tears at being forced to read, which were relieved by stolen hours for his favourite amusement.”²² In school, Fuseli was introduced to many of the literary works that would inspire his subject matter over the course of his career.²³ Bodmer admired William Shakespeare and Homer and translated numerous texts, notably John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1732), the Ugolino passage from Dante’s *Inferno* (1741) and a section of the *Nibelungenlied* (1757).²⁴ Fuseli may have developed an interest in literature through Bodmer, whom he respected as an instructor.²⁵ Knowledge of theory and a classical education informed the intellectual approach that Fuseli took to visual art. He was inspired by a Romantic sensibility that positioned him against Enlightenment rationalism and the subdued emotionalism advocated by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768).²⁶

Experiences in Zürich were instrumental to the formation of the distinct style and wild persona that we associate with Fuseli, who was known as Heinrich Füssli prior to 1764 when he changed his name to sound less Germanic.²⁷ The drawings that he produced in his formative years demonstrate that Fuseli maintained ongoing artistic interests in fashion, femininity and sexuality throughout his career. A series of illustrations drawn in Zürich employ didactic satire to critique female cunning and unnecessary ornamentation, evidence that the relationship between

²¹ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 8.

²² Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 8.

²³ Referred to from now on as *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child*.

²⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* edit. Richard Bentley (Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1732). Dante Alighieri, “Inferno” in *The Divine Comedy* (1317). Johann Jakob Bodmer, trans., *Nibelungenlied* (Zürich, 1757).

²⁵ Tomory, *The Life and Art of Henry Fuseli*, 10.

²⁶ Christian Klemm, “The Principles of Fuseli’s Art or the Aesthetics of the Stroke of Genius,” in *Fuseli - the Wild Swiss* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2005), 88.

²⁷ Smith, “Artist as Educator?,” 559.

femininity and corruption was of interest to the artist prior to the nineteenth century.²⁸ Gender politics and the relationship between morality and fashion were explored in a collection of drawings known as a *Narrenbuch*, or a *Book of Fools*, that Fuseli compiled in his youth.²⁹ Smith takes a teleological approach to the artist's biography to illuminate why Fuseli consciously challenged the impersonal inventive strategies advocated by the Academy in England, and suggests that his critical opinion of institutions may have derived from Swiss texts like the *Discourse der Mahlern* (Discourse of the Painters) (1721-1722).³⁰ Furthermore, Johann Jakob Bodmer's republican associations would have influenced Fuseli as a Carolinum student and urged him to distrust *both* the secular and religious authorities that presided over Zürich.³¹ His drawings exhibit a freedom of expression, guided by intellect but unencumbered by academic training. According to Fuseli, "the institution of academies were symptoms of art in distress,

²⁸ Smith, "Artist as Educator?," 574.

²⁹ Smith, "Artist as Educator?," 578.

³⁰ Johann Jakob Bodmer, Johann Jakob Breitinger and Theodor Vetter, *Die Discourse der Mahlern: 171-1722* (J. Huber, 1891).

³¹ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 436. Fuseli, with his friends Lavater, Jacob and Felix Hess, inflamed with the social and political ideas found in the works of Rousseau and Voltaire, felt justified in a cause to punish a corrupt magistrate in their native city. The ruling magistrate, high land-bailiff Grebel had been accused of oppression and tyranny, and the young students threatened to raise awareness to specific crimes that the official had committed, specifically appropriating property. When their threatening letter addressed to the magistrate was ignored, they published and circulated a pamphlet outlining evidence for his crimes among the community and government which eventually succeeded in bringing the magistrate to justice. Their actions, however, had caused the powerful family members of the magistrate a degree of disgrace, the consequence of which, Knowles writes, fell upon Lavater's and Fuseli's families, the two students who had come forward as the pamphlet authors. As a result of the scandal, they were asked to leave the city until the unrest had quieted. Knowles recounts that this incident was perhaps the most important in Fuseli's life, as he was forced to leave his native country. With that, Fuseli also left behind any restraints his family had placed upon his professional inclinations and was thus able to pursue art seriously. Fuseli, Knowles notes, rarely spoke of these events but once remarked "Although I cannot but reflect with some degree of satisfaction upon the correctness of our feeling, and the courage we displayed, yet, situated as we and our families then were, it evinced precipitation on our part, and a want of knowledge of the world." This sentiment, expressed in retrospect, relates an understanding of his noble, albeit naive actions. It suggests that Fuseli developed a more realistic, if not cynical view of the world from which he looks back unto his youth. This event would have made a significant impression on the developing artist who distrusted governing institutions his entire life. Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 20-21.

[sic]” because they taught imitation and compositional formulae.³² Knowles writes that the artist was disenchanted with academies, and refused to become a member of any academy in Rome.³³ He states that after Fuseli’s marriage to Sophia Rawlins in 1788, he was less obstinate in his reproach for artistic institutions, having previously refused to apply, even with the persistent encouragement of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792).³⁴ Knowles recounts, “[He] overcame his reluctance; and having put down his name, and forced himself to undergo the penance of solicitation... he was elected an associate of the Royal Academy on the 3rd of November, 1788.”³⁵ His motivation, according to Knowles, was a pension afforded to widows of Royal Academy members. Nevertheless, his admission into the Academy did not prevent Fuseli from asserting himself as an *enfant terrible*.³⁶ Fuseli challenged institutional standards and worked with his own artistic values in mind, values which often met with criticism. Fuseli fashioned himself as an outsider, and his contemporaries likewise extolled his unconventional manners as a product of artistic genius. The idea that an artist might possess special, albeit odd qualities became popular in the early nineteenth century.³⁷ The celebrated artist possessed an aura of

³² Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 51-55.

³³ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 159.

³⁴ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 159.

³⁵ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 159.

³⁶ *Enfant terrible* as defined as a successful artist who is strikingly unorthodox, rebellious, innovative or avant-garde. Petra Maisak emphasizes that Fuseli nurtured his artistic reputation from an established position in society as an intellectual. Possessing the respect of his peers before commencing his career as an artist enabled Fuseli to be daring in his art. See Petra Maisak, “Henry Fuseli – ‘Shakespeare’s Painter,’” in *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery*, ed. Walter Paper et al. (Bottrop, 1996). In a letter written to Mary Moser in 1771, Fuseli wrote, “I am approaching the period which commonly decides a man’s life with regard to fame or infamy; if I am distracted by the thought, those who have passed the Rubicon will excuse me, and you are amongst the number.” Henry Fuseli, *The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli*, edit., David H. Weinglass (New York: Kraus International, 1982), 13. That Fuseli intentionally crafted his identity is evidenced by his desire for attention. William Godwin (1756-1836) wrote of Fuseli in a letter to John Knowles that “He was the most frankly ingenuous and conceited man I ever knew. He could not bear to be eclipsed or put in the back-ground for a moment.” Fuseli, *The Collected English Letters*, 509.

³⁷ Mathew Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830: A History of the Visual Arts in an Era of Unprecedented Urban Economic Growth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42-45.

difference, removing him from the mundane or bourgeois sphere of existence.³⁸ It was an idea that spread throughout Europe, and even now informs our understanding of artists from Fuseli to Francisco Goya (1746-1828). Although both sympathetic toward civic humanist values, Goya, unlike Fuseli, believed in the didactic efficacy of art. In either case, in a quintessentially Romantic fashion, these artists chose to depict subjects that were disturbing and unpleasant, were both reluctant members of their respective Academies, and both profoundly critical of their cultural milieus. Indeed, Fuseli challenged emotional decorum in art, and Mathew Craske, author of *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, argues that Fuseli's experimental erotic drawings allowed him to explore an unrefined creative impulse. He hints that the drawings had a serious purpose: positioning Fuseli as a "virile creative figure who was best placed to pioneer a cultural rebirth."³⁹ The sublime, as a masculine aesthetic associated with high art, was a component of that artistic project. As Powell observed, "Rubens is drawing an arm, Alexander Cozens has smudged in a landscape, but with Fuseli it so often must be [that] he is trying to inspire terror."⁴⁰ The terror of the sublime is interwoven into Fuseli's oeuvre, but the erotic drawings, private and therefore less reserved, illustrate an ongoing experimentation.

Although his arrogance and vanity were likely already well developed, the wild extravagance ascribed to Fuseli by his contemporaries was a product of his experience in Rome where he studied art from 1770 to 1778. His unique treatment of heroic nudity, the classical figure and Michelangelesque *terribilitá* (or the effective expression of frightening power, emotional intensity and awesomeness) can be explained by an exceptional early career. Fuseli

³⁸ For more on the relationship between madness and genius in early nineteenth-century discourse see George Becker, *The Mad Genius Controversy: A study in the Sociology of Deviance* (SAGE Publications, 1978).

³⁹ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 240.

⁴⁰ Nicolas Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli*, 11.

decided to become a visual artist at the age of thirty, persuaded by Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), PRA.⁴¹ Among an international community of artists, including Swedish sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel (1740-1814) and British artists Alexander Runciman (1736-1785), Thomas Banks (1735-1805) and George Romney (1734-1802), Fuseli became a respected artist.⁴² Johan Caspar Lavater (1741-1801) captures the effect of his presence in Italy: “Fuseli has the greatest imaginative powers in Rome. He is always extreme – always original... Reynolds told him that he’ll be the greatest painter of his age. He [Fuseli] despises everyone... No one comes near him.”⁴³ It was during his years in Italy that Fuseli advanced his expressive style through drawing, inspired by the classical and classicist sources that would inform his approach to the figure for his entire career.

Fuseli cultivated an elite circle of patrons suited to his unconventional art, eccentric personality and intellectualism. His literary work appealed to men of culture who were members of the aristocracy, historians and connoisseurs of antique poetry.⁴⁴ It was through these relationships that Fuseli was able to succeed as an artist, as his patrons would purchase almost any work produced by his hand.⁴⁵ In addition to his personal success among friends, Fuseli acquired prestigious positions within the Royal Academy, and was respected as an authority on art. He became a Member in 1790, a Professor of Painting in 1799 and a Keeper in 1804.⁴⁶ Despite affiliations with the Academy and a commitment to elevated art, Fuseli occupied a

⁴¹ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 43.

⁴² William Pressly, *The Artist as Original Genius: Shakespeare’s ‘Fine Frenzy’ in Late Eighteenth-century British Art* (Cranbury: University of Delaware, 2007), 95.

⁴³ Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art 1750-1810* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 164. The letter was written in 1773.

⁴⁴ Antal, *Fuseli Studies*, 79.

⁴⁵ Antal, *Fuseli Studies*, 79. The banker Thomas Coutts (1735-1822) was Fuseli’s most generous patron and supported him throughout his entire career. His daughter, Susan, Countess of Guilford would likewise later become an avid collector of Fuseli’s works.

⁴⁶ Antal, *Fuseli Studies*, 79.

peculiar space in the British art scene. The English middle classes of the late eighteenth century were not receptive to Romantic depictions of psychological phenomena, the macabre, the erotic or the fantastic, and Fuseli, as a proponent of the sublime was, according to early Fuseli scholar Frederick Antal, too sophisticated for bourgeois audiences.⁴⁷ Fuseli believed that art should aspire to express national sentiment and public spirit, but the emergence of the private citizen had, in his mind, allowed European art to slip into irreversible decline.⁴⁸ Fuseli responded with emotionally driven art that denounced art for amusement and emotional decorum.⁴⁹

It was a vehement and marginal resistance to bourgeois attitudes that assured Fuseli a degree of notoriety. *The Nightmare*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782, brought Fuseli to the forefront of British art, and firmly situated him within the collective imagination of the public, contemporaneously and into the modern period (Fig. 4). The woman, into whose boudoir the viewer was given visual access, was depicted in contemporary dress, and thus situated firmly in the present. The immediacy of the painting involved the viewer personally in the potentially licentious action.⁵⁰ It was this quality which earned Fuseli a “bloody” reputation, according to the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846), who wrote that Fuseli reminded him of Archimago, the infernal magician in Spencer’s *Fairie Queene* (1590):

Weak minds he destroyed. They mistook his wit for reason, his indelicacy for breeding, his swearing for manliness, and his infidelity for strength of mind; but he was accomplished in elegant literature, and had the art of inspiring young minds with high and grand views.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Antal, *Fuseli Studies*, 80.

⁴⁸ Mathew Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 17.

⁴⁹ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 26.

⁵⁰ Nicolas Powell, *Fuseli: The Nightmare* (London: The Penguin Press, 1973), 77.

⁵¹ Robert Haydon, *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, historical painter Vol. 1*, edit. by Tom Taylor (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 33.

Haydon captures the inconsistent and audacious personality of the artist. He was an aggressive intellectual, certainly, but in the many accounts of his artistic “genius,” Fuseli was classed in a myriad of stereotypes; he was mad, eccentric and sublime to the extent that rumours began to circulate that he supped on raw pork to induce the nightmarish dreams that appeared in his paintings.⁵² Supporters dismissed Fuseli’s eccentricities as indications of his genius, while critics argued that he perverted nature in misrepresenting the human form, and in doing so, broke the rules associated with Neoclassicism: morality, virtue and emotional restraint, the ideals embodied in the classical nude.⁵³

A comparison between Fuseli’s paintings and those by American-born, Academy favourite, Benjamin West (1738-1820) illustrates the dissimilarity of their artistic projects. West was empirical in his approach to the subject; his emphasis on pictorial detail appealed to rationalism and created an emotional distance between subject and object. Fuseli described West’s figures as “tame, inexpressive, characterless puppets with derivative heads,” and wrote that West “has no intellect ... [and] absolutely no soul.”⁵⁴ The “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” espoused by J. J. Winckelmann, a major proponent of European Neoclassicism, was according to Fuseli, passive, empty and frigid. Although many artists in England supported Winckelmann’s ideas about art, Fuseli objected to his conservatism:

To him [Winckelmann] Germany owes the shackles of her artists, and the narrow limits of her aim; from him they have learnt to substitute the means for the end, and by hopeless chace [sic] after what they call beauty, to lose what alone can make beauty interesting, expression and mind.⁵⁵

⁵² Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 309.

⁵³ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 309.

⁵⁴ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 169. This was written in a letter from Fuseli to Lavater in June of 1777.

⁵⁵ Henry Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting Volume II* (H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831), 14. Although Fuseli published a translation of Winckelmann’s text: *English Reflections on the painting and sculpture of the Greeks: with instructions for the connoisseur, and an Essay On grace in works of art* (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1767), Fuseli did not agree with many of the ideas proposed in the text. Although he did at

Imitating the ancients, as Winckelmann proposed, had, according to Fuseli, failed to achieve modern artistic supremacy, a result of a fixation on the “celebrated monuments” of the past.⁵⁶ The substitution of the means for the end was an emphasis on art objects rather than the classical ideals that informed them. Winckelmann encouraged artists to copy, and Fuseli, in his art, lectures and presence embodied imaginative autonomy as an ideal. His imagination, however, in the midst of enthusiasm for Neoclassicism, was continually contested as a transgression against artistic propriety. The imagination was often associated with feminine indulgence while a commitment to the *real* past was gendered as masculine and associated with civic humanism.⁵⁷ This opinion is articulated in Reverend Robert Anthony Bromley’s (1735-

first believe that the work had merit, Fuseli became disenchanted with Winckelmann; he was specifically critical of Winckelmann’s ideas about the relationship between the artist and the past. For more on Henry Fuseli’s translation and thoughts on Winckelmann see Jonah Siegel, *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 71-73.

⁵⁶ Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting Volume II*, 14

⁵⁷ Jonah Siegel, *Desire and Excess*, 72. See also, Martin Myrone, “Gothic Romance and the Quixotic Hero: A Pageant for Henry Fuseli in 1783,” *Tate’s Online Research Journal* 1 (2004), 16. For more on eighteenth-century discourse on the imagination see Walter Jackson Bate, “The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism” *ELH* 12 (1945), 144-164. In his thirteenth discourse, Joshua Reynolds discusses the imagination and the power of an imagined scene. He writes, “Like the history painter, a painter of landscapes, in this style and with this conduct, sends the imagination back into antiquity; and like the poet, he makes the elements sympathize with his subject, whether the clouds roll in volumes like those of Titian or Salvator Rosa, or, like those of Claude, are gilded with the setting sun; whether the mountains have sudden and bold projections, or are gently sloped; whether the branches of his trees shoot out abruptly in right angles from their trunks, or follow each other with only a gentle inclination. All these circumstances contribute to the general character of the work, whether it be of the elegant or of the more sublime kind. If we add to this the powerful materials of lightness and darkness, over which the artist has complete dominion, to vary and dispose them as he pleases, to diminish or increase them as will best suit his purpose and correspond to the general idea of his work, a landscape thus conducted, under the influence of a poetical mind, will have the same superiority over the more ordinary and common views as Milton’s “L’Allegro” and “II Penseroso” have over a cold, prosaic narration or description; and such a picture would make a more forcible impression on the mind than the real scenes, were they presented before us.” Reynolds unites the imagination, the poetical mind and the sublime in his discourse. The artist creates a scene, which does not exist, but is a product of his creative mind and skilled hand, translating disparate elements which when perceived alone are not exceptional, but when combined in a painting, achieve a level of grandeur that inspires the awe associated with the sublime. The word imagination, in this text, speaks to our contemporary understanding. The OED defines imagination as “The power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations, and those

1806) *Philosophical and Critical History of the Fine Arts* (1793).⁵⁸ He expresses a potent distaste for Fuseli, an “extravagant libertine,” contrasting his approach to artistic matters against the neoclassical visions of Benjamin West. Bromley considered West a respectable artist, as his work was based on truth and historical fact.⁵⁹ Royal Academician and art critic Edward Dayes (1763-1804) was also more traditional in his artistic outlook and warned that, “Enthusiasm in the arts is often mistaken for genius, which, if not directed by sound judgement, will answer little purpose, and often end in error: this is precisely the case of Fuseli, whose heat is not tempered with the coolness and judgement necessary to an artist.”⁶⁰ Dayes was especially disdainful of

constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously experienced qualities, objects, and situations.” Reynolds references both the power of the imagination to inspire images of ‘remembered objects and situations’ with the landscape painters ability to send one back to antiquity, an image of which Western culture holds in its collective memory, and its ability to elicit sympathy from the viewer. This conceptualisation of imagination, discussed by Walter Jackson Bate as a major component of the Romantic imagination, is important, as I argue that Fuseli intended to inspire an empathetic recognition of the feelings that he was attempting to express with the figure. According to Walter Jackson Bate, Romantic critics took Shakespeare to be their foremost example of this phenomenon. According to Hazlitt, who declared in a lecture on Shakespeare and Milton, Shakespeare’s hold on our imagination was a result of his ability to empathise. He writes, “He had not only had in himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by anticipation, intuitively, into all their conceivable ramifications, through every change of fortune, or conflict of passion, or turn of thought. He had ‘a mind reflecting ages past,’ and present: all the people that ever lived are there...He had only to think of anything in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it.” William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets Delivered at the Surrey Institution* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818), 92. Fuseli came to similar conclusions when speaking about Michelangelo’s success with his Sistine Chapel ceiling, a work that expressed “every attitude that varies the human body” wherein Michelangelo “traced the master-trait of every passion that sways the human heart.” The idea that the imagination had the power to reveal to the artist diverse perspectives is fundamental to understanding Fuseli’s erotic studies. The viewer is able to participate and experience the terror and pain of the victims, unable to breath, subjected to torment and emasculated. The visual struggle of proximity versus distance, clarity versus obscurity and danger versus safety creates a conflict between opposing reactions that allows the viewer to experience the sublime.

⁵⁸ Reverend Robert Anthony Bromley, Preface to *A Philosophical and Critical History of the Fine Arts Painting, Sculpture, And Architecture; With Occasional Observations On The Progress of Engraving ... Deduced From The Earliest Records, Through Every Country In Which Those Arts Have Been Cherished, To Their Present Establishment In Great Britain, Under The Auspices Of His Majesty King George III: Volume II* (London: The Philanthropic Press, 1793), xv.

⁵⁹ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 12.

⁶⁰ Joshua Reynolds, *Portraits: By Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed., Frederick W. Hilles (London: Heinemann, 1952), 108-109.

Fuseli's figures, which he found to be meager, poor and lacking flesh.⁶¹ These criticisms express a division within the artistic community, as many artists and critics resisted the supremacy of imaginative expression. Even Fuseli's colleagues in Rome expressed a marked criticism. Johan Tobias Sergel depicts the artist as an arrogant and ardent Romantic in a *Caricature Portrait of Henry Fuseli* (c. 1770-1778) (Fig. 5).⁶² The drawing represents Fuseli as a rebellious *Sturm und Dranger*, whose resistance to religious and artistic convention is increasingly emotive and despondent. Although his roots were firmly Neoclassical, Fuseli did not equate the elevation of the visual arts with an imitative and lacklustre Neoclassicism. His rejection of Raphael in favour of Michelangelo in his art historical analysis, as well as his theoretical departures from Winckelmann and fervent detestation for the pallid Neoclassicism of Benjamin West position Fuseli as an innovative, if not subversive, character. It is the same character that Sergel depicted in his *Caricature Portrait*. It is important to understand that Fuseli maintained a complex relationship with the antique, adopting some ideas while rejecting others. *The Nightmare*, a striking, iconic work that continues to fascinate scholars for its intrigue and imaginative rather than literary content, illustrates that Fuseli copied specific motifs from antique sources.⁶³ Moreover, although Fuseli adopts classical visual idioms, the narrative and its references to folklore and the power of the imagination indicate the role of what art historian Miles L.

⁶¹ Joshua Reynolds, *Portraits: By Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 108-109.

⁶² Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 169.

⁶³ For example, the horse has been attributed to Phidias, *The Horse Tamers* in the Piazza Quirinale in Rome, the Incubus has been argued to exhibit visual resonances with Gorgon figures or the satyr Marsyas from Greek and Etruscan vases or from a *Roman relief sculpture of satyr in Bacchanalian scene*. The sleeping girl has been argued to share similarities with the *Sleeping Ariadne* or Giulio Romano's *Sleeping Psyche* and the furniture has been argued to share motifs with objects found in *Pompeii or Herculaneum*. Likewise the specific design has been suggested to resemble a *Bacchanalian scene with reclining Maenad* found on a second-century AD marble sarcophagus among other possible referents. For more antique comparisons see Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 14.

Chappell called the “artful eclecticism” in his work.⁶⁴ When confronted with the classical, Fuseli experienced sublime emotions of elation and despair, not the requisite “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.”⁶⁵ Indeed, Fuseli approached antiquity with a Romantic sensibility. In the 1920s, Ernst Wirz described Fuseli as a figure of transition in his dissertation on the artist. He noted that Fuseli was a Classicist in his approach to imitation theory, his concern for form and in his appreciation of the grandeur of history painting, but a Romantic in his theories of genius, adherence to free invention and in the character of his pictures.⁶⁶ Although Fuseli’s relationship with Michelangelo is not discussed in depth until Chapter Two, a comparison between the artists is nonetheless pertinent; in the same way that the Sistine Chapel that Fuseli so admired achieves the perfect High Renaissance expression through Mannerist forms, Fuseli often utilised a classical visual language to express Romantic ideas.

Fuseli was foremost an intellectual, and undoubtedly a product of the cultural atmosphere of his native city of Zürich, which, during the eighteenth century, was the philosophical capital

⁶⁴ Miles L. Chappell, “Fuseli and the ‘Judicious Adoption’ of the Antique in the ‘Nightmare,’” *The Burlington Magazine* 128 (1986), 421.

⁶⁵ Gert Schiff, “Fuseli, Lucifer and the Medusa,” in *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*, trans., Sarah Twohig (Tate Gallery: 1975), 10. Schiff describes the “vehement emotional reaction” that Fuseli felt when confronted with Roman antiquities and the Sistine Chapel. He argues that Fuseli was critical of Winckelmann’s condemnation of Michelangelo and his understanding of antique art as harmonious. Suzanne G. Lindsay describes Fuseli’s “sublime confrontation with the Classical past” in her discussion of the art work *The Artist in Despair over Magnitude of Antique Fragments, 1770-1780*. Works such as this illustrate not only the emotional impact of Roman antiquities, but Fuseli’s peculiar Romantic approbation of them. See Suzanne G. Lindsay, “Emblematic Aspects of Fuseli’s Artist in Despair,” *The Art Bulletin* 63 (1986), 438.

⁶⁶ Ernst Wirz, *Die literarische Tätigkeit des Malers Johann Heinrich Fussli (Henry Fuseli): Ein Beitrag zu den englisch-schweizerischen Beziehungen und zur Aesthetik des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Universität Basel, 1922). Ernst Wirz writes, “Durch seine Nachahmungslehre, den Glauben an einen feststehenden Geschmack, die einseitige Hochschätzung der Form und des grossen Stils in der Historienmalerei hängt er mit dem Klassizismus zusammen. Andererseits gehört er durch seine Genielehre, das Betonen der freien Erfindung, seine genetische Geschichtsbetrachtung und unvoreingenommen Kunsturteile, vor allem aber durch den Charakter seiner Gemälde und Zeichnungen zu den Romantikern.” My translation: “Through his imitation doctrine, belief in a fixed idea and one-sided appreciation for form and grandeur in his history painting, Fuseli’s work can hang alongside the Classicists. On the other hand, in his teaching he stressed the importance of free invention and the genetic study of history, but it was especially the character of his paintings and drawings that made Fuseli one of the Romantics.”

of the German speaking nations in Europe.⁶⁷ His classical education is evident in his erudite approach to visual art, an observation made by a number of his contemporaries, especially Knowles, his earliest biographer, who comments on his artistic motivations, noting that “[Fuseli was] always intent upon the intellectual part of his art.”⁶⁸ This learned approach was perhaps uncommon but not wholly unconventional for an artist, however, Fuseli’s lack of formal training was, and, according to some of his contemporaries, this perceived deficiency was ironically touted as among his greatest assets. The collector and author William Young Ottley (1771-1836) writes,

The genius of Mr. Fuseli was of a very different class. An intimate acquaintance with the learned languages had early enabled him to fill his mind from the rich storehouses of ancient poesy; he was all energy and imagination. But in his youth, not then intending to practice painting professionally, he had not subjected himself, as an artist, to the restraints of an academic education. To curb his genius afterwards was impossible; and to this we must attribute much of that fine wildness of character which distinguishes his performances; not unmixed, it is true, with a certain exaggeration of manner in the drawing and action of the figures, but which still no person of fancy would consent to exchange for the regulated but cold manner too often learned in schools.⁶⁹

The discourse surrounding artistic temperament and temperature attributed heated passion to Fuseli and cool, calculated judgement to West, a comparison rooted in the medieval idea of humours in which the artist was understood to be melancholic or saturnine by nature.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Schiff, “Fuseli, Lucifer and the Medusa,” 10.

⁶⁸ Knowles, *The Life and Writings*, 404.

⁶⁹ Knowles, *The Life and Writings*, 422.

⁷⁰ The Renaissance witnessed a re-emergence of the Aristotelian ideal of genius, understood to be, according to Max Pensky, a “delicate balance between mediocrity and madness.” Max Pensky, author of *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*, writes that both medieval and Renaissance artists and philosophers made use of the melancholic figure, resulting in “the transformation of a dialectic of illness and insight into one of individual genius.” Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 31. Likewise, Frances Yates in *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, notes that the Melancholic humour was reevaluated through Aristotle, and argued to be a sign of genius, wherein madness was understood to be the source of all inspiration and thus the temperament of genius. Yates recounts that “the notion of the melancholy hero whose genius was akin to madness became familiar to the European mind.” Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (Routledge, 2003), xvii. The discourse surrounding genius,

Crucially, Fuseli was a contradiction. He was unsociable and ever in the spotlight, committed to the classical nude but a major figure in an age of Romanticism. Furthermore, he was a Member, Keeper and Professor of the Royal Academy and an avid critic of artistic institutions, a high-minded intellectual with elitist values and the author of extraordinarily popular images: *The Nightmare*, for example, haunted the collective British imagination for several decades through the proliferation of engravings.⁷¹ The complexity of his persona and career created an aura surrounding Fuseli unlike any other working artist in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain.

Given the pervasiveness of works like *The Nightmare* and Fuseli's esteemed position within the Academy, it is not surprising that he had a profound influence on his colleagues and students. Interestingly, there were artists equally drawn to his more intimate delineations. Theodor Von Holst (1810- 1844) produced a series of erotic drawings that are almost indistinguishable from Fuseli's. So similar in style and content are the works that scholars originally misattributed *Erotic Scene with a Man and Two Women* (Fig. 6) to Fuseli when in fact this work belonged to Von Holst.⁷² How and more importantly why such similarities appear between Fuseli and Von Holst can be explained by their relationship. *Recumbent Man, Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* were drawn in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and perhaps shared with Von Holst and Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1794-1847), who may have been members of Fuseli's intimate circle of exchange, given the nature of their

madness and melancholia thus continues into the eighteenth century, and is utilised in comparisons between Fuseli, West and their respective artistic projects.

⁷¹ Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 5. The success of the image was a result of its appeal to the emergent gothic tastes of the British public and was widely disseminated through monochrome prints. Several versions were circulated including an engraving by T. Burke from 1781, a version by T. Holloway, engraved in 1791 and two engravings produced by W. Raddon in 1802 and 1827.

⁷² The misattribution was corrected in 1963 by Gert Schiff. Browne, *The Romantic Art of Theodor Von Holst*, 67.

own erotic art.⁷³ Max Browne, author of *The Romantic Art of Theodor Von Holst 1810-44*, writes,

[T. G. Wainewright] this intimate friend of Holst and Fuseli reportedly possessed a private portfolio of ‘exquisite delineations of the female human form’ and all three artists produced similar works to this with the two disciples [Holst and Wainewright] certainly copying and borrowing from their master and probably each other.⁷⁴

Moreover, Browne emphasizes that this “neglected backwater of Georgian draughtsmanship,” the erotic drawings of the aforementioned British artists, requires further investigation, hinting that misattributions abound.⁷⁵ Von Holst, a child prodigy, was admitted into the academy at the young age of fourteen and became a Fuseli’s pupil, another indication of the strong influence the established artist may have had on his impressionable student. Fuseli’s collection became controversial after 1825, the year of his death. In his memoirs, Haydon documented a conversation between himself and the sculptor, John Flaxman (1755-1826) from 1826 in which the drawings were mentioned. He writes,

‘Poor Fuseli is gone, sir.’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Ah, Mr Haydon, he was a man of genius, but, I fear, of no principle.’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘He has left I understand, behind him, some drawings shockingly indelicate.’ ‘Has he, sir?’ ‘Yes, Mr. Haydon. Poor wretch!’⁷⁶

Beyond the few words exchanged between Haydon and Flaxman, little is known of how the drawings were exposed to a wider audience. Flaxman’s appraisal of the drawings as “shockingly indelicate” confirms their content, but his neoclassical approach to the nude and pious religious

⁷³ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 444. Smith argues that these two men saw his erotic works while he was alive. Fuseli’s colleague and fellow Royal Academician John Flaxman attested to their secrecy after the artist’s death in a conversation with Haydon which was subsequently recorded in a diary entry dated 13 July 1826. Haydon, *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, 494. Camilla Smith likewise argues that the drawings were kept secret from the public and were shared among an exclusive audience only. See Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 420.

⁷⁴ Browne, *The Romantic Art of Theodor Von Holst*, 67. Browne quotes William Hazlitt’s biography of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. See Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, *Essays and Criticism*, ed. William Hazlitt (Reeves and Turner, 1880), xxx.

⁷⁵ Browne, *The Romantic Art of Theodor Von Holst*, 67.

⁷⁶ Haydon, *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, 494. Flaxman speaking to Haydon as recorded in the entry dated 13 July 1826.

disposition were not conducive to the appreciation of Romantic explorations of the erotic sublime; we cannot assume that other artists would have expressed similar sentiments. Artists working in Rome during the 1770s produced sketches of erotic subjects, suggesting that drawing such scenes was a common practice in both Rome and England during this period.⁷⁷ Allan Cunningham (1784-1842), Scottish poet and author of *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, describes the subsequent destruction of the erotic drawings in a telling account. According to Cunningham, Fuseli's widow Sophia Rawlins (1762-1832) destroyed the majority of Fuseli's private drawings:

His love of loose wit and free humour of the old writers of Italy and England was great; as he read them he chuckled with pleasure, and taking up his pencil lent form to such scenes as gladdened his fancy. Those works are entitled to the praise of poetic freedom and vivacity, the humour and the wit triumph over all other levities – and sense has generally the better of sensuality. Fire, however, fell amongst most of these when he died - nor do I blame the hand of his widow who kindled it.⁷⁸

Several issues emerge from this quotation, as Cunningham alludes to literary sources for drawings that “gladdened his [Fuseli's] fancy.” Perhaps Cunningham is referring to the erotic Priapus images executed in Rome for which *humorous* is a plausible adjective. Likewise, it is possible that Cunningham did not see the works, and having heard about them, speculated that Fuseli *must* have sought examples in Renaissance literature such as the erotic poems of the author, playwright, poet and satirist, Pietro Aretino (1492-1556).⁷⁹

The provenance of the “indelicate” drawings is unknown, but it is probable that Sir Thomas Lawrence prevented the destruction of certain erotic sketches when he acquired a

⁷⁷According to Camilla Smith in “Between Fantasy and Angst,” Kevin Salatino argued in an essay entitled *Sex and the Eternal City* that the Swedish sculptor Johann Tobias Sergel and Danish painter Nicolai Abildgaard worked with Fuseli in Rome and produced erotic sketches based on engravings after Romano's sixteen postures by Marcantonio Raimondi. Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst,” 421, 447.

⁷⁸Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects Volume 2* (London: J. Murray, 1830), 348.

⁷⁹Pietro Aretino, *Sonetti Lussuriosi*, 1524. The *Sonetti Lussuriosi* were a collection of erotic poems.

collection of drawings from Rawlins, following her husband's death.⁸⁰ Cunningham describes the burning of many drawings, but does not disclose the reason for the iconoclasm. Perhaps Rawlins, whose resemblance reappears throughout the collection, decided that the drawings were too intimate, for example *Mrs. Fuseli with a curled coiffure, reading* (Fig. 7) and *Mrs. Fuseli, her Hair in Large Rolls, with Pink Gloves in front of a Brown Curtain* (Fig. 8).⁸¹ Alternatively, she could have deemed the studies that once informed the art of her late husband no longer relevant, or burned them in an emotional expression of grief. Gert Schiff has suggested that Fuseli depicted Rawlins in various lights, as his opinion of his wife changed throughout the course of their marriage. The earliest portraits of Rawlins portray an attractive young woman with an obstinate disposition, but later likenesses appear to reveal more oppressive aspects of her nature. Schiff explains that Rawlins' youthfulness and obsession with hair undoubtedly appealed to her much older suitor, and, although she maintained an agreeable composure in social settings, she was reported to be argumentative and vulgar in private, especially towards servants.⁸² Perhaps Rawlins was, in fact, unaware of the portraits and drawings, and on discovering herself depicted unfavorably, burned them. Schiff speculates that since many of the courtesans resemble Rawlins, perhaps Fuseli wished to degrade her through his depictions.⁸³ In contrast, Cunningham appears to believe that the drawings were a source of shame, an idea supported by Flaxman's condemnatory comments. It is reasonable to speculate that Rawlins could not permit their exposure to a wider audience because it risked damaging her reputation. Nevertheless, the

⁸⁰ Peter Tomory, *The Poetical Circle: Fuseli and the British* (Florence: Centro Di, 1979), 92.

⁸¹ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 169. Martin Myrone states that Gert Schiff and David Weinglass have argued that the portraits or studies of women and courtesans are portraits of Fuseli's wife whom he married in 1788. Myrone remains unconvinced that the drawings are portraits, but admits that it is possible, especially given the fact that Sophia Rawlins was an artist's model and that there are certain resemblances.

⁸² Schiff, "Fuseli, Lucifer and the Medusa," 19.

⁸³ Schiff, "Fuseli, Lucifer and the Medusa," 19.

remaining works first aroused academic curiosity in the 1940s and have since provided scholars the opportunity to examine a body of work that was once private and exclusive. The opportunity to investigate these works is a significant one, given that their relevance extends beyond Fuseli and our understanding of his artistic career. These objects provide a unique perspective on early nineteenth-century sexuality in Britain and gender issues during this period. Moreover, as studies, these drawings inform works of art that Fuseli intended to be viewed, sharing both thematic and compositional elements with paintings intended to be displayed at the Royal Academy. The similarities between Fuseli's private drawings and his Academy submissions will be discussed throughout the following chapters in more depth.

‘In Speaking of Fuseli’: A Survey of Recent Scholarship on the Drawings

“In speaking of Fuseli, curiosity, mystification, and obscurity are terms that at once spring to mind.” – Nicolas Powell, *The Drawing of Henry Fuseli* (1951)⁸⁴

“He [Fuseli] gives no clear-cut, straightforward answers. In fact, it is debatable whether he is giving us answers at all, or whether he is simply playing a masquerade with us, fooling us with a virtuoso psychological and artistic performance.” – Werner Hofmann, *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825* (1975)⁸⁵

It seems that the questions Fuseli has provoked us to ask, despite the fact that there may be no definite answers, as Hofmann points out, still remain attractive to scholars. His erotic drawings, however, have failed to muster the same sense of curiosity as his major works, and academics have, with a few exceptions, neglected to engage with these drawings. *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* were the central focus of an in-depth examination, Camilla Smith’s essay entitled “*Between Fantasy and Angst: Assessing the Subject and Meaning of Henry Fuseli’s Late Pornographic Drawings, 1800–25.*”⁸⁶ Smith provides an excellent framework for further investigation, but does not explore the idea of imagination, and situates the works as products of an emergent pornographic culture. Martin Myrone has likewise discussed the drawings and included them in a major exhibition of Fuseli’s work, however, his discussion in the exhibition catalogue is limited. He focuses on the intermingling of sex and death, highly sexualised femininity, thematic infanticide and fetishism in relation to the drawings which he describes as “perverse pornographic vision[s] of the Marquis de Sade.”⁸⁷ Although Myrone’s associations are fruitful, he does not consider the aesthetic qualities of the drawings, which becomes problematic if they are indeed an expression of the sublime. This thesis contests the argument that these drawings illustrate the Marquis de Sade’s perverse world, an argument

⁸⁴ Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli*, 11.

⁸⁵ Hofman, “A Captive,” 29.

⁸⁶ Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst,” 420-447.

⁸⁷ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 173.

advanced in both Smith's and Myrone's contributions. I argue that although Fuseli may have been aware of libertine literature, the drawings are a product of his imagination, and not personal sexual fantasies, nor direct illustrations of literary or real subcultures operating in the social peripheries of London or Paris. Furthermore, although Smith hints at the influence of Edmund Burke on Fuseli, who may have been drawn to his essays on "the sublime effects of pain," neither Smith nor Myrone recognise the works as studies of the sexual sublime or discuss the importance of the Michelangesque figure in these drawings. Smith does acknowledge that the works express a rebellious spirit and voice criticism toward the confining nature of religious and artistic institutions that promoted private interest and encouraged the consumption of decadent art. Nevertheless, the significance of the political woman, who I argue embodies the private citizen, indulging fashionable whim with habitual consumerism, responsible for and emblematic of commercialisation, is not discussed.

Moreover, although Smith explores the critical nature of the drawings towards the detrimental effects of the Royal Academy on the civic humanist ideal of public art, and while she emphasises that these works circulated outside the realm of the Academy, her analysis focuses on the Academy itself. While I agree that Fuseli was critical of the systematic approach to art taught in such institutions, his pessimism was directed towards the public spirit of the British people, which had, in his opinion, been diminished by industrialisation, commerce and the rising middle class. Fuseli created erotic works throughout his career, and those executed before his British debut were likewise circulated among fellow artists, specifically in Rome during the 1770s. These drawings approach sexuality through antique culture, referencing the ancient Greek god of fertility, Priapus. The Roman images do not provoke the same alarming response as, for

example, *Woman Torturing a Child*, but illustrate that Fuseli was not averse to depicting intimate scenes, and that these drawings were circulated outside of Academic institutions.⁸⁸

In spite of the esteemed status Fuseli achieved among painters over the course of his career at the Royal Academy, his prominence declined rapidly after his death in 1825; critics found his style of drawing to be “mannerist,” a term that signalled both the bizarre and exaggerated forms that developed during the late Renaissance and the position of Mannerism as a degenerate stylistic movement in eighteenth-century art-historical discourse.⁸⁹ These conclusions were sustained in England and elsewhere for over a century. Perhaps this is not surprising, as Fuseli, himself, ascertained how ineffectual his work was in a British context, stating once that “Portrait with [the English] is everything. Their taste and feelings all go to realities. The ideal does not operate on their minds.”⁹⁰ The *idea*, or the fundamental concept of a historical painting, sublime or poetic, was absent from traditional portraiture, the dominant genre in the British art market in the late eighteenth century. Fuseli participated in attempts to

⁸⁸ Andrei Pop, “Henry Fuseli: Greek Tragedy and Cultural Pluralism,” *The Art Bulletin* 94 (2012): 87. In *Couple on an Altar before a Herm of Priapus* (1776) (Fig. 34), it is evident that Fuseli is developing his aggressive visual language. The defined musculature of the figures is highlighted through dramatic poses. The woman, whose head is thrown back out of view and whose left arm is held erect while the other bends toward the altar, communicates the intensity of the physical moment. Likewise, the male aggressor clutches the phallus of the sly-looking Herm, emphasising his brute strength and control over the penetrative act. It is difficult to conclude whether the act is consensual, but the drawing does confirm that Fuseli was interested in depicting sexual themes throughout his career. Andrei Pop argues that these images were produced as a response to archeological evidence for Priapic worship; “experiments” in understanding the past. Nudity and sex were fundamental to ancient Greek culture, in their religion and daily life. Fuseli translates this sexuality into an image that is immediate, and is able to do so outside the Academy in the company of like-minded painters.

⁸⁹ Bernhard von Waldkirch, “Fuseli’s Early Drawings: Transformations in Expression” in *Fuseli: the Wild Swiss* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2005), 33. Fuseli was exposed to sixteenth-century Swiss Mannerist prints through his father, whose artistic career provided Fuseli with opportunities to engage with art and artistic ideas at an early age. Smith has also argued that Fuseli was influenced by sixteenth-century broadsheets and humanist texts that would have been available to him through the Zürich library, and she maintains that Fuseli incorporated sixteenth-century motifs into his earliest drawings. See Smith, “Artist as Educator?,” 562. The artist’s interest in Mannerist forms may have been influenced by the prints that he was exposed to and that informed his work during his formative years in Zürich.

⁹⁰ Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary Volume III* (Hutchinson & co., 1924), 91.

establish patronage for historical painting in Britain such as the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery and his own ill-fated Milton Gallery, but as Fuseli observed, “...to expect a system of art built on grandeur, without a total revolution, would only be less presumptuous than insane.”⁹¹ It was presumed that public art should reflect the values of the new viewing public, but art was a commodity, subject to middle class and aristocratic patronage.⁹² In a lecture, Fuseli complained: “The ambition, activity, and spirit of public life is shrunk to the minute detail of domestic arrangements ... and the greatest praise [of art] is to furnish the most innocent amusement for those nations to whom luxury is become as necessary as existence.”⁹³ The privatisation of public art was associated with the domestic sphere, an association made explicit in Fuseli’s critique. Likewise, the display culture of the Royal Academy was sensational and exhibitions were described as spectacles for which even the entrance fee of one shilling did not prevent crowds of people from flocking to the gallery where observation, judgement and comment were frequently reserved for gossip.⁹⁴ It was hardly a conducive environment for the production, recognition and reception of great works of art.⁹⁵

Perhaps the most valuable of the early works on Fuseli is Ruthven Todd’s *Tracks in the Snow* (1946). This text preceded the major studies on the artist published between 1949 and 1956, notably *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli* by Paul Ganz (1949), *The Mind of Henry Fuseli* by

⁹¹ Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, 553. From Lecture XII *On the Present State of Art, and the Causes which Check its Progress*.

⁹² Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, 259.

⁹³ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 48. *Lecture XII*.

⁹⁴ Christopher Frayling, “Fuseli’s The Nightmare: Somewhere Between the Sublime and the Ridiculous,” in *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 9.

⁹⁵ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 51-55. Fuseli describes the institution of the Academy as a symptom of art in distress.

Eudo Mason (1951) and *Fuseli Studies* by Frederick Antal (1956).⁹⁶ In a chapter entitled “The Reputation and Prejudices of Fuseli,” Todd traces the decline of the artist. Five years after Fuseli’s death, Haydon declared that the artist would fade away because of his propensity to pervert nature and misuse form, colour, light, and shadow.⁹⁷ He states,

...Fuzeli, as a painter, must be a warning to all. Had he taken the trouble to convey his thoughts like the great masters, his pictures would have risen as time advanced; yet as time advances, his pictures, from having no hold on our feelings like the simplicity of nature, must sink [*sic*].⁹⁸

His influence on other artists was, however, indisputable.⁹⁹ As a professor at the Royal Academy, Fuseli taught a number of significant British artists. Those influenced by his appeals to eroticism were fewer, but Von Holst and Wainwright illustrate a distinct sexual energy that appears to be drawn directly from their colleague. Likewise, it was predominantly his former students who made an effort to preserve Fuseli in the minds of the public and in British art history. Todd observes that those who admired his work after his death were painters, the same painters who identified a cold emptiness in West’s paintings.¹⁰⁰ William Blake (1757-1827), a former pupil, expressed his ongoing admiration for Fuseli, even as his work became increasingly unpopular. Blake once stated, “This country must advance two centuries in civilization before it

⁹⁶ Paul Ganz, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli* (Chanticleer Press, 1949). Eudo Mason, *The Mind of Henry Fuseli: Selections from his Writings with an Introductory Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951). Frederick Antal, *Fuseli Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

⁹⁷ Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 75.

⁹⁸ Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Painting and the Fine Arts: being the Articles under those Heads contributed to the Seventh Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. William Hazlitt (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1838), 213.

⁹⁹ Tomory, *The Life and Art of Henry Fuseli*, 10. For an extended analysis of Fuseli’s influence on British and European artists, see pages 201-216. For works by James Gillray, Theodor Von Holst and William Blake that demonstrate an affinity with the erotic, fantastical, violent and satirical qualities of Fuseli’s erotic drawings, see also: Myrone *Gothic Nightmares*, 151-204.

¹⁰⁰ Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 79.

can appreciate him.”¹⁰¹ Blake’s prophetic statement anticipates the recent fascination with these drawings, the impetus of this study, nearly two centuries later.

A number of erotic drawings including *A Recumbent Man* and a work later attributed to Von Holst, were acquired by Ruthven Todd in the 1940s. He found them fascinating, obscene and among Fuseli’s finest works of art.¹⁰² Alluring details of elegant coiffures and rosy cheeks from the drawings were included in his book, but he was unable to reproduce entire images due to a “dubious legal system” (Fig. 9).¹⁰³ He does not elaborate on what exactly was dubious about the system, but we can surmise that since he owned the drawings, it was censorship and not copyright issues which prevented him from publishing reproductions. What Todd finds most striking in his analysis is the combination of violence and perfect hair: “Fuseli’s hair fetishism appears in the elaborate headdresses of the women, whose hair, poured and moulded into fantastic shapes, suffers no disturbance from the static violence of which they partake.”¹⁰⁴ Gert Schiff likewise comments on Fuseli’s fetish-like interest in hair in the exhibition catalogue *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*, but it remains unclear to what extent the hairstyles he copied and invented were intended to be arousing.¹⁰⁵ Hair, executed in extreme and arguably unnecessary detail, could suggest a form of caricature. Given the potentially problematic nature of Fuseli’s relationship with his wife, whose portraits almost always included complex, if not unrealistically rendered hair, it is possible that the ornamental head pieces that proliferate throughout his sketches are in some way critical. Powell did recognise that Fuseli’s women were drawn with “a sly sensuousness, and a touch of dry middle-European humour,” and likewise adds that “the

¹⁰¹ Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli*, 24.

¹⁰² Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 93. The drawings were owned by Susan, Countess of Guilford, sold to the collection of Sir Hugh Walpole and thereafter acquired by Ruthven Todd.

¹⁰³ Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 82.

¹⁰⁴ Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Gert Schiff, “Fuseli, Lucifer and the Medusa,” 17.

exaggeration of dress and coiffure, has a suspicion of the style of Beardsley, if only in the stressing of the inessentials of dress rather than character.”¹⁰⁶ The women in the drawings, *Mrs. Fuseli with a curled coiffure, reading* (Fig. 7) and *Mrs. Fuseli, her Hair in Large Rolls, with Pink Gloves in front of a Brown Curtain* (Fig. 8) are believed to be modeled after Fuseli’s wife, Sophia Rawlins, although more contemporary analyses relate that this conclusion is purely speculative.¹⁰⁷ In highlighting her feminine attributes and affection for fashion, it is possible that Fuseli is commenting on gender and the cultural symbolism of femininity. The implications of Fuseli’s hairstyles will be explored further in Chapter Three, but as scholars such as Powell and Ganz have emphasised, fantastical hair contributes to the curious and inexplicable nature of these drawings. It is this inherent mysteriousness, however, that holds them at the forefront of our imaginations.

In the early twentieth century, Fuseli re-emerged in scholarship in a comparatively similar artistic atmosphere.¹⁰⁸ In the 1930s, art historian John Piper compared late eighteenth-century England to his own period, characterised by the same number of artistic schools, equally divergent.¹⁰⁹ Interest in dreams and the subconscious, as expressed in the Surrealist works of Giorgio de Chirico (1888 – 1978), Joan Miró (1893- 1983) Salvador Dali (1904 – 1989) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924), had given rise to new audiences, who took fresh interest in Fuseli.¹¹⁰ Modern viewers were furthermore more accustomed to ambiguity and understood the power of the imagination in creating visual narrative.

¹⁰⁶ Nicolas Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 169. Although Sophia Rawlins had been an artist’s model, Myrone doubts conclusions made by Gert Schiff and David Weinglass that

¹⁰⁸ Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 83. Fuseli was virtually unheard of in the early twentieth century until his works began to disappear to Switzerland where scholar Paul Ganz was conducting research on the artist.

¹⁰⁹ John Piper, *Henry Fuseli R.A., 1741-1825* (London, 1938), 14. Quoted in Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 84.

¹¹⁰ Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 84.

In 2006, Fuseli was the focal point of two major exhibitions, *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* at the Tate Gallery in London and *Fuseli: the Wild Swiss* at the Kunsthhaus in Zürich. Within the context of these exhibitions, the curatorial approach to *Recumbent Man, Three Courtesans Operating* and *Woman Torturing a Child* affirmed that their status as works of art remains unresolved. In the London gallery, the drawings were displayed behind a gauze curtain (Fig. 10). Furthermore, their content was preemptively classified as inappropriate or transgressive through the presence of a printed disclaimer. The curators presupposed the reaction of their audience and perpetuated an aura of taboo that has surrounded these objects since their re-discovery in the nineteenth century.¹¹¹ By hanging these drawings in a secluded gallery space, the sexual relationship between subject and object was heightened.¹¹² The effect was further anticipated by the translucence of the fabric that served to simultaneously reveal and conceal. However, the space had a modern visual appeal, and the white curtain separated the drawings from a larger gallery space, brightly lit with natural light, which invited a visual commentary on the place of these drawings in modernity and within our own social and artistic milieu. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Martin Myrone affirms their irresolute status, writing, “They may not be as simply ingratiating as pornography, but neither perhaps, can they be wholly removed to an ‘elevated’ realm of pure contemplation...”¹¹³ This statement provokes further questions, as it seems to place these works in a space between pornography and art.

¹¹¹ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 42. The curtain was specifically designed by Cotrell & Vermeulen architects.

¹¹² Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 421. Reviews of the exhibition substantiate my claim that these works were treated like pornography. See David Bindman, "Fuseli. Zürich and London," *The Burlington Magazine* 148 (2008): 365. In this review Bindman writes, "The suggestion of psychosexual drama, with images of female dominance and open pornography, also sets Fuseli apart from his contemporaries..."

¹¹³ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 173.

In Zürich, the drawings were hung in a secluded ‘Blue Room,’ perhaps alluding to pornographic films known as “blue movies” and likewise affirming their incongruousness with both the larger themes presented in the exhibition and with Fuseli’s other works.¹¹⁴ The catalogue also revealed a struggle to integrate the drawings, as expressed in the foreword. It reads,

We present Fuseli not only as a painter and a graphic artist, but a businessmen and a teacher at the Royal Academy in London, as a passionate enthusiast for the theatre of his time, and an admirer of beautiful women, and last but not least, we include his erotic work, which has been preserved only in a small number of sheets.¹¹⁵

This summary statement addresses the variety of positions held by Fuseli in his professional life and articulates his interests, but the addition of his erotic work seems to be an afterthought. Although the inclusion of these drawings relates their importance, curators have encountered numerous obstacles in the analysis and display of these objects. It seems that scholars have recognised their importance, but are unable to affirm the status of the drawings within Fuseli’s oeuvre. Christian Klemm contributed an essay entitled “Friedel’s Love and Kreimhild’s Revenge” to the catalogue, and his text is followed by nineteen images of courtesans, portraits of women with their breasts exposed and erotic scenes, but he does not discuss these works except to argue that the biblical Eve is the prototype for the figure of the *femme fatale*. Klemm writes, “He pursues her with relish from the literary heights to the depths of his portraits of courtesans, associated with those of his wife, and pornographic drawings, in which preferably gigantic, bound men are abused by women.”¹¹⁶ Klemm hints at the erotic drawings which are included in his essay, but the reader is left with too many questions to feel satisfied with his sentence-long analysis. In the exhibition catalogue, the label ‘pornography’ provides an authoritative

¹¹⁴ Camilla Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst,” 421.

¹¹⁵ Franziska Lentzsch ed., *The Wild Swiss* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2006), 9.

¹¹⁶ Klemm, “The Principles of Fuseli’s Art,” 155.

perspective on the sexual themes in these works of art, and assumes their function solely as sexual stimulants. Although supportable, this stance negates the possibility that these drawings engage in an aesthetic discourse, and leaves the viewer to contemplate the controversial divide between pornography and art.

If these works are pornographic, do they belong in the gallery space at all? Smith situates *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* in an emergent visual culture of licentious material. According to Smith, these three drawings are predominantly pornographic in that they seek to provoke a state of arousal, an intention symptomatic of changes in eighteenth-century readership and viewing. She argues that the works depict marginal rituals of sexual violence that were performed in brothels in London, reflect a growing body of unofficial knowledge surrounding acts of cutting, share an affinity with the libertine literature of the Marquis de Sade and express an interest in the sublime effects of pain.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, Smith employs biographical information to substantiate an argument that formative experiences in Zürich may have profoundly influenced Fuseli's interest in women's fashion. She maintains that the descriptions of female dress present in the *Discourse der Mahlern* express an anxious fascination that is synonymous with the alluring, but unnatural, fashions and headdresses depicted in the drawings.¹¹⁸ Finally, Smith suggests that the pornographic drawings could represent contempt for religious and cultural institutions serving to voice specific political ideas

¹¹⁷ Smith discusses acts of cutting as ploughing, weaving, circumcision, sacrifice and killing, And she likewise makes reference to Burke's ideas of the sublime effects of pain. She writes, "Fuseli may well have regarded Sade's literary interpretation of the sublime effects of pain as stimulating material for his own pictorial re-enactments of sexual violence."

¹¹⁸ Johann Jakob Bodmer, Johann Jakob Breitinger and Theodor Vetter, *Die Discourse der Mahlern: 171-1722* (J. Huber, 1891). Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 431. The text, compiled by Fuseli's tutors Bodmer and Breitinger, would have been made familiar to him during his school years. Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 431.

among a small audience.¹¹⁹ Although Smith provides a valuable and enlightening formal analysis, she has understated the importance of the *imagination* in the creation of these objects, situating them within a reflective literary sphere. Smith provides a solid foundation for further investigation into Fuseli's drawings, and invites scholars to critically engage with works which are often dismissed as simply pornographic. Her contribution signals a major departure from the tentative approaches taken in exhibitions like *Gothic Nightmares*, and challenges preconceived notions about the value of erotic art. As a response, this thesis asks: is pornographic an appropriate or misleading adjective and can the sexual sublime be proposed as an alternative?

These drawings illustrate the turbulent relationship between sexuality and power. The London exhibition situated Fuseli within the context of the Gothic, a movement which encompassed literature, theatre and the visual arts and exposed the horrors of an age of Enlightenment.¹²⁰ Fuseli explored Gothic themes of violence and sexuality in scenes from epic poems, folk tales and antique literature. According to Myrone these drawings can be evaluated on the same terms as a Gothic novel, as they allowed the viewer to become a voyeur and to indulge in fantasy by vicariously experiencing both sadistic and masochistic pleasures.¹²¹ Myrone implies a masturbatory function for these works, yet the deliberate composition, attention to detail and inner tension in *Recumbent Man* create what Todd has identified as “an extraordinary atmosphere.”¹²² It is, I argue, an atmosphere indicative of an acute artistic engagement. Furthermore, the audience of the popular Gothic novel was massive, diverse and predominantly female while the private drawings circulated amongst an exclusive and intimate

¹¹⁹ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 424.

¹²⁰ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 32.

¹²¹ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 173.

¹²² Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 172.

group of male artists.¹²³ Gothic texts were calculated to titillate, excite and horrify.¹²⁴ Thus these three drawings do not belong in the *horror* genre, indicative of the repulsive in Gothic art and literature, but, as works of *terror* or *pathos* in that they elicit an emotional response, be it alarm, fear or empathy.¹²⁵ In his *Aphorisms on Art*, Fuseli wrote, “Sympathy and disgust are the lines that separate terror from horror; though we shudder at, we scarcely pity what we abominate.”¹²⁶ Fuseli negotiated an artistic territory between the Gothic and the sublime and between popular culture and academic art, what Myrone has called “a blind spot.”¹²⁷ As Craske put it, “One man’s original genius was another man’s perpetrator of cheap artistic gimmicks.”¹²⁸ Fuseli did depict the excess, violence and transgression associated with the Gothic while utilising the same language as Gothic novelists like M. G. Lewis. Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796) has been discussed by Vijay Mishra in her book *The Gothic Sublime*, as “the first literary pornography, a sexual sublime which takes as its object sexual excesses that are not contingent on social restraint or responsibility.”¹²⁹ Mishra, however, falls into the same trap as other scholars investigating the Gothic, inviting the question: how do we define pornography and can a work of art or literature be both pornographic and sublime? What Mishra does recognize is the sexual excess of Monk’s novel which reappears in numerous Gothic texts, including Fuseli’s erotic drawings. It is the kind of excess that disturbs ideological frameworks such as social restraint and responsibility, but which can also be understood in terms of abjection, as a threat to cultural structures and identity by transgressive forms of sexuality. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva, introduces the abject as

¹²³ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 421.

¹²⁴ Martin Myrone, "Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70 (2007): 296.

¹²⁵ Pathos is defined as a quality that evokes pity, sadness or compassion.

¹²⁶ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 89.

¹²⁷ Myrone, "Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle," 297.

¹²⁸ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 35.

¹²⁹ Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, (Albany: Suny Press, 1994), 62.

an oscillation between repulsion and desire, an idea which is mirrored in the concept of the sexual sublime. Kristeva writes,

There looms within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful – a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.¹³⁰

The inescapable boomerang which attracts and repulses and the subsequent feeling of being beside oneself or overwhelmed is particularly relevant because Kristeva discusses these conditions of the abject in terms of the body and taboos. Indeed, Kristeva aligns the abject with the sublime stating the abject “is not the same moment on the journey [as the sublime], but the same object and speech bring them into being.”¹³¹ They share a sense of blurred boundaries, and operate between curiosity and fear. The sexual sublime, in the same way as the abject, assumes a rule or standard of social conduct, subverts it, and in doing so produces the desired viewer response.¹³² On one level, the drawings could be considered bawdy pornographic entertainment, but the juxtaposition of deplorable violence and unsettling ambiguity with a surprisingly delicate beauty tempts one to wonder if they could be something more, an art form that although explicit and shocking, is *also* intellectual and insightful, an idea supported by Knowles:

Although he was happy in delineating playful scenes, yet those which create terror or sympathy in the mind, were his general and favourite subjects, and these he treated with

¹³⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

¹³¹ Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, 11-12

¹³² Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, 15.

great power; yet in carrying the terrible to its utmost limits, I know of no subject from his pencil calculated to create horror or disgust. [*sic*]¹³³

Critics of Fuseli in the early nineteenth century employed their pens against the artist for his commitment to an art of *horror*, however, I suggest that these drawings were intended to appeal not to *horror*, but to *terror*, an elevated aesthetic associated Michelangelo's *terribilità* or an effective expression of frightening power, emotional intensity and awesomeness.¹³⁴ These drawings were intended to be engaged with intellectually, and were available to select viewers who would recognise their appeal to the aesthetic discourse of the sublime.¹³⁵ If we can accept this, then these works cannot be considered only or even primarily pornographic.

¹³³ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 405. If Fuseli treated subjects chosen to elicit terror with great power, as Knowles describes, it is worth comparing Fuseli's drawings to other erotic works that circulated during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. It is important to make this comparison because artists such as Thomas Rowlandson, whose satirical prints are as explicit as *Recumbent Man*, had different artistic motives and audiences. It is apparent that Rowlandson intends his images to be received as comedic, while Fuseli's more disturbing narratives, which may have satirical elements, were certainly not intended to provoke laughter. Indeed, it is critical that Fuseli's intended audience was exclusive, intimate and well versed in the aesthetic theories and artistic values that drove Fuseli's expression. For more on Rowlandson's explicit drawings see Gert Schiff, *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson* (New York: Cythera Press, 1969): xvi. For a more detailed analysis on the import of sexual themes and satire in eighteenth-century British print culture see Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-century London* (New York: Walker and Co., 2006). William Blake, *Annotations to the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed., Edmond Malone (London: 1798), 636.

¹³⁴ *terribilità* refers to awesomeness, frightening power or emotional intensity of conception and execution in an artist or work of art and was originally a quality attributed to Michelangelo by his contemporaries.

¹³⁵ Bradford Mudge, "Romanticism, Materialism, and the Origins of Modern Pornography," *Romanticism on the Net* 23 (2001): 3.

Chapter One: The Sexual Sublime and the Pornographic Problem

“One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous, and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again.” – Thomas Paine (1736-1809), *Age of Reason* (1794)

The sublime and the ridiculous shared a peculiar semblance in the late eighteenth century. The spectacular emotionalism of the sublime could slip into absurdity and become comedic or embarrassing.¹³⁶ In *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805) Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824) wrote, “The ridiculous seems indeed to be always lying in wait on the extreme verge of the sublime and pathetic.”¹³⁷ In extending the limits of visual representation, works that were described by Horace Walpole (1717-1797) as, “shocking, extravagant, very mad, shockingly mad, madder than ever, quite mad,” could be absurd or sublime, depending on the critic, their tastes and their level of involvement in art theoretical discourse.¹³⁸ According to Walpole, the Gothic pictures that hung in the gallery at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1782 were firmly classed as ridiculous, but now exemplify the elevated status of the Romantic sublime. The subjective nature of art criticism that clouded distinctions between the sublime and the ridiculous are at this point in time mirrored in the differences debated in contemporary scholarship between pornographic representation, erotic art and as I argue, the sexual sublime. This chapter will address the problematic classification of these works as pornography and will specifically address the parameters that constitute the difference between pornography and erotic art. First, I provide a brief history of pornography in an effort to demonstrate that the term is, at best inappropriate and at worst anachronistic in discussions of the erotic figural drawings that Fuseli produced in the early nineteenth century. Implicated here is what I see as the true purpose of the drawings as objects of social exchange and an expression of artistic virtuosity, which I will

¹³⁶ Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, (T. Payne, 1805), 414.

¹³⁷ Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry*, 414.

¹³⁸ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 35.

discuss in the context of their circulation among a libertine circle of artists.¹³⁹ Finally, I will elaborate on the erotic implications of the sublime to determine how and why Fuseli mediated an elevated aesthetic into imaginative sexual scenes.

The viewer who looks is not a passive receiver of knowledge but an active participant in the construction of meaning, an idea developed by French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault.¹⁴⁰ In the act of looking, the eye produces knowledge; it extends its function beyond effortless perception to interrogate and assume, a process that has given rise to the term *the eye of power*.¹⁴¹ Foucault investigates the act of looking and determines that the historical lens through which scholars examine the past must necessarily account for a diversity of viewers, historical and contemporary.¹⁴² The word pornography, then, should be applicable to both our contemporary understanding of the works and their status in the early nineteenth century, but as Walter Kendrick has observed the term “has named so many things during the century and a half of its existence that any statement of what it means now must degenerate into nonsense...”¹⁴³ In the nineteenth century, drawings such as *Recumbent Man* were shocking to Royal Academician John Flaxman but not to the young artist Von Holst, who made copies and produced works with similar themes.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, the drawings were preserved in the collection of an aristocratic

¹³⁹ In Rome Fuseli socialised within the libertine circle of artists including John Tobias Sergel, an experience that Susan Mathews argues, heightened his taste for sexually explicit imagery and extreme emotions. In this sense, the group of artists were libertine in their pursuit of eroticism in art. Susan Mathews, Fuseli and the ‘Female Dream’ of Europe in *Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 32

¹⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power” in *Power and Knowledge and Other Essays 1972-77* edit., Colin Gordon (New York: Random House, 1980), 146-166.

¹⁴¹ Foucault, “The Eye of Power,” 146-166.

¹⁴² Foucault, “The Eye of Power,” 146-166.

¹⁴³ Walter M. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), xii.

¹⁴⁴ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 172. Martine Myrone confirms that *Erotic Scene with a man and two women* (c.1822-30) was misattributed to Henry Fuseli, but also suggests that one of the five drawings owned by Todd is also misattributed to Fuseli and is actually a work by Wainewright.

woman, Susan, Countess of Guilford, who maintained a warm friendship with the artist during his lifetime and assiduously collected his work after his death.¹⁴⁵ Diverse reactions indicate that these drawings occupied an irresolute space in their historical context, and incite subsequent viewers to wonder what kind of responses Fuseli intended to provoke.

Pornography did not have a single, static definition in the long eighteenth century, and the history of the word in European culture affirms its evolution.¹⁴⁶ First of all, the word pornography derives from Greek and originally meant the “writings of prostitutes” or “writings about prostitutes.”¹⁴⁷ This association, between prostitution and pornography, was appropriated in the mid nineteenth-century when *pornography* described the prostitution industry and its effect on public health in England.¹⁴⁸ However, in 1909 the term acquired associations with art and literature, and it was not until the 1970s that attempts were made to establish exclusive definitions. George P. Elliott, author of *Against Pornography*, defined pornography as “the representation of directly or indirectly erotic acts with an intrusive vividness which offends decency without aesthetic justification.”¹⁴⁹ Likewise, Fred Berger, author of *Freedom, Rights and Pornography*, defined it as work, “which explicitly depicts sexual activity or arousal in a manner having little or no artistic or literary value.”¹⁵⁰ Berger and Elliott argue that art and

¹⁴⁵ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 341.

¹⁴⁶ The long eighteenth century is the period between 1660, the year of the restoration of Charles II until the death of George III in 1820.

¹⁴⁷ Gwen Brewer and Vern Bullough “Women, Pornography and Prostitution in Eighteenth-century Britain” *Sexuality and Culture* 9 (2005), 14.

¹⁴⁸ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 1. In England, the word pornography appeared in a medical dictionary in 1857 and described prostitution in relation to public hygiene and in 1909 signified descriptions of prostitutes in art and literature.

¹⁴⁹ George P. Elliott, “Against Pornography” in *Perspectives on Pornography* ed. Douglas Hughes (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 72-95.

¹⁵⁰ Fred Berger, “Pornography, Sex and Censorship” in *Social Theory and Practice* (1977), 183-209.

pornography are incompatible by definition.¹⁵¹ In a more recent discussion, philosopher Jerrold Levinson has argued that audience and intention should be considered in the evaluation of erotic representation. Pornography would then be intended as an explicit representation to sexually arouse the viewer in the interests of sexual release while erotic art would assume an aesthetic or intellectual dimension.¹⁵² Levinson maintains that pornography appeals to the viewer “in the name of arousal and release,” and in doing so encourages the viewer “to ignore the representation so as to get at what is represented.”¹⁵³ In contrast, erotic art persuades the viewer “in the name of aesthetic delight, to dwell on the representation and to contemplate it in relation to the stimulatingness or arousingness [sic] of what is represented.”¹⁵⁴ If we allow for the existence of pornographic art, he argues, there will be no way to distinguish between erotic art and pornography.¹⁵⁵ The distinctions are muddled further: the definition for the word pornography in the 2006 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* appears to reject the possibility of pornographic art. It reads, “The explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or sexual activity in literature, painting, film, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings.”¹⁵⁶ What is significant in this definition is the importance of intent.¹⁵⁷ If we accept the OED definition as our contemporary understanding of what constitutes pornography, then *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* are not pornographic because they elicit the sexual sublime, an experience of erotic *and* aesthetic pleasure. It is the combination of the erotic and the aesthetic that has led Myrone to pose the

¹⁵¹ Hans Maes, “Who Says Pornography Can’t Be Art?,” in *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29.

¹⁵² Davies, “Pornography, Art, and the Intended Response of the Viewer,” 62.

¹⁵³ Davies, “Pornography, Art, and the Intended Response of the Viewer,” 63.

¹⁵⁴ Davies, “Pornography, Art, and the Intended Response of the Viewer,” 63.

¹⁵⁵ Davies, “Pornography, Art, and the Intended Response of the Viewer,” 64.

¹⁵⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Pornography,” accessed September 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Maes, “Who Says Pornography Can’t Be Art?,” 32.

question, “What if such designs were literal aids to masturbation, rather than ‘erotic’ explorations of some profound or dark dimension of humanity? Is it possible to imagine that they could be *both*?”¹⁵⁸ The answer is yes, the drawings could be both, but scholarship demonstrates that there has been an overemphasis on their eroticism and an interest in comparing them to pornographic works like the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine*. Such comparisons distract from the investigational purpose of the sketches and situate them within a predetermined, even anachronistically fashioned genre. Although there are semblances between the sadomasochistic literature of the period and these drawings, such associations assume that the text informed the image, while the drawings present original ideas and reflect an interest in the sublime and the power of the imagination. The twofold response of visual pleasure/psychological disturbance and sexual arousal/intellectual engagement allows them to be both; the artist is able to produce the conflicting responses associated with the sublime in a sexual representation. According to the OED, pornography excludes “art” because pornography is “intended to stimulate erotic *rather* than aesthetic feelings,” not intended to stimulate erotic *and* aesthetic feelings. I argue that Fuseli is able to elicit both, and in doing so, creates a vision of the sexual sublime. Even if this analysis is rejected, the question remains: do these drawings qualify as an early nineteenth-century manifestation of pornography?

In the eighteenth century, the divisions between erotica, pornography and libertine or licentious literature and art were not well defined.¹⁵⁹ Although the early modern period was decisive in the development of modern pornography, *pornography* did not exist as a cohesive and distinct genre until the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶⁰ The graphic satire of Thomas Rowlandson,

¹⁵⁸ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmare*, 38.

¹⁵⁹ Julie Peakman, *Mighty Lewd Books*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan: 2003), 5.

¹⁶⁰ Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography*, 10.

works of erotic literature such as John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, the erotica of the Greeks and Romans and the art and literature of the French Enlightenment were not classed into independent genres.¹⁶¹ Likewise, the advent of modern pornography encouraged stringent censorship and encumbered public access to countless erotic texts and images, works that may have been of value to scholars under less restrictive circumstances. The Reserve Room in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, for example, demanded a shrewd application process before admitting persons into the *Collection de l'Enfer* until 1992 and, similarly, the Private Case of the British Library maintained a comparable protocol throughout the twentieth century.¹⁶² Moreover, scholars have been prevented from investigating the erotic works of prolific artists, works that may be integral to understanding the life and art of those individuals. It begs the question: what other major cultural artefacts remain locked in the depths of secret museums and covert libraries? What do we gain from this classification, if works considered pornographic are neither available to scholars nor worth serious criticism?

Art objects are allocated value, prestige and academic recognition while pornographic material is dismissed and in some cases destroyed.¹⁶³ Although her reasons remain unknown, Sophia Rawlins set fire to the erotic drawings of her late husband. Burning erotic material was not an uncommon practice in the nineteenth century: Richard Burton's translation of *The Perfumed Garden* (1886), for example, was destroyed by his spouse after his death and John Ruskin was believed to have set fire to a large number of J. M. W. Turner's sexually explicit drawings.¹⁶⁴ Perceived artistic repudiation may have instigated the destruction of art considered

¹⁶¹ John Cleland, *Memoirs of a woman of Pleasure or Fanny Hill* (London: 1749).

¹⁶² Alison Moore, "Arcane Erotica and National 'Patrimony,'" *Cultural Studies Review* 18 (2012): 196-216.

¹⁶³ Maes, "Who Says Pornography Can't Be Art?," 38.

¹⁶⁴ Maes, "Who Says Pornography Can't Be Art?," 39.

‘licentious’ or ‘obscene’ produced by otherwise celebrated artists. Significantly, in Ruskin’s case, the alleged iconoclasm did not actually occur, as Ruskin could not bring himself to ruin the works, and reported their destruction, it seems, to preserve his own moral standing among his colleagues and to sustain Turner’s reputation.¹⁶⁵

Moreover, the perception of transgression has allowed other artists’ erotic art to remain unexamined. Adam Komisaruk, a specialist in British Romanticism and eighteenth-century British culture, recently expressed criticism towards his discipline for their “sheepish evasion” and “smirking insinuation” in their discussions of Thomas Rowlandson’s erotic prints (1756-1827).¹⁶⁶ This “sheepish evasion” could also be applied to Fuseli. Despite the publication of major social histories of pornography in recent years, which have allowed for serious academic interest in erotic material to move forward, Fuseli’s sexually explicit drawings have provoked modest art historical investigation.¹⁶⁷ In the following segment, I will delineate a selective history of erotic material in the early modern period to demonstrate that *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* have stronger genre affiliations with erotic literature than modern pornography, and since a definitive genre of pornography did not exist in the early nineteenth century, it is problematic to discuss them as such.

¹⁶⁵ Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves* (Paris: privately printed, 1922), 400. Frank Harris recorded a conversation between himself and Ruskin. Harris recounts the words of Ruskin. “I came across a portfolio of the most shameful sort - the pudenda of women - utterly inexcusable and to me inexplicable...I took the hundreds of scrofulous sketches and paintings and burnt them where they were, burnt all of them. Don’t you think I did right? I am proud of it, proud...” Harris interjects, “and his lower lip went up over the upper with a curious affect of most obstinate resolution.” For an in depth discussion of why Ruskin felt compelled to lie about burning Turner’s erotica see Ian Warrell, “Exploring the Dark Side: Ruskin and the Problem of Turner’s Erotica” in *Turner’s Secret Sketches* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012).

¹⁶⁶ Adam Komisaruk, “Pygmalion’s ‘Wanton Kind of Chace’: Hogarth, Rowlandson and the ‘Line of Beauty,’” *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 33 (2004), 369.

¹⁶⁷ Komisaruk, “Pygmalion’s ‘Wanton Kind of Chace,’” 369.

The first widespread circulation of erotic literature occurred after the advent of printing in the sixteenth century; but it was not until the long eighteenth century that erotic literature became a common literary genre in England.¹⁶⁸ The circulation of erotic literature in early modern England, however, is not synonymous with the modern consumption of pornography. This fact is illustrated by Ian Moulton, author of *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England*, in his analysis of seventeenth-century lyric poetry.¹⁶⁹ Explicitly erotic writing, he argues, was not sold by booksellers to the public, but circulated in manuscripts among wealthy, male university students or members of the Inns of Court.¹⁷⁰ Moulton quotes a passage from the *Diary of Samuel Pepys* to illustrate what he argues is the difference between the consumption of pornography and the circulation of erotic literature in the seventeenth century. In 1668, Pepys purchased a copy of the French novel *l'escolle des filles* [*sic*] and described his reading experience:

We sang till almost the night, and drank my good store of wine; then they parted, and I to my chamber, where I did read through *l'escolle des filles*, a lewd book, but what doth me no wrong to read for information sake (but it did hazer my prick para stand all the while, and una vez to decharger); and after I had done it I burned it, that it might not be among my books to my shame.¹⁷¹

Moulton stresses that the shameful, consumptive and private nature of the experience reflects a modern experience of pornography, exhibiting an inward-turning subjectivity rare for the seventeenth century.¹⁷² The social eroticism of the 1600s transformed in the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment and its emphasis on the individual. Read in a private setting, the book arouses the reader and incites him to relieve his inflamed sexual desire through masturbation,

¹⁶⁸ Gwen Brewer and Vern Bullough “Women, Pornography and Prostitution in Eighteenth-century Britain” *Sexuality and Culture* 9 (2005), 14.

¹⁶⁹ Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁷⁰ Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 30.

¹⁷¹ As quoted in Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 36.

¹⁷² Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 36.

and then is cast to the flame, having no further value to him. Pepys was famously aware of his library as a collection, and the books, it seems, were carefully chosen. The book itself is incriminating and Pepys expresses his shame at the prospect of it being discovered among his belongings. The erotic manuscripts, however, were not bought and sold or read in private, but coveted among an exclusive and elite audience.¹⁷³ The manuscripts were objects of social exchange, what Moulton describes as a “cultural property shared in common.”¹⁷⁴ He suggests that these works may have been read aloud in groups and at gatherings, and it is probable that erotic drawings were exchanged in a similar manner, where artists would examine and discuss them in exclusive, but nonetheless social settings.

I argue that Fuseli’s erotic drawings were shared in similar circumstances. Both Holst and Wainwright executed erotic drawings, and given that the style and content of these works appears to be drawn from Fuseli, it is probable that the artists exchanged and discussed their works. Likewise, their social function may be compared to the exchange of similarly erotic works in Fuseli’s Roman circle. Alongside Johan Tobias Sergel, Fuseli produced erotic scenes of Priapic worship that were shared among a libertine circle of artists working in the city during the 1770s (Fig. 22) and (Fig. 23).¹⁷⁵ The purpose of the drawings as objects of social exchange proves that these drawings were more than private fantasies.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the satirical images that Sergel produced in the same period have an overt eroticism that resonates with his more

¹⁷³ Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 37. The manuscripts were received as gifts and even passed down through inheritance, relating their value and perhaps suggesting that they signalled coming of age in a male exclusive community.

¹⁷⁴ Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 37.

¹⁷⁵ The similarity of explicitness, style and medium suggest that these artists were aware of the erotic drawings of their colleagues. See Gert Schiff ed., *Henry Fuseli: 1741-1825*, Tate Gallery (London: 1975) and Nancy L. Pressly, *The Fuseli Circle in Rome: Early Romantic Art of the 1770s* (New Haven: The Yale Centre for British Art, 1970), 32. Pressly writes, “Rome heightened Fuseli’s taste for explicitly sexual imagery and extreme emotions within the Libertine circles associated with Johan Tobias Sergel.”

¹⁷⁶ Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 37.

explicit designs, suggesting that the production and circulation of satire equally served to express criticism, encourage discussion and exhibit wit and skill. According to art historian Arline Meyer, Serigel exchanged satirical drawings with Swedish intellectual Pehr Tham (1737-1820), Swedish painter Elias Martin (1739-1818), Danish painter Nicolai Abildgaard (1743-1809), artist Carl Ehrenswald and Fuseli while in Rome and later through letters.¹⁷⁷ It is equally likely that Fuseli maintained multiple artistic circles in which he exchanged different kinds of work, and why for example, his late erotic drawings appear to exist in a smaller circle of exchange. Likewise, as Fuseli became an established artist with a reputation to maintain, it is probable that he wished to limit his audience to his most intimate of colleagues. It is the intended audience, the awareness of that audience and the visual riddles interwoven into the images that Fuseli tailored to that specific audience that differentiates the artist's erotic drawings from modern pornographic experiences. The drawings are contextualised within social circumscription; the transition from communal sharing to solitary consumption occurred with the emergence of the private sphere in the early modern period and consequently displaced sexuality in social life.¹⁷⁸

Recumbent Man, the most explicit drawing, has an intellectual element that would be superfluous in an image intended for sexual purposes exclusively. There is a Greek inscription, located on the bottom right of the image, and although Myrone states that it may function as a veil of pretension, I argue that it assumes an audience literate in classical language and versed in Greek literature.¹⁷⁹ The text translates to, "Thus fatal to my foes / Be Love" and is taken directly from a play by Aeschylus concerning the heroic and tragic tale of Prometheus. The significance

¹⁷⁷ Arline Meyer, "Regency Rowlandson: Thomas Rowlandson's studies after (long after) the Antique" *The British Journal* 10 (2009): 57.

¹⁷⁸ Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 37.

¹⁷⁹ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmare*, 38. References to public works of art include similarity of the exaggerated musculature of the three women in *A Recumbent Man* to Michelangelo's figures from the fresco cycle in the *Sistine Chapel* and Fuseli's R. A. exhibited painting *The Nightmare*.

of the quotation could, as Myrone suggests, give an intellectual edge to an otherwise lascivious image, but I argue that the reference to Prometheus situates *Recumbent Man* as one image in a larger collection of Fuseli's Prometheus narratives. The imagined scene is not explicit in its attempt to inspire terror, and Fuseli's subtle hints require the active participation of the viewer to construct meaning. It is the kind of inexplicable drawing that fascinated Powell, who recognised that Fuseli "...left much in the air, much to be added by the individual, indeed much mental exercise to be performed by the beholder."¹⁸⁰ The protagonist, like Prometheus, is bound, but similarities between the heroic tale and this drawing are few. Perhaps Fuseli is commenting on love or the fulfillment of sexual desire as some kind of hazardous pursuit, or maybe he is establishing a visual association with the fallen hero, alluding to the unseen danger that the quotation implies. The recumbent man does not appear unwilling until the viewer notices the unnatural arch of the male body, his lifeless legs and the position of the right-most woman over his face, potentially impeding his ability to breathe. Moreover, why would Fuseli fashion his drawing with an intellectual veil when it was prevented from reaching the discerning public? Why bother? Thus the quotation illustrates that eroticism is not the singular focus of the work and demonstrates that the opposing elements are espoused to create the disjuncture associated with the sublime experience.

Physical suffering became a motif in Gothic representation, and proponents of the Gothic movement often depicted the experience of pain in scenes with overt sexual references.¹⁸¹

Prometheus Bound (c. 525 – 455), the Greek tragedy by Aeschylus, became a popular subject among British artists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when Robert Potter's

¹⁸⁰ Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli*, 27.

¹⁸¹ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 53.

English translation was published in 1777.¹⁸² Artists adopted Prometheus as an allegorical representation of creativity and a model of heroic rebellion.¹⁸³ The myth described the trials of Prometheus, a Titan who disobeys the gods to give fire to humanity. The gods, furious with his defiant act, subject him to eternal punishment, and he is bound to a mountain in the Caucasus by Kratos, Bia and Hephaestus. Each day, an eagle is sent to feast upon the fallen hero's liver, an organ that regenerates endlessly to fulfill the punishment. Fuseli and his artistic circle depicted Prometheus as a Romantic symbol of self determination, and the tragic consequences of asserting oneself against governing institutions.¹⁸⁴ Collectively, their drawings emphasise the inherent violence of the original myth, and accentuate the tense musculature and suppressed energy of the bound and sexualised male body. The relationship between sexuality and violence is markedly pronounced in the scenes imagined by Fuseli, specifically in *Prometheus* (Fig. 24) and *Hephaestus, Bia and Crato Securing Prometheus on Mount Caucasus* (Fig. 25). The former image is a product of a 'five-point' drawing game, practiced in Rome among members of Fuseli's circle. By placing dots in a random pattern on a sheet of paper, the draughtsman was challenged to quickly complete a successful figure, whose limbs were drawn to reach each dot.¹⁸⁵ The objective was to exhibit virtuosity, and the result of this five-point *Prometheus* is a muscular figure pressed inward to protect himself, but in an intriguing departure from the myth, it is not the liver he intends to preserve, but his virility.¹⁸⁶ The phallus, or the body-become-phallus, is

¹⁸² Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 53.

¹⁸³ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 53.

¹⁸⁴ Martin Myrone "Perverse Classicism" in *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, (Tate Publishing, 2006), 53. Richard Cosway, Thomas Banks, John Flaxman and George Romney all produced drawings of Prometheus, which emphasized violence and sexuality.

¹⁸⁵ Régis Michel, *la peinture comme crime: part maudite de la modernité* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2001), 90.

¹⁸⁶ Michel, *la peinture comme crime*, 90.

threatened by the sharp and wicked beak of the incoming eagle, who means to feast upon it.¹⁸⁷ The conventional narrative is, thus, being retold as story of castration.¹⁸⁸ The Prometheus drawings, specifically the five-point image, are relevant to my argument because they illustrate a continued interest in themes of binding, confinement, sexuality and virility, and also because they were circulated in similar environments.

The sexual tension afforded by *Prometheus Bound* is made more explicit in *Hephaestus, Bia and Crato Securing Prometheus on Mount Caucasus*. In the drawing the hero awaits a fatal blow to the chest, and the female figure, Bia, appears to crouch tenderly over his rigid body in the moment before the act. However, a closer look informs the viewer that the character of Bia, a female personification of force or violence, plays an active role in positioning the penetrative weapon. The absent phallus of the assailant is replaced by a procession of phallic symbols that draw the eye upward from Prometheus' genitalia to the stake held steady and erect, succeeded by the buttocks of the male aggressor, clenched tight in anticipation. Finally the eye rests on his poised and upright pickaxe, communicating a subplot of rape and female dominance. *Recumbent Man* invites the viewer to make comparisons between the protagonists while providing subtle hints that suggest a violent subtext. In a biographical read, it could be argued that Prometheus represents artistic confinement, where original genius is abandoned in favour of academic convention or prevailing Bourgeois taste. As an artist with perceived Mannerist tendencies and a Romantic sensibility, Fuseli was not successful as a commercial artist outside of a small group of patrons. Perhaps the bound male hero symbolises the fate of the ardent Romantic artist, or as the sexual intrusion of a woman appears to comment on gender, the male artist subjected to the luxuriant whims of the female consumer. Fuseli conceals the penis of the aggressor, so that the

¹⁸⁷ Michel, *la peinture comme crime*, 90.

¹⁸⁸ Michel, *la peinture comme crime*, 90.

weapon acquires phallic symbolism and, in doing so, heightens, the sadistic eroticism of the scene.¹⁸⁹ Fuseli's private drawings, it appears, are composed in a manner that utilises obscene behavior to elicit an experience where reason is suspended and danger looms. In *Hephaestus, Bia and Crato Securing Prometheus on Mount Caucasus* and *Recumbent Man*, the threat of emasculation in an overtly sexual scene elicits the terror of the sexual sublime.

In the analysis of erotic art, obscenity is in the eye of the beholder. The bench-mark example of this from conventional art history is found in the nudes of Michelangelo. His nudes may appear relatively tame to modern eyes, but the Council of Trent (1545-63) censored *The Last Judgment* because they believed it was in violation of morality.¹⁹⁰ The Council of Trent was formed as part of a larger Christian project to censure, alter or destroy works of art that offended Christian values. Critics of *The Last Judgement* were concerned not with the explicit content but with the audience of the work. The original fresco was available to a privileged and well educated audience, but reproductions and prints were available to a wider viewing public, and it was the viewing public that the Council of Trent took issue with during a period of reform.¹⁹¹ In 1563, Daniele de Volterra, a pupil of Michelangelo, was commissioned to obscure the genitalia in the work to prevent the misuse of the image's inherent sensuality by the lower classes, a decision that was made despite the knowledge that the representation of exposed human flesh was for Michelangelo a neo-platonic expression of divinity.¹⁹² Prior to the advent of Christianity, the nude was commonplace, and sexual acts were painted in domestic spaces and on everyday objects: ancient Roman lamps, vases, mirrors and pottery depicted a plethora of sexual

¹⁸⁹ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*. 67.

¹⁹⁰ Gert Schiff, *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson* (New York: Cythera Press, 1969): xvi.

¹⁹¹ Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment: The Renaissance Response* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 48.

¹⁹² Gert Schiff, *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson*, xvi.

activities.¹⁹³ These designs were intended to entertain, and viewers were invited to appreciate the image as well as the craftsmanship of the object.¹⁹⁴ By the eighteenth century, the presence of sexual imagery on a functional, everyday object would have been unusual. In 1780, Pierre Sylvain Maréchal (1750-1803) published a nine volume catalogue illustrating the relics unearthed at the archaeological digs at Pompeii that he considered obscene. Maréchal could not excuse the proliferation of sexual themes in Roman art. He writes,

I know of no way to justify the Ancients in this cynical habit. Their imagination, inflamed by the lure of pleasure desired that all objects, even the most indifferent and alien to this purpose, should remind them of what seems to have been the sole focus of their existence.¹⁹⁵

But Fuseli was not offended by the proliferation of sexual imagery in Roman culture, and instead asserts a classical awareness of all aspects of nature. In *Aphorisms on Art*, Fuseli writes,

The expression of the ancients, from the heights and depths of the sublime, descended and emerged to search every nook of the human breast... the expression of the ancients explored nature even in the mute recesses, in the sullen organs of the brute; from Argus of Ulysses, to the lamb, the symbol of expiatory resignation, on an altar, and to the untameable feature of the toad. The expression of the ancients roamed all the fields of licit and illicit pleasure; from the petulance with which Ctesilochus exhibited the pangs of a Jupiter delivered by celestial mid-wives, to the libidinous sports of Parrhasius and from these to the indecent caricature which furnished the Crassus with a repartee.¹⁹⁶

This passage articulates that the ancients were interested in depicting the unexplored realms of human experience. The libidinous sports of Parrhasius refer to erotic paintings of the *illicit pleasures* described by Fuseli that were nonetheless chosen as appropriate subjects for art. Fuseli was concerned with the full range of experience to the extent that scholars have argued his oeuvre to be a visual Encyclopédie of human experience.¹⁹⁷ In one of the first discussions of

¹⁹³ Bette Talvacchia, "Classical Paradigms and Renaissance Antiquarianism in Giulio Romano's "I Modi"" *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 7 (1997): 82.

¹⁹⁴ Talvacchia, "Classical Paradigms," 83.

¹⁹⁵ Talvacchia, "Classical Paradigms," 83.

¹⁹⁶ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 93.

¹⁹⁷ Warner, "Invented Plots," 27.

Fuseli's late erotic drawings, Hofman argued that the esoteric erotic visions were indicative of a desire to explore the endless variations of a formal idea.¹⁹⁸ He maintained that the anatomical accuracy and athleticism of the figures, victims and aggressors, invoke, "the ambivalent core of experience composed of the extremes of triumph and despair."¹⁹⁹ Hofman notes the artist's attraction towards extremes. It seems as though Fuseli believed that *all* variants, including the *full* range of sexual experiences, should be investigated. Writing about Fuseli in the 1950s, when few English scholars were doing so, Mason described "the daring pencil [of Fuseli] that appear[ed] ever on the stretch to reach the upmost boundary of nature."²⁰⁰ This preoccupation with human experience and expression led the artist to his own heights and depths of the sublime, a fact that even the earliest studies recognised in his figural expressions.²⁰¹ Moreover, Fuseli was also interested in depicting the inner and unseen world of the mind, which he successfully communicated through the figure. The corporeal and the subconscious mind converge in works like *Vision of the Lazar House* (Fig. 26). The figures, in various defeated, extravagant or strange postures, emphasize, as Knowles noted, Fuseli's interest in extreme states of mind, particularly madness. He describes the painting:

as a composition of seventeen figures, and parts of figures, in which the painter creates both terror and pity in the spectator, by judiciously excluding most of those objects represented by the poet as suffering under bodily diseases calculated to create disgust, and confining himself chiefly to the representation of the maladies of the mind, which are so forcibly described by the passage, 'Demonic Phrensy, moping Melancholy And moon-struck Madness [*sic*].'²⁰²

Fuseli expresses the inner mind through the actions, posture, expression and energy of his figures. Is it possible that the figures populating the most aggressive of Fuseli's erotic drawings

¹⁹⁸ Hofman, "A Captive," 32.

¹⁹⁹ Hofman, "A Captive," 33.

²⁰⁰ Eudo C. Mason, *The Mind of Henry Fuseli* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1951), 289.

²⁰¹ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 93.

²⁰² Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 222.

are also manifestations of madness? I speculate that Fuseli was investigating the relationship between insanity and sexual desire, a relationship with sublime potential. British historian, Roy Porter, wrote very poignantly about mental illness, stating that “The meanings of madness are thus manifold, equivocal, and hard to interpret...”²⁰³ Consequently, the challenge of visualising madness would have appealed to the artist for these reasons. Porter continues,

...Can we ever hear the mad themselves speaking – indeed communicating their thoughts down the ages? ...With the insane, we are seeing quite distinctive power relations. Even so, it is important to get inside the heads of the mad: For one thing, their thought-worlds throw down a challenge, being at once so alien and yet so uncannily familiar, like surrealist parodies of normality.²⁰⁴

Porter, writing about madness from a contemporary standpoint, nonetheless summarises the appeal madness may have had to Fuseli as an artist investigating human experience with a marked interest in the visual power of the sublime. The sublime has in common with Porter’s conceptualisation of madness the state of being two things at once. Madness is strange and perplexing, yet, as Porter recognises, uncannily familiar.²⁰⁵ Despite our opposition, we can understand madness in an intimate, albeit frightening way. Likewise, the sublime in art utilises conflicting responses to affect the viewer, opposing emotion against reason and pleasure against

²⁰³ Maxamillian Novak, “Sex, Madness and Suicide in Sir Herbert Croft’s Love and Madness,” in *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-century Literature*, ed. Jolene Zigarovich (New York: Routledge, 2013), 165.

²⁰⁴ Novak, “Sex, Madness and Suicide in Sir Herbert Croft’s Love and Madness,” 165.

²⁰⁵ The uncanny is an experience of fear caused when confronted with that which was once well known or familiar. It causes a person to feel anxious about a real or imagined situation or object. According to Freud, this feeling results from the re-emergence of repressed infantile complexes such as fear of castration. This is relevant for Fuseli’s *Woman Torturing a Child* and *Three Courtesans Operating*, given the powerlessness of the bound males and the ambiguous intentions of the female aggressors. Although less obvious, the uncanny could also be experienced while viewing *Recumbent Man*. The threat of castration is not explicit, but implied violence turns an image that is seemingly designed to arouse and please into an image that creates fear and unease. It appears, at first glance, to be a familiar scenario. The familiarity of the scenario is likewise enhanced through our contemporary cultural lens, as our visual culture is saturated with pornographic images. The implications of violence are hidden under this veil of familiarity, creating tension and provoking an experience of the uncanny. If the women that populate these drawings are intended to represent specific maladies of the mind, then Porter’s explanation of the uncanny effects of madness is pertinent. See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin UK, 2003). See also Nadine Beck, *Discussing the ‘uncanny’ from Sigmund Freud’s Essay “Uncanny” in Relation to Surrealism* (Munich: Grin Verlag, 2007), 3.

fear. In *Recumbent Man*, the viewer is confronted with an explicit image of erotic activities, and his primary response is curiosity, a natural attraction to look at what is taboo. Upon further examination, the viewer is presented with questions that challenge an unencumbered viewing experience. He notices subtle hints of distress in the posture of the male figure and an overemphasis on the comfort and control of the female participants. The posture of the male figure presents two possible narratives: Does the curvature of his torso anticipate the moment of sexual release or the moment before the collapse of the body that follows suffocation? Do inanimate limbs indicate the relaxed state post orgasm or do they express the despondency of defeat? Is it sexual arousal that causes the erect penis to perform or the onset of rigor mortis? If we choose the latter narrative, then we find ourselves in one of Fuseli's "surrealist parodies of normality," where sexual desire and madness intertwine in truly fascinating ways.²⁰⁶ This intermingling of madness, sex and death was not exclusive to Fuseli: Sir Herbert Croft's novel *Love and Madness* (1780) explored similar themes.²⁰⁷ Croft, like Fuseli, attempts to explore the inner mind of his protagonists, albeit using literary conventions. Maximillian Novak's essay in *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-century Literature* explores sex, madness and suicide in Croft's novel.²⁰⁸ He argues that the text exemplifies the way in which late eighteenth-century sensibility interpreted the combination of sexual desire and the impulse toward self-harm.²⁰⁹ The book, he maintains, is a study in sexual desire, a compulsion to commit murder, suicide and temporary insanity.²¹⁰ The prevalence of these ideas in late eighteenth-century literature and in Gothic and Romantic art, suggests that Fuseli was likewise contributing to an *ongoing* aesthetic investigation.

²⁰⁶ Novak, "Sex, Madness and Suicide in Sir Herbert Croft's *Love and Madness*," 165.

²⁰⁷ Sir Herbert Croft, *Love and Madness* (G. Kearsley, 1780).

²⁰⁸ Novak, "Sex, Madness and Suicide in Sir Herbert Croft's *Love and Madness*," 165.

²⁰⁹ Novak, "Sex, Madness and Suicide in Sir Herbert Croft's *Love and Madness*," 165.

²¹⁰ Novak, "Sex, Madness and Suicide in Sir Herbert Croft's *Love and Madness*," 166.

In looking at these drawings, Burke's emerging theories on pain as an aesthetic experience seems to provide answers.²¹¹ The ability of the viewer to empathise when confronted with the suffering of another individual was for Burke, an aspect of the sublime experience.²¹² Burke cautions that a degree of distance is necessary to maintain the sublime: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful [*sic*]." ²¹³ The limits of the picture plane provide the necessary distance, because although the viewer is able to empathise with a victim, they are not presently in danger themselves. Fuseli experiments with distance in the confined space of *Recumbent Man* and in the closeness of the action to the viewer in *Woman Torturing a Child*. Each provides a level of proximity that creates an unsettling sense of immediacy.

Moreover, the sublime was proposed as an aesthetic of reform in *An Enquiry*; Burke challenges the supremacy of the beautiful, a feminine aesthetic that brought to mind the commodities of modern consumption, a supremacy not easily reconciled with ideal masculine virtue.²¹⁴ The ease of the beautiful, its pleasant and uncomplicated smoothness, presented no intellectual challenge, complexity or danger and was allied with luxuriant femininity.²¹⁵ Burke describes the effect of the sublime and the beautiful within the framework of the body. He imagines the beautiful to cause an "inward sense of melting and languor," as "beauty acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system."²¹⁶ Myrone argues that Burke's concept of the beautiful

²¹¹ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 101.

²¹² Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, Pornography*, 101.

²¹³ Edmund Burke, "Section VII of the Sublime," in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (J. Dodsley, 1767), 111.

²¹⁴ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11. See also: Ian Balfour, "(The) Sublime Sex, Beautiful Bodies, and the Matter of the Text," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39 (2006).

²¹⁵ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11

²¹⁶ Burke, "Section VII of the Sublime," 233.

softens not only the body, but the ethical, political and sexual structuring of society.²¹⁷ In opposition to degenerative relaxation, Burke proposes the sublime effects of *labour* as “an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles.”²¹⁸ The beauty of the women, absorbed in pleasure, is contrasted with the defined musculature and tension in the male body in *Recumbent Man*, who embodies the sublime idea. Myrone poignantly summarises the effect: “The eye, before a great and Sublime scene is tested; the body, shocked by novelty or terror, hardens; the minds expands.”²¹⁹ This concept of the sublime is mirrored in Fuseli’s *Aphorisms on Art*, when he writes, “Whatever hides its limits in its greatness—whatever shows a feature of immensity, let the elements of Nature or the qualities of animated being make up its substance, is sublime.”²²⁰ In this statement, Fuseli calls attention to a division between sublime nature and the sublime figure. The “animated being,” or the figure, must hide its limits through exertion, and demonstrate its greatness in the power of that exertion. Fuseli would emulate the “grand contours” of Michelangelo not only in the precise lines that enclosed the human form in his works, but also in his figural poses, which were considered by many eighteenth-century artists, critics and connoisseurs, to be sublime.²²¹ The tension in the musculature of the seated man in *Three Courtesans*, and the pronounced contours of both the men and the women in *Recumbent Man*, exhibit the same qualities of the heroic masculine forms designed by the most sublime of Renaissance painters.

²¹⁷ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11.

²¹⁸ Burke, “Section VII Of the Sublime,” 216.

²¹⁹ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11.

²²⁰ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 74.

²²¹ Michael H. Duffy, “Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995), 223. Duffy also points to the artist James Barry and the historian and critic Robert Bromley as proponents of a sublime Michelangelo. Reynolds, *Discourses*, 273. Reynolds describes the “grand contours” of Michelangelo in his *Discourses*.

Michelangelo was central to the development of the sublime idea in Fuseli's work, but the artist was certainly influenced by his contemporaries, predominantly Edmund Burke. Although there is no evidence that Fuseli read German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), his theory of the sublime as an effect both agreeable and disagreeable, attractive and repulsive, is pertinent. Although Kant's theories may not have informed Fuseli, his explanation is nonetheless helpful in that it illuminates the viewer's experience of the aesthetic. Kant describes the sublime sensation as a movement between poles caused by opposing responses:

The mind feels itself moved in the representation of the sublime in nature, while in aesthetical judgements of the beautiful it is in restful contemplation. This movement may be compared to a vibration, i.e. to a quickly alternating attraction toward, and repulsion from, the same object.²²²

The persuasive force of sexual desire is pushed and pulled as a result of reason. The illicit creates a discord between the impulse to withdraw and the impulse to proceed. The drawings exhibit an artistic virtuosity, strategically composed of disparate elements of the sublime and the beautiful.²²³ The combination of rosy cheeks, swollen breasts, ropes, whips, ribbons and hair pins is perplexing, but the intimate audience of the drawings in the early nineteenth century may have been inclined to accept their combination as an attempt to produce the sexual sublime. It could even be argued that sublime experience is analogous to male orgasm in the context of viewing, particularly if we employ Kant's description of the sublime moment as a feeling of pleasure, affected by a quick check to the vital forces and followed momentarily by an even more

²²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans., James Creed Meredith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1911), lxxxviii.

²²³ This idea of the sexual sublime as a movement or vibration between poles is not to be mistaken with the picturesque, which has been described similarly as a middle ground between the sublime and the beautiful.

powerful discharge. The erection could be a metaphorical surrogate for the vital force and the powerful discharge, the moment of sexual release through ejaculation.²²⁴

If such a comparison were made in the nineteenth century, the experience of the sexual sublime would augment the erotic pleasure of the drawings, but does it situate them within the realm of the pornographic? Pornography, I would argue, holds in common one essential attribute with erotic art: the description of imagined sexual experience.²²⁵ Both pornography and erotic art are historically insightful, providing a window into the sexual imagination of a specific culture at a specific moment. Liza Sigel, author of numerous books on the history of pornography, has investigated that window. Sigel argues that a *social imaginary* of sexuality is a space situated within the imagination, independent of the tangible, which explores the possibilities of sexual experience.²²⁶ The *social imaginary*, she elaborates, is outside the realm of the real and the rational, and is an expression of what a culture imagines to be *possible*.²²⁷ She maintains that pornography and erotic art are fundamental components of cultural representation that serve to allow people to, “organise their culture” [and], she writes, “understand the actions, behaviors, artifacts, symbols and signs among which they live. It acts not only on people but through people as they continually cast, recast and reconstitute their milieu in meaningful ways.”²²⁸ It is intuitive to approach sexual representation like artistic representation because erotic images likewise reflect the social atmosphere of their period. Smith has argued that the drawings reflect real

²²⁴ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 91.

²²⁵ The pornography that exists within the realm of the imagination is pornography that is based in an artistic medium, such as literature or drawings and paintings. The photographic or cinematic pornography that we associate with modernity has an added sense of realism that stems from the myth of photographic truth. Erotic drawings and erotic writing do not share the same sense of realism, and their appeal to reality exists within the reader’s opinion of whether or not the situations the pornographic material describes or represents are possible.

²²⁶ Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 9-39.

²²⁷ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, 9-39.

²²⁸ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, 9-39.

sexual acts that took place in brothels during the early nineteenth-century. Smith considers the invasive acts performed in four of Fuseli's drawings: *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans Operating*, *A Woman Torturing a Child* and a fourth drawing titled *Prostitute Swinging a Whip* (Fig. 11). She argues that they indicate a burgeoning cultural awareness of "the somatic idea of the erotic attachment to suffering."²²⁹ The appearance of works by the Marquis de Sade in England, reports of flagellation and other acts of sexual violence in brothels, and the publication of the memoirs of Theresa Berkley documenting similar occurrences in the flagellation brothel that she owned, confirm that libertinism was a marginally practiced but nonetheless culturally pervasive phenomenon in early nineteenth-century London.²³⁰ The drawings are unlike the memoirs of Theresa Berkley and *La Nouvelle Justine ou Les Malheurs de la Vertu* (1791) in that they do not seek a widespread audience.²³¹ Furthermore, the unfinished quality of the drawings and the exclusive group among which they were circulated assumes their function as studies. In fact, they share a number of formal similarities with other figural studies executed by Fuseli, for example, *A Sheet of Studies: Three Figures of Recumbent Women. A Head of a Man* (Fig. 12), the verso of the same sheet, *Verso: Half Length Figure of a Woman in Profile, and a Study of a Head and Arm* (Fig. 13), *Siegfried about to Deny on Oath that Brunhild Had Been his Paramour* (Fig. 14) and the verso of that sheet (Fig. 15). The attention to anatomy, expression, gesture and pose appear in the erotic drawings as well as in his informal figural studies. They investigate the body as a vehicle for emotional expression that Fuseli attempts to push into the realm of the sublime. *Recumbent Man*, *Woman Torturing a Child* and *Three Courtesans Operating* fulfill their function as studies because they explore themes that Fuseli exploits throughout his oeuvre

²²⁹ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 424.

²³⁰ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 429.

²³¹ The Marquis de Sade, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised*, (New York: Grove, 1965). This is the second version of this text, originally published in 1791.

in drawings and more crucially, in large-scale paintings. One of many drawings of *Siegfried and Kriemheld* (Fig. 16), Fuseli's watercolour from 1807 utilises the dominant female counterpoised against a subordinate male. Her authority is made evident in her position above him on the picture plane and through the curious position of her hands, softly caressing or forcefully securing the head of her lover. The violent undercurrent is implicit, as it appears as if Kriemheld could break Siegfried's neck with a quick turn of her wrist. The watercolour references the *Nieblungenlied*, a medieval epic rife with themes of "sexual domination, erotic submission and cruelty," themes that Fuseli was fond of exploring.²³² A small pencil and watercolour drawing entitled *An Incubus Leaving Two Sleeping Women* (1810) (Fig. 17), proves that Fuseli was inclined to be more explicit in less formal works, as his painted version illustrates the same women wearing sheer white garments, who in the later drawing are almost fully nude. Having recovered from the sexual exploits of the fleeing incubus, one woman clings to her night clothes in a half-hearted effort to cover her exposed breasts. The image is a reiteration of the narrative illustrated in *The Nightmare*, depicting the moment post coitus.

Moreover, the implied themes of infanticide and castration in *Woman Torturing a Child* reappear in Fuseli's *The Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches* or *Lapland Orgies* (c.1794-1796) (Fig. 18). Fuseli depicts an imminent child sacrifice, an imagined scene based on a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.²³³ A knife reaches toward the exposed child, while the Night-Hag lays the sleeping infant on the stone altar. Whether we witness an act of circumcision, castration or infanticide is unknown, but Fuseli exploits the sublime potential of violence, and allows the

²³² Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 95.

²³³ According to Myrone, Fuseli illustrates lines from Book II, II. 62-6 of Milton's *Paradise Lost* when Milton compares the hellhounds that surround sin to the hounds that: "follow the Night-Hag when call'd, in secret, riding through the Air she comes Lur'd with the smell of infant blood, to dance, with Lapland Witches..." Quoted in Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 140.

imagination of the viewer to complete the narrative. This painting was hung in his own Milton gallery, a testament to the importance of the sublime and the sexual sublime in his public oeuvre.

It is essential to understand how philosophers, artists and writers handled the sublime in the late eighteenth century to appreciate how Fuseli utilised implied sexual violence to achieve it. I will therefore discuss a number of influential texts that were informing artists like Fuseli during this period. The sexual sublime operates much the same way as the dynamical sublime outlined by Kant in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790). Kant explains that objects or ideas that have sublime potential are not necessarily inherently sublime. For example, a limitless framework for sexual desire is exciting but factual accounts about sex are not. Indeed, there is nothing arousing or remarkable about statistics on illegitimate pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases, likewise Kant's reductive description of the ocean as a site of knowledge nullifies its sublime potential:

Similarly, as to the prospect of the ocean, we are not to regard it as we, with our minds stored with knowledge on a variety of matters, are wont to represent it in *thought*, as, let us say, a spacious realm of aquatic creatures, or as the mighty reservoirs from which are drawn the vapours that fill the air with clouds of moisture for the good of the land, or yet as an element which no doubt divides continent from continent... for this is the way we get nothing beyond teleological judgements. Instead we must be able to see sublimity in the ocean, regarding it, as the poets do, according to what the impression the eye reveals, as, let us say, in its calm and clear mirror of water bounded only by the heavens, or be it disturbed, as threatening to overwhelm and engulf everything [*sic*].²³⁴

According to Kant the ocean is not inherently sublime; the viewer must be able to imagine its sublime potential. Likewise, sexuality is not inherently sublime, but from the perspective of an artist intent on creating sublime experience in art, sexuality possesses sublime potential. If the drawings are pornographic, it is because we are wont to represent sexual representation in *thought* as a means to an orgasm, as simply drawings of sexually engaged individuals and as documents that illustrate an emerging sexual subculture in the late eighteenth century. If we label

²³⁴ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 122.

these three drawings as pornographic, the word distracts from what makes them *artistic* and, in doing so, lessens their significance in Fuseli's oeuvre.

In the eighteenth century, the Romantic sublime emerged out of an ongoing discourse. The sublime had been an artistic idea for centuries, but Samuel H. Monk assesses how proponents of the Romantic utilised it to express the effects of imagination and terror. He writes,

Certain passages in *Paradise Lost*, *Macbeth*, Ossian, Michelangelo, to the indiscriminating eye of most eighteenth-century connoisseurs, could be grouped together as representative of the sublime which not only transcends rules and displays imagination, original genius, and energy, but which also has its basis in terror.²³⁵

Intense emotion and terror, rather than ideal form and classical serenity, informed the sublime that Fuseli was drawn to. The Romantic and the Gothic developed as art movements with specific aesthetic goals in a cultural atmosphere of uncertainty during the reign of King George III and the Regency period. Dramatic transformations in social structure and collective attitude were driven by war, revolution and industrialisation.²³⁶ The Gothic movement was a product of an era facing crises, some real and others imagined but nonetheless urgent.²³⁷

1780 was a decisive year in British history; optimism for the future was encouraged by the grand opening of Somerset House, an impressive institutional structure that improved the visual landscape of London and became a symbol of cultural progress, however, 1780 also marked a British struggle for power among rival European nations, increased taxation, a depressed economy and the imminent loss of America as a profitable colony. Criticism towards British imperialism and involvement in international wars (1756-63, 1775-83 and 1793-1815)

²³⁵ Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime*, 189.

²³⁶ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 230.

²³⁷ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 230.

caused a decline in national confidence.²³⁸ That same year also witnessed the Gordon Riots, the most destructive force in London since the Great Fire of 1666. These riots affected the British social imagination in particular, because they occurred on native soil and were a result of faults in British social and political systems.²³⁹ The riots were prompted by the passing of a Catholic Relief Bill which granted new civil rights to Catholics, and incited Protestant militants to burn down Catholic chapels, the homes of politicians who had voted for the Bill, and symbols of State power such as Newgate Prison and the Bank of England.²⁴⁰ One report of the riots in *The Political Magazine* of June, 1780, describes the spectacular violence of the event: "... [The riots] impress[ed] the mind of the spectator with an idea, as if not only the whole metropolis was burning, but all the nations yielding to the final consummation of all things."²⁴¹ The magazine captures the sublime aspect of the violence. These political riots were not singular in the tumultuous atmosphere of eighteenth-century Europe and Ian Haywood has described the cultural mood of Britain as "Bloody Romanticism."²⁴² The period was troubled with spectacular accounts of violence during the French Revolution, the American Revolution, the slave trade, the Irish Rebellion and numerous public insurrections.²⁴³ The same images evoked by firsthand accounts of the Gordon Riots became the images of the late eighteenth-century Gothic. The upheaval of this period was understood to be the result of a backlash against Enlightenment

²³⁸ Ian Haywood and John Seed, eds., *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 23, 24, 41, 95.

²³⁹ Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 182.

²⁴⁰ Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 183.

²⁴¹ *The Political Magazine* (June 1780), 1: 441. Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 183.

²⁴² Ian Haywood, *Bloody Romanticism, Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation, 1776-1832* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 2.

²⁴³ Haywood, *Bloody Romanticism*, 2.

rationalism, the supremacy of which was challenged in the artistic projects now associated with Romanticism.²⁴⁴

Radical shifts in national identity, class structure and gender politics became focal points for artists. Sexuality, violence and mental illness were explored in ways that expressed inner turmoil as a microcosm for social unrest. *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* examine sexuality and, as I will argue, implicate economic discourse. Michel Foucault, author of *The History of Sexuality*, discusses the economics of sex in Western culture.²⁴⁵ He argues that illegitimate sexual interactions required an economic exchange, and proposes that the brothel and the mental institution became spaces of transformation, where unspoken pleasures were integrated into the order of things that are counted.²⁴⁶ Sex, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, according to Foucault, required regulation:

...one had to speak of [sex] as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum...²⁴⁷

Sexuality, like the population, had to be controlled, efficient, and financially viable. Foucault notes that sex had to be governed, and sexual acts would necessarily have to be classed as licit or illicit.²⁴⁸ As such, Fuseli depicts illicit sexual activities that reject the confinement of sexual behavior to consensual heterosexual adults within marital bonds for procreative purposes, the form of sex that was both approved and prescribed by the state. Foucault furthermore suggests that legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied in the late eighteenth century and

²⁴⁴ Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 32.

²⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 2012).

²⁴⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 4.

²⁴⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 24.

²⁴⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 83.

that sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness, from childhood to old age.²⁴⁹ The norm of sexual development was defined and all possible deviations were carefully controlled through medicine and pedagogy.²⁵⁰ The relationship between mental illness and sexuality became a central theme in Fuseli's well known painting *The Nightmare*. In a depiction of a woman dreaming, the unsettling supernatural being that haunts her dream experience is also present.²⁵¹ The panoptic narrative allows the viewer to recognise the object of terror, the demon, as a product of the subconscious mind. The unwelcome creature sits upon her breast, arresting her ability to breathe.²⁵² The horror of this intrusion is more pronounced in a later version of the same subject. In the version painted in 1790 (Fig. 19), the incubus is far more terrible with a malevolent grin and visible teeth. The sleeping maiden is not only supine, but appears in such a dramatic arc that one wonders if her entire body has not been broken in half. Even the horse expresses a sense of alarm not present in the original work. Compositional and thematic similarities between *Recumbent Man* and *The Nightmare* could suggest that the drawings investigate related ideas. The supine female figure in *The Nightmare*, for example, has been argued to be a hysteric woman. Hysteria was an affliction described in medical discourse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, predominantly associated with sexual frustration, nymphomania, fragile nerves and an emotional temperament.²⁵³ Women experienced an oppression of the upper chest, vertigo, and a sense of impending suffocation.²⁵⁴ *The Nightmare* was highly controversial, but possessed the decorum necessary for public display, while the

²⁴⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 36. Foucault maintains that this began in the eighteenth century.

²⁵⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 36.

²⁵¹ Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction*, 5.

²⁵² Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction*, 5.

²⁵³ Diana Faber, "Hysteria in the Eighteenth Century," in *Brain, Mind and Medicine: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Neuroscience* ed. Harry Whitaker et al. (New York: Springer, 2007), 329.

²⁵⁴ See the case of Isabel Gray, admitted to a hospital and placed under the care of James Gregory on November 6th, 1785. Faber, "Hysteria in the Eighteenth Century," 326-327.

private drawing could be a more liberal association between hysteria and nymphomania. Indeed, Philippe Pinel (1745-1826), a French physician, proposed that hysteria was caused by “furor uterinus” and developed in three stages. The onset of lascivious thought was followed by sexually provocative behavior and then deteriorated into complete mental derangement.²⁵⁵ This experience was likewise associated with Robert Burton’s (1577-1640) quasi-scientific study, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Burton concludes that the haunting of *succubi* and *incubi* was tangibly real, but nonetheless a wholly psychological phenomena arising through the force of the imagination in sexually deprived individuals whilst sleeping.²⁵⁶ The sublime element derives from the presence of the supernatural, the incubus. The woman is violated in an act of transgressive sexuality, *daemonialitas*, or sexual intercourse with a demon in a manner that is both visually pleasing and frightening.²⁵⁷ The convergence of sexual perversity and the supernatural create an effect that can be described as the sexual sublime. The elements of feminine allure, vulnerability, sexual violence and terror in *The Nightmare* are mirrored in the viewer’s intrusion into the private space depicted in *Recumbent Man* where implied sexual aggression produces the “vibrating” effects and shock of the sexual sublime.

The drawings illustrate an active rejection of state mandated sex and relate an illicit sexual narrative that appeals to the emotions and, more importantly, the curiosity of the viewer. If Fuseli’s visions of sexual transgression are intended to be critical, it is possible that they are commenting on the gradual desexualisation of British culture, a consequence of Enlightenment rationalism and the economizing tendencies of modern social life. The ambiguous setting in *Recumbent Man* could be a brothel, a private home, or an imagined space, and the sadistic

²⁵⁵ Faber, “Hysteria in the Eighteenth Century,” 328.

²⁵⁶ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy: What It Is, With All the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes and Several Cures of It* (London: Dent, 1932), 253-54, 415-418.

²⁵⁷ Moffitt, “A Pictorial Counterpart...” 173.

amusement of the women, expressed through upturned lips and rounded cheeks (Fig. 20), may speak to the illicit pleasures of the mentally ill or simply women's natural sexual preferences for more violent and aggressive forms of sexuality. The relationship between sexuality and mental illness that Foucault establishes, however, is particularly relevant to Fuseli who was fascinated with the inner workings of the mind. Are these women mentally ill themselves, driven to torture their victims in an act of madness, or are these women prostitutes in a brothel providing a service to a client whose illicit desires appear dangerously unreasonable? Fuseli could also be commenting on all members of the female gender, illustrating the danger inherent in allowing women to possess and control their own sexual desires. If these women are prostitutes, then they represent the consumer *and* the good, the participant in a capitalist structure *and* the object of desire. Thus illicit sexuality and mental illness are interwoven to form a social critique. In further speculation, assuming the stage is set within the confines of a brothel; could Fuseli be commenting on the client who irrationally seeks out his demise in his desire for the beautiful but cruel woman? Perhaps it is Fuseli himself depicted beneath the gigantic woman in a Prometheus narrative of suppressed creative freedom, or could the anonymous male figure be the viewer, looking back at himself bound and gagged with the troubles of early nineteenth-century Britain?²⁵⁸ In typical Fuseli fashion, the viewer has far more questions than answers, but it is these kinds of speculations that make it difficult to imagine that Fuseli was not interested in creating a dialogue around his erotic drawings.

²⁵⁸ The size and defined musculature of the women in *Recumbent Man* could be influenced by Michelangelo's depictions of women from the Sistine chapel ceiling, or as has will be discussed later in the thesis, referencing the Amazonian, that appeared throughout eighteenth-century texts. Prytula, for example, notes that the figure of the Amazon was, with few exceptions, oversized with masculine-like strength and daring. Nina Prytula, "Great Breasted and Fierce": Fieldings Amazonian Heroines," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35 (Winter 2002), 177.

The difference between erotic art and pornography is not definitive and although the genres both illustrate imagined sexual encounters, the parameters of either remain subject to debate in scholarship. Further confusion results from the anachronistic application of the term pornography to late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century art and literature. The distinction is complicated further through the evolution of the word itself as *pornography* has embodied various meanings among a number of historical and cultural contexts. The word *pornography*, with its modern associations, cannot be unmindfully applied to historical material without first providing a definition for the word and situating it within the debate. Walter Kendrick, a literary scholar and critic, observes that the “great age of pornography” began in the nineteenth century, a period that witnessed a rummaging through of the past in search of “books and pictures that had been pornographic all along without anyone knowing it.”²⁵⁹ Everything from Pompeian frescoes to *Madame Bovary* (1856) was placed in secret museums, as the advent of modern pornography subsumed the erotic art and literature of previous centuries. Walter maintains that the volatile status of the word pornography has created both confusion in scholarship and an unproductive binary opposition. He writes, “With surprising uniformity, arguments about “pornography” for the past hundred and fifty years have boiled down to a single pair of opposing assertions: “This is pornographic” and “No, it isn’t.”²⁶⁰ The trouble lies within a panoptic definition of the term that allows for the existence of pornographic art, a genre that precludes the possibility that there is a distinction to be made between pornography and erotic art.²⁶¹ Political activist and scholar Susan Sontag and philosopher Matthew Kieran have argued that pornographic art *is* an appropriate subgenre for art works with erotic content designed to arouse the viewer, and for works of pornography with perceived aesthetic qualities. The erotic drawings

²⁵⁹ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, xi.

²⁶⁰ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, xii.

²⁶¹ Levinson argues that pornographic art should be resisted as a genre.

of Pablo Picasso or the libertine literature of the Marquis de Sade would be examples of works that appear to maintain a dual status as pornography and art.²⁶² My project is not to reject the possibility that *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans*, and *Woman Torturing a Child* could be pornographic art, historically or contemporarily, but to argue that it is an unproductive classification. If the drawings are, as I have argued, studies, then the inquisitive approach to sexuality can be compared to the *Sonnetti Lussuriosi* (1524), the first known erotic text to evaluate sexual experience as a space for diversity and experimentation.²⁶³ Indeed, the approach to the sexual content in the *Sonnetti* may have influenced Fuseli who acquired an illustrated copy while in Rome.²⁶⁴ Kendrick maintains that Aretino was innovative in his analytic approach to human sexuality; no other author prior to Aretino and very few writers for three centuries thereafter approached the erotic with the same curiosity. Moreover, Aretino conceptualised “sex” outside of moral, legal, religious and political contexts, a move that was not well received by the church or the state.²⁶⁵ Perhaps it was Aretino’s approach to sexuality as a space for experimentation disconnected from governing institutions that appealed to Fuseli. The ambiguity of Fuseli’s images and visual clues require a high level of engagement on the part of the viewer that substantiates an intellectualisation of the subject, despite their overt eroticism. Fuseli has chosen to render specific elements in these drawings with perfect clarity. Hair accessories such as combs, pins and ribbons are interspersed with braids of hair twisted and pinned into elaborate detail-oriented styles, while entire figures are almost imperceptible, rendered in a few suggestive lines. These choices are deliberate, and the viewer is expected to glean information about the identities of the figures as well as their relationship to each other from the objects that have been

²⁶² David Davies, “Pornography, Art, and the Intended Response of the Viewer” in *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 61.

²⁶³ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 64. Pietro Aretino, *Sonnetti Lussuriosi (Lascivious sonnets)* (1524).

²⁶⁴ Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst,” 424.

²⁶⁵ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 65.

assembled within the image. Fuseli has constructed the opposite of a conversation piece through his appropriation of its forms. Peter de Bolla in an essay entitled “The Culture of Visuality,” describes the conversation piece as a precise image in which the high resolution of the objects and surfaces depicted convey specific meanings that inform the viewer about the persons portrayed.²⁶⁶ He writes, “In relation to the semantic content the detail of the image is assumed to present information about the relationship between the individuals we see and about their specific identities in terms of class, rank, and profession.”²⁶⁷ It appears as though Fuseli highlights certain details in *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* to suggest the identities of the figures, but twenty-first century viewers are not privy to the specific symbolism he utilises. In opposition to the conventions of the conversation piece described in de Bolla’s essay, Fuseli’s details confuse rather than inform. Does, for example, an intricate hairstyle speak to the role of a courtesan? Likewise, could it remind the viewer of Mrs. Fuseli and her preoccupation with her hair, especially given that the intended viewers would have been acquainted with the artist’s wife and her habits? Are Fuseli’s women allegorical figures standing in for the British public and their fixation with their own likenesses? These are certainly possibilities given what we know of Fuseli, his wife and his attitudes toward his own cultural milieu. If these drawings were shared with a select and intimate early modern audience, comprised predominantly of men who were well versed in the artistic conventions of the period and the artistic interests of their colleague, then it is surprising that the importance of the imagination and viewer engagement in relation to these curious drawings has been overlooked until now, and more surprising still that it is a twenty-first century woman who has recognised them. Like the boundaries between genres in the early nineteenth century, the sublime was not

²⁶⁶ Peter de Bolla, “The Culture of Visuality” in *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape and Architecture in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University of Press, 2003), 47.

²⁶⁷ Bolla, “The Culture of Visuality,” 47.

defined in concrete terms. In arguing that Fuseli's *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* are erotic, not pornographic, intellectual, not lewd, and imagined scenarios intended for contemplation, not personal fantasies or illustrations, I have established that these drawings were studies investigating the expressive potential of the figure and the sublime potential of implied sexual violence. These drawings were objects of exchange, proof of artistic virtuosity and aesthetic experiments intended to provoke the sublime.

Chapter Two: The Romantic Sublime and the Preeminence of the Figure

“The being seized by an enourmous passion, be it joy or grief, hope or despair, loses the character of its own individual expression, and is absorbed by the power of the feature that attracts it [*sic*].”²⁶⁸ – Henry Fuseli, *Aphorisms on Art* (1789)

Fuseli describes a moment of rapture; the sublime moment when the emotional appeal of the work of art overpowers the viewer and displaces the mundane. This displacement was further associated with the higher genres of painting, specifically history painting. This chapter examines debates on the ‘ordering of the arts’ and situates Fuseli’s ideas about the sublime within those debates. In this chapter, I suggest that Fuseli’s erotic drawings reflect an interest in the abstract philosophies outlined in Burke’s *An Enquiry*, and I argue that it is unproductive to discuss them without considering their primary aesthetic goal. Fuseli’s interest in the imagination manifests itself in *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* through fictitious narrative and viewer engagement. He expresses his own imaginative prowess in these sadomasochistic visions while encouraging the viewer to use his imagination to ‘fill in the gaps,’ so to speak.

In criticism directed toward Fuseli by his contemporaries, the sublime was often discussed as an aesthetic that he both struggled to attain and excelled in producing.²⁶⁹ The anecdotist William Seward (1801-1872), the historian William Roscoe (1753-1831) and fellow artist, William Blake, believed Fuseli had achieved the sublime in his work. However, artist and critic, Edward Dayes, complained that they were “taking this man’s ‘chimeras dire’ for efforts of the sublime,” and expands his criticism to state that “they [Fuseli’s works] have always appeared

²⁶⁸ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 7-72.

²⁶⁹ Torbruegge, “Bodmer and Füssli,” 7.

to me more like the dreams of a lunatic.”²⁷⁰ Likewise, Swiss national and friend to Fuseli, Johann Caspar Lavater expressed in his English publication of *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-1778) that Fuseli’s imagination “is ever aiming at the sublime, and delighting itself with prodigies,” and although “formed to feel it, he seldom reaches the sublime.”²⁷¹ Given that Fuseli’s supporters and critics alike found his art to be both ample and lacking in terms of the sublime, it is apparent that the aesthetic was subjective. Samuel Monk, author of *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-century England* (1935), observes that:

The elevation of Michelangelo to the first place among painters resulted in a new taste and a new sublime, a sublime that was at one with the sublime of Ossian and of wild, rugged nature, that is perceived not in ideal form, but in the intensity and depth of feeling that produced the work of art in which it resides.²⁷²

This statement describes a transition in the discourse, and reveals how Michelangelo became a central figure within it. American scholar, Marilyn Torbruegge likewise argues that Fuseli’s decision to elevate Michelangelo over Raphael as the archetypal sublime artist reflects a new, Romantic way of thinking about the aesthetic.²⁷³ But it is perhaps Monk’s account of a transition that is most pertinent: the sublime transformed from a natural phenomenon, dependent upon ideal form, to an intense emotional experience that communicated the artist’s state of mind or ‘artistic genius,’ and actually reverted the aesthetic back to Renaissance standards.

Fuseli’s patrons, critics and colleagues spurred the debate on the nature of his art, but Haydon situated the discussion in an art historical context. He states that Fuseli’s depiction of

²⁷⁰ Edward Dayes, *The Works of the Late Edward Dayes: Containing an Excursion through the Principal Parts of Derbyshire and Yorkshire with Illustrative Notes by E. W. Brayley; essays on paintings; Instructions for Drawing and Colouring Landscapes; and Professional Sketches of Modern Artists* (London: Printed by T. Maiden, published by Mrs. Dayes, 1805), 326. Quoted in Torbruegge, “Bodmer and Füssli,” 7.

²⁷¹ Cunningham, *The Lives* Volume II, 95. Quoted in Torbruegge, “Bodmer and Füssli,” 7.

²⁷² Quoted in Torbruegge, “Bodmer and Füssli,” 25. Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935).

²⁷³ Torbruegge, “Bodmer and Füssli,” 25.

Uriel and Satan was “sublime, and never was surpassed by anything produced by Michel Angelo, Raffaele or Julio Romano in their highest poetry of mind [*sic*].”²⁷⁴ The creative imagination or “poetry of mind” then, was for many eighteenth-century thinkers and artists, an essential component of the sublime.²⁷⁵ Fuseli was drawn to the theoretical texts of Longinus, Quintilian and Lord Kames, authors that explored the mind and its ability to enliven ideas absent from the present time and place.²⁷⁶ I argue that, in a Romantic fashion, the tempting but manipulative enchantresses found in Fuseli’s erotic drawings perform a kind of investigational “gothic spectacle” and fulfill an artistic ambition to elevate the visual arts through the sublime.²⁷⁷

The texts that informed Fuseli are examined in Peter de Bolla’s influential text, *The Discourse of the Sublime*. De Bolla affirms that during the eighteenth century, three successive translations of Longinus (1712) (1724) (1739) inspired an obsession with sublime nature, the sublime text and their relationship.²⁷⁸ De Bolla also describes a transition from the ethical to the psychological sublime.²⁷⁹ The former located sublimity within the object while the latter framed

²⁷⁴ Benjamin Robert Haydon, “Lectures on Painting and Design in two Volumes,” *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* 26 (1846), 465. It is unclear what specific work Haydon is referring to, although it is likely *Satan starting from the touch of Ithuriel’s spear*, 1779. Oil on canvas, 2305 x 2763 mm. Quoted in Torbruegge, “Bodmer and Füssli,” 7. Haydon not only confirms that Fuseli is aiming for a sublime aesthetic modeled after Renaissance artists like Michelangelo but includes Giulio Romano as an artist of the sublime, an artist who like Fuseli, was interested in sexuality. Romano illustrated the *I Modi* in addition to the frescoes he painted in Italian Palazzos. Although it is more likely that Haydon was thinking of works like *Hall of the Giants* (1530-1532) in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, it is nonetheless interesting that an artist with a grandiose imagination and interest in the sublime would also, like Fuseli, explore sexuality in visual representation.

²⁷⁵ Haydon, “Lectures on Painting,” 465.

²⁷⁶ Duffy, “Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism,” 220. See Longinus, *On The Sublime: Translated from the Greek with Notes and Observations, and Some Account of the Life, Writings, and Character of the Author* trans. William Smith (B. Dod, 1752). See Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (London: A. Miller 1762).

²⁷⁷ Warner, “Invented Plots,” 28.

²⁷⁸ Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 32-33.

²⁷⁹ Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime*, 33.

the sublime experience within the mind.²⁸⁰ Discussions on the sublime began to adopt words such as passions, sentiment and imagination, and, according to de Bolla, “these explanations of the sublime [provided] the impetus for the investigation into the internal workings of mind.”²⁸¹ Sir Joshua Reynolds describes his confrontation with the Sistine Chapel, in which the sublime was equated with feelings of joy, expansion of mind and self congratulation, recalling the ethical sublime and the ancient text of Longinus, *On Sublimity*.²⁸² However, the sublime in the last few decades of the eighteenth century assumed a Romantic sensibility and in a matter of a few years, the uplifting aesthetic experienced by Reynolds was replaced with the terrible sublime.²⁸³ Fuseli did not believe in the efficacy of moralising art, and the idea that an artist should endeavor to teach lessons or civilise the viewer was, accordingly, a trivialisation.²⁸⁴ Instead, Fuseli sought the psychological sublime, an aesthetic that was not didactic or agreeable, but that reflected the artist, his state of mind and the emotions he wished to inspire in the viewer.

The cultural landscape of the eighteenth century facilitated the transformation of the sublime from a classical literary phenomenon to a Romantic visual superlative, and this transformation is evidenced in institutional support for Michelangelo over Raphael.²⁸⁵ Artists who had long admired the neoclassical ideal associated with Raphael began to emulate the expressive figural compositions associated with Michelangelo. This movement is articulated in the final discourse on painting that Sir Joshua Reynolds delivered at the Royal Academy wherein he argued that the sublime imagination of Michelangelo represented the height of humanist classicism. He writes,

²⁸⁰ Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime*, 33.

²⁸¹ Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime*, 33.

²⁸² Duffy, “Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism,” 222.

²⁸³ Duffy, “Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism,” 222.

²⁸⁴ Craske, *Art in Europe*, 27.

²⁸⁵ Duffy, “Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism.”

I reflect, not without vanity, that these Discourses bear testimony to my admiration of that truly divine man; and I should desire that the last words which I should pronounce in this Academy, and from this place might be the name – Michael Angelo.²⁸⁶

Reynolds resolutely advocates for Michelangelo's sublime *terribilità* over Raphael's sublime dignity and emotional decorum, and in doing so signifies a departure from Neoclassical tastes; Michelangelo seemed a more appropriate model for Shakespearean drama, the genius of Milton and epic history paintings. The classical sublime was empathetic and moral; it evoked "inward pride and nobility of soul" while the Romantic sublime inspired wonder and terror.²⁸⁷

Furthermore, the imagination became a central component of the late eighteenth-century sublime, specifically in the Raphael versus Michelangelo debate. Fuseli maintains,

When Reynolds said that M. Angolo had more *imagination*, and Raphael more *fancy*, he meant to say, that the one had more sublimity, more elementary fire; the other was richer in social imagery, in general conceits, and artificial variety. Simplicity is the stamen of M. Agnolo; varied propriety, with character, that of Rafaello [*sic*].²⁸⁸

Simplicity and imagination, as Fuseli recounts, are integral to the Romantic sublime, a sublime that resided in intensity and depth of emotion, and not in ideal form.²⁸⁹ It became necessary for the artist to transform the mundane present into the extraordinary, a transformation dependent upon a vigorous imagination.²⁹⁰ A single idea, well executed, is how Fuseli described the epic or sublime in his *Lectures on Painting*; all visual components were to contribute to the unity of the composition. *The Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel was an appropriate example, being universal and without unnecessary rhetoric.²⁹¹ The curves and breadth of form that made up the

²⁸⁶ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds Volume I*, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies: 1809), 423.

²⁸⁷ Duffy, "Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism," 237.

²⁸⁸ Henry Fuseli, "A History of Art in the Schools of Italy," in *Life and Works*, ed. John Knowles (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831).

²⁸⁹ Monk, *The Sublime*, 191.

²⁹⁰ Duffy, "Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism," 220.

²⁹¹ Duffy, "Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism," 232.

figures successfully directed attention towards the whole and away from individual parts.²⁹²

Fuseli endeavored to eliminate subsidiary details in order to impress upon the mind a distinct and momentous idea. Jonathan Richardson (1667-1745), author of *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1725), opposed faithful reproduction because artistic reiterations created monotony, and Fuseli would adopt a similar stance on imitation. Richardson writes,

I take the Sublime to be the Greatest, and most Beautiful Ideas, whether Corporeal or not, convey'd to us the most Advantageously. By Beauty I do not mean that of Form, or Colour, Copy'd from what the Painter sees; These being never so well Imitated, I take not to be Sublime, because These require little more than an Eye, and Hand, and Practice [*sic*].²⁹³

The essay was rooted in a British tradition, and anticipated the Burkean theory of the sublime as an epic literary moment which captures the imagination and engulfs the mind. Richardson, and later Burke and Fuseli, located the sublime in Milton's poetry: "In Milton's Description of the Devil, and his Host of Fallen Angels, there is a profusion of Ornament, particularly Similes, but in each of them there is a great Oeconomy shewn in the Language, not a word is but to the purpose [*sic*]."²⁹⁴ Although Richardson discusses poetry, Fuseli translates the poetical sublime into the visual and attempts to focus his drawings on a single, original idea. In *Recumbent Man or Woman Torturing a Child*, figural relationships are composed to reveal and conceal physical interactions. The interaction between the female and male bodies critically examines female sexuality and masculine identity. Fuseli utilised a number of strategies to achieve a sublime aesthetic that David A. Brenneman identifies in an essay entitled *Self-Promotion and the Sublime: Fuseli's Dido on the Funeral Pyre*.²⁹⁵ Brenneman argues that during Fuseli's career,

²⁹² Duffy, "Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism," 224.

²⁹³ Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (London: Printed for A.C. and sold by A. Bettesworth, 1725), 248.

²⁹⁴ Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, 242.

²⁹⁵ David A. Brenneman, "Self-Promotion and the Sublime: Fuseli's 'Dido on the Funeral Pyre,'" *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 62 (1999): 76.

the sublime was transformed from a marginal aesthetic into an acknowledged theoretical platform.²⁹⁶ Fuseli, among other artists interested in the aesthetic, began to employ drab colours, dramatic lighting and obscurity in paintings that best expressed sublime ideas, specifically subject matter that dealt with the supernatural, subjects that Burke himself had suggested in his discourse.²⁹⁷ Works such as *The Mandrake: A Charm* (Fig. 26) and *Ezelin Bracciafero Musing over Meduna* (Fig. 27) perplexed critics who found his interest in the supernatural and macabre too eccentric, even for Fuseli, who was admired for his imagination. The misshapen figure of the witch in the *The Mandrake* digs into the ground with a large, grotesque hand while a female figure looks apprehensively on. The legend suggests that the Mandrake root, which held special powers, would scream or release poisonous fumes into the air if disturbed. One critic wrote of the painting, “We have frequently had occasion to admire the enthusiasm and eccentricity of this artist’s imagination; but here it is genius run mad.”²⁹⁸ Remarkably, the critic likewise commented on the fashionable dress of the rightmost female figure, an indication that critics recognised Fuseli’s preoccupation with feminine attire. The latter painting, *Ezelin Bracciafero Musing over Meduna*, also captured the imagination of critics, and in 1780, a writer for the *St. James Chronicle* made the connection between Fuseli’s dark subject matter and the sublime. He wrote, “The Imagination of the Artist delights in the Sublime. The contrast between the amiable, though offending Meduna, and her stern Sacrificer, is horridly expressed.”²⁹⁹ Brenneman emphasises the importance of an association between the morbid representation and the sublime,

²⁹⁶ Brenneman, “Self-Promotion and the Sublime,” 70.

²⁹⁷ Brenneman, “Self-Promotion and the Sublime,” 76.

²⁹⁸ Myrone, “Witches and Apparitions” in *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 132.

²⁹⁹ “Exhibition,” *St. James Chronicle*, 2-4 May 1780, 4. Quoted in Brenneman, “Self-Promotion and the Sublime,” 77.

but argues that the critic was not aware of the painting's theoretical underpinnings.³⁰⁰ The sexual sublime, then, is a natural extension of the sublime qualities found throughout Fuseli's oeuvre, from lighting and colouration to subject matter. A broader look at his oeuvre reveals that themes of violence, and even sexual violence, reappear throughout. *The Nightmare*, for example, depicts a young maiden in the throes of sexual distress, caused by the presence of a grotesque looking incubus. *An Incubus Leaving Two Sleeping Women* (1810) likewise figures the predatory fiend, as he flees the scene, the sexual act having already taken place. As the sublime was a central component of Fuseli's history paintings, it seems likely that the aesthetic was for Fuseli, highly involved in his ideas surrounding the ordering of the arts and the state of visual art in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The 'ordering of the arts' was also entangled in debates on the sublime, as is evident in Burke's *An Enquiry*; the treatise was influential in both the visual and literary arts, but Burke originally argued that literature most effectively expressed the sublime. He writes,

...we find by experience that eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable of making deep and lively impressions than any other arts, and even nature itself in very many cases," while painting, "with only the superadded pleasure of imitation, can only affect simply by the images it presents."³⁰¹

Burke delineates a division between verbal and visual communication, one that I argue Fuseli attempts to dismantle in his drawings through the discourse of the imagination. Burke emphasises that paintings depend on imitation, specifically relevant for literary paintings which illustrate an idea originally expressed in words. He argues that the essence of the sublime is lost through the imitative process. Burke argues that Milton epitomises the sublime literary moment

³⁰⁰ Brenneeman, "Self-Promotion and the Sublime," 77.

³⁰¹ Burke, *An Enquiry*, 259.

in *Paradise Lost* (1667). He quotes a specific passage from *Paradise Lost* in *An Enquiry* to prove his point. Milton writes:

The other shape,
If shape it might be called that shape had none
Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb;
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed
For each seemed either; black he stood as night;
Fierce as ten furies; terrible as hell;
And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head
The Likeness of kingly crown had on.³⁰²

Burke praises Milton's poetic proficiency, writing, "In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree."³⁰³ Milton stirs emotions within the reader, an effect evocative of the sublime. Burke reasons that Milton is successful because he describes places, characters and experiences that have no real-world referent, such as hell or the figure of Satan. Milton is able imbue abstract ideas with a sense of reality.³⁰⁴ The painter, on the other hand, is confined to the imitation of nature. Fuseli challenges this idea in a painting entitled *Sin Pursued by Death* (Fig. 28) that visualises the verse applauded in *An Enquiry*. The painting progresses toward the sublime in its reimagining of a preconceived idea. Although Burke argues that images are less powerful being imitative of nature and verse, Fuseli attempts, not to illustrate Milton, but to create a fundamentally new text.³⁰⁵ The poem is made use of, but not faithfully retold, as *Sin Pursued by Death* communicates new content.³⁰⁶ In a recent study, Paul Duro

³⁰² John Milton, *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained...Paradise Lost. A Poem in Twelve Books* (Birmingham: John Baskerville for J. and R. Tonson in London, 1758), 59. Charles Robert Leslie writes that *Sin Pursued by Death* was the finest of all Fuseli's works because he achieved the impossible; Fuseli was able to embody Milton's words, specifically the line "What seemed his head; The Likeness of kingly crown had on." Charles Robert Leslie, *A Hand-Book for Young Painters* (London: 1853), 137-138.

³⁰³ Edmund Burke, "Section III Obscurity," in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (J. Dodsley, 1767), 101.

³⁰⁴ Paul Duro, "Observations on the Burkean Sublime," *Word and Image* 29 (2013): 41.

³⁰⁵ Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁰⁶ Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*.

addresses *Sin Pursued by Death*, and makes a provocative comparison between Fuseli and his contemporary James Barry (1791-1865). Barry's *Satan and his Legions Hurling Defiance toward the Vault of Heaven* (c.1792-1795) (Fig. 29) was designed, Duro argues, as an illustration; it is therefore supplemental because it does not sufficiently rework the material to be considered an independent pictorial statement.³⁰⁷ Fuseli, on the other hand, chooses a lesser known aspect of the narrative and deviates enough from the verse that viewers unfamiliar with specific lines in *Paradise Lost* may not recognise its literary source.³⁰⁸ Myrone suggests that Fuseli deviates from the textual sources that inform his work to establish the "sovereignty of the visual" over the literary.³⁰⁹ I agree with Myrone, but would extend his argument to suggest that Fuseli intends to activate the imagination of the viewer, who must participate in the interpretation of works with invented subjects or obscure literary references.³¹⁰ In works such as *The Nightmare* and *Recumbent Man*, the imaginative impulse becomes a tool available to the artist as well as the poet because the literary source, if there is one, is quite obscure. Barry, then, appeals to the sublime through a faithful representation of an already sublime subject while Fuseli employs Milton as a spring-board for an original composition that appeals to the sublime through the same literary conventions outlined in *An Enquiry*: darkness, uncertainty, confusion and the terrible.³¹¹ *Woman Torturing a Child* and *Three Courtesans* likewise involve the active imaginative participation of the viewer and with no textual source, affirm artistic proficiency in original, imaginative composition.

³⁰⁷ Duro, "Observations on the Burkean Sublime," 41.

³⁰⁸ Marcia R. Pointon, *Milton and English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 133.

³⁰⁹ Myrone, "Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle," 302.

³¹⁰ Myrone, "Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle," 303.

³¹¹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 101. Burke writes of Milton's description of death in *Paradise Lost*, "In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree."

The late eighteenth century witnessed the eroticisation of pain, a rise in the popularity of sexually rewarding acts of violence such as flagellation and an increased awareness of the boundaries between normative domestic sex and transgressive sexualities.³¹² Although Fuseli may have been inspired by the sublime effects of pain explored in the works of the Marquis de Sade or the sadomasochistic sexual practices in early nineteenth-century sexual subcultures, I argue that the drawings were products of his imagination, figural studies investigating the sublime possibilities of sexuality.³¹³ Burke described the imagination to be “the singular power of fabricating images, without any foundation in reality.”³¹⁴ Fuseli laments that there are those who refute the value of pure imaginative expression, alluding to the mimesis debate and ‘Ut Pictura Poesis.’³¹⁵ The question that Fuseli asks is:

[if] whether it be within the artist’s province or not, to find or to combine a subject from himself, without having recourse to tradition or the stores of history and poetry? Why not if the subject be within the limits of art and the combination of nature, though it should have escaped observation? Shall the immediate avenues of the mind, open to all its observers, from the poet to the novelist, be shut only to the artist?³¹⁶

Fuseli positions the artist, like the poet and the novelist, as a creator, not an imitator. The artist should be permitted, if not expected, to represent the musings of his imagination, but the idea of invented paintings was unconventional in the late eighteenth century, and even paintings drawn from literary referents that had fantastical elements were sometimes criticized, such as Fuseli’s

³¹² Katherine Binhammer, “The ‘Singular Propensity’ of Sensibility’s Extremities: Female Same-Sex Desire and the Eroticization of Pain in Late-Eighteenth Century,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 9 (2003), 310-311.

³¹³ Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst,” 425.

³¹⁴ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 16.

³¹⁵ Ut Pictura Poesis is a Latin phrase that translates to “as is painting so is poetry.” It refers to the debate on the supremacy of different art forms. The superior merits of painting over poetry and vice versa were vehemently contested. The statement is mostly famously attributed to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*. Horace argued that poetry, or imaginative texts, required the same level of contemplation as painting. Fuseli argues that poetry is more imaginative than painting because it exists entirely within the imagination.

³¹⁶ Henry Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, 411.

well-known Shakespearean faerie paintings. An anecdotal biography of the artist comments on Fuseli's tendency to invent his own subject matter. John Timbs recounts:

Fuseli frequently invented the subjects of his pictures without the aid of poet or historian. On one occasion he was much amused by the following inquiry of Lord Byron: "I have been looking in vain, Mr. Fuseli, for some months, in the poets and historians of Italy, for the subject of your picture of Ezzelin; pray, where is it to be found?" "Only in my brain, Lord," was the answer; for I invented it.³¹⁷

Invented subjects were not popular among gallery goers and art critics, a fact that both perplexed and frustrated the artist. Timbs recounts an equally poignant exchange between Fuseli and John Bonnycastle (1751-1821) in which Fuseli questions why his inventions, although based in a British literary tradition, displease the public. Timbs writes,

One evening, Fuseli said to Bonnycastle: "Pray, Bonnycastle, what do you consider the reason that I am not popular as a painter in a country which has produced Shakespeare and Milton?" Bonnycastle answered: "Because the public like familiar subjects, in which there may be individual beauty with fine colouring." "Is that their taste?" said Fuseli, hastily: "then, if I am not their painter, they are not my critics."³¹⁸

Fuseli states that he does not accept the British public as his critics, a result of their lack of interest in his work. Despite being of Swiss origin, Fuseli adopted British culture and maintained astute opinions on the status and future of British art. Although many of his paintings depict scenes from famous British narratives, Fuseli was never as prominent as West or Reynolds. The reason may have been rooted in the conservative tastes of the viewing public and a preference for Neoclassicism.

Stuart Siller, Shakespeare scholar and author of *Painting Shakespeare: The Artist as Critic, 1720-1820*, discusses Fuseli's Shakespearean images and his general interest in extreme states of being. He argues that his working relationship with Lavater encouraged his taste for "extreme human states" whilst allowing him to discard prescribed models. In images of the

³¹⁷ John Timbs, *Anecdote Lives of William Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, Henry Fuseli, Sir Thomas Lawrence and J. M. W. Turner* (London: R. Bentley 1881), 212.

³¹⁸ Timbs, *Anecdote Lives*, 212.

supernatural, his imaginative impulse combined figures pushed to their utmost emotional and physical limits with an innate appreciation for imaginative texts that operated in a metaphoric mode.³¹⁹ Members of the viewing public were likewise accustomed to familiar narratives that were easily recognised and understood, while Fuseli's paintings required active participation in the construction of meaning. The reluctance of the viewing public to engage intellectually with works of art was criticised within the artistic community, and in the following account, the unsympathetic viewer is given a feminine voice. According to Thomas G. Wainwright, a female visitor to the Royal Academy exhibition in 1821 complained that Fuseli painted fanciful pictures of "fairies, spirits and nonsense."³²⁰ Unobservable phenomena were "foolish to paint" from an Enlightenment perspective because they did not conform to a universal truth or rational thought.³²¹ The female viewer precludes the imaginative impulse from existing within a reality all its own, declaring that it is impossible to faithfully represent fairies because nobody can know what they look like.³²² Wainwright, however, was formulating a critique within a critique, as the Fuseli paintings displayed in the exhibition of 1821 were entitled *Jealousy: A Sketch*, *Prometheus Delivered by Hercules* and *Amphiarus*, and neither included fairies. According to Nicola Bown, Wainwright imagined the conversation as a critique on public taste and female viewership.³²³ Romanticism as an emerging discourse valued the ephemeral nature of human experience; however, Romantic artists were challenged to appeal to an emergent viewing public

³¹⁹ Stuart Sillers, *Painting Shakespeare: The Artist as Critic, 1720-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 219.

³²⁰ As quoted in Nicola Bown, "The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late eighteenth century," *Women: A Cultural Review* 10 (1999): 308.

³²¹ As quoted in Bown, "The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late eighteenth century," 308-309.

³²² As quoted in Bown, "The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late eighteenth century," 308-309.

³²³ Bown, "The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late eighteenth century," 308.

that sought portraits and genre pieces to furnish their homes.³²⁴ In order to appreciate the challenging and intellectually demanding properties of the sublime, a predominant feature of Romanticism, the viewer required an awareness of aesthetic theory.

The visual devices through which the sublime could be achieved in visual art were discussed at length in eighteenth-century discourse and relied on the characteristics put forth in *An Enquiry* such as darkness, uncertainty, confusion, obscurity and the terrible. Burke writes,

No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too...To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of apprehension vanishes [*sic*].³²⁵

Fuseli obscures the central action in *Three Courtesans Operating* to produce this effect. In the image, the obscured objects carried in-hand and more pertinently, the intentions of the female entourage are uncertain and although the male nude has no visible affliction, the image assumes an ominous atmosphere that threatens both the masculine figure and the male viewer. His face has been obscured to the extent that the fingers of the eager courtesans appear buried deep within it, and an indefinite object, in the form of a single line, dangles from the hand of the right-most figure, suggesting a rope to bind or a whip to administer punishment. Even their features propose violent attitudes through bulging chests, double chins and angular noses. Furthermore, *Three Courtesans* and *Recumbent Man* resonate visually and thematically with works such as *The Shepherd's Dream* (1786) (Fig. 30) which required the viewer's imaginative participation. A critical response to *The Shepherd's Dream* reads, "Mr. Fuseli gives us the human figure, from recollection of its form, and not from the form itself; he seems to be painting everything from

³²⁴ Bown, "The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late eighteenth century," 312.

³²⁵ Burke, *An Philosophical Enquiry*, 42.

fancy, which renders his work almost incomprehensible, and leaves no criterion to judge them by, but the imagination.”³²⁶ In the case of *The Shepherd’s Dream*, Fuseli has attempted to “express what lies more within the reach of the poet” and the result is a painting which defies aesthetic or technical comparison, existing within the realm of the imagination, and the imagination alone.³²⁷ In *Woman Torturing a Child* the viewer’s imagination naturally arouses fear. The boy has been cut off from view and his hidden face communicates nothing about the nature of the ritual to which the viewer bears witness. The tool, itself an ambiguous object, could be a weapon and the faint outline of male genitalia between the legs of the bound youth, hints at the possibility of genital mutilation. The imaginative powers of the artist, his “magic,” so to speak, affects viewers through their own assumptions.³²⁸ A lack of evidence enhances the apprehension of the viewer whose imagination seeks to complete the picture, even if it means arriving at an unpleasant or shocking conclusion. By obscuring the central action Fuseli has created a sense of uncertainty; he hints at the terrible, and in doing so creates a vision of the sexual sublime.

Fuseli did not study from nature, but took up the “judicious adoption of figures in art.”³²⁹ The artist studied from Michelangelo, and his figural emphasis adheres to the heroic male nudes of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, “under which he spent day after day, week succeeding week...lay[ing] on his back... with upturned and wondering eyes, musing on [that] splendid ceiling...”³³⁰ The body of the artist, laying supine on the floor of the chapel is described as if

³²⁶ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 230. Originally published in the *Public Advertiser*, May 22 1786.

³²⁷ Myrone, “Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle,” 308.

³²⁸ Myrone, “Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle.”

³²⁹ Chappell, “Fuseli and the ‘Judicious Adoption’ of the Antique in the ‘Nightmare,’” 421.

³³⁰ Cunningham, *The Lives of the most Eminent British Painters*, 48. Also in Powell, *Fuseli: The Nightmare*, 27. Also in John Gould, *Biographical Dictionary of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, and Architects from the Earliest Age to the Present Time* (London: Greenland, 1838), 175. To this anecdote,

receptive to the sexual energy of the dynamic actions of the figures above. It is a corporeal power infused with sexual tension, one which Fuseli develops into a physical vocabulary, a legibility of the body.³³¹ Michelangelo was the most elevated artist in the minds of Fuseli and the circle of artists with whom he worked in Rome, a choice that corresponded with a budding interest in an aesthetic duality between the sublime and the beautiful.³³² Michelangelo, according to Fuseli, embodied artistic genius because he cared neither for the transient whim of fashion nor local sentiment and pursued in art the truth in nature and the genuine feelings of humanity.³³³ This sentiment is political, as Fuseli felt his own professional success and the success of national art threatened by the private and ephemeral interests of the new viewing public.³³⁴

Fuseli felt that British art was in decline, a result of the destructive power of eighteenth-century revolutions. The Industrial and American Revolutions had affected a downturn in national pride and ushered in an age of pessimism, anxiety and doubt. New forms of social life, urbanization, the emergence of popular literature and a rise in unconventional media encroached on tradition. British folklore lost its enduring foothold on the collective imagination with shifts in class structure, urbanisation and the rise of Enlightenment ideologies.³³⁵ Originality was unremittingly opposed to novelty, and ‘artistic genius’ was an essential idiom in the vocabulary of art critics. Fuseli rose to artistic prominence in an aggressive economic atmosphere and was concerned by the sheer number of artists working in London, feeling that the result of such

Fuseli sometimes added that such a posture was necessary for a body like his with the pleasant gratification of a luxuriant city, and he imagined that he drank in the spirit of the sublime Michelangelo. Interestingly, Fuseli imbues his relationship with Michelangelo and his admiration for the ideal masculine forms depicted on the Sistine Chapel ceiling with erotic qualities. He describes viewing as a pseudo-sexual experience.

³³¹ Myrone, “Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle,” 303.

³³² Brenneman, “Self-Promotion and the Sublime,” 76.

³³³ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli Volume 3*, 18.

³³⁴ Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, 550.

³³⁵ Bown, “The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late eighteenth century,” 313.

excessive competition would be a rise in mediocrity and a reliance on false values.³³⁶ He warned his students in his lectures on painting to, “Expect no art in those that multiply their artists beyond their labourers.” The consequence of imprudent imitation was an art that conformed to popular taste and “pleased the vulgar.”³³⁷ Michelangelo embodied original genius, an artist whose unshakeable commitment to grandeur was imposed on all his subjects. Fuseli recounts that,

The child, the female, meanness, deformity, were by him indiscriminately stamped with grandeur. A beggar rose from his hand the patriarch of poverty; the hump of his dwarf is impressed with dignity; his women are moulds of generation; his infants teem with the man; his men are a race of giants. This is the “terribil via,” this is that “magic circle,” in which we are told that none durst move but he. No, none but he who makes sublimity of conception his element of form.³³⁸

Fuseli is referring to himself in the last line of this excerpt from his eleventh lecture on the *History of Painting*. Fuseli emphasises that no one but himself who, like Michelangelo, understands the power of the sublime can understand or perhaps fully appreciate the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Fuseli explored the sublime through the human figure, and his penchant for bodies found historical precedents in the High Renaissance and its evolution into Mannerism. The figure is not only of central importance, it is the *only* articulated object in these drawings. Fuseli rarely set his visual narratives in landscapes and fully realised backgrounds were often entirely excluded.³³⁹ Fuseli maintained that early modern artists had one single advantage over the ancients and the old masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; they were able to privilege the figure above all else, to allow it to occupy the entire picture plane and realise its full potential against an empty horizon.³⁴⁰ This is evident in *Three Courtesans* and *Recumbent Man*.

³³⁶ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 35.

³³⁷ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli Volume 3*, 4.

³³⁸ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli Volume 3*, 19.

³³⁹ Klemm, “The Principles of Fuseli’s Art,” 97.

³⁴⁰ Klemm, “The Principles of Fuseli’s Art,” 97.

The former drawing has no background and the figures appear to float in ambiguous space. The latter scene has been depicted within an interior, although the walls and furniture have only been suggested through the presence of draped fabric. Furthermore, the figures in both drawings have been rendered in exquisite detail; the women's clothing and hair exhibit contemporary fashion in London, but have been embellished to comment on their excess. The women wear elaborate hair pieces, pins, plaits and hats, and in some cases fabric has been woven into their hair. Likewise, the men are defined in sophisticated musculature; an anatomy of expression which finds its origins in the Sistine Chapel.

Fuseli left London for Rome in 1770 and during his eight-year sojourn in the Italian city, studied paintings and sculptures in order to discover the principles upon which Renaissance artists based their work.³⁴¹ Renaissance masters sought to perfect antique forms; their compositions exhibited coherence and unity, qualities that complied with the civic humanist ideology with which Fuseli sympathised.³⁴² He wrote, "Elevated or charmed by the contemplation of superior works of art, our mind passes from the images themselves to their authors and from them to the race which reared the powers that furnish us with models of imitation or multiply our pleasures."³⁴³ Fuseli believed that the state of art was equal to the state of society, and Reynolds observed that it was the role of the artist to "raise the thoughts and extend the views of the spectator."³⁴⁴ The sublime became an elevated aesthetic because, according to Reynolds, it could encourage virtue.³⁴⁵ The wholesome expression of ideal morality was not, however, a prerequisite for great art and Fuseli was not interested in didactic art, but identified with the history painter James Barry (1741-1806) who argued that the sublime should

³⁴¹ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 48.

³⁴² Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 440.

³⁴³ Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, 550.

³⁴⁴ Frayling, "Fuseli's the Nightmare," 9.

³⁴⁵ Frayling, "Fuseli's the Nightmare," 9.

not be subject to good manners.³⁴⁶ Barry wrote, “We affect such nice feelings and so much sensibility, as to not be able to bear the sight of pictures where the action turns upon any circumstance of distress.”³⁴⁷ *Three Courtesans, Recumbent Man and Woman Torturing a Child* illustrate “circumstances of distress,” a major component of the sublime, and could likewise, as this chapter has explored, served to investigate the limits of pathos, expressed in the rebellious and twisted figures of the High Renaissance. Fuseli’s desire to visualise all of human experience, from the most elevated to the depraved, is evidenced in his description of the Sistine Chapel and its author. Michelangelo was according to Fuseli,

...the inventor of epic painting, in that sublime circle of the Sistine Chapel which exhibits... every attitude that varies the human body, traced the master-trait of every passion that sways the human heart.³⁴⁸

Fuseli, after Michelangelo, wished to explore the *full* range of human emotions, expressions and experiences, especially those which extended into excess or extremity. Superlatives and the shock of the sublime were for him associated with an aesthetic of artistic genius.³⁴⁹ This chapter has explored how Burke’s influential text on the sublime shaped Fuseli’s aesthetic goals and aspirations for visual art, and established the importance of Michelangelo to Fuseli, who adopted his emphasis on figures and interest in emotional extremes. The figure allowed him to demonstrate his strengths in design, chiaroscuro and dramatic composition, and sexuality was an ideal subject for the expression of the secretive and obscene aspects of life.

³⁴⁶ It is worth mentioning that James Barry was the only Member of the Royal Academy to be expelled.

³⁴⁷ Jane Martineau, *Shakespeare in Art*, (London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003), 61-63.

The quotation from James Barry was published in a pamphlet in 1775.

³⁴⁸ “The Late Mr. Fuseli” in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 436.

³⁴⁹ Klemm, “The Principles of Fuseli's Art,” 164.

Chapter Three: Disruptive Women and the Politics of Fashion

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers” -
Ephesian 6:12

“Powerful effects always come from a mixture of the voluptuous and the terrible, for instance beautiful half-naked women offering us delicious potions in the bloody skulls of our enemies. That is the model for everything that is sublime. It is subjects like that which make the soul melt with pleasure and shudder with fear. The combination of these feelings plunges us into an extraordinary state and it is the mark of the sublime that it moves us in a quite exceptional way.”
– Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*³⁵⁰

Denis Diderot may not have been a figure of importance to Henry Fuseli, but he captures the essence of the eighteenth-century sublime and its inherent sexual appeal in his image of alluring, partially undressed women. Diderot’s women offer us sickly sweet potions in the bloody skulls of our enemies, although Fuseli might have imagined the enhanced effect if the skulls of our enemies were replaced with our own. It is a mixture of visual pleasure, sexual arousal, feminine beauty, unexpected violence and terror that makes the sexual sublime so powerful. It is a model of a gender-oriented experience of the sublime that Diderot illuminates, where the male viewer is impressed with an image of feminine excess. It is likewise an experience made explicit in Fuseli’s erotic drawings, and this chapter analyses the gender politics that inform that experience. I discuss the influence of civic humanism, biological theory and gender discourse on the thematic content of *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans Operating* and *Woman Torturing a Child* to establish who the women are and their position within the ideological frameworks of early nineteenth-century Britain. The literature on gender in the early modern period is both vast and rich, but from this body of work, civic humanism and biological theory emerge as vital components of the lofty sublime. This chapter explores the artist’s stance

³⁵⁰ Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*, vol. IV, ed. Georges Roth (Paris: Minuit, 1958), 196. Translation modified from Diderot’s Letters to Sophie Volland, trans. Peter France (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), 132. Quoted in Balfour, “(The) Sublime Sex,” 323.

on the state of art in Britain at the turn of the century and examines the broader cultural atmosphere that I argue brought about Fuseli's pessimism. His adherence to civic humanist systems of thought and the implications of biological models of human progress were integral to his understanding of the purpose and importance of art. Likewise, understanding the critical nature of these drawings is fundamental to appreciating their status as works of art rather than simply pornographic fantasies. I argue that the figure of the courtesan is utilised throughout the erotic drawings to comment on consumerism and the private interests of the British public. Although Fuseli proclaimed an aspiration to elevate the visual arts, he believed that culture had entered into an irreversible decline, and this cynicism permeates the drawings.³⁵¹ Fuseli imagines London as a new Rome or Babylon on the brink of devastation, a cultural dissolution caused by indulgent, lustful, vain and political women. I will situate *Recumbent Man*, *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child* within a civic humanist discourse to prove that Fuseli utilised his erotic drawings to voice criticism.

The effect of consumer power on the art market in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was denounced by artists Barry, Haydon, William Hazlitt (1778-1830) and Fuseli, among others.³⁵² Artists who chose to pursue careers within the Academy were subject to decorum, convention and structure, and their collective disdain was rooted in the idea of confinement. This metaphor was employed as early as 1777 in the *London Chronicle*:

It is indeed to be lamented, that Sir Joshua Reynolds, who, by some former specimens, has demonstrated his talents as well for historical as for other species of paintings, should be confined entirely to the drawing of portraits; but such is the mean vanity and selfishness of the age, that our great personages would rather give two or three hundred

³⁵¹ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 16.

³⁵² Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 17.

pounds for their own dear likeness, than one half, or even one third of that sum for the noblest historical picture that ever was produced.³⁵³

The commentator, who was likely an Academy insider, reproaches the public for their private interest. Artists felt confined by the limitations of a genre largely driven by vanity and were unable to pursue grandiose subjects in painting because of prevailing tastes for portraiture. These same artists proposed the sublime as a solution and the aesthetic became a central component in artistic reform, upsetting the values associated with the private, mundane space of bourgeois modernity.

During the mid-eighteenth century, the decline of British culture that was discussed in John Brown's (1715-1766) *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of Taste of the Times* (1757-58) was mirrored in a number of publications, in which masculine identity became the central focus of the debate.³⁵⁴ According to Myrone, Burke's *Enquiry*, Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), James Macpherson's 'Ossian' publications (1760-63) and those works by Thomas Percy (1729-1811), Thomas Warton (1722-1800) and Joseph Warton (1722-1800) on English literature, are all texts, albeit complex and varied, that attempt to upset or challenge 'polite refinement,' the feminising behavioral code that was governing British culture during the period.³⁵⁵ Myrone aptly summarises their effect:

All share a concern to explore or address discursive territories beyond the pale – original genius beyond rules, experiences beyond description, taste without order and heroes greater than ever imagined...the most powerful persuasive device for incorporating a rhetoric of excess into the discourse of aesthetic judgement was the concept of the sublime.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ *London Chronicle*, 24 Apr. 1777. Quoted in John Brewer, *The Pleasure of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2013), 168.

³⁵⁴ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11.

³⁵⁵ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11.

³⁵⁶ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 11.

The sublime emerged in the mid-eighteenth century as an alternative to the beautiful, but it was utilised to challenge the supremacy of portraiture; Fuseli, Barry and Blake, among others, defiantly pursued the terrible and irrational in their work, rejecting the harmonious and idyllic qualities associated with the beautiful in favour of the more emotionally compelling sublime. Conversation pieces, pastoral landscapes, traditional portraits and sentimental genre scenes or ‘fancy pictures’ were associated with the beautiful, while history paintings or grand manner portraits explored the possibilities of the sublime in visual representation.³⁵⁷ The emergence of the viewing public in the late eighteenth century incited a bitter struggle for influence in the artistic sphere; connoisseurship was contested, and painters, art dealers and collectors all asserted their authority on good taste.³⁵⁸ It was a common conviction that the rising middle class was responsible for the stasis of British art, and this opinion was expressed in a lecture entitled *On the Present State of the Art, and the Causes which Check its Progress* wherein Fuseli denounces the emergent private citizen and the influence of the viewing public on art.³⁵⁹ Fuseli maintained that the arts impacted all aspects of life and argued that their elevated or debased state reflected not only the character of a nation but their progress from barbarism to civility. Fuseli discusses the biological model on which the history of art was increasingly reliant:

...observations on the importance of the arts, lead to questions so often discussed, and at no time more important than ours – on the causes that raised them at various times, and among different nations – on the means of assisting their progress, and how to check their decay.³⁶⁰

His art-historical analysis demonstrates that biological theory, an emerging historical discourse, measured the health of a society by the triumphs and failures of their art; it identified the cyclical

³⁵⁷ John David Farmer, “Henry Fuseli, Milton and English Romanticism,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* (1973-1982) 68 (1974): 15.

³⁵⁸ Brewer, *The Pleasure of the Imagination*, 168.

³⁵⁹ Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, 550.

³⁶⁰ Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, 551.

nature of history and proposed that civilization developed as living organisms, progressing from youthfulness towards maturity and then declining into old age and death.³⁶¹

Comparisons between nations and civilisations were often made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and courtesans and their sexual behaviours resonate with descriptions of Babylonian prostitutes from the ancient metropolis where vice was given a feminine gender. Haydon, for example, delineates a comparative impression of the city of London from a distance:

So far from the smoke of London being offensive to me, it has always been to my imagination the sublime canopy that shrouds the city of the world. Drifted by the wind or hanging in gloomy grandeur over the vastness of our Babylon, the sight of it always filled my mind with feelings of energy such as no other spectacle could inspire.³⁶²

Babylon in biblical accounts was a city of vice, luxury and sexual immorality: the elaborate headdresses and hair ornaments of Fuseli's courtesans recall the whore of Babylon in Revelation 17 of the Bible that describes her ornate dress, gold jewellery and pearls. The narrative explains that the great prostitute held in her golden cup all the abomination and impurities of her sexual immorality, and the words "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations," were written on her forehead.³⁶³ It is possible that Fuseli is referencing the Babylon/London analogy or expressing a similar sentiment as Haydon, whose melancholic nationalism reaches for the sublime through prose. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed harsh reminders that economic wealth, an ever-expanding empire and industrialisation had consequences. The Gordon Riots of 1780, for example, were described by the *Annual Register* as, "one of the most dreadful spectacles this country ever beheld," in which "everything served to impress the mind with ideas of universal anarchy and approaching

³⁶¹ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 219.

³⁶² Haydon, *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon Vol. 1*, Willard Bissell Pope edit., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 49.

³⁶³ John R. Kohlenberger, *The Evangelical Parallel New Testament: New King James Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1690.

desolation.³⁶⁴ Likewise, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars had horrific costs.³⁶⁵ The biological account of civilization that informed historical discourse in the eighteenth century suspected that European society had matured too quickly and was approaching catastrophic decline.³⁶⁶

Cultural decline was associated with the corruption of good values, and fashion, with its transience and excess, was not surprisingly criticised for its corrupting nature. A pervasive influence of *la mode française* on the British was chastised in the media, as the perceived corruption believed to be rampant in the rival nation was argued to have secured a foothold on British soil. In Paris, social critic Lemoyne Desessarts described the coquetry of French women who were lured into the boutiques of the *Marchandes de modes*. He writes, “It is a large community, born of the luxury of women, fed by coquetry, and thriving as long as the taste for frivolity is the ruling passion.”³⁶⁷ In France, the insatiable desire for consumer goods was positioned as a danger to society. In 1740 a manuscript was published entitled *The Superiority of Men over Women or the Inequality of the Sexes*, wherein the author warns:

When a new fashion arrives, women want to have what other women have, without stopping to think or consider if it is above their station; if there is a new fabric, they must have it no matter what the price, even if their husband cannot afford it,... they will have it. Their children might die of hunger, but they will have bellies of luxury and clothing of silk.³⁶⁸

Fuseli expresses a similar idea in his *Aphorisms on Art*, emphasising that women do not consider their subordinate position to men, and aspire to be above themselves. Fuseli writes, “In an age of luxury women have taste, decide and dictate; for in an age of luxury woman aspires to the

³⁶⁴ Haywood, *The Gordon Riots*, 117.

³⁶⁵ Haywood, *The Gordon Riots*, 117.

³⁶⁶ Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, 222.

³⁶⁷ Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford UK: Berg, 2004), 145.

³⁶⁸ Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender*, 145. My translation: the original title reads, *Supériorité de l’homme sur la femme ou l’inégalité des deux sexes*.

functions of man, and man slides into the offices of woman. The epoch of eunuchs was ever the epoch of viragoes [*sic*].”³⁶⁹ Fuseli may have imagined the drawings as sublime visions of London-become-Babylon, a decadent and upside down version of British society where women made financial and sexual decisions at the expense of their feminised mates. The sartorial nature of gender debates would have been of interest to Fuseli if he intended to voice criticism in the drawings. The *Discourse Die Mahlern*, a text that would have been familiar to Fuseli through his connections in Zürich, describes the misleading qualities of accoutrement as a threat. The translation reads:

A woman has erected a pointed tower of cloth on her head like gothic architecture, her hair, forehead, cheeks, mouth and chin are encased within, only a pair of eyes and her nose peep out from beneath. . . These clothes are made up of so many superficial and frivolous hooks and extensions that presume to show off parts of the body, that what one actually imagines is a misshapen monster lurking beneath. They have completely lost and paid no attention to the proportions of nature, these constructions [the clothes] produce the oddest figures, which one couldn't call either round, oval or even pyramidal.³⁷⁰

Fuseli may have been referencing such descriptions in *Three Courtesans* where the odd shaped garments of the women deceive the eye. Rogue lines suggest the contours of wide panniers on the right-most woman and her chest appears to be inflated with some ambiguous item of clothing. The central woman wears a shawl that enlarges the appearance of her shoulders, giving her a more masculine physique, and the folds of fabric and ribbons on the back of her dress have the same encasing effect described in the *Discourse*.

The decline in modern masculine authority was associated with a rise in polite refinement, an idea initially disseminated in Brown's *Estimate*.³⁷¹ The influence of this literature, which was especially critical of fashion, may be discerned in Fuseli's portraits of courtesans.

³⁶⁹ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 114.

³⁷⁰ Johann Jakob Bodmer et Al., *Discourse 17 and 22* in “Die Discourse der Mahlern Volume II” (Hildesheim: Ohms, 1969). Quoted in Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst,” 432.

³⁷¹ Myrone, *Bodybuilding*, 230.

Neoclassical fashion and the proliferation of feathers throughout his portraits of courtesans and in *Three Courtesans* and *Woman Torturing a Child*, demonstrate that Fuseli was interested in the visual and symbolic power of dress. The nude male, aligned with classical ideals of beauty is juxtaposed with the highly structured garments and hair pieces of Fuseli's women. Additionally, these corrupted models of modern fashion are subjecting their idealised counterparts to humiliating rituals of emasculation in a poignant role reversal where women initiate and dictate the central action. Fashion was a fundamental aspect of the gender debate; the emboldened, dominating woman of fashion transgressed her gender and the man at his toilette was ridiculed for his domestic pleasure.³⁷² It was a belief articulated in the *Estimate*: "The sexes now have little other apparent distinction beyond that of a person and Dress; Their peculiar and characteristic Manners are confounded and lost: The one sex having advanced into Boldness, as the other have sunk into Effeminacy [*sic*]."³⁷³ The nude man in *Three Courtesans* and the exposed boy in *Woman Torturing a Child* create a visual association with a classical tradition, but their nudity could also be understood as a form of humiliation, when compared to the dressed state of their ostentatious female counterparts.³⁷⁴ In these two drawings, the opposition of feminine action with passive masculine reception and feminine fashions with male exposure situates the men, not the women, as objects of the gaze. If the images are intended for a male audience, the female usurpation of vision and authority could comment on the status of gender in social debate. The images could be read as a celebration of the male nude in western culture in comparison with the temporal and transient fashionable woman, but it could also be read as an unjust exposure that augments the humiliation of the male victim in the presence of clothed

³⁷² Blackwell, "The Feather'd Fair in a Fright," 339.

³⁷³ John Brown, *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* Volume I (London: Printed for L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1757), 51.

³⁷⁴ Smith, "Between Fantasy and Angst," 427.

women, where clothing symbolises power. These conflicting readings relate the importance of a high level of viewer engagement. In either reading, the status of the male figure as a disgraced symbol of high art or a humiliated victim requires viewer empathy. This empathy is, as Burke claimed, a prerequisite of the sublime. The male viewer places himself in the position of the fallen hero, a metaphor for the artist and a symbol of cultural decline, and in doing so, experiences the perceived crisis that Fuseli translates from a disappointment with British public art into a vision of decadence and sublime violence. These conclusions are impossible without the active imaginative engagement of the viewer, who must recognise subtle visual clues, make the essential visual associations and draw the worst possible conclusions. That is the power of the imagination that Fuseli uses to his artistic advantage, knowing that his specific audience would not be passive receivers, but active participants.

In the eighteenth century, female patriotism and sensibility, when removed from the domestic environment, were associated with corruption and narratives of national decline, specifically the decline of the Roman Empire.³⁷⁵ According to literary scholar Harriet Guest, the negative implications of sensibility were most potent when associated with political or fashionable women, and were exploited in satire.³⁷⁶ Catherine Macaulay, a popular target for satirists, is pictured in an image entitled *The Auspicious Marriage!* (Fig. 31), which appeared in *Town and Country Magazine* in 1778. Here she is portrayed as a fashionable woman with a distinctly Roman nose, an indication of her republican views. Guest argues that Macaulay's sexuality, dress and political activities were interchangeable signs of corruption and positioned her as symbol of decline, associated with the decline of the Roman Empire, which was

³⁷⁵ Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Leaning, Patriotism 1750-1810* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 218.

³⁷⁶ Guest, *Small Change*, 219.

understood to be equivalent to the decline of the British Empire.³⁷⁷ William Alexander, in *The History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time* (1779), argues that women,

Before the [Roman] Republic was contaminated with the riches, which from every corner of the globe flowed to Rome, they were the best of wives, of mothers, and of citizens” but after the flood of wealth to the ancient city, “as wives...the Roman matrons were frequently unchaste. As mothers, not less frequently careless and unnatural. As citizens, endeavoring to overturn all decency and decorum, and sacrificing everything at the shrine of pleasure and ambition [*sic*].³⁷⁸

Excessive fashions were utilised in British satire alongside references to the fall of Rome, and the hair ornaments, panniers and bustles of the women in *Three Courtesans* evoke these satirical images and texts. Fuseli exploits elaborate accessories to comment on changing gender roles and class structures, as his aphorisms suggest that the rise of ambitious, political women was synonymous with the decline of patriarchal society. Moreover, the accoutrements could indicate aesthetic alliances between the feminine and the beautiful while the masculine would naturally be associated with the sublime. Indeed Kant notes that “Women have a strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful, elegant, and decorated. Even in childhood they like to be dressed up, and take pleasure when they are adorned.”³⁷⁹ Kant and Burke maintained gendered concepts of the sublime and the beautiful and it is perhaps the combination of conflicting aesthetics and their inherent social critique that appealed to Fuseli in his erotic designs.

Portraits of courtesans such as *Courtesan with an Elaborate Head-dress* (Fig. 32) and *A Woman at Her Dressing Table* (Fig. 33) depict women from multiple views, admiring themselves in mirrors with breasts exposed and headdresses similar to those in *Three Courtesans* and *Recumbent Man*. The peculiar exposure in which Fuseli renders the breast may allude to its

³⁷⁷ Harriet Guest, *Small Change*, 192.

³⁷⁸ William Alexander, *The History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time: Giving Some Account of Almost Every Interesting Particular Concerning that Sex, Among All Nations, Ancient and Modern Volume I* (J. A. Husband, 1779), 338. Quoted in Harriet Guest, *Small Change*, 192.

³⁷⁹ Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (University of California Press, 1960), 77. Quoted in Balfour, “The Sublime Sex, Beautiful Bodies, and the Matter of the Text,” 326.

more general significance as a communicative tool in the eighteenth century. According to literary historian Nina Prytula in an essay concerning Fielding's Amazonian Heroines, novelists Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson both utilised breasts as "outward manifestations of intangible qualities of mind."³⁸⁰ This conclusion resonates with Fuseli's ideas about the communicative potential of the figure, whose inner disposition is made available to the gaze through expression and, as is the case with his courtesans, ornament. Prytula argues that Fielding's description of elongated or oversized breasts caricatured the "Amazonian qualities of mind," of the women they belonged to and became symbols of a perverted feminine ideal.³⁸¹ The Amazonian woman, as a figure of social and sexual defiance, proliferated throughout eighteenth-century English literature, and may provide insight into Fuseli's women. In their rejection of patriarchal structures of governance in combination with their appropriation of traditionally masculine qualities, these mythical warrior women denied "weakness, chastity and maternal devotion."³⁸² Fuseli's women likewise perform a role reversal, becoming the dominant sex and rejecting their responsibilities as virtuous and chaste unmarried women and nurturing wives and mothers. The implied violence in *Woman Torturing a Child* is a shocking denunciation of socially prescribed ideals of womanhood in the early nineteenth century.

Nicolas Powell wrote that Fuseli's women were unmistakably "whores," an observation that likely derived from Haydon's observations made in the nineteenth century.³⁸³ Haydon's opinion is especially important because he maintained an intimate relationship with the artist, yet was able to recognise Fuseli's faults with a sense of clarity unavailable to others.³⁸⁴ Despite their

³⁸⁰ Prytula, "Great Breasted and Fierce," 175.

³⁸¹ Prytula, "Great Breasted and Fierce," 175.

³⁸² Prytula, "Great Breasted and Fierce," 175.

³⁸³ Powell, *The Nightmare*, 64.

³⁸⁴ Frederick Wordsworth Haydon reflects on his father's relationship with Fuseli. He writes, "It would have been no loss, I think, to Haydon if he had seen less of Fuseli at this critical period of his artist life.

mutual respect, Haydon had no misgivings in remarking that, “Fuseli knows full well he is wrong as to truth of imitation. A man has no more right to dislocate an arm and call it the ‘Grand Style,’ than he would have to put six toes on a foot and call it ‘Nature as she ought to be.’”³⁸⁵ Thus Haydon was well positioned to comment on the potentially violent inclinations of Fuseli’s coquettish females and their corrupted male counterparts: “His [Fuseli’s] women are all whores, and men all banditti. They are whores not from the love of pleasure but from a hatred, a malignant spite against virtue...”³⁸⁶ This hatred is embodied in the delight of the women in *Three Courtesans*, wielding ambiguous weapons that position them as participants in emasculating rituals or acts of castration, a visual metaphor for the detrimental effects of capitalism on public art.

If we presume that the women in *Recumbent Man* and *Three Courtesans* are prostitutes, as their ostentatious appearance and Haydon’s conclusion suggest, then they assume a dual status as both commodities and consumers. According to Laura J. Rosenthal, a scholar of eighteenth-century British literature and culture, prostitution occupied an intermediate space between the economic and the erotic.³⁸⁷ Prostitutes blurred the boundaries between the private and public spheres and brought into question the commercialised Bourgeois modernity that Fuseli resented for its impact on the patronage of the visual arts.³⁸⁸ Political historian, J. G. A. Pocock argues that the prostitute became an ideal trope for civic humanists, who represented the economy as

Yet no one, even thus early, saw and marked the defects of Fuseli’s Frenzied extravagance of style more clearly [*sic*].” Frederick Wordsworth Haydon and Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Correspondence and Table Talk: With a Memoir, Volume 1* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1876), 23.

³⁸⁵ Haydon, *Correspondence and Table-talk*, 23.

³⁸⁶ B. R. Haydon, op. cit. vol. I, 232. Haydon reworked this passage, written in 1815, from a previous diary entry written on April 27, 1812. “Think of Fuzeli’s savage ferocity, his whorish abandoned women, the daughters of the bawds of Hell, engendered by lecherous, dusky demons... Again think of Fuzeli’s men, the sons of banditti, and contrast them with the rapturous innocence of [Raphael’s] St. John...”

³⁸⁷ Laura Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3.

³⁸⁸ Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 3.

irrational, as opposed to abstract and logical.³⁸⁹ Likewise, the commercial enterprise was understood to be both threatening and feminine.³⁹⁰ Perhaps, if these women are indeed prostitutes, they declare a relationship between femininity, eroticism and commerce, and embody the irrational, passionate and subversive qualities of a woman-become-commodity.

Civic humanism was a masculine ideology, and the concept of virtue within the framework of the discourse placed public good above personal interest.³⁹¹ Commerce was suspected of tempting citizens to pursue selfish goals, goals that would invariably subsume the responsibilities of state citizens. Although Fuseli identified with civic humanist ideology, the contradictions of his character were mirrored in his lectures. He believed that art should not adopt a false ideal of heroic antiquity, as it was unsuited to British culture where public spirit was too diminished to warrant its return. In a bout of cynicism, he relates that the very desire to possess works of art was symptomatic of acquisitive individualism.³⁹² Fuseli recounts that his age, “when compared with former ages, has but little occasion for great works, and that is the reason why so few are produced.”³⁹³ Furthermore, in his twelfth lecture delivered at the Royal Academy, he reiterates the diluting effects of material wealth: “Luxury in times of taste keeps up execution in proportion as it saps the dignity and moral principle of the Art; gold is the motive of its exertions, and nothing that ennobles man was ever produced by gold.”³⁹⁴ Fuseli argues that private patronage in Britain could not support history painting, the consequence of the pervasiveness and depth of privatisation in European societies:

³⁸⁹ Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 3.

³⁹⁰ Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 3.

³⁹¹ J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Quoted in Laura Jean Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 3.

³⁹² Barrel, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, 261.

³⁹³ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 48.

³⁹⁴ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 54.

We have now been in possession of an Academy more than half a century; all the intrinsic means of forming a style alternate at our commands; professional instruction has never ceased to direct the student; premiums are distributed to rear talent and stimulate emulation, and stipends are granted to relieve the wants of genius and finish education. And what is the result? If we apply to our Exhibition, what does it present, in the aggregate, but a gorgeous display of varied powers, condemned, if not to the beasts, at least to the dictates of fashion and vanity? What therefore can be urged against the conclusion that, as far as the public is concerned, the Art is sinking, and threatens to sink still deeper...³⁹⁵

Fuseli, unlike Reynolds or Barry, communicates a sense of despair and asserts the futility of his efforts to elevate art, but nonetheless, dedicates himself to his artistic project. Fuseli had once declared that if he was not considered by the British people to be their painter, then they could not be his critics. Perhaps his erotic drawings are intended to intervene, voicing disappointment and critically examining the reasons why he felt that his culture was failing: the emasculating tendencies of polite refinement, the emergence of the political woman, the rising power and affluence of the middle class and the emergence of new viewing publics. These problems, at the close of the eighteenth century, were exasperated in the violent and unsure context of the Gordon Riots, the French Revolution, the American Revolution and a precarious confidence in the British Empire. The drawings then, could serve to critique these socio-political conditions while investigating Fuseli's interest in inner states, extremities of being, the fringes of human experience and Burke's aesthetic ideas in what are ultimately images of the sexual sublime.

³⁹⁵ Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 46-48.

Conclusion

In conclusion I quote Gert Schiff's comment on the work of Thomas Rowlandson as "an indispensable commentary on the manners and events of the period in which he lived."³⁹⁶ Fuseli, like Rowlandson, offers us a glimpse into the cultural and ideological atmosphere of the early nineteenth century, but in a significant departure from Rowlandson's comical approach to sexuality, Fuseli has provided contemporary scholars with a series of complex riddles.

Recumbent Man, Three Courtesans and *Woman Torturing a Child* reflect a period of contention and transition, a period in which, according to William Blake, "Reynolds & Gainsborough Blotted & Blurred one against the other & Divided all the English world between them..." and where "Fuseli Indignant <almost> hid..."³⁹⁷ The transgressive eroticism of the sexual sublime arose in a context of social upheaval, and highlighted a number of social anxieties that occupied Fuseli at the turn of the nineteenth century. Specifically, the erotic drawings reflect contempt for the rise of commercialism in a perceived culture of decline and express a strong desire for public art in an age of private interest. This thesis has explored Fuseli, not as a product of his time but as an active agent in the construction of his cultural environment. It is at this point that scholarship, having overcome our "sheepish evasion," can appreciate a collection of erotic drawings as serious works of art. I have argued for a need to examine the aesthetic possibilities of erotic representations that have up until this point, been dismissed. Likewise, in extending the investigation to include Fuseli's contemporaries, his intentions and guiding interests will become clearer. Fuseli's relationship with Theodor Von Holst merits an in depth study, as the artists were clearly exchanging their drawings. Perhaps we can learn more about Fuseli through Von Holst,

³⁹⁶ Schiff, *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson*, xviii.

³⁹⁷ William Blake, *Annotations to the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed., Edmond Malone (London: 1798), 636.

and expand our understanding of the exchange of such objects. Moreover, it would prove insightful to examine erotic drawings as objects of exchange in Rome where Sergel and Fuseli, among others, circulated sexually explicit drawings. These earlier scenes require a comparative analysis with those executed later in his life, as they explore other realms of human sexuality. Although this thesis has argued that Fuseli utilised the figure to express the depths of the inner mind, the concept of madness could be explored further, specifically the eroticism of madness and its gender implications. This thesis has provided a foundation for further investigation into the elaborate hair and fashions that proliferate throughout Fuseli's art, and although I have provided insight into their symbolic value, there is a need to explore their implications further. Likewise, further studies would illuminate why Fuseli's women who appear in public works of art differ from those depicted in the more intimate medium of drawing. Although I have uncovered yet more riddles, I hope that this thesis has established that Fuseli, an artist compelled to push the boundaries of visual art and to establish the pre-eminence of the figure in history painting, successfully created visions of the sexual sublime in drawings of bewildering depth and elegance. I have argued that Fuseli asserted the figure as a vehicle for outward expression of inner turmoil and bitter critique in drawings that are violent, erotic, visually commanding and emotionally powerful. If their esoteric nature has been even partially revealed then this thesis has succeeded in dissolving the aura of taboo surrounding these objects, firmly situating them as works of fine art.

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(Fig. 9) Illustrations printed in Ruthven Todd's *Tracks in the Snow*. Bottom left image is a detail of *Three Women and a Recumbent Man*, 1809. Pencil and ink wash on paper, 18 × 24.5 cm.

(Fig. 10) The Exhibition Space at the Tate Gallery in London, 2006. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 11) Theodor Matthias von Holst after Henry Fuseli, *Prostitute Swinging a Whip*, 1822–30. Pencil on paper, 30.4 × 17.5 cm. Ashmolean Museum.

(Fig. 12) Henry Fuseli, *A Sheet of Studies: Three Figures of Recumbent Women. A Head of a Man*, date unknown. Ink, graphite, watercolour and gouache on paper (verso on paper). 190 x 232 mm. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 13) Henry Fuseli, *Verso: Half Length Figure of a Woman in Profile, and a Study of a Head and Arm; a Nude Male Figure*, date unknown, Ink, graphite, watercolour and gouache on paper (verso on paper). 190 x 232 mm. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 14) Henry Fuseli, *Verso of Siegfried about to Deny on Oath that Brunhild Had Been his*

Paramour, the Figures Traced Through, 1805. Graphite and watercolour on paper, 255 x 415 mm. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 15) Henry Fuseli, *Siegfried about to Deny on Oath that Brunhild Had Been his Paramour*, 1805. Graphite and watercolour on paper, 255 x 415 mm. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 16) Henry Fuseli, *Siegfried and Kriemheld*, 1807. Watercolour on paper, 480 x 360 mm. Auckland Art Gallery.

(Fig. 17) Henry Fuseli, *The Incubus Leaving Two Sleeping Women*, 1810. Pencil, wash and watercolour on paper 31.5 x 40.8 cm. Kunsthhaus Zürich.

(Fig. 18) Henry Fuseli, *The Night-hag Visiting Lapland Witches or Lapland Orgies* c. 1794-1796. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 126.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

(Fig. 19) Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1790-91. Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 64 cm. Frankfurt am Main: Freies Deutsches Hochstift/Frankfurter Goethe-Museum.

(Fig. 20) Henry Fuseli, *Detail of Three Women and a Recumbent Man*, 1809. Pencil and ink wash on paper, 18 x 24.5 cm. London: Victoria and Albert Museum.

(Fig. 21) Henry Fuseli, *Erotic Scene of a Man and Two Women at the Foot of an Altar to Priapus* c.1770-78. Grey wash, pen and traces of black ink on paper 26.8 x 33.3 cm. Florence: Museo Horne.

(Fig. 22) Johan Tobias Sergel, *Erotic scene (Liebesszene)*. Washed Pen and Ink Drawing (Lavierte Federzeichnung). 142 x 140 mm. Private Collection (Privatbesitz).

(Fig. 23) Henry Fuseli, *Prometheus*, c. 1770-71. Pen and ink and wash over paper. Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett.

(Fig. 24) Henry Fuseli, *Hephaestus, Bia and Crato Securing Prometheus on Mount Caucasus*, c. 1800-1810. Pencil on paper, 359 x 302 mm. Auckland Art Gallery.

(Fig. 25) Henry Fuseli, *The Vision of the Lazar House*, 1791-93. Pen and wash on paper, 560 x 660 mm. Zürich, Kunsthhaus Zürich.

(Fig. 26) Henry Fuseli, *A Mandrake: A Charm*, c. 1785. Oil on canvas. 35 x 765 mm. Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

(Fig. 27) Henry Fuseli, *The Italian Count (Ezzelin Bracciaferro, 'Iron Arm', Musing over Meduna, Destroyed by him for Disloyalty, during His Absence in the Holy Land)* c. 1780. Oil on canvas. 49 x 61 cm. Sir John Soane's Museum

(Fig. 28) Henry Fuseli, *Sin Pursued by Death*, nineteenth century. Oil on canvas. Zürich: Kunsthhaus, Zürich.

(Fig. 29) James Barry, *Satan and his Legions Hurling Defiance toward the Vault of Heaven*, 1792-1808. Etching on paper, 865 x 508 mm. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 30) Henry Fuseli, *The Shepherd's Dream*, 1786. Oil on canvas, 1543 x 2153 mm. London: Tate Gallery.

(Fig. 31) *The Auspicious Marriage!* in *Town and Country Magazine* vol. 10, 1778. Engraving, 4.25 x 4 inches.

(Fig. 32) Henry Fuseli, *Courtesan with an Elaborate Head-dress* (Kurtisane mit Federschmuck) c.1800-10. Pen, pencil and watercolour on paper. Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich.

(Fig. 33) Henry Fuseli, *A Woman at Her Dressing Table*, c. 1800-1806, 45 x 29.5 cm.

(Fig. 34) Henry Fuseli, *Couple on an Altar before a Herm of Priapus*, ca. 1776. Pen and wash on paper, 26.1 x 37.6 cm. Museo Horne, Florence.

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