

**Balancing Binaries:**  
**Michelet, Woman and the Tightrope of History**

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‘Every organism that works well is double, has two sides ... a certain balance between two forces is necessary, forces mutually opposed and symmetrical.’

Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière* (1862).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Image André Gille, *La Parodie* (1868), Internet Archive, <[archive.org/details/caricaturedejulesmichelet](http://archive.org/details/caricaturedejulesmichelet)>, viewed 12 September, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Michelet, Jules, *The Sorceress: A Study in Middle Age Superstition*, trans. Allinson, A.R. (London: Imperial Press, 1905).

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## **Abstract**

The Nineteenth Century romantic historian Jules Michelet remains one of the canons of French history and as such much has been written concerning both Michelet the man and his approach to history. This thesis seeks to re-examine how Michelet represented woman, moving away from arguments which present Michelet as either a misogynist or a man enamoured with the entire female sex. The thesis presents an alternate perspective on Michelet and woman, suggesting that his writings regarding women were not essentially an expression of his perspective on gender. Rather, Michelet's works concerning women must be understood in terms of Michelet's conception of history as a balancing act. The core idea influencing this thesis is that for Michelet, the tenuous balance between opposite, and at times opposing, forces was necessary to ensure progress in history. His works on the subject of women are re-interpreted in this light.

## Introduction

Jules Michelet (1798-1874) was many things, a republican, an anti clerical, a staunch supporter of the family, a poet, an idealist and a capital 'r' Romantic. However, he was neither a feminist, nor an antifeminist. Even though Michelet did not advocate the extension of rights such as suffrage to women, that he preached conservative, republican family values and advocated separate 'spheres' for men and women and despite his insistence that the sexes were by 'nature' different, he cannot be described as an antifeminist. The question of women's rights in regards to suffrage, broached by feminists during the mid-nineteenth century, were largely incompatible with Michelet's view of the family unit in which each member (man, woman, child) fulfilled a specific role and it was the man's responsibility to take care of his wife relinquishing the need for her to possess 'rights'. Equally, regardless of Michelet's frequent declarations affirming that woman transcended man, the superlatives he saved for her alone, his conviction that without woman man would be lost and his belief that woman, by virtue of her link to nature, acted as an intermediary between man and the natural world and was therefore irreplaceable, he cannot be dubbed a feminist.

The texts *L'Amour* (1858), *La Femme* (1859), *Jean D'Arc* (1858) and *La Sorcière* (1862) have been chosen for examination because, superficially at least, they concern women but more accurately they reflect and further one of Michelet's central assumptions regarding history.

As such, each work will be interpreted, as Michelet's entire oeuvre must be, in light of his conception of history, which influenced the character of all his works. Michelet was convinced that history was an ongoing balancing act, a perpetual search for equilibrium, which could only be achieved if each element was in its proper place and played its part in relation to the other. Without equilibrium history would stagnate and progress could not be achieved, as evidenced in *La Sorcière* in which Michelet depicts the Middle Ages as a period of stasis due to the disproportionate power the church possessed over the people. Joan of Arc and Marianne also emerged as feminine symbols during periods of unrest, the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) and the French Revolution (1789), respectively, and acted as counterweights for the destructive, masculine forces that threatened to destroy the French people. This is reflected in Michelet's frequent use of binaries to describe and explain history, and the world itself, as he saw it, as an eternal dance of dualities.

Michelet's position in relation to women can only be understood in terms of his wider approach and interpretation of the forces that stunt and propel history forwards along its trajectory. It is rather simplistic, and largely nonsensical, considering Michelet's insistence on equilibrium to argue that Michelet was either *for* or *against* women. The reality is, he was neither. Just like any other force, individual, symbol, group or institution, woman could be simultaneously stabilising and destructive, both beneficial and harmful to man. Michelet did not see woman's role in history as being accidental but functional, just as the role played by 'great men' or even historians.

Michelet saw himself as performing a specific function, being responsible for 'resurrecting' the spirit of ages past in his histories. This thesis moves from the micro to the macro. Chapter one, 'Woman as Wife', examines Michelet's republican, family model of politics and his elevation of the family unit as the ultimate ideal because husband and wife represented the perfect balance between masculine and feminine qualities. Chapter two, 'Woman as Witch', concerns the role of the witch in the village community, presenting her as a figure of progress and wisdom in contrast to the widespread ignorance and superstition of the community, which Michelet saw as being fostered by the church. Chapter three, 'Woman as Counterweight' begins with an exploration of the symbolic function of Marianne, the revolutionary symbol of liberty, whose femininity balanced the masculine domination of revolutionary politics. It is suggested that Michelet was influenced by this notion of balance and mirrored it in his representation of Joan of Arc, who like the sorceress, was contrary to both her context and her milieu. The core idea influencing this thesis is that for Michelet, the tenuous balance between opposite and opposing forces was necessary to ensure progress in history.



## Chapter 1: Woman as Wife

Jules Michelet was born in post revolutionary Paris to a printer, Furcy Michelet, who was just wealthy enough to ensure that his son received a good education at the Lycée Charlemagne.<sup>3</sup> During his time there, the studious Michelet won three prizes in the *Concours général*, scholastic competitions which established early on that he was bound for academic excellence.<sup>4</sup> He went on to teach, first at the Lycée where he had initially discovered his love of learning, then at the Collège Sainte-Barbe, followed by the École Normale Supérieure, in 1827.<sup>5</sup> In 1830 he acquired a post at the National Archives which placed him in a uniquely advantageous position to produce the numerous volumes of national history which he would go on to write.<sup>6</sup> He also worked as a deputy professor at the University of Paris (Sorbonne), under the more conservative academic and politician François Guizot, who would later, briefly, become prime minister of France, before the establishment of the Second Empire under Napoleon III. Michelet married Pauline Rousseau in 1824 and thirty five years after her untimely death from tuberculosis, at the age of fifty, he wed the twenty year old Athénaïs Mialaret.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Michelet* trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd Oxford, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 7.

Michelet, the romantic historian of France and the French remains, to this day a canon of French historiography. He is perhaps best remembered for his national histories, the epic *Histoire de France* (1833-67) and the seven volume, *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1847-1853). The latter, Simon Schama, revisionist historian of the French revolution, describes as ‘ Jules Michelet’s triumphant narrative’, claiming that it ‘ made of the Revolution a kind of spectacular performance, at once scripture, drama and invocation’. Schama is convinced that although, ‘ other chronicles followed- [by] Lamartine and Victor Hugo- none of them quite drown[ed] out the mighty tympanum of Michelet’s epic’.<sup>8</sup> Michelet was indeed a fan of ‘ epic’ stories, in the sense that his histories were tales of the trials and the triumphs of the people, who were always the heroes of his histories.

In writing these histories, Michelet ‘established a place for himself on a crowded stage’, populated by such illustrious players as Louis Blanc, Alexis de Tocqueville, Alphonse de Lamartine and Edgar Quinet.<sup>9</sup> After the Revolution of 1848, which ended the reign of the Orléans Monarchy and led to the establishment of the Second Empire in 1852, the republican Michelet became disillusioned with politics and turned to natural history and domestic topics concerning the family. He produced several works of natural history in the two decades following the revolution, including *L’oiseau* (1856), *L’insecte* (1857), *La Mer* (1861) and *La Montagne* (1868). Michelet’s romantic style, emotive language and poetic sensibilities rendered him well suited to natural history.

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens: A chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> François Furet, Mona Ozouf, *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 981.

His post at the national archives may lead one to suspect a Rankean approach to history. Although Michelet did utilise the archives, his histories are characterised by frequent flights of fancy, poetic declarations and metaphor. Primarily, the recurrent metaphor of ‘ the spirit of France’, which he sought to ‘resurrect’ evidencing why many of his contemporaries, and current historians, took for granted his status as a romantic. Some admired Michelet’s emotive, emotional brand of history and others, unsurprisingly criticised Michelet for not being ‘ objective’ enough. Some wrote of Michelet with a strange combination of reproach and respect, like Joris Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) the French novelist who in 1891 wrote ‘ it mattered little...that Michelet had been the least accurate of historians, since he was the most personal and the most artistic.’<sup>10</sup> In 1859, Eugène de Mirecourt commented that he was, ‘ un des hommes qui ont la plus contribué à la démoralisation politique et religieuse de ce siècle.’<sup>11</sup> Michelet had his supporters too, like the historian Gabriel Monod (1844-1912), founder of the *Revue Historique*, who greatly admired Michelet. Monod wrote,

Michelet a un sens historique plus large et plus profond que ses illustres devanciers, Guizot et Augustin Thierry. Tandis que ceux-ci cherchent dans le passé et y admirent surtout... les idées ... qu’ils défendent eux-même ... Michelet cherche et admire surtout dans le passé ce qu’il eut ... de caractéristique; il oublie

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<sup>10</sup> Joris Karl Huysmans (1891) article in *Là-bas* quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> Eugène de Mirecourt, *Michelet* (Paris: Havard, 1859), p.15. The Internet Archive <[archive.org/details/michelet00miregoog](http://archive.org/details/michelet00miregoog)>, viewed 13 July, 2012.

ses propres idées...pour comprendre par une intelligente sympathie les idées et les sentiments des hommes d'autrefois. <sup>12</sup>

By the twentieth century, perspectives on Michelet became, if possible, even more heterogeneous. There were those like Françoise Giroud who believed he was, 'un géant de l'histoire, l'un des maîtres du romantisme, le narrateur inspire d'une histoire de France... racontée "de bas en haut", épopée sublime.'<sup>13</sup> *Annales* historian, François Furet referred to him as the 'greatest of all republican historians.'<sup>14</sup> Arthur Mitzman praised the 'psychological awareness of Michelet', noting how, 'Michelet emphasised the common psychological denominators of a historical epoch... [which] led him to the edge of what would later be called psychoanalytical awareness'.<sup>15</sup> Others, like Pieter Geyl, have remained 'outraged by his nationalistic pathos and his blatant subjectivity.'<sup>16</sup> Regardless of what opinion one most closely subscribes to, Michelet remains relevant for those grappling with questions that continue to challenge historians. Such as, the presentation of historical time (linear, circular) and what advances and halts history (people, forces, nations).

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<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Monod, *Portraits et Souvenirs: Victor Hugo, Michelet* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1897), p. 30. The Internet Archive <http://archive.org/stream/portraitsetsouv01monogoog#page/n8/mode/2up>, viewed 14, July, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Françoise, Giroud, *Les Femmes de la Révolution de Michelet* (Paris: Carrere, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> François Furet, Mona Ozouf, *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian: Rebirth and Romanticism in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Mitzman, 'Michelet and Social Romanticism: Religion, Revolution, Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57, no. 4 (October, 1996), p. 660.

In the books *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, Michelet presents a paradoxical image of woman. Proceeding from the assumption that woman is, by 'nature' inherently different to man, Michelet paints a multilayered picture of her. For the poetically inclined Michelet, woman is both a supernatural being who surpasses man and the symbiotic half that completes him. She is at times a 'sibyl', a figure of strength possessing otherworldly powers of intuition and at others, a being so fragile and delicate that she relies on man for protection. She is the repository of love and grace and a positive force whose propensity for love ensures stability in the sacred unit of the family. Reading Michelet's *L'Amour* and *La Femme* in light of the political and social context of the early to mid-nineteenth century, it emerges that his perspective on woman shares elements with ideologies as diverse and divergent as ultraroyalism, Saint-Simonianism and Fourierism (two branches of utopian socialism) and the republicanism espoused by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Even some of the values espoused in the Napoleonic Code of 1804 can be found in Michelet's writings. Just as Michelet saw woman as being simultaneously essential to and detached from man, his own perspective was both rooted in and divergent from the ideological landscape of nineteenth-century France. Ultimately, Michelet saw woman as a force whose role was to ensure homeostasis in history by virtue of her contrary nature to man.

Champions of women's rights, notably, Jenny D'Héricourt, criticised Michelet's texts for revealing an anti feminist, perspective because she saw his insistence on the 'natural' differences between the sexes as an expression of male

superiority.<sup>17</sup> Other feminists such as Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin cited, like Michelet, the 'natural' differences between the sexes and the role of women in the home but utilised these alleged facts to argue *for* the involvement of women in the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> Michelet's books were essentially not a statement of an anti-feminist perspective but a furthering of his conception of history as a balancing act. Exploring the political and social discourse of this period and considering the actuality of women's involvement in – and more often exclusion from- the political upheavals of the time, it emerges that Michelet's image of woman bore little relation to the reality of women's experiences. This is because his texts are less an attempt to situate woman in her actual context and more a furthering of his perception of history as a tale of balance between different forces; in this case man and woman. This explains the difference between Michelet's idealised image of woman as the loving wife under her husband's tutelage and the doting mother of future republicans, on the one hand, and the reality of women who took to the streets and erected barricades alongside the men during the revolution of 1848, on the other.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Importance of the Family**

The notion that progress in history depended upon the balance between opposite forces, as represented by the ideal, symbiotic family unit, composed of man woman and child, pervaded Michelet's oeuvre. Undoubtedly, this was

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<sup>17</sup> See Jenny P., D'Héricourt, *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman* (New York: Carleton, 1864) in particular pages xii, 18, 88 and 77-6.

<sup>18</sup> See Susan K. Foley, *Women in France since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> See David Barry, *Women and Political Insurgency: France in the mid-nineteenth century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 29-35.

largely due to his observations of the 1848 Revolution and its aftermath, which divided his beloved France, hurling the nation into instability and that dreaded condition, stasis. Some interpreted this focus on the family as evidence of Michelet's antifeminist perspective.<sup>20</sup> However, Michelet's insistence on the inviolable nature of the family unit should not be interpreted as a categorical statement regarding the role of women in society but rather as an expression of his interpretation of history. In *La Femme* Michelet claimed that 'woman cannot live without man', but this was not an observation on women's secondary status under the law in mid-nineteenth-century France.<sup>21</sup> It was true that women quite literally depended on their husbands, who controlled their finances, owned the familial home and under whose patriarchal protection they fell.

However, Michelet was not referring to women's political disenfranchisement as evidenced in the rhetorical '...and does man live without woman?'<sup>22</sup> This suggests that man was equally dependant upon woman. Michelet cautioned unmarried men, that in the absence of a wife, 'you have not sure foundation, the harmonious equilibrium so favourable to productiveness.'<sup>23</sup> Clearly, Michelet was certain that man and woman could not live *without one another* and that the 'harmonious equilibrium' between the couple would result in productivity reinforcing the idea that historical progress relied on the balance between opposing forces or entities. This, he explained, was because 'nature has bound up

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<sup>20</sup> Jenny P. D'Héricourt in *Woman Affranchised*. Jeanne Deroin also expressed this opinion, see Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996) chapter three 'The Duties of the Citizen: Jeanne Deroin in the Revolution of 1848'.

<sup>21</sup> Jules Michelet, *Woman* trans. J.W. Palmer (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1860), p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 50.

life within a triple and absolute man, woman and child. Separately, they are sure to perish and are only saved together.’<sup>24</sup>

The codependency, rather dramatically expressed in Michelet’s contention that without one another all ‘are sure to perish’ and the reference to nature, emphasised the importance of maintaining the family unit. Michelet was not alone in expressing a belief in the sacred trinity of the family. Fellow republican Victor Hugo made similar claims, arguing, ‘ l’homme à lui seul n’est pas l’homme; l’homme, plus la femme, plus l’enfant, cette créature une et triple constitue la vraie unité humaine.’<sup>25</sup>

However, Michelet and Hugo differed on the implications this unit had for the place of women in society. Hugo was convinced that woman’s place in the family meant that the rights of the citizen could not be withheld from women, declaring

Dans notre législation telle qu’elle est, la femme ne possède pas, elle n’est pas en justice, elle ne vote pas... il y a des citoyens. Il n’y a pas de citoyennes. C’est là un état violent; il faut qu’il cesse.<sup>26</sup>

Michelet, despite being equally convinced of the importance of the family unit never deployed it, as Hugo did, to argue for the extension of rights- such as suffrage- to women. This is not because, as some have argued, he was inherently

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<sup>24</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Nicole Priollaud, *La femme au 19<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Paris: Liana Levi et Sylvie Messenger, 1983), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Priollaud, *La femme au 19<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, pp. 15-18.



sexist.<sup>27</sup> Both James McMillan and Joan Wallach Scott are of this position, making much of Michelet's refusal to support women's suffrage. McMillan suggests that Michelet was articulating a position based on his 'antipathy to women in public life.'<sup>28</sup> Scott presents a misogynistic Michelet who was keen to represent woman as 'a danger to the republic... [and a] pious, superstitious handmaiden of the priest.'<sup>29</sup> Their interpretation is based on Michelet's own contention that the clergy exercised an inordinate level of control over women and could therefore influence their vote. He wrote, 'our wives and daughters are raised, governed by our enemies. Enemies of the modern spirit of liberty and of the future.'<sup>30</sup>

Admittedly, Michelet was suggesting that women were particularly susceptible to being influenced by priests but he was not expressing an inherently antifeminist perspective. Nor was this idea limited to Michelet, as Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga note, 'the secularism and anti-clericalism of many French radicals and republicans led to a powerful attack on the alliance between women and the Church and their presumed conspiracy to limit the freedom of independent men.'<sup>31</sup> Michelet's refusal to support women's suffrage was based on a belief, not limited to Michelet, that the church exercised control over women, and by extension, their husbands. This relates to Michelet's belief in the importance of balancing forces. In Michelet's estimation, extending suffrage to

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<sup>27</sup> See James F. McMillan, *France and Women 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 92. and Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1996), p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> James F. McMillan, *France and Women 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1996), p. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Jules Michelet, *Du prêtre, de la Femme, de la Famille* (1845) quoted in Mcmillan, *France and Women*, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Caine, Glenda Sluga, *Gendering European History* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 41.

women would upset the balance of society in two ways. Not only would it extend the church's control over the people but it would also destabilize the sacred balance of the home by removing woman from it.

An Early twentieth-century biographer of Michelet, known only as 'Nerthal', explained Michelet's position simply, but more accurately than Scott or Macmillan. He wrote, 'il aime le peuple, il aime la patrie, il aime la nature, il aime la femme et il abhorra l'église, qui, disait-il, fonctionner abuser le peuple...contrecarrer la nature, influencer la femme.'<sup>32</sup> Although Nerthal could have presented Michelet's viewpoint more analytically and with a greater degree of subtlety, he is essentially right in pointing out that Michelet's 'antipathy' was directed towards the church and not towards women's presence in public life. Michelet did not reject the idea of offering women the vote because he was a misogynist, as Macmillan and Scott imply nor was it because he simply 'hated the church' as Nerthal suggests. Michelet was opposed to the extension of suffrage to women because he believed that doing so would 'empower the church' and draw women away from the hearth.<sup>33</sup> Michelet believed that this would upset the balance of both domestic and national life, which Michelet was so convinced, was necessary for historical progress.

Michelet was certain that woman's involvement in public life was incompatible with her role as a balancing force in the home. Although Michelet was convinced of the inviolable nature of the family unit, the cooperation of man and woman,

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<sup>32</sup> Nerthal, *Jules Michelet: ses Amours et ses Haines*, (Paris: Librairie des Saints- Péres, 1906).

<sup>33</sup> Caine, Sluga, *Gendering European History*, p. 95.

which was so crucial for stability and success in the private sphere, was not justification for the involvement of women in public life. Michelet explained that he wrote *L'Amour* because he 'sought to lead woman back to the fireside'.

He accused critics of his work of claiming 'they preferred the pavement or the convent for her' evidencing both his anticlericalism and his rejection of women abandoning their homes in order to protest.<sup>34</sup> This opinion was by no means an anomaly in the nineteenth century. The ideal image of *la femme au foyer*, or the woman by the fireside was a prevalent, potent picture of womanhood, expressed particularly, but not exclusively in republican circles.<sup>35</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, fellow republican intellectual and politician had, like Michelet, voiced the same view, in December 1848 when he asserted that 'woman's role is not to be found in public life, the life of human relations and agitation but truly in private life, that life of feeling and peacefulness associated with the domestic hearth.'<sup>36</sup> Both Michelet and Proudhon maintained that woman's proper place was the fireside, which would ensure stability in the home and as a result, in the nation. For Michelet, this also meant that the balance of opposite forces could be maintained and history could progress.

Although Republicanism may have been considered a 'radical political ideology' in the nineteenth century, it was not radical enough regarding the woman question to support their involvement in the public sphere.<sup>37</sup> As Susan Foley notes, 'even though they [republicans] saw themselves as 'democrats'... they

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<sup>34</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> McMillan, *France and Women*, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *Le Peuple* (1848) quoted in David Barry, *Women and Political Insurgency: France in the mid-nineteenth century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Susan K. Foley, *Women in France since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 115.

subscribed to a gendered social model in which women's world was separate from the world of politics.'<sup>38</sup> Michelet was undoubtedly influenced by this 'gendered social model' and as such subscribed to the republican ideology of the family, which contended that whilst a woman's place in the home was crucial and inalienable, she had no place in the public world of politics. This was not, for Michelet at least, an attempt to reinforce the subordinate status of women. Quite the contrary, woman's place in the home was necessary to maintain the sacred family unit which Michelet perceived as being so favourable to productivity. Michelet's belief that women should remain guardians of the domestic hearth was not an articulation of his view of gender roles but a furthering of his idea that historical progress relied on maintaining the tenuous balance between contrary forces.

The notion that women's involvement in the public and private spheres was mutually exclusive is not an invention of late nineteenth-century republican ideology. Evidence of the conviction that women belonged in the home can be found in the rhetoric of politicians, the images of cartoonists created and in the literature written during this period. When Michelet set himself the task of writing *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, it was during a period of instability and uncertainty both in terms of the revolution of 1848, which had toppled the Orléans monarchy, and in relation to his personal life. According to Lionel Gossman, there was 'no doubt' that Michelet saw the revolution of 1848 as 'a catastrophe ... from which History, as Michelet viewed it, emerged wounded and

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<sup>38</sup> Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, p. 115.

bleeding.’<sup>39</sup> Gossman emphasises that for Michelet ‘the very order of history, its progress toward ever greater freedom and the full realization of humanity...seemed to be contradicted by these events.’<sup>40</sup> Gossman was referring to the fact that, for Michelet, the revolution of 1848 had not resulted in unity and progress but the opposite, division among the classes and stasis. In this light, it is little wonder that he would preach unity and stability and the importance of the family in achieving these ideals at such a time. Not only was politics on uncertain ground but, as Gossman notes, ‘the year 1848 was also a personal disaster for the fifty-year-old professor’ because it was then, having been suspected of ‘turning his lecture course at the Collège [de France] into a focus of resistance to the regime of President Louis Bonaparte’ Michelet was suspended and finally lost his position after his refusal to pledge allegiance to the president-turned-emperor in 1852.<sup>41</sup> Gossman reinforces the profound impact this had on Michelet, highlighting the historian’s own confession that he was ‘sick at heart’ during this period and that this was, as Michelet wrote, ‘one of [his] darkest hours’.<sup>42</sup> Gossman utilises Michelet’s dismissal and his subsequent reaction to explain his turn to natural history.

The same argument can be made for his turn to the subject of woman and the family and his insistence that stability in the family was key to historical progress after the revolution of 1848, ‘the outcome of which, the restoration of “order” under Napoleon III, could only be seen by Michelet as a disastrous

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<sup>39</sup> Lionel Gossman, ‘Michelet and Natural History: The Alibi of Nature’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 145, no.3 (September, 2001), p. 286.

<sup>40</sup> Gossman, ‘Michelet and Natural History’, p. 286.

<sup>41</sup> Gossman, ‘Michelet and Natural History’, p. 286.

<sup>42</sup> Gossman, ‘Michelet and Natural History’, p. 286.

regression.’<sup>43</sup> The short-lived Second Republic had not fulfilled Michelet’s dreams of a united France. Considering this, it is unsurprising that both *L’Amour* and *La Femme* focused on the idea of stability and that Michelet elevated the family as the primary means of achieving stability. Furthermore, Michelet was undoubtedly influenced by widespread fears surrounding the negative impacts of women’s involvement in politics, primarily that they would abandon their homes. During the 1848 revolution women had been involved in building barricades, inciting men to fight, stealing food and provisions, and sometimes personally leading mobs. There were concerted acts of collective insurgency involving both men and women such as the scene on the Rue des Gravilliers where, ‘women practiced an age-old tactic of confusing the forces of order ... by advancing ahead of their menfolk on the soldiers and crying to them to shoot if they dared.’<sup>44</sup>

There was, in addition, the ‘23<sup>rd</sup> of February [when] women with dresses tucked up against the wet, muddy streets joined men in the Rue St-Honoré in stoning the hated armed police, the Municipal Guards.’<sup>45</sup> There were also examples of individual women rebelling, such as Catherine Delacroix who ‘led the rebels with a pickaxe in her hand, crying ‘Qui Vive!’ to passers-by’ and Adélaïde Bettrette, ‘who summoned the men of her quarter to march to the barricades, made gunpowder and delivered arms to the insurgents.’<sup>46</sup> Michelet and his fellow republicans would be able to draw upon such occurrences to fuel their fears of women quitting the home to participate in public life. In response

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<sup>43</sup> Gossman, ‘Michelet and Natural History’, p. 285.

<sup>44</sup> Barry, *Women and political insurgency*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Barry, *Women and political insurgency*, p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Barry, *Women and political insurgency*, p. 29, 35.

to female insurgency during the revolution of 1848 female revolutionaries were frequently referred to as 'furies'. This was a term, which even appeared in the official records as in the report into the insurrection of the Var where the women of La Garde-Freinet were referred to in this derogatory manner.<sup>47</sup> The use of this term highlights fears regarding the involvement of women in political life.

Similar anxieties are reflected in the works of republican cartoonist Honoré Daumier (Figures 1-2). Figure 1 depicts a 'bas-bleu', an intellectual woman, deeply engrossed in her work while her infant topples into the bathwater, set against a backdrop of a home in disarray. This illustration clearly evidences fears regarding the catastrophic impact on domestic life that women's involvement in the masculine public sphere would have. The second image shows a husband left at home with his young child while his wife, a 'socialist', is nowhere to be seen. The caption reveals that she left for 'a banquet' forty-eight hours previously, implying that once a woman is involved in politics, she will naturally abandon her husband and child, never to return. Daumier's illustrations reveal, perhaps even more than the categorical statements of Proudhon or the assembly, why men like Michelet, whose romantic notion of an inviolable family 'trinity' was merely a more poetic expression of the same sentiment, were so reluctant to allow women to become involved in public life.

Michelet, Proudhon and others preached the importance of the family and woman's central role within it, which precluded her involvement in the public realm of politics. These ideas were influenced by the events of 1848 and the

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<sup>47</sup> Barry, *Women and political insurgency*, p. 100.

reactionary rhetoric that developed in response to it. Women's involvement in public life was clearly seen as a direct threat to peace at home and, by extension, in society. This anxiety, although often masked by poetic language and romantic declarations, is also found in Michelet's texts. However, it is not because he was inherently opposed to women's rights but because he saw women's involvement in public life as upsetting the balance that was required for stability in the home and for progress in history.

### **The natural difference between man and woman**

Michelet emphasised the 'natural' difference between the sexes, which rendered the couple the perfect binary to demonstrate Michelet's conception of history in which progress depended on the balance of opposite forces. Michelet, rather hyperbolically, articulated the idea of a natural difference between the sexes. In *L'Amour* he stated that 'woman...is much more unlike man than would at first appear... she does nothing as we do. She thinks, speaks and acts differently', thus establishing the idea of an inherent difference between man and woman. This supports Michelet's belief in the stabilising effect that partnership between two opposite forces had in history.<sup>48</sup> Michelet continued 'her blood even does not flow in her veins as ours does, at times it rushes through them like a foaming mountain torrent.'<sup>49</sup> The metaphor of the torrent expresses the idea, pervasive in both *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, as well as being a prevailing assumption at the time, that women were emotional, irrational and unpredictable. Man, on the

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<sup>48</sup> Jules Michelet, *Love* trans. J.W. Palmer (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861), p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p.62.



other hand balanced the irrationality and emotionality of woman through his 'natural' endowments, reason and logic.<sup>50</sup> Michelet often referred to the 'natural tendencies of man and woman', hers being 'love and generation' and his 'law, reason and justice.'<sup>51</sup> Michelet saw woman's natural characteristics of 'love and generation' relating to her role as wife and mother, and therefore evidencing that her presence was necessary in the private sphere of the home. Similarly, man was naturally inclined to pursue 'law, reason and justice', placing him necessarily in public life.

However, this did not mean that man surpassed woman and played a more important role. The contrary is true, Michelet saw husband and wife, man and woman, as being equally important in the achievement, and maintenance, of stability because, according to Michelet, 'the man and the woman are two relative and incomplete beings, only two halves of a whole...she is relative...she has no support...no happiness that does not come from him. He is relative...she renews him...creates the man.'<sup>52</sup> This reinforces Michelet's perspective, that the ideal conditions for historical progress were to be found in the harmony of opposites. Michelet was not an antifeminist, as his views regarding gender roles reflected his more general belief in the necessity for opposites to balance one another in the home and in society in order for humanity to progress. Again, Michelet was not alone in arguing that men and women were, by 'nature', different. This idea was expressed even more hyperbolically by the eminent politician, philosopher and republican Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who was a vocal

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<sup>50</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 213.

<sup>51</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 222-3.

<sup>52</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 203.

advocate and supporter of socialism and of the republican principles of the family. Proudhon claimed 'the difference of sex gives rise between [man and woman] to a separation of the same nature as that which the difference of races places between animals'.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly, Michelet, and other proponents of the 'natural difference' argument did not see themselves as ascribing these characteristics to woman but rather relating what they observed. When Michelet wrote 'nature favours man. She gives woman to him, feeble, loving, depending on the constant need of being loved and protected. She loves in advance him to whom god seems to lead her,' he was relinquishing responsibility for - and as a result the need to justify- the claim that woman was more feeble than man and in need of his protection.<sup>54</sup> The statement 'nature favours man' gives weight to his argument because it frames his perspective as an observation rather than an opinion. Michelet was not attempting to prove that woman possessed certain characteristics such as love and kindness and man possessed others including logic and reason because he saw these as *facts*. This supports the idea that *L'Amour* and *La Femme* were not conceived as texts which attempted to present a position on gender but rather an elaboration of Michelet's idea that historical development depended on the achievement of balance between binaries.

Further, distancing himself in this manner made it difficult for others to counter these claims without accepting the premise of a 'natural' difference themselves.

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<sup>53</sup> Pierre Joseph Proudhon, quoted in D'Héricourt, *Woman Affranchised*, p.34

<sup>54</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p.18.

Jeanne Deroin, a staunch advocate for women's rights who in 1849 was the first woman who attempted to run for election to the National Assembly also appealed to natural law theory but she did so in order to call for women's inclusion in politics. She argued, 'only woman, who is innately opposed to war, because the principles of love and peace are inherent in her nature, can make everyone understand that the temple of brotherhood cannot be constructed on foundations of bloodshed.'<sup>55</sup> For Deroin, woman's 'natural' tendency towards love and peace supported her *inclusion* in the public sphere in order to temper the more aggressive, violent constitution of man. Her remarks regarding 'love and peace' being 'inherent' in a woman's nature mirror those of Michelet who was convinced that to love and be loved was a woman's primary function. He claimed that:

This is woman's mission...to renew the heart of man...with love. In love is her true sphere of labour, the only labour that it is essential she should perform. It is that she should reserve herself entirely for this that nature made her.<sup>56</sup>

This claim leaves no doubt regarding Michelet's conviction about woman's natural propensity for love and of the importance of this 'essential mission'.

Elsewhere, he mused, 'whose heart is more tender than that of a woman?

Everything that suffers or is weak, among men or animals, is loved and protected

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<sup>55</sup> Jeanne Deroin, *La Voix des Femmes* (28 March 1848) quoted in Susan K. Foley, *Women in France since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>56</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p.54.

by her.’<sup>57</sup> Michelet was not the first to argue that the dominant feature of woman’s ‘nature’ was love. Echoes of Saint-Simonianism, the philosophy associated with utopian socialism and later with ‘feminism’ and in its later stages largely connected with the writings and activities of Barthélemy Prosper-Enfantin (1796 –1864) and his followers, can be found in Michelet’s insistence that woman was by ‘nature’ associated with love.<sup>58</sup> The brand of Saint-Simonianism preached by Enfantin and his sympathisers, depended upon two central assumptions, both shared by Michelet. They were, that the sexes were characterised by an innate difference with qualities unique to their sex and that both were necessary for the ideal society. The Saint-Simonian ‘principle that woman’s nature was defined by “love” ’ can be clearly identified in Michelet’s writings.<sup>59</sup>

However, Michelet’s core ideas also differed from Saint-Simonian ideology. Michelet insisted that in order for balance to be maintained in society, woman’s ‘true sphere of labour’ was in love and therefore in the home. The ‘Saint-Simonians made a theoretical distinction between woman’s “nature” and man’s [but] did not espouse separate “spheres” of action.’<sup>60</sup> Michelet’s conviction that women’s natural tendencies meant that they should tend to the domestic hearth was one claim that Jenny D’Héricourt felt the need to refute. She saw Michelet’s insistence on the ‘natural’ differences between the sexes as evidence that Michelet’s perspective was ultimately anti-feminist. This interpretation of

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<sup>57</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p.306.

<sup>58</sup> See Susan Foley, *Women In France*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>59</sup> Claire G. Moses, ‘Saint-Simonian Men/Saint-Simonian Women: The Transformation of Feminist Thought in 1830s’ France’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 54, no. 2 (June 1982), p. 244.

<sup>60</sup> Moses, ‘Saint-Simonian Men/Saint-Simonian Women’, p. 248.

Michelet was, by no means, limited to D'Héricourt, nor was it restricted to the nineteenth-century. To this day, numerous historians continue to present a parochial image of Michelet as a misogynist.<sup>61</sup>

While Michelet was thoroughly convinced of woman's 'natural tendency' towards love, Jenny D'Héricourt rejected this notion altogether. In the preface to her work *Woman Affranchised: An Answer to Michelet, Proudhon, Girardin, Legouvé, Compté and Other Modern Innovators* (1864), which was essentially conceived as both a refutation of many of the claims made by Michelet and others and a call for the equality of the sexes, she made this clear. Writing of her detractors she remarked:

Others...accuse me of *not writing like a woman*, of being harsh, unsparing to my adversaries, nothing but a *reasoning machine, lacking heart*.  
[author's italics] .<sup>62</sup>

D'Héricourt was thus refuting the common assumption, as reflected in Michelet's works that emotion or 'heart' was the 'natural' faculty for woman and that 'reasoning' belonged only to man.<sup>63</sup> She rejected this with the sardonic rebuttal, 'gentlemen, I cannot write otherwise than as a woman, since I have the honour to

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<sup>61</sup> See in particular Kathryn Ayers 'The only good woman, isn't a woman at all: The Crying Game and the Politics of Misogyny', *Women's studies International Forum*, 20, No. 2 (March-April 1997), pp. 329-335. Especially pages 331-2 where Ayers, makes much of the 'natural differences' argument to demonstrate Michelet's misogyny. Also, Karen Offen, 'The Second Sex and the Baccalauréat in Republican France, 1880-1924', *French Historical Studies*, 13, No. 2 (Autumn, 1983), pp. 252-286. Offen does not present Michelet as a misogynist but as a 'benevolent patriarch' which, while not as categorical a denunciation of Michelet's perspective as that of D'Héricourt and Ayers, is still critical of Michelet's paternalistic perspective on women.

<sup>62</sup> Jenny P. D'Héricourt, *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman* (New York: Carleton, 1864), p. xi.

<sup>63</sup> Jenny P. D'Héricourt, *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman*, p. xi.

be a woman.’<sup>64</sup> D’Héricourt also rejected the patriarchal contention that woman was a meek being destined to rely on man for protection, expressed in the line in *L’Amour*, which reads:

This poor, nervous being...whom nature desires to be feeble...that nature also desires that she should be always protected...it is for us to defend her for she is unable to do it herself.<sup>65</sup>

This she countered with the statement that:

Woman, *according to Michelet*, is a being of nature opposite to that of man; a creature weak, *always wounded, exceedingly barometrical*, and, consequently, unfit for labor... now we, women of the west, have the audacity to contend that we are not invalids. [author’s italics]<sup>66</sup>

Although the views expressed by Michelet were much more pervasive than those articulated by D’Héricourt, Deroin and other defenders of women, D’Héricourt’s work evidences that other points of view were also being voiced.

Such dissident voices would be easy to lose behind the more resonant tones of the dominant attitudes, which advocated the maintenance of separate spheres for men and women. Michelet’s writings also reflect the influence of these dissident voices, although he rarely reached the same conclusions. Notably, the influence of philosopher Charles Fourier’s thought can be seen in Michelet’s

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<sup>64</sup> D’Héricourt, *A Woman’s philosophy of Woman*, p. x.

<sup>65</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p. 221.

<sup>66</sup> D’Héricourt, *A Woman’s philosophy of Woman*, p. 31.

oeuvre. It was Fourier who first expressed the idea that ‘masculine and feminine talents differed, but were not automatically equated with male and female persons.’<sup>67</sup> Whilst Fourier’s philosophy revealed the arbitrary nature of arguments stemming from the ‘natural tendencies’ of the sexes, Michelet’s interpretation was radically different. For Michelet, women could take on male characteristics but in doing so they became men. He was convinced that ‘when women take on characteristics such as pride, she is no longer woman but man.’<sup>68</sup> Michelet reinforced the undesirability of this by adding ‘as soon as she is woman again, as soon as she is gentle, and no longer proud all is kindly, all is smooth. The saints are pleased that she is humbled.’<sup>69</sup> Both Fourier and Michelet argued that male and female characteristics were not necessarily restricted to males and females respectively, but Michelet differed from Fourier in claiming that when a woman took on male characteristics, she was ‘no longer woman but man’. This is because, in taking on male characteristics such as pride, woman was upsetting the equilibrium which Michelet saw as so important for the onward march of history.

Further, Michelet argued that women were well suited to ‘administration’, by which he meant organising the household, and not for politics because of the unique nature of their sex. In doing so, he was almost reiterating verbatim the sentiments expressed by ‘ultraroyalists’ de Bonald and de Maistre two decades previously who contended that a woman’s proper place was in the home.<sup>70</sup>

Although it cannot possibly be said that the anticlerical, republican Michelet was

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<sup>67</sup> Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, p. 117.

<sup>68</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 59.

<sup>69</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 40.

<sup>70</sup> Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, p. 107.

an 'ultraroyalist', the fact that he could agree with de Bonald and de Maistre on the issue of women suggests that 'the woman question' was one on which even men on radically different ends of the political spectrum could agree. De Bonald was convinced, as Michelet would later be, that 'women understand better than men how to run domestic affairs, which proves better than lengthy arguments that nature does not summon them to control public affairs'.<sup>71</sup> As Foley notes, 'both theorists called on 'nature' to demonstrate the subordinate status and domestic destiny of women.'<sup>72</sup> Michelet was similarly convinced that 'the political world is generally almost inaccessible to her [woman]' because it required 'a generative and essentially *masculine* spirit.'<sup>73</sup>

However, Michelet granted women had 'the sense of order' and as such were 'well fitted for administration.'<sup>74</sup> The notion that women should be excluded from the public sphere of politics due to their unique 'nature' relinquished both the responsibility and the necessity for proponents of the 'family model' of politics to justify their claims. Although Michelet was not as categorical and blunt as Proudhon who declared 'woman, by nature and by destination, is neither associate, nor citizen, nor public functionary,' he was essentially expressing the same sentiments.<sup>75</sup> Where Michelet differed from both Proudhon and the ultraroyalist was in his frequent and paradoxical claim that woman was both inferior and superior to man. He frequently described how she was, 'elevated by her beauty, her natural poetry, her quick intuition and divining

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<sup>71</sup> Louis De Bonald, quoted in Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, p. 107.

<sup>72</sup> Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, p. 107.

<sup>73</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 202-3.

<sup>74</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 203.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, quoted in Jenny P. D'Héricourt, *Woman enfranchised*, p. 40.



faculty', but was quick to underscore this claim by remarking 'she is...held down by nature in the bonds of weakness and suffering.'<sup>76</sup> For Michelet, although woman may have excelled man in some, albeit limited, regards she was still dependent on him. In *L'Amour* he was convinced that woman 'reaches into the details of matters which escape us and ... at certain times ... sees over our heads, pierces the future, the invisible, and penetrates through the body into the world of spirits.'<sup>77</sup> He was suggesting that woman was an almost supernatural being capable of reaching into 'the world of spirits' with a degree of intuition unavailable to man. Again, he qualified this statement of woman's superiority with another, adding, 'but her thought seldom attains strong reality; and that is why she has created so little.'<sup>78</sup> For Michelet, woman was paradoxically both superior and inferior to man, which emphasises his idea that the two sexes needed one another in order for humankind to achieve its full potential.

Woman was unable to put her natural, 'personal gifts' into practical use without the aid of man, but he too required woman without whom his household would lack the 'stability so favourable to productivity'.<sup>79</sup> It was man's role to protect woman because she was a 'fragile globe of incomparable alabaster' and Michelet urged that 'one must care for thee well ... guard thee closely in the warmth of his bosom.'<sup>80</sup> In turn, woman would guard the hearth and home,

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<sup>76</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p.43.

<sup>77</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p. 202.

<sup>78</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p. 202.

<sup>79</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p.200.

<sup>80</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p.201.

providing a stable environment for her husband and supporting him in his endeavours.

For Michelet, the family was important because it supported his contention that balance and unity between different elements, in this case between husband and wife, would lead to productivity and progress.

### **The Complementary Role of Woman**

Michelet also claimed that woman played a complementary role to man. He was certain that whilst her own natural shortcomings may have limited woman from participating, like man did, in the public realm, her very weaknesses rendered her a useful and irreplaceable companion, allowing man to excel in his endeavours. In his advice to women he urged, ‘madam, be not perfect, keep faults enough to console a man; nature intended him to be proud.’<sup>81</sup> This implies that woman is capable of perfection but that she should not strive for it because her role is to ease and ameliorate the lot of man. This is equally reflected in the line, ‘when you see him dejected, sad, discouraged, the best remedy is to downcast yourself, to be more a woman.’<sup>82</sup> It is with this notion, that woman’s sole purpose is to aid man achieve his full potential, that D’Héricourt took issue. She wrote that in Michelet’s estimation woman was merely ‘created for man... the altar of his heart, his refreshment, his consolation. In her presence he gains new vigour,

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<sup>81</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 207.

<sup>82</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 207.

becomes inspired, draws the strength necessary to his high mission as worker, creator, organiser.'<sup>83</sup>

This assessment of Michelet initially appears to be supported by his own remarks explaining why woman had not created anything noteworthy in the arts. He claimed, 'the great creations of art seem even now impossible to her. Every noble work of civilization is a product of the genius of man.'<sup>84</sup> Michelet was, nevertheless, not anti-woman as D'Héricourt's assessment suggests, because whilst the 'noble works of civilization' may have been created by man, he could not have produced them without the support of woman. For Michelet, both man and woman were symbiotic partners working *together*. This is supported by his claim that both male and female faculties of the mind were required in the creation of 'great works', the female faculties being 'inspiration and intuition' and the male ones being 'reason and logic.'<sup>85</sup> Michelet stressed 'we cannot say (like Proudhon) that woman is only receptive,' reinforcing the notion that both partners are required to produce any thing noteworthy.<sup>86</sup> Woman was, according to Michelet, 'productive by her influence upon man.'<sup>87</sup>

Whilst de Maistre claimed that 'women had never excelled in intellectual or creative endeavours, attributing this to nature's design rather than their historical exclusion from such undertakings,' Michelet was certain that they

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<sup>83</sup> D'Héricourt, *A Woman's philosophy of Woman*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>84</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p.203.

<sup>85</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p.203.

<sup>86</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p.202.

<sup>87</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p.202.

had.<sup>88</sup> It is because Michelet did not make a distinction between woman being productive *through* man and being productive in her own right that led D'Héricourt to conclude, on the subject of Michelet's *L'Amour*, 'you see, my readers, that in Michelet's book, woman is created for man; without him she would be nothing.'<sup>89</sup> Whilst D'Héricourt is apparently correct in highlighting the subordinate status given to woman by Michelet in this work due to her complementary role, this is a simplification of his perspective. Michelet was equally adamant that without woman, man too would be lost. He would be incapable of creating without the feminine faculties of 'inspiration and intuition'. More to the point, without her loving aid and support, he would be lost because the sacred couple was required for all endeavours under heaven. Michelet perceived of the world in terms of binaries, and he was convinced that both man and woman were necessary, complimentary partners. One was not superior to the other, simply different and their union would result in happiness, stability and progress, for the couple and for the nation. Thus, Michelet initially appears to be implying that women are inferior and dependant upon man and incapable of creating without his aid and this is certainly how D'Héricourt interpreted his *L'Amour* and *La Femme*. However, given Michelet's propensity for thinking in binaries and his frequent reflection that both members of a pair are necessary, this assessment becomes less convincing.

Michelet was, like many of his contemporaries, from the staunch republican Proudhon , to the ultra royalists De Bonald and De Maistre, a firm supporter of

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<sup>88</sup> Foley, *Women in France since 1789*, p. 107.

<sup>89</sup>D'Héricourt, *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman*, p. 33.

the family. This necessarily meant that woman was to be limited to the hearth and home but Michelet did not see this as a subordination of women because his argument was dependant upon their being a balance between different forces. In this case the love and kindness of the wife would necessarily counter the husband's logic and reason. Nowhere did Michelet claim that one was more important than the other. Man and woman were complementary partners and although, admittedly, Michelet could never have been considered a feminist, he was equally not an antifeminist because he simply did not conceive of the world in this manner.

Michelet made much of the 'natural' differences between the sexes and of the inalienable nature of the trinity of man, woman and child which some perceived as being a justification for woman's exclusion from the public sphere. However, Michelet's opinion of woman cannot be limited to that of a republican champion of the family who preached, that women be limited to the private sphere of the home. For Michelet, woman was simultaneously transcendent to man and in need of his protection, strong and fragile, natural and supernatural. Ultimately his writings about women are primarily influenced by his propensity for thinking in terms of binaries and his assumption that a balance between contrary forces was required for stability and evolution in history. This is evidenced further when his representation of witches in his later work, *La Sorcière*, is considered.



**Figure 1:**

The caption reads “La mère est dans la feu de la composition, l’enfant est dans l’eau de la baignoire” Honoré Daumier. *Le Charivari*, 26 February 1844.

<<https://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/1573?show=full>>.



**Figure 2:**

Les Femmes Socialistes, the caption reads ' Ma femme reste bien longtemps à ce banquet, voilà bientôt quarante huit heures qu'elle est partie!' Honoré Daumier, 1849.

<<http://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/2289>> .

## Chapter 2: Woman as Witch

In the beginning 'woman was all' and then man made use of nature and began to flourish. However, in the Middle Ages progress stagnated and superstition reigned, and the witch emerged as a force of good to counter the twin evils of ignorance and fear. By the Renaissance she was no longer necessary; both clergy and men of science were beginning to feel threatened by the witch whose superior knowledge was disquieting. By the Age of Reason, she was entirely obsolete, her use long outgrown. This new perspective relates to Michelet's contention that the feminine in history is a force that can both precipitate and hinder development. Michelet saw history in terms of a teleological, linear progression and an 'amorous combat' between masculine and feminine forces.<sup>1</sup> Michelet reflects this way of thinking in *La Sorcière*.

In the first section of the book, the witch is presented as a necessary figure who aids scientific progress, then in section two she becomes a figure both threatening and dangerous. The idea that woman is both necessary and harmful to man, both strong and thus capable of being threatening and dangerous and frail and requiring protection, pervades Michelet's writings. This idea is expressed in *L'Amour* and *La Femme* and also in *La Sorcière*. When the sorceress

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of others advocates of a teleological view of history, such as Edgar Quinet and Alphonse de Lamartine see, H.A Collingham, *The July Monarchy: A Political History of France* (New York: Longman House, 1988) particularly p. 260.



had fulfilled her role in aiding the progression of science, she became no longer, neither literally nor historically, necessary. This explains the contradictory images of witches that appear in Michelet's *La Sorcière* as the book moves from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. With the passage of time, the witch becomes less noble and bold and closer to the villain the Church, and the ignorant, painted her to be during the superstitious Middle Ages. However, Michelet also wrote that 'the fairy continues' implying that the feminine is always necessary but that she may change form in order to fulfil her role in aiding man in his endeavours. Similar to Michelet's depiction of woman presented in *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, in *La Sorcière* the witch is a figure both powerful and fragile, both villain and victim, both seductress and seduced, depending upon which role she needed to play in order to balance the forces (Satan) or institutions (the church).

It is clear that Michelet structured his histories in terms of binaries, as Gossman notes, 'whatever its specific subject matter, Michelet's text is always structured by a principle of antithesis that determines the selection of its elements and generates chains of variations.'<sup>2</sup> Gossmann, referring to Michelet's 1831 work, *Introduction à L'Histoire Universelle*, describes it as 'a forty page amplification of the initial proposition that the history of the world is a struggle of man against nature...spirit against matter, freedom against fate.'<sup>3</sup> *La Sorcière*, like *L'Amour* and *La Femme* before it, is essentially another example of Michelet's presentation of history as a dance of binaries.

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Gossman, 'The Go-Between: Jules Michelet, 1798-1874', *MLN*, 89, no. 4 (May, 1974), p. 505.

<sup>3</sup> Gossman, 'The Go-Between', p. 505.

Michelet's image of the sorceress of the Middle Ages was of a powerful, skilled healer who played a crucial role in the community. Utilising her superior knowledge of herbs and their uses to heal others, she was a beneficent wise woman who acted as a counterbalance to the ignorance and superstition which Michelet saw as characterising the Middle Ages. From the outset, Michelet highlighted the importance of the sorceress in her role as a physician, writing, 'for a thousand years, the people had one healer and one healer only, the Sorceress.'<sup>4</sup> He noted that 'the witches were the only onlookers and were, for women especially, the sole physicians,' reinforcing the irreplaceability of the witch during the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup>

Not only was the witch important in her role as physician, but she was also a figure of great wisdom, skill and boldness, utilising various poisons, which could, if administered without adequate understanding, prove fatal. Michelet referred to the plants the witch used as being 'ambiguous and highly dangerous', elevating the position of the witches who administered them as remedies. Michelet added, 'but these plants are mostly of very dubious use: it required boldness to specify the doses, perhaps the boldness of genius.'<sup>6</sup> This reinforced the notion that the witch possessed a degree of knowledge and courage that others did not. Michelet emphasised that the 'witch was risking a great deal' because 'in those days, no one realised that, when applied externally or taken in

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<sup>4</sup> Jules Michelet, *The Sorceress: A Study in Middle Age Superstition*, trans. A.R. Allinson (London: Imperial Press, 1905), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress* (1862), quoted in Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, *Michelet* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd Oxford, 1987), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress* (1862), quoted in Roland Barthes, *Michelet* trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd Oxford, 1987), p. 71.

very small doses, poisons were remedies. The plants which were grouped together under the name “witchgrass” seemed [to others to be] ministers of death.’<sup>7</sup> This places the wisdom and courage of the witches in opposition to the ignorance and fear of the wider community. This opposition rendered her a necessary figure for the progress and development of medical sciences during the Middle Ages.

Certainly, for Michelet it was ‘ woman, under the name of witch, who sustained the great current of the beneficent sciences of nature.’<sup>8</sup> Michelet, whilst praising the superior knowledge of the witches, also critiqued the ignorance of others, noting that if certain herbs were ‘ found in her hands, they would have accused her of being a poisoner, or making evil spells. A blind mob, cruel in proportion to its fear, could, some morning, stone her to death.’<sup>9</sup> In the first section of *La Sorcière*, Michelet’s witch emerges as a rogue healer, a skilled physician and a brave protector of those in need.

Evidently the wise woman was both respected and feared ‘ if her cure failed they abused her and called her a witch. But more generally, through a combination of respect and terror, she was spoken of as the *Good Lady* or *Beautiful Lady* (Bella Donna), the same name as given to fairies.’<sup>10</sup> Whilst the witch was both wise and benevolent, the church and the wider community were presented as the exact opposite, foolish and selfish. Michelet was highly critical of the witch-hunts of the sixteenth century, declaring that ‘never [before had there been ] such a lavish

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress* (1862), quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress* (1862), quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 3.

waste of human life.’<sup>11</sup> He highlighted the folly of the church in allowing women to be ‘condemned on the slightest pretext’, suggesting that the condemned were nothing more than victims of the ignorance and fear of a century.<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, the anti clerical Michelet was particularly critical of the church, referring to two monks who tried witches simply as ‘two imbecile monks of the fifteenth century,’ reinforcing that they stood in binary opposition to the wisdom of the witches.<sup>13</sup> Writing of the ‘men of the law’ who later ‘took the place of the monks’ he stated they were not ‘much less idiotic themselves’, again reinforcing the folly of the clergy who condemned the wise woman to the stake.<sup>14</sup> Michelet exaggerated the folly and eagerness of the church to burn the witches claiming ‘the cruel emperor of the Thirty Years’ War, in reference to Ferdinand II, was ‘forced to restrain these worthy bishops, else they would have burned all their subjects’.<sup>15</sup> The fact that a ‘cruel emperor’ had to restrain these men of the cloth paints them in an even worse light and significantly reinforces their foolishness.

Not only was the church contrasted to the sorceress’ wisdom but the community too was presented as being foolish and selfish in contrast to her selflessness and skill in healing them. Michelet argued, ‘female jealousy, masculine avarice, are only too ready to grasp so convenient a weapon. Such and such neighbour is rich? Witch witch! Such and such is pretty? Ah! Witch!’<sup>16</sup> Michelet regarded the women who were tried as victims of cruelty and barbarism fuelled by hatred, greed, fear and ignorance. Michelet presented the witch as a figure completely

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<sup>11</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 5.

contrary to her society, she was the wise woman in the face of the blind mob and the genius in the face of ignorance. Thus, Michelet's witch emerges as a balancing factor that was necessary to counter the fear, ignorance and superstition of the Middle Ages.

Michelet argues that women were by 'nature' drawn to witchcraft in order to strengthen the validity of his claim that historical progress depended on the balance of binaries. This recourse to natural law is not, as Thérèse Moreau claims, an attempt to catalogue the shortcomings of women and the deviant characteristics which lead them into temptation. Rather, referring to nature, as Michelet did in both *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, is an attempt to give weight to the idea that the sorceress, through her natural talents, was meant to emerge as an invaluable force in the Middle Ages, to counter the forces of ignorance and fear. Framing this argument in terms of what he observes as a 'natural' fact places the idea of opposing forces balancing one another as a natural fact and not a theory developed by Michelet. Moreau argues that, for Michelet, witchcraft was a uniquely feminine malady, emerging from a susceptibility in the female to be attracted by the fruits and poisons promised by the black sabbath. She writes that according to Michelet, 'l'amour sabbatique est proprement féminin; la femme en folie désire'.<sup>17</sup>

This interpretation *appears* to be largely supported by Michelet's own claims that woman was 'by nature' a witch. Moreau continues:

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<sup>17</sup> Thérèse Moreau, *Le sang de l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), p. 160.

La biologie démontre que l'irruption de la sorcière, du sabbat et de ce monde convulsé peut intervenir à n'importe quel moment. Aucune femme n'en est exempte puisque toutes portent en leurs corps les symptômes de la maladie... la femme est toujours malade du sexe.<sup>18</sup>

While Moreau is right to highlight that Michelet saw sorcery as being primarily the field of women due to their 'natural' qualities, this was not an attempt to denounce women as being 'malade du sexe'. Rather, as he had previously done in *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, Michelet appealed to the 'natural' argument in order to strengthen his claim that the sorceress was a force of nature who, like all things in nature, was necessary to achieve the equilibrium so favourable to progress in history. Michelet contended that:

Nature makes them [women] witches. It is the genius proper to woman and her temperament. She is born a fairy. By the regular return of exaltation, she is born a sibyl. By love, she is a sorceress. By her delicacy her (often whimsical and beneficent) cunning, she is a witch and determines fate, or at least lulls and deceives all pains, all disease.<sup>19</sup>

This quotation frames the existence of the sorceress as an inevitable, natural phenomenon, which came about as a result of the natural qualities of women. Michelet's attempt to frame the rise of the witch in terms of a natural propensity in women to be attracted to witchcraft is neither an attempt to argue that

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<sup>18</sup> Moreau, *Le sang de l'histoire*, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 167.

women were unstable and 'sick' as a sex as Moreau claimed, nor was it an attempt to 'highlight the role of powerful women during the Middle Ages,' as Gaudin argued.<sup>20</sup> Michelet was not primarily concerned with presenting an image of a bold, courageous, independent woman who chose, despite the fear and hostility of ignorant bystanders, to heal and cure others. Nor did he set out to present a woman, weak and fragile who, by her very nature, was destined to dabble in these 'arts'. Instead, Michelet was discussing 'nature' in order to strengthen his idea that the balance of binaries was a naturally occurring fact and not a creation of his own making.

This recalls Michelet's contention in *L'Amour* and *La Femme* that woman was, by nature, destined to reign in the private sphere of the home through love and kindness. For Michelet, it was woman's 'natural' qualities, which prevented her from participating in public life or creating great works in the arts, and this idea is furthered in *La Sorcière*, where witchcraft emerges as a similar, uniquely feminine 'field' or sphere. This is because woman was required to balance the activities of man, who revelled in justice, reason and logic, and she in love and kindness, which were associated with hearth and home. Like Michelet's image of the wife and mother in his previous works, his sorceress gained knowledge and turned herbs into remedies in order to cure and care for her family. He noted how, 'eyes lowered upon the amorous flowers, young and herself a flower, she makes a personal acquaintance with them. A woman, she asks them to heal those she loves.'<sup>21</sup> This echoes Michelet's sentiments of a family unit that could be

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<sup>20</sup> Gaudin, 'Woman my symbol', p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress* (1862), quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 167.

maintained by the woman through love and kindness, as expressed in his other works.

Michelet was certain that 'the humblest of witch wives still retains something of this Sibyl. But these self styled wizards, sordid charlatans, commonplace jugglers, mole and rat catchers, casting spells over cattle, selling secrets they don't possess, infect the age with a foul, black, smothering smoke of fear and foolish terror.'<sup>22</sup> Michelet left no doubt that men were incapable of actively practicing witchcraft, that it was for women alone to act as mediator between nature and man, and any 'wizard' who claimed to possess the uniquely feminine skills, the prophecy and the intuition implied through the use of 'sibyl', was merely a fraud, spreading folly and ignorance. This appears to suggest that woman, by virtue of her ability to practice witchcraft, possessed a power which man could not access, placing her in an elevated position.

Elsewhere, again comparing the witch and the wizard, he claimed that she possessed a 'spring of womanhood [and a] feminine electricity', which meant that she had 'gifts' that were 'unknown to the male sorcerer'.<sup>23</sup> These included the 'half sane, half insane madness, illuminism, of the seer ... second sight, preternatural vision [and] ... above all else, the power of believing in her own falsehoods.'<sup>24</sup> With poetry and alacrity, Michelet negates the power of the sorceress, admitting she has powers of 'intuition' and 'prophecy', unknown to

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<sup>22</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 9.



her male counterpart but painting a figure that is 'half sane, half insane' and who cannot differentiate between the truth and the falsehoods of her own creation.

There is the implication, articulated in Michelet's previous works, that whilst woman may possess qualities unique to her sex which appear to make her a figure transcendent to man, she lacks those essentially masculine qualities such as reason and logic that would maintain her in this lofty position. This is because, Michelet believed that neither sex could survive without the other and that both served a unique and particular function which allowed for the progress of humankind. The sorceress functioned in a similar way, utilising her unique gifts to aid and abet the activities of man. Thus, the sorceress, like the wife in Michelet's *La Femme*, is a figure both weak and powerful, depending on what she needs to be for society. His history is not a commentary on gender roles but a furthering of his perception of history as a balancing act between opposites.

Michelet's sorceress emerged as a necessary response to the harsh Middle Ages and the church's inability, and unwillingness, to alleviate the suffering of the people. The first tale Michelet recounts is of the serf wife who turned to witchcraft not solely as a result of her 'nature' but as a response to the dismal situation in which she was attempting to raise her family. Michelet's serf wife became a sorceress in order to keep her family together, to help her ailing husband and to care for her children. This is a story of temptation but it is not woman who is to blame, it is society. Chapter two of *La Sorcière*, which is titled, 'What Drove the Middle Ages to Despair' may have been called 'What Drove the Serf Wife to Witchcraft' but, tellingly, it is not. This is because Michelet's history, though professedly a study of witchcraft and, 'a formula of the sorceress's way of

life,' is essentially about the imbalance of forces which left the Middle Ages in stasis.<sup>25</sup> The sorceress is only one side of this greater tale, which is a continuation of Michelet's view of history as a balancing act between opposing forces. The sorceress emerged as a necessary reaction to the dismal societal conditions fostered by feudalism and the church.

Michelet painted a grim picture of feudal life in the Middle Ages where households were reduced to serfdom and the uncertainty and servitude that came with it. He referred to this time as a 'cruel period' characterised by 'deep shadows' in which 'the feudal regime involved ... the two things that .... make a hell on earth' these were, according to Michelet, 'the extreme of immobility...and a high degrees of uncertainty as to the continuation of existing conditions.'<sup>26</sup> Michelet concluded that 'the black mass of the fourteenth century, that deliberate and deadly defiance of Jesus...sprang ready made from the horrors of the time.'<sup>27</sup> Michelet's belief that the sorceress was a result of the abysmal conditions of the Middle Ages, particularly for serfs, suggests a degree of inevitability to her emergence which is in line with his idea of the perpetual existence of binaries in history.

The role of the church in Michelet's tale relays the undesirable consequences of an imbalance between these binaries, primarily the halting of progress. The church, the institution which pursued, condemned and damned the sorceress emerges as the antagonist of Michelet's tale. Michelet asked:

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Orr, 'A Sort of History: Michelet's *La Sorcière*', *Yale French Studies*, no. 59 (1980), p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 7.

From when does the sorceress date? I answer unhesitatingly,

“from the ages of despair.”

From the profound despair the world owed to the Church.

I say again unhesitatingly, “The sorceress is the Church’s crime.”<sup>28</sup>

Evidently, Michelet blamed the Church for not only perpetuating the ‘despair’ of the people but also of forcing them to accept this misery as a necessary consequence of ‘original sin’, which Michelet referred to as ‘the fundamental dogma of universal injustice.’<sup>29</sup> Michelet was critical of the Church’s use of original sin as an excuse for not alleviating the suffering of the laity. He was certain that ‘they [priests and later lawyers who tried the witches] were one and all arrested ... and made cruel savages of by the poison of their first principle, the doctrine of Original Sin.’<sup>30</sup> The word ‘arrested’ reinforces Michelet’s concern with the halting of history’s progress, and ‘savages’ takes this further by implying not only stagnation but regression to a cruel past fuelled by ignorance and a blind adherence to out-dated doctrines.

The story of the sorceress is thus revealed to be a continuation of Michelet’s view of history itself. For Michelet, History was a story of progress, along a linear trajectory, which depended on the balance of binaries. In *La Sorcière*, the church’s monopoly on power and refusal to re-examine age-old creeds to alleviate the suffering of the lay people, stood in the way of development and

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<sup>28</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 6.

resulted in the necessary emergence of the sorceress, whose subversive power would balance that of the church. This idea is reinforced by Michelet's claim that the men of the Middle Ages were 'unable to make one step in advance' because they were under the beguiling spell of the church which forever bound them to unquestioningly believe, and act upon, the superstitions they had inherited.<sup>31</sup> In this light, Michelet's history of the sorceress is more a study in the folly and superstition fostered by the church to arrest the development of the sciences and of mankind in general. The witch becomes a figure who necessarily emerged in opposition to the church's hegemony during the Middle Ages.

Emphasising the point that Michelet's text was primarily concerned with the notion that opposing forces needed to be balanced in order for history to progress is the change in his depiction of the sorceress following the Renaissance. When men of science began to take the place of the sorceress in medical advancements, and the church began to make concessions for them to do so, the sorceress became unnecessary and even malignant. The witch was only a necessary character in Michelet's story so long as the church was actively halting the progress of science and medicine. Once the church ceased to do so, the witch became a superfluous, meddling and dangerous figure who stood in the way of the serious men of science who took over the role as knowledgeable healers and advancers of medical science.

Amira Silmi claims this is an inversion in Michelet's text, an internal contradiction whereby he alters his position and in the second section of the

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<sup>31</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 6.

book moves away from the image of a powerful, rebellious woman who defied the church's authority to 'embrace the opposite image of the woman ... whose ally is the Devil, [who] was not really the revolutionary, but the flipside of the coin.'<sup>32</sup> Silmi is certainly not alone in highlighting a shift in Michelet's text, in pointing out how Michelet represents the sorceress as a benevolent healer in the first section only to invert this image and paint her as a figure of reproach in part two. Alain Besançon notes how in the first half, due to the sorceress 'il y a progression vers l'interdit', in reference to the sorceress' activities, which encouraged advancement in the studies of anatomy banned by the church, but in the second section, 'la sorcière change de taille, de camp', she becomes a malignant figure, the exact opposite of what she was in the first chapter.<sup>33</sup> Silmi is correct in identifying a shift in Michelet's text, however, it is not the one she presents. Michelet's witch of the Middle Ages was not really the 'revolutionary' that Silmi assumes she was. She was a figure who inevitably emerged as a counterweight to the harsh circumstances, the ignorance and the fear of the stagnant, dark and disease-ridden Middle Ages when the church was halting the progress of science and medicine.

The witch of the first half of *La Sorcière* was not a witch by choice and was therefore never the revolutionary figure which Silmi's argument relies upon. Silmi claims, 'Michelet tells us that after the famine and the Black Plague of the fourteenth century and then in the fifteenth, the image of the witch changes, she

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<sup>32</sup> Amira Silmi, *Michelet's Sorceress: The witch craze in Europe and the persecution of women*, Doctoral dissertation in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California. Available from <[http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets\\_Sorceress.pdf](http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets_Sorceress.pdf)>, viewed 27 August, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Alain Besançon, 'Le premier livre de *La Sorcière*', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 26, no.1 (January-February, 1971), p. 188.

is born from the Black Mass, the witch becomes malignant.’<sup>34</sup> She quotes Michelet who wrote, ‘ this woman is quite the reverse of the other ... there is nothing of the Titan about her, to be sure. Far from that, she is naturally base; lewd from her cradle and full of evil daintinesses.’<sup>35</sup> This, Silmi assumes, is a story of ‘ the witch as the story of regression, of falling back to an ancient past.’<sup>36</sup> However, the story of the witch, as told by Michelet, is not one of regression but rather one of progress and stasis. When, by the Renaissance, the Church stepped aside to allow advances in medicine and the sciences, the clandestine medicine of the witches was no longer needed and their contribution to history could no longer lead to progress. Thus, the witches from the Renaissance onwards evolved to represent the superstition and stagnation that had plagued times past. This is the inversion in Michelet’s text and supports his wider interpretation of history as a balance of binaries. When the circumstances changed, so too did the role and position of the witch. She was no longer required to balance the widespread ignorance and superstition of her age and came to represent the very thing she was originally presented as opposing.

The sorceress was necessary during the Middle Ages, teaching even the ‘ great physician Paracelsus’, who as Michelet is keen to point out, ‘ declared that he learned from the sorceresses all that he knew.’<sup>37</sup> However, she was to have little place in the continued advancement of science and medicine. During the Middle

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<sup>34</sup> Amira Silmi, *Michelet’s Sorceress: The witch craze in Europe and the persecution of women*, <[http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets\\_Sorceress.pdf](http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets_Sorceress.pdf)>.

<sup>35</sup> Amira Silmi, *Michelet’s Sorceress: The witch craze in Europe and the persecution of women*, <[http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets\\_Sorceress.pdf](http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets_Sorceress.pdf)>.

<sup>36</sup> Amira Silmi, *Michelet’s Sorceress: The witch craze in Europe and the persecution of women*, <[http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets\\_Sorceress.pdf](http://home.birzeit.edu/wsi/images/stories/Michelets_Sorceress.pdf)>.

<sup>37</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 4.

Ages, the church had prevented the study of anatomy, and it was the 'criminal university of the sorceress, the shepherd and the hangman, by means of its experiments, a sacrilege every one, [that ] emboldened the other and rival seat of learning and forced its scholars to study.'<sup>38</sup> When finally, the 'rival seat of learning', the universities, adopted these experiments themselves, the sorceress was no longer necessary. The witch, who had previously been central to gaining a better understanding of biology and chemistry at a time when, under the influence of the church, 'the school men turned their backs for good and all on Medicine,' became unnecessary.<sup>39</sup> As long as the church stood in the way of learning and the acquisition of knowledge, it would be the antagonist in Michelet's history of the sorceress. As soon as the church began, grudgingly, to allow the sciences to progress, there was no longer a need for the 'truant school of the sorceress' and another rival to her would emerge: the scholar.

By the Renaissance and even more so by the great age of science and reason, the Enlightenment, the men of science no longer needed the witch to guide them towards the light. Her knowledge of cures and remedies was, as she was, past her use and thus this powerful figure became, like the superstitions that had led her to the stake, out-dated, outmoded and obsolete. By the Renaissance, Michelet no longer saw a place for the witch, who during the Middle Ages had been instrumental in ensuring the survival of the community as a force of progress in the face of the superstition and ignorance which had stunted it. Moreau concludes, 'Michelet proclame la mort de la sorcière...de l'inceste grâce au

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<sup>38</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 12.

triomphe de la science' highlighting that the sorceress had to perish in order to make way for scientific advancement by the scholars who now took over her role as community physician and wise woman.<sup>40</sup> This supports the notion that Michelet was primarily concerned with the balance of contrary forces leading to progress in history. Michelet resolved:

Elle [la sorcière] a péri, devait périr. Comment? Surtout par le progrès des sciences mêmes qu'elle a commencées, par le médecin, par le naturaliste pour qui elle avait travaillée.<sup>41</sup>

For Michelet, the sorceress had, in history, a purely functional role. She had come into existence to balance the twin forces of ignorance and superstition, which threatened to halt history eternally and leave it floundering forever in the inertia of the Middle Ages. When the church allowed the development of medicine in universities, the scholar took her place, and continued the work the sorceress had begun, and the sorceress was no longer required to act as a counterbalance. This explains Michelet's fatalistic conclusion : ' elle a péri, devait périr'.

The notion that *La Sorcière* is primarily a furthering of Michelet's idea that history is a balancing act between opposite, and in this case mutually opposing, forces is supported by his condemnation of the church's attack on Satan.

Michelet asked, 'now that his [Satan's] fall has been so far consummated, do his foes [the church, the inquisitors, the clergy] quite realise what they have done?

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<sup>40</sup> Thérèse Moreau, *Le sang de l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> Michelet, *Sorceress*, p. 285.



Was he not a necessary actor, an indispensable factor?'<sup>42</sup> Like the sorceress, Satan was a figure that necessarily acted as a counterbalance in the world. By actively working to eliminate Satan, the church was setting the world off kilter. Michelet was convinced that 'every organism that works well is double, has two sides', concluding, 'life is hardly possible otherwise.'<sup>43</sup> This, he explained was because 'a certain balance between two forces is necessary, forces mutually opposed and symmetrical.'<sup>44</sup> Michelet was referring to Satan but his sentiments reflect the position he held in *L'Amour* and *La Femme* in which he discussed the need for husband and wife, two opposed and symmetrical partners, to work together in order to achieve stability. For Michelet, Satan may have been evil but he was a necessary element who acted as a 'counterpoise' to the forces of good. This claim reinforces the idea that *La Sorcière*, like much of Michelet's oeuvre, was primarily concerned with the balancing of binaries, which he saw as a necessary condition for history to progress.

Michelet's *La Sorcière* was never primarily about the sorceress, but, like all of his histories it was a story of progress and the conflict between the forces that aid and those that halt progress. In the first section of the work, the witch is the former, advancing the sciences when no other dared, in the second section she is the latter and is therefore no longer required. Michelet's *La Sorcière* is clearly an extension of his view of history and the forces that move it and is neither a 'defence of woman' or 'defence of the witch' nor a condemnation of them as 'half mad, hysterics' because it is, essentially, not about women.

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<sup>42</sup>Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Michelet, *The Sorceress*, p. 13.

Woman emerges as a secondary character in this tale of progress and the forces and institutions (primarily the Church) which Michelet saw as standing in its way.

## Chapter 3:

### Woman as Counterweight

In his 1858 work *Joan of Arc*, Michelet presented a young maid who was, in every aspect, contrary to both the time she lived in and the military milieu she found herself thrust into. Joan was benevolent when others were cruel, wise when they were foolish, determined when they wavered and innocent when they were guilty. Michelet's Joan symbolised the people and belonged to them unlike the courtiers and royals she came into contact with. For Michelet, Joan was less an individual than a force who functioned to balance the destructive impulses of the military men she associated with. Her tale evidences that Michelet was less concerned with offering portraits of actual women and more interested in the idea that balance was required between contrary forces in order for history to progress along its trajectory. Michelet's depiction of Joan as a symbol and a contrary force capable of affecting change was can, to an extent, be attributed to the symbolic field he inherited. Specifically, Michelet's predecessors represented the eternal symbol of liberty, Marianne, in a similar way. She was a potent, feminine figure who represented liberty but also rebirth under the republic and as such functioned as a counterweight to the destructive impulse of the revolutionaries.<sup>1</sup> Some have argued that such representations were conceived to limit woman's active involvement in political life but for Michelet representing

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<sup>1</sup> See Maurice Agulhon, Janet Lloyd trans., *Marianne Into Battle*, ( London: Cambridge University Press, 1981) in particular chapter one ' Liberty, the Republic and the goddess: 1789-1830'.

woman as a symbol and a force was not intended to diminish her power.<sup>2</sup> Quite the contrary, for Michelet the balance of opposite forces was necessary for historical development and, as such, women such as Joan and symbols such as Marianne were significant and necessary.

Michelet was neither the first nor the last to conceive of woman in a symbolic sense and to present feminine symbols as forces which could influence history. The most relevant example, for Michelet, as chronicler of the French Revolution was Marianne, the perpetual symbol of liberty. Michelet was undoubtedly influenced by the symbolic field he inherited from the Revolution, that had given birth to the Republic, which Michelet held sacred. In other words, Michelet's use of feminine symbols both influenced, and was influenced by the *mentalités* of the period.<sup>3</sup> It is certain, as Simone de Beauvoir noted, that 'symbolism did not fall out of heaven or rise out of subterranean depths. It was rather, elaborated like language, by the human [or historical] reality'<sup>4</sup> Michelet's symbolism certainly did not 'fall out of heaven', it was not an anomaly in his context but neither was it entirely typical of his time. The utilisation of feminine symbols as forces to further the notion that historical progress depended on balancing opposing forces was decidedly Micheletist. In this case balance was achieved by the

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<sup>2</sup> Joan B. Landes makes this argument in *Visualising the Nation: Gender, Representation and revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) see in particular Chapter one, 'Image as Argument in Revolutionary Political Culture' and Chapter two, 'Representing the Body Politic'. See also Susan K. Foley, *Women in France Since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.296.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of *mentalités* was articulated primarily by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch of the French *Annales* school in the late 1920s. It may be literally translated as 'mentalities' but more accurately it refers to the ways of thinking that characterise the collective consciousness of a society. Febvre, Bloch and others saw *mentalités* as a useful tool for understanding the past. Although this notion may be considered old fashioned today it still has a place in the study of history.

<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Random House, 2009), pp. 57-8.

potency of the feminine in the symbolic field (Marianne), countering the male domination of the political field. Marianne 'became an important republican and national symbol during the nineteenth century and has remained so to the present day'<sup>5</sup>. Whilst explicit references to Marianne may be notably absent from Michelet's oeuvre, the legacy of her significance can be seen in his treatment of other feminine symbols as counterweights to the activities of man.

Although I refer to Marianne in the singular for the sake of clarity, it is more accurate to conceive of several, divergent 'Mariannes' as the symbol had interpretations, uses and champions almost as diverse as the concept of Liberty itself. As Annie Duprat points out, 'plusieurs Mariannes s'affrontent, de la vamp à la concierge ou de la République radicale à la République modérée, ces métamorphoses de Marianne sont bien connues'.<sup>6</sup> The diverse manifestations of Marianne testify that she played a functional role. Michelet did not shy away from the idea that a single symbol, idea or individual could be several things simultaneously, depending on which role would help them fulfil their function of aiding, or hindering, the course of history. As Joan Landes notes, 'over time, the representations of liberty became more sedate and tranquil, reiterating on the symbolic plane the defeat of women's independent, radical, political initiatives within the Revolution.'<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, and as Foley notes, rather 'ironically ... for much of the period since 1789, Marianne, image of a free and autonomous citizen, bore no relationship to unfree and disenfranchised French

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<sup>5</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Visualising the Nation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup>Annie Duprat, 'Comment est née "Marianne"? La caricature, Médiatrice de la figuration de la République en France', *Dominio da Imagem*, No.1 (November, 2007), p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Woman and the public sphere in the age of the French Revolution*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 160.

women.’<sup>8</sup> This suggests that symbolic representations of women were not designed to reflect the reality of women’s experience, which is reflected in Michelet’s oeuvre.

As many feminist, women’s and gender historians have since noted, the Revolution, with its catch cry of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, did not liberate women nor did it offer them the equality that the newly enfranchised *citoyen* enjoyed.<sup>9</sup> There was no place for women in the fraternity of men who, having toppled the *Ancien Régime*, were attempting to bring the budding *République* of 1792 to fruition. Although woman was symbolically significant, the plight of women was rather insignificant to the majority of revolutionaries who, whilst eager to dispose of the monarchy, still firmly believed in the ‘old order’ when it came to women’s place being the hearth and the home. This is not to say that women were silent and absent from the front of the revolutionary battle. There are countless examples of women’s active participation and struggle not only for their rights but also for the privilege of fighting for them. From the women’s march on Versailles on October 5, 1789 to Olympe de Gouges writing *La Déclaration des droits de la femme et la citoyenne* (1791) to the *Requête des dames à l’Assemblée Nationale* where women addressed the assembly of men to call for equal rights.

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<sup>8</sup> Susan K. Foley, *Women in France since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 296.

<sup>9</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Women and the public sphere in the age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1996) and Françoise Giroud, *Les Femmes de la Révolution de Michelet* (Paris: Carrere, 1988) to name a select few. For an excellent and in depth history of the French Revolution which contextualises the birth of the citizen see Simon Schama’s *Citizens* (London: Penguin Books, 1989).

Not only were women denied access to the spoils of the revolution they 'were excluded and thus became less 'equal' than previously to men of their own social group'.<sup>10</sup>

If women were actively excluded from the realm of politics, why then was the symbol of liberty and later of the republic itself, a woman? Marina Warner observes, 'liberty is not represented as a woman...because women were or are free. Often the recognition of a difference between the symbolic order, inhabited by ideal, allegorical figures, and the actual order, of judges, statesmen ... depends on the unlikelihood of women practising the concepts they represent'<sup>11</sup> Warner, whilst acknowledging the existence of a gap, which is closer to a veritable chasm, between the symbolic life of woman and the real experience of women in this period, does not adequately explain why this is so. Landes suggests that 'love of the nation was fostered metaphorically by the nation's representation as a woman (La France, or Marianne).'<sup>12</sup> Foley suggests a more sinister motive arguing that using woman as a potent symbol was a method actively employed to limit her power in actuality. She argues that ' the aim was to contain and limit women's public presence [and] ... utilising female images in revolutionary culture, to represent ' liberty', ' the republic' ... was one way of doing this.'<sup>13</sup>

For Foley, not only did '[women's] presence as visual metaphors camouflage their exclusion from political rights', but it 'served as a contained way of allowing

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<sup>10</sup> Foley, *Women in France*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the female form* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), p. xix-xx.

<sup>12</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Visualising the Nation* (2001), quoted in Susan K. Foley, *Women in France since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 169-170.

<sup>13</sup> Foley, *Women in France*, p. 18.

or acknowledging women's presence in public life.'<sup>14</sup> Women could champion the cause of men in the symbolic field as long as they did not step into the political one. Foley and Landes make a valid point but although employing the female image may have had the *effect* of 'camouflaging' women's absence from public life and limiting their involvement in politics, it does not follow that this was consciously *intended*. All political movements require symbols and it may just be the case that the simplest response is the closest to the elusive 'truth'. Marianne was utilised because some ideas lend themselves more to feminine imagery and the feminine was required to balance the masculine in the political field.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with the notion that Marianne was a creation designed to entice feelings of love and devotion in male citizens, or part of a more sinister scheme to actively limit women's involvement in the political struggles of eighteenth and nineteenth-century France, the feminine image was certainly deployed as a symbol. Instead of being represented as individual or 'great woman' of history woman was utilised for her symbolic significance. Ultimately, the reasons behind the emergence of symbols such as Marianne are less important than the impact that limiting woman to the symbolic realm had, and continues to have, for women in history and for the history of women. What is significant for the current discussion is the idea that woman was deployed successfully as a symbol long before Michelet chose to utilise her in this manner.

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<sup>14</sup> Foley, *Women in France*, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> André Guérin, *Il y a cent ans, la République, on l'appela Marianne*, (Paris: Hachette, 1973), pp. 289-90.



It is beyond the scope of this argument to detail the origins of Marianne or to engage extensively with debates in the literature surrounding her meaning and significance during, and since, the Revolution of 1789.<sup>16</sup> What is significant for understanding Michelet is that she was a powerful feminine symbol who stood in contrast to the masculine politics of eighteenth-century France. Amid the carnage of the Revolution, Marianne, a woman, represented rebirth and later a new way life under the Republic. She was the counterweight to the death and destruction the men of the revolution had wrought in search of their ideals, she was liberty, pure and untarnished by the blood, which had been spilled in her name. Marianne was everything the revolutionaries were not and this is what Michelet took from representations of her and wove into his narrative of another contrary character, Joan of Arc. This allowed him to further explore his conception of history as a search for balance between opposites.

Michelet's Joan was placed in binary opposition to both her time and her milieu. Painting a picture of Joan, which contrasted so greatly to everything in her context, allowed Michelet to further his contention that historical progress relied on achieving a balance between opposite, and sometimes opposing, forces. The influence of Marianne can be seen in the symbolic function Joan played for Michelet. She was less an individual and more a force whose faith, bravery, courage, beneficence and innocence balanced the cruelty, fear and doubt of those

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<sup>16</sup> For a survey of the divergent iconography of Marianne, see Maurice Agulhon's three books *Marianne into battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880* (1979) *Marianne to Power* (1989) and *The Metamorphoses of Marianne* (2001). For a thoughtful study of origins of the name see André Guérin's *il y a cent ans la république, on l'appela Marianne* (Paris: Hachette, 1973) Agulhon provides an overview of the changing iconography of Marianne over time and Landes ties this well to the political context of women's involvement and exclusion from the political sphere, Foley extends the context to the present day.

around her. Michelet's Joan, the 'deliverer of France', was kind, empathetic and charitable, possessing an 'amiable sweetness, [a] prompt and charming pity [and] ... the virtue of quickly excited sympathies.'<sup>17</sup> This immediately placed her in contrast to the vain nobility, the hardened men of war and the selfish royals with whom she associated. Michelet highlighted how Joan, 'preserved sweetness and benevolence in the midst of so many bitter disputes.' Joan's 'sweetness' places her in direct opposition to the 'bitterness' around her, suggesting that she was a contrary, balancing force. In battle, her bravery and faith in victory was contrasted to the fear and uncertainty displayed by other troops. Describing one skirmish on the banks of the Loire river, Michelet recounts how 'the French, being seized with a panic and terror' began to retreat and Joan removed herself from the fray and 'took the English in flank'.<sup>18</sup>

Her benevolence and empathy is evidenced repeatedly. Whilst the French troops were celebrating victory, Michelet recounts how Joan busied herself with bringing in prisoners of war, placing 'many of the English ... in her own house to ensure their safety [because] she knew the ferocity' of the men.'<sup>19</sup> After another battle Michelet describes how 'at the sight of such numbers of dead La Pucelle shed tears,' reinforcing the empathy she possessed, the kindness and regret for loss of life that was absent from the generals, councilors and other men of war. Michelet placed her in contrast to the military men, adding that she 'wept more bitterly when she saw the brutality of the soldiers, and how they treated

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<sup>17</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, p. 236.

<sup>18</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, p. 60.

prisoners.’<sup>20</sup> Michelet describes numerous incidents where Joan displayed immense empathy for the suffering of others, even her enemies. One such incident in which Joan, upon ‘perceiving one of them [an English soldier] felled, dying...threw herself from her horse, raised the poor man’s head...[and] comforted him, smoothed his way to death’ exemplifies her compassion and reinforces her opposition to the cruelty of the men.<sup>21</sup> Michelet’s Joan was sweet in the face of bitterness, brave and constant when others fled in terror, had faith when others doubted and displayed kindness and compassion when her companions resorted to cruelty. In short, Joan was placed in binary opposition to almost everyone and everything around her. Joan was a balancing force in Michelet’s history and her contrary character resulted in equilibrium being achieved, allowing for France’s ultimate victory. According to Michelet, ‘her cruel fate was inevitable, and, we must say the word, necessary.’<sup>22</sup> Once she had fulfilled this purpose, she was no longer required. Like the sorceress in Michelet’s *La Sorcière*, after Joan had fulfilled her historical purpose, it was necessary for her to perish.

Further, Joan’s wisdom and insight was contrasted with the shortsightedness and ignorance of others, including the Dauphin’s councilors. Michelet remarked, ‘the originality of the Pucelle...[was] her good sense. She clearly saw the question and knew how to resolve it. The knot which politician and doubter could not unloose, she cut.’<sup>23</sup> Michelet was referring to Joan’s insistence that the Dauphin be crowned immediately at Rheims, to declare his legitimacy before detractors

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<sup>20</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, pp. 95-6.

<sup>23</sup> Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, p. 9.

had a chance to doubt it. Michelet argued, ' [with] her quickness, [she] gained the decisive advantage over the English of the coronation' strengthening the legitimacy of the French under the leadership of the newly crowned Charles VII. Evidently, Joan was an important and potent figure for Michelet but what exactly was her place in history? Was she an individual? A symbol? An abstract force influencing the march of history? Colette Gaudin suggests that 'for Michelet, the strong presence of women in history ultimately remains accidental. Joan of Arc was miraculous'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the presence of women in history is hardly 'accidental' for Michelet. As his representation of Joan evidences, women are necessary and potentially potent forces in Michelet's oeuvre. Gaudin's suggestion that their presence is accidental ignores Michelet's propensity for thinking in binaries and his contention that historical progress required the balancing of opposing forces. Woman, and Joan in particular, was the ultimate counterbalance to man in Michelet's works. *La Pucelle* is a force, an idea, a symbol whose strength stems from Michelet himself and from everything she represents for the historian.<sup>25</sup> Michelet's pen is ultimately the power behind Joan's sword and it is indeed mightier.

Moreover, for Michelet, Joan not only symbolised France but also *le peuple*. Accentuating Joan's connection to the people placed her in contrast to the nobility and royalty in the court of the Dauphin. Describing her first meeting with the Dauphin, Michelet notes how, ' she entered the splendid circle ... like a

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<sup>24</sup> Colette Gaudin, 'Woman, My Symbol', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 46, no. 3 (Fall 2006), p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> The diminutive for Joan that was sometimes used ' la pucelle' here seems relevant since the discussion at hand refers to the stripping of power and agency that is occurring when Michelet represents her as a pure symbol. It may be translated from the old French as ' the maid' or more accurately ' the virginal maid'.

poor little shepherdess,' accentuating Joan's humble origins and differentiating her from the courtiers whose gilded world she had just entered. Michelet made a great deal of Joan's humble status, frequently referring to her as the 'girl of the people' reinforcing her 'otherness' and furthering the idea that she acted as a counterbalance, allowing the history of France to progress, which in this case meant an eventual French victory in the Hundred Years' War (1337 - 1453). Joan was connected to the people, as Gaudin suggests, for Michelet Joan was, 'not merely a historical character...[that] she [came] to exemplify for him the heroic ideal embodied in a being emanating from the people as if by spontaneous generation.'<sup>26</sup>

However, as Michelet himself noted, during a lecture at the Collège de France, the idea of 'the people' was not a straightforward one. He asked 'où commence, où finit le peuple?' all the while claiming that he himself belonged to the people, a designation which was 'not limited to the social category of workingmen [but] could also... embrace all of humanity or just the French nation...the "plebs" or... [the] masses.' Vivian Kogan and Jacques Rancière both interpret Michelet's insistence on writing the history of 'the people', or of the representatives of the people like Joan, as an act in silencing them. Kogan ironically notes: 'Michelet, the defender of the people, could not entrust them to voice their needs.'<sup>27</sup> He, being 'plus peuple que le peuple, plus simple que le simple' would write their story. Rancière saw the elevation of the people in Michelet's histories as merely another way to exercise control over them, much like the argument Foley made

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<sup>26</sup> Colette Gaudin, 'Woman, My Symbol', p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Kogan, *The "I" of history*, p. 55.

about Marianne, the powerful symbol of liberty, rendering women powerless. In Rancière's words, 'Michelet invente l'art de faire parler les pauvres en les faisant taire, de les faire parler comme muets.'<sup>28</sup> Both Kogan and Rancière critique Michelet for doing a disservice unto the people by speaking for them and not allowing them to speak for themselves. The same criticism could be levelled at his representation of Joan, who Michelet saw as the ultimate representative of the people. Discussions in the field of gender history, post-colonial history and other sub genres which have focused on previously 'silent' groups, have revealed that a greater disservice can be done unto 'silent' groups and groups and individuals when the historian acts as a ventriloquist in this manner and speaks for the 'other'.<sup>29</sup>

Despite Michelet's own fervent claims in his histories, lectures and journal to be of the people, Kogan insists that for Michelet the people are always 'other'. She claims that 'if he cannot reach the other that he considers himself, then surely he is guilty of impersonation.'<sup>30</sup> Kogan's argument neglects the fact that it is the very 'otherness' of the people, and of Joan their embodiment, which renders them important in Michelet's oeuvre. Michelet's conception of history as an ongoing battle of opposing forces depends on their always being contrary forces which are always, necessarily 'other'. Nowhere is this exemplified more than in the figure of Joan of Arc, both a woman and a representative of the people; she is doubly 'other'. Michelet presented Joan as a figure who was radically contrary to

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Les Noms de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> The debt to Edward Said's, *Orientalism*, is evident in those supporting this stance. See Joy Damousi, 'Writing Gender into History and History in Gender: Creating a Nation and Australian Historiography', in Leonore Davidoff, Keith McClelland and Eleni Varikas, eds., *Gender and History: Retrospect and Prospect* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), pp. 195- 206

<sup>30</sup> Kogan, *The "I" of History*, p. 61.

everyone she encountered, including the military, nobility and royalty. Her bravery, benevolence and wisdom balanced the fear, cruelty and myopia of others. Thus, Michelet's *Joan of Arc* was, like all of his works, a reflection of his conception of history as a balancing act of contrary forces.

Woman, in addition to being an important symbol and a balancing force *within* Michelet's histories is also central to his conception of History itself. Specifically, the feminine is key to this historian's notion of the forces that move and halt history, which Michelet sees as an ongoing battle between the mutually opposing forces of Grace (which Michelet saw as being feminine) and the masculine Justice. It must be noted that this discussion will be framed in terms of binaries (grace/justice, feminine/ masculine, circular/ linear time) because this is how Michelet frequently organised these concepts. From his lecture notes comes a representative remark he noted: 'l'histoire du monde semble l'histoire de la haine et de l'amour.'<sup>31</sup> Having said this, Michelet's view was undoubtedly more nuanced, as is both implicitly and explicitly evidenced in his oeuvre, journal entries and lectures. For example, the masculine and feminine were not always mutually opposed. Michelet also conceived of them as complementary, symbiotic partners. In *La Femme*, he claimed, 'the man and the woman are two relative and incomplete beings, only two halves of a whole.'<sup>32</sup>

Elsewhere, he dissolved the boundaries between the sexes entirely claiming he belonged to an 'ultra' or 'complete' sex, a hybrid of the two, he declared: 'I am a

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Viallaneix, *Jules Michelet: Cours au College de France (1845-51)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 452.

<sup>32</sup> Jules Michelet, *Woman* trans. J.W. Palmer (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1860), p. 203.

complete man, having both sexes of the mind.’<sup>33</sup> Michelet saw certain elements of thinking, including inspiration and intuition, as feminine faculties of the mind, and others, like logic and reason, as inherently masculine. He considered both the feminine and masculine elements to be equally important and necessary, balancing one another. The claim that he possessed both ‘sexes of the mind’ meant that Michelet saw himself as being capable of tempering his masculine logic and reason with feminine intuition and imagination, rendering both masculine and feminine qualities equally important.<sup>34</sup> In *La Femme*, he asks, ‘is it absolutely certain that even those who believe in relying exclusively on logic, never yield to this feminine power of inspiration? I find traces of it even among the closest reasoners.’<sup>35</sup> Thus, before the conflict between the mutually opposed, masculine and feminine aspects of history can be discussed, it is important to remember that, for Michelet, the feminine and the masculine were also complementary, symbiotic partners.

Roland Barthes, in his psychoanalytic, thematic study of Michelet and his writings wrote that for Michelet history was an ‘amorous combat’. This is a rather accurate assessment, when one considers Michelet’s presentation of the conflict between grace and justice.<sup>36</sup> The lover’s quarrel was, according to Michelet, between the feminine grace and the masculine justice. Far from being intangible ‘forces’ that influence history, for Michelet, grace and justice could, and did, take on many forms but the ‘two major figures....[were] Christianity and

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<sup>33</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p.58.

<sup>34</sup> See Françoise Giroud, *Les Femmes de la Révolution de Michelet* (Paris: Carrere, 1988), p. 10 for a discussion on how Michelet is boasting when he identifies ‘feminine elements of the mind’ in himself and is therefore not of the opinion that women are intellectually inferior to men.

<sup>35</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 202.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes trans. Richard Howard, *Michelet* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1987), p. 60.



the Revolution' which Michelet saw as being in perpetual, mutual opposition.<sup>37</sup> This notion underlies much of Michelet's work but is, unsurprisingly, most explicitly expressed in his monumental *Histoire de la Révolution Française* in which he claimed that 'the revolution is nothing but the tardy reaction of justice against the government of favour and the religion of grace.'<sup>38</sup> Later, in language more characteristic of this poetically inclined historian he railed against the 'terrible, frightful struggle' that is the revolution, that is history itself, a 'mortal combat' where, 'theology fling[s] aside the demure mask of grace, abdicating, denying herself in order to annihilate justice, striving to absorb, to destroy her within herself, to swallow her up.'<sup>39</sup>

This quotation appears to support Gaudin's interpretation that Michelet sees grace and justice as the twin, 'antagonistic forces that dominate the past' arguing that 'Michelet had long associated grace, a feminine motif, with everything that led history astray, that is, away from justice'.<sup>40</sup> However, this is not entirely the case. The word 'astray' implies that grace, 'a feminine motif', is not only a hostile element but also one that should be done away with in order for justice to prevail. Although the above quotation from Michelet's chronicle of the Revolution appears to imply this, it should not be interpreted in isolation from his other works. When they are considered, it emerges that Michelet sees both grace and justice as necessary forces, which act as counterbalances to one another. This, for Michelet, will result in progress in history.

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<sup>37</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 60.

<sup>38</sup> Jules Michelet trans. Charles Cocks, *History of the French Revolution* (London: H.G Bohn, 1847), p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> Gaudin, 'Woman, My Symbol', pp. 45-6.

In *La femme* and *L'Amour* it is man, in his quest for justice, who causes chaos and strife and woman who 'is...all beauty and grace...the very opposite to that right line of precision and strict justice which is the proper walk of man' and 'is in all history, the element of stability'.<sup>41</sup> In *L'Amour* and *La Femme* woman serves as a stabilising, balancing force *because* she is 'the destroyer of justice. She is all love...and love, it seems is favour and proffered grace.'<sup>42</sup> In her unique, and paradoxical, position of being '... always above or below justice', she can act as Grace or Mercy, an element that balances the masculine scales of justice.<sup>43</sup> Michelet effaces any lingering doubts regarding this notion in *La Femme* where he concludes:

Man is, most of all, an agent of creation. He produces, but in two senses; for he also produces wars, discords and combats... the torrent of benefactions, that flow from his fruitful hand, flows also a flood of evils, which woman follows, to soften, console, and heal.<sup>44</sup>

Here, it is not the feminine, grace, but man who acts as a destructive figure, stunting the progress of history by producing 'wars, discords and combats' which woman, always the opposite to man, balances with her healing touch. This furthers the idea that Michelet was ever aware of a need for opposite forces to ensure the progress of history.

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<sup>41</sup> Jules Michelet, *Love* trans. J.W. Palmer (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861), p. 305.

<sup>42</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p. 305.

<sup>43</sup> Michelet, *Love*, p. 305.

<sup>44</sup> Michelet, *Woman*, p. 230.

What accounts for the apparent contradictions that exist between Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution Française* on the one hand, and *L'Amour* and *La Femme* on the other? The fact that the former work concerns the French Revolution may have required the anticlerical, republican Michelet to exaggerate the malignancy of the church, thereby vilifying grace and championing the cause of justice. The very nature of *La Femme* and *L'Amour* (being, as they are about woman and love respectively and not the fate of the nation) allow Michelet to be a great deal less categorical and as a result, more nuanced in his approach to the masculine and feminine forces which he sees as influencing the past. In light of this, any historian attempting to articulate Michelet's conception of history would be negligent in claiming that the feminine is simply representative of all that 'led history astray' as this overlooks the fact that woman could also act as a stabilising factor in history, healing the wounds inflicted by man who was capable of creating 'wars and discords'.

Michelet viewed the passage of historical time in terms of a linear, evolving trajectory characterised by progression, whereas he sees woman as being akin to nature (both a chaotic and a stabilising force) and bound to a 'circular rhythm', thereby placing her in a position both outside and transcendent to history. Woman is therefore in a strange limbo, being, like nature simultaneously a stabilising factor crucial for man's survival and a devastatingly destructive entity, which halts and hinders his efforts. Michelet conceives of historical time in terms of a linear progression rendering history inherently masculine. This is because woman, by virtue of her unique 'monthly crisis, is identified with

nature, governed like [and by] nature'.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Michelet sees time for woman to be circular and ever repeating like the phases of the moon and belonging to the natural realm. This excludes her from history, which he characterises as a linear progression. As Barthes notes, for Michelet 'woman's regular period identifies her with a totally natural object, and thereby contrasts her entirely with man.'<sup>46</sup> Barthes' interpretation is supported when one considers Michelet's *La Femme* in which he claims 'the man passes from drama to drama, not one of which resembles another ... History goes forth, ever far-reaching, and continually crying to him: "forward!"' So, history for Michelet is necessarily masculine because both are on a linear, ever evolving trajectory whereas 'woman, on the contrary follows the noble and serene epic that Nature chants in her harmonious cycles, repeating herself with a touching grace of constancy and fidelity.'<sup>47</sup> For woman time is circular, perpetual and in a sense static, thereby placing her in a position outside of the masculine, ever evolving history.

What does it mean for Michelet to conclude that 'nature is woman. History, which we very foolishly put in the feminine gender, is a rude, savage male, a sun burnt, dusty traveller.'<sup>48</sup> It seems to suggest that woman is forevermore bound to be exterior to, and excluded from, history. However, Michelet adds, 'refrains in her lofty song bestow peace, and, if I may say so, a relative changelessness', and it is this unchanging quality that renders woman 'in all history ... the element of

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<sup>45</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 148.

<sup>46</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 148.

<sup>47</sup> Michelet, *La Femme*, p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> Michelet, *La Femme*, p. 105.

stability.’<sup>49</sup> Just as her connection with nature renders woman the ‘constant other’ forced to remain forever outside of history, which is male, she is also a necessary element; her existence maintains the equilibrium. As Barthes notes, woman is ‘an element at once contiguous and exterior to humanity.’<sup>50</sup> Woman, like nature, is paradoxically both necessary and hostile to man, both intrinsic and foreign, both invested in and apathetic to his endeavours. For Michelet, woman was nature; if we conceive of history as a train she could be, at once, the fallen tree that brings the train to a catastrophic halt and the steam that allows it to continue, ever forward, along its trajectory.

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<sup>49</sup> Michelet, *La Femme*, p. 105.

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 154.

## Conclusion

In *L'Amour* and *La Femme*, Michelet painted an image of woman as the kind, loving republican wife who inspired man to create great works. Michelet elevated the sacred unit of the family to an ideal, arguing that the maintenance of unity in the family would result in stability and progress in history. This is largely unsurprising considering that Michelet was writing following a period of both personal and political instability. The revolution of 1848, followed by the short lived second republic and finally the ascension of Napoleon III to emperor and Michelet's own expulsion from his teaching post at the Collège de France following his refusal to pledge allegiance to the new emperor, all compounded the feelings of uncertainty that racked Michelet's mind. In this light, his insistence on the need for stability in the family, achieved through the mutual cooperation of husband and wife, is not shocking. Not only was he influenced by the events of 1848, but Michelet also reflects the writings and philosophies of fellow republicans Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Victor Hugo, the variety of Saint-Simonianism expressed by Prosper Enfantin and even the attitudes of ultraroyalists Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre.

Some, significantly, Jenny D'Héricourt saw Michelet's insistence that woman remain the keeper of hearth and home, as an expression of a misogynistic, antifeminist position. However, Michelet's emphasis on the maintenance of family unity, which depended on woman retaining her position at home, should be interpreted not as a statement of Michelet's position on gender roles, but as a

continuation of his theory that progress in history relied upon a balance being achieved between contrary forces, in this case husband and wife. It is significant to note that Michelet always stressed the symbiotic nature of the family. Not only was the wife dependant upon her husband for protection and education, but he too relied on his wife to love, care for, inspire and support him in his endeavours. Michelet relied on natural law to frame his conviction that man and woman needed to work together in their specific functions because they both were endowed with different and complementary qualities, by 'nature'. Utilising nature strengthened Michelet's argument and rendered it more difficult for those who disagreed with him to counter his opinion because he was framing it as an observation rather than an argument.

The sorceress of *La Sorcière* exemplifies Michelet's notion of a need for opposite, and in this case opposing, forces to balance one another in order for history's progress to continue unhindered. Michelet's witch was a benevolent figure during the dark, disease-ridden Middle Ages. Michelet depicted her as the wise, brave and good-natured physician of the community. In her role as wise woman and healer she stood in stark contrast to the ignorance, fear and superstition which often led the rest of society to persecute her. She was also positioned in opposition to the church, whose doctrine of original sin was, according to Michelet, utilised as an excuse for not alleviating the suffering of the people. In the second part of his history, the witch becomes a dangerous and threatening figure. This is because Michelet saw her as having fulfilled her function. With the entrance of scholars and scientists onto the scene of medical sciences, there was no longer a need for the witch who had healed the people in

secret and had studied anatomy by moonlight, she had become superfluous. As long as the church prevented the advancement of medicine and science, the sorceress was required as a necessarily subversive, beneficent figure who would heal those whom the church had forsaken. However, once the church began to allow the previously forbidden studies of anatomy to take place in universities, Michelet's sorceress transforms from being a figure of progress and defiance, to a relic representing the superstition of times past. The transformation of the witch is, like Michelet's emphasis on the republican wives' role in the family, not a condemnation of women. Rather, it is a furthering of Michelet's conviction that history was characterised by binaries, which needed to balance one another in order to prevent stasis. Just as he did in his previous works, Michelet appealed to natural law to explain why women were, by 'nature', inclined to pursue witchcraft. Again, this was in order to reinforce the strength of his argument and not, as Moreau claims, a profession, by Michelet, of the inherent 'sickness' of the female sex.

Like the sorceress, Joan of Arc was another woman placed in radical contrast to her context and whose actions, like those of the sorceress, had positive consequences for the onward march of France's history. Similar to the witch, Joan fulfilled her functioned and like her supernatural sister, necessarily had to burn at the stake. Joan's benevolence, bravery and faith are contrasted to the cruelty, fear and doubt expressed by the military, nobility and royalty she encountered. She was of the people, whose history Michelet felt himself obliged to recount. Just as the sorceress did, Joan functioned to balance the forces she encountered in her short life, and in doing so she contributed to an eventual



French victory, over the English in the Hundred Years' War. Michelet's representation of Joan was influenced by the symbolism of the revolution of 1789, notably of Marianne. The perpetual image of liberty, a figure of hope and rebirth, was also a symbol who stood in stark contrast to the bloodshed and aggression, being enacted in the masculine, political sphere during the revolution.

Michelet's representation of history as an ongoing conflict, an 'amorous combat' between grace, which he took to be feminine, and justice which was masculine, reinforces the idea that he perceived of history as an eternal dance of binaries. Just as the husband and wife complemented one another in Michelet's image of the ideal family, the masculine and feminine elements in history functioned to balance one another. Both were powerful and necessary elements in history and could, like the potions brewed by the sorceress, be simultaneously beneficial and malignant to, both halt and advance history.

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Figure 1:

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Figure 2:

Honoré Daumier, 'Les Femmes Socialistes', *Le Charivari*, June 9, 1849, The Brandeis Institutional repository, Hosted by Brandeis University,  
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