

Witches, Jews, and Redemption Through Sin in Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2021

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Abstract

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The present study aims to bring into focus the antinomian doctrine of redemption through sin as it appears in Jules Michelet's La Sorcière. According to Michelet, the witch-cult was both vestigial paganism and an attempt at overthrowing the Christian political order. The witch redeemed mankind by sinning against the Christian order, thus anticipating the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, as well as the French Revolution.

The notion of redemption through sin, borrowed from Gershom Scholem, will enable us to compare Michelet's and Scholem's approaches to history and counter-history. It will also allow us to read La Sorcière against a broader religious background than is usually employed. Among the sources of Michelet, the often overlooked kabbalistic, possibly Sabbatian, subtext will be assessed in relation to his peculiar female messianism. Likewise, the episode, in La Sorcière, of the encounter between the witch and the Jew will be thoroughly studied. This may lead us to better comprehend Michelet's theology, with the biblical God being akin, in his opinion, to that of the witches.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Antoine Compagnon, as well as Pierre Force and Mark Lilla, whose precious insights helped me to complete my research. I am also grateful to Michael Stanislawski and David Biale, for their willingness to participate in my defense, and for their priceless observations. Madeleine Dobie's help, especially during the difficult times of the pandemic, has been astonishing. I want to thank her, as well as Isabelle Chagnon, for their support during my years in the French Department. I would also like to thank Saverio Campanini, whose knowledge of Scholem and Kabbalah helped me greatly during my research. Without the precious advice of Judith Kogel, Deborah Kaufmann, Susan Torn, Yehudah Cohn, Bob Goldfarb, Daniel Solomon, and Emmanuel Kattan, I could not have completed my research and writing successfully. I am greatly indebted to them, as I am to Edmond Torn, Amy and Ronald Guttman for having provided me with peaceful environments in which I finalized the writing of this dissertation. More than anything else, I want to thank my wife, Tsilla Kogel, whose support and sacrifices have been overwhelming, and my parents. I dedicate this study to my daughter, Suzanne – our little witch – and to the beloved memory of Henri Mitterand, who passed away two days after my defense. I wish he could have read a study that is immensely indebted to him.

Introduction

The present study aims to bring into focus the antinomian doctrine of redemption through sin as it appears in Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*.

The witch-cult, Michelet held, was at once vestigial paganism and an attempt at overthrowing the Christian political order. It would have thus anticipated the French Revolution. The witch redeems mankind by "sinning" against the lies of a false, Christian order. Once confined to the offscreen of historiography, she becomes the real hero, the Prometheus of Western history. For Michelet, the margin tells the truth about the center it reflects and inverts. It also nurtures and somehow absorbs it.

The recent interest, both in and outside the academia, in Michelet's *La Sorcière* has been overwhelming, with most authors insisting, of course, on its feminist stance. In the past, some have cursorily discussed its historical relevance and its sources,¹ with others focusing on its context or philosophical tenets.² We should mention that a critical edition of *La Sorcière* exists, to which the present study is greatly indebted.³

The antinomianism of the book has not been fully assessed by these authors. Michelet is often described as an apostle of progress, blind as it were to darkness itself, to *negativity*. Despite

¹ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons – The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom*, New York, New American Library, 1993 (revised edition); Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies – Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1991 (Italian: *Storia notturna – Una decifrazione del sabba*, Torino, Einaudi, 1989).

² *La Sorcière de Michelet – L'envers de l'histoire*, edited by Paule Petitier, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2004. See also Roland Barthes, "La Sorcière," in *Essais critiques*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1964; Jeanne Favret, "Sorcières et Lumières," in *Critique*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, April 1971, n°287.

³ Wouter Kusters, *La Sorcière*, critical edition, Nijmegen, Catholic University of Nijmegen, 1989.

the fact that it never discusses *La Sorcière*, or, perhaps, because of it, a telling example is to be found in Hayden White's *Metahistory*.

As a narrator, Michelet used the tactics of a dualist. For him, there were really only two categories into which the individual entities inhabiting the historical field could be put. And, as in all dualistic systems of thought, there was no way in his historiographical theory for conceiving of the historical process as a dialectical or even incremental progress toward the desired goal. There was merely an interchange between the forces of vice and those of virtue – between tyranny and justice, hate and love [...].⁴

Long-growing tensions which force humanity into two opposed camps, one good, the other bad, are the key, White avers, of Michelet's conception of history. Redemption, being the end of history, is conceived in radical opposition to the forces of darkness. This conception is encapsulated in a certain "emplotment," that is the literary genre to which Michelet's history would belong – medieval romance, according to White. "It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness."⁵ The historian, especially that of the Revolution, depicts "a birth process. But the birth envisaged [is] more Caesarean than natural."⁶ We shall see that *La Sorcière* captures, in fact, a more complex metaphysics than that envisioned by White. It does so in relation with a more hybrid literary genre or emplotment. White might have been aware of it, which would explain the total absence of any mention of the book in his critical assessment of Michelet's historical realism.

That such a discussion matters is made clear by the polemical statements of a book influential in literary and journalistic circles if not in the academia proper. Philippe Muray's *Le 19^e siècle à travers les âges* asserts that Michelet was utterly unaware of the horror of history.

⁴ Hayden White, *Metahistory – The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, p.150.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.154.

Que le mal se déduise du bien en permanence, puis de nouveau le contraire du mal, puis de nouveau le contraire du bien, c'est la découverte que l'on peut faire sur le 19^e siècle avec le recul. Le début [...] des mauvaises surprises. Amorcées d'ailleurs avec la Révolution, où le règne de la liberté et de la justice donne naissance dans une illumination à l'univers de la Terreur. Cela, nos écrivains du 19^e siècle ne le verront pas ou fort peu, tout attachés qu'ils seront à faire le bonheur de leurs lecteurs à travers de multiples mises en scène du progressisme épique.⁷

Good begets evil, Muray cautions, then evil begets good, and so on. That the worship of freedom gave rise to the Terror is the best example of this unending process. Although they themselves embodied that intricacy of good and evil – with their progressivism rooted in the occult – most of nineteenth-century French writers did not perceive it. They did not notice the bloody streams in which they would nonetheless bathe. As a champion of the Revolution, Michelet is in the front row of the naïve idealists whom Muray thus targets. The reading I propose of *La Sorcière*'s dialectic goes the other way around. This book is first and foremost a history – as consciously ambiguous, and cruel as it needs to be – of the dark forces of mankind.

Regarding the antinomian contents of *La Sorcière* as well as those darker undertones, two works constitute exceptions to its consensual reception as ingenuous and exceedingly optimistic. These are Georges Bataille's preface to a 1946 edition of the book, later reprised in *La littérature et le mal*;⁸ and Ruben van Luijk's study of the origins of satanism. Let us note, however, that only a short part of the latter is actually devoted to Michelet.⁹ As for the former, its main intuition is that evil was for Michelet a path to good, that it was, in fact, an ancillary means to attain good, and that therein lies Michelet's "weakness."¹⁰ In his own words, Bataille seems to have envisioned the

⁷ Philippe Muray, *Le 19^e siècle à travers les âges*, Paris, Denoël, 1984, p.67.

⁸ Georges Bataille, *La littérature et le mal*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

⁹ Ruben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer – The Origins of Modern Religious Satanism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁰ G. Bataille, *op. cit.*, p.56.

religious philosophy of *La Sorcière* as one of redemption through sin. There is a certain point in the book, however, when evil invades everything, with Michelet (or the witch, or the reader) experiencing a state of delirium and turmoil, a giddiness transcending the initially ancillary, or purely *responsive* nature of sin.¹¹ Bataille's essay being as short as it is insightful – and very few paragraphs thereof actually dealing with the details of *La Sorcière*, the present study discusses and expands on this twofold or contradictory interpretation.

The Jewish aspects of the book – somehow related to its metaphysics of evil – are largely ignored, with Muray being again the best example, perhaps, of this widespread phenomenon. *Le 19^e siècle à travers les âges* goes as far as to equating Michelet to antisemitic (*sic*) nineteenth-century French writers, who, in Muray's opinion, wished to substitute “*occultosocialisme*” to both Judaism and Christianity.¹² What might be true of *La Bible de l'humanité*, a book written after *La Sorcière*, is not true of the latter. I want to demonstrate that *La Sorcière* possesses an interesting Jewish subtext, and I shall explore the meaning of its Jewish signifiers as well as its possibly Jewish, notably Sabbatian influences, connections or parallels. In other words, antinomianism is the organization principle of *La Sorcière*, and the Jewish signifier, I propose, may help to comprehend its intricate theology.

Comparing the witches and the Jews is certainly not a new thing, nor is the comparison, at the core of this study, between witchcraft and Sabbatianism. Moshe Idel addressed both aspects in *Saturn's Jews* – a book exploring the belief that the planet Saturn was assigned to the Jews by God via the celebration of the sabbath.¹³ Moreover, some of the links existing between the Jews and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹² P. Muray, *op. cit.*, pp.471-472.

¹³ Moshe Idel, *Saturn's Jews – On the Witches' Sabbat and Sabbateanism*, London & New York, Continuum, 2011.

the witches are the subject of such books as Carlo Ginzburg's *Storia notturna*, a seminal research on the origins of the witches' sabbath, Esther Cohen's *Con el Diablo en el cuerpo*¹⁴ and Jacob Rogozinski's *Ils m'ont hai sans raison*.¹⁵ This is the first time, however, that this twofold comparison is carried out in the context of French literature, with *La Sorcière* as its main focus.

In Scholem's Words

In Christianity, what is called redemption is the *deliverance from sin* and, ultimately, from death. In his *Epistle to the Romans* for instance, Paul conveys the notion of *apolutrosis*, which refers to the payment of a ransom; the Latin *redemptio* is literally a "ransom" as well. Actually, the idea that salvation amounts to buying back something or someone from an enemy comes from the Hebrew Bible itself: in Hebrew, the verb *ga'al* signifies "to act as a kinsman," i.e. as the one charged with "redeeming," or "paying back" for his impoverished relative's possessions. In some occurrences it designates the duty of "avenging one's kin's blood." A more abstract meaning seems to have developed at the same time, since already in the Song of the Sea, one of the oldest texts in the Bible, the same word is used for describing God's redemption of Israel from bondage. The substantive *ge'ulah*, usually translated as "redemption," possesses both abstract and concrete meanings. Redeeming Israel means saving it from slavery, or more generally from the control of the idolaters. While in the New Testament redeeming man denotes releasing him from the power of Satan, in the Jewish tradition, the idea of redemption eventually encountered a similar mystical reception too: in a shift close to that implied by the Paulinian *apolutrosis*, Israel and the world now had to be redeemed from the grip of demoniac forces. It is well-known for instance that according

¹⁴ Esther Cohen, *Con el diablo en el cuerpo – Filósofos y brujas en el Renacimiento*, Mexico, UNAM, 2003.

¹⁵ Jacob Rogozinski, *Ils m'ont hai sans raison*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2015.

to Lurianic Kabbalah, the cosmos – or rather the divine pleroma itself – had been *broken* from the beginning, and therefore needed to be *repaired*: all terrestrial forms of redemption were now seen as metaphors for that divine mission. The fact remains that redemption and sin are antithetical. When Israel is redeemed from Egypt, she can freely worship her God, and it is assumed that she will be completely free from sin and evil once utterly released from the power of idolatrous nations. Likewise, when Jewish mysticism uses the word *ge'ulah*, it entails the destruction of all evil. In Christianity, Jesus redeemed mankind from original sin when he died on the cross: some, like Origen, described his sacrifice as a ransom price paid to Satan. In other words, redemption always saves *from* sin, but can hardly happen *through* sin.

Although paradoxical, redemption through sin is a well-known phenomenon in the history of religions. To begin with, the antinomian idea – that is, the idea that one may access redemption despite the Law, if not against it – has its roots within Paul's Epistles. The seventeenth-century Antinomian Controversy, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a theological debate opposing two visions of Paul's theology, with Anne Hutchinson insisting on the "Covenant of Grace," as opposed to the "Covenant of Works." To be sure, this moderate kind of antinomianism did not directly involve sins as blatant as those on which we are going to focus. In the history of Christianity, however, the idea that one may reach redemption through sin itself is not unheard-of.

In a certain gnostic theology, sin, at least in the orthodox definition, did not exist, yet it could be viewed as a way to escape this world's illusions and lies.¹⁶ In some circles, moral

¹⁶ One usually calls gnostics those radical Christians who then indulged in such "redemptive sins." It should be reminded that the word *gnosticism* is actually an ambiguous designation, originally referring to Christian groups who were branded as heretics by the Church Fathers: until more recent discoveries such as the one that took place in Nag-Hammadi in 1945, patristics constituted our major source on those religious nonconformists. Apart from the doctrine that redemption is achieved through "knowledge," they differed greatly from one another and very few of them actually called themselves gnostics ("the Knowing Ones"). Modern research has broadened the traditional definition of the term by arguing the existence of pre-Christian Jewish and Hellenistic trends of gnosticism, and by including Manichaeism or even later Christian doctrines, as well as Jewish, and sometimes Muslim ones, in its vast history. Scholem saw Sabbatianism as a form of Jewish gnosticism, and earlier forms of (Christian) gnosticism as originally

indifference to good and evil was therefore redeeming, as was the performance of deeds generally *construed as sins*.

The purest and most radical expression of the metaphysical revolt is moral nihilism. [...] The pneumatic is “naturally saved,” i.e., saved by virtue of his nature. The practical inference from this is a maxim of general license which permits the pneumatic the indiscriminate use of the natural realm. The inner-worldly difference of good and evil has been submerged in the essential indifference of everything cosmic to the destiny of the acosmic self.¹⁷

Such trends tended to describe sins as mere illusions, kept up by ignorant theologians and priests: the very distinction between good and evil, between sins and good deeds, was challenged. If we should define gnosticism as intrinsically dualistic, then such sinners are no gnostics. Rather, we could describe their approach as pantheistic. If they do “sin,” it is for empowerment’s sake.

Others, the Carpocratians for instance (as far as we can tell anything about people whose texts and views have only been transmitted to us by their adversaries), strove to access the hidden and true God by systematically trampling on the Demiurge’s or the Archons’ laws: an *obligation* to perform every kind of illicit action was indeed positively suggested to believers. To abide by the earthly law was denying the truly divine one: just as Sabbatians would do later, radical antinomian gnostics thus seem to have regarded redemption as the very offspring of sin. These did not confine themselves to moral *indifference*: as Hans Jonas puts it, “we find sometimes [among such heretics] the freedom to do everything turned into a positive *obligation* to perform every kind of action.”¹⁸ From the alien dimension of both the believer’s *pneuma* and of the “true” God, it ensues that denying the power of this lowly world’s rulers is not only permissible but a duty. Here

and essentially Jewish. In the course of this study, we will deal with gnostic influence on Romanticism, *or rather with the Romantic reception of ancient gnosticism*.

¹⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion – The Message of the Alien God & the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2001, pp.270-271.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.273

is why in some instances, sin became a program that had to be completed. According to Irenaeus' account of gnosticism,

this means that [man] shall not get free from the power of the angels that made the world, but has always to be reincarnated until he has committed every deed there is in this world, and only when nothing is still lacking will he be released to that God who is above the world-creating angels.¹⁹

The gnostic heretics tended to challenge the orthodox perspective on redemption because of their “exceedingly *transcendent* [...] conception of God.”²⁰ Their radical dualism of realms of being (the separation between God and the world, light and darkness, soul and body, good and evil) sometimes even led them to a radical theological dualism, according to which the world and its laws were created by an evil god, a demiurge, or by other lowly powers – the so-called “Archons” –, while the true and good God was completely *alien*. Hence a mythology of escape and revolt: the *pneuma*, spirit, seeks to return to its source, beyond the cosmic prison. However, two contrary conclusions could be drawn from that, an ascetic one, and a “libertine” one. Either the obligation to reduce contact with the world to a minimum, or the privilege of absolute freedom, derived from the possession of “knowledge:” it is true that antinomian nihilism unveils the underlying nihilistic dimension of gnosticism, but some of those heretics actually distinguished themselves by their abstemious way of life. Such was for instance the case of Marcion.

Some gnostic circles endorsed the outcasts of the Hebrew Bible, starting with Cain, and sometimes of Greek mythology (Prometheus).²¹ Adam's first son was elevated to a “pneumatic” symbol because he had been condemned by the Old Testament god. The Cainites took their name from him, thereby building a counter-history in which the “other side” was systematically

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*. Quoted in H. Jonas, *op. cit.*, p.273.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.96.

preferred to that promoted by the blind author of the Pentateuch, who “had unwittingly embodied something of the truth in his partisan version of things.”²² The peculiar use of allegory in gnostic writings does not merely take over the traditional mythologies, Greek or Hebrew, but it *reverses* the roles of good and evil.

Over the course of Christian history, a variety of heretic groups endorsed an antinomian program of redemption through sin. In some instances, their repression informed the Church’s view of witchcraft – vestigial pagan customs that were, late in the history of Catholicism, conflated by theologians with Luciferian beliefs and practices.²³ The Brethren of the Free Spirit, for instance, were accused of religious debauchery in thirteenth-century Europe, and so had been – on weaker grounds, to be sure – the Templars. Seventeenth-century England was shaken by controversies involving the Ranters, Christian antinomians preaching an amoralism rooted in the bold idea that God lives in every creature. To defy human laws and morals, even through sexual licentiousness, was therefore to be godlike. In Russia, from the seventeenth century onward, the Khlysty believed in direct communication with the Holy Spirit. Initially, this had led them to extreme asceticism, but they gradually came to believe that sin could be killed by sin itself, therefore indulging in orgiastic rituals.

The very idea of *redemption through sin*, although it has existed under a variety of names, is, as such, principally associated with Gershom Scholem, or rather with Hillel Halkin’s English translation of Scholem’s famous 1936 essay. At the core of it is the Jewish-gnostic idea that, for Sabbatian Jews and their heirs, one could attain redemption by trampling on the laws of the Torah. The original Hebrew title of this text is “*Miṣwah haba’ah ba-‘aḇeirah*,” which refers to a religious

²² *Ibid.*, p.95.

²³ On this topic, see N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, and C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*

commandment executed via the ancillary performance of a sinful act, rather than to redemption proper. For instance, although one is not supposed to free one's "Canaanite slaves," the Talmud teaches that one may do so in order to complete a synagogue quorum. In such a case, "a commandment comes through a transgression."²⁴ Scholem's title is a pun barely related to the idea of redemption.²⁵ However, the article itself does emphasize the messianic and redemptive power of the sins ritually performed by Sabbatians. Moreover, inasmuch as *mišwah*, "divine commandment," and *'aḇeirah*, "sin," are antonyms, both the Hebrew and the English title of this essay convey the antithetical idea of achieving good in an apparently evil way, or by *inverting* evil into good.

The Messianic revival of 1665-1666 was not, initially, antinomian. Sabbatai Tzevi was a pious kabbalist and an erudite. The hope that the redemption was near "spread to every sector of the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora," with many Jews believing that Sabbatai Tzevi "was soon to overthrow the Turkish sultan, whom he would depose from his throne and strip of all his powers."²⁶ Heretical Sabbatianism was born when Sabbatai agreed to convert to Islam, "when for the first time a contradiction appeared between the two levels of the drama of redemption, that of the subjective experience of the individual on the one hand, and that of the objective historical facts on the other."²⁷ Even before the tragic conclusion of Sabbatai's Messiahship, the idea that

²⁴ Berakhot, 47b.

²⁵ A similar talmudic concept is that of *'aḇeirah lišmah*, a transgression committed "for its own sake," or rather for an honorable outcome. It is said of *'aḇeirah lišmah* that it is preferable to a religious deed performed with a selfish intention (Nazir, 23b). Examples given involve some kind of redemption. Tamar engaged in licentious sexual intercourse with her father-in-law in order to beget children. Ultimately, the Messiah will be among her descendants. Likewise, Jael had sex with Sisera so she could kill him and save the people of Israel from his brutality. Both *'aḇeirah lišmah* and *mišwah haba'ah ba-'aḇeirah* subvert the limits between good and evil.

²⁶ Gershom Scholem, "Redemption Through Sin," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York, Schocken Books, 1972, pp.86-87.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.88.

the world was restored in such a way that the Torah was to be violated, if not utterly nullified, in order to be really fulfilled, had gained ground among Sabbatians. Lurianic Kabbalah had spread among Jews since the late sixteenth century so as to become the *de facto* theology of Judaism. Some of its tenets already contained heretical potentialities, as Scholem showed in the first chapter of his biography of Sabbatai Tzevi.²⁸

Among Sabbatian circles, it came to be argued that redemption could only be reached through sin. God himself, as per radical Lurianic theology, was a prisoner of evil forces. As a result, so believed those sectarians, just like a secret agent sometimes needs to live among, and even act the way his country's enemies do in order to trick and to ultimately vanquish them, Sabbatai's disciples believed that he – if not every Jew – needed to trick Satan (whom he mysteriously “resembled”) by delving into his realm.

The essential difference, I propose, between this kind of “Jewish gnosticism” and Christian gnosticism lies in the question of evil. This is also the aspect that may allow one to compare Sabbatianism with Michelet's vision of witchcraft. Evil, according to various Jewish texts, is entwined with good. It might even reinforce it. In regard to the Genesis narrative of creation, a Palestinian rabbi from the 3rd century CE is quoted as saying that the reason God only utters the words “*very good*” at the end is that they refer to the *yeşer hara* ‘, or “Evil Desire,” which was created together with man. Without the Evil Desire, so runs his thesis, no one would build a house, take a wife and beget children.²⁹ Evil is not a flaw of creation, it is actually its yeast. In fact, the Jewish vision of evil seems to push the *felix culpa* theme to its ultimate limits. It is not that sin is *felix* in retrospect because a higher state of things might originate from it. Sin and evil are part of

²⁸ G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi – The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

²⁹ Bereshit Rabbah, 9: 7.

the creation plan. In Lurianic theology, evil is actually not foreign to God himself, and redemption through sin (in Sabbatianism) is possible, if not mandatory, precisely because evil and good are intertwined within the godhead. The latter is itself built on opposites, which is in deep contrast with the idea that opposition and inversion are postlapsarian.³⁰ A student of Isaac Luria, Joseph Ibn Tabul went as far as to claim in a *Treatise of the Dragons* that the *šimšum*, the self-contraction of God at the origin of the creation process in Lurianic mythology, was actually God's self-purification. In other words, the creation of the world was "a gradual purification of the divine organism from the elements of evil."³¹ Expanding on Ibn Tabul's quasi-heretical theology, Nathan of Gaza, Sabbatai's Paul (and John the Baptist at once), wrote another *Treatise of the Dragons*. There he suggested that the residual divine light in the *tehiru* – that is, the empty space which *En-Sof*, the Infinite God, had produced by his self-contraction – contained the very forces of darkness.³² The Messiah's role in the overcoming of these forces follows from his special position in the divine pleroma. From the outset, his soul, far from being of a holy nature, was sunk deep in the realm of the *qelippot*, the satanic barks, if not actually rooted in them.³³ In fact, "the holy serpent dwells together with the evil primordial serpent, struggling with it but not consubstantial with it."³⁴ "The root of the Messiah's soul stems from the abyss of evil and formlessness."³⁵ The Messiah is therefore constantly at war with this evil twin, ever trying to subdue the latter's realm

³⁰ See below, pp.18-19.

³¹ G. Scholem, "Kabbalah and Myth," in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York, Schocken Books, 1996, p.111.

³² G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, *op. cit.*, p.300.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.302-306.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.307.

³⁵ G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead – Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, New York, Schocken Books, 1991, p.87.

of darkness through paradoxical ways.³⁶ His original nature, in other words, is still manifested in strange outbursts of antinomianism.³⁷

Born in 1726, Jacob Frank, a Polish Jew, gave Sabbatianism its most radical form. Scholem asserts that he “will always be remembered as one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole of Jewish history.”³⁸ A brutal nihilist, Frank claimed that messianism should amount to “entering the abyss in which all laws and religions are annihilated.”³⁹ He converted to Catholicism in 1759, and a great many numbers of his disciples followed his example – as some had done when Sabbatai Tzevi had “taken the fez.” This happened after a violent controversy between Sabbatian Jews, who called themselves “Zoharites,” and the orthodox camp. Protected by the Polish Church, the former went as far as to accuse the latter of ritual murder. However, it soon became obvious that their conversion was not sincere, and Frank was sentenced to jail. His “religion” actually developed then. Because they bear on Michelet’s idiosyncratic female messianism, we will bring some of his later teachings into focus in the fourth chapter of our study.

Scholem had experienced the “program” of redemption through sin in his very life, as he recalled in his autobiography, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*. Although his family was not religious, the fact that his father would “ritually” kindle his cigar from the Sabbath candles, then recite a made-up blessing over it, attested to “the unexpected persistence of discourses of the divine among those for whom God had long been dead or missing,” yet at the same time to “the notion of a divine

³⁶ G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, *op. cit.*, p.311.

³⁷ G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, *op. cit.*, p.87.

³⁸ G. Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” *op. cit.*, p.126.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.131.

commandment fulfilled through transgression.”⁴⁰ The most striking idea, perhaps, of “Redemption Through Sin” and Scholem’s subsequent studies, is the pervasive influence of Sabbatianism on the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. This is highly counterintuitive, since the latter was presumably devoid of any mystical tendency. Scholem showed, for instance, that family links united a variety of eighteenth-century Sabbatians – among them Frankists who had not converted to Catholicism – and *Maskilim*.⁴¹ Jonas Wehle, “the spiritual leader and educator of the Sabbatians in Prague after 1790, was equally appreciative of both Moses Mendelssohn and Sabbatai [Tzevi].”⁴² Moreover, the hopes and beliefs of late eighteenth-century Sabbatians “caused them to be particularly susceptible to the ‘millennial’ winds of the time.”⁴³ Scholem devoted a lengthy study on the case of Moses Dobruška, a relative of Jacob Frank, who became a Freemason, then a French revolutionary, under the name of Junius Frey.⁴⁴ Scholem’s controversial thesis bears on our study, since it will be argued that some Sabbatian connections might account for Michelet’s strange messianism. It was notably criticized by Jacob Katz but reassessed by Ada Rapoport-Albert in her book on *Women and the Messianic Heresy Of Sabbatai Zevi*, in which she studies the case of Arie Löw Enoch Hönig Edler von Hönigsberg. Born in 1770 to a wealthy Jewish family of Prague, he seems to have combined ideas from both Frankism and the Haskalah. Scholem stated that the Sabbatian break from traditional Judaism had prepared the ground for the

⁴⁰ Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted – Heresy and the European Imagination*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, p.135.

⁴¹ See for instance his essay on “A Sabbatian Will From New York,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, *op. cit.*

⁴² G. Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” *op. cit.*, p.141.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁴⁴ G. Scholem, *Du frankisme au jacobinisme – La vie de Moses Dobruška alias Franz Thomas von Schönfeld alias Junius Frey*, Paris, Gallimard & Editions du Seuil, 1981.

rationalism of the Haskalah – or even, in Hönigsberg’s case, his feminism. Katz maintained that Hönigsberg had actually abandoned the Haskalah in favor of the heretical mysticism of the Frankists. Rapoport-Albert suggested that “he genuinely combined the two discrete sources of his spiritual and intellectual inspiration, clearly viewing them as being mutually corroborative and in perfect harmony with each other.”⁴⁵ Michelet’s idea that witchcraft was a proto-Renaissance is akin to Scholem’s. In both cases, we see an attempt at finding the roots of progress and light in a mythical past, and in darkness itself. In both cases, history is turned upside down, and narrated from the perspective of its subterranean truth.

Steven Wasserstrom suggested that Scholem’s idea might have been reinforced by the French intellectual context of the 1930s. At the time, his dear friend Walter Benjamin was indeed acquainted with Pierre Klossowski, whom “he saw with some regularity in Paris between 1935 and 1939.”⁴⁶ Klossowski was giving lectures on Sade, which he would assemble after the war in *Sade mon prochain*. In his opinion, evil should erupt once and for all, and it had done so through Sade, who had reminded his fellow revolutionaries of their putrid roots. Scholem’s Sade was Jacob Frank, whom he described as an utterly corrupt and degenerate man. He nonetheless implied that “in order to exhaust its seemingly endless potential for the contradictory and the unexpected, the Sabbatian movement was in need of such a strongman.”⁴⁷ Both Klossowski and Scholem explicitly linked their antiheroes to gnosticism. Beside Sade, Klossowski had a deep interest in Fourier’s utopian doctrine, which Benjamin also discussed, going as far as to evoking it in connection with

⁴⁵ Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi*, Oxford & Portland, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011, p.318.

⁴⁶ Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion – Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p.220.

⁴⁷ G. Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” *op. cit.*, p.127.

Kabbalah.⁴⁸ In short, Scholem's "Redemption Through Sin" may well possess a French context alongside its well-known German one. Wasserstrom does not bring up Michelet, and although it appears that Benjamin knew his books (since he quoted excerpts, among others, from *Le Peuple*, in his *Arcades Project*), it is hard to determine whether Scholem was familiar with them too. A direct influence would be difficult to assess, if not utterly futile. But we are going to show that Romanticism may have found in *La Sorcière* its finest program of redemption through sin. Sometimes, Scholem's thought shall be used to better grasp Michelet's idea. The latter may also help us comprehend what Scholem himself, an heir to the Romantic tradition, had in mind when he undertook his research. It may also happen that they mined the same sources, including (quite surprisingly for Michelet) Kabbalah. At any rate, striking resemblances between Michelet's approach to witchcraft and Scholem's history of Sabbatianism are documented in the following pages. The comparison between the two may shed new light on both oeuvres.

The Politics and Metaphysics of Inversion

Antithesis and inversion played a significant role among the Jewish heretics whose doctrines Scholem brought into light. From its outset, inverting hallowed rites, and substituting for the laws of the Torah the very opposite attitude, were the trademark of the Sabbatian movement. For instance, on the Seventeenth of Tammuz in 5425 (1665), Sabbatai Tzevi switched to the Great Hallel, that is the festival psalms, forsaking the traditional mourning rituals. His prophet, Nathan, proclaimed that on that day, feasting and rejoicing would henceforth replace all mourning practices.⁴⁹ In fact, the very idea of redemption through sin inverts the normal function ascribed to

⁴⁸ S. Wasserstrom, *op. cit.*, p.220.

⁴⁹ G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi op. cit.*, pp.236-237.

both notions. That of *mišwah* and that of *'abeirah* are antonyms, whose respective meaning those heretics turned upside down. The power of holiness had to descend into the realm of impurity, with good assuming the very form of evil.⁵⁰ Asserting that one could only fulfill the (heavenly) Torah by violating the (earthly) Torah, they came to the conclusion that redemption should entail the reversal of the commandments – *bittulah šel Torah, zehu kiyyumah*.⁵¹ Toward the end of his life, Sabbatai Tzevi had sexual relations with young boys and girls, while being clad in phylacteries and singing psalms, thus conflating a commandment and a major sin.⁵² The rise of anything forbidden to religious duty remained the attribute of the sect, eventually turning it into a revolutionary movement. In 1756, in the Polish town of Lanckoronie, a Sabbatian ritual prompted a rabbinical investigation into Jacob Frank's heresy. Frank's disciples had taken "the wife of the local rabbi (who also belonged to the sect), a woman beautiful but lacking discretion, [...] undressed her naked and placed the Crown of the Torah on her head, sat her under the canopy like a bride, and danced a dance around her [...] and in dance they [had fallen] upon her kissing her, and called her 'mezuzah,' as if they were kissing a mezuzah."⁵³ According to the idea that "in the normative law man's will is taken care of by the same powers that control his body," he who wants to regain the authority of his self nurtures "a positive metaphysical interest in repudiating allegiance to all objective norms and thus a motive for their outright violation."⁵⁴ It is as such that the upside down ritual turns out to herald the Revolution.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.801.

⁵¹ G. Scholem, "Redemption Through Sin," *op. cit.*, p.110.

⁵² See G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, *op. cit.*, p.880, and A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, p.190.

⁵³ Quoted in Paweł Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude – Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755-1816*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, p.23.

⁵⁴ H. Jonas, *op. cit.*, p.273.

The act by which the metaphysical rebel defies the lowly power is often a carnivalesque ritual, an inversion entailing both political and religious consequences. It should be remembered that, as Bakhtin notes, the carnival was initially described as a mystical experience, with “the antique gods [playing] in these parades the role of the saturnalian uncrowned kings.”⁵⁵ More recently, Ginzburg demonstrated the link uniting the sabbath ritual and carnivalesque ceremonies, with youths often impersonating the procession of the dead,⁵⁶ and animal disguises being ritual correlatives of “the animal metamorphosis experienced during ecstasy.” The latter, Ginzburg proposed, was a shamanistic way of “making contact with the dead.”⁵⁷ “The cycle of themes and images of the turnabout face and the substitution of the upper by the lower parts is linked with death and the underworld.”⁵⁸ It is also revolutionary in essence, with *concordia discors* conforming to divine laws of proportion invariably couched in the language of government.⁵⁹ In premodern and early modern political thinking, the role of the king is to prevent society from reverting to chaos by way of inversion.⁶⁰ Inversion originally marks two forms of chaos, although it will be shown that they may actually relate to a superior form of order – precisely as a mystical experience. These two forms of chaos are the pre-social behavior of mythical precursors on the one hand, and the extra-social behaviors of strangers and outsiders on the other hand.⁶¹ But from a Christian perspective,

⁵⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.393.

⁵⁶ C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.182-184.

⁵⁷ M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p.280.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.377.

⁵⁹ Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons – The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.76.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

that everything in the world “has to be maintained in counterweight to its contrary” is a corollary of the Fall.⁶² There would be no opposition, therefore no inversion, were we not fallen creatures. Witchcraft, at least as seen by Michelet, combines the two aforementioned forms of chaos. In it, as in any carnivalesque structure, the mystical converges with the political by trampling on the ordinary rules of society. An interesting parallel is to be found in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, where it says that the reason of the paschal sacrifice was, as Jan Assmann puts it, “normative inversion.”⁶³ The Egyptians, Maimonides asserts, worshipped the constellation of Aries, and therefore did not slaughter sheep. As the Bible says, shepherds were abominable to them. Hence the commandment to kill a lamb on Passover, for the Hebrews had to free themselves of the Egyptian superstition.⁶⁴ Inversion serves a goal of empowerment, with Judaism here affirming itself as counter-religion. The Hebrews had to be de-Egyptianized. Inversion is a cure for idolatry and slavery. However, the “inversionary” theme in witchcraft expresses the intuition that, by turning things upside down, one does not so much subvert God’s will as look into the once obstructed infinite. In other words, magic inversion resembles the rite of Passover (as seen by Maimonides) by its political meaning, but it possesses positive qualities rather than merely being a pedagogical or contrarian attitude.⁶⁵

All these themes will be encountered in *La Sorcière*. In Michelet’s view, the redemption of the body is correlated with the consorting with the dead, as well as aesthetic, epistemological, and political inversion.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.70-71.

⁶³ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian – The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998, pp.57-65.

⁶⁴ Maimonides, *Moreh hanevukhim*, Jerusalem, Mosad haRav Kook, 2000, pp.531-532.

⁶⁵ In Kabbalah, rites likewise *do* something, as Moshe Idel and Charles Mopsik have aptly demonstrated.

Hayden White ascribed the metaphor to Michelet as his privileged trope. What might be true of earlier works is not so true of *La Sorcière*, where, I propose, the antithesis dominates. Barthes went as far as to describe it as the dominant structure in most of Michelet's oeuvre.⁶⁶ It is, at least, obviously the case in the book we shall focus on.

Comment y arriva-t-on ? Sans doute par l'effet si simple du grand principe satanique que tout *doit se faire à rebours*, exactement à l'envers de ce que fait le monde sacré. Celui-ci avait l'horreur des poisons. Satan les emploie, et il en fait des remèdes. L'Église croit par des moyens spirituels (sacrements, prières) agir même sur les corps ; Satan, au rebours, emploie des moyens matériels pour agir même sur l'âme ; il fait boire l'oubli, l'amour, la rêverie, toute passion. Aux bénédictions du prêtre il oppose des passes magnétiques, par de douces mains de femmes, qui endorment les douleurs.⁶⁷

Michelet's book is built on opposites. The great satanic principle is that everything must be done "à rebours," a notion directly borrowed from Pierre de Lancre's *Tableau de l'inconstance des démons*, where it is indeed ubiquitous. "*Le Diable [...] lui faisoit voir choses estranges tout à rebours du commmun et quasi contre nature*," Lancre writes of a certain witch from Gascony.⁶⁸ He elsewhere maintains that the Devil, out of love for disorder, does everything "à rebours."⁶⁹ As previously shown, witchcraft was generally seen as disorder qua inversion. As such, it was one of many "inversionary" themes pervading the theological-political ideology of the early modern period. Michelet's idea that "the great satanic principle" is actually redeeming, with the poison being thus turned into a remedy, originates there. Discussing *La Sorcière*, he wrote that he had himself endeavored to turn history around, like a glove: "*Je crois avoir cette fois retourné par la magie le moyen âge, du tout au tout, comme un gant*."⁷⁰ His own method espouses the satanic

⁶⁶ R. Barthes, "Le discours de l'histoire," in *Social Science Information*, August 1967, Volume 6, Issue 4, p.73.

⁶⁷ Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière*, edited by Katrina Kalda, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p.143.

⁶⁸ Pierre de Rosteguy de Lancre, *Tableau de l'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges et Demons, où il est amplement traicté des Sorciers, & de la Sorcellerie*, Paris, Nicolas Buon, 1613, p.88.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.211.

⁷⁰ J. Michelet, *Correspondance générale*, edited by Louis Le Guillou, Paris, Honoré Champion, X, 1999, p.67.

principle by inverting every accepted truth. Darkness is light, and the evil committed by the witches is at least a path to good and redemption. Moreover, in the mythology he invents, the inside becomes the outside, the margin absorbs the center, the sacred and the profane are interverted, the lower part of the body is conflated with its higher one, which it ultimately vanquishes.

In an extraordinary fragment from his 1849 diary, Michelet conveyed his love for Athénaïs, whom he was to marry a few days later.

Le soleil est une masse de feu qui roule, morne et sombre, sans éclat, sans rayons. La nuée qui s'interpose le fait mieux voir à la plaine. Elle le révèle dans sa véritable puissance et, par la richesse infinie des accidents de sa lumière, elle fait deviner aux hommes la richesse et le trésor de sa force nourricière [...].

Tu es le miroir magique où le monde concentré apparaît plus vrai qu'en lui-même. Tu es la fleur électrique d'où sort pour moi sans cesse un jet de vie, au moindre regard que je jette dans ton calice profond. Tu es le nuage mystérieux qui voile le Dieu sans le cacher, qui aide à le voir et le montre dans le prisme mouvant de la grâce.

Petit miroir, faible fleur, léger nuage qui passes à l'horizon de la vie, comment verrais-je l'infini sans toi ?⁷¹

Love is a cloud between God and us, the West cautions. The Orient replies that it is more of a protective atmosphere, a “cloud” inverting the awful might of the sun and allowing it to invigorate the earth. For him, Athénaïs is this screen through which he may approach the infinite. Inversion is the process through which the infinite becomes visible. This bears on the treatment of the witch in *La Sorcière*. She is the inverted image of the society that rejects her. As such, she is a window to the divine.

The Regicide

⁷¹ J. Michelet, *Journal*, edited by Claude Digeon, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, II, p.28.

The sway held on nineteenth-century French literature by sacrilegious themes, might be explained by an inaugural sacrilege – the regicide. It is, of course, in terms of sacrilege that the king’s execution has to be read. His *sacred* body was *deseccrated*. The solemnity of the event was unique and clearly religious, as if to say that such an execution had to fit a royal body. Likewise, by “killing” the already dead kings of Saint-Denis, the revolutionaries precisely designated them as sacred.⁷² For many revolutionaries, the regicide had been the true founding act of the French Republic. Just as in Sabbatianism, the “sin” that was performed was at once a sin and a duty, and in both cases, things unfolded as though a program were being completed.⁷³ The fact that some of those who voted for Louis XVI’s execution eventually described it as a painful, yet necessary duty could even remind us of a notion originally inherent to redemptive sin – at least in Sabbatianism: that of “selfless sin.”⁷⁴

Theocratic monarchy had made the regicide necessary. Royal publicists claimed that the king’s body politic was immortal; the *king* could not die, even if an assassin struck down the *man* who wore the crown. But the public trial and execution of the king could and did destroy the king’s body politic along with the man himself. It was precisely because he was ‘twice-born,’ as body and embodiment, that the king had to die and to die in public. It was royalist ideology that inextricably bound together revolutionary change and the killing of kings.⁷⁵

⁷² See Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Tuer le mort – Le désir révolutionnaire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2015, p.33.

⁷³ See for instance G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, *op. cit.*, pp.242-243 and 459-460.

⁷⁴ In Hebrew, ‘*aḇeirah lišmah*, sin for the sake of Heaven or, perhaps more literally, “sin for its own sake.”

⁷⁵ Michael Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution – Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p.13.

Although the Enlightenment had deeply reduced the legal and philosophical fascination with the king's "sacred body," regicide was still regarded in France as a peculiar crime, and the king's body was still, so to speak, an exception in revolutionary France: the 1791 Constitution explicitly stated his "inviolability." In 1792 and 1793, the discussion around his possible execution allowed for the revolutionaries, especially those who wanted him dead, to describe him as an extraordinary being, a sacred monster which the guillotine had to suppress as an expiatory victim.⁷⁶ An old religion had to be trampled on so a new one, purer and more sacred so to speak, could emerge. Monarchists would later evoke Louis XVI as a martyr, a quasi-Christ, whose blood could perhaps redeem France. Yet, his killing was still a sin. For the revolutionaries it was a sacred and, literally, *awesome* duty, for the very reason that he was regarded as sacred. In other words, the regicide conveyed both *sacrificial* and *sacrilegious* dimensions. Although those two notions are usually opposed they might be ultimately identical.

An entire royalist mystique was destroyed then – and utter desecration (at Saint-Denis) ultimately reinforced what the Convention had undertaken. Actually, the king's execution "was a function of the king's embodiment of the old regime and of his claim to be inviolable. It was not possible to bring Louis within reach of the law without attacking both his person and his pretensions."⁷⁷ Consequently, Walzer suggests, when British and French revolutionaries tried then executed Charles I and Louis XVI, these unfortunate kings "did not die ignominiously or obscurely [...]. Though they were condemned as men and citizen, they died as they had tried to live, as bodies simultaneously politic and natural, symbols of a regime, gods incarnate: greater justice could not

⁷⁶ See Daniel Arasse, *La guillotine et l'imaginaire de la Terreur*, Paris, Flammarion, 1987, pp.67-71.

⁷⁷ M. Walzer, *op. cit.*, p.86.

have been done them.”⁷⁸ The regicide is a “ritual process through which the ideology [the old regime] it embodies (and the man who embodies it) can be publicly repudiated.”⁷⁹

Many have emphasized the transgressive nature of the revolutionary festival, which, Michelet has in mind, of course, when he writes about the sabbath. Ozouf showed that despite the authorities’ ambivalence, spontaneous “*fêtes*” often verged on the carnivalesque, even the blasphemous.

On voit des femmes donner la bastonnade aux saints et aux saintes. Les soutanes des curés et des vicaires tombent pour faire place à l’habit des sans-culottes, les religieuses dansent la carmagnole. Le cardinal et la catin se font pendant de chaque côté du cercueil du despotisme ; les célébrants revêtent sans vergogne les dalmatiques, les chasubles et les chapes dérobés à l’église, comme dans le fameux cortège imaginé par la section de l’Unité qui en frimaire an II défile devant la Convention.⁸⁰

Several episodes of the French Revolution attest to the presence of what we may well call attempts at redemption through sin. The revolutionaries’ intentional desecration of royal tombs and churches was meant to express their will to reach *political* redemption by religious, if sacrilegious, means. Michelet explicitly acknowledges it in *Histoire de la Révolution française*, although the revolutionary sinners, in his view, performed such sins for empowerment’s sake, with no real mysticism of sin whatsoever.

Le moment semblait venu de frapper les grands coups.

La Convention accueillait à merveille les envois de saints, de châsses, de défroques ecclésiastiques [...].

La Convention avait voté la destruction des tombeaux de Saint-Denis. L’on avait réuni la cendre des rois à celle des morts obscurs. Cruel outrage pour ceux-ci d’être accolés à Charles IX, de recevoir à côté d’eux la pourriture de Louis XV, ou l’infâme mignon Henri III !

La Convention avait trouvé très bon que le vieux Rulh [...] brisât de sa main la fiole appelée la Sainte-Ampoule.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.88.

⁸⁰ M. Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire – 1789-1799*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Idées, 1976, p.105.

⁸¹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, edited by Gérard Walter, Paris, Gallimard, 1952, II, *op. cit.*, p.641.

Some contemporary reports illustrate “the emergence of a sacrificial economy whose abandonment of death taboos and logic of exchange guided the violent practices of the French revolutionaries.”⁸² Sometimes, revolutionary atrocities even took the form of twisted liturgical rituals, as if the French revolutionaries “needed to adopt Christian rituals in order to highlight the sacred character of their” mission.⁸³ In *La guillotine et l’imaginaire de la Terreur*, Daniel Arasse ascribed a religious, sacrificial quality to the guillotine, which was able to assume the status of the altar at which the new religion was celebrated.⁸⁴ To begin with, the king’s blood was supposed to cleanse the republican body. The blood of a king brings good fortune, an enthusiastic citizen proclaimed on January 21 while spraying the watching crowd with “Capet’s” blood.⁸⁵ The new regime was thus literally anointed – although in a sacrilegious way. “Mixing sacrificial traditions, the citizen who showers his compatriots with blood inverts Clovis’ baptism,” Jesse Goldhammer aptly asserts in a book on *Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*. The regicide is probably seen by Michelet himself as the most redemptive – given its sacrificial/sacrilegious qualities – of all revolutionary “sins.”

The father of counter-revolutionary thought, Joseph de Maistre, interpreted the Revolution in terms of redemption through sin. As Max Milner Milner puts it, the Revolution, for Maistre, amounts to black magic. Pure impurity and utter nothingness, the Revolution is evil, but, as such, it serves the aims of the Providence.⁸⁶ Maistre believed that absurdity and horror attest to God’s

⁸² Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic – Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005, p.50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.55-56.

⁸⁴ D. Arasse, *op. cit.*, 1987.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.65.

⁸⁶ Max Milner, *Le Diable dans la littérature française de Cuzotte à Baudelaire*, Paris, José Corti, 1971, pp.160-161.

very existence. Violence is God's epiphany, and the awe he inspires is the evidence of his very divinity.⁸⁷ For all its monstrosity, the French Revolution is divine for the same exact reason as war. It is part of a providential design in which evil is an instrument meant to purge itself. In the Revolution lies the corrupt nation's violent and divinely planned regeneration (including of course the violent regeneration of its depraved clergy and nobility) through bloodshed. The latter is certainly Satan's work, but it is, as such, paradoxically holy. Just like the Revolution, about which he wrote in a 1807 letter: "*La Révolution française, qui va son train, ressemble à la lance d'Achille, qui avait la vertu de guérir les plaies qu'elle avait faites.*"⁸⁸ Maistre's theory on sacrifices explains best his vision of the Revolution. Good and evil are certainly opposed but in the same time identical in the sacrificial process. Redemption through blood, in *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, is connected with the notion of *sacer*, where the holy and the unholy converge. *Sacrifices* are *sacrileges*.

Enfin l'idée du *péché* et celle du *sacrifice pour le péché* s'étaient si bien amalgamées dans l'esprit des hommes de l'antiquité, que la langue sainte exprimait l'un et l'autre par le même mot. De là cet hébraïsme si connu, employé par saint Paul, que *le Sauveur a été fait péché pour nous*.⁸⁹

Pranchère infers from this passage that in the doctrine of reversibility, good and evil are at once irreconcilable, and identical within the sacrificial process. Sin and injustice are redemptive by themselves. Joseph de Maistre did not confine himself to excoriating the Revolution's crimes:

Il fallait que la grande épuration s'accomplît [...] ; il fallait que le métal français dégagé de ses scories aigres et impures, parvînt plus net et plus malléable entre les mains du Roi futur.

⁸⁷ See Jean-Yves Pranchère, *L'autorité contre les Lumières – La philosophie de Joseph de Maistre*, Genève, Droz, 2004, p.395.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.421.

⁸⁹ Joseph de Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, in *Œuvres*, edited by Pierre Glaudes, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2007, p.710.

[...] Tous les monstres que la Révolution a enfantés, n'ont travaillé suivant les apparences, que pour la royauté.⁹⁰

Just as Jesus' death on the cross was both a holy sacrifice and a sacrilege, Maistre maintained that the bloodshed of the Revolution was a necessary, divinely designed sacrifice, though performed by scoundrels and criminals. It was a gigantic sin, but an ultimately redemptive one. "In short, Maistre turns revolutionary violence against the instauration of the French Republic by calling upon the Christian sacrificial tradition and tying it to a political theology of conservative regeneration."⁹¹ Not unlike the revolutionaries, Maistre believed that eighteenth-century France was decadent, that it suffered from a corrupt clergy and atheistic leaders, that the violence of the Terror was thus necessary to purify it. Like Saint-Martin, or even Robespierre, Maistre saw the Revolution, and especially the Terror as a necessary evil through which redemption would finally emerge. In his letters, he boldly asserted that "the present situation, as abominable as it [was], [was] necessary for the accomplishment of justice in the world."⁹² When he maintained that "*il n'y a point de désordre que l'amour éternel ne tourne contre le principe du mal*," he did not only imply that the omnipotent God had the power to reverse the intents of weak men, but that good was lurking in evil. The same could be said about Napoleon who, like Robespierre, was certainly a sinner, even an Antichrist figure. But he had to be so, and his very sins were allowing a corrupt France to get rid of its own flaws and sins. In his case, sin was redemptive, because it was punishment as well as sin. Indeed, the Revolution was both crime and punishment, a medication meant to punish and regenerate men in the same time. Even more than a necessary evil, the Revolution was thus in Maistre's eyes a redemptive process of moral *catharsis*. In the same way

⁹⁰ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, in, *Œuvres, op. cit.*, pp.206-208.

⁹¹ J. Goldhammer, *op. cit.*, p.72.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.95.

as the Greeks would purify themselves through the symbolic *exposition* of their own wickedness, France had to realize how decadent it was through a punishment removing “the evil that originally provoked the crime.”⁹³

Klossowski probably had Joseph de Maistre’s approach in mind when he wrote *Sade mon prochain*. He denied that Sade believed in any kind of regeneration. He nonetheless maintained that, in his thought, the Revolution was “*la corruption monarchique portée à son comble*,”⁹⁴ the monarchic corruption exasperated and inverted. It was necessary to defeat evil from within – “*faire régner le mal une fois pour toutes dans le monde, afin qu’il se détruise lui-même*.”⁹⁵ An old and corrupt nation could only sustain itself through crimes, and even through the worst of all crimes, the regicide. In Maistre’s words:

On ne saurait nier que le sacerdoce, en France, n’eût besoin d’être régénéré ; et quoique je sois fort loin d’adopter les déclamations vulgaires sur le clergé, il ne me paraît pas moins incontestable que les richesses, le luxe et la pente générale des esprits vers le relâchement, avaient fait décliner ce grand corps ; qu’il était possible souvent de trouver sous le camail, un chevalier au lieu d’un apôtre ; et qu’enfin dans les temps qui précédèrent immédiatement la Révolution, le clergé était descendu, à peu près autant que l’armée, de la place qu’il avait occupée dans l’opinion générale. Le premier coup porté à l’Eglise fut l’envahissement de ses propriétés ; le second fut le serment constitutionnel : et ces deux opérations tyranniques commencèrent la régénération. Le serment cribla les prêtres, s’il est permis de s’exprimer ainsi. Tout ce qui l’a prêté [...] s’est vu conduit par degrés dans l’abîme du crime et de l’opprobre [...].⁹⁶

However, “unlike the revolutionaries, who viewed sacrificial regeneration as an agent of political transformation, [...] Maistre strips it of creativity.”⁹⁷ His view of the redemptive process is akin to what Scholem calls “restorative” messianism, as opposed to “utopian.” Maistre thinks

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁹⁴ Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain, précédé de Le philosophe scélérat*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967, p.65.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁹⁶ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, *op. cit.*, p.209.

⁹⁷ J. Goldhammer, *op. cit.*, p.75.

indeed that regenerative violence will finally punish the revolutionary “*homme nouveau*” himself, restoring him to the status of a royal subject. No doubt that the revolutionary sin is redemptive, but it is in the same time definitely conservative:

Qu'on y réfléchisse bien, on verra que le mouvement révolutionnaire une fois établi, la France et la Monarchie ne pouvaient être sauvées que par le jacobinisme. [...] La coalition en voulait à l'intérieur de la France. Or, comment résister à la coalition ? Par quel moyen surnaturel briser l'effort de l'Europe conjurée ? Le génie infernal de Robespierre pouvait seul opérer ce prodige.⁹⁸

In *Histoire de la Révolution française*, Michelet implicitly tackles Maistre's mystique:

Un résultat très funeste s'accomplit sur l'échafaud, par la mort de ce faux martyr [...]. La vieille Eglise déchuée et la Royauté [...] finirent là leur longue lutte, s'accordèrent, se réconcilièrent dans la *Passion d'un roi*.⁹⁹

That Louis XVI could be a martyr, even a new Christ, would be the *Ancien Régime*'s revenge, which Michelet cannot accept. Not only does he deny that Louis XVI was a real martyr, but he also reproaches him for having believed so. His philosophy might have evolved between *Histoire de France* and *La Sorcière*. The latter does not depict any actual regicide, but we will see a symbolic one, not devoid of mystical undertones.

Michelet's initial rejection of Maistre's mysticism of sin may take an ironic and satirical form. “*Sanguin et replet, comme il était*, he writes about Louis XVI, *l'air, l'exercice, lui étaient fort nécessaires, il souffrait de la prison. L'humidité de la tour lui donna, à l'entrée de l'hiver, des fluxions et des rhumes.*”¹⁰⁰ Claude Millet showed that an entire “inversionary” rhetoric was used here. The legendary fantasy par excellence, in the nineteenth century, revolves around the king's blood. While his blood is no longer sacred, he is literally replete with blood, “*sanguin*,” like a

⁹⁸ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, *op. cit.*, p.207.

⁹⁹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, II, *op. cit.*, p.190.

¹⁰⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, *op. cit.*, II, p.98.

peasant. And his fat is substituted for his holy flesh.¹⁰¹ The grotesque has replaced the sublime. This exit from the monarchist legend will allow for Michelet's reunion, in *La Sorcière*, with an authentically democratic – and non-Christian – legend. The “*légendaire*” had been stolen from the people, it will be restored to them.

Even this ironic and blasphemous tone may be related to the black magic of the regicide. The latter was an act of uncovering, a transgression that revealed the emptiness of the king's body politic. It nullified the mystery on which the monarchic system was grounded. Michael Walzer brings up “the importance of mystery to the integrity of monarchic rule and the importance of its denial to the establishment of democratic regimes.”¹⁰² Since the Garden of Eden, there has always been a link between the very idea of sin and that of “uncovering” mysteries. By unveiling what should remain hidden, the regicide is the ultimate sin.¹⁰³

Redemptive Sin in Romanticism

Romanticism was a post-revolutionary spirituality.¹⁰⁴ Romantic writers attempted reversed readings of theology, history, and philosophy. Scholars have since long noted similarities between Romanticism and Gnosticism. Georges Gusdorf bluntly describes Romanticism as a Gnostic

¹⁰¹ Claude Millet, *Le légendaire au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p.201.

¹⁰² M. Walzer, *op. cit.*, p.5.

¹⁰³ The revolutionaries' crudities are literary sins. Sade is their literary face. Eventually, all literature will have to deal with the imperative of uttering certain things while withholding others. See also Fontanes' “Les tombeaux de Saint-Denis”: “*Le cercueil n'a plus de mystères, / L'abri des mânes solitaires / De toutes parts est assiégé [...]*”¹⁰³ (*Œuvres de Monsieur de Fontanes recueillies pour la première fois et complétées d'après les manuscrits originaux*, Paris, Hachette, 1859, I, p.170).

¹⁰⁴ Georges Gusdorf, *Le romantisme*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, 1993, I, p.55.

revival.¹⁰⁵ With Romanticism, Europe witnessed a “return” of redemptive sins in the late eighteenth century.

As Frank Bowman argued, the Romantic dialectic of sin and redemption was related to an aesthetic reappraisal of ugliness thereafter seen as an aspect of beauty itself. This was especially the case in the works of French radical theologians, such as Ballanche and Lamennais.¹⁰⁶ This idea is also pervasive in *La Sorcière*, where the (physically as well as morally) monstrous and the uncanny merge with the sublime on the path to redemption.

By overthrowing the traditional theological-political order, and sometimes by committing sacrilegious acts, the French revolutionaries had given this outlook a brutal and concrete illustration. The very destruction of the *Ancien Régime* was sinful from the Church’s perspective. The latter imposed upon European consciences a vertical order, in which the individual would find, from childhood, their appropriate place. This archaic order had already been questioned by rational empiricism but the Revolution, for all its failures, gave it a mortal blow. It is by that very blow that Romanticism was made possible.

“Good is the passive that obeys reason,” William Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. “Evil is the active springing from energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell. [...] Energy is Eternal Delight.”¹⁰⁷ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* diabolically inverts all theology and literature. “The marriage in the title, as a matter of fact, was described as the dissolving of a ‘good’ angel into the ‘flame of fire’ of a devil.”¹⁰⁸ Blake fashioned his own cosmogony, in which he

¹⁰⁵ G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, I, p.512.

¹⁰⁶ Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ romantique*, Genève, Droz, 1973, pp.265-273.

¹⁰⁷ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, New York, Norton, 1979, p.86.

¹⁰⁸ R. van Luijk, *op. cit.*, p.71.

bestowed his characters, renegade gods such as Los and Orc, with Christlike as well as Promethean and Luciferian features. He lived at the time of the French Revolution, and Satan was, in his eyes, the bearer of light, Lucifer, the angel of Liberty. Evil, or what was usually described as such, could become a path to redemption, and to good. Likewise, “in literary works by Romantic poets like Shelley and Byron [...], the great adversary of yore was frequently depicted in a strangely benevolent, even heroic manner. The contrast with the age-old Christian image of Satan as prime mythological representative of evil could hardly be starker.”¹⁰⁹ This “satanist” school was very blunt in its rejection of Christianity, with Shelley writing in 1811: “Oh! I wish I were the Antichrist!”¹¹⁰ Not only did such authors and artists redeem Satan from the Christian Hell where he had been imprisoned, but they also “resurrected him from the burial he had been given by Enlightenment rationalism.”¹¹¹

Ultimately, Blake, Byron and Shelley are all heirs to Milton. Their own vision of Lucifer is a recasting of the seventeenth-century poet’s fallen angel. One could say that, conversely, Blake is the father of the satanic school of miltonic criticism, since before his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “nobody ever appears to have been seduced by [Milton’s] Satan’s Promethean charms.”¹¹² The tragic beauty of this character has been noticed, in retrospect, by a variety of scholars.¹¹³ To be sure, some contrasted his qualities with those of Aeschylus’ Prometheus, whose rebellion,

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.69.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in R. van Luijk, *op. cit.*, p.83.

¹¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹² Raphael Judah Zwi Werblowsky, *Lucifer and Prometheus: A Study of Milton’s Satan*, London, Routledge, 1952, p.3.

¹¹³ See for instance Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, London, Oxford University Press, 1951, chapter II.

founded on pure love, is devoid of wickedness. He is merely a hero, which Satan is not.¹¹⁴ However, “what greatly strengthens the resemblance is the divine, or rather semi-divine nature of the protagonists in both cases.”¹¹⁵ Satan was Lucifer, the bringer of light. For the Romantic readers of Milton, Prometheus was also a *lucifer*, which made him near to Satan than to Christ. “The circumstances in which Christianity was born made it inevitable that every *lucifer* should be vehemently rejected [...], and that the bringing of light and fire, in fact every human surge forwards, should be abandoned for that other ‘light of the world’ whose passion, death, and resurrection were to supplement the dramatic ‘action is suffering’ with the messianic, or rather Christian, ‘suffering is action.’ Moreover, the fact that the Son has to mediate between God the Father and mankind, tends to give the former the inhuman remoteness of [a] whimsical tyrant.”¹¹⁶ The Romantic school tended to see in Christianity a condemnation of civilization, with every human act being virtually Promethean, and therefore of the Devil. “The only thing that matters is Christ’s move towards us, and (possibly) our response.”¹¹⁷ For the Romantics, hybris was a psychic necessity on the way of individuation toward a higher level of consciousness. Human life involves trespasses and violations of the divine, static order. We will see that Michelet’s theology of revolt somehow differs from this blunt progressivism, with his “Prometheus” being actually an old deity. At any rate, we have in *Paradise Lost*, a Zeus-like God, and a humanity which, being created in His image, is brimful of creative energy. This energy is “bedevilled” and Lucifer – whose status as a god or semi-god is ambivalent – is condemned. Fascinated as they were by his figure, the

¹¹⁴ R. J. Z. Werblowsky, *op. cit.*, pp.47-48.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.64.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.65

Romantic readers of Milton turned *Paradise Lost* against the Christian convictions of its author. Lucifer, the most beautiful angel, became their hero. Michelet's Satan retains many traits of Milton's archvillain, although he combines them with other, grotesque features, mined from Christian tradition.

Beside the English origin of the Luciferian myth, Goethe's *Faust* should be mentioned because it is the first version of the myth in which the hero does not end up in Hell. Not only does Goethe show him finally redeemed, but he insists on the intercession of Margarete, the very woman he once seduced, leading her to crime then punishment. Mephistopheles' effort will ultimately serve what it means to combat. The fiend only helps Faust's self to be renewed, and Margarete, the once naïve and abused girl, is now his teacher. But, after all, Mephistopheles knew it from the outset, since he described himself as "a humble part of that great power / Which always means evil, always does good."¹¹⁸ In other words, it is through sin that the Romantic Faust is redeemed.

In France, the idea that one might gain redemption through sin is present throughout the century, at times in connection with Luciferianism. In *La Fin de Satan*, Hugo depicted the Angel of Freedom as the daughter of Lucifer, or rather as a feather escaped from his wings. The Luciferian revolt actually pervades his poetry, with *La Légende des Siècles* proclaiming:

Qu'est-ce que ce navire impossible ? C'est l'homme.
C'est la grande révolte obéissante à Dieu !
La sainte fausse clef du fatal gouffre bleu !
C'est Isis qui déchire éperdument son voile !
C'est du métal, du bois, du chanvre et de la toile,
C'est de la pesanteur délivrée, et volant [...].
Audace humaine ! effort du captif ! sainte rage !
Effraction enfin plus forte que la cage !
Que faut-il à cet être, atome au large front,

¹¹⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, a Tragedy – Parts One & Two*, translated by Martin Greenberg, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, p.48.

Pour vaincre ce qui n'a ni fin, ni bord, ni fond [...].¹¹⁹

Like other writers during the July Monarchy, George Sand felt drawn to the history of Luciferian sects to which generous ideas were then commonly ascribed. She had always been interested in Christian heresies, including modern ones: in 1835, she met Lamennais, whom she greatly admired but even before then, as a child, she had felt lost between faith and incredulity at the convent where she was a boarder. She eventually described, in *Histoire de ma vie*, how, at night, she would explore the basement of the convent in the hope she could find a young girl “immured” by vicious nuns. Paradoxically, she had also abandoned her grandmother’s voltairianism, and found spiritual completion, Chateaubriand-like, in a pure and naïve Catholic faith. However, despite her tireless spiritual quest, Sand was soon to drop her love for the Church, perhaps in the name of a more perfect and spiritual, a “more Christian” love. In her eyes, far from showing the path to heaven, the Church was an obstacle to redemption: “*L’Evangile est la voie et la vie, l’Eglise est le mensonge et la mort.*”¹²⁰

Indeed, the Lollards, whom she appeared to have discovered thanks to the Socialist Pierre Leroux,¹²¹ play an important part in both novels. They worship the one “who has been wronged,” Lucifer, whom they deem better than the Archangel Michael – protector of the wealthy and the powerful.

C’est que, dans la croyance des Lollards, Satan n’était pas l’ennemi du genre humain, mais au contraire son protecteur et son patron. Ils le disaient victime de l’injustice et de la jalousie. Selon eux, l’archange Michel et les autres puissances célestes qui l’avaient précipité dans l’abîme étaient de véritables démons, tandis que Lucifer, Belzébuth, Astaroth, Astarté, et tous les monstres de l’enfer étaient l’innocence et la lumière même. Ils croyaient que le règne de

¹¹⁹ Victor Hugo, *La Légende des siècles*, in *La Légende des siècles – La Fin de Satan – Dieu*, edited by Jacques Truchet, Paris, Gallimard, 1950, p.720.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Paul Christophe, *George Sand et Jésus – Une inlassable recherche spirituelle*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2003, p.46.

¹²¹ See Isabelle Hoog Naginski, *George Sand mythographe*, Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2007, p.103; and M. Milner, *op. cit.*, II, pp.164-165.

Michel et de sa glorieuse milice finirait bientôt, et que le diable serait réhabilité et réintégré dans le ciel avec sa phalange maudite. Enfin ils lui rendaient un culte impie, et s'abordaient les uns les autres en se disant : Que celui à qui on a fait tort, c'est-à-dire celui qu'on a méconnu et condamné injustement, te salue, c'est-à-dire, te protège et t'assiste.¹²²

Their religion is a political one, just like Catholicism, but unlike it, the Lollards preach a Gospel of equality, laying the ground for the French Revolution. Milner argued that the Lollards' religion pursues the redemption of matter. He saw the source of it both in Pierre Leroux's Saint-Simonianism and in Hugo's esthetic rehabilitation of the grotesque in his Preface to *Cromwell*.¹²³ Sand's heroes reject the medieval disdain for the body, and they adore Satan as the material part of man, unfairly condemned by the Church. Their doctrine is thus sinful in the eyes of the orthodox, but they ultimately reject the very idea of sin and, as Sand herself, of evil. Sand's Jesus and Sand's Satan are not enemies, at least they should not be so: Satan's revolt, she argued, was nothing more than God's struggle against himself, and Jesus came to reconcile those two aspects of the Godhead.¹²⁴

Less significant from a literary perspective, but no less relevant for those attracted to the idea of redemption through sin, Alphonse-Louis Constant (Eliphas Lévi) was yet another apostle of the "holy sin." The damned of an ending world are the elect of the newborn world, he wrote in *La Bible de la Liberté*. "Les damnés d'un monde qui finit sont les élus d'un monde qui commence."¹²⁵ Hence the notion that Eve's sin is her very "glory."¹²⁶ Every law, religious or political, contradicts God's will that man be free.¹²⁷ A former seminarian, Constant fancied himself a new Christ. He

¹²² George Sand, *Consuelo*, edited by Léon Cellier and Léon Guichard, Paris, Garnier Frères, 1959, I, p.277.

¹²³ See M. Milner, *op. cit.*, II, p.167.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.169.

¹²⁵ Alphonse-Louis Constant, *La Bible de la Liberté*, Paris, Le Gallois, 1841, p.2.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14.

would not die on the Cross, but charge himself of the world's evil instead – thus filling the entire Hell and extinguishing its fire.¹²⁸ Drawing from Lurianic Kabbalah, via its Christian interprets, Constant eventually described Lucifer as the very condition of God's creative process. “*Si la lumière n'était pas repoussée dans l'ombre, il n'y aurait pas de formes visibles,*”¹²⁹ he wrote, thereby translating into his own idiom the notion of *šimšum*, the self-contraction of God. Without evil, the world would not exist. Sin, as a metaphysical principle is instrumental to the existence of all things.

In nineteenth-century France, Lucifer, being thus associated with liberty, yet also with science, was reclaimed by a variety of authors and artists. His connection with the spirit of the Revolution is illustrated by the brass column that was erected after the July Revolution of 1830. It is topped by a gilded statue four officially called the “*Génie de la Liberté.*” Some scholars maintain, however, that it is yet another avatar of Lucifer, the angel of light and liberty.¹³⁰ A Proudhon would describe himself as a Satanist, or Satan himself – “*le Satan de tout ce qui ressemble à une autorité.*”¹³¹ Granted, this is no *religious* Satanism, but it all the more so attests to the pervasiveness of the Luciferian motif in nineteenth-century French culture, as well as its association with progressivism. *La Sorcière* is to be read against this backdrop.

Paganism Resurrected

¹²⁸ A.-L. Constant, *L'Assomption de la Femme ou le Livre de l'Amour*, Paris, Le Gallois, 1841, p. XII.

¹²⁹ A.-L. Constant, *Le Testament de la Liberté*, Paris, Frey, 1848, p.4.

¹³⁰ R. v. Luijk, *op. cit.*, pp.116-117.

¹³¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise*, Bruxelles, 1869, IV, p.307.

The presence of a pagan lode in *La Sorcière* forces us to assess, beside its “gnostic” context, the place of Michelet’s book amid the overall Romantic revival of paganism. Like other Romantic writers, Michelet believed that the religions of Antiquity were closer to both nature and God than Christianity, maybe even than Enlightenment industrialism and rationality.¹³² Christianity was rebuked for having destroyed the venerable order and beauty of Antiquity. This trend “set up the antithesis between Christianity and other patriarchal monotheisms, and the religions of nature which had preceded them, and regarded the triumph of the former as a disaster.”¹³³ Nostalgia for the ancient pagan order went hand in hand with a thirst for freedom, with the modern, Christian world being characterized as both unnatural and authoritarian.

Some attempted to specifically rehabilitate Pan, like Michelet would do in *La Sorcière*. After 1830, Pan became the most celebrated of pagan deities. His popularity overtook that of Apollo, and remained especially strong in the English context until the turn of the century.¹³⁴ The “shocking, menacing, and liberating aspects of the god’s image” held a sway on a variety of authors.¹³⁵ In his infamous *On the Worship of Priapus*, the erudite Englishman Richard Payne Knight had already reminded his readers that Pan was “the principle of the universal order.”¹³⁶

The figures of Pan have nearly the same forms with that which I have here supposed to represent inert matter; only that they are compounded with those of the goat, the symbol of the creative power, by which matter was fructified and regulated. To this is sometimes added

¹³² See David Waldron, *The Sign of the Witch – Modernity and the Pagan Revival*, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 2008, pp. 71-72.

¹³³ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.20.

¹³⁴ R. Hutton, *op. cit.*, pp.46-53.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.48.

¹³⁶ Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus, Lately Existing at Isernia, in the Kingdom of Naples, in Two Letters; One From Sir William Hamilton to Sir Joseph Banks and the Other From a Person Residing at Isernia, to Which Is Added a Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, London, T. Spilsbury, 1786, p. 60.

the organ of generation, of an enormous magnitude, to signify the application of this power to its noblest end, the procreation of sensitive and rational beings.¹³⁷

We will see that Christian apologetics had denied Pan any creative power, railing against the pagans who had made him the god of the universe by implying that his horns were symbol of the sun and moon. That such an all-containing god should be a rutting he-goat points to paganism's depravity, whereas for a pre-Romantic writer like Richard Payne Knight, it merely expresses the Greeks' wholesome materialism. Likewise, Leigh Hunt could write in 1818 that "the great God Pan is alive again – upon which the villagers will leave off starving, and singing profane hymns, and fall to dancing again."¹³⁸ Paganism, which the cult of Pan appears to encapsulate, was associated with "the human, natural, and supernatural worlds [coexisting] in a state of tranquillity and bliss."¹³⁹

Other authors tried to argue that paganism could be *reconciled* with Christianity. It was typically George Sand's case, but Joseph de Maistre himself, long before Frazer or Girard, had formulated an almost syncretic theory of sacrifices. In his *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, he went as far as to say that even human sacrifices harbored a kernel of Christian piety.¹⁴⁰

In fact, the anti-Christian tendency was generally less pronounced in French Romanticism than in England or Germany. Neo-pagan ideas, somehow blended with Orphic themes, are not absent from it: Gérard de Nerval solemnly claims, "*Ils reviendront, ces dieux que tu pleures toujours!*". Yet Michelet's radicalism (at least in *La Sorcière*) still contrasts sharply with most of his French peers. In *Le roman contemporain*, Alfred Nettement, after having asserted that the

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³⁸ R. Hutton, *op. cit.*, p.23.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph de Maistre, *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, in *Œuvres*, *op. cit.*, pp. 815-828.

historian had become a mad novelist, faults him for worshipping Pan.¹⁴¹ He calls him a disciple of Julian the Apostate,¹⁴² and applies himself to contrast the ideas of *La Sorcière* with Michelet's previously Christian feelings.

Interestingly, Nettement associates Michelet's propensity to dream and fancy to his anticlericalism, as if Christianity were on reason's side.¹⁴³ Nettement also suggests that Michelet would find in Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* his own ideas put upside down.¹⁴⁴ Christianity didn't outlaw nature, Nettement asserts, it forbade its worship. Man should not be slave to Pan, because man alone is made in God's image. One may think that Michelet had just Chateaubriand in mind when he depicted Christianity's war on nature. But is not, after all, Chateaubriand's intent closer to Michelet's than to his orthodox epigones? Nature, he asserted, needed to be freed, which only Christianity could possibly allow, whereas paganism had filled it with illusory powers, preventing man from losing himself in her silence.¹⁴⁵ Chateaubriand identified ancient idolatry with gross utilitarianism and kitsch. As will be shown, Michelet would assert that Christianity, not paganism, destroyed the organic society of old, while subjecting nature its own social needs.

Regarding Michelet's view that witchcraft was vestigial paganism, Norman Cohn related it to two of his contemporaries', the German scholars Karl Ernst Jarcke and Josef Mone. Both held

¹⁴¹ Alfred Nettement, *Le roman contemporain – Ses vicissitudes, ses divers aspects, son influence*, Paris, Jacques Lecoffre, 1864, p. 383.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁴⁵ See for instance François-René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme*, in *Essai sur les révolutions – Génie du christianisme*, edited by Maurice Regard, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, p. 719.

that witchcraft derived from pre-Christian times. Jarcke believed it had once been the Germans' religion, whereas in Mone's view its origin laid "in an underground, esoteric cult practised by the lowest strata of the population. The Germanic people who sojourned on the north coast of the Black Sea came in contact with the cult of Hecate and the cult of Dionysos, and the slave elements in the population adopted these cults and fused them into a religion of their own."¹⁴⁶ Cohn points out the differences between Michelet and those two Catholic authors, nevertheless emphasizing their common acceptance of the reality of witchcraft. Michelet accepted the two others' construction, while reversing it. Although this exceeds the scope of the present study, it should be noted that Michelet's work held a sway on European literature, especially in the English-speaking world, with a variety of later authors drawing inspiration from *La Sorcière* in order to develop their own mythology of witchcraft and neopaganism.¹⁴⁷

Goethe's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* had offered similar views. There witchcraft is said to derive from the Celts' religion. Moreover, the first sabbath is both described as vestigial paganism and revolt against the nascent Christian order, which very much anticipates *La Sorcière*. The French polymath Jacques-Antoine Dulaure made an analogous suggestion about the witches' sabbath being indeed a remnant of Pan's cult.¹⁴⁸ He might have directly influenced Michelet, who occasionally quotes him. I shall stress that, after more than one century of Enlightenment, such ideas were radically innovative, since "practically no educated person believed that there had ever been a sect of witches."¹⁴⁹ That the witch trials had been nothing more than a dreadful mistake –

¹⁴⁶ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.149.

¹⁴⁷ R. Hutton, *op. cit.*, pp.146-156.

¹⁴⁸ Jacques-Antoine Dulaure, *Des Divinités Génératrices, ou du Culte du Phallus chez les Anciens et les Modernes*, Paris, Dentu, 1805, pp. 31-32.

¹⁴⁹ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.148.

and the witches themselves idiotic and mentally ill women – was Voltairian dogma. Actually, this idea lasted long after Michelet's *La Sorcière*, especially in America, where such historians as George Lincoln Burr and Henry Charles Lea tended to represent the early modern witch-craze as a "hunt organized from above by churchmen, and ultimately brought to end by the benevolent effects of modern scientific thought."¹⁵⁰ Michelet's perspective is entirely different, since he views witchcraft as both historical reality and the matrix of modern knowledge.

In the course of this study, we will bring into focus a variety of sins narrated and often endorsed in *La Sorcière*. In our first chapter, we shall examine the myth of Pan's death, conjured by Michelet in the beginning of *La Sorcière*. Pan is vanquished by Christianity. Witchcraft will resurrect him under the guise of Satan. Moreover, it will be shown that the notion of redemption through sin finds echoes in the very nature of this god.

Then, we will explain in what manner the witches, according to Michelet, undertook to redeem the human body. Michelet describes rituals connecting the living with their beloved dead, as well as folk medicine that would have heralded the discoveries of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The motifs of the womb and the stomach will provide us with vivid symbols of Michelet's philosophy of inversion.

We will then proceed to the question of knowledge. Michelet describes the witches as the bearers of light – a light stemming from the dark world of the demonic. As such, they would redeem mankind by overcoming prejudice.

¹⁵⁰ R. Hutton, *op. cit.*, p.138.

Our fourth chapter will establish them as political rebels, with the sabbath heralding the *fêtes révolutionnaires* while adding to them a female touch. We will assess the messianic meaning of *La Sorcière* and its sources in historical events and kabbalistic thought.

Our fifth and sixth chapters shall be devoted to Michelet's critique of antinomianism. The former will show witches only seeking to harm and therefore indulging in actual crimes, as if lost on the path to redemption. The latter will address the second part of the book, where Michelet discusses cases of elite antinomianism echoing the witches' while betraying it.

Our seventh and final chapter will focus on the encounter between the witch and the Jew, as narrated by Michelet. It is central in that it evinces some aspects of Michelet's theology. His God was a syncretic deity, both good and evil, pagan and biblical at once. As such, it needed the alliance of those two outcasts, the witch and the Jew.

Chapter One

Great God Pan is Dead

In the beginning was paganism. Teeming with gods, nature was itself divine. And it came to pass, when Christianity arose, that these ancient gods were all sentenced to death. Michelet undertakes to narrate the history of witchcraft, but this history is essentially that of the pagan deities, killed and resurrected. The first chapter of *La Sorcière* is thus entitled “La mort des dieux,” and it can be read as the Passion of Pan. Construed as the supreme god of paganism, his death “under Tiberius” was indeed announced, Michelet reminds us, in Late Antiquity – paralleling that of Jesus. Yet, the historian assures, he was to live again with the active help of the Eternal Witch, his own Mary Magdalene. As sinful as it is in the eyes of Christianity, witchcraft is therefore but an attempt to serve more legitimate gods than the Nazarene – to serve, revive, and *redeem* “Great God Pan,” reincarnated as Satan, while *redeeming* mankind from its false beliefs through a range of behaviors that the (false) Church views as sins.

In this chapter, I intend to show that the choice of Pan is seminal to Michelet’s narrative philosophy. Pan is both good and evil, both demon and god, both Christ and Satan. He is nature, and as such both benevolent and brutal. While he saves, it is only – at least in the characterization of his enemies – through sin. Ultimately, his name is that of the one true religion, whose truth one may access by trampling the lies of Christianity.

I.1 Michelet Recasts a Tale of Late Antiquity

Michelet grounds his history of witchcraft in a legend. As a farewell to mythology it is in a way the last of all pagan legends, and therefore a legitimate point of departure for his task.

Certains auteurs nous assurent que, peu de temps avant la victoire du christianisme, une voix mystérieuse courait sur les rives de la mer Egée, disant : « Le grand Pan est mort. »

L'antique dieu universel de la Nature était fini. Grande joie. On se figurait que, la Nature étant morte, morte était la tentation. Troublée si longtemps de l'orage, l'âme humaine va donc reposer.

S'agissait-il simplement de la fin de l'ancien culte, de sa défaite, de l'éclipse des vieilles formes religieuses ? Point du tout. En consultant les premiers monuments chrétiens, on trouve à chaque ligne l'espoir que la Nature va disparaître, la vie s'éteindre, qu'enfin on touche à la fin du monde. C'en est fait des dieux de la vie, qui en ont si longtemps prolongé l'illusion. Tout tombe, s'écroule, s'abîme. Le Tout devient le néant : « Le grand Pan est mort ! »¹⁵¹

It was announced, “certain authors” had declared, that Pan had died. Awful tidings for some, while for Christians the old god’s demise had been an occasion of triumph. Not only did they rejoice in the overthrow of the ancient religion, but also in the prospect that nature itself, the god’s realm, was about to vanish. All they wished for was the end of the world, which was now imminent. Matter had to become naught. This is how Michelet interprets both the tale of Pan’s death and its Christian reception. Such a reading is his own, with his sources barely allowing for it, obliging Michelet to recast them creatively. In this chapter, we will show that the story itself as well as Michelet’s poetic misprisions – including his silences – are key to unveiling the mystery of redemption through sin in *La Sorcière*.

To begin with, we need to examine the texts he cites in order to understand what Michelet may have had in mind when evoking the god’s death. The first of those “*certain auteurs*” whose testimony is so strangely summoned at the outset of *La Sorcière* is Plutarch, a Greek and a pagan, not a Christian author. The famous story of Great God Pan’s death is indeed first introduced in his *Obsolescence of Oracles*, and in the context of a broader reflection on gods’ transience.

As for death among such beings, I have heard the words of a man who was not a fool nor an impostor. The father of Aemilianus the orator, to whom some of you have listened, was Epitherses, who lived in our town and was my teacher in grammar. He said that once upon a time in making a voyage to Italy he embarked on a ship carrying freight and many passengers. It was already evening when, near the Echinades Islands, the wind dropped, and the ship drifted near Paxi. [...] Suddenly from the island of Paxi was heard the voice of someone loudly calling

¹⁵¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.47.

Thamus, so that all were amazed. Thamus was an Egyptian pilot, not known by name even to many on board. Twice he was called and made no reply, but the third time he answered; and the caller, raising his voice, said, 'When you come opposite to Palodes, announce that Great Pan is dead.' [...] Under the circumstances Thamus made up his mind that if there should be a breeze, he would sail past and keep quiet, but with no wind and a smooth sea about the place he would announce what he had heard. So, when he came opposite to Palodes, and there was neither wind nor wave, Thamus from the stern, looking toward the land, said the words as he had heard them: 'Great Pan is dead.' Even before he had finished there was a great cry of lamentation, not of one person, but of many, mingled with exclamations of amazement.¹⁵²

During Late Antiquity, Pan had been ubiquitous. His pictures abounded in Asian cities as well as Attica's caves, which "continued to draw pilgrims long after Constantine's conversion."¹⁵³ The Empire's institutions were already Christianised, yet "Pan still piped and was moved to anger." But who is this god whose demise thus seems to herald the end of the pagan world? According to Plutarch, he is actually a daemon rather than a god proper. Those beings are the intermediaries between the supreme gods and the world. Let us recall that a well-known meaning of the Greek word *daimon* is a tutelar genius, a soul-guide – like the one Socrates had in the *Apology*, in which daemons are expressly designated as "children of gods." Plutarch even improves on this tradition, also comparing them to another Platonic notion, that of primeval matter.¹⁵⁴

They put the case well who say that Plato, by his discovery of the element underlying all created qualities, which is now called 'Matter' and 'Nature,' has relieved philosophers of many great perplexities; but, as it seems to me, those persons have resolved more and greater perplexities who have set the race of daemons midway between gods and men [...].¹⁵⁵

Daemons may well be the Greek equivalent of the Judeo-Christian angels, which, given their reception among Christian writers, is quite ironic. They are those who enforce, so to speak, the gods' decrees, while transmitting men's prayers to them. Hence their appointment, Plutarch

¹⁵² Plutarch, *Obsolescence of Oracles*, in *Moralia*, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1936, V, pp.401-403. The citation has been modified by using *daemons* instead of "demigods."

¹⁵³ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1987, p. 130.

¹⁵⁴ See Plato, *Timaeus*, 48e – 50d.

¹⁵⁵ Plutarch, *op. cit.*, pp. 377-379.

maintains, to the care of oracles. Pan is one of them, and his death is one of the various episodes of such daemonic demises. Indeed, the problem is that *the daemons are mortal*, which compromises the permanence of oracles.

Demetrius said that among the islands lying near Britain were many isolated, having few or no inhabitants [...]. He himself, by the emperor's order, had made a voyage for inquiry and observation to the nearest of these islands [...]. Shortly after his arrival there occurred a great tumult in the air and many portents; violent winds suddenly swept down and lightning-flashes darted to earth. When these abated, the people of the island said that the passing of someone of the mightier souls had befallen.¹⁵⁶

The story of Pan's death falls within Plutarch's overall assessment of paganism's mortality. Gods die, oracles wither, temples collapse. In the beginning of the dialogue, one participant asks how it came to be that "in Boeotia, which in former times spoke with many tongues because of its oracles, the oracles have now failed completely, even as if they were streams of flowing water, and a great drought in prophecy has overspread the land."¹⁵⁷ *The Obsolescence of Oracles* is a melancholic meditation on the ancient world's fatal end. Let us not forget that Plutarch was a philosopher yet also a priest of Apollo; the world he had always known was decaying before his eyes, and he wanted to know why. The answer lies nowhere else than in the Greek beliefs themselves, for they had always asserted that some gods naturally die.

The proclamation of Pan's death, we are told, immediately gave rise to an anxious curiosity at Tiberius' court. According to Philip, Tiberius' scholars, or rather "philologists," come to the conclusion that the Pan who died was "born of Hermes and Penelope." They have inferred this from Herodotus' *Histories*, in which Pan's age and identity are discussed: the Greeks see him as a "young god," indeed son of Hermes and the mortal Penelope, while the Egyptians consider him a very ancient and awesome deity. And it is because Pan has the face and legs of a goat, Herodotus

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

asserts, that the Egyptians hold goats in great veneration. However, when it comes to the Greek belief, the time since Pan's birth is supposed to be even shorter than to the Trojan war. This is consistent with his genealogy, since Penelope was Odysseus' legitimate wife.¹⁵⁸ Tiberius' experts maintain that the Pan whose passing was ominously announced on the Aegean Sea is the one whose birth can thus be situated in historical times, a young god, and even the youngest of the whole pantheon. Yet a striking ambiguity remains. To be sure, Plutarch's Pan may be that young daemon born of a woman, but the Pan whom Michelet evokes seems to be an older one, he is the god of the gods, the ultimate pagan deity. "*L'antique dieu*," as the historian calls him. Is not Michelet's Pan thus related to both Christ and Satan?

Michelet conjures him because of his kinship with the Archenemy, whose Christian, medieval representation owes greatly to the horned Greek god: Pan's legs, tail, body hair, genitalia, his very horns, sometimes even his head are of those of a goat – which is the animal form in which the Devil most commonly appeared to his worshippers.¹⁵⁹ The Greek god's animalistic features are Satan's, as well as his shrewdness, his lechery, his violence. This trait is explicitly recalled elsewhere in *La Sorcière*, with Michelet stating that the witch would dress up a wooden sculpture of Satan who, by his male attributes was a Pan or a Priapus. And the "god" would *greet* her like Pan would have done his priestess.¹⁶⁰

As will be shown, Michelet sees a continuity between paganism and witchcraft. For him, Pan was "killed" by Christianity, yet he was to resurrect as Satan – the one true God. However, Herodotus' proposed genealogy of Pan allows to connect the Greek god to the Nazarene. Human

¹⁵⁸ See Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 145.

¹⁵⁹ See for instance Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe – A Study in Anthropology*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1921, pp. 60-70.

¹⁶⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

and yet divine, “young” but “old” at the same time, part and whole, and, at least if we follow Michelet’s use of the myth, dead yet resurrected... Moreover, Hermes is the god of speech and interpretation, a god of Logos, and we know that Christ is Logos incarnated. Therefore, we can suggest that in the interstices of these inaugural paragraphs lies the question put forward in the present study. That Pan, the god of the witches, can be akin to both Christ and Satan, already gestures to redemption through sin.

I. 2. A Liminal Deity

Let us note that, originally, Pan (Πάν) was not the Stoic or Orphic-inspired “god of all things,” Πᾶν, but a pastoral god, protector of the flocks. For obvious reasons the two words had always been associated nonetheless. The notion of a “universal god of nature,” derived from this quasi-homonymy, is the one taken on by Michelet. However, Pan’s older attributes are present by implication, obliging us to bring them into focus. We can also infer from Michelet’s multiple allusions – mostly derived from Maury’s *Les Fées du Moyen Âge* – to Pan’s later metamorphosis into a benevolent protector of the farmer, that he was aware of his original status as a pastoral god.¹⁶¹

Pan is described by Plato as “the double-natured son of Hermes, smooth in his upper parts, rough and goat-like in his lower parts.”¹⁶² Both wild and wise, Pan resembles the witches, whose intuitive wisdom, Michelet maintains, heralded the Renaissance. I believe that there lies Michelet’s ambivalence toward both rationality and nature: the old god of nature is *frenzy* and *cunning*, bounty

¹⁶¹ See Alfred Maury, *Les Fées du Moyen Âge – Recherches sur leurs origines, leur histoire et leurs attributs, pour servir à la connaissances de la mythologie gauloise*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique de Ladrangue, 1843, p.78.

¹⁶² Plato, *Cratylus*, translated by Harold North Fowler, in *Cratylus – Parmenides – Greater Hippias – Lesser Hippias*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 86-89.

yet also violence. Far from being a debonair god, Pan is awesome and bestial at the same time. The idea of *redemption through sin*, which we ascribe to Michelet, bears upon a pagan, *daemonic* understanding of those values' intermingling of which Pan is the very embodiment.

The god's liminal identity and his connection to violence will help us understand Michelet's dialectic of nature. When he undertook writing *La Sorcière*, he had already come to terms with nature's inherent cruelty – which, in the beginning, had repelled him – and was willing to see redemptive opportunities in this very savagery.

Πάν is a cognate of πάειν, “to graze sheep.” And yet, this pastoral god is not so much an agricultural deity as a *liminal* one. Living at the extreme border of the civilized world, he embodies the barbaric substratum of all civilization, the untamed essence of humanity. As a liminal force, Pan is the one who reconciles men and nature, pasture and desert.¹⁶³

Pan is sometimes identified with Priapus, with both being phallic deities. To mention him thus amounts to hinting at men's lust and sexual energy. Representing our drive for survival, he is a god of life, and of the primeval, bestial power of the universe. On the one hand, full of lust as he is (being attracted to nymphs, young shepherds and goats alike), Pan provides fecundity to the flocks. That is why many ancient pictures show him as a companion of Aphrodite's.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, his lust is also constantly thwarted. Hence Dio Chrysostom's tale, according to which Pan is the one who taught masturbation to the hapless shepherds. He is “temptation” in all its splendor, sometimes lucky, sometimes unlucky, both fecund and sterile. Pan's love is *fiercely natural*, which encompasses the uncanny – that is what the Christians will ultimately see as counternatural. Pan terrifies, he kills, he rapes. Gang-rape and pederasty are somehow associated

¹⁶³ Philippe Borgeaud, *Recherches sur le dieu Pan*, Genève, Institut Suisse de Rome, 1979, p. 91.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117-118.

with “honoring” him. A gang-raped nymph, according to Euripides, is thus “married to Pan.” The god’s brutal lust can even lead him to rape attempts on Aphrodite herself.¹⁶⁵

The opposition between Pan’s realm, and urban, political life is essential. Even before his resurrection as Satan, there is something rebellious, an anarchist energy about him.¹⁶⁶ As a result, Pan Aegipan, the “Good Shepherd,” may become Pan Lykaios, the “wolfish” Pan. The protector of the flock is also its enemy. Both goat and wolf, Pan definitely personifies the wild side of our nature. He is that crepuscular realm within us, “where there is no law but sex, cruelty, and metamorphosis.”¹⁶⁷ A hybrid god, he is the Enemy from within, so to speak, both gentle and fierce. Definitely a chthonian deity, he is “the West’s dirty secret.”¹⁶⁸ One legend, ascribed to Aeschylus, asserts that Pan was actually Lycaon’s grandson, through his daughter Callisto. While Lycaon was transformed into a wolf, Callisto was herself metamorphosed into a bear – then into the constellation Ursa Major.¹⁶⁹ Wolves and bears live at the edge of men’s dwelling. Although men were their hereditary foes, human heroes were often compared to them. Bears had even been worshipped as gods, and they held a crucial place in shamanistic cults. The eerie boundaries at which wolves, bears and their god, Pan (and, eventually, the witches) live, are an image of mankind’s genesis, gazed upon with awe and disgust at the same time. One who traverses the limit is either a saint or a warlock, and who consorts with those wild animals consorts with the Devil.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-120.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁶⁷ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae – Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, New York, Vintage Books, 1991, p. 4.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

¹⁶⁹ P. Borgeaud, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-69.

It seems that women played a seminal role in Pan's mysteries. Through his role in earth-religions – pre-Olympian, and mostly feminine –, Pan has always been, as it were, the god of the witches. Satan's priestesses are but late avatars of Pan's hierophants. Even in Athens, a long way from his native Arcadia, he was worshipped through libations, sexual trance and characteristic female screaming.¹⁷⁰ The witches' sabbath may indeed be reminiscent of those chthonian feasts. In Satan's uncanny kingdom, the witch is still a queen whose courtiers are ominous or wild beasts. Like her, these outlaws are the members of a fierce, self-sufficient cult.¹⁷¹ A cult of margins, by which fear may be transformed into Pan's pleasures of savage freedom. One feature particularly associated with Pan is indeed the well-known *panic*. He is a god of fear, who can even terrify his own worshippers. He startles beasts and men, especially the enemy's army: the Athenians started honoring him after he frightened off their Persian antagonists. The *battlefield* is still *his* field, he does not need to leave his pastures and deserts in order to smite men with fear: usually conducted beyond the city walls, war is nothing if not the return of the repressed panic. The god's whip makes the soldier a crazed beast. Under his lashes, the whole city may revert to the desert from which it once sprang. Panic is a collective disorder. It is a state of mental alienation that results, as it were, from a revenge of nature. Panic being a key element of war, we can understand the latter as the moment when all men revert to the worshipping of Pan – which is about shrewdness, blood and lust. Drive for survival, even at the expense of the other. Fierceness and animality.

Pan's female worshippers would screech like terror-stricken animals, or rather like bereaved mothers after a battle.¹⁷² The panic is not only destined toward the enemy. Indeed, to

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 243-251.

¹⁷¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.125-126.

¹⁷² P. Borgeaud, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

revere Pan is to accept being possessed by him, even at one's own expense. The god's feast is not a peaceful one, it is full of violence and danger. Pan remains a god that *possesses* men and women: with him, rape, physical or spiritual, is everywhere. A protector yet an aggressor, forever beyond good and evil, Pan is the daemonic itself. Greek daemons were not evil – or rather they were both good and evil, like nature itself.¹⁷³ All the negative occurrences of the word *daimon* point to a typically Greek, Dionysian ambiguity. Good and evil are intertwined, and the gods themselves are never “good” in the flat, modern meaning of the term.

Interestingly, when he began showing a genuine interest in Pan's broader realm, that is nature, Michelet stripped off every Rousseauist garment he might have previously worn. As will be shown, this was correlated to a change in attitude toward the people, women, and the irrational. “*Rien de la nature ne m'est indifférent*, he wrote in an undated note, *je la hais et je l'adore comme je ferais d'une femme.*” Nature, he suggests, is definitely *panicky* – violent and cruel. Michelet's nature is Sadean, not Rousseauist, daemonic and pagan, not Christian. There is no lost Paradise in the cosmogony of *La Mer* or *L'Insecte*. To the contrary, he believes that nature was first and foremost a realm of daemonic forces eventually tamed by men. Over the course of his life and research, Michelet seems to have vacillated as to whether that daemonic nature was fundamentally evil or good. In the beginning, he stuck to the former opinion, but at the time when he was writing *La Sorcière*, he had already paid a vibrant tribute to men's “*frères inférieurs*,” animals, in three different books. Yes, nature is replete with suffering. As such, however, it is also teeming with *suffering beings*. Animals suffer, just like men.

According to his previous view, civilization was nothing if not a constant struggle against nature. However, there is an interval during which Michelet came to believe, with Nerval among

¹⁷³ C. Paglia, *op. cit.*, p.4.

others,¹⁷⁴ that holiness was living hidden in the dark world of nature itself. For a while he would renounce the contempt he had expressed for lowly realms, creatures, and even women – or Asia as opposed to the West. He did not do so by negating, Rousseau-like, the violence inherent to nature, but by coming to terms with it.

Having first believed in an intrinsically benign nature, Michelet could at the time only be outraged at the reality. His nature books – and *La Sorcière* too – point, however, to his acceptance of it. Let us suggest that when he definitely renounced both his Rousseauist “*naïveté*” and his subsequent disgust at the reality of nature, he could also break with Christianity.¹⁷⁵ Although in classic Christian theology, nature is fallen, Rousseauism – which negates the very notion of original sin – had strengthened Michelet’s theological optimism. As a Rousseauist, he was a secularized Christian, believing that nature was intrinsically good and peaceful – which, a Christian would argue, it really should be, had we not sinned. Discovering that nature was cruel *from the outset*, Michelet could not remain a Rousseauist – nor could he still adhere to the illusions of Christianity. No need for the mythical Serpent since nature is always already fallen! Evil and good are intertwined, they beget and nurture each other. Salvation may therefore rise from evil itself, or what theological optimists call evil – whether, as Rousseauists, they lament the end of a strifeless “state of nature,” or, as Christians, they weep over the fall of man.

Pan’s world needs to be violent. There live all sorts of monsters, and fertility – a very Sadean idea¹⁷⁶ – is always balanced by destruction. “*Nature : mère ou marâtre ?*” Michelet

¹⁷⁴ See for instance his “Vers dorés,” or other Illuminist-inspired texts, such as Victor Hugo’s “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” in *Contemplations*.

¹⁷⁵ See Jean-Louis Cornuz, *Jules Michelet – Un aspect de la pensée religieuse du XIX^e siècle*, Genève, Droz, 1955, p.309.

¹⁷⁶ See for instance D. A. F. de Sade, *op. cit.*, II, p.188.

wonders in his diary. Is nature a mother or the wicked stepmother of fairy tales? If she is a mother, then why should we die?¹⁷⁷ The answer is that death must be a new birth, destruction a new creation: “*il faut que la mort soit un accouchement.*” Another answer is that nature is not entirely good, or rather that she is redeemed through the evil that resides within her. Vishnu, Michelet notes after his reading of excerpts from the *Mahabharata*, triumphs over himself. Nature – or fate – is vanquished by the most “natural” of the gods – “*le Dieu-peuple, le Dieu-libérateur (un Dionysos indien).*”¹⁷⁸

The most striking examples of this inherent, yet redeeming cruelty, are to be found in the oceans. Against the enormous fecundity of such animals as the cod or the sturgeon, nature evokes a “matchless devourer,” a destroyer of the superfluous life that would otherwise produce universal death – the shark.¹⁷⁹ Men are awful, especially when they are starving¹⁸⁰, but animals are by no means better than they. “*Deux êtres, aveugles et féroces, s’attaquent à l’avenir, font lâchement la guerre aux femelles pleines ; c’est le cachalot, et c’est l’homme.*”¹⁸¹ Nature is all about violence and destruction. In it, even love is cruel or stems from cruelty. Mating beasts are sometimes this close to turn their embrace into massacre. See the sharks, upon whom nature has imposed the “peril of embracing!” Should they mate indeed or devour each other?

La femelle, intrépidement, se laisse accrocher, maîtriser, par les terribles grappins qu’il lui jette. Et, en effet, elle n’est pas dévorée. C’est elle qui l’absorbe et l’emporte. Mêlés, les monstres furieux roulent ainsi des semaines entières, ne pouvant, quoique affamés, se résigner

¹⁷⁷ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, I, p.388.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.388-389.

¹⁷⁹ J. Michelet, *La Mer*, Paris, Louis Hachette, 1861, p.106.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.264.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.327.

au divorce, ni s'arracher l'un de l'autre, et, même en pleine tempête, invincibles, invariables dans leur farouche embrassement.¹⁸²

The sexual drive finally overcomes hunger, thereby transforming cruelty into creative fierceness. The male is bold and ferocious, and so is the female, who rapes as much as she is raped. In a word, the sea is terrifying, like Pan, and accordingly puts men in relation with the sublime and the monstrous. Both Chaos and Abyss – vague and shapeless, dark and regressive. For Michelet, it is the realm of horrific creatures – such as the biblical Leviathan – that defy both consciousness and law.

We can now understand why Michelet seems to condone the kind of violence to which the Ancients would give themselves over, while firmly condemning the Christian one:

L'antiquité païenne, toute guerrière, meurtrière, destructive, avait prodigué la vie humaine sans en connaître le prix. Jeune et sans pitié, belle et froide, comme la vierge de Tauride, elle tue et ne s'émeut pas. Vous ne trouvez pas dans ses grandes destructions, la passion, l'acharnement, la fureur de haine qui caractérise au moyen âge les combats et les vengeances de la religion de l'amour.¹⁸³

Pagan violence comes from the utter absence of illusion about nature: man is a beast, gods are both benevolent and malevolent. Christian violence springs from the very negation of nature and its inherent violence. Nature *is* violent, but Christianity is even more violent when it seeks to erase nature and its temptations. The airtight separation between good and evil, definitely a Christian fantasy in Michelet's eyes – at least at the time when he was writing *La Sorcière* – sires hate and undue brutality. Temptation needs to be accepted and condoned. “*On se figurait que, la Nature étant morte, morte était la tentation.*” Michelet violently rejects such puritanism.

In *La Sorcière*, the reason why good springs from evil is that, in nature, they are ultimately blended: Michelet envisions an ethics beyond good and evil, which “Pan,” I would suggest,

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p.231.

¹⁸³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française, op. cit.*, I, p.33.

designates. That is why even after he has “converted” to nature, Michelet unapologetically reminds his readers that this “Great Mother” is cruel. “*Quoi ! je quitte l’histoire des hommes pour chercher l’innocence [...] et j’y trouve cette chose sans nom!*”¹⁸⁴ In *L’Oiseau*, he even confessed having been “scandalized” by the Goddess. She appalled him with a maternity so cruelly impartial: in nature, victims can hardly escape their fate.¹⁸⁵ But in the same time, it is *within nature itself* that progress emerges. Michelet is heir to Lamarck, and he believes that just as good springs from evil, freedom may rise from brutal necessity.

Although in *La Sorcière*, Pan is primarily conjured as the great all-containing whole, the more archaic aspects we just highlighted are key to the dialectic of redemption through sin we believe is at the core of the book. The relevance of the Pan motif at the outset of *La Sorcière* lies in the god’s ambiguous and at times ghastly nature. He is the universal god of nature but the different strata of his mythos point to nature’s paradoxical character. Pan is quite simply the name of a primeval entanglement, that of tenderness and fierceness, fecundity and destruction.

I. 3. Eusebius’ Contribution

But what is the link between Pan’s death and Christianity? How can Michelet seem to take it for granted? To be sure, there is nothing about Jesus in Plutarch’s tale. Actually, it seems that Michelet discovered a connection between the two gods, Pan and Jesus, in Eusebius’ *Preparation for the Gospel* – if not in Rabelais’ *Quart Livre*. According to Eusebius, God’s Incarnation is the reason why oracles have fallen silent. The proclamation of Great God Pan’s death is really that of *all the pagan gods*. In the passage which Michelet may have in mind, the *Moralia* are quoted at

¹⁸⁴ J. Michelet, *L’Insecte*, Paris, Hachette, 1860, pp.259-260.

¹⁸⁵ J. Michelet, *L’Oiseau*, Paris, Hachette, 1856, p.104.

length while the mortality of d(a)emons is discussed. The Christian historian polemically suggests that

it is important to observe the time at which he says that the death of the daemon took place. For it was the time of Tiberius, in which our Saviour, making His sojourn among men, is recorded to have been ridding human life from daemons of every kind (πᾶν γένος δαιμόνιων): so that there were some of them now kneeling before Him and beseeching Him not to deliver them over to the Tartarus that awaited them. You have therefore the date of *the overthrow of the daemons*, of which there was no record at any other time [...].”¹⁸⁶

“As the Roman Empire becomes the new cultural and political entity, ‘Christendom,’ the old pagan gods are radically devalued, and ‘daemons,’ a word which once meant ‘gods,’ become ‘demons,’ that is, ‘evil spirits.’”¹⁸⁷ The Greek word *daimon*, *daemon*, will henceforth be the equivalent of the (mostly Rabbinical) Hebrew *šed*, *demon*. In truth, it is already the case in the New Testament, where Jesus is depicted as exorcising d(a)emons, and the conflation of those two notions is even perceptible in the Septuagint. In some other instances, as in Josephus’ account of King Saul’s possession, the meaning of the word *daimon* is even extended to those “evil spirits,” which the Jewish tradition sometimes construes as spirits of the dead. To be sure, Josephus asserts, the art of healing from evil spirits is a Jewish specialty, recognized as such by the Romans themselves.¹⁸⁸ Christians eventually appropriated the practice of exorcism, so much so that the fame of Christian exorcists “became widely known. Their apologists appealed repeatedly to their achievements, and according to Tertullian, they had been summoned to practise in the household of the emperor Severus.”¹⁸⁹ But unlike Jewish exorcists, the Christians asserted that Satan was

¹⁸⁶ Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, translated by Edwin Hamilton Gifford, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1903, I, p.225.

¹⁸⁷ Sharon Lynn Coggan, *Pandaemonia – A study of Eusebius’ recasting of Plutarch’s story of the “Death of Great Pan,”* Syracuse University, 1992, p. III.

¹⁸⁸ See for instance *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin*, 89a. For Josephus’ use of the term δαίμων, see Josephus, *Antiquities Judaica*, VI, 8, 2, and VIII, 2, 5, and, S. L. Coggan, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-163.

¹⁸⁹ R. L. Fox, *op. cit.*, pp. 328-329.

doomed by Christ's advent. What Eusebius implies is indeed that Christ's death and resurrection have driven the demons out of the whole universe once and for all, achieving in a way his day-to-day practice of exorcism. Under the polemicist's pen, Pan is already the Devil, from whose malign influence the Church has the power to save. Already Satan, yet already vanquished. Christ has *exorcised* Pan.

Interestingly, the old god's power was still taken for granted, even by Christians. "The gods still showed their anger and stood invisibly beside favoured men [...]. To account for it, the Christians cited the demons."¹⁹⁰ Those old and venerable forces lingered despite the apparent triumph of the God of the deserts. Yes, the wild spirit of the forests and hills still haunted the Empire, and the faith of the newly converted, those who were acceding to power at that time, was often surpassed by a superstitious fear of demons. It is then that paganism was gradually confused with sorcery, which eventually allowed for religious persecution. In Eusebius' time, "the boundary between the court and the traditional aristocracy coincided, generally, with a boundary between Christianity and paganism," and it was often representatives of the former who raised accusations of sorcery against rivals in order to fight the predominance of the latter, "an ill-defined aristocracy of culture and inherited prestige."¹⁹¹ In a time of lasting instability, the reduction of the Greek pantheon to a pandemonium might well have mirrored that of old and prestigious "skills," philosophy, poetry, rhetoric, to sorcery. At any rate, the accusers certainly believed in, and feared the efficacy of those magical skills.

Ces dieux logés au cœur des chênes, dans les eaux fuyantes et profondes, ne pouvaient en être expulsés.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁹¹ Peter Brown, "Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages," in Mary Douglas, *Witchcraft – Confessions and Accusations*, London, Tavistock, 1970, pp. 24-25.

Et qui dit cela ? c'est l'Eglise. Elle se contredit rudement. Quand elle a proclamé leur mort, elle s'indigne de leur vie. De siècle en siècle, par la voix menaçante de ses conciles, elle leur intime de mourir... Eh quoi ! ils sont donc vivants ?
« Ils sont des démons... » – Donc ils vivent.¹⁹²

Eusebius accepts the Jewish apocryphal tradition of Enoch, which expands on Genesis 6. The demons, Enoch says, were begotten by fallen angels. This notion was considerably developed by early Christian angelology, starting with the Book of Revelation. Eusebius combines this lore with Greek myth: the biblical Giants are fallen angels, but they are also the same as the heathen gods and demigods.¹⁹³ In other words, they asked men that they worship them as gods. The Christian exegete is certainly responsible for the shift in meaning that ultimately allowed to see the pagan world as having worshipped evil spirits – a theological attitude that would have serious consequences on a moral level, unless it is their already black-and-white morals that primarily led the Fathers to vilify the Greek daemons. At any rate, this doctrine would become Catholic dogma about Greek gods. The French magistrate Pierre de Lancre recalls it at the outset of his *Tableau de l'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges et Démons*, by mentioning “*la Pythonisse ou Prestresse du Demon Phœbus*”¹⁹⁴, the first categories of demons being, in his understanding, those of the false gods “*par ce que de tout temps ils ont tasché à estre honnorez comme Dieux.*”¹⁹⁵ Likewise, Jean Bodin writes that, although “*Platon, Plutarque, Porphyre, Jamblique, Plotin tiennent qu'il y a de bons & mauvais Dæmons: si est-ce que les Chrestiens prennent tousjours le mot de Dæmons pour malings Esprits.*”¹⁹⁶ That Bodin mentions both Plutarch and Eusebius a few lines below is worthy

¹⁹² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁹³ See Henry Charles Lea, *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft*, New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1957, I, p.50.

¹⁹⁴ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.5.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

¹⁹⁶ Jean Bodin, *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*, Paris, Jacques du Puys, 1587, f.1.

of remark: Pan, a d(a)emon, is dead, because all demons, Bodin maintains, are to die at some point.¹⁹⁷ Incidentally, he also reproaches Pico della Mirandola for believing in pagan mysteries and celebrating Pan.¹⁹⁸

Eusebius' recasting of Plutarch's tale is actually made possible by the ambivalence of the Greek word *daimon* we mentioned above. While those divine beings were beyond good and evil, Christianity preferred to see them as purely evil, because it needed to ascribe good to God only, while thoroughly separating it from evil. Eusebius' strategy consists both in ridiculing the god's sexual appetite and denouncing the violence he incarnates. The phallic symbolism attached to the shepherd god is thus only evidence of the pagans' moral depravity. "Such is the unseemly theology, or rather atheism of the Egyptians, which it is degrading to even oppose, and from which we naturally revolted with abhorrence, when we found redemption and deliverance from so great evils in no other way than solely by the saving doctrine of the gospel."¹⁹⁹ Elsewhere, the fact Pan terrifies and kills people, including his own worshippers, is brought about as evidence that he is evil, that he is but a fiend – and that heathen cults are themselves evil.

What ought a good deity, or at all events the advent of a good deity to confer on those to whom the manifestation of the god has been vouchsafed? Did then any good result to the beholders of this good daemon, or have they found him an evil daemon and learned this by practical experience? This admirable witness says indeed those to whom this blessed sight was vouchsafed all died at once.²⁰⁰

Given what we know about Pan, we can say that Eusebius did not need much imagination to transform this *daemon* into a *demon*, or even *all of them*. As Pan is the ultimate demon-god, his

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, ff.3-4.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, f.21.

¹⁹⁹ Eusebius, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

name must indeed allude to the whole *Pantheon* as well. The new and only God of the universe has indeed cleansed it from “*all* kind of demons,” says Eusebius. Here he makes use of the well-known pun mentioned above, while not identifying Pan as the universal god of nature. Rather than seeing Pan as the god of all, Eusebius “pluralizes” him, so to speak. His name points to the pagan *multitude* of gods. In a way, Michelet does the same, since for him Pan’s death is that of all ancient gods. “*Dieux anciens, entrez au sépulcre. Dieux de l’amour, de la vie, de la lumière, éteignez-vous !*”²⁰¹ It is not so much that Eusebius ignores the possibility that Pan might be the Orphic spirit of the whole universe, it is rather that he carefully rejects such an interpretation:

They made Pan the symbol of the universe and gave him his horns as symbol of the sun and moon and the fawn skin as emblem of the stars in heaven, or of the variety of the universe. Must it not then be evident to all men that they are only talking solemn nonsense in their physical theories, and as far as words go, put a fair face on foul things by their perversions of the truth, but in actual deeds, establishing the fabulous delusion and vulgar superstition. [...] Pan, therefore, was no longer the symbol of the universe, but must be some such demon as is described who also gave forth the oracle, for of course, it was not the universe and the whole world that gave the oracle which we have before us. The men, therefore, who fashioned the likeness of this demon and not that of the universe, imitated the figure before described. [Such] [...] ministrants of the oracles we must in plain truth declare to be evil demons, playing [...] parts to deceive mankind [...] and deceive the common people.²⁰²

On the one hand, Eusebius appears to downplay the uniqueness of Pan, which somehow makes him resemble the one god of monotheism – a pantheistic Great Spirit at the very least; on the other hand, he can be seen here as the one author originally responsible for the connection between Pan and Satan. By reducing the former to his animalistic qualities, stripping him of his godly and “positive” ones, he created the latter.

While Michelet’s vision owes much to the Greek Father’s own recasting, it also astutely turns the same recasting against him. He needs Eusebius’ interpretation, but he goes against the

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.53.

²⁰² Eusebius, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-139. Quoted in S. L. Coggan, *op. cit.*, pp.95-96.

grain. He acknowledges that the Christian god killed the pagan ones, or rather that he tried to, but far from rejoicing in it, the Romantic historian envisions that “murder” as the *original sin* of Christianity – an injustice which the witches would attempt to reverse. Pan is definitely *the one who has been wronged*. Moreover, no one has actually witnessed Pan’s death: it is announced, yet without any evidence. It is a crime that has a perpetrator (Christianity), but maybe no actual victim. The reason why Pan cannot die without eventually being resurrected (“*La Nature enterrée revient, non plus furtivement, mais maîtresse de la maison,*” suggests Michelet in a footnote²⁰³) is that he might have never really died! *La Sorcière*’s “à rebours” philosophy of history is thus entailed in the way it reworks both Plutarch and Eusebius.

In order to argue that witchcraft is a redemptive sin, Eusebius was needed, if only to turn his testimony against him. Plutarch was the first to tell the story, but without Eusebius, there is no connection between Pan, Jesus and Satan. Eusebius lived “shortly before the triumph of Christianity,” not Plutarch, and even less the protagonists of his tale – Tiberius’ reign hardly deserving such a title. To be sure, Eusebius did not see Pan as the wondrous god of universal life. But for Michelet to be able to see him that way – and to construe his “resurrection” as a redemptive sin – Eusebius’ *Preparation* was necessary, since it expanded on Plutarch’s more minimalist narrative, thereby making it the locus of a *cosmic battle* between the pagan gods – if not nature itself – and Christ.

I. 4. From Plutarch and Eusebius to Rabelais

It is possibly in the context of mystery cults that Pan left Arcadia to inhabit the whole universe. There the notion of a cosmic Pan developed. Once a son of Hermes, he was henceforth

²⁰³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

said to be “first-begotten.” His physical constitution symbolized the universe, his horns were connected to the stars and the moon, as well as to Zeus, with whom he ultimately came to be identified – called by his name, and vice versa. The first occurrence of Pan being described, beyond his pastoral and bestial qualities, as a god of all, both Πάν and Πᾶν, embodying the generative power of the universe, and even its very “substance,” is in the *Orphic Hymns*.

I call upon Pan, the pastoral god,
I call upon the universe, [...].
Present in all growth, begetter of all,
Many-named divinity,
Light-bringing lord of the cosmos, [...]
Cave-loving and wrathful,
Veritable Zeus with horns [...].²⁰⁴

The Stoics also described the god’s well-known lust in terms of godly creativity, and we have seen that Eusebius alluded to the belief that Pan was not merely a pastoral god. It is a long time afterwards, Alban Krailsheimer and Michael Screech showed, that for the first time Pan’s name was straight spelled Πᾶν. This spelling is found in Guillaume Postel’s works. Following Orphism’s example, the Humanist author called him “*Deus universitatis*,”²⁰⁵ which, since we read *La Sorcière*’s first chapter, sounds familiar to us.

At that time, an interesting reversal was occurring. *Despite Eusebius, Renaissance syncretism endeavored to identify Pan with the Christian god.* Commenting on Pico della Mirandola’s strange assertion that “he who cannot attract Pan, in vain approaches Protheus,” (“*Frustra adit naturam et Protheum, qui Pana non attraxerit*”) Edgar Wind writes in his *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*: “Mutability, according to Pico, is the secret door through which the

²⁰⁴ *The Orphic Hymns*, translated and edited by Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin W. Wolkow, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, pp. 13-14.

²⁰⁵ Michael Screech, *The Death of Pan and the Death of Heroes in the Fourth Book of Rabelais – A Study in Syncretism*, Genève, Droz, Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance, XVII, 1955, p.37.

universal pervades the particular. Hence Proteus transforms himself continuously because Pan is within him.”²⁰⁶ Pan had become a divine, alchemical alliance of opposites. He is the god who creates and redeems the world by dividing, transforming, and sacrificing himself. A shepherd god, just like the Jewish and Christian one, says François Habert.²⁰⁷ Logos incarnated, as the belief that he is son of Hermes already implied... Above all, the comparison between Pan and Jesus rests on the fact that both gods suffer, that both died.

Not only did they both die, but they both died “under Tiberius.” Rabelais – whom, incidentally, Michelet ranks among his “*amis chéris*” in his *Histoire de la Révolution française*²⁰⁸ and calls elsewhere the Dante of French language²⁰⁹ – is particularly famous for having identified Pan as “*le nostre Tout*” and Jesus at the same time.

« [...] Et se guementant es gens doctes qui pour lors estoient en sa court de Rome en bon nombre, qui estoit cestuy Pan, trouva par leur raport qu’il avoit esté filz de Mercure et de Penelope. [...] Toutefois je le interpreteroys de celluy grand Servateur des fideles, qui feut en Judée ignominieusement occis par l’envie et iniquité des Pontifes, docteurs, prebstres, et moines de la loy Mosaicque. Et ne me semble l’interprétation abhorrente. Car à bon droict peut il estre en languaige Gregoys dict Pan. Veu que il est le nostre Tout, tout ce que sommes, tout ce que vivons, tout ce que avons, tout ce que esperons est luy, en luy, de luy, par luy. C’est le bon Pan le grand pasteur qui [...], non seulement a en amour et affection ses brebis, mais aussi ses bergiers. À la mort duquel feurent plaincts, souspirs, effroys, et lamentations en toute la machine de l’Univers, cieulx, terre, mer, enfers. À ceste miene interpretation compete le temps. Car cestuy tresbon tresgrand Pan, nostre unique Servateur mourut lez Hierusalem, regnant en Rome Tibere Cæsar. »

Pantagruel ce propous finy resta en silence et profonde contemplation. Peu de temps après nous veismes les larmes decouller de ses œilz grosses comme œufz de Autruche. Je me donne à Dieu, si j’en mens d’un seul mot.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New York, Norton, 1968, p. 196.

²⁰⁷ M. Screech, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²⁰⁸ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, I, *op. cit.*, p.40.

²⁰⁹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, Paris, Chamerot, 1855, p.411.

²¹⁰ François Rabelais, *Quart Livre*, in *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Mireille Huchon, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, pp.604-605.

Michelet probably did not discover the tale of Pan's death in *Quart Livre*, but we can safely assume that he was greatly indebted to the Renaissance writer for his interpretation of it. In offering up his own perspective on Plutarch's and Eusebius' tale, Rabelais departs from both, and his interpretation of Pan's identity and death is a necessary step for Michelet.

The fact that Rabelais mentions Hermes' paternity points to his syncretism, even though he apparently dismisses Plutarch's genealogy. As mentioned above, being the progeny of a god and a mortal, Pan is Word made flesh and is thereby akin to Jesus. Both as Pan and Jesus, the god who died "*regnant en Rome Tibere Cæsar*," is also a shepherd. And Rabelais' syncretism, here drawing from the Orphic tradition, allows for his description of Pan as "*le nostre Tout*." Eusebius is read, but against himself.

Moreover, Rabelais refers to the "*Pontifes, docteurs, prebstres, et moines de la loy Mosaicque*." These words, potentially subversive, might have struck Michelet. Is not Rabelais implicitly equating contemporary Christianity to Pharisaic Judaism? Where is, then, the true Church to be found? And who is the true God?

At the end of his speech, Pantagruel jokingly exclaims: "*Je me donne à Dieu, si j'en mens d'un mot*." He should have said: "*Je me donne au Diable*," an ordinary and quite understandable curse. I shall venture to suggest that this sentence might have impressed Michelet. Pan is the one whom the Church (at least since Eusebius) once described as the Archenemy, but Rabelais, departing from that tradition, maintains *he is actually God*. To give oneself to the Devil is therefore the same as to give oneself to God. To be sure, Rabelais does not consciously blaspheme but he *verges* on blasphemy, pointing out that his identifying of Christ to Pan amounts to connecting him to the Devil. At any rate, the one true God dwells beyond the Church's dogma, institutions and morals: Michelet has obviously learned from the Renaissance writer.

To read *La Sorcière*'s inaugural tale against this background has the merit of suggesting an important notion about Pan's death, to which we alluded above. Pan died, yes, but only to rise again. If Pan is Christ, it should mean that his death is temporary. Let us recall James George Frazer and Salomon Reinach's hypothesis, according to which Plutarch had actually mangled a report on Tammuz's cult, by ascribing the god's name to the pilot. The Near Eastern pilot's name, Thamus, is the very name of the dead and resurrected god, which might indeed denote some cultic connection to the whole narrative, while diverting it from its apparent realism. "On the whole the simplest and most natural [explanation] would seem to be that the deity whose sad end was thus mysteriously proclaimed and lamented was the Syrian god Tammuz or Adonis, whose death is known to have been annually bewailed by his followers both in Greece and in his native Syria."²¹¹ Reinach believed that "Thamus" was not so much the pilot's name, as one of the names of the god, then a part of the syncretic formula which the sailors heard.²¹²

Even though Michelet is no Reinach, he hints at the fact that the old gods should perish. Both Osiris and Adonis die in order to rise again,²¹³ a "gloomy doctrine" to which he alludes elsewhere, in *La Femme*, in a passage we will bring into focus later on.²¹⁴ Interestingly, Frazer also suggests that a link between Osiris-Adonis-Tammuz, and Pan exists. This link, he proposes, ultimately involves Jesus himself. Just like Tammuz, Jesus is a god who must die and revive.

All over Western Asia from time immemorial the mournful death and happy resurrection of a divine being appear to have been annually celebrated with alternate rites of bitter lamentation and exultant joy [...]. A chain of causes which, because we cannot follow

²¹¹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough – A Study in Magic and Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.226.

²¹² Salomon Reinach, *Cultes, mythes et religions*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1908, III, pp. 10-11.

²¹³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

²¹⁴ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, Paris, Hachette, 1860, p.247.

them, might in the loose language of daily life be called an accident, determined that the part of the dying god in this annual play should be thrust upon Jesus of Nazareth [...].²¹⁵

A staunch Frazerian, Murray also emphasized that “like many another god, [Satan] was sacrificed for the good of his people.”²¹⁶ This observation is of no less interest for understanding Michelet’s religious doctrine. Pan is Satan, but Pan is also the true Christ – if not the historical Jesus, whose divinity Michelet dismisses. The one true God, the god of the witches, dies only to be resurrected. He is a metaphysical Christ, the Saviour, a god who redeems, even if through sin.

I. 6. Two Myths of Pan

Another literary connection should help us grasp *La Sorcière*’s intent. Its first chapter might indeed be reminiscent of Victor Hugo’s “Le Satyre,” in *La Légende des siècles*. If we read Michelet in light of this poem, we may better understand what is at stake in his own mythology. Hugo narrates the birth of Pan rather than his death. In the beginning, Pan is but a satyr, kidnapped by Hercules in order to please the Olympians – whom the little monster actually preceded on Mount Olympus. The usurpers taunt him: on hearing his plea for the world, they scornfully laugh. Pierre Albouy has noted the similarity with other Hugolian schemes, in which a “*gueux*” is mocked by an elite assembly, Gwynplaine for instance, in *L’homme qui rit*.²¹⁷ It happens likewise to Champmathieu in *Les Misérables*, to Quasimodo in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, to Triboulet in *Le roi s’amuse*. The people is always somehow ugly, but that very ugliness points to its divinity. That is why the satyr does not take notice of the false gods’ sarcasm. On the contrary, he goes on singing “*la terre monstrueuse*.” As so often in Hugo, it is the oppressed who is actually the strongest; the

²¹⁵ J. G. Frazer, *op. cit.*, pp. 675-676.

²¹⁶ M. A. Murray, *op. cit.*, p.28.

²¹⁷ Pierre Albouy, *La création mythologique chez Victor Hugo*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1963, p. 239.

satyr is a titan whose speech will overwhelm that false order and hierarchy. He is both Prometheus and Pan, the people persecuted no less than the whole universe. Growing to the level of mountains and stars, he thus becomes what he has always been. The other gods can therefore only disappear, since he alone contains and transcends them all.

- » Un roi c'est de la guerre, un dieu c'est de la nuit.
- » Liberté, vie et foi, sur le dogme détruit !
- » Partout une lumière et partout un génie !
- » Amour ! tout s'entendra, tout étant harmonie !
- » L'azur du ciel sera l'apaisement des loups.
- » Place à Tout ! Je suis Pan ; Jupiter ! à genoux. »²¹⁸

Being Pan, the only legitimate god of the universe, or rather the *very substance of the universe*, the satyr says the truth about all things, the obscure and concealed truth, “*le revers ténébreux de la création.*”²¹⁹ It is already Michelet’s view of (counter-)history – *à rebours*. Pan saves because *he alone really is*. To know that necessarily amounts to refusing the lies and deceptions of all religious institutions – and to “sin” against them. Hugo’s original tale also means that Pan may never die, that he has always been there, though hidden, and will always be. If we believe that *La Sorcière* should be read with *La Légende des siècles* in mind, then the underlying promise which we already discussed, namely that Pan is not really dead but will surely return, acquires a greater depth. The Epilogue can thus be understood as a commentary on Hugo’s poem.

“*L’anti-Nature pâlit, et le jour n’est pas loin où son heureuse éclipse fera pour le monde une aurore. Les dieux passent, et non Dieu. Au contraire, plus ils passent, et plus il apparaît.*”²²⁰

The Anti-Nature is the Church with its awful idols, but it grows dim. The Day of Reckoning is near, the false gods have been judged and condemned. They will vanish, overcome by the one true

²¹⁸ V. Hugo, *La Légende des Siècles*, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

²²⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.390-391.

God. As we saw in the Introduction, to describe rebellion as a return to a more legitimate, primordial, or elevated order is really a peculiarity of all gnostic doctrines. Despite appearances, they are not so much about novelty as about reality – the true Torah or Law, the true God, the ultimate truth, which is made invisible by our social and political pretenses. Whereas gnosticism is usually the name we give to dualistic systems, such is not the case with Michelet – if, of course, *La Sorcière* is to be called a gnostic book – nor with many other so-called gnostic works. Romanticism reenacted historical gnostic heresies while singing the praises of Spinoza’s substance, precisely because the former, it was suggested, was really aiming at unveiling the truth about the universe’s fundamental oneness. And here is how both gnosticism and pantheism may incarnate themselves as a democratic ideal: God is Pan – the hidden reality of the universe – and the people – the hidden substratum of all political superstructures – at the same time.

The fact remains that Michelet, as Nettement rightfully wrote it, is more radical than Hugo. Whereas the latter prophesied about Jesus and Satan’s ultimate reconciliation, Michelet does not hesitate to equate Satan himself to God. Actually, that should not surprise us since Satan is Pan. He thus quotes George Sand’s opinion, very close to Hugo’s, according to which “*les deux Esprits dont la lutte fit le Moyen Age,*” Satan and Jesus, “*le fier proscrit, le doux persécuteur,*” will make peace after all.²²¹ “*Aimable idée de femme,*” he patronizingly asserts. A compromise would be illusory or hypocritical, as with the Jesuits, whose pettiness he ridicules: “*l’ombre de Satan, l’ombre de Jésus, se rendant de petits services.*”²²² Satan does not need to reconcile with Jesus : the Nazarene, an impostor who only donned Pan’s garments, will vanish, as the Olympians do in *La Légende des siècles*, while the once outlawed Satan will remain and live forever. Michelet’s

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 388.

view of redemption is uncompromising and unapologetic. Christianity should be destroyed in order for man to finally be given back his true nature.

We saw in this first chapter how Michelet's recasting of an ancient tale, which inaugurates *La Sorcière*, sheds light on the notion which our study means to bring into focus. Pan is both evil and good, violence and life, sin and redemption. He is Satan, yet also Christ – the true Christ. And the vicious murder of which Christianity is accused will be atoned by the victim's return and clandestine worship. In other words, "sin" will redeem from false religion. Finally, we can already see that in redemption through sin, nostalgia for a long lost order and metaphysical revolt are intertwined. We will now turn to instances pertaining to the realm of the redeemed nature of witchcraft, in which Eros and Thanatos, man and beast, male and female are reconciled.

Chapter Two

Eros and Thanatos

For Michelet, the Church is both the Anti-Nature²²³ and, having outlawed the old gods, the Anti-Religion. This is an ironic – “witchy” – inversion of the demonologists’ stance, since they described *witchcraft* as Anti-Nature and Anti-Religion.²²⁴ Redemption therefore means salvation from the alienation and impiety this twofold desecration has brought about. *To sin*, yes, since Michelet believes that Christianity has corrupted everything natural by labeling it as sin. We will eventually discuss cases of “learned” antinomianism, of which Michelet, having seen the nihilistic potential of antinomianism, is far from approving. His book, however, first claims to offer up a view of what “good” antinomianism would mean. What is at stake, good and evil being ultimately merged within Pan’s realm, is salvation from the dangerous illusions of Christian idealism – that is, the notion of an unadulterated, prelapsarian state of nature. A female Rabelais, the witch proclaims that nature is good, that the body – whether harmonious or grotesque – is good and noble.²²⁵ It will be shown in next chapter that Michelet acknowledges that witchcraft at times entailed actual crimes or moral sins. In the present one, my aim is to show in what manner the witches’ cult, according to Michelet, redeemed the flesh and, with it, an alienated material as well as spiritual world, thereby strengthening man’s genuine connection with nature and his beloved ones – including the dead. Eros and Thanatos, sexual love and death are, according to Michelet,

²²³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.391.

²²⁴ See for instance P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.211.

²²⁵ See *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, pp.417-418.

the two main intermingled aspects of the witches' cult, with both appearing as robust responses to Christian opprobrium.

II. 1. *Similia Similibus Curantur*

Michelet derides the first Christians for having caught “*le démon dans une fleur*,” the Devil in a flower.²²⁶ Whereas Pan symbolizes the whole universe, both good and evil, holy and unholy, spiritual and corporeal, their vision was dualistic in essence. There was good, which is immaterial and eternal and, radically opposed to it, evil: the realm of matter.²²⁷ Their ultimate hope was that the latter – the earthly and lowly world – be destroyed. Even a flower, then, was suspect. A flower, perhaps, more than anything else. Nature was to be killed, again and again.

From Michelet's perspective, this is a false and blasphemous piety. The real religion is what he elsewhere calls the “Communion of Love,” encompassing, of course, the *physicality* of love – the highest mystery of God.²²⁸ The rehabilitation of love therefore goes against Christianity, at least as Michelet sees it, while being the ultimate aim of true religion, whose priestess is, of course, the witch herself. How so? By her effort at redeeming nature, the main hostage of Christian prejudice, through her care for the body, and for everything deemed filthy and impure by the false religion.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.48.

²²⁷ This should prompt us to show some prudence as to the use of the word *gnosticism*. As it happens, such a dualism may well be the very definition of gnosticism. As will be shown, Michelet utterly rejects Christian libertinism, which he probably suspects of stemming from this initial, *gnostic*, rebuke of the matter. His own “gnosticism” is balanced by his pantheism.

²²⁸ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.282.

Witchcraft is religion upside down because inversion is the only way to return to the one true God – *Celui à qui on a fait tort*.²²⁹ With the same honesty as the Cynics of old, it unveils the invisible fabric of all things, stripping the accursed human body naked. Actually, the witch’s “patients” know only too well that the torturing fire of sex has ravaged the Church itself. Have not the indictment of the Templars and the trial of Pope Boniface unveiled the Sodom hidden beneath the altar?²³⁰ The witch is needed because “Satan” is really the Prince of this World – a truth Boniface’s or John XXII’s depravity attests to. Her sciences liberates nature by showing what her opprobrium really entails. Her obscene and reckless rites unmask the hypocrisy of the Church’s.

Men and women, Michelet suggests, suffered from a thousand ills, all of them resulting from sexual repression. Leprosy was the deadliest and the last stage of this effervescing of blood.²³¹ The sap of life was corrupting itself. No outlet, neither for the body nor for the soul. A *resurrection of the desire* was needed.²³² Strange as this idea may be by modern medical standards, Michelet found it in Christian literature itself, yet reading it against the grain, as he did for the demonization of Pan. Leprosy had indeed been associated with forbidden sexual practices, especially with having sex on the Christian sabbath.²³³ Michelet acknowledges a sexual origin to the disease, albeit using it *against* Christian prudery.

At any rate, the heated blood of the sick needed to be cured. Hence their desertion of the old, futile medicine, and of the no less futile altar – Catholic priests being unable to save them in

²²⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.165.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.137.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.135-137.

²³² *Loc. cit.*

²³³ See for instance Henri Leclercq, “Lèpre,” in *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Paris, Letouzey & Ané, 1929, VIII, pp.2578-2590.

this world or the other. The true Church, “*la vraie Eglise,*” was thenceforth in the wilderness, with her.

The witch became the only physician of the people, the rich and the princes resorting to the science of the Jews and the Moors instead.²³⁴ A genuine physician, she also fulfilled the priest’s role, or rather she became the priestess they had been deprived of, curing the body and the soul together, redeeming man as the whole he is, both melancholy and leprosy being interpreted as psychosomatic diseases. The successful cure of a physical ailment was achieved through the use of herbal remedies and ancestral, performative ceremonies alike.²³⁵ Witchcraft is medicine qua religion, and religion qua medicine. And it is both inasmuch as it boldly looks into the shared roots of good and evil. This view, of course, reflects the historical reality of witchcraft and folk medicine: early modern “cunning folk” were healers as well as necromancers.

The way the witch chooses and combines her healing herbs is revealing. It needed some boldness to use them, especially those “comforters,” the *Solanaceae*, that can both cure or kill – growing, like the witch herself, alone amidst ruins and rubbish, in waste wildernesses. Some are simply good for food, such as the tomatoes or eggplants; others might already be poisonous. Michelet, who believed in homeopathy, suggested that their use was the first experiment of the law of similars. The well-known homeopathic formula expresses the following idea. Any drug that may produce morbid symptoms in the healthy will cure the same symptoms when they are an expression of disease. Before homeopathy, folk medicine likewise held that a yellow stone would

²³⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

²³⁵ Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits – Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2013, p.200.

cure from jaundice, and a red one from bleeding: *evil cures evil. Similia similibus curantur*, like cures like.²³⁶

The witches, as Michelet adds in a footnote had to go step by step, beginning with the weakest and rising only gradually to the strongest.²³⁷ They risked being seen as poisoners, a heavy risk indeed. But they took that risk anyway, going from the bittersweet to the dark nightshades, and then to the henbane, and, finally, to the terrifying belladonna, a gentle poison (“*doux poison*”) able to kill yet also able to ease the pain of childbirth.²³⁸ Belladonna is thus the most emblematic of those plants that cure evil through evil itself.

And how did the witch come to this astonishing discovery, Michelet rhetorically asks? Answer: by the simple effect of the Satanic principle, that everything must be done *à rebours* – against the grain. The Church condemns poisons; Satan uses them and turns them into remedies. The Church pretends to act on the body by spiritual means; Satan uses material means to act upon the soul, making you *drink* forgetfulness, love, happiness.²³⁹ The Devil lives in flowers, the prudish churchmen said. There is indeed much power, both good and evil, in flowers. The ignorant would often curse them, fearing their questionable hues. Unlike them, the witch acknowledged and respected their power; she did not shrink back from them.²⁴⁰

II. 2. The Womb and the Stomach

²³⁶ The same principle actually applies even more to other, scientifically validated, kinds of inoculation. Vaccination is an example of the law of similars. Like protects from like.

²³⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.139-140.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.142.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.29.

More than the use of belladonna, Michelet proclaims, *the redemption of the womb and the digestive organs* was the greatest revolution caused by the witches – another important step against the medieval spirit.

Mais la grande révolution que font les sorcières, le plus grand pas à rebours contre l'esprit du Moyen-âge, c'est ce qu'on pourrait appeler la réhabilitation du ventre et des fonctions digestives. Elles professèrent hardiment : « Rien d'impur et rien d'immonde. » L'étude de la matière fut dès lors illimitée, affranchie. La médecine fut possible.²⁴¹

Women were typically rebuked for their “*cupidité bestiale*,”²⁴² as Pierre de Lancre puts it. He thereby explains why more women are witches than men. Their very womb was looked upon with suspicion. Then the witch came, who liberated the grotesque human body from the Church's grip and prejudice, but also from social or moral qualms – an important step, according to Michelet, toward the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In the physical world everything is pure: nothing that a futile spiritualism should forbid, still less men's silly disgust.

Michelet said that *La Sorcière* had turned history inside out, like a glove.²⁴³ What is hidden within or in the margins is what gives meaning to the whole. Michelet was fascinated by Bourger's *Traité complet de l'anatomie de l'homme*. Gerbe's anatomical engravings inspired in him a remarkable, and often quoted (and ridiculed) ekphrasis in *L'Amour*. There Michelet wrote that nature has hidden her most gorgeous beauties *within*, in the depth of life itself.²⁴⁴ This bears on his conception of history as well. Anticipating Scholem, Michelet views the vital force of history as a subterranean one – in the same way as the vital force of the human body lies in his internal organs. The passage quoted in our introduction, in which Michelet compares Athénaïs to

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.145.

²⁴² P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.54.

²⁴³ J. Michelet, *Correspondance générale, op. cit.*, p.67.

²⁴⁴ J. Michelet, *L'Amour*, Paris, Hachette, 1859, p.179.

a mirror showing him the infinite, was written only two days before he wrote considerations on the female “*ventre*” which we are going to bring into focus. We may well infer from that proximity in time (and space) that they were connected in the writer’s mind. The womb and the stomach are both “inverting” entities, like a mirror. They connect us to eternal life by inverting life into death and death into life. It could be said that all witchcraft – as inversion and redemption through sin – is contained in such motifs. In Michelet’s pantheistic doctrine, there is no above or beneath, and if the stomach is servant to the brain, the brain also works nonetheless for the stomach. Heaven is not higher than the abyss, all things are equal.²⁴⁵

Let us emphasize that “*ventre*,” although it designates the digestive organs in modern-day French, means the womb in Michelet’s idiom. At the time, it often had a reproductive and sexual connotation – which it kept until the infamous *Histoire d’O*, where it always substitutes for the more explicit terms used to designate the woman’s sexual organs. Among other definitions, Littré writes that “*ventre*,” when it applies to females, has a sexual and reproductive connotation: “*En parlant des femmes et des femelles d’animaux, la partie où se forment les enfants, les petits de l’animal, et où se passe la gestation.*” And it is clear, from the vocabulary Michelet uses elsewhere, in his diary for instance, that it is the only meaning he has in mind in *La Sorcière*. Here is a passage he wrote in 1849:

Disons le vrai mot : *ventre*. Cette découverte, il faut l’avouer, fut pour les jeunes imaginations l’éveil d’une vive sensualité. En réalité, c’est la femme qu’on semblait avoir retrouvée en son principal organe. Déjà mère ou prête à le devenir, elle apparaît vraiment femme ; elle ne cachait plus la place où l’amour doit frapper ses coups.²⁴⁶

Discussing both early Renaissance painting (Ghirlandaio and Van Eyck) and Romantic etchings such as Devéria’s, Michelet asserts that the depiction of the *ventre* there unveils the main

²⁴⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.145.

²⁴⁶ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, II, p.29.

organ of the woman, the one that makes her female. “The woman is the uterus,” he strongly asserts. “*La femme, c’est la matrice.*”²⁴⁷ Depicted in this new manner, she is no longer hiding the place where Eros sends his arrows. We will see that a connection rose, in the historian’s thought, between the spirit of the Renaissance – and of the progressive nineteenth century as well – and that of the medieval witches, to whom the Humanists (which, here, would include the painters) owed their thirst for knowledge and science.

The witches were primarily the physicians of the women. Michelet wished that in his own century, more women should care for each other, instead of letting clumsy male physicians do it.²⁴⁸ For there is a certain *male* disgust toward the reproductive organs, especially after childbirth. Michelet, a true male-witch, advised his readers to rid themselves of that, but he knew too well that most men could not help but feel it. The description he gave, in *L’Amour*, of the ripped, blood-exuding womb, is unforgettable. “*L’irritation prodigieuse de l’organe, le torrent trouble qui exsude si cruellement de la ravine dévastée, oh ! quelle épouvante !... on recule...*”²⁴⁹ The womb combines the grotesque and the sublime. Horrible and magnificent at the same time, it gives shape to humans while verging itself into shapelessness. At any rate, it needs to be rehabilitated because that horror it conveys is indeed the deeper beauty – a very female one – of life.

The problem of the womb’s supposed impurity occupied Michelet’s imagination greatly. The passage from *La Sorcière* we are discussing echoes several similar considerations, scattered in such works as *L’Amour* or *La Femme*. For instance, he focuses on the fact that most women are ashamed of mentioning menstruation in front of their male physician, whereas they could do so

²⁴⁷ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴⁸ J. Michelet, *L’Amour, op. cit.*, pp.174-175.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.178.

with no shame at all in the presence of another woman.²⁵⁰ Menstruation, Michelet acknowledged in his books, was the object of his own constant and careful observation. He compared it to the movement of the ocean, except that he would have observed his wife's cycle with a greater awe and wonder.²⁵¹ Michelet even advised his male readers not to let a maid interfere with that part of their wives' lives, for should a foreigner intrude too much in it, the whole intimacy of the couple would be imperiled. Everything is pure for the pure hearts, Michelet elsewhere proclaimed, to which the witches' "motto" seems to echo.²⁵²

As it happens, his diary includes myriad references to Athénaïs' menstrual cycle and other genital discharges. "A 2 heures, les règles. Elle dort très bien," he wrote on March 22, 1861.²⁵³ "Les règles. Je fus rassuré ! Je craignais d'avoir oublié," in May.²⁵⁴ "J'aurais demandé quelque chose, si elle n'avait un peu de pertes qui l'affaiblissent. Je lui rappelai vendredi, j'aurais voulu la faire parler," in September.²⁵⁵ Verging on compulsive disorder, Michelet seems to have recorded every occurrence of his wife's periods, sometimes writing down even the hour when they started. "– Mise en vente de La Sorcière. – Dormi assez bien. A 4 heures ? les règles," he notes on November 15, 1862. And a few lines below: "Les règles, sans doute arrêtées à leur commencement par l'émotion de samedi (5 heures), reprirent bien dimanche à 3 heures."²⁵⁶ Quite disturbingly, when, in April 1862 – at the time he was finishing *La Sorcière* – Michelet's son died, the mention

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.359.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, pp.113-114.

²⁵³ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, III, p.9.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.46.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.154.

of his passing, along with his burial, is nothing but a short parenthesis in the historian's diary, embedded between a report on Athénaïs' hygienic routine ("*Assise r... cabinet.*") and yet another laconic sentence regarding her period: "*Les règles. Elle dort mieux ici.*"²⁵⁷

Contrary to what has been said about Michelet's obsession and "prejudice," what is at stake here is not so much the woman's monthly "disease"²⁵⁸ as her divine nature. Menstruation is a holy mystery, the menstruating woman carrying a god within herself.²⁵⁹ Michelet flatly denies the "monstrous perversion of ideas" the Middle Ages is supposed to have brought about – that the flesh is filthy, and women accursed.²⁶⁰ The cult of the Virgin, exalted as *virgin* more than as "*Notre-Dame,*" far from lifting up the real woman, had caused her abasement. Michelet's real woman, the witch, is no virgin. And her womb is not sick, it is really divine. It is "*le vase fragile de l'incomparable albâtre où brûle la lampe de Dieu.*"²⁶¹ Hence its use, which we shall bring later into focus, at the sabbath. The rhetoric of blood, ubiquitous in Michelet's works on women, carries religious connotations, and the womb is a physical and natural altar. Sure, Michelet wrote in previous works that "*la femme est une malade,*" but *La Sorcière* is, for that matter, different from *La Femme* – or perhaps more consistent. Her thrice holy womb ("*ventre trois fois saint*")²⁶² does what the Virgin's cannot possibly do: it eternally gives birth to the man-god, and it does it through sexual bliss and knowledge.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.108.

²⁵⁸ See Thérèse Moreau, *Le sang de l'histoire – Michelet, l'histoire et l'idée de la femme au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Flammarion, 1982, pp.106-112.

²⁵⁹ J. Michelet, *L'Amour*, *op. cit.*, p.5.

²⁶⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.146.

²⁶¹ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.327.

²⁶² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.147.

Michelet is perfectly aware of the semantic as well as anatomical proximity of the two “ventres.” Moreover, they both pertain to what Bakhtin would call the grotesque body – “a body in the act of becoming,” that is “never finished, never completed.” They are those parts through which the body “outgrows its own self, transgressing [its own limits], in which it conceives a new, second body.”²⁶³ For Michelet, they *both* bring the self to immortality by connecting it to death. The images of the latest dead and of the newest-born, set upon the loins of the witch at the sabbath after the collective consumption of her body and the fertility rites,²⁶⁴ convey this idea of an immortal grotesque body. In it the sexual and the digestive functions coincide, overcoming the confines between the body and the world, the individual and the collective. This is revolutionary, perhaps even more so *after* the Middle Ages.

Rien de plus vain que le contraste que Voltaire croit établir entre le sanctuaire d’amour et le laboratoire chimique de l’alimentation qui est à côté. Il n’y a pas de contraste. Ils sont sacrés l’un comme l’autre. Quel est leur but commun ? La vie. L’un l’entretient ; l’autre la reproduit, la renouvelle.

La base profonde de la vie, ce sont les entrailles. C’est la vraie racine de la fleur humaine, d’où elle fleurit sans cesse, dans ses corolles supérieures, tête, poitrine, etc. Ce qu’il y a de plus profond en l’homme, l’amour, l’organe de l’amour, y est très légitimement placé.²⁶⁵

We may infer from his scathing note on Voltaire that Michelet would include him among the virtual targets of his chapter on medicine: it is not only the priggish Catholics who despise the womb and the stomach, but the Voltairians of his time who snigger at nature, wondering why those functions are so close to one another, and consequently why human anatomy is so animalistic and grotesque.

²⁶³ M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p.317.

²⁶⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.170.

²⁶⁵ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, II, pp.29-30.

The digestive organ's "beauty" occupied Michelet's mind the same way the reproductive one's did. As a matter of fact, everything revolutionary he ascribed to his medieval witches seems to be *his* domain, and his diary is also pretty clear in this regard. Since the publishing of it and the circulation of such works as José Cabanis' *Michelet, le prêtre et la femme*, the bizarre passion the historian nurtured for his wife's daily routine – including, as shown above, her menstrual cycle, but also the minute inspection of her bowel movements – has been well-known and widely discussed. Accounts of Athénaïs' intimate peculiarities, at times terse, at times lengthy, fill pages and pages of Michelet's diary. For instance, we read in August 1865: "*La digestion reprend son équilibre interrompu depuis 8 ou 10 jours [après un lavement et une soupe, bonne petite s. suffisante pour le peu qu'elle a mangé. Point de douleur, point de sang.]*" Elsewhere he describes, in an almost poetic way, the product of Athénaïs' intestine: "*Dort mieux mais relâchée, un fin serpent blond, extrêmement long : se vida les entrailles en une fois.*"²⁶⁶ In May 1867, traveling with her in Switzerland, he laments that he is unable to scrutinize her excrements as he is used to: "*Je regrette que la localité actuelle me prive souvent de juger, jour par jour, de l'état intérieur de ses entrailles.*"²⁶⁷ It seems actually that this obsession became even more pervasive after *La Sorcière*, as if his own book had bewildered him.

Paul Bénichou noted a difference between Michelet's moral obsessions and such sensorial themes as "the dry, the viscous, the turgescient, the humid, and the plethoric."²⁶⁸ Such a distinction appears to be overcautious. Bodily functions animate Michelet's oeuvre and, at the time *La Sorcière* was taking shape, he tended to see the importance of digestion everywhere. He went as

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, p.12.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, III, p.461.

²⁶⁸ Paul Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes – Doctrines de l'âge romantique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p.499.

far, in his *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle* (1860), as to bring into focus Louis XIV's anus and bowel movements, or what he called the "monumental chronicle of our kings' digestion."²⁶⁹

Read against his diary, the portrait of the king's physicians, who were always "following him and scrutinizing" his feces, is somehow redolent of Michelet himself – or of his witches. It seems that the digestive functions play a twofold role in the historian's imagination. First, they are an equalizing factor, since nature was reminding Louis he was a man after all: "*Elle se permettait de le prendre à l'endroit par où tous sont humiliés. Il avait eu des tumeurs au genou et avait patienté. Elle lui en mit une à l'anus.*"²⁷⁰ Likewise, it is pretty clear that, in *La Sorcière*, the "beneath" stands to the "above" in the relation of the commoners to the patricians in the society. "*Non seulement l'esprit est noble, selon lui, le corps non noble, — mais il y a des parties du corps qui sont nobles, et d'autres non, roturières apparemment.*"²⁷¹ The rehabilitation of the stomach and the bowel is political: everyone needs them, and it is a mere illusion of the Ancien Régime that some should be excused from such functions.

The expression "*réhabilitation des fonctions digestives*" appears in the 1861 diary, in relation with the Saint-Simonian leader Prosper Enfantin's book, *Physiologie de l'homme*, which had been sent to Michelet by the author himself. "*Pourquoi le livre d'Enfantin, sa réhabilitation des fonctions digestives, sont-ils rebutants ? C'est parce qu'il s'agit moins chez lui de spiritualiser la matière que de matérialiser l'esprit.*"²⁷² Michelet envisions a doctrine of "digestive chastity," noting, however, that his wife seems to lament "*la part d'elle-même qu'elle rend chaque jour à la*

²⁶⁹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Louis XIV et la révocation de l'Edit de Nantes*, Paris, Chamerot, 1860, p.217.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.373.

²⁷¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.145.

²⁷² J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, III, p.49.

nature, la mue de ses entrailles.”²⁷³ The motif of the “human flower” appears here as well, which, as we shall see, inscribes defecation in a broader field of life, death and resurrection: “*Mais il faut bien s’en détacher et le donner en tribut à la nature qui y a droit, aux plantes, au besoin des fleurs. Leur amour fleurit, se nourrit de ce que laisse échapper la fleur humaine.*”²⁷⁴ This is the second aspect of the digestive functions, maybe more related to what has been said about redemption through sin. In Michelet’s view, digestion is somehow akin to alchemy, where good and perfection – life, immortality – surges from “evil,” or rather baseness – the digestible food on the one hand, the waste matter discharged from the body on the other. Inspired by the letter an unknown man wrote to him after the passing of his betrothed, Michelet observed in his diary, in a very Hegelian tone, that every progress stemmed from the *negative* overcoming of a passive and stable previous state – hatred, death, war or *critique*. “*Chaque fois que nous montons à un degré supérieur, en nous arrachant à la molle nature où nous étions confondus, il y a comme un accouchement, le moment du fer, la haine ou la mort, par rapport à l’état antérieur.*”²⁷⁵ He elsewhere called this phenomenon the fecundity of death – “*fécondité de la mort.*”²⁷⁶ This reminds one of the then popular belief in metempsychosis – a belief influenced by Plato and the Indian religion, as well as Kabbalah. A spiritual evolutionism, it was particularly influential in France among such progressive thinkers as Charles Fourier, Eliphas Lévi, Pierre Leroux, Alphonse Esquiros, Alexandre Weill, and Victor Hugo. The latter held that the cycle of reincarnations was at once a means of expiation and a path to progress, with the universe being a gigantic Purgatory where

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.50.

²⁷⁴ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p.11.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p.360.

souls purify themselves over the course of their many lives and avatars.²⁷⁷ Even Ballanche, a Catholic writer, believed that human destinies were connected by an infinite chain, with “*palingénésie*” being both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic notion, a spiritual phenomenon and a social one.²⁷⁸ Michelet himself felt attracted to this belief, writing in 1842:

Impatience de naître pour des vies supérieures, qui ont longtemps attendu et qui vont se dégager de l’animal inférieur. Impatience aussi de l’âme, qui a fini sous cette forme et voudrait monter, c’est-à-dire devenir un animal supérieur à elle-même. Oui, le grand mystère de la maternité enveloppe le monde. *Quid* naissance ? Accouchement. Et la vie ? Accouchement. Et la mort ? Accouchement.²⁷⁹

Death is akin to childbirth, life itself is but a long series of birthings. In fact, Michelet goes beyond such visions as Ballanche’s or even Hugo’s, since what he is looking for is a psychophysical foundation to the eternal cycle of life.²⁸⁰ He also looks at himself, seeing that he dies and resurrects every day.²⁸¹ Death lives in ourselves. The image of digestion illustrates the principle of eternal transformation in the realm of nature while somehow materializing it. And in the same way as this Romantic theology is one with the school’s political doctrine, the witch’s rehabilitation of digestion is, of course, politics and metaphysics combined. Nevertheless, an important difference between Michelet’s conception of metempsychosis and other Romantic

²⁷⁷ On this question, see P. Bénichou, *Les mages romantiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, pp.422-438.

²⁷⁸ See G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, I, pp.828-831.

²⁷⁹ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, I, p.388.

²⁸⁰ Rabelais, whose philosophy Michelet’s resembles so much, also writes in *Pantagruel*: “*quand par le plaisir de celluy qui tout regist et modere, mon ame laissera ceste habitation humaine, Je ne me reputeray point totalement mourir : mais plus tost transmigrer dung lieu en aultre, attendu que en toy et par toy ie demeure en mon ymage visible en ce monde, vivant, voyant, et conversant entre gens de honneur et mes amys.*” Bakhtin maintains that “the soul destiny does not interest Gargantua; he thinks of the change of ‘habitation’ in earthly terms and within earthly space [...]. The father’s new flowering in the son does not take place on the same level but on a higher degree of mankind’s development. When life is reborn, it does not repeat itself, it is perfected.” And just like in Michelet’s diary, “death [...] is the ‘other side’ of birth.” (*op. cit.*, pp.405-407)

²⁸¹ G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, II, p.630.

writers' considerations should be noted. For Michelet, the ascent implied by the cycle of reincarnation is inextricably bound up with a preliminary descent – death, digestion, or sin.

II. 3. Holy Incest?

The redemption of the womb entails a new sexual ethics. Its most disturbing aspect is the question of incest. “The touchstone of all antinomian theories is the delicate subject of sexual morality,”²⁸² and *La Sorcière* is no exception. Actually, the historian must have felt the need to conceal how radical his ideas were, but we can safely assert that they had not changed since his first depiction of the witches' promiscuity in *Histoire de France*. To be sure, in *La Sorcière*, he emphasizes the innocent nature of their sabbath lovemaking:

Quant à l'inceste, il faut s'entendre. Tout rapport avec les parentes, même les plus permis aujourd'hui, était compté comme crime. La loi moderne, qui est la charité même, comprend le cœur de l'homme et le bien des familles. Elle permet au veuf d'épouser la sœur de sa femme, c'est-à-dire de donner à ses enfants la meilleure mère. Elle permet à l'oncle de protéger sa nièce en l'épousant. Elle permet surtout d'épouser la cousine, une épouse sûre et bien connue, souvent aimée d'enfance, compagne des premiers jeux, agréable à la mère, qui d'avance l'adopta de cœur. Au Moyen-âge, tout cela, c'est l'inceste.

Le paysan, qui n'aime que sa famille, était désespéré. Même au sixième degré, c'eût été chose énorme d'épouser sa cousine. Nul moyen de se marier dans son village, où la parenté mettait tant d'empêchements. Il fallait chercher ailleurs, au loin. Mais, alors, on communiquait peu, on ne se connaissait pas, et on détestait ses voisins. Les villages, aux fêtes, se battaient sans savoir pourquoi (cela se voit encore dans les pays tant soit peu écartés) ; on n'osait guère aller chercher femme au lieu même où l'on s'était battu, où l'on eût été en danger.

Autre difficulté. Le seigneur du jeune serf ne lui permettait pas de se marier dans la seigneurie d'à côté. Il fût devenu serf du seigneur de sa femme, eût été perdu pour le sien.

Ainsi le *prêtre défendait la cousine, le seigneur l'étrangère*. Beaucoup ne se mariaient pas.

Cela produisait justement ce qu'on prétendait éviter. Au Sabbat éclataient les attractions naturelles. Le jeune homme retrouvait là celle qu'il connaissait, aimait d'avance, celle dont à dix ans on l'appelait le *petit mari*. Il la préférait à coup sûr, et se souvenait peu des empêchements canoniques.²⁸³

²⁸² G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, op. cit.*, p.810.

²⁸³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, pp.174-175.

Michelet here takes issue with Lancre's assertion, that the main end of the sabbath, the explicit doctrine taught by Satan, was precisely incest.²⁸⁴ This is hard to believe, he maintains, and in the manner of the man who, in a famous story told by Freud, having been accused to have returned a damaged kettle to his neighbor, replied that he had returned it undamaged, that it was already damaged, and that he had not even borrowed it in the first place, Michelet goes on saying that Lancre's accusation is false because the people would attend the sabbath only by pairs, that no sexual promiscuity was actually involved, and that what Lancre calls incest was not really so. At the time, Michelet contends, all alliances between kinsfolk, even those permitted in the modern age, were regarded as incestuous. Being debarred by the priest from his cousin, by the lord from any stranger – because, had he married another lord's serf, he would have been lost to his own – the peasant experienced abject sexual deprivation. The sabbath simply allowed the natural sympathies to spring forth again. No need to insist on the free – if not utterly incestuous – character of that hippie-like kind of love. Against nineteenth-century prudishness, Michelet implies that the joyful debauchery of the sabbath was nothing but a redemptive attempt at overthrowing the cruelty of the social and political order. “*Qu'ils l'aient du moins, ce court moment ! Que chacun des deshérités soit comblé une fois, et trouve ici son rêve !...*” Let them at least enjoy, he charitably proclaims, this one short moment of bliss, through which and for once they may fulfill their fancy!²⁸⁵

One cannot insist too much on the sexual relativism hidden in those lines. In his 1861 diary, Michelet goes as far as to call incest “*mariage naturel*,”²⁸⁶ natural alliance, which is contrast with

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.173.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.172.

²⁸⁶ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, III, p.6.

its qualification, in *La Sorcière*, as “*mœurs contre nature*.”²⁸⁷ The expression “*mariage naturel*” means that incest differs from both other forms of heterosexual intercourse, and homosexuality: the longer passage we just quoted follows his rebuttal of the judges’ accusations of sodomy, with the unclean (“*immonde*”) brotherhood of the Templars being apparently unknown of the sabbath participants.²⁸⁸ Elsewhere, Michelet proves more explicit in his condoning of incest, which suggests, regarding *La Sorcière*, that his defense of the witches’ probity is merely tactical. In *La Femme*, he mentions in passing that incestuous unions were once held in high esteem by pretty civilized peoples – the Persians and the Greeks, who married their near relatives. Michelet even suggests that this custom parallels the way in which race-horses are improved, being permitted to breed only with their own stock, so as to keep the purity of the line. We thus magnify their “heroic sap.”²⁸⁹ As for his *Histoire de France*, the vague tone of reproach showing up in the sabbath scene should not deceive us: “*Est-il vrai que le frère s’unît même à la sœur, comme en Égypte, à Sparte et à Athènes ? Il est difficile de savoir si le fait est réel, ou une de ces fables répétées tant de fois pour donner l’horreur des sociétés secrètes.*”²⁹⁰ The second sentence is quoted almost word for word in *La Sorcière*, but the first one is missing from it. It would be unlikely, though, that Michelet had suddenly come to believe that such purely incestuous intercourses only existed in the accusers’ minds. Undertaking to praise the witches – which was not his intention in 1857 – he has simply adopted a more prudent, apologetic approach. He nonetheless ends up by acknowledging the

²⁸⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.179.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.174.

²⁸⁹ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, pp.134-135.

²⁹⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Henri IV et Richelieu*, Paris, Chamerot, 1857, p.280.

possibility of both mother-son and brother-sister relationships at the sabbath, while still excusing them.

À en croire Lancre et autres, Satan faisait au fils un grand mérite de rester fidèle à la mère, tenait ce crime pour vertu. Si cela est vrai, on peut supposer que la femme défendait la femme, que la sorcière était dans les intérêts de la mère pour la maintenir au foyer contre la belle-fille, qui l'eût envoyée mendier, le bâton à la main.

Lancre prétend encore « qu'il n'y avait bonne sorcière qui ne naquit de l'amour de la mère et du fils ». Il en fut ainsi dans la Perse pour la naissance du mage, qui, disait-on, devait provenir de cet odieux mystère. Ainsi les secrets de magie restaient fort concentrés dans une famille qui se renouvelait elle-même.

Par une erreur impie, ils croyaient imiter l'innocent mystère agricole, l'éternel cercle végétal, où le grain, ressemé au sillon, fait le grain.

Les unions moins monstrueuses (du frère et de la sœur), communes chez les Juifs et les Grecs, étaient froides et très peu fécondes. Elles furent très sagement abandonnées, et l'on n'y fût guère revenu sans l'esprit de révolte, qui, suscité par d'absurdes rigueurs, se jetait follement dans l'extrême opposé.²⁹¹

Michelet thinks of Abraham who, according to Genesis, 20: 12 – a verse which we alluded to above – actually married his half-sister. Interestingly enough, the Jews of the Dentu and Hetzel 1862 edition are replaced by “Orientals” in 1863, in all of the Belgian editions: was the publisher, Lacroix, given that this “accusation” targets the very ancestors of Jesus, eager not to offend (too much) the Catholic feelings of the readers? Or was Michelet himself desirous of sparing a community he cherished, given that such unions would not have been deemed appropriate by his audience? From the previous allusion to Genesis, it is clear, however, that those “Orientals” were really Jews – or that Jews were at least counted among them, along with the Persians, the Greeks or the shepherd tribes of the Himalayas.²⁹² Furthermore, in *La Sorcière* itself, the Patriarchs are implicitly described as incestuous, with this character being taken in good part. The ethics of the early medieval peasants, Michelet already suggests in “Le petit démon du foyer,” resembled those of the Patriarchs, of the Chosen People of Scripture as well as other highly civilized nations.

²⁹¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.179.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p.177.

Some nuances, though, may be mentioned. Antiquity regarded marriage with a stranger as immoral, Michelet maintains. Likewise, the Merovingian *villa* was one family.²⁹³ The problem is that women could not rise higher in such a context, they were held of little worth – things among things as they were, the properties of the lord.²⁹⁴ The situation is utterly different at the sabbath, since the attendants show up as separate individuals, not boorish masses. In addition – and in contrast with what he says elsewhere of the “heroic sap,” and so much so that we may question his complete honesty – Michelet seems at times to approve of the sterile character of incestuous unions. He nonetheless mentions that they were progressively abandoned, with the witches only returning to them out of protest against the stringencies of the Church.

Between the lines of this (moderate) rebuke, still looms an ambiguous apology of incest. There is a mystical reason to such unions, redolent of the above-mentioned allusion, from *La Femme*, to the purity of the line. By impregnating his own mother, the serf is a new Persian magus. Again the kettle logic! For we are unable to assert if, finally, those unions were fruitful or not. At any rate, read against Michelet’s eulogy of Persia in *La Bible de l’humanité*, this comparison can only mean that it was no more of a crime then. Or if there is a crime, it is a redemptive one – such an *impious mystery* as are all sacrifices.

Son fils, enfant sans père, était le seul à qui elle se livrât. Contre la haine universelle du monde et cet accablement de malédiction monstrueuse, elle opposait un monstrueux amour. C’était celui du mage d’Orient ; il ne se renouvelait qu’en épousant sa mère. De même, disait-on, pour perpétuer la sorcière, il fallait ce mystère impie. A ce moment douteux où pâlisent les dernières étoiles, la mère et son jeune hibou, élixir de malice, accomplissaient leur triste fête. La lune fuyait ou se cachait.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.69.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.70.

²⁹⁵ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Henri IV et Richelieu*, *op. cit.*, p.281.

The witch's enormous, monstrous love is a response to the world's hatred. This quasi-parthenogenesis may allude to Enfantin's extreme belief (at the origin of Olinde Rodrigues' break with the Saint-Simonian sect) that it was the woman's exclusive right to know the secret of her child's paternity. At any rate, it is nothing short of anti-Christianity. The witch is a reverse Mary. And from it, for all its ugliness, the redemption of magic, with evil destroyed from within, may rise. Moreover, this apparent and hateful "*mystère*" ultimately comes from an innocent one – that of the corn eternally resown in its furrow. In other words, nature seems to encourage us to give ourselves to "*mariage naturel*." We might err by heeding her call in such a literal manner, but this evil derives from pure and commendable intentions.

Furthermore, we may find in Michelet's oeuvre some hints that, on a symbolic or mythical level at least, this kind of "*mystère impie*" was not only necessary but indeed holy.²⁹⁶ Nature is a mother to man, and in his diary, Michelet compares his mystical and sensual (perhaps masturbatory, erotic in any case) ravings, to an incestuous union with her.

Il y a une singulière sensualité dans la solitude. C'est un tête-à-tête avec la tout aimable et toute féconde, la dangereuse aussi, la résistante, l'homicide... la mère à la fois et l'amante, la mère incestueuse, qui nous fait et nous propose la séduction, nous fait jouir d'elle, nous caresse, nous saoule et nous tue : la Nature. *O marâtre* ! [...] Je voudrais la voir pure et divine. Mais je la souille de mes désirs, ou elle moi de ses caresses. Divine elle est certainement. Et quoi ! y a-t-il donc adultère et inceste avec Dieu ?²⁹⁷

Nature as "*marâtre*," this is a recurring theme in Michelet's *Naturphilosophie*. Let us recall those awful sharks, and all the gruesome depictions of Pan's cruel realm. Here, nature is Venus, and he is Aeneas. She is Lilith, the fierce goddess or she-devil who preys on men's virtues and her

²⁹⁶ Scholem notes that in radical Kabbalah, "there is no incest" in the divine pleroma, nor in the redeemed world (*Sabbatai Ševi*, *op. cit.*, p.810).

²⁹⁷ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, I, p.119.

own children's lives. In other words, the incest actually performed between mothers and sons has a divine template. In solitude, we all commit incest with the universal mother, Michelet whispers.

As for the unions of brother with sister, it has been said that Michelet suggests their harmlessness, or, at least, their inferior level of gravity. One has to understand that his moderate, esoteric endorsement of such unions mirrors his mystical sensitivity. In the same way as Satan is both the witch's son and her spouse, and the genuine warlock a son and a spouse to the revered sibyl, the brother-sister relationship is the earthly embodiment of a divine mystery. In *La Femme*, Michelet delights in the tale of Isis' and Osiris' birth and mystical love. They already loved each other, he recalls, *in their mother's womb*, and there they were so close and united that they begat a son before being born themselves, a son who was really his father – Horus.²⁹⁸ After Osiris died, Isis laments, praying for the return of the one who was hers. I was his sister and his lover, she says, and his mother too!²⁹⁹ In other words, incests harks back to a primordial and awesome truth, which petty social conventions can only disfigure.

Ultimately, incest might be a way to correct an inequitable social order. "*Inceste économique surtout, résultat de l'état misérable où l'on tenait les cerfs*," Michelet asserts in a final note.³⁰⁰ Overall, he suggests that the practice of incest was an exaggerate, somehow unnatural reaction against Christianity's hatred of nature and its theology of grace – a "*culte dénaturé du dieu nature*."³⁰¹ From the "Anti-Nature" had come the rejection of authentic family values. For Michelet, the corruption of both nobility and the Church (against which, as will be shown, the

²⁹⁸ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.245.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

³⁰⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.400.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.179.

witches rebel in their nocturnal assemblies) would not be possible without the theological downgrading of nature expressed in Eusebius' proclamation of Pan's death. Rather than constituting stability and continuity, Christianity would thus be first and foremost the nadir of revered Antiquity. In narrating the constitution of medieval society, Michelet suggests that the chastisement of nature went hand in hand with the reduction of man to isolated monad. This brought about the end of both the ancient city and all organic communities. Incest, in this context, is maybe not so much a blurring of legitimate boundaries as a return to the strong harmony of the organic family ("*forte conjuration, entente très fidèle*"),³⁰² a way of tightening the bonds of the family unit.

Je ne m'étonne pas si cette société devient terrible et furieuse. Indignée de se sentir si faible contre les démons, elle les poursuit partout, dans les temples, les autels de l'ancien culte d'abord, puis dans les martyrs païens. Plus de festins ; ils peuvent être des réunions idolâtriques. Suspecte est la famille même ; car l'habitude pourrait la réunir autour des lares antiques. Et pourquoi une famille ? L'Empire est un empire de moines.³⁰³

The devils, Michelet recalls, were persecuted everywhere, under every guise, in the temples and at the fireside alike. Feasts are gatherings of idolaters, and the family is itself a suspect. But why should there be a family in the first place? Has not Christ proclaimed: "If any man come to Me and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple?" The Christian empire is a virgin one – an empire of monks. Michelet argues that, far from sanctioning family values, Christianity desecrated them. To be sure, the new mythology could have been propitious to the family, had not the father been *cancelled* in the divinely cuckolded Joseph, with the mother's moral childbirth being ultimately

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p.176.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.52.

denied as well. The initial road seemed fruitful, but it was forsaken at the very outset in order to attain a barren and dry purity.³⁰⁴

II. 4. Folk Religion and Sexual Bliss

Free love and incest blur the boundaries between individuals, as well as between the holy and the unholy. Witchcraft is often equated with confusing boundaries – between men and animals, for instance, or between the living and the dead. As such, it subverts the medieval spirit by connecting the peasants to their genuine roots.

The witches' religion, as Michelet describes it, stems from the people's loyalty to their ancient gods, with peasants, from the fifth century onward, braving persecution by parading them in the guise of "small dolls made of linen," and the *Capitularies* apparently threatening death in vain. Jupiter, Minerva, Venus, Diana, the very same goddess to whom the churchmen referred as *paganorum dea*, were still held in high respect, although their cult had gone secret, and their identity conflated with that of the nature spirits and the dead – "*pauvres anciens dieux, tombés à l'état d'Esprits.*" Now dwelling in rocks and in the trees' hearts, they would also warm themselves in the stables beside the beasts, their spiritual kins. And, delighting in the women's parallel and secret worshipping, they would go out at night – banished from the day yet greedy of lamplight – so they could drink the milk they had prepared to quench their thirst.³⁰⁵

We find in François de Rosset's *Histoires mémorables et tragiques de ce temps* – a source for the Gauffridi Affair to which Michelet devotes a chapter of *La Sorcière* –, that "*les orgies de*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50-51.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.76.

Bacchus n'étaient autre chose que ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui sabbat."³⁰⁶ Incidentally, Rosset also equates "*ce Pan lascif, tant recherché des matrones d'Italie*" with Satan.³⁰⁷ Even before that time, the assimilation of witchcraft to ancient Greek, Germanic, or Celtic religions had actually been commonplace in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. We previously addressed the turn it took in such demonological works as Bodin's and Lancre's. The *Canon Episcopi*, one of the earliest texts mentioning what would be labeled as "Sabbath" centuries later, runs as follows:

Bishops and their officials must labor with all their strength to uproot thoroughly from their parishes the pernicious art of sorcery and malefice invented by the devil [...]. It is also not to be omitted that some wicked women perverted by the devil, seduced by illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess themselves, in the hours of night, to ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of the pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the dead of night to traverse great spaces of earth, and to obey her commands as of their mistress, and to be summoned to her service on certain nights.³⁰⁸

Over the course of centuries, the *Canon Episcopi* was modified so as to include other female deities, more or less equated with Diana. Indeed, the Greco-Roman goddess had continued to enjoy a certain cult in the early Middle Ages, but other sources mention Herodias, or Aradia, yet others Holda, "a supernatural, motherly being who normally lives in the upper air, and circles the air. [...] She travels in the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany, and this brings fruitfulness to the land during the coming year."³⁰⁹ Sundry documents evoke a "Fair Lady" who, accompanied by a throng of "ladies of the night," would visit peasants' homes at night. "From all this there emerges a coherent picture of a traditional folk-belief"³¹⁰ that had survived the crush of

³⁰⁶ François de Rosset, *Les Histoires mémorables et tragiques de ce temps*, edited by Anne de Vaucher Gravili, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1994, p.108.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.131.

³⁰⁸ Quoted in H. C. Lea, *op. cit.*, pp.178-179.

³⁰⁹ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.169.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.172.

paganism by Christianity. Michelet's idea was therefore not so new, but he gave it academic and literary new credentials.

More importantly, he refined it by adducing a dialectic dimension. Paganism is crushed, then it returns in the guise of rebellion – unless it is the Revolution that has first to don the old garments of paganism and witchcraft. The Church soon had indeed waged fierce war with those “demons,” hunting them down in every place.³¹¹

It had been acknowledged that the old deities could not be driven from the oaks and springs in which they abode.³¹² The desert, the moor and the forest, but, above all, the home, substituted for their destroyed temples, with the fireside superseding the altar.³¹³ Michelet notes that paganism, even before it was reincarnated as witchcraft, and independently of that clandestine cult, endured in a subterranean way, with the ancient feast of the northern spirits surviving in the guise of Christmas, the Vigil of May (*Pervigilium of Maia*), when the trees were planted in honor of the gods, becoming the apparently innocent Eve of May-day, and the true feast of life, flowers, and newly-awakened love turning into Saint John's Eve.³¹⁴ The invisible and subversive force of paganism was thus undermining the burdensome order of Christianity by adopting its external features.

Like most religions if not all of them, witchcraft was meant to save. For Michelet, the witches' rejoicing was a communal one, ultimately destined to bring about a renewed political conscience amongst the masses. At any rate, drinking each other's blood at the sabbath, certainly

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.77.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p.49.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p.50.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.77.

a cannibalistic ritual, is redolent of the dark cannibalistic banquets of Basque Country, with the witches having there the custom of eating the bodies of their dead sisters.³¹⁵ Above all, it seems to be fashioned after the Eucharist ceremony, its mention in the chapter on the sabbath explicitly pointing to the witches' own idea of redemption.

This recourse to paganism was soon to take an erotic turn, and, by doing so, pave the way to the redemption of the womb described above. To put it in another way, the scientific revolution of the witches – and, then, of the Humanists – takes root in the way their foremothers, thanks to their own *mystical* quest, reappropriated their body. Early in *La Sorcière*, Michelet brings up parthenogenesis, which, as already suggested, is somehow connected with incest. Both actually point to a symbolic, and heroic second birth – to reenter the maternal womb in order to beget oneself.³¹⁶ It also bears another connotation, which Michelet never clarifies, yet repeatedly implies – that of autoeroticism.

L'illumination de la folie lucide, qui, selon ses degrés, est poésie, seconde vue, pénétration perçante, la parole naïve et rusée, la faculté surtout de se croire en tous ses mensonges. Don ignoré du sorcier mâle. Avec lui, rien n'eût commencé.

De ce don un autre dérive, la sublime puissance de la *conception solitaire*, la parthénogénèse que nos physiologistes reconnaissent maintenant dans les femelles de nombreuses espèces pour la fécondité du corps, et qui n'est pas moins sûre pour les conceptions de l'esprit.

Seule, elle conçut et enfanta. Qui ? Une autre elle-même qui lui ressemble à s'y tromper. Fils de haine, conçu de l'amour. Car sans l'amour, on ne crée rien. Celle-ci, tout effrayée qu'elle est de cet enfant, s'y retrouve si bien, se complaît tellement en cette idole, qu'elle la place à l'instant sur l'autel, l'honore, s'y immole, et se donne comme victime et vivante hostie. Elle-même bien souvent le dira à son juge : « Je ne crains qu'une chose : souffrir trop peu pour lui. » (Lancre.)

Savez-vous bien le début de l'enfant ? C'est un terrible éclat de rire. N'a-t-il pas sujet d'être gai, sur sa libre prairie, loin des cachots d'Espagne et des *emmurés* de Toulouse. Son *in pace* n'est pas moins que le monde. Il va, vient, se promène. À lui la forêt sans limite ! à lui la lande des lointains horizons ! à lui toute la terre dans la rondeur de sa riche ceinture ! La sorcière lui dit tendrement : « Mon *Robin* », du nom de ce vaillant proscrit, le joyeux Robin

³¹⁵ E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre – Voices of the Accused in the Basque Witch-Craze, 1609-1614*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2019, pp.208-209.

³¹⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, *Lettres et autres textes*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2015, p.177.

Hood, qui vit sous la verte fouillée. Elle aime aussi à le nommer du petit nom de *Verdelet*, *Joli-bois*, *Vert-bois*. Ce sont les lieux favoris de l'espiègle. À peine eut-il vu un buisson, qu'il fit l'école buissonnière.

Ce qui étonne, c'est que du premier coup la Sorcière vraiment fit un être. Il a tous les semblants de la réalité. On l'a vu, entendu. Chacun peut le décrire.³¹⁷

The witch's frenzy, or rather illuminism,³¹⁸ is a poetic kind of creativity, second sight by dint of insight, and the ability to believe her own lies, thereby making them performative. And in the same way as the females of several species possess the sublime power of unaided conception, the witch possesses a similar *spiritual* power, which makes her the mother of the very Devil she can imagine and unite with in dream. The little fiend she wants to "suffer" for is born of her revolt, of her laughter. Like those *incubi* whose copulations obsessed so much Sprenger and Kramer, he is the son of her erotic ravings.

Schizophrenics and hysterics tend to interpret – unconsciously if not consciously – birth and reproduction as parthenogenetic, with babies resulting of autoerotic fantasies.³¹⁹ It is obviously what Michelet has in mind here. The little fiend caresses her, she feels his sensual presence when he rubs her gown³²⁰, or whenever she feels herself fondled by a light breath or a bird's wing. He laughs, and his gentle voice declares the joy he felt in taking his chaste young mistress by surprise. The imp, a fruit of her fancy, is the daring lover she has always dreamt of, who, being so tiny that he can creep everywhere, glides into her bed at night.³²¹ There is even, Michelet suggests, a certain

³¹⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.38-39.

³¹⁸ The word, as shall be shown, really matters since Michelet later discusses the Christian doctrine of that name, whose shortcomings echo the witches' genuine redemptive efforts.

³¹⁹ Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas – Reclaiming Hysteria*, New York, Basic Books, 2000, p.151.

³²⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.78.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.79-80.

slit – “*une certaine fente*” – where he likes to stand and sing.³²² The holy log which the woman puts on the fire, which prompts her to think of her old gods, might also allude to the sexual dimension of her “illumination.”³²³ At any rate, the apprentice witch’s husband, a merry or happy-go-lucky cuckold – somehow akin to Saint Joseph, whose “cancellation” Michelet elsewhere laments – can only observe that the little trickster, the “*follet*,” has redeemed his poor house, making his fortune along with his wife’s physical and mental happiness.³²⁴ Among Michelet’s sources for this passage is Maury’s book on fairies. In a footnote, Maury explicitly conflates fairies and elves with men’s and women’s erotic dreams, born out of hysteric arousal and other analogous sensations which sleeping women might confuse with a loving embrace.³²⁵

There is a moment of resistance on the part of the future witch, after which she and her helping spirit embark upon a working relationship whose aim is primarily to heal, to divine and to redeem.³²⁶ She is the one who summons the devil: her miserable wooden saints cannot help her, but she knows that the little fiend may save her from her sorrow and misery.³²⁷ He soon becomes, however, a cruel enemy, at least before she utterly surrenders herself to his power. She is always shivering, unable to sleep, scared of the animals she once loved. And to chastise her for hesitating to sign the pact, the demon puts on a hundred hideous forms, twisting as a snake on her bosom, dancing as a toad or a bat upon her stomach, going as far as to violate her. Tortured by his attacks,

³²² *Ibid.*, p.80.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p.77.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81.

³²⁵ A. Maury, *op. cit.*, p.90.

³²⁶ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, pp.136-137.

³²⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.90-91.

she feels him within her. Michelet describes her possession as a *tænia*, which points to the digestive theme analyzed above. The possession is at once her punishment and her pride.³²⁸ What does he want? To crush her, that she may yield and utter the word “Yes.” Still she prefers this endless martyrdom.³²⁹ The consensual love of the beginning has morphed into a sadistic relationship. It is her own flesh that the aspirant gives the devil to eat.³³⁰ Finally, she will feel the strength of his embrace with bliss and terror, fire and ice, “*elle frissonna, se sentit avec horreur empalée d’un trait de feu, inondée d’un flot de glace.*”³³¹ As everyone knows, Hell and sexual bliss are fiery, but Satan’s semen is cold as ice.³³²

Michelet suggests here that the very teachings of the Church may account for this dark turn. The Christian god punishes via the demons, who delight in torturing the damned. That Sodom – Hell – is an everlasting one, where those who substitute for the exterminating angels of Genesis actually stay with their victims, fouler than the sinners yielded into their charge.

Tant que Dieu punissait lui-même, *appesantissait sa main* ou frappait *par l’épée de l’ange* (selon la noble forme antique), il y avait moins d’horreur ; cette main était sévère, celle d’un juge, d’un père pourtant. L’ange en frappant restait pur et net comme son épée. Il n’en est nullement ainsi, quand l’exécution se fait par des démons immondes. Ils n’imitent point du tout l’ange qui brûla Sodome, mais qui d’abord en sortit. Ils y restent, et leur enfer est une horrible Sodome où ces esprits, plus souillés que les pécheurs qu’on leur livre, tirent des tortures qu’ils infligent d’odieuses jouissances. C’est l’enseignement qu’on trouvait dans les *naïves* sculptures étalées aux portes des églises. On y apprenait l’horrible leçon des voluptés de la douleur. Sous prétexte de supplice, les diables assouvissent sur leurs victimes les caprices les plus révoltants. Conception immorale et profondément coupable ! d’une prétendue justice qui favorise le pire, empire sa perversité en lui donnant un jouet, et corrompt le démon même !³³³

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.100.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

³³⁰ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, p.144.

³³¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.103.

³³² See for instance P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, pp.223-224.

³³³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.99.

Once again, Michelet suggests, Christianity has betrayed the lessons of Antiquity. The venerable God of the Old Testament would chastise as a father, not as a lustful “witch pricker.” And it is in the simple carvings hung out at the doors of churches that these new, blasphemous teachings were henceforth to be seen. By them, a Sade may have learned the pleasures of pain. On the pretense of punishing – just like the lecherous inquisitors – the devils wreaked upon their victims their most unclean desires. In other words, the Demon himself was corrupted by this theology of sin. Yet, it appears to have also inspired the witch’s own fancy. For she is tortured by her devil, more and more, and he uses her with dreadful cruelty as long as she preserves herself, bedeviled as she is, yet still independent from him.³³⁴ At last, she will surrender herself to her suitor, with an ill grace, to be sure, but aware that she is already all his, invaded and possessed, filled with his flame.³³⁵ And by ruining her (“*Je t’ai perdue*”), destroying both her security and faith in God, he will, in fact, save her : “*Oui, mais c’est moi qui t’ai sauvée et qui t’ai fait venir ici.*”³³⁶ That the devil who thus tortures this wretched woman – while she is still alive and reluctant to abandon herself to his power – may also be the one who ultimately saves her is a complete reversal of the Catholic myth. In Hell, there is no redemption, even through pain.

Christian mystical literature contains many accounts of sexualized, at times sadistic relations between a female contemplative and Christ or some angel – which Michelet’s “witchy” method seems again to take “*à rebours,*” unless they both pertain to the same, hidden paradigm, namely the universal symbol of mystical union.³³⁷ Since the Christian demons delight in torture,

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.101.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.110.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.111.

³³⁷ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits, op. cit.*, p.238.

Michelet's Lucifer does too, but he does so the way the angels do. To be raped by him is to be redeemed, since demons and angels are, in fact, the same. "On a popular level there was often little difference between a fairy and an angel, saint, ghost, or devil,"³³⁸ and it appears that Michelet, when he mentions the little fiend of the fireside is deliberately close to that kind of mentality. Teresa of Ávila's heavenly, yet highly corporal bliss – the object of Bernini's famous sculpture – did not escape Michelet's attention.³³⁹ That she had often questioned whether her visions were of divine or demonic origin was well-known³⁴⁰, and this ambiguity is key to the dialectic of *La Sorcière*, with the genuinely demonic vision of the witch deserving more praises, in Michelet's opinion, than Christian erotic mysticism. At any rate, we see with the little devil's appearance that the religion of the witch is not only a propaedeutic to modern medicine, or even an archaic tool to cure and appease the immediate needs of the aching body. It also saves by informing visionary and sensual experiences which remain thereby unpoliced and far less inhibited by any ethical restriction. What Michelet saw in witchcraft is the remarkable kind of freedom it must have lent ordinary people for centuries.

II. 5. Folk Religion and Animal Transformations

The witches' relationship with animal life, to which I now turn, may unite their carnal ethics with the question of death. In European folk religion, helping spirits – angels, imps, or the dead – typically appeared in varied animal forms.³⁴¹ I propose to read one Michelet's cryptic

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

³³⁹ See our penultimate chapter.

³⁴⁰ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, p.224.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.129.

assessment as referring to what twentieth-century historians and anthropologists, his heirs, would understand as the shamanistic substratum of European witchcraft. To be sure, Michelet could not have construed witchcraft as vestigial shamanism, since this notion was yet to be devised, but, thanks to his readings, of Maury especially, he had the intuition of something very close to it.

In *La Sorcière*, the human finds shelter amidst the inhuman.³⁴² The sabbath was not only a *moment*. It was a certain *space* too – the liminal space of Pan Lykaios. Condemned by the Church, it is reappropriated by the peasants, who thereby liberate themselves from their physical and social imprisonment, at last allowed to commune with their animal brothers.³⁴³

Représentez-vous, sur une grande lande, et souvent près d'un vieux dolmen celtique, à la lisière d'un bois, une scène double : d'une part, la lande bien éclairée, le grand repas du peuple ; — d'autre part, vers le bois, le chœur de cette église dont le dôme est le ciel. J'appelle chœur un tertre qui domine quelque peu. Entre les deux, des feux résineux à flamme jaune et de rouges brasiers, une vapeur fantastique.³⁴⁴

Such is the set of the witches' sabbath – a vast moor, an old Celtic dolmen (loyalty to the old religion *oblige*), a twofold space for the people to both take communion and to admire in awe the fantastic beauty of nature.³⁴⁵ Witchcraft is not a cult to be held in a cellar or between the closed walls of a gothic castle. It is nature itself, in all its splendor, freed and saved from the fetters of Christian prejudice. The Christian sabbath is held in the stale atmosphere of churches, the witches' one in the open air. From the outset, the sabbath is also, as such, the celebration of men's animalistic roots. The witch is a queen, with courtiers of her own – those outlaws of the forests,

³⁴² Roland Barthes, "La Sorcière," *op. cit.*, p.118.

³⁴³ See J. Favret, *op. cit.*, p.358.

³⁴⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.165-166.

³⁴⁵ It should be reminded that both *pagan* and *heathen* connote the countryside and the natural world, with the latter referring to people worshipping their forbidden old divinities in wastelands and wild places. See R. Hutton, *op. cit.*, p.4.

the ravens, the wolves and the bears, who talk to her of passing things, or salute her timidly, or even seat at the threshold of her den, talking to her like a hermit talking to a fellow hermit.

Tendue, vive et acérée, sa vue devient aussi perçante que ces aiguilles, et le monde [...] lui est transparent comme verre. [...]

N'en est-elle pas la reine ? n'a-t-elle pas des courtisans ? Les corbeaux manifestement sont en rapport avec elle. [...] Les loups passent timidement, saluent d'un regard oblique. L'ours (moins rare alors) parfois s'assoit gauchement, avec sa lourde bonhomie, au seuil de l'ancre, comme un ermite qui fait visite à un ermite, ainsi qu'on le voit si souvent dans les Vies des pères du désert.

Tous, oiseaux et animaux que l'homme ne connaît que par la chasse et la mort, ils sont des proscrits, comme elle.³⁴⁶

Through contact with them, the witch's powers gain strength. She reconnects with her own "wolfish" energy and female fierceness. As sharp as the lynx's, her sight intensifies, making the world transparent as glass and delightful again. She is less of a human being, more of an animal spirit, rejoicing in her kins' friendship.

Even before yielding to such savage impulses, the apprentice witch is described, along with her family, as being in close relationship with domestic animals. The overall animalistic culture of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period is contrasted with the Christian prejudice against nature. Already in *Le Peuple*, Michelet seemed interested in that aspect of the peasants' lives – what he calls the rehabilitation of the animals.

Les animaux, réhabilités, prennent place dans la famille rustique après l'enfant qui les aime, comme les petits parents figurent au bas bout de la table dans une noble maison. Ils sont traités comme tels aux grands jours, prennent part aux joies, aux tristesses, portent habits de deuil ou de noces (naguère encore en Bretagne). Ils ne disent rien, il est vrai, mais ils sont dociles, ils écoutent patiemment ; l'homme, comme prêtre en sa maison, les prêche au nom du Seigneur. [...]

La famille une fois composée ainsi, il s'agit de la faire, si l'on peut, entrer tout entière dans l'Église. Ici grandes difficultés ! On veut bien recevoir l'animal, mais pour lui jeter l'eau bénite, l'exorciser en quelque sorte, et seulement au parvis... « Homme simple, laisse là ta bête, entre seul. L'entrée de l'église, c'est le Jugement que tu vois représenté sur les portes ; La Loi siège au seuil, saint Michel debout tient l'épée et la balance... Comment juger, sauver ou damner ce que tu amènes avec toi ? La bête, cela a-t-il une âme ?... Ces âmes de bêtes, qu'en faire ? leur ouvrirons-nous des limbes, comme à celles des petits enfants ? »

³⁴⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126.

N'importe, notre homme s'obstine ; il écoute avec respect, mais ne se soucie de comprendre. Il ne veut pas être sauvé seul, et sans les siens. Pourquoi son bœuf et son âne ne feraient-ils pas leur salut avec le chien de saint Paulin ? ils ont bien autant travaillé ! « Eh bien ! je serai habile, dit-il en lui-même, je prendrai le jour de Noël où l'Église est en famille, le jour où Dieu est encore trop petit pour être juste... Justes ou non, nous passerons tous, moi, ma femme, mon enfant, mon âne... Lui aussi ! Il a été à Bethléem, il a porté Notre-Seigneur. Il faut bien en récompense que la pauvre bête ait son jour... Il n'est pas trop sûr d'ailleurs qu'elle soit ce qu'elle paraît ; elle est, au fond, malicieuse, fainéante ; c'est tout comme moi ; si je n'étais aussi traîné, je ne travaillerais guère. »³⁴⁷

Away with prejudice, the peasant proudly replies to the churchman. His philosophy is no Christian, not even Roman, being in a way closer, Michelet ventures, to that of the Hindus, or to Virgil's since the author of the *Eclogues*, an exception in his own era, did not share with the rest of his nation its contempt for Pan's realm.³⁴⁸ Christianity rebuked the animals, rejected them from its temples, offering them the holy water only to exorcise them. And the revolt of the peasant is, perhaps, the first step of the resurrection of paganism, the first episode of the history of witchcraft : they proclaimed that salvation should include the smallest, the humblest in God's creation. The lives of those people and their beasts were literally intertwined. The uninhibited nature of the latter, so true to themselves and unrestricted by social and moralistic values, would have been intimately woven into Pan's children's idea of what life really meant.³⁴⁹ These previously articulated considerations are the backdrop against which we should read *La Sorcière*. To be sure, Michelet is somehow more specific and explicit in *Le Peuple*, where he argues at length that beasts have souls, and need to be saved. I would however propose that, in *La Sorcière*, they save men rather than the other way around.

³⁴⁷ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, Paris, Hachette, 1846, pp.189-191.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.183-186.

³⁴⁹ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, pp.228-230.

The mention of *Donkey Skin*, although brief and odd, is instrumental to understanding this idea. Michelet asserts that the well-known tale conveys both a typically female empathy toward the downtrodden, and a broader one toward all living creatures.

C'est l'autre face de *Peau-d'Âne* et autres contes semblables. La surtout on est bien sûr qu'il y a un cœur de femme. Le rude travailleur des champs est assez dur pour ses bêtes. Mais la femme n'y voit point de bêtes. Elle en juge comme l'enfant. Tout est humain, tout est esprit. Le monde entier est ennobli. Oh ! l'aimable enchantement ! Si humble, et se croyant laide, elle a donné sa beauté, son charme à toute la nature.³⁵⁰

The woman regards the beasts with the fondness of a child. To her fancy, Michelet proclaims, they are no beasts. A hidden god inhabits obscure being, and a pure spirit may grow beneath the surface of stones: this esoteric belief was shared by a variety of Romantic authors, with Victor Hugo also writing in “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” that everything lives, replete with soul, “*tout vit, tout est plein d’âme.*” But there is more to Michelet’s take on *Donkey Skin* than a mere rephrasing of this old occultist tenet. Actually, the historian appears to perfectly know what he means, or rather to sense it in a way that does not need to be clarified, and yet there is nothing self-evident about this suggestion. Any reader of Perrault’s tale would be very surprised indeed: where is the woman’s compassion toward the despised animal to be found in it? And where is the beast’s soul? The eponymous donkey plays no part as a character, except that it is killed and flayed so the princess may escape from the castle she grew up in, thereby being saved from her father’s incestuous desire.

There are only two possible explanations. Michelet may be misreading Perrault’s tale, and it is even feasible that he did not read it at all. The other possibility might sound excessively bold, but I will nonetheless propose it. There is a hidden, shamanistic layer in *Donkey Skin* – notably conjured up in Ginzburg’s *Ecstasies* – of which Michelet might be, at least intuitively, aware. In

³⁵⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.75.

connection with both the *Cinderella* story and *The Golden Ass* – a seminal work for all scholars of ancient magic – it re-elaborates the theme of the journey of the soul to the netherworld via an “animal transformation.” Ginzburg even showed that the origins of the witches’ sabbath lie in the same stock of beliefs as the *Donkey Skin* original story and lycanthropic folktales, with the necessity for the initiate – or shaman – to undergo such a metamorphosis in order to travel to the world of the dead, and thereby to save the living. An enigmatic animal, the donkey has been ascribed both ignorance and wisdom, enlightenment and obscurity, and, of course, satanic powers as well. Sacred to both Apollo and Dionysus – and connected to Jesus and Jewish messianism too – it was also instrumental, in *The Golden Ass*, in the author’s transformation from instinctive to spiritual levels.³⁵¹

In a footnote which we already mentioned, Maury discussed shamanistic Eurasian rituals such as those Ginzburg would address in *Ecstasies*. Michelet has certainly read this passage, which he alludes to in *La Sorcière*³⁵² as well as in *Renaissance*, repeatedly asserting that the old religion survived during the Middle Ages through the fairies’ oaks and the springs where they gathered for two thousand years. Maury brings up Diana, from whose cult the nocturnal assemblies later called sabbaths stem:³⁵³ Michelet, as shown above, quotes this almost word for word.³⁵⁴ Maury then focuses on mysterious “theurgic operations” called *Seidr* and pertaining to the ancient Norse religion. *Seidr* is typically shamanistic, although such a qualification could not have been used in 1843.

³⁵¹ Bettina Knapp, *French Fairy Tales – A Jungian Approach*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p.73.

³⁵² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.160.

³⁵³ A. Maury, *op. cit.*, p.60.

³⁵⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.76.

Les vacations nocturnes, *Utisëtur*, se rencontrent aussi chez les Scandinaves, elles se rattachaient, ainsi que les voyages chez les Finnois, *Finförrar*, aux opérations théurgiques et principalement à la connaissance du Seidr ou art de revêtir telle forme ou telle peau (ham) d'animal que l'on voulait. Après avoir fait partie de la religion des peuples septentrionaux, après avoir été la science des dieux, le Seidr devint en horreur, et fut regardé comme la science des Iotes, ennemis des dieux [...]. Les codes suédois, norvégiens et danois punirent les opérations magiques comme des crimes, et Olaf-le-Saint brûla traitreusement dans un festin, après les avoir enivrés, tous les sorciers, ministres du Seidr.³⁵⁵

What we have here is an evocation of nocturnal assemblies and supernatural flights, and an animalistic ritual, with the attendants apparently donning an animal skin in order to perform some theurgic operation. It appears that Michelet had metabolized these notions, elsewhere mentioning, for instance, the “Lupercal” (or proto-werewolf), that was still following women and children, he suggests, disguised indeed under the dark face of ghost Hallequin,³⁵⁶ a mythical being initially known for leading the cohorts of the dead identified with tumultuous squads of masked youths.³⁵⁷ There is a memorable episode of lycanthropy, to which we will turn later, but Michelet also mentions such animal transformations while discussing Sprenger’s activities:

On prenait les sorcières fort aisément par leurs aveux, et parfois sans tortures. Beaucoup étaient de demi-folles. Elles avouaient se transformer en bêtes. Souvent les Italiennes se faisaient chattes, et, glissant sous les portes, suçaient, disaient-elles, le sang des enfants. Au pays des grandes forêts, en Lorraine et au Jura, les femmes volontiers devenaient louves, dévoraient les passants, à les en croire (même quand il ne passait personne). On les brûlait.³⁵⁸

Witches easily confessed to turning themselves into beasts, Michelet insists. In Italy, they would often become cats, sucking the blood of children under this guise. In a land of mighty forests, they would become she-wolves. Both Maury and Lancre, Michelet’s sources, had explained such confessions in terms of pagan rituals. The fact that we find allusions to sundry

³⁵⁵ A. Maury, *op. cit.*, p.61.

³⁵⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.160.

³⁵⁷ C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, p.191.

³⁵⁸ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.213.

shamanistic practices in the French magistrates' book is indeed noteworthy, and it is especially the case in relation to the Lupercalia, which Lancre aptly relates to werewolves stories.³⁵⁹ A correlation between witchcraft and Eurasian paganism may be found in his *Tableau*, to the effect that “the followers of Diana [...] and the shamans of Lapland described by Olaus Magnus and by Peucer” shared “the ability to fall into a diabolical ecstasy.”³⁶⁰

That being said, in what manner such a subtext could relate to *Donkey Skin*? We saw that in *La Sorcière*, this tale was explicitly connected with the belief that “all is soul.” What could that possibly mean unless read against the backdrop of shamanism? In Perrault's tale, the donkey is not a real character, it does not appear to have a “soul,” unless we construe the donning of its skin as a vestigial rite – or an allegory pointing to some ancient and hidden ceremony – involving souls exchange, with the fairy godmother presiding over the initiation. At any rate, it is probably the original meaning of the story. I want to suggest that Michelet expressed an intuitive knowledge of it, informed or guided by such sources as Lancre or Maury. He perceived the primordial cultic meaning of the tale, however covered up with courtly clothes. But, more importantly, animal disguises were rituals correlative of the animal metamorphosis experienced during the ecstasy of the sabbath – or what the witchhunters would thus call – representing different ways of making contact with the dead.³⁶¹ Whether Michelet was conscious of it or not, this shamanistic pattern helps connect the theme of nature with that of the netherworld.

II. 6. The King of the Dead

³⁵⁹ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.282.

³⁶⁰ C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, p.137.

³⁶¹ C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.185-186.

Witchcraft redeems nature and the human body. It saves the animals and, through them, men. It also gives the living the ability to connect with their beloved deceased. In a time when death is ubiquitous, and the Church unable to cure the poor's grief, witchcraft is the religion of the bereaved.

Like a shaman, Michelet's witch is a healer and a diviner, she inspires and comforts, she redeems by curing the ill as well as by speaking to her tribe of that *mysterium tremendum* which the official priests are unable to convey. The shaman is the one who can travel to the beyond, communicate with the dead and placate them in order to preclude their hostility to the living – an essential trait of what seems to have been the primeval religious culture of Eurasia. Likewise, Michelet's witch is really the one who can revive the dead. Unlike Christian contemplatives, she lives in the heart of her community³⁶², her mysticism being as popular in essence as it is genuine.³⁶³ In the eyes of those common folk whose voice Michelet tries to unearth, the witch is a saint if not a semi-goddess.

Pénétrer l'avenir, évoquer le passé, devancer, rappeler le temps qui va si vite, étendre le présent de ce qui fut et de ce qui sera, voilà deux choses proscrites au Moyen-âge. En vain. Nature ici est invincible ; on n'y gagnera rien. Qui pêche ainsi est homme. Il ne le serait pas, celui qui resterait fixé sur son sillon, l'œil baissé, le regard borné au pas qu'il fait derrière ses bœufs. Non, nous irons toujours visant plus haut, plus loin et plus au fond. Cette terre, nous la mesurons péniblement, mais la frappons du pied, et lui disons toujours : « Qu'as-tu dans tes entrailles ? Quels secrets ? quels mystères ? Tu nous rends bien le grain que nous te confions. Mais tu ne nous rends pas cette semence humaine, ces morts aimés que nous t'avons prêtés. Ne germeront-ils pas, nos amis, nos amours, que nous avons mis là ? Si du moins pour une heure, un moment, ils venaient à nous ! »³⁶⁴

To fathom the future and to call up the past – divination and necromancy, which both enlarge the present with that which has been and that which will be – these are the two things

³⁶² E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, p.206.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.216.

³⁶⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.117.

forbidden by Christianity. Yet, they are forbidden in vain. Nature – the alliance of Eros and Thanatos – is invincible. And anyone who thus sins against the beliefs of the Church is but a man. Michelet describes the poor peasant hailing the earth that he measures out with so much care: “What do you hold in your entrails? What secrets? What mysteries? You give us back the grain we entrust to you; but not that human seed, our beloved dead, we have entrusted to you. Will our beloved ones never rise from you? Will they never bud again?” This harrowing prayer echoes a well-known Christian analogy, equating death and burial with sowing. “Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain.”³⁶⁵ Let us note the digestive metaphor, to which we have been prepared by Michelet’s emphasis on the bowels, stomach, and even feces. From time immemorial, the underworld and the intestines have been connected. The former was literally “the bowels of the earth,” with Proserpina being both the daughter of Ceres, goddess of fertility, and the wife of Pluto. Unfortunately, for the bereaved Christian of that era, the Church appears to be unable to hold its own promise – perhaps because it is unable to fully think in such digestive, organic terms. As a result, there is no solace nor resurrection.

Actually, the situation, Michelet maintains, is even worse than it was in Antiquity. These everlasting thoughts of nature were no longer simply melancholic, they had become bitter and cruel, thereby making the heart itself grow smaller. “*Il semble que l’on ait calculé d’aplatir l’âme,*” it seems that the Church had reckoned on flattening the soul, squeezing it down to the size of a coffin. And if ever the beloved dead was to returned in his children’s or spouse’s dreams, he would no longer appear as a hallowed shadow, like in the time of the Greeks or the Romans, but only as a wretched slave of Hell. What a hateful and impious idea, Michelet protests. Likewise, it was a

³⁶⁵ I Corinthians, 15: 36-37.

cruel device to move the Feast of the Dead from the Spring to November. Instead of being buried among the flowers, or, along with the seed of corn, in March, entering the earth together with the same hope, they would henceforth be mourned once all the work is done, in a gloomy weather. The moment was already in itself the obsequies of nature: for the churchmen to choose it, Michelet insists, was a manner of saying they feared that the bereaved would not find cause enough of sorrow.³⁶⁶ Not only was Christianity inept, it also actively forsook the dead.

Fortunately, the one who lives with the elves and fairies also consorts with the dead. Medieval and early modern sources, such as Marie de France's poem "Lanval," point to an association between the fairies and the dead. The former were commonly believed to be souls, resurrected and immortal, of the latter.³⁶⁷ The "Good Mistress" of the fairies, Diana, who led the nocturnal assemblies, was called the Queen of the Elves, with her *societas* being both a group of immortal spirits – of devils according to the Church – and of dead ones. The ecstasies experienced in the fertility cults related to her were thus a way to communicate with the netherworld as well as a manner of securing the harvest.³⁶⁸ It is, then, only natural that the little elf's lover should become a necromancer – the priestess of the simple ones.

« Savez vous bien, voisin ?... Il y a là-haut certaine femme dont on dit du mal et du bien. Moi, je n'ose en rien dire. Mais elle a puissance au monde d'en bas. Elle appelle les morts, et ils viennent. Oh ! si elle pouvait (sans péché, s'entend, sans fâcher Dieu) me faire venir les miens !... Vous savez, je suis seul, et j'ai tout perdu en ce monde. — Mais cette femme, qui sait ce qu'elle est ? Du ciel ou de l'enfer ? Je n'irai pas (et il en meurt d'envie)... Je n'irai pas... Je ne veux pas risquer mon âme. Ce bois, d'ailleurs, est mal hanté. Maintes fois on a vu sur la lande des choses qui n'étaient pas à voir... Savez-vous bien ? la Jacqueline qui y a été un soir pour chercher un de ses moutons ? eh bien, elle est revenue folle... Je n'irai pas. »

En se cachant les uns des autres, beaucoup y vont, des hommes. À peine encore les femmes osent se hasarder. Elles regardent le dangereux chemin, s'enquièreent près de ceux qui

³⁶⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.118-119.

³⁶⁷ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, p.102.

³⁶⁸ C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.102-103.

en reviennent. La pythonisse n'est pas celle d'Endor, qui, pour Saül, évoqua Samuel ; elle ne montre pas les ombres, mais elle donne les mots cabalistiques et les puissants breuvages qui les feront revoir en songe. Ah ! que de douleurs vont à elles ! La grand-mère elle-même, vacillante, à quatre-vingts ans, voudrait revoir son petit-fils. Par un suprême effort, non sans remords de pécher au bord de la tombe, elle s'y traîne. L'aspect du lieu sauvage, âpre, d'ifs, et de ronces, la rude et noire beauté de l'implacable Proserpine, la trouble. Prosternée et tremblante, appliquée à la terre, la pauvre vieille pleure et prie. Nulle réponse. Mais quand elle ose se relever un peu, elle voit que l'enfer a pleuré.³⁶⁹

A peasant speaks to another one. Don't you know that this woman, of whom people speak ill and well, has power over the world below? She summons the dead, and they come. Oh that she could call up my people – of course, without sin, without angering God! To be sure, the man knows that his very desire is sinful, but his “religion” is more generous than the Church's. He has lost everything, and all what he wants is to see, to *feel* his beloved ones again. His neighbor is hesitant. He is dying of curiosity but he does not want to imperil his soul. Yet, unknown to each other, many men go to the witch, then women, parents and grandparents who have lost their dear ones. And the woman, for them, makes Hell weep: they will see their beloved ones again, in dream. The widow, provided she kisses the last cloth her husband wore, and sing a song he made for her, may even have a sense of his presence. “*Et sans retard, buvant ce vin amer, mais de profond sommeil, tu coucheras la mariée. Alors, sans nul doute, il viendra.*”³⁷⁰ In the same way as the witch sleeps with her little imp, she will lie down again as a wedded bride. The accursed woman thus eases many a sorrow, which the Church is utterly unable to do. That love which was supposed to give life, the Nazarene's religion turns out to be unable to provide it, but the old, pagan religion has this ability. As such, it alone builds a bridge between the two worlds. One has sinned, yes, but one is thus redeemed, and the dead also are. Blessed be thou, Spirit of the Netherworld!³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.120-121.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.123.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.124.

It should be noted that Michelet is far from being the only author of his time who “consorted with the dead.” What Muray disparagingly called “*l’école nécromantique*” included, for instance, his friend Quinet. The latter wrote that his worship of the dead and belief in metempsychosis were actually more pious and spiritual than the tenets and rites of Christianity.³⁷² The nineteenth-century saw the rise of Spiritism, with Allan Kardec publishing his *Livre des Esprits* in 1857, and his *Livre des médiums* in 1861, one year before *La Sorcière*. Victor Hugo forayed into table-turning while in exile in Jersey in the early 1850s, writing also at length about reincarnation. Likewise, Gérard de Nerval sought immemorial truths in his own previous lives. Michelet was a necromancer, a necrophile, but many others drank along with him “*le sang noir des morts*.” Death, as the hidden and paradoxical force of life itself, was everywhere.

We saw that Satan was Pan. Michelet sees him as “*Osiris, le pasteur des âmes*,” the shepherd of the souls.³⁷³ As such, he is more compassionate toward the bereaved lovers and mothers than the new god is. The Virgin herself makes no answer to such a want of the heart.³⁷⁴ He will. And for the people, he will keep his primal, Miltonian, beauty, even though the Church insists so much on blackening and disfiguring it.³⁷⁵ That, in Michelet’s mind, Osiris is associated with blessed incest, is relevant here. Incest has to do with Eros, yet also with Thanatos. To unite with one’s mother or one’s sister is to return to the formless world of the non-born, that is also the world of the dead.

³⁷² Edgar Quinet, *Prométhée*, Bruxelles, E. Laurent, 1838, p.39.

³⁷³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.122.

³⁷⁴ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷⁵ *Loc. cit.*

Osiris is the shepherd of the souls, and the first being ever to resurrect. For Michelet, death and resurrection are intertwined. We already mentioned the bizarre idea, ascribed by him to the early Christians, that the Devil could live in a flower. It may well contain – rather than any authentic Christian tenet – the whole of his doctrine regarding life, love and death. That he repeatedly refers to this idea is all the more so remarkable considering it entirely stems from Maury's misreading of a sentence the *Acta Sanctorum* credited Cyprian of Antioch with. Michelet did not bother himself to verify the authenticity of Maury's rendition of it, which, as Wouter Kusters demonstrated in his critical edition of *La Sorcière*, was absolutely inaccurate.³⁷⁶ In fact, I believe there is a reason why Michelet *needed* this image to be true, and it is no mere rhetoric.

The image of the flower is found elsewhere in *La Sorcière*, first and foremost, as shown above, in association with medicine, but also *with death*, not to mention obvious erotic undertones. The first gift Satan offers his devotee – that power over death which we described, or perhaps the power to give death – is compared to a flower:

« La première fleur de Satan, je te la donne aujourd'hui pour que tu saches mon premier nom, mon antique pouvoir. Je fus, je suis le roi des morts... Oh ! qu'on m'a calomnié !... Moi seul (ce bienfait immense me méritait des autels), moi seul, je les fais revenir... »³⁷⁷

Satan is a courteous prince. The first flower he gives his mistress is death. He is indeed both the Prince of Nature and the King of the Dead. This image, the flower, connects those two qualities. It is, of course, a symbol of nature, but also one of death and rebirth. As it happens, it possesses intricate connections with death elsewhere in Michelet's oeuvre. A barbarous, medieval ignorance had made death a gloomy specter, Michelet writes in *La Femme*, whereas "*la Mort est*

³⁷⁶ W. Kusters, *op. cit.*, p.35.

³⁷⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.117.

une fleur,” it is really a flower.³⁷⁸ Literally, death is a return to the realm of plants and flowers, “*notre mort physique n’est rien qu’un retour aux végétaux.*”³⁷⁹ Our bodies survive by transforming themselves into earth, or rather by entering its bowels, as the bereaved peasant says, and by nurturing the plants and the trees that take root in it.

Actually, this process begins before we die, which explains why our entrails are the pillar of our existence – the root of the “human flower.”³⁸⁰ And ultimately, we are “digested,” so to speak, by the earth. You pile up marble and stone over the decomposing corpse, yet it is already *a flower*, a child of light.³⁸¹ Michelet goes as far as to call the combination of sand, fossils and marine shrubs, the “poor little soul” of all the decomposing marine lives, a “flower exhaled in odors.”³⁸² The flower is the *chiffre* of all that lives, dies and is reborn, and it is as such that flowers and herbs – “*les simples*” – may cure the ill. They are evil and death transformed into good and life immortal.³⁸³ The reason why Michelet stuck to Maury’s misreading is clear. For him, the Devil lives in flowers, since he is everything flowers symbolize. Michelet here uses his foes’ ideas – or the ideas he thus needed to ascribe to them – against themselves, as he did for Pan, and as he often does in *La Sorcière* – using his own “witchy” wit, his “*à rebours*” spirit and method. The Christians, in his mind, speak the truth, provided their rhetoric is put upside down, as the witches did in their ceremonies.³⁸⁴

³⁷⁸ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.365.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.364.

³⁸⁰ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, II, pp.29-30.

³⁸¹ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.365.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p.367.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.367-368.

³⁸⁴ In an appendice to *Réforme*, Michelet conjures the fairies, or *fantines*, “ces pauvres petits êtres qui vivaient encore dans les fleurs” (*Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.507).

II. 7. The Bride of Corinth

To conclude this chapter, let us turn to the second myth conveyed by *La Sorcière* – that of the Bride of Corinth. It encapsulates, in itself, the dark unity of love and death.

The first witch to be mentioned in *La Sorcière* is really an undead, a female vampire. The story of the Bride of Corinth first appeared in Phlegon of Tralles' *On Marvels*, but Michelet's rendition of it is really a translation of Goethe's poem, "Die Braut von Korinth," which adds to the original tale an anti-Christian flavor it could not have had in the second century. As such, it constitutes a poetic conclusion to the first chapter of *La Sorcière*, "La mort des dieux." The Bride of Corinth appears elsewhere in his works, always as a symbol of love, of *erotic* love, or even more of what he calls the *communion of love*. "*A midi, ni l'un ni l'autre n'y ayant pensé, vives caresses, Kuss auf Kuss, comme dit Goethe dans La Fiancée de Corinthe.*"³⁸⁵

The tale is set at the time when Christianity was overcoming the traditional religion of Greece. A young man from Athens, himself a Pagan, travels to Corinth, to the house of a man whose daughter he is in love with. The young man does not know that the family had turned Christian.³⁸⁶ Arrived late, he is received by the mother, who "serves up for him the hospitable repast." No sooner has he surrendered to slumber than a girl all clothed and veiled in white enters the room. "Am I such a stranger in my own house, she exclaims, that my room is given to someone else?" The two lovers do not recognize each other, the reason being, apparently, that *she is dead*.

³⁸⁵ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, II, p.461.

³⁸⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.53.

“Stay, fair maiden!, the youth implores. Here are Bacchus, Ceres, and with thee comes Love. Fear not, look not so pale!” She replies him that she no longer *belongs* to joy. Thanks to an oath taken by her ill mother, her life and vital energy are bound for ever. The gods have fled, she cryptically laments, and instead of animals, humans are now offered up on the altars.³⁸⁷

Although Michelet, who otherwise faithfully quotes from Goethe, claims he is repelled at his vampiric interpretation – which is actually not so much Goethe’s as Phlegon’s himself – his “own” Bride is also a vampire, albeit a more abstract, or stylized one, a *strix* maybe, drinking her beloved one’s energy rather than his blood. Having been recognized by him and having given up on resisting his advances, she asks for a curl of his hair, then accepts to be “warmed” by him, she kills him by the mere force of her accursed state. “*Las ! ami, il faut que tu meures.*”³⁸⁸ Like Gautier’s Clarimonde and many other vampires, like cannibalistic witches and dark shamans,³⁸⁹ she harms the one she loves the most. Does not Michelet later acknowledge that witches, in monstrous vows of loving cannibalism, performed bloody rituals at the sabbath?³⁹⁰

They make love: “*Soupirs, baisers, s’échangent. ‘Ne sens-tu pas comme je brûle ?’ – L’amour les étreint et les lie. Les larmes se mêlent au plaisir.*”³⁹¹ But the bride’s mother was there all along, listening to their “soft vows, cries of wailing and of bliss.” She enters in wrath, not so much, as expected, because a man is defiling her daughter’s virginity, as because her daughter

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.54.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.55.

³⁸⁹ See Emma Wilby, “Burchard’s Strigae, the Witches’ Sabbath, and Shamanistic Cannibalism in Early Modern Europe,” in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, Volume 8, Issue 1.

³⁹⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.156.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.54.

belongs to the realm of the dead – and, above all, because the man is a heathen. His love inopportunately “resurrected” her buried daughter only to give her back to Pan’s dominion.

The bride protests. Was it not enough, she cries, to have wrapped me in a shroud? A divine power has lifted up the stone of the grave! Your priests’ prayers were vainly mumbled, for the earth does not freeze up love. This man was promised to me: I am only reclaiming what is rightly mine. But this love is doomed, and she knows it. She then asks one last thing: to be burnt at the stake with her soon-to-die lover, so she may find rest in the flames: “Let the sparks fly upward and the ashes redden. We will return to our old gods.”³⁹² “*Wenn die Asche glüht, / Eilen wir den alten Göttern zu,*” says the original German.

Like another poem by Goethe, “Die erste Walpurgisnacht,” this one narrates the deadly triumph of Christianity over pagan religions. What was natural and beautiful, wholesome, is now deemed sinful. We do not exactly know why and how the girl died, but it appears that her love was rebuked by her mother because her promised one was not baptized. Did she die of sorrow? This is likely, making her death, as she herself puts it, a human sacrifice. The god of Christianity does not demand to men that they sacrifice animals, rather that they virtually kill themselves on his altar.

In this perspective, it is Christianity that blocks up access to salvation. It is a spiritual jail, and men need to get free from it in order to redeem themselves. Michelet repeats several times the same story, under different guises. The Bride has been clothed in a white shroud, just like the whole earth, in the Middle Ages, shut as it will be in a transparent tomb.³⁹³ We are in a myth, a tale in which the victims have the power to access salvation by defying the laws of nature. It is the

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p.56.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.126.

resurrection of desire eventually brought about by the witches,³⁹⁴ a resurrection that does not go without suffering and alienation. The bride returns from Hades, as if paganism was able to do what Christianity vainly promises – to operate the resurrection of the dead! In doing so, she “sins,” among other things by making love to her pagan bridegroom, and by killing him. Yet, it is the only possible way for them to escape the fetters of Christianity. This multiple sin – fornication, suicide, maybe murder – is redemptive and restorative. It redeems by restoring what once existed – nature, love, the gods. Once *dead*, they may declare: we will return to our gods. They may live again.

In a footnote, Michelet recounts several modern versions of the tale. We will see that most of the information he had about the sabbath comes from the early modern era, even though he tends to apply it on earlier periods. Interestingly, after having quoted from the same “gloomy” inquisitors and judges he is to make use of for writing about the sabbath, he says here that their time has come to an end. “*L’histoire est inutile.*” What does this sentence mean? Is story or *history* futile? Does Michelet mean the tale itself? Its retelling by insensitive churchmen and lay judges? Or does he try to imply his own discipline? “*Car notre temps commence*, he continues, *et la Fiancée a vaincu.*”³⁹⁵ Things happen as if the triumph of the Bride should put an end to any objective approach we may have – and, all the more so, to the Christian demonization of the Bride’s late avatars, the witches. Our age is that of myth, meaning the return *of* and *to* the old gods.

Of Mona Lisa, Walter Pater said that, “she is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave.”³⁹⁶ Likewise, the Bride of Corinth embodies the fierce wisdom of the ages. She is the ever young archetypal

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.137.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.126.

³⁹⁶ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance – Studies in Art and Poetry*, New York, Dover, 2005, p.83.

grosse Mutter, “*cette grande mère*,” the eternal spirit of the Antiquity, which Michelet, in *Renaissance*, eulogized as the “hotter and fresher blood, the love flame returning in our withered veins along with Homer’s, Aeschylus’ and Sophocles’ generous wine.”³⁹⁷ Like Eurydice, the Bride of Corinth is an erotic symbol of the resurrected – or yet to be resurrected – past.³⁹⁸ There is a link between death – more as the realm of those who once lived than as a state opposed to life –, love and wisdom, which the Bride must personify. She is the “witchy” Antiquity living through our lives and our desire to better know ourselves – at the risk of dying to the lies of linear time. There is at least one place in Michelet’s writings, in his 1835 diary – where history as a discipline is compared to the Bride of Goethe’s tale, and the historian to her accursed lover. Was he still thinking of this comparison when he wrote “*La mort des dieux?*”

Je rêvai sur la route. Il me semblait que l’histoire et l’historien, aujourd’hui que l’histoire est si complexe et si absorbante, sont comme la fiancée de Corinthe et son jeune homme : la mort sur le vivant et buvant sa vie... Le malheureux veut, du fil simple d’une vie individuelle, refiler le fil complexe des générations passées.³⁹⁹

History is like the Bride of Corinth, the historian like her young lover. Here, Michelet is not so shy as in *La Sorcière*: the Bride is a vampire, who drinks her lover’s blood. To be a historian is to unite oneself with the past, to let out cries of wailing and bliss along with the dead. It entails a certain form of symbolic death, as in initiatory rites, or fertility cults – such as the sabbath itself. One might even die from it, as is suggested in the 1869 Preface to *Histoire de France*. But vampirism is always balanced by the victim’s own necrophilia: despite his friends’ advice, who believe he is too close to the dead, Michelet’s only desire is indeed to stay with them, to make love

³⁹⁷ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance, Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, Paris, Chamerot, 1855, p.198.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.201.

³⁹⁹ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, I, p.173.

to the pale bride who drinks his heart's blood, "*la blanche Fiancée, si pâle et si charmante, qui boit le sang de votre cœur.*"⁴⁰⁰ The past lives through us, and we die of it only to resurrect to a richer life. I have drunk Homer's wine, blood and life, Michelet wrote.⁴⁰¹ He often described history as "resurrection," implicitly comparing his own work to necromancy and witchcraft. Apparently, history needs first to take the appearance of death. To write about the past is to become part of it. The comparison between the historian and the witch, with both being able to talk to the dead, is somehow reversed here. The historian is the victim of his own object, that lives on his vital energy.

Remarkably enough, the other theme of "La mort des dieux," namely the late triumph of nature, shows up a few pages later in Michelet's diary, actually just the day after he wrote those words. Visiting the Angoulême Cathedral, he wonders at the arabesques on the walls, the secular character of the scenes there depicted, the vivid animal and vegetal designs.

Cela donne une idée singulière des joyeux chrétiens qui se sont fait enterrer sous ces roses. [...] Ce genre des arabesques qui fleurit aux époques où le sens religieux et moral s'endort (sous les premiers empereurs romains, sous les derniers califes, et au XVI^e siècle), n'est autre que le caprice d'une âme désoccupée, désabusée du sérieux, qui se prend à la nature, à la nature extérieure du moins, à la fugitive et fantasque Maïa, faisant la guerre à ce Protée femelle, la poursuivant, l'enlaçant, lui faisant l'amour.⁴⁰²

Did Michelet know that, as mentioned earlier, Pico held that "Proteus transforms himself continuously because Pan is within him?" At any rate, he himself occasionally uses the figure of Proteus, instead of Pan's, as a symbol of nature, as when he writes that the woman is the most natural thing in the world, that she fits much better than the other sex in the mighty game which

⁴⁰⁰ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, Paris, Lacroix, I, 1876, p.XVIII.

⁴⁰¹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p.199.

⁴⁰² J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, I, p.175.

the universal Proteus likes to play.⁴⁰³ Nature is male as Pan or Proteus, yet female here, and in *La Sorcière*. A female nature to whom the male artist makes love, thereby begetting such vivid figures as those early medieval arabesques; history as the Bride of Corinth, living on the historian's blood – and maybe granting him immortality by killing him: such are the two unconnected images showing up under Michelet's quill in August 1835. In *La Sorcière*, they are finally merged into one image, with the Bride being both nature, at last “mistress of the house,”⁴⁰⁴ and history transfigured into myth.

Another possible understanding of Michelet's cryptic sentence (“*L'histoire est inutile*”) is that the buried nature, having once come back from her grave, *by stealth*, surreptitiously, in the guise of vampirism, or really witchcraft – since vampirism can only be a metaphor – is now, at last, “mistress of the house,” *maîtresse de la maison*. It means that she may live again, through social progress and education, without needing to hide herself under the cover of night-cults and secret ceremonies. The witches, as flesh-and-blood Brides of Corinth, anticipated the messianic, post-revolutionary times, but they did not bring them to completion.

Let us note that there is another hint of vampirism in the book, and this time Michelet does not hide the bloody nature of the facts he narrates. It actually reinforces the connection between the Bride and the witches, allowing us to understand the role of this tale in the structure of *La Sorcière*. I am alluding to the blood that is communally drunk, Michelet asserts, at the sabbath. We will get back to this point later. Suffice it to say that the great sacraments of rebellion among the serfs apparently include the blood they would drink – each other's blood. But in their case, blood is what makes them live and overcome their oppression. Ever since the tale of the Bride,

⁴⁰³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.129.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.56.

there is this idea that the rebels live, die and resurrect together. The youth from Athens needs to die at the hands of the beloved in order to resurrect in the lost realm of the old gods. The blood exchange – or the gift or the curl and the wine drunk together, as well as the intercourse – is a symbol of the communal fusion of individuals, who really become one and thereby separate themselves from the false values of the society, or Christianity. It points to the ultimate fusion of life – Eros – and death – Thanatos – in Satan’s revolutionary cult.

Thus far, we have gained insights into the main tenets of the witches’ upside down religion as understood by Michelet. As the celebration of Pan – a god both good and evil – it redeems the world from the doubtful idealism of Christianity. Its primary goal is thus to save love and death from prejudice and moralism. Ultimately, they appear to be one and the same, merging into the character of the undead Bride of Corinth. For Michelet, death and resurrection are inextricably entangled. The witch both heals the sick and consorts with the dead, she is both a priestess and a physician, who cures evil through evil, endeavoring to rehabilitate the humblest functions of the body. Digestion, one of those functions, becomes a figure of redemption through sin, the ubiquitous symbol – along with the flower with which it fuses – of Michelet’s philosophy.

Chapter Three

Darkness of Light

The program of redemption through sin involves moral, spiritual, and corporeal salvation. We will now turn to its epistemological implications. A female Prometheus, the witch wants to possess and to pass down knowledge in a time when it is equated with heresy. She has the vocation of redeeming intelligence from the dogma, the former being connected, in Michelet's approach, to the reviled material world. More than ever, the fruit of knowledge is also that of sin. In Michelet's view, she brought about a "redemption of the womb and the digestive organs." Witchcraft would have thus saved the body and the soul, yet also the *mind*. By curing and healing, by delivering other women's babies, the witches pave the way for science. According to Michelet's idiosyncratic mythology of knowledge, it is through their "primitive" sort of science, indeed, that people were gradually raised to "modern" knowledge. In this chapter, we will see that the message of the book is addressed to Michelet's generation, for it is in the witch's very unreason that he saw the root of modern reason. And the learned community of his time needed to be reminded of this fact

III. 1. The Wisdom of the Simple and the Stupidity of the Learned

What needs to be explained first is how witchcraft came to play a seminal role in Michelet's epistemology of human intelligence. In fact, this is somehow akin to Pascal's "*raison des effets*," or to Montaigne's peculiar anti-intellectualism. Like the latter, Michelet might have believed, when he first took an interest in witchcraft, that the witches deserved more of *ellebore*, a fool's

antidote, than of hemlock.⁴⁰⁵ Later, he contrasted the witches' natural knowledge with the stupidity of the elite. Witchcraft, by freeing the body and redeeming nature, could also redeem the mind from the grip of dogma because it embodied a certain spirit of simplicity and straightforwardness. Michelet saw that witchcraft, as folk medicine and folk spirituality, operated – like the kind of tribal shamanism it stemmed from – within predominantly non-literate cultures.⁴⁰⁶ Although it took him a long time to acknowledge the inherent nobility of such spiritual experiences and curative practices, what becomes clear in *La Sorcière* is that he was ready to favor the wisdom of the simple over the sophisticated stupidity of the learned.

Let us read Michelet's evocation of Jakob Sprenger, the notorious author of *Malleus Maleficarum*. The chapter devoted to him in *La Sorcière* is, word for word, the same as in *Renaissance*. Its meaning, however, has changed inasmuch as Michelet's overall assessment of popular knowledge is different in 1862 from what it was in 1855. Initially, Sprenger, the archetype of the learned fool, was described as the enemy of the few genuine learned men, the Humanists. The witches he persecuted were but madwomen. The Inquisitors in general were fools, “*sots*,” yet the witches and the wizzards were “*fous en haillons*,” deserving the historian's patronizing sympathy rather than his admiration.⁴⁰⁷ In *La Sorcière*, the witch is no longer an unjustly persecuted yet mentally ill woman: she is the wise one.

Rome, du reste, s'est piquée toujours de choisir très bien les hommes. Peu soucieuse des questions, beaucoup des personnes, elle a cru, non sans raison, que le succès des affaires dépendait du caractère tout spécial des agents envoyés dans chaque pays. Sprenger était-il bien l'homme ? D'abord, il était Allemand, dominicain soutenu d'avance par cet ordre redouté, par tous ses couvents, ses écoles. Un digne fils des écoles était nécessaire, un bon scolastique, un

⁴⁰⁵ See Michel de Montaigne, “Des boyteux,” in *Les Essais*, edited by Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien, and Catherine Magnien-Simonin, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p.1079.

⁴⁰⁶ E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, *op. cit.*, p.202.

⁴⁰⁷ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, p.CXXXIII.

homme ferré sur la Somme, ferme sur son saint Thomas, pouvant toujours donner des textes. Sprenger était tout cela. Mais, de plus, c'était un sot.⁴⁰⁸

Sprenger was a German Dominican, Michelet reminds us here, enjoying the support of that dreaded order to which the Inquisition had been entrusted in 1231. He was a “worthy son of the schools and a good disputant” especially skilled in Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, therefore able to quote it by heart at any moment. *But last but not least, he was a fool.* Or rather he was a fool because he was all that to begin with. Here looms, between the lines, the notion that the scholarly culture of the Middle Ages was a culture of stupidity, of learned, somehow subtle,⁴⁰⁹ yet utter stupidity. How so? Precisely because, in it, words and books had replaced reality. Michelet’s praise of the Enlightenment – or rather of the Renaissance – surprisingly stems from a certain anti-intellectualism. “*Voilà ce que c’est que d’étudier. [...] Ce solide scolastique, plein de mots, vide de sens, ennemi juré de la nature, autant que de la raison, siège avec une foi superbe dans ses livres et dans sa robe, dans sa crasse et sa poussière.*”⁴¹⁰ Material and carnal reality need to be explored again, words need to be jettisoned.

J’aurais voulu voir en face ce type admirable du juge et les gens qu’on lui amenait. Des créatures que Dieu prendrait dans deux globes différents ne seraient pas plus opposées, plus étrangères l’une à l’autre, plus dépourvues de langue commune. La vieille, squelette déguenillé à l’œil flamboyant de malice, trois fois recuite au feu d’enfer ; le sinistre solitaire, berger de la forêt Noire, ou des hauts déserts des Alpes ; voilà les sauvages qu’on présente à l’œil terne du savantasse, au jugement du scolastique. [...]

Voilà une vieille bien folle ; le berger ne l’est pas moins. Sots ? Ni l’un ni l’autre. Loin de là, ils sont affinés, subtils, entendent pousser l’herbe et voient à travers les murs. Ce qu’ils voient le mieux encore, ce sont les monumentales oreilles d’âne qui ombragent le bonnet du docteur.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.199-200.

⁴⁰⁹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p.200.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.CXVIII.

⁴¹¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.203.

It is by the universities, by their false logic and their perverted philosophy, that the monastic elite saved themselves, thereby “postponing” the Renaissance.⁴¹² Not unlike Hobbes in his famous description of the “Kingdom of Darkness,” Michelet focuses on the fantasies of the monks, a pathetic tribe of word-worshipping fools, who sacrificed the material reality on the altar of empty ideas. “*Tout mot répond à une idée et toute idée est un être,*” every word equals an idea, and every idea is a real entity. Why, then, study nature, “*pourquoi étudier la nature ?*”⁴¹³ The students literally learnt how to “*se payer de mots.*”⁴¹⁴ It is the world derided by Rabelais through the character of Janotus.⁴¹⁵ Exceptions, like Abailard, who was the first of the Scholastics, or Ockham, the last of them, or even the alchemist and proto-Humanist Roger Bacon, “*un héros,*”⁴¹⁶ only make the rule.⁴¹⁷

The learned’s stupidity ruled over the universities and colleges. One could neither walk nor fly, only crawl and grovel.⁴¹⁸ The Church, democratic in principle, turned out to be aristocratic in the difficulties of her idiotic teachings. Condemning natural instinct, she unduly erected reflective science into the condition of salvation.⁴¹⁹ Genuine reason was banished and disappeared, while intuition survived,⁴²⁰ with both, in the guise of logic and prophecy,⁴²¹ being equally frowned upon.

⁴¹² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p.CXXXI.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p.XXXI.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.XL.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.XLIII.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.LIII.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.XXXII-XXXIII.

⁴¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁴¹⁹ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.176.

⁴²⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p.XXXIII.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p.XLIV.

In *Histoire de France*, the latter is principally associated with the mystics: we know that Michelet eventually came to acknowledge that women, and especially, among them, the accursed witches, played that role more thoroughly. But it is important to read *La Sorcière* against his 1855 book, for most of its epistemology is already contained in it, and is thus made clearer. Even the idea that redemption, revolt, and a certain “*perversité*” need, at a certain level, to go hand in hand, is to be found in *Renaissance*. “*Mais voyez ! L’esprit humain a un tel fond de révolte et de perversité native, qu’exclu de l’étude de l’âme et des libertés du monde intérieur, il commença à regarder sournoisement du côté de la nature.*”⁴²² The witches’ quest for knowledge will henceforth combine down-to-earth empiricism – a sort of pantheistic abandon in the hands of nature and folk tradition – with an acute spirit of revolt.

The same epistemology of simplicity is to be found in *Histoire de la Révolution française*, where Michelet praises, the way Luther did, “Herr Omnes.”

Tout-le-Monde, pour les habiles et les gens d’esprit, c’est un pauvre homme de bien, qui n’y voit guère, heurte, choppe, qui barbouille, ne sait pas trop ce qu’il dit. Vite, un bâton à cet aveugle, un guide, un soutien, quelqu’un qui parle pour lui.

Mais les simples, qui n’ont pas d’esprit, comme Dante, Shakespeare et Luther, voient tout autrement ce bon homme. Ils lui font la révérence, recueillent, écrivent ses paroles, se tiennent debout devant lui. C’est lui que le petit Shakespeare écoutait, gardant les chevaux, à la porte du spectacle ; lui que Dante venait entendre dans le marché de Florence. Le docteur Martin Luther, tout docteur qu’il est, lui parle le bonnet à la main, l’appelant maître et seigneur : « Herr *omnes* (Monseigneur *Tout-le-Monde*). »⁴²³

“Everyman,” such is the derogatory term used by the “*doctes*” and the elite to qualify the people. Even with the willingness to do them good, they cannot help seeing them as intrinsically less enlightened, therefore needing their insights. Yet, Michelet insists, the real geniuses, are themselves from the same stock as the “*simples*” – Dante, Shakespeare, Luther who would only

⁴²² *Ibid.*, pp.XLIV-XLV.

⁴²³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française, op. cit.*, I, p.285.

talk to them with his hat in his hand as a token of respect. Likewise, Rabelais owes everything to the common folk. What he took from the Sorbonne, he derided it.⁴²⁴

The man of analysis – the scholastic mind – looks down on the simple man. Sometimes they agree, with the former inferring reality from his senses, while the latter immediately perceives it. Often, however, the simple are laughed at when they intuit the whole, seen only with the eyes of the spirit, from just one of its parts, or divine something from a mere sign.⁴²⁵ In *Le Peuple*, Michelet laments the contemporary avatars of that cold and futile intellectualism, with the scholars of the Ecole Normale ignoring the “*sciences de l’homme*,” to which they prefer sterile facts.⁴²⁶ He even acknowledges that it took him years to erase his own scholasticism, to get rid of the “*sophiste*” he had become.⁴²⁷ Sometimes, statistics play the same role as the empty entities fancied and discussed by the idiotic scholars of the Middle Ages. An heir to the witches, the historian chooses the study of sensual, human experience.⁴²⁸

Le scolastique, le critique, l’homme d’analyse, de *nisi*, de *distinguo*, regarde de haut les simples. Ils ont cependant l’avantage, ne divisant pas, de voir ordinairement les choses à leur état naturel, organisées et vivantes. Donnant peu à la réflexion, ils sont souvent riches d’instinct. L’inspiration n’est pas rare dans ces classes d’hommes, quelquefois même une sorte de divination. [...]

Il faudrait l’avoir, cette grâce, pour en parler seulement. La science n’exclut nullement la simplicité, il est vrai ; mais elle ne la donne pas. [...]

Il ne faut plus que les plus sages se contentent de dire : « Laissez venir les petits. » Il faut qu’ils aillent à eux.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁴ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.414.

⁴²⁵ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.197.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.290.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.115.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.VIII-IX.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.163-164.

Distinguo, as is *in juro* in Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*, is often taken by Michelet as a trait of this intellectual category, the "parvenus" of the mind. In contrast to them, the simple do not divide, generally perceiving things in their natural state: their intelligence, like that of the children, or that of the poets,⁴³⁰ is synthetic and intuitive, rather than analytical and reflective. And like children – or Michelet himself – they give a historical and narrative form even to abstract ideas.⁴³¹ As a result, they are the true wise, simplicity being the constituent of genius and its primary cause while, conversely, genius constantly preserves some simplicity in itself.⁴³² The infinite that is initially in children gradually disappears under the chisel of logic and criticism, which render most people, not only weak and sterile, but also vulgar.⁴³³ For the people, when they retain some of their primal naïveté, do not understand the hollow abstractions of the learned, grasping things, instead, in their concrete and living state.⁴³⁴ They live on the large fund of instinct, swimming in a sea of milk.⁴³⁵ Seeing, like savage or barbarous nations,⁴³⁶ what is invisible to the eyes of reason, they verge on clairvoyance or prophecy – witchcraft, so to speak. Intuition is the secret knowledge one can only draw from the netherworld, from early infancy or death: "*La première enfance et la mort, ce sont les moments où l'infini rayonne en l'homme, la grâce, prenez ce mot au sens de l'art ou de la théologie.*"⁴³⁷ For Michelet, genuine humanism must acknowledge

⁴³⁰ J. Michelet, *Principes de la philosophie de l'histoire, traduits de la Scienza Nuova de J. B. Vico, et précédés d'un discours sur le système et la vie de l'auteur*, Paris, Jules Renouard, 1827, pp.XX-XXI.

⁴³¹ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.165.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, pp.198-200.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.166.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.167.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.197-198.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.167.

its popular roots, it needs to go to the little ones rather than patronizingly suffering them to come. Again, Christianity is put upside down, since Michelet is explicitly quoting, “à rebours,” one of Jesus’ most famous sayings.

Over the course of his life, Michelet celebrated a variety of heroes. Vico already symbolized, thirty-five years before medieval witches, the middle ground between scholastic subjection to the past, and Descartes’ almost totalitarian individualism and cold rationalism. In *Scienza nuova*, he had discovered the notion of a human collectivity transcending the tyranny of the *cogito*. The intuitive reason of everyman takes precedence over that of each individual, tradition over method.⁴³⁸

Son système nous apparaît au commencement du dernier siècle, comme une admirable protestation de cette partie de l’esprit humain qui se repose sur la sagesse du passé conservée dans les religions, dans les langues et dans l’histoire, sur cette sagesse vulgaire, mère de la philosophie, et trop souvent méconnue d’elle.⁴³⁹

Michelet’s Vico curses scholasticism and Cartesianism with a plague on both their houses.⁴⁴⁰ At the time he was writing his *Principes de la philosophie de l’histoire*, Michelet was not aware that his Vico was simply a witch. To be sure, it would take him years – more than two decades – to fully acknowledge the value of the witches’ science, but what he would come to see in it was already implied in this first epistemological essay.

III. 2. Reason and Unreason

⁴³⁸ P. Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes*, op. cit., p.504.

⁴³⁹ J. Michelet, *Principes de la philosophie de l’histoire*, op. cit., p.III.

⁴⁴⁰ He would resemble Rabelais, whose philosophy of education is both a reaction against the Middle Ages, and an anticipatory response to the “*raisonneurs*” of the Enlightenment (*Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, op. cit., pp.418-419).

The Renaissance is Faustian in essence.⁴⁴¹ Every progress, every step forward was once deemed the Devil's crime. He was a wicked physician, a wicked logician too. Spurning the clerical law, he preserved instead the law of authentic jurists and philosophers, for, Michelet maintains, the clerical law was nothing but the triumph of grace over justice.⁴⁴²

Détruisons, si nous le pouvons, toutes les sciences de la nature, l'Observatoire, le Muséum et le Jardin des Plantes, l'École de Médecine, toute bibliothèque moderne. Brûlons nos lois, nos codes. Revenons au Droit canonique.

Ces nouveautés, toutes, ont été Satan. Nul progrès qui ne fût son crime.⁴⁴³

Medicine, astronomy and botany, all the modern libraries, all the “novelties” denounced as such in the Middle Ages came from Satan. As we will see, early modern witchcraft is a mockery, at least in Michelet's eyes. Satan, however, has won as a scientific rebel – the Renaissance being his work. “*Gagne-t-il en substance ? Oui, sous l'aspect nouveau de la Révolte scientifique qui va nous faire la lumineuse Renaissance.*”⁴⁴⁴ The schools of the Middle Ages were nothing but jails, *in pace*, and the origin of the Renaissance, Michelet asserts, is therefore to be found in “*l'École buissonnière*” instead – a French idiomatic expression meaning truancy but literally referring to the bushes, Pan's realm. There Satan had set up a class attended by witches and shepherds. The teaching was perilous and tentative (“*hasardeux*”) but its very perils heightened their yearning to know. Thanks to the audacious woman who had stolen some corpse from the cemetery, you might, for the first time, gaze upon the heavenly wonders of the human body! And there also began such wicked sciences as pharmacy and astronomy. The former was evolving from the science of poisoning – from the homeopathic use of plants discussed above – whereas the latter owed to the

⁴⁴¹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p.XCII.

⁴⁴² J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, I, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-30.

⁴⁴³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.389.

⁴⁴⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.210.

shepherd's "spying" on the stars – along with other "*coupables recettes*" he would bring.⁴⁴⁵ The emergence of modern reason stems from the witch's very *unreason*. The fallen angel and his servants grounded on an impious belief, a "*croyance impie*" – namely the faith in the freedom of the will – the life and renewal of law and science. They ultimately redeemed mankind through sin – sin against the lies of the Church, *sin against sin*.

Women, and witches especially, embodied the hidden, subterranean life of a stiffened society. The female nature is compared by Michelet to a volcano lying beneath the glacier of Christianity, that has no need to burst out, its mild and gentle heat simply *caressing* it from below. To men, it says in a whisper: "*Descends.*"⁴⁴⁶ It lures them into their own intimate self. There might be a regressive aspect to it: it is by looking for the roots of matter and being, rather than trying to reach heaven, that one attains freedom and knowledge. Redemption is *beneath* rather than *beyond*.⁴⁴⁷ In *Réforme* and elsewhere in his oeuvre, Michelet drew from the anticlerical tradition in which the theologians are merely *obscuri viri*, children of darkness.⁴⁴⁸ In contrast, he suggests in *La Sorcière* that light comes from obscurity itself.⁴⁴⁹

It should be noted that the converging of the ascent and the descent is also, in Bakhtin's terms, a Renaissance theme. "At the time of Rabelais, Bakhtin writes, the hierarchical world of the Middle Ages was crumbling. The narrow, vertical [...] model of the world, with its absolute top

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.41-42.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.127.

⁴⁴⁷ Jean-Pierre Richard, "Cristaux, volcans, sorcières," in *Michelet cent ans après*, edited by Paul Viallaneix, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1975, p.97.

⁴⁴⁸ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, pp.33-34.

⁴⁴⁹ The darkness of light, in *Réforme*, is also that melancholy depicted by Dürer. The pages Michelet devotes to it are remarkable in their insight. Dürer creates in the obscurity of his cellar. All knowledge, he tragically shows, all light comes from darkness and is doomed to return there (*ibid.*, pp.87-90).

and bottom, [...] was in the process of reconstruction. [...] In the struggle for a new conception of the world [...], Rabelais continually used the traditional folklore method of contrast, the inside out, the positive negation.”⁴⁵⁰ If Michelet is to be believed, witches mixed the hierarchical levels before Rabelais, thereby discovering “the core of the object’s concrete reality”⁴⁵¹ and freeing knowledge from the prejudice precluding it.

Michelet is often, although wrongly, credited with having coined the word *Renaissance*. At any rate, the notion is an important one in his thought, and it needs to be addressed in connection with his view of witchcraft – not so much, actually, because the Witch Hunt occurred at the same time, as because he came to describe the roots of Humanism, as previously said, within witchcraft itself. In fact, Michelet systematically and erroneously dated the beginnings of the Witch Hunt to the Middle Ages. This will be discussed in next chapter. “*D’un même élan, elle embrassait amoureusement la nature, finissait le fatal divorce entre elle et l’homme, rejoignait ces amants,*” Michelet writes in the Introduction of the *Reformation* volume of his *Histoire de France*.⁴⁵² The Renaissance is described here as the reconciliation between man and nature, the latter having been condemned by Christianity. In other words, the spirit of the Renaissance is the same as the witches. Their world owes to Pan more than to the Nazarene’s religion.

As for the Enlightenment, that glorious eighteenth century whose legacy greatly contributed to shape Michelet’s doctrine – at least in the beginning –, it is obvious that he sees it as less bold as the witches’ “philosophy.” Their courageous science had initiated the Renaissance because, for them, nothing natural should be derided or reviled. When it comes to “*le ventre et les*

⁴⁵⁰ M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p.403.

⁴⁵¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁵² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.XI.

fonctions digestives,” however, Michelet marvels at the lack of genuine interest, among those philosophers, in nature – as if they had been unable to reach the level of medieval witches. We mentioned his disappointed reference to Voltaire’s snigger.⁴⁵³ Yet, who, among the learned, even the honest and brilliant physicians, acknowledges his debt? Who, among them, is aware of the subterranean energy distilled by the witches’ religion, to which his high knowledge owes nonetheless so much? The witch is like the stomach, she is treated with contempt and disgust by those who know, yet do not know whence their *desire* to know really comes from. In an addendum to his chapter on “Satan médecin,” Michelet wonders:

En lisant les très beaux ouvrages qu’on a faits de nos jours sur l’histoire des sciences, je suis étonné d’une chose : on semble croire que tout a été trouvé par les docteurs, ces demi-scolastiques, qui à chaque instant étaient arrêtés par leur robe, leurs dogmes, les déplorables habitudes d’esprit que leur donnait l’École. Et celles qui marchaient libres de ces chaînes, les sorcières n’auraient rien trouvé ? Cela serait invraisemblable. Paracelse dit le contraire.⁴⁵⁴

To be sure, the Enlightenment saw itself as opposed to the old scholastic world, yet the common belief was that, at least, a certain ethos of knowledge, a certain *scholarly* practice had been born in those very schools and universities – certainly not in the witch’s moor, among the beasts of the wilderness. What comes out, between the lines of *La Sorcière*, is that those who once burnt the witches at the stake, were followed by others – learned and as powerful as them – who just forgot them, even erased them from their conscience, thereby reiterating the crime of their forerunners.⁴⁵⁵

Before the Enlightenment proper, seventeenth-century physicians, although their science had sprung from the plebeian empiricism of the witches, spat on their legacy. The legitimate sons

⁴⁵³ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, II, pp.28-29.

⁴⁵⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.398-399.

⁴⁵⁵ J. Favret, *op. cit.*, p.368.

of those despised women, they forgot Satan's highest patrimony, showing themselves ungrateful to those who had paved the way for them.⁴⁵⁶ And before then, Michelet suggests that the physicians' magisterium had been a trick of the Church who had the wit to divide Satan's realm in two. Against the Witch, his daughter, they armed his son, the doctor. The latter was heartily loathed, yet to destroy the Witch, they established his monopoly: in the fourteenth century the Church proclaimed that any woman who dared to heal was a witch and should therefore be burnt. Now, how could those "good women" have studied in public?⁴⁵⁷

One noteworthy exception, in *La Sorcière*, in this general contempt of the learned was the abovementioned Paracelsus, but it might be due to his pertaining to the sixteenth century, which, even from Michelet's perspective, was certainly not as "Cartesian" as the following centuries would be. At any rate, the historian twice notes that Paracelsus deemed all medicine vane and false, while avowing that he knew nothing he had not learnt from witches.⁴⁵⁸ He had been the only doctor whom Satan "admitted" at his sabbath.⁴⁵⁹ Popular medicine – that of the witches, but of the shepherds and the executioners too – was the only origin, he claimed, of his knowledge. Michelet wrongfully suggests that his book on *The Diseases of Women* was the first written on this theme: there were other, older learned works dealing with gynecology, including the female physician Trotula's *De curis mulierum*. Yet, Michelet insists that its content entirely came from his special experience of those "good women," those witches who also acted as midwives. It is interesting to see that, from *Renaissance* to *La Sorcière*, Michelet actually changed his mind, ascribing to Jews

⁴⁵⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.298-299.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.42.

and Muslims in the former what would become the witches' special gift in the latter – even to the exclusion of Jews and Muslims – namely the study of the human body and the use of the simples. Not only that: for Michelet, the very resurrection of nature's God – Pan – was the work of the Moors and the Jews before he saw the hand of the witch in it.

Par Salerne, par Montpellier, par les Arabes et les Juifs, par les Italiens leurs disciples, une glorieuse résurrection s'accomplissait du Dieu de la nature. [...] Les Maures avaient découvert ces puissants elixirs de vie que la Terre, de son sein profond, par l'intermédiaire des simples, envoie à l'homme son enfant [...].⁴⁶⁰

The historian certainly includes himself in the general ungratefulness of the learned. An heir to the Enlightenment, Michelet once despised the ugly rites of witchcraft.⁴⁶¹ When he first addressed it in 1837, he could only call it “*avorton dégoûtant des religions vaincues.*”⁴⁶² It is, so ran his critique, a mediocre form of “industrialism,” unable to unveil nature's true treasures, therefore attempting to grasp them through crime and violence. His attitude evolved gradually. Even this passage was later altered in a milder tone. He came to see witchcraft as the ugly result of the Church's abominable doctrine – then as a truly admirable attempt at knowing the truth and redeeming mankind. In *Renaissance*, he already emphasizes its link with old paganism, for which he praises it, but he laments that, instead of fair Diana, it was Ahriman, the last of the false gods, that they should worship at the sabbath in the guise of Satan.⁴⁶³ Their Luciferianism is by no means praised. In his diary, a sudden volte-face appears to have occurred not unlike Pascal's “Nuit de feu,” at night, making him excessively happy.⁴⁶⁴ In order to come to that conclusion, he had to get

⁴⁶⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, pp.LII-LIII.

⁴⁶¹ W. Kusters, *op. cit.*, pp.23-24.

⁴⁶² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, Paris, Hachette, 1833-1844, III, p.111.

⁴⁶³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, pp.CV-CVI.

⁴⁶⁴ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, III, p.90.

rid of at least part of his own rationalism; or to see rationalism as fundamentally rooted in a deeper, perhaps more “democratic” sensitivity. I disagree, however, with Hayden White regarding Michelet’s supposed repudiation of the ironic attitude of the Enlightenment. Actually, Michelet’s moderate anti-rationalism is precisely rooted in a greatly ironic approach to knowledge, as is shown in the abovementioned considerations of scholasticism. We will also see that morality itself is treated with much irony in *La Sorcière* – rooted in the same, almost cynical consciousness, that the flesh has precedence over the spirit.

III. 3. *Supernatural*

At this point, we have to clarify how magic is to be understood in *La Sorcière*. What is suggested by *La Sorcière*’s first chapter is that magic is only *natural*. By conflating him with Pan, Michelet actually removes the mystique surrounding Satan. The first part of the book intentionally confuses the reader by throwing him into a fairy tale world. A later note, dealing with the fifteenth-century Witch Hunt, allows us understand what Michelet’s approach really is.

Là commence une époque de terreurs croissantes, où l’homme se fie de moins en moins à la protection divine. Le Démon n’est plus un esprit furtif, un voleur de nuit qui se glisse dans les ténèbres : c’est l’intrépide adversaire, l’audacieux singe de Dieu, qui, sous son soleil, en plein jour, contrefait sa création. Qui dit cela ? La légende ? Non, mais les plus grands docteurs. Le Diable transforme tous les êtres, dit Albert le Grand. Saint Thomas va bien plus loin. « Tous les changements, dit-il, qui peuvent se faire de nature et par les germes, le Diable peut les imiter. » Étonnante concession, qui, dans une bouche si grave, ne va pas à moins qu’à constituer un Créateur en face du Créateur ! « Mais pour ce qui peut se faire sans germer, ajoute-t-il, une métamorphose d’homme en bête, la résurrection d’un mort, le Diable ne peut les faire. » Voilà la part de Dieu petite. En propre, il n’a que le miracle, l’action rare et singulière. Mais le miracle quotidien, la vie, elle n’est plus à lui seul : le Démon, son imitateur, partage avec lui la nature.

Pour l’homme, dont les faibles yeux ne font pas différence de la nature créée de Dieu à la nature créée du Diable, voilà le monde partagé. Une terrible incertitude planera sur toute chose. L’innocence de la nature est perdue. La source pure, la blanche fleur, le petit oiseau, sont-ils bien de Dieu, ou de perfides imitations, des pièges tendus à l’homme ?... Arrière ! tout devient suspect. Des deux créations, la bonne, comme l’autre en suspicion, est obscurcie et

envahie. L'ombre du Diable voile le jour, elle s'étend sur toute vie. À juger par l'apparence et par les terreurs humaines, il ne partage pas le monde, il l'a usurpé tout entier.⁴⁶⁵

In Michelet's understanding, the Witch Hunt was made possible by a blurring between the natural and the supernatural. *La Sorcière* absorbs and appropriates this vision. In it, Satan is at once a physician and a necromancer. To say that nature is d(a)emonic – which Michelet would, of course, assert in a favorable manner – is to acknowledge that everything supernatural is really natural, and that everything natural is fundamentally supernatural. We could admit that fairies exist as cosmic or psychological forces just as well as we hold that life is a “daily miracle.” Michelet is no more a rationalist than a mystic: he is both. And this ambiguity underlies the structure of *La Sorcière*, whose first part sometimes reads like poetry or fantastic fiction, whereas its second part is more of an historical piece of nonfiction. While Michelet, in his chapter on the *Malleus Maleficarum*, seems to satirize Sprenger's doctrine, he actually makes use of it. For the German inquisitor, nature and its daily wonders may well be Satan's creations: Michelet believes they pertain to Pan's realm. They are as much beyond reason and superstition as they are beyond good and evil. And if the Church's sacraments are indeed futile, communication with the dead is not necessarily so.

To live in conformity with the demonic forces of nature is potentially sinful. We have hitherto understood that Pan's nature was indeed sinful in the Church's eyes. So utterly did the first Christians condemn nature, Michelet suggests in “La mort des dieux,” that they could find the Devil incarnated in a flower. They wished that the exterminating angels who erstwhile overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah would come swiftly to annihilate the entire world.⁴⁶⁶ Thanks to the *Malleus*

⁴⁶⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.208-209.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.48.

– which, asserting that the witches, just like the Devil, had effective powers, took the opposing view to the medieval orthodox doctrine on witchcraft and demons – it was now possible to give a theological justification to this old rebuke. Not only was nature fallen, it was also susceptible of being “refashioned” by the Devil himself, “the daring ape of God.” Michelet’s view seems only to expand on Sprenger’s: the world is straight Pan-Satan’s kingdom – except that he is not God’s enemy, but God himself.

III. 4. The Turn to Myth

Does Michelet believe in magic? To the extent that everything natural is also supernatural, certainly. To the extent that knowledge is inherently “witchy,” even more so. It should be noted that the Jewish thinkers of the Weimar Republic reacted to the legacy of Hermann Cohen’s Kantian rationalism the same way Michelet had done to the Enlightenment and his own previous endorsement of it. They felt the same necessity because, in both cases, rationalism had proved of no avail. Cohen’s characterization of Judaism as anti-mythology if not demythologized Enlightenment rationality, no longer satisfied them. For Scholem, the “enemy” was at once Cohen’s philosophy and Graetz’s rationalistic vision of Jewish history, a belated offspring of the Aufklärung. According to Graetz, “the idea of a transcendent God went through a gradual and progressive process of purification throughout Jewish history.”⁴⁶⁷ His notorious rejection of Kabbalah as a deviation from the mainstream of Jewish theology, if not utter idolatry, was, of course, the most contentious point of his work in Scholem’s eyes. The remythologization involuntarily triggered by Cohen (and Graetz) was marked by those thinkers’ reversion from Kant

⁴⁶⁷ David Biale, *Gershom Scholem – Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979, p.21.

to Schelling.⁴⁶⁸ The latter had also attracted Michelet's interest a few decades before. On visiting Germany and after having discussed the legacy of German Idealism with a Lutheran minister in Swabia, Michelet had written in his diary: "*Schelling, réclamation de la nature dans la scolastique elle-même, tandis que la poésie reste au logis et célèbre les vieux souvenirs en poussant aux idées nouvelles.*"⁴⁶⁹ With Schelling, Michelet thus suggested, nature reenters and subverts the scholastic culture that expelled it. Given that he saw "narrative philosophy" – that is, mythology – as the ideal of the philosopher, it is not surprising that Scholem should mention him in his essay on "Kabbalah and Myth."⁴⁷⁰

Actually, it is not only Cohen, nor even Graetz, whom Scholem opposed, but Jewish medieval scholasticism as well. He may even have extended such opposition to the original biblical impulse, which indeed repressed ancient Middle Eastern myths. Relegated in the recesses of Scripture, they resurfaced in a variety of later texts – especially in Kabbalah.⁴⁷¹ In 1915, Scholem wrote in his diary: "I'll have to compose the myth of the coming reality, a reality that arises out of our own needs like fog out of steamy water."⁴⁷² Believing that myths had the power to resurrect a dying, spiritually exhausted nation, and to rejuvenate its blood, Scholem "was taken by the biblical myth and the myth of Hasidism newly introduced by Martin Buber, understood in the spirit of the German idealist and romantic traditions."⁴⁷³ Both in the cases of Michelet and that of Scholem's

⁴⁶⁸ S. Wasserstrom, *op. cit.*, pp.112-115.

⁴⁶⁹ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, I, pp.431-432.

⁴⁷⁰ G. Scholem, "Kabbalah and Myth," *op. cit.*, p.87.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

⁴⁷² G. Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth – The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, translated and edited by Anthony David Skinner, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, p.64.

⁴⁷³ Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem – An Intellectual Biography*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2017, p.54.

generation, the turn to myth was connected to “the quest for an *Urreligion*,” for a “daimonic moment [unifying] deep past with projective future” and through which historical life may be revived.⁴⁷⁴ The narrative philosophies brought into focus by Scholem “allowed Judaism to be understood in symbolic terms common to all religions” for “it too had a myth.”⁴⁷⁵ Scholem became nonetheless a “master of disenchantment”⁴⁷⁶ because his mythology of the Jewish myth came at the furthest distance of its origins. Similarly, Michelet’s mythology of witchcraft is a foundation to his conception of history, yet it is also a farewell to myth, with the witches’ knowledge and revolt degenerating into decadent Satanism, or morphing into political revolt. “*L’universel martyr du Moyen Âge, la Sorcière ne dit rien. Sa cendre est au vent,*” Michelet melancholically writes toward the end of *La Sorcière*.⁴⁷⁷ And yet, it seems like myths die only to live again, transfigured: “*La Sorcière a péri pour toujours mais non pas la Fée.*”⁴⁷⁸ The eternal archetype of the supernatural woman is to resurrect under new guises and avatars.

It should also be noted that “Redemption Through Sin” appeared at the same time as Husserl’s *Krisis*. The latter, in contrast with the *Lebenswelt*, the life-world or the world actually lived and experienced, expressed a distrust toward the abstract and dull universe of the scientists. This stance is correlated with a return to mythology and symbols.⁴⁷⁹ Scholem’s general attitude is a Romantic reaction to the imperialism of cold reason, akin to Husserl’s call to the “things

⁴⁷⁴ S. Wasserstrom, *op. cit.*, p.122.

⁴⁷⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁷⁶ George Steiner, “The Remembrance: Rescuing Walter Benjamin From His Acolytes,” in *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 October 1993.

⁴⁷⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.388.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.390.

⁴⁷⁹ See G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, II, pp.301-302.

themselves.” For that matter too, *La Sorcière* and “Redemption Through Sin” may highlight each other. Leo Strauss wrote to Scholem that the *nihil* he was fascinated by was precisely what the Aristotelian Arabs would call *phusis*, or nature. Scholem undertook in his way what Strauss had identified as the task of the philosopher in a technological age – that is, the recovery of *phusis*.⁴⁸⁰

The same may be said of Michelet’s *Naturphilosophie*. Viallaneix wrote that the Romantic school was the guilty conscience of the industrial age.⁴⁸¹ Interestingly enough, Michelet is the first author who used the word “*machinisme*” with the meaning of mechanization. Suspecting that the eternal struggle of man against fatality, once carried out through work, may well be cancelled by mechanization, Michelet repeatedly denounces it, especially in *Le Peuple*.⁴⁸²

Le travail solitaire du tisserand était bien moins pénible. Pourquoi ? C’est qu’il pouvait rêver. La machine ne comporte aucune rêverie, nulle distraction. [...] Là, au contraire, il faut bien que l’homme se conforme au métier, que l’être de sang et de chair où la vie varie selon les heures, subisse l’invariabilité de cet être d’acier.

Il arrive dans les travaux manuels qui suivent notre impulsion, que notre pensée intime, s’identifie le travail, le met à son degré, et que l’instrument inerte à qui l’on donne le mouvement, loin d’être un obstacle au mouvement spirituel en devient l’aide et le compagnon. Les tisserands mystiques du moyen âge furent célèbres sous le nom de *lollards*, parce qu’en effet, tout en travaillant, ils *lollaient*, chantaient à voix basse, ou du moins en esprit, quelque chant de nourrice. [...]

L’Eglise, qui souvent les persécuta comme hérétiques, ne reprocha jamais à ces rêveurs qu’une seule chose : l’amour ; l’amour exalté et sublime pour l’invisible amant, pour Dieu ; parfois aussi l’amour vulgaire [...] et néanmoins mystique, enseignant pour doctrine une communauté plus que fraternelle qui devait mettre un paradis sensuel ici-bas.⁴⁸³

The rhythm of the weavers’ shuttle would chime in with the rhythm of their soul. Through work, they would free themselves, whereas machinery would make their descendants inferior to machines. Why were they called “lollards?” Because, whilst working, they *loll*ed, that is to say,

⁴⁸⁰ B. Lazier, *op. cit.*, p.137.

⁴⁸¹ P. Viallaneix, “Michelet, machines, machinisme,” in *Romantisme*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1979, n°23, p.3.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁴⁸³ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, pp.38-41.

they chanted or whispered some nursery rhyme. This is also reminiscent of Sand's Lollards from *Consuelo*, whom we mentioned in the Introduction to the present study. According to Sand, the Lollards were a group of Luciferian heretics, hailing each other with the Satanist greeting "May he who has been wronged, salute you." In other words, Michelet – who had read *Consuelo* (explicitly mentioned in *La Sorcière*) – specifically chose to pay tribute to a medieval Luciferian group as a recourse against technological gelidity.

The laudatory mention of the Lollards and, by contrast, the derogatory use of the word "machinisme" create an interesting network of meaning. Was Michelet conscious that the latter neologism also denoted Descartes' theory of animal-machines? It is, in fact, one of only three definitions of *machinisme* given by Littré in 1863. Behind Michelet's rejection of *machinisme*-mechanization, what is at stake is the issue of Cartesianism. For Michelet, animals possess souls, as the *Donkey Skin* lode attests to in *La Sorcière*, and as the abovementioned passages from *Le Peuple* also demonstrate. Mechanization is the process that achieves the separation of man from nature, from his own instincts.⁴⁸⁴ An indirect outcome of Christianity, it is only logical that witchcraft – or the Lollards' tribal Luciferianism – should help combat it.⁴⁸⁵

That again and again, whenever legend is killed, a new threshold in historicization is crossed, points to the ambiguous status of historical consciousness.⁴⁸⁶ There is a direct connection, in contrast, between myth – the primeval night of history – and the question brought into focus in the present study, namely, redemption through sin. The voices of the unconscious, the violence of

⁴⁸⁴ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.231.

⁴⁸⁵ Could Michelet's reaction to "machinisme" be a key to understand Scholem's turn to redemptive sin as well as his choice of myth over pure logos?

⁴⁸⁶ We will study the "decadence of witchcraft" in our penultimate chapter. It is related, in Michelet's cryptic narration, to another "last" myth, in fact made up by Michelet himself.

the flesh can make their way through the clefts of reason. In the realm of myths and fairy tales, the opposites unite, good and evil mirror each other. *Märchen* and gothic novels (with *La Sorcière* somehow being both), non-Euclidean spaces imagined by Piranesi or Goya, trance or opium unleash the urges stemming from the subterranean foundations of human reason and morality. They give man over to the power of the devils. Romanticism is fascinated by the night, which precedes and begets the day.⁴⁸⁷ Legends are the thesaurus of the repressed of history, that is political and religious heresy, the long-forgotten history of the vanquished, which subterraneously subverts the official narrative.⁴⁸⁸

III. 5. A Mythology of History

Michelet himself is in his own eyes a magician of sort, a necromancer. A propaedeutic to science, witchcraft also appears to be the template of historical activity. By stressing the witch's consorting with the dead, Michelet alludes to something else, namely, his own demonism. History is resurrection, the historian famously asserted on many occasions, including in his later editions of *Le Peuple*, his *Histoire de France*, his diary and letters. "*Je l'ai nommée résurrection et ce nom lui restera.*"⁴⁸⁹ Is history a kind of secularized, earthly day of reckoning? Yes, it is, as such encompassing, Michelet insists, the resurrection of the dead. "*Histoire : jugement ? Oui, mais avec résurrection ; non le galvanisme d'Alexandre Dumas, qui remue les cadavres et les fait grimacer.*"⁴⁹⁰ The word even appears on his grave, like a motto, or a prayer. Note that his rival, in

⁴⁸⁷ G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, I, pp.497-498.

⁴⁸⁸ C. Millet, *op. cit.*, pp.122-123.

⁴⁸⁹ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, Paris, Librairie Chamerot et Lauwereyns, 1866, p.XXXI.

⁴⁹⁰ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, I, p.353.

that sentence from his 1840 diary, is a novelist and a mythmaker, not a fellow historian. To be a resurrection, history has to reconnect with myth. Both a diviner and a “thaumaturge,” the historian therefore resembles the witch herself, whom the peasants ask to conjure their dead.

The most developed vision of the historian as necromancer is to be found in Michelet’s 1842 diary. It is literally a vision, a prophetic dream, whose narrative beauty is remarkable.

Plutarque raconte que César, naviguant un jour entre..., s’endormit et vit en songe toute une armée en pleurs, une foule d’hommes qui pleuraient et lui tendaient les bras. En s’éveillant, il écrivit sur ses tablettes : *Corinthe* et *Carthage*. Et il rebâtit ces deux villes.

Son petit-fils, l’empereur Claude [...] essaya de refaire les peuples eux-mêmes, de les renouveler par l’histoire. [...]

L’historien n’est ni César ni Claude. Mais il voit souvent dans ses rêves une foule qui pleure et se lamente, la foule de ceux qui n’ont pas assez, qui voudraient revivre. Cette foule, c’est tout le monde, l’humanité. Demain nous en serons. [...]

Il faut le rameau d’or. D’où l’arrachera-t-on ? De son propre cœur. [...]

Il leur faut un Œdipe, qui leur explique leurs propres énigmes dont ils n’ont pas eu le sens [...]. Il leur faut un Prométhée et qu’au feu qu’il a dérobé, les voix qui flottaient, glacées, dans l’air, se résolvent, rendent un son, se remettent à parler. [...]

Alors seulement les morts se résignent au sépulcre.⁴⁹¹

In Plutarch’s narrative, Caesar was implored by a crowd of dead people to rebuild their devastated cities, which he did. Michelet says that the same crowd visits him every day and night – undead people begging him to tell their lives. At this condition only, they may rest in peace. The golden bough which the historian, like Aeneas, will use to descend to Hades, he needs to pluck it from his own heart. But Michelet is not only Aeneas, he is also Oedipus, the one who deciphers the enigmas of the past – with the Sphinx also being a figure of the netherworld. Interestingly enough, Ginzburg showed that the myth of Oedipus, in its primeval, pre-Sophocles form, and the shamanistic origins of the sabbath were connected.⁴⁹² The lameness that characterizes him is a recurring theme in the sabbath mythology, always in connection with the mystical journey to the

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.377-378.

⁴⁹² C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.226-230 and 240-260.

beyond. As for Prometheus, he is the one who wrests knowledge from darkness. He is the last figure to whom the historian compares himself, and this also points to the witch, since she is described as a female Prometheus in *La Sorcière*.⁴⁹³ Michelet's view of witches had to evolve because of the way he envisioned his own task. It already involved an analogy with what he would come to associate with witchcraft.

This dream may be described as the matrix of *La Sorcière* in that it also conveys a myth of language. Perhaps unconsciously, it is borrowed from Rabelais. "*Les voix qui flottaient, glacées, dans l'air, se résolvent, rendent un son, se remettent à parler,*" the frozen words that were fluttering in the air are thawed by the power of the historian. This is redolent of an episode of *Quart Livre*, adjacent to the story of Pan's death. Pantagruel and his friends hear words that were previously frozen. Having been thawed by the warm sun, they "speak" again. To resurrect the dead, for a master of words like Michelet, is to revive the pristine force of their language. At the end of his life, Michelet actually lamented that he had not successfully done so.⁴⁹⁴ It had nonetheless been his ideal, with the witch acting as a mythical and envied model.

In *Adieu*, Jean-Cristophe Bailly offers a very suggestive reading of Plutarch's tale of Pan's death. We may connect it to Michelet's dream. Bailly reminds us that Thamus, the pilot's name according to *Obsolescence of Oracles*, and the real name of Adonis as mentioned in our first chapter, is also the name of that Egyptian king who rebuked Hermes' invention – namely, writing –, in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In other words, the one who once condemned writing on behalf of an older conception of language – a non-frozen one. Now, he is the one announcing the demise of a daemon, a god of language, the son of Hermes. The one notifying mankind that this old conception of

⁴⁹³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

⁴⁹⁴ See P. Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes*, *op. cit.*, p.549.

language is dead. The pagan world knows it is dying, or freezing forever.⁴⁹⁵ Pan represents the mythological essence of language. Through writing, that essence had already begun to vanish. At the time of Plutarch, a cluster of causes is achieving that process: the people's lack of interest in their ancient cults, the contempt of the lettered for the sacrifices and, above all, the oracles – and the rise of Christianity. Against the destruction of language ushered in by Christianity's triumph, Michelet advocates, siding with the witches, a “*refondation*” of it. The witch's language gives life.⁴⁹⁶ It is the mysterious, ominous power of Toledo to which we will turn in our last chapter. That power is a power to create and to resurrect through words, even to resurrect the words themselves.

The historian's aim is to decipher the opacity of the one authorized discourse on witchcraft: that of ecclesiastical reason. It is a discourse that freezes and kills. Michelet's counter-history is about giving life to those reduced to silence. What is left to them once the usurper has confiscated the right to speak? They can only moo and bleat, like the animals they live with. First the witch, then Michelet himself try to redeem them though, through language.

Un divorce infini commence, un abîme de séparation. Le prêtre, seigneur et prince, chantera sous une chape d'or, dans la langue souveraine du grand empire qui n'est plus. Nous, triste troupeau ayant perdu la langue de l'homme, la seule que veuille entendre Dieu, que nous reste-t-il sinon de mugir et de bêler, avec l'innocent compagnon qui ne nous dédaigne pas, qui l'hiver nous réchauffe à l'étable et nous couvre de sa toison ? Nous vivrons avec les muets et serons muets nous-mêmes.⁴⁹⁷

An unending divorce had divided the people and the priest. The former is closer to their cattle. They are literally bereft of human speech, of the only speech. They can only bleat with their

⁴⁹⁵ Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Adieu, essai sur la mort des dieux*, La Tour d'Aigues, Edition de l'Aube, 1993, p. 125-126.

⁴⁹⁶ Muriel Louâpre, “*La Sorcière*, un mythe de la parole,” in *Variétés sur Michelet*, Clermont-Ferrand, Cahier Romantique, III, 1998, pp. 135-136.

⁴⁹⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

guileless friends, who never scorn them. Commenting on Michelet's analysis, Muriel Louâpre writes that Michelet endeavors to give the people back their right to speak, to pray, to conjure, through the "*parole vive*" that was denied to them: tales and legends, pleas, laments, stream of consciousness. It is a response, once initiated by the witch, to the opposite effort, the solipsistic rhetoric of the Church.⁴⁹⁸

A conflicted historian, Michelet believes history should be rejuvenated by the living spring of legends and imagination, so it may resurrect those miserable dead it purports to consort with. It should be acknowledged that Michelet's apparent ambivalence is very different, though, from any postmodern attempt at denying the existence of facts beyond the realm of language, or even at reducing historiography to a kind of "moderate" philosophy of history.⁴⁹⁹ *La Sorcière* rises above the old separation of myth and history. It reconciles, so to speak, Herodotus with Homer by suggesting that the *Odyssey* is really the bedrock of the *Histories*. Far from being a pure rationalization of legends and myths, history must be construed, instead, as a daughter of mythology. Although a science, history is grounded in mythology, as chemistry is in alchemy. Was it not born, in Michelet's own mythos, when Pan died? It should not be oblivious of its origin. In fact, what the reading of Vico has taught him is that all aspects of culture are connected within mythology, that the mythical relation with the world is the obscure foundation of our mental structures.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ M. Louâpre, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁴⁹⁹ See for instance H. White, *op. cit.*, pp.275-276.

⁵⁰⁰ Gabriel Monod wrote that, an heir to Vico, Michelet saw the primitive history of all peoples as symbolic constructs, yet more revealing than is factual history ("Michelet et les Juifs," *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 1907, p.V).

In this chapter, we have shown that, in the same way as good should spring from evil because they are ultimately one in the bosom of Pan, reason should not be oblivious – at least according to Michelet’s Romantic epistemology – of its irrational roots. It stems from our animalistic nature. As a historian, Michelet embraced the approach he described, turning to mythology in order to give the facts he would narrate a soil to take roots. Mythology is the unfathomable center of Romantic knowledge.⁵⁰¹ It unifies the categories of the mind with those of nature, and particular facts with archetypes. It is the native land of meaning. The *a priori* structure of reason is unreason, unconditioned – carnal – feeling, and this is precisely what Michelet tries to uncover: logos as the offspring of mythos. Unlike the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which worked in a sanitized intellectual space, Romanticism seeks to root knowledge in a human and sensual experience. Moreover, as a revolution, the return to mythology is a “tiger’s leap” into the past – “reactionary,” in short, for the very reason it is revolutionary.

⁵⁰¹ G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, I, p.506.

Chapter Four

Sin and Revolution in *La Sorcière*

For Michelet, witchcraft brought about redemption for the flesh and the mind. In *La Sorcière*, Michelet turns to the sabbath ritual's political dimension. The sabbath, as Michelet imagines it, anticipates the Revolution. What does this imply about his view of the Revolution? I propose that the key to understanding it is the concept of redemption through sin. *La Sorcière* emerges as a *messianic* book, with its political tenets expressing an underlying metaphysics of progress, revolution, and reaction.

IV. 1. Reaction and Revolution

To begin with, the meaning of the Revolution needs to be assessed. As it happens, Michelet's progressivism appears to be much more ambivalent than is usually understood. In his *Bible de l'humanité*, he sympathizes with Aeschylus' dismissal of the "young gods"⁵⁰² in favor of the established order. Prometheus, a revolutionary, is called the Son of the Law, while Jupiter is a figure of Grace.⁵⁰³ The old gods are the legitimate ones, while Jupiter is a usurper. In *La Sorcière*, the witch is explicitly compared to a Prometheus⁵⁰⁴ whose Jupiter would be, by analogy, the Christian god – so much so that she is somehow conflated with the God she serves, Pan. In effect,

⁵⁰² J. Michelet, *Bible de l'humanité*, Paris, Chamerot, 1864, pp. 255-257.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁵⁰⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

witchcraft is both revolt and order. Perhaps more precisely, it is revolt in pursuit of order – a Promethean thrust to reestablish truth and justice.

Michelet writes that never was a revolution so violent as that one which made Nicene Christianity the State religion of the Roman Empire. The Edict of Thessalonica authorized the persecution of pagans and unorthodox Christians alike, brutally outlawing the old religions of Europe.⁵⁰⁵ Christianity thereby subverted the old system, ultimately destroying all values.

Michelet is heir to Gibbon. “The ruin of Paganism, in the age of Theodosius, is perhaps the only example of the total extirpation of any ancient and popular superstition,” he writes in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It “may therefore deserve to be considered as a singular event in the history of the human mind.”⁵⁰⁶ These words could be Michelet’s. *La Sorcière*’s first chapter is reminiscent of Gibbon’s vivid depictions of Christian iconoclasm.

According to both historians, Antiquity had never before witnessed such violent proscription of any cult. “In almost every province of the Roman world, an army of fanatics, without authority, and without discipline, invaded the peaceful inhabitants; and the ruin of the fairest structures of antiquity still displays the ravages of those Barbarians, who alone had time and inclination to execute such laborious destruction.”⁵⁰⁷ More importantly, Gibbon repeatedly described Christianity as a subversive force which eventually destroyed the Roman Empire. “As the happiness of a future life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.”⁵⁰⁸ Conversely, Michelet suggests in response to Gibbon, every vestige

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁰⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, New York, The Modern Library, 1946, II, p. 46.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

of paganism may be construed as an effort at reestablishing order. In the eyes of pagans, Christianity--by destroying the legacy of Antiquity--renounced the true god(s) and ruined the true religion. Therefore, sinning against Christianity is merely holding fast to a superior, albeit forsaken, truth.

This notion is a trait of *La Sorcière*, but it was already present in *Histoire de la Révolution*: “Un jour reviendra la justice ! [...] Crois, espère ; le Droit ajourné aura son avènement, il viendra siéger, juger, dans le dogme et dans le monde... Et ce jour du Jugement s’appellera la Révolution.”⁵⁰⁹ In accordance with the etymology of the word *revolution*, Man is not redeemed by novelty, but by seeing his days renewed as of old. This paradox lies at the core of *Histoire de la Révolution*, where Michelet writes: “Je définis la Révolution, l’avènement de la Loi, la résurrection du Droit, la réaction de la Justice.”⁵¹⁰ The word *réaction* here may be surprising, as it usually connotes the opposite of the Revolution. Michelet uses it in *La Sorcière* concerning the Fronde, a “*réaction morale*.”⁵¹¹ The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* declared in 1798 that this word “*se dit figurément d’un parti opprimé qui se venge et agit à son tour*.”⁵¹² Although its current acceptance crystallized quite early, it kept its initial meaning even in the Revolutionary context. La Harpe thus explained that the Jacobins called their enemies “*réactionnaires*” while vowing to start a “*réaction républicaine*,”⁵¹³ which seems to foreshadow Michelet’s own usage. Another way

⁵⁰⁹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵¹¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.293.

⁵¹² Quoted in Jean Starobinski, *Action et Réaction – Vie et aventures d’un couple*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1999, p.307.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, p.311.

of understanding *réaction* is the Maistrian one, which might also have influenced Michelet.⁵¹⁴ For Maistre, the *réaction* is by no means a negative *action*, but rather an *inevitable return* to a divine order and a primeval state.⁵¹⁵ As a Christian writer, Maistre believes that the original sin ruined a divinely ordered world. The French Revolution is therefore at once the last stage of that general decadence, and the ultimate manifestation of God's will. Through it, France will be cleansed. Both a crime and its own expiation, the Revolution will necessarily bring about a "*contre-révolution*." Michelet shares with Maistre the idea that something was broken, that a "sin" occurred, shaking the whole universe, but he suggests that this sin is Christianity itself.

This directly bears on the analysis of the witches' sabbath. Michelet maintains that this celebration, rather than being legend, was actually performed. Paganism and political revolt combined and mirrored each other. Regarding its origin, however, there seems to be a tension in his thought. On the one hand he emphasizes the connection of witchcraft to ancient pagan rituals. The witch, Satan's priestess, gives herself to him as she did once to Pan and Priapus.⁵¹⁶ On the other hand, Michelet argues that the true witch is neither the Greek magician, nor the seeress of Celts and Germans.⁵¹⁷ He also argues that the rural Sabbath of the early and high Middle Ages has nothing to do with what he calls the Black Mass of the fourteenth century, where the grand defiance solemnly given to Jesus plays such a central part.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁴ Surprising as it may seem, Jean-Louis Cornuz points out that, having read the French Illuminists in the 1820s, Michelet was well acquainted with Maistre.

⁵¹⁵ See for instance J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, in *Œuvres, op. cit.*, p. 209.

⁵¹⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.167.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.36.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.160.

Apparently contradicting himself, he adds that this later kind of gnostic rebellion did not grow out of a long chain of tradition. Rather, it appeared in the *age of despair*.⁵¹⁹ The “true witch” is not only the heir of the pagan world. Witchcraft is more than innocent superstition and passive sin. Rather, it is the active effort to combat “*l’horreur du temps*” by reenacting buried – or rather uncompletely buried – paganism. However, Kusters marks, I propose, too strong a contrast between the two forms of witchcraft in *La Sorcière*, the ancient one and the “classic” medieval one.⁵²⁰ The rupture that he perceives in Michelet’s typology is rather a dialectic elaboration, with witchcraft opposing Christianity, indeed, yet *as a return* to the old religion whose energy had not completely withered. A revolution, yes, but also, as such, a *réaction*. Satan is a cosmic revolutionary because he was once Pan, the almighty God, whom Christianity despoiled of his eternal power. The witches’ Luciferianism is thus both gnosticism – or cosmic *revolt* – and paganism – or nostalgia for a lost *order*. Interestingly, Michelet rejected both – nature first, then the principle of “Ahriman.” In *La Sorcière*, he praises their reunion within witchcraft – that distorted, anti-natural worship of the Nature God himself – “*culte dénaturé du dieu nature*.”⁵²¹

IV. 2. The Role of the Christian State

We need to turn to the question of the State in relation to that of Christianity, to better understand what Michelet was looking for in writing a political history of witchcraft. *La Sorcière*’s first part is commonly opposed to the second one. Some twentieth-century reprintings do not even include the latter. This contradistinction has some basis, yet the two parts do have a common

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

⁵²⁰ See W. Kusters, *op. cit.*, p.92.

⁵²¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.165.

thread: Michelet's critique of the power of the State. At first it seems that the State is ubiquitous in *La Sorcière's* second part and almost absent from the first. Michelet sees the State's development as parallel to Capitalism'.⁵²² The State, evolving from feudalism to absolutism, in effect evolves from a world governed by the gods to a society driven by money. The gods are the secret force lying behind the events of the first part. That force is invisible, especially to the peasant, who only knows his local priest and the lord he belongs to, but it is all the more powerful and efficient.

Michelet's analysis of the State actually starts with Rome. Discussing Late Antiquity, he approves of Gibbon's anti-Christian "Conservatism," but strongly rejects Gibbon's enthusiasm for the institutions of the Roman Empire:

On montre ces dieux dans Rome, on les montre dans le Capitole, où ils n'ont été admis que par une mort préalable, je veux dire en abdiquant ce qu'ils avaient de sève locale, en reniant leur patrie, en cessant d'être les génies représentant les nations. Pour les recevoir, il est vrai, Rome avait pratiqué sur eux une sévère opération, les avait énervés, pâlis. Ces grands dieux centralisés étaient devenus, dans leur vie officielle, de tristes fonctionnaires de l'empire romain.⁵²³

The old gods were admitted in the Capitol after a kind of preliminary death. Their sap had been drained. In order to receive them, Rome had performed on them a "cruel operation" anticipating the Christian emasculation of the Jewish God. Once centralized, those venerable deities became the dull functionaries of the Roman Empire – which, Michelet elsewhere laments, despised its own natural, animalistic roots.⁵²⁴

⁵²² See Franck Laurent, "Figures de l'Etat dans *La Sorcière*," in *La Sorcière de Michelet – L'envers de l'histoire, op. cit.*

⁵²³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.49.

⁵²⁴ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple, op. cit.*, p.185.

In other words, the Christian *enframing* of nature succeeded because nature had already undergone a “cruel operation” from the part of the Roman State. Christianity destroyed the pagan, pre-Roman order by lashing out at Rome, but Michelet’s paganism is not to be found in the City’s arrogant laws, nor in the “Olympus’ aristocracy” and its human substitutes.

After the double destruction exerted first by the pagan Rome, and then by the Christian Rome, we see the rise of a new, feudal order, whose initial principles Michelet seems to praise.⁵²⁵ In the beginning, feudalism was intended to reconstitute a naturalistic order. It was somehow to restore the venerable law of the tribe, with the serf being not a slave but the lord’s protégé. This new order degenerated, particularly because of the monetarization of the economy: “*L’âge terrible, c’est l’âge d’or.*” Michelet argues that money is abstract, and by making materiality more abstract as well, it deprives the relations between the peasant and his lord of their humanity.⁵²⁶

Le monde est changé ce jour-là. Jusqu’alors, au milieu des maux, il y avait, pour le tribut, une sécurité innocente. *Bon an, mal an*, la redevance suivait le cours de la nature et la mesure de la moisson. Si le seigneur disait : « C’est peu, » on répondait : « Monseigneur, Dieu n’a pas donné davantage. »

Mais l’or, hélas ! où le trouver ?... Nous n’avons pas une armée pour en prendre aux villes de Flandre. Où creuserons-nous la terre pour lui ravir son trésor ? Oh ! si nous étions guides par l’Esprit des trésors cachés !⁵²⁷

In *La Sorcière*, gold is not the Jew’s creation, although we will see that the encounter between this character and the witch does occur during the “dreadful age of gold.” Rather it is circulated to supply the feudal lord’s needs, then the king’s – and, ultimately, to compensate the loss of the flesh-and-blood bonds within society. After the first centuries of the feudal system, came the dreadful age of gold, with King Philip choosing money as his real and mighty pope, his

⁵²⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.64-65.

⁵²⁶ R. Barthes, “La Sorcière,” *op. cit.*, p.113.

⁵²⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.93-94.

only god. The movement, Michelet suggests, intensified with the Crusades. The only wealth which mattered then was that of buying and selling. To strike his blows, the king wanted nothing but gold.⁵²⁸ The tribal order has disappeared but an army of gold, a fiscal army, has spread over all the land instead. Then the Crusader came back, bringing with him his luxurious dreams of the East – always longing for its unforgettable wonders, for damascened armor, carpets, spices, and valuable steeds, for more gold than ever. Corn no longer satisfied him: “*Ce n'est pas tout ; je veux de l'or !*” On that day the world was changed. Before then, even amid the injustice of the feudal order, there had always been an innocent certainty about the tax. The rent followed the course of nature. But the gold, alas! where shall we find it, *où le trouver?*

In the fifth chapter of *La Sorcière*'s first part, entitled “Possession,” Michelet argues that the witch, the *natural woman*, shall redeem those men from the abstract and relentless power of the Anti-Nature. She will save them, through nature, from the grip of political and economic oppression – indeed, from politics itself. To escape the hell of being a Christian-sanctioned possession, the peasant, the serf can only turn to another kind of possession – a more intimate, perhaps even violent one, a more genuine too. Where shall we dig the ground to win the lord the treasures he demands? Is not Satan the one who knows where a jealous God has hidden precious stones and gold? Redemption is thus gained through sin; *escape*, through *possession*.

IV. 3. Sabbath and Revolution

After several centuries, the witch-cult had matured. Thanks to the utter despair of the late Middle Ages, the sabbath could finally be born, along with the *Jacquerie*.⁵²⁹ The same movement

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.93.

⁵²⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.162.

of revolt against the cruel lords and a deaf God brought about these two phenomena. The satirical farces of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries morphed into a ritualized defiance of the political order: the real *Black Mass*. The ancient pagan cult then became a political religion by way of inversion: Pan, the defeated God, becomes the anti-Jesus. Thanks to the doctrine of the fallen angels, via Milton, Michelet can depict Satan both as Pan, the ancient God, and Lucifer, a rebel. He is the One who has been wronged, “Celui à qui on a fait tort, *le vieux Proscrit, injustement chassé du ciel, l’Esprit qui a créé la terre, le Maître qui fait germer les plantes.*”⁵³⁰ Whether we call him the most beautiful angel as in true Miltonian tradition, or the one true God, assassinated by the Nazarene’s disciples, he is the one to whom injustice has been done.

In its primitive form, the sabbath consisted of merry dances and satirical farces. It is now a real mass, *black* like the night when it is performed. It unfolds in four acts, just like the ordinary mass, whose symbols it systematically inverts.⁵³¹ Redemption must happen through defiance of the Christian heaven.

The mass was held on a vast moor, often near an old Celtic dolmen, at the edge of a wood. On one side a great feast of the people; on the other, the choir of the “church” whose dome is the sky. Heaven and the abyss, darkness and the yellow flames of torch-fires, with red brasiers emitting a fantastic smoke. At the back is the priestess – the witch – dressing up a great wooden idol, her black and shaggy devil. His grotesque and obscene traits are those of Pan and Priapus, Michelet writes, but the proud melancholy he distills is that of the Miltonian outcast, “*l’éternel Exilé.*”⁵³²

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, pp.165-166.

The elder god, upon his return to power (“*le vieux dieu, revenu*”), takes back the magnificent Introit once taken by Christendom from antiquity. Inversion is reaction. Once the priestess-witch has had the children taken off, the service begins. Satan (“*Seigneur*”) is asked to save his faithful ones from the priest and the baron, then comes the denial of Jesus. One pays homage to the new master, with the feudal kiss given to his buttocks (“*on aime mieux le dos de Satan*”), so the denial is somehow aggravated.⁵³³ Michelet here explicitly conflates the peasant witches with the Templars (“*comme aux réceptions du Temple*”), appropriating the medieval and early modern witchhunters’ gossip.⁵³⁴ Significantly enough, although he was evoked as “*le vieux dieu*” two paragraphs before, Satan is now only “*le nouveau maître.*” Jesus is “*l’ancien Dieu.*”

Then comes the moment when the priestess herself is consecrated by her god and becomes the living altar of the sabbath. The wooden deity receives her in the manner of Priapus. Following the old pagan custom, she sits upon him, like the Delphian Pythia on Apollo’s tripod. This obscene motif is meant to subvert the chaste atmosphere of the Catholic mass. And the witch thus receives “*le souffle, l’âme, la vie, la fécondation simulée.*”⁵³⁵ Folklore, sexual bliss, and political revolt coincide.

Once the Introit is over, the service is interrupted for the joyous feast. Was alcohol circulated? Or psychedelic drugs? Michelet suggests that the latter would have prevented the participants from dancing, which makes it unlikely because the famous Sabbath-round, the whirling dance, was the highlight of the show. Another inversion: they turned back to back, with their arms behind them, not seeing each other, but often touching each other’s *back*. The “old

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, p.167.

⁵³⁴ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp.79-101.

⁵³⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.167.

lady,” as they would call the witch, was old no more. She was a desirable woman, to whom the entire crowd made love, as suggested by these cryptic two words: “*confusément aimée*.”⁵³⁶

The sacrifice was then offered on the living altar, her loins, with a demon officiating and reciting the *Credo*.⁵³⁷ A harvest-offering was made to the *Spirit of the Earth*, a name reminiscent of *Faust*, as a flight of birds bore to the *God of Freedom* the sighs and prayers of the serfs. Again the conflation of a pagan, or pantheistic, motif with a gnostic one. What did they ask? Only that their distant descendants might be free.⁵³⁸

What was the sacrament which was divided among the attendants? Michelet says it was most likely the *confarreatio*, the love-cake baked on the witch’s (or her client’s) own body: i.e., on the victim who, perhaps, would herself be sacrificed eventually through the fire. It was her life and her death that they ate there.⁵³⁹ Finally, they placed upon her two last offerings, *apparently* of flesh (Michelet denies that any actual cannibalism took place at the sabbath). Through these two images—one of the latest dead, the other of the newest-born in the community—they would actually worship themselves.

Note the alliance between Eros and Polis. This is what *communion de révolte* means – with the rebels ritually consuming the sacraments of their political, physical, and spiritual redemption. The witch shall beget a new god, who is her very spouse, Satan, that is nature, or the people rejuvenated. The symbol of revolt is a symbol of love, of physical love.⁵⁴⁰ The historical moment, whether it is

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.168.

⁵³⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.169.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁵⁴⁰ Is not “Le temps des cerises” both a love song and a revolutionary song?

the rise of the sabbath-cult, or the Revolution, is always described by Michelet as an erotic ejaculation.⁵⁴¹ “*Cela, je crois, se fit d’un jet,*” he says of the sabbath.⁵⁴² Likewise, the Revolution is a “*jet brûlant d’héroïsme, qui perça et jaillit au ciel,*”⁵⁴³ and Thermidor “*eut l’effet d’une convulsion, d’un spasme violent.*”⁵⁴⁴ Ultimately, human temporality imitates Nature. Michelet compares it to that hard wild African shrub the agave, so sharp and bitter: every ten years it loves, and then dies. In one day, the *amorous gush* (“*jet amoureux*”), which has so long been gathering in the rough creature, goes off with a noise like gunfire and darts skyward. The seeds become a whole tree.⁵⁴⁵ Just as, in the sacred moment of love, one “desires beyond himself,” nations also desire beyond themselves and literally ejaculate: “*les grandes nations ont éjaculé leur pensée par-delà les siècles.*”⁵⁴⁶

To devise this fantastic scene, Michelet mined several sources, perhaps including, as will be shown, the Haitian Revolution. The idea that the Black Mass constantly inverts the symbols of the Catholic one is found explicitly in Lancre’s *Tableau*. Lancre also frequently brings up the kiss on Satan’s buttocks. Unlike Christ, but like “*le grand dieu Janus,*” the Devil has “*un visage devant & un autre derrière la teste,*”⁵⁴⁷ and he asks to be kissed on his behind⁵⁴⁸ or his “*membre.*”⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴¹ Georges Poulet, “Michelet et le moment d’Eros,” in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, Paris, Gallimard, October 1967, n°178, pp.627-633.

⁵⁴² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.162.

⁵⁴³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, *op. cit.*, I, p.1021.

⁵⁴⁴ J. Michelet, *Histoire du XIX^e siècle – Directoire – Origine des Bonaparte*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1875, p.182.

⁵⁴⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.130.

⁵⁴⁶ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, II, p.298.

⁵⁴⁷ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.131.

⁵⁴⁸ See for instance P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, pp.71-73.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.131.

Although some witches avowed to him that their mass was the more spectacular one, “*avec plus de pompe que dans la vraye Eglise*,”⁵⁵⁰ it is usually obscene and grotesque. The Devil who is to imitate God needs a ceremony which corresponds to the Christian one.⁵⁵¹ He has his bishops and prelates;⁵⁵² his crosses – “*esbranchées, comme il se voit ès cimetières infectez par les Sorciers*”;⁵⁵³ his *black candles*;⁵⁵⁴ his holy *urine*;⁵⁵⁵ and his Trinitarian formula, which substitutes the *baise-cul* to the original words.⁵⁵⁶ Many early modern intellectuals utilized such concepts of inversion, the witches’ Sabbath being only one. The supreme symbol of inversion that had emerged in medieval Europe was, of course, the Antichrist.

The Witch Hunt was prompted in part by concerns that Mexican and other native religions were themselves mimetic inversions of Christianity.⁵⁵⁷ As Bakhtin puts it, “the rump is the back of the face, the face turned inside out. World literature and language abound in an infinite variety of these turnabouts. One of its most common forms, expressed in word or gesture, is *baise-cul*, a variant often found in Rabelais’ novel.”⁵⁵⁸ The Russian critic also emphasized the link between these “uncrownings” and the fact that Rabelais was writing “at the end of the old and at the beginning of a new era of world history.”⁵⁵⁹ Irrespective of the accuracy of Bakhtin’s statement

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.124.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.458.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p.460.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.459.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.461.

⁵⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁷ E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, *op. cit.*, pp.297-298.

⁵⁵⁸ M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p.373.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.376.

regarding Rabelais and the Renaissance, it could be argued that Michelet had such a turnabout in mind when he brought up Satan's peculiar kiss. The witch kissing her god on his buttocks proclaims the rise of a new world, where there will be no more *above* or *beneath*. This gesture performed at the height of a revolutionary ceremony will thus converge with the redemption of the stomach heralded by the witch's previous medical activity. Not only did the medieval ethos count the spirit noble, and the body ignoble, but even some organs or parts of the body were called noble, and others—the “plebeian” (“*roturières apparemment*”)—were not.⁵⁶⁰ The God of the witches has a *cul*, like Louis XIV, and to kiss it is to worship him properly. To remind the people that the abyss is no lower than heaven, or the anus than the mouth, is also reminding them that the plebe is not inferior to the aristocracy. To remind them that Louis XIV has bowels no less than they is to proclaim that “*nous sommes hommes comme ils sont.*”⁵⁶¹ In short, inversion is correlated with political equality.

Ruben Van Luijk implicitly takes issue with Norman Cohn's assertion that the notion of a “Black Mass celebrated on a woman's back [...] was born in [the context] of the Affair of the Poisons.”⁵⁶² He suggests that Michelet actually took his inspiration elsewhere. To be sure, the latter mentions the Affair of the Poisons in a footnote. He writes that the witch's role at the medieval sabbath is known to us through its decadent form – as when the Voisin woman and Guibourg entertained the aristocrats of Versailles. Nevertheless, Michelet contends that this type of decadent ceremony certainly imitates the original ones.⁵⁶³ He thus takes the aristocratic black mass away

⁵⁶⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.145.

⁵⁶¹ This proud anthem, which Michelet calls “*La Marseillaise de ce temps-là*,” comes from Wace's *Roman de Brut*.

⁵⁶² N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp.150-151.

⁵⁶³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.169.

from the courtesans, giving it back to medieval and Renaissance peasants. From a ceremony which was no longer a “genuine sabbath” (but nonetheless really happened), he infers what it must have been in a *mythical* past. Incidentally, he acknowledges his debt to the notorious Voisin woman, which Cohn does not mention. Nonetheless, the French historian does not explain “why his female altar is positioned *face down*, with her loins serving as an offering place, while the women in the Voisin affair had most certainly had *their* clandestine Eucharist celebrated above their ‘thrice holy’ wombs. For this remarkable choice of posture, one suspects, Michelet must have consulted a different source, albeit a rather non-academic one: namely the indecent scenes from the work of [...] Sade.”⁵⁶⁴

Michelet chose to put his witch on all fours, a detail which was not mined from the archives of the Affair of the Poisons. A Sadean memory indeed? Sade was widely read in the nineteenth century in intellectual circles, so the revolutionary pornographer might well be a source of Michelet’s creative history. Sainte-Beuve famously declared in a 1843 article that Byron and Sade had perhaps been the two greatest inspirations of his generation: the former blatant and visible (“*affiché et visible*”), the latter clandestine, yet not too clandestine.⁵⁶⁵ Likewise, Jules Janin asserted that Sade was “everywhere, in all the libraries, on a certain mysterious and hidden row which one always find.”⁵⁶⁶ Furthermore, Michelet somehow shared Sade’s cruelty and fascination with the evil forces in nature, so redolent of Pan. There is a sadistic tone in many passages in his works, including others from *La Sorcière*, especially the La Cadière episode. He explicitly

⁵⁶⁴ R. van Luijk, *op. cit.*, p.125.

⁵⁶⁵ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, “Quelques vérités sur la situation en littérature,” in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, July 1843, p.14.

⁵⁶⁶ Jules Janin, *Le marquis de Sade*, Paris, Chez les Marchands de Nouveautés, 1834, p.20.

acknowledges his debt to Sade in his *Histoire de France au XVIIIe siècle*, bluntly saying that one has to read Sade in order to know the kind of sexual cruelty in which Louis XV would indulge.⁵⁶⁷

This mention evinces disgust and horror, rather than sympathy, for the aristocratic “*infâme et sanguinaire auteur*,” as he qualifies him in *Histoire de la Révolution française*.⁵⁶⁸ Yet that does not preclude a literary influence by Sade, or a shared interest in the violence of nature. There is a general ambivalence toward antinomianism, especially in *La Sorcière*, and Sade might be the hidden *figure* of that ambivalence. Michelet’s own interest in nature’s barbarity being turned there into a revolutionary impulse thus sees in the Sabbath an instance of “good” Sadism.

As a direct precursor of the Black Mass scene in *La Sorcière* in the Marquis’ oeuvre, the following scene from *Justine* would certainly be of interest:

Irrités de ce premier crime, les sacrilèges ne s’en tiennent point là : ils font mettre nue cette enfant, ils la couchent à plat ventre sur une grande table, ils allument des cierges, ils placent l’image de notre Sauveur au milieu des reins de la jeune fille et osent consommer sur ses fesses le plus redoutable de nos mystères. Je m’évanouis à ce spectacle horrible, il me fut impossible de le soutenir. Sévérino, me voyant en cet état, dit que pour m’y apprivoiser il fallait que je servisse d’autel à mon tour. On me saisit ; on me place au même lieu que Florette ; le sacrifice se consomme, et l’hostie... ce symbole sacré de notre auguste religion... Sévérino s’en saisit, il l’enfonce au local obscène de ses sodomites jouissances..., la foule avec injure..., la presse avec ignominie sous les coups redoublés de son dard monstrueux, et lance, en blasphémant, sur le corps même de son Sauveur, les flots impurs du torrent de sa lubricité !⁵⁶⁹

The Sade reference reinforces the connection between Michelet’s sabbath and the Revolution, although Michelet inclines the Marquis toward mysticism. That he saw the political uprising in religious terms is well-known – and *religious* needs here to be coextensive with *sacrilegious*.

Tous le voyaient, tous le sentaient. Les hommes les moins amis de la Révolution tressaillirent à ce moment, ils sentirent qu’une grande chose advenait. Nos sauvages paysans du Maine et des marches de Bretagne [...] vinrent eux-mêmes alors, émus, attendris, s’unir à nos fédérations, et baiser l’autel du Dieu inconnu.

⁵⁶⁷ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVIII^e siècle – Louis XV – 1724-1757*, Paris, Chamero & Lauwereyns, 1866, p.285.

⁵⁶⁸ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, I, *op. cit.*, p.516.

⁵⁶⁹ D. A. F. de Sade, *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*, *op. cit.*, p.274.

Rare moment où peut naître un monde, heure choisie, divine !... Et qui dira comment une autre peut revenir ? Qui se chargera d'expliquer ce mystère profond qui fait naître un homme, un peuple, un Dieu nouveau ? [...]

Ce jour-là, tout était possible. Toute division avait cessé ; il n'y avait ni noblesse, ni bourgeoisie, ni peuple. L'avenir fut présent... C'est-à-dire, plus de temps... Un éclair de l'éternité.⁵⁷⁰

In this famous page, the Festival of the Federation is a “lightning of eternity,” a mystical moment when the assembled people may see a god being born out of their own entrails. The sabbath, in *La Sorcière*, appears to be a proto-*Fête de la Fédération*. Michelet drew this mystical view of the Revolution from Illuminism, along with his mystical interest in nature and animals. Significantly, he praised Saint-Martin's books as “*originaux, si doux et si hardis, dévots et révolutionnaires, où l'auteur met si haut l'action et le pouvoir de l'homme, où il montre Dieu même, pour l'œuvre du salut, et celui-ci comme collaborateur de Dieu [...]*.”⁵⁷¹ Saint-Martin had expressed in his *Lettre à un ami* his revolutionary enthusiasm, deeply rooted in his mystical doctrine. The world, he argued, was witnessing a genuine “religious war,” the first one since the Jews had lost Jerusalem at the hands of Titus.⁵⁷² A universal providence was manifesting itself through the French Revolution, which Saint-Martin went so far as to compare to the Last Judgment.⁵⁷³ While he hardly saw it in terms of “sin,” he did acknowledge the considerable horrors revolutionaries had committed, and he justified them:

Tu pourras même trouver des bases à cette consolante espérance, jusques dans nos excès, et, si j'ose le dire, jusques dans nos fureurs presque inséparables des crises révolutionnaires, qui comme les remèdes violens ne peuvent ranimer les humeurs salutaires du malade, qu'en mettant à découvert toutes les humeurs corrosives et malfaisantes ; car si tout est vif dans les

⁵⁷⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, I, *op. cit.*, pp.428-430.

⁵⁷¹ Quoted in J.-L. Cornuz, *op. cit.*, p.30.

⁵⁷² See Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Lettre à un ami, ou Considérations politiques, philosophiques et religieuses sur la Révolution française*, Paris, Louvet & Migneret, 1795, p.18.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

vengeances des hommes, [...] ne devons-nous pas croire que tout seroit vif aussi dans leurs vertus [...].⁵⁷⁴

Things happen as though the very violence of the revolutionaries, for all its barbarity, were the touchstone of their will to redeem the nation and the world. Although they ultimately need to be overcome, such excesses are necessary for redemption. As a spiritual being, man has to conquer his material part, and to do so he must use material, imperfect weapons. Saint-Martin even accuses “*publicistes*,” including Rousseau, of having neglected that irreducible violence inherent to any psychosomatic being. For Saint-Martin, the body stands in relation to the soul like a rock to the water spring that flows down from it. Actions may be sinful while their intentions remain pure, as do their results.⁵⁷⁵ Furthermore, our imperfect, postlapsarian condition implies a dialectic of redemption through sin. Saint-Martin does not use the word “*péché*” when he speaks about the clergy which the Revolution purified, but another one, “*prévarication*,” while sins can redeem, prevarication never does.

Michelet saw the dark unity behind a spirit like Saint-Martin’s and Sade’s. The revolutionaries, Michelet holds, “*se croyaient athées et ne l’étaient pas*.” Even a Danton – who claimed to read *Justine* to warm up, the legend goes, before talking in front of the deputies – could feel God “*dans les énergies créatrices de la Nature, dans la femme et dans l’amour*.”⁵⁷⁶ It is, however, not until *La Sorcière* that the mystic substratum of libertinism and the libertine face of political mysticism show up. Thanks to Michelet, Saint-Martin becomes an accomplished revolutionary, and Sade, quite Klossowski-like, an upside down mystic.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁵⁷⁶ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, II, *op. cit.*, pp.427-428.

It seems that Michelet did not become fully aware of what such ideas entailed until he wrote *La Sorcière*. While he was still playing the Cartesian card in *Histoire de la Révolution*, by 1862 he had become a mystic of sin. The upside down sacrificial dimension of the Revolution is symbolically brought to mind in his rendition of the witches' sabbath.

Particular attention should be devoted here to the motif of the sacrificed toad and the blasphemes that precede it. It combines a symbolic regicide with a grotesque version of the Eucharist. After the priestess had given herself up to be eaten by the worshippers, she paradoxically confirmed the "lawfulness" of the mass by praying that the thunder hit her. This insolent defiance of the Christian God was accompanied by sundry sacrileges – the obscene mockery of the *Agnus Dei*, and the desecration of the Christian Host. Then a dressed up toad was brought and torn into pieces. Rolling her eyes about, she raised them to the sky, and beheading the toad, uttered these strange words: "Ah ! Philippe, si je te tenais, je t'en ferais autant !"⁵⁷⁷

The scene comes from Lancre's *Tableau* (here precisely referred to in a footnote), albeit with a few modifications. For instance, Lancre does mention that the witch raises her eyes to the sky,⁵⁷⁸ but not that she is rolling them about – a detail that might bear a sexual resonance. For Michelet, the height of the emancipatory ritual should associate orgasm and blasphemy. Why "Philippe," the historian wonders in another footnote? Lancre asked the same question, but their (tentative) answers differ greatly. For the French judge, it must refer to Philip the Apostle whom Jacopo de Voragine shows defeating a dragon, the beast of Lucifer. The heathens of an Asia Minor city worshipped a sun-idol. He showed them that it was really inhabited by the monster whose foul

⁵⁷⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.170.

⁵⁷⁸ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.137.

breath had infected the atmosphere. They became Christian.⁵⁷⁹ Philip should therefore refer to a fierce enemy of the Devil, once responsible for the trampling down of his false cult.

For Michelet, it is either Jesus' nickname, or a reference to Philip of Valois, who brought on the wasting Hundred Years' War with England. Unlike Lancre, who does not mention this royal connection, Michelet here emphasizes the link between blasphemy and political revolt – symbolic deicide and regicide. The sabbath appears to be derisive both of the king and of Jesus Christ – and they may be one and the same. The “black mass” enacts the desecration of the king's body politic, thereby anticipating on the Maistrian “martyrdom” of Louis XVI.

Lancre's strange tale might still be present, albeit in a silent way, in Michelet's own interpretation. The *Golden Legend's* tale is indeed reminiscent of biblical images of regicide-deicide. As in the story of Moses, the sun – the royal “planet” of the Pharaohs – is vanquished. How so? In being shown to be nothing else than the monster responsible, in Egyptian lore, for imperilling the solar deity! The giant serpent Apophis – in short, a dragon – was the divine enemy of Ra, whom he would battle as he made his circuit through the underworld.⁵⁸⁰ In the Bible, Moses' staff threatens the entire cosmic order, Maat, by turning into a replica of Apophis. In the *Golden Legend*, the two archenemies are uncannily conflated, with Moses' dragon-staff becoming the sun itself. In Michelet, there is a displacement, with the Philip signifier being moved from that enemy of the royal sun-god to the latter. Like a Christian tyrannicide, the witch symbolically kills a royal idol – yet giving it the name of a Christian apostle. In a word, she intimates that the ultimate

⁵⁷⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁸⁰ See Scott Noegel, “Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus,” in *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 1997, Issue 24, pp.47-48.

tyranny and idolatry is Christianity itself. A new Moses, she tears into pieces the living image of a wrongful order.

The psychoanalyst and philosopher Paul-Laurent Assoun suggested in a book on the 1793 desecration of the Saint-Denis royal necropolis that Michelet did not really assess the impact of what happened then, namely that the desecrated bodies of the kings were all the more so sacred as they were so horribly defiled.⁵⁸¹ While it is possible indeed that the author of *Histoire de la Révolution française* did not fully realize what was at stake between January and August 1793, the author of *La Sorcière* certainly understood it. As an archetype of all revolutionary rites, the sabbath underscores the very sacredness of what it desecrates. As a result, the false gods (Jesus or Louis XVI) of the Christians need to be actively desecrated, not merely ignored. Although Michelet had previously mocked Maistre's mysticism of martyrdom, he paradoxically endorses it in *La Sorcière*. According to Maistre, bloodshed regenerates mankind, and some sacrileges may therefore be holy.⁵⁸² The French Revolution, Maistre maintains, is sacred – *sacer* – in both etymological meanings of the term – holy and unholy. It is a gigantic sin, but a redemptive one. In *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*, Mauss held that, despite its sacredness or because of it, the sacrifice of a living being was originally deemed a crime by those performing it.⁵⁸³ Anticipating on this idea, Maistre conflates sacrilege and sacrifice: the “*grande épuration*” was performed through sin itself, in an infamous and repulsive way.⁵⁸⁴ In a way, Michelet's sabbath scene illustrates this mysticism of sin. There might be some *avant la lettre* Frazerian undertones in the

⁵⁸¹ P.-L. Assoun, *op. cit.*, p.122.

⁵⁸² J. de Maistre, *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, *op. cit.*, p.816.

⁵⁸³ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice,” *L'année sociologique*, 1899, II, pp.67-68.

⁵⁸⁴ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, *op. cit.*, p.201.

motif of the sacrificed toad. In addition to being the most important of the poison-medicine ingredients, the toad was often depicted as an avatar of the Devil – a god, then, who dies so his worshippers may live.⁵⁸⁵ Jesus and Satan, the people as God and the king’s body politic are finally one and the same.

IV. 4. Michelet and the Political Witch Hunt

It’s understandable why Michelet saw Christianity as oppressive. That he saw witchcraft as politically redeeming is harder to comprehend. For one thing, it departs from the secondary sources he used, especially Maury and Lamothe-Langon.⁵⁸⁶ Part of Michelet’s influence until this very day is correlated to this interpretation, with feminist writers often waving medieval and early modern witches as political icons. Where, then, does this idea come from? In Michelet’s epistemology, witchcraft is inherently emancipatory because it was a pre-Enlightenment phenomenon. *La Sorcière*, however, goes beyond that to identify specifically political aspects.

The first element allowing Michelet to envision witchcraft in this manner is nothing less than early modern demonological literature itself. As has been said in our introduction, the depiction of witchcraft was one of many “inversionary” patterns and themes, all of them correlated to political threat, so much so that kingship was somehow regarded as counter-magic. Michelet read such texts against the grain – in a “witchy” or “à rebours” way. In effect he turned that “*horrible de littérature de sorcellerie*”⁵⁸⁷ against its own purposes, much as he had read Eusebius against himself. To see

⁵⁸⁵ E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, op. cit., p.124.

⁵⁸⁶ Etienne Léon de Lamothe-Langon, *Histoire de l’Inquisition en France, depuis son établissement au XIII^e siècle, à la suite de la croisade contre les Albigeois, jusqu’en 1772, époque définitive de sa suppression*, Paris, Dentu, 1829.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.33.

in witchcraft the emancipatory tool described in *La Sorcière*, he just had to read those who had first described it as such despite themselves.

Regarding the witches' sabbath in particular, most of what we know about it dates from the early modern period. Sprenger and Kramer do not mention it. What's more, Norman Cohn convincingly demonstrated in his seminal *Europe's Inner Demons* that Lamothe-Langon's *Histoire de l'Inquisition en France*, on which Michelet relied greatly, was nothing short of "a spectacular historical hoax."⁵⁸⁸ On that basis we could see Michelet's depiction of the Sabbath as simply "an imaginative creation"⁵⁸⁹ but I believe there is more to it.

Michelet combined Lamothe-Langon's forgery with early modern testimonies, which he reworked in a visionary way. Having imagined a sabbath that never was, he dated it to the Middle Ages –long before the historical Witch Hunt, and well before any real testimony about such a ceremony. He even acknowledged that no detailed accounts of these gatherings are earlier than the reign of Henri IV.⁵⁹⁰ Though he knew that the historical reality was different, he asserted that the *real* sabbath was the one he had conceived, the "*communion de révolte.*"

The drama which he succeeded in reproducing in *History of France*, drawing upon Lancre, bore too many of the grotesque adornments which clothed the later form of the Sabbath. Now he was ready to define what belonged to the older shell – namely, what he himself had so creatively imagined.⁵⁹¹ Pierre de Lancre, he maintained, had only witnessed a decadent version of the sabbath.⁵⁹² What could explain why "the aging romantic radical had neither time nor desire for

⁵⁸⁸ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp.181-193.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.152.

⁵⁹⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.159.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁵⁹² See our penultimate chapter on Michelet's critique of antinomianism.

detailed research,”⁵⁹³ and why this historian ultimately favored “imaginative creation” over archival research? The reason, I propose, is that Michelet *needed* to fashion a myth associating knowledge, sex and politics. So he mined everything he could: Lamothe-Langon’s rantings, Lancre’s stereotypes, and especially his own fantasies. As noted above, his goal was to base historical writing on mythology. “Detailed research” could wait.

Michelet also needed to find specific grounds for his political reading of the Sabbath. Lamothe-Langon was not particularly useful to that end. But the early modern demonologists were, and he decided to rely on them, and in a rather uncritical way. In addition, the role of lay institutions in the early modern Witch Hunt is an established fact. The rise of modernity was concomitant with harsh competition between the Church and the State, with equal brutality on both sides. When he studies the early modern Witch Hunt, Michelet cannot help noticing this phenomenon. “*J’ai épuisé d’abord et les manuels de l’Inquisition, les âneries des dominicains [...]. Puis j’ai lu les parlementaires, les juges laïcs qui succèdent à ces moines, les méprisent et ne sont guère moins idiots.*”⁵⁹⁴ In short, the Witch Hunt was becoming secularized toward the middle of the sixteenth century. Different treatises were published, which marks an important step toward the secularization of the Witch Hunt. Jean Bodin’s *Démonomanie* (ten editions between 1580 and 1600) is one. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was republished at the same time, in Venice in 1574, then Frankfurt and Lyon, as if to say that even a religious book on demonology needed a secular awakening to be worth reading. Bodin, a theorist of “modern” absolutism, held that the king, not

⁵⁹³ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.152.

⁵⁹⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.33-34.

the Church, was the fittest to fight the crime of witchcraft.⁵⁹⁵ In Michelet's terms, that is the moment when witchcraft could appear as it really was – *a theological-political tool of redemption*.

Yet the lay judges did not pursue a “secular” Witch Hunt. Pierre de Lancre was among those magistrates who took charge of the persecution. As a devout Catholic he dreaded the corruption of the Church, believing Basque priests to be often connected with wizards and witches.⁵⁹⁶ He devoted lengthy parts of his book to issues related to wizard-priests, whom he had to judge despite the violent opposition of the clergy itself.⁵⁹⁷ Defending his power to judge the witches, Lancre went as far as to say that the Church should emulate the State's stringencies instead of being overcompassionate.⁵⁹⁸ Michelet was particularly impressed by Lancre's contention that the Spanish Inquisition had been too lenient. In Logroño, a trial dragged on for two years, ending with a miserable *auto-da-fé*. Lancre, on the other hand, could boast of his triumph over the Devil in the Basque country: he had got rid of innumerable witches – and better still, of three priests – in less than three months!⁵⁹⁹ That explains Michelet's assertion that Lancre wrote his book mainly to show how much the justice of French Parliaments excelled that of the priests.⁶⁰⁰ This idea was not unheard-of in Christendom. Did not Philip IV believe he was more Catholic than corrupt Pope Boniface? And was not Dante adamant that his *alto Arrigo* would better save God's people than both of them, with the latter rotting in the Eighth Circle of his Inferno?

⁵⁹⁵ Robert Muchembled, *Le roi et la sorcière – L'Europe des bûchers, XV^e-XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1993, p.46.

⁵⁹⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.215

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.222.

⁵⁹⁸ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.57.

⁵⁹⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.217.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.226.

Moreover, in their holistic vision, Lancre and Bodin explicitly described the sabbath as a political threat. It was the opposite of the rigid and stable social order that was then being built: witchcraft amounted to chaos, frenzy, and political rebellion.⁶⁰¹ In fact, Michelet may have perceived in such anxious testimonies something of an underlying popular utopian spirit. Lancre had indeed merged his own stereotypes with actual folkloric features. The Basque accused, it appears, employed traditional tales of earthly paradise to flesh out their accounts of the *akelarre*, that is the sabbath. Many of these narratives, especially that of the Land of Cockaigne, offered the vision of an upside down world.⁶⁰² It was not devoid of political undertones, and it is at least certain that through Lancre's unforgiving lens, any evocation of such comedic pleasures should have been vulnerable to both demonization and political fear.

Michelet saw the sabbath as "*communion de révolte*" because it was described as such by those in charge of repressing it. Bodin, whose repressing zeal Michelet refers to, explicitly designated the repression of witchcraft as a political duty. Like Caligula, Michelet suggestively writes, Bodin uttered a prayer that the "two million" wizards then living in Europe might be gathered together so as he could sentence and burn them all at one stake.⁶⁰³

Bodin's *République* might also bear on Michelet's political interpretation of witchcraft. *Harmony* connects the well-ordered society to the human soul, and to the family unit as well: "*les familles estans bien gouvernees, la Republique ira bien,*"⁶⁰⁴ he counsels, implicitly linking political sovereignty to women's subjection. Strangely enough, the inversions in Michelet's use of his

⁶⁰¹ See for instance J. Bodin, *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*, *op. cit.*, f.185.

⁶⁰² E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, *op. cit.*, pp.202-205.

⁶⁰³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.215.

⁶⁰⁴ J. Bodin, *Les Six Livres de la Republique*, Paris, Jacques du Puys, 1580, p.8.

material has never been noticed by the scholars of *La Sorcière*. It nonetheless reveals something essential about his method. A sort of witch himself, the historian needs to do everything “à rebours.”

Bodin’s fear of the witches’ political threat is correlated with a strict monotheism. For him, there should be no more intermediaries between God and his creatures than between the king and his subjects. D(a)emons are outlawed; saints are suspect as well.⁶⁰⁵ Bodin’s contempt for popular superstition put him at odds even with the Church – so much so that his *Démonomanie* was consigned to the *Index* in 1594.⁶⁰⁶ The witches’ *Weltanschauung* was utterly different: to quote Carolyn Merchant, it “was personal animism. The world of the witches was antihierarchical and everywhere infused with spirits.”⁶⁰⁷ When Michelet suggests that God-Pan can also be “*le petit démon du foyer*,” he could not be more opposed to Bodin’s political theology. For Michelet, elves and fairies are both intermediaries between the oppressed witch and her supreme god, and avatars of the latter.

Lancre’s *Tableau* proposes that pursuing witchcraft is a matter of order, like strengthening the sovereignty of the king. He believes that one can save the State from political corruption only by curing it of spiritual contamination. (He uses the word “*souverain*” both for God and for Satan, the usurper – and for the king as well.⁶⁰⁸) Pursuing witchcraft is a matter of order, just like building the sovereignty of the king alone. Conversely, one can only save the State from political corruption by curing it from spiritual contamination. Society would dissolve in nature and chaos without those

⁶⁰⁵ J. Bodin, *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*, *op. cit.*, ff.21-22.

⁶⁰⁶ R. Muchembled, *op. cit.*, p.51.

⁶⁰⁷ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature – Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco, Harper & Collins, 1990, p.140.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.28.

two coupled efforts. The king's sovereignty is pure *constance*, unlike demons – or, in his example, Basques' collective personality. To Michelet the Basque character is wholly fickle, and their quasi-“republic,”⁶⁰⁹ as he calls it, amounts to a *mise en abyme* of the political dangers inherent to witchcraft. It is no coincidence that the persecution of witches was more intense in peripheral areas such as the Basque country, as Michelet was aware. The center subdues the margins through such suppression, and the local authorities can assert their own power as well. Witchcraft, by contrast, is a concatenation of centrifugal, liminal – *panicky* – forces, in some ways corresponding to the rebellious instincts seething among the people whom the sovereign wishes to submit to his rule.

IV. 5. An African Connection?

There might be another reason, utterly foreign to his primary sources, why Michelet sees the sabbath as a political ritual, and witchcraft as politically redeeming: the Haitian Revolution. This revolution exerted a real fascination for many authors at the time, as in Victor Hugo's first novel, *Bug-Jargal*, published in 1826. There is an allusion to the “Negroes of the Antilles” in a passage from *La Sorcière*:

Ces révoltes purent fort bien commencer souvent dans les fêtes de nuit. Les grandes communions de révolte entre serfs (buvant le sang les uns des autres, ou mangeant la terre pour hostie) purent se célébrer au sabbat. *La Marseillaise* de ce temps, chantée la nuit plus que le jour, est peut-être un chant sabbatique :

Nous sommes hommes comme ils sont !

Tout aussi grand cœur nous avons !

Tout autant souffrir nous pouvons !

Nos nègres des Antilles, après un jour horrible de chaleur, de fatigue, allaient bien danser à six lieues de là. Ainsi le serf. Mais, aux danses, durent se mêler des gaités de vengeance, des farces satyriques, des moqueries et des caricatures du seigneur et du prêtre. Toute une littérature de nuit, qui ne sut pas un mot de celle du jour, peu même des fabliaux bourgeois.⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.218.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.161.

The slaves, after a dreadful day of heat and hard work, would go and dance far from their plantation, and so it was with the serf. The latter, according to Michelet, would have surpassed the former in combining satire and revolt, then magic. In any case he saw that this very idea – that perverted rituals could bear a political meaning, as well as a magical one – was present among the slave rebels in the late eighteenth century. It's worth noting that the formulation he uses, "*parent se célébrer au sabbat*," conveys a sense of tentative reasoning grounded in a missing, or implied analogy.

Michelet was acquainted with the events in Haiti through his readings as well as family connections, his wife's father having been the private tutor of Toussaint-Louverture's children. The magical overtones of the Haitian uprising were well-known and discussed at the time, so it is possible, although not certain, that Michelet mined them to fashion his Sabbath. The above-quoted sentence does not explicitly connect the Sabbath and Voodoo or other Afro-Caribbean religions. But it may suggest that Michelet's ahistorical idea of the Sabbath being political in essence – a "*communion de révolte*" – could have been prompted by the Haitian Revolution. Certainly its manifestations were really both political and ritual.

Michelet could also have been familiar with the political interpretation of Voodoo through two documented sources. In Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* the connection between Voodoo "Sabbath" and revolution is explicit. The main protagonist, Léopold d'Auverney, unwillingly attends a Voodoo mass (inspired by the event at Bois-Caïman in 1791), where sacrilegious rites obviously bear a political meaning. There is a grotesque and lascivious dance,⁶¹¹ then the mass proper – with a dagger substituting for the missing cross – is celebrated by a mischievous and deceitful sorcerer,

⁶¹¹ *Bug-Jargal*, in *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné, précédé de Bug-Jargal*, edited by Roger Borderie, Gallimard, 1970, pp.107-109.

the *obeah*. After the Eucharist, the leader, Biassou, stirs up the crowd, calling for revenge against the White settlers and slaveowners. Finally the obeah cures the sick by using some pages from his missal, which he burns and whose ashes he mixes with wine. “*C’était quelque chose d’un sabbat,*” d’Auverney marvels.⁶¹² The word “*obi*” became well-known in French, as its use by Baudelaire (“*l’œuvre de quelque obi, le Faust de la savane,*”) attests. We do not know, of course, if *Bug-Jargal* had a direct influence on Michelet, but his own depiction of the black mass is somehow redolent of it.

Additionally, Michelet maintained friendly relations with the Haitian historian Thomas Madiou. In 1854, he wrote to him in order to congratulate him on a “*grand et difficile travail,*”⁶¹³ probably his *Histoire d’Haïti*. “*Je saisisrai,*” he suggestively added, “*la première occasion que mon livre me donnera pour exprimer publiquement tout ce que le vôtre présente d’instruction solide et d’intérêt dramatique.*” Could not his chapter on the communion of the rebels have been implied in this remark? His personal relations with the one he calls “*un Haïtien éminent*” in *La Femme* are mentioned in his diary in many occasions during the years 1857 to 1860. On January 28, 1863, a few lines below terse notes regarding his wife’s health and a mention of Dentu’s edition of *La Sorcière*, he wrote in his diary: “*A 4 heures visite de M. Madiou, et sa très jolie fille, traits fins, sombre, belle comme la nuit, tragique comme la révolution de St-Domingue (la Noire).*”⁶¹⁴ As beautiful as the night – or perhaps even a daughter herself of this “literature of the night,” which, in *La Sorcière*, he tried to uncover? There is, at any rate, something “witchy” about this dreamy note. It is also redolent of the lengthy passage in *La Femme* where Michelet had written about

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, p.125.

⁶¹³ Quoted in Léon-François Hoffmann, “Lamartine, Michelet et les Haïtiens,” in *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*, July-August 1985, N° 4, p.673.

⁶¹⁴ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, III, p.174.

Black women's beauty and merits,⁶¹⁵ especially in relation to the aforementioned myth of Isis.⁶¹⁶ In his eyes, the Black race, particularly Black women, was a messianic race: "*Telle est la vertu du sang noir : où il en tombe une goutte, tout refléurit. Plus de vieillesse, une jeune et puissante énergie, c'est la fontaine de jouvence.*"⁶¹⁷ The flower motif, in Michelet's imagination, entails birth, death and resurrection. The Black women's beauty and the Black race's grandeur fall within the same semantic space as the witches.

To be sure, Michelet never explicitly draws the line between Caribbean politics on the one hand, and witchcraft on the other. Madiou, whose book he claimed to have read, sees the mixture of politics and magic present in Voodoo religion and the 1791 Haitian Revolution. Here is, for instance, a description of the "mysteries of Voodoo":

Ces malheureux ne jouissaient de quelque liberté que dans leurs réunions secrètes formées de nuit, pendant le sommeil de l'impitoyable commandeur. Initiés la plupart dans les mystères du Vaudoux, société africaine dont les membres se reconnaissaient à certains signes, ils se rappelaient alors les rives nigritiennes, patrie à jamais perdue, pratiquant les cérémonies de leur culte et se livrant à l'espoir que leurs donnaient leurs prêtres ou papas de revivre après leur mort au-delà de l'Atlantique. Souvent dans ces réunions, l'esclave conspirait contre son maître, et s'engageait, par d'horribles sermens, à le détruire par le poison, l'assassinat, par n'importe quel moyen.⁶¹⁸

Those reckless rites are conducted at night, like the witches' sabbath, and rebellion against the race of the masters is actually intertwined with them. Moreover, Madiou specifies that Voodoo also contains some vestigial paganism, much like European witchcraft in *La Sorcière*. In the case of Voodoo it is, of course, African rather than Celtic or Germanic. Another passage of his book deals with the start of the 1791 insurrection at Bois-Caïman, which, as is well-known, consisted

⁶¹⁵ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, pp.138-140.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.136.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.138-139.

⁶¹⁸ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti*, Port-au-Prince, Joseph Courtois, 1847, I, p.28.

of a Voodoo ceremony of the kind Hugo described in *Bug-Jargal*. It alludes to Biassou's interest in magic, "African superstitions," and sacrilegious practices, as well as his promise to the insurgents that, should they die, they would return, like the burnt Bride of Corinth, to their old gods.⁶¹⁹

It is not possible to prove that the Haitian example, and African paganism in general, had any influence on Michelet's literary invention of the sabbath. Nonetheless, such an African or Caribbean connection could well contribute to understanding the thought process of Michelet, and how he came to envision European witchcraft as redemptive sin. It is much like the early modern period, when the circulation of images and narratives from the New World breathed new life into the image of the European witches, especially in connection with cannibalistic practices,⁶²⁰ with orgiastic sex⁶²¹ or the sabbath.⁶²² More specifically, Michelet's knowledge of Haitian history might have prompted him to understand European history in a novel way through the notion of sabbath as an 'upside down ritual'⁶²³.

In Lancre's and other testimonies, the Devil would appear to his worshippers under the guise of a "*grand Nègre*."⁶²⁴ Mining such historical elements and reading them against the grain, Michelet might have also reasoned analogically. Because magic was political in the Caribbean, it must have been so in medieval Europe too; and because sinning against the White Church helped

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.72-73.

⁶²⁰ E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, *op. cit.*, pp.221-222.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.248-249.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, pp.264-265.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, pp.294-296.

⁶²⁴ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.124.

the Black insurgents topple the slavery system, sinning against the feudal masters must have been a way to try to overcome the feudal system. As is often the case with his writing method, in using stereotypes pertaining to the “other,” he would have acted as an inquisitor or a new Pierre de Lancre, yet against the grain, or “upside down.”

IV. 6. La Sorcière vs. Histoire de la Révolution française

The sabbath is revolutionary, but it would be unfair to *La Sorcière* to suggest that it merely rephrases *Histoire de la Révolution française* by projecting its main tenets into the medieval period. In fact, it seems that Michelet’s view of the French Revolution itself has evolved in some respects when he undertakes to write his book on witchcraft. Consciously or not, his revolutionary message is not the same, with the sabbath adding a predominant female element to the mostly male symbolism of the “*fête révolutionnaire*.” In other words, it would contain that feminine part which Michelet explicitly excluded from the Revolution, ascribing it to the degenerate Vendéans. The pages he devoted to the latter are notoriously devoid of any empathy to their plight. Strikingly enough, they even convey a sense of misogynistic hate that is, of course, absent from Michelet’s later works. However, the difference between them has not been fully assessed, even by Elisabeth de Fontenay, who recently addressed Michelet’s silence on the extermination of the Vendéans.

On a beaucoup parlé de l’influence des prêtres sur les femmes, mais pas assez de celle des femmes sur les prêtres.

Notre conviction est qu’elles furent et plus sincèrement et plus violemment fanatiques que les prêtres eux-mêmes ; que leur ardente sensibilité, leur pitié douloureuse pour les victimes, coupables ou non, de la Révolution, l’exaltation où les jeta la tragique légende du roi au Temple, de la reine, du petit dauphin, de Mme de Lamballe, en un mot la profonde réaction de la pitié et de la nature au cœur des femmes, fit la force réelle de la contre-révolution. Elles entraînaient, dominaient ceux qui paraissaient les conduire, poussèrent leurs confesseurs dans la voie du martyre, leurs maris dans la guerre civile.⁶²⁵

⁶²⁵ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, op. cit., I, p.1153.

Although Michelet elsewhere describes the priests as viciously manipulative, and the women they confess as their victims, here it is the other way around. The women informed the priests' fanaticism! They prompted them to become martyrs while at the same time deceiving their spouses into fighting against the Revolution. Michelet even brings up a common stereotype, hardly conceivable for a reader of *La Sorcière* – namely, that the peasant's wife manipulates him by trading her favors.⁶²⁶ The woman is both the home and the Church.⁶²⁷ She is one with the priest, she is the Counter-Revolution incarnate. She is darkness, and as such she is everything that the Revolution is not. It could be said, by contrast, that the sabbath would have happily combined darkness with light. For the author of *Histoire de la Révolution française*, the Revolution was pure light. “*La Révolution, c'est la lumière elle-même.*”⁶²⁸ *La Femme, L'Amour* and his nature books having been written in the meantime, he came to acknowledge, in *La Sorcière*, that light was really born out of darkness – and that the womb precedes and contains every other power.

Elisabeth de Fontenay aptly compares Michelet's description of the Vendéans' mortuary rites and the sabbath.⁶²⁹ What was awful in the eyes of the enlightened author of *Histoire de la Révolution* has become awesome in 1862.

Plus tard, l'instruction secrète ne leur permit plus même de l'amener à l'église. « Si l'ancien curé ne peut l'enterrer, dit-elle, que les parents ou amis l'enterrent en secret. » Dangereuse autorisation, impie et sauvage ! L'affreuse scène d'Young, obligé d'enterrer lui-même sa fille, pendant la nuit, d'emporter le corps glacé dans ses bras tremblants, de creuser pour elle la fosse, de jeter la terre sur elle (ô douleur !), cette scène se renouvela bien des fois dans les landes et dans les bois de l'Ouest...⁶³⁰

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.1146-1148.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1146.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1144.

⁶²⁹ Elisabeth de Fontenay, *La grâce et le progrès – Réflexions sur la Révolution française et la Vendée*, Paris, Stock, 2020, p.130.

⁶³⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française, op. cit.*, I, p.745.

Same space (the moor) indeed, same mystery, same darkness. Is not the serf in *La Sorcière* a wolf, a fox, an animal of the night?⁶³¹ Elsewhere in *Histoire de la Révolution*, Michelet writes that the rebels' army resembled a gang of thieves or merry-makers – perhaps a tribe of Hurons or Hottentots,⁶³² or even those slaves to whom he explicitly compares the sabbath attendants:⁶³³ “*Cette armée tenait beaucoup d’une bande de voleurs et d’un carnaval. [...] Le combat, le bal, la messe et l’égorgement, tout allait ensemble.*”⁶³⁴ At the time, this carnivalesque atmosphere obviously repelled him. The Vendéans’ sabbath – with the entanglement of lascivious and religious rituals – had been nothing but revolting to his eyes. But what then revolted his cold rationality would eventually absorb and transform it. In other words, that quasi-Manichaeism which both Barthes and White perceive in Michelet’s thought and methodology, although it might indeed have informed his view of the Revolution in the late 1840s and the early 1850s, disappeared from his later works. *La Sorcière* was thus the atonement of a historian once duped by his own ideology.⁶³⁵ And in it, Michelet was finally reconciled with “*l’obscur continent de la féminité.*”⁶³⁶ Pan’s tenebrous empire had gloriously invaded the kingdom of light.

IV. 7. The Female Messiah

⁶³¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.159.

⁶³² E. de Fontenay, *op. cit.*, p.136.

⁶³³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.161.

⁶³⁴ J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, *op. cit.*, II, p.455.

⁶³⁵ The *tiqqun*, so to speak, of a writer guilty of erasing the memory of a people oppressed and exterminated in the name of progress.

⁶³⁶ E. de Fontenay, *op. cit.*, p.127.

The year following the publication of *La Sorcière*, an influential book on messianism appeared – Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*. In the light of what has been said, *La Sorcière* should, no less than *Vie de Jésus* – actually, more so – be read as a messianic book, with the Messiah being both a female and a collective one.

To begin with, let us emphasize the witch’s priestly status, in which she resembles Christ as depicted in the Epistle to the Hebrews. “*La femme est une religion,*”⁶³⁷ woman is a religion, the historian had previously written. Although her body is the altar of the sabbath participants, the witch possesses a level of religious agency which the woman praised in *La Femme* – a *passive altar* to be sure – did not.⁶³⁸ Indeed, she is the priestess no less than the altar and the host.⁶³⁹ It should be recalled, though, that she *is* the victim of the sacrifice – eaten through the *confarreatio* or through copulation, by the whole assembly and eventually martyred at the stake. “*C’était sa vie, sa mort, que l’on mangeait. On y sentait déjà sa chair brûlée.*”⁶⁴⁰ She is the lamb of God – a God, of course, who is Satan. And like Christ at Gethsemane, she knows she is going to die: the fires of the sabbath, Michelet writes, resembled those of the stake.⁶⁴¹

Norman Cohn argued that Michelet had completely invented the notion of a witch-priestess.⁶⁴² This opinion must be considerably refined since we meet a “Queen of the Sabbath” in the Basque trials, whose records Michelet alludes to on many occasions.⁶⁴³ The Devil’s consort

⁶³⁷ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.283.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁶³⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.168.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.171.

⁶⁴² N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.150.

⁶⁴³ E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, *op. cit.*, pp.185-186. See, for instance, Jan Ziarnko’s engraving, *Description et figure du sabbat des sorcières*, inserted in the 1613 Berjon edition of *Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et*

and the “queen of all spirits,” she was generally intertwined with a range of folkloric hallmarks linked to Diana-like nocturnal goddesses. Del Río mentioned her in connection with some resurrection rituals, with others emphasizing her control, as an avatar of the Goddess, over the weather and the crops.⁶⁴⁴ Lancre himself discovered with much dismay that a female quasi-priesthood existed in Labourd. Michelet might have been impressed by this passage from *Tableau*, where it says that Basque women, especially women churchwarden (*marguillières*), have a role that no woman in Christendom has, which imperils their churches. This high status of women, Lancre ventures, is a trick of Satan.⁶⁴⁵ Michelet might also have used Lancre’s following remark to the effect that, in Canon Law, women cannot confer the sacraments.⁶⁴⁶ If so, as is usual in *La Sorcière*, he used it “à rebours,” expressly describing his witch as a priestess who not only confers the sacraments, but is also the sacrament herself. Michelet often drew from such preexisting motifs and expanded on them.

Let us recall that the “real sabbath” is the mythical one, supposedly occurring in the Middle Ages. The other “historical” reason for Michelet’s construal of the witch as a priestess is that, at the time, a ruling place was indeed assigned to women. To be sure, that was an “accursed age,” the Hundred Years’ War and the savage Free Company ravaging the Kingdom of France. Women nonetheless held their royal sway in a hundred ways – which, as previously discussed, Michelet brings up elsewhere in a more critical, at least ambivalent way. At the time, he insists, she could inherit fiefs, and she brought her kingdoms to the king she would marry. The Virgin had supplanted

démons. The Devil himself officiates, but two witches, one of them called the Queen of the Sabbath, are seated next to him. All the rituals are performed by women.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.195-197.

⁶⁴⁵ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, pp.55-56.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.56-57.

Christ. Beatrice reigned in heaven among the stars, while John of Meung in the *Romaunt of the Rose* preached sexual liberation. A fair English damsel traveled to France, it is said, around 1300, to preach the redemption of women (“*rédemption des femmes*”) and is believed to be their Messiah. In a word, the woman was everywhere, and we might say of her, Michelet (not so) jokingly concludes, what others said of God: “What part has He in the world? The whole.”⁶⁴⁷ “*Dieu changea de sexe, pour ainsi dire. La Vierge devint le dieu du monde,*” he wrote in *Histoire de France*, discussing what is now called the twelfth century Renaissance.⁶⁴⁸ Bénichou points out that, unlike other favorable mentions of Christianity, this one was kept in later editions of *Histoire de France*.⁶⁴⁹ It must have been one of the few medieval features which Michelet continued to admire, although he was eventually to denounce the cult of the Virgin as insufficient.⁶⁵⁰ It should be noted that, thanks to the miracles that took place in Lourdes in 1858, the cult of the Virgin underwent a resurgence a few years before *La Sorcière* was written. More than a general return to the Goddess (as Muray would describe it), this might explain why the idea of a medieval Goddess appealed to Michelet. The witch is not so much an abstract female God as a response to the false cult of female virginity.

This feminization of God turned out to be a neutralization. The male God was emasculated, while Mary was not a real woman. In fact, her exalted virginity had caused women’s abasement.⁶⁵¹ Michelet therefore devises a secret space where the woman would have really been divine and

⁶⁴⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, pp.163-164.

⁶⁴⁸ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France, op. cit.*, II, pp.300-301.

⁶⁴⁹ P. Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes, op. cit.*, p.552.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.554.

⁶⁵¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.146.

celebrated in all of her bodily and sacred functions – namely the sabbath. Historically speaking this is not true, but the sabbath here works as the *archetypal* image of an era. Although marked by a feminine seal, the Middle Ages were oblivious to its existence. The Virgin Mary was not quite the Goddess, the Great Mother she should have been. In *Histoire de France*, “Philip”’s murder is not so much a regicide or a deicide as an infanticide, with the toad indeed disguised as a baby.⁶⁵² This bears on the idea that the witch is a new, inverted and terrifying Mary. She is a Lilith, God’s dark spouse, sister and mother – except that God is not Jesus anymore.⁶⁵³ In sum, Michelet’s view is not historical but utterly mythical, and it should be read as such. His sabbath, although fashioned out of later testimonies (and Michelet’s own fantasies and interpretations) is the unearthed unconscious of the Middle Ages – perhaps of Western civilization itself. It is counter-history, “what lies beneath the surface” of history.⁶⁵⁴ But it is counter-history qua myth.

We saw that Michelet had rejected nature, defining history as man’s struggle against her demonic forces. Then he came to love her for what she is – fierce and violent, yet magnificent. In *La Sorcière*, the meaning and purpose of the historical process therefore work the other way around. The Messiah is the one who has swallowed up within herself the wondrous might of universal life. Reconciled with her own bodily functions, she has life and death in her bowels. The witch teems with nature herself, and she gives birth to it:

Elle a une *envie* de femme. Envie de quoi ? Mais du Tout, du grand Tout universel.
 Satan n’a pas prévu cela, qu’on ne pouvait l’apaiser avec aucune créature.
 Ce qu’il n’a pu, je ne sais quoi dont on ne sait pas le nom, le fait. À ce désir immense, profond, vaste comme une mer, elle succombe, elle sommeille. En ce moment, sans souvenir, sans haine ni pensée de vengeance, innocente, malgré elle, elle dort sur la prairie, tout comme une autre aurait fait, la brebis ou la colombe, détendue, épanouie, — je n’ose dire, amoureuse.

⁶⁵² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Henri IV et Richelieu*, *op. cit.*, p.279.

⁶⁵³ “Even the great *Pietà* [...] is a tableau of female immortality and perishable manhood. In archetypal terms, has the Holy Mother not drained her son?” (C. Paglia, *op. cit.*, p.167)

⁶⁵⁴ D. Biale, *op. cit.*, p.195.

Elle a dormi, elle a rêvé... Le beau rêve ! Et comment le dire ? C'est que le monstre merveilleux de la vie universelle, chez elle s'était englouti ; que désormais vie et mort, tout tenait dans ses entrailles, et qu'au prix de tant de douleurs elle avait conçu la Nature. ⁶⁵⁵

There is a moment when Satan's embrace no longer satisfies the witch. What she wants is the God whose Satan – the Rebel – is but an avatar; Pan, the great all-containing whole. This appears at the end of "Le prince de la Nature," and therefore before the description of the sabbath. Such pantheistic thirst will nonetheless animate the future evolution of the witch. The modern age will see her gnostic revolt degenerate into obscene antinomianism, but her longing for the whole will endure and eventually triumph. Her father, Satan, has penetrated and impregnated the witch, only to be born mightier and immortal. ⁶⁵⁶ As in Goethe's *Second Faust*, he is *Hexensohn*. This, of course, is redolent of the Christian dogma of the virgin birth of Christ. In Christianity, God is at once Mary's father, spouse, and son. "Mary's reunion with her son in heaven is not just the reunion of mother and son, but also that of bride and bridegroom. [...] Mary and Jesus become the true lovers of Canticles."⁶⁵⁷ Here, God-Satan is likewise the witch's lover, her father (as Pan), and the son she begat by herself – through parthenogenesis.

However, Michelet's theology is more complex than a mere rephrasing of Christian dogma. In *L'Amour*, the woman was still described as a potential mother to the Messiah – a fertile being, utterly occupied by her fecundity. ⁶⁵⁸ As such, she would resemble Mary, whose readiness to accept God's fertilization is crucial for the course of history. In some accounts, like Bernard of Clairvaux's, Mary is somehow part of the Godhead, of the Trinity. She is completely enclosed in

⁶⁵⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁶⁵⁷ Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty – Feminine Images of God From the Bible to the Early Kabbalah*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002, p.158.

⁶⁵⁸ J. Michelet, *L'Amour*, *op. cit.*, p.157.

the divine fire that penetrates her.⁶⁵⁹ For Hildegard of Bingen, she was the divine Wisdom, and as such her creation was foreseen before all creation. “You are the shining white lily on which God gazed before all creation,” the nun wrote.⁶⁶⁰ At any rate, the Virgin’s role in salvation is an active one, and so is the woman’s in *L’Amour*. In *La Sorcière*, we go one step further. The witch is the (non-)Virgin Mary, but she is also the Messiah. As such she is God – meaning Satan, or the universe she has begotten through her dream. In a tribute to the witch’s androgynous sexual power, Michelet writes:

La Messe noire, dans son premier aspect, semblerait être cette rédemption d’Eve, maudite par le christianisme. La Femme au sabbat remplit tout. Elle est le sacerdoce, elle est l’autel, elle est l’hostie, dont tout le peuple communique. Au fond, n’est-elle pas le Dieu même ?⁶⁶¹

It is not only that the witch fulfils all functions in the Sabbath: she *is* everything – Πᾶν. As such, she is redeemed (Michelet himself uses the word), and nature is redeemed through her and her sin. The Virgin Mary was God’s mother; Mary Magdalene was his female servant. The witch is Mary and Mary Magdalene, yet also Christ in both his human and divine natures.

Michelet’s messianism seems to conflate biblical theology with paganism; eschatology on the one hand, cosmogony on the other.⁶⁶² Those women and families would engage in the sabbath ritual because they believed they could ultimately bring about salvation. The practice of pagan fertility rites conveys a sense of progress and future redemption while at the same time connecting

⁶⁵⁹ P. Schäfer, *op. cit.*, p.161.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.164.

⁶⁶¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁶⁶² See Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l’éternel retour*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949.

the worshippers to cyclical time. Some wheat was offered, along with birds, to the Spirit of the Earth, and the witch would thereby ensure the freedom of future generations.⁶⁶³

Cyclical time pertains to the feminine. In different places, Michelet stressed the fact that women were *natural* beings, men *historical* ones. Men's temporality is linear, women's cyclical – and therefore more rhythmic and poetic.⁶⁶⁴ This would even have some practical consequences, since women, Michelet holds, should study the laws of nature rather than history.⁶⁶⁵ Now history is masculine, but not as construed by Michelet in *La Sorcière*. We saw that, for him, history was comparable to the Bride of Corinth. There is a certain mythical hope attached to history, or rather to the overcoming of history, and its sinking back into nature. For Michelet, it would have its source in the very origin of civilization, in Egypt, when “immortal nature” would fortify the miserable peasant, promising him that death did not really exist: “*Et la nature attendrie lui jura qu'on ne meurt jamais.*”⁶⁶⁶ Eschatology is rooted in cosmogony, linear time in cyclical time. The hero in charge of revealing this paradoxical truth is called the Witch.

IV. 8. A Kabbalistic Subtext?

The idea of a female Messiah – especially as the female hypostasis of an androgynous God – was probably suggested to Michelet by the Saint-Simonians, perhaps also by another intellectual tradition itself linked with Saint-Simonian religion. It should be added that the “Romantic Christ”

⁶⁶³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.169.

⁶⁶⁴ J. Michelet, *L'Amour*, *op. cit.*, pp.183-184.

⁶⁶⁵ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.87.

⁶⁶⁶ J. Michelet, *La Femme*, *op. cit.*, p.244.

was sometimes described as female, or, rather, that women were compared to the crucified and resurrected Jesus by Romantic radical theologians and thinkers such as Esquiros or Constant.⁶⁶⁷

Michelet's ambivalent links with Saint-Simonianism have already been brought into focus and will be discussed again in our penultimate chapter. We should nonetheless add here that his friendship with Gustave d'Eichthal, a prominent Saint-Simonian, begun around 1837, continued until his death. The historian repeatedly refers to d'Eichthal in his diary, and they exchanged numerous letters.⁶⁶⁸ He may well have mined the Saint-Simonian feminist theology while disapproving of Enfantin's gross materialism, or the sectarian organization of his Church. The spirit in which Michelet wrote about women, especially in *La Sorcière*, has been characterized as "millenarian" and, for that matter, is indeed very close to that of many Saint-Simonians – d'Eichthal especially, but also Olinde Rodrigues and Prosper Enfantin himself, the leader of the cult.⁶⁶⁹

Je crois en DIEU, père et mère de tous et toutes, éternellement bon et bonne. [...] Je crois que DIEU a suscité Saint-Simon pour enseigner le PERE par Rodrigues ; je crois que DIEU a suscité le PERE pour appeler la FEMME MESSIE qui consacrera l'union par l'égalité de l'homme et de la femme, de l'humanité et du monde.⁶⁷⁰

Rodrigues and Enfantin built a theology centered around an androgynous God, with the sacred priestly couple supposedly embodying the deity. The real Savior should be Woman, whose power would redeem the new Adam.⁶⁷¹ She would at the same time be Eve, Mary, and the Serpent, whom Enfantin wished to rehabilitate as well.

⁶⁶⁷ F. P. Bowman, *op. cit.*, pp.105-106.

⁶⁶⁸ See Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity – The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006, p.100.

⁶⁶⁹ Ursula Phillips, "Apocalyptic Feminism: Adam Mickiewicz and Margaret Fuller," in *The Slavonic and Eastern European Review*, 2009, Volume 87, Issue 1, p.3.

⁶⁷⁰ Quoted in *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin*, Paris, Edouard Dentu, 1865-1878, VIII, p.219.

⁶⁷¹ See Sébastien Charléty, *Histoire du saint-simonisme (1825-1864)*, Paris, Hachette, 1896, p.168.

Murray relates the female Messiah of these utopians to Joachimism, via Postel – without bothering to mention that Postel himself was highly influenced by Kabbalah.⁶⁷² Murray’s agenda actually entails the contradistinction of occultism and Judaism. As a consequence, he does not question what is, in his opinion, the occultists’ paradigm – namely, the rebuke of Judaism for being overly phallogentric. That nineteenth-century writers’ mystical feminism – and Michelet’s in particular – should relate to Judaism is, however, a promising trail to follow, with Kabbalah providing notions of a “female God” as well as a female Messiah. Both “Orthodox” Kabbalah and Postel’s syncretic doctrine, or even the Frankist, radical version of kabbalistic messianism, may bring a new light to bear upon the origin and hidden rationale of *La Sorcière*’s mythos.

Postel is certainly a more direct influence on Michelet than are classic Kabbalah or Frankism. The latter knew at least some aspects of the former’s doctrine, which he discussed in *Réforme* along with tenets of Kabbalah learnt from Adolphe Franck.⁶⁷³ Moreover, Postel was instrumental in the creation of the Joan of Arc myth, and would, as such, have certainly impacted Michelet’s own outlook. Joan of Arc was, in Postel’s mystical thought, an embodiment of Christ, just like “Mère Jeanne,” the Venetian prophet and nun Zuana whom he considered as his spiritual mother. She collaborated with him – although she was virtually illiterate – at the time he was working on a translation of the Zohar, around 1547. For Postel, Joan “had been given authority to rule the military because Christ was in her.”⁶⁷⁴ However, because her call had not been heeded, the messianic *persona* descended into Zuana, with France being punished in the meantime for

⁶⁷² P. Murray, *op. cit.*, pp.172-173.

⁶⁷³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.22.

⁶⁷⁴ Yvonne Petry, *Gender, Kabbalah and the Reformation – The Mystical Theology of Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)*, Leiden, Brill, 2004, p.66.

ignoring Joan-Christ. Postel was particularly sensitive to the theme of God's androgyny in Kabbalah, insisting, for instance, on the fact that Šaddai, one of God's Hebrew names, refers to the female breast.⁶⁷⁵ The coming of the (female) Messiah would therefore equate "*l'universelle Monarchie de la Mere du monde.*"⁶⁷⁶

It should be noted that the idea of a female God, for all its "Jewishness," was not foreign to Christianity itself. We saw that Mary was almost deified, and sometimes identified with the divine Wisdom. The latter was known to Christian authors through the works of Philo, who believed that Wisdom was the "mother of all things." In his opinion, she was God's female consort, "by whose agency the universe was brought to completion."⁶⁷⁷ In other words, Philo considered "not only the human but also the divine world as composed of masculine and feminine forces."⁶⁷⁸ Likewise, the *Apocryphon of John*, a gnostic text written in the second century CE, mentions at least two female divine principles, one called "Barbelo," the other being Wisdom. Interestingly enough, "Wisdom [...] relies solely on herself: not only does she not ask for permission [to beget her offspring], but she also generates her offspring out of herself, without any collaboration of a male partner. And the reason for this is that she is *prounikos*, [...] 'lewd' and even 'whore.'"⁶⁷⁹ Moreover, Wisdom, the Sophia also called "Mother of the living," is sent down to rescue humankind from evil and to rectify the cosmic disaster she has herself brought about. She "heals

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.110.

⁶⁷⁶ Guillaume Postel, *Les Tres-Merveilleuses Victoires des Femmes du Nouveau Monde*, Paris, Jehan Ruelle, 1553, p.30.

⁶⁷⁷ Quoted in P. Schäfer, *op. cit.*, p.46.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.56.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.66.

the break and [...] functions as [...] the redeemer of humanity.”⁶⁸⁰ In other words, she is the divine substratum of the Messiah. Such ideas seem to anticipate several themes we have already encountered, including parthenogenesis. The presence of a “goddess lode” within the Christian tradition – with Philo being known to that tradition and somehow seminal to it – may account for Postel’s propensity to embrace the kabbalistic theme of the Shekhinah, namely the kabbalistic feminine element in the divinity, as well as Michelet’s own ability to make use of it. It should nonetheless be noted that the *Apocryphon of John* bears many more Jewish traits than later gnostic texts, such as the Valentinian gnosis, in which the task of salvation has been absorbed by Christ, thus depriving the female Wisdom of her salvific qualities. Only in Judaism, and much later, would Wisdom return, “fully invested with all of her powers.”⁶⁸¹ For only in Judaism is the female aspect of God present in the Godhead itself, whereas in Christianity, God acquires his female quality on earth.⁶⁸² It is nonetheless true that the return of the Goddess theme within Judaism, especially in the Bahir, then the Zohar, drew from a certain *Zeitgeist* shared by the Catholic proponents of the Marian cult, as well as the Troubadour poetry.⁶⁸³

Inspired – if unconsciously – by Postel, Michelet saw Joan as a Messiah, a female Christ betrayed, like the male one, by (Catholic) Pharisees,⁶⁸⁴ who then actively endorsed her martyrdom.⁶⁸⁵ “*Le Dieu de cet âge, c’était la Vierge bien plus que le Christ,*” Michelet avers,

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.78.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, p.171.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.235-243.

⁶⁸⁴ J. Michelet, *Jeanne d’Arc*, Paris, Hachette, 1856, p.IV.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.V.

reminding his reader that he has expanded on this subject elsewhere. The Virgin was the real God but the living Virgin, reincarnated in a young and beautiful shepherdess. “*Il fallait la Vierge descendue sur terre, une vierge populaire, jeune, belle, douce, hardie.*”⁶⁸⁶ Postel’s influence here is blatant, with the Maid of Orleans embodying both Mary and Christ.

“*Il fallait qu’elle souffrît,*”⁶⁸⁷ Michelet writes. She knew from the outset that she had to sacrifice herself, that she was born for this Golgotha. It should also be noted that, in many respects, Michelet described her as a proto-*Sorcière*.⁶⁸⁸ In fact, the way he came to envision the witch was influenced by his own Joan of Arc myth. He suggested, for instance, that Joan was endowed with those same creative traits eventually associated, in *La Sorcière*, with parthenogenesis, or symbolized by it. Another common trait between Joan and the witches is the cult of the fairies.⁶⁸⁹ Michelet, who does not want to consider his Joan as a Catholic saint, endorses the English’ accusation: while in Domrémy, she consorted with the fairies, “*ces anciennes dames et maîtresses des forêts.*”⁶⁹⁰

La jeune fille, à son insu, *créait*, pour ainsi parler, et *réalisait* ses propres idées, elle en faisait des êtres, elle leur communiquait, du trésor de sa vie virginale, une splendide et toute-puissante existence, à faire pâlir les misérables réalités de ce monde.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.30-31.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁶⁸⁸ To be sure, Joan was accused of consorting with the Devil, but her trial and death occurred before the witch-craze. Her main crime was heresy, not witchcraft *per se*. At the time, the two were not utterly identified as would be the case after 1459 (*Vauderie d’Arras*). However, the way Michelet viewed her informed his own eventual sympathy for the witches.

⁶⁸⁹ Imagining that Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais were really worshippers of Diana and the fairies – and, as such, witches – Margaret Alice Murray conflate the former’s messianic qualities, including her self-sacrifice, with her “religion.” This seems to be inspired by Michelet, although in a systematic and pseudo-scientific way that is absent from *La Sorcière* and *Histoire de France (The Witch-Cult in Western Europe, op. cit., pp.271-276)*.

⁶⁹⁰ J. Michelet, *Jeanne d’Arc, op. cit.*, pp.10-11.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

This is to be compared with the passage, from *La Sorcière*, where Michelet moots the “lucid frenzy” of the witch, her *poetic* and creative sense, second-sight and depth of insight, that goes with her simplicity of speech and the power of believing in her own delusions. This is, he would venture to suggest, *unaided conception*, that parthenogenesis recognized by physiologists among certain animal species, and symbolically attained by those wise and deeply creative women.⁶⁹² Joan possesses these qualities, and we might even imagine that he came to sympathize with the witch because he found in her Joan’s very own characteristics, or perhaps that he interpreted the witch in the terms he had established in writing about Joan. At any rate, he thus gave his witch the same prophetic and creative features he had ascribed to his French Messiah.

Frankism, I propose, may have also influenced Michelet via two different channels – the Saint-Simonians, who might have been in touch with Frankists, and Mickiewicz. Drawing his inspiration from the Zohar itself, Frank taught that God was actually androgynous. More controversially, he also maintained that the feminine dimension within the Godhead had to be incarnated in a female Messiah. This was “the most radical expression of [his] predilection for inverting conventional gender norms.”⁶⁹³ To be sure, “the Zohar already alludes to the idea of a male and female messianic pair,”⁶⁹⁴ and so did Luria, as well as less radical Sabbatian authors.⁶⁹⁵ Peter Schäfer identifies another tradition of female messiahship in Judaism, that of the Apocalypse of Zerubbabel. There the mother of the Messiah is akin to a Joan of Arc figure. Personally contributing to salvation, she goes to war and kills the enemies of Israel. “She is fully invested

⁶⁹² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.38.

⁶⁹³ A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, p.175.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.179. See Zohar, I, 145b-146a.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.175-178.

with the messianic insignia, most notably the staff of salvation and the stars, and enjoys equal rights with her male companions.”⁶⁹⁶ For Schäfer, this was not so much the result of a theological denial of the Virgin as an expression of the will to emulate that precise aspect of Christianity – its divine femininity.⁶⁹⁷

To return to Frank, it should be added that “the kabbalistic tradition, by linking the soul of Messiah son of David to the *sefirah* of Malkhut [that is, the Shekhinah], had already bestowed a distinctly female dimension upon the male figure of the ultimate redeemer.”⁶⁹⁸ Frank considerably expanded on this idea. The Shekhinah, called the Maiden in Frankist sources, was declared to be embodied in his virgin daughter Eva. This was the logical conclusion of the aforementioned kabbalistic tenets. Frank went as far as to berate both Judaism and Islam for their views on women, while suggesting that Christianity was not fully aware of the implications of its “feminist” theology.⁶⁹⁹ This began after Frank’s wife’s passing and during his incarceration in Częstochowa, in the early 1770s. Seeing the Black Madonna there worshipped “as representing the hidden essence of the supernal Maiden,”⁷⁰⁰ he came, through it, to conflate the Holy Virgin, the Shekhinah and his own daughter. It should also be noted that his redemptive “Maiden” possessed some demonic attributes, just like the zoharic Shekhinah (whose “twin sister” and rival is Lilith herself) and the Black Madonna of Częstochowa “who was famed throughout Poland as a seasoned warrior, a heroine in battle.”⁷⁰¹

⁶⁹⁶ P. Schäfer, *op. cit.*, p.214.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.215.

⁶⁹⁸ A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, p.224.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.194.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.185.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.186.

What did Saint-Simonians know about Frankism? The Jewish aspects of Saint-Simonianism have been explored in a variety of essays and articles. From the overwhelming number of Jews in the movement (including d'Eichthal) to the strange 1832 expedition in search of the Jewish Mother, the Jewish signifier indeed pervades the history of Saint-Simonianism. That some vestigial Sabbatianism might have inspired such outbursts of Jewish messianism has been less emphasized, yet the possibility has been brought up by some scholars. The Saint-Simonian journey to Odessa in search of the mystic Mother might be explained by the will to make contacts there with Frankist circles.⁷⁰² Likewise, “the possibility that the delegation had contacts with Dönmes in Smyrna and Constantinople cannot be excluded, particularly in the light of the choice of the Turkish capital as the place where the Mother was to appear.”⁷⁰³ Auguste Collin’s booklet “Aux femmes juives,” published in the aftermath of the Constantinople expedition, parallels the Frankist doctrine in some respects.⁷⁰⁴ At the time, the members of the sect had set out to identify their Messiah, whom they imagined to be a Jewish woman, with *Enfantin* being merely the messenger of her coming, her John the Baptist⁷⁰⁵ – just as Jacob Frank had been to his own daughter. “*La Mère paraîtra cette année à Constantinople, elle y paraîtra cette année, de la race juive ; le mois de mai lui est réservé.*”⁷⁰⁶ Not only is the belief in a female Messiah both typical of Frankism and at the core of this strange text, but the more surprising idea that the Spirit must

⁷⁰² Abraham Gordon Duker, “The Tarniks (Believers in the Coming of the Messiah in 1840),” in *The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume – Studies in History and Philology*, New York, The Conference on Jewish Relations, 1953, p.194.

⁷⁰³ Paola Ferruta, “Constantinople and the Saint-Simonian Search for the Female Messiah: Theoretical Premises and Travel Account From 1833,” *The International Journal of the Humanities*, 2008, Volume 6, Number 7, p.120.

⁷⁰⁴ Auguste Collin, “Aux femmes juives,” Lyon, 1833.

⁷⁰⁵ Jacob L. Talmon, “Social Prophetism in 19th-Century France: The Jewish Element in the Saint-Simonian Movement,” *Commentary*, August 1958, Volume 26, Issue 2, p.171.

⁷⁰⁶ Quoted in S. Charléty, *op. cit.*, p.275.

ultimately become Flesh – rather than for the flesh to be spiritualized – happens to be another explicitly Frankist formulation.⁷⁰⁷ Scholem notes that, for the Frankists and other radical Sabbatians, “redemption was a process filled with incarnations of the divinity.”⁷⁰⁸ They endeavored to corporealize the idea of God. “According to a long-standing eschatological tradition that originated in rabbinic literature [...], redemption [...] would be experienced as the intellectualization or spiritualization of material reality, including the sublimation of the body and its physical appetites. Frank turned this, too, on its head: his vision of the redemption entailed the substantiation of the spirit and similarly the materialization of the divinity.”⁷⁰⁹

As for the antagonism between the Virgin Mary and the real, messianic woman,⁷¹⁰ it seems to anticipate Michelet’s considerations in *La Sorcière*. Not, of course, that Collin’s bizarre, Age of Aquarius-like ravings should be interpreted as a source for Michelet. It is also unlikely that he had read this text – and even more unlikely that he would have taken it seriously. It attests, though, to a certain ethos. At the time, especially through Saint-Simonianism, Jews could be seen as heralds of social progress via a kind of moral transgression that was really a return to their roots.

It should be noted that Scholem himself suggested that the Saint-Simonian theme of the female messiah might point to Frankist connections.⁷¹¹ This would imply that Kabbalah had been more influential in nineteenth-century France than is usually believed. Muray’s mistake was shared by an author usually more prudent than he. In discussing Saint-Simonian theology in *Le temps des*

⁷⁰⁷ A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, pp.227-231.

⁷⁰⁸ G. Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” *op. cit.*, p.125.

⁷⁰⁹ A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, pp.227-228.

⁷¹⁰ A. Collin, *op. cit.*, pp.2-3.

⁷¹¹ G. Scholem, “Die Metamorphose des härestischen Messianismus der Sabbatianer in religiösen Nihilismus im 18. Jahrhundert,” in *Judaica III – Studien zur jüdischen Mystik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1973, pp.215-216.

prophètes, Bénichou writes that it was a reaction to both Judaism and Christianity, since neither acknowledged any female aspect within God – although Christianity, at any rate, had the semi-divine yet secondary figure of the Virgin Mary.⁷¹² Gusdorf acknowledged the influence of Kabbalah and, unlike both Bénichou and Muray, was aware of its doctrine of androgyny. He nonetheless assumed that the Saint-Simonians had no knowledge of it. Their theology, he maintained, was a reaction to Christian misogyny. He did not notice that most of them happened to be Jewish.⁷¹³

In another text, Scholem mentioned Mickiewicz's Jewish origin.⁷¹⁴ This is of interest for the present study, given Mickiewicz's deep friendship with Michelet and their mutual influence. As it happens, the former believed in the imminent coming of a female Messiah, going so far as to assign this role to women of flesh and blood, such as the American journalist Margaret Fuller, with whom he was acquainted on her trip to Europe.⁷¹⁵ Is it likely that, as Scholem suggested, the Polish poet was influenced by Frankist doctrine? We have a few elements that allow us to believe that such was indeed the case. To begin with, in his 1842 Collège de France class on the Slavs, Mickiewicz explicitly referred to the Frankist sect in the context of a general reflection on the messianic doctrine to which he claimed to adhere.⁷¹⁶ He mentioned the Frankists in relation to his

⁷¹² P. Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes*, *op. cit.*, pp.426-427.

⁷¹³ G. Gusdorf, *op. cit.*, II, p.225.

⁷¹⁴ G. Scholem, "Hatenuah hašabbetayit bePolin," in *Meheqarim umeqorot letoledot haShabbetaut vegilguleiah*, Jerusalem, Mosad Bialiq, 1974, p.140.

⁷¹⁵ U. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.31.

⁷¹⁶ Adam Mickiewicz, *Les Slaves – Cours professé au Collège de France (1842) et publiés d'après les notes sténographiées*, Paris, Au Comptoirs des Imprimeurs-Unis, 1849, III, p.305.

fellow countryman Wronski, another messianic thinker and, incidentally, a self-proclaimed “*antinomien*.”⁷¹⁷

As it happens, Mickiewicz’s own Frankist connections were well-known at the time, notably among other Polish emigres in Paris. Through his wife, a scion of the Frankist Wolowski clan, he had the opportunity to be in touch with other members of the sect.⁷¹⁸ Celina was a descendant of Elisha Schor of Rohatyn, who had led his family and flock into the Frankist camp.⁷¹⁹ She apparently retained some Jewish-Frankist beliefs, with Mickiewicz himself suggesting that, in 1841, she was cured from insanity thanks to the strength and voice of Andrzej Towiański’s Mosaic might. Through it, her own “Israelite spirit” was touched.⁷²⁰ It even seems that, at the time, she expressed herself in Yiddish instead of Polish.⁷²¹ That Mickiewicz was also of Jewish descent was less known when Scholem wrote his article and remains controversial. It has nonetheless been convincingly demonstrated by Abraham Gordon Duker in a series of articles.⁷²²

Among other things, the origin of Mickiewicz’s project of a Jewish legion may be traced to Frank’s well-known emphasis on military action. Moreover, Towiański, the messianic leader who cured Celina from her illness, had based his movement on a notion very much redolent of late Frankist thinking – namely, that there were three “Israel nations,” the Slavs, the French and the Jews, and that they were to lead mankind into a new epoch of Grace. In 1845, he appointed

⁷¹⁷ See Josef Hoëné-Wronski, *Messianisme, union finale de la philosophie et de la religion constituant la philosophie absolue*, Paris, Didot, 1839.

⁷¹⁸ A. G. Duker, “The Mystery of the Jews in Mickiewicz’s Towianist Lectures on Slav Literature,” *The Polish Review*, Volume 7, N° 3, Summer, 1962, p.57.

⁷¹⁹ A. G. Duker, “Polish Frankism’s Duration,” *Jewish Social Studies*, October 1963, Volume 25, Issue 4, pp.317-320.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.326.

⁷²¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁷²² *Ibid.*, pp.305-306.

Mickiewicz himself to the leadership of Slavdom, in the sense of a synthesis of these aspects of Israel.⁷²³ Unlike other Christian authors, Mickiewicz held that modern Jews had retained the spirituality of their ancestors. In his class on the Slavs, Mickiewicz referred to the Jewish people on several occasions, even speaking of the specific qualities of the Jewish prayer.⁷²⁴ In 1845, he even decided that the Towianist circle should attend the Tisha b'Av services at the synagogue on rue Notre-Dame de Nazareth.⁷²⁵

What was the level of these Kabbalistic influences on Michelet? It is hard to define with certainty. Mickiewicz's and d'Eichthal's messianism may have held a certain sway on his thought. Postel's Christian Kabbalah is a likely source of his Joan of Arc myth. Overall, a kabbalistic-influenced ethos, with women's deification being somehow associated with the final redemption, was pervasive at the time when Michelet undertook the writing of *La Sorcière*. The book would therefore be an interesting – but by no means unique – example of secularized Kabbalah, with one of its main tenets stemming from the Jewish mystical tradition.

The most celebrated aspect of *La Sorcière*, its political stance, has been brought into focus in this chapter, and we have thereby born a new light on it. The apparent contradictions in the text have been explained, and so have the sources used by Michelet to conceive his extraordinary literary myth – from well-known early modern demonological texts, read against the grain, to the Haitian connection, and the kabbalistic context of nineteenth-century France. Not only is the sabbath anticipating the French Revolution, it also “corrects” it by anticipation, adding the

⁷²³ A. G. Duker, “The Mystery of the Jews,” *op. cit.*, p.42.

⁷²⁴ A. Mickiewicz, *Les Slaves – Cours professé au Collège de France (1842-1844)*, Paris, Musée Adam Mickiewicz, 1914, p.238.

⁷²⁵ A. G. Duker, “The Mystery of the Jews,” *op. cit.*, p.50.

feminine touch it desperately lacked. The tension between paganism and pantheism on the one hand – with God or the gods filling the universe – and gnosticism on the other – with the true God being an exile, an alien deity – animates Michelet’s view of witchcraft. At the sabbath, witchcraft turns out to be both reactionary and revolutionary, pagan and Luciferian. We previously said that Pan was Christ and Satan. Here, Satan himself appears to be both Pan and the Miltonian “most beautiful angel,” the *one who was wronged*. Witchcraft is, as such, reaction and revolution at once – nostalgia for a long lost order, and thirst for novelty. To be sure, the sabbath Michelet describes never happened. One should therefore read it for what it is – a fascinating attempt at revealing the unconscious of an era, whether the Middle Ages, the Virgin-focused nineteenth-century, or our own.

Chapter Five

Bluebeard, Griselda, and the Werewoman

We have not yet explicitly addressed the crimes committed by the witches. Michelet depicts an actual war of the sexes, with women at times responding to the outrages they are victims of with gruesome revenges. To the twofold myth of Bluebeard and Griselda – which is that of male aggression – corresponds the myth of the werewoman. Like the Bride of Corinth, she defies the laws human and divine, delighting in being a monster. This chapter will show that, far from whitewashing his witch protagonist, Michelet acknowledges her crimes, thereby situating her in a liminal moral space, beyond good and evil. To begin with, however, we need to turn to one of the most famous passages in *La Sorcière*, where the future witch is the victim, not the offender. Every sin she will henceforth commit is but a response to that awful, yet unpunished first violation. In the beginning, as we shall see, witchcraft was the last resource of an overwhelming despair and dreadful suffering.

V. 1. Rape and Revenge

Michelet (erroneously) narrates the origin of *jus primae noctis*, implying that, stemming from the destruction of a venerable family order, it was logically connected with Christianity. The feudal system dispossessed the peasant from his land as well as his own body, after the doctrine of the Nazarene had already dismantled family values. For women, the consequences were even more appalling, with rape becoming a right of the powerful over them. Their honor was not their

own: as they were constantly told, they were “*serve de corps*.” They had no right to be held in any respect.⁷²⁶

Even the monks, Michelet asserts, who were sometimes leading the life of great feudal lords, carrying arms and fighting duels, would assail the nuns, then betray the fruits of their debauchery.⁷²⁷ What must the lay lords, then, have been? He suggests that the two tales of *Bluebeard* and *Griselda* may answer this question. They indeed convey the same sadistic vein, with, in both cases, a male protagonist torturing, morally or physically, his own lawful wife. Moreover, Michelet maintains that they have a historical basis, elsewhere contending that, in both cases, the wife so often killed and replaced, or morally abused, could only have been the lord’s vassal – which is explicitly the case in *Griselda*. He would have reckoned otherwise with the daughter of another baron, who could have avenged her. Michelet even ventures to suggest that *Bluebeard*, like *Griselda*, must date to the fourteenth century, since no lord would have previously deigned to take a wife below his rank.⁷²⁸

Quel était l’intérieur de ces noirs donjons que d’en bas on regardait avec tant d’effroi ? Deux contes, qui sont sans nul doute des histoires, la *Barbe-Bleue* et *Grisélidis*, nous en disent quelque chose. Qu’était-il pour ses vassaux, ses serfs, l’amateur de tortures qui traitait ainsi sa famille ? Nous le savons par le seul à qui l’on ait fait un procès, et si tard, au quinzième siècle : Gilles de Retz, l’enleveur d’enfants.⁷²⁹

That the Church did not prosecute Gilles de Rais for having raped and tortured those children – a crime not uncommon at the time, Michelet asserts – but only for having immolated them to Satan, attests to its corruption and to the injustice of the feudal law. Gilles de Rais’ sins

⁷²⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.86.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.84.

point to those of the entire society. Like the wrinkles on the picture of Dorian Gray, they expose the awful truth about the false values of the Christian kingdom. Notwithstanding the importance of Michelet's historical and contextual diagnosis, however, let us not take it too seriously. Both Gilles de Rais and the fictional Bluebeard manifest here something deeper.⁷³⁰

One often wishes so fiercely to keep one's beloved's love that one is even ready to destroy him or her. The eponymous character of *Bluebeard* is a wealthy lord who, having married one of his neighbor's daughters, notifies her she may go wherever she sees fit in his castle, except for a certain, mysterious room. "I forbid you to enter it, he bids her, and I promise you surely that, if you open it, there's nothing that you may not expect from my anger." Bluebeard has been married several times before, but his wives have all mysteriously disappeared. After having promised to obey all his orders, the young lady is overcome with the temptation to visit the forbidden chamber. She then takes the little key with which its door may be opened, she enters the room and, after a few moments, realizes that several corpses are reflected in the curdled blood splattered on the floor. These are all the wives whom her husband had married and murdered before her. Later, trying to wash the key which, having fallen out of her hand, is stained with blood, she realizes it is magical: the blood cannot be wiped off. When Bluebeard unexpectedly returns, it immediately gives her away. He resolves to kill her, but she asks for some little time to say her prayers, which allows her to be saved *in extremis* by her brothers, who, having successfully fought him, run their swords through his body and leave him dead.

⁷³⁰ Thérèse Moreau wrote in her influential *Sang de l'histoire* that, in Michelet's eyes, the ideal woman was the humiliated and passive Griselda. In fact, it is obvious from even a cursory reading of *La Sorcière*, that the historian refers to this character from Boccaccio's and Perrault's tales to better denounce the injustice of medieval – Christian – mores. He refers to *Griselda* in *Renaissance* too – with no ambiguity whatsoever (*op. cit.*, p.CLII). See T. Moreau, *op. cit.*, pp.133-140.

The most famous version of this tale was written by Perrault, but, as already noted, Michelet takes for granted that it is very old, harking back to feudal times. Likewise, *Griselda*, a tale figuring in Boccaccio's *Decameron* as well as in Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye*, is "certainly real." This time, the murder is a symbolic one, and the torture in which the wicked lord revels, purely psychological. In a way, it is all the more gruesome. Griselda is a commoner, but she marries Gualtieri, the Marquis of Saluzzo. Her husband tests her obedience by demanding that their two children should be killed. She accepts, yet he is not satisfied. Claiming that the pope had granted him dispensation to divorce her and to remarry, he renounces Griselda. She is sent back to her father, bearing all those indignities without complaint. Some years later, Gualtieri announces he is to remarry and perversely recalls his former wife, this time as a servant tending to the wedding celebrations. He introduces her to a twelve-year-old girl dressed in bridal clothes who is really their daughter: he has not put their children to death, choosing to hide them instead. Griselda wishes the ostensible newlyweds a happy life. At this, he reveals the truth to her and she is restored, after years of suffering, to her place as spouse and mother.

Gualtieri is a Bluebeard of the mind, who delights in abusing his wife and children, a Sadean hero of sort. Both characters have a compulsive need to prove their dominion over women, forever ready as they are to neutralize any would-be aggressive female – to which, of course, the witch's violence and wit will be a legitimate, if fierce, response. The two female characters, however, do not resemble each other. In *Bluebeard*, the young lady is carried away by her curiosity, and therefore inquires into the secrets of the male, which Griselda does not. Both male protagonists test their wives' faithfulness: Gualtieri is pleased with Griselda's submission, while Bluebeard is obviously not so pleased with his wife's attitude. Has she not rebelled against his will? In this respect, she is an image of the witch, who, in Michelet's gnosis, is the one who, Prometheus-like,

trespasses the limits imposed to knowledge and happiness by unlawful institutions. Sex is power. Both stories deal with the dark side of Eros,⁷³¹ they are both examples of the “wolfish” Pan’s sensual brutality.

Now comes the case of the woman-serf, whom the lord could lawfully rape and whose revenge is arguably the core of *La sorcière*. “They were too ugly,” some skeptical readers might say on hearing about *jus primae noctis*.⁷³² Michelet does not deny this, but, in fact, there is no question raised as to their beauty. Instead, the great pleasure lay in the outrage, in making them suffer and weep in order to ascertain one’s own status. In a passage which he decided to remove in the end, Michelet brings up another kind of affront. A nobleman whom he identifies as Saint-Simon’s brother (who did not exist) was hosted in Fontainebleau by a bourgeois woman. Wealthy and highly educated, pretty and hospitable, she had treated him with much respect and decency. Yet he wanted to show that, although a “*cadet*,” he was a lord. “*Dans cet appartement bien propre, il laisse, au milieu de la chambre, le cadeau le plus immonde.*” Elsewhere, he would have certainly defiled her body, raped her and beaten her. To prove his nobility, he needed to humiliate her, but he could not, close as they were to the king’s castle, break her bones as he had fancied, so he just defecated on the floor, and left her apartment.⁷³³

Michelet maintains that the *droit de cuissage* is no modern forgery. Rather, it was a natural consequence of the feudal system. At the time of *La Sorcière*, despite Voltaire and Beaumarchais’s *Le mariage de Figaro*, most scholars did not take this “right” at face value – and they still do not. To assert that it really existed, however, is to justify political and religious disobedience, hence

⁷³¹ See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment – The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, pp.299-302.

⁷³² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.85.

⁷³³ See W. Kusters, *op. cit.*, pp.45-46.

Michelet's efforts. Against a "*droit immonde,*" which unveils the barbarous substratum of medieval law – the dirty secret of all legislation maybe – one can only rebel. Others believed that it was formal, not real. That is not the case, Michelet adamantly replies, since it was both inscribed in the laws and actually enforced. One even had to pay for getting a dispensation, and the price exceeded the means of almost every peasant. By writing down as an actual right the most grievous pain that could ever wound someone's heart, the Christian law thus went far beyond the cruelty of Antiquity.

On ne croira pas aisément dans l'avenir que, chez les peuples chrétiens, la loi ait fait ce qu'elle ne fit jamais dans l'esclavage antique, qu'elle ait écrit expressément comme droit le plus sanglant outrage qui puisse navrer le cœur de l'homme. [...]

On a cru trop aisément que cet outrage était de forme, jamais réel. Mais le prix indiqué en certains pays, pour en obtenir dispense, dépassait fort les moyens de presque tous les paysans. En Écosse, par exemple, on exigeait « plusieurs vaches ». Chose énorme et impossible ! Donc la pauvre jeune femme était à discrétion. Du reste, les Fors du Béarn disent très expressément qu'on levait ce droit en nature. « L'aîné du paysan est censé le fils du seigneur, car il peut être de ses œuvres. »

Toutes coutumes féodales, même sans faire mention de cela, imposent à la mariée de monter au château, d'y porter le « mets de mariage ». Chose odieuse de l'obliger à s'aventurer ainsi au hasard de ce que peut faire cette meute de célibataires impudents et effrénés.

On voit d'ici la scène honteuse. Le jeune époux amenant au château son épouse. On imagine les rires des chevaliers, des valets, les espiègeries des pages autour de ces infortunés. — « La présence de la châtelaine les retiendra ? » Point du tout. La dame que les romans veulent faire croire si délicate, mais qui commandait aux hommes dans l'absence du mari, qui jugeait, qui châtiât, qui ordonnait des supplices, qui tenait le mari même par les fiefs qu'elle apportait, cette dame n'était guère tendre, pour une serve surtout qui peut-être était jolie. Ayant fort publiquement, selon l'usage d'alors, son chevalier et son page, elle n'était pas fâchée d'autoriser ses libertés par les libertés du mari.

Elle ne fera pas obstacle à la farce, à l'amusement qu'on prend de cet homme tremblant qui veut racheter sa femme. On marchande d'abord avec lui, on rit des tortures « du paysan avare » ; on lui suce la moelle et le sang. Pourquoi cet acharnement ? C'est qu'il est proprement habillé, qu'il est honnête, rangé, qu'il marque dans le village. Pourquoi ? c'est qu'elle est pieuse, chaste, pure, c'est qu'elle l'aime, qu'elle a peur et qu'elle pleure. Ses beaux yeux demandent grâce.

Le malheureux offre en vain tout ce qu'il a, la dot encore... C'est trop peu. Là, il s'irrite de cette injuste rigueur... « Son voisin n'a rien payé..... » L'insolent ! le raisonneur ! Alors toute la meute l'entoure, on crie ; bâtons et balais travaillent sur lui, comme grêle. On le pousse, on le précipite. On lui dit : « Vilain jaloux, vilaine face de carême, on ne la prend pas ta femme, on te la rendra ce soir, et, pour comble d'honneur, grosse !... Remercie, vous voilà nobles. Ton aîné sera baron ! » — Chacun se met aux fenêtres pour voir la figure grotesque de

ce mort en habit de nocces... Les éclats de rire le suivent, et la bruyante canaille, jusqu'au dernier marmiton, donne la chasse au « cocu ! »⁷³⁴

On her wedding day, the bride was supposed to go up to the castle, bearing her “wedding-dish.” She had to make her way among lecherous and unfettered celibates, and the presence of the lady was by no means a check on their brutality. On the contrary, she somehow encouraged her husband and his friends to take their pleasure with the peasant girl, since it would implicitly allow her to keep her page lover: Michelet repeatedly emphasizes the utter lack of faithfulness in the medieval culture, with cuckolds being often ridiculed and given chase to by a noisy rabble. Moreover, the lady could be as cruel as the lord himself. Years or centuries later, when the peasant woman is no longer a serf, but a wealthy and comely wife, she will disgrace her in public.⁷³⁵

She would have died, had she not believed in Satan's redemptive power.⁷³⁶ As will be shown, the choice of witchcraft will be the woman's revenge on the society that raped her. Her body was hostage. Her soul was humiliated.⁷³⁷ The evil she will commit will be their ransom. And she will patiently endure Satan's cruel initiation, with that one word helping her to withstand it: *Vengeance!*⁷³⁸

V.2. Redemption Through Crime

⁷³⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.86-87.

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.106-108.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.112.

Even though Michelet ostensibly refers to the tales of *Bluebeard* and *Griselda* to prepare and justify his droit de seigneur sequence, we are going to show that they possess another, dialectic meaning as well.

In his chapter on “the covenant,” the historian emphasizes the witch’s desire to do evil.

« Je ferai grandement les choses. Je ne suis pas de ces maris qui comptent avec leur fiancée. Si tu ne voulais qu’être riche, cela serait à l’instant même. Si tu ne voulais qu’être reine, remplacer Jeanne de Navarre, quoiqu’on y tienne, on le ferait, et le roi n’y perdrait guère en orgueil, en méchanceté. Il est plus grand d’être ma femme. Mais enfin, dis ce que tu veux.

« — Messire, rien que de faire du mal.

« — Charmante, charmante réponse !... Oh ! que j’ai raison de t’aimer !... En effet, cela contient tout, toute la loi et tous les prophètes... Puisque tu as si bien choisi, il te sera, par-dessus, donné de surplus tout le reste. Tu auras tous mes secrets. Tu verras au fond de la terre. Le monde viendra à toi, et mettra l’or à tes pieds... Plus, voici le vrai diamant, mon épouse, que je te donne, la *vengeance*... Je te sais, friponne, je sais ton plus caché désir... Oh ! que nos cœurs s’entendent là... C’est bien là que j’aurai de toi la possession définitive. *Tu verras ton ennemie agenouillée devant toi*, demandant grâce et priant, heureuse si tu la tenais quitte en faisant ce qu’elle te fit. Elle pleurera... Toi, gracieuse, tu diras : Non, et la verras crier : Mort et damnation !... Alors, j’en fais mon affaire.⁷³⁹

Tell me what you wish, Satan asks. Only the power to harm and do evil, the witch replies. At this point, we are before her transformation into a physician, nurse, and priestess. This means that all the good she will do stems from the evil she wishes to commit. Along with what you delightfully asked, says Satan, you will learn all my secrets. Either evil was a path to good (as Bataille, commenting on *La Sorcière*, contends), or the latter is a mere byproduct of the former – an additional, maybe even accidental outcome of it. Michelet does not solve the problem, implying in “Satan médecin” that the witch only sought to heal, but writing in “Le Pacte” that she really meant to harm.

At any rate, he reiterates in “Charmes, philtres” that he has not attempted to whitewash the witch. “*Si elle fit souvent du bien, elle put faire beaucoup de mal.*”⁷⁴⁰ The bride of Satan wielded

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.111-112.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.148.

a mighty power, and there is no such power which is not abusive.⁷⁴¹ How could she have helped employing it to wreak her hate and revenge? And sometimes, Michelet acknowledges, this happened even out of a mere delight in evil.⁷⁴² This is the turmoil, the delirium which Bataille caught, when the witch, having walked on the path of sin in order to better attain redemption, simply gets lost.

To begin with, she actually delights in helping the others to sin. All that once was told to the priest was now imparted to that priestess and physician of the common folk. But, in contrast with what used to be the confessor's share, one would not only tell her the sins already committed, but also those which one intended to commit – "*non seulement les péchés qu'on a faits, mais ceux qu'on veut faire.*"⁷⁴³ She holds each by their least unclean fancies. To her they entrust their bodily ills, but she would also cure the heart's lustful desires – cure them, or rather nurture and satisfy them. With her, one would bluntly demand love, life, death.

A young woman comes for an abortion. Then it is an exhausted mother who wants to be taught how to freeze the pleasure ("*glacer le plaisir*"), in other words, how not to beget other children, born only to die.⁷⁴⁴ Birth control is, from the outset, the witch's preserve. In the time of her "decadence," it will still be the main reason for her success and power.⁷⁴⁵ One day, a stepmother visits her: she simply tells the witch that the child of a former marriage eats too well and lives too long. Never mind, the witch whispers, I know how to help you get rid of him. After

⁷⁴¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*, p.149.

⁷⁴³ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁴⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁴⁵ See our chapter on Michelet's critique of antinomianism.

all, Satan gave her his “first flower,” the golden bough that provides life and death. This is, perhaps, the precise moment when sin stops being a tool for redemption – although it will revert to that previous function at the sabbath. “*Maléfice*” will then switch back to sacrifice, with good being the ultimate goal of the latter.⁷⁴⁶

It should be noted that before the inquisitorial procedure was applied to common folk – those accused of any crime but heresy – witches, who could only be accused of *maleficia*, were seldom tried. This kind of crime was treated like any other, that is in agreement with the accusatory procedure.⁷⁴⁷ The idea that the witches were devil-worshippers, and therefore a subcategory of heretics to whom the inquisitorial method, and even torture, should be applied, did not arise until the fifteenth century⁷⁴⁸ – when, incidentally, the inquisitorial method began to be applied to other crimes as well. As he does with the sabbath, Michelet relies on later stereotypes, which he reads against the grain. Yes, he suggests, the witches, whether they were healers or spellcasters, were devil-worshippers, but they were right in choosing, against Christian injustice, the old outlaw.

And now, comes a youth to buy at any cost the love philter that shall gain him the heart of some haughty lady. I mentioned Michelet’s disapproval of medieval mores, with the insolence of the feudal woman leading her to entertain lovers almost in front of her husband. He pleasantly reminds us that it also broke out in the triumphant *escoffion*, or *hennin*, the two-horned headdress worn in the 14th century.⁷⁴⁹ Satan was no longer the witch’s property. In the late Middle Ages, he was everywhere. It is even the main theme of the book’s second part, with Michelet lamenting the

⁷⁴⁶ G. Bataille, *op. cit.*, pp.54-55.

⁷⁴⁷ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp.213-217.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.202-210.

⁷⁴⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.150.

rise of aristocratic (or ecclesiastic) satanism. The scornful lady, the very one who once humiliated the witch,⁷⁵⁰ was now her kin. They shared the same headdress, with Michelet emphasizing in both cases its pertaining to the Devil: “*le triomphant bonnet du diable,*” he writes about the witch’s *hennin*,⁷⁵¹ while he relates the lady’s *escoffion* to her devilish insolence. “*L’insolence de la femme féodale éclate diaboliquement dans le triomphal bonnet aux deux cornes et autres modes effrontées.*”⁷⁵² Same bonnet, same words. The little witch would imitate the lady of the castle. It is now the latter who is contaminated by the former.

Both serve Satan, and the lady’s page as well. They all sin, and for once, with no hope of redemption. Sin is the air they breathe. It has no aim beyond itself – apart from that of love and pleasure. Why does the young page consider yielding himself to Satan? Because he loves that unreachable lady, and wants to be loved in return.⁷⁵³ But for the witch, it is no mere game or trade (for she *sells* her philters of course), it is still a matter of revenge. She feels a special bliss in hitting in secret the baron who once raped and humiliated her.⁷⁵⁴ It is a bitter and deep delight (“*plaisir âpre, profond*”), with, in fact, both the lady and the lord being degraded by her evil deeds. While the latter might raise a bastard son, the former may well feel abased by her love for a mere servant.

Moreover, it may happen that the lady herself goes to the witch and asks her that she prepare a philter for her. What a victory, then, for the ex-peasant!⁷⁵⁵ And in the same way as she was once

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.106-108.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.152.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.153.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.157.

stripped naked,⁷⁵⁶ she is now the one dominating the other, who fastens a little shelf on her loins, on which a small oven is set for the cooking of the *confarreatio*, the love cake. The witch's revenge has a levelling aspect, being also, in a way, a ritual of inversion. While the lord experiences the same humiliation as the peasant on his wedding night, the lady becomes slave to love, slave to her – to the very peasant girl she once despised.

“*C’est le fait du Moyen Âge de mettre toujours en face le très haut et le très bas.*”⁷⁵⁷ The highest and the lowest are constantly brought together, Michelet writes. They face each other, like a man and his own reflection in a mirror. One is at once the same as the other, and its inverted image. In the same way as love is blended with violence, many a gross ingredient enters in the composition of love philters, turning disgust, horror, and death, into bliss and life.

Beyond the classic nail clippings, or hairs that might have fallen from the lady's comb, or even sweat-soiled threads from her clothing, the composition of the philter could involve feces – an ingredient which, as mentioned, was somehow appealing to Michelet. This is suggested in a remarkable footnote, which inverts – yet again – a gesture once ascribed to a wicked nobleman. In fact, it is the very “*cadeau le plus immonde*” which Michelet considered bringing up, yet omitted from the final version of *La Sorcière*.

On voit que de nouveaux philtres deviennent souvent nécessaires. Et ici je plains la Dame. Car cette furieuse sorcière, dans sa malignité moqueuse, exige que le philtre vienne corporellement de la dame elle-même. Elle l'oblige, humiliée, à fournir à son amant une étrange communion. Le noble faisait aux juifs, aux serfs, aux bourgeois même (Voy. S. Simon, sur son frère), un outrage de certaines choses répugnantes que la dame est forcée par la sorcière de livrer ici comme philtre. Vrai supplice pour elle-même. Mais d'elle, de la grande Dame, tout est reçu à genoux.⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.154.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.158.

Fresher and, perhaps, more diverse philters were often needed, and hairs and garments were not sufficient. The most powerful ingredients should come from the lady herself – in which the witch appears to revel in her humiliation, like nature did in reminding Louis XIV that he had an anus like everyone else.⁷⁵⁹ What the witch asks from the lady, then, is precisely what the nobles would use to degrade commoners and such outcasts as the Jews. Like cures like. What was meant to symbolize the absolute separation between the classes was thenceforth the alchemical image of their forgotten unity.⁷⁶⁰

We could infer from the censored episode introducing Saint-Simon's alleged "*cadet*," that the *droit de cuissage* does not serve so much the lord's sensual needs as his psychological thirst for domination. However, that such a narrowly political explanation has been removed from the final version of the book might evince a deeper understanding of what sensuality means. We already alluded to this possibility, and the above-quoted footnote brings more credit to it. Sexual freedom unites the witch and her offender: it is dialectic and ambiguous, both delightful and dangerous. As will be shown, there is also, in *La Sorcière*, a "bad" antinomianism, that of the lascivious and heretic priests, which Michelet contrasts with the "good" one, peacefully practiced by the witches. They nonetheless share many features, and he uses similar images to describe both. Saint-Simon's fictitious brother resembles Gauffridi and Father Girard. Yet, to relate this story as a mere illustration of political oppression would not have been adequate to Michelet's ambition, or, perhaps, to that delirium of his which Bataille perceived. There is a moment, indeed, when the common root of the witch's rebellion and the noble's immorality needs to be pointed to. It is

⁷⁵⁹ See our previous chapter.

⁷⁶⁰ Bakhtin notes that, since "everything descends into the earth and the bodily grave in order to die and to be reborn, [...] all these [scatological] images throw down, debase, swallow, condemn, deny [...], bury, send down to the underworld, abuse curse; and at the same time they all conceive anew, fertilize, sow, rejuvenate, regenerate, praise, and glorify." (*op. cit.*, p.435)

precisely what the fecal pattern means. As shown in the previous chapter, feces have, in Michelet's imagination, a metaphysical meaning. They connect the body to immortal life and to resurrection. To use them as a tool of oppression is not only degrading for those humiliated thereby, but also for the stomach itself. Therefore, the witch achieves her mission as the redeemer of the womb and the digestive functions by projecting the filth of the latter unto the oppressors themselves, and by using it in order to arouse love. In doing so, she also paradoxically emphasizes her kindred with the likes of Saint-Simon's brother.

Likewise, although the rape scene must appall the reader, they should perceive that the lord's cruelty and the witch's "redemption of the womb" stem from the same root – Pan's dark kingdom. Her subsequent effort at saving herself and her body from the grip of both the nobility and the Church can only naturally follow a path of violence and murder.

Michelet does not hide that witchcraft could involve bloody rituals, in which Eros and Thanatos were connected and mirrored each other. One example he gives is presented as a symbolic interpretation of *Roman du châtelain de Coucy*. This story has been brought up in the same chapter as illustrating a medieval subculture of sexual licentiousness, especially adultery.⁷⁶¹ Fayel, a nobleman, discovers that his wife cheats on him. When her lover is killed in the Crusade, Fayel has his heart torn from his chest, then he deceives his wife into eating it. This recurring theme of medieval literature is present, among other sources, in Boccaccio's *Decameron* as well, with Guglielmo Rossignole, a valiant knight, killing his rival and having his wife eat it. Michelet suggests that it might actually refer to the kind of magic cannibalism encouraged by the witches.

Quelquefois, dans ces folies, on buvait du sang l'un de l'autre, pour se faire une communion qui, disait-on, mêlait les âmes. Le cœur dévoré de Coucy que la Dame « trouva si bon, qu'elle ne mangea plus de sa vie, » est le plus tragique exemple de ces monstrueux sacrements de l'amour anthropophage. Mais quand l'absent ne mourait pas, quand c'était

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.152.

l'amour qui mourait en lui, la dame consultait la sorcière, lui demandait les moyens de le lier, le ramener.⁷⁶²

My interpretation of Michelet's cryptic mention of *Donkey Skin* is supported by this story, which seems to reflect sensitivity to anthropological and symbolic subtexts. The literal meaning of *Roman du châtelain de Coucy* is not a ritualistic one, rather it is a crime story, a bloody romance. Yet, Michelet returns to it in another context, that of love philters and cannibalistic magic ceremonies. The buried meaning of the tale, he suggests, must have been one of violence blended with magic. In any case, that "cannibalistic love" connects the witch's criminal charms to the later "*communion de révolte*," when the serfs would drink each other's blood in the same way two lovers would, in a soul-mingling communion. Apparently, the absent one could die of it, as if the witch should boost love – a love strong as death – at the expense of life itself. "Was Bluebeard asking to be brutally killed?" Bettina Knapp wonders in her Jungian analysis of Perrault's tales. "Or was he simply enticing his wife to join him in his sadomasochistic erotic rounds until death did them part?"⁷⁶³ There is certainly a sadomasochistic energy about the ex-peasant girl, the once abused woman-serf, who is now a witch, and might even morph into a male Bluebeard.

V. 3. What Do Chatelaines Dream About?

Michelet often intertwines his historical considerations with short stories or prose poems. The story by which he narrates the origin of *jus primae noctis* is one example, and so is its sequel, which we have addressed in relation with the woman's possession, and to which we shall return in our last chapter. Elsewhere, we are told about the lady of a castle – supposedly one or two centuries later – who, overwhelmed with boredom, asks an old witch to initiate her to witchcraft by

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁷⁶³ B. Knapp, *op. cit.*, p.103.

transforming her into a she-wolf. The lady whom Michelet imagines is a jaded, “*spleenétique*” noblewoman, perhaps reminiscent of neglected bourgeois spouses of his time, or of prerevolutionary Sadean aristocratic heroines. Her horizon is closed. Her God is dead. What she seeks is not, at first sight, redemption, but moral release.

« Écoute bien... J'ai une *envie*... (tu le sais, c'est insurmontable), l'envie de t'étrangler, de te noyer ou de te donner à l'évêque qui déjà te demande... Tu n'as qu'un moyen d'échapper, c'est de me satisfaire une autre *envie*, — de me changer en louve. Je m'ennuie trop. Assez rester. Je veux, au moins la nuit, courir librement la forêt. Plus de sots serviteurs, de chiens qui m'étourdissent, de chevaux maladroits qui heurtent, évitent les fourrés.

— « Mais, madame, si l'on vous prenait... — Insolente... Oh ! tu périras... — Du moins, vous savez bien l'histoire de la dame louve dont on coupa la patte... Que de regrets j'aurais !... — C'est mon affaire... Je ne t'écoute plus. J'ai hâte, et j'ai jappé déjà... Quel bonheur ! chasser seule, au clair de lune, et seule mordre la biche, l'homme aussi, s'il en vient ; mordre l'enfant si tendre, et la femme surtout, oh ! la femme, y mettre la dent !... Je les hais toutes... Pas une autant que toi... Mais ne recule pas, je ne te mordrai pas ; tu me répugnes trop, et, d'ailleurs, tu n'as pas de sang... Du sang, du sang ! c'est ce qu'il faut. » [...]

Cela se fait, et la dame, au matin, se trouve excédée, abattue ; elle n'en peut plus. Elle doit, cette nuit, avoir fait trente lieues. Elle a chassé, elle a tué ; elle est pleine de sang. Mais ce sang vient peut-être des ronces où elle s'est déchirée.⁷⁶⁴

Whereas he does not sympathize with her the way he does with the peasant witch, he nevertheless acknowledges the thirst for freedom of those “*nobles captives des châteaux*.”⁷⁶⁵

Beside the shamanistic exchange of souls, there is another connection with the passage quoted above, from “Le petit démon du foyer,” and it makes Michelet's indulgence toward the chatelaine's crimes understandable. “*Elle étend sa compassion sur la dame même du château, la plaint d'être dans les mains de ce féroce baron (Barbe-Bleue)*,” the historian wrote about the oppressed peasant woman soon to become a witch.⁷⁶⁶ In certain cases there is a harsh rivalry between those two women, as is the case when the lady envies the serf's beauty to the point that

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.191-192.

⁷⁶⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.74.

she has her robe cut along her loins by a pet of hers.⁷⁶⁷ The situation in the fifteenth century – or, rather, during an imaginary era which Michelet identifies with the fifteenth century – is different. The lady and the witch – now described as old, powerful, and feared by the villagers – certainly do not like each other, but no rivalry in love is involved. And the lady needs the witch in order to obtain the freedom – “*libertés, libertés cruelles*”⁷⁶⁸ – that she craves.

Quite remarkably, their “reconciliation” happens in relation with an animalistic transformation. The fact that those two episodes could not possibly have involved the same persons, had they occurred in the realm of facts, does not matter here. If my interpretation is correct, the mention of *Donkey Skin* in “Le petit démon du foyer” already alluded to such a metamorphosis – a spiritual, shamanistic one of course: when it comes to werewolves, it is quite obvious that Michelet does not expect from the reader a belief in a real, physical transformation of the chatelaine into a she-wolf. A faint and obscure solidarity between the two women, for all their differences, is looming – and their mutual connection with the world of souls and animals is responsible for it. In other words, although this portrait shows up in a passage involving a critique of antinomianism, it still evinces Michelet’s antinomian tendencies – the reason being that it concerns a woman, cruel and privileged but nevertheless oppressed by her lord.

On the surface, the lady just wants to get rid of the sensation of pointlessness that oppresses her. The witch is summoned to help her in becoming a wolf: does not this chatelaine then, in her own bizarre way, hope for redemption? It is in fact at least possible that the “metamorphosis” which the witch offers her is not completely futile. The footnote we brought into focus in our third chapter certainly attests to Michelet’s ambivalent attitude to the lady’s fancy. It mentions a source

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.106-107.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.191.

Michelet found in Boguet, according to which a gentleman's wife was once hurt by a hunter somewhere in the hills of Auvergne. The hunter had drawn his sword against a she-wolf, but, missing her, he had only cut off its paw. Coming to a neighborhood castle to seek hospitality, he drew out of his pouch the she-wolf's paw in order to show how good the sport had been – only to find a hand instead, and on one of its fingers a ring, which the gentleman recognized as belonging to his wife. “*Le mari eut la cruauté de la livrer à la justice, et elle fut brûlée.*” Cruelty: Michelet thus appears to condone the savage fantasies of the lady, while condemning the husband's appeal to law.

Let us go back to the Barbe-Bleue topos. The lycanthropic lady, for all her “crimes,” may well be the victim of a true criminal, a “*féroce baron,*” a Bluebeard. With the mention of Gilles de Rais, there is another connection between the two passages. While Michelet refrains from condemning outright the witch's participation in her lady's frenzy – and the mysterious help she gives her – he unambiguously condemns de Rais' “terrible Italian,” his faithful retainer, who provides him with little serfs to rape, torture, and kill. The purveyors of that horrible children charnel-house were mostly men, Michelet adds in a footnote.⁷⁶⁹ Nowhere more than in this chapter does the historian's feminism show.

To be sure, the lady is not necessarily a criminal: the blood she is covered with, we learn, might come from having torn herself among the brambles! But she certainly longs for violence, and she might as well have killed animals, at any rate. In her case, such violence may, however, be an attempt at redemption from boredom, and salvation from her desperate condition. To the contrary, there is no redemptive quality in Bluebeard's or Gille de Rais' crimes, which the latter aggravated by sacrificing his small serfs to Satan. Not that Michelet sees Satan's worship as

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.193.

blameworthy: we saw that, in his eyes, Satan's religion was the true one, but to transform its "communion de révolte" into a tool of oppression is to betray it.

The difference in treatment of the fictional lady and the historical Gilles de Rais hints to an underlying critique of antinomianism to which we will turn in another chapter of this study. The chatelaine's Satan is Pan, the proletarian wolf-god of nature. Gilles de Rais', on the other hand, is an aristocratic mockery of Pan. Hence Michelet's refusal to imagine that a woman, alongside the Italian henchman, may have been *consciously* involved in the cruel lord's pleasures.⁷⁷⁰ However, even a simulacrum bears something of the original it is modeled after. Even degraded, Pan is still Pan. Another way of approaching this matter is to say that, both the woman's cruelty and Bluebeard's (or Gilles de Rais') point to the moral ambiguity of the former's revolt.⁷⁷¹ Michelet did not begin his history of witchcraft with Pan without a reason. A liminal god, at once benevolent and fierce, he embodies freedom as well as murder and rape. Is not the witch raped by Satan the same way she is raped by men?⁷⁷² Under the apparently Manichaean meaning of the story, we have an epic of blended good and evil – two twins holding each other's heel in nature's womb.

Therefore, if *La Sorcière* belongs to the genre of romance, as Hayden White maintains, it is a kind of romance loaded with irony. It is Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, rather than any classic Holy Grail story. Apropos Ariosto, a passage on Leonardo, from *Renaissance*, might give us an interesting insight on the nature of Michelet's book.

Une étrange île d'Alcine est dans les yeux de la Joconde, gracieux et souriant fantôme.
Vous la croyiez attentive aux récits légers de Boccace. Prenez garde. Vinci lui-même, le grand

⁷⁷⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁷¹ It should be noted that Gilles de Rais was Joan of Arc's companion in arms. The latter was a witch in Michelet's understanding of this word – both a demonic and a messianic figure. The former might have retained, in Michelet's dialectic view, some of Joan's traits – and *vice versa*.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, pp.99-101.

maître de l'illusion, fut pris à son piège ; longues années il resta là, sans pouvoir sortir jamais de ce labyrinthe mobile, fluide et changeant, qu'il a peint au fond du dangereux tableau.⁷⁷³

The mention of Alcina points to the “witchy” aspect of the Renaissance. A prominent and ambiguous character in Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, she is the sorceress who beguiles Ruggiero and traps him on her enchanted island. It is this “*étrange île*” which Michelet catches in Mona Lisa’s mysterious gaze. Leonardo, whom he calls “*le génie de la Renaissance*,”⁷⁷⁴ was the master of the “depths of the world and the unknown abyss of the ages,”⁷⁷⁵ a wizard himself, yet also a scientist and a rational mind. To be sure, when he wrote *Renaissance*, Michelet did not yet envision witchcraft as a positive form of knowledge, but this dialectic would still inform *La Sorcière*. If it is a “romance,” as White puts it, then it is replete with all the creative ambiguities of Ariosto’s epic poem, where good and evil are intertwined and often indistinguishable, if not utterly blended. Is the Ruggiero who attempts to rape Angelica as good as the one who saved her? They are the same person anyway. And, likewise, Orlando is both a Christian hero and a dangerous psychotic. Ariosto’s “romance” possesses that irony which, according to White, characterizes satire, in contrast with romance – and so does *La Sorcière*, which, no less than *Orlando furioso*, is at times “a drama of *diremption*, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitely the dark force of death, which is man’s unremitting enemy.”⁷⁷⁶ Diremption, that is the process of separating something forcefully from its environment, would characterize the spirit of satire. The little witch,

⁷⁷³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p.XCVI.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.LXXXIX.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.XC.

⁷⁷⁶ H. White, *op. cit.*, p.9.

alone on the moor, greeted only by ravens and bears, the Jew whom a “miracle of the Devil” has made generous, or the story of the Cadière girl in the last chapters of the book, might illustrate what White means by diremption. At any rate, the ultimate redemption of its characters never erases the darkness of *La Sorcière*, nor its saturnine laugh.

By telling the story of the werewoman chatelaine, Michelet conveys an archetype of magical and fierce femaleness. Over the centuries, one has tried to clean up the wilds as well as the “wolfish” side of the psyche, with both women and wolves having been the targets of these efforts. Bataille suggests that Michelet spoke with more humanity than anyone about that savage and despised realm of evil.⁷⁷⁷ What we have shown in this chapter is that Michelet was not duped by his own redemptive doctrine. Sin is a tool, a path leading to redemption. It can also lead back to Pan’s murky realm, where Bluebeard and his rebellious wife – who looks at her own reflection in her predecessors’ curdled blood – resemble very much each other.

⁷⁷⁷ G. Bataille, *op. cit.*, p.49.

Chapter Six

Michelet's Critique of Antinomianism

One of the strangest features of *La Sorcière* is that it depicts the only witches about whom we have actual information as false ones. Even if we should take seriously Lamothe-Langon's ranting – which Michelet did – most of the notions we have of witchcraft can be traced back to the Renaissance and the Baroque. Michelet is well aware of this, since his depiction of the sabbath owes considerably to that literature. In other words, although the historical Witch Hunt – including, of course, the sabbath stereotype – is an early modern phenomenon, and although he knows that and even acknowledges it, Michelet describes the period as one of decline of witchcraft. In this chapter, we will show that his critical view of antinomianism is key to understanding the rationale behind this choice.

V. 1. Good Devil, Bad Devil

The primitive sabbath was “*communion de révolte*.” Starting from the fifteenth century, it became, Michelet suggests, a celebration of wealth and privilege. In parallel with his overall endorsement of redemption through sin emerges a critique of antinomian behaviors. To be sure, the stories of the werewoman and the poisoner also evince some level of disapproval, yet Michelet sympathizes with those criminals. Everything changes when antinomianism is appropriated by the elite. This needs to be understood in order to avoid confusing *La Sorcière* with other “Sadean” works, or with decadent books possibly inspired by it: Michelet does not condone witchcraft in general, only popular, “democratic” witchcraft. When it is appropriated by the nobility – or, as will be discussed, degenerate churchmen – he can only recoil with disgust. While he first depicts

witches as heroes and martyrs, going so far as to espouse their supernatural fancies, he aggressively reverts to an ironic kind of rationalism in the second part of the work. The disappearance of every heroic character – which is the case here – is indeed a central theme of “ironic literature.”⁷⁷⁸ In other words, *La Sorcière* turns out to be at least as “ironic” as it is “romantic.”

It would be simplistic to state that, before the elite’s appropriation of witchcraft, the latter is only “good.” In fact, the germs of its decadence lie in its dialectic nature. As shown above, the witch is a rebel whose cause is just, yet she is also a criminal, a female Bluebeard. The fact remains that, from the fifteenth century onward, Michelet believes that the elite increasingly made use of the supernatural imagination of the people mediated by the inquisitors’ perverse fantasies. The sabbath, once the redeeming inversion of an oppressive order, is now itself inverted.⁷⁷⁹ To describe that perverse *subversion of subversion*, the historian conveys the following image: in the seventeenth-century Basque country, he writes, Satan found his old seat, the druidic stone, too hard for him, and therefore treated himself to a cosy well-gilded armchair.⁷⁸⁰

According to Michelet, the decline of witchcraft actually started two centuries before the well-gilded armchair period – which, I should stress, is the only one for which we have actual, lengthy archives. In his chapter on “The Witch in her Decline,” Michelet brings up a feast which Charles VI threw in 1389 – perhaps conflating it with the famous Bal des Ardents (1393), a savage masquerade whose tragic ending sparked accusations of devil-worship. However, nothing from earlier history books could have allowed Michelet to infer that the 1389 feast was a “*sabbat royal*,” as he nonetheless calls it.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁸ H. White, *op. cit.*, p.231.

⁷⁷⁹ P. Petitier, *op. cit.*, p.229.

⁷⁸⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.228.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.187.

To begin with, the *Sorcière* allusion is made clearer by another text, found in Michelet's *Histoire de France*. There we learn that, frustrated by his inactivity, Charles VI wanted feasts instead of wars.⁷⁸² The feast alluded to in *La Sorcière* took place at Saint-Denis, in the royal necropolis, hence the mention of the graves (“*cette bacchanale près des tombeaux*”) and the dead, “disturbed” by the living.

Il y eut trois jours de fêtes: d'abord les messes, les cérémonies de l'Église, puis les banquets et les joûtes, puis le bal de nuit ; un dernier bal enfin, mais celui-ci masqué, pour dispenser de rougir. La présence du roi, la sainteté du lieu, n'imposèrent en rien. La foule s'était enivrée d'une attente de trois jours. Ce fut un véritable *Pervigilium Veneris* ; on était aux premiers jours du mois de mai. [...]

Cette bacchanale près des tombeaux eut un bizarre lendemain. Ce ne fut pas assez que les morts eussent été troublés par le bruit de la fête, on ne les tint pas quittes. Il fallut qu'ils jouassent aussi leur rôle. Pour aviver le plaisir par le contraste, ou tromper les langueurs qui suivent, le roi se fit donner le spectacle d'une pompe funèbre.⁷⁸³

The masquerade, a classic medieval *charivari*, becomes a sabbath. Venus is summoned, Eros and Thanatos are mated in a loud orgy. Finally, Du Guesclin's funeral is celebrated but is a mockery, conceived as a way to give the king perverse aesthetic satisfaction. Here we have a sabbath, but already a parodic one, redolent of the idle Versailles courtesans' erotic ceremonies rather than of the actual, popular sabbath. In such case, obscenity is no longer a tool of salvation but the very symbol of political and social privilege.

We should examine the historical facts to better understand Michelet's own literary approach. Possible sources for this text and its recasting in *La Sorcière* are Juvénal des Ursins' *Histoire de Charles VI* and Jean Le Laboureur's book on the same topic. As it happens, both historians relate a feast which Charles VI really threw at Saint-Denis, first to honor the Sicilian knights, and secondly to properly entomb Du Guesclin, who had died ten years earlier. The French

⁷⁸² See J. Michelet, *Histoire de France, op. cit.*, IV, p.44.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.46-47.

king converted the abbey into a state room, and built an outer walled area where tournaments were to take place.⁷⁸⁴ The feast lasted several days, the knights pretending to emulate Charlemagne's paladins while the ladies, Le Laboureur marvels, did not resemble queens but real goddesses: "*c'estoit quelque chose de plus auguste que toutes les assemblées des Divinités du Paganisme.*"⁷⁸⁵ In Michelet's imagination, a note like this might be somehow reminiscent of the nocturnal assemblies which the medieval peasant witches would join, in order to worship fairies and other pagan goddesses. As a reader of Maury's *Les Fées du Moyen Âge*, he might have had these rituals in mind when he qualified the bizarre feast as a "*sabbat royal.*" At any rate, it was to degenerate into a spectacular orgy. Le Laboureur laments such licentiousness taking place in the presence of the king and in a holy place such as Saint-Denis.⁷⁸⁶ "*Chacun chercha à satisfaire ses passions, & c'est pour dire qu'il y eut des marys qui patirent de la mauvaise conduite de leurs femmes, & qu'il y eut des filles qui perdirent le soin de leur honneur.*"⁷⁸⁷

The feast, however, reached its peak after the tournaments – and even the orgy proper – with the apparently innocent funeral. To be sure, this event was sullied by the nobles' debauchery, but the idea that the French and Sicilian courtesans had really indulged in the devilish pleasures of sabbath is entirely Michelet's. As mentioned above, some accusations of witchcraft and devil-worshipping were cited after the fire that occurred during the Bal des Ardents – not to mention the demonic dimension of the "*hommes sauvages*" costumes then worn by the nobility. But that is an utterly different episode, which Michelet does not mention here. What prompts him to identify the

⁷⁸⁴ See Jean Le Laboureur, *Histoire de Charles VI, Roy de France*, Paris, Louis Billaine, 1663, II, p.168.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.170-171.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.171.

earlier Saint-Denis feast as a sabbath – although a “decadent” one – is the same element that causes Le Laboureur to recoil with horror, namely the sacred character of the place and the proximity to the dead. Now that Satan has been “multiplied and made common,” his most awesome attribute – his being the King of the Dead – is made common as well. Or rather it is used to placate an idle privileged class. Having been awesome it is now merely vulgar.

The “*sabbat royal*” which Michelet thus conjures up possesses an inaugural character. Heeding Schlegel’s call, the historian creates his own mythology in order to ground his vision of history in a soil that transcends history. In this regard, it is given the same eerie dimension as Pan’s death – a tale whose sources and philological history are erased at the outset of *La Sorcière* so it might actually become foundational. In both cases, the myth is really a farewell to all myths.

In the structure of Michelet’s counter-history there are legendary milestones, such as Pan’s death. Charles VI’s feast, a mimicry of the witches’ sabbath, is one of them. As a historian, Michelet is interested in facts, but their relation must proceed from something that precedes and transcends them, without ever annulling their reality – just as a mathematical demonstration, or even the observation and understanding of natural facts must relate to undemonstrable axioms. He does not bring into question the nature of objectivity, but lays stress on what underpins it. In *La Sorcière*, the primeval myth is the axiom. In other words, the “rules of the game”⁷⁸⁸ should be the same for everyone because they are not a way of construing reality, but rather the soil in which reality takes root. Let us reiterate that, for that very reason, every myth conveyed by Michelet is, at the same time, a farewell to mythology.

From now on, as we leave the realm of legend and enter history, we shall witness a decline of witchcraft, with high society indulging in its rites out of mere boredom, depravity, or cruelty.

⁷⁸⁸ H. White, *op. cit.*, p.277.

From the necropolis orgy to Gilles de Rais there is a continuum, and then from Gilles de Rais to seventeenth-century elite satanists – including the protagonists of the Affair of the Poisons, whom Michelet does not even mention in his book, apart from one footnote. In *La Sorcière*, although we find fewer details about the feast itself than in *Histoire de France*, this legacy is made clearer:

Trois jours, trois nuits. Sodome se roula sur les tombes. Le fou, qui n'était pas encore idiot, força tous ces rois, ses aïeux, ces os secs sautant dans leur bière, de partager son bal. La mort, bon gré, mal gré, devint entremetteuse, donna aux voluptés un cruel aiguillon. Là éclatèrent les modes immondes de l'époque où les dames, grandies du hennin diabolique, faisaient valoir le ventre et semblaient toutes enceintes (admirable moyen de cacher les grossesses). Elles y tinrent ; cette mode dura quarante années. [...] Le célèbre enleveur d'enfants, Retz, lui-même alors page, prit là son monstrueux essor. Toutes ces grandes dames de fiefs, effrénées Jézabels, moins pudibondes encore que l'homme, ne daignaient se déguiser. Elles s'étalaient à face nue. Leur furie sensuelle, leur folle ostentation de débauche, leurs outrageux défis, furent pour le roi, pour tous, — pour le sens, la vie, le corps, l'âme, — l'abîme et le gouffre sans fond.⁷⁸⁹

Gilles de Rais grew up during those forty years of satanic debauchery, when a proto-Sadean nobility would use the goad of death and horror to stimulate their dampened senses. The prologue of those forty years was Charles VI's "*sabbat royal*," when the funeral of the last genuine feudal knight was unduly used to whet a disillusioned king's appetite. It is not the first time that Michelet alludes to Gilles de Rais. There is no doubt that Michelet envisions such crimes as not only horrendous but even contrary to the very thrust of his "*communion de révolte*." Was not the witch's "possession" presented as a response to her Bluebeard of a lord? The aristocratic Luciferian Gilles de Rais is really the ultimate avatar of the Bluebeard archetype, and it is actually against such criminals – all the real "Barbe-Bleue" of medieval Europe, whether sexual molesters or violent rogues – that, in Michelet's view, witchcraft was "created." It reenacted pagan rituals at the same time as popular imagination was inventing heartening fairy tales, with both rituals and tales aimed

⁷⁸⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.187-188.

at redeeming the downtrodden.⁷⁹⁰ On the contrary, the late form of the sabbath appears to be 1) a kind of cultural appropriation on the part of the nobility, 2) a perverse subversion of subversion.

V. 2. When Priests Made Satan in their Image

As already mentioned, Michelet observes “one hundred years of toleration” in France, between 1450 and 1550.⁷⁹¹ Wherever the lay courts claimed the management of the witches’ trials, he holds, they actually grew scarce. Then came Henri II’s dark reign. Under Diana – Henri II’s mistress, whom Michelet feigns to consider as the then actual or *de facto* queen – heretics and wizards were burnt again.⁷⁹² Catherine of Medici, however, was surrounded by astrologers and magicians such as Nostradamus, whom she had invited to her court in 1555: later, in her capacity as regent, she protected magicians.⁷⁹³ But at that time “Satan had turned priest,” “*Satan se fait ecclésiastique*,” Michelet asserts. This seems to be the ultimate step in the overall decline of Luciferianism – whose Charles VI’s “*sabbat royal*” was, as shown above, the first symbolic (and mythical) step.

The late Renaissance coincides with both the Great Witch Hunt and the culmination of what Michelet qualifies as a *decadence* of witchcraft. This decadence became fully tangible around 1610, at the time when witchcraft had become mainstream, or even trendy in some milieus against whose grip it once was intended – typically, the Church. Michelet is astonished to read that so many priests would attend the sabbath: it is what Lancre claims, and he readily believes him. My understanding is that Michelet needs to do so because it serves his dialectic approach of

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.211.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*, p.214.

⁷⁹³ *Loc. cit.*

antinomianism. Let us not forget that the sabbath, the “real” sabbath or “*communion de révolte*” – which never was but whose description constitutes the core of *La Sorcière* – is supposed to anticipate the French Revolution, including its many excesses. Now in the same way as, in Michelet’s eyes, the worst excesses in the eighteenth century are the nobility’s and monarchs’ (like Louis XV), they need to be the elite’s as well during the great Witch Hunt. In other words, after paganism was vanquished it returned as “*communion de révolte*,” and then its most subversive features were appropriated by the very representatives of Christian order, making it necessary to overcome that order through a more complete revolution. In traditional, popular witchcraft, antinomianism was the tool of a real, subterranean order. Once taken on by perverted Christian elites – in *La Sorcière*’s second part –, it becomes a tool of oppression. Charles VI, Gilles de Rais, Jean-Baptiste Girard⁷⁹⁴, even Louis XV, whom Michelet describes as a new Herod whose atrocities only Sade can make us perceive⁷⁹⁵, are antinomian rogues. Their antinomianism is really the instrument of a criminal order which the revolutionaries’ *genuine antinomianism* should defeat – thus ultimately bringing back a long lost pre-Christian order.

Let us not forget that, for Michelet, to be oneself at one’s higher level, to better attain one’s essence, one has to die – “*il ne faut plus être soi, mais mourir, se transformer.*”⁷⁹⁶ In dying, witchcraft became what it really was – on the one hand, the spirit of the Revolution, on the other hand, degenerate satanism. This means that it already contained both in the beginning, or, in other words, that those cruel priests whose dark deeds we are going to bring into focus, the renegade sons of the witches – along with the scientists – somehow embody the essence of witchcraft too.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.302-334.

⁷⁹⁵ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVIII^e siècle – Louis XV*, *op. cit.*, p.285.

⁷⁹⁶ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, I, p.360.

In other words, Michelet's critique of antinomianism attests to his deeply dialectical understanding of the intricacy of good and evil.

We will see below a particularly striking feature of that false, or hypocritical antinomianism. But first of all, it is important to understand what Michelet really means when he describes the early modern Satan as a prelate. To be sure, Michelet mistakenly takes for granted that the tales told by Lancre – not to mention Lamothe-Langon's forgery – are true. The Baroque sabbath he describes in the fifth chapter of *La Sorcière's* second part comes from "testimonies" mostly obtained under torture. Such statements actually combine ecclesiastical stereotypes, slowly crystallized over the centuries, and distorted folkloric elements. Even before addressing the Baroque Witch Hunt, Michelet borrows from the demonologists themselves the idea that a real witch-cult existed in the Middle Ages. The obsessive theme of demonic copulations, present both in the first part of the book⁷⁹⁷ and in the second one⁷⁹⁸, is likewise an inquisitorial stereotype, grown out of Late Antiquity, and early medieval tales about incubi.⁷⁹⁹ The very order of the sabbath, mimicking the Catholic mass, is yet another ecclesiastical idea, as is the belief that Satan was actually worshipped by the witches. As already said, all we know about medieval "sabbaths," or rather pagan nocturnal assemblies which the Church did *not* originally call by this name, is that fairies or "*Bonnes Dames*," fertility goddesses that had survived the demise of paganism, were somehow worshipped then.⁸⁰⁰ Diana, not Satan. To be sure, the *Canon Episcopi* mentions Satan,

⁷⁹⁷ See J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-115 and pp.166-167.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁷⁹⁹ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp.30-34.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.166-171.

to whom wicked women were apparently “turning back.” But he was only responsible for their idolatry, he himself was not their god.

Then the Church undertook to demonize heretics, ultimately equating their cults to Satanism. It is in this context that a vast persecution of crypto-pagan witches became possible. From 1420 onward, it developed as a by-product of the persecution of the Waldensians⁸⁰¹ and the demonization of the Jews, originally in the Alps.⁸⁰² Michelet does not seem to be aware that he is the plaything of a double falsification – the Inquisition’s and its lay successors’ on the one hand, Lamothe-Langon’s on the other hand. He nevertheless unveils the truth despite himself: the Catholic vision of pagan deities is Satan. Through him, Pan is caricatured and made common, mirroring the churchmen’s ravings rather than nature – which he once embodied. He ultimately turns priest, because he has always been “*ecclésiastique!*”

V. 3. Infertility

Infertility is the key word of elite antinomianism – and actually the only authentic element that it ever took from the witches’ sabbath. When he first addressed that period in *Histoire de France*, Michelet already described it as “infertile” while acknowledging that witchcraft, *along with convent life and casuistry*, was one of three different names for that very same infertility.⁸⁰³ If we want to understand what Michelet means when he satirizes the Baroque Devil of “decadent” witches as a real “prelate”, whose disciples are wealthy merchants and peasants, noblemen and churchmen, we have to turn to his *Histoire de France*.

⁸⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp.202-210.

⁸⁰² C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.63-80.

⁸⁰³ See J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Henri IV et Richelieu*, *op. cit.*, p.261.

It appears that all those things which only the Sabbath had previously allowed were now part of mainstream culture and mores. Even in *La Sorcière*, Michelet seems not to stomach this upheaval. Physical infertility – or, rather, birth control – was both frowned upon by the Church, and part of the Sabbath’s rites (“*Jamais femme n’en revint enceinte*”⁸⁰⁴). Michelet is of the opinion that in the seventeenth century, not only did birth control become accepted by casuists, but its need even *gave birth* to casuistry!

Cependant, dit le père, il est bien dur d’avoir des filles qu’il faut doter pour les couvents. Pourquoi engendrer des enfants, s’il faut ainsi les faire mourir ? Réflexion judicieuse que l’on soumet à son père spirituel. C’est à celui-ci de chercher, d’imaginer. On ne le lâchera pas. De main, après-demain, toujours, on lui demandera d’inventer quelque moyen subtil de faire que la stérilité volontaire ne soit plus péché. C’est l’origine principale de la casuistique.

On ne veut pas pécher. Ou, s’il y a péché, on veut qu’il soit au confesseur, qui doit, non pas l’absoudre, mais le légitimer d’avance.⁸⁰⁵

Michelet maintains that the sordid arts of abortion and birth control were the object of an intense rivalry between the Church and the witches. If the confessors did not comply, those wealthy merchants and noblemen would avail themselves of the witches instead, and make their way to the sabbath rather than attend the mass. “*Dans certaines contrées, le noble commençait déjà à fréquenter l’église du Diable, l’assemblée du sabbat, l’orgie stérile où le peuple des campagnes était guidé par les sorcières dans les arts de l’avortement. C’est là, en réalité, la cause principale qui étend si prodigieusement l’action des sorcières en ce siècle.*”⁸⁰⁶ The extraordinary inflation then experienced is the reason why one would give up conceiving children: it is out of “kindness” to them that one decided not to beget them. The Devil’s force therefore vastly increases, expanding to the highest classes themselves. Living amidst debauchery, they indeed insisted that their

⁸⁰⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.176.

⁸⁰⁵ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Henri IV et Richelieu*, *op. cit.*, p.267.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.268.

confessors should absolve them for it. The priests, Michelet argues, could only abide by the lecherous desires of the wealthy. There grew up a vast literature of casuistry, that is “*l’art de tout permettre*,”⁸⁰⁷ to allow all things, and especially birth control.

V. 4. “Sin Could be Killed by Sin...”

The two sides of the Church’s permissiveness, Michelet argues, are casuistry – meant for the world – and mysticism – meant for the convent.⁸⁰⁸ Or rather it is a certain hidden mysticism of sin that constitutes the bedrock of the Jesuits’ well-known art of allowing all things.⁸⁰⁹ Quietism, in fact, makes the link between the two. Miguel de Molinos’ doctrine of mystical love, although not antinomian *per se*, created a trend of mystical antinomianism. The *alumbrados* (or Illuminates) of Spain, having been persecuted in their country, had fled for shelter in France. There, especially in the convents, they instilled the poison of mysticism.⁸¹⁰ A “*doux poison*,” Michelet suggestively writes, “gentle poison,” using a term found elsewhere in *La Sorcière*: is not the witches’ belladonna also a “*doux poison*?”⁸¹¹ It should be noted that the witch-craze that occurred in Northern Spain was likely enhanced by inquisitorial concerns about the heretical cult activity of those *alumbrados*.⁸¹² Moreover, their licentiousness, whether justified by their beliefs or not, might have contributed to some stereotypes of the Basque persecution.⁸¹³ Aware as he was of the early modern

⁸⁰⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.262-263.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁸⁰⁹ Mortal sin, when ordered by the Company, is even a commandment (*Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, pp.431-433).

⁸¹⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, pp.260-261.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.142.

⁸¹² E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, *op. cit.*, p.179.

⁸¹³ *Ibid.*, p.240.

Spanish persecution of the witches, Michelet perceived the link between the two – the “good” and the “bad” antinomianism, the illiterate’s and the learned’s. It should also be noted that the reference to Molinos – and to his revolting doctrine – points to another, contemporary phenomenon – that of the Saint-Simonians. Michelet had attended a Saint-Simonian ceremony in 1831. Despite his interest in the doctrine itself, and the friendship he maintained with members of the movement, he was shocked and repelled by its Catholic-like hierarchy and its conventual atmosphere. For him, *Enfantin*, like many a Socialist guru, resembled too much Molinos.⁸¹⁴ Likewise, Fourier’s *phalanstère* was nothing short of a monastery.⁸¹⁵ Both would encourage a kind of mystical and passive sensuality through which the initial rebellion against the Church could only bring about a new form of tyranny.

In *La Sorcière* Michelet mentions the poet Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, author of *Délices spirituelles*, an allusion made clearer if we read *Le prêtre, la femme et la famille*. There we learn that the Jesuits and the Quietists made an alliance *against the Jansenists*. While the Jesuits had fought for more than a century for the idea of justice and free will, against that of grace, they joined forces with the Quietists, who were proponents of self-annihilation.⁸¹⁶ Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin’s “*dévoués*,” the mortal enemies of Jansenism, saw themselves as “victims of love”⁸¹⁷ only living in God, therefore unable to err in their soul. Quoting from him, Michelet explains his doctrine as follows: “*L’âme [...], étant devenue un rien ne peut consentir ; quoi qu’elle fasse, n’ayant pas*

⁸¹⁴ P. Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes*, *op. cit.*, pp.513-514.

⁸¹⁵ P. Viallaneix, *La « Voie royale » – Essai sur l’idée de peuple dans l’œuvre de Michelet*, Paris, Delagrave, 1959, p.428.

⁸¹⁶ J. Michelet, *Le prêtre, la femme et la famille*, Paris, Chameroth, 1862, p.94.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

consenti, elle n'a pas péché. [...] S'il y a encore des troubles dans la partie inférieure, la partie supérieure n'en sait rien ; mais ces deux parties, subtilisées, raréfiées, finissent par se changer en Dieu, l'inférieure aussi bien que l'autre ; Dieu habite alors avec les mouvements de la sensualité qui sont tous sanctifiés."⁸¹⁸ The soul is annihilated in God, it therefore ignores the body, and what the body does is of no concern. However, the body itself may be ultimately redeemed by this *unio mystica* – and apparently its sinful drives as well, since Desmarets explicitly mentions “*les mouvements de la sensualité.*” Obsessed with this belief and the permissiveness it might allow for, Michelet uses almost the same words in *La Sorcière* to summarize it:

L'anéantissement de la personne et la mort de la volonté, c'est le grand principe mystique. Desmarets nous en donne très bien la vraie portée morale. Les dévoués, dit-il, immolés en eux et anéantis, n'existent plus qu'en Dieu. *Dès lors ils ne peuvent mal faire.* La partie supérieure est tellement divine, qu'elle ne sait plus ce que fait l'autre.⁸¹⁹

Elsewhere in *Le prêtre, la femme et la famille*, Michelet explicitly connects this odd theology with Molière's *Tartuffe*, yet maintaining that the famous character is not as accomplished a hypocrite as he could be, precisely because he does not speak Desmaret's language! If Molière had not been confined in so narrow a frame, if his *Tartuffe* had been able to take the cloak of Desmarets and Molinos, he might have advanced still further in his designs without being discovered.⁸²⁰ In other words, the Quietists are the real *Tartuffes*.

We have to understand the difference between this mysticism, real or simulated, and that of the witches. Both rest on the idea that sinning may bring about redemption, but they ultimately stem from completely different anthropologies, which is actually quite clear from Michelet's words themselves. Quietist rehabilitation of sin is antinomian nihilism, but is really Christian –

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.95-96.

⁸¹⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.263.

⁸²⁰ J. Michelet, *Le prêtre, la femme et la famille*, *op. cit.*, pp.108-109.

that is, according to Michelet, dualistic. Corporal sin may be practiced because the body is worthless. To be sure, Desmarets apparently believed that it would be redeemed as well, sanctified by the soul's annihilation in God – and the disconnection thus established between bodily drives and mental intentions. Remarkably enough, this part of his doctrine, italicized in *Le prêtre, la femme et la famille*, is simply absent from *La Sorcière*. Perhaps Michelet wanted to emphasize the fact that, despite the obvious “*sensualité*” of those priests, they fundamentally hated the senses.

“The great mystic principle,” in full accordance with Christianity’s rebuke of nature, posits that one should forget one’s carnal existence: we have here a kind of libertinism that grows out of contempt, not love, for the flesh. We know that already in Late Antiquity some “pneumatics” believed that, if they had reached a certain level of perfection, they could “do unabashed all the forbidden things of which Scripture assures us ‘that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.’”⁸²¹ Such radical Christians would say that “you must render the flesh to the flesh and the spirit to the spirit.”⁸²² You may therefore sin if your body demands it – provided your soul knows nothing of it. How far is such libertinism from what Michelet elsewhere calls the “redemption of the womb and the digestive organs!”⁸²³ For the witches there was nothing impure or unclean, hence they had to “sin” against those thinking otherwise. For the seventeenth-century priests – and their Late Antique models – the body was all uncleanness, hence one could sin with it provided one kept one’s spirit alien to it. Here are two opposite forms of antinomianism – the former fertile and redeeming, the latter infertile and ultimately oppressive.⁸²⁴

⁸²¹ Quoted in H. Jonas, *op. cit.*, p.271.

⁸²² *Loc. cit.*

⁸²³ See J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.145.

⁸²⁴ We saw in the previous chapter that “good” and “bad” antinomianism were not essentially different. This is also true here. Michelet is, of course, aware that the nuns’ angels resemble the witch’s little imp.

It is those considerations that lead Michelet, who quotes from Father David, a corrupt churchman involved in the Louviers case, to utter the very idea of redemption through sin. We learn indeed that at Louviers an old director, of some authority, taught that *sin could be killed by sin*.⁸²⁵ Yet, Michelet expresses nothing but disgust at the priest's bizarre doctrine. And the fact that it might bear some resemblance to his own heroic witches only makes things worse. We now understand why.

Michelet devotes an entire chapter to the possessions of Louviers, one of four cases of "ecclesiastical satanism" mentioned in *La Sorcière*. Putting aside the last one – the Cadière trial – the historian is of the opinion that the first three affairs were really one.⁸²⁶ In each case there is a libertine priest, Gauffridi in Aix-en-Provence (1610), Grandier in Loudun (1632-1634), Picart in Louviers (1633-1647); in each a jealous monk, and a sexually repressed and hysterical nun – obviously jealous as well – by whose mouth the Devil speaks and reports the priest's misdeeds; and in all three the priest gets burnt at the stake – although in Louviers it is only his corpse that was burnt since the priest himself had passed away before the trial.⁸²⁷ In each case, the jealous nun is a tool in the hands of both the organized Church and the monarchy. She is the true devil, Michelet ventures to suggest. In the beginning, those frantic women's revelations served the interests of the Church, but they were so plain ("*claires*") that at last everyone felt ashamed: they had unveiled the horrible truth about the conventual mores.⁸²⁸

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.265.

⁸²⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.266.

Antinomianism supplied in Louviers immense means of corruption, the director resorting to the “*vieilles fraudes de sorcellerie*,”⁸²⁹ the old trickeries of witchcraft, only to somehow spice his pleasures and better persuade his reluctant victim. Louviers is not about witchcraft proper, but antinomian libertinism. The corrupting priests were acting the way they did by justifying themselves in the name of piety – a bizarre piety, to be sure.

Louviers is a town in Normandy, where an Ursuline convent, similar to the Loudun convent, had been established in the early seventeenth century. Magdelaine Bavent entered it as a novice around 1622. There Father David, the confessor whom everyone deemed a saint, took charge of her. Actually, David was a self-taught Gnostic, who secretly instructed the nuns in his antinomian ways. He believed, or pretended to believe, that sin could be killed by sin itself.

Ce mauvais homme & dangereux Prestre, sous pretexe d’introduire la parfaite obeïssance, qui doit aller jusqu’aux choses plus difficiles & repugnantes à la nature, introduisoit des pratiques abominables, par lesquelles Dieu a esté extraordinairement deshonoré & offensé. Oseray-je seulement les nommer ? Il disoit, qu’il falloit faire mourir le peché par le peché, pour rentrer en innocence, & ressembler à nos premiers parents, qui estoient sans aucune honte de leur nudité devant leur premier coulpe. Et sous ce langage de pieté apparante que ne faisoit-il point commettre d’ordures & de saletez ?⁸³⁰

Outwardly severe, David was really a consummate libertine, although his libertinism was justified by his “Adamite” esoteric beliefs: he preached Adam’s innocence, meaning his “nakedness.” But first of all, he taught his female victim that she should obey him – *ac cadaver* – and that she needed to overcome her *natural* qualms: this seems to specifically allude to anal sex. The recommended obedience apparently refers to the Virgin’s obedience to Gabriel as well, thus distorting the well-known answer she gave to the Archangel – *Ecce ancilla dominus*.⁸³¹ Then

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.279.

⁸³⁰ Charles Desmarets, *Histoire de Magdelaine Bavent, religieuse du monastère de Saint Loüis de Louviers – Avec sa confession générale & testamentaire*, Paris, 1652, p.10.

⁸³¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.263.

comes the “Adamite” doctrine proper – his radical yet only apparent piety, in Desmaret’s words.

Another source Michelet used is more specific:

Ainsi discourroit ce nouveau Gnostique, protestant que le secret infallible pour arrester tous ces désordres & obtenir une glorieuse victoire, estoit de laisser voir, souffrir, & agir à la convoitise tout ce que requeroit son inquietude, pourveu que l’esprit se reposast, s’enfermast au centre de l’union abstraite avec Dieu, que le péché n’estoit pas au corps, ny aux actions corporelles, mais au discernement de la prudence humaine, & que celui qui discernoit, estoit maudit, & damné selon l’Apostre, que la pudeur des filles estoit un erreur ; qui ne sçait, disoit ce vilain, que la nudité est l’apanage de la vraye innocence, il faut donc mortifier la honte, & la crainte naturelle sans aucune exception : car pourveu que l’on ne voye point le péché, il n’y en aura pas [...].⁸³²

The aim of those practices was to redeem the girls’ bodies and souls, or rather to make them forget their carnal part, for “*le corps ne peut souiller l’âme*,” the soul cannot be defiled by what the body does.⁸³³ They had to stop respecting it in order to be redeemed, David holding that sin makes humble⁸³⁴ – a likely veiled reference to sadistic humiliations, but also to the idea that Jesus despised his own flesh so much that *he bared himself for a scourging* before all the people.⁸³⁵ Moreover, shame is a corporal feeling, born out of pride and sin – Adam and Eve feeling shameful after having eaten the forbidden fruit. Radicalizing Paul’s idea that “sin is not imputed when there is no law,” the priest asserts that there is no sin provided one does not see it. David’s point, whether he was sincere or not, is that there is and should be an absolute separation between the soul and the body. To sin with one’s body was therefore a propaedeutics to knowing God with one’s soul!

The same man had authored a bizarre and violent book against debauchery, *Le Fouet des paillards*, especially meant at rebuking the abuses that defiled the Cloister.⁸³⁶ Michelet qualifies

⁸³² Esprit du Bosroger, *La Piété affligée ou Discours Historique & Théologique de la Possession des Religieuses dites de Sainte Elizabeth de Louviers*, Rouen, Jean le Boulanger, 1652, p. 51.

⁸³³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.282.

⁸³⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁸³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁸³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.281.

David's libertine beliefs as "inner" ("*sa doctrine intérieure*"),⁸³⁷ contrasting them with the official orthodoxy of his book. Such a discrepancy between inner and outward doctrines immediately brings to mind the medieval rumors about the Templars worshipping Satan in secret, or the Sabbateans' esoteric antinomian teachings. Although the Templars were certainly innocent of the charges brought against them⁸³⁸, the "pneumatic's" need to conceal his nihilistic attitude under the cover of orthodoxy – and, ultimately, his being elect or enlightened – is really a recurring element in radical antinomianism. Michelet reacts to that kind of nihilistic antinomianism the same way, it should be said, as Scholem. Nihilism is condemned, while God's elusive presence in the world – his "nothingness" – is affirmed. God is the invisible, almost absent Pan, whose very absence suffuses the world.⁸³⁹ This allows Michelet and Scholem to praise the world against those who demean it, either through asceticism and religious rigidity, or through cynicism and libertinism.

Father David's teachings apparently repelled Magdelaine, while she could observe that her fellow nuns welcomed them. She was frightened at the depth of their depravity, especially the fact that they would indulge, at David's suggestion, in lesbian practices: "*Les religieuses, imbues de ces doctrines, les pratiquant sans bruit entre elles, effrayèrent Madeleine de leur dépravation.*"⁸⁴⁰ Father David died when Magdelaine was eighteen, without having succeeded to obtain from her what he hoped for. His successor, Picart, did. He relentlessly pursued her, spoke to her only of love at the confessional, beset her when she was sick to death, even sought to frighten her by

⁸³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.282.

⁸³⁸ See N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp.90-93.

⁸³⁹ B. Lazier, *op. cit.*, p.136.

⁸⁴⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.282.

making her believe he had received some infernal prescriptions from David.⁸⁴¹ At last, he drugged her and raped her many times, insisting they were attending the Sabbath together while she was in a hallucinatory state. Moreover, he neglected the great principle that one never gets pregnant or makes a woman pregnant at the Sabbath: Magdelaine actually gave birth several times, with the nuns arranging for the newly-born to swiftly disappear.⁸⁴²

Picart, getting old and fearing that Magdelaine might fly off some day and confess their shared sins to someone else, found a horrible way to bind her to himself.⁸⁴³ He forced her to make a will in which she promised to die with him and, beforehand, to stay with him while alive. She had become his property – a property which he did not hesitate to share with another corrupt priest and a woman during orgies, or “sabbaths” in Michelet’s words. Moreover, he would use her to gain the favors of other nuns, sometimes through magical means. A wafer soaked with her (probably menstrual) blood and buried in the garden would be used to disturb their senses.⁸⁴⁴

The rogue drove the poor girl insane. Finally, acknowledging that her visions were to be fought, the mother superior and the bishop looked for another nun to trump them. Picart had died by then, and so had Richelieu and Louis XIII. The cardinal-duke had actually wanted to bring such horrors to an end. It seems that the political elite of the time was sincerely disgusted at the Church’s excesses and licentiousness. Richelieu nevertheless did not allow any lengthy inquiry into the doings of the illuminate Confessors: had he allowed it, some strange light, Michelet asserts, would have been thrown into the depth of the cloisters.⁸⁴⁵ Had Richelieu let loose on the monks’ pack

⁸⁴¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, p.283.

⁸⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.284.

⁸⁴⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁸⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.279.

(“*meute*”), no secular priest would have escaped their fury and, ultimately, a fair trial. “*Quel directeur, quel prêtre, même honnête, n’avait usé et abusé du doux langage des quiétistes près de ses pénitentes ?*”⁸⁴⁶ Instead, Picart was tried post mortem, with Magdelaine thenceforth being twice victim. She had been horribly abused by him, now she would face the Church’s ire – the prelates meaning to get rid of both this alleged witch, a convenient scapegoat, and of the corrupt priest’s legacy.

Magdelaine’s visions and the other instances of demoniac possessions at Louviers had not really begun until Picart’s passing. Then, several nuns declared themselves to be possessed by devils sent them by Magdelaine and her lover’s unclean spirit. Now came Anne de la Nativité. She was the main accuser, and the bishop’s pawn. She would throw insults and terrible accusations in Magdelaine’s face. Of course, her own devil (Leviathan!) was perfectly “*ecclésiastique*,” and would only say what the bishop of Evreux wanted him to. Picart was exhumed, and Magdelaine questioned at Anne’s suggestion. The latter even had Magdelaine’s body examined for the mark of the Devil. Her veil and gown were torn off, and the nuns – acting as matrons, Michelet sarcastically adds – ascertained whether she was pregnant or not, shaved her entire body, and dug their cruel needles into her flesh in order to find an insensible spot. As the common belief held, it would have betrayed the mark of the Devil. Every dig, however, made Magdelaine suffer: they knew she was not a witch, which probably dissatisfied them, but at least those Sadean virgins could revel in her tears.⁸⁴⁷ Magdelaine was finally confined to a dungeon as Sadean as the hysterical nuns, a pit below a cave, filled with darkness, where she would crawl in her own faeces, with

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.264.

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.285-286.

voracious rats for company.⁸⁴⁸ Despite her filth, the guards would often rape her, while she would herself dream of the Devil, imploring him to come and give her back the pleasures in which she had indulged with Picart. In a word, Michelet writes, she became a woman again – but a depraved one, for prison corrupts the soul, “*la prison déprave l’esprit.*”⁸⁴⁹ Magdelaine Bavent was finally used the way Anne de la Nativité had been: the priests would sometimes pull her out of her *in pace*, using her for purposes other than the guards did (or the late Picart), but no less horrendous. She had been the victim of a libertine priest, then the scapegoat of the whole institution: from that point on, she could bear false witness, and thus become a tool for any slander. They had only to drag her down to Evreux. She was a ghost of a woman, living only to make others die at the stake.⁸⁵⁰

The Bavent case is presented as the epitome of elite antinomianism. A priest who outwardly displays all the stringencies of the Church, sports with an innocent nun, exploiting her as it pleases him. Satan has really turned priest, meaning that he is now really detestable. While he was once a redeeming god, he is now the ugly face of oppression. That the predecessor of Picart performed such sinful deeds in order to find redemption – or that he pretended to aim at redemption through sin – is actually remarkable. His words not only mirror, in a distorted way, the teachings of the Church, they also, and more critically, warp the witches’ rituals and beliefs.

In the footnote where he first addresses David’s antinomian credo, Michelet asserts that it was prevalent at the time among the convents of France and Spain. As already said, it was, in his words, the conventual equivalent of the Jesuits’ casuistry. He is, of course, aware, that this doctrine

⁸⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.289-290.

⁸⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.290-291.

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.291.

is an old one, even suggesting that it “turned up again in the Middle Ages.”⁸⁵¹ His main source for the Louviers Affair, *La Piété affligée*, displays a relatively good knowledge of the history of Gnosticism, mostly grounded in canonical literature. And while Esprit du Bosroger equates David and Picart with Late Antique Gnostics, but he describes such heresies as stemming from witchcraft itself.

On ne lit qu’avec horreur ce que les Auteurs raportent de l’heresie des vilains Nicolaites, des sales Adamites, & particulièrement de celles des ignorans Gnostiques les plus monstrueux de tous, engendrez de l’egout & cloaque des Magiciens Carpotras, & Basilides : Nous ne parlerons pas de toutes ces ordures qui sont filles de la Magie, & de la brutalité [...].⁸⁵²

“*Magie*” and “*brutalité*,” meaning a certain, excessive proximity to nature and animal life, point to the realm of the witches – Pan’s world. Under Michelet’s pen, both words could have had a positive meaning or at least found a convenient substitute. We know, however, that Michelet is himself less than approving of the conventual libertinism du Bosroger denounces. Their magic is not redeeming, their “*brutalité*” is pure abuse. The difference between the friar and the historian is mostly that the former refuses any form of magic and “*brutalité*,” deeming Gnosticism the worst of all, whereas the latter deems modern Gnosticism, at least in its conventual form, to be a misappropriation of the witches’ wholesome antinomianism. As will be shown, Michelet’s own appraisal of “Gnosticism” much anticipates Scholem’s: he is at times sympathetic to it, but he never ignores the destructive potential of those doctrines.

While he makes use of its content, the historian utterly disparages the book itself: “*La Piété affligée, du capucin Esprit de Bosroger, est un livre immortel dans les annales de la bêtise humaine. [...] Je me suis gardé de copier les libertés amoureuses que l’ange Gabriel y prend avec*

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁸⁵² E. du Bosroger, *op. cit.*, p.41.

la Vierge, ses baisers de colombe, etc.”⁸⁵³ Might any reader of *La Sorcière*’s first part not reply that Michelet is the pot calling the kettle black?⁸⁵⁴ After all, Gabriel is as good as Satan, by whom Michelet’s little witch is literally *possessed!* Unless there is a radical difference between poetic, folkloric inspired fancy on the one hand, and unwholesome, theological babbling on the other? Between a dream about the awesome “god of Nature” by whose “intercourse” the oppressed woman could regain possession of her own body and soul, and a virginal, puritanical frenzy? Things happen as if the Christian, learned form of the helping spirit was detestable, while Michelet could only approve of it when it comes under the guise of a pre-Christian fairy, of an imp, or a little “devil.” Greedigut is preferable, and somehow more “real” than the Angel Gabriel.⁸⁵⁵

At any rate, this underscores the hidden unity behind the priests’ religion and the witches’. It should be noted that the ceremony of exorcism is, at times, redolent of the sabbath – as if the two were mirroring and inverting each other. When Madeleine de Demandolx, the victim of the Gauffridi Affair, is led into a charnel-house in the bishop’s palace, they exorcise her by putting the bones found there to her face. She then gives herself up to their will and pleasure.⁸⁵⁶ The limit between Christianity and witchcraft is not only blurred by the priests’ “gnosticism,” but also obscured in another manner. Those in charge of combatting the corruption of the Church themselves emulate the worshippers of Satan. The same could be said of the stake itself, since Michelet describes it as a “beautiful derivative” and an excellent “popular weapon to subdue the people itself” at a time when revolt was seething in Europe. Its fire would save the elite from the

⁸⁵³ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.280.

⁸⁵⁴ Or any reader of his *Jeanne d’Arc*, where it says that, after the handsome Archangel Michael had left her, Joan cried and wished the angels had ravished her (*Jeanne d’Arc, op. cit.*, p.14).

⁸⁵⁵ See E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits, op. cit.*, pp.218-242.

⁸⁵⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.254.

“invisible lake of fire” imperilling the princes.⁸⁵⁷ The homeopathic principle – that of the witches – is now applied by the political and religious elite.⁸⁵⁸ Exorcism and the stake are, in their own way, magic ceremonies – the evil twins of the sabbath.

Although du Bosroger aims at rebuking those “Gnostics” responsible for the Louviers disaster, Michelet, who certainly disapproves of the latter’s libertinism as much as the former’s priggishness, ultimately lumps them together. Both fundamentally detest the body, with du Bosroger and the orthodox deriving from this hatred an ascetic way of life, while David and Picart use it to justify sexual nihilism. We might, at first, wonder whether Michelet is fair to either the Gnostics or their foe, du Bosroger, when he qualifies the Capuchin’s book as “a work immortal in the annals of human stupidity.” The examples he gives pertain more to the heretics’ ravings, rather than to the friar’s orthodox doctrine itself, and yet we cannot possibly admit that he has suddenly reverted to Catholic orthodoxy! Why, then, does he mercilessly disparage the book itself? The answer lies precisely in the nature of those heretics’ doctrine, and the fact that it traces back to the same Christian rebuke of the flesh as the friar’s. Du Bosroger and Father David look very much the same after all, and both doctrines attest that Satan is now “*ecclésiastique*,” whether he is used – as was the Ophites’ serpent⁸⁵⁹ – by degenerate, libertine churchmen, or given extraordinary features straight from the imagination of obsessive priests.

V. 5. The Cadière Trial

⁸⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.199.

⁸⁵⁸ P. Petitier, *op. cit.*, p.230.

⁸⁵⁹ See E. du Bosroger, *op. cit.*, p.45.

Ultimately, the seventeenth-century illuminate's antinomianism would become utter *tartufferie*. If we give David, Picart and their like the benefit of the doubt regarding the sincerity of their bizarre piety – which Michelet does not seem to question – we nevertheless must acknowledge that the nihilistic potential of their attitude and beliefs bears on what would occur during the following century, namely the complete disintegration of the faith. Why did Michelet devote almost half of his book's second part to the 1730 Cadière Affair – while the chapter on the *Malleus* hardly boasts of a dozen of pages? Catherine Cadière was not a witch, but her story brings the witches' era to a close. It is not until then that one can write that “*la Sorcière a péri pour toujours.*”⁸⁶⁰ She embodies the end of a process initiated by Charles VI's mysterious “*sabbat royal*,” by which the witches were at once persecuted and robbed of their cultural practices. For Michelet, the modern witch is but a parody of the old one. Not only that, but her martyrdom also makes clear that, once stripped of its *raison d'être* – the rebels' communion – antinomianism is but a detestable avatar of chaos.

For Michelet, the Cadière Affair, which is the sordid epilogue of the witches' history, is to be understood against the rivalry, then particularly violent, between the Jesuits and the Jansenists. The Jesuits “ruled the Court,” but the Jansenists, especially after Deacon Pâris' death and posthumous miracles at Saint-Médard, had the people's hearts, for the Jesuits could not even do one tiny miracle!⁸⁶¹ For a moment they believed Catherine Cadière to be useful, then they had to defend Father Girard (a Jesuit himself and a libertine) against her, then describe her as a witch.

The story took place in Toulon, where Michelet was himself to finish writing *La Sorcière* one hundred and thirty years later. The main protagonist was Father Girard, who had been abusing

⁸⁶⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.390.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.302.

the young Catherine Cadière, among others, for months, and had made her pregnant. We learn that he eventually secured her an abortion.⁸⁶² In the beginning, he had used the same rhetoric as David's, demanding that she should obey him: "*Je suis votre maître, votre Dieu... Vous devez tout souffrir au nom de l'obéissance.*"⁸⁶³ Then, after having only fondled her for weeks while persuading her it was for the good of religion, the last barrier of reserve was broken down. Michelet observes that Cadière complained about the pain she had experienced, which the Jesuit appears to have explained as a necessary step to purification and sanctity. Interestingly enough, we do not detect here any mystical justification, as in the Louviers case: Girard was an accomplished scoundrel, exploiting religion and abusing a naïve girl, whom he did not even bother to convince or enlighten. Michelet notes that Cadière did not understand what was going on in her sleep.⁸⁶⁴ David, and then Picart, had disclosed their intentions to Magdelaine, and whether they were sincerely "Gnostic" or not is another matter; to the contrary, Girard insisted that Catherine obey him *without explicitly telling her they were having sexual intercourse*.

It is interesting to observe that, in *Thérèse philosophe*, the licentious book on the Cadière Affair which Michelet reads against the grain, Father Girard speaks the language of piety and religious patience. While he is sadistically torturing his naïve victim, he pretends to teach her how to bear pain as a true saint. Of course, he does not let her know that he is at the same time raping her. He whips her, making her believe that it is a mere chastisement of her guilty flesh so she can reach a superior spiritual state. At the same time, the Jesuit possesses his victim *a tergo*, so she cannot see the true nature of the "relic" he claims to use. This brings her to orgasm – which she

⁸⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.

⁸⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.321.

⁸⁶⁴ *Loc. cit.*

believes to be the mystical “*bonheur céleste*” that was promised to her.⁸⁶⁵ The Jesuit’s rhetoric is purely manipulative. It seems that Father David pretended, at the very least, to ground his debauchery in a theological system. Girard just lies and dissembles. At first sight, however, both doctrines may look alike:

Dès que nous touchons, que nous entendons, que nous voyons, etc., un objet, des particules d’esprit se coulent dans les petites cavités des nerfs qui vont en avertir l’âme. Si vous avez assez de ferveur pour rassembler, par la force de la méditation sur l’amour que vous devez à Dieu, toutes les particules d’esprit qui sont en vous, en les appliquant toutes à cet objet, il est certain qu’il n’en restera aucune pour avertir l’âme des coups que votre chair recevra : vous ne les sentirez pas.⁸⁶⁶

Does not this bizarre combination of Cartesian physics and Christian spirituality bear some resemblance to Father David’s idea that “*le corps ne peut souiller l’âme?*” Let us wager that Michelet was struck by those words, so redolent of other Christian rogues’ perverse rhetoric. While Gnostic on the surface, since it proclaims the alien character of the mind, never does Girard reveal his true intentions to his victim. He wants her to be completely passive and ignorant. He does not so much conquer her as he treacherously surprises her.⁸⁶⁷ A victim she is, not a spiritual partner, *and not even a sexual one*. Michelet takes on this idea but goes further, ascribing his Cadière more complexity: we indeed learn that she was to give indications of independence. Michelet thus gets rid of eighteenth-century derision. He wants his Cadière at least to try to make use of her female power.

But before he gets to it, the historian writes that Girard not only sexually abused the poor girl, but also took advantage of scrofulous scabs she had on her skin, having suffered from “*écrouelles*” years before. He formed a devilish (“*diabolique*”) plan of renewing the wounds in

⁸⁶⁵ *Thérèse philosophe, avec figures*, London, 1782, I, p.37.

⁸⁶⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.28.

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.330.

order to pass them off as stigmata. In other words, he would save his skin – Catherine’s brother having become suspicious – by pleasing the Jesuits who had desperately waited for a miracle performed by one of them.⁸⁶⁸ Again in a sadistic vein, Michelet wallows in horrendous details that implicitly equate Girard with an ancient wizard or witch – as we know such people made it a point of honor not to be disgusted at the human body. The Jesuit was eventually described as a sorcerer, which one might well believe, given how easily he had charmed so many women while being neither young nor handsome!⁸⁶⁹

Pour faire ces plaies, comment le cruel s’y prit-il ? Enfonça-t-il les ongles ! usa-t-il d’un petit couteau, que toujours il portait sur lui ? Ou bien attira-t-il le sang la première fois, comme il le fit plus tard, par une forte succion ? Elle n’avait pas sa connaissance, mais bien sa sensibilité ; nul doute qu’à travers le sommeil, elle n’ait senti la douleur.⁸⁷⁰

Girard’s “love” is a vampiric one, literally. At this point, his victim is as passive as the character of *Thérèse philosophe* – even more so, since she sleeps when he has sex with her, and has no consciousness when he applies himself to renewing her wounds. As for Girard, he is *devilish*, a real Satan turned priest. Of course not the Satan whom the medieval downtrodden would have implored, not “the one who has been wronged,” but a Jesuit Devil, Satan as the Church sees him.

Progressively, Michelet writes, Catherine becomes *proud*. Half understanding what is really happening – but not her pregnancy – *she is the one who justifies it out of antinomian beliefs*, which Girard does not. It seems that she does not even need anyone’s rhetoric, since she has delightful visions instead. Her pride, raised by her new physical sensations, enables her to grasp

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.322.

⁸⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.328.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.323.

the special sway enjoyed by Mary, the Woman, over God himself.⁸⁷¹ Of course, if we read a passage like this while keeping in mind the rest of the book, we realize that Catherine mirrors the ancient witch, whom Michelet has compared to the Virgin: by herself, he suggested in his Introduction, she conceives a son, Satan.⁸⁷² A Satan who is both the real Christ and Pan, the universal god of nature, and who, as such, has himself impregnated her (“*Elle en reçoit le souffle, l’âme, la vie, la fécondation simulée*”).⁸⁷³ Just as God is Mary’s creator, as well as her spouse and son, Satan – or the god of nature – is the witch’s creator.⁸⁷⁴ Witchcraft was thus unveiling, as already said, Christianity’s share of truth – that the woman is the Savior. By appropriating this wholesome blasphemy, Catherine also brings it back within the framework of Christianity, thus making it, in Michelet’s eyes, detestable.

Her antinomianism is twofold. First of all, she mistakes herself for a new Virgin, which is particularly ironic given the circumstances; secondly, she mistakes herself for the Lamb – for a victim whose virtue and eternal salvation, if not its life, needs to be offered on the altar so that others might be saved instead.⁸⁷⁵ At this point, she is certainly aware of her sinful state, but she justifies it by her godlike status – not knowing how exploited she really is.

Sans humilier Girard, elle lui dit qu’elle avait la vision d’une âme tourmentée d’impureté et de péché mortel, qu’elle se sentait le besoin de sauver cette âme, d’offrir au diable victime pour victime, d’accepter l’obsession et de se livrer à sa place. Il ne le lui défendit pas, lui permit d’être *obsédée*, mais pour un an seulement (novembre 1729). [...]

Elle voyait le mépris où les jésuites (qu’elle croyait le soutien de l’Église) ne pouvaient manquer de tomber. Elle dit un jour à Girard : « J’ai eu une vision : une mer sombre, un vaisseau plein d’âmes, battu de l’orage des pensées impures, et sur le vaisseau deux Jésuites.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.324.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.167.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.133.

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.325.

J'ai dit au Rédempteur que je voyais au ciel : « Seigneur ! sauvez-les, noyez-moi... Je prends sur moi tout le naufrage. » Et le bon Dieu me l'accorda. » [...]

Elle s'était dévouée. À quoi ? sans doute à la damnation. Voudra-t-on dire que, par orgueil, se croyant impassible et morte, elle défiait l'impureté que le démon infligeait à l'homme de Dieu.⁸⁷⁶

Michelet is of the opinion that, in the beginning, she did not experience any pleasure from her intercourses with Girard. Then a real frenzy took possession of her. She would meet him in the church, where they would make love before the altar and the cross. For her, it must have been the expression of her will to secure redemption for the others – through sin and damnation for herself – with Girard's sadistic abuse merging with Christ's cruel favors, the stigmata. It is there, at the altar, that she finally experiences orgasm : “*Heureuse de ces défaillances, elle y trouvait, disait-elle, des peines d'infinie douceur et je ne sais quel flot de la Grâce [...]*”⁸⁷⁷ For him, the sacrilege just made his passion all the fiercer.⁸⁷⁸ Girard – at least Michelet's Girard – here appears to be another Dolmancé, who curses God although he does not believe in his existence.⁸⁷⁹ The reason why one might curse God (“*jurer Dieu*”) if one does not believe in him lies in the power conveyed by divine and religious images. Girard is a pure eighteenth-century man, a casual esthete, not a mystic – not even a mystic of sin, like his seventeenth-century counterparts, Father David and Father Picart.

At some point, Catherine became very unsettled and showed tokens of rebellion. She wanted God only, refused to be the passive victim of the Spirit (holy or unholy) who possessed her. Girard then realized he had no hold upon her at all.⁸⁸⁰ To regain his lost power, he resorted to

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.318-319.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.325.

⁸⁷⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁸⁷⁹ See D. A. F. de Sade, *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, in *Œuvres, op. cit.*, III, p.57.

⁸⁸⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.330.

humiliation and brutality. In a passage censored in the Hetzel-Dentu edition⁸⁸¹ Michelet continues by narrating what happened then. His retelling mostly relies on the three depositions Catherine Cadière made at the tribunal and bears some resemblance to the *Thérèse philosophe* passage discussed above. Actually, most of the shocking material of this story remains allusive, although not allusive enough for Michelet's nineteenth-century audience.

Girard stripped Catherine naked, told her she deserved to be thus humiliated, not on his bed but in the street instead, in front of everyone. He put her on all fours, arranged cushions under her elbows. No love was involved there, Michelet exclaims, but pure hatred. A true Sade hero, Girard only wants to subjugate Catherine as a victim, and he offers her as a sacrifice: "*Mais surtout il ne lui pardonnait pas de garder une âme. Il ne voulait que la dompter, mais accueillait avec espoir le mot qu'elle disait souvent : « Je le sens, je ne vivrai pas. » Libertinage scélérat ! Il donnait de honteux baisers à ce pauvre corps brisé qu'il eût voulu voir mourir !*"⁸⁸² He finally brings her to orgasm ("elle sentit [...] « certaine divine douceur »"⁸⁸³), then might anally rape her: "*il l'étreignit et lui fit une douleur toute nouvelle qu'elle n'avait jamais éprouvée.*" How did he justify to her, Michelet wonders, this shocking combination of cruelty and caresses? Did he resort to Molinos' doctrine, to Quietism? Did he play the antinomian card, finally teaching Catherine that it was only by sinning that one could quell and overcome sin? Michelet does not know. Finally, the poor girl was put into a convent, a convenient way to get rid of the "saint" she had become in public opinion.

The abbess of the Ollioules convent was happy to receive her, immediately seeing the advantage she could draw from the young ecstatic. She did not, however, content herself with a

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp.332-333.

⁸⁸² *Ibid.*, p.333.

⁸⁸³ *Loc. cit.*

political use of Catherine Cadière. Confessing her (as a disciple of St. Theresa, Michelet suggests, would deem appropriate), and demanding that she keep only for her those secrets she would not disclose to male confessors, she initiated a Lesbian relationship, very much redolent, this time, of Diderot's *La Religieuse*. Fondled at night by the abbess, her head on the pillow, Cadière would have let out many a secret. When she realized things had gone too far, she humbly asked to leave that "*lit de colombes*," which the abbess was never to forgive.⁸⁸⁴ The worst is that, as she finally remained at the convent, Catherine seemed to neglect her benefactor while paying the other members nocturnal visits. Together, they would unite within Jesus' Sacred Heart. However, the young girl once revealed she had had divine communications about the mores of her sisters. Once again, she imagined herself bound to atone for them by draining the worst cruelties which the devils could wreak.⁸⁸⁵ She had painful convulsions, hysterically calling for Girard to take care of her again. She renewed her wounds by herself, half believing in their authenticity, half trying to appeal to Girard through them. He came, but bore her a grudge. He wished she had remained a slave, a dead person. His tyrannous soul, Michelet insists, wanted nothing but a dead victim.⁸⁸⁶

The sight of her blood nevertheless gave him another "devilish" idea. He asked that she bleed for him as she had done for the nuns. She complied, and they drank together the water with which he had washed her wounds: he thought to bind her soul by this hateful communion.⁸⁸⁷ It should be reminded that Michelet connects the bizarre ritual to the communion of blood that had prevailed among the German *Reiter*. He does not make directly reference, however, to his own

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.336-338.

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.339.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.344.

⁸⁸⁷ *Loc. cit.*

tale of black mass – with the serfs drinking of each other’s blood at the Sabbath, when the blood of the people was, literally, the great sacrament of rebellion.⁸⁸⁸ Girard’s ritual and the serfs’ are similar but the difference is blatant. The serfs were brothers and sisters, whereas Catherine is only slave to Girard, who drinks from her blood but does not give his. This horrific, yet short scene, somehow sums up what we already said about elite antinomianism as misappropriating the “sacraments” of the rebels’ communion – serfs and witches.

Catherine’s brothers had set out to ruin Girard. Knowing that coming down too hard on Girard as the libertine confessor he was would be bad strategy, as offence would thereby be given to all clergy, who deemed confession their territory, they decided to play the Quietist card. After all, had not a vicar from Dijon been burnt for Quietism in 1698? Girard would be described as another Father David, a Gnostic rather than a (libertine) Jesuit.⁸⁸⁹ They devised the idea of drawing up a memoir, supposedly dictated by Catherine herself and full of her divine visions, in which Girard’s Quietism would be affirmed and praised. It came to the bishop’s attention, and the Jesuit believed himself to be lost.

He wrote to Catherine, asking that she support him and provide his papers. Once again, she complied. She was the Lamb, she had to sin on the behalf of the others, yet also to suffer for them. I have lied, she said to those who accused Girard in front of her. Now, the scoundrel was triumphant. Fortunately, the bishop had taken a real interest in the affair, and had Catherine taken away from Ollioules and from Girard. She was handed over to her family and a new confessor, to whom she told her story. The confessor, and then the bishop himself, were horrified. They wanted

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.160.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.350.

to bring Girard, whom they deemed a real wizard⁸⁹⁰, to ruin and disgrace. Catherine understood how sinful their relationship had been but she still refused to be avenged. Moreover, Girard and his Jesuit friends, as well as his flock, were maneuvering undercover, especially by insisting that the bishop's "abominable life" would be revealed if he did not comply. He finally did, becoming, as Michelet sarcastically puts it, a convert to the Jesuits.⁸⁹¹

In the meantime, the "good people" of Toulon were taking sides with Catherine Cadière and her brother. They claimed the poor girl, who suffered from "suffocation of the womb," had been bewitched by Girard,⁸⁹² and the crowd became outraged by the Jesuit's cruelties and debauchery. Some of his fellow Jesuits then conceived of a way to save him. They insisted that Catherine be brought to trial, presenting her as a new "Messalina" and the one who had really *bewitched* poor Father Girard.⁸⁹³ The bishop and the judges complied. The episcopal judge asked Catherine if it was true that she had divined the secrets of many people. She answered in the affirmative and might therefore have been charged with witchcraft, as this alone warranted the stake. They were still burning (or hanging) witches in the eighteenth century, in Spain, in Switzerland, in Germany, in the British Isles. Michelet maintains that France was very inconsistent, at times showing more mercy than its neighbors, at times burning wizards for offences which passed as jokes in Versailles. Cadière was finally not sentenced to be burnt, but a death sentence was anyway arranged.⁸⁹⁴ The devil-priest Girard had apparently succeeded in

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.355.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.358-359.

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*, p.361.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.363.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.379-381.

destroying his victim, now passing her off as a heretic and rebel. Girard was the real “decadent witch” – in Michelet’s words – and Catherine nothing but a sordid mimic of real witches.

Toulon was at the point of rising up against the Jesuits. The crowd wanted to burn Girard. Ladies of distinction such as Madame de Sévigné’s granddaughter, Madame de Simiane, defended the young girl against her enemies. In this unique atmosphere austere Jansenist ladies offered up the Law, Michelet writes, on the altar of Grace – “*immolèrent la Loi à la Grâce.*”⁸⁹⁵ As we know that, for him the original sin of Christianity lies precisely in the notion of grace, and that the Revolution was to be the return of Law, this note is quite remarkable. It seems though the evil brought about by Christianity needed to be fought by its own weapons, at least until a true Revolution. Catherine Cadière was finally released, while Girard was to die a few years later “*en odeur de sainteté.*”⁸⁹⁶

In this chapter, we studied Michelet’s critique of antinomianism. Although we said that *La Sorcière* rehabilitates witches by describing their “cult” as an attempt at redemption through sin, we must not lose sight of the fact that Michelet does not give a blank check to all antinomian behaviors. Rather, he imagines an ideal “communion of the rebels,” a “*communion de révolte*” which would have both reenacted ancient paganism and reversed the rites of Catholicism in order to empower the downtrodden. This accomplishes redemption through sin, and is the kind of antinomianism which Michelet extols. He is, however, perfectly aware of the danger inherent in it, and that what he refers to as the decline of witchcraft is merely its appropriation by the political and ecclesiastical elite. Additionally, we saw in a previous chapter that Michelet was by no means

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.382.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.384.

unaware of the criminal nature of witchcraft, somehow implying that the revengeful witch was not so different from the cruel “Bluebeard” who had assailed her. Both belong to the murky realm of Pan. This, as well as the late decadence of witchcraft, point to the ironic nature of *La Sorcière* – a book whose hero does not overcome definitely the evil she has brought about. It is a path to good, yet also a dark forest where one could get lost. From the moment when Satan “turns priest” onward, the mysticism of sin became a tool of oppression, leading the true rebels to devise other forms of struggle. Incidentally, this aspect of our study may have caused us to discover the joint that connects *La Sorcière*’s two parts. For all their difference in tone and genre, they could indeed be connected by the dialectic of redemption through sin – first a mythic communion of the rebels, then, more historically, a tool of oppression. The exit of *La Sorcière* from the realm of legends and myths – although ushered in by a last one, Charles VI’s royal sabbath – is matched by a switch from praise of antinomianism to its critique.

Chapter Seven

The Awesome Oath by Which One Dies

The encounter between the witch and the Jew is generally overlooked. It is nonetheless essential to an understanding of *La Sorcière*. The encounter marries the event with a reassessment of the value of knowledge, while at the same time hinting at Michelet's "secret" theology. We have been wondering from the outset as to the real identity of that God of the witches, killed by Christianity, yet resurrected and worshipped at the sabbath. Who was he? The "awesome oath by which one dies" might provide us an explanation.

VII. 1. Redemption of Gold

One morning, the witch walks straight to the door of a Jew.⁸⁹⁷ We are in 1300, under the reign of King Philip the Fair whom one deemed "of gold or iron,"⁸⁹⁸ the monarch soon to humiliate the Pope at the hands of Guillaume de Nogaret, expel the Jews, and charge the Templars with heresy. Gold is everywhere, yet always lacking. Over the centuries, the witch has ascended. She was a peasant, secretly loyal to the gods of her ancestors – in the guise of the little goblin who was growing so imperious. Not yet Satan, but Pan no longer... Then, she became a serf. As a woman, she was doubly oppressed, savagely violated as she was, again and again. However, times have changed. Her husband is a respected farmer, or soon to become so. Thanks to her consorting with the fairies, the couple is prosperous, and the lord is grateful that he pays his taxes in advance – so

⁸⁹⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.104.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.93.

much so that he appoints him overseer over his house.⁸⁹⁹ She perceives the scorn of the castle, of the lady especially, and the trembling hate of those below.⁹⁰⁰ She is no more a pauper, but nor she belong to the aristocracy. Plump and comely as she is, she walks with her head upright, merciless in her contempt.⁹⁰¹ For she thinks to herself: “I ought to be there in the castle, in the stead of that shameless lady!” Their rivalry is now set on foot. And the village is equal parts proud and resentful of her.

That age, Michelet insists, was cruel, due to lust for gold, yet also to the Church’s oppression, both ultimately being connected within the Christian rebuke of the flesh. Grace had utterly triumphed over justice, with the poor little children from their earliest years fearing eternal damnation.⁹⁰² Lust torments the virgin and the unhappy wife, with both believing they will burn in Hell. The Foolish Virgins of Strasbourg Cathedral are not only lured by the Devil, they are blown out by him, physically possessed. Satan, however, has not vanquished yet. The pact shall be signed, but she is still fighting against his grip. However, she no longer belongs to the Christian God.

The lord wanted more money. He is no longer paid in wheat or *corvée*. Money has become everything and the king is marching toward Flanders. He asks his overseer to give him a hundred pounds. When the latter answers him that he cannot find them, the answer is: “You may sack the whole village, but I need them.”⁹⁰³ The peasant could not sleep, and his wife was sorry to have

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.95.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.96.

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.102.

sent the imp away. She summons him, but she still refuses to forsake her soul. The Jew will help her instead.

“*Le premier mot était vert.*”⁹⁰⁴ This is the color of the Devil and the fairies, and she sees it everywhere – a sign that she already belongs to the demonic world. Michelet grows cryptic here, but we may infer from this passage that the green gown she finds hanging at a shopkeeper’s door is an omen. She goes to see the Jew, thinking she may thereby escape the grip of the fiend who torments her. But the former is but an agent of her eventual meeting with the latter – who, in the meantime, will have grown to be Satan, not only a fiend or an imp, a zombified or dwarfified Pan, but Pan resurrected and overawing.

She hits the door, which the Jew cautiously opens.

« Mon cher, il me faut cent livres ! — Ah ! madame, comment le pourrais-je ? Le prince-évêque de la ville, pour me faire dire où est mon or, m’a fait arracher les dents... Voyez ma bouche sanglante... — Je sais, je sais. Mais je viens chercher justement chez toi de quoi détruire ton évêque. Quand on soufflète le pape, l’évêque ne tiendra guère. Qui dit cela ? C’est *Tolède.* »

Il avait la tête basse. Elle dit, et elle souffla... Elle avait une âme entière, et le diable par-dessus. Une chaleur extraordinaire remplit la chambre. Lui-même sentit une fontaine de feu. « Madame, dit-il, madame, en la regardant en dessous, pauvre, ruiné comme je suis, j’avais quelques sous en réserve pour nourrir mes pauvres, enfants. — Tu ne t’en repentiras pas, juif... Je vais te faire le grand serment dont on meurt... Ce que tu vas me donner, tu le recevras dans huit jours et de bonne heure, et le matin... Je t’en jure et ton grand serment, et le mien plus grand : *Tolède.* »⁹⁰⁵

The moneylender shall give her the money she needs. He protests he cannot possibly do so, since the bishop has stolen all his gold. To have him reveal where it was hidden, he had all his teeth torn out. In a footnote, Michelet writes that this was a common way of extracting resources from Jews, with John Lackland often exerting it. In fact, the story has it that he did it once in 1210

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.104-105.

“at Bristol.”⁹⁰⁶ Michelet’s Jew is every Jew, just like the Witch is every witch. Incidentally, the switch from fourteenth-century France to thirteenth-century England, and from Philip the Fair to John Lackland, is a Freudian slip of sorts. If it was not clear already, the source of this passage is thereby evinced. We may indeed find it in *Ivanhoe*, and this Jew is one among many literary avatars of Isaac of York. Another source might be *La Juive*, Halévy’s opera. There the rival of Eléazar the Jew is also a prelate, Cardinal Brogni. In any case, this is fiction more so than history, or history qua fiction.

The Jew hesitates, but the witch tells him he will not regret the help provided. She swears him the great oath by which one dies, the oath of Toledo. Or rather it is Toledo that speaks through her mouth. The sentence is again strange, and we can only infer from its silences what Michelet really means. The Jew accepts, and finds the money she needs. They go into partnership, and the Jew has grown so generous (“*par un miracle du Diable*”) as to lend her money at any signal, so she may herself, in her turn, maintain the castle.⁹⁰⁷

In the same way as Michelet reads Eusebius and early modern demonologists themselves, he does so here with all the medieval authors who saw the Jew as the Devil’s creature. The former was no less the enemy of Christ than the latter, and Christian lore soon established a relation between the two. Theophilus, for instance, resorts to a Jew who calls Satan his master and his companion, and is the one responsible for delivering him into the Devil’s hands. As a character from *The Merchant of Venice* puts it, “Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnal.” And in *Réforme*, Michelet repeats the anxious questions asked by good Christians on witnessing, along with the Ottomans’ invasions, the arrival of the Jewish exiles from Spain: Do they belong to God

⁹⁰⁶ Kate Norgate, *John Lackland*, London, Macmillan, 1902, p.137.

⁹⁰⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.105.

or Satan? To the latter, certainly. In fact, they are themselves devils in the guise of humans.⁹⁰⁸ Does not the legend mention that the Antichrist will be born of a Jewess and an incubus?

Usury was seen as typically satanic, with artists, as late as the seventeenth century, depicting Satan as an actual participant in Jewish financial operations.⁹⁰⁹ The usurer was deemed a robber of time, therefore of God himself.⁹¹⁰ Usurers, especially the non-Jewish ones, were described as belonging to the same category as Luciferians and Albigenses. Once again, Michelet turns a Catholic belief upside down. Yes, the Jew is demonic, but his very demonism is redeeming.

Different characteristics unite the witch and the Jew in the text, notably their melancholy. The witch is described as “burdened with” this sentiment, which one may misread as a mere Byronian trait.⁹¹¹ Incidentally, the Devil is also full of “melancholic pride.”⁹¹² Melancholy was seen as a typically Jewish trait, described as such in a variety of literary works, at times in relation with wealth, or the burden of the Law, the letter that *kills*.⁹¹³ It should be noted that, in medieval culture, the planet Saturn was viewed as the “Jews’ planet” as well as the witches’, with melancholy deriving from its sinister influence.⁹¹⁴ This is a demonic possession of sorts, with the witch being literally invaded by the Devil: “*la femme qui commençait à être envahie de lui errait*

⁹⁰⁸ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.2.

⁹⁰⁹ Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews – The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983, pp.192-195.

⁹¹⁰ Jacques Le Goff, *La Bourse et la vie – Economie et religion au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Hachette, 1997, p.42.

⁹¹¹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.100.

⁹¹² *Ibid.*, p.166.

⁹¹³ See David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism – The Western Tradition*, New York, Norton, 2013, pp.269-299.

⁹¹⁴ See Moshe Idel, *Saturn’s Jews*, *op. cit.*

accablée de mélancolie.” The encounter with the Jew, narrated soon after this passage, is thus placed under the ominous, and melancholic sign of Saturn.

The mention of Toledo, which we will explain, makes it clear that Michelet takes the kinship of the Jew and the witch for something deeper than mere slander or opportunism. The witch is a merchant, and it appears that the Jew is, in many respects, himself “full of sorcery.”⁹¹⁵ Michelet explicitly wrote it in *Histoire de France*: “*Au moyen âge, celui qui sait où est l’or, le véritable alchimiste, le vrai sorcier, c’est le juif.*”⁹¹⁶ Although his views have changed in *La Sorcière*, this theme may still pervade it, with the Devil being, in his turn, the prince of hidden treasures.⁹¹⁷ Both the Jew and the witch deal with money and diseases, curing or (in popular imagination) perpetuating them. Liquid capital appeared to be Jewish. That such a group was also believed to traffic in blood is therefore not surprising. In modern economics money circulates, just as blood does in modern medicine.⁹¹⁸ The association between the Jew and the witch, in *La Sorcière*, also becomes clearer. He invigorates the economy by liberating its blood, once concentrated into the hands of the feudal lord and the Pope. She helps him in that task, but she also redeems physical blood from its imprisonment. She cures indeed the torturing heat of a blood inflamed and soured.⁹¹⁹ She cures leprosy, a disease born from the corruption of the blood, and she gives back to blood the thickness it has been deprived of.⁹²⁰ Conversely, Michelet repeatedly insists on the importance of

⁹¹⁵ See J. Trachtenberg, *op. cit.*

⁹¹⁶ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France, op. cit.*, III, p.112.

⁹¹⁷ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.94.

⁹¹⁸ D. Biale, *Blood and Belief – The Circulation of a Symbol Between Jews and Christians*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, p.7.

⁹¹⁹ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.149.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.134-136.

Jewish medicine, albeit in an ambivalent way, with the homeopathic principle being, in his eyes, specific to folk medicine instead.⁹²¹ In contrast, what Michelet would eventually construe as the witch's empiricism was described in *Renaissance* as primarily Jewish and Muslim.⁹²²

To imagine the sort of conspiracy narrated in *La Sorcière*, Michelet may have mined the texts written by those who persecuted both witches and Jews. Lancre compared his own struggle against witchcraft to the repression of Jews and Conversos in Spain.⁹²³ Moreover, Ginzburg has showed that the persecution of the Jews was instrumental to the rise of the witch-craze.⁹²⁴ The latter did not happen until the fourteenth century, and it started in places where, following the Black Death, Jews had been accused of a vast conspiracy against Christianity. Granted, Michelet believed that the Witch Hunt had started earlier. He nonetheless knew that the Jews had been scapegoated in that manner, and drew the comparison with the witches. In his own terms, the repression of *both groups* was a black magic of sorts, an elite homeopathy designed to combat the fire of the people's wrath by the fire of the stake.⁹²⁵

It is tempting to speak of both the Jew and the witch as belonging to the Derridian category of the *pharmakon*. Yet, Michelet cannot be read through the Derridian lens. His view of the Jews is not one of an entity opposed to nature, or oral language. What is nonetheless true is that the *pharmakon* is never only benevolent,⁹²⁶ and neither are Jews or witches. The former are cunning,

⁹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

⁹²² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, pp.XLV-XLVI.

⁹²³ P. de Lancre, *op. cit.*, p.394.

⁹²⁴ C. Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.63-69.

⁹²⁵ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.199.

⁹²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1972, p.112.

at times petty, even cruel to their debtors, and the same can be said of the latter, who are deceitful and revengeful. Both characters belong to a liminal moral space. Poisons and drugs belong to the same *pharmacie*, and the same money that crushes the people (“*L’âge terrible, c’est l’âge d’or*”) may also redeem them by ultimately crushing the lords. Moreover, both the Jew and the witch are untouchables, as such belonging to a world of margins, ominous and repulsive, yet also fascinating. The Jew is still in *La Sorcière* the unclean man (“*l’homme immonde*”) he was in *Histoire de France*,⁹²⁷ but we know that uncleanness now appeals to Michelet. Digestion and excretion, deemed unclean by a prejudiced society, are the key to a divine and, at the same time, demonic universe. That the archetypal template of the witch, the heroine of *Donkey Skin*, should don the skin of a financier – who excretes gold – is revealing. We saw that Michelet may have mined a shamanistic lode when he brought up this story in *La Sorcière*. The witch’s sorcery bears on the circulation of gold and dung as well as blood – and, conversely, there is a shamanistic energy about the Jewish activity of banking.

It was a common Saint-Simonian idea that money, a neutral device *per se*, might possess some redeeming aspects. This was typically argued in relation with Jews. Emile and Isaac Péréire had distinguished themselves in the early years of the July Monarchy by developing loans in order to bring down the interest rate. Over the fall of 1831, Isaac published in *Le Globe* a series of articles devoted to the banking system. He advocated the establishment of a national bank that would be an emancipatory tool for workers.

Je naquis dans cette religion qui apprit aux hommes la puissance de l’autorité morale et politique, dont le souverain pontife priaït pour toutes les nations de la terre, dont le grand prophète annonça qu’un jour, du fer des lances, on forgerait le soc des charrues, et dont les membres dispersés et unis sur toute la terre, persécutés, commencèrent l’affranchissement des travailleurs, en créant la lettre de change.⁹²⁸

⁹²⁷ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France, op. cit.*, III, p.112.

⁹²⁸ *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d’Enfantin, op. cit.*, IV, p.209.

Here Jewish prophecy and universalism are equated with the most controversial “Jewish invention,” namely the bill of exchange. For the Saint-Simonians, medieval Jews and Lombards, “by lending money to the feudal lords on interest, [...] gradually squeezed out all the utilizable resources from the nobility and placed them at the disposal of industry.”⁹²⁹ It is exactly what Michelet describes in *La Sorcière*, with the witch being the demonic intermediary between the Jew and the lord. The devilish alliance between Jews, witches and lepers, indeed fantasized in the fourteenth century, would have aimed at overthrowing Christendom. Michelet is not far from describing such an alliance – while, of course, praising it.

The *Sorcière* episode comes within the scope of Michelet’s overall assessment of the Jews’ contribution to history. In his eyes, the Renaissance was a magnificent outcome of the Jewish influence, with Pico della Mirandola and his likes giving the whole of Europe over to their spiritual power.⁹³⁰ “*Tout subit l’influence occulte et d’autant plus puissante des Juifs espagnols et portugais.*”⁹³¹ D’Eichthal at times tended to accentuate his Jewishness and discussed it with Michelet. In an enthusiastic letter written in 1837, he described their friendship as that of two suffering peoples, the Jewish and the Breton (*sic*).

Il y a entre nous, Monsieur, un point de contact que je n’avais pas d’abord senti. Nous sommes tous deux fils d’une race déchue, qui se relève. Notre cœur est tout attendri des souffrances passées de cette race, tout gonflé de l’espoir de sa réhabilitation. Vous êtes enfant de la Bretagne, moi de la Palestine et nous sentons que le jour de la résurrection et du jugement dernier est proche, de la résurrection des peuples [...].⁹³²

⁹²⁹ J. L. Talmon, *op. cit.*, p.164.

⁹³⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁹³² Quoted in P. Viallaneix, *Michelet, les travaux et les jours – 1798-1874*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p.190.

Over the years, this idea that they should, together, build a religious democracy, an association involving Jews and Christians, was repeatedly brought up by d'Eichthal.⁹³³ In a letter he sent to Michelet in 1847, there even appears the notion that the Jewish God, as opposed to the Christian one, was the God of the Revolution.⁹³⁴ This was heeded by Michelet, at least in *La Sorcière*, where the Jew and the witch do build an unholy (yet holy) alliance against the false order of Christianity and feudalism. The latter's stance on Jews, however, was not devoid of ambivalence. The Jewish signifier is an ambiguous one, with Paule Petitier noting that Michelet at times deems the Orient responsible for the Crusader's thirst for gold, at times better and wiser than the West, not to mention closer to nature.⁹³⁵ The same could be said of the Jews, in *La Sorcière* in particular, but this is actually part of his epistemology of inversion. In *Le Peuple*, there are a few mentions of Jews, almost all of them negative. They are vampiric usurers, with their only motherland being the London Stock Exchange.⁹³⁶ Michelet explicitly implies that his own family had to complain about their crimes.⁹³⁷ It should be noted, however, that the former remark ends with a more positive allusion to the fact that medieval Jews would have never engaged in such gruesome deeds as *befriending the aristocracy and royalty*. "*Quelle décadence dans la sagesse juive !*" As for the biographical note on the Jewish usurers, the word "*juifs*" is lowercased there, which might actually include non-Jewish usurers, if not only referring to them. This word had

⁹³³ *Ibid.*, p.279.

⁹³⁴ Quoted in Michael Graetz, "Une initiative saint-simonienne pour l'émancipation des Juifs," in *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 1970, volume 129, n°1, p.82.

⁹³⁵ P. Petitier, *op. cit.*, p.225.

⁹³⁶ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.119.

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.XXIII.

indeed a greater acceptance at the time, offensive by modern-day standards but not especially then.⁹³⁸

To be sure, there is a remarkable lack of consistency, in Michelet, not only regarding the Jews as a people, but also regarding the legacy of Judaism. In *Légendes démocratiques du Nord*, for instance, he brings up the recent Russian antisemitic persecutions. A deep admirer of the Jewish family order,⁹³⁹ he proved particularly sensitive to the Cantonists' abductions. This vibrant tribute to the Jewish people contains a mention of the Jewish women's beauty, and of the incomparable genius of male Jews.⁹⁴⁰ Was he thinking of Celina, Mickiewicz's wife, along with Rachel, whom he saw on stage and greatly admired?⁹⁴¹ The Polish poet had probably informed him on the Eastern European Jews' dire situation. We will see that even *Le Peuple* actually hints – perhaps unconsciously – at the Jews' awesome character. Conversely, *La Sorcière* conveys, along with its resolutely philosemitic stance, some motifs going the other way around, with the Jew's generosity, for instance, being pleasantly labeled as a miracle of the Devil. Moreover, the witches' popular *médecine à rebours* is contrasted with that of both the Arabs and the Jews, which was adopted by the elite.⁹⁴²

The fact remains that the Jews' knowledge is generally praised, and in terms very similar to those employed in relation to the witches. “*Son génie anti-sacerdotal,*” says Michelet of the

⁹³⁸ This explanation (suggested by Viallaneix) is tentative, given Michelet does not capitalize the word *Juif* with much consistency. See *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, pp.104-105, and the footnote on Toledo.

⁹³⁹ The oath episode alludes to it. See also, for instance, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme, op. cit.*, pp.15-16, where Michelet's description of a typical Jewish family actually echoes the way he would describe his own family's *train-train* (P. Viallaneix, *La « Voie royale », op. cit.*, p.17).

⁹⁴⁰ J. Michelet, *Légendes démocratiques du Nord*, Paris, Garniers Frères, 1854, pp.261-262.

⁹⁴¹ See G. Monod, *op. cit.*, p.XVIII.

⁹⁴² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière, op. cit.*, p.143.

authentic Jewish mind.⁹⁴³ He thus praises the Jew inasmuch as he is the antithesis of the anti-Nature. The reading of Isaiah inspired him precious insights on the mission of the Jewish people. The Jews are like the poor man confined to his home during a bright summer day, seeing that everyone but him, everyone *and even nature*, is happy.⁹⁴⁴ Their pride is their very curse: like Pascal's thinking reed, they know they are better than their oppressors, but they suffer all the more so. Here, Michelet imperfectly quotes Pascal: "*Mais quand l'univers tuerait l'homme, il serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue.*" Then he turns to the opposition between the priests and the prophets. Although we are before Wellhausen, this contrast is already a classic antithesis, with Richard Simon appearing to "*entrevoir*" it.⁹⁴⁵ The prophets, Michelet suggests, were persecuted by the Jews in the same way as the Jews themselves, at the same time, were so by the entire universe. The Jew is the man of man, and the prophet is the Jew of the Jew: "*que le prophète soit scié en deux, comme l'est Israël, qu'il soit lié, traîné comme Israël, cela même est symbolique.*"⁹⁴⁶ Resembling the witch, the prophet is often forced to live in a desert, with ravens and other wild animals. While Josephus – himself a *kohen* – believed that both priests and prophets knew the past, Michelet holds that only the latter must have written so passionate a history as that of Scripture. But in their conception of history, like in myth, there is no present nor past nor future.⁹⁴⁷ It might be, in a word, akin to the kind of history he wrote in (some chapters of) *La Sorcière*.

⁹⁴³ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, I, p.389.

⁹⁴⁴ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, I, p.389.

⁹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.390.

⁹⁴⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁹⁴⁷ *Loc. cit.*

This is in line with other texts, such as the first chapter of *Réforme*. There it says that Judaism, in a time of mutual hatred and intolerance, was the last vestige of light, with Muslims and Christians agreeing in waging war on human thought and freedom.⁹⁴⁸ “*Seuls, ils s’obstinèrent à penser, et restèrent, dans cette heure maudite, la conscience mystérieuse de la terre obscurcie.*”

VII. 2. Toledo

The first explanation of the strange oath taken by the Jew (“*ton grand serment*”) would lie in his own biblical (or mystical) creed, and the sacredness therein associated with oaths in general. The witch refers to it, and somehow espouses it, by linking her own satanic oath to it. Another explanation lies in the oath *more judaico* whose grotesque and humiliating formula was retained in Prussia as late as 1869. In France, Adolphe Crémieux is responsible for its abolition during the July Monarchy.

As a general rule, an oath is an essentially magically coercive formula, binding upon the one who performs it. The oath *more judaico* was originally designed by Christians to incorporate what they conceived to be binding upon Jews. The latter were required to swear by the name of Adonay, and sometimes by “the seventy names of God,” or angelic Hebrew names. The oath could also include a list of divine attributes and, above all, imprecations drawn from biblical examples. They typically encompassed a variety of diseases – leprosy, bleeding, starvation, death of children etc. The intent of such formulas was to performatively subject the Jew to the prescribed heavenly penalties in case he was swearing falsely.⁹⁴⁹ Awesome and awful, the oath *more judaico* was

⁹⁴⁸ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, pp.10-11.

⁹⁴⁹ See J. Trachtenberg, *op. cit.*, pp.69-70.

supposed to bring death upon the head of the perjurer – although its later form certainly differed from its original one. At any rate, the witch willingly embraces his fate.

But why Toledo? Michelet explains in a footnote⁹⁵⁰ that Toledo was the holy city of wizards, numberless in medieval Spain. There, they formed a kind of university, along with the Moors and the Jews. The latter's status of managers of the royal taxes is emphasized here, and correlated with their high knowledge. This reinforces the above-mentioned link between money and magic. In the sixteenth century, Michelet adds, this high science was christianised and reduced to white magic. This appears to allude to Marsilio Ficino's "Christian" notion of magic as *copula mundi*, or to his disciple Pico della Mirandola – although the latter, given his deep interest in Kabbalah, can hardly be said to have been "Orthodox" Christian.

The idea that Toledo had been the capital of magic was commonplace among early modern authors.⁹⁵¹ It stemmed from the pervasiveness of Solomonic magic at the court of Alfonso X of Castille, where both Jewish and Arabic grimoires were indeed translated into Latin, with astrologers and magicians of the three Abrahamic religions collaborating to this task. Such books combined black and white magic, religious and sacrilegious practices.

L'Espagne, en cela et en tout, offre un étrange combat. Les Juifs, les Maures, s'y mêlaient de magie, et avaient leurs pratiques propres. Le centre et la capitale de la magie européenne, en 1596 [...] aurait été Tolède. C'était une grande école de magiciens, sous les yeux de l'Inquisition. Magie blanche, si on veut les croire, innocente, comme celle du célèbre médecin Torralba (1500), guidé par un esprit tout bienfaisant, le blanc, blond, rose Zoquiel, qui sauva la vie à un pape. [...] L'école de Tolède avait un chapitre de treize docteurs et soixante-treize élèves. Ils obtenaient, disent-ils, puissance sur le Diable par les œuvres de Dieu, jeûnes, pèlerinages, offrandes à Notre-Dame. Mais, à côté de cette magie bâtarde qui mariait l'enfer et le ciel, se propageait dans les campagnes la magie diabolique ou sorcellerie.⁹⁵²

⁹⁵⁰ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.104.

⁹⁵¹ See for instance J. Bodin, *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*, *op. cit.*, Preface.

⁹⁵² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVII^e siècle – Henri IV et Richelieu*, *op. cit.*, pp.289-290.

In Solomonic magic, the demons are not to be worshipped. They are commanded through the power of God. The separation of good and evil, however, is somehow blurred since the magician may use his art to find hidden treasures, but also to burn towns to the ground if needed. The fact that demons were indeed lured into helping the practitioners of ritual magic (sometimes through offerings of flesh and blood), the latter's moral status was certainly problematic.⁹⁵³ Inasmuch as he uses divine names along with demonic powers, the ritual magician could still feel himself a pious Christian or Jew.

In *La Sorcière*, the very word *Tolède* conveys magic and mystery. What did Michelet know about Solomonic magic? Probably not very much, but he wanted to devise a magic spell of sorts. *Tolède* points to a world parallel to that of scholastic culture, while being itself replete with knowledge. A knowledge closer, in Michelet's eyes, to the wholesome instinct of the simple brought into focus in a previous chapter. The reason why we should refrain from conflating his view of the Jewish and female *pharmaka* to that of Derrida, is that, unlike the latter, Michelet's Jew, at least here, is a man of oral words, rather than written. And he is persecuted as such, with his teeth being torn out of his mouth. Christianity, not Judaism, is on the side of the letter that kills. *Tolède* symbolizes the oral energy of the two prophets, the Jew and the witch. It would be, as such, everything Christianity is not.

Michelet mentions again the city of Toledo in *La Sorcière*:

Elle se vit à l'entrée d'un de ces trous de troglodyte, comme on en trouve d'innombrables dans certaines collines du Centre et de l'Ouest. C'étaient les Marches, alors sauvages, entre le pays de Merlin et le pays de Mélusine. Des landes à perte de vue témoignent encore des vieilles guerres et des éternels ravages, des terreurs, qui empêchaient le pays de se repeupler. Là le Diable était chez lui. Des rares habitants la plupart lui étaient fervents, dévots. Quelque attrait qu'eussent pour lui les âpres fourrés de Lorraine, les noires sapinières du Jura, les déserts salés de Burgos, ses préférences étaient peut-être pour nos Marches de l'Ouest. Ce n'était pas là seulement le berger visionnaire, la conjonction satanique de la chèvre et du chevrier, c'était une conjuration plus profonde avec la nature, une pénétration plus grande des remèdes et des

⁹⁵³ N. Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.111.

poisons, des rapports mystérieux dont on n'a pas su le lien avec Tolède la savante, l'université diabolique.

L'hiver commençait. Son souffle, qui déshabillait les arbres, avait entassé les feuilles, les branchettes de bois mort. [...] « Voilà ton royaume, lui dit la voix intérieure. Mendiante aujourd'hui, demain tu régneras dans la contrée. »⁹⁵⁴

The witch had finally signed the pact. She was in the wild borderland, in the countries of the old legends and gods – the liminal space of Pan and Satan. There lived the visionary shepherd, there the “*école buissonnière*” was to be established – a *conjunction* with nature, a conspiracy. And Toledo again, the *learned*, the satanic *university*. It has been suggested that the mostly popular magic of the witches was indeed connected, in some places, with ceremonial and learned magic. In particular, Moorish and Jewish worldviews might have enabled witchcraft to flourish more freely in the Iberian Peninsula.⁹⁵⁵ Is the witch at the origin of the Jew's knowledge, or is it the Jew who inspires her? We do not know what these mysterious connections really were, Michelet concludes, and in which direction they went.

Wouter Kusters mentions a twofold rupture, of which we only addressed one aspect – that of time, with medieval witchcraft being inherently different from ancient magic and folk religion. That is, according to Kusters, Michelet's view of witchcraft, but we showed that such a contrast was simplistic. Granted, according to Michelet, the sabbath was not born until the fourteenth century, but it was nonetheless the belated outcome of vestigial paganism. The other aspect is that of space, and it needs to be dealt with as well. Kusters maintains that medieval witchcraft – in Michelet's opinion and as opposed, for instance, to Maury's scattered suggestions in his *Fées* – had nothing to do with the Orient.⁹⁵⁶ Such a reading does not take *Tolède* into account.

⁹⁵⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.114.

⁹⁵⁵ E. Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, *op. cit.*, p.140.

⁹⁵⁶ W. Kusters, *op. cit.*, pp.92-93.

The witch now belongs to a space which she shares with the Jew. The latter is, for Michelet, closer to nature, but also to the dead. This is even suggested in *Le Peuple*, where it says that Judaism's estrangement from nature was not due to utter rejection. Judea knew herself too well!⁹⁵⁷

As it happens, the above-quoted passage just precedes the chapter on "Le roi des morts." One day, Michelet went to the Père-Lachaise. He had had dinner with Mickiewicz and Celina two days before. There, in the Jewish section, he admired Préault's *Silence*, the sculpture adorning the Jewish banker Roblès' grave – "*le beau buste de Roblès, scellé du destin.*"⁹⁵⁸ It is an enigmatic character, wrapped in a shroud, with a finger on her lips. Michelet was astonished, and would never forget it. That he consciously associated it with the Jewish people is hinted at by a footnote in *Le Peuple*.

L'horreur de la fatale énigme, le sceau qui ferme la bouche au moment où l'on sait le mot, tout cela a été saisi une fois, dans une œuvre sublime, que j'ai découverte dans une partie fermée du Père-Lachaise, au cimetière des juifs. C'est un buste de Préault, ou plutôt une tête, prise et serrée dans son linceul, le doigt pressé sur les lèvres. Œuvre vraiment terrible, dont le cœur soutient à peine l'impression, et qui a l'air d'avoir été taillée du grand ciseau de la mort.⁹⁵⁹

While Michelet was comforting Madame Dumesnil – his great platonic love – in her last moments, he read Isaiah, which immensely impressed him. Did he know that the Hebrew words carved in Préault's sculpture came from this book? *El mistater*: God is hiding. Michelet termed this mystery "*l'horreur de la fatale énigme.*" Within death, the Jews and the "*peuple*" should be reconciled – the banker and the historian, son of a pauper. Likewise, in *La Sorcière*, the witch must have first encountered the Jew to become what she is. Only then can she have access to this mystery both divine and demonic.

⁹⁵⁷ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.187.

⁹⁵⁸ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, I, p.550.

⁹⁵⁹ J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, *op. cit.*, p.168.

The only kabbalistic passage ever quoted by Michelet, in *Renaissance*, bears on the mystery of incarnation, death and rebirth – perhaps also alluding to Préault’s sculpture. This parable conflates two passages from Adolphe Franck’s *La Kabbale*, one regarding the phenomenon of the souls’ embodiment,⁹⁶⁰ the other addressing the righteous’ death.⁹⁶¹ Franck himself directly quotes from the Zohar in both cases.⁹⁶²

L’Eternel, ayant fait les âmes, les regarda une à une... Chacune, son temps venu, comparâit. Et il lui dit : Va !... Mais l’âme répond alors : O maître ! je suis heureuse ici. Pourquoi m’en irai-je, serve et sujette à toute souillure ? – Alors, le Saint (béni soit-il !) reprend : Tu naquis pour cela... – Elle s’en va donc, la pauvre, et descend bien à regret... Mais elle remontera un jour. La mort est un baiser de Dieu.⁹⁶³

God creates the souls who, knowing that they will be defiled on earth, do not want to leave him. They nonetheless do, having been created to be so defiled, then redeemed. They therefore descend to a world of sin and pollution. Fortunately, they will, one day, return to their creator – for death is God’s kiss. Franck’s considerations address a variety of themes, including the souls’ sexual identity. Michelet mined them to build his own myth of Judaism, in which the Jew is kin to the necromancer, if not a necromancer himself. The oath of Toledo is not so much a political conspiracy, as a metaphysical attempt at uncovering the fatal secret of death and nature.

VII. 3. Pan and the Jewish God

“*Les dieux passent, et non Dieu,*” Michelet writes in the Epilogue of *La Sorcière*.⁹⁶⁴ Satan was but an aspect of the immortal God, named Pan in the first chapter. I want to conclude this

⁹⁶⁰ Adolphe Franck, *La Kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux*, Paris, Louis Hachette, 1843, p.241.

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.250-251.

⁹⁶² Zohar, II, 96b and 97a.

⁹⁶³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme*, *op. cit.*, p.22.

⁹⁶⁴ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.391.

study by suggesting that Pan, *the witch's God*, is akin, for Michelet, to *the Jewish God*. This might explain the unexpected harmony between the two characters in "Possession."

The author of *La Sorcière* would be a remarkable exception to Muray's diagnosis. In *Le 19^e siècle à travers les âges*, the latter repeatedly contrasts occultism and nineteenth-century syncretism with Judaism. He argues that, on a metaphysical level if not on a racial one, the interest in magic, gnosticism, and paganism was inherently antisemitic, with its attempt at uniting all religions, except for Judaism. "*Toutes les religions sont une sauf la juive.*"⁹⁶⁵ That this is not true of Quinet, Hugo, or Eliphaz Lévi may also be demonstrated but is beyond the scope of this study. It is, however, certainly not true of Michelet himself.

The witches' God is Pan, Michelet suggests, a fearsome yet benevolent deity that came to embody the spirit of the whole universe – both Satan and the Old Testament's God. One has expressed amazement at the apparent lack of consistency Eusebius displays by reviling Pan's violence: is not the Hebrew god at least as wrathful and cruel as the Greek Pan? I do not believe that Eusebius is especially inconsistent here. Pan is rebuked *just like* the Hebrew god. While the Ancient World saw the gods – whether they were called Pan, Jupiter, or YHWH – as both good and evil, the Fathers of the Church reserved their negative attributes to demons, describing their own God as entirely good. "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things," Isaiah proclaimed (in the words of King James' translators). Michelet's own belief is that God should be both "good" and "evil," divine and demonic.

Medieval men despaired, Michelet argues, because they were forced to become "infants," and therefore to abandon the natural violence they could feel in themselves and express. "*C'est l'aimable conseil que donne l'Eglise à ce monde si orageux, le lendemain de la grande chute.*"

⁹⁶⁵ P. Muray, *op. cit.*, p.178.

The kind of “childhood” that was demanded was not that genuine energy which leads man back to its fresh and fruitful springs? From Michelet’s perspective, Christianity rejected both paganism of old and Judaism because of their common approbation of life, even in its violent dimension. “*Qu’est-ce que cette littérature devant les monuments sublimes des Grecs et des Juifs ?*”⁹⁶⁶ In fact, Michelet tends to see Judaism as pertaining to the pagan world, with the Sibyl, for instance, being held in high esteem by both Jews and Gentiles, Moses and the Prophets no less than Nebuchadnezzar.⁹⁶⁷ The Sibyl is not the witch, yet both are avatars of the Fairy, as Michelet would put it. In any case, this points to the deep pagan – and magical – roots of Judaism, as well as the Oriental roots of witchcraft.⁹⁶⁸

As shown above, Michelet had mixed feelings regarding the medieval feminization of God. To be sure, he himself drew from it his idea of a female hypostasis of God – the witch. He nonetheless lamented the fact that Mary – the female God of medieval Christians – was not so much a woman as a virgin. In other words, this feminization was really a *neutralization* of God. Michelet resented the medieval antipathy toward the First Person of the Trinity, and even, in some instances, the Second Person. The Holy Spirit would emasculate the Son as the Son did the Father.⁹⁶⁹ In *Renaissance*, Michelet explicitly contrasts this eunuch-God with both the Jewish God and pagan deities:

Remarquez que pendant quinze siècles, Dieu le Père, Dieu le Créateur, n’a pas eu un temple, et pas un autel. [...] Au treizième, il se hasarde de paraître à côté du Fils. Mais il reste toujours inférieur. [...] Il reste avec sa longue barbe, négligé et solitaire. La foule est ailleurs. On le souffre ; le Fils et la Vierge, maîtres de céans, ne l’expulsent pas de l’Eglise. C’est

⁹⁶⁶ J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁹⁶⁸ Maury insists on the Semitic origin of both Druidism and those ex-gods revered as elves and fairies, whom he relates to the Cabeiri (*op. cit.*, pp.83-86).

⁹⁶⁹ J. Michelet, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, II, p.102.

beaucoup. Qu'il se tienne heureux qu'on ne lui garde pas rancune. Car enfin il a été juif. Et qui sait si ce Jéhovah est autre que l'Allah de la Mecque ? Arabes et Juifs soutiennent qu'ils sont croyants de Dieu le Père, et qu'en récompense il leur verse les dons de sa création.

Création, production, industrie de Dieu, industrie de l'homme, tous mots de sens peu favorable et mal sonnants au moyen âge. La Force génératrice, naïvement mise sur l'autel dans les anciennes religions, fait scandale dans celle-ci, pâle et blême religieuse devant qui on ose à peine parler de maternité. [...]

L'Ormuzd créateur de la Perse, le fécond Jéhovah des Juifs, l'héroïque Jupiter de Grèce, sont tous des dieux à forte barbe, amants ardents de la nature, ou promoteurs énergiques des activités de l'homme. Le doux et mélancolique Dieu du moyen âge est imberbe, et reste tel dans les vrais siècles chrétiens.⁹⁷⁰

Ormuzd, Jupiter and Jehovah are all bearded gods. They are intensely, and unapologetically masculine deities, and, as such they are fecund, while the Christian, emasculated God is not. Jehovah would be closer to such deities as Priapus or Pan (“*la force génératrice*”) than he is to the impersonal Father of the Trinity. This kind of remark is not infrequent in Michelet’s considerations on the Renaissance, with Michelangelo, for instance, being no Christian – rather, a Jew, or a Pagan-Jew, of the religion of the Sibyls and the Old Testament fierce locust-eaters! As such, he restored the Right in its place.⁹⁷¹ His Moses looks like a he-goat, Michelet writes, like another Pan, “*figure sublimement bestiale et surhumaine, comme dans ces jours voisins de la création où les deux natures n’étaient pas encore bien séparées.*”⁹⁷² In this sentence echoes another one, in the same book, that everything in Nature is kin, Leda is both woman and swan, men belong to the same realm as the other animals – the great idea, he asserts, of the Renaissance, of Leonardo and the Humanists.⁹⁷³ Moses’ very animality, his resemblance to Pan, would only attest to the Jewish Antiquity’s honesty regarding the kinship of all being.⁹⁷⁴

⁹⁷⁰ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, pp.XLVI-XLVIII.

⁹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.219.

⁹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.224.

⁹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.313.

⁹⁷⁴ And while the female principle was once despised, Pan-Satan is also female thanks to the witch who begets and marries him, thanks to Diana, thanks to the Fairy. Michelet’s God is actually an androgynous (see P. Bénichou, *Le*

Although his knowledge of Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy was scarce, Michelet somehow felt that Judaism did not amount to the cold and rational celebration of a purely intellectual – and purely monotheistic – God. He expressed it by conflating Judaism with the occult on the one hand, and paganism on the other. His Jewish-Pagan God possesses a dark and awesome side. Here Michelet anticipates on the kabbalistic – and Scholemian – theology of evil brought into focus in our introduction. Redemption may come from sin since they ultimately stem from the same source. God, *who creates light out of darkness*, is Satan.

temps des prophètes, op. cit., pp.557-558). He sometimes speaks of his creation in terms of “divine maternity.” (*Légendes démocratiques du Nord, op. cit.*, p.256).

Epilogue

The idea around which the present study is built stems from Scholem's theory of messianism. It appeared to this author, while delving in Scholem's work, that the theory in question was not only indebted to German Romanticism, yet also to a broader European ethos. In fact, France, with its theater of transgression and revolution, is key to understanding Scholem's dialectic. And although he did not mention Michelet as a relevant source to his epistemology of history, *La Sorcière* is the most Sabbatian, if not the most Scholemian, of all French books. There, one may observe how sin and evil, for a Romantic mind, may be legitimate paths to good and redemption. In other words, Michelet's work is a photograph of the antinomian Romantic mind, thereby allowing us to better understand the architecture of Scholem's own mythos of antinomianism. Conversely, we showed that the latter was a powerful tool for grasping the structure and ideas of *La Sorcière*. Scholem would have probably considered Michelet as a questionable scholar. The fact remains that both historians, whose respective births occurred one century apart, may explain one another. Both chose myth over blunt *scientisme*, and somehow both, being in search of redemption, envisioned it through restorative forces no less than cosmic revolt – in the return of the religious repressed. Messianism, in *La Sorcière* just like in Scholem's powerful biography of Sabbatai Tzevi, is the outburst of a subterranean energy – that of the undead past.

“On ne peut pas aimer à la fois le mal et l’humanité,” Max Milner posits in his *Histoire du Diable dans la littérature française*. This double bind would characterize Byron’s thought,⁹⁷⁵ but what may be true of Byron does not necessarily apply to Michelet. *La Sorcière* is a book of love – love of mankind, yet also of the Devil.

For years, Michelet had interpreted Satan as the symbol of man’s struggle against nature.

Le principe héroïque du monde, la liberté, long-temps maudite et confondue avec la fatalité sous le nom de *Satan*, a paru sous son vrai nom. L’homme a rompu peu à peu avec le monde naturel de l’Asie, et s’est fait par l’industrie, par l’examen, un monde qui relève de la liberté. Il s’est éloigné du dieu-nature de la fatalité, divinité exclusive et marâtre, qui choisissait entre ses enfants, pour arriver au dieu pur, au dieu de l’âme, qui ne distingue point l’homme de l’homme, et leur ouvre à tous, dans la société dans la religion, l’égalité de l’amour et du sein paternel.⁹⁷⁶

A symbol of freedom, Satan was the aristocratic force through which man rouses himself from the oppression of fate. This Promethean principle still animates *La Sorcière*, a book narrating the subversive origin of science. Light stems from darkness, goodness from evil, order from rebellion. Michelet elsewhere notes that the “Satanic School” began with Aeschylus’ *Prometheus*, continuing through Hamlet’s doubt and Milton’s Lucifer, finally collapsing with Byron’s “bottomless perdition.”⁹⁷⁷ Satan is Ahriman, the Zoroastrian god, the critical and negative, thereby creative principle.⁹⁷⁸ By this principle, the first aristocrats – the proud warriors of the Orient – redeemed themselves from the yoke of the past and nature, from the kings’ authority. These were iconoclasts, Michelet wrote, if not “Protestants.” In short, Satan is explicitly equated by the “first Michelet” with revolt and reason, yet also with our alienation from the world.

⁹⁷⁵ M. Milner, *op. cit.*, II, p.435.

⁹⁷⁶ J. Michelet, *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, Paris, Hachette, 1831, pp.26-27.

⁹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.62.

La Sorcière is a satanic book, yet of a very different ilk. His Satan has grown and now embraces nature instead of combatting it. He possesses the kind of female energy which is typically associated with nature. Conflated with Pan, he becomes the monarch of nature. This later Michelet is a pantheist and a pagan. Instead of distinguishing between the divine and the demonic, he embraces them as a single force. The kind of revolt he preaches is a reaction. Nature has been slandered. To worship Pan is to repair this. In *La Sorcière*, one sins in order to gain access to one's roots within the dark realm of nature. Satan-Ahriman was a pure revolutionary. Satan-Pan is a revolutionary qua reactionary. He existed before the Christian God, and his desire is to recover what duly belongs to him. Michelet is a Julian, as one of his critics aptly remarked – a Julian more so than another Byron.

La Sorcière thus unites two opposed categories of messianism. As Scholem put it, messianism needs to be either *restorative* or *utopian*. “The restorative forces are directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal.”⁹⁷⁹ In other words, “hope is turned backwards to the re-establishment of an original state of things.”⁹⁸⁰ Other forces, especially in Jewish messianism, are directed to a complete renewal of the world. These are the utopian forces. In fact, “both tendencies are deeply intertwined.” The vision of a new content to be realized in the future may involve the restoration of what is ancient. “The completely new order has elements of the completely old, but even this old order does not consist of the actual past; rather, it is a past transformed and transfigured in a dream brightened by the rays of utopianism.”⁹⁸¹ The witches, as Michelet sees them, wished to bring about a new world, they wished that we, their

⁹⁷⁹ G. Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, *op. cit.*, p.3.

⁹⁸⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

descendants, might be free and happy.⁹⁸² They nonetheless served an old god, the oldest of all gods, and the only one – “*Dieu*” – who does not wither.⁹⁸³ The future will be a return to the past – a *réaction*. Linear time shall ultimately fuse with a feminine cyclical eternity, history merge with nature and myth. Asia, once distrusted, is recognized as the benevolent mother of civilization. The feminine is not only the matrix of everything that lives, it is also the redeeming principle of the universe. At the sabbath, Michelet writes, the witch is everything, she is the Great God Pan incarnate – no less than his daughter, spouse and mother.

By inverting the false values of Christianity, Michelet suggests, one may gain access to what lies behind the veil of Isis. What is hidden, or in the margins, absorbs and contains the whole. The womb is the universe. The stomach symbolizes the eternal cycle of life, death, and resurrection. Proclaiming that no bodily function was foul or unclean, the witches unlock the purest mysteries of a demonic yet utterly divine nature.

La Sorcière is a myth of freedom and knowledge. Wisdom, Michelet shows, is nothing if not the intuitive connection of the human mind with animals and plants, with the dead. I suggested that Michelet may have conceived of a religious structure very similar to what modern-day anthropologists call Shamanism. Witchcraft heals and saves by trespassing the boundaries of reason and morals. Its light stems from the darkness of the beyond – the beasts and the souls. It is thus described as an attempt at freeing man from oppression by rooting him in the realm of nature. Witchhunters labelled witchcraft unnatural. Michelet reverses the accusation, calling Christianity “*l’Anti-Nature*” instead, and prophesying its demise.

⁹⁸² J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, *op. cit.*, p.169.

⁹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.391.

One might however get lost on the road. The witch sometimes resembles Bluebeard. The difference between the werewoman and Gilles de Rais is hard to determine. Both draw their fierce power from the same stock. The homeopathy of the witches (the great satanic principle, as Michelet calls it) may be used by their enemies, with the stake or the sessions of exorcism checking the people's outbursts of energy. Moreover, aware of the destructive potential of antinomianism, Michelet devoted the second part of his book to the slow decadence of witchcraft. Once appropriated by a dualistic elite, its subversive rituals cause enormous damages. When witches sin to gain redemption, they do so because their God encompasses good and evil. The degenerate priests described in the last chapters of *La Sorcière* hold nature and their own body in great contempt. They believe that sin may be killed by sin itself out of scorn, not love.

Besides highlighting similarities between Michelet and Scholem, these pages have allowed us to identify a Jewish lode in *La Sorcière*. It is actually twofold. To begin with, there might be a kabbalistic subtext to the book. If so, Michelet's counter-history and counter-metaphysics anticipating Scholem's would be unsurprising. In fact, Scholem's Kabbalah is greatly indebted to Romanticism, including Romantic authors themselves indebted to Kabbalah. Michelet is certainly not one of them, but his ethos is similar to theirs. Along with the Marian cult, which the divinization of the witch provocatively inverts, Kabbalah may explain Michelet's idiosyncratic messianism. The Jewish mystical tradition did not only beget antinomian trends – heralding or mirroring the Romantics' own quest for redemption through sin. Its tradition also possesses a robust feminine principle. Michelet may have followed this path when he created his own messianic mythology, with Postel, a Christian kabbalist, and the Frankists, having earlier envisioned messiahship as female. Michelet was acquainted with Postel's thought, which probably inspired both his portrait of Joan of Arc, and his myth of witchcraft. That Michelet may have been

in touch with descendants of Frankists who had kept some tenets of the faith, has been assessed. If a direct influence is not inevitably at stake, we may at least infer from such similarities that the same spiritual needs prompted all these authors and “believers” to conceive messianism in a similar fashion. A female Messiah would provide her rebels with the kind of energy whose absence becomes immediately visible in Michelet’s take on the War in the Vendée. Ten years passed between *Histoire de la Révolution française* and *La Sorcière*. In the meantime, Michelet had discovered that the woman was a religion. Far from hindering the Revolution, she was the Revolution itself – the living altar whose flesh was eaten by the rebels, whose sins might save from tyranny by making men return to their own roots.

Secondly, *La Sorcière*’s Jewish signifiers matter to our understanding of its whole. That Michelet came to see the Jewish God as closer to Pan than the Father of the Holy Trinity is hardly surprising. In his eyes, what Christianity lacks is, despite the dogma of the Incarnation, a vision of the divine encompassing the flesh. Judaism and Ancient Greece possessed it, not Christianity. Antiquity envisioned the divine as one with the demonic. It was not man who had brought about evil on earth, since God himself was both good and evil. The medieval Jew and the witch are heirs to this philosophy. Their marginality, even their moral ambivalence, would point to it. What Michelet has come to understand in the Bible is that *God is Satan* – hence the choice of Pan, the one god from Ancient Greece whose history resembles that of the Jewish God. Once a minor deity, he became the all-encompassing universe. Both a demon and a god, both benevolent and terrifying, Pan harbors within himself good and evil. One may sin to reach redemption because, within the primordial abyss that is Pan, good and evil are united.

But the margins contain the whole. “*Les dieux passent, et non pas Dieu.*” The last pages of *La Sorcière* convey a melancholic sense of immortality, which few works possess to that extent.

The witch's ashes have been scattered to the winds, yet she lives forever, Michelet ventures. She is the Fairy. And the modernity he dreamt of would be a peaceful return, after centuries of dialectic and revolt, to the womb of the Mother. Michelet's philosophy is no less in communion with God's Creation, than a form of protest against the fallacies of an unfair order. Like Camus, he was a rebel, but a solar rebel,⁹⁸⁴ who believed that man's urge to repair the world, if by tortuous means, was a tribute to its beauty.

⁹⁸⁴ P. Viallaneix, *La « Voie royale »*, *op. cit.*, p.465.

Appendix

French Sabbatianism

Small as it was until the nineteenth century, and situated on the margins of the Jewish world, the French Jewish community had not been impacted by the Sabbatian crisis and its aftermath as broadly as others. Scholem notes that, in France, “signs of interest in the messianic movement come mainly from Christian sources” and that the information found there was “obtained from Dutch and Belgian sources and not from the French Jews.”⁹⁸⁵ We know, however, that “there was considerable agitation in Avignon” where, unlike Paris, Jews were permitted to reside. Manuscripts are extant of a Provençal Sabbatian prayer book, a copy of Nathan’s *Devotions*, that were not yet printed at the time.

In 1666, the Jews of Alsace were still part of the Holy Roman Empire, and probably behaved accordingly. As for the Jews of Lorraine, they “behaved like their brethren elsewhere. [...] The rich merchants in Metz believed in the messiah no less than their rabbi, R. Jonah Fränkel Te’omim [...].”⁹⁸⁶ Frankism, the late stage of Sabbatianism, might have had ramifications in Alsace and Lorraine, but there is no data on this subject. The only attested French Frankist was Moses Dobruška, whose life was studied by Scholem in a volume published in French.⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸⁵ G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, *op. cit.*, pp.549-550.

⁹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.550-551.

⁹⁸⁷ G. Scholem, *Du frankisme au jacobinisme*, *op. cit.*

Dobruška, who took the name of Junius Frey during the Revolution, was born in Moravia. His mother, a Polish Jew, was a cousin of Jacob Frank. The latter had chosen to settle in Brünn, where Moses' parents lived. His influence on the family was demonstrated by Scholem, with Moses receiving a kabbalistic education at the hands of a Sabbatian rabbi who later converted to Christianity.

Moses Dobruška's life, full of twists and turns, was abundantly documented by Scholem. He converted to Catholicism and took the name of Franz Thomas von Schönfeld. A Freemason, he initiated the members of his lodge to Kabbalah. Along with his brother, he settled in Strasbourg, then Paris in 1792, where he became acquainted with the Dantonists, whose fate he would share two years later. In 1793, he published *Philosophie sociale dédiée au peuple français*, an awkward synthesis of Locke's, Rousseau's, and Kant's ideas,⁹⁸⁸ in which he tackled the "Law of Moses," arguing that the Hebrew prophet had concealed the truth behind a veil. Knowing the truth, Moses was all the more reprehensible. Scholem detected a Frankist element in this harsh critique. The notion of a *Torah temimah*, a pure and never proclaimed law, is a Frankist one.⁹⁸⁹

In the fourth chapter of this study, we considered the possibility that Gustave d'Eichthal, who was the scion of a Bavarian-Jewish family, had Sabbatian connections. It does not seem that d'Eichthal was actually acquainted with Frankism, but the sort of mystical rationalism that pervades his thought – not to mention his strange messianism – may well evince some vestigial Sabbatianism. Moreover, the Frankist undertones of the following passage, dealing with the female Jewish Messiah whom the Saint-Simonians were looking for, is striking.

⁹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.73.

⁹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74.

Nous irons leur annoncer ce Messie en lequel ils ont presque honte d'espérer maintenant. Nous leur dirons qu'eux-mêmes le tiennent encore en esclavage ; car il est femme, et nous réclamerons de ce peuple excommunié la fin de l'excommunication de la femme.⁹⁹⁰

One may compare this with Frank's admonition of his fellow Jews who, he maintained, "accustomed as [they were] to their madness, [...] [still] said that the Messiah would be of the male sex [...]."⁹⁹¹ Inspired by Salvador's *Histoire des institutions de Moïse et du peuple hébreu*, d'Eichthal nonetheless ascribed a providential role to the Jewish people, and even came to see himself as a prophet.⁹⁹² Interested in biblical criticism, he seems to have been attracted to Kabbalah as well. A discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that d'Eichthal's thought may bear on late Sabbatianism, or share with it a certain *Zeitgeist*.

The writer Alexandre Weill, who was a messianic thinker and a would-be biblical scholar like d'Eichthal, is yet another example of crypto-Sabbatian thought – whether he “created” his own theology, or somehow received it. He was a paradoxical figure of nineteenth-century French literature. While a minor figure in the landscape, he was acquainted with such famous “colleagues” as Balzac, Hugo or Baudelaire. A deeply religious soul, he nonetheless wrote a collection of poems entitled *Amours et blasphèmes*, having broken with Jewish orthodoxy at the age of 22. He comically compared himself to Isaiah, and seems to have actually believed he was chosen by God.⁹⁹³ Despite his penchant for mysticism, he was attached to biblical criticism, which he used against the grain but, unfortunately, with poorly scientific skills.

⁹⁹⁰ Quoted in Valérie Assan, “Gustave d'Eichthal, du judaïsme à la religion saint-simonienne,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 2020, Volume 190, Issue 3, p.118.

⁹⁹¹ Quoted in A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, p.204.

⁹⁹² V. Assan, “Gustave d'Eichthal en Algérie: Entre utopie saint-simonienne et quête des origines (1838- 1839),” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 2015, Volume 60, Issue 169, p.340.

⁹⁹³ Robert Dreyfus, “Alexandre Weill ou le Prophète du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Conférence faite à la Société des études juives le 23 mars 1907,” *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 53, n°106, April-June 1907, p.LXX.

Weill was born into a poor Alsatian-Jewish family. Although he grew up in a religious environment, his father was a freethinker “*qui n’aima jamais ni saint, ni rabbin.*”⁹⁹⁴ This and his kabbalistic education could point to vestigial Sabbatianism. Having read Spinoza and German biblical scholars while he was studying to become a rabbi, Weill broke with the orthodox tradition. A disciple of both Maistre and Hugo, he engaged in political and social struggle during the July Monarchy. First a Radical, especially interested in the emancipation of women, he evolved toward Legitimism during the Second Republic, before going back to his initial beliefs. He was known as a kabbalist, especially because of such publications as *Les Mystères de la création*,⁹⁹⁵ purportedly translated from Hebrew. On the one hand, he published a pseudo-critical exegesis of the Pentateuch, on the other hand he pretended to have been introduced to Kabbalah at the age of twelve by his Talmud teacher. On occasions, he referred, although vaguely, to Jewish mysticism as his main source of inspiration.⁹⁹⁶

Regarding his exegetic approach of the Bible, he claimed to be a disciple of Spinoza’s, yet his method was barely philological, and he was cruelly mocked by Adolphe Franck for the naivete of his arguments.⁹⁹⁷ While it is impossible for now to assert that Weill had known anything about Sabbatianism or Frankism, his theological profile is redolent of those heretical Jewish trends. Even the fact his thought combines rationalistic elements with mystical ones makes him akin to those personalities from late Sabbatianism, who oscillated between the school of Mendelssohn and that of Frank.⁹⁹⁸ For Weill, Deuteronomy (D) stands to Leviticus and other priestly sources (P) in the

⁹⁹⁴ Alexandre Weill, *Mon enfance*, Paris, Edouard Dentu, 1870, p.78.

⁹⁹⁵ A. Weill, *Les Mystères de la création – Traduit de l’hébreu*, Paris, Edouard Dentu, 1855.

⁹⁹⁶ See A. Weill, *Les Lois et les mystères de l’amour*, Paris, Edouard Dentu, 1868, p.9.

⁹⁹⁷ A. Franck, *Philosophie et Religion*, Paris, Didier, 1867, pp.277-278.

⁹⁹⁸ See A. Rapoport-Albert, *op. cit.*, pp.309-320.

relation of the secret and hidden Torah to Moses' false Law in Dobruška's *Philosophie sociale*.⁹⁹⁹ He thus appropriated Spinoza's legacy in a mystical and esoteric way. Like Dobruška, he assumed that Moses was versed in the mysteries of Egypt, that is modern science – conflated with Kabbalah. For instance, he had mastered, Weill avers, the electric force.¹⁰⁰⁰ At any rate, his idiosyncratic blend of Kabbalah and antinomianism would seem by no means unique if read against the broader context of heretical Jewish mysticism.

The case of Adolphe Franck, who was acquainted with Michelet, should be addressed here. Franck developed his own mystical philosophy. He probably did not have any actual connection with late Sabbatianism, but he encountered Sabbatianism by himself, prompted to do so by the necessity of his thought. Michelet noted in his diary that he received “*beaucoup de caresses de Franck pour La Sorcière*.”¹⁰⁰¹ The respect and admiration was mutual. Michelet had hailed Adolphe Franck's *La Kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* as a “*chef-d'œuvre de critique*.”¹⁰⁰² Adolphe Franck's *La Kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* is the first French study on Kabbalah carried out from a scholarly perspective. In this 1843 book, Franck notably explored the possible ancient sources of Kabbalah, and compared its tenets to those of Christian Gnosticism.¹⁰⁰³ His situation in the broader Haskalah movement was singular since most of the scholars associated with it despised Kabbalah. Unlike them, and although his own approach resembled theirs in some ways, Franck saw Kabbalah as a major contributor to the history of

⁹⁹⁹ See A. Weill, *Le Pentateuque selon Moïse et le Pentateuque selon Esra*, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1886.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.266. Compare with Junius Frey, *Philosophie sociale dédiée au peuple français*, Paris, 1793, p.39.

¹⁰⁰¹ J. Michelet, *Journal, op. cit.*, III, p.158.

¹⁰⁰² J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au XVI^e siècle – La Réforme, op. cit.*, p.491.

¹⁰⁰³ A. Franck, *La Kabbale, op. cit.*, pp.340-352.

philosophy.¹⁰⁰⁴ It is likely that he was not well acquainted with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which might explain why, instead of focusing on the rationalistic Jewish tradition, he chose Kabbalah.¹⁰⁰⁵ Some of his ideas are now seen as preposterous, such as the belief that the Zohar had been written in Antiquity. Moreover, he was in touch with occultist circles that were willing to interpret Kabbalah in a highly dubious way. Franck, however, was by no means a charlatan, nor a self-proclaimed prophet like Weill. His very sympathy for occultism stemmed from a genuine interest in everything spiritual, which had led him to devote himself to the esoteric tradition of Judaism with utmost care.

Interestingly enough, in his book, Franck gave of the first lengthy accounts of Frankism in French. However, it seems that no one has ever addressed his surprising embrace of that late stage of Sabbatianism. His stance regarding the rabbinical establishment is remarkable: “*Jaloux de sa réputation,*” he says, “*les rabbins persécutèrent Frank et ses partisans avec une violente animosité.*”¹⁰⁰⁶ Polish rabbis were jealous of Jacob Frank and persecuted him. An analogy with Jesus is implied, Kabbalah and “true” or esoteric Christianity, being, perhaps, connected in his thought.

Franck’s problematic silence on the ignominious Frankist blood libel of 1759 is equally interesting, since it reinforces his overall sympathetic view of Frankism. He also raised the eighteenth-century rabbinic ban on Kabbalah due to the machinations of the so-called

¹⁰⁰⁴ Paul Fenton, “La contribution d’Adolphe Franck à l’étude historico-critique de la Kabbale,” in *Adolphe Franck, philosophe juif, spiritualiste et libéral dans la France du XIX^e siècle – Actes du colloque tenu à l’Institut de France le 31 mai 2010*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012, pp.82-83.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁰⁰⁶ A. Franck, *La Kabbale*, *op. cit.*, p.402.

“Zoharites.”¹⁰⁰⁷ In this respect too, he seems to have resolutely taken side with those antinomian Jews rather than the rabbis.

Franck’s interest in Kabbalah verges on antinomianism. It may be said of Kabbalah, he suggests, that it teaches as though it had some authority, *quasi auctoritatem habens*.¹⁰⁰⁸ These Latin words appear to be a misquotation from the Gospel of Mark in the Vulgate, where it says: “*erat enim docens eos quasi potestatem habens et non sicut scribae,*” for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes. Several passages of *La Kabbale* appear to be explicitly “Zoharite,” denigrating the Talmud, whose tepid legalism is contrasted with the free mysticism of the Zohar. The laws of the Torah might imprison man’s soul, whereas Kabbalah frees him.¹⁰⁰⁹ About Onqelos’ Targum, Franck says that it is filled with a spirit entirely different from that of “*judaiisme vulgaire,*” the Talmud.¹⁰¹⁰ Contrasting what he describes as the overt antinomianism of the Essenes and the kabbalists’ orthopraxy, he qualifies the latter as a mere habit of prudence.¹⁰¹¹ He calls the rabbis of the Talmud “narrow-minded casuists.”¹⁰¹²

That there might exist an immaculate Torah, *Torah temimah*, superior to the earthly Torah – the one written in ink on parchment – is a tenet of Jewish antinomianism. The earthly Torah is that of the “unredeemed world of exile,” whereas the heavenly Torah is the pure truth of the divine.¹⁰¹³ It seems that Franck endorsed such radical views. They might explain why, reporting

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.340.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.125.

¹⁰⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁰¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.67.

¹⁰¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.73.

¹⁰¹² *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁰¹³ G. Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” *op. cit.*, p.112.

on the Frankist phenomenon, he systematically downplayed its darker sides, presenting the “Zoharite” Jews as enlightened iconoclasts fighting the yoke of the rabbis. Did actual connections exist between him and Frankist families? If this were the case, it would be of interest for the scholarship of Frankism, that the first French scholarly work on Kabbalah should have been written by him.

The existence of a Sabbatian lode in nineteenth-century France would allow us to interpret *La Sorcière* in its broader, European and Judeo-Christian, context. Michelet was in quest of a religion, at once primordial and more genuine than any later theological content. “*Les dieux passent, et non pas Dieu,*” the gods may vanish, yet God remains – beyond artificial dogmatic separations, beyond good and evil.

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