

Bryn Mawr College
Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr
College

German Faculty Research and Scholarship

German

2008

Feminist Redemption of the Witch: Grimm and Michelet as Nineteenth-Century Models

Qinna Shen

Bryn Mawr College, qshen@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/german_pubs

 Part of the [German Language and Literature Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Shen, Qinna 2008. Feminist Redemption of the Witch: Grimm and Michelet as Nineteenth-Century Models. *Focus on German Studies*. Vol. 15: 19-33.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/german_pubs/11

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Feminist Redemption of the Witch: Grimm and Michelet as Nineteenth-Century Models

QINNA SHEN

It is well-known that the witch was a cultural icon and an figure with which Western feminists identified during the second wave women's movement that started in the late 1960s. Activist feminist Witch Covens mushroomed in the United States after Robin Morgan and others founded the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) on Halloween 1968. Literary theorization of the witch as the innocent victim of the Christian church and the patriarchal state, and reassertion of the witch as a woman with knowledge and power were the contention, for example, in the American suffragist Matilda Gage's *Woman, Church, and State*, Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, as well as in the French journal *Sorcières: Les Femmes Vivent* and the West German feminist magazine *Emma*. Although the 20th century has seen a number of reappropriations of the witch, these stand in a much longer history of witch reception and recasting.

This article will focus on the reconfigurations of the image of the witch in Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835) as well as Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862). It begins with the discussion of the prevalent negative perception of the witch during Jacob Grimm's lifetime in two iconic texts: Goethe's *Faust* and Jacob Grimm's own collection of fairy tales that he and his brother Wilhelm assembled. In light of his archival work in search of the German national past, Jacob Grimm arrived at a more sympathetic account of the witch. In *Deutsche Mythologie*, he asserts that the definition and perception of the witch has a history; it is the Christian church that created a witch-phobic culture and labeled non-Christian and un-Christian practices as devil-serving witchcraft. The political agenda of *Deutsche Mythologie* is in keeping with the Romantic nationalist sentiment. To enhance the cohesiveness of the German people, to generate the feeling of Germans as one nation and thus to facilitate political unification of the German principalities, Grimm foregrounds a shared German culture, language and identity through reclaiming pre-Christian tradition and primitive German religion. Second, the article analyzes Jacob Grimm's influence on Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*, and outlines Michelet's atypical 19th-

century anti-clerical and anti-medieval attitude that reflects the author's nationalist fervor. Lastly, the article ends with Michelet's influence on feminists who embrace the emblematic subversiveness that the witch brings with her.

Conventional Representations of the Witch in the 19th Century

In the conventional fantasy of a witch, she is typically an old and evil woman who practices magic; she is popularly depicted as wearing a black cloak and a pointed hat, and flying on a broomstick. The depiction of witches in Goethe's *Faust* remains ingrained in the European imagination of the witch. Witches appear mainly in two scenes in *Faust*: "Hexenküche" and "Walpurgisnacht." In "Hexenküche," Mephistopheles brings Faust to a witch who should prepare a magical brew to rejuvenate the aged Faust. The witch has stereotypical features: she enters and leaves through the chimney, rides a broomstick, serves the devil as her master, laughs immoderately ("unmäßig," line 2314),¹ and chants nonsensically. In the "Walpurgisnacht" scene, Goethe again borrows from the popular tradition of depicting witches as vulgar, obscene, and murderous. In ascending the Brocken, witches trail behind their pig-riding leader named Baubo.² The witches in the chorus invoke the common belief in witches' killing pregnant women and children: "Die Gabel sticht, der Besen kratzt, / Das Kind erstickt, die Mutter platzt" (lines 3976-7). The riding tools—pitchfork for warlocks, broomsticks for witches—will stab and cut open a pregnant woman's womb and cause the death of both the mother and the infant. The witch peddles her murderous wares with the most blood-curdling descriptions. Mephisto warns Faust that Lilith, Adam's first wife, will ensnare him with her sexuality (lines 4120-3).³ Then in a scene that perverts Faust's dance with Gretchen, a naked witch dances with Faust, scaring him away when a little red mouse jumps out of her mouth (lines 4176-82). The negative depiction of these witches shows that there is little reconfiguration of the witch in Goethe.⁴

Likewise in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, "die böse Hexe" is a recurrent figure who always receives severe punishment at the end for her evil deeds towards the young protagonists. The witch is often substituted by a number of variants in fairy tales, including cooks, stepmothers, mothers-in-law or even mothers, who all demonstrate the same villainy and craving for human flesh (Tatar 137-55). In his

structural study of folktales, Vladimir Propp analyzes literary figurations of the witch, stepmother, dragon, devil and bandit as variables with the same function as villains.

In “Hänsel und Gretel” (no. 15),⁵ the witch lures the children with her gingerbread house and further delicious treats only to reveal her cannibalistic plans. She fattens Hänsel up for a feast and tries to lure Gretel into the oven to bake her too, whereupon Gretel outwits the evil witch, shoves her into her own oven and bakes her. In “Fundevogel” (no. 51), a similar tale to “Hänsel und Gretel,” the old woman plans to boil Fundevogel and is finally drowned. In “Der liebste Roland” (no. 56), the stepmother is a real witch (“eine rechte Hexe”) with a magic wand. She fails to hack off her stepdaughter’s head with an axe, and she is forced to dance to her death to the tune of Roland’s magic flute. In “Brüderchen und Schwesterchen” (no. 11), the witch stepmother causes her stepson to turn into a deer and attempts to murder her stepdaughter. At the end, the stepmother is thrown into a fire and burned in agony while her own daughter is torn to pieces by wild animals. In “Schneewittchen” (no. 53), the stepmother, who knows “Hexenkünste,” has to dance to her death in heated iron shoes. The old and evil witch appears in numerous other tales such as “Die zwölf Brüder” (no. 9), “Die drei Männlein im Walde” (no. 13), “Die sieben Raben” (no. 25), “Das Rätsel” (no. 22), “Frau Trude” (no. 43), “Von dem Machandelboom” (no. 47), “Die sechs Schwäne” (49), “Die zwei Brüder” (no. 60), “Die weiße und die schwarze Braut” (no. 135), “Der Trommler” (no. 193).

In a word, the portrayal of witches and other “evil women” in the tales perpetuates the stereotypical notion of the witch. The tales — didactic, cautionary and entertaining in nature — are conventional, conservative, and paternalistic. The tendency to depict a malevolent maternal figure that explains the formulaic existence of evil stepmothers/witches cannot be more appropriate for such patriarchal and sexist tales. Ruth Bottigheimer’s feminist study of the Grimms’ tales convincingly identifies the general pattern of incriminating women and exculpating men that permeates the tales. Exploiting and perpetuating the image of “‘all women as Eve’ [i.e. the first sinner] makes it particularly easy to see some women as witches” (Bottigheimer 171).

Jacob Grimm’s Reappraisal of the Witch

With his *Deutsche Mythologie*, published two decades later than *Faust* and *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Jacob Grimm revolutionarily redefines witches as German heathen believers and wise women who were unjustly persecuted during the church’s suppression of heresy.

With patriotic zeal, Grimm collects remnants from German heathen mythology, legends, tales, popular superstitions and other oral lore, and compares them with other European and even non-European bodies of traditional lore. In the process, he creates a sense of a unique German nation with its own language and culture. Grimm stresses that the Germans belonged to those of the obdurate pagans who clung to their time-honored, indigenous gods before and even after their gradual conversion to Christianity, a process that in Germany lasted from the fourth to the eleventh century (Mythologie 7). Grimm suggests that witchcraft was actually a label that the Christian church attached to German heathen worship. He writes:

die alten Deutschen kannten zauber und zauberer, und auf dieser grundlage ruhen zuerst alle nachher entsprungnen vorstellungen. Schärffen und verwickeln musste sich aber die ansicht seit nach einführung des christenthums alle begriffe und bräuche der Heiden für trug und sündhaftes blendwerk erklärt wurden. Die alten götter traten zurück und wandelten sich in teufel, was zu ihrer verehrung gehört hatte in teuflische gaukelei. Bald erzeugten sich überlieferungen von unmittelbarem zusammenhang des bösen feindes mit dem wesen der zauberei, die unerhörteste grausamste verwirrung zwischen phantasie und wirklichkeit ist daraus hervorgegangen. (861-2)

As Grimm would have it, the previous gods were not simply forgotten under the suppressive yoke of Christianity. Rather, they underwent a tectonic shift in which they were recasted as devils and, in turn, became the nexus at which the devil and the magic of German folklore met. Witch-persecution lasted from the late 15th century until the era of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, reaching its gory crescendo in the late 16th and early 17th century. However, by 1800 witchcraft was no longer credible to most Europeans (Roper 7-11). Grimm's argument finds resonance in a similar argument put forth by a German professor of law, Karl-Ernst Järcke. In 1828, Järcke's article "Ein Hexenprozess" in *Annalen der deutschen und ausländischen Kriminalrechtspflege* argued that witchcraft was the ancient religion of the German people, suppressed by Christianity.⁶ Järcke's article reflected the new *Zeitgeist* of questioning the church-dominated rendition of witchcraft — and from a legal and criminological perspective no less —

and started a dispute that pitted German nationhood as a bulwark against the necessarily international movement of Christianity and its evangelical nature. It was against this backdrop of the Romantic movement and the rising nationalist sentiment that Grimm reappraised the witch.

Countering the rhetoric of witch-hunting, Grimm examines the transformation of the image of the witch before and after Christianity gained a monopoly in Europe and observes that “[d]ie jüngeren sagen schildern sichtbar schon mit verächtlichen zügen” (871). Grimm revises the church’s explanation of the witches’ Sabbath and offers accounts of how the specific myth of the witch arose. He points out that Walpurgis Night was originally the holiest day in all heathenism marked by pilgrimages to feasts and sacrifices. Yet Christians everywhere in Europe saw heathen rites as sorcery. Grimm explains that the witches’ nightly excursions were actually gatherings to rather practical ends, such as salt-boiling, which, he argues, was very likely accompanied by sacrifices and festivals managed by women. But he finds that salt-gathering women were rumored to be broomstick-riding witches (873-877).

Diabolical conspiracy theories put forth by the Catholic church, later also by the Protestant church, have made witches the devil’s minions (as Jews, lepers and heretics had previously been) and accordingly they have been subjected to merciless persecution (Waite 8). But Grimm emphasizes that there was no mentioning of devil worship among these heathens; the idea of devil-worshipping was rather a creation of the church. Witches were goddess-worshippers. After the goddesses were dethroned and their image degenerated, the few faithful adherents performed their heathen rites in secret:

Die hexen gehören zum gefolge ehemaliger göttinnen, die von ihrem stul gestürzt, aus gültigen angebeteten wesen in feindliche, gefürchtete verwandelt, unstät bei nächtlicher weile umirren und statt der alten feierlichen umzüge nur heimliche, verbotene zusammenkünfte mit ihren anhängern unterhalten. Wenn auch der gro[ß]e haufen für die neue lehre gewonnen war, einzelne menschen mochten eine zeitlang dem alten glauben treu bleiben und insgeheim ihre heidnischen gebräuche verrichten. (881-2)

Witches obeyed and sacrificed to “frau Holda” on Horselberg, a trysting-place of witches in Thuringia, but there is no mention of a

covenant with the devil: “von einem bund mit dem teufel aber durchaus noch keine rede ist” (882). Grimm leaves no doubt that witches’ conspiracy with the diabolical power was initially the Catholic church’s excuse to eliminate any rivaling force that challenged the church’s authority. His idea of witches as goddess-worshippers would find repercussions in later feminists’ goddess religion, for example, Starhawk’s goddess religion, and also feminists’ alignment with the theories of matriarchy.

According to Grimm, witches were in fact wise women. Grimm’s description of wise women remains mostly in mythological terms, as standing somewhere between goddesses and earthly women: They are half-goddesses, prophetesses, supernatural beings, sorceresses, healers and so on. Even the three Fates, who appear in myths of many cultures, are examples for wise women (Chapter XVI on “weise frauen” in *Deutsche Mythologie*). As Grimm explains, the persecution of wise women as witches would have been inconceivable in antiquity: “Hexen waren dem höheren alterthum priesterinnen, ärztinnen, sagenhafte nachtfrauen, die man ehrte, scheute, endlich gering schätzte, aber noch nicht zu verfolgen und hinzurichten trachtete” (924). Christianity’s final triumph over heathendom demonized the wise women into “witches,” negatively coded by the rhetoric of the church: “auf der allmählich erfolgten verwandlung der götter in teufel, der weisen frauen in hexen, des gottesdienstes in abergläubische gebräuche” (10). Apparently, Grimm’s definition of wise women has a broader range than that of the historically hunted witches.

The wise woman also appears in a number of Grimms’ tales, although less frequently than the witch. In “Einäuglein, Zweiäuglein und Dreiäuglein” (no. 130), the mother and her two daughters, One-Eye and Three-Eyes, starve the normal-looking Two-Eyes, but a wise woman helps her conjure up meals and marry a knight. A wise woman in “Die sechs Schwäne” (no. 49) makes the king a magic ball of yarn that shows him the way out of the forest. The wise woman, the titular figure of “Frau Holle” (no. 24), rewards the diligent, good-natured girl and punishes the wicked, arrogant and lazy one. In “Der Teufel und seine Großmutter” (no. 125), a woman shows the three soldiers a way out of the clutches of the devil. In “Dornröschen” (no. 50), the twelve wise women bestow magical gifts on the child. The thirteenth wise woman, however, has not been invited to the royal dinner and casts an evil spell. Here, we cannot even distinguish a wise woman from a witch. In general, the wise woman uses her magic in a charitable way by giving

good advice to the hero/heroine and makes sure that they stay out of trouble, in opposition to the witch who represents evil feminine powers.

It is to be concluded that the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale collection (published in two volumes, the first in 1812 and the second in 1815) lacks the revisionist attitude towards the witch which can be observed in *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835). Criticism of Christianity for its suppression of European national cultures and of predilection for witch-hunting, which rings clear in *Deutsche Mythologie*, is entirely absent in the tales.

How can the different stances towards witches and Christianity in the fairy tales and *Deutsche Mythologie* be reconciled? This incongruity can be explained by the different nature, purpose and authorship of the two publications. On the one hand, the focus of *Deutsche Mythologie* precedes the European Middle Ages, i.e. before Europe's Christianization. Commensurate with Grimm's nationalist agenda, *Deutsche Mythologie* is an analysis of Christianity's ever-encroaching impact on European national cultures and languages, a commemoration of the suppressed national past, and an indictment of the witch-hunt. The collection of fairy tales, on the other hand, had been circulating among the populace up to the early 19th century, and reflects the value system of the German bourgeoisie and their Christian beliefs. Moreover, *Deutsche Mythologie* is a scholarly work singly authored by Jacob Grimm based on his studious, if often pedantic, research. But in terms of the fairy tale collection, Jacob Grimm was mainly responsible for collecting the tales, then passed them along to his brother Wilhelm to complete the editorial work required. Ruth Bottigheimer attributes the profound gender division in the fairy tales to the editorial work of Wilhelm Grimm, who imposed "a Christian overlay based on the late medieval and early modern value system that permeates many of the tales the Grimms, especially Jacob, unearthed in archives" (168). Hence, Wilhelm Grimm not only subscribed to the widely, uncritically accepted notions about witches in the 19th century, but embraced and reinforced this gender-based image of the witch. In providing the folk fantasy of the witch a canonical literary form and wide popular readership in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the brothers Grimm created a long-lasting impression upon the German imagination which far overshadowed Jacob Grimm's later reassessment of the witch as a German cultural icon in *Deutsche Mythologie*.

Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*

Despite the fact that this text has been overshadowed by the collection of fairy tales, *Deutsche Mythologie* establishes itself a foundational text that sets the precedent for positively re-writing the witch and, as we will see, exerted a demonstrable impact on the next voice to enter this discussion, Jules Michelet. *Deutsche Mythologie* antedates later reconceptualizations of witches in historical and feminist texts. Jacob Grimm became the creator of the Romantic paradigm that laid a solid ground for the positive construal of witches (Behringer 229-41). Following Grimm, the 19th-century French historian Jules Michelet takes up the demonological notion of Satan-worshipping witches minted by Christianity. However, Michelet retraces this trajectory along different lines as he re-writes the history of the witch as a cultural icon. He equates witchcraft with Satanism, yet attaches a positive connotation to both. In *La Sorcière*, a study of the evolution of European witchcraft, he views the witch as a product of extreme ecclesiastical and feudal suppression, locating the origins of European witchcraft in the Greek pagan religion of the Sibyls, and positing witchcraft as the pagan resistance against the new powers of Christianity and the peasants' opposition to feudal exploitation (viii).

La Sorcière is the first book-length treatise dedicated to witches. However, it is not exactly accurate to attribute "the first modern work on witchcraft" to Michelet, as Stephen Kippur insists (xi). Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, especially Chapter 33 on "teufel" and Chapter 34 on "zauber" and "hexen," covers the topics on witchcraft in relation to the church, the heretic tradition, superstitions, healing, etc. In other words, what is common in later witch-hunt literature echoes sentiments already expressed by Grimm. Of course, this does not mean that later historians and feminists necessarily use Grimm as their source, but there is no question that Michelet's *La Sorcière* was self-consciously inspired by Grimm's philological, mythical and cultural study on witchcraft and the persecution of witches. *Deutsche Mythologie* was mentioned by Grimm in a letter dated on March 24, 1837 to Michelet for his reference. In fact, Michelet's intellectual debt to Grimm had begun long before he wrote *La Sorcière*. Already in the 1820s, Michelet was mesmerized by the richness of ancient German customs and laws and was convinced of their relation to the ancient history of France (Kaegi 64ff.)

Werner Kaegi's book *Michelet und Deutschland* analyzes the cultural and personal ties Michelet had with German intellectuals. His friendship with Jacob Grimm was the culmination of his relationship with German culture and history. Indeed, one finds that their professional and intellectual exchange predates even their mutual interest in witchcraft. Michelet's letter to Grimm in May 1836 showed his admiration and gratitude for Grimm's *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer* that provided the main source material for his *Origines du droit*. In the introduction to his *Origines du droit*, Michelet lavishly praised Grimm's *Poesie im Recht* and *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer* and acknowledged the fact that half of his *Origines du droit* was translated from Grimm (Kaegi 71-2). Michelet communicated his indebtedness to Grimm in the same letter, written in May 1836: "Ich habe augenblicklich ein umfangreiches Werk im Druck, in dem ich Ihr unvergleichliches Buch, die Deutschen Rechtsalterthümer, reichlich gebrandschatzt habe" (qtd. in Kaegi 73). *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer* was also a timely book that met Michelet's desire to gain a greater understanding of the ancient Germanic character so as to better understand the great revolution of the 16th century: the Reformation. Michelet often sent volumes of his *Histoire de France* to Grimm, accompanied by letters. He also planned to make "eine Wallfahrt nach Göttingen" where Grimm was a professor at the time. Due to his illness, he did not manage to visit Grimm as planned. That such a rich and active exchange took place between these two men in the years immediately before and after the publication of Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* cannot be overlooked. When Grimm, one of the "Göttingen Seven," was banished from the kingdom of Hannover, Michelet and others offered Grimm a position in France; an offer Grimm ultimately declined. After Grimm's death in 1863, Michelet gave their correspondence to Frédéric Baudry for the latter's essay in honor of Grimm. In his new foreword to *Histoire de France*, Michelet emphasized that Martin Luther and Jacob Grimm had "made a new person of him" (qtd. in Kaegi 81).

La Sorcière is a relatively late work by Michelet, published in 1862 when he was 64 years old. It fuses key concepts that marked his earlier works—his polemics against Christianity, his passion for the French Revolution, his love for the people, and his newly-developed focus on nature and women. For Michelet, revolution is "a new religion" that replaces Christianity (Kippur 153). The serfs/peasants-turned-witches are predecessors of the French people in Michelet's treatment, which recasts French history and social struggles as a narrative which can be mapped onto the phenomenon of the witch. The

witches' Sabbath is then transformed into a primitive form of the French Revolution and the witch's fate embodies the fate of France, which has been under the twofold yoke of feudalism and the church.

In *La Sorcière*, Michelet dramatizes the genesis of the witch from the serf's wife, using allegorical language enframed in an emotional and biographical, but ultimately representative story line. The narrative starts with the serf's loss of secular and religious freedom as a result of the combination of feudalism and the church's oppression. The serf's wife sallies out at nightfall to worship her old, overthrown gods who no longer appear in the forest except by night. Boundless and excruciating injustice motivates her pact with the devil, which aims at revenge. Feudal and often ecclesiastical prerogative over her virginity on the wedding night impels the raped and mistreated bride to pray for help from a powerful spirit. When she makes a fortune with her crops, jealous neighbors spread rumors that she is assisted by the devil. Her husband, who is able to deliver his rent in advance to the feudal lord, is appointed tax collector. With this, the resentment on the part of the other villagers only mounts. In the wake of the defeat of France by the English, her husband is coerced to levy a ransom for the captured officers or face death. To save her husband, she plots to get the amount from a Jewish money-lender by playing a witch. Rumor has it that she is "possessed." Her new fortunes incur envy from the Lady of the Castle, at whose collusion the serf's wife is beaten up. Soon, she is turned away even by her timid husband. Utter despair delivers her into Satan's hands, and her pact with the devil is sealed. Witchcraft is presented in Michelet as a form of "satanic" resistance against feudalism and the church and a vow of revenge.

According to Michelet, the ritual of witches' Sabbath begins as the serfs' harmless, nocturnal carnival as a relic of pagan rituals which took place on the first of May. During the Great Schism, following France's defeat by England, intensified exploitation catalyzes the transition from apolitical gathering to Black Mass. This transition is simultaneously religious and political: it is on one hand a mockery of the Christian Mass and on the other the serf's de facto anti-feudal, anti-clerical insurrection (even if such an insurrection is non-confrontational). In Michelet's view, the witches' Sabbath exerts a liberating effect on its participants, especially on women, who fulfill every office on this occasion. It constitutes some political and social activities for women that signify a "redemption of Eve from the curse Christianity had laid upon her." The Sabbath is "the creation of woman's efforts, of a woman driven to desperation, such as was the

Sorceress of those days” (Michelet 102). The general impression of licentious, incestuous Sabbaths finds an explanation in Michelet, who justifies such outbursts as result of conflicting rules set by the church and the feudal order. The church forbids endogamy while secular authorities prohibit exogamy. “Thus while the priest barred the cousin, the feudal forbade the stranger; and so many men never married at all” (111). As with the Bakhtinian carnival, which serves as both a form of release and a defiant acting out, the seemingly “lawless” witches’ Sabbath emboldens serfs to defy for once the impossible and contradictory injunctions of church and state.

La Sorcière is of vital importance for understanding feminist witchcraft. It incisively analyzes the apparent and hidden reasons for witch-hunting. The fate of the so-called witch bears out Michelet’s anti-church stance. Likewise, the church and its misogynist views come under feminist attack. Thus, Michelet and his rehabilitation of the witch gain appreciation from the witch-admiring feminists, who are often atheist and/or anti-Christian, and see the heretic, the unorthodox thinker and a woman healer in the witch.

In Michelet’s conceptualization of the witch, she is a product of extreme exploitation, forced into a homeless, animalistic existence. Her new natural habitat—the heath or the forest—enables her to become an auto-didactic healer. The witch-healer’s existence meets the demand of the common folk, who receive nothing but useless holy water and admonitory words from the church, and who cannot afford expensive physicians. The healing, life-affirming Satanism offers more practical and much needed comfort than the church’s doctrine of asceticism and denial of the world. Witches were midwives and pharmacists; in other words, the practitioners of women’s health. They knew the art of contraception and abortion—practices banned by the Catholic church even today. In the 14th century, the church declared that if a woman dares to cure without having studied, she is a witch and must be put to death (Michelet xix). This ultimatum from the church is equivalent to criminalization of all woman healers since the study of medicine was closed to women at that time. Michelet’s claim that witches are the “foremothers” of modern medical professionals (particularly gynecologists and obstetricians) echoes Grimm’s notion that wise women “had a knowledge of medicines and poisons” (Grimm 1075).

What makes witches “stake-worthy,” as Michelet informs us, is their representation of the opposite of what the church dogma prescribes. Self-taught and taboo-breaking women healers and midwives contravene the church’s ban on focusing on the transient, ignoble and

impure body, which is the diametric opposite of the ever-lasting, noble, and pure spirit. The elevation of the spirit and the debasement of the body are consistent with the church's anti-sex, anti-Nature, anti-woman views. In the self-righteous minds of the inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, the greatest sin and origin of all evil is women's "insatiable" sexuality.⁷ Demonizing female sexuality only disguises and exonerates men's carnal lust by blaming it on women. "By a monstrous perversion of ideas," writes Michelet, "the Middle Ages regarded the flesh, in its representative, woman (accursed since Eve), as radically impure" (87). The rather hypocritical idea of sinful flesh is quintessentially reflected in the immaculate birth of Jesus. The Virgin Mother, empirically impossible, nonetheless reflects the ideal of womanhood as conceptualized by the church. It elevates a single woman, conveniently legitimizing the misogynist church's subjugation of all the rest of women.

Conclusion: From the 19th to the 20th Century

In the footsteps of Grimm, Michelet redresses the dominant Christian image of the witch, re-conceptualizing the witch in accordance with his nationalist ambitions. Nonetheless, he differs in many respects from Grimm, including his theory of witchcraft, his attitude towards Christianity, and his methodology. For Grimm, the witch was first of all a heathen believer and the church made her punishable by labeling heathendom as sorcery and heresy. Thus, according to Grimm, the popular notion of the witch was the result of the church's high-handed persecution of heathendom. For Grimm, the history of the witch ended with her victimization. Michelet, however, has re-situated the witch to serve his own revolutionary ideas by infusing a radical, revolutionary spirit into the witch and the Sabbath. The witch becomes a victim not only of an oppressive religious agent, but of an oppressive socio-political apparatus: feudalism. She has no way out but to turn into a figure of resistance. Both Michelet and Grimm cast the church in an unfavorable light, but Grimm maintained his personal religious belief, while Michelet was a vehement polemicist against Christianity. In terms of their methodology, Grimm was interested in tracing ancient German culture and myths from a philological perspective, while Michelet's analysis was a socio-historical one. They differ significantly in their style: Grimm appeared to be more objective and scientific in comparison to Michelet,

whose book was idiosyncratic and emotionally charged, a style that made him a controversial historian.

Grimm's influence on contemporary feminists, still largely unrecognized, was mediated through Michelet. *La Sorcière* was widely quoted by feminists, not least by Matilda Gage, Catherine Clément, Barbara Ehrenreich, Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and in publications such as Emma. Drawing on Michelet, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's well-known *Witches, Midwives, Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1973) focuses precisely on this key aspect of witches as women healers to which Michelet dedicates so much of his book. Ehrenreich explores the barring of women from practicing medicine, and degradation of women healers from positions of leadership to positions of subservience; that is, from doctors to nurses. In the process of masculinizing the medical profession, the sexist state and its legal apparatus exclude women in order to facilitate men's predominance in practicing medicine. Lorna Martens notes that Ehrenreich's monograph is the pivotal text in which "witch" becomes "an honorific designation, an identification figure, for feminists" (Martens 117). Martens indicates that Ehrenreich's monograph bridged the gap between Michelet's theoretical redefinition of witches and wide-spread feminist practice a century later. Like Ehrenreich and English, many feminists do not just dwell on witches' victimhood, but analyze why witches were victimized, and hence come to see witches as wise women, women healers and heretical thinkers who posed threat to the status quo. Concluded with the feminist exaltation of the witch, the witch as a cultural icon has gone through a trying journey from pariah of the Catholic and Protestant churches to an image of Germanic nationhood suffering under the church for Grimm to a politicized victim of and rebel against Christianity and feudalism for Michelet, and finally to an iconoclastic model for 20th-century feminists.

Notes

¹ As so many editions of Goethe's *Faust* are in circulation, I will be citing line numbers instead of page numbers.

² Baubo is "originally the name of a lewd nurse in classical mythology who tries to console Demeter after her daughter Persephone is carried off by Hades." Cyrus Hamlin, ed., *Faust: A Tragedy: Interpretive Notes, Contexts, Modern Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) 113.

³ According to a legend in the Jewish Talmud, Lilith is a consort of a demon who threatens pregnant women and small children. See Hamlin's "Interpretive Notes" on this scene.

⁴ However, Goethe's *Faust* re-utilizes the witch for the purpose of social satire and thereby neutralizes or even reverses the apparent negative image of the witch. Cyrus Hamlin points out that the witch's magic ritual in "Witch's Kitchen," nonsensical as it seems, is very ceremonial with music, glass, drink, declamation from a book. Thus the witch's ritual parodies a religious rite, in particular, the Christian Mass. On one hand, *Faust*'s disgust reflects Goethe's own distaste of the Nordic supernatural world of witchcraft. On the other hand, the witch's act functions as mockery of the Christian holy rite, with subversive implications. The scene exists not merely to enable *Faust*'s seduction of Gretchen, but through the witch's mock ceremony, it becomes one of the early texts that insinuate the opposition between witchcraft and Christianity. (See Cyrus Hamlin, "Interpretive Notes," *Faust: A Tragedy: Interpretive Notes, Contexts, Modern Criticism*.) Likewise, Goethe transcends the clichéd materials about witches' Sabbath by eluding the climax of the witches' debauch on the Brocken [See Hermann J. Weigand, "Goethe's *Faust*: an Introduction for Students and Teachers of General Literature," *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Nov., 1964) 467-486.] The rowdy scene of witches' ascent is already too wild even for the likes of Mephisto and he drags *Faust* to a quieter corner, and thereby anticlimactically diverting the focus on the Sabbath to Goethe's own textual purpose. First Goethe launches a satire through the four social types—general, cabinet minister, social climber and author, who reminisce about the good old days and complain about being left out by the young generation. This social satire shows Goethe's energetic outlook towards youth, progress, and the future. Then he parodies his personal enemy, Friedrich Nicolai, a representative of Enlightenment rationalism in Berlin. (See Hamlin, *Faust*, 118.) In the disguised figure of Proctophantasmic, Nicolai chides the superstitious crowd, but to no avail on this special day, and is himself poked fun at. As a result, the "Walpurgis Night" scene is not one that is steeped in popular imagination of the lewd activities between the devil and his brood, but serves as social satire and personal satire.

⁵ As so many editions of the Grimms' fairy tales exist, I will be referring to the numbered order of the tales instead of individual page numbers.

⁶ This article is discussed in: Purkiss 34.

⁷ "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable." Kramer and Sprenger 122-123.

References

- Behringer, Wolfgang. *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. *Grimms' Bad Girls & Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Clément, Catherine. "The Guilty One." *The Newly Born Woman*, co-author Hélène Cixous, trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. It was originally published in France as *La Jeune Née* in 1975.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Dworkin, Andrea. "Gynocide: The Witches." *Woman Hating*. New York: Dutton, 1974. 118-150
-

- Echols, Alice. *Daring to be BAD: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deirdre English. *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1973.
- Gage, Matilda Joslyn. *Woman, Church, and State*. Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2002.
- Gauthier, Xaviere, et al. *Sorcières: Les Femmes Vivent*. Paris: Editions Stock, 1976-1982.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust*. Erster und zweiter Teil. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Kinder -und Hausmärchen*. München: Winkler-Verlag, 1971.
- Grimm, Jacob. *Deutsche Mythologie*. Fourth Edition. Berlin: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1875.
- Hamlin, Cyrus, ed., *Faust: A Tragedy: Interpretive Notes, Contexts, Modern Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.
- Kaegi, Werner. *Michelet und Deutschland*. Basel: Bennischwabe, 1936.
- Kippur, Stephen A. *Jules Michelet: a Study of Mind and Sensibility*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1981.
- Martens, Lorna. *The Promised Land?: Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.
- Michelet, Jules. *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*. Trans. A. R. Allinson. Fifth ed. New York: The Citadel Press, 1965.
- Morgan, Robin. "Three Articles on Witch." *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*. New York: Random House, 1977. 71-81.
- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Roper, Lyndal. *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Schwazer, Alice, ed. *Emma*. Köln: Emma Frauenverlag, 1977--.
- Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987.
- Waite, Gary. *Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. Basingstoke, Hampshire England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Weigand, Hermann J., "Goethe's *Faust*: an Introduction for Students and Teachers of General Literature," *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Nov., 1964) 467-486.
- Zipes, Jack David. *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- . "The Struggle for the Grimms' Throne: The Legacy of the Grimms' Tales in the FRG and the GDR since 1945." *The Reception of Grimm's Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*. Ed. Donald Haase. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993. 167-206