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Pétroleuses, Witches & Fairy Tales

The Myth of Revolutionary Women as Arsonists

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2016, Summer

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Bird,” the petroleuses use trickery and cunning as survival tactics.

Like Baba Yaga, they defend their turf fiercely and understand that everything comes with a great price. For all of these women and their stories, accoutrements of fire serve as incendiary metaphors for un-making and re-making their worlds.

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The Paris Commune

The Paris Commune, which lasted from March 18 to May 28, 1871, was an experiment in self-governance that is still inspiring today.

The Franco-Prussian war of 1870 saw the defeat of the French military by the more disciplined and technically better equipped Prussian military.

While the French government worked on negotiating the end to the war, many people living in Paris refused to surrender. Following a brutal four-month siege, they bravely took their fate into their own hands and declared Paris an independent Commune.

Direct democracy was established in a network of neighborhood popular clubs. Citywide elections resulted in a council which proclaimed Paris autonomous and asserted the desire to recreate France as a confederation of self-governing communes (harkening back to those of the 18th century French revolution). The delegates were required to report back to the people who had elected them, and were subject to immediate recall if they did not carry out their designated mandates.

The communards established self-managed workers’ associations and cooperatives. By May, 43 Parisian workplaces were co-operatively run and the Louvre Museum was converted into a munitions factory run by a workers’ council to provide for the defense of the city.

Many anarchists played influential roles within the Commune, including the Reclus brothers, Eugene Varlin, and Louise Michel.

Michel, one of the most devoted and admired participants, was active in the Union of Women for the Defense of Paris and the Care of the Wounded. During the Last days of the Commune, she fought on the barricades in the defense of the city. She was also in charge of recruiting women to serve in the ambulance corps, and well known for welcoming all women,

especially prostitutes who were ostracized by the male officials of the Commune.

—Fifth Estate staff

Pétroleuses, Witches & Fairy Tales

Among the myths born out of the Paris Commune of 1871 was that of the pétroleuses. These working-class, female arsonists were crafted by opponents of the commune during its last, smoke-filled days, now known as the *semaine sanglante*, or the bloody week.

It was during that week the French army, which had been lying in wait in Versailles, marched into Paris and re-conquered the city. As the Versailles forces advanced, their artillery shells burst into flame, igniting fires. Other fires were set by communards at barricades to block the army's advance. During that week, the night sky had a burnished glow.

Historians contend that the pétroleuses and their incendiary acts were largely fabricated—almost all the fires that raged during the *semaine sanglante* were set by male barricade fighters and Versailles soldiers. But the fires were the perfect propaganda device, and the country's conservative newspapers seized on them as a chance to sway public opinion away from the revolutionary Commune. This was their primary tactic: blame all of the fires on working-class women, and then make those women monsters. It worked.

Conservative journalists of 1871 were remarkably detailed and persuasive in their reporting. On June 3, a description was published in the popular newsmagazine, *Le Monde Illustré*. It described the pétroleuses as "furies" who "glide through the rich quarters, profiting from the darkness or the desertion of the streets the civil war has caused; and fling their little vials of petrol, their devil's matches, their burning rags [into cellar

"Vasilissa the Beautiful" is the best known of the Baba Yaga stories scattered across Eastern Europe. In these stories, Baba Yaga is a fierce and powerful witch who lives deep in the forest.

She defends her forest home ferociously, much like the mythological pétroleuses defended Paris and the commune they helped build there. In most stories, Baba Yaga has an array of magical objects: her house on chicken legs, her mortar and pestle ship, her one leg made of bone. All of these give her power and bring the stories that she stars in to life on the page. But what is of most interest is Baba Yaga's associations with fire.

Her house is sometimes located across a river of flame and is ringed by lanterns made of human skulls. Her stove is her greatest threat, a place where characters believe they will be incinerated, although it as often resurrects life.

Like Fitz Fitcher, Baba Yaga has the power to take life, but like the youngest sister, she can also put it back together again. Baba Yaga can even resurrect herself: in fact, she sometimes dies at the end of a story, only to turn up in yet another tale.

Baba Yaga is neither fairy godmother nor evil sorceress. She is something more ambiguous. She teaches those who come to her door essential survival skills. She teaches them when to be honest or to lie, when to obey or demand, to steal or stay. Baba Yaga doles out punishments, but she also doles out tough love.

Why, then, the bad reputation? Perhaps she is called evil to remind the young that she cares not for polite society. That even if she helps the hero, she is a wild woman and not to be trusted. If Baba Yaga builds incendiary devices to give to little girls, and Baba Yaga is good, doesn't that mean the social order is at least a little bad?

The conservative press after the Paris Commune crafted mythical pétroleuses as villains, but they can be seen as folkloric heroes, willing to go to great measures to defend their city and their dreams. Like the youngest sister in "Fitcher's

who destroy Fitz Fitcher and his friends. Imagine that the ending is a little bit different. That all three sisters are there, participating in the burning. That they are, in a way, pétroleuses.

(They are also, maybe, witches. University of Winnipeg professor Catherine Tosenberger offers a bit of lexical evidence that could link “Fitcher’s Bird” to the witch hunts. Although the German word the Grimms use for Fitcher—hexenmeister—usually means “wizard” or “sorcerer,” it can also refer to someone who “detects witches and turns them over for punishment.” Following this line of logic, the story offers an inverted view of the witch trials, where the witches set fire to the witch burners.)

“Vasilissa the Beautiful,” a Russian fairy tale, is also a story about a young girl held in the woods against her will at the mercy of a powerful being with a bad reputation. Her step-sisters and stepmother have sent Vasilissa to the house of the fearsome witch, Baba Yaga, for a lantern, a ploy they hope will get her killed. But Baba Yaga—while certainly exacting and sharp tongued—is not as cruel as her stepfamily says. Vasilissa completes tasks that Baba Yaga sets before her with the help of a magical wooden doll given to her years prior by her deceased mother.

After a while, Baba Yaga is impressed with Vasilissa’s work and asks about it. When Vasilissa attributes her success to her birth mother’s blessings, Baba Yaga throws her out. Before Vasilissa goes, Baba Yaga gives her the asked-for lantern, in the form of a human skull set upon a stick. Vasilissa arrives home, and her stepmother and stepsisters are overjoyed to see her—they haven’t been able to keep a match lit since she left, and are living in the dark. But the fire escapes through the eye sockets of the skull and incinerates Vasilissa’s stepfamily. Baba Yaga has not only given Vasilissa light, she has also given her freedom from a bad home situation.

windows].” Other papers, both French and international, published similar assertions.

While journalists may have invented the pétroleuses, it was caricaturists who turned them into the defining image of the Commune. While the illustrations differ according to each artist’s and publisher’s predilections, they draw on similar elements: flame, gasoline-soaked rag, unruly woman. There is the pétroleuse stalking forward with a flaming torch, her back hunched, her face contorted into a menacing grimace. Then, there’s the trio of co-conspirators, looking like Macbeth’s witches, setting an arson as a bourgeois family escapes out of a burning home in the background.

The pétroleuses’ fire and ferocity hint at interesting predecessors. Born of the collective fear of a power-hungry élite, pétroleuses follow in a long line of mythologized fire-wielding devil-women—women like Baba Yaga, the youngest sister in the fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm, “Fitcher’s Bird,” and the women burned during the great witch hunts of early modern Europe.

In *Caliban & The Witch*, historian Silvia Federici considers the pétroleuses heirs to the propaganda originally created during the witch-hunts. “Like the witch,” she writes, “the pétroleuse was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair. In her hands was the container for the liquid she used to perpetrate her crimes.”

This is reflected in contemporary descriptions of pétroleuses. E.B. Washburne, the American minister to France at the time, wrote that the pétroleuses were paid ten francs per ten houses burned, and that they would find, kidnap, and arm children with “incendiary liquid.” The crimes of recruiting children and setting fire to private homes echoed allegations levied against women tried as witches.

Depictions of pétroleuses, like those of alleged witches, were rooted in sinister ideas about “female nature.” Communardes who fought on the barricades waged battle on the same terrain

as men, and though they might have fought hard, they were never seen as equals.

The pétroleuses disregarded the male-defined fields of battle and rules of engagement; instead, they snuck through the night with their fire and kerosene. They used trickery, cunning, and secrecy—negative qualities ascribed to women by European society—as tools of revolt.

Federici doesn't reference fairy tales directly, but the tropes of the genre weave their way through her text. She writes that "the world had to be disenchanting in order to be dominated" and that "the witch came to be associated with a lecherous old woman, hostile to new life, who fed upon infant flesh or used children's bodies to make her magical potions—a stereotype later popularized by children's books."

In fact, the crimes witches were charged with—cannibalism, deception, night flights, spell-casting and transformation into animal familiars, to name but a few, sound remarkably like the behavior ascribed to mischievous women in fairy tales.

Witch imagery is strong in the stories of the Brothers Grimm, where bad women go up in smoke and get gotten by the devil. Some scholars estimate that the Grimm's German homeland executed around 26,000 people on charges of witchcraft, so it's plausible that this history would find its way into folklore. Or, maybe it's just the nature of German wonder tales, which are often explicitly gruesome—limbs are lost, children are cooked into stew, and Cinderella's sisters have their eyes plucked out by birds.

Here and there, however, there's a German story that turns the bad, punished woman trope on its head. One of these stories is "Fitcher's Bird." Here's the plot, in brief: a sorcerer, Fitz Fitcher, kidnaps young women to romance and then kill them. The protagonist's two older sisters—first one, then the other—have recently fallen prey to his machinations.

Both have been taken to his home in the forest, treated lavishly, and then, after some time, told by Fitz Fitcher that he

must depart for a while. Both have been given an egg that they are instructed to carry with them everywhere. Both are warned not to open a certain door.

The sisters follow his instruction about the eggs, but break the taboo of the forbidden room. They discover a bloody basin full of dismembered corpses and, in shock, drop their eggs. The eggs are stained with blood, which the sisters can't rub off no matter how hard they try. Fitcher kills them for their transgressions.

Fitz Fitcher then kidnaps the youngest sister, and the plot repeats itself, except the youngest sister puts the egg in a safe place, opens the door, and, when she discovers the hacked-up corpses of her sisters, sets to work putting their limbs back together. The older sisters come back to life, and the youngest sister hides them in the house.

Fitcher returns, sees the unblemished egg, and is tricked into believing that his bride-to-be is obedient. The balance of power shifts, and now the sorcerer is compelled to follow the youngest sister's every command. She requests that he deliver a gold dowry to her family before she marries him and he carries the heavy load willingly, unaware that it is really her sisters.

While he's gone, she invites all of his cronies to the wedding party. She places a dressed up skull in the window of his home to stand in for herself, and then rolls herself in honey and feathers. She has become Fitcher's Bird and, in this disguise, she makes her escape. She meets Fitcher's friends, and later Fitcher himself, along the road home. None recognize her. Fitcher and his friends reach the house and, when they are inside, her kinsmen burn the house down.

It is only in this act of burning that the story feels a little wrong. The heroine outwits the sorcerer, brings her sisters back to life, tricks Fitcher's entire posse to their deaths and makes her escape. She uses deceitfulness and trickery as survival strategies for herself and her sisters. Yet it is the brothers