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### Shedding, Witchcraft, and the Romantic Subject: Feminist Appropriation of the Witch in Sarah Kirsch's Zaubersprüche

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Shedding, Witchcraft, and the Romantic Subject: Feminist Appropriation of the Witch in Sarah Kirsch's *Zaubersprüche* (1973)

**Abstract:** Against a background of the feminist appropriation of the witch taking place concurrently in second-wave American, French and West German feminism, the paper examines Sarah Kirsch's appropriation of the witch as a subversive figure in her poetry cycle *Zaubersprüche* (*Conjurations*, 1973). In subverting the traditional image of the witch, Kirsch establishes a new one: that of a feminist witch and a feminist witch-writer. The witch is both the fictive character created by Kirsch, and her own self-designation; in the latter case, writing, especially writing in the experimental fashion, is a form of witchcraft. The paper analyzes the poems using the theoretical concept of magical realism. Although magical realism is mostly associated with post-colonial studies, it proves to be an apposite mode for feminist studies as well. The magical realist modality contradicts the state-sanctioned aesthetic of socialist realism, a fact that makes Kirsch one of the subversive "GDR-Witches."

Keywords: Sarah Kirsch, *Zaubersprüche*, the Witch, magic, GDR feminism

## Introduction

The title of Sarah Kirsch's 1973 poetry collection recalls "Die Merseburger Zaubersprüche," originally an Old High German text, in which the chains of a prisoner are magically broken, or a horse's broken legs are healed with magic words.<sup>1</sup> From the outset, Kirsch presents the volume's female protagonist as a witch, who is uttering magic words. In donning a witch's cloak, Kirsch embraces the notorious way of labeling women, including its assumptions that women are irrational, wicked, and threatening to men, but then reduces such assumptions to impossibility by showing that the woman is anything but an evil witch. Kirsch subverts the traditional image of the witch, and at the same time establishes a new one: that of a feminist witch and a feminist witch-writer.

*Zaubersprüche* is the first to be published among GDR feminist texts that employ the witch as a symbolic subversive figure. After *Zaubersprüche*, a cluster of literary works by GDR women writers came out that share the common denominator of enlisting the service of the witch to monitor, evaluate and critique the GDR society from gendered perspectives. Irmtraud Morgner retrospectively defines her *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura* (1974) as a witches' novel and Beatrice as a witch in the sense that the woman troubadour transgresses social norms prescribed for women and defies the object status of women (Morgner 1984 pp 16—17) In *Amanda. Ein Hexenroman* (Morgner 1980, pub. 1983), the sequel to *Trobadora Beatriz*, nearly all women are witches in nature, split in two: the suppressed feminist half and the "normal" half. In Petra Werner's short story "Sich einen Mann backen" (1982), an old witch bakes husbands for sale—husbands she claims that are better than most

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<sup>1</sup> "The Merseburg Incantations" are translated by Prof. D. L. Ashliman from Old High German. (<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/merseburg.html>).

natural ones. Elke Willkomm's *Hexensommer* (1984) portrays a Gymnasium teacher's struggle with the GDR's stifling educational system, emboldened by her witch grandmother and her suppressed witch Doppelgänger Barbara. The protagonist in Renate Aplitz's *Hexenzeit* (1984) utters a spell that wishes to deplete her unfaithful lover's virility. In *Kassandra* (1983) and *Medea* (1996), Wolf chooses pre-historical mythical figures who lived in a society in the process of violent transformation from a matrilinear to a patriarchal one. During that process, women lost the esteem they once had as goddesses, priestesses and were defamed as witches. Given this array of Hexenliteratur, the *Geschlechtertausch* stories (Kirsch et al. 1975) by Kirsch, Morgner and Wolf can be read as witches' sexual metamorphosis choreographed to reveal the gendered presumptions underlying ordinary social practice.

Feminist self-fashioning as witches is part of the international second-wave women's movement that started in the late 1960s. Feminist witches, self-evidently, derive their motifs from the actual history of the witch persecution. Feminist gestures towards the topoi of the witch seem identical across western cultures. They embrace the negative identity of a witch and thereby change the valence of the term. Valence change is a device taken from the Civil Rights Movement in the US to valorize the derogated, to claim value in what is devalued. In re-valuing the witch, feminists are engaged in a process of uncovering the process by which a woman was made a witch. The historical witch does not look like the image we are familiar with. The image we have of the witch is rather culturally constructed, a product of male fantasy that has worked its way into shared cultural awareness. By revealing the witch-making process, feminists return witches to their rightful place in history. Feminist witchcraft is constituted of deconstructing the witch and constructing the witch. It is a semiotic process that takes apart the cultural assumptions and preconceptions about the witch and reconstitutes new understandings of her.

During the second-wave women's movement in the United States, Robin Morgan and others founded WITCH, acronym for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, on Halloween 1968, implicitly inspired by and critical of Senator Joseph McCarthy's HUAC witch-hunt hearings of the 1950s (Morgan 1977).<sup>2</sup> In France, the journal *Sorcières: Les Femmes Vivent* (first issued in 1976), edited Xaviere Gauthier et al., testifies to the same engagement with the witch as alter ego for feminists. The West German feminist magazine *Emma* (founded in 1977 and still publishing), edited by Alice Schwarzer, is a showcase for the strong presence of feminist witchcraft in West Germany. Nowhere in the collection does Kirsch explicitly refer to the historical witch-hunt or the contemporary women's movement in the West. Yet she clearly has the (feminist) witch motif in mind, since she designates her collection "Fachliteratur für Hexen" (Mabee 1989; Cosentino 1990).<sup>3</sup>

*Zaubersprüche* is not only the first to be published among GDR feminist-witch texts, but it exemplifies them. The collection contains the central message of female self-determination shared by other women writers. The general trajectory of the collection moves from the runaway wife in "Sieben Häute" to the autonomous 'ich' in an actually entitled poem "Ich." Yet within this trajectory, the 'ich' does not move easily in the direction of autonomy. Rather, the

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<sup>2</sup> Morgan (1977, pp. 71-81). Also see Echols (1989. 96ff).

<sup>3</sup> "Acht Fragen an Sarah Kirsch," Cover text of the first edition of *Zaubersprüche* published by the Aufbau-Verlag in Berlin in 1973. See Mabee (1989. p. 123). Also see Cosentino (1990, p. 41). In the inside of the West German version published in 1974 by the Langewiesche-Brandt Verlag, it says: "Sie nennen die neue Sammlung Ihrer Gedichte *Zaubersprüche*..." "Ja. Ich hoffe, daß Hexen, gäbe es sie, diese Geschichte als Fachliteratur nutzen könnten." (Kirsch 1974).

development is non-linear, undulating to reflect the to and fro of a love relationship. The fluctuation is shown through the ordering of the poems. “Trennung” is the last poem in the first section, but themes like love, eroticism, female vulnerability, and separation resurface in the third section. Kirsch explains in a 1975 interview that her poems are to a great extent autobiographical, but they are also about experiences of others (Cosentino 1990, p. 45). The autobiographic writings arose out of the affair Kirsch had with fellow poet Karl Mickel (Mabee 1989, p. 34).<sup>4</sup> Through the poems’ formal arrangement, Kirsch shows the path towards autonomy to be a difficult one; women’s emancipation, she demonstrates, is not something that is or can be bestowed by the state alone, but something a woman has to achieve mostly on her own.

*Zaubersprüche* is a feminist and magical realist text. Its magical realist modality contradicts the state-sanctioned aesthetic of socialist realism. Magical realism is mostly associated with the Latin American Boom in the middle of the twentieth century, most influentially embodied in Gabriel García Márquez’ Nobel Prize winning *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). It is a concept that conjoins the aesthetic style with politics in the post-colonial context. Despite controversies over the concept, critics agree on magical realism’s social and political functions, its continuity and discontinuity with nineteenth-century realism, its subversion to the hegemonic, colonial, and realist discourse. Zamora and Faris 1995; Hart and Ouyang 2005. Juxtaposing post-colonial and the feminist rhetoric, we can notice a lot of resemblance. Juxtaposing post-colonial and feminist rhetoric, we can notice a lot of resemblance. As the case with colonization of the natives, women are colonized by men in a patriarchal society. Magical realist literature in both contexts is a literature of decolonization, emancipation and reconstitution. Thus, much of the analysis about the magic and politics in the post-colonial magical realist texts is transferable to the feminist texts. Drawing on Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Franza-Fragment*, Christa Wolf conflates post-colonial and feminist concerns in her *Kassandra* lecture and later again in *Medea*, juxtaposing the colonization of women and aboriginals.

Magical realism proved an ideal mode for GDR witch-novels. The feminist witch, product of female reality and female imagination, is a concept that explodes the boundaries of conventional realism. What the feminist-witch authors do is two-fold. On one hand, they depict characters that mimic the traditional witch. Magic is often associated with conventional fantasy about what a witch is capable of: flying, brewing, metamorphosis, conjurations, prophecy, etc. Witches’ magic literally covers the “magical” portion of the two-word term. On the other hand, from the image of the traditional witch, these authors ingeniously derive a new image of a feminist witch to attack gender inequalities, which covers the “realism” part of the concept.

In *Zaubersprüche*, magic itself is evoked repeatedly: for instance, in “Schwarze Bohnen,” the ‘ich’ un-grinds the ground coffee back into black beans, or when the witch protagonist resorts to magic spells to conjure back the lover. More generally, Kirsch’s choice to write in a language that is fantastic, subjective and metaphorical demonstrates that her poetry has a different genealogy than that of official socialist literature. She aligns herself with the Romantic literary tradition, which itself recalls aspects of German medieval literature, both literary epochs deemed illegitimate in the GDR. Formally as well as thematically, Kirsch thus challenges the patriarchal state for its propaganda about women in socialism and for its regimentation of literary taste.

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<sup>4</sup> While her husband Rainer Kirsch went to the Soviet Union in 1968, Sarah Kirsch started an affair with Karl Mickel, and became pregnant. She got divorced in the same year, and continued the relationship with Mickel for 7 years. See Mabee, 34.

Kirsch's subjective and imaginative poetry reconnects with the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Romanticism was a reaction to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the age of reason. Kant's philosophy about the consciousness proves to be critical for the Romantics. To the question whether the world has an objective existence or is a product of the mind, Kant's famous answer is that we cannot know the thing itself (*das Ding an sich*). We can never be certain about the real world outside of our mind. The thing we know is mediated by our subjective projections. The human mind gives determinative shape to reality. The imperative set by Enlightenment on the empirical and the rational curbs freedom in human imagination. The Romantics contravene their predecessors with an emphasis precisely on human imagination and subjectivity. The industrial revolution, beginning during the Enlightenment period, aggravates alienation of man from nature, and reduces the individual to insignificance in mass society. In remedy, the Romantics exalt the Self and his relationship with nature.

Kirsch's deviation from the state-sponsored socialist realist aesthetic replicates the opposition of Romanticism against Enlightenment. Romanticism was a vexed issue for and in the GDR (Hohendahl 1983, pp. 13-52; Herninghouse 1982, pp. 1- 17; Gaskill et al 1990). Officially atheist, the GDR selectively endorsed rationalist, revolutionary, and nineteenth-century realist traditions, and suppressed romanticism because of its links with the irrational and the fantastic. Georg Lukács, who influenced cultural policy in the 1950s and 1960s, blamed fascism on the German tradition of irrationalism, and thus brought romanticism into disrepute. During the early Honecker era (1971-1976), a relatively liberal cultural policy relaxed governmental control of literature, although this changed with the expatriation of Wolf Biermann.

During this period, a new round of discussions concerning heritage and tradition initiated the first serious rethinking of romanticism since its 'banishment' in the 1950s. Self-conscious about this fact, Kirsch makes the reader aware of the 'danger' of her poetry in the first poem in the collection, the short and terse "Anziehung."

### Anziehung

Nebel zieht auf, das Wetter schlägt sich um. Der Mond versammelt Wolken im Kreis. Das Eis auf dem See hat Risse und reibt sich. Komm über den See.

Stylistically, Kirsch keeps her poem plain and unembellished. Each sentence is reduced to a minimal length, with simply the subject and its verb, without any adjective or any modifying word. The poem starts with the statement that the weather is thawing, which could allude to the political "Tauwetter," and it ends with an invitation. But the invitation to walk over the lake on cracking ice puts the invitee at danger. What makes Kirsch's poetry 'dangerous' is the possibility that she may whet the reader's appetite for subjective writing, thereby 'misleading' or 'corrupting' a member of the collective who is supposed to be reading socialist realist literature. Not without pride, Kirsch suggests that she is about to bring her reader along for an adventure, and give him a different kind of experience. Implicitly the poem incorporates an artistic proclamation from Kirsch about the otherness of her writing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In her discussion of Bachofen's equation of the moon with the Dionysian, the emotional, the female, and the sun with the Apollonian, the intellectual, the male, Barbara Mabee sees the female protagonist gaining self-agency and subsuming an active role in a relationship (See Barbara Mabee, 133). Christine Cosentino interprets "Anziehung" as sexual attraction between two sexes,

The famous poem “Schwarze Bohnen” illustrates the central points of the volume, both formally and thematically. Appeared in 1968 prior to the publication of the volume, “Schwarze Bohnen” is included in *Zaubersprüche* as “an honoured component” (Graves 1985, p. 18).

Schwarze Bohnen  
Nachmittags nehme ich ein Buch in die Hand  
Nachmittags lege ich ein Buch aus der Hand  
Nachmittags fällt mir ein es gibt Krieg  
Nachmittags vergesse ich jedweden Krieg  
Nachmittags mahle ich Kaffee  
Nachmittags setze ich den zermahlenden Kaffee  
Rückwärts zusammen schöne  
Schwarze Bohnen  
Nachmittags ziehe ich mich aus mich an  
Erst schminke ich dann wasche ich mich  
Singe bin stumm

Using anaphora and parataxis, this deceptively simple, in fact evasive poem enlists a series of mutually nullifying actions. Each of her second, but backward acts cancels out any effect her first action has had. Her efforts constitute an exercise in futility. If we read the poem as a personal poem, we see the ‘ich’ appearing selfcontradictory, spending an agitated and meaningless afternoon, waiting for her lover probably, an effort that could be as futile as what she does in the afternoon. As Christine Cosentino sharply points out that such a love poem is downright “unhexisch” (1990, p. 53). Indeed, the unproductive and pathetic woman counters the traditional image of the witch.

But Kirsch not only invalidates the traditional image of the witch, she inaugurates a new image of the witch, that of a *feminist witch-writer*, in the way that the poem exemplifies the subjective and magical realist mode of writing. Most notably, her ‘ungrinding’ the ground coffee back into black beans is impossible. But the unreal is made real, imaginatively ‘realized’ in poetic form. As a result of her willfulness, the intact black beans appear, or to be exact, re-appear in front of her. Figuratively, black beans are products of an imaginative and subjective process, much like Kirsch’s poems. Thus the black beans embody her poetry. “Schwarze Bohnen” affronts socialist realism by disregarding objectivity and existential reality, and replacing it with her own fanciful subjectivity. By reversing the process, she enacts her subversive act of writing. The witting and whimsical action of the narrator lays claim to subjectivity and individuality, a politically loaded pronouncement in that regimented society, where individuality is supposedly subordinated to collectivity. Thus “Schwarze Bohnen” is a bold and rebellious display, especially when one considers that she wrote it before the short-lived liberalization under Honecker.

The political ramifications are not immanent in her poetry, but contingent on their environment, the text upon its context. In the context of the GDR, the political gesture made by Kirsch’s writing is unmistakable: she does not kowtow to what is expected of and from artists, instead writes in her own way. Not surprisingly, the reception of “Schwarze Bohnen,” as Barbara

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which, at least in the long term, is questionable, because of the period used after the invitation, instead of an exclamation mark (See Christine Cosentino, 49). Both Mabee’s and Cosentino’s interpretations agree with the gist of the entire collection, which is about a failed relationship and the woman’s coming to herself.

Mabee has documented, mirrors the struggles of GDR cultural policies. Published in the anthology *Saison für Lyrik* in 1968, it was vehemently criticized in 1969 during the Sixth Writers' Union Congress for its "private" and thus "un-socialist" sentiments. Ironically, such criticism only justifies the anxiety over artistic muteness as already expressed in the

poem: “Singe bin stumm.” The angst of losing productivity is captured in the image of black beans, as Mabee cites from Bachofen’s system of nature symbols. The bean, according to Bachofen, is a fecund symbol, then black beans signify “abgetötete Fruchtbarkeit” (Mabee 1989, p. 137). Cosentino observes the same insecurity and agony Kirsch expresses in the face of the literary and artistic control in the GDR: “Als Künstler- oder Politgedicht [weist dieser Text] auf ausgedörrte Kreativität, Verzweiflung an der Gegenwart und an einer ungewissen Zukunft sowie auf kulturpolitische Irritationen, denen die Künstlerin sich ausgesetzt sah” (1990, p. 53). Subsequent criticism of this poem only confirmed that Kirsch was right about being pessimistic. Yet in the wake of the political thaw, “Schwarze Bohnen” was extolled on the Writers’ Union Congress in 1973 as “Beispiel für notwendige Vielfalt der Poesie” (Mabee 1989, p. 137).

As the title of the volume makes clear, Kirsch’s poems approximate conjuration formulae. In recourse to the tradition of the *germanische Gebrauchsichtung* which encompasses the genre of “Zaubersprüche,” the female protagonist in Kirsch repeatedly resorts to magic—in “Rufformel,” “Klagmf,” “The Bird,” “Fluchformel,” “Ruf- und Fluchformel”—in an effort to retain a disappearing relationship. In an elegiac and resentful tone, she deplores a man’s fading love, resorts to witchcraft and calls upon nature to curse him, but with the underlying intention of attracting him back to her.

In “Rufformel,” she beseeches Apollo to benumb the senses of her lover, so that he can presumably be more manageable and available. In expressing the desire of having some control over the lover, she reveals that she has indeed lost control of him, and therefore wants Apollo to bind him with her hair: “Mit meinen Haaren/ Binden ihn”. In “Klagruf,” she compares the lover with a horse and herself with hay, but the horse, faithless and stupid in her eyes, has run away in favor of chaff: “Weh mein schneeweißer Traber, [...] ging durch! Lief/Drei Abende weit war nicht zu bewegen/Heimzukehren. Nahm das Heu nicht/Wahilos fraß er die Spreu/Ich dachte ich sterbe so froh ich.”

In “Fluchformel,” she hurls curses upon his feet and toes with “Frost Regen und Schlamm” and “Eis.” The lover’s imperceptiveness is expressed in a material, concrete, and descriptive language: “Deine Poren/Sind völlig verstopft und verkommt.” But her loving tenderness is revealed by the expression “Zarthäutiger,” and by her regret about having lost the irretrievable intimacy they once enjoyed: “[...] zwischen die Zehen mit denen ich/Einstmals die Finger verflocht, du schiebst sie/Nicht mir untern Tisch”. Both her anger and yearning are simultaneously on the brink of bursting forth, lurking just barely beneath the lines. In Kirsch, the curse a witch spells out is divested of any real evil or virulence, thus neutralized and harmless.

In “Ruf- und Fluchformel,” she calls on the weather (Regen Schnee Gewitter Hagelschlagen) for alliance. Because she is on familiar terms with the natural elements—given her use of “ihr” and “euch”—she hopes to enlist them in her efforts to force her lover to return. She summons them to come out of their resting place at the sea and to spread themselves throughout the sky, but only in order to intimidate him, not to harm him. In fact, she pleads them to restrain themselves until he finds shelter at her house. As long as he is with her, “you”—the natural elements—can go wild, the wilder the better in fact, so that he will have to remain inside with her, and make love to her: “Dieweil wir uns in unsrer Lieb erproben.”

The fact that these conjuration poems are placed in the third section, long after “Trennung,” the last poem in the first section, attests to her lingering erotic desire for the



undeserving lover.<sup>6</sup> However, her eroticism seems to be misplaced: The lover in Kirsch is portrayed as promiscuous, callous and cold, while the woman is plagued by an inability to express outright resentment. Her cruelty is only feigned, a display of sorts; her hatred is rather helpless and involuntary. *In fact, she is not at all witch-like and her magic does not work to recall the unfeeling and unresponsive lover.* Desperate about her inefficient magic, she once even tests the effectiveness of the magic by uttering the magic backwards.

#### The Bird

Ist es einerlei was daraus wird  
Fliegt lediglich am Haus vorbei der Amsel  
Die Amsel kann sich nit drum kümmern sie  
Mit ihr in eure Kammer gehst Eu Gott!  
Ein üppig Mahl verzehrest und darauf  
Den Blumentöpfen deines Eheweibs  
Du mich längst vergessen hast und bei  
Ist es einerlei ob du mich liebst ob  
Die Amsel fliegt am Haus vorbei der Amsel

At first glance, the reader is perplexed by this nonsensical jumble of words, and may be inclined to blame the witch for not knowing her craft as well as she should. Kirsch's annotation indicates the reader into the trick of the poem: The poem is a magic formula, which will lose its effect, if it is read syntactically correctly, i.e. from the last line to the first line (Kirsch 1973, p. 103). This annotation implies that the upside-down poem is intended to be the correct magic spell, and the witch protagonist does know her craft. However, at the hint of the annotation, the reader is bound to read the last line first. Thus Kirsch means for the magic to be undone through the act of reading. In a way, Kirsch invites the reader to intrude her world of magic, and become part of the poem and her experiment. Moreover, it goes without saying that Kirsch writes from the last line to the first as well. Hence, Kirsch only furnishes her witch protagonist with a sense of self-pretense. The artificiality of the poem signals the disconnection between word magic and the physical world.

Reading from the last line upwards, we learn that the 'ich' is having an affair with a married man. She is agonized at the thought of him going to bed with his wife. But the blackbird does not care about what will become of this relationship. Birds, in medieval literature, are endowed with the ability to prophecy. Here the use of an English title instead of a German one—"Die Amsel"—means it is a foreign bird. One thinks of the talking raven in Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem "The Raven." Even if the English-speaking bird predicts the future, she is unable

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<sup>6</sup> Kirsch's love poetry is provokingly erotic; indeed, it stands out as radical and immodest in the landscape of GDR literature. "Don Juan kommt am Vormittag" shows the lovers impatiently craving for each other, presumably early in their relationship. "Der Flug" captures the highs and lows of the relationship through spatial metaphors. It begins with concentrated love-making, imaginarily on top of the train, on the roof, in the sky, and ends with inevitable separation on the street. "Muskelkater" describes the muscle pain resulted from wild love-making, compared with other sports activities that would cause similar muscle ache. Barbara Mabee considers the eroticism in Kirsch as parody of Malleus Maleficarum, which represents women as susceptible to the devil's sexual seduction. See Mabee 1989, 130.

to communicate with it. What makes matters worse is that Kirsch's bird is as indifferent as the lover. And it cannot even serve as confidante, as it did for the female protagonist in Walter von der Vogelweide's famous "Under der linden," where the 'ich' hopes that the bird, witness to her affairs, will keep the secret:

“Daß er bei mir gelegen hat, wenn es jemand wüßte,  
(das verhüte Gott!) so schämte ich mich.  
Was er mit mir tat, niemand jemals  
möge das erfahren als er und ich und ein kleines Vögelein, tandaradei,  
das wird wohl verschwiegen sein”<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly enough, the 'ich' in Kirsch animalizes the lover as if he were a bird too: “[ob du] bei/Den Blumentöpfen deines Eheweibs/Ein üppig Mahl verzehrest und darauf/Mit ihr in eure Kammer gehst” (quoted in the correct syntactic order). In order to vent her frustration she turns her lover into a bird, as a witch might do.

Conventionally, a *Zauberspruch* remains true and effective until it is fulfilled. Such sustaining power does not inhere in Kirsch's verbal magic. Moreover, a magic formula is usually regularized and conservative. The person reciting it must get it exactly right in order for it to work. The famous magical formula “Open, Sesame!” used by Ali Baba in the *Arabian Nights* to open the door of the robbers' cave does not work when Ali Baba's brother Kasim has forgotten the magic word and says “Barley!” Kasim then tries all other sorts of grain, except “sesame,” and of course the door will not open to the wrong code. Such precision does not seem to concern Kirsch in her conjurations. No fixed formulae are found in her poems. She is resourceful with her magic words, as though trying different ones, much as Kasim does, in order to test their effectiveness, to see what works. She has not yet found her “Open, Sesame,” since her magic words so far have failed her.

Hence, Kirsch's magic formulae at once stand within the tradition of incantation and go beyond it. In the same vein, the poem “Schneeröschen,” an intelligent combination and reversal of the Brothers Grimm's “Schneewittchen” and “Dornröschen,” shows that Kirsch does not simply align herself to the Romantic tradition, but innovatively enriches and adds to this legacy. In “Schneeröschen,” the female protagonist gets stuck in the snow-hedge; she is left dying without the same redeeming love and hope as Dornröschen and Schneewittchen had. No one, not even “you” who are the only hope, would bother to venture through the winter snow, and he even begins to mourn her while there is still plenty of time to save her. *She curses like a witch.* But she does not curse his “patience,” (very ironic of course), instead that he will not find her body the next day. For her, death and the invisibility of the body would mean triumph and revenge, because it frustrates his hope of finding what he looks for—a corpse. Referring to Karl Mickel's cold treatment of their separation, the dying 'ich' predicts that he would hew a likeness of her from the ice, buy flowers of glass, and compose the most artificial obituary that would make him famous as one of the country's ice-poets (Mabee 1989, p. 125). Kirsch's “Schneeröschen” reverses the original Romantic stories of rescue, love, and happiness. It comes from the fairy tale tradition of magic, but the magic is lost in the face of the coldness of the lover, a cruel reality that is completely at odds with the fairy tale world. In a way, Kirsch de-mystifies

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<sup>7</sup> Brackert (1983, pp. 153-154).

the myth, un-romanticizes the romantic tales, notwithstanding the fact that she is being deeply romantic by conjuring away her own body when she cannot conjure her lover to her.

The coldness of the lover, mirrored in images of the winter, snow, ice and glass, is contrasted with the woman's mixed feelings of love and hate, which make the feminine indecisive and vulnerable. Kirsch demonstrates that it is impossible for a woman to be the conventional evil witch by thematizing women's vulnerability and their inability to hate, in accord with the widely made claim by GDR women authors that men are incapable of love. Indeed, Kirsch's witch is *a witch of love*.

"Ich wollte meinen König töten" lends further weight to this observation. It starts with a sense of defiance and a violent wish, which however gives way to her inability to do him any harm. The poem makes a reference to Bettina von Arnim's *Dies Buch gehört dem König* (1843), in which the politically engaged Romantic woman writer appeals to the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV on behalf of the impoverished class. In the poetry cycle "Wiepersdorf" in *Rückenwind*. Kirsch writes of herself and her Romantic role model: "Immer/Sind wir allein, wenn wir den Königen schreiben/Denen des Herzens und jenen/Des Staats" (1977, p. 27). Kirsch differentiates between two kinds of kings, the king of state, and the king of heart. In "Ich wollte meinen König töten," the 'ich' is at first hurt and exasperated by the lover—the king of her heart, and determines to leave him and sever any ties she has with him: She wants to abandon the bracelet he gave her, his family name she has adopted, and the love verses she has made for him. But after the hyphen and "doch" in the middle of the poem, she is made indecisive by "Das Ding Seele dies bourgeoise Stück" and her action becomes self-contradictory. Wanting to accuse him and betray him, she ends up doing exactly the opposite, kissing another (prostituting herself?) for the sake of protecting the lover: "Ich suchte ihn, den Plan zu vollenden/Kiibte den ändern, daß meinem/König nichts widerführe." The poem exposes her as unable to be evil, violent or even vengeful. The violence entailed in the wish—"Ich wollte meinen König töten"—is merely a violent thought, which will never be acted upon. The tension between her thoughts and actions affirms Kirsch's diagnosis of female vulnerability and humanity. In so doing, Kirsch questions and invalidates the traditional image of the witch.

Instead of the witch-victimizer, women are presented as victims of men's unfaithfulness and of domestic violence. In "Er erzählt mir ohne Absicht im Winter," a husband uses a turkey to kill his wife on their seventh Christmas, simply because there is a piece of hair lying near the turkey. He then eats the turkey, and thus carries the murder tool (Mordwerkzeug) with him. He sets her down as a scarecrow in cabbage field, and forgets about the whole thing, only noticing that there is nobody to cook for him, until the police come. We see just how precarious a woman's situation can be through the fact that the husband hies into a murderous rage simply because a hair is out of place. It is a horror story about a murder case that connects to Romantic writings like E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Nachtstucke*, as well as to Alfred Hitchcock. The 'er' in the title is not to be identified with the husband in the story. Kirsch adds "ohne Absicht" in the title, which ironically indicates that the 'er' in the title does not understand what the story is actually about. He simply tells the story, without reflecting upon its significance. He tells it possibly because it also happened in winter and it was a good "Nachtstiick." The fact that men do not even reflect on how and why women live as they do is an obstacle in the women's emancipation.

Kirsch's protagonist does not remain the vulnerable and victimized *anti-witch*. The author is not satisfied with only uprooting the stereotypical image of the witch. In the spirit of Western feminist-witches, she embraces the label 'witch.' During the course of the poetry collection, we observe a metamorphosis of a teary wife into a new woman, an anti-witch to a

feminist witch. The process of her transformation starts in the poem “Sieben Häute,” the title poem of the first section.

### Sieben Häute

Die Zwiebel liegt weißgeschält auf dem kalten Herd  
Sie leuchtet aus ihrer innersten Haut daneben das Messer  
Die Zwiebel allein das Messer allein die Hausfrau  
Lief weinend die Treppe hinab so hatte die Zwiebel  
Ihr zugesetzt oder die Stellung der Sonne überm Nachbarnhaus  
Wenn sie nicht wiederkommt wenn sie nicht bald  
Wiederkommt findet der Mann die Zwiebel sanft und das  
Messer beschlagen

While peeling an onion, the wife suddenly runs down the stairs crying. The poet gives two possible explanations for that: the onion or the position of the sun above the neighbor’s house. The seven layers of the onion convey the image of entrapment that resembles the trapped state of housewifery. The reason she cries could well be that she is struck, while peeling the onion, by the similarity between her existence and the onion’s inner skins. The sun symbolizes the prospect of a different, better and brighter existence ‘out there.’ In a metaphorical and symbolic language, Kirsch captures the nuanced feelings and predicament involved in being a housewife, the traditional role ascribed to women. Peter Graves notes that the title “Seven Skins” alludes not only to the onion but also to the seven layers of skin on the human body (1985, p. 83). In that case, peeling onion also signifies the stripping away of skins. Without skin, the body loses its exterior protection and becomes exposed and vulnerable. Thus the image of the onion symbolizes the woman’s body as object of abuse and exploitation.

However, the poem does not end with the wife’s bad mood. Instead it goes on: if she does not come back, if she does not come back immediately, the onion is soft and the knife tarnished. If this line is read as the husband’s voice, though threatening-sounding, a sense of dependence and powerlessness of the man is also perceivable. Interestingly, instead of the subjunctive mode. Kirsch uses the indicative mode, which means that the onion is soft and the knife is tarnished, which further indicates that the wife is not returning, at least not returning in time to finish her household chore without blemish; she is running away like Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Mabee calls her running away “den Streik der Frau, das Ende der Unterwerflichkeit [sic].” She reads the knife as a phallic symbol. The knife was used to cut the onion, but now it is tarnished, rusty, and blunt, implying the man’s loss of phallic power over his wife (1989, pp. 132-135).

The image of the onion also anticipates Verena Stefan’s *Häutungen* (1975), which would appear two years after *Zaubersprüche* and become the first West German literary text dining the new women’s movement (Stefan 1994, p. 7). Stefan uses the image of shedding or molting as metaphor to represent her metamorphosis towards a lesbian feminist. Her heterosexual relationships with Dave, a black revolutionary, and then Samuel, a leftist activist in the student movement, make her realize that “Sexismus geht tiefer als rassismus als klassenkampf” (Stefan 1994, p. 7). She arduously but determinedly sheds that heterosexual skin and slips into another skin: “Das paargeriist erwies sich als ungeheuer, als stabiles, widerstandsfähiges ungetiim. Ich wollte die sucht, teil eines paarès zu sein, ausmerzen. Das hieß, über den eigenen schatten springen, in eine andere haut schlüpfen, sich erst von der alten haut trennen, von allein löste sie sich nicht” (Stefan 1994, p. 105). She argues that lesbianism would solve many of the gender

problems, which, proves to be difficult to implement in reality through her own experience in homosexual relationships. A crisis of identity follows the shedding: “Nach der Häutung folgt die Identitätskrise” (Stefan 1994, p. 10). In “Kürbisfrau,” Stefan hides herself behind the skin of Cloe, also a woman writer, to imply that she, like Cloe, is in the process of transformation, with old patches of skins still hanging, and new patches dazzling through. Shedding is a positive metaphor because it is essential to growth and survival. In this sense, when the layers of the onion are peeled or shed, the wife in Kirsch’s “Sieben Häute” arrives at the core of the onion. She is not only struck by the similarity between the onion’s anatomy that encases the core and the patriarchal structure that encloses her true Self, but is also empowered by the act of peeling to shed old skins and find new identities; thus she brings up the courage to leave the husband and the household.

In establishing the image of a new witch, Kirsch portrays the defiant side of the woman in “Widerrede.” As the title already indicates, the ‘ich’ does not acquiesce to her lot, but acts by talking back. The poem can be divided into two parts. The first part, starting with “Ich blase meinen Atem aus/In meinen kleinen Himmel in meinem Haus,” sounds similar but stands in stark contrast to the beginning lines of the second part: “Jetzt blase ich meinen Atem aus/Unter natürlichem Himmel.” The latter has double meaning, literal and figurative. Literally, she is thrown out by her husband, and breathes in the open; figuratively she can now breathe more freely, empowered by nature. She has shed her old skin and brings up the coinage to go back to her house and challenge him, an act that shocks him more than awakens him: “Nicht daß er sich im Unrecht fühlt/Er ist blaß.” Her change is mirrored in the changed reaction of the clock. When she is weak, even the clock seems to mock her: “Ich erreiche nichts, nicht die Uhr/Mit schleppenden Zeigern hält an.” But when she contradicts him, the clock seems to celebrate her courage: “Widerrede, da scheppert die Uhr/Sie schlägt und stottert und klirrt mit dem Glas.”

This is only one of the many examples where Kirsch instills life into inanimate objects. We remember the talking tree as her interlocutor in “Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen” in her first self-authored anthology *Landaufenthalt* (Kirsch 1967). The practice of animism is a common treat in Kirsch’s poetic world, a practice whose literary heritage harks back at least as far as to the Minnesang. In Walter von der Vogelweide’s “Under der linden,” for example, the broken flower, a metaphor for lost virginity, testifies to their love scene, and the bird is drawn to secrecy: “und ein kleines Vögelein, /tandaradei, /das wird wohl verschwiegen sein”. Nature—animated and anthropomorphized—takes on a life force, serving as a communicative partner for the female protagonist in Vogelweide and empowering Kirsch’s protagonist to an act of standing up for herself. Thus not only do humans animate nature, but also vice versa. The Romantic reciprocal relationship of man and nature finds resonance in Kirsch.

The affinity with the witch makes her bolder in “Katzenkopfpflaster,” the title poem of the third section. In this poem, the road made of cobblestones, instead of irregular rocks, spurs her to trot fast, as if her hair has grown wings, and she could fly like a witch: “Wäre ich auf der Straße mit dem Katzenkopfpflaster, ich begänne zu traben. Mein Haar schlägt die Flügel. Ich trage Schellen hinter den Ohren. Bevor ich stürze, bin ich weiter.” The ‘ich’ in “Katzenkopfpflaster” sounds cheerful, optimistic and defiant. She will “trot” over old feelings subsequently expressed in this section and arrive at the last poem—“Ich,” thus ending the collection on an optimistic and vibrant note with the protagonist proclaiming independence and self-determination: “Ich stand/Auf eigenen Füßen, Proleten unter den Gliedern, ich hätte/Mir gern einen Bärn aufgeladen ein Zopf aufgebunden/Ein Pulverfaß aufm Feuer gehabt.” The independent image of a woman is desirably that of a *feminist witch*, who would have pulled her

own leg, untied her hair and been stirring in a tripod, containing explosives. The anthology ends with a revolutionary, almost terrorist verse, resonating with the danger announced in the leading poem of the collection—"Anziehung."

*Zaubersprüche* is one of the earliest explicitly feminist works coming out of the GDR. It honestly captures women's emotional world, and the necessity for them to attain self-agency. It precedes Verena Stefan's *Häutungen* by two years, in which Stefan concludes with the same self-assertion as in Kirsch's "Ich:" "Der mensch meines lebens bin ich" (Stefan 1994, p. 158). While an activist women's movement was underway on the other side of the border, a specific GDR feminism began to take place in literature in the wake of Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, a text also studied by early West German feminists (Stefan 1994, p. 9). Due to the political climate. East German feminism remained largely a literary one. And GDR women writers play a particularly significant role for understanding GDR feminism. Literary precedents, especially Romantic women writers such as Karolina von Giinderode and Bettina von Arnim serve as role models for GDR women writers.<sup>8</sup> Romanticism and feminism are not an odd couple. Advocacy of women's emancipation is consistent with the Romantic spirit of rebellion and the cultivation of the Self. The conventional association of man with reason and woman with emotion establishes man as the Enlightenment figure and woman as the Romantic figure. Kirsch subsumes this notion, goes along with it, but counters it with the dichotomy of the cold, unfeeling man and the humane, compassionate woman.

Poetry, by nature, is terse and compact. More is left unsaid than said. Works like Maxie Wander's *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* created sensation, while a poetry collection like *Zaubersprüche* did not. In the late 1970s, some West German feminists opted for pamphlets and tracts: "Leave the poetry, write reports!"<sup>9</sup> Verena Stefan also points to the simple, terse and direct language that the West German feminist activists use to reach a broad range of women.<sup>10</sup> Kirsch is more of an intellectual and a poet than an activist. Distancing herself from the Western feminist movement, she relies on her own devices to contribute to women's striving towards emancipation. To that end, she creates new forms and a new language that consciously or unconsciously subscribes to the magical realist mode of writing, deviating from the nineteenth-century realism and socialist realism, a fact that makes Kirsch one of the subversive "GDR-Witches."

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<sup>8</sup> Wolf (1979). Wolf (1971). Kirsch (1977. pp. 18-29).

<sup>9</sup> Krechel (1979, p. 61). Quoted from Altbach (1984).

<sup>10</sup> "Wir schrieben in einfachen Sätzen und machten einfache, direkte Aussagen. Unsere Sprache war nicht nur knapp und genau, weil wir Jahre der Flugblätter, Pamphlete, Aufrufe und Ankündigungen hinter uns hatten und weil wir alle Frauen, also auch die sogenannten einfachen Frauen, erreichen wollten." See Stefan (1994, p. 16).

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