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Literary Mythscapes in the Brothers Grimm's *Deutsche Sagen*: A Comparative Study of Frau Holle's Myth and Friulian "Benandantism"

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the significance of the Brothers Grimm's *Deutsche Sagen* as a valuable analytical tool for studying issues related to literature, history, and customs across different cultures and epochs. The paper focuses on nineteenth-century German nationalism, examined through the lens of anthropological and literary genre studies. Building on a methodological framework that stems from André Jolles' considerations on the *Sage* as a literary genre, as well as from Duncan Bell's concept of "mythscape," the discussion will juxtapose the Germanic figure of Frau Holle, as depicted in the Grimmian collection of "legends," with the phenomenon here defined as "Benandantism." As for the research material, in addition to the outlined methodological tools and the Grimms' *Sagen*, the corpus includes studies on the inquisitorial reports concerning the "benandanti" as first collected by Carlo Ginzburg. Ultimately, the purpose of this comparison is to highlight similarities that could indicate the perpetuation, in both myths, of specific memetic processes inherent to their respective cultures, thereby laying the groundwork for further research in this area.

Keywords: Brothers Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen*, Frau Holle, Benandantism, literary mythscapes, folklore

Introduction or Digging Up a Hidden Common Treasure

The thirtieth volume of Joep Leerssen's book series *National Cultivation of Culture*, published in 2022 and edited by Terry Gunnell, presents a thorough examination of the literary and cultural consequences which spread throughout Northern Europe after the publication of the Brothers Grimm's *Deutsche Sagen*

(“German Legends,” 1816–1818).¹ The volume, titled *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms’ Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe*, can be credited with shedding new light on, as well as doing justice to, the Grimms’ collection of “legends.”² In fact, when it was first published, the collection was more successful, at least among folklore scholars (Gunnell 2022: 1), than the now better-known *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (“Children’s and Household Tales,” first ed. 1812–1815), whose «enchanted and morally edifying material for children» (Gunnell 2022: 2) won an increasingly large audience over time, even though at the beginning they were «intended primarily for learned adults» (Zipes 2012: 111). Thus, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the fairy tales began to gain popularity at the expense of the legends, which have eventually «come to be [...] neglected by folklorists» (Gunnell 2022: 10).

Nevertheless, the *Deutsche Sagen* left an indelible mark and an invaluable legacy in Europe, especially but not limited to the North, and the reason lies in the historical, political, and cultural implications of the collection. In fact, behind the idea of collecting and then publishing the material for the *Deutsche Sagen*, as well as for their collection of *Märchen* – «an idea that the Grimms had first formed in 1808 around the time that they were beginning to collect fairy tales» (Schmiesing 2012: 357) – was Jacob and Wilhelm’s desire to offer the German people something that would stand out for its own national values during a time in history in which Germany was yet to become a modern nation and needed to secure its own national identity. In Donald Haase’s words, «Grimms’ collection of folktales [*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*] was conscripted into nationalistic service and became a political weapon in the Grimms’ intellectual resistance to the Napoleonic occupation of their beloved Hessian homeland» (Haase 1993: 386), which is something that can also be said about their collection of legends, as it is clear from reading through its 1816 preface:

We recommend our book to devotees of German poeise, history, and language and hope that it will be welcome to all as purely German fare. For it is our firm belief that nothing is as edifying or as likely to bring more joy than the products of the Fatherland. Indeed, an apparently insignificant, self-occasioning discovery and endeavor in the study of our own indigenous culture can in the end bring more fruit than the most brilliant discovery and cultivation of foreign fields. (DS 23)

This being the case, the circulation of the *Deutsche Sagen*, along with the «continual publication of the [...] *Children’s and Household Tales*, which grew larger with each new edition up through 1857» (Zipes 2012: 111), created a «Romantic Nationalistic cultural tsunami» (Gunnell 2022: 4) that prompted

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- 1 Henceforth, when cited, *Deutsche Sagen* will be referred to as DS, followed by the page number to which the quoted text belongs. The edition of the collection used as bibliographical reference is the one edited and annotated by Heinz Rölleke for *Deutscher Klassiker Verlag* in 1994. On the other hand, the translation of the texts into English is credited to Donald Ward, the first and only editor of an English edition of the Grimms’ *Sagen* (1981). The decision to refrain from solely relying on Ward’s translation for the entire referencing apparatus stems from the fact that the German edition translated by Ward is not the original, but the third one, edited by Herman Grimm. With the latter’s alterations, mostly of a structural and quantitative nature, the collection deviated from its original state, which instead is the focus of this paper for reasons that will be discussed shortly. Moreover, when necessary, the translator’s commentary will be cited in the following format: last name, year of publication, and the respective page number. Both references have been included in the bibliography at the end of the paper.
 - 2 *Sage* is a challenging term to translate, as the English word “legend,” while suitable, can be mistaken for the German *Legende* (also translated into English as “legend”), which denotes a different genre (see: *infra* 1.2). Bearing this in mind, the author of this paper has chosen to primarily utilise the word “legend” – and the term “saga” where necessary to distinguish it from *Legende* – in line with the official English translation by Donald Ward. For a broader exploration of the *Sage* as a literary genre, see Röhrich ([1966] 1971).

several European countries to collect and publish any kind of folk tales that constituted the history of their people (Zipes 2012: 112–113). Despite their understandable dissimilarities, which broadly speaking differentiate one cultural tradition from another, the folk collections spawned as a result of this tendency display a substratum of common folk beliefs that often transcends the geographical area to which they belong. This was also clear to Jacob, whose treatise on Germanic mythology titled *Deutsche Mythologie* (“Teutonic Mythology,” 1835)³ «has been seen as taking the place of [a] third volume» of *Deutsche Sagen* that «never came to fruition» (Schmiesing 2012: 354). In order to isolate the Germanic lore from other folkloric traditions, especially from Norse mythology, with the aim of «sharpen[ing] our vision for a criticism of the Old German faith» (DM 10), as well as circumscribing said “purely German fare,” Grimm had to start making the necessary assumption that there were, in fact, similar traditions common to different cultural areas.

This is, among others, the case of Frau Holle,⁴ whose «name has a purely Teutonic meaning, and is firmly grounded in the living traditions of our people to this day» (DM 266), yet most of her core characteristics, albeit with some differences, can also be found in other-than-Germanic folkloric lore, where she is known, or has come to be associated with, different names, the Italic and Roman goddess Diana being one of them. The etymology of the name “Diana,” which means “goddess of light,”⁵ is reminiscent of «[a] being similar to Holda, or the same under another name», namely, «frau Berchte, i.e., in OHG. Perahta, the bright, luminous, glorious (as Holda [herself] produces [a] glittering snow)» (DM 272). She «makes her appearance precisely in those Upper German regions where Holda leaves off, in Swabia, in Alsace, in Switzerland, in Bavaria and Austria» (DM 272). Some of them bordered Italy, where yet another figure similar to those mentioned rose after Christianity had taken over, i.e., the so-called “Befana,” whose similarities with Bertha and Perchta provided the opportunity for Jacob to entertain the possibility of the existence of a pre-Christian, heathen deity as a common denominator of all those mentioned above (see, for instance, DM 281–282).⁶

3 Henceforth, when cited, *Deutsche Mythologie* will be referred to as DM, followed by the page number to which the quoted text belongs. The bibliographical references pertain to the first volume of the 1882 English translation from the fourth edition of the text by James Steven Stallybrass.

4 Also spelled as Holda, Holde, and elsewhere known as Perchta, Berchta, or Bertha, Frau Holle is usually associated with deities such as Diana and Nerthus (DM 250–315).

5 «In Roman mythology, Diana was equated with the Greek Artemis although she had an independent origin in Italy. [...] Varro and Cicero offer the oldest and most commonly accepted etymology of the name of Diana. She was conceived as the female counterpart of Iuppiter Dianus, following this etymological chain: *Deus, dius, *diuius, Diovīs, dies, Diuiana*, Diana. Diana is therefore “the goddess of light” and she is often defined as such in inscriptions of the imperial era, which honor her as *Dea Diana, Deana*, or simply, *Diana*» (Casadio/Johnston 2021: XIII). Jacob Grimm further argues that: «The light of day is a notion that borders on that of heaven, and it was likewise honoured with personification as a god [...]. To begin with, *dies* [...] is itself connected with *deus* and *divus*; Jupiter was called *Diespiter*, i.e., *diei pater*, for the old gen. was *dies*. Then the word in the sing. fluctuates between the masc. and fem. genders; and as the masc. *Ju, Dju* with the suffix *n*, is shaped into the fem. forms *Júno* for *Jovino*, *Djovino*, and *Diana*, just so the Lith. name for day, *diena*, is fem., while the Slav, *den, dzien*, dan, is masc.» (DM 195) Refer to Timm/Beckmann (2003) for additional insights on this topic.

6 Linked to this hypothesis, the discussion regarding the prehistory of a pre-Christian religious agrarian witch-cult could be pertinent. For a brief yet efficient exploration of this topic, which, to this day, continues to be a focal point for research, critique, and debate, see: Murray (1921, [1931] 1960), Ginzburg ([1966] 2011, [1989] 1991), Cohn ([1973, 1993] 2000), Hutton (1999), Feraro/White (2019).

In the analysis of this myth, which Christianity inevitably encountered and intertwined with, it might be of good use to focus on the studies on the Friulian phenomenon here referred to as “Benandantism,” started by Carlo Ginzburg in his 1966 book *The Night Battles*. This is not only because Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the Italian region where this phenomenon was first recorded, happened to be «an area [...] where Germanic and Slavic traditions came together» (Ginzburg [1966] 2011: XX), but also because the very myth of the so-called “benandanti” («people who go out to do good», Zipes 2012: 74) follows in the footsteps of those beliefs concerning the heathen entity to which Frau Holle is also inspired. This double key of interpretation, both divine and human, likely embodies a new memetic declination of what is probably the result of religious syncretism between paganism and Christianity:

On the one hand, this belief is tied to a larger complex of traditions (connected, in turn, with the myth of nocturnal gatherings over which female deities named Perchta, Holda, Diana presided) in an area that extends from Alsace to Hesse and from Bavaria to Switzerland. On the other hand, it is found in an almost identical form in the lands which once comprised Livonia (present day Latvia and Estonia). Given this geographic spread it may not be too daring to suggest that in antiquity these beliefs must once have covered much of central Europe. (Ginzburg [1966] 2011: XX)

As such, the aim of this paper is to show how the Brothers Grimm’s *Deutsche Sagen* are a valuable analytical tool for studying issues related to literature, history, and customs across different cultures and epochs. Utilising André Jolles’ considerations on the *Sage* as a literary genre, as well as Duncan Bell’s concept of “mythscape,” a methodological framework will be built, and the discussion will be exemplified by juxtaposing the Germanic figure of Frau Holle with Benandantism. Similarities between the two will ultimately point out the perpetuation, in both myths, of specific memetic processes inherent to their respective cultures, thereby setting the stage for further research on the topic.

1. The Brothers Grimm’s *Deutsche Sagen*...

1.1. ... Between Law, Folklore, and History

Reading through Jacob’s *Deutsche Mythologie*, it becomes clear that alongside oral tradition, ancient law serves as a primary source for documenting the old Germanic religion, which is in fact the most ancient and sacred folkloric heritage of Germanic culture as a whole.⁷ The text suggests an «undeniable intermixture of the old religious doctrine with the system of law», with «the latter, even after the adoption of the new faith, [...] not part[ing] with certain old forms and usages» (DM 11–12).

Before they were collectors of folk tales, the Grimms were law students. Following in their father’s footsteps, they both attended the University of Marburg, where they found a guide in the historian and jurist Friedrich Carl von Savigny, whose pamphlet *Vom Beruf unserer Zeit für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft* (“Of the Vocation of Our Age for Legislation and Jurisprudence,” 1814) was particularly inspiring to Jacob and Wilhelm. In one of the letters addressed to their mentor, Wilhelm wrote that he had especially enjoyed the chapter on the origin of the law, and that it was his brother and his own intention to collect fairy tales and legends in order to represent the origin of poetry in the

⁷ Refer to Cohn ([1973, 1993] 2000: 164–165) for additional insights on this topic.

same way, that is, as a “shared property of the people” («Gemeingut des Volks», *Briefe* 1953: 183). In fact, speaking of origins, Jacob further argued that law is, like language and customs, essentially popular, and that law and folk poetry, being similar in their growth, development, and death, can exemplify each other (*ivi*: 172). In this regard, Maria Carolina Foi suggests that law and poetry share a supra-individual and collective nature that embodies the voices of the communities they serve; similar to that of a judge, the poet's role does not entail creation, for both law and poetry are grounded in the shared experiences and values of their people (Foi 2016: 59-60). Therefore, what Jacob and Wilhelm had intended to do by putting together their first collection of fairy tales and their collection of legends had nothing to do with the creation of new narrations, but was rather aimed at the rediscovery and treasuring of an old Germanic past during its “downfall” («Untergang», *Briefe* 1953: 174), which would have probably been lost without their mediation.

This is true especially for the *Deutsche Sagen*, because whereas «[t]he fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historical; the former exists securely almost in and of itself in its innate blossoming and consummation. The legend, by contrast, [...] represents something special in that it adheres always to that which we are conscious of and know well, such as a locale or a name that has been secured through history» (DS 11). After all, «for the most part, history and legend flow together» (DS 14).

1.2. ... As Literary Mythscapes: Considerations on the Sage as a Literary Genre

In his 1930 study titled *Einfache Formen* (“Simple Forms”),⁸ André Jolles examined «nine elementary narrative structures underlying, as [he] thought, all literary production: legend, saga, myth, riddle, saying, case, *memorable*, fairy tale, and joke» (Schwartz 2017: *Translator's Introduction*). Specifically, the scholar⁹ «viewed these ‘simple forms’ as structuring principles operative in language before their ‘actualization’ in specific legends, sagas, fairy tales, and so on, or as components of more complex narrative types» (*ibidem*). Among these forms, the fairy tale (*Märchen*), the legend (*Legende*), and the saga (*Sage*) are the ones that might be relevant to discuss briefly before further delving into the specifics of Frau Holle's presence in the *Deutsche Sagen*. The construction of these forms is best summarised by Jolles' idea that «each simple form [is] the reflection in language of a particular mode of human engagement with the world» (*ibidem*), namely, what he calls *Geistbeschäftigung* (“mental disposition”). For instance, the legend is considered by the scholar «a response to the human need for ideals of conduct», and thus stems from *imitatio*, while the

8 Henceforth, when cited, *Einfache Formen* will be referred to as EF, followed by the number of the chapter and the paragraph it refers to, as the bibliographical references are based on the Kindle edition of the 2017 English translation from the second edition of the original text by Peter J. Schwartz. As per footnote No. 1, to differentiate between Jolles' text and the translator's commentary, quotations from the latter will be identified with the translator's last name, the year of publication, and the corresponding section title.

9 André Jolles (1874–1946) was a literary critic and art historian. Despite *Simple Forms* being «recognized as a classic of genre theory [...] [t]he question of the work's value is complicated by Jolles's enthusiastic and principled decision to join the National Socialist German Workers' Party in May 1933, which was followed by years of active commitment to the reorganization of scholarship at Leipzig University along Nazi lines» (Schwartz 2017: *Translator's Introduction*). While keeping this in mind, Hans Robert Jauss, as quoted by Schwartz, still finds value in Jolles' study of “simple forms” especially in its heuristic proposition that these forms allow «the researcher to infer ‘the particularity of a period's and literature's cultural code from the particular historical constellation of the forms’» (*ibidem*).

fairy tale is «an image of a just world unlike the real one» (*ibidem*) and captures our «naive morality» (EF 8.VI), rather than the human «predilection for the marvellous» (EF 8.III) to which the genre, to some extent appropriately, has mostly been associated to. The saga, however, constitutes a peculiar case.

According to Jolles, the saga is ultimately the representative of «an approach to problems of family, blood ties, and inheritance» (Schwartz 2017: *Translator's Introduction*). Nevertheless, what has been translated into English as “saga” is indeed a concept¹⁰ hardly translatable from the German word *Sage*, and the reason lies specifically in its connection to «a specific school [...] that sees the *Sage* exclusively in its relation to another concept, which it calls history [*Historie*]» (EF 2.I).

Indeed, the emphasis on historical familial connections, characteristic of the Icelandic saga (EF 2.II), represents just one facet of a genre that encompasses a wide range of texts with distinct characteristics. In this regard, drawing from the Grimms' *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Jolles highlights a significant definition of the term “Sage”: «[A]n orally disseminated report of something, news of something» (EF 2.I). The *Sage*, as the scholar points out, not only serves as a report detailing a family's history and lineage, but it also encompasses the verisimilar retelling of an event. While contemporary readers may find such narratives “wondrous” due to their incorporation of supernatural elements seemingly detached from concrete historical realities, they were deemed credible within the belief systems of the time and by the local communities that originated and transmitted them in the first place. In fact, «in more archaic usage, the notion of non-historicity was not yet insolubly linked with the concept *Sage*» (EF 2.I). If it holds true, as Marcel Mauss asserts, that magic, the marvellous by extension, can only truly be perceived as such when an entire society actively engages with it, acknowledging and embracing its own standing reality (Mauss [1950] 1972: 22–23), it follows that only a work that authentically captures the historical context of that society, including its beliefs and customs, can successfully embody its essence. The *Deutsche Sagen* were collected by Jacob and Wilhelm exactly with this understanding in mind:

History does not [...] tolerate the incredible in its presentations; but it is able, in its own way and in its observance of the totality, to seek it out and to honor it. While it is the children alone who believe in the reality of fairy tales, the folk have not yet stopped believing in their legends; and the collective understanding does not attempt to differentiate between the real and the unreal. The reality of the wondrous is established sufficiently for the folk by the details that accompany narration, that is, the undeniable familiarity with the nearby events and the visible existence of the site together outweigh any doubts about the wondrous events associated with the location. (DS 12–13)

This double meaning of the term *Sage* can be observed precisely in the structure of the collection. On the one hand, akin to the saga as understood within the Icelandic literary tradition, the second volume of the *Deutsche Sagen* is comprised of a series of texts described as *Sagen* «that derive directly from actual history [*wirkliche Geschichte*]» (DS 387), for they recount historical events of Germanic peoples and families.¹¹ On the other hand, the *Sagen* of the first volume are called *Ortssagen* (“local legends”) because they display a strong connection to specific geographic locations and reflect a spatial perspective tied to the

10 «It is very dangerous to confuse words and concepts [...]. Here, the consequence of the confusion is that it could seem to a foreigner [...] that in the German language the word *Sage* actually has a negative connotation, and that we use it to designate something that ‘lacks historical authentication.’ This is simply wrong. When we use the word *Sage*, we mean something positive – provided we do not use it in express contrast to history» (EF 2.I).

11 It is noteworthy that Jacob and Wilhelm specify in their preface to the second volume that this group of legends could also be labelled as “Legends of Teutonic Tribes and of Royal Families,” thus highlighting their fidelity to the historical events being narrated.

geocultural memory of the communities inhabiting those places. Lutz Röhrich argues that the distinction made by the Grimms between “local” and “historical” legends is not entirely precise, as the latter could, in many cases, be subsumed under the former category (Röhrich [1966] 1971: 2). Nevertheless, it can be contended that such a distinction, albeit simplistic, is necessary for analytical purposes, particularly when examining the varying degrees of geographical and historical specificity in the transmission and adaptation of the *Sagen*.

Because of their inherently cultural, geographical, wondrous, and literary nature, the “local legends” of the Brothers Grimm can ultimately be regarded as vessels containing literary “mythscares,” or “mythoscapes.” The former term was proposed by Duncan Bell to define a «discursive realm, constituted by and through temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly» (Bell 2003: 75); the latter term has been occasionally circulating in contemporary art and fashion for a few years, conceptualising the “mythoscape” as a new type of landscape determined not merely by physical features and historical events but also by myths and legends.¹² In this regard, Bell expands on the importance of his selected term as follows:

[M]yths [...] subsume all of the various events, personalities, traditions, artefacts and social practices that (self) define the nation and its relation to the past, present and future. [...] The temporal dimension denotes a historical span, a narrative of the passing of years, and it is a narrative that is most likely to include *inter alia* a story of the origins of the nation and of subsequent momentous events and heroic figures. [...] The spatial dimension tends to be rooted in particular constructions of an often-idealized bounded territory, for example a romanticized national landscape: in pastoral English villages, rugged American frontiers or bucolic German forests. As such it includes a powerful narrative of place, embodying the topophilic power of a “here-feeling” [...]. (*Ivi*: 75–76)

Referring to the Brothers Grimm’s “local legends” as “literary mythscares,” favouring the Bellian terminology in order to denote the texts’ strong association with nationalism and the evolving significance of the myth linked to a particular geographic area, not only validates Bell’s intuition that «[m]yths [...] are shaped [...] perhaps through the particular resonance of works of literature and art» (Bell 2003: 75), but also reinforces Jolles’ insight that the concept of “Sage” and its significance have fluid boundaries.¹³ This encompasses Jacob Grimm’s idea that «[t]he ground of all *Sage* is *mythos* [...] with all its infinite variety of nuance from people to people: a much more common, unsteady element than history, but gaining in scope what it lacks in fixity» (EF 3.I). In this regard, the scholar further argues that «*Sage* cannot be grasped independently of such a mythical substratum, any more than history can be grasped independently of things that have happened» (EF 3.I).

Among the characters featured in the Brothers Grimm’s collection of *Sagen*, Frau Holle and her numerous iterations emerge as the most compelling illustration of how a myth evolves into a driving

12 For instance, consider the series of artworks by artist J. P. Aleksander titled “Mythoscape” and showcased at Studio 23 from 18 May to 8 July 2023, in Bay City, Michigan.

13 Regarding this subject, Filippo Fonio (2016) contends that «the “actualised simple form” of the saga is characterised by openness and [...] indefiniteness» [la «forma semplice attualizzata» della Saga presenta un carattere aperto e [...] indefinito] (Fonio 2016: 173). Translations from Italian into English are provided by the author of this paper. See also footnote No. 20.

force behind a collective narrative that is both “national” and “culturally specific” (Fonio 2016: 173), yet geographically decentralised and therefore “deterritorialisable.”¹⁴

2. The Divine and The Human in the Myth of Frau Holle

One of the most well-known and recognisable characters in German mythology, Frau Holle «is a familiar figure in both legends and fairy tales» (Ward [1891] 1981: 317). Although «legends and fairy tales share many of the same figures, [...] there is frequently a pronounced difference in their treatment in each genre. The witch of the legend, for example, is a member of a village community who engages in sorcery. In the fairy tale, by contrast, she is a demonic creature who lives alone in the forest and likes to eat children» (*ibidem*).

In this concise comment by Donald Ward regarding the fourth *Sage* of the collection, the first to be dedicated to Frau Holle and titled *Frau Hollen Teich* (“Mother Holla’s Pond”), the editor introduces two noteworthy aspects concerning the myth. First of all, Frau Holle is not referred to as a goddess but is depicted as a “witch,” namely, a woman possessing magical abilities yet ultimately of mortal nature. Secondly, she is a member of the local village community, thus ultimately emphasising the human aspect of the figure in contrast with the established notion of Frau Holle having mythical origins, *i.e.*, religious, and therefore divine.

In fact, according to Jacob Grimm, «[i]n popular legends and nursery-tales, *frau Holda* [...] appears as a superior being, who manifests a kind and helpful disposition towards men, and is never cross except when she notices disorder in household affairs» (DM 267). The scholar further argues that

Frau Holle is represented as a being of *the sky*, begirdling the earth: when it snows, she is making her bed, and the feathers of it fly. [...] *Holda* comes before us as a goddess of no mean rank. [...] She loves to haunt the *lake* and *fountain*; at the hour of noon she may be seen, a fair white lady, *bathing* in the flood and *disappearing* [...]. Mortals, to reach her dwelling, pass through the well [...]. She [...] brings *fertility* to the land. [...] At the same time *Holda* [...] can also ride on the winds, clothed in terror, and she [...] belongs to the ‘wütende heer’ [raging host]. From this arose the fancy, that *witches* ride in *Holla’s* company. (DM 267–268)

This set of characteristics can also be found in the *Deutsche Sagen*, where, however, other attributes of a less divine nature promptly situate Holle’s myth within a well-defined geocultural and historically contextualised framework. Here follow some excerpts from the fourth *Sage*:

The people tell many things about Mother Holla, both good and bad. Women who visit her by climbing into the spring have been made healthy and fertile. [...] Mother Holla is very tidy and keeps a neat household. When it snows in man’s world then everyone knows that Mother Holla is shaking out her feather beds until the flakes drift around in the wind. [...] Each year, Mother Holla wanders around the countryside bestowing fertility on the fields. However, she can also strike terror into the hearts of the people when she roars through the forests, leading raging hordes. Sometimes she appears as the beautiful White Woman, floating or hovering above the surface of her pond. (DS 39–40)

14 What is being suggested here is that the myth of Frau Holle could potentially be analysed within the framework of “deterritorialisation” as conceived by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1972] 2000).

Jacob and Wilhelm's acknowledgment of the potential human facet of Frau Holle, who is in fact referred to as "White Woman" (*weiße Frau* in German), is a clear example of Christianity's «dislodgement of the gods» (DM 264), which eventually led to the transformation of many pagan gods «into hostile malignant powers, into demons, sorcerers, and giants, who had to be put down» (DM 5), ultimately meaning that «the same old heathen idea [...] could only maintain itself in [...] [the] customs of the people» (DM 264). Just as it appears in the quoted text, the adjective "white" primarily denotes the attire typically associated with these entities;¹⁵ it is not by chance that white garments were donned both by baptismal candidates (DM 5) and by pagan priestesses – also known as "wise women" (*weise Frauen* in German) due to their prophetic and clairvoyant abilities¹⁶ – who «trespass on the superhuman» (DM 98) even though «[t]heir own being itself [...] rests on human nature» (DM 400). In this regard, Jacob maintains that the «[m]aidens clothed in white, who [...] show themselves in clefts of the rock and on mountains, are suggestive of the ancient goddess» (DM 291). Indeed, these figures are designated as *halbgöttinnen* ("demigoddesses") by the philologist, who further elaborates on their role in ancient times as follows: «The mission and functions of half-goddesses [...] may be roughly defined thus: to the upper gods they are *handmaids*, to men *revealers*» (DM 397), suggesting the coexistence of their divine status with their inherent human nature.

Bearing this in mind, it can be argued that especially within the first volume of the *Deutsche Sagen*, numerous discernible texts, in addition to those that explicitly mention her (DS 39–42), contribute to the formation of Frau Holle's mythscape by expanding her set of attributes beyond her divine status; these include, for example, *Die weiße Frau* ("The White Woman," Sage No. 122; DS 174), *Frau Berta oder die weiße Frau* ("Mother Bertha or the White Woman," Sage No. 267; DS 302–303), *Die Heidenjungfrau zu Glatz* ("The Heathen Maiden of Glatz," Sage No. 317; DS 341–343), and *Die weiße Jungfrau zu Schwanau* ("The White Virgin of Schwanau," Sage No. 330; DS 355). In these texts, among many others,¹⁷ tales about *weiße* and *weise Frauen* create hybrid mythical landscapes in which mortality and divinity blend to mirror syncretic images and figures that were, and still are, widely spread throughout Europe.¹⁸

Such is also the case of the *benandanti*, inheritors of a pagan agricultural cult born itself out of a fusion of ancient mythical-religious beliefs. As their members were being gradually transformed into supernatural beings, cults like those of the *benandanti* seemed to represent a declension of Frau Holle's transfiguration from goddess to mortal being, ultimately resulting in her demonisation (Zipes 2012: 56–61). Thus, they provide a testimony of Christianity's intention to eradicate all remnants of paganism, for, whereas a god-like entity is impervious to mortality, a mortal being is susceptible to such fate.

3. The Peculiar Case of Friulian Benandantism

Benandantism can be mainly framed in the juridical and religious events of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, states Margherita Hack in the introduction to Adriano Del Fabro's study on the subject (Hack 2016: 5). Franco

15 For additional information, see, for instance, DM 271, 280, 288, 412, 414, 430, 432.

16 In Jewish tradition, these characteristics have even bestowed upon Holle an educational role (Hammer 2005: 74–75).

17 Others encompass, but are not limited to: *Fräulein von Boyneburg* ("The Maiden of Boyne Castle," Sage No. 10; DS 44–45), *Die Schloß-Jungfrau* ("The Maiden of the Castle," Sage No. 12; DS 46), *Die Wiesenjungfrau* ("The Woman of the Meadow," Sage No. 223; DS 263–264), and *Die wilde Berta kommt* ("Wild Bertha Will Come," Sage No. 268; DS 303).

18 See, for example, Map 3 in Ginzburg ([1989] 1991: 98–99).

Nardon further argues that beliefs about benandanti were widespread in the area surrounding Cividale del Friuli and in the middle and lower Friulian plain, especially in the diocese of Aquileia, with appendices in the territory of Monfalcone and in the diocese of Concordia (Nardon 1999: 45). However, as far as the “prehistory” of this phenomenon is concerned, one can only speculate. According to Nardon,

assuming [...] hypothetically that the data from such distribution constitute a sort of ethnographic map, this same data may provide useful clues for defining the original substratum of the myths and rituals associated with the night battles [carried out by the benandanti]. From such a «map» one can deduce and venture into guessing that these myths and rituals emerge from a Slavic substratum rather than a Celtic or Germanic one, considering the absence of mountain testimonies concerning the benandanti’s activities.¹⁹ (*Ibidem*)

Even so, the myth cannot be completely separated from Germanic tradition, for Friulian (especially Carnia’s) documentation of the time presents many analogies with its contemporary German records regarding women who, similarly to the benandanti, wondered at night during the Ember Days; the theme of the ecstatic journey of women following a female deity like Diana or Frau Holle also appears in written German legends such as Heinrich Kornmann’s 1614 *Mons Veneris* and in the collection of sermons by Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg, *Die Emeis*, published in Strasbourg in 1516 (*ivi*: 47).

The benandanti, according to Hack, were people “born with a shirt on.” In common parlance, to be born with a shirt on meant that one was born particularly fortunate (“born with a silver spoon in their mouth,” the English would say). However, the benandanti were almost literally born with a white shirt on, for they were among those rare cases in which the newborn baby remains wrapped in the amniotic sac (*ivi*: 5). Given this unique circumstance, they were thought to be special and were assigned a distinct social role within their community, that is, to safeguard the cultivated fields from witches and sorcerers. Del Fabro further argues:

These people were essentially folksy peasants. The benandanti did not have any prospect of social career, nor did they occupy traditional positions of power. They seemed to bear witness to atavistic attributes of “simplicity, reliability, and commitment to their community.” Thus, they did not think themselves powerful, nor did they seek compromises with the civil and religious powers of their time. They professed themselves Christians and their faith committed them to the defence of the crops and the fight against evil.²⁰ (Del Fabro 2016: 17)

The fight with witches and warlocks that the benandanti were believed to engage in had specific connotations, including the weapons used and the time in which the battle would take place. Their weapons consisted of fennel or viburnum stalks, while the witches defended themselves by wielding and

19 «Assumendo [...] in via ipotetica che i dati di questa distribuzione costituiscano una sorta di mappa etnografica, essi possono fornire indizi utili alla definizione del sostrato originario dei miti e dei riti legati alle battaglie notturne. Dalla “mappa” si può desumere e azzardare che tali miti e tali riti emergano da un sostrato slavo piuttosto che celtico o germanico, considerata l’assenza di testimonianze montane sui benandanti.» The translations of Fabio Nardon (1999) and Adriano del Fabro’s (2016) works from Italian into English are provided by the author of this paper, as they have not yet been officially translated into English.

20 «Si trattava, essenzialmente, di gente del popolo, *rustica*. I benandanti [...] non facevano carriera sociale, non occupavano tradizionali ruoli di potere. Parevano testimoniare caratteristiche ataviche di “semplicità, fedeltà e coerenza” e, perciò, non si inventavano potenti e non cercavano compromessi con i poteri della loro epoca, né civili né religiosi. Si professavano cristiani e la loro fede li impegnava nella difesa dei raccolti e nella lotta contro il male.»

beating around sorghum rods, bamboo canes, or oven shovels (*ivi*: 18). The spiritual journeys allegedly took place only four times a year, on the Thursdays of the Ember Days, the same days when the “white” and “wise” women from the *Sagen* were often reported to appear (see, for instance, *Die Jungfrau im Oselberg*, “The Maiden of Osel Mountain,” *Sage* No. 221; DS 261). During those nights, the benandanti would fall asleep, their spirit would leave their body, fight, and return before dawn. If they won the battle, it meant that the seasonal harvests would be good. If, on the other hand, it was the witches who won, the crops would be ruined in the upcoming season (*ibidem*).

Nonetheless, despite their alleged commendable deeds in combatting evil, the benandanti eventually found themselves condemned by the Holy Inquisition due to their perceived association with witchcraft. It was probably the sectarian nature of the cult²¹ and the belief in its use of magic that led to persecution by the inquisitors of the time, whose trials of the benandanti, for this reason, were immediately traced back to those concerning rituals associated with the Sabbath, even though Carnia remained essentially unaffected by the spread of such gatherings (Nardon 1999: 47). From this perspective, the fact that «according to Ginzburg, the ecstatic experience of these women and men had nothing to do with a belief in demons and devils» (Zipes 2012: 75) fits perfectly with Pietro Ellero's observation that, in Friuli, those whom Ginzburg later referred to as “benandanti” were not initially considered witches but rather “mysterious beings,” reminiscent of the «*dame bianche*» (“women dressed in white”) found in Germanic and Celtic traditions (Ellero 1881: 34, 36, 41). In Zipes's words, «[i]n essence, the benandanti participated in some kind of shamanistic fertility ritual that involved a voyage to the world of the dead or another world. There were numerous other shamanistic cults in Europe that celebrated the Sabbath in similar ways. They were associated with witches and fairies», subsequently «demonized by the church during the European Inquisition and witch hunts» (Zipes 2012: 74).

Conclusion or Setting Up the Groundwork for Future Research Perspectives

The social, religious, and folk-related changes concerning the myths of Frau Holle and Friulian Benandantism undeniably mirror certain aspects of the cultural evolution observed not only in witchcraft but also in overall religious beliefs across Europe, through the course of many centuries and in diverse regions; a phenomenon arguably sustained by ongoing memetic processes.

In his brief account of memetics, intended as the branch of studies that analyses the meme as «a cultural analogue to the gene» (Graham [2002] 2005: 83) and therefore as a «unit of cultural transmission» (Zipes 2012: 17), Jack Zipes points out that «numerous serious scholars [...] have endeavored [...] to explain the role that memetics plays in different cultural and scientific fields» (*ivi*: 18), illustrating «why the term can be helpful in understanding cultural evolution» (*ibidem*). Moreover, given that «[t]he crucial elements in the evolution of the memetic process are repetition and memory» (*ivi*: 19), Melvin Konner contributes to the conversation by saying that

the meme has proved useful in understanding cultural stability and change [...]. As with genes, the faithfulness of replication and its associated repair mechanisms can ensure stability over time. And also as with genes, the replication process is imperfect and errors have a creative function, serving

21 See, for instance, Nardon (1999: 69–83).

as grist for the mill of cultural change, much as mutations offer the genetic variation that natural selection acts upon. (Konner 2010: 689)

34

From this point of view, the depiction of Frau Holle in the *Deutsche Sagen* and Friulian Benandantism emerge as two sides of the same coin. While both myths likely originated from ancient pre-Christian traditions, perpetuated by memetic processes passed on through rituals and storytelling, they also diverge following specific temporal, spatial, and cultural axes. Positioned at different points along the historical continuum, they arguably represent two deviations (*i.e.*, “errors” that have a “creative function”) from the stable memetic process that sustained them in the first place, influenced notably by the rise and dissemination of Christianity (due to the reconfiguration of values this religion entailed and in accordance with the doctrine it professed).

Considering Drout’s (2006) insights regarding the suitability of a meme-centred approach to oral tradition theory, along with Dawkins’ ([1976] 2006: 192) classification of memes, what is argued here is that the Grimms’ *Deutsche Sagen*, more than their fairy tales, could have evolved into memetic repositories of such deviations. Especially because of the historical nature of the collection, imbued with culturally specific, rather than universal, significance. Thus, the collection of *Sagen* offers new perspectives on the cultural and the historical trajectory of the myths, originally stemming from oral tradition, documented within the collection itself. Additionally, as Lotte Motz underlines in her 1984 essay *The Winter Goddess*, the study of folk beliefs, customs, and legends – often overlooked by scholars – yields valuable insights into historical, cultural, and religious phenomena (Motz 1984: 151) such as those discussed in this paper. According to Zipes, who writes specifically about fairy tales, though his observation could very well be extended to any type of folk tale,

[w]itch is memetically loaded. [...] Witches are replicated in our minds through all modes of communication, and we employ the concept of witch in various ways, often changing the witch’s meaning, in information or stories [...]. We do this without realizing that the memetic staying power of the word and concept “witch” are rooted in pagan cultural traditions that hark back to the Neolithic period, if not before. Witch is a word/concept/image that has undergone a process of “demonization” that is still potent today. [...] Witches as ancient divinities are intriguing because the pagan goddesses in the Western world eventually gave birth to the Greco-Roman goddesses and fates, who [...] engendered fairies, nymphs, mermaids, sirens, pixies, and other supernatural creatures. That is, not only were the goddesses transformed into witches, they were also precursors of the fairies and their kin. All this means that the irresistible and inexplicable fairy tale cannot even be partially explained unless we endeavor to draw connections to ancient rituals and customs pertaining to magical transformation, witches, and fairies. (Zipes 2012: 56–57)

To conclude, the Brothers Grimm’s *Deutsche Sagen* not only serve as a repository of old Germanic folk narratives, but are also themselves representative, for this very same reason, of an invaluable and indisputable methodological resource for the analysis of ancient traditions, customs, and beliefs, for they pertain to phenomena that may appear distant in both space and time but, like Benandantism, exhibit shared traits and cultural and historical connections. Following Motz’s lesson, the aspiration accompanying this preliminary research, with the prospect of further development, is therefore to highlight the significance of primary literary folk material in order to explore phenomena that go beyond the literary realm and the exegetical analysis of texts.

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