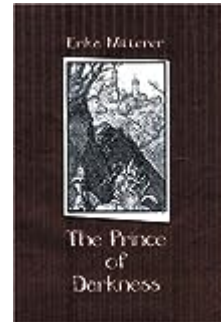


Erika Mitterer. *The Prince of Darkness.* Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2004. 676 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57241-134-0.



Reviewed by CJ Probst (Royal Holloway University of London)

Published on H-German (November, 2005)

The Power of Imaginative Historical Fiction

Erika Mitterer's *The Prince of Darkness* may be a rather lengthy novel with dozens of carefully depicted characters, but its central story focuses on two late-fifteenth- to early-sixteenth-century sisters living in southern Germany who suffer separate yet grimly interconnected fates. The story includes intense friendship and betrayal, religious devotion and apostasy, illicit love and fierce hatred. Yet, the rising action leads to climax like the slow boil of a huge pot of water rather than like a match tossed on a fuel-drenched pile of wood.

In form as well as in content, Mitterer's meticulously constructed story, written in Austria in 1939, murkily mirrors the dark events taking place in Hitler's Third Reich. The novel is considered part of the literature of "inner emigration," which is not a literary genre *per se* but recognizably anti-fascist literature by "heterogenic authors." In this case, the author opposes National Socialism via carefully camouflaged criticism (p. 667).

The central characters are Hiltrud vom Ried, promised to life in a convent by her mother during her difficult childbirth, and her younger sister Theresa, who ends up living with her father's cousin Matthias Nothaft

after the death of first her mother and then her father. Hiltrud adjusts to a life of sole and solemn commitment to Christ, which she often seems to bear reluctantly, before giving way to her illicit feelings for the Dean and her confessor, Alexander. Their cat-and-mouse games of love and power serve as an uneasy subtext before playing center stage in Hiltrud's trial for her series of mainly well-intended deceptions of the sisters in the convent where she serves as prioress. Precocious and idealistic Theresa, in the meantime, develops a secret love for her departing cousin George, who heads off to Venice for his apprenticeship. When he returns, however, he finds his passion for her unrequited, making his acrimonious reprisal at the novel's protracted and bitter close much easier.

It is only in the last third of the novel, however, that the Inquisitor and his assistants come to town. It is also only during this section that the events of the novel resemble in any significant way the events of Nazi Germany. Doctor Schuller, sent to investigate charges of witchcraft and other wicked behavior, is presented as a careful, if unloved and unloving, prosecutor. He believes

his actions will purify and heal the inhabitants of the town. Eager townspeople with varying motives, however, share their suspicions with the Inquisitor, leading to potentially disastrous fates for Theresa and Hiltrud, along with the many others who come under the accusation of the inquisitorial court.

Though written more than a decade apart, in a different language during different times, I cannot help but compare *The Prince of Darkness* with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. While the differences in particulars far outweigh the similarities, the general pattern of a novel decrying the immorality of a current crisis via a (loosely) historically based witch trial is too striking to overlook. The collaboration of townsfolk with religious authorities, forbidden love affairs, and religious hypocrisy are all present in both works. Both work on the level of historical allegory.

The call by church authorities for Theresa to renounce supposed evils is met with both dignity and desperation. Her idealistic belief in her coming salvation by Doctor Albertus Fabri, the sympathetic intellectual and humanistic figure just outside of the center of the story, persists nearly until the end. The behavior of Theresa and her fellow prisoners in the dank "jewcellar"—at times repulsive and at other times selfless—is depicted in graphic detail, casting light on the desperation of human beings in a situation where life is slowly drained away even before the ultimate demise. Perhaps this realistic honesty is one reason why the novel was such a "morale booster" to inmates at the Dachau concentration camp, as well as to other victims of the Nazi regime (p. 668).

The author's thorough attention to the social, political, economic, and religious details of sixteenth-century life just prior to the upheaval of the German Protestant Reformation is truly remarkable. The religious authorities discuss the Borgias, Aquinas, and Savonarola. George Nothaft's apprenticeship in Venice and the revolt

of Arnold vom Ried's peasants drive home the changing realities of economic life in the late Medieval/early Modern setting. The artist Albrecht Dürer even makes a brief appearance as a character in the novel.

The attention to character development is rich in psychological and sociological depth. If the book has a weakness, it is the amount of depth which Mitterer provides for so many characters that seem to be on the periphery of the story. Yet again, this detail may point to a belief on her part that collaborators and informants "on the periphery" of the events nevertheless share culpability for attempting to ingratiate themselves with the Inquisition.

The author probes the depths of human depravity—and human kindness—without painting one-dimensional characters devoid of the complexities of human existence. At no point does she fall prey to even subtle anachronisms to clue the reader in to the identity of the "Nazis" in the story. Even Doctor Schuller is a multifaceted character despite his singular devotion to his nefarious duty.

In the end, *The Prince of Darkness* serves as much to criticize and explain the traitorous behavior of supposed friends in a time of fear and superstition as it does to assail the ideologically driven witch hunt of the authorities. The sheer breadth of the author's portrait of human nature reveals the benefits of engaging yet historically believable fiction that sometimes cannot be communicated through historical nonfiction. Thus, as a rewarding and thoroughly interdisciplinary exercise, I commend to readers Mitterer's fascinating novel.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: CJ Probst. Review of Mitterer, Erika, *The Prince of Darkness*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11223>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.