

Virtual Special Edition of *Folklore*, 13, 2022: Witchcraft Beliefs

In 1692 a young servant girl fell ill in Connecticut claiming that she was bewitched. Two women were accused of witchcraft, but local opinion was divided as to the reason for the afflicted girl's condition. Some believed that she had been bewitched or that she was feigning symptoms, while others felt that she was suffering from an illness. A local healer suggested burning feathers as a cure, a treatment recommended for hysteria—a condition that medical views of the time classified as a female ailment (Pentangelo 2021). The incident illustrates the complexity of beliefs surrounding witchcraft trials, and the diversity of opinion among the population as to its cause. That same year, another trial took place in Vadsø in the Finnmark. Anders Poulsen, an elderly Sámi shaman, was tried for witchcraft. His testimony about the symbolism of his sacred drum has been analysed previously as a source for information on shamanic activity. In her article, however, Liv Helene Willumsen suggests that the Christian elements in Poulsen's testimony may more accurately reflect a common pattern in witch-trials in which the accused's confession was shaped by the assumptions of the accusers (Willumsen 2020). The tensions between shamanism and witchcraft beliefs in Poulsen's trial and the explanations for the servant girl's illness in the Connecticut trial reveal differences in the perceptions of witchcraft activity and also how these differences affected witchcraft trials in two geographically distant areas. This complexity, and its implications for studying traditions about witchcraft, is reflected in the articles selected for this year's Virtual Special Edition.

The idea that experiences designated as witchcraft were rooted in physical or psychological states is the subject of Owen Davies's extensive examination of a phenomenon known as the 'nightmare' in historical English sources and as 'sleep paralysis' in contemporary medical studies (Davies 2003). Drawing on a wide range of material, Davies notes the degree to which cultural differences influence non-medical interpretations of physical experiences like sleep paralysis and highlights significant features: for example, whether vengeful living beings, including witches, cause nightmares or whether they are due to supernatural forces such as ghosts, fairies, vampires, or animal spirits. Lucy Mair suggests that the witch represents the opposite of what is socially approved. Her article examines how this negative marginalization influenced the designation of witches as heretics, and how European attitudes to witchcraft changed as judges moved away from accepting supernatural evidence, such as spirit possession and witch-marks, to establishing a link between seemingly anti-social behaviour and mental illness (Mair 1980). The

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a shift from supernatural belief to medical explanation. Interest in anatomy, better surgical techniques, the rise of public medicine, and—most relevant for the re-assessment of witchcraft belief—the beginnings of the discipline of psychology provided an alternative to the perception of symptoms as caused by supernatural means (Burstein 1956). Sona Rosa Burstein's article traces the work of significant scholars, physicians, demonologists, and writers on the occult to provide an overview of the evolution of ideas during that period.

Two articles in this Virtual Special Issue focus on the environment and the social world rather than on the witch-figure directly. The loss of livestock was frequently attributed to witchcraft in many places. Changes in agricultural methods and the economy, such as enclosure of land, damaged the biodiversity of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland during the Tudor and Stuart periods. Animal poisoning due to the ingestion of toxic plant material was an aspect of husbandry that was not well understood at this period (Hickey 1990). As a result, witchcraft was blamed for adverse effects such as reduced fertility or failure of animals to thrive. Plants, specifically herbs, are also the subject of Michael Ostling's study of so-called witches' herbs (Ostling 2014). His findings, based on an examination of Polish trial records and the plants referred to in these sources, suggests that the spells and cures offered by witches and folk healers owed little to elite medical herbalism. Nevertheless, his research revealed that many herbs mentioned in the trials were important in Polish botanical folk practice and corresponded closely with herbs blessed during church services.

Witches who possessed an animal familiar appear in trial records, but the belief that witches could adopt an animal form themselves is more prominent in legend narratives. The most famous of these transformation stories is undoubtedly a migratory legend, 'The Witch that was Hurt' (ML 3055), in which the witch turns herself into a hare. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne examines examples of this legend in Ireland (Ní Dhuibhne 1993), while Bodil Nildin-Wall and Jan Wall consider the role of the witch as hare in Nordic tradition (Nildin-Wall and Wall 1993). In a typical Irish version, an old woman takes the shape of a hare in order to steal milk. The hare is shot by a hunter, and the next day a woman who has been wounded in a similar way is revealed as a witch.

The actions and fate of the witch-hare act as a vehicle for resentment directed at a minority, which is characteristic of witchcraft beliefs more generally. The witch in hare form uses supernatural guile to steal and disrupt the established order, while the male hunter restores the normal everyday balance. Significantly, the wounding frequently

occurs as the hare re-enters her own dwelling where she must return to her human form. Similar witch-into-hare narratives exist in Nordic areas. These are related to the belief that witches can create 'milk hares' to do their owner's bidding, and that mysterious forest-dwellers known as 'troll hares' can deceive hunters. The hare remains central to acts of witchcraft that threaten the community and can only be neutralized through proper ritual measures.

This Virtual Special Issue began with accounts of two witch-trials that took place at the end of the seventeenth century. The final article also deals with an early case of witchcraft, but one whose effects were still current in Canewdon, an Essex village that had remained isolated until the beginning of the twentieth century (Maple 1960). The addition of typical witch-legend motifs transformed this single historical case into a much more elaborate legend. The witches became linked to the church tower and its bell, and acquired the power to bewitch carts and horses, and to paralyse their victims. This last motif brings us full circle to the nightmare experiences and spirit possessions associated with bewitching discussed in other articles.

The articles selected for this Virtual Special Issue demonstrate a number of features which remain important in any study of beliefs associated with witches and witchcraft, namely the power of narratives as reflections of social attitudes and the ability of supernatural and rational explanations for these wide-ranging beliefs to exist side by side.

Dr Juliette Wood