Once Upon A Time:

Folkloric and Pagan Elements of the Western European Witchcraft Worldview, 395-1820 CE

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History 489

May 12, 2014

Abstract

This study examines specific elements of paganism and folklore that played significant roles in the Western European witchcraft worldview of the Middle Ages. The origins of these beliefs are explored as well as the ways in which they were incorporated into Christian thought from 600-1600 CE. The primary beliefs that this study focuses on include Diana and the Wild Ride, folk spirits (elves, fairies, gnomes, giants, dwarves, trolls, kobolds, leprechauns, etc.), shapeshifting (lycanthropy/werewolves), and flight (strigae). This study will argue that the Western European witchcraft worldview was developed through the demonization and integration of various elements of folklore and paganism into the Christian belief system.

The Western European Witchcraft Worldview of the Middle Ages

While many historians have studied the events and trials relating to Western European witchcraft in the Middle Ages, few have sufficiently delved into the beliefs behind the phenomenon. Instead of focusing on the institutions that fanned the flames of the witch-craze, the publication of a comprehensive piece of work regarding the beliefs that comprised the witchcraft worldview is critical to the field of history. The Western European witchcraft worldview is a coherent set of beliefs held by the vast majority of people throughout the Middle Ages that defined what attributes were possessed by a witch as well as their supernatural abilities. In order to accurately depict the world from a medieval mindset, a historian must understand the folklore of the Middle Ages as well as the remnants of ancient paganism that persisted into this time period. The witchcraft worldview consisted of a complex network of beliefs and ideas drawn from the folklore and pagan traditions of the time. In order to accurately sum up the entire phenomenon, the question must be asked: What elements of folklore and paganism were most important to the formulation of the Western European witchcraft worldview due to their incorporation into the belief, and why were they so significant?

The integration of folkloric and pagan elements into the witchcraft worldview was a slow process that can be viewed through the demonization of various beliefs. The syncretic nature of medieval Catholicism attempted to find places for paganism and folklore within the larger sphere of Christian thought. These beliefs were incompatible with the concept of God and Heaven, so they found their roles to be in legion with the Devil and his minions. The Western European witchcraft worldview of the Middle Ages was developed through the demonization and integration of various elements of folklore and paganism into the Christian belief system.

Historiography

Before studying any historical topic, it is important to thoroughly analyze the various trends within the historiography as well as the significant contributions made by individual historians. The historical analysis of European witchcraft began in the late nineteenth century. The most prominent witchcraft scholars of this time period include Joseph Hanson, Henry Charles Lea, and Andrew Dickson White. While their work was not without value, these historians focused primarily on the institutional aspect of the persecution of witches, and were plagued by strong anti-Catholic sentiments.[1] By dismissing the ideas that formed witchcraft beliefs as inventions of superstitious inquisitors, these historians neglected to acknowledge the widespread network of preexisting ideas that accounted for this worldview. It is important to note that out of this wave of witchcraft scholarship came the Andrew Dickson White Library at Cornell University, which contains one of the largest collections of European witchcraft documents in the world.[2]

A second trend in the study of Western European witchcraft appeared during the 1920's and placed a heavy emphasis on the folklore that comprised this worldview. This scholarly effort was headed by Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist. Her primary goal in the study of European witchcraft was to demonstrate that a single, unified witch-cult with a clear and consistent doctrine had existed since ancient times. Murray has been completely discredited by the scholarly community.[3] It has been proven on numerous occasions that much of her evidence was completely fabricated and that she took great liberties in many of her translations of primary documents. Murray's research has no historical value whatsoever and is primarily used by modern occultists in an attempt to legitimize their religion. It is important to note that while

[1] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 30.
[2] *Ibid*., 31.
[3] Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 10.

Murray's work has no scholarly value, her notion that the witchcraft worldview was largely comprised of preexisting folklore is correct. She must be given some credit for breaking away from the strong anti-Catholicism of her predecessors in favor of a more accurate foundation to her research.

While there exist many historians who use the European witchcraft persecutions to attack the Catholic Church, there have also been historians who defend the Church's actions in this regard. One such scholar was Montague Summers, a historian and theologian from the early twentieth century. Summers not only defended the Catholic Church in its persecution of supposed witches but actually believed that witchcraft, werewolves, vampires, and other supernatural phenomenon existed.[4] While he has little value as a historian, Montague Summers made great contributions to the field of history through his translations of various documents into English. Perhaps the most significant translation he made was of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the notorious witch-hunting manual written by German inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. Although over thirty inquisitorial handbooks had been produced before its publication, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was by far the most influential.[5] One possible explanation for its widespread influence is that it was written shortly after the invention of the printing press which facilitated its large-scale production and distribution. The translations conducted by Montague Summers have made research on European witchcraft possible among English-speaking historians throughout the United States.

Perhaps the most popular current trend in scholarship regarding European witchcraft views the phenomenon from the perspective of gender. Feminist historians typically argue that witchcraft was a crime invented by the male elite in order to demonize and repress women in a

[4] Montague Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2007), 4.
[5] John Demos, *The Enemy Within: 2,000 Years of Witch-Hunting in the Western World* (New York: Viking Books, 2008), 63.

deeply patriarchal society. Regardless of the legitimacy of this argument, it fails to explain the beliefs that comprised the European witchcraft worldview. Feminist historians attempt to identify trends within statistics indicating that witchcraft accusations and trials primarily targeted women (a fact that has been proven on numerous occasions) instead of looking at the broader worldview that sparked such accusations. By simply dismissing witchcraft as a method of subjugating women, feminist historians fail to explore the deeper cultural components of the witchcraft phenomenon.

Many historians produce general histories of European witchcraft instead of subscribing to specific, preexisting trends. In many ways, this is beneficial because it allows these scholars to make unique and intriguing insights instead of working within the various frameworks already laid out by previous historians in the field. Perhaps the most influential historian in regards to European witchcraft is Jeffrey Burton Russell, a professor of history at Cornell University. Russell has written numerous books, the most influential to the study of witchcraft being *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* and *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans*. Jeffrey Burton Russell's work was ground-breaking because of its emphasis on the development of the witchcraft worldview. In *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans*, Russell claims, "The roots of historical European witchcraft lie partly in Graeco-Roman and Hebrew thought and partly in the sorcery, folklore and religion of northern Europe."[6] Russell recognizes that European witchcraft was comprised of preexisting religious and cultural thought that was demonized by the Christian church and developed into a coherent worldview throughout the Middle Ages.

[6] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1980), 42.

Acknowledgement must also be extended to Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, professors of history at the University of Pennsylvania and editors of *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*. This book contains a collection of significant primary sources relating to European witchcraft. The revised edition of this book was published in 2001 and was expanded to contain a total of sixty-nine documents. The work of Kors and Peters makes the study of witchcraft possible for scholars who speak only English.

The Demonization of Paganism

In order to understand Christianity, one must study the pagan traditions that preceded it in Greece, Rome, and throughout Western Europe. Before Christianity had gained a powerful foothold in Europe, Church leaders attempted to convert people to the worship of Christ by absorbing aspects of paganism into their religion. The syncretic nature of Christianity can be understood by viewing the various holidays that its followers celebrate even into modern times. For example, October 31st was originally the annual day of an Anglo-Saxon rite called 'need fire.'[7] On this day, participants would ignite large bonfires in order to lend strength to the sun.[8] The Christians established All Hallows' Day on November 1st, and October 31st became All Hallows' Eve (which was later transformed into Hallowe'en).

Christianity adopted and transformed not only pagan festivals, but also pagan gods. A unique aspect of medieval Catholicism was the assumption that, because the existence of multiple gods was not possible, what were previously perceived as gods by various civilizations were actually demons. By assimilating pagan gods into their demonological hierarchy, Christians effectively delegitimized any religious dissenters by equating them with Devil-worshippers. This

[7] *Ibid.,* 50.
[8] *Ibid., 50.*

idea gave birth to the concept of pact, which was used extensively by inquisitors to persecute and eliminate remaining pagans throughout Western Europe. A pact is an agreement made between a witch and a demon that traded the witch's soul for the ability to perform maleficium. There were two different types of pacts in the witchcraft worldview. An explicit pact was made when a witch deliberately signed a contract, renounced Christianity, and paid homage to a demon. An implicit pact was the idea that, because magic could not be performed without the aid of demons, an inherent pact was made the moment a witch dabbled in sorcery. The idea of the implicit pact was extremely dangerous in the hands of inquisitors because it allowed simple sorcery and folk-magic to be prosecuted as harshly as any other heresy. The method in which a pact was made is described within Kramer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum*,

> The first method is when witches meet together in conclave on a set day, and the devil appears to them in the assumed body of a man, and urges them to keep faith with him, promising them worldly prosperity and length of life; and they recommend a novice to his acceptance. And the devil asks whether she will abjure the Faith, and forsake the holy Christian religion and the worship of Anomalous Woman (for so they call the Most Blessed Virgin MARY), and never venerate the Sacraments; and if he finds the novice or disciple willing, then the devil stretches out his hand, and so does the novice, and she swears with upraised hand to keep that covenant. And when this is done, the devil at once adds that this is not enough; and when the disciple asks what more must be done, the devil demands the following oath of homage to himself: that she give herself to him, body and soul, for ever, and do her utmost to bring others of both sexes into his power.[9]

While Kramer and Sprenger did not add any new ideas to the concept of pact, they managed to sum up preexisting beliefs perfectly. The method of pact described in the *Malleus Maleficarum* involves a sabbat at which the witches would meet on a regular basis. New recruits would form pacts, and preexisting members would renew their oaths to the Devil. This passage also contains

[9] Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 99-100.

the renunciation of Christianity commonly seen in the making of pacts, in this case of the religion as a whole and of the Virgin Mary specifically. One interesting aspect of this passage is the idea that, once accepted into demonic service, the witch had a duty to recruit new followers to the worship of Satan. This notion was popular among inquisitors because it allowed them to force accused witches to implicate others under torture, significantly adding to the number of people prosecuted by the Inquisition.

The demonization of paganism as a whole can be viewed in the writings of Augustine, perhaps the most influential Christian theologian of all time. In *On Christian Teaching*, written between 395 and 398, Augustine writes,

> Something instituted by humans is superstitious if it concerns the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of the created order or part of it as if it were God, or if it involves certain kinds of consultations or contracts about meaning arranged and ratified with demons, such as the enterprises involved in the art of magic, which poets tend to mention rather than to teach. From this category-- only their vanity is even more reckless-- come the books of haruspices and augurs...[10]

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this passage is how quickly Augustine moves from describing pagan practice as superstitious to condemning it as demonic. For example, he speaks out against haruspices and augurs. An augur was a diviner from Ancient Rome. More specifically, haruspicy was the Roman practice of divining through the inspection of entrails from sacrificed animals.[11] Although he originally described such arts as superstitious, Augustine quickly equated such actions with the worship of demons. The way in which Church leaders attempted to separate their religion from others was through the condemnation of the use of

[10] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 44-46.
[11] Rebecca L. Stein and Philip L. Stein, *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft* (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005), 156.

magic.[12] Therefore, it was during this time period that the practice of divination became synonymous with the conjuring of evil spirits.[13] In fact, this passage is one of the first theological doctrines that equates pagan practices with the formulation of pacts. Christian theologians throughout the Middle Ages were able to use the works of Augustine to justify their persecution of people performing pagan rites by associating them with Devil-worshippers through the concept of pact.

The condemnation of the use of sorcery persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Even after Europe became Christianized and organized paganism had been erased, magic was still considered an ever-present threat. This is evident in Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*. Written in early twelfth century France, this text discusses the legitimate types of learning. It is apparent that Hugh did not approve of sorcery when he states,

> Magic is not accepted as a part of philosophy, but stands with a false claim outside it: the mistress of every form of iniquity and malice, lying about the truth and truly infecting men's minds, it seduces them from divine religion, prompts them to the cult of demons, fosters corruption of morals, and impels the minds of its devotees to every wicked and criminal indulgence.[14]

The fearful way in which the *Didascalicon* regards magic is the norm of this era. The fact that formal pagan worship had been dismantled by the time Hugh wrote this text did not diminish his belief in the reality of magic. Works such as this indicate that the sorcerer and the witch were viewed as synonymous with one another. People practicing paganism were no longer thought of

[12] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 45.
[13] Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 165.
[14] Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, trans. Jerome Taylor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 69.

as performing religious rites in honor of their own gods, but were perceived as practicing sorcery with the aid of the Christian Devil and his demons.

Diana and the Wild Ride

The demonization and integration of paganism into the witchcraft worldview can be viewed through the specific example of Diana and the Wild Ride. Diana was the Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt.[15] Her identity as a fertility goddess caused Christian authorities to equate her with Hecate, the three-faced mother of lamias and goddess of the Underworld.[16] Lamias were cannibalistic spirits who flew out at night to feed on the flesh of infants and children.[17] As Diana became notorious as an influential leader of witches, it was believed that she held assemblies at night where children were sacrificed to lamias.[18] Diana was also thought to roam the countryside on the Wild Ride with her followers, who were known as the bonae mulieres.[19] This name is possibly derived from the belief in the bonae res, or the "Good Society." It was thought that folk spirits from this group, often sprites, would enter dwellings at night to take food and clothing, giving prosperity to the households' residents in return for these items.[20] The Wild Ride was also known as the "wild rout" or "wilde jagd," and was perhaps the most influential Teutonic tradition on the Western European witchcraft worldview of the Middle Ages.[21]

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[15] Robert Schilling, "Diana," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade vol. 4, trans. Paul C. Duggan (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 349.
[16] Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans*, 48.
[17] Rossell Hope Robbins, "Lamia," *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1981), 295-296.
[18] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 77-78.
[19] Waldemar Kloss, "Herodias the Wild Huntress in the Legend of the Middle Ages," *Modern Language Notes* 23 (1908), 101.
[20] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages,* 157.
[21] *Ibid*., 48.

It is important to note that the Wild Ride was not the same as Hellequin's hunt. This is the belief that a procession of damned souls would march at night, each being punished in a manner appropriate to the particular sin that he/she committed during life (i.e. an adulteress sitting on a metal spike with her breasts pierced by searing nails, a violent knight being forced to carry a flaming weapon, etc.)[22] The literary theme of punishments mirroring particular sins is displayed in many different medieval texts. Perhaps the most prominent example of this occurs in Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. This story describes Hell as consisting of nine different layers, each with the purpose of administering a unique torture for a specific type of sinner. For example, the second layer, Lust, is a place where sinners are blown about in the air indefinitely.[23] The third layer, Gluttony, is a place where sinners are forced to lay under a storm of hail, snow, and discolored water.[24] The fourth layer, Greed, is a place where sinners are forced to push great weights with their chests.[25] Like the Wild Ride, Hellequin's hunt was believed to be led by a prominent figure. Several examples of such leaders included Hellequin, King Arthur, and Venus.[26] However, the primary difference between these two phenomenon is that the Wild Ride was an activity for witches and demons, while Hellequin's hunt was forced upon the souls of deceased sinners. Therefore, it is important to note that the Wild Ride was a separate phenomenon from Hellequin's hunt, which was in no way an element of the Western European witchcraft worldview.

The tradition of the Wild Ride is best studied through an examination of the *Canon Episcopi*, an influential theological text written by Regino of Prüm in 906. During the Middle

[22] Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 95-96.
[23] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Francis Cary (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, Ltd., 2009), 28-31.
[24] *Ibid.,* 32-35
[25] *Ibid*., 36-39.
[26] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, 94, 108, 117.

Ages, this document was believed to have been produced by the Council of Ancyra in 314, causing it to be extremely influential.[27] The *Canon Episcopi* states,

> It is also not to be omitted that some wicked women, who have given themselves back to Satan and been seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess that, in the hours of night, they ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the night traverse great spaces of earth, and obey her commands as of their lady, and are summoned to her service on certain nights. But if only they alone perished in their faithlessness, without drawing many other people with them into the destruction of infidelity. For an innumerable multitude, deceived by this false opinion, believe this to be true, and so believing, wander from the right faith and return to the error of the pagans when they think that there is anything of divinity or power except the one God... Thus Satan himself, who transfigures himself into an angel of light, when he has captured the mind of a miserable little woman... leads it through devious ways...[28]

It is important to note that the *Canon Episcopi* does not promote the belief that Diana and the Wild Ride exist in reality. Instead, Regino claims that women are commonly deluded by the Devil to believe that the Wild Ride exists and that they participate in it. This logic manages to equate pagan belief with the demonic and at the same time delegitimize paganism by claiming that this popular belief was merely an illusion. This doctrine was absorbed into canon law shortly after it was written, and it remained the official position of the Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages.[29]

The *Corrector*, written by the canon lawyer Burchard of Worms between 1008 and 1012, serves as an effective demonstration of the influence of the *Canon Episcopi* on medieval theological thought. In fact, this text was essentially a revised version of the *Canon Episcopi*.

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[27] Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 60.
[28] Regino of Prüm, *Canon Episcopi*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 62.
[29] Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*, 39.

Burchard did not deviate from Regino of Prüm on any significant points and reaffirmed nearly everything found within the *Canon Episcopi*. Burchard states,

> Have you believed that there is any woman who can do that which some, deceived by the devil, affirm that they must do of necessity or at his command, that is, with a throng of demons transformed into the likeness of women, (she whom common folly calls the witch Hulda), must ride on certain beasts in special nights and be numbered with their company?[30]

Like the *Canon Episcopi*, the *Corrector* claims that the Wild Ride does not exist in reality, but that the minds of women who believe they take part in this phenomenon are deluded by the Devil. It is interesting that Burchard deviates from Regino by referring to the leader of the Wild Ride as Hulda. Hulda, also known as Holt or Holle, was a fertility goddess of central Germany, but she was possibly synonymous with Diana, Herodias, and Hecate by the time the *Corrector* was written.[31] This text most significantly serves as a demonstration of the *Canon Episcopi*'s influence throughout the Middle Ages due to its reaffirmation of Regino's sentiments regarding the Wild Ride.

While Diana and the Wild Ride were far from the only aspects of pagan belief to be incorporated into the European witchcraft worldview, they were perhaps the most significant. It must be understood that while originally a pagan idea, this concept was demonized over time and successfully incorporated into the worldview of an overwhelmingly Christian civilization. Diana's connection to the Underworld and the Wild Ride allowed people still practicing paganism to be targeted by Catholic authorities for witchcraft. Extensive primary sources indicating the prominence of these beliefs demonstrate the success with which Christians were able to absorb and destroy the remnants of paganism throughout medieval Europe.

[30] Burchard of Worms, *Corrector, Sive Medicus*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, trans. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 65.
[31] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 49.

The Demonization of Folklore

The customs and beliefs of the common folk within Europe became demonized and integrated into the witchcraft worldview as Christianity gained power across the continent. Ideas previously held by European lay people were not readily accepted by theological authorities, who managed to incorporate them into the darker side of Christian philosophy. The most influential aspects of folklore in the witchcraft worldview include the belief in folk spirits, shapeshifting, and flight. All of these beliefs were demonized and integrated into the witchcraft worldview by the Christian authorities of medieval Western Europe.

Folklore is difficult to study because it was primarily an oral tradition. However, Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm made a valuable contribution to the study of this tradition in 1812 when they composed *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Tales of Children and the Home*), also known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.[32] Although the Grimm brothers were vigilant in maintaining the accuracy of the various tales they recorded, this source still has some weaknesses. Like any other oral tradition, the stories passed down throughout Europe were inevitably altered over time. This means that Jacob and Wilhelm could not have possibly recorded the original folklore from the Middle Ages. However, the stories contained within *Grimm's Fairy Tales* are still valuable to the study of European culture. Although small aspects of each story were undoubtedly altered since the Middle Ages and some tales likely originated in countries neighboring Germany, it is likely that the general outlines and themes of the stories remain true to their medieval counterparts.[33]

[32] "Grimm, Jakob Karl and Wilhelm Karl," *Encyclopedia of European Social History From 1350-2000*, ed. Peter N. Stearns vol. 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 132.
[33] Orrin W. Robinson, *Grimm Language: Grammar, Gender and Genuineness in the Fairy* Tales (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010), 2.

One aspect of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* that was integrated into the witchcraft worldview was the appearance of various folk spirits. An example of this can be viewed in "The Elves." In this fairy tale, industrious elves aid a cobbler in his work, and he provides them with clothes in return.[34] Folk spirits also play a prominent role in "The Valiant Little Tailor." In this story, a tailor cleverly defeats a mighty giant in a physical competition through cunning means.[35] In "The Little Folks' Presents," a traveling tailor and goldsmith stumble upon a circle of dancing and singing folk spirits that give them gold in exchange for their hair.[36] The story titled, "The Water Nixie," tells the tale of a boy and girl who fall down a well and are captured by a fairy who forces them to perform manual labor for her until they manage to cleverly escape.[37] The various spirits and creatures found within *Grimm's Fairy Tales* appeared frequently within the European witchcraft trials of the Middle Ages, proving their integration into this worldview as well as their cultural significance.

Shapeshifting plays a prominent role within *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as well as the Western European witchcraft worldview. An example of this appears in "Little Red-Cap." In this story, Little Red-Cap and her grandmother are eaten by a wolf and are stuck in his belly until a huntsman saves them.[38] This wolf is presumably a lycanthrope due to the fact that he is wearing clothes and has the ability to talk. Shapeshifting also appears in "The Frog King, or Iron Henry." This tale is about a princess who loses her ball in a well and promises a frog that she will be his companion as long as he retrieves it for her.[39] The story ends with the frog transforming back

[34] Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm, "The Elves," *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, trans. Margaret Hunt and James Stern (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 197-199.
[35] Grimm and Grimm, "The Valiant Little Taylor," 112-120.
[36] Grimm and Grimm, "The Little Folks' Presents," 742-744.
[37] Grimm and Grimm, "The Water Nixie," 364.
[38] Grimm and Grimm, "Little Red-Cap," 139-143.
[39] Grimm and Grimm, "The Frog-King, or Iron Henry," 17-20.

into a human prince after the curse that changed him into a frog is broken.[40] In "The Six Swans," an evil queen turns her step-children into swans through the use of witchcraft.[41] Similarly, "The Seven Ravens" is a story about a father who accidentally changes his sons into ravens through the use of an enchantment.[42] Another tale that contains shapeshifting is "Fitcher's Bird." In this story, a wizard takes the form of a poor man so that he can meet women while begging at houses.[43] Shapeshifting was a phenomenon that was adopted from folklore and integrated into the witchcraft worldview of medieval Europe.

Although it does not appear as often as folk spirits or shapeshifting, flight is a prominent element within many of the stories located in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. However, flight appears most often as a natural phenomenon due to the large amount of birds within these tales. Several examples of stories in which birds play prominent roles include, "The Death of the Little Hen," "The Sparrow and his Four Children," "The Dog and the Sparrow," and "The Fox and the Geese." The birds that appear within *Grimm's Fairy Tales* often have distinctly human characteristics, such as a keen intelligence and the ability to talk. This phenomenon occurs frequently within folklore, and serves as an example of flight being linked to humanized creatures.

Due to the dark subject matter of many fairy tales, it is not surprising that the Catholic Church was able to integrate certain folkloric elements into the witchcraft worldview. Such stories often reflect the shadow of human nature. In Jungian psychology, the shadow is a negative ego identity.[44] This often includes emotions and impulses of selfishness, sexual lust,

[40] *Ibid*., 17-20.
[41] Grimm and Grimm, "The Six Swans," 232-236.
[42] Grimm and Grimm, "The Seven Ravens," 137-138.
[43] Grimm and Grimm, "Fitcher's Bird," 216-219.
[44] David H. Rosen, "Jung, Carl Gustav," *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. Alan E. Kazdin vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 418.

rage, and envy.[45] The common people of the Western European Middle Ages projected their repressed shadow in the form of certain evils into their folklore, such as various spirits/creatures, shapeshifting, and flight. Ecclesiastical authorities then adopted, Christianized, and projected similar ideas onto supposed witches.

Folk Spirits

Although in modern times folk spirits exist only in fairy tales, they were once thought to be as real as any creature on Earth. Types of folk spirits that appear within medieval lore include elves, fairies, gnomes, giants, dwarves, trolls, kobolds, leprechauns, and green men.[46] They were portrayed as morally ambiguous creatures within traditional folklore; they could be helpful or mischievous.[47] However, Christianity managed to put these creatures in a darker light. Folk spirits became increasingly evil and malicious as they were absorbed into Christian thought, finding their place as minor demons within the witchcraft worldview. In fact, folk spirits evolved in many of the same ways as pagan gods: both were classified as demons by Catholic theologians because their positions within the belief systems in which they originated were incompatible with Christian philosophy. In the eyes of a Christian, any supernatural being that was not heavenly was demonic. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that folk spirits were seen as minions of Satan.

Folk spirits commonly found their roles in European witchcraft as demonic familiars to witches. Familiar spirits were believed to aid witches in maleficium in exchange for sustenance,

[45] Stephen A. Diamond, "Shadow," *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming, Kathryn Madden, and Stanton Marlan vol. 2 (New York: Springer Science+Business Media LLC., 2010), 836.
[46] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 111.
[47] Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42.

usually in the form of blood that was sucked from a protrusion on the witch's body.[48] Although believed to be demonic, folk spirits were not considered to be particularly dangerous. This can be seen in the silly nature of their names. Several examples include, Rumpelstiltskin, Heinnekin Hämmerlein, Haussibut, Hinkebein, and Berit.[49] Their reputation as mischievous tricksters in popular lore seemed to have survived their demonization and integration into the witchcraft worldview in this respect.

A particularly interesting case that involved a demonic familiar occurred in 1324, and it was the first witchcraft trial to take place in Ireland. Alice Kyteler, a wealthy woman from a prominent banking family, was accused of causing her husband's death through maleficium.[50] It was also claimed that she consorted with a familiar spirit named Robert Artisson, who supposedly served as her incubus.[51] According to trial records, Robert would appear to Alice in various forms, including that of a large cat, a dog, and a black man.[52] She was also accused of sacrificing roosters to Robert and concocting potions containing their intestines mixed with herbs, nails from dead men, hair, and the brains of unbaptized children.[53] With a name translating to "Son of Art," it is likely that Robert was actually an Irish folk spirit manifesting as a demonic familiar within this trial.[54] The unique case of Alice Kyteler serves as an effective example of the influence that various folk spirits had as demonic familiars within the witchcraft worldview of medieval Western Europe.

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[48] Robin Briggs, *Witches & Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 29.
[49] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 53, 111, 187.
[50] Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 77.
[51] Robbins, "Kyteler, Alice," 294.
[52] Robert Thurston, *The Witch Hunts: A History of the Witch Persecutions in Europe and North America* (Bungay: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 117.
[53] *Ibid*., 294.
[54] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 190.

Folk spirits often had roles other than that of demonic familiars within the witchcraft worldview. In Scotland, elves appeared in witchcraft trials with unusual frequency. The phenomenon of "elf shot" is a disease or affliction attributed to projectiles launched by elves, often in the form of flint arrowheads, which were believed to be their primary weapons.[55] Many instances of this can be viewed in various trials throughout Scotland. For example, the testimony of Isobell Thomsone against Jenet Miller from a Scottish witchcraft trial taking place in 1659 proceeds as such,

> when the said Isobell... was reproveing her for beareing ane bourden wpon the Lords day The said Jenet Miller sate downe upon her knees courseing And said that she should have A mends of her And thereafter when she was layeing wakeing with a paine in her Arme she perceaved her thombe shot through with that which they call ane elffe stone And the blood of her thumbe sprinkled a longe the bed And there looking to the floore she saw her standing upon it with ane other who is dead.
>
> [when the aforementioned Isobel... was rebuking her [Jenet] for bearing a burden on the Lord's day, the aforementioned Jenet Miller knelt down upon her knees cursing, and said that she would have some compensation from her [Isobel]. And thereafter, when she [Isobel] was lying awake with a pain in her arm, she perceived her thumb to be shot through with the thing which is called an *elf-stone*, and the blood of her thumb sprang out along the bed. And looking from there to the floor she saw her [Jenet] standing upon it with another person, who is dead.][56]

This court record is a typical example of the role that elf shot played in witchcraft trials. The only abnormality in it is that instead of an arrowhead, Isobell was struck by a stone. It is also strange that she accused Jenet of appearing in her room with "ane other who is dead." Due to the aforementioned elf stone, it is most likely that the "other who is dead" was the elf that was aiding Jenet in maleficium. A similar testimony appeared in the 1662 Scottish trial of Jonet Morisone.

[55] Alaric Hall, "Getting a Shot of Elves: Healing, Witchcraft and Fairies in the Scottish Witchcraft Trials," *Folklore* 116, (2005), 19.
[56] *Ibid*., 30.

Jonet implicated Margrat NcWilliam, who confessed that in exchange for wealth the Devil "sought her sone [son] William a child of 7 yeires old which she promised to him and he gave her ane elf errow stone to shott [shoot] him which she did ten dayes thereafter that the child dyed immediately therafter which grieved her most of anything that ever she did."[57] This confession is significant because Margrat directly linked elves with the Devil. A second prominent example of this connection between elves and the Devil appears in a confession made by Issobel Gowdie. She states,

> As for Elf-arrow-heidis, the Divell shapes them with his awin hand, [and syne deliueris thame] to Elf-boyes, who whyttis and dightis them with a sharp thing lyk a paking neidle; bot [quhan I wes in Elf-land?] I saw them whytting and dighting them. Quhan I wes in the Elfes howssis, they will haw werie . . . . . them whytting and ighting; and the Divell giwes them to ws...
>
> [As for *elf-arrow-heidis*, the Devil shapes them with his own hand, [and thereafter delivers them] to *elf-boys*, who shape them and finish them off with a sharp thing like a packing needle (a needle for binding bundles); but [?when I was in Elf-land] I saw them shaping and finishing them. When I was in the *elvis'* houses, they will have very . . . . . them shaping and finishing them; and the Devil gives them to us...][58]

This confession is particularly interesting because Issobel claimed that the elves were working with the Devil to craft projectiles to be utilized in the performance of maleficium. She believed that the Devil began production on the arrowheads, and the elves finished shaping them. Such cases provide irrefutable evidence of the demonization and integration of folk spirits into the Western European witchcraft worldview.

While elves played an especially significant role in Scottish witchcraft, kobolds stood out prominently in German cases. It was widely believed that kobolds lived in mountainous regions

[57] *Ibid*., 30.
[58] *Ibid*., 31-32.

and mines.[59] They were thought to partake in mischievous behaviors, such as stone-throwing and the substitution of one ore for another.[60] In his *Histoire Generale du Monde et de la Nature,* published between 1617 and 1619, Petrus Valderrama states,

> The subterranean spirits are those who dwell in caverns and other recesses of the earth, where they kill or suffocate or render insane miners in search of precious metals. The Germans call them Kobolds. They are gnomes, dwarfs not over an ell in height, and they help in cutting stones, getting out metals, packing them in baskets and hauling to the surface. They laugh and whistle and perform a thousand tricks, but their services often redound to the injury and death of those whom they serve. They cut the ropes, break the ladders, cause the fall of rocks, send poisonous vapor; and you will se rich mines abandoned for the fear of them... It is they who cause earthquakes... They are not only the guardians of the mines, but of hidden treasures, which they allow no one to take...[61]

This passage demonstrates that many people believed in the existence of kobolds even into the early seventeenth century. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Christian mind increasingly equated the activity of kobolds with that of demons. Although kobolds could act independently, it was frequently believed that they were compelled by witches to commit mischievous deeds.[62] This is yet another example of the absorption of folk spirits into the witchcraft worldview.

Regardless of the specific type of folk spirit being examined, evidence overwhelmingly points to their demonization and integration into the Western European witchcraft worldview. In modern times, people use tales of such creatures to entertain children, but to the medieval mind such creatures existed in reality. Folk spirits were believed to be in legion with the Devil and were thought to serve as his minions. These minor demons played the role of familiar spirits and

[59] Jane P. Davidson and Christopher John Duffin, "Stones and Spirits," *Folklore* 123, (2012), 103.
[60] *Ibid*., 103.
[61] Petrus Valderrama, *Histoire Generale du Monde et de la Nature,* trans. Henry Charles Lea (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), 474-475.
[62] Davidson and Duffin, "Stones and Spirits," 103.

general facilitators of maleficium. Folk spirits were a significant aspect of European culture that played a prominent role in the witchcraft worldview of the Middle Ages.

Shapeshifting

The concept of shapeshifting had many roles in the European witchcraft worldview. Witches and demons were believed to have the ability to change their own form as well as the form of others. However, Christian theologians believed that demons did not have the ability to physically alter the creations of God, but instead tricked the senses of humans to create the illusion of shapeshifting.[63] Under this logic, a witch in the form of a rat would not be able to enter a house through a small crevice but would have to enter through an area large enough to fit a human. Furthermore, it was believed that if a human was wounded while in the shape of an animal, they would possess a corresponding wound when they reverted back to their human form.[64] This is supported by the French Inquisitorial handbook, *An Examen of Witches.* Written by Henry Boguet in 1619, this text states, "While he was in the shape of a wolf, Michael Udon was wounded by a gentleman, who followed and found him in his hut where his wife was bathing his wound; but he had then resumed the form of a man."[65] In the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Kramer and Sprenger state, "Whoever believes that it is possible for any creature to be changed for the better or for the worse, or to be transformed into any other shape or likeness, except by the Creator Himself... is without doubt an infidel, and worse than a pagan."[66] Like most ideas contained within this German witch-hunting handbook, the notions regarding shapeshifting from

[63] Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 93.
[64] Nicole Jacques-Lefèvre, "Such an Impure, Cruel, and Savage Beast: Images of the Werewolf in Demonological Works," *Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Belief & Folklore in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kathryn A. Edwards (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2002), 183.
[65] Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, ed. Montague Summers (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2009), 140.
[66] Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 61.

the *Malleus Maleficarum* are strictly traditional. This position is also supported by *An Examen of Witches*. In this text, Henry Boguet states, "Nevertheless it has always been my opinion that Lycanthropy is an illusion, and that the metamorphosis of a man into a beast is impossible."[67] Although an overwhelming majority of theologians believed shapeshifting to be illusory, it was still considered to be a dangerous and demonic phenomenon.

Perhaps the most well-known form of shapeshifting was lycanthropy, the transformation of a human into a wolf. "Werewolf" literally translates to "man-wolf" (from Old English "wer" ["man"] and "wulf" ["wolf"]).[68] Werewolves appear frequently in medieval lore and throughout European witchcraft trials, especially in regions that were heavily forested.[69] However, the first mention of lycanthropy comes from Heroditas in the fifth century BCE, long before the emergence of Christianity.[70] Werewolves play a particularly prominent role in *An Examen of Witches*. Henry Boguet justifies his belief in lycanthropy through the history and literature of the past. He states,

> Job Fincel relates that he saw a Lycanthrope at Padua. Herodotus tells that the inhabitants of a district in Scythia used to turn into wolves; and this is also common among the peoples of the North. When the Romans were trying to prevent Hannibal from crossing the Alps, a wolf came amongst their army, rent those whom it met, and finally escaped without being hurt. In the year 1042 the people of Constantinople were much embarrassed by the appearance of more than 150 wolves at the same time. And in 1148 in the land of Geneva there was seen a wolf of unusual size, which killed thirty persons of both sexes and various ages. Who, then, can doubt but that these wolves were Lycanthropes?[71]

[67] Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 143.
[68] Felix J. Oinas, "Werewolf," *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997), 840.
[69] Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, (London: Longman Group Limited, 1995), 50.
[70] Oinas, "Werewolf," 840.
[71] Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 139.

This passage is significant because it reveals how important lycanthropy was in the lore of the Middle Ages. Boguet also discusses werewolf attacks that he had dealt with firsthand as an inquisitor. He states, "The same method of procedure which was used in the case of Francoise Secretain was followed in those of Jacques Bocquet, Clauda Jamprost, Clauda Jamguillaume, Thievenne Paget and Clauda Gaillard.... The first four of these confessed that they had turned themselves into wolves and that, in this shape, they had killed several children...."[72] The condition of lycanthropy is perhaps the most well-known manifestation of shapeshifting, and it persists into modern times as a rare psychological disorder.[73] This provides a possible explanation for the significant number of medieval people who confessed to being werewolves. A second explanation for the widespread belief in lycanthropy during the Middle Ages lies in porphyria, a congenital disorder that causes light-sensitivity, clay-colored teeth, and destructive ulcers that cause deformity of the nose, ears, and fingers of the afflicted.[74] Although it is likely that the vast majority of lycanthropy confessions were elicited through torture, the widespread belief in werewolves existed among the accusers and the accused.

The Devil and his demons were believed to have the ability to take various forms, which they frequently demonstrated at witches' sabbats. They often appeared as wolves, dogs, cats, bulls, pigs, sheep, horses, cows, bears, monkeys, birds, and foxes.[75] These shapes were possibly derived from the demonization of the ancient folk belief in animal spirits. However, demons could also appear in human form. The Devil had reportedly been seen as a black man, an old man, a child, a pretty girl, a queen, and even as a half-man half-goat.[76] Perhaps the Devil was so

[72] *Ibid*., 136-137.
[73] Petra Garlipp, "Lycanthropy," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 115, (2007), 161.
[74] Kathryn A. Edwards, *Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Belief & Folklore in Early Modern Europe* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2002), xxi.
[75] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 246.
[76] *Ibid*., 246.

terrifying to the medieval mind because he could be anyone. The feelings of suspicion that arose from this undoubtedly fanned the flames of the witch-craze in Western Europe.

Flight

The concept of flight stands out as a particularly prominent aspect of the witchcraft worldview. It has even persisted into modern society, as the European witch is typically depicted as a green-skinned woman flying on a broomstick. However, the idea of flight has its roots in the ancient folk concept of the strigae. Similar to lamiae, strigae were thought to be spirits who flew out at night to feast on the flesh and blood of infants and children.[77] This is evidenced by the late sixth century *Salic Law*, which states, "if a *stiria* or *stria* eats a man and is put on trial, she shall be sentenced and condemned to pay eight thousand *denarii*."[78] However, some people were more doubtful as to whether or not strigae existed. For example, the seventh century *Edict of Rotharius* claims that it "was impossible for a Christian mind to believe that a woman could eat the viscera of a living man."[79] In eleventh century Hungary, King Stephen I (997-1038) produced laws that distinguished strigae from simple witches.[80] Similarly, King Ladislas of Hungary (1077-1095) denied the existence of strigae in the traditional sense but maintained that they were supernatural by grouping them with succubi.[81] However, King Coloman (1095-1114) of Hungary claimed that strigae could not be punished for the simple reason that they did not exist.[82] The evolution of the strigae from spirit to cannibalistic witch was complete by the time of the witch-craze. This can be seen in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *Strix*. Written in 1523, this text uses the term

[77] Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 46.
[78] Emma Wilby, "Burchard's *Strigae*, the Witches' Sabbath, and Shamanistic Cannibalism in Early Modern Europe," *Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* 8 (2013), 19-20.
[79] *Ibid*., 20.
[80] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 97.
[81] *Ibid*., 97.
[82] *Ibid*., 97.

"strega" to refer to a human witch.[83] The adoption of flight and cannibalism can be largely attributed to the belief in strigae and is reflected in the night-flying of witches and their eating of infants and children.

It is important to note that strigae were not the same as vampires. While strigae were originally considered to be spirits, vampires were thought to be corporeal entities. It was believed that vampires were the reanimated corpses of dead humans. People who were thought to rise from their graves as vampires were typically murder victims, suicides, alcoholics, and evildoers.[84] According to medieval lore, effective methods of killing a vampire include staking, decapitation, complete dismemberment, and cremation.[85] Many aspects of the vampire mythos were developed through the signs of a carcass's decay being interpreted as supernatural in nature. For example, blood around a corpse's mouth as well as bloating were thought to be caused by the vampire's feeding.[86] Sometimes scavenging animals would dig at graves or uncover bodies that had recently been buried, causing the people to think that corpses had dug themselves out of the ground.[87] Vampires and other forms of undead remained in the sphere of folklore while strigae were integrated into the witchcraft worldview.

Although witches in modern times are often depicted riding on broomsticks, they were originally thought to use a wide variety of objects and animals to achieve flight. In *An Examen of Witches*, Henry Boguet goes into great detail regarding the witch's ability to fly. He states,

> Françoise Secretain was carried there [the sabbat] upon a white staff; Rollande du Vernois on a big black ram which she rode horsewise. Satan in the form of a black man when he bore Thievenne Paget and Antide

[83] Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Strix*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 242.
[84] Paul Barber, "Vampire," *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997), 827.
[85] *Ibid*., 827.
[86] *Ibid*., 827.
[87] Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 134.

> Colas to the Sabbat: others go there sometimes on a goat, sometimes on a horse, and sometimes on a broom, and generally leave their house by the chimney.[88]

Regardless of which item was used, it was typically believed that witches anointed these with a flight-facilitating salve.[89] The ointments and powders that were thought to cause flight were made of gruesome ingredients and almost always contained the remains of slain infants or children. One example of such a concoction called for the flesh of a toad that had been fed a consecrated host, the blood of murdered children, the bones of exhumed corpses, and menstrual blood.[90] It was believed that witches were able to fly through the air on the backs of beasts. However, this was brought about by the influence of the Wild Ride, not the concept of strigae. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, demonic aid must be present for a witch to fly.[91] In *An Examen of Witches*, Henry Boguet claims that witches achieve flight by having the Devil carry them through the air. Boguet states, "Thievenne Paget said that the first time the Devil appeared to her... he embraced her and raised her in the air and conveyed her to the house in the field of Long-chamois where he had carnal intercourse with her, and that he then brought her back to the place from where he had taken her."[92] By equating the phenomenon of flight with the demonic, Christian authorities successfully integrated it into the witchcraft worldview as a prominent power of witches.

Conclusion

The Western European witchcraft worldview was largely comprised of various pagan and folkloric elements. Christian authorities sought to absorb preexisting ideas into the Christian

[88] Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 44.
[89] *Ibid*., 44.
[90] Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 240.
[91] Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 105.
[92] Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 41.

sphere of thought, and many of these found their places to be in legion with the Devil. Pagan gods and folk spirits were categorized as demons, while shapeshifting and flight were thought to be powers that witches possessed. The goddess Diana became a leader of witches and flew out at night with demons to commit horrendous acts. What was previously considered to be harmless suddenly took on a darker light, becoming malicious and evil. It makes perfect sense that a civilization that considered the spiritual world to be just as real as the physical would seek out supposed witches for eradication. Instead of studying this phenomenon from an institutional or gender-based perspective, it can be understood through the lens of a coherent worldview developed through the demonization and integration of various elements of folklore and paganism into the Christian belief system.

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