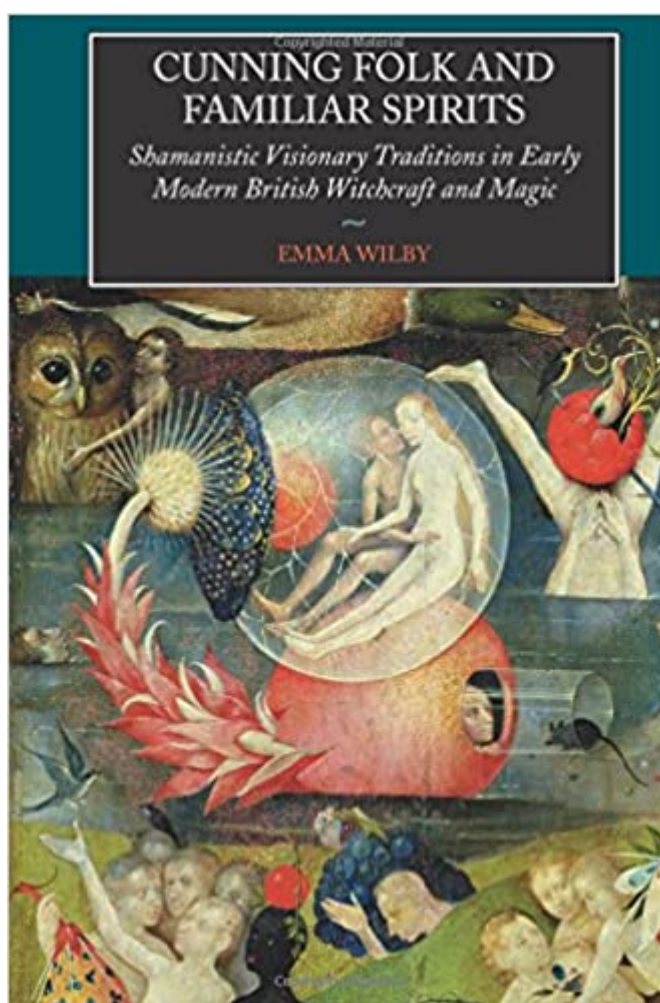


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Cunning-Folk And Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions In Early Modern British Witchcraft And Magic



Synopsis

In the hundreds of confessions relating to witchcraft and sorcery trials from early modern Britain we frequently find detailed descriptions of intimate working relationships between popular magical practitioners and familiar spirits of either human or animal form. Until recently historians often dismissed these descriptions as elaborate fictions created by judicial interrogators eager to find evidence of stereotypical pacts with the Devil. Although this paradigm is now routinely questioned, and most historians acknowledge that there was a folkloric component to familiar lore in the period, these beliefs and the experiences reportedly associated with them, remain substantially unexamined. *Cunning-Folk and Familiar Spirits* examines the folkloric roots of familiar lore from historical, anthropological and comparative religious perspectives. It argues that beliefs about witches' familiars were rooted in beliefs surrounding the use of fairy familiars by beneficent magical practitioners or 'cunning folk', and corroborates this through a comparative analysis of familiar beliefs found in traditional native American and Siberian shamanism. The author explores the experiential dimension of familiar lore by drawing parallels between early modern familiar encounters and visionary mysticism as it appears in both tribal shamanism and medieval European contemplative traditions. These perspectives challenge the reductionist view of popular magic in early modern British often presented by historians.

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Customer Reviews

“Wilby’s thesis is that the image of the familiar spirit is not an elite fiction imposed

by prosecutors, but represents the folk beliefs of magical practitioners – cunning folk who practiced beneficent magic, and witches who were more malevolent. She goes further, arguing that the concept of the witch’s familiar derives from ancient British animistic religion. . . . Wilby points out, correctly, that we do not think of cunning folk as mystics because they do not conform to the pious and ascetic norms established by Christian saints. The book is carefully organized and clearly written.

• Moira Smith, *Journal of Folklore Research*

“Emma Wilby examines in abundant detail the statements in which witches and cunning folk described their encounters with spirits . . . [and] argues that these statements . . . are evidence of archaic animistic beliefs persisting into early modern times; occasionally, they hint at experiences of religious intensity comparable not merely with shamanism, but with the visions of medieval Christian mystics. This is bold stuff . . . Emma Wilby’s views challenge those of other current historians, notably Owen Davies, who sees cunning folk as far more pragmatic and down-to-earth, and Diane Purkiss, who interprets the encounters of witches with fairies as compensatory psychological fantasies. The debate between these and other scholars will be very instructive.”

• Jacqueline Simpson, *Folklore*

“Wilby’s book is fascinating and well researched. It is a genuine contribution to what is known about cunning folk and lays very solid foundations for future work on the subject.”

• Brian Hoggard, *White Dragon*

“Wilby valuably sets the ground for further exploration of the role and character of folk magic within community and tradition and is to be recommended for that.”

• John Billings, *Northern Earth*

Emma Wilby is an honorary fellow at the University of Exeter.

This book takes a look at aspects of early modern English witchcraft and cunning-folk practice that have seldom been examined in academic ways. The first section begins with a good summary of the nature of the popular culture of the day - illiterate or semiliterate, land-dependent, and steeped in what she identifies as an ‘animistic’ world view. Wilby provides an interesting perspective on just how uneducated in Christian orthodoxy the ordinary man-in-the-field was, and how close and real was the world of local spirits and ghosts. The book then offers a selection of descriptions of the spirit-allies of those identified as ‘witches’ or ‘cunning folk’ (and makes a clear distinction between the two classes). Wilby uses trial accounts and the descriptions of elite (i.e. literate) observers as her main sources for how English magic-users viewed their ‘familiars’ or ‘spirit guides’. She makes a good case for which kinds of trial accounts make for good evidence, and her choices are entirely convincing. The second section of the book provides a summary of traditional ‘shamanism’,

especially as practiced in central Asia. The author focuses on the interactions of shamans with spirits, describing the encounter, initiation and ongoing work. This section has little that is new. Those familiar with world shamanic models will find it ordinary; those without that familiarity are given a good summary introduction. In the final section of the book, Wilby makes the case that early-modern witches and cunning-folk had relationships with spiritual beings similar in many ways to those of traditional shamans. She takes some time to discuss how westerners so 'close' to us in temperament and culture could commonly experience the visionary events required for spirit-contact. She discusses (throughout the book) modern western objections to the stories, and how materialist historians have tried to describe the stories of the cunning folk as 'mutual constructions', fictions created by the interactions of elite witch-hunters with impoverished victims. In my own opinion, Wilby's theories of actual events of spirit contact (whether psychological or metaphysical) fit the evidence much more clearly than materialist skepticism. Wilby is aware of both neoshamanic and neopagan practice in modern times. The book doesn't spend much time talking about them, but it is filled with a sensibility that takes spirit-contact by modern people (or early modern people...) seriously. Modern practitioners will find many suggestive notions, seeds on which our practice might be grown. Ian Corrigan

This is what books on the history of witches and witchcraft should be like. I don't mean offense to anyone's cherished religion, but I am so tired of the rampant ignorance of New Age authors who want to rewrite the world as a matriarchal paradise before those bad old Christians came along. This book is a solid historical/anthropological analysis of witch trial testimonies and contemporary documents pertaining to the subject. Wilby makes a convincing case that the "cunning arts" practiced in 16th and 17th century Britain contained a significant element of shamanism and were in many ways quite distinct from the witchcraft practiced in continental Europe at the time. Although today much is made by witchcraft enthusiasts of the use of hallucinogenic herbal "flying ointments," Wilby shows that British witches were having visionary experiences spontaneously, and that familiars, far from being pet cats or dogs, were spirit beings encountered during these visionary experiences. Wilby also illustrates that witchcraft in Britain, at least by the early modern period, was not a "goddess religion" but was in fact an element of a more animistic "fairy faith." The account also gives the reader a sense of the regional variability of practices and their evolution through time. In short, an excellent analysis, very readable although erudite, and I'm looking forward to reading Wilby's other works.

I enjoyed the first half of this book very much for the information it presented. The second half I found less interesting, in part because it seemed to lapse into the tired old pursuit of trying to show us how familiar spirits "might have been experienced as real", and does so without ever allowing the explanations and experiences to speak for themselves. In this way, the author seems to struggle with the common impulse among researchers of the "paranormal" to rationalize and explain their topic rather than just taking it at face value. All in all, the book makes a convincing argument for its title and I really enjoyed the information it contained, while something in the presentation and structure of the book seemed like it could be worked on.

This book consists of two rough parts (formally three, but the second and the third are discussed together here). The first portion of the book discusses the lore surrounding fairy folk, demons, etc. and their relationships with cunning folk and witches. This section is extremely well done and covers a wide range of sources. Where some sources disagree with the author's thesis, she explains why she disagrees with them and presents counter-evidence. We are thus left with a very interesting and well-supported picture of how spiritual figures are connected to the practice of traditional magic in the geographic areas the book covers. The second portion of the book (parts 2 and 3) try to draw parallels between these practices and tribal shamanism surveyed by Mircea Eliade and others. The author's thesis here, that these are "shamanic survivals" in Europe which can be discovered through comparison to unrelated cultures rests on a foundation of sand and suffers from serious methodological problems. Among others it assumes a remarkable homogeneity of pre-Christian religion which is unsupported by evidence from other disciplines. This thesis centers around a broad definition of shamanism that is actually argued against by many of her sources, but the general idea has been picking up steam in recent years. However, despite these serious objections, the parallels found are interesting because they suggest some universal elements of the human condition. For this reason although I think this portion is flawed, it is still worth reading and considering. All in all, a recommended book.

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