

The Witch Figure. Edited by Venetia Newall.

Pp. 239 + xiii, list of publications by Katharine M. Briggs, index.
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Reviewed by Catherine A. Shoupe.

The theme of this collection of essays is the witch figure as a malevolent intermediary in folk belief. Scholars from a variety of disciplines ranging from archaeology, sociology and comparative religion to literature and English language have contributed wide-ranging essays aimed to "augment folklore in exploring and throwing fresh light upon this theme" (x). The difficult problem of the definition of witch/witchcraft is put aside here allowing a broad interpretation which permits the various viewpoints within the topic. The culture areas discussed are also wide-ranging, covering four continents--Africa, Japan, France, Norway, Iceland, Great Britain, Ireland and Newfoundland. Equally varied is the methodology employed by the individual authors. The content of the essays is generally more descriptive than analytical, and more comparative than historical. Thus, the volume is held together by theme rather than by theory or methodology.

There are two essays which are almost exclusively descriptive: "Some Instances of Image-Magic in Great Britain" by Christina Hole, and "Witchcraft at Some Prehistoric Sites" by L. V. Grinsell. Both these contributions exhibit an antiquarian curiosity for physical and mental survivals related to witchcraft beliefs, and fail to supplement library research with field-work. Grinsell is admittedly selective: "The purpose of this essay is to bring together some scattered fragments of witchcraft and fairy lore associated with prehistoric barrow and megalithic monuments, especially in France and Britain" (p. 72), but he interestingly relates beliefs to physical properties of the landscape which could be a starting point for a discussion of local legends. Hole, on the other hand, relates the making of images for magical practices to the principles of sympathetic magic with examples gathered from 16th and 17th century court and royal records and later antiquarian collections.

Taking advantage of the loosely defined scope of 'witchcraft' in this work are two essays somewhat peripheral to the main theme. Anne Ross discusses the varieties of forms of ambivalent female deities as determined from manuscript sources and sculpture in "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts". An interesting theme brought out in this essay is the duality that is the basis of all Celtic thought, which is demonstrated by the goddess figure as divine hag as well as divine sovereign. In "Cain's Kin" Beatrice White dismisses the witch as a figure more frequently found in folktales, and then discusses the more usual supernatural figure of the romances and the ballads--the giant.

Three other essays possess a literary focus as well. Margaret Dean-Smith investigates the sources for Milton's Comus, a masque which deals with the Child Roland story. By tracing the traditional superstitions in works that could have been the sources of Milton's story including a 16th century comedy entitled The Old Wive's Tale, the Danish Kaempe Viser about Rosmer Hafmand,

and a 19th century folktale, the thesis of folklore as a source for literature is explored. H. R. Ellis Davidson discusses the assumptions involving the hostile magic of the Icelandic sagas known as sejar, a practice similar to Lapp shamanism, and speculates on its origins after the historical-geographic method. The sagas and other Icelandic literature are also used by Jacqueline Simpson, who examines those works dealing with Olaf Tryggvason and the Christianization of Norway for evidence of the origin of witchcraft in a hostile view of pagan cults by Christians. Her conclusions are largely negative, showing a lack of identification between heathen worship and sorcery in this literature.

The final group of essays tend toward a more analytical approach. Carmen Blacker describes the varieties of demoniacal possession found in rural Japan associated with either discontented ghosts or witch animals. Concentrating on the latter type here, the development of belief systems surrounding the animal witch figure is described, and its origins related to a survival of cult practices associated with the totem animal/family deity as well as to a need to explain the unknown and personal misfortune.

Psychological factors are again brought up to explain functions of witchcraft in Western societies. Venetia Newall's essay to "The Jew as a Witch Figure" analyses the antisemitic racism in the legend of the Wandering Jew and the identification of the Jew and the witch as figures of social nonconformity in a frankly hortatory plea for understanding as a means for social change. "The Witch as a Frightening and Threatening Figure" by John Widdowson is based on field-collected data from Newfoundland which reveals first, that the witch to some extent is the embodiment of human fears, and second, the social function of witch beliefs as a threat to inhibit or encourage particular types of behavior especially among children. This article is well documented and suggestive for further fieldwork-based investigations of this function of folklore. A final article by Geoffrey Parrinder considers the entire issue from the point of view of the witch in both African and European settings. "The Witch as Victim" points out some of the cruelties and fallacies propounded by the use of torture in eliciting confessions of guilt for practicing witchcraft.

These essays have been brought together to honor Katharine Briggs on her 75th birthday for her contributions to English folkloristics, and reflect her own scholarship exemplified in Pale Hecate's Team (1962), a study of witchcraft and sorcery of the 16th and 17th centuries from the contemporary literature. The contributions to this collection in her honor are confined to scholars resident in England as a kind of rededication to the serious study of folklore there which has been in a state of decline since the first World War. In other countries of the United Kingdom folklore studies have achieved considerable status, but in England "vigorous efforts are still needed to press ahead along the lines which Katharine Briggs has done so much to establish" (ix). The range of subjects and cultures documented in these essays indicates that the renaissance of English folkloristics need not, not ought not, become a parochial endeavor at the expense of international connections and cross cultural comparisons in folklore.

Likewise, interdisciplinary viewpoints can aid in bolstering the academic potential of the discipline and related fields can serve as a temporary foothold for folklore studies in the University. In the English situation where folklore is struggling to obtain academic recognition and respectability, care should be exercised in the choice of fields with which folklore aligns itself. These essays show a leaning toward the humanistic side of the disciplinary spectrum, and omissions from both the humanities and social sciences are notable. For example, historians have recently been dealing with witchcraft in Britain through documentary evidence which can also serve as a fruitful source for folklore on the topic, as well as evidence of the social meaning and function of the phenomenon. In addition, English social anthropologists have dealt extensively with the question of witchcraft in Africa. A consideration of the findings of the scholars in these two fields, their sources and methods, and most especially their theoretical and interpretive statements would strengthen the present volume considerably. Despite the limitations and inadequacies of this work as a whole, it is a welcome achievement for the cause of folklore in England, and a fitting salute for Katharine Briggs.