



Cunning-Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic

By Emma Wilby

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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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Editorial Review

Review

“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*

About the Author

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

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