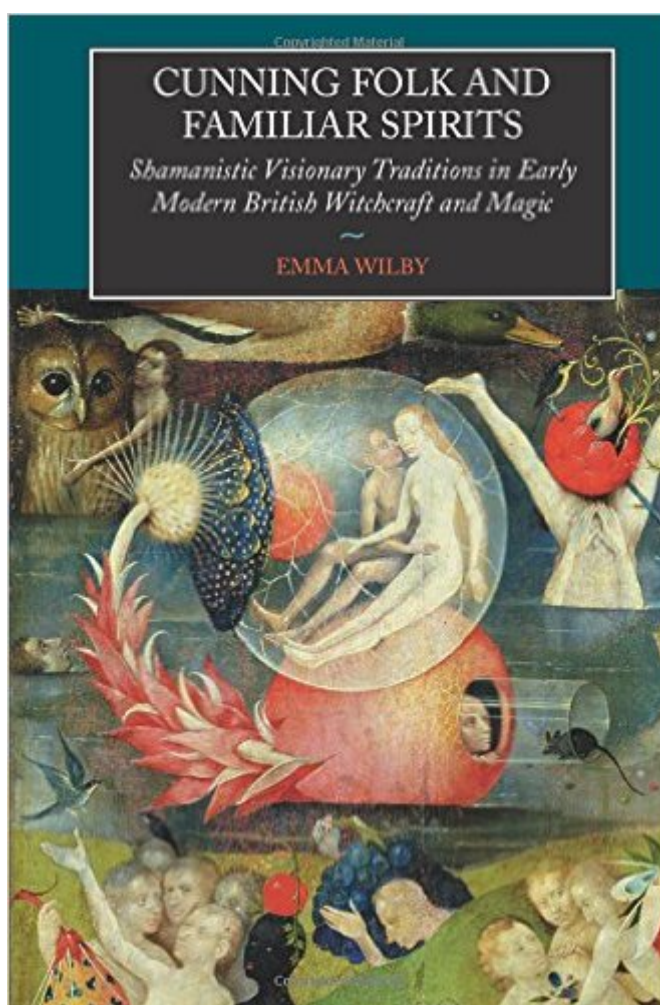


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# Cunning-Folk And Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions In Early Modern British Witchcraft And Magic



## Synopsis

This book examines the folkloric roots of familiar lore in early modern Britain 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 then goes on to explore 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 Britain often presented by historians

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## Customer Reviews

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 'familiar' 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

I finished this book a month ago, but I still find myself thinking over much of the information I got from it, and to me, that's the sign of a good book. Its take on the relationship between the witch and the familiar is unique, in my experience. For instance, Wilby shows that familiars were by no means "fetches" for witches and did not act as slaves or pets. They were equals in the relationship and could even act to the detriment of the witch. For me, the concept of moral ambiguity that Wilby posits for the familiar shows the familiar's depth and independence, its realness. It also fits with the position of the witch or cunning folk in their community - they were depended upon for medical help, communicating with the dead, or help in finding things, but they were also feared for the trouble they could cause to someone if they were antagonized. The treatment of the fairy folk is also unusual. These are not Victorian Tinkerbells flitting around the garden like a bunch of beneficent mosquitoes. These are a powerful people with their own agenda, recognizable to those who've read British folklore or even stories by Arthur Machen. Wilby makes a pretty convincing argument that the fairies served the same purpose for early modern witches that guiding spirits have done for shamans in

traditional societies. Like those spirits, fairy familiars helped witches acquire practical knowledge, like where a stolen cloak might be or how to cure (or hex) someone, and they were often friends and companions as well. Witches generally first encountered a familiar while being under extreme stress - broke, family members sick, overworked, hungry, fearing the worst - and Wilby compares this to the sort of deliberate preparation to encounter a guiding spirit that shamans in traditional societies engage in - fasting, depriving themselves of sleep, and creating other physical extremes. This interesting parallel fits with assertions made by Carlo Ginzburg in his work on the Sabbat, *Night Journeys*. Wilby also argues that the concept of traveling to a sabbat is basically the interrogators' interpretation of the witch accompanying a fairy to fairyland, where for instance they might learn how to use plants or feast and dance with the fairy folk. I was surprised by some of the information given in simple asides, such as that people at this time kept toads for pets or the average number of cats per household in Britain at this time was five. Something that really stuck with me, though, was how often witches described their familiar as being like an animal but not of any recognizable type, such as "something like a rabbit" which appeared in a witch's bed at night and asked him to love it. Even the pictures of them were somewhat disturbing. Other familiars appeared as humans but often wore old fashioned clothing. This isn't the most engaging book ever written - the writing is just serviceable, and the book feels like it began life as a dissertation. But it does present what in my experience is a unique perspective on familiars. And the information here also goes far to bust up preconceived crusty notions about the good, wise hedgewitch who wouldn't hurt a fly, the *Burning Times*, Disneyworld-style fairies, and so forth. It presents a world much more complicated than that. The footnotes and bibliography also provide a number of directions for further reading about cunning folk in other countries as well as some interesting books on fairy folk in Britain.

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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