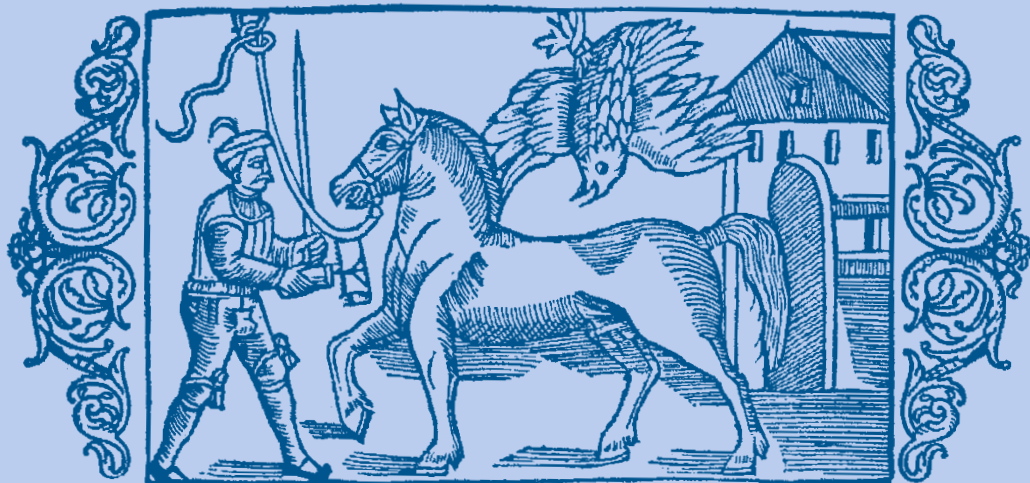




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Narratives and Rituals of the Nightmare Hag in Scandinavian Folk Belief

Catharina Raudvere



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This English version is a slightly different book than the original version and I am a different person and a different researcher. All the same, over the years I have continuously learnt from and been encouraged by two scholars who have generously shared their knowledge of folklore

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My husband was my greatest support in the early 1990s—and has remained so. This book is for you, Gunnar.

Copenhagen, in April 2020

Catharina Raudvere

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PART I

Why the Nightmare Hag?



CHAPTER 1

Why the Nightmare Hag? Points of Departure

Why study stories about women who, driven by envy and greed, were thought to be able to transform their bodies and conduct nocturnal attacks on humans and animals? The archived narratives about the nightmare hag (Swedish *mara*—the vernacular term used as a synonym for “nightmare hag” throughout the book; Danish and Norwegian *mare*) are scarcely high art, and today they are only available in the folklore collections of the Nordic countries. The original contexts in which these stories were performed have long since passed and we can only assume how these narratives and ritual advice were once communicated and on what occasions. Furthermore, the texts are often violent. Without any finesse whatever, they recount situations of social and sexual repression in which norms are momentarily broken, only for order to be ultimately re-established and the malefactor punished. These textual leavings from rural communities sometimes seem like an endless catalogue of interpersonal suspicion and fear, possibly because the limits of acceptable behaviour and moral conduct were long-established and therefore situated outside the world of the text telling of the nightmare hag. In this respect—and whatever their stories about bodily transformation and the effects of “strong thoughts”—the *mara* narratives are strongly Christian in their morality, and those who ventured across the line in this Lutheran universe were reprimanded accordingly. Yet, at the same time, the Church had an ambivalent attitude towards the ability of the Devil and his crew Devil’s to interfere

successfully in the lives of humans, which gave both the storytelling and the listeners' interpretations a certain moral and performative storytellers' performative flexibility. The narrative outlines in the archives may be simple, but the world of beliefs they reference is complex.

This study describes and analyses conceptions of the nightmare hag in Scandinavian pre-industrial society and how narratives and rituals about the *mara* related to a larger imaginary of witchcraft, cunning knowledge and stores of covert advice on how to ward off attacks of greed and malevolence.¹ Stories about the *mara*, often a woman who could temporarily assume a different body shape and cause physical damage in the vicinity, are documented in several text types and genres of oral literature as well as being present in everyday ritual practice. Indeed, the choice of subject matter for the study was initially triggered by a fascination with the broad span of expressive forms in which the *mara* stories appeared: from first-person accounts of hypnagogic states of anxiety to drastic legends of assault and accusation involving a range of people besides the victim and the hag, plus an elaborate corpus of charms and ritual action for protection from lurking dangers. The complexity of conceptions in the archived fragments of folk belief calls for reflection on the role the figure played in a larger pattern of beliefs about the origin of unhealth and suffering and the means to reverse them—elsewhere in this study labelled a conceptual universe or shared imaginary.

Narratives about the nightmare hag are, not least, stories about female beings and women associated with witchcraft. While women are not necessarily always the main characters or even active subjects at all, most *mara* texts indirectly deal with beings with highly marked, sometimes grotesque, female features. Hence, by making use of an opposition between attacker and victim, the texts express norms and values about the expected behaviour

¹ This study was originally presented as a doctoral thesis at Lund University, Sweden, in 1993. Chapter 2 in the Swedish original was extended to a 100-page chapter in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, volume 3, edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Raudvere 2002), “*Trolldömr* in Early medieval Scandinavia”; some of the material from this chapter was also included in a Swedish monograph on cunning knowledge and insight in Old Norse literature, *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition* (Raudvere 2003). The discussions of hag-like creatures in the Old Norse texts and other medieval material are therefore excluded in this book.

The introductory chapter has been re-written to include the major contributions to Scandinavian folk belief studies as well as some of the discussions about how the folklore archives were established in the late nineteenth century and some recent discussions about concepts like “folk” and “popular” in relation to religion, belief and ritual practice.

of women in rural society. People in every time and place have told stories about their own and others' sexuality, with the link between aggression and sexuality always both titillating and tabooed; a talented storyteller could play on this, to the amusement of the audience. It is hard to imagine, however, that the *mara* narratives generated much delight among women, given the reiteration that women's errant behaviour could be stopped by brute force; they are whipped, slashed by scythes and exhorted to return to hell whence they supposedly came—just to give an indication of the tone. In the material for this study, women appear to be especially prone to evil, greed and envy, although the justification for what are framed as defensive acts is far from always central to the texts; the detail lies in depictions of how the perpetrators are stopped, exposed and disciplined.

What began as an interest in a corpus of startling narratives developed into questions about how people in rural communities envisaged good and evil, illness and health, cause and effect. The legends of the *mara*, no matter how immediately strikingly sordid and violent they are, were also embedded in a web of broader conceptions about the human soul and body, fortune and misfortune, local community and power relations. The shape-shifting *mara* that appears in the texts is by definition ambiguous. Therefore is it not surprising that vulnerability and power both become keywords when speaking of *mara* traditions in the Nordic countries.

The guiding hypothesis of this study is that in order to be able to identify the religious significance of such archived texts at the *mara* material, they must be framed by a larger conceptual context that can explain their relevance. It then becomes plain that the notions and understandings that appear in the nightmare hag stories were not necessarily contradictory to the Lutheranism taught from the pulpit. Quite the opposite. The catechisms confirmed the captivating capacities of the Devil and the position of humans in the fight between the kingdom of God and that of his counterpart.

A presentation of the most significant features of the *mara* follows, providing a background to the very varied circumstances in which she appears and the many discursive and performative genres that express this variety. When reading about the nightmare hag in the archival records one is struck by how heterogeneous the texts are corpus. Since so many dimensions of folk belief and witchcraft were linked to the *mara*, an outline of the figure is necessary before this varied corpus is presented.

THE NIGHTMARE HAG IN NORDIC NARRATIVES AND RITUALS

Accounts of experiences of the nightmare hag and narratives of this creature are documented in all the Nordic countries. They were a mode of communicating knowledge of a world close to, yet beyond, everyday life, within a repertoire of motifs in local oral literature. Briefly, the *mara* can be said to appear in three major kinds of texts:

- first-person narrative accounts expressed in the voice of a victim of a nocturnal experience, or formulated as a testimony from a supposed witness to an assault;
- legends with various motifs acknowledging a suprahuman sphere embedded in the social life of humans;
- advice, which often includes detailed ritual instructions on how to protect humans and cattle in advance, or ward off the attacker once the problem has descended, and the charms and rituals considered effective against the *mara*.

The nightmare hag can appear in the account of an unpleasant dream, described in some first-person records as a highly tangible physical reality. She is then depicted as threatening, associated with strong unease, shortness of breath and an inability to speak or move; she presses and squeezes, and the victim is sometimes said to scream aloud in agony. Legends of the hag and advice about how to protect oneself against her can be stereotyped in their formulations, but texts narrating personal experiences of contact, or providing explanations of who she really was beyond her temporal features, indicate considerable differences in how this creature was conceived. These conceptions were strong and widespread, both socially and geographically, with “*mara*” appearing to have been a local technical term in a shared model for explaining nightmare dreams, mishaps and illness: consequently, a character with many dimensions. This, in analysis of archival records the *mara* stands out as:

- a distinct figure in narratives and ritual advice;
- a meaning-bearing category in a conceptual imaginary linked to various dimensions of witchcraft and conceptions about the Devil;
- a psychosomatic diagnosis in local folk medicine or the name of bovine and equine illnesses;

- a more diffuse component in existential experiences of nocturnal horror;
- and not least, an explanation for illness and misfortune.

Sources on the nightmare hag differ not only in genre and origin, but also in age: from the first mention of the term *mara* in the Old Norse poem *Ynglingatal* to records of folk belief collected well into the twentieth century. Several thousand Nordic files collected mainly between 1880 and 1940 mention the *mara*, either as the name of a figure in a rural universe or as a label for an experience in various stories and sayings. These records were indexed according to a system that was created around 1920 for the folklore archives.² Two main criteria for these entries were, firstly, the name of the being and, secondly, the activities motifs in the narratives.

The nightmare hag is depicted in the folklore records as a person, usually a woman, that, under special circumstances (either willed or as the effect of a curse), was thought to be able to transform from human form to a different, temporary body and back again. The transition back and forth between guises and ontological categories distinguishes the *mara* from several other beings in Nordic rural imaginaries. Through this constitution, she belongs to both the human and suprahuman spheres, which must have offered story tellers a great opportunity to practice their craft, as only milk hares (which sucked milk from cows at the behest of witches), werewolves and some witches themselves were thought to have this capacity to change in both directions. Yet shape-shifting is essential for beings connected to witchcraft and its fundamental ideas: what appears to be real and tangible can suddenly change and turn out to be an illusion. While the witchcraft theme is not paramount in all legends about the *mara*, it constituted a basic concept when explaining how evil thoughts could materialize and have a profound impact on everyday life. Besides being a creature in a worldview wherein malevolent deeds provided an acceptable explanation for otherwise inexplicable phenomena, the nightmare hag was also a character in oral literature that helped in visualizing conceptions of witchcraft and evil. The narratives provided space for storytellers, as well as the audience, to take certain liberties in interpreting the hag according to individual attitudes to life. The harsh reactions she provokes in the legends indicate that the threat she represented was real, so, rather than merely

² Lilja (1996); Amundsen (1999); Klintberg (2010); Skott (2008); Gustavsson (2014, 2015).

accepting the *mara* as an explanation, listeners could relate to the destructive forces behind mishaps, misfortune and illness.

On her nocturnal visits the *mara* could appear in human shape, as an animal or move around as a more or less shapeless entity. She did not have a constant body or any distinct attributes like many other beings, but transported herself as a spirit of kind that could enter through the smallest gap in the wall—irrespective of the shape the victim experienced her as having. Her markers were physio-psychological rather than outward—like the hole in the back of the lady of the forest or the nix with his fiddle.³ Along with records of the werewolf, changes of this kind are labelled “Transformed” in the classification systems of the folklore archives. From a less taxonomical perspective, it would be as sensible to place these shape-shifters among broader categories of witches, milk thieves, *spritus*, illness missiles and other beings with a destructive influence on human life. Nonetheless, the indices of the archives still guide access, and their filing principles urge interpretation in certain directions, as they provide the preliminary operative definition of themes even before the material comes out of the stacks. A reflection on the norms that direct the structuring of the collections is therefore the first step to be taken in source criticism when considering the process from oral performance to filed manuscript. Thus, this analysis also serves to exemplify how a cluster of concepts and rituals centred around one being can take us far beyond the indexing categories.

Sex and gender definitions are very explicit in most of the *mara* records. In texts where the biological sex of the hag is emphasized, it is often through coarse sexual allusions in which a threatening female sexuality plays a large part. In these legends the *mara* forces herself on men, usually unmarried farmhands, who, after receiving advice from a third party, are able to ward her off. The physical and sexual aspects of the nightmare hag are marked both in stories about alleged personal experiences and in the legends. Social expectations of females, on the other hand, are most clearly expressed in legends in which the *mara* is socialized into the role of wife and mother after her husband forces her to assume and maintain her human shape. Local understandings of sex and gender are reflected both in narratives about the nightmare hag and in ritual instructions for warding her off: she attacks men sexually but, when the object of her assault is

³ Klintberg (2010).

a horse, which she rides until it is exhausted and unfit for work, she also threatens men as farmers and breadwinners.

Many records detail the cause of the nightmare hag's transformation and her movements in another body. One group of stories explains that the *mara* is a rejected lover who attacks the object of desire at night. Here we find both male and female *maras*, although the feminine gender also dominates depictions of the nightmare hag as the manifestation of desire. In these texts the image of female sexuality can be quite coarse, to put it mildly, and often associated with violent male behaviour. The nightmare hag, however, is not always female and does not always take the shape of a woman; sometimes the attacker is something neutral and in some cases even a male. This can serve as an indication that conceptions of witchcraft, in which both men and women can be active agents, are fundamental to understanding the logic behind the nightmare hag. Even as early as the Icelandic sagas and the medieval laws of Scandinavia, both men and women were assumed to be capable of practising shape-shifting in order to cause damage to humans, animals and material goods; and the folklore archives offer numerous references to men versed in various forms of witchcraft.⁴

Older, more taxonomical analyses of the *mara* material suggest that nightmare hags are directly linked to a conceptual universe wherein witchcraft was a reality, as was the possibility that the human soul could take a temporary shape and leave the body. Such ideas are often explicitly visible in the archive texts as comments made about the cause of shape-shifting, when evil and envious people are often said to be behind the torment caused by someone making use of their extraordinary knowledge. Yet the *mara* was not necessarily the source of evil; she could be a victim herself, acting under the duress of a curse. In southern Sweden and in Denmark the nightmare hag was said to be a woman whose mother had attempted to avoid the pain of delivery by clandestine means.

⁴ Dillmann (2006); Raudvere (2002, 2003); Stark (2006); Mitchell (2011); Friðriksdóttir (2013:47ff.); Häll (2013).

THE *TROLLDOM* IMAGINARY OF WORLDS AND POSSIBILITIES BEYOND EVERYDAY LIFE

Witchcraft is not the optimal term, but is nevertheless used throughout this study—from convention and for convenience. From a historical aspect *trolldom* is the older term, while *bäxeri* was introduced from the German to the Scandinavian languages during the witch-hunt era, and still has a slight hint of exoticism. *Trolldom* in general could be regarded as an assemblage of discursive practices embedded in a set of ideas about a system of knowledge that complements the practice and conditions of other forms of local ethnomedicine. In the Nordic folklore records, however, *trolldom* is something more spoken of than actually practised—and then mostly in apotropaic form. The link between the narratives of the practice of witchcraft and evil as a moral concept is apparent in the vernacular explanatory model. Those who had insights into how *trolldom* works and the ability to stop evil or incendiary thoughts also knew how to ward off the nightmare hag and thereby expose her true identity. These protective rituals are never presented in the legends as a use of witchcraft for destructive purposes, but as healing practices designed to save someone. The conceptions of the nightmare hag in rural Nordic countries can, in many respects, be compared to the narratives of shape-shifting in the Icelandic sagas, the medieval and later ballads and, most of all, the werewolf material from the region and continental Europe.⁵ Werewolf transformations are depicted in the texts as solely founded on witchcraft: a person wilfully changes and makes temporary use of a predator's body with the aim of hurting or stealing and are a common motif in international folk literature. Documentation of transformations for predatory purposes sometimes appear in early medical, religious and literary history under the physiopathological concept of lycanthropy, a term with roots in ancient Greek mythology and medicine. Like the nightmare hag, the werewolf in folk narratives had sexual dimensions and was said to attack pregnant women and bridal processions.

Communication, concealed or open, is an important part of dream lore and the interpretation of dreams appears to be a worldwide phenomenon, both in history and in contemporary times. Yet conceptions of the nightmare hag differ from other beliefs about dreams, as the *mara* was not regarded as a revelation to be interpreted or a figure in a vision that came

⁵ Odstedt (1943); de Blécourt (2015).

with a message. The *mara* was the dream itself. The nightmare dream is certainly a category of its own in popular dream classification, but this terrifying state of mind has never been an object of folk interpretations like other dreams.

It appears from the archive records that those who experienced a visit from the nightmare hag always remained in their ordinary place of sleep or in their daily environment. The spatial circumstances were not extreme or frightening as such. This combination of everyday qualities and unspeakable fear was a handy instrument for skilled storytellers. The extraordinary thing about the encounter with the nightmare hag was the physical pain: the pressure upon the breast, the shortness of breath, the visual impression either of something furry or a beautiful woman, the fear and the powerlessness. Several of the techniques to ward off the *mara* and reveal her true identity employed objects that were common at the sleeping-place or in the cowshred, in combination with ritual activities. In the legends an unfamiliar tool was sometimes mentioned, but in a plausible environment; the object was likely to be an unfamiliar shovel or pitchfork next to the animals at the farm, which turned out to have an analogous link to the nightmare hag. When the object was damaged in some manner, the human body of the *mara* was injured in a similar way. In this sense everyday life always constituted the background of a powerful experience that signalled both the known and the frightening; oral tradition provided models to interpret and provide plausible explanations for extraordinary experiences. The nightmare hag played a double role: from the perspective of shared imaginaries she was an intense incarnation of the evil and the dangerous, while from an individual perspective her visitation was a private existential experience conveying an image of what she could be.

The nightmare hag could also be described as a cultural rendering of a physiological phenomenon based on observable symptoms. Such a description comes close to a psychological definition of this creature. A nightmare experience occurs in the border zone between dream and waking, a severely anguished dream, but it is not an illness in the strict sense of the term. Though there are narratives about *mara* experiences in the archives that describe a force that brings about a state of pathological character, the figure in the widespread narratives and ritual instructions served as an explanatory model for those who suffered from sleep disorder (*parasomnia*) and strong anxiety attacks during sleep and connected to local imaginaries of *trolldom*.

From a psycho-pathological perspective, the archive records report on hypnagogic hallucinations, that is, a state of half-sleep in combination with a feeling of horror, *pavor nocturnus*. Medical definitions naturally regard the nightmare experiences as part of a broader group of parasomnia symptoms with some general characteristics: feelings of suffocation, intense anxiety attacks, racing pulse and motor reactions while the victim is fully oriented in terms of space, sometimes trying to communicate through screaming. The victims do not have a sense of leaving their ordinary life and do not cease to recognize familiar objects; it is the hag that is the intruder. David Hufford has carefully investigated the psycho-physical preconditions for nightmare experiences in his study of conceptions of the Old Hag experience in Newfoundland, Canada,⁶ a theme also discussed at length by Willem de Blécourt, Owen Davies and Caroline Oates.⁷ In this study neither psychological nor medical aspects of nightmares are emphasized, and certainly not pathological conditions; rather, the cultural and religious dimensions dominate, with the ambition to approach how and for what purposes references to the *mara* made sense to people in pre-industrial Scandinavia.

Susan Sontag's discussion of cancer, tuberculosis and other illnesses as metaphors, which explores how the understanding of a disease can serve as an image for the norms and values of an era, has produced insights that could be fruitful to apply to the Nordic rural worldview and folk medicine.⁸ "Illness is the night-side of life", Sontag opens her long essay *Illness as Metaphor*. Even if her focus is the figurative use of illnesses like TB and cancer in the more literate traditions of Western Europe, Sontag points to viewpoints relevant for pre-industrial Scandinavia. Firstly, making a clear distinction between the illness as such and the figure in a narrative is crucial when navigating between statements on, rituals to avoid and legends about the *mara* and trying to circumvent one-to-one readings. Like the structuralists would have put it: the nightmare hag was "good to think with" which does not imply that every statement about her is to be understood as an absolute mirror of "belief". Secondly, Sontag underlines how illness metaphors very directly tell a lot about the society that produces them. As she puts it "Disease imagery is used to express concern for

⁶ Hufford (1982).

⁷ de Blécourt (2003); Davies (2003); Oates (2003).

⁸ Sontag (1978) and later revised editions.

social order”.⁹ Like the illness metaphors Sontag investigates, the nightmare hag was an attack from the outside but with willing fifth columnists on the inside. The nightmare hag was a powerful image of anxiety and threat, but was not used in a literary sense as a metaphor in folk-belief narratives. In Sontag’s sense, the *mara*, with her diffuse character, was both a diagnosis with concrete identifiable symptoms and a way of representing the power of evil thoughts. Hence, the distinction between form and content is a key to the heterogeneity of the nightmare hag material. Form is often more culturally governed, in this case by the conventions and genres of oral tradition. Content, on the other hand—the *mara* narratives—is more often expressed in an emotional present tense, even if the tale is, in grammatical terms, being told of time past: the horror the nightmare hag was believed to cause, the nightmare suffocation and the way in which the cattle’s illness was interpreted. There must have been many dramatic possibilities when a storyteller made use of personal details and this study will show how norms and values were embedded in the explanations of an illness caused by the *mara* and in the customs how to treat and cure the ill.

Conceptions of the nightmare hag are, to a great extent, part of rural notions of illness and health—comprising the origin of discomfort—a formulation that reflects Lauri Honko’s classic definition in the *Krankheitsprojekte* of illness as something carried by a missile of disorder, as something that takes effect from the outside, sent as a projectile or a “shot” (a term used as a synonym to missile in this book since it corresponds very directly to the Nordic term *skott* or *skud(d)*, implicating somebody firing off from a distance) and conceived of as a concrete object.¹⁰ As an explanation of illness, the nightmare hag links to conceptions of witchcraft; yet she is not only the illness itself but also a tool for people versed in witchcraft and acting with evil intentions. As in the notion of an exterior missile, a person with the skill to materialize thoughts could set the *mara* onto other people. Other *mara* texts build on the idea of the hag as herself a victim of a curse that forces her to engage in nocturnal shape-shifting.

The conceptions of the nightmare hag are, like most Nordic folk beliefs, linked to the self-sufficient rural economy. The means of production and support are clearly visible in the context as the economic circumstances in which an existential experience like a nightmare, like the *mara*, was

⁹ Sontag (1978:76).

¹⁰ Honko (1959:32).

interpreted. Explanations such as envy, the evil eye and witchcraft “shots” were regarded as being just as likely as draughts, epidemics or infections. Socio-economic perspectives shed light on the strong elements of conflict in these *mara* texts: the nightmare hag threatens the farmer both as a man and as a provider. In this rural life-world the horse had a particular symbolic value in terms of potency as well as work capacity.

In some respects the psychological and existential dimensions of the nightmare hag can be contrasted with the economic and religious aspects. The former are based on general human experiences while the latter are culturally bound to a specific environment. The *mara* was part of a conceptual universe with distinct limits and conventions that shaped good and evil, power and force, vulnerability and free will; consequently, she provided the explanation for anxiety-filled dreams. As a shape-shifter she has roots in pre-Christian conceptions of the soul, the power of strong thoughts and transformations, although, of course, the figure is also profoundly influenced by the Church. The legends reiterate the potential influence of an evil mind and confirm that some people have the possibility of self-transformation, thereby constituting a ritual link between sending evil and warding it off: the narratives about the cure were constructed as the reverse action of the curse.

THE ACTIONS OF THE NIGHTMARE HAG IN TIME AND SPACE

This study primarily focuses on the Nordic *mara* material from a perspective that places it in its cultural and social context. The intention is not to write a “biography” of the nightmare hag figure, for several reasons. The sources are far too heterogeneous in form and content; further, they have a long chronology dating back to the oldest Norse texts and are geographically spread all over Scandinavia and Finland. Instead of trying to unify all the elements in this corpus of both old and fragmented texts—(many of them transmitted without any distinct context), the primary ambition is to underline a strong connection between the conceptualization of the *mara* and general ideas about clandestine correspondences, illness and misfortune—using the conventional umbrella term, witchcraft—in the pre-industrial Nordic region. In order to do so, three aspects of the nightmare hag are emphasized throughout the study.

Firstly, no other figure in vernacular religion in the region shows a similar long-term continuity as the term *mara* and the motifs associated with it. Presenting the recurrent themes, however, does not constitute an

argument in favour of unchanging beliefs; rather, it indicates how a certain cluster of motifs and a term remained the framework for a credible explanation for a long period of time. Claims of continuity of this sort have been called “folklore’s problem child” by Stephen Mitchell when discussing both methodological and political aspects of the matter.¹¹ The latter affected the study of folk beliefs after the Second World War, when folklore and its heritage from the nineteenth-century—romanticism and nationalistic ideologies—were associated in general with a broad range of conservative conceptions of long-term cultural continuity in terms of ethnicity and spaces.¹² The continuity in the narratives and rituals surrounding the nightmare hag us of another kind and appears to have persisted during both the Catholic era and after the Reformation. Evil as an existential dimension of life and the moral weakness or depravity of those who make use of clandestine knowledge recurs across political as well as religious shifts.

Secondly, the nightmare hag in this study is seen as an element in narratives about other beings, shape-shifters and healers: fundamental conceptions that provide the basis for the continuity. Thus, it is less a continuous belief in a particular that is represented in the texts, but rather the logic of practice and reasoning.

Thirdly, both the narratives of the nightmare hag and the rituals performed to keep her away are heavily invested with references to power relations, and obviously to gender definitions, but also to the relationships in small scale communities. As an analysis of *mara* records indicates, there are references to maintaining hierarchies as well as more rebellious elements in the stories, although most of them depict corrective behaviour; the vast majority of the records describe some kind of punishment meted out to the *mara*.

In order to grasp the variety of possible angles to the *mara* figure, diachronic analysis is supplemented by a synchronic perspective. The latter is obviously not devoid of historicity, but places a greater emphasis on the contexts in which the texts were produced. In all its contradictory variety, the seemingly muddled material mentioning the nightmare hag also carries indications of possibly diverging interpretations. As historical anthropology has shown, questions about worldviews and the outlook on the

¹¹ Mitchell (2014).

¹² Bendix (1997); Mitchell (2014).

human condition can also be put to fragmentary archived material carrying traces of the past.¹³

It is easier to define this study geographically than chronologically. The socio-cultural environment is the pre-industrial Nordic region, whose dominant livelihood was agrarian, supplemented by fishing and hunting. Despite substantial regional differences, local communities were comparatively homogeneous. It appears that most people of the place and time had heard of the *mara*, which does not of course mean that they believed—in a Lutheran sense—in the stories told or paid any attention to the rituals performed.

The prime sources for the study are the records in the folklore archives, mainly gathered in the period between 1880 and 1940, as agrarian society was giving way to industrialization. It was a period that saw extensive collections of folk belief, legends and ritual practices being built up in the Nordic countries, intense activities that have been discussed from many angles. The studies by Leea Virtanen and Thomas DuBois (2000), Fredrik Skott (2008), Bjarne Rogan and Anne Eriksen (2013), Line Esborg and Dirk Johannsen (2014), Karin Gustavsson (2014) and Kyrre Kverndokk (2018) all provide comprehensive bibliographies that reference debates over the nationalistic and romantic ideas behind the interest in rural culture; the histories of the archives, museums and academic institutions that handled the folklore material; and the biographies of individual collectors. Critical investigations of the ideological presumptions about, and the idealization of, a rural past constitute the fundamental point of departure for any study of worldviews, offering a necessary background to recent attempts to put new questions to old texts without relinquishing the reflexive work of source criticism.¹⁴

The records as we encounter them today comprise seemingly widely scattered texts from the late eighteenth into the first half of the twentieth centuries. Recorders The recorders often used an archaizing style when transcribing the oral texts, and many informants were also quite old, as the aim was to get materials “uncorrupted” by modern times. Paradoxically, there is a tendency among the individuals selected for interviews to rationalize the stories they share, maintaining a certain distance from the material. Several of them, for example, refer to what parents or grandparents

¹³ Axel (2002); Wulf (2016).

¹⁴ Oja (1999); Asplund Ingemark (2004); Stark (2006); van Gent (2008); Ohrvik and Guðmundsdóttir (2014); Nyholm Kallestrup and Toivo (2017); Ohrvik (2018).

have said, stressing in different ways that they are talking about traditions from days gone by. Many records have insufficient information about the age, sex, marital status and occupation of the informants to permit more quantitative analysis of the corpus. Furthermore, while Lutheran ecclesiastical hegemony and the expansion of the free evangelical churches in the nineteenth century must undoubtedly have influenced the attitude to rural narratives and practices, very little of this is visible in the archives.

It is difficult to be precise about the number of records concerning the nightmare hag, as both the quality and quantity of references differ from one collector to another. Many records only mention the *mara* in an enumeration of beings while others merely offer negative responses such as, “No, I don’t know anything about the nightmare hag.” On the other hand, there are a great number of documents that do not mention the *mara* by name, but deal with nocturnal assaults, illness among farm animals and legends about witches, healing, charms and other elements clearly central to the semantic field. There are approximately 5000 records in the Scandinavian folklore archives of relevance to how the *mara* was conceptualized.¹⁵ The material is not evenly distributed within or among the countries. The records from Sweden and Finland dominate (in Swedish and Finnish) and in both countries there are several examples of ambitious collectors focused on folk beliefs.¹⁶ In the last part of this chapter, one of them, Valter W. Forsblom, is presented both because of his special interest in the nightmare hag and, not least, his reflections on the place of legends, charms and rituals in a larger religious universe. During his field work in the 1910s, sometimes with a camera, in the 1910s where he developed a special interest in ritual practice which reflected an analytical interest in healers as local characters, and the worldview the rituals transmitted.

¹⁵This does not include occasional mentions of the term *mara*, but on the other hand, it takes into account records about witchcraft and healing that are relevant in relation to the *mara* material without not necessarily mentioning the hag.

¹⁶The Finnish records have only been available to me thanks to helpful archive staff and translators.

FOLK BELIEF, VERNACULAR RELIGION OR EVERYDAY RELIGION

Most concepts carry definitions. Framing the imaginary worldview where the *mara* appeared as an active agent is far from simple. How to label such a universe? A negative characterization of the term folk belief can briefly read: folk belief is not a religion of the elite. This is hardly a satisfactory definition; nevertheless, such an understanding constitutes the subtext of many discussions about folk religion, which helps to explain why the subject matter has not been of core interest to either academic studies of religion or religious institutions; furthermore, it petrifies any possible interaction in an ever-present hierarchical dimension. True, Nordic popular beliefs were initially documented from above, often with a critical and dismissive attitude that saw them as superstition or magic, a view that becomes apparent in the transformation of living thoughts to texts in archival files. Those who embraced the folk beliefs did not leave behind much written material; rather, their worldview was an object of interest to others—romantics and rationalists alike. Folk beliefs in the Nordic countries have, to a large extent, remained a curiosity at the margins of the study of religion, but rarely at the core—more of a line in the history of ideas.

The material for this study is not primarily divided into genres, with the exception of the last chapter that exclusively deals with legends, but, rather, on the basis of themes and motifs. The notion of Nordic folk belief is conventionally defined as the conceptions documented in the records of the folklore archives: that is, a long oral tradition recorded during a comparatively limited time and under the influence of specific ideological presumptions. There are, however, several questions to ask when reading the *mara* material: Whose beliefs? What beliefs? And what status do ritual and practice have in such discussions about belief?

The nightmare hag material requires some definitions in order not to sink into “the marches of trivialities” as Lauri Honko put it,¹⁷ and to move the discussion away from a simple denotation of the concept to indicating what significance these stories could have had. A tentative or working definition of folk belief could therefore read:

¹⁷ Honko (1987:49).

Scandinavian folk beliefs as accessed today relate to an imaginary of conceptions and practices concerning supranatural beings, *trolldom* and power relations beyond the scope of everyday life. They were transmitted mainly in rural communities from the end of the Middle Ages up until the industrial revolution, whose mechanization of farming and urbanization radically transformed agrarian society. These conceptions and the trust in the efficacy of the practices were expressed in oral texts and rituals, both modes of expression whose details were coloured by the context in which they were performed.

The discursive expressions available in the archives provide sufficient sources to substantiate an identification of the assumed “folk beliefs” as belonging to the category of religion.¹⁸ For this, there must be explicit reference to categories beyond everyday life, made by a distinguishable agent, that makes it reasonable to argue that people have attributed meaning to artefacts, images, symbols and spatial constructions that goes beyond human experience; i.e. miracles, metaphors and powers, what in literary texts are regarded as fantastic and in religious texts as trustworthy. Yet this understanding of the world must still be possible to grasp with human knowledge and be given a place in narratives; in other words, it must be conceivable to be formulated in local language and comprehensible in relation to everyday life. What is labelled folk belief in the archives often consists of material connected to specific beings and/or narrative motifs, but the accompanying discourse is also full of references to abstract concepts such as envy, fortune, fate, greed and malevolent witchcraft. These were considered active forces connected with both cause and effect.¹⁹ When a phenomenon is defined as religious in academic studies, the judgement is usually based as much on explicit content as on the use of the text in rituals and social life and its place in discursive reasoning. Some records make obvious reference to realms and powers beyond everyday life and, taken with their motives, indicate a complex of narratives and rituals relating to a more subtle and equivocal worldview than is conventionally regarded as the basis of Nordic folk beliefs.

During the last decade, a clear trend in the academic study of religion, be it the history of religion or contemporary religion, has been a pronounced interest in what could fit under the broad umbrella term

¹⁸ Alver and Selberg (1990); Amundsen (1999, 2005); Valk (2008); Selberg (2011); Raudvere (2012); Kapáló (2013); Toivo (2016).

¹⁹ Clark (1997); Cameron (2010); Edwards (2015).

“everyday religion”. Starting with Talal Asad’s seminal reading of religion as a discursive tradition and followed by Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec’s volume on everyday religion, the critical discussions of the character of the concepts governing the study of religion have developed as well as a pronounced focus on religion as practice.²⁰ The interest in “everyday religion” has promoted theoretical discussions, new methodologies and a search for sources that can shed light on non-institutional religion. In most cases this has meant inter-disciplinary work. In line with this development, Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk’s discussion of “vernacular religion” presents a useful model that marks the place of folk belief as integral to the study of religion without placing it beside or below institutional religion.²¹ The term puts a focus on expressive forms that ran parallel with those taught by the established religious institutions but which can include elements of a very different background. The main themes in the genres of Nordic folk religion were not didactic or proselytizing, but, rather, about solving problems and providing meaning to what otherwise could not be explained. This broad repertoire was furthermore an advantage for the performer, who could, as a result, adjust the narrative told or ritual performed to the situation and audience. It should be noted, however, that the recorded folk beliefs do not necessarily relate to religion, cosmology or mythology in a structural sense, but more to conceptions and life-worlds connected to rural existence before the mechanization of agriculture and early industrialization.

The history of how terms like folk belief and popular religion have been utilized in academic literature has received considerable attention in recent research.²² The discussions have largely focused on how archival categorizations construct hierarchies and dichotomies that have a historical background, as they have served as conceptual tools for the exclusion of certain categories from theological rhetoric. These attempts to distinguish religion from non-religion—that is, folk belief, superstition and magic—are apparent in the history of the study of folk belief in the Nordic countries: not only in academic writing, but also in the practical handling of records and artefacts in archives and museums.²³

²⁰ Asad (1993); Schielke and Debevec (2012).

²¹ Bowman and Valk (2012).

²² Devlin (1987); Bendix (1997); McLeod (1997); Mathisen (2009); Bowman and Valk (2012); Schielke and Debevec (2012); Edwards (2015); Kverndokk (2018).

²³ Skott (2008); Selberg (2011); Esborg and Johannsen (2014); Kverndokk (2018).

Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk emphasize the common intellectual background when anthropology, comparative religion, ethnology and folklore were established as academic disciplines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, something which provided them with a common conceptual platform.²⁴ This period also saw the development of special archives and museums representing rural culture as they were thought to display the roots of the nation state. The study of folk culture shared this kind of evolutionary distinction with academic literature on cultures outside Europe. The modifiers “folk”, “primitive” and “popular” came to indicate something different from what was conceived as high culture, and thus became loaded with prejudice.²⁵ Thus, in line with Orsi and Primiano, Bowman and Valk argue that the term vernacular religion referring to everyday life rather than particular social strata should replace constructions with “folk” as the modifier. Their critique of the conventional concept relates to a general discussion in the study of religion over the last 15 years. In a later essay Robert Orsi underlines this point when he observes:

The “everyday” offers a theoretical framework for the study of religion that points beyond the catalogue of antinomies in human experience that have long oriented religious scholarship [...] while at the same time keeping in clear sight the realities of political power, social hierarchies and cultural formations.²⁶

To completely replace the “folk” modifier has turned out to be difficult, however, while “everyday” has its problems as an element in a definition, as the former emphasizes hierarchies and the latter ignores them.

As several studies have shown, the changing conditions for institutional religion after the Enlightenment period had prompt impact on vernacular religion, even after the Reformation Catholic narratives and rituals had continued to be highly visible in vernacular religion in Protestant environments. All this affected the attitude to folk beliefs and the interest in documenting the non-material aspects of local culture. Protestant clergy and scholars, influenced by Enlightenment thinking, shifted from regarding folk belief as ideas and practices influenced by the Devil to regarding

²⁴ Bowman and Valk (2012).

²⁵ McLeod (1997); Bendix (1997).

²⁶ Orsi (2012:154).

it as a sign of lack of education and rational thinking. The reaction on behalf of local clergy and teachers influenced by the Enlightenment took the form of educational and disciplining projects in order to work against ignorance under which many narratives and ritual performances based on the imaginaries of vernacular religion fell. “Folk belief” became either folly or romanticized as an archaic relic.

All these attempts to formulate more productive definitions of how to approach religious life outside the dominating institutions—in history or in the contemporary world—share one feature: a certain emphasis on discursive expressions in order to identify the semantic fields with related concepts. These do not primarily define the content of beliefs, motifs in the narratives or practices, but rather focusing on how meaning is constructed by means of local language. In other words, they try to identify the discourses that made assumptions about a creature like the nightmare hag relevant as explanations of the world as it was experienced. “Vernacular” is, therefore, a suitable way to describe religion as it approaches discourse in the profound meaning of the word. In this Bowman and Valk follow Talal Asad’s critical investigation of the conceptualization of the term religion, consequently regarding religion as discursively constructed and in constant negotiation with various power constellations.²⁷ Asad’s line of argument has had a significant impact on the study of religion in general, but less so on the study of folk belief. The strength of Bowman and Valk’s main argument is hence arguing that folk belief should be analysed in the same way as any other religion. Vernacular religion in this sense has the double meaning of both pointing to a local discourse as well as to the linguistic aspects of communication.

Another way of underlining the discursive aspects of folk belief and the ways it was communicated would be to say that its components relate to a certain semantic field shared within a group that develop it by using it. When regarded as part of a semantic field, the *maru* is, like other beings in this imaginary, a hyponym for conceptions of witchcraft, envy and “strong thoughts”. This cluster has obvious connections to Catholic as well as Lutheran theological thinking and references to a pre-Christian worldview. Nonetheless, perhaps most important to bear in mind is that the collected folk-belief texts are full of conceptions that cannot be linked to either Christendom or pre-Christian religion, but represent local ideas, conditions and a sense of powerful places and relations. This study will

²⁷ Asad (1993:27ff).

therefore also look at who is thought to have the authority to take command of the situation and to have insight into the correct techniques for counteractions to reverse the situation caused by the *mara*. Special attention will be paid to how narrative explanations legitimate ritual practice.

The worldview that an informant could mine for a charm against the nightmare hag, for example, or a first-person narrative about a nocturnal horror, can be labelled a representation of folk belief as an empirical term referring to commonly held assumptions about this world, the afterlife and the invisible world of powers that still affect humans and their livelihood—as a synonym for worldview or universe. It is difficult, however, to use the term as an analytical concept as it takes some kind of homogeneity among “the folk” for granted and leaves little space to identify social stratification or individual interpretations. In this discussion folk belief is used as an umbrella term in order to grasp a semantic field that, when used in oral communication, gave meaning to narratives and practices that referred to beings and powers acting beyond the everyday world, but with the potential to affect it—now to be encountered in archive files and, to some small extent, in preserved artefacts. For analytical purposes “semantic field”, “conceptual universe” and sometimes “vernacular religion” are used to indicate how folk belief came together with official Lutheran dogma, Enlightenment-inspired educational projects and the mechanization of agricultural production.

In the same way as folk belief, the term “magic” has produced a special field of problems.²⁸ Used in a negative way throughout history as a tool to define what does not belong to the concept of proper religion or to reject certain local customs, it has been a quite efficient inclusionary discourse to confirm who belongs to a specific religion in terms of dogma and practice, as much as it is exclusionary by defining the other. The identification of magic, along with what constitutes the popular and witchcraft, has a long history in Christian catechisms.²⁹ As is discussed below, this was not only a conceptual dichotomization, it was also integral to early modern theological reflections on the power of the Devil, with some Lutheran theologians seeing what is conventionally labelled as magic or witchcraft as a reality in the cosmic battle between Good and Evil. Although avoided to some extent, magic is still used in this study since the concept of *trolldom*

²⁸ Gilje (2003); Stark (2006); Mitchell (2011); Otto and Stausberg (2013); Nyholm Kallestrup and Toivo (2017); de Blécourt (2017).

²⁹ Clark (1990); Tedeschi (1990); Amundsen and Laugerud (2010); Ohrvik (2018:69ff).

(in Swedish and Norwegian, *trolldom* in Danish) is commonly used in local discourse—alone or in compound terms. This is not to indicate differing qualities in the concept of religion, but to mark that the informants—influenced by clergy, doctors and local teachers and their stances on rational religion—in some cases made clear distinctions between competing realms of knowledge, showing an awareness that these insights were not part of the teachings of the Church, a highly influential institution in the world of folk belief. Magic, more often associated with narration and practice than dogma, seems to have been a flexible concept that covered practices that addressed the hardships of life. It came to life in the hands of a local healer or other person with clandestine knowledge whose assistance could be offered to those who sought help that went beyond the offerings of the local vicar or schoolteacher.

Witchcraft and magic may in the broadest sense be defined as beliefs and rituals that attribute skills and insights to some people who are thereby thought to have the ability to master forces of clandestine origin: forces possible to identify due to their consequences for everyday life, but not visible to, or fully understood by, ordinary people. The use of the term witchcraft usually also implies some kind of public denouncement and has associations with accusations and trials, while magic has a partly different set of associations connected to the world of learning during the Renaissance, for example, and the early modern period. The Scandinavian vernacular terminology of witchcraft and magic (*trolldom* or *håxeri*) is in many respects affected by the witch hunts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries³⁰ that also introduced the popular use of the word *håxa* or *hexe* that lingered on in popular belief. The effect of a social trauma like the witch trials must be taken into consideration when long-term perspectives on magical practices are gathered on the basis of later folklore records. The vernacular vocabulary for extraordinary insights and abilities to heal and harm is rich and detailed, and not always possible to translate into general concepts like witchcraft and magic in English.³¹ Thus, when I use the term “folk belief” in this study it functions as a descriptive term reflecting a conventional expression, a sufficiently elastic definition to frame an empirical field of narratives and rituals. It should not, however, be read as a theoretical statement.

³⁰ Ankarloo and Henningsen (1990); Hastrup (1990); Oja (1999).

³¹ Raudvere (2002).

GREED AND FORTUNE

The widespread vernacular discourse on envy and fortune comes very close to fundamental features in the *mara* material. As a being that brought illness and worked magic, the *mara* was said to be caused by envious thoughts, while the results of her assaults were referred to as stolen fortune; the sexual dimensions of the *mara* also fall into this pattern. The records do not include any tender or sensual depictions. The nightmare hags are creatures that draw the energy from men and cause general downheartedness among humans and cattle alike, a condition explained with reference to both beings and individuals in the vicinity.³²

At the end of the 1960s, anthropologist George Foster introduced the model of “the limited good”. He argued that this was a distinctive feature of farming communities where assets were thought to be an absolute constant and any change in the balance of advantages was regarded as manipulation from the outside.³³ Conceptions of the nightmare hag were linked to a logic of this kind, where one person’s fortune was another’s misfortune.³⁴ In Nordic folkloristics, conceptualizations of fortune and misfortune have been discussed as a key to the logics of folk belief.³⁵ Indeed, Orvar Löfgren writes, “Conceptions about fortune and its destroyer were directly connected to ideas about envy as a destructive force”.³⁶ When assets were understood as limited, stealing someone else’s fortune was the only way to prosper, meaning that the notion of limited good is the point of departure for all narratives and ritual action connected to witchcraft. Legends about magical milk theft, charms against shots of illness and rituals in which steel is nailed to the wall as protection against the evil eye are all founded on what Kirsten Hastrup and Orvar Löfgren call “the economy of fortune”.³⁷

Questions about the nature of evil and its origin have fascinated people throughout history. In her book *Natural Symbols*, Mary Douglas devoted a chapter to “The Problem of Evil”. Together with discussions of “the

³² Ågren (1964).

³³ Foster (1965, 1972).

³⁴ Löfgren (1991); Hastrup and Löfgren (1992); Nenonen (1993:80 f.); Raudvere (1993, 2002, 2003); Stark (2006:220ff.); Andersen (2008); Malmstedt (2018:111ff.).

³⁵ Gustav Henningsen has discussed conceptions of fortune in relation to the Danish witch trials at the end of the seventeenth century (1991:20ff.).

³⁶ Löfgren (1991:102).

³⁷ Hastrup and Löfgren (1992).

limited good”, Douglas’s reflections on societies where witchcraft constitutes an acceptable explanation have guided this study. These are societies where individual mobility is limited, as she notes. “By and large witchcraft beliefs are likely to flourish in small enclosed groups, where movement in and out is restricted, when interaction is unavoidably close, and where roles are undefined or so defined that they are impossible to perform”.³⁸

Leaving aside the issue of the origin of witchcraft, the more general characteristics listed by Douglas of societies where the logic of witchcraft is acceptable show many similarities to rural living conditions in pre-industrial Nordic countries. In rural areas most people lived in small and comparatively closed communities where the local minister and the school-teacher were the major channels of contact with the outside world, and both professions had a complex attitude towards folk beliefs and folk religion.

Conceptions of fortune and envy were also connected to ideas of a given destiny. Trying to interfere with what was predetermined was not only theft of someone else’s allotted fortune, but was also an attack on a broader predicted balance. From this perspective, explanations of illness and health become a question of harmony versus imbalance. The abstract terms were ascribed a highly concrete capacity in the lives of individuals as they explained dramatic shifts in existence and served as the fundamental logic in narratives about the evil eye, the nightmare hag, magical milk theft and witches. They were cornerstones in how reality was conceived and implied a threat that had to be countered. Seen in this light, all protective means involved a state of preparedness. Belief in fate meant that every individual had a presumed lot in life, a measured time and assets, and a given place in society. Discovering the destiny of oneself and others was an important and well-developed part of the practices of folk belief. It is known from the early sources that the Church fought a long-term, intense and futile struggle against various forms of divination.

The imaginary of folk beliefs was not totally deterministic, however, as those who had the necessary insight could change the premises in their own or their clients’ favour. The oldest Nordic terminology for such knowledgeable persons underlines that they are skilled in more than one technique.³⁹ Their strength was that they knew more than other people—and could practise this knowledge. Insight into the more clandestine

³⁸ Douglas (1970:108).

³⁹ Raudvere (2003).

aspects of reality gave them power over ordinary people, which is also mirrored in the means of protection as well as in the intensity and frequency of advice. The complex outline of the latter could be read either as a way for informants to make folk belief more exotic to the collectors or as an indication of a complex conceptual universe behind the startling narratives. Clandestine knowledge is as important for those who seek to profit from other people's fortune as for those who are seeking to protect themselves and the animals on their farm. Attaining clandestine insight is therefore a common theme in the records of folk belief, with an emphasis on how to reveal the source of mishaps and illness, thereby providing the right to punish. Kirsten Hastrup and Orvar Löfgren underline that concepts such as fortune and envy are elements in a moral system, noting, "‘Fortune’ is a figure of thought that has linked farmers, fishermen, hunters and craftsmen together in a specific moral economy".⁴⁰ The concept of fortune also puts the spotlight on the differences between the well-to-do and the poor. Envy was not only an emotional state, but had the potential to be materialized as an acting force: a mentality in a vulnerable agrarian society where crop failure and starvation were realities. This component of fear in conceptions of envy has been underlined by Henning Sehmsdorf and Laura Stark in their respective studies,⁴¹ with the latter speaking of "the cultural language of fear" in her analysis of the darker side of folk belief.

The idea of a governing destiny is obvious both in narratives about materialized thoughts and desire and also when the nightmare hag is connected to the returning dead. The latter often appear in order to complete or correct something so that what is predetermined can occur and wily attempts to alter destiny become merely a temporary kink in an otherwise straight line. While ideas about a predetermined destiny are less striking than the conception of materialized ill-will, they are nevertheless contradictory to Christian teaching about the human soul. The ideas of progress and humans as caretakers of what God has provided feature prominently in the Christian creation narrative; people should profit and accumulate from the sweat of their brows, not by stealing from their neighbours. In the imaginaries of Nordic vernacular religion, however, prosperity and adversity were regarded as a measure of fortune.

⁴⁰ Hastrup and Löfgren (1992:241).

⁴¹ Sehmsdorf (1988); Stark (2006).

SHAPE-SHIFTING

Stories about temporal bodily transformations are to be found in myths and secular narratives from all over the world. While the guise that the temporal body takes is very much dependent on the immediate environment, the shape is often that of an animal. A further shared feature of shape-shifter narratives is that most transformations take place at night and the animal is a strong and forceful one—with an interesting exception being when shape taken is so tiny that it can sneak in anywhere. In international research, narratives about werewolves have been more studied than those about the largely equivalent nightmare hag, as lycanthropy is a more frequent literary motif in literature and also in early modern science.⁴² Werewolves are mostly discussed in social and psychological terms, and I have not as yet found any studies of European folk beliefs that unequivocally problematize the belief that a human can take on a temporary body. Michael Jackson's study "The Man Who Could Turn into an Elephant",⁴³ based on fieldwork in Sierra Leone, was therefore a welcome complement to discussions of the Nordic narratives. Studying religion through fieldwork is, of course, quite different from research in the archives, and no direct comparison between West Africa and rural Nordic countries is intended here, but Jackson raises philosophical questions about material that could easily have been rejected as superstition or tall tales. Following his line of reasoning, I maintain the perspective on Nordic folk belief that it is a serious way of expressing religious and existential thoughts.⁴⁴

Historians have touched upon the theme of the religious life of ordinary people, with Arne Jarrick stating, when analysing the pietistic movement among craftsmen in Stockholm in the late eighteenth century, "There are reasons for devoting some research to the fact that ordinary people not only worked and bred, but also thought, not least about fundamental existential issues."⁴⁵ This is also very much true for the folk-belief records that were compiled a hundred years later. People have always asked questions about existence, though perhaps not as we formulate them today; nevertheless, they were raised, and reading shape-shifting

⁴² Senn (1982); de Blécourt (2007, 2009, 2015).

⁴³ Jackson (1989:102ff).

⁴⁴ I do not share Jackson's phenomenological approach in this particular study or his later visions of an existential anthropology, but the questions he raises in the essay about transformation narratives is of high relevance to the study of religion.

⁴⁵ Jarrick (1987:156).

narratives closely may be a way of approaching an imaginary very different from our own, but not so distant in time.

Shape-shifting in Sierra Leone is a commonly shared idea in the region, according to Michael Jackson, and most often connected to witchcraft. However, not all shape-shifters are considered witches, nor were they in the Nordic countries; rather, “a complex of shared assumptions and ideas” forms the basis for a worldview wherein a man may state that he can turn into an elephant.⁴⁶ As it is this foundation for the belief in transformation that Michael Jackson wants to identify, he takes the narratives about shape-shifting seriously, regarding them as statements about concrete experiences, not as metaphorical narratives. However, when he encounters a well-educated man in a high social position who tells him in a serious manner that he can transform himself temporarily into an elephant, many questions are generated about how to analyse this. Jackson tries to uncover the circumstances in which a statement about transformation of this kind is regarded as a reasonable, intelligible and acceptable truth. In order to do so, he presents four points.

As his point of departure, he problematizes how personhood is conceived in a local context, beginning with what he labels the ontology of shape-shifting. This is based on a number of presumptions about the constitution of reality and individual experiences which are framed by collective beliefs in phenomena such as witchcraft and the ability of the soul to leave the body: beliefs that frequently offer explanations for setbacks and success. Second, there is always a purpose with a narrative about shape-shifting: somebody gains goods or acquires an advantage. The operations of the nightmare hag are thought to augment her part of “the limited good” or win a reluctant lover, while the Kuranko man can win social and political benefits from his transformation. Therefore, rather than asking whether these statements are true or false, it is more relevant to look for the “place of beliefs in the context of actual existence”.⁴⁷ The third of Jackson’s points touches on collective ideas about how people can be hurt from a distance by evil thoughts and envy which frame individual experiences. What we know about the Nordic nightmare hag makes her a good exemplar in discussions about individual conceptual freedom in relation to a prevailing mentality; nevertheless, the phenomena share the same ontological presumptions.

⁴⁶ Jackson (1989:60).

⁴⁷ Jackson (1989).

Fourth, narratives about shape-shifting have a confirming function as they fill in the details of the narrated experiences, thereby providing vitality and affirmation to the folk beliefs. Not least in importance, these were highly useful discursive strategies in times of crisis. Socially, a transformation narrative could be used both positively and negatively as it strengthened the status of the teller's own person or stigmatized somebody else. There is often a historical background to stories of this kind, and references like this give the legends authority. This discursive strategy constructs social meaning, no matter how odd and ferocious the narratives may seem, especially since the narratives appear to have had a repressive rather than constructive social impact.

Michael Jackson uses terms and concepts common in the study of religion and worldviews, but he applies them to the kind of material that otherwise is often, if not neglected altogether, trivialized and explained away with "rational arguments". Instead, Jackson boldly speaks of the philosophical and epistemological aspects of the belief in transformations, treating shape-shifting as part of a solid worldview and marking this with a clear distinction between the folk model and the analytical framework. This serious attitude shows respect for the humans he is writing about, but I have not found any similar treatment of the creatures of Nordic folk belief. On the other hand, the Nordic material contains no documentation, nor even a hint, of personal accounts of transforming into a *marva*. The records deal with the experiences of the victims (and/or the witnesses) or legends about what happens when people take action against her assaults. In the following sections, the relevance of Jackson's four points will become salient, especially the concept of personhood and the line between human and non-human.

There will always be dislocation between the inner images people have and the concrete expressive forms of narratives and practices they use to communicate when warning, entertaining or disciplining. The interplay between a given form and individual content in these expressions offers the potential to identify meaning and significance in verbal and ritual expressions—in the indigenous model as well as in the analytical framework.

A COLLECTOR AND HIS COLLECTIONS: VALTER W. FORSBLOM

In this final part of this introductory chapter, I shift the focus from the worldview of the informants to the collector as a producer of texts in the process that transforms oral literature into archive files. Source-critical problems are obvious, but the value of the collectors and collections is undeniable, with some from the Swedish-speaking region of Ostrobothnia in Finland constituting the case discussed here. Valter W. Forsblom (1888–1960) documented healing practices at large between 1913 and 1917, in the course of which he developed a special interest in how the nightmare hag was conceptualized in relation to more general conceptions of witchcraft and illness.⁴⁸ Ten years after his fieldwork, Forsblom edited his material for one of the volumes of *Finlands svenska folkdiktning* in which he included most of his collected corpus.⁴⁹ The material is amongst the most interesting on folk belief and ritual practices kept in Nordic archives, and few other collections can match Forsblom's perceptive observation of coherence within the varied material from his interviews, his photographic documentation and the self-reflective summaries in the reports he wrote after each fieldtrip.⁵⁰ Today, the folklore archive of the Society for Swedish Literature in Finland houses the files and related materials.⁵¹ Forsblom's detailed collections bear witness to the worldview and vernacular anthropology that formed the basis of narrative and ritual strategies that provided tools to combat illness, misfortune and attacks of envy

⁴⁸ Forsblom (1917a, b); Raudvere (2014).

⁴⁹ The quotations from Forsblom's collections are taken from the volume of *Finlands svenska folkdiktning* [Finlands Swedish Folk Literature] on magical folk medicine, volume 7:5 "Magisk folkmedicin" [Magical Folk Medicine] (Forsblom 1927). The printed version strictly follows his edited archive manuscripts; little of the first hand-written notes remain. Forsblom's own thematic structuring followed the categories he had used to organize his own files, but he added other Finland-Swedish and Scandinavian sources (mainly printed works and other collections at the Society's archive). It thus became a considerable volume of 759 pages plus photographs and indices which is now also available on-line: <http://folk-diktning.sls.fi/#/publication/47/table-of-contents>.

⁵⁰ Forsblom (1913, 1914, 1915); Raudvere (2014); Wolf-Knuts (2009); Ekrem et al. (2014).

⁵¹ Valter W. Forsblom's collections are filed at the Archives of Folk Culture of The Society of Swedish Literature in Finland as: SLS 218 (from 1913), SLS 232 (from 1914), SLS 253a and b (from 1915), SLS 267 (from 1916) and SLS 285 (from 1917). See: <http://www.sls.fi>.

and malice—from this he developed his particular interest in the figure of the *marä*.

The reasoning behind understandings of discomfort, disease and death in general played a dominant role in pre-industrial vernacular Nordic religion: explanations that also provided instructions on how to cope with misfortune and how to protect limited resources from attack from afar. Such instructions implicitly conveyed an image of the forces and power relations that defined human contact with the Christian God, the dead, fate and, moreover, the evil desires of people with *trolldom* knowledge and, consequently, people's dependence on local healers (Fig. 1.1).

Valter W. Forsblom's interest in documenting local medicine and related beliefs was limited to the early years in his career. His work sprung from a focus on some specific concrete practices and his fieldtrips were made in a well-defined geographical area and over a comparatively short period of time. Nevertheless, he had the opportunity to go back to



Fig. 1.1 Åkers mor, a local healer, prepares remedies against a “troll shot” (*flojest*), Vörå 1916 (SLS 267:17). (Photo: Valter W. Forsblom)

Ostrobothnia for five consecutive summers during his days as a student of ethnography to gather additional data from additional parishes, thereby refining his methodology. Rather than confirming an established legend motif, his point of departure was to seek variations of certain commonly used cures, with the result that various aspects of belief were expressed as explanations for the action taken. Later, when explicating his view of disciplinary differences, he wrote, “My commitment was to collect the purely folkloristic material, the charms, as well as the ethnographic material, the ceremonies and the practices, that are used when curing illnesses”.⁵² To him the former referred to religion and the latter to culture, which was a distinction he was eager to maintain (Fig. 1.2).



Fig. 1.2 Valter W. Forsblom with one of his informants, known as Lurkun, in Oravais during his fieldwork in the summer of 1916 (SLS 267:18). See also Fig. 3.7 with an example of Forsblom’s notes after listening to Lurkun. (Photo: Valter W. Forsblom)

⁵² Forsblom (1927: VII).

Forsblom amassed five large collections related to vernacular medicine. On his first trip he was actually tasked with documenting rural architecture by the Society; however, Forsblom concurrently took the opportunity to take down information about local cures when he found the time, eventually aided by a camera. This new tool profoundly influenced his documentation methods, and during the last three summers of fieldwork, Forsblom could focus on healing practices with the help of his camera. His collections grew larger every summer, although he developed an increasingly critical consciousness of the limitations on his goal of comprehending all the aspects of a single ritual event: so elusive and still so complex. Forsblom was highly aware that the texts he took down had their function in an oral culture, and that most often the words were inseparably embedded in ritual practice. The files could never be more than incomplete notes.

As early as in his first report from 1913, and indeed thereafter, Forsblom repeatedly emphasizes in his communication with the Society that young people who have been influenced by school education, newspapers and modern thinking reject the old traditions. This, Forsblom told the Board of the Society, engenders reluctance in old healers to reveal their knowledge and abilities, anticipating that they might be ridiculed. The fundamental value of the endeavour of collecting lay, according to Forsblom, in rescuing this vanishing world. He was convinced that the old traditions were threatened by modernity, and also that the defenders of change and development were cutting links with the past as a result of pure ignorance. The main criticism in his remarks is, however, directed at the Church “that has made itself known for its zealous ambition to eradicate superstition [*vidskepelse*] from the world [...] but—luckily for scientific research—only with all too limited results”.⁵³ The attacks on the Church from an otherwise quite conservative person can perhaps seem surprising today, but are based on Forsblom’s experience of the impact that the institution, along with secular education, had had on ethnomedicine. The healers he had encountered knew and used a rich tapestry of words and deeds, but they tended to conceal their insights—not only to retain the magic of the secrecy of their procedures—from the eyes of the modern, personified by the priest, the teacher and other educated people. This meant that some of the charms were “defective or altogether truncated. (Surprisingly enough, these truncated charms have been used with success)”, as Forsblom wrote about their fragmentary condition.⁵⁴ He clearly identified

⁵³ Forsblom (1914:XLVII).

⁵⁴ Forsblom (1913:XLII).

himself with an academic position that aimed at uncovering layers of tradition unspoilt by both the Church and modern living conditions: a position that defined the field of folklore for a long period, as discussed by Regina Bendix.⁵⁵

The work of Valter W. Forsblom should not be idealized; it has its biases and limitations. He was a child of his time and with an evolutionist mindset; the existence of pre-Christian elements in rural life-worlds is an unquestioned assumption in his reasoning, not the result of investigation, and every belief element has its given place on an assumed chronological line. Forsblom developed a special interest in charms, with their combination of both Christian and non-Christian components, considering them ancient in form and content and thereby providing knowledge about the authentic religion of the common folk beyond the institutional influences of the Church. In his own words, the study of these practices offered “a unique opportunity to get insight into the opinions and beliefs of the peasantry, precisely in the area where religion and magic meet; an area people [i.e. Forsblom’s informants] today rarely want to expose to everyone’s gaze [i.e. the visiting scholar]”.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, in Forsblom’s presentations the ritual events were distinctly tied to problems and situations in the present. His chronological framework for interpretation must therefore be said to alternate between the timeless—in the view of his era, the authentic—and the appearance of modern society, which cast new light on old remedies and practices. While the details of his comments emphasize the former, it is apparent that the latter informed his analytical framework.

In order to defend practices as appropriate, informants referred to the healing acts of Christ, and to the fact that the Saviour also passed these skills onto his disciples. The use and correct transmission of extraordinary knowledge was thereby sanctioned by the biblical narrative. Furthermore, the acts of healing were often declared to be “in the name of the Father...”, and the charms connected to Church ceremonies; they were not, it appears, associated with the performance of any destructive witchcraft, although the concluding “Amen”, crucial in its Church context, was not supposed to be uttered. The reason given by the informants was that, once pronounced, the concluding invocation made it impossible for the healer to perform another ritual if the first was ineffective. This indicates the ambivalent status of these ritual acts: they could be constituted by more or

⁵⁵ Bendix (1997:95ff.).

⁵⁶ Forsblom (1913:XLI).

less the same ceremonial elements, but it was the intention behind the act that defined whether it was a question of healing or witchcraft. The ontological status of witchcraft was not only the subject matter of local narratives; among the learned the issue of whether it was a reality or a delusion was also raised. Some catechisms explicitly defined the Devil himself as the source of remedies that attempted to alter difficult situations⁵⁷; however, the attitude is sometimes ambiguous when attributing such powers and extended authority to the Devil. After the days of the witch hunts, even the clergy questioned whether the Devil had such influence over the world of humans and whether the belief in the efficacy of such rituals was a sin in itself (Fig. 1.3).



Fig. 1.3 An attempt to ward off a troll missile (*flojest*) which has targeted the victim and is said to be caused by an evil-minded person, Nedervetil, 1917 (SLS 285:4). (Photo: Valter W. Forsblom)

⁵⁷ Wolf-Knuts (1991:117 ff.); Oja (2005); Stark (2006); van Gent (2008); Toivo (2008, 2016); Cameron (2010:219ff.).

Although contextual information is scarce, it seems likely that the rituals had audiences (and not only those in Forsblom's photographs) and that the healer was not the only one involved in the performance; the active participation of the patient should not be underestimated. It was these witnesses who helped to spread the word about effective rituals and whose stories helped to construct the post-ritual narrative in which the charms had their given place.

THE SEARCH FOR A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Forsblom was very explicit in his reports from the five field trips about his view that, seen from the perspective of his informants, he felt that the collected materials belonged to a semantic field that included pre- and non-Christian conceptions as well as the teachings of the Church. He explained his aim as one of bringing forward the "logical combination of thoughts" he had observed and formulated in the longer quotation below from one of his studies on the attacks of the nightmare hag.⁵⁸ Forsblom was wary about overusing umbrella concepts like witchcraft and superstition as he preferred vernacular terminology that carried with it more of the detailed information of how the beliefs interconnected with each other. Hence the notions of "shot" or "arrow" were part of the logic he sought. The name of the missile could either define the victim's vulnerability and weak sides, the kind of suffering, the method of sending, or its material form when dispatched from the source (evil thoughts) towards the body of the victim. The following charm illustrates the imagery of possible attacks that were thought to be able to attack at any point.

God protect you
 From troll shots
 Troll women's shots
 And every shot
 That flies in the midst of the day
 And at all times
 I put you
 Between farm and gate
 From the rise of the sun
 To its setting.

⁵⁸ Forsblom (1917b:117).

To be read over teat-warm milk. To be consumed; the rest is to be rubbed in. (Korsnäs 1915)⁵⁹

The basic imprint of the charm is the sense of the uncertainty of the origin of the “troll women”. The missile moves quickly and seems to know no spatial limit unless stopped by the cunning words and ritual movements. After reaching its target where it was thought to sometimes leave a mark on the body that could be detected by the healer, this missile, to use Lauri Honko’s term, of evil and envy affixed itself to the victim. No place or time was safe when it came to such attacks from the evil-minded; a person could even be targeted while sitting in Church during Sunday service. While the “missiles” were frequently attributed to the Devil and his following, in contrast to the healers, the assumed senders are less visible as individuals and agents in the archives, and the material does not suggest that any accusations or denouncements occurred. Rather, the imagined evil sources were embedded in the narratives describing charms and rituals.

Forsblom’s sensitivity to local understandings of cause, effect and counter-strike was rather unusual for the time. On the one hand, the individual files are comparatively contextualized with information about individuals and places; on the other, Forsblom’s commentaries on the strong cohesion he observed between the belief elements must be placed within the academic discourse of his time.⁶⁰ To Forsblom, medical charms (*sjukdomsbevärljelser*) and healing rituals (*omlagningar*) represented two very different types of activity—the verbal and the ritual—which he connected to the analytical scope of two different academic disciplines. He voiced his sense of a rift between ethnography and folkloristics in his reports to the Society, repeatedly stating that his collections dealt with both. His academic background could perhaps explain this: he was an ethnographer coming to folkloristics, whereas other folklorists at the time often had a background in Nordic languages or literature and hence a view of folklore as consisting mainly of forms of oral culture deriving from the rural population.

Whether expressed through narratives or rituals, for Forsblom supernatural beings are connected to the world of humans. The implicit definition of religion in his writings—as social interaction by means of words, deeds and visual representations with the goal of reaching powers beyond

⁵⁹ Printed in Forsblom (1927:283).

⁶⁰ Raudvere (2014).

the everyday world—reads as very contemporary, particularly in contrast to his other line of reasoning about the evolutionistic separation of religion and magic, something he repeatedly underlined. In one of his two articles on the nightmare hag he states:

Magical folk medicine offers in this respect [...] a rich and invaluable source for observations. It is certain that it has emerged from a logical—even if primitive—combination of thoughts, and its application has certainly lived through history and is to be seen in folk practices.⁶¹

Forsblom continues with a discussion about the layers of belief throughout history, in accordance with the evolutionary paradigm, but adds:

One will find in the oldest layers of folk beliefs and conceptions a consequence, a law-bound thinking, a primitive philosophy to be present; and one will discern certain fundamental principles according to which this way of thinking has been turned into practice as well as generated practices and customs that have been inherited from generation to generation up until our days. (1917b:177ff.)

In contrast to many collectors of folklore of this period, Forsblom was not trying to rationalize; instead, he emphasized that beliefs, narratives and rituals have their own coherence, and that the conceptual and ritual elements—no matter how banal or simple they may seem—belong to a wholeness. It is a mature reflection made by a comparatively young man who received his master's degree the same year he wrote the above, in 1917, and therefore definitely before Lucien Lévy-Bruhl published his *Mentalité primitive* in 1922, where he argued in favour of the existence of a primitive logic, like Paul Radin somewhat later in *Primitive Man as Philosopher* from 1927. One can only regret that, after his fieldwork during the 1910s and his enormous editorial work with the volume presenting “magical folk medicine” in the *Finlands svenska folkdiktning* series, Forsblom did not continue to work on vernacular religion, but chose another path in life.

⁶¹ Forsblom (1917b:117 f.).

READING FORSBLOM TODAY

The challenge to working with Forsblom's collections is that, no matter how thorough about noting time, place and names of the informants, he organized his notes according to the themes that later constituted the outline of *Finlands svenska folkdiktning*. Forsblom was commissioned to edit a volume on "magical folk medicine" in the series—the last of the five volumes on "folk beliefs and witchcraft"—and one which is in many respects a completion of the research he began with his first fieldwork in the summer of 1913. He started the editing work in 1926 and the volume was published late the following year. The original notes were not preserved, and the manuscripts in Forsblom's hand now only exist, thematically organized by himself, in the form they had already when he submitted his results in the 1910s. As an editorial principle, he omitted the legend narratives related to the ritual practices since they were, in Forsblom's opinion, not first-hand information. The files are therefore arranged according to the various illnesses, and to some extent the symptoms: a few chapters concern the causes behind such phenomena, such as troll missiles or the nightmare hag.

Nevertheless, Forsblom's collections can be used as sources when examining how adversity was conceptualized among Swedish speakers in Finland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Illness and hardship were met with narrative and ritual strategies, in which non-Christian and Christian concepts complemented each other and both men and women undertook ritual responsibilities in practices where text and action were inseparable.

Even without statistics on demography or the local economy, the texts Valter W. Forsblom transcribed can tell us a lot about the human condition in western Finland in the early twentieth century. While the Heavenly Father, the Holy Trinity and the Trinitarian formula are persistent elements in the collections of healing practices, the focus of the religious imaginary is on humans and their relationship to the threatening forces that were very much present in their everyday lives. The fears described are related to both illnesses and famine as well as anxiety and existential reflection.

When looking for witchcraft (*trolldom*), in the sense Forsblom used the term to denote intentionally evil deeds and wilful damage, the question arises of whether to read the files as verbatim documentation of events or as emphasizing the narrative aspects of rituals. The latter line of reasoning will be developed further in the section on charms against the nightmare

hag. In Forsblom's collections the performers of *trolldom* and senders of illness and worries rest in the background of the narratives and are mostly implicit presences in the formulas. However, the possibility of practising *trolldom* is definitely there in the texts. As Forsblom sensed already as a young student, words and deeds used to ward off illness and distress derive their meaning from a coherent set of thoughts that reflect on how humans are affected by the will of God, fate and the influence of others.

Most archived folk-belief collections are based on circulated questionnaires: too often with leading questions followed by heavily edited answers that confirm preconceived themes and motifs with little left of the local context. A collection like Forsblom's can be a tool for working with a broader conceptualization of religion, one also applicable to contemporary religions. Both in his way of reasoning around as well as practising his studies, Forsblom's approach was inter-disciplinary before the term was coined and despite the very different conditions for academic co-operation.

* * *

After this introduction to the hag and the fundamental conceptions associated with her, previous research on the theme and related matters and a discussion of the concept of folk belief(s) follow in the two main sections: one on the central elements in the various beliefs and rituals surrounding the nightmare hag and one specifically analysing legends about her—both with a certain emphasis on *trolldom* and ethnomedicine in light of gender hierarchies, social conflict and power relations.

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PART II

Imagining the Nightmare Hag and
Warding Her Off



CHAPTER 2

Imagining of the Nightmare Hag

*What does it mean to use superstition [widskepelse]?
It means abusing God's Word and Name, in order to drive away
sickness, from people and livestock; or else seeking the assistance of such
persons as pretend to know how to perform magic [trolla], discover
hidden things, and more of that kind.*

— Catechism of Olof Swebilius from 1689, revised by Jacob
A. Lindblom in 1810

The nightmare hag in narratives and rituals served as an image of an individual's own anxiety and other people's malevolence in pre-industrial Nordic countries. As such, the hag functioned as a folk definition of evil in the form of malicious acts and envy. These traditions were to a great extent embedded in an imaginary with its own logic, representing a rural world-view, yet they were simultaneously dependent on Christianity as it was preached and practised in rural communities. Vernacular religion acknowledged the Devil as the master of evil, but not necessarily Christianity's definitive boundaries for what constitutes wickedness or the Christian dichotomy of vice and virtue. In vernacular religion, it was the intention behind an act that counted, whereas the Church simply taught that these folk beliefs and customs came from the Devil. Thus, knowledge of magic, in the eyes of the Church, was associated with the Devil's deceptions and entailed distancing oneself from God and the order of creation. As we see

from the catechism quotation above (one of the most widespread in Sweden over a long period of time), using superstition, which implied actions just as much as beliefs, was not primarily a denial of God but an abuse of his word. From the perspective of the Church, therefore, all knowledge of witchcraft, and all insight into it, was intrinsically evil.

Thus it is not surprising that the nightmare hag is associated not only with anxiety but also with shame, as it was phrased in central Sweden by a man born in 1856:

It would not be appropriate to mention the hag by name in the evening. If she heard her name she would come in the night. It was an evil being who gained power over some people. It was considered shameful to be ridden by the hag. Anyone who was ridden was reluctant to talk about it.¹

Shame and power can be seen as key words for the entire *mara* corpus, even in folklore records where such thoughts are not explicitly uttered. The nightmare hag's potential for gaining power over a person and his source of livelihood, and the shame generated by the latent sexual dimension of the creature, are ever-present in the material. These themes are present both as an underlying theme and in direct descriptions of the *mara* as a beautiful woman or as something caused by envious and malicious wishes. The legends of *trolldom* functioned in rural society as metaphors for evil, in a broad sense, and as expressions of conflict and fear. It was a way for people to define anxiety caused by envy and discord in their everyday lives. Explanations were not sought in metaphysical constructions but in the immediate vicinity, "because if someone is troubled by it [the hag], you are careful not to talk about it, since it is considered a shame to be troubled by the hag. For it was assumed that a person troubled by the hag was more godless than others".²

Although the stories about the hag address general existential issues, this does not mean that the narratives about her were not deeply grounded in the everyday milieu; indeed, she was an intimate part of the rural way of life. The many forms taken by the nightmare hag display the flexibility that made her appearance believable in many reported situations.

¹IFGH 3211:18 Värmland, Sweden, 1933.

²SLS 33:114 Åboland, Finland, 1893.

IMAGINING THE NIGHTMARE HAG

Conceptions of the nightmare hag are far from uniform, as Carl-Martin Bergstrand observes when presenting the folklore records collected from Värmlandsnäs by Ragnar Nilsson, a statement with which Valter W. Forsblom would have strongly agreed.³ Conceptions of the hag were heterogeneous, not simply because of regional differences but because they related to individual experiences of anxiety-ridden dreams. This part of the study describes how the *mara* was represented in Scandinavia based on extant narratives, a survey intended as a background to the *trolldom* logic of the stories.

THE CAUSE OF THE NIGHTMARE HAG

Accounts of the *mara*, and descriptions of who or what it was, vary in the narratives. It clearly appeared in diverse forms, and there are many different explanations for its existence. Indeed, the stories are not merely heterogeneous; in some cases they are downright contradictory. The hag was virtually always a woman, in both a biological and a social sense, representing femininity in terms of both sex and gender; however, in a few texts closely associated with ideas of witchcraft, the *mara* turns out to be a man. “The fact that the opinions prevailing among the peasantry concerning the nature, shape and causes of the hag are extremely divergent and often highly vague merely helps to heighten the interest offered by a closer study of these phenomena”,⁴ wrote Valter W. Forsblom in 1917. He is the scholar who has most consistently analysed the hag traditions in relation to other conceptions and performances, above all drawing attention to the link with ethnomedical customs and attitudes. In his work the hag primarily stands out as a folk definition of illness, not as an individual experience of anxiety.

Many folklore records place great emphasis on expounding the reasons for the appearance of the nightmare hag, although it can be difficult to determine the extent to which the collector’s questions steered this quantitative distribution, and whether there was a genuine tradition of seeking to explain the origin of the hag. On the other hand, this is often the twist at the end of the legends. At the time when the first systematic collecting

³ Nilsson and Bergstrand (1962:208) Värmland, Sweden.

⁴ Forsblom (1917:113) Österbotten, Finland.

of folk traditions began in the Nordic region, there was keen general interest in conceptions of the soul from a comparative perspective; there is reason to suspect that scholars explored folk beliefs in an evolutionistic spirit, eager to see petrified forms of pre-Christian notions. This was explicitly stated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by scholars such as Hyltén-Cavallius and Hammarstedt in Sweden and Evald Tang Kristensen in Denmark. The close connection in the hag material to notions of *trolldom* and *häxeri*, however, puts the focus on the question of the hag's origins and whether it was sent by malicious people or was a neighbour in disguise. Ideas about such capabilities built on the conception that people with "strong thoughts" or envy had the power to send them in material form. In these cases the source of the hag had to be personal, and there had to be a connection between the malicious person and the hag. Explanations for the background of the hag may be said to be of two kinds: those that see the cause in the hag herself and her evil thoughts, and those that see the cause in some person or persons beyond the hag: an external influence that forces the hag to go—involuntarily and in some cases unconsciously—on her nocturnal journeys.

The Hag's Origin in Evil or Envious Thoughts

Attacks by the hag were often said to be caused by particular individuals whose malicious thoughts and wishes were materialized in the creature; in other words, hags were "people that think evil thoughts", as stated a woman in Hälsingland, Sweden, stated.⁵ In such cases the idea of the nightmare hag relates to common notions of witchcraft and traditions about the werewolf and milk-stealing, in which powerful forces also take concrete form. There are two possible explanations for the ability of thought to assume material shape: one is psychological, with the desire to harm and the intention to cause someone else to suffer being the primary factors; the other explanation is economic, with the person sending such a being after a larger share of the limited good. Conditions of scarcity in the agrarian community created a seedbed for explanations of this kind—ideas about resources and opportunities that were far from the optimistic faith in progress that prevailed in the early years of industrialization.

Valter W. Forsblom wrote, after one of his collecting trips in Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia, that he had found many examples of

⁵ ULMA 9546:2 Hälsingland, Sweden, 1936.

the belief that certain diseases could be imposed on a person, or in other words sent by one person to another. This imposition of diseases could take place either simply through “evil thoughts, oaths and curses” or else through certain acts of magic, usually of a symbolic character, intended to exert a harmful effect on the targeted person. Both the evil thoughts and the curses, or evil wishes clad in words, were said to be able to take on a material form.⁶

There is always an active sender behind the hag, whose actions are described in the verbs “impose” (*påsätta*) and “send” (*avsända*). The hag is not a creature “in herself” any more than the milk-stealing *bjära* (a living body or a material object acting on the behalf of a woman with clandestine knowledge); she is caused by someone’s will or wish. Even in traditions describing the *mara* as the object of a curse, from which she is grateful to be released, it is another person’s evil action that is the cause of the periodic transformation.

The hag was not alone in spreading illness. Many beings in folk belief caused disease in humans and animals. Offending the brownie (*tomte*), creatures of the underworld (*de underjordiska*) or the wight (*vittra*) could also bring bad luck to livestock. Ghosts and spectres could instil as much fear and anxiety as the nightmare hag.

Here and there in the archival records one can encounter pious explanations for the coming of the hag. Instead of someone’s evil thoughts, it was caused by a person’s own sins. It was reported from Norway: “They believed it was the sins that lay down and weighed heavy on top of you.”⁷ The hag was thus the pressure and torment of a guilty conscience. Leonhard Rääf observes in a record from the start of the nineteenth century, “Some people believe that the hag is a condemned person who can find no rest until she has crept around in the bedroom at night and pressed down on people”,⁸ while in a text from Everlöv in Skåne, the *mara* is a possessed woman: an expression presupposing a close connection to the Devil and, thus, an explanation of the nightmare hag in terms of Christian theology. In the Bible people with various mental disorders are described as being possessed by malevolent spirits. To say that the hag is possessed is to go half-way towards the dogmatic explanation that the evil beings proceeded from the Devil himself. Yet the real effect exerted by

⁶ Forsblom (1917:96) Österbotten, Finland.

⁷ NFS Bøyum II:34 Sogn og Fjordane, Norway, 1929–30.

⁸ Rääf ed. Wikman (1957:283) Östergötland, Sweden.

the nightmare hag is not doubted either in theology or in folk belief. A man born in 1871 said: “A possessed woman was called a *mara*. She mock-rode the horses at night and plaited their manes.”⁹

The Hag as Disease Personified

In both the Old and the New Testament diseases are regarded as being caused by attack from outside. Jesus casts evil spirits out of people’s bodies and frees them from the illness the spirits have caused. In the gospel texts these demons must be envisaged as concrete beings, since on one occasion they leave the afflicted person and descend on a herd of swine. These texts and other stories about the miracles performed by Jesus which the congregation heard from the priest in Church must have served to confirm the thought that certain beings could cause disease; thus, it is no wonder that Jesus, Mary and Peter occur so often in curing charms. Explanations for sickness in terms of external attack are pretty much universal. As noted in the previous chapter, in Nordic countries a disease of this kind is often called a “shot”, which reveals two crucial ideas in local explanations of disease: that it is a missile from outside that penetrates the victim’s body, and that it has a sender (discussed in greater detail at the end of this chapter). Both ideas are fundamental to understanding the nightmare hag as an explanation for disease, although the hag often appears as a personified disease and is then both the sender and the symptom.

The Hag as a Person Returning from the Dead

There is a rich store of narratives about the deceased returning in various guises in all the Nordic countries.¹⁰ These figures have different names in different areas, and the stories told about them vary significantly in regard to their appearance, intentions and actions. Those who return to earthly life in Nordic folklore can find no rest in the grave, for various reasons. This applies to murderers and other criminals who have to come back to atone for their crimes in some way or another. Those who died a death that was in some way unnatural, whether through murder or accident, were thought to have difficulty finding peace in the grave and were therefore driven to come back and tie up the loose ends of what they had left

⁹ LUF 13721:10 Skåne, Sweden, 1954.

¹⁰ Hagberg (1937:545ff.); Pentikäinen (1968, 1969); Almquist (1984).

unfinished. Suicides could never rest easy, having committed one of the most serious sins: taking one's own life opposed God's whole plan for creation and determined one's own destiny. These lost souls were what Juha Pentikäinen has called "dead without status".¹¹ Not all those who returned from the dead, however, were out to do something on their own account; the aim of many was rather to change conditions among the living.

Ghosts in vernacular religion often want to communicate with the living and pass on a message by some means. Despite the varied forms in which they appear, the stories about returning spirits have one feature in common: the experiences they cause are powerful and often frightening. This is a pattern we recognize from the legends about the nightmare hag, and it is not surprising that the folklore records talk of the hags and ghosts as if they were the same thing. From Swedish-speaking Finland it was noted: "It was believed that a dead person could also be sent by a living person to hag-ride someone."¹² There are other similarities between these nocturnal beings. Like the nightmare hag, ghosts sometimes appear in the shape of an animal, and can aggravate horses and cause physical harm. On the other hand, there is also an element of revenge in the actions of the hag who assails a person who has rejected her, while ghost traditions do not contain notions of clandestine deeds. There are few examples of the living taking the initiative in communicating with the dead, although the means of warding them off are comparable to other prophylactic measures in popular practices.

In contrast to the dead, the *mara* never makes any noise and she never passes on messages. Nevertheless, in both cases there is unique contact. As in the material about the hag, there are many documents concerning highly individual encounters with the dead that resemble the sensation of being ridden by the hag: an experience of intense anxiety which ends suddenly. A person who was wicked while alive remains so in death, and sometimes a person like this could also be called a *mara*. Ghosts returning from the dead sometimes pressed upon their victims like a heavy weight, like the nightmare hag.¹³ Indeed, one record from Värmland in west-central Sweden reports that "[t]he hag was an evil that came from the dead. [They were] supposed to be old crones that had known nothing but tricks and

¹¹ Pentikäinen (1969).

¹² Forsblom (1917:130) Österbotten, Finland.

¹³ Danielsson (1930:21f.); Almquist (1984:52).

malice in their lifetime.”¹⁴ The hag could also be a lost soul of more general character, or someone “who died an unfortunate death, who had no rest. It could ruin both people and horses. It could be very small and come in through closed doors,” as a woman born in 1850 said.¹⁵

Here in the interstices between different beliefs about ghosts, the evil dead and nightmare hags there are, unsurprisingly, sexual interpretations of these phenomena. Among the northerly records, a text from Swedish-speaking Finland states that, “if a widow lives immorally, her dead husband can start going ‘hag-riding’ [*gå i mar*]”.¹⁶ The hag is thus interpreted as a punishment that the dead can inflict on the living. Otherwise it is an unusual idea in the records that a person deserved to be afflicted by the hag.

The Hag as the Daughter of a Woman Who Has Avoided Birth Pain

In the records from the southern part of the Nordic region, hags and werewolves are commonly said to be the result of their mothers, when pregnant, crawling through a foal’s caul to avoid pain in childbirth.¹⁷ As a source from Skåne explains, “When a woman wanted to give birth easily, she crawled through a stretched-out foal’s caul. Then the first child became a *mara* if it was a girl, and a werewolf if it was a boy.”¹⁸ These stories are formulated both as legends and as statements explaining why hags exist, an analogical way of thinking that resembles many other forms of behaviour and recommendations in ethnomedical practice. Through her action the woman wishes to ensure her labour will be as easy as that of a foaling mare. The narratives about the foal’s caul resemble many other childbirth practices in folk medicine. Mostly, however, they concern ritual customs performed during labour, connected to the actual delivery, not preventive measures taken beforehand. A slightly different version from Blekinge, Sweden, is the following:

¹⁴ IFGH 3627:50 Värmland, Sweden, 1935.

¹⁵ LUF 4170:33 Skåne, Sweden, 1931.

¹⁶ Forsblom (1917:116) Österbotten, Finland.

¹⁷ Odstedt (1943:115ff.); Möller (1940:55ff.); Weiser-Aall (1968:118ff.) and the literature cited in the third section of this study below under the heading “Foal’s caul legends”.

¹⁸ LUF 2948:10 Skåne, Sweden, 1930.

My grandmother told of how a child became a *mara* or werewolf. The way it happened was that people in the past made things easier for a woman in childbirth by saving the caul in which a foal was born. It was dried so that it became a ring. The child was delivered through this ring, and it then became a *mara* or a werewolf.¹⁹

The story, narrated by a man, presents the ritual of the foal's caul as a planned act, a performance for which the necessary objects were gathered in advance. The foal's caul ring was dried and stored away, to be taken out when needed. The legends about the foal's caul are examined in the third section, but statements that this behaviour gave rise to hags and werewolves are part of local explanations of the origin of the hag.

In all probability no such rituals were ever performed by pregnant women, despite the many stories told about irresponsible expectant mothers who tried by these means to evade their painful lot and the natural order, a condemnatory stance that is even clearer in the legends than in the statements taken down by the folklorist in the field. These explanations emphasize, however, that being a hag could be the result of a curse that drives a woman to nocturnal shape-shifting: in other words, a person is a hag not because of her own malicious actions but, rather, is an innocent victim of her mother's behaviour. In the legend material there are a great many texts dealing with the motif of liberation from the compulsion to become a nightmare hag in which the hag expresses profound gratitude for her release. The theme of liberation and gratitude is far removed from the example from Finland cited above, in which the transformation was a punishment for a sinful way of life, thus demonstrating the breadth of the imaginary in the explanations.

Accounts of the attempting to avoid the pain of childbirth almost all concern both hags and werewolves. The explanations for the existence of these creatures are identical; only the sex of the expected child differs. On the other hand, there are considerable differences in the other material about hags and werewolves even in the regions where stories of foal's cauls dominate. The most common legends of werewolves in southern Sweden and Denmark are about a man coming home with threads between his teeth, i.e. the final proof that the werewolf had torn a human to pieces.²⁰ He is released from the compulsion to turn into a werewolf by his wife's

¹⁹ LUF 623:3 Blekinge, Sweden, n.d. [probably the end of the 1910s].

²⁰ A few legends of the hag deal with the motif of "threads between the teeth". See also Christiansen (1958 ML 4005); Lid (1950:82ff.); Klintberg (2010 Q 32).

pronouncement of the words “You are a werewolf!” or if she recognizes him some other way and speaks his name. In other legends the werewolf chases bridal processions and attacks pregnant women, and the more northerly traditions are dominated by stories of the werewolf being transforming at will. Ella Odstedt has conducted a thorough analysis of the werewolf narratives, with a great many references to local histories and other printed literature containing stories of hags and werewolves.²¹ Hereby she could establish clear patterns of regional differences.

The linkage of hag and werewolf in the archival material is found in the southern regions where legends of the foal’s caul were most common. It was on the basis of these motifs that the archival index term “Transformations” was established. Narratives like this, however, are just a part of much more complex traditions. The ideas of the *mara* and the werewolf as innocent victims of a curse are in many ways essentially different from the northern material that emphasizes the element of clandestine knowledge. From this perspective, the southern legends of the foal’s caul differ most radically from other notions about the nightmare hag in that the stress is on the cause; further, they are coloured by a sense of pity for the person who is forced to become a nightmare hag as punishment for her mother’s sin. The effects of the *mara* are not mentioned in texts about the foal’s caul, neither as disease nor as a terrifying experience of anxiety, while the starting point in other texts is often the observation that the hag has paid a visit to torment a person or to ride on horses or cattle.

The Hag as Materialized Sexual Thoughts and Feelings

The power of thought in ensuring continuity in Nordic traditions has already been discussed. The erotic element is always more or less explicitly present in ideas about the nightmare hag, most clearly when it is caused by someone’s unrequited feelings. If the *mara* is not a beautiful young girl in the records, then she is an ugly crone who attacks young men, or it is stated outright that she is a rejected girlfriend. Nightmare hags can also be old maids (*gamle gjentar*)—unmarried elderly women.²²

The motif of the old lovesick woman in the shape of a nightmare hag tormenting a younger man can be recognized from Old Norse literature. Yet later stories which described the hag as a rejected lover commonly

²¹ Odstedt (1943:115ff).

²² NFS Hermundstad IV:74 Oppland, Norway, 1932.

featured a man plaguing the woman he desired. In the legend of the hag who suffered death from the cut of a scythe it is almost always a man who fell victim to his own envious thoughts. In Swedish-speaking Finland people spoke of “strong thoughts” or dangerous and uncontrollable emotions, possibly erotic, which materialized as the nightmare hag. Even in cases where the nightmare hag was not caused by sexual desire, there is still a noticeable sexual charge in the image of the hag riding her victim during the night.

There is a close link between violence and sexuality in the hag material. *Mara* imagery expresses sexuality solely through violent acts; there does not appear to have been any scope for tenderness. No records are found which speak in positive terms of the nocturnal visits of the hag. She is always dangerous and terrifying, and there is never any mention of pleasure. The violence is expressed in the ways people protected themselves from the hag and in the description of her attacks. She is driven away by brutal means, and a multitude of potent images are used to provide protection from her: knives, scythes, fire and so on. In the legends we see the aggressive pattern more clearly, as people try by various means to injure the hag’s human body in narratives which are spun around an analogous relationship between the customary and the temporal body. The brutality lies both in the *mara*’s actions and in the preventive methods employed against her, almost all of which are pursued forcefully and aggressively.

Many of the supernatural beings in Scandinavian folklore have sexual features: the *huldra*, *vittra* and *skogsrå* are all associated with longing and desire, while both legends and ballads exhibit the motif of supernatural marriages and relationships. In these liaisons the man somehow succeeds in capturing the supernatural woman, but the texts often end with his losing her again. In other narratives, female beings force themselves on the man against his will. The *skogsrå*, a kind of lady of the woods, entices men to make love, whereupon they awake in a fen or with her mocking laughter ringing in their ears, and the beautiful *vittra*, a female wight, also seduces men. In these narratives the man can never master the female creature; she has the upper hand in sexual terms. Only through force can he gain power over her. The stories of the seductive creatures of folklore paint strong images of how free, self-willed female sexuality is curbed by means of brutality.

Tone Dahlstedt, who has conducted a study of *vittra* material in upper Norrland, notes about the love affairs between humans and the *vittra* that a “characteristic of all these stories is that it is only men who have liaisons

with *vittra* women”.²³ Like Gunnar Granberg, who has examined beliefs about the *skogsrå*, Dahlstedt sees these texts as records of men’s sexual daydreams.²⁴ There are also numerous folk narratives about earthly women who are seduced by the nix (*näcken*) or water-sprite or spirited into the mountain. Such blatant mixtures of the human and the supernatural never end well, however, although folk belief does not explicitly condemn these liaisons. The legends about the “hag wife” (*marhustru*) are those which deal most obviously with sexuality in the hag traditions, in that an ordinary man ends up marrying the hag and they have children together. Yet in these legends it is not sexuality that occupies the primary place, but the intention to demonstrate the impossibility of the constellation itself, the mixing of categories. In other texts, such as those referring to “strong thoughts”, the eroticism is more explicit. “Young men often get the *mara* when a woman thinks strongly about them. [...] The hag also appears on a person if someone nourishes a sinful desire for somebody or otherwise has evil designs against them.”²⁵

The stories about the “strong thoughts” convey the understanding that sexuality between individuals is a highly charged field. The nightmare hag frequently functioned as a very useful trope when knowledge about such erotic tensions had to be passed on, although there are variations in on that narrative, evident in the following extract from Öland narrated by a man born ca. 1860:

There was a maid who used to go visit one of the farmhands in her sleep. She didn’t want to, but he had such power over her. One evening he was going to sleep down by the lake in the boathouse because he was laying nets at dawn. As he went, he said to the maid, “This evening you’ll come to me.” The girl spoke to the housewife about her desperate situation. The housewife then tied the maid’s apron around the old sow. In the night it set off down to the boathouse. The farmhand had a terrible time protecting himself.²⁶

This is an unusual but telling legend. The farmhand’s will is so strong that the maid cannot resist. The girl is not really a nightmare hag. It is through the man’s desire and will that she “used to go in her sleep to one

²³ Dahlstedt (1976:57).

²⁴ Granberg (1935:243f.).

²⁵ FSF (1919 VII:1:483).

²⁶ ULMA 15682:3f. Öland, Sweden, 1942.

of the farmhands". Yet a story like this about arousing love shows many similarities to the more stereotypical texts about the *mara*. It is a matter of getting close to the object of desire through the use of power. It is not until the victim seeks help from another person, a mentor who gives concrete advice, that the tormentor's power can be overcome. The method is simple but it carries a gendered charge: the maid's femininity seems to rest in her apron, and she makes the sow go to the farmhand by tying the apron around it. The man suffers a humiliating punishment for his nocturnal acts, as the only company he gets is that of a pig. He is not to be pitied like the cursed hag of the legends; he is merely getting his just deserts.

The art of arousing and allaying love is common in most *trolldom* practices and in Nordic ethnomedicine. It is not just a matter of longing, desire and the will to attract someone, but also a question of gaining power over another person and forcing one's feelings on him or her. From Zealand in Denmark it was recorded:

It would not have helped no matter how much advice he had sought for it. For this reason, there was a great deal of talk about the *mara*, and it had been heard tell that it could only be of female sex. A person who was ridden by the hag was supposed to be secretly pursued for the sake of love by a woman who caused the persecution with the aid of magic [*Trolldomshjælp*]. This cruel suffocating sensation in sleep was achieved by her personally laying herself on the chest, especially by the heart of her victim.²⁷

According to Forsblom, the Finland-Swedish records call this kind of dangerous desire "stiff thoughts" (*styva tankar*), describing the term as follows:

"Stiff thoughts" are taken to mean love which floats via thought towards the desired person. These thoughts thus have a certain erotic character. If a woman feels love for a man who is indifferent to her, it can happen that the woman starts to "go hag-riding" [*gå i mar*].²⁸

This condition, in which emotions affect a person mercilessly, was called *elsk* in Norwegian.²⁹ In his major study of Norwegian ethnomedicine,

²⁷DFS 1906/23 M. K. Hansen, Københavns amt (132) Zealand, Denmark, 1934.

²⁸Forsblom (1917:115) Österbotten, Finland.

²⁹Reichborn-Kjennerud (1933 II:17), (1943 IV:140ff.); Alver (1971:14).

Reichborn-Kjennerud writes, “*Elsk* /---/ is the name of a morbid state that is supposed to affect a man or woman because one of the underground people has gone after them and torments them with her love.”³⁰ The “underground people” (*underjordsfolket*) is a rather vague name for the source of the trouble; *elsk* is usually more exactly defined by its appearance in compounds such as *tusseelsk*, *huldreelsk* and *trollelsk*, attributing the cause to supernatural beings such as the *tuss*, *huldre* and *troll*. In all these cases the sexual forces have a supernatural form but a human sender. Like the hag, *elsk* is associated with ideas about the soul, as Bente Alver elucidates in her study of the soul in Norwegian folk belief.

A longing that had been imposed upon one was called an *elsk*. [...] People believed that it was contracted from the outside. In the records, we also find the *elsk* being imposed by supernatural beings who desire a mortal as a partner, or by a dead person.³¹

There is, admittedly, no *marelsk* to mean the longing imposed by the nightmare hag, but both Alver and Reichborn-Kjennerud draw parallels between being hag-ridden and *elsk*: “*Marer* [...] a morbid attack that comes over a person at night and disturbs the sleep, has an erotic background, like *elsk*, but otherwise differs from this folk illness.”³² Reichborn-Kjennerud says that the hag differs from the “sickness wights” (*sykdomvetter*) that cause *elsk* since the hag has a pathological background. He argues, much like Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, that modern medicine has found scientific explanations for the nocturnal experiences to which people gave the name of *mara*. With the rationalism that was typical of the time, Reichborn-Kjennerud claims that it is “people with an irritable nervous system and suffering from certain heart or lung diseases” who experience the hag. But the *mara* and *elsk* have an important feature in common: they are local explanations for the ability of certain people to influence other people’s feelings.

Inger Lövkrona has pointed out that there are not very many published collections of folklore on sexuality from the Nordic region.³³ One may wonder how many traditions of this nature were collected and not archived or concealed in the archives by being scattered under a large number of

³⁰ Reichborn-Kjennerud (1943 IV:142).

³¹ Alver (1971:14).

³² Reichborn-Kjennerud (1943 IV:143).

³³ Lövkrona (1991:267).

headings. Stories with erotic themes were not confined to a single genre and must surely have had a wide span in agrarian society, ranging from expressions of genuine tenderness to gross vulgarity. To some extent such stories were restricted by the norms of the local community, but the possibilities of pushing the envelope, shocking people and achieving successful effects in storytelling must have appealed to many. Texts about the hag were not, as has been pointed out several times, recorded at actual performance events, but we can imagine how a story about her could have been told with rather racy gusto by a skilled storyteller.

While even obscenity can express playfulness, it is still surprising how much of the crude and burlesque is preserved while more intimate texts are lacking. Scandinavian folk narratives deal with desire and love, with longing and jealousy, but few texts talk of sexuality and its emotional dimensions. “Not a sperm stain anywhere, but buckets of blood”, as Bengt Anderberg writes in the preface to *Fula visboken*, a collection of old erotic folksongs.³⁴ Anderberg’s observation also applies to the collected *mara* material, and this cannot solely be explained by the fact that oral literature was taken down by visiting collectors or local authorities like the priest or the schoolmaster. The records often demonstrate a craving for power over another person, part of a whole complex of ideas revealing that most sexual liaisons were built on complicated emotional ties. If a history of Nordic sexuality is ever written, stories about the nightmare hag will no doubt be able to provide perspectives far beyond demography statistics, and instead point to a history of emotions—pleasurable as well as fearful. In the very north of Sweden in the late 1920s a woman said:

Gustav Hansson spoke about when he was a bachelor and Tohed-Mora when she was a girl. Gustav Hansson was merry at one Enefors market and asked if he could sleep by her that night. Yes, she promised that he could sleep by her that night. And [she] dressed up nicely—but he didn’t come. And so she tormented him. She was a *mara*. She came in the same dress she had been wearing when she was waiting for him. She tormented him for several years. They were forced to go and wake him up because they knew what was bothering him.³⁵

Here the rejected girl takes matters into her own hands. She has a cunning strategy for her actions, and just like people who return from the

³⁴ Anderberg (1977:9).

³⁵ ULMA 1835:2:4f. Norrbotten, Sweden, 1928.

dead, she wants to exact revenge, and, also like them, she shows herself in an everyday guise. “She came in the same dress she had been wearing when she was waiting for him. She tormented him for several years.” The man who lured her into fruitlessly waiting for him had no reason to doubt who the *mara* was.

The sexual dimensions of the hag could be emphasized in other ways than through talk about strong thoughts and longing; the hag could be thought to be an illegitimate child,³⁶ in which case, as in the legends of the foal’s caul, the state was a punishment that had afflicted an innocent child whose mother had breached a norm. An alternate form of punishment is mentioned by Carl-Martin Bergstrand in his book of legends from Bohuslän to the effect that if a fornicating woman drowns herself, she becomes a hag, a kind of ghost who is punished for sins committed in her earthly life.³⁷

Another common explanation is that those who deviate in some respect in regard to the quantity and colour of their hair are hags. As a whole, deformities, birthmarks and other visible signs on the body—some of them visible, others hinting at more intimate aspects of the person in question—were interpreted in folklore as reflections of inner qualities. It was said in one record that “[a]ll adults who do not have hair under their arms are hags”.³⁸ Thus the hag is someone who lacks vestigial hair, whose eyebrows meet in the middle or who is red-headed. Red hair and sexual lust are often associated in folk narratives all over Europe.

The Hag as Associated with the Devil

This was a connection that was often made, with the *mara* either forming part of the Devil’s entourage or his actual emissary. In all probability this was due to the Church’s constant reminders of the Devil’s existence. As David Lindquist writes on the subject of the Devil’s position in devotional literature, “Behind the whole world of evil spirits stands, as its prince and leader, the Devil himself, who directs the hordes of demons”.³⁹ In certain cases the nightmare hag was entirely identified with the Devil, particularly in the Finland-Swedish material in which the parallels between the nightmare hag and Satan are obvious. Ideas about the Devil in this field are very

³⁶ LUF 2930:18 Skåne, Sweden, 1930.

³⁷ Bergstrand (1947:116). Bohuslän, Sweden.

³⁸ NFS Hermundstad VII:46 Oppland, Norway, 1936.

³⁹ Lindquist (1939:363).

well documented and analysed thanks to complementary studies by Paul Danielsson and Ulrika Wolf-Knuts.⁴⁰

The vernacular religion of the Nordic region, as pointed out previously, was a moral worldview with dividing lines between good and evil, yet it was the intent of people's actions that determined whether the use of *troll-dom* was considered reprehensible or not. The hag was an evil being, and it is not surprising that she often issues from Satan himself. Otto Blehr's conclusions are therefore disputable when he writes:

It is obvious that there can be evil features in the brownie [*tomten*] and in other supernatural beings. But these features never dominate, not even when it comes to the *mara* which may seem solely evil. For do we know that it is out of evil she rides horses and people?⁴¹

The farmer who found his horse bathed in sweat and lather in the morning, or who had himself awoken during the night, convinced that he was being suffocated by a furry animal, knew the answer to that question. The nightmare hag, just like the other shape-shifters in folk belief, is associated with destructivity. No hags, werewolves or witches occur in stories with a positive outcome, nor does the Devil (the latter an important player in vernacular religion).

The charms often claim a total identification between the hag and the Devil. "It was believed that it [the hag] was the Evil One himself", a man on Öland narrated in 1942.⁴² This parallel drawn between the hag and the Devil, and the deliberate linkage of the two, highlighted any similarities apparent between them. The *mara* and the Devil could both appear in different guises and could easily transform themselves, thereby breaching external obstacles and getting in anywhere. They could only be stopped with considerable effort and clandestine knowledge, the possession of which not infrequently emphasized the intellectual superiority of human beings.

Bengt af Klintberg has pointed out that the Devil holds a special position among the darker agents in Nordic folklore because his existence was constantly confirmed by the Church and the clergy.⁴³ People heard

⁴⁰ Danielsson (1930–32); Wolf-Knuts (1991).

⁴¹ Blehr (1987:214).

⁴² ULMA 15681:3 Öland, Sweden 1942.

⁴³ Klintberg (1972:34ff.). Also discussed at length by Sörlin (2004); Stark (2006); van Gent (2008); Toivo (2008, 2016).

sermons about the Devil, his power and activities, and examples were cited from the Bible. The catechism had a detailed description of the Devil, and catechetical examinations in the home gave the priest the opportunity to check that everyone was aware of this. People sang hymns in which the Devil was mentioned and they said prayers asking God to protect them from the Devil. Mortals were not only under perpetual menace from his attacks and temptations, they also lived under the threat of eternal punishment in hell. Marianne Liliequist, in her dissertation *Nybygggarbarn* ("Settlers' Children", 1991), cites several examples of how very much alive the Devil was in people's consciousness, and how the fear of eternal punishment in hell was used as a threat not only in the raising children but also to monitor norms among adults.⁴⁴ Vernacular religion mixed dogmatic and iconographic notions about Satan which properly belonged to the theological tradition, providing one of the best examples of how "folk" and "church" have mutually influenced each other, and how difficult it can be to keep them discrete. One must bear in mind, however, that none of this mattered for individuals who could tell stories about own and others' experiences of the hag. Concrete images of the Devil could be seen everywhere, from the words in the Bible about the roaring lion, to the paintings on Church walls showing the grotesque lord of the underworld. Devotional books and prayers conjured up an image of a potentate who never failed to spot any human weakness. It was said that "[t]he more God-fearing a person is, the more vehemently the Devil exerts himself to achieve that person's destruction."⁴⁵ The Devil was not poetic imagery: his power was real, and the hag was integral to these ideas about evil and its prince.

Archive records often mention that supernatural creatures rained down on earth in the wake of Lucifer's fall from heaven. This link with the Fall and the history of salvation palpably strengthened the position of the beings appearing in folk religiosity.⁴⁶ The following was told by a woman in western Sweden:

⁴⁴ M. Liliequist (1991:123ff., especially 137ff.).

⁴⁵ Lindquist (1939:369).

⁴⁶ Ulrika Wolf-Knuts comments on the beliefs in the creatures that rained from heaven: "Through the catechism they [the informants] were aware of the fall of the evil angels from heaven, and they also knew the link between the Devil and different creatures in folk belief [...], but it is uncertain whether the informants themselves used this expression in the narrating situations."

The *mara* was very much on the go in the old days. It was something evil that came to people while they were asleep. They could never see who it was. But it was “the evil one” who wanted to smother them. The evil one was on the loose much more in the past, because people were so superstitious. The best medicine was if they used the word of God.⁴⁷

The informant seems to assume that the more widespread a superstition, the greater the power the Devil has over people. The same kind of remedial action is recommended as in the healing charms: the hag, who originates in the Devil, can only be combated with the word of God. In this way the hag is a confirmation of the power of the holy word, a consequence that was not in the interests of the Church. There is even a local debate about this relationship between theology and vernacular religion—the relationship of the hag to the Devil—in a document collected in Nagu in western Åboland, Finland, in 1893 by K. P. Petterson, who writes:

[F]or the *mara* derives from the Devil, and his close presence proves that a person is not on “the right path”. [...] That the *mara* derives from the “evil one” is undoubtedly inherent in folk belief, although not directly, but through the help and ability that the Devil gives to his supporters among people. These receive help in the way their wishes are fulfilled by the Devil. No one believes exactly that the person through whose envy the *mara* arises travels personally around the barns to torment other people’s animals; it is solely their wishing bad luck on others which makes the Devil carry out their wish, either together with the spirit of the wisher or knowing nothing at all about it.⁴⁸

Envy is thus the ultimate basis for the hag. Petterson adds:

To all my questions about this I have almost always received the same answer, directly or indirectly, that the *mara* is some envious person’s spirit, which has acquired the ability, with the aid of the Devil, to travel around the world independently of the body and to go through closed doors.⁴⁹

Envy was sinful not only because a person begrudged something to a fellow human being, but because of the notion of limited good. One person’s surplus reduced another person’s resources. What the people of

⁴⁷ IFGH 3794:18 Halland, Sweden, 1936.

⁴⁸ SLS 33:114 Åboland, Finland, 1893.

⁴⁹ SLS 33:114f. Åboland, Finland, 1893.

Nagu call *otur* (bad luck) is comparable to what other records call loss of *lycka* (fortune, luck).

Yet a nightmare hag could be made more or less by accident. “If a cat ran under the cradle or the bed where a newborn child lay [giving rise to associations with the Devil], the child ran the risk of going as a *mara*.”⁵⁰ Other records are more precise, stating that only an unbaptized child was exposed to this risk. The curse of becoming a hag was just one of many dangers hovering over the unbaptized. Here, the association with the Devil comes from his special interest in such children, not from the evil of the hag as in the earlier records.

“Rational” Reasoning to Explain the Hag

Not only scholars and collectors sought to give rationalistic, preferably medical or scientific, explanations for conceptions of the nightmare hag. Among the records, we find some in which the informant evidently knew a great deal about local notions of the hag but simultaneously wanted to explain away the “superstition” through rational argument; this is exemplified in the statement, “The hag sits in the blood. When the blood gets too old it clogs”, from central Sweden.⁵¹ Reflecting a wish to find a rational explanation for the customs surrounding the nightmare hag, this is typical of the era of social change during which these narratives were recorded. References to science were common. It was evidently important for some informants to distance themselves from what “modern” and/or educated people thought of as superstitions, and it also seems to have been important for the collector to appear “modern” by having seen through it all. Superstition was not for the younger generation, as it was inherent in the whole documentation project that folk beliefs were antiquated, a thing of the past. “The scientific opinion is that it is in the blood”, observed a man from Västergötland, born in 1860, who added, “The hag was a disease in the body which they believed was something supernatural.”⁵² It was often claimed that the hag came when people were sleeping on their backs or had eaten too much food, or because it was too hot.⁵³

⁵⁰ LUF 2924:69 Småland, Sweden, 1930.

⁵¹ IFGH 3478:19 Värmland, Sweden, 1934.

⁵² IFGH 3905:11 Västergötland, Sweden, 1936.

⁵³ Reichborn-Kjennerud (1943 IV:147). This opinion was formulated as far back as the medieval leechbooks.

The Diffuse Origins of the Hag

In most cases, however, the background to the hag is vague and ill-defined. It is noticeable in many archival records that the collector did not ask about the origin or cause of the hag. Yet the question is often answered indirectly as in the case of a man from central Sweden born in 1869:

My brother was lying in a barn when he heard the patter of feet. "Here comes kitty", he said, thinking it was the cat, but then it grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him backwards on his back, she couldn't get at him otherwise, and started squeezing. In the morning you could see on his shoulder the marks of five fingers.⁵⁴

Without its being said explicitly, we are told that the hag is perceived as something that approaches stealthily and is mistaken for a cat but swiftly turns violent and makes her attack. It is described as feminine and seem to have a human-like appearance, since the marks it leaves are of fingers rather than claws.

The different forms in which the nightmare hag appears, and the range of causal explanations connected with her, were probably necessary for notions of the hag to survive. In order to be able to relate individual experiences of nocturnal anxiety and the need for explanations of illness and misfortune to a shared worldview, the latter had to be sufficiently flexible. So many of the recorded stories of the *mara* do not fit into absolute schemas, but categorizing such disparities in archival notes as "odd" and "divergent" misses the whole point of the hag's ambiguity and the ungraspable qualities that facilitate flexibility between the personal and the general. What is more frightening than something we cannot clearly define? Furthermore, such a figure is very useful in the repertoire of a skilful storyteller.

THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF THE HAG

The guise in which the *mara* appears at night varies considerably from one text to another,⁵⁵ but can be broadly divided into human, animal and less defined forms. The physical anomalies which, according to some of the records, characterized people who went hag-riding at night are irrelevant

⁵⁴ IFGH 3611:34 Värmland, Sweden, 1936.

⁵⁵ Tillhagen (1960:319f.).

to the discussion of what the hag looked like when people encountered her, as these external signs comprise explanations for her existence rather than being part of her appearance when out riding. The hag cannot be captured in an easy description with specific attributes in the analytical framework; rather, vagueness and ambivalence are her prominent characteristics and it would be wrong to gloss over this. Indeed, this study highlights them.

As with her physical appearance, she also has ambivalent sexual traits. One explanation for this is the public character of many recordings, with an outsider visiting and taking notes. Sexual allusions could be found embarrassing since informants knew that what they said would be archived. If the stories about the hag not only had an entertaining function but also an existential meaning, it must often have entailed a situation where a local felt uncomfortable about confiding in a visiting student or the local schoolteacher. They may have hesitated to talk about things that felt highly personal.

The vagueness and the diffuse appearance of the nightmare hag, on the other hand, provided two concrete advantages in the performance context, allowing the storyteller to use allusion and thereby heighten the suspense, enabling greater freedom when telling his or her version. There was also a psychological gain as this dynamic gave scope for individual imagination. These two elements increase the narrative and psychological complexity of the texts. Bo Lönnqvist, in an article about “Trolls and Humans”, has shown the need to stress outward deviations in anything that has to be kept at a distance from the human category;⁵⁶ the hag is thus given features belonging to animals or farm tools, although there is narrative freedom in letting her alternate between human and demonic. To accomplish this, the hag’s body must have attributes (shagginess) or properties (the ability to pass through keyholes) which show that she is non-human.

Below is a schematic presentation of the different forms in which the *mara* appears, but it is important to bear in mind that records of particular experiences and ideas about the nature of the hag are less specific. Certain guises are associated with certain types of texts, and linguistic hedges—such as “similar to” or “roughly like”—proliferate in the records. When someone compares the hag to a cat, for instance, it does not mean that we can interpret this as meaning that the hag was exactly the same as a cat as we picture this category: a furry animal with a tail and whiskers. A

⁵⁶ Lönnqvist (1989).

distinction must be made between the need to organize a quantitatively rich corpus of material on the one hand, and images held to be true by the individual who saw and experienced the hag, on the other. The problem constituted by the relationship between the conception and the narrative form of the hag can scarcely be more obvious. It would be misleading to interpret the stories as showing that the hag was identical to a cat or a ball of yarn rather than regarding such metaphors as rough descriptions of an experience.

The Mara as a Human

woman	beautiful and attractive or old and ugly
man	described as neither attractive nor repulsive; has distinctive features; recognized as a person from the surroundings

The Hag as an Animal

specific species	cat, mouse
non-specific	furry animal, "shaggy"

The Hag as an Object

distinct	pitchfork, ball of yarn
obscure	piece of cloth, ball of fire

The Hag as an Immaterial Being

spirit, ghost	comes through the keyhole
the Devil	never has the Devil's conventional attributes

The image of the hag in the folklore records may be said to be that of a feeling that finds concrete expression, and is thus a summary of different properties rather than a specific form. That the hag was a person in one's surroundings who could change shape is not clearly stated in all the records. For many people the hag remained something diffuse, while others saw a distinct human figure entering the room. Some informants said that they recognized a person from the neighbourhood who appeared without transforming his or her external form. This is particularly common in cases where the hag is accused of being a rejected lover, whereupon it is emphasized that it is precisely that person who is the tormenter. In most of the accounts, however, it is more common for the informant to describe the damage done by the hag, rather than her outward

appearance. Often the hag is very human, although described as invisible, as in the following account told by a woman born in 1858:

According to what the storyteller heard from her mother, the hag was usually believed to be some kind of creature who did have a body, although she made herself invisible. You could hear her footsteps as she approached the bedroom, but you could not see anything. She could get in even if the doors were closed, because she needed only a little knot-hole to get in.⁵⁷

Although a long catalogue can be made of the various gender-neutral forms in which the hag appeared, she is specified as female in the majority of cases. Brief observations without detailed explanations are common in the material, and often what is said in passing is as interesting as a whole recorded narrative. If the gender is specified, it is often *en passant*. “It was a woman that went hag-riding.”⁵⁸ It is more common that a figure whose body is not precisely described is simply called “she” without further comment. One would think that it would be natural to offer an exact description of the beauty and attractiveness of the hag, in view of sexual allusions in the texts. It is chiefly in the legends of the hag wife, however, when the man plugs a knot-hole to force the human figure to reveal herself, that the hag is directly and explicitly described as young and beautiful, as in the following:

So there was a man who suffered from hag-riding. When the hag came he took the bolt and put it in so that she could not escape, and the next morning there was a lovely girl sitting beside him. He liked her so much that he got her to stay, and later he married her.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, the descriptions of the beautiful *mara* lack individual distinguishing features. The sexual dimensions are expressed instead in terms of the power of sexuality. Erotic longing in the texts about the hag are rather a way to manoeuvre out of another person’s power rather than descriptions of a desirable woman.

Old ‘Skenebjärn’ saw when the hag came in. He would never forget it, he said. It really threw itself on him and squeezed his chest, so that he really

⁵⁷ IFGH 3492:24 Västergötland, Sweden, 1934.

⁵⁸ IFGH 3570:23 Västergötland, Sweden, 1935.

⁵⁹ Kristensen (1928 II:156).

thought he would die. These are real people, you see. He saw her [the hag] so nicely, he was lying awake. She came in through the window. And he recognized her well too. It was someone from not far away—her name was Ingrid.⁶⁰

It is uncommon in the material to find the nightmare hag being identified as a named person, except in cases where the hag is produced by desire and appears as the rejected lover. More usual is a somewhat vague remark that it was a person from the neighbourhood.

The *mara* as a man is most common in the legends indexed in the archives under the motif heading “Dead on the Scythe”, where the hag falls into his own trap. Male examples are also found in more exotically coloured records. It is rare, however, to find any description evaluating his appearance. He is not said to be either attractive or repulsive. In texts about the male nightmare hag it is his character that is central, his will to gain power over another person, not his physical appearance.

The most powerful descriptions of the hag emphasize the ugliness of the creature. These inverted images of attraction are often more personal and detailed than stock descriptions of her as young and beautiful. The ugly *mara* is repulsive and old, and depicted with colourful invective. Despite her human features, she is given attributes clearly indicating that she cannot be regarded as completely human. For instance, “She was like a human being, but she was hairy and had long narrow fingers and long nails and big eyes. She lay down on the chest of the sleeping person.”⁶¹ A figure named “Mara-Lissun”, who is said to be an ugly old woman, sometimes appears in the records of the hag from southern Ostrobothnia.⁶² This figure seems to occur only locally and the descriptions of her crumpled face and her little body make her more like a *tomte* or a *rå* than a human, but “Mara-Lissun” reminds us once again of the fluid boundaries between brownies, imps and other beings. The *mara* can also appear as a little old man in records from eastern Nyland, Finland.⁶³

The boundaries between these beings are not always so distinct in the material, and often they are described in very general terms. The hag was “a troll that lay down on top of a person in the night”.⁶⁴ Not surprisingly,

⁶⁰ IFGH 3861:44 Västergötland, Sweden, 1936.

⁶¹ IFGH 3463:49 Värmland, Sweden, 1934.

⁶² Forsblom (1917:114) Österbotten, Finland; FSF (1919 VII:1:490).

⁶³ FSF (1919 VII:1:522); Danielsson (1930–32 II:18).

⁶⁴ NFS Oppedal I:107 Hordaland, Norway, n.d.

the informants failed to observe the collectors' strict rules for classifying what was said about which being. The texts about the hag are therefore classified rather randomly in the archives: sometimes by name, sometimes by activity. The variety of the names of the being reveal quite a lot about how the informants envisaged it, but the *mara* is primarily defined in the narratives according to what she does (pressing, squeezing, tormenting), not according to what she is called. It was said in Småland: "The *mara* rode some people. It was an evil spirit that came over them when they were lying sleeping."⁶⁵

Bengt af Klintberg has pointed out the similarities that exist between *gastkramning* (being hugged or squeezed by the returning ghost of a dead person) and being ridden by the nightmare hag.

In the Swedish folk tradition they have occasionally been blended. This is not because of any striking similarities between the ideas about their origin and appearance, but because of the fact that in folk medicine that they have both given names to morbid states that occur at night.⁶⁶

We have seen that the hag may come from a dead person, but the emphasis is on the person's being evil rather than deceased. The nightmare hag is also occasionally said to milk other people's cows. In none of these descriptions is the hag associated with a specific appearance.

Many folklore records specify that the *mara* looked like an animal, especially a furred animal of some kind. "While sleeping she sets off to worry people; goes into the house through the smallest hole, and if it is plugged she turns into different kinds of animals", as Leonhard Rääf noted in Ydre Härad.⁶⁷ Yet the species is not often stated; often we are only told that she was like a shaggy animal. The nightmare hag is associated particularly with cats, just as the werewolf is associated with dogs (because of its likeness with wolves?).⁶⁸ The cat was an animal with mostly negative connotations;⁶⁹ it brought misfortune, and it was common that the sight of a cat was viewed as an omen, and very rarely a good one. In Opland, Norway, it was recorded that "The hag was said to look like a cat that lay on top of you. Some people have also seen a cat run away from them when

⁶⁵ LUF 4702:19 Småland, Sweden, 1933.

⁶⁶ Klintberg (1973:25).

⁶⁷ Rääf ed. Wikman (1957:283) Östergötland, Sweden.

⁶⁸ Danielsson (1930–32 I:101ff.).

⁶⁹ Heurgren (1925:77ff.).

the hag let go.”⁷⁰ The cat implied sexual associations, particularly in connection with witches, who often appeared in the guise of a cat.⁷¹ As a consequence, cats were chiefly associated with female sexuality. The nightmare hag appears far more often in the shape of a cat than of a dog. The werewolf, on the other hand, was often seen in the shape of a three-legged dog. When the nightmare hag is described as a “a big dog”, it is an exception in the hag material.⁷² It is also uncommon for the hag to be seen as a pig, but it does occur in some unusual and interesting legends and in occasional descriptions. Another Norwegian record states: “Once it looked as if a black pig had jumped up on her bed.”⁷³ Meanwhile, a few records state that the nightmare hag appeared as a monkey, yet not many people would have ever seen a live monkey; the likely interpretation is that people wanted to portray something really out of the ordinary. The monkey was both an alien and a shaggy animal, two characteristics that nicely fit the imaginary of the hag, which was then described as a “shaggy ape”.⁷⁴

Birds are the cross-cultural form in which demons appear. They fly through the air and are hard to catch. The feathered body shows similarities to that of a shapeless woolly animal. Yet it was highly unusual for the hag to appear as a bird. Occasional informants seem to have thought that the hag was like a magpie; presumably this comes from local representations connected with how one protects oneself with a dead magpie nailed with a hammer to a wall. Many kinds of indeterminate, unspecified animals occur in the material. She is “an animal with goat-hair over her shoulder”, according to one Norwegian record.⁷⁵

Individual experiences of the nightmare hag, then as now, must have had varying modes of expression. It is surprising that the material does not contain more variations on the theme of the appearance of the hag. The images we are given show some sort of uniformity, despite everything, and the dominant picture is of animals with shaggy fur and feathers. When the nightmare hag appears as an object it is also diffuse in character. It can be like a fireball that rolls along and is difficult to catch, or a ball of yarn that keeps escaping, images which may, of course, stem from dream experiences of things slipping out of one’s hands. The hag could lie like a feather

⁷⁰ NFS Hermundstad VII:22 Oppland, Norway, 1936.

⁷¹ Kristensen (1928 VI:96ff.).

⁷² LUF 5641:18 Skåne, Sweden, 1938.

⁷³ NFS Hermundstad IV:35 Oppland, Norway, 1932.

⁷⁴ IFGH 2955:11 Dalsland, Sweden 1932.

⁷⁵ NFS Skirbekk I:E Hordaland, Norway, 1923–29.

over the mouth, impossible for the tormented victim to get hold of, or could feel like a piece of fur,⁷⁶ or a tablecloth,⁷⁷ or like a grey skin fluttering away.⁷⁸ As already observed, in many cases the formless⁷⁹ hag can get in through the tiniest hole. We may therefore assume that she was perceived as incorporeal, like air, smoke or a spirit. In the legends of the hag wife this is the prelude to the actual story, which is about the man who manages to plug the gap and capture the hag. She has to assume human form at dawn, but as soon as she finds out how the man captured her, she disappears the same way. In psychological terms these are eloquent images of helplessness, although the legends of the nightmare hag convey the hope that a person who finally manages to catch her will find release.

The hag was not the only creature in vernacular religion that could change shape. This group includes the werewolf, obviously, but there are also narratives of how witches and the Devil could transform themselves from one shape to another. The returning ghost of a deceased (*gast*) could also shift shape, unlike other revenants, and appear as an animal, flames, fire and so on.⁸⁰ The Devil, like the nightmare hag, can get in anywhere, and parts of the material about the hag correspond to certain sayings about the Devil, who cannot be stopped by any means.

In the legends about farming implements and cats, which I have given the heading “analogy legends” in order to emphasize the fundamental conflict in the narratives, the forms of the hag are stereotyped and linked to a specific object (usually a pitchfork, shovel or hackle), or she comes in the form of a cat. In these cases, the form is a jarring contrast with the experience of an attack by her. The point of these disguises is, rather, that they are everyday objects which can materialize “invisibly” because they are mundane things which do not attract any attention. Distinct signs and specific attributes like this have been among the grounds for interpreting supernatural creatures in terms of perception psychology, but since the nightmare experiences are so individual, it is difficult to link the visual perceptions of the hag to a few given forms.

Jochum Stattin has considered transformations in the stories about the water-sprite or nix (*näck*),⁸¹ and suggested that the changes back and forth

⁷⁶ IFGH 4284:21 Bohuslän, Sweden, 1939.

⁷⁷ IFGH 4735:9 Västergötland, Sweden 1942.

⁷⁸ ULMA 3393:1 Västergötland, Sweden, 1931.

⁷⁹ NM EU 29 561 Värmland, Sweden, 1928.

⁸⁰ Klintberg (1973:8).

⁸¹ Stattin (1984:97f.).

which it undergoes are not random. “To mark that these shapes were of a magical nature, the storyteller could ascribe properties to them which could distinguish them from the normal order.”⁸² This principle also applies to the stories about the hag, which highlight her non-humanity in different ways. The texts also present the topography of individual dreams, a feature that is not only about marking that this creature is different, but just as much a matter of finding a form for personal experiences.

THE HAG’S TORMENT OF PEOPLE

One could question how meaningful it is to divide the archive material into records which describe how the hag harasses people and those in which she plagues animals, when it is apparent how closely—in many cases indissolubly—these ideas are related. In the universe of folk belief, the concepts of the hag had their place in a locally shared imaginary; her attacks affect humans and animals alike. The division, however, is only technical: a means to organize the material and make it manageable. Somewhat simplified, we can make a rough distinction into different groups of texts: stories in the first person often concern personal experiences of the hag, while accounts of the hag’s attacks on animals tend to be formulated as technical advice about prevention and cure.

Stories concerning the hag’s attacks on humans can be divided into two main groups according to the person describing what happened. One group contains texts about personal experiences: first-person accounts where the informant has replied to a direct question about whether he or she has ever been attacked by the nightmare hag or has seen her. The other group, consisting of an equal number of records, concerns third-person accounts, and here the storyteller can live the part of the victim with great intensity. In regard to the first group, we can never know for sure whether it is an actual event that is reported or if the teller merely claims it to be authentic. From one point of view, however, this question is of no interest. What is important is that stories about night visits by such beings were told and could live on as they made sense in peoples’ lives. Whether the accounts of the hag’s attacks are presented in the first or the third person, they are often dramatic and poignant. The emotional presence conveyed by the descriptions of the attacks on people are the existential foundation

⁸² Stattin (1984:97).

for the legends and stories of the hag that were passed on, to which this Norwegian statement bears witness of.

A hag-ride [*mareritt*] was something that people could suffer at night. If felt as if you would wake up, but you slept, but you couldn't move, not so much as a finger. As soon as you could wake up enough that you could move more than just a finger, you were free from it. If you touched a person who was hag-ridden, he was freed at once.⁸³

The symptoms expressed in the narratives are, in one respect, emotional: people feel anxiety and terror when the hag attacks. Often, however, the emotional distress is accompanied by physical symptoms: the victim feels suffocated, with heavy pressure on the chest. The hag's attack often left people unable to move or speak. The victim was entirely in the grip of the experience and could not cry out for help. This sense of total helplessness is nearly always accentuated by clear visual perceptions of the attacker (Fig. 2.1).

Many texts about the nightmare hag convey an intensive sense of presence. Hedvig Olofsdotter (born in 1849) from Gudmundtorp in Skåne, Sweden, tells this story:

One night I was sleeping with my mother. Suddenly there was a scraping at the door between the hall and the bedroom. "Is that you again?" said my mother. I crept under the quilt in terror but Mother hurried to take Father's trousers and put them over her knee, "because the hag never has power over men and men's clothes". My mother could feel how the hag was working and working to get over the obstacle—but in vain.⁸⁴

There is entertainment value in the documentation, and a good storyteller could turn the motifs into personal experience. Yet to give life and intensity to a story about an evil creature who comes at night to dispense torment almost requires an insider perspective. A man from central Sweden told the following:

The hag was shaggy like a cat. She came on to me one night and almost suffocated me. I managed to twist my body a bit and then she let go. But it was some kind of animal. I thought that it came through a crack in the floor. I

⁸³NFS Frimannslund 11:85 Hordaland, Norway, 1944.

⁸⁴LUF 2250:18 Skåne, Sweden 1930.

Fig. 2.1 Hedvig Olofsdotter, born in 1849, interviewed by Kurt Frankman in 1929 in her home-parish in central Skåne, Sweden (LUF 2250). She had served as a maid in the vicinity and provided Frankman with a lot of materials about Scanian folk beliefs



sweated so much that my shirt got wet and I was afraid I would die. But Father said that the hag couldn't kill anybody.⁸⁵

This is a first-person narrative about the nightmare hag, quite typical of others in the archival records as the description of the hag is vague. Yet the experience is tangible. She subjects her victim to severe physical torment, and the narrator portrays himself as helpless, without the strength to

⁸⁵ IFGH 3769:19, Värmland, Sweden 1936.

move. There are also many testimonies from people who were sleeping in the same room as a person who was hag-ridden. These accounts can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from the legend texts:

The hag rides or lies on top of the sleeper, squeezes him so that he feels suffocated, and sticks her tongue in his mouth so that he can't make a sound. So if you lie face down in bed, the hag puts her tongue in the orifice that's offered, and as a consequence of this mistake she will not return.⁸⁶

This account recorded by Leonhard Rääf conveys a graphic description of suffocation followed by a drastic suggestion of a protective measure to make the nightmare hag look ridiculous. And from Swedish-speaking Southwest Finland it was recorded:

Once old woman Holmström was lying in bed with her little girl at her breast, and the old man was lying asleep behind her, sunk in a deep sleep. As he lay there, she thought she saw her husband coming through the door and throwing himself at her. She grabbed hold of him and threw him on the floor. Then she woke her husband up and gave him a good scolding and said, "You devil, going awry like that!" The old man blessed himself but didn't know a thing about it.⁸⁷

A violent reaction from a person who witnesses the hag always has an effect. The confrontation and the direct address are of note: without the evil being mentioned by name, the shape-shifter is liberated. The ending is a perfect fit for a combination of vernacular religion and more strict Lutheran teaching. First the man is scolded and it is suggested that the hag is the Devil, then he gratefully blesses himself for his evident release from her clutches.

In the northern traditions of the hag it is said that she counts her victim's teeth.⁸⁸ This conjures up a picture of her sitting on or riding on her victim. Eye to eye, she can count the teeth of the person who has been struck dumb. The counting hag is also found elsewhere, but envisaged in a completely different way. There the counting is a ruse to ensure protection from the hag, by giving her a problem that is impossible to solve or by telling her that she is so stupid that she can only count to three. Others

⁸⁶ Rääf ed. Wikman (1957:284) Östergötland, Sweden.

⁸⁷ SLS 202 I:248f. Nyland, Finland 1909–10.

⁸⁸ Reichborn-Kjennerud (1927 I:223, note 160, 1943 IV:148).

explain that if she finished her counting, the victim died. “If the hag was allowed to count all the teeth, then you were done for.”⁸⁹ Otherwise it is rare in the material to find statements that the hag could kill.

The hag not only brings on an acute torment of anxiety and breathlessness; she can also leave traces after her visit, meaning that outward symptoms, visible to anyone, could be explained as a consequence of the hag’s attack. Small blisters on the lip were called *markyssar* (hag kisses), and were described as a sign of her visit and as proof that such severe torment must be of evil origin. In the records from Swedish-speaking Finland we find statements that the hag left yellow spots (*gulan plett*) on the body, as Forsblom noted.⁹⁰

Associated with the stealing of milk, there are Finnish accounts of the hag’s leaving excrement (*maranpaska*) behind. Since this calling card served as a link to the hag, it could be used to reveal the identity of the guilty person in the neighbourhood. These conceptions are discussed below under the heading, “The nightmare hag and magic thinking”, and among the analogy legends.

THE HAG’S ATTACKS ON ANIMALS

The hag directs her attacks against farm animals, chiefly cows and horses, as often as humans. In quantitative terms, the archival documents concerning the creature’s persecution of animals outnumber those about attacks on humans, but this may be because far more statements were recorded about livestock than about human fears. The hag also occurs in surveys of folk beliefs about livestock diseases, work and tools, ethnomedicine and so on. There are both advantages and disadvantages to this state of affairs; to a modern reader it provides a context to rural living conditions, but often the nightmare hag is only mentioned in passing, with something else as the main topic. The stories about the nightmare hag and animals could really be described as diagnoses, comprising a clear expression of concern for the well-being of the livestock. In their recorded form, however, they are much briefer and more repetitious than accounts of the hag’s attacks on humans. Nonetheless, cows and horses had individual names, which gave them an identity and a personality,⁹¹ and the farm tools

⁸⁹ NFS Bøym IV:133 Sogn og Fjordane, Norway 1930–31.

⁹⁰ Forsblom (1917:114) Österbotten, Finland.

⁹¹ Dahlstedt (1991:22).

and activities associated with caring for the animals and the work with them had a powerful cultural resonance. Many concrete symptoms caused by infection, malnutrition, neglect or ignorance were explained as a result of the animals being listless or having been furtively milked in the night or ridden by the hag. For other complaints there were various compounds of the word *sot* (sickness)—*blodsot* (passing blood), *vattusot* (dropsy)—but also more abstract explanations for the sickness of the animals: evil, destruction, “shots” and so on.

The *mara* and the milk-stealing *bjära* are the two beings most commonly mentioned in connection with the diseases of horses and cattle. Whereas other beings associated with livestock—the *vittra* (wight), the *tomte* (brownie), the underground people and others—live their own lives, both the *mara* and the *bjära* are sent out by some person in the neighbourhood, implying that individual malice lay at the root of the attacks; ideally, this could be detected and revealed.

When the livestock became sick, considerable economic value was at stake. A horse commanded a high price, and a cow made a vital contribution to the household with her milk. Just as important as the economic values were the figurative ones. Of all the farm animals, the horse was particularly vulnerable to the hag. “The horse was often subjected to unpleasantness from the hag. She plaited its mane so that it was almost impossible to unravel it again.”⁹² The following is also from the very south of Sweden:

The farmhands at Bjersgård sometimes spoke of how, when they came in the morning to groom the horses, the manes and tails were plaited so tight that it took great toil to unravel them. They said it was the nightmare hag who had ridden the horses during the night and plaited the horsehair.⁹³

She would also ride them until they were covered in sweat. The animals’ symptoms resembled those that affected humans, and they always appeared at night; they became restless and sweaty and, when morning came, afflicted horses were unable to work. Cows could likewise be dripping with sweat, and sometimes it was said that the animals lost their hair, developing bald patches.

In certain parts of Scandinavia a plait in the horse’s mane was interpreted as something positive. In the Norwegian tradition these elflocks,

⁹² LUF 466:696 Skåne, Sweden 1921.

⁹³ LUF 3322:2 Skåne, Sweden s.d. [probably 1932].

attributed to the male *nisse* (*nisseflette*) or the female *tusse* (*tusseflette*), can be a positive sign that the brownies are looking after the horse. The plait is a mark of their affection. In exceptional cases the plaits left by the hag have been interpreted in this way too. A record from Jämtland in northern Sweden mentions that the plait was a sign that the hag brought good fortune to the farm.⁹⁴ This idea is probably inspired by neighbouring Norway. This ought to be mentioned, but the interpretation is marginal in the context, since it is far outnumbered by the records describing the hag's plaits as a sign of illness.⁹⁵

The fact that the horse is a particular object of the hag's attacks is part of the sexual conflict. The horse is one of man's oldest workmates, who pulls the plough with which he tills the soil; this gives it a strong masculine value, representing potency and force. The nightmare hag comes from a suprahuman demonic world beyond the everyday human world, and she threatens the farmer as both a Christian man and a breadwinner. In 1907 a man on Zealand told a collector from the Danish Folklore Archive:

I have observed how the hag also rode horses, but only geldings (not mares) [...] but in the morning it [the mane] was braided in the most amazing plaits, and as a rule the horse was sweaty too.⁹⁶

Statements like these further accentuate the sexual charge, since the informant claims that the hag attacks only male horses.

Unlike the work with the horse, the care of the cows was a part of the women's sphere. It was the women's job to milk the animals, prepare the dairy products, keep the cowshed clean and help with calving; they also took part in the slaughter.⁹⁷ "The large amount of work with the cows obviously engendered a deeper relationship between women and cows",⁹⁸ Tone Dahlstedt writes in an essay on how proximity, tenderness and sexuality were expressed in ideas about women's encounters with *vittror*, wights that were particularly associated with animal husbandry in the north of Sweden. One of her most important conclusions is that people in rural communities had a deeper emotional relationship with their animals than has generally been assumed. Dahlstedt's study gains indirect support from evidence in the records about the hag, since such a large share of it

⁹⁴NM EU 1746 Jämtland, Sweden 1929.

⁹⁵Heurgren (1925:232).

⁹⁶DFS 24 Larsen, Frederiksborgs amt (31) Zealand, Denmark 1907.

⁹⁷Österman (1986).

⁹⁸Dahlstedt (1991:18).

concerns various ways to protect livestock from her attacks. Often the stories about the hag bear witness to desperate attempts to keep illness away from the animals by every conceivable means. In occasional cases it was reported that the hag could ride other animals other than horses and cows, but these are the exception in the material.

Accounts of ways to shield oneself against attacks by the hag make up a much larger share of the material than descriptions of the symptoms she causes or her outward appearance and it is to this field that the next section turns.

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CHAPTER 3

Protection Against the Nightmare Hag

There were numerous methods and rituals used for protection against the nightmare hag, both those only described in the legend texts and those that were performed in practice, although many of them were common in Nordic folklore and were understood as broad measures of protection not only from the hag. These ways of shielding humans and animals, and perhaps even revealing which person in the neighbourhood was the hag, make up a very large share of the archival material. It is clear that knowledge of the means of protection was both conscious and unconscious, capable of being activated on occasions when a person sensed the presence of the hag or heard talk of her. Several prophylactic methods are based on conceptual analogies and can be rather intricately constructed, while simpler and more widespread variations of these methods are the apotropaic devices placed in the way of the hag, blocking her potential points of entry into a bedroom or a stable. The many different methods have to do with the different causal explanations people had for the nature and origins of the nightmare hag. In cases where the legends present recommended defence measures, it is not unusual that they are communicated to the victim by a mentor who has been asked for advice, someone supposed to have special knowledge not possessed by ordinary folk. The picture of the hag contains a complex of notions with ramifications concerning good and evil, sexuality, sickness, the economy and more. Texts that superficially appear to deal only with the animals' health are also invested with such conceptions.

Accounts of folk medicine in agrarian society show that the hag was perceived as a reality, and most folklore collectors encountered numerous variants of measures designed to protect against her visitations; indeed, an estimate shows roughly half of the material consists of protective advice and remedies.¹ The methods for guarding humans and animals are very similar, with the same images and objects recurring. The themes in stories of ghosts and the returning dead who violently squeeze people during the night, as we have seen, resemble those in records mentioning the hag, and, likewise, methods for protecting oneself are more important than descriptions of the oppressive figure.²

An alternative method for categorizing material about the nightmare hag could have been to distinguish between cause, protection and cure. It proved, however, to be impossible to separate the latter two, as the ideas are indissolubly related. Several of the methods function in three stages, since they protect, expose and punish simultaneously: a magical, three-step method that is based on an absolute analogy between the figure of the nightmare hag and the human body of the person who goes hag-riding. If the nightmare hag's body is injured in any way during the night, corresponding injuries are seen on the body of the guilty person the following morning, and are thus at once a physical punishment and a visible stigma shaming the person who, according to the text, is to blame. The actual idea of not only protecting against the hag, but also exposing and punishing, is linked to conceptions of witchcraft in a much more explicit way than in most of the rest of the texts about the hag. In many of the accounts it is as important to expose the hag as to stop her.

Reichborn-Kjennerud observes that “[t]he recommendations against the hag mostly come from people who have words that can help against witchcraft, and the primary thing here is the power of words, iron and blood”.³ In early research on the nightmare hag, scholars took a keen interest in curative and preventive measures, and sources from northern Sweden and Swedish-speaking Finland has been examined in certain studies that have placed emphasis on methods used to shield against the hag.⁴ Mention must again be made here of the great work done by Valter

¹ Forsblom (1917b:117ff.); FSF 1927 VII:5:611ff.; Björkquist (1934); Reichborn-Kjennerud (1943: IV:149ff.).

² Klintberg (1973:24).

³ Reichborn-Kjennerud (1943: IV:149).

⁴ Forsblom (1917a, b); Björkquist (1934). It is interesting to compare these with the ways of guarding against “shots” from different senders, as described by Honko (1959:233f.).

W. Forsblom, since he not only collected large amounts of material but also analysed how it was related to other performances in folk medicine.

The various defences against the hag are communicated through different modes of expression which a researcher can divide into different categories. For the people who wished to avert the threat of the hag, however, there were no such absolute dividing lines, and in occasional records it can be difficult to contrast the content with the expression. As implied above, the organization of the material is intended as an attempt to make a huge corpus manageable in terms of analysis. A basic division has been chosen that codes the material according to whether expressions can be distinguished between operational and verbal: what people do and what people say to avoid the hag. Within these two groups the categorization is based on the content of the texts, but it must be stressed once again that one record can contain both details of what was done and stories about what the informant had heard could be done, along with charms and other verbal expressions. Did people always put their accounts of preventive measures into practice? Perhaps the farmer himself just nailed up a page from the almanac, but he could testify in long stories to how other people had suspended ingenious constructions built from scythes, on which the nightmare hag was found hanging in the morning. This material can be regarded in several ways, but it is important to remember that the stories of protective measures refer both to customs that really were performed and to actions described in the form of legend.

A ritualized act can serve as a concrete way to obstruct the nightmare hag. Hanging up a scythe so that she would cut herself and die could be thought to have a practical effect. At the same time, steel is a powerful image in folk belief and ethnomedicine. For the individual behaving in this way, it is one and the same action; however, this behaviour can be divided into two levels, one operative and one figurative. It does not seem improbable that the two methods operate simultaneously at the level of both text and reality. When studying the folklore records for methods of gaining protection against the hag, one finds that a coherent weave of principles and actions with the same pattern constantly appears in different contexts. One is struck by the serious way in which these, to us, remarkable customs are described; yet, it must be remembered that the hag was perceived as a real threat to mental well-being and to the economic value that livestock represented (Fig. 3.1).

The narratives about the nightmare hag and the apotropaic ritual performances are remarkably violent; the nightmare hag is often defeated by



Fig. 3.1 A small snake placed in a drilled hole in a threshold of a barn in Närke, Sweden (NM 0223480). In a parallel hole a lump of iron pieces were placed; both items were supposed to give general protection against all kinds of evil that could enter the barn and cause illness or the cows' milk to dwindle

means of physical force, cutting herself on a scythe or being stopped with knives and steel. This aggression can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, it was aimed at a female being with sexual overtones, and, therefore, ultimately at the free expression of female sexuality, which, in rural Scandinavia, as in all communities, had distinct social boundaries and rules; secondly, the violence also demonstrates how seriously the beliefs were held. The threat from the hag was so great that it could only be stopped through equally vigorous action.

A scheme of the protective measures that were thought to be effective against the hag is presented below; it is a counterpart to the scheme showing the forms assumed by the hag. The categories make no distinction between protection for humans and protection for animals; as they often coincide, any such division would add nothing to the analysis. One can clearly see the difference between the analytical framework and the local worldview in the ways of guarding oneself or the livestock against the hag. Patterns of powerful images such as fire, steel, pentagrams and all the other protective methods are closely linked to everyday work and the body. Things are intimate and palpable: knives and tools, sweat, urine and other human exudations.

A distinction between protective performances and words is made. The actions include putting steel, birds of prey and fire in the path of the nightmare hag so that she will hurt herself. These are all strong cultural imaginaries as well as concrete threats: lacerating, burning or damaging. Other things that warded off the hag were printed texts nailed to the wall or signs formed in some way, usually comprising a symbol of Christian origin. These actions should not, however, be interpreted in excessively pious terms; they rather highlight the hag's association with the Devil. Protection included acts where a reaction on the hag's part was expected, such as frightening her with her own mirror image or pointing one's shoes away from the bed.

OBJECTS AND PERFORMANCES GIVING PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

metals

steel: implements, sharp-edged tools
silver, mercury, lead

fire

birds

birds of prey, magpies, crows

the printed word

"the word of God", sheets from the hymnbook, catechisms
calendars

signs

crosses and other Christian symbols, pentagrams

garments

aprons, trousers, underwear

human exudations

urine, sweat, saliva

foul-smelling substances

sulphur

hag-bushes

hag-stones

turning shoe tips away from the bed towards the door

mirrors

THE SPOKEN WORD GIVING PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

Readings**Charms**

Giving the nightmare hag an impossible task

The reading person challenges the hag

Word and action

Direct confrontation

Identifying the hag with the Devil

Turning the hag onto someone else with the aid of charms

Formulaic sentences in longer texts

“Come back in the morning and ask for something I don’t have!”

OBJECTS AND ACTIONS PROVIDING PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

Certain ritual acts and signs—together or individually—could counteract the hag: drawing a cross or a pentagram above the bed or the animals’ stalls warded off her attacks. All the charms and apotropaic ritual acts involved an active counter to the threat. This meant that a person who dared, or who had the knowledge, could take action against the magic on its own terms, using its own logic. The directness of these acts and addressing the *mara* would have provided an intense sense of presence. This can only have contributed to confirming the place of the hag in the worldview of folk belief for those who witnessed how a charm was pronounced or a ritual performed.

A pattern of images is repeated in the protective measures against the hag, which are not random. In an article Forsblom wrote on rituals and reparative actions (*omlagningar*) in 1917, he notes some reflections on the meaning of performance that are strikingly modern:

[O]ne also has to make oneself thoroughly familiar with the different reparative methods or, in other words, with the *traditional folk customs* used for curing sickness. In this respect the magical folk medicine offers a rich and invaluable source of observations. For as sure as a custom once arose from an—albeit primitive—combination of logical thinking, and as sure as the practice has survived through the ages and can be found in folk custom,

when one possesses a sufficiently large comparative body of customs one can surely detect many of the primitive thoughts and concepts in which this practice, this custom, originated. The more deeply one can penetrate this material, the more clearly one should be able to distinguish the different layers of folk beliefs from each other. It should be possible to find in the oldest stratum of folk belief a consistency, a regular way of thinking, a primitive philosophy prevailing, and one should be able to discern certain fundamental principles according to which this thinking was translated into action and has generated practices and customs which have been passed down from generation to generation until our time.⁵

Although Forsblom, with his evolutionistic perspective, believes that the consistency and the logic in folk medicine can be found in “the oldest stratum”, it is important to see that he respects the actual mental construct and does not attempt to explain it away rationalistically. Folk medicine, according to Forsblom, has its own imperative logic, as introduced in the previous chapter. Ideas about the nightmare hag are also logical and coherent in the sense that they follow their own premises.

The question of who performed the protective acts is difficult to answer from the archival material. Both the concrete recommendations which we know to have actually been performed and the measures that may only have been talked about were simple and uncomplicated. It seems as if most of the practices were available to everyone and there was always a reasonable possibility for anyone to perform them. Many of the physical measures used as protection against the hag were expressed in both action and discourse. People put up steel, protective in itself, but they also arranged it in the form of a cross. The act as such created a picture. Prophylactic objects can be assigned to all three categories of protection: a physical action is performed when an object is placed somewhere strategically defensive; in figurative terms it then becomes an obstacle to the hag; and it can become verbal by being combined with uttered words. Many different kinds of objects were used against the hag. If we enumerate them, they constitute a catalogue of things that were believed to have power to combat witchcraft and disease in Nordic folk belief as a whole, because few objects were exclusively recommended as protection against the nightmare hag. The most common measures can be ordered under the headings below.

⁵ Forsblom (1917b:117ff.), Österbotten, Finland.

STEEL AND METAL AS PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

One of the most common forms of protection by far was steel.⁶ Steel is a cultural image of strength and power, and as such offered equal resistance to the nightmare hag. It is durable, permanent and used for weapons and tools. Objects of steel are strong and unambiguous images, widely employed in conceptions of vernacular religion and folk medicine, thus warding off all kinds of beings and forces. Not least of all, steel protected weak and vulnerable infants and animals. “So that the hag will not gain power over the horse, you should hang a sickle above it.”⁷ One could set up protective objects above the bed, the stall or the cowshed door: steel and silver in particular, metals in general. The widespread practice of stopping evil with steel is vigorously expressed in legends registered in the archives under the motif heading “Dead on the Scythe” in which a farmer or his farmhand hangs a sharpened scythe above the horse’s back to keep the nightmare hag away, but is himself found dead the following morning, mortally wounded by the scythe. In Dalsland the following was taken down in 1932: “There was an old man who hung scythes around the horse to protect the horse from the nightmare hag. In the morning the farmer himself was hanging there on the scythe.”⁸

Everyday objects were used most, with the steel in knives and tools being considered particularly effective. There are numerous stories of sharp-edged tools and knives, preferably laid in a cross or set in a wall, stuck onto a bed-end or placed above a stall. The same was done with all manner of implements: scissors, sickles, scythes and horseshoes. Coins were placed in a horse’s muzzle,⁹ or a horseshoe found in the ground was nailed up on the wall.¹⁰ Coins (especially of silver), mercury and lead are all commonly used in general folk medicine.

⁶FSF 1919 VII:1:526ff.; Ambrosiani (1922); Backman (1927:29ff.); Danielsson (1930–32: II:127ff.); Björkquist (1934:55). For an overview of steel as a substance charged with power, see Tillhagen (1981).

⁷NFS Bugge VI:215 Oppland, Norway 1901.

⁸IFGH 2978:22 Dalsland, Sweden 1932.

⁹FSF 1927 VII:5:530.

¹⁰NFS Krogh XXII:33 Akershus, Norway 1931.

A fascinating example of how the methods practised were viewed by the authorities is shown by a witchcraft case from 1755 found thanks to Ilmar Aren's excerpts from witchcraft cases in the National Archives, copies of which are kept in the Nordic Museum:

Extract from the judgement book of Stranda Hundred Court held at the statutory court in Ålem on 4 October 1755, in the presence of the usual Hundred Panel.

The County Sheriff, the well-respected Bengt Elwing, had summoned and charged the farmer Håkan Swensson of Hammarglou for having practised superstition [*föröfwat widskiepelse*], in that, when moving from the croft of Holkiärr Frelsse, he had chopped out a piece of the barn's threshold and taken it away with him, for which a statutory fine is prescribed.

The defendant is present, 26 years old, and voluntarily acknowledges that, as he has heard tell, what was to be done when the *mara* rides the livestock, that accidentally broken-off points of knives were stuck into the byre threshold, and therefore, as the *mara* had ridden his oxen a great deal, although he had previously tied linen on them and it had not helped, and they were instead sweaty every morning, he struck such broken-off knife points into the threshold, but it was to no avail; and when he moved from Holkiärr, he chopped this piece of wood out of the threshold to take with him, but has since brought it back and put it in its former place. Says that he does not know anything about it, only heard old women, whom he will not name, say that this would be good, for then no nightmare hag would enter the barn or milk his cows.

An inquiry found that Håkan Swensson has not previously been caught doing anything like this or been accused of it, nor has he had any reputation for the like.¹¹

Håkan Swensson was fined, nothing worse. The records of his trial show how he tried different ways to protect his oxen. First he tied linen¹² on them, and when that did not help, he hammered tips of "regret-steel" (a blade used by the owner in a way he later regretted) into the threshold. When he moved he took that part of the threshold

¹¹NM EU Quoted after Ilmar Aren's transcripts in the Nordic Museum's folklore collection, from Göta Hovrätts arkiv, Handlingar rörande trolldom och annan vidskepelse 3, 1755–1764.

¹²Tillhagen (1986:16ff.).

with him, but when brought to court he sought to explain it all away as something he had been advised to do by old women.

There is a certain difference between when the steel is intended to ward off the nightmare hag and when it is meant to hurt her. In the latter case an analogy is assumed to prevail between the nocturnal body of the hag and her human body. The former can apply to any demonic being:

Besides the arrangements for the brownies (*tomte*), on Christmas Eve you also had to fix things for the horses so that the hag would not take them and ride them to exhaustion. That's why they put a sharp scythe blade up over the stable door. If the blade was bloody in the morning, the *mara* had been out with the horses but had cut herself on the sharp steel.¹³

Christmas Eve recurs in the texts about the nightmare hag as an occasion when many strange things could happen. The text affirms to the listeners that the method was certain to bring results; if there was blood on the scythe, it was the hag who had cut herself and bled. Although it may seem cumbersome to us, the practice of positioning large tools for protection seems to have persisted long after Håkan Swensson appeared in court. There was a report from 1930s Skåne of a man born in 1855 who had narrated the following:

There was an old man in Kvesarum who had never been married and lived alone in his cottage. He had the notion that the hag came to him at night, and to protect himself he had put knives, axes, and other tools around his bed. It was the steel that kept the hag away. I often went there when I was a boy and I have seen it myself many times.¹⁴

The old man seems to have been particularly vulnerable to the hag because he had never been married; as the informant says, "He had the notion"—thereby indicating a certain scepticism on the speaker's part. It could also be dangerous to handle the protective steel. One man, according to a record from Småland, took a knife to bed to guard himself against the hag, "But he cut a big gash in his own scrotum."¹⁵ This story was

¹³ ULMA 18:65 Västergötland, Sweden 1909.

¹⁴ LUF 3010:4 Skåne, Sweden 1931.

¹⁵ LUF 4708:2 Småland, Sweden 1933.

doubtless told not only to teach people that knives could be dangerous, but also to show that the hag was not to be taken lightly. A similar motif is encountered in the “Dead on the Scythe” legends: instead of being injured herself, the hag outwits the person who puts out the sharp implement, such as a hackle, turning it around on her victim. Or from southwest Finland: “Against the hag people put the hackle on the cow’s back with the points upwards, but it often happens that the nightmare hag maliciously turns the hackle with the points downwards.”¹⁶ A story like this differs on one point from other narratives about the nightmare hag: apart from the narrative gain of the surprise ending, the person does not overcome the suprahuman being but is instead subjected to its vengeance, a feature that also occurs in the material about the brownie (*tomte*). The hag does not always accept the role as object of the actions; she acts herself and counters the effect of the protective measures. Johan Törner writes in a note from the mid-eighteenth century: “One man sought a remedy against her like this: he took a hackle and placed it on his stomach, but she knew better and turned it round on the subject.”¹⁷

FIRE AS PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

Fire, like steel and weapons, is a physically harmful prophylactic.¹⁸ It also has the same dual properties: it is supposed to safeguard the user and injure the hag. Yet it is both a tool and a hazard: both heat and light, but also the risk of burning oneself. Working as a metaphor in the narratives, the glow of the fire gave protection against beings that could not bear light because it turned them to stone or, as in the case of the nightmare hag, transformed them into humans again when dawn came. A man from central Sweden in 1935 explained:

Grandfather got the hag and he saw a black dog that jumped up on to his chest. The dog “sucked itself fast” so that Grandfather was near dying. But when Grandfather got free he went for the knife and hewed the bed board

¹⁶SLS 202 I:261 Nyland, Finland 1909–10.

¹⁷Törner (ed. Wikman) (1946:104), Småland, Sweden.

¹⁸Backman (1927:34f.).

with it. Before he lay down in the evening he put “heat” around the lock and around the bed, and then the “hag” did not attack him anymore.¹⁹

With “heat”, a name for fire, Grandfather drew a circle around the lock, the hag’s presumed placed of entry. The performance is simple but with a distinct significance. The circle is both an image of healing and a highly charged boundary marker. When a circle is completed, evil cannot possibly pass.

More or less complex rituals with fire could be performed as protection against the hag. In one report it was said that if a glowing coal was dropped between the shirt and the body, it was thought to protect against most kinds of evil attack.²⁰ A slightly more sophisticated version is presented in the following narrative:

There is a story from Härjedalen about an old man who was badly harassed by the hag and was advised by a witch man to whittle a stick and ask his wife to light it when he was being ridden by the hag. The next time this happened the woman did as she was told and then saw a piece of down in one corner of the old man’s mouth. She set fire to it and then the old man got well, but the next morning a woman on one of the neighbouring farms had half of her hair burnt away. That woman had previously been the old man’s girlfriend.²¹

Besides containing a description of fire as a protective agent, this legend has several of the most common ingredients in a hag narrative: the mentor, “a witch man” (*trollkarl*) whose knowledge provides the solution, and the hag who appears as a feather resting on the man’s mouth. The latter, and the account of the hag’s hair burning, reinforces the sexual element in the legend. As in most analogy texts, the old girlfriend receives her punishment.

Documents from Swedish-speaking Finland say that a cow could be protected from the hag by setting fire to a broom and letting the sparks fall on the cow’s back.²² Power was ascribed not just to the fire and the sparks, but also to the ashes. In another record furthermore, a woman states

¹⁹ IFGH 3627:53 Värmland, Sweden 1935.

²⁰ FSF 1919 VII:1:531; Ågren (1964:39, 50).

²¹ Quoted after Björkquist (1934:55f.).

²² FSF 1919 VII:1:508, 512; Danielsson (1930–32 II:134f.).

The mistress of the house gets undressed and stands under the cow's head; then she puts the linen cloth on the animal's back and strokes it three times from the tail to the head. (A charm should also be spoken, but the informant refused to communicate it.)²³

With such dramatic advice, comprising not only protective substances but also the nakedness of the woman and her striking gestures, it almost turns into a legend in its own right.

NAILING BIRDS OF PREY AND MAGPIES TO THE WALL GIVES PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

A very special, but common, method for protecting oneself against the hag was to nail up a dead raptor, usually an owl or a hawk, above the stable door.²⁴ Magpies and crows could also be hung up, as noted in a record from Oppland. "They also used to hang up a magpie in the stable for that kind of witchcraft [*marå*]"²⁵ Forsblom, who, it will be remembered, took photographs during his collecting trips, took the photo, reproduced here, of an owl nailed up above a stable door; this was claimed to give protection against the hag (Fig. 3.2).

Since ancient times there has been a general belief in Europe that dead owls and raptors can deter illness and demons, as the latter were often pictured, in the European context, in the guise of birds, who can move around quickly in the air and are difficult to get at.

In Olaus Magnus's major work from 1555 on the history of the Nordic peoples, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, there is a woodcut (see below) depicting a man leading his horse from a stable. A bird of prey is nailed up above the stable door, but there is no comment on this in the text. In a later chapter, however, Olaus Magnus writes: "A dead long-eared owl is often hung up in the stable above the horses, which is believed to protect them from illness."²⁶ We may reasonably assume that this was a not uncommon medieval practice for safeguarding horses from diseases caused by destructive forces, otherwise the motif in the woodcut would not have been left without comment. Further, it is not contradicted by other texts about magic deeds so the prophylactic method evidently survived. The sight of the bird's dead body hanging there undeniably

²³ SLS 215:55 Österbotten, Finland 1912–13.

²⁴ Heurgren (1920:154ff.); Tillhagen (1978:202, 231).

²⁵ NFS Hermundstad VI:37 Oppland, Norway 1932–33.

²⁶ Olaus Magnus (1996–98 19:48).

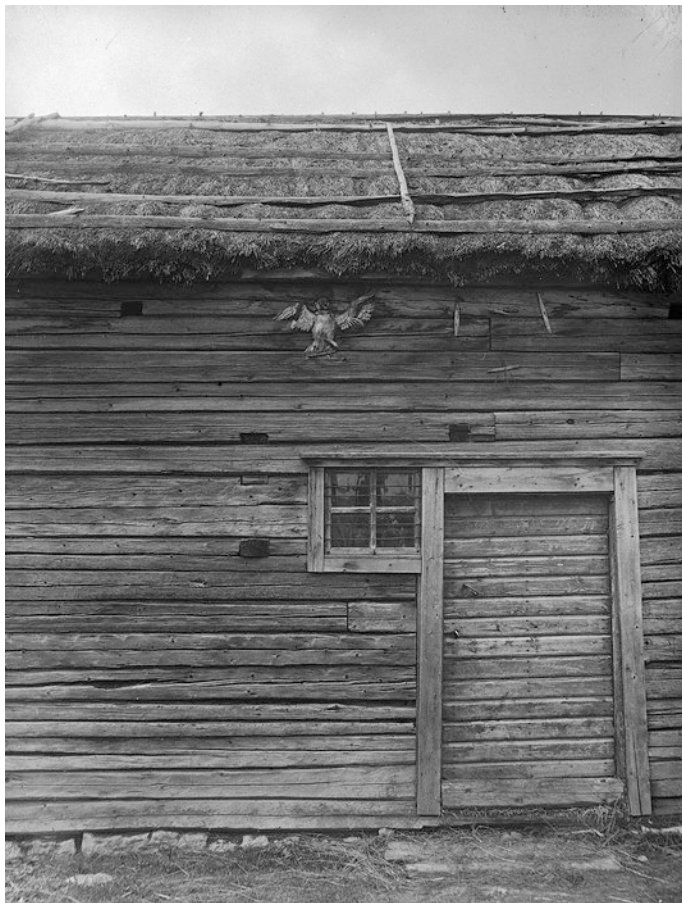


Fig. 3.2 An owl nailed up over the stable door of farmer Mårten Jofs, Vörå, Österbotten, Finland, 1916 (SLS 267:16). (Photo: Valter W. Forsblom)

produces a very strong image of how concrete the threat from the hag was felt to be (Fig. 3.3).

Flying birds of the air often serve as representations of the soul in contrast to earthly life, and their kinship with the angels is emphasized. There do not, however, appear to be any such allusions in the birds associated with conceptions of the hag, despite the special ideas about the soul expressed through this being. It is only exceptionally that the hag herself

takes the form of a bird. Rather, we find birds associated with apotropaic acts. In this respect, Nordic folk belief does not follow the continental iconographic pattern in which the demon has the form of a bird. Thus, nailing up the birds, such as magpies and raptors, should perhaps be interpreted as a figurative act. Only a magical sign of equal strength can stop the nightmare hag. This practice appears to have been very strong in the Nordic countries, and still today older people can remember lifeless birds crucified over the doors of barns and stables. The raptors that were nailed to walls are birds of superior strength which, by analogy with the nightmare hag, rob people of their vigour and health. They function as representations of the protective remedy in the narratives of the hag. The basis of the imagery is the bird which injures and kills, while the figure is the idea that it is as dangerous as the hag.

There are also local interpretations of the imagery of the nailed-up birds. A common understanding is that the bird frightens the hag away or that the hag chooses to ride the bird instead, but the powerful image also gives rise to many other explanations. “Other people believed that that the

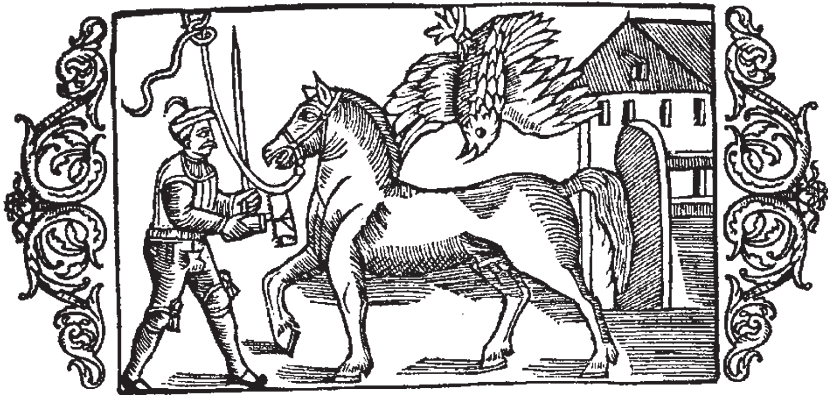


Fig. 3.3 A bird of prey nailed above the stable door as an apotropaic artefact against the attack of the nightmare hag. This woodcut comes from Olaus Magnus's work *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* printed in Rome in 1555. Here the author presents the history and living conditions of the Nordic peoples, with natural conditions, folk beliefs and warfare included among the variety of topic. The scene from the sixteenth century woodcut is strikingly similar to Valter W. Forsblom's photograph from 1916 (Fig. 3.2)

hag could not do her mischief until she had counted the feathers on the bird, while others saw the nailed-up bird with the outstretched wings as a protective symbolism of the Christian cross.”²⁷

THE PRINTED WORD GIVES PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

The power of the word in Nordic vernacular religion has already been mentioned in connection with the medieval material. This chiefly applied to the spoken word, which was also effective against the hag. Yet the practice of nailing up pages from the Bible, the hymn book or the catechism also figured among the operational devices protecting against the hag. The printed word had high social status that gave the written text a value of absolute truth, especially printed matter containing the word of God, which gave the sheet of paper twice the power.

The hymn book and the catechism were of enormous significance as folk literature. They were more widespread than any other books among the people, and the custom of the clergy to hold catechetical examinations in the home confirmed their status. Indeed, the social significance probably gave the pages as much power as the religious content. Lennart Björkquist claims that “hanging up sheets from some religious book” is solely a northern tradition, noting, “the custom seems to be wholly confined to Norrland, and there to the northernmost coastal regions”.²⁸ This is not correct, as the practice is attested to elsewhere in Sweden and also in Finland. It was more common to nail up sheets from the hymn book than from the Bible, probably because the former was more widely spread and less expensive. A woman from central Sweden born in 1860 attested that:

He kept an old hymn book in the cowshed. It didn’t matter so much that not all the hymns were in it, for I think that people believed that it would have an effect even if it was only a pair of covers. If you took a rag with you when you went to communion and wiped your mouth or spat into it after having taken communion and then put it in your bed, you would not be hurt by the hag.²⁹

²⁷ Björkquist (1934:58).

²⁸ Björkquist (1934:62).

²⁹ IFGH 3965:8 Värmland, Sweden 1937.

The clergyman's role was both social and religious. In *trolldom* imaginaries the power of the priest over the written word is of crucial significance. In many texts the priest functions as the link with magic, acting both to ward off evil and to communicate the special knowledge which he brought from outside, from the university and the learned world. This, and his literacy more generally, gave him a strong social position which he used to act both inside and outside the rural community.

When someone is tormented in his sleep, wanting to cry out but not being able, he is ridden by the hag, that is, by someone who sleepwalks and lies on top of him and chokes him. This hag comes in either through the keyhole in the door or through the chimney if the damper is open. Once the hag has come in and has started riding someone, it is dangerous to close the keyhole or the chimney, for then it can happen that the hag can't find any other opening to get out through, and in anger she can try to tear all the fire and ashes out of the fireplace [and throw them] over the whole room. But a priest who is very strong in his faith in God can force her to go out through a hole stuck with a pin in the cross of the window lead. The nightmare hag is invisible to everyone except a priest with a strong faith.³⁰

Protective objects that were at least as effective as hymn books and catechisms were calendars and almanacs. The importance of the almanac should not be underestimated in relation to the Bible and the hymn book. Hilding Pleijel has drawn attention to the significance of its function as a "guide and reminder", yet, with its references to the cycle of biblical texts and prayers in the ecclesiastical year, it also worked as a book of devotions.³¹ In this way it had a dual meaning in a life of piety, as religious guidance and as an effective agent against witchcraft. Folk belief confirms the power of God's word, just as the use of texts associated with the Church for this purpose strengthens the explanatory model of folk belief.

DRAWING SIGNS AGAINST THE HAG

Drawing a sign on the wall of the cattle stall or on the end of the bed was a simple action but one with a lasting effect. Many Christian symbols, particularly crosses painted with tar, occur profusely in the archival

³⁰ Wallensteen (1899:8) Uppland, Sweden.

³¹ Pleijel (1942:9f.).



Fig. 3.4 One of Valter W. Forsblom's informants, Kajas Ann, in Terjärv, Österbotten, in 1917 (SLS 285:14). In her hand she holds an object with a pentagram inscribed within a circle. Kajas Ann is said to be able to ward off the lady of the forest and other dangers by means of the sign. (Photo: Valter W. Forsblom)

material.³² "On Maundy Thursday you are supposed to tar a cross in front of each beast and say 'He who tars will have, and he who has will tar' for each cow. Finally you have to paint a cross on the cowshed door too."³³ The form of the cross recurs in many different contexts: for instance, the recommendation to arrange steel in a cross. Among other signs we often find the pentagram, the five-pointed star (Fig. 3.4).

Records from Ostrobothnia document a custom not encountered anywhere else. People drew pictures in chalk to guard against the nightmare hag. "To protect the cows from the hag, people used to draw human figures in chalk or charcoal over the door of the cowshed."³⁴ One could also

³² NFS Skirbekk I:31 Hedmark, Norway 1923–29.

³³ SLS 190:15 Nyland, Finland 1909.

³⁴ SLS 215:54 Österbotten, Finland 1912–13.

draw a picture of a bird, which evidently had the same function as the nailed-up birds.³⁵

OBSTRUCTING THE HAG WITH MALE AND FEMALE GARMENTS

Turning one or more female garments inside out was a protective act in itself, one used against all kinds of witchcraft. There are numerous recorded variants of how to behave with one's own clothes or someone else's: that could be, sexually charged garments, especially trousers or underwear, were commonly said to provide protection against the hag. This was explained by a farmer in Småland in 1927:

Johannes of Östergården told me that Hedda (his wife) once got sick, night after night at exactly the same time. It was presumably the hag who had ridden her. But he took her underwear and hung it up at a crossroads, and it hadn't hung there long, no more than a couple of days, when one hole after another appeared in it. You see, that was what worked.³⁶

This action evidently helped, because the hag aimed her attacks against the garment. It can be noted in this account that it is the husband who acts while the female victim is passive, which is an unusual scenario in the traditions of the nightmare hag, where it is almost always the victim him- or herself who launches the counteraction. Several other texts refer to a situation in which a farmhand is advised by a friend or mentor on how to get rid of the hag, but it is the victim who actually performs the crucial act. It is rare that other people's concern is of any assistance against the hag; direct confrontation is needed to avert the threat.

To achieve the desired result, either the clothes should be turned inside out or else they had a protective effect in themselves. Trousers could be laid in a cross—"your trousers in a cross on the pile of clothes"³⁷—to guard against the hag. An alternative approach is a response to the portrayal of the Devil's realm in theological literature as the exact opposite of God's creation. Murals in the churches also depicted everything to do with Satan as a world turned upside down. It is therefore not surprising that turning clothes the wrong way around helped against the hag. Just as

³⁵ SLS 232:82 Österbotten, Finland 1914.

³⁶ LUF 745:72f. Småland, Sweden 1927.

³⁷ NFS Trantum I:39 Akershus, Norway 1943.

with other ways of shielding against the hag, the protection had to be equally dangerous, equally threatening, or—as in this case—equally wrong and topsy-turvy. The hag remained the reverse of the human category.

HUMAN EXUDATIONS GIVE PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

According to folk belief, there was a direct link between all products of the human body—sweat, saliva, blood, urine and excrement, as well as nails and hair—and the person from whom they came. Using these substances was a way to gain power over another person, since the exudations contain a concentrate of the person's strength. The greatest body of sources claiming that these substances help against the nightmare hag comes from Swedish-speaking Finland,³⁸ either because these practices were more closely associated with witchcraft, or because we have more detailed records of the region from Forsblom and others. Anything with a strong or bad smell was perceived as effective against the hag. The explanation that is mentioned in connection with this is that a disgusting odour is strong and charged with power in more than one sense. All these exudations were regarded as equally obnoxious. From Nagu comes the statement that it helps to put up “a sweaty garment (especially old waistcoats drenched in sweat to give off the smell of people, whose proximity the hag fears) and several other objects. Another cure is to smear the animal with human excrement.”³⁹

A Norwegian example claims that urine helps. You had to “get a little boy to piss on her [the cow's] back”.⁴⁰ Menstrual blood was another powerful substance used in folk medicine. “For a cure against the nightmare hag, a piece of female linen stained with sanguine menstrosus was thrown over the animals tormented by the hag.”⁴¹ Spitting was a simple but symbolically charged gesture.⁴² Sulphur, with its pungent smell, was also believed to drive the hag away.

³⁸ FSF 1919 VII:1:506ff.; FSF 1927 VII:5:632ff.

³⁹ FSF 1919 VII:1:508.

⁴⁰ NFS A Larsen Jr VII:136 Hedmark, Norway 1924.

⁴¹ Hertzberg (1889:51).

⁴² Backman (1927:57ff.).

STOPPING THE HAG WITH A “HAG-BUSH”

There are numerous dialectal names in all the Scandinavian languages for the morbid excrescences that can be seen on trees, especially birches, when branches and twigs grow together into large, tangled, brush-like balls. They were similar to the braids that the nightmare hag was imagined to tie in the horse's mane. Special rules applied to bringing home a hag-bush. It could not, for example, be brought along a road that had been used to transport a corpse; if that happened it immediately lost its power (Fig. 3.5).⁴³

It was recorded in central Sweden. “Outgrowths on birches, which were like balls, were hung in the stable so that she [the hag] would be afraid to fly out of the stable.”⁴⁴ “Hag-brooms” (*markvistar*) were nailed up to give protection above the stall, the stable door and so on, and informants often mention that the bundles of “hag-twigs” (*marruskor*, *marvasar*) looked like magpies' nests. In this way two ideas were linked, as the magpie was one of the birds that could be nailed up to ward off the nightmare hag. Just as the hag would be frightened away by the sight of her own face in the mirror, she would turn away when she saw the ball of twigs above the animal she wanted to attack. There are records where the informants refer not only to the similarity between a hag-bush and a magpie's nest but also to the custom of using dead magpies as protection against the nightmare hag. Many interviewees who did not have any actual knowledge of the hag say that they remember the nailed-up birds and the hag-bushes from their childhood.

A HAG-STONE HUNG FROM THE CEILING GIVES PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

A similar practice occurred in the southern parts of the region, where people hung “hag-stones” on strings from the ceiling to ward off the nightmare hag, and it was said, “you just had to take a holed stone and hang it from the ceiling above the horse, then the hag could not get power over it.”⁴⁵ These were stones with holes in the middle (Fig. 3.6).

⁴³ Kalén (1927:192) Halland, Sweden.

⁴⁴ IFGH 3814:45 Värmland, Sweden 1936.

⁴⁵ DFS 1930/1 Mortensen, Fredriksborgs amt (87) Jutland, Denmark 1921.



Fig. 3.5 A hag-broom or hag-bush from Svinhult vicarage Östergötland, Sweden (NM 112813a). The *mara* was thought to turn away when she encountered something similar to the tangles she caused herself when riding a horse

These actions do not have any of the analogical associations with the activities of the hag that the hag-bush has. Rather the cold and hard stone is the opposite of the human body.

My husband [who was not a farmer, but had served as a footman at one of the local mansions] had a hag-stone hanging from the ceiling above the bed. It was an ordinary stone but there was a round hole in it. He never slept well at night but just lay there groaning, and he got really sweaty. And he believed that that stone would help, but I didn't notice any benefit, so I got angry at it, but I still wasn't allowed to throw it out.⁴⁶

This account expresses the not uncommon sense of ambivalence of a person torn between hope and despair. It reminds us that this folklore was

⁴⁶LUF 3845:19 Skåne, Sweden 1932.



Fig. 3.6 A hag-stone from Ravlunda, Skåne, Sweden (NM 0118053). There is an apparent discrepancy between the complexity of the ritual instructions in some of the legends and charms compared to the simplicity of the acts and objects documented as used for protection against the *mara*

recorded at a time when agrarian society was breaking up, hence the considerable scepticism seen in the records.

ESCAPING THE HAG BY TURNING ONE'S SHOES

A more out-of-the-ordinary way to protect oneself was to turn one's shoes to point away from the bed when lying down for the night. It is an action that is often recommended in the material, especially that from Denmark, Norway and southern Sweden, sometimes appearing as part of a legend. The hag then has to place her feet in the same direction as the shoes and thus has to turn away from the bed. The following story was recorded on Gotland from a woman born in 1853: "The hag is cursed people who move around [at night] if they have a grudge against somebody. Then you should take off your shoes in the evening and put them with the heels under the bed and then make a cross on the door. Then no hag can get

in.”⁴⁷ In these recommendations the shoes serve as directional indications, pointing away from a person who felt threatened by the nightmare hag. “Take your shoes and put them facing towards each other under the bed,”⁴⁸ was advice on protection from the hag that Leonhard Rääf noted from southern Östergötland. Shoes were relatively precious for most people, but in terms of protective actions against the hag they are more prosaic, merely constituting part of everyday working clothes. The advice on adjusting the direction in which one’s shoes are placed can be compared with more general measures against aggression based on magic, such as turning one’s clothes inside out, and with the view of *trolldom* as a kind of topsy-turvy world: logical but completely reversed in relation to God.

The practice of reversing the direction of one’s shoes can additionally link the nightmare hag to folk erotic traditions. “Shoes are often included in love divination and in love omens, and here we probably have the same fundamental idea as with clothes, an intimacy based on the fact that shoes have absorbed the owner’s sweat”, Reichborn-Kjennerud writes in his large monograph on Norwegian folk medicine.⁴⁹ The intimacy lies in the sweat, which constitutes the same link to the person as other exudations. Shoes are always closely associated with their owners, and shoes and feet are not uncommon sexual imagery.⁵⁰

This simple action with shoes, reveals two essential features in the hag material. First, humans have power over supernatural beings through their knowledge; a person who knows that it is enough to point one’s shoes away from the bed can gain protection against the hag’s attacks. The second insight, following from this, is that the hag is easily fooled, as long as you know how, thus demonstrating the intellectual superiority of human beings.

The most common form of the advice about the shoes to appear in the legends is a very brief observation, such as, “The shoes had to be placed with the heels towards the bed, for then she [the hag] could not do any harm”, a man in Värmland claimed.⁵¹ In some cases, however, the advice is incorporated into a legend more fully, as a woman born in 1856 attests in the following record from Halland.

⁴⁷NM EU 17883:1:X Gotland, Sweden 1935.

⁴⁸Rääf (ed. Wikman) (1957:284) Östergötland, Sweden.

⁴⁹Reichborn-Kjennerud (1933: II:42).

⁵⁰Tillhagen (1989:252ff.).

⁵¹IFGH 3751:1 Värmland, Sweden 1936.

A farmhand who was often troubled at night by the hag usually heard, as he fell asleep, the hag going around wearing his clogs before she hugged him. He thought out many ways of getting rid of her. Among other things, he thought of pointing the clogs in different directions before he lay down. In this way he got rid of her.⁵²

The night and the act of falling asleep are prominent almost from the beginning of the text. The scene is the usual sleeping-place, and there are no special circumstances, just the everyday rhythm of work and rest. Yet the threat is there. What we learn about the hag is that she walks—the farmhand hears her walking in his clogs—but there is no description of her physical form. Further, although she is not corporeal, she is described as feminine and also as being overcome by cunning deeds, and “he thought out” a way to get rid of her. Here it becomes very clear that the clogs functioned as a directional indication. As the hag wore the man’s clogs, all he had to do was turn them around to escape her. The text begins by describing the farmhand as a victim of the hag, but soon the roles are reversed. The same pattern recurs frequently in the legends of the hag. She is overcome by force or outwitted, as here, becoming an object of the farmhand’s actions.

Concrete obstacles were another way to stop the hag in her path. Narratives about the stupid, easily duped hag exist in many variations, including among the charms. In the following text from the very north of Sweden, the hag is tricked into attacking a forked stick instead of the horse’s mane, indicating that analogical thinking is effective. “Oskar Engelmark’s father in Bodträskfors had learnt from a Finn that you had to take and hang up a split stick with discs of wood in between. The hag would tread there and not come any further.”⁵³ This example represents a northerly imaginary that is closer to magic thinking. To confirm the truth of the story, the informant refers to named persons and their family relationships. The man in the text learned “from a Finn” how he could become free, which is entirely in keeping with the conceptions of Finns and Sami being skilled in magic performances. The method is based on analogy: the hag would just as easily attack the forked stick as the horse’s mane.

⁵² IFGH 3714:1 Halland, Sweden 1934.

⁵³ ULMA 1835:2:7 Norrbotten, Sweden 1928.

MAKING THE HAG SEE HERSELF IN A MIRROR

Turning one's shoes in the wrong direction can be compared with another practice, that of putting up a mirror so that the hag sees herself and is frightened away by her own ugliness. In both cases it is a matter of reversing a situation and making fun of the hag, which resonates with medieval and later material about fooling and deceiving a gullible Devil.

To preserve the animals from the hag, some people in the old days used to put up a mirror over the door of the stable or the cowshed, for they thought that the hag was shaggy and diabolically ugly. When she came at night and saw her image in the mirror when she was about to sneak into the cowshed, she got so afraid that she shied away and ran off as fast as ever she could, for she was so ugly that she frightened herself.⁵⁴

A comparison can be made between the beautiful girl in the legend about the man who married the hag and the ugly hag in the quotation above, reminding us that images of the hag are far from uniform. The ugly hag who can be warded off by means of a mirror is closely related to ideas of magic, whereas the beautiful hag wife is closer to perceptions of the *mara* as a person afflicted by a curse who goes hag-riding without knowing about it. "A mirror is hung in front of the cow so that the hag will be frightened when she sees herself in the mirror."⁵⁵ The reference is not to the beautiful girl in the stories about strong thoughts, but to the hag that is so ugly that she frightens herself. Using a mirror as protection against the hag is a very common method in the records from Swedish-speaking Finland.

To sum up, the operational methods for giving protection from the hag proceed against most cases from some kind of analogical thinking. With the guidance of the powerful objects that are used, this is a hint of the danger that the hag represented to humans and animals. The hag had to be countered with something that had the same strength as she possessed herself, with things that are dangerous and disgusting, causing injury or foul smells. The threat from the hag is charged with as much power as sharp steel, as revolting as excrement. The stories about the hag show great similarities to other folk medicine and witchcraft material when it comes to both the concrete methods and objects in use. In addition, knowledge is emphasized as a human being's superior weapon.

⁵⁴NM EU 5613:823 Västergötland, Sweden 1932.

⁵⁵SLS 217:409 Nyland, Finland 1912.

THE SPOKEN WORD AS PROTECTION AGAINST THE HAG

Besides the acts and objects described above, the spoken word could also be used against the hag. The power of the word to affect reality is fundamental in magic thinking. Those who know the right formulations also have power over their surroundings, both to do harm and to protect against dangerous influences by others. The words that have power over the hag vary in complexity, ranging from advice to speak the name of Jesus when the cow has been hag-ridden to intricately constructed charms; however, the number of records describing verbal protection against the hag is much smaller than those concerning operational methods. In this section the examples are organized, first according to the type of text (readings, charms, formulaic sentences), and then the largest group, the charms, is divided according to their content.

The distinction between the different types of text means that readings are singled out, which are things with general averting power; consequently, the texts do not always mention the nightmare hag specifically. Readings are aimed directly at the symptoms of the disease and can be described as part of the general characteristics of Nordic folk medicine. On the other hand, charms, some not longer than a sentence, on the other hand, should be regarded as representations of a worldview in which magic made sense. The content and the language are usually quite complex compared to other verbal performances. With the formulaic sentences we come closer to the form ritual practices take in the legends. Like the readings, they are general in character but are aimed directly at the hag. They are part of a longer text, often a legend, and do not function independently, often constituting the climax of the legend, a resolution of the conflict with the hag. The material concerning verbal protection against the hag is not large, and sometimes there are only hints about the power of the word. Further, often the formula or the words are not cited in the record; the informant merely says that a prayer was said against the hag.⁵⁶

Readings

Most of the records concerning verbal protection against the hag contain various kinds of speech acts described by the Nordic word for “readings”. They are much less intricate than charms, often consisting solely of an

⁵⁶ ULMA 6864:2 Värmland, Sweden 1933.

exhortation to speak the name of God or the word of God in some form. This verbal ritual can be compared with the instruction—"Speak to the hag"—in legends, where the actual address, the spoken word, breaks the power of the hag and saves the hag-ridden victim. "Reading" was the folk name for this kind of verbal ritual. A man born in 1863, when interviewed in western Sweden in 1936, stated that:

I remember they spoke about whether they could read her away with the word of God. If somebody spoke the name of God over the person the "hag" used to want to get at, then she had no power. If you wrote God's word on a slip of paper and stuck it where you thought that the "hag" came in, then she could not get through.⁵⁷

In this example it appears clear that one could prolong the power of the spoken word by writing it down on paper, but the primary power lay in the ability of the speaker of the words to avert the threat. One could say (or "read", as the verb in Swedish means) the Lord's Prayer⁵⁸ or call out "In the name of Jesus!"⁵⁹ It also was also assumed that pronouncing the name of the hag-ridden person helped. The general character of the "reading" means that there are a relatively large number of variations in the utterances that could be employed against the hag.

Charms

The term "charm" is actually a literary designation for a specific genre with set rules, as with other groups of texts.⁶⁰ There is nothing in the records to suggest that there was any genre-bound content, specific to the charms against the hag, which would justify any further discussion of the definition. To consider the charms solely as a literary phenomenon would, however, mean lifting them out of their historical and social context as part of ethnomedical knowledge in which the hag was just one of many illnesses that could be countered by verbal resistance. Three concepts were central when charms were pronounced (or "read"): energy, power and faith. These components empowered the charms in regard to both genre

⁵⁷ IFGH 3893:33 Dalsland, Sweden 1936.

⁵⁸ NFS Hermundstad VI:37 Oppland, Norway 1932–33.

⁵⁹ NFS Hult I:118 Østfold, Norway 1934.

⁶⁰ Bang (1901–02); Ohrt (1917–21, 1935); Klintberg (1965, 2016); Grambo (1984); Roper (2004, 2005, 2009); Stark (2006:44ff., 89f., 414f.); Gent (2008:127ff.); Cameron (2010:50ff.); Kapaló (2011:183ff.).

and content. They were all necessary if the charm was to have the intended effect.

The power contained in a charm is an independent unit. It is neither evil nor good in itself, but has to be used within a given framework. It is the duty of the person using the energy to direct it; the purpose lies with the sender. In many stories about witchcraft there are warnings about the risk of using this energy without sufficient knowledge, or without following the instructions to the letter. The power of the word is always a matter of direction; there is a sender, there is a target, and the word is the medium.

Power resided with those who had the knowledge to heal, the “wise” ones. Insights were knowledge that was passed on orally between individuals and generations. It was in large measure general property, but more complex processes and actions were the specialist knowledge of the healers. There was also power in the disease and its presumed sender. The reading process should be regarded as a struggle between the power of the disease and that of the person with the performative qualifications; whether it succeeded depended on the strength of the latter. Meanwhile, faith had to reside in the person who received the reading of the magic, who was read over or who learned a charm. The question of faith or otherwise is a difficult problem to resolve when we are working with reconstructions after the event, but if we do not presume that the person speaking the charms at least in some sense believed in their effects, studying them would be meaningless (Fig. 3.7).

There are relatively few charms which were aimed directly at the nightmare hag, and those that are attested to make up a very small share of the recorded material. Nonetheless, they are very interesting in their composition and content.⁶¹ A characteristic of charms against the hag, and of many Nordic charms as a whole, is that they convey an emotional presence with an energy that is still striking. They are constructed in the form of direct address and confrontation, often with internal polarity or parallelism, and they have certain recurrent images. The hag is implicitly defined in the charms and the readings as a disease in humans and animals, a state caused by someone in the surroundings. In contrast, there are typically no charms

⁶¹ Several printed collections of charms against the nightmare hag exist, including Bang (1901–2:376ff.); Ohrt (1917–21: I:217); Linderholm (1917–40: II:124); FSF 1927 VII:5:611ff.; Klintberg (1965:76); Grambo (1984:109, 2014). The Norwegian *Vinjeboke* (ca. 1500) has a number of examples of how to protect horses by means of the spoken word. The symptoms are very much the same as after an attack by the night hag, but no *mara* is mentioned in the manuscript (1993:23ff.).

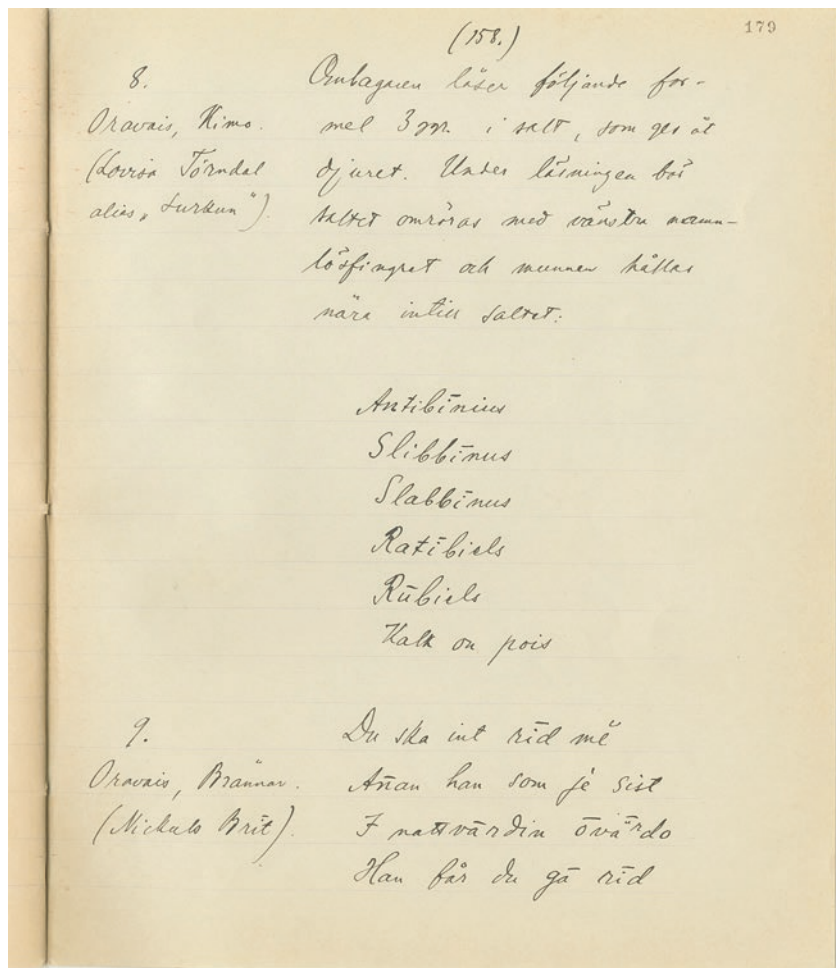


Fig. 3.7 One of Valter Forsblom's notebooks in which he transcribed his notes from the field (SLS 267:179). The concepts and the thematic outline are in principle identical with the ones used by Forsblom in Finland's svenska folkdiktning. Here he has taken down a formula and ritual instructions from the old woman known as Lurkun whom he photographed himself with in 1916 when on field-work in Ostrobothnia (se Fig. 1.2 in Chap. 1)

The record, which Forsblom indicates is against the *mara*, reads:

(continued)

or readings against werewolves, which were never regarded as a disease. Some hag charms are very general in expression and cannot be said to reflect any specific hag characteristics, as exemplified by the following description from the Swedish west coast:

There was someone who asked an old woman what she should do when the hag rode her husband. The old woman said:

“Salt and malt and cicely root
That’s the cure for you!”⁶²

Charms like this can be compared to the “mezereon legends” and were mentioned as cures for the *skogsvrå*, wights and others.⁶³ This extremely poisonous shrub played a role already in Greek mythology. Local names of the plant associate it with the Devil. It is not uncommon for performances of the recommended cures to be identical when encountering different supernatural beings. In the introduction to the volume *Svenska trollformler* (1965), Bengt af Klintberg comments on the frequency with which charms were collected and notes that the material is very unevenly distributed in different parts of Sweden. In some cases this is due to the interests of individual local collectors, and in other cases we find that different provinces largely lack any collected charms. One explanation can be sought

←
Fig. 3.7 (continued)

“The healer reads the following formula three times over salt given to the animal. During the reading the salt should be stirred and the mouth kept close to the salt:
Antibinius

Slibbins

Slabbinus

Ratibiels

Rubiels

Kalk on pois”.

The spell comprises both mock-Latin and mock-Finnish. We can recognize the Swedish words “slibb” and “slabb” pointing to smudgy and dauby things which actually stands in contrast to the pure salt. Latin, or mock-Latin, phrases are quite frequent in Nordic spells, connecting the spoken words to the ceremonies of the Church and giving the performer a certain status as an insightful person

⁶² Bergstrand (1947:118) Bohuslän, Sweden.

⁶³ Granberg (1935:183ff.).

in the opposition of the Church to what it recognized as superstition.⁶⁴ As with the material on the hag in general, it is difficult to make quantitative or geographical comparisons of the Nordic charms. Finnish charms, differ radically from those in the other Nordic countries, which often agree in detail and wording. The charms, unlike the other texts about the nightmare hag, appear to have been memorized, since they appear in a form that is bound in some sense, such as in verse, as exemplified by the following Danish charm collected by Evald Tang Kristensen. “This is what you say: ‘You, hag, why do you tear me? Do you not know that I was born with you, and you with me; I bind you like the man who bound Beelzebub.’ Say it three times.”⁶⁵ Despite this, there seems to have been scope for individual imaginaries.

The charms can be grouped into classes according to content: the hag can be given an impossible task or she can be urged to leave the house; they can be linked to specific ritual behaviour; they may suggest a direct confrontation with the hag; and she can be identified with the Devil himself. There are also examples of the use of a charm to set the hag on another person.

GIVING THE HAG AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK

The most common type of charm outlines a task that the hag cannot possibly solve.⁶⁶ This is represented in Bengt af Klintberg’s collection of Swedish charms, exemplified by a charm from Närke.

Hag, hag, mind [*Mare, mare minne*],
 you can’t stay in here
 until you have counted
 birds in the forest
 fishes in the river,
 all the oak trees,
 and God’s words.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Klintberg (1965:21).

⁶⁵ Kristensen II (1928:155).

⁶⁶ For Norwegian variants see Bang (1901–2:376ff.) and also Grambo (1984:109); for Danish variants see Ohrt (1917: I:217), and for Swedish-speaking Finland Forsblom (1917b:122), Österbotten.

⁶⁷ NM EU 786:461 Närke, Sweden 1929; also printed in Klintberg (1965:76).

In this charm the hag is given an impossible counting task which simultaneously contains a contrast between the hag and the whole of God's creation and the words in the Bible. The motif of the impossible counting assignment is also recorded in connection with occasional operational measures to protect against the hag: for instance, a person whose cow or horse was tormented by the hag was to hang up a strainer. The hag was then told to count all the holes in the strainer, which would be impossible for the hag, as we know from other records that she could only count to three or five.⁶⁸ In several places in the material about the hag we find the motif of tricking the stupid hag in order to be free. Yet, in the charm above, the moral contrast between the hag and creation is at least as important as the impossible task, demonstrating that the hag belongs to chaos and is different from created beings. Much more clearly than the actual task, the contrast confirms that the hag is a non-human being with changing bodily features.

The Norwegian charm that follows likewise gives the hag an impossible task and simultaneously puts the charm in a ritual context, thereby indicating when and where it must be pronounced in order to take effect:

“Hag, hag, mind,
if you're in here
then out you go.
All the stones stuck fast in the earth you must loosen,
and all the crooked birches you must straighten.”
This prayer should be said in the evening when you go to bed.⁶⁹

It is not unusual for a charm to be linked to instructions for acts to accompany the spoken words, as in the following:

A piece of an old herring net is tied around the neck of the horse or cow in the evening while you say:

“Untie a knot in the night!”

Just as impossible as it is for a person to untie a net knot, so it is impossible for the hag, and therefore it does not dare to appear again.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Grundtvig ed. Ellekilde (1944:388).

⁶⁹ NFS Grimstad III:61 Oppland, Norway 1932.

⁷⁰ SLS 218:41 Österbotten, Finland 1913.

There are numerous variants of the impossible task: Forsblom recorded one in which the hag is asked to count hairs, which may be compared with the hag's task of counting the feathers in the nailed-up bird.⁷¹

THE READING PERSON ORDERS THE HAG OUT

The protective method of addressing the hag, of directly confronting the evil, can also be found as an element in other stories about the hag. Forsblom notes that “menacing or conjuring charms” and “express threats” are often used as protection against “shots” of various origin.⁷² (Conceptions of the nightmare hag are so similar to those of “shots” that it is reasonable to compare them.) The actual method is based on the psychological insight which accompanies the necessity of dealing with the problem: that there is no solution without conflict. The following story was told about some lobster fishermen in Bohuslän who tried to build huts to escape the hag, but without success. “But Grandfather got the hag anyway, and then a woman came and really chased her away. She said, ‘If you are out of God then stay, but if you are out of the Devil then scat and scam!’ And then she went away again.”⁷³ Evidently the hag would go back to hell if she was “out of the Devil”.

In Ronald Grambo's collection of Norwegian charms there is one for the hag which corresponds to the charms containing counting tasks, both in its opening phrase and its listing technique. Grambo points out in a commentary that the charm type is based on a conflict between out and in.⁷⁴ It begins, “Hag, hag, mind, if you're in here, you must go out!”⁷⁵ The hag is thus directly ordered to leave. The contrast between “in” and “out”, God's world and the Devil's, is marked. The true home of the hag is never more clear than in the concentrated charms. Other variants give the hag a task that is not impossible but certainly difficult. The power of words can thus also punish the hag. Several of the Norwegian charms also mention arduous tasks or severe torments to exact revenge for the hag-riding. When a knife wrapped in a cloth was passed round the body one could say, “Call, call, hag. If you're in there then out you'll go. You shall

⁷¹ Forsblom (1917b:122) Österbotten, Finland.

⁷² Forsblom (1917a:101f.) Österbotten, Finland.

⁷³ VFF 1251:47f. Bohuslän, Sweden 1925.

⁷⁴ Grambo (1984:109, 143).

⁷⁵ NFS Bøyum II:34 Sogn og Fjordane, Norway 1929–30.

draw log and stone on your own neck bone. There you shall stand to the last judgement day.”⁷⁶ In this variant the hag is ordered to start some laborious task, but since the task is not obviously “impossible”, it is stipulated for safety’s sake that the work must continue “to the last judgement day”.

Another Norwegian charm commands the hag to drink lye.⁷⁷ This is both impossible and a punishment of the same kind as the legend motif of the hag riding the scythe.⁷⁸ The graphic descriptions of these impossible punitive tasks make the texts even more powerful.

Hag, hag, mind,
are you in here?
Out you go to the garden
in a snowstorm,
draw logs and stones
with all your bones.
That’s what you’ll have.⁷⁹

Charms that do not directly stipulate difficult tasks for the hag can instead address her in a menacing way. The person pronouncing the charm mentions the weapons that are available in the house for use as protection against her. The following was to be said in the evening when going to bed.

Hag, hag, mind,
if you’re in here
I shall strike you.
I have shears,
I have knife
I have sword
I have *Simon-svipa* here.⁸⁰

The charm outlines a list of three things made of steel: shears, knife, and sword—all conventional protective means against the nightmare hag. These are both concrete implements, weapons with which to protect oneself and the usual steel objects that guard against the hag. They are the

⁷⁶NFS Bøyum IV:B 3–4 Sogn og Fjordane, Norway 1932.

⁷⁷NFS Hermundstad VI:39 Oppland, Norway 1932–33.

⁷⁸Compare the Devil in the topsy-turvy world and the hag who is ordered to do the impossible: to drink lye, ride a scythe, or count all the trees.

⁷⁹NFS Leiro V:37 Hordaland, Norway 1929.

⁸⁰NFS Løyland 2:165 Aust-Agder, Norway 1929.

same kind of objects as those that injure or kill the hag in the analogical texts. A *Simon-svipa* (Simon-sweeper) is a hag-bush which strengthens the three steel implements. The Simon referred to is most likely Simon Magus, the sorcerer who in the Acts of the Apostles 8:9 tried to buy power from the apostles, which has given rise to the term “simony”. Reichborn-Kjennerud gives a different interpretation, observing, “*Sigmundsvepa* seems to contain one of Odin’s by-names and suggests a connection with the wild hunt.”⁸¹

In the legends I have labelled “address legends”, the person who goes hag-riding is released when she is addressed as a hag or by her name. Bengt af Klintberg has drawn attention to the parallels between these legends and the significance of the name in charms, noting that “[i]t is based on the perception in sympathetic magic of a such a close connection between name and bearer that is close to identification.”⁸² This can be exemplified by the advice to address the hag that we find in Jens Kamp’s collections. “If a person is “hag-ridden” he should call out to her by her forename, then the ‘hag’ will leave him.”⁸³

Address legends correspond to the charms in which the hag is ordered out of the house. The hag cannot put up any resistance in either case. The words pronounced have absolute power over her, as in the following description of a charm from Ångermanland given by a woman as late as 1966:

I learned this incantation against the hag from my uncle at Dyhöjden.

A dead man, Jesus Christ, and Saint Peter once met on a narrow path. “Where are you going, dead man?” “I am going to N.N. [the victim’s name is to be pronounced aloud]” “What will you do there?” “I shall ride him.” “I forbid you to do that. You shall ride on logs and buried stones through three names [Father, Son and Holy Ghost].”⁸⁴

The charm is constructed as a meeting between the hag and the two healers, Christ and Peter. This type of meeting, which Irmgard Hampp calls the confrontation between sickness and healer, has been studied in the Swedish material by Bengt af Klintberg, who points out that the healing technique is based on a dialogue that ends with Christ’s healing

⁸¹ Reichborn-Kjennerud (1927: I:44, 47).

⁸² Klintberg (1965:34).

⁸³ Kamp ed. Boberg (1943:220) Jutland, Denmark.

⁸⁴ ULMA 26236:1 Ångermanland, Sweden 1966.

words.⁸⁵ It is unusual for the nightmare hag to be identified with a ghost in a charm, but it has its counterpart, as we have seen, in other hag narratives. The evil intent is clearly declared and the scene is “a narrow path” where confrontation is inevitable. Logs and half-buried stones recur in several Norwegian charms against the hag, and it is not surprising to find them recorded from the adjacent province of Ångermanland in Sweden. The hag/ghost is ordered to ride on objects, not humans. Many of the concrete methods of protection are based on the same idea. The hag is said to ride a scythe, or must turn in the direction of the shoe tips.

A Swedish charm from Finland which is poetically powerful but hard to interpret reads as follows: “Do not eat flesh! Eat ashes!”⁸⁶ Does the charm mean that the hag is supposed to turn her interest towards other objects instead of tormenting the animals, “eating flesh”? The words were to be spoken at the same time as ashes were mixed in the meal or oats given to the animal that had suffered the attack.

THE COMBINATION OF WORD AND DEED

It is difficult to imagine that people in a concrete situation merely said a charm without performing an accompanying act. The history of religions tells us that most power-charged words are accompanied by an action that confirms the statement, and some examples in the archives mention that acting and speaking were combined. A woman born in 1859 stated:

There was an ox that was attacked by the hag, he sweated terribly. Against this you had to pull hair three times from the chest of the ox, then you had to split a fence-post in two directions and place the pulled hair in it and say: “Hag, ride here and leave my ox alone.”⁸⁷

With this action the hag could be forced to move to the piece of wood and ride it instead. An even more effective method, of course, was if you could get the hag to ride on a sharp object; that way you could not only get rid of her but punish her painfully.

A different recommendation was given by a man in Skåne:

⁸⁵ Hampp (1961:175ff.); Klintberg (1965:45ff.).

⁸⁶ Forsblom (1917b:119), Österbotten, Finland.

⁸⁷ IFGH 3261:13 Västergötland, Sweden 1934.

You had to take a steel knife and make cuts across the horse's mane, really close to each other, and read:

"You have ridden many horses,
but now I shall prevent your courses.
You'll have to run to make earth ring,
but never on my horses swing."⁸⁸

Is this a creative improvisation to please the collector, or is it an individual formulation—or something in-between? The description of the action agrees well with other protective and healing performances, but the charm sounds extremely contrived. No similar variant is found. Another unique, but more contextualized, southern Swedish charm was recorded in Kabusa, Skåne, in 1706. It is related to the other charms commanding the hag, and is yet another example of how word and deed are combined in efforts to obtain protection from the hag. Almost like an evening prayer, an old woman is said to have used this charm:

For the evil that came come over a person at night.
"For my spirit,
two hands
and 10 fingers,
12 angels of God
shall shun
and flee
all evil!
In the name etc., etc., etc."

It should be noted that Hanna, when reading, used to stroke her hands over the sick person. This explains the "two hands and 10 fingers" in the charm.⁸⁹

Hands were thought to be healing and full of power, and touch was a way to transfer power,⁹⁰ although certain persons' hands had more power than others'. Without the hand movements the text has more the character of a pious Christian prayer. What is folk belief and what is ecclesiastical tradition is not always easy to determine since it not expressed in the wording but in the purpose of the reading. The charm above, as Bengt af

⁸⁸ LUF 2503:5 Skåne, Sweden 1929.

⁸⁹ Linderholm (1917–40: II:124).

⁹⁰ Tillhagen (1989:226f).

Klintberg has pointed out, is related to a blessing with a similar enumeration technique which Emil Liedgren quotes in his work on hymns and religious songs. The text, which was supposed to give “protection against the terrors of night”, was still read in 1926:

I go to bed with God’s twelve holy angels
two for hand, two for foot.
two for each of my members,
two to put me to sleep, two to wake me,
two to erase my great sins.⁹¹

We meet another type of ritual and charm in one from southern Ostrobothnia, which is also based on the ability of a person to outwit and defeat the hag using the human intellect. We can compare it with the methods of turning shoes around or giving the hag an impossible counting task:

[...] you whittle nine splinters and set fire to each splinter with sulphur. Then you take three sticks simultaneously in your hand and set fire to them and draw them over the cow’s back three times from the horns to the tip of the tail and read:

“If you fly with one then I’ll fly with two, if you fly with two then I’ll fly with three [etc. up to nine]”, then the cow will get well and not be ridden by the hag any more.⁹²

Another Finnish example of a charm-like expression comes from Satakunta. Two men drop tallow from a burning candle over a horse that is tormented by the hag and say aloud, “Ride, devil, on this but not on my horse!”⁹³ Apart from the direct address that is typical of charms requiring the daring to confront the threat, this charm is combined with action likewise intended to get rid of the hag.

⁹¹ Liedgren (1926:53); Klintberg (1965:29f).

⁹² SKS Brandt, H. (b) 680 Pohjanmaa, Finland 1890. Translated by Martti Soutkari.

⁹³ SKS Brandt, H. (b) 437 Satakunta, Finland 1889. Translated by Martti Soutkari.

DIRECT CONFRONTATION

In Swedish-speaking Finland the healer is called *omlagare* (re-maker, repairer), and the reparative ethnomedical rituals—of which Forsblom has recorded many examples⁹⁴—are called *omlagningar* (rituals combining words and deeds for the purpose of returning the situation back to a healthy state). A charm from Korsnäs accentuates the confrontation even more and contrasts the hag with three symbols of Christ.

Against the hag in livestock. With his left index finger the fixer draws a cross on the animals' withers and reads:

“To Christ’s cross

And his wounds

And his nails

Satan shall yield.”

Repeated three times.⁹⁵

The charm resembles the type of encounter in which Christ is confronted with the sickness. In other charms it is Peter or Mary, with their liberating keys, who appear in the role of healer. The fixer draws a cross on the animal with his index finger (called *namnisfingret* in the charm) and names three times what will help: Jesus, and the cross, wounds, and nails which are the three symbols of his suffering. The text is an example of a total identification of the hag with the Devil. It is reinforced by the polarization between Christ and Satan and is thus given Christian legitimacy.

CHARMS THAT IDENTIFY THE HAG WITH THE DEVIL

The identification between the hag and the Devil is nevertheless unusual in the charm texts, although more common in texts in pure prose form that discuss the shape and identity of the hag. It is above all in the Swedish charms from Finland that the hag and Satan are brought together, and several charms from that region also mention the symbols of Christ listed in the example above. They polarize the hag and Christ, whose cross and nails are also mentioned. The reading is sometimes accompanied by hand movements drawing three crosses. The explicit identification of the hag with the Devil almost makes the ceremony seem like a good Christian

⁹⁴ Forsblom (1917a, b) and the records in SLS 218, 232, 253, 267, and 285.

⁹⁵ FSF 1927 VII:5:611f.

prayer. It is the accompanying gestures that distinguish it from ecclesiastical practice. A less complex ritual that could be performed quickly and easily when a person was plagued by the hag was to speak the following words:

“Go and leave
All the way to hell [*ilakrumi* ‘the evil room’]
From which you have come!”
Then the fixer spits at the door three times.⁹⁶

Here, once again, a direct address is combined with a reference to hell, which is where the hag comes from and is ordered to return to, since that is her proper home. In a similar, although rather more complicated, vein is the following extract from Sweden:

One can write the hag away if she is difficult to shake off, as follows: you cut the little finger on your left hand and write with the flowing blood:

“Hag, Hag, Hag!
You want to be here at night;
But if you want to go to your home
Or would rather be in hell,
You may do what pleases you best.”
Then you cut your left little finger again and write with the blood:
“As true as God lives,
And my soul lives,
So truly shall my heart’s blood
Bear witness to this.”⁹⁷

This resembles the “Hag, hag, mind” type but is formulated here in a more individual version. It may be questioned, however, whether these texts—one from Finland and one from Sweden—were practised in reality; the writing in blood mentioned in the latter seems somewhat dramatic in a stereotyped way. The material collected in Finland is richer, but it is difficult to determine whether this means that ritual performances were regarded as being more powerful there. Or were these descriptions of rituals just a way to make a story more vivid? Ultimately, the spoken word

⁹⁶ FSF 1927 VII:5:612.

⁹⁷ *Bidrag till Södermanlands ...* (1882: III:118), Södermanland, Sweden.

appears to have been thought to possess the same status of reality as an action performed.

PUTTING THE HAG ON SOMEONE ELSE WITH THE AID OF CHARMS

There are just a few examples of charms that were designed to send the hag to someone else. No other texts come as close to the sender of the hag. Other narratives about the hag almost always begin with the consequences of the hag's visit, and some of them explain how to discover and punish her. The following is the only text that puts the words in the mouth of the hag/sender:

Hag, hag, mind,
come and lie down on her (N.N.) in here.
Break off both hand and leg.
Come thence as stone floats and feather sinks.⁹⁸

This starts like a common hag charm but quickly changes character. The hag is called forth from her home where the normal rules are reversed: stones float and feathers sink. Such a description of her proper environment has the same effect as portraying her as an animal or letting her enter through the keyhole: it identifies the hag as non-human. Importantly, however, for the first time we meet the sender in an active role, rather than as the object of another person's action.

Most charms are formulated as direct addresses; the person pronouncing the charm speaks directly to the evil. In content, then, they are outright confrontations with the sender, as the reader faces the hag eye to eye, with the courage to do this surely coming from the conviction that the spoken word has power. The basic pattern, that the hag's visits require an equal and opposite reaction, corresponds to other, more concrete methods of protection, as well as legend texts. The charms, like other texts about the nightmare hag, cover a wide span, from descriptions of rather unlikely rituals to a powerfully conveyed dread of the hag. The drama of the charms often seems to have confirmed the accompanying actions.

⁹⁸NFS Leiro VI:14 Hordaland, Norway 1914.

Formulaic Actions

Formulaic actions are often very similar to the commands in the charms and, like them, they offer a resolution to conflict. They occur above all in legends or general advice about protection against the hag, but they rarely function independently. There are many examples of different phrases that can be addressed to the hag when one encounters her, such as that in the following description of ordering the hag away: “A farmhand here was sore after the hag, and when he woke up he swore and told her to go away ‘as far as the road lasts!’”⁹⁹ The advice to speak the name of God or Jesus is very common, and the utterances are often more like oaths and angry exclamations than charms.

“COME BACK IN THE MORNING AND ASK FOR WHAT I HAVEN’T GOT!”

Certain set phrases occur formulaically in the legends of the hag. Most of these were recorded in Sweden and Finland and they belong to the group of legends that both expose and punish the hag. The power of the spoken word forces the hag to revert to her human form and reveal herself. “Come back in the morning and ask for what I haven’t got!” were the words some of the legends advise the victim to shout at the hag during the night. The result was that a woman on a neighbouring farm or some other local woman would come the following morning and reveal that she was the hag. This command occurs both as a charm in the readings and as a part of the legends in two main variants that serve to resolve the conflict. In one of these the hag-ridden man tells the hag to ask for something that he does not have, and in the other she is invited to come for breakfast the next morning. When the sun has risen the hag must appear in her human form.

If, as soon as you wake, you spit on the quilt and throw it at the door with the words “Come here tomorrow and borrow what we don’t have” or “Come here for breakfast”, then the person who has sent the hag had to turn up shamefaced in the morning.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ IFGH 3709:41 Värmland, Sweden 1935.

¹⁰⁰ SLS 10:565f. Österbotten, Finland 1882–90.

There are many variants in the Swedish texts from Finland describing how the hag could be forced, with a specific phrase, to come back in the morning.

To find out whose body the hag goes in you must say to her, when she approaches with her caresses, "You shall come here tomorrow morning before we pull out the damper, and say what you want!"¹⁰¹

There are similarities between the charms that give the hag an impossible task and these recommendations for how to force the hag to come back. Both put the hag in an impasse that leads to a slightly comical ending. Through the rather absurd move of inviting the hag to breakfast, the power of the word over the attacker is confirmed.

If you catch sight of the "hag" in the barn you should say: "Come again tomorrow and borrow something I don't have." If a person comes the following day to borrow something you haven't got, that's the hag.¹⁰²

Although most descriptions of the hag's victims emphasize that they cannot utter a sound, there are several phrases that a hag-ridden person is advised to say, such as: "You are a hag!" We usually find this expression among the address legends. This kind of direct address releases both the hag and the werewolf from the compulsion to run around at night.

The hag-ridden person can also be freed of the torment if someone in the room calls out the victim's name. This can hardly be counted among the repertoire of charms, but the ways in which this advice is given are often stereotyped, like in legends. The following example is formulated as an eyewitness account, presented by a woman in central Sweden:

Mother got the "hag" when she was lying on her back. But if we called out her name she was all right. She screamed and moaned as if there was something dangerous upon her. She herself thought that it was something dangerous that came in during the evening. She didn't want us to talk about the hag.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ SLS 56:143 Österbotten, Finland 1897.

¹⁰² SLS 106:2 Åland, Finland 1906.

¹⁰³ IFGH 3475:22 Värmland, Finland 1934.

The instruction to call out the name of the victim or to advise the victim to address the hag shows the limitations of dividing texts about folk belief according to genre. They can be formulated as highly individual first-person narratives, as short, stereotyped legend fragments, or as something close to charms. The shared and central feature is that the spoken word has the power to stop the hag's afflictions, making the hag into an object instead of a subject.

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CHAPTER 4

The Nightmare Hag and Magic Thinking

*What does it mean to use magic [trolldom]?
It means deceiving people with pretended knowledge about secret ways
in which to obtain what one desires through other than natural and
permitted means.
Catechism of Olof Swebilius from 1689, revised by Jacob
A. Lindblom in 1810*

The aim of this chapter is to emphasize a line of thinking in the narratives about the *mara* and to show that what we are talking about here—despite the divided picture of the hag that emerges from the archival records—is a worldview, a discursive universe. This set of ideas is often implicit in the texts and rarely commented on by those who took down the records.

Both the notions about the hag and the mode of presentations show great variety. There are probably many reasons why the hag texts do not agree, but here two should be emphasized. First, it is a benefit for narrative technique if multifaceted conceptions can be linked to a single figure. Second, there is a psychological benefit in that the features ascribed to the hag are often said to be grounded in personal experiences. Individuals could tell stories about the hag based on what they had actually experienced themselves as well as using the trope as a point of departure for their stories, which created a great variety of expression with many possible

meanings, as they reflect the lives of individual people. This meant that both storytellers and listeners had a generous degree of freedom in their presentation and interpretation.

Ideas about magic and witchcraft are essential to conceptions of the hag, which remain disordered if *trolldom* thinking is not regarded as fundamental. While the texts rarely express such ideas directly, and nor do they necessarily reference other beings or worlds inhabited by supernatural beings, we do see that ideas about how people could make use of their special insights are a unifying theme running through the *mara* narratives. Stories about nocturnal attacks of the hag type are found in many cultures, and in most cases there is a clear link between the shape-shifter and claimed knowledge beyond everyday life. As the conceptions of the *mara* are expressed in the Nordic countries, they belong to a highly specific context: an agrarian society with clear boundaries on opinions and actions. Notions of magic were ever-present in explanations of illness and health, failure and success. In the hag material there is thus a range of expressive forms, from those which are common human dream experiences to those which are culturally determined.

MAGIC (*TROLLDOM*)

Magic is both a technical term and a designation for thoughts within a framework that was imaginable and relevant to its users. As a technical term it refers to specific actions and ritual patterns associated with certain types of texts, whereas the ideas discussed in this chapter pertain to some specific supernatural creatures and concern, in equal measure, the sender of the destruction and the person affected by it. Our knowledge of how *trolldom* was understood, based on the archived folk narratives, indicates how people in pre-industrial Scandinavia took great measures to protect their households from threats which were explained as *trolldom* attacks, and to a much lesser extent actively attempted to harm their neighbours.

Mary Douglas, in *Risk and Blame* (1992), makes a comparison between the witch as a worker of magic and the carrier of an infection, reminding us of Susan Sontag's discussion of illness as metaphor. Douglas writes,

Both witch and carrier of infection are liable to go unsuspected. Both have a capacity to deceive. The hidden power of causing injury that they have in

common justifies their being treated together as potential weapons in strategies of rejection.¹

It is a fruitful starting point, since it is in the nature of magic to be visible only when practised. Magic, like contamination, constitutes a concealed threat in everyday life, an understanding which was also the discursive logic employed during the witch trials in the early modern era. This idea that some people have special capabilities also features in this orally communicated corpus of knowledge.

Magic is related to perceptions of power and experiences of the balance of power and is well grounded in everyday relations between people. It always has a sender with a purpose, and concrete consequences; *trolldom* causes damage, illness, crop failure or other misfortunes. Yet the texts about the uses of witchcraft in Scandinavia are almost always presented from the perspective of the victim: a sender is sought in the surroundings, the person who is thought to have caused the problems for the victim. Most begin when the original act causing the problem has already been performed and there is a need for a diagnosis of the situation, going on to describe possible ways to find the sender. The use of magic as an explanation is intended to reveal previously invisible causal connections. Once the victim regains control over his or her life, the perspective shifts from that of someone in an inferior position to one of superiority.

Conceptions of the nightmare hag and the magic ideas with which she is associated can be found in different oral genres and are only to a minor extent attached to specific patterns of expression. Texts about magic may perhaps be spontaneously associated with charms, but rather a large number of other Nordic folklore texts have magic, whether enacted or in reasoning, as their central theme. The Scandinavian terms, *trolldom* or *trolldom*, and references to compounds such as *trollkona* “witch” and *trollkunnig* “skilled in magic”, indicate that this was a broad complex of more abstract understandings, with a strong emphasis on ritual activities. The term can stand as an umbrella notion for imaginaries in a worldview relevant to people in rural Nordic countries. It is possible that the actual term(s) for magic functioned as a kind of signal term for the people listening to the stories. Since *trolldom* is an emic term frequently used in a number of constructions, it can serve as an umbrella term when introducing the term *magic thinking* (*trolldomstanken*) into the

¹ Douglas (1992:84).

discussion. The word *thinking* is chosen because it encompasses a range of discursive practices by which people make use of semantic fields to express will and emotions as well as ritual instructions. Ideas about special knowledge were both a vital part of local Nordic ways of explaining hardship in life, with their own distinct vernacular vocabulary, and an academic category used to reference a variety of practices and conceptual features. The latter circumstance facilitates possible broader comparative investigations, while the former aspect links the analysis to cultural and historical premises—both of which are well-trodden analytical paths in the history of religions—although the latter is in focus here.

The prominent stance taken in regard to *trolldom* in order to explore the *mara* narratives is one of a sense of respect for the people who embraced conceptions and rituals associated with the nightmare hag. Beliefs in powers with influence over human living conditions were hardly random notions or spontaneously invented constructions, and neither were the protective acts. It is hard to imagine that people in rural society had a more fragmented or less well-considered outlook on life than we have. If one assumes that the archived traces of vernacular religion reflect a view of life with both individual and collective dimensions, it must also comprise general concepts and ideas designated by certain hyponyms such as *trolldom*. A worldview is not a conscious category in every detail, and the aim of the analysis is merely to frame the elements that appear to have been relevant to people in a specific context. When reading the texts mentioning the *mara*, a semantic field connecting names of beings, abstract concepts and ritual action opens up and hereby hints at what made such stories relevant.

Magic thinking indicates its own logic in both discourse and practice, conveying an epistemological theory inasmuch as it says something about the conditions and limits of human knowledge. Knowledge is a vague term, but the epistemology of magic is based on a set of ideas that are taken to have the capacity to provide explanations for hardship and mishaps in human life. This thinking also provides an anthropology—that is to say, it defines humankind in relation to nature and to supernatural beings—as well as a cosmology that inscribes the realms of God and the Devil, the dead and the great variety of creatures that could influence everyday life. It does not, however, offer any explanation for the origin of the universe. Rather, magic thinking in this respect sets the limits to human existence and points to the need for insight from beyond the immediately visible world. This knowledge about humankind, and

especially about the relationship to nature, says something about the order and the hierarchies of life. Magic thinking also contains social dimensions as it presupposes certain relations between people, and between the individual and the collective. Finally, it can be said to express a moral stance, since distinctions between evil and good are made in the corpus in regard to the different purposes for which magic is used.

Many of the imaginaries surrounding *trolldom* were constantly confirmed in the practice of the Christian religion through reminders about the existence of the Devil and his deeds. His actions and his helpers appeared as living realities. In the quotation from the catechism that began this chapter, we see that magic, although it is condemned and called “pretended” knowledge, is still described as a possibility for a theologian at the end of the seventeenth century. What would otherwise be the meaning of “other than natural and permitted means” stated in the catechism? It also presupposes active agents who did not hesitate to demonstrate their extraordinary knowledge in practice.

ENVY

The introduction to this book discussed envy as an overall, almost abstract concept in folk belief. Without considering envy as an active principle in life, it is difficult to understand texts about magic. Envy or pure malice were the forces that could cause evil intentions to materialize. Unlike other supernatural beings, the nightmare hag was not to be found in nature, in the forest or in water or other potentially dangerous places, waiting to attack a passing person. The hag always had a sender in the midst of everyday life, and the cause was not infrequently downright envy, as was reported in northern Sweden: “the hag is a woman who is envious. There was an old woman who was the hag in Old Micke’s barn. Then he saw who it was. So he went to talk to her and it came to an end.”² Here, exactly as in the charms, direct confrontation is practised as a strategy in the encounter with the hag. The conflict is resolved by means of direct verbal address. The hag was in the old man’s barn, causing harm in some way not described in the text. Envy is expressly stated to be the force that drives her, but when it is exposed it loses its effect.

Legends about witches, hags, people with the evil eye, or others who caused harm to humans and animals, are in most cases explained in terms

² ULMA 1835:2:6 Norrbotten, Sweden 1928.

of envy. In such texts the important thing is to expose and cure; the designation used is secondary. In the narratives about the *mara*, compared to those about witches, it is less common to see the guilty person named outright, but it does occasionally happen, such as in this narrative from Dalsland in western Sweden:

I know that there was an old woman they called “Mare-Brita” [Brita the Hag] because she was supposed to have the “hag” with her. When she wished evil on somebody, she arranged it so that she got the hag in the night. The old woman had red hair and that was the reason she was supposed to have the “hag”.³

The word “arranged” (*ställde*) indicates that deliberate action was envisaged, that this “Mare-Brita” consciously performed deeds meant to harm her fellow human beings. Examples like these can be compared with slightly more general statements about the use of magic to “put evil” on others, which are more common in the archival material. Otherwise the woman fits the description of a hag with her age and red hair. Stories about the hag must have been an excellent seedbed for gossip and slander. Who had the outward features typical of a hag? Didn’t the neighbour woman, with her single eyebrow, seem envious and greedy? Maybe that old maid can’t stop thinking about the man who jilted her to marry another woman? A number of less explicit symptoms could be associated with people who were suspected of harbouring evil thoughts: “You had your suspicions pointing in a certain direction but didn’t dare say who it was.”⁴ We may imagine that this made it all the easier for gossip to spread.

THE HAG AND THE MILK THIEF

The *mara* texts from northern Sweden and Finland (both Swedish and Finnish) are much more explicit about *trolldom* notions—of which we have seen many examples—than their counterparts in southern Scandinavia. In particular, there are many points of agreement between conceptions of the hag and those of the milk-stealing *bjära*, a being clearly caused by witchcraft. Sometimes they appear to have been regarded as identical.

³ IFGH 3685:50 Dalsland, Sweden 1935.

⁴ LUF 4551:23 Småland, Sweden 1934.

The *bjära* has fallen into oblivion. On the other hand, it was believed that envious people could make your cows dry up or give blood instead of milk. People who knew magic [*trollkunnigt folk*.] could put this right with blessings [*signerier*]. The hag could also be sent on to other people's cows, and if the cow's owner guessed who the hag was, he could expose the guilty person [by placing a pitchfork over the threshold of the cowshed?] The guilty person then came and asked to borrow something you didn't have.⁵

It was not only in the north, however, that the nightmare hag was thought to be a milk thief who made the cows dry up and produce blood instead of milk. "Those who were hags could milk cows at night", according to a record from Lister in Blekinge, 1930.⁶

The phonetic similarity between the Finnish words for hag (*mara*) and the thieving milk-hare (*para*) is far from being the whole explanation for the very closely related conceptions concerning these two beings. They are both creatures sent by a person in the locality. Envy, evil thoughts and malice lie behind them, and the sender is assumed to work through the temporary form. That is why there are also stories about analogies between the *mara/para* and the witch who lies behind them, and descriptions of methods ensuring protection and revealing the guilty person. A common way to go about the latter was to whip or perform some other action against the traces it had left behind, forcing the milk thief to come and be revealed.⁷ It was called whipping the *paranpaska* (the milk thief's dung). Something similar is said about the *bjära* in Swedish-speaking parts of Finland:

The neighbour ordered some boys to whip the dung on a half-buried boulder with twigs from nine trees, all of different kinds. If they did this they would see who the milk thief was living with. The boys followed the order and the farmer's wife in question was obliged to present herself. She roundly scolded the boys for their wicked behaviour.⁸

⁵ SLS 583:22bis Nyland, Finland 1945.

⁶ LUF 2737:2 Blekinge, Sweden 1930.

⁷ FSF 1919 VII:1:448f.; Simonsuuri (1961 H 171 "Parascheisse"); Wall (1978:76ff.).

⁸ FSF 1919 VII:1:448.

All such narratives, which proceed from the analogous link between the witch and her temporary body, are similar in outline. The nightmare hag can likewise be made to appear by whipping or burning.⁹

My mother told of an old woman who used to milk other people's cows, and the cow got the hag. And Mother said: "Now I'll fix it so that she has a rough time." She saw who it was and she could make it so that that person hurt herself or cut herself. Then she saw how the same old woman fell and hurt herself, and really badly too.¹⁰

An old woman engages in some kinds of practices without any details presented, and according to the teller, her milk-stealing is obviously synonymous with putting the hag on the cow. The storyteller's mother, however, sees an opportunity to take revenge on the person who sent the hag. She knows the ritual procedure to make the sender of the hag "hurt herself or cut herself" and sustain the bruises that will expose her. Analogical reasoning underlies the text, but it is the physical markers, the exposure and punishment, that are central. An equivalent act of *trolldom* is the only thing that can stop the hag. In every situation, force seems to be the most effective protection against the nightmare hag, and generates two similar acts: one condemned and one commendable.

MISSILES

The milk thieves, whether they are called *mara* or *para*, were linked by a specific symptom: the cow's milk dried up because of someone's envy or malevolence. The explanation of illnesses in vernacular terminology as "shots" is associated with the idea of materialized evil thoughts. A disease could be sent and was of the same diffuse character as the nightmare hag herself and other aspects of the clandestine. Missiles were assumed to be able to fly through the air, unstoppable by the strictures of everyday reality, and just like the hag they could take on material form. Both caused disease, including ailments of an inchoate physical and psychological character, and were associated with the whirlwind, evil people and revenants. Yet there are also significant differences between a missile and a hag. Missiles could be sent at any time, in daylight and outdoors, while the hag was associated

⁹FSF 1927 VII:5:624; Simonsuuri (1961 Q 321 "Mahrscheisse").

¹⁰ULMA 1835:2:4 Norrbotten, Sweden 1928.

with the night and her attacks almost always occurred indoors. Forsblom also noted in his records that the name of the missile can refer to the person who sent it or to the type of the missile;¹¹ thus, *slagskott* (stroke shot), *trolldomsskott* (witchcraft shot), *Satans skott* (Satan's shot) and the like were intended to confirm the identity of the sender of the symptom. The hag is to be regarded as both the sender and the attacking creature, according to the local understandings of the methods through which some people were thought to draw from covert stores of knowledge.

PUTTING THE HAG ON SOMEONE ELSE

The examples in the archives talk about certain persons or groups (often known but yet distant), such as the Finns or the Sami, who were particularly liable to change shape and place evil on other people. It is less common, however, to find documents in the archives with concrete advice on how to go about performing clandestine acts. Other records, although amounting to a much smaller number, contain explicit descriptions of how to aim the magic at someone else. When such instructions occur, they are almost always associated with a person who has acquired the required skills and insights. There are very few records of this kind about the nightmare hag. "The hag can be put on someone through powerful curses or by placing a 'cat's cheese' [puffball mushroom] under the bed."¹² These rituals were probably not performed as often as the apotropaic ones. To counter evil with something equally evil or powerful was, after all, less dangerous than taking the first step in using magic. There were no terribly complex rituals or actions prescribed for getting the hag to attack. Even if the remedies are odd at times, they are still part of the everyday surroundings. "If you stealthily put a bunch of feet from birds of prey in someone's stable the horses will start to be tormented by the hag."¹³ We recognize the scene from the charms that were claimed to be useful if you wanted to put the hag on someone. "You can put the hag on other people's cattle if you take the bark off a tree where it has scraped against another tree and put it in the cowshred."¹⁴ This record goes on to describe how to bring misfortune to the cowshred. The last of the methods prescribed, rubbing some

¹¹ Forsblom (1917:100) Österbotten, Finland. See also Lid (1950:1ff.).

¹² SLS 10:565 Österbotten, Finland 1882–90.

¹³ SLS 202:I:262 Nyland, Finland 1909–10.

¹⁴ SLS 220:169 Österbotten, Finland 1913.

bark, is almost banal in its simplicity. No dramatic action is required of the person who wishes the hag on the neighbour's cow, apart from the evil intent. Seemingly simple actions, then, could have dire effects. This record can be used to illustrate the significance of the sender. All ideas about *trolldom*, including those about the hag, presupposed a sender who had a concrete purpose for his or her actions.

These relatively rare records about the art of putting the hag on someone else raise a question that will recur in the analysis of the legends and in the conclusion: Did people really practise the actions and rituals described in the hag texts? Or were they mainly methods that were spoken of in stories to illustrate what was believed about the nature of the *mara*? Depending on the person and the situation, the answer is perhaps yes to both questions.

GIVING FEAR A NAME. THE *MARA* IMAGINARIES

This part has presented and analysed the imaginary in which the nightmare hag was conceptualized, based on her appearance in files in the Nordic folklore archives.

The first chapter asked who the hag was believed to be, what she looked like, who and what were the objects of her visitations and attacks. The forms in which the hag appears in the archival texts are varied and no uniformity can be detected. The hag's victims were both humans and animals, chiefly horses and cows. The records make it clear that the hag was experienced as a threat and a source of anxiety, and that an encounter with the hag could never lead to anything positive. Reasons for the hag's attacks are often implicit in the texts, unless the informant was asked directly by the collector, but in most cases may be found in ideas of evil and materialized malevolence. Such concepts correspond to Scandinavian ideas of "fortune" and what George Foster calls "the limited good": in other words, the ability to steal and acquire advantages at someone else's expense. Ultimately there was always a purpose for the transformation. Not only greed, but also unsatisfied desire, could be given free rein in the conceptions of the nightmare hag.

The second chapter analyses archival records listing ways of protecting oneself from the hag with actions or words; these are connected to the imagined origin of the hag. In these texts the hag is the object of humans' actions. Descriptions of cures make up the majority share of the records about the *mara*, and they correspond in large measure to other ethnomedical practice.

This final chapter of this part places the nightmare hag in a broader context, emphasizing links with general ideas about magic and extraordinary knowledge. It is obvious that these seemingly disparate conceptions should be perceived as connected to magic and folk medicine, as both the explanations of the origin of the hag and the prophylactic methods used against her point to these more general concepts.

The gender of the nightmare hag is marked clearly and in different ways in the material, both in the descriptions and in the protective methods. The most striking thing is the way sexuality is described, not least because this is associated with pronounced violence and powerful aggression. The hag's visits to men do not give rise to pleasure; rather, the narratives tell of anxiety and menace, although sexual associations are present both in the causal explanations and in the protective methods. It is above all in the latter that we see aggression in combination with a sexualized image of the hag.

Despite certain exceptions, the hag is a decidedly female creature. Even in records where the sex is not specified, the pronoun "she" is used, or we are otherwise given to understand that the hag is assumed to have a female body. Regardless of whether the account of the hag focuses on the experiences of anxiety or the idea of envy, she constitutes a threat through her female appearance. This is evident both in the descriptions of encounters with her and of effective remedies against her. The hag is portrayed as a concrete threat to norms, health and prosperity, although one that is almost always defeated. People launch counterattacks and their efforts are rewarded: the torment disappears and sometimes the hag is punished. This is often the climax of the texts about the hag. In that sense the narratives about the hag are repressive and seem to offer a confirmation of the status quo. The hag is never presented as an alternative to prevailing norms or as an attractive counter-image. Regardless of whether she is driven by greed or struck by a curse, there is always an act of witchcraft behind the hag. Consequently, there could never be a good encounter with her. It was essential to safeguard oneself and the livestock.

The material about the nightmare hag mostly consists of short records with few or no contextual details. In addition, we have the methodological complications of working with written transcriptions of oral texts. Yet even if the narratives in the archives are distorted in relation to the original performance event, they convey an indisputable intensity, a sense of participation that can be termed "emotional presence". Although the stories are narrated in the past tense, their references to general human

experiences give a sense of immediacy that can touch even a person reading the archival records.

Individual records are rarely divided in the technical manner used in this part. At the same time, the informants' texts give details of the reasons for the hag and her appearance, and sometimes we are told about prophylactic methods and hear fragments of legends. Not least of all, the stories are filled with intertextual references to other texts about the hag, which shows that they presuppose considerable knowledge about other folk beliefs and about effective measures against *trolldom*. Despite the disparate impressions provided concerning the origins and causes of the hag, and the means to guard against her, we can see that the texts have two basic ideas. In the first, guided by analogy, it is the person performing the clandestine deeds that must be exposed. In the second, being a hag is a curse that has struck someone. Conceptions about *trolldom* are fundamental to both. Combined, these two aspects of the *mará*, both of which have their foundation in magic thinking, are used as a grouping principle in the analyses of legends that make up the next part of the study.

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PART III

Narrating About the Nightmare Hag

CHAPTER 5

A Model for an Analysis of the Hag Legends

The observations resulting from the presentation of the hag material in the previous sections provide the starting point for analysis of the *mara* legends. One of the most important of these was that imagery in which the nightmare hag appears is a part of a larger conceptual universe which is here designated with terms such as “magic thinking” (*trolldomstanken*), “imaginary” and “vernacular religion”.

LEGENDS

No great importance is given in this study to the different genres in which the texts about the *mara* are formulated. The term “texts” is frequently used to emphasize that the main aim is not genre analysis, as such, but a discussion of content. My interest as a historian of religions is primarily to approach the possible meanings attached to the mentioning of the hag; thus, the previous sections presented compiled material, arranged according to content. This chapter, however, almost entirely concentrates on one of the traditional genres of folklore studies: legends. This prominent position is justified by an assessment of the material that shows that legends of the hag constitute the group of stories with the most varied forms of expression. They are sufficiently long to be suitable for detailed analyses, and there are enough to make it relevant to use them as a base for a framework that can indicate the potential polyphony of voices and how stories could have been understood in diverse modes.

Since a legend is usually classified according to its formal outline, the term is easier to use than those for text groups which conventionally have been regarded as more intrinsically authentic in content. Earlier folkloristic studies attributed “memorates” greater source value, but it is often difficult to determine whether first-person narratives express personal experiences or if they represent a narrative strategy. The references to individual experiences can, rather, demonstrate a skilled storyteller’s use of the first person in order to give authority to the content. Furthermore, it is not the personal experience that is at focus here but what made the narratives relevant, and the very phenomenon whereby such narratives flourished in rural communities. It is, therefore, reasonable to limit the more detailed discussions to the legends about the *marä*.

THE FEATURES OF THE *MARÄ* LEGENDS

In their formal outline the legends about the hag do not differ from other folk-belief legends. We can therefore stick to a commonly used definition of the genre as a monoepisodic narrative in an everyday setting which concerns folk belief in a broad sense.¹ Timothy Tangherlini has written a welcome survey of suggestions for how the concept should be understood, which ranged from Jacob Grimm’s collections to recent analyses of “urban legends” and “contemporary legends”.² At the end of his survey he arrived at the following conclusion:

Legend, typically, is a short (mono-) episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a figurative representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs.³

This definition aptly describes much of what, in this study, is labelled the “*marä* legends”. It highlights essential features of the texts: they are short narratives, well rooted in everyday life and told in the past tense. Contextually and visually, however, they are absolutely present in the storyteller’s and the listener’s own time. This shift in temporalities can be

¹ Holbek (1987:198ff.); Tangherlini (1990, 1994, 2000, 2008); Siikala (1990); Asplund Ingemark (1994); Koski and Frog (2016:17ff.).

² Tangherlini (1990).

³ Tangherlini (1990:385).

observed also in very short legends and appears to be a significant narrative strategy to encompass the facts of rural life with its fantastic imaginaries. When we read the manuscripts in the archives today, they have a concentrated form that derives from the recording situation. This gives the texts a character approaching notebook jottings, far away from the actual performance of narrating, also with a focus on motifs assumed to be stable over long periods and distances rather than individual expressions.

The legends about the nightmare hag have, however, some distinctive features that are worth noticing, although the summary of the analyses should not be anticipated. One prominent characteristic is the relationship between what is stated in them and what they do not explicitly tell us. Ultimately, what is left untold in the narratives proved to be as interesting as a close reading of the episodes in the legends, contributing to an intricate pattern of her presence and absence. Unlike many other legends, it is only to a limited extent that the hag texts concern the *mara* herself; indeed, she is not the main actor in the episodes of the recorded text where human agency dominates. Instead, the vast majority concern the efforts of people to get rid of her. Her immediate absence in many legends creates the “spots of indeterminacy” that Roman Ingarden talks of: “gaps” in the text that the listeners fill in with their knowledge and experience.⁴ Other legends with folk-belief themes emphasize the distinctive features of the supernatural being—appearance, identity-creating attributes, characteristic actions and behaviour—but the very definition of the nightmare hag specifies that one of her distinctive features is the effect she has on others. We thus do not always find the same external attributes for the creature. What we do find is that she is always threatening; encounters with her are charged with drama and anxiety and she is not ambivalent in the way that other beings, even the Devil, can be. In other legends, tension is created by the fact that the being can be both evil and good, and the outcome is not always given. The legends of the hag are about stopping, deflecting and exposing a menacing and dangerous figure. With a few exceptions, the hag is always defeated, and people put a stop to her assaults.

On the other hand, some of the legends express empathy with the hag or, more correctly, with the person afflicted by the curse of having to transform into a hag. As we have seen, the hag is both the attacking nocturnal figure and the everyday body. Any empathy concerns only the latter. As pointed out above, all legends are told in the past tense. They retell

⁴Ingarden (1973:246ff.).

something that happened not very long ago, and they describe a setting with which the narrator is familiar. Yet the intensity of the hag stories and their personal touch mean that there is an emotional presence. The narratives made the *mara* palpably here and now.

RELATIONS TO OTHER FIGURES IN FOLK BELIEF

It can be difficult to demarcate which texts should be reckoned as hag legends. In the following—where space allows—those which do not mention the name *mara* but which are of interest for understanding one that does are also considered. Based on my discussion of magic thinking, it is not only irrelevant but also impossible to make absolute categorizations of records as “hag legends”. Legends as a text group constitute an organizational category for archival purposes, not a mirror of the imaginary of the people who told stories about the *mara*. For me the central factor in the analysis of the legends has been to emphasize fundamental aspects of folk belief: ideas about magic, the ability of certain people to perform acts of magic and witchcraft, accusations, power relations, norms and social rules.

Notions about the power of thought and the ability of evil wishes to take on material form were attached not only to the hag but also to other creatures in folk belief. The names of these beings vary, as we saw earlier, which also applies in particularly large measure to the text group labelled “analogy legends”. While there are many stories about magic beings—people with the skill to effect change clandestinely—which detail the forms they take when engaging in these acts, the names of the temporary figures vary. The tension between the magic worker, the victim or target and the temporary figure has given rise to a great many legends in which the storyteller has used the situation in different ways and given different names to the transforming figure. In a broader perspective the legends about the “hag wife” can likewise be regarded as regional variants of the wide spread stories about marriages to supernatural creatures; very similar narratives about the man who marries the hag can be found in the legends of the seal-wife or selkie in the North Sea region. Moreover, a whole range of stories, confined to the Nordic countries, concern sexual relations between humans and supernatural beings: the *näck*,⁵ the *vittra*,⁶ the *skogsrå*⁷ and others.

⁵ Velure (1972); Stattin (1984); Häll (2013:409ff.).

⁶ Dahlstedt (1976, 1991).

⁷ Granberg (1935); Häll (2013:321ff.).

DEVELOPING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To arrive at an understanding of the meaning of the *mara* legends, a method for organizing the interpreted legends has been devised. The material for the analyses is mostly drawn from folklore collections—that is, written down, often edited and catalogued oral texts about the hag—although some records come from printed anthologies. As there is very little documentation of the original performance contexts, they must be (re)constructed on the basis of available contextual material. It is therefore stressed at several points that it is important to presume that a range of individual interpretations must have existed; while these are merely constructions, this at least eliminates the risk of homogeneous “standard versions”.

The scholars who have influenced my interpretation of the Nordic legends are, above all, Bengt af Klintberg, John Lindow, Timothy Tangherlini, Camilla Asplund Ingemark, Mikael Häll, Kaarina Koski and Frog all of whom have analysed folk legends with belief motifs.⁸ My main sources of inspiration for the model I constructed to analyse the hag stories include Pentti Leino, who builds on Rumelhart’s “narrative grammar”; three of his terms are borrowed for the analytical frame.⁹ Additionally, I apply Roman Ingarden’s concept “spots of indeterminacy”, which he developed in analyses of the novel and other artistic prose, but it nevertheless provides an opportunity to emphasize the intricate composition of oral texts and draws attention to the relationship between the narrator and the audience and indicates turning-points in the texts.¹⁰

There is an element of (re-)construction in all context analysis of historical narratives, which is hazardous but necessary if the ambition is to say something about the meaning an archived record could have had when it was part of living oral literature. Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal’s method of strictly separating the level of text, the level of meaning and the level of interpretation is reflected in the analysis here,¹¹ otherwise it would be easy to present the legend as being identical to individuals’ image of the

⁸ Klintberg (1972); Lindow (1978); Tangherlini (1990, 1994, 2000, 2010, 2017); Asplund Ingemark (2004); Häll (2013); Koski and Frog (2016).

⁹ Leino (1981:111).

¹⁰ Jean-Claude Schmitt’s analysis of legends and rituals regarding the holy greyhound argues in favour of a careful separation of form and content, although his strict division is not retained here. Schmitt also makes far-reaching political interpretations of verbal expressions and rituals, for which he was later criticized by Aron Gurevich (1992:43f.).

¹¹ Jason and Segal (1977).

nightmare hag. Finally, Jacqueline Simpson’s article in *Folklore* (1991) demonstrates that the term “coda”—designating the concluding part of a legend—can be used in studies of contemporary legends to capture the morality which is often expressed at the end of the story.

The model described below was constructed to explicate how the archival records still can give hints about the flexibility of the legends. It is not intended as a template for analysing legends in general, nor was it designed to present the formal outline of the hag legends in detail. The intention here is not to discuss the general principles of the narrative outline of legends, but to point out how the form was an effective tool for highlighting the moral turn in the legend. However, analyses performed with the aid of the model became rather lengthy and it is used to the fullest in only three cases: the legend of the pitchfork, the legend of the foal’s caul and the hag wife. These represent three legends with very different content which simultaneously express essential features in the narratives about the *marva*.

A POSSIBLE ANALYTICAL MODEL

The analytical frame can be summed up in the following scheme:

Quotation from records	
Synopsis	
	Starting point
	Episode
	Change of state
	Coda
	Spatial context and chronotope
	Ritual context
	Cultural context

Quotation from Records

Each individual analysis begins with an example of the particular legend motif in the form in which it was recorded and archived. The records quoted here have been selected on the basis of having a certain length and on regional distribution, the quality of the written record and aspects of source criticism.

Synopsis

“Synopsis” and “fable”, as used in the study of literature, are complementary to the quotation. A synopsis may seem unnecessary immediately after a verbatim quote from an archival record, but the aim is to obtain a concentrated version of the main elements and suggest the most important variations of the legend that exist. The synopses are based on an intensive reading of the hag texts and are attempts to present the essence of the legends in a simple but sequential way. A synopsis allows the discussion to become more general, since it can be used in parallel with the archival quotation, which often contains both local and individual conceptualizations.

Starting Point

Like the terms “episode” and “change of state”, “starting point” comes from Leino. “The model is strictly hierarchical and describes above all the causal relations between the events or actions and the motives for the actions”, he writes about the relations between these three parts of the course of events.¹² It may also be noted that these are the only elements, besides the quotations, which are based exclusively on what is directly verbalized in the narrative; the other parts of the analysis are based on a discussion of the communication between the lines. In other words, this is the initial scene where a problem or an issue for the further narrative is introduced. By defining this point in the narrative, we introduce a pause in the reading of the archival records. The emphasis on points in the course of events makes it easier to bring out messages and meanings. The starting point, at least for the hag legends, is an excellent example of this. The opening phrases of the legend often contain a whole narrative in themselves. In order to make the extraordinary events that follow comprehensible, the knowledge the listeners possessed about the hag had to be evoked, without which the story would be unintelligible. Much of the discursive universe of magical thinking is implicitly present in this part of the text, although most legend narratives never comment on matters such as the cause or origin of the hag.

¹²Leino (1981:112).

Episode(s)

In this part of the course of events it is not the hag that plays the main role but the person(s) combating her. This is unequivocally the section of text where the explicit action happens and with human agents. Legends are conventionally described as monoepisodic, but the term episode refers to the actual sequences of action in the text. This clarifies the relationship between the text's subject and object: Who acts? Who is the target of the action? Who has the relevant knowledge to solve the issue presented when the scene was set?

Change of State

In the hag legends the change in the prevailing situation is the decisive turning point in the text. Here the power of the hag is broken and the victim gains control over the magic agent. The aim of the actions described in the episode is to achieve a change, and the consequences of this comprise the main message of the legend. Pentti Leino offers a fine parsing of this stage, dividing the response to the episode's action between concealed and manifest reaction.

Coda

Jacqueline Simpson defines the coda as "any sentence(s) which may occur after the resolution of a story, and which serve to bridge the gap between past and present, assert and deny truth, evaluate the occurrence, point to a moral, etc."¹³ The term has proved very useful for a summarizing discussion of the legends, even when working with historical records, particularly in relation to the emotional presence prevailing in the text. Moreover, it links the ending to the starting point by bringing together the temporalities used in the narrative. The changed state in the middle of the text and the coda at the end can together explain the cause and origin of the hag.

¹³ Simpson (1991:29).

Spatial Context and Chronotope

The following three points in the model—the spatial, ritual and social contexts—contribute to a more concrete description of the context, while simultaneously revealing some important differences in content between the analysed legends.

Jean-Claude Schmitt has pointed out the significance of defining both time and place in the analysis of form and content.¹⁴ In the former case, when analysing form, these relations draw our attention to the outline of the text: how the different elements are emphasized, how they are linked to each other, contrasts and so on, while the analysis of content seeks to bring out the meaning the texts could have had in the culture of their time. The different meanings of time in the analytical model and vernacular religion were discussed in the introduction of the book, and in the legend texts we see how temporalities are an important part of the actual composition. The resolution lies in time past. When it comes to place, it is the setting and the cultural conditions that are important. The *mara* legends are obviously rooted in rural society and in highly specific places in the domestic domains. We shall see how some interesting variations within these set limits create further drama in the text.

Ritual Context

There are many elements in the legend texts that are closely connected to the imagery of ethnomedicine. We shall see repeatedly how the legends are linked not only to existing ritual practice but also to what in this study are called fictitious rituals. The legends thus describe healing processes as ritualized behaviour that may never have been practised, although they are presented in such a way that they seem perfectly reasonable in their context. Regardless of whether the rituals were performed or not, the records have something important to teach us about vernacular religion and folk medicine. By indicating actions, words, objects and substances the position of the *mara* in magical thinking would have stand out to the listeners.

¹⁴ Schmitt (1983:59).

Cultural Context

The social context is perhaps the clearest of all the contextual aspects; rural living conditions are ever present in the material. In particular, we see how the legends convey perceptions of social control, norms and values. Power structures become visible in the texts, and male-dominated values are expressed. The relationship—and the shifts—between subject and object are especially emphasized in the legends and often in connecting to what is spoken of as legitimate.

RECURRENT CONCEPTS

The recurrent concepts used in a specific and limited sense in the analysis include imaginary, magic thinking and discursive universe. They have already been discussed in previous chapters. Other terms are:

Subject and Object

These terms from conventional communication models have proved very useful in analysis. From a gender perspective, it has been particularly fruitful to study relations between the subjects and objects in the texts. Through the simple method of asking who acts and who is the target of the actions, we highlight the significant shifts between the starting point, the episode(s) and the closing of the legend.

Agent

It may seem unnecessary to use two terms, subject and agent, but subject-object is used here to refer to the distinct positions in the texts that can drastically change during the course of events. The agent needs not be the given leading character or even the subject of the manifest action. Nor is the agent necessarily visible in the text, but the person who propels the action in daylight, darkness or in disguise.

Victim

When using the term “victim”, not only the person who has been assailed by the hag in the texts is indicated, but also the person whose animals have suffered her attacks: in other words, the targets of her interests. Livestock

was an important sign of prosperity and status in rural society. If a horse or a cow was attacked, so was the owner, in both a concrete and a figurative sense. The role of the victim alternates in the text; it can be found both in subject and object position.

Mentor

The mentor who occasionally acts in the legends is of crucial significance by giving the victim the knowledge necessary to get rid of the hag. That figure could be an experienced healer or someone offering simple advice. Usually, the victim does not gain immediate insight into the true state of affairs, but simply follows the mentor's advice. It is only later, as the consequences of the action unfold, that the truth of the matter is discovered. This knowledge does not always appear to be accessible to everyone. It takes a person with special insight to resolve the conflict described at the starting point. While not all texts present a mentor, and although his or her presence in the text is confined in most cases to a sentence or a mention in passing, when there is one, he or she functions as a catalyst, thus acquiring a significant function between subject and object. The latter becomes the target of the subject's actions, prompted by the mentor's instructions.

Spots of Indeterminacy

In a chapter in *The Literary Work of Art* entitled "The 'Life' of a Literary Work",¹⁵ Roman Ingarden writes about the "gaps" and the "spots of indeterminacy" (*Unbestimmbarkeitsstellen*) which exist in texts and which the reader fills in, based on personal experience or fantasy.¹⁶ His follower in the development of reception theory, Wolfgang Iser, rather speaks of "empty spaces" (*Leerstellen*) filled with the reader's or listener's "tacit knowledge" of previous readings.¹⁷ In order to avoid a dichotomy between fiction and reality, Iser underlines the receiver's knowledge of related texts and writes: "The blanks as an empty space between segments enables them to be joined together, this constituting a field of vision for the wandering

¹⁵ Ingarden (1973:331ff.); Iser (1978:170ff.).

¹⁶ Ingarden (1973:331).

¹⁷ Iser (1993).

viewpoint”.¹⁸ The hag texts turn out to be full of such spots of indeterminacy or blank places, which may be problematic for a present-day reader of the legends, needing knowledge acquired through broad reading of the material and requiring explicit comment in the course of analysis. When the legends were told in rural communities, however, this knowledge was possessed to varying extents by the listeners, who filled in the “blanks” according to their own experience, or as Iser puts it, “In other words, the need for completion is replaced here by the need of combination”,¹⁹ i.e. familiarity with the local corpus of legends, charms and *trolldom* narratives. The individual narrator could hereby concentrate wholly on the central conflict between the hag and her target while the listener could fill in the blanks with their own experience, fantasy and knowledge of *maralore*. The latter is in this study discussed as a shared corpus of folk-belief references or, shorter, an imaginary.

Initially, each element in the interpretations discussed here was divided into form analysis and content analysis. During the work with the texts, however, it became clear that in many cases it is difficult, sometimes totally impossible, to make a distinction between the form and the content of the hag legends. Moreover, there were far too many repetitions. Instead form and content are only stressed in cases where the distinction adds something to the interpretation.

POLYPHONIC DIMENSIONS

Searching for meaning attributed to the narratives and figures from this discursive universe in archival material creates a number of problems on which one has to take a stance. The message in one and the same text can be ambivalent, and there can be several parallel meanings, even though not all may be relevant at the same time. The texts are also full of latent or open signifiers which may have been perceived very differently by listeners in an actual performance situation. All legends in oral traditions are dependent on the storyteller’s ability to formulate a version that catches the attention of the audience and situational circumstances. The story as narrated thus refers to both individual and collective contexts.

In oral traditions there are always many ways to tell, understand and interpret a story. Great importance is therefore attached to the individual

¹⁸ Iser (1978:197).

¹⁹ Iser (1978:182).

interpretations that must have existed. We cannot reconstruct them individually, but we should accept the idea of variation in receiving and understanding. The legends are linked to a discursive universe, both collective and individual, which emerges from the properties and experiences of individual persons; or as Charles W. Joyner writes: “legend formation is collective, but legend creation is individual”.²⁰

Thus, there were as many possible interpretations as there were listeners at the performance. Since great emphasis is placed on norms and execution of power in the analyses, the possibilities of both revolt and repression are often found in the same text. After some of the analyses a few conceivable situations are suggested, entirely as constructions, to show possible variations of one and the same “legend type” that otherwise could stand out as fairly monochrome. The archived legend texts are problematic since, in the stereotyped form—based on motif rather than content—in which they are written down, they can scarcely be used for a repertoire analysis. They are not sufficiently individually formulated in the manuscripts to be attributable to individual informants. Nor can we treat the archival records as written text. Instead the range of this discursive universe is indicated through “individual interpretations”, not in order to link them to a specific informant, but to show how elastic the texts are. This may seem speculative, but the purpose of these constructions has been to point to interpretive possibilities that must have surrounded the original performances.

As a historian of religions, my aim in this analysis has been to get at the religious content contained in the legends and to try to ascertain the meanings that people may have invested in these texts. This entailed carefully distinguishing between the textual world and everyday realities, and between social circumstances and religious assumptions. Eva Österberg, in her work on “Folk Mentality and State Power”, mentions some influential scholars who have also grappled with this problem:

Both Burke and Gurevich thus analytically distinguish a mental world that is not identical with the material world. This is not the same as saying that they see the mental world as independent of the more concrete dimensions of reality. On the contrary, they presuppose some connection between other realities and mentalities, between matter and spirit. It is just that the connection is not so easy to establish unambiguously.²¹

²⁰ Joyner (1982:59).

²¹ Österberg (1992:82).

GROUPING THE LEGENDS

The analysis of the *mara* legends is based on a division into analogy legends and curse legends which both underline the stories as grounded in magical thinking. This distinction is entirely my own; it differs from the archives' classifications and is of fundamental significance for the interpretations. It is not claimed that it is the only conceivable distinction; rather, the arguments for this division are based on the presentation of the textual world surrounding the *mara* in the previous chapters. This division is entirely a tool and is intended to help in understanding the hag material; it does not represent a claim that the grouping represents cognitive terms in individual people's minds.

The terms "analogy legends" and "curse legends" are based on the differences in local explanations of the origins of the hag. In the first group, the analogy legends, the hag is a person's materialized will and appears in transformed guise with analogical ties to the person who sent it. In the second group the hag is afflicted by a curse and forced to undergo the nocturnal transformations, sometimes unknown to herself.

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CHAPTER 6

Analogy Legends

In the survey of the hag material, we saw how most of the records concerning personal experiences of the *mara* described her as a highly diffuse figure, fully in keeping with the powerful mental discomfort caused by a nocturnal attack of anxiety. Apart from the fact that this was a relevant and realistic way to describe the sense of anxiety experienced by the victim, it was also of benefit to the narrative, since it gave the experience a general character that listeners could understand. If a story is not too concrete in its external details, it is easy to invoke one's own experience to visualize something frightening and dangerous; such narratives, based on alleged or real personal experiences, confirmed that the hag was a being that really existed. Hence the relevance of the empty spots. In the legends, which clarify other aspects of the concepts about the hag, she appears with sharper contours and in a more definitive form. In some cases—for example, in the legends about the foal's caul—the hag is a threat but the text says nothing about a bodily presence. Other legends, in contrast, present her as being directly bound to a highly specific external form.

“Analogy legends” is my term for texts where the hag, more or less explicitly, appears as the materialized will or desire of a specific individual. The main element in these legends is the revealing of the hag's identity, which is the resolution of the problem. In the early, medieval texts, narratives about harm caused by analogical links are documented in the hag material; thus, we may conclude that the idea belongs to the core of the

hag texts. The foundation for all these texts is the notion of the hag's power and the ability of certain people to materialize desire and malevolence in a visible figure. This way of perceiving human mental capacity is the basis for all stories involving magic in practice, and the analogy legends are the hag texts which most explicitly link ideas about the hag to beliefs about magic. The grouping of the legends proceeds from the content of the texts: the harm caused by the analogical relationship between the bodies. The reason to choose this basis for division is to emphasize the ideas underlying the imaginaries, in this case, chiefly the magic thinking. Clarification is achieved by presenting the analogy legends as a unit and contrasting them with the curse legends. Once again, this division is entirely an analytical tool, not claiming to represent experiences in people's lives.

Among the analogy legends, the greatest number are texts that Bengt af Klintberg, in his catalogue of legends, has called "Object or animal harmed—neighbour harmed"; these also most clearly express the analogy between the hag's different bodies, and therefore this group serves as the foundation for the designation. In these texts the *mara* appears in non-human form. When this figure suffers injury from someone who wants to guard against her attacks, a corresponding injury appears on the person who transformed herself. The actual analogy lies in the link between the two bodies.

When legends about analogous injuries were narrated, the different forms in which the hag appeared were very useful, since this meant she could easily be introduced into many settings and contexts. The hag appears in the analogy legends as various objects: a pitchfork, a shovel or a needle; or as animals, such as a cat, a sow, a mouse, a magpie and so on. Once the hag's human identity is revealed, it turns out in most cases that it is a person from the neighbourhood or some outsider in the community. Indeed, the legends communicate the knowledge that the hag's attack was caused by someone in the victim's immediate surroundings. In the analogy legends the hag very rarely appears as a terrifying nocturnal being in the form of a human or a diffuse figure, but almost always as an everyday object or animal. Measures taken against the hag in this kind of legend are described as a magical three-step method. As a result of aggression against the object or the animal, the hag's true identity is revealed and she is simultaneously punished, with the result that the target is released from torment. After the analogical connection, the three steps—reveal-punish-protect—constitute a second criterion when identifying analogy legends.

The analogy texts illustrate that the hag was conceived as both a nocturnal being that commits assaults and an envious person. Otherwise, it would be tempting to only discuss the nocturnal figure, giving rise to a distorted picture of what causes the hag in local imaginaries. The legends where the hag complains about the cold or vanishes from her clothes clearly show how the analogy legends concentrate on conflicts between people. In these texts we learn nothing about the hag's nocturnal guise; rather, we are told, for example, that it was a maid on the farm who had the ability to act outside her body. Like the witch and the milk-stealing *bjärra*, the hag was a human being who could transform herself or let her envious will take on a physical shape. This marks a great difference between the *mara* and other folk-belief creatures which have a stable form and which operate at the boundary between nature and culture: the *mara* is changeable and acts in the midst of the everyday reality of the human world.

Several of the general prophylactic methods used against the hag presented above recur as effective tools in the legends, especially fire and steel. The analogy texts, moreover, have an even more pronounced pattern of violence; people hit and hurt the object or animal in whose shape the hag appears. Ultimately, in one sense they are not instructions on how to act against a suspected hag; they are textual representations of fear. The violence conveyed by the texts is astonishing: deep wounds, severed limbs, serious burns. One example, which would amount to grievous bodily harm if it described a real course of events, comes from one of the Swedish island settlements in Estonia (Ormsö/Vormsi) in a record from the middle of the nineteenth century. The narrative focuses on the injuries that can arise when someone is active in a temporary guise. The victim defends himself vigorously, clearly seeking to inflict physical punishment on the hag.

In one family there was a grey sow that often showed itself in the evening, sniffing about everywhere, and it also came into the hall. The master of the house gave it a whipping and knocked out one of its eyes, while shouting, "You old grey gilt [young sow], don't come back anymore!"

The next day it was found that the neighbour woman had an eye put out.¹

This record contains a direct address to the hag that we recognize from the charms. The man in the legend suspects that it is a human being in the

¹FSF (1931 II.3:547), translating from Russwurm (1855 II:208).

guise of a pig. The pig was “sniffing about everywhere” on the farm and even entering the house: in other words, it posed an external threat. The violence is clearly marked, and the man acts with authority and power. He “gave it a whipping...”. Other analogy legends do not show the same insight into the origin of the unknown object; the aggressive reaction is merely aimed at what is perceived as alien and dangerous. Examples of immediate reactions like this are found in legends about both witches and hags, as when they end up getting shot while in the form of a magpie.

A hunter was out hunting early one morning, before daylight. He caught sight of a magpie and shot her, but instead of a magpie an old woman fell from the tree. She was a hag, but she had been out in the guise of a magpie, because the hag can use many different guises.²

This legend is similar to the most common stories about witches (sing. *Häxa*, *hekse*), while differing in one important respect from many other hag texts in that it takes place outdoors. Nevertheless, since the event is associated with night and darkness, the time of the nightmare hag—“before daylight”—it follows a familiar pattern. We recognize the violence against the hag from other legends, and from the way in which the action is performed, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The *mara* is exposed in accordance with the pattern and is forced to assume human form.

The different guises of the hag gave a skilled storyteller the opportunity to present the narrative of magic in many different ways. In the analogy legends the form taken by the hag changes according to the storyteller’s intentions and the circumstances of the narrative event, even though the key theme remains the same. To underline the elements of the analogy legends further, it should be pointed out that each text can be divided according to content, a division which often coincides with the different outward forms of the hag. The analogous connection between the bodies, and ultimate exposure, are the central and shared themes in all these texts.

²von Sydow (1911:601).

OBJECT OR ANIMAL HARMED—NEIGHBOUR HARMED

The Hag as a Pitchfork

The legends where the hag appears as an unknown pitchfork in the byre cowshred make up the largest group of all the analogy texts, and they are most common in the northern Nordic region.³ The heading assigned to these texts in the archives is “pitchfork legends”, and there is no reason not to use that. The alien object is attacked in some manner and is damaged in such a way that corresponding physical marks appear on the hag’s human form. With this method the identity of the guilty person is disclosed.

In legends where the hag appears as a pitchfork or a shovel there are two versions of the story. While they are thematically identical, as both deal with the threats of an envious, magic-working neighbour against livestock, but they can end in two different ways with regard to the altered state: either by breaking of the teeth (or the shaft) of the pitchfork so that the hag suffers a fracture, or by sticking the suspect implement into the manure heap so that the hag is found standing there in human form the following morning, unable to move. In both cases the guilty hag is exposed; in the former case she is injured, and in the latter she is punished by shaming.

A great deal of the hag material in the archives from Finland (in both Finnish and Swedish) and Estonia contains very obvious links to *trolldom*. Envy and greed are mentioned explicitly, and many contexts can be recognized from legends about witches and other workers of magic. These narratives are associated with several motifs: someone stays awake in the stable in order to discover the hag, or fires a shot over the horse to get rid of her, or grasps at the hag in an attempt to catch her. The parallel notions concerning the *mara*, witch, *bjära*, *puke*, *para* and other milk-stealing creatures emerge very clearly in the texts from this region.

The following narrative from south-eastern Finland shows how one of these pitchfork legends accords some common in northern Scandinavia, displaying patterns which are found in all the analogy texts.

Witches can turn themselves into the hag and come at night to torment the animals. That is the subject of the following story.

³ Many examples can be found in the collections of texts from Swedish-speaking Finland, *Finlands svenska folkdiktning*: FSF (1925 VII:2:197 ff.); FSF (1931 II:3:545ff.).

The horse on a certain farm was wet every night as if it had been driven very strenuously. It was suspected that it was the hag tormenting it. To find out what it was that was straining the horse at night, the farmer hid under a tub with an axe in his hand. Near midnight he saw a figure like a manure pitchfork coming in through the stable door and approaching the horse. The farmer hit the pitchfork with the axe and one prong of the pitchfork came off at the same time that the whole pitchfork disappeared. In the morning there was talk about the neighbour woman having broken a leg. As the hag she had taken the form of a manure pitchfork and had tormented her neighbour's horse, so when the farmer hit the pitchfork, he struck off the neighbour woman's leg.⁴

SYNOPSIS

A cow or a horse is hag-ridden over a lengthy period. The farmer or farmhand discovers a foreign object, usually a pitchfork or a shovel, in the cowshed or stable. He damages some part of the implement. The next morning the neighbour woman (or some other person in the neighbourhood) has broken a leg or an arm, or experienced some other physical injury.

STARTING POINT

The effects of the hag.

The legend quoted above begins with a comment to the collector: "Witches can turn themselves into the hag and come at night to torment the animals." This does not only provide a clarification to the local beliefs, for a reader today it adds the collector as a part of the narrative.

The storyteller thus makes a deliberate direct link between hag and witch. There is reason to believe that this is due to the context of the recording, since the informant might have suspected that the collector was not wholly familiar with the logic of the theme, and at least not in the same way as a listener from the local community would have been. Similar additions are highly conceivable if the narrator encountered an audience less alert or accustomed to the prevalent imaginaries.

The motivation for the action in the legend is that symptoms are observed in the animal, which is severely tormented, and a preliminary diagnosis is stated: "It was suspected that it was the hag tormenting it."

The pitchfork legend is always linked to the hag's attack on animals; she very rarely appears as a pitchfork when she

⁴SKS Rajajärvi 114 Häme, Finland, 1936. Translated by Martti Soutkari.

attacks people. In other legends the animal's torments may not always be immediately linked to the hag at the start; she may not be mentioned until later. The text contains an implicit definition of the hag in all her guises: not just a being that attacks by night but also a human who lives near the farm. Together the two forms constitute the hag. The awareness of the cause and the early diagnosis mean that the hag's presence is clearer than in other legends, but she has no other external nocturnal form in the text.

No action is taken at the starting point, beyond noting the effect of the hag's visits. The magic deed has already been performed, the hag has acted, and the traces she leaves are obvious. Symptoms are observed, no definitive diagnosis is made, but the suspicion is there and hence the curing methods are given.

A counteraction is prepared, and in this particular text the strategy is described in detail: "To find out what it was that was straining the horse at night, the farmer hid under a tub with an axe in his hand." In other versions this can be described in a rather fragmentary manner. Here the farmer stands out as a most active agent.

EPISODE

Foreign object found and damaged.

The legend says that "one prong of the pitchfork came off at the same time as the whole pitchfork disappeared", thus emphasizing the simultaneity of the transformation. The man enters the text and immediately becomes its main actor. An exact statement of the time, such as "near midnight", is rare in hag legends. There is a linguistic marker in the text which makes yet another clarification that it is not just an ordinary pitchfork: "a figure like a manure pitchfork".

The man finds a foreign object and reacts with a violent attack against it: he chops off a prong with his axe. In the blow against the prong we see the relationship between subject and object most clearly; the man's superior power is absolute. The man is the active agent, the subject of the text, and his aggressive action is undoubtedly aimed at the hag, the object of the text. His action is wholly geared to the consequences: the hag is to receive a punishment that is on a par with the torment she has caused the horse. This pattern is easily recognized from other texts: the hag is rarely the active party. It is the person who suffers the hag's attacks who takes

action. The narrative thrust of the analogy legends is not just about protecting oneself from the hag, but also about exposing and punishing her.

CHANGE OF STATE The hag's human form is discovered.

In the pitchfork legends the hag's transformation from one guise to another is never obvious; on the other hand, the pitchfork vanishes as soon as it becomes the object of the counteraction. The shifting between the hag body and the human body is never described in the *mara* texts; it is merely stated that the change took place, and it is usually not visible until the next day.

The hag body generally seems to be associated with night; this is most clearly expressed in the legends of the hag wife, where no direct action is needed for the transformation to come about. When it is discovered, the hag takes on the form of a young woman. The actual transformation is never the main point in hag legends, merely the reason why the hag-riding is always central.

The reaction to the action is that the hag's human body incurs an injury. The man is always the active party in the text. The hag is visible only through the symptoms displayed by the animals at the start and the neighbouring woman's injuries at the end. This is yet another example that demonstrates the way the hag is mostly concealed in the texts; it also illustrates the spots of indeterminacy which were filled by the listener's knowledge of the hag.

The people on the farm see the consequences of the actions taken and a definitive diagnosis can be made: the cause of the animal's illness was the neighbouring woman's envy. The diagnosis also means that the hag is exposed and punished; the text follows the magic three-step method. It turns out that the evil was close by: the neighbour was the nightmare hag. The transformation is an example of how empty spots in Iser's sense work; they require both imagination, knowledge of similar stories and some insight into conceptions of the human soul and into the logics of *trolldomstanken*.

CODA The last sentence serves as yet another comment on the legend's moral message.

"As the hag she had taken the form of a manure pitchfork and had tormented her neighbour's horse, so when the

farmer hit the pitchfork, he struck off the neighbouring woman's leg." Not all texts, however, conclude with such a clear coda and it is impossible to know whether this is a special addition in the recording moment. The text states it as a certainty that the hag can act in the shape of a pitchfork and that anything alien is a potential danger. The gender dichotomy that is so distinct in many other hag legends is not as obvious in the analogy legends since they are based on tropes of a general *trolldom* character. While they contain several examples of male hags, the vast majority of the pitchfork legends have as their central element the conflict between the farmer with his suffering livestock and an envious female neighbour.

The conflict that lies at the core of the analogy legends has a clearly marked boundary between evil and good action, and the principle by which witchcraft can be discovered and must be punished is emphasized. The man in the pitchfork legend is indirectly the one who confirms the norm. Through his action, which is motivated by the context—using force against a foreign object—he is rewarded when his animal is released from the hag's torments. This is legitimate masculine violence which appears to confirm the man's power over the hag/female neighbour. The power hierarchies are less explicit in these texts than in other hag legends, but they accentuate and are reinforced by the folk belief in the link between women and witchcraft. In the legend the hag chiefly acts to cause disease, thus constituting a threat to the well-being of the farmer's livestock, rather than a figure that brings anxiety. That which causes the animals' distress stabs the victim like a pitchfork. According to vernacular explanations, diseases often come flying through the air, and a person with knowledge of *trolldom* can send disease to afflict others. The hag that causes anxiety in other texts here has a vaguer and more indeterminate form.

Punishment and reward in the pitchfork legends, as in many other hag legends, are clearly expressed at the end of the text and are in accordance with the local moral economy. The hag, the envious neighbour woman, receives a highly visible punishment which simultaneously entails social stigmatization. The man's reward is that his animals are freed from the hag. At the same time, the farmer receives confirmation of the correctness of his behaviour and certainty about who in the neighbourhood nurtures malicious and envious thoughts about him.

SPATIAL CONTEXT AND CHRONOTOPE

The *marā* is frequently encountered at home. One distinctive feature of the pitchfork legend is that it always takes place in a cowshred or stable—never outdoors, with the exception of the version where the pitchfork is stuck into a manure heap just outside these buildings. The dwelling house and the bed are never the setting for the pitchfork legend, unlike other encounters with the nightmare hag. Nonetheless, she still serves as a contrast to other folk-belief beings that people usually confronted outdoors. The hag never appears as a pitchfork or a shovel in other texts than this specific type of legend.

RITUAL CONTEXT

The action that frees the farmer's animals from the hag is clearly rooted in the practice of *trolldom* and folk medicine: based on the analogous connection between the malicious person working the magic and the form in which she temporarily acts—in this case the pitchfork—the farmer's protective action is the central ritual act. The text devotes no attention to the transformation of the hag. This apotropaic pattern runs through the whole of the hag material, which concentrates on countering, driving away and eliminating the hag rather than describing or explaining who she is.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The pitchfork legend, like all texts about the hag, has a distinct social context in the day-to-day work and circumstances of farming. In this setting the pitchfork is a frequently used implement, and no listener would have been in doubt about the object being described. The contrast between the quotidian character of the pitchfork and its status as a foreign object—besides the fact that the implement acts—brings tension to the legends.

FEMALE AND MALE HAGS

Ideas about *trolldom* were linked in a special way to women, particularly understandings of the nightmare hag, something evidenced in many texts where both her biological sex and gender are accentuated in the descriptions of her possession of clandestine knowledge. At the same time, the powers associated with magic were something that both men and women could possess. There are several examples of male hags in the pitchfork legends, whose emphasis, as we have seen, is on the causes of the hag's visits and on the exposure of envy in a neighbour. The most frequently

repeated pattern tells of a man who exposes a woman, but the very fact that the hag's identity and hence sex is unknown until the denouement is typical of the analogy legends. It is very common for the nocturnal being to turn out to be a woman, and it is very rare for another woman to expose the hag. Identifying the sex of the hag is no problem in areas where narratives of the foal's caul dominate because in these legends the punishment of hag or werewolf status is the consequence of an act of magic, and the gender conflict is on a different level; the mother's action against the natural order is the central feature, along with the question of why hags exist at all. In cases where envy and *trolldom* are the most important aspect of a text, however, the hag can turn out to be a man. These texts always end with the exposure of the hag. It is in the analogy texts, where the pattern is to discover and punish, that we see the greatest difference from the curse legends. In the latter case the aim is release, in the former it is punishment. Naturally, an individual storyteller could use the element of exposure in the legend as a surprise when showing that the hag was a man. The story below from northern Sweden tells of one such male hag, told by a man born in 1858 to a female collector in 1938:

I had an uncle who told me that on a farm in Lenninge, Jönses their name was, they were disturbed in the night by the horses making a racket in the stable. The farmer got up several times to look, and the horses were snorting and restless. One night he had to go out and he took a knife, because the horses were so restless, but he couldn't see anything. He turned and was about to leave when he caught sight of a pitchfork at the door that he didn't recognize. "Whatever the hell it might be, I'll stick my knife in it," he said. And so he did, but it felt strange, just as if he was sticking the knife into something soft.

In the morning there came a message that he was to go to the neighbouring farm—that was Erk-Daniels—because the farmer there was sick in bed. And when he got there, the farmer was lying with a knife in his thigh, and he couldn't get better until he had spoken to the farmer who had stuck it there. It was the farmer of Erk-Daniels who had gone to the Jönses' stable and worried the horses there.⁵

A man in the neighbourhood, singled out by name, had caused the horses to be "restless", as this text says, but the hag is not expressly mentioned. "Whatever the hell it might be," says the farmer before sticking his knife into the unknown object, but no diagnosis is made of the hag as the cause; the farmer seems to act by intuition. The text goes further than hag texts normally do, since the hag on the neighbouring farm cannot get the knife

⁵ ULMA 12721:5:40 f. Hälsingland, Sweden 1938.

out of his thigh until he has talked to his assailant. This confrontation between the parties renders the event a harsh example of the conflicts that are central in all analogy legends. The sex of the hag, however, is not accentuated in the text. The analogy is marked all the more strongly by the role of the knife when it comes to exposing–punishing–detering (Fig. 6.1).



Fig. 6.1 The narrator of the legend by his well where the sprite used to show himself (ULMA 12721–29:77). (The photograph was taken in 1939 by one of the most prolific female collectors of Nordic folk belief, Ingeborg Nordin-Grip)

THE PITCHFORK IN THE *MARA* IMAGINARY

Earlier sections have mentioned that the hag appears in many guises, while most texts describe her as diffuse and shapeless. In this group of legends she (occasionally he) appears in a clear and concrete form. The pitchfork with its sharp “teeth” or “claws” at the end of the wooden shaft was used for lifting manure, peat, root vegetables and the like; the shovel was used for moving all kinds of loose material. Both were necessary for work and were ostensibly trivial objects. Why was the hag identified with these implements? The analogy legends offer several interpretations.

The pitchfork was an everyday tool, associated with working with the farm animals and providing the necessary care for them. When the hag in these legends comes in the guise of one, she is sneaking into everyday life; unnoticed, she is suddenly in close proximity to the livestock. There is a certain psychological effect in letting the evil take the form of an implement that is so integral to everyday life. Likewise, when the hag-riding is caused by an envious neighbour, the torment originates in the neighbourhood, in the immediate vicinity. In the texts about the hag, the root of the evil is not somewhere far away, but lodged in the day-to-day reality. From this perspective, telling stories about the hag is a way to talk about conflicts. Narrow survival margins and the relatively few ways of making a living produced a constant seedbed of aggression; envy, social control, resources and other people’s behaviour were always important elements of social life.

The hag is discovered because, as a foreign object that has intruded on her victim’s domestic sphere, her magical stratagem is exposed with the aid of a violent reaction against the thing that does not belong in the stable. In a community with relatively few contacts outside the immediate social context, anything alien is readily viewed as a potential danger, and the discussion of envy and the notion of limited good demonstrates how social conflicts were given economic and clandestine form in these conditions. Since a person’s scope was strictly limited, a neighbour could always be suspected of wanting to steal one’s “fortune”. The farmer/farmhand in the legend gains control over the situation by virtue of his aggressive action, thus confirming both his power over witchcraft and the ecclesiastical norms which opposed all forms of magic and witchcraft.

The pitchfork and the shovel also have a figurative meaning as vital elements in the work to produce milk and grain: small quotidian implements in a larger system of production. Milk and cereals were the basis of survival for humans and animals alike, and caring for the animals was built on shared

harsh material conditions.⁶ Their economic value was a palpable reality. It was not just for the matter of hygiene that the animals and their shelters were kept clean, but because it was necessary for the animals' well-being and productivity. The pitchfork was used, for instance, to remove cow and horse dung—a laborious and dirty job—and occasionally the hag is identified with manure rather than with the pitchfork. This may be compared with the texts about *marapaska* (Finnish, “hag shit”), where there is a total identification between the human hag and contemptible dirt, which, of course is a concept that only means something in a specific context. Obviously, perceptions of dirt in these rural communities differed from what we in our post-industrial society regard as dirt or impurity. Nonetheless, all bodily exudations had a special status in folk medicine, as uncontrollable substances which were simultaneously intimately associated with a living being or a particular individual. Both urine and excrement have special connotations in many rituals and texts aimed at warding off the hag.

The moral status of the hag, that is, the person who nurtures the envious and malicious thoughts, is associated with horse and cow dung. The version of the hag legends that ends with the guilty party being stuck firmly in the dunghill corresponds to other legends with a humiliating punishment for clandestine acts: those about foal's cauls and witches (“The Priest's Wife Who Became a Horse”,⁷ “The Old Woman Who Cried out for Milk”⁸) but also legends about the Devil (“The Devil Got to Be the Fourth Wheel”⁹). The moral of these texts could be punishment through humiliation.

The pitchfork and the shovel are both sharp, weapon-like implements, even when the prongs of the pitchfork were made of wood. The fact that the hag takes the form of these objects indicates the damage it was thought that a hag could cause, and how serious a threat she thus constituted. The physical damage she inflicted was palpable and could therefore be identified with these sharp objects. To protect themselves from the hag and other creatures, people often used knives, sickles, scythes, hackles (flax combs) and other edged tools with the dual imaginary of steel and weapons.

⁶Tone Dahlstedt has convincingly shown how strong the bonds between women and cows could be in rural society based on archive material from Norrbotten in the very north of Sweden (1976, 1991).

⁷Klintberg (2010:279 f).

⁸Klintberg (2010:284).

⁹Klintberg (2010:229).

In some legends about the hag the narrative takes advantage of the relationship between weapon and protection and reverses the story: the hag is made to turn the hackle. This is a roguish feature which we recognize from legends about the Devil, where it is uncertain right up to the end who is deceiving whom. In these legends the person who acts is not the gullible hag—the silly creature who can be stopped by a pair of shoes pointing in the wrong direction out of the room or be forced to perform impossible counting tasks—but a powerful figure who takes up the struggle against the person who is trying to stop her.

You tie a hackle with the spikes upwards on the animal's back; that protects it against the hag. But it has happened that the hag has turned the hackle upside down and set the spikes in the animal.¹⁰

There are just a few examples of this type of legend, and only in the Swedish-language material from Finland, but the hag's counteraction is interesting. In other texts she disappears or is exposed as soon as the victim learns how to ward off the hag and follows the advice provided. All this corresponds to the Church's view of such creatures as existing but possible to deter. When the hag turns the hackle in the legend, she escalates the conflict and ends up the victor. We may suspect a half-joking, half-serious tone, telling us that hags and other workers of magic are not to be treated lightly. In myths and legends all over the world there are figures with special knowledge, exceptional skills and powers, which act in the same ambiguous way.

In the pitchfork legends the hag is almost always a woman, and although the pitchfork is chiefly associated with work in the barn, there is another aspect of the actual form of the implement. It was customary to divide utility objects into male and female. All tools which are in some way divided into two parts are feminine whereas straight ones are masculine: the spoon is female and the knife is male. It is not implausible that these kind of sexual images could be used with great effect by some storytellers; the spreading prongs of the pitchfork could easily become an image of the female body and thus reinforce ideas linking female sexuality and magic.

The pitchfork is attacked with great force in the legends in order to ascertain who is causing the torment of the animal and to reveal the guilty person. The punishment that afflicts the hag also has moral dimensions,

¹⁰ SLS 1550:201 Åland, Finland 1935–45.

since *trolldom*, according to the Church and the catechism, had to be curbed and punished. Force was used against force and legitimated as the correct reaction to the hag. One of the basic conditions for this magical logic is that anything alien is a potential threat; envy and fear come hand in hand. “One should not let any stranger into the byre, for then the cows get the ‘hag’”, observes a record from Swedish-speaking Finland.¹¹ Both Foster and Sehmsdorf emphasize fear in their discussions of limited good and envy. “Envy was a reality to be feared”, Sehmsdorf writes.¹²

Analogy legends in general and pitchfork legends in particular are especially widespread in northern Sweden and Finland. According to Simonsuuri’s index of Finnish legends, the pitchfork motif is associated with several different supernatural creatures: *painajainen*,¹³ *mara*¹⁴ and *para*.¹⁵ In most cases—actually ten times as often as other objects—it is the witches that are transformed into a pitchfork, known in Finnish as *trulli*, *noitaämmä*, and other names.¹⁶ The narrative about the pitchfork is a witch legend in Finland, but the name is fundamentally irrelevant; the important thing to note is that ideas about links between a strange pitchfork and a malicious person are deep-rooted.

STUCK IN THE MANURE HEAP

In one variant of the pitchfork legends, the man who acts takes the foreign pitchfork and resolutely sticks it in the manure heap outside the stable. The next morning the hag thus revealed is back into human shape and unable to extricate herself. Forcing someone into this position is, of course, an exceedingly humiliating punishment. In some texts on the subject the hag is even stuck headfirst into the dunghill. This grotesque image does not represent a desire to suffocate a person in a concrete sense; rather, it is an expression of the ultimate humiliation. As an emblematic punishment, it is a powerful image of the severe retribution deserved by anyone who threatened livestock welfare or human peace of mind, and also of the vehement aggression common to these texts.

¹¹ SLS 220:130 Österbotten, Finland 1913.

¹² Sehmsdorf (1988:42).

¹³ Simonsuuri (1961 Q 231 “Alp als Mistgabel”).

¹⁴ Simonsuuri (1961 Q 316 “Mahr als Mistgabel im Viehstall”).

¹⁵ Simonsuuri (1961 H 231 “para als Mistgabel”).

¹⁶ Simonsuuri (1961 D 1721 “Hexe als Mistgabel”).

There was a woman who was ridden by the hag every night. There came an old tramp woman who told her to go to the manure heap and stick a pitchfork over its head in the manure. [This means putting the prongs of the pitchfork so far down in the manure that they cannot be seen.] Then she would be in peace from the hag. In the morning when she came out, the neighbour's girl was standing stuck in the manure. Then the neighbour's girl thanked her for giving her back her freedom. For it was she who had been the hag every night.¹⁷

In this text, narrated by a woman from the Swedish west coast, it is a human being who is tormented, unlike most other pitchfork legends. Further, the hag does not appear as a pitchfork on the occasions that she plagues the neighbour, yet she is assumed to be associated with the implement. Knowledge about this state of affairs, as is so often the case in texts about the hag, comes from an outsider, a mentor. The victim obviously does not know how to get rid of the torment, but another woman is able to advise her to stick a pitchfork in the manure heap. The person conveying the magical knowledge in this case is a woman who is a social outsider, a tramp (*rännarkäring*). A possible interpretation of this is that the vagrant woman had been able to acquire considerable clandestine knowledge in her travels and thus knew more than someone living permanently on a farm. A more plausible explanation, however, is that possession of a kind of knowledge of, and familiarity with, covert performances resulted in social stigma. Anyone who “knew a lot” was deviant in some sense.

This legend is also an example of how texts could be formulated when conceptualizations interfered. The link to the pitchfork or the manure heap is not obvious; it enters the legend as “knowledge from outside”. The description of the neighbour, or someone else, standing upside down in the manure heap, carries a strong picture of humiliation along with burlesque comical aspects. A skilled storyteller could of course contrast these two features. Presenting the image of a neighbour stuck in the dung naturally yielded a hilarious tale based on *Schadenfreude*, but it also served as a horrifying reminder of the presence of *trolldom* in everyday life. Beyond all doubt, the manure heap here is a representation of dirt and impurity, even though it was known as “the pride of the farm” because of the economic value it represented. Only a farmer with many animals had a

¹⁷NM EU 3019:763 Bohuslän, Sweden (1931).

big dunghill. In addition, it was believed to have the power to cure sickness.¹⁸ This increased the effect of having the nightmare hag stand in it.

Another, more realistic, but still humiliating punishment in the legends was to pour water over the suspected hag. We find this in some Danish records, where the link with magic is less obvious than in other analogy legends. The material comes, above all, from Grundtvig's collections. The texts describe how the farmhand pours water over the head of the hag-ridden horse, and the guilty person suddenly stands there in human form.¹⁹ Both the drama and the complexity are toned down in these Danish texts, but the element of humiliation remains.

The Hag as Some Other Object

In a more violent variant of "Stuck in the Manure Heap" from the island Gotland in the Baltic Sea, a needle is found beside an animal instead of a pitchfork. The pattern is the same but there is a noticeable intensification of the elements of threat and damage:

When a farmer and his farmhands went out to the stable one evening to do some chores, one of the horses was standing there sweating so that the water poured off him, and he was downcast. The farmer, who suspected what was wrong with the beast, looked more closely and finally found a darning needle stuck in the horse's chest. He took out the needle and put it with the eye downwards in the manure heap overnight. And when they came out in the morning, the neighbour woman (*astu-mor*) was standing on her head in the manure heap! For when the sun rose, she had to be transformed [back to her human form].²⁰

The narrative begins with a diagnosis of the animal's status, which is described as *amodenes*, "discouraged, downcast". The farmer has an idea of the cause and inspects the horse carefully, as there must be an outward sign indicating the presence of the hag. When the legend talks of a needle having been stuck in the horse's chest, this becomes a powerful image of the threat and the harm to which the horse has been subjected. The needle, like the pitchfork, is an everyday object that attracts little attention because it is so small as to be almost invisible. We

¹⁸ Tillhagen (1962:136), Reichborn-Kjennerud (1927 I:126 f.).

¹⁹ Grundtvig ed. Ellekilde (1944:377ff).

²⁰ Säve (1959:227) Gotland, Sweden.

recognize from the pitchfork legends the account of how the hag sneaks up on her victim. The sickness is not transmitted via the needle, and the needle is not a metaphor for the sickness. The needle *is* the hag. The eye of the needle corresponds to the neighbouring woman's head, and in the morning she is found with it stuck in the manure heap, with the storyteller creating a grotesque and ridiculous image of the kind of relationship possible between neighbours. The coda of the legend uses an explanation that is very common and explicitly expressed in the legends of the hag wife, namely, that the hag has to change shape when day breaks. To expose her in her human form, she must be held fast in some way until dawn. "For when the sun rose she had to be transformed." The text above, with its highlighting of the eye of the needle, is perhaps the clearest analogy legend. Through everyday metaphors it expresses a rather advanced magic logic.

Keeping Watch in the Stable

Many legends, especially those in both languages from Finland, tell of nocturnal vigils in the stable to find out who is tormenting the animals. Such vigils were actually arranged during the era of witch hunts, but those in the hag traditions are probably fictitious. Just like the performance involving the foal's caul, it was a ritual act that was the subject of stories rather than a real practice. In both cases, however, the texts follow—in both form and content—the magic rituals and charms of folk medicine. The purpose of the vigils described in the analogy legends is to find a physical object which can be envisaged as having some connection to the hag's human body, or be in some other way associated with her, as in this version from Västergötland:

There was a farmer once that I heard of. He kept watch in the stable to see when the hag came, but she didn't. Otherwise she can come like a shaggy animal and that can be anything at all, a person too. And as he was standing there the farmer saw a broom on the horse's back.²¹

The person telling the story knows the complexity of the forms the hag can take, the multiple guises—"she can come like a shaggy animal and that can be anything at all, a person too"—or an object, as it turns out. The

²¹ IFGH 1020:20, Västergötland, Sweden, 1927.

farmer in this story wanted to see the hag, but evidently he almost failed in his efforts. This legend does not tell us whether he later discovered the hag's human identity or if he succeeded in stopping her, but the vigils did result in his managing to see the broom.

The following Finnish quotation sheds light on the question of the importance one should attach to the external form of the hag, something not entirely uncomplicated in either the analytical or the local model:

The farmer keeps watch in the stable during Christmas Night with a lighted candle under a bushel measure. When the hag comes he lifts the bushel and sees the figure of Solttila's wife riding the horse. He hit the hag on the leg with a rolling pin. At the same time, Solttila's wife's leg came off during the Christmas morning service.²²

The man's grasp of the situation is expressed in the very first sentence; the hag must already have caused some harm which the text does not mention. The listeners are aware of the reason for the vigil. The farmer knows that the night before Christmas is a suitable time to mount a counterattack on the hag. In this text the hag is in the same form in two places simultaneously: in the stable and at the Christmas morning service. This also shows that questions and explanations concerning the guises of the hag—the actual transformation in a technical and physiological sense—should be part of the analysis. In local discourse it is taken for granted that one can be in two places at the same time if one is a hag or a witch. Local discourse asks other questions, about greed, envy and guilt, and it therefore gives completely different answers grounded in the storyteller's and the listeners' discursive universe.

It evidently does not worry the storyteller that Solttila's wife was seen in two places at the same time. The important thing is that she had the ability and that she used it for evil purposes. The form taken by the hag in the stable is not specified, but she has a leg that the farmer can knock off, which is a hint that she showed herself in a human body, not just as a spirit. This physical presence, the external sign, is important in the hag texts.

Christmas morning occurs frequently in Nordic folklore in connection with stories about the dead, the Devil and *trolldom*.²³ That was a night at the darkest time of the year, with a strong religious charge, a very old

²² SKS TK 54:7 Satakunta, Finland, 1961. Translated by Martti Soutkari.

²³ Hagberg (1937:650 f.), Johansson (1991:49ff. et passim).

festive occasion when many people were assembled; this is implicit in the texts about events on the night and morning before Christmas Day. For those who wanted to point out a hag effectively, the Christmas morning service was of course better than other services, both for the social humiliation and for the given link between magic and this night.

As has already been stressed with regard to examples of texts about the hag, both pitchfork legends and others, the form of the hag is of less interest than the cause of the hag's attack, on exposing who it is and discovering how to get rid of her. Comparisons within the hag material, however, show us that the outer form corresponds with the theme in any particular text. The most important thing in the analogy legends is to identify a well-known person who has materialized her (or his) will. This can be compared with the legends of the hag wife, where the human form of the hag is also forced into the open, although in these legends she turns out to be a young girl of unknown origin. Analogy legends always place the origin of envy in the neighbourhood and the immediate vicinity of the storyteller. The results in the narratives about stable vigils, however, are not always what was expected: that a female neighbour or some other person in the vicinity turns out to be a hag.

Sometimes it is the master's family itself that is the hag. On a farm where the horses were harassed, the farmhand hid during the night and saw the farmer himself.²⁴

Here no injury is done to the hag, and in that respect the text differs in content from the heading, "Object or animal harmed—neighbour harmed". Yet the vigil in the stable has an element that is recognizable from many other texts: the purpose of exposure is achieved, although it is not a person outside the farm who is the hag, but the master himself. This motif appears again in the section about the legend type, "Dead on the Scythe" (discussed below).

The story of the exposure of the farmer offers an image of social power struggle. The servants' freedom varied at different times and in different parts of Scandinavia, but the master's power was traditionally great, both in law and in reality. A master who so wished could subject his servants to considerable sexual and economic repression. Telling heinous tales about a person who exerted power over one's life made the legend a form of

²⁴ SLS 90:109 Åland, Finland 1902.

revenge. It had an even greater effect if the story claimed that the farmer himself was not aware of his nocturnal doings, thus linking the legend to the idea of the presence of *trolldom* in everyday life.

Catching the Hag

In many texts about the hag, the motif of keeping watch and somehow immediately injuring the hag is explicitly stated; sometimes the storyteller formulates this over the course of a whole legend. The following example can be difficult to assign to any particular group of texts, but it has an emotional intensity that makes it interesting:

If only you could get at her to cut her so that blood came, then she wouldn't come again. There was one who had got hold of her leg and wanted to hold her, but he didn't succeed.²⁵

The text radiates the hope of “getting at” the person who is the hag in order to exact vengeance. The hag's deed must not go without response; she must encounter resistance. This pattern of conflict—action and counteraction—can be recognized from the corpus of *mara* charms. This text too builds on the idea that the external sign, in this case blood, is what makes it possible to get at the hag. The expression, “There was one” who almost succeeded in grabbing the hag with his bare hands, is a wording that brings the event to life. It is a way of telling stories that makes it easy for many listeners to identify with the victim, who failed despite his efforts to gain power over the hag.

Bente Alver and Torunn Selberg's study of Norwegian ideas about witches also mentions the widespread notion that a person who struck a witch and drew blood gained power over her. They associate this idea with addressing the guilty person, but this is not the case as regards the hag texts. With the hag the idea is to hurt the temporary guise so that the human form will be injured, with the consequence that the person who goes hag-riding is exposed. Addressing the hag, as we saw above, concerns the power of the word over the shape, and it is directed at the human figure.

²⁵ Bergstrand (1947:116) Bohuslän, Sweden.

If one made the witch bleed so that the blood dripped on the ground, or exposed her by calling her a witch, one took the harmful capabilities from her.²⁶

Another record from Bohuslän, which is very close to the one cited above, is even more pessimistic in tone with regard to the possibility of getting at the hag; it describes a personal experience:

If only I could move so much that I could get hold of the penknife and stab at her, she would stay away.²⁷

The man's expression, "If only", has a tone of resignation, making it seem like a hopeless endeavour to get hold of the hag. The advice to catch the hag seems unrealistic, but there is still the aggressive hope and a strong desire to reach the penknife and stick it in the hag. When reading an archival text like this the scale of variation in ideas about the hag becomes apparent. We find irony, humour, gravity, suspicion and teasing expressions in the texts about the *mara*; we also see hopelessness and worry about the animals' sickness, and we find documentations of personal encounters with the hag.

Examples of advice to get rid of her by stabbing her appear among the recommendations for protecting oneself and one's livestock against the hag and also in personal narratives of meetings with the hag. Implicit in these examples is the hope of inflicting injury on the body of the guilty person. These records, which are of various kinds, convey the intense violence and aggression that is more or less explicit in all analogy legends, and also the demand of magic thinking that an external sign that can accomplish the magic three-step method be created or forced.

The Hag as a Whirlwind

The hag sometimes appears as a whirlwind, which is also very common in the witch legends. The stories about the enchanted winds are fashioned like analogy legends and always proceed from the analogous connection between the wind and the human figure. The reactions in the whirlwind narratives are more spontaneous than in other texts on *trolldom*, which

²⁶ Alver and Selberg (1990:283).

²⁷ Bergstrand (1947:116) Bohuslän, Sweden.

clearly follow the intrinsic logic of magic thinking, in which the person acting also receives guidance from a mentor. The name of the figure varies and, just like the pitchfork legends, these texts can be about both witches and hags. The history of religions is full of examples of parallels drawn between unbridled forces of nature, such as the whirlwind, and psychological forces of the kind expressed by the figure of the hag, especially in relation to concepts about demons. A typical statement recorded from Swedish-speaking Finland contains the following instruction:

Whirlwinds are nothing but travelling witches, and therefore you should never swear when you see one, but rather say a prayer.²⁸

The advice not to swear when meeting such a diffuse figure reminds us of the close association between all these beings and the Devil, with the wind as the outward sign that witches and hags are on the move. The stories about the hag as a whirlwind are very close to the legend of the hag who turns herself into a pitchfork. In the texts about whirlwinds, a knife is thrown quite spontaneously at the threatening wind, an act that corresponds to the aggression against the pitchfork. The knife disappears; the sudden and “inexplicable” phenomenon has its resolution when it is found again in the home of the guilty person. As in all analogy legends, this provides certainty about the true state of affairs. Likewise, the whirlwind texts express the same suspicion towards anything unusual or strange. In this case from northern Sweden it is a natural phenomenon, and here too it is better to take pre-emptive action:

We had an old woman from Skog who was a witch, that was Håka-Per's aunt in Böle. Then we had an old woman here at home, Aunt Kari, she'd never been married, who went about shaking. She and Dad were out raking and there came a whirlwind. “Throw yourself down, Aunt Kari,” Father cried, “otherwise the whirlwind will take you!” So he pulled out his knife, spat on it, and threw it into the whirlwind. Then it calmed down so that the haystack wasn't up in the air. But the knife was gone; then Father had to go to Böle to get the knife back again from Håka-Per's old woman. The knife was stuck in her thigh, and she laughed and said, “I didn't think that you would resort to the knife, Pelle.”²⁹

²⁸ FSF (1919 VII:1:748).

²⁹ ULMA 12721:29:33, Hälsingland, Sweden 1938.

This old witch (*trollgumma*) who appeared as a whirlwind could no doubt also be called a hag or witch. Although no explicit acts of witchcraft are observed or described, the important thing in the legend is the naming of the guilty woman and the identification of the whirlwind with evil: “otherwise the whirlwind will take you!” It is not merely a construction of comparative research to associate the hag with the whirlwind stories; the affinity of the motifs appears to have been obvious when the texts were living parts of oral traditions. In the following, the narrator claims the whirlwind is related to the nightmare hag in a response to one of the questionnaires that formed the basis for *Atlas över svensk folkkultur* (Map over Swedish folk culture) a long-term collecting project:

[A] whirlwind that rushes along the road and pulls up dust and soon disappears is related to the hag, and you have to watch out for it; a farmhand threw his knife into the *middasnisse* (as it was called, that little gust of wind) [and] he couldn’t find his knife no matter how hard he looked. Then he went on an errand to an old man who knew a bit of magic, it was rumoured. “Look, that’s my knife,” said the farmhand. “Oh no, that knife’s mine, you threw it at my knee the other day, so now the knife is mine.”³⁰

In this example the wind is called *middasnisse*, a personal name for the whirlwind and a euphemism for the Devil (often called Nisse), and the knife, as in many whirlwind legends, is the outward sign. The legend varies between describing the wind as a person and as a natural phenomenon. The old man who “knew a bit of magic” is not the mentor who helps the farmhand, as one might at first believe, but the witch who travels along the road like a wind. Here the storyteller achieves tension and an unexpected ending, while simultaneously problematizing knowledge of *trolldom* and hags. A person with this kind of knowledge can use it for diverse purposes.

The Hag as a Cat

We have only a few recorded instances of the “cat legend”, where the hag appears in the shape of a cat and incurs injury. This type constitutes a separate subsection in the archives of the Nordic Museum, but it is more reasonable to treat it among the analogy legends since the cat legend follows the magic three-step method. The analogous connection between the cat

³⁰ ULMA 14933:6 Östergötland, Swden.

and the woman is the central theme of the text, and there are the same elements of violence, punishment and exposure. The following is from the Swedish west coast:

A shoemaker was busy working in the evening when a cat came in. He took the last and struck the cat so that its leg came off, and in the morning one of his girls had lost a leg.³¹

This is a short legend and the hag is not mentioned at all. It seems to be taken for granted that a being can take the form of a cat and that some form of reaction is necessary. The legend does not really say why the shoemaker wanted to hurt the cat, and the beginning of the episode may seem meaningless and cruel in our eyes. The shoemaker maims a cat that happens to come into the room, but the text is not advocating cruelty to animals; instead it informs us of the correct behaviour against witches and the like. A great deal of presupposed knowledge about the hag, several “spots of indeterminacy”, lie behind a short text like this, and for this condensed form of what is actually a very long narrative one must also envisage several different ways of perceiving the text among individual listeners.

The shoemaker appears in some other hag legends as a temporary visitor to the farm. He is always the one who in some way resolves the conflict between the tormentor and the tormented, and it is he who discovers the truth. The cat is a common guise for creatures associated with *trolldom*, generally with negative consequences.³² The Devil, familiar with the art of shape-shifting, often shows himself in the form of a cat.

When a cat once appeared in a cowshred, people thought it was the hag, so they singed it. The following day a woman with singed eyebrows came to the farm. It was she who had gone “hag-travelling”.³³

Fire, which we know is a means to ward off witchcraft, recurs here as a way of exposing the hag. The actions in the text must be regarded as intuitive, as cats were otherwise commonplace animals. Why should this particular cat be subjected to this horrific treatment? The legend gives no answer to that question. It rather confirms the correctness of spontaneously

³¹ VFF 1650:3 Bohuslän, Sweden 1928.

³² Heurgren (1925:76ff).

³³ Klockars (1891:206).

aggressive behaviour against that which is perceived as alien and dangerous, something we recognize from the whirlwind narratives.

The legends about the hag as a cat show certain similarities with the Guntram legend, in which a human's soul appears as a mouse. This analogy narrative has been widespread across Europe ever since the Middle Ages. Carl-Martin Bergstrand, in his anthology of legends from Halland, has included a variant where the hag appears in a kind of Guntram legend:

When I was in service at one place, the tailor was up sewing one night when he had a lot to do. He was often hag-ridden when he slept, so he couldn't move a finger, but he didn't know who the hag was. Just then a mouse ran over the tailor's shears on the table as we sat there. The next day the maid said, "I dreamed that I walked over a steel bridge last night." Then we understood that she was the hag.³⁴

Just as in the legends about the man who married the hag, an international folktale motif has been attached to a being in Nordic vernacular religion.

Other Occasions When the Hag's Human Body Is Injured

There are several other legends and stories about analogous ties between the different forms in which the hag appeared, a particularly large number of which have been written down in Finland and northern Sweden. Stories about the temporary transformations of individuals who knew magic, and about how other people could discover this, obviously proffer rich opportunities for texts describing many different kinds of analogous injuries. Oral texts are always flexible and changeable, and there are, as already noted, good reasons to assume the existence of great individual variations between them. Here it is not a question of the diffuse hag of the personal experiences, but of simple everyday objects which attract no attention.

The Hag as a Straw

The threatening hag can occasionally assume the form of something as seemingly harmless as a straw as in the following legend from the Swedish west coast:

³⁴ Bergstrand (1949:140) Halland, Sweden.

In one place both cows and horses were hag-ridden. The man that owned the animals was then told that he ought to keep watch so that no one came into the barn. Well anyway, that didn't help. They had advised him to sweep it clean, so that there was nothing in with the animals. So he did that. And then one night—it was the night before Sunday—he caught sight of a straw in a mare's pen. He was sure that straw hadn't been there when he had swept. So he took the straw and set fire to it. But he put the fire out, so that there was a bit left of the straw. And on the Sunday morning half the linen shift of the maid on the farm was burnt up. And then she said that she never knew that she had been a hag. But she had always felt tired and poorly from having walked in her sleep.³⁵

Although the text is short, it has clear markers of time and place. No one need be in any doubt about where and when the event occurred: on the night before Sunday, a point in time that often recurs in texts about *troll-dom*. We recognize the starting point from many other texts where “cows and horses” were hag-ridden. The owner of the animals is obviously at a loss for what to do, and in this legend he receives help from a mentor. Yet the first piece of advice, to keep watch in the cowshred, yields no result: “Well anyway, that didn't help.” The farmer nevertheless refuses to give up. He sweeps out the cowshred and keeps watch once more. He then sees a straw “in a mare's pen”. The text emphasizes that he is sure it had not been there before, which shows how careful and attentive he was. As soon as he notices it he takes action, invokes the recurrent image of fire and burns the foreign straw, meanwhile ensuring that “there was a bit left”. This demonstrates his certainty about the effect of fire and about the link between the foreign straw and the hag's body: burning the whole straw would have killed the hag. The method the farmer is recommended to try is at once simple and subtle: the simple aspect is the use of fire, which is easily available and simultaneously a strong general image; the subtle aspect, in terms of both narrative technique and ritual, is the insight into the connection between the seemingly lifeless straw and the hag's body.

Burning clothes or linen undergarments was sometimes practised as a cure for disease, especially the falling sickness. A person who understood clandestine connections that other people could not see regarded this procedure as a matter of course.³⁶ Clothes, then as now, were indications of

³⁵ IFGH 5238:6 f. Bohuslän, Sweden 1947. Cited from normalized version by Klintberg (1972:243 f).

³⁶ Tillhagen (1962:197 f).

gender and status. The maid's shift has a powerful sexual charge, accentuating her nudity. Shifts, aprons, trousers and other gender-specific garments were used in a number of protective ritual acts against the hag and other beings.

Garments such as aprons and headdresses, as well as coiffures, were used to mark a woman's status as a gendered and social being,³⁷ comprising distinct signs of civil status and social affiliation.³⁸ Changes in these signs were immediately detected by people in the surroundings. The fact that it was the hag's shift that was burnt, a symbolically charged garment, marks the connection between sexuality and crimes of witchcraft. The effect of the fire on a garment that directly touches the body is a clear indication of the punishment that is wished upon her. As in the pitchfork legends, the aim is not only to expose the hag but also to inflict on her a severe punishment and mark her with a stigma.

The link between the straw and the shift differs from that between the pitchfork and the hag. There is no similarity in form whatever: the shift merely represents the woman and her body. In the pitchfork legends the punishment relates to the hag's activity; the analogy provides a connection to working with the animals and their care. The shift associates the hag with ideas of sexuality in the imaginaries about *trolldom*. The common feature is that the stories about the straw and the pitchfork reveal a woman as a nightmare hag, and that both are based on the magic three-step method.

Analogical thinking dominates the legend of the straw, but the end of the text brings it closer to the curse legends and the motif of the hag being unaware of her nocturnal activities. The coda of the narrative brings elements into the text that actually belong to the curse legends: "And then she said that she never knew that she had been a hag. But she had always felt tired and poorly from having walked in her sleep." The coda is a reminder that the division into analogy legends and curse legends belongs to a model whose purpose is to indicate the composition of the texts; in living oral traditions there is no opposition between them. We recognize the analogical pattern running through the entire text, but it ends with the explanation that the hag had done these evil deeds unbeknownst to herself.

³⁷ Wikman (1915).

³⁸ "if a pregnant woman went to the cowshred without an apron, the child got the falling sickness". Tillhagen (1962:196).

In a large manuscript of 1517 pages of records from Swedish-speaking districts in Finland, compiled by Ragna Ahlbäck, there are many variations of narratives about the injuries that arise because of the connection between the hag's bodies.³⁹ Someone grabs at the ball of yarn in which the hag appears, and the neighbour gets an injured leg,⁴⁰ or wool is thrown across the table by a tormented seaman and "a suspicious-looking woman drowns".⁴¹ There is a story of a woman in the village who finds it hard to sit after a man put a hackle on the back of a cow, which thus functions like a sharp weapon.⁴² Other Swedish texts from Finland talk about the hag as a bottle; when it is smashed, the woman on the next farm is injured⁴³; another example is when two men shoot a little bird and the miller is then unable to move.⁴⁴

THE HAG BECOMES SOOTY

The outward signs of successful retaliation by the person being tormented is accentuated to very different extents in the texts. An extreme and relatively uncommon example from Sweden, which shares the motif of exposure with many other myths and folktales, runs as follows:

There was once a person who was badly harassed by the hag. She came and rode him every night so that he could sometimes lie for several hours without being able to move or cry out. In the end he couldn't bear this anymore; he was so exhausted that it was only with the greatest of difficulty that he could work in the daytime; that's how badly the hag had tormented him. He tried all kinds of measures to keep the hag out, but none of them succeeded. Finally, however, a good friend told him that if he could find out who the hag was, she would stop. He also taught him how to do this. He was to change where he slept for one night, and put a copper kettle with the bottom up in the bed, and he would surely find out who the hag was. So he did this, and the next day he saw that the neighbour's wife was all black in the face, and so he knew that she was the one who had harassed him, but after that day she left him in peace.⁴⁵

³⁹SLS 560.

⁴⁰SLS 560:323 Åland, Finland 1942.

⁴¹SLS 560:506 Åland, Finland 1942.

⁴²SLS 560:1272 Åboland, Finland 1942.

⁴³FSF (1925 VII:2:198).

⁴⁴FSF (1927 II:3:545).

⁴⁵VFF 1664:38 f. Bohuslän, Sweden 1928.

The legend of the sooty hag, narrated by a man born in 1860, contrasts the daytime activities, work, with the night when the hag is active. “In the end he couldn’t bear this anymore; he was so exhausted that it was only with the greatest of difficulty that he could work in the daytime; that’s how badly the hag had tormented him.” Thanks to the mentor he learns of a clandestine way to get at her. This text can be contrasted with the legend of the cat cited above, with the great difference being the aim of the narratives. The tone in the story above is mocking and humorous, whereas violence is the central expression in the cat legend. The pattern in the legend of the sooty hag is however recognizable from the pitchfork legends: the hag must incur a physical injury which lets people in the neighbourhood know for sure who the hag is. In this legend the hag is not physically injured, but the soot is a clear marker and in accordance with the familiar schema the woman next door is the guilty party. As in many other texts about the hag, a mentor advises on how to solve the victim’s problem. The aim of exposing the hag is stated explicitly: “he would surely find out who the hag was”. We do not find the physical violence of the pitchfork legends, the broken legs, the wounds and so on. These are not described in the text, but there is a physical marker, a stigma that reveals and punishes the hag. The exposed hag incurs no painful physical punishment, but she has to bear the shame.

Hag Dung

Previous chapters described narratives concerned with whipping “hag dung” (*maranpaska*). The texts that mention this ritual are usually not legends, but the clear analogous connection means that they deserve to be considered along with the analogy legends. The belief that it was possible to “whip out” the guilty person is mostly associated with the milk-stealing *para* which is sent by someone who knows magic, but it also applied to witches.⁴⁶ There is understood to be an absolute analogy between the *para* and its creator/owner; when the *para* dies, so does its owner.⁴⁷ The legend variants, “Object or animal harmed—neighbour harmed”, never record that the hag dies or is killed in its nocturnal guise. In contrast, another group of analogy legends, “Dead on the Scythe”, has this motif.

⁴⁶ Simonsuuri (1961 D 1731 on witches, H 171 on the *para*, Q 231 on the *mara*).

⁴⁷ Simonsuuri (1961 H 261, “wenn *para* stirbt, stirbt auch sein Erzeuger”).

It is otherwise exceptional for the hag to die in the narratives; rather, the texts normally seek to convey ways in which she can be exposed.

The most common method for exposing the *para* is to burn or whip the substance that is found; then the guilty person will appear. Jan Wall, who performed a detailed study of the Nordic material on milk thieves, writes, "It was usually said that the 'butter' that was discovered had to be burnt or whipped, and this damage was thought to go back to the owner of the being, who was forced by the pain to come to the place in order to break off the action."⁴⁸

The practices described in the *maranpaska* texts can be regarded as fictitious rituals. There is admittedly nothing in the texts that is so complicated, unrealistic or impossible that it could not have been done in reality, yet it must be questioned whether the acts were ever performed. Other legends, such as those of the foal's caul below, create problems of the same kind: were they practised or were they fictitious? When reading all these legends and descriptions of rituals we get the impression that the main message was to draw analogies between the hag dung and the suspected person, not to communicate knowledge about an apotropaic act.

Outside barns you can often find what they call "hag dung" which the "hag" left behind. This should be burnt at once so that the hag will stop her rambling.⁴⁹

This is undoubtedly close to a possible and easily performable ritual. In their complexity, several texts about *maranpaska* can be compared to charms, which also have a ritual element and a foundation in concrete ethnomedical practice. The performance is simple and easy to understand, and the question of whether the action only exists at the level of the text is, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the message of the text: there are sure methods for exposing the hag.

The informant said that her mother got no butter because witch butter (*trollsmör*) grew on the ground. Then she procured nine kinds of tree (juniper, alder, birch, etc.), got the children to help, and whipped the witch butter. Then the neighbour woman came running, shouting and with eyes popping, and said that they were whipping her. Mother answered, "We're

⁴⁸ Wall (1977–1978:76).

⁴⁹ SLS 220:130 Österbotten, Finland 1913.

going to whip you, yes!” She took three whips and “piled it on her” three times, once with each whip. After that Mother got butter.⁵⁰

The texts from Finland about *maranpaska* are heavily charged with violence. Whipping with nine different species of twigs is a forceful act that has more to do with a carefully composed narrative than a practical custom. The text is built by contrasts and parallels. Witch butter is yellow and soft like real butter, but slimy and inedible. The neighbour woman’s clandestine deeds are directed at the mother’s churning, and the nine kinds of wood are used to make three whips which are used three times. If carried out in practice, the punishment meted out to the witch would be absurd, but in the story it presents a powerful image. If the text wanted to emphasize that witches should be whipped, then the person administering the punishment would not need to change the switch after each stroke. The mother acted against both the witch butter and the neighbour in the same action. Unusually, it is a woman here that exposes a female hag.

In folk medicine it was common practice to burn what was sick or apply fire above the sick place. In Norrbotten, according to Carl-Herman Tillhagen, one could achieve a healing effect “by burning a piece of tinder the size of a pea on the sick place”.⁵¹

The hag rides a calf. It is the neighbouring woman who is envious. A pile of human excrement is found at beside of the calf. When it is gone the calf begins to get better.⁵²

The most correct translation of *paska* is “shit”, and here the informant uses powerful imagery to underline as firmly as possible what he thinks about people who use witchcraft. There are also records where the hag is completely identified with the dung, and we may call to mind here the expressions in the legend of the hag who is stuck head down in the manure heap. Other texts narrate how the hag flies in through the keyhole, the shoemaker burns her with a candle and the next day a tramp woman (*strykarekärning*) arrives. After a long scolding that almost ends in physical violence, the woman turns the curse around and says to the farmhand who scolded her most, “Now you can be a hag as long as I have been.”⁵³ This

⁵⁰FSF (1919 VII:1:753).

⁵¹Tillhagen (1962:127).

⁵²SKS TK 112:300 Etelä-Savo, Finland 1961. Translated by Martti Soutkari.

⁵³ULMA 9059:19ff. Småland, Sweden 1935.

is a phrase that rarely occurs in the narratives of *trolldom*, but as we have seen, it blends different motifs in the living transmission.

Dead on the Scythe

One harsh analogy legend is about the hag who sets up a deadly obstacle against herself. In its short form and with all its drama, this text type sums up the essence of the hag material. The starting point is the same as in “Object or animal harmed—neighbour harmed”: the hag is tormenting animals. Unlike the previous analogy texts, there are no attempts to keep watch or to uncover the hag’s identity by other means. The legends tell us nothing about the figure of the hag, what it looks like or how it acts, just that someone on the farm ties sharp scythes above a tormented animal. The next day the hag is found hanging, in her human body, dead over the scythes. The idea that the shape-shifter never dies in its temporary form is described by Michael Jackson, and it appears to be a general phenomenon in stories of transformation. Instead, many narratives about shape-shifters emphasize that the critical moment is the actual transformation. The hag that dies on the scythe is in this respect a typical narrative; the hag must die in her human form. In these legend texts the hag harasses animals (cows or more usually horses), very seldom humans. “Dead on the Scythe” is a short legend, rarely furnished with details, and sometime almost fragmentary in its outline. The scythe, like the pitchfork, was a quotidian implement, but it is used here—unlike the hackle, the pitchfork and the needle in the earlier texts—as a weapon against the hag.

The legends about “Dead on the Scythe” thus differ in some points from most other analogy legends: the hag never takes the form of a scythe but is instead harmed by it. Moreover, the exposed hag in these legends is often a man. There is not the same gender conflict here as in other analogy narratives. Despite these reservations, the legend is a good fit with the way the analogy texts alternate between everyday reality and latent violence. Even though no transformation is ever mentioned, it is not unreasonable to assume that that one has taken place, for it is always the human body that suffers the injury and takes the punishment. This is the whole point of the analogy narratives. The scythe legends are also fashioned according to the three-step method, although the implement fills a different function. “Dead on the Scythe” is found in a number of versions which vary in regard to who is found dead, although it always turns out to be a person in the immediate vicinity of the storyteller. The strongest argument for



Fig. 6.2 The informant Emil Månsson (b. 1879) on a staged photograph with his wife taken by the collector Anna-Lisa Hedenström in 1934 (LUF 4525)

not classifying the scythe legends as curse legends is that magic thinking is present in such large measure. “Dead on the Scythe” builds on the same logic and values as other legends about beings. The narrative is profoundly tragic, but that is not good enough reason to group it with the wholly “innocent” hags. One can suspect a malicious intention on the part of the hag who is cut to death on the scythe. As in other analogy legends, it is someone’s materialized will that caused the hag-riding.

The most dramatic ending of the legend is when the hag is found as a dead man hanging over the scythes that he himself has hung up. For the hag in these stories is usually a man who rides his own horses, unknown to himself. When the hag prepares a trap and then gets killed in it, there is not the same explicit link to the witchcraft imaginaries as in other analogy legends. There is no envy or express will to do harm. The actual pattern, however, recurs here, expose—punish—deter, but the denouement is unexpected. The hag is closer than anyone could have suspected, and he is hoist with his own petard (Fig. 6.2).

One man tied a scythe over the horse so that the hag would cut itself. In the morning he himself lay dead in the stable. It was he himself who was the hag, although he didn't know it.⁵⁴

This story from the south of Sweden is a typical variant which conveys, in three short sentences, several important ideas about how to get rid of the hag, but it has a surprising ending after the usual advice that steel keeps evil away. The legend says that the deterrent weapon should preferably be an edged tool so that the hag will get cut and die, that the hag is active at night and that a person who has set a trap can expect a result the following morning. The starting point, as in earlier texts, is the effects of the hag, but nothing is said about keeping watch or in some other way acting in order to catch sight of the figure of the hag. The legend, in its form as an archival record, does not give the reader any explanation of what the hag is. Yet the *trolldom* element reveals itself clearly, and it is closer than one might suspect: subject and object are the same in the text. The otherwise very clear relationship between the subject—usually a man—and the object of his actions, embodied in his final mastery over the hag, is totally absent from this version of “Dead on the Scythe”. The action whereby the subject in the starting point becomes the object later in the episode fails to work out here. In this version the title, “The Farmer whom the *mara* had Power over”, had been given by the collector when he received this story from a former soldier born in 1858:

Once there was a farmer who had a horse that he found all sweaty in its stall every morning. To remedy this he went to a wise old man who advised him to hang up a couple of scythes lengthwise over the horse's back the next evening and see who it was that was riding the horse. The farmer did what the wise man said but the next morning he himself was wounded between the legs. Then he understood that he himself had been the hag, but after that the horse was left in peace.⁵⁵

In this longer variant the man seeks help from a “wise old man” (*klok gubbe*). It is relatively uncommon to find a mentor in the “Dead on the Scythe” legends, but in this case it reinforces the impression that the farmer is wholly unaware of his nocturnal activities. The text seems to convey the idea that even unconscious wishes and thoughts can take

⁵⁴ LUF 4525:18 Blekinge, Sweden 1934.

⁵⁵ LUF 3487:10 Småland, Sweden 1932.

material shape. This interpretation lends a deeper psychological dimension to the hag material, offering insights into how thoughts and emotions that are not expressed in words can nevertheless have a dramatic impact on our day-to-day lives. The man in this version does not die, but he is “wounded between the legs”, as the wording goes. This expression clearly combines the sexual aspects of the hag narratives with the idea of magic: a parallel is drawn between sexual desires and coveting other people’s livestock and “fortune”. The farmer’s unconscious nocturnal wishes led to a punishment that each listener could comprehend according to prevailing circumstances. Could he be suspected of bestiality, or had he shown an inappropriate interest in the maids?

The legend could certainly have been told by a farmhand or a maid in such a way that it expressed a wish for the master to be punished by castration. His economic and sexual power over the servants was significant. Apart from the fact that their freedom of movement was restricted by lack of any capital other than their labour, the master could sexually abuse the maids and prevent the men from marrying. In this way he controlled the servants’ intimate lives; on the one hand, he could take liberties that never had any official consequences other than the maid’s risk of becoming pregnant and undergoing social and ecclesiastical punishment; on the other, the master of the farm could play the legal and religious role of patriarch and monitor of norms in a world governed by the table of duties in Luther’s Small Catechism. Through the skilful use of these two roles, a farmer with servants could manipulate the world around him.

The hag sometime ties knots, which are impossible to loosen, in the horses’ manes. If you tie a scythe to the horse, the hag cannot do that. In one place they had done that. The following day they found the master in the stall, cleft into two parts.⁵⁶

The surprising ending to the legend marks the social difference between master and farmhand. The story of the farmer cut in two reveals cracks in the social façade. There are texts which stress very clearly that it is the farmhand who hangs up the scythes and that the farmer is the victim that the astonished farmhand discovers the following morning. Such variants further reinforce the conflict in the legend, which could be highlighted to differing extents in different situations. In 1932 a local road

⁵⁶NM EU Manuscript Helge Rosén “Folkföreställningar” I:1593 Skåne, Sweden 1908–9.

worker said that the master of Sjögerås in the parish of By, Värmland, had had his saddle horse was severely harassed by the hag:

They took and tied up a scythe over the horse and they thought that the hag would ride itself to death on it. The morning after they had done this, the stable boy came to the stable and saw that the master was cut in two in the saddle horse's stall. It was he that was the hag without knowing it.⁵⁷

The legend gives scope for individual storytellers to present the text about the master's true nature. It is interesting that the hag in these stories is unaware of his affliction, but scarcely the subject of a curse. He is the target, not of a curse from someone else, but of his own actions. Social conflict is strongly accentuated in these texts, and what individual storytellers could make of this constellation where the master is exposed as the hag by his own farmhand is something we can only imagine—especially if it was combined with sexual allusions of the kind cited about the hag who sets a trap for itself.

There are also scythe legends which omit the conflict between the master and the servants; rather, the confrontation is, as in other analogy legends, between the farm and the neighbours. The social antagonism is then directed outside the immediate community of the farm as told in Lister, Blekinge.

Against the hag, in one place they put a scythe in the mane of a horse that was badly tormented by the hag. But the day after a woman in the vicinity was badly injured.⁵⁸

In cases where the hag turns out to be the woman from the neighbouring farm, there is an even more explicit connection of “Dead on the Scythe” with “Object or animal harmed—neighbour harmed” and with a general pattern of *trolldom* in which women in particular are associated with evil acts. Occasional records combine “Dead on the Scythe” with attacks by the hag on humans. The following legend is interesting both because it is an example of one such exception and because the sexual theme recurs—the latter is of particular interest. This time, however, it is a woman who is the hag in the legend of the scythe—also this time from southern Sweden.

⁵⁷ ULMA 3870:3 Värmland, Sweden 1932.

⁵⁸ LUF 3278:10 Blekinge, Sweden 1930.

In one place the man was hag-ridden every single night. So they advised him to tie a scythe with the edge upwards over the bed. In the morning the woman of the farm was hanging there, cut to death. It was she who had been the hag.⁵⁹

The method, as presented by a clog-maker in 1915, is the same as in other texts where the hag torments the animals and has to be stopped. Here, however, it is the wife who hag-rides the man (*karlen*, which refers here to the farmhand). The text is less about a carnal relationship between the mistress and the farmhand than a way to insult her by hinting at strong sexual desires and to use the story to present the justifiable punishment for this.

The accounts of what happened when someone hung up a scythe so that the hag would kill herself are not always long enough to be called legends: for example, "There was someone who hung up scythes against the hag, but in the morning he himself was found dead on the scythe." Or as this one from the Swedish west coast:

The hag rides horses. Then you hang a scythe with the edge upwards right over the horse. The hag then cuts herself to death on the edge.⁶⁰

To sum up, it may be noted about the legends which recount how the hag is found dead on the scythe, that for the modern-day reader they seem to be closely connected to the other analogy texts. The question of whether the hag was assumed to be unaware of his or her nocturnal activities, or if it was a secret transformation, is not really answered in the texts, which rather express the notion that even unconscious thoughts and wishes could be materialized. The pronounced will that is so important in other analogy legends is absent here.

Although some scythe legends explicitly comment on the hag's unawareness, it is not a matter of a curse imposed from outside. Instead it is the thoughts and emotions of the exposed person that take this perceptible form. The ability of a particular individual will to assume material form is the theme of the text. There are features in the hag texts here which one is tempted to view as psychological insights into evil deeds and concealed conflicts. The variations within the legend type concern the

⁵⁹ LUF 868:3 Småland, Sweden 1915.

⁶⁰ IFGH 3890:19 f. Bohuslän, Sweden 1936.

identity of the exposed hag; otherwise the type has a fixed form with few deviations: it is always very short, and what differs is who is found hanging dead above the horse at the end of the narrative.

The legend about the hag who is killed or wounded on the scythe meets several of the criteria for analogy legends. It builds on the analogical pattern of expose—punish—deter, and the central element of the texts, the reaction in the episode according to the analytical model, is the exposure of someone as a hag. Even the exposed neighbour is included, although presented somewhat differently. On the other hand, the “Dead on the Scythe” legends never describe the temporary form assumed by the hag, the material external guise taken by the evil wishes. On this point the scythe legends are far from the first-person narratives which try to make a nightmare experience concrete. Instead, conflicts within the farm are at the centre.

An explicit gender conflict is found in some of the texts. In cases where the exposed hag turns out to be a woman, the legend is close in pattern to other analogy legends.

“Come Back in the Morning and Ask for What I Haven’t Got!”

Many legends concern the various ways in which words have the power to ward off the nightmare hag. The clearest examples of this are the curse legends in this study, called “address legends”, when a person says to a suspected hag, “You are a hag”, which releases the hag from the curse. In these texts it is not a matter of revealing the human figure of the hag—that is already known—but of changing a state by giving it its true name.

Among the analogy legends there is a group of texts about using the power of the word and, like all verbal magic, they build on direct confrontation with the hag. The starting point, as in the other analogy legends, is the harassment by the hag, and the aim is to find out who lies behind it. Often the victim keeps vigil in these texts and calls out to the unknown figure: “Come back in the morning and ask for what I haven’t got!”

At one place in Morby the horses were tortured by the hag and the farmer hid in the stable at night along with a farmhand. When the hag came it was like a man and the farmer said, “Come in the morning and ask to borrow what I haven’t got.” The following day there came one of the neighbours the likes of whom he never would have believed the like of, and asked to borrow some rye flour. But he had none at the time.⁶¹

⁶¹ SLS 90:109 Åland, Finland 1902.

Unlike the address legends, the central element in these texts is ascertaining who the hag is. The legends where the hag is asked to return the next day are assigned in this study to the analogy legends because they are based on the magic three-step method with the ultimate aim of averting an unknown threat. If one left magic thinking and ideas of envy and malevolence out of analysis, these texts would be totally illogical and incoherent. It is only the certainty that the hag and the evil she causes are maliciously sent by someone in the surroundings that makes the legends reasonable. The punishment is not physical in these legends, but the compulsion to return and thus reveal oneself as a hag can be perceived as harsh enough. We recognize the wish to humiliate the hag from earlier texts, the desire to attach a stigma to her body. The legend above has a social dimension since it says that the hag is a person “the likes of whom he never would have believed”. This makes the text much more menacing, and we recognize the tendency to ground *trolldom* in everyday life. As in the “Dead on the Scythe” legends, the hag is closer than the victim might suspect. The text does not specify the sex of the hag, just that it is “one of the neighbours”. Mostly, however, the legend type is about women who are exposed as hags.

Lassesson was often ridden by the hag in the past. Once when he was ridden by the hag, he took the chance, just as the hag let go of him, to arrange a meeting with her. At the set time the hag did indeed come. The woman said nothing, nor did Lassesson. Both stood looking at each other, she in all her nudity.⁶²

In this variant the method for meeting and thus exposing the hag is not the main thing; it is the sexual conflict. The gender of the hag and the reason for the hag-riding is beyond all doubt in this case.

The Hag Complains of the Cold

It has been pointed out several times that the texts about the hag, especially the legends, are built up around gaps. In the legend texts discussed above it is clear that the hag’s transformation is of no interest. When these gaps are called “spots of indeterminacy” in the analytical model it does not mean that people did not reflect on the different guises of the hag or how

⁶² LUF 537:4 Skåne, Sweden 1928.

the actual transformation was achieved, because there are hag texts which in some sense can be said to consider this, although the vast majority do not.

One type of legend, which appears to have been most common in Götaland and is only preserved in a few records, allows the hag's human figure to speak and comment on what happens to the transformed figure that "goes hag-riding".⁶³ In these texts we meet for the first time the body that is left at home, not the destructive nocturnal figure.

There was a maid in one place that was a hag. She got up at night and said, "Far and cold to Böda!" But shoemaker boys who were lying in the same room hit her with a last. Then she woke up.⁶⁴

Hag-riding is not the starting point in this legend narrated by a woman. We are not told anything about the hag's activities. The shoemakers who act to resolve the conflict will be recognized from other legends. The text says nothing about what the hag does when she is out, or who she harasses, only that the quick action of the apprentice shoemakers has an immediate effect. Once again we meet a hag who reveals herself; in the following case, transmitted by a man born in 1843, the ties to the human body are so strong that the temporary figure feels the cold surrounding it. The hag's complaint about the cold means that it is possible to perceive her travels as involuntary.

In one place there was a shoemaker who was sitting making shoes. Then a cat walked across the floor and said, "Far and cold and rough." And the shoemaker hit out at the cat with the last, and the morning after the maid in the house had a big hole in her head left by the last. She had been out and had been a hag.⁶⁵

The element of violence, a recurrent theme in the analogy legends, is far from being discreetly expressed in this text: the maid gets "a big hole in her head left by the last", just like the cat. It seems to be implicit in the text that a hag deserves her punishment.

⁶³ According to Bengt af Klintberg's catalogue of legends (2010), this legend chiefly occurs in western Götaland.

⁶⁴ NM EU 1938:985 Östergötland, Sweden 1930.

⁶⁵ IFGH 2375:16 Västergötland, Sweden 1931.

This text is interesting not just because it combines the cat legend with the hag complaining of the cold—this juxtaposition is highly reasonable—but there is a very telling correction in the archival manuscript made by the collector himself, Helmer Olsson. Originally the archived text had ended with the words *ridit påskkäring* (ridden as the Easter witch), but Olsson later crossed this out and changed it to *varit mara* (been a hag) and added the comment: “(The collector later discovered these legends in Lerum and Stora Lundby, it turns out to have been a hag, not an Easter witch.)” The correction and the commentary show how much the collectors were steered by a predetermined idea about what “folk belief” was supposed to entail, and we may suspect that there are many other such corrections in the archival material of which we will never be aware. The complaint about the cold was, for the collector, an obvious part of the hag legend. When the hag feels the cold in both bodies, the legend hints at something about the relationship between the two. This explicit expression is highly unusual in the hag material.

A certain vagueness is more common as in the following from Halland, Sweden:

My grandfather was with another shoemaker whose name was Sven, and was working at a place in Idala one night just before Christmas. Just then a girl sat up in bed and wanted to get out through the fireplace. “Hush, hush, hush, it’s far to ride to Knäred,” she said. Sven hit her with a belt and then she went back to bed.⁶⁶

Here again we have the shoemaker and the violence, but the coda of the legend makes the text seem as if the experience of being a hag was a nightmare: “Sven hit her with a belt and then she went back to bed.” It is true that the blow both exposes and punishes her, but the legends about the hag complaining of the cold do not accentuate the hag’s harmful effects as other texts do. There is not a word to suggest any magic; only the phrase about the long road to Knäred indicates that the girl is a hag, because the place name recurs in many records connected with the creature. The place names and its variants seem to have been connected to the wind motif in this region.

⁶⁶ IFGH 4009:37 Halland, Sweden 1937.

Men could be attacked in the night when they lay sleeping. There were certain women who were the hag, and they could travel in a whirlwind and go far and wide. They talked about one such woman who is supposed to have said, "It's a long way to Knarra"; I don't know where that is.⁶⁷

Unlike the other texts about the hag feeling the cold, we find here a starting point that is known from other hag legends: "Men could be attacked in the night when they lay sleeping." In this record it is men who are exposed to danger from "certain women who were the hag, and they could travel in a whirlwind and go far and wide." The wind returns here as the evil women's means of travel, but the analogy is never completed with three steps in the way we know from other texts. This does not mean that the analogy is lacking; on the contrary, it is confirmed by the hag's plaintive cry.

Disappearing from the Clothes

One legend of the hag which, according to Bengt af Klintberg, has been documented only in Skåne, is about how a maid disappears from her clothes and thus reveals herself as a hag.

My grandmother lived in Lunnarp, and she had a maid serving there, and they had a lot to do that day, because there was a feast. So they had things to look after in the kitchen until ten or eleven o'clock in the evening, and the girl and my grandmother were in the kitchen the whole time. Just as they are standing there working, the girl disappeared from her costume. It stayed there standing in the kitchen and the maid was gone a good time. And suddenly she came into her costume again. So my grandmother said, "Girl, I think you're a hag." "Yes, I am, poor me," said the maid. But if she had said, "Now you can be the hag in my place," then Grandmother would have become the hag.⁶⁸

The text, narrated by a man born in 1853, is not easy to classify as either an analogy legend or a curse legend. It is a bit of both, which means that it is a link between the different categories of legend. Although, from one point of view, the legend can be dismissed as local conceptions about the *mara*, it represents an interesting insight into how people problematized

⁶⁷ IFGH 3794:19 Halland, Sweden 1936.

⁶⁸ LUF 3295:18 Skåne, Sweden 1931.

the hag's transformations. The stories about the hag were naturally not just built around spots of indeterminacy. People must also have reflected on the metamorphosis, what happens to the hag's ordinary body when she travels in another form or returns. "And suddenly she came into her costume again," the story says. The body and the soul must have been regarded as being separated for a good while.

Interpretive Possibilities

The analogy legends have an outline that is both fixed and free. The pattern of expose–punish–deter is inescapable, but otherwise the storyteller had great licence to shape the text according to the circumstances. Many different forms must conceivably have existed, but the individual interpretations of the narratives about the link between the hag and the figure in which she acted must have been well grounded in the rural environment. In the records the guises of the hag are never fantastic or unlikely creatures; on the contrary, they are often mundane and prosaic. The variations in form chiefly concern the shapes in which she appeared.

In the written form, the analogies vary more than any other hag legends. They are the hag texts with the most complex compositions, and therefore they leave the greatest scope for individual variation. Even the choice of the guise in which the hag appeared allowed the storyteller to set the tone: ironic jocularly, a serious explanation of sickness, a menacing tale of witchcraft.

A natural angle of approach is the act of magic. The emphasis could be on the disease or the ability of evil people to achieve an effect from a distance. A hag story of this kind is close to the projectile model. The hag's guise and the methods of getting at her were naturally adapted to suit this. An analogy legend could serve as a good way to demonstrate the notion of limited good and the necessary conditions for economic "fortune". One can envisage that there were many variants to the effect that the success of one person was always at the expense of someone else.

A storyteller who wished to put the actual *trolldom* in focus could highlight the powerful effect of a small object. The seemingly harmless, but foreign, object in the text caused great harm. The moral could be an exhortation to caution and attentiveness to anything that did not belong in the home. Stories about the evil eye, flattery and other examples of visits by strangers with dire consequences are well documented in the archive

material, and both the storyteller and the listeners no doubt made comparisons to such narratives.

A third possibility would be to concentrate the narration on the end of the legend and prolong the actual denouement of the conflict. The legend had a greater effect when it turned out that the guilty person was a neighbour. One can only imagine how rewarding it could feel to portray a neighbour in this way. Indeed, a performance of the narrative could conceivably focus entirely on the conflict between neighbours, allowing a number of themes to be aired: the reason for the trouble could be found closer than anyone suspected; a stress on the fact that the hag was a woman. The legend could then name a specific hag and cite embarrassing details such as manure heaps and hag shit (*maranpaska*) to achieve a more or less sexualized account. The story could stop at this, but it is entirely possible to envisage a storyteller who seized on the theme of power, conflict and social control. There are numerous possibilities, but the records clearly show that the analogy narratives with their witchcraft associations were always presented negatively.

Likeness and Sameness

The legends about the manure pitchfork, with their explicitness and their wide distribution, constitute the main group of what in the present study are called “analogy legends”. The idea of an analogous relationship between the hag’s nocturnal shape and her human body is the logical premise for these texts. The analogy legends are clearly rooted in notions about *troll-dom* and shape-shifting, above all those which concern the possibility of thoughts being materialized and the links between the different guises of the evil doer. Such ideas comprise the core in the continuity of the ideas about what constituted the *mara*. The connection between the guises is the fundamental criterion for analogy legends and, as we have seen in the texts, it does not only concern the being that the archives call *mara*.

The dividing line between witches and hags is often fluid, and the name of the being who is imagined to be capable of changing shape is not important here. The legends and other texts documented about witches and cunning people also deal to a large extent with analogous connections. Regardless of whether the creature was called *mara*, *häxa*, *bjära* or some other name for a milk thief, it represented the threat of illicit knowledge in the midst of everyday life. The person who works magic in the texts is often the neighbour or a woman in the locality. In the texts about

analogous injuries, the hag is no absolute category. The names of the beings vary in the texts. The storytellers often mix motifs and names that the archival categories keep separate, but they all have magic thinking in common.

A striking feature in the analogy legends is that the exposed hag is almost always a woman. That is also the pattern in other Nordic *trolldom* traditions. Women were associated with clandestine acts much more than men, which does not mean that magic was exclusively ascribed to women. Rumours of witchcraft could also affect men, especially if they were deviant in some sense.

Many of the texts refer to the need for an external sign so that the hag can be identified and revealed. To achieve this stigma almost always requires the use of force, meaning that many texts about magic describe physical injuries and bloodshed in the exposure of a person who has worked magic. The analogy legends are no exception; they are full of violent acts. Just like the charms, they build on a pattern of action and counteraction. The hag's action, tormenting the animals, lies in the past in the text. This event is the starting point of the legend, while the man's counteraction is the true action of the narrative, the episode. The element of violence underlines grotesque features in several of the texts. The change in state is seen in the wounds and injuries that arise of which the degrading punishment of putting the hag head down in a manure heap is but the most drastic example, but several of the texts recount actions that aim in some way to humiliate the person who goes around as a hag.

The analogy legends are based on a fear that is seemingly as diffuse as it is widespread: the fear of the alien. The threat of that which comes from outside may take the form of a strange pitchfork or a cat. The texts confirm how right it is to react intensively against them, and here we see the normative element in the texts about beings and actions with roots in a world beyond everyday life. The analogy legends are structured according to a pattern that is called a "magic three-step method" in this study. The three decisive points are to expose, punish, and deter the hag from future wrongdoing. The starting point in the legends is the victim's desire for protection against the hag. The real action in the legend lies in the preparations for the exposure and the discovery itself, which means that the hag is stopped when her identity is revealed. The conclusion of the text describes the punishment and stigma incurred by the hag, which simultaneously functions to confirm the worldview, since the beings must be stopped by devices that correspond to their activities.

The legends about the punished and exposed hag are based on magic thinking. Ideas about fortune and envy—the ability of certain persons to acquire by unfair means what properly belongs to others—are associated with hags as much as with milk thieves and witches. Just as a milk thief that is sent by someone is dangerous, or the glance from an evil eye, so was a hag who came in the shape of a pitchfork.

There is a pronounced sense of simultaneity in the narratives. The connection to everyday life and the hard, sometimes bloody punishment creates an intense emotional presence, which is not exclusive to the analogy legends, but the tension surrounding the exposure and the punishment is greater than in other texts about the hag. In the analogy texts the hag is the object of various deterrent acts, with occasional exceptions, such as when the hag turns the hackle and thus reverses the whole situation. The texts describe an active man performing deeds with purposeful energy and often with violence. The hag is neither agent nor subject in a narratological or grammatical sense, but the object of someone else's actions. The analogy legends, with their foundation in conceptions of *trolldom* and clandestine knowledge, are hard to envisage without repressive features. The texts appear, in most cases, to be wholly concentrated on concrete protections against witchcraft: nothing is what it seems to be, and attack is the best defence. When thoughts like these are coupled with erotic hints, there is plenty of scope for variation.

The analogy legends share certain similarities with the northern were-wolf texts that Ella Odstedt calls “self-transformation”. A crucial difference in the narratives about these voluntary shape-shifters, however, is that the text concentrates on the ritual act; the person who wants to be transformed crawls through a harness or something of that nature. How the hag in the analogy legends manages the transformation is something we are never told.

The hag in the analogy legends never has the diffuse features that are common in narratives referring to personal experiences of the hag. On the contrary, these legends emphasize a stereotyped and more general image: a manure pitchfork, a cat. It is almost always an unambiguous and familiar object. The role of the objects and figures in the texts is to be natural parts of the environment yet simultaneously placed there by a stranger. It is not the experience that the analogy legends seek to describe, but the way the hag acts and the logic in the methods of achieving protection against her. More clearly than other texts about the hag, the analogy legends are based

on ideas about the human soul which we have good grounds to assume may have their origin in a pre-Christian conceptual world.

Many of the analogy legends come from the northern parts of the Nordic countries, but perhaps one should not attach too much importance to the geographical distribution. In this area, however, the foundation in imaginaries of the hag material seems to have been greatest, whereas further south people stressed other features of the hag's nature. Analogical thinking and the three-step method are nevertheless not exclusive to the region.

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Curse Legends

The hag that appears in the curse legends differs in one crucial respect from the hags in the analogy legends. In the curse legends the hag herself is the victim of a curse or is being punished because her mother tried to escape pain in childbirth. Although she is not a malicious person, she cannot stop herself from going hag-riding. She is driven by the curse and unable to get rid of it. The nocturnal deeds are depicted either as a compulsion or as an unconscious act.

There are frequent references to curses in the archival material. They are often caused by words flung out, directed against a specific target, just like charms. The power of words is a precondition both when a curse is sent and when it has to be stopped, while spoken words bind misfortune to a victim. Curses and illnesses are “sent” to or “put” on other people; even a look from a malicious person could be enough for misfortune to strike. They are invisible and cannot be retracted without the use of something with the same or greater power, hence the purpose of readings and rituals is to break the bond between the sender and the target.

There is much more archival material describing ways of gaining protection against unguarded words and the evil eye than about putting curses on others. There must have been very few people in peasant society who actually practised such witchcraft, but there were firm convictions about who caused illness and other evils by performing *trolldom*. People who deviated in some way who were most likely to be accused of such practices, particularly “Finns” and “Lapps” (*lappgubbar*), both terms

referring to Sami. These marginalized individuals also occur in folklore texts from areas where there were normally no Sami people, a result of suspicion targeting people who were different or considered unusual in some sense. The question of the link between women and magic ought to be raised in this connection. While not only women were associated with illicit knowledge, they dominate in the texts about *trolldom*. Does this mean that there was a concealed definition of women as marginal? This study does not intend to resolve that huge question here, but merely to hint at the context in which the whole problem is situated.

Some recurrent features can be observed in the curse legends. Magic thinking might seem to be absent, since it is not central to the action in the text. Yet the logic of magic is an epistemological necessity if the story is to make sense. The curse legends require a sender, even though the person is not visible in the texts.

Just as in the analogy legends, exposure is a central event, but instead of pointing out an evil person in the neighbourhood, in these texts it is a question of finding out the true state of affairs. The idea of envy is absent because the person who turns out to be a nightmare hag is not primarily a stigmatized neighbour but someone who has escaped from an unwanted compulsion. The astonished hag can be grateful for the liberation.

Power, as always, is significant in texts about the hag, both over other people and over supernatural creatures; knowledge about the beings gives people potential power over them. The address legends, a category of curse legends, are based on the power of words and on direct confrontation, just like the charms, and, once again, it is most common for a woman to be exposed. Figuratively, the narratives about the “innocent” hag are images of lived-out sexuality. Without being aware of it herself, the hag harasses people at night. The stories could no doubt serve as daydreams about a freer life.

Two groups of curse legends are presented for analysis: those about the foal’s caul and those in which the hag is addressed. The foal’s caul legends are an important exception to the rule that texts about the hag say nothing about why someone has suffered the curse of being a hag. In the other curse legends there is no coda revealing the ultimate cause. (The foal’s caul and the expectant mother’s fear of birth pain were mentioned in connection with folk explanations for the origin of the hag.)

Foal’s caul legends provide a kind of background to the other curse legends. They are geographically limited to the southern parts of the Nordic region. The foal’s caul legends are chosen as the starting point for

a longer analysis of the curse legends. There are several reasons for this, one of the principal being that they introduce discussion of gender conflicts into the texts about the nightmare hag.

In the second group of curse legends, labelled “address legends” in this study, someone plucks up the courage to speak the truth to the hag. In many respects the address legends resemble charms and other forms of verbal protection against the hag, all building on a direct confrontation. Those who have the strength to cry out, “You are a hag!” not only free themselves from the nightly torment but also release the hag. The storyteller can also give a somewhat humorous ending to the text, turning the curse against the person who dared to address the hag. “Now you can be the hag yourself!” she replies.

In comparison with the analogy legends, the conflict with the neighbours is toned down in the curse legends. The unconscious hag who is exposed in the text often belongs to the household where relations were not necessarily less conflictual, but the nature of conflict was less over the limited good than it was sexual. Psychologizing interpretations come naturally to a modern-day reader. It is easy to regard the address legends as texts about unconscious acts which are resolved through the uncovering of conflicts.

We can sum up the criteria for curse legends as follows: magic thinking is usually in the background, functioning as a spot of indeterminacy in these texts. It is an “innocent” hag who is exposed, but the sender of the curse remains invisible in the text. The only actors in the curse legends are the hag and the person who exposes her. Both address legends and foal’s caul legends function in large measure as narratives about sexual relations.

FOAL’S CAUL LEGENDS

Unlike the analogy legends, which start with the hag’s activities having already had effect, a number of legends, short narratives and statements from southern Sweden, Denmark, Värmland and southern Norway suggest that some women become hags and some men become werewolves because their mothers had crawled through or under a foal’s caul (the membrane enclosing a foal foetus) during pregnancy to avoid pain in childbirth.¹

¹Reichborn-Kjennerud (1933 II:49ff.); Odstedt (1943:115ff.); Møller (1940:55ff.); Weiser-Aall (1968:118ff.); Lindqvist (1987:138ff.); Stigsdotter (1991).

If a woman crawls on a Thursday evening at midnight under a “horse caul” that is stretched out over three posts, she will give birth without pain; but if it is a boy she has, it will be a “werewolf” [...] If it is a girl it becomes a “hag” [*Maer*].²

This motif has its main distribution in the south, but the legends are occasionally found elsewhere in Scandinavia, although not in Finland. Most of the archived stories about the foal’s caul are brief statements that hags and werewolves are the consequence of this procedure. Far from all of them can be classified as legends. In the records about the foal’s caul the compulsion to become a hag seems to be a curse which afflicts a person whose mother used clandestine methods of folk medicine to avoid pain in labour. She crawled through a foal’s caul to give birth as easily and quickly as a mare. Lily Weiser-Aall has called this ritual symbolic labour.³ It is sometimes said that the mother stretched the *lätt*, as the foal’s caul is called in some dialects, and crawled under it, or that she used some circular object. The technique described is not really relevant; it is rather the images in the narrative that are important, although, however it is undertaken, the behaviour is supposed to resemble a birth.⁴

The foal’s caul legends presupposed some knowledge of the imaginaries of folk belief if the listener was to understand how terrible the punishment was. For, as the legend goes on to say, the performance of this act of magic brought punishment upon the child that was born: if a girl, she became a hag later in life, and if a boy, a werewolf. All this is in accordance with the idea that the act was a crime against the order of creation and the biblical tenet, “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16), or, as it reads literally in a version of the King Charles XII translation of the Bible printed in 1860, where pain and submission are directly linked:

And to the woman he said: “I shall cause you great hardship when you have conceived. You shall bring forth your children with pain, and your desire shall be submissive to your husband, and he shall be your lord.”

J. S. Møller, in his study of Danish folk medicine, says that labour pain was generally accepted as the God-given order and that attempts to avoid it were only undertaken by younger women. “Married women submitted to

² Kamp (1943:62).

³ Wesier-Aall (1968:118).

⁴ Lindqvist (1987:143f.).

this natural order. But according to Danish folk belief, young girls who were about to give birth to an illegitimate child could let themselves be tempted to use reprehensible means to give birth without pains.”⁵ There is, however, no evidence that such ideas were confined to young girls and births out of wedlock, although occasional Swedish records mention situations like this.

Those who had illegitimate children did not want to have any pains when they gave birth. There was a way to avoid this. The pregnant woman had to take the chance, when a mare foaled, to tear a hole in the caul and crawl through it. Then she escaped any pains at the birth of the child, but the child became a hag.⁶

This statement thus equates sexual licence and having illegitimate children with the desire to avoid pain when giving birth. In moral terms they appear to have been regarded as equivalent acts, and we can suspect that the statement implies the understanding that extramarital sex was associated with women who did not want to assume responsibility for their children. The sex drive seems to have been intended for procreation, not pleasure. We may compare the text with all those that exist about murdered infants (*mylingar*, *utburd*, *liekkiö*, etc.) who return as ghosts to attract the mother’s attention and expose her crime.⁷ This attempt to avoid a divinely instituted order is associated with God’s enemy, the Devil.

The desire to evade labour pains and to have extramarital liaisons could evidently be regarded as equally objectionable. In view of the harsh and humiliating treatment to which unmarried mothers were subjected, we understand how severely the action in the quotation above was condemned.

Others claim that the hag arose when, for example, a girl murdered her child and buried it under a floor or the like, without its being discovered. Then that child becomes a hag who gives the people in the house no peace at night.⁸

This statement from Halland, Sweden, merges the ideas of the hag and the murdered infant, both of whom have the same purpose: to punish the

⁵ Møller (1940:55).

⁶ IFGH 3837:44 Halland, Sweden 1936.

⁷ Pentikäinen (1968).

⁸ von Sydow (1911:598).

woman for having killed the fruit of an extramarital liaison. She has to be reminded of the sins she committed, thus the ghost of the child is both a punishment and a stigma.

Unlike other childbirth magic, however, these foal's caul rituals do not actually seem to have been practised. Nonetheless, a whole body of oral literature developed around this imagined crime, suggesting that certain reflections and considerations about the order of things must have preceded the emergence of such stories. It appears that many must have wondered why lust and its consequences should necessarily entail pain.

The stories about the pain-relieving effect of the foal's caul are found not only in the form of legends, as we have seen. Usually these ideas are mentioned in the archival material without further comment. It is just said that the reason why some people are hags and werewolves is that their mother crawled through a foal's caul. There is no talk of punishment, and the narratives do not express any moral indignation. The texts analysed here, however, are legends about women who try to practise the ritual with the foal's caul but are prevented by men. In a number of records the actual legend is introduced with general observations about why hags exist, often with an addition that grounds the statement in the local context. This of course benefits the narrative, serving to refresh the listeners' knowledge of the hag. Another explanation for the form of the records may be that they begin with an answer to a direct question from the collector as the one below told by a woman in southern Sweden in 1927:

[T]hey become hags and werewolves if their mother is afraid of the pains and gets rid of them. Then the children are punished because it says in the Bible that "you shall bring forth your children with pain". But they can be free of the pains if they take a foal's caul, when a mare has foaled, and crawl through it, but then the child they have becomes a werewolf if it is a boy and a hag if it is a girl. When Grandfather was in service on the plain he saw two girls who had stretched a foal's caul between three posts and they were just about to get undressed, because they were going to crawl under it naked, and when they were undressed Grandfather ran up and gave them a thrashing and they had to run naked to the village.⁹

⁹LUF 488:12f. Skåne, Sweden 1927.

SYNOPSIS

To avoid labour pains, one or more women crawl (naked) through the foetal membrane of a foal, a foal's caul. A man discovers them by chance, interrupts the ritual, and prevents them from completing it, punishing the woman/women in some way, usually with a whip.

STARTING POINT

The explanation as to why hags exist.

The starting point in this legend, as in all foal's caul legends, differs from other legends of the hag in that it does not begin with the diagnosis that an animal or person has been hag-ridden. The hag is not present at all in the legend, whether as agent or subject, but only as an absent threat and, at the end, as a punishment for the child that is to be born. The hag as an anxiety-creating and terrifying nocturnal being is not mentioned in these legends.

The starting point of this legend is possibly a question posed in a conversation about people who are transformed at night into hags and werewolves. The legend above differs from the majority of the recorded versions of the legend by virtue of its direct quotation from the Bible. As we shall see below, however, the legend contains more questions than simply that about the origin of hags. It is probable, although difficult to prove, that the collectors' direct questions influenced the way the informants began the legends and thus made it seem as if the primary aim was to explain the cause.

Thus the starting point of the foal's caul legend is a good example of Ingarden's term, "spots of indeterminacy". The hag and her activities are neither explained nor described; there are no accounts of nocturnal anxiety or sweaty, exhausted horses. There is a "gap" in the legend. To fill this vacuum, the entire fashion of the text presupposes considerable familiarity with how covert knowledge worked and with ethnomedical practices. The listener must be acquainted with several other stories about hags in order to understand the presentation fully. Incidentally, there is reason here to contemplate the meaning of intertextu-

ality when applied to oral traditions, given that archived texts about folk beliefs refer so much to each other that it is justified to use such a term.

Despite her lack of presence, the hag is a threat. The text does not question whether or not hags exist, and it says nothing about the psychological experience of the hag. The danger and pain of childbirth are more explicit problems in these legends than the fact that the hag instils terror and anxiety in people at night, or that she rides the animals until they are sick. The threat of punishment for the forbidden act is more present than the fear of the hag.

EPISODE

The women crawl through the foal's caul.

Initially, the women act independently in the legend and they are the acting subjects in the text. The travail of labour is the object of their actions and their project is to escape its pain. The biblical quotation at the beginning, however, shows how serious this crime is. The act can only be perceived as a conscious choice on the part of the women. The ritual has been prepared and is about to be performed when the legend starts. It must be beyond all doubt that it really is a magic act since the text emphasizes this at the very beginning.

The ritual described here has great similarities to other Nordic ethnomedical practices. Going through a circle to achieve a cure and relief is a trope that was used in both word and deed.

CHANGE OF STATE

The man stops the magic act and the women are prevented from completing their project.

The change of state is marked very clearly when the man enters the action. Through this he becomes the subject of the text and the women become the object of his action. The magic act is stopped by the man.

When the man enters the legend as an actor, we go back to the discussion of the norm that began the text. The consequence of the actions is stated explicitly: "Then the children are punished." The women are

hindered, and the original project is reversed: instead of having their pain relieved, they are humiliated and receive a painful punishment.

CODA

The punishment with the whip.

The women have to endure a physical punishment, along with the shame of going back to the village naked. This point in the story can be compared with other stigmatizing punishments in peasant society, such as the stocks, the cap that fornicating women had to wear and so on, although the legend of the foal's caul is on the narrative level.

The man is the “maintainer of norms” and his reward is the confirmation that he has the right to supervise the norms. The Bible stipulated, “and your desire shall be submissive to your husband, and he shall be your lord”. This, of course, refers to the position of the married woman in relation to her husband, but it could no doubt be interpreted as applying to a man's authority in general. In the example cited above, for example, Grandfather is the image of this older male authority.

The legend does not need to explain that hags exist. Instead the text conveys knowledge about *why* hags exist: the mother has committed a misdeed by crawling through a foal's caul. What the legend actually tells us is that such rituals do not always succeed, and that those who nevertheless attempt them can expect to receive the punishment they deserve, thereby expressing the prevailing ideology and a pattern of social and religious norms and behaviour.

Norms are an expression of interaction between different kinds of texts, demonstrating that popular imaginaries were interwoven in a complex manner with the learned ecclesiastical tradition. Of the texts about the hag, this is seen most clearly in the foal's caul legends. Aron Gurevich has engaged in a polemic against French *mentalité* historians such as Le Goff and Schmitt—who make firm distinctions between folk practices and the world of learning—claiming that he wants instead to study the “internal system, which remained fairly immobile and reproduced its basic features over and over again”.¹⁰ The history of religions contains numerous

¹⁰Gurevich (1988:xviii).

examples of how the two discursive traditions borrow from each other when necessary. In the hag texts about the foal's caul, ideas are blended in a continuous process which was not as static as certain scholars wish to portray it. If something is reproduced it is in motion in history, with everything that involves in terms of constancy versus change, the individual versus the collective. The biblical quotation above may serve as an example of one such constant which was always present in individual and collective interpretations, in the minds of specific people and in printed homily books. Although rural life-worlds were often built on quite different cultural and economic premises, they could adopt Church traditions like this biblical passage. The rural clergy was a group that mostly originated in the peasant class, receiving its education from the elite culture. The Church's definitions of right and wrong, and good and evil, created norms, definitions that were variously expressed in different circumstances. The "basic features" of which Gurevich speaks can be found in folk belief, as well as elsewhere, and are adaptable to different situations. Yet it is important to point out that both the folk and the Church traditions were patriarchal, that is to say, their discourses were male-defined. Conceptions about the hag and the foal's caul and the misogyny they reflect are dependent on the patriarchal patterns of agrarian society, created in accordance with, and constantly adapted to, prevailing circumstances.

SPATIAL CONTEXT AND CHRONOTOPE

The foal's caul legend is one of the few texts about the hag which takes place outdoors. This is because it has nothing to do with hag-riding in the bed or the stable. It is striking that the scene of the shameful magic act in the text above is outside the village, but when the women are punished they are chased back into the village. The ritual practice has its place beyond the everyday order, but the punishment and the exposure are only meaningful within the social community.

RITUAL CONTEXT

In ritual terms the foal's caul legend is connected both to ideas of magic performances and to ethnomedical acts of passing through circles. In some cases, nudity can also have a ritual status. The ceremony, with its correspondences, is neither unreasonable nor absurd. Figuratively, the step through the foal's caul is analogous to childbirth, based on similarity, just

as in the analogy legends. In the practice of folk medicine, circles were important imaginary in the healer's work; analogies were employed when one wished to take away and blow away the illness. The ideas about the foal's caul can, in many cases, be compared with "passing through" a hole in the ground, but with the important difference that the performance with the foal's caul was probably never practised.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

The power hierarchies of rural communities find expression in the foal's caul legend, and the text shows explicitly who supervises norms and administers punishments. Generally speaking, the supervision cannot be reduced to a male-female dichotomy; it could also be women who exercised control over other women, especially unmarried girls to ensure that they did not show any signs of pregnancy. Nonetheless, both the punishment for participation in foal's caul rituals and the exposure of young women's breasts were undoubtedly instances of the control of sexuality by a patriarchal society.

The text above is clearly divided into two main sections. The first, introductory part explains the consequences of the behaviour described and states the starting point and premises, while the second presents the legend itself. The dominant and active position of the man is underlined: he prevents the magic act from being performed, and he evidently has the right to punish its perpetrators. The storyteller refers to the active man as Grandfather, which further reinforces his authority as an elderly male relative. The women's role, on the other hand, involves only misguided activity and improper behaviour. At the end of the text they are entirely passive, their nakedness is emphasized, and sexuality is thus linked to shame. As a whole, the legend warns of the danger constituted by magic rituals, with the hag and other supernatural beings inhabiting the suprahuman world. The ritual is never presented as being observed by women in the legend, although it had been collected from female informants.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In the foal's caul legends we see that a woman's biological functions in a patriarchal discourse defined her gender, her social sex. Both the social and the figurative aspect can be glimpsed in the foal's caul legends.

A woman's fertility gave her roles to fill as a wife and a mother, and a dual position as a gendered being; this phenomenon can be observed globally for menstruating woman and those who have just given birth. With their bleeding and their childbearing, women provide evidence that they fulfil a vital function in the continued existence of society, but they are simultaneously regarded as impure and dangerous. This complexity has proved difficult for anthropological research to penetrate, and it has been impossible to provide a proper answer to this question of why women's life-giving ability is viewed so ambivalently. Based on feminist anthropological theory, Inger Lövkrona has discussed whether the taboos of separation that surrounded a woman who had just given birth "were created in interplay between this female need [for seclusion] and the man's fear of her powers".¹¹ Lövkrona also argues against the popular image of a strong and independent peasant woman in Nordic rural communities, represented by the keys she carried. Instead, she demonstrates the weak position women had and how the fear of their life-giving ability was expressed. Fertility, pregnancy, childbirth and nursing were hedged in by many rules and taboos in peasant society. The foal's caul legends clearly show women's subordination in society, but they are simultaneously symbolic narratives which can be integrated in individual repertoires and which offer an opportunity for personal interpretations.

The mother's behaviour and experiences during pregnancy were of the utmost importance for the child's development.¹² The woman was not to be frightened and could not be allowed to see an accidental fire, slaughtering, cemeteries, executions and so on. Such things could give the child birthmarks, a harelip, cross-eyes or the falling sickness. The expectant mother's mood affected the baby, which could become a problem child, wicked, thieving or liable to chronic illness. In these cases, too, it is clear that the reasoning is based on analogical conceptualizations.

If a perspective of gender and power is applied to the texts, the foal's caul legends are obvious markers of the relationship between male and female, and the power hierarchy between the sexes. An important question to ask in this context is whether the legend text corresponds to reality. The answer seems to me to be yes and no. Women's independence and scope for action in pre-industrial society was strictly limited in political,

¹¹ Lövkrona (1990:205).

¹² Reichborn-Kjennerud (1933 II:49ff.); Möller (1940:65ff.); Weiser-Aall (1968:9ff.); Bolstad Skjelbred (1972:14ff.); Tillhagen (1977:26, 194, 261 *et passim*).

legal, social and religious terms. Yet the freedom of a man without property was also curtailed; powerlessness was not exclusively feminine.

The norms for reproduction, even if we take regional differences into account, were fixed within the local community. Although men could be present, and probably could also help, during childbirth,¹³ it was between women that knowledge about pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and childcare was transmitted, without the participation of men, which meant that men were excluded in several respects from the women's important reproductive functions. The man, the ultimate subject in the legend, acts with force in contexts with which he actually has little contact at the individual level. Does the foal's caul legend express a desire for total control over sexuality, reproduction and childbirth?¹⁴ One can very well imagine a male narrator recounting, in a moralizing tone, how pleasure-seeking women try to evade the painful price of their desire. Presented in this way, women were shown to be irresponsible and lacking insight into the order of existence, thereby justifying violent male intervention.

In all the texts about the hag there is a more or less explicit sexual charge, but the foal's caul is the legend in the hag texts that most expressly links ideas about the hag to women's sexuality. In these texts women are sexualized in a broad sense, entirely encompassed by unalloyed sex drive, reproduction, pregnancy, childbirth and the rules surrounding all this.¹⁵

At the individual level the foal's caul stories concern particular women's fear of the pain of childbirth and the complications that can arise. Although childbirth was a common occurrence, it must also have been perceived as frightening. Women knew that it could be dangerous and risky: if infections arose, they could be difficult to cure; blood loss could be life-threatening; the foetus could get stuck. In the eighteenth century, complications in childbirth accounted for 10 per cent of deaths among women aged between 15 and 49,¹⁶ with the risk of complications being highly dependent on a woman's general health status and her condition before childbirth. The fall in maternity mortality and perinatal mortality from the eighteenth century onwards was largely due to the expansion in

¹³ Lövkrona (1989:103ff.).

¹⁴ Lövkrona (1989:197ff.).

¹⁵ Lövkrona (1989:197ff.).

¹⁶ Högberg (1983:129, 1985 I:1:20). The osteologist Elisabeth Iregren has analysed the subject of maternity fatalities from a biological and medical point of view, although she uses medieval material (1992:58ff.).

the work of midwives.¹⁷ While statistics are uncertain, Beata Losman comments, “[m]aternity mortality nevertheless seems to have decreased in rural communities during the nineteenth century, where the number of trained midwives grew slowly but surely”. Not all women, however, received the help they needed, and Losman continues, “Rather a neighbouring woman whom one knew, who had herself given birth, than an unknown woman with a certificate. Moreover, the husbands were often unwilling to pay to have a midwife in the house.”¹⁸

The dynamic of the foal’s caul narratives lies in the fact that they could be interpreted in several different ways. In oral performances the text could become a liberating story or, equally easily, a repressive one. The storyteller could put forward an idea that a woman could find attractive, suggesting that she could infringe on the cultural norms and dare to go against the word of the Bible; the legend could also give her hope that it was unnecessary to suffer pain. The emphasis could thus be on the fact that a woman is a child-bearer and a mother, that it is the woman’s lot to feel pain and expose herself to danger in connection with birth and that any attempt to go against this would bring punishment not just upon the woman herself but also upon her child.

The foal’s caul legends say a great deal about who has power, meanwhile clarifying the interaction between normative and social levels, which makes the language of power even stronger. Discussing the normative cultural level in Scandinavian peasant society, Inger Lövkrona mentions its folklore in particular, noting the extreme hostility of its message regarding women; her analysis of erotic riddles likewise studies the male perspective and masculine dominance.¹⁹

NORMS

On a normative level, the legends express the Church’s values concerning the order of creation and the biblical commandments. They also convey the prohibition on acts or crimes of magic, against which several catechisms argued forcefully. We have seen examples of how the warnings in the catechisms were aimed as much against practised customs as against belief in *trolldom*.

¹⁷ Högberg (1983:130ff.).

¹⁸ Losman (1987:60).

¹⁹ Lövkrona (1991:272ff.).

Power relations between the sexes in pre-industrial society are far from being unproblematic. Beata Losman has painted a much brighter picture of women's situations than Inger Lövkrona and, certainly, conditions must have differed considerably depending on the circumstances. As she observes, "In villages on the plain the man probably had a more dominant position in the family than in other regions where he was away from home for long periods, when the wife automatically stepped in as decision maker."²⁰ It is surely no coincidence, then, that legends of the foal's caul were prevalent in the southern plains region. A woman born in 1855 told the collector:

County Sheriff Sjöström saw one evening at Sjöbo Ora that it was full of naked women who had set up a caul. It was a moonlit evening. They vanished when they caught sight of him. So then he sent a man who buried the caul.²¹

No law texts, either medieval or later, mention any measures against magic connected with childbirth; nor do the catechisms, which, despite warning against all manner of superstition and delusion, do not say a word about pain relief in labour. It is only in the legends that the women's prophylactic performance is punished, in this case by a man acting with all his legal authority as county sheriff, thus further underlining that the activity is to be regarded as a crime. The text reinforces this gravity with the expression, "it was full of naked women". Women are more inclined to turn to clandestine knowledge, or perhaps more easily enticed into such behaviour, the legend seems to say. The text ends with a counteraction when the caul is buried by the county sheriff's assistant. It was evidently incompatible with the social status of the county sheriff to have anything to do with this implement of *trolldom*.

The foal's caul legends paint a picture of how relations between the norm and power could be perceived in Scandinavian rural communities. This variant offers a snapshot of how power and hierarchy could be portrayed in a narrative explaining the existence of the nightmare hag. Questions are asked in these legends about who creates the norms, who maintains and sanctions them, who complies with them, who metes out penalties and who supervises this, and we are given fairly concrete answers: men and

²⁰ Losman (1987:65).

²¹ LUF 3294:14 Skåne, Sweden 1931.

male-defined discourse. In texts like these, biological functions provide a foundation for definitions of social roles, and these are held up as arguments for repression. The punishment with the whip is not just a whipping but also an image of the supervision of norms and the hierarchies of power.

Folk narratives undoubtedly reinforced these conventional roles by mostly dealing with biological givens, although the story could also express women's strength, resourcefulness and unique knowledge. The possibilities of the strategic use of the latter qualities and repression can be found in one and the same text, for storyteller and listeners alike.²² Can one regard the foal's caul legend as a figurative construction? There is no evidence that the prophylactic rituals and actions it describes were practised by pregnant women in agrarian society. What can provoke some surprise is that the punishment does not only affect the women who perform the action but also the next generation: the child becomes a nightmare hag or a werewolf.

ETHNOMEDICINE

There are methods for relieving the pain of labour in folk medicine all over the world;²³ in principle they were in conflict with Church norms, but they were practised and were not condemned.²⁴ Additionally, there are no legends or other folk texts criticizing this practice and there are legends which actually describe the rural circumstances of childbirth, with or without the assistance of a midwife.²⁵

Carl-Herman Tillhagen presents the Swedish material on the foal's caul in tabular form,²⁶ but does not pay any attention to the difference between ethnomedical methods historically used by pregnant and childbearing women and those which are found in stories, chiefly with figurative meanings. It is totally impossible to determine whether the ritual was actually

²² Lövkrona (1990:205).

²³ Gélis (1991:150ff.).

²⁴ Jacques Gélis draws far-reaching conclusions from the relationship between motherhood and pain. "Pain as a symbol of motherhood" is the title of a section where he writes: "The woman in labour had her place in a world where only suffering and penitence could confer grace [...] but first the Bible and the Church's teachings did strongly favour the emphasis on pain in their image of childbirth [...]. The image of motherhood is inseparable from that of pain." (1991:115).

²⁵ Lövkrona (1989).

²⁶ Tillhagen (1983:172).

practised. Indeed, none of the scholars who have previously studied the foal's caul texts has even asked whether the ritual was performed or not. Compared with other ethnological documentation, however, the accounts of the foal's caul ritual are divergent, so it is reasonable to assume that it was never practised. Outside the records of folk belief and the collected legends there is no description, to my knowledge, of how the ritual was performed.²⁷ Nor is there any photograph of a preserved foal's caul used in any such act. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility that occasionally women may have performed the procedure in the hope of pain relief.

It is not just rituals with the foal's caul that end badly. Crawling through other objects could have the same result. Carl-Herman Tillhagen, in his book on folk beliefs about children,²⁸ quotes versions of the foal's caul narratives where women crawled through a harness or some other object similar to that of the foal's caul.

It is said that they [hags and werewolves] have become such because their mothers, when they were pregnant, crawled through a harness.²⁹

Other connections to the horse are present in childbirth material. Tillhagen refers, for example, to Lars Roberg, professor of medicine in Uppsala, who wrote in a textbook in 1709 that “women in labour should drink the juice of fresh horse dung to have an easy delivery”.³⁰ A legend from Halland recounts:

At a place in Mickedal the wife wanted to crawl through a bridle so that she would have an easy delivery. But her husband stopped her and said that they were not going to have a child that would become a hag.³¹

An isolated record speaks of crawling through a hole in a tree trunk, which is very closely related to the customs above.³² The technical performance of the foal's caul legends is reasonable in its context, since similar rituals were performed in folk medicine; the circular form has been interpreted as

²⁷ Odstedt (1943:160ff.) refers to material on folk belief, as does Lindqvist (1987:137ff.).

²⁸ Tillhagen (1983:169ff.).

²⁹ von Sydow (1911:600).

³⁰ Tillhagen (1983:131).

³¹ IFGH 4015:38 Halland, Sweden 1937.

³² Kalén (1927:252) Halland, Sweden.

an image of wholeness, harmony and health. Sickness was regarded as a disharmonious state, which could be restored to harmony through contact with the circle. Although it seems reasonable and corresponds to other customs, the question remains: why did both mother and child have to be punished for this particular practice?

OTHER PAIN RELIEF IN FOLK BELIEF

The analogies for childbirth in the foal's caul legends can be compared with the prayers for childbirth recorded among the Scandinavian charms. Characteristically, Ulf Högberg, in his study of folk health, calls the chapter about infant mortality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "The Virgin Mary's keys".³³ It was these keys or the Virgin's loose shift that was invoked for relief by women in labour. The shift became an image of the pelvis, the circle through which the child was to emerge.

One of the prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary during childbirth was documented in Småland in 1638:

Help, God
 Virgin Mary, lend me your loose shift,
 so that I may bear a son or daughter without mishap!
 In the name of:
 The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.³⁴

Mary is used here as a parallel to the childbearing woman, and her loose shift, like the foal's caul, becomes an analogy for a delivery without complications. The looser the shift, the less risk of blood loss, infections, puerperal fever and so on. A more conventional metaphor in the charms talks of the keys of the Virgin Mary which can open the childbearing woman's body. The prayer asks to borrow Mary's keys to ease the pain. The womb is the lock that will be opened by the keys.

Virgin Mary,
 lend me your keys
 to open my body
 and bear my child!
 In the name of the Lord Jesus.³⁵

³³ Högberg (1983).

³⁴ Linderholm (1917–40:126).

³⁵ Linderholm (1917–40:125).

A Danish version has the following formulation:

Virgin Mary, lend me your keys,
that I may open my loins!³⁶

The folklore about the Virgin Mary's keys rests on a theological foundation in the veneration of Mary as the door and the keys to heaven, the one with the power to loosen and bind. The narratives seek to assert Mary's loftiness.³⁷ There was a give-and-take between the learned and the folk traditions, and the ordinary people's stories about Mary enriched the theological literature as much as vice versa. The folk narratives emphasized Mary's feminine experiences of bearing and nursing Jesus. There were of course many opportunities here for identification, but these aspects of Mary also had far-reaching theological consequences.

Mary occurs frequently in charms and incantations,³⁸ although it must have seemed highly offensive to the Lutheran clergy if they ever came into contact with anything of the kind; Lutheran orthodoxy often equated "papism" with paganism. Thus, it is all the more remarkable that the confrontation was not greater.³⁹ Although the imagery is simpler and more direct, there is the same concrete desire for a painless birth. From Ångermanland we find similar imagery in the advice about difficult labour:

Water is first poured through a knife sheath, then through a wedding ring, after which it is given to the sick person. [...] A woman who has a difficult delivery should seek out a tree in the forest that has split and then grown together again to a trunk. She must drink some water through the hole in the trunk. Then the pain will disappear.⁴⁰

This is hardly suitable advice for a woman in the middle of labour, but we may note in this context that the text speaks about pain relief for women without condemning it.

J. S. Møller, in his study of mothers and children in Danish folk tradition, writes that he has found only two recorded instances, apart from the foal's caul stories, which concern rituals for reducing pain in childbirth. In

³⁶ Ohrt (1917–21:191) Jutland, Denmark.

³⁷ Backman (1947:167ff., 185ff.).

³⁸ FSF (1919 VII:1:66ff.)

³⁹ Helgesson (1917:136).

⁴⁰ Modin (1887:9) Ångermanland, Sweden.

one of these the woman has to walk nine times around the Church on three Thursday nights and whistle through the keyhole; in the other case the pains will recede if the woman “calls the name of the Evil One” during childbirth.⁴¹ In the first case the pain blows away and, in the second, the wish for a painless delivery is portrayed as an unambiguously negative action, given the reference to the Devil. According to the text, the punishment of the child’s becoming a hag or a werewolf is the same as when the woman crawls through a foal’s caul. Other actions which were actually practised are documented all over the Nordic countries. According to these texts, everyone present had to help the woman giving birth by ensuring, for example, that there were no knots in the room.

If it was believed that it would be a difficult birth, you had to take apart things that were nailed together. It would also help if you untied all the knots in the birth room.⁴²

Like the quotation above, the text below mentions acts of the same kind which were intended to give the woman tools to “open” and “close” for the woman. An analogous condition is assumed to prevail between what is tied or joined together in some way and the bearing-down woman.

The woman giving birth had to have her hair down. It was best if the other women present had their hair down too.⁴³

These words have a poetic ring for us in their description of women with their hair let down, but they bear witness to a grim reality where hardly any pain relief was available. From the perspective of breaches of the norm, the foal’s caul legends have parallels with other Nordic legends about people who refused to accept their fate and tried to change their predetermined destiny. Among these legends, “The woman who did not want to have children” is particularly interesting since it too tells of women who wished to avoid their feminine destiny.⁴⁴ The only recurrent pattern that I can see in the folklore texts about childbirth is that help during labour is accepted, while the foal’s caul rituals that were practised for preventive purposes were harshly condemned. Margareta Stigsdotter calls the ritual

⁴¹ Møller (1940:58) Jutland, Denmark.

⁴² Hult (1937:51) Østfold, Norway.

⁴³ Hult (1937:51) Østfold, Norway.

⁴⁴ Klintberg (1986). See also Lövkrona on magic assistance in childbirth (1989).

“anxiety manipulation” and argues that, “The evil in the foal’s caul act must have been due to a blending of incompatible categories, a forbidden contamination of the human and the animal.”⁴⁵ It was, however, rather the premeditated action that was condemned.

THE FOAL’S CAUL LEGENDS AND THE WEREWOLF NARRATIVES

The foal’s caul legends are the only ones where the nightmare hag and the werewolf occur together, and that is only in the introduction to the legends, describing the consequence of the women’s actions. The archival category of “Transformed” and the parallel drawn between the hag and the werewolf are based entirely on the texts about the foal’s caul from southern Scandinavia, which are more about the mother’s crime of working magic than about the hag and the werewolf. In texts from the northern Nordic regions, on the other hand, the hag and the werewolf are never mentioned together. There the two are separate parts of a more general *trolldom* tradition and difficult to distinguish from other beings. The legends about werewolves, moreover, have a pronounced social angle since they very clearly concern the ethnic conflict between sedentary people and nomads (chiefly Sami and Finns), who were accused of working magic.

A Lapp beggar gets food and kind treatment from a woman and says that if she then sees him going through the herd of livestock she should not be afraid, he is not going to do anything to her. One morning in the summer a bear goes through the herd of cows and looks at her but does not kill any animals; then he goes to another village and kills horses.⁴⁶

The aim of the actions in the text has nothing to do with reproduction; it describes an act of actual magic that endows the agent with the ability to harm other people’s livestock (Fig. 7.1).

In the chapter, “Self-transformation”, in Ella Odstedt’s study of the werewolf, she discusses northern material which describes how Finns and Sami turn themselves into bears, wolves or other beasts of prey. In the north of Sweden and Finland Sami men and women (they are called “Lapps” in the records) were thought to be able to transform themselves

⁴⁵ Stigsdotter (1991:58).

⁴⁶ ULMA 10771:3–4 Jämtland, Sweden



Fig. 7.1 The collector Ella Odstedt on during fieldwork (ULMA 20434). Her long-term work on werewolf traditions and *trolldom* related themes produced a substantial corpus of the records she collected. Odstedt covered long distances in the north of Sweden to meet her informants. Here on horse in a photograph that was probably taken with a self-timer

by crawling through a belt or a harness and when someone manages to damage the transformed guise, injuries appear on the human body.⁴⁷ Many legends of self-transformation, which are thus analogy legends, say that the transformed person cannot be injured while in animal form.

In Rissättra village a legend has been related that someone once should have shot a woman who had “walked in bear guise [*hamn*]”; the shot she-bear had hair plaits like a woman.⁴⁸

In comparison with the foal’s caul legend, the stories about self-transformation contain much more deliberate acts of magic. Those who can change shape do so in order to gain personal advantage. The texts about the foal’s caul are, rather, about a prophylactic undertaking, with elements of *trolldom*. Considered as a magical act, the passage through the caul entails the hope of evading the rules which dictate that a man must live by the sweat of his brow and a woman must give birth in pain. In other words, it went against the order of creation and the predetermined destiny of each life; because the women in the foal’s caul legends use other than natural and permitted means—in the words of the catechism—and they obtain benefits wrongly and without effort. It can also be noted that that the collector, when reporting material from Lima in Dalarna, uses the same label for the genre (*sägen*, legend) as written in the questionnaire he had received from the archive in Uppsala Dalarna. This gives a hint of how much the prepared questions influenced how the narratives were transmitted and the role which the collectors played in confirming the established academic classifications used at the folklore archives.

MAGIC THINKING VERSUS PUNISHMENT BY CURSE

The hag in the foal’s caul narratives had no part in the magic act. She is merely a victim of her mother’s actions. From the very south of Sweden a man born in 1847 related:

Grandfather told us that when a mare foaled, they hung up the foal’s caul and naked women crawled through it three times in each direction, but then the child they later bore became a hag or a werewolf. Grandfather saw a couple of danged women passing through it up here in the pasture—it was Gertrud Ola Pers’, she was the mother of the one who was a hag.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Odstedt (1943:30ff., 48ff.).

⁴⁸ ULMA 11136:2:1 Dalarna, Sweden. Printed in Odstedt 1943:54.

⁴⁹ LUF 3635:13 Skåne, Sweden 1930.

The text above is not a legend in the strict sense. Instead we read an account of an experience that the narrator ascribes to his grandfather. He is said to have witnessed some women, disparagingly described as “danged women” (*konejäcklar*), performing an act of magic. The text also names and singles out a woman who was thought to be the mother of a hag, in the same way as witches and people with the evil eye could be pointed out and thus subjected to the suspicion of the village community. Women, as we have seen before, are the first to act in the foal’s caul legends. Their actions represent improper behaviour, but the records of the foal’s caul legend do not describe them as regularly practising *trolldom*. We may compare this with the more northerly records where the hag is much more like the women who, out of envy, send milk-stealing creatures. In such texts the hag is definitely someone who deliberately performs malicious acts. In the text above, however, the women were merely viewed as foolhardy for thinking that they could easily avoid the natural order. They performed an act that was considered shameful, associated with sexuality and reproduction, but not deliberate witchcraft. The shame could be more or less explicitly expressed. Also from the Swedish south:

Yes, it’s so ugly I hardly want to say it. But it’s like that if a mother, seeking to give birth more easily, crawls through a horse caul. Luckily there are no such mothers now, but there often were in the past, when tinkers and other rubbish hung around the countryside.⁵⁰

Here we see clearly the moral indignation as the male informant marks his repudiation by mentioning “such mothers” together with “tinkers and other rubbish”. *Trolldom* is linked to specifically named persons or groups of people. Meanwhile, if punishment is administered, the male figure in the legends physically demonstrates how the norms are to be observed. His action also reveals insight and knowledge: he knows what it means when naked women crawl through a foal’s caul; it is an act of magic which must be stopped, and it is up to him to do so. The man knows the means whereby women try to avoid the given, its rituals as well as its consequences. When he intervenes against the magic, his reaction simultaneously confirms its logic and its effect. It is an important function in the legend that the act of magic thus has repercussions. For the listener, the truth of the legend is that offspring become hags and werewolves if their

⁵⁰ LUF 455:1:27 Skåne, Sweden 1922.

mother crawls through a foal's caul. Otherwise the man's reaction would not be so vehement, and the story would, moreover, become quite improbable. The man affirms two discursive traditions: that the illicit knowledge is active and that it is dangerous and sinful, a simultaneously confirming/condemning attitude that characterizes how *trolldom* was viewed in pre-industrial Nordic countries.

No records have been found which detail a priest's being the man who discovers and punishes the women, which would otherwise be very reasonable since the act runs counter to the words of the Bible. An unusual version of the foal's caul legend, on the other hand, was told by a woman born in 1855:

There was a woman at Rösbacken who crawled through a foal's caul. She gave birth to a child and had no pains and even got up and scrubbed the floor. Then the priest went there to see if it was the truth. He said, "The sow lies in a torpor but you weren't in bed once!" Then he hit her over the back with his stick and the pains came on her, and she had to go to bed and lie there for eight days as others do.⁵¹

The expression "had to go to bed and lie there for eight days as others do" can of course be interpreted as a punishment both for a person who sought to avoid her fate and for someone one who attracts the envy of other women. Judging by this example, the ritual of the foal's caul was regarded as criminal, as a breach of the law more or less comparable to abortion. The priest's words are evocative: "The sow lies in a torpor but you weren't in bed once!" Reproduction is obviously regarded as an animal act; the birth-giving woman is equated with a sow. Then, just as in other foal's caul legends, male violence, this time inflicted with a stick, marks the turn in the story; in other words, not even a woman who has succeeded in completing a foal's caul performance can be sure of escaping discovery and punishment. The detail of being hit on the back echoes the "cat legend" in which the shoemaker, or some other man, hits a suspicious cat on the back so that the injury will appear on the hag and reveal the analogical relationship. The priest restores order and gives the woman the inevitable birth pains retroactively. "The punishment is severe for those who do it," says a record from Skåne about passing through the foal's caul,⁵² although

⁵¹ IFGH 1627:15 Västergötland, 1929.

⁵² LUF 455:2:49 Skåne, Sweden 1922.

a more explicit view of sin is sometimes expressed as, in this record from Halland:

Then the birth took place with no pains at all. But it was a great sin against God's will. And the punishment for it was that the child became a hag if it was a lass and a werewolf if it was a lad.⁵³

The idea of magic can, however, be more or less accentuated in some records. In exceptional cases there is even an express wish to become a nightmare hag.

At Jörn's in Ingalsröd [Bro Parish] a mare had foaled while she was out grazing and the caul [the placenta] was left lying out in the field and found by one of the girls, and just as Jörn came walking she was trying her best to crawl through the caul, but she was stopped by him. She was doing this to have easier labour and also so that she could become a hag.⁵⁴

In this example from the Swedish west coast becoming a hag appears to be a desirable goal for a wicked or ill-natured person. The unusual expression, "She was doing this to have easier labour and also so that she could become a hag", suggests an imaginary where the hag was generated by the acquisition of magical insights. Similar ideas existed about witches and even priests who had learned their extraordinary knowledge "in Wittenberg". Yet ideas of this kind are exceptional in the foal's caul legends.

How is the idea of a curse expressed in these legends? To a certain extent one can compare them with the pitchfork legends, contrasting the idea of the curse with the idea of magic. Yet we should not forget that the same fundamental ideas and values are found in both groups: the ability of some people to change shape, and the imagery of the soul upon which such ideas are based. Magic thinking is expressed in the ritual behaviour itself, while the idea of the curse is revealed in the narrative when the punishment afflicts the innocent child: "There was a heavy curse on a woman who did that."⁵⁵ In many cases the foal's caul legends combine the ideas of curse and clandestine deeds, as both are necessary if the story is to work. The hag herself is "innocent" but is punished for her mother's crime of

⁵³ IFGH 3114:14 Halland, Sweden 1933.

⁵⁴ VFF 1288:4 Bohuslän, Sweden 1926.

⁵⁵ LUF 2551:41 Skåne, Sweden 1929.

trolldom. What is narrated in the foal's caul legends is the logical requirement for the legends where an "innocent" hag like this is released from the curse. The person who goes riding as a hag at night in these latter legends is wholly unaware of what she is doing, and the legend type, "Speak to the hag", sometimes ends with the hag thanking the person who has removed the curse and revealed the true circumstances. In these legends the period as a hag becomes a time of atonement for the mother's crime. Several of the werewolf legends contain this and similar motifs of release,⁵⁶ for example, "Threads between the teeth".⁵⁷ The wife says "Werewolf!" to her husband when she sees threads between his teeth. She realizes that he is the monster who previously tried to attack her, but she threw her apron at him for him to bite. The spoken words release the man.

VIOLENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER

Violence against the hag recurs throughout the hag material, and in this respect the foal's caul legends are no exception. In Bosjökloster a man stated:

My old father told of how he had once met six young girls who were completely naked and had set up a foal's caul which they were crawling through. If they crawled through one of them they would have easy deliveries, but then the child would become a hag or a werewolf. But my father, who came across them, drove them, stark naked, with a horsehair whip all the way to the village, so that everybody could see them.⁵⁸

The rhetorical strategy in the form of a recollection is similar to many other *mara* records with references to days gone by and an older relative. The listener was to be convinced that this had actually taken place and that it was a praiseworthy act—or at least accept it as a morality. The man's action is portrayed as righteous and justified. The violence and the man's "right" to punish are given a central position in the legend. Its significance for the exercise of power and the maintenance of norms and roles is important in the text. There is an undercurrent of struggle between the women's endeavours to avoid pain and the men's violent counteractions.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁶ Odstedt (1943:75ff.).

⁵⁷ Odstedt (1943:134ff.).

⁵⁸ LUF 2534:8 Skåne, Sweden 1929.

⁵⁹ On "violent" legends see Odstedt (1943:145ff.).

violence and the blows are never condemned in the text. Indeed it was not until the Penal Act of 1864 that corporal punishment of wives by their husbands, which had been an implicit right in the act of 1734, was prohibited.⁶⁰ The conclusion that can be drawn from the need to legislate against it is that the practice must have survived up to that point at least.

It is easy to imagine how stories of this kind served as a seedbed for gossip and slander. The foal's caul legend could no doubt be narrated in a spectacular manner. There was ample opportunity for a skilled storyteller to emphasize and exaggerate the misogyny in the legend and conjure up a one-dimensional, sexualized image of women.

INTERPRETIVE POSSIBILITIES

The records we have are admittedly stereotyped, and often they lack relevant details about the informants and the circumstances in which they lived. Even in cases where the collector was meticulous, the details are not sufficient to give us a complete picture of an individual or of the context in which people naturally told stories about the foal's caul. Yet it is interesting to try to construct two situations in which the legend may have been performed and understood. One can envisage several contrasting situations with regard to social class, environment and economic status in which the given motifs and themes may have been shaped very differently. The fact that a male and female narrator are contrasted below does not mean that this study argues that there was a "male" and a "female" way of telling stories; rather, it suggests that the foal's caul legends could be stretched in many directions depending on the storyteller's intentions.

If a man presented the story about how naked women were discovered when they were trying to crawl through a foal's caul, it is probable that he emphasized aspects such as norm breaches and sexuality. The quotation below from a rather different foal's caul story shows how the motif could be used by an individual storyteller and given idiosyncratic features. It was

⁶⁰ This right went back to the national law of King Kristoffer, which entitled men to discipline their wives, as a consequence of women's subordination. The law of 1734 brought about major changes in Swedish legislation. Yet the law appears to have given its tacit consent so that "even after 1736 men had the right to beat their wives, and that the legislator only omitted the addition about the permitted corporal punishment because he did not wish to directly encourage its use. [...] Only if the husband exceeded the natural limits of his power as head of the household would he be accountable. It was probably not until the Penal Act of 1864 that the old legal right of the husband to beat his wife disappeared." Hafström (1970:52).

taken down by a female collector who heard the story from Karna Larsson, born in 1854.

Jens Schörens had lived in that place, and all of his mistress' kids were born in that house, because she served there and she stayed with the man, and they had several children while his wife was still alive. Jens Schörenskan, as Mother Nils Lars [the nickname of the informant] called her, was supposed to be of tinker kin. She came when she was very young to Jöns Göran's in Kastberga, as a maid. The man of the house was a very wicked and coarse person and there was soon an unsuitable relationship between him and the maid so that she gave birth to several children while the wife was alive. Despite the husband's infidelity the wife looked after his and the maid's children and both they and their mother stayed on the farm. When the wife died he married the maid. Mother Nils Lars seemed to think, however, that this woman, who of course would not shy away from any means, had crawled through a foal's caul, to have an easy delivery according to the general notion, and therefore she believed that that room was especially liable to visits by the hag.⁶¹

This is a text that is completely outside the frame of the common foal's caul narratives, but it gives us an idea of how a storyteller who so wished could combine sexual lewdness, wicked women, tinkers and nightmare hags into a text that suited a particular occasion. From the previously quoted records we can also understand that the foal's caul legends offered plenty of opportunity to strengthen the belief in the special link between women and *trolldom* and the tendency of women, as daughters of Eve, to rebel against God's plan for creation. We have also seen how the legend contrasts the women's project—to avoid birth pangs—with the male project of stopping the ritual. It is easy here for male behaviour and male norms to find confirmation.

In another, wholly constructed scene we can assume that women told legends to each other when there were no men around and it is not unlikely that the emphasis here would be on childbirth, pain and the fear of complications. Such matters must have been relevant to peasant women, something confirmed in studies by Ulf Högberg's studies, who writes:

The frequent pregnancies drained women's health. Anaemic, prone to infections, and last to come to the table, they went through one pregnancy after

⁶¹ LUF 3362:20f. Skåne, Sweden 1931.

the other. “Worn out already in her forties,” a provincial doctor reports from inland Västerbotten as late as 1929.⁶²

In these women’s narratives the hag is less present as a nightmare experience or a creature that causes illness than as a punishment for improper behaviour, while the act of magic in the legend seemed like a possible way to gain relief—if only in the mind. The analogies with the seemingly easy delivery of foals perhaps provided a moment’s reprieve for a woman worrying about future deliveries. When no midwife was present there was a greater risk of long labour and hence of complications, and a quick birth was not just a matter of reduced pain but just as much about increasing the chances of survival. It is not impossible that women spread such stories more than men although, because of the nature of the sources, we cannot prove that assumption. Yet, in the different ways of telling stories, and the different ways of perceiving them, lay the potential for a strategic use of the text, for storyteller and listener alike.

ADDRESS LEGENDS

It is not only in the foal’s caul legends that the hag is “innocent”. It is said of both werewolves and hags that they could be liberated from the curse of being transformed simply by being addressed. A word of truth was all it took to change their cruel destiny.

A hag-ridden person was encouraged to cry out “You are a hag!” in order to stop her attack. More detailed variants of the text tell how the person suffering under the weight of the hag summoned up his last bit of strength and spoke to her, and she released her grip because, just as in the charms, the strategy of confrontation has an immediate effect. The hag’s liberation is a secondary element in the narratives compared to the power of the word as protection against magic attacks, and the advice is presented as a cure for the victim rather than as concern for the hag herself. The texts about addressing the hag are therefore often formulated as first-person narratives, as in this man’s account:

I have felt that something heavy comes on my chest and I can’t lift a hand. It’s dreadfully difficult. I have even woken up so much that I tried to grasp at it but then it flies away. Then it’s a person that you feel. If you get hold of

⁶² Högberg (1983:130).

it [you should] say, “You are restless and come to hug me.” If somebody speaks to them they don’t come back again.⁶³

It is not unreasonable to view the address legends as a continuation of the foal’s caul legends because, after all, what happens to the daughter who incurs the mother’s punishment? Such parallels are not drawn in the collected material. The primary factor is that the hag-ridden person escapes the torment, and the liberation of the hag is a secondary consequence to this.

Jenny’s mother spoke about of how there was a farmhand in Lekeryd who never had any peace at night; every single night something came and lay on top of him. But he told the farmer and his wife, and they advised him that if he suspected that [the something] was the hag—because it couldn’t be anything else that was tormenting him—to call out her name. And there was a girl in the district that they say was a hag, because she hadn’t a hair on her body where ordinary people have hair. But the next night when it visited the farmhand he cried out her name and then she was standing there by the bed and couldn’t move anywhere until he gave her permission to go. After that he never suffered from her again.⁶⁴

The suspicion about the hairless girl proved to be justified, and the words fixed her in place. The farmhand is initially at a loss to know what to do but receives guidance from two people and gets the same kind of simple advice that we have seen in previous texts about the hag: to address some words to her or to put an everyday object in her path. The farmhand’s demonstration of power, which resonates with the foal’s caul legends, evidently had a permanent effect.

The address legends are almost entirely associated with deterring the hag’s attacks on people, whereas the majority of the analogy texts concern attacks on animals. In addition, they never hint at analogies between the hag’s different bodies, nor is the original sender ever exposed, and no one is punished. The basic theme of deterring the hag is presented in two different ways, with the conclusion to the narrative being shaped according to two different possible outcomes, or rather two different reactions on the part of the hag.

⁶³ IFGH 3971:38 Västergötland, Sweden 1937.

⁶⁴ LUF 745:134f. Småland, Sweden 1927.

THE HAG GIVES THANKS FOR THE LIBERATION

The most pleasant outcome with the curse theme is the story ending in which the hag thanks her liberator. Sometimes she is ashamed, unaware of her existence as a hag.

There was one woman who was never left in peace when she slept. There always came an invisible being who nearly choked her. She noticed when it came, and once she had the idea that she should speak to it and ask who it was. Well anyway, she fell asleep. But in her sleep she began to talk to the other one. When she woke up she couldn't remember what they had spoken about, except that the other had said "thank you" and shaken her hand just as she woke. Then she swept out through the window. It was a woman from the neighbourhood who was born out of wedlock. For she recognized her as she stepped out through the window.⁶⁵

This example from southern Sweden is unusual in that the conversation with the hag takes place during sleep. The hag, however, differs from other dream folklore: she has no message to communicate, nothing to show the recipient. The whole text concentrates on the experience of the nightmare hag and how to escape it. The account has several important characteristics of a hag experience: "an invisible being who nearly choked her" and the hag's being "born out of wedlock". This kind of causal explanation also regards the hag as innocent, as merely representing the mother's punishment.

"NOW YOU CAN BE THE HAG!"

The address legends sometimes have an additional section in which the hag has the last word. Instead of giving thanks for the release, she turns the curse against the person who addressed her, as in this record from Skåne:

If someone says, "You horrible hag", then the hag says, "That's good, now you can be the hag because I've been it so long."⁶⁶

This is not the grateful hag but rather a relative of the hag who, instead of being badly cut on the hackle, turns the hackle and attacks. Unsurprisingly,

⁶⁵ LUF 2930:17f. Skåne, Sweden 1930.

⁶⁶ LUF 4154:7 Skåne, Sweden 1929.

the stories of the hag turning the hackle and the hag turning the curse were both mostly taken down documented in Swedish-speaking Finland. It is a universal motif that a curse cannot be erased but must be passed on to someone else. Addressing the hag corresponds to touching an object: the power is immediately transferred. When the hag replies, a hint is provided that helps explain the existence of the hag. With the hag's response, the sender of the curse can be relieved, and a new innocent person has to become the hag. In this way the hag gets revenge for the compulsion she has been under. She has not been able to control her transformations, nor has she had any personal benefit from them. In this respect these legends differ from most other texts about shape-shifting.

The great similarities to the foal's caul legends lie in the elements of the "innocent" hag and the curse itself, the compulsion to be a hag. The agent who caused the curse remains invisible in both legend types, and it is rare for anything that can be interpreted as a curse to occur in the address legends.

In the address legends the hag appears as a materialization of unconscious thought, thereby showing connections with the hag who dies on the scythe; nevertheless, after some hesitation, the latter is placed among the analogy legends. From one point of view, it might perhaps have been justified to regard the scythe legends as belonging to the curse group, as the hag who is cut to death on the scythe was thought to be unaware of her deeds. Like most analogy legends, however, the attacks were against animals. The bloody end corresponds to the pattern of violence in other texts woven around the analogy. The male nightmare hags who sometimes occur are almost exclusively found in analogy texts, very rarely in address narratives.

Among the proactive methods of defence against the hag, mention is sometimes made of a variation on addressing the hag. To get rid of her, someone else had to call out the name of the hag-ridden victim, as explained by a woman born in 1841:

My brother Ola and I were lying [asleep] one night. Then Ola began moaning. So I called out to him. "It was good that you called out to me, for now it's vanished," he said.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ LUF 4154:11 Skåne, Sweden 1929.

It is very common to find first-person narratives in which the speaker describes such an incident; in the address legends it is the hag-ridden person who shouts at the hag, but when the victim's name is the one being spoken aloud, it is necessary for a third person to be present. The essential difference in the motifs of crying out the name of the hag-ridden victim in relation to the address legends is that the hag is only the sickness that has to be chased away. She is not a person who manifests herself or is recognized.

ACTION, COUNTERACTION AND CONSEQUENCES

To summarize, we may note that the curse legends differ in several respects from other texts about the hag. They do not have the same starting point as other legends, and they do not concern the hag's activities at all. She is not an economic threat in these texts, nor is she a representation of a dream experience or regarded as a projectile carrying a disease. The foal's caul legends are entirely aimed at explaining the reason why hags exist. Like the analogy legends, however, they seek to expose and punish acts of magic, although they lie one stage further back in the chain of events. The hag is suffering the punishment for her mother's deeds.

The foal's caul legends may be said to describe metaphoric births. The rituals are linked to other ethnomedical practices connected to childbirth, based on the analogical notion of opening and closing. Unlike other help in childbirth, however, acts associated with the foal's caul are condemned in the legends, which treat them as premeditated behaviour that goes against the words of the Bible. Just as obviously as reality creates texts, texts can create reality, because there is nothing to say that women did not really use the foal's caul ritual as a prophylactic measure. Judging by the archival material, however, it is unlikely that the ritual was practised on any scale. I therefore cannot find any weighty argument against describing the rituals in the legend as fictitious. In the present study the foal's caul narratives are regarded as texts that communicate a norm rather than knowledge: their purpose is not primarily to describe pain relief in childbirth but to condemn acts of magic. Furthermore, they are reliant on audiences' knowing about the nightmare hag as she is represented in the texts surveyed in previous chapters. A female being with associations of sexuality and magic, anxiety and sickness, could easily be linked with moralizing stories like those about the foal's caul.

To a certain extent, the foal's caul legends are akin to self-transformation legends and other texts about *trolldom* in which the person who wants to change shape passes through some circular object, but women very rarely want to turn into hags. Nonetheless, if we compare the foal's caul texts with legends about voluntary shape-shifters, we see that both groups concentrate on the associated ritual, narrating events connected with magic acts performed by marginalized persons, which are stopped. In the former case it is women who dare to defy their fate, in the latter case Sami and Finnish individuals, but both groups of texts convey a tone of social disparagement and moral superiority; on the other hand, magic thinking is implicit in the foal's caul narratives, while shape-shifting is of less importance.

As the texts are so concerned with fertility and reproduction, it cannot be ruled out that both male fear and female jealousy lay behind the foal's caul narratives, which are geared to society's norms and values to a much higher degree than the analogy legends. How these are described in an analysis naturally depends on the basic view one takes of pre-industrial society. For my part, I find that the values and norms that steer the actions in the foal's caul narratives express a patriarchal spirit and a narrow society. Women are defined by their reproductive biological functions, and their ideal social role is one of submissiveness. Male authority and power are confirmed in the texts, whereas female ritual action is condemned from the beginning. Just as the exercise of power is patriarchal in the legends, it is often ratified by the Church, while the Bible endorses such behaviour. This male-female conflict in the hag material is seen most clearly in the foal's caul stories.

Women are certainly visible in folklore, but the picture painted of them in the foal's caul legends is sexualized and simplified, a crude caricature of young, fertile women, portrayed as refusing to accept the painful consequences of their lust. In a living oral tradition, stories like these about the foal's caul could no doubt be a seedbed for slander and gossip, leading to social stigmatization. The women in the legends offend against the words of the Bible, which is in itself a gross breach of the norm. Moreover, the consequence of their actions is the existence of torments such as the hag and the werewolf. At the same time, the scene in which the foal's caul legends are rooted—dangerous and painful childbirth—must have been ever-present for fertile women. "As a rule, women in the countryside had as many children as they could. Regulating factors were the age of

marriage, nursing habits, sterility, sickness, and death”, writes Beata Losman.⁶⁸ Naturally, however, ideas about sexuality and fertility were always related to economic and social circumstances in everyday life.

In the curse legends there is no malicious intent or will as in other legends about the hag. We see no materialized evil wishes, no explicit desire. The hag acts by compulsion, not infrequently as a punishment for other people’s actions. The texts are therefore geared to explaining and revealing real conditions rather than punishing people who work magic.

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⁶⁸ Losman (1987:61).

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The Man Who Caught the Hag

In folktales, legends and myths, there are often descriptions of marriages to enchanted and supernatural creatures, frog princes and seducers in various guises. The Nordic ballads also contain many examples of young women being spirited away into the mountains and shape-shifting marriage partners.¹ Norse mythology describes liaisons between gods and giantesses, and in myths all over the world there are examples of love affairs between mortals, on the one hand, and gods, heroes, demons or spirits, on the other. The latter can manifest themselves in a wide range of forms: from animals to the virtually formless.

In Nordic stories about interactions between humans and other beings there are similar boundary-crossing sexual constellations: the spirit of the forest (*skogsrå*) who seduces the charcoal burner, the mermaid or merman who targets humans, the water-sprite or the werewolf making advances on women. We have seen above that much of the hag material is based on more or less erotically charged encounters with the hag, something which applies in particular to legends about men who marry the hag.² The essential difference from other stories about the hag is that these legends have their foundation in the general motif in legends and myths about sexual

¹ Feilberg (1910); TSB A 14–31.

² Christiansen (1958 ML 4010, “Married to the Nightmare”).

relations with supernatural beings³ featuring a captured, shapeless woman being forced to adopt a human body and marry.

All these narratives address a serious breach of a taboo, that of failing to keep human and supernatural categories separate. In many myths a relationship of this kind—and any progeny it might produce—involves some kind of renewal, a fresh start, the creation of a new order, but these aspects are totally lacking in Nordic folklore where affairs with supernatural beings rarely, if ever, lead to anything good. Unlike in most myths, the liaison seldom results in any offspring; rather, the narratives concentrate on the meeting between mortal and spirit, with the attraction as the main point, along with methods for averting the threat that this entails.

It is not only in the legends that such boundary transgressions occur. Jonas Liliequist, in his dissertation on the ideology surrounding crimes of bestiality (1992), has shown that attitudes towards these crimes, legal aspects aside, were expressions of a deep-seated fear of the sexually mixing of incompatible categories,⁴ which people thought could produce monstrous and deformed creatures. A study of the manner in which such categories are constructed and how they were contrasted in various ways against each other would be very interesting, touching on questions of great relevance for the hag material: issues of sick and healthy, human and non-human, good and evil. That would be beyond the scope of this present work, but it may be noted that the attitude to relations between mortals and supernatural beings was not always as categorically negative as Liliequist presents it. The interest here is on legends about the hag wife: how a man manages to capture the hag that torments him. He marries her and—unlike in most other Nordic folk legends—in some texts they have children. Later, however, he loses her for some reason or other. The texts focus very much on the capture of the hag and the moment when she vanishes.

LEGENDS OF THE HAG WIFE

The legends about the captured woman can be called “The man who married the hag” or “The hag wife”, depending on where one wishes to place the emphasis in the texts. “The man who married the hag” is a more relevant heading if highlighting the man as the main agent in the text and the initiator

³ Raudvere (1993).

⁴ J. Liliequist (1992:140ff.).

of the action in texts which are primarily about how to gain power over the hag—at least temporarily. The theme is a good fit with other texts where the conflict between hag and human is emphasized, and one of the main aims is to learn how to get rid of her. “The hag wife”, on the other hand, puts the confrontation between categories at the centre since the heading is actually a contradiction in terms. The latter designation is preferred here, precisely because it says something about the fundamental conflict in the text, although both are used synonymously for the sake of variation.

A hag “was nasty to” a farmhand every single night. He was advised to seal all the holes. He did that but he forgot the keyhole. In the night the hag came in through it and he got someone else to block the hole. In the morning there was a naked woman in the room who was terribly beautiful. He married her and they lived together for several years and had children. Then one day he said to her, “Do you know where you came from?” And he took the stopper out of the keyhole. She disappeared at once.⁵

SYNOPSIS

A man (usually a farmhand) is tormented by the hag. Not knowing what to do, he is helped by someone else (a farmhand who sleeps in the same room or a person from outside). The man is told that all the holes in the room except one must be sealed. The next time he feels the hag coming in the night the next time he has to plug the last knothole or the keyhole. When the farmhand follows the advice, the captured hag is transformed the following morning into a beautiful girl. They marry and live together for a long time, but somehow she finds out how she came to the man and then removes the plug. She immediately loses her human form and disappears out through the hole through which she entered.

STARTING POINT

The hag torments a man.

The hag acts in a way we recognize her from other legends, as a source of physical and mental torment. The text cited above says only that the hag “was nasty” while other legends may be more detailed. “The hag wife” is really the only legend that gives a lengthy account of the hag’s activities. The other legend texts

⁵ LUF 460:91f. Skåne, Sweden 1921.

note her effect and make a diagnosis, but the man in this text seems to know what is actually happening. He just does not know the method for getting rid of her.

EPISODE 1

The man is advised by a mentor to seal every conceivable point of entry.

“He was advised,” the text says rather vaguely. The mentor thus does not act as an agent in the text, as in many other texts about the hag wife. There the mentor has a more prominent role in the action. The mentor can be the master of the farm or a wise woman who knows magic. The mentor is a third agent apart from the victim and the hag, and is the one who initiates the counteraction. No other text highlights this third party who provides the knowledge as this text does. The recommended measure gives concrete confirmation that the evil always comes from outside and thus can be stopped by sealing holes. This demonstrates how well the text connects to notions of the limited good. Both the threat—the hag—and the person resolving the conflict—the mentor—come from outside. Balance and harmony are found in the little world of the home which is subjected to constant attack from the outside world. A parallel interpretation can perceive the situation as erotic imagery. Not many hints from the storyteller are necessary for the holes and the plugs to be understood as sexual images, especially since the conflict is fundamentally of such a distinctly sexual character, with the hag tormenting helpless men in the night.

CHANGE OF STATE

The nightmare hag is caught.

The man’s project, following the mentor’s advice, is to catch the hag. She becomes the object of his actions, just as in the hag legends analysed above. We recognize the same pattern in the shift between object and subject.

Unlike other hag legends, the hag here turns out not to be a known person but a young stranger. It is

not a matter of finding analogical links between the attacking being and its sender, and the hag is never physically injured. In the analogy narratives the whole point is that the hag is a local person; it would be inconceivable for the man to want to marry such a witch. In the legends of the man who married the hag there is never any question of exposing a worker of magic. On the contrary, the text emphasizes the surprise at the transformation from a nocturnal demon to a beautiful girl. The hag seems to be aggressive only in her non-human body; as a woman she is not at all threatening. The legends studied hitherto end after the change of state when the hag's human shape is revealed, but in "The hag wife" the story continues. The hag stays, unlike in the other legends where the exposed person is driven away. She is often described as homeless, helpless and almost confused. The nudity of the hag is stressed in some texts; she covers herself and is ashamed that she has no clothes. The woman is allowed to remain, but more because of the man's curiosity than his passion. She stays on since she has no other place in the world of mortals.

In human form the hag then submits to the ritual that, more than any other, constitutes the foundation for the social and human order: marriage. As a wife she has a given place in the community. There are variants where the hag is baptized, the sign of membership of the church contrasting with the assaulting nocturnal figure that comes in through the keyhole.

In myths and legends, children born of a union between a mortal and a supernatural being often have special gifts. This is not the case in the legends of the man who married the hag. Their mother appears to be entirely a woman as long as she has her bodily form, and there is no mention of the children having any divergent properties, whether positive or negative. "He married her." The actual marriage and the children, if any, are not a sexual element in the text but more of a social matter. The children, about whom

there is no further comment, are a confirmation that the social role has been fulfilled.

EPISODE 2

The hag discovers the plug.

During a quarrel, or because of a mistake, the woman finds out how she got into the house. As in the introduction to the text, the hag becomes the acting subject. She understands the connection and reverses the situation through her action. The motif of the hag who regains power is also formulated in other legends, when she turns the hackle against the person who is using it for protection, or when she says, "Now you can be the hag!" The hag wife also responds with a counteraction, and once again it is knowledge that causes the legend to take a new direction. The hag wife's insight means that the man loses his power over her.

CHANGE OF STATE

The hag disappears.

The hag vanishes immediately, as the inevitable consequence of the removal of the plug, a counteraction that underlines the central significance of the plug as a symbol, not just in an erotic sense but also, and just as much, in terms of the passage between two worlds: outside (the chaotic, assaulting) and inside (the home and the ordered world).

The shape-less form is evidently the hag's proper state. She is not a woman who is transformed back and forth to achieve evil purposes, but a figure who is constantly forced to remain in the home. The change is a return to the original. In one regard the text is back where it started, with the exception that the hag no longer torments the man. The circle is closed. A closure like this is unique among hag stories. The others end with her being exposed in her human form and, in exceptional cases, with her reversing the situation, as in some of the address legends. The fact that no one in the surroundings is accused of being the hag makes its essential elements very different from the rest of the hag material.

CODA

The person who suffers defeat in the text is the man who loses his wife.

This applies to most people who attempt to have a relationship with a supernatural being as there is always a fundamental flaw in relationships that mix two incompatible categories. Once again there is a breach of a norm at the centre, but this time it is a man who is the offender. Yet he is not punished to any great extent, not in the way the hag in the analogy legends is punished when she is subjected to the magic three-step method. The hag simply disappears back to the unknown place from whence she came. In other hag texts, the punishment of the hag is the central element at the end of the story.

In its formal outline the legend returns in its coda to the starting point: the hag goes back to her unknown origins; thus the text is circular. Also unlike other legends of the hag, there is more than one episode, and there is a greater wealth of detail. Moreover, the action covers a longer period of time. Sometimes a narrative says explicitly, “several years”, and in other texts the couple manage to have children. Other legends of the hag take place during a short, intensive period, at the most over one night as we await the outcome of the actions. This means that the legends of the hag wife do not have the same emotional presence as other texts about the hag, even though they start with her tormenting someone. In regard to content, the end of the legend gives no solution as in the other hag legends. No hag is exposed or punished. The only result is that the man is no longer bothered by her.

The shape of the hag in this legend differs in one important point from other texts about her. The hag wife appears to be a constant demonic figure which temporarily takes on human form and returns at the end of the text to her non-material state. This is essentially different from the hag in the analogy legends and the curse legends, whose other nocturnal shape is only temporary, while her true existence is a part of ordinary, everyday life. The legends about the hag wife thus lack the connection to magic thinking that is so important for other hag texts.

It can be concluded that, in this category of hag material, an international narrative motif has been linked in various ways to Nordic conceptions of the hag and adapted to the existing traditions. Yet essential parts of the hag material are lacking in these texts because they are so closely

linked to the folktale motif. It is of course impossible to say when people started telling stories about marriages to the hag, although the various guises in which she appears elsewhere are suitable for stories about supernatural marriages and for portraying a figure who can enter a room unnoticed. In addition, she is a being with sexual features. This international folktale was easy to link to a spatial context in a local community in Scandinavia, the farmhand's bedroom, which simultaneously gives the text a more contextualized dimension. All we can say is that in the earliest documentation of the beliefs about the hag there are no such motifs. Nevertheless, the stolen swan garments in the Old Norse Eddic poem *Völundarkviða* (The Lay of Völund) show that the motif existed in the North at an early stage, although with no connection to the night-riding beings. Old Norse literature has several examples of spouses of demonic character, and such marriages are always dissolved. Olaus Magnus in the sixteenth century refers to a myth about a relationship between a woman and a bear, whose offspring was able to perform mighty deeds. The text is accompanied by a picture of a young woman and a bear walking fondly together.⁶ The stories of abducted brides in the ballads, or the accounts of transformed partners, as we have noted, never have anything to do with the nightmare hag.⁷

The hag we encounter in medieval texts is a periodically transformed human being, linked to ideas about shape-shifting and clandestine knowledge. It is precisely the changeability of this figure that is the foundation for the logic of the other texts about the hag. Ambiguity is her distinctive feature, but in the stories about marriage to the hag she is made into one of the constant figures in folklore. King Vanlandi's wife Huld in *Ynglinga saga*, who sends the hag against her husband, is no hag herself. He cannot be said to be married to the hag, and it is not the wife who changes shape, but she punishes him by putting the hag on him. The text is closer to the story of rejected love in the *Eyrbyggja saga*, in which the old woman punishes the reluctant young man than to a legend of the hag. Above all, it is a story about the use of *trolldom*. Among the early folklore records collected by Just M. Thiele, Johan Törner, and Leonhard Rääf, on the other hand, there are stories of the hag wife which follow the later archived legends. An example from Rääf runs:

⁶ Olaus Magnus (1996–98: 18:30); J. Liliequist (1992:142).

⁷ Swang (1983).

The hag comes in through some small opening in the room; if that can be sealed while she is in the room, she is captured and stays until the same hole is opened again. A hag of this kind can be taken as a wife and become a mother, but she goes away and vanishes forever if she is given the aforementioned opportunity.⁸

Some of the curse legends also contain the motif of plugging the hole so that the hag will reveal herself. The purpose in these texts, however, is quite different from that in “The hag wife”. Most exposure legends are about releasing the hag from a curse imposed on her without her knowledge. Apart from the initial diagnosis, which is usually of quite a general character, such exposure legends say more about how to deal with the hag than they do about her appearance. In the legends about the man who captures and manages to hold on to the hag, her appearance and shape-shifting are problematized.

SPATIAL CONTEXT AND CHRONOTOPE

The legend of the hag wife initially takes place in a bed, usually in the farmhands’ shared room. Although there is more than one episode and a long time is envisaged as passing, the legend takes place inside the dwelling. As we have seen, this is common in the texts about the hag; it is exceptional for anyone to meet the hag outdoors. The method of plugging knot holes says a great deal about housing conditions. Houses were draughty, cold and had thin walls; knot holes were not uncommon. Otherwise the story is much less firmly rooted in agrarian society than many other hag legends with their cowshreds, manure pitchforks, and scythes.

RITUAL CONTEXT

The legend of the man who married the hag does not include any description of any performance as such, but there is a figurative act. When the man plugs the holes he wants to stop the attacks from outside. The action confirms the view that the causes of disease and ill health are to be found outside one’s own world. By sealing every conceivable point of entry, the man defends himself against further attack. Moreover, he acquires the covert knowledge that one can capture and keep the attacking creature.

⁸ Rääf ed. Wikman (1957:283), Östergötland, Sweden.

Without committing oneself to psychoanalytical interpretations, one could also construe the action as a picture of sexual intercourse. Here, however, the plugging of the holes as a counteraction against the hag's attack should be primarily stressed. The starting point, after all, was that the hag was tormenting the man. As in all texts about the hag, it is a seemingly simple action that has dramatic consequences, and there appears to be some kind of relationship between the temporary body and the plug. As long as it is there she cannot get out. The bond is expressed even more explicitly in the stories of the swan maidens, where the man must get hold of—or, more precisely, steal—her swan garment in order to gain control over her.

An odd variant of the theme of release is part of a werewolf legend from Skåne. It is about a man who is periodically transformed and hides his wolf skin between his periods as a werewolf, but if someone can find it and burn it, he is freed.⁹ Then the bond between the person and the temporary body is definitively broken. Some legends emphasize the socialization of the hag through the clothes the man gives to her. The new garments indicate her becoming human.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

"The hag wife" is the legend with the clearest grounding in a social context. The legend portrays the rural environment as a whole and marriage as an institution. The story of the man who marries the hag can also be interpreted as an image of the legal bonds of marriage and the limits to women's freedom of movement. A single woman was in a vulnerable position in peasant society, largely economically dependent on others. When we attempt to understand a narrative like this, however, a number of questions arise, as many of the values and premises have changed radically. If we imagine the legend of the hag wife being told at roughly the same time as Ibsen was writing *A Doll's House* (1879), it is obvious that they are about essentially different worlds. Marriage in the hag texts reflects the social order: "The farmhand married her, later bought a farm and several children [came]", a woman living in the alms-house stated.¹⁰ The man thus turns the hag into a socially acceptable woman. But when Nora leaves home it is to embark on a nascent social alternative. The hag who flies out

⁹ LUF 2945:7 Skåne, Sweden 1930.

¹⁰ LUF 2248:9 Skåne, Sweden 1930.

through the keyhole ends a story about what happens if one tries to mix the human and the demonic, about defence against witchcraft and ideas about the origin of sickness: in the former case a revolt, in the latter the expected proper closure.

The frequently higher age of marriage for people without property was of course a breeding ground for stories about the woman who comes from nowhere and the man who can marry her as easily as she can come in through the keyhole. The farmhand in the legend longs for a wife—perhaps an impossible dream, but here a solution is provided for him. Beata Losman writes of the significance of marriage in rural communities:

Perhaps the church records with their focus on marriage and households have misled me into overemphasizing the significance of marriage, but since households were the foundation stones in the local community and they were built on marriages, weddings must have been very important, both for the contracting parties and for the people around them.¹¹

Issues of marriage and relationships are to a certain extent personal and individual, and there are regional and social differences. Moreover, the age of marriage varied according to time period, region and groups, depending on economic circumstances, but certain societal norms and ideals dominate the picture of it.

The legends about the man's marriage to the hag differ significantly from other folklore texts describing sexual relationships with supernatural beings. These liaisons are of a temporary character, with sexual advances by a spirit of the forest, a water-sprite, a wight or a werewolf's attempts to attack a bridal procession or a pregnant woman. The texts are primarily about how people free themselves from the temptations of the supernatural creature. The hag, on the other hand, is captured by the man and transformed, for which there is no counterpart in other folklore narratives. The texts that come closest are legends about people being spirited away into the mountain or ballads about abducted brides. This can be explained in part by the fact that the legends of the man who married the hag are based on a lengthier folktale motif with several episodes. Yet the stories are also of a quite different character from those which content themselves with describing enticing creatures and possible counteractions.

¹¹ Losman (1986:105).

WHY DOES THE HAG WIFE DISAPPEAR?

The legend of the hag wife varies in form in regard to the reason for the wife's disappearance at the end. Some legends say that she found out by mistake about the hole through which she had entered. Knowledge is always central for changes that occur in the hag stories, something that also applies to the hag wife's learning something that only her husband had known previously.

A woman said about one man who had sealed the holes and married the hag experienced the following:

Then he asked her once if she knew how she had come there, but she didn't know. So he showed her the hole in the wall and took away what he had closed it with. But then she disappeared out through the hole and said, "It's far and cold to Knarre." So he was left on his own with his children.¹²

This example shows how motifs about the hag blend together seamlessly. From the perspective of the hag material, it is logical that the hag feels the cold outside the home. In Halland, where this legend was recorded, it was common for the hag to complain of the cold, and it must therefore have felt natural to insert this into the story. Through her complaint she reveals herself as a hag.

In other texts it is as a result of a disagreement or a quarrel that the hag wife acquires the knowledge. The exchange of words between the spouses leads to the man's revelation of the secret.

[B]ut after a year or so she asked her man for something and he didn't like it and so there was a dispute between them and he said in anger that if you're not content you can go back to where you came from and he went and took away the plug in the bore hole in the wall, and at once she vanished out through it and nobody saw where she went, but after that day [the man] became glum and broody, and he went and opened the hole in the wall and thought she would come back, but she never came again.¹³

The common feature of both explanations of how the woman discovered how she had come to the house is the element of chance. The easily captured wife vanishes quickly again.

¹² IFGH 3808:21 Halland, Sweden 1936.

¹³ IFGH 3382:37 Västergötland, Sweden 1934.

Sometimes, especially from southern Scandinavia, there is an addition to the legend in which the disappearing hag utters the strange phrase “Hear England’s bells!” or the like. One legend tells how the man hears the following when he has shown his wife the hole by mistake, “‘The bells are ringing in England,’ she replied and vanished and the man never saw her again.”¹⁴ Another recorded version reads, “‘Ding, dong, far from England,’ said the little woman and disappeared and was never seen again. And the man mourned so badly for her.”¹⁵ Helge Holmström has commented on this, seeing a link between angels (*änglar*) and England that is perhaps not very plausible. However, there is no other explanation as to why the phrase is integrated into the legend of the hag.

One variation on the ending is found in a version where the man has sealed the hole with a bit of his shirt and a plug. It was taken down in Ydre, where Leonhard Rääf collected his material almost a century earlier.

But then one Sunday afternoon, when they were lying having fun in bed, he happened to say, “This is where you came from!” And he took the plug and the piece of shirt out of the wall—but if he hadn’t taken away the piece of shirt she would not have had the power to see it. “Now I see my father’s and my mother’s land!” she said and so she left and he never saw her and he never heard of her again; so she was from far away.¹⁶

The hag wife’s words about a different country fall into place nicely in an interpretation of this narrative as a confrontation. The picture in the text is also reinforced by the fact that the man has not only used a plug but also cloth from his own shirt. The piece of cloth becomes a powerful image of intimacy and the personal prestige which the man invests in the action.

In several stories about supernatural wives there is the motif that the woman has not completely vanished. The anxious mother comes back now and then to look after her children, but she never stays.¹⁷

¹⁴ LUF 38:7 Skåne, Sweden 1929.

¹⁵ LUF 2762:8 Blekinge, Sweden 1930.

¹⁶ LUF 1950:330f. Östergötland, Sweden 1921.

¹⁷ Holmström (1919:96f).

“LOVELY NAKED GIRL”

The most important variation on the theme of the hag wife is found in the texts where no marriage is ever mentioned; instead, the man just catches the hag who turns into a beautiful girl. These are monoepisodic accounts which lack the marriage motif. They are usually classified as “Lovely naked girl” (*Grann, naken flicka*) in the archives. These texts, like the following, have mainly been found in southern Sweden and Denmark like the following, which is also an interesting example of how the collector has included the informants name in the record

The hag could only get out the same way she had come in. One night, Per Nilsson tells, an old man heard the hag coming into the house. He got up and sealed a couple of small holes at the door. Then he went back to bed. In the morning the hag was standing there on the floor in all her modesty and nakedness, and he could see who it was that was the hag.¹⁸

The text is just like the marriage stories minus the marriage and the disappearance of the hag. The method is the same, and the hag is naked and shy. In addition, her identity is exposed: “he could see who it was that was the hag.”

Among these texts there are also examples of the hag being recognized as someone from the neighbourhood. “Then he put a stick in the keyhole so that she couldn’t get out. Then he could see the most beautiful girl in the district. She came back one other night and then she disappeared. After that she never came back again.”¹⁹ When legends are formulated as briefly as this, they are very similar to other legends where the main point is to expose the hag. The method has the same effect as other texts which also single out a particular woman: “Then he could see the most beautiful girl in the district.” The three steps are, broadly speaking, included in the text. The hag is exposed in such a humiliating way that it must be interpreted as a punishment and she disappears, never to harass him again.

These legends, contrary to what one might believe, are more sexually charged in their descriptions, even though there is no mention of marriage. Or precisely because of that?

¹⁸ LUF 542:7 Skåne, Sweden 1928.

¹⁹ NM EU 3857:279 Skåne, Sweden 1932.

Once the hag was properly duped. When she had come in, a stick was put into the hole she had come through. Now she couldn't get out again. It could be seen then that it was a beautiful maiden who had come from her faraway home, and now she was standing here in her bare skin.²⁰

There are many examples among the stories about the captured hag showing how beliefs and descriptive details about her are interconnected. In a manuscript recording material from the parish of Marbäck in Västergötland there are variations which are very close to the analogy legends. The hag proves to be a woman who can work magic, but she is outwitted and exposed.

There was once a farmhand who suffered from the hag at night. His master told him he should cross his arms over his chest when he felt the hag coming, so that she was "bound" and couldn't get away before the sun came up and she was given "leave" to go. The farmhand did what he had been taught to do and in the morning he was lying there hugging a big fat woman whose home was far up in Lapland. After that she had to walk all the way home.²¹

Here the action appears to be wholly geared to protection against an external threat, and it corresponds accordingly with other folk cures. The creature cannot pass anything in the form of a cross, and the man uses his own body as a shield against the hag. The storyteller uses the verb "bind" to describe what happens, a common expression in magic traditions and ethnomedicine. Later in the manuscript there is a record from the same parish stating that the hag turned out to be "a wicked old woman, all the way from Lapland. She knew where she had come from and had to lumber that whole long way to get home."²² Lapland recurs as the home of women with sinister knowledge. The hag is also given a physically palpable punishment, the long walk, just as in the analogy legends and the impossible tasks in the charms.

²⁰ Grundtvig (ed. Ellekilde) (1944:390).

²¹ IFGH 4223:14 Västergötland, Sweden 1937.

²² IFGH 4223:17 Västergötland, Sweden 1937.

WHY MARRIAGE TO THE HAG?

Since the legend of the hag wife is linked to a group of texts with an international distribution, there are more analyses to consult than in the case of the other legends of the hag. The oldest is Helge Holmström's *study Studier över svanjungfrumotivet* ("Studies in the Motif of the Swan Maiden", 1919). It does not really provide any analysis of the hag texts, concentrating more on the motif of the swan maiden in European folktale collections. It is mainly an index and an aid to anyone searching the early literature. One chapter in the book is entitled "The Hag Wedding Type", further developed in an article entitled "The Legends of the Marriage to the Hag".²³ Writing on the subject of the distribution of the marriage legends, Holmström notes: "They are most numerous in Germany, where they are fairly common. They also occur in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. But that seems to be the limit of their occurrence."²⁴ He emphasizes the experiences of terror and anxiety and finds rationalistic explanations for them, in the spirit of von Sydow, observing that the experience of the hag is "a purely physiological feeling".²⁵ His explanations for ideas about the hag are supported by the rationalism that was acceptable at the time, when medical and psychological explanations were highly valued. Tales of the hag therefore had to be included entirely in this explanatory model. Holmström does not discuss form and content, nor does he ask what the narratives may have meant for the people who told them.

On the significant differences from other stories of the swan maiden, Holmström writes: "The only difference is that, in the legends of marriage to the hag the wife is portrayed as a hag before and after the actual marriage episode, and that the formula for her capture and disappearance is not one of those used in the swan maiden types."²⁶ The connections with the folktale motif are undeniable, but in this context it is more important to see how the legends correspond to the other texts about the nightmare hag.

Before Holmström, the Englishman Edwin S. Hartland devoted a long chapter to "Swan-maidens" in his *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891).²⁷ In this evolutionistic account Hartland also mentions the Nightmare. A

²³ Holmström (1918, 1919).

²⁴ Holmström (1919:91).

²⁵ Holmström (1919:89).

²⁶ Holmström (1919:94).

²⁷ Hartland (1891:255ff., especially 278ff., "The Nightmare Type").

much later folktale scholar, Bengt Holbek, has identified Hartland's book²⁸ as the first to consider this theme. In sharp contrast to earlier studies which mostly had a literary orientation, we have James M. Taggart's anthropological study, *Enchanted Maidens: Gender Relations in Spanish Folktales of Courtship and Marriage* (1990). He proceeds from the male–female dichotomy, assigning a central role to the gender conflict, and devotes one chapter to “The Animal Groom”.²⁹ Taggart's material consists of narratives about lovers and suitors in animal guise in modern records. He cites Bruno Bettelheim's opinion that fairy tales about suitors in animal form illustrate how the fear of sexuality is transformed into heterosexual love, just as the animal is transformed into a young man. Taggart himself has a more societal model for his reading of the narratives. He considers, for example, whether the text was communicated by a man or a woman, which we cannot always do with the Scandinavian archival material since all too often we lack these data. Taggart writes, “The animal-groom tales are part of a series of stories that metaphorically describe a gender division of labor in courtship and marriage.”³⁰ This interplay between loyalty and new insight is the foundation for the women's more passive role in the Spanish village community, according to Taggart's analysis, which resonates with an interpretation of the legend of the hag wife as a reflection of social conditions. Taggart, however, is exclusively interested in the place of such narratives in society, whereas the legend of the hag wife is here treated as one of many hag legends which are all a part of the rural Nordic world of folk belief.

Tone Dahlstedt has examined similar narratives about wights in her work, although there are no marriages between humans and wights. On the other hand, her method of combining ethnological description of rural communities with an attempt to understand the significance of the conceptual universe in such a society has been a source of inspiration for this study.

Marriage between a man and a hag is a breach of a taboo. An act of this kind ignores set boundaries and dissolves categories such as human, non-human, supernatural and demonic, thus constituting a threat to the social order. A boundary transgression of this kind cannot endure. It is doomed to come to an end, so that things may return to their original state. With

²⁸ Holbek (1987:233ff.).

²⁹ Taggart (1990:146ff.); see also Leavy (1994); Sax (1998).

³⁰ Taggart (1990:164).

few exceptions, dealings with supernatural beings could never lead to anything good. Encounters with the creatures of folklore were a matter of warding off a threat or appeasing them, perhaps maintaining good relations with them in order to obtain benefits; kindness towards the brownie (Sw. *tomte*, Da. and No. *nisse* and Fi. *tonttu* or *haltija*) brought rewards. There were no relations that were intrinsically good in the folklore texts.

The stories of the hag wife have clear social dimensions found in few other tales of the hag. They emphasize the importance of marriage, not just economically but also as a cornerstone of the local community. The mentor who tells the man to plug the holes plays a not insignificant role in the narrative line of the legend.

The legends of the man who married the hag belong to the category of erotic narratives and sexual imagery in folk literature. The interpretative models cited above give priority to the fear of sexuality, an analysis that is a good fit for the hag wife. The plug in the hole could thus be interpreted as a penis symbol, or the whole method taught by the mentor could be seen as an image of sexual intercourse. All this is reasonable, even plausible, as one of several levels of interpretation among the listeners to a story about the hag. Yet it is also important to see that the recommended action likewise agrees with the texts concerning *trolldom*.

INTERPRETATIONS FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES

It is easy to imagine the legend about the marriage between the mortal man and the temporary hag wife attaining different formulations in individual interpretations.

The perspectives of a male and a female narrator are used here to provide contrast. These two wholly hypothetical narrative situations can convey interesting aspects of how people may have told stories about the hag. What they have in common is that they represent dreams of a different life which could have been rather unrealistic in light of the lives of their listeners. This feature of escapism distinguishes them from other legends of the hag, and is perhaps the reason for the fairy-tale character of the marriage legends.

The first individual interpretation involves the dream of marriage. For a man, the story of the hag wife could express a fantasy of marriage. It could be a rather utopian dream for farmhands who did not have the economic means to get married, or many opportunities to meet young women. The man who married the hag gets a wife who flies in through the keyhole.

This dream may seem superficial, but it could be very attractive for young men with no prospects of a home of their own.

A more moral aspect of the legend could also be accentuated when considerable importance was attached to marriage as the most important choice in an adult's life. A good marriage was economically rewarding, ideally contracted with a woman who was able to work and have children. From this moralizing viewpoint, the legend of the hag wife could be a warning against a fixation on a woman's attractive external appearance. Her disappearance can thus be interpreted as the illusory beauty that vanishes—the kind of worldly wisdom an older man might want to pass on to younger ones. The ending could be depicted as more or less tragic. A more sexually accentuated presentation of the moral content in the hag legend could be a warning against temporary liaisons. Of course, there were not many women moving freely around between rural communities, but one can perhaps interpret the marriage as casual sexual intercourse with a person who did not belong to the social setting. Or might it be an attempt to get rid of a wife after a long and unhappy marriage? As one snippet recounts, "And they got married and they had been married a long time. But he got fed up with it and showed her the hole and said, 'Go now to where you came from.' And she was gone."³¹

If a male perspective on the text is a sexually coloured dream of a woman who comes to him without any effort on his part, then in the hypothetical reconstruction we can contrast this with a reasonable female way of understanding the text. This could mean a dream of liberation from marriage and arduous everyday duties. Unlike other legends of the hag, this text makes it more difficult to construct a purely feminine perspective. The very starting point is masculine: the plan is to capture the hag, who turns out to be a beautiful young woman whom he then marries. It is easier to imagine a female storyteller highlighting the more general and less gender-specific taboo according to which relationships and contracts with supernatural beings usually lead to problems and results that are the opposite of what was expected. There is really nothing in the text concerning women's day-to-day work or lives apart from the hag wife having children.

³¹ LUF 207:22 Skåne, Sweden 1922.

FUGITIVE RELATIONS

To sum up: “The hag wife” differs from other legends of the *mara* but is not peripheral to the overall corpus. Its undeniable kinship with international motifs is chiefly noticeable in the outline with multiple episodes and the fact that there are fewer individual features. This stereotyped character cannot be ascribed solely to the recording situation, because the documentation of the other hag legends does include more variations.

One of the more significant differences in relation to other hag legends is the narrative’s weaker foundation in everyday reality. Accusing a neighbour of being a hag is not a feature of either “The man who married the hag” or “Lovely naked girl”. The hag tormenter is exposed but not punished. Instead it is often as if the man takes pity on the naked, helpless woman. Yet she returns to her origins as soon as she has the chance.

Despite the clear differences, similarities to other categories of the hag material can also be seen; for instance, the hag has given several of her distinctive features to the marriage legends. Furthermore, the significance of knowledge is emphasized; without the help of the mentor the man would be powerless against the hag’s attacks. Curing and healing are not at the centre, however; rather, marriage as a social institution creating order takes centre stage.

Now you see her, now you don’t. Summing up the narratives about the *mara*.

Legends about the hag are not documented as far back as other texts about the *mara*, appearing only in material written down by folklore collectors, unless we count the story of Vanlandi’s painful death in *Ynglingatal* and other Old Norse texts as legends. These, however, take place far from everyday rural life, enacted in an aristocratic milieu, and should rather be regarded as parts of idealized chronicles. It is not only a question about the age of the documentation; the legends are less fragmentary and more complex than the early material about the hag.

Of the texts about the hag, the legends are the most constricted by their external form; one can observe great agreement within the different “legend types”. In regard to content, the legends are expressions of a collective worldview—or, to use Michael Jackson’s phrasing, “a complex of shared assumptions and ideas”³²—which was shared to varying extents by the rural population and reflected a common ontology and anthropology.

³² Jackson (1989:60).

These perceptions of reality and human nature and potential are common to the hag legends, even though they are seemingly about very different things. It is also this foundation that makes each individual text plausible and comprehensible.

Perceptions of reality and humanity are mainly expressed in negative terms in the legends of the hag. Acts of violence against the hag are described throughout the texts, and the language of power is explicit. It might seem as if I am siding with the hag in saying this, and that the events in the legends ought to be portrayed in more positive terms. It could be said that the reactions to the hag in the texts—above all the rituals and the protective measures—are people's way of guarding themselves against what they perceive as evil and menacing. Yet we cannot escape the fact that the violence in the legends of the hag is aimed at a figure that is obviously defined as feminine. Even in her terrifying appearance the hag is an image of evil women, often sexually active examples. Unlike other female beings in folklore with a constant form, the hag is a transformed human being, both an earthly woman and a shape-shifter with many possible forms. The legends are often crude, claiming to be talking about a woman in the immediate vicinity of the listeners. As we have seen, there are indeed texts about male nightmare hags, but it is evident that the confrontation is usually between the man or victim, who reverses the balance of power, and the woman, the hag who is transformed from subject to object.

Gender, the socially defined female role, is a more explicit theme in the conflicts than sexuality itself. It is not primarily a sexual conflict that propels the action in the legends, although the hag traditions have erotic features; it is a conflict that should be described in terms of gender. In the texts the man is portrayed as the upholder of norms vis-à-vis the hag, who is defined as a half-human, half-demonic figure. There is always a tension in the texts between the hag as a supernatural being and an ordinary woman. An effective threat is thus created, filled with everyday details and supplemented with certain distancing elements. The evil of the hag lay in her dangerous envy, prone to assuming material form, and this danger was represented in stories about sexually active women or fertile young girls. Female sexuality—rather than fertility—was associated in the legends with the use of magic, the practice of which was grounded in ideas of envy and fortune.

There is good reason to return to the relationship between form and content in the legends, even though it did not play any great part in the text analyses. In terms of form, the legends of the hag largely agree with Tangherlini's definition. They are short and monoepisodic, narrated

within the framework of traditional folk narrative. The legends of the hag are mundane in character, taking place in a social space that was well known to listeners. They are “highly ecotypified”, as Tangherlini writes.³³ The spatial foundation in all the legends is the rural setting, more specifically a non-mechanized agricultural environment, whose day-to-day work implements (shears, scythes, pitchforks) occur in the texts. Events in the majority of the material take place in the stable or the cowshed, or else in the bed. The legends of the hag would be inconceivable in an urban context. Several of them stretch and play with given social roles, no doubt functioning as both a mirror and a distorting mirror. The events are assumed to have taken place in bygone times, but they are related with great intensity. Thus, while the account is formulated in the past, psychologically and symbolically the figures in the legends are definitely present in the storyteller’s and the listeners’ own time; emotionally we are in the present. The dynamic of the narrative mostly lies in the tension between the everyday and the alien, and between the story in the past and the emotional effect in the present. The legends could be told and understood at many levels with a given collective frame of reference, “reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs”, to quote Tangherlini.³⁴

The concentrated form of the legends preserved in the archives is largely due to the actual recording situation. This gives the text a notebook character, but we should not forget that this concentrated form was probably also a way of telling stories. The form provided the framework within which an individual narrator could vary the presentation.

The content must presumably have been adapted, at least to some extent, to fit the situation. A changeable being like the hag would have lent itself well to this adaptation. The analogy narratives in particular gave great freedom in the choice of setting and the figure of the hag, although the content is presented from the victim’s perspective. Usually it is the effects of the hag that we are confronted with first; what preceded this is only indirectly illuminated through the exposure of the hag.

In the legends there are no descriptions of the technique used by the hag to perform acts of magic, but there are many detailed accounts of how the prophylactic methods should be practised. Most legends in fact

³³Tangherlini (1990:385).

³⁴Tangherlini (1990:385).

proceed from different methods of protection against the hag. In certain cases they are complex acts, rituals that were not necessarily performed in practice.

The legends lack the detailed descriptions that we find in first-person narratives, for example, of the appearance of the hag, the way she gets into the house and the physical and mental torments she causes. Instead there are curtly worded statements like, "He suffered badly from the hag" or "The farmer's horse was tormented by the hag every night". It is difficult to make quantitative comparisons of the archival material, but it is more common for the hag to attack animals than humans in the legends. The attitude to the hag can vary in the legends, but basically there is an aversion to her, and, by extension, to acts of magic. The material on protective methods, as we have seen, is very rich, with the legends serving to confirm the effectiveness of the advice.

Pentti Leino's terms—starting point, episode and change of state—effectively brought out central elements in the legends of the hag and demonstrated common features in the fashioning of the texts. The starting point of the legends is that the hag's actions have caused injury to a person or animal. The introductions are often constructed around spots of indeterminacy, gaps in the text concerning things that the listeners are presumed to know already, and therefore filled by the listener's individual experience and knowledge. A legend can very well begin with a statement of facts without needing to give long explanations of what the nightmare hag is. These invisible links constitute a form of intertextuality.

The action proper of the text is directed against the hag, which means that subject and object change places in the legend, but a counteraction must be launched against the hag if the change is to come about. The victim becomes the agent. The action performed entails a change of state to one that is completely different from that at the outset. The hag is punished and the person who has engineered this, usually a man, is rewarded in some way. The analytical schema designed to read the legends has proved useful for highlighting shifts in the balance of power, the agent's movements and the relationship between subject and object. As in all traditions concerning the hag, knowledge is crucial if the victim is to escape the hag, which is why it is also important to stress the role of the mentor in the text. Like the threat, such knowledge comes from without. The significance of the background has also been emphasized through the social, spatial and ritual context. Many legends of the hag are built up around what in this study is called the magic three-step method of

revealing who the hag is and punishing that person, thus ensuring protection against further attack. A feature of all the traditions about the hag is that they are geared to action.

The grouping of the legends highlights three essential themes: the analogy legends present the hag as something related to the traditions of magic and witchcraft; the curse legends explain that the person who acts as the nightmare hag is afflicted by a curse; and the legends of the man who married the hag examine the theme of shape-shifting.

The analogy legends bring out one of the cornerstones of magic thinking, namely, the relationship between the action and the implement used for the magical act. The assumed analogical connection between the bodies is essential for the plausibility of the legends about the female neighbour being found in the manure heap or the girl complaining about the cold. These are the texts with the greatest agreement between older and newer sources. Even in the very oldest texts where hag-like beings occur, analogies are essential for the formal structure of the text and for the arrangement of the content. Such stories are immediately linked to ideas of envy and “the economy of fortune”, situating the hag in a moral and economic system. The analogy legends are often short and intensive, geared to exploring the concrete counteraction, with the violent resolution of the conflict at the centre. The hag in “Dead on the Scythe” is also transformed without her own knowledge, and we are not told why. It is a cruel legend which gives powerful confirmation that steel is the best protection against the hag.

The descriptions of the hag in the curse legends—which are absent from the older material—can sometimes appear to conflict with other records where the hag is described as a person who acts with evil intent. In the foal’s caul stories and the address legends, the compulsion to be a hag is a curse in itself; the act of magic has been moved one stage back in the action. These legends aim in large measure to answer the question of the origin of hags (and werewolves), although in many ways the curse legends appear to be secondary to the analogy legends, which give a different answer to the same question, but indirectly. One can suspect Christian influence in descriptions of the change of shape. The transformation into a hag is not an act of will in the foal’s caul legends, but punishment for a sinful deed: offending against the words of the Bible. The address legends make it clear that the hag is transformed without her own knowledge.

The legends of the foal’s caul and the man who dies on the scythe are both tragic stories, whereas the address legends can turn the tragedy into

rough comedy. We should therefore not be surprised when address legends express a certain sympathy for the hag. The target is the underlying act of magic.

The legends of the man who married the hag differ on several points from the other legends. "The hag wife" must be regarded as multi-episodic, and it takes place over a longer time, containing action that is not really intended to reveal an act of magic but to catch a demon. The shape-shifting is at the centre, but in a different way from the other legends. An international motif in folk literature—marriage to a supernatural being—has been introduced here, perhaps because the changeable nature of the hag makes her suitable for inclusion in such stories. In the legend of the hag wife it is the magic body that is temporary, but the hag wife appears to return to an original non-human state, and in the legend it is the human body that is temporary. The hag disappears because the man loses his mastery over her, not because he has disrupted an act of magic. The actual transformation confirms an affinity with the core of the ideas about the hag: she is both a demon and a human and can move between the categories. The legends of the man who married the hag also show many other similarities to the other legends of the hag, providing indications of the stories being well integrated into the other hag traditions.

The legends of the hag are not dream narratives; they have been fitted into the form of the genre with some scope for individual variation. Functioning in large measure as confirmation of the effectiveness of the prophylactic methods, they clarified the association between hags, magic and women.

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The Nightmare Hag: Narrative Figure, Personal Experience and Explanation of Misfortune—Some Concluding Remarks

The aim of this study has been to underline the strong connection between the conceptualization of the *mara* and general ideas about clandestine correspondences, illness and misfortune in the pre-industrial Nordic region. The local variants on the name *mara*—mostly translated in this study by the term “nightmare hag”—referred to a being, usually female, who attacked humans and animals during the night, and also to the rituals and charms intended to ward her off. When animals were found weak and exhausted in the morning it was thought to be due to an attack by the nightmare hag, while her assaults on humans were said to bring about anxiety and a sensation of being suffocated: an experience of physical and psychic discomfort. A latent sexual charge is more or less explicit in many of the *mara* narratives. She was often described as an attractive young woman, despite the anxiety she caused. Horror and eroticism are blended in the Nordic conceptions of the creature.

The present study has to a large extent focused on the *mara* from a narrative perspective and also on how the stories about the nightmare hag were communicated. The depicted nightmare dream, seen from an individual perspective, was a trope in local discourse for anxiety in its general human, non-pathological form. Presumptions about the human soul and some persons’ abilities to act outside their everyday bodies constitute the conceptual framework for such narratives, although it is impossible to determine whether the stories, when performed, were visualized as involving a concrete transformation or were presented in a more metaphoric

mode. Stories about shape-shifters appear in many cultures around the world; it is common for insomnia and anxiety to be attributed to a spirit that presses on the chest of a victim or a demon that is sent by somebody with a malevolent mind. Indeed, anxiety and evil are crucial concepts in most imaginaries that seek to explain questions about the existence of nocturnal attacks and the human condition, using a framework constituted by ideas about the causes of illness, power over others based on clandestine knowledge, and envy.

However, stories about the *mara* were not only about individual experiences. The nightmare hag featuring in Nordic oral tradition is only possible in a pre-industrial society. Like all kinds of beings and activities associated with witchcraft (*trolldom*) in the region, this shape-shifter was a concrete threat to production and subsistence that could have both psychological and economic dimensions; she was a threat in more ways than one. Ideas about a figure like the hag functioned as a tool for visualization in legends and statements as they delimited and encapsulated characteristic features of evil which were also promoted by the Church.

What is conventionally known as folk belief could also be said to constitute a semantic field where beings, forces and influences were connected to hypernyms that placed these kinds of stories—which were frightening, fantastic and entertaining in equal measure—in a framework. *Trolldom* is a major theme in the folklore records and much of it centres around descriptions of how illness is set on humans and animals, and of methods for warding off attackers; the material contains the same assumptions about illness and describes similar ceremonies, along with very different intentions and varying results. Among the aggressors in this conceptual universe was the nightmare hag.

Analysis of the advice offered for protection against the hag has shown how texts and rituals intermingle and how descriptions of ceremonial activities can function as structuring elements in a narrative. Such entexted rituals cannot, however, be read as instructions; rather, the details made the story more intriguing from both the teller's and the audience's perspective. Nonetheless, the substances with supposed apotropaic qualities played a fundamental role in ritual practices, while the elements also appear in the formulations of the charms. Several of the latter end with instructions on how to read them (sometimes accompanied by suggested physical gestures), but almost all have references to substances over which they are to be read in order to convey the benefit, and describe their application, either by being rubbed in or otherwise consumed. Substances with strong

metaphoric value appear throughout the narratives: water, salt, blood, alcohol and a number of less pleasant fluids.

Analysis of the legends, with their very varied motifs, showed that even the most stereotypical of them must have provided the potential for individual interpretations by members of the audiences. With closer reading of the archival records, narratives about the *mara* character can be seen to contain religious themes and comments on gender and social hierarchy, as well as reasoning about cause and effect at personal and cosmic levels. They also provide insight into how personhood was conceived and how the link between the human and the non-human was imagined. The mode of narration, with its conceptualization of cosmologies, beings and norms, indicates that what at first glance appears to be an entertaining or frightening story also carries elements of a clearly articulated worldview. Its coherence is not necessarily obvious in each single record, but the intertextual relationship between the recorded texts presents a local logic of a shared conceptual universe that must have underpinned and illuminated the actual performances.

By means of rituals with apotropaic ambitions, phenomena like human desire, envy, or, for that matter, well-wishing, were identified as more or less independent forces behind clandestine actions. Among them the *mara* was a forceful figure. It must not be forgotten, however, that the material about the Nordic nightmare hag features Christian concepts (some with obvious Catholic references) and ritual practices, blended with pre-/non-Christian elements. If Nordic vernacular religion may be assumed to have constituted a consistent worldview with its own mode of reasoning, its relation to Christian dogma and the Lutheran Church must also be considered.

One of the striking qualities of a collector like Valter W. Forsblom is that his notes highlight the zone between narration and ritual. Reflecting on how Forsblom differentiates between vernacular religion (*folktro*) and magic (*trolldom*), as was the convention of the day, he sees in the first communication; in the latter, attempts to change certain conditions such as illness, bad luck or lack of affection. He noted that it has been impossible in many cases to determine whether the healing practices have “a magical element or not”; therefore, the classifications that are used for the material he has assembled follow the illnesses rather than the ritual action. This combines an evolutionary explanation that moves from primitive to more complex with a search for patterns that gave the worldview expressed in various genres meaning in local contexts. His clear ambition to

contextualize his material renders it an example of the potential inhering in folklore archives, despite the generally difficult, source-critical condition of the records. Forsblom's documentation is without doubt both unique and extraordinarily rich and his interests in healing practices and their explanatory qualities put the *mara* traditions at the forefront. Incidentally, this collector's insistence that the concepts and rituals appearing in the material are coherent within their own framework of reason may sound very contemporary to a modern reader, especially since it is based on highly localized fieldwork, but it should be remembered that the theoretical basis is situated in an understanding of the content as "primitive philosophy", in line with the evolutionary academic framework of the time.

The Nordic records often place the scenes of the narratives in "the old days". This temporality, in combination with a spatial definition of the subject matter that depicts something close at hand but not immediate, enables the flexibility needed for creative (re)-formulations and interpretations of the well-known motifs. This balance between closeness and distance in the narrative structure meant that the threats from the *mara* were present in the problems of everyday life, which is what made the stories and practices connected with the *mara* relevant to people in rural Nordic countries. Moreover, the single figure with its multiple aspects in the folk-belief narratives made it possible for both teller and audience to connect an individual experience to a shared imaginary.

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