

*Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion, 700-1100*, by Max Dashu. Richmond, CA: Veleda Press, 2016. Pp. iv + 388; b/w illustrations. ISBN: 9780692740286 (paperback).

The first published volume in a planned sixteen-volume sourcebook entitled *Secret History of the Witches, Witches and Pagans* is the product of forty years of research on the part of independent scholar Max Dashu, and it shows. This book might best be characterized as an ethno-linguistic historical study, or even an act of linguistic textual archaeology. Taking an ethnohistorical approach focused primarily on a linguistic interpretation and analysis of early Celtic, Scandinavian, English, Frankish, and Germanic texts, Dashu has painstakingly traced and described the obscure, partially vanished, and often uncertain characteristics, relationships, and affinities of various female figures in the early medieval European folk tradition. The result of this decades-long effort is a richly dense and important, even indispensable, resource for scholars working in any field with an interest in women's culture in Europe (especially Northern Europe) during the period covered in this volume (the eighth to the twelfth centuries).

What sets Dashu's book apart from other studies focusing on women's culture in the early medieval period is that there is no overarching argument at its center, other than that the knowledge she has gathered together deserves to be preserved and disseminated beyond a narrow range of specialists working in scholarly fashion on the subject. This is a true sourcebook rather than a monograph. It is organized around a series of sometimes overlapping topics instead of by more formal chapters beginning with "The Webs of Wyrd," focusing on the women figures associated with Fate, and progressing to "Wyccecraft" (spinning and weaving magic), "Names of the Witch," "Völur" (diviners and seeresses), "Runes," "Cailleachan, Disir, and Hags" (divine hags and spirits), "The Witch Holda and Her Retinue" (focusing on night goddesses), "Witch Burnings," and "Voluspa" (the sybil's world prophecy in the Norse tradition). Each of these chapters, in turn, is organized into a series of sections, each of which deals with a particular aspect of the overall topic, and all of which feature material gleaned from source texts that are carefully documented. The source texts include extant medieval works, later books featuring descriptions of lost works from the period, and cultural studies that make use of primary sources, including archaeological artifacts and other material objects.

The value of this book for scholars is twofold. First, it serves as an introductory foray into the vast and historically underexplored world of women in early medieval European folk culture for new medievalists and people just beginning

work on the subject. Second, it serves as a one-volume resource for the quick location and review of the names and characteristics of the large variety of women figures associated with prophecy and witchcraft in Northern Europe during this time. As a sourcebook, it provides a valuable service in underscoring and supporting more theoretical and analytical work on women's lives in the folk tradition. While much of the material covered will not be new to specialists in medieval witchcraft and folk belief, the way Dashu groups figures together according to what medievalists might label "kind" may yield new insights into avenues of research that have not yet been undertaken or considered thanks to a dearth of evidence—for example, possible ways in which these figures traveled from one culture to another, or how they developed and changed in later iterations.

In keeping with a book that seeks to be accessible to a wider audience, Dashu avoids using complicated terminology and overly academic language. Her writing style alternates between impressionistic, offering a series of loosely connected examples grounded in the stories that preserve the women figuring at the heart of her work, and descriptive, offering definitions and specific linguistic references as needed. Whenever possible, she points her reader to the scholars whose work has uncovered or illuminated particular aspects of her subject. Quotations from primary sources are highlighted in bold print or accentuated by the use of a manuscript font. Critical apparatus in the print volume is kept to a minimum and comprises the chapter notes (mostly consisting of bibliographic citations), general bibliography, illustrations, and brief appendices to certain sections. The volume is illustrated with black-and-white line drawings of artifacts from the various cultures represented, handdrawn reproductions of medieval and early modern manuscript drawings and woodcuts, and public domain images from later works. At the end of the section on "Names of the Witch" Dashu includes a list of ethnic names for witches alongside their attributes and powers, and in the "Runes" section she includes a chart of the runes and their meanings. In addition to these printed aids, there are an online searchable index ([www.veleda.net/witchesandpagans/index/](http://www.veleda.net/witchesandpagans/index/)) and digital glossary ([www.veleda.net/witchesandpagans/glossary/](http://www.veleda.net/witchesandpagans/glossary/)). Dashu also includes a link to further commentaries at her own website, [www.suppressedhistories.net/witchesandpagans/commentaries/](http://www.suppressedhistories.net/witchesandpagans/commentaries/).

Experienced scholars may be frustrated by the minimal critical apparatus of the book and by the fact that all chapter notes refer solely to author's last name and page number, so that any individual note must be painstakingly searched out in the bibliography. A few sources noted in the chapter notes do not appear

in the bibliography. For a project that has been in production for forty years, such accidental omissions are understandable. Scholars teaching and writing about early medieval folk beliefs, Northern European literature and culture, women in medieval literature, and women's culture in early medieval history will find this resource particularly useful both for their students and themselves as an introduction to organizing and considering the many figures and forms of women in pagan and early Christian societies. Having read and been alternately perplexed, intrigued, and absorbed by it, I cannot now imagine not having *Witches and Pagans* on my shelf to turn to on a regular basis for information, for inspiration, or for a reminder of how much work has been done, yet how much material there is still left to uncover in terms of women's influence, work, and presence in history. I look forward to the publication of further volumes in this series.

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