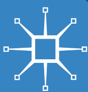

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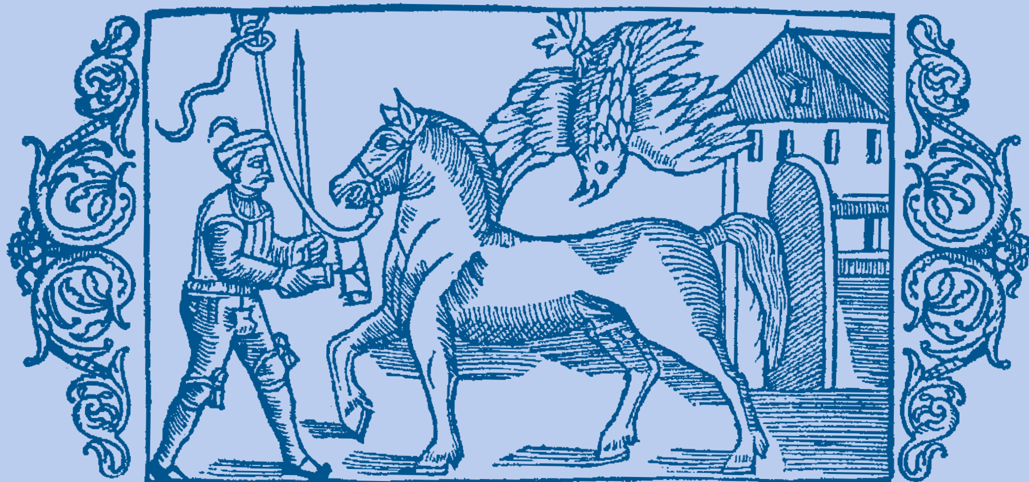
Narratives and Rituals of the Nightmare Hag in Scandinavian Folk Belief

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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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 116

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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

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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), "*Trolldómr* 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 *mara*s, 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 *häxeri* 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 physio-pathological 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 *Krankheitsprojektile* 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.

[15] This 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.

[16] The 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); Kapaló (2013); Toivo (2016).

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