

**Heinz Sieburg, Rita Voltmer, Britta Weimann (Hg.),
Hexenwissen. Zum Transfer von Magie- und Zauberei-
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When the contributors to this volume met at the University of Luxembourg in October 2011, they set out to address one of the most important and complex questions among witchcraft scholars. How was knowledge about witchcraft, sorcery and magic disseminated, received and re-worked in different times and contexts? Their answers reveal why answers to this question are even more complex than even the most experienced researchers may have imagined.

One reason for this gap in our understanding of witchcraft and magic, as Rita Voltmer explains in her fine introduction, is that the manuscript and printed sources are massive, varied and complex, and the currently available theories and concepts regarding the transfer of knowledge remain limited in value. The terms »witchcraft«, »sorcery« and »magic« themselves represent part of the problem. At any given time, these terms were capacious categories with ambivalent meanings and porous boundaries that overlapped with other forms of knowledge. Their meanings also shifted, sometimes drastically, over time.

Rita Voltmer points out that overall explanations have to consider a daunting variety of historical sources, including: manuscripts, printed tracts, decrees and proclamations, trial records, newspapers, pamphlets, learned treatises, fictional literature, poetry, travel accounts, chronicles, plays, songs, encyclopedias, almanacs, planetary books, polemical literature, sermons, and more. Each genre presents its own unique challenges. Taking images as one such source, Voltmer points out that their meanings shifted, sometimes drastically, as they were re-printed, linked with different texts, and received in new contexts. The same motif or element of magical lore might be treated skeptically in one context, credulously in another, or seen as superstitious, fantastical or simply ridiculous in still others.

It is not just the complicated borrowings of stock images and motifs between sources that make this topic so challenging. The reception of printed media shifted with ever changing historical, social, cultural and political contexts. In short, while the print media was massively important in transmitting knowledge about witchcraft, sorcery and magic, scholars grasp only limited aspects of these processes of transfer.

The five historical case studies in Part II illustrate a few of the specific mechanisms that played decisive roles in transmitting the lore about magic and witchcraft. Particularly noteworthy are Kathrin Utz Kemp's and Martine Ostorero's studies of how the earliest and most important treatise on witchcraft, the »Errores gazariorum«, created the new »cumulative concept« of witchcraft out of inquisitors' encounters with Cathars, Waldensians and local magic in Savoy in the 1430s. Several institutions – the Council of Basel, the Court of Savoy, and



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religious orders, among them – played decisive roles in familiarizing new audiences with the text. As new copies were made, often with amendments and variations, knowledge about the new heretical sect spread from the western Swiss Alps northwards into Burgundy, the Palatinate, Bohemia and beyond.

Three other contributions explore the significance of other mechanisms of transferring witchcraft lore from place to place. Georg Modestin argues that Swiss notaries became »memory carriers« about the new sect and its hideous associated practices when they transcribed testimonies at trials, moved from office to office, and shaped a body of records with terms and lore picked up from other trials. In other cases, even a single but mobile and influential officer of the state, like the case of John Cunningham in Finnmark, northern Norway (Liv Helene Willumsen), might introduce the elements of diabolical witchcraft into the judicial institutions of an entirely new region. New versions of old legends, myths and stories did the same. Katrin Moeller argues that the medieval legend of the changeling, a morality tale, was demonized in the Reformation era. The tale then became a vehicle for spreading fears about how demons propagated, assumed human forms, and worked diabolical evil within families and communities. Shorn of diabolism in the 19th century, the changeling myth was then adapted to new cultural purposes and audiences.

Knowledge transfer also took place through language. The three linguistic studies in Part III analyze how specific linguistic terms, phrases and semantic constructs not only disseminated knowledge about witchcraft and magic, but made such knowledge certain, authoritative, or natural. Monika Schulz, for example, reports some of her first findings on her analysis of formulae for conjuring and swearing contained in 28 000 texts from the Dresden »Corpus der deutschen Segen und Beschwörungsformeln«. She points out how many of the principles governing these formulae endured, almost unchanged, over 1000 years.

Two of this section's linguistic studies focus on single terms or expressions to show how these migrated from text to text. This can account for how the same elements of witchcraft lore appear in hundreds of witch trial protocols at the height of the witch trials (ca. 1600). Commonplace references to witchcraft as »ridiculous« or »silly« (*aberwitzig*) (Jürgen Macha) or epistemological terms like »guilt« and »truth« (Elvira Topalović) seem to build right into trial proceedings pre-judgements and assumptions about the nature of witchcraft.

The literary and cultural studies of Part IV explore how literary works, large and small, made elements of magic seem a natural part of the order of the world. Noteworthy in this section is Heinz Sieburg's analysis of how medieval German epics made the »supernatural« into an unquestioned, naturalized, even matter-of-fact dimension of the world. Courtly poetry, epics and romances like the »Nibelungenlied«, works of Hartmann von Aue and the widely read »Tristan and Isolde« wove elements of magic and wonder into these dramatic tales almost seamlessly. Magic was therefore naturalized as another dimension of the »supernatural«.

Examining anew the early modern influences on Goethe's »Faust«, Anne Uhrmacher notes that literary scholars have overlooked or underestimated the influence of a wide variety of early modern sources on the drama. »Faust« memorialized vast elements of early modern magic and witchcraft while, at the same time, removing them from their original historical contexts, inserting them into new ones, forgetting others and



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treating still other elements and motifs in novel ways. She points out that scholars who confine their observations about magic and witchcraft in Goethe's drama to the two classic scenes («The Witch's Kitchen» and «Walpurgis Night») miss the extensive borrowings and re-cycling of elements in many other scenes of the play. Key early modern motifs in Goethe's play – such as melancholy, learned skepticism, dancing witches, the witch's salve, superstitious credulity, a pact written in blood – are given new vitality and meaning in the drama.

Studies of lesser known literary works can also reveal equally intriguing literary mechanisms for disseminating knowledge about magic and witchcraft. Digging into the epistemological underpinnings of one such text, Ulrich Molitor's »Von den vnhulden oder hexen« (1489), Julia Gold shows how Molitor borrowed literary forms and elements of lore from classical and Christian texts to make magic and witchcraft not just credible, but compelling elements of reality. By evoking some forms of authoritative knowledge so effectively, Molitor even undermines his own stated »skepticism« regarding the reality of witches. Ambivalence is an important feature of all of these literary analyses. Sonja Kmec's study shows how the legend of Melusine developed complicated, multiple, even contradictory associations as a story. In one context the tale legitimizes the claims of the House of Luxembourg to power and authority, but later, in the Catholic Reformation, some re-tellings associated this Melusine with diabolism and witchcraft.

Creative re-workings of elements of witchcraft and magic continue right into the present day. Wilhelm Amann's study of modern »cargo cults« and Felix Wiedemann's exploration of modern feminist images of witches as »wise women« show how readily certain elements and motifs are re-worked to serve new religious, cultural, and political purposes.

What remains to be done? The need for further interdisciplinary studies of this massive body of material is an obvious lesson. More pressing, but far more challenging, is the need to develop new conceptual and theoretical ways of grasping the complexity of knowledge transfer illustrated by these studies. Universalizing theories, such as Foucault's, can hardly deal effectively with the different ways that witchcraft lore was created, disseminated, transformed, and re-used. As Wolfgang Behringer has recently noted, witchcraft studies are still only in the beginning stages.



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