

*The coming months, I will write a number of very short pieces about human – animal relationships in belief narratives, the theme of the coming BNN conference in Ragusa (Sicily). The deadline for the conference proposals is the first of November 2017 and thus my series will continue after that. Since my focus is somewhat narrowly western-European, I invite you to supplement my contributions with your own from elsewhere. This does not have to be immediately related to your own proposals. You may also disagree with my approach and analysis, which may also be a reason to react. In both ways we can build a platform for the discussion in Ragusa. To some of you, I will also write personally to ask more specific questions.*

*Willem de Blécourt*

## The Woman Who Changed Into a Hare

In *The Lore of the Land*, by Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, one can find an entry on Duddleswell in East Sussex, England. It goes as follows:<sup>1</sup>

In this village there lived, in the mid nineteenth century, a certain Dame Garson who was much feared as a clever and vindictive witch. She was said to turn into a hare whenever she wanted to spy on her neighbours. On one occasion a man who was fond of hunting spotted a hare and chased it for two or three miles (3-5 km) until it doubled back towards Duddleswell, where it leaped through the open window of Dame Garson's cottage, just ahead of the leading hound. From inside came a mocking voice: 'Ah, me boys, you ain't got me yet!'

The text on which this story was based, was far from neutral and much more condensing.<sup>2</sup> Also the reason for the metamorphosis is given as: 'no doubt, amongst others, of learning the secrets of her neighbours as well as of injuring their property and tormenting their bodies without directing suspicion to the real culprit'. This places the animal metamorphosis in the context of bewitchments, without having to be specific about the latter. The hare story itself is a bit more colourful:

A gentleman in the neighbourhood who was fond of hunting, and kept a pack of hounds, one day started a hare on Old Land Farm. There was an exciting run for two or three miles, when the hare doubled back to Duddleswell, and, closely followed by the hounds, made straight for Dame Garson's cottage, jumped over the garden gate and through a little window into the house, disappearing just as the foremost hound grazed its back, when a voice was heard from the interior, "Ah, my boys, you ain't got me yet."

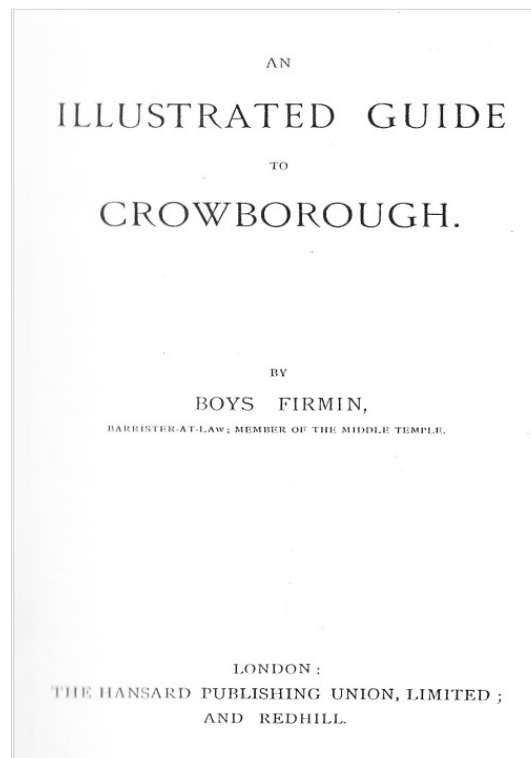
In *The Lore of the Land*, the Duddleswell hare story is one of the two witchcraft stories for (East- and West-) Sussex, the other one pertaining to nearby Crowborough and partly based on the same text by the local barrister Firmin. This man was born on St. Helena (the remote island in the Atlantic) and thus import in Crowborough, where he died in 1916, 88 years-old.<sup>3</sup> The interesting thing about his fulminations against witchcraft is that he starts pointing the finger at 'many religious teachers and men of ability and learning' who were as delusional, for believing in witchcraft, as the 'illiterate'. His stories originated from 'several old residents'. Yet how open they will have been to him, remains to be seen. For of witchcraft it was said: 'It scorns an unbeliever, and will never show itself or make known its secrets to him'. It was also based on religious belief. When Firmin

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1 *The Lore of the Land* (London 2005), p. 731.

2 Boys Firmin, *An Illustrated Guide to Crowborough* (1890), 148-149; <http://theweald.org/d10.asp?BookId=FirminB901>

3 <http://theweald.org/N10.asp?Nid=5874>



expressed his doubts, he was confronted with the biblical Witch of Endor, who underlined the reality of the concept. It did not matter that it was a mistranslation, although Firmin did not notice that himself. Thus the story of 'the wild region of Duddleswell' was one of the few he could be detailed about.<sup>4</sup> The hare story, itself an anecdote, was part of a collection that consisted mainly of other anecdotes. What must have made it enticing for Firmin, was that through a responding witch, the story depicted a confrontation between her and the hunter. That was in itself exceptional.

Early in her career, Jacqueline Simpson published *Folklore of Sussex*, in which she placed the hare story next to similar ones in East Harting, Ditchling 'and of four other old women in villages that are not named'.<sup>5</sup> One of those had appeared in the publications of Mary Macleod Banks,<sup>6</sup> who served as President of the Folklore Society and had earlier (among other items) presented her readers with fishing folklore from Scotland. During an air-raid in London she was told about a young maid who had wondered why her great-aunt had turned into a hare

and did so much harm to the corn and other crops that twenty men of the village went out one moonlight night to shoot her. They saw a big hare which boldly ran right among their legs; all fired but no one hit her. One of the men remembered afterwards that of course no ordinary shot would hurt a witch-hare, so he made a silver bullet out of a sixpenny piece and went out alone next night and shot the hare in the leg. Next day old Mrs. Branford was in bed with a bad leg and she was lame for the rest of her life.<sup>7</sup>

It is not reported whether the maid ever received an answer to her question.<sup>8</sup> Yet it should emerge from further research into the story, that is to say, from a consideration of more variants. To this

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4 One of the others was the case of the bewitched butter churn, related in *The Lore of the Land*, p. 729.

5 *Folklore of Sussex* (Stroud 2002), p. 67. The first edition was published in 1973 and the (unchanged) quotation can be found on p. 70.

6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Macleod\\_Banks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Macleod_Banks).

7 'Witch Lore from the Borders of Sussex and Surrey. (1895-1898.)' *Folklore* 52 (1941), p. 74-75.

8 Owen Davies, who quotes the same question, also did not answer it, see his: *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester 1999), p. 191.

purpose one can consult Ernest Baughman's *Motif Index*, which has listed the stories under G211.2.7 and G275.12(d).<sup>9</sup> The story was often told, indeed. The answer, or at least an answer, may also be found in the *Folklore of Sussex*, in which a story is reprinted from the 1933 edition of *Sussex Notes and Queries*. Here a man out in the middle of the night first saw a woman and then 'she vanished, and instead of her I saw a hare running through a gap in the hedge. I saw it – and you could have knocked me down with a feather. I shall never forget it, not to my dying day'.<sup>10</sup> This is an example of what I have called a place-bound, or situational metamorphosis. The animal is seen in the same place as the person and thus the two are identified.<sup>11</sup>

There is also another potential answer. The hare stories may have featured women but were very much male stories, also when they were occasionally retold by women. This is indicated by the hunting theme. Poachers also feature. It were men who will have told these stories among each other, about women who could change into hares, and therefore were very fertile, but could also be injured by hunting dogs or, even better, silver bullets. Women could change into hares because men said so.

It would be relatively easy to illustrate this with the 110 Flemish witch-hare stories.<sup>12</sup> Scattered over north-western Europe, there are many others indeed.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it should be acknowledged that such stories were among the easiest to tell to outsiders, folklorists included.

*Note: this little article has been send in without having undergone the usual process of correction and reformulation. My apologies for any remaining mistake.*



*Illustration from: Folklore of Sussex, p. 66. Artist unknown.*

<sup>9</sup> *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague 1966), p. 240-241, 274-275.

<sup>10</sup> 2002 edition, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Willem de Blécourt, 'Metamorphosen oder Metaphern? Sprachliche und körperliche Aspekte der Tierverwandlung in den Niederlanden'. In: Willem de Blécourt & Christa Agnes Tuczy (eds), *Tierverwandlungen. Codierungen und Diskurse* (Tübingen 2011), p. 69-84, esp. p. 71-72.

<sup>12</sup> [www.volksverhalenbank.be](http://www.volksverhalenbank.be)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the milk-hare entries in: Bengt af Klintberg, *The Types of Swedish Folk Legend* (Helsinki 2010) (FFC 300).