

## Section **The Witch and the Body**

Bodies are not a given but culturally constructed. These constructions are, at least partly, regionally specific and change over time. Nowhere is this more evident than in the history of witchcraft and magic. Yet historians of the body have hitherto largely neglected to employ the insights and sources used by historians and folklorists who engage with supernatural ideas and practices and vice versa. This is a first attempt to remedy the situation.

Witchcraft and the body are interrelated in several ways. Firstly, it is vital to find out how the body of the witch was conceived, since it was thought that her body facilitated bewitchments. The witch's interactions with her victims had strong somatic aspects, such as touching, looking or being in close proximity. Witches were generally old, a fact probably related to their lost ability to procreate. Secondly, the changes that had occurred in their victims bodies and that were ascribed to witchcraft were associated more with frequent misfortune and liminality than a medical condition. Thirdly, the bodies of the opponents of witches, too, the unwitchers, or healers in general, had been ascribed specific capabilities (especially by themselves), ranging from the power of their hands to their ability of extra-somatic communication with spirits and other entities. Fourthly, specific body parts of other parties were considered to possess magical qualities, such as pubic hair, the hands of hanged thieves, or specific bodily fluids.

Furthermore, the bodies of witches were thought to possess extraordinary qualities not found in the bodies of ordinary people. Witches had a second body that they could send out in different forms. Witches could fly, or were physically carried by demons, or at least they weighed proportionally less than other people, hence their capacity to drift when thrown into water. And witches, and not always just their second body, could change their shape into that of animals. According to demonologists, witches also stood out by their marks and their sexual relations with their devils, a different sort of corporal interaction.

This section will be interdisciplinary and contributions are sought from historians, folklorists, and anthropologists, historians of literature, religion, and art. Possible subjects range from the magical powers of bodies to bodily movements through space, from specific bodily substances to bodily actions, from external souls to bodily possession, or from sexuality to barrenness.

Such topics should be discussed within the wider context of other 'magical' bodies, such as of saints or menstruating women. Together presentations will lead to a more inclusive study of body history and they will also further the history of magic and witchcraft.