

Cunning Folk, Conjurers, and the 'Lancashire Seven'.

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One of the most significant, and perhaps unforeseen, implications of the Protestant Reformation was how it affected the ability of laypeople and the clergy to ward off evil. Protestant theology—with its focus on returning to the 'true' roots of Christianity and removing the perceived institutional barriers that the Catholic Church had imposed on personal faith—largely rendered useless the charms, wards, incantations, and relics that people once relied upon to resist the Devil. However, it was not all that easy to completely leave the old ways behind and in the far flung villages of early modern society, many of these beliefs persisted. Cunning folk (also referred to as white witches, wizards, magi, wise/weird folk, or any other form of regional terms) were remnants of these particular traditions. They were figures of arcane knowledge within the local village system who were sought out for medical treatments, charms, wards, and other magical remedies. The perception of cunning folk is closely linked with the shifting attitudes towards magic in Reformed Protestant theology, and the story of the 'Lancashire Seven' provides a valuable insight into how these shifts manifested themselves in everyday society.

In early modern England, the opportunity for cunning folk and magicians to practice their craft had been curtailed by the Witchcraft Act of 1563, which stipulated harsh penalties for those found guilty of using magic for illicit means. Despite this, magic practitioners continued to operate in regional areas beyond the influence of the Church and civil authorities. Cunning folk were often regarded with great caution, as the use of magic came under serious theological and legal scrutiny in the latter half of the 16th century. Many demonologists and theologians labelled the cunning craft as witchcraft and it was not uncommon to hear of these magicians being hanged for *maleficium* (harmful magic) in this period. William Perkins, an influential Puritan theologian, outlined a typical view of mainstream Protestantism in his 1618 book, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, insisting that:

by Witches we understand not those onely which kill and torment: but all Diviners, Charmers, Juglers, all Wizzards, commonly called wise men and wise women...and in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which doe not hurt, but good, which doe not spoile and destroy, but save and deliver.

Magic in this period was largely divided into two main categories: the 'elite' arts such as astrology, geomancy (earth divination), palmistry (palm reading), and the 'popular' forms of magic that focused on creating charms or treating certain afflictions. One such form of magic that was prevalent across these two categories, while also being relevant to the Lancashire Seven case, was the use of conjuring circles. This was a form of ritual magic that involved the construction of geometric patterns (usually physically marked out with chalk/salt or drawn in earth) as a means to channel energy or summon familiar spirits that would carry out the conjurer's bidding. The conjuring of spirits was practiced by a number of people across the class divide, including those seeking a higher form of knowledge, or less educated would-be magicians after wealth or remedies to everyday problems. The spirit world offered seemingly untold magical resources for early modern magicians, tapped into through rituals involving a combination of Christian prayer and fasting, paired with incantations and spells of hermetic origin. It was common for cunning folk to partake in the use of conjuring circles, risking arrest and even harsher penalties under the English witchcraft laws.

The perception of cunning folk in this period was largely tied to their effectiveness, as there was no clear distinction between the charms that these individuals offered and witchcraft. While the use of any form of magic was punishable by law, the intentions of the magic-user and the outcome of their role in any particular case were the primary factors in determining whether they would be charged with *maleficium*. One such example of this is the story of the Lancashire Seven, involving the aristocratic Starkie family and their dealings with the cunning man Edmund Hartley. This account is outlined in two texts from 1600, *A True Narration of the Strange and Greuous Vexation by the Devil, of 7. Persons in Lancashire* and *A True Discourse Concerning the Certaine Possession and Dispossession of 7 Persons in One Familie in Lancashire*, penned separately by the Puritan exorcists John Darrell and George More. These clergymen witnessed first-hand the strange events at the Cleworth estate in Lancashire, Lancaster county, when called upon to treat several individuals supposedly afflicted by demonic spirits as a result of Hartley's influence. Lancaster, a region that was

sparsely populated, agriculturally barren, and renowned for being home to many Catholics, recusants, occultists, and witches, was largely on the periphery of early modern English society. This was thus a fitting backdrop to the events that would unfold throughout the Lancashire Seven account.

In 1594, the two children of the Starkie family fell afoul of some mysterious illness. Unable to find a cure through physicians or the clergy, the patriarch Nicholas Starkie contacted a local cunning man, Edmund Hartley. Hartley was known to have intimate knowledge of “popish charmes and herbes” (*A True Discourse*), and agreed to administer treatment to the children. Over a period of a year and a half, Hartley ingrained himself in the Starkie household, using their dependence on him to dictate his own terms. He was compensated well, provided with bed and board for his medical remedies that seemed to largely quell the children’s strange afflictions. As time went on, Hartley’s services to the Starkie family became indispensable. However, his presence was inevitably beginning to cause friction within the household. He was apparently a lecherous and inscrutable man, making sexual advances towards the women, maidservants, and even the girls of the household. Yet as long as his remedies worked, this behaviour was largely ignored.

The tide finally turned against Hartley when on an overnight journey, Starkie witnessed the cunning man constructing a strange circle in the woods. According to *A True Discourse*, this circle was “the compass of a yard and halfe, with many croffes and partitions”, intended to inflict harm on the cunning man’s enemies. Starkie was affronted by the use of such sorcery, and proceeded to look elsewhere for treatment. He soon approached the famed Dr. John Dee, who was, at this time, warden of the Collegiate Chapter in Manchester. Dee was regarded as one of the wisest men in England: a practitioner of elite magic, a renowned conjuror of spirits, and skilled across a number of fields including mathematics, geometry, cartography, navigation and the occult arts. He had served as the astronomer of Queen Elizabeth and occupied many prestigious posts before his interest in the occult eventually prompted his fall from favour. Dee did not administer treatment to the children but he did go to the lengths of summoning Hartley to Manchester where he proceeded to sharply reprimand him about the dangers of conjuring spirits. The meeting between these two is quite symbolic, illustrating the divide between elite and popular magic in early modern English society.

Soon after this meeting, the illness of the two Starkie children began to spread to others in the house. A few of the other children boarding at Cleworth fell ill, along with some of the maidservants, and one of the Starkie cousins. It soon became apparent to the family that several of their household had become afflicted by demonic possession, with Hartley implicated as the cause. The authorities were promptly brought in and it was agreed that Hartley had bewitched these individuals through his kisses, 'breathing the Devil into them'. This case was taken to trial, yet the demoniacs (the possessed individuals) were not of sound disposition to offer any testimony, and a verdict could not be reached. *A True Narration* contends that Hartley had "stopt their mouthes, & would not suffer them to speake", all the while refusing to make a confession. Under the 1563 Elizabethan Witchcraft Act, only magic that caused harm could result in tougher sentences, including the death penalty. In this instance, it was believed that death alone could lift Hartley's enchantments, so the authorities settled on a different tactic.

The conviction came down to the testimony of Starkie himself, who told the court that he had witnessed Hartley conjuring spirits with a magic circle. Hartley was thus sentenced to be hanged on charges of witchcraft, all the while protesting his innocence. Yet when the hangman slipped the noose around Hartley's neck and strung him up, the rope snapped and he was left sprawled on the gallows. Taking this as a sign from God, Hartley admitted to having constructed the magic circle with the purpose of inflicting harm to those that had wronged him. This last minute confession did not deter his executors and the second time they hung him the rope held firm.

However, Hartley's enchantments were not undone and the Starkie family then turned to spiritual treatments, requesting the aid of the notable Midlands exorcist John Darrell. Darrell, his brethren George More, along with a local minister, and concerned neighbours, proceeded to exorcise the Lancashire demoniacs of their evil spirits. The exorcism was arduous, with the demoniacs assailed and tormented by demonic forces (some in the form of Hartley). After a full day and night of prayer, Hartley's bewitchment was vanquished and the Starkie family's long-running spiritual ordeal was finally over.

As the Lancashire Seven account so vividly illustrates, there was no definitive manner in which cunning folk and magic were understood during the early modern period. It is evident that magic still existed as a reality to early modern audiences, but its use was increasingly coming into conflict with the shifting theological attitudes of post-Reformation England.

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the English Church was adamant in suppressing any practices that seemed overtly Catholic, with 'magical' treatments coming under particular scrutiny. Edmund Hartley was but one of the many magical healers operating in English villages and his character—depicted in the source material as lecherous and conniving—largely encapsulates how cunning folk were perceived in this period. These individuals were now viewed in the same manner that Catholic priests and monks were: as threats to public order and spiritual conformity. The role of cunning folk in larger society had changed dramatically from just a few decades earlier and, as English Protestantism moved further away from its Catholic past, would continue to be challenged in this period.

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