
Reviewed by Megan Guensch, Graduate Student at Louisiana State University

Everyday Magicians, by Sharon Hubbs Wright and Frank Klaassen, compiles historical records about magic practitioners in Tudor England, also known as the “cunning folk,” and explores the social and legal implications of their practice. The authors present records of secular and religious court cases against cunning folk alongside texts depicting how to perform magic to describe the societal mindset and norms regarding magic in this era.

Wright and Klaassen address common misconceptions about magic practitioners and repeatedly make the distinction that cunning folk are not synonymous with witches. Witchcraft was often associated with practices linked to deceit, theft, or harm, whereas cunning folk magic was associated with societal benefits. Cunning folk were often respected in their community and were commonly sought out to protect from witches’ spells or retrieve stolen goods. Wright and Klaassen highlight specific cunning acts that occurred due to society’s needs or desires. They identify prognostication, theft divination, love magic, men’s games magic, and healing magic as the most common uses of magic during this period.

Alice Anceyr’s case of theft divination is an example. Original records in the London Metropolitan Archives describe Anceyr’s use of a magic mirror to retrieve her missing item, which is believed to be a set of rosary beads. Theft was prevalent in premodern society, so many people welcomed theft divination to identify and recover stolen goods. The texts documenting Anceyr’s case and others emphasize the commonplace nature of magical acts during this era and diminish the presumed evil nature of them. Wright and Klaassen’s careful comparison of the legal texts and the historical record of each account allow for a more accurate narrative of the circumstances surrounding the use of magic that have previously been misunderstood.

Wright and Klaassen also challenge stereotypes that attribute love magic and healing magic to women rather than men. As the authors demonstrate, male and female cunning folk each played their own significant role in various types of magic, but because their acts posed a risk of undermining Tudor England’s patriarchal society, women were more often prosecuted than men, resulting in biased documentation. The authors use documents at the London Metropolitan Archives and the National Archives of the United Kingdom in London to describe ways in which women were misrepresented or exploited to cover up promiscuous acts of men, delving into the social disorder of the time.
Everyday Magicians could be strengthened only by diving deeper into the lives of the accused, whom the authors only briefly profile. However, their comparison of historical accounts and examination of primary sources reveals previously unknown complexities about cunning folk. While the authors occasionally alter the language of original records so that modern readers can understand them, each deviation from the original text is always noted. The authors’ accessible writing style thus allows for a seasoned historian or a novice student to utilize this resource both as an historical account and an example of properly framing primary sources. By dismantling stereotypes and countering potential misunderstandings of cunning folk, the authors honor the true historicity surrounding the community.