

“By 1725 the elite had reached a point where [magical practices] are entirely useless. Magic practitioners have by this point almost entirely lost their cultural meaning.”

CUNNING FOLKLORE

The Meaning of “Superstition” in Early Modern Europe

ALEXANDER GILMAN

SIMULTANEOUS WITH THE EUROPEAN WITCH CRAZE, EARLY MODERN SCHOLARS BEGAN TO COLLECT THE SUPERSTITIOUS PRACTICES OF THE LOWER CLASSES INTO WRITING. IT WAS A TASK OF COMPILING CHARMS, SPELLS, AND RITUALS OF A PEOPLE THOUGHT TO BE VANISHING AND A LIFESTYLE NO LONGER DEEMED CURRENT. SCHOLARS TODAY ERRONEOUSLY LABEL THESE LOWER CLASSES “CUNNING FOLK.” THESE PRACTITIONERS OF MAGIC WERE NOT CONFINED TO A PARTICULAR GROUP BUT RATHER REPRESENTED THE LOWER CLASS WORLDVIEW IN GENERAL. WHAT IS MOST USEFUL ABOUT THESE FOLKLORE TEXTS, HOWEVER, IS THEIR REVELATIONS ABOUT EARLY MODERN INTELLECTUAL CULTURE. THESE TEXTS ARE A PARTICULAR GENRE OF LITERATURE, ADDRESSING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH THEY WERE WRITTEN IN ORDER TO ELUCIDATE WHAT CONTEMPORARIES BELIEVED ABOUT MAGIC PRACTITIONERS AND WHAT THESE BELIEFS INDICATE ABOUT THEIR INTELLECTUAL WORLDVIEW. WHAT BECOMES CLEAR IS THAT THE CULTURAL MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF MAGIC PRACTITIONERS IN THESE TEXTS ARE INEXTRICABLY TIED TO CHANGING DISCOURSES CONCERNING RELIGION, MEDICINE, AND ANTIQUARIANISM. SUPERSTITION IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE WAS THUS USED AS A FOIL FOR “RIGHT THINKING” AND CASTS LIGHT ON THE CONCERNS AND PREJUDICES OF THE EDUCATED CLASS.

“Cunning folk” is a term used by scholars to describe a group of individuals who practiced various forms of “good” magic in early modern England. This group is often addressed peripherally in witchcraft studies but unfortunately there are few scholarly studies that focus on them specifically. Keith Thomas, in his tome *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, has a considerable section on “popular magic” and cunning folk but his study stops short of a careful analysis, focusing only on descriptions of their perceived practices.¹ In 1994, Willem de Blecourt readdressed the issue and opened up a new discussion concerning cunning folk. He comments on the limitations of Thomas’ book and suggests various new areas to research, such as gender and class differences in cunning folk. Yet even Blecourt’s overall claim is insufficient, failing to address the underlying issue in *Decline of Magic*, which focuses only on the actual practices of cunning folk and never on the larger, overall cultural meaning of cunning folk. Moreover, Thomas’s project is predicated on the assumption that the category of cunning folk is one utilized by early modern culture. Reading his text, one would assume that cunning folk were a distinguishable class of people—a hasty conclusion. Consequently, elucidating the cultural meaning of cunning folk is severely limited by Thomas’ classifications and superficial focus.

Beyond the questions Blecourt raises in his article, it may be asked if cunning folk were an accepted category of persons or a recognized profession in early modern Europe. Surprisingly, none of the major published texts Thomas uses in his study use the term “cunning folk.”² The practices he attributes to cunning folk are not practiced by one definable group but are indicative of common practices of a large majority of the lower social classes. The early modern texts he cites make no clear distinction between an isolated group resembling cunning folk and the rest of the public, nor is there one between cunning folk and witches.³ Furthermore, the sources Thomas uses are from the elite perspective and therefore are suspect in establishing fair data on “cunning folk.”⁴ Undeniably, the authors do confirm the fact that various people did engage in practices that Thomas attributes to cunning folk, but they are not confined to one specific group. A careful reading of the texts shows that the authors viewed such practitioners as outmoded at best and profane and blasphemous at worst. Beyond identifying “cunning folklore” as a misleading label, it is important to consider the cultural environment in which the authors were writing to understand the meaning of the texts and the meaning of the people they describe. Therefore, using the term “cunning folk” in this

paper is problematic since the term is imprecise from a scholarly point of view and indeed absent in all these texts. Instead, this analysis will use the term “magic practitioners” to describe the group of people who engaged in the superstitious practices mentioned in the texts or were perceived as superstitious by the writers. This term is meant to be as general as possible, without a specific definition or fixed meaning. The group itself will stay fairly uniform,

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being always the lower class and superstitious in the eyes of the compilers. The use of the term will not carry the negative connotation it does in some of the texts, but will only be descriptive. What will change significantly, though, is how the authors view the group and what cultural meaning they ascribe to them. Therefore, magic practitioners will also include these complex cultural meanings as well as the actual group of persons. To further clarify, this analysis will use the term “cultural meaning” to suggest this broad and diffuse concept that both touches upon the group of magic practitioners and more directly reveals something about the writers themselves via their attitude toward magic practitioners. In other words, what this analysis calls the changing cultural meanings of magic practitioners throughout history signifies shifts in the concerns of the intellectual culture of early modern Europe. This

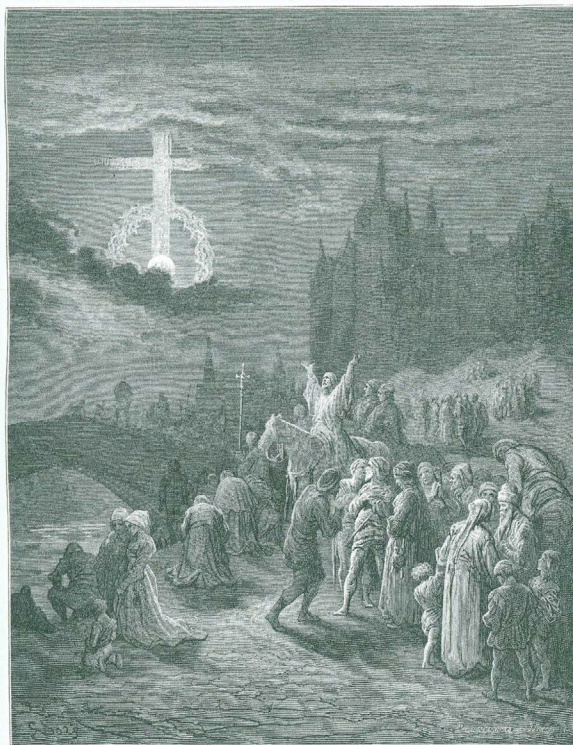
paper, therefore, studies the writers and their culture more so than it does the magic practitioners and their culture, though the two are indeed intertwined.

The aim of this essay is to analyze these texts as a particular genre of literature, addressing the cultural context in which they were written, to elucidate what contemporaries may have actually believed about magic practitioners and what this says about their intellectual worldview. What becomes clear is that the cultural meanings and functions of magic practitioners in these texts, which become synonymous with the lower classes, are inextricably tied to changing discourses concerning religion, medicine, and antiquarianism. The meaning of this group is not static. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when these texts were written, the intellectual culture changed significantly, focused on new ideas, and therefore continuously changed the cultural meaning of magic practitioners as well.

The texts that Thomas and other twentieth-century scholars utilize for their research on cunning folk is a literary genre that developed simultaneously with the European witch craze. This genre could be described as early folklore, books that compile the superstitious practices of the common classes. Alexandra Walsham describes in her essay on the origins of folklore that the educated classes in early modern Britain became completely obsessed with recording superstition and behavior of the common classes. It was a task of compiling charms, spells, and various practices of a class of people they thought were vanishing and a lifestyle no longer deemed “modern.”⁵ This burgeoning scholarly tradition includes several texts that describe these superstitious activities. These texts are especially interesting since authors self-consciously distanced themselves from the people about whom they were writing.

Even the most distanced texts, however, make a clear point about the attitudes of their intellectual culture. As Walsham notes,

The subtext of much of this literature is undeniably self-congratulation. By recording the ‘puerile superstitions’ of former generations that are fast disappearing in the face of the spread of ‘correct information,’ its authors throw into sharp relief the ‘rational’ ethos of their own superior and ‘enlightened’ era.⁶



PROTESTANT WRITERS OFTEN EQUATED THE CATHOLIC RELIANCE UPON SIGNS AND CHARMS WITH CERTAIN SUPERSTITIOUS PRACTICES OF THE TIME.

Therefore, by elucidating the sometimes subtler subtext of the works, as didactic in a cultural, medical, or religious way, a clear indication of the concerns of intellectual culture may be brought into light.

The earliest aim of folklore texts came out of a fierce anti-Catholic theological discourse created by zealous Protestants. As a result of the Protestant Reformation, these early authors fronted an attack against what they viewed as the idolatrous and profane “popery.” Many of the texts are directly aimed at conflating superstitious practices with Catholicism. Yet only the earliest of these texts are strictly polemic; the later ones become more antiquarian after the Reformation. The authors writing near the time of the Reformation are more attuned to theological concerns than those writing two hundred years later. This trend does not follow a straight line, though. The last text in fact reincorporates theology into folklore, yet in a completely new context. Reginald Scot’s text is the clearest example of this purpose.

Alongside this theological concern, these authors also had a historical, or what Waltham calls “nostalgic” and “anti-quarian” purpose.⁷ Indeed, the way of life they describe, a world full of magic practitioners and superstition, was quickly disappearing. Simply by recording these practices, a certain degree of respect for the material is present. One text in particular, by John Aubrey, embodies this antiquarian concern. As suggested, the later texts are most antiquarian. Even so, all the texts have this aspect of the folklore genre present to some degree. By analyzing the development and changes within these dual discourses through time, a more complete historical picture of magic practitioners comes into view.

Reginald Scot’s famous *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) is the most polarized example of the zealous anti-Catholic concern in folklore. Originally a “surveyor of flood defenses” in Kent, Scot wrote *Discoverie* to respond to and refute the *Démonomanie* by Jean Bodin (1580). Unlike Bodin, Scot was skeptical toward witchcraft. He contended that no witch had ever lived in England and that all prosecuted for it were innocent. He writes in the first book of *Discoverie*:

*And because it may appeare unto the world what trecherous and faithlesse dealing, what extreame and intolerable tyranny, what grosse and fond absurdities, what unnatural and uncivil discourtesie, what cankerd and spitefull malice, what outrageous and barbarous cruelty, what lewd and false packing, what cunning and crafty intercepting, what bald and pievish interpretations, what abominable and devilish inventions; and what flat and plaine knavery is practised against these old women; I will set down the whole order of the inquisition, to the everlasting, inexcusable, and apparent shame of all witch-mongers.*⁸

Therefore, Scot’s project is emphatically critical and di-

dactic. His book is a repudiation of common beliefs he saw as destructive to society.⁹ Scot’s aim is certainly positive, yet behind this humanitarian project lurks the savage anti-Catholicism that ran rampant around the time of Scot’s life.¹⁰ He saw superstitious practices, which he attributes largely to outdated Catholic belief, as the direct cause of the wrongful persecution of witches. In Book XII of the *Discoverie*, Scot asserts that

*Poets are not altogether so impudent as papists herein, neither seeme they so ignorant, prophane, or impious. And therefore I will shew you how lowd also they lie, and what they on the other side ascribe to their charmes and conjurations; and together will set downe with them all maner of witches charmes, as convenientlie as I maie.*¹¹

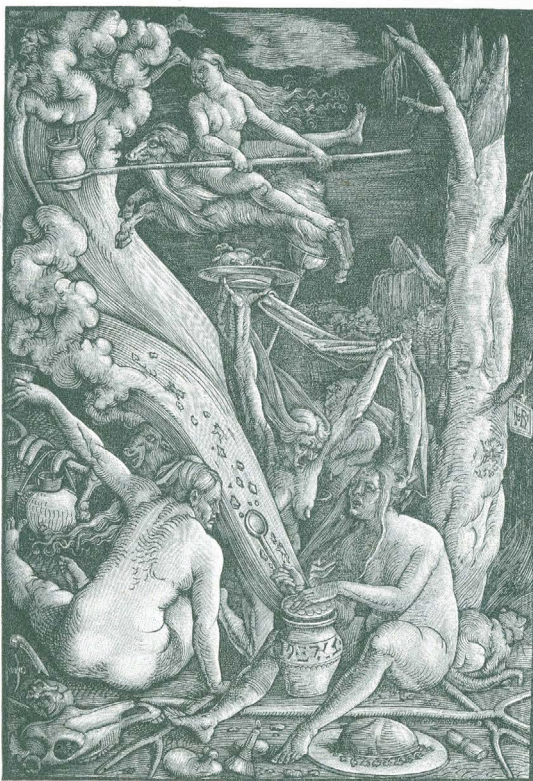
The next chapter is a list of “Popish periapts, amulets and charmes” read during Mass or used as aids “against theeves.”¹² This religiously themed list exactly resembles other lists that record “charmes” of supposed “witches” and other practitioners of “magic.” Thus, without attacking “poperie” directly, Scot conflates Catholicism with all other pagan forms of superstition simply with his choice of organization and layout.

On top of subtly leading the reader to this conclusion, Scot also states his contentions directly. At the end of the section, Scot provides his “confutation of the force and vertue falselie ascribed to charmes and amulets.” He writes:

*My meaning is not, that these words, in the bare letter, can doo anie thing towards your ease or comfort in this behalfe; or that it were wholesome I wish you to weare the whole Bible, which must needs be more effectual than anie one parcell thereof.*¹³

Scot makes two important points here. First, he asserts

A WOOD CARVING OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY WITCHES PRACTICING MAGIC.



that no spoken or written words can ever work magic. Charms are useless and only lead to the accusation of witches. Second, Scot's major complaint about attributing power to these superstitious practices is that they remove God from his place of omnipotence, "for God is our onlie defender and deliverer."¹⁴ Later he also declares:

*It is the Lord only that worketh great wonders, and bringeth mightie things to passe. It is also written that Gods word, and not the words of conjurors, or the charmes of witches, healeth all things, maketh tempests, and stilleth them.*¹⁵

In the next chapter this assertion is directed back to Catholicism. He contends that Catholics, especially clergymen, remove God from his place of power, as do witches. He writes:

*I see no difference betweene these [other conjurors] and popish conjurations; for they agree in order, words, and matter, differing in no circumstance, but that the papists doo it without shame openlie, the other doo it in hugger mugger secretlie.*¹⁶

Indeed, priests are even worse than witches, for they practice these superstitions in the name of the Lord. These anti-Catholic sentiments are repeated throughout the *Discoverie*.

But, Scot does not operate entirely on the polemic side of the folklore spectrum. His *Discoverie of Witchcraft* is one of the first texts in the genre of folklore and sets a precedent in form and content for later, more antiquarian works. For

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example, several chapters of Scot's book simply quote or describe various superstitious practices or spells and only at the end of each section does he include his "confutations." Later authors mirror the form of Scot's section recording charms used by priests, while focusing less on religion and more on folk practices. And while Scot is not ambivalent about the value of these practices, the more antiquarian texts utilize Scot's format nonetheless.

Finally, what does Scot reveal about cunning folk, if anything? As is the general trend, Scot does not use the term "cunning folk," nor does he distinguish between different kinds of practitioners of magic. Yet, magic practitioners do serve an important purpose for Scot. For him, unlike Thomas, magic practitioners had an important rhetorical meaning that negated rather than utilized or affirmed their practices. His concern is related to discourse and ideology rather than practice. Thomas contended that their cultural meaning lay only in their role as conjurors or charmers, but this very role is useless, destructive, and sinful for Scot. Being a staunch skeptic of magic, the main cultural meaning of magic practitioners, for his elite class at least, is as a rhetorical tool for their reforming critiques and anti-Catholic propaganda. The group's cultural meaning was then, through Scot, tied to a theological attitude and religio-political concern. After Scot, magic practitioner bears a negative association of "wrong religion."

Through time, layered onto this religious discourse that first shaped the meaning of magic practitioners in written history, a medico-intellectual discourse developed that added yet another meaning to the group and reveals a shift in intellectual culture. Sir Thomas Browne, born twenty-one years after Scot published his work, was a well-known physician and author. He first became known with a book entitled *Religio Medici*, which recounts "Browne's relationships to his God and fellow creatures."¹⁷ His most famous book, *Pseudodoxia epidemica, or, Enquiries into very many received tenents and commonly presumed truths*, first published in 1646, continues Reginald Scot's project of compiling and challenging various superstitious practices of the common folk.¹⁸ Yet Browne wrote in a very different cultural environment than Scot. The *Pseudodoxia* represents a major shift in the genre of early folklore. Browne, like Scot, was not a self-proclaimed folklorist, but the style and form of his work again bear resemblance to the form later perfected by John Aubrey and Henry Bourne.

Yet Browne does not present an entirely clean break with Scot. Although, as Walsham notes, the concept of "super-

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stition” becomes more neutral and less polemical in the *Pseudodoxia*, Protestant religious concerns are still the basis and organizing principle of Browne’s work. Furthermore, Browne, like Scot, appeals to elite readers. He writes in his prefatory “To the Reader” section:

*Nor have wee addressed our penne or stile unto the people, (whome Bookes doe not redresse, and are this way incapable of reduction) but unto the knowing and leading part of Learning.*¹⁹

The *Pseudodoxia* can be seen as a text for other physicians to avoid “common errors” that may be useless at best or harmful at worst. Historian Natalie Davis wrote an article discussing the genre of Browne’s text that confirms the derisive nature of the *Pseudodoxia*. She notes that these medical “collectors of vulgar errors were critical of the people to begin with” and intended to change their practices.²⁰ Because Browne aims to address more than just theological and anti-Catholic concerns, he is in the middle of the two extremes of folklore discussed by Walsham.

First it is important to situate Browne’s work within its theological context. Because Browne is still within the discourse of Reformation, Browne locates the real source of “common errors” and “superstition” in theology. In the first book of the *Pseudodoxia*, Browne analyzes the causes of these errors, from “the common infirmity of humane nature,” to, more importantly, “Satan.”²¹ Browne contends:

*But beside the infirmities of humane nature, the seed of error within ourselves, and the severall wayes of delusion from each other, there is an invisible Agent, and secret promoter without us, whose activity is undiscerned, and plays in the darke upon us, and that is the first contriver of Error, and professed opposer of Truth, the Divell.*²²

Browne also points to the fall of Adam and Eve as the root of our “errors.”²³

Although the majority of the text is mostly medical and scientific in its aim,

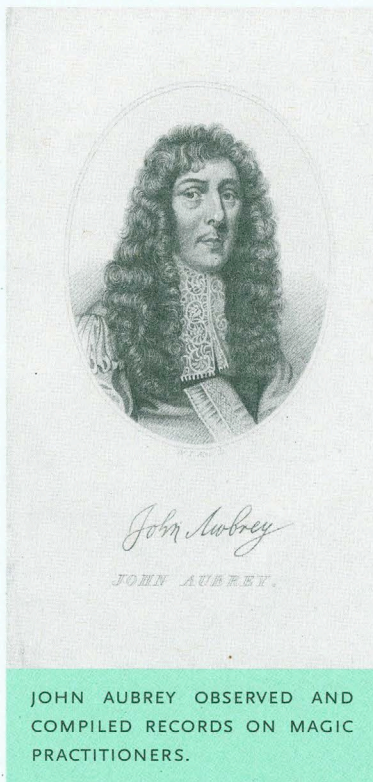
Browne uses theology to substantiate his purpose and claims, thereby introducing a moral aspect to his medical discourse. For Browne, delusion is not just harmless or useless; it is also sinful. Using similar language to demonological descriptions of witches, Browne contends that by practicing these superstitions one dislocates God from his rightful place in the hierarchy of the religious universe. Browne proclaims that these “errors” are

*. . . a sinne or folly not only derogatory unto God, but men, overthrowing their reason as well as his divinitie. In briefe a reciprocation, or rather an Inversion of the creation, making God one way, as he made us another; that is after our Image, as he made us after his owne.*²⁴

Following Scot, he also hints at an anti-Catholic sentiment, attacking what he sees as their practice of wrongly creating a god in the image of imperfect humans rather than the “right” idea of humans in the image of God. Here Browne connects superstitious medical practices with sin, thus moralizing medicine. Later he elaborates this anti-Catholic sentiment and conflates it directly with Pagan religion. He writes:

*Thus the Priests of Elder time, have put upon them many incredible conceits, not onely deluding their apprehensions, with Ariolation, South-saying, and such oblique Idolatries, but winning their credulities unto the literall and downe-right adoration of Cats, Lizards, and Beetles; and thus also in some Christian Churches, wherein is presumed an irreproveable truth, if all be true that is suspected, or halfe what is related, there have not wanted, many strange deceptions, and some thereof are still confessed by the name of Pious frauds.*²⁵

Browne’s introduction of the concept of inversion was an important elaboration on Scot. Historian Stuart Clark argues that the inversion of societal norms attributed to witches in demonology texts mirror the common social practice of playful inversion during festival times. He notes, “But even if they shared no specific type of inversion, both festive behavior and learned demonology were



dependent on inversion itself as a formal principal.”²⁶ Browne’s idea of inversion adds to Scot’s understanding of magic practitioners as a challenge to “right” religion; Browne instead claims that they “invert” right religion. Clark rightly emphasizes the rhetorical power and ubiquity of this concept in early modern culture, thus the new phrasing is a vital addition.

Although he continues some of Scot’s themes, Browne also sets the stage for Aubrey and Bourne by shifting the focus of his text away from theology and emphatically toward scholarly matters, in his case medicine. Beyond the theological introduction, religion becomes a peripheral concern. For most of the lengthy work Browne scrutinizes various common-held beliefs about “Minerall and Vegetable bodies,” “Animals,” “Man,” “Geography,” and finally “holy Scripture.” The structure is consistent throughout: Browne describes a “common error” and then amends or replaces any misinformation with his own data. For instance, he writes:

*The last consideration, concerneth Magicall relations, in which account we comprehend effects derived and fathered upon hidden qualities, specifical forms, Antipathies and Sympathies, whereof from received grounds of Art, no reasons are derived.*²⁷

It bears repeating that this text is not intended for the common people who perpetuate these “errors,” but instead is meant to be a guide for other physicians and scientists to

While in this case “vulgar” simply means “of the common people,” there is nonetheless a condescension in many of his entries. It both widens the gap between the elite and common class and also adds another cultural meaning to magic practitioners. Again being used as a rhetorical inversion of the “right” position, “magic practitioners” now operate as examples of false and useless, if not harmful, medicine. Magic practitioners, or all “vulgar” people to be more precise, now represent the outdated past, an irrational “adherence unto antiquity.”²⁹ And while Browne never took it upon himself to bring all people out of this shadow of antiquity, he nevertheless believed his ideas would help society in general in eradicating their harmful “errors.” Unlike later authors, whose ulterior motives are more hidden, Browne meant to be didactic and dismissive of past practices. Thus we find “magic practitioners” now tied to a discourse concerning “right” and “wrong” medical practices. Where before they represented an inversion of “right” religion, they are now an inversion of “right” health. It is worth recalling again Walsham’s notion that these authors in general juxtapose their modern, rational elite ideas with the outmoded and “superstitious” past. After Browne, John Aubrey moves folklore in a new direction, less didactic and more focused on the task of recording these practices for the sake of collection and not necessarily of refutation.

John Aubrey, author of *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* (1689), presents a new attitude toward superstition. He, out of the four authors, is the most neutral toward the

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treat the misinformed common folk. It vaguely resembles a textbook. Yet, Browne is not neutral or ambivalent in his opinion of these practices. He later says about “Magicall relations” that “these conceits are of that monstrosity that they refute themselves in their recitements” with “credulous and vulgar auditors readily beleeving it, and more judicious and distinctiv heads, not altogether rejecting it.”²⁸

practices of the common folk. *Remaines* also is unique in this body of texts in that it appears entirely unorganized and indiscriminating. Michael Hunter, one of Aubrey’s biographers, discusses Aubrey’s unique approach to antiquarian studies. Quoting Aubrey, Hunter notes he “justified his work by ‘the novelty of it,’ as well as ‘the faithfulness of the delivery,’ which ‘may make some amends for

the un-correctness of the Stile.”³⁰ Part of the reason for the “un-correctness of the Stile” is that the work was a rough draft of an intended larger work on folklore that was never finished.³¹ Yet, as Hunter shows, many of Aubrey’s works used a similar format, so we can assume it was close to its intended final form. In general, and especially in *Remaines*, Aubrey compiles only the practices and rites themselves and omits personal critiques or “right” information. Because the work was not yet ready for publication and was only distributed to a few of his colleagues, his opinions are indeed scarcer than in other works. Aubrey appreciated the “novelty” of all practices without priority. Within only a few lines he marks practices concerning the “Whipping of Villains,” “Girdles,” “Witchcraft,” and “Times prohibiting Marriage” with no categorical distinction whatsoever.³² He also discusses “Herbs as Charms in Duels” alongside “Masses for the Dead” and “Ale.”³³ The very structure and order of *Remaines* reveals Aubrey’s purely antiquarian concern. Hunter ventures to claim that Aubrey may have even been developing “an objective science of antiquities distinct from traditional history.”³⁴

It seems from the style of *Remaines* that Aubrey extracted himself successfully from the bitter theological debates of his predecessors. Aubrey gave magic practitioners value outside their rhetorical opposition to “right” Protestantism, and therefore they take on a new, more neutral cultural meaning. They still represent an antiquated past distinct from the present time, but there is no hint of superiority in Aubrey’s tone or in the content of his work. His hands-off approach reflects a respect for these customs. Hunter writes that his “achievement as an antiquary was his imaginative approach to fragmentary relics that would otherwise seem of little value.”³⁵ Writing after the Reformation and not being a physician, but rather a biographer and antiquary, Aubrey is the best example of a true folklorist. Aubrey reveals his opinion that there is inherent value in recording practices of antiquity even with an “uncritical attitude towards historical sources.”³⁶ Their existence alone was enough for Aubrey. Remembering the quote Hunter provided, the neutrality of the work is an expression of Aubrey’s attitude toward the past in general. He once said, “I was inclin’d by my genius, from my childhood to the love of antiquities . . . and my fate dropt me in a country most suitable for such enquiries.”³⁷ Knowing more about Aubrey, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the *Remaines* was not unorganized, but rather organized in Aubrey’s unique antiquarian style, paying more heed to simply recording folklore than “examining these ideas skeptically.”³⁸ The fact that it was a rough draft chal-

lenges this conclusion, but the evidence of Aubrey’s personal opinions and the style of the rest of his works makes it more than speculation. Since this text is not polemic against witches like Scot or condescending toward superstition like Browne, Aubrey gives another meaning to our magic practitioners via scholarship and folklore and thus indicates another shift in early modern intellectual culture. He emphasizes in *Remaines* that these people have intrinsic value as our cultural ancestors. Their practices are important for the fact alone that they represent our past, one that Aubrey thought deserved recording and reverence. Twentieth century scholars can especially appreciate Aubrey’s addition to the changing meaning of magic practitioners because it begins the discussion that will later be addressed by the term cunning folk. Aubrey makes this group of people historically important. Thus on top of a theological and medical meaning, Aubrey gives them an academic and cultural meaning. But, there is a gap of time before this work enters more generally into academic circles. The *Remaines* was read, discussed, and quoted by Aubrey’s contemporaries, but it was only published in full in 1881 by the British Folklore Society. Before this happened, one more important text changed the cultural meaning of magic practitioners once again.

Henry Bourne, who wrote the popular work *Antiquitates Vulgares, or, The Antiquities of the Common People* (1725), redefines both the study of folklore and introduces a major change in the cultural understanding of magic. An antiquarian like Aubrey, the format and purpose of the text is similar to *Remaines*. Yet, as he sets forth in the preface, Bourne also intended the text to be didactic, similar to Browne’s *Pseudodoxia*. Moreover, Bourne, like his early predecessors, raises religious and theological issues. Therefore, Bourne’s text is a synthesis of all the works that came before him. He addresses all of their concerns, yet tries to frame them more generally. The full title of the text touches on his cultural purpose:

*Antiquitates Vulgares, Giving the account of several of their opinions and ceremonies with proper reflections upon each of them; shewing which may be retain’d, and which ought to be laid aside.*³⁹

He elaborates on what he views as his role in writing this text in the preface:

I would not be thought a Reviver of old Rites and Ceremonies to the Burdening of the People, nor an Abolisher of in-

nocent customs, which are their Pleasures and Recreations: I aim at nothing, but a Regulation of those which are in Being amongst them, which they themselves are far from thinking burdensome, and abolishing such only as are sinful and wicked.⁴⁰

He blames Pagans and Monks, one group, for the harmful superstitions. He proclaims:

As to the Opinions [the common people] hold, they are almost all superstitious, being generally either the Produce of Heathenism; or the Inventions of indolent Monks, who having nothing else to do, were the Forgers of many filly and wicked Opinions, to the World in Awe and Ignorance.⁴¹

Thus, in a way, he takes up Scot's project again. But it is important to note that Bourne does not believe superstition to be inherently negative; certain practices are destructive and others may be "retain'd." This balance reveals Bourne's antiquarian side.

Yet, the major reason why Bourne condemns certain practices is essentially theological. Following the idea developed by Browne, Bourne contends that superstition is an inversion of right religion and a displacement of God from

“‘Superstition’ has taken on a different meaning, one less related to magic than to antiquated practices in general.”

his proper place. For example, Bourne shows that interpreting omens is a practice inherited from biblical times, when God did miracles, but now are just the work of the devil. He writes:

In these early Ages of the World, GOD permitted such Things upon extraordinary Occasions, to be asked by his own People. But they were only peculiar to those Times. We have no Warrant for doing the like...The observation of Omens, such as the falling of Salt, a Hare crossing the Way, of the Dead-Watch, of Crickers, etc. are sinful and diabolical:

They are the Inventions of the Devil, to draw Men from a due Trust in GOD, and make them his own Vassals.⁴²

It is clear from this that any practice that undermines faith in God's power is culturally inexcusable for Bourne and therefore sinful. It appears certain superstitions are nearly synonymous with devil worship. Similarly, "exorcising haunted Houses" is not just a "vulgar practice" but one of "ignorant Priests, as to make them be esteemed Men of greatest Faith and Learning."⁴³ He contends that the whole "Church of Rome are perswaded of the Truth of it, to a Fault [sic]."⁴⁴ Continuing his tirade against the Catholic Church, he also claims that "consecrating Wax Candles" is "manifest Blasphemy and Idolatry."⁴⁵ In many ways, therefore, *Antiquitates* fits in well with the myriad of anti-Catholic texts. Also, we see from this that, in a way, the meaning of magic practitioner as anti-Catholic rhetoric persists well into the eighteenth century. Aubrey's distance from this debate was certainly not followed by Bourne. Bourne is less an "antiquarian" than he may have wanted to be. Although Bourne's text, republished with John Brand's 1777 expansion of the project, is still a classic of folklore, it is clear that Aubrey, more than Bourne, was the real pioneer in the field.

Despite following the arc of his predecessors in many ways, Bourne actually ends, rather than continues, the discussion of magic practitioners. The earlier texts recorded practices that involved charms and spells, the field that magic practitioners would be involved in. Bourne, on the other hand, only approves of such things as "following the Corps to the Grave," putting "Garlands in Country Churches," and "rising early on Easter-Day."⁴⁶ Only things completely devoid of any possibly occult, magical, or Catholic connotations are permitted. "Magic" practices are never admissible in Bourne's opinion. It appears that by 1725 the elite had reached a point where any such activities are entirely useless. Magic practitioners have by this point almost entirely lost their cultural meaning. Intellectual culture had abandoned superstition as a viable topic. In fact, even the examples given of "sinful and diabolical" magic practices represent a small percentage of Bourne's total work. The vast majority of practices he records, good and bad, are of all the common people and do not concern magic whatsoever. We might conclude that by the eighteenth century the practice of magic had been attacked enough by past demonologists that Bourne felt the case closed. Or, it is possible for Bourne, that "superstition" has taken on a different meaning, one less related to magic than to antiquated practices in general. Superstition before

was nearly synonymous with magic, but by the eighteenth century, Bourne contends that the common practices of the “vulgar” population are more outdated than occult. This practical purpose is the new meaning of superstition. In general, Bourne addresses the utilitarian use of superstitious practices more than their moral meaning. In this light, although Bourne takes up Scot’s discussion, he addresses theology from a radically different perspective and within a new cultural and religious discourse. Before the eighteenth century, religion was inextricably tied to culture, whereas in Bourne’s time the two could be separated enough to have unique concerns. His text introduces some of these secular, cultural concerns. Of course, his text shows that Bourne is not a secular writer whatsoever, but he reveals the transition to a society where religion is but an aspect of culture. Along with this shift, it seems, the intellectual and religious concern with magic had fallen away by the time Bourne wrote *Antiquitates*.

By looking at this total arc of the historical meaning of magic practitioners in these texts, it is clear that the limited definition that scholars such as Thomas and Blecourt assign to cunning folk is insufficient in accurately describing the meaning of magic and superstition in early modern Europe. To focus solely and superficially on these early texts’ descriptions of magic practitioners as a class of individuals is firstly to misconstrue the historical worldview of early modern Europeans by imposing contemporary divisions between superstition and reason upon them. Secondly, and more importantly, it misses a vital meaning of these texts as indirect barometers of the concerns and presuppositions of the educated classes of which these writers are a part. In other words, the writers say much more about themselves than they do about the practitioners of magic. This attitude toward the sources is in the end more concrete and useful as historical data than using them as sources for studying the lower class magic practitioners themselves. Studying them directly and with the same veracity is a far more difficult task for historians. Thus, viewing these sources in such a way affirms the term “cunning folk” in scholarship as problematic and instead opens up a new, more nuanced discussion on superstition and magic in early modern England.

ENDNOTES

1. This terminology is found in Thomas 1971.
2. Thomas 1971
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

5. Walsham (178)
6. Walsham (180)
7. Walsham (187)
8. Reginald Scot (10)
9. Oxford Dictionary, “Reginald Scot.”
10. Walsham (186)
11. Scot (131)
12. Scot (133)
13. Scot (162)
14. Ibid.
15. Scot (252)
16. Ibid.
17. Oxford Dictionary, “Sir Thomas Browne.”
18. Ibid.
19. Browne (2)
20. Davis (258)
21. Davis (5)
22. Davis (58)
23. Davis (6)
24. Davis (16)
25. Davis (19)
26. Clark (102)
27. Browne (111)
28. Browne (112)
29. Browne (ix)
30. Hunter (160)
31. Aubrey (iii)
32. Aubrey (58-61)
33. Aubrey (77-78)
34. Hunter (181)
35. Hunter (179)
36. Hunter (186)
37. Oxford Dictionary, “John Aubrey.”
38. Hunter (183)
39. Bourne (title page)
40. Bourne (x)
41. Bourne (xi)
42. Bourne (75)
43. Bourne (90)
44. Ibid.
45. Bourne (173)
46. Bourne (17, 25, 188)

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