Stars, Sieves & Stories
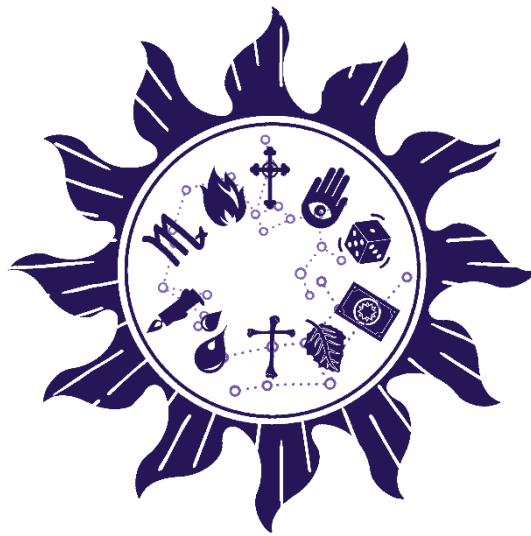
An interactive exhibition about early modern divination

Curriculum guide

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Introduction

Stars, Sieves & Stories is an interactive exhibition that explores divinatory methods in England, Scotland and Wales between c. 1500 and 1750. It began life as an online lecture for the 2021 British Academy Summer Showcase, developed from Dr Martha McGill's research, and supported by Imogen Knox and Francesca Farnell. The same team then developed a physical exhibition that was hosted at Coventry Central Library in 2022 as part of the Resonate Festival, and subsequently at the University of Warwick. The online version was developed by Martha McGill and Imogen Knox. It describes a variety of practices, and offers interactive tools to try some of the methods at home. It also includes extracts from historical sources, and tells the stories of several early modern diviners. Finally, it features an interactive story that invites players to assume the role of an early modern woman and use the divination methods to make life choices. This document contains suggested templates for using *Stars, Sieves and Stories* in university modules.

Divination was the practice of seeking hidden knowledge. Divinatory methods might predict the future, or discover other secrets, such as the location of lost items. In constructing *Stars, Sieves and Stories*, we have sought to showcase a wide range of practices. Some - such as spirit conjuration - depend on animistic (often pre-Christian) conceptions of the world. We have also included the orthodox religious practice of prayer, when used to discern information about God's will and/or the nature of things to come. We have included some practices - such as observing the patterns of the weather or the behaviour of animals - that might be considered a form of scientific enquiry, although we have not attempted to treat scientific experimentation systematically as a form of divination. We have also included some methods of predicting the future - namely prophecy and second sight - that could be considered a practice, but might also be understood as an involuntary gift (or curse).

Studying supernatural beliefs and occult practices requires students to grapple with the unfamiliarity of the past. Many of the divinatory techniques explored in the exhibition have survived in some form to the present day. Perhaps most obviously, astrology remains popular, even if it is no longer championed by leading scientific luminaries. But other methods - like summoning fairy servants, placing the heart of a mole on a sick man's head, or suspending a sieve from a pair of sheep shears - will probably be surprising and strange to students. It is worth underlining that these practices made sense within their cultural contexts. People did not visit diviners or practise divination themselves because they were ignorant, irrational or superstitious. Most early modern Christians believed that events unfolded according to a divine plan set down by God at creation. It was not unreasonable to believe, in turn, that it might be possible to gain insight into God's will by closely observing the natural world, or seeking the aid of supernatural beings.

Although many divinatory methods were expressly religious in character, the post-Reformation Protestant establishment was suspicious of quasi-magical practices. Many theologians considered divination presumptuous; it was not for humans to pry into divine mysteries. *Stars, Sieves and Stories* features various passages from clerics condemning divination, as well as examples of diviners who were punished by ecclesiastical or secular courts. Educated figures also dismissed many divinatory methods as inefficacious, rooted in

superstition and ignorance. From the late seventeenth century, the growing popularity of Cartesian mechanism threatened to undermine divinatory practices by positing primarily natural explanations for the day-to-day operations of the universe. In the eighteenth century, fashionable society increasingly scorned magical beliefs and practices.

The mistrust of religious and secular authorities notwithstanding, divinatory methods were popular throughout the early modern period, and were employed across the social spectrum. Divinatory practices might be closely allied to scientific studies; most obviously, astrology was closely related to astronomy and depended on mathematical knowledge. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, astrologers commanded many prestigious clients. Palmistry was stereotypically the preserve of 'gypsy' fortune-tellers, but published guides instructed literate people on the practice, and often drew heavily on astrological theory. Other methods - such as the sieve and shears, or uprooting kale - seem to have primarily been practised by folk who were lower on the social ladder. In some cases, divination could be a means of challenging social marginality: female prophets could speak with authority on political matters, for example, although there was always a risk of backlash. The study of divination sheds light on early modern people's hopes and anxieties, understandings of the natural and supernatural worlds, and ways of navigating the constraints of societal hierarchies.

Content warnings

Some aspects of the exhibition touch on sensitive themes, including cruelty towards animals, witch hunting, violence, misogyny and racism. This is as might be expected from a scholarly study of the early modern period.

The 'gamification' of sensitive topics has the potential to be uncomfortable. In our experience, students are usually happy to engage with the exhibition's interactive activities in the light-hearted spirit in which they are intended. However, some students may not be comfortable with conducting an astrological reading on religious grounds, or may not wish to enter their date and place of birth into a website (although this information is entirely anonymised). In this case, students could look up the birthday of a celebrity and generate a chart for them instead. Text predicting future spouses, such as that accompanying the dice-rolling in the Lots page, contains sexual innuendo, and may not be suitable for schoolchildren.

Physiognomy is perhaps the most potentially uncomfortable activity. In the early modern period, the practice of physiognomy was not as racially coded as it would become in the nineteenth century, but texts on physiognomy often reinforced European beauty standards, displaying a preference for 'delicate' features. The text used in the interactive activity contains the following interpretation:

'Thick lips denote the party foolish, easy of belief, and one given to excess. Thin lips denote eloquence, much talk, and a good understanding.'

Depending on the dynamics of your class, you may wish to discuss this point in advance, or 'depersonalise' the physiognomy activity by asking students to analyse the face of a celebrity rather than their own faces. This is the approach taken in the lesson plans below, and also avoids any more general awkwardness that might be introduced if students are invited to analyse their own or their peers' personal appearance.

In places, the interactive story touches on themes of violence, misogyny, sexual coercion and racism. This material is, in general, toned down relative to historical reality. The main character is a woman, and may experience male characters attempting to verbally pressure her into sexual relations. The player always has the option to decline. There is brief allusion to high infant mortality rates: one line states that 'most of' the main character's siblings survive infancy. The main character can have children who fall ill, but there is no storyline in which they die. It is possible for the main character to be beaten by her employer, to die in childbirth, or to die from disease.

In one of many possible paths, the main character enters service in the household of a merchant. One of her fellow servants is a black man who was enslaved in Barbados, and subsequently taken to England (this was not uncommon in the later seventeenth century). If the main character seeks to know him better, the subsequent storyline acknowledges contemporary racial prejudices. The most sensitive scene reads as follows:

'Lucy gives a dramatic mock-shiver and asks you if it doesn't frighten you to sleep under the same roof as a "Moor". Her mother points out that many of the fashionable families employ black servants, but Lucy snorts and repeats some derogatory comments she's heard.

Will you go along with what she is saying, disagree politely, or rebuke her more strongly?'

Again, the interactive story is - overall - sanitised relative to historical reality, and the sensitive material is unlikely to catch students of the early modern period unawares.

Lesson Plans

Below we suggest one icebreaker activity and ten full lesson plans using the exhibition. Students will need a laptop or tablet and an internet connection to access the exhibition. For some activities you could, if you wished, bring in physical materials: physiognomy could use a mirror, divination by the Bible could use a bible, divination by elements could use a bowl of water and some paper, and divination by kale could use stalks of kale in a bag.

The full lesson plans follow the same format: there are 3 suggested readings, learning objectives, an activity or activities for students to do in pairs or small groups, and wider questions. You may wish to ask students to feed back on their activities to the main group. The wider questions can be discussed in small groups, or as a full class, depending on your class size and dynamics.

Icebreaker

This simple, fun activity could be used during the introduction to an early modern module. It encourages students to talk to each other, and offers insight into early modern understandings of positive and negative character traits.

Learning objectives

- Begin thinking about life in the early modern period, and get to know classmates.
- Examine what early modern people considered positive or desirable attributes, and explore the breadth of economic roles in early modern society.

Activities

- Generate your natal chart and determine your ruling planet, as explained at https://starsandsieves.com/astrology.
- Read about your positive and negative qualities and suitable professions.
- In small groups, introduce yourselves with reference to your early modern attributes.

Questions

- How do you feel about your character description?
- Do any of your recommended professions appeal to you?
- What sorts of attributes did early modern people look favourably, and negatively, upon?
- Why might early modern people consider astrology a reliable guide to character?

1) Anxieties

The early modern period has been conceptualised by historians as an era of anxiety, marked by religious and political upheaval, social transformation, large-scale outbreaks of disease, climate change, subsistence crises and frequent bouts of warfare. People's anxieties might manifest in a wide variety of ways, but this session draws on one particular source type: the early modern dream book, which offered interpretations for a wide range of popular dreams. The session seeks to identify common anxieties, and relate them to their wider historical context.

Reading

- William J. Bouwsma, 'Anxiety and the Formation of Early Modern Culture', in Barbara C. Malament (ed.), *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J. H. Hexter* (Philadelphia, 1980)

- Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750* (Oxford, 2010), ch. 1 ('The Problems of Pre-Modern Life')
- Janine Rivière, *Dreams in Early Modern England* (London, 2017), ch. 2 ('Decoding Dreams: Dreambooks and Dream Divination')

Learning objectives

- Understand the kinds of things that early modern people worried about.
- Contextualise these anxieties with reference to contemporary events and processes.

Activities

- In small groups, chat for a couple of minutes about your experiences of dreaming. Do you tend to remember their dreams? Did you have any last night? Do you have any recurrent or particularly vivid dreams?
- Look at the 1680 dream book, *Oniropolus*, from https://starsandsieves.com/dreams. Do any of your dreams appear in the book? If so, check their meanings.
- Have a look at some of the other dream verses in the book. What sorts of things did people dream about? Which are the same, and which are different, to common dreams in the modern day? Why might this be? What do these dreams, and their meanings, suggest about early modern concerns and anxieties?

Questions

- Why did early modern people think their dreams had meaning?
- What sorts of anxieties are represented in the dream book?
- What do these concerns tell us about early modern society more broadly? Were people in the early modern period more anxious than people today?
- Consider the primary sources at the foot of the page. On what basis does Reginald Scot criticise dream interpretation? How does his understanding of dreaming compare with that of the 1720 woodcut on the right?

2) Cunning Folk

Cunning folk played an important role in early modern British communities. While witches were malevolent magical practitioners, cunning folk were benevolent: they offered services such as 'unwitching', healing, finding lost goods and divining other mysterious matters. Although typically valued within their communities, cunning folk were sometimes reprimanded - or even prosecuted - by ecclesiastical and secular authorities. This session explores the demographics of cunning folk, and looks at their skills and activities. It also encourages reflection on how wider society perceived cunning folk.

Reading

- Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2008), ch. 6 ('Divination and Prophecy')
- Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning-folk in English History* (London, 2003), ch. 3 ('Who and why') or ch. 4 ('Services')
- Tabitha Stanmore, *Love Spells and Lost Treasure: Service Magic in England from the Later Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, 2023), ch. 1 (Practical Magic: Practices and Demands) or ch. 2 (Service magicians)
- Any of the following pages from https://starsandsieves.com: Diviners; candle wax; elements; nature; scrying; second sight; sieve and shears; spirit guides

Learning objectives

- Understand the place of cunning folk in early modern society.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the methodologies cunning folk employed and the questions they addressed.

Activities

- In small groups or pairs, take it in turns to tell each other about one cunning person mentioned in your reading. What kind of services did they offer? How secure was their place in society? (If you've struggled to find anything detailed, try reading the stories of Andrew Man (https://starsandsieves.com/diviners) and/or Elspeth Reoch (https://starsandsieves.com/second-sight) together and discussing them. Note that both were executed for witchcraft - a rare, but not impossible, fate for a cunning person.)
- Try your skills as a cunning person! Divide into pairs if you haven't already, and assign one person the role of cunning person and the other person the role of client. The cunning person should predict the client's character and future by reading their palm (follow the guide at https://starsandsieves.com/palmistry), and answer a question from the client by interpreting candle wax (https://starsandsieves.com/candle-wax). When you've finished, swap over.

Questions

- Who were cunning folk, and what roles did they play in early modern communities?
- What kind of skills did cunning people need to have? Did you make an effective cunning person?
- How were cunning people perceived by their neighbours, and by early modern authorities?

3) Divination

Divination was popular in early modern Britain, despite condemnation by the post-Reformation religious establishment. There was a wide range of possible methods, and practitioners from various walks of life served an equally diverse client-base. This session explores multiple divinatory practices, and looks at how the questions posed by clients reflect early modern hopes and fears. It also questions what divinatory practices reveal about early modern understandings of religion, science and magic.

Reading

- Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture, Cognition and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke, 2008), ch. 6 ('Divination and Prophecy')
- Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750* (Oxford, 2010), ch. 4 ('Insight and Foresight: Techniques of Divination'. There is also helpful framing in the introduction and ch. 1)
- https://starsandsieves.com. Read the pages 'welcome', 'diviners' and 'clients', plus a few pages of your choice on divinatory methods.

Learning objectives

- Examine a range of divinatory practices, and understand who used them and why.
- Assess the functions of divination in early modern society.
- Reflect on what divination reveals about early modern culture more broadly.

Activities

- In small groups, discuss the divinatory methods you learned about from your reading. Who used them? How did they work?
- Go to https://starsandsieves.com and try out some divination methods together. Any of the following are suitable:

> *To learn about yourself*
> Astrology: https://starsandsieves.com/astrology
> Palmistry: https://starsandsieves.com/palmistry
> Physiognomy: https://starsandsieves.com/physiognomy

> *To answer burning questions*
> The Bible: https://starsandsieves.com/bible
> Candle wax: https://starsandsieves.com/candle-wax
> Elements: https://starsandsieves.com/elements
> The sieve and shears: https://starsandsieves.com/sieve-and-shears

> *To predict your future*
>> Cards: https://starsandsieves.com/cards
>> Dreams: https://starsandsieves.com/dreams
>> Kale: https://starsandsieves.com/kale
>> Lots: https://starsandsieves.com/lots

- Optionally, you can also play through the interactive story together (https://starsandsieves.com/stories). Try using the divination methods to make some or all of your choices.
- Why did people consider these methods (potentially) effective?

Questions

- Who practised divination, what methods did they use, and what did they seek to learn?
- Why were the secular and ecclesiastical authorities wary of divination? Why did some methods - or some practitioners - arouse more suspicion than others?
- Why did people continue to practise divination in the face of official condemnation?
- What do divinatory practices reveal about religious, magical and scientific beliefs in the early modern period?

4) Gender

Early modern social and economic roles were dictated by gender. Few families could afford to exempt women from work entirely, but for the most part, women and men did different jobs: women looked after children, dominated the service industry and took on lighter agricultural work, while men did most heavy labouring jobs and made up the majority of artisans. Leadership of households, and political involvement, was largely (although not exclusively) the preserve of men. This session will explore the roles allotted to men and women in early modern Europe, and consider how far it was possible to deviate from them.

Reading

- Bernard Capp, 'Gender and Family', in Beat Kümin (ed.), *The European World, 1500-1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History*, 4th edn (London, 2022)
- Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720* (Oxford, 1998), ch. 3 ('Adult Life')
- Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 4th edn (Cambridge, 2019), ch. 2 ('The Female Life Cycle') or ch. 3 ('Women's Economic Role')

Learning objectives

- Understand the different roles allotted to men and women in early modern society, and how they varied according to factors such as age and social status.
- Have a sense of the different life paths men and women might follow.
- Reflect on how far it was possible to deviate from prescribed gender roles.

Activities

- In small groups, have a few playthroughs of the interactive story at https://starsandsieves.com/stories. If you can't decide what to do, feel free to use the divination methods to guide you. When you've finished, talk about the paths your characters went along. How typical were their experiences? What other life experiences were normal for early modern women?
- Read about one of the following women:

    Rachel Brown: https://starsandsieves.com/prayer
    Elinor Channel: from the relevant primary source at
    https://starsandsieves.com/prophecy
    Elspeth Reoch: https://starsandsieves.com/second-sight (note: references to physical and sexual assault)

    How was this woman's life experience influenced by her gender? To what extent was she able to negotiate gendered constraints?
- Go to https://starsandsieves.com/lots (you may already have used this to make some of your choices). Roll the dice once each and look at your results. What do the passages mean? How do they reflect on early modern gender dynamics?

Questions

- What was expected of early modern men and women, respectively?
- How far did gendered roles vary according to factors such as age, marital status and social rank?
- To what extent was it possible to subvert or defy traditional gender roles?

5) 'Gypsies' in early modern society

Travelling communities operated at the margins of early modern society. They were typically described as 'Egyptians', shortened to 'gypsies'. In continental Europe, many 'gypsies' were part of the Romani diaspora from India. In Britain, they may have been primarily English and Scottish travellers. However erroneous the association with Egypt, it remained an important element of 'gypsy' identity, and contributed to their exoticisation by wider society. This

session will explore who 'gypsies' were, look at how the group was persecuted, and examine their practice of fortune-telling.

Reading

- David Cressy, 'Trouble with Gypsies in Early Modern England', *The Historical Journal* 59:1 (2016), 45-70

And two of the following four pieces:

- Frances Timbers, *'The Damned Fraternitie': Constructing Gypsy Identity in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (London, 2016), ch. 1 ('"From Aegypt have I come"'), ch. 2 ('"Gypsies: thieves and tramps?"') or ch. 6 ('"By lines they read in face and hand"')
- Frances Timbers, 'Mary Squires: A Case Study in Constructing Gypsy Identity in Eighteenth-Century England', in Kim Kippen and Lori Woods (eds), *Worth and Repute: Valuing Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Toronto, 2011)

Learning objectives

- Consider debates around the origin of early modern 'gypsies', and reflect on fortune-telling as an aspect of 'gypsy' identity.
- Gain an understanding of how and why 'gypsies' were persecuted in early modern society.

Activities

- Navigate to https://starsandsieves.com/diviners. Read the story of Mary Squires, and Richard Head's attack on 'gypsy' fortune-tellers. How do these resources reflect on attitudes towards gypsies in the early modern period?
- In pairs, try reading each other's palms using the guide at https://starsandsieves.com/palmistry. Then choose a celebrity, look up a picture of their face and do a reading using the guidance at https://starsandsieves.com/physiognomy. Why might early modern people pay 'gypsies' for fortune-telling services? Why did the authorities find this threatening?

Questions

- Who were early modern 'gypsies'?
- Why, and in what ways, were 'gypsies' marginalised or persecuted within early modern society?
- How did fortune-telling become a recognised aspect of 'gypsy' identity? Did divination offer 'gypsies' a means to navigate their marginalisation?

6) History of the body

In Christian belief, the body was made in God's image and operated according to his divine plan. The marks and lines of the body, its strengths and infirmities, and the course of diseases reflected God's will. Simultaneously, Galenic theory provided a physiological explanation of the body's behaviour, teaching that the body was composed of four humours - blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm - and the balance of these humours determined physical and mental wellbeing. This session will explore how early modern understandings of the body differed from modern conceptions, and look at the ways in which the body was connected to the wider cosmos.

Reading

- Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr, 'Introduction: Inhabiting the Body, Inhabiting the World', in idem (eds), *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (London, 2007)
- Karen Raber, 'The Common Body', in Linda Kalof and William Bynum (eds), *A Cultural History of the Body in the Renaissance* (London, 2010)

    and either

- Paweł Rutkowski, 'Through the Body: Chiromancy in 17th-Century England*', World and Word* 32:1 (2019), 33-44

    or

- Frances Timbers, *'The Damned Fraternitie': Constructing Gypsy Identity in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (London, 2016), ch. 6 ('"By lines they read in face and hand"')

Learning objectives

- Understand early modern religious and medical theories about the nature of the human body and its connection to the wider environment.
- Examine what the practices of palmistry and physiognomy reveal about early modern conceptions of the body.
- Reflect on the extent to which early modern bodily experience was culturally contingent.

Activities

- In pairs, try reading each other's palms using the guide at https://starsandsieves.com/palmistry. Then choose a celebrity, look up a picture of

their face and do a reading using the guidance at
https://starsandsieves.com/physiognomy.
- What do your readings suggest about the kinds of qualities that early modern people valued, and the kinds of questions they considered important?
- Did your readings seem accurate, or potentially accurate? Why did (some) early modern people believe that the body was encoded with clues about a person's character and future? You may wish to look at the extracts from primary sources on the Physiognomy page in thinking about your answer.

Questions

- How did early modern understandings of the body differ from modern-day conceptions?
- How was the early modern body connected to the wider cosmos?
- On what grounds did some people reject palmistry and physiognomy? (You may wish to consider the primary sources on the Palmistry page.) Do you think critics of the practices have fundamentally different ideas about the nature of the body?
- How similar do you think your experience of your body would be to the experience of an early modern person of the same age, gender etc?

7) Humans and the natural world

People in the early modern period - like people today - had a complicated relationship with the natural world. The environment was something to be conquered. Natural resources were stripped, land was drained, animals were eaten or brought into human service. But the environment also had profound significance beyond its practical utility. Divine providence directed the course of nature, and God's will might be read in the patterns of the weather, the behaviour of animals and any unusual events or conditions. This session will examine how early modern people understood the natural world, and look at the similarities and differences with people today.

Reading

- Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York, 1998), ch. 5 ('Monsters: A Case Study')
- Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr, 'Introduction: Inhabiting the Body, Inhabiting the World', in idem (eds), *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (London, 2007)
- Joseph Hardwick and Randall J. Stephens, 'Acts of God: Continuities and Change in Christian Responses to Extreme Weather Events from Early Modernity to the Present', *WIREs Climate Change* 11:2 (2020)

Learning objectives

- Demonstrate an understanding of early modern attitudes towards the environment, and reflect on the similarities and differences to the modern period.
- Explore how natural phenomena could be interpreted in supernatural terms, or invested with occult significance.

Activities

- In small groups, choose one of the following pages and navigate to it:

  On animals: https://starsandsieves.com/animals
  On bones: https://starsandsieves.com/bones
  On the elements: https://starsandsieves.com/elements
  On kale: https://starsandsieves.com/kale
  On nature: https://starsandsieves.com/nature
  On the weather: https://starsandsieves.com/weather

  Read the page and try out the activity together.

- Discuss the primary source material on the page. How does it reflect on early modern people's relationship with the natural world?

  If you have time, move on to a different page and compare the material featured there.

Questions

- Why did early modern people ascribe occult significance to the patterns of the natural world?
- What were 'monsters', and what was their significance within early modern society?
- How did early modern Europeans' relationship with the natural world compare to our relationship with it today?

8) Love and marriage

Marriage was a crucial milestone in the life cycle of early modern Europeans. The choice of a marriage partner could dictate an individual's future economic prosperity, place in the social hierarchy, religious development and day-to-day happiness. Making a marriage was a complex business, commonly involving not only the individuals concerned but a wide network of family members, and love was rarely considered sufficient foundation for

happiness in the marital state. This session will look at how early modern people chose marriage partners, and consider changes over the course of the early modern period.

Reading

- Katie Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650-1850* (Manchester, 2011), ch. 3 ('The First Step to Marriage: Courtship')
- David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), ch. 10 ('Courtship and the Making of Marriage')
- Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2000), ch. 1 ('The Structures of Courtship and the Role of Family, Kin and Community')

Learning objectives

- Demonstrate an understanding of how early modern marriages were made, and reflect on the differences compared to modern practices.
- Examine how much freedom early modern men and women had to choose their own marriage partners.
- Explore how attitudes towards love and marriage changed over the course of the early modern period.

Activities

- In small groups, try out three different methods to predict your romantic fortunes:

  Cards: https://starsandsieves.com/cards
  Kale: http://starsandsieves.com/kale
  Lots: https://starsandsieves.com/lots

  For cards and lots, take some time to talk about your results together and make sure you understand the early modern text. How do these resources reflect on early modern attitudes towards love and marriage?

- Play through the interactive story at https://starsandsieves.com/stories. If you can't decide what to do, feel free to use the divination methods to guide you. How typical is your character's experience of courtship and/or marriage? If you have time, you can do some extra playthroughs to try different paths.

Questions

- How did early modern European attitudes towards love and marriage differ from attitudes today?

- What did courtship look like in the early modern period? What qualities did people seek in a potential spouse?
- How much freedom did men and women have to choose their spouses? How did this vary according to social position?
- How did approaches to courtship and marriage change between c. 1500 and c. 1750?

9) Religion, science and magic

In early modern Europe, there was significant overlap between religious, scientific and magical studies and practices. Astrology, for example, incorporated theories and methodologies from all three fields. However, many clerics were keen to differentiate orthodox religious beliefs and practices from occult studies and magical rituals, and developments in scientific methodologies in the seventeenth century arguably placed more significant barriers between science and magic. This session will look at the overlaps, and points of contention, between religion, science and magic over the course of the early modern period.

Reading

- Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750* (Oxford, 2010), ch. 4 ('Insight and Foresight: Techniques of Divination')
- Robert W. Scribner, 'The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the "Disenchantment of the World"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23:3 (1993): 475-94.
- Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), ch. 22 (The Decline of Magic')

Learning objectives

- Reflect on the areas of overlap between religious, scientific and magical beliefs in the early modern period, and consider how or whether they became more rigidly delineated between c. 1500 and c. 1750.
- Demonstrate an understanding of relevant scholarship.

Activities

- In small groups, choose one of the following pages and navigate to it:

  On animals: https://starsandsieves.com/animals
  On astrology: https://starsandsieves.com/astrology
  On the Bible: https://starsandsieves.com/bible
  On the elements: https://starsandsieves.com/elements

On physiognomy: https://starsandsieves.com/physiognomy

Read the material together and try out the interactive Activities. How does the divinatory method blend religious, scientific and/or magical beliefs? When you have finished, try out a different page.

Questions

- What are the differences between Keith Thomas's and Robert Scribner's visions of magic, religion and/or science in the early modern period? How convincing do you find their respective theses?
- How would you characterise a) the aims and b) the methodologies of magic, science and Christianity? Have they become more clearly differentiated over time?
- Should they be viewed as competing systems? If so, is there a point in time when this became the case?

10) Understanding historical difference

Studying early modern religion and magic requires historians to find strategies to make sense of ideas and practices that may no longer seem rational. It is not typically helpful to explain past beliefs by suggesting that people were ignorant, or superstitious. We learn more by prioritising contextualisation: even the most apparently bizarre beliefs and activities often become logical when viewed as part of a web of related beliefs, many grounded on empirical observation and/or meticulous scholarship. This session will explore helpful methodologies in the study of historical magic and religion.

Reading

- Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2008), ch. 6 ('Divination and Prophecy')
- Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750* (Oxford, 2010), introduction
- Darren Oldridge, S*trange Histories: The Trial of the Pig, the Walking Dead, and Other Matters of Fact from the Medieval and Renaissance Worlds*, 2nd edn (London, 2018), ch. 1 ('Introduction: Strange Worlds')

Learning Objectives

- Examine the religious, scientific and/or magical frameworks through which early modern people understood the world.
- Reflect on the methodological challenges that may arise when studying or writing about unfamiliar historical beliefs.

Activities

- Go to https://starsandsieves.com and try out some divination methods together. Any of the following are suitable:

  To learn about yourself
  Astrology: https://starsandsieves.com/astrology
  Palmistry: https://starsandsieves.com/palmistry
  Physiognomy: https://starsandsieves.com/physiognomy

  To answer burning questions
  The Bible: https://starsandsieves.com/bible
  Candle wax: https://starsandsieves.com/candle-wax
  Elements: https://starsandsieves.com/elements
  The sieve and shears: https://starsandsieves.com/sieve-and-shears

  To predict your future
  Cards: https://starsandsieves.com/cards
  Dreams: https://starsandsieves.com/dreams
  Kale: https://starsandsieves.com/kale
  Lots: https://starsandsieves.com/lots

- Optionally, you can also play through the interactive story together (https://starsandsieves.com/stories). Try using the divination methods to make some or all of your choices.
- What do these divinatory methods tell us about early modern culture?

Questions

- Why did (some) early modern people believe it was possible to tell the future? What broader beliefs about God, the natural world, the body etc buttressed belief in the power of divinatory methods?
- What do divinatory practices reveal about religious, magical and scientific beliefs in the early modern period?
- How should historians approach the study of beliefs or practices that most people today would consider fantastical?