

2018

## Perks Of Perkins: Understanding Where Magic And Religion Meet For An Early Modern English Theologian

Kyle Sanders  
*University of South Carolina*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sanders, K. (2018). *Perks Of Perkins: Understanding Where Magic And Religion Meet For An Early Modern English Theologian*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4681>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

PERKS OF PERKINS: UNDERSTANDING WHERE MAGIC AND RELIGION MEET  
FOR AN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH THEOLOGIAN

by

Kyle Sanders

Bachelor of Arts  
Baylor University, 2016

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

History

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2018

Accepted by:

Kathryn Edwards, Director of Thesis

Matthew Melvin-Koushki, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Kyle Sanders, 2018  
All Rights Reserved.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wanted to acknowledge all of the people who have helped me get this thing across the finish line. I have to start with my family, who helped me make the decision to go after my Master's Degree at University of South Carolina. I also want to thank my thesis committee. Dr. Edwards has been an amazing guide as my Thesis Director and advisor. I have learned a great deal from her about Early Modern Europe and how to approach history. Dr. Melvin-Koushki has also been a great reader and teacher. I also need to thank my amazing friends, like Emmaline Smith, whose great feedback and encouragement kept me motivated. Finally, I want to thank Drew, who spent way too much time as my second pair of eyes and emotional support.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* by William Perkins, a prestigious Puritan theologian in Elizabethan England, highlights several themes in his witchcraft discourse which reflect his larger theology and more general trends in English theology: a world with an active Devil, predestination, providence, Biblicism, and anti-Catholicism. These central themes shape his understandings of where witchcraft fits within a world where God dominates everything. Witchcraft is an attempt to steal the dominion from God, even though the Devil only tricks witches into thinking they have power. He also tricks them into thinking he has power, since God grants him his ability over humanity. Perkins' described witchcraft practices mirror this understanding and are circumvented by godly opportunities for Christians to avoid witchcraft. In thus painting witchcraft, Perkins demonstrates a culture he sees as far too permissive of magic in academic settings, popular culture, and Catholicism. The different theological elements Perkins presents in his *Discourse* coalesce to portray a man representing a fermenting Puritan culture which emphasizes the impurity of a larger culture and works to correct the moral failings of the larger world, spawning from a black and white understanding of good and evil.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: The Devil in a Predestined Cosmos.....	5
Chapter 3: Witchcraft and Sin.....	17
Chapter 4: Divination and Prophecy.....	24
Chapter 5: Charms and Anti-Catholicism.....	34
Chapter 6: Perkins and the Witch Trials.....	46
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	55
Bibliography.....	57

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Originally published by Thomas Pickering in 1608, four years after the death of its author William Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft; So Farre Forth as it is reuealed in the Scriptures, and manifest by true experience. Framed and Delivered by M. William Perkins* is probably not the first document that comes to one's head when talking about witchcraft treatises.<sup>1</sup> It is most often overshadowed by bigger names, such as the James I's *Daemonologie*. Even in terms of English witchcraft it is often lumped in with general discussions of theology Elizabethan England. 256 pages long, it deals mostly with analyzing the dangers of witches to society, placing witches within a larger religious cosmology, and advising Christians on how to deal with witches. The argument of this thesis is not necessarily that Perkins' discourse is atypical or incredibly influential in its own right. Though this document circulated widely in England and the continent of Europe, there is very little direct evidence that it increased accusations or shaped the way witchcraft trials were run.<sup>2</sup> The center of this thesis actually hinges on placing this *Discourse* as a central means of understanding Perkins' personal theology and larger societal trends.

---

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 153.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn A. Edwards, "Witchcraft in Tudor England and Scotland," in *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, ed. Kent Cartwright (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 40.

William Perkins was born in 1558 as lower gentry and was educated at Cambridge where he received as far as an MA. He then worked as a lecturer at St. Andrew's Church and was a Fellow at Cambridge. He was tutored by Lawrence Chaderton and remained a central theological figure in the moderate Puritan movements of the late 1500s. He is even credited for teaching figures such as William Ames and Robert Cotton.<sup>3</sup> Perkins had a practical Puritan theology, focusing on how Reformation religious values, such as predestination, worked practically for the believers.<sup>4</sup> He sees the importance of Perkins in the proliferation of his work. He notes that Perkins published forty-eight books, twenty-one during his life. Many of these books made their way over to the New World, and many more were translated into the vernacular languages of many different countries.<sup>5</sup> Perkins was a key figure in the early development of Puritan belief through his practical theology and influence as a teacher and writer.

Through the *Discourse*, Perkins contributes to a growing genre of pamphlets and treatises in England regarding witchcraft. Pamphlets and treatises on the witch trials proved a popular and profitable subject for printers and writers at the time, providing an often-salacious subject for readers. Starting in 1566, most witch trials were passed to the public as accounts of the events of the trials with varying levels of accuracy. These pamphlets encouraged the production of lengthier treatises, such as that of Perkins. The first major treatise in a long line of English treatises by theologians in communication with English and European witchcraft beliefs was Henry Holland's *Treatise against*

---

<sup>3</sup> William Perkins et al., *A Commentary on Galatians* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), viii–ix.

<sup>4</sup> Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, 216–17.

<sup>5</sup> Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, 190–91.

*witchcraft* from 1590.<sup>6</sup> Others soon followed: James Mason's *The Anatomie of Sorcerie* (1612), Thomas Cooper's *Mystery of Witchcraft* (1617), John Cotta's *The Trial of Witchcraft* (1616), and Richard Bernard's *Guide to Grande Jury Men* (1627).<sup>7</sup> In compiling these larger works, authors relied on trial records, smaller pamphlets, and other treatises; in each case their information was distanced from the witch herself.

Whether it is reading the witchcraft pamphlets or treatises, one cannot ignore that these documents are created documents. Marion Gibson breaks down this belief best in his *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of early English witches*. The information included, the subjects focused on, and way the author talks about witchcraft are all shaped by what the author and what they want to achieve, where he attempts to read past the flaws in these documents to understand the information beneath.<sup>8</sup> Reading Perkins' treatise as a created document will help illustrate its importance to historical understandings.

This thesis will argue that the importance of Perkins' treatise is not in an abundance of unique contributions, but in how many different elements of theology and social criticism come together in this work. Perkins sees his world as battleground between the God and Satan, where Satan's abilities are granted by an omnipotent God to punish sinners. These beliefs display an emerging understanding of predestination and providence that is present in Anglican Protestantism but is becoming more distinctly Puritan. His understanding of sin feeds further into his ideas of predestination but takes it a step further to show that he sees sin as humans trying to steal God's authority. good His

---

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Sharpe and Richard M. Golden, eds., *English Witchcraft, 1560-1736*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), xi.

<sup>7</sup> Sharpe and Golden, 1:xxv-xxvi.

<sup>8</sup> Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8-10.

social commentaries in his *Discourse* focus on the dangers of a society that accepts some magic as benevolent, like the high magic of academia and the popular magic of the cunning-folk. Anti-Catholicism emerges with his discussion on charms and the defenses against it. He caps off this discussion calling for a more rigorous standard for witch trials, rather than the less structure current system. The theological beliefs and criticism in this treatise coalesce to portray a man representing a fermenting Puritan culture which emphasizes the impurity of a larger culture and works to correct the moral failings of the larger world, spawning from a binary understanding of good and evil.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE DEVIL IN A PREDESTINED COSMOS

The central argument of this thesis is that Perkins' witchcraft text is a microcosm of several evolving trends in Elizabethan society. Before sketching this argument in depth, this thesis needs to establish the way Perkins understands God's power and the forces at play in the cosmos, as this will allow readers to understand Perkins' most foundational beliefs before tackling more complex elements. The central questions in this case are how Perkins understands his world and how does this perspective illustrate larger trends in English theology at the time. Perkins' witchcraft discourse wants to demonstrate how magic fits in relation to God and His power. He sets up his understanding of reality: "Again, as God hath enacted Laws, whereby his kingdom is governed, so hath the devil his ordinances...which generally and for substance, are nothing else but transgressions of the very law of God." Witchcraft is the worst of these transgressions.<sup>9</sup> Perkins presents the world as two warring kingdoms. On one side there is God in all of His justice with all of His angels, the saints, and Heaven under his domain, where he rules with order and goodness. On the other side is the Devil, who is God's opposite but not his equal. On the Devil's side are the devils and the damned souls, and

---

<sup>9</sup> William Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft so Farre Forth as It Is Reuealed in the Scriptures, and Manifest by True Experience. Framed and Deliuered by M. William Perkins, in His Ordinarie Course of Preaching, and Now Published by Tho. Pickering Batchelour of Diuinitie, and Minister of Finchingfield in Essex. Whereunto Is Adioyned a Twofold Table; One of the Order and Heades of the Treatise; Another of the Texts of Scripture Explained, or Vindicated from the Corrupt Interpretation of the Aduersarie.*, Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1284:05 ([Cambridge] : Printed by Cantrel Legge, printer to the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, 1610), 5–6.

the most dangerous of the Devil's servants are witches. Perkins' theory on the dangers of witches is the central idea of this discourse and helps illustrate his larger ideas. The first and greatest danger is the intense connection between witches and the Devil. The witches might be the Devil's human servants, but Perkins' sees them as the most dangerous.

The idea of the world as a battlefield between God and the Devil is present in most of Perkins' works. One example where he prominently displays his belief is *The Combat Betweene Christ and the Diuell Displayed: or A Commentarie Upon the Temptations of Christ*. In this book, he looks in greater detail at the battle between God and the Devil. Perkins wrestles with the story of Christ's temptation in the desert, finding it an excellent example for his congregation. He states that, "first he [the Devil] will seeke to nuzzell men in ignorance....: if he faile that way, then will he endeuour to plunge their soules into some damnable error and heresie; and by one of these meanes doth he destroy the faith of many; ."10 The Devil is constantly at war for the souls of the godly and will always go after them how he can. The battle between the two figures is something that plays out on the personal and universal scale for Christians. One of Perkins' primary focuses is how his parishioners live with this grand battle. In this *Discourse* and his larger theology, he is looking at how this pitched battle works through the Devil's implementation of witches as a means of tempting and trying godly individuals.

---

<sup>10</sup> William Perkins, *The Combat Betweene Christ and the Diuell Displayed: Or A Commentarie Vpon the Temptations of Christ: Preached in Cambridge by That Reuerend and Iudicious Diuine M. William Perkins*, Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1213:06 ; Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1492:6d (London : Printed by Melchisedech Bradwood for E. E[dgard] and are to be solde [by Cuthbert Burby] in Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Swan, 1606), 15.

Though Perkins depicts an active Devil in his discourse on witches, he severely limits the Devil's agency. One of the most essential and confusing arguments that Perkins' makes in his discourse is that witchcraft is an illusion, as it helps define the limitations of witch power. In one sense, he means illusion in the truest sense that, instead of making any real changes, magic tricks the mind or the senses (by creating an external trick).<sup>11</sup> He seems to think of magic as an illusion in the sense that witchcraft is not only a trick done by witches, but one done to them. The Devil deceives witches into thinking that he will give them a little bit of power over the world. However, this is a lie. Perkins is very clear that any working of magic, whether done through direct contact with the devil or passed down in tomes of magic comes from the Devil. The knowledge originates from the Devil, and the workings are ultimately done by the Devil. Despite this, they are still active agents of the Devil, worthy of an entire treatise.

Referring to magic as an illusion is not just a throwaway line, but a reference to a long history academic discourse. One of the most fundamental thinkers of the occult movement is the Greek philosopher Plato. The idea that a lot of the world is a watered down imitation of reality, or an illusion.<sup>12</sup> Though Plato is not explicitly Christian, there is a long history of referring to Plato and Platonist ideas as an Christian way to think about the world. St. Augustine thinks of Platonism as something of a precursor of the true Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it would not have been strange for an academically trained theologian, like Perkins, to reference the pagan Plato as the center of their witchcraft understanding.

---

<sup>11</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Moss, "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72, no. 3 (2006): 502–5.

<sup>13</sup> Wouter J Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, 2013, 27.

The fact that Perkins is using a platonic reference is somewhat surprising, however, when one considers it in his Cambridge. The Cambridge Neoplatonists were a rising group at Cambridge, which used the philosopher as a foundation for their theological beliefs, whole pursuing a heavily occult centered understanding of science and religion.<sup>14</sup> Considering Perkins is writing a piece against magic, it seems somewhat strange that he would build his witchcraft theology on the same foundations as this group. However, history of Platonism in the church means that he would have been comfortable using Plato as a solid theological foundation and as a way to snub a group that he most likely disagreed with.

Perkins presents magic as a deception to sinners, created in all of its forms by the Devil. Witchcraft answers a desire in humans to have the power of God and to be able to change the world. However, it is only the illusion of control. All of a witch's power comes from the Devil and is never truly possessed by the witches: "The reason is, because [God] is the author and creator of nature, and therefore at his pleasure...the working of a miracle is a kind of creation, for therein a thing is made to be, which was not before."<sup>15</sup> Though change can occur, it is less than true miracles and a sad imitation of the works wrought by God. Witchcraft is only capable of illusion.

This understanding of witchcraft fits well within the larger narrative of sovereignty and competition that Perkins understands as the relationship between God and the Devil. Perkins illustrates in his *Discourse* that magic's place in the universe is integrally tied into the way that he understands this relationship. Witchcraft is one of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard Marback, "The Phoenix of Hermes, or the Rebirth of Plato in the Eighteenth Century," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13, no. 1 (1995): 71–72, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.1995.13.1.61>.

<sup>15</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 15.

most powerful tools in the Devil's arsenal, but its efficacy is intimately tied into the effectiveness of the Devil in relationship to God. God's sovereignty is firm and the idea that he allows trials for a reason is well established. That also has to mean that this competition and the powers of the Devil are allowed by God. Therefore, witchcraft inherently has to be less effective than true miracles and cannot cause any true change.

Despite being the godly way to really change the world to Perkins, for Protestants the time of miracles was over. It is not necessarily that God could not perform miracles, as that would be limiting God's power. It was simply that he no longer needed humans as a vehicle for miracles, since miracles were there to encourage the godly church that Protestantism was already.<sup>16</sup> This understanding that the age of miracles is over, means that there is no way for magic to really work. There is no situation anything currently masquerading as miraculous could be. It must be an imitation.

Perkins mirrors many of his overarching arguments regarding the evil of magic in his commentary on Galatians. In his section on Galatians Chapter 5, he goes into relative depth on his opinions on the art. In this rather long section, he says a lot of the things that would be repeated in the discourse. One example of this comes when he writes, "Nothing hath efficacy but by the Ordinance of creation... And the efficacy was either put into the thing that comes by any other means is by Satanical operation. Charms... whatever, have no force unless we believe that they can do good... [but are] the service of the devil."<sup>17</sup> He is clear that the sovereignty of God trumps the devil. Also, any action which tries to take control away from the creator and put it into anyone else's hands is evil. It cannot be

---

<sup>16</sup> Alexandra Walsham, "The Reformation and 'The Disenchantment of the World' Reassessed," *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2008): 509.

<sup>17</sup> William Perkins et al., *A Commentary on Galatians* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 380

anything but the work of the Devil. This means that Perkins in his own opinion cannot be lax on magic or its practitioners, as their power comes from Satan. There is no such thing as good magic, even if humans pursue or consult it for good reasons.

In fact, people must believe in magic, especially the effectiveness of magic, for it to work. Perkins seems to suggest that magic works via placebo effect rather than through any material actions of magic. This is a definite return to the idea he introduces in his discourse that magic and its might is only an illusion. Illusions are only effective if they manage to convince people that they are real. The mirage-like nature of magic does not mean that it is not dangerous or evil in Perkins' eyes, however. Just because it is not as effective as miracles does not mean there is not material danger posed by Satan's power.

Perkins' belief in witchcraft as an illusion is foundational to Perkins' *Discourse*, but it should not be surprising that Perkins' personal magical beliefs are directly referenced multiple times in his extensive body of work. If his magical beliefs were important enough for him to write an entire discourse on them, they probably at least merit mentioning in other works. However, the placement of this passage within this his *A Commentary on Galatians* hints to several factors. First, its placement within a larger theological commentary speaks towards the interdependency of magic and religion that this thesis argues. Magic is clearly part of his larger theology in Perkins' own mind. If Perkins clearly places it within his theology, then he wants the larger world to see it as well.

This understanding of the devil as an active but limited figure is not unique to this work. *The Combat Betweene Christ and the Diuell Displayed* is an excellent instance of Perkins' understanding of the Devil's active role in the world. Since Perkins cannot

separate the Devil from witchcraft, he also talks about them several times in *The Combat Betveene Christ and the Divell*, although witches might seem tangential to this topic. He mentions witches' existence and actions several times, advising his parishioners not to seek the medical advice of a witch over that of normal physicians and telling people not to be so arrogantly assured of their faith that they think they cannot be bewitched.<sup>18</sup> For Perkins, this battle between the Devil and God is both the stage where all temptations, including witchcraft, take place and is the motivation for much of the mischief caused by those who practice magic. One of the struggles that Perkins must address in his works, especially in his witchcraft document, is how a Christian can live in this world in the midst of war. In this instance, he uses his discussion of the temptation of Christ and what it tells him about the Devil's reason for temptation. He also tries to give his partitions practical advice about how to avoid snares. The biggest temptation is the aide of witches.

These limitations placed on the Devil demonstrate very hint at central beliefs in his larger work. Though he never states his beliefs as fully as in the discourse, they are representative of several theological trends at the time. He believes that these tribulations are delivered by God, who holds power over creation. He illustrates why God afflicts peoples: "1. To humble vs. 2. To wean vs. 3. To winnow vs. 4. To prevent vs... To protect vs. 12. To adopt vs. And last of all, to teach and comfort."<sup>19</sup> God uses temptation and struggle of any kind to build Christian character. If a person goes untested, then how can one be sure that they are truly committed to God? In Perkins' eyes, God uses

---

<sup>18</sup> Perkins, *The Combat Betveene Christ and the Diuell Displayed*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Perkins, *The Combat Betveene Christ and the Diuell Displayed*, 5.

temptation inspired by the Devil as a means of smoothing the rough edges of those truly committed to holiness and to break down those who do not deserve Heaven.

He issues a surprisingly similar statement in his *Discourse*, arguing that God allows magic to exist for two main reasons. The first is as a trial to believers: magic is a means for evil to harm people, and these trials help those afflicted to become better people by making them humble and stronger. The other is a similar point. As much as magic is a physical danger to people, it is worse as a temptation for believers. Only those who can resist the call of magic are worthy of Heaven.<sup>20</sup> Perkins does not believe that temptation comes from the random acts of the Devil or chance. God is all-powerful, so therefore nothing can happen without his say. This is just as true for the bad things in life. These bad things are a way to test or punish humanity. This is a point that Perkins and other theologians like himself struggle with. How does a person understand and live in a world where everything is already determined, even whether you burn in hell? This is the basic conundrum of predestination. Predestination is definitely not original to Perkins, but it shapes almost every element of his theology.

Though Perkins is most commonly associated with the early Puritan movements, making him an excellent barometer of how early Puritanism looked, it is not necessarily true that his ideas are exclusively Puritan or held by all Elizabethans. In these documents, and especially in his witchcraft discourse, Perkins demonstrates an understanding of the Devil as active and dangerous, but ultimately controlled by God to punish sinners. This understanding is driven by predestination, a common theme in English theology. One of the best ways to talk about Early Reformed English predestination is the term

---

<sup>20</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 38.

unconditional predestination, which means “there were not efficacious instruments of salvation but instead memorials of the eternal decree of predestination by which God had already decided who numbered among the elect and who among the damned and reprobate.”<sup>21</sup> It was a relatively common belief for English Protestants by 1553 and was transplanted from Calvinist theology on the continent.<sup>22</sup> Predestination is commonly believed to be the most formative element of Reformed theology. An easy way to understand predestination, as held in the Reformed tradition, is that God decided who got into heaven, often known as the elect. He also decided all the events that happened in a person’s life. Many historians trace this idea’s connection to continental theology and reasons that it became a noteworthy and relatively widespread belief at the time of Perkins’ life.

Beyond predestination is the idea of double predestination. Double predestination is a protestant idea that God has a secret will that has predestined some people to heaven and others to hell. In practice this theology offered very little comfort for believers, offering them no reassurance that they will be saved. This left people in a constant quest for forms of reassurance. Double predestination became a relatively common pastoral idea by the mid-1500s.<sup>23</sup> Distinguishing double predestination from broad predestination helps create a detailed portrait of early modern English theology. It is not enough to say that Perkins’ indicates a rise of predestinarian thought in England; one must note that his theology relies particularly on the problems posed by double predestination. Double

---

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “History, Memory, and the English Reformation,” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 4 (2012): 909.

<sup>22</sup>Dewey D. Wallace, “The Doctrine of Predestination in the Early English Reformation,” *Church History* 43, no. 2 (1974): 201,

<sup>23</sup> Samuel R. Kessler, “Guyon’s Faint and the Elizabethan Soteriological Debate: Double Predestination in ‘The Faerie Queene’, Book 2, Canto 8,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 43, no. 1 (2012): 24.

predestination heightens the uncertainty of a predestined world. God is not only in control; he determines who goes to Heaven and who goes to hell with no reassurances for believers. Taking away the element of personal choice in salvation makes eternity a difficult reality to deal with. God's omnipotence might be what drives predestination, but it did not necessarily mean God's power was all that comforting to believers.

Belief in predestination was a common idea associated with Puritanism, but many authors have argued that predestination was not tightly bound to Puritanism as it developed in the Elizabethan period. Many historians have convincingly argued that predestination was not an idea unique to Puritanism at all. They agree that there was a "Calvinist consensus" within the Elizabethan and Jacobean church, and that between 1560 and 1625 the doctrine of predestination was accepted without question by virtually all of the most influential clergymen."<sup>24</sup> The different types of predestination are not an exclusively Puritan belief at this point. That does not mean that this not central to Perkins' theology. Perkins' predestinarian theology just proves his role as a representative of the time. It also may help to explain why predestination became such a defining concept specifically for Puritans later: many of its major early figures were advocating the concept.

Yet Perkins' emphasis on predestination may have multiple sources. Calvinist theology was widely debated at Cambridge and Oxford at the time. In particular, Perkins follows the complex arguments proposed in Cambridge, most likely since he lived and worked there. Though many of the thinkers debated on the nature of predestination, predestination was an officially supported theological position by the leadership of

---

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Durston and Eales Jacqueline, eds., *The Culture of English Puritanism: 1560 - 1700* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2002), 7.

Cambridge and other teachers at the school like Perkins.<sup>25</sup> Understanding the prevalence and controversy of predestination as a theological term at Cambridge helps to highlight Perkins' the context in which Perkins' is creating. Despite the fact that it is difficult to place his works in a chronology since most of them were published posthumously, one must understand that Perkins saw himself in communication with his larger intellectual community at Cambridge.

To associate double predestination with Perkins is not strange. One of the things that Perkins is noted for by most historians is his practical approach to double predestination by asking congregants to look for God's providence in their lives.<sup>26</sup> Perkins understood the extreme anxiety that came from living in a predestined world, where there was no sure way to guarantee salvation. He wanted to give his flock some relief from anxiety. His solution was providence. Providence differs from standard predestination because it refers to the specific concern taken by shape the events. Where predestination is the more general understanding that God has a plan ultimate control; providence is the idea that every specific event can be traced to God. In particular theologians like Perkins believed that God shaped the events of their lives for better or worse depending on whether they were favored. In the instance of witchcraft belief, God allows witches as a way to test the elect and punish the rejected. As such, witchcraft and the Devil's work more generally becomes a limited providence.

Providence is at the center of Perkins' witchcraft discourse. Alexandra Walsham argues that providence is the way Puritans separated themselves: "oscillating between anxiety and arrogance, the godly incessantly scrutinized events for signs of divine favour,

---

<sup>25</sup> Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, 37–39.

<sup>26</sup> Kessler, "Guyon's Faint and the Elizabethan Soteriological Debate," 24.

keys to unraveling the mystery of predestination.”<sup>27</sup> Providence thus amplified daily events, giving them cosmic import. Though Perkins’ work emphasizes the anxiety created by double predestination, many Puritans found strict predestination a source of inspiration. When positive events happened to Puritans, this helped reinforce how special they were. In particular, events perceived as witchcraft would work well as a means for Puritans to distinguish themselves from the rest. Those who were tempted by witchcraft or experienced their ills were not following the pure way. Perkins will repeatedly use this understanding to distance the elect from a fallen society. It is not that all Puritans are immune to witchcraft, but that those behaving with godly approval might be less impacted by witchcraft.

Perkins treatment of witchcraft thus both builds on his ideas about the Devil and predestination in England and his understanding of human susceptibility to temptation. Witchcraft illustrates how Perkins believes sins function in society. Establishing this outlook of providence and predestination help to establish how Puritans differentiated themselves from the lesser versions of Christianity. Puritans were the one that God elected and showed favor. This differentiation helped Puritans to understand their superiority and understand that they had to set the standard for purity in a fallen society.

---

<sup>27</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “The Godly and Popular Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul Chang-Ha Lim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

## CHAPTER 3

### WITCHCRAFT AND SIN

So far, this thesis has discussed some of the more general elements of witchcraft, placing them within the larger foundation of Perkins' understanding of witchcraft and what that means for the larger society of predestination and providence. It has also touched on the ineffectiveness of witchcraft as an illusion. However, the next step to understanding Perkins' beliefs is to go into greater specifics of what exactly he thinks witchcraft looks like, this will give a better conception of how Perkins understands sin. Through witchcraft, Perkins' begins to tell more about how he expects humans to behave, especially how they relate to God. This understanding of witchcraft as sin will inform the entirety of his magical beliefs.

Perkins defines art as something held in esteem by a society that has a fixed set of laws and precepts that are required for the art form. The author uses this definition to justify talking about witchcraft as an art. He reasons that witchcraft has many rules that conduct how magic is performed. He then explains how magic's precepts were created. They were: "devised first by Satan, and by him reuealed to wicked and vngodly persons of auncient times, as occasion serued: who receiuing them from him, became afterward... his instruments to report and conuey them to others from hand to hand."<sup>28</sup> Understanding this use of terminology is essential to understanding what Perkins thinks witchcraft is.

---

<sup>28</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 4–5.

Instead of thinking of witchcraft as something like painting or sculpting, Perkins means something more like craft, similar to carpentry or artisanship. Perkins seems to see magic as something systematic that has to be passed down by practitioners. The roots of magic are not as obvious as the Devil simply coming and teaching individuals about magic. They are subtler than that and can be passed as a seemingly respectable practice similar to those passed down from masters to apprentices in artisanal practices. This gives magic a reputable air and makes it more tempting.

Perkins continues to explain what exactly he sees as the sin of witchcraft. He reasons that “that rebellion and disobedience is as the sinne of Witchcraft, that is, a most horrible and undefined span of illegible text, like vnto that wicked, capitall, and... sinne.”<sup>29</sup> His first reference to what exactly makes witchcraft a sin seems pretty standard, arguing that it is disobedience and rebellion that fuel witchcraft. Defining witchcraft as a form of disobedience does not actually tell the reader very much. By starting with the simplest definition of sin to explain witchcraft, Perkins seems to argue that witchcraft is no different than any other sin. Yet, if witchcraft is just like any other sin, why devote an entire lengthy discourse to explaining it? Perkins goes on to explain why witchcraft is far more dangerous than any other defiance of the often mysterious will of God. Witchcraft is the sin that more directly attempts to usurp the authority of God by making a contract with the Devil

Perkins’ preoccupation with the definition and thorough understanding sin is not unique. The relationship between Puritans and sin helps inform why Perkins was such a prolific moral writer and why he spent so much time explaining such a dangerous sin.

---

<sup>29</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 8.

Durston and Eales express the strict relationship between Puritanism and sin, even in the formative days of Elizabeth I's reign. They note the Puritan preoccupation with sin, ferreting out the ungodly and pruning Christian practices they see as corrupt. They note several Puritans were accused by parishioners of refusing to use sections of "the Prayer Book, excluding the ungodly from communion, or victimizing individual parishioners in their sermons."<sup>30</sup> These accusations show that Puritans, especially Puritan clergy distanced themselves through their strict approach to sin. Puritans, in part by definition, wished to purify the Anglican Church. This purification bore itself out in several ways. First, these Puritans wanted to alter elements of the Anglican Church with which they disagreed, possibly by excluding certain practices in the Book of Common Prayer. It also might express itself through the ways Puritan clergy related to their parishioners. This thesis has already discussed the emergence of predestination as an fundamental Puritan theology. Inherent in predestination is an emphasis on the godly versus the ungodly. Using the principles of predestination and providence might give Puritans extreme anxiety, but it would also give them the ability to actively judge their community. For many Puritan leaders, like Perkins, it might seem obvious who in their flock was among the elect. All they had to do was look at their actions and the events that happened to them. Then they could exclude those individuals or at least openly chastise them. This conclusion might not have been forgone, since John Calvin, the famous continental predestination-centered theologian, rejected the idea that calamity could be used to separate sinners from the elect.<sup>31</sup> However, despite the controversy of this stance, many

---

<sup>30</sup> Durston and Jacqueline, *The Culture of English Puritanism*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Susan E. Schreiner, "Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Church History* 58, no. 3 (1989): 322, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3168467>.

theologians like Perkins relied on this practice to bolster their beliefs. The emphasis on ferreting out sin and purifying the church is exemplified in Perkins' discourse and other works and may explain why he thinks an in-depth understanding is necessary. It is only by truly understanding a witch that you can guard against the temptation to associate with witches.

Perkins explains even more about his understanding of sin as he expounds on witchcraft's sinfulness. His explanation of what he believes motivates witches is central to comprehending his *Discourse*. He writes that part of the sin of witchcraft is when a person's curiosity leads them to be dissatisfied with their personal knowledge and abilities: "he is moved to attempt the cursed art of Magicke and witchcraft, as a way to get further knowledge in matters secret and not reueiled, that by working of wonders, he may purchase fame in the world."<sup>32</sup> Part of what witches are doing in their sin is pursuing that which is beyond them. In particular, they are concerned with God but unsatisfied with the things they could learn about God and the world through conventional means. It also represents a turn towards worldly means, rather than God. They accept the lure of magic, of something contingent on the natural world, as means to gain the secret knowledge of God, the supernatural. This quest for the knowledge of God will be a main point of discourse that Perkins argues with, which this paper will address in far greater detail in the section on divination and prophesy. Perkins reasons that the mistake of witches is trying to be like God.

He describes more bluntly what he believes witchcraft is, by describing how the works of magic are conducted. He reasons, "The power of effecting such strange works,

---

<sup>32</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 11.

is not in the art, neither doth it flow from the skill of the sorcerer, man-or-woman, but is deriued wholly from Satan.”<sup>33</sup> Perkins to this point has called magic an art, passed down from master to apprentice. However, he believes that magic is different from conventional art, not just because of its sinfulness, but because of where the effectiveness of magic comes from. Where the effectiveness of stonemasons comes from their own internal skills and God-given power, the power of witchcraft solely comes from partnership with the Devil. It is not that the Devil grants any power to witches, but that witches are mediums used by the Devil to do works. They embrace a false source of power and are hoodwinked into thinking they have actual powers. This partnership is especially cheapened when considering that Perkins believes magic is only an illusion with no real works behind it. These are only tricks used to bamboozle witches and their victims.

In order to talk about the sin of witchcraft in greater detail, he starts by explaining the original sin: “for the eating of the forbidden fruit, was no small or single offence, but as some have taught, contained in it the breach of every commandement of the Morall lawe... Satan laboured to bring them to the sinne of discontentment.”<sup>34</sup> The ultimate sin that spawned all other sins, according to Perkins, was not just eating a forbidden fruit, but that Adam and Eve believed that the fruit would give them the powers and comprehension of God. Therefore, all sins are different dimensions of this discontent. This discontent can be boiled down to attempts to steal the authority of God. Providence and predestination ultimately rely on the ultimate and unquestioned dominion to God over creation. Any attempt by humans to break the laws of God or to gain powers that

---

<sup>33</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 9.

God did not give them thus becomes trying to steal God's dominion. Since witchcraft is the attempt to gain power through the Devil, it is the most direct sin. Whereas many sins flout certain divine laws, witchcraft is one of the few sins that involves a somewhat open turn from Christ to the Devil.

The way that the author describes magic provides a picture of how Perkins' believes magic works and cultural criticism. He indicates a belief that many powerful occupations and intellectual pursuits are strangely similar to what makes witchcraft sinful. The Elizabethan period was not just a period of fear of evil magic. It was also a period where specific elements of occultism were celebrated. The Renaissance fostered a growing intellectual class of people interested in the marriage of science, magic, and religion. These individuals were often accepted by the nobility and communities throughout Europe. Glynn Parry discusses the aims of this significant group of accepted occult practitioners as a quest to use science and magic to uncover the secrets of magic and knowledge given by Jesus. John Dee is an excellent example of this, though Parry does admit that he and the students like him faced a lot of disapproval from Cambridge's rising Protestant population.<sup>35</sup> Dee lived from 1527 to 1609, making him a rough contemporary of Perkins. He was a prominent mathematician, scientist, and magician. He was a prominent magician in the court of Queen Elizabeth and even determined the date of her coronation through astrology.<sup>36</sup> Some historians explain Dee's goals: "Dee's career as natural philosopher can, perhaps, best be described as a continuous striving toward a complete restoration of the wisdom of the ancients, a restoration which ultimately would

---

<sup>35</sup> G. J. R. Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>36</sup> Robert W. Barone, *A Reputation History of John Dee, 1527-1609: The Life of an Elizabethan Intellectual* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 37-41.

lead him to the very origin of Truth — the Word.”<sup>37</sup> These aims are eerily similar to the goals that Perkins talks about in his criticism of witchcraft. He reasons that witches gain their knowledge through ancient sources of magic and that witches do magic in order to become more like God. Specifically, they are trying to gain hidden knowledge of God and the world. That is exactly what this group of scholarly magicians is trying to do. Therefore, Perkins is using traditional conceptions of witchcraft, but applying demonic magic broadly to all groups who practice magic. This is an indictment of a society that glorifies learned magic.

In conclusion, Perkins defines sin in relation to the way people are relating to God. People become impatient and centered towards the world. Sins are most often a form of rebellion attempting to break the laws and authority of God. To Perkins, God is the dominant force in the world. He has ultimate power over the world, and any attempt by humans to gain power for themselves is a sin, perpetrated by the Devil. This understanding can make his definition of magic and sin incredibly broad. Perkins’ understanding of sin is a foundational element of his magical theology. The next step in constructing Perkins’ *Discourse* is to look at his more specific conceptions of witchcraft practices, like charms and divination.

---

<sup>37</sup> Håkan Håkansson, *Seeing the Word: John Dee and Renaissance Occultism* (Lunds Universitet, 2001), 72.

## CHAPTER 4

### DIVINATION AND PROPHECY

Perkins' understandings of divination and the other practices of witchcraft continue his evisceration of the evils of his society and demonstrates further elements of the Puritan quest for purification. The first section of Perkins' *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* deals with the theory behind witchcraft, setting up the theological system. The next few chapters examine practical magic, what witchcraft actually looks like to him. Although he discusses charms and other forms of magical practice, by far the most time and effort is put into his study of divination, the practice of fortunetelling. In fact, he presents the practice of magic as being split into two separate categories: working and divining.<sup>38</sup> He defines divination as using witchcraft to try to see the future; prophecy is looking towards God and the Bible to learn what God allows. Divination is clearly an act of magic and prophecies are the revelations of God. In some ways, divination is borderline miraculous, but it is not one of the flashy biblical miracles from the age of miracles that witchcraft wants to emulate. Instead, it is an act of faith that allows the holy spirit to speak to a select few. It is not loud or outwardly impressive and may even seem ordinary next to the intricacies of divination.

---

<sup>38</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 55.

Perkins starts by explaining the sources of divination. He clearly notes that true divination is a skill held only by God who sets and foresees the future. He continues to explain that Satan and the forecasting done by the Devil through witches “are only probable and coniecturall: and when he foretelleth anything certainly, it is by some revelation from God, as the death of Saul; or by the Scripture, as Alexander’s victory: or by some special charge committed unto him.”<sup>39</sup> He maintains key themes of this work and his belief system here, specifically the limitation of the Devil’s power and the ultimate illusionary nature of witchcraft. The theme of witchcraft’s illusionary reality is not simply confined to the more traditional workings of magic, such as potions or charms. There is no such thing as true divination, as divination is exclusively witchcraft. It is all the Devil making suppositions based on his knowledge of God and the world. Only prophecy from God is true.

Perkins’ *Discourse* gives several examples of true prophecies and visions delivered within the Bible. One example is the many Old Testament prophecies foretelling the state of the church through time.<sup>40</sup> Fitting with his theological outlook, he begins by establishing God’s supremacy. He then explains how the Devil mimics true prophecy. He speaks of Satan’s intelligence and guile. It is not just about his ability to build convincing lies, but his ability to understand the world and even Heaven well enough to craft a convincing lie or guess about what the future holds. He leverages his ability to look at the probability of things, his knowledge of the world, and his knowledge of God in order to create fortunes. This understanding of divination means that there can be no truth from divination. Like before, the importance of divination is not its

---

<sup>39</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 65.

<sup>40</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 57.

effectiveness, but the witches' aims and effects on others. Perkins sees all magic as an attempt by humans to gain power over their lives and realities. Divination is no exception. Perkins believes that all the power and the plans in the universe ultimately belong to God. Divination is simply witches trying to take these plans away from God, or at least the knowledge of them. Though Perkins does not think that there is a godly form of divination, he hints to a godly path to fortunetelling. He talks about the many valid prophecies visible in the Bible. The distinction here lies in the difference between divination and prophecy. Divination is looking to the Devil or the outside for foreknowledge; prophecy looks only at God.

One of the most ready and obvious points of comparison between Perkins' larger works and his discourse on witchcraft is his text *The Arte of Prophecyng*. The prophecy that he is advising here looks nothing like a magical act. In fact, it looks much like the daily thought processes of your legitimate Protestant clergyman. The dissimilarity between divination and the prophesying illustrated in this text are integral to understanding Perkins' theological mindset. Prophesying is a godly means of gaining information, while divination is a form of magic. Although Perkins' advice on how to bring forth prophecy is complex and difficult to sum up in the small amount of space allowed in this thesis, but in the end it becomes clear that prophecy can at least potentially be thought of as the public acts of any minister or clergy person with the intention of understanding or communicating the will of God.

For Perkins, prophesying can be broken down into two groups: preaching and praying. Preaching is the transmission of God's word to a congregation of believers, and

praying is more about the conceiving of public conversation with God.<sup>41</sup> These pastoral acts are fundamental Christian experience. The two public acts of faith are instrumental to the godly instruction of a congregation. It would make sense that Perkins would want an encourage sermons and prayers from the Holy Spirit, so that he might lead a more godly congregation. Perkins explains more closely how this experience works: “The Elect having the Spirit of God doe first discern the voice of Christ speaking in the scriptures. Moreover, that voice, which they do discern, they doe approve: and that which they do approve, they do believe.”<sup>42</sup> By using the term "elect" Perkins demonstrates that, though his parameters seem expansive, there are actually very few who can achieve them. Though belief in God is free and encouraged for all, the Calvinist understanding of predestination means that the elect are the virtuous few destined for heaven. Perkins is clear that the only people who will ever truly succeed at prophesying are the elect. This position helps to explain why Perkins and other Puritans often used providence to try and find the truly elect.

The quote also reveals the common requirements that are needed for prophecy to occur. One must use discernment provided by the Holy Spirit through scripture. Not just any prayer or sermon can be prophecy. The Christian facilitator must provide an open and inquiring mind that is truly seeking after the truth and God must reveal the truths he will allow humans. The best sources for the divine inspiration for prophecy are the words of scripture, which were already sent to Christians via God’s prophecy. Now that Perkins

---

<sup>41</sup> William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng, Or, A Treatise Concerning the Sacred and Onely True Manner and Methode of Preaching First Written in Latine by Master William Perkins ; and Now Faithfully Translated into English (for That It Containeth Many Worthie Things Fit for the Knowledge of Men of All Degrees) by Thomas Tuke.*, Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1823:09 (London : By Felix Kyngston for E.E. and are to be sold in Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Swan, 1607), 2–4.

<sup>42</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 18.

has fully demonstrated his understanding of prophecy, it is clear that he views prophecy is a more passive process than divination. Divination is the witches attempting to find meaning for themselves on the questions they feel they should know the answers to, with the aid of Satan. Prophecy is godly humans seeking answers from God and receiving only the truths that God wants to reveal.

The only true foundations for prophecy is scripture. Perkins spends the majority of his work on prophecy talking about the importance of scripture. He explains that scripture is really the grounding for all Christian life. Though the church and the ministers are important to living a perfect Christian life, the keys are the Holy Ghost and scripture. The church should be ultimately guided by scripture and individuals should use the scripture as inspiration to prophecy while preaching or praying publicly.<sup>43</sup> This intrinsic tie between prophesying and scripture shows that Perkins saw the Bible as the center of a well-balanced Christian life. It is the source of all divine knowledge and inspiration. By using the Bible as the center of prophetic and religious authority, keeping the eyes on God is key here. It is the best way to be godly and avoid witchcraft.

Prophesying, as Perkins presents it, demonstrates an the importance of the centrality of scripture to early Puritanism. The idea that scripture is tantamount is not unique to Puritanism. One would be pressed to find any Christian denomination that did not agree the Bible was their central text. All Protestants argue that part of what sets Protestants apart from Catholics is their reliance on the Bible over church tradition. However, the differentiation between Protestant sects relies on this same claimed faithfulness to Biblical text over church custom. The Anglican Church, as it emerged

---

<sup>43</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 18–20.

during Elizabeth I's reign, was founded on what many people call a middle way between Catholicism and Protestantism. This Elizabethan Settlement allowed for relative peace between the two camps in English society.<sup>44</sup> However, the Puritans did not appreciate this compromise, believing that the Anglican Church did not go far enough and relied too much on tradition.<sup>45</sup>

The extent to which Puritans rely on scripture as the source of their inspiration is one of the elements that Peter Marshall believes bound Puritans together in their early years: "the Biblicism of Puritans was peculiarly intense, and explains their dislike of ceremonies in the book of prayers... more fundamentalist Biblicism shone through in attitudes to the keeping of the Ten Commandments."<sup>46</sup> The understanding of Biblicism as one of the most essential elements of Puritanism helps to frame the arguments that Perkins is making about prophecy. He encourages the elect to use the Bible as the sole source of their inspiration as a way of keeping purity at the center of church life and ascribes a great deal of power to the elect and Scripture, more power than to the Devil and divination.

Perkins touches on this element of his theology in his *Discourse* on witches as well. He spends a large amount of his time talking about the different ways that witches and other magicians use divination in service of the devil. He spends almost 30 pages looking at different methods of divination, with a focus on reading from animal and astrology. His discussion of entrails reading is not necessarily as detailed. It fits well within the narratives of divination that he has set up so far. It is the use of the natural

---

<sup>44</sup> Peter Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480-1642* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 177–179.

<sup>45</sup> Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480-1642*, 137.

world to try to understand the future.<sup>47</sup> Though Perkins' begins his discussion with the first type, his discussion of astrology seems more urgent. He makes it clear that any person who consults an astrologer is going against God. He believes God "allotted the same punishment to the Astrologer, which he hath to the Soothsayer & Magician, and account them all one; it is manifest, that Divining by the stars ought to be held as a superstitious kind of Divination."<sup>48</sup> Perkins groups astrologers together with several other practitioners of magical arts that are not necessarily associated with witches or demon consultation. Astrologers and magicians were sometimes given positions of trust and influence in the society. Perkins' mistrust of witches might lead one to believe witches are perceived as too devious for such societal advancement. However, he would argue that these individuals present themselves as reputable and powerful figures that have hoodwinked larger society. That is part of what makes them so dangerous.

The reference to reading the entrails of animals is particularly telling when one looks at the few sources Perkins ever cites. One of the few sources is Homer.<sup>49</sup> This helps to show that one of the few sources he openly admits for witchcraft is not even about witchcraft. One of the major sources for his understanding of witches is actually paganism, or polytheistic beliefs. He seems to conflate witchcraft and paganism. This conflation is part of standard trended that tended to equate the beliefs of polytheistic cultures of the past with magic. It also became particularly difficult for later thinkers to understand Christian practices that married with those they considered pagan.<sup>50</sup> Though this confusion of the religious practices in sources like Homer for magic is somewhat

---

<sup>47</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 65–69.

<sup>48</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 297.

<sup>50</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 153.

typical for the time, it is also strange due to Perkins clear knowledge and acceptance of ancient sources like Plato.

The astrologers' goal of knowing God's secrets and becoming more like God was not secret. Perkins, in particular, would argue that astrology is an evil attempt to learn the secrets of God through false analysis of nature. This outright rejection demonstrates part of Stuart Clark's argument about what Perkins and the Puritans like him represent. Clark asserted the minds of early modern Europeans saw no division between the worlds of magic and religion. Dee and other magicians understood their pursuits as a godly activity, as it is a communion with divinity and pursuit of its power.<sup>51</sup> In his section on astrology, Perkins is directly engaging with this cultural acceptance of magicians. Perkins takes a black and white view of all magic in this document.

Although the main subject of this work is witches, Perkins spends this time on these other practitioners, typically separated from the demonic witches, because he sees no real distinction between all of these groups. All magic, including that done by accepted magicians, is ultimately practicing divination, the Devil's art. He is warning a culture he sees as tolerant and somewhat dominated by evil. Perkins' position here is an excellent example of the shift towards a rejection that Clark charts in the early modern period. He also emphasizes the superstitious nature of astrology in particular. He believes that all of the mathematics and learning that goes into these magical practices are unreliable and pointless.<sup>52</sup> In some ways astrology is more dangerous than some of the other disciplines because of its falsehood and power over Christian society.

---

<sup>51</sup> Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England*, 10–11.

<sup>52</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 89–90.

Despite the fact that Perkins' overall position on magic is unexceptional in his own mind, there are several examples of areas that might be mistaken for divination but are actually safe for godly people to use: "There be some kinds of predictions that are and may be lawfully used, because they are natural, of which sort are those that are made by Physicians, Mariners, and husbandmen, touching the particular alterations and dispositions of the weather."<sup>53</sup> The distinction he makes shows Perkins' concern for his Christian readership. These practical employments have historically relied on almanacs and other types of diviners and magicians to help them predict weather and other agricultural changes in the future.<sup>54</sup> Though he does not agree with divination in these fields, he cannot totally discount prediction in these fields. While he is quick to dismiss anything connected to witchcraft, he keeps in mind that his readers must come away with practical applications for his lofty theological discourse. In the case of divination, he says that all forms of foretelling that cannot be clearly connected to the scripture or God's influence are from the devil, but there are many professions that undertake fortune telling that are truly indispensable and lawful.

A question one might ask is: why do the professions listed here get permission to attempt fortune telling if astrologers and magicians are not given the same latitude? The distinction seems to be their roots in natural law. As already stated, Perkins sees astrology as a superstitious science based on made up ideas like constellations and the zodiac.<sup>55</sup> The professions mentioned above, such as farmers, doctors, and sailors are figures with established practical jobs that use elements of science, math, and experience. He

---

<sup>53</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas Popper, "Abraham, Planter of Mathematics': Histories of Mathematics and Astrology in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 1 (2006): 105.

<sup>55</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 90-91.

recognizes a structure and base in the natural world that he just does not see in divination, which applies human and often pagan ideas. More than a connection to science or reason, there is the simple necessity of prediction in each of these fields. All of these jobs are integral to a functioning society and need freedom to use their specialized skills to make determinations without fear of divine retribution. Though prediction does not seem all that close to divination, Perkins is trying to prevent any sort of confusion by his reader that prediction might possibly be confused for divination. This is an example of the practical nature of Perkins' theology. Just like he is credited for looking at Calvinist predestination with an eye towards making it easier for parishioners to cope, he is also keeping this in mind as he makes his prohibitions against magic.

The relationship between divination and prophecy in Perkins' mind helps to unlock a clear structure that will help interpret the rest of his work. Prophecy and, to a lesser extent, prediction, offer the mirror opposite to divination. Prophecy is approaching God and his word without interposing one's own ideas or demanding specific answers. For the elect prophecy provides a way out for those who might be tempted by divination. Magic always answers the desire that tempt humans to defy God. Divination answers a very specific craving for sinners, the desire to know what is beyond them. Magic provides an easy answer through divination that seems to give the person good information on the future. Though prophecy is much more difficult and sometimes less straightforward, it still answers this same basic desire for knowledge. For every element of witchcraft, there will always be a Christian solution.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHARMS AND ANTI-CATHOLICISM

Perkins focuses the majority of this document on the problems he sees with witchcraft, highlighting the similarities between witchcraft and Catholic practices. Another key piece of Perkins' discourse is its anti-Catholic message. His arguments against Catholicism are particularly striking when placed next to his discussions on charms. Though Catholic practices are often proposed as a solution to evil, he sees parallels between Catholicism and the practices of witchcraft that cannot be ignored.

His anti-Catholic rhetoric cannot be separated from his larger magical understandings, especially charms. Charms cannot easily be defined. However, for the purpose of this thesis, they are the means by which magic is performed, whether through spoken word, written text, or other physical representations. These means by which people do magic start to look more and more like Catholicism as Perkins describes them. Therefore, though Catholicism is often talked of as the solution to magic, Perkins believes they are far too similar to be allowed.

Many historians agree that early modern Protestants tended to lump in all Catholic practices as irrational superstition. However, historians like Helen Parish and William Naphy dislike the term superstition when talking about Catholic practices in modern terms, as they argue that it was used at the time to discredit any beliefs that the early modern Protestant did not agree with. To the Catholics even the strangest priestly

practices were practical because they are their way of realistically approaching their world.<sup>56</sup> This reality makes it difficult to approach anything Perkins has to say about Catholicism without thinking about the practical concession he makes in terms of divination and the use of prediction. Why, if many people would consider Catholic practices as just as practical as forecasting weather, does Perkins draw a line? The answer seems to be the similarity between the aims that Perkins see in magic and Catholicism. Both want to use God's power for themselves. Therefore, the practicality of Catholicism is somewhat irrelevant.

His first issue arises with the simple name of Jesus. He argues that Catholics use the name of Jesus to expel demonic forces. He concedes that the name of Jesus is powerful, especially in calling on God in prayer. However, he accuses Catholics of taking this point too far and believing that there is some sort of special power that comes from the name itself. For Perkins, he argues that Catholics see the name as somehow endowing the exorcist with the authority of Christ, which is a terrible presumption.<sup>57</sup> One of the major themes present in Perkins' discourse is that magic is fueled the drive for to steal authority from God. He sees Catholicism as sinning in the same way. Using Christ's authority in exorcism is going this way. By calling on the name of Jesus as if it has the power to bestow God's might on oneself, you are tapping into that same sinful desire that magic serves. The only way for God's power to be present is for God to grant it. Simply saying the name or claiming that God is helping is actually a dangerous presumption on the part of a Christian, who can never truly know where God's favor rests. This idea

---

<sup>56</sup> Helen L. Parish and William G. Naphy, eds., *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, Studies in Early Modern European History (Manchester ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2002, n.d.), 2–3.

<sup>57</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 240.

comes from Perkins' Calvinist understanding of God's grace. The issue is not necessarily whether God will or will not grant exorcism, but that one cannot just assume they are saved because they call on God. They have to learn that they have no control and can ultimately only pray for deliverance. Though Catholicism would seem to offer the easiest answer in tough cases, like exorcism, Perkins has already established that he believes the easiest answer is only the right answer in certain circumstances. This does not totally excuse the allowance of prediction, but he is more likely to make concessions for his own congregants he would not make for Catholic outsiders.

His next step is to systematically strike down five tools that he believes Catholics use particularly: the name of Jesus, the use of saints' reliquaries, the sign of the cross, what he calls hallowed creatures, and exorcisms.<sup>58</sup> Another similar argument is featured in his perspective on hallowed creatures. The term "creature" does not necessarily mean a living thing. In this instance, he means any object created by God, such as salt, crosses, grain, bread, images, or water.<sup>59</sup> His issues with their use for exorcism are somewhat similar to his problems with the use of Jesus' name. These objects again are claimed to have some level of power in their own right to bestow God's power. His biggest problem with this aspect is actually with the idea of sanctifying objects. He reasons that all objects must have the same level of sanctification, because we can pray over them and God creates them.

For Perkins, this idea that some objects can be hallowed is without biblical foundation. He then sets up a sort of biblical strawman argument, looking at the one

---

<sup>58</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 239. Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 239.

<sup>59</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 244.

instance he thinks a Catholic person might latch on to as justification of hallowed objects. He cites Elisha's use of salt in miracle working in 2 Kings, saying that the salt is not the holy element of this narrative. Instead, it is God's permission that conducts the power through Elisha, not an object.<sup>60</sup> The extent of Perkins' attacks on Catholic practice in this section is not explicitly stated here, but he is attacking several different elements that set Catholicism apart from Puritanism. The idea of hallowed creature is an inclusive term that simultaneously attacks iconography, holy water, and even Catholic understanding of communion. His reliance on his interpretation of scripture is fundamental to his theology. The biggest issue with this solution to demonic possession is a problem that will be a recurring theme in his and many other Protestant objections to Catholicism. Perkins simply does not see the biblical support for their practices. In his mind, they are manipulating the Bible and their faith to make Christianity into something that better suits them.

One of the best examples of falsely blessed objects is transubstantiation. Perkins takes a very strict stance on the divine nature of communion, especially in terms of whether transubstantiation comes from the Bible. He explains this idea much further in some of his other works. His issue with Catholics are clearly spelled out when he says, "Papists abuse this place notoriously: for whereas the *Church* hath been so ancient, they argue therefore it is about the *Scripture*: yea, & that we could not know it to be *Scripture*, but by the ancient testimony of the *Church*." He continues arguing that the scripture is older, originating with Moses and is divinely gifted, so it must be trusted over the

---

<sup>60</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 244–46..

decisions of the church.<sup>61</sup> During his discourse on witchcraft, he subtly goes after the practices of holy water and transubstantiation. When doing this he hints that his problem with these sources is that he does not see the biblical grounding for these practices. Beyond this, transubstantiation in a Catholic sense means the utter transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. One of Perkins' central arguments against the power of witches to effect true change is that only a full-scale miracle from God can effect true change. To Perkins, Catholics could not bring on the changes necessary for transubstantiation. This is in part because the age of miracles is over.

He expands on this idea in his commentary on Hebrews 11. He argues that Catholic tradition and practice emerges from an overreliance on Church tradition and doctrine over the actual words of Scripture. In justifying his position, he draws on an argument for the primacy of scripture and its direct origination from God. This argument is incredibly pertinent for the arguments that are being championed by the Catholic support that he would be responded to. One of the biggest arguments for Catholicism in reaction to the Protestant Reformation in England was to argue for the Catholics' deep roots and ancient tradition. One of the recurring elements in all of Perkins' works dealing with Catholics is reclaiming the tradition that the Catholic Church seems to have on their side. The Catholic Church claims that they are the church from the New Testament and have an unbroken line between their tradition and the Apostles. Perkins' does not challenge them on the ancientness of their church, but reasons that the Bible's age trumps

---

<sup>61</sup> William Perkins, *A Cloud of Faithfull Witnesses, Leading to the Heauenly Canaan, Or, A Commentarie Vpon the 11 Chapter to the Hebrewes Preached in Cambridge by That Godly, and Iudicious Divine, M. William Perkins ; Long Expected and Desired, and Therefore Published at the Request of His Executours, by Will. Crashawe and Tho. Pierson, Preachers of Gods Word, Who Heard Him Preach It, and Wrote It from His Mouth.*, Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1801:16 (London : Printed by Humfrey Lownes, for Leo. Greene, 1607), 43.

that of their church. He calls on the scripture as the best way to understand the will of God and behave as a Christian. Even in his discourse on magic, he is clear that the biggest mistake a Christian can make is to try finding sources other than God for their knowledge and comfort. God is the only one who can really give the truth and authority. He believes that Catholics have turned away from scripture as their central authority and are looking at their church instead. This recalls the Biblicism that is one of the real defining factors distinguishing Elizabethan Puritans.

The repeated anti-Catholic sentiment is key to understanding Perkins' religious outlook on magic, they are not necessarily unique to this individual. In fact, this article is in no way trying to argue that Perkins is in some way the originator of the ideas that form the base of his magical theology. Perkins' anti-Catholicism represents larger cultural and theological trends of the time. A distrust of Catholicism and its tenets is an almost ubiquitous feature of Protestantism in England, and most texts on Elizabethan Puritanism and Protestantism deal with anti-Catholicism at some point. In fact, anti-Catholicism was simply a cultural marker. The focus of Elizabeth I's early regime was in removing the Catholic religious apparatus from the churches, and by 1575 had shifted to trying to root out stubborn Catholics from England.<sup>62</sup> However, the culture of anti-Catholicism goes far deeper. Some historians would claim that English society was by definition anti-Catholic. Anti-Catholicism was one of the few things Anglicans could agree on across the spectrum, to the point that the Pope was the antichrist and the Arminian position of the Catholic Church could only be cured by a Calvinist approach to Christianity.<sup>63</sup> This anti-

---

<sup>62</sup> Mark Ingram, "Puritanism and the Church Courts, 1560-1660," in *The Culture of English Puritanism: 1560 - 1700*, ed. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2002), 71.

<sup>63</sup> Durston and Eales, *The Culture of English Puritanism*, 6-7.

Catholicism is clear in Perkins' work beyond the discourse. This theological rejection of Catholicism practically overtakes this particular section of his discourse. He goes so far that it almost seems like he is trying to equate witchcraft and Catholicism.

While it would be too much to say that Catholics are witches, Perkins would seem to argue that the sins are eerily similar. Both witches and Catholics were trying to steal the authority of God. Witches wanted to use the Devil to steal the authority for themselves. Catholics wanted to take the authority away from the scriptures and put it in the church. Where charms seem to call on the powers of Satan, holy water and communion call on the power of the church. This element of Perkins' theology helps to establish that Perkins is a man of his time. An emerging Puritan identity, which pits itself against Catholicism, and the larger English culture, will shape every aspect of the way he conceives of magic. Magic and Religion are inseparable.

Catholicism is trying to give the power of God to the trappings of the church and even allowing magic as the foundation of the church. While this understanding of Catholicism is intricately tied to magic, an elucidation of Perkins' belief on charms make the link even clearer. Both Catholicism and the constructed charms rely on prescribed rituals to commit magic.

Perkins' presents a relatively vague understanding of how these enchantments and charms actually work. One of the few moments he goes into detail about how these magical practices work is when he talks about the power of written magic: "For the bare picture hath no more power of it selfe to hurt the bodie represented, then [written] words. All that is done commeth by the worke of the de|uill." He also mentions that herbs and

other amulets work in a similar way.<sup>64</sup> This description is still relatively vague, though he notes that charms tend to fall into three distinct groups: written, drawn, and otherwise constructed amulets. These descriptions are purposefully vague. Perkins argues that the specifics of charms and how they are passed is unimportant. They are simply ways of communicating with the Devil. This reason may help to explain why a lot of Perkins' section on charms is used to restate his arguments about the deep connection between the Devil and magic.

Perkins' argument that the wording of charms is ultimately unimportant seems at odds with the current scholarship on the role of written charms in English popular culture. Examination of the written charms and testimonies demonstrate several trends. Owen Davies argues that written charms were a popular form of magic requested by the customers of cunning folk. Though most of his sources on written charms were from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, these charms show the practitioner believed emphatically in the detailed construction of charms. He reasons that these charms show incredible sophistication, combining mystical language and biblical text in a way that shows the particular Christian context that these charms were created.<sup>65</sup> Davies' analysis presents a very different perspective on the cunning-folk than the one that Perkins' represents. Though Perkins represents several trends in the rising Puritanism and the existing Protestant culture, his understandings of charms does not seem comprehensive at first. However, attributing his vagueness to a lack of understanding does not seem fair, since we have little information on his source material. Instead it might be better to argue

---

<sup>64</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 149–50.

<sup>65</sup> Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (New York: Hambledon, 2003), 147.

that Perkins could be being purposefully vague as not to pass on witchcraft knowledge or might simply think the words are meaningless next to their demonic origin.

Perkins presents charms and witches as something unquestionably evil. Perkins does seem to agree with some of Davies arguments, at least to a certain extent. He would concede that to the practitioners the written charms are not random, but complex works shaped by generations of cunning-folk. Perkins also seems to agree that cunning folk were something widely utilized in English culture. Where Perkins and Davies seem to differ is on the origins of these magical tools. Perkins thinks that magic is satanic, but Davies argues that cunning-folk understood these magical practices as Christian. Dee and the popular magicians saw themselves as godly pursuits, even though Perkins' disagrees. This Christian understanding of magic does not die with rising Puritanism, as Davies notes many of these practices continuing past Perkins. Perkins', however, again seems to mark this shift towards seeing magic as evil.

Many historians note a complex magical reality in Europe during Perkins' time. Europe had a large culture of popular magic.<sup>66</sup> There were many terms for village wizards: including magi, wise men, cunning folk, charmers, and sorcerers. These wizards provided many services "from healing the sick and finding lost goods to fortune-telling and divination of all kinds."<sup>67</sup> Perkins reacts against this widely-accepted popular culture of magic. Their services include several of the practices that Perkins' links directly to witchcraft. Reformation thinkers like Perkins are part of the reasons why the lines between different types of magic blurred and why theologians stopped seeing witchcraft

---

<sup>66</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 634.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas, 178.

and benevolent magic as different.<sup>68</sup> Perkins reacts against this popular magical practice people relied on. Though there may have been differences between witchcraft practices and the magic practiced by real magicians, Perkins blends all these together as evil. The overwhelming rejection of magic will help to explain his belief in charms, and part of why he would lump in Catholic magic with charms.

One might want to argue that Perkins' apparent lack of understanding comes from a laziness or a simple lack of information, but there are others. To make too many arguments about where Perkins gets his information would be a difficult, as there is little information on his personal life and he rarely cites information outside of the Bible. However, there are several arguments to explain why he is so vague. The first of these goes back to the relationship he sees between the Devil and magic. One of his most pervasive ideas is that magic comes from the Devil. However, actually getting the Devil's help is not that difficult. He goes on to explain that these charms use complex words and a confusing language to sound more impressive. The complicated nature of charms adds to the mystique and makes it easier for witches to convince people of their power. Only one or two watch words summon the Devil.<sup>69</sup> Perkins believes witches are charlatans. Though Perkins clearly believes witches have been deceived about the nature of their power, he ultimately believes that witches manipulate the people around them through a totally fictional magical process. They are aware of their sinful behavior and are at least to some degree complicit with the Devil in actively deceiving. That is at least part of the reason he does not spend much time describing specific magical practices. The details do not matter as long as the Devil is being invoked.

---

<sup>68</sup> Thomas, 636.

<sup>69</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 129.

Another element of the charms and spells Perkins describes is what he believes they can do. He issues a list of enchantments witches use charms to get the Devil to do: “The raising of stormes and tempests; windes and weather, by sea and by land: 2. The poysoning of the ayre: 3. Blasting of corne: 4. Killing of cattell, and annoying of men, women, & children: 5. The procuring of strange passions and torments in mens bodies and other creatures, with the curing of the same: 6. Casting out of deuills.”<sup>70</sup> These feats are amazing and massive achievements, from summoning storms, to blighting, agriculture, and exorcism. These achievements are not necessarily unusual charges for your standard witches. The evil practices of witchcraft, often called *maleficium*, focus on causing disruptions to godly lives, either by natural disturbances, family discord, or disruption of reproduction.<sup>71</sup> Even the sixth power is evil, partly because it appears good. By casting out devils, they are simply removing the afflictions they created. Some of these powers seem relatively comparable to the ideas widely associated with witchcraft at the time. Witches have an extreme ability to impact the lives of Christians, disrupting social order and causing sin. It is important to note that this list seems to contradict the idea that magic is an illusion, but the powers are still ultimately the Devil’s.

Davies argues that this list of abilities is somewhat unrealistic for what the cunning-folk actually were. He reasons that the cunning-folk were people who used their magical abilities to answer much more pragmatic issues than the grand is Perkins attributes to magic. Davies argues that the majority of magic actually practiced was much more practical. Magicians were called to cure illness, conduct love spells, recover

---

<sup>70</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 128

<sup>71</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88–89.

property, and even simple domestic fixes.<sup>72</sup> This practical understanding of what magic actually looks like in England both contradicts and confirms the ideas that Perkins has talked about so far. He is contradicted by the small scale of most of the actual magic being conducted in England. Though Perkins perceived a huge magical threat in the form of witches, what is actually there seems more harmless. This was obviously a prevalent culture of magical consultation that he would want to confront, though many practitioners would argue they are not evil. Therefore, the temptation to consult was common, even if the ascribed danger is only understood by people like Perkins.

Perkins' discussion of charms is particularly fruitful for reconstructing the world around him. Perkins continues to criticize a failing English culture that is too tolerant of magic. He disagrees with the acceptance of academic magicians in positions of influence as astrology, which has a say over how people live their lives. He also objects to a culture that allows cunning-folk to have a respected position and to craft charms for healing and protection. One of the most salient comparisons between his arguments against Catholicism and charms is how similar they are. They answer a lot of the same sins, trying to transfer power to objects and actions rather than leaving them with God. Perkins proves that Puritanical impulse to improvement and purification to an extreme, making Catholics more than just wrong. They are witches.

---

<sup>72</sup> Davies, *Cunning-Folk*, 93.

## CHAPTER 6

### PERKINS AND THE WITCH TRIALS

The theological elements of the discourse demonstrated Perkins and the cultural shifts he represents. However, he has yet to really address how people were meant to behave practically with all this information on witches. He finishes his document by giving some practical advice about how one should go about conducting witch trials. Though the original publication of this document had little connection to the actual witch trials, this thesis argues that the *Discourse* is a barometer of Elizabethan religious life and magical belief, both of which are influenced by and foster witch trials. This is true about his advice for how to hunt witches. Perkins' discussion of the witch trials raises several reforms he believes are necessary. Evaluating what these complaints highlight Perkins zeal for reform in the witch trials, but he also shows that many theologians had false perception on the trial.

The first of his proscriptions is a relatively obvious point about who should conduct trials. He explains, "Witch is a matter judicial, as is also the discoverie of a thief and a murderer, and belongeth not to euerie man, but is to be done Iudicially by the Magistrate according to the forme and order of Law."<sup>73</sup> To this point Perkins' discourse focused on theological argumentation and Christian behavior. He provided a great deal of social commentary and alluded to perceived societal disruption of witchcraft. However,

---

<sup>73</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 199–200.

this is the first time that he seems to directly address something less connected to religion. He argues that the persecution of witches is the job of the courts, rather than just the church. The church courts and the secular courts need to tackle these issues, rather than letting it be a mob activity. This understanding illuminated the lack of separation between church and state in Perkins' eyes. Though he is often credited as a founding theologian in early Puritanism, he still believes that the ultimate authority is the church and the government together. He may think that the Anglican Church has not gone far enough towards purification, but he does not question their right to control.

The importance of magistrates in the narrative of these trials cannot be understated. Accusations were brought in front of magistrates and then it was up to these magistrates to collect the accusations, question the individuals and try to learn the truth.<sup>74</sup> Understanding the centrality of the magistrates and the church to the existing trials is important. Though Perkins' book is not useful for showing the reality of witch trials. It shows what he and other authors of his time would have thought of witchcraft as a legal process. Witchcraft was a form of social disruption, just like theft and murder. Therefore, a person has to be careful not to disrupt the social order while trying to right it. Though Perkins has many problems with society, he is trying to fix those problems within the system he perceives.

The importance of these arguments is not that he is confronting the reality of the witch trials. Perkins seems to believe that the witch trials are relatively lawless and unregulated. In reality, there were several protections in place that work to fight the coercion of the accused in witch trials, with a particular focus on preventing extreme

---

<sup>74</sup> Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999), 13–14.

torture methods.<sup>75</sup> The laws on witch trials are not sloppy and there are many judicially trained men who tried to make witch trials at least somewhat fair. Perkins is in some ways confronting a fictitious understanding of the witch trials, which is distrustful the institution and wary of false convictions. Overall, it seems like these trials were incredibly well-regulated affairs that with a lot of oversight by central common-law courts. This actually kept convictions relatively low.<sup>76</sup> This misinformation does not invalidate his recommendations for the trials, but makes them an opportunity to understand why he perceives them as he does.

Perkins explains what he believes prompts an investigation. His list includes frequent defamation of character, accusation by a confirmed witch, a curse resulted in misfortune, mischief following quarrels, relation to known witches, and the Devil's mark. He stipulates what the judge needs in cases of mass defamation, since these might be cases of communal bias.<sup>77</sup> These signs of witchcraft are similar to many of the markers actually used in witchcraft trials, where the majority of accusations centered around social ills and damage against other people. Contact with the Devil was rarely brought up until later in the seventeenth century.<sup>78</sup> Many of Perkins' proofs of witchcraft stem from social dislike or from *maleficium* associated with a curse or quarrel. Despite acknowledging the social aspect of these trials, Perkins' caution shows that he acknowledges the slippery slope these eyewitness testimonies can be. It would be easy

---

<sup>75</sup> Brian P. Levack, "Possession, Witchcraft, and the Law in Jacobean England," in *Witchcraft in the British Isles and New England: New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 30.

<sup>76</sup> Levack, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 201–2.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 443–44.

for an individual disliked in the community for being unpleasant to be swept up in a witch trial.

The next important point for Perkins is how the courts obtain evidence of witchcraft. He is skeptical of torture and other methods that could harm the innocent, but perhaps his most striking admonishment is against the use of superstitious methods to prove witchcraft.<sup>79</sup> Despite his extreme fear of witchcraft in society, he is tempered by the threat of harming innocent people in the process of these trials. One of the most noticeable objections is his disapproval of throwing suspected witches into the water to see if they float witches to explain: “the casting of a Witch into the water... shee hath renounced her Bap|tisme, and hereupon there growes an Antipathie betweene her, and water. Ans. This allegation serues to no pur|pose: for all water is not the water of Baptisme.”<sup>80</sup> Rejecting extreme tactics for uncovering witchcraft indicates a trend in the way Perkins wants his perceived legal system to change. He desires a stricter, more humane standard of evidence gathering when it comes to witches. Many historians of the larger water trials agree that these water trials were a possible way of proving innocence, lasting until the eighteenth and nineteenth century in parts of Europe.<sup>81</sup> Perkins’ reference to these practices demonstrated his conversation with some of the larger trends of witch trials in Europe. Though the focus of this paper is to talk specifically with the English witch trials and larger English culture, one must acknowledge that these events did not occur in an English vacuum to really more fully understand these trials.

---

<sup>79</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 203–5.

<sup>80</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 205–8

<sup>81</sup> Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies, eds., *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 3–4.

His next major point is discussing the evidence needed to convict someone of witchcraft. He believes that there are only two real ways to get a conviction. The first option is if the person admits without coercion that they are a witch. If a person admits of their own free will, then it is believable. The second means of conviction is if two reliable witnesses saw the accused “hath inuocated and call|led vpon the deuill, or desired his help... that the party hath entertained a familiar spirit, and had conference with it..., if they both can auouch vpon their own proper knowledge...have put in practise any ...Witch|craft.”<sup>82</sup> Perkins’ means of conviction are a very specific list. He argues that the only true ways to prove a witch are by self-recrimination and specific witness of witchcraft. Though quarrels followed by maleficium is enough to start an investigation, there needs to be more concrete proof that correlation and dislike. He once again calls for a new standard for the witch trials. He wants there to be stricter rules for how someone can be accused and how these charges are proven. Perkins focuses his larger discourse on expounding the evils of witchcraft, but he presents a social conscience here, which fears convicting the innocent.

The last instruction Perkins’ gives on judicial proceedings is what should be done with convicted witches. Perkins is characteristically harsh, arguing that all witches must be killed. He gives only a slight caveat: “All Witches ... ought to haue space of repentance granted vnto them, where|in they may be instructed and exhor|ted, and then afterward executed. For it is possible for them to be saued by Gods mercie, though they haue denied him.”<sup>83</sup> His outlook of witches and all magicians remains unforgiving. There is no salvation on the Earth for those convicted of witchcraft. However, Perkins’

---

<sup>82</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 211–14.

<sup>83</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 253.

theological beliefs do not allow him to totally condemn them. Perkins belief in predestination and the mysteriousness of God means that there is no way for him to know who is ultimately in the elect. God's plan might include allowing some witches into heaven as long as they repent. Therefore, even Perkins must allow witches a chance to turn back to God.

While it is clear that Perkins calls for a more stringent approach to witch trials, it is hard to understand why he is doing this. What in the existing trials was so unsatisfactory? Connecting this issue back to the practical witch trials is somewhat difficult. Therefore, the question might need to be somewhat reoriented. Instead of asking what in the trials made him call for these changes, it might be better to ask what made Perkins perceive witch trials this way.

The first places to look for his sources is the footnotes. The majority of these notes are references to scripture. However, there are a few other references he makes in his legal section. One of them is Homer, which he uses to talk about Circe as an example of witchcraft.<sup>84</sup> Though these two sources do not seem that special, they do give the reader at least a little information. Perkins' understanding of witchcraft is heavily impacted by literature. Classical literature was incredibly important for both the Renaissance and Reformation, which presented a past to look for an ideological past by intellectual elites.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Perkins throws away reference to Homer shows that at least some of his inspiration comes ancient sources. Though he is clearly participating in the intellectual culture of his time, this also makes the reader wonder if he communicates with any modern sources and modern understandings of the witch trials.

---

<sup>84</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 197..

<sup>85</sup> Alexandra Walsham, "History, Memory, and the English Reformation," 901.

Perkins' call for stricter standards for trials represents a trend that would manifest towards the ends of the Elizabethan period. Malcolm Gaskill argues that witch trials began to signal more of a breakdown of judicial authority, only occurring during times of strain and lost control: "Belief in witchcraft was always a matter of theological inference and blind faith, but after 1600 its demonstration as law became an increasingly taxing exercise in persuasion and proof. Witchcraft, it was once said, 'is a crime which is created by the measures taken for its suppression'; as those measures ceased to be viable so convictions dwindled."<sup>86</sup> Gaskill tracks a change in the way the English trials are conducted. The standards of evidence and persuasion become much higher. It becomes harder to get a witchcraft conviction. Though Perkins' personally impact on these proceedings was slight, his voice represents this important shift. The lessening of convictions after this point does not represent a move from witch belief, but a move towards a stricter standard of evidence.

The last major source for his trial information that this treatise can really determine are is the one he references in a brief footnote. Nicolas Remy's as one of his sources for larger witchcraft beliefs.<sup>87</sup> Remy was a French judge, and more than likely Catholic.<sup>88</sup> Remy's work, *Demonolatry*, was first published in 1595 in Lyon and reprinted in 1598 in Cologne and Frankfurt. This document was a collection of summaries of individuals stories and court records of female witches going after babies and other tales of witchcraft.<sup>89</sup> This document helps prove that Perkins is at least somewhat in

---

<sup>86</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England," *Past & Present*, no. 198 (2008): 34–35, 37.

<sup>87</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 187.

<sup>88</sup> John L. Teall, "Witchcraft and Calvinism in Elizabethan England: Divine Power and Human Agency," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1962): 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708055>.

<sup>89</sup> Lyndal Roper, "Witchcraft and the Western Imagination," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 16 (2006): 123–31.

conversation with the larger arguments on witchcraft. Including this source seems odd, given the open distrust of Catholics. However, he might have been including this source as a way to prove he is well read in continental scholarship, even those he does not like. Though he does not necessarily reference that many collections, witches were clearly something he was very concerned with witches. He cared enough about witches to include them in several of his works and write a specific treatise on them. It would be odd for him not to pursue that academic interest. However, this is one of the few pieces of evidence in this conversation. The fact that this evidence is a European source indicates that he might have been far more conversant with European trials and stories than any the other English source. At least he might have given European sources more credence. There is a great deal of evidence that Perkins was well versed in larger European theological discourse. He was well known for responding to and being included in the continental debates on salvation and other topics.<sup>90</sup> This helps show that Perkins appreciated conversing with his larger academic community, even those he disagreed with.

The final comparison between the witch trials in practice and Perkins' commentary is the gendered aspect of both. Perkins is very clear about which gender is more prone to witchcraft: "The more women, the more witches: His first temptation in the beginning, was with Eve a woman, and since he pursueth his practise accordingly, as making most for his aduantage. For where he findeth easiest entrance, and best entertainment."<sup>91</sup> Perkins' argues that women are the weaker vessels compared to men and more susceptible to the guile of the Devil. Just as in other references he has made to

---

<sup>90</sup> Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, 69–71.

<sup>91</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 169.

defining witchcraft, he links it back to the nature of sin and the original sin. Since Eve was the first to sin, women would be the first to become witches. While not necessarily a major concept for his work, it is an existing part of his beliefs that needs acknowledgement.

75 percent of those persecuted were women, and many historians reason that women are considered in greater danger of witchcraft temptation by most witch trials.<sup>92</sup> The fact that the author falls into this same gendered understanding of witchcraft, help to illustrate again that Perkins is a product of his time. Though he does not take this argument as far as some theologians, he still uses the gender as a way to establish women as somewhat weaker than men. This is understood by many historians a way to persecute women who violated their inferior social position.<sup>93</sup> The fact that Perkins does not focus on this, means that is at least is not his goal.

Many people looking for the links between Perkins' and witch trials will see very little. He was a prominent thinker who wrote a discourse on witches that made little practical impact. However, a closer examination of his active engagement with these trials shows a man who is confronting a system with lax rules of evidence and the danger of convicting the innocent. He pushes for stricter standard of evidence that would soon be reality in these witch courts. He how this change, he is still the product of his intellectual position and context. This is another key example of how the Puritan drive for purity and reform can affect their approach to every social institution. In this case he wants to make witch trials the perfect tool for protecting the church.

---

<sup>92</sup> Alison Rowlands, ed., *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–2.

<sup>93</sup> Rowlands, 2.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Perkins illustrates certain elements of a burgeoning Puritan theology that focuses on predestination, providence, and social correction. These elements present hallmarks of the fermenting Puritan identity in Early Modern England. Many historians agree that ideas such as predestination and scriptural focus are not exclusive to Puritans, but Perkins' focus on these principles as what set godly activity apart from sin shows why they became more pronouncedly Puritan ideals over time. Perkins' cultural commentary presents a world he finds too complacent to sin, especially the sin of magic. There is no difference between high magic, popular magic, and witchcraft to Perkins, and the English people are too eager to use any magic instead of relying on God. He is also clear that, for every temptation of the Devil there is a godly alternative. For divination there is prophecy. For charms, there is prayer. The other enemies he talks about, other than magicians, are Catholics, who he believes are not much better than witches. This shows the anti-Catholic culture that shaped Protestantism in Elizabethan England. All of these different theological beliefs displayed in his *Discourse* portray a forming Puritan identity that is centered on social and theological reform. He also calls for reformation in the witchcraft courts, asking for a much more regulated approach to proving witchcraft. Though many of the ideas now associated with Puritanism, are true of larger Protestant culture in England, Perkins' reliance on many of these ideas as central to his witchcraft thesis shows how these ideas become enhanced and central even to fledgling puritanism.

It also demonstrates how the culture of Puritans approached their culture at large. They were unforgiving of those they saw as sinners, while trying to save a fallen society tolerant of transgression.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blécourt, Willem de, and Owen Davies, eds. *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*. Manchester ; New York: Manchester University Press : Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2004.
- Clark, Stuart. *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. Oxford [England] : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Collinson, Patrick. *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*. Oxford [England] : Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Davies, Owen. *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History*. London ; New York: Hambledon and London, 2003.
- Durston, Christopher, and Jacqueline Eales, eds. *The Culture of English Puritanism: 1560 - 1700*. Reprint. Themes in Focus. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2002.
- Edwards, Kathryn A. "Witchcraft in Tudor England and Scotland." In *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, edited by Kent Cartwright. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture. Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Gibson, Marion. *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Håkansson, Håkan. *Seeing the Word: John Dee and Renaissance Occultism*. Lunds Universitet, 2001.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, 2013.
- Ingram, Mark. "Puritanism and the Church Courts, 1560-1660." In *The Culture of English Puritanism: 1560 - 1700*, edited by Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales, Reprint. Themes in Focus. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2002.
- Kessler, Samuel R. "Guyon's Faint and the Elizabethan Soteriological Debate: Double Predestination in 'The Faerie Queene', Book 2, Canto 8." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 43, no. 1 (2012): 19-45.
- Levack, Brian P. "Possession, Witchcraft, and the Law in Jacobean England." In *Witchcraft in the British Isles and New England: New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology*. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=3061312>.

- Marback, Richard. "The Phoenix of Hermes, or the Rebirth of Plato in the Eighteenth Century." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13, no. 1 (1995): 61–86. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.1995.13.1.61>.
- Marshall, Peter. *Reformation England, 1480-1642*. Reading History. London : New York: Arnold ; Distributed in the United States of America by Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Moss, Jessica. "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72, no. 3 (2006): 503–35.
- Parish, Helen L., and William G. Naphy, eds. *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*. Studies in Early Modern European History. Manchester ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2002, n.d.
- Parry, G. J. R. *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Patterson, W. B. *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Perkins, William. *A Cloud of Faithfull Witnesses, Leading to the Heauenly Canaan, Or, A Commentarie Vpon the 11 Chapter to the Hebrewes Preached in Cambridge by That Godly, and Iudicious Divine, M. William Perkins ; Long Expected and Desired, and Therefore Published at the Request of His Executours, by Will. Crashawe and Tho. Pierson, Preachers of Gods Word, Who Heard Him Preach It, and Wrote It from His Mouth*. Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1801:16. At London : Printed by Humfrey Lownes, for Leo. Greene, 1607., 1607.
- . *A Commentary on Galatians*. Edited by Gerald T. Sheppard, Brevard S. Childs, John H. Augustine, and Ralph Cudworth. Pilgrim Classic Commentaries. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989.
- . *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft so Farre Forth as It Is Reuealed in the Scriptures, and Manifest by True Experience. Framed and Deliuered by M. William Perkins, in His Ordinarie Course of Preaching, and Now Published by Tho. Pickering Batchelour of Diuinitie, and Minister of Finchingfield in Essex. Whereunto Is Adioyned a Twofold Table; One of the Order and Heades of the Treatise; Another of the Texts of Scripture Explained, or Vindicated from the Corrupt Interpretation of the Aduersarie*. Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1284:05. [Cambridge] : Printed by Cantrel Legge, printer to the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, 1610., 1610.
- . *The Arte of Prophecyng, Or, A Treatise Concerning the Sacred and Onely True Manner and Methode of Preaching First Written in Latine by Master William Perkins ; and Now Faithfully Translated into English (for That It Containeth Many Worthie Things Fit for the Knowledge of Men of All Degrees) by Thomas Tuke*. Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1823:09. Imprinted at London : By Felix Kyngston for E.E. and are to be sold in Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Swan, 1607., 1607.

- . *The Combat Betweene Christ and the Diuell Displayed: Or A Commentarie Vpon the Temptations of Christ: Preached in Cambridge by That Reuerend and Iudicious Diuine M. William Perkins*. Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1213:06 ; Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 1492:6d. London : Printed by Melchisedech Bradwood for E. E[dgar] and are to be solde [by Cuthbert Burby] in Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Swan, Anno 1606., 1606.
- Popper, Nicholas. “‘Abraham, Planter of Mathematics’: Histories of Mathematics and Astrology in Early Modern Europe.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 1 (2006): 87–106.
- Roper, Lyndal. “Witchcraft and the Western Imagination.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 16 (2006): 117–41.
- Rowlands, Alison, ed. *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*. Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Schreiner, Susan E. “Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin’s Sermons on Job.” *Church History* 58, no. 3 (1989): 322–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3168467>.
- Sharpe, J. A., and Richard M. Golden, eds. *English Witchcraft, 1560-1736*. Vol. 1. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003.
- Teall, John L. “Witchcraft and Calvinism in Elizabethan England: Divine Power and Human Agency.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1962): 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708055>.
- Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England*. London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971.
- Wallace, Dewey D. “The Doctrine of Predestination in the Early English Reformation.” *Church History* 43, no. 2 (1974): 201–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3163952>.
- Walsham, Alexandra. “History, Memory, and the English Reformation.” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 4 (2012): 899–938.
- . “The Godly and Popular Culture.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, edited by John Coffey and Paul Chang-Ha Lim. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- . “The Reformation and ‘The Disenchantment of the World’ Reassessed.” *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2008): 497–528.