

The Murder of Mistress Lacey's Maid: Ad Hockery and the Law in England circa 1530

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On 20 June 1530, John Laurence, former servant to a London widow named Lucy Lacey, and Robert Turner, a Lancashire man, made a confession regarding their parts in a heinous crime committed about two months before. In late April of the same year, the two men and two other confederates had conspired to rob Mistress Lacey's house and had callously killed her maidservant in the process. The two men admitted their roles in the felony under examination at Cardinal Wolsey's residence at the manor of Southwell, Nottinghamshire. As those who examined Laurence and Turner no doubt knew, Mistress Lacey was a widow of advanced years—perhaps as old as eighty—and the attack upon her, not to mention the cruel slaying of her maidservant, was an especially heinous crime.

Laurence and Turner were likely in custody awaiting trial when they were examined at Southwell, but this was not an official questioning; it was instead an ad hoc interrogation, undertaken at the residence of a man no longer in the king's service, by examiners who had no official standing in the case. We know, of course, that alongside the formal legal processes of late medieval and Tudor England a range of informal and under-the-table negotiations and maneuvers took place, but by their nature such practices were usually undocumented. Sometimes, however, they were documented and sometimes, usually by accident, those written records survive, as is the case for Laurence's and Turner's examination, the record of which made its way into the State Papers series at the National Archives when it was

seized in a later unrelated treason attainder.¹ Taking apart this curious record and putting it into its context—considering how the men came to be at Southwell and what the purpose of the interrogation was—allows this usually shadowy behind-the-scenes world to come partially into the light. Unsurprisingly, backchannel strategies in Tudor England depended heavily on networks of power and influence. Though a woman of humble birth, the elderly Mistress Lacey had through her long life built up impressive connections that she could call upon in this moment of crisis. Those connections helped her with both formal legal processes and the informal and even illegal tactics upon which the success of those formal legal processes depended.

The document written at Southwell consists of records of John Laurence's and Robert Turner's interrogations and an inventory of the stolen goods. Three men were named as examiners: one, Sir John Dunham, was a local gentleman; and the other two, William Disney and Hugh Fuller, were administrators in the cardinal's household. As Mistress Lacey's servant, Laurence, was clearly a lynchpin in the conspiracy, the record of his questioning is the longer and more detailed of the two. He told his examiners a version of events in which he distanced himself from the most terrible part of the crime—he insisted that he had had no role in the murder of the maidservant—while admitting his part in the planning and execution of the robbery, itself a capital offence. Laurence gave the examiners a narrative of events: he had been in Mistress Lacey's service in the parish of St. Antholin in London for about nine months when he became acquainted with a certain rather shady priest named Sir Richard (surname unknown). Sir Richard, Laurence hastened to clarify, was by no means respectable and perhaps not really in holy orders: he was a sanctuary man of St. Martin le Grand, and he lived there with a woman named Charity, meaning that she was "either a concubine or ellis [he] falsely profess[ed] the order of priesthood." Sir Richard put Laurence in touch with a certain "unknown person" who was an accomplished thief. Although both Laurence and Turner claimed that they never learned the second man's name, they described him in some detail for the examiners so that they could hunt him down:

1. Kew, The National Archives [TNA], SP 1/57, fols. 179r–181v. The details of the examination below come from this document. They were part of Cromwell's papers seized in 1540 on his attainder.

A yong man about xxxii yeres of aege, meane of stature, whitely visaged, with sharpe nose, light abren heare, a litle berde nere of the same colour, comunely accustomed to were a Spanyssh Cape and sumtyme a cote of Orange Tawny and white hosen / most parte haunting to Saynt Martyns Saynctuary.

The man brought with him to his meeting with Laurence certain irons "mete to pike locks," hidden underneath his "Spanissh cloke."²

Although Laurence did not immediately enter into a coven with the white-visaged man, soon thereafter his mistress's high-handed ways caused him to consider his new acquaintance's criminal expertise. Lucy Lacey was a formidable woman who was not inclined to take nonsense from her servants, and whose servants sometimes resented it.³ Laurence outlined to his examiners at Southwell why he felt ill-treated: he had ridden out to Kent to Mistress Lacey's daughter, Mistress Knyvett, who usually lived with her mother in London but had gone to her own property in Kent for a week. On his return to London Mistress Knyvett sent back with Laurence a small gift for her mother, a "bowed noble," a bent coin that served as a good luck charm or a token of faithfulness, but which nonetheless still carried the value of a noble coin, 7s 6d. Laurence duly brought it to Mistress Lacey, but she refused to acknowledge that she had received it, and he began to worry that she would report him for theft. Because of this, he said, he conceived "inwarde grefe ayenst his Mistress."⁴ In that resentful state, he set out to St. Martin's to find the mysterious man in the Spanish cloak. On the morning of 25 April 1530 the two men, together with Robert Turner, Laurence's co-examinee, met in the Leopard's Head tavern, and the three of them agreed that they would rob Mistress Lacey's house.

Laurence and Turner explained to the examiners that the robbery, which a later record dates to 28 April (a Thursday), was accomplished in this fashion: first, at about ten o'clock in the morning John Laurence se-

2. TNA, SP 1/57, fols. 179r, 181r.

3. In an undated case in the court of Requests, a priest who had been in her employ complained in a petition of the "Ryall power" (regal pretensions?) she exhibited in withholding of his wages, a gown, and his "letters of his orders" when he wanted to leave her employ. TNA, REQ 2/6/101.

4. TNA, SP 1/57, fol. 179v.

cretly brought Robert Turner and the unknown man into the house, and hid them in a cellar until such time as Mistress Lacey left the house to hear mass, as she did daily. While she was at church, they took her maid and bound her hands and feet and gagged her with a cloth so that “she should not crye or make any noyse.” They then took her up to a chamber and cast two featherbeds on top of her to muffle her cries. Once downstairs again, however, they could still hear her and feared others would, too. The unknown man returned to the chamber where they had left her, and “what so ever he dyd unto her these deponents can not say, but crye they herde her no more.”⁵

When the time came for Laurence to go to the church to escort Mistress Lacey home again after mass, he left the unknown man and Turner, warning them not to hurt the maid. When he brought Mistress Lacey into the house, they tied her up, too, binding her hands and feet and putting a blindfold over her eyes. They used her keys to enter into her chamber where she kept her valuables, using sheets to wrap up her plate, money, jewellery, and other goods. Laurence and Turner, both probably originally Lancashire men,⁶ then apparently fled to the north with their share. At Ripon in Yorkshire and in Lancashire and Westmorland, they fenced the stolen goods with a number of men named on the inventory—an esquire, a barber, a “Master Cettle” of the collegiate church of Ripon. Where the man in the Spanish cloak went, Laurence and Turner did not know, and they had, or so they claimed, only partial knowledge of the goods that he had taken. Their interrogation ended with the examiners asking Laurence and Turner if they had ever before been accessory to any murder or felony other than what they had just confessed, to which the two men fervently swore that indeed they had not.

This examination was recorded neatly in a secretary hand, with a heading detailing the names of the men examined, the names of the examiners and their positions, the place, and the date, in the “xxiiⁱⁱ yere of the reigne of our Sovereigne lorde King Henry the viiith.” The confessions and inventories take up three sheets of paper, which survive today as part

5. TNA, SP 1/57, fols. 179v–180r.

6. Turner is identified in his examination as of Warton, Lancashire, and John Laurence, too, seems to have originally hailed from the same area, as some of the goods were delivered to a Lancelot Laurence of Yealand, Lancashire, near Warton.

of the State Papers series at the National Archives. These papers are not, however, state papers in the sense that they represent some kind of formal, governmental legal process; they are instead the record of an unofficial examination undertaken in the residence of Cardinal Wolsey, by a local gentleman and two of the cardinal's servants. Although Wolsey had held very high administrative and judicial offices in the king's service from the early 1510s until November 1529, in June 1530 he was simply the cardinal archbishop of York, without secular office of any kind, living theoretically in retirement at his manor at Southwell.⁷ How, then, came John Laurence and Robert Turner to undergo this examination in the cardinal's household regarding their part in a London crime, outside both Wolsey's authority as a bishop and his ecclesiastical province of York? Why would this crime, heinous as it was, pique the concern of the cardinal? What was this extra-judicial examination meant to accomplish? How did the records find their way into the State Papers?

Some of these questions are answered relatively easily. The records came into the Crown's possession when Thomas Cromwell's papers were seized in 1540 on his attainder for treason. They had come into his possession because he was acting as the widows' main legal counsellor in the case; he kept the records probably because he kept everything, for which historians of Henry's reign should be truly thankful. Wolsey's involvement is also fairly easy to explain; although he was in disgrace, and with hindsight we know he would never recover his former position, he still had hope in the summer of 1530 while he was resident at Southwell that he could salvage his career as royal servant. He was certainly busy around this time attempting to build good will: his biographer George Cavendish reported that in June and July he "made many agrementes and concordes" amongst disputing parties who came to him at Southwell.⁸ This intervention in Mistress Lacey's case was similar in some ways to the arbitration and mediation that was commonplace in legal disputes over land or other kinds of litigation.⁹

7. On Wolsey's last year, see Peter Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 599–639.

8. George Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester, Early English Text Society 243 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 138.

9. J. H. Baker, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England*, Volume VI, 1485–1558 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 333–34.

Unlike those other kinds of unofficial facilitations of concord, however, this dispute would not have been brought to Wolsey by the two parties. Laurence and Turner were felons, not litigants, and they were presumably brought there in some kind of custody. The case had to have been brought to Wolsey's attention through strings the victims, Mistress Lacey and her daughter Anne Knyvett, were able to pull. Thus the identities and connections of the two widows are crucial to understanding how this examination came about. Over her long lifetime Lucy left traces in different kinds of records and, as it turns out, her life journey is an interesting story in itself.

THE NETWORKS OF MISTRESSES LACEY AND KNYVETT

Mistress Lucy Lacey was likely born about 1450 or a few years after, and she died in 1541, at the age of about ninety.¹⁰ She was not born into the kind of family that presaged the high connections she was able to call upon at the end of her life. Her father, Lewis Brampston, was a provincial brewer of modest means, married to a woman named Katherine, and they had at least three children, a son Lewis and two daughters, Mary and Lucy. Brampston was, however, a brewer in a university town, Cambridge, and after his death in the late 1460s, his widow Katherine's remarriage about 1470 to a university-trained physician, Walter Lemster, seems to have provided access to a quite different world, both for the widow and for her daughter Lucy.¹¹ (Lewis's and Katherine's other two children make only brief appearances in the records, in small bequests in later decades from Walter and Katherine, suggesting that they played a much less central part

10. Her date of birth is inferred from her having entered into a betrothal c. 1469 (see TNA, C 1/61/584, discussed below), when she would have been no younger than her later teens according to contemporary marriage patterns for non-elite women (as she was then). Her will (TNA, PROB 11/28/631) was probated in 1541.

11. Corpus Christi College Cambridge Archives (through online calendars at <http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk>), CCCC 09/06/1A-1C; CCCC 09/07/46; CCCC 09/07/104; CCCC 09/09/32; TNA, PROB 11/8/40, Will of Walter Lemster, 1487; A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 362-63. C. H. Talbot and E. A. Hammond, *The Medical Practitioners in Medieval England: A Biographical Register* (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1965), 369-70, mistakenly considers Lemster's "daughter-in-law" (in our terms, stepdaughter) to be distinct from his "daughter," Lucy.

in the Lemsters' lives.)¹² Walter Lemster would have been amongst the earliest academically-trained physicians in England to marry, part of a shift of university-trained medical men away from their clerical roots towards a lay identity.¹³ Walter, Katherine, and Lucy settled in St. Antholin's parish in London while Walter, or all of them, maintained connections with Cambridge.

In the years that followed, Walter's medical career advanced. Probably through Cambridge connections he became physician to the bishop of Ely and to Elizabeth Mowbray, dowager duchess of Norfolk, whom he named in his will as "his singular lady and renowned princess [*meam singularem dominam et inclitam principissam*]."¹⁴ As an academic who may well have started his career assuming he would never marry but then acquired a wife and daughter, Lemster straddled the lay and clerical worlds. His will shows that he had a "chamber" at the Carthusian house at Sheen, and that he had ties to the lay literary circle in London that formed around William Caxton in the 1480s. Amongst his most precious bequests were his books, most of which were given to King's College, Cambridge, while several others were bequeathed to individuals, including a copy of the fourteenth-century Latin horticultural text *Ruralia commoda* by Petrus de Crescenciis, which he intriguingly left to the wife of William Pratt, mercer, a close friend of Caxton, "as her own book [*ut suum librum proprium*]."¹⁵ By the mid-1480s, Lemster's ties to episcopal, noble, and London civic circles were crowned by an appointment as royal physician, first to Richard III in 1484 and then

12. TNA, PROB 11/8/40, Will of Walter Lemster, 1487; and TNA, PROB 11/11/211, Will of Katherine Bentley alias Lemster, 1497.

13. On English physicians and marriage, see Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), 110–12.

14. TNA, PROB 11/8/40; see also C 1/147/56, on a ring the duchess had given to Lemster, which he devised back to her in his will but which Lucy had lent to another man who refused to return it.

15. *Ibid.* William Pratt and his wife Alice, who was likely a silkwoman in her own right, were close friends with William Caxton. See Anne F. Sutton, "Caxton Was a Mercer: His Social Milieu and Friends," in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1992 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Rogers (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1994), 118–48; Anne F. Sutton, "Alice Claver, Silkwoman (d. 1489)," in *Medieval London Widows, 1300–1500*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), 133–42. A fifteenth-century English manuscript copy of Petrus de Crescentiis is Harley MS 3662 (which is available online at www.bl.uk); it was also printed in Augsburg in 1471.

to Henry VII in 1486.¹⁶ He was not able to enjoy his new position for long, however, as he died in March 1487. His epitaph in St. Antholin's church highlighted his final career triumph: "Under this black marble stone lieth the body of Master Walter Lemster, doctor of physic, and also physician to the high and might prince Henry VII."¹⁷

Of Katherine's children with Lewis Brampton, Lucy clearly had a special place, both with Walter and with her mother, probably owing to her continuing to live with them through much of her young adulthood. This circumstance arose because of an ambiguous marital situation in which she found herself in the decade following her mother's marriage to Walter Lemster. Lucy made her first appearance in surviving records in a Chancery bill dating from 1481, in a suit by Walter Lemster against Richard Narborough. As the bill states, in 1469 Lucy entered into a future contract of marriage with Narborough, then a young Cambridge scholar, before he left for what was supposed to be a two-year stint in Padua to study civil law.¹⁸ He did not return, however, for ten years, and when he did return, as a newly minted Doctor of Civil Law, he refused to go through with the marriage. Given the binding nature of such promises of marriage, Lucy had been left through the 1470s with little choice but to wait for his return, probably through the entirety of her twenties, her most marriageable decade. Narborough's repudiation of the contract was a caddish act. One might imagine that Lucy (with the help of Walter and her mother) sued Narborough in the ecclesiastical court to enforce the contract, but if so, it was not successful. We do know that Walter Lemster successfully sued Narborough in Chancery for Lucy's room and board and the costs of a maidservant over ten years, and that he was awarded the sum of 300 marks. This was a mitigated victory for Lemster and Lucy Brampton, however: Narborough could not pay and was thus incarcerated in Ludgate, the London debtors' prison, from which he was subsequently able to escape. At the time of his death, Lemster had a

16. *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, 1476–85 (Edward IV, Edward V, and Richard III)* (London: HMSO, 1901), 482; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, 1485–94 (Henry VII, Vol. 1)* (London: HMSO, 1914), 482.

17. John Weever, *Antient Funeral Monuments, of Great-Britain, Ireland, and the Islands* (London: William Tooke, 1767), 190.

18. On Narborough, see Emden, *BRUC to 1500*, 419.

suit pending against the sheriffs of London, whose negligence had allowed the escape, to recompense him for the full sum. (The outcome of the suit is unknown.)¹⁹ In any case, however, Narborough's career was apparently ruined, as he disappears from the records, and no doubt Lucy and her parents took some comfort in that.

When Lucy's stepfather Walter Lemster died in 1487, he left substantial bequests in his will to his still-unmarried stepdaughter.²⁰ Some time soon after that, Lucy finally did marry, taking as her husband another Cambridge-educated physician, Walter Lacey, who presumably knew Lucy through Walter Lemster. Given the dates of his university career, Walter Lacey was likely born about 1450,²¹ and thus both he and Lucy embarked on this marriage when they were in their mid- to late-thirties; for her it was certainly her first marriage (not counting the abortive relationship with Narborough), and likely also for him. Walter and Lucy Lacey settled in St. Antholin's parish, where Katherine and Walter Lemster had lived. Katherine herself remarried after Walter Lemster's death to a John Bentley, but that marriage was either very short in duration or highly unsatisfactory according to Katherine's 1497 will (which pointedly names Lewis and Walter as "beloved" husbands, but not John).²²

Although relatively little is known of Walter and Lucy Lacey's early married life, various records give us some hints. Like Walter Lemster, Walter Lacey was tied to the book-centred elite lay circles in London; he was associated with the family of the mayor Sir Thomas Hill and with the lawyer and future King's Bench justice John More.²³ He also had a particular interest in Syon Abbey, then an important locus for a style of literate lay piety. The extent to which the wives of the two Walters—Katherine and her daughter Lucy—shared their husbands' interest in the current styles of literate devotional piety is unknown; both Walters bequeathed their whole libraries to others on their deaths, and neither Katherine nor Lucy

19. TNA, C 1/61/584; PROB 11/8/40.

20. TNA, PROB 11/8/40.

21. Emden, *BRUC to 1500*, 346; Talbot and Hammond, *Medical Practitioners*, 369.

22. TNA, PROB 11/11/211. It is possible that John Bentley was still alive when Katherine made her will; she did not call herself widow, and she bequeathed only her paraphernalia. Lucy was named executrix.

23. R. A. Latham, ed., *Calendar of Close Rolls, Henry VII, Vol. 2, 1500–1509* (London: HMSO, 1963), 25, 45.

left books in their wills.²⁴ Lacey, like Lemster, maintained his academic links: he was a man of considerable learning and proud of his connections to Cambridge, especially desiring in his will that he be remembered as a fellow of Peterhouse and “that I may be putt in their boke the better to be hadde in memorie ons a yere what tyme they doo their obsequies.”²⁵ Walter Lacey’s occupation as physician allowed him an entrée into court circles, too. Walter was listed among those who walked in Henry VII’s funeral procession in May 1509, and then was among the “Squires of the Body” in the coronation procession for Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon the following month.²⁶

As Walter wrote his will in 1509 but did not die until 1513, it is possible that he fell ill in the first year of Henry VIII’s reign, when he was about sixty. Walter’s and Lucy’s marriage was apparently very affectionate, at least on his part, for he emphasized in his will the “verey love” that he found in her and urged the overseers who were to help her in the execution of the will to see that “noon wrong her in her right.”²⁷ Lucy did not subsequently remarry and was thus a widow of considerable means for about the last three decades of her life. At Walter’s death, he and Lucy had only one surviving child, Anne, although both Walter and Lucy asked for masses to be said for other children, indicating there were others who had died as infants or young children. Walter left Anne a significant sum, 300 marks, to be used to buy property for her marriage.²⁸ The high status that Walter and Lucy Lacey had established for themselves by the time of his death is perhaps best illustrated by Anne’s marriage, which occurred some time subsequent to the writing of Walter’s will: Anne married the Norfolk gentleman Charles Knyvett, who as grandson of the first duke of Buckingham was quite a match for the granddaughter of a provincial brewer. Knyvett served in the household of Edward Stafford, the third duke of Buckingham, in the 1510s and played a crucial role in the latter’s fall, testifying against him

24. TNA, PROB 11/11/211; PROB 11/28/631, Will of Lucy Lacey, 1541.

25. TNA, PROB 11/18/1, Will of Walter Lacey.

26. J. S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1862), 1/1.13, 1/1.42.

27. *Ibid.*

28. TNA, PROB 11/18/1; PROB 11/28/631.

in his trial for treason in 1521.²⁹ Knyvett subsequently entered into the service of Lord Berners, but was dead by about 1526.³⁰ Anne and Charles had at least six children together, three sons, Richard, Anthony, and William; and three daughters, Lucy, Anne, and Alice.³¹ Anne Knyvett later married the gentleman John Sebyll or Sybley, probably fairly soon after the 1530 robbery and murder.³²

In 1530, then, Mistress Lucy Lacey was at least in her seventies, and perhaps eighty, and her daughter, Mistress Anne Knyvett, was a widow aged forty or so with six children. In the aftermath of the traumatic robbery and murder, Lucy and her daughter, who lived with her mother at least some of the time, were able to call upon the networks of influence that they had collectively inherited from their husbands and perhaps themselves had nourished. The point of contact between the two widows and Cardinal Wolsey seems to have been Wolsey's former servant Thomas Cromwell, still faithful to his master through the summer of 1530 and in close touch with him. Cromwell had reason to be loyal to Mistress Knyvett in particular; it had been her husband Charles Knyvett's engagement of his services in the early 1520s, in the aftermath of Buckingham's fall, that brought Cromwell to the attention of Cardinal Wolsey and in effect launched his career in government.³³ Cromwell may have been personally present at the interrogation of Laurence and Turner, as documents place him with the cardinal at Southwell on or about the day in question.³⁴ And Cromwell was not the only man with high connections the two widows knew; records of Lucy's activities in the courts in 1520 and 1529 relating to a manor she

29. Roger Virgoe, "The Earlier Knyvetts: The Rise of a Norfolk Gentry Family, Part II," *Norfolk Archaeology* 42 (1990), 251–52, 262–63; Barbara Harris, *Edward Stafford, Third Duke of Buckingham, 1478–1521* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 180–89; *Letters and Papers*, 3/1.49.

30. *Letters and Papers*, 3/1.513. The will of his brother, Edward Knyvett [Knevet], dated 1528, shows him as already deceased: Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, ed., *Testamenta vetusta* (London: Nichols and Son, 1826), 2.635–40.

31. These are all named in Lucy Lacey's will, dated 1534, proved 1541. TNA, PROB 11/28/631.

32. See the Chancery bill, between 1529 and 1532, which dates from after the marriage: TNA, C 1/677/29.

33. Howard Leithead, "Cromwell, Thomas, Earl of Essex," ODNB, 2004.

34. He wrote with his own hand a draft of a letter from Wolsey responding to a letter from the king dated 21 June. TNA, SP 1/57, fol. 168; *Letters and Papers*, 4.2906.

held in Sussex indicate that Sir Thomas More—named as chancellor only months before the attack on Mistress Lacey’s maid and house—served as a feoffee for the property.³⁵ The tie between Mistress Lacey and Sir Thomas may well have dated back to More’s father John’s relationship with Lucy’s late husband Walter during the reign of Henry VII. Even though More was presumably busy with his new post, he nonetheless had his hand in this situation; Cromwell mentioned in a letter to Wolsey that More had discussed the case with him, apparently representing Mistress Lacey’s interests.³⁶

None of this tells us explicitly how John Laurence and Robert Turner came to be examined at Cardinal Wolsey’s residence on 22 June 1530, so we must make some inferences. Following the robbery, Mistresses Lacey and Knyvett must have called upon the men of influence they knew—Cromwell, More, possibly others. Having escaped to the north with their ill-gotten goods and fenced them to various men in Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Westmorland, John Laurence and Robert Turner must have been arrested for the felony. That arrest must then have been brought to the attention of the widows’ counsellors. Laurence and Turner were—somehow—brought from wherever they were being held to the cardinal’s manor to be questioned. The interrogation was not part of the normal criminal process, but it was undertaken with the knowledge and even the authority of the current chancellor More and his predecessor Wolsey. Laurence and Turner were presumably induced to tell their story by threats or promises, or a combination of the two. They could easily have believed, even if no one promised them directly, that their cooperation would entail an escape from the noose—a pardon from the king, perhaps.

If the two men hoped to avoid execution, however, that hope was vain, as likely both were hanged. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate any records of the formal prosecution of the felony; most ordinary records of processes against felons do not survive for this period.³⁷ There is, howev-

35. This dated from at least 1520 to 1529: TNA, CP 40/1060, mm. 568d, 632; Edwin Hadlow Wise Dunkin, ed., *Sussex Manors, Advowsons, Recorded in the Feet of Fines, Henry VIII*, Sussex Record Society 19 (London: Sussex Record Society, 1914), 87–88.

36. *Letters and Papers*, 4.2913–14.

37. I searched through the KB 27 and KB 29 records for two years following the date of the robbery, and found nothing.

er, evidence, if somewhat unspecific, that they were prosecuted in London, convicted, and hanged. An anonymous London chronicle contains three entries related to executions for this felony. In the first, the chronicler states that on 5 July 1530 “was one hangyd in chayns in Fynsbery fyld for kyllynge mastres knevytt’s mayd in sente Auntolyns paryshe.” The second, dated 14 July 1531, reads: “maystre Lacis servant was hangyd in Fynsbery fylde for y^c morderynge of a mayde, & for y^c robynge of this sayd mistar Lacie.” The third, dated 28 June 1532, indicates that “The xxviiij day of June was one othar man hangyd in chaynes in Fynsbery fylde for y^c kyllynge of mystris Lacis mayd.”³⁸ This indicates that three men were executed for the crime, although some of the information the chronicler had was somewhat imprecise. The second, named as servant of “Master” Lacey, must have been John Laurence, while the first and third were presumably Robert Turner and the man with the Spanish cloak. (Sir Richard would have been able to claim benefit of clergy.) The first was executed about two weeks after the interrogations at Southwell, while there were apparently delays before Laurence was executed a year later and the third man two years later. The chronicler indicates not only that the men were executed, but that at least two of them were “hangyd in chayns.” This was a type of execution reserved for particularly notorious crimes, by which the body would not be taken down from the gibbet after the hanging but would instead be left there, suspended by chains, to decompose, as an example to others. John Bellamy notes that normally the order for such an execution was made by the king or his council, as it was in effect an extra-judicial punishment.³⁹

Although the confession Laurence and Turner made before the examiners at Southwell on 22 June 1530 was presumably not used in the felony process, the information the two gave about the man in the Spanish cloak could well have allowed those counselling Mistress Lacey and her daughter to identify him. That they did in fact learn the names of the third conspirator, along with that of the priest Laurence and Turner knew only as Sir Richard, is shown by a Star Chamber suit, likely launched by the

38. Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, ed., *Two London Chronicles from the Collections of John Stow*, Camden Third Series 18 (London: Camden Society, 1910), 4–6.

39. John G. Bellamy, *The Criminal Trial in Later Medieval England: Felony Before the Courts from Edward I to the Sixteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 154.

two widows soon after the examination at Southwell manor. One of the purposes of the Southwell interrogation seems to have been to gather information for that suit, the goal of which was recovery of the stolen goods. In the only surviving record from the suit, Lucy Lacey and Ann Knyvett outlined in a bill the terrible robbery and murder, which they said was committed by Laurence, Turner, and two other men: Richard Hudson, clerk—presumably the priest Sir Richard—and Thomas Brode, who must be the hitherto-unnamed man in the Spanish cloak. (The bill also gives a name to the slain maidservant: Joan Cake.) Those men took away money, plate, apparel, and jewels worth 500 marks, the widows said, and afterwards they fled, and some of them were still at large (presumably meaning at least Brode and perhaps also Hudson). The account of the crime was a prologue, however, to the object of the suit: that the chancellor should issue a subpoena to seven men of Yorkshire, Westmorland, and Lancashire, who had come into possession of the goods Laurence and the other felons had stolen. The widows, the bill indicated, knew not how, nor by what means, the said goods had come into the possession of the seven defendants; they therefore prayed that the men be summoned to appear in the Star Chamber to explain themselves.⁴⁰

As alleged receivers of stolen goods, these men could have been indicted as accessories to the robbery and murder. It is thus interesting that the widows (presumably through the advice of the men counselling them) instead take a much softer approach, requesting that the men be summoned to the Star Chamber to explain how the goods came into their hands. Although retribution was evidently the goal regarding Laurence, Turner, and Brode, regarding the receivers the strategy instead seems to have been to ask, firmly, for the return of the (presumably fenced) goods. Felony charges against the receivers would in fact have been counter-productive if the goal was return of the goods; once convicted of a felony, all the felon's moveable property, including any stolen goods in his or her possession, became property of the Crown.⁴¹ A victim might petition the Crown for the goods' restitution, but that might take some time and the request might not be grant-

40. TNA, STAC 2/25/65.

41. K. J. Kesselring, "Felony Forfeiture and the Profits of Crime in Early Modern England," *The Historical Journal* 53/2 (2010): esp. 273–77; K. J. Kesselring, "Felony Forfeiture in England, c. 1170–1870," *The Journal of Legal History* 30/3 (2009), 201–26.

ed; if the widows were willing to forego punishment of these men, then this more oblique method of the Star Chamber suit was the best tactic to pursue. The objective, presumably, was for the men to appear in Star Chamber, profess ignorance as to the goods' provenance (they fell off a wagon), and agree to return them to the widows. This may have been what happened: some of the jewellery and plate Lucy Lacey bequeathed to her relatives in her will, written in 1534, seems to correspond to the similar items listed by Laurence and Turner in their interrogation, although the descriptions on both lists are too generic to be certain.⁴² There is every reason to think, however, that it would have been a successful strategy.

AD HOCKERY AND THE LAW IN HENRY VIII'S ENGLAND

What does all this tell us about the operation of law in Henrician England? One of the great gifts that Cromwell left behind for future historians in his papers is the lifting of a veil on what had hitherto either gone altogether unrecorded or for which documents usually do not survive. Backroom negotiations and end-runs around the courts and the letter of the law were nothing new in Henry VIII's reign, but because of Cromwell's obsessive paper-keeping we are able to take apart a number of interesting instances of it, for he had his fingers in many cases before and during his period of power. In Mistress Lacey's case, we see men of great influence, including the Lord Chancellor Thomas More himself, using back-door processes. How we might characterize the questioning of Laurence and Turner by Cardinal Wolsey's men is not quite clear to me: quasi-legal? Illegal? Was it secretive or a perfectly legitimate activity? Was its departure from the normal process of felony prosecution problematic, or did the chancellor's involvement (and even perhaps his mandate) *make* it legitimate? The utility of the interrogation is clear: it was meant to elicit from the suspects information that would otherwise die with them if they were simply prosecuted through the normal channels. The means employed to extract this information—promises of pardon or mitigation that no one had any intention to fulfill, and/or more threatening kinds of persuasion (torture is not an impossibility)—might not have been strictly according to legal form, but

42. TNA, SP 11/57, fols. 180r-v; PROB 11/28/631.

the ends (the receipt of the information the widows' counsellors sought) justified them more generally. The subsequent step, the bringing of a Star Chamber suit to restore the goods, was clearly "legal" in the sense that it was undertaken through a royal court, but its purpose seems to have been to sidestep the prosecution of the felony of receiving stolen goods in order to avoid felony forfeiture, which would have made the recovery of the goods difficult if not impossible.

Peeling off the layers of a case like this allows us "to tell a story that might otherwise never be told," as Charles Donahue has put it⁴³—back-room maneuvers were rarely recorded, and thus when we get an opportunity to see one in action, we should take it. As he has also pointed out, we can only speculate about what lies behind and beyond the written record that remains. This speculation is both "irresistible," as Charlie Donahue puts it,⁴⁴ and necessary, for the documents' meaning is not determinable simply by the words inscribed on it but also by the instrumental purposes it served, and we can only approach understanding that through inference about its larger context. In this particular case, for instance, we cannot know why men like Cromwell, Wolsey, and More felt moved to facilitate this unofficial interrogation, a crucial missing piece of the puzzle this record poses: but we can speculate. They might well have been driven by moral outrage at the nature of the crime and thus bent the rules to achieve the goal of a rough justice, with the central perpetrators punished in exemplary fashion and the victims reunited with at least some of their goods. The identity of the robbery victims—a very elderly widow and her daughter, widowed with six children, likely all underage—no doubt contributed to the sense in which "true" justice might be served by these kinds of tactics. If the maid's murder on its own would not likely have sparked this level of outrage, it likely intensified it, if only because it demonstrated how close Mistress Lacey herself came to being slain. Women like Lucy Lacey and Anne Knyvett were seen to be in need of protection, and in the absence of husbands or other male relatives, others must step in; and indeed they *were* in need of help, as in no way could Mistresses Lacey and Knyvett, as women, have orchestrated this on their own. Thus, we could interpret the ad-hockery

43. Charles Donahue, *Law, Marriage, and Society in the Later Middle Ages: Arguments About Marriage in Five Courts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

44. Donahue, *Law, Marriage, and Society*, 62.

here as a means to reach a conclusion that was just in a broader sense, if not one that strictly followed the law: this fits in with some scholarship that has emphasized flexibility in legal and para-legal processes in order to carve out appropriate outcomes from an otherwise unwieldy or unyielding system.⁴⁵ It is important for us to recognize, however, that such bending of processes did not always contribute to conclusions that would have been viewed then, much less now, as “truly,” or even roughly, just. Around the same time, for instance, Cromwell’s handling of a wife-murder allowed the perpetrator to escape without prosecution; that murderer, too, had strings to pull.⁴⁶ Even if occasionally an elderly (albeit wealthy and well-connected) widow was its beneficiary, such ad-hockery was a tool of power and most benefited the powerful. It was also thickly intertwined in the workings of law and the courts in Tudor England. Although it is often entirely absent from the evidentiary record, we need to think about how the back channels, even more than official processes, constituted and reproduced the powers of the elite.

45. See, for instance, Thomas A. Green, *Verdict According to Conscience: Perspectives on the English Criminal Trial Jury, 1200–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), esp. chapters 2 and 3; Cynthia B. Herrup, *The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. chapter 8.

46. This is the 1529 case of John Watson; see TNA, SP 1/42, fols. 126–45.



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