I came to this topic after examining a century’s worth of newspaper advertisements for wanted persons. From the mid-seventeenth century, newsprint permitted the increasingly rapid and wide circulation of physical descriptions for people who did not usually care to be identified. If the early modern press gradually made possible an information dragnet, then what did people do before the extension of a communications network which identified fugitives and profiled criminals?

They routinely consulted those versed in astrology, those able to cast a figure or, we would say, draw up a horoscope and evaluate the alleged influence of myriad celestial beams radiating down to earth. Many early moderns still believed that the alignment of the planets when people were born set the seal on their different physiques and diverse personalities. And vice versa, careful interpretation of the heavenly situation at the time and place of a crime could reveal the sort of person responsible; allowed the astrologer to construct a profile of the guilty party.

My engagement with the history of astrological surveillance serves as a means to an end. If present-day criminalistics relies on a particular understanding of human variation, of how and why people are physically distinct from one another, then I want to tap seventeenth-century answers to these same questions by studying early modern detective work.

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