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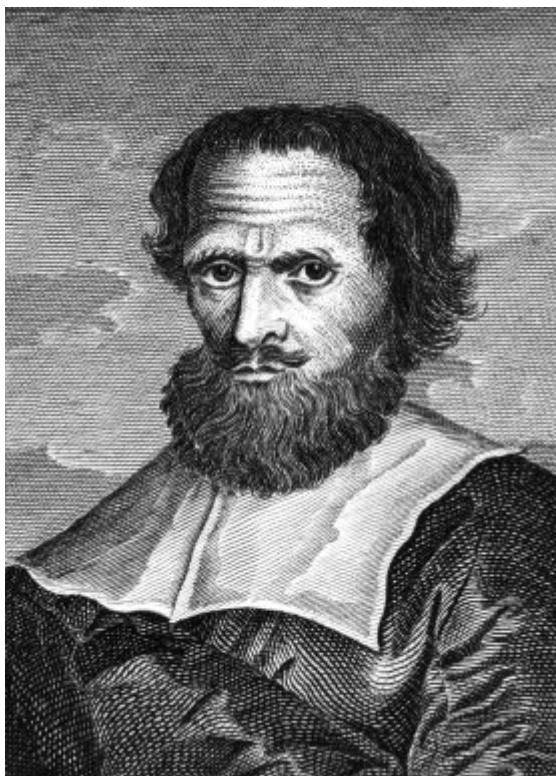
Simon Forman: The Astrologer's Tables

By Lauren Kassell | Published in *History Today* Volume: 61 Issue: 9 2011

Lauren Kassell reveals how the casebooks, diaries and diagrams of the late-16th-century astrologer Simon Forman provide a unique perspective on a period when the study of the stars began to embrace modern science.

On a September evening 400 years ago, Jean Forman, the wife of the astrologer, Simon, teased him over supper. Could he tell which of them would die first, she asked, mocking his art and his age. He was 58, she 30 years his junior. His reply was simple. She would bury him within a week. This was a Thursday. On Friday nothing happened. On Saturday nothing happened. By Wednesday the astrologer's skill was happily in question. But on Thursday, as Forman set off by boat from Lambeth to the City – presumably to visit clients, attend to business or see friends – he fell down, shouted 'An impost, an impost' and died.

Some years later Jean told this story to William Lilly (1602-81), then England's most famous astrologer. Lilly had tracked down Forman's widow in pursuit of the deceased astrologer's papers and he included the story of Forman's death in the account of his own life that he wrote in 1668 for his friend Elias Ashmole, the great antiquary and founder of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Lilly's autobiography set out a genealogy of English astrologers culminating with himself. Lilly praised Forman as 'judicious and fortunate' in horary questions and stressed that [diagnosing] sickness was his 'masterpiece' [meaning his specialism]. But he also insinuated that the Elizabethan practitioner was an old-fashioned magician, in contrast to himself, whose numerous prognostications during the Civil Wars and Protectorate combined politics and prophecy, improved the astrological literacy of the nation and advanced the art. Forman's death, then, marks not the end of an era when astrologers thrived, but the beginning of a period of a more systematic and public pursuit of the science of the stars.



An engraving of Simon Forman, from an original c. 1590. Image: Getty / Hulton

Astrology was a serious business. The roots of learned astrology lay in ancient texts. In second century Egypt Ptolemy set out the sophisticated mathematical model of the geocentric cosmos that prevailed until Copernican cosmology was adopted in the 16th and 17th centuries. Ptolemy also outlined the principles of astrology, the study of the influences of the stars and planets on the natural world, the fate of nations and the lives of men and women. In the 12th century Latin translations of Arabic astrological books began to circulate in Europe. Astrology was typically taught as part of the medical curriculum at universities. With the Protestant Reformation theologians increasingly complained that astrology was overly deterministic. This, combined with the rise of Copernicanism, prompted efforts to reform astrology in line with empirical observations of the motions of the stars and their effects on life on earth.

Throughout Renaissance Europe astrologers taught at universities and practised in royal courts and for private clients. They published almanacs and prognostications, bolstering their incomes and advertising their expertise to potential patrons. Theologians questioned whether astrology was compatible with concepts of free will and divine providence. Poets and playwrights used astrological language to convey correspondences between the human body and the terrestrial and celestial realms, often expressed in terms of an analogy between the microcosm and the macrocosm.

Learned astrology was based on the motions of the known 'planets' – Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sun and the moon – in relation to the 12 signs of the zodiac. Most astrologers did not look to the skies. They used an ephemeris, a table of planetary motions, to calculate the positions of the planets. These were plotted on a horoscope, a diagram of the heavens divided into 12 parts, each known as a 'house' and corresponding to one of the signs of the zodiac. Once the astrologer had drawn a horoscope he could judge past or future events from the locations of the planets within the houses and their relationships (e.g. conjunction, opposition) to one another.

Astrological judgements came in four main types. A 'revolution' was a general prediction, calculated annually, which forecast the fate of the nation in terms of weather, plague, war or famine. A 'nativity' was a map of the position of the planets at the time of a person's birth. These were often calculated retrospectively, based on the major events, known as 'accidents', in a person's life. A third sort of judgement was known as an 'election' or 'favourable hour'. This determined the best time to do something (embarking on a journey, getting married, letting blood, making an amulet), usually calculated by assessing the position of the stars at a person's birth and projecting their motions forward in time. Finally an 'interrogation', or 'horary' question, was based on the moment at which a person asked a question. A 'decumbiture' is a refinement of this based on the time that an ill person took to bed. General prognostications were considered natural astrology and were in principle intellectually credible. Nativities, elections and interrogations were considered judicial. Because they related to the fate of individuals, this was the aspect of astrology that theologians and natural philosophers debated. Forman, as Lilly noted, was a master of horary astrology.

When Forman died that Thursday in September 1611 his study was filled with books and papers. Perhaps a wall-mounted shelf held his working library, a motley collection of texts ranging from medieval astronomical and alchemical manuscripts, bound in vellum, inscribed and stained by previous owners, to recent printed works such as a volume by Roger Bacon on the prolongation of life printed in Oxford in 1590 and a second-hand copy of the 1567 Paris edition of Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's magical manual, *De occulta philosophia*. An ephemeris probably sat on the desk and perhaps also a recent almanac or satirical pamphlet. Heaps of paper, folded into notebooks, covered in Forman's scrawl, filled the room. Some of these contained the dozens of

alchemical and magical works that Forman copied, a common means of acquiring esoteric or out-of-print texts in this period. Others contained Forman's reading notes, records of his astrological practice and original writings. These included manuals on medicine, astrology and geomancy, plague tracts, alchemical commonplace books, various musings about historical, prophetic, Biblical and literary themes and a series of autobiographical works. Pots of brown and red ink, a clock, jars of strong waters and a commissioned portrait of the astrologer in his purple robes furnished the room. This was the habitat of the self-styled astrologer-physician of Lambeth.

Forman fashioned himself as a modern magus, driven by a passion for learning and chosen by God to overcome adversity and ultimately to acquire knowledge of health and disease, life and death and the secrets of creation. His autobiographical writings chart his early life. He was born in Quidhampton, a small hamlet on the outskirts of Salisbury, in 1552. He attended a grammar school in Salisbury and, while apprenticed to a hosier and grocer, he secretly studied in the evenings. He made it to Oxford for a year and a half as a poor scholar and attended the school attached to Magdalen College. His studies, he complained, were disrupted by the frequent trips to hunt rabbits and to court women of the young gentlemen scholars he served. Through the 1570s and 1580s Forman worked as a teacher and studied astronomy, medicine and magic. Caught repeatedly with magical books and antagonistic to the authorities, he served a series of prison sentences. He also began to establish himself as a medical practitioner. After an especially unsettled period in the late 1580s, during which he pursued the philosophers' stone in vain, was taken captive by pirates, imprisoned by the Bishop of Salisbury, accumulated debt and suffered venereal disease, he settled in London in 1592 and established a thriving astrological practice. At this point his autobiographical writings tail off and, to seek more information, we have to refer to his diaries, casebooks and astrological manuals.

Through the 1590s Forman was consulted more than 2,000 times a year, mostly on questions about health. His success attracted the attention of the College of Physicians of London, which regulated the practice of medicine in the capital. In 1599 they fined him for practising physic without a licence but he continued with his work. They imprisoned him and he sought the protection of noble patrons. They harried him and he moved out of their reach to Lambeth. In 1601 the college complained that Forman was the most obnoxious of the 'unlearned and unlawful practitioners, lurking in many corners of the City' beyond the college's jurisdiction. The antagonism continued and Forman's paranoia grew. He worried that the physicians were trying to murder him. In 1603, in an effort to establish the legitimacy of his credentials as an astrologer-physician, he spent a few months at Jesus College, Cambridge and secured a doctorate in physic and astronomy and



William Lilly's 1651 prediction of a great fire of London (the twins, Gemini, were the zodiacal sign associated with the

a licence to practise medicine. The capital).
physicians remained unimpressed and
the feud was never resolved.

What made Forman's approach to astrology so appealing to his clients and so opprobrious to learned physicians? Part of the answer lies in the politics of medicine in Elizabethan and early Jacobean London.

The College of Physicians of London was founded in 1514 (it received a Royal Charter in 1674). Its powers waxed and waned over the coming centuries, depending on support from the Crown and courts. It issued licences to practise physic, inspected the wares of apothecaries and heard cases of malpractice. Physic was defined as medicine that concerns the internal workings of the body. It was rooted in the teachings of Galen, adapted and augmented as it was transmitted through the Arab world and into the universities of medieval and Renaissance Europe. The four humours – blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile – had elemental properties (hot, cold, moist, dry) and an imbalance resulted in illness. Physicians advised their clients about how to maintain health through attention to diet, sleep and exercise and prescribed remedies to maintain the correct balance or to moderate a disruption. As directed, barber-surgeons performed blood-letting and apothecaries filled prescriptions for substances to evacuate the body through vomits, purges or sweats. Physicians and a minority of surgeons learned their art at the universities. Apothecaries and most surgeons trained through apprenticeships. These occupations were regulated through urban guilds.

This was a hierarchy of knowledge and status. Physicians were the medical elite, though they represent only a fraction of the medical practitioners in early modern London. Between 1580 and 1600 there were 50 licensed physicians in London. During this period the college identified 150 people practising physic in the city without due authority, some of whom were licensed but most of whom represent a larger body of irregular practitioners, many holding multiple occupations. These people ranged from highly educated men with medical degrees from foreign universities to people (mostly men, the occasional woman) who were schooled through experience alone. These practitioners came to the attention of the college through informants, during disputes over contracts or in cases of malpractice. From the perspective of the college, Forman was a quack. They examined him and found that he had little Latin learning and his knowledge of astrology was risible. Other practitioners defied the college's authority but Forman alone professed the supremacy of his astrological methods and attracted such an extensive clientele.

Forman actively challenged the established hierarchy in the name of astrology, promoting a model of medicine in which a single practitioner managed his patients' health by reading the stars to judge the cause of the disease, advising on regimen, performing blood-letting and minor surgery as necessary and prescribing his own distillations and drugs. Not only did the astrologer provide a complete service in tune with the cosmos, he alone could judge whether a disease was natural, demonic or divine. He alone could fashion amulets and potions charged with occult forces.

Forman's papers provide a unique perspective on a moment when the definitions of orthodox medicine and the authority to practise it were contested. They are also especially rich with details of the dynamics between the practitioner and his clients. Because he was an astrologer and because he needed to record systematic information and map the celestial motions, Forman recorded his consultations. His casebooks (a modern term; he called them books of judgements) record thousands of meetings with clients and his manuals of astrological medicine instruct us in his methods. Someone consulting him at his house would find him in his study, sitting in

front of his desk with a large notebook open in front of him and a pen in his hand. The astrologer usually wrote down the client's name, age, whether they appeared in person or had sent a letter or messenger, the moment at which the consultation began or the message arrived and the question posed. Ninety per cent of Forman's cases related to health, usually 'what is my disease' or 'am I pregnant'. This information provided a heading for each consultation.

Beneath it Forman drew a horoscope, mapping the position of the stars within the 12 celestial houses at the moment when the question was asked. To establish these positions Forman consulted an ephemeris. He then read this figure according to a series of rules about the positions of the planets within the houses. Thousands of stellar configurations were possible and the compendious rules of astrology were lodged in handbooks – such as Forman's guides to astrology, the Latin works which were his model, or, later, Lilly's *Christian Astrology* (1647). Beneath the chart the astrologer recorded his judgement about the cause of the disease, the identity of the thief, fidelity of the spouse, fortune of the merchant, soldier or cleric and so on. In some cases he also recorded further information stated by the client, a prediction, remedy, recommended course of action or payment.

Six volumes of Forman's casebooks survive, containing 10,000 consultations between 1596 and 1601 plus a brief run in 1603. Together with the records of Forman's protégé, Richard Napier (1559–1634), a clergyman in Buckinghamshire who had studied the art of astrology with him in the late 1590s and kept records of his astrological practice until his death in 1634, these number among the most extensive sets of surviving records of medical practice before 1800. Forman's clients included courtiers and their mistresses, merchants' wives and their servants, clergymen seeking preferment, actors suffering delusions and ordinary people worrying about their health and seeking lost and stolen property. Forman's casebooks came to embody the two-fold nature of his reputation. Some considered him an excellent astrologer; others perpetuated his identity as a quack by focusing on his magical aspirations, alleged demonic allegiances and lurid details of his sexual prowess.

Forman's skill was legendary. This is why, decades after the astrologer's death, Lilly sought papers in which Forman had documented the secrets of his art. Most of these had passed to Napier, who in turn bequeathed them to his great-nephew, from whom Ashmole bought them to add to his collection of astrological, alchemical, magical and heraldic books and manuscripts. Ashmole sorted and indexed Forman's papers and had them bound in the thick calfskin volumes, which strain the brass clasps, which their readers must gently unfasten. When Ashmole died in 1692 he had ensured that Forman's papers were preserved with the rest of his collection of manuscripts, books and rarities in the newly founded Ashmolean Museum. The Ashmole Collection, now housed in the Bodleian Library, holds the majority of Forman's papers. A few items are in the Sloane Collection at the British Library, the odd volume has strayed further afield and some are lost. (I recently discovered an unidentified work by Forman in the Ashmole Collection itself.)

The dark side of Forman's reputation also persisted through the 17th century and beyond. Four years after his death Forman was implicated in the trials of Frances Howard, Countess of Somerset, and her servant Anne Turner for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, spawning a rash of gossip and pamphlets. The women had consulted Forman and the court considered evidence that implicated Forman and portrayed him as an agent of the devil. This included a letter from Howard to Forman requesting magical potions to alienate her then husband, Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex and attract the love of James I's favourite, Robert, Earl of Somerset, whom she

hoped (and did go on) to marry; obscene wax images for use in love magic; and a book, perhaps a casebook, in which ladies at court had signed their names, engaging the services of the astrologer and perhaps also entering into a pact with the devil. From Jacobean plays to 19th-century novels, Forman became the stock cunning man of old whose work was sinister and foolish in equal measure.

Victorian bibliophilia exposed Forman to further scandals. When cataloguing the Ashmole Collection, William Black directed Shakespearean scholars to Forman's papers. Notes headed *The Bocke of Plaies* record rare eyewitness accounts of the performances of *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* at the Globe in April and May 1611. Forman also saw a play called *Richard II*, though this seems not to be the work by Shakespeare of that name. The manuscript was printed by John Payne Collier in 1836. Collier's other 'discoveries' have been exposed as forgeries and questions about the authenticity of the Forman record were raised by Shakespeareans in the 1930s. Literary scholars remain divided about the authenticity of *The Bocke of Plaies*, though the content and format of the manuscript is typical of the astrologer's writings in his final years.

The literary scholar James Halliwell prepared an edition of Forman's autobiographical writings in the 1840s but the text was deemed too unsavoury for publication and prurient readers needed to wait more than a century for the historian A.L. Rowse to use Forman's papers to identify Emelia Lanier – who consulted the astrologer a number of times and became friendly with him – as Shakespeare's alleged Dark Lady and to christen Forman the Elizabethan Pepys. Forman, like Pepys, would have been insignificant to the historical record if he had not exercised an excessive compulsion to write things down. And, like Pepys', Forman's papers are more than source material for the historical voyeur. His autobiographical works have informed social histories of family and youth; references to his medical writings adorn histories of medicine; his copies of alchemical and magical texts feature in histories of the occult; his casebooks document the popularity of astrology in early modern England; and, following Rowse, they've been pillaged, especially by literary scholars, for details of the lives of notable Elizabethans.

Forman's casebooks are legendary for the rare gems that reward the scholar who braves page after page of Forman's crabbed hand. But to treat these records as biographical repositories is to misunderstand their complexity and to underestimate their value. A project to produce a digital edition of Forman's casebooks is underway. This project marries the history of medicine and digital humanities. Through searching and sorting facilities it will make Forman's casebooks accessible as never before. It will also coach its users in the nature of these records. Each encounter between the astrologer and his client was inscribed within an astrological cosmology. When the astrologer recorded that a woman had a toothache it is as likely that he knew this from the position of the stars as from the woman's indication of pain. To begin to disentangle the astrologer's judgements and the client's experiences, we need to learn to understand the science of the stars. Astrology, moreover, factored in the dynamic between the astrologer and his clients. Through the language of the stars they negotiated the causes of disease. This is one of the reasons why Forman worked with a pen in hand. Record-keeping was both practical and performative. Healing was a process in which practitioners and patients collaborated in constructing narratives about the causes of disease, the dispersal of corrupting influences in the body and the restitution of health. Seldom are such medical transactions limited to a circumscribed exchange between a client and his patient. The edition will trace the links between people, allowing scholars to explore the ways in which matters of health and questions about fortune more generally were socially constituted.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of Forman's casebooks is not what they can tell us about the experiences of any individual or his or her family, friends, associates and enemies, but the perspective this edition will afford on cohorts of the astrologer's clients and the questions they asked. So far the most striking data to emerge from the edition relates to gender and fertility. Why did 50 per cent more women than men ask the astrologer about their health? What does it mean that six per cent of these women asked if they were pregnant? Is it possible that for people living in London 400 years ago Simon Forman provided the services of a gynaecologist, fertility counsellor and sex therapist?

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