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How to Read Simon Forman's Casebooks: Medicine, Astrology, and Gender in Elizabethan London

By LAUREN KASSEL

SUMMARY. Simon Forman's astrological casebooks record thousands of medical consultations. Amidst the wealth of information in these documents, however, it is unclear to what extent Forman relied on the stars for diagnoses and therapies, or how the casebooks reflect the dynamic between Forman and his clients. This article attempts to answer these questions by reading the casebooks alongside Forman's guide to astrological physic. This approach reveals that astrology was paramount in Forman's evaluations and treatments of his patients. According to Forman, in order for him to effect a cure, he had to be trusted. It was particularly difficult to treat women because their health depended on the state of their wombs, and on their sexual activity, subjects about which women were notoriously duplicitous. The task of the astrologer was first to assess whether or not a woman was sexually active, and only then could he make a judgement about her disease. At the same time, in demonstrating an ability to discern whether or not she was being honest about her sexual activities, Forman won her confidence. By accounting for the role of astrology and the dynamics between the patient and the physician, this article provides the framework within which to read one of the most comprehensive records of medical practices in early modern England.

KEYWORDS: astrology, casebooks, early modern, gender, medicine, Simon Forman, women

In Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* Dauphine compares Truewit's powers to procure the love of women with those of Medea, the mythological enchantress, and Simon Forman.¹ Forman was probably the most popular astrologer in Elizabethan London. To pair him with Medea is to signal Forman's popularity, and to dismiss his art as trickery. The serious, if compulsive, motives for Forman's pursuit of hermetic knowledge are documented in the thousands of pages of his extant manuscripts: he thought of himself as a magus.² This is not how he has been remembered to posterity. At the end of his life Forman was consulted by Frances Howard, the Countess of Essex, in her efforts to win the affections of Robert Carr, the Earl of Rochester, and to further estrange her husband, Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. Four years after Forman's death in 1611 his reputation was dragged into the trials of Howard and Carr for the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury.³ It was alleged that Forman had conspired with the devil and provided the Countess with

* Pembroke College, Cambridge, UK.

¹ B. Jonson, *Epicoene*, Act IV, scene 1, lines 139–40. This was acted in 1609 and first printed in 1616.

² Most of these manuscripts are preserved in the Ashmole Collection in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. For a full bibliography of Forman's manuscripts, see L. Kassel, 'Simon Forman's Philosophy of Medicine: Medicine, Astrology and Alchemy in London, c.1580–1611' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1997).

³ W. McElwee, *The Murder of Sir Thomas Overbury* (London, 1952); D. Lindley, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James* (London, 1993).

love philtres and magical objects. Two centuries later, Forman's lurid autobiographies and eye-witness accounts of Shakespeare's plays were unearthed by James Halliwell.⁴ Most recently, A. L. Rowse focused on Forman's casebooks, autobiographies, and diary to identify the women with whom he was intimate (including Shakespeare's alleged Dark Lady), and the men with whom he dined.⁵

Forman's papers only incidentally document his social engagements and romantic involvements; they are records of his study and practice of alchemy, natural magic, astrology, and medicine. Six volumes of Forman's casebooks are extant. They record more than 8,000 consultations and depict in unparalleled detail an Elizabethan medical practitioner, in this case an astrologer physician, in his day-to-day business.⁶ Most of Forman's clients came to him with medical queries, though he was also consulted for cases of theft, missing persons, patronage, and the occasional romantic predicament. Each entry in the casebooks begins with a person's name and the exact time of the question, and usually includes the patient's age, the question asked, and occasionally his or her address or occupation. This information is followed by an astrological figure, and below that a series of conclusions and perhaps a therapy.

To keep such detailed records in Elizabethan England was unusual; to judge the cause of a disease, and to predict its outcome according to the stars was controversial.⁷ The information which the casebooks record is far from transparent, and in order to make sense of it we must first account for the practical and intellectual processes within which it was inscribed. When the casebooks are set alongside Forman's astrological and medical treatises, a picture of what exactly happened in his consulting room can be reconstructed. The result will not be an explanation for why Forman, as an astrologer physician or eccentric philanderer, was so popular; I hope, rather, to clarify the terms within which one of the most comprehensive sets of early modern medical records should be read, and, albeit limited to this case, to reassess our understanding of the place of astrology and the dynamics of gender in the consulting room.

I

Historians of early modern England have approached astrology from three perspectives. Investigations into the popularity and decline of astrology have focused on almanacs and other printed astrological texts.⁸ Casebooks, of which those kept by astrologers tend to be the most detailed and systematic, have been plundered for

⁴ J. O. Halliwell (ed.), *The Autobiography and Personal Diary of Dr Simon Forman* (London, 1849). See also idem., 'Dr Simon Forman's Diary', *The Archaeologist, and Journal of Antiquarian Science*, 1 (1841–2), 44–7; idem., *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (Brighton, 1881), p. 78.

⁵ A. L. Rowse, *Simon Forman: Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age* (London, 1974).

⁶ Bodleian Library, MSS Ashmole (hereafter Ashm.) 234, 226, 195, 219, 236, 411.

⁷ D. C. Allen, *The Star-Crossed Renaissance: The Quarrel about Astrology and Its Influence in England* (London, 1943).

⁸ Allen, *Star-Crossed*; B. Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1500–1899* (London, 1979); A. Chapman, 'Astrological Medicine', in C. Webster (ed.), *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 275–300; P. Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1989); A. Geneva, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars* (Manchester, 1995).

intimate records about notable individuals.⁹ Those writing anthropologies of illness and healing have demonstrated that astrology provided a social and cosmological framework in a world where people experienced much anxiety and little medical efficacy.¹⁰ Forman figures in all of these accounts, sometimes as a charlatan, sometimes as a womanizer, and sometimes as a testament to the popularity of astrology; he has not been considered in his own right as an influence on the history of astrology or medicine, despite his numerous writings on these subjects. These writings provide extensive material for evaluating the role of astrology in medicine in Elizabethan London.

Ninety-two per cent of the questions about which Forman was consulted were medical, and 60 per cent of Forman's consultations were with women. These figures are typical of other early modern medical practices.¹¹ Various reasons to explain the higher numbers of women consulting medical practitioners have been suggested, ranging from a practitioner's sex appeal to the tendency for women to internalize the tensions which men expressed, for instance, at Shrovetide riots.¹² Forman's casebooks document that, in addition to consulting him more often than men for cases of illness, women were also more inclined to consult him about non-medical cases, to come to him in person, and to ask him questions on behalf of other people.¹³ While a woman's sex might have made her more prone to illness, gender emerges not only as a factor influencing who consulted Forman in the first place, but as an integral component in what happened in the consulting room. To make sense of this we need to look beyond Forman's personal charms and therapeutic skills to his astrological expertise.

We cannot categorically answer the question of why so many people, mainly women, consulted Forman; by looking instead at what happened between Forman

⁹ Rowse, *Simon Forman*. For this approach to non-astrological casebooks, see J. Lane (ed.), *John Hall and his Patients: The Medical Practice of Shakespeare's Son-in-Law* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1996).

¹⁰ M. MacDonald, 'The Career of Astrological Medicine in England', in O. Grell and A. Cunningham (eds.), *Religio Medici: Medicine and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 62–90; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981); R. Sawyer, 'Patients, Healers and Disease in the Southeast Midlands, 1597–1634' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1986); K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1973).

¹¹ For a brief study of Forman's astrological medicine, see B. Traister, 'Medicine and Astrology in Elizabethan England: The Case of Simon Forman', *Transactions and Studies of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, 11 (1989), 279–97. For the practice of another astrologer physician, Richard Napier, rector of Great Linford, Buckinghamshire, who learned astrology from Forman, and who was in devotion and character very different from him, see MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, esp. pp. 36–7; Sawyer, 'Patients, Healers and Disease', esp. p. 469; Thomas, *Religion*, p. 365. For studies of non-astrological practitioners, see L. M. Beier, *Sufferers and Healers: The Experience of Illness in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1987). An exception was the practice of Joseph Binns, a surgeon, who saw more men than women: *ibid.* pp. 55–6. For the London College of Physicians the popularity of irregular medical practitioners with women was axiomatic: M. Pelling, 'Compromised by Gender: the Role of the Male Medical Practitioner in Early Modern England', in H. Marland and M. Pelling (eds.), *The Task of Healing: Medicine, Religion and Gender in England and the Netherlands, 1450–1800* (Rotterdam, 1996), p. 112.

¹² See for instance Beier, *Sufferers and Healers*, pp. 217, 241; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 39; S. Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 11.

¹³ These conclusions are based on my M.Sc. dissertation, 'Casting Figures for Disease: The Patients of an Astrological Medical Practitioner in London, 1596–1598' (Oxford, 1994).

and his patients we will shift the emphasis from why people went to Forman to what happened while they were with him. Two conclusions will emerge. First, astrology was integral to Forman's procedures. The casebooks embody this: as material objects, they were present in the consultation, and literally exposed the astrological component of Forman's expertise. This is not to say that the patient necessarily believed in astrology; indeed, the astrologer had to establish his authority and to negotiate a diagnosis and a therapy. Secondly, according to Forman, astrology was particularly necessary in dealing with women's diseases because women were perceived as duplicitous.¹⁴ The astrologer, unlike other medical practitioners, could discern the sexual activities and emotional preoccupations of his patients, factors which, it seems, were essential to women's well being. Astrology and gender, from Forman's point of view, were inextricably bound: his astrological skills entailed an ability to win the trust of women.

II

These conclusions could not be drawn from the casebooks alone. Fortunately, Forman provided the perfect complement to them: his guide to how to practise astrological physic, *The Astrologicall Judgements of Phisick and Other Questions*. Forman first drafted this treatise around 1594, and periodically revised it until his death in 1611.¹⁵ For our purposes the most extensive version of the work has two important features. The first is a long introduction that outlines how to hold an astrological consultation and make judgements. The second is a series of stories interjected throughout the manuscript in which Forman illustrated the necessity of astrology to physic, and portrayed himself as a successful physician.

In the introduction Forman told the reader that there were three questions which the astrologer should ask at the beginning of every consultation. The first was the sick person's name. Where a consultation occurred on behalf of another person, this revealed the sex of that person, and in all cases made it possible to locate previous consultations. The next question was the sick person's age, as close as could be known. This was because diseases were age specific, not because Forman planned to cast a horoscope. The third question, in cases where the question was not asked by the sick person directly, was whether the person who had brought or asked the question had come at the request and with the consent of the patient. Forman made it clear that these formulaic interviews were controversial, and he defended them:

These men and such like I know will sey unto me many tymes behind my back, as well as they have some tymes sayd unto my face. Why should this Phantasticall Fellow demaund such foolish Questions? Is it Materiall to know the Name of the sick, or is there any difference in Names, or is ther any thing to be knowen by once Name? Or in the Age of the Parties? Or is it to any purpose whether the sicke bodie doth send him selfe or no? Cometh not all to one end, or will not the Judgment be all one? To which I answere and say, No Sir, it is not one.

¹⁴ A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven, 1995), pp. 73–4.

¹⁵ Ashm. 1495, 355, 363. Of the latter, there are four versions: Ashm. 389, 403 and B.L., Sloane MS 99. For the most part I rely on the fullest version, Ashm. 363.

Forman also told of attempts to prove him wrong by changing the name of the patient from John to Joan, or the proverbial replacement of human urine with that of a horse. The astrologer's questions exposed such impostors.¹⁶

Based on the time a question was asked, Forman then constructed an astrological figure. Astrology was by definition a written art. Whether making a prediction, casting a nativity, calculating an election or decumbiture, or answering a horary question—which Forman mostly did—a figure needed to be drawn.¹⁷ The figure was a square divided into twelve sections, called houses, each of which represented a section of the celestial orb. The signs of the zodiac were positioned on the edges of the houses, and the five known planets, the moon, and the sun were likewise mapped onto the figure.¹⁸ Each house could represent a set of categories, which might include a person (the patient, the physician), a principle (life, death), a part of the body, a social relationship, or some combination thereof. For medicine, the first, sixth and eighth houses (representing the ill person, the affliction, and death, respectively) were the most important, and the presence of evil planets (Saturn, Mars) in these was ominous. Forman devoted a chapter to each house in his guide to astrological physic and the bulk of the book consists of thousands of astrological configurations and their meanings. They range from the general ('party feareth to die and is aferd of death'); to the specific ('the partie hath surfeited with muskadell and oysters').¹⁹ Forman culled these rules from numerous sources and revised and added to them from his own experience.

III

The guide to astrology is as much an apology for the medical use of astrology as an exposition of it. Forman needed to justify his methods. His adversaries were the university-educated, humanist physicians, as represented by the London College of Physicians. Forman was not formally educated. He attended school in Salisbury, near where he was born, and was then apprenticed to a grocer, from whom he learned the mysteries of herbs and drugs. He broke his apprenticeship at age twenty and spent a year and a half in Oxford as a poor scholar. The next two decades of his life are poorly documented, though he seems to have been a school teacher, acted as a tutor, and occasionally practised medicine. His knowledge of disease and the ability to cure it, as far as he was concerned, were endowed by God, and he was elusive about the terrestrial sources of what he called his art. His manuscript notes,

¹⁶ Ashm. 363, fols. 1–9v, esp. 2v–3. MacDonald relies on this introduction for his description of Napier's methods for conducting a consultation: *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 26. An early version of this introduction appears in Ashm. 1495, fols. 29–32.

¹⁷ A nativity was based on the time of birth, a decumbiture on the time a person fell ill, an horary question on the time the question was asked, and an election was to determine the most propitious time to do something.

¹⁸ These methods were described in numerous printed astrological handbooks of the seventeenth century. See for instance William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* (London, 1647). For other accounts of Forman's medical astrology, see R. Dunn, 'The Status of Astrology in Elizabethan England 1558–1603' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1992), pp. 112–21; Sawyer, 'Patients, Healers and Disease', pp. 279–87.

¹⁹ These are from Forman's judgements on the first house, Ashm. 363, fols. 30v–44v.

however, reveal that at the age of twenty he had begun his lifelong interest in buying, copying and reading manuscripts and books relating to astrology, alchemy and medicine.

He moved to London in 1591 (when he was forty years old), and established a reputation as a medical practitioner during the plague of 1592. The College of Physicians summoned him in 1593, and began their long-standing attempts to curtail his practices; at first they succeeded in fining and imprisoning him. In 1599, in an effort to escape their persecution, Forman moved to Lambeth, which was beyond their jurisdiction.²⁰ In 1603 he made a final effort to quell their opposition and obtained a licence from Cambridge University to practise physic.²¹

In one of the College's last attempts to quash Forman, a Mr Pelham reported on Forman's activities: 'Firstly he asks the name and place of habitation of the client: then (as he openly confesses) he makes an effigy: thirdly just as if he were a prophet he foretells the disease and fate of the patient: finally he prescribes medicaments.' Further testimony followed from one Jacob Saterthayte: 'for when he [Saterthayte] had come to him [Forman] at his home, he first asked him his name and then where he was staying: thirdly he fashioned an effigy and gave an opinion regarding the disease. He demanded ten pence from him for one medicament: for another five shillings and for two purgatives four shillings.'²² As was often the case, Forman refused to appear to answer these charges.

Prescribing medicines was officially the domain of the physician, and providing them that of the apothecary. Forman was one of many practitioners who violated this hierarchy.²³ Throughout his manuscripts he denounced the practices of humanist physicians in terms as strong as those in which they condemned him, and articulated an oppositional, hermetic philosophy of medicine. He subscribed to the analogy between the macrocosm and the microcosm, and argued that astrology should govern all medical practices. The physician, surgeon, or apothecary who neglected astrology could not know the cause of a disease, nor the correct time to administer medicines which would ease it. In disregarding the stars, they acted against the ancient medical authorities, against experience, and against God.

The marriage of physic and astrology was nothing new. Although judicial astrology was the subject of rigorous debate in Elizabethan England, the importance of the position of the planets remained a medical commonplace, and some physicians specialised in its principles.²⁴ Forman, however, had neither the credentials nor the status of a formally educated physician. Indeed, the College of Physicians found him ignorant of astrology, a verdict that it is difficult to reconcile with the evidence of his papers.²⁵ For Forman, astrology was the difference

²⁰ Ashm. 195, fols. 98, 111; 219, fol. 135; 411, fols. 32v, 50v, 103v; 208, fol. 63v; 392, fol. 142. Forman had also lived in Lambeth for the first six months of 1598: Ashm. 226, fol. 268.

²¹ Ashm. 208, Item 13, fol. 225v; 802, Item 13, fol. 133. The licence is Ashm. 1301, and Ashm. 1763 is Ashmole's copy of this.

²² Royal College of Physicians, *Annals* (hereafter *Annals*), 30 March 1607 (vol. 2, pp. 191–2).

²³ M. Pelling and C. Webster, 'Medical Practitioners', in Webster (ed.), *Health, Medicine and Mortality* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 165–235. See also Pelling, *The Strength of the Opposition: The College of Physicians and Irregular Medical Practice in Early Modern London*, Macmillan, forthcoming.

²⁴ Chapman, 'Astrological Medicine', p. 283.

²⁵ *Annals*, 7 Feb. 1595 (vol. 2, p. 97).

between himself and other medical practitioners. He stressed that while it was important to learn all that one could about the patient, this information alone was not the basis of the diagnosis. Rather, the information and the time at which it was conveyed were matched to astrological rules; a prescription which should make us pause before equating the astrologer with the holistic medical practitioner. Forman, moreover, dismissed other means of diagnosis. Urinoscopy did not afford information about the state of the body; if a patient brought the urine to the physician it was a token of his or her will to be healed.²⁶ Listening to a patient was likewise unreliable.²⁷ Forman boasted that he could make an accurate diagnosis when he had seen neither the patient nor her urine; the particulars of the situation and the timing of the question were enough.²⁸ As he discovered with the case of one Lady Hawkins, Forman's methods could be considered dangerous. After he had gone to her house, he recorded that 'they suspected me to be a magician &c. because I told her disease and sawe not her water'.²⁹ Forman did not look at the urine; nor, he tells us, did he assess the situation from what the client told him. He succinctly stated the importance of the astrologer's diagnostic questions: 'ther is no true way to knowe a mans disease by his water, pulse, sedge [stool] or talk, but by arte Astronomicalle.'³⁰

In practice this meant that a patient could consult Forman in his rooms, request that he visit her at her own home, or send a note or representative. Those who saw him in person might witness his disregard of their urine, and his enactment of the strange ritual of asking questions and writing the answers in his book. He would then draw a figure, and perhaps consult several other books. What happened next is less clear: the introduction to the guide to astrology and the casebooks cease to be prescriptive. Presumably Forman delivered a verdict, his judgement. In some cases this was accepted, medicines prescribed, and the consultation could be concluded in a few minutes. In many cases it was not this simple. The patient and the practitioner would then negotiate the reading of the figure.

IV

It is one thing to reconstruct Forman's medical theories from his precepts for the astrologer physician; it is another to determine to what extent his writings reflected his actual practices. Forman represented himself as having a minimum of contact with his patients. This may be because talk was associated with women, and physical operations were associated with the manual crafts of the surgeon, two associations which might lessen a physician's prestige.³¹ How does this portrayal compare with Forman's procedures for diagnosing his clients as they are recorded in the casebooks?

²⁶ Ashm. 1495, fols. 29, 31v-32; 1491, pp. 1274-5.

²⁷ Ashm. 1495, fol. 32; 363, fol. 2.

²⁸ Ashm. 403, fol. 81.

²⁹ Ashm. 1495, fol. 486.

³⁰ Ashm. 1491, fol. 1274. I am grateful to Mark Jenner for defining 'sedge'.

³¹ Pelling, 'Compromised by Gender', pp. 107, 111.

In an early version of his guide to astrology Forman stressed that the nature of the question which was put to the astrologer was extremely important, largely because a question would only be asked when a person's mind was in accordance with the heavens.³² In the casebooks, Forman did not record the specific questions as patients or their querents asked them, but reduced them into categories.³³ For most of the cases Forman recorded 'diz', an abbreviation for disease. For 8 per cent of the cases Forman recorded no type of question at all, though most of these were probably for disease. Occasionally Forman recorded more specific questions, 'mend or pair'³⁴ or 'live or die'; he classified 5 per cent of the women who consulted him as asking if they were pregnant. Forman also noted if a person was having a second or third consultation. This was relevant because the position of the stars at the first consultation remained extremely important.³⁵ Although Forman's categories might have effaced his patients' questions, they none the less represent a certain element of diversity. They also make it clear that a question was asked, and an answer was expected.

Most of the entries in the casebooks (more than 90 per cent) contain secondary information. This consists of some combination of symptoms, causes, personal histories, and prescriptions. The symptoms are usually formulaic, including various internal pains, vomiting or nausea, swimming in the head, or fevers, and it is unclear whether these were articulated by the patient or whether Forman deduced them from the positions of the stars, or, as is most likely, from some combination of the two. The repetition of symptoms in successive cases may indicate that Forman literally looked to the stars to determine the person's disease: such as when he recorded three cases of toothache on a single day in May 1596, and no other cases during the same quarter of the year.³⁶ These examples illustrate the necessity for caution in attributing the patients' symptoms to themselves. At the end of some of the entries Forman recorded information which either contradicts or corroborates the previous symptoms, and it appears that he and the patient negotiated his conclusions, and the patient conveyed, or Forman elicited, extra information.³⁷

A close analysis of the casebooks, combined with Forman's prescriptions for the astrologer, demonstrate that astrology was essential for diagnosing the disease. It was also integral to choosing a course of therapy to remedy it.³⁸ The astrologer had to persuade the patient of the correctness of his judgement, and the appropriateness of the course of action to be followed to remedy the determined disease. The casebooks, as enduring documents, were essential to this process. If a patient had consulted him before, Forman could recall the previous session from his notes.³⁹ He wrote:

³² Ashm. 1495, fol. 31v.

³³ Napier seems also to have done this, though MacDonald and Sawyer overlook it.

³⁴ Meaning to improve or worsen, to mend or decline.

³⁵ Ashm. 1495, fols. 494, 502.

³⁶ Ashm. 234, fols. 28v–29.

³⁷ See for instance, Ashm. 234, fols. 14, 16v, 34.

³⁸ Ashm. 1495, fol. 32; 363 fols. 159–62v, 170v–71.

³⁹ In most cases the casebooks do not record when a patient returned to have a therapy administered. It seems that there might have been another notebook in which this, as well as costs and payments, would have been recorded.

For suppose there comes to me this day 3, 4, 5 or 6, 10 or 20, and to morrow as many more, & the next day as manie more, some of them will take physick and some will take none. Some tymes again, the tyme doth not serve to give physick, and sometymes men, or ye parties have no tyme to tacked it because of necessarie businesse and they com again 2, 3, or 4 dayes a weeke after. If I had not their names, and disease on my booke, how could I tell what thier diseases were, or what to doe unto them, or what to give them, but so soone as they tell me again their names I find it one my boack. There do I see the cause of their disease, and how they are troubled & what I must doe unto them. Els should I forget as many doe, and so give them chales for cheese, and so perhaps give them that which will doe them more harme then good ...⁴⁰

Some would take physick, and some would take none. Forman used astrology to determine what was wrong with the patient, whether or not to prescribe a course of therapy, and then had to persuade the patient of the validity of these decisions. Those who had come to him did not necessarily accept astrology, nor respect Forman's authority as a medical practitioner; his method for conducting a consultation was unorthodox, and he had neither the credentials of status nor education to legitimate his eccentricities. Forman's skill, he asserted, was in making correct judgements, and thereby winning the confidence of the patient. In order for him to heal, he had to be trusted.⁴¹ The casebooks do not record how Forman and his patients negotiated their differing expectations and ideas about a diagnosis and the appropriate course of therapy, yet these exchanges are fundamental to understanding his records. The casebooks enabled Forman to provide continuity and consistency in his therapies.

Throughout Forman's guide to astrology he stressed the importance of the relationship between the physician and the patient. In all cases the physician had to determine whether he could help the patient or not, depending on whether the patient would trust him, and whether the disease was caused by natural, as opposed to supernatural, factors. Forman noted in some cases that the presence of the physician could be as important as the course of therapy prescribed.⁴² For instance, Forman recounted an extreme case in which his mere presence was enough to effect some relief. He was called to see a woman who had been constipated for nearly a week and, he noted, when he went to see her 'as I toke her by the hand she rejoiced so much of my coming to her that she presently went to stolle'.⁴³ In most cases, however, the relationship was not so productive. The trust between the physician and the patient, Forman maintained, was continually undermined by the abuse of physick by medical practitioners who did not heed the stars. This abuse caused people to fear physick, which in itself was neither good nor bad:

they see that many physicians for want of art & knowledge have dealt so evill with them or their friends in former tymes making their bodies Apothecaries shops, & consume their substance and wealth, and use so much Physick unto them, that they bring them from better to worse. And where before they were a little out of quyet, they macke them sik.

⁴⁰ Ashm. 363, fol. 3r-v.

⁴¹ For the subject of trust in sixteenth-century Latin medical literature, see W. Schleiner, *Medical Ethics in the Renaissance* (Washington, DC, 1995), pp. 6-7, 25.

⁴² Ashm. 1495, fol. 477v.

⁴³ Ashm. 1495, fol. 486v. This case is recorded in Forman's casebooks, Ashm. 234, fol. 8. See also Ashm. 1495, fols. 486, 500v, 503.

And where they be a little sicke, they detinewe [detain] them so, till in the end they dye, so that more in a yeare often perish through the follie of ignorant phisicians (for want of art and knowledge, to know the cause of the disease) then other wise.⁴⁴

The abuse of physic damaged the credibility of all medical practitioners, and made many people distrustful. It also made Forman's job very difficult. If a patient did not accept the physician's judgement, a cure could not be effected. It was not enough for a patient to tell a practitioner what was wrong, and then to accept or to refuse the prescribed medicines. Further co-operation was required. Based on when he was asked a question, the astrologer discerned the cause of the disease. In order to remedy the cause, the course of physic, if it was required, had to be administered at the appropriate times. If the time for the curing of the disease was not propitious, the physician should decline to treat the patient, and ask her or him to come back after a season or a year. In his experience, Forman noted, many did return, though having consulted other medical practitioners in vain during the interval.

The secondary information in the casebooks supports this image of the shrewd astrologer. Forman's records of therapies are clear, though they may be incomplete. Most of the prescriptions which he recorded were for preparations, purges and/or vomits (74 per cent total; 71 per cent women; 79 per cent men). A quarter of his treatments required bleeding, usually following a preparation and purge (20 per cent of female treatments; 29 per cent of male treatments).⁴⁵ Occasionally Forman specified a potion or pill, such as his imperial water, strong water, or diet drink, and sometimes he listed the ingredients.⁴⁶ Although the remedies were rather generic, they were to be administered at distinctly different times and intervals. What is striking about the therapies recorded in the casebooks is the lack of them: Forman only recorded treatments for 35 per cent of his cases. The figure is the same for men and women. He occasionally noted whether a person would be ruled, was reluctant to take physic, had previously taken much medicine on ill advice, as well as whether his or her temperament was well or ill suited to particular therapies.⁴⁷ Though the information might be imperfect, the casebooks support Forman's self-portrayal as prudent in his use of physic; he was not sending everyone away with a barrage of potions or a universal panacea.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ashm. 363, fol. 5.

⁴⁵ For Forman's notes on bloodletting, see Ashm. 1494, pp. 305–20. Cf. Rowse, *Simon Forman*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ For recipes dated 1595 see Ashm. 1495, fols. 1–2. For recipes on the endpapers of casebooks, see Ashm. 411, fol. 101 where Forman noted several diet drinks; also Ashm. 219, fols. 51v–52. For recipes within the casebooks, see Ashm. 195, fols. 88, 52v; Ashm. 236, fols. 12, 87v; a recipe for sore eyes, Ashm. 411, fol. 49v. For a list of herbs and minerals, see Ashm. 219, fol. 182. Forman recorded other recipes in his alchemical notebooks, Ashm. 1490, 1491, 1494.

⁴⁷ Had Forman's correspondence with his patients survived, we might have a clearer record of how therapies were conducted when the patient was not present. For a letter inserted in the casebooks, see Ashm. 236, fol. 23.

⁴⁸ Cf. H. Cook, 'Good Advice and Little Medicine: The Professional Authority of Early Modern English Physicians', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), 1–31.

V

In the verse preface to *The Astrologicalle Judgements of Phisick and Other Questions* Forman went beyond doubting the value of his patients' words and asserted that nothing that anyone said should be trusted; rather, the truth had to be read in the stars.⁴⁹ His mission, as he saw it, was to expose duplicity, and to discover the cause of the disease. By so doing, he won the trust of the patient and his or her compliance in the requisite therapy. This process of negotiation was not recorded in the casebooks; it is, however, illustrated in Forman's guide to astrology in the stories in which he presented himself as a successful astrologer physician. These stories are typical of the genre of case histories such as those used by Cardano.⁵⁰ In many cases the patient was quite young and genteel, and there were moral and sexual overtones to the encounter.⁵¹ Forman portrayed himself within this genre, despite the fact that gentlewomen were a minority of his patients.⁵² His artfulness aside, in these stories Forman demonstrated the mechanisms by which he established his authority as an astrologer, an authority that he attributed to the veracity of his judgements and the virtue of the therapies he prescribed for all of his patients.

Before looking at Forman's representation of his triumphs over gentlewomen, we need to disentangle early-modern stereotypes about women's untrustworthiness, medical ideas of female physiology, and Forman's own preoccupations about gender.⁵³ As the Casanova of the astrological consulting rooms, Forman has a reputation for having more than a medical interest in his female patients. His records of sexual encounters aside, Forman subscribed to the contemporary notions of female physiology and affirmed the commonplace that women were duplicitous.⁵⁴ He echoed contemporary proverbs when he noted '<Never> trust a woman by her wordes/ thought she doth wepe and cry'.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ashm. 389, fol. 1. This version of the guide to astrology begins with a verse preface which is absent from the other versions. For a discussion of physicians lying to their patients, see Schleiner, *Medical Ethics*, pp. 45–8.

⁵⁰ N. Siraisi, 'Girolamo Cardano and the Art of Medical Narrative', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 52 (1991), 581–602.

⁵¹ L. Dixon, *Perilous Chastity: Women and Illness in Pre-Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Ithaca, 1995).

⁵² Although Forman occasionally described someone as a lady or a servant, he did not consistently record the status of his patients.

⁵³ For the conclusion that Forman was a gynaecological expert, see Traister, 'Medicine and Astrology', p. 297.

⁵⁴ P. Crawford, 'Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 91 (1981), 54; Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 63–5; I. Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1980); A. Laurence, 'Women's Psychological Disorders in Seventeenth-Century Britain', in A. Angerman et al. (eds.), *Current Issues in Women's History* (London, 1989), pp. 203–19; H. Smith, 'Gynecology and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England', in B. A. Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women's History* (Urbana, 1976), pp. 99–101. Forman is used as an example throughout the literature on women's illnesses, sexuality and medicine.

⁵⁵ Ashm. 389, fol. 2. Cf. 'trust not a woman when she weeps', 'women have tears of dissimulation as well as sorrow', 'women laugh when they can and weep when they will', 'women weep and sicken when they list' (K. U. Henderson and B. F. McManus (eds.), *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England 1540–1640* (Urbana, 1985), p. 62, quoted in Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pp. 73–4).

Forman followed contemporary ideas when he asserted that women's diseases were bound to their reproductive capacity and their sexual activity. In order to assess a woman's health, a physician needed to know whether she might be pregnant. Women, however, were seldom forthright or frank in this capacity. In the later version of the guide to astrology Forman described the difficulties that the physician had in obtaining this information: 'And yet as a man examine them [women] and tell them they are with child they will denie it utterly & say they are exceding honeste, when God knoweth no such matter. But some of them have had a bastard or 2 before & manytimes doe lie 3 or 4 times in a weeke with a man & yet they would be thought honest maides, wives, or widdoes.' Forman recommended that the astrologer consult the stars to see if a woman was a virgin, then whether she was pregnant.⁵⁶

The importance of reproduction when dealing with female consultations is evident in the casebooks. Although Forman recorded that only 5 per cent of the women who consulted him asked if they were pregnant, in 44 per cent of women's medical cases he noted factors concerning reproduction (usually simply 'in matrix' (womb), or 'pain in matrix', whether or not she menstruated regularly, or 'taken in childbed'). Like most of Forman's writings, his notes on the diseases of women were astrological. His sources are elusive, though he drew extensively from a treatise by Guido Bonatti for general questions such as whether or not a woman would conceive.⁵⁷ Diseases of women were not yet the subject of a specialized literature written in English.⁵⁸ Forman extracted passages on women from general, vernacular medical texts, to which he added his observations, such as the appearance of a woman when she was menstruating.⁵⁹ In contrast to his astrological writings, Forman's treatise on the diseases of women, 'Matrix and the Pain thereof', is highly empirical as well as astrological.⁶⁰ Forman wrote this in 1596 and revised it in 1599, during a period when London physicians were debating whether various diseases of women had natural or supernatural causes; yet Forman seems not to have engaged with these controversies.⁶¹

This treatise contains detailed information about Forman's treatment of diseases of women. In it Forman described the problems which women experienced when evil humours congealed in their wombs and were not properly evacuated. The physician's job was to assist this evacuation, as he might evacuate the body with

⁵⁶ Ashm. 363, fol. 198v. In an earlier version Forman, less cynically, suggested that the first question was whether or not the woman was married: Ashm. 1495, fol. 29.

⁵⁷ Ashm. 390, fols. 202–3v. Forman gave folio references to Bonatti, *De Astronomia Tractatus X* (Basel, 1550).

⁵⁸ M. MacDonald (ed.), *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case* (London, 1991); Schleiner, *Medical Ethics*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ King's College, Cambridge, MS 16, fols. 78v–80v; see M. Edmond, 'Simon Forman's Vade-Mecum', *Book Collector*, 26 (1977), 56.

⁶⁰ B. Traister (ed.) "'Matrix and the Pain Thereof': A Sixteenth-Century Gynaecological Essay", *Medical History*, 35 (1991), 436–51. The manuscript is Ashm. 390, fol. 161–8. 'Matrix', a fair copy, is bound alongside a draft treatise on questions of pregnancy (Ashm. 190–9). Forman also included sections on diseases of women in his guides to astrology, though he either excised them or left them incomplete (Ashm. 363, fols. 102–10v; 1495, p. 506).

⁶¹ MacDonald, *Witchcraft and Hysteria*, p. xii.

purges and emetics.⁶² Medicines taken orally or rectally were no good for this; the matrix required special attention. In order to discover whether this was in practice possible, Forman noted,

I have made diligente Inquisition amonge grave matrons and midwives and others to knowe wher the matrix doth exempte himself of any thinge that yt receyveth of man more then once in a month or noe. And they have told me yea, that yt doth exempte yt selfe of any thing that yt receyveth of man and dothe vomite out the nature and sperme of man received by divers coitions, and will alsoe belche out wind (like as the stomacke doth) at the vulva.⁶³

As the menstrual cycle followed the moon, so these lesser evacuations of the womb followed the tide. These were natural evacuations of the womb. There were in addition medicines which purged the womb violently and artificially. The physician should 'joine arte and nature together', and prescribe physic to purge the womb at times which corresponded with its natural evacuations.⁶⁴ In order to find the correct time at which to administer a remedy, 'First youe muste learne the tyme when their [a woman's] menstruelle course doth use to com, and som thre or 4 dais alwaies before they have their course youe shall make them a lotion to washe their bellies as hote as thei can suffer yt all over'.⁶⁵

Elsewhere Forman described how diagnosing pregnancy was one of the greatest difficulties in dealing with diseases of women: a woman might menstruate while pregnant, or not menstruate while not pregnant. As with other conditions, the urine would not reveal the answer, nor could the patient simply tell the physician. In his discussion of questions of pregnancy, Forman added an empirical observation to his usual precept that the answer had to be read in the stars: if a woman had milk or water in her breasts, she might or might not be pregnant. But one thing was certain: she had been with a man, and his seed had caused a conception in her womb, which might be 'perfect' (genuine) or false, as could be judged astrologically.⁶⁶

Throughout his writings Forman appealed to his experience of correct and false astrological judgements; in his writings on the diseases of women he also gave vivid accounts of physical observations and therapeutic procedures. These accounts were more explicit than those found in the casebooks, and they reveal the boundary between Forman and his female patients. This boundary was conventionally traversed by other women, the grave matrons and midwives from whom Forman had obtained his information.⁶⁷ In particular, Forman described how a midwife, Mrs Whip, inserted her hand into the womb of one of his patients, and he also recommended Mrs Whip's ointment.⁶⁸ These women, however, do not appear in

⁶² Traister, 'Matrix', p. 443.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 443. For possible resonances with Hippocratic ideas, see H. King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London, 1998), p. 136.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 444.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 442.

⁶⁶ Ashm. 390, fol. 190r-v.

⁶⁷ Although Forman's reference to the expertise of women may in part be artful, the extent to which medical authors used this trope requires further study. For the contrast between the knowledge of physicians and that of old women and empirics, see C. Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626-1660* (London, 1975), p. 248.

⁶⁸ Traister, 'Matrix', pp. 441, 445. See p. 442 for another description of a skilful midwife inserting her hand into the matrix.

the casebooks, with the possible exception of one Mrs Cuer, who might have been a go-between for Forman and some of his patients.⁶⁹ In addition, although there is an isolated record in which Forman noted 'I with my own hands did minister a cataplasme to her lower parts of her belly', this was probably not the norm.⁷⁰ Though these women are absent from his casebooks, Forman encompassed the skills of midwives under the rubric of his astrology. Women trusted Forman, a man and an astrologer, to recommend therapies conventionally controlled by women.⁷¹ By his definition, this meant that they entrusted him with information about their sexual activities, information with which, in most cases, women were not forthcoming.

VI

Although casebooks are the closest records we have of the patients' words, they need to be read with caution; little remains of the dialogue out of which they emerged. The stories which Forman recorded in his guide to astrology, albeit formulaic and dramatic, allow another perspective on the way in which exchanges between the astrologer and his clients might have occurred. In conclusion, then, we will look at the most elaborate of these.

One morning Forman was called to a woman, lodging with her sister in London, who had travelled a great distance to consult him. 'When I came to her, our selves beinge lefte alone, she showed me her urine, according to the ordinary custome, and desireth my judgemente.' Before he had left his house he had cast a figure. It showed that 'the course of heaven yielded no disease, but some paine of her head and eyes'. He told her this. She demanded whether he found anything at all. He said no, he could not find any disease at all in her body. Then,

She saide she was troubled with a greater matter thee which, if I could not finde, she thought my skill was not sufficient to give her remedie for it: And therefore she saide further I am sorry that I have taken so greate a journey to come so farre unto you, thee which I perceive is not such in respecte of your skill, as is reported to be. And I am also sorry that I have troubled you so much, and againe that it is not my good fortune to find that good and knowledge at your hands as others have done.

Forman remained composed, and asked to be given two hours to see if he could discover anything else. She agreed. Forman went home, looked at the figure he had cast, consulted many books, and came to the same conclusion: the disease was of her mind.

He returned to the woman's house for dinner, after which she went to her room and sent for him: 'and I told her as before, I found no other disease in her body but only in her head and [I] kept the rest of the secret matter to my selfe, because she seemeth to deal so coningly with me, and thought to overretched me, and to try my skill so deeply.' The woman thanked Forman and said, 'Sir, you are note the

⁶⁹ See Ashm. 234, fol. 33v; 226, fols. 35, 193v, 208v, 232v, 300v; 236, fol. 183; 411, fol. 101.

⁷⁰ Ashm. 1495, fol. 503v.

⁷¹ Pelling, 'Compromised by Gender', p. 107.

man that I looketh for, or did hope to finde that can no better discerne my greefe. I am very sorry, I have troubled you'. Forman promptly put her in her place:

Yea gentlewoman, quoth I, and I am very sorrie also that you should be so troublesome both to me and to yourselfe, to the which need not have been, if the greeve of your mind, were noe greater then the greeve of your body. But because the disease of the mind are not seene in a pissotte, it pertaines not to me, but rather to a dynnie [divine?] that can give goode counsell, of the which at this time you have more neede thereof than of medicine to cure any disease of your body. You had little need of either of them at thise present. And so I leave you ...

He turned around and stepped quietly out of the door. By the time the woman had recovered from the shock of the truth of Forman's words, he was in the street. She ran after him, grabbed his cloak, and begged him to return to her chamber. He declined, and resisted for a time before giving way and returning with her. Once in her chamber, she shut the door and sat down in front of it.

He had won; the denouement followed. She asked what he had meant when he said she was more sick in her mind than her body. He replied:

Well gentlewoman, quoth I, because hereafter you shalle not saye that you have found lesse in me then was reported unto you, I will now unfold my mind more largely unto you because yourself shall not saye your journey hath bene in vaine, and againe, because I will not have arte blemished. This it is you come unto me with a pissott to knowe your disease of your body or rather the disease of your mind, but how should the greefe of the mind be discerned therein, when the disease of the body cannot be seene therein. I never saw a gentlewoman of your vocation having so deepe occation to use good counsell, to mocke a man of arte with a pissott. Thou shouldest have delt plainly with mee and not fraudulently if you ment to have any succar at my hands, and have told me the greefes of thy mind for the which cause you are come to me ...

As it transpired, Forman had discerned a romantic scenario, which he recounted to the woman. The woman had been 'familiar' with a man who was not her husband. She and her lover had fallen out, and he had said he would tell her husband. This was the source of her disease: 'for feare hereof thou art much perplexed in thy mind, which made the[e] come unto me for good counsell to prevent the mischeef and harme that may and is like to inssue hereof. For thy creadit and whole estate dependeth theron, if it once come to thy husbands eares.' When Forman told the gentlewoman this tale, she was amazed and ashamed. She did not know what to say, and burst into tears, 'saying Sir it is true, it is true, and I am so much ashamed of my follie herein that I am hartely sorry for provoking you so much.' She then told Forman the whole story, and asked for his advice. He concluded, 'So I adviseth her so wisely that wee stopt the gentlemans mouth, and made them frinds again, but in such sorte that thay should never come together againe as thay had done before, and so saved her creadit and cureth her disease'.⁷²

Astrology governed how Forman kept his casebooks, conducted a consultation, and evaluated a question. These practices set Forman in opposition to the medical authorities and might have aroused suspicion among his patients. At the same time astrology provided the mechanisms by which Forman demonstrated his authority,

⁷² Ashm. 363, fols. 138v-[40]v.

and required that he win the trust of his patients in order to treat them. These conclusions are based on Forman's writings: we do not have a single patient's account of a consultation with Forman. The casebooks are themselves a tenuous clue to how Forman's services as an astrologer were perceived. As physical objects they were central to the representations of him in the pamphlet literature that surrounded the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. Forman was described in one account as 'the fiend in human shape,/ That by his art did act the devil's ape'; then portrayed as 'poring over his blasphemous books,/ making strange characters in blood-red lines'.⁷³ According to another account a book of Forman's was brought into the trial as evidence for his meddling in the illicit romances of those at court. Forman had reputedly made his clients write their own names in this book before he would practise his art.⁷⁴ This is the procedure for engaging in a contract, though it contains diabolic overtones. This book, if indeed it ever existed, has not been positively identified: it was probably meant to be a casebook. What this account illustrates is that whether demonic or, as he thought, divine, Forman's astrological physic was controversial. It required a complete faith in the physician. Some people objected, some complied, and many were convinced.

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⁷³ R. N[iccols], *Sir Thomas Overburies Visions* (Oxford, 1616).

⁷⁴ A. W[eldon], *The Court and Character of King James* ([London], 1650), p. 110.