



**Lauren Kassel.** *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005. xviii + 281 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-927905-0.



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Simon Forman, an astrologer and physician in Elizabethan London (1552-1611), is a well-known figure amongst scholars of literature and medicine for this period. Besides having a reputation for sexual lechery, four years after his death, he was implicated in the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury (1616).[1] His influence continued throughout the seventeenth century, with Robert Napier and Elias Ashmole each inheriting his papers in turn and William Lilly writing his biography in his own *Life* (2nd. ed., 1715). In this study, Lauren Kassel (Lecturer, Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge) provides an examination of "the circulation of esoteric texts, the politics of medicine, the popularity of astrology, the vagaries of Paracelsianism, and the powers of magic" (p. 13).

The book is divided into four sections: "The Making of an Astrologer-Physician," "Plague and the College of Physicians of London," "The Case-books," and "Alchemy, Magic, and Medicine." Part 1 considers the nature of Forman's knowledge, using his autobiographies and diary, his pamphlet on longitude (1591), his unpublished astrological

and medical tracts, and his correspondence with Richard Napier. Despite "a passion for learning," Forman left Oxford after a year and ended up in the Low Countries "to seke for arte and knowledge" (pp. 24-25). Much of his education was informal, coming from books that he read and divine revelation. Longitude, for example, he claimed to have learned only "by the grace and helpe of God" (p. 38). Kassel also intriguingly explores the ways in which Forman perceived himself: a magus--a truly great individual with the divine gift of being able to read the stars--who was persecuted by lesser practitioners (both of medicine and mathematics).

In part 2, Kassel examines the College of Physicians' pursuit of Forman as an irregular medical practitioner. This detailed study of one practitioner's confrontations with the College is invaluable, especially since this case has accounts available on both sides. Through his unrepentant opposition to what he saw as the "corrupt methods of traditional physicians" rather than his combination of astrology and physic, Forman offended the College (p. 74). After 1600, he was able to

avoid the College's pursuit through patronage. Forman's encounters with the College occurred against the background of the plague. Astrologers, he believed, were well placed to judge the past, present and future of the plague. The only true cure, he argued, was repentance and adherence to God's will, which could be identified through astrology. Physicians, in contrast, were morally corrupt for fleeing the city during outbreaks and ignorant for practicing medicine without knowing astrology.

Using Forman's casebooks, Kassell assesses his medical practice in part 3. Kassell focuses on Forman's use of astrology to establish authority, particularly over women (60 percent of his patients). Another book review of *Medicine and Magic* argues that "Forman's fixation on power relationships and his attitude toward women ... [makes it] impossible to evaluate Forman's career without considering his incessant preying on women." [2] Kassell's avoidance of Forman's philandering is actually more effective, focusing on Forman's professional life and his patients rather than on the salacious details of his private life. These female patients were not "preyed upon," but extremely active in their decision-making, as Kassell demonstrates. Kassell also clearly indicates how Forman's misogynistic ideas shaped women's medical treatment. Forman distrusted women and, immediately upon consultation, he cast their horoscopes to determine the truth; only an astrologer, therefore, "was fully equipped to understand women" (p. 161). It was necessary to reveal the hidden in order to find answers--a process at the heart of astrology and medicine. The process of uncovering truth established Forman's expertise and encouraged patients to be open with him as there were no more secrets.

In part 4, Kassell reconstructs Forman's world view and its influence on his use of remedies, connecting his magical and alchemical activities and his medical ideas. His magical remedies were diverse, including remedies that were Paracelsian,

ancient and modern, and Jewish, Arabic and Christian. For example, Forman used antimony ("cako," as he called it)--a remedy hotly debated between Paracelsians and Galenists--for both alchemy and medicine. Forman even called spirits (preferably angelic, but sometimes demonic) to obtain alchemical and medical knowledge. Through his practice of "astromagic," Forman brought together the microcosm (the patient) and the macrocosm (the secrets of the universe). Whatever his aspirations about being a magus, Forman was a practical man who needed to make a medical living, and his research into the occult ultimately aided his medical practice.

Overall, this is an excellent, well-researched book about an interesting man, his scientific and magical investigations, and his medical practice. However, Kassell's discussions of social status, gender, and religion could be strengthened. First, by reading between the lines of the casebooks for a more extensive consideration of patients' social status, Kassell might further her analysis of Forman's authority. Chapters 1 and 4 refer to Forman's connection to an Oxford group interested in alchemy and astrology, and to the patronage networks that protected Forman from the College, which raises the question of the influence that such people might have had on Forman's career. He may have been a "creature of the city, not the court," but Forman certainly had some very high and mighty patients, as his later implication in the Overbury trial emphasizes; at one point, he even hoped to attract the Queen's patronage (p. 12). Patronage from a core group of patients could have been integral not only to building his career, but to his establishment of authority.[3]

It is understandable why Kassell concentrated on Forman's relationship with female patients and her portrayal of the practitioner-patient relationship is fundamentally persuasive. However, her analysis of "gender," as specified in the chapter title, "Gender, Authority, and Astrology," is misleading. She only examines women, not gender is-

sues in relation to male patients (still a substantial part of his practice) or Forman. Kassell justifies this because Forman "did not display an interest in conditions specific to men" (p. 166). Gender, however, is not merely a question of sex-specific diseases. Rather, Kassell might have looked at the workings of gender more broadly, such as the extent to which Forman treated his male and female patients differently when it came to non-sex specific diseases. Indeed, even looking at sex-specific ailments is not necessarily clear cut. As other historians have shown, menstruation was not seen as specifically female in pre-modern Europe.[4] Identifying medical treatments as gendered is problematic if men have not been examined alongside women.

Finally, Kassell dismisses the importance of religion to Forman's magical and medical enterprises, despite repeated returns to the subject under other rubrics. Forman, she suggests, "was curiously, and perhaps prudently, almost silent on the subject of religion" (p. 11). However, throughout the book, she refers to several of Forman's unpublished writings about religion. Forman may not have spoken publicly about his religious ideas, but they certainly formed an important component of his medical and magical practices. For example, relatively little of the chapter "Plague and Paracelsianism" is about Paracelsianism, while much of the chapter considers Forman's use of religious ideas to justify his authority. Forman's religious ideas are central to the chapter, "The Food of Angels," in which Kassell examines Forman's transcription of the *Life of Adam and Eve* (1599) from a medical perspective. The transcribed text, however, also explored several religious themes that reappeared elsewhere in his manuscripts: the composition of body, soul and spirit and the relationships between "man, the cosmos, medicine and disease" (p. 208). Although Kassell has overlooked the role played by religion in Forman's work, the true strength of her book is the way in which this constant slippage between

medicine, magic, and religion can be seen in Forman's ideas and practices.

This book can be situated within the histories of London, religion, medicine, science, and magic and incorporates different approaches (intellectual, cultural, biography). In particular, it is an exciting microhistory of one man's understanding of the cosmos. Historians have questioned how typical were the ideas and reading style of Menocchio, a sixteenth-century miller of Friuli who was tried for heresy because of his distinctive and vocal interpretations of books.[5] As Forman's reading habits and world view reveal, the miller's creative ways of looking at the world were perhaps not so unusual. Both men took ideas from many different sources and combined them in personally meaningful ways.[6]. However, this book is not only a story about Forman as a unique man. It is also about the continued existence of the magical world for Londoners--a group supposedly more educated and likely to reject superstition. The popularity of Forman's practice demonstrates that his skills were thought to be useful to a wide range of patients. In this book, Kassell successfully responds to Keith Thomas's argument that English people's belief in the magical world declined after the Reformation.[7] Kassell reveals both the long-standing continuity of the magical world in post-Reformation London and the practical applications of those ideas. For practitioner and patient alike, medicine, magic, and religion--the natural and the supernatural--could not be separated. Whatever Protestantism's official rejection of the magical world, it was thriving in Elizabethan London.

#### Notes

[1]. On Forman, see also Barbara Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001) [see Louise Hill Curth, "Review of Barbara Howard Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman*," *H-Albion*, *H-Net Reviews*,

August, 2002 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=25701046648682>); Judith Cook, *Dr Simon Foreman: A Most Notorious Physician* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001); and A. L. Rowse, *Simon Forman: Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974). For recent accounts on the Overbury Affair, see Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) [see David Underdown, "Review of Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, May, 2002 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=265621024068269>)]; and David Lindley, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[2]. Mordechai Feingold, "A Conjurer and a Quack? The Lives of John Dee and Simon Forman," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68 (2005): p. 550.

[3]. Margaret Pelling has demonstrated the importance of patronage to the development of a practitioner's career. Many others have discussed the importance of a practitioner's reputation amongst patients in furthering his practice. Cf. Margaret Pelling, *Medical Conflicts in Early Modern London: Patronage, Physicians, and Irregular Practitioners, 1550-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) [see Lisa Wynne Smith, "Review of Margaret Pelling (with Frances White), *Medical Conflicts in Early Modern London: Patronage, Physicians, and Irregular Practitioners, 1550-1640*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, November, 2004, (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=142721106927101>)]; Joan Lane, "'The doctor scolds me': The Diaries and Correspondence of Patients in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Patients and Practitioners: Lay Perceptions of Medicine in Pre-Industrial Society*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Nicholas Jewson, "Medical Knowledge and the Patronage

System in Eighteenth-Century England," *Sociology* 12 (1974).

[4]. John Beusterien, "Jewish Male Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century Spain," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73 (1999); and Gianna Pomata, "Menstruating Men: Similarity and Difference of the Sexes in Early Modern Medicine," in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, ed. Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (London: Duke University, 2001).

[5]. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

[6]. On the reception of texts and ideas, see Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and the Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

[7]. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973).

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