

Poole, Robert ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9613-6401> (1997) Book review: Astrology and the seventeenth-century mind: William Lilly and the language of the stars. *History*, 82 (268). pp. 693-694.

Downloaded from: <https://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/727/>

Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

provided that

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing insight@cumbria.ac.uk.

deals with the aftermath of the revolt, a study of peasant resistance after the summer of 1381, largely based on manorial court rolls and gaol delivery records. The appendix of this very interesting volume (which deserves the attention of a wide audience in Britain) contains an updated list of places where court rolls were destroyed as well as thirteen maps. Separate indexes of names and places are provided.

University of Birmingham

JENS RÖHRKASTEN

***Astrology and the Seventeenth-Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars.* By Ann Geneva.** Manchester University Press. 1995. xxi + 298pp. 40 illus. £40.00.

‘Just what was William Lilly so good at?’ asks Ann Geneva near the start of this interesting book. It is a question well worth the asking, for William Lilly’s almanacs were one of the publishing phenomena of the Civil War period, selling in their tens of thousands to a public anxious for signs of what was to come, and supported by a parliament well aware of the value of works which declared that the heavens proclaimed the downfall of the king. In the war for hearts and minds, Lilly was parliament’s secret weapon, ‘the first astrological republican’. Moreover, not only did he write his predictions in an accessible way, he also explained his methods, breaking the magicians’ code. He even issued a manual, *Christian Astrology*, in 1647. Lilly’s combination of evangelicalism and predictive success did more than anything to popularize the arcane craft of astrology.

Geneva makes good use of Lilly’s manuscripts to show how he first drafted his predictions in abstruse, symbolic fashion, then rewrote them with explicit reference to the political events of his day, and finally retuned them to fit the demands of censorship and political prudence. She demonstrates that Lilly’s later protestations of loyalty to the monarchy were (as one would expect) so much flannel – Lilly was always ‘gunning for the king’. His particular skill lay in his ability to manipulate astrological rules. Thus, Scorpio, as the ruling house of his adversary John Gadbury, was ‘a viperous sign’; as a sign associated with parliament, it indicated military virtues. Lilly was no crude astrological determinist. Geneva’s central argument is that Lilly was not ‘a quack or a charlatan’ but rather had ‘an inviolate belief in astrology’s validity’, and that in order to understand ‘the seventeenth-century mind’ we must understand in detail the whole astrological tradition. Accordingly, large chunks of the book (chapters 2, 4 and 5) explore at length such subjects as encryption, number mysticism, the symbolism of natural phenomena and the history of astrology right back to and including the Babylonians. These tedious and unprofitable wastes should not deter the reader from turning to the later chapters where the real value of the book lies. Nor is it easy to see why such taxing detail is relevant, given Lilly’s capacity to select and innovate. As Keith Thomas has shown, Lilly’s ability to read a client was more important than his ability to read the stars. Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* remains the best guide here; in these respects Geneva’s work supplements but does not supplant it. Like Thomas, Geneva concludes her work with a stimulating chapter on the decline of magic, and here there is much to chew over. The key, she suggests, is language. Astrology had a ‘mental grammar’ all of its own, inhabiting

'a perfectly ordered universe in which each element reflected and signified all the others'. With this platonic universe went a language that was complex, allusive and multivalent, a language of metaphors and equivalents, symbols and hieroglyphs (well suited, of course, to the art of ambiguous prognostication). Lilly's language had much in common with the alluring richness of puritan sermonizing, and here lay its downfall. As the educated classes reacted against the excesses of puritan enthusiasm, a new 'mental grammar' emerged, characterized in language by 'plain, undeceiving expressions' and in philosophy by 'the taxonomic austerity of modern science'. Astrology was never seriously investigated by the natural philosophers of the Royal Society; it was simply discarded as the wrong sort of science.

When his run of luck ended with his failure to predict the Restoration, Lilly was left looking pretty stupid, although he had excuses aplenty and his almanacs continued to sell. In the long run his achievement was to popularize astrology among the lower orders just as it was being disdained by their social superiors. Ann Geneva's well-written book has much of value to say about the mental world of the seventeenth century. A more tightly edited version at a less rapacious price would have increased its value; but for that, the publishers must answer.

St Martin's College, Lancaster

ROBERT POOLE

***Francis Bacon: The History of a Character Assassination.* By Nieves Mathews. Yale University Press. 1996. xiii + 592pp. £40.00.**

Traditionally seen as a cunning and manipulative man, Francis Bacon has lately been reassessed by such academics as Fulton Anderson, Jenny Wormald, Joel Epstein and others who value Bacon as a great reformer of the legal system and as a political thinker. This book, on the author's admission, is primarily a re-examination of these and other writers on Bacon. It has a twofold objective: first, it investigates the key episodes in Bacon's public and private life, focusing on the integrity and honesty of his actions; secondly, it explores the history of Bacon's reputation in an attempt to explain why and how it has been so successfully blackened over the years. In this way the book gives us an insight into how the past is reconstructed, how a reputation is made and how it can be misrepresented by historians.

Historically, Bacon's reputation is based on Macaulay's masterpiece of innuendo and defamation, his *Essay on Bacon*, in which he expressed the view that Bacon's years of office epitomized everything that was rotten in British politics. The early twentieth-century view changed very little from that of Macaulay. Bacon was stigmatized as a 'horrible old rascal' although he 'wrote very charming essays', while textbooks condemned him as an avaricious and ambitious man, involved in fraud and corruption, and taking bribes at every opportunity. Similarly, Bacon's career as senior judge has conventionally been accepted as self-serving, sycophantic and basically corrupt, and his part in the downfall of Essex was traditionally seen as an act of vindictiveness against a man once considered a friend. Now, of course, we know that this was an action forced on him by the queen.

Although Bacon is undoubtedly one of the most discussed men in history, one feels that Mathews' defence of him is rather overdone and that she is perhaps a