

English Astrologers

A BELIEF in judicial astrology can now only exist in the people, who may be said to have no belief at all; for mere traditional sentiments can hardly be said to amount to a *belief*. But a faith in this ridiculous system in our country is of late existence; it was a favourite superstition with the learned, and as the ingenious Tenhove observes, whenever an idea germinates in a learned head, it shoots with additional luxuriations.

When Charles I. was confined, Lilly the astrologer was consulted for the hour which would favour his escape.

A story, which strongly proves how greatly Charles II. was bigoted to judicial astrology, and whose mind was certainly not unenlightened, is recorded in Burnet's History of his Own Times.

The most respectable characters of the age, Sir William Dugdale, Elias Ashmole, Dr. Grew, and others, were members of an astrological club. Congreve's character of Foresight, in *Love for Love*, was then no uncommon person, though the humour now is scarcely intelligible.

Dryden cast the nativities of his sons; and, what is remarkable, his prediction relating to his son Charles

took place. This incident is of so late a date, one might hope it would have been cleared up: but, if it is a fact, we must allow it affords a rational exultation to its irrational adepts.

In 1670, the passion for horoscopes and expounding the stars prevailed in France among the first rank. The new-born child was usually presented naked to the astrologer, who read the first lineaments in its forehead, and the transverse lines in its hand, and thence wrote down its future destiny. Catherine de Medicis brought Henry IV., then a child, to old Nostradamus, whom antiquaries esteem more for his chronicle of Provence than his vaticinating powers. The sight of the reverend seer, with a beard which "streamed like a meteor in the air," terrified the future hero, who dreaded a whipping from so grave a personage. Will it be credited that one of these magicians having assured Charles IX. that he would live as many days as he should turn about on his heels in an hour, standing on one leg, that his majesty every morning performed that solemn exercise for an hour; the principal officers of the court, the judges, the chancellors, and generals, likewise, in compliment, standing on one leg and turning round!

It has been reported of several famous for their astrologic skill, that they have suffered a voluntary death merely to verify their own predictions; this has been said of *Cardan*, and *Burton* the author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

It is curious to observe the shifts to which astrologers are put when their predictions are not verified. Great *winds* were predicted, by a famous adept, about the year 1586. No unusual storms however happened. Bodin, to save the reputation of the art, applied it as a *figure* to some *revolutions* in the *state*, and of which there were instances enough at that moment. Among their lucky and unlucky days, they pretend to give those of various illustrious persons and of families. One is very striking.—Thursday, was the unlucky day of our Henry VIII. He, his son Edward VI., Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth, all died on a Thursday! This fact had, no doubt, great weight in this controversy of the astrologers with their adversaries.

The life of Lilly the astrologer, written by himself, is a curious work. He is the Sidrophel of Butler. It contains so much artless narrative, and at the same time so much palpable imposture, that it is difficult to know when he is speaking what he really believes to be the truth. In a

sketch of the state of astrology in his day, those adepts, whose characters he has drawn, were the lowest miscreants of the town. They all speak of each other as rogues and impostors. Such were Booker, George Wharton, Gadbury, who gained a livelihood by practising on the credulity of even men of learning so late as in 1650, to the eighteenth century. In Ashmole's *Life* an account of these artful impostors may be found. Most of them had taken the air in the pillory, and others had conjured themselves up to the gallows. This seems a true statement of facts. But Lilly informs us, that in his various conference with *angels*, their voice resembled that of the *Irish!*

The work is curious for the anecdotes of the times it contains. The amours of Lilly with his mistress are characteristic. He was a very artful man, by his own accounts; and admirably managed matters which required deception and invention.

Astrology greatly flourished in the time of the civil wars. The royalists and the rebels had their *astrologers*, as well as their *soldiers!* and the predictions of the former lead a great influence over the latter.

On this subject, it may gratify curiosity to notice three or four works, which bear an excessive price. The price

cannot entirely be occasioned by their rarity, and I am induced to suppose that we have still adepts, whose faith must be strong, or whose scepticism weak.

The Chaldean sages were nearly put to the rout by a quarto park of artillery, fired on them by Mr. John Chamber in 1691. Apollo did not use Marsyas more inhumanly than his scourging pen this mystical race, and his personalities made them feel more sore. However, a Norwich knight, the very Quixote of astrology, arrayed in the enchanted armour of his occult authors, encountered this pagan in a host stately carousal. He came forth with "A Defence of Judiciall Astrologye, in answer to a treatise lately published by Mr. John Chamber. By Sir Christopher Heydon, Knight, printed at Cambridge 1603." This is a handsome quarto of about 500 pages. Sir Christopher is a learned and lively writer, and a knight worthy to defend a better cause. But his Dulcinea had wrought most wonderfully on his imagination. This defence of this fanciful science, if science it may be called, demonstrates nothing, while it defends everything. It confutes, according to the knight's own ideas: it alleges a few scattered facts in favour of astrological predictions, which may be picked up in that immensity of fabling which disgraces history. He strenuously denies, or ridicules, what the greatest writers have

said against this fanciful art, while he lays great stress on some passages from obscure authors, or what is worse, from authors of no authority. The most pleasant part is at the close, where he defends the art from the objections of Mr. Chamber by recrimination. Chamber had enriched himself by medical practice, and when he charges the astrologers with merely aiming to gain a few beggarly pence, Sir Christopher catches fire, and shows by his quotations, that if we are to despise an art, by its professors attempting to subsist on it, or for the objections which may be raised against its vital principles, we ought by this argument most heartily to despise the medical science and medical men! He gives here all he can collect against physic and physicians, and from the confessions of Hippocrates and Galen, Avicenna and Agrippa, medicine appears to be a vainer science than even astrology! Sir Christopher is a shrewd and ingenious adversary; but when he says he means only to give Mr. Chamber oil for his vinegar, he has totally mistaken its quality.

The defence was answered by Thomas Vicars in his "Madnesse of Astrologers."

But the great work is by Lilly; and entirely devoted to the adepts. He defends nothing; for this oracle delivers his dictum, and details every event as matters not

questionable. He sits on the tripod; and every page is embellished by a horoscope, which he explains with the utmost facility. This voluminous monument of the folly of the age is a quarto valued at some guineas! It is entitled, "Christian Astrology, modestly treated of in three books, by William Lilly, student in Astrology, 2nd edition, 1659." The most curious part of this work is "a Catalogue of most astrological authors." There is also a portrait of this arch rogue, and astrologer! an admirable illustration for Lavater!

Lilly's opinions, and his pretended science, were such favourites with the age, that the learned Gataker wrote professedly against this popular delusion. Lilly, at the head of his star-expounding friends, not only formally replied to but persecuted Gataker annually in his predictions, and even struck at his ghost, when beyond the grave. Gataker died in July, 1654, and Lilly having written in his almanac of that year for the month of August this barbarous Latin verse:—

Hoc in tumbo jacet presbyter et nebulo!

Here in this tomb lies a presbyter and a knave!

He had the impudence to assert that he had predicted Gataker's death! But the truth is, it was an epitaph like lodgings to let: it stood empty ready for the first

passenger to inhabit. Had any other of that party of any eminence died in that month, it would have been as appositely applied to him. But Lilly was an exquisite rogue, and never at a fault. Having prophesied in his almanac for 1650, that the parliament stood upon a tottering foundation, when taken up by a messenger, during the night, he contrived to cancel the page, printed off another, and showed his copies before the committee, assuring them that the others were none of his own, but forged by his enemies.