

LILLY, ASHMOLE, AND WHARTON: A RATHER UNCIVIL WAR

This article will look at the back story of three influential astrologers active during the English Civil War, as well as examining a relationship chart between two of them.

Our dramatis personae are: William Lilly, Elias Ashmole, and Sir George Wharton. William Lilly is probably best known to astrologers; he was the author of *Christian Astrology*, which has been republished in modern times and forms the basis of many horary astrology courses today. Lilly was born on 1 May 1602 (old style date) in Diseworth, a small village in Leicestershire. His cottage still stands to this day – it has been renovated beautifully and there's a lovely YouTube video showing this at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPFZGnPkFP4>.

Lilly was referred to by some as the “English Merlin” during his lifetime, and he was a controversial character. He sided with parliament against the king during the Civil War, and in his biography he describes how Oliver Cromwell defended his use of astrology against critics. [The Lives of those Eminent Antiquaries Elias Ashmole, Esquire, and Mr William Lilly, written by themselves, London: T. Davies, 1774]. When we think of the Civil War, we tend to think of a nation divided down clear lines – Cavaliers and Roundheads, the Cavaliers supporting the King, while the Roundheads supported parliament. However, it wasn't always that clear-cut, as we shall see shortly.

Elias Ashmole, after whom the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is named, was a royalist, and was friendly with another royalist astrologer, Sir George Wharton.

Wharton had been publishing annual almanacs since the early 1640s, but wasn't aware of Lilly until 1644. This was the year that Lilly published *A prophecy of the white king, and dreadful dead-man explained*. Lilly states in his ‘paraphrase’ that he wishes to ‘avoid all misconstruction that my intentions might point out any particular man living’, claiming that the book relates to a Welsh legend, and that therefore the ‘white king’ in question ‘was certainly of that people’ and implied it related to a king living centuries earlier. However, it was fairly obvious in his preface, entitled ‘To all well affected Englishmen’ where he writes:

You see what stormes, what miseries, what cruell Warres our Nation is one like to suffer by the meanes and procurement of a King called a White King... He brings over strangers to destroy us...’

It was clear that Lilly was referring to Charles I, who was frequently known as the “White King”.

This drew the ire of Wharton, who in his almanac for 1645 in a section on eclipses wrote: ‘But here I cannot omit the Impudent and senselesse discourse of *William Lilly*... concerning the Eclipse of the Sunne, which happened the 22. Of August, 1644.’

Lilly was furious at this, and wrote that ‘Hee called me an impudent senseless fellow...Before that tyme I was more Cavalier than Roundhead, and so taken notice of, but after that, I engaged body and soule in the cause of Parlament...’

It may seem bizarre to us today that someone should allegedly switch sides because of a bad review, but that's what Lilly claimed. The feud certainly escalated. Wharton subsequently published his *Merlini Anglici Errata, Or, The Errors, Mistakes, and Mis-applications of Master Lilly's New Ephemeris for the yeare 1647* and his preface is absolutely scathing:

It is a common proverb, dogs bark more for custom, than fierceness. And had I not assuredly known this whelp Lilly to be one of that bawling litter, I should not have suffered his perpetual snarling with that patience and temper I did; but before this, would have alighted

from my saddle, to hurle him one stone (at the least) to gnaw on. But, as he is now grown bolder, and blacker in the jaws, I must begin to have an eye over him, and a care to keep him at a distance, lest he bite me till I bleed, and thereby I become maniaque, or brain-sick like himself, and so be more desirous of his liver than his heart. I shall scorn to take notice of his former grinnings; nor will I trouble my self, or the reader, with any repetition of his bypast fooleries, frantick expressions, and but a few, (if any) of his many errors and mistakes, so grosly committed, in every of his lowzy-pamphlets (for them (indeed) I have tyed and twitch'd up together in a pack-thread, as thinking them fitter for his quondam Hell, than the meanest shelf in my study) but I will content my self only with that dainty bit, this sweet brat of his own begetting, Merlini Anglici Ephemeris, the 4th (and perhaps the last) of that name: and examine I shall, and that strictly, of what metal it is compounded, or whether it be simple (like the dad of it) and the truth you have freely, as followeth.

The frontispiece of this document doesn't say who the publisher is, but I assume it was Wharton's friend Elias Ashmole, for in Ashmole's diary entry for 19 November 1646 (Old Style) he writes: 'A note of an horary question: 2.30 whether it will be any prejudice for me to publish Wharton's errors against Lilly.' The horary doesn't look promising: with Taurus rising, Venus is Ashmole's significator (assuming the '2.30' means 2.30pm, but even it were 2.30am, it would still be Venus since the Ascendant would be Libra rather than Taurus). Venus is in Scorpio, squared by Mars and opposite Saturn. [*Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) His autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to his Life and Work*, ed. C. H. Josten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), Vol 2, p.399]

To be fair, Ashmole only knew of Lilly by reputation, and they hadn't met – but they were introduced the following day, hit it off immediately and forged a lifelong friendship, despite a difference of political opinion. However, despite the horary not looking very good, Ashmole did go ahead and publish Wharton's attack on Lilly. This meant that there was a sword of Damocles hanging over Ashmole's head, as he obviously hadn't told Lilly this, and on top of that it seems that Ashmole gave further information to Wharton, which allowed the latter to print further slurs against Lilly. A year later, Lilly discovered Ashmole's treachery and they had a falling out. Ashmole records, very succinctly, 'This morning Lilly told me of my discovering his secrets to Wharton.'

However, the falling out didn't last long. Ashmole and Lilly both had an interest in a text of astrological magic called *Picatrix*, and Ashmole copied this fascinating text by hand, and presented it to Lilly as a gift. Lilly was delighted, and they made up again – Ashmole simply recorded in his diary: 'This evening I delivered to Mr. Lilly *Picatrix* and was reconciled to him.'

So far, it sounds like a spat between Lilly and Wharton, with Ashmole stuck in the middle. However, after Lilly and Ashmole reconciled their differences, things then took a rather curious turn of events. Shortly after, Wharton was arrested after publishing a vicious satire against parliament, and imprisoned. He escaped from Newgate but was recaptured a year later, and was about to be hanged. However, Ashmole persuaded Lilly to intervene – because Lilly was on the parliamentary side during the civil war, he had more clout with Cromwell, who was now the de facto ruler of England, than Wharton or Ashmole, who were both royalists. Lilly did intervene and argue Wharton's case, and Wharton was quietly released from jail, and was then grudgingly supportive of Lilly for saving his life despite having been enemies.

Much later, on 22 October 1666, William Lilly was summoned to appear before a parliamentary committee to explain two images he'd published in 1651, apparently showing the fire of London. The monarchy had been restored in 1660, and the Great Fire of London started on the evening of 2

September 1666. Apparently, in April 1666 eight conspirators had been convicted of high treason and claimed that the city was to be burned on 3 September that year, and that a horoscope for this day was in Lilly's almanac, showing the 'Downfall of Monarchy.' Lilly's publication did not explicitly state this, but he was under suspicion and it could have ended very badly for him, had it not been for the intervention of Ashmole, who convinced the committee of Lilly's innocence, and he was allowed to go free.