Encounter with Lilly

The world wishes to be deceived.
Sebastian Brant, 1458–1521

We have good reasons to believe that Culpeper met the most notorious astrologer of his time, William Lilly (1602–1681). Lilly was Culpeper’s senior and had already established a reputation when he came to London for his apprenticeship. During his formative years Culpeper was most certainly influenced by him and since Lilly shared the same puritan political view during this period, it is very likely that he was his tutor in matters concerning astrology. In 1651 Culpeper wrote: ‘you are all bound to bless God for raising up that famous man, Mr. William Lilly who has through God’s assistance made the art astrology so plain to you, that you may not only see your former ignorance, but be in a capacity to do yourselves good.’

In later years, however, the two were maybe at odds and not on good speaking terms, since Culpeper is not included in the list of famous astrologers which Lilly appended to his Christian Astrology of 1659.2

William Lilly, of modest origin and upbringing, was born in 1602. He was an intelligent man and from childhood on obsessed with dreams and revelations. He had some grammar school knowledge of Latin and Greek when he came to London to become the personal servant of a rich merchant, Gilbert Wright. On the death of his master he married his widow, who provided him well, so that he could spend his time in angling, hearing puritan sermons and learning astrology from the famed Rhys Evans of Gunpowder Alley.

When Culpeper met him he had already attained the reputation and fame as an apt astrologer who could cast nativities and predict future events. He lived on the Strand over against Strand Bridge,
and after the death of his first wife he remarried another rich widow, Jane, a lady with a sharp tongue.  

For a long time Culpeper had wished to see him and one November day in 1635 he decided to pay him a visit. It was a Sunday afternoon, a bright and cold day, when Culpeper walked down to the Strand where he had heard that Lilly lived. He inquired at the nearest inn and upon his question he was immediately given a reply as to the direction, because Lilly was well known and people seemed to have a frightful respect for the man. The house was past the Temple and towards Charing Cross. There he lived in a big corner house facing south, four stories high with a protruding facade and many paned windows. On the outside of the third floor was a big sun-dial.

After knocking the door was opened by a man servant who asked him about his business. After introducing himself, Culpeper was shown into the parlour. He looked around and found a room nicely decorated with guilded leather tapestry above and wooden panels below. There was a big ornate fireplace with warming flames, wooden chests and cupboards near the sides and at the far end a small virginal and a lute on the wall. An elderly lady appeared, saying that she was the mistress of the house, asked him again in a shrieky voice for his business and bade him sit down.

After a while Lilly appeared. He was a man of middle age with long hair and a severe face. When Culpeper told him that he had always admired his work, Lilly began to smile and offered to show him his observatory which was on the top floor. After climbing three flights of stairs, they came to a big chamber with many high windows on two sides.

Here a man busied himself writing horoscope charts. Lilly introduced him as his assistant, Mr. Ferdinand Parkhurst. The room was filled with various instruments for the study of the stars: a long tube near the window, pointing to the skies, an instrument with circular rings arranged in a sphere, and two globes. The tables and the walls were covered by charts of various kinds. Culpeper had never seen so many implements used solely for the study of the skies. Only in the attic at Emmanuel College in Cambridge had he seen a small tube with magnifying glasses which could be used at night to observe the stars. He stared with surprise and admiration at all this.

Lilly was only too happy to explain the novelties: