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Through the Body: Chiromancy in 17th-Century England

In traditional anthropology—in its ancient, medieval and early modern variants—the hand occupied a unique position and attracted particular attention, as one of the most important (and culturally significant) parts of the body. Apart from noting its intricate anatomical structure—which was universally considered an ingenious design¹—various authors admired its flexibility and multi-functionality. As one of the 17th-century sources—repeating centuries-old opinions—observed,

[The man was given] a Hand, the Organ of Organs, that therewith he might supply himself with all things necessary, tending to the use of humane life; with which he writes Laws and Ordinances for the People, with which he defends himself from the violence of savage Creatures, and the hostility of humane Enemies; as also therewith he is fitted to Till the ground, and in one word, to execute every needful humane office.²

¹“Take the hand: this is as good as a talon, or a claw, or a horn, or again, a spear or a sword, or any other weapon or tool: it can be all of these, because it can seize and hold them all. And Nature has admirably contrived the actual shape of the hand so as to fit in with this arrangement [...]. It is not all of one piece, but it branches into several pieces; which gives the possibility of its coming together into one solid piece, whereas the reverse order of events would be impossible. Also, it is possible to use them singly, or two at a time, or in various ways. Again, the joints of the fingers are well constructed for taking hold of things and for exerting pressure [...]. The nails, too, are a good piece of planning.” Aristotle, *Parts of Animals with an English Translation by A.L. Peck* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 372–374.

²Richard Saunders, *Physiognomie and chiromancie, metoposcopia, the symmetrical proportions and signal moles of the body fully and accurately handled, with their natural–predictive–significations: the subject of dreams, divinative, steganographical, and Lullian sciences: whereunto is added the art of memorie* (London: R. White, 1653), p. 4.

The hand was such a versatile tool, responding so dexterously to anything the mind wanted it to do, that it made humans unique and placed them high above all other living creatures. It was effectively the Aristotelian bodily sign of supreme human intelligence and humanity itself.³

The hand was considered the “instrument of instruments” also because it could be conveniently used for communicating with others as well as for storing and imparting knowledge. It played a role in rhetoric, as the formalized gestures were supposed to accompany and emphasize a consummate orator’s (or actor’s) statements and figures of speech.⁴ Also, there were systems of hand gestures that constituted a sign language to be used by the deaf, the mute and by those who wished to talk to handicapped people.⁵ What is more, hands, especially fingers, served as an abacus to make sums and calculate dates of movable feasts in the calendar,⁶ and the so-called Guidonian hand with musical notes on the palm and fingers made it easier to memorize melodies.⁷ The human hand, generally speaking, was a useful mnemonic device, on the surface of which practically any information could be encoded, from numbers and music to religious truths and a sequence of the Biblical events.⁸

³ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, pp. 370–373. The Renaissance fine arts were preoccupied with the task of drawing or painting hands accurately not only because it was difficult and required artistic skills one could boast of but also because this particular body part, like no other, was the essence and symbol of being human.

⁴ Fritz Graf, “Gestures and Conventions of Roman Actors and Orators,” in: *A Cultural History of Gesture. From Antiquity to the Present Day*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Goodenough (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 36–58. J.B., *Chironomia: Or, The Art of Manual Rhetorique. With the Canons, Lawes, Rites, Ordinances, and Institutes of Rhetoricians, both Ancient and Moderne, Touching the artificiall managing of the HAND in Speaking. Whereby the Naturall GESTURES of the HAND, are made the Regulated Accessories or faire-spoken Adjuncts of RHETORICAL Utterance. With TYPES, or CHIROGRAMS: A new illustration of this Argument.* (London: Th. Harper, 1644).

⁵ Charles de La Fin, *Sermo mirabilis, or, The silent language whereby one may learn perfectly in the space of six hours, how to impart his mind to his friend, in any language, English, Latin, French, Dutch, &c. tho never so deep and dangerous a Secret, without the least Noise, Word or Voice; and without the Knowledge of any in Company. Being a wonderful Art kept secret for several ages in Padua, and now published only to the wise and prudent, who will not expose it, as a Prostitute, to every Foolish and Ignorant Fellow. By Monsieur La Fin, once secretary to His Eminence, Cardinal of Rich[e]lieu* (London: T. Salusbery, 1692), J.B., *Chironomia*, p. 5.

⁶ Sachiko Kusukawa, “A Manual Computer for Reckoning Time,” in: *Writing on Hands: Memory and Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Claire Richter Sherman and Peter M. Lukehart (Carlisle, Pa.: Trout Gallery, Dickinson College; Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library; Seattle, Wa.: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 28–34.

⁷ Susan Forscher Weiss, “The Singing Hand,” in: *Writing on Hands: Memory and Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Claire Richter Sherman and Peter M. Lukehart (Carlisle, Pa.: Trout Gallery, Dickinson College; Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library; Seattle, Wa.: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 35–45.

⁸ Claire Richter Sherman, and Peter M. Lukehart, eds., *Writing on Hands: Memory and Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (Carlisle, Pa.: Trout Gallery, Dickinson College; Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library; Seattle, Wa.: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 153–159. Richard Saunders, *Physiognomie, and Chiromancie, Metoposcopia, The Symmetrical Proportions and Signal MOLES of the BODY, Fully and accurately explained: with their*

The hand was therefore a meaning-generating machine, conveying senses arbitrarily imposed on it by human inventiveness and need. At the same time, however, it was also thought to be a kind of table or plane containing *visible* and *natural* signs, left there by Nature (on behalf of the Creator), which could reveal vital information about its owner: about the person's bodily constitution and health, character and inclinations, and even future vicissitudes. The technique of recognizing those signs and understanding what they meant was, of course, chiromancy or palmistry, one of the ancient divinatory arts, which, although never entirely forgotten in Europe, was revived in the later Middle Ages and which enjoyed a renaissance in the early modern period.⁹

In England popular interest in chiromancy was reflected, in the first place, by the frequent publication of works of continental authors like Cocles and Johannes de Indagine (the latter's *Introductions* had ten editions between 1558 and 1683). However, what can be called an English chiromantic revival took place in the mid-17th century in the circle of Elias Ashmole, a prominent antiquary, collector of curiosities, alchemist, astrologer and patron of the occult arts. The present paper examines works of Ashmole's two friends: George Wharton (1617–1681), a gentleman and student of astronomy, and Richard Saunders (1613–1687?), an astrologer from Warwickshire. The analysis of their output clearly demonstrates how much significance they attached to chiromancy. They were certain that it fully deserved to be glorified and given a prominent position in a system of arts capable of providing cognizance of the world. They held a firm belief and assumption that it was the human body (and the hand in particular) that should be considered one of the most promising objects of study, through which the keen and learned observer could obtain valuable and trustworthy knowledge about mankind as well as individual men and women. It is also worthy of attention and study that this followed from an easily discernible deep fascination with the material and the

Natural-Predictive Significations both to MEN and WOMEN. Being Delightful and Profitable: With the Subject of DREAMS made plain: Whereunto is Added the ART of MEMORY (London: H. Brugis, 1671), pp. 371–377.

⁹ Carroll Camden, "Elizabethan Chiromancy," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 62 No.1 (1947), pp. 1–7. Lynn Thorndike, "Chiromancy in Medieval Latin Manuscripts," *Speculum*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1965), pp. 674–706. Charles S. F Burnett, "The Earliest Chiromancy in the West," *Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes*, Vol. 50 (1987), pp. 189–195. There was a network of early modern European chiromantic writers, the most prominent of them being Johannes Hartlieb (c. 1410–1468), Bartolommeo della Rocca (Cocles) (1476–1504), Johannes de Indagine (Johannes Indaginis) (?–1537), Jean Taisnier (Johannes Taisnierus) (1508–1562), Giovanni Baptista della Porta (1535?–1615), Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), Johannes Rothmann (fl. 1595), Patricio Tricasso (Tricassus Mantuanus), Rudolph Goclenius (1572–1621), Robert Fludd (1574–1637), and Johannes Praetorius (1630–1680).

corporeal, which permeated the chiromantic treatises standing for their distinguishing mark.

George Wharton published his *Keiromantia* [sic] or, *The art of divining by the lines and signatures engraven in the hand of man...* in 1652, the treatise being a translation of, but also a commentary on, Johannes Rothmann's *Chiromancia* (1596). And in the following year Richard Saunders issued his own original treatise *Physiognomie and chiromancie*, which attempted to recapitulate the whole tradition of the art and systematize and synthesize its principles, often in defiance of the earlier authors. William Lilly, who wrote a preface to the treatise, emphasized the fact that Saunders's treatment of chiromancy was much better than his predecessors' works. As he said, Saunders was superior to "either the long-winded Genius of Cocles, infinite contradictory Aphorisms of Taisnerus, abrupt and rustic considerations of Indagines, or too much brevity of Goclenius."¹⁰

The two works—both, by the way, dedicated to Elias Ashmole—principally aimed at rehabilitating the art of palmistry, which, in their authors' opinion, was unjustly scorned and denigrated by the general public, which associated it with common fortune-tellers offering their (potentially fraudulent) services at fairs, in ale-houses or in the street. As Wharton put it, palmistry had in consequence "the Gypsy-like Esteeme [...] among the vulgar."¹¹ It was even more exasperating that similar opinions were shared and propagated by other scholars, who also "attributed the invention and greatest practise of [chiromancy] to those miserable Vagabonds, which we call Gypsies" and generally claimed that it merely "merited the notion of old wives Fables [than] a useful Science."¹² Annoyed by such unacceptable "ignorance and passion against [chiromancy]"—shown, for instance, by "the peevish priest" Martin Del Rio—the English chiromancers wished to demonstrate in their texts that the object of their study was not a superstitious and deceitful practice but a "noble" science. In other words, they intended to "honour" chiromancy and disclose its true value, "to the shame of all Malitious and Pestilent Detractors."¹³

In order to show that there was nothing degrading about studying and practising palmistry, several arguments were used by its apologists. A

¹⁰Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. b4.

¹¹Johannes Rothmann, *Keiromantia* [sic] or, *The art of divining by the lines and signatures engraven in the hand of man, by the hand of nature, theoretically, practically. Wherein you have the secret concordance, and harmony betwixt it, and astrology, made evident in 19. genitures. Together with a learned philosophical discourse of the soule of the world, and the univrsall spirit thereof. A matchlesse piece. / Written originally in Latine by Io: Rothmanne, D. in Phisique, and now faithfully Englished, by Geo: Wharton Esq.* (London: J.G., 1652), p. A3.

¹²Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. a2.

¹³Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. A7.

standard one was the argument from tradition and authority, highlighting that “this science of Chiromancie” had been “respected, honoured and studied” by “the wisest Philosophers and most eminent Magistrates” in antiquity—here Saunders mentioned Aristotle, Virgil, Plautus, Juvenal, Lucius Scylla and Julius Caesar.¹⁴ What was more important than its long history was the relation of chiromancy to other sciences. It was insisted that chiromancy must be studied in reference to two other branches of occult knowledge, namely, physiognomy (the study of the face) and, especially, astrology. The three formed a harmonious system, whose parts mutually verified one another (e.g. what you saw in somebody’s hand would be confirmed by the person’s astrological horoscope and vice versa). This supposedly guaranteed the objective and scientific status of palmistry.¹⁵

However, the most important asset of chiromancy was that it gave its students a unique chance to obtain useful and otherwise unavailable knowledge about themselves and other human beings. The chiromantic inspection could “not onely discover the whole natural condition of the body” but also “the events of future actions”¹⁶ The undeniable benefit from knowing one’s “proper peculiar destinies” or “events of [...] all life” was that one could then try to avert, or at least mitigate, the predicted evil or, just the other way round, “cherish and augment the good pertended [portended]”; in other words, palmistry meant “foreseeing the good and evil” in one’s life.¹⁷ Practising palmistry also provided basic data about one’s health and susceptibility to particular diseases, which was particularly “good for physitians”—although not only for them—who could “judge of the temperaments of their patients” and, in consequence, order a really effective cure.¹⁸ Chiromancy was then a true art of knowing man, in all their aspects (both bodily and psychological); the art, furthermore, ideal for changing the regrettable fact that “most men [were] a terra incognita to themselves.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, in order to realize the ancient commendable maxim *Nosce te ipsum*, it was enough to cast a look at what everybody had

¹⁴ Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. av.

¹⁵ Johannes de Indagine, *Briefve introduction, both natvrall, pleasant, and delectable vnto the art of chiromancie, or manuell diuination, and physiognomy with circumstances vpon the faces of the signes. Also certaine canons or rules vpon diseases and sicknesses. Wherevnto is also annexed aswell the artificiall, as naturall astrology, with the nature of the planets. Written in the Latine tongue by Iohn Indagine priest. And translated into English by Fabian Withers* (London: Thomas Purfoot, 1633 [1558]), pp. B4v-B5, F6v; Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, pp. A3v, A6-A6v, A7, 38; Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. a3.

¹⁶ Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. av, b2v, 4; Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 177.

¹⁸ Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. b2v.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. b2v.

with him or her all the time: the hand. The learned palmists expressed their astonishment that this easy-to-use and available-to-all “Index of Fortune” was so neglected. It was unbelievable that people having at their disposal such a “perfect Table” which delineated the “properties” and “events” of their whole lives, remained “ignorant, not knowing of this treasure.”²⁰ This praise surely added another point to the long list of reasons why the hand should be treated as a marvel.

One of the most interesting issues related to palmistry—which may seem obvious but frequently escapes attention—is the question of *physicality* in chiromancy and its preoccupation with the body. Naturally, a concentration on the human body was then a prominent trend and early modern chiromancers shared it with contemporary physicians, surgeons, anatomists, natural philosophers, collectors, and artists. Still, it seems that the material aspect of palmistry played an exceptionally important role (definitely much more significant than in the case of, for instance, its twin divinatory art, astrology, which had been always, by necessity, a bit abstract). In the first place, chiromancy was founded on the very bodily gesture of gazing at the hand—Saunders insisted that a chiromancer “must fixedly look on it.”²¹ The scrutiny also implied close physical contact with the examined person, whose hand, for instance, had to be held by the examiner, arranged in the most convenient position, moved up closer to the palmist’s eyes, etc.

Furthermore, the hand was viewed as a complex physical object that needed to be divided and classified into many smaller parts—each of them having its own special name—for the sake of systematic description and analysis. So, for chiromancers—who most evidently relished such an anatomizing activity—the hand consisted of the wrist, palm, hollow (depression in the middle of the palm), pommel (percussion), table (the rectangular area between the two horizontal lines on the palm), five fingers and four roots of them, twelve joints, five nails and six mounts or hills, one in the pommel and five at the base of the fingers, named astrologically after planets. All these parts, put together, formed the basic anatomical structure of the hand all humans had in common, a structure whose surface, especially its palm side, was additionally covered with a net of smaller and larger lines visible on the skin. One should note that whenever the lines were mentioned in the chiromantic texts it was stated that they were “delineated,” “drawn” or, especially, “engraven.” The use

²⁰Ibid., p. 4.

²¹Ibid., p. 25.

of such verbs was by no means accidental, as it reflected the representation of God (or Nature) as a skilled divine artist, who personally engraved the lines on people's bodies so that they could discover them and contemplate "his omnipotence, omniscience, and infinite mercy."²² God's work was so ingenious that no human artist could emulate it, as Rothmann observed, when excusing himself for the rather sketchy images of hands included in his treatise.²³ The concept of the human hand as a work of art, made and decorated by the Creator with the intricate network of lines, seemed so natural, convincing and self-explanatory that in the popular 17th-century fine arts handbook *Polygraphice*, first published in 1672, a chapter on drawing the hands was supplemented—without a word of justification, which suggests that the connection was taken for granted—with a short appendix on "Chiromantic Signatures."²⁴

The chiromancers marvelled at the pattern, number and variety of the lines engraved on the human palm. In their catalogues—they never forgot to make them—they meticulously listed and named them all. The lists started with the four principal lines—Line of Fortune (Table Line), Middle Natural Line, Line of Life (or of Heart) and Line of the Liver (or of Stomach)—but also included numerous lesser ones—e.g. the Line of Death, Solar Line, Milky Way, Wrist Line, etc.—which were not present in everybody's hands or were not clearly seen.²⁵ Apart from the lines, there were other meaningful signs on the skin: crosses, knots, dots or circles located on or between the lines. All of these marks had to be taken into consideration in order to draw some conclusions about the examined person and their life, which usually assumed such form as the following sentences:

If the line of life is long, straight, lively coloured, bright and cleare, it be-
tokeneth long life and few diseases [...]. If, on the contrary, the same line is

²² Ibid., p. a2v. Interestingly, the creative act was supposed to take place "at the very instant of the Nativity [birth]" —when "infants [...] first approach[ed] into the world [...] first beh[e]ld the light [and] open[ed]" their hands to expose them to it. Ibid., p. 4.

²³ Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 117.

²⁴ William Salmon, *Polygraphice, or, The art of drawing, engraving, etching, limning, painting, washing, varnishing, colouring, and dying in three books: I, shews the drawing of men and other animal creatures, landskips, countries, and figures of various forms, II, the way of engraving etching and limning with all their requisits and ornaments, III, the way of painting, washing, varnishing, colouring and dying according to the method of the best authors now extant, exemplified in the painting of the antients, washing of maps, globes or pictures, dying of cloth, silks, bones, wood, glass, stones, and metals, together with the way of varnishing thereof according to any purpose or intent: the like never yet extant; by W.S., a lover of art* (London: E.T. and R.H, 1672), pp. 15–16, 79–86.

²⁵ Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 3.

short, of divers colours, thin, cut or parted, it means shortness of life, much sickness and that no work will be brought to a good end.²⁶

If the line of life have Branches stretched out toward the middle natural [...] it is a signe of riches, honor, and perfection; But if the sayd branches run downward toward the wrest, it means poverty and damage by household servants, through their untruth.²⁷

If you happen to find in the hand of a woman, a crosse, with three small lines at the upper corner of the line of life, it signifieth an unshamefast and dishonest woman, but if that crosse bee found about the right corner in the line it selfe, and be deepe in: it signifieth an ungodly and mischievous woman which shall suffer great punishment for her mischief [...] such a crosse in that line, doth always betoken evill both in man and woman.²⁸

Chiromantic works contained dozens or even hundreds of similar “aphorisms”—Saunders in his treatise published 700 of them²⁹—as each palmist tried to provide in his handbook as many examples as possible, aware that the number of possible combinations observable on each palm was enormous.

It is clear that during the examination the material features of the hand were observed and focused on. First of all, it had to be decided whether the left or right palm should be scrutinized, as their linear asymmetry was well known.³⁰ Although the commonsense option was to choose the hand with lines and signs that were simply more visible,³¹ Richard Saunders definitely preferred the left one. The reason he gave, after Galen and Avicenna, was that the left hand was closer to the heart, which, as “the seat of all desires, affections and concupiscences [...] gives greater demonstrations of the passions in this Hand [...] being nearer it.”³² The appearance of the hand’s parts was another key factor. The chiromantic books contained lists of attributes to be noted. For instance, if you wanted to “draw any judgement” from the fingernails, you were supposed to see first whether they were “broad, white, narrow, long, oblique, little, round, fleshy, pale, black, yellowish, red and marked.”³³ In a very similar vein—if your wish

²⁶ Indagine, *Briefve introductions*, pp. B7-B7v.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. C.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. B8v.

²⁹ Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 39.

³⁰ Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 161 [181].

³¹ Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 8.

³² Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

was to read the palm, you had to check how long and broad and deep the lines were; what their colour and shape was; whether they were straight or crooked; or whether they crossed other lines or ran parallel to them.³⁴ The chiromancers' acute awareness of the physicality of their object of study was further demonstrated by an interesting comparison between geometry and chiromancy, or, precisely, between mathematical and bodily lines. As noted by Saunders, geometrical lines have “only longitude, without latitude, wanting profundity or depth,” whereas,

our Lines admit of latitude and profundity as well as longitude [...] for we will not consider them according to length and brevity only, but according to breadth and depth. As also in their appearance and colour, and in many other particulars, sensibly demonstrative: so that our Lines are rather Natural, then Mathematical.³⁵

In this way Saunders proudly emphasized the concrete character of the chiromantic profession, which dealt with the material and the tangible, rather than with the imagined and the abstract, as mathematics did.³⁶

Dabbling with the material sometimes brought about some specific problems for chiromancers to tackle. For instance, among the natural lines there were also those that were “man-made,” i.e. made “by Labour, by wounds, by nasty usage, through infirmity, Cold, Famine, Fear, or the like.”³⁷ The “artificial” lines were useless because they could not convey any message and, what is more, they were capable of “clouding” the natural lines and making them “not perceptible.”³⁸ It was then necessary to be able to recognize them and decide if the hand containing them was still readable. Incidentally, the chiromantic discourse included an only seemingly eccentric question whether soles of the feet could be read in the same way as the palms. The answer to this was that theoretically it would be possible, but unfeasible in practice, “because most commonly there is some deformity [in them], through daily travel, straight shoeing, and the weight which they sustain, and other accidents, which happen to this low part [...]”.³⁹

³⁴Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 21; Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 6.

³⁵Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 4.

³⁶Saunders did not, however, intend to deny any links with mathematics. On the contrary, he noted both types of lines shared other attributes like shape, which was enough for him to conclude: “We agreeing with them [i.e. mathematicians].” *Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

Even if the hands inspected were not deformed or defaced, the chiromancers still had to cope with the problem of the enormous variety of line patterns on human hands. “[T]he position of these Lines—remarked Rothmann—very much differs in all Mens Hands [...] although you should observe *A thousand*, yet could you not finde any *Two* exactly agree in every *Particular* [position] *posture* of their *Lines*.”⁴⁰ This was observed with awe and admiration at such abundance of material forms available for study but at the same time it was undeniable that this made it more difficult to find some regularities and draw more specific conclusions, since so many variants had to be considered first.

Last but not least, there was the puzzling question of the hands’ changeability. It was a common knowledge among the learned chiromancers that the line pattern on the hand’s palm was never permanent and stable. “We daily Observe—confessed Rothmann—how some Lines are quite Vanished, which were but even now in our Hands and that others Arise in Lieu thereof, with a Different Face.”⁴¹ The lines then appeared and disappeared, altering their shape, length, colour and hue. The key factor, determining that, seemed to be the person’s age, as there was a different set of lines at each stage of life, but it was also temper at the given moment—“tears, Passion, Infirmitie, overmuch Joy, excess of sorrow, wrath and fury”—that could and did affect the body.⁴² Therefore, it was essential for the most studious chiromancers to remember that “the body is alterable”⁴³ and, consequently, that a single inspection was not enough to know the examined person—it had to be repeated several times and in different circumstances to “attain the [more reliable] knowledge of Particulars.”⁴⁴

The present paper has tried to recreate what 17th-century chiromancy was to its English students, by focusing on their absorption in the corporeal and their assumption that it was through the human body that man and the world could and should be known. Chiromancy was basically an act of contemplation of the tangible hand, which consisted in anatomizing it, counting and classifying its components, and observing their physical features. It was claimed that the hand was like a looking-glass, and it seems to be quite an accurate simile, since the complexity, changeability,

⁴⁰Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 56; Marin Cureau de La Chambre, *A discourse on the principles of chiromancy by monsieur de la Chambre, counsellor to the king of France in his counsels, and his physitian in ordinary; Englished by a person of quality* (London: T. Newcomb, 1658), p. 10.

⁴¹Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 161.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 21–22; Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 26.

⁴³Saunders, *Physiognomie* (1653), p. 26

⁴⁴Rothmann, *Keiromantia*, p. 22.

and uniqueness discovered in the hand, were exactly the attributes of what was then called the sublunary world. And as for the way of knowing man, which was after all the chief objective of learned palmistry, the hand offered an impressive collection of meaningful bodily signs just waiting for being deciphered. The chiromancers Richard Saunders and George Wharton called themselves scientists and in a sense they were right. Just like natural philosophers, they wanted to obtain certain knowledge about the world. The object of their study was hands, which were just another leaf in the book of nature—to use the contemporary metaphor—that could be studied in order to get insight into the human body and mind. The reason why the art of chiromancy ultimately failed to be rehabilitated was that it absolutely relied on the Neoplatonic concept of hidden correspondences and influences linking all parts of the universe; this concept was increasingly exposed to criticism for being rationally and scientifically unverifiable. A symbol of this change was, for example, the stance of King Louis XIV's physician, Marin Cureau de La Chambre, who did consider the use of chiromancy in his practice but eventually decided that a standard down-to-earth medical observation of bodily symptoms was sufficient to acquire knowledge about his patients.⁴⁵ In spite of its enthusiasts' efforts, palmistry was doomed to remain, in the following centuries, a speciality of gypsy fortune-tellers.

Paweł Rutkowski

Through the Body: Chiromancy in 17th-Century England

The early modernity inherited the ancient and medieval conviction that normally hidden knowledge about fellow humans could be obtained by an inspection of particular parts of their bodies. It was the hand that was considered especially informative, as it contained lines and other natural marks that were supposed to form a kind of alphabet that could disclose the “Inclinations, the Motions of the Soul, the Vertues and Vices”, and were even capable of revealing the examined person's future. The present article explores the English boom in chiromancy in the 17th century, which saw new editions of old authorities as well as new treatises by, for instance, Richard Saunders and George Wharton, whose chiromantic texts aimed at elevating palmistry to the status of science that pursued the ancient *nosce te ipsum* philosophy. The striking feature of chiromancy was its preoccupation with the material and the bodily. Each chiromantic session was in fact a kind of sym-

⁴⁵La Chambre, *A discourse on the principles of chiromancy*, p. 322.

bolic dissection that consisted in identifying, naming and interpreting particular anatomical parts of the hand. Furthermore, palmists had to consider all unique physical attributes of their clients' hands, whose varied size and shape – together with palm lines' length, depth, colour, straightness or crookedness – always had to be taken into account. Chiromancy was thus founded on acknowledgment and contemplation of variety and changeability observable in the human bodies, which provided access to knowledge about humanity.

Keywords: chiromancy, palmistry, body, England, XVII century

Słowa kluczowe: chiromancja, ciało, wróżenie, Anglia, wiek XVII