

ASTROLOGY

by Patrick Curry, for J.L. Heilbron (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the History of Modern Science* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

Astrology is best defined as the set of theories and practices interpreting the positions of the heavenly bodies in terms of human and terrestrial implications. (The former have variously been considered signs and, more controversially, causes.) The subject – and therefore its study – is riven with characteristics, often paradoxical, that constitute both its interest and its difficulty. One is that although inextricably entangled with what are now demarcated as science, magic, religion, politics, psychology and so on, it cannot be reduced to any of these. Another, relatedly, is that although the historical longevity and cultural diversity of astrology are far too great for it to have been precisely the same thing in all times and places, it has nevertheless always managed to reconstitute itself as just that in the minds of its practitioners, public and opponents alike. These points have particular relevance in relation to historians of science, who until recent decades predominantly analyzed astrology anachronistically as a “pseudo-science”, *i.e.*, a failed version of something else, the human meanings of which could largely be derived from its lack of epistemological credentials.

Western astrology essentially originated as Mesopotamian astral divination. The planets and prominent stars, identified with gods in ways that have since changed remarkably little, were considered celestial omens in which could be discerned the messages of the gods, largely answering royal concerns. The origins of many key elements of the astrological tradition – not only the planetary deities, zodiacal signs, risings and settings, *etc.*, but the effort to systematize divination through what we would now consider astronomical and empirical observations – developed between its apparent origins around 2000 BCE and the fifth century BCE, when natal astrology first appeared. The latter, following Alexander’s conquest of Persia, was absorbed and transformed by Greek geometric and kinetic models, which added the aspects, or angles of separation between planets and points, and emphasized the importance of the horoscopus or Ascendent, the degree of the sign rising on the Eastern horizon. (The first known horoscope dates from 4 BCE.) Astrology was also fruitfully married to Aristotelian cosmology, Hippocratic humours and slightly later, Galenic temperaments. The general tendency was in the direction of a more universal and flexible application to any individual or event. All this was very influentially formulated by Ptolemy (c. 100-170 CE) in his Tetrabiblos.

Astrology played an increasingly important role in Roman life, but largely in crudely populist and overtly political contexts. A far more fruitful future course followed in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquests, whereby Greek astrology spread to Persia and throughout Eastern Asia as far as India. In this way Greek astrology eventually became incorporated into, and benefitted from, the learning of the Arabic world. It was reintroduced into medieval Europe by translations into Latin: for example, from the mid-twelfth century onwards of works by Abu Ma’shar (787-886), which not only supplied a philosophical basis (largely Aristotelian) for astrology but popularised the idea of Great Conjunctions, according to which conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn in a new symbolic element – which take place every 240 years –

signify changes of political rulership. A complete revolution, which takes 960 years, was similarly associated with changes in the fortunes of entire religions. This astral historiography was taken up by Pierre D'Ailly and Roger Bacon.

In the late fifteenth century, a series of influential translations by Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) made available more re-discovered Greek texts, including much of Plato, Plotinus and Iamblichus and the Corpus Hermeticum. These placed a renewed magical and/or mystical astrology at the heart of the Renaissance revival of neo-Platonism and hermeticism. Typically, it managed to evade Pico della Mirandola's powerful critique in his Disputationes (1494) by finding shelter elsewhere in the very set of ideas that had so inspired him (for example, occult sympathy and antipathy).

Not surprisingly, astrology remained controversial with the Christian Church. It survived the condemnations of St. Augustine and the early church fathers, who saw it as pagan (and in particular polytheistic) and a transgression of both human free will and divine omnipotence. Augustine didn't deny that astrologers could speak truthfully, only that when they did so it was with the help of, and in the service of, demons.

At both popular and elite levels, however, astrology in one form or another remained entrenched. It fell to St Thomas Aquinas in the late thirteenth century to arrange a compromise which secured for it a longlived and relatively secure, if limited, niche. His synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian natural philosophy permitted "natural astrology" to influence physical and collective phenomena but not – directly – human souls; the individual judgements (and in particular predictions) of "judicial astrology" were therefore illicit. Since Aquinas admitted that most people were in turn influenced by their bodies, however, there was a kind of tacit legitimization of astrology in practice. But the Reformation presented a serious new challenge in the 15th-16th centuries, as Luther and Calvin objected violently to astrology's idolatry, as they saw it, which they stigmatized as "superstition".

The seventeenth century was pivotal in the history of astrology, but pace Keith Thomas's influential Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971), the appropriate question is not why so many otherwise intelligent people believed in astrology (at a time when this was not extraordinary), but why did many people stop believing in it?

There was a strong social and political dimension to its fall from favour. In the English Revolution the pamphlets and almanacs of astrologers on both sides – but especially those of William Lilly (1602-81) for Parliament – played a major, and highly visible, role. In the late 17th and 18th centuries the new patrician and commercial alliance sought to put sectarian strife and upheaval behind them, and astrology became firmly identified as vulgar plebeian (rather than religious) superstition, to be contrasted with the spirit of rationalism and realism. This perception was now most often articulated by a new set of opponents: the metropolitan literati. It was epitomised in 1707 when Jonathan Swift issued a mock almanac predicting the death of the prominent astrologer, John Partridge, followed by another putatively confirming its fulfilment. Partridge became a laughing-stock in coffee-house circles, although his almanacs continued to sell. Benjamin Franklin later employed the same tactic in the American colonies.

At the same time, increasing political centralisation in France made astrologers' unlicensed prophecies unwelcome there too. And after a short period of ambivalence, most prominent European natural philosophers also started to close ranks against astrology, alternately ignoring or criticising it as part of the old Aristotelian order, and/or magical (whether plebeian or Platonic). To a considerable extent, Isaac Newton's success set the seal on this development. He borrowed the old idea of attraction at a distance, but substituted a single and quantifiable force for an astrological *sine qua non*: the planets as a qualitative plurality. So natural astrology (including, for example, the moon's effects on tides) was quietly absorbed by natural philosophy; but judicial astrology, as a symbolic rather than mathematical system addressing merely "secondary" qualities and "subjective" concerns, became out of place as never before in a newly disenchanting (and commodified) world.

It was in this context that the charge against astrology of "superstition" began to acquire its present meaning as a cognate of stupidity or ignorance. To begin with, scientific hostility largely coincided with those of the guardians of religious orthodoxy; but as natural philosophy moved in the direction of modern science, it increasingly became a secular opposition.

The early modern period has too often been described, by those willfully mistaking contemporary rhetoric for reality, as the death of astrology. There was indeed a serious decline, as astrology was pushed into largely (but not entirely) rural strongholds, where Moore's Almanac was so central, and a relatively simple and magical set of beliefs. But early in the 19th century, as the middle classes grew in power and began to break away from patrician hegemony, a new urban astrology appeared which is still with us. More individualistic than before, it succeeded in adapting to consumer capitalist society. And in the early 20th century, through the work of Alan Leo (1860-1917) and his commercially canny Theosophy, astrology secured a firm footing in both the popular press and the thriving middle-class market for psychology-cum-spirituality. At present it still seems to meet a demand for Weberian (re-) enchantment which no amount of technical, technological or purely theoretical progress can obviate.

Thus astrology has so far managed to adapt to, and even exploit, every challenge history has thrown it – not without constraints and setbacks, of course, but there is no reason to expect it will ever fail to do so, despite the outraged denunciations it continues to attract from contemporary guardians of scientific probity.

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