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Translations of Kepler's Astrological Writings

Part I, Section 2.3. Kepler's Letter to an Official on Rudolf II and Astrology, 1611

Translated by Cornelia Linde and Dorian Greenbaum; annotated by Dorian Greenbaum

Kepler wrote the following letter on Easter Sunday, 3 April 1611, to an unnamed court official. It is of interest because it contains more of Kepler's views of astrology in addition to his views of how Rudolf thought about astrology. He cautions the official about the undue influence which astrological advice is liable to exert upon the fragile psyche of the Emperor.

Taken from Opera Omnia 8.1, pp. 343-345; Gesammelte Werke 16 (Briefe 1607-1611), pp. 373-375.

Note: Words or phrases appearing in GW, but not in OO, are added between forward slashes (/).

[OO 8.1, p. 343; GW 16, p. 373]

[Prague, 3 April 1611]

In the year 1611. Easter.

Away with ceremonies and titles,
certainly deserved, but which betray what is secret.

I trust you will recognise a man of German faithfulness. I deserve the wages of the Emperor; I am uncorrupted by Bohemians and Austrians, and after several meetings deliberately refrain from conversation with them. I am writing to you freely, you who are loyal to the Emperor,

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because not only your reputation, but also my eyes and ears speak to me about your support.

Among other things in yesterday's conversation, I said in one sentence that astrology brings immense harm to monarchs, if some sly astrologer should wish to abuse men's credulity. I believe I have to take pains that this will not happen to our Emperor. If he should hear about a prognostication of the Frenchman,¹ he will impute much to it. Therefore it is for you, who counsels the Emperor, to consider whether this is the Emperor's habit. For I think you see that all trust is vain and destructive if the fundamentals of doing things well are lacking. Already I am almost certain that the rumor of the French prognostication has been reported to the Emperor's ears.

Popular astrology, believe me, is a tragic illusion (*cothurnus*) and can be readily made to say things that are agreeable to both parties.² I [**OO 8.1, p. 344; GW 16, p. 374**] certainly think that not only popular astrology, but even that astrology which I perceive as in agreement with natural things, has to be separated from such weighty deliberations. Of course I do not warn against this, if it is necessary for you in the

¹ Edward Rosen, 'Kepler's Attitude toward Astrology and Mysticism', in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. B. Vickers (Cambridge/London/New York, 1984), pp. 253-272, here p. 270, n. 41, says that he does not know who the Frenchman is, but I wonder if it might be Nostradamus? We know that Nostradamus had cast and interpreted Rudolf's chart (see <http://ramkat.free.fr/nerg1.html>: "Nativitas Ser[enissimi] et Potentissimi Principis, D[omi]ni Rudolphi, Invictissimi Principis, D[omi]ni Maximiliani, Regis Romanorum, filij, nati die 18ua Julij, hora sexta minuta 45 à meridie, anno 1552. In ciuitate Vienna Austrae, quo in loco altitudo poli est 48. graduum: una cum perfecta inventione gradus horoscopi, et amplis suis significationibus. Per Michäelen Nostredamum fideliter calculata et explicata. Anno 1564. [fol. 127r] Ex Sallon de Crau Provinciae oppido, die 20 Julij 1565." From the Herzog August Wilhelm Library, Wolfenbüttel [Cod. Guelf. 208 Extrav.]).

² *Cothurnus* has no immediately recognizable connotation in English today. Edward Rosen, 'Kepler's Attitude', p. 261, translates *cothurnus* as 'technique' (*cothurni* were special high shoes worn by tragic actors, often used to make the actor appear to be taller), but rather than translating it as a neutral 'technique', I am trying to convey what I think was Kepler's intention in using this word, to invoke the idea of popular astrology as a tragic illusion (even travesty?) of what it could be, not merely as a kind of prop. Carola Baumgardt, *Johannes Kepler: Life and Letters* (London, 1952), p. 99, avoids the translation problem by not translating 'cothurnus': 'Ordinary astrology is a cothurnus...'

customary assemblies; I know that usually nothing is discussed in them on this basis. But this little fox may lie well hidden in ambush in the bedroom, or outside in the street, or within the mind; and it instils, meanwhile, what someone corrupted by it has brought into the senate, while concealing its author.

I was asked about the decrees (*decreta*) of the stars by parties which I know are opposed to the Emperor, and I answered that what I believe is not of any import, but what frightens the credulous; long indeed is the lifetime of the Emperor, with no bad directions; of course there are bad Revolutions and Eclipses, but those have already passed one, two and three years ago. On the other hand, Matthias's disturbances are threatening,³ because Saturn comes to his own Sun, and because the great opposition of Saturn and Jupiter will occur in the place of his own Sun. This is what I say to the enemies of the Emperor, since if they do not shake with fear from these things, certainly they will not be so confident. I would not say that to the Emperor himself, since they are not of such import that I think they can be trusted; and in truth I fear that they will steel the Emperor against reason, so that he neglects the ordinary means which he can have, perhaps, by the intercessions of his faithful Princes. In this way Astrology would drive him to a much greater evil than there is now.

In turn, I would sincerely like to tell you, because you are faithful to the Emperor, what I will never say to Matthias and the Bohemians, what is surely my opinion about the cooperation of the stars in these disturbances, seen seriously from a more sensible (*sanior*) astrology, even though I would not want anyone to put faith in them, the closest circumstances of things and the earthly planets being considered of less importance.

Matthias has experienced what were, by God, some toilsome directions:⁴ in 1566 the Moon to square Saturn, in 1595 the Sun to Saturn;⁵ but fortune answered. For in 1594 (this is precise enough; more is not to be expected from the stars), he badly conducted the affairs

³ Matthias was Rudolf's brother; there had been enmity between the two of them for years, and in 1611, the year that Kepler wrote this letter, Matthias forced Rudolf to turn over the kingdoms of Hungary, Moravia and Bohemia to him. Rudolf was forced to abdicate on 11 November 1611.

⁴ See No. 1148, pp. 405-406 in *GW* 21, 2.2, Kepler's calculations of the directions for Matthias described in this paragraph.

⁵ By conjunction?

against Esztergom and Győr on the island.⁶ Likewise in 1589 the Midheaven came to the opposition of Saturn, and in 1605 and 1606 the Sun to the opposition of Mars, when there were Hungarian disturbances, and the Archdukes, coming to Prague and proposing Matthias as Emperor to the Emperor, bestowed much more of a vexation on him. From this time onwards the directions and revolutions were good; in 1606 the Moon to the trine of Mars, in 1607 the Moon to the sextile of Jupiter, and now in this year the Midheaven to the body of Mars, which is certainly a turbulent direction, but plainly has power. Next year the direction of the Midheaven to the sextile of Jupiter follows, afterwards the Ascendant to the sextile of Mars (feverish, but in the meantime a happy constitution (*constitutio*), and finally the Ascendant to the body of Jupiter. Here I believe (astrologically of course) that all external matters will turn out to be happy and honoured, and the passing of the Emperor's fortune to him, since both of them have the sextile [GW 16, p. 375] of Jupiter and Mars, and the Emperor of course was conveyed to his kingdoms through the same revolutions.⁷ I think that the only, and to him alone the most harmful, are future respiratory infections. Even if Saturn indeed approaches the Sun and the great opposition comes to be in the place of the Sun, nevertheless it was the same in 1593. These also happened to the Emperor in 1594. Whereby a horrible war arose for the Emperor, but nevertheless with a happy outcome, by which war he turned out to be great, and thus the same can also be hoped for Matthias, when the application of Jupiter to the rising place (*ortus*) promises all the most auspicious things.

The Emperor, on the other hand, has adverse directions: the Midheaven to the oppositions by ray of Venus and Mercury, where Matthias has the Moon; the Ascendant closely square the ray of the Sun, which is opposite Mars in Matthias's nativity.⁸

If some astrologer saw and weighed this carefully, and if it were in his power [OO 8.1, p. 345] to give advice to one of the two, he would

⁶ Rosen, 'Kepler's Attitude', pp. 262 and 270, n. 42, explicated the Latin *Strigonius* and *Jaurinus*, and pointed out that Matthias lost battles with the Turks at these locations.

⁷ For Kepler's notes on these aspects in Rudolf's natal chart, see **Part I.2.1** in this volume, pp. 89 and n. 33, 91 and n. 39.

⁸ See No. 1109, pp. 394-395 in *GW* 21, 2.2, a comparison between Rudolf's birthchart and Matthias's.

certainly instil Matthias with great confidence and the Emperor with terror. As I have said, I believe that no construct need be placed on this. I wrote and researched these things so that you could form your own conjecture from it, as to how much is to be imputed to the French Prognostication: without a doubt, exactly nothing.

Briefly, I believe that Astrology ought to retire, not only from the senate but also the minds themselves of those who today want to recommend the best things to the Emperor, and therefore it has to be kept totally out of the Emperor's view.