

The Representation of Astrology in Golden Age Spanish Theatre: Different Points of View in Calderon's *El astrologo fingido*¹

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Abstract. This paper examines the representation of astronomical phenomena, and their astrological interpretation, in the Spanish theatre of the sixteenth century. The idea is not to use the plays as direct sources of information on the practice of astrology and also medicine, as has been previously done by Chevalier, Soufas and Sanchez Granjel.² Instead, I will look at the representation of astrology and its practitioners in theatre plays, considered as a cultural creation of their contemporary society. The first part of this study is focused on the representation of the variety of astrological practitioners, and how they dramatize the contact between academic astrology (taught at the universities) and other non-scholarly astrological practices, usually associated with magic and popular predictions. I also look at the interest of the general public in conventional representations of astrological theories.

During the last decades of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century, the period traditionally known in the history of Spanish literature as the Golden Age, the most famous playwrights of Spain wrote plays that included elements inspired by astronomical phenomena. This inspiration was often directly associated with the

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² Maxime Chevalier, 'Le médecin dans la littérature du Siècle d'Or' in Casa de Velázquez, *Le Personnage dans la littérature du Siècle d'or: statut et fonction*, (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1984), pp. 21-37; Teresa Scott Soufas, *Melancholy and the Secular Mind in Spanish Golden Age Literature* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990); Luis Sánchez Granjel, *Historia general de la medicina española: La Medicina española del siglo XVII*, Volumen 3. (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1978).

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practice of astrology, represented in the plays in various ways. Several plays are widely known for being developed around an astrological plot, as could be said of the famous *La vida es sueño*, by Pedro Calderon de la Barca. Other plays by Calderon, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina and other authors included characters who were astrological practitioners, and discussed astrological ideas.³ This is not unique to Spanish theatre: authors in Italy, France and England, such as Ludovico Ariosto, Jean Baptiste Moliere, Pierre Corneille, Ben Jonson and John Dryden also used astrology as a theme or presented characters who were practitioners of the discipline. Scholars, mainly historians of literature, have traditionally pointed out the great number of astronomical and astrological elements in the plays, particularly in Calderon's works, which have been studied in detail by Frederick de Armas. There have been studies on Shakespeare or Ben Jonson's works, focused on the knowledge of astrology or astrological medicine.

The content of the plays may allow us to suppose these playwrights had a familiarity with astrology; in the case of Spanish theatre, Halstead has studied the attitude of Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina toward astrology.⁴ Despite the abundance of plays that included these elements, the aim of this project is not to use these plays as sources of information on early modern astrology (except on specific occasions), but to see in them how astrology and astrologers were represented to the public. Thus, this research does not mainly concentrate on what the playwrights knew or believed (if we consider that the plays reflect their thought) but on the way these authors chose to represent astrological practices, and the ideas of astrologers.

This paper is a presentation of a part of a research project which is in its initial phase, focused on medical culture and on how medicine was represented in golden age theatre, including astrological medicine. As a part of medicine and following the tradition of doctors with some knowledge of astrology and of astrologer-doctors, the explanation of diseases through the influence of the stars was, at the time, considered as a scientific explanation. But the research on this aspect of the practice of

3 R. Lima, *Dark prisms: Occultism in Hispanic Drama* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), pp. 19-20.

4 Frank G. Halstead, 'The Attitude of Lope de Vega toward Astrology and Astronomy', *Hispanic Review*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (1939): pp. 205-219; Frank G. Halstead, 'The Attitude of Tirso de Molina toward Astrology and Astronomy', *Hispanic Review*, Vol. 9, no. 4 (1941): pp. 417-439.

medicine during the early modern period and its relationship with astrology, does not cover every element inspired by astronomical phenomena that appear in the plays. Leaving aside the use of astronomical metaphors and images of the stars and planets as symbols, there are many ideas related to astrology as it was understood by early modern people. Even if astrological medicine is one of the main issues referred to in these plays, other features of the practice of early modern astrology not related to medicine are mentioned and used as literary resources or to portray characters. One of the aims of the research is to study the representation of astrology as a whole, that is, the general view of astrology as a discipline that the plays reflect. In this paper I will focus on the representation of astrology in the play by Calderon *The Fake Astrologer*, mentioning some of the topics that the play suggests, as a sample of the themes that can come out in the study of the theatre of the Golden Age.⁵

Astrology as a discipline is a common theme in several works by Calderon de la Barca.⁶ Indeed, most Spanish (and probably most non-

5 This play of 1623 was very popular. Several authors wrote adaptations of it all over Europe during the seventeenth century: first in France in *Ibrahim ou l'illustre Bassa* by Madeleine de Scudéry in 1641 and *Le Feint Astrologue* by Thomas Corneille (the brother of Pierre Corneille) in 1648; in England in an anonymous play, *The Feign'd Astrologer*, in 1668 and by John Dryden in his *An Evening's Love, or The Mock Astrologer*, 1671; and in Italy, by Carlo Costanzo Costa in the play *L'astrologo non astrologo o gli amori turbati* in 1665, by Arcangelo Spagna in *Il finto astrologo* and by Raffaello Tauro in *La falsa astrologia, ovvero, il sognar vegghiando*, 1669. On these adaptations see M. Pavesio, 'Las imitaciones francesas de Calderón: Hispanismo e italianismo en el teatro francés del siglo XVII', in I. Arellano (ed.) *Calderón 2000: homenaje a Kurt Reichenberger en su 80 cumpleaños: actas del Congreso Internacional, V centenario del nacimiento de Calderón, Universidad de Navarra, septiembre, 2000* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2002), pp. 725-735; A. Steiner, 'Calderón's *Astrólogo Fingido* in France', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 24, no.1, (1926): pp. 27-30 and A. Zambrana Ramírez, '¿La astrología como ciencia? Un estudio comparativo entre el "Astrólogo fingido" de Calderón de la Barca y la versión en inglés "The Feign'd Astrologer" (1668)', *RILCE*, Vol. 20, no.1 (2004): pp. 99-116; V. Pompejano, 'Le migrazioni testuali tra Francia e Italia dell' "Astrologo fingido": dal romanzo di Madeine de Scudéry al teatro di Carlo Costanza Costa' and F. Antonucci, Arcangelo Spagna adattatore di Calderón: da El astrólogo fingido a Il finto astrologo' in F. Antonucci, *Percorsi del teatro spagnolo in Italia e Francia* (Firenze: Alinea, 2007), pp. 91-125 and pp. 13-35.

6 N. Vivalda, 'Basilio o el ocaso del monarca astrólogo: juegos de la similitud e inconveniencias políticas en *La vida es sueño*' in Frederick De Armas, L. García

Spanish) plays including astrological elements seem to have as a theme or at least make a reference to the issue of the validity of astrology. Traditionally, scholars have considered that Calderon's plays *Life is a Dream* and *The Fake Astrologer* were both written with the aim of establishing the falsity of astrology: one by proving that Segismundo's destiny was not deterministically established by the stars, and the other one by using the mess created by the deception of the false astrologer as an image of the falsity of the discipline. This tradition considered that Calderon, Lope and other authors were different from their contemporaries in their attitudes toward astrology, because these early historians saw in the plays a supposed superiority of Calderon's intellect, or proof of his moral fight against superstition.⁷ This would allow placing *The Fake Astrologer* and other plays that criticize astrology in the wave of educational theatre proposed by Tirso de Molina, theatre that was intended to be 'of profit to the people', in contrast with Lope's very different understanding of theatre as entertainment.⁸ More recent studies have moved beyond these ideas, taking into account the historical context and the place of astrology within science during the period.

It is too simplistic to maintain that there might be only two ways in which astrology is presented in the plays, whether as a useful and valid discipline or as an object of jest. Between these two apparent extremes, which often appear in the same play, there is a wide range of appreciations of astrology in the works, which mirrors the various attitudes towards the discipline that co-existed in early modern society.⁹ The influences of the stars were generally accepted, some of them accepted as the effects of natural causes, others put in doubt for several reasons. A play addressed to the popular public, like *The Fake*

Lorenzo, E. García Santo-Tomás (eds.), *Hacia la tragedia áurea* (Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana Editorial / Vervuert, 2008), p. 384.

7 As in Zambrana, '¿La astrología como ciencia? Un estudio comparativo entre el "astrólogo fingido" de Calderón de la Barca y la versión en inglés "The Feign'd Astrologer" (1668)', *RILCE*, Vol. 20, no. 1, 2004.

8 See, for instance, A.J. Valbuena Briones 'El concepto del hado en el teatro de Calderón' *Bulletin Hispanique*, Vol. 63, no.1-2, (1961): pp. 48-53.; or I. Arellano, *Historia del teatro español del siglo XVII* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1995).

9 Lima, *Dark prisms*, p. 20.

Astrologer, represented these attitudes, because they were hotly debated when the play was written, in about 1623.¹⁰

The play represents a situation that the public would understand: the Renaissance debate on the legitimacy of astrology and its very nature, polemics that had been increasingly active in the scholarly realm since the fifteenth century that had gone beyond the limits of academic culture, ultimately extending to the popular classes.¹¹

The discussion of the discipline that appears on stage was based on the two points that concerned the people: whether or not astrology could be considered reliable and whether it was right to practice and to seek its advice from a moral and, above all, from a religious point of view. In *The Fake Astrologer*, the character of Doña Maria concedes that it is not right to believe the astrologers, but she consults one anyway:

(Mi prima) me dixo, que conocía
vn gran Astrologo, a quien
preguntò su nacimiento:
y aunque crearlos no es bien,
quise de mi casamiento
ver el efecto tambien,
[(My cousin) told me that she knew a great astrologer and
requested of him her birth [horoscope]. *And even if it is not
right to believe them,* I also wanted to know about my
marriage.]

The character of Don Diego, who is pretending to be the astrologer, makes a reference to the religious consequences of certain practices, although he clearly refers to them as magic:

porque representar
a la vista la imagen
de vn hombre que està ausente,
es Magia, y castigarle
podrán a quien lo hiziere,
si alguno ay que lo alcance:

10 Max Oppenheimer, 'A Note on Calderón's El astrólogo fingido', *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, Vol. 2, no.1 (1950): pp: 3-4.

11 Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life* (English trans.), (Penguin, 1988).

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[Because to show the image of an absent man is Magic, and they could punish the person who did it, if there is anybody who can].

The standard arguments common to the polemics on astrology appear in the plays. One of the arguments used to defend the discipline against those who pointed out the many mistakes astrologers made was the idea that astrology was a very difficult knowledge to acquire because of the many elements that had to be taken into account and because of the complexity of the combinations. When Doña Maria tells her father that Don Diego is the best known astrologer, he answers that few men deserve to be called good astrologers, because of the difficulty of the knowledge.

Muchos ha auido,
que en estudio tan dudoso
aqueste nombre han tenido,
mas es tan dificultoso,
que pocos le han merecido
[There have been many (men) who have had that name (of the best astrologer) in such a doubtful study, but it is so difficult that very few have deserved it.]

This character, Doña Maria's father Don Leonardo, shows respect for and interest in the discipline. However, he himself calls it "such a doubtful study". Both attitudes, accepting astrology as a true science and simultaneously rejecting it as unsure, are repeated throughout the whole play. The same happens with the figure of the practitioners; sometimes the astrologers are criticized and other characters make fun of them, and sometimes there are astrologers respected and mentioned as "people of wit" (*gente de ingenio*), as Don Leonardo calls them.

Astrological Practitioners

One of the aims of this project is to describe the ways in which the various characters related to astrology appeared on stage. The plays often make fun of astrologers, in the same way that they make fun of physicians. When an astrologer is presented as ridiculous in a play or is the object of jokes this does not necessarily imply that the play is dismissing the discipline as a whole. Even if this is the most usual interpretation suggested by scholars for these kinds of plays, this assertion needs to be revisited. In the case of medicine in the theatre of

the Golden Age, it has been pointed out that it would be a mistake to understand the satire of medical practitioners as a wholesale rejection of medical practice.¹² There was a debate on medical practices, as there was a debate on astrological practices. This does not mean that several scenes and verses of the play were not intended by the playwright as a criticism of astrology. When Don Diego wonders what he will say when people begin to ask him things, his servant, who is the most ironic character, tells him that every astrologer answers whatever he wants, and that none of them was ever right in a prediction:

Diego

Si, mas luego que he de hazer
si todos estos se juntan,
y mil cosas me preguntan?

Moron

Lo que todos, responder;
vna vez si y otras no,
sea de gusto, ò de pena,
Dios se la depare buena:
Pues que Astrologo acertò
cosa ninguna?

[Ok, but then, what can I do if all these people get together and ask me a thousand things? Do what they all (the astrologers) do, answer them; sometimes yes, sometimes no, whether good or bad things, let God have for them something good in store. Because, what astrologer ever got anything right?]

In the case of this play, the astrologer is not a real practitioner of the art, but is simply pretending. The theme of the character that has to become a fake astrologer, as Micheline Grenet pointed out, is a part of the literary

12 J. Slater, M.L. Lopez Terrada, 'Scenes of Mediation: Staging Medicine in the Spanish Interludes', *Social History of Medicine*, first published online September 8, 2010: 'It would be a mistake to understand the satire of medical practitioners as a wholesale rejection of medical practice; instead, the scenes of mediation in the interludes constitute another coherent, critical voice that participates in a broad discourse about healing alternatives in early modern Spain'.

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tradition.¹³ Fake practitioners became part of the conventional representation of astrologers, used to make fun of practitioners of the discipline, certainly, on many occasions. *The Fake Astrologer* was also used as a literary tool to establish ideas on astrology that could be recognized by the public. These representations, including mockery, show interest in the activities of the astrologers and a general understanding of their practices by the public.

There is also a dual representation of astrological authority. In the play the fake astrologer, Don Diego, when creating his deceit, says that he learned astrology in Italy with the expert "Aporta". This name recalls Giovanni Battista della Porta, the famous natural philosopher who had written on astrology in his *Magia Naturalis*. But as a changed name used by the false astrologer and because of the references to this supposed master in astrology who was simultaneously a magician and had a relative who "spoke with the devil", the figure is presented before the public as another fake practitioner. The public knows Don Diego is inventing everything he says about his master. This is another way to satirize the discipline; however, it establishes a difference between false astrologers and real experts. Immediately after Don Diego talks about Aporta, Doña Maria's father, Don Leandro, makes a reference to a real authority in mathematics, astronomy and astrology: Gines de Rocamora, who wrote a work on the *Sphere* and was a professor at the Academy of Mathematics of Madrid, which was about to become the Jesuit Colegio Imperial in 1625, about two years after the play was written.

Tambien yo en mi mocedad,
si he de deziros verdad,
alguna cosa estudiè,
y con deseos pequè
en esta curiosidad:
Don Ginès de Rocamora
me enseño tiempos atrás.

13 M. Grenet, *La passion des astres au XVIIe siècle, de l'astrologie à l'astronomie* (Paris: Hachette, 1994), and M. Grenet, 'L'astrologie au XVIIe siècle : déterminisme astral ou charlatanisme', *Science... et Pseudosciences*, n° 242, 2000 and Hors série Astrologie, 2009 at <http://www.pseudo-sciences.org/spip.php?article1222> [accessed 28 Jan. 2011].

[If I must be honest, I also studied a bit when I was young, and I willingly sinned in this curious issue: Don Gines de Rocamora taught me some time ago].

The opposition between the two mentioned authorities is clear. When Maria's father says this, Don Diego and his servant Moron are worried, considering that Don Leonardo could have some real knowledge of astrology and could 'examine' or interrogate Don Diego. This suggests that there is a difference in the plays when representing what we could call a popular astrologer or practitioner and when what appears is a university-trained figure. This parallels what happens with physicians, but the matter deserves further study and reference to a broader corpus of plays.

There were close links between astrology and theatre, not only because the stage becomes a place where astrological practices were represented, but also because of the known theatrical aspect of several activities of the astrologers. As Moss and Peterson explained for the case of medical themes, the astrological themes played out on the early modern stage also mirrored actual cultural practices.¹⁴ Similar to non-official medical practitioners, astrologers often advertised themselves—or used their servants for that—to let the inhabitants of a city know they were there. This is what Calderon transmits when the character of Don Diego is worried about how he will convince people that he is an astrologer, in order to maintain the lie. Moron, his servant, tells him that he will go around the place advertising his presence, in the same way as physicians did, and that is the comparison he uses:

y yo irè dando alaridos,
como vn Medico, que iba
diziendo por el lugar:
ay enfermos que curar.

Ansi, pues, con voz altiva
dirè, no ay algo perdido,
que para hazer parecer
quanto se puede perder,

14 R. Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 36, quoted in Moss, Stephanie and Peterson, Kaara L., *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage* (Aldershot, Hants, England / Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), p. xii.

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vn Astrologo ha venido
[and I will go around shouting, as a physician who asked in a
place: are there sick people to cure? This way, with high voice,
I will say, is anything lost? An astrologer has come to make
find anything that is lost].

Astrological practices and ideas

The main idea that the plays treat when including astrological elements is, of course, the concept of determinism: that is, that stars force people to act, or that their influence is so strong that a person cannot resist it. This is a usual element in the plays; an element that had been a constant subject of polemics since Antiquity and that was present in literary and scientific works from ancient Greece to the seventeenth century. Calderon repeats his references to it in several of his works. Its presence does not necessarily imply that astrological influences were believed to be irresistible in every case, nor that the playwright was trying to show the failure of astrology when a character, like Segismundo in *Life is a Dream* overcomes a prediction and deliberately acts contrary to the astrological forecast.

The plays represent one of the main subjects of the polemics: the opposition of determinism to free will. Catholic practitioners, including university mathematicians, theologians, physicians and even popular astrologers, were aware that this was one of the main problems that astrology encountered before the Catholic Church. The arguments defending free will and accepting any astrology that would respect it also had a long tradition, with Thomas Aquinas as the main reference. That is what Calderon represents in his plays.

It must also be considered that determinism, the strength of the stars, works well as a literary trope, particularly when it comes to love, in a tradition that follows, as De Armas explained, the classical use of fate in ancient plays.¹⁵ This is what Don Diego means when he talks about his love for Doña Maria in *The Fake Astrologer*:

15 Frederick De Armas, *The Return of Astraea: An Astral-Imperial Myth in Calderón* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986); A. J. Valbuena Briones, 'El concepto del hado en el teatro de Calderón', *Bulletin Hispanique*, Vol. 63, no.1-2, (1961), pp. 48-53.

Y viendo al fin, que es en vano
que un desdichado porfie
contra su estrella...

[And seeing finally that it is vain for an unfortunate man to
fight against his star...]

Doña Maria answers him on her own love for Don Juan:

Y quien tan bien conoció
la fuerza de las estrellas
bien será en sus luces bellas,
que no puedo torcer yo
lo que dispusieron ellas

[Someone (like you) who knew well the power of the stars will
accept their beautiful lights, because I cannot change what they
stipulated].

This is also what the character of Don Diego uses as a kind of excuse for
having studied astrology in Italy when he met the astrologer 'Aporta':

Aquí le conocí, nunca
le conociera, y aquí,
ò fue fuerça de mi estrella,
ò de mi muerte infeliz,
ò fue mi desdicha solo,
tan inclinado me vi
a su ciencia, como él
a mi inclinación.

[There I met him, I wish I had never done it, and there, *whether
forced by my star,* or by my unhappy death, or simply my
misfortune, I was so inclined to his science (astrology) as he
was to my inclination].

What did astrologers do according to the plays? In the case of *The Fake Astrologer*, the scenes mix practices that were the usual activity of itinerant astrologers with other magical or superstitious practices that, on some occasions, were recognized as not related to the "official" practices of learned astrologers. Don Diego explained that, as an astrologer, he was supposed to know everything currently happening in the world, something that he himself doubted could be believed:

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él dixo, *que yo sabía,*
siendo en esto sin segundo,
quanto passaua en el mundo:
y que por la Astrología
pude llegar a saber
el secreto que la admira.

Buena, ò mala la mentira,
ella la llegó a creer,

[He said that I knew everything that happens in the world, being the best at it, and that through astrology I got to know her secret, which amazed her. Whether the lie was good or bad, she believed it].

They were expected to find lost things, one of the most usual practices of popular astrologers that was rejected by university-trained astrologers and that sometimes led to persecution in the trials of astrologers by the Spanish Inquisition. They were expected to make figures of the positions of the planets in certain moments to answer questions, the practice known as interrogations, that was also forbidden.

Sabreis, D. Diego, que oy
vna joya se ha perdido
en mi casa, que por gusto,
mas que por valor, la estimo,
quisiera que me dixerais
donde està, y ansi os suplico
que me estudeis con cuidado
esta figura.

[You must know, Don Diego, that today a jewel was lost at my house, a jewel I appreciate more for liking it than for its value, I would like you to tell me where is it, therefore I beg you to study carefully this figure].

However, during the play other characters ask Don Diego to do things such as bring the image of an absent person before someone who wants to speak with him, send a person to his home magically, so that he wouldn't have to travel, or make someone love or hate someone else. It is interesting that Don Diego, who is a fake astrologer, but seems to know which are the usual practices of astrologers and which are not, insists on

all occasions that those are not astrological practices. It is magic, he says, of the first case; of the second, the public understands that it is an absurd request, made by an ignorant person. In the other cases, it is Don Diego who affirms that it is ignorance to believe that someone can do these things and not realize it is a deceit.

In this paper I have only mentioned some of the issues that a play like *The Fake Astrologer* presented on the stage: representations of the general view of astrology; its consideration from the moral and religious points of view; representations of some arguments in early modern polemics on astrology about astrologers; the conventions related to their representation and the fun made of them; reference to astrological authorities and the practices that were represented. These are just some of the themes that the plays of the Golden Age theatre suggest, and that this research project, which is in its first stage, aims to study further.