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Historical Approaches to Astrology

Patrick Curry

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This discussion is necessarily both brief and summary, and mainly concerns the literature in English. Astrology is the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the tradition that has thus been generated. Within that tradition there are many different ways of doing so, and rationales – from highly technical (but impassioned) arguments for one way of dividing up space into “houses” as against others, to larger conceptual questions such as whether the stars should be construed as signs or actual causes. A broad initial definition is best, however, so as not to miss out too much.

There are three good reasons to study the history of astrology. First is its distinctiveness as a form of knowledge whose basic concepts and practices have lasted an extraordinarily long time – since their origins in roughly 2000 BCE in Mesopotamia – have interacted with a wide array of other traditions – notably Platonism and neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Christianity (especially Thomism, but also the antagonism of Augustine and the Protestant Reformation), humanism, magic (initially Hermetic) and occultism, and modern science – and have succeeded in adapting to such a variety of often distinctly hostile social and intellectual conditions.

Second, between about 1300 and 1700, astrology was a relatively integral part of European society and culture. And third, even as a relatively marginal pursuit after around 1700, it continued to be attacked in ways that are very revealing about the attackers. The latter have principally featured the Christian church (since its origins); natural philosophers and scientists (mostly since the mid-17th century), and

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4 Historical Approaches to Astrology

literati and professional intellectuals (beginning in the 18th century). Mistaking polemical assertion for historical fact has often resulted in perennially and laughably exaggerated reports of the “death” of astrology by some historians, especially historians of science, who ought to have known better.

There are at least two reasons why its historiography is difficult, and as challenging as it is rewarding. One is the weight of mainstream intellectual opinion against it – something whose origins lie precisely in the history being studied, but which is frequently restimulated by astrology’s continued existence, and makes the resort to “Whiggish” anachronism a constant temptation. Another problem is that astrology once frequently united disciplines long since sundered, and in some cases suppressed, and whose fragmentation modern academies have inherited: astronomy, natural philosophy, medicine, natural magic, religious prophecy, divination, and what is now psychology and sociology. The temptation therefore is to doubt that such a now-fabulous beast ever existed.

These problems have more or less defined the historiography of astrology, which I shall illustrate using three different examples. Respecting the history of Greek astrology, the historian of science George Sarton’s early work was badly marred by his open contempt for the astrologers he was studying (based, it would seem, on his feelings about their modern heirs). This included his eagerness to salvage ancient “astronomy” but jettison the “astrology” from which it was inseparable; in this Sarton was unfortunately typical of historians of science until about the 1980s. (He was memorably taken to task in 1951 by Otto Neugebauer in a short paper, “The Study of Wretched Subjects”.) For a contrasting approach to the same subject-matter that successfully avoided anachronism, see the work of G.E.R. Lloyd, who pointed out that the explanandum is not “the victory of rationality over magic: there was no such victory: but rather how the criticism of magic got some purchase.” Tamsyn Barton has followed up and developed this lead in her recent work on Greek astrology.

Another revealing case-study is the historiography of Hermetic and neo-Platonic astrology which was stimulated by the work of D.P. Walker and Frances Yates, in particular her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964). It is true that Yates sometimes overstated her case; on the other hand, that was arguably necessary after decades of scholarship which massively ignored and/or misrepresented this important and fascinating area, one which – even at the Warburg Institute where she

worked, and whose founders Warburg and Saxl were responsible for pioneering studies such as *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964) – was, both then and since, sometimes apparently disregarded as embarrassing and somewhat disreputable. Only as a result of her labours, however, has a relatively balanced and full assessment of magic, including magical astrology and astrological magic, become possible.

My third example concerns early modern astrology in England, when it attained extraordinary importance in 1640-1700. Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) has been highly influential in Britain, but his account is somewhat skewed contextually by anachronistically asking the wrong question – why did “so many otherwise intelligent people” believe in astrology? – instead of: why did so many people stop believing in it, who exactly did, and why? These are the questions that my book *Prophecy and Power* (1989) sets out to answer instead. For another very different book that tries to do the same, see Ann Geneva's *Astrology and the Seventeenth-Century Mind* (1995). Geneva's approach is “internalist” and closely textual, whereas mine is “externalistic” and broadly sociological; yet their common commitment to a history that takes the beliefs and practices of its historical subjects seriously, in their own terms, shows that that divide is not fundamental.

Finally, there is a recent and encouraging tendency for scholars to become more familiar with the actual practices of astrologers in order to write better histories, and astrologers themselves to become involved in and/or produce more scholarly studies of their subject. An example of the former is the recent edition of Abu Ma'Shar's *Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology* (1994) by Charles Burnett *et al.*; of the latter, the translations of Greek, Latin, and Arabic texts by Project Hindsight in the US, and the editions of Lilly, Bonatti and others by Regulus Press in England.

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