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Astrology on Trial, and its Historians: Reflections on the Historiography of 'Superstition'

Patrick Curry

Abstract. This paper is an historiographical inquiry into some problems that arise when confronted with so-called supernatural, irrational or superstitious phenomena in human history. Other descriptions are possible, of course, but none of them without at least some question-begging - something that itself points to the principal problem. As an initial formulation, let us define that problem as follows: how can the historian describe and explain these phenomena without participating in the very processes - characteristically ones of power/knowledge - that produced them in the first place?¹ And this problem becomes especially acute when the discourse in question, like astrology (but unlike, say, phrenology) is still the subject of contemporary controversy. This is not something I hope to resolve here, but perhaps I can improve the quality of the questions it raises.

The Trial

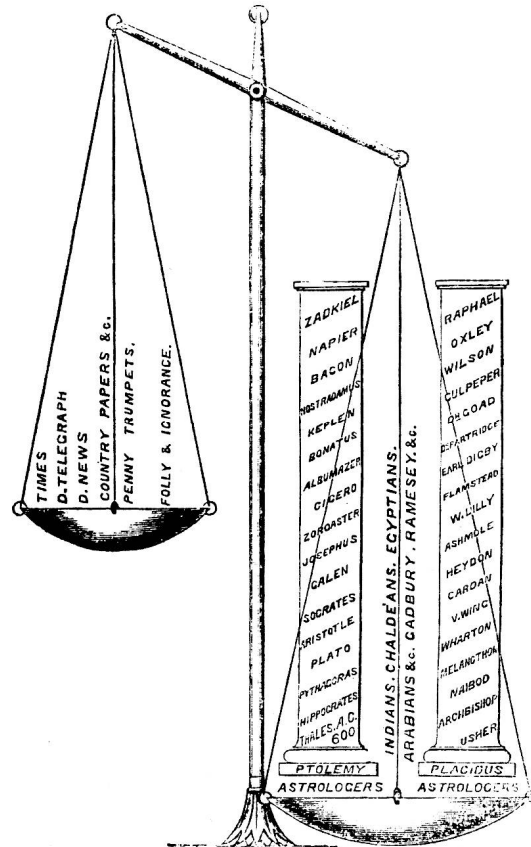
Rather than attempt a comprehensive historiographical survey, I am essentially going to use myself, as an historian and historiographer, as a heuristic subject. And the history that provokes my reflections here is a libel trial which attracted a great deal of public and press interest at the time: Morrison vs. Belcher, Knight, which took place in the summer of 1863 before a special jury at the Court of Queen's Bench, with Sir Alexander Cockburn, the Lord Chief Justice, presiding.²

R.J. Morrison (1795-1874) was better-known as Zadkiel, the leading astrologer in mid-Victorian England and editor of *Zadkiel's Almanac*. Started in 1832, this annual publication catered, unlike the long-standing *Moore's Almanac*, to a metropolitan audience of largely middle-class readers; sales by the time of Morrison's death stood at about 80,000 a year.

A minimum of historical context must precede a brief account of the trial itself. Astrology and its popularity was a worrying concern for much of the Victorian establishment. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge issued its widely-hailed *British Almanac* in 1828 in order (as the *Athenaeum* put it on 2 Jan. 1828) 'to attack ignorance and imposture

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The Scales of Justice, from Zadkiel's Almanac for 1870.



in one of its strongest holds'. In 1843, through its *Penny Magazine*, the SDUK was still warning its readers in lurid terms against 'the secret admission of sidereal influences' (23 Sept. 1828). Two decades later, nothing had changed; *The Times* of 28 April 1862 contrasted the 'safe scientific footing' of ancient astronomy with astrology, which, 'even when most prevalent was a passion, like table-turning or spirit-rapping in our own time, chiefly of those to whom morbid excitement had become a necessity: silly women, worn-out fashionables, and unprincipled adventurers'. And the *London Review* added that 'When Sir Bulwer

Lytton writes romances of the Mumbo Jumbo order, no wonder that Zadkiel can persuade the old women that their fate depends on the hour of their birth' (25 Oct. 1862).

All this came to a head with Zadkiel's almanac for 1861, published in the autumn of 1860, which contained the following passage: 'the stationary position of Saturn in the third degree of Virgo in May, following upon this lunation, will be very evil for all persons born on or near the 26th August; among the sufferers I regret to see the worthy Prince Consort of these realms. Let such persons pay scrupulous attention to health.' When Albert apparently obliged by suddenly dying on 14 December 1861, it was too much for that paragon of respectability, the *Daily Telegraph*, and on January 31, 1862 it editorialized:

'We should rejoice to hear that the police had routed out the 'cunning' men who lurk in garrets in poor neighbourhoods, and delude inexperienced girls and frivolous young married women. But, at the same time, we claim an equal need of justice to be applied to an impostor quite as impudent and thrice as mischievous as the beggar, the gypsy, or the 'cunning man.' There is a fellow who calls himself ZADKIEL, and who for thirty-two years, it seems, has been suffered to publish annually a farrago of wretched trash which he calls an almanac, and in which, pretending to interpret the 'voice of the stars,' he gives vent to a mass of predictions on public affairs....and sells his almanac, we are sorry to learn, by thousands....it shall not be our fault if this mischievous deluder is not in the long run morally tarred and feathered, and has not his ears nailed to the pump.... Who is this Zadkiel, and are there no means of ferreting him out, and hauling him up to Bow-Street under the statute as a rogue and a vagabond?'

(The Statute referred to is Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act of 1824, which applied to 'every person pretending or professing to tell Fortunes', and which was used against prominent astrologers as late as 1917. It was repealed by a Parliamentary committee in 1989.)

On 1 February 1862, the *Telegraph* carried a letter signed 'Anti-Humbug', which named Zadkiel as Morrison, and added that he was also

'the celebrated crystal globe seer, who gulled many of our nobility about the year 1852, making use of a boy under fourteen or a girl under twelve; he pretended, by their looking into the crystal globe, to hold converse with the spirits of the Apostles, even our Saviour, with

all the angels of light as well as darkness, and to tell what was going on in any part of the world....One noble lady gave one of these boys £5 to communicate intelligence respecting her son, who was in the Mediterranean. That boy peached - let the cat out of the bag. Of course the information was false. The seer took the money - if he really be the same - for these profane acts, and made a good thing of it'.

Morrison immediately engaged the services of a solicitor, and the *Telegraph* soon identified 'Anti-Humbug' as Rear-Admiral Sir Edward Belcher (of whom the *Dictionary of National Biography* notes that 'Perhaps no officer of equal ability has ever succeeded in inspiring so much dislike'). Upon being refused an apology and retraction of the libel, Morrison sued.

After two delays at Belcher's request, the trial was finally set for 29 June 1863. Mr. Serjeant Shee acted for Morrison, the plaintiff, and Mr. Serjeant Ballantine for the defendant Belcher. The latter pleaded not guilty, but offered no witnesses and declined to take the stand. As the *Morning Advertiser* reported the next morning, 'The court was crowded, and among the auditory were numerous distinguished persons, nobility and gentry, who had their nativities cast and their fortunes told by aid of the horoscope, the particular planet under which they were born, and "the voice of the stars"'. *The Times* too, which carried a full report, allowed that 'This was a case of a very extraordinary character' (30 June 1863).

Witnesses, all for the prosecution, included many of those present at Morrison's crystal-ball gazing sessions of the early 1850s: a cast dominated by various knights, lords and ladies, plus a bishop, an earl, a marchioness and various naval grandees. (Among them was also Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton.) I have no space to describe here the trial; that is anyway available elsewhere.³ It is necessary only to stress three things. First, that Belcher's claim of payment was comprehensively squashed. Second, that as contemporary reports make very clear, the defence proceeded wherever possible by mockery - in which the judge, who evidently made no effort to control laughter in the court, frequently contributed witticisms of his own at Morrison's expense. And third, that the defense repeatedly returned to Morrison's role as an astrologer, although this bore no direct relevance to the case.

In his summing-up, the Lord Chief Justice pointed out to the jury that in order to find for Belcher, they must be satisfied not only that his charge - which, he pointed out, had failed - was sincere but that it was not

reckless. But at this point, the aspect of the trial as one of astrology, as an exemplar of "imposture", came into crystal-clear focus. For, Sir Alexander asked rhetorically, given the "preposterous and mischievous" nature of *Zadkiel's Almanac*, how much could Morrison's character be said to have suffered from Belcher's libel? This was followed by a remarkable disquisition on the nature and history of astrology:

‘Of all the strange delusions that had ever misled the mind of man, the notion that our destinies are affected by the combinations of stars is perhaps the strangest. Ancient astronomers affixed, for convenience, certain names to certain stars, borrowing those names from heathen mythology; and then astrologers actually, in their ignorance, ascribed to the stars the character of those deities whose names they bore. Then, because one bright star was called Venus and another of a more fiery red was called Mars, they fancied that persons born 'under' those stars had the characteristics of those particular heathen deities. Nothing could be more absurd, and such is the rubbish with which this almanac is filled. How people can be led to believe that planets named after heathen deities can have influence upon their birth and fortunes is indeed surprising. It is absurd to entertain such opinions, and when those opinions lead to disturbance in the minds of persons, they become mischievous and often productive of evil consequences. The plaintiff in his Almanac of 1861, amongst other predictions, spoke of evil impending over the lamented Prince Consort’.⁴

Here the Lord Chief Justice repeated the prediction, and read aloud passages from *Zadkiel's Almanac*, asking ‘What could be more absurd?’ and concluding by inviting the jury ‘to consider the nature of the publication in your verdict as to the amount of damages you award’. The jury took an hour to find Belcher guilty, and award Morrison the derisory amount of twenty shillings. The Lord Chief Justice then refused an application for both parties' costs.

The Historiography

Sir Alexander's idiosyncratic version of the history of astrology is of less significance and interest than the fact that his case encapsulated almost all of the learned opposition to astrology of this and preceding centuries. It appealed to every customary argument: religious orthodoxy (as opposed to personal, implicitly antinomian, prophecy), safe scientific knowledge (as opposed to dangerous astral imposture), and common sense (as

opposed to laughable, but arguably deranged, eccentricity). We may also note the relative absence of Zadkiel in these, the bare bones of the episode. This is no accident, of course, but just the problem; he was very effectively undermined, marginalized and silenced therein.

Let us recall the historiographical problem as I defined it above: how to write this history without participating in the same processes that produced it. It cannot be presented entirely neutrally, after all; contextualization and explanation (such as I have just engaged in, very briefly) are essential, and that requires an intervention that means making choices.⁵

My own solution as an historian has consistently taken its cue from E.P. Thompson's famous dictum about rescuing history's 'losers' from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.⁶ In this case, astrologers and their constituency - both attacked and despised by the winners at the time, and in print by most historians subsequently - were a minority defined not by their race, gender or class (although the last was a powerful consideration), but by their beliefs; their crimes were, so to speak, epistemological. But that there was and is persecution is not in doubt.⁷ Thus, I would reply to the hypothetical (but frequently unavoidable) question, 'But do you believe in astrology?' that I believe in the right of my historical subjects to believe in it (whatever that may exactly mean). This then entails showing the relative consistency and integrity of the astrologers' case *as well as* its contradictions and self-interestedness; and vice-versa for that of their critics.

Now, I initially took this even-handedness and inclusiveness as a way of avoiding an unwitting participation in the historical processes of dominant ideology and resistance, hegemony and counter-hegemony that was so important in producing the historical subject-matter.⁸ This understanding drew sustenance from the 'symmetry principle' of the so-called Edinburgh School of Barnes and Bloor, which requires truth and error to be treated as effects which, equally and alike, require social explanation.⁹

But such an appearance of neutrality (and, *a fortiori*, of scientific objectivity) now seems to me misleading, in at least three respects. First, and most basically, any intervention in a two-sided debate will have complex and uneven consequences for how those sides are analysed and portrayed by historians, and therefore understood by their readers. In this case, take the attempt to permit the astrologers a legitimate voice and not treat them as 'deluded' simply on account of their being astrologers (in the face, incidentally, of even Thompson's language, Joanna Southcott

and her followers), but rather as entitled to the working assumption – to which we would also feel entitled – that their beliefs are justified in their own eyes. This is not neutrality, but plainly an intervention on the side of the astrologers and against that of the well-born judges, scientific apologists and publicists, metropolitan literati and clergymen who made up their chief opposition.

Let me add that outright and deliberate fraud apart, which is a special case, this position rules out the arrogant and anachronistic attribution of ‘false consciousness’; that is, after all the explaining – socially, culturally, psychoanalytically and whatever – of reasons for acting in such-and-such a way, no historical actors can be shown to have actually been acting for meta-reasons in a way that entirely bypasses or undercuts their own, and effectively turns them into dupes, fools, or even merely renders them ‘unconscious’. We can all play that game, and it is a shabby one which leads nowhere.

That leads me to my second point, namely that this kind of intervention affirms the legitimate consideration of more than one voice, version, and indeed truth. It is necessarily pluralistic, although not uncritically so; or, if you will, relativistic.¹⁰ The problems usually associated with relativism, once its understanding has graduated beyond that of a crude caricature, pale into insignificance compared with the disastrous consequences for historical understanding, and beyond, of attempting the separate Truth (in its rationalist version) from delusion (as defined by the former).¹¹

Now the interesting thing here is that the astrologers' persecutors, whom I briefly listed earlier, all and without exception affirmed just the opposite: a single Truth, whether that of God or secular reality, with a single licensed set of interpreters, whether those of revelation, scientific reason, or enlightened thought. So a pluralistic intervention is again, in this respect, a taking of sides within an ongoing debate. It is a debate which in the properly broad sense is not only ancient but still very much with us; but the contemporary survival and indeed in some ways flourishing of astrology adds a certain additional piquancy.

What did the astrologers themselves affirm in this respect? It seems to me that they were divided. Some, and many for at least some of the time, put forward a single, univocal alternative Truth (with astrologers, naturally, as its correct interpretive caste). Others, and many of the same ones the rest of the time, maintained a live-and-let-live pluralism, a proposition that is at once more modest and more truly counter-hegemonic.

In different circumstances, each of these strategies might appear to offer the better hope for survival. But I have argued elsewhere that as a discourse, or a practice, which is integral to a discourse - astrology as a whole is deeply marked by its origins in and as divination.¹² There is no space here to make this case, so let me simply baldly assert that divination is a contextual, provisional, unfinished kind of intervention, rather than its vulgar and/or polemically motivated image as a prediction of the future that entails representing an unalterable Truth. As such, divination bears a striking resemblance to the historiographical pluralism/relativism that I have already discussed - and thus points to another, if largely implicit, sympathy for one side in the historical debate.

This leads me to my third and last point. If astrology, despite the best efforts of its leaders to portray it as scientifically and religiously licit (albeit unrecognized), is, in practice, divinatory, then by the same token the connection with the divine or the sacred is essential to it. The fundamental astrological commitment to different planetary qualities, effects and, by implication as well as historical association, deities, points to the same conclusion. And here too, the extension of E.P. Thompson's dictum that I have adopted results not in avoiding but taking part in the ongoing debate. In this case, opposing anachronistic and reductionist condescension with what I am calling critical pluralism necessarily includes a spiritual dimension. And in another twist, such pluralism conflicts not only with the monotheism of their elite opponents but also with the equally universalist secular humanism (whether specified as atheism or not) of the great majority of contemporary professional intellectuals. Dare I suggest not only that in the present historical circumstances, most historians' attachment to the modernist and humanist 'war against mystery and magic' prevents them from doing fuller justice, as historians, to astrologers, spiritualists and the like, but that the latter (and their contemporary heirs) may - in *this* respect, at least - be less antediluvian than they are?¹³ I hope I need not add that such an observation is not an argument for religious sectarianism, or indeed even for religion, but for taking seriously the domain with which religion, preeminently among other discourses, is concerned.

To conclude, I hope I have established that my initial posing of the problem - how to avoid participation? - and its initial solution - comprehensive agnostic neutrality - were both mistaken. Participation is unavoidable, and neutrality impossible. So the question becomes instead, is the kind of intervention that I am advocating a good one; that is, are its effects likely to be defensible and desirable ones? If it promises to

increase (deepen, augment, enrich) our historical understanding – as seems likely to me – then the answer is surely, yes. But it comes without any guarantees, and therefore triumphalism. For at the risk of fatal inconsistency, it follows from the conclusion we have reached that that very *desideratum* is not stable or transparent, but is itself embroiled in an ongoing debate partaking as much of power as of knowledge.

References

1. 'Power/knowledge' refers, of course, to a concept animating the work of the late Michel Foucault. See Hubert L. Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982).
2. For a detailed account I shall refer the reader to my *A Confusion of Prophets: Victorian and Edwardian Astrology* (London: Collins and Brown, 1992; available from Regulus Publishing Co., enquiries (0181) 998-8127). See also Katherine Anderson, 'The Weather Prophets: Science and Reputation in Victorian Meteorology', *History of Science* (1999) 37:179-216.
3. Curry, *Confusion*, chapter 3.
4. *The Morning Advertiser*, 30 June 1863, *The Times* 30 and 31 June 1863.
5. For a good recent discussion of these issues, see Adrian Wilson and T.G. Ashplant, 'Whig History and Present-Centred History', *The Historical Journal* (1988) 31:1-16; and Ashplant and Wilson, 'Present-Centred History and the Problem of Historical Knowledge', *The Historical Journal* (1988) 31:253-74.
6. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 12.
7. On prosecutions of astrologers (which frequently used entrapment) see my *Confusion*, 13, 63-4, 66 and chapter 5 *passim*; Maureen Perkins, *Visions of the Future: Almanacs, Time and Cultural Change, 1775-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), chapter 6.
8. See the Introduction to my *Astrology, Science and Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1987); and my *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).
9. See for example Barry Barnes, *Scientific Knowledge and Sociological Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976).

10. Although Paul Feyerabend and Clifford Geertz have both written well on relativism, the best discussion is in Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), and *idem*, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also my 'Towards a Post-Marxist Social History', 158-200 in Adrian Wilson (Ed.), *Rethinking Social History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

11. See Terry Castle, 'Contagious Folly: *An Adventure* and its Skeptics', in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson and Harry Harootunian (Eds.), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) pp. 11-42. (My only criticism is that the epistemological implications of Castle's paper are - *pace* her own presentation - ultimately more significant than those of gender or sexuality.) For an example of the indignities of the 'debunking mania', even within the supposed sanctum of science itself, see T.J. Pinch and H.M. Collins, 'Private Science and Public Knowledge: The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal', *Social Studies of Science* (1984) 14: 521-46; and George P. Hansen, 'CSICOP and the Skeptics: An Overview', *The Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* (1992) 96: 19-63.

12. Curry, *Confusion of Prophets*, 165-68; but see also Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination* (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1994), and the excellent analysis in Alby Stone, *Wyrd: Fate and Destiny in North European Paganism* (1989; available from 20B Cranfield Road, London SE4 1UG).

13. See Ihab Hassan, 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective', 196-207 in Charles Jencks (Ed.), *The Post-Modern Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), who draws in this connection on William James's *The Will to Believe* (NY: Longmans Green & Co., 1897); also John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995), Chapter 10, on humanism as part of the obsolete (so he argues) Enlightenment project; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimation of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), the source of my quotation here (p. xi).