

## **ASTROLOGY**

Astrology is literally defined as the “word of the stars,” as distinct from astronomy, the “law of the stars.” Thus, while astronomy deals primarily with the measurement of the stars' positions, and hence with their motions, astrology is concerned with the significance that human beings attach to those celestial movements in relation to their own affairs. The discipline of astrology is thus so broad that it is often necessary to talk of “astrologies” rather than of one monolithic astrology to which all astrologers subscribe.

The fundamental philosophical debate in astrology distinguishes belief in real planetary influences, which themselves may be conceived as either physical or metaphysical in nature, from an astrology of “signs” and “omens” in which a divine force communicates with humanity via the stars. An additional debate pits an astrology in which the stars reveal a predetermined future against one in which the future is negotiable, either because planetary influences are only tendencies or because the omens sent by the gods may be withdrawn if suitable supplications are made. A common distinction in the Middle Ages distinguished “natural astrology,” in which the planets might be the cause of general influences (for example, Mars causes heat while the moon brings rain) from “judicial astrology,” in which an astrologer uses a horoscope (a map of the heavens at a particular moment) to make specific judgements about particular events such as wealth, health, family happiness, and professional success. Judicial astrology is divided in turn into four branches, genethiology (modern natal astrology, the interpretation of birth charts), revolutions (modern mundane astrology, the study of history and politics), interrogations (modern horary astrology, the use of horoscopes to answer precise questions) and elections (the selection of auspicious moments to inaugurate new enterprises). In its simplified form, using only the sun and moon, electional astrology provides the rationale behind most religious calendars, including the Jewish, Christian and Islamic. While most astrological texts since classical times deal with the interpretation of celestial alignments, its practice frequently involved the active manipulation of the future. From this is derived an astrological magic, including the creation of planetary amulets at auspicious moments, which survived in the West until the Renaissance, when one of its prime advocates was Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa.

### **History**

Complex systems of astrology developed independently in three regions: in central America, perhaps as early as two thousand years ago; in China, probably in the first millennium B.C.E.; and in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), from which western astrology is derived, prior to 2000 B.C.E. The earliest fragments of astrological tablets in Mesopotamia date back to c 2200 B.C.E. and the first complete set of omens, based on the planet Venus, occur in the so-called “Venus Tablet of Amisaduqa” of c. 1646 B.C.E. Assyrian emperors made extensive use of astrologers. Their patronage stimulated further innovation: the modern twelve sign zodiac appeared in the sixth century, while the first known birth-chart dates to 410 B.C.E. Encouraged by the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 330s, the techniques of Mesopotamian astrology spread east to India and west to Egypt, where they fused with Egyptian religion and Greek philosophy (especially Plato and Aristotle) and mathematics to create an astrology that is both philosophically and technically recognisably modern. By the first century C.E., we can recognise all the competing philosophical distinctions outlined above, including astrologies which favoured signs or influences, materialism or spirituality and predestination or freedom of choice. We also see the introduction of daemons, supernatural entities that St. Augustine confused with demons. A combination of the collapse of the Roman empire and literacy in western Europe, and hostility from Christianity in Eastern Europe and the near east, then moved its focus to Persia and India. The Islamic rediscovery of ancient learning led to astrology's reintroduction to the Near East and Moslem lands in the Mediterranean. From there it was reintroduced into Western Europe in the twelfth century and became an accepted part of alchemy, medicine, and political prognostication. However, its application to individual lives always remained controversial because of the

suspicion that it denied the freedom to make moral choices and hence to achieve salvation. A further influx of Greek mystical material (Plato and the *Corpus Hermeticum*) in the fifteenth century further reinforced astrology's credibility. There was, however, substantial scholarly criticism of astrology, together with attempts to reform it, notably by Jean Bodin (1530-1596) and Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). At the University of Padua, Galileo cast horoscopes for rich German students, which caused his first brush with the Roman Inquisition in 1596.

By the late seventeenth century, astrology had lost its credibility in educated circles. The ancient tradition has continued unbroken until the present day in India, while in the west it survived initially only in popular almanacs, partially recovering in the early twentieth-century under the aegis of the Theosophical Society and the New Age movement.

### **Astrology and Witchcraft**

Keith Thomas (1971: 757) noted that astrology and witchcraft are essentially rival explanatory models, because to suspect one's neighbour of a malign influence is to rule out possible astral causes. While there is no reason why a witch might not be the intermediate agent of some misfortune which had a celestial origin, Thomas describes a client of the astrologer Richard Napier in 1635 who "feared he was bewitched *or* blasted by an ill planet," as if the two possible causes are mutually exclusive. Because astrologers were frequently consulted by clients who believed they had been bewitched, they were obliged to create tests to ascertain this: the sixteenth-century English astrologers Richard Saunders and Joseph Blagrave asserted that astrology offered the only certain means of discovering witchcraft. The surviving case books of William Lilly, who acquired an international reputation in the 1640s-60s, contain well over fifty cases of suspected witchcraft, twenty-three of which date from 1654 to 1656, the highpoint of Cromwellian rule in England (Thomas 1971: 756-7).

An astrologer testing for witchcraft would most likely cast an "interrogation," a horoscope set for the moment of the asking of a question such as "is the subject bewitched?" If the subject was sick and witchcraft was the suspected cause, an alternative would be to cast a "decumbiture" (literally "lying down"), a horoscope set for the moment that the diseased individual took to their bed. Lilly, whose 1647 text *Christian Astrology* provided the first major compendium of medieval astrology to be published in English, set out the rules for establishing whether witchcraft was a cause of illness or distress, advising on treatment and assessing whether it might be overcome (Lilly 1647: 56, 250, 464-466, 640-2). In the horoscope witches were indicated by the "twelfth house," the sector of sky immediately above the eastern horizon, and by the planet ruling the sign of the zodiac in which the house cusp (its beginning, in this case its uppermost point) was placed. For example, if the uppermost point of the twelfth house was in Leo, the ruling planet would be the Sun, Leo's "ruling planet." Lilly defines six rules for the positions of house rulers in which he had "found more certain (the) suspicion of Witchcraft." For example, if the twelfth house ruler was in the sixth house (i.e., immediately below the western horizon), witchcraft was likely. Saturn and Mars were likely both to reveal the presence of witchcraft and indicate the subject's vulnerability to it, while Venus and Jupiter might suggest the opposite. Only five of the horoscopes in Lilly's casebooks include a judgment, and all of those are negative.

Other astrologers are known to have diagnosed witchcraft. For example, in 1654 Christopher Hall, the Norfolk astrologer, declared that the cause of a client's disease was one of three witches in her home village. Thomas (1971: 757) notes that the very existence of such astrological work confirmed the existence of witchcraft at a time when its reality was openly challenged. Lilly certainly believed that "people are troubled with witches...in many places of this Kingdome" (1647: 465). The same applied to astrological palliatives: if witchcraft wasn't real then there could be no reason for such remedies. These treatments, which could be adapted for cattle, were not explicitly astrological but worked according the principles of sympathetic magic. For example, if the horoscope established the presence of witchcraft then it might be overcome if a tile from the witch's house is heated in a fire, then

has the urine of the bewitched person poured on it, and is finally returned to the fire until “extremely hot.”

Although such practices had disappeared by 1700, at least from educated circles, the twentieth-century saw a number of interesting developments. In the UK and USA, most contemporary Wiccans pay great attention to the moon as the embodiment of the mother goddess in a conscious evocation of what are believed to be ancient traditions, and some also study the psychological astrology which has developed largely under the influence of the theosophists and the psychologist C.G. Jung. Meanwhile, in Latin America, where belief in witchcraft is strong, astrologers are still consulted and, in some instances, use the traditional rules.

--*Nicholas Campion*

**See also** Agrippa von Nettesheim, Heinrich Cornelius; alchemy; amulets; Bodin, Jean; Cardano, Girolamo; divination; Kepler, Johannes; moon; Paracelsus, Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim.

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