



The MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology

ASPECT THEORY

Notes on Medieval Astrology

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Aspect Theory in Medieval Astrology

There are three major differences between the aspects of contemporary western astrology and that of medieval astrology.

The first is that of the aspects themselves. The five aspects used in medieval astrology are known as the Ptolemaic aspects — although these are called the Ptolemaic aspects, they are not Ptolemy's creation, they are the standard aspects used throughout Hellenistic and Egyptian astrology. These aspects are:

Conjunction, Sextile, Square, Trine and Opposition

Kepler in the 17th century, introduced the modern minor aspects of semi-squares, sesquiquadrates, quincunx, semi-sextile and so on. Kepler was motivated to link aspects to music and the perfection of geometry of Plato. However, these minor aspects play no part in the medieval astrologer's tool kit.

Orbs and Moiety

The second major difference between the aspect theory of medieval astrology and that of contemporary western astrology is orbs. In contemporary astrology one allocates an orb to an aspect however, the medieval tradition was to allocate an orb to a planet. Guido Bonatti considered the Sun could have an orb of 15⁰ for ANY aspect that it formed whereas Mars was considered to have an orb of only 7⁰ for any aspect. These orbs are given as diameters rather than the modern system listing an orb by its radius. In other words, the orb of 15⁰ for the Sun means 7⁰ 30' each side of the Sun.

Bonatti's orbs (see Bonatti Third Tractatus., 1995) are as follows:

S ... has an orb of 9⁰ for any aspect 4⁰ 30' in modern terms

R ... has an orb of 9⁰ for any aspect 4⁰ 30' in modern terms

Q ... has an orb of 8⁰ for any aspect 4⁰ in modern terms

N ... has an orb of 15⁰ for any aspect 7⁰ 30' in modern terms

P ... has an orb of 7⁰ for any aspect 3⁰ 30' in modern terms

O ... has an orb of 7⁰ for any aspect 3⁰ 30' in modern terms

M ... has an orb of 12⁰ for any aspect 6⁰ in modern terms

In this system the orb for any of the five aspects was decided by the sum of their two respective orbs divided by two. This was known as the "moiety" of the orbs.

Thus Saturn would be forming an aspect to the Sun if they were within 12^0 as follows:

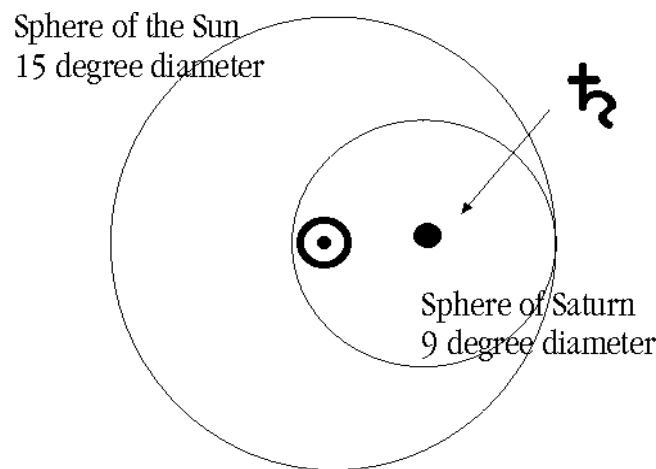
Saturn orbs of 9^0 + Sun's orb of 15^0 = 24^0

Divide this answer by 2 and the resulting orb for the Sun and Saturn is 12^0 .

Thus contact of an aspect between the Sun and Saturn with an orb of 12^0 was seen as a minimum contact between the two planets. A greater, more powerful interaction exists between the two once the smaller planetary orb is completely contained within the larger. For example, for a Sun Saturn aspect a 3^0 orb, was considered far stronger than one with a 8^0 orb. For at this distance the “sphere of Saturn” which was 9^0 in diameter (or 4.5 degrees in radius) was totally contained within the “sphere of the Sun” which was 15^0 in diameter or 7.5 degrees in radius.

Thus we can reduce this thinking to:

Sphere of the Sun (15^0) – Sphere of Saturn (9^0) = 6^0



Saturn's sphere totally contained
within the Sun's sphere and therefore
within 3 degrees of the Sun

Thus the maximum orb between Saturn and the Sun would be the outer edge of the Sun sphere of influence, 7.5 degrees. But the orb which provides the greatest contact and thus was considered to hold the greatest meaning or effectiveness was an orb of 3 degrees where the sphere of Saturn was totally contained within the sphere of the Sun.

However when considering the orbs for all aspects between the Sun and the Moon the maximum orb would still be 7.5 degrees (the radius of the Sun's sphere) but the orb

which allowed for the full sphere of the Moon to be contained by that of the Sun was only 1.5 degrees.

$$\text{Sphere of the Sun } (15^0) - \text{Sphere of Moon } (12^0) = 3^0 / 2 = 1.5^0$$

It is in fact harder for the Sun to totally contain or control the Moon, as she had a big influence in her own right.

Or in this example of aspects between the Moon and Venus

$$\text{Sphere of the Moon } (12^0) - \text{Sphere of Venus } (7^0) = 5^0 / 2 = 2.5^0$$

Max orb was 6 degrees which was the radius of the Moon's sphere and the containing orb was that of 2.5 degrees.

This style of aspecting and setting of orbs applies to all five aspects.

This is evident when Ibn Ezra (1998,117) stated:

Conjunction is when there are two planets in one sign and each one is in the [orb of] influence of the body of the other [planet], then they are said to be joined. And when they are in same [degree and] minute then, their power is complete in everything that they indicate. If one [planet] is in the [orb of] influence of another body, yet the other [body] is not within the [orb of] influence of the first one, then whatever they indicate will be but half complete. An example is when the distance between the Moon and Saturn is 8 degrees, before or after, then each one of them is within the [orb of] influence of the other. But when there are 10 degrees between them, then Saturn is within the influence of the Moon, but the Moon is not within the influence of Saturn.

Additionally, a planet was thought to cast rays (Valens, 1997,28, Bonatti, 1995,72, Tiberias, 1997,19).. These rays were like spotlights on the terrain of the natal chart. Other planets, via the orbs given above, would either fall into the zones or pools of light from another planet or they would not. However, regardless of the presence of any other planet these rays – pools of light – were present in the chart. Thus a planet's were directed not the zone of the chart which were "occupied" by a ray. A little like moving around the board of a Monopoly game where "squares" on the chart are loaded with not only the information of the essential dignities but also could be taken over by rays from other planets.

Reception

The third major difference between contemporary western astrology and medieval astrology within aspect theory is that of Reception. If a planet forms an aspect to another planet and the second planet was in a sign in which the first planet has

dignity, then the first planet receives the second and gives to it a gift. Bonatti(1995,pg. 83) writes in his *Liber Astronomiae* :

And it is said that if a planet is joined with the lord of the sign in which it is, or with the lord of the exaltation of the same sign, or with the lord of the bound [term] or triplicity or face, whether bodily or by aspect, that planet which is the lord of the sign or of some other dignity commits and gives to the planet its own disposition, nature and virtue. However, this is true [only] if it is joined with the lord of the domicile or exaltation, or with the lord of two of the other, lesser dignities, to wit, with [a planets which is] the lord of the bound and triplicity, or with the lord of the face and triplicity.

In another example, if Mars was in Gemini making an aspect to Mercury, it receives the nature and energy of the Mercury. Thus Mercury is said to “receive” the Mars. This is a most important concept and was applicable in horary, electoral and natal astrology. An aspect that contains a reception was considered powerful, allowing the planet’s to manifest their intention.

The Conditions of Reception

There are many different conditions that apply to the ability of a planet to accept a reception from another planet, as well as the effect on the receiving planet when its gifts are returned. These are described by Ibn Ezra (1998,116) in his work *The Beginning of Wisdom* where he list thirty variations to this aspect theory.

References

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