

William Gilbert: Macrocosmal Astrologer in an Age of Revolution

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Abstract. William Gilbert's writings on magic and astrology were published anonymously in *The Conjuror's Magazine* between 1791 and 1793. He announced these would form a Treatise on Macrocosmal Astrology, whose object was the enlightening of Mankind. My paper will be concentrating on his predictions of revolution: death and destruction of grandees. He insisted (unlike his contemporaries Worsdale or Sibly) on the omnipotence of the recently discovered Uranus. The Georgian Planet, as he called it, would bring revolutionary renewal as cosmically significant as the star that appeared to the Magi announcing the birth of Christ. Gilbert is best known as the author of *The Hurricane: A Theosophical and Western Eclogue*, a poem published in Bristol in 1796 while he was associating with the poets Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey. Gilbert explained that his poem was grounded on a Theosophical view of the relation between America and Europe. He believed that the American Revolution and succeeding events in Europe were the opening stages of a coming golden age which was being shaped by the continents as evolving cosmic principles. There were justifiable doubts about his sanity, and his contemporaries regarded *The Hurricane* as a work of eccentric incoherence partly because of a lack of understanding of the occult tradition underlying it. The four continents correspond to the four elements and the cardinal signs of the zodiac, and are a brilliant reshaping of a tradition of hermetic geography that can be traced back through seventeenth century hermetic philosophers to Ptolemy.

Item—A strange Poem written by an Astrologer here,
who *was* a man of fine Genius, which, at intervals, he
still discovers.—But, ah me! Madness smote with her
hand and stamped with her feet and swore that he should
be her's—& her's he is.—He is a man of fluent
Eloquence & general knowledge, gentle in his manners,
warm in his affections; but unfortunately he has received
a few rays of supernatural light thro' a crack in his upper

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story. I *express* myself unfeelingly; but indeed my heart
always aches when I think of him.¹

This incisive thumbnail sketch of William Gilbert was written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Bristol in December 1796 when sending a package of books that included Gilbert's newly published poem *The Hurricane: a Theosophical and Western Eclogue*.² Gilbert is a colourful figure, who has been saved from obscurity by his association with the poets Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey while he was living in Bristol between 1795 and 1798. This was the fertile period when they were writing the early works that would make them famous. *Lyrical Ballads*, the joint 1798 Bristol publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge, claiming to pioneer a new natural aesthetic, is widely acknowledged as the overture to English Romantic poetry.

Gilbert's visionary poem, which the poets all admired as a somewhat crazed work of genius, is a whole-hearted idealisation of the French Revolution; but his perspective is unusual. The underlying theme of *The Hurricane* concerns the spiritual and physical interactions between the continents Africa, Europe, and America. Gilbert described a hidden spiritual influence—a 'Divine Afflatus'—emanating from Africa, which first travelled with the slaves to America, inspiring its Revolution in 1776, and then spread to Europe starting with France in 1789.³ The mechanics of this are similar to the 1954 novel *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which features an extraterrestrial invasion of a small Californian town: in Gilbert's poem, the European invaders following Columbus had conquered and wiped out the native populations of America—but they were not aware that the spirits of the natives they had killed were invading European bodies. At the time Gilbert was writing his poem in 1796 he imagined these spirits in European guise driving on the revolutionary cause in Europe, and on the verge of achieving a new millennial age of freedom and enlightenment. As is the case with many

1 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956–71), Vol. 1, p. 286.

2 William Gilbert, *The Hurricane: A Theosophical and Western Eclogue. To which is Subjoined, a Solitary Effusion in a Summer's Evening* (Bristol: 1796; repr., Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1990).

3 Gilbert, *Hurricane*, pp. iv–vii, 75.

brilliant people on the edge of madness (Gilbert's condition had previously necessitated a stay in an asylum) one can find rich symbolic meaning, and at some level profound truth, in his apparently delusional system.⁴

As well as being a fringe Romantic poet, Gilbert has figured in histories of astrology. Snippets from pronouncements in the *Conjuror's Magazine* in the early 1790s, by the London based astrologer and magical talisman maker William Gilbert, have been quoted by Ellic Howe and Patrick Curry, but they made no link to the author of *The Hurricane*.⁵ Marsha Keith Schuchard's paper 'Rediscovering William "Hurricane" Gilbert', published in 2005 is the first to connect these two different worlds. Schuchard's interest was in Gilbert's connections with occultist freemasonry rather than in his astrology, and what follows is a first attempt to present an account of Gilbert's astrological writings in the *Conjuror's Magazine*.⁶

Although the magazine's first monthly issue, in August 1791, opened with an article on the planetary rulership of medicinal plants, it announced that: 'Our principal aim is to comply with the wishes of the public, generally expressed to have a pleasing variety. We need scarcely say with what glee, innocence and satisfaction, families, purchasers of this Magazine, will be enabled to pass the ensuing Winter evenings'.⁷ Its

4 Paul Cheshire, 'The Hermetic Geography of William Gilbert', *Romanticism*, Vol. 9, no. 1 (2003): pp 82–93.

5 Ellic Howe, *Astrology & the Third Reich: A Historical Study of Astrological Beliefs in Western Europe since 1700 and in Hitler's Germany 1933–45*, 2nd ed. (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press 1984), pp. 24, 27; Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 104.

6 Marsha Keith Schuchard, 'Rediscovering William "Hurricane" Gilbert: A lost voice of revolution and madness in the worlds of Blake and the Romantics' at http://www.williamgilbert.com/GILBERT_Schuchard.htm (accessed 30 Sep 2011).

7 *The Conjuror's Magazine, or Physiognomical Mirror*, Vol. 1, (Aug 1791): 'Correspondents &c' p.[2]. (CM hereafter). All Gilbert's known articles are available online referenced by volume and page number at http://www.williamgilbert.com/CM_WGlist.htm (accessed 30 Sep 2011).

contents ranged from card and magic tricks down to how ‘To pull off any Person’s Shirt, without undressing him’.⁸ Schuchard’s description of the magazine as an ‘organ of radical Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry’, might be appropriate for Gilbert’s contributions, but such a characterisation places too much emphasis on a relatively small part of the overall contents. The magazine was aimed at a broad audience, and its mixture proved so popular that a later commentator reckoned its circulation at 10,000 copies a month.⁹

Gilbert’s contributions to the *Conjuror’s Magazine* between September 1791 and July 1793 were mostly under the name of ‘B’. Pseudonymous publication was the norm for gentleman contributors to magazines, so this anonymity need not be seen as significant. In any case within six months he replied to a query signing himself both as ‘B’ and as William Gilbert.¹⁰ This was only the first of many such disclosures and no regular reader need have been in any doubt as to his true identity.

Gilbert’s first contribution, ‘Remarkable fulfilment of events, notified by the solar eclipse, June 4, 1788’, appeared in September 1791.¹¹ This was over three years after the eclipse in question. The major historical event between these two dates was, of course, the French Revolution, and Gilbert’s article is clearly intended as political commentary. Gilbert quotes extensively from William Lilly—‘the GREAT Lilly’ he called him—and, in another sign of indebtedness to the astrology of the seventeenth century, he cited ‘Rules’ ‘from a book printed in 1665’, and applied his own observations to point out their relevance to recent events:

RULE. An eclipse or comet in the 11th House causes death and destruction of grandees. OBS. The numerous deaths of peers in Great Britain during the operation of this eclipse, has been remarked by persons without any

⁸ *CM*, Vol. 1, (Aug 1791): Title Page.

⁹ Schuchard, ‘Rediscovering William “Hurricane” Gilbert’; ‘Memoirs of HENRY LEMOINE [etc]’ in Granger, William and others. *The New Wonderful Museum; and Extraordinary Magazine* 6 vols. (London: Hogg), Vol. 5 (1807), pp. 2218–40, 2229.

¹⁰ *CM*, Vol. 1, (Feb 1792): p. 224.

¹¹ *CM*, Vol. 1, (Sep 1791): pp. 46–48.

reference to Astrology; and in France, where it fell in the same House, the effects on Aristocracy have been still more notorious.¹²

He then discussed a further rule concerning eclipses in air signs, whose effects were said to include seditions, observing: ‘On Seditions, I may without apology be silent’.¹³ This suggestive tone—just the right side of explicit statement—was taken a step further when he added that that ‘The eclipse was also on the sun’s place at the birth of a very distinguished Personage in England’.¹⁴ This ‘distinguished personage’ was King George III. Gilbert points this up with a mocking footnote reference to the King’s Birthday Ode of 1788 in case anyone has missed the allusion.

Although the treason trials were in the future, and England was not yet at war with France, a turning point had been reached just six weeks earlier when an anti-Jacobin mob burned down the house of the prominent revolutionary sympathiser Joseph Priestley, and hanged an effigy of him while forces of law and order stood by and let this happen.¹⁵ By September 1791 to be a sympathiser with the French Revolution was potentially to be a traitor. Most particularly applicable to astrologers was the crime of ‘imagin[ing] the King’s Death’ which meant that in theory any such prediction was potentially treasonable.¹⁶

It may have been safer, or less treasonable, to ‘imagine the King’s Death’ if he was a foreign monarch. The next king in Gilbert’s prognostic sights was Gustav III, King of Sweden, whose death Gilbert forecast in December 1791: ‘Kings will be privately tormented and conspicuously impotent and shamed [...] The HEAD of Sweden drowned cruelly’. Four issues later the editor was no doubt delighted to report: ‘PREDICTION FULFILLED: [...] 8. [April 1792] THURSDAY evening an express arrived

¹² *CM*, pp. 46–47.

¹³ *CM*, p. 47.

¹⁴ *CM*, p. 47.

¹⁵ Mike Jay, *The Atmosphere of Heaven: The Unnatural Experiments of Dr Beddoes and his Sons of Genius* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), pp. 1–10.

¹⁶ John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 29–36.

at the Secretary of State's Office [...] which brought the extraordinary intelligence, that his majesty the King of Sweden had fallen a victim to the too successful attempt of a regicide'.¹⁷

Gilbert gained a following from his astrological observations on the momentous events of the day. But he regarded all this as a lower form of astrology: he had from the outset aimed higher. The editorial of February 1792 announced: 'It is the purpose of B. to communicate gradually through this Magazine, a Treatise on MACROCOSMAL ASTROLOGY; which he had first designed for a separate publication; but thinks his OBJECT—the enlightening of Mankind will be more certainly attained by interspersing his information where it may meet the eye that looks not for it, and important matter where amusement is sought'.¹⁸

Gilbert's 'General Essay on Magic', which had appeared in October 1791, gave a good sense of his aspirations: 'Astrology has of late been considered merely as giving an intimation of future events; so, that her grand office of gatekeeper or usher to magic [...] has been forgotten'.¹⁹ According to Gilbert, the study of the macrocosm-microcosm correspondence leads to an understanding of the spiritual laws underlying the physical world, and (as must be evident by his use of talismans) the aim is to harness, or enter into relationship with, those planetary forces in an active mode. He quoted from Scripture in support of his argument, and repeatedly insisted on God as the ultimate cause. The ending of this essay, culminating in a quote from St. Paul is a good summary of Gilbert's beliefs, and an example of his idiosyncratic prose style:

As man embraces in his form (that of God) the forms, and consequently the principles or spirits of all creation, it follows that, when these springs are touched in him, they are touched in all creation. Hence at his fall, at the moment that his mind ceased to be the garden of GOD, the ground brought forth thorns and brambles: hence at his renewal in peace and love, 'the wolf shall dwell with the lamb'. Hence too, it follows that, as the magician may be distinguishingly, a martial, mercurial, or solar

¹⁷ *CM*, Vol. 1 (April 1792): p. 396.

¹⁸ *CM*, (Feb 1792): p. 204.

¹⁹ *CM*, (Oct 1791): p. 77.

spirit, a lunar, venereal, saturnine, or jovial, so laws, governments, kingdoms, tempests, thunders, lightnings, love, winds, popular commotions, destruction of buildings, fires, are all in the power of the Magician, as far as he is in the power of GOD. In a word, whatever human powers can do in body, man can cause to be done by his spirit; nay, nothing can be done without this cause, as body is efficient through spirit only. Therefore the true magician is the true christian, and alone acknowledges, as such, that ‘all things are his, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present or things to come, all are his, and he is Christ’s, and Christ is GOD’s’. 1 Cor. iii. 21, 22, 23.²⁰

It has been commented that astrologers such as William Lilly inserted conventionally pious formulas into their writings ‘to forestall clerical censure’.²¹ This is not the case with Gilbert: his Methodist upbringing left him with an intense religious zeal, and although he was heterodox in his beliefs, he felt he was restoring true Christianity, and marshalled biblical quotations (as here) in support of his argument. This is his vision of Macrocosmal astrology—a cosmic blueprint that unites man with God.

Gilbert found astrological backing for his belief that humanity was on the verge of a new epoch in the discovery of the new planet Uranus by William Herschel from his back garden in Bath ‘between ten and eleven in the evening’ on 13 March 1781.²² Herschel had named the planet Georgium Sidus (or, the Georgian Star) in honour of King George III. Here, in much the same way as astronomers are able to see galaxies being formed, there is potentially an opportunity to focus on the astrological formation of a planet’s meaning, and trace how a consensus gathers on its attributes. The leading astrologers writing in the 1790s were John Worsdale, who as late as 1828 said he was reluctant to interpret Uranus, and Ebenezer Sibly, who made no mention of the new

²⁰ *CM*, (Oct 1791): p. 79.

²¹ Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology, Volume 2: The Medieval and Modern Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 152.

²² Nicholas Campion, *The Book of World Horoscopes* (Bournemouth: The Wessex Astrologer, Revised Ed. 2004), p. 497.

planet in his compendious *Illustration of Astrology* (1784–88).²³ John Varley's experiment to determine the nature of Uranus took place in 1825.²⁴ Gilbert's fullest comment on Uranus, in the July 1793 *Conjuror's Magazine*, is thus in the vanguard of interpretation, and shows that an astrological debate was in progress:

As several astrologers have taken upon them to assert, that because the Georgean is small and distant he is insignificant nearly; they must excuse my imperiously telling them that he is Omnipotent.

Others have said he is of the nature of Saturn and Mars; but this will be better understood if they erect a figure for his first discovery at Bath, where they will find him in the 8th house, in opposition to Saturn and Mars, and in square to the Sun, viz. to kings, monks, and soldiers [...]

The reason why the Georgean is said to be malefic is, because he is in direct opposition to those that are, and kills them with their own weapons.²⁵

Gilbert linked Uranus with the French Revolution and the new metal platinum for full hermetic correspondence. Drawing up a chart for its first sighting was the traditional way of assessing the significance of a new heavenly body, and as no chart or time data for its discovery was provided with his article, Gilbert may have expected fellow astrologers already to be familiar with the details. The Sun, Mars, and Saturn aspects he gives agree with the standard chart for the discovery of Uranus.²⁶ A major indication of the importance Gilbert attached to the planet is his belief that Uranus had been the New Star sighted by the Magi at the start

²³ Campion, *History*, p. 211, quoting John Worsdale, *Celestial Philosophy or Genethliacal Astronomy* (London: Longman, 1828) pp. 56–57; Ebenezer Sibly, *A New and Complete Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology [etc.]* 2 vols. (London: for the proprietor, 1784–88), Vol. 2, pp. 1051–55.

²⁴ Campion, *History*, p. 211.

²⁵ *CM*, Vol. 2 (Jul 1793): p. 518.

²⁶ Campion, *World Horoscopes*, p. 497.

of the Christian era. The Magi were led by this planet's course to its zenith over Bethlehem which it indicated as the birthplace of the new world saviour by remaining stationary, as a planet does prior to retrograde motion.²⁷ The sighting of Uranus was for Gilbert a sure sign of the dawning millennium.

Conclusion

Nicholas Campion usefully defines four types of astrologer: the scientific; the religious; the occultist; and the cunning man or woman.²⁸ Gilbert clearly was a mixture of the second and third types, and his fiercely anti-rationalist astrological writings offer an important window into what has been seen as a fallow period for astrology. His views on Uranus show that he was not afraid to stick his neck out and take on the new. His strongly religious form of hermetic philosophy (without which he felt astrology was of no value) anticipates the theosophical occultists of the nineteenth century, as much as it looks back to the hermetic sages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And yet, as a revolutionary enthusiast, he also used this tradition to comment on the transitional times of his own Romantic generation.

²⁷ *CM*, Vol. 1, (Mar 1792): p. 337.

²⁸ Campion, *History*, p. 216.