

Ars, technē, śāstra, ‘ilm: What’s in a name?

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Abstract

The designation of astrology as an art raises some simple but fundamentally important historical questions. How old is this designation, and, given that earlier generations of astrologers wrote in different languages, what words did they use that we translate as ‘art’? What are the connotations of those different words in their historical contexts? What other designations than ‘art’ would have been possible, and were such alternative labels used as well? Was astrology ever practised in cultural contexts where distinctions like that between ‘art’ and ‘science’ were not made? And if calling astrology an ‘art’ was not originally a question of aesthetics, was there still an aesthetic dimension to the practice of astrology, and how might we define or understand that dimension?

Introduction

We all know that language is a changeable thing, and that words may acquire new meanings over time. What I want to discuss in this paper is what ancient, medieval and early modern astrologers are likely to have meant when they described astrology by the word *art*, or by words that we translate as ‘art’. I should perhaps state at the outset that this endeavour is not an instance of what is sometimes called the etymological fallacy: I am not proposing to find out the true meaning, or even the current meaning, of either ‘art’ or ‘astrology’ by means of linguistic analysis. Rather, what I am aiming at is what every historian or philologist tries to do, namely, to read texts – in this case, astrological texts – carefully and in a culturally and contextually sensitive way.

If we look up *art* in a contemporary English dictionary, we find meanings such as these:

The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power

(the arts) The various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance

(arts) Subjects of study primarily concerned with human creativity and social life, such as languages, literature, and history (as contrasted with scientific or technical subjects)

A skill at doing a specified thing, typically one acquired through practice¹

These consecutive levels of meaning take us not only from the more common or widespread usages to the less common, but also from contemporary to historically earlier strata. The word *art* as it is used today, even by people with radically different views about what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘real’ art, is largely to do with creativity, aesthetics, and emotion. In the older sense, however, an art is simply a craft or an acquired skill, often contrasted with whatever is natural or inborn. This is not, of course, to say that premodern societies or civilizations were strangers to expressions of creativity, aesthetics, and emotion; merely that they didn’t use the word *art* to refer to them – or not exclusively to them: insofar as aesthetic activity involved a skill or

¹ Excerpts taken from the online *Oxford Dictionaries* (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>) [accessed 12 August 2016].

craft to be mastered, it could be called an art, but the word *art* did not necessarily connote aesthetics.

To be precise, most earlier societies didn't use the word *art* at all, as their cultures were expressed in other languages. It may seem rather trivial to point out that, for instance, Hellenistic authors didn't write in English; but when we read works in translation it is very easy to forget that every occurrence of a term like 'art' is the result of a choice made – whether consciously or unconsciously – by the translator, and that, quite often, different but equally justifiable choices could have been made. Nor do we typically find one-to-one relationships between the terms used in the original and those of the translation, at least not in the more readable translations. To illustrate, let us look at a few well-known astrological texts.

Hellenistic origins

Horoscopic astrology arose in the Hellenistic world, building on Babylonian foundations, so a good starting point would be looking at Greek words that were used to describe astrology. The Greek term most often translated as 'art' is *technē*, which has precisely the range of meanings just mentioned: 'art, skill, cunning of hand [...] craft, i.e. a set of rules, system or method of making or doing, whether of the useful arts, or of the fine arts'.² This is such a broad definition that we may almost be tempted to ask: what else could they have called astrology, if not an art? And in the most influential of all Greek astrological texts, the *Tetrabiblos*, Ptolemy does indeed use the designation *technē* twice, with Robbins's well-known translation rendering it as 'art'.³ But Ptolemy also calls astrology a theory, *theōria*, which Robbins likewise translates as 'art', and *epistēmē*, which is translated as 'science'.⁴ So there is some variation in terminology, more so in the original than in the translation; but nowhere does Ptolemy associate astrology with aesthetics or the fine arts. (He mentions those a few times in other contexts, calling them 'that which relates to the Muses' – which of course is the origin of our word *music*.)

However, if we turn for comparison to Ptolemy's contemporary and fellow Alexandrian, Vettius Valens, we find that he doesn't call astrology *technē* at all: the word occurs twenty-odd times in his *Anthologies*, but never as a designation of astrology.⁵ Nonetheless, the widely circulated translation by Mark Riley – which, I should add, is by his own admission a preliminary one – uses the word 'art' as a designation of astrology quite often, to render a number of Greek terms that to me, at least, have a more theoretical ring to them.⁶ The most frequent of these is *theōria* itself, which occurs ten times – twice as often as the next in order, *epistēmē*, which I (like Robbins) prefer to translate as 'science'.⁷ The last three terms used by Valens, with at least one occurrence each, are *suntaxis*, *mathēma* and

² Excerpts taken from Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

³ Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940). A more recent critical edition of the Greek text is found in Wolfgang Hübner (ed.), *Claudii Ptolemaei opera quae exstant omnia*, vol. III.1: *ΑΠΟΤΕΛΕΣΜΑΤΙΚΑ* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1998). The use of *technē* to designate astrology is found in I 2,13 (transl. Robbins p. 13) and I 3,18 (Robbins p. 31); it is further implied in III 1,1 (Robbins p. 221) by the adjective *prognōstikē* [sc. *technē*].

⁴ Both in Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*. I 2,12 (transl. Robbins p. 13).

⁵ For the Greek text see David Pingree (ed.), *Vettii Valentis Antiocheni anthologiarum libri novem* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1986).

⁶ Vettius Valens, *Anthologiae*, trans. Mark Riley, published electronically (<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/t/riley/vettius%20valens%20entire.pdf>) [accessed 12 August 2016].

⁷ When the two words occur in close proximity, Riley sometimes does translate one as 'art', the other as 'science'. *Theōria* as a designation of astrology occurs at Vett. *Anth.* III 9,5; V 2,10; V 8,110; VI 8,9; IX 1,3; IX 3,1; IX 12,2; IX 15,1; IX 15,11; IX 16,6. *Epistēmē* occurs at II 36,19; V 8,110; VIII 5,20; IX 9,10; IX 12,3.

doxa, which mean something like ‘system’, ‘learning’ and ‘opinion’, respectively.⁸ So to Valens – who, intriguingly, is often seen as a more hands-on, practical astrologer than Ptolemy – astrology is a theory, a science, a system, a form of learning, and an opinion, all of which sounds rather more abstract, even academic, than the ‘art’ with which Riley has somewhat loosely translated all these terms into English.

Astrology, then, is sometimes called an ‘art’ or ‘craft’ in Greek, if not as often as the translations might make us think; but that is only one of several designations, and neither the most frequent nor the most specific one. Now, if we travel from Alexandria across the Mediterranean to Sicily, we find, a couple of centuries later, the Roman lawyer Julius Firmicus Maternus writing on Hellenistic astrology in Latin.⁹ The English word *art* is, of course, derived from the Latin *ars*, and Firmicus does call astrology *ars* a few times.¹⁰ This Latin term covers more or less the same semantic range as the Greek *technē*, with ‘acquired skill’ or ‘craft’ being among the most frequent meanings – again, there is no necessary creative or aesthetic dimension here. Much more often, though, Firmicus calls astrology *scientia*, which is the origin of our word *science*.¹¹ Just as *ars* does not correspond very closely in meaning to the modern concept of art, so *scientia* doesn’t mean ‘science’ in the modern sense; but it does mean ‘knowledge’: it’s a matter of understanding something, rather than of creating or enjoying it. Another word that Firmicus is fond of using to describe astrology – so fond, in fact, that it is the title of his book – is the Greek loanword *mathēsis*. Like the *mathēma* used by Valens, it means ‘learning’ and is related to our word *mathematics*, and of course to *mathematicus*, which for many centuries was one of the most common Latin words for ‘astrologer’.

Perhaps more surprising to many is the fact that Firmicus occasionally uses the word *religio* as a designation of astrology.¹² Again, this does not mean that he viewed astrology as ‘a religion’ in the modern sense of a more or less exclusive system of observances and beliefs; but it does connect astrology with what we would call religious attitudes and experiences, as does the adjective *divina*, ‘divine’, which he sometimes uses to qualify *ars* or *scientia*.¹³ Perhaps this is where astrology in the classical world most closely approximates ‘art’ in our sense of aesthetic creativity and enjoyment – but let us return to that point in a moment.

India, the Islamic world, and Europe

By the time Firmicus wrote his *Mathesis*, horoscopic astrology had most likely already made its way from the Greek-speaking world to India, where it soon took root. The Sanskrit culture of classical India has no concept precisely analogous to *technē* or *ars*, but it does have a category somewhat closer to our modern idea of art: *kalā*, which covers a number of what we would call the fine arts, including singing, music, dance, drama, painting and sculpture – although it also covers a number of practical skills, mostly associated with pleasures and amusements, that may not strike westerners as equally fine or important, such as dressing hair; arranging flowers; putting on costume, jewellery and perfumes; preparing drinks and dainties; playing games, telling riddles and doing magic tricks; organizing cockfights,

⁸ *Suntaxis* as a designation of astrology occurs at Vett. *Anth.* IV 11,11; *mathēma*, at V 6,22; and *doxa*, at VIII 5,20.

⁹ For the Latin text see W. Kroll and F. Skutsch (ed.), *Iulii Firmici Materni Mathesos libri VIII*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1897–1913; repr. 1968).

¹⁰ Firm. *Math.* I 2,5; II 30,10; IV prooem.,5; VII 26,12; VIII 5,1; VIII 25,10.

¹¹ Firm. *Math.* I 1,1–2; I 3,2–3; I 3,5; I 4,1; I 4,5; I 4,14; I 5,1; II praef.,1; II 20,14; II 30,1; II 30,14–15; IV prooem.,5; IV 1,10; IV 22,1; V praef.,1; VIII 5,3; VIII 33,2

¹² Firm. *Math.* II 30,14; VIII 5,1.

¹³ Firm. *Math.* I 1,1; I 3,3; I 3,5; II 30,1–2; II 30,10; II 30,14; IV prooem.,5; IV 22,1; V praef.,1; VII 26,12.

teaching parrots to talk; and so forth.¹⁴ Some of the more complex arts can be classified in their theoretical aspects as *śāstras*, a word that denotes any systematic body of teaching (and the texts expounding it); but most *śāstras* are not arts (*kalā*).

Astrology, like medicine, is uniformly viewed as a *śāstra* – *jyotiḥśāstra*, ‘the science of lights’ – or a *vidyā*, field of learning; but never, despite its practical applicability, as a *kalā* or art. In India, then, we have an ancient culture that does possess a separate category corresponding more closely to ‘art’ in our modern sense, but which unambiguously excludes astrology from that category. Nevertheless this is arguably the culture where horoscopic astrology has thrived and developed for longer, and achieved more widespread acceptance, than anywhere else in the world.

Greek and Sanskrit astrological traditions, along with Syriac and, above all, Persian ones, formed the basis of the great Arabic astrological synthesis that began in the eighth century. I am no Arabist and cannot claim the same familiarity with Arabic-language astrological works as with their Greek and Indian counterparts, but I find that just the titles of these works tell us a great deal.¹⁵ Phrases like *‘ilm an-nujūm* (‘the science of the stars’), *aḥkām an-nujūm* (‘the judgements of the stars’) and *ṣinā ‘at an-nujūm* (‘the craft of the stars’) recur constantly in varying combinations or, one is tempted to say, constellations.¹⁶ Of these terms, my impression is that the least frequent is *ṣinā ‘a* – meaning ‘craft’ and thus corresponding most closely to the Greek *technē* or Latin *ars* – though the Arabic astrological corpus is a large one and nobody, to my knowledge, has attempted to produce a concordance to it. Certainly *‘ilm* and *aḥkām* are very frequent, as are the corresponding *scientia* and *iudicia* in the mostly twelfth-century Latin translations from the Arabic. This choice of words again emphasizes the role of astrology as an intellectual endeavour rather than an aesthetic one.

Following on the translations from the Arabic, original works on astrology began to appear in western Europe, eventually alongside direct translations from the Greek. Most of the published works of the Renaissance and early modern period were still written in Latin, but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, publications in the vernaculars began to appear. By and large, these new contributions to astrological literature preserved the terminology employed by the early Latin translators and spoke, in their various languages, of the ‘science’ and ‘judgement’ and, occasionally, ‘art’ of astrology.

To an English-speaking readership, no doubt the most familiar of the early modern authors in the field is William Lilly. His writings are of particular interest to us, not only because they are numerous and influential, but because they reverse the general trend to which I have referred: whether as a reflection of the English idiom of his time or simply of his personal preferences, Lilly was very fond indeed of the word *art*. For an illustration, we need only look to the address to the reader at the beginning of his three-volume *Christian Astrology*: in just seven quarto pages he manages to call astrology an ‘art’ no less than sixteen times.¹⁷ We may compare this to the designation ‘science’, which occurs only twice in the whole of the first book.

Lilly certainly helped popularize the English use of *art* as applied to astrology; but what did that term mean to him? It was during his lifetime in the seventeenth century that the word began to acquire something of its modern sense, relating particularly to painting, sculpture,

¹⁴ For a more extensive list of Indian ‘arts’ see, e.g., *Kāmasūtra* 1.3.15. Several editions of the Sanskrit text exist, but none of them critical in the strict sense. A passable translation is: Vatsyayana Mallanaga, *Kamasutra*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ For an overview of the available literature, see Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, Band VII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979).

¹⁶ For a wealth of examples see Sezgin *Geschichte*.

¹⁷ William Lilly, *Christian Astrology* (London: Tho. Budenell, 1647), vol. 1, pp. 5–12.

and the like. However, a close reading of Lilly's work fails to turn up any instances of this aestheticized usage: when he speaks of *art*, it is always in the older, broader sense of the word, as a skill or craft. An illuminating instance is his discussion on finding a person's occupation from the horoscope, in which *profession*, *magistry*, *trade*, and *art* are all used synonymously.¹⁸ An art, to Lilly, is simply whatever one is trained to do, including astrology; and an artist – a word he sometimes uses to refer to astrologers – is anyone skilled in his own art.

Inspiration and the aesthetics of astonishment

To sum up the views of Hellenistic civilization, classical India, the Islamic Golden Age and pre-industrial Europe in a few words, then, astrology can be called an art in the sense of a craft to be mastered, but hardly in the sense of a 'fine' art or creative self-expression; and the majority of terms used to describe astrology across these cultures are in fact what in today's popular idiom might be termed left-brain ones: knowledge, system, science, learning, opinion, judgement, and so forth.

But let us pause to consider the word I just introduced into that last sentence: *self-expression*. If the aestheticized use of the term *art* is modern, the widespread understanding of artistic creativity as an expression of one's individual personality or unique vision is, historically speaking, very recent. A great deal has already been written about art in this sense being a product of European late modernity, and I shan't add to that discussion here. The point I do want to address, just briefly, is how creative and aesthetic experience can transcend the individual perspective in a way that may also be relevant to the practice of astrology.

I deliberately say 'creative and aesthetic' so as to cover both the act of creating or performing a work of art (in the modern sense) and of actively appreciating or participating in it. We are familiar, of course, with the concept of inspiration, although the word is typically used in a watered-down sense today. The exception is in religious discourse, where for a text to be inspired still means that it was dictated by or produced under the direct influence of a deity, who 'breathed into' the writer – the literal meaning of *inspiration*. Artistic inspiration, too, was traditionally viewed in this light, as the manifestation of a power beyond the artist himself, often represented by the semi-divine Muses. Whatever one's religious beliefs, this sense of transcending the everyday self and temporarily gaining access to a trans- or suprapersonal realm is still experienced by some creative artists.

But such transporting experiences are not necessarily limited to the creators of art: in fact, some aesthetic philosophers claim them as the domain of the connoisseur rather than of the artist. Such was the view of Abhinavagupta, who lived about a millennium ago and who is still one of the most celebrated Indian thinkers on aesthetics.¹⁹ Aesthetic experience is known in Sanskrit as *rasa*, 'flavour', and according to Abhinavagupta, its essence is 'astonishment', *camatkāra* (a term variously rendered by translators as 'rapture', 'wonder', or even 'epiphany'). Significantly, he uses the same word to describe the experience of spiritual illumination, when personal consciousness expands in a shock of realization or, more accurately, recognition of ultimate reality. Although the two forms of experience – mystical and aesthetic – are not identical, Abhinavagupta considers them to be analogous; and it is precisely the universalization of emotion in art, liberating it from the confines of individuality, that makes such lofty raptures possible.

Now, it may be argued – and in fact I would argue – that rapturous epiphanies are not confined to the realm of what we typically consider to be aesthetics, firmly grounded in

¹⁸ Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, vol. 3, pp. 624–634.

¹⁹ For an introduction to Abhinavagupta's aesthetics based on the most recent scholarship see Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 181–238.

visual, auditory or other sensory experience: they can also occur in contexts that are preeminently rational, such as philosophy or mathematics. Indeed, it is not uncommon for discoveries in these fields to be described in aesthetic terms by those who understand them, as ‘elegant’ or even ‘beautiful’. If there is an aesthetic dimension to the traditional practice of astrology – and I think there is – then I believe it is more akin to delight in the beauty of a mathematical proof than to the enjoyment of a fine painting or piece of music. And this shift from the sensory to the intellectual realm makes the dividing line between aesthetic and religious experience a very thin one. Perhaps it is not even a meaningful distinction.

The ways in which astrologers express their experiences of awe and delight naturally vary with religious and cultural contexts. In the Hellenistic period, one of the most vocal authors is Firmicus Maternus, mentioned above, who called astrology a *religio* and *divina scientia*. Near the beginning of his work, he writes:

To whom does the whole nature of divinity both show and produce itself if not to the *mind*, which, having come forth from the celestial fire, has directed itself toward the ruling and direction of earthly fragility?

This one handed down the plan of this science. This one devised the computations. This one demonstrated the courses, regressions, stations, associations, augments, risings, and settings of the Sun and the Moon and the other stars [...] And constituted in the fragility of an earthly body, he did not forget, but remembered to hand down all these things with the awareness of his own brief majesty. [...]

For the stars have their own sense and divine prudence, because, animated by the pure concept of divinity, they conform with unceasing agreement to [the will of] that highest and master God, who arranged all things with a perpetual disposition of law, in order to preserve the order of his creation everlastingly.²⁰

Firmicus’ vision is one of ordered beauty, a *kosmos* in the full sense of the word, reflected kaleidoscopically for the astrologer in an infinite number of individual horoscopes. And this, I believe, is the point at which the traditional art of astrology can become both a mystical and, in the deepest sense, an aesthetic experience.

²⁰ Julius Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, trans. James Herschel Holden (Tempe, AZ: American Federation of Astrologers, 2011), pp. 15–16, 19–20.