

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology

Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul

Week 6

Astrology in the Renaissance and the Early Modern World: Weekly

Description

Nick Campion

Purpose of the Week

This week's purpose is to gain a critical understanding of the practice and context of astrology in the European Renaissance, with particular reference to the Platonic and Hermetic revival.

Tasks this Week

- Read the required reading and review the optional reading, looking at what may be useful as additional reading now or in the future.
- Watch Frances' pre-recorded lecture on Marsilio Ficino.
- Consider your title for your second essay. If you are ready, post your title on the Forum.
- Prepare for next week's seminar discussion.
- Attend the zoom seminar or, listen to the recording if you are unable to attend.

Weekly Description

The Renaissance (literally 'rebirth') in western Europe was characterised by a second wave of translation (the first being in the twelfth century) of classical material, this time directly from Greek (rather than mainly from Arabic) into medieval Latin, in particular the works of Plato and Neoplatonic philosophers including Plotinus and Iamblichus, and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. According to conventional dating, the Renaissance began in Italy around the middle of the fifteenth-century, but the challenge to established systems of thought which it legitimised, encouraged the Reformation - the revolt of the Protestants against the Catholic Church - from 1517 onwards, and the 'scientific revolution' of the mid-sixteenth to late seventeenth centuries.

Until the mid to late twentieth-century the standard interpretation of the cultural change that took place during the Renaissance was based in the notion that pictured the supposed Medieval focus on faith and superstition was first confronted and then overturned by reason and enlightenment. It is now generally considered that the picture was more complex and that a revival in neo-pagan and classical magical systems of thought was both a central feature of the Renaissance and contributed directly to the development of modern science. In addition, it is recognised that the 'middle ages' of the 12th to 14th centuries had a vibrant intellectual culture based in logic and reason, as well as through such astonishing achievements as cathedral architecture. Mathematical astronomy relied on the astrolabe, planetary tables and perpetual tables which allowed the calculation of the calendar, especially the date of Easter, over long periods. The invention of the mechanical clock, probably in the 13th century, is a remarkable achievement.

Another version of history which is now challenged is that certain features assumed to be characteristic of the Renaissance, such as perspective in painting, were pioneered in Germany, not in Italy.

The concept of the Renaissance appears to have been consciously developed in Italy as a means of asserting the distinctive newness of 15th century culture. There are two major theories of the Renaissance's central nature:

1. The traditional notion is that it represented the rebirth of classical reason, the forerunner of the Enlightenment, democracy, freedom and science; science and reason and the overthrow medieval magic and superstition.
2. The revisionist view is that it represented the rebirth of classical paganism, legitimised astral magic and introduced Platonic and Hermetic mysticism into Europe. According to this view, firstly the break with the Middle Ages was less than has been supposed and secondly Renaissance magic then evolved into science. This theory is strongly associated with scholars at the Warburg Institute in London,

including Aby Warburg, Fritz Saxl, Raymond Klibansky and Frances Yates, as well as Charles Webster at Oxford.

Although we should be cautious about using the term it remains a convenient designation. It is better to focus on what actually did happen. To summarise there are three significant developments:

1. The adoption of printing by moveable type in Germany, probably in 1439 replaced the laborious copying of manuscripts with the production of books. This prompted a massive spread in popular astrology through the printing of almanacs.
2. The spread of Platonic and Hermetic notions of the soul, beginning in the 1470s with Marsilio Ficino.
3. The Protestant Reformation, beginning in 1517. Institutionally, the Reformation disrupted the power of the Roman Catholic church and theologically it removed the Catholic doctrine that the priesthood was necessary to intercede between God and humanity, and therefore allowed people to develop a personal relationship with God. The translation of the Christian Bible from Latin into vernacular languages allowed any educated person to read. It is usually agreed that the long-term consequence was the encouragement of ideas of personal autonomy and democracy.

Astrology

This week will examine the context of the development of astrology in the fifteenth and sixteenth- centuries, taking into account such factors as the development of printing (which allowed the creation of the mass astrology of the almanacs), but will focus on the philosophical context provided by the translations of Hermes and Plato.

It is important to remember the distinction in European astrology introduced by Isidore of Seville and Thomas Aquinas between a legitimate astrology which was justified as natural philosophy, and an illegitimate

divinatory or superstitious one which sought knowledge (especially of the future) not sanctioned by God.

A common distinction is made between what we now know as natural astrology (an astrology based on natural influences and avoiding precise prediction) from judicial astrology (which usually emphasised detailed predictions and other statements, often using horoscopes). The distinction is not absolute (and is challenged by Darrel Rutkin): for example a horoscope could be seen as neutral, and might be either contextualised as natural philosophy and legitimate, or divinatory and illegitimate. It is useful to understand why the notion of general connections between celestial and terrestrial affairs was universally accepted (the most devout Christians accepted such Biblical phenomena as the Star of Bethlehem, which coincided with Christ's birth, and had no objection to celestial influences) yet precise prediction and the management of time was not.

While judicial astrology flourished, supported by the rediscovery of Platonic philosophy and the Hermetic teachings, it remained highly controversial in many quarters. There were high profile attacks on it, notably by the Florentine philosopher Pico della Mirandola whose *Disputationes* was published in 1496. The effect of these attacks was to put many astrologers on the defensive and prompt them to argue that astrology should be thoroughly reformed, a programme that culminated in the work of Johannes Kepler in the 1610s.

The Soul

The dominant view of soul remained that it was not subject to astrology, at least not to legitimate astrology as natural philosophy. To consider the soul in relation to astrology was to stray into illegitimate divinatory territory. Astrology could consider character and behaviour, so could be considered retrospectively as psychological. The principle set out by Thomas Aquinas was that if a person lived a devout life they would be freed from planetary influences, but if they didn't then their bodies would be subject to planetary influences, which would stir up their character. It was therefore possible, to take an example, for a transit of Mars to cause anger, but only as a secondary influence after Mars had first influenced the body. The translations of the Platonic and Hermetic works undoubtedly introduced

new possibilities but there, emphasis on a transcendent soul was easily Christianised, as were Hermetic texts which emphasised the soul's escape from planetary influence. In the longer term, historians of western esotericism identify the translations of the Platonic and Hermetic works as 'a', if not 'the', foundation of the western esoteric tradition.

Thought for the week: did Renaissance astrology differ to Medieval astrology? You could consider this question through technical astrology, or through the philosophical background and assumptions.