

Astronomy and Literature: Astrology in some English Language texts

Nick Campion

Heavenly Discourses

Geoffrey Chaucer



- born around 1357 and died in 1400
- concerned was with astrology as a literary device, a means to reveal the foibles of human nature.
- That he used it is a fact which itself indicates the extent to which the language of planets and zodiac signs was familiar.
- His chosen subjects were ordinary people, the embryonic bourgeoisie,
- We know of no instance in which he advised the great and powerful, in spite of his high-level contacts.
- .



- Chaucer himself was also himself clearly something of an expert on astronomy and astrology
- The first use of the astronomical terms 'ascension' and 'declination' in English occur in the 'Franklin's Tale' and the 'Merchant's Tale'.
- His influences included a series of classical astrologers, including Dorotheus, Firmicus, Rhetorius and Ptolemy, who he calls 'the wise astrologien'.
- Treatise on the astrolabe, 1393, drawing on Masha'allah's work,
- Manual on the equatorium, a device which, in the absence of astronomical tables, was used to determine the positions of the sun, moon and planets.



- The key is in the next passage in which Chaucer then reported that May had spent exactly four days in her chamber - from noon on the first day until noon on the fourth.
- For the moon to travel from two degrees of Taurus into Cancer, means that it must have moved at least fifty-eight degrees, an average of fourteen and a half degrees a day.
- The moon's mean motion is in the region of thirteen degrees per day.
- When May was in her chamber the moon was therefore moving faster than usual, always an auspicious indication.
- Chaucer, having taken care to specify the moon's exact location was making a definite point about the plot, namely that May is in a strong position.
- The Moon in Cancer is in its own sign, so May could hardly put a foot wrong.
- At a point in the story at which the crisis caused by May's near-adultery has not yet broken, Chaucer told his astrologically aware audience that the story has a happy ending.
- There are two levels of plot, the cosmic and the human and, by examining the first, the outcome of the second was revealed.
- 'This is Ptolemaic astrology dramatised' (Campion)
-

Psychological profiling in Chaucer

- The children of Mercurie and Venus
- Been in hir wirkyng ful contraries;
- Mercurie loveth wisdom and science,
- And Venus loveth ryot and dispence.
- And, for hire diverse disposicioun,
- Ech falleth in otheres exaltacioun.
- And thus, God woot, Mercurie is desolat
- In Pisces, wher Venus is exaltat;
- And Venus falleth ther Mercuie is reysed.
- Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue',
697-705, in Robinson, *Works*, pp. 82-3.
-
- The children of Mercurie and Venus
- Worked in her (the Wife of Bath) in
contrary ways
- Mercury loves wisdom and science,
- And Venus loves riotous and licentious
behaviour.
- And, to it matters worse,
- Each planet is in the other's exaltation [in
other words, is instance, weak]
- Therefore Mercury is weak in Pisces,
where Venus is exalted
- And Venus is weak in Virgo, where
Mercury is exalted.





The use of astrological timing

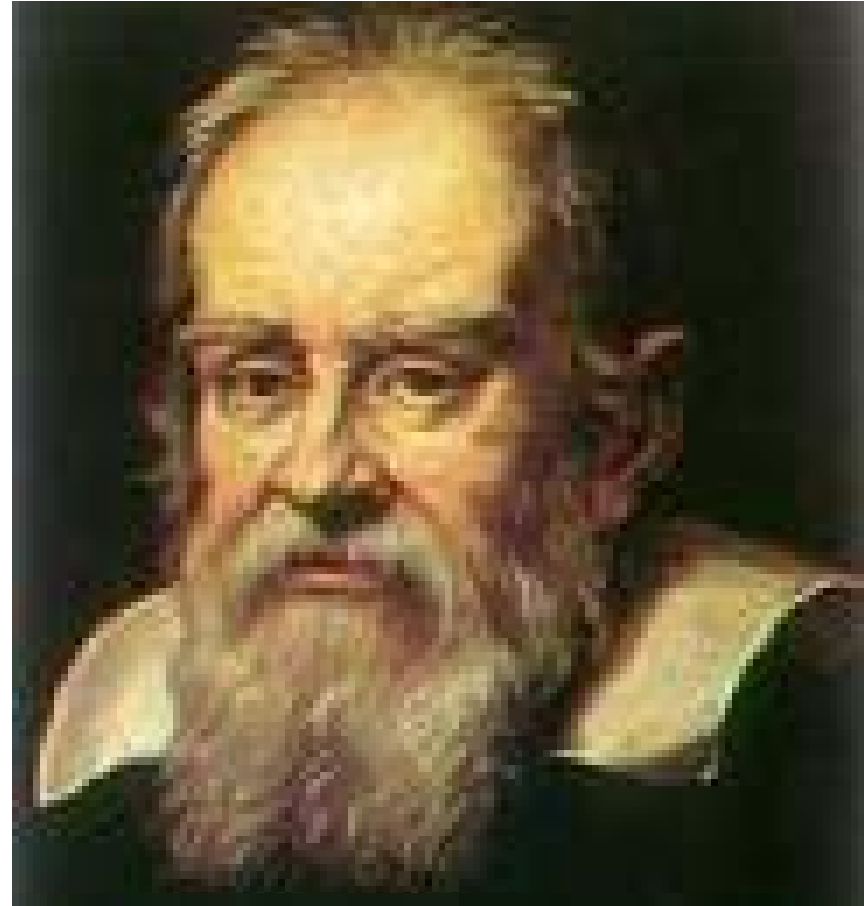
- The Merchant's Tale: the marriage of January and May
- 'The moone that at noon was thilke day that Januarie hath wedded fresshe May, in two of Tawr, was into Cancer glyden: so long hath Mayus in hir chamber abyden'.
- Chaucer, 'The Merchant's Tale', 1885-8, in Robinson, *Works*, p. 121.



2. Analysing Shakespeare

The context

- Galileo
- Use of refracting telescope 1609
- *Sidereus Nuncius* 1610.



The impact was immediate

John Donne The Anatomy of the World 1611

- *And new philosophy calls all in doubt,*
- *The element of fire is quite put out,*
- *The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit*
- *Can well direct him where to look for it.*
- *And freely men confess that this world's spent,*
- *When in the planets, and the firmament*
- *They seek so many new...*
- *'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone...*



Shakespeare: his philosophical context

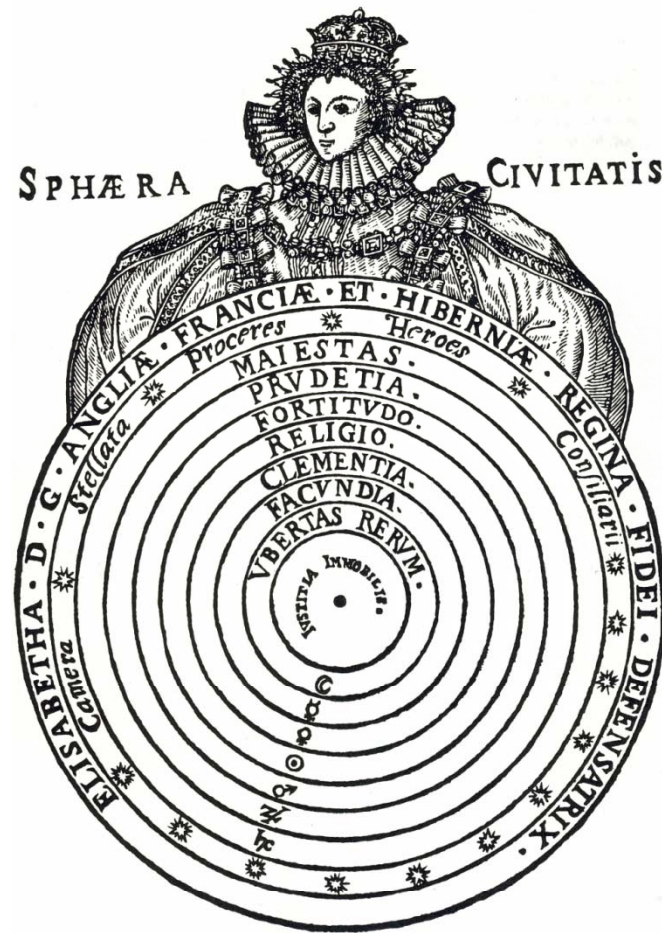
- Elizabethan?
Renaissance Man?
- 1. Scripture
- 2a. Plato
- 2b. Aristotle
- 2C Stoicism
- 3. Reform



The Elizabethan World View

- 1. Scripture: stars as signs
- 2a. Plato: the cosmos as a vast, living machine in which the planets are 'keepers of time'
- 2b. Aristotle: the cosmos interlinked by a web of psychic and physical influences
- 2C Stoicism: the cosmos as an organ of fate.

The Elizabethan Cosmos



3. Reform

- Frances Bacon:
- The human understanding is unquiet. It cannot stop of rest, and still presses onward. Therefore it is that we cannot conceive of any end or limit to the world, but always as of necessary it occurs to us that there is something beyond.[\[1\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Bacon, Francis, *Advancement of Learning; Novum Organum; The New Atlantis*, in Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 30, Chicago, 1952, Aphorism XLVIII (Nicholson p. 195)



Fulke Greville 1554–1628

Chancellor of the exchequer, and commissioner of the Treasury under Elizabeth I and James VI/1

- 'Needfull it therefore is, and clearly true,
- That all great Empires, Cities, Seats of Power,
- Must rise and fall, waxe old, and not renew...
- States have degrees, as human bodies have
- Springs, Summer, Autumn, Winter and the grave.'[\[1\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Fulke Grenville, 'A Treatise of Warres', in Certain learned and elegant workes of the Right Honourable Fulke, Lord Brooke, London 1633, pp 77, 78, quoted in Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophic History*, p 52.



Troilus and Cressida. 1.iii.

- *The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre,*
- *Observe degree, priority and place,*
- *Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,*
- *Office and custom, in all line of order:*
- *And therefore is the glorious planet Sol*
- *In noble eminence enthroned and sphered*
- *Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye*
- *Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,*
- *And posts like the commandment of a king,*
- *Sans check, to good and bad...* [\[1\]](#)
-



[\[1\]](#) Troilus and Cressida. 1.iii.

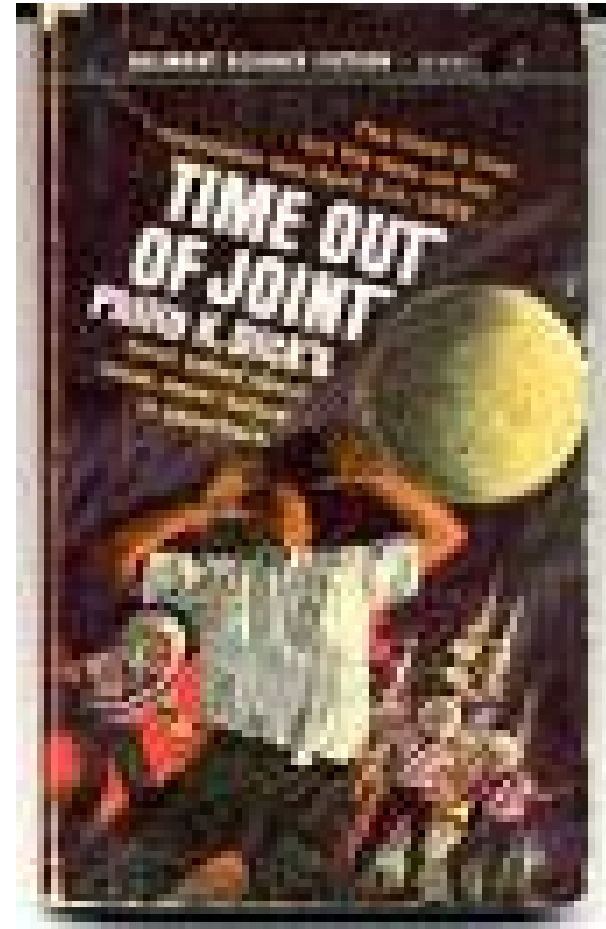
Troilus and Cressida – and Copernicus

- In the midst of all assuredly dwells the Sun. For, in this most beautiful temple, who would place this luminary in any other or better position from which he can illuminate the whole at once? Indeed, some rightly call Him the Light of the World, others, the Mind or the Ruler of the Universe: Hermes Trismegistus names him the visible God. Sophocles Electra calls him the all-seeing. So indeed the Sun remains, as if in his kingly dominion, governing the family of Heavenly bodies which circles around him.[\[1\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Copernicus, Nicolaus, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books 1995, I.10, pp. 24-5.



Time Out of Joint

- Hamlet Act 1, scene 4, 87–91
- **Marcellus:**
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
- **Horatio:**
Heaven will direct it.
- **Marcellus:**
Nay, let's follow him. [*Exeunt.*]
- Hamlet I.V. 211-212
- **Hamlet:** The time is out of joint;
O cursed spite,
• That ever I was born to set it right!



Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Book V, prologue, stanza 1.

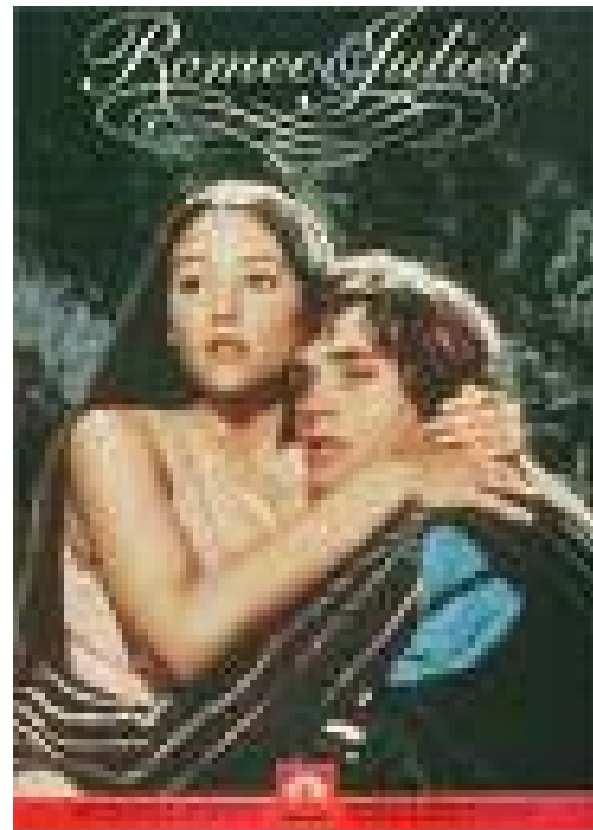
- Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square
- From the first point of his appointed course,
- And being once amisse, growes daily wourse and wourse.[\[1\]](#)
- *
- Gloucester in King Lear:
- O ruin'd piece of nature!
- This great world shall so wear out to naught.
- [\[1\]](#) Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Book V, prologue, stanza 1.



Metaphor: Star Cross'd

ROMEO AND JULIET: PROLOGUE

- Two households, both alike in dignity,
- In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
- From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
- Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
- From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
- A pair of **star-cross'd** lovers take their lives.



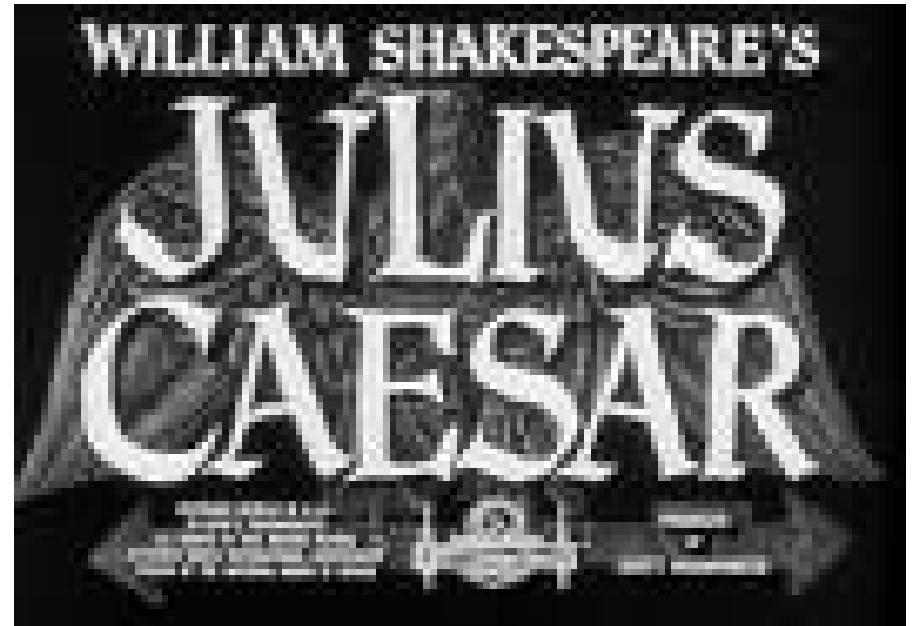
A Midsummer Night's Dream

- ; Hermia says to Lysander of their troubles:
- *"If then lovers have been ever **crosse'd**, It stands as an **edict in destiny**: Then let us teach out trial patience, Because it is a customary cross, As due to love as thoughts and dreams and sighs, Wishes and tears, poor fancy's followers." (Act I Scene I)*



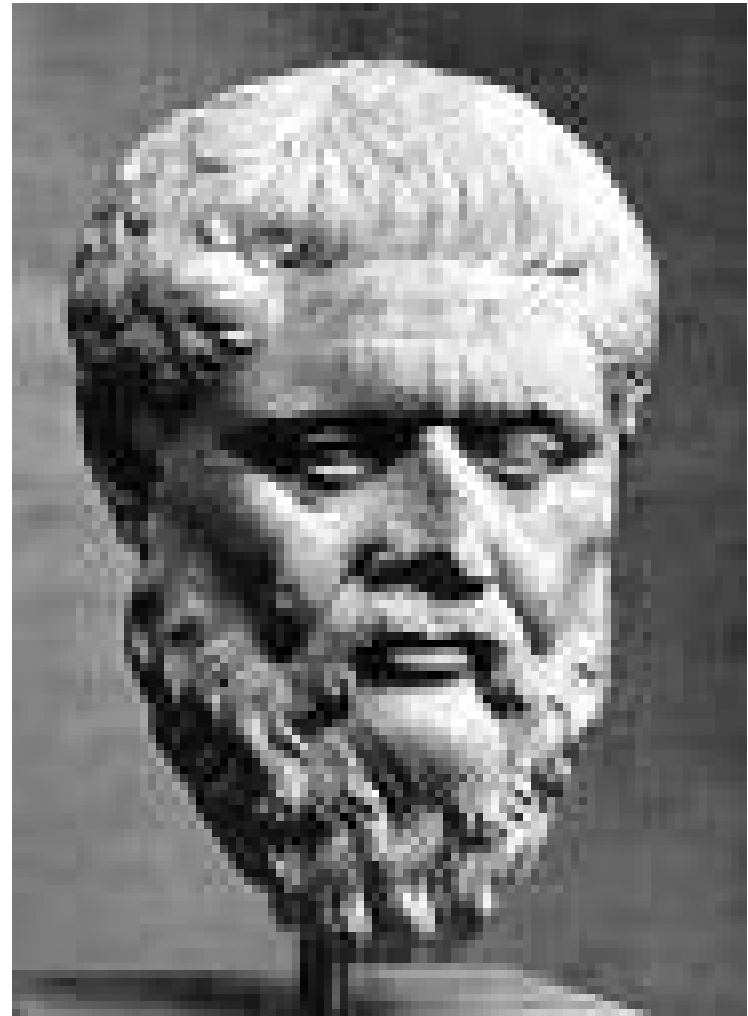
Are the Stars to Blame?

- The fault, dear Brutus,
is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that
we are underlings...
Julius Caesar
- (I, ii, 140-141)



Perhaps. But Perhaps Not

- 'The blame is he who chooses: God is blameless.'
- Plato: Republic X.617E.



SONNET 14^[1]

- Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck;
- And yet methinks I have astronomy,
- But not to tell of good or evil luck,
- Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality;
- Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell,
- Pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind,
- Or say with princes if it shall go well,
- By oft predict that I in heaven find:
- But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
- And, constant stars, in them I read such art
- As truth and beauty shall together thrive,
-

^[1] Shakespeare, William, The Royal Shakespeare Theatre Edition of the Sonnets of William Shakespeare, London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975.

- 'Shakespeare Online', <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets>

And yet Romeo, on his way to Juliet's house (I.4) says

- My mind misgives
- Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,
- Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
- With this night's revels.



On Gazing at the Stars

- On earth the brute creation bends its gaze,
- but man was given a lofty countenance
- and was commanded to behold the skies;
- and with an upright face may view the stars:--
- Ovid Metamorphoses, Book 1, lines 97 - 114.
- <http://www.ovidio.org/book1.txt>





Marcus Aurelius. Emperor 161-80

- ‘Survey the circling stars as though yourself were in mid-course with them. Often picture the changing and re-changing dance of the elements. Visions of this kind purge away the dross of our earth-bound life’.
- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1964, V.47, p. 112; see also IX.29, p. 144.
- *One’s soul can be cleansed by an imaginative union with the stars.*
-

SONNET 15 (Aristotle?)

- **When I consider every thing that growes**
- **Holds in perfection but a little moment,**
- That this huge stage presenteth nought but shoves,
- Whereon the Stars in secret influence comment.
- **When I perceive that men as plants increase,**
- **Cheered and cheque'd even by the self-same sky:**
- **Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,**



King Lear

- Written 1604-5,
perhaps as late as 1608,
the year before Galileo's
observations



‘These Late Eclipses’

Gloucester, 1.2

- These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked twixt son and father: the king falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves! Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose thee nothing; do it carefully. And the noble and true hearted Kent banished! his offence, honesty! T'is strange indeed.**

A contemporary example

- The Conjunction of the two Luminaries in Aries, occasions strange Alienations of friendship and Death. viz break of Leagues, Amities and friendships: from thence Warre and controversy, after which follows quarrels, and then Death and Destruction; many times a Famine and scarcity of provisions...Nor are men or Cattle onely concerned in this our great Eclips: without doubt whole Kingdomes, Nations, People, Cities and Common-wealths.[\[1\]](#)
-
- [1] Lilly, William, *Annus Tenebrosus or the Dark Year*, London 1652, p. 26.



And an ancient one!

- **Prognosis of the eclipse on 29th Iyyar (Ayar, month 2) sent by the Babylonian astrologer Rasil to the Assyrian emperor (8th c BCE):**
- **‘the god of all four quarters will become confused; rise of a rebel king; the throne will change within five years, there will be rebellion in Akkad, a son will kill his father, a brother will kill his brother’**

Edmund breaks in:

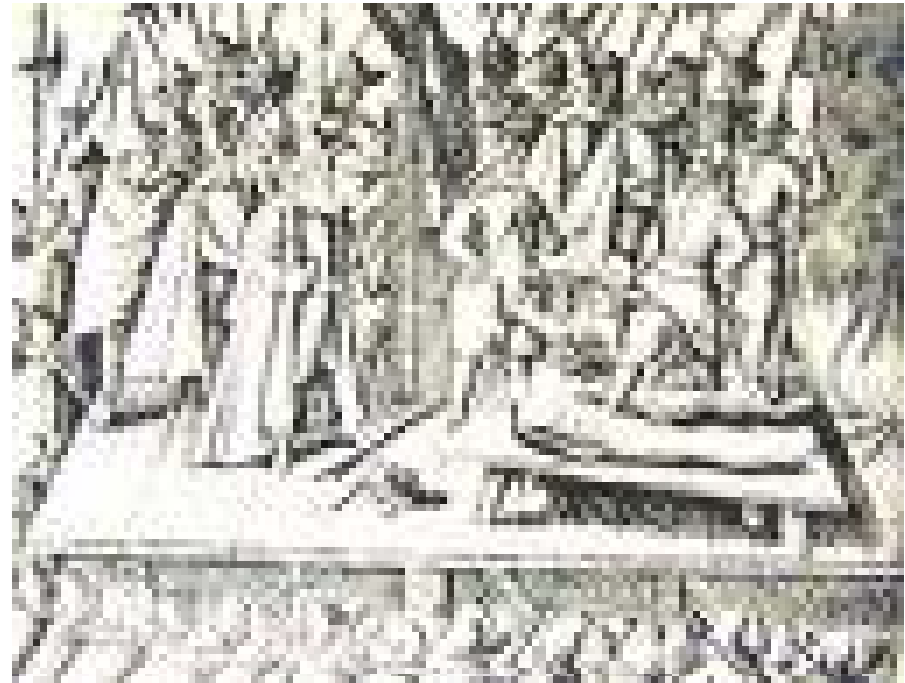
- This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune,(often the surfeit of our own behaviour) we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by special predominance; drunkards, liars, adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion on the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail; and my nativity was under Ursa major; that that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Tut, I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardising. Edgar - and pat he comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy: my cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o'Bedlam.

- Edgar, who cannot believe his ears, is moved to ask his cynical brother in astonishment
- ‘How long have you been a sectary astronomical?’

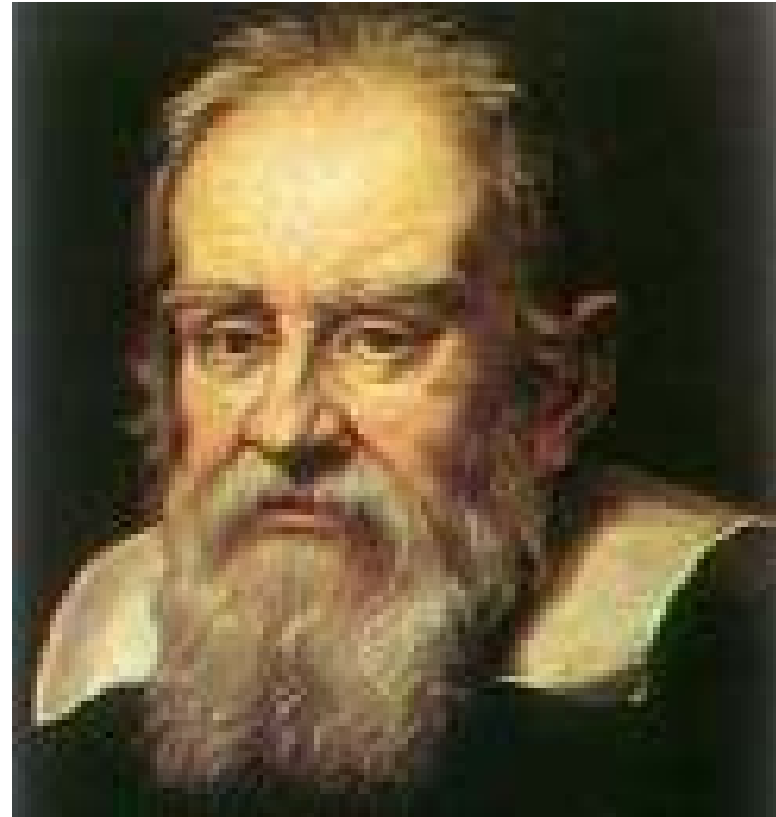


Was Lear explosive?

- It was on 5 November 1605 that Guy Fawkes was arrested in the Gunpowder Plot, and accused of conspiring to blow up not Parliament and the king - the entire British government. Halliday writes that 'The Moon, indeed, portended no good. There was an eclipse on the 27th, and only a fortnight before there had been a total eclipse of the sun'.[\[1\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Halliday, F.E., *Shakespeare in his Age*, London: Duckworth 1956, p. 282.



- Henry Wotton, wrote a letter to King James I of England
- :
- ‘So as upon the whole subject he hath first overthrown all former astronomy – for we must have a new sphere to save the appearances – and next all astrology. For the virtue of these new planets must needs vary the judicial part, and why may there not yet be more?[\[1\]](#)’
-
- [1] Sobel, Dava, Galileo’s Daughter: a Drama of Science, Faith and Love, London: Fourth Estate 1999, p. 30.



All's Well That Ends Well II.3

- *LAFEU:*
- They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.



- And so, the last of the magi –
or
- (Keynes on Newton – the last
of the magicians)

3. TED HUGHES





Ted Hughes 1930-1998

- Born 17 August 1930, Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire
- At Cambridge read 'mainly folklore and W.B.Yeats'.
- British Poet Laureate (a royal appointment) 1984-98
- Met and married Sylvia Plath in 1956.
Separated 1962. Plath committed suicide 1963



TED HUGHES St. Botolph's.

The *St. Botolph's Review* was launched in Cambridge on 26 February 1956. Hughes met Plath at the party and they married four months later

- Our magazine was merely an overture
- To the night and the party. **I had predicted**
- Disastrous expense: a planetary
- Certainty, according to Prospero's book.
- Jupiter and the full moon conjunct
- Opposed Venus. Disastrous expense
- According to that book. Especially for me.
- The conjunction combust my natal Sun.
- Venus pinned exact on my mid-heaven.
- For a wait-and-see astrologer so what?
- Touch of a bat's wing easily exorcised.
- Our Chaucer would have stayed at home with his Dante.
- Locating the planets more precisely.
- He would have pondered it deeper. What else? I left it
- For serious astrologers to worry
- That conjunction conjunct my Sun,
- conjunct with your natal ruling Mars. And Chaucer
- Would have pointed to that day's Sun in the Fish
- Conjunct your Ascendant exactly
- Opposite my Neptune and fixed
- In my tenth House of good and evil fame.
- **Our Chaucer**, I think, would have sighed
- He would have assured us, shaking his sorrowful head.
- **That day the solar system married us**
- **Whether we knew it or not.**



Ways to analyse this poem

- General:
- Consult the regular literary criticism on Hughes
- Specific:
- Consider any astrological influences – W.B Yeats?
- What does it tell us about Hughes' knowledge of astrology?

A Critical View of Hughes

- The critic Al Alvarez, a friend of Hughes, denounced the poet's 'belief in mysteries, the under-life...black magic...mumbo-jumbo...astrology, hypnosis, Ouija boards [and] the dottier forms of Jungian magical thinking' as partly responsible for the tragic suicide of his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath.
- Hughes couldn't help it, Alvarez thought. As a country boy fallen amongst intellectuals he was out of his depth and liable to succumb to weird beliefs but Plath's interest, as the daughter of middle class American intellectuals was incomprehensible to him: how could she be taken in by such obvious rubbish?
- Alvarez believed that although 'the baleful influence of the stars' didn't come naturally to Plath, but that 'she went along willingly when [she and Hughes] played spooky games with the Ouija board and read each other's horoscopes'.
- Alvarez, Al., *Where Did It All Go Right?*, London: Richard Cohen Books, 1999., p. 203
- Alvarez, Al', 'How Black Magic killed Sylvia Plath', *The Guardian*, G2, 15 September 1999, p. 4.
-



4. Other Possibilities

- Representations of astronomers and astrologers in literature
- Celestial Journey literature
- Science Fiction
- Astrological texts as 'literature'.
-

Back to Shakespeare.....

Savage Chickens

by Doug Savage

