

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul
Week 8: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries
Nick Campion

Purpose of the Week

To gain a critical awareness of western astrology in the 18th and 19th centuries, with particular attention to questions of 'decline' and 'revival'.

Tasks This Week

- Consider your essay topics.
- Post your choice of topics for Essay 2 on the Forum if you have made it.
- Attend or listen to the weekly seminar.

Weekly Description

This week covers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period when judicial astrology – the casting of horoscopes - almost disappeared and then revived, and natural astrology began its conversion into astrophysics, under cover of Newtonian philosophy. Astrology survived in two forms - as Patrick Curry's 'low astrology' in the almanacs, and as 'esotericism' or as a factor in 'magical' ritual embedded in parts of Freemasonry and later to emerge in late nineteenth century magic groups such as the Golden Dawn. Certain underlying astrological principles (the notion of an ordered cosmos, the belief that human life and terrestrial patterns are connected) was embedded in secular world-systems such as sociology in the nineteenth century (we might make the same point about the influence of Kabbalah in Freud and of astrology, via Jung, on Myers-Briggs personality testing). Nick Campion calls this 'disguised' astrology.

To summarise, then, 18th century astrology saw the following trends and characteristics:

1. The near disappearance of horoscopic astrology
2. The attempt to rationalise astrology according to Newtonian principles (The claims of Newtonianism, as an 'ism', are not necessarily the same as those of Isaac Newton).
3. The loss of intellectual respectability

4. The diversion of esoteric astrology into esoteric and occult currents within Freemasonry.
5. The continuation of 'low' astrology in mass, popular culture.

This said, the detailed scholarly research into 18th century European astrology has yet to be done. Most material relates to astrology in Britain, some to Germany, France and the USA but little or none elsewhere. It may well be that Britain was the genuinely the main focus of astrological activity in the western world, but the problem may equally be one of a lack of research of astrology elsewhere.

The early nineteenth-century saw the first serious revival of judicial astrology in Britain since its decline in the late seventeenth-century. Factors to consider may include the new independence of the self-educated British middle classes from the hegemony of an intellectual elite, and Romanticism as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. We might also ask whether the revival of judicial astrology was a reaction against Enlightenment secularism, or part of it, or both. The answer is probably that, as astrology developed, it encompassed different world-views and perspectives, which may be variously described as Romantic or Secular. By the end of the 19th century, the Theosophical Society had become an organising force in institutional astrology, as well as the theory and practice. There is a widely accepted theory, in the rest of Europe as well as in Britain, that Britain was the pioneer in the revival of judicial astrology in the 19th century. However, this theory fails to take developments in France and Germany into account. A number of key features and characteristics of 19th century European astrology can be identified.

1. A growing interest in judicial astrology, initially amongst a small group of enthusiasts, spreading to the general public, at least in Britain, by the end of the century
2. A consistent attempt, especially in Britain, to organise astrological societies and periodicals, which was only successful by the end of the century.
3. Diverse currents, some requiring empirical proof, others more aligned with the occult and magical.

We should note that (1) astrology in the USA is included in the overall sphere of European astrology (I am trying not to use the word 'Western') and was connected to Britain via its common language and (2) the word 'science' only moved towards its current meaning during the course of the century, and that there was no necessary contradiction between being 'magical' and 'scientific'.

Soul: Alan Leo and Theosophy

A critical even for astrology occurred in 1875 when H.P. Blavatsky and Henry Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York, promoting a cosmology drawing on Platonic and Hindu sources in which the entire material universe emerges out of consciousness or soul. The impact on astrology was profound and expressed primarily through the work of Alan Leo in the 1890s-1910s. Every since then notions of reincarnation and 'soul-centred' astrology have been central to the western tradition. In the view of Patrick Curry 'Modern astrology is difficult to imagine without his [Leo's] intervention.'¹ Much of Alan Leo's work was published in the 1910s, but his ideas were developed in the 1890s so we are including him as the leading astrologer at the end of the 19th century.

Psychology

The mid-late 19th century saw the development of models of psychology in which the psyche was no longer connected with soul and rather with mind, which was seen as a product of the physical brain. With this we begin to see the development of the 'psychological society' in which all human behaviour can be explained according to psychological tendencies or complexes. A standard history is Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (London: Penguin 1970).

Thought for the week

What differences do we see between western astrology in the early 19th century as compared to the end?

¹ Patrick Curry, *A Confusion of Prophets: Victorian and Edwardian Astrology* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992), p. 123