

# SCHOLARS AND POWER: ASTROLOGERS AT THE COURTS OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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## 1. The problem

Historians often speak as though astrology served the medieval scholarly world as an instrument of power. As a first step to justifying such a claim, one ought to ask how astrology found its way into the courts of Europe, and how it fared in that environment. Much of the evidence borders on the anecdotal, but such as it is, it suggests that astrological knowledge was at best a very modest instrument of power —let us say a small instrument associated with great powers, rather than an intrinsically powerful instrument.

Even those with a very slight acquaintance with this dark corner of history will be vaguely aware of a gradual change that took place in the subject between ancient and modern times. Most modern astrology is concerned with the personal fortunes of ordinary individuals, whereas much of early astrology —for instance Babylonian astrology— was a question of the fortunes of states and princes. The prince was a human being, but his life was at the focus of attention chiefly because he was a representative of the state. Over the three millennia of its history, astrology has been steadily democratized, and put at the service of the private individual, but this transformation was certainly not complete during the Middle Ages. In fact not all medieval astrology concerned human individuals at all. Forecasting the weather, «the prognostication of times» (*pronosticatio temporis*), was an important part of medieval astrology for example.

Astrology in its western forms has its origins in Babylonian divination. It was codified in Hellenistic culture, and much stiffened by mathematical astronomy, especially by Ptolemy. Even this astronomy owed much to Mesopotamian culture. Largely motivated by astrology, in the ancient world as well as the middle ages, astronomy was in itself an intellectually challenging affair. To make almost any kind of serious astrological prediction, a long series of calculations was needed. The ability to practise mathematical astrology was a rare talent, and like all rare things, the value placed on it was largely independent of its intrinsic merits, intellectual or otherwise.

## 2. Eastern and Iberian Sources of Western Astrology

By the time that scholarship in general was beginning to revive dramatically in medieval Europe, especially from the twelfth century onwards, Greek and Arab astronomy was

arriving too, through Sicily and Spain. By the ninth century the emirate of Cordova was beginning to compare, culturally and politically, with the glories of the Abbasid Caliphate in Bagdad. The emir ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II surrounded himself with astrologers. There is in existence a list of them—a diwan—just as there is a list of court poets.<sup>1</sup> Astrology played a significant part in the political life of the court of Almanzor, ruler of Córdoba (981-1002).<sup>2</sup> This ruler burned books on astrology, but he would not go to war without a horoscope, and he took the precaution of having his son's horoscope cast. That sort of ambivalence has been quite typical of patrons of astrology during most periods of history.

From the second half of the tenth century, astrology was well served in Spain by astronomers of great originality. Several Spanish scholars made important contributions to astronomy, and many to astrology too. It is clear that the Andalusian courts were at this time patrons of astrology, but we know very little about the precise role of astrologers at court.

Courtly concern for learning in general in Spain must nevertheless have become known in other parts of Europe very quickly, even before the time of Almanzor. The most famous early bearer of such information was Gerbert of Aurillac, who studied mathematics and a little astronomy in Catalonia—indeed in the very town of Vic in which I am now speaking.<sup>3</sup> We should not take too seriously the reputation for supernatural powers that he left behind him, since mathematics generally was regarded with suspicion in some quarters then, but he must at least have been aware of Spanish-Moorish astrology.<sup>4</sup> He was of course no stranger to court life, for he became pope in 999. As Sylvester II he was the first Frenchman, and no doubt the first mathematician, to hold that office.

As the number of translations from the Arabic grew, Spain set an example to Europe that was more easily followed. Not only books but scholars made the journey northwards and eastwards, and Petrus Alfonsi was one who carried much responsibility for forming new tastes. He was a royal servant of a new type in northern Europe. Let me remind you of one or two facts about him. He was originally known by his Jewish name Moshe Sephardi before he converted to Christianity at Huesca in 1106, his godfather being king Alfonso I of Aragon.<sup>5</sup> Moshe, alias Petrus, was the king's physician, and in due course he became physician to Henry I of England. As a physician, his knowledge of astronomy and astrology were important to him.<sup>6</sup> We know little about his influence on the court, as regards astrology. We can say only

1. Julio SAMSÓ, *Las Ciencias de los Antiguos en Al-Andalus*, Madrid, 1992, p. 50-51.

2. «Astrología y política en la Córdoba del siglo X», *Revista del Instituto de Estudios Islámicos*, 15 (1970), p. 91-100. See also SAMSÓ, *op cit.*, p. 78.

3. He had left his convent (Saint Géraud, Aurillac) in 967 in the company of Borel, count of Barcelona. In 970 he went with Borel to Rome, where he drew the attention of the Pope, John XIII, and the Emperor, Otto I.

4. He kept up a correspondence with friends in Spain, asking them to send him copies of scientific works. See J. M. MILLÁS VALLICROSA, *Nuevos estudios sobre historia de la ciencia española*, Barcelona, 1960.

5. As pretender to the throne of Castile after 1109, he is sometimes known also as Alfonso VII of Castile.

6. It was perhaps through his influence that both of the kings he served showed a tolerant attitude to Jews:

that he had almost a missionary fervour in his spreading of astronomical knowledge. This is not surprising: it was something he could offer that was not readily available in England. This is the old story: one tends to put a high value on the knowledge one doesn't already have.

### 3. Adelard of Bath and the Norman Kings

Petrus' contemporary, Adelard of Bath, was a man about whose movements we know rather more. The two seem to have worked together, and the astronomical tables of al-Khwarizmi translated by Adelard contain, in one manuscript, material by Petrus dating from 1116.<sup>7</sup> Adelard tells us himself that he travelled, when a young man, to the Norman kingdom of Sicily, and his *De eodem et diverso* was in fact written in Syracuse. His *Quaestiones naturales*, beneath its outward form as a discussion between an uncle and a nephew, is effectively a report on his travels and a paean of praise for Arabic learning.<sup>8</sup> Adelard translated from the Arabic two astronomical and three astrological works, including one that contained passages on gem-stones engraved with magical images. But what connection did he have with the court?

The evidence is circumstantial. He was socially fairly well-connected. Like his father, for many years he was in the service of bishops. At one place he tells us that, while on the banks of the Loire, the queen had asked him to play the harp. (It is not clear whether he was here showing pride in his familiarity with the queen or with the harp.) Other evidence that he acted as court astrologer, however, exists in the form of ten Norman horoscopes that might very well have originated with him.<sup>9</sup> Charles Burnett has suggested that they might have been done by Robert of Chester. Whatever the truth of the matter, these are royal horoscopes in an untidy autograph, not a professional scribal copy, and nine of the ten seem to be in the same hand. The earliest is for 1123, the next for 1135, one is for 1150, seven are for 1151, and the odd one out is for 1160. There are notes associated with the horoscopes that are difficult to read, but most of them seem to point to king Stephen of Blois, grandson of William the Conqueror. The horoscopes seem to be concerned with dynastic questions, an

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at least, we find that both of them issued orders protecting certain Jews in their territories. Y. BAER, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, tr. L. SCHOFFMAN, Philadelphia, 1966, vol. 1, p. 52; C. ROTH, *A History of the Jews in England*, Oxford, 1941, p. 6. He made an excellent informant about Muslim and Jewish religious practice, since he was fluent in Hebrew and Arabic and could draw on rabbinic and cabbalistic material, for example for his anti-Jewish writings after his conversion.

7. O. NEUGEBAUER, *The Astronomical Tables of al-Khwarizmi* (etc.), Copenhagen, 1962. The material is extracted from writings he had prepared for the French Peripatetics. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

8. It is possible that Adelard was from a Lorraine family. At all events, he belonged to a circle of clerics associated with two men of Lorraine, Robert Losinga, Bishop of Hereford, and Walcher, Prior of Malvern. Both were expert in mathematics and astronomy. The most valuable modern work on Adelard is CHARLES BURNETT, ed., *Adelard of Bath. An English Scientist and Arabist of the Early Twelfth Century* (Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, XIV), London, 1987. For biography, see the chapter by MARGARET GIBSON, pp. 7-16.

9. See my chapter «Some Norman horoscopes» in C. BURNETT, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 147-161.

obligation by the barons to pay homage to the king's son, the possibility of an invasion, and so on.<sup>10</sup> One horoscope might concern Henry, son of Geoffrey of Normandy, and the possibility of a transfer of Normandy in 1150, to the boy who would eventually become Henry II of England. Henry was almost certainly the person to whom Adelard of Bath dedicated a treatise on the astrolabe, perhaps in 1149.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not these works were by Adelard, they show that there was at least one intelligent scholar using astrology in political circumstances in Norman England. The transfer of an ancient and Islamic tradition of this kind had therefore well and truly taken place in northern Europe by the mid-twelfth century. I suspect that when the astrological form of divination arrived on the scene, it simply stepped into the place of existing magical practice. Both magic and astrology had the same general function of explaining things that could not be otherwise explained, and both were involved in practices for bringing about things that one wishes to happen. In short, both had explanatory and pragmatic, even social, functions.

#### 4. Frederick II and Michael Scot, «Magician»

At the second important point of European contact with Islam, namely Sicily, the emperor Frederick II (1194-1250) played a central role. He had spent much of his childhood in Sicily, and had spoken Arabic with his childhood friends.<sup>12</sup> The island had been under Arab domination from 902 to 1091, and after its conquest by the Normans it became a natural meeting point for Greek, Arab and Latin cultures, so that it comes as no surprise that Frederick not only promoted the sciences generally, but is said to have employed a court astrologer and magician, Michael Scot (c. 1195-c. 1235).

Is this true? Michael Scot himself claimed to be a faithful astrologer to Frederick.

10. Stephen was on the English throne from 1135 until 1154. He claimed to be heir to Henry I, but his Anjou descent represented to many a disturbing change of dynasty. One horoscope mentions an obligation by the barons to pay homage to the king's son, presumably Stephen's son Eustace (d. 1153). One horoscope relates to a question concerning a deceased count: this would have been highly topical since Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, second husband to Stephen's rival Matilda, had died eight days earlier. Another horoscope concerned the coming of a certain person to England.

11. It seems likely that he taught Henry whilst the boy resided at Bristol, and looked on him as a future English hope. Adelard mentions two Arabic authors in the astrolabe treatise, one the Cordoban astronomer al-Majritī (d. 1007), and the horoscopes seem to rely on tables for Cordoba —perhaps brought to England by Petrus Alfonsi. The only other known English astronomer of the time capable of doing the necessary calculations is Robert of Chester, and he had no clear royal connection. There is, however, a charter of king Stephen drawn up between 1135 and 1139 that was witnessed by a certain Adelard de Bath'nian', and this was very probably Adelard of Bath. See the comments by C. BURNETT, *op. cit.*, p. 4, and his chapter cited in n. 10 above.

12. Having been excommunicated in 1227 for not embarking on a crusade, he exercised diplomacy which the Arabs had cause to respect. He received various gifts from the Sultan of Damascus, al-Ashraf, in 1232, including some sort of planetarium of gold, stellated with gems, which it is said he valued next to his son Conrad. This was lost when he was humiliated by the citizens of Parma in 1248. For more details see «Opus quarundam rotarum mirabilium», reprinted in my *Stars, Minds and Fate*, London and Ronceverte, 1989, p. 162-164. On Frederick see, for example, E. KANTOROWICZ, *Frederick the Second, 1194-1250*, London, 1931.

Although there are no documents proving this, the Parmesan chronicler Salimbene calls him «astrologer to the Emperor», and Dante calls him «a practitioner of magical tricks».<sup>13</sup> In fact Salimbene also associates his name with a prophecy in verse on the future of several northern Italian towns. Of these two characterizations, I think Dante's came nearer the mark.

How much Michael Scot depended on the emperor, and whether he resided at Frederick's court, are unknown, but the tenor of the advice he is likely to have offered may be judged from his writings.<sup>14</sup> His *Liber introductorius* and his *Liber particularis*, both said to have been written at Frederick's request, are a pot-pourri of astronomy, astrology, meteorology, physical geography, and other lore.<sup>15</sup> Michael informs us, for example, that he used to advise the Emperor that «if he wished clear counsel from a wise man, he should consult him in a waxing moon and in a human and fiery or aerial sign of the zodiac».<sup>16</sup> This suggests astrology of a technically weak sort. Michael was obviously much more at home when he was allying astrology with a doctrine of incantation, and the conjuring of spirits.<sup>17</sup> It is not our task to define the correct attitude of a thirteenth-century scholar to his subject, but we should at least take note of the apparent poverty of mathematical content in Michael Scot's works.

## 5. The Diffusion of Astrology in the Late Middle Ages. Court Physicians and Calendar-Makers

From this time onwards, many European courts seem to have had advisers with a knowledge of the newly arriving sciences. They were not always astrologers as such. Vincent de Beauvais, for example, a Dominican who held a position in the Cistercian abbey of Royaumont, and served Louis IX as royal chaplain, librarian and tutor to the royal children, took a critical view of both demonology and astrology. It is quite obvious that he believed in both of them. When he condemned them, it was with arguments that had been circulating since the time of the Church Fathers.<sup>18</sup> Such sceptics as Vincent would not have protested so much had there been nothing to protest against.

13. *Inferno*, c.20.117.

14. He dedicated a translation of Avicenna to Frederick in 1232; but he had an income from benefices in Britain.

15. See the brief account in C. H. HASKINS, *Studies in the History of Medieval Science*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1927, p. 292-298. On Scot generally: LYNN THORNDIKE, *Michael Scot*, London, 1965; and J. W. BROWN, *An Enquiry into the Life and Legend of Michael Scot*, Edinburgh, 1897.

16. L. THORNDIKE, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 2, New York & London, 1923, p. 326.

17. In this he was not unusual. A far worse example of a high ecclesiastic with such views was William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris from 1228-1249, who nevertheless spoke out against judicial astrology.

18. See his *Speculum naturale*, his *Speculum doctrinale*, and his *Speculum historiale*, for example.

Certainly by the end of the thirteenth century astrology was an accepted part of court life. One can see this from its increasing use in illuminated ecclesiastical calendars, of a sort that only the wealthy could afford.<sup>19</sup> The fullest examples gave at first only simple calendar information, saints days, sunrise and sunset, the phases of the Moon, eclipses perhaps, and medical information such as the best time for bloodletting (phlebotomy). As time went on, more and more astrological information was added.

One such calendar was prepared by Guillaume de St Cloud in 1296 for queen Marie of France.<sup>20</sup> In England, Richard of Wallingford, like all other abbots of St Albans, was often expected to act as host to the royal household, so it is not entirely surprising that he too seems to have written on nativities in the margins of a calendar, perhaps one written for Philippa, wife of Edward III.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the fourteenth century two English friars wrote calendars that were to be mentioned and used by the poet Chaucer, but both were expressly royal calendars.<sup>22</sup> There were of course many others, and I mention these as prime examples of a relatively modest astrological tradition —modest in the sense that it was free from the worst excesses of what we now deem to have been superstition. And the astronomical content was relatively high.

## 6. An Intellectual Power-Struggle. The Sceptics

This is an important point. Most of the information we have from royal courts, and from university circles where the expertise was obtained in the first place, suggests that astrology was a fairly sober activity. The number of horoscopes surviving from before the end of the thirteenth century is small, possibly suggesting that the personal element was as yet little developed, but even so, many theologians were beginning to worry about developments.<sup>23</sup>

19. In the best known example, the *Très Riches Heures* of the duc de Berry, illuminated by the brothers Pol, Hermant and Jehannequin of Limburg in the early fifteenth century, the astrological content is minimal and the quality of the book is quite exceptional.

20. *Kalendarium regine M(arie) per G(uilielmum) de Sancto Clodoalde*. See P. DUHEM, *Le Système du Monde*, vol. 4, p. 10-14.

21. Evidence for his authorship is circumstantial: there is simply no other likely candidate for authorship among the abbots of St Albans. See my *Richard of Wallingford*, vol. 2, 1976, p. 371 ff.

22. One of them was dedicated by the Carmelite Nicholas of Lynn to John of Gaunt, prince and duke of Lancaster. The other was by John Somer, a Franciscan, who composed it for Joan, widow of the Black Prince, and mother of the English king Richard II. Both calendars ran from 1387 onwards. For more details, see my *Chaucer's Universe*, Oxford, 1988, p. 87-133, etc.

23. The most famous moves of censure were those by Etienne Tempier, bishop of Paris, and Robert Kilwardby, archbishop of Canterbury, in 1277, but there was far more than astrology at issue in their edicts. These were hastily prepared and directed against Aristotelian «scientific» tendencies generally. Tempier issued 219 propositions that were not to be taught. Kilwardby followed with thirty. They covered grammar, logic and natural philosophy generally. Peter Conflans, a Dominican, replied, and Kilwardby's response survives. Kilwardby was made a cardinal a year later, but died in 1279.

What they regarded as particularly dangerous was the idea that if the movements of the stars are predetermined then the same holds true of human fortune —at least as long as the one is believed to be caused by the other.

This theme of determinism was an important issue in two works with an anti-astrological flavour, both written for royal consumption, one by Thomas Bradwardine for Edward III of England and one by Nicole Oresme for Charles V of France. The works were very different in character, and it is of some interest to see how the two kings were being intellectually advised.

Bradwardine (c. 1290-1345) was an established scholar at Merton College Oxford who entered into the circle of Richard de Bury, then bishop of Durham, around 1335. He became confessor to the king, accompanying him on campaigns, perhaps in Flanders and certainly in France, in 1346. He became archbishop of Canterbury in 1349, but died a few weeks later in the Black Death. Bradwardine had twice dealt with the question of predestination,<sup>24</sup> and his solution is a specifically determinist one: he places responsibility for everything on the will of God, within the limits of which we exercise our free will.

Nicole Oresme (c. 1320-1382) was likewise a scholar who straddled the worlds of university, church and court. He became Grand Master of the College of Navarre in 1348, and was later Professor of Theology there; and he was made bishop of Lisieux in 1378 and died in that office in 1382. Oresme wrote against astrology. His *Tractatus contra astrologos* was not widely known, except through the writings of others,<sup>25</sup> and his *Livre de divinacions*, written in French between 1361 and 1365, is in many ways more interesting. He there presents astrology as an art natural to kings, alluding to Ptolemy, «king of Egypt», to Albumasar, and to «king Neptanabus», all of them «sovereign astrologers».<sup>26</sup> He sets the scene in the opening paragraph, however, where astrology is said to be most dangerous to those of high estate, in whose hands government falls.<sup>27</sup>

Philippe de Mézières also writes in French, but he claims to do so in order that the common people may learn how to avoid astrological nonsense. Brave words, but when we

24. First in a quaestio entitled *De futuris contingentibus*. His attack on the nominalists (the «Pelagians») in his great treatise *De causa Dei* is more famous. The full title in its later printed form (London, 1618) is *De causa Dei contra Pelagium et de virtute causarum ad susos Mertonenses*. See GORDON LEFF, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge, 1957).

25. Pierre d'Ailly used it in his writings against false prophets, and Philippe de Mézières made use of it in his *Songe du vieil pelerin*.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

27. «Mon entencion a l'aide de Dieu est moustrer en ce livret par experience, par auctoritez, par raison humaine, que fole chose, mauvaise, et perilleuse temporelment, est mettre son entente a vouloir savoir ou deviner les aventures et les fortunes avenir, ou les choses occultes, par astrologie, par gromance [geomance], par nigromance, ou par quelxconques tielx ars, se on les doit appeller ars, mesmement telle chose est plus perilleuse a personnes d'estat comme sont princes et seigneurs auxquels appartient le gouvernement publique.» The text is given in G. W. COOPLAND, *Nicole Oresme and the Astrologers. A Study of his Livre de Divinacions*, Liverpool, 1952. See p. 50 (for this) and 62 (for the following quotation), and p. 149-172 for hitherto unpublished astrological portions of the *Songe (Dream)*.



continue reading his work we find that he regarded certain kinds of astrological prediction as perfectly possible. His is a view that was almost universal among medieval intellectuals: astrology is scientifically possible but spiritually dangerous, although it cannot do anything that stands in the way of human freedom. Dangerous though it may be, Philippe believes that kings and princes should study astrology, for it is a noble science. Nobles and princes should know more of what is good and beautiful than anyone else, he says, citing Vegetius' *Book of Chivalry*.<sup>28</sup> He lists several kings who knew the subject well, and he recalls that Aristotle, the supposed author of the *Secret of Secrets*, advised Alexander the Great to do nothing without first consulting an astrologer. It is a minor consideration that the *Centiloquium*, a text wrongly ascribed to Ptolemy, says that the best astrologers come from southern lands, so that Frenchmen and Englishmen can have little profit from astrology. The broad message is that astrology is a science fit for princes, but not for commoners.

## 7. Positive Astrology at the French and English Courts in the Late Middle Ages

Opinions differ as to whether Oresme was ever tutor to Charles v. Certainly the library of that prince in the Louvre contained numerous astrological works. That simple fact might not have distinguished it from the best scholarly libraries of the time elsewhere, but we know a little more of the strength of the royal interest from a manuscript formerly owned by Charles, but now in the library of St John's College, Oxford.<sup>29</sup> It was written for Charles, and apart from various astronomical and astrological works contains a collection of five horoscopes, very carefully drafted, one for Charles himself and the others for four of his children.<sup>30</sup>

Nativities like these were usually cast at the time of birth, as a guide to future fortune and character, but nativities were not meant to be interpreted only once. If they were carefully preserved, as in this case, a natal horoscope could be consulted by the physician-astrologer at later stages in a person's life, for example, to pronounce on the probable course of an illness. It is a sad thought that those of Charles' children must have been studied very closely, since most of them died of disease prematurely.

It became a habit in the late Middle Ages, and afterwards, for astrologers to collect together horoscopes of the famous. Emanuel Poulle has discussed a manuscript now in the Bibliothèque Nationale that contains a triple collection of about sixty figures in all. Among them are horoscopes of Henry VI of England possibly done by Jean Halbout de Troyes, minister gen-

28. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

29. This has been well discussed by Emmanuel Poulle.

30. The future Charles VI, b. 3.12.1368; Marie, b. 27.2.1371; Louis, future duc d'Orléans, b. 12.3.1372; Isabelle, b. 23.7.1373. E. POULLE has argued plausibly that since Marie died in 1377, and a horoscope is unlikely to have been prepared for a deceased child, the collection dates from the period 1373-7. See his «Horoscopes princiers des XIVe-XVe siècles», *Bulletin de la Soc. Nationale des Antiquitaires de France*, 1969 (séance du 12 Février 1969), p. 63-77. Poulle notes the value of these horoscopes for purposes of fixing the date of Charles' birth, but notes the artificiality of the timing of the supposed moment of birth, arrived at by the process known as animodar.



eral of the Trinitarians. Others in the collection are for Jean, duc de Bourgogne, Jean, comte d'Alençon, and other nobles, and one for John Fastolf—Shakespeare's character Falstaff.<sup>31</sup>

What is of great interest here is that the collection as a whole was apparently made in an attempt to find an astrological explanation for political events. There are anniversary horoscopes for the duc d'Orléans that relate to his assassination in 1407 by the duc de Bourgogne. Eclipses of the Sun and Moon in that year, and a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 1405, were related to the possibility of a dynastic change such as the one that had taken place around 988, when the nobles of France had given the crown to Hughues Capet. It was calculated that a Saturn-Jupiter conjunction had taken place then, just as on 1 June 1325. On the second occasion it was supposed to have heralded the accession of Philippe VI de Valois—although this came about only three years later! Other astrological phenomena with suitably delayed actions were introduced. The feeble character of the exercise must have been evident to the person who collected the material. By the time of the last cluster (1437) Charles VII had made his triumphant entry into Paris, and the astrologer thought it desirable to make a thorough analysis of his birth horoscope. Charles VII is apparently the only French king of the Middle Ages on whom such a commentary is now extant.<sup>32</sup>

In later horoscopes there are references to «king Henry of France» and «Charles who calls himself king of France».<sup>33</sup> The writer comments further on an adverse judgement made by Roland l'Escrivvain (Roland Scriptoris) on a horoscope for the crowning of Charles VII. Roland's analysis was already confused in the Middle Ages with a prediction, supposedly made in his youth, of the advent of Jeanne d'Arc.<sup>34</sup> Again, it was easier to make astrological judgements after the event. No less interesting is the fact that so much effort was being put into dynastic astrology. In view of the prospects for the downfall of the English cause in France one may suppose that this emphasis on dynastic analysis is not surprising.

Roland l'Escrivvain was primarily a physician, and his career is of interest in this connection. He was a master of arts and of medicine, seemingly from Lisbon, who had served John duke of Bedford as physician.<sup>35</sup> But Roland was like so many other scholars in history

31. POULLE, *op. cit.*, p. 69-71. Cf. L. THORNDIKE, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 4, 1934, p. 99-100. The dates of the horoscopes fall into clusters: 1407-8, 1426-7, and around 1437. The Hundred Years War between England and France was still festering, but Philippe le Bon's alliance with Charles VII by the treaty of Arras in 1435 had marked a serious reversal for the English by the time the last cluster was done.

32. POULLE, *ibid.*, p. 73.

33. The last group is concerned, among other things, with a suitable date for a marriage of Jean II d'Alençon: 5 March 1437 was judged favourable. The duke did indeed marry Marie d'Armagnac, but on the last day of April, no doubt having his own reasons.

34. POULLE, *ibid.*, p. 74.

35. The information comes from an astrological geomancy he composed that is now in the British Museum. Roland addresses the duke of Bedford in a six-part astrological physiognomy, of which at least two copies survive. The duke died in 1435, placing this service earlier than his other interpretations. The geomantic work is in Sloane 3487, and the physiognomy in Oxford, St John's Coll. MS 18, and British Library, MS Royal 12 G XII. See THORNDIKE, *ibid.*, p. 143.

have been, a weather-cock, turning with the political wind. Like any other astrologer anxious to raise his reputation he had to prove that he possessed a better system than his rivals. He entered into some academic disputes that might seem to us to be absolutely piffling, but they were not so at the time. They all concerned scientific credibility, and that in turn meant patronage.<sup>36</sup>

## 8. Astrology as a source of Political Power

It is clearly somewhat misleading to speak as though there were «astrologers in the service of kings», since astrology was not in any sense a full-time activity. Every medieval king had his medical advisers and every university-trained physician had some knowledge that one would describe as astrological. Every king therefore had his astrologer, in that simple sense. Astrology, however, covers a multitude of sins, from blood-letting to meteorology, from casting nativities to making prognostications about wars, from analysing history through the occurrence of great conjunctions to predicting the end of the world from sightings of comets. In a sense, doing any of these things amounted to the exercise of power. I can quite imagine that blood-letting was for some patients almost as terrifying as an announcement that the end of the world was at hand. (In some cases —Descartes', for instance— the two amounted to the same thing.)

What sort of power might a scholar hope to gain by the practice of astrology? Many, in the past as now, would have said that they did not want power. Employment, perhaps, a warm room, enough to eat and drink, but not power. Power suggests more: it suggests the use of other people for one's own ends.<sup>37</sup> Whether a person thirsted for power of this kind will have depended on character and circumstance, and it is foolish to generalize about such imponderables. One way or another, like any other scholar seeking royal employment, he must persuade the ruler that he has rare expertise, and that he can do something important that others cannot do. He must make sure that the interpretation of what he says is difficult, without encouraging royal neuroses that could be positively deadly.

There is a dilemma here, however, for the bottom line of the argument must not be too difficult to understand, if action is to be taken. «Go to war on Friday next.» This at least

36. It is a curious fact that at the very time that Roland was paying so much attention to the affairs of Charles VII, namely 1437, he entered into a public controversy with a theologian, Laurens Muste, on a question of the suitability of a certain day (2 January 1437) for blood-letting. The great question reduced to one of deciding whether the day should be marked with a cross in the almanac, or only half a cross. The rector and university appointed two arbitrators, who no doubt after many hours of deliberation formulated a masterly compromise. They decided that the alternatives were equally acceptable. This most certainly did not mean that the arbitrators were in any way astrological sceptics or that they undervalued the art of phlebotomy. On the contrary, the care they gave to the judgement shows how serious was the entire game to them. THORNDIKE, *ibid.*, p. 140-141, has more information on this episode, drawing on BN 7443. They recommended a large almanac rather than a small one, for the sake of accuracy in placing the all-important Moon in the calculation.

37. One might define power more generally, but in the end one comes back to the same point. To be able to determine the future course of society is to be in possession of power. However, whether you alter society in a gentlemanly way or not, what you are doing involves the manipulation of other people.

must be reasonably explicit, although of course a little ambiguity might prove to be useful if things go badly wrong, as they often did—at the siege of Parma by Frederick II, for instance. An instance of flexibility of interpretation was when Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim forecast that the Constable de Bourbon would succeed in his attack on Rome in the spring of 1527. He omitted to say that the constable would be killed in the first assault on the city.

Power over the person of the prince, obtained through the astrologer's possession of a supposed source of secret knowledge, is a very real sort of power, but this, the «Rasputin effect», is not peculiar to astrology. Knowledge of the future is a powerful thing, and to the true believer a personal horoscope that is sincerely believed no doubt chills the blood. But there are other sorts of power. Astrology has always been concerned with the fates of nations. Geoffrey Chaucer was alluding to this very strong tradition when he wrote his *Troilus and Criseyde*, into which he wove the same doctrine of great conjunctions as that I mentioned earlier. His courtly audience would have experienced a frisson of excitement when they drew parallels between the fall of Troy in the story and the possibility of the fall of London in their own time. Then again, the doctrine of great conjunctions was often applied to the rise and fall of religious sects. How pleasant to think that the fall of Islam might be at hand! The prestige of the astrologers who could explain these things must have been high, but even predicting the fall of Islam was not something to keep a man in business for long. He needed a second profession, and a man who was a trained physician had more or less a guarantee of employment.

Astrologers were of course occasionally more than innocent interpreters of the heavens. Like Karl Marx, the scholar often wished not only to interpret the world but to change it. For some examples of the exercise of scholarly power to focus spiritual celestial influence on the world here below, it is instructive to consider the English court during the Wars of the Roses. English royal horoscopes are not especially common, but there are more than twenty surviving medieval examples,<sup>38</sup> and their mathematical accuracy provides a measure of the quality of advisers. The quality improved in the fifteenth century, beginning with the figure for Henry VI (1421), but with notable technical lapses in later examples.<sup>39</sup> For instance one Cambridge astronomer<sup>40</sup> prepared a horoscope for Edward IV, who was born in Rouen, using tables appropriate to Norwich, many miles to the north.

Does the existence of these royal horoscopes tell us anything about the royal concern with astrology? Does the chart of a patient's temperature, placed at the foot of a hospital bed, tell us anything about the patient's concern with medicine? In both cases, the individual

38. They include figures for Edward II and III, Edward the Black Prince, Richard II, Henry V and Henry VI, and Edward IV and V—in other words, for every king born between 1284 and 1470 except Henry IV. I know of only a French figure for Henry IV.

39. It is interesting to see how in the sixteenth century standards outside royal circles declined right across Europe, with a period of mass-production: these things were very tedious to calculate. An example of a royal astrologer in too much of a hurry to include much detail is Girolamo Cardano. See my *Horoscopes and History*, p. 142.

40. John Argentine, Provost of King's College Cambridge and a royal physician who owned many fine astrological books.

is doing no more than submit to the superior wisdom of the scientist. Having a horoscope cast was viewed by some princes with suspicion, rather in the way that having one's photograph taken used to be regarded by primitive peoples. The question asked is: what will be done with the «image», the resulting encapsulation of the subject's very being?

There was perhaps most reason to worry near the magical fringe of astrology, where there was belief in a power that came from illicit sources. This was a serious spiritual problem that posed an intellectual challenge to theology, but to the prince who lived in fear of his enemies it could be very worrying indeed.

## 9. Punishment by Death. The Hazards of Court Astrology (1441, 1447)

There are one or two salient points to be made here. Christianity had been founded in a world where magic was commonplace. An early stand was taken against magical practices,<sup>41</sup> but old practices survived, and the vast number of medieval prohibitions show that while many sorts of magic were condemned, others were actually sanctioned. Contacts with the East, for instance during the Crusades, clearly led to a growth in the use of amulets and charms for personal protection and the cure of ills of many sorts.<sup>42</sup> And then, with the spread of classical and eastern astrology, magic came in at its fringe.

Renaissance humanism, ostensibly directed against medieval styles of thought, actually encouraged magic, where it was found endorsed by suitably classical texts. The Reformation's emphasis on the living power of the Word, while meant to work against superstition, merely served to stress the fundamental split between two sorts of spirits, harmful and beneficent, demons and angels, that could in principle be invoked in similar ways, that is, by the use of words. The early neo-Platonists had tried to formulate a philosophical theory of popular magic, and the Church adopted many of their views, for example those of John Damascene. There are many problems of definition in discussing magic, but always there is some sort of distinction between licit and illicit, white and black, harmless and offensive. This distinction was later transferred to magic practised in ways that we should now be inclined to see as scientific, natural magic, which was spiritually harmless. In fact it is perhaps useful to draw a triple distinction between white magic, in the sense of dealing with good spiritual powers (as when using holy relics or holy water or the sacrament or scapularies), black magic, dealing with demonic powers, and natural magic, dealing with physical powers that may be mysterious but that are handled in essentially physical manipulations.

There is a good English illustration of the dangers of meddling with magic from the year 1441, when Eleanor Cobham, duchess of Gloucester, was accused with two clerks, Roger Bolingbroke and Thomas Southwell, and a woman named Margery Jourdemayne, known as the Witch of Eye, of conspiring to bring about the death of the king, Henry VI. The duchess fled to sanctuary at Westminster, and was later imprisoned for life; Southwell died in

41. As we learn from *Acts* 19:19. There we are told that as a result of Paul's preaching, magical books worth 50,000 pieces of silver were publicly burned at Ephesus.

42. In the Catholic church medals are still struck for use at shrines, on pilgrimages, and in festivals, and many people still carry images of various sorts for their supposed protective power.

gaol; Bolingbroke was hanged, drawn and quartered, after being exhibited «with the vestments of his magic and with waxen images, and with many other magical instruments»; and the witch was burned as a relapsed heretic.

The crime was the use of necromancy and the black arts, but the men were practised astrologers, indeed senior scholars from Oxford.<sup>43</sup> It was very unfortunate for the two Oxford men that the king appointed two Cambridge men—one a royal physician, the other chancellor of Cambridge—to look into the question. Both interpreted the Oxford men's horoscope as having predicted the king's death. One of the interesting aspects of the case is that it seems that the king might have been playing off scholars from one university against scholars from another.<sup>44</sup>

This entire episode illustrates the principle that astrology was potentially dangerous—more so than even medicine, since it covered many more human situations. The two scholars' reports had not been overtly treasonable, but the very ambiguity of astrological interpretation that provides it with what one might see as its perennial commercial strength in this case allowed their report to be interpreted as hostile to the king. The two scholars had made the mistake of advising the king's enemies, and so they paid the price. This happened often enough to others in the shadow of the court, in other connections, and is to that extent not surprising. What is more interesting is the high degree of seriousness with which the whole case was investigated, the crown calling on expert advisers, and the whole case being written down by an anonymous author who, while fair, was also in deadly earnest.

Another rather similar case of treason occurred in 1477, and again it involved two Oxford astronomers. John Stacy and Thomas Blake were both from Merton College, and they had answered a query from a friend of the king's brother. Would the king die? According to the legal charge, they began by trying to discover the future; but later they supposedly used magic, necromancy and astronomy to actually cause the death and destruction of the king, Edward IV, and the Prince of Wales.<sup>45</sup> Blake was pardoned at the request of the Bishop of Norwich, but Stacy was executed at Tyburn.

In 1485 another astronomer of great talent, Lewys of Carleon, almost met the same end.<sup>46</sup> He escaped with a period of imprisonment in the Tower of London—and in the peace

43. Southwell was an Oxford graduate in medicine and Bolingbroke was the head of a hall in Oxford. They had cast a figure for the king which could be interpreted as predicting his imminent death. One might think that any horoscope can be interpreted in almost any way you like, if you twist your reasoning enough, but Bolingbroke produced a text with far too much circumstantial detail for the sake of comfort, such as that if one asks a question concerning an ill subject, and the lord of the first house is in the eighth mundane house, then the man will die. He went on to discuss childbirth and other matters, relevant because the duchess at her trial admitted that she had indeed consulted Bolingbroke, but only to get help in conceiving a child by the duke her estranged husband—this was Duke Humfrey of Gloucester, founder of the Oxford library that goes by this name.

44. For a longer account see HILARY M. CAREY, *Courting Disaster*, 1992, p. 138-153 and for further technical details see my *Horoscopes and History*, p. 143-149.

45. See CAREY, *ibid.*, p. 155-156.

46. He was physician to many of the nobility in the Lancastrian faction in the English civil wars, the Wars of the Roses, in 1485 at the time of a conspiracy to overthrow the Yorkist king, Richard III.

and tranquility of that place he used his time to great advantage to produce numerous astronomical tables.<sup>47</sup>

There is an old rule of diplomacy that one does not kill the messenger for unpalatable news, but this rule has often been most evident in the breaking of it. And so in astrology. Causing the death of the ruler and predicting it may today seem to be very different things, but astrology could be used in a form of psychological warfare, to turn cause into effect, so to speak. In 1499, Thomas Murner, a German satirist, published an invective against certain Swiss astrologers who had predicted the death of the emperor Maximilian.<sup>48</sup> On the part of the Swiss, this was merely a case of wishful thinking. One is reminded of a remark by Ibn Khaldun, in his *Introduction to History*: astrology, he said, by discovering signs of crisis, encouraged the enemies of the dynasty. Astrology should for this reason be forbidden.<sup>49</sup>

## 10. Astrologers and the Fashion for Foreign Advisers

The main centres of astrological learning by the fourteenth century were Paris, Oxford, and Italy. Italian princes were no less active in patronizing astrology than their northern cousins. They began their wars, they received foreign embassies, they laid foundation stones, and dedicated their churches, all with respect to the state of the heavens.<sup>50</sup> Guido Bonatti advised nobles and warlords, in particular the Ghibelline leader Guido da Montefeltro. The times of the crowning of popes were calculated by astrologers. Leo X (formerly Giovanni de' Medici) was particularly beholden to astrologers, and had patronized them long before he became pope. Many supposedly correct predictions were made concerning his period of office.

With the founding of numerous universities in the following century astrology snowballed in importance—let us not forget that every scholar in arts was trained in basic astronomy. Princes could at last buy the services of astrologers almost as easily as they can now buy computers. The field from which they had to choose was now much greater than it had been in the earlier Middle Ages, and another principle came into play, not of power but of intellectual fashion. Let me focus on two aspects of fashion. First on intellectual hierarchy, and second on the fashion for looking abroad for one's scholars.

As is widely recognized, in medieval Europe knowledge was ordered in a hierarchi-

47. See my Richard of Wallingford for further details of them.

48. THORNDIKE, vol. 4, p. 482.

49. «Further, astrology often produces the expectation that signs of crisis will appear in a dynasty. This encourages the enemies and rivals of a dynasty to attack it and revolt against it. We have personally observed much of the sort. It is, therefore, necessary that astrology be forbidden to all civilized people, because it may cause harm to religion and dynasty». IBN KHALDUN, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*. Trans. FRANZ ROSENTHAL, Princeton Univ. Press, p. 262. This comes in the midst of «A refutation of Astrology. The Weakness of its Achievements. The Harmfulness of its Goal».

50. The Piazzini chapel and the sacristy of San Lorenzo, the Salone Palace in Padua, and the Schifanoia Palace in Ferrara are all places decorated with astrological painting related to particular historical events.

cal way and so, therefore, were its practitioners. Knowledge was given by God, and so theology was put at the top of the pyramid. Astrology came well down most of the published hierarchies, if it was there at all, but the feeling that it was a somewhat inferior branch of learning, was one that faded as medieval astronomers became more skilled and more distanced from other scholars.

The second change in fashion concerns the widespread feeling that foreign scholars are somehow superior to one's own, that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. The list is endless. We find, for instance, Charles V of France summoning the Italian Thomas de Pisan (father of Christine) to his court as astrologer. More than a century later an Italian astrologer-physician, William Parron, was employed at the court of Henry VII of England,<sup>51</sup> while Henry VIII used the services of the Bavarian Nicolaus Kratzer, a friend and collaborator of Hans Holbein, who was of course also in Henry's service. There was no shortage of good English astronomers, although Kratzer brought a few new ideas with him. His predecessor Parron had another great virtue, for he had a long list of publications. In fact he consolidated a fashion for political prognostications in England, and published the earliest printed version of such a thing.<sup>52</sup> The tradition of publishing such predictions annually continues to the present day in most western countries. At the end of the fifteenth century we find the same sort of love for foreign fashion at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. There Johan Kanter was employed from Groningen. There are many more examples of this phenomenon of employing scholars from other countries, and I suspect that if analysed they would reveal that the choices were made not on the basis of technical excellence but ideas that were judged exotic and foreign.

## 11. Conclusion

Being a court astrologer brought with it much the same pleasures, rewards, and dangers as those experienced by other satellites to the court. The power exercised was perhaps subtle but it was rarely very great. Much is known of courtly remuneration, and it is clear that far more court physicians died rich than did pure astrologer-scholars. If astrologers kept any kind of power in play, it was because they could exploit human ignorance. We know much more about the exercise of this last type of power from the later practice of astrologers at a much lower point in the social scale, especially from the seventeenth century onwards. By then, astrology was splitting into two parts. In university circles it was becoming less speculative, less concerned with the sillier excesses of eastern prognostication of human affairs, and more concerned with empirical matters such as medicine and meteorology. It failed to produce results, and so it eventually died. A new profession was growing up, however, of astrologers serving the common people. The workings of this profession are much better documented than those of court astrologers, and it is clear that the psychology of the common man is much the same as that of princes.

51. See C. A. J. ARMSTRONG in *Italian Renaissance Studies* ed. E. F. JACOB, London, 1960, p. 433-454.

52. Printed by Winkyn de Worde in 1497.



Scientific astrology faded away gradually, but old literary habits showed greater resilience. Astrology has a long history of being used to colour literary style, and even to provide literary structures not to say royal adornment. For example, the notorious metaphor of Sun, gold, heart and king lived on to be exploited by the publicity managers of *Le roi soleil*. That imagery had a history going back at least to Babylon, and although by the seventeenth century it was more or less empty of scientific pretensions, it was still possible to use it with effect, in a very general and non-technical way, when writing treatises on kingship. Jean Bédé and Jean Bodin did so in France, and William Pemberton and many others did so in England. They were involved in a power game that had little to do with astrology, but they exploited language that was by this time so familiar and acceptable to their readers that it was rarely questioned.

The political power of the astrologer was never that of a Napoleon, and rarely approximated to the power of a Rasputin. Even when it was backed up by highly technical calculation, it worked at a deeper level in people's minds, and usually as a force for preserving the values that were ensconced there already, traditional values. The fact remains, that the court astrologer was in a special position since, as Shakespeare has it in his *Julius Caesar*

When beggars die there are no comets seen,  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes...

The link between princely powers and astrological conceits was one that was simply taken for granted by most people, and so it remained until long after Shakespeare's death.