CHAPTER FIVE

ASTROLOGY AND SOCIETY

William Eamon

It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our conditions.

(Kent in King Lear, Act IV, sc. 3)

The biggest media event of the sixteenth century—perhaps of the entire early modern period—took place in 1523–24, when scores of astrologers leaped onto a bandwagon of collective hysteria by announcing the imminent end of the world. The final days, the astrologers pronounced, would occur as a result of a second Deluge brought on by a conjunction of the three upper planets, Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, in the sign of Pisces.\(^1\)

Although it was already common knowledge among astrologers that the conjunction would take place in February 1524—thanks to an ephemerides, or table of planetary positions, printed in 1499—it was only around 1519 that the forecast began to generate widespread fear and animated debates among astrologers and theologians. Hundreds of almanacs and pamphlets foretold the flood. More than 160 works by 56 different authors weighed in on the dire prognostication, either by offering astrological evidence confirming the prophecy or denouncing it as a mad delusion.

News of the prophecy quickly spread through sermons and printed broadsides and almanacs. In January 1524 the Venetian chronicler Marin Sanudo reported that the mainland “is in great fear” over the impending catastrophe.\(^2\) As intellectuals debated, people all over Europe frantically moved their places of residence in anticipation of the deluge. Rumor of a second deluge spread to Paris, while in Toulouse, a president of the

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Figure 5.1: The great conjunction in Pisces, portending a second deluge. Leonhard Reymann, *Practica vber die grossen und manigfaltigen Coniunction der Planeten* (Nuremberg: 1524)
parliament anxiously built an ark upon a mountaintop. Year by year as the dreaded date approached, apprehension increased and the prophecies grew more ominous. In a 1523 tract, the noted German astrologer Leonhard Reimann predicted not only a great deluge but also a general uprising of peasants and common people. In Rome, there was general panic.

Of course, the great flood never materialized. Heavy rains fell in some parts of Italy, but civilization was not swept away by the floods that ensued. Other parts of Europe remained dry. Precipitation reconstructions for northern Europe in the 16th century indicate no unusual spikes for the year 1524. As far as the weather was concerned, for most of Europe it was an uneventful year. Yet the incident illustrates the extraordinary power that astrology and prognostication held over intellectuals and common people alike.

The failure of this prophecy, upon which so many astrologers staked their reputations, many scholars have argued, severely damaged the social authority of astrology. The German reformer Martin Luther, who adamantly opposed astrology, used the occasion to ridicule the astrologers for having predicted a great flood for the year 1524, “which, nonetheless, did not happen; yet in the following year, 1525, the peasants rose in rebellion. Of this, no astrologer had breathed so much as a word.” Some historians have argued that the failed 1524 prophecy was one of the signal events determining the demise of astrology.

If that was the case, astrology’s end was a long time in coming. Signs in the heavens continued to convey deep significance down through the end of the 17th century. As late as 1682, a great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn produced a flood of treatises predicting great mutations in the

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4 Robin Bruce Barnes, Prophecy and Gnosis. Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation (Stanford: 1988), p. 143. Reimann was not so far off: the German Peasant’s Revolt broke out in 1525.
6 D. Kurze, "Prophecy and History: Lichtenberger’s Forecasts of Events to Come (From the 15th to the 20th Century); Their Reception and Diffusion," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 21 (1958): 63–85, p. 70. Of course, Luther was wrong: The German astrologer Leonhard Reimann had predicted the Peasants’ Revolt (see n. 4). Only no one, not even Luther, had noticed Reimann’s prophecy until after the revolt had taken place.
secular and ecclesiastical worlds. Astrology flourished in early modern society because it made sense to people and offered the power to predict the future in uncertain times.

_Heavens and Earth: Astrology in Everyday Life_

Despite its intellectually demanding theoretical foundations and complex observational requirements, astrology was not a science just for the educated classes. The idea that the planets and stars transmitted qualities that influenced earthly events was ingrained in popular culture. Although few dared go as far as to say that the stars determined human destiny—such a claim would have been considered heretical—no one denied the influence of the heavens upon the weather or disputed the relevance of astrology in medicine or agriculture.

Scientific astrology—though linked to a tradition going back to the ancient Babylonians—was rare in Europe until the 12th century, when scholars revived the ancient Greek astronomical and astrological texts (through the medium of Arabic) and translated them into Latin. Yet even without the ancient scientific texts, popular forms of astrology flourished in the city and countryside alongside the learned astrology taught in the universities. For the most part, popular astrology comprised lore about the phases of the moon rather than the motions of other heavenly bodies—for the obvious reason that the moon was more visible to the naked eye than the planets. Early medieval charts told which days of the lunar cycle were good or bad for various activities. Heavenly events such as thunder also foretold the future. The direction from which a thunderclap came, when it was heard, and the sound it made were all read as portents affecting everyday life: thunder in January meant strong winds, while thunder heard in December portended a rich harvest.

Such simple, nonscientific forms of astrology survived long past the introduction of scientific astrology into the West. The German Protestant minister Johannes Coler (1566–1639) noted that in early modern Germany peasants believed that a child born under a new moon—especially one

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that coincided with the Sabbath—would develop and prosper with a waxing moon, while a full moon that waned as an infant grew older portended weakness, disease, and death. The moon’s phases also held significance for medicine. A 15th century English text warned, “When thou takest a cure, be it of physic or of surgery, take notice of the moon, and of the time when the sickness took and in what sign it began.”

Folk healers gathered herbs during specific phases of the moon depending on how they would use the plants. In Wallonia, they picked rue for a sore throat cure during a waxing moon and, to use it as an abortifacient, during a waning moon. Eclipses were especially portentous. “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us,” says Gloucester in Shakespeare’s King Lear. “Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack’d ‘twixt son and father.”

The Making of the Astrologer

When we think of astrology today, all sorts of negative images come to mind, from the banal horoscope columns in daily newspapers to New Age witches and pagans caught up in a world of make-believe. Yet in the Renaissance, astrology was regarded as a serious science. Many scholars maintained that it was the highest of sciences. Astrology assisted theology, medicine, history, and prophecy. Above all, it answered questions that pertained to everyday life.

In the early Renaissance, almost all professional astrologers were university educated. Many held positions in the courts of princes and popes. Though roundly condemned by the patristic authors and enormously controversial throughout the Middle Ages, astrology nevertheless became a

12 Wilson, Magical Universe, p. 340.
13 Shakespeare, King Lear, Act I, scene 1.
regular part of university study and teaching. So popular had the subject become among professors and students at Paris that in 1277 the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, found it necessary to include astrology among the 219 propositions that must not be taught in the university. Particularly repugnant to the Church was astrology’s fatalism and the notion that the stars influenced the soul or the human will. Yet Tempier’s condemnation had little impact on the growth of astrology. Despite forceful critiques by scholastics, the practice and teaching of astrology flourished. Even at Paris, despite Tempier’s condemnation, professors gave lectures on astrology in courses they taught on the margins of the academic program—in private homes, on feast days, or in the hours reserved for “extraordinary” lectures on subjects not included in the regular curriculum.\textsuperscript{15}

Any university student in the 14th and 15th centuries would be expected to complete courses in the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Following Ptolemy’s Tetra-

biblos, university masters included both astronomy and astrology in the “science of the stars”—a body of courses embracing the “science of movements” (astronomy), which taught how to describe and predict the movements of the heavenly bodies, and the “science of judgments” (astrology), which concerned the influence of the heavens upon human affairs.\textsuperscript{16} In addition to being familiar with basic astronomical works such as the widely used textbook De sphera (On the Sphere) of Johannes de Sacrobosco, arts students would also have had some familiarity with astrological theory, which they might have learned from a text like the popular Liber introductorius of the 4th century Arabic author al-Qabisi, known in the West as Alcabitius.

The humanist movement brought an entire new body of astrological literature into the picture. While medieval astrology relied on Arabic authorities, the humanists introduced European scholars to a large corpus of Greek magical and astrological texts, mainly stemming from Hellenistic authors. In particular, the Hermetic Corpus (\textit{Corpus Hermeticum}), an eclectic collection of Greek philosophical and magical writings that most humanists believed comprised the work of Hermes Trismegistus, a


Greek version of the Egyptian god Thoth (but in fact written in the first centuries of the Christian era), caught fire in the Renaissance.\footnote{Brian P. Copenhaver, \textit{Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation, with notes and introduction} (Cambridge: 1992). There is a very large literature on the hermetic tradition in the Renaissance, beginning with Frances A. Yates, \textit{Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition} (Chicago: 1964).} The \textit{Hermetica}, which had been introduced into Europe in the 15th century, were replete with astrology and magic. As a result, technical astrology reached its zenith in Europe in the early modern period.

The hermetic writings brought to the forefront the tension—present throughout the Renaissance—between astrological determinism and human freedom, generating a contentious debate that lasted throughout the early modern period. In 1495, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola wrote a scathing denunciation of astrology, \textit{Disputationes adversus astrologos}. Consistent with the dominant theme of his philosophy, Pico’s condemnation of astrology was grounded upon a defense of human freedom against astral determinism.\footnote{On Pico’s refutation of astrology, see Garin, \textit{Astrology}, pp. 83–93.} His influential treatise was the most sweeping Renaissance critique of the foundations of astrology.

Though widely read, Pico’s critique had little impact on the practice of astrology. Despite Pico’s stature as a philosopher, refutations of his anti-astrological tract by academic and professional defenders of astrology poured in for decades. From as far away as Würzburg, in a work printed in 1502, the medical professor Jakob Schönheintz defended astrology against Pico’s attack.\footnote{Thorndike, \textit{HMES}, 4: 342–3.} Astrological texts continued to enjoy wide popularity and were among the earliest printed books.

At least since the mid-14th century, astrology had been a standard part of the curriculum of most European universities. Courses on astrology were regularly given at almost all the Italian universities down through the 17th century. The famous astrologer Luca Guarico (1476–1558) founded a school of astrology at Ferrara that attracted many pupils, while Bologna boasted distinguished professors of astrology, including Copernicus’s teacher Domenico Maria Novara (1454–1504), who taught astrology at the university as \textit{professor ordinarius} since 1483.\footnote{Thorndike, \textit{HMES}, 5: 167–8, 234–51.} Astrology was also part of the curriculum of the Spanish universities. At Salamanca, a chair of astrology was founded in 1561 and occupied for many years by the distinguished
Valencia astronomer Jerónimo Muñoz (1520–1591). Chairs of astrology were also established at the universities of Alcalá de Henares and Valencia. Even after Pope Sixtus V condemned the teaching of astrology in the bull *Coeli et terrae* (1586), professors at the Jesuit university of Santo Antão in Lisbon continued to teach courses on judicial astrology. Dismissing arguments against astrology, one professor asserted that the bull only condemned “false and superstitious astrology,” not the legitimate and strictly natural sort.

Almost every medical school in the Renaissance had courses in astrology. Medical students were required to take astrology because, as the physician John of Burgundy wrote in a 1365 medical treatise on the plague, “Everything below the moon, the elements and the things compounded of the elements, is ruled by the things above, and the highest bodies are believed to give being, nature, substance, growth and death to everything below their spheres. It was, therefore, by the influence of the heavenly bodies that the air was corrupted and made pestilential.” Since each part of the human body was ruled by a particular sign of the zodiac, it was therefore the physician’s duty to understand how to read the heavens so as to prescribe drugs at the most propitious moment or to order phlebotomies to be done in the proper location and at the proper time.

In the 16th century, nearly all of Europe’s leading astrologers were university educated. John Dee (1527–1609), England’s most prominent 16th century astrologer, had gone to Cambridge. No back-street quack, Dee was the confidante of Queen Elizabeth and gave advice to a number of her ministers. In Italy, most mathematics professors taught astrology.

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Giovanni Antonio Magini (1555–1617), who held the chair of mathematics at the University of Bologna from 1588 (he was chosen over Galileo), was one of Italy’s leading proponents of astrology and was the author of an important treatise “modernizing” astrology, *De astrologica ratione* (Venice, 1607). Magini also served as court astrologer to the Dukes of Mantua. Even almanacs, which would eventually become pulp literature, were written by university graduates and carried the imprimatur of humanistic learning. The very first book that the immensely learned Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576) published was an astrological prognostication. Astrology and astronomy were seen as sister disciplines commanding equal respect.

By the mid-17th century, however, astrology could claim no leading scientific figures such as Cardano, Muñoz, and Galileo. 17th century authors of astrological publications tended to have much less formal education than astrologers typically had in previous centuries. In fact, many were completely innocent of any astrological knowledge at all. Even the notorious “Doctor” John Lambe, an English astrologer who served the Duke of Buckingham and claimed that he could read fortunes and locate missing or stolen items with his crystal ball, proved, when examined by the Royal College of Physicians in 1627, to be ignorant of the astrological sciences he professed to practice.26

Such pretenders were common in the 17th century, due in part to a changing medical marketplace that brought scores of unorthodox healers onto the scene. Equally important was the availability of cheap printed handbooks and guides that taught the rudiments of casting horoscopes and nativities. Hundreds of thousands of almanacs and ephemerides streamed from the presses in the 16th and 17th centuries. Added to that outpouring of texts were scores of books on conjuring, prognosticating, and forecasting that used astrological methods. The English astrologer Stephen Trufelacke, who was tried in 1591 for conjuring, had an extensive reference library of astrological and magical books, including two ephemerides, a copy of the book *Arcandum* (a translation of the *Judgement of Nativities* [*Jugements astronomiques sur les nativités*, Lyon, 1550] by the French astrologer Auger Ferrier), and miscellaneous formulae such as

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“figures to know how long one shall live & whether they shall obtain the treasures hoped for; figures to know the things lost; a book of conjuration for divers things; a conjuration to find hidden treasure, a conjuration at mixture of metals; sundry conjurations of raising of spirits & binding them;... a figure to know whether a man be dead or alive, or whether he has another wife; to obtain the love of any woman.” By the 17th century, astrology had fallen on hard times; yet, despite ridicule of the art by satirists and philosophers, people continued to seek the advice of astrologers.

The Astrologer and His Clients

Visiting a Renaissance astrologer in his consulting room was an experience not unlike that of a modern patient keeping an appointment with a physician. Entering the astrologer’s chambers, a client encountered powerful symbols of the astrologer’s professional authority. Like the books and instruments in the modern doctor’s office, those in the astrologer’s consulting room created a similar aura of expertise. An ephemeris, or table of planetary motions, which the astrologer used to calculate the positions of planets, might have been prominently displayed on the desk. Other essential reference works would have been ready at hand, including an almanac and various medical treatises. An image of a zodiac man might have decorated one of the walls of the room. Like the exploded illustrations of the muscular system or inner ear on the wall of a modern doctor’s examination room, such images were meant both to inform and to impress. The astrologer might also have a mechanical clock and an astrolabe, which he used to make precise measurements of the moment at which he cast a nativity. On a table nearby might have stood an armillary sphere, an impressive metal instrument consisting of a spherical framework of rings, centered on Earth, representing lines of celestial longitude and latitude and other astronomical features. The armillary sphere was a model of the heavens in miniature, and the astrologer used it both to calculate nativities and to make an impression on his clients. (See Figure 5.2).

The comparison of the astrologer’s chambers with a modern physician’s examination room seems apt on several accounts. Like modern medicine, astrology in the Renaissance was not a science, though it was based on

Figure 5.2: Frontispiece to John Melton, *Astrologaster* (1620). The astrologer holds an armillary sphere in his right hand and a "mathematical glass" in his left hand.
evidence produced by sciences such as astronomy. Nor was it a branch of mathematics, though it shared much common ground with mathematics and used its methods on a regular basis. Some of the most prominent astrologers of the 17th century—William Lilly, for example—had no formal training in astronomy or mathematics. Nor was astrology a religion, though astrologers often weighed in on the religious issues of the day and sometimes prophesied momentous religious transformation. It was not meteorology or psychology, either, though some astrologers were adept at both—some even claiming “psychic” abilities. Rather, astrology was a rigorous divinatory and prognostic art embodying centuries of accreted methodology and tradition, the continuity of which was unmatched in the European intellectual tradition.28 Like a modern doctor, the astrologer read signs and symptoms—though not in the body, but in the heavens—and strived to make a prognosis.

The description of a client visiting an astrologer’s consulting room from John Melton’s satirical work, *The Astrologaster* (1620)—though meant to ridicule the astrologer’s pretentious demeanor—captures something of the wonder and awe that people felt when entering the astrologer’s chamber:

> Before a square table covered with a green carpet, on which lay a huge book in folio, wide open, full of strange characters, such as the Egyptians and Chaldeans were never guilty of; not far from that, a silver wand, a surplus, a watering pot, with all the superstitious or rather feigned instruments of his cozening art. And to put a fairer color on his black and foul science, on his head he had a four-cornered cap, on his back a fair gown (but made of a strange fashion), in his right hand he held an astrolabe, in his left a mathematical glass. At the first view, there was no man that came to him (if he were of any fashion) could offer him for his advice less than a Jacobus and the meanest half a pence, although he peradventure (rather than having nothing) would be contended with a brace of two-pence.29

The astrologer was an expert in reading the stars and, for much of the period, commanded all the respect that other experts were accorded. Even as astrology’s prestige relative to other sciences and professions declined in the 17th century, astrologers continued to offer early modern people valued “scientific” advice and help in resolving personal, profes-
sional, and family problems. Early modern people turned to astrology for a variety of reasons, but above all because they regarded astrologers as experts in matters concerning daily life. In the absence of effective police forces, pregnancy tests, and the like, astrologers filled many of the roles that modern experts perform. They provided pre-natal advice, including predictions about the number of children a woman would give birth to, and were often peoples' only recourse for finding lost objects, determining whether a woman was pregnant, or whether a child would be male or female. As criminologists, astrologers informed clients of everything from a thief’s appearance to where to look for stolen valuables. They acted as matchmakers and marriage counselors, determining whether a sweetheart really loved a client, whether a woman was still a virgin, or whether a man was cheating on his wife. Astrologers even acted as investment counselors, giving advice on where to put one’s money and when might be the best time to buy or sell.

Astrology also played an important role in medicine, which used astrological methods to determine the proper times to prescribe drugs, perform phlebotomies, and other medical functions. Astrologers even provided advice on when to pray. Princes made wardrobe decisions based on astrology: thus, Lionello d’Este, the marquis of Ferrara, followed the advice of his court astrologer by wearing clothes of a color chosen to draw down favorable celestial influences. In his comprehensive how-to book on astrology, *Christian Astrology*, the 17th century English astrologer William Lilly revealed the wide variety of questions that might be put to the astrologer from “querents,” ranging from “If the querent shall be rich” to “Whether the querent shall have children”; or the client might ask, “To what parts the thief has gone” or “If one shall return safe from war or a dangerous voyage.” Quite simply, astrology gave answers to questions that still vex humans.

**Consulting an Astrologer**

When Renaissance clients consulted astrologers, they were asking for a “judgment,” or astrological prediction, whether of a propitious time for specific undertaking or, simply, an overall outlook for the future. The

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Astrologers’ predictions were grounded in the belief that each planet—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Sun, and the Moon—had particular characteristics (loosely corresponding to the ancient god after whom it was named) that determined its influence on human affairs. Thus Saturn, by nature cold and dry, had malevolent influences and was melancholic in temperament; whereas Jupiter, which was warm and moist, was a fortunate planet, sanguine in temperament and portending bounty and riches. Mars’s evil influence, a result of its hot and dry nature, could incite people to anger, war, and violence. The Sun, though also hot and dry, was more benevolent than Mars. Venus was a feminine, airy (hence hot and moist), and fortunate planet—though phlegmatic in temperament and linked with sensuality. Mercury, true to its protean nature, was changeable, taking on the qualities of other planets that influenced it. Finally, the moon, a watery (hence cold and moist) planet, had an especially powerful influence during one’s infancy, and was sometimes associated with madness (hence “lunacy”).

So much for the basic and general planetary influences. The specific effects of the heavens depended upon the planetary configurations at a given moment in time. As the seven planets travel along the zodiac—the circle of twelve divisions of celestial longitude centered on the ecliptic, or apparent path of the Sun—they pass through twelve successive signs, each with its own particular characteristics. The signs of the zodiac were in turn divided among four “triplicities” or trigons (groupings of three signs), each corresponding to one of the elements. The fiery trigon, consisting of the signs Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius, was ruled by the Sun by day and Jupiter by night. Venus and the Moon ruled the earthy trigidity, containing Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn. The airy trigidity, under Saturn and Mercury, was made up of Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius. Finally, the watery trigon, under the dominion of Mars, comprised Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces.

Astrologers provided four main types of judgments: general predictions, nativities, elections, and interrogations. A general prediction, or “revolution,” usually calculated annually, looked at the stars’ effects on society as a whole and forecast such events as the weather, plague, war, famine, or the fortune of states. The most important factor in drawing up a revolution was the position of the heavenly bodies at the beginning of
the year. A *nativity chart*, by contrast, mapped the position of the planets at the moment of a person's birth and was designed to predict the general characteristics, personality, and fortune of the subject. Nativities were often calculated retrospectively, based on the major events, or "accidents," in a person's life.

In the third type of judgment, the *election* (also known as the favorable hour), the astrologer determined the best time for a specific undertaking, such as embarking on a journey, getting married, letting blood, or making an amulet. The astrologer calculated the election by determining the position of the planets at a person's birth and projecting their motions forward in time. Finally, in an *interrogation*, or "horary" question, the astrologer used his knowledge of the stars to answer a client's specific query, basing his calculation on the moment at which the client asked the question. General prognostications, such as the kind of predictions that would appear in almanacs, were considered natural astrology, a subject that, in itself, drew little criticism or debate—although the prognostications themselves were often highly controversial. Nativities, elections and interrogations, on the other hand, belonged to the realm of judicial astrology. Because they related to the fate of individuals, this was the aspect of astrology that theologians and natural philosophers most vigorously contested.

The horoscopes that Renaissance astrologers drew up bore almost no relation to the modern, stripped-down versions encountered in the "Daily Horoscope" columns in many of today's local newspapers. It was hardly a simple matter to compute which celestial influences would dominate an individual, and no one imagined that it was possible to create a "one size fits all" horoscope. Horoscopes were important; people made life judgments based on them. Everyone in the Renaissance—including the astrologer's clients—knew that the astrologer could not simply base a nativity on the dominant sign of the zodiac at the time of the client's birth.

Computing a horoscope was a complex process. In addition to establishing the positions of the planets within the zodiac, the astrologer also had to determine the relation of the heavens to a particular point on earth such as the place of birth. To do that, he partitioned the zodiac into twelve arbitrary divisions or "houses," each approximately 30° long and each represented by an animal or other symbol. Each house was supposed to govern a particular aspect of a person's life. As a planet traveled through the sky, it would traverse all twelve houses in succession. The area of life the planets influenced would depend upon which house they were in at a given time. Thus, a planet in the first house influenced one's personality
and course of life in general. The second house signified wealth and property. A planet in the third house related to the character of one's siblings. Other houses indicated aspects of spousal or parental relationships, voyages, career and reputation, friends and hopes, health, enemies, and so forth.\textsuperscript{33} The planet that had the greatest influence in a particular house indicated how one might expect to fare in that aspect of a person's life.

In the case of medical consultations, the houses had somewhat different indications. The first house, called the house of life, represented the person who was ill; the second represented the relationship between the patient and the physician (for example, whether the physician would be paid well); and so on through houses that represented the third party when the consultation was being made on behalf of another person; medicines; the four physiological virtues (attractive, attentive, digestive, exclusive); the infirmity; life and death; the physician; God (showing whether the disease was supernatural); the time to begin a cure; and whether a disease had natural or unnatural cures, such as witchcraft.\textsuperscript{34}

In constructing a horoscope, the astrologer had to complete three tasks. First, he had to determine the positions of the planets at the moment in question, whether the time of one's birth, the moment at which a person asked a question, or the time of the onset of an illness. To accomplish this, the astrologer would not ascend to his rooftop to measure the positions of the stars. The chances are that he would not have known what to look for. Unlike modern astronomers, astrologers were not observational scientists. They did not peer into the heavens for the data they needed to determine judgments. Instead, they consulted an ephemeris (a table of planetary positions) to ascertain the general positions of the planets. Then, using a calculating device such as an astrolabe, the astrologer would make a precise measurement of the time at which he cast the nativity.

Next, the astrologer had to calculate the relation of the zodiac to the astrological houses. Finally, the astrologer had to combine these two sets of information in an astrological diagram, the horoscope—essentially an illustration of the configuration of the heavens at a given time and relative to a fixed point on earth. Once the important calculations were made, “casting” the horoscope was a fairly routine procedure whereby the astrologer sketched the horoscope on a template consisting of a series of

\textsuperscript{33} Kieckhefer, \textit{Magic}, p. 126.
triangles with a square at the center. The triangle at the nine o’clock position represented the first house, and from that position, proceeding counterclockwise, the remaining houses were drawn. The astrologer plotted the planets’ positions using conventional symbols, for example: the Sun (☉), Jupiter (♃), Saturn (♄), Pisces (♓), Sagittarius (♐), and so on. Once the astrologer had drawn the horoscope, he could project the calculations into the future to make a judgment about forthcoming events.35

Renaissance astrologers drew upon a long-established tradition of standard techniques for computing horoscopes. Collections of nativities, which existed both in print and manuscript, provided countless examples. The conventional Renaissance horoscope looked much like Girolamo Cardano’s nativity of the famous Belgian anatomist Andreas Vesalius, which Cardano published in his *De supplemento Almanach* (1547; Figure 5.3). The chart, a geniture, depicts the twelve houses at the moment of Vesalius’s birth, which in the horoscope indicates was 30 December 1514 at 5:45 am. In the text accompanying the figure, Cardano writes, “all the stars agree exactly” that Vesalius’s fame was foretold:

For Mars in quadrature with the full moon in octant assures assiduousness in study and agile hands. Mercury in trine with Jupiter, and Venus in quadrature indicate wonderful genius and eloquence as related to his art, or even beyond it. He is an illustrious physician. The moon in opposition to the Sun gives memory, science, and many enemies, but at the same time makes one famous. Because it is a night star Saturn with the heart of Scorpio in the sextiles of Mercury indicates profound ability, memory, and assiduousness. The Spica of Virgo in the midst of heaven indicates fame in his art, as much for him as for any other person. Observe also that Mars is looking at the sun shining in all its glory, and also the moon standing in her own house. These indicate favor with princes.36

Whether having visited the astrologer for advice about a prospective marriage (the customer’s own or, perhaps, that of a daughter), to determine a propitious time to take a journey, or to obtain a geniture for his newborn son, the client left the astrologer’s chamber with valuable advice about the future and, if the visit was for a geniture, a document that could serve for many life decisions. Properly interpreted, the horoscope would forewarn a client of potential threats to his career or fortune, and might provide

35 The most comprehensive and detailed discussion is J.D. North, *Horoscopes and History* (London: 1986).
Figure 5.3: Girolamo Cardano's Horoscope of Andreas Vesalius
(Courtesy of the Clendening History of Medicine Library, University of Kansas Medical Center)

information that could prepare him for family quarrels or for marriage. He might have answers to a specific question, such as whether to buy or sell property, when to take a journey, or when might be the best time to start a business. There was not much that a client could do to avert an astrological prediction; but at least he would have the comfort of knowing how to prepare for the future, whatever it might bring.

The Astrologer’s Practice

Complex though the process of casting horoscopes and genitures was, a skilled astrologer could accomplish the task in a matter of minutes. Simon
Forman, who practiced in London and Lambeth from 1592 until his death in 1611, was famous for the number of clients he served. During the 1590s, more than 2,000 clients per year consulted Forman. His skill was legendary. Upon receipt of a question from a client, he would record the exact moment at which it had been asked, then proceed with his calculations and announce his findings. The entire process might have taken less than fifteen minutes.37

Six volumes of Forman’s casebooks survive, containing approximately 10,000 consultations between 1596 and 1601. His clients included courtiers and their mistresses, merchants and their wives and servants, clergymen, actors, and ordinary people worrying about their health or seeking stolen property.38 Nor was Forman exceptional in terms of the number of clients who consulted him. His contemporaries Richard Napier, William Lilly, and John Booker each recorded more than a thousand consultations per year.39 Successful astrologers such as Forman handled an enormous volume of business. What kinds of inquiries did they deal with? What did people want to know?

Most of Forman’s cases dealt with medical issues, and the complaints ran the gamut from toothache to nausea and from internal pains to “grief & cold.”40 One of Forman’s patients, a woman named Brigit Allen, consulted him five times in 1596 for a mysterious ailment. Forman concluded that Allen was suffering from the symptoms of a false pregnancy complicated by “natural melancholy.” Asked whether she would get better or not, Forman recorded a judgment based on the presence of Saturn in the fifth, sixth, and seventh houses. The judgment indicated that Allen would be a difficult patient, but that her disease was natural and could be cured with hot and moist remedies.41

Clients also consulted astrologers to locate lost or stolen property. Such consultations seem almost routine, as when a London apothecary went straight to an astrologer when his copy of Gerard’s *Herball* was stolen from

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38 A number of historians have studied the casebooks, including Barbara Howard Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (Chicago: 2001); Kassel, *Medicine & Magic*. The casebooks of Forman and Napier are being published on the web at The Casebooks Project web site: http://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/casebooks/.
his shop. In 1597, a client asked Forman if there might be treasure in a house formerly inhabited by Sir Frances Drake. People also sought help from astrologers to find missing children, husbands lost at sea, and lovers missing in war. In 1632, the Valencian nobleman Diego de Vich recorded in his diary that the “distressed and weary” parents of a lost six-year-old girl went to an astrologer for help in finding their daughter. “The astrologer responded that they should look in the well,” Vich reported, “because the figure and hour of the interrogation pointed to this unfortunate water source, and thus the girl was found in the well.” The anxiety over such lingering questions must have been intense. Even if the astrologer’s report was grim, perhaps the news itself gave some relief and brought closure to nagging doubts.

Anxious merchants and ship owners routinely sent for astrologers when a cargo ship was delayed. Astrologers chose appropriate days for beginning a voyage, gave assurance to anxious passengers making daunting overseas journeys, and answered questions about the risk of pirates. Astrologers counseled servant girls asking about future husbands, widows wondering whether or not to remarry, men asking how rich their proposed brides might be, or whether they were virgins, wives and husbands worried about a spouse’s faithfulness, fathers, wives, and husbands inquiring about the life expectancies of family members. Practically every conceivable kind of domestic problem, question, or entanglement was vetted in the astrologer’s consulting room.

Some clients came to astrologers to seek advice about their careers or other economic decisions. “Mr. Broughton,” one of Forman’s clients, repeatedly visited Forman in 1597 to ask about his chances of being appointed Dean of Chester Cathedral versus that of rivals for the position. Mr. Digby, another client, inquired about whether to rent a particular house and whether he had a chance to be appointed Master of the Robes. In 1597, Mr. Woodward consulted Forman “to know which way from his master is best for him to dwell to thrive.” Recently released from his apprenticeship, Woodward was ready to set up shop on his own. “Go east,” Forman advised, “Or southeast or flat west to the Strand.”

Merchants also used astrology. In an age of unparalleled mercantile opportunity and incalculable risk, businessmen sought every conceivable way of predicting market fluctuations. In Antwerp, the Nuremberg

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42 Thomas, Religion, p. 307.
44 Lanuza, Astrología, p. 188.
astrologer Christopher Kurz claimed to have devised an astrological system by which he could foretell the prices of spices and other commodities. “Trade in spices needs great foresight,” he wrote to the Antwerp merchant Lienhard Tucher. Kurz warned the merchant against consulting other astrologers: “For our astrologers aforetime have written much, but little with reason.” Kurz preferred to find his own rules by experiment. After three years of searching, he claimed, he had discovered a system for foretelling the prices of pepper, ginger, and saffron. “I think God has given it to me,” he told Tucher. The merchant was convinced. Tucher diligently followed Kurz’s prognostications—although to what success we do not know.46 In Venice, an astrologer named Bartolomeo Raines had similar relations with merchants who employed him to predict market fluctuations.47

Astrologers’ clients came from all walks of life. They were from privileged classes, from the trades and professions, and from the ranks of servants, seamen, peddlers, and paupers. Both men and women sought out astrologers for advice, although Forman’s clients were mostly women. Many came seeking explanations for the misfortunes that had beset them: illness, miscarriages, sterility, bankruptcy, and political failure. Others sought to gain an advantage in business or politics. Or they wanted advice to help them make life decisions: whether and when to propose marriage, file a lawsuit, move house, or take a journey. Astrology refuted the notion that misfortune was purely random or coincidental. Nothing occurred purely by chance, the astrologers assured their clients: for everything there is a rhyme and reason.

The ubiquity of astrology in Renaissance Europe defies any attempt to make firm distinctions between high and low, between popular and elite cultures, or between learned and vulgar. Astrologers were all over the place: in the courts of princes and popes, in university lecture halls, and on the piazzas, serving men and women of every social station.

Almanacs and Prognostications: Astrology in Print

One did not actually have to visit an astrologer for a personal consultation to gain access to useful astrological information. The advent of printing

made it possible for practically any literate person to learn the rudiments of astrology—or at any rate to obtain, even if second-hand, the advice of an astrologer. Many astrologers gained their first exposure to the public by printing an astrological prognostication—a pamphlet chock-full of predictions about short and long term events.

Such pamphlets were extremely popular in the 16th century. The prognostication mingled prophecies about the future of the Church and state with practical advice for farmers and merchants. They almost always took the form of short, unbound booklets, cheaply printed, both in Latin and the vernacular, and often decorated with woodcuts depicting a prophecy. Vernacular prognostications aimed at a broad public, and they came off the 16th century presses by the hundreds. With sweeping generalizations proclaimed in booming tones, the prognostications announced deliberately frightening predictions about global and local events. Although many educated readers dismissed prognostications as worthless nonsense, most ordinary readers took them seriously and read them with fascination.

The 16th century astrologer and polymath Girolamo Cardano got his start in print by publishing a prognostication in 1534.48 His twenty-two-page booklet, in Italian and aimed at a popular audience, was typical of the Italian prognostications of the period: a hotchpotch of political, religious, and meteorological predictions, along with information on long-term historical trends, all based on his reading of the heavens. “I say in general that men must become worse than they are now, so far as the faith is concerned,” Cardano wrote gloomily. A planetary conjunction of 1564 signaled “the renovation of all the religions, the Christian and the Muslim.” Drought would strike in July and August 1536, while fog and storms would come the following summer. Why did Cardano, arguably the most erudite man of the times, stoop to write such a paltry work? He did it for the same reason other astrologers wrote prognostications: to make a little money. Similarly, the German physician Theophrastus von Hohenheim (1493–1541), later known as the radical medical reformer Paracelsus, also broke into print with a prognostication. Paracelsus’ Practica gemacht auf Europen [Prediction for Europe], printed in 1529, was his first publication under the name of Paracelsus. The tract, containing the usual alarming predictions of political and civil unrest, launched Paracelsus’s successful

48 Grafton, Cardano’s Cosmos, p. 38.
career as a pamphleteer and enabled him to establish a reputation as a prophet.49

By far the commonest type of astrological publication—the one that consumed most of the astrologers’ energies and met the highest demand—was the almanac. Ever since Johannes Gutenberg published the first printed almanac in 1448—eight years before the publication of the famous Gutenberg Bible—almanacs had become a prominent part of early modern popular literature. By the 1470s almanacs streamed from printing presses all over Europe, some appearing as broadsheets and others, more commonly, in booklet form. By the 16th century, almanacs had become a staple of the book market, and were available in every city and hamlet. By the 1660s in England—a period of particularly robust astrological publication—about 400,000 almanacs a year were sold, roughly one for every third family.50 It has been estimated that during the heyday of astrological publication in England a minimum of three to four million almanacs were printed, a figure that Keith Thomas considered “a distinct under-estimate.”51 Almanacs were, arguably, the most popular books of the early modern period.

An almanac typically contained three elements: a calendar, including church festivals, feast days, markets, fairs, and sometimes even a selective chronology of world history or a list of kings; information about the years’ astronomical events; and a series of astrological prognostications, including predictions about the weather, crops, health, and political and religious events. Some almanacs made room on blank pages for diaries and account books. Others included routes between towns, a zodiac man illustrating the effects of the planets on the human body, or entertaining games and tricks for leisure hours. Almanacs were all-purpose reference books that served multiple uses for ordinary readers.

It is easy to see why almanacs enjoyed such huge success in the popular book market. They were the simplest and most accessible expression of scientific principles that promised readers the capacity to predict the future in times of uncertainty. Moreover, almanacs were specific to

51 Thomas, Religion, p. 294.
particular geographical regions, issued to fit the varying astrological meridians of particular places. They also contained information and advice for a variety of different professions and ways of life. A surveyor might look to an almanac for information about land measurement, while a seaman might carry an almanac aboard ship for its nautical advice. Almanacs even catered to specific religious and political tastes, which is why times of political uncertainty tended to stimulate their production. Finally, they were cheap: in 16th century England, one could purchase an almanac for as little as a penny.52

Thus there was a ready market for almanacs. They were a staple of the book trade throughout Europe and were available for sale in practically any bookstore. In France, almanacs became an important part of the literature of colportage, or peddler’s literature. Along with tools and trinkets, peddlers carried in their packs volumes known as the Bibliothèque bleue: small, badly printed on coarse paper, and roughly bound in the same blue paper that was used to wrap sugarloaves.53 The little booklets of fables, legends, tales of knightly valor, and, most of all, almanacs, sold at a phenomenal rate, and they continued to sell well into the modern period. In the mid-19th century, it has been estimated that some 9,000,000 per year were printed and sold.54 Almanacs were for the poor, for those with little time to read, and for the modest classes who read little. They were, as historian Geneviève Bollème described them, “the books of people who hardly read.”55

In fact, one did not even need to read in order to tap the secrets of an almanac. One could still gaze at them and consult them for their pictures and astrological signs. The Elizabethan almanac maker who styled himself “J.A.” wrote that he intended his almanac, A Perfyte Pronostycacion Perpetuall (c. 1555), specifically for “the ignorant people” and “them which knoweth not a letter on the book.” The compiler met the needs of the unlettered by supplying illustrations of sickly cattle, sinking ships, corpses, and other catastrophes (Figure 5.4).56 If a peasant or craftsman

56 Capp, English Almanacs, p. 31.
owned only one book, it was likely to be an almanac. And if he didn’t own one, a neighbor probably did, or, at the very least, the nearby barber or midwife had a well-thumbed copy at hand.

However, almanacs were not just pulp literature for the common people. Everyone, it seems, read almanacs. The *Shepherds’ Calendars* (*Le Grand calendrier compost des bergers*), the archetype of the French almanac, were published continuously from the late 15th century down through the 16th and 17th centuries.\(^{57}\) Each issue contained a mélange of folklore, astrological information, and forecasts; the *Shepherds’ Calendars* circulated widely throughout France. A staple of the Bibliothèque bleue, the booklets were read not only by the people but also by the king of France, François I, who had a copy in the royal library.\(^{58}\) Costing only

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\(^{57}\) On this work, see Bollème, *Almanachs*, pp. 40–6.

three sous, they were within reach of almost any merchant, laborer, or even peasant; but they were read by a broad cross-section of society.

Of course, just because one could afford a book does not mean that one wants or needs it. How useful would early modern readers find books such as the Shepherd’s Calendar? Certainly they would have provided information that would supplement oral tradition, but it is difficult to know how essential such information was. Villagers had access to a wide range of information from local sources, such as midwives, apothecaries, and priests. At times, the information in almanacs seems so elementary as to be hardly new, or of much use, to a villager. Did the almanacs give people a sense that the future was knowable, or at least not subject entirely to the whim of chance? Were almanacs a source of entertainment? It is difficult to say. Yet, though it is impossible to know whether peasants read these works—or whether they were, in fact, even intended for peasants—we can be certain that almanacs were ubiquitous.

Purchasers of almanacs belonged to every social group. Most surviving copies originally belonged to members of the gentry or the professions. However, yeomen and middle-class readers probably bought the great majority of almanacs. The Elizabethan mason Captain Cox was reported in 1575 to possess a library that included the Kalender of Shepherdes (an English translation of the French Calendrier des bergers), various almanacs and prognostications, and astrological books by Jasper Laet and Nostradamus. The English pamphleteer Thomas Nashe (1567–c. 1601) wrote, concerning the popularity of almanacs, “Not the poorest walking-mate or thread-bare cut-purse…can well be without them, be it but to know the Faires and Markets.”

To appreciate the wide diffusion of almanacs in the 16th century, one may look at the records of books purchased at the Frankfurt book fair from the Frankfurt bookseller Michael Harder in the spring of 1569. Harder sold more than 5,900 books to book dealers all over Germany. He had customers in cities as far north as Braunschweig and as far south as Zurich, and in more than twenty cities and towns in between, including Nuremberg, Münster, Magdeberg, and Schwäbisch-Hall. Almanacs and other works on astrology make up a significant share of Harder’s stock.

59 Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England (Chapel Hill: 1935), p. 84.  
60 Wright, Middle-Class Culture, p. 169.  
He listed purchases at the fair of 194 astrology books and 106 almanacs. Postmortem library inventories bring us even closer to the world of book ownership, and show that almanacs, prognostications, and astrological books were part of even the smallest libraries of merchants, craftsmen, and professionals.\(^{62}\) Considering that almanacs had a distinct life span and were not typically the kind of books one saved, their appearance in post-mortem inventories is significant.

Almanacs and prognostications were ephemeral literature. Printed on cheap paper and sold unbound, they were easily discarded and not much valued. In its most elementary form, an almanac might give merely the conjunctions and oppositions of the sun and moon, dates of eclipses and moveable feasts. Such sheets were “the poor man’s practical astronomy;” many were, in effect, broadsides.\(^{63}\) Countless copies must have simply disappeared through overuse or recycled as kindling, writing paper, lining for pie dishes, or even for wrapping small items. Almanacs were also used as diaries and daybooks, and many surviving copies contain handwritten memoranda, accounts, and farming notes.\(^{64}\) Alternatively, as the 17th century English *Poor Robin* almanac helpfully noted, “When an Almanack is out of Date, the Leaves thereof will serve to make your Back-side bright, and are very useful about such privy matters.”\(^{65}\)

### Prognosticators, Almanac Makers, and Readers

Almanac makers came from a variety of professions and walks of life. Many were irregular medical practitioners, “empirics,” or hack writers who wrote almanacs for a living. Thomas Bretnor (f. 1602–1622), for example, referred to himself in 1607 as a “Teacher of Mathematicks and geometrie,” and later expanded his title to “Teacher of Mathematics and Physitian,” even though the London College of Physicians prosecuted him for illegal...
practice. Yet, unlike some of the imposters who wrote almanacs, Bretnor was an accomplished mathematician. He was also a devoted Copernican, and never passed up the opportunity to voice his disapproval of Ptolemaic astronomy, which he contemptuously dismissed as “vulgar opinion.”

Almanacs and prognostications were almost as likely to appear under completely fictitious names—even the name of a deceased writer or a pseudonym designed to increase sales—as an author’s real name. Some claimed exotic origins: A popular English prognostication was ascribed to the “wandering Jew” Kinki Abenezrah, while a much-reprinted 16th-century almanac bore the title *Erra Pater*, supposedly a “Jew born in Jewry.”

Selling almanacs was a lucrative business, “readier money than ale and cakes,” as the Elizabethan writer Thomas Nashe wrote in 1596. The genre even enticed leading mathematicians and doctors, who attempted to improve upon the pulp that was the basic stock in trade of the almanac-maker. Richard Forster, the president of the Royal College of Physicians and a mathematician, wrote an almanac aimed specifically at physicians and surgeons. The self-taught London mathematician William Bourne composed a series of almanacs designed especially for navigators, who needed accurate information about celestial configurations. Like the majority of the compilers of nautical almanacs, Bourne was little interested in astrological prophecies. In fact, he was openly skeptical of astrological forecasting, preferring to provide the essential information that navigators might use to find their way on the open seas.

By the 17th century, however, authors such as Forster and Bourne were rapidly disappearing from the ranks of the almanac makers.

Clergymen also published almanacs. Georg Caesius, a Lutheran pastor in Ansbach, published one every year between 1570 and 1604. Caesius warned the people of Ansbach that they were sure to feel God’s wrath, “since sermons, warning, and godly admonishments do not help, God must visit us for our many sins with plagues, unnatural weather, hail, and violent storms.” Despite Luther’s opposition to astrology, Caesius defended the art, arguing that a knowledge of astrology was necessary for

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69 Qu. Capp, *English Almanacs*, p. 44.
70 On English nautical almanac makers, see Capp, *English Almanacs*, pp. 201–2.
a correct understanding of Scripture. Caesius's son, Georg Friedrich, also a pastor-astrologer, went further, writing in his annual prognostication for 1603, "any man of understanding can learn from the stars, which God has printed and put in the heavens like letters in a book, what great doings and signs of wrath he sends to threaten us sinful men." For the Lutheran almanac-makers, the heavens were windows on God's mind. The stars and planets are "preachers of penance," wrote one pastor, "heralds of God's wrath."73

Almanacs contained more than just astronomical and astrological information. With its calendars, tide tables, phases of the moon, proverbs, lists of kings, advice on thrift, health hints, diagrams for phlebotomy, and charts showing the accumulated value of investments, the almanac was "the simple man's treasury of knowledge."74 An almanac might be the first place where a reader encountered mathematics, and might be a stimulus for learning more. At any rate, teachers of the subject must have thought so, since they frequently advertised their services in almanacs and wrote almanacs themselves.

For many readers, an almanac might also have been one's first encounter with the new astronomy.75 One of the earliest English references to Copernicus appeared in an almanac by John Field, a London mathematics teacher, whose Ephemerides of 1557 contained a preface by John Dee endorsing the Copernican system.76 In an almanac for 1624, John Rudkin described "new discoveries in the celestial regions," including Galileo's sighting of the moons of Jupiter and his observations of the surface of the moon, Tycho Brahe's calculations on refraction, and Kepler's observations of sunspots.77 Arthur Hopton's almanacs often included, in addition to the usual practical information, brief sections explaining the elements of astronomy. In his Almanack and prognostication for this year 1607, for example, Hopton added, by way of an epilogue, "A short Theorax [theoretical discussion] of the Moon, opening many secrets to enlighten vulgar

72 Barnes, Prophecy, pp. 131–2.
76 Capp, English Almanacs, p. 191.
77 John Rudston, A new almanack and prognostication, for the yeare of our Lord God, 1624 (London: 1624).
admiration.” In his excursus, Hopton explained in detail such abstract matters as the new cosmology’s understanding of the source of the moon’s light:

Concerning the light of the Moon, you must first understand, that she hath no light but what she receives of the Sun: as is manifested in her eclipse, where the earth being betwixt the Sun and Moon directly placed, shadows and breaks off the beam of the Sun, so that they cannot pass to the body of the Moon: by which means her light is taken away, and her body darkened, until such time that the Earth (by their motion) is put from betwixt the Sun & her, whereby it is apparent that the Moon is not translucent of herself, but a dark & solid body, having no light but what the Sun doth project unto her: for if she were shining of herself as a Diamond, she would retain light, not withstanding the want of the beams of the Sun.78

By and large, almanacs rarely addressed the great cosmological debates of the day. A notable exception was the Englishman Thomas Digges’s Prognostication Everlasting (London, 1576). In an appendix to the work, Digges provided a brief account of the Copernican system that played an important role in introducing the new astronomy to English readers.79 Other almanac makers wrote about the new cosmological theories without endorsing them. In an almanac for the year 1606, Arthur Hopton discussed the theories of Copernicus and Tycho Brahe and his reasons for rejecting them in favor of the traditional Ptolemaic system, while Abraham Grammar, in almanacs published in the 1620s, made calculations based on Copernicus and Tycho without choosing between them.80

The almanac makers’ seeming indifference to cosmological matters is easy to explain. Almanacs were intended for practical use. The new Copernican cosmology did not seem to offer astrologers any advantages when it came to making astrological forecasts and nativities. As the English empiric John Partridge expressed it somewhat flippantly, it was “not a rush matter which your principles are, whether geocentric, heliocentric, or selenocentric.”81 Even so, almanac-makers sometimes tried to enhance

78 Arthur Hopton, Almanack and prognostication for this year 1607 (London: 1627), spelling modernized.
81 Quoted in Capp, English Almanacs, p. 192.
their tracts’ appeal by calculating their prognostications according to the new astronomical system. Thus the Venetian astrologer Mario Vergieri calculated the prognostications in his almanac for 1581 “according to the new and more true Copernican motions.” In reality, however, most readers probably had little interest in the cosmological debates of the day. As long as people could buy their almanacs and learn from them what the future might hold, what did they care whether it was Ptolemy’s, Tycho’s, or Copernicus’s mathematics that astrologers employed in making them?

Although almanacs may not have played a decisive role in disseminating the new cosmology, they influenced popular culture in subtler and perhaps more permanent ways. Historians have noted, for example, that early modern almanacs were often printed for a specific city or region. Such “spatial pinpointing,” along with the presence in almanacs of other local geographical information, heightened readers’ awareness of place—in contrast to the drift of early modern Protestantism, which stressed that since God was everywhere, earthly time and place were irrelevant to the divine Heaven. The spatial referencing of almanacs, however, had nothing to do with sacred spaces such as altars and shrines; instead, it privileged secular spaces such as towns, cities, and coastlines. Astrology was premised on the notion that time and place mattered in a larger celestial sense, since astrological forecasting had necessarily to take into account the location from which the calculations were made. Moreover, because astrology privileges the specific and local over the universal and global, it undermined the idea of universal history. The diversity of humans is not only an empirical fact: it is also a natural consequence of the diversity of celestial influences over human affairs.

Annotations in almanacs provide additional insights into how people read, used, and were influenced by almanacs. Readers frequently used almanacs as diaries, and included annotations in the margins or daily entries recording events in their lives. For such readers, almanacs were


not only instruments to divine the future, but also were tools for organizing the past in the form of autobiography. In recognition of this practice, some almanac makers included blank columns in their almanacs or interleaved blank pages specifically for such autobiographical entries. Even though arguments about destiny versus God’s power continued to vex early modern people, readers of almanacs were not so much interested in using occult powers as attempting to understand God’s providence. Most readers understood that astrology had its limitations. The stars predict matters that God put under their influence, but God’s eternal plan for the universe placed it outside the sovereignty of the heavens.

Astrology in the Countryside

The most common forms of environmental prediction by astrological means concerned the weather. Early modern societies were overwhelmingly rural and agricultural; hence weather conditions directly affected the economic and social conditions of the population. Drought, floods, and extreme cold could easily determine whether a family would survive or starve. To find out what to anticipate, most people turned to almanacs, which offered readers simple weather forecasts for the year. Usually divided into the four seasons, weather predictions tended to be general and often vague, for example, “rainy spring,” or “windy winter.” Although astrology provided an imperfect meteorological guide and often drew scorn and criticism, the public demanded weather forecasts, and no almanac writer could risk omitting them.

Most almanacs also contained astrological information concerning farming, such as the best time to plough, plant, geld animals, harvest, and fell timber. Land should be manured during the wane of the moon, said an Elizabethan astrologer, since during its increase the manure would merely stimulate the growth of weeds. A 1640 almanac noted, “many country people use to take observation of the Prime in covering and weaning of cattle.” Almanacs also provided guidance for farmers concerning veterinary medicine. The medical advice that almanacs provided for treating animals was almost identical to that found in the conventional medical books of the

day—ultimately based on the reigning humoral theory. Readers of John Swan’s almanac were advised to rub sick horses with “arasmart” or water pepper—a broad-leaved herb that, being under the dominion of Mars, had cooling and drying properties—and then to lay “a good handful or two” of the herb under its saddle. Another soothing remedy consisted of bathing a sick animal in ale infused with bay leaves, followed by a rub-down with oil and wine. Almanacs also included weather forecasts that had particular significance for animal health.

Just how deeply into peasant culture did printed almanacs and calendars penetrate? It is a fair question to ask, given the low rates of literacy in the countryside. Historian Natalie Zemon Davis questions whether works such as the Calendrier des bergers could have provided peasants with any useful information, and wonders “whether compilers and publishers envisaged a peasant public for them.” Davis suggests that works such as the Shepherd’s Calendar presented an idealized, sentimental vision of the peasant world for country gentlemen and city people and a way for such readers to identify themselves with the simple wisdom of country folk. Besides, peasants had their own ways of calculating the astronomical data they needed, including simple astronomical charts that they recorded in little wooden tablets. As for the almanacs’ gynecological sections, Davis writes, the information presented was “trifling compared to the lore of the village midwife.” Davis concludes that the almanacs “could hardly have brought [country people] much new information or changed significantly their reliance on oral transmission and their relationship with non-peasant groups.” Such observations caution us against making quick judgments based on the supposed public for popular astrology.

**Astrology in the Piazza**

For many astrologers, the “consulting room” was the piazza itself. Rubbing elbows with the ciarlatani in the town squares were prophets dressed in sackcloth declaiming their tales of catastrophic and prodigious happenings. Interpreting the meanings of natural and celestial events, they

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90 Davis, Society and Culture, pp. 197–9.
foretold of death, famine, and war, and urged the populace to repentance. Both anomalous prodigies and normal astrological events were objects of fascination, packed with hidden meanings that popular prophets and almanac-makers promised to divulge.

“Respectable” astrologers and social commentators denounced the street-corner prognosticators. The redoubtable Tommaso Garzoni derided the almanac-makers, branding them as “eccentric madmen, made fun of by the vulgar and scorned by all the world’s learned sages.” Girolamo Cardano, himself an astrologer who had gotten his start by publishing a prognostication for a popular audience, railed against the “common” astrologers and tried to distinguish his prognostications from the ones that the “crazy diviners” sold in the piazzas. Indeed, it seemed to many learned astrologers that common diviners had overrun the piazzas. The Italian humanist Giovanni Pontano railed against “the vulgar spectacle of third-rate necromancers that one hears ad nauseam in Rome, Bologna, and Florence.”

There was a vigorous trade in astrology in the cities and towns of early modern Europe. Rigorous education was hardly a prerequisite for becoming an astrologer. A witness at the trial of the notorious Roman astrologer Orazio Morandi, when asked if he knew of anyone in Rome who practiced astrology, responded, “All Rome is filled with these charlatans; and I am amazed that the pope has not given sufficient provision against these imposters. Among them is a knife-seller whose name I don’t know, a certain Battelli, certain Spaniards who go around selling their opinions about nativities, as I have heard.”

They were of all sorts: charlatans, almanac-makers, diviners, balladeers, even priests. In 16th century Venice, a friar by the name of Aurelio di Siena became widely known as the “fortune-telling friar” (“il frate della ventura”) for his ability to foretell the future. Fra Aurelio practiced astrology, chiromancy, and geomancy to give clients advice about love and marriage, finding lost objects, and helping merchants realize

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93 Grafton, *Cardano’s Cosmos*, p. 41.
Aurelio’s mixed bag of prognosticating tricks was hardly unique. By this time, printed prognostications included everything from prophecy and astrology to comet lore and politics. Prophets in the piazza were as likely to sell an almanac and cast a horoscope as to read celestial signs and portents to predict calamities to come. Practicing divinatory arts was dangerous, however, even in republican Venice: in 1579, Fra Aurelio was jailed and interrogated by the Inquisition while his case dragged on, unresolved. He probably died in prison.

Most of the marketplace stargazers came and went without leaving a trace. Like other charlatans, they were itinerants who drifted from city to city peddling their prognostications to a curious public. A few, however, gained not only local notoriety, but also widespread fame. One such prophet was Giuseppe Rosaccio (1530–1620), early modern Italy’s most famous diviner. Noted for his thick flowing beard, resplendent gown, and charismatic personality, Rosaccio had his prognostications licensed for sale in the public squares in cities throughout Italy. He had an “open house” on the Grand Ducal piazza in Florence and was a frequent visitor on the Piazza San Marco in Venice. When the priors of the Medical College in Bologna denied him permission to show himself on the central square, Rosaccio petitioned the papal legate, Cardinal Benedetto Giustinianni, who readily overturned the college’s decision. Unsurprisingly, Rosaccio drew the ire of “legitimate” astrologers such as Giovanni Antonio Roffeni, a professor at the University of Bologna and a prolific author of almanacs and prognostications, for presuming to usurp the “most noble science” of astrology. Roffeni rightly regarded Rosaccio and his ilk as dangerous competitors.

Roffeni’s condemnation of the street-corner prognosticators did little to damage Rosaccio’s reputation. In fact, with his Defense against Roffeni’s slander and his vast output of tracts on astrology and cosmology, Rosaccio managed to elevate himself to a virtual brand name. One follower, who dubbed himself Domenico Rosaccio, declared himself the son of great prognosticator. Another popular astrologer called himself Tolomeo Rosaccio, thus appropriating the names of the two famous ancient and

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99 Casali, Spie, pp. 211–16.
modern astrologers. Rosaccio’s own works continued to be reprinted down through the 18th century; and in 1676, the poet Paolo Minucci painted an unforgettable portrait of “the great mathematician and astrologer” in his annotations of the Florentine painter Lorenzo Lippi’s mock heroic poem *Il Malmantile riacquistato*. Minucci identified the astrologer-soldier of the poem with a nephew of Rosaccio. Minucci’s charlatan did not mount a portable stage but operated on horseback next to an elevated platform that displayed his parchment license, “a skeleton of a cat or dog, a brass sphere, and three long black horns, from one of which hung a piece of magnet, from another a ball of the clearest crystal, and the third he said was unicorn.” This “proudest chatterer that has even been seen in the world of charlatanry” was obviously a composite of several charlatans—chief among which was the great prognosticator Giuseppe Rosaccio.\(^\text{100}\)

It is not entirely clear how seriously the urban population took the science of astrology. While some astrological prophecies caused great alarm, others passed by with little notice. The dire prognostications of the deluge of 1524 caused panic in Rome and elsewhere, but in Venice the forecasts were the subject of Carnival derision. As the 16th century drew to a close, urban people grew increasingly skeptical of astrology. Just as the *ciarlatani* lampooned the doctors in street comedies, ballad singers satirized the astrologers in Carnival songs such as one by “Doctor Master Pegasus Neptune” that predicted “conjunctions of cheese and lasagna” that would cause “a deluge of poultry in the soup cauldrons, . . . and a flood every morning of Greek, Dalmation, and Latin wine,” followed by “horrendous winds shot off like bombards sending off stupendous stenches.”\(^\text{101}\) In the piazzas and marketplaces, amid the revelry of Carnival (when people of all social levels rubbed elbows), the object of public terror was transformed into an object of laughter, and the stars and planetary conjunctions were brought down to the level of bodily functions.

Nevertheless, the fear was real, and calming public fear was a matter of grave concern to civic authorities. Fear of public disorder during predictions of dire events, such as the deluge of 1524, may explain why the Bolognese astrologer Giacomo Pietramellara published one prediction for the learned in a Latin prognostication promising terrible calamities, and

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another, more optimistic one, in the vernacular, for popular readers. Fear itself was to be feared. Historian Ottavia Niccoli explains: “When astrological debate descended to the city streets it became a complex system of opposing and contradictory forces involving fear, ritual, and mockery. These forces had to be channeled.” In some cities, such as Modena, the prognosticators divided into “opposing camps of deluge and Carnival.” On one side were the astrologers predicting terrible events to come; from the other camp, howls of laughter and derision could be heard, as charlatans and popular ballad singers regaled the people with songs like one recorded by a local observer, in which the ballad singer transformed the astrologer’s instruments into pots and pans and other kitchen utensils:

Those astrolabes of yours are frying pans, your spheres are juggling balls, the quadrant is a pot, a jar; your tables are [dining] tables set, where you put good things to eat…. You are part prophet and part diviner when you have drunk well of wine. Go with your almanac into the kitchens, to the stoves in the back alley, where there is always a flood of grease and fat.

The failure of the flood predictions and their comic inversions in popular culture may have had a damaging effect on the public figure of the astrologer. “In the culture of the mass of urban folk,” writes Niccoli, “the astrological arts were reduced to the level of a juggler’s bag of tricks, and astrological science is denied, derided, and made to seem ineffectual.” Yet the ridicule of astrologers in Carnival songs and charlatans’ performances did not imply a rejection of prophecy. Popular divination used other, more traditional means to foretell the future. The urban populations were aware of astrology, but gave it little credit.

In 1578, a Spanish writer called Cosme de Aldana published a book in Italian on the errors of the common people—a popular genre of the day. In his treatise, Aldana criticized the common people for deriding the astrologers and refusing to believe in their prophecies, while maintaining their own superstitious divinatory methods, by which, for example, “because a dog barks in a certain way…you say, if anyone is sick in the neighborhood, he will die.” Such forms of popular divination, Aldana remarked, survived particularly among “certain ignorant and silly old enchantresses and charm purveyors,” the sort of women who went about “throwing flour on a polished table on St. John’s Eve to forecast the husband their daughter

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102 Niccoli, Prophecy, p. 160.
103 Niccoli, Prophecy, p. 165.
104 Niccoli, Prophecy, p. 167 (translation slight altered).
would have.” The stark contrast between learned astrology and popular divination that Aldana observed was a symptom of a broader phenomenon, which historian Peter Burke has described as a wholesale withdrawal of the elites from popular culture. “In 1500,” writes Burke, “popular culture was everyone’s culture; a second culture for the educated, and the only culture for everyone else. By 1800, however, . . . the clergy, the nobility, the merchants, the professional men—and their wives—had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as never before, by profound differences in world view.”

Astrology and Prophecy

Renaissance people expectantly awaited the Last Judgment. Messianic prophecies were highly influential in the Middle Ages—particularly with minority and marginalized groups that regarded the prospect of heavenly bliss as just compensation for their earthly afflictions—and continued to hold sway into the early modern era. Periodically, waves of millennial expectancy swept Europe. The idea that people must prepare the way for the coming of Antichrist and the reign of God on earth was familiar to all Christians.

Chiliasm—the expectation of an imminent, supernaturally caused transformation of the world—was not limited to religious fanatics and social revolutionaries; it was widespread and constant in the Middle Ages. Indeed, some historians have argued that medieval apocalyptic thought was predominantly conservative, and that the revolutionary use of apocalyptic ideas was the exception. According to historian Robert Lerner, millenarianism was a part of the mental “deep structure” of European thinking. It lasted for centuries because it brought consolation not just in times of social dislocation, but in everyday life: “Present disasters might be tolerated better if they could be viewed in terms of a coherent divine

105 Cosme de Aldana, Discorso contro il volgo in cui con buone ragioni si reprovano molte sue false opinioni (Florence, 1578), quoted in Niccoli, Prophecy, pp. 193–4.
107 For a survey of such movements, see Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages (London and New York: 1970). Cohn’s argument—that millenarianism occurred only among radical groups as a response to extreme social dislocation—has been shown by recent studies to be fundamentally flawed.
When disaster struck, new forecasts were brought forth out of the long tradition of old prophecies and retailed to suit a new age.

The early modern period was an apocalyptic age. Contemporaries felt as if they were living in the Last Days. The Black Death, famine, and other natural disasters, and the general political instability of the 14th and 15th centuries, created a climate in which optimistic hopes for the future mingled with fear and dread. The sense of historical crisis spawned innumerable prophecies about the world’s end. By the time of the Great Schism, apocalyptic ideas were rife in Western Europe. The Reformation heightened society’s anticipation of the end of days. By making Scripture more generally accessible to readers, the reformers riveted the attention of believers on prophetic passages in the books of Daniel and Revelation, which they searched with ever-greater care for insights into the relationship between the present and the future.

Astrology intensified millennial expectations. Signs in the heavens gave astrologers and theologians clues that the Kingdom of God was at hand. One of the most prominent crises of an age filled with troubles was the Great Schism (1378–1414), when the papacy was divided between opposing “obediences.” First two, then three rival popes claimed to lead the Church. The schism stirred up countless apocalyptic visions and prophecies. To many, the division of Christendom was a preamble to the advent of Antichrist.

Not everyone concurred. Initially Pierre d’Ailly (1350–1420), who was chancellor of the University of Paris from 1389 to 1395 and later a cardinal, agreed with those who saw the Schism as a sign of the approaching end of the world. But as the fissure widened, d’Ailly rejected the apocalyptic interpretation of the Schism, which, he reasoned, did little to heal the rupture. D’Ailly turned to astrology for further insights. After long study of the astrological writings of Roger Bacon, he discarded his previous views and came to the conclusion that the return of the Antichrist would occur in the year 1789, “if the world shall last that long.” Armed with astrological reasoning that postponed the apocalypse into the distant future, d’Ailly

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refuted the false prophets and urged authorities to take measures to heal the Schism.\textsuperscript{112}

While for d’Ailly astrology performed a sober, calming role, tempering the exuberant predictions of the apocalypse from the stars, others saw in the stars dire prophecies for Christendom. Despite the denunciations of astrology by Protestant reformers, including both Luther and Calvin, the 16th century was a veritable golden age of astrological prophecy. Indeed, Lutheran Germany was one of the hot spots of prophetic astrology.

Johann Lichtenberger (d. 1503) was one of Renaissance Germany’s most prominent stargazers. Lichtenberger’s prophecies, originally published in Latin in the 1470s and 1480s, were reissued continuously in German and Latin down through the 16th century.\textsuperscript{113} At one point in his career, Lichtenberger was (or at least he called himself) “court astrologer of Emperor Frederick III”—or better, “Imperial Astrologer” (\textit{astrorium iudex sacri imperii}). Lichtenberger’s main work, \textit{Prognosticatio} (1488)—one of ten astrological publications by him that survive—was within a decade of its initial publication reissued in at least fourteen Latin, German, and Italian editions. By 1600, some 60 editions of the work had been published. Even Luther couldn’t stem the tide: despite giving astrology a cold shoulder, he published a German edition of Lichtenberg’s prophecies in 1527, adding a preface spelling out his own position on the art.\textsuperscript{114} Luther denounced Lichtenberger as a false prophet filled with a “fanatical spirit” and intent on fostering confusion among rulers with his vague hints of future happenings. Lichtenberger was most remembered for having predicted the German Peasants’ War of 1524–1525. However, it can hardly be said that Lichtenberger—or, for that matter, any other astrologer—had a direct influence on the rebellion, since only after the country had been rocked by the war did people discover that he had foretold the disastrous event.

In the second half of the 16th century, astrologers everywhere were pointing to signs in the skies that indicated deterioration, change, and chaos so pronounced that it could only culminate in the end of the worlds. Tensions increased when, in 1572, a new star appeared in the heavens—the first new star since the star of Bethlehem that announced the birth of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{113} On Lichtenberger, see Kurze, “Prophecy.”
\textsuperscript{114} Barnes, \textit{Prophecy}, p. 146.
\end{footnotesize}
Christ. A few years later, in 1577, a comet blazed through the night sky, carrying all sorts of eschatological messages.

_The Fiery Trigon Conjunction_

Soon astrologers were warning of another, far more ominous threat looming on the horizon. In 1583, a rare conjunction of the superior planets Saturn and Jupiter would occur. The reason why this conjunction was so menacing is that it was to happen at the end of the “watery trigon” (comprised of the signs linked to water, Pisces, Cancer, and Scorpio), and at the beginning of the “fiery trigon,” the triplicity defined by the fiery signs of Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius. Astrologers knew that the changes brought about by conjunctions were magnified as planets entered a new trigon. Thus, a “great conjunction” occurred every twenty years, when the superior planets Saturn and Jupiter entered a specific trigon. “Greater conjunctions” were much rarer and more significant events, occurring once every 240 years, when Jupiter and Saturn entered a completely new trigon. The rarest conjunction of all—the “greatest conjunction”—happened only about once every thousand years, when Jupiter and Saturn entered the fiery trigon in the sign of Aries. Astrologers agreed that only six “greatest conjunctions” had ever occurred in the history of the world, one being at the birth of Christ. So exceptional was the fiery trigon conjunction that many astrologers connected it with an old prophecy for the year 1588 predicting major upheavals and the end of the world.

The European fascination with the Wonder Year of 1588 can be traced back to the supposed discovery among the papers of the German astronomer Regiomontanus (Johannes Müller) of a doggerel predicting great calamities for that year, which he was alleged to have scribbled on a leaf of paper. Regiomontanus, one of Europe’s most respected mathematicians, was widely known in intellectual circles for his inaugural lecture at University of Padua, in which he praised astrology as queen of sciences. Thus any prediction attributed to him gained credibility.¹¹⁵ Because the prediction was in verse, it soon assumed the status of a prophecy. The prophecy, in English translation, foretold:

When from the Virgin Birth a thousand years
With full five hundred be complete and told,
The Eighty-Eighth a famous year appears,
Which brings distress more fatal than of old.
If not in this year all the wicked world
Do fall, and land with sea to nothing come;
Yet Empires must be topsy-turvy hurled
And extreme grief shall be the common sum.\[116\]

Regiomontanus’s prediction was probably a fabrication, though this hardly seems to have mattered at the time. Kaspar Brusch (1518–1599), a German humanist, published it for the first time in 1553, claiming that he found it among the astronomer’s papers. The prophecy was quickly endorsed by leading astrologers, including the Bohemian astronomer Cyprian Leowitz (1524–1574), whose works were widely regarded as authoritative, not only by polemics but also by astronomers such as Tycho Brahe—although Brahe also opined that Leowitz should have spent more time on astronomy than astrology.\[117\] In his *De coniunctionibus magnis insignioribus superiorum planetarum* (1564), which Leowitz wrote at the request of the future emperor Maximilian II, the astronomer offered his interpretation of the conjunction’s significance: “Since… a new trigon, which is the fiery, is now imminent, undoubtedly new worlds will follow, which will be inaugurated by sudden and violent changes, for this has happened before when one trigon ended and another began, but especially if the watery trigon is being followed by the fiery. ” Leowitz predicts that Maximilian II will be the first Hapsburg ruler under whom a fiery trigon begins, a sign that the new emperor will become another Charlemagne (Maximilian, who died in 1576, did not live to see the fiery trigon). Leowitz went on to proclaim that the conjunction “undoubtedly announces the second coming of the son of God and man in the majesty of his glory.”\[118\]

The predicted fiery trigon conjunction spawned a huge body of prophetic literature. People remembered the prophecies it generated long after the conjunction had come and gone. Everything about the momentous changes in the heavens combined to convince the English astrologer Richard Harvey that “either a final dissolution, or a wonderful horrible alteration of the world” would take place in the year 1588. Elaborating in

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his Astrological Discourse upon the great and notable Coniunction of the two superiour Planets, SATURNE & JUPITER (1583), Harvey detailed the disasters that would befall: “many fierce and boisterous winds,” extraordinary floods, cold weather, unusual troubles, sorrow, envy, hatred, contention, strife, extreme poverty, famine, ruin to many great men, death, shipwrecks, and other “watery and fiery calamities”—all to be crowned by the final dissolution of the world and the Second Coming.\(^{119}\)

Other astrologers chimed in, warning believers that the end of history was near. Robert Tanner, in his Prognosticall iudgement of the great conjunction of the two superiour Planets, Saturne and Mercurie (1583), agreed that the conjunction marked the end of time. “I will not take upon me to tell the very hour, day, and year, which is known to God alone,” he averred; yet he was certain that the conjunction indicated the end of days. “Therefore watch and be mindful of the Lord’s coming.” The message the prognostications announced was clear, unmistakable, and always the same: The end is nigh; repent and do penance; turn to God while there was still time.

As in 1524, the annus mirabilis came and went without calamitous results. Astrologers, who had gone out on a limb predicting the world’s end, became the butt of ridicule. Philip Stubbes, in his Anatomy of Abuses (1583) chided the “foolish star tooters,” whose “presumptuous audacity and rash boldness… brought the world into a wonderful perplexity…, expecting a wonderful alteration of states and kingdoms… or else a final consumption and overthrow of all things.” Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, wrote that astrologers should be shunned “like a dragon’s den.”\(^{120}\)

Prophecies of doom traveled well in the 16th century, traversing both geographical borders and social class lines. In 1595, the London printer Abel Jeffes gathered a bunch of them in a pamphlet titled A Most Strange and Wonderfull Prophesie upon this Troublesome World.\(^{121}\) The work, attributed to German astrologers Dr. John Cypriano and Tarquatus Vandermas, announced that the year 1596 would bring the end of the world. “Dr. John Cypriano” was in fact Cipriano Leowitz, the Bohemian astronomer whose tract on the fiery trigon conjunction had caused such a stir. “Tarquatus Vandermas” was Antonio Arquato (Tarquatus in Latin), a Ferrarese physician and author of one of the most famous prognostications of the 15th


\(^{120}\) Aston, “Fiery Trigon Conjunction,” pp. 171–2.

century. Arquato’s *Prognosticon de eversione Europae* (Prognostication of the Overthrow of Europe), dedicated to the King of Hungary Matthias Corvino, appeared in 1480—a year full of alarm made memorable by the occupation of Otranto by marauding Turks, who ransacked the city and massacred much of its population after offering them a choice of conversion or death, and by the first siege of Rhodes. The sensational, doom-filled treatise predicted some of the most earth-shattering events of the 16th century, including the Lutheran reform, the Sack of Rome, and the Spanish conquests.\(^{122}\)

To these tracts, the author of *Strange and Wonderfull Prophesie* added excerpts from a widely read 1521 prognostication by the German astrologer Johann Carion.\(^ {123}\) Weighing in on the conjunction of 1524 in his *Prog nosticatio und Erklerung der grossen Wesserung*, Carion set a specific time and date for the impending deluge: four o’clock in the afternoon on July 15, 1525. According to a legend, the elector with his wife took refuge on a mountain that day. When the appointed time arrived without any sign of the flood, the elector ordered his coach to return to his castle, where the four horses and a coachman were struck by lightning as they entered the gate.\(^ {124}\) Out of such texts and legends, the author of the *Strange and Wonderfull Prophesie* cobbled a mishmash of heavenly portents, including comets, planetary conjunctions, and massive social upheaval—all meant to “move us to a penitent life that God may withhold his grievous scourge from us.” That the dense, learned works of prominent German astrologers should have been translated and condensed into an English pamphlet of a dozen pages is indeed something strange and wonderful.

*Astrology, Politics, and Social Change*

In the spring of 1599, an Italian Dominican friar by the name of Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), under the banner of natural magic and biblical prophecy, led a wretched band of libertine Dominicans, declassed noblemen, refugees, heretics, and bandits in a fantastic plot to overthrow the Spanish government in Calabria, and to establish a theocratic commune

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\(^{123}\) Carion (1499–1537), who served as court astrologer to the elector of Brandenburg, is best known for his *Chronicle*, a work on world history.

of which he himself would be head.125 The revolt was a complete failure. Betrayed by co-conspirators, Campanella was arrested and charged with heresy and insurrection. Despite unbelievable torture, he refused to confess to having had any part in the uprising and escaped the death penalty only by feigning madness. He spent the next twenty-seven years in the jails of Naples, where, despite long periods of barbaric confinement, he composed the bulk of his voluminous œuvres of scientific, religious, and political writings. Among his prison writings was his utopian classic, La Città del sole. Far from being utopian in the usual sense of an abstract idealization, The City of the Sun was in fact a blueprint for the ideal state he hoped to establish in Calabria, and then see expanded to the rest of the Christian world.126

Astrology vindicated Campanella’s millennial rebellion, justifying it as God’s will revealed in the stars.127 To the Calabrian friar, astrology was a divine science that promised deep insights into God’s creation. The appearance of celestial novae, the progression of the sun toward the earth, recent earthquakes, floods, outbreaks of plague, and widespread political unrest were to Fra Tommaso signs of the impending end of the world. The general decline of Christendom and the spread of the Protestant heresy indicated that the time of Antichrist had arrived, further evidence of the approaching transformation.128 The year 1600 was itself portentous, thought Campanella, as theologians, prophets, and astrologers alike confirmed.129 All of these apocalyptic portents signified an imminent


129 Campanella, Articuli prophetales, pp. 244–5.
“mutation in human affairs” (mutationes rerum humanarum).\textsuperscript{130} In defiance of conventional theology, Campanella argued that biblical prophecy—confirmed by astrology—not only justified the Calabrian revolt but made it an ineluctable necessity. He rested his defense on the claim that the conspiracy was not a rebellion at all, but was a natural and inevitable event, and that he was merely an instrument in the fulfillment of celestial and biblical prophecy.\textsuperscript{131} When questioned by authorities, several of the conspirators in the Calabrian uprising testified that the friar proclaimed himself a prophet, announcing that the year 1600 would witness great changes, including wars, revolutions, “transformations of states” (mutatio di stati), and the restoration of humanity’s “natural liberties.”\textsuperscript{132}

Campanella was not alone in seeing astrology as an instrument to forecast social and political upheavals. As we have seen, the German astrologer Leonhard Reynmann saw in the conjunction of 1524 signs of a general peasant upheaval, while Johannes Lichtenberger had predicted a peasants’ revolt for 1524–25. Astrology also fueled religious wars in France.\textsuperscript{133} French historian Denis Crouzet, in his magisterial work, Les guerriers de Dieu, argues that an “intelligentsia of prophets,” consisting of clerics, astrologers, and soothsayers flourished in 16th century France. Crouzet maintains that astrologers such as Richard Roussat, the Catholic author of a 1520 prognostication, whipped up a frenzy of anti-Protestant sentiment and created a climate of intense millennial expectation. The astrologists’ prophecies of doom, he argues, created a “climate of anguish” among 16th century French Catholics and encouraged them to implement divine vengeance directly on the all-too-visible heretics around them. According to Crouzet, the extravagant rituals of violence and destruction that characterized the religious wars in France may be directly attributed to the “eschatological anguish” that resulted from the astrological prognostications.

In 1586, Pope Sixtus V promulgated the bull Coeli et terrae against astrology and all forms of divination. The bull solemnly declared that knowledge of the future was God’s exclusive preserve, and goes on to outlaw a host of divinatory arts. Astrologers, in particular, offend God, the bull continues. Far from being a useful science, astrology is one of the

\textsuperscript{130} Amabile, Congiura, 3: 496; Firpo, Supplizio, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{131} Amabile, Congiura, 3: 478, pp. 480–2; Firpo, Supplizio, pp. 76, 84–94.
\textsuperscript{132} Amabile, Congiura, 3: 129–43.
\textsuperscript{133} Crouzet, Les guerriers de Dieu, pp. 120–30.
most dangerous manifestations of human pride.\textsuperscript{134} Containing an unusually detailed account of current “superstitions,” the bull is eloquent proof of the widespread practice of divination in various forms in early modern Europe.

Pope Sixtus’s bull hardly ended astrological practice in Europe. A sensational episode in Rome in 1630 dramatically illustrates both astrology’s grip on the imagination of intellectuals and its tenuous marriage with politics and religion at the end of the Renaissance. For years, astrologers had been predicting the imminent death of Pope Urban VIII. The rumors and predictions, doubtless fueled by Spanish propaganda, became widespread by 1628, when the Spanish openly called for a new conclave as if there were already a “vacant seat.” The pope, himself a firm believer in astrology, was intent on protecting himself from pestiferous astral influences by any possible means. In the summer of 1628, he summoned to the Papal palace none other than Fra Tommaso Campanella, who had recently been released from his long period of incarceration.

What happened next constitutes one of the most improbable chapters in astrology’s strange history. Campanella immediately set about putting into practice the astrological theory that had been the foundation of the abortive Calabrian revolt. In order to take measures against disease-bearing eclipses and the evil influences of Mars and Saturn, Campanella and the pope retreated to a chamber sealed off from outside air, sprinkled the room with rose vinegar and other aromatic substances, and burnt incense of laurel, myrtle, and rosemary. They draped the room with silken cloths, and then lit two candles and five torches representing the seven planets. They listened to Jovial and Venereal music to disperse the malignant air, used stones, plants, colors, and odors belonging to the benevolent planets (Jupiter and Venus) to attract positive astral forces, and drank astrologically distilled liquors.\textsuperscript{135} By such “philosophical” procedures, the friar and the pope tried to ward off the evil influences of Mars and Venus.

When Campanella’s description of the bizarre event was accidently printed in 1629 (Campanella claimed he had imprudently given the text to enemies, who had it printed), a loud and embarrassing scandal erupted. The exasperated pope, furious at Campanella for having revealed the


Astrological séance, immediately cracked down on the astrologers. One of the first victims of the pope’s wrath was Don Orazio Morandi, abbot of the convent of Santa Prassede, which was a center of astrological practice. Arrested and charged with heresy, Morandi stood in as “the symbolic victim representing astrologers and freethinkers of all kinds.” After being subjected to extreme torture, he died in prison in November 1630.

A fierce backlash followed the Campanella affair. Urban VIII, in order once and for all to throttle the predictions of his early death and intrigues surrounding his succession, promulgated the ferocious bull *Inscrutabilis* against the astrologers. Confirming the bull of Sixtus V, it added an absolute ban on predicting the death of a pope or any of his family. In a sweeping condemnation of the art that dares “in its sinful curiosity to pry into the mysteries which are hidden in God’s heart,” Urban VIII’s bull marks the end of Renaissance astrology.137

**Conclusion: The End of Astrology and Prophecy**

Astrology’s reputation declined steeply in the 17th century. In fact, signs of astrology’s changing fortunes were already apparent by the mid-16th century, when Girolamo Cardano related an entrapment scheme by enemies to prevent his appointment to a professorial chair at the University of Bologna. As Cardano told the story, his opponents asked him to cast horoscopes “as if I were a soothsayer and prophet and not a professor of medicine.” In 1589, the Italian writer Tommaso Garzoni drew a firm line between astronomy, a respectable science, and popular astrology, a “superfluous and superstitious investigation.” Garzoni ridiculed the sham prognosticators who sold crude almanacs and cast horoscopes in the piazzas, comparing them to the buffoonish *commedia dell’arte* figures “Capitano” Grillo and “Dottore” Graziano. Although Garzoni was speaking mostly of the prognosticators that crowded the piazzas, he even ridiculed the eminent astrologer Luca Guarico, who, Garzoni asserted, “couldn’t tell a sheep from an ass.”

Although astrology had long been the subject of condemnation and reproof by intellectuals and theologians, the tone of the criticism changed

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137 Quoted in Ernst, “Astrology,” p. 271.
noticeably in the second half of the 16th century. Formerly, the assault on astrology was grounded on carefully reasoned philosophical principles—Pico’s sweeping and learned refutation, for example—a sign that astrology was taken seriously. Late Renaissance critiques of astrology, by contrast, tended toward outright ridicule. Instead of being the object of sustained critique or mere derision, astrology became a comic subject.

The change can be detected in the large number of burlesques of almanacs published in the 16th and 17th centuries. One of the earliest was Rabelais’s *Pantagrueline prognostication* (1533), which the poet attributes to the fictitious astrologer “Master Alcofribas Nasier.” Writing of diseases to come during the year, the almanac prognosticates such calamities as:

This Year the Stone-blind shall see but very little; the Deaf shall hear but scurvily; the Dumb shan’t speak very plain; the Rich shall be somewhat in a better case than the Poor, and the Healthy than the Sick. Whole Flocks, Herds, and Drovers of Sheep, Swine, and Oxen; Cocks and Hens, Ducks and Drakes, Geese and Ganders, shall go to Pot; . . . As for old Age, ’twill be incurable this Year, because of the Years past.

Rabelais’s use of truisms to ridicule astrology reappears in countless 16th century mock-prognostications. In 1572, the German humanist Johann Fischart published a satirical almanac that contained such platitudes as “This year there will be few gulden among the poor,” and so on. “Adam Fouleweather,” in an English mock-prognostication for the year 1591, wrote that an eclipse that year portended that women “shall learn to cozen young novices, and fetch in young Gentlemen, to the great overthrow of youth.” The use of such tired clichés for comic purposes in the mock-prognostications obviously had a satirical function, because, as Hugh Roberts points out, “by predicting the blindingly obvious, they imply that more portentous predictions are equally empty of meaning.”

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Mock-almanac writers also used satire to critique social conventions and economic conditions. Gazing into the future, "Adam Fouleweather" forecast, "many poor men are like to fast on Sundays for want of food, and such as have not shoes go barefoot, if certain devout Cobblers prove not the more courteous." Eclipses for the coming year portend that brewers will water beer, the rich will prevail over the poor, and "many shall have more Spruce Beer in their bellies than wit in their heads."

Misogyny, too, shows up in the mock almanacs. Thus the French burlesque, Prognostication des cons saulvaiges (Prognostication of the Wild Cunts) of 1527, as its title suggests, uses female genitalia for divinatory purposes. Another French work, Grandes et recreatives prognostication (Great and Amusing Prognostications, 1625) by Astrophile Le Roupieux (Snotty-Nosed Astrophile) sports misogynistic jokes such as, "I do not speak of the moon's movement, of eclipses of its quarters, of its influences, because you will find all this with its retinue in women's heads."145

In addition to being lampooned in mock prognostications, astrologers also became the butt of jokes by popular playwrights such as Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson. In Middleton’s play, No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s, the character Weatherwise quotes more than a dozen proverbs and catchphrases from Thomas Bretnor’s almanac for 1611. Bretnor’s name was practically synonymous with the almanac in 17th century England; yet despite having the respect of his scientific peers, he was repeatedly satirized on the stage and in print.146

The brisk market for mock-prognostications shows that early modern people thought about astrology in many different ways—just as people do today. Skepticism of astrology coincided with a flourishing trade in almanacs and prognostications. On one hand, the comic portrayal of astrologers, both on the stage and in parodies of almanacs, suggests that the public figure of astrologer had become something of a fool. At the same time, the mock-prognostications, as well as the almanacs they parodied, indicate that astrology was woven into the fabric of everyday life. The very fact that prognostications were ridiculed is a sign that they were taken seriously, because parody cannot function in the absence of that which it parodies.147

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146 Bretnor also appears in Ben Jonson’s Devil is an ass and in other comedies of the period.
147 This point is made by Roberts, "Mocking the Future," p. 199.
Astrology and Society

Astrology survived, in spite of itself. The notion that the universe forms a coherent and meaningful whole, and that everything in this world has its correspondence in the larger world—the certainty that “on earth as it is in heaven,” as the Lord’s Prayer assured—gave astrology its authority. Contrary to the Church’s worry, early modern people did not regard astrology as a form of astral determinism. Nor did astrology necessarily imply fatalism. It was simply one of many forms of divination that people had recourse to in order to find missing persons and objects, peer into the future, and make life decisions. In the 1630s, the Inquisition of Toledo investigated an astrologer by the name of Cristóbal Rodríguez, whose eclectic blend of divinatory methods included astrology, conjuring, and hydromancy. Even theologians, who had the most reason for concern about the astrologers’ activities, did not universally condemn the art. For some, including the prominent Lutheran reformer Phillip Melanchthon, astrology provided insights into God’s divine plan for the universe.

Astrology confirmed the popular belief that humans are part of a larger whole; hence their actions are not the result of chance or whim. In that sense, astrology fulfilled a basic human need of reducing uncertainty, and perhaps made people feel as if they have a greater sense of control over the future. Whether to know what may come, discover a thief, or find answers to questions that vexed them, people sought help in the stars, because there was nowhere else to turn.

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149 Barnes, Prophecy, p. 147.