

Argumentaire

Historians have long considered it part of their job to explain the very possibility of astrology appearing in the record of the human past. Pioneers like Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, Franz Cumont, or Franz Boll approached astrology as a form of escapism through which humans evaded the truth that they must determine their own lives in a realm of impersonal and overpowering natural forces. Astrologers and their clients were practitioners of a veritable “faith in the stars” or “astrological faith”, which Bouché-Leclercq characterized as the “satisfaction of believing oneself to be known and protected by supernatural powers”. According to Keith Thomas’s influential *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), astrology nurtured the human belief of being able to model and resist the overpowering forces of nature in the absence of modern technologies which could actually do this.

A new wave of work on the history of astrology in the 1990s, firmly allying itself with the history of science, aimed for a clear break with the positivistic domestication of astrology. Astrology’s past credibility was no longer premised on the notion of a universal history of the gradual death of superstition. Instead, it became relative to socio-political, institutional, and cultural contexts. The traditional explanation of the presence of astrology in the historical record in terms of a lack of superior alternatives, was now replaced by an emphasis on the variability of what counts as 'rational' or 'scientific' in the past.

On closer inspection, however, this new historiography continued the domestication of astrology in at least three ways. First of all, it led to a fairly standardized but unreflective interpretation of astrology. Astrology was now portrayed as a highly individual, portable tool with which to minimize or evade the possibility of loss and misfortune in one’s personal domain of possessions - in other words, as the pre-modern equivalent of the stock- or weather forecast.

Secondly, the recent literature has a built-in asymmetry by which it approaches astrology’s past legitimacy, not its present illegitimacy, as a historical construct. Consider the standard narrative of early modern astrology. After c. 1630, the story goes, astrology rapidly became illegitimate to Europe’s academic elites. Demoted to the status of a superstitious pseudo-science, its attractions were henceforth limited to the more popular strata of society, home-brewed esoteric strands of bourgeois culture, and newspaper entertainment. The basic facts of this story are undoubtedly correct. Far more surprising, however, is the extent to which this master narrative makes astrology’s historical position and legitimacy dependent on its relation to official scientific and pedagogical institutions. Indeed, historians tend to present astrology before 1630 as an art whose credibility was dependent on outside sources of support, such as belief in the equivalence of words and things, or an Aristotelian cosmology which upheld the distinction between super- and sublunary realms or the reality of celestial influence.

Thirdly, the privileging of a stable relation to official science as a historical condition of astrology’s legitimacy, led historians to interpret its illegitimacy after 1630 as collateral damage to the rise of intellectual modernity. The latter, we are told, eroded astrology’s academic life-lines by promoting religious disenchantment, the advent of mechanical natural philosophies, and the rise of more intense demands on empirical verification. Once again, historians define legitimacy and rationality as a function of astrology’s relation to official science and its variable world-views. Accordingly, they

have continued to espouse the notion of the period 1630-1680 as an epochal point of no-return under which astrology suffered a definitive “fall from grace”, “marginalization”, “popularization”, “decline”, or even “death”.

This one-day workshop focuses on empirical phenomena and historiographical strategies that can help us to further undermine this surreptitious ‘domestication of astrology’. Accordingly, we are especially interested in the different strategies of *active marginalisation* of astrology, such as:

- *Connecting astrology to broader superstition discourses
- *Strategies of historicizing and anachronizing cultural phenomena of astrology
- *The rise of novel conceptions of embodiment (e.g. agronomy, medicine, biopolitics) in the Enlightenment and their censorship of incompatible astrological worldviews
- *Phenomena of self-censorship in astrological discourse (including prognostications)
- *Differences of attitude toward astrology among scientific communities
- *Differences of temporality in marginalization
- *...

