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The Blending of Astrology and Medicine

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The Blending of Astrology and Medicine

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**"To everything there is a season, and a time
for every purpose under heaven."**

So reads Ecclesiastics 3:1. To the mediaeval physician the above was instructive of things pertaining to the body and the soul.

The correlation between what occurs in the heavens and what occurs on Earth is age old. It has direct application in medicine and finds justification in the Scriptures of the [Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Pagan sects](#) ².

This connection of the celestial bodies with time is clearly recognised in both [Genesis](#) ³ and in Plato's *Timaeus*. The latter also asserts an intimate relationship between the soul and the physical body on both a level of the Cosmos and of the individual. It is thus not surprising that astrological methods for the timing of treatment; for diagnosis, prognosis and for cataloguing of *materia medica* were quickly adopted by the learned in Western Europe after the reintroduction of astrology in the 12th century.

¹ Former published as **Renaissance Astrology and Medicine**.

² See **Jewish Astrology, Arabic Astrology** and **Avicbron and the Fountain of Life** at www.new-library.com/zoller/features

³ supra **Jewish Astrology** and the lessons relating to Medical Astrology in the **Diploma Course in Medieval Astrology**.

It has been remarked that

“Astrology was the supreme science in the 13th century and the fundamental law almost to the time of Newton was the subjugation of the inferior elementary bodies to the rule of the stars.”⁴

Astrological calculations were thought absolutely essential to determine the appropriate time to commence or change treatment and planetary movements were regarded as strongly influencing the patient's prognosis.

Arabic medicine (which strongly influenced European medicine after the 12th century) taught that various parts of the body were controlled by different signs of the zodiac (*melothesia*). The most detailed and complex astrological computations were undertaken by the physician in order to attempt a diagnosis. Moreover, these computations were thought to indicate which treatment was appropriate to a particular illness.

Isidore of Seville, writing as early as the 7th century AD, in response to the question why medicine is not included in the seven Liberal Arts, stated that a physician is required to know all the Liberal Arts, including Astronomy⁵

"By which to contemplate the system of the stars and changes of the seasons ... for our bodies change too along with the qualities of the heavens."⁶

Yet, though the intellectual atmosphere was favourable in the early Middle Ages, the level of mathematical and astronomical learning

⁴ **Michael Scot**, Lynn Thorndike, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, London, 1965, pp.13-14.

⁵ i.e. astrology - the two terms being used interchangeably until fairly late in the modern period.

⁶ **Etymologies**, IV, 13,4.

in Christian Europe was not equal to the task of articulating an astrological medicine until the 12th century when Arabic scientific learning (which was based on Greek science) was assimilated.

In the 13th century, Roger Bacon wrote that if a doctor was ignorant of astronomy (and thus astrology), his medical treatment would be dependent upon chance or fortune. He further stated that

"It is manifest to everyone that celestial bodies are the cause of generation and corruption in all things."⁷

Astrology held so prestigious a place in that Age that even in a stronghold of orthodoxy, the University of Paris, the faculty of medicine was designated the "*Facultas in Medicina et Astrologia*." A similar situation existed at Bologna. In fact, in 1437, there was a controversy at the University of Paris as to which days were favourable for blood letting and the taking of laxatives. The issue was resolved by arbitration. The judges deciding that it was not the day of the week that was of importance but the zodiacal sign in which the Moon was placed which mattered.⁸

Astrological medicine was considered a scientific and acceptable procedure, as Dr Madeleine Cosman has shown in her article *Medieval Medical Malpractice: The Dicta and the Dockets*.⁹ In a malpractice case filed in London in 1424, the court of eight experts determined that damage to the plaintiff's hand, which he alleged was caused by the negligence of his physicians, was actually caused, at least in part by the malevolent constellation Aquarius in which the Moon was placed at the time of the original injury.

⁷ **Fr Roger Bacon, Opera quaedam hactenus inedita**, ed. J.S. Bremer, London, 1859, Opus Tertium, cap. 30, 107.

⁸ **History of Magic and Experimental Science**, Lynn Thorndike, vol.IV, p139-141.

⁹ **Bulletin of the N.Y. Academy of Medicine**, vol.49, no.1, January 1973, pp 35-40.

Today, some may automatically dismiss this as being a testament to innate superstition but before such a judgement can be reached the serious enquirer should examine the scientific bases of the matter.

A Scientific Bases for Medieval Medicine

Medieval medicine depended on the medical theories of Galen and Hippocrates. It was therefore, based on Greek medical theories and Greek philosophy and its basic presuppositions were influenced by Greek physics.

In answering the question: **What makes things what they are?** The Medieval physician, like his Greek predecessor, replied "**Their nature.**" The nature of a thing determined both its form and its function and, in the case of living things, determined the kinds of disturbances or diseases to which it could be subject.

There was another question with which the Greek philosopher/scientist concerned himself: **What is the relation of the One to the Many?** This is to ask: **How do things come to be and pass away (generation and corruption)?**

Astrology seemed to provide answers to both these questions. It presented a language by means of which it was possible to describe the **infinite number** of natures by the means of a **finite number** of astrological causes. These being [the light of the luminaries, planets, stars, and signs, and the mutual aspects of the luminaries and planets, etc](#)¹⁰. These causes had their origin in the One yet formed the mean between the abstract One and the concrete Many.

While the One remained serene and immutable beyond all motion, the astrological causes, conceived of as spiritual forces existing in the quintessence or ether and therefore not subject to change themselves, produced motion and alteration in the elementary bodies of this terrestrial (or sublunary) world.

¹⁰ This is more fully explained in the **Diploma Course in Medieval Astrology** at www.new-library.com/zoller/courses

Since disease was considered by Galen and Hippocrates to be a divergence from the natural healthy state, and since the stars ruled all change in sublunary nature it was the stars, which were considered the causes of health and disease. Since they were viewed as spiritual forces, there was an implicit assertion of an intimate relationship between body and soul: the health of one depended upon the harmony and well being of the other.

The astrological causes could disturb or harmonise either. For the Medieval astrological physician, God had placed the luminaries (being the Sun and the Moon), the planets and stars in the immutable quintessence of heaven pursuing immutable cycles so that man could, in accordance with **Genesis 1:14**, know the "signs" and "times" (mentioned in Ecclesiastes) for such things as the treatment of disease.

Astrology seemed entirely justified to the Medieval scientist and was quickly grafted onto medicine once the necessary learning was made available. The complex doctrines of astrology were made to serve medical needs as, for instance, in prognosis as is seen in the fifth chapter of Differentia III of Jean Ganivet's *Amicus Medicorum* written in 1431.¹¹

As you may read in the [original Latin](#) ¹²with translation, Ganivet had been asked by a friend, whether the Dean of Vienne, who was ill, would recover. Having erected a figure for the time the question was asked (in accordance with the astrological doctrine of interrogations) he made his observation

"I saw the Moon (already) below the rays of the Sun [i.e. just before New Moon] moving to the conjunction of the Sun, this was one testimony of death. I considered the Part of the

¹¹ I have used: Ioannis Ganiveti **Amicus Medicorum** Francoforti Typis Nicolai Hoffmanni Sumptibus Iacobi Fischeri Anno MDCXIV, at NY Academy of Medicine, pp 324-326 . For an extract see www.new-library.com/zoller/libray

¹² Ibid

Killing Planet¹³ in the 14th degree of Leo beneath the Moon and the Sun and beneath the rays of the Sun in the beginning of the 12th House to be a weak sign of evil sickness.”

“Thirdly, I considered the **Part of Death**¹⁴ in the 26th degree of Virgo in the Ascendant, the House of Life, to be of evil testimony. I considered fourthly, the **Part of Life**¹⁵ of the present figure, in the 26th degree of Aries in the House of Death. Thus, there was an evil combination: the life or Part of Life in the House of Death, and the Part of Death in the House of Life; both with the same number of degrees of each sign, which degrees are the terms of the malefics.”

“ Again, with the signification of the Part of Fortune in the 7th degree of Virgo with 6 degrees and 9 minutes completed, and with Mercury (the Ruler of the Ascendant), in the 12th House in the limit of its direction about to go retrograde; thus corrupting the Ascendant, I judged that the sick Dean would become delirious before one natural day was out and that he would die no matter how prudent he was and so it happened that he became delirious within one natural day and death came on the second day.”

Such a delineation, which is typical, required consideration of a great number of factors both medical and astrological. The information necessary for the erection of a horoscope was so voluminous that special portable books were devised to contain the necessary information. These books included ephemerides of the planets positions, tables of correspondences between the bodily limbs and organs and the stars. They also included the various

¹³ See **Diploma Course in Medieval Astrology** lessons on longevity for fuller explanation and **Tools and Techniques of the Medieval Astrologer Part One : Prenatal Concerns and the Calculation of the Length of Life** (only consult those edition published in 2002 or after)

¹⁴ See **Bonatti on Parts** and the **Foundation Course in Medieval Astrology** at www.new-library.com/zoller under books and courses.

¹⁵ Ibid

subdivisions of the signs and the animal, vegetable and mineral substances used as *materia medica*.¹⁶ Such works might also include tables and diagrams indicating the times for astrological fortification of medicines and places on the body for phlebotomy and cupping.

Treatment in the Dean's case, was out of the question since it had been determined that the patient was beyond hope. In less dire cases treatment would have been administered in accordance with the appropriate astrological considerations. The *Centiloquium* (One Hundred Considerations), attributed during the Middle Ages to Claudius Ptolemy, author of the *Quadripartium* (or *Tetrabiblos*) and the *Almagest* contains several aphorisms relating to medicine.

Aphorism XIX states that the efficacy of purgation is impeded when the Moon is conjoined with Jupiter. Aphorism XX states

"Pierce not with iron that part of the body which may be governed by the sign in which the Moon is posited."

While Aphorism XXI says

"When the Moon may be in Scorpio or Pisces, purgation may be advantageously used, provided the lord of the ascendant be coupled with some star posited below the earth. If he be coupled with a star [i.e. planet] above the earth, the potion swallowed, will be vomited up."

In these examples, we see that astrological considerations determined the timing of treatment. Purgation might have to wait for the Moon to pass sufficiently far past Jupiter or until the lord of the Ascendant was joined to a star below the earth. The time of an operation might have to be moved up or delayed to avoid the Moon's entering a sign governing the part of the body to be operated on. Such considerations were widely known. They were,

¹⁶ See M.P. Cosman, "Medieval Medical Malpractice and Chaucer's Physician," N.Y.State **Journal of Medicine**, vol.72, no.19, Oct. 1, 1972.

in fact, accepted practice and to violate them was to court professional condemnation.¹⁷

Thus, we see that astrological doctrine played a dominant role in Medieval medical theory and practice. This role was dictated by the contemporary cosmological scientific and philosophical foundations, which as we have seen, went back to the Greeks. Astrological medicine also linked the individual's body and soul together with the body and soul of the Cosmos thus producing a medicine with a spiritual dimension. The alteration of scientific and religious conceptions in the 17th century brought about changes in the medical field and astrological doctrines, like religious doctrines, were excised from the physician's concerns.

¹⁷ See M.P. Cosman "Medieval Medical Malpractice: The Dicta and the Dockets" **Bulletin of the NY Academy of Medicine** vol.49, no.1, Jan. 1973, pp. 22-46.