

CHAUNCY WOOD

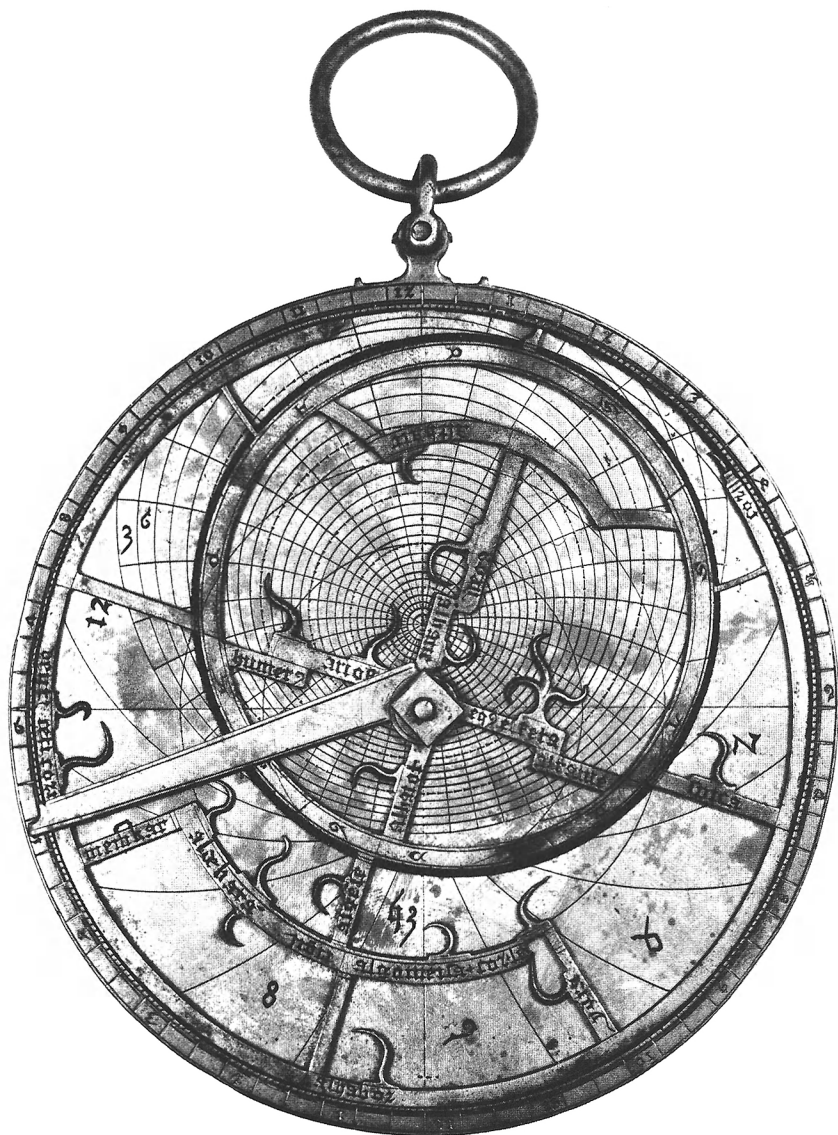
Chaucer and the Country of the Stars

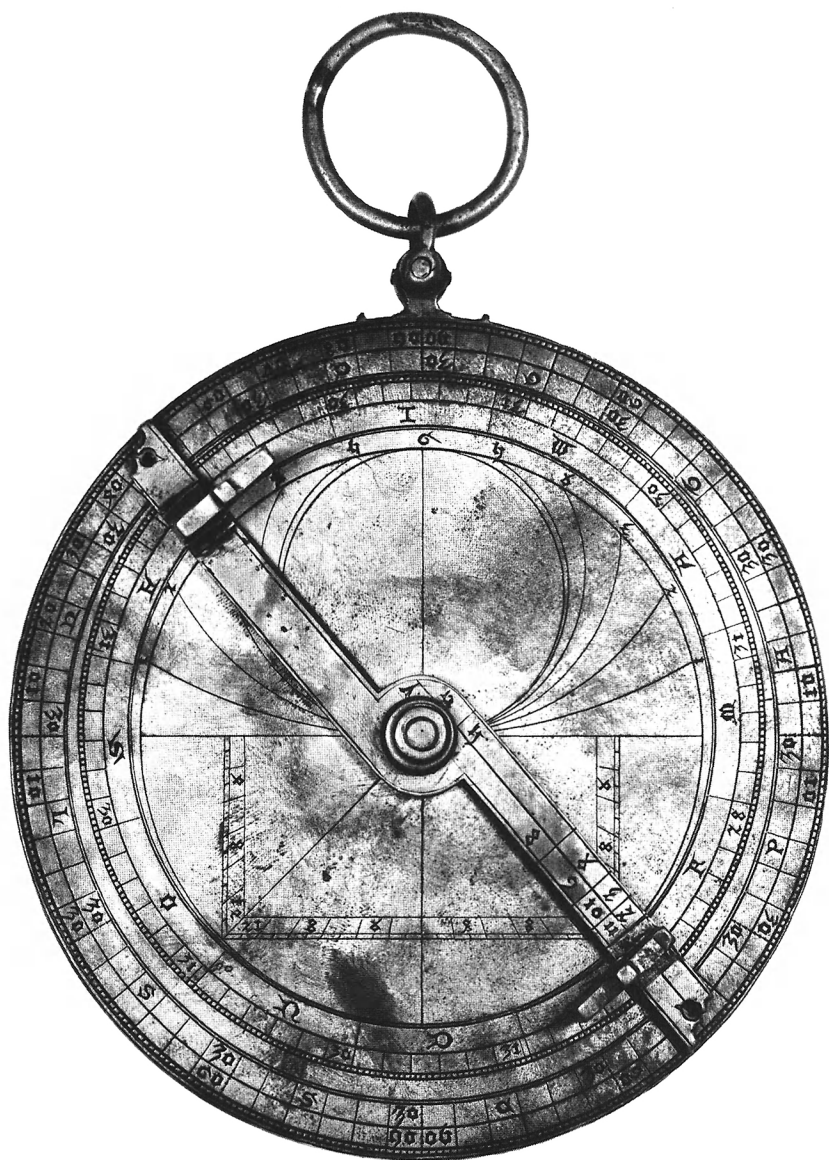


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*Chaucer and
the Country of the Stars*

Frontispiece: Late Gothic Astrolabe (front and back)





Chaucer
and the Country of
the Stars

Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery

By Chauncey Wood

Princeton University Press
Princeton, New Jersey
1970

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TO SARAH

*Penelope and Marcia Catoun,
Mak of youre wyfhod no comparisoun*

“And thus maketh Love entrechaungeable the perdurable courses; and thus is discordable bataile yput out of the contre of the sterres.”

“For the erthe overcomen yeveth the sterres.”

BOETHIUS

Preface

IN THE Middle Ages astrology was closely linked with mythology, with the problems of free will and determinism, and with the understanding of character and personality. Because of these associations it was fundamental to Chaucer's epoch in a way difficult to imagine today. Thus, while astrology is neither the cornerstone, the keystone, nor the touchstone of Chaucer's art, it is featured prominently among his materials, and we should not downgrade the importance of astrological imagery in a poet who both opened and closed his *Canterbury Tales* with references to the zodiac. It follows that this book is not as narrow a study as one might think from the title, for astrology was once not as narrow as today's newspaper horoscopes and weighing machine fortunes. Moreover, it has not been my intention to write a book about astrology, but rather about Chaucer. I have tried to write essays of historical criticism in which an analysis of certain incidental astrological images based on mediaeval source materials would lead to a reconsideration of the poetry in which those images occurred.

In this respect I have departed from the mainstream of Chaucerian scholarship, which has been confined to analyzing the astrological imagery in Chaucer solely from the technical point of view. The rare attempts to probe the poetic function of Chaucer's astrological images, notably those of Professor Curry, have made a profitable start by studying the horoscopes of some of Chaucer's literary characters. However, recent work in art history suggests that the sense of mediaeval artistic uses of astrological images should be studied in a wider context that would include, among other things, mythology and mythography. There is, then, much that has not been done, and although the immensity of the subject and its not infrequent obscurity have caused it to be neglected by scholars, there is as a consequence an excellent and rarely assumed vantage point here for a fresh look at many of Chaucer's poems.¹

¹ When one considers the writings debating the merits of astrology as well as the writings of the astrologers themselves, the resulting corpus is impressively large. No less a scholar than Don Cameron Allen has remarked on this: "The literature of astrology is as vast as the history of man. No one scholar can possibly hope to untangle all of its intricately woven strands . . ." (*The Star-crossed Renaissance*

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Because this book's orientation is toward poetic and not astrological explication, I have made little attempt to adjust the length of different chapters, and have tried to say as much about the poetry as was warranted in each case and no more. For the same reason I have not made any effort to analyze every astrological image in Chaucer's extant work, but have pursued those that preliminary investigation suggested would be the most fruitful. This has resulted in a somewhat cursory treatment of the *Troilus*, but the major astrological imagery there has already been treated in detail by Professor O'Connor, and any further study should properly take up the astrological references in their relation to the abundant mythological imagery in the poem. This will be more appropriate after the appearance of Professor McCall's work on classical mythology in the *Troilus*.²

As for astrology per se, I have not given a history of the subject nor have I tried to find presumed "sources" for passages in Chaucer, nor have I attempted to document the astrologers' opinions in strict chronological order. I have devoted a chapter to the vexed issue of Chaucer's attitude toward astrology, but I have not always made an effort to separate the astrologers one from another. There were two phenomena before Chaucer's era that caused many astrological writings to be disjoined from their original authors: the first was the encyclopedic activity in Arabian astrology from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, which saw much compiling of earlier writings, and the second was the vigorous work of translation from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth century. The latter also tended to erase any chronological sense, and was accompanied by new compilations by translators themselves, such as the famous one of John of Seville.³

[Durham, 1941], p. v). For Curry's work see the revised edition of his book: Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* (New York, 1960).

² See John J. O'Connor, "The Astronomical Dating of Chaucer's *Troilus*," *JEGP*, LV (1956), 556-62; and John P. McCall's unpublished dissertation, "Classical Myth in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*" (Princeton, 1955).

³ The classification of Arabian astrology into various periods is taken from Carmody's invaluable bibliography: Francis J. Carmody, *Arabic Astronomical and Astrological Sciences in Latin Translation: A Critical Bibliography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1956). On the history of translations see George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, 3 vols. in 5 (Washington, 1927-48), II, Part 1, pp. 20-21, 114, 167-75. Sarton points out that the Moorish occupation of Spain from 712-1085

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Thus, by the fourteenth century there were a great number of astrological manuscripts available to Chaucer, and many of them borrowed from one another either openly or tacitly. This situation is further complicated by the mediaeval predilection for *florilegia*, epitomes, and *centiloquia*, which often show heavy editing and make the identification of particular ideas even more difficult.⁴ Chaucer mentions very few astrologers by name—Ptolemy, Alchabitius, and Al-Kindi being the only ones—and while I have consulted the works of these men, it would be foolish to think that Chaucer knew only their writings or knew them better than those of other astrologers, for his specific references are too meager.⁵ In the case of an author like Boccaccio, who was in the habit of referring his astrological remarks in the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* to their respective sources—Dorotheus Sidonius, Andalo da Negri, Haly, etc.—one could make out a plausible case for sources of astrological imagery in his other works, but this will not work for Chaucer.

Chaucer's creations, like the works of other fine artists, are always greater than the sum of their parts, but we must perceive and understand these contributory elements if we are to appreciate fully the

provided a center of learning in Toledo. After the reconquest, this learning was tapped heavily and abruptly, accounting for the chronological concentration of the translations.

⁴ For example, there are many more extant manuscripts of a *florilegium* based on Albumasar than there are of his major work, the *Introductorium*. (See Carmody, *Sciences*, pp. 88-94.) In the same vein we should not forget that the Wife of Bath's proverbs from "Ptolemy" are in fact taken from a list of apothegms prefixed to an edition of Ptolemy by a twelfth-century translator. See Ewald Flügel, "Ueber Einige Stellen aus dem Almagestum Cl. Ptolemei Bei Chaucer Und Im Rosenroman," *Anglia*, XVIII (1895-96), 133-40; and R. Steele, "Chaucer and the 'Almagest,'" *Library*, Ser. 3, X (1919), 243-47.

⁵ Chaucer refers to Ptolemy in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, discussed in the note previous, and in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, wherein occurs his only reference to Alchabitius. The reference to Al-Kindi is to be found only in the Paris Manuscript, wherein Nicholas, the clerk and roué of the *Miller's Tale*, is said to prize, in addition to his "augrym stones" his "Grayel, Myssal, and Holy Euangel / Of Marke alkyndys wryten fayre and wel, / The Book that hight *Non est iudicium*." See the review by Roland M. Smith of Derek Price's edition of *The Equatorie of the Planetis*, *JEGP*, LVII (1958), 537. It is also worth mentioning that Chaucer's contemporary, John Gower, refers to the Arabian astrologer Albumasar by name in *Confessio Amantis* VII, 1239, in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS, Extra Series No. 82 (London, 1901), II, 266.

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precise nature of the greatness of the whole. I hope that this investigation will contribute to this first level of perception, and perhaps to other levels as well. I do not expect that every interpretation of the various astrological cruxes offered here will find universal acceptance, but hopefully some attention will be drawn to a series of important and intriguing Chaucerian problems.

ALL QUOTATIONS from Chaucer are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1957), and are specified by an abbreviated title and a line number or by line numbers only, when a single work is under consideration. The abbreviations used are Robinson's with a few exceptions, and the italics used for emphasis in some Chaucerian passages, although not always so indicated, are mine. I am grateful to the Houghton Mifflin Company for permission to cite from the Robinson edition, and to the editors and publishers of *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Philological Quarterly*, and *Traditio* for permission to use slightly revised versions of articles of mine that originally appeared in these journals. The research for this volume and the writing of it were carried out at several institutions and under various auspices. Of these I am particularly indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a grant to complete the writing of the book, and to the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin for a summer research grant and other research funds. I also wish to thank the University of Cincinnati Graduate School and the Hollins College Faculty Committee on Travel and Research for their support of my work. Thanks are also due to the Graduate School of McMaster University for funds for the acquisition and payment of reproduction fees for the photographs and diagrams in this book.

My debts to persons are both more numerous and more profound than my debts to institutions. Professors Urban Tigner Holmes and Francis Lee Utley read the entire manuscript and offered many cogent suggestions for its improvement, for which I am most grateful. Thomas Roche helped me with my earliest forays into this field with his characteristic erudition and generosity. I am indebted to Leeds Barroll for his continuing encouragement, both personal and professional. My thanks go also to my friend and sometime colleague, Eric

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Rothstein, who has been both enthusiastic advocate and impartial critic of my ventures into Chaucerian scholarship for a decade. My parents have always applauded my scholarly interests, and my gratitude to them is matched by my admiration of them. My thanks to my wife are expressed in the dedication of this book.

My greatest debt with regard to this book is to D. W. Robertson, Jr., who first kindled my enthusiasm for Chaucer. He suggested the topic of the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based, and has advised and encouraged my study ever since. The scholarly debt I owe him will be obvious from my approach to Chaucer through historical criticism. I wish, however, to acknowledge my further indebtedness to him for his inspiring classroom teaching. To read Chaucer with him is, as Dante said of his own reading of Boethius and Cicero, to seek silver and find gold.

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*Chaucer and
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CHAPTER I

Chaucer's Attitude Toward Astrology

I. THE NATURE OF BELIEF

TO ARGUE, as Professor Curry has done, that it is "both a futile and a useless procedure" to attempt to reconstruct Chaucer's personal attitude toward astrology is short-sighted.¹ While this observation might hold true for some other artist in some other age, there are certain presuppositions made in connection with it that many Chaucerian scholars would be reluctant to accept. The heart of the matter is that this opinion presumes that the genius of Chaucer's art begins and ends with the creation of self-determining characters who are free to work out their own destinies. As Professor Curry puts it:

His primary purpose was evidently to create characters acting in stories before a specific audience whose beliefs and prejudices were known; and as artist, with his personal attitudes carefully concealed, he permitted his people to discuss whatever subjects they liked and to express whatever conclusions they pleased.²

Such an approach denies the existence in the Middle Ages of any pattern of normative values against which literary characters were to be measured, a view more appropriate to modern than to mediaeval letters. Thus, when Professor Curry goes on to argue that the Franklin's "strictures on natural magic cannot be said to reflect Chaucer's opinion," we must perforce agree, but in fact the issue is not whether or not the characters speak for Chaucer but rather what it means when they speak for themselves. We do not expect that whatever one of Chaucer's characters says will automatically express Chaucer's personal view on the matter—although there was once a tendency to think this—so it is important that we attempt to determine the attitude of Chaucer and of his society toward these various matters by means of analysis of non-literary statements. When this is done we shall have a norm against which we can measure the characters as they are presented. For example, it makes a great deal of difference

¹ Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, p. xv.

² *Ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.

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what Chaucer and his society thought of the "natural magic" that the Franklin said was "nat worth a flye" (*FranklT*, 1132), for if the subject was scorned by all, then the Franklin is wise, and if Chaucer and others prized astrological magic, then the Franklin is being satirized.

This is, of course, an oversimplification of the problems facing the critic of Chaucer, since our judgment of the Franklin and of the *Franklin's Tale* will depend not only on what is said, but how it is said, and in what intrinsic literary context as well as in what sort of extrinsic conceptual context it is said. The fact remains, however, that we cannot avoid coming to grips with the problem of Chaucer's personal attitude toward astrology and the attitude of those in his audience, for if we assume that Chaucer had goals in mind in his poetry other than the presentation of character for its own sake, then we must assume that all of his own attitudes are important. Once again if we make allowances for tone, the Wife of Bath's plangent cry, "Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!" (*WB Prol*, 614), which follows on the heels of her statement of her horoscope, produces one impression of her character if we assume that Chaucer believed that the configuration of stars at her birth inevitably and unalterably determined that she would be lustful beyond her control. Yet we should draw quite a different conclusion about her predicament if we were reasonably sure that Chaucer thought that horoscopes were nonsense. It is not easy to reduce a subject as complicated and as latitudinous as astrology to such pure blacks and whites of opinion, but it should be possible to obtain some idea of Chaucer's attitudes toward various facets of the science.

This fragmentation of astrology is of great importance, for one of the problems plaguing the study of mediaeval attitudes toward astrology has been a certain tendency toward monolithism: a tendency to survey a writer's remarks on the subject, made at various times and in various contexts, and then to conclude that the author in question was or was not a "believer" in astrology. The subject of the mediaeval attitude toward astrology demands and has received a book length treatment, as has the problem of the Renaissance atti-

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tude toward astrology;³ but although a thorough investigation of the problem is not possible here, some consideration of the nature of the problem and an analysis of the work done on the subject is better than no statement at all. Essentially the situation is that while a great many people believed in astrology in the Middle Ages, there were also many who did not believe at all, while among the "believers" only a very few believed in unalterable astral determinism. However, two issues have tended to cloud the discussions on the subject: how does one define astrology, and how does one define belief?

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the words astrology and astronomy were sometimes interchanged in the Middle Ages. This does not mean that the two subjects were necessarily "confused" or that people saw no significant differences between them, but it does mean that there exists an area in which mistakes can be made. Isidore of Seville gives a definition that is interesting because it both distinguishes between astronomy and astrology and shows what we would find to be a common ground between them. Astronomy, according to Isidore, deals only with the motion of the heavens and the causes thereof, while the motions of the sun, moon, and stars are a part of the science of astrology. The other part of astrology, concerning predictions, is merely a superstition.⁴ Thus, even when a distinction is drawn between astronomy and astrology there remains a part of astrology that does not concern divination, and this study

³ Theodore Otto Wedel, *The Mediaeval Attitude Toward Astrology*, Yale Studies in English, No. 60 (New Haven, 1920); and Allen, *Star-crossed Renaissance*.

⁴ "Inter astronomiam et astrologiam aliquid differt. Nam astronomia conversionem coeli, ortus, obitus motusque siderum continet, vel qua ex causa ita vocentur. Astrologia vero partim naturalis, partim superstitiosa est. Naturalis, dum exsequitur solis et lunae cursus, vel stellarum, certasque temporum stationes. Superstitiosa vero est illa quam mathematici sequuntur, qui in stellis augurantur, quique etiam duodecim signa per singula animae vel corporis membra disponunt, siderumque cursu natiuitates hominum et mores praedicere conantur" (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, PL, 82, col. 170). The term "superstition" carried the sense of theological rather than rational error in the Middle Ages. A distinction virtually the same as the modern one is made by Gower in *Confessio Amantis* VII, 670-84, in *The English Works of John Gower*, II, 251-52.

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of celestial motions is not something that requires or does not require "belief." It is rather something to be studied or ignored.

In a similar fashion, a distinction was sometimes drawn between astrology as it pertained to the study of the stars and planets and their motions, and judicial astrology, which had to do with the computation of horoscopes and so on. Chaucer commented on judicial astrology, and we shall investigate his remarks in due course. Professor D. C. Allen, writing on the Renaissance attitude toward astrology, points out that while there were many opponents of judicial astrology—that is, people who claimed that the nature or extent of astral influence could not be precisely calculated, much less predicted—still no one disputed *astrologia naturalis*, the concept that the stars did indeed influence at least some kinds of terrestrial phenomena.⁵ Thus, while today we can easily say that such-and-such a person believes in astrology and another does not believe in it, similar distinctions are much less valid in the discussion of earlier ages; there are some very real semantic problems to be faced.

If we conjure up a mental image of a present-day believer in astrology, we tend to think of someone mildly eccentric who frequents quacks and charlatans for advice on his or her business and personal life based on the presumed influence of planetary movements on terrestrial affairs. We hasten to add that *we* don't "believe" in "astrology," but in fact we do believe in some kinds of stellar influences on terrestrial events; the difference is that most of us would deny that there are any demonstrable celestial influences on people. No one would deny, of course, that the sun's varying altitude in the course of the year is the direct cause of the summer's heat and the winter's cold, and we could scarcely take exception if someone wanted to argue that the sun's presence in one sign or another of the zodiac caused cold or hot weather. So far we are only concerned with a difference of expression. If we move on to lunar periodicity the distinction becomes more subtle. We know today that some sea urchins, land crabs, and palolo worms display certain forms of behavior depending upon the phase of the moon.⁶ In fact, the palolo worm sends its tail section to the surface of the water on a given day,

⁵ Allen, *Star-crossed Renaissance*, p. 148.

⁶ Louis MacNeice, *Astrology* (London and New York, 1964), p. 46.

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at a given hour, when the moon is in its last quarter.⁷ We have, then, situations where we can point to the influence of the moon in its monthly course of the zodiac, the sun in its yearly course of the zodiac, and the sun in its daily movement around the earth (which could be expressed as its passage through the twelve "houses" of the judicial astrologers).

In all of this we are still concerned with differences in kind rather than degree, for we would reject the influence of astral bodies other than the sun and the moon on terrestrial affairs, and we would also deny that human beings could be affected in the way that palolo worms are. Part of the difficulty in discussing mediaeval as opposed to modern ideas about astrology is that in the Middle Ages virtually everyone granted a little more celestial influence than would the great majority today: mediaeval people believed that all the "planets" (we shall, as they did, have to consider the sun a planet) had sub-lunar influences, and they believed that people as well as other animals were affected.

On the other hand, there is a further complication of the issue in the fact that while in the Middle Ages almost everyone believed in astrology to a greater extent than do people today, not only what one believed but how one believed was important. We have noted that there were areas of overlap between astronomy and astrology, and that once within the realm of astrology it makes a great deal of difference whether one believes that the stars compel or merely incline. Similarly, how one believed in stellar influence could vary considerably; for while astrology was often the instrument of profiteering charlatans, no less an event than the birth of Christ had been foretold if not foreordained by a star. At the same time that diviners were condemned, prophets were exalted. Thus, the wise man might use even judicial astrology well, even though the subject was widely abused. St. Augustine's distinction about use is therefore essential: "A wise man may use the most precious food without any vice. . . . We are to be commended or reprimanded not because of the things we use, but because of the motive in using them."⁸ With this in

⁷ *Ecology*, ed. Peter Farb, et al., in *Life Nature Series* (New York, 1963), p. 80.

⁸ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., Library of Liberal Arts (New York, 1958), p. 91.

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mind we shall have to note that there are believers and believers, who may be distinguished both in kind and in degree.

Probably the most sobering way in which to approach the kind and degree of mediaeval belief in astrology is to examine the position of its very famous opponent, the French contemporary of Chaucer, Nicole Oresme.⁹ In the first two chapters of his *Livre de divinacions*, Oresme divides astrology into six parts and makes a judgment as to how much we can know about each. The first part, which we would call astronomy today, is concerned with "the movements, the signs, and the measurements of the heavenly bodies, so that by means of tables, constellations, eclipses and suchlike things in the future can be known." This part, Oresme assures us, is "speculative and mathematical, a very noble and excellent science," and it can be "adequately known but it cannot be known precisely." The second part is concerned with the "qualities, the influences, and physical powers of the stars, with the signs of the zodiac, with degrees, with the heavenly signs, and so on." Here there is a basic variance with what a modern man would believe, for Oresme accepts this study of general stellar influence as a legitimate area of inquiry practiced wrongly in his day. "The second part is a part of natural science and is a great science and it too can be known as far as its nature is concerned but we know too little about it." Furthermore, he says, "the rules in the books are false . . . for the fixed stars . . . are not now in the position they were in then."

The definition of the second part of astrology is rather precise. When Oresme speaks well of the general stellar influences of this part, he is concerned with influences on things terrestrial that are physical and very general, as we may see by his example. "As, for instance, that a star in one quarter of the sky signifies or has power to cause heat or cold, dryness or moisture, and similarly with other physical effects." It is not clear in whom or in what the stars will cause dryness or cold, but it is important to note that these are physical

⁹ No direct influence of Oresme on Chaucer can be posited, nor are there a great many extant manuscripts of his *Livre de divinacions*. However, Eustache Deschamps, Chaucer's literary if not personal acquaintance, transcribed the bulk of the eighth and ninth chapters of the work, with a few additions, as *Demoustracions contre sortilèges*. See G. W. Coopland, *Nicole Oresme and the Astrologers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), pp. 8-9. The citations from Oresme are from this work, pp. 53-57.

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changes of the same kind as those produced by the sun's and the moon's revolutions. Another important distinction of Oresme's is that the stars either signify or cause events. This is a common statement and one that makes it very difficult to determine who believed what about astrology. There is all the difference in the world between causing and signifying events, yet one commonly encounters statements about signification being accepted as evidence of belief in astrology. It is belief, to be sure, but belief of a very different order from the belief in the deterministic power of the stars.

For his third category of astrology Oresme is once again concerned with physical influences of the planets and stars, but here with their predictive possibilities. He subdivides his category into three kinds of predictions. "The third part deals with the revolutions of the stars and with the conjunctions of the planets, and is applied to three kinds of predictions; first, that we may know from the major conjunctions the great events of the world, as plagues, mortalities, famine, floods, great wars, the rise and fall of kingdoms, the appearance of prophets, new religions, and similar changes; next, that we may know the state of the atmosphere, the changes in the weather, from hot to cold, from dry to wet, winds, storms, and such movements in nature; third, that we may judge as to the humours of the body and as to taking medicine and so on." Of course, Oresme's second subdivision is of great interest, because we ourselves ascribe certain macrophenomena of the weather to the sun, and we should expect that Oresme would assent to this branch of the science. However, he once again argues that while the field is a legitimate branch of inquiry, present study is misdirected. "Secondly, as regards change in the weather, this part by its nature permits of knowledge being acquired therein but it is very difficult and is not now, nor has it ever been to any one who has studied it, more than worthless, for the rules of the second part are mostly false, as I have said, and are assumed in this branch." By this Oresme refers to the influences of the fixed stars on terrestrial things, which he regarded as existent but as wrongly understood, because, as he correctly observed, the fixed stars have shifted their positions with regard to the zodiac since the time of the ancient writings on the subject. Insofar as any detailed knowledge is concerned, Oresme had nothing but scorn for astrolo-

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gers, for, he says, "we see every day that sailors and husbandmen can prophesy changes in the weather better than the astronomers."

Even more surprising than Oresme's disbelief in the ability of astrologers to know anything about the weather is his admission that the relationship of astrology to great events of the world not only is a legitimate area of inquiry, but also is better known than the relationship between the stars and the weather. Of the predictions of great events, he says that the subject "can be and is sufficiently well known but only in general terms. Especially we cannot know in what country, in what month, through what persons, or under what conditions, such things will happen." As for the last part of the third category, that concerning the prediction of proper times for taking medicine and the like, Oresme says "we can know a certain amount as regards the effects which ensue from the course of the sun and moon but beyond this little or nothing." Here again, while Oresme indicates much less belief in astrological medicine than is usually ascribed to the men of the Middle Ages, he does not dismiss the subject out of hand.

Oresme distinguishes the next three categories as having to do with fortune, whereas the first three were concerned with physical influence. While it is hard to see how the appearance of a new religion constitutes a physical phenomenon, the distinction is in general between influences on natural phenomena, mass human phenomena, or on the physical bodies of individual people, and influences on intangible events in the lives of individual persons. At all events, Oresme promptly throws out the arts of "interrogations" and "elections" as totally false, as we should expect from an opponent of astrology. The practices of electing favorable times to get married, declare war, and the like, and inquiring of the stars about the advisability of business transactions or the moral probity of one's neighbor were among those most abused by astrologers. However, the subject of nativities, which is nowadays thought of as the whole science of astrology, is not completely condemned by Oresme. Rather, he says that the fourth part of astrology, concerning nativities, is not in itself beyond knowledge so far as the complexion and inclination of the person born at a given time are concerned, but this part "cannot be known when it comes to fortune and things which can be

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hindered by the human will, and this section has to do with those things rather than with physical effects." Thus, while Oresme would deny that the stars could predetermine that a man would be rich or that he would choose one career rather than another, he would not deny that the stars might influence someone to have an imbalance of humours or to be wrathful or lecherous.

If someone like Nicole Oresme had read the Wife of Bath's plaint, what would his reaction have been? Certainly her association of an ascendant in Taurus with an inclination toward what she calls "love" he would believe to be possible. "Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne," she says, and then, assuming that the audience knows that this configuration was said to incline a person toward lechery, she complains, "Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!" There is more to it, however, which becomes evident when the Wife of Bath proceeds to elaborate the relationships between her horoscope and her behavior:

I folwed ay myn *inclinacioun*
By vertu of my constellacioun;
That made me I koude noght withdrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.
(*WB Prol*, 615-18)

Now depending upon what he thought of the Wife's sincerity, Nicole Oresme might have made several judgments about her character, but as to the astrological situation there is no doubt what his judgment would have been. That the configuration or "constellation" of stars at her birth might have inclined the Wife toward lechery he would not deny, for he admitted that inclination and complexion can be influenced by the celestial bodies; but the Wife's following her "inclinacioun" is her own responsibility, for "things which can be hindered by the human will" cannot be determined by astrological phenomena. Whether the Wife's outcry is poignant or defiant will be discussed later.

When we consider that Oresme, who draws the line only at complete determinism, was actually a vigorous opponent of astrological practice, we see the hopelessness of dividing up mediaeval people into "believers" and "non-believers" with reference to modern definitions.

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On the other hand, we can say that someone who allowed astral influence on human inclinations might or might not have considered himself a "believer" according to mediaeval theories, depending on just how binding he considered those inclinations to be. Thus, it would seem that the Wife of Bath was deterministic to the extent that she believed or at least professed that the stellar inclinations "made" her unable to withdraw her chamber of Venus from a "good felawe." Having considered the Wife's attitude toward her horoscope, and what Nicole Oresme might have thought about her attitude toward her horoscope, let us now consider what Chaucer thought about nativities, leaving his feelings about the Wife herself for a later discussion.

2. CHAUCER'S COMMENTS IN THE *TREATISE ON THE ASTROLABE*

BECAUSE most scholars have chosen to let Chaucer's characters speak for Chaucer the man, they have regarded his poetic statements about astrology as being of more importance than his two statements *in propria persona*. These statements, occurring in the middle of the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, have never been fully studied in context. They should be perused, however, in some detail, for here is one of those rare and happy instances in which a prolific author writes in an expository fashion on a vexed issue that might otherwise be known only in a possibly ambiguous literary context.

The first of Chaucer's statements has to do with the general effects of celestial bodies on earthly affairs, and is part of his description of the astrolabe itself. An astrolabe is an instrument for measuring the altitudes of stars and planets and performing other astronomical tasks, and Chaucer's treatise, which is heavily derivative, treats the device in two parts. The first is a description of the instrument, and the second a series of "conclusions" or operations that can be performed with it. In his description of the astrolabe Chaucer has occasion to describe the zodiac inscribed on the astrolabe, which leads him to discuss the heavenly zodiac, which in turn leads him to comment on celestial influences:

And this forseide hevenysse zodiak is clepid the cercle of the signes, or the cercle of the bestes, for "zodia" in langage of Grek

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sowneth "bestes" in Latyn tunge. And in the zodiak ben the 12 signes that han names of bestes, or ellis for whan the sonne entrith into eny of tho signes he takith the propirte of suche bestes, or ellis that for the sterres that ben ther fixed ben disposid in signes of bestes or shape like bestes, or elles whan the planetes ben under thilke signes thei causen us by her influence operaciouns and effectes like to the operaciouns of bestes. (*Astrolabe*, I, 21, 49-62)

If Chaucer were a devotee of astrology one would expect something stronger than his offering the idea of celestial influence on people as one of three alternative explanations as to why the signs are named after animals. No preference is given to any of the alternatives: the "or ellis" formula introduces all three, and the terminal position of the theory of celestial influence could as easily diminish as augment its importance. Since even Oresme was quite willing to grant that the stars could influence complexions and inclinations of individuals, this statement seems more than non-committal; it seems to downgrade celestial influence. Chaucer also mentions the relationships of signs of the zodiac to parts of the body, but again only as part of a list and without judgment pro or con.

The second part of the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* consists of a series of "conclusions," most of which begin with a formula such as "To know the altitude of the sonne . . .," or "Declaracioun of the ascensioun of signes," or "The conclusioun of equaciouns of houses after the Astrelabie." There are, however, two subdivisions that are called "special declarations"—both have to do with judicial astrology, that is with the application of astrological knowledge, and both are innovations beyond Chaucer's source. It is the first of these that we are concerned with. Chaucer has written on the problem of knowing "by nyght or by day the degre of eny signe that ascendith on the est orisonte, which that is clepid comounly the ascendent, or ellis horoscopum." Following his analysis of how to determine the precise degree of the sign ascending on the eastern horizon, Chaucer proceeds to a special statement about the ascendant which has to do with the definition and use of the ascendant by judicial astrologers:

A special declaracioun of the ascendent.

The ascendent sothly, as wel in alle nativites as in questions and

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eleccions of tymes, is a thing which that these astrologiens gretly observen. Wherefore me semeth conveyent, syth that I speke of the ascendent, to make of it special declaracioun.

The ascendent sothly, to take it at the largest, is thilke degre that ascendith at eny of these forseide tymes upon the est orisounte. And therefore, yf that eny planete ascende at thatt same tyme in thilke forseide degre, than hath he no latitude fro the ecliptik lyne, but he is than in the degre of the ecliptik which that is the degre of his longitude. Men sayn that thilke planete is *in horoscopo*.

But sothly the hous of the ascendent, that is to seyn, the first hous or the est angle, is a thing more brod and large. . . .
(*Astrolabe*, II, 4, 1-8)

Here Chaucer gives us the astronomical definition of the ascendent, which is simply the degree of whatever sign is rising on the eastern horizon. Then he defines the astrological "house" of the ascendent, which is an area of thirty degrees. Finally he points out that for a planet to be "in the ascendent" in the astronomical definition it had to be in the single degree of longitude that was on the eastern horizon and in the latitude of the ecliptic, while a planet can be in the astrologers' "house" of the ascendent if it is anywhere within a thirty degree area of the zodiac.

The paragraph then proceeds to discuss the "lord of the ascendent," which is an astronomical term meaning the planet that has the most power over the sign of the zodiac in the ascendent:

Yit saien these astrologiens that the ascendent and eke the lord of the ascendent may be shapen for to be fortunat or infortunat, as thus:—A "fortunat ascendent" clepen they whan that no wicked planete, as Saturne or Mars or elles the Tayl of the Dragoun, is in the hous of the ascendent, ne that no wicked planete have noon aspect of enemyte upon the ascendent.

Chaucer notes, however, that the astrologers who sell their horoscopes can better sell good prospects than bad, so he continues directly with the hint that the astrologers "arrange" the facts to suit the customer:

But thei wol caste that thei have a fortunat planete in hir ascendent, and yit in his felicity; and than say thei that it is wel.

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Having described what the astrologers called a fortunate ascendant, Chaucer observes that an unfortunate ascendant is the contrary, and then goes on to define what constitutes a fortunate lord of the ascendant:

Further over thei seyn that the infortunynge of an ascendent is the contrarie of these forseide thinges. The lord of the ascendent, sey thei that he is fortunat whan he is in god place fro the ascendent, as in an angle, or in a succident where as he is in hys dignite and comfortid with frendly aspectes of planetes and wel resceyved; and eke that he may seen the ascendent; and that he be not retrograd, ne combust, ne joyned with no shrewe in the same signe; ne that he be not in his descencioun, ne joyned with no planete in his descencioun, ne have upon him noon aspect infortunat; and than sey thei that he is well.

Immediately following this comes Chaucer's explicit statement about astrology, which closes the special declaration:

Natheles these ben observaunces of judicial matere and rytes of payens, in whiche my spirit hath no feith, ne knowing of her *horoscopus*. For they seyn that every signe is departid in thre evene parties by 10 degrees, and thilke porcioun they clepe a face. And although that a planete have a latitude fro the ecliptik, yit sey somme folk, so that the planete arise in that same signe with eny degree of the forseide face in which his longitude is rekned, that yit is the planete *in horoscopo*, be it in nativyte or in eleccion, etc.

We must now discover exactly what this last paragraph says and what it means. Perhaps the most important issue is to determine the antecedent of "these" in the first sentence. It seems unlikely that Chaucer would be referring only to the definition of the fortunate state of the lord of the ascendant, for while that is indeed "judicial matter" so is the fortunate or unfortunate state of the ascendant itself, which is discussed a few sentences previously in the same paragraph. Surely there is nothing any more or less objectionable in determining the fortunate or unfortunate state of the lord of the ascendant than that of the ascendant itself. A much more likely explanation is that Chaucer refers here to the entire discussion of the