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“More Things in Heaven and Earth”:

References to Astrology in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

NOM DE L'ESTUDIANT: Clara Machín Sandoval

NOM DEL TUTOR: Enric Monforte

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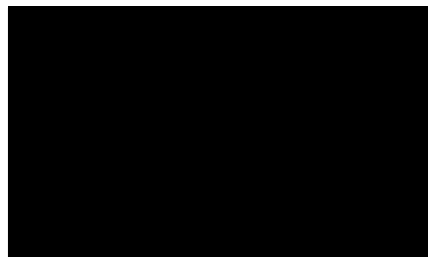


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Abstract

Astrology was pervasive in England during the Renaissance, and thus texts written in this period of time have abundant references to it. Readers nowadays do not grasp or sometimes even see these references because our worldview has been changed from an enchanted view of the universe to the current scientific mechanistic and materialistic paradigm. To fully understand and be able to interpret these works more accurately, this Early Modern conception of the universe must be ‘resuscitated’ —even if that implies suspension of (dis)belief on the part of the critic— for we can only make sense of the works of this time period by immersing ourselves in their worldview. This paper analyses two of Shakespeare’s plays, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*: their references to astrology and the changed or added meanings to their interpretation that accounting for those references provides.

Keywords: astrology, literature, Renaissance, Early Modern England, Shakespeare

Resumen

La astrología era un arte omnipresente en la Inglaterra del Renacimiento, y por lo tanto los textos escritos durante esta época contienen abundantes referencias astrológicas. En la actualidad, estas referencias no se entienden o bien pasan desapercibidas, ya que nuestra visión del mundo ha cambiado de una concepción del universo como algo encantado al actual paradigma científico-materialista. Para poder entender estos textos plenamente y ser capaces de interpretarlos de una manera más precisa, esta cosmovisión debe ser ‘resucitada’ — aun cuando conlleve dejar de lado prejuicios por parte de lx críticx, — pues es solo cuando nos sumergimos en esta visión del mundo que podemos aprehender la literatura de este período. Este proyecto analiza dos obras de Shakespeare, *Hamlet* y *King Lear*: sus referencias a la astrología, y como tenerlas en cuenta altera o añade significado a la interpretación de las obras.

Palabras clave: astrología, literatura, Renacimiento Inglés, Inglaterra Moderna Temprana, Shakespeare

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE CONTEXT OF ASTROLOGY	2
2.1. <i>The Current Paradigm and the Old Cosmology</i>	3
2.2. <i>A Brief History of Astrology.....</i>	4
2.3. <i>Astrology in Early Modern England.....</i>	6
3. ASTROLOGICAL REFERENCES IN <i>HAMLET</i>	8
3.1. <i>Astrology for Time-keeping.....</i>	9
3.2. <i>Astrology for Plot-developing.....</i>	11
3.3. <i>Astrology for Character-creation</i>	12
4. ASTROLOGICAL REFERENCES IN <i>KING LEAR</i>.....	15
4.1. <i>Fate or Free Will?.....</i>	15
4.2. <i>Astrology as Metaphor.....</i>	19
4.3. <i>Astrology for Outlining Major Themes.....</i>	21
5. CONCLUSIONS.....	25
REFERENCES	26

1. INTRODUCTION

Astrology (noun): astrology is the study of the correlation between celestial and earthly events. It is based on the premise that when something happens in the sky, an event that has similar symbolic meaning will also occur on Earth. (Brennan, n.d.)

Astrology is the oldest of the occult sciences. It is also the origin of science itself. From astrology are derived astronomy, calculation of time, mathematics, medicine, botany, mineralogy, and (by way of alchemy) modern chemistry, among other disciplines. (Bobrick, 2005, pp. 5-6)

The topic of astrology turns many a critic away. Nowadays it is thought to be a fraud, an easy way to take money from gullible people, as well as a superstition that must be left behind in the shadow of the dark ages, and most definitely not something that is worth studying. There is a real stigma associated with it and because of that not many scholars have dared enter into the topic. The truth is that before the 17th and 18th centuries and for millennia, astrology was part of the common parlance, and it coexisted alongside religion in the cosmology of the people; it was a way of understanding how the universe worked. There was no substantial difference between astrology and astronomy, in fact the terms were used interchangeably (Campion, 1989, p. 2), and every astronomer was also an astrologer. In Shakespeare's time (1564-1616), if one wanted to study medicine one had to study the effects of the stars and planets upon the human body. If one was a farmer, one should look at the position of the celestial spheres to discern the best time to plant and to sow the harvest. Kings and queens made use of astrologers too for a variety of reasons. Speaking about the wide scope of astrology then, historian P. Curry writes, "the stars were widely considered to be God's handiwork, and therefore a source of divine guidance; so astrology overlapped with religion. As part of natural knowledge, their study fell within the ambit of natural philosophy, medicine, and early modern science" (1989, p. 3).

At the end of the High Middle Ages and after the advent of the printing press, astrological literature emerged as a great source of revenue; as Campion (2013) says, "once the sacred scriptures had been reproduced, there were two other boom areas in printing — pornography and astrology. Astrological almanacs spread rapidly" (p. 84). It is no wonder then that the world's most famous playwright included astrological references in his works, both in his poems and in his many plays, and indeed he was not original in doing so. Centuries before Shakespeare was born, Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) had already made both allusions and

direct references to the celestial art in many of his *Canterbury Tales* and also in other works, and coetaneous with the bard, Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) did so too in his poems, and John Webster (1580-1634) in his plays.¹ Their use of these references logically points to the fact that the audience and the readers knew about astrology, that they were fluent in this language and could easily follow along the allusions made, unlike modern day readership. Commenting on this, astrologer and scholar P. Costello writes that,

we may instantly understand allusions to *The Hobbit*, or “Mad Men” or “Star Wars” or various reality television shows because they have established the conventions of contemporary storytelling. In contrast, Shakespeare relies on his audience’s familiarity with the astrological alphabet to create characters whose personalities reflect astrological types and to shape stories that ‘unpack’ the deeper meanings of the planets and signs. (2016, pp. 12-13)

These texts are products of a time in which the movement of the celestial bodies was of sufficient importance as to alter and inform people’s lives. As Curry states, “no part of the human past is beyond question, or unworthy of our attention” (1989, p. 168), and it is in that spirit that this study is undertaken. Reading Shakespeare’s plays together with the astrological manuals and the knowledge that circulated at the time of writing can open new doors to interpretation, and since this particular path has been largely neglected, new light can be shed on these ‘old’ texts. In order to understand Shakespeare’s works fully, it is essential that we take into consideration these references in the context in which they were made; that we submerge ourselves into the view and conception of the universe that society had then.

2. THE CONTEXT OF ASTROLOGY

To get a better understanding of the context in which these plays were developed, it is worth looking at how the overarching paradigm has shifted since the Early Modern Period in England to today, from a world in which astrology was possible and thrived to one in which it is disbelieved and dismissed. The information in this section has been separated into a reflection on the different paradigms that govern and governed society, followed by a brief outline of the history and practice of astrology in the West up to Early Modern England.

¹ See J.C. Eade (1984), pp. 109-145 for astrological references in Chaucer’s work, pp. 173-184 for references in Spenser’s, and p. 188 for references in Webster’s.

2.1. *The Current Paradigm and the Old Cosmology*

Paradigm (noun): a set of theories that explain the way a particular subject is understood at a particular time. (*Cambridge English Dictionary*, n.d.)

Cosmology (noun): a branch of philosophy that deals with the origin and general structure of the universe. (Costello, 2016, p. 76)

As stated by R. Tarnas, consensual reality today is materialistic, atheistic, and scientific-reductionist (2007, p. 26). According to the current scientific paradigm, the world is like a machine, it has no inherent purpose. It is inert, in other words, incapable of thought or emotion. It is the object upon which we, the subjects, inscribe our mark (p. 12). This worldview only takes for true things that are material —no matter how small or invisible— and things that under laboratory conditions perform repeatedly stable results: theories and hypotheses that pass the Scientific Method. It is the result of the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, as well as of the centuries upon centuries of European colonisation, which erased alternative forms of epistemology (how knowledge is defined), and also of the glorification of reason that had its apogee in the Enlightenment — a faculty that is commonly thought of as masculine, rational, and intellectual.

This worldview affects how we view history. On looking back, we invent a narrative that takes us from point A, which is uncivilised, barbaric, and superstitious, to point B: scientific, rational, and technologic. In Tarnas' words, this point of view sees history as “a long heroic journey from a primitive world of dark ignorance, suffering and limitation to a brighter modern world of ever-increasing knowledge, freedom and wellbeing” (2007, p. 12). This myth of progress is a very dangerous fallacy into which historians are prone to falling. It is dangerous because it dismisses other cultures, and important parts of one's own culture. This fallacy is responsible for condemning different or differing forms of epistemology which did not, for multiple reasons, make their way into the present consensus of what is real and what is superstition.

In contrast to the above, the view of reality that was pervasive when Shakespeare was writing was radically different to the one that is prevalent now. Before those revolutions and the Enlightenment, people lived in what Max Weber has famously termed an “enchanted world” (quoted in Campion, 2013, p. 70): a world in which angels, demons, and planetary influences coexisted on Earth. This old cosmology was part Christianity but also part Aristotelianism and Platonism —since those works were being re-popularised— and part Hermeticism as well (Campion, 2013, p. 85). The world was not thought of as an object but

rather as a subject which was capable of emitting signs and symbols that were meaningful; it was capable of communication, and on the other end of the conversation there stood humanity. Humans, instead of creating the symbols themselves, would read them, *interpret* them and *interact* with them (Tarnas, 2007, p. 17).

There is no place in the current worldview for such a subject as astrology, which presupposes that there is an inherent meaning to an external observable phenomenon that is not logically explainable as directly affecting life on Earth. As teacher and astrologer C. Taylor said, “astrology only makes sense in a pre-Enlightenment world” (personal communication, 2018). Astrology can be understood as a poetic metaphor, a way of seeing the world through symbol and through an understanding that we humans are part of a cosmos; that the cosmos is an *internally coherent system* and not a random collection of stars. Astrology is about trying to understand the self and others as being embedded in the world, and not as an objective observer, as science would have it, but instead as a subjective participant. Astrology then is about participation between the micro and the macrocosm (Taylor, 2018), and it belongs to a period of time in which the view and conception of the universe was radically different to today’s.

The subject matter of this dissertation has an ancient source, with roots as far back as Mesopotamia. The tradition survived century upon century due to orality: word of mouth knowledge taught from teacher to student, as well as written records and translations. It endured the rise of Christianity, the ‘dark’ Middle Ages with their inquisition and witch burning, as well as the Scientific and Technological Revolutions. And now the current scientific paradigm is taking a toll on it. To better understand what astrology is, it is worth to look back momentarily at its ancient history.

2.2. *A Brief History of Astrology*

Ancient civilisations have been studying the skies for millennia. Although the type of astrology that we have today and the one that was used in Shakespeare’s time did not begin to coalesce until the late Hellenistic period (2nd and 1st century BCE), its origins go as far back as the first form of writing in the West. As outlined in *The Fated Sky* (Bobrick, 2005), the earliest written records of Western astrology come from Mesopotamia, the land that is nowadays Iraq. These records are around 700 cuneiform tablets known as the *Enuma Anu Enlil*, a series of celestial omens compiled around 6500 and 7000 BCE. These deal with general omens for the nation and the King’s life, according to the positions and movements of celestial bodies. The zodiacal constellations were established around 3000 BCE, and by 700 BCE the Assyrians had traced the apparent path of the Sun around the Earth,

² and distinguished the planets —from the Greek word *planētēs*, meaning ‘wanderer’ (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.)— from the fixed stars (Bobrick, 2005).

This knowledge was merged with that of the Greeks some time after the invasion of Alexander the Great in 331 BC, which is perhaps the ultimate source and birth of modern astrology (Campion, 1989, p. 5), for it is in the mixing of Greek and Babylonian sources that we first begin to see an astrology that can be recognised: the fourfold system of planets, signs, houses, and aspects. In Greece, astrology incorporated Pythagorean mathematical concepts and Platonic theories, as well as the idea of the human being as a microcosm of the universe, which changed not only practical aspects of the art, but more importantly, its philosophical foundations. Indeed, “[i]t may be argued that astrology became the most popular method of divination precisely because it inherited the intellectual depths of Greek philosophy” (p. 10). Other important contributions to astrology made at this time are the theory of the four fundamental elements underlying all matter,³ and the application of the former to the human body,⁴ giving birth to medical astrology (p. 12).

In Rome, astrology came from the east, from what they termed “Chaldea”, and it became popular with the masses, the priests, and the rulers (p. 19). Many of the treaties and books that were later translated and distributed around Europe were written in this period. The most influential of these is Claudius Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*, which is thought to be a compilation of earlier astrological works to which he had access to and read in the Library of Alexandria (p. 21).

After the fall of the Roman Empire (476 CE), while the West was suffering the repression of the Dark Ages, astrology continued to be practised in the East, in the Byzantine and Arab Empires. During the 8th and 12th centuries, the Arabs kept the knowledge of astrology and the philosophical conceptions of the Greeks alive (Costello, 2016, p. 52), with characters of paramount importance such as Abu Mashar or Masha’allah. Bobrick describes this in page 61 of his book:

It has been said that “in the general decline of learning that overtook Western Europe during the first Christian centuries, no science suffered a more complete eclipse than astrology.” To flourish, it had required the books, instruments, astronomical tables, and the relevant knowledge that only an environment sympathetic to higher education could

² This is the *ecliptic*, which is divided in 30° sections that make up the signs of the zodiac and is the circle upon which astrologers place the celestial bodies.

³ Introduced by Empedocles (c.495-430 BCE). The four elements are fire, earth, air, and water (Campion, 1989, p.12).

⁴ Hippocrates (c. 460 BCE) merged the theory of the elements to the theory of the humours (p.12).

supply. The Dark Ages were conspicuously lacking in those cultural coordinates. That was in the West. In the East, in the Empire of the Byzantines, it continued as an object of study; and in the Arab world it was taken up and embraced. (2005)

Moslem culture flourished in Spain in the 10th century and there too astrology developed, which coincided with a renewed interest on the topic in France and Germany (Campion, 1989, p. 24). Alphonse X of Spain commissioned the so called *Aphonisine Tables*, a set of astronomical calculations used for astrology and astronomy up until the 17th century. In the rest of Europe, astrology was somewhat ‘dormant’ until the interest in learning and scholarship re-emerged. As Campion puts it, “[t]his renewed intellectual activity in Western Europe created a demand for astrological texts” (1989, p. 27). These texts were at times created, but often they were just translated. Classical Greek authors were rediscovered, Arab texts were rendered into Latin, and astrology became an essential part of daily life.

2.3. *Astrology in Early Modern England*

During the High Middle Ages, at the time in which Geoffrey Chaucer was writing, astrology was very much part of the people’s cosmology, in all of society’s strata. The uses of astrology were, as they had been, multiple, ranging from weather prediction, to medicine, and also divination, time-management and decision-making (Curry, 1989, pp. 8-9). In the following centuries, it becomes established and common for astrologers to be part of the court of kings and noble people. Some related disciplines were seen as dangerous, such as magic, divination, or alchemy, but astrology was usually not considered so. Although there were bans against the practise of certain types of astrology —namely, *judicial* astrology, which comprises *natal*, *electional* and *horary*, and so only *mundane* astrology and weather prediction were officially spared,⁵ (Curry, 1989, p. 11)— it continued to be practised. It was condemned at times by the Church because they thought astrologers were attempting to know the mind of God and alter the course of destiny, and at times by political leaders who thought their reigns were in jeopardy by certain predictions (Campion, 1989, p. 34). However, as Campion explains, “[t]he debates about astrology [...] concerned only the extent to which astrologers could make detailed or general pronouncements, and whether the magical use of talismans or prediction of life-events were permitted. The general principle on which it rested was no more doubted than is gravity

⁵ Natal astrology concerns an individual’s fate, fortune, and character, and an astrological chart is cast for the moment that person is born. Electional astrology is the art of finding suitable times (or suitable charts) for the inception of an enterprise. Horary astrology or Interrogations is the art of answering questions based on the position of the heavenly bodies at the time the question is posed. Mundane astrology, on the other hand, deals with large groups of people, cities, or nations instead of individuals (Curry, 1989, p. 8).

today” (2013 pp. 131-132).

In the 15th century the Renaissance began in Italy, with the translation of what was then thought to be ancient Egyptian texts, the *Corpus Hermeticus*, by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). This would revolutionise medieval cosmology: they caused a revival of pagan learning and interest in pagan-inspired art, which led to a reawakened appeal for the mythological figures that give name to the planets (Campion, 2013, p. 85). In that same century, Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543) changed forever the vision of the cosmos that people had had before—even though he was not the first to postulate this idea.⁶ He made the Sun the centre of the universe, which displaced the accepted geocentric model of the cosmos in favour of a heliocentric one. His astronomy, however, was only an attempt to get better and more accurate calculations, and thus predictions; it served astrology (p. 109). Moreover, his discoveries, as well as the subsequent findings of astronomical importance by figures such as Johannes Kepler or Tycho Brahe, were not merely scientific; they were findings of spiritual significance. The cosmos was perceived as something divine, and thus to be able to understand its workings better meant that humanity was closer to understanding divinity. These breakthroughs were “divine illuminations and spiritual awakenings” (Tarnas, 2007, p. 5) that magnified the confidence in human reason (p. 6).

The 16th and 17th centuries would see the advent of what has been termed *Renaissance Astrology*. In Britain, two of the most famous astrologers in history emerged: John Dee (1527-1608) and William Lilly (1602-1681). The former was the court astrologer to Elizabeth I, who among his duties elected suitable times for her, like her coronation, and was a leading figure in the English Renaissance (Campion, 2013, p. 121), as well as a brilliant mathematician and a magician. William Lilly is the writer of the first complete astrological manuscript in the English language, *Christian Astrology*, written in 1647, which is influenced by classical authors such as Ptolemy (c. 100-c.170 CE), and medieval ones such as Guido Bonatti (c.1210-c.1296), and also more contemporary ones like Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) or John Dee (2013, p. 120). Author of *Shakespeare and the Stars*, P. Costello, writes about the possible astrological sources for the knowledge that circulated when Shakespeare was writing and his plays were being performed, and outlines those in pages 28 and 29:

Probably the most widely disseminated work was still Claudius Ptolemy’s famous *Tetrabiblos* (second century CE), but a more practical and comprehensive text for

⁶ In Classical Greece, Aristarchus (b.310 BCE) discovered the heliocentric system, but geocentrism remained popular for centuries to come (Campion, 1989, pp. 14-15).

learning how to delineate horoscopes was Julius Firmicus Maternus' *Matheseos* (fourth century CE) [...] The most popular and complete text from the medieval period was Guido Bonatti's *Liber astronomicus* [...] Material in them [in those books] was rehashed again and again in the copious printings of other astrological writings. (2016)

Thus, Shakespeare and literate people living in his time period could have access to those publications, as well as to almanacs, which were usually printed yearly and contained predictions for the year ahead. Campion states that the creation and popularisation of the almanac contributed to the "new accessibility of astrology," and as a result "almanacs spread to areas where astrology was a relatively recent arrival, [and] [a]lmanac production reached a level comparable with that of modern newspapers at peak times, such as in early 17th century England" (1989, pp. 33-34).

Renaissance astrology was similar in some respects to modern-day astrology, but it was much more self-aware of its history; more connected to the source. On this topic, Mahaffey writes that,

[t]he astrology of the Renaissance had roots in the ancient Greek culture. Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, written sometime in the second century, contributed much to the organization of basic Greek concepts in this area. During Shakespeare's lifetime Neptune, Pluto, and Uranus had not yet been discovered. [...] The astrology of Shakespeare's time was taken seriously and was employed by commoners, clergy, and nobility. Even physicians were expected to know concepts of astrology. By referring to long-established astrological terms and ideas in his plays, Shakespeare hoped to successfully convey themes and symbols that could be understood by a wide audience. (2001, p. 2)

Shakespeare was surrounded by all these influences, trying to appeal to a crowd that was to different degrees steeped in astrological lore, from the common people standing on the yard to the more affluent in the balconies. He did that by using astrological symbolism in different ways, both overtly and between the lines, and writing what Campion states are "[t]he greatest literary accounts of Renaissance astrology" (2013, p. 127). The manner, meaning, and purpose of those references will be discussed in the following sections.

3. ASTROLOGICAL REFERENCES IN *HAMLET*

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / That are dreamt of in your

philosophy. (*Hamlet*: I, v, 166-167)

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark was written sometime between 1599 and 1602. It is set in the kingdom of Denmark, where the king has recently died, and his brother, Claudius, is now occupying the throne after marrying the queen, Gertrude. The son of the old king, and arguably the heir to the crown, Hamlet, grieves over his father and feels resentment towards his mother and his uncle. A ghost appears, identifies itself as Hamlet's father, and gives Hamlet the mission of avenging him and killing Claudius because, he says, he murdered him in order to become king.

The references to astrology in this play are many and varied. Doing a close reading of it results in finding these, as it were, lost jewels, that can add flavour to the understanding of the play and of the contextual situation in which it was conceived, as well as give way to new interpretations. In this section, the focus will be on determining what the narrative purpose of those references is, which is separated into three main parts: astrology for time-keeping, for plot-developing, and for character creation.

3.1. Astrology for Time-keeping

Some of the astrological references in the play are used to mark the pass of time. This is, in fact, quite a natural way of using astrology, since its development is linked to the development of time measurement systems: the division of the hours in the day, the names of the days of the week, and the whole calendar system all have their origins on an astrological basis (Campion, 1989, p. 2). It is worth mentioning here that most of the references quoted are also astronomical in nature, due to the very close relationship that the two disciplines had in that moment in time, as mentioned in the introduction.

An example of an astrological reference used for time-keeping is in the first act, when Bernardo is telling Horatio about him seeing a ghost the previous night:

Last night of all,
When yond same star that's westward from the pole
Had made his course t' illumine that part of heaven
Where now it burns, (I, i, 35-38)

Here the passing of time is kept by the movement of a star that appears to move at the same time each night, due to the rotation of the Earth on its axis, or as was commonly thought then,

due to the rotation of the sphere⁷ containing the fixed stars around the Earth. In this instance it is not particularly clear to which star he is referring, and in fact some critics have argued that perhaps it is not a star at all, but a supernova (Costello, 2016, p. 27). Nonetheless, he makes a reference to a celestial body in order to say, “it happened at this time last night”.

Another example of astrological references to establish the time is in the play-within-the-play, *The Mousetrap*:

P. King: Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round
Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orb'd ground,
And thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen
About the world have times twelve thirties been,
Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands
Unite comutual in most sacred bands.

P. Queen: So many journeys may the sun and moon
Make us again count o'er ere love be done! (III, ii, 150-157)

“Phoebus' cart” refers to the Sun, since Phoebus, also known as Apollo, was the Roman god of the Sun and of light. Neptune refers to the sea, and Tellus (also called Tellus or Terra Mater) to the Earth; therefore, the Sun has gone around the Earth thirty times. Now, the exact time that has passed since the Player King and Queen got married is not too clear, for it could be argued that the revolution of the Sun can refer to its daily rising and setting, and therefore they have been married for a scant month, or to a year, and thus it is thirty years since they made their vows. The clue may be in the following two stanzas. The moons have “borrowed” their brightness, for the Moon does not shine, but instead it reflects the light of the Sun. Twelve times thirty equals 360 which is more or less the days in a year, and so perhaps the Moon has risen and set daily. However, the objective of the play-within-the-play is to illustrate Hamlet's opinion that his mother should not have married a second time in such a haste had she loved his father, and in this case the Player King and Queen mirror Gertrude and Hamlet the father, not Claudius. So, the meaning of those lines is that they have been married for a long time, presumably like Hamlet's parents. The Moon goes through the twelve zodiac signs, from Aries to Pisces, every month. These are the “thirty dozen moons” that have gone around the world thirty times twelve; thirty times twelve months, or thirty years, since there are twelve months

⁷ “Earth was a fixed body, enclosed by concentric spheres which rotated around [it], and on the outermost circle were the fixed stars, which people saw move across the sky as this starsphere turned on its axis” (Mahaffey, p. 5).

in a year.⁸

Thus, references to astrological and astronomical phenomena can be used in order to explain the passing of time, whether that be short term, like in the former example, or long term, like in the later. The effect of using these terms makes the dialogue of the play more poetic, and also closer to the experience of the audience, since this was the common way to mark the hours, months, and years.

3.2. *Astrology for Plot-developing*

In *Hamlet*, astrology is also used to indicate the plot of the play, to hint at the actions that are going to take place and to further its main theme, like in the following example. This is another reference to the stars in the first act, again right before the ghost of Hamlet's father reappears, spoken by Horatio:

As, stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse;
And even the like precursor of fear'd events,
As harbingers preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,
Have heaven and earth demonstrated
Unto our climatures and countrymen. (I, i, 117-125)

Here the bard cites the two astrological phenomena that are most easily seen with the naked eye and that have had consistent interpretations throughout millennia: comets and eclipses. The "stars with trains of fire" are the comets that from time to time appear in the night sky, and they are likened here to "dews of blood," thus the reader can discern that seeing a comet is not a good omen and that it, in fact, will indicate the shedding of blood. Speaking about these two events, Curry says that they are the most basic and popular of the astrological phenomena, and that "these [the phases of the Moon, the comets, the eclipses, and the conjunctions]⁹ were visible to the naked eye, and needed no further astronomical calculation or elaboration" (1989,

⁸ My reasoning is: twelve zodiac signs in 30 days (in a month) x twelve months (one year) x 30 times equals 30 years. I have been unable to find a satisfactory answer to this riddle in other works and thus take full responsibility for the mistakes in this one.

⁹ The conjunction is the phenomenon in which two planets are in close proximity to each other within the ecliptic. A new Moon would be an example of this.

p. 11). This was the basis of popular astrology, and the main events that astrologers used in mundane predictions. In the *Tetrabiblos*, Ptolemy writes about comets in a way that is similar to the one here presented: “those celestial phenomena called comets, [...] operate effects like those of Mars and Mercury; exciting wars, heated and turbulent dispositions in the atmosphere, and in the constitutions of men, with all their evil consequences” (2nd c. CE/2002, p. 62).

The Sun in mundane astrology represents rulers: “[o]ne meaning of the Sun in astrology related to kingship or leadership. This is an extremely old association. [...] [G]ods and goddesses were believed to exert influence through the person of the ruler who was considered the son of the Sun” (Costello, 2016, p. 37). Therefore, these “disasters in the sun”, the comets, are linked to chaos in the affairs of the King. This is doubly emphasised in the following lines, when Horatio calls on the “moist star” who rules “Neptune’s empire”. The key to understanding what this star might be is in the adjective “moist”. Here is Ptolemy’s description of the Moon: “The Moon principally generates moisture; her proximity to the earth renders her highly capable of exciting damp vapours” (2nd c. CE/2002, p. 13). Moreover, the Moon has dominion over large bodies of water such as the oceans or lakes; this is “Neptune’s empire”. In astrology, both the Sun and Moon are considered planets, and the words *planet* and *star* are often used interchangeably. In this case, the Moon is “sick to doomsday with eclipse”: it is eclipsed by the Sun. When this phenomenon happens the Moon turns red, it is what is known as a *Blood Moon*, and to the ancient eye it awakens fear, and is reminiscent to the “blood” mentioned in the previous lines. These two signs, the comet and the eclipse, are “harbingers” and “omens” of doom, and in interpretation that doom concerns not the common person but the life of rulers and the affairs of state.

What is notable about these images being alluded to here in this part of the play, when the audience still does not know the past or even the current situation in the kingdom, is that it, in and of itself, acts as a foreshadowing of the plot; it sets the stage for the events that both happened in the past and that will happen at the end of the play. The play’s plot can be summarised in a metaphorical way using those two astrological events, because the allusion is to the falling of kings and Empires, and to a restructuring of the social order brought about by the spilling of blood.

3.3. *Astrology for Character-creation*

Shakespeare also uses astrology as a kind of ‘short-hand’ to describe character, or in the word of the period, *temperament*. This is related to the four *Galenic* humours, a theory of medicine that was developed by Marcus Aurelius’ physician, Galen. He postulated that there

were four basic humours, or fluids, coursing through our bodies, and that the imbalances of each were the cause of diseases (Costello, 2016, p. 52). This formed the basis of classical and medieval medicine, and it continued to be used until the 19th century (p. 55). These humours—namely, yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood— were later assigned to four elements, planets, and signs, and thus this holistic theory of health came to be adapted by astrologers to analyse a person’s basic temperament; in essence, it became a system of personality classification. In Costello’s opinion, this theory “is fundamental to understanding Shakespeare’s creation of character” (p. 50). The four humour types are the following:

- *Choleric*: its humour is yellow bile, or choler, and it is related to fire and Mars,
- *Phlegmatic*: its humour is phlegm, and it is related to water and the Moon,
- *Sanguine*: its humour is blood, and it is related to air and Jupiter,
- *Melancholic*: its humour is black bile, and it is related to earth and Saturn (Costello, p. 54).

Hamlet, the main character of this play, shows signs of the melancholic type: he is gloomy, pessimistic, introspective, depressive, philosophical and serious, characteristics that all match the descriptions of the temperament. Hamlet, Costello says, is “an outstanding example” (p. 58) of the melancholic character. This is seen both in his manner of speech as much as in the references to his physical form, for example in his first scene in the play:

Tis not alone my *inky* cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn *black* [...]
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
that can denote me truly. (I, ii, 77-83, emphasis mine)

Black is the colour traditionally assigned to Saturn: “colors black, lucid, leaden, brown, have relation to Saturn” (Ptolemy, 2nd c. CE/2002, p. 146), and “all things under Saturn conduce to sadness, and melancholy” (p. 73). In these lines he has demonstrated what his temperament is, and the audience would have been able to recognise it.

Marsilio Ficino, on his *Three Books on Life*, a series of recommendations on how to live a better, healthier, and longer life, writes extensively about melancholy, and relates it to literary men in particular, saying,

[l]earned people are told always scrupulously to avoid phlegm and black bile, even as sailors do Scylla and Charybdis. For just as they are inactive in the rest of the body, so they are busy in the brain and the mind. [...] Hence it can justly be said that learned people would even be unusually healthy, were they not burdened by phlegm, and the

happiest and wisest of mortals, were they not driven by the bad effects of black bile to depression and even sometimes to folly. (1489/1989 p. 113)

Hamlet is depicted as a scholarly young man, having studied and wanting to continue his studies at university:

King: For your intent

In going back to school in Wittenberg,

It is most retrograde¹⁰ to our desire; (I, ii, 112-114)

Therefore, according to Ficino, he is more likely to suffer from an imbalance of black bile than the common person. In addition, something else that also resonates with the character of Hamlet is the last line, that folly is sometimes a result of melancholy. In his case, it can be argued that the madness he suffers from is pretence, since he told Horatio and Marcellus that he would feign folly, that he would “put an antic disposition on” (*Hamlet*, I, v, 172), but it is never too clear whether he is or is not pretending. Other characters notice that he is acting strangely; Claudius calls this “Hamlet’s lunacy” (II, ii, 49), which is another reference to astrology, since it is derived from the Latin word for Moon, Luna, and refers to the “belief that changes of the moon caused intermittent insanity” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

In addition to corresponding to Saturn, this temperament is also assigned to the element of earth. The melancholic type, “has a dominance of the earth element, with a personality likely to be depressed, gloomy in outlook, and *disinclined to take action*. Because earth is the heaviest element, melancholiacs are ‘heavy’, with low spirits and little energy” (Costello, 2016, p. 59, emphasis mine). It is these characteristics that drive his character and the plot around him, and they also describe his ‘tragic and fatal flaw’: his inability to decide and act.

There is more that could be said about the character of Hamlet, these are only some of the ways in which Shakespeare made use of astrology and astrology-derived concepts to aid in the depiction of characters, to make them recognisable by the audience and to help him drive the plot. Perhaps it is this use of astrology that made his characters relatable even centuries after they were written and in a completely different setting, because astrology is a language of archetypes and it communicates to us through symbols which need not be wholly constrained by a sociocultural context.

¹⁰ *Retrograde* is an astrological term too. It refers to the point in a planet’s orbit when it seems, from our vantage point on Earth, to stay still and go backwards from its usual motion. Thus, to be retrograde means to go in the opposite direction, here of the desire of Claudius. It was thought to be unnatural, which is what Claudius tells Hamlet in the lines above, that his will is “most incorrect to heaven” (I, ii, 95).

4. ASTROLOGICAL REFERENCES IN *KING LEAR*

It is the stars, / The stars above us, govern our conditions; / Else one self mate and
make could not beget / such different issues. (*King Lear*: IV, ii, 32-35)

King Lear was written sometime in the beginning of the 17th century. Like *Hamlet*, it is one of Shakespeare's tragedies, and probably the most well-known. The play follows the story of Lear, the king of Britain, who abdicates from his throne and divides the kingdom in three to give a part to each of his daughters. In order to decide what to give to each, he tests them on their love for him. His eldest daughters, Regan and Goneril, highly praise him, but his youngest, Cordelia, is unwilling to play along. He is enraged and banishes her. He then lives with his daughters for some time, but they strip him from what he had left, and he wanders off on his own and slowly descends into madness. Meanwhile, Edmund, the bastard son of one of the nobles at court, is planning to kill his father, Gloucester, to obtain his money and title, but not before also taking his brother out of the way, the rightful heir Edgar.

Astrology in *King Lear* is of particular importance, as part of the plot depends upon an astrological prediction; thus, not only are there scattered references to the cosmic art, but there is an overt use of astrology to push the story forward; to trigger some of the events. Other astrological references in the play are relatively fewer in number than in *Hamlet*, yet some are easier to spot. However, looking at the play through an astrological lens and paying attention to seemingly minor details can provide rich results. This section is divided into three parts: a discussion on fate and free will, astrology used as a poetic metaphor, and astrology for outlining overarching themes.

4.1. Fate or Free Will?

This play contains what is perhaps the most reproduced and analysed reference to astrology in any of Shakespeare's works, which is found in Edmund's soliloquy in the second scene of the first act. It follows a speech from his father, Gloucester, in which he comments on the eclipses that have occurred recently. Gloucester says,

[t]hese late eclipses in the sun and moon portend
no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can
reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself
scourg'd by the sequent events: 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. (I, ii, 100-107)

Edmund has just told him that his brother Edgar is likely going to attempt against his fortune, if not his life too. Gloucester, then, makes a connection between that and the astronomical phenomena of “late”, which according to him threaten to break the filial bond, both by the son, and in the scene previous to this one, by the father, Lear, towards Cordelia:

This villain of mine [Edgar] comes under the
prediction: there's son against father. The King
falls from bias of nature: there's father against
child. (I, ii, 108-111)

He uses astrology in order to confirm what he thinks is happening around him. Part of it, though, is false: Edgar is not planning against him, but instead Edmund is. Be that as it may, the interpretation still rings true; there *is* “father against son”.

After Gloucester leaves, Edmund rises in opposition to this use of astrology as deterministic and fatalistic and mocks it in a soliloquy. The quote follows thus:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that,
when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits
of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our
disasters the sun, the moon, and stars; as
if we were villains by necessity; fools by
heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and
treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards,
liars, and adulterers, by an enforc'd obedience of
planetary influence; and all that we are evil in,
by a divine thrusting on—an admirable evasion
of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish
disposition on the charge of a star! (I, ii, 112-123)

He pronounces himself against the notion that there is such a thing as fate outside of the control of human beings and dictated by the stars, because he believes he is a self-made man, who intends to raise to power not by birth—for he cannot claim the position that his brother will one day have by reason of his being a bastard—but instead by brains, by cunning, by tricks

and lying. In that respect he is *humanistic*; he believes in the power of human beings (or men) to write their own story, and to build their future according to their actions, instead of being constrained by “heavenly compulsion” and by whatever societal status was imposed at birth. In fact, his attitude matches perfectly with the precepts laid down by Pico de la Mirandola’s manifesto on the modern man, a key Renaissance text:

Thou [Adam], constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. [...] We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth [...] so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. (1484/1984, pp. 224-225)

In the play, then, there is a conflict between these newer ideas about human beings, personified by the figure of Edmund, and the established notion that there is a plan set in stone, and that there are things outside the control of human action, exemplified by Gloucester.

To further mock astrology, Edmund casts his own horoscope¹¹ in the lines following his soliloquy:

My father compounded with my mother under the
Dragon’s tail, and my nativity was under Ursa
Major, so that it follows I am rough and
lecherous. Fut, I should have been that I am,
had the maidenliest star in the firmament
twinkled on my bastardizing. (I, ii, 121-127)

First, he makes reference to his conception, which is unusual in modern astrology. Normally, the horoscope or chart that is used to delineate the character and future of a person is not the one of their conception. In Ptolemy’s book, though, he states that the chart of the conception can in fact play an important part in the life of the native,¹² “[f]or the seed will, at the very first, and at once, receive its due quality, as then dispensed by the Ambient; and, although in subsequent periods its substance is varied, [...] it will still, by the laws of nature, congregate, during its growth, only such matter as may be proper to itself” (1531/2009, p. 72). Thus, we can come to the conclusion that the chart of the conception could have played a part in the astrological tradition of the Renaissance, even if the *Tetrabiblos* and books based on it were

¹¹ ‘Horoscope’ comes from the Greek word *horoscopos*, which means Hour-Marker (*The Astrology Dictionary*, n.d.). In this case, it is the chart or diagram of the positions of the planets at a moment in time and space.

¹² In the astrological tradition, *native* refers to the person whose horoscope or *nativity* is drawn.

the only sources for that. However, according to religious doctrine and platonic philosophy, the soul descends through the planetary spheres and enters the body of the infant in the precise moment when it takes its first breath, and destiny, as they conceived it, had to do with the soul, not with the body (Costello, 2016, p. 88).

In any case, his conception, he says, was under “the Dragon’s tail”, which is the south node of the Moon, or *Cauda Draconis*. This, along with the Dragon’s head, mark the points in the ecliptic where the orbits of the Sun and Moon intersect, and therefore the places where eclipses occur. In traditional astrology, both of them were usually considered malefic, because of their association with eclipses, but the tail especially so. William Lilly considered it to be “evil” and at the very least the cause of “disturbances” and “much wrangling and great controversie” (1659/2005, p. 83). His birth, Edmund adds, was under Ursa Major, which is one of the polar constellations, therefore it never sets, and it also does not fall within the ecliptic. Campion gives a possible explanation as to why Shakespeare decides to use this constellation: “all born at the latitude of England are born under the Great Bear. Who, then, is Edmund? He is everyman, the average sinner, or fallen human, and Shakespeare uses celestial symbolism to tell us this” (2013, p. 129). Another possibility, which is likely because it is also Ptolemaic, is that he is again saying something of astrological importance. According to Ptolemy, “*Ursa Major* is like Mars, but the nebula under the tail resembles the Moon and Venus in its influence” (2nd c. CE/2002, p. 19). Mars in traditional astrology is the lesser malefic, being considered evil because of an excess of dryness (p. 14), and if ill-placed it may indeed cause someone to be “rough”, or in other words, to be “cruel, treacherous, and fierce” (Maternus, c.355/1975, p. 14). On the other hand, the influence of Mars and Venus together “will make seducers and adulterers. Possessed by depraved desires and unconquerable lust, the natives break the bonds of other people’s marriages by clever promises” (Maternus, p. 200). Both delineations describe Edmund perfectly well: he *is* a rough and lecherous man, with a cruel disposition and unconquerable passions that break the marriages of Regan and Goneril. However, Edmund says that if the “maidenliest star”, which is a reference to Venus, the lesser benefic, had been predominant in his horoscope, he still would have been “rough and lecherous”. Venus is the planet of love, and if well-placed and well-aspected, can make someone “pleasure-loving, charming, handsome” (Maternus, p. 14), which, according to astrological tradition, would have made Edmund a completely different man.

The fact of the matter is that both his conception and his birth are inauspicious, and

even though he tries to make use of the current transits¹³ by plotting against his father to rise to power and in order to revert his ill fortune, he cannot help but be ruled by “spherical predominance”; “he *is* exactly the kind of person whom the stars portend” (Costello, 2016, p. 25). In accordance to his difficult astrological charts, at the end of the play he is punished: he dies of a sword wound while his brother Edgar, after all his suffering, lives to tell the tale. In Campion’s words, “Shakespeare [...] introduces a delicious irony by making Edmund, the victim of his birth, a sceptic who mocks Gloucester’s belief in the power of the stars to reveal upheavals in the body-politic” (2013, pp. 128-129). His horoscope describes him accurately, and the acts foretold by Gloucester as to the eclipses do eventually come to pass. This play is then both an example of how an astrological prediction can be an important part of the plot and of the subplot, as well as of the debate that was currently taking place as to the degree of determinism and fatalism allotted to the conception of life in general, and to astrology in particular.

4.2. *Astrology as Metaphor*

Apart from the prediction at the beginning of the play, there are also many other instances where the characters mention terms related to astrology in order to make comparisons and to use them for poetic analogies. This is the most common use of astrology in the work of Shakespeare, perhaps because it need not be constrained to a character, to the plot, or to the message of a dialogue. In total in *King Lear* there are nine references to the Moon by this name, eight to the Sun, three references to the stars, as well as some more references to the rest of the planets, and other references that are epithets or mythological names (like Jove for Jupiter or Phoebus for the Sun). In addition to this, the characters also use other astrological terms in their speech, and the use of some of these will be analysed in this part.

This play abounds with references to the Moon. One such reference occurs in the fourth act, when Edgar, disguised, walks with his father who is now blind:

Glo. Set me where you stand.

Edg. Give me your hand. You are now within a foot

Of th’ extreme verge. For all beneath the moon

Would I not leap upright. (IV, vii, 24-27)

In this case, Edgar is making a reference to the structure of the cosmos that was the consensus in the Medieval and Early Modern periods, when it was believed that the Earth was surrounded

¹³ The word transit, in astrology, refers to the position of the planets at the present moment in time.

by concentric circles each containing one of the planets in order of their closeness to it. Therefore, the first of these orbs was that of the Moon, Earth's satellite and closest celestial body. "All beneath the moon" refers to the *sublunary* world, in other words, to the Earth and all it contains: so, the meaning of that sentence is that Edgar would not jump off that cliff for anything in the world.

Another reference to the *Queen of the Night* can be found towards the end of the play, when Lear is facing imprisonment with Cordelia, spoken by him:

And we'll wear out
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon. (V, iii, 17-19)

Here one of the effects of the Moon is mentioned, which is related to the visible phases of it, as well its visible effects. The Moon is linked to the movement of the tides: "the seas in ebbing and flowing do observe the motions and times of the Moon" (Agrippa, 1531/2009, p. 67), and thus it is related to the principle of change and inconstancy. In this case, Lear mentions the "packs and sects of great ones", that are the people outside the walls of his prison, in contrast to him and Cordelia inside. H. Luke comments on this quote of Shakespeare by saying,

"In a wall'd prison" the spirit of the king is free, while those who think they have made themselves great through the instinctive greed of the pack through fanatical assertion of the rights of sects or party, are the truly imprisoned. They are the ones at the mercy of the ebb and flow of the unconscious forces they despise. The king himself had been one of these "great ones," driven by his lust for flattery, blind to all individual feeling values, dominated by the ebb and flow of the moon, the unconscious. [...] But now, at the end, the storm of his suffering has transmuted the lust and cruelty of the pack, of the mob, into tenderness and compassion. (2010, "King Lear," para. 11)

The Moon, according to modern psychological astrology, is "unconscious—or subconscious—and inward looking" (Farebrother, 2013, p. 59), and because it is always changing, here it makes reference to the outside world of people fighting and arguing which had been Lear's world before. Now, however, he is in a place where he is not constrained by this ebb and flow, nor by the passing of time: the constant anger of younger years is no longer there, as his mind is already in eternity imprisoned and free at the same time, with Cordelia.

Some of the references do not allude to the heavenly bodies themselves, but to other parts of astrology, such as the aspects. They are the geometrical relationships between the planets, and one example is the conjunction, when two planets are close to each other in the

ecliptic. Regan in the beginning of act five mentions this term: “I am doubtful that you have been conjunct / And bosom’d with her,” (V, i, 13-14). She is talking to Edgar, asking him if he has bedded her sister Goneril. The same metaphor is also used in the second part of *King Henry IV*, when in a tavern Falstaff and a young girl kiss: “Saturn and Venus this year in conjunction! / What says the almanac to that?” (II, iv, 252-253); therefore, the conjunction, an astrological aspect that refers to two planets coming together, is used as a metaphor for love-making.

Campion wrote that “Shakespeare used astrology as a literary device, enabling the characters to convey information in an indirect, symbolic manner” (2013, p. 128), because it is only natural, when something is part of the common framework to understanding life, that writers use it, especially in a poetic way. Astrological metaphors are a common literary device that is used both in *King Lear* and in *Hamlet*.

4.3. *Astrology for Outlining Major Themes*

Some of Shakespeare’s plays, Costello (2016) claims, are ‘keyed’ to a particular planet and sign. What she means by that is that they reflect the characteristics of those two astrological components in plot, in the characters, and in the overarching theme. All these factors together with seemingly small details can make a play be ‘attuned’ to certain planetary energies. In this particular case and according to Costello, *King Lear* is keyed to the planet Saturn, and to one of the signs that this planet rules: Capricorn (pp. 379-434).

Saturn is the furthest of the visible planets, and as such it used to mark the boundary of the physical world before the discoveries of the modern planets,¹⁴ and thus is related to boundaries and limitations. It is said to rule¹⁵ the signs of Aquarius and Capricorn, signs that are directly opposite those ruled by the luminaries; Leo and Cancer. Therefore, Saturn rules the signs in which the Sun goes through in the dead of winter. Accordingly, Henry Cornelius Agrippa attributes coldness to Saturn (1531/2009, p. 146), as well as the element of earth, and black choler¹⁶ as its humour, and thus melancholy as its temperament (p. 83).

In the Greek myths, Kronos, Saturn’s Greek counterpart, was the king of the old ruling race, the Titans. In order to ascend to that position, he had had to kill his own father. It was prophesied to him that one of his children would in turn overthrow him and thus fearful of that he decided to eat his offspring, devouring each as they were birthed by his sister-wife Rhea. She had the cunning to give him a swaddled stone instead of her last child for him to eat, and

¹⁴ Uranus was discovered in 1781, Neptune in 1846, and Pluto in 1930.

¹⁵ Each planet rules or has as their ‘domicile’ two signs, except for the Sun and the Moon, who rule one sign each.

¹⁶ Which later began to be known as ‘black bile’ (Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.).

to send her son away. Eventually, he would come back and kill his own father, thus liberating his siblings from his stomach and occupying his place as the king of the gods. This was Zeus, or Jupiter, king at Olympus (Costello, 2016, p. 387).

Some of the motifs of the play can be gleaned from the planet's mythology. First of all, the plot revolves around a king, which is the position of authority that is related to Saturn,¹⁷ especially when it is patriarchal. Moreover, Lear is an aged king; his advanced age is emphasised thorough the play, and Saturn was the king of the *old* gods, and corresponds to old age and to the processes of ageing, decaying and eventually dying. This is the Saturnian phase of life, which is depicted in *As You Like It*, in the famous speech on the Seven Ages of Man, one for each planet in succession:

The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big, manly voice,
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange, eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II, vii, 157-166)

Lear is in this stage, in the Saturnian part of life.

With regards to the act of eating his offspring, Costello argues that “Lear embodies the ‘devouring’ parent who uses various strategies (emotional abuse, shaming, and deprivation of inheritance) to disempower his children, especially Cordelia” (2016, p. 386). By doing this, Lear makes sure, even if it is unconsciously, that his youngest child does not, cannot, and will not replace him and occupy his throne. In addition, even though he steps down from his throne, he refuses to accept that he is no longer a king by maintaining his troop of men and expecting other characters to obey his command (Costello, 2016, p. 172). In the other and parallel storyline, we see the same motif of devouring and dispossessing, but from the point of view of the child, who, once grown, attempts to overthrow his parent. In this case, it is the bastard son Edmund, who by his tricks and cunning, strives to inherit his father's money and title. Thus, both the plot and the subplot mirror the myth of the titan Kronos, who gives name to the planet

¹⁷ As mentioned previously, it is also related to the Sun.

this play is keyed to.

With regards to the storyline, many of the characters undergo a journey of great pains and misery that is alike those misfortunes brought about by the greater malefic, Saturn, usually thought to be responsible of bringing misery, famine, and pain in general. The ultimate cause of their misfortune (principally that of Edmund and Lear) is that the characters do not have the virtues that this planet signifies: namely, wisdom, patience, humbleness, restraint, and honesty (Costello, pp. 393-398). Lear's journey is one of learning —the hard way, which is the Saturnian way— those virtues, and of going from being a fool to becoming a wise old man. He has to learn patience, in order to restrain the bouts of choler that come to him suddenly and make him curse his daughters and worsen his fate; he has to learn humility, for he has renounced to the title of King but not to the perks that come with it; he has to learn to be wise and not the fool his own fool reminds him he is, and, finally, he has to learn to value truth over flattery to understand that Cordelia loved him best. At the end of the play, after all his hardships, he has finally learnt these Saturnian virtues, and is ready for his, as of yet, most Saturnian act: he is ready to die. In accordance to this, astrologer and Jungian psychologist Liz Greene writes on her book on Saturn that,

Saturn symbolizes a psychic process as well as a quality or kind of experience. He is not merely a representative of pain, restriction, and discipline; he is also a symbol of the psychic process, natural to all human beings, by which an individual may utilise the experiences of pain, restriction, and discipline as a means for greater consciousness and fulfilment. (1976, p. 10)

It is this 'greater consciousness' that Lear has attained after all his travails, after the "psychic process" that he undergoes when he is stripped from his throne, his daughters, his men, his clothes, his sanity, and finally his sense of self; when he is left "sans anything". It is all these deprivations that finally conclude in his attaining a new sense of self and in enjoying a certain type freedom which can only come after its complete opposite has been experienced.

He also goes through a regression, a "second childishness," after the process:

Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds in th' cage;

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel¹⁸ down

And ask thee forgiveness; so we'll live,

¹⁸ In medical astrology, the knees are ruled by Saturn, and are related to that Saturnian virtue of humility. For an in depth study of the act of kneeling in the play in relation to Saturn, see Costello, 2016, pp. 391-392.

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, (V, iii, 8-13)

As well as being part of the ageing process, going back to infancy, or ageing ‘backwards’ is also particularly relevant to the sign Capricorn, whose natives are often described as people who “seem in some ways older than [their] years, especially when young, for life is taken seriously. These people mellow as they grow older, becoming ‘younger’ in attitude” (Farebrother, 2013, p. 103). The fact of his regression is even mentioned textually in the play, when Cordelia calls him her “child-changed father” (IV, vii, 17).

The characteristics of this sign also seem to mirror those of the personality of Cordelia. While her sisters are very much alike, both prone to lying and flattery, and both cruel and vile, Cordelia is the complete opposite. Even though she is the youngest, she is the wisest, and values, instead of flowery words, silence, preferring to say “nothing” (I, i, 86) when asked for her love towards his father. She attaches importance to honesty, duty, and authority, and says so repeatedly. For example, when Lear asks her to “mend her speech”, she replies by saying, “I love your Majesty / According to my bond; no more, nor less” (I, i, 91-92). And further down,

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov’d me: I
Return those *duties* back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most *honor* you. (I, i, 95-98, emphasis mine)

In a modern astrologer’s words, “Capricorn is very aware of her obligations —to family, friends, or job— and is willing to work hard to fulfil these” (Farebrother, 2013, p. 103).

In addition to these references, there are also multiple other ways in which the play conveys the images and meaning of Saturn and of Capricorn, too many to be analysed in depth here. But perhaps the most important and crucial are the experiences through which the characters go through, which are “the worst possible Saturnine experiences in the human realm: restrictions, loss, and disappointments in the form of slander, rejection, banishment, fall from position of power, poverty, homelessness, loss of identity, physical and emotional torture, and ultimately, death” (Costello, 2016, p. 426). The fact that there are constant references to the greater malefic in this play is fitting, since it is a tragedy, and one of the most violent and disturbing of all.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Astrology is such an essential part of the works of Shakespeare that it, at the very least, deserves to be payed proper attention. The range of ways in which the bard used astrological symbolism is rich and varied, and shows a command of the celestial language, that far from being something unusual or an eccentricity, was part of the common framework for understanding the universe. As Costello writes, “[m]odern audiences may be surprised at the frequency of such allusions since astrology has been marginalized in our day, but the audiences of Shakespeare’s time were steeped in its language” (2016, p. 11). We, therefore, are at a disadvantage, because not only do we not understand these references, for astrology is no longer common knowledge, but on top of that, we are inclined to ‘disbelieve’ it, on the grounds that according to modern science it does not work or is not true. Since we nowadays think of it as a belief, instead of as a given, we mistakenly extend that conception into the past, and wonder whether Shakespeare *believed* in it, which is completely ahistorical:

The question then becomes not did Shakespeare believe in astrology, but did he regard astrology as an effective metaphor for the social and political scene, of the inexorable rise and fall of kings, of the ebb and flow of seasons in human affairs? Quite clearly he did, for as order is restored in the closing scene [of *King Lear*], and as the elements return to a state of balance, Edmund is dead and Edgar is duke. Birth had won, and wit had failed. If Shakespeare did not take this view, he would have been out of step with the entire intellectual consensus of his time. (Campion, 2013, p. 131)

It is of crucial importance, then, to bear in mind both the historical and the cultural context of the moment of conception of the plays, for, just like the chart for Edmund’s conception, they indicate what those texts are capable of, and what influences are imbued within them. Being able to analyse the allusions to astrology is of critical importance when dealing with Medieval and Early Modern literature interpretation, for these references enhance, complete, and give nuances to the interpretation of the texts. Of course, that implies becoming familiar with a whole body of literature that was buried after the Age of Reason, but now new editions and new translations of these once thought lost astrological texts and manuals are resurfacing,¹⁹ and Hellenistic and Renaissance astrology are gaining popularity within the astrological community.²⁰ In fact, after the publication of *Shakespeare and the Stars*, the study

¹⁹ A notable example is Project Hindsight (1993-2018), which published for the first time the complete astrological works of Guido Bonatti in English (*Liber Astronomiae*, 1994).

²⁰ Examples of astrologers working to resurrect the Hellenistic tradition would be Demetra George and Chris Brennan, among others, and of Renaissance astrology, Christopher Warnock.

of astrological references in Shakespeare is now more accessible than ever, since no other work has dealt with the topic with such care and to such depths before. In fact, apart from that volume, “[t]he literature on Shakespeare’s attitude to astrology is surprisingly sparse in view of its importance as metaphor in his plays” (Campion, 2013, p. 131), and the few articles that do exist are either written by sceptics or by people who did not delve into contemporaneous astrological literature. There are many other works from the same or similar time periods that could also use further studies taking into account the validity of astrology, not only as a way of understanding the universe, but also (and more relevant here), as a useful, rich, and nuanced literary device worthy of consideration and research.

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