

*FROM MĀSHĀ 'ALLĀH
TO KEPLER
Theory and Practice in
Medieval and Renaissance
Astrology*

Edited by Charles Burnett and Dorian
Gieseler Greenbaum



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Cover image: the horoscope of the creation of the world, dedicated to the future Henry VIII, including a world map, the four winds, the signs of the zodiac (in gold), the planets in their degrees of exaltation (except Mercury) and the twelve astrological places: I (beginning of) life; II moveable property and helpers; III siblings, short journeys and religions; IV parents, immoveable property and ships; V children and entertainment; VI illnesses and servants; VII marriage and controversies; VIII death and inheritance; IX religion and long journeys; X rulership and profession; XI friends and hope; XII enemies and large animals.

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DEDICATION

In memoriam
Giuseppe Bezza
21 September 1946 – 18 June 2014
amico nostro, caro et docto

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SELF-GOVERNANCE AND THE BODY POLITIC IN RENAISSANCE ANNUAL PROGNOSTICATIONS

Steven Vanden Broecke

Introduction

Extant texts which we might identify as annual prognostications appear to be no older than the middle of the fourteenth century.¹ However, there is ample evidence that the genre fits into a much older tradition of ‘mundane astrology’ (also known as ‘general’ astrology) which was already well-represented in Book II of Claudius Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*. From at least the thirteenth century onwards, medieval textbooks on mundane astrology contain extensive discussions of forms of astrological prediction which are strongly reminiscent of the preserved annual prognostications.² Moreover, there is some evidence of proto-prognostications for the late twelfth century.³

Lodovica Braïda has pointed out how, as early as the eighteenth century, European elites began to adopt a strangely bifurcated interpretation of the astrological almanacs and prognostications which annually came off the European presses.⁴ On the one hand, these productions were interpreted as reflections of a popular culture and folk psychology possessed by superstition and fear. On the other hand, they were approached as utilitarian instruments distributing useful knowledge amongst the masses. Any choice between these

¹ Cf. Lynn Thorndike, ‘Extracts from Augustine of Trent on the Year 1340: Latin Text’, in *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia U.P., 1923–58), III: pp. 699–707.

² Notable early examples include (ps.-?)Albertus Magnus, *Speculum astronomiae* (c. 1260); Guido Bonatti, *Liber astronomiae* (c. 1277); John of Eschenden, *Summa iudicialis de accidentibus mundi* (1347–48).

³ For instance, the so-called Toledo letter of 1179. On this document and its impact, see now Gerd Mentgen, *Astrologie und Öffentlichkeit im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 2005), pp. 17–134.

⁴ Lodovica Braïda, ‘Les almanachs italiens du XVIIIe siècle: véhicules de “faux préjugés” ou “puissants moyens d’éducation”?’ in *Les lectures du peuple en Europe et dans les Amériques du XVIIe au XXe siècle*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Lüssenbrink (Editions Complexe, 2003), pp. 259–70.

competing interpretations is intimately entwined with the interpreter's decisions about which features of these texts will count as typical or fundamental, as well as about the social origins and legitimacy of these features. The very presence of astrology in these texts, for instance, could be classified on the side of the superstitious or the legitimate.

Interestingly, the interpretive tension between the prognostication as site of information or representation of anxiety has been carried over into the historiography of astrology. Anthony Grafton's *Cardano's Cosmos*, for instance, approached the Renaissance prognostication as a tool which served the utilitarian interests of the prognosticator and his audience. The prognosticator, Grafton asserted, 'probably hoped to' gain credibility for his medical services by recruiting the astrological beliefs of his audience, while the audience gained 'practical advice for farmers, doctors, and others concerned with short-term futures and theoretical advice for the rulers of church and state'.⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, that the Renaissance prognostication was presented as the early modern analogue of the contemporary weather prediction or economic forecast.⁶ At the same time, Grafton found himself confronted with frequent instances where the early modern prognostication offers 'sweeping generalizations, sonorous, deliberately frightening language, and banal details about rain and snow' or 'the gravest and most pompous prose to predict the obvious'. Switching over to a portrait of the prognostication as arising from a 'sharply competitive prophetic ecology', this genre now represented the objective political and religious turmoil of the early modern world.⁷

The basic nature of the Renaissance prognostication thus oscillates between its being a symptom of anxiety and a tool of instrumental reason, while the Renaissance prognosticator is cast in the alternative roles of shouting prophet and sedate knowledge-maker.⁸ In this paper, I would like to question both interpretations by portraying the early Renaissance prognostication as an instrument of self-governance. Renaissance self-governance, I would like to

⁵ Anthony Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U.P., 1999), pp. 42, 48.

⁶ Anthony Grafton, 'Starry Messengers. Recent work in the History of Western Astrology', *Perspectives on Science* 8 (2000): pp. 70–83.

⁷ Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos*, pp. 44, 48–50.

⁸ A hysteria supposedly stimulated by popular belief in prophecy and divine punishment.

suggest, differs from more modern models of self-conduct in two important ways. On the one hand, it primarily addresses a situation of being governed by an Other with superior force. In the case of astrology, this Other is the visible heavens, and its government manifests itself in the form of fortunate or unfortunate gifts being added to the self's life story. This is the anthropological background against which Renaissance prognostications annually unveiled what one must reasonably hope and fear. To interpret the latter revelations as symptoms of an underlying pessimism or anxiety overlooks both the prognosticator's revelations of good fortune and his profound concern with the stability of the body politic.

On the other hand, Renaissance self-governance did not seek to extract or protect the self from its lifelong relation to the stars; instead, it sought to inject some measure of resistance and agency *inside* this reality, thus turning the self into something which was not *only* governed by the stars, but also by God, the intellect and the will. Accordingly, it may be anachronistic to interpret Renaissance astrology as a modern project of technical rationality which approaches the heavens as an external realm threatening the self's proper domain of possessions and acquisitive acts.

Preaching God's Book in the Heavens

Giuseppe Bezza has already pointed out how fifteenth-century astrological discourse spoke of the heavens as a legible book, sometimes—erroneously—attributing this to the authority of Abū Ma'shar.⁹ Such claims were certainly prevalent in early Renaissance prognostications, where they were often cast in the language of divine providence and care for humankind. In his prognostication for 1486, Martin Pollich of Mellerstadt thus presented the visible heavens as a legible surface

. . . in which [God] has written all things. He has fashioned a book in which we may read and acknowledge what is to happen to us, warning us for the evil future sooner than she arrives.¹⁰

⁹ Giuseppe Bezza, 'Liber scriptus et liber vivus. Antecedenti astrologici alla metafora galileiana del Libro dell'universo', accessed 24 July 2012, <http://www.cieloeterra.it/articoli/liber/liber.html>.

¹⁰ Martin Pollich of Mellerstadt, *Practica Lipcensis* (Nürnberg, 1485), fol. [A1r]: 'Der Erwardige got (. . .) haut auss gestreckt das fel der hymel sam ein permet in welches er

The very availability of this book, Pollich continued, was a sign of unspeakable divine mercy (*unaussprechliche barmhertzicheit*). It was a gift which allowed humans to negotiate their helplessness in the face of corporeal corruption (*verderben*) by offering them a content of ‘coming histories’ (*zukunfftigen geschichten*). Johann Virdung’s *Judicium Lipczense* for 1492 emphasized that it was God’s will for there to be a relation of subjection between man and the stars, because it is ‘they from whom cognition of many future events can be obtained’. Moreover, Virdung continued:

In *Timaeus*, Plato testified that ‘those things which God wanted us to know he wrote down in the heavens as if in a book’. Albumasar alludes to this when he says ‘God made the heavens like a parchment on which the species of all inferior things are written down’.¹¹

A clear echo of the readable-book approach to the heavens can be overheard in the preface to Gaspar Laet’s prognostication for 1524:

And the natural force of the position of the stars is not at all the primary cause of inferiors, but the instrument of the divine mind and a secondary cause: an instrument by which God gives us an understanding of the conceptions in His mind, just as the voice by which a man imparts the conceptions of his heart.¹²

On the one hand, such interpretations of the visible heavens easily closed the gap between the astrologer and the prophet. This had already been prepared in

alle ding geschriben hat. Und hot gemacht ein buch darynne wir mügen lesen und erkennen was uns schedlich sey, Warnende uns vor böser czukunft ee danne sy kummet’. Hain *13313

¹¹ Johannes Virdung of Hassfurt, *Iudicium Lipczense* (. . .) 1493 (. . .) (Leipzig, 1493), fol. [A1r]: ‘Ipsa namque sunt ex quibus futurorum plurima haberi potest cognitio (. . .). Testante Platone in thimeo inquentis: ea quae a nobis deus scieri voluit scripsit in celo quasi in libro. Cui alludit et albumasar cum dicit: fecit deus celum ut pellem in quo omnium inferiorum rerum species sunt descripte’. Hain *8372.

¹² Gaspar Laet, *Pronosticum* (. . .) *pro anno domini millesimo quingentesimo vigesimo quarto* (Antwerp: Michael Hillenius, 1524), fol. [A1r]: ‘Et vim positionis siderum naturalem causam inferiorum non omnino primariam esse, sed instrumentum divinae mentis et secundariam causam, mediante quo instrumento deus dat nobis intellegere mentis conceptum, sicut homo conceptus cordis per voces’.

the early fifteenth century by Pierre d'Ailly, who approached the heavens as a legible book in which God announced the same basic events which Scripture codified into a closed narrative.¹³ D'Ailly put this presupposition to use by correlating Apocalyptic 'end of the visible world' prophecies with specific astrological phenomena and situating the latter in a given chronological framework. In doing so, D'Ailly re-used the regularity of celestial motion so as to offer a more secure and credible revelation of which events one should expect inside the spiritual relation to God.

On the other hand, these interpretations also turned the prognostication into a starting-point for negotiating God's supernatural mercy and assistance. At the end of an extensive doxography of the ancient defense of a 'fatal disposition' in the cosmos, the preface to Paul of Middelburg's prognostication for 1482 emphasized two reasons for accepting the existence of fate while rejecting its 'necessity in compelling'. On the one hand, Paul invoked the fact that 'the influxes of the stars can be stopped by a nudge of the omnipotent God'; on the other hand, there was the certainty that 'the actions of the stars are not received except in suitably disposed matter'.¹⁴

Acknowledgment of this first possibility was not unexceptional among the prognosticators. Consider the following passage, which appears in the preface to Johannes Laet's prognostication for 1479:

With the highest God as my witness, the present [prognostication] was only written so that the hearts of men would convert to the good, and would wholly guard themselves from coming threatening evils. Whenever the stars threaten us with approaching terrestrial evils, we, forewarned, could implore God with devote minds for Him to convert to good those evil starry influences which we fear, and this out of His infinite goodness. For the divine will and human prudence both change and lift the starry influences on earth.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350–1420* (Princeton NJ: Princeton U.P., 1994), p. 98, on pagans knowing of Christ's birth on the basis of a Saturn–Jupiter conjunction.

¹⁴ Paul of Middelburg, *Iudicium pronosticum (. . .) anni 1482*, fols. [A2r/v]: Hain 11144. For more on Paul of Middelburg's prognostications, see the contribution of Stephan Heilen in this volume.

¹⁵ Johannes Laet, *Prenosticata (. . .) 1479* (Cologne: Johannes Guldenschaff, 1479), fol. [A1r]: 'Cum teste altissimo presentia scripta ad alium finem scripta non sunt quam ut hominum corda ad bonum convertat et de futuris malis comminatis possetenus precaveant. Ut cum

Likewise, the section on war and peace in a *Practica* for 1488 by Martin Pollich of Mellerstadt was concluded with 'But here I end, imploring the aid of the omnipotent God to assist the just and mercifully safeguard his people'.¹⁶ In his *Practica* for 1493, Marcus Schinnagel explained that the astrologer publicly foretells evils to come because 'the evils being foreknown, we should immediately and without delay implore the omnipotent God with a devote mind and supplication, with fasting and weeping, so that he would deign to avert evils known beforehand from us, wretches'.¹⁷ Pietro Bono Avogadro's prognostication for 1495 advised the people of Bologna to 'plead with God for the divine fabricator to safeguard this most renowned city'.¹⁸ And in the section on war and peace of Gaspar Laet's prognostication for 1525, we hear:

(. . .) if strife would not be suspended before the summer, [I have] little hope for the rest of the year—unless God, omnipotent founder of the stars, from whom the stars have a force and power of influencing these inferior things, averts or suspends their laws, or disposes the minds of men in such a way that they do not welcome the malign influences of the stars.¹⁹

Likewise, the difference between divine *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* was often couched in the theological language of 'grace'. Laet concluded his

stelle nobis de futuris malis comminentur super terram ut tunc avisati devotis mentibus deum deprecemur ut ipse sua bonitate infinita malas stellarum influentias quas formidamus velit in bonum commutare. Quoniam voluntate dei et prudentia hominum stellarum influentie super terram alterantur atque tolluntur (. . .)'. Sole known copy: British Library IB4240.

¹⁶ Martin Pollich, *Practica Lipcensis* (Leipzig, 1487), fol. [A7v]: 'Sed hec et quamplura missa facio, dei omnipotentis auxilium implorans ut sit adiutor iustorum et suos misericorditer tueatur'.

¹⁷ Marcus Schinnagel, *Pregnosticum (. . .) 1492*, fol. A2v: '(. . .) illa non est mea nec alicuius astrologi intentio, sed ut statim et illico malis precognitis omnipotentem deum devota mente et oratione ieiunio et fletu implorare debeamus ut mala prius cognita a nobis miseris avertere dignetur'. Hain *14539.

¹⁸ Pietro Bono Avogadro, *Prognostico dell'anno 1495* (Venezia: Cristoforo de' Pensi(?), 1494), fol. A4v: 'Bononienses deum deprecant ut divinus fabricator hanc celeberrimam custodiat civitatem'. GW 245 (cf. <http://www.gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de>).

¹⁹ Gaspar Laet, *Pronosticum* (Antwerp: Michiel Hillen van Hoochstraten, [1523]), fol. [A2v]. Wouter Nijhoff and M.E. Kronenberg, *Nederlandsche bibliografie van 1500–1540* ([Nijhoff]'s-Gravenhage, 1923–71), 8 vols., n° 3338.

prognostication for 1478, for instance, by expressing his hope that:

(. . .) the most glorious God would deign, out of his most benign grace, to convert and change all evil future things to good, and liberate us from unforeseen death and enemies. Amen.²⁰

The prognosticator's art of embodiment

Despite the frequency of the prognosticator's emphasis on divine mercy it was the second possibility, mentioned by Paul of Middelburg in 1482, that would be the default option in carving out corporeal non-helplessness. The basic contours of this second option were set down in a highly influential commentary on Alcabitus's *Libellus isagogicus* by John of Saxony (fl. 1327–1355), who put the point rather clearly:

One is to heed the way in which a wise man can impede or help the operations of the stars. It is certain that we cannot simply block off the celestial influence, just as we cannot [stop] the general fact that fire combusts. But we can dispose the passive so as to receive the celestial influence in such or such a way. For we see that the very same solar heat dissolves ice, while hardening mud.²¹

Notice John of Saxony's emphasis on the fact that there is nothing to be done about the *fact* of one's body being affected by the cosmic play of influence. Instead, our commentator's hopes were strictly limited to an endless refashioning of the 'passive' recipient of this play. The same set of expectations was voiced in the extremely influential *Introductorium maius* (in the standard

²⁰ Johannes Laet, *Pronosticatio anno presentis lxxvii* (. . .) (Paris: Richard Blandin and Guillaume Février, 1478), fol. B8r: '(. . .) deus gloriosus sua benignissima gratia dignetur omnia futura mala in bonum convertere et immutare et nos ad [sic] morte improvisa et inimicis liberare amen'. Hain 9827.

²¹ Al-Qabisi, *Alcabitus Astronomie iudicarie principia tractatus cum Joannis saxonij commentario* (Paris, 1521), fol. a2v: 'Sed advertendum est de modo per quem sapiens potest impedire vel adiuuare opus stellarum. Certum est quod nos non possumus simpliciter impedire influentiam celestem: sicut nec combustione ignis. Sed possumus disponere passum ad recipiendum alio vel alio modo influentiam celestem. Videmus enim quod idem calor solis glacies dissolvit et constringit lutum'. On John of Saxony's astrological work, see Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia U.P., 1923–58), III: pp. 253–67.

Latinized version of Hermann of Carinthia) of Abū Ma‘shar (Albumasar). In his attack on the supposed uselessness of astrology (chapter I.5), the Latin Albumasar conceded that the coming of (good or bad) things cannot be hastened nor changed, but asserted that a warning does allow one to impede or at least lighten the ‘force of the thing’, and this either by fashioning a more robust body for oneself, or fleeing.²² The third tract of Leopold of Austria’s *Compilatio* likewise stated that the utility of astrology was to ‘evade a foreknown danger, if this is possible, or to provide for its coming if this is impossible’.²³

Such assumptions appear to have been widely shared among early prognosticators. Johannes Laet’s printed prognostication for 1476 found that

(. . .) the death of some great prelates is discerned for this year: bishops and abbots of great renown, who are under the direct will and command of great princes (. . .). And this mortal accident will come out from acute fevers, or from the burning of the blood which generates such fevers. Hence, if any prelate, bishop, or abbot would meet such an accident, he is advised to take recourse to venesection, and a purging of the body by drugs.²⁴

In this passage, it was not so much the ‘accident’ as such, but rather its effects in the recipient which were to be turned around by a work on the body. In a similar vein, Johann Virdung of Hasfurt’s *Practica* for 1495 claimed that

(. . .) foreseen blows hurt less. Thus, if we were to know that a great cold will come, we would furnish our house so that our bodies would not be bound in cold.²⁵

²² Abū Ma‘shar, *Introductorium in astronomiam Albumasaris abalachi* (Augsburg: Erhard Ratdolt, 1489), fol. b2v.

²³ [Leopold of Austria], *Compilatio Leopoldi ducatus Austrie filij de astrorum scientia* (Venice: Erhard Ratdolt, 1489), fols. C1v–C3r.

²⁴ Johannes Laet, *Pronosticationes (. . .) eventuum futurorum (. . .) 1476* (Louvain: Johannes de Westfalia, 1475/6), fols. A2r/v: ‘(. . .) quod hoc an[n]o percipietur mors aliquorum magnorum prelatorum, episcoporum scilicet et abbatum magni nominis qui subsunt voluntati seu ditioni magnorum principum (. . .). Et illud accidens mortis eveniet ex febribus acutis, seu ex adusto sanguine qui generabit tales febres. Quapropter si alicui prelato episcopo vel abbati tale accidens evenierit: consulendum est sibi quod statim faciat sibi fieri minutionem sanguinis, et corpus purgari per medicinam’. Sole known copy Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Arch.Seld. B 25 (fols. 253–262).

²⁵ Johann Virdung of Hassfurt, *Practica Cracoviensis super anno M.cccc.cxxv (. . .)*, fol. [A1r]:

The preface to Domenico Maria de Novara's Italian prognostication for 1497, meanwhile, asserted that 'the operation of the stars in this world is similar to the force of the magnet which attracts the iron unless it is impeded by the vapor of garlic or the virtue of a diamond'.²⁶ It is precisely this focus on sublunary passion and the mode of expression—rather than the fact—of celestial influence which also underlay Novara's emphasis, in the preface to his prognostication for 1492, on the need for astrologers to 'adapt the passive virtues of subject parts to the agents [of the virtues of celestial bodies]'.²⁷ The same attitude probably underlay the claim of John of Glogau (c. 1445–1507) that

(. . .) The best astronomer can prohibit much evil which is to come from the stars, if only he would know *the nature of these [stars]* [my italics].²⁸

John of Glogau's assertions were repeated almost verbatim in a prognostication for 1495 by his Ferrarese colleague Pietro Bono Avogadro, who duly identified this as stemming from the pseudo-Ptolemaic *Centiloquium*.²⁹

Hope, fear, and governance of the self

Contrary to what many historians have claimed about the Renaissance prognosticator, this art of embodiment was not specifically, and certainly not exclusively, obsessed with misfortune and calamity. Consider the opening section of book IV of Guido Bonatti's *Liber astronomiae* (c. 1277), one of the

'Nam iacula previsa minus ledent: sicuti si cognoverimus frigus grande eventurum, domum lignis exornemus ne nostra frigoribus constringantur corpora'. Hain *8373.

²⁶ Domenico Maria de Novara, *I pronostici di Domenico Maria de Novara*, eds. Fabrizio Bònoli, Giuseppe Bezza, Salvo de Meis and Cinzia Colavita (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2012), p. 209: '(. . .) la operatione de le stelle in questo mondo è simile a la virtù de la calamita che tira a sé el ferro, se non è impedita dal vapore de l'aglio, overo dalla virtù del diamante'.

²⁷ Novara, *Pronostici*, p. 182: 'Mondanorum effectuum naturam prescire desiderans non solum vires celestium corporum contemplatur verum subiectarum partium debet virtutes passivas agentibus adaptare'.

²⁸ Malgorzata H. Malewicz, 'Johannis de Glogovia "Persuasio brevis quomodo astrologiae studium religioni christianiae non est adversum"', *Studia Mediewistyczne* 22 (1985), pp. 153–75.

²⁹ Pietro Bono Avogadro, *Prognostico dell'anno 1495* (Venezia: Cristoforo de' Pensi(?), 1494), fol. A1r.

standard authorities of the prognosticators, where Bonatti discusses the usefulness of mundane astrology through 'revolutions of the years of the world':

By the revolutions of the years of the world, it is known what good or bad is to be in that year; whether the year will be tranquil or importune; whether there will be wars in the revolved year or not, and likewise for peace; what is the future state of kings or princes, of rich men or magnates, of the populace and the mean religious; also, the well-being of anyone whatsoever, as well as of any sort whatsoever, and this universally according to the customs of men. Likewise, it is known what is to be concerning crops, whether abundance or penury is expected, and what is to come forth from them: a mean or mediocre price, as is said in the section on lots.³⁰

Part VI of *Liber astronomiae*, which dealt with weather prediction, spoke of the cognition of 'fortunate' and 'infortunate' things (in the plural), but not in the sense of effects of a given relation to something called 'fortune'.³¹ Likewise, Johannes Laet's dedication of his prognostication for 1477–8 to prince-bishop Louis de Bourbon of Liège approached the visible heavens as the source of fortune and infortune, and this with the accord of God.³² In his dedication of a Latin edition of Ptolemaic and Arabic astrological works (1493) to Domenico Maria de Novara, Girolamo Salio of Faventino not only approached the phenomenon of celestial motion as the ultimate source of the sublunary phenomena of generation and corruption, but also as the source of differentiation in the ultimate fortunes of humans. The importance which Salio attached to this is underlined by the fact that he identified such differentiation,

³⁰ Guido Bonatti, *De astronomia tractatus X* (Basel: Nicolaus Prucknerus, 1550), col. 489. I will be referencing this edition throughout this paper. The literature on Bonatti is undeservedly small, but includes: Bernardo Boncompagni, *Della vita e delle opere di Guido Bonatti astrologo ed astronomo del secolo decimoterzo* (Roma: Tipografia delle Belle Arti, 1851); Mario Tabanelli, *Un Astrologo Forlivese dal 1200: Guido Bonatti* (Brescia: Magalini Editrice, 1978); Cesare Vasoli, 'L'Astrologo Forlivese Guido Bonatti', *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi Danteschi* (. . .) (Ravenna, 10–12 Settembre 1971) (Ravenna: Longo, 1979), pp. 239–60.

³¹ Bonatti, *De astronomia*, col. 830.

³² Johannes Laet, *Pronosticatio anno presentis lxxvii* (. . .) (Paris: Richard Blandin and Guillaume Février, 1478), fol. A1r: '(. . .) et fortuna vel impedimentum operatio seu destructio fit ex motibus planetarum ex operibus eorum et hec nutu dei est totumque opus planetarum eorumque fortuna et infortunium'. Hain 9827.

when correlated with differences in human birth charts, as the basis for astrology's primeval experiential tradition.³³

Such passages suggest that pessimism was not as 'typical' of the prognosticators as is often suggested. Even if it is true that astrological productions of this period assign a privileged position to the possibility of foretelling misfortune, this does not necessarily imply a 'pessimistic' outlook. At the beginning of *Liber astronomiae*, Bonatti thus explained that astrology responds to a desire to know

(. . .) what must happen to someone concerning a specific thing. Through this, an evil thing which threatens someone *can* be avoided by that person, while a profitable thing that is promised, *can actually* be apprehended [my italics].³⁴

This passage anticipated a claim with which Domenico Maria de Novara introduced his prognostication for 1484:

For only the art of coming things of the stars gives us foresight and similitude to the immortal God; for knowing the end of things through her, we may embrace things which are coming, or flee coming danger and damnation.³⁵

Likewise, the prognosticator John of Glogau identified astrology as that art which opens up the possibility for men to

(. . .) declare the passion of future events to mortals from the site and motion of the stars; that is, what good is to be hoped for from the stars, and what evil is to be abhorred.³⁶

It is interesting to read such statements with an actual Renaissance prognostication in hand. Doing so enables one to understand how Johannes

³³ Claudius Ptolemaeus, *Liber quadripartiti Ptholemei* (. . .) (Venice: Bonetus Locatellus, 1493), dedicatory letter, col. 1. Hain *13544.

³⁴ Bonatti, *De astronomia*, col. 12: 'quid debeat ei evenire de re illa. Unde si minetur ei damnum, poterit illud evitare; et si promittat ei lucrum, poterit illud apprehendere'.

³⁵ Novara, *Pronostici*, p. 133: 'Sola namque astrorum peritia nos futurorum praescios immortalis deo similibus reddit per hanc enim cognito rerum fine poterimus quae praefutura sunt complecti, periculum vero aut dannum allatura subterfugere'.

³⁶ Malewicz, 'Johannis de Glogovia', p. 167.

Canter's promise of a planet Saturn which, beginning in September 1489, would 'administer better fates to his kin' might not have been read as the announcement of a future fact, but rather as a warning of a future *possibility*, whose materialisation would depend on the willingness of Canter's Saturnine readers to seek out such good fortune, as well as on their capability of doing so by knowing that it would be a reasonable expectation in the first place.³⁷

Glogau's statement not only qualifies historians' claims about the endemic pessimism of Renaissance prognostications; it also calls for carefulness in reading these texts as informative predictions of future trends and events, wielded so as to minimise the possibility of loss. Glogau's liberal use of the language of passions, hopes and fears suggests a far less detached outlook on celestial influence, which we must now try to unpack.

Ladislaus of Cracow, an *émigré* prognosticator working in Rome, opened his prognostication for 1494 with the claim that both philosophers and theologians defended the opinion that '*this inferior world* is governed by celestial causes [my italics]', and that this was adopted as a working assumption in 'all judgments of the stars'. Worries about a distancing of God were handled by Ladislaus by asserting that the celestial influences were contained by His absolute rule, which 'added or diminished' these influences at will.³⁸

While this last statement echoes the aforementioned emphasis on divine mercy and supernatural intervention, the rest of Ladislaus's text highlights the extent to which prognosticators approached the visible heavens as intermediaries ('secondary causes') in a single web of the divine governance of creation. The prognosticators specialised in the intimate relations of rule obtaining between the visible heavens and the four sublunary elements. In the preface to his prognostication for 1477–8, Johannes Laet thus spoke for many of his colleagues when he wrote that

[God] instituted the earth immobile and neither declined to the right nor to the left. He also made the four elements changeable, and led them—and each creature along with them—to be changed by the motion of the seven planets. Thus,

³⁷ Johannes Canter, *Prognosticatio anno 1489* (Rome: Stephan Planck, 1489), fol. [A3v]. Hain *4353.

³⁸ Ladislaus de Cracovia, *Iudicium anno 1494* (Rome: Andreas Freitag de Argentina, 1494), fol. A1v. Hain *5800.

everything which happens in this world, is effected by the motion of the planets.³⁹

In the preface to his vernacular *Practica Lipcensis* for 1486, Martin Pollich of Mellerstadt began by pointing out that ‘the honorable God of the heavens, who governs and universally rules over this entire world by His will and power’, created the heavens and the stars, endowing them with light, motion, and influence. This God, Pollich continued, ‘moves the heavens around the terrestrial realm’, situating and fixing the latter in the middle ‘so that through these, the lower world would be ordered and ruled’. It is not surprising, then, to find that the prognostications of the Bolognese prognosticator Domenico Maria de Novara habitually described man’s relation to the stars in terms of ‘being ruled’ or ‘being governed’ (*regi, gubernari*) and ‘governing oneself’ (*se gubernare*).⁴⁰ Similar statements were made in Gaspar Laet’s Dutch prognostication for 1503.⁴¹ In this way, Renaissance prognostication culture comes forth as a primary instance of what Michel Foucault referred to as the Renaissance culture of governmentality: one organised around the practice of turning to the visible heavens, *rather than something else*, in order to organise the self’s relation to fortune and change.⁴²

Such statements confirm how the Renaissance prognostication annually renewed man’s insight into the inevitable and constant changes which followed from the embeddedness of sublunary bodies in a relation of governance by the stars. As we have seen, prognosticators did not consider this relation to be something which one could oppose, let alone extract the self from. Instead, the

³⁹ Johannes Laet, *Pronosticatio anno presentis lxxvii* (. . .) (Paris: Richard Blandin and Guillaume Février, 1478), fol. A1r: ‘[Deus] posuit terram immobilem in circuitu eius et non declinate ad dexteram neque ad sinistram et posuit quattuor elementa mobilia et movere fecit ea per motum septem planetarum ita omnis creatura et universa que fiunt in hoc mundo efficiuntur a motu planetarum (. . .)’. Hain 9827.

⁴⁰ See e.g., Novara, *Pronostici*, pp. 139, 170, 178, 187.

⁴¹ Gaspar Laet, *Pronosticacie* (. . .) MCCCCCij (Antwerpen: Adriaen van Berghen, 1503), fol. a1v: ‘Ghesien dat de werelt geregeert wort bijden lope des hemels ende dat die dingen opter aerden hen veranderen ende muteren naden loop des hemels als philosophus seit Methaurorum primo. Ende dat wi vinden in vele ende menige vande dingen (. . .)’. Wouter Nijhoff and M.E. Kronenberg, *Nederlandsche bibliografie van 1500–1540* (Gravenhage, 1923–71), 8 vols., n° 3344.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France (1977–78)* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004).

rationality of their productions hinged on their enabling a work of preparing the body to receive or alter celestial gifts. A good example of this occurs in the *Iudicium* for 1505 by Georg Tannstetter, which emphasized that God endowed man with reason and art, by which he could '(. . .) easily choose to flee sicknesses, wars, hunger, and many more of this kind, and to embrace health and a temperate air'.⁴³ This is also why prognosticatory predictions were typically voiced as revelations of what one could hope and fear for the coming year. Domenico Maria de Novara's prognostications were often styled as sources of advice on what one should reasonably fear (*timere*) in one's relation to fortune. More often than not, this was not a matter of anxiety or pessimism but of the organisation of self-governance. It is in this way that one should read the typical prediction for the city of Mechlin in Johannes Laet's prognostication for 1479:

To those of Mechlin, I declare that nothing special is to come out, different from how the years usually pass by; nevertheless, drowning of some people is to be feared, as are fire and messengers arriving at unusual times (. . .).⁴⁴

Conversely, one should also be careful in associating the Renaissance prognostication with utilitarian and informative discourses about the future, designed to minimise the danger of loss in human actions. Such a picture does not allow us to sufficiently appreciate the prognosticator's emphasis on a given governance of the embodied self inside a hierarchically structured creation; his understanding of the prognostication as an annual revelation of new episodes in the story of such governance; his uptake of human agency as a means of altering these celestial passions (rather than of modifying one's own projects in light of information about the future).

⁴³ Georg Tanstetter Collimitius, *Iudicium Viennense* (. . .) *super anno M.ccccc.v* (. . .), fol. [A1r]: 'Altissimus ille deus (. . .) humanum genus arte rationeque dotavit, qua aegritudines, bella, famem, et id genus plura fugere, pacem vero sanitatem et temperamentum aeris eligere facile queat'.

⁴⁴ Johannes Laet, *Prenosticata* (. . .) 1479 (Cologne: Johannes Guldenschaff, 1479), fol. A5v: 'Mechlinensibus non assigno aliquam rem specialem eventuram aliter quam anni communiter solent pertransire. Sed est timendum de submersione aliquarum personarum et igne et nuncijs advenientibus ex temporis alienis et est particulare'.

Celestial Passions, the Lower Soul, and the Social Body

An emphasis on divine governance of corporeal creation through the secondary causes of the stars was hardly exclusive to the prognosticators. In *Summa theologiae* Ia.q115.a4, which detailed the participation of celestial bodies in the divine government of the world, Aquinas even invoked the successes of mundane astrology as evidence for the reality of such governance. Considering that ‘astrologers often foretell the truth concerning the coming of wars, and other human actions, of which the intellect and will are principles’, Aquinas explained

The majority of men follow their passions, which are movements of the sensitive appetite, in which movements heavenly bodies can co-operate; but few are wise enough to resist these passions. Consequently astrologers are able to foretell the truth in the majority of cases, especially in a general way. But not in particular cases, for nothing prevents man resisting his passions by his free-will. And so the astrologers themselves say that the wise man is stronger than the stars, in so far as, that is, he conquers his passions’ (ST.Ia.q115.a4.ad 3).⁴⁵

Likewise, his letter *De iudiciis astrorum* made it amply clear that there was an entire realm of what Aquinas called ‘corporeal effects’: that is, of ‘things which depend on natural and corporeal causes’. His examples of these clearly evoked the realm of mundane astrology: ‘storminess and serenity of the air, health or infirmity of the body, or abundance and sterility of crops’.⁴⁶ Aquinas also asserted that ‘all men use some observation of the celestial bodies regarding effects of this kind’, providing a list of examples that would inform the pastoral-theological category of ‘natural astrology’ for many centuries to come:

⁴⁵ ‘Ad tertium dicendum quod plures hominum sequuntur passiones, quae sunt motus sensitivi appetitus, ad quas cooperari possunt corpora caelestia, pauci autem sunt sapientes, qui huiusmodi passionibus resistant. Et ideo astrologi ut in pluribus vera possunt praedicere, et maxime in communi. Non autem in speciali, quia nihil prohibet aliquem hominem per liberum arbitrium passionibus resistere. Unde et ipsi astrologi dicunt quod sapiens homo dominatur astris, inquantum scilicet dominatur suis passionibus’. Acc. 24 July 2012, <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/sth1103.html#33271>.

⁴⁶ ‘(. . .) prenoscendum corporales effectus, puta tempestatem et serenitatem aeris, sanitatem uel infirmitatem corporis, uel ubertatem et sterilitatem fructuum’. Accessed 24 July 2012, <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ote.html>.

(. . .) farmers sow and reap at a specific time, which is observed through the motion of the sun; sailors abstain from sailings at full or new moon; physicians observe the critical days in the case of diseases, determined in accordance with the course of sun and moon.⁴⁷

Like the prognosticators, Aquinas assumed that the lower faculties of the human soul, animals, plants, and the elements were all equally governed by the stars. However, the evidence collected in the preceding sections also allows us to understand that, unlike Aquinas, the prognosticators did not approach such celestial passions as a natural fact which required no more than a privileging of the intellect and the will. The key difference lay in the prognosticator's focus on the realities of fortune and historical vicissitude. This focus invited them to re-use the Thomistic model of celestial passions as the natural-philosophical basis for a work of constructing prognostications and distributing these, so as to enable a relation of self-governance in relation to fortune.

There is good evidence that such self-governance was not modeled on the ideal of the modern, individual, rational actor seeking to protect or maximise his own domain of possessions. Consider the structure and content of early Renaissance prognostications. Although there is considerable geographical variation in order and completeness (especially in the fifteenth century), it is fair to say that the archetypical Renaissance prognostications treated the following five topics:

- (1) accidents relative to other bodies: weather, the well-being of crops and livestock;
- (2) accidents relative to the health of human individual or social bodies: health and disease, peace and war;
- (3) accidents of specific kinds of members of the social body, relative to a distribution of these kinds over different planetary rulerships: men of arms and military leaders are under the rule of Mars, women are under

⁴⁷ '(. . .) sicut agricole seminant et metunt certo tempore quod obseruatur secundum motum solis; naute nauigationes uitant in plenilunio, uel in lune defectu; medici circa egritudines creticos dies obseruant, qui determinantur secundum cursum solis et lune'. Accessed 24 July 2012, <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ote.html>.

Venus, lawyers, philosophers, and artists are under Mercury, worldly princes under the Sun, etc.;

- (4) accidents of individual prelates or princes, relative to their natal horoscope;
- (5) accidents of individual cities or provinces, relative to their foundation horoscope and/or planetary rulership.

In the case of the first sections, the prognostication narrated the state, in any given year, of beings which, as Domenico Maria de Novara put it in 1497, 'are agitated by a certain fatal connexion of causes'. Like other prognosticators, however, Novara also emphasized that the human will was capable of resisting such causes, even if this was difficult. Accordingly, it did not belong to the prognosticator 'to announce the effects, but the influxes and celestial impressions'.⁴⁸ Seen from this perspective, the second section stands out by introducing the presence of celestial passions in the social body and 'body politic'. Typical of this was the following passage from Marcus Schinnagel's prognostication for 1493:

Mars coursing through the tenth house, signifies discord, betrayal, and enmity between powerful men and magistrates. It is to be feared that many men will perish this year from war. It is also to be feared that soldiers will die a sorry death (. . .). Noblemen, kings, and potentates will be inclined to war.⁴⁹

As for the third section of the early Renaissance prognostication, consider the following passage from Johannes Canter's prognostication for 1489:

Those governed by the most dire ray of Saturn, such as Jews, farmers, old men, those pursuing vile professions – as well as, according to Guido [Bonatti], monks, especially those in black garments. These persons will be well in the beginning of

⁴⁸ Novara, *Pronostici*, p. 209.

⁴⁹ Marcus Schinnagel, *Prognosticon anno 1493* (s.l., [1493]), fol. [A2r]: 'Mars in decima decurrens discordias simulatas et inimicicias multas inter homines potentes et magistratus esse significat. Et timendum est multos homines hoc anno bello perire. Timendumque milites mala morte extingui. (. . .) Nobiles, reges, potentes, ad bellum excitabuntur'. Hain *14539.

the year, and will flourish for the most part, since their significator will find itself well-disposed in its own house. However, its retrogradation, from 19 April until 2 September, will rightly lead them to consider themselves unlucky, being vexed by diverse furies and infirmities. When Saturn escapes from its great misfortune, in the beginning of September, he will administer better fates to his kin.⁵⁰

Although Canter addresses the reader directly, it is significant that he does so as the bearer of a specific societal (and planetary) name. Distribution of planetary rulership over various parts of human society was hardly typical of the textual tradition of mundane astrology before the thirteenth century; it is not to be found in *Tetrabiblos* nor in the major Arabic authorities with which the prognosticators were familiar.⁵¹ Clearly, early Renaissance prognostications manifested a stronger tendency to approach the social body as an association and incorporation of different classes or—more accurately—‘social regions’. Even in this case, the prognosticator set out to offer an annually renewed revelation of the celestial life of the social body. Consider the following passage, taken from Martin Pollich of Mellerstadt’s preface to his prognostication for 1488:

There are various estates of men and their artifices which the heavens do not influence [lit. ‘flow directly into’], just as they do not for the rational part of man as a whole, nor for that which falls under this part – the individual intellectual habits, justice, and whatever is part of that, such as exchanges and distributions of things, all of which are willful due to the freedom of the rational appetite. Nevertheless, the heavens can act indirectly in this part, and this through most strong inclinations of the entire sensual faculty and inferior appetite. Because of the latter’s linkage to the body, it is agitated so much and with such a great stimulus

⁵⁰ Johannes Canter, *Prognosticatio anno 1489* (Roma: Stephan Planck, 1489), fol. [A3v]: ‘Saturni durissimi radio gubernati: quales sunt hebrei rustici agricolae senesque homines et vilia exercicia sectantes, Monachi item teste Guidone maxime nigris indumentis induti. In principio anni bene se habebunt, plurimumque fortunabunt, quum eorum significator in domo propria gaudioque erit. Verum propter eius retrogradationem quam faciet a xix aprilis usque ad ij septembris, diversis furijs vexari infirmitatibusque infelices etiam se reputantes non errabunt. Post tamen principium septembris evasus ex infortunio maximo saturnus, fata meliora suis etiam parabit’. Hain *4353.

⁵¹ A brief survey suggests that planetary rulership over different parts of society appears neither in Albumasar’s *Flores*, nor in Messahallah’s *De revolutionibus annorum mundi*, nor in Haly Abenragel’s *De iudiciis astrorum*.

and sweet caress – so to speak – from the celestial bodies, that it would be hard to kick back this fatal stimulus and difficult to resist such a strong inclination, just as it is most arduous to navigate against the stream. This is particularly the case for men who guide their lives according to the sensual faculty. But the heavens can do much less in those who live by reason. The present prognostication is instituted for the benefit of that inclination in diverse men.⁵²

The similarities with Aquinas's language are clear; but these metaphors and concepts are here deployed to address the challenges of a social body, rather than of embodied individuals. For both the social body as a whole and its specific social 'estates', the prognosticator set himself the task of predicting their 'state' (*status*) or well-being in the coming year. Accordingly, the ideal reader was expected to identify with this social body and with one of these categories, and to take the content of the prognostication as a guide to organising his celestial life.

The crucial importance of reader identifications with a limited set of social categories and 'roles' casts an interesting light on the intended use and meaningfulness of the prognostication. More specifically, it suggests that the aforementioned five-fold structure was carefully constructed as a mirror of the various identities and predicates which a prognostication reader was expected to adopt. If this hypothesis is correct, then the typical structure yields an ideal reader who defined himself as situated in the cosmos through relations of dependency on other, non-human beings (section 1), as a member of a social body (section 2), and as a specific kind of member of a social body (section 3).

⁵² Martin Pollich of Mellerstadt, *Practica Lipsiensis* (Leipzig, 1487), fols. [A7v–A8r]: 'Sicut sunt diversi hominum status et varia ipsorum artificia quibus celum non per se influit, quemadmodum nec toti parti rationali. Neque his que huic parti insunt quales sunt singuli intellectuales habitus cum iusticia et que illi insunt ut commutationes et rerum distributiones que omnia arbitraria sunt propter libertatem rationalis appetitus. Sed nihilominus celum in hanc partem agere poterit indirecte et secundum quondam fortissimam inclinationem totius sensualitatis et inferioris appetitus qui propter colligationem sui ad corpus tanto stimulo et dulci palpamine (ut ita loquar) a corporibus celestibus adeo agitur ut durum sit recalcitrare fatali stimulo et difficile resistere tam forti inclinatione quemadmodum gravissimum est contra torrentem navigare: presertim hominibus qui secundum sensualitatem vitam ducunt. Qui enim ratione vivunt in hos celum minus potest. Ad illam ergo inclinationem diversorum hominum presens prognosticum est institutum'. Hain *11055.

If this reading has some virtue to it, then the ideal reader of the Renaissance prognostication may very well have been expected to take responsibility for the presence of good fortune in each of these regions of existence, gradually working his way towards his identity as a city-dweller. This would also mean that the first sections of the Renaissance prognostication in fact targeted members of a kind of undefined, universal social body situated in the natural world. Contrary, then, to what often obtained in older mundane astrology, prognosticatory discourse was no longer *primarily* aimed at kings and princes. The art of negotiating celestial passions was no longer just the responsibility of Big Men. If the prefaces of early Renaissance prognostications still primarily targeted kings and princes, then it was mainly by virtue of expecting them to support and protect the legitimacy of the prognostication as such. Instead, the early Renaissance prognostication counted on its being received and wielded by individual 'everymen'.

However, all of this still leaves open the last two sections on political 'particulars': specific rulers, kingdoms, counties, cities. These sections were often based on annual revolutions of particular horoscopes, rather than the chart of the vernal ingress on which the first three sections were based. At the very least, then, these sections appear to involve more than a simple differentiation of the non-particularised social body of the first three sections towards nameable realities. These sections may not have been primarily targeted at 'ordinary' subjects of particular rulers (section 4) or members of particular social bodies (section 5). Indeed, a cursory inspection (although this would repay further study) of a random selection of early Renaissance prognostications suggests that these last two sections were, quite simply, directed at specific detainers of rule: kings, counts, dukes, and city magistrates.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that early Renaissance prognosticators are best interpreted as creative adopters of widespread analyses of divine governance through the secondary causes of the stars. Adopting these theological and natural-philosophical anthropologies as a key to the secrets and vicissitudes of human fortune, their productions offered an annually renewed insight in the celestial life of embodiment and the lower soul, so as to allow self-governance amongst the members of the Christian body politic and render the latter less passionate in its relation to fortune.

This result strongly qualifies two dominant interpretations of the early modern prognostication. On the one hand, historians have suggested that these texts are best interpreted as printed commodities in an early modern information economy, providing individuals with a tool for fine-tuning the rationality of their acquisitive actions by taking in credible knowledge of the future. On the other hand, historians have also portrayed the early Renaissance prognostication as a site where ‘popular’ fears and anxieties, stimulated by the objective uncertainty and disorder of an entire age, manifested themselves in the form of ‘pessimistic’ predictions which could easily cross over into the language and imagery of apocalyptic prophecy.

As we have seen, there is good evidence that early prognostication culture is best interpreted as part of a late medieval culture of political governance which had begun to carve itself out within the older theological discourse of divine care and guidance of his people. The early prognostication was deeply conversant with this older discourse in its emphasis on the heavens as a divinely given book which demonstrated His mercy; in its easy adoption of the language of grace and divine supplication as a source of assistance for natural man; in its manifold borrowings from scholastic analyses of divine governance of creation through the secondary causes of the stars; in its deep concern with the reality of celestially induced passions of the lower soul. Contrary to what is often suggested, prognosticators did not seek to protect individual readers from celestially induced misfortune. Instead, they tried to inject a measure of stability and rationality inside the constant play of celestially induced passions and effects. As far as the individual self was concerned, the early Renaissance prognosticators were much more akin to Joan Quigley, the infamous astrological consultant to the Reagans, who claimed of astrology that ‘it is like being in the ocean: you should go with the waves, not against them’.⁵³

At the same time, early prognostication culture also testifies to a novel interest in the body politic, rather than the more homogeneous and universal social body of Christ, as the ultimate focus of its attention. The ideal reader of the prognostication was expected to identify himself as a member of the natural realm of elements, plants and animals, of the social body of Christendom, and of a body politic consisting of different social estates under the guidance of specific

⁵³ TIME Magazine, 16 May 1988, accessed 25 July 2012: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,967410-1,00.html>.

secular rulers. Without entirely disavowing the importance of individualised consumption through booksellers and peddlers, it should be noted that some of the most solid evidence we have about 16th-century consumption and distribution of prognostications, points in the direction of city councils buying large parts of a print run and distributing these as new year's gifts.⁵⁴ Although this will require much additional research, the self-image of the prognosticator as offering guidance to the body politic, which Patrick Curry so meticulously unearthed for 17th-century England, may have been much older and widespread than we suspect.

⁵⁴ This situation was convincingly demonstrated in Jeroen Salman's study of Dutch prognostication culture. See Jeroen Salman, 'Populair drukwerk in de Gouden Eeuw. De almanak als handelswaar en lectuur' (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 1997), pp. 56–67, 102–19, 155–59, 177–85, 207–13.