

Monica Azzolini. *The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan*.

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The origins of this book lie in an encounter with the *Fondo astrologi* of the State Archives in Milan. This collection, devised in the eighteenth century and later redistributed over other parts of the Milan archive, documents the use of astrology by the fifteenth-century Sforza princes, and formed the basis of Ferdinando Gabotto's pioneering studies and text editions on the subject (1889–91). Revisiting this tantalizingly rich source, Monica Azzolini has finally produced what Gabotto never gave us: a book-length monograph on the astrological engagements of five Milan dukes and one duchess.

In her introduction, Azzolini lays out the two ways in which her research contributes to the field of Renaissance history. First of all, she sets out to make a difference in the way we narrate political history: "Italian Renaissance leaders may have been cunning, calculating men driven by personal and dynastic ambitions, but this did not make them immune from embracing the worldview of their contemporaries" (2). Secondly, the author intends to make a difference to our knowledge of the history of Renaissance astrology. Over the past few decades, our knowledge of the social and technical aspects of Renaissance astrology has been considerably advanced by scholars like John North, Patrick Curry, Sophie Page, Jean-Patrice Boudet, Germana Ernst, and Gunther Oestmann, as well as Robert Zoller's underacknowledged group of professional astrologers studying the techniques of premodern astrology. Only rarely, however, does one get the opportunity to inspect Renaissance astrologers' private correspondences and prognostications, as Azzolini has done.

Starting out with a focus on astrology as an academic science, chapter 1 also takes advantage of a student notebook to reconstruct the kind of astral science that was imparted at the local *studium* of Pavia. On this basis, the four subsequent chapters take different Sforza dukes as exempla for different aspects of their adoption of astrological consulting: nuptial and pedagogical planning, political strategy, medical care, and the almost obsessive authorization of desire *per puncto de astrologia*. By casting the courtly client rather than the astrologer as its protagonist, *The Duke and the Stars* forms a fine counterpart to Anthony Grafton's successful *Cardano's Cosmos* (1999). In the course of four elegantly written chapters, Azzolini

gives us important insight into the complex social dynamics and negotiations surrounding the prince's relation to the astrologers, and the way in which this formed an integral part of Renaissance political practice. Azzolini also pulls off another remarkable feat: in her capable hands, lengthy discussions of the arcane techniques deployed by Renaissance astrologers actually become fun and an integral part of the microhistorical approach to past actors that she favors.

There is really only one point where Azzolini's timely study fails to open new ground. By adopting the well-worn economic metaphors of "information," "market-place," "circulation," and "consumption," Azzolini effectively asks the reader to commit to disputed methodological approaches to astrology. Throughout the book runs the assumption that astrology really does not work, that it thrives on psychological anxiety and social crisis, that much of its attractiveness revolves around the absence of a better alternative (cf. Malinowski's infamous analysis of magic), that princes ultimately did not take it seriously as a form of prophecy or truth-telling (in the sense of Marcel Detienne and Michel Foucault), and that those who did paid a severe price for doing so.

The problem with these presuppositions is not that they are wrong: they are presuppositions precisely because they are unprovable, and hence beyond right or wrong. They do, however, tend to obscure those aspects of Renaissance astrology that are not about power/knowledge (cf. Galeazzo Maria Sforza's fascinatingly delicate articulation of the sociopolitical challenges of astrology, 126 sqq.). They also seem to limit our options for integrating this book in a *longue durée* story of astrology's credibility to the older narrative of astrology dying under the conceptual and practical breakthroughs in mankind's mastery over nature (i.e., the Scientific Revolution).

Despite my methodological qualms, this is a magnificent achievement. I know of no existing historical study that gets us closer to the relation between the Renaissance prince and the astrologer (including Pierre Brind'Amour's overlooked book on Nostradamus), making this an *incontournable* point of reference for anyone who is interested in courtly knowledge economies of the Renaissance.

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