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ASTROLOGY AND THE DEMOTIC PRESS: ALMANACS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Abstract

The present article focuses on the eighteenth-century English almanac as an iconic element of the demotic press, on the one hand, and as a literary commodity published by the Stationers' Company, a guild of artisans involved in the printing trade. Engaged in popularising their astrological content as scientific observations, almanacs were classified by the elite as low reading in tune with the Company's supply and demand policy. My task is to apply the “high” / “low” culture dichotomy to English almanacs and to examine the way in which they marked a radical change from an archaic, superstitious, and irrational frame of mind to a rational, scientific, and, implicitly, modern worldview backed by the Scientific Revolution. Last but not least, the paper will show that eighteenth-century English almanacs were sensitive to historical, national identity and popular patriotism issues and adhered to divergent religious and political allegiances exposed to the shafts of satire – the prevailing genre of the time – practiced by elite writers like Jonathan Swift or by famous almanac-compilers, such as George Parker and John Partridge.

Keywords: Eighteenth-century English almanac, high culture, low culture, popular press, astrology, satire

Introduction

One of the emblems of eighteenth-century popular culture, the English almanac gained its status as a flagship publication thanks to the mass printing policy put into effect by the Stationers' Company of London, a community of printers and booksellers whose monopoly on the trade was granted by the 1557 Royal Charter of Queen Elisabeth I. Unlike its seventeenth-century counterpart, which many historians regard as successful due to its astrological bent, the eighteenth-century almanac built its brand reputation upon a solid commercial foundation laid by the advent of early modern capitalism. Timothy Feist cogently argues that "almanacs were first and foremost a commodity, and one has to consider them as products before one can interpret them intelligently as literature" (1). Outnumbering newspapers in terms of circulation, the English almanac was a predilect genre for the lower sorts. With a print-run that exceeded 400,000 copies by 1660, the utterly commercial publication also became a means of entertaining the polite with trivialities and unscientific speculations brought to the fore by astrological practitioners. Bernard Capp, the reputed historian concerned with almanacs published in the early modern period, claims that "most surviving copies originally belonged to the gentry or professional men" (60). Capp's statement points to the fact that the elite's appraisal of the almanac as a genre mainly read by the *vulgus* was premised on moral and literary, rather than social, criteria. Furthermore, the almanacs preserved in libraries reveal "the handwritten annotations of evidently educated owners," for whom "almanacs doubled as diaries recording personal important dates and memoranda" (Mullan and Reid 146) on a page intentionally left blank for their readers. The following analysis will concentrate on the "high" / "low" culture dichotomy applicable to English almanacs as "products" that were instrumental in disseminating predictions about political events and the weather, chronological arrangements of major historical events and English monarchs, summaries of astronomical events, agricultural advice, dates and places of fairs and markets, tide tables for the Thames, etc. Read by high-class and low-class readers alike, eighteenth-century English almanacs are, I argue, a conflation of popular culture and popular press, which marked a radical change from an archaic, superstitious, and, therefore, irrational frame of mind to a rational, scientific, and, implicitly, modern worldview backed by the Scientific Revolution. Notwithstanding this cultural and scientific shift of a Whiggish kind, which was indicative of human improvement and the advancement of learning, this paper

endeavours to show, via a cultural-historical approach, that the prophecies contained in eighteenth-century English almanacs were tightly related to questions of history, national identity, and popular patriotism and were contingent, at the same time, on conflicting religious and political allegiances prompted by the supply and demand policy imposed by the Stationers' Company. All these issues were exposed to the shafts of either Tory or Whig satire – the prevailing genre of the time – practiced by elite writers like Jonathan Swift or by famous almanac-compilers, such as George Parker and John Partridge, who promoted their own products as commercially superior to other publications in an effort to champion the almanac as “the most widely read literature after Bibles and newspapers” (Feist 122).

Astrology under Attack

Apart from being used as a tool for recording the passage of time, the eighteenth-century English almanac was inextricably linked to astrology. Suffused with astrological references that accompanied the calendar of a given year, the almanac was a supplier of allegedly scientific information or prognostications of all sorts, which satisfied public demand. In the words of Timothy Feist, utility turned the almanac into “a compendium of information useful for orienting one's life to the annual rhythms of commerce, government, and the physical world” (15).

By broadening the scope of almanacs with explanations about the influence of the planets upon worldly events and human activities, almanac-makers and compilers – who had been well-versed in astrology ever since the sixteenth century – thought of themselves as “philomaths,” or “lovers of learning” (Stowell 42). As Barry Reay (1998) has shown, the elaborated theoretical background of astrology appealed to both patricians and plebeians as long as it deciphered the influence of the sun, the moon, and the planets on the body, its humours, and diseases. In their capacity as “polimaths,” almanac-makers extended the scope of their publications from instruction and entertainment to useful data on the moon's phases and the weather, both of great interest to seamen and travellers, political and historical events, the lives of monarchs, tables of eclipses, festivals and saints' days, fairs, the best harvesting time, medical advice, horoscopes and tide tables for the Thames. However, by 1670, the scientific prestige of astrology waned. At loggerheads with Christian doctrine, astrologers began to be refuted by the elite because they disseminated a type of superstition-based knowledge

and political propaganda. The decline of astrology had been foreshadowed by new scientific discoveries, which paved the way for a rational understanding of the universe. Francis Bacon's empirical method proposed in his *Novum Organum* (1620) and the establishment of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge in 1662 are two cases in point. The rise of natural theology and natural philosophy, respectively, entitled Anglicanism to dismiss the idea that the stars and the planets were means through which God intervened in earthly affairs and, consequently, "there was little place for astrologers as self-appointed interpreters of God's will" (Jacob 113). As a matter of fact, it was judicial astrology that was refuted by the Church, since natural astrology could come to terms with the idea that the influence of the sun, the moon, the stars, or the planets, on humans was philosophically understood as *musica universalis*, an ancient Pythagorean concept appropriated by the Renaissance and Neoclassicism to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies. Deborah Houlding has noted that judicial astrology, i.e. the unofficial science of prognostications, "was felt to undermine the supreme power of the Creator and the freewill of the individual to make the best of his circumstances."¹ The individual's capacity "to make the best of his circumstances" was epistemologically sustained by reason that, limited as it is, Deism proclaimed as the only cognitive faculty able to establish that the universe is the work of a single creator. The last line of Epistle I of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* becomes an axiom written in block letters: "One Truth is clear, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT" (Pope 22).

Scandalised by the unchecked information spread by almanacs, Jonathan Swift launched the shafts of his satire towards pseudo-scientific rules with the purpose of shattering the astrologers' credibility. Well-known astrologers like John Partridge, John Cadbury, and Frances Moore "seem to have had no successors of comparable stature after the 1720s" (Jacob 114). Swift's *Bickerstaff Papers* (1708-1709), a pamphlet ridiculing John Partridge's astrological observations, attests to the elite's disdain for astrology as a popular science. Natural signs continued to be interpreted in various symbolic ways by the uncouth in order to decode various visions, superstitions, warnings, and threats. Sold like no other almanac in almost 200,000 copies by the end of the century, Frances Moore's most influential *Vox Stellarum* (1768) shows that popular science and popular press

¹ Deborah Houlding makes the case that astronomy became separated from astrology in the seventeenth century, when the former was established as a scientific discipline that ceased to have recourse to an ingenuous use of astrological symbolism.

targeted a multiplicity of readerships whose Christian beliefs did not compete with their openness to the miscellanea provided by almanacs. According to Jacob, “few people seem to have been much influenced by the mechanistic world view implied by Newton’s theories. Most people of all sorts held a sacralised world view and believed in the power of God and of evil” (120). Unwilling to accept a scientific interpretation of the world, the lower sorts remained unflinching believers in astrology throughout the eighteenth century. However, early eighteenth-century almanacs designed for instructing and entertaining people of quality, and women in particular, inveighed against popular astrology in the same Swiftian vein. For instance, the 1704 *The Ladies Diary: or, the Woman’s Almanack* committed itself to training the fair sex in mathematics and, implicitly, to deconstructing stereotypes concerning women’s intellectual weakness.

Proclaimed by astrologers as a science, judicial astrology was emptied of its alleged theoretical sophistication by satirical writers like Jonathan Swift, Thomas Brown, and Ned Ward, who railed against the predictive prophecy popularised by “polymaths.” *The Jestling Astrologer, or The Merry Observation* (24 February – 3 March 1701) mocks both astrology as a pseudo-science and popular prognostications that are not upheld by scientific explanations:

Great talk of strange Plots will addle the Noodles of the Publick, and those who are silly enough to believe the Reports of ill Designs, without good Grounds for it, tho’ they are much more safe, are but very little wiser, than those who are drawn into the Project, to be made a hanging Testimony to convince the World of the Truth thereof; who are apt, in such Cases, to be better confirm’d by a dying Convict, than a living Evidence. (Mullan and Reid 162)

Astrology in the eighteenth century continued, however, to maintain its popularity as long as its credibility was reinforced by the precepts of the Church of England. Feist writes that astrology in eighteenth-century almanacs “plagiarized heavily from earlier astrological work and contributed nothing new to the art” (94). Though astrology did not turn to occult beliefs like witchcraft and magic,² it became the focal point of the elite’s satirical accounts. “A Broadside

² See, for instance, Keith Thomas’s study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), which examines the shift from popular religion preached by the Medieval Church to the Protestant Reformation, which propagated scientific experiment and explanation as new ways of explaining

Advertisement” puts forward a few remedies to suffering, predictions related to marriage, pregnancy, diseases, voyages, and lawsuits, as well as advice on which city or country one should live in. All “lawful Questions, that depend on the most noble Art of CHRISTIAN ASTROLOGY” are to be answered by a licensed astrologer and physician whose secret skills are “far beyond the reach or Knowledge of common persons” (Mullan and Reid 163). In *A Comical View of the Transactions That Will Happen in the Cities of London and Westminster* (1705), Tom Brown derides the specious accuracy of weather forecasting and its preposterous effect on Queen Anne’s servants:

Whereas the Town has been Banter’d near Two Months with a Sham Account of the Weather, pretended to be taken from Barometers, Thermometers, Hygrosopes, Telescopes, and such Heathenish Instruments; by which means, several of her Majesty’s good Subjects have put on their Prize Coats, expecting it should Rain, when it has been Fair; and wore their best Cloaths, thinking it would be Fair, when it has rain’d to the no little Detriment and Prejudice of the aforesaid Cloaths and Persons: And likewise, whereas the Planets that have regulated the Almanacks for about two thousand Years, have been most wickedly slander’d by a late Author, as if they had no influence at all upon the Weather, the Publisher of this Paper has been Perswaded by his Friends to print these his infallible Predictions, gather’d from the Experience of thirty Years and Upwards. . . . (Mullan and Reid 164)

In spite of being lambasted for their prophetic publications, almanac-makers were providers of low reading, which, inevitably, was either ridiculed or consumed for amusing purposes by the upper class. In compliance with the policy imposed by the Stationers’ Company, which printed what would sell well, “judicial,” or predictive, astrologers promoted, at least in the first decades of the century, the belief that people “literally cohabited with the stars” (Feist 105), ignoring the certainty that rationalism and empiricism had already laid the foundations of a new cosmology.

the universe and concurrently cleansed religion from the magical elements it included until that time.

Politicising Astrology

Astrology was a subject of heated debate mirrored by the enmity between two highly regarded almanac-makers, George Parker, a Tory supporter, and John Partridge, an impassioned Whig who fell prey to Swift's fierce satire in *Bickerstaff Papers*. Fuelled by conflicting political sympathies, the antagonism between Parker and Partridge is living proof that prominent almanac compilers associated their personality with the content of their publications. Driven by their own ideology, Parker's and Partridge's almanacs gave birth to distinctive "interpretive communities,"³ which produced their own sense of political and national identity. Irked by Parker's Jacobite sympathies, the Stationers' Company banned the publication of his *An Ephemeris on the Cœlestial Motions for 1699* in the first decade of the century. Parker's response to the Company is actually disguised as a harsh critique against Partridge, the one who was held responsible for putting the ban on *Ephemeris*. A fervent Whig, Partridge's almanacs published in the 1680s concentrated on a rampant anti-Catholic propaganda against James II and continued to support the same agenda until 1700, when the most popular British almanacs adopted a mollified Whiggish tone, publicizing, at the same time, a strong nationalist drive. Partridge's famous *Merlinus Liberatus* was suspended by the Stationers' Company between 1710 and 1713, following a dispute over the tax that the latter owed to him. Yet, Partridge's prestige appeased the Company's anger, which eventually melted into a good deal for both parties. In *Merlinus Liberatus for 1699*, he defames popery, the Tory government, and, even more vehemently, the popish Jacobite plot designed by Parker and his peers and extols the godly figure of William of Orange who abolished James II's risible and authoritarian Catholic policy during the Glorious Revolution of 1688:

'Tis Brave and Great, and shows Heaven had design'd
 Still greater things for the immortal mind
 When from the War, he the night Tidings brings,
 (A thing not us'd of late by British Kings)
 His Subjects wisht to see him, Hope and Pray,

³ See *Is There A Text in This Class?* (Harvard University Press, 1980), where Stanley Fish argues that the meaning of a text, far from being intrinsic in a work, is produced by a community of readers who share a set of socially constructed interpretive and aesthetic strategies that shape the whole reading process of a text.

Freely Rejoyce, and willingly Obey. . . . (Mullan and Reid 156)

Partridge's rant also points out Parker's mathematical incompetence justified by the latter's sly appropriation of astrologer John Merrifield's calculation of the place of the planets "put upon the World last Year, and call'd An Ephemeris" (Mullan and Reid 156). A supporter of Ptolemaic astronomy, Partridge publicises the allegedly scientific background of his prognostications in terms of superiority towards Tory astrologers, whose predictions are merely the product of their imagination:

We English have two sorts of People among us; one of them grumble without cause, and the other hope without ground; and how to cure them is a work too hard for me. The fore part of this Month gives us but little fresh Intelligence, but what was the effect of the last Month . . . And now to any man that doth deny these Aphorisms, I do challenge him to prove his own, and disprove my Doctrine by Experiments in print; and I will vindicate my Master Ptolomy not only in these, but the rest of his Aphoristical Doctrine on Nativities . . . and I will print the same, and give Judgment according to mine, and then the World will be able to Judge who is in the right: and in so doing we shall by degrees bring this Debate to an Issue. (Mullan and Reid 157)

Partridge reveals his anti-Catholic feelings by scoffing at Parker's Tory affiliation and inaccurate ephemerides. Frank Palmeri's investigation of this topic allows him to conclude that Partridge predicted the Glorious Revolution by taking into account other political events printed in his *Annus Mirabilis* in 1689. Partridge envisaged the birth of a son on June 9, 1688, which caused "a long-lasting suspicion that under cover of a false pregnancy a fraudulent child had been made Prince of Wales in order to provide a Catholic heir for James and displace his Protestant daughters, Mary and Anne" (Palmeri 391). The meeting of the extraordinary Convention Parliament that Partridge predicted to be held at the end of 1688 actually took place in mid-January 1689, when it was decided that William of Orange and Queen Mary be proclaimed king and queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland in February of the same year.

Parker's reaction was equally offensive, chastising Partridge for his lack of knowledge of astronomy and geometry:

It would be a grand absurdity in me to undertake by my own hand to build some noble Structure or other Edifice from the ground; and at the same [time], at the sight of a Hand-saw, or a Hatchet, &c. to admire at those Implements, and wonder to what use and purpose they are design'd for. This is the case of *John Partridge*, for demand of him the several uses of the Logarithms, Sines, and Tangents, he's silent; or the Solution of a plain Triangle, tho' but lately at the Coffee-house a learning of it, yet he is as mute as a Mouse; Or what denomination the Circles of the Sphere shall have upon any certain Division of the same, than he's Planet-struck. (Mullan and Reid 153)

Not only is Partridge jeered at because of his professional ineptitude but he is also accused of having run away to join William of Orange in the Netherlands and of having been involved in the Rye House Plot, the Whig conspiracy of 1683 against Charles II, and in the Duke of Monmouth's scheme to depose James II.

All these disputes were recorded in *The Post-Boy* (7-9 May 1700) after the trial held at Guild Hall. Partridge's lawsuit filed at Guild Hall against Parker on the grounds of being called "A Malignant in his Writings; A Lyer in his Almanack; And a Fool of an Astrologer" (Mullan and Reid 158) was related by Ned Ward in *The London Spy*. Ned Ward disparages the two astrologers' "scientific" predictions and, in a comical manner, he tells us the verdict – "Five Pound damage" for Partridge – given by the Court packed with all "Fortune-telling Wise-Acres in the Town both Male and Female" whose art of divination "by which they pretended to tell Fools their Fortune" cannot "foresee which of the two contending Planet-Peepers were most likely to obtain the Victory" (Mullan and Reid 158). Pacified for a short while after the lawsuit, Parker resumed his attack against other Whig almanac compilers, particularly on John Wing's "innate propensity to Reviling" and to causing confusion, which he "has been too sedulous in promoting" (Mullan and Reid 160).

Playing a significant role in designing the structure of almanacs and in articulating the message they conveyed, politics was frequently satirised for commercial purposes, especially when the prophetic ambitions of successful astrologers like Parker and Partridge sought to stir feelings of popular patriotism by making reference to recent historical events. As was the case with Partridge's prediction of the Glorious Revolution, almanacs "looked forward only by giving shape to what has gone before" (Mullan and Reid 150). Though a large number

of almanacs continued to vent their rage against Tory or Whig policy in a period of political instability, William Andrews's *Great News from the Stars or, an Ephemeris for the Year 1716* celebrated the astrological news of the day, which seemed to favour and protect the nation after the Hanoverian succession:

Many have been the Disturbances and Misfortunes of War of late in several Parts of Europe, and what is yet to come will not be conceal'd long: Some Kingdom stands at present but upon a tottering Bottom, tho' we of Great Britain (at present) seem to be free from such slavish Fears, for the present Position of Heavenly Bodies, seem much more to befriend us than fright us, in this Month of January; tho' some deep Consultations, in some remote Countries, of an unhappy Consequence seem to be on foot about the latter end hereof. (Mullan and Reid 168)

Andrews's jingoistic attitude was meant to stir the patriotic feeling of the masses, which, however, was withheld by "the strongest and most direct evidence of the complex politics of the almanacs" disclosed under the form of satire, and which "had an implicitly irreverent and deflating effect on the form and the culture that was at odds with its overt allegiances" (Palmeri 379).

Astrology Seen Through a Highbrow Satirical Lens

Embedded in the tradition of the satiric almanac epitomised by *Poor Robin* in the first decades of the Restoration, *Bickerstaff Papers* established Swift's position as a High-Church defender of tradition, in opposition to Partridge's Low-Church affinities. Employed as a satirical tool, Isaac Bickerstaff challenges the Whig astrologer's "Aphoristical Doctrine on Nativities" in a series of humorous prognostications that were to affect the latter's reputation. Nevertheless, both Bickerstaff's and Partridge's predictions were equally hazardous. Whereas Partridge foretold the accession of William of Orange to the English throne, as well as the death of James II at the end of 1688, Bickerstaff predicted the death of Partridge "upon the 29th March next, about eleven at night, of a raging fever" (Swift). The lies predicted by Bickerstaff were probed and certified by Swift himself, who declares in a mocking tone that "the predictions Mr. Bickerstaff had publish'd ... had not too much affected and worked on his imagination." As well as admitting that Partridge was alive on March 29, the very day of his death, Bickerstaff states that the former's return to life was not germane to his prognostication. These humorous remarks stress the fact that Bickerstaff's, and implicit-

ly Swift's, predictions were as spurious as Partridge's vision of James's death. According to Palmeri, "both Swift and Partridge use casuistical cavilling, wordplay, and logic-chopping to make events that do not confirm their predictions appear to do so" (393). However, Swift's sharp wit and stinging satire against Partridge suggests that almanacs and their compilers are ephemeral presences whereas highbrow canonical authors and their works have the capacity to stand the test of time. Swift summarises this point in the following terms:

There is one objection against Mr. Partridge's death, which I have sometimes met with, though indeed very slightly offered, that he still continues to write almanacks. But this is no more than what is common to all that profession; Gadbury, Poor Robin, Dove, Wing, and several others, do yearly publish their almanacks, though several of them have been dead since before the Revolution. Now the natural reason of this I take to be, that whereas it is the privilege of other authors to live after their deaths; almanack-makers are alone excluded, because their dissertations treating only upon the minutes as they pass, become useless as those go off. In consideration of which, Time, whose registers they are, gives them a lease in reversion, to continue their works after their death.

Notwithstanding their transience, many eighteenth-century English almanacs continued to gain acclaim after the death of their founders. The names evoked by Swift show once again that the prestige of almanacs was a matter of circulation and consumption of demotic print culture. Thomas Moore's *Vox Stellarum*, an almanac that became a real brand up until the twentieth century when it ceased to exist, was a conservative and anti-Catholic publication whose mission, similar to Swift's *Bickerstaff Papers*, was to repudiate predictions and, implicitly, astrology as a science. Its unstinting royalist bent, which persisted even after the end of the Jacobite rising of 1715, propagandized patriotic hopes for unity and national pride under the Hanoverian regime:

With Mercy cloath'd, GEORGE wou'd not Thunder wear,
He craves his Peoples Love more than their Fear:
His pious Ancestors their Blood did spend
For our Religion, which He does defend;
Bravely for which He draws his conqu'ring Sword,
Which to secure we have his Royal Word.

At Home ungrateful Britains are in Arms.

Ah! Foolish Men, who can your grief express?

Refusing madly thus your Happiness! (Mullan and Reid 171)

Conclusion

This article has made the case that almanacs were a highly popular literary genre, which juxtaposed astrological predictions with political, religious, and cultural allegiances. Deeply engaged in deprecating the prognostications of the opposite camp and in regarding them as nonsense, superstition, or mere speculations stripped of a solid scientific background, almanacs perpetuated “the paradox of reason leading to the undermining of reason and the felt incommensurability between the divine and the human,” which “encouraged the frequent use of satiric form in this period” (Palmeri 399). Unravelling the failings of pseudoscientific predictions, almanacs like Swift’s *Bickerstaff Papers* sought to change the readers’ horizon of expectation and to implement an intellectual reform carried out by means of satire and parody of prominent almanac-makers who promoted their publications for commercial reasons. In spite of their variety, almanacs were literary commodities attuned to the demands of the market and to the interests promoted by the Stationers’ Company. Considered by Linda Colley to be “the contemporary equivalent of the tabloid press, both in tone and popularity” (20), almanacs could not be completely ignored by patricians, particularly when their prophesies articulated a rhetoric of jingoism and popular patriotism and supported, towards the end of the century, an ethos of hard work and citizenship alongside intellectual improvement and the cultivation of taste.

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ASTROLOGIJA I NARODNE NOVINE: ALMANASI U ENGLESKOJ 18. STOLJEĆA

Sažetak

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Rad proučava engleske almanaha 18. stoljeća kao kulturnu sastavnicu narodnih novina s jedne strane te, s druge, kao književni proizvod koji objavljuje Stationers' Company, obrtnički ceh u tiskarskoj industriji. S obzirom na njihov udio u popularizaciji astrološkog sadržaja kao znanstvenih opažanja, elita je almanaha klasificirala kao štivo niske kvalitete u skladu s politikom ponude i potražnje ceha. I na kraju, rad nastoji pokazati da su engleski almanasi 18. stoljeća iznimno vodili računa o pitanjima povijesnog, nacionalnog identiteta i popularnog domoljublja te da su se držali divergentnih vjerskih i političkih struja izloženih satiri – dominantnom žanru ondašnjeg vremena – koju su prakticirali elitni pisci poput Jonathana Swifta ili poznati sastavljači almanaha kao što su George Parker i John Partridge.

Ključne riječi: engleski almanah 18. stoljeća, visoka kultura, niska kultura, popularne novine, astrologija, satira