LATERAL THOUGHTS

Aspects of low-resolution horoscopy

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Aspects of low-resolution horoscopes
Iggy McGovern

Libra: "Your latest plan is about to bear fruit but be careful not to spoil it at the last minute by being too clever. Expect a windfall from an unusual quarter and think twice about that long journey overseas."

The art of drawing up horoscopes, I suspect, is somewhat similar to that of writing grant proposals. In attempting to be all things to all referees, a certain vagueness is required. You have to present what is reasonably attainable in such a way as to suggest infinitely greater potential, without actually lying through your teeth. The above — a composite from my recent horoscopes — is equally consistent with my winning the National Lottery and having a more modest success in the Physics World Lateral Thoughts competition. It's the low resolution that keeps the whole business alive.

And big business it is, too, ranging from the First Lady's astrologer to the syndicated slot in the national dailies. I notice now in the latter that each star sign has an individual telephone number for the price of a local call your horoscope is further explored, presumably at slightly higher resolution. Now, I draw a line at the horoscope but I must confess that I always read my horoscope, especially the longer versions that you find in women's magazines. I read my wife's horoscope as well, paying particular attention to what is in store for her, as they say, "on the domestic front".

This latter exercise has the additional benefit of constantly reminding me of her birthday; my own domestic front would be rather more peaceable if I had a similar method of remembering her wedding anniversary.

Recently, I attempted a further study of the subject, that is, I got a book on DIY astrology from the library. This beautifully illustrated (and, I suspect, very expensive) book was rather heavy going. I dutifully ploughed through houses and signs, ascendant and descendant, cusps and constellations, solar and sidereal time but I absolutely baulked at the requirement of viewing the Earth at the centre of the action. And then there was the whole business of the seven planets (Sun, Moon plus five) to match the seven days of the week. I learned that the subsequent discovery of Uranus, Neptune and Pluto has been accommodated by saying that they are too far away to make much difference. Either we need next-nearest-neighbour horoscopes or we should just settle for a ten-day week. I liked the statement in the book about the need for accurate astronomical data — Uranus, Neptune and Pluto notwithstanding. I could well imagine a medieval astronomer making the case to the Emperor for funding so that the astrologers (usually himself) could more accurately predict when the local princes would next launch a putsch against the throne. It's an idea which will not be unfamiliar to researchers rehearsing the old "basic versus applied" argument with national funding agencies. However, the ancients probably did believe the line, at least in part. Indeed, John Bannville has Kepler (in his novel of that name) sounding off about stargazers as "necromantic monkey-shine" while in the next breath he is allowing "that the stars do influence our affairs". Space considerations (thankfully) prohibit further discussion as to whether astrology has any scientific acceptance today.

However, by coincidence (ah, but what is coincidence?) my college library has just mounted an exhibition called "Vox Sellarum", about the mixed fortunes of astrology following the invention of the printing press. Whereas some astrologers undoubtedly profited from sales of texts, the subject soon wilted under a more refined scrutiny, among others, by Jonathan Swift. Writing under the pseudonym of Isaac Bickerstaff, his satirical book Predictions for the Year 1708 destroyed the career of John Partridge, chief astrologer of these islands in his day. In the book Swift contrived to foretell Partridge's death "on the twenty-ninth March next at about eleven at night of a raging fever (sic)". Apparently, the unfortunate Partridge had great difficulty thereafter in convincing the populace that he was still alive. Hoist with his own petard!

Rather more success had attended William Lilly who was an active supporter of the parliamentarian side and who made many "correct" predictions. The most famous of these was the Great Fire of London in 1666. However, success had its detractors even then and Lilly was hauled before a tribunal to answer the charge that he had started the fire himself. On this occasion, he seems to have been a fairly high-resolution horoscopist. However, when his predictions were less accurate, he took refuge in the dictum that God had acted by miracle and not through nature. Experimentalists take note!

The penultimate word lies with a former student whose hobby it is to insinuate himself into trendy conversations where the topic is astrology. When he is (in- evitably) asked what his sign is, he smiles apologetically and replies "Pyrex". Then he waits just long enough to head off the chorus of complaint with the explanatory "Yes, I was a test-tube baby".

Did I spoil it all at the last minute? I think I'll take that long journey overseas, after all.

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