Renaissance and Early Modern Science

Monica Azzolini


This is a finely-written and thoroughly-researched book on how one of the most powerful dynasties of the Italian Renaissance, the Sforza of Milan, made use of astrological predictions and medical astrology throughout their reign in the second half of the fifteenth century. The history of astrology is often studied under the rubric of the intellectual history, or in its relations with astronomy, religion and the arts – see for instance the ever-growing bibliographies on the debates about judicial astrology, following Pico della Mirandola's critique, on prophecy and prophetic literature, the Church's censorship, as well as on astrological motifs in the figurative arts. Most of these topics originate from Aby Warburg's studies, which dealt only briefly with the political use of astrological prognostication and prophetic divination. Over time, Paola Zambelli, Germana Ernst, Brendan Dooley, Darin Hayton and others, have enriched our understanding of the interwoven worlds of astrology and politics during the Renaissance. Monica Azzolini's The Duke and the Stars adds a whole new depth to the current perspective by adding to the picture a detailed and, at times, intimate portrait of the uses of astrology by three generations of the same ruling family. The book is based on primary sources that are usually the domain of political and social historians. Diplomatic correspondence and dispatches, private letters, medical reports and family histories provide first-hand information of astrological practices and of the role of astrologers and astrologers-physicians under a succession of Sforza dukes, from the founder of the dynasty, Francesco (1401–1466), the condottiero greatly admired by Machiavelli, to Ludovico Maria (1452–1508), who lost the Duchy to the French at the end of the fifteenth century.

With the exception of the first chapter, which deals with the intellectual background of astrological practice at the University of Pavia, the book is structured around the central figures of the Sforza dynasty, namely, Francesco I, his dissolute son Galeazzo Maria (1444–1476), the feeble heir Gian Galeazzo (1469–1494) and his ambitious uncle, Ludovico Maria, who was also son to Francesco. The chronological organization of the book helps the reader to navigate through the intricacies and the intrigues of the Sforza's family history, the attempts to strengthen and legitimize their power by means of political
marriages, and the development of Italian politics in the face of converging interests (of Milan and Naples, in particular) to neutralise a French intervention in the peninsula. The focus on the author on astrological expertise and advice in assisting the political decision-making process on the one hand, and the employment of astrologers-physicians in the healthcare of members of the family on the other, bring together the different narrative threads.

Chapter 2, *The Making of a Dynasty*, outlines the origin of the Sforza’s relations with astrology and astrological practitioners in the period between the reign of the last Visconti duke, Filippo Maria, and the rise to power of Francesco Sforza. Francesco’s marriage with Filippo Maria’s illegitimate daughter Bianca Maria ensured continuity between the two dynasties, and also those physicians and astrologers who had been part of the Visconti’s entourage continued to work at the service of the Sforza family. Bianca Maria Visconti was the main channel through which astrological culture and the frequent use of prognostications transitioned from one ruling family to the other, while her husband Francesco, seemingly, never solicited astrological advice directly (pp. 70–71). The Visconti-Sforza’s involvement with astrology was by no means limited to the kind of political prognostications frequently found in the *iudicia*, but included a sustained recourse to astrological medicine for the wellbeing of family members (see Bianca Maria’s employment of the physician and astrologer Antonio Bernareggi), as well as in the context of decisions pertaining marriage strategies.

One of the arguments of the book is that the recourse to astrological advice did not entirely conform to, and to some extent was disjoined from, individuals’ beliefs. If the Sforza are representative of Renaissance attitudes, then the extensive use of astrology does not immediately translate into absolute faith in the power of astral influence, or blind acceptance of the astrologers’ verdicts. Well before Pico, the idea that “stars could only incline, not necessitate” was widely accepted, thus leaving the future open to the vagaries of free will and fatality. By looking at how Galeazzo Sforza interacted with astrologers – consulting more than one of them about the same event or decision – reacted to their errors, and sought to control the circulation of astrological news, Chapter 3 (*Astrology is Destiny*) analyzes astrological prognostications as a type of “conjectural art” (p. 111) whose predictions were assumed to be uncertain both by its authors and consumers. The study of Galeazzo’s case reveals an unsuspected pragmatic approach to astrological predictions, allowing for human error and flexibility of interpretation on the account of the intricacies of the predictive model, i.e., the different ways to construct and interpret astrological charts and the possibility of observational errors. Galeazzo also understood that control of information was a key aspect in Renaissance political strategy.