



'The Zodiac Man' a diagram of a human body and astrological symbols with instructions explaining the importance of astrology from a medical perspective. From a late 15th-century manuscript by Gutun Owain, a Welsh poet in the National Library of Wales, NLW MS 3026C 'Mostyn 88' Image made available under the Creative Commons CCO 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara*

Designed and decorated by hand, this extraordinary Zodiac Man (also known as *homo signorum*, or man of signs) is, of course, a

unique image – but many similar ones survive. Resembling medical charts drawn with cosmic coordinates, they incorporated advice about the best time to treat a particular illness and helped to predict its likely outcome. Well into the eighteenth century, cheap annual almanacs were still reproducing cruder black-and-white versions of Zodiac Man, the essential diagram

for householders committed to safeguarding the family's health. When consulted in conjunction with astronomical tables, these pictures yielded crucial information about the anticipated course of a disease, including warnings to wait until a more auspicious period before intervention. They showed how human beings were integrated within God's grand design for the universe – the celestial mechanisms modelled in magnificent church clocks.

Competent doctors were required to be well-versed in the alignments of the stars and planets. When Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims set off for Canterbury, they were accompanied by an excellent 'DOCTOUR OF PHYSICK... grounded in astronomy.'

He kepte his pacient a full greet del
In houres, by his magik naturel.
Wel coude he fortunen the ascendant
Of his images for his pacient.

Nowadays, when you visit a doctor, the state of your sick body is represented by numbers – its pulse-rate, temperature, blood pressure – that compare it with the average data for healthy people. A few hundred years ago, a physician would also have started by compiling important numerical information – the time of your birth, today's date, the intervals between any recurrent fevers – but these would have described you in relation to the motions of the heavens. A human being was a microcosm of the entire cosmos, as suggested by Leonardo da Vinci's famous diagram of a man with outstretched arms spanning the universe and reflecting the proportions that interconnect the heavenly bodies. When William Harvey modernised anatomy by showing that blood circulates round the body, he maintained that the heart 'deserves to be styled the starting point of life and the sun of our microcosm just as much as the sun deserves to be styled the heart of the world.'

The fundamental principles stretched back to the ancient Greeks – Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen – as well as to Arabic sources that were translated into Latin and absorbed into European culture around the twelfth century. Each of the seven planets circling round the Earth had its own characteristics and interacted in a unique fashion with

individual people by altering the balance of their humours – those idealized qualities such as blood, bile or phlegm whose varying combinations affected a person's character and behaviour. The humours could be hot, dry, cold or wet in varying proportions: thus the planet Venus had a special rapport with the cold, wet brains of women, whereas hot dry men were associated with Mars, her mythological lover.

Zodiac Man provided an indispensable celestial timetable for human ailments, and this seventeenth-century rhyme provided a helpful guide:

The Ramme doth rule the head and face:
The Necke and Throat is Taurus's place.
The Twinnes the Armes and Shoulders
guide:
The Crab the Breast, the Spleene and
side.
The legges t'Aquarius doth fall:
And Feete to Pisces last of all.
The Heart and Back's hold Leo's share:
Of Belly and Bowels the main takes care.
To Library Reines and Loynes belong:
The Secrets to the Scorpion.
The thighs the Archer doth direct:
And Capricorne the knees protect.

According to their model of the universe, seven planets – the Moon and the Sun as well as the five that can be seen without the aid of a telescope – orbited around the Earth in perfect circles. Each one had its own characteristics. The most obvious driver of the cosmic medical clock was the Sun: illnesses and deaths were more common during the winter months, when he was visible for shorter times. But for prognostication, the most important of the seven planets was our nearest neighbour, the Moon. As well as causing the tides, she governed menstruation and could also make the brain swell periodically. Unlike the laws of Newtonian physics, the human-celestial relationship was not determined sufficiently tightly for it to be expressed mathematically; this complex theory had a rational structure but was based on analogy, not direct cause and effect: it was couched in terms of dispositions, tendencies and conditional circumstances.

The physician's first step at a consultation was to use astronomical tables for finding

the whereabouts of the Moon when a patient fell sick. Instructions varied in their details, but as a simplified example, suppose she had been in Aries: a glance at Zodiac Man shows Aries – the ram – perched on his head, thus identifying the location of the problem and also warning that no treatment should be attempted on this part of the body until the Moon has moved into a different sign. If the Sun had also been in Aries, then this would be a hot disease, best treated by letting (releasing) hot-humoured blood and eating cool foods such as lettuce, cucumber and new cheese. But if the Moon were accompanied by the two evil planets, Mars and Saturn, the patient would die within seven days because the Moon was at 45° (square) to the Sun, and seven days is a quarter of a month. In contrast, if the Moon were square to Saturn, the patient would survive but would become mad, an unfortunate consequence of head diseases. An experienced practitioner would also take many other complicating factors into account, such as the planetary conjunctions at birth and the differences between the lunar and solar calendars.

To establish their reputation, physicians needed to demonstrate that they could predict the course of an illness; on the other hand, to foretell the future with total certainty might

override the will of God. One expert dispensed some excellent advice to physicians. If death seems imminent but you have little idea how to prevent it, adopt a suitable expression of grief and announce that ‘Only a divine miracle can restore health.’ This has the double advantage of acknowledging God’s freedom of action and proving that you deserve to be praised for your foreknowledge.

Main Sources and Further Reading

Curth, Louise Hill. *English Almanacs, Astrology and Popular Medicine: 1550-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

French, Roger. ‘Astrology in Medical Practice’. In Luis García-Ballester et al (eds), *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 30-59.

*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is number sixteen in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.