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Astrological Physiognomy from Ptolemy to the Present Day

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Abstract. Physiognomy, the art of judging character or destiny through physical appearance, has had a long and varied history. Although not strictly astrological in all its forms, it is usually found combined with astrology, numerology, palmistry and other popular forms of fortune-telling; and, like all of these, it is unlikely to become extinct despite being ridiculed by modern science. Equally, attempts to legitimise and modernise it in recent times, usually for the purposes of identifying criminals or other social undesirables, are unlikely to render it wholly respectable either.

For the greater part of its history, between the classical era and the eighteenth century, physiognomy was seen as an integral part of astrology: physical evidence and vindication of the theory of planetary influences.

The aim of this paper is to trace the principal lines of transmission for the lore of planetary physiognomy within the Western astrological tradition, with particular emphasis on the descriptions given for Mars and Saturn. Astrological tradition is highly conservative, with data passed down through centuries of use almost unaltered; but in some cases, as will be shown, the material seems to have been modified and added to in significant ways at certain stages in its history, and to have been influenced or perhaps deliberately rewritten to reflect the prevailing religious or political views of the time.

Almost every mass-market book on astrology which proclaims that it will enable the reader to 'discover his true character' and 'create his own personal horoscope' will contain several pages on personal appearance according to astrological criteria. A typical example is this description of someone born under Aries from Mann's *The Round Art*: 'Lean, spare body, rather tall, strong limbs, large bones, thick shoulders, long face, sharp piercing sight, dark eyebrows, reddish and wiry hair, swarthy expression, rather long neck'.¹

According to Derek and Julia Parker, whose lavishly illustrated book *The Compleat Astrologer* was the most popular book of its kind in England in its day and played a major role in astrology's boom period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Aries face appears thus: 'The eyebrows are heavy, the eyes have a direct, piercing gaze and the nose is long'.²

Ephrein offers more detail but, in essence, is saying much the same as the other two when she states that:

Prominent Mars influence gives qualities of intensity, muscularity, drive and directness of motion [...] Mars eyes are piercing, small, close together and sometimes very dark. Mars hair is dark brunette, black or red. The nose is pointed and sharp. A very prominent Mars can give arching eyebrows [...] Mars gives muscularity without necessarily giving weight [...] the torso can be quite spare [...] even when the muscles are prominent.³

It will be seen at once that these versions of the Mars physique are essentially the same, depicting a strong but not overly fleshy form, deep-set piercing eyes under strong brows and dark or red hair. If these authors were to claim that their interpretations were in any way new, innovative, and unique to themselves, then such obvious copying of material would have them placing lawsuits against each other at once; but they do not. The reason that they are all saying the same thing must be that the correspondence between Mars and, say, red hair, is already agreed and accepted knowledge; and this must come about because such a correspondence is either plainly obvious to the man in the street, is scientifically proven, or is found in an earlier authority accepted and referred to by these authors – in other words, is part of an established tradition. Whichever of these is the case, it is clear that for an astrologer to deviate from these accepted values would be considered unusual.

The correspondence between Mars and red hair, or any other planet and physical feature, is not, in fact, plainly obvious to the man in the street. If it were, there would be no point in writing books about it. Astrology books like the ones quoted, intended for the mildly curious reader rather than those learning astrology in depth, work by a process of 'revelation and recognition', in which the author suggests various character traits and the reader recognises some of them in himself. At the end of the process, the reader may have actually learned almost nothing about himself that he did not know previously, but has taken a closer look

than usual at his own talents and foibles. This gives him, for the moment, a richer and more complex idea of himself, seemingly more interesting than the dull and familiar face which scowled at him from his shaving mirror that morning, and he feels pleased both with himself and with the author for capturing his likeness so well.

Nor is the correspondence between planets and physical features scientifically proven. Dean noted that despite six famous astrologers repeating the link between Mars and red hair, and another two linking red hair to Mars' sign Aries, a statistical study of 100 red-haired people showed that neither factor was significant. Dean⁴ also notes that the UK Astrological Association has 500 photographs of people arranged according to their ascending degree, but no noticeable similarity in appearance seems to exist. When over 100 delegates to the 1976 Astrological Association annual conference were photographed in groups according to their sun signs, the results plainly showed no similarity within the signs. (Dean is a known opponent of, and disprover of, astrology.) A practising astrologer might respond that, if Dean had gathered 100 people with Mars rising and no other strongly placed planet, or 100 people with both sun and moon in Aries, the result might have been different. In fact, this is a side issue. Of more interest is the fact that the scientific community has no interest in physiognomy and its links to external non-causal factors, with the result that almost no proper and rigorous studies of such supposed links exist; and that astrologers in general are happy enough to repeat, and give credence to, the usual formulas of red hair and so on, without feeling the need to validate these formulas by statistical proofs of their own.

Astrological authors must, therefore, be working within a tradition, handing down a set of agreed values for the influence of the planets on personal appearance which is held to be valid for all time. In general, this material falls into two categories.

Firstly, material in which the physique is made to represent the astrological (and sometimes physical) qualities of the planets: Mars is red, so people born under Mars have red hair and/or flushed complexions. Added to this are mythological associations and extensions of the planetary identity: Mars is god of war, so people born under Mars must be warlike, active, virile, and thus (probably) athletic in appearance, with more muscle than soft tissue.

Secondly, material in which the physique is made to resemble and ratify astrological theory. Aries, Mars' sign, is the sign in which the Sun is said to be exalted, so the light of the Sun shines from the eyes of Mars'

people in their ‘piercing gaze’. Also of this category is material which supports the theory of the medicine of the humours: Mars is hot and dry, so the bodies of Mars’ people must also be hot and dry, that is, sinewy and dark, as roast meat is when all the fat and soft tissue have been burned off it (there is an association here, too, with burned offerings, and which parts of sacrificial animals are offered).

Thirdly, but far less frequently than the preceding two, is material which may simply be from observation, such as the heavy brows of Aries. In fact, it is very hard to find any material in this category which is wholly free from astrological associations. The eyebrows, for example, may be connected to the idea of melothesia, in which each sign of the zodiac is associated with a part of the body. Aries, Mars’ sign, is given to the head, and particularly to the forehead. This idea has further associations with Aries the Ram; the forest of ideas grows ever denser, and it may be safer to say that there is not one item in this category which does not actually belong to one of the other two.

If planetary physiognomy is not self-evident, scientific, or observed, but dependent on a tradition which is itself based on astrological vocabulary, then it will be susceptible to change when that vocabulary itself changes, as all languages do over time. On the few occasions when it has done so in recent times, the ‘neologisms’ seem to stay with the tradition, in that features are chosen to illustrate the astrological nature of the planet rather than being inferred from hundreds of impartial and documented examples. Barrett, quoted in Dean,⁵ gives an illustration for the planet Uranus in which the main features are pale eyes and wild curly hair: the pale eyes come from the traditional formula for the sign of Aquarius, the sign ‘given’ to Uranus by modern astrologers, while the hair is reminiscent either of cartoon electrocution, or of the iconic (and unrepresentative) photograph of Einstein which fixed the archetype of the ‘mad scientist’ on the popular imagination of the twentieth century. Uranus is the planet associated with revolutionary ideas and with lightning: clearly, Barrett’s illustration has more to do with the astrological values of Uranus than any actual physical traits. Similarly, he gives an illustration of a Neptunian type: here the main features are an aloof, distant gaze and a prominent forehead with domed temples, which are surely linked to the then-current astrological values given to Neptune which emphasized spirituality and psychic development. Since 1950, Neptune has been seen as the guiding spirit of the counterculture; if anyone were to draw a Neptunian type now it would undoubtedly appear less spiritually superior and more ‘dopey’ in every sense. Barrett is not,

however, alone in making up faces to fit the planets; he is merely a part of the tradition, and he has many illustrious predecessors in making up rather obvious archetypes, as will be shown later.

Mann, the Parkers and the other astrologers of the 1970s sourced their astrological interpretations, naturally, from the astrologers of the generations immediately preceding them, and in particular from the preceding boom age of astrology at the end of the nineteenth century: authors such as Alan Leo, W.J. Simmonite, Sepharial (W. R. Old) and the several astrologers who took the name 'Raphael'. Mann's descriptions of the planetary physiques are actually taken word for word from Simmonite's *Arcana of Astrology*,⁶ unaltered in even the smallest way.

Raphael's *Key and Guide to Astrology*, actually written by Robert T. Cross in 1905, is typical of these Edwardian astrological manuals. Edwardian astrologers were usually Theosophically inclined, which puts an emphasis on the zodiac rather than the planets, and so Raphael's list of physical characteristics is arranged by planet within sign: Neptune in Aries, Uranus in Aries, and so on. Nonetheless, the material is very much the same: Mars in Aries, where it is strong, gives 'big bones, swarthy complexion, sharp eyes and austere countenance...fond of combat, in which he is usually successful'.⁷ As one would expect for a god of war.

The best of these Edwardian manuals is Sepharial's *Manual of Astrology*, first written at the end of the nineteenth century but still being reprinted seventy years later. It became, as Curry says, 'a standard text for the first three decades of the twentieth century'.⁸ The material is very similar to Raphael and Simmonite, except for choosing to arrange his list by sign within planet rather than planet within sign. His version of Mars in Aries holds no surprises: 'A middle-statured person, well set, large boned; swarthy complexion, light hair, and curling, frequently red; austere countenance, and if Mars be oriental, ruddy and smooth; bold and undaunted, confident, choleric and proud; fond of war and dispute; one who often gains by those means'.⁹ Once again, the descriptions are so similar that it can only be concluded that all the authors were drawing on some earlier, common source, a source which Sepharial is quite happy to disclose:

We have ventured to introduce Lilly's description of persons in the Appendix to this Book, because Lilly is a reputable author, whose 'Christian Astrology' is a standard work on the horoscopolical science, and much esteemed by modern votaries of Astrology. For quite other reasons, which the polite reader will appreciate on reference to the

original in the Ashmolean MSS., we have thought fit to paraphrase, refine, and otherwise temper the language of Lilly's delineations [...].¹⁰

This over-genteel approach from Sepharial is in fact a bluff. Although he invites his reader to inspect the original, were the reader to do so he would see that Sepharial has done little more than bring Lilly's archaic spelling up to date for the nineteenth century.

Compare Sepharial's Mars in Aries to Lilly's version of Aries as a sign, and Mars as a planet: 'A dry body, not exceeding in height, leane or spare, but lusty bones and the party in his Limmes strong; the Visage long; black Eye-brows, a long neck, thick Shoulders, the Complexion dusky browne or swartish'.¹¹

Generally Martialists have this forme: they are but of middle Stature, their Bodies strong, and their Bones big, rather leane than fat; their Complexion of a browne, ruddy colour...their haire red or sandy flaxen, and many times crising or curling sharp hazle (sic) eyes, and they piercing, a bold confident countenance, and the man active and fearlesse. When Mars is orientall...a decent tallness...hairy of Body [...] [Occidental] Very ruddy, smooth body, and not hairy [...].¹²

There is nothing in the modern astrologers which was not in the Edwardian authors, and nothing in the Edwardians which cannot be found in Lilly. An astrology book bought today, in 2002, will contain the very same descriptions of planetary physiques as were being printed in 1647, which extends the tradition for three hundred and fifty years without alteration. No other literary canon in regular and ongoing use has lasted so long unaltered except the Scriptures.

The line of transmission from the contemporary astrology book back to Lilly is straight and unbroken. Lilly himself assists the process of taking the line further back by listing the contents of his own bookshelf, and thus his likely sources, as an appendix to *Christian Astrology*.¹³ Although he lists almost two hundred authors, many are translations or commentaries on the works of others, so the core of his library and knowledge is perhaps just a couple of dozen. The most respected and widely read astrological author in Lilly's day was Ptolemy, whose works enjoyed the same sort of exalted status as Lilly's own books were to have for the English astrologers who followed him. At the beginning of *Christian Astrology* there is a dedicatory ode, which rejoices that Lilly

has produced a masterpiece of astrology in English rather than Latin, and compares him to the legendary classical master:

Loe! He hath taught great Ptolom's secret skill.
Learning, that once in brazen piles did stand,
You now may see is printed in our land.¹⁴

The re-discovery of the literature of the classical world was a key factor in the growth of interest in astrology and hermeticism during the Renaissance; by Lilly's day astrologers had access to a wide variety of authors from earlier eras, often translated into Latin from their original languages, but sometimes in modern European languages as well. As with all things esoteric, the prevailing view was 'the older, the better'; and so the classical authors were seen as the ultimate source of astrological knowledge and truth.

On examination, however, the Greek and Latin astrologers have rather less to offer than might be expected. There is a small but very important section in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, which we shall examine more closely later, and some more material in Dorotheus, but otherwise the Classical world (or at least, what we have left of it) seems to have had only a passing interest in planetary physiognomy.

Far more attention is given to the idea of planets providing destiny. Ancient authors frequently refer to a planet (or, more frequently, a sign) prominent at birth which will predispose the native towards certain occupations in life, certain hazards, and certain diseases. Although all of these are quite clearly derived from the usual symbolic values given to the signs in question, pure physiognomy – that is, that the planets also govern the physical appearance of the native – is rarely found. Firmicus Maternus is typical:

If Mars is in a morning rising, he [the native] will be a soldier, or in charge of arms, or will spend time in foreign places, or be cut down in a sudden and violent death.¹⁵

If the Full moon is found in the terms or decan of Saturn, she makes the natives sluggish, cold in mind and body. They are lacking in all boldness, but have certain periods of rash fury. Their intestines are tormented by cold humours. If the moon is waning, activities and plans never turn out well, and all inheritance is lost. The natives are weighed down with poverty, slow in all their activities, and languid

in mind and body. They suffer various pains from consumption, spleen, pains in the kidneys or haemorrhages.¹⁶

The list of ailments here is clearly linked to the cold and wet humour of the moon and to the stomach and digestive system usually associated with the moon or its sign, Cancer; but there is no indication in Firmicus of how such a person might actually look. Perhaps this is a case of astrology reflecting the society of its times. In Roman society there was a long but well-defined career path which could lead from slavery to being made a free man and thence to wealth and even public office; advancing from one stage to the next was often a matter of pure luck, and so naturally astrologers and their clients were eager to know whether such fortune was a part of their destiny. Firmicus gives plenty of examples where various astrological factors might lead to wealth from inheritance or public office – or, conversely, to death in the arena. It may also be, too, that the ancient world, lacking photography, mass media, or even flat glass for mirrors, was far less obsessed with immediate appearance than the image-saturated society of today.

Hephaestio of Thebes, writing about sixty years after Firmicus, gives details in his *Apotelesmatics* on what sort of life the native might expect, but unlike Firmicus he also gives descriptions of physical appearance, using each decan of the signs. Those born with the third decan of Leo rising, he says, will be '[...] of middling stature, the face red, the eyes protruding; he will be unbridled around women'.¹⁷ Although he does not say so in so many words, Hephaestio is actually using planetary archetypes here: his florid-faced lecher has nothing to do with Leo or the Sun and everything to do with Mars, the ruler of the third decanate of Leo, as the emphasis on sexual activity and the colour red clearly show. Elsewhere, Hephaestio suggests places where those born under various signs could have distinguishing marks on the body; these seem to be linked to the parts of the zodiac animals contained within particular decans, as for example the hind legs of the lion, or the elbow of the archer Sagittarius.

Both Firmicus and Hephaestio belong to the late Classical world, and were drawing on much earlier sources such as Dorotheus and Ptolemy. Dorotheus is the earlier of the two if Pingree¹⁸ is correct in dating him to 75 CE, and he does include material on physical appearance, but not in a section devoted to the planets and their qualities per se; the references to physical appearance occur in a section on horary astrology where he gives likely descriptions for thieves signified by the various planets.¹⁹

Furthermore, Dorotheus has not survived in his original language but only in quotations in later Greek authors and in Arabic translations made in the 9th century from earlier Persian versions. It is very difficult to establish which parts of Dorotheus' work as we have it now are original, and which parts were later additions.

Ptolemy, on the other hand, writing in about 150 CE, seems to have become an established authority within his own lifetime, and remained the benchmark for astronomy and astrology until the Renaissance. In addition, the *Tetrabiblos* has survived more or less intact in its original language, along with a paraphrase made in late antiquity by Proclus, which helps validate the content of the original work. There is barely any later author, either classical or medieval, who does not either directly quote him or invoke his name. Some, like Firmicus, even attribute techniques to him which do not actually appear in his writings.²⁰ Ptolemy's short section on physical appearance in the *Tetrabiblos* – chapter 11 of book III – is therefore by far the strongest thread in the transmission and development of planetary physiognomy in European astrology, and should now be examined in detail.

The most striking thing about Ptolemy's planetary physiognomies is that there are not seven of them as one might expect, but only five. He gives details for the five planets from Mercury to Saturn, but none for the sun or moon, preferring to use the sun and moon to modify or highlight the facial features dictated by the five planets, with the sun giving a stronger and more positive illumination, the moon a rather more subdued effect. Dorotheus suggests something very similar in his own section on the description of thieves, which points perhaps to an earlier source common both to him and to Ptolemy, but then he finds himself caught out by the technical complexities of his subject, and having to improvise.

It is perfectly reasonable for Ptolemy to suggest that the five planets give the native his appearance and that the sun and moon give lighting or shading to these planetary forms, because in a natal horoscope all seven planets are taken as parts of the interpretation and it is almost impossible for a single planet to be the sole significator of appearance; but in the astrology of interrogations, now usually called horary astrology, single planets are made to stand as tokens for the various players in the scenario under enquiry, and therefore it can easily happen that the sun or the moon is the sole significator of a person. Dorotheus is therefore forced to invent solar and lunar archetypes. He indicates that such occasions would be extremely rare, and advises his readers to use first the planets which are in aspect with the sun or moon, or which are about to be, or which have

recently been so – which should cover almost all eventualities. Finally, he says:

If the Sun and the Moon do not aspect the stars and have withdrawn from them and have no aspect to any of the stars... then when the Sun is the indicator of the characteristics of the thief, then it indicates that the thief is fat and red, with yellowness mixed in his eyes. If the Moon is the indicator of the characteristics of the thief, then it indicates that this thief is comely in this appearance, white, and fat-cheeked in his face.²¹

These are thin descriptions indeed. They have no detail on character, nor do they say anything about the stature of the native. The reason for this is that these are descriptions of objects which have no bodies, but only faces: the sun and moon themselves. What Dorotheus is describing is the appearance of the sun and the ‘Man in the Moon’. It seems unlikely that he was the first to create these descriptions, but it does seem to be the case that he was forced to include them when his discourse on horary astrology made it theoretically possible to have the sun or moon as sole indicator of appearance. Whatever the real reason for their inclusion (and it must be remembered, too, that Dorotheus’s material as we have it may not be all his own) these solar and lunar archetypes have become an accepted part of the tradition, and neatly fill the gap between Ptolemy’s five planets and the septenary world-view of later eras. Later astrologers added more detail, such as golden or curly hair to denote the sun’s radiance, but seem always to have been aware of the strictly astronomical nature of what they were describing. Nonetheless, these two images have proven remarkably long-lasting and popular: few people nowadays would recognise a figure representing Mars unless told what it was, whereas a radiant yellow circle with a smiling face on it, or a face drawn into a pale crescent (usually wearing a nightcap on the upper point) find immediate recognition. (Children’s books regularly put a face on the sun, which children assimilate and recognise without question. The tradition of planetary physiognomy is alive and well in the present day).

Ptolemy’s planetary descriptions are full of familiar phrases, easily recognisable ancestors of those given by Lilly, Sepharial, and Ephrein centuries later. He says those born with Mars rising are strong, ruddy-faced, and grey-eyed. The word for ‘grey-eyed’ is *glaukophthalmos*, which does indeed mean grey-eyed, but Homer uses the similar *glaukopsis* as an epithet for Athena, goddess of wisdom: the idea is that these are eyes

which do not merely look, but find what they are looking for. Here is the probable root of the later writers' 'sharp-eyed' phrase, though what was said earlier about the exaltation of the Sun is none the less valid for that. This is precisely how astrological ideas cross-fertilise each other and grow.

It is Ptolemy's description of Saturn, however, that is the most interesting – and the most surprising.

Saturn, if he is in the orient, makes his subjects in appearance dark-skinned, robust, black-haired, curly-haired, hairy-chested, with eyes of moderate size, of middling stature, and in temperament having an excess of the moist and cold. If Saturn is setting, in appearance he makes them dark, slender, small, straight-haired, with little hair on the body, rather graceful and black-eyed; in temperament, sharing most in the cold and the dry.²²

Boiled down, this suggests that Saturn gives dark colouring and modest size no matter whether rising or setting. When rising he gives a stronger physique with more hair, but when setting these qualities are absent. Much depends on the word Robbins translates as 'robust'. Ashmand, who is translating a Latin version of the Greek original, prefers the phrase 'a good constitution'.²³ Ashmand also has 'a broad and stout chest' where Robbins has 'hairy-chested', though Ashmand does include the 'scanty hair' assigned to Saturn setting.

The word in the original Greek text for Robbins' 'robust' is *euēktikos*, and Ptolemy uses it both for Saturn and for Mars. It is not an unusual or rare word, and occurs across a wide range of extant Greek authors from Plato to Galen. It is to do with health and well-being. It goes further than mere health, however, in that there is the idea of active, vigorous growth in it – being fit rather than merely healthy. Galen writes on the contrast between *hygeia* (health) with *euexia* (bodily vigour). *Euexia* is better than being free of ailments: it is actively thriving, glowing with health.

Robbins' 'hairy-chested' is *dasusternos* in the original Greek. This is not 'hairy-chested' in the sense of having a few separate hairs; it is more furry than hairy and is used to describe a matted, woolly mass, as modern English uses 'shaggy'. Hesiod uses it to describe the coats of sheep and goats,²⁴ while Sophocles uses it to describe the centaur Nessus. Other authors use it to describe satyrs.

Between them, these two words offer a tantalising glimpse back into a much earlier world, where Saturn is not so much an astral entity but a chthonic one, a god of the earth and agriculture. Saturn as a god has links to the earth quite separate from his astrological links, and is a major figure in early Roman religion as a farming deity. Astrologically, he governs the winter signs Capricorn and Aquarius, and the winter solstice, which is close to his main festival, Saturnalia. Virgil says in Book I of his great paean to farming, the *Georgics*, that the good farmer should ‘in respect of this note the months and the stars in the heavens, and see which chilly sign Saturn settles himself in’:

hoc metuens caeli mensis et sidera serva,
frigida Saturni sese quo stella receptet²⁵

Almost every Renaissance woodcut or engraving depicting the planets and their associations shows men at work ploughing under Saturn. The sweat and toil of turning the earth in winter is seen as specifically Saturnine and so, of course, is the essential business of planting seeds in winter, to grow through spring and summer for the main harvest of the year.

Centaurs and satyrs are also nature-deities, as are all mythological creatures with animal or part-animal form, including the greatest nature-deity of them all, Pan. It is this rough and ready sort of nature, uncivilised but endlessly fecund, which farmers work with and wish to invoke, so that the seeds sown will grow into a plentiful harvest. The hair or fur on anything dasusternos is an emblem of this energy, something rough and wild yet indisputably alive and growing. For Ptolemy, to be born with Saturn rising is a positive link to the energy of the earth and the farmer’s fields, producing a body well suited to hard work, tanned by the outdoor life, and apparently both vigorous and virile, with a hairy-chestedness – showing, in fact, that it can make things grow, a piece of sympathetic magic which is far older than astrology – that has not lost any of its appeal as an epithet of masculinity twenty centuries later. Naturally, when Saturn is setting the god has run his course and spent his energies in the day just gone; those qualities of a fine husband (in all senses) which he gives when rising must now be less, and so the Saturn-setting native is slimmer, less muscular, and with less hair because this is a god who makes things grow, and when setting he cannot be so prolific.

It is important to see that Ptolemy’s Saturn is not, in any way, malefic. What he is saying, in effect, is no more than this: Saturn strong

makes men strong and virile, workers of the land; Saturn weak makes them less so. Saturn is not seen as a bringer of ill-fortune here: if anything, the reverse. Nor does Ptolemy see a weak Saturn as anything necessarily to be feared or ashamed of. Some people are farmers, some not. Ptolemy's absolutely even-handed attitude, evidence of his Aristotelian rather than Platonic philosophy, is much to be admired, and it is regrettable that his balanced and non-judgmental viewpoint was not shared by those who claimed to follow in his footsteps.

As already noted, astrologers of the Renaissance and early modern eras took Ptolemy as their model, and much of their astrological writing can be traced directly back to the *Tetrabiblos*. Yet in the case of Saturn, something very odd appears to have happened. This is Lilly's description:

[Saturn] signifieth one of a swart colour, palish like lead, or of a black earthy brown; one of rough skin, thin and very hairy on the body, not great eyes, many times his complexion is betwixt black and yellow, or as if he had a spice of the black or yellow jaundice: He is lean, crooked, or beetle-browed, a thin whay beard, great lips, like the black Moors; he looks to the ground, is slow in motion, either is bowlegged, or hits one leg or knee against another; most part a stinking breath, seldom free from a cough: (This is where he [Saturn] is peregrine or unfortunate) He is crafty for his own ends, seducing people to his opinion, full of revenge and malice, little caring for the church or religion; it's a foul, nasty, slovenly knave, or a whore; a great eter, or one of a large stomach, a brawling fellow, big great shoulders, covetous, and yet seldom rich, etc.²⁶

Where is Ptolemy's brawny farmer? Nowhere to be seen. Lilly has added personality traits here which are not a feature of Ptolemy, though they are to be found in several other authors, including some from the ancient world. But if the comparison is restricted to purely physical traits, Lilly's Saturn is lean and scrawny, and he both sounds and smells distinctly unhealthy. He is also either bowlegged or knock-kneed, a curious attribution since the two conditions are exactly opposite. Whatever he is, he is hardly suited to guiding a plough, and his general state of health is anything but *euektikos*.

Although it is normal, and indeed desirable, for any tradition to develop and grow, it is almost always the case in astrology that the core values are maintained unaltered. Signs, houses and planetary aspects have travelled from ancient Greek times to the present day without significant

revision, with the result that the basic grammar and vocabulary of astrology are the same now as they were then. But here, in this one instance, the basic meaning of a planet – that is, the strength, solidity and earthiness of Saturn – has been supplanted by something else.

It is possible to see in Lilly's Saturn some of the traits of Ptolemy's Saturn-setting descriptions, such as the thin frame, the thin hair, the thin beard (surely an extension of the same idea) and the dark colouring. Perhaps the 'great lips like the black Moors' are an imaginative extension of the dark colouring. But perhaps they are not. Somehow, a different Saturn archetype has been superimposed on Ptolemy's original. Where did it come from? And when?

The distance in time between Ptolemy and Lilly is almost exactly fifteen centuries, a very long period indeed. Moving forward from Ptolemy to find the point at which the tradition changes takes the thread of transmission past the later classical authors like Hephaestio and Firmicus, who as already noted seem not to have much interest in astrological physiognomy, and then into the limbo of the early medieval period, where finding anything at all is generally difficult. It is more productive, perhaps, to continue working backwards from Lilly, but in smaller steps than the original leap back to Ptolemy. Somewhere in between the two lies the fork in the road. Whatever the origin of the new Saturn archetype, it was certainly pervasive, and can be found regularly in non-astrological literature as well as strictly astrological contexts. The poet Louis MacNeice, writing on astrology at the end of his life, noted an all-too-familiar view of Saturn from the *Kalendar of Shepherds*:

He that is born under Saturn shall be false, envious, and full of debate, and full of law. And he shall be cunning in curing of leather, and a great eater of bread and flesh. And he shall have a stinking breath, and he shall be heavy, thoughtful, and malicious; a robber, a fighter, and full of covetousness [...]. He shall have little eyes, black hair, great lips, broad shoulders, and shall look downwards. He shall not love sermons, nor go to church.²⁷

The similarity to Lilly is extraordinary. And the more familiar this new archetype becomes, the more it seems that somehow we all know him. We do: he is none other than Shylock, the Jew from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. He is false, envious and full of debate; and he is greedy for his pound of flesh. His physical characteristics, as represented in virtually every production of the play since Shakespeare's day, match

Lilly's description perfectly. There is no astrological reason why those born under Saturn should have stinking breath or be greedy; neither respiration nor digestion are associated with the planet in astrological medicine, and anyone as thin and bony as the description suggests is unlikely to be a big eater. This new archetype of Saturn is quite simply an anti-Semitic propaganda image.

The next question is to ask who, or which group, inserted this new archetype into the tradition. Christian writers would seem to be the obvious candidates – but the works of two medieval astrologers, works known to Lilly and mentioned in the bibliography to *Christian Astrology*,²⁸ point to a different answer.

Working backwards towards those medieval astrologers, it is worth making a detour en route to examine the *Tractatus of Judicial Astrology* of Luca Gauricus published a century before Lilly, at Nuremberg in 1540. Gauricus grandly claims on the title page that his work is 'compositus...ex Ptolemaeo et aliis autoribus dignissimis', 'composed from Ptolemy and other most distinguished authors,' and so it is gratifying to find that his Saturn archetype has kept the agricultural aspects of the original. Nonetheless, other, non-Ptolemaic elements are present as well:

Saturn...makes men dark and of a citrine colour [yellowish?], fairly hairy, and with a dishonest face. And he will choose to go about badly dressed, and when he walks he brings one heel to the other [i.e. he shuffles] and makes his way heavily and slowly. He rarely or never smiles, and is irritable. He takes delight in agriculture, is reasonably fat [or solidly built], hairy on his chest and of small stature.²⁹

Gauricus has stayed loyal to Ptolemy in some of his phrasing, but the lame and ragged curmudgeon of the second archetype is very definitely present as well. Its original form must lie further back in the past.

A hundred and fifty years before Gauricus, Antonius de Montulmo wrote his book *On the Judgement of Nativities* (c.1396), in which he not only gave a long and detailed description of personal appearances as denoted by the planets, but obligingly quoted his sources. After quoting Ptolemy very faithfully, and emphasising Ptolemy's own point that these physical traits are present more noticeably when Saturn is rising than setting, he adds a note from Dorotheus that a Saturn type often has eyebrows joined in the middle, which is simply a development of the

'hairy' idea. Then he adds a new source, Messahalla: 'Messahalla said that Saturn signifies a dark man who in walking about turns his eyes downward onto the ground, and goes about in a plain manner, and is ponderous, slow and lazy, having a sparse beard on his cheeks'.³⁰

Montulmo's labelling of his source takes the argument back not just in time but also across cultural boundaries into the world of Arab astrology, which opens up other lines of influx and transmission from India, Persia, and perhaps even older cultures. There is corroboration, too, in part III of Guido Bonatti's *Liber Astronomiae*, a century earlier still than Montulmo:

Messahalla said that of the forms of mankind Saturn signifies a human being between black and yellow, who, heavy as he walk about, lowers his eyes onto the earth; when he walk he joins his feet together and keeps them crooked, having small eyes, dry skin; [he is] nervous, having a sparse beard on his jaws, thin lips, clever, ingenious, a seducer, a murderer, and especially in secret.³¹

Bonatti also repeats Dorotheus' observation about Saturn giving joined eyebrows, which probably indicates that Montulmo and Bonatti were using the same source, and that they probably encountered Dorotheus' work along with one or more Arab authors at the same time: most of the Arab authors were translated into European languages during the twelfth century in Spain or Italy, as Holden explains,³² and the transmission of Dorotheus came via this route.

Messahalla (Masha'allah) is among the earliest of the great Arab writers on astrology, active in Baghdad during the late eighth and early ninth century. It is difficult to determine whether he is the ultimate source of the 'lame and ragged' Saturn archetype, and harder still to go further back, since that would take the trail into pre-Islamic cultures where surviving material is scarce indeed. What is known, however, is that at the same time that Messahalla was writing there were several Indian astrologers active in Baghdad, and they, or other material they had access to, could be the source of the non-Ptolemaic Saturn archetype.

There is some support for this in the works of Al-Biruni. Al-Biruni was the last of the great Arab writers on astrology, and fully two centuries later than Messahalla, writing his *Elements of the Art of Astrology* in 1029 CE. He is also geographically distinct from the rest, living and writing far to the east of Baghdad in what is now Uzbekistan. He spent much time in India and studied astrology there, though in his

writings he was sometimes less than complimentary about the skills of Indian astrologers. Nonetheless, his works contain much material from Indian sources, though also very much products of his own culture and faith. It is therefore interesting to find in the *Elements* a description of Saturn as

Ugly, tall, wizened, sour face, large head, eyebrows joined, small eyes, wide mouth, thick lips, downcast look, much black hair, short neck, coarse hands, short fingers, awkward figure, legs crooked, big feet.

In disposition: fearful, timid, anxious, suspicious, miserly, a malevolent plotter.

Instincts and Morals: Exile and poverty, or wealth acquired by his own trickery or that of others.³³

This is extraordinarily detailed, and extraordinarily pejorative, too. There is hardly a single attribution in the lists which is even neutral, let alone desirable. There is barely a trace here of Ptolemy's brawny farmer; this is a veritable thesaurus of insults, reinforcing what Bonatti and Montulmo took from Messahalla and adding some new ones – the wizened face and the coarse hands, for example – for good measure.

Yet Al-Biruni's list does not in itself prove anything. He could have taken all of it from Messahalla and those who followed him, some of whom may have fallen from the historical record. If the original of this archetype does lie with Messahalla, then plenty more insults could have been added to the list in the two centuries which separate him from Al-Biruni. Without knowing Al-Biruni's sources, and without knowing which Indian astrologers he had been in contact with, it is impossible to say whether the 'lame and ragged' Saturn archetype originated in Baghdad, in India, or somewhere else entirely. What does seem to be clear, though, is that this archetype is not European, and that the further east the trail is allowed to go, the stronger the evidence for this archetype seems to be.

Dorotheus presents a problem. He is of roughly the same era as Ptolemy, and yet seems to present a version of the later archetype. Here is his Saturn:

Repulsive in [his] face, black in [his] colour; his gaze is towards the ground, [and] he is broken, [and] small in [his] eyes, slim, twisted in [his] gaze; a pallor is upon him, his limbs abound in hair, his eyebrows are grown together; he is a liar, sickly, and his gentleness (manner) and nature proceed in accordance with secrets and tricks.³⁴

This is so unlike Ptolemy as to be unrecognisable. It is also so similar to the Arab authors that either they copied Dorotheus verbatim, or the Arab version became inserted into Dorotheus somewhere along the line as it was translated into Persian and then into Arabic, with probably some Indian input at some stage as well.

There are two reasons why the second option is likelier. The first is that the similarity is simply too good to be true, and as in the world of fine art, any original which is too good to be true is usually false. The second is that this archetype of Saturn is simply too one-sided. There is an inherent sense of balance in Greek thought which is exemplified in Ptolemy, and which Dorotheus' Saturn patently lacks. Also, the pre-Classical thinking which is echoed in Ptolemy, in which Saturn is seen as a god of agriculture, producing men who are well fitted to working the soil, should be there in Dorotheus too, especially since he claims to be quoting earlier sources. Dorotheus in his surviving form is simply too sophisticated, too urban, and too far removed from the primitive but essential link between the sky and the earth which motivated all early agrarian societies and their religions.

If Dorotheus is genuine and the text as it is today is what he wrote in the first century, then obviously he is the original source for the 'lame and ragged' Saturn. If that is the case, then there may be two traditions of planetary signification at work. One would be Ptolemaic, Greek in both language and thought, located in the Mediterranean, and with probable links to Babylonian practice but also possible connections to other agrarian cults (Etruscan, perhaps). The other would be Dorothean, Greek in language but Levantine in location and thought, with possible links to other peoples of Syria, northern Iraq, Iran, and perhaps India or the Arabian peninsula. The crux of the dispute is whether Ptolemy was the mainstream and Dorotheus the breakaway development, or Dorotheus the mainstream and Ptolemy a deliberate attempt at archaism, perhaps for artistic reasons. Without an original text of Dorotheus and a wider range of contemporary astrological writings for comparison, it is impossible to judge, though Hephaestio gives some hint by following Ptolemy's

example and giving a broad-chested yet sinewy physique – and no downward-looking shuffling in evidence at all.³⁵

Assuming that Dorotheus' description of Saturn is suspicious and probably owes something to its Arab translators, the second Saturn archetype seems likeliest to have originated with the Arab astrologers. As has been shown, this heavily negative image became the accepted norm in medieval and Renaissance authors. The appearance of this archetype in the character of Shylock and in other art and literature of the time begs the question as to whether this description of Saturn was deliberately intended to suggest a Jew, and to present the Jewish people in an unflattering light.

Such speculation is fraught with difficulties. In support of the idea is an extraordinary list in Al-Biruni's *Elements*,³⁶ where a list of the planets and their associated faiths is given. At the top of the list, naturally, is Saturn, given to 'Jews and those who dress in black'. Christians are given Jupiter, and Moslems Venus. The sun is given to 'Magians and Mithraists', Mars to idolaters and wine-drinkers, Mercury to all disputants and heretics within any sect, and the moon to those who keep to the prevailing religion. (This astounding piece of astrological lore must be very old indeed if it includes Mithraists and Magians, who may be Zoroastrians, and if it is as old as it appears then perhaps the moon refers to those who keep to aboriginal faiths, that is, the practice of worshipping local deities whose cult predates the advent of later militant religions such as Christianity or Islam. Mars could refer to a Bacchic or Orphic cult. Whatever the provenance of this list, it does not appear to be Indian in origin, since it omits any mention of Vedic deities or Jainism).

Anti-Semitic feeling in the history of western Europe has been well-documented, but it has been just as prevalent in the middle east, so the idea of Arab astrologers creating a negative archetype to represent the Jews is not unthinkable. If that is the case, though, then Messahalla is unlikely to have been the originator, since he was himself a Jew. It is interesting to note, too, how the development of this archetype takes the symbolism to the very opposite of its original form: for Al-Biruni, the people of Saturn are exiles, people without land (and very descriptive of the Jews following the Diaspora), which is exactly the opposite of the man of Saturn so firmly connected to the soil which Ptolemy describes.

It would be wrong to press the point too strongly, but the idea of using the Saturn archetype to describe and denigrate the Jews does seem to have had an influence on the development of the 'lame and ragged' image, and probably on its ready acceptance by the Medieval and

Renaissance astrologers. By the time the Jewish scholar Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote his *Book of Reasons* in the twelfth century, the archetype was already well-established, and his attempts to explain some of the symbolism sound desperately defensive:

[Saturn] is tall because he is above all the [other] planets. He has a thin beard because his is the opposite of the Moon that rules the beard. His face is dark because of the black bile, and lean because of the dryness. His eyes are small and black and downcast because of his heavy walk. He talks little and does not get angry because of his slow motion; but when he gets angry, he becomes destructive, for he is a malefic; and since he is the superior [planet] he overcomes all the others.³⁷

Once this view of Saturn had been established as the model, later authors could build on it (Ramesay, writing in 1653, repeats the usual litany, but adds that the nose is large, too.³⁸ As previously shown, the astrological writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century astrological revival simply drew on the writers active before astrology's eighteenth-century lapse, seeking to restore and continue the tradition rather than add to it or develop it, and so the 'lame and ragged' archetype of Saturn, the Wandering Jew and universal figure of hate, has continued to the present day.

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