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## WALTER BURLEY ON THE INFLUENCE OF PLANETS

Although Walter Burley is best known for his contributions to medieval logic and philosophy of nature, the list of his works, created over a long period of his busy life, includes treatises and commentaries covering various subjects from *trivium* to theology. One of the less known *opuscula* of Burley's is his brief treatise *De planetis et eorum virtute*<sup>1</sup>, which is apparently his only work devoted to astrology and, indeed, a rare gem in the library of scholastic works on the subject<sup>2</sup>. Despite its small size, hardly exceeding two columns of a manuscript page *in folio*, it is an interesting summary of the standard astrological knowledge about the influence of planets in his times. The work has been preserved in two 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts, both at Lambeth Palace Library in London<sup>3</sup>. No suggestions for its dating have been made so far<sup>4</sup> and in the absence of any cross-references to other works or direct information concerning the time of its composition, fixing the time of its composition is admittedly difficult. Its dry, unadorned style, almost mechanically repetitive phrases have an uncanny resemblance to parts of *De vita et moribus philosophorum*, but the doubtful attribution of the latter work means it cannot be taken as a reference point<sup>4</sup>. From passing remarks betraying philosophical erudition one could guess that it is a late rather than early work.

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. J.A. WEISHEIPL, «Repertorium Mertonense», *Mediaeval Studies* 31 (1969) 200.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. E. GRANT, «Medieval and Renaissance scholastic conceptions of the influence of the celestial region on the terrestrial», *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 17, 1 (1987) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mss Lambeth Palace 74, f. 8va-b, 70, ff. 147vb-148va.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. R. WOOD, «Studies on Walter Burley 1968-1988», *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* (1988) 232-250.

The structure of *De planetis* is clear and simple: the work is divided into sections, each one paragraph long, devoted to all of the seven planets of medieval heaven, in the following order: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. The order of presentation does not coincide with what was then believed to be the natural order of planets (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn); the latter, however, presented according to the growing distance from Earth is mentioned by Burley in the second paragraph of the treatise<sup>6</sup>. It does not diverge from the standard Aristotelian – Ptolemaic model prevalent in the Middle Ages. The order of sections devoted to planets does not reflect their division into benevolent, mediocre and malevolent ones either, even though the type of influence is an important criterion used by Burley in the description of planets. Surprisingly enough, Burley's order of presentation seems to take into consideration either some other undisclosed criteria or must be accepted as completely random.

Less surprising but equally interesting are the extreme paragraphs of the treatise. Their role, beside the traditional function of an introduction and conclusion, seems to be one of a disclaimer, in which Burley dissociates himself from Ptolemy, whose opinions form the main part of his work. Already in the first sentence of the work, immediately after proclaiming that if someone knows the hour of his birth (throughout the treatise Burley never mentions the fair sex), he will know whether he is under the influence of a malevolent or a benevolent planet, our author reminds his readers that none of these influences results in any necessity. He states unequivocally that it is free will that is responsible for human actions: with the help of God's grace, man is able to do good, or he can choose to follow the sensual concupiscence and fall into sin<sup>7</sup>. Even a man

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. J. OTTMAN & R. WOOD, «Walter Burley: His Life and Works», *Vivarium* 37,1 (1999) 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> «Notandum est quod inter omnes planetas Luna infima est. Post Lunam vero situatur Mercurius, post Mercurium Venus, post Venerem Sol, post Solem Mars, post Martem Iovis, post Iovem Saturnus, semper ascendendo», Gualterus Burlaeus, *De planetis et eorum virtute*.

<sup>7</sup> «Si quis nascatur in aliqua hora diei in qua dominatur quivis septem planetarum, proniar erit ad bonum sive ad malum secundum influentiam illius planetae, in quo natus est, sed tamen nullus illorum septem inducit aliquam necessitatem. Per liberum enim arbitrium et gratiam Dei pervenientem et cooperantem bona facere potest homo; et e converso: per liberum arbitrium et concupiscentiam cordis et oculorum habens fomitem peccati in semet ipso mala multa facere quibit», *Ibidem*.

born under a malevolent star, Burley assures his reader in the concluding section, can turn away from evil and cling to the immutable good and thus merit eternal life<sup>8</sup>.

The short remarks, in which Burley distances himself from any sympathy for astral determinism, are characteristic. Astral determinism that was so persuasively argued for by Averroes in his *De substantia orbis* was on the list of 219 propositions condemned by the bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, in 1277. After that date, even proclaimed Averroists, like John of Jandun, did not dare to preach universal determinism but found human actions to be «the only exception to the total dominance of celestial bodies over terrestrial bodies<sup>9</sup>». According to Jandun: «Celestial bodies do not have the power for causing the intellect to understand or not to understand and for necessitating the will to choose or not to choose, or to will or not to will»<sup>10</sup>. Burley, who arrived in Paris to study theology in the same year Jandun obtained his degree in philosophy (1310), certainly saw no reason to oppose the prevalent opinion.

With respect to their influence on people born under their dominance, the seven planets are divided into three groups: Venus and Jupiter are considered benevolent, Mars and Saturn – malevolent, Moon, Sun and Mercury – mediocre. Despite its proclaimed mediocrity, Sun is the celestial body whose prominence is specially stressed. Its description given by Burley, though not much longer than those of other planets, contains several pieces of interesting information. Sun is recognized to be of ‘universal’ importance<sup>11</sup> for two reasons. On one hand, Burley notes that in the cosmos it occupies the middle position that corresponds to the

<sup>8</sup> «Si vero sub malivola constellatione natus fuerit, a malo, ad quod pronus est, declinet et firmiter bono incommutabili adhaereat. Quod si fecerit, praemia digna a bono Deo suscipiet, scilicet vitam aeternam», *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> E. GRANT, *Planets, Stars and Orbs. The Medieval Cosmos, 1200-1687*, Cambridge 1994, p. 590.

<sup>10</sup> «Corpora coelestia non habent virtutem ad causandum intellectum ad intelligendum vel non intelligendum et ad necessitandum voluntatem ad eligendum vel non eligendum, vel volendum vel non volendum», Johannes de Janduno, *De coelo*, I, q. 1, f. 2va, quoted after E. GRANT, *Op. cit.*, p. 590.

<sup>11</sup> «Quidam planetae sunt valde benivoli, ut Iupiter et Venus, quidam vero sunt valde malivoli secundum suas influentias, ut puta Mars et Saturnus, quidam autem sunt mediocres, ut Mercurius et Luna. Sol quoque inter omnes computatur universus. Iupiter atque Venus bona sunt, Saturnus Marsque maligni. Sol et Mercurius cum Luna sunt mediocres», Gualterus Burlaeus, *Op. cit.*

position of the heart in man<sup>12</sup>; this underlines its vital significance. He does not develop the Pythagorean - Platonic analogy of *macrocosmos* and *microcosmos*, so it is difficult to say whether he treats this theory seriously or, like Aquinas and Albert the Great only metaphorically<sup>13</sup>, but he seems at least to accept its explanatory value. On the other hand, drawing from the Aristotelian tradition, he stresses Sun's role as the illuminator of other planets and the cause of day on earth, and, moreover, as the co-generator of all corruptible beings in the sublunary world<sup>14</sup>.

The sections concerning the results of the influence of planets on the features of boys born under their dominance follow a single pattern. After the proclamation of the type of influence, Burley enumerates the qualities of character and of appearance generated by a particular celestial body. The presentation of the last two planets from his list, Venus and Saturn, is enriched with remarks concerning their relations to the elementary qualities: Venus is said to be cold and humid while Saturn is cold and dry<sup>15</sup>. These passing remarks show Burley's familiarity with the theory of correspondence between some planets and the elements of the sublunary world. Cold and humid Venus would be paired with water that shares the same characteristics, while cold and dry Saturn would be paired with earth. According to Grant, the theory of domination of planets over the four elements, popular in the Middle Ages, did not contradict the belief in the ethereal nature of celestial bodies: the planets did not possess the elementary qualities actually but virtually, as their causes<sup>16</sup>. It is most likely that Burley shared this belief, too, even though he does not make it explicit in his text.

<sup>12</sup> «Et ecce sicut Sol in firmamento situatur in planetarum medio, sic in microcosmo, id est in minori mundo, qui est homo, cor medium locum tenet», *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. M. KURDZIAŁEK, «Średniowieczne doktryny o człowieku jako mikrokosmosie», in: M. KURDZIAŁEK, *Średniowiecze w poszukiwaniu równowagi między arystotelizmem a platonizmem*, Lublin 1996, p. 282.

<sup>14</sup> «Sol est mundi oculus, firmamenti pulchritudo, Lunae et aliorum planetarum illuminator, a quo etiam dies accipit suum esse. Nam nihi aliud est dies quam latio Solis super terram, a cuius calore mediante humore originantur omnia corruptibilia super terram, quia vult Philosophus [quod] homines sine virtute solis non oriuntur. Nam homo generat hominem et sol», Gualterus Burlaeus, *Op. cit.* Cfr. also Aristoteles, *Physica*, 194b. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> «Venus est stella lucidissima et inferioribus propitia, temperate frigida et humida. (...) Saturnus est planeta obscurus et malivolus, frigidus atque siccus», Gualterus Burlaeus, *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. E. GRANT, *Op. cit.*, p. 587. The example taken from Amicus's commentary on *De coelo* pairs the elementary water with Moon rather than Venus.

The description of the features of character dominated by a given planet is very brief and only in a few cases goes beyond a simple enumeration of qualities covered by a single sentence. The features Burley claims to be the result of the benevolent influence are, strangely enough, not wholly positive. Generosity, graciousness, and religiosity blend together with hilariousness and gallantry to make a boy born under the influence of Jupiter a saintly person; on the other hand, such a person is naturally prone to fall into the snares of Venus<sup>17</sup>. The list of qualities that describe the character of a person born under the influence of Venus is actually surprising as the unequivocal virtues are outnumbered by other qualities: on Burley's list intelligence, generosity and compassion follow not only gentleness and gaiety, sociability and playfulness, wit and talent for music but also irascibility and conceit<sup>18</sup>. The same balanced characteristics can be seen, quite expectedly, with respect to people born under the influence of mediocre stars. Those influenced by Sun are kind and gentle, eloquent and accurate, intelligent and wise, joyful, helpful and amiable. Their only weakness mentioned by Burley is, just as in the case of men born under the influence of Jupiter, a penchant for women. Moon produces unsettled and indecisive people, restless and parsimonious, yet thoughtful and forgiving<sup>19</sup>. The influence of Mercury, in turn, results in a personality that is talented in sciences, arts and crafts, open minded, intelligent and eloquent but insolent<sup>20</sup>. Malevolent planets seem to have

<sup>17</sup> «Facit enim Iuppiter homines largos, hilares et audaces, multum amabiles atque gratiosos, nexus veneris naturaliter appetentes», Gualterus Burlaeus, *Op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> «Sub [Veneris] constellatione nascitur homo formosus et luxuriosus, iocosus et gaudens, diversa genera instrumentorum appetens, ut organa, citheram et lyram et tubas buccinantes. Eritque homo iste deliciosus et nobiles gestus amans et erit appetens laudem vanam. Eritque multum irascibilis et faciliter dimittens et propriis consiliis plus quam alienis credens. Praeterea, si dives fuerit, facultates multas pauperibus erogabit. Si vero pauper fuerit, misericordiam quam non potest opere, bona voluntate et compassione fortiter adimplebit. Item, largus erit valde plus cum pauperibus quam divitibus; et erit boni ingenii», *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> «Sub [Lunae] constellatione nascitur homo vagus, multum vigilans, intra se nimis cogitans, incante loquens, frigore faciliter infirmans, levem causam in gravem trahens, sed et faciliter iniuriam dimittens, non libenter sua participans, argentum multum congregans, nec expediens; non sedens vel quiescens sua sponte, quimo inconstans et circumquaque respiciens», *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> «Sub [Mercurii] constellatione nascuntur philosophi omnium scientiarum cupidi, nascuntur etiam laici mechanicarum artium valde docti. Nam Mercurius facit homines sub eo natos superbos, facundos, boni ingenii et etiam bonae memoriae, mobiles et leves, in

influence more uniform in their evil action. Even here, however, some positive features can be found, although the proportion of virtues and vices is far from balanced. In the case of Mars, Burley has some difficulty in finding a positive quality: such a person is clever and not to be cheated easily; by contrast, negative qualities are a legion: aggressive, foul-mouthed, and quarrelsome, vainglorious and envious<sup>21</sup>. Saturn does not fare much better: its influence on men produces shy, tongue tied people with good memory, who are blunt and unsocial, envious and treacherous<sup>22</sup>.

The tendency to find both positive and negative aspects of the planetary influence seems to be apparently inconsistent with the idea of their benevolent and malevolent actions. Nor does, paradoxically, the idea of mediocre planets look quite clear, for two of them, Sun and Mercury, seem to have predominantly positive influence, while the influence of Moon does not look much better than those of Mars and Saturn. It seems as if Burley tried to mitigate the determinist air one-sided presentations of celestial influence were bound to have. In this, he departed from Ptolemy, his most likely source of information, whose descriptions of human characters dominated by a particular planet are quite unequivocal<sup>23</sup>. He remained faithful, however, to his declaration from the opening paragraph of the work, in which he stressed the superiority of human free will over the influence of celestial bodies. If their domination does not result in an irrevocable destiny, it must mean that even features of character produced by the most unfortunate constellation may be used for the benefit of the person and thus cannot be wholly evil, and similarly even features of

diversas regiones proficiscentes, ut semper nova possint discere et prius inaudita. Facitque Mercurius homines suis propriis consiliis credentes, aliorum consilia respicientes. Facitque homines multa perquirentes et libentissime expedientes», *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> «Sub [Martis] constellatione nascuntur reges bellicosi, maledicentes, seditiosi et callidi, quia non faciliter decipiuntur; sed et laudis cupidi et iactantes, opera propria colaudantes, aliena parvipendentes seu etiam vituperantes», *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> «Sub [Saturni] constellatione nascitur homo timidus et amarus, aliud in corde aliud in ore habens. Eritque homo iste invidus atque tristis, proditor et solitarius, pauca et maliciose loquens, sed et cum bona loquendo simulat, mala callide pertractat, et quod pessimum est faciliter offenditur et de difficili placatur. Item, de difficili scientiam concipit, et cum scientiam habuerit non de facili amittet», *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. the synopsis of Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblus* in G. LUCK (ed. & transl.), *Arcana Mundi. Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Baltimore and London 1985, pp. 342-348.

character produced by the most fortunate constellation may be misused and wasted. This way all planets are ‘mediocre’ in their influence and their division retains sense only as a guide explaining certain traits by giving ‘ideal types’.

The ideal type of a good man that emerges from these descriptions is surprisingly distant from the contemplative nature one would expect to see in a work penned by a medieval philosopher. Outgoing, gentle and generous, joyful, witty and intelligent are qualities that are associated rather with a renaissance courtier than a medieval Everyman. Apparently, Burley had fewer reservations concerning the Ancient ideal of man that emerges from Ptolemy’s comments than he had with respect to astral determinism. By contrast, one is not surprised at all that vices seem unaffected by the time separating Ptolemy from Burley: a man who is blunt and aggressive, scheming and niggardly, lustful, vainglorious and conceited is reproached by every epoch.

The second part of Burley’s descriptions of boys born under the influence of planets concerns the characteristic features of appearance. There he gives his readers a lesson of physiognomic in a nutshell. Unfortunately, this part of the description is incomplete; Burley says nothing about the looks of people dominated by Saturn and not much more about the people dominated by Venus. Boys born under the influence of Sun are said to be beautifully built, with clear and rosy faces, mouths not too large but with slightly puffed lips<sup>24</sup>. Similar characteristic appears with respect to boys born under the influence of Mercury and Jupiter; Burley adds that Mercurians blush easily, have large mouths and equal teeth, straight noses and black eyes<sup>25</sup>, whereas Jovians have smiling faces, straight noses, unequal and sparse teeth and round eyes<sup>26</sup>. By contrast, boys born under the influence of Moon are pale and turn pale easily, have small mouths and snub noses, while those born under the influence of

<sup>24</sup> «Signa Solis in humano corpore sunt sic: facies clara et rubea, os mediocre, labia aliquantulum tumentia et rosea, et totum corpusculum perornatum», Gualterus Burlaeus, *Op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> «Signa Mercurii in corpore humano sunt haec: facies clara et pulchra et de facili rubea, labia grossa et tumentia, dentes aequales, oculi nigri, nasus directus non gibbosus», *Ibidem.*

<sup>26</sup> «Signa Iovis in corpore humano sunt haec: facies subrisa, clara, oculi circui, dentes inaequales et divaricati, nasus directus non gibbosus», *Ibidem.*

Mars have thin and dark faces with big and frequently open mouths and long hooked noses that for Burley are natural signs of falsehood<sup>27</sup>.

It is quite easy to imagine Burley's ideal of male beauty on the basis of these comments if one accepts the assumption, present already in Aristotle's *Physiognomica*, that corporeal beauty should reflect the beauty of character. I am not in the position to say whether a round face with rosy complexion and puffed lips still matches the ideal; what seems more interesting, however, is the appearance of the 'black character'. The description of a person born under the influence of Mars seems to be that of a Shylock. It is small wonder that Burley, brought up in the land of red faced, fair haired folks associates negative qualities with the appearance of an alien, possibly a Jew. Regrettably, he was not the last one to yield to this superstition. The matching of looks and character seems to be only indirectly related to Aristotle's *Physiognomica*. Burley follows the Philosopher's advice that faces make best mirrors of character<sup>28</sup> and concentrates almost exclusively on them. The interpretation of particular features, however, is in most cases different from the one we find in *Physiognomica*. For Aristotle a hooked nose was a sign of pride and a snub nose – a sign of concupiscence, a thin face was a sign of shrewdness while a big face a sign of laziness. Both dark and pale faces are treated as signs of anxious character; red ones, by contrast, betray a lively and quick temper<sup>29</sup>. Clearly, over the fifteen hundred years separating Aristotle from Burley either the ideas of beauty or the analogy of body and soul must have changed.

Burley's *De planetis et eorum virtute* is, admittedly, an interesting piece of writing documenting the beliefs and doctrines of the time. Its value does not seem to be limited solely to the information it contains. If it is true that *historia magistra vitae*, then there is a lesson for a modern reader to be drawn from the text. The scientific method or erudition are not enough to make a subject scientific and being too serious about your subject makes it difficult to judge its value.

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<sup>27</sup> «Signa Martis in humano corpore sunt haec: facies nigra et macilenta, os magnum frequenter ad rixas et detraciones apertum, nasus longus et gibbosus. Et hoc pro constanti tene quod quicumque habuerit nasum longum in medio elevatum sicut aquila sive mulus naturaliter falsus est», *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. Aristoteles, *Physiognomica*, 814b, 2-4.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, 811a-812a.