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The astrological roots of mesmerism

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ABSTRACT

Franz Anton Mesmer's 1766 thesis on the influence of the planets on the human body, in which he first publicly presented his account of the harmonic forces at work in the microcosm, was substantially copied from the London physician Richard Mead's early eighteenth century tract on solar and lunar effects on the body. The relation between the two texts poses intriguing problems for the historiography of medical astrology: Mesmer's use of Mead has been taken as a sign of the Vienna physician's enlightened modernity while Mead's use of astro-meteorology has been seen as evidence of the survival of antiquated astral medicine in the eighteenth century.

Two aspects of this problem are discussed. First, French critics of mesmerism in the 1780s found precedents for animal magnetism in the work of Paracelsus, Fludd and other early modern writers; in so doing, they began to develop a sophisticated history for astrology and astro-meteorology.

Second, the close relations between astro-meteorology and Mead's project illustrate how the environmental medical programmes emerged. The making of a history for astrology accompanied the construction of various models of the relation between occult knowledge and its contexts in the enlightenment.

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1. Introduction

The human mind has two epochs: complete ignorance and semi-science. The first was very long; we are now in almost every respect in the second. In the age of complete ignorance, people were mistaken in accepting every error, without examination, as truth; and in the age of semi-science, people are mistaken almost as often, in rejecting many truths as errors. (Antoine-Joseph-Michel Servan, *A provincial's doubts proposed to the physician-commissioners charged by the King with the examination of animal magnetism*, 1784, p. 90)

Before hypnotism, there was mesmerism; before mesmerism, there was animal magnetism; before animal magnetism, there was animal gravity. This term, 'animal gravity', appeared first in an essay by Franz Mesmer presented to the Vienna medical school in May 1766, a *Physico-medical dissertation on the influence of the planets* (Amadou, 1971, p. 40; Bloch, 1980, p. 14). Its author, a Swabian in his early thirties, had already studied theology at the Jesuit colleges at Dillingen and Ingolstadt and came downriver to Vienna

to study law in 1759. Mesmer was not always the most reliable informant about his own deeds and sufferings. The title page of his dissertation claimed he held a philosophy doctorate he almost certainly did not possess. As is now well known and as his gnomic reference to gravity implied, the dissertation was in large part plagiarised from the work of the eminent London physician Richard Mead, whose Latin *Discourse concerning the influence of the Sun and Moon on animal bodies*, first published in 1704, was thereafter revised, translated, and released in a host of editions in London, Paris, Frankfurt and elsewhere well into the late eighteenth century. As Frank Pattie first pointed out half a century ago, Mesmer's source was Mead's 1746 London edition, *De imperio solis ac lunae in corpora humana* (Mead, 1746; Pattie, 1956; Amadou, 1971, pp. 29–31).

The aim here is not to rehearse the details of that ingenious transposition of a Whig physician's judicious reflexions on aerial tides into a charismatic Viennese therapist's visionary cosmology. In fact, Mesmer explicitly named Mead as his predecessor in the text of the dissertation. Rather, by re-examining intriguing aspects of the status of these texts and the milieux of their composition and interpretation, it will be argued that some of the debates

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around Mead and Mesmer included unusually important assessments of the history of astrology. The medico-astrological condition of the body played a decisive role here. The mesmerism controversies represented a salient moment when medical astrology became a topic for historical inquiry, as well as being a signal episode in the history of that enterprise.

Histories of past knowledges help make the familiar somewhat stranger and the exotic a little less odd. Historians find Mesmer's use of Mead a sign of the enlightened culture of the founder of animal magnetism, yet find Mead's use of medical astrology a sign of the backward-looking state of the London physician's intellectual development (Porter, 1985; Roos, 2000). This apparent historiographic contradiction is the concern of the first section of this paper. It then becomes important to study how Mesmer's place in the history of medical astrology was understood in the late eighteenth century, whether as splendidly enlightened or appallingly outdated. Antimesmerist writers discussed in the paper's second section developed a complex and sophisticated history of astro-meteorology to put Mesmer where they wanted him. Their histories included some strikingly positive appraisals of the doctrines of those judged his predecessors, such as William Maxwell and Robert Fludd (Kassell, 2007). These judgments invite a re-evaluation of the understanding of astro-meteorology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The balance of the paper, therefore, devotes attention to the ways in which Mead's astro-meteorology and its contemporary projects were developed from resources available in Augustan London's medical, meteorological and commercial enterprises. These cases show how intricate relations between bodily and atmospheric conditions were crucial aspects of the period's environmental histories and therapies (Jordanova, 1979; Golinski, 2007, pp. 170–184). Writers of that epoch were sensitive to the intriguing relation between the capacity of atmospheric powers to act remotely on the body and the capacity of beliefs about these powers. It was, in the end, not the mesmerists but rather their enemies who explained away animal magnetism and animal gravity as effects on the body of the immense powers of imagination (Azouvi, 1976; Bauer, 1984). This is why it is worth exploring the imaginative and material conditions of the emergence of animal gravity and its cognate principles in the mesmerist debates.

2. Mesmer reads Mead

This is what Mesmer found in, then copied from, Mead's text. The London physician provided much familiar evidence that the position of the Moon affected the motion of terrestrial airs and waters. The brilliant analysis by the Royal Society's then recently elected president, Isaac Newton, presented in the 1687 *Principia mathematica* and made accessible in the summary prepared by Edmund Halley for the Catholic king James II and printed in the *Philosophical Transactions*, showed how the combined action of Moon and Sun raised the tides (Mead, 1746, pp. ii–iii; 1748, p. vii). The same must be true of winds and the atmosphere: especially so, since the air was rather nearer the celestial bodies than was the sea. Winds blew strongly at the equinoxes, while the great storm of November 1703, which raged across Britain a few months before Mead completed his first version of the text, coincided precisely with the Moon in perigee (Mead, 1708, p. 29; 1746, pp. 98–99; 1748, pp. 104–107; Golinski, 2007, pp. 43–52). Air had of course long been taken to be responsible for epidemic constitutions and to catalyse disharmony of the humours, while attention to the powers of the non-naturals grew following renewed attention to the Hippocratic tradition. With Mead and his closest medical contemporaries air, or indeed a range of airs, came to be seen as the principal agents in disease, no longer one among many non-naturals (Riley, 1987, pp. 9–15; Rusnock, 2002; Golinski, 2007, pp. 140–

144). Effects of solar and lunar position on aerial motion would consequently matter much to health. Weaker beings, the sick, female and the aged, would indeed be even more subject to these influences (Mead, 1746, p. 29; 1748, p. 32). Respiration caused blood circulation through air pressure, thus aerial weight changes would directly affect the blood (Mead, 1708, p. 12; 1746, p. 25; 1748, p. 27). And since the nervous fluids were composed of tinier and springier particles, they would respond even more dramatically to these atmospheric tides (Mead, 1746, p. 34; 1748, p. 37). There were some puzzles about evidence for such aerial flows, notably that of the newfangled barometers marketed by ingenious London makers. No obvious barometric falls could be systematically observed at new or full Moon: Mead hazarded that this could be explained away by perturbations of gravity and of effluvial motions (Mead, 1708, pp. 10–12; 1746, pp. 15–17; 1748, pp. 17–20). In any case, the consent of ancient authority and long-term medical meteorology confirmed atmospheric tidology. The lunar periodicity of menstruation, epilepsy and the (significantly named) lunacy was well known to Galenists. Indeed, 'this powerful action of the Moon is observed not only by philosophers and natural historians, but even by the common people who have been fully persuaded of it time out of mind' (Mead, 1746, p. 76; 1748, pp. 82–83).

Mead's text accompanied these reflexions on atmospheric tidology and its bodily consequences with a host of well attested cases of celestial periodicity. Thus in his celebrated *Spicilegium anatomicum* (1670) the north German physician Theodore Kerckring reported 'a young gentlewoman whose beauty depended upon the lunar force, insomuch that at full moon she was plump and very handsome, but in the decrease of the planet so wan and ill-favoured that she was ashamed to go abroad'. Mead added the fishy argument that 'if this seems strange, it is indeed no more than an influence of the same kind which the Moon has always been observed to have upon shellfish' (Mead, 1746, p. 58; 1748, p. 64). Lunar effects on shellfish were well recognised in astrological tradition and had been given renewed meaning by writers such as the royal physician Walter Charleton, who in 1654 explained that shellfish grew larger at full moon, perhaps because of the 'Moon's great Humidity' developed from the lunar seas, 'as the most and best of our Modern Astronomer have believed', or perhaps simply because full moons raised greater tides so encouraged shellfish growth (Charleton, 1654, p. 352; Roos, 2001, p. 191). Episodes closer to home confirmed the doctrine of celestial influence. On the day of Oliver Cromwell's death, 3 September 1658, there was a great storm much affected by the Moon. Mead offered the retrospective diagnosis that the Lord Protector 'died of a fever accompanied with grief from the unhappy state of his domestic affairs, and its very certain that grief disposes the animal spirits to be easily affected by causes of this nature' (Mead, 1746, p. 108; 1748, p. 114). Mead knew a Thames-side boatman whose daughter suffered periodic fits: the mariner was able to anticipate the river tides simply by observing the onset of his daughter's crises (Mead, 1746, p. 40; 1748, p. 44). The London medic's pre-eminent patron and colleague, the great Edinburgh physician Archibald Pitcairne, suffered nosebleeds at the new moon when the barometer was unusually low (Mead, 1746, p. 49; 1748, p. 54). Anecdotes from Joshua Childrey's *Britannia Baconica* (1661) and from John Goad's *Astro-meteorologia* (1686), canonical texts of the Baconian reforms of astro-meteorology much promoted in Restoration Britain, were also mobilised to good effect (Mead, 1708, p. 31; 1746, p. 4; 1748, pp. 4–5; Curry, 1987, pp. 247–248). Medical implications were much stressed: the received Galenic attention to critical days, 'now grown into disuse, quite slighted and even ridiculed', could well be revamped by systematic attention to solar and lunar cycles as they acted through gravity on the atmosphere and thus on the human body (Mead, 1746, p. 60; 1748, p. 66).

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