

Are the Stars Aligned? Matchmaking and Astrology in Early Modern Italy

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Abstract: This essay examines how early moderns used birth horoscopes (genitures) to assess the compatibility of prospective spouses before marriage. Astrologers could probe the horoscope of an individual to investigate his or her present and future physical and moral qualities or compare charts to reveal the personal compatibility of a couple and help establish the best time to consummate their marriage. These practices aimed at ensuring a fruitful marriage and the harmony and happiness of the couple and their families. Focusing on a few key examples, the essay outlines both the astrological theories and the social politics that propelled astrological matching, suggesting that its appeal lay in the promise of informed choice while also preserving free will. Finally, the author suggests ways in which astrological practices and the use of vast amounts of astronomical data share affinities with data-driven matching in our own time.

In a recent article in *Cosmopolitan*, Jake Register, the author of the U.S. magazine's weekly "sexoscopes," triumphantly announced, "Here Are Your Sign's Four Romantic Matches: When It Comes to Zodiac Compatibility, You've Got Options." While warning us that astrological compatibility should not be based only on Sun signs, Register defiantly invites us to go on and try to determine the broad contours of our compatibility. If, like me, you are an Aries, you may have fulfilling relationships with Gemini, Leo, and Aquarius. But it is relationships with Sagittarius that promise to produce a spark. A few months after Register's article appeared, a piece in *Vogue Paris* offered similar advice: Aries, its author maintains, have blissful relationships with Libra, fulfilling relationships with Sagittarius and Leo, and passionate affairs with Scorpio. No doubt playing on the subtle desire of its female readers to be both beautiful and successful in love, the magazine accompanied each sign with the photo of a sleek, willowy model and specified her birthday. Only a month later, the same article was repackaged and repurposed in French in a slightly different version.¹

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¹ Jake Register, "Here Are Your Sign's Four Romantic Matches: When It Comes to Zodiac Compatibility, You've Got Options," *Cosmopolitan*, 16 Apr. 2020, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a23745601/zodiac-signs-compatibility/> (accessed 5 Apr. 2021); Julie

Endless examples of this kind could be found in a variety of media, from morning TV programs to daily papers and weekly magazines. According to popular belief, your star sign gives you some specific physical and psychological traits, and a thorough look at your chart will unlock further information and allow you to find the perfect match.² It all sounds reassuringly easy. Contemporary astrologers and modern-day believers in the science of the stars, however, would cringe at this uncouth use of astrology in matchmaking. This is not how things work, they would say. Astrology is an ancient art based on a series of complex techniques rooted in centuries-long, tried-and-tested knowledge that carefully assesses the subtle but powerful influence of the stars on Earth and on human beings. As such, it requires proper training and should be practiced only by those who have dedicated decades to its study.

If you ask around in your immediate circle of friends nowadays, many will say that they don't believe in astrology. Some will even forcefully call it nonsense. But why, if the majority of the global population declares its disbelief in astrology, do we find the Sun-sign horoscope so pervasively flagged in our everyday lives as something we should care about when looking for love? The reasons are complex, but it seems certain that the idea of determining the indeterminate, of reducing uncertainty, of basing our decisions on some data (of whatever nature) in an aspect of life—love, sex, or both—in which we invest so much of ourselves makes the appeal of astrology as legitimate as any other means of improving our odds. Astrology preserves our free will to choose while also providing us with tentative techniques that can help us make that crucial choice. It also translates the quantitative—a plethora of astronomical data—into a qualitative narrative, much like any of the algorithms used by modern-day matching sites.

Furthermore, astrology is based on something that seems to speak to the core of our selves: our temperament, our inner constitution, something that, according to this ancient art, is determined at birth by the position of the stars in the sky and their influence on our bodies. It also works, as modern-day astrologers would say, by drawing on ancient and tested techniques whereby a large body of celestial data can be used to find marital harmony and a fulfilling sexual life, while also giving us a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of our relationships on which we should continue to work. The use of birth horoscopes (genitures) to investigate the present and future of one's offspring goes back to ancient times: its origins can be firmly placed in ancient Babylonia, and its practice can be found as far afield as India.³ In the Renaissance, the period on which this essay will focus, birth horoscopes were commonly cast and interpreted for both elite and non-elite members of society at various points in their lives. By the sixteenth century, the practice of geniture interpretation was so popular that the printed collections of famous Renaissance astrologers such as Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), Luca Gaurico (1475–1558), and the Lutheran Johannes Garcaeus (1530–1574) took pride of place in the libraries of educated intellectuals

Patriat, "Compatibility Horoscope: Which Star Sign to Match With This Year," *Vogue Paris*, 20 Nov. 2020, <https://www.vogue.fr/horoscope/article/love-horoscope-which-zodiac-sign-are-you-most-compatible-with> (accessed 5 Apr. 2021); and Patriat, "Horoscope: Quel est votre matching signe astrologique pour tomber amoureux?" *ibid.*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.vogue.fr/astro/galerie/astro-votre-horoscope-amoureux-matching-signes-ame-soeur-compatibilite> (accessed 5 Apr. 2021).

² On horoscopes as repositories of information see Monica Azzolini, "Horoscopes," in *Information: A Historical Companion*, ed. Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2021), pp. 486–490.

³ The literature is very extensive and cannot be summarized effectively here. For important work on the earliest times see Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994); Francesca Rochberg, *Babylonian Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998); Rochberg, *In the Path of the Moon: Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Noel M. Swerdlow, *The Babylonian Theory of the Planets* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998); and Swerdlow, *Ancient Astronomy and Celestial Divination* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999). I refer the reader to the bibliographies in these books for further studies on the subject.

across Europe. At the same time, learned debates and religious controversy raged about the correct horoscope of Martin Luther owing to the uncertainty surrounding the actual year of his birth.⁴

In a period when life was much more precarious than it is today, and marriage for love was virtually unthinkable among the upper classes, astrological consultations represented a legitimate way to approach the difficult task of constructing lasting bonds between family and kin under auspicious conditions. By the fifteenth century, astrology was a well-developed intellectual practice in much of Western and Eastern Europe: it had been part of the university curriculum of continental Europe since the late thirteenth century and had only grown in prestige since.⁵ By the sixteenth century, resorting to the services of one or more astrologers had become the practice of many Europeans at multiple times in the course of their lives, including when it came to issues of lineage and progeny. Why was astrology deemed a suitable epistemic practice for matchmaking? And on what basis did it claim to grasp the salient elements of human nature and discern compatibility? In this essay, I shall attempt to answer these questions by exploring some of the factors that astrologers and their clients considered important in a spouse to guarantee a happy, lasting, and fruitful marriage.

IT'S ALL IN THE STARS: MARRIAGE PROSPECTS IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

Princely marriage in the Renaissance was a delicate affair upon which the fortunes of entire houses could depend. Therefore, it needed to be carefully considered and properly negotiated. Even the best planning, moreover, was no guarantee of success, as the vagaries of European politics and its volatile alliances could make or break the future of one's state. For this reason, astrology — as a predictive tool with a distinguished pedigree — was seen as highly dependable for navigating the rough seas of marriage alliances. As I have argued elsewhere, the Renaissance houses of the Sforza, the Este, and the Gonzaga and even the royal household of the Habsburg actively used astrological consultation before and after marriage as a useful instrument of decision making and planning.⁶ Astrology could be deployed in marriage negotiations in multiple ways: one possible application involved the employment of a trusted astrologer to examine the chart of the prospective spouse and look for potential problems.

In Western astrology each birth chart or geniture is divided into twelve parts, or houses, with the seventh specifically dedicated to marriage. The third house, as the house of love and in-laws, is also potentially significant, and so is the fifth, the house of children (see Figure 1). An analysis

⁴ Girolamo Cardano, *Opera omnia*, 10 vols. (Lyon: Jean Antoine Huguetan and Marc Antoine Ravaut, 1663), Vol. 5; Luca Gaurico, *Tractatus astrologicus* (Venice: Bartholomaeus Caesanus, 1552); and Johannes Garcaeus, *Astrologiae methodus* (Basel: Ex Officina Henricpetrina, 1576). On geniture collections see Anthony Grafton, "Geniture Collections: Origins and Uses of a Genre," in *Books and the Sciences in History*, ed. Nick Jardine and Marina Frasca-Spada (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 49–68; Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999); and Monica Azzolini, "Refining the Astrologer's Art: Astrological Diagrams in Bodleian MS Canon. Misc. 24 and Cardano's *Libelli quinque* (1547)," *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 2011, 42:1–25. On Luther's horoscope see Aby Warburg, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), pp. 597–697 (originally published as Warburg, *Heidnisch-Antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* [Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1920]); Dietrich Kurze, "Popular Astrology and Prophecy in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Johannes Lichtenberger," in *"Astrologi Hallucinati": Stars and the End of the World in Luther's Time*, ed. Paola Zambelli (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), pp. 177–193; Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia C. Cochrane (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 136–139; and Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos*, pp. 33, 75–77, 101–102.

⁵ Paul Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 412–426; and Monica Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 22–50.

⁶ Azzolini, *Duke and the Stars*, Ch. 5 and *passim*.

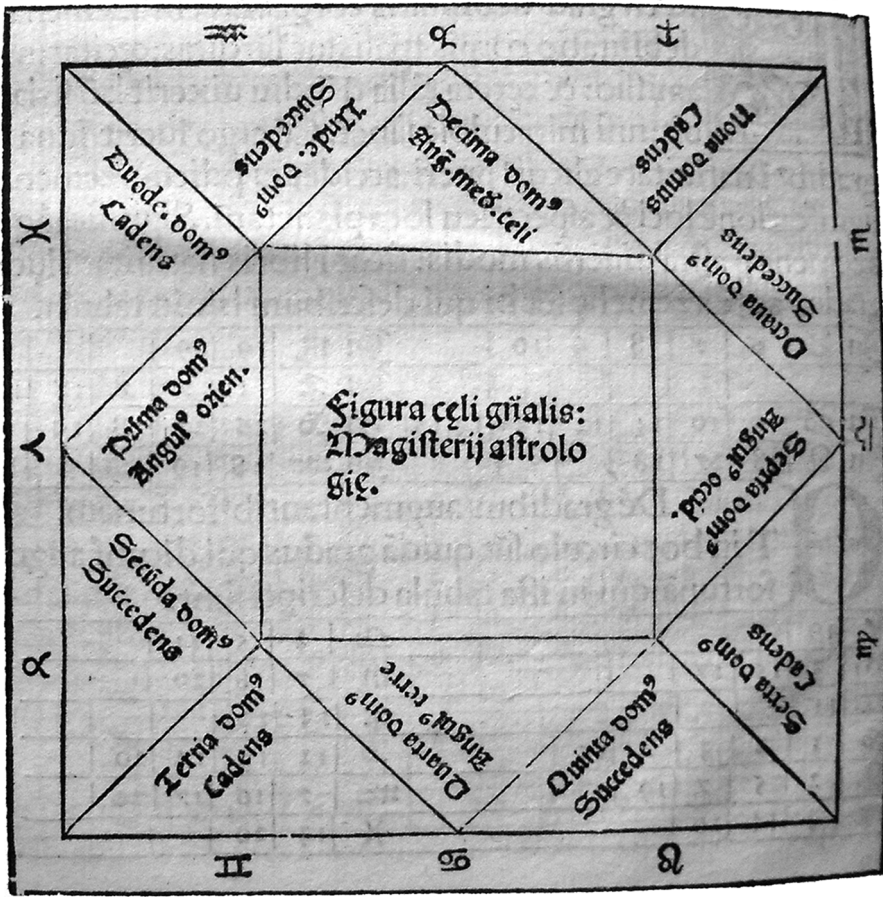


Figure 1. Square celestial chart (geniture or *figura caeli*) with the house division. From Alcabitius, *Liber introductorius* (Venice: Erhard Ratdolt, 1485), sig. bb1v. By kind permission of the Crawford Library, Royal Observatory, Edinburgh.

of astrological “indicators” (planets, *pars*, signs) located in these houses, and, additionally, the relation of these elements with each other and with other aspects of the chart, allowed the astrologer to build a thick interpretative grid that could provide useful clues about the client’s marriage prospects.⁷ Among the planets, Venus emerges as particularly relevant, as it represents passionate love but also carries what are perceived as the unsavory associations of adultery and lesbianism, which, as we shall see, was one of the many aspects on which an astrologer could comment.⁸

The potential relationship between two individuals could be probed deeper by comparing natal charts: while one chart could indicate the qualities of a single potential spouse, comparison allowed the astrologer to build a new, more complex interpretative grid to assess actual compatibility. This

⁷ This is rather basic information that can be found in any introductory text. See, e.g., Alcabitius, *Al-Qabisi (Alcabitius): The Introduction to Astrology: Editions of the Arabic and Latin Texts and an English Translation*, ed. Charles Burnett, Keiji Yamamoto, and Michio Yano (London: Warburg Institute; Turin: Aragno, 2004), pp. 51–53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

kind of analysis could provide the astrologer with key data to formulate his advice, including the best moment for a marriage to be celebrated and, more important, consummated to ensure the most propitious timing for the (potential) birth of an heir. This was certainly how astrology was deployed by Ludovico Sforza, duke of Milan, when organizing not only his own marriage but also those of his nieces Anna Sforza and Bianca Sforza, who were married off, respectively, to Alfonso I d'Este and Emperor Maximilian I in the last decade of the Cinquecento.⁹

Any good Renaissance marriage, however, would also have to ensure a healthy offspring, ideally of the male sex. A good wife, therefore, had to be able to bear numerous healthy children, a common concern of elite families across Europe. How to choose a healthy and fertile woman for their sons was thus a prominent preoccupation of early modern parents. In Book 2 of his *Libri della famiglia*, a fictional dialogue on education, marriage, and household management, L. B. Alberti famously articulated the social, economic, and political benefits of picking a good wife. While “in choosing a wife one looks for beauty, parentage, and riches,” Alberti stressed, one should not forget to consider “her aptitude for bearing and giving birth to many fine children.”¹⁰

Significant evidence exists to suggest that Renaissance astrology was sometimes used to dissect the physical and moral qualities of a prospective spouse. While most astrologers would maintain that the stars influence but do not determine one's fate, physical attributes were generally believed to be more strongly determined by specific celestial configurations at the time of birth and closely linked to a person's *complexio*, or humoral balance.¹¹ When Francesco Sforza, duke of Milan, sought to consolidate his alliances in the Italian peninsula, he therefore gave substantial attention not only to questions of political expediency but also to the choice of a suitably healthy bride for his firstborn and heir, Galeazzo Maria. It was on this basis that Francesco negotiated the marriage of Galeazzo Maria with Susanna Gonzaga, eldest daughter of Ludovico Gonzaga, one of Francesco's allies against the Republic of Venice. When Susanna developed a visible deformity of the spine, an essential condition for the match—namely, Susanna's ability to bear healthy children—was no longer met and the long-planned marriage was called off. At this point, the Gonzaga offered the duke of Milan their second daughter, Dorotea, only a few years younger than Susanna.¹² As the political scenario evolved between the first agreement and its cancellation, however, Francesco Sforza's political plans changed. Aspiring to create lasting bonds with the Marquis of Savoy and the French King, Francesco attempted to cancel the marriage between his firstborn and Dorotea Gonzaga, citing worries about a possible deformity of the spine similar to that of her unfortunate sister. It was at this very moment that the mother of the prospective bride, Barbara Gonzaga Hohenzollern, intervened, resorting to the services of the Gonzaga's court astrologer, from whom she requested an opinion on the matter.

Barbara's inquiry was prompted by the arrival at the Mantuan court of Francesco Sforza's trusted physicians Benedetto Reguardati and Antonio Bernareggi, who were sent there to examine Dorotea's body for signs of deformity before the marriage could go ahead. Understandably, Francesco

⁹ For more on the propitious moment for the consummation of the marriage see Azzolini, *Duke and the Stars* (cit. n. 5), pp. 137, 170–175, 189–190.

¹⁰ L. B. Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence, Books 1–4: I libri della famiglia*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland, 2004), p. 115.

¹¹ The medieval Arabic astrologer Alcabitus made this link explicit in his *Introductorius*, where he says: “Every sign has its own proper indication of what it indicates in the constitution of a person, and of plants, regions and other things.” See Alcabitus, *Al-Qabisi (Alcabitus): The Introduction to Astrology* (cit. n. 7), p. 35; see pp. 63–67 for the connections between planets and the humors.

¹² The events surrounding these marriage arrangements are recounted in Achille Dina, “Qualche notizia su Dorotea Gonzaga,” *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 1887, pp. 562–567; and Luca Beltrami, “L'annullamento del contratto di matrimonio fra Galeazzo Maria Sforza e Dorotea Gonzaga (1463),” *ibid.*, 1889, pp. 126–132. On Dorotea see Isabella Lazzarini, “Gonzaga, Dorotea,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 2001, 57:707–708.

Sforza's request to have Dorotea examined was met with much opposition and resentment. Rumors of Francesco's diplomatic negotiations with the King of France to marry Galeazzo Maria to Bona of Savoy had already reached Barbara's ears, and she feared that the aim of such an examination was to annul the contract they had stipulated years before. For their part, the Milanese doctors did not give in, explaining that to verify Dorotea's health they needed to examine her spine from the lower neck to the tailbone; they wanted to see her chest, too. This request stalled the negotiations.¹³ The Gonzaga were in need of reassurance.

Three years earlier, Barbara Gonzaga had made inquiries about the health, character, and behavior of the young Galeazzo—then a boisterous and somewhat promiscuous adolescent—and had received confirmation from Galeazzo's grandmother, Agnese del Maino, that the Sforza astrologers had scrutinized his chart and assured her that Galeazzo was “not inclined by any planet to any vice” and was, instead, “strongly inclined to live well and virtuously, being particularly clement, pious, and magnanimous, and without fear of any of his neighbors.”¹⁴ All of these characteristics, according to the epistemic language of astrology, could be reliably deduced from a natal chart. Now it was the turn of another astrologer, the Mantuan Bartolomeo Manfredi, to scrutinize Dorotea's chart and offer similar encouragement. Manfredi already possessed Dorotea's geniture, which he had probably cast at the time of her birth, and swiftly provided Barbara Gonzaga with his interpretation. The Marquess had explicitly asked the astrologer to probe the chart to see if anything indicated that Dorotea, too, would develop a deformity of the spine. The response was a resounding no; Dorotea's nativity was “without fault (*difetto*).” Manfredi had also looked at the day and time when the promise to marry her to Galeazzo was reached: even that chart “did not indicate imperfection.”¹⁵ The astrologer suggested twice that if a change in the agreement—and Dorotea's fate—was taking place, this was due to external factors.

Sadly, Manfredi was wrong: Dorotea did develop a hereditary deformity of the spine, and Francesco Sforza took the opportunity to cancel the marriage and forge a more expedient alliance with the Savoy and the French crown.¹⁶

THE THEORY BEHIND THE PRACTICE: DOWN TO THE BONES

Why did Barbara Gonzaga think that resorting to astrology could provide an answer to her questions? Was astrology considered a suitable tool for predicting her daughter's deformity? According to traditional astrology, it was. Luca Gaurico's *Tractatus astrologicus* clearly illustrates how astrological influence was believed to affect not only a person's character and physical appearance but also one's body, down to the bones, making an individual prone to specific illnesses or causing chronic disabilities and deformities. The last book of Gaurico's *Tractatus* is entirely dedicated to this theme: in it, Gaurico examines a series of charts to illustrate the relationship between the celestial configuration of the sky at birth and people's chronic illnesses and other debilitating physical conditions. In this section, we find the horoscopes of people who have suffered chronic illness, were born disabled, or became such. For example, Gaurico examines the geniture of the Veronese astrologer Annibale Raimondi. According to Gaurico's

¹³ Dina, “Qualche notizia su Dorotea Gonzaga,” pp. 565–567; and Beltrami, “L'annullamento del contratto di matrimonio fra Galeazzo Maria Sforza e Dorotea Gonzaga,” esp. pp. 129–132.

¹⁴ The astrologer who was consulted was, in fact, Antonio Bernareggi, the same physician (also an astrologer) who was sent to examine Dorotea. See Azzolini, *Duke and the Stars* (cit. n. 5), p. 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 92.

¹⁶ Rumors about Francesco Sforza's attempts circulated widely within diplomatic circles. See Isabella Lazzarini, “L'informazione politico-diplomatica nell'età della pace di Lodi: Raccolta, selezione, trasmissione: Spunti di ricerca dal carteggio Milano-Mantova nella prima età sforzesca (1450–1466),” *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 1999, 83:247–280, esp. pp. 273–280.

narrative, the young Raimondi was healthy and fast—indeed, “faster than a deer”—until 1521, when he was severely wounded in his right leg, as could be inferred by the particular position of Mars and Saturn in his chart. A series of other unfortunate events unfolded, all meticulously explained according to the positions of the stars. Gaurico applied the same heuristic tools to his astrological analysis of the blindness of a Spanish monk aptly called Tyresias and to the disabled body of the contemporary physician Achille Balugula of Modena, who was very short, with a noticeable hunchback and a deformed face.¹⁷

As these examples show, identifying chronic illnesses and deformities was clearly within the reach of the Renaissance astrologer. In using astrology to explain chronic illness and disability, Gaurico was drawing from an ancient practice that had come down to Renaissance astrologers via works on nativities by Arabic authors such as Alcabitus and Albubater and medieval astrologers like Abraham Ibn Ezra, Guido Bonatti, and Leopold of Austria.¹⁸ According to this astrological practice, chronic disease could be located in some specific degree of the Zodiac, the *gradus azemena*: analysis of the chart, and attention to these particular degrees of the Zodiac, could allow a skilled astrologer to forecast the existence or the emergence of chronic illness or permanent disability. According to Gaurico’s definition, “*azemena* is an Arabic term, [which] in Latin means an imperfection or illness that cannot be eliminated from the body, such as a hunchback, limping, being blind, deaf, or dumb.”¹⁹ Within this framework, Dorotea’s deformity would have been clearly detectable from her birth chart.

Other parts of the chart could help illuminate further a person’s state of health—and specifically those matters important for a potential bride: a reading of the sixth house, the house of health, could indicate a woman’s ability to bear children. The two spouses’ chances of procreation could also be probed through an analysis of the seventh and the fifth houses together, the latter being dedicated to one’s children. According to at least some classical authors, the position in the Zodiac of the planet ruling the fifth hour from the birth of the client would determine the likely chances of having one or more children, of which gender, and at what point in one’s life.²⁰

Thus, for example, according to the medieval Jewish astrologer Abraham Ibn Ezra, if Venus is in Leo, combusts, and rules over the newborn, then he or she will not have children because of an organ dysfunction. The same is true if Venus is retrograde or in an unfavorable aspect with one of the “malignant” planets.²¹ Similarly, the ninth-century astrologer and astronomer Abū Bakr al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥaṣīb, known to the Latin West as Albubater, wrote in Chapter 62 of his popular *Liber genethliacus, sive De nativitatibus*, entitled “De natis gibbosis”:

When the Moon is at the start or at the end of a sign, and in aspect with Saturn, the newborn will carry a hunch. When the Moon is in the third house, and Saturn is descendant and is

¹⁷ Gaurico, *Tractatus astrologicus* (cit. n. 4), fols. 116r–121v, esp. fols. 116v–117r (Raimondi), 120r (Tyresias), 117v (Balugula).

¹⁸ The authors who dedicated works to the interpretation of nativities are too numerous to be listed comprehensively here. Alcabitus gives the degrees of chronic illness very succinctly in a table in his popular *Introductorius*. See Alcabitus, *Al-Qabisi (Alcabitus): The Introduction to Astrology* (cit. n. 7), p. 45. On complex issues of authorship, circulation, and translation of Ibn Ezra’s works by the Paduan physician Pietro D’Abano see Shomo Sela, “Pietro D’Abano, Translator of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Astrological Writings,” *Sefarad*, 2019, 79:7–87. See also Guido Bonatti, *De astronomia tractatus X* (Basel, 1550), Pars I, Ch. XXVI, col. 60 (orig. composed after 1277); and Leopold of Austria, *Compilatio de astrorum scientia* (Venice: Erhard Ratdolt, 1489), fol. C5v (orig. composed soon after 1278).

¹⁹ Gaurico, *Tractatus astrologicus* (cit. n. 4), fol. 116r. On this Arabic term and its meaning see also Paul Kunitzsch, *Mittelalterliche astronomisch-astrologische Glossare mit arabischen Fachausdrücken* (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977), p. 32.

²⁰ *Abrahe Auenaris Judei astrologi peritissimi in re iudiciali opera* (Venice: Petri Liechtenstein, 1507), *Liber nativitatum et revolutionum earum*, fols. LIIv–LIIIr; regarding determination of the likelihood and timing of children, as well as their gender, see esp. fol. LIIIr.

²¹ *Ibid.*, fol. LIIIr.

being lifted in a mobile sign, the newborn has a hunch. When Saturn descends [on the horizon] and Mars is the Lord of the ascendent, and is rising in an ambiguous sign, and it is almost hidden, similarly the newborn has a hunch, and the same if Mars is in the third part of that sign.

In the section about the fifth house, the same author listed a long series of conditions linked to this house and the chances for a client to have children. These ranged from “when Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury are strong and healthy in the chart, the newborn will have many children, and will experience a multitude of them,” to “when the Moon and Mercury are in the *Medium Caeli*, the newborn will have children, but they will not be lucky and happy with them.”²² Like physical disability, the fertility or infertility of a client (or the spouse of a client) could be determined astrologically.

While in our time disability (visible and, especially, invisible) and infertility are two aspects of matchmaking that are rarely foregrounded, this was clearly not so in the Renaissance, where a premium was placed on the production of a healthy male heir. Yet the distance between the past and the present may not be so great after all. Even if no modern algorithm would prominently factor in a client’s fertility, many modern-day matchmaking sites include questions about children—both about having some already and about wanting them in the future. It is recognized that these matters, and the issue of infertility in particular, could generate sufficient distress to bring a relationship to an end.²³ In short, matchmaking is not just a matter of two people: it has an important societal dimension that escapes the close boundaries of the couple to involve families, kin, friends, and society at large. Unlike modern matchmaking services, early modern astrology promised to provide insight into these rather delicate and crucial matters.

Finally, sexuality and sexual proclivities are another aspect that astrological matchmaking would take into account. We have noted that Galeazzo’s moral qualities had come under examination during the Gonzaga–Sforza negotiations, as rumors of his overabundant sexual appetite started to circulate. As noted, betrothals could be annulled and marriages could be dissolved because of the physical or moral flaws of the bride or groom. It is not fully surprising, therefore, to notice that the placement of Venus in the chart could lend itself to some poignant commentary, as in the case of the astrological interpretation of Livia Vernazza’s chart by the Tuscan astrologer Ferdinando Magnani, to which I shall now turn.

The story of the troubled love between Don Giovanni de’ Medici and Livia Vernazza and the numerous efforts of the Medici family to hinder their relationship have been richly documented in a recent study.²⁴ Among the abundant records of this troubled relationship, however, one document has been overlooked—namely, Livia’s horoscope (see Figure 2). Despite prefacing his interpretation by saying that “little can be said of a woman’s action,” Magnani’s lengthy reading of the chart depicts Livia as a lively woman, with a sharp mind, a good complexion, and a weak stomach. Another important element, however, emerges. According to Magnani, the reciprocal positions of Mars and Venus indicate that “[Mars] will cause her trouble and little peace with her husband, and little faithfulness as Venus is not placed ideally, as she is masculine, and this will make her hot when making love and a lover of her own sex, and especially young women, and this is

²² Albubater, *Liber genethliacus, sive De nativitatibus* (Nuremberg: Iohannes Petreius, 1540), fols. h3v, q1r–v.

²³ For a large-scale study of how infertility affects relationships one can take the example of a Turkish study carried out a few years ago. See Güliz Onat and Nezihe Kizilkaya Beji, “Marital Relationship and Quality of Life among Couples with Infertility,” *Sexuality and Disability*, 2012, 30:39–52.

²⁴ Brendan Dooley, *A Mattress Maker’s Daughter: The Renaissance Romance of Don Giovanni de’ Medici and Livia Vernazza* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014).

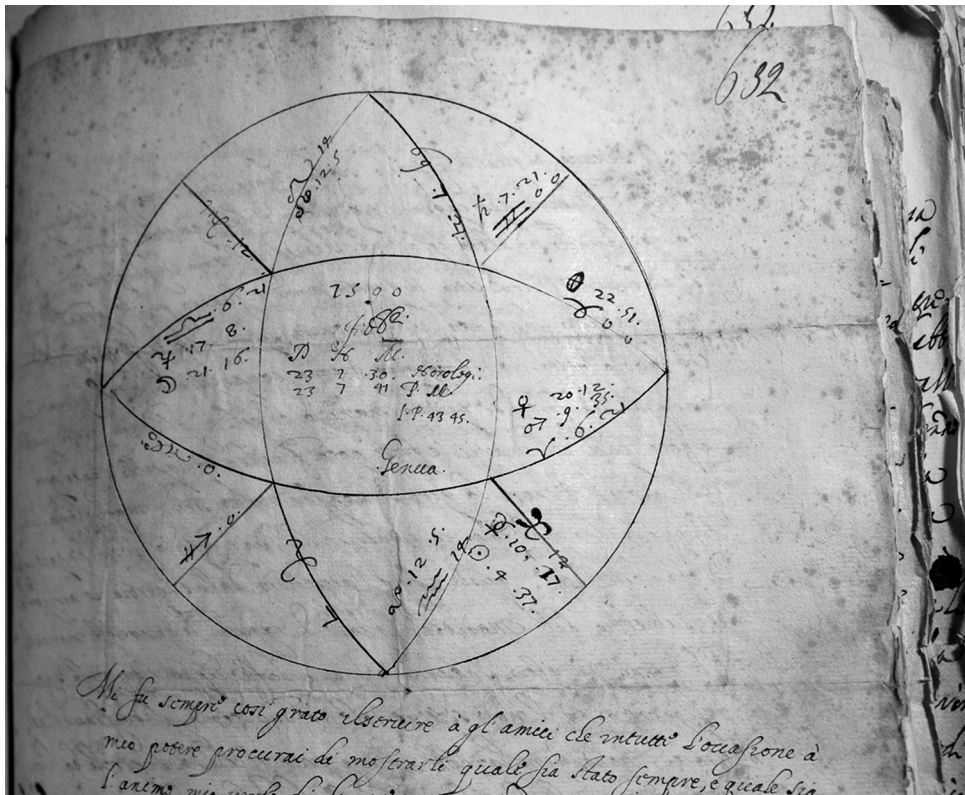


Figure 2. Geniture of Livia Vernazza. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato 6355, fol. 632r. By kind permission of Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali/Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

increased by the pride and arrogance of her husband, whom she should leave and take another.”²⁵ Magnani was not far from the truth: when she met Don Giovanni Livia was already married to another man, Battista Granara—a man she hated from the start and never learned to love.²⁶

While we do not know when this astrological interpretation was written, its presence in the Florentine archives leaves no doubt that it was commissioned by a member of the Medici family—and quite possibly by Livia’s lover and later husband, Don Giovanni. If this is the case, how did Don Giovanni read the astrologer’s interpretation? Did he find the reference to Livia’s lesbianism titillating? Did he find her propensity to love passionately especially interesting? It is impossible to say. What is certain is that their relationship continued: in 1619, while she was pregnant with her first child by Don Giovanni, her husband died, leaving Livia able to marry the passionate and wayward Don Giovanni, with whom she remained until his premature death three years later, in 1621.²⁷

²⁵ Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato 6355, fols. 632r–633r. I wish to thank Barbara Furlotti for generously drawing my attention to these documents many years ago. For the astrological conditioning behind this interpretation see Albubater, *Liber genethliacus* (cit. n. 22), fol. g2v. On Ferdinando Magnani see Edward Goldberg, *A Jew at the Medici Court: The Letters of Benedetto Blanis Hebreo (1615–1621)* (Toronto: Univ. Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 39–52.

²⁶ Dooley, *Mattress Maker’s Daughter* (cit. n. 24), pp. 66–67 and *passim*.

²⁷ *Ibid.* On astrology and homosexuality see Darrel H. Rutkin, “Astrological Conditioning of Same-Sexual Relations in Girolamo Cardano’s Theoretical Treatises and Celebrity Genitures,” in *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kenneth Borris and George Rousseau (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 183–200.

CONCLUSIONS

Scores of examples could be drawn from early modern astrological interpretations to illustrate how astrology represented one of the many tools at the disposal of early moderns as they chose future spouses for themselves or their progeny. Astrological books are filled with long lists of planetary and sign combinations and permutations noting specific locations in the sky and in the chart that would condition the astrologer's reading. We may ask how and why, in the face of the evidence, the Gonzaga and the Medici in the examples cited here could trust astrology as a reliable heuristic tool, especially since some key predictions had proven so wrong. Was this blind belief on their part? Did the errors undermine the astrologer's professional standing? Judging from astrology's enduring success across time and space, the answer is no. Free will, as any good astrologer would tell you, is paramount. The stars incline but do not compel.

Another important element, however, should be considered: the refinement of judgment through data. The two working manuscripts of the fifteenth-century astrologer Antonio Gazio now in the Bodleian Library evidence clearly how a practicing astrologer continually tested and tried theories on charts of family members as well as famous historical actors whose life events were well known.²⁸ Astrology is an interpretative skill, a semiosis, and as such there is an element of conjecture—informed as it may be—that makes any prediction imprecise. Applying interpretations to new data gradually refined the astrologer's predictions. Many other fields today take a startlingly similar approach to uncertainty. Economics is an example often cited; meteorology is another. Our lives are replete with choices we make on the basis of shaky data. If you believe in celestial influence, trusting astrology to predict your future success in love is not so different from accepting that a better algorithm trained on more data will help you find your match. Undoubtedly, in the Renaissance some people trusted astrology more, some less. Astrologers were fallible, and humans were equipped with free will. Almost no one, however, questioned the fact that the sublunary world was subject to the influence of the stars and the planets. This configuration, apparently, was enough—and, one can say, it is still enough—for people to believe in the power of astrology to guide their choices in love.

²⁸ I discuss Gazio's two extraordinary manuscripts in Azzolini, "Refining the Astrologer's Art" (cit. n. 4).