



ASTROLOGICAL MAGIC IN THE PICATRIX

Mining Gold in 2,500 Years of Written Astrology

If astrology is a language, it is the oldest in the world. Astrologers can draw on written sources dating back to well before Christ. In this series, Ben Rovers delves into the gold mine of 2,500 years of written astrology and discusses works that are too interesting to forget. They come from all currents of Western astrology. The selection is a purely personal one. The main criterion is that the work can inspire astrologers of our time.

This time: The Picatrix, perhaps THE book on astrological magic

Why this work?

Of all the works in this series, this will probably be the most unknown. Now you may think, if nobody knows the book now, there may also be good reasons *not to* consign it to oblivion. Permit me, dear reader, to disagree with this. Indeed, I would argue that this book is wrongly the most unknown work of a very important astrological tradition, that of astrological magic. To make sense of the contents, we will first sketch some context. At the end, I will show how the tradition of astrological magic keeps emerging in new forms and is thus highly topical. And let the goal be clear: I want to win as many astrologers' souls as possible for this fascinating book 😊.

The history of the Picatrix

The book most probably dates from the 11th century and comes from the Arabic/Moorish tradition in Spain. The original is Arabic, but a Latin translation appeared in the 13^e century. This version enjoyed great popularity in Europe, especially during the Renaissance (15^e and 16^e century). Influential thinkers and astrologers, such as Marcilio Ficino (who translated Plato and the Hermetic texts, among others), knew this work. The book enjoyed widespread fame for at least several centuries afterwards. Only in the twentieth century did the Picatrix appear in modern languages (German and English). Only very recently, in 2010, an (English) translation made by people who understand astrology appeared. This version is the one I use (Greer & Warnock 2010). Where the name Picatrix comes from is not entirely clear. Some scholars believe it to be the name of the book's compiler: Biqratis. A figure that would not be out of place in Asterix & Obelix. And that hits the mark, because *fun fact*: in volume 3 of Asterix, a druid named Cicatrix appears (in the French edition).

Magic, what was that again?

The Picatrix is called a *grimoire*: a magic book. This was a popular genre in the Middle Ages. The use of magic or sorcery goes back to an ancient tradition, that of theurgy: this is the invocation of Gods to manifest themselves in material objects. Very early on, this often involved statues of gods. For example, one would make an image of Zeus and then invoke Zeus to take up residence in this image. The aim of the practitioner was to get in touch with the divine and to be able to use this power to bring things about on the earthly plane. The earliest theurgic texts date from just after Christ (e.g. the Chaldean Oracles and the book 'On the Mysteries' by Iamblichus).

At its core, what the practitioner of magic does, is communicate with spiritual forces and apply them in a conscious way in material matters. The example of the statues of gods was mentioned above, but a perhaps more familiar example is that of the amulet or talisman: a tangible object that possesses spiritual power, such as offering protection, bringing luck, health, a child, et cetera.

What is astrological magic?

Magic and astrology are very different things. In astrology, fate rules: the position of the planets determines how things manifest. You have no control over this as a human being: with Moon in Aries, your emotional life will inevitably look different from that with Moon in Pisces. There is nothing you can do about that. The application of magic is based on the idea that humans can in some way influence the affairs of life. This touches on a fundamental discussion we also encounter in astrology: where does fate end and free will begin?

Nevertheless, the practice of magic combines very well with the application of astrology. Through objects, rituals and spells, magic focuses on invoking hidden spiritual powers. In astrological magic, these powers are found in, yes, the workings of planets. Somewhere in the Picatrix we find the following statement:

All things in this world are subordinate to the heavenly forms

The Picatrix goes on to say about this: all sages agree that the planets influence phenomena in this world. It follows that the core of the application of magic is found in the movement of planets.

What characterises astrological magic and distinguishes it from many other applications of astrology is that it does not stop at gaining an understanding of how things work in our world (the lawlike power of

planets), but that this understanding is also used to influence the phenomena of the world. This raises 'pretty deep' questions. If you are Christian or follow any other religion, you will probably sigh: 'But then, as astrologers, we are going to sit in God's chair, aren't we?' The astrological magician will answer you: yes, and in doing so, I take my place as a co-creator alongside God.

The application of astrological magic is historically closely linked to Neoplatonic and Hermetic thought. The idea here is that everything in our creation, microcosm and macrocosm, is a manifestation of the One. According to Hermeticism, humans occupy a special position in creation: only they are capable of finding their way back to the One from the multiplicity of phenomena. How? By discovering the analogies. Certainly in the theurgic tradition, discussed above, this is a very sacred goal: the application of magic is aimed at becoming one with God.

In the *Picatrix*, we find applications of astrological magic, not all of which serve a high spiritual purpose. For example, it also deals with making talismans to destroy a house or defeat an enemy. We also find examples of magic involving the use of animal blood. Translator and astrologer Christopher Warnock says that they thought long and hard about whether to include these passages. They did, but made very pressing caveats that some procedures could be dangerous or even deadly ('Don't try this at home').

As with everything in life, it is ultimately man who decides what to do with certain powers. As Warnock says: you can drive a car to take bread to people or drive people to death with it. The same applies to the application of astrological magic. In the *Picatrix*, there is no distinction between good and evil intended magic.

The book itself

The *Picatrix* is not a book with a head and a tail. It is a collection of more or less loose texts bundled together. It is divided into four parts, called books. Roughly speaking, two types of content can be distinguished. On the one hand, the book consists of a collection of techniques, rituals, recipes and the like that you can apply to bring about certain magical effects. On the other hand, the book contains many profound reflections on the nature of nature, the soul, the relationship with God, et cetera. It helps to have some knowledge of classical astrology, as classical techniques are often used. Thus, much work is done with dignities of planets and especially with electional astrology, as timing is an important key in the application of astrological magic.

Some examples from the book will be presented to get a feel for the text.

A good conversation with Saturn

The book gives tips for when you want something from Saturn (book 3, chapter 7). Step 1: The first prerequisite for a good conversation is that the planet is in a good position, otherwise its action will not be beneficial to you. The best place then is Saturn in Libra, because that is where it is in exaltation. In Aquarius, Saturn is also very good, because in that sign this planet 'rejoices', and Capricorn is also okay, because that is its 'second home' according to *Picatrix*. (This last statement will sound strange to modern astrologers). Following are some things to watch out for in terms of timing, as well as horoscope positions to avoid. For instance, a square with Mars is an absolute NO GO; you never want to talk to Saturn if it makes a discordant aspect with the other 'bad boy' of classical astrology. Even if Saturn is Retrograde, little (good) can be expected from him.

Step 2 is then to put on the right clothes (obviously: head to toe in black) and go to a suitable place where Saturn feels comfortable (think dark and deserted places, places where you can feel humble as a human being). In that place, you will make pills from a combination of herbs and animal products (don't try this at home!). You burn these pills in a brought censer while, facing Saturn, you recite the following prayer:

Oh exalted lord, whose name is great and who stands above the heavens of all other planets, and who is made subtle and exalted by God. You are Lord Saturn, who is cold and dry, shadowy, the author of good, faithful in your friendships, true to your word, enduring and persistent in your love and hate. Your knowledge reaches far and deep, truthful in your words and promises, operating individually, lonely, far away from others, near suffering and sorrow, far from joy and celebration; you are old, ancient, wise and destroying knowledge of good things; you are the writer of good and evil. Miserable and tormented is the one made unhappy by your misfortune. And happy is he who is touched by your happiness. God has placed powers and virtues in you and a spirit that causes good and evil. I ask you, father and lord, that through your exalted names and miraculous deeds, you may mean [specification of wish] to me.

Following are some instructions on the prayer, which is preferably said on the day of Saturn (Saturday) and in the hour of Saturn (8^e, 15^e or 22^e hours after sunrise). The intention of modesty is important as it concerns Saturn.

What is nice about this example is that, on the one hand, in prayer we get to know Saturn as a planet that brings little joy, but at the same time it illustrates Saturn's qualities that bring good to human beings, such as perseverance, wisdom and modesty. In addition, this example makes it clear that we can use these powers for very different things. An Hermetic undertone can be discerned in the Picatrix: like humans, planets are animated quantities that navigate between the spiritual world of unity, connection and love and the material world of distinction and struggle.

Curing kidney stones

Astrological magic is also used to cure diseases, see the following example:

An image to cure kidney stones and bladder stones (book 1, chapter 5)

Create an image of a lion on a gold leaf. This lion holds the stone in its claw as if dancing with it. Make this image in the Sun's hour when the first degree of the second face of Leo (11^e degree Leo, BR) is on the Ascendant. Those who wear this image will be immediately released from their complaints. This has been demonstrated many times. Hermes adds that when making the image, the Moon should not be in an increasing sextile with Saturn and the Sun should not be in aspect with Saturn, even in a decreasing aspect.

So for curing the medical complaint in question, the astro-magician has to look for a specific time, as indicated in the prescription: 11° degree Leo must be on the Ascendant in the hour of the Sun. Next, the astrologer must check that the indicated malefics do not manifest (the Saturn aspects mentioned). Once the astrologer has found a suitable time, this forms the starting point for making the image.

Prerequisites for successful work with the power of planets

The Picatrix is full of fascinating, funny and sometimes terrifying recipes for the practice of astro-magic. We also find in the book more general reflections on how best to practice this art. In the fourth chapter of the fourth book, 45 statements are made about this. Some examples.

Statement 1: If man wants to make full use of the powers and virtues of a planet, he should connect with this planet to the maximum extent, for example, by carrying out activities that the planet rules over, by consciously drawing on forces that the planet stands for, and especially by remaining spiritually focused on this.

Statement 9: The requested will be fulfilled quickly if the planet targeted by the requested also rules the person's natal chart. If this is not the case, the requested will be more difficult to achieve.

Statement 11: If the nature of the Ascendant deviates from the requested thing, the requested thing will not be obtained, the prayer too will then be of no avail.

Statement 26: Delay in the outcome of the requested is due to: errors in the procedure, lack of confidence or disorder in the structure of the procedure

Statement 30: A heavy planet, despite its slower movement, has a stronger effect than a lighter one. The lighter planets do work faster.

Final thought: significance for this time

Every astrologer works from the assumption that there is a connection between planets in the sky and events here on earth. Consciously or unconsciously, many astrologers assume that there is influence in one direction: the planets influence life on earth. Astrological magic focuses on humans and their ability to 'cooperate' with and even 'direct' the planets. The Picatrix emphasises the power of faith several times in this context. This is something that humans possess, but planets do not. Faith is a creative force through which humans can also influence the gods that rule over them. This insight is important for today's astrologer for several reasons. For instance, it teaches us that we are not only subject to the laws of fate, but can also take control of this fate ourselves. And it may also teach us that the practice of astrology itself is also based on the power of faith (in the sense of conferring meaning), more than on knowledge of 'astronomical facts'.

Although astrological magic, in the forms described in the Picatrix, has gone rather out of fashion, the phenomenon itself is alive and well. I would even venture to say - based on my limited observation - that it is on the rise. The forms in which it manifests itself have changed as well as the name we give it, but

there seems to be a growing number of astrological practices aimed at changing/influencing situations through astrological symbolism. Examples include experiential and therapeutic methods of astrology, working with constellations and the like. Many of these methods are not limited to gaining insight, but explicitly focus on change. Even today (by way of example), conversations are held with Saturn in order to bring certain forces of this planet into position and perhaps weaken others. Nowadays, these techniques often involve changes on a psychological or spiritual level. In this, modern astro-magic practices may differ from medieval ones, which seem more materialistically oriented. Working with talismans has also stood the test of time generously and has never quite gone out of fashion.

In Chris Brennan's podcast, translator Warnock explains how difficult it was to get the Picatrix manuscript to a mainstream publisher. They didn't want to burn their fingers on it. Surely magic is often associated with black magic; a legacy of Christianity, which associates the practice of magic with the work of the devil. Anyway, astrological magic as a phenomenon alerts us to the great importance of (a pure) intention in the astrologer applying it. As Warnock points out: astrological magic can be a vehicle by which we deliver bread to people or drive them to death.

Want to know more?

For this article, I used the English translation of the Picatrix by John Michael Greer and Christopher Warnock (Adocentyn Prerss, 2010). I recommend this version for the astrologically interested.

In addition, Chris Brennan has a podcast episode dedicated to this book, see :

<https://theastrologypodcast.com/2020/01/24/the-picatrix-a-grimoire-of-astrological-magic/>

For those who want more context, I recommend Christopher Warnock's very informative website on astrology in the Renaissance: <https://renaissanceastrology.com/> . For more on my own experience with astrological magic, see <https://mythcosmologysacred.com/the-jupiter-project-ben-rovers/> .

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