SHAKESPEARE AND ASTROLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of astrology in Elizabethan England is reflected by the large number of references to it in the works of William Shakespeare. The majority of astrological references in the Shakespearean canon are "commonplaces" and do not add significantly to our understanding of his work, although they are of interest in studying exactly how much astrological knowledge he possessed. There are astrological references in the plays, however, that are of significance in the study of character in Shakespeare. In certain plays (Romeo and Juliet, The Winter's Tale) a judgement concerning various individuals' inner nobility may be reached by examining the way in which they react to varying starry influences. Those characters that strive against the stars may be seen as heroic, while those that surrender to the stars may be seen as ignoble.

CHAPTER IV

SHAKESPEARE'S STARS

I: Varieties of Astrological Reference in Shakespeare

Johnstone Parr estimates that there are over one-hundred astrological references in Shakespeare.[1] The question, however, is what, if any, significance do these many astrological allusions have? Are they merely figures of speech, as Theodore Oscar Wedel asserts in his The Mediaeval Attitude Toward Astrology,[2] or do they indicate, as Bruce King believes, that Shakespeare's characters are merely puppets of the stars?[3] In my opinion the stars in Shakespeare's work do influence the actions of men but do not dictate them. By studying the ways in which various characters react to fortune or misfortune caused by celestial influence, we gain further insight into their respective moral strengths and weaknesses.

Perhaps the best place to begin any discussion of Shakespeare and astrology is with a consideration of the playwright's beliefs. Unfortunately, any consideration of Shakespeare's personal beliefs will always remain speculation. The poet left no autobiography cataloguing his thoughts, nor did his acquaintances take the time to write down his beliefs. Any speculation about Shakespeare's thoughts on astrology must be based entirely on the plays, sonnets, and narrative poems he left behind, together with a consideration of his social context.

A study of the plays can provide little concrete proof as to

Shakespeare's opinion of astrology. While the use of so many astrological allusions seems to reflect both the fact that many astrological terms had passed into the English language during this time period[4] and that astrology was very popular with the Elizabethans,[5] this does not mean that Shakespeare himself had any great faith in astral prophecy.[6] From the evidence in the plays it seems that Shakespeare had a good general knowledge of astrology but was by no means an expert in the art; he never, for instance, mentions its more technical aspects.[7] Even if he did know more it would have been unlikely for him to include arcane information in the plays, since it might have confused his audience.

We must also remember that Shakespeare wrote for dramatic effect, so that it is dangerous to attribute any one of his character's astrological opinions to him.[8] At any rate, his characters exhibit all sorts of beliefs in regard to astrology. Some, like Romeo, see the stars as an absolute influence. A few, like Hotspur and Edmund, laugh at the idea of celestial power over man. Others, like Coriolanus and Macbeth, do not appear to acknowledge the stars in any manner at all. Some admit astral influences but fight to overcome them; these include Hermione and Helena. Considering the vast variety of astrological beliefs presented in the plays, it would be a mistake to assign Shakespeare a particular opinion from this evidence.

<u>The Sonnets</u> would seem to be the writings where we are likely to discover something about the poet's belief in astrology. If we agree with W. H. Auden's view that <u>The Sonnets</u> were a very private body of work and that Shakespeare was quite probably horrified at

their publication,' it would seem that in these poems we might find the opinions of the "real" Shakespeare.

Indeed, in many of the sonnets celestial influences are mentioned. Sonnet 26 is offered as a token of duty from Shakespeare to his friend. The poet acknowledges the inferiority of his work, but hopes that in the future his star will shine more favorably so that his work will be better and more worthy:

> To thee I send this written ambassage,
> To witness duty, not to show my wit.
> Duty so great, which wit so poor as mine
> May make seem bare, in wanting words to show it,
> But that I hope some good conceit of thine
> In my soul's thought, all naked, will bestow it,
> Till whatsoever star that guides my moving
> Paints on me graciously with fair aspect,
> And puts apparel on my tattered loving
> To show me worthy of thy sweet respect.
> (4-12)

The mention of the personal, guiding star would seem to betray some sort of belief in judicial astrology.

Similarly, in Sonnet 15 Shakespeare again seems to show some credence in the existence of starry influences on man:

> When I consider everything that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment,
> That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
> Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
> When I perceive that men as plants increase,
> Cheere'd and checked even by the selfsame sky,
> Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
> And wear their brave state out of memory;
> (1-8)

However, it would be a mistake to attribute to Shakespeare any particular belief in astrology based on The Sonnets. While it certainly seems as if a conviction in the power of the stars is being shown, the fact remains that, even if he was writing for a private audience, Shakespeare was still creating art. It is

certainly possible that these planetary references are merely part of the great store of language and metaphor that Shakespeare was able to call upon when writing in order to perfect his conceits. In Sonnet 26, for example, the idea that Shakespeare needs the influence of an amicable star to improve his writing accentuates the implication that the writer is unworthy of his friend. Similarly, in Sonnet 15 the concept that the stars "cheer" or "check" men leads into the notion that the poet values his friend's beauty (which he will "engraft" anew with his work) all the more due to its ephemeral nature. As in the case of the dramatic works, it is a mistake to assign Shakespeare any particular belief in astrology based on the evidence of The Sonnets.

While our evidence for asserting that Shakespeare had some sort of belief in astrology is meager, it seems likely that he did possess some form of credence in celestial influences. The sheer number of astrological references in his work makes this probable. Don Cameron Allen notes that Shakespeare mentions astrology more than most other writers of the period,[10] while Richard Furnald Smith notes that acting is a notoriously superstitious profession.[11] The superstitious outlook of his chosen profession may well have influenced Shakespeare's attitude toward astral prophecy. Considering that the general trend was toward belief in astrology during the Elizabethan era and that many of the leading intellectuals appear to have accepted some sort of astral influence on man, it appears likely that Shakespeare would also have had room in his world picture for some form of celestial sway over man. If

he did believe in astrology, however, it is highly probable that his was a moderate conviction, perhaps allowing for starry influences over man but also leaving room for man (through the exercise of free will) to counteract them. Perhaps his beliefs regarding astrology were much like those of Raleigh (see Chapter III, p. 41). It seems unlikely that Shakespeare, with his natural understanding of and great empathy for the human condition, could ever have subscribed to absolute judicial astrology, with its concept that men are the merely puppets of the stars.

The great majority of astrological references in Shakespeare's work are "commonplaces."[12] That is, while they do refer to some commonly known (in Elizabethan times) aspect of astrology, most references add little to our critical understanding of Shakespeare when studied individually. However, they can prove of value when considered in conjunction with other astrological allusions. It is worthwhile, nevertheless, to examine some typical references in order to understand just how thoroughly astrology permeates the Shakespearean canon.

One common type of astrological in Shakespeare is the nativity, the influential position of the stars at the moment of a person's birth. References to nativities are myriad in the plays. One occurs in 2 Henry VI and concerns Queen Margaret's lover, Suffolk. Suffolk knew the following information from his natal horoscope: "A cunning man did calculate my birth,/ and told me by 'water' I should die" (IV.i.33-35). Indeed, Suffolk dies at the hand of the vengeful pirate Walter (pronounced "water")[13] Whitmore.

A more humorous mention of a nativity occurs in Much Ado About

Nothing. Benedick, preparing to woo Beatrice, tries his hand at poetry with the following result:

> The god of love,
> That sits above,
> And knows me, and knows me,
> How pitiful I deserve-- (V.ii.26-29)

Benedick wisely realizes that he does not have the makings of a poet and declares that he "was not born under a rhyming planet,..." (V.ii.40-41).

A rather inappropriate nativity is that of Parolles in All's Well That Ends Well. A cowardly fop, Parolles was nevertheless born under the planet of warlike Mars, for which Helena mocks him:

> Helena: Monsieur Parolles, you were born under a charitable star.
>
> Parolles: Under Mars, ay.
>
> Helena: I especially think, under Mars.
>
> Parolles: Why under Mars?
>
> Helena: The wars hath so kept you under, that you must needs be born under Mars.
>
> Parolles: When he was predominant.
>
> Helena: When he was retrograde, I think rather.
>
> Parolles: Why think you so?
>
> Helena: You go so much backward when you fight.
> (I.i.197-207)

A much more appropriate nativity than that of Parolles is that of the roguish Autolychus in The Winter's Tale. A born thief, he soliloquizes that "My father named me Autolychus, who being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles" (IV.iii.24-26). That Autolychus was "littered" under Mercury is altogether fitting since the planet's

namesake was the patron of thieves.

Probably the most famous nativity in Shakespeare is that of Edmund in King Lear. Although he mocks the idea that his nativity makes him what he is, the fact remains that it fits Edmund perfectly:

> My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's Tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled in my bastardizing. (I.ii.139-144)

Harry Rusche believes that this statement shows a somewhat more arcane side of Shakespeare's astrological knowledge, since the passage mentions the Ptlomaic idea that the position of the stars at conception could also influence character.[14] The fact that his conception occurs under the Dragon's Tail (a particularly ominous spot on the moon's orbital path)[15] and Ursa Major, a constellation dominated by Mars but in this case containing the additional influence of Venus (making him lecherous), practically guarantees that Edmund will have a predisposition toward being a scoundrel.[16] It is likely that Elizabethan audiences would have been very suspicious of Edmund due to his disbelief in such an obviously correct nativity.[17]

Prophecy and celestial omens are other aspects of astrology that appear quite often in Shakespeare's plays. In Richard II King Richard's hopes of defeating Bolingbroke are destroyed by the appearance of meteors and a frightful looking moon. These astral phenomena cause his much needed Welsh reinforcements to believe that he is already dead:

> Captain: 'Tis thought the king is dead; we will not
> stay.
> The bay trees in our country are all withered,
> And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven,
> The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth.
> (II.iv.7-10)

As a result of the Welshmen's decision Richard is left with too few men to fight Bolingbroke and is doomed to eventual death by his capture. The prophecy of the skies comes true, at least partly because the Welsh believe in such prophecies.

The wild state of the skies of Rome in Julius Caesar just prior to the assassination of Caesar is one of the best examples of an evil astrological portent in the plays. So full of omens are the skies that the stunned Casca remarks:

> But never till tonight, never till now,
> Did I go through a tempest dripping fire.
> Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
> Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,]
> Incenses them to send destruction. (I.iii.9-13)

The sky of Rome is so full of fiery portents that Brutus has no need of a torch to read a recently delivered letter: "The exhalations whizzing in the air/ Give so much light that I may read by them" (II.i.44-45). Caesar's wife, Calphurnia, is fully aware of the significance of these omens: "When beggars die, there are no comets seen;/ The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes" (II.ii.30-31). Unfortunately, Caesar ignores these signs of disaster and goes forth to his death.

In Hamlet Horatio echoes the celestial disturbances at Caesar's death when, seeing the appearance of the elder Hamlet's ghost as an evil omen, he likens it to the significance of "...stars with trains of fire and dews of blood" (I.i.117).

Not all astrological references in Shakespeare are so dire, however. In Twelfth Night, for example, there are two allusions that are quite humorous. In one instance Sir Andrew Aguecheek congratulates Feste on his excellent clowning of the previous night, quoting some doggerel that apparently mocks the high-flown technical language of astrology:

> In sooth thou wast in very gracious fooling
> last night, when thou spok'st of Pigrogomitus, of
> the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus.
> 'Twas very good, i'faith. (II.iii.22-25)

Another humorous moment based on astrological lore occurs when Sir Andrew and Sir Toby Belch have a good-natured, though rather misguided, argument over which zodiacal sign governs the legs (they are interested in dancing):

> Andrew: ...Shall we set about
> some revels?
>
> Toby: What shall we do else? Were we not born under
> Taurus?
>
> Andrew: Taurus? That's sides and heart.
>
> Toby: No sir; it is legs and thighs. (I.iii.134-137)

This conversation echoes the astrological concept that different signs had an influence over certain parts of the body. In reality, however, Taurus governed the head and neck, while Sagittarius governed the legs and thighs. Shakespeare's audience would have known this and understood the joke.[18]

The acerbic Thersites of Troilus and Cressida uses a witty astrological allusion to denounce the Grecian Diomedes' bragging ways. He mocks the pompous warrior in the following manner:

> He
> will spend his mouth and promise like Brabbler

> the hound; but when he performs, astronomers
> foretell it. It is prodigious, there will come some
> change. The sun borrows of the moon when Dio-
> med keeps his word. (V.i.94-99)

Here Thersites compares Diomedes' rare honest actions with seldom seen celestial events. It is also interesting that Shakespeare uses the term "astronomer" in an instance when "astrologer" would be the correct expression. This seems to indicate the minimal difference between these two professions during Elizabethan times.

Most astrological allusions in Shakespeare are used metaphorically, as in the above instance.[11] For example, witness Leontes' comment in The Winter's Tale in which he likens adultery (of which he suspects his wife, Hermione, and his friend, Camillo) to a disruptive planet:

> ...Physic for't there's none;
> It is a bawdy planet, that will strike
> Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis powerful, think it,
> From east, west, north, and south. (I.ii.200-203)

Astrological metaphors are also used to describe happier relationships between men and women. In Hamlet Claudius describes his love for Gertrude in the following manner: "She is so conjunctive to my life and soul,/ That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,/ I could not but by her" (IV.vii.14-16). Queen Margaret takes a similar view of Suffolk in 2 Henry VI when she learns of his death at the hands of pirates:

> Ah, barbarous villains! Hath this lovely face
> Ruled like a wandering planet over me,
> And could it not enforce them to relent,
> That were unworthy to behold the same? (IV.iv.15-18)

Both of the above examples use the astrological term "conjunction" (in this case meaning a favorable relationship between two planets

occupying the same sign) to illustrate the magnitude of the affection existing between the lovers.

Conjunction is also used by Prince Hal in 2 Henry IV to describe a kiss between the prostitute Doll Tearsheet and Falstaff: "Saturn and Venus this year in conjunction! What says th' almanac to that?" (II.iv.269-270) In this case, however, the astrological metaphor is clearly a jest. Doll, as a prostitute, is obviously associated with Venus, while Falstaff is associated with Saturn, a planet identified with old age. This would seem to be an odd, if not unfavorable, conjunction.

An astrological metaphor is also used to describe the face of Bardolph in the same scene as he kisses Mistress Quickly. Poins describes him as the "fiery Trigon" (II.iv.271) referring to his friend's red face. The "Trigon" mentioned is the conjunction of the zodiacal signs Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius, all of which were associated with the element of fire in astrological lore.[20] In Bardolph's case, however, his red face is more probably the result of excessive drinking than of passion.

The power of the planets is sometimes used to describe the martial prowess of certain men in the plays. In Coriolanus Comminius, the friend of Caius Marcius (soon to be dubbed Coriolanus for his deeds), uses an astrological metaphor to describe Marcius' bravery at the battle for Corioles:

> Alone he ent'red
> The mortal gate of th' city, which he painted
> With shunless destiny, aidless came off,
> And with sudden reinforcement struck
> Corioles like a planet. (II.II.111-115)

Presumably "to strike like a planet" compares Coriolanus' martial power to that of a malignant planetary influence, or perhaps Comminius is imagining the devastation that might ensue from a planetary collision.

Timon of Athens uses a similar metaphor when he describes how he wishes the exiled military leader Alcibiades to crush Athens. Timon tells Alcibiades to be to Athens "...as a planetary plague" (IV.iii.109). This reflects the astrological belief that epidemics were the result of bad planetary influences.

In Troilus and Cressida an astrological allusion is used as a metaphor for order. Achilles' refusal to fight or to acknowledge Agamemnon's superior social status has brought chaos to the Greek cause, which the wise Ulysses describes in astrological terms:

> The heavens themselves, the planets, and this center
> Observe degree, priority, and place,
> Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
> Office, and custom, in all line of order.
> And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
> In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
> Amidst the other; whose med'cinable eye
> Corrects the influence of evil planets,
> And posts, like the commandment of a king,
> Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planets
> In evil mixture to disorder wander,
> What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny,
> What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
> Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
> Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
> The unity and married calm of states
> Quite from their fixture? O, when degree is shaked,
> Which is the ladder of all high designs,
> The enterprise is sick. (I.iii.85-103)

This passage is Shakespeare's clearest and most famous use of an astrological metaphor for earthly order and disorder. In it the horrors of political disorder are clearly delineated as Ulysses makes his point using cosmic order as an example. Whatever their

nationality, be it French, Italian, or Danish, Shakespeare's characters almost always reflect an Elizabethan sensibility, and nowhere is this clearer than in this speech of Ulysses. His words obviously mirror the Elizabethan obsession with order discussed in Chapter III. Many of the astrological passages in Shakespeare do, indeed, allude to this concern, as will be shown below.

That the astrological references that permeate Shakespeare's work are not incidental becomes clearer when we examine the role of the stars as influences upon human fate in the plays. Most of the characters in the plays seem to believe that the stars are an influence upon their lives. There are some thirty-six direct statements of this doctrine[21] in the over four-hundred lines of astrological allusion present in the plays.[22]

Quite often in the plays the characters directly blame the stars for their misfortune. Hermione, wrongly accused of adultery by Leontes in The Winter's Tale, asserts, "There's some ill-planet reigns;" (II.i.105). Othello, realizing too late that Desdemona was, indeed, innocent, sadly terms her an "ill-starred wench" (V.ii.269). In Twelfth Night Sebastian, feeling that the stars are against him (he has been shipwrecked and believes his sister dead), implores his friend Antonio to leave him:

> Antonio: Will you stay no longer? Nor will you not that I go with you?
>
> Sebastian: By your patience, no. My stars shine darkly on me; the malignancy of my fate might perhaps distemper yours. (II.i.1-5)

A more ominous reference to the power of the stars is made in Measure for Measure by Duke Vincentio. Disguised as a friar, he

visits Claudio in jail, and, while preparing him for death explains:

> ...a breath thou art,
> Servile to skyey influences,
> That dost this habitation, where thou keep'st,
> Hourly afflict; (III.i.8-11)

It seems that a real friar might have told Claudio that he was "servile" to the providence of God but not to "skyey influences."

Are the characters of Shakespeare mere puppets of the sky, "Fortune's fools," to paraphrase Romeo? If so, the study of character in Shakespeare is greatly simplified. We need seek no further motivation than celestial influences. Iago is evil because of the stars, while Miranda is virtuous due only to her nativity. However, a close examination of certain astrological references will show that, while the stars do appear to exert an influence, their power is far from absolute. Certain characters are able to overcome negative astral influences; others struggle and fail but are ennobled by their efforts. Some characters give in to despondency and make no attempt to overcome the stars. They will be seen as ignoble.

Furthermore, political and social order are closely linked to the astrological allusions present in the plays to be discussed. While astrological references are used metaphorically in these plays to represent order and disorder, even more important to the maintenance of "degree" are the ways in which these characters react to their varying starry influences. Invariably, those characters who retain their will and reason in the face of the stars make a positive contribution toward maintaining order, while

those characters who give in to their animal passions when oppressed by malign influences tend to foster the disorder so feared by the Elizabethans. Studying the ways in which various individuals react to negative (and sometimes positive) astral influences furthers our understanding of character in Shakespeare, for it provides a yardstick by which true inner nobility may be judged.

Before we discuss those characters who strive against or surrender to the skies, it must be acknowledged that there are still other characters who do not admit the influence of the stars at all. It is not that they reject astrology, but that they ignore it. This type of character is so single-minded in his purposes and has such a powerful will that the influence of the stars simply does not come into play. Examples of this personality type are Richard III, Iago, Timon of Athens, Cassius, Hotspur, Coriolanus, and Macbeth. These individuals, while they may mention astrology, never acknowledge that they themselves are subject to any planetary influences. Their personalities are so powerful that is likely they would overcome any planetary influences contrary to their will. This idea is supported by the fact that there are so few astrological references in Macbeth, Coriolanus, Timon of Athens, and Richard III. There are only an average of two astrological allusions in each of these plays as opposed to an average of seven references in other plays. In the cases of Hotspur, Cassius, and Iago, these characters either do not believe in astrology or decline to acknowledge its power, although there are a goodly number of astrological references in 1 Henry IV, Julius Caesar, and

Othello. Hotspur openly mocks the portentous nativity of Owen Glendower, while Cassius is famous for observing that "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/ But in ourselves..." (I.iii.140-141). Iago, in his consuming desire to destroy Othello, acknowledges no starry power and mentions it only in deceit when he wishes to cover up his involvement in provoking a fight between Cassio and Montano. When Othello demands to know the cause of the brawl, Iago replies that maybe "some planet...unwitted them" (II.iii.181).

This does not necessarily mean that these men are immune to the influence of the stars; they all do come to bad ends. But the stars are not mentioned in conjunction with their respective fates, and since they themselves do not assent to celestial power, they must be considered apart from our main discussion of the men and women in Shakespeare who do acknowledge the influence of the stars.

II. Character, Fortune, and the Stars

Our discussion of the way in which various characters respond to heavenly influences begins with the longest and most famous astrological passage in Shakespeare.[22] It occurs in King Lear, a play that is very much concerned with political order and responsibility. In this play, chaos ensues when the ruler of England, Lear, abdicates his position and divides his kingdom among his daughters. Lear thus breaks political order by removing himself from his natural place in God's scheme. Lear further violates his

duty by allowing his passions to overrule him when he makes the actual division of his domain. Enraged by Cordelia's refusal to flatter him in the manner of her sisters, Regan and Goneril, Lear leaves her portionless. This is a further betrayal of his duty to maintain order in that, of the three sisters, Cordelia is most fit to rule. Lear's actions result in disaster for his kingdom and death for Cordelia and himself.

The longest Shakespearean astrological passage, mentioned at the beginning of the preceding paragraph, occurs in I.ii. as the Duke of Gloucester, speaking to his evil bastard son, Edmund, inveighs against the damage that recent astral events have wrought on earth, particularly the disloyalty (so he believes) of his son Edgar and the disinheriting of Cordelia by Lear:

> These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies, in countries, dischord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction, there's son against father; the King falls from bias of nature, there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. (I.ii.112-127)

Gloucester reasons that celestial influences are at the root of the present problems and that the situation is not likely to improve. Edmund, however, considers his father a fool for blaming the stars.

> This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun the moon, and stars; as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compul-

> sion; knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence.
> (I.i.128-135)

Edmund's soliloquy is a stinging critique, not of the doctrine of planetary influence, but of those who see it as immutable and blame their self-caused woes upon it. Note that, while he mocks the idea that there is an "enforced obedience" to planetary influence, he does not deny that the planets have an influence upon man. Although Edmund may wrongly mock his evil nativity (it seems obvious that by declining to admit the influence of his inauspicious birth, Edmund has allowed its effects to run wild; he is the monster that it portended), it must be granted that he at least accepts responsibility for being the villain that he is.

Certainly, Gloucester pays for his folly of blaming the recent troubles upon the stars and remaining passive in the face of them. Assuming that nothing can be done about Lear's foolish division of the kingdom, he makes no objection to the ill-fated disposition between Regan and Goneril. Similarly, assuming that the stars have ordained that Edgar rebel against him, he makes no effort to discover the truth and uncover Edmund's treachery. His passiveness in the face of bad celestial influences that both portend and contribute to earthly disorder costs him dearly when he does try to assist Lear. The evil sisters have become too powerful and Gloucester, betrayed by Edmund, suffers blinding at the hands of Cornwall.

Kent, however, takes a very different course from Gloucester. Kent apparently also believes in astrology. Indeed, he sees starry

influences at birth as the reason for the great difference between the temperament of Cordelia and the temperaments of Regan and Goneril:

> It is the stars,
> The stars above us, govern our conditions;
> Else one self mate and make could not beget
> Such different issues. (IV.ii.34-37)

Presumably Kent would have seen the same dire eclipses as Gloucester and realized their ominous meaning, but, unlike Gloucester, he does not remain inactive in the face of the present dangers. It is he who has the courage to stand up to Lear and tell him that his actions are foolish, even though Lear banishes him for his honesty. Kent could not do otherwise; it is his duty as a good nobleman to do his utmost to maintain the political stability of the kingdom. Even when banished, Kent returns in disguise (risking death should he be discovered) to aid his sovereign in any way he may. It is clear that Kent is intent on bringing order to the realm by restoring the rightful monarch to his throne. Although Kent fails to save Lear and Cordelia, he is brave in his attempt. He no doubt realizes that the stars portend no good, but this does not deter him from following the logic of his heart. Indeed, the "degree" that exists at the end of the play (in the form the of presumed regime of Albany and Edgar) is in large part a direct result of the actions of the valiant Kent.

Shakespeare's Henry VI is also very concerned with political order. In these plays, also, disorder is linked both to the stars and to the unwillingness of a man (Henry VI) to face up to his

responsibilties as a ruler. Disorder is imminent from the beginning of 1 Henry VI, emanating from the fact that Henry V has died while Henry VI is still an infant. Henry VI's long minority (and subsequent weak-willed ineffectiveness) creates political instability, eventually leading to the Wars of the Roses, as the English nobles fight to control their monarch. Indeed the initial source of Henry's problems and the planets are linked from the very first lines of the play when Bedford bemoans his brother's recent death:

> Hung be the heavens with black, yield day
> to night!
> Comets importing change of times and states,
> Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
> And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
> That have consented to Henry's death! (I.i.1-5)

Although no astrological portents have yet appeared, Bedford believes that they should, since Henry's death will undoubtedly result in political turmoil. Indeed, some forty lines later Bedford prays that Henry's ghost will combat malign planetary influences for the sake of England: "Henry the Fifth, thy soul I invocate:/ Prosper this realm, keep it from civil broils,/ Combat with adverse planets in the heavens!" (I.i.52-54)

Unfortunately, King Henry VI is a prime example of someone who does surrender in the face of unfavorable stars, thus defaming his royal title and subjecting his kingdom to political disorder. Although Henry VI is undoubtedly a good man, he no doubt lacks moral courage. An example of his refusal to strive against the stars occurs in 2 Henry VI at the battle of St. Albans. Rather than fleeing to fight another day (the Yorks have already won the field)

as Queen Margaret would have him do, he asks her, "Can we out run the heavens?" (V.ii.73) His statement implies that bad celestial influences cannot be overcome and that it is futile to try. That Henry would rather surrender to the starry powers than strive against them is further illustrated in 3 Henry VI. Following his capture by the Yorks and his imprisonment in the Tower of London, Henry willingly cedes his kingly power to Warwick:

> Therefore, that I may conquer Fortune's spite
> By lying low, where Fortune cannot hurt me,
> And live that the people of this blesse'd land
> May not be punished with my thwarting stars,
> Warwick, although my head shall still wear the crown,
> I here resign my government to thee,
> For thou art fortunate in all deeds.

Henry would rather surrender his birthright than struggle against the stars. Warwick is very aware of Henry's weak temperament and plays on it by congratulating his monarch for his good sense:

> Your Grace hath still been famed for
> virtuous;
> And now may be seen as wise as virtuous,
> By spying and avoiding Fortune's malice,
> For few men rightly temper with the stars.
> (IV.vi.26-29)

Warwick knows very well that Henry is not a man who would "temper with the stars" and encourages him in this tendency. By giving in to fear and not fulfilling his God-given role as monarch, Henry VI condemns his kingdom to decades of civil war.

In direct contrast to Henry's weakness is Lord Talbot's strength in 1 Henry VI. His job as the English general of France is to maintain order (from the English point of view) and retain France as part of Henry's domains. He never gives a thought to turning away from his duties, even when faced with an impossible

military situation at the French city of Bordeaux. With no hope of reinforcements due to the political intriguing of Suffolk and York, Talbot curses the stars when his son arrives at the scene, calling them "malignant and ill-boding" (IV.v.6). However, rather than despair at this ill-fortune, Talbot fights bravely in the ensuing battle. Although he and his son both perish, Talbot is ennobled both by his willingness to struggle against the evil celestial influences that he curses and his unfailing desire to do his duty.

While the Henry VI plays and King Lear explore the realm of political disorder, Othello explores what happens when a man's mind becomes disordered. Although he is intrinsically noble, Othello succumbs to burning jealousy (believing his wife, Desdemona, to be an adulteress) and, duped by the wiles of Iago, murders the woman he loves. Immediately after the murder Emilia, Iago's wife, enters the chamber and tells Othello of another murder: the death of Roderigo at the hands of Cassio. Othello, still in shock, mutters: "It is the error of the moon./ She comes nearer earth than she was wont/ and makes men mad" (V.ii.108-110). Emilia, unaware that Desdemona is dead, thinks that Othello refers to Cassio. However, Othello is really speaking of himself. Overcome by the enormity of what he has done, he is as yet unable to accept the responsibility for his wife's death, and his disturbed mind blames it on the unnatural influences of the moon. Later, after he discovers that he was horribly mistaken about Desdemona, Othello does take responsibility for his actions. To atone for the life he has wrongly taken, he satisfies justice and his conscience by slaying himself.

Romeo and Juliet is a play in which social order and the stars are closely linked. This is evident from the words of the Chorus at the play's beginning. The Chorus calls the lovers "star-crossed" and asserts that their death has at least restored order between their two feuding families in Verona:

> A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;
> Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
> Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
> The fearful passage of their death-marked love,
> And the continuance of their parents' rage,
> Which, but their children's end, naught could remove,
> Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
> (Prologue 6-12)

However, while the deaths of Romeo and Juliet do serve to restore order, we must consider whether their being "star-crossed" necessarily doomed them to this fate.

What does the Chorus mean when it terms the young lovers "star-crossed"? Certainly they do seem to suffer from very bad luck that might very well emanate from the stars. Unfortunate coincidences abound in the play. Indeed, the unlucky stroke of Tybalt that slays Mercutio as Romeo attempts to separate the two brawlers marks the moment when the play makes its turn toward the tragic. Similarly, the quarantine of Friar John as he attempts to deliver the all-important letter telling Romeo that Juliet is not really dead sets the stage for the play's disastrous ending. The phrase "star-crossed" may, indeed, be seen as referring to these supremely unlucky events.

However, the reason that Romeo and Juliet are really "star-crossed" is that they are born into two feuding families. The hatred between the Montagues and the Capulets is one of the major

factors behind the deaths of the lovers. Family hatred results in Romeo's banishment as he becomes involved in the fatal street fight and slays Tybalt. Friar Laurence's disastrous "sleeping beauty" stratagem must be employed to keep the Montagues from marrying Juliet to Paris, since the news of her previous marriage would presumably outrage them. At the end of the play Prince Escalus clearly sees social strife as the primary cause of the deaths that have occurred:

> Where be these enemies? Capulet, Montague,
> See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
> The heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.
> And I, for winking at your dischords too,
> Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished.
> (V.iii.291-295)

The term "star-crossed" may be seen as a metaphor for the social disorder that helps to precipitate the lamentable ending of Romeo and Juliet.

However, while there are many forces working against the love of Romeo and Juliet, it is really the fatalistic attitude of Romeo toward starry influences that turns the play into tragedy. From the beginning of the play we are aware that he has a belief in the influence of the stars. On the way to the Capulet's feast he confesses that:

> ...my mind misgives
> Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
> Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
> With this night's revels and expire the term
> Of a despised life, closed in my breast
> By some vile forfeit of untimely death. (I.iv.106-111)

It is worth noting that Romeo appears to have, even at this early stage of the play, a very fatalistic attitude toward the stars. He assumes that the influence he suspects will have bad consequences

in store for him.

Romeo's negative disposition becomes vividly apparent in the depths of depression he sinks to in III.iii. as he hides at Friar Laurence's after the fatal street brawl. While he obviously has reason to be upset (his banishment, Mercutio's death), he takes his emotion to such extremes that both the Friar and the Nurse are shocked. Upon entering the Friar's cell and finding the blubbering Romeo prostrate on the ground, the Nurse sternly reprimands him: "Stand up, stand up! Stand and you be a man./ For Juliet's sake, for her sake, rise and stand!/ Why should you fall into so deep an O?" (III.iii.88-90) After Romeo attempts to stab himself later in the same scene, the Friar rebukes him even more sternly:

> Hold thy desperate hand.
> Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art;
> Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote
> The unreasonable fury of a beast.
> Unseemly woman in a seeming man!
> And ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!
> Thou hast amazed me. By my holy order,
> I thought thy disposition better tempered.
> (III.iii.108-115)

It is only the promise of a night with Juliet that redeems Romeo from this violent fit of despair.

The combination of Romeo's belief in negative starry influences and his predisposition toward despair proves fatal, however. When he is falsely informed that Juliet is dead he quickly exclaims "Is it e'en so? Then I defy you stars!" (V.i.24) But Romeo has no intention of defying the stars. Later in the same scene we find that, instead of struggling with the stars, he intends to escape them by killing himself. That Romeo's purpose is not to defy but to surrender is further illustrated by his words

at the "dead" Juliet's side as he prepares to take his poison:

> O, here
> Will I set up my everlasting rest
> And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
> From this world-wearied flesh. (V.iii.109-112)

While Romeo and Juliet do face many obstacles beyond their control (hostile families, the unfortunate street brawl that results in Tybalt's death), it is, nevertheless, Romeo's decision to surrender to the starry influences that brings events to tragedy. His decision to commit suicide costs not only his own life, but those of Paris, whom Romeo slew to enter the tomb, and of Juliet, who stabs herself upon waking and finding the dead Romeo beside her.

Happily, there are characters in Shakespeare's plays who combat the stars and triumph. Some even use favorable celestial influences to their advantage. Prospero of The Tempest is such an individual. Interestingly enough, in this case the stars provide the opportunity for the restoration of political order. Marooned on an island following the usurpation of his Milanese dukedom by his evil brother, Antonio, Prospero, at the play's beginning, is at last granted the chance by Fortune (the stars) to regain his birthright. A fortuitous storm has brought the ship of his enemies within reach of his magical powers. Prospero acknowledges this opportunity as the working of Fortune:

> Know thus far forth.
> By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune
> (now my dear lady) hath mine enemies
> Brought to this shore; and by my prescience
> I find my zenith doth depend upon
> A most auspicious star, whose influence
> If I now court not, but omit, my fortunes
> Will ever after droop. (I.ii.177-184)

However, Prospero realizes that while Fortune, which is really equated with the stars in this passage, has provided him with a chance for revenge, it is his duty to take advantage of this chance. He must "court" the "auspicious star" on his own. Prospero swiftly takes advantage of these benign celestial influences, wisely realizing that Fortune will not always be his "dear lady."

While Hermione of The Winter's Tale does not have any benign starry influences to court, she does manage to overcome some bad ones. Wrongly accused of adultery by her husband, Leontes, Hermione blames her situation on the stars: "There's some ill-planet reigns;" (II.i.105). However, rather than despair, she decides (one line later): "I must be patient, till the heavens look/ With an aspect more favorable." (II.i.106-107). Hermione's strategy, then, is to simply wait out the negative celestial influences she is experiencing. This is, indeed, what she does. Feigning death to avoid her death sentence, she remains concealed at the home of her friend Paulina for some sixteen years until Leontes has repented properly for his mistakes and the situation is favorable for her to return. By not despairing at her bad fortune but instead struggling through it, Hermione is able to return to her home in happier times.

Hermione's decision is important in that it is part of the restoration of order that occurs at the end of The Winter's Tale. Leonte's foolish actions have resulted in the dissolution of degree in his kingdom. Although no civil war results from his wrongful deeds, he has created a terrible situation in that he has destroyed any chance for a smooth succession after his death. His son,

Mamillius, dies of grief following the wrongful accusations against his mother, while his daughter, Perdita, is left exposed on the "seacoast" of Bohemia. The sin of this destruction of order is shown by the death of Antigonus, who is eaten by a bear after he (on Leontes' orders) abandons Perdita. His wife, Paulina (blaming Leontes), sees this as a heavenly punishment for his effectively taking part in an attempt to break order by disposing of a king's child: " 'Tis your counsel/ My lord should to the heavens be contrary,/ Oppose against their wills" (V.i.44-46).

Although the order of succession is effectively reestablished by the return of Perdita near the end of the play, the reappearance of Hermione is also important. The reuniting of this brave queen and Leontes adds to the sense of "order restored" at the play's conclusion. This reunion is made possible only by Hermione's determination in the face of negative astral influences.

Helena of <u>All's Well That Ends Well</u> is perhaps the Shakespearean character with the most affinity for astrology. She mentions the various influences of the stars many times, which is, in her case, quite natural since she is the daughter of a physician and would presumably have learned about astrology from her father, from whom she has, indeed, learned her medicine.[24] Helena's problem in the play is that she loves a nobleman, Bertram, who is both above her station and not in love with her. She herself acknowledges that her birth is not worthy of him:

> ...'twere all one
> That I should love a bright particular star,
> And think to wed it, he is so above me,
> In his bright radiance and colateral light
> Must I be comforted, not in his sphere. (I.i.91-95)

To marry Bertram would be a breaking of social order.

But Helena does not despair or blame the stars for keeping her from Bertram; instead she takes action to place herself on his level, declaring:

> Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
> Which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky
> Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
> Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
> (I.i.223-226)

Helena hits upon the idea that, if she can cure the King of France of his mysterious disease, he will reward her and elevate her to Bertram's social level. In this manner she will be able to attain her love without forcing Bertram to marry beneath himself. She accomplishes this goal but runs into an obstacle when Bertram, who really does not want to marry her, declares that he will never bed her. Rather than giving up, however, she feigns death and follows him to Florence, where, substituting herself for a local maid that Bertram wished to seduce, she does succeed in having the marriage consummated, although Bertram remains unaware of this until the end of the play. When it is revealed at the French court that she is alive, Bertram, sorry for his past conduct, finally declares his love for her. Thus, by her persistence and her belief that the stars do not dictate (though they may influence) a person's life, Helena is able to marry the man she loves, yet still avoid breaking the social order.

The fact that characters like Hermione, Helena, and Prospero are able to overcome, or even make use of, starry influences indicates that the power of the stars is far from absolute in the plays of Shakespeare. Men and women do appear to possess free will.

This concept is highlighted further by the ability of other characters to ignore the power of the stars totally. Individuals like Richard III, Iago, and Macbeth are such creatures of pure will that planetary influences just do not seem to apply to them.

While it is apparent from the above examples that men and women are not the puppets of the stars in the context of the plays, there are still those characters who view the stars as unopposable.Both Romeo and Henry VI abjectly submit to planetary influences that they perceive as omnipotent. Their surrender is especially ignoble when compared with the actions of a Kent or Talbot. These latter men, although they do acknowledge the power of the stars, nevertheless strive mightily to thwart their influences. Although they fail in their endeavors, they should be accorded respect for their brave efforts.