

Planetary Influences

As we approach the spring equinox and the beginning of a new astrological cycle, **Andy Medhurst**, a reliable Capricorn, peers into the heavens and wonders what pleasures the stars hold for us

Louise Montgomery, who writes the horoscopes in the *Daily Mirror*, had some good news for me on February 1: 'It's one of those days when luck will surround you. Something should make it a time to ignore life's more boring demands and have a good time.' Spot on, Louise, for just a couple of hours later *Marxism Today* phoned me to ask if I would write an article about astrology. Given my celestial tip-off, what could I do but throw down the duster, defer the washing up and head for my typewriter?

Astrology is, as you'll have noticed, an easy target for cheap sarcasm. Believing that the arrangements of stars and planets might influence terrestrial lives is usually seen as irrational gullibility. Think of the responses to the news that Nancy Reagan relied on astrological advice, or recall how *Neighbours'* Mrs Mangel gazed into her tealeaves and exposed herself as an old charlatan. And what better way is there to mock a certain kind of American than by assuming a deep voice, sidling up to someone at a party, and purring, 'Hi, I'm Ralph, I'm Gemini'? Yet despite its lack of any concretely provable basis, not to mention its embroilment in those risible Californian lifestyles, astrology continues to boom. It's extremely big business, but what needs does it answer? Is it harmless fun or pernicious delusion?

I have more reason to complain than most. As a Capricorn, I've been systematically victimised all my life. We Capricorns are dependable, dogged, reliable, solid, the trusty mountain goat plodding along. We are massacred with faint praise. One astrology book I read (it was, needless to say, American)

assigned countries and parts of the body to the various signs of the zodiac. I got Belgium, knees and shins.

This anti-Capricorn bigotry aside, horoscopes are rarely negative. The style and the language vary from publication to publication, adjusted to suit the different target audiences, but no column I've read doles out despondency and gloom. Take these three forecasts for Aquarius, all from the same week. *Woman's Own* gushed, in the rotundly-camp shape of Russell Grant: 'As one life cycle comes to an end, so another more brilliant, radiant and sparkling is about to begin. Make the most of it.' *The Taller*, loquaciously upmarket, cooed: 'The harmonious effects of Venus make this a good time for rebalancing partnerships that may have endured small difficulties last month. The other very enjoyable aspect of Venus is a heightened appreciation of yourself.' *Mizz*, aimed at teenage girls, was commendably blunt: 'Romance chance - wear black, look dramatic and head for your fave Friday Night Place. He'll wear green, look gorgeous, and head straight for you.'

These horoscopes function as a kind of reassurance therapy, stating an optimistic version of the obvious. I doubt, for example, whether readers of *The Taller* need very much encouragement to devote their lives to self-admiration. Pop astrology (as it is dismissively called by the more serious practitioners of the predictive arts) appeals because of its delight in categorisation. How simple life would be if there were only 12 basic types of people. The horoscopes let us enjoy that fantasy for a while. It's all a bit of a giggle, like those pseudo-

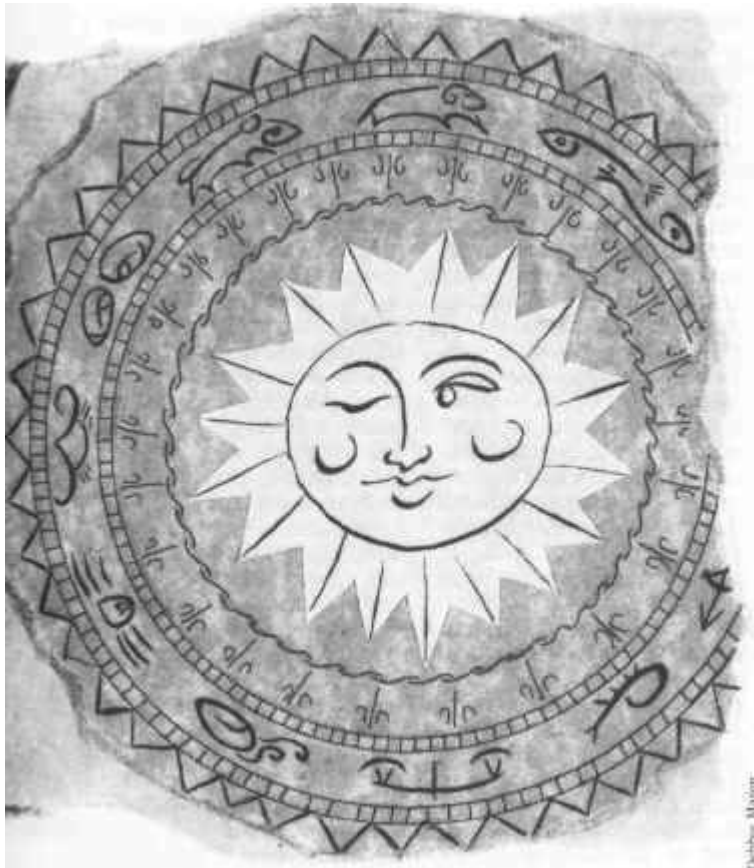


psychological surveys which also occur so frequently in the popular press. The same issue of *Mizz* that tipped the wink to love-hungry Aquarians also included a guide to men's personality traits based on their choice of underpants. Wearers of boxer shorts are 'strong, faithful and down-to-earth', while those who favour Y-fronts 'haven't a clue what sex is all about'. Substitute zodiac signs for undergarments and you'd have perfect pop astrology.

There is a more serious side to this. Interest in astrology is part of the 80s' boom in all things alternative. The revival of Westerners' involvement in Eastern religions, the growth of homeopathic medicine, the continuing popularity of interpersonal therapies, feminist appropriations of mystical symbolism - all these share a deep and understandable dissatisfaction with the claims of hard science to explain the world. If masculine rationality has brought us acid rain and nuclear missiles, then perhaps ways of thinking

hitherto stigmatised as 'irrational' may deserve re-examination. Astrology has its place in this, but what marks it out as different is that it also has a long-standing place within popular culture. You'll find fortune-telling booths in every seaside resort, but there aren't many Sri Chinmoy temples or Gestalt workshops along the Golden Mile.

This is why horoscopes continue to flourish. Of course they can't offer any hope of accuracy, they don't deal in trines, alignments and rising signs, but that isn't their point. On its pop level astrology has few pretensions, it offers nothing more or less than the pleasures of day-dreaming. Reading Louise Montgomery gives us a moment or two to wish things were otherwise. She and her colleagues form part of the soft-hearted utopianism that is a central strand to so much of popular culture. The tabloid horoscopes allow us the indulgence of if-only-ism. After all, who *wouldn't* like to meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger? •



Deborah Mahon

Aries:
 Hasty, forceful, active, impulsive.
Marlon Brando, Adolf Hitler, Maya Angelou, Neil Kinnock.

Taurus:
 Materialistic, tasteful, possessive, stick-in-the-mud.
Marx, Lenin, Elizabeth II.

Gemini:
 Talkative, analytical, intellectual, spontaneous.
Boy George, John Wayne, Mary Whitehouse.

Cancer:
 Protective, determined, intense, emotional.
Nancy Reagan, Esther Rantzen, Ernest Hemingway, David Owen.

Lee:
 Kind, loveable, fun-loving, self-centred.
Barbara Cartland, Alfred Hitchcock, Jacqueline Onassis.

Virgo:
 Systematic, repetitive, thorough, practical, patient.
Agatha Christie, Michael Jackson, Sean Connery.

Libra:
 Approachable, relaxed, indecisive, artistic.
Margaret Thatcher, Oscar Wilde, Edwina Currie.

Scorpio:
 Passionate, complex, devious.
Pablo Picasso, Richard Burton, Grace Kelly.

Sagittarius:
 Optimistic, loyal, adventurous, restless.
Woody Allen, Bette Midler, Winston Churchill.

Capricorn:
 Traditional, committed, unadventurous, successful.
Marlene Dietrich, Arthur Scargill, Josef Stalin.

Aquarius:
 Independent, curious, cool.
Ronald Reagan, James Dean, Vanessa Redgrave.

Pisces:
 Imaginative, sensitive, creative, vague, spiritual.
Mikhail Gorbachev, Elizabeth Taylor, Albert Einstein. •