

Poésie et astronomie. De l'antiquité au romantisme edited by Florian Barrière and Caroline Bertonèche

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Poésie et astronomie. De l'antiquité au romantisme edited by Florian Barrière and Caroline Bertonèche

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This collection of essays edited by Florian Barrière and Caroline Bertonèche presents an anthropological and cultural approach to astronomical themes in poetic works from antiquity to the Romantic period (with emphasis on Latin literature and British Romantic poetry). Apart from the main subject, the framework spans myth, theater, natural philosophy, and musical composition. Although the reader can tell that the emphasis is on the philological aspects of works, it is done with much careful consideration of contemporary scientific and philosophical debate and a good knowledge of the critical literature.

The publication of these French scholars is advertised as the first milestone of the proposed interdisciplinary AROSE (Antique and Romantic Skies in Europe) project—under the auspices of the William Herschel Museum in Bath, the Goethe Museum, the Maison Chateaubriand, and the Keats-Shelley House in Rome—and as one of the proponents of the workshop on the Romantic representations of the skies in poetry and arts. The editors hope that the volume will be the first in a series of intersecting approaches to astronomy and the arts in cooperation with other notable researchers [182]. Their aim is to provide a platform for the discourse on the relationship between science and such art forms as music and painting.

The book is comprised of a preface, an introduction, three main parts, a brief conclusion, a bibliography, and a name index. The *avant-propos* was written by Marc Lachièze-Rey, a renowned French astrophysicist and cosmologist,

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who begins the preface by saying that the heavens have repeatedly been expressed through words and that there is a continuous link between celestial phenomena and human artistic expression. Further, in the introduction, we read that the stars have always been an object of fascination [11]. Although these statements may pass as clichés, they are important for anthropological considerations of the human relation to nature. Coincidentally, the same convictions permeate Jo Marchant's *The Human Cosmos: A Secret History of the Stars* [2020], a popular presentation of this theme that is grounded in the most serious studies on the subject.

Part 1 (“Les Astres et l’antiquité. Mythes et représentations”) deals with Homeric influence on Greco-Egyptian magical corpora and references to stars in poetic works by two Latin authors living in the first century AD, Lucan and Marcus Manilius. The emphasis is on catasterism in antiquity and its vital cultural representations in later literature. The poetic representations are weighed against the standards of the astronomical knowledge of the period.

Parts 2 and 3 are almost entirely devoted to the English poetry of the 17th through 19th centuries. Part 2 (“La Poétique des sphères. Une révolution?”) focuses on the attitude to stars and spheres in three of Shakespeare’s plays and the poetry of James Thomson (1700–1748). The authors indicate the influences of Greek philosophy and contemporary scientific debates on the English astronomical imagination in the early modern period. Part 3 (“Le Modèle antique. Les imaginaires du romantisme”) discusses the Romantic authors who were fascinated by astronomy but were on the outskirts of typical academic work on Wordsworth and Coleridge [see Owens 2019; Brothers 2015]. As is rightly observed, the cosmological model of the universe was reflected in poetry but was also entwined with discoveries in natural history and descriptions of the world.

In the opening article in Part 1 (“Des Fauves dans les ciel. Astrothésie, mythologie et astrologie”), Jean Trinquier writes about the animated constellations described by Aratus, Ovid, and Seneca. For example, the poetic descriptions of the “theater of the skies” were to help with remembering the risings and settings of asterisms. In the author’s view, the reenactment of the scenes—the movable zoomorphic heavens—bears a resemblance to cinematic images or the Roman circus [25]. In this interpretation, the skies are a two-way mirror for the dramatic content of poetry, which could be reflected in the skies, while the skies could also be reflected in the writings. What is more, any change in the celestial spectacle would have terrible consequences for the immutable order of the universe [31].

In terms of constellations, the anthropomorphic-zoomorphic opposition also appears in Manilius, and Trinquier claims that it is essential for noting the influence of the numerous asterisms on humans. As he observes, constellations are cultural objects: they are imagined representations (*représentations imaginaires* [39]). This text is in tune with Jo Marchant’s observation that

if we want to understand where we come from as a species, to reach the source of humanity’s earliest beliefs and identity, then we have to include a consideration of the wheeling night sky. [Marchant 2020, 24]

In the following essay (“Les Astres de Lucain. Représentations érudites et poétique”), Florian Barrière discusses, among other things, solar and lunar eclipses in Lucan’s *Bellum civile*. He connects such events with prodigies—for example, those associated with the death of Caesar—but he also rightly notes that such associations are infrequent in Latin literature.

Barrière is interested in how much astronomical knowledge we should read into Lucan’s text. Should we date the poem according to the information about the stars that it provides? How could the arrangement of the night sky be used for navigation? Barrière traces the actual geographical route of the ship following the clues in the poem and using modern software (Stellarium). In 2016, a similar tool was applied to Sappho’s “Midnight Poem”, which allowed the researchers to date the work to roughly between 25 January and 31 March, 570 BC, thus supporting the previous estimate made by Herschberg and Mebius [1990: cf. Cuntz and Gurdemir 2016, 21–22]. Such reconstructions are important not only because they help establish the dates or check the correspondence between the lyrical and factual aspects of poetic works but also because they prove that ancient authors’ knowledge of astronomy (and its application in everyday life) was grounded in some—now usually unidentifiable—sources that explained the phenomena and provided the calculations.

It is a commonplace that the knowledge of astronomy had practical dimensions for the ancients and was used for agriculture and navigation. In “La Grande Ourse et la souveraineté universelle dans les milieux gréco-égyptiens de l’Empire romain”, Florian Audureau focuses on Greco-Egyptian magical texts. He brings the readers’ attention to the fact that the cycle of celestial bodies also guided the structure of rituals, including the metaphorical aspects of birth and death [62].

Audureau also highlights a less-traveled path of interpreting the celestial spectacle, that is, the ideological use of the imagery of the circumpolar constellations and the theme of empowerment (“elles permettent d’incarner

physicament dans l'univers une puissance souveraine" [64]). Ursa Major was associated with the divine Re, the majestic and universal aspect of the heavens and their power.

Audureau also underlines the fact that there was great significance given to the northern circumpolar stars, and that as much as Ursa Major may have been associated with the gods of light, in the rituals it was also associated with the deity Seth/Typhon [76]. The idea of the Pantocrator—somebody who imposes the universal order by force—is another example of the power relations that linked the heavens to the world of mortals in the Greco-Egyptian corpus.

In addition, Audureau traces ritual semantics and their later Christian appropriation [80–81], showing the transmission of concepts and interpretations across diverse cultures in the ancient world and how these concepts and interpretations determined later religious practices. Thus, he maintains, we must remember that the interpretation of the heavens and stars varies with the culture in question. The example of the hippopotamus deity, which was recognized and represented in the night sky by the Egyptians but not by others elsewhere, shows that mythologies are built on the local, intimate experience and common practice.

Part 2 begins with Sophie Chiari's analysis in "'To Be Called into a Huge Sphere'. Désire et désastre dans le théâtre de Shakespeare" of astral influences in three of Shakespeare's plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Besides some critically acknowledged and well-known contexts, Chiari proposes a philological analysis of what she believes to be the key notions in the plays—desire and disaster—which she links etymologically to the stars. And although this type of semantic correspondence is fascinating and alluring, it is not always cogent. Even if indeed the root of «désastre» (disaster) is connected with the influence of a "bad star", as Chiari suggests [cf. 91], linking «désirer» to «sidus, gen. sideris» (star) is a bit of a stretch, since the root of «desiderare» should be «sīpos» (mark, target), and the verb (in the older sense) would therefore mean "to miss a target" or "to fall short of a goal" [cf. da Vaan 2008, 562–563]. Moreover, it is not methodologically sound to propose a meta-semantic connection between English "heat" (with reference to the dog days/canicule in *Romeo and Juliet*) and "hate" based on the shared set of letters in these words [89]. In her analysis of *Othello*, Chiari refers to the solar eclipse in 1603, which preceded the conjunction in the same year of Saturn and Jupiter in Sagittarius. She follows F. P. Wilson's view that the conjunction was presumably

responsible for the outbreak of plague in London at the time [92]. A small addition should be made: the conjunction happened in December 1603, and the plague in London that year was most prominent throughout the summer months. However, it is true that in anticipation of the conjunction various astrological theories of its possible (plague-related) outcome were created, and the influence was “felt” in the following year [cf. [Burke-Gaffney 1937](#), 417–418].

In her analysis of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Chiari also focuses on the portents of calamities, such as the falling stars. She refers to several contemporary sources (such as William Fulke’s *A Goodly Gallerye* and Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*) that tackled the subject. Following the French critical edition of the play (2002), she rightly points out that the stars’ leaving their orbs marks the end of the Ptolemaic cosmos with its concentric, solid spheres [98 n47]. For those interested in this particular aspect of the bard’s work, a philologically and historically broader context for Shakespearean stars’ leaving their spheres was recently presented in “UnspHERed, Disorbed, Decentred: Shakespeare’s Astronomical Imagination” [[Cetera-Włodarczyk, Hope, and Włodarczyk 2021](#)]. Chiari ends with an allusion to Shakespeare’s later plays in which his characters want a more “pragmatic” heavenly domain and can finally decide on their own fate regardless of celestial influences [99–100].

Pierre Carboni’s “Explorer la lumière, faire entendre l’harmonie des spheres. La Science newtonienne au coeur du project poétique de James Thomson” discusses James Thomson’s poetry in respect to Newtonian science. In the beginning, he refers to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the invocation of the muse Urania. For him, “Uranian patronage” gives way to a return to poetry that is both terrestrial and cosmic, scientific and metaphysical [105].

As Carboni argues, the Newtonian mathematical order of the heavens helps Thomson create his poetic vision of the harmonious, ordered universe laid out in aesthetic (or, actually, synesthetic) terms. Just as sensual reception of the world was important for Milton, so it was also for Thomson. Carboni lists numerous examples of Thomson’s employment of various auditory and visual sensations in his depiction of the world’s order.

Carboni states that Thomson substitutes the classical myth of inspiration (as the fountain of muses, and so on) with a modern myth of poetic inspiration guided by sciences [108]. It is a vision of poetry that imitates the natural phenomena. Thomson searches for the semantic consistency between scientific reality and its poetic representation. Along Saussurean lines, I would

be tempted to call this type of literary sensitivity *la poesie scientifique*. In addition, Carboni offers a good bibliography of the “secularization of Newtonian science” in the 18th century [106]. We are left convinced that popularization was one of the chief aims of 18th-century scientific poetry.

I missed in Carboni’s text references to the visual aspect of the richly illustrated editions of Thomson’s *The Seasons* or engagement with Sandro Jung’s recent publication [2015]. The inclusion and the analysis of the engravings would have been a much appreciated final touch.

The first author in Part 3, Caroline Bertonèche, is well versed in Romantic scientific knowledge and poetic imagination. In “Le Poète, veilleur des cieux. L’Influence astrale d’Homère à Keats”, Bertonèche explains how the scientific progress of the late 18th and early 19th centuries influenced the Romantic poets, taking John Keats as an example. Keats’ experience in his youth is discussed in the context of the new mechanical structure of the heavens. Furthermore, Bertonèche rightly observes that Keats’ writing on Chapman’s Homer adapts Homeric style (such as the use of epithets [134]), which shows a slightly different aspect of how ancient poets influenced the Romantics.

A seemingly minor issue caught my eye. The text of John Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” [1816], cited in note 18 on page 132, differs from the Harvard Library manuscript version of the same sonnet presented in Figure 4. This discrepancy is worth observing, as it shows that Keats’ poems underwent revisions (a common practice then), which perhaps would be valuable for Bertonèche’s argument.

Another essay in this part is Caroline Dauphin’s meticulous analysis of what I would call Romantic “botanical astronomy”, “Flowers of the Sky’. Erasmus Darwin et William Herschel”. Her observations bring to mind a premodern correspondence of the micro- and macrocosm. But Dauphin also looks at the contemporary poetic language explaining the universe in both its terrestrial and its cosmic aspects.

Dauphin focuses on the connection between natural history and astronomy, which she traces back to antiquity, of course. It is hard to escape the impression that in describing the newly discovered aspects of the world, thinkers drew parallels between what was already known and what was new (*datum* vs. *novum*) in searching for the connection between what was above and what below.

A similar comparison of stars to flowers can also be found in William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud", also known as "The Daffodils" (1802; rev. 1815):

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay. [Black *et al.* 2010, 247]

The allusion to the so-called Elizabeth Linnaeus phenomenon (the discovery of flashing flowers) is conspicuous. The poetic version of the discovery was described in Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*, which Wordsworth surely knew, as he must have also been familiar with Herschel's *Catalogue of a Second Thousand of New Nebulae and Clusters of Stars*. Thus, the connection between the astronomical, the botanical, and the literary was well established in the Romantic imagination [cf. Gaull 2015].

As Dauphin notices, in Herschel's own words, observing the flowers and the stars was "almost the same thing" [144]. Her opinion that eventually Herschel wrote a celestial herbarium (*un herbier céleste* [145]) is both imaginative and apt.

Next, Dauphin proceeds to Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, an illustrated poem published in the same year (1789) that Herschel submitted his *Catalogue* to the Royal Society. The biological and geological turn, as we might call it, is also visible in Herschel's and Darwin's deliberations on the origins and evolution of the world as well as in the language that they use [149–154]. And, as Dauphin convinces us, the universe that they offer is not biblical—it is Lucretian.

Finally, Elsa Courant investigates nocturnal poetry of the 18th and 19th centuries in England and France in her "Du Jour à la nuit. La Transition symbolique des imaginaires culturels [XVIIIe–XIXe siècles]". In her analysis of Edward Young's heritage, she observes the philosophical implications of nighttime, which can be associated with meditation, solitude, and death.

Courant traces how the poetic theme of the night inspired Chopin's nocturnes, Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata", and Debussy's "Clair de Lune". But what was initially a romanticized theme of poetry and music became an

object of derision by the second half of the 19th century. For example, the erotic motifs in “Clair de Lune” were changed into satire; and popular visual representations of the night included those of the threat of violent attacks [176–177]. For Courant, it is proof that the *topos* of the night is not easily delineated in the Romantic period and that the profuse circulation of these compositions also influenced the reception and transformation of the theme. Overall, the book fulfills the promise made in the preface: it shows that most celestial references in literary works reflect the progress of astronomy and sciences in general, that is, they go hand in hand with the scientific development of the times when the works were written. What is more, the authors give us a coherent picture of poetic creation, which is inseparable from its sociocultural conditions and influences. The pan-European reflection (*réflexion paneuropéenne* [181]) that the editors have envisioned is perhaps an exaggeration, judging by the actual choice of sources. Nevertheless, most conclusions could be extrapolated and applied to other poetic pieces in a broader European context.

The publication should not be neglected in current discussions of the representation of the heavens and celestial phenomena in literature. It will delight those who investigate the intersections of astronomy and literature in Europe in antiquity and the Romantic period, especially those who see the literary output as a mirror held up to nature.

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