J. B. Morin: The Last "Official" Court Astrologer

by
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Jean-Baptiste Morin is one of those many individuals in the past who chose what history later showed to be the wrong side of a controversy. As a result, until recently, he has suffered either neglect or denigration by historians. In Morin's case, his bad judgment caused him to support astrology in a period when it was beginning to lose its intellectual respectability. He also rejected the Copernican hypothesis, even using his astrological principles to argue against it, despite advice from friends who treated Copernicanism much more sympathetically (Delambre 2:235-274).[1] If we add to that the fact that he also carried on a vigorous dispute with some of the leading French mathematicians over their rejection of his claim to have invented a method for determining longitude at sea, we see a further reason for historical disdain. If he had made some outstanding scientific discovery, such indescretions might have been overlooked, or explained away, but, unfortunately for him, he did not, his idea on longitude being his only real claim to such fame.

Since he is not of significant scientific stature, his defects are usually seized upon as ground for slighting him. The fact that he had useful connections at court, and was consulted by several of its members from time to time, has not seemed to help him in the eyes of posterity. It is, nevertheless, some indication of the fact that his views, although out of fashion today, were perhaps more representative of the general attitudes of his day than were those of contemporary scientists whom we remember and who treated him with more consideration than historians have done.

An examination of his ideas and attitudes will help to redress the balance a little and provide a greater insight into the thinking of the period. Since it was his astrological work which won him political approbation, gaining him a permanent job and assuring his usefulness to the royal family itself, as well as to some of its ministers, his role as an astrologer merits consideration, particularly when we realize that it was his work in astrology, along with his method for determining longitude, which he considered his major accomplishments. We should recognize right from the start, however, that although some of his admirers have called him an "official" court astrologer, he never actually received such a title. Lynn Thorndike tells us that Vautier, the king's physician tried to have him made royal astrologer, but without success (Thorndike 8:480). Michaud's *Biographie universelle* calls him, instead, the last of the astrologers who are worth citing (n. 1).

Morin was born in Villefranche in the Beaujolais region of France on February 23, 1583. After studying philosophy at Aix, he moved on to the University of Avignon to study medicine, receiving his M.D. in 1613 at the age of thirty. He went to Paris to practice and found a place in the service of Claude Dormy, Bishop of Boulogne. While on a trip to Vienna for the Bishop, he examined mines in Germany and Austria, and on his return to Paris, published his first work, the *Nova mundi sublunaris anatomia*, in which he proposed that just as Aristotelian science divided the air into three regions, it would likewise be helpful to consider the earth as made up of three distinct zones (*Astrologia*, "Vita" III).

The work is an indication that Morin had begun to participate in the scientific activity of Paris. He joined with the mathematicians Mydorge and Des Hayes, for example, to observe an eclipse (Mersenne 2:20, 89). Not only did he know Mersenne, and many of those with whom he was associated, he also knew those, like Peiresc, Descares and Gassendi, who visited Paris only occasionally (Mersenne 163, 399, 414-15). He was in

attendance, for example, at the meeting at the Papal Nuncio's in 1628 where Descartes expounded his ideas (Mersenne 1:107; Descartes 1:561, 2:201). His interest in chemistry led him to publish a *Réfutation des thèses erronées* (1624) taking issue with the Hermetic anti-Artistotelian ideas which Antoine Villon and Etienne De Claves had proposed to debate, until they were banned by the Sorbonne. Morin complained that there is "nothing more seditious and more pernicious than a new doctrine," not only in theology, but in natural philosophy as well (*Réfutation* 3).

Various explanations have been advanced as to why Morin began the study of astrology in a serious way. They are derived from comments which he made here and there in his writing. He apparently took up astrology shortly after arriving in Paris, for he tells us that is took him ten years before he could discover any unifying principles in the subject (*Astrologia*, "Apologetica" V). Whether he did so at the request of the Bishop (*Astrologia*, "Apologetica" V) or because he had become dissatisfied with the various medical theories of his day, and turned to medical astrology, as Galen and Hippocrates recommended, and then went on to astrology in general (*Astrologica*, "Vita," IV), or whether he was intrigued by the attack on astrology made by a friend in the Bishop's service, William Davisson, and decided to investigate it for himself (*Astrologia*, "Vita," IV), he devoted a great deal of time to it, searching for unifying principles. At length, in 1623 he published his first treatise on the subject, the *Astrologicarum domorum Cabala detecta.*

He set out to find some reliable principles in a subject filled with confusion, and compounded by the theoretical uncertainties in astronomy, which could not even determine the exact location of planets. No science is perfect, Morin insisted, and like many other sciences, astrology has its heresies and superstitions which were to be rejected (*Astrologicarum* 6). He did not agree, however, with those like De Angelis and Pico della Mirandola that the heavens played no role in physical events (*Astrologicarum* 18). Instead, he

argued, there is a power located in the highest heaven, the *primum mobile*, which is directed downward and influences events on earth. This basic postulate, he thought, was a well recognized principle. His purpose in writing this tract was to justify its division into twelve houses, each exerting influence on different activities of life, particularly when seen in connection with the planets located within them (*Astrologicarum* 12-14; *Astrologia* 314-16). Despite his attack on De Claves and Villon in their Hermetic interpretation of alchemy, which he published the year following the *Astrologicarum domorum Cabala detecta*, Morin based his arguments for this twelvefold division of the heavens on the Cabala, which had been handed down for a long time as an oral tradition springing from Adam, who had had knowledge about the world imparted to him directly by God (*Astrologicarum* 21-22; *Astrologia* 18).

The difficulties in trying to establish reliable principles for his astrology did not deter Morin from putting them into frequent use. One of his prognostications concerned the Bishop for whom he worked, and was a warning of impending evil indicated by the stars which advised that he should take care to avoid landing in prison (*Astrologia*,"Vita" V). the Bishop responded to this warning with derision, but his political machinations went awry in 1617 when Louis XIII rid himself of his mother's favorite, Concini, and political fortunes changed as the king began to reach for control of the government. The Bishop apparently supported the wrong side and was imprisoned. Morin later found employment with the Duke of Luxemburg.

One of the groups in Paris with whom Morin became acquainted was that of Cardinal Bérulle. When Father Charles de Condren, the Confessor of Gaston d'Orléans, came to Paris in 1625 to assist Bérulle, he and Morin became friends, since both had an interest in astrology. Condren was interested enough to compose a discourse on the subject at Richelieu's request (*Recueil de lettres* 46-47, *Astrologia*, "Vita,"

V).[2] His friendship with Morin continued even after Condren became the second Superior General of the Oratory.

As Morin's reputation as an astrologer grew, his work was sought more and more by important people. He came to the attention, for example, of the Princess Louise-Marie de Gonzague, who eventually became Queen of Poland, and who asked him in 1626 to compose her horoscope (*Astrologia* 554). She remained his protector for the rest of his life. When he was planning to publish his great work, the *Astrologia Gallica*, she contributed 2000 thalers for that purpose (*Thorndike*, VIII: 489).

In 1628 Morin published another tract on astrological theory, entitled *Ad Australes et boreales astrologo*. Ancient astrologers had assumed that only the Northern hemisphere was inhabited, and that it was too hot at the equator and too cold at the poles for human habitation. Ptolemy, for example, had relied only on observations made in Europe, Asia and North Africa when he described the divisions of the Zodiac. Astrological theory needed to be adjusted to take account of the new information about global inhabitants which was available to the 17th century, and Morin began to do this here by pointing out how the twelve houses of heaven, which he had discussed in his earlier work, could be applied. Information must be collected, he said, from people living in those regions, such as those within the Arctic circle, so that we can determine not only how the houses apply to their situation, but the influence of the planets as well (*Ad Australes* 3-4, 18). He concluded with information that needed to be collected and correlated with the location of the constellations and planets in order to produce empirical verification of astrological assumptions (*Ad Australes* 28-32). This search represents a second fundamental principle in Morin's astrology, a desire for empirical verification.

Cardinal Bérulle asked Morin on behalf of the Queen Mother, Marie de Médicis, for his astrological progonostication about Louis XIII, who had become very ill in September 1630. Louis' doctor had predicted from his medicoastrological readings that Louis would die. Morin, however, concluded from his own prognostications that Louis would be severely ill, but would survive. Morin was fortunately right, for the more pessimistic astrologers were sent to the galleys (Morin: *Recueil* 47; Mersenne 3:176). Important political considerations hung on the life of Louis XIII, whose brother and heir at the time, Gaston, was not on friendly terms with Richelieu.

A further result of this affair was that when David Sainclair, a mathematics professor at the Collège Royal, died on June 29, 1629, Morin, with the support of the Queen Mother and Claude Bauthillier, the Comte de Chavigny, was appointed to the position (*Remarques Astrologiques* 52; *Astrologia*, "Vita" VI). Chavigny, who held various ministerial posts, consulted him for the most favorable times, astrologically, for the travel and to be received at foreign courts (*Astrologia*).

After the dispute between Marie de Medici and her son Louis XIII over his reliance on Cardinal Richelieu came to a head on November 10, 1630, Louis chose to give his support and allegiance to the Cardinal rather than to his mother, who fled the country. Morin's former association with Marie de Medici did not prevent Richelieu from turning to Morin for answers to certain questions. He wanted to know especially about France's enemies in the Thirty Years' War. Morin obliged him with the horoscopes of Wallenstein and Gustavus Adolphus (*Astrologia* "Vita" V, 400, 402; *Remarques* 67). He also provided one for Richelieu himself (*Astrologia* 612). It is reported that he missed the date of Gustavus Adolphus' death by several days, but was wrong on Richelieu's only by hours (Thorndike 480).

While his practical activities involved an increasingly impressive clientele, Morin continued his theoretical endeavors. By 1631 he had decided that he should directly oppose the new Copernican astronomy, which, he felt, disrupted his astrological assumptions. In that year he published *Famosi et antiqui problematis de telluris motu, vel quiete.* Although he had been advised against publishing the work by both Pierre Gassendi and Marin Mersenne who were much more sympathetic to the new theories than he, he ignored their advice, and gathered a variety of arguments which he thought were convincing proof that the earth did not move (Mersenne 3:520). Among these were the basic principles of astrology which he was convinced assure us that the earth is motionless. In his first work on astrology, he had attempted to demonstrate that the influence of the heavens flowed downward from the *primum mobile.* Now he argued that any influences coming from such a sphere should be focused on its center. If the earth were removed from that center, the influences would strike it at an oblique angle and thus be ineffective (*Famosi* 82-83). He insisted, however, that astrology showed empirically the effectiveness of these influences, and therefore the earth must be in the center. Another argument was based on the assumption that the planets acted in conjunction with the section of the heavens behind them. If the earth as well as the planets were in orbit around the sun, as the Copernicans argued, the relationship of the planets to the stars would be changed and they would no longer be in conjunction with those constellations with which astrologers had always associated them. Since experience has taught us what the proper associations are between the planets and the constellations, we may be assured that they are correct. The universe, therefore, must be geocentric (*Famosi* 83-86).

Morin also produced a variety of other more traditional arguments for the earth's stability. Several of these were based on Aristotelian physics of motion. For example, Morin argued that a stone dropped from a tower would not land at its foot if the earth were

moving. Since it does land at the foot of the tower, the earth cannot be in motion (*Famosi* 101-103) Morin was proud of his book. When he heard that Galileo was preparing to publish a work on the tides, Morin sent him a copy of this work to try and forestall Galileo's book -- to no avail (*Responsio* 54).

Although Morin's book did not affect Galileo, it did stimulate Gassendi to publish an analysis of motion, drawing upon the new ideas of Galileo and others, which dealt with the kind of objections Morin had made. In it Gassendi reported the results of his won experiments involving the dropping an object from the top of the mast of a moving ship. The object fell at the foot of the mast, even when the ship was in motion (Gassendi 3:520; Mersenne 3:360). Morin answered Gassendi in such a way that their friendship continued for a time, but the publication of a letter from Gassendi to some friends, which was critical of Morin, eventually led to a rupture (*Alae Telluris*; Gassendi 3:520-563).[3] One of the actions in the dispute which followed was an astrological prediction by the Morin that Gassendi ran the hazard of dying of an illness at the end of July or beginning of August, 1650, although it proved inaccurate. Morin advised that such predictions were made so that they could be avoided by proper prudence.[4]

The problem which soured the latter part of Morin's life began in 1633 when he responded to an offer of an award by the French government to anyone who could discover a practical method for determining longitude at sea. Morin proposed a method based on determining the distance from the moon to a specific star and comparing the time of their conjunction with those published in a table of ephemerides.[5] He was criticized because there were no tables of ephemerides complete enough to make his suggestion actually usable, and also because there were problems with precision in observations. In the spring of 1633, he explained his idea in a lecture at Renaudot's *Bureau d'adresse* and followed it by a poster announcing his discovery. Richelieu appointed a commission, made up

of the mathematicians Abbé Chambon, Etienne Pascal, Mydorge, Boulenger and Hérigone, as well as the ships' captains Cam, Treillebois and Letier, to evaluate Morin's proposal (the mathematican, Beaugrand, was added later to replace Chambon). Morin knew many of these mathematicians, and believed at first that their decision was going to be favorable. When it was not, he was very critical of the result, and Richelieu asked for another meeting of the commission to answer certain specific questions. This, too, was negative. To their primary criticism - that the method could not be successfully used because of the lack of complete tables of the locations of the stars - Morin responded that this was not his fault and that his method was in theory a good one. Although Richelieu granted him 1000 livres to build a quadrant to develop a satisfactory set of ephemerides, Morin was not successful in making his method work. Still, he continued to argue his views to his friends, and in print. By then Mazarin, who often preferred to soothe away discontent rather than confront it, eventually granted him a pension of 2000 livres a year.

The high point of his career as an astrologer came on September 5th, 1638, when he was asked to be on hand at the birth of Louis XIV to cast his horoscope at the exact moment of his birth (*Astrologia* 555, *Remarques* 58). It is undoubtedly for this reason that the rumor started that Morin was appointed official court astrologer. There seems little question that he was favorably regarded in court circles. We may be sure, however, that he was not hidden in Louis XIV's bedroom on his wedding night in 1660 to draw up a horoscope based on the conception of the future Dauphin (McIntosh 139). Although this makes for a good story, it is upset by the fact that Morin died four years before the wedding.

Morin continued his theoretical concern for astrology with some comments on Ptolemy's *Centiloquium* which had just been published by Nicolas Bourdin. In them he reiterates his belief that the heavens do not act on us inevitably to produce events

arising out of necessity. Astrologers predict them by conjecture, since they deal with genera or species, and not with particular and individual events before their realization. It is the devil, he suggests, who reveals and inspires the knowledge of particular effects, as he did with Dr. Faust, a magician in the time of the Emperor Charles V, although the devil, too, is often wrong about the future, out of malice, or from ignorance of future events controlled by free will (*Remarques* 63).

Throughout this period Morin was writing his great work, the *Astrologia Gallica*, finishing the bulk of it by 1638, although its publication was delayed by the events of the *Fronde*. He included in this work most of the ideas he had worked on during his life, comprising, along with astrology, mathematical proofs of the existence of God, [6] criticism of the philosophies of Descartes and Gassendi, [7] his attack on Copernican astronomy, and many others. Of the 26 books contained in the work, which appeared posthumously in 1661, two have been reproduced in the 20th century.

In 1902 the astrologer Henri Sylva produced a summary translation of book 21, which was reprinted in 1976, and again in 1981. For Sylva, Morin was the first to establish true principles of astrological science. He was also impressed with the experimental sanction for astrology contained in the *Astrologia Gallica*, maintaining that it could replace most earlier works on the subject. Before Morin, the theory of astrological determinations was taught only by aphorisms applied to special cases. Morin introduced a method, and systematized the subject (Sylva 16-17).[8] The second book of the *Astrologia Gallica* to receive a modern translation (by Jean Hiéroz) was book 25, on the universal constitutions of heaven. To it was added Sec. II of Book 26, containing Morin's doctrine of elections. Morin's arguments that the Church's condemnations of astrology did not apply to the sort of thing he was doing, as well as his reply to the criticisms of astrology made by Gassendi and others, were apparently not persuasive (*Recueil de lettres* 48-49). Not only did his

efforts fail with philosophical and scientific friends such as Descartes, Merserme and Gassendi, but also court circles turned against his views when, in 1666 Colbert forbade academics to study astrology, and, in 1682, Louis XIV prohibited astrological calendars and almanacs. The heyday of astrology in France was over.[9]

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Notes

[1]Montucla criticizes him specifically for these two points (2:252). Pierre Costabel ("Morin," *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*) concludes that his "philosophical and scientific choices were too often political ones." Michaud ("Mirin," *Biographie universelle*) says he could have been a useful astronomer except for his deplorable championing of judicial astrology and being one of the most opinionated contradictors of Copernicus and Galileo in sustaining the immobility of the earth. More recent scholars have examined other parts of his work as will be seen below. Unfortunately, Eugenio Garin's *Astrology in the Renaissance* does not include the seventeenth century and makes no mention of Morin.

[2]A copy of Condren's horoscope is found in *Astrologia* on p. 628.

[3]See Gaston Sortais (2:167-72), for a discussion of the controversy.

[4]Montucla (1:526) sneers at Morin for this. See Morin's comments, (*Recueil* 51). It was Morin's reaction to this letter which led to the break of their friendship, rather than their disagreement over the physics of motion as Cornelis De Waard assumed in Mersenne 3:360.

[5]Many of the documents in this controversy have been republished along with a French translation in Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres completes*, ed. Jean Mesnard, 2:82-99. Most of the texts reproduced by Mesnard are drawn from Morin's own work *Longitudinum terrestrium necnon nova et hactenus optata scientia.* See also Delambre (*Histoire* 2:236-74) for an account of the dispute. It has been dealt with more recently in Jean Pares's *J. B. Morin et la querelle des longitudes de 1634 a 1647.*

[6]Morin's mathematical proofs of the existence of God, *Quod deus sit*, was published in 1635 and republished in an expanded form in *Astrologia* at the end of Book I.

[7]For a discussion of his views on Descartes, see Léon Auger's article.

[8]In the back of the volume (pp. 215-17) Sylva reprints the horoscopes Morin made of himself, Richelieu, Gustavus Adolphus, Louis Tronson, de Chavigny, and the Duc de Montmorency.

[9]Mary Ellen Bowden considers the attempts to revise astrology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a scientific revolution which failed and concludes that by the end of the latter century "it had sunk to the level of pseudoscience in the eyes of virtually all learned men."

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