

# Saturn as a Malefic Planet: A Research Note

**Stavroula Konstantopoulou.** University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture

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This research note compares and contrasts the treatment of Saturn as a malefic planet according to three original source documents. The first source is the second-century *Tetrabiblos* or *Quadripartitum*, the four-book treatise on astrology composed by Claudius Ptolemy and originally written in Greek (ca. 100-178 CE).<sup>[1]</sup> Though the *Tetrabiblos* is now known as a systematic treatise on astrology, Ptolemy actually uses the word ‘astronomy’: the two words then had no separate meaning.<sup>[2]</sup> The second source, *De vita libri tres* (*Three Books on Life*) by the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), was first published in Latin in 1489 and discusses a variety of topics relating to on medical, psychological, astrological and magical issues.<sup>[3]</sup> Ficino also offered his readers advice on how to be a man of letters (as he was) and still maintain good health.<sup>[4]</sup> The third source is *Saturn. A New Look at an Old Devil*, a seminal work in modern psychological astrology by Liz Greene, published in 1976.<sup>[5]</sup> Greene examined the traditionally so-called ‘malefic’ influence of the planet Saturn through signs, houses, aspects and synastry from a psychological point of view. Greene’s analysis dismissed Saturn’s traditional description as malefic and, relying on a psychological perspective, she re-defined the planet’s role as a tool for self-realisation and self-actualisation. This research note will analyse these sources from the viewpoints of Saturn’s influence as a malefic or transformational planet, and from the different cosmological contexts that shaped understanding of Saturnian qualities.

One of the most fundamental distinctions in Western astrology, which originated in Mesopotamia, holds that there are two categories of planets — ‘good’ and ‘bad’ classified in the sources as ‘benefic’ and ‘malefic’, that is, causing good and evil fortune respectively.<sup>[6]</sup> Western astrology’s view — both traditional and modern — of Saturn is an amalgam of a variety of characteristics. Inherited from the earlier Mesopotamian tradition, what prevails is Saturn’s association symbolically with restriction, harshness and discipline.<sup>[7]</sup> The *Tetrabiblos* presented some of the earliest negative perceptions of the planet’s astrological characteristics. Ptolemy called Saturn malefic, deadly and the bringer of evil: ‘if it happen’, he wrote, ‘that Saturn be in fixed signs, and in quartile or opposition to the Sun, and contrary in condition, he will produce death by suffocation, occasioned either by multitudes of people, or by hanging or strangulation... if in Virgo or Pisces, or watery signs, and

configured with the Moon, he will operate death by means of water, by drowning and suffocation'.<sup>[8]</sup>

Conversely, Ficino's *De Vita* promoted a more positive and constructive attitude towards Saturn's influence: 'if some were to accuse Saturn and Mars of being harmful by nature, I would not believe it ... When the power of Saturn is cautiously taken, it is useful ...'<sup>[9]</sup>Ficino seemed to have great respect for Saturn, which may be related to its prominent place in his own personal horoscope.<sup>[10]</sup>In a letter addressed to his friend Giovanni Cavalcanti, he commented that 'Saturn seems to have impressed the seal of melancholy on me at the beginning'.<sup>[11]</sup>His understanding of Saturn sought to counter the planet's constrictive connotations – the 'tyranny of Saturn' as he called it – by encouraging the reader to create harmony and balance in all spheres of life.<sup>[12]</sup>Similarly, Greene acknowledging that the majority of astrological textbooks about Saturn coincided 'with hindrances and the frustration of the even flow of material and emotional comfort in life,' was oriented towards a more psychological reading of the planet; in her words 'it is the inner meaning which here concerns us'.<sup>[13]</sup>For example, in discussing the placement of Saturn in the sign of Leo, Greene suggested that the planet's challenges had to be recognised and seriously accepted in order for the individual to increase their self-awareness: 'Saturn is awkward in the Sun's sign, and the challenge offered to the person with this placement is a difficult one for he needs to find his inner centre and identify with that rather than the trappings with which he usually surrounds himself'.<sup>[14]</sup>

Taking into account their diverse cultural backgrounds, while all three source documents connected Saturn to adverse connotations, they varied in their assessments of the planet's impact and experience, a variation which may be related to their broader cosmological context. Within the *Tetrabiblos* one may see Aristotle's pivotal impact on Ptolemy's cosmology, in which the mechanism behind astrology was conceptualised as working through some naturalistic rationale, and the celestial influence from the stars and planets was removed from all divine and mythological causes. As Ptolemy wrote: 'We apprehend the aspects of the movements of sun, moon, and stars in relation to each other and to the earth, as they occur from time to time; the second is that in which by means of the natural character of these aspects themselves we investigate the changes which they bring

about in that which they surround'.<sup>[15]</sup> Following the Aristotelean line of thought to set up the framework for the astrological mechanics, Ptolemy argued that the principles of physics and geometry defined the favourable and unfavourable nature of planets. Thus according to the planets' natural qualities and their angular relationships towards the ecliptic, Ptolemy claimed that 'Saturn's quality was chiefly to cool and, moderately, to dry, probably because he is furthest removed both from the Sun's heat and the moist exhalations about the earth'.<sup>[16]</sup> One may observe that the format of Greene's *Saturn* followed the Ptolemaic tradition in a sense of an astrological textbook of delineations, presenting Saturn's placement in the signs and houses and in aspect to other planets. However, as Robert Hand noted in his introduction to the 2011 edition of the book, this conventional way of organising the material moved passed the traditional forms of astrology that held there were 'good' and 'bad' planets, and maintained that 'the level of consciousness with which one approaches one's own life is not fixed or determined by whatever the birth chart signifies'.<sup>[17]</sup>

Similarly, but contrary to the Ptolemaic tradition that upheld a natural process of causation, Ficino objected to the mechanistic rationale in Aristotelean causality and embraced, as he exclaimed, 'Plato's style [which] is more like that of a divine oracle than any human eloquence'.<sup>[18]</sup> At the beginning of Book I, Ficino stated that 'Hippocrates promises health of body, Socrates, of soul,' meaning that his exposition of causality did not exclude the spiritual presence in the natural world.<sup>[19]</sup> Ficino understood and perceived astrology's purpose not in the sphere of prognostication but as a means to harmonise one's physical and spiritual living with the heavenly order. His aetiological treatment on the influence of the stars was based on the idea of correspondences (*sympatheia*), which, as Suzanne Bobzien wrote, held that 'in some sense everything in the universe emits some physical influence on everything else,' where every single thing in the cosmos was linked into a set of intricate horizontal and vertical correspondences.<sup>[20]</sup> The reader of *De vita* was then encouraged 'to investigate which star promised what good to the individual at his nativity' and then to participate actively in the relationship between the natural and the divine worlds 'by an application of our spirit to the spirit of the cosmos' in order to achieve balance.<sup>[21]</sup>

Ficino's concern about the influence of the body on the soul was epitomised in his treatment of the astrological significance of the melancholic humour, particularly in its relation to the planet Saturn.<sup>[22]</sup> Profoundly influenced by the fact that Saturn had a prominent place in his birth chart, Ficino offered a series of remedies to counterbalance the malefic effects of the planet upon one's horoscope, such as wearing specific garments and amulets, listening and playing to music, using appropriate herbs and scents and altering behavioural habits.<sup>[23]</sup> Unlike Ptolemy, Ficino perceived that the experience of astrological Saturn was not confined in the workings of a deterministic universe but on the corresponding level of the individual's ability to minimise in their mind, body and soul the effects of what was thought to be a challenging astrological placement. It was from this notion that Ficino re-visioned the role of planets as they all had gifts to offer, including the so-called malefics for which he cautioned his readers to 'be sure then that you do not neglect the power of Saturn'.<sup>[24]</sup>

Nicholas Campion raised an important distinction in that Aristotelean naturalism provided the cosmological framework for Ptolemy's astrological rationale, but at the same time appealed to Plato's worldview of manipulating the natural world by harmonising with celestial influences.<sup>[25]</sup> According to Campion, Ptolemy indeed brought into his work Saturn's traits from the Babylonian astrological tradition, 'but gave them a naturalistic justification which meant he hoped that it was difficult to challenge them'.<sup>[26]</sup>

As a final note, Saturn's astrological malefic manifestations found in the Ptolemaic tradition are part of astrology's history and can offer a constructive insight into rationalisations in modern Western astrology. All three source documents exhibited that the perception of Saturn remained in its core intact, for in the course of the historical scholarship of astrology the planet seemed to call for the same attention and effort from the individual to constructively maximise its astrological influence. For instance, with regard to Saturn's early interpretations Erin Sullivan took a contemporary psychological point of view and suggested that 'they were valid perceptions of Saturn at that time, and to a certain degree remain entirely functional at a symbolic level'.<sup>[27]</sup> From this viewpoint when Saturn in the fixed signs Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, Aquarius) makes hard aspects (such as square and opposition) to the Sun, physical suffocation is better understood as 'suffocation of

one's will, vitality and essential Self, originating in feelings of inadequacy or oppression'.<sup>[28]</sup>At one level, by exploring the different Saturnian dimensions of experience, Ptolemy, Ficino and Greene all revealed the developments in the technicalities of practicing astrology through the centuries; yet at another level these passages can contribute to a profound understanding for the historical scholarship in astrology.

Introducing the 2011 edition of Liz Greene's *Saturn*, Robert Hand presented a short history of the ideological framework of the notion of benefic and malefic planets that dominated the astrological literature until the twentieth century, and he explored how other ancient and contemporary authors before Greene had voiced similar objections about the deterministic views on astrology and the planets' classifications as auspicious or not.<sup>[29]</sup>Out of this range of meanings and functions ascribed to Saturn one can observe that modern Western astrology survives through a continuity rather than diversification in its technical language, and this continuity is based primarily on the shared philosophical, cultural and cosmological patterns of belief that shaped the astrological milieu. It is within this framework that one can understand why for Ptolemy, Ficino and Greene astrology, in Champion's words, 'remained managerial and participatory ... but the locus of participation had changed' for each.<sup>[30]</sup>In the Ptolemaic tradition the focus was the natural universe, in Ficino's world the struggle between the body and the soul, and for Greene psychological factors.

To conclude, having considered the treatment of the planet Saturn in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, Marcilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres* and Liz Greene's *Saturn*, a key conclusion is that, aside from methodological and ideological points of convergence and divergence, the notion that it can provide an insightful framework for appreciation and understanding of humanity's relationship and discourse with the sky links to classical, Renaissance and modern texts with remarkable continuity.

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[1]Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E Robbins (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. x-xi

[2]Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, pp. x-xi.

[3]Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies and the Renaissance Society of America, 1989), p. 4 ff. *De Vita* consists of three books: Book I entitled *De litteratorum veletudine curanda* (*On Caring for the Health of Learned People*), Book II entitled *De vita longa* (*On Long Life*) and Book III *De vita tum valida tum longa coelitus comparanda* (*On Obtaining a Life both Healthy and Long from the Heavens*).

[4]Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*.

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[8]Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book IV.9.

[9]Ficino, *De Vita*, Book III.2.60ff

[10]Ruth Clydesdale, "Jupiter tames Saturn': Astrology in Ficino's *Epistolae*" in *Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and his Influence*, ed. by Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw and Valery Rees (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 198. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 123-126.

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[13]Greene, *Saturn*, p. 15.

[14]Greene, *Saturn*, p. 83 and Hand, 'Introduction', pp. 3-8.

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[16]Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, I.4.

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[18]Angela Voss, 'The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?', *Culture and Cosmos* 4.2 (2000), pp 29-45 (p. 33), citing Marsilio Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Basle, 1576), p. 1129; Campion, *History II*, pp. 89-90.

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[23]Ficino, *De Vita*, Book III.2.63-66.

[24]Ficino, *De Vita*, Book III.12.59-60.

[25]Campion , *History I*, pp. 210-211

[26]Campion, *History I*, p. 211.

[27]Erin Sullivan, *Saturn in transit: boundaries of mind, body, and soul*(York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 2000), p. 17.

[28]Sullivan, *Saturn in transit*, pp. 17-18.

[29]In Greene, *Saturn*, Hand, 'Introduction', pp. 3-6.

[30]Campion, *History I*, pp. 211-213.