



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 4, Episode 7

Woman in the Moon: Written in the Stars

Hosts: Joan Raube-Wilson and Jake Raiter

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Bonus Materials

Explore Robert Green's "Planetomachia: or the first parte of the generall opposition of the seuen planets wherein is astronomically described their essence, nature, and influence..." by visiting:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A02157.0001.001?view=toc>

Want to know more information about your own star sign, natal chart, and other astrological things? Check out Co-Star for all things planetary at: <https://www.costarastronomy.com/natal-chart>

Episode Resources

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Joan: Is astrology real? Do the movements of the planets and stars influence our earthly behaviors? Does free will exist, or are we simply pawns of fate being manipulated by the heavens?

Jake: These are the questions... we will not be answering today! Instead, we'll be discussing *The Woman in the Moon*, a play published in England in 1597 written by John Lyly. My name is Jake Raiter, my pronouns are He/Him/His and I'm a Scorpio Sun, Scorpio Moon, and Aquarius Rising.

Joan: Yikes! My name is Joan Raube-Wilson, my pronouns are she/her/hers, and I'm a Virgo Sun, Aquarius Moon, and Virgo Rising.

Jake: Oof! The reason we introduced ourselves within the context of astrology is because this play was heavily influenced by the early modern English attitudes about astrology, and that's the lens through which we're going to

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be exploring this play.

Joan: In many ways, this play is a very literal manifestation of the tenets of astrology. The planets are not distant celestial bodies that symbolically influence us. They are characters! They're on the stage, physically manipulating the events of the play. This depiction is informed by early modern astrological beliefs, as well as the representation of the planets in Robert Greene's *Planetomachia*, which is believed to be one of John Lyly's sources for this play. So today we'll be discussing early modern astrology and *Planetomachia*, and how they influenced *The Woman in the Moon*. But first, Jake, can you tell us a bit about what happens in *The Woman in the Moon*?

Jake: Of course! The story takes place in Utopia, a fictional land where male shepherds live peacefully, ruled over by the goddess Nature. Because the shepherds have no female companions, they ask Nature to provide them with a woman, and she creates Pandora, the first woman who is imbued with all the best qualities of the planets, each represented by a different Roman god. The planets, jealous of Pandora's perfection, strive to ruin her life with the shepherds by each influencing a particular quality in Pandora to the extreme.

Joan: Before we dive further into the play itself, let's talk a bit about how astrology functioned in early modern English society. I would venture that today, most people don't exactly look kindly on astrology as a legitimate scientific field, but view it more as a spiritual practice, a superstition, or even just complete nonsense. The case was somewhat similar in early modern England, but slightly more complicated. Astrology seemed to live in a somewhat muddy middle ground between science and pseudoscience. This is partially because in early modern England, scientific practices and understandings had a lot of overlap with philosophy and religion. For instance, astrological beliefs are connected to early modern humoral theory, which was a practical, medical concept for understanding how the human body worked. If someone was physically or emotionally unwell, or behaving unusually, it was believed to be caused by an imbalance of the humors within their body. And one thing that could cause the humours to become unbalanced was the movement of the stars. This is also very much tied to the concept of The Great Chain of Being, which was a philosophical way of understanding humans' place in the universe. The human body was essentially viewed as a microcosm of the universe as a whole, so naturally, the distant, intangible changes in the heavens would be reflected in visible changes on earth and changes within individual humans.

Jake: So, you're saying that in early modern England, everybody just accepted astrology as scientific fact?

Joan: Well...not exactly. This is not to say that astrology was a universally accepted doctrine like that of the church, nor was it a core scientific belief. There were certainly some communities that viewed astrologers as quacks. But it was still a prevalent element of the culture and was not viewed as directly antithetical to Christianity or science. In an article for *Renaissance Quarterly*, Allison Chapman says the following:

“Although challenged by the rise of both empirical science and Calvinist theology, astrology had remarkable currency and credibility in the early modern period. Belief in some degree of celestial influence was nearly ubiquitous in early modern England, and only a minority regarded astrology as a disreputable form of the occult, embraced only by the less-educated or the credulous. Nor was it seen as irreconcilable with

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Christianity.” (Chapman 1258)

Jake: You know, Robert Greene actually addresses that in *Planetomachia*, saying that it can't be heretical to find meaning and divine inspiration in the stars, because God gave us the stars in the first place, and thus bestowed that divine inspiration unto humans.

Joan: That's true, but also, shh! Spoilers! We're not talking about *Planetomachia* yet.

Jake: So, what did this look like in practice? What does an astrologer do, exactly?

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Joan: Well, most of what we know about astrological practice in early modern England comes from surviving casebooks of astrologers. For example, Simon Forman and his protegee Richard Napier were astrologers who practiced between 1596-1634, and they kept meticulous records of their work. Their casebooks document their meetings with patients, who would come to them with a question or a problem, then Forman or Napier would create a chart or map of the position of the stars at that moment, and would use that information to provide an answer. Forman and Napier used these astrological consultations essentially as a form of healing or medical treatment, and much of their work was particularly focused on women's health, because they believed that astrology played a notably strong role in women's reproductive health and sexual behaviors.

Jake: I bet that's gonna be relevant when we talk about Pandora.

Joan: Absolutely. But again, no spoilers!

Jake: But wait...this type of astrological work sounds like...you know...witchcraft...

Joan: Well, you're not entirely wrong, but there was a fine line between astrology that was considered acceptable, and astrology that was an act of evil. According to King James' *Daemonologie*, which dives into the distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of "witchcraft", consulting the stars and planets was fine if one was doing it to diagnose a problem or tell someone more about themselves. But if they were using astrology to predict the future or some other form of divination, then that was considered a sinful form of witchcraft.

Jake: So, if astrology was that close to witchcraft, was it basically only accepted by superstitious people? Did the scientific community look down on it?

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Joan: Again, not necessarily. Most doctors would have studied at least some basic astronomy and astrology in university. In fact, that brings me to something interesting. Have you ever had the experience in school where a teacher creates a game that helps you learn something?

Jake: Why yes I have, we played Mathball in my Algebra class, where if you didn't answer a question correctly you got hit in the head with a tennis ball!

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Joan: Oh...um, wow...Well believe it or not, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, English university students studying astronomy and astrology had a similar educational tool, called the Astronomer's Game! (Or, sometimes the Astrologer's Game!) Basically it was a board game created in a university setting to help students learn the basic principles of astronomy and astrology.

Jake: Wait, that's so cool! Can we play it?

Joan: Right now?

Jake: Yeah!

Joan: Well, I don't think that'd be such a great idea. First of all, since a podcast is an auditory medium, I don't think our listeners would be exactly riveted by listening to us play a board game that they can't see. Second of all, we don't have a copy of the board game, so we'd have to make the board and pieces ourselves. And thirdly, this game is really complicated.

Jake: Well, let's at least learn the rules so our listeners can incorporate it into their game nights!

Joan: Okay, I'll try. Here's my understanding of the game based on the description in Ann Moyer's article about it, for the journal *Early Science and Medicine*. Basically...in its very basic principles it works similarly to chess, but it looks completely different. You know how in chess, each type of game piece has very specific parameters for how they can move on the board?

Jake: Yep!

Joan: Well, imagine that instead of those chess pieces, the game pieces represent the planets, the sun and the moon. Similarly to chess pieces, each of the celestial bodies has specific rules for how it can move on the board, and those rules are determined by their relationship to the sun.

Jake: I'm with you so far.

Joan: But obviously the planets don't move on a square board, they move in orbital patterns. So the board has two circular tracks on it, each one divided into twelve sections marked by the zodiac signs, and those are the pathways on which you move your pieces.

Jake: Okay...

Joan: So at the start of the game, each piece begins in their planetary houses, the Sun is placed in the 16th degree of Leo, the moon in the 8th degree of Cancer, Saturn is in the 20th degree of Capricorn

Jake: Okay wait, now you've lost me. This might be more complicated than I thought.

Joan: Yep. This game isn't just about the philosophical elements of the zodiac, it involves a lot of actual astronomy as well. But the long and short of it is, you have two players who are each trying to capture the pieces in their opponent's cosmos, and they do that by engaging their pieces in battles or contests based on how much astrological influence they can exert over one another.

Jake: Hey, you know what that reminds me of? One of the source materials for *Women in the Moon*, *Planetomachia*!

Jake: *Planetomachia* was published in 1585 by Robert Greene, best known as a big Shakespeare-hater who wrote *Greene's Groats-Worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance*, a pamphlet ridiculing Shakespeare and other playwrights of the time. Framed by a debate amongst the planets judged by the Sun or Sol, also staged as Roman deities,

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Planetomachia describes the emotional characteristics that each of the planets represent and how they most influence humans, and equate a different myth or story as examples of how the gods influence affects mortals. It also shares some similarities to the Astronomers Game, such as the planets competing with one another and Sol as the center of their conflict.

Joan: That's pretty interesting, does Greene explain anything else about astrology?

Jake: Absolutely! The brochure begins with almost 16 pages of discourse on astrology, interspersed with Latin quotes from some of Greene's favorite authors. Finally he starts his play, where the gods accuse each other of maliciously influencing human beings, in which they cite the characteristics found in the followers of these gods. Jupiter rails against Mars, saying:

"They (Mar's followers) are commonly over-rash, not fearing to rush through sword and fire, seeking to move immovable things, carrying a head without a brain, impatient in injuries, doing all things with preposterous advice, being variable in their purposes, prodigal of their own, and desirous of other men's..." (53).

Joan: Wait a minute, "followers of Mars"? That just sounds like people who were born under the planet Mars!

Jake: Exactly! The followers of Mars can be easily translated into those born under the planet Mars, which turns this into an astrological description of character traits. They also describe the health problems and conditions that are most common among the followers, such as when Luna lengthily describes Venus's medical effects on her followers. Luna says,

"The peculiar diseases to this star are palsies, apoplexies, gonorrhoea, obstructions of the bladder & belly, with pains in the secret parts, quotidian fevers, pains in the head, diarrhoea, dropsies, & other more

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proceeding of crudities, excess, and abundance of phlegm, windiness, and such others” (39).

Joan: Dropsies? Windiness? Gonorrhoea? Yikes, I would not want to be born under Venus.

Jake: Imagine being born under Uranus.

Joan: Now wait a second, this sounds like a great example of the crossover between astrology and humoral theory that I discussed earlier, where astrology would be used to attempt to diagnose why a patient might have certain chronic health issues or be more susceptible to certain diseases. Whether or not these are accurate ways to give medical diagnosis, they are examples of early modern authors' attempts to reconcile the differences between astrology and science.

Jake: It also shows off how early modern authors adapted classical myths in order to tell new stories, as each of the gods provides a story about the mistakes of mortals and how it was actually the gods' influence that caused the misfortune. We can see this in Luna's tale about Venus, and the effect she had on the misfortunes of Rhodope, originally a story of a queen punished for vanity that Greene adapts into a tale of how lust brought down an entire kingdom.

Joan: Ah, I hate it when that happens.

Jake: This adaptation and straight up changing of classical myths to fit a story the author wanted to write can be seen clearly in *Women in the Moon*, where the usual story of Pandora and her box is completely disregarded to instead be a tale of new life and the planets. By combining mythology with the pseudo-medical psychology of astrology, we see Robert Greene tapping into ideas and concepts that were popular and audiences were asking for, which eventually inspired John Lyly to write *Women in the Moon*.

Joan: That's awesome. I would love to learn more about the planets and how a production would stage something like that.

Jake: Well you're in luck! Cole Graham and Emily Basset will be releasing an episode on *Writ in the Margins* where they discuss the stage production history of *Women in the Moon*. Keep an eye out for episodes coming out on writinthemargins.com.

Joan: So knowing that John Lyly was writing in a time when astrology was such a prevalent cultural aspect of people's understanding of the world, and with *Planetomachia* as one of his source materials, what does this reveal about *The Woman in the Moon*?

Jake: As we mentioned earlier, the presence of the planets in *The Woman in the Moon* is a very literal representation of the early modern understanding of astrology. The relative positions of the planets at any given time could have influence on people's behaviors, and that is precisely what we see them doing to Pandora. Take this early scene, for

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example, where Nature creates Pandora, endowing her with the best features of all the planets:

Nature (Joan):

I make thee for a solace unto men,
And see thou follow our commanding will.
Now art thou Natures glory and delight,
Compact of every heavenly excellence:
Thou art endowed with Saturns deep conceit,
Thy mind as haught as Jupiters high thoughts,
Thy stomach lionlike, like Mars heart,
Thine eyes bright-beam, like Sol in his array,
Thy cheeks more fair, than are fair Venus' cheeks,
Thy tongue more eloquent than Mercury's,

Thy forehead whiter than the silver Moons:
Thus have I robbed the Planets for thy sake.
Besides all this, thou hast proud Juno's arms,
Aurora's hands, and lovely Thetis' foot,
Use all these well, and Nature is thy friend;
But use them ill, and Nature is thy foe.
Now that thy name may suite thy qualities,
I give to thee Pandora for thy name.

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Jake: Here, Nature establishes the aesthetic and personality traits that are associated with each of the Roman deities and their corresponding planets. These were the traits believed to be heightened in people as the planets moved, as described by the conflict of *Planetomachia*.

Joan: Also, remember when I was talking about Forman and Napier's casebooks earlier, and I mentioned the connection between astrology and women's sexual behaviors?

Jake: I remember you talking about sex.

Joan: Well, it's important to note that one of the most likely reasons why these particular astrologers had so many female patients is because to them, women's overall health was largely dependent on their reproductive capacity. If there was something about them that was physically or emotionally preventing them from having children or engaging in healthy sexual behaviors, that was a problem that required medical intervention, and astrology was another potential way to provide that. We can see that reflected in Pandora's journey as well. As each of the planets takes its turn influencing her and changing her behaviors, the most overt consequence we see is in Pandora's relationships to the shepherds. After all, Pandora was placed in Utopia specifically to be a romantic partner to one of the shepherds, and at first, they are all so enamoured with her that they are competing for her love. But once

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the planets start changing her personality, these relationships are thrown into chaos, most overtly when Venus takes over and she starts seducing everything in sight. I can certainly imagine that if Pandora was one of Forman or Napier's patients, they would have prioritized finding a way to calm her lustful behaviors. Now, let's take a listen to the final scene, after Pandora has been influenced by all of the planets. Here, she summarized what changes they caused in her, and ultimately makes her choice to dwell with Luna:

Pandora (Jake):

Fair Nature, let thy handmaid dwell with the Moon,
 For know that change is my felicity,
 And fickleness Pandora's proper form.
 Saturn mad'st me sullen first; and thou, Jove, proud;
 Mars bloody-minded; Sol a puritan;
 Thou, Venus, mad'st me love all that I saw,
 And Hermes to deceive all that I love.
 But Cynthia made me idle, mutable, forgetful,
 Foolish, fickle, frantic, mad.
 These be the humors that content me best,
 And therefore I will stay with Cynthia.

Nature (Joan):

Now, rule, Pandora, in fair Cynthia's stead,
 And make the moon inconstant like thyself.
 Reign thou at women's nuptials and their birth.

Let them be mutable in all their loves.
 Now follow me, ye wand'ring lights of heaven,
 And grieve not that she is not placed with you.
 All you shall glance at her in your aspects,
 And in conjunction dwell with her a space.

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Jake: In this scene we hear Pandora describing the planet's different effects on her emotions and state of mind, continuing to reinforce the concepts of the effects that the planets have on the human psyche. However, in contrast to Nature's first monologue, Pandora describes the Moon's effects as more overarching, encompassing the full range of human emotions and this is what Pandora prefers. Nature then reminds the planet that they will not completely miss out on Pandora, as the Moon will pass through their spheres.

Joan: This is another reference to the astrological culture of early modern England, and how an audience would be aware of the concept of the movements of the planets and the phases of the Moon. The changeability of the moon is mythologized as a reflection of Pandora, and how she is affected by the movement of the planets.

Jake: In conclusion, by looking at the historical context of astrology and mythology in early modern England, it

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becomes clear where John Lyly gleaned inspiration from to write *The Women in the Moon*.

Joan: By tapping into astrology from medical, psychological, and mythical angles, Lyly was able to craft a play that encapsulates the different ways in which early modern England viewed and perceived the study of the stars and how it affected us.

Jake: He also uses the framework of classical myths to help an audience, who would already be knowledgeable on these characters, to tell a story that both touches on classical mythology but also adapts it to tell a new story.

Joan: Of course, this reveals a lot about how early modern audiences would have received this play, but future audiences won't have the same cultural understandings of astrology and mythology to inform their viewing of it. By being aware of the historical context behind this play, future productions can engage with this in order to better understand what stories already exist within the text and what stories can be brought in and explored through performance.

Jake: Thank you so much for listening, and we'll see you on the far side of the moon.

Joan: Or...maybe we'll see you...IN the moon.

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