

Placidean teachings in early nineteenth-century Britain: John Worsdale and Thomas Oxley

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Abstract

John Worsdale (1766 – c. 1826) has been described as something of a historical anomaly, perhaps the last representative of a dying astrological tradition, struggling uselessly against the rising tide of modernity. While this may be true with regard to the natural philosophy underpinning his view of how and why astrology works, Worsdale's actual practices place him rather in the vanguard of an emerging modern astrology characterized by a modified Placideanism. Although the first stirrings of Placidean teachings were felt in Britain towards the end of the 17th century, they gained firm ground only after the subsequent hiatus of judicial astrology spanning most of the 18th. This paper examines the British adoption and transformation of the doctrines of Placidus, particularly as evinced in the writings of John Worsdale and those of his junior contemporary and occasional critic, Thomas Oxley (1789 – 1851).

The history of modern astrology arguably begins in Italy, where, in 1650, the Olivetan monk and professor of mathematics Placido de Titi (better known as Placidus, 1603 – 1668) published his *Physiomatica sive coelestis philosophia*, 'Physiomatics or celestial philosophy'.¹ According to his perhaps most famous statement, Placidus 'desired no other guides but Ptolemy and Reason'.² Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* being a most incomplete guide for a practising astrologer, the proportion of Placidus' own reason in the resulting system was, for better or worse, correspondingly

¹ Also known as *Quaestionum physiomaticarum libri tres*, 'Three books on physiomathematical questions' and first published under the pseudonym Didacus Prittus Pelusiensis – *pace* Lynn Thorndike, who, in *A history of magic and experimental science*, vol. 8: *The seventeenth century* (New York: Macmillan), pp. 302 f., mistakes the two titles for separate works.

² Cooper, John (transl.), *Primum Mobile [...] by Didacus Placidus de Titus* [hereafter Cooper, *Primum Mobile*] (London: Davis and Dickson), p. 47.

large. The uses he made of Ptolemy's work speak of scholastic training and ingenuity, but would have greatly surprised its author.

Placidus was determined to purge astrology of everything 'fictitious' or merely symbolical and establish it firmly on the basis of Aristotelian natural philosophy and physics; but he was not to be honoured as a prophet in his own country. Despite having been thrice censored and approved by the Catholic Church, Placidus' *magnum opus* was placed on its Index of forbidden books in 1687, a decision renewed in 1709. Instead, Placidean teachings found a haven in Protestant England, where they were promulgated towards the end of the seventeenth century, notably by John Partridge (1644 – 1715).

In 1693, Partridge published his *Opus Reformatum*, in which he rejected the traditional astrological doctrines which he had previously espoused in favour of Ptolemy and Placidus, although the latter is only rarely mentioned by name.³ More particularly, the book sets out to refute Partridge's former friend Gadbury, who is abused on nearly every page of the book, not only as an incompetent, ignorant and dishonest astrologer, but as a traitor and a turncoat. The background of this bitter attack lay in Gadbury's new-found Catholic sympathies during the religio-political struggle over the English throne in the late seventeenth century. Partridge's own sympathies lay with the Parliament and in particular with Oliver Cromwell, whose nativity and primary directions are discussed extensively in *Opus Reformatum*.⁴ He was also favourably disposed towards William Lilly, whose religious and political views (not to mention his long-standing feud with Gadbury) seem to have made up, in Partridge's eyes, for his clinging to erroneous astrological ideas. *Opus Reformatum* was soon followed by *Defectio Geniturarum*, in which Partridge criticized the analyses of nativities found in earlier writers, particularly on the subject of fatal directions; the main target was once again Gadbury, to whose *Collectio Geniturarum* Partridge's title alludes.

Partridge was by no means the only English astrologer of his day to take the Placidean teachings to heart. Others included Richard Kirby and John Bishop, who a few years before had published *The Marrow of Astrology* – an unacknowledged and somewhat abbreviated translation of Placidus' own work with very little original content added.⁵

³ Cooper, *Primum Mobile*, p. iv, notes: 'It was from this book [by Placidus] that Mr. Partridge took all the best of the matter which he inserted in his *Opus Reformatum* and *Defectio Geniturarum*, though he very rarely acknowledged the obligation.'

⁴ Primary direction, known before the 17th century simply as 'direction', is an ancient method of astrological prognostication based on the apparent diurnal rotation of the celestial sphere. As the heavenly bodies move across the sky in the hours following a person's birth, each degree of such motion (corresponding to approximately four minutes of time) is equated with one year of life.

⁵ The work plagiarized was Placidus' *Tabulae Primi Mobilis* (1657), which about a century later was

But there is little doubt that Partridge was the most instrumental in bringing about the Placidian revolution in England – and, by extension, in making Placidus the grandfather of modern western astrology.

Following its unprecedented popularity in the seventeenth century, English astrology all but vanished in the eighteenth; and the newly-discovered teachings of Placidus were forgotten until the very end of the century, when they found a champion in John Worsdale (1766 – c. 1826).⁶ Worsdale has been described by Patrick Curry as ‘a remarkable, and remarkably late, heir of the Ptolemaic reformers’ representing ‘the last gasp of anti-scientific naturalism at any learned level’.⁷ If we confine our examination to the natural philosophy underpinning Worsdale’s astrology, this is no doubt an accurate portrayal; but I would argue that the actual astrological practices of Worsdale simultaneously place him in the vanguard of an emerging modern astrology characterized by a modified Placidianism. I should like here to look at the contributions of Worsdale as well as his junior contemporary Thomas Oxley, with whom he contrasted sharply in many ways, and to examine some major points of difference between them and earlier generations of Placidianists.

Worsdale’s first astrological work appeared as early as 1796, but he is best remembered, when at all, for his *Celestial Philosophy or Genethliacal Astronomy*, published posthumously in 1828. Its opening sentence sets the tone: ‘This Work contains an exposition of the Errors of all Ancient and Modern Authors, impartially stated [...] including the Names of all piratical Authors, who have dishonored this CELESTIAL SCIENCE

again rendered into English by an unknown translator engaged by a Dr J. Browne of Islington. The manuscript of this translation was lent out, clandestinely copied by a third party, and published by Manoah Sibly in 1789 as his own under the title *Astronomy and elementary philosophy*. A supposedly improved version was published 25 years later by John Cooper as *Primum Mobile*, giving the name of the original author as Didacus Placidus de Titus [sic]. *The Marrow of Astrology* was reissued only a year after its first publication, this time under the sole name of John Bishop and with a preface by Henry Coley, who does name Placidus as the originator of the method taught, if not of large portions of the text itself. Coley mentions ‘Dr. Wright, Thomas Moor Esq. Mr. Worrall and [...] Mr. John Partridge’ as other contemporary English adherents of Placidus, and feels that their endeavours ‘ought to be encouraged, and assisted, as Aiming at Truth it self, and not rejected and ridiculed, (as some are too forward to do)’.

⁶ Worsdale’s year of death is given in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as 1828 or after, and by Patrick Curry in *Prophecy and power: astrology in early modern England* [hereafter Curry, *Prophecy*] (Cambridge: Polity), p. 132, as ‘c. 1828’, presumably based on the year of publication of Worsdale’s last work. However, Ellic Howe in *Astrology: A recent history including the untold story of its role in World War II* [hereafter Howe, *Astrology*] (New York: Walker), p. 27, states: ‘*Celestial Philosophy, or Genethliacal Astronomy* [...] was published two years after his death. (It was seen through the press by his son John, who appears to have succeeded to his astrological practice at Lincoln. His decease was not announced, probably to avoid the loss of clients.)’

⁷ Curry, *Prophecy*, p. 134.

by their inexplicable principles and practice.’ Worsdale’s allegiance to Ptolemy as interpreted by Placidus is evident throughout, although the name of Placidus is never mentioned – no doubt due to Worsdale’s frenzied anti-Catholic bias, which makes Partridge look positively tolerant. The style is terse and highly technical, except for occasional outbursts condemning ‘Infidels, Deists, and Atheists’ along with rivalling astrological authors and baby-eating popish priests.

Judging from his works, Worsdale’s main interest appears to have been in the prediction of death. His examples are mostly concerned with the correct method of finding the giver of life (hyleg) and its lethal directions, sometimes with ill-concealed satisfaction at the fulfilment of dark forecasts made to disbelievers. Indeed, one historian has spoken of ‘the pathological pleasure that Worsdale derived from acquainting clients, or others who had offended him, with the date they might expect to die’.⁸

Not much is known about Thomas Oxley (1789 – 1851). In 1830 he published a work entitled *The Celestial Planispheres, or Astronomical Charts, a Supplement* to which appeared in 1833; and in 1848 he published *The Gem of the Astral Sciences, or Mathematics of Celestial Philosophy*. The first book was printed in Liverpool, the latter two in London. *The Gem of the Astral Sciences* describes Oxley as a civil engineer; *The Celestial Planispheres*, as ‘many years mathematician in the United States of America’.⁹ There is in fact a record of a United States patent for an unspecified invention granted to a Thomas Oxley on 3 March, 1821; he is then listed among ‘Aliens who have not resided two Years in the United States’.¹⁰ On the other hand, a series of letters to the Editor of the *Mechanics’ Magazine* in 1839, where a Thomas Oxley claims with two colleagues to have anticipated the invention of the Daguerreotype, states that he lived in Liverpool for nearly eight years, including the years 1823–24. If, as seems likely, all of these records refer to the same scientific gentleman, Thomas Oxley’s residence in the United States cannot have lasted more than four years.

⁸ Howe, *Astrology*, p. 27.

⁹ Oxley’s interests and inventions were many and varied. As early as 1816, he had published *Facilography, or, A system of easy, expeditious writing: entirely new, applicable to all languages, ancient and modern, in characters completely adapted to conciseness and currency in combination, expressing every word without the omission of a single letter, in half the space and in one third the time required for common running hand, comprised and rendered attainable in six lessons, calculated to facilitate the accounts, correspondence and memorandums of the merchant and man of business, where both accuracy and dispatch are indispensibly requisite, and to expedite the preparations in manuscript, and other exertions of the man of letters, in which he described himself as ‘author of several fugitive pieces, essays, &c. moral and philosophical; and Master of a mathematical and commercial academy’.*

¹⁰ *Synoptical Index to the Laws and Treaties of the United States from March 4, 1789, to March 3, 1851* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown), pp. 138, 542.

Oxley was not the first astrologer to promote the use of planispheres for calculating horoscopes or directions, but he did invent his own variant of the instrument, an accomplishment which he liked to compare to Napier's discovery of logarithms. Worsdale, who, like Oxley, found the earlier variety of planispheres wanting, contented himself with giving his opinion on them in his usual frank and unreserved manner:

This *paltry thing* at first sight appears *beautiful to behold*, in consequence of the *various Colours* with which the *Signs* and *Planets*, &c, are ornamented; but the more it is attentively surveyed, the more *disgusting* it appears, with all its *visible imperfections* [...] though it is *artfully* contrived to attract the notice of the innocent, and delude the ignorant, and unwary.¹¹

Oxley appears to have influenced modern astrology in one highly visible respect, although his influence has rarely been acknowledged: he was prime mover behind the shift from the traditional square horoscope chart to the modern circular format.¹² As early as 1830 he passionately argued his case as follows:

There is also another very great impediment to the perfect attainment of this science, which is the absurd figure, or diagram almost always used, and very improperly called a figure of the heavens; which figure consists of a square and a number of half squares, or triangles cornered and dovetailed into one another like a mosaic pavement. In the name of reason I would ask in what respect can such a tessalated [*sic*] pavement be compared to a figure of the heavens! The orbits of the planets are nearly circular, the planets themselves are globular, and the lines distinguished by the names of ecliptic and equator, etc., are perfect circles. How excessively absurd then must it be, to represent the figure of the heavens under the similitude of a broken pavement, or of a square of board made up of a number of other squares, cut through their diagonals and clumsily glued together again. Surely it could never have been a man of science who invented so absurd a figure, but some sordid miser, with the view of saving half an inch of paper.¹³

Oxley's lead in employing circular charts was followed by R. J. Morrison (1795 – 1874), better known by his *nom de plume* Zadkiel, three years afterwards, and in later decades

¹¹ Worsdale, John, *Celestial Philosophy, or Genethliacal Astronomy* [hereafter Worsdale, *Philosophy*] (London: Longman & Co.), pp. 55 f.

¹² Credit for the research underlying this conclusion goes to Mr Philip Graves, BA.

¹³ Oxley, Thomas, *The Celestial Planispheres, or Astronomical Charts in IV. Parts, illustrated by the Nativities of the Emperor Napoleon and King William IV* [hereafter, Oxley, *Planispheres*] (London: Davis and Dickson), p. 38.

by the second famous Zadkiel, A. J. Pearce (1840 – 1923).¹⁴ Others were more conservative in their choice of diagram, and the square format survived in some publications until the turn of the century.

A considerable portion of Oxley's *Celestial Planispheres* is devoted to the discussion of the emperor Napoleon's nativity, a topic almost as popular in its time as that of Adolf Hitler's horoscope would become among twentieth-century practitioners. It was also a subject which brought many of Oxley's and Worsdale's differences into focus. While Oxley agreed that Worsdale had picked the correct time of birth for the emperor – there were several such times proposed by astrological authors in a number of pamphlets – he made it clear that this agreement between them was due to 'very strong scientific reasons' and 'not the *Gentlemanly* language in which he has drawn up his remarks on this Nativity'. To Oxley, who admired Napoleon's enterprising spirit and ability to raise himself from relatively humble beginnings to imperial dignity, Worsdale's flow of invectives directed at the emperor was proof of narrow-minded caste prejudice:

From what I have seen of Mr. Worsdale's Astrological works, he appears to be what we may call a clever Astrologer, or a Ptolomean; I wish I could compliment him so far as to pronounce him a Mathematician, Philosopher, Politician, or even a man of candor. To be serious, I should be ashamed of a man who could so prostitute his talents by writing such a tirade of falsehood and calumny, on one of the greatest geniuses, and on one of the most meritorious characters that the world ever produced [...] no doubt one of the most detestable traits which Mr. Worsdale can discover in Napoleon is, that Napoleon was a Tyrant without being duly qualified by his ancestors [...] Oh for the good Mr. Worsdale! the liberal minded Mr. Worsdale!¹⁵

Nevertheless, Oxley reproduced some of Worsdale's predictions on Napoleon's overthrow and death, 'published sixteen years before the latter event transpired! by which [sceptics] may see that there really exists a Predictive Science, founded on regular and methodical rules and calculations'.¹⁶ The two astrologers largely agreed on

¹⁴ See Zadkiel (pseud.), *The Grammar of Astrology* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper); Pearce, Alfred John, *The Text-Book of Astrology* (London: Mackie). Morrison, the first 'Zadkiel' on the English astrological scene, was succeeded after his death by one R. V. Sparkes, who died only a year later, so that Pearce was really the third editor of *Zadkiel's Almanac*. Morrison and Pearce were, however, the more well-known of the three.

¹⁵ Oxley, *Planispheres*, pp. 117 ff.

¹⁶ Oxley, *Planispheres*, p. 124. Oxley was less than impressed with Worsdale's mathematical skills, however, and describes with vindictive pleasure his discovery of an error in Worsdale's nativity for Napoleon: 'I said to myself, "I must have committed some great oversight, for surely Mr. Worsdale can never have made so gross a blunder as to put the cusps of the twelfth and sixth

the nature of these rules. Both followed Placidus and Partridge in their method of dividing the houses and made use of several Placidian innovations.¹⁷ These included the new aspect angles called quintile (72°), biquintile (144°) and sesquiquare (135°), taken from ‘the very excellent Kepler’, as well as the prognostic techniques of secondary directions and progressions, for which Placidus had sought to establish Ptolemaic authority.¹⁸ All aspects were calculated not only in the traditional way along the ecliptic, but by proportions of the planetary semi-arcs, known as aspects *in mundo* or ‘in the world’.¹⁹

Certain features of the Placidian system, however, are conspicuous by their absence from the works of both Worsdale and Oxley. One such feature is the consideration of crepuscular and obscure arcs. To Placidus, light was the medium through which the influence of the heavenly bodies is transmitted to us. This belief led

houses of the figure four whole degrees wrong!!” The next morning I projected another Planisphere for the same Nativity, the result was exactly the same as the first, and as I had never before found my Planispheres to deceive me, I now concluded that I was right, and that Mr. Worsdale, the pretended Ptolemy of our age, was wrong [...]’ (Oxley, *Planispheres*, p. 90).

¹⁷ The so-called Placidus system of house division, based on the method of direction or ἄφαισις taken from Ptolemy, had in fact been proposed earlier – it was known to Abraham ibn Ezra in the 12th century – but had not found wide support; see North, John David, *Horoscopes and History* (London: The Warburg Institute), pp. 20 ff.

¹⁸ Placidus wrote of his new prognostic techniques: ‘We call these motions the secondary directions, to distinguish them from the primary and principal; and we are of opinion, that Ptolemy, speaking of annual places, is to be understood of the places of those motions, and when of the menstrual, hints at the places of the progression’ (Cooper, *Primum Mobile*, p. 25). Today, secondary directions – equating the motions of the celestial bodies on each day following birth with the corresponding year of life – are generally known to astrologers as *secondary progressions* or simply *progressions*, while the ‘progressions’ of Placidus – equating each synodic month with one year of life – seem largely to have fallen into oblivion. There is no mention of either technique in Ptolemy, who, in the place referred to by Placidus (*Tetrabiblos* IV.10), was in fact writing about yearly and monthly *profections*. The reference to Kepler occurs in connection with Placidus’ argument for a connection between astrology and musical harmonies, also mentioned by Ptolemy; see Cooper, *Primum Mobile*, p. 79.

¹⁹ The diurnal circle described by a planet is divided into four semi-arcs measured between its points of rising, culmination, setting, and anti-culmination by the degrees of right ascension passing over the meridian during each phase. In calculating Placidian aspects *in mundo*, each semi-arc is taken as the equivalent of 90°. The principle is related to, but not identical with, the aspects in oblique ascension mentioned, for instance, by Antiochus of Athens (2nd century CE?) and alluded to by Ptolemy in *Tetrabiblos* III.11. Placidus tried to establish Ptolemaic authority for his new definition of aspects by arguing that as Venus cannot be more than 48° distant from the Sun in the zodiac, Ptolemy, speaking (in *Tetrabiblos* I.23) of a sextile between the two, must have meant a ‘mundane’ sextile (see Cooper, *Primum Mobile*, pp. 15 f). In reality, of course, Ptolemy was referring to whole-sign aspects.

him to devise special procedures in primary directions involving the sun, whose light is visible for some time before its rising and after its setting. When the sun was below the horizon by less than 18° of altitude, it was said by Placidus to be in the crepuscular or twilight space; below 18°, it was in the obscure space. In such cases, Placidus modified the Ptolemaic method of direction.²⁰ Worsdale does not discuss these suggested modifications, but tacitly ignores them.²¹ Oxley, on the other hand, discusses them in some detail, concluding:

After thus investigating thoroughly all the various circumstances and all the various Positions under which the Sun can be placed, both under the Crepusculine Parallels, and also in the obscure spaces, it does appear to me very plain that Placidus's precepts for the application of the Eastern differences are, in many respects not only inconsistent, but impossible.²²

Oxley's objections are mathematical – the Placidean principles are not universally applicable – and empirical – the standard techniques of astrological forecasting appear to function just as well without such special exceptions. They are not, however, philosophical: Oxley does not touch at all upon the idea of light as the transmitter of astrological influences. Indeed, towards the end of the *Celestial Planispheres* Oxley dismisses the whole notion of such influences in favour of a theory of non-causal covariance.²³ Worsdale, who does not scruple to uphold planetary causality as part of his 'elementary philosophy', nonetheless deviates from the Placidean emphasis on light as its instrument.

Another practice ignored by Worsdale is the use of the so-called *horimaea* (ὠριμαία [sc. ἄφεισις]). Unlike many innovations of Placidus' masquerading as Ptolemaic doctrines, the *horimaea* is one of two procedures actually given in the *Tetrabiblos* for calculating the length of life – in this case, by the setting of the chief significator of life (the hyleg or apheta) at the western horizon, with the other planets adding or

²⁰ When the sun was in the crepuscular space, Placidus wanted the other planet or aspect involved in the direction (the promissor) to be brought not to the corresponding point in its semi-arc, as would normally be the case, but rather to the sun's circle of altitude – a circle parallel to the horizon and also known as a crepuscular arc. When the sun was in the obscure space, Placidus would work only with that part of the sun's semi-arc which was located below the crepuscular space and which he termed the obscure arc.

²¹ For instances of directions ignoring the crepuscular or obscure position of the sun, see Worsdale, *Philosophy*, pp. 159 ff., 294 ff.

²² Oxley, *Planispheres*, p. 139.

²³ Oxley, *Planispheres*, pp. 176 ff. The prevalent astrological language of causality, including the word 'influence', is nevertheless employed by Oxley throughout the work.

subtracting years according to their own positions.²⁴ It is not the main procedure for the purpose, and Placidus devotes comparatively little space to it. Worsdale's first book contains a brief summary of the method but no examples; his *magnum opus*, published some thirty years later, is wholly silent on the matter despite the inclusion of several horoscopes in which the horimaea would have been of relevance.²⁵ Oxley similarly gives only a very short summary of Ptolemy's doctrine, with no attempt at applying it to any actual nativity. Indeed, the outlines presented by both authors are so brief as to be rather obscure, and it is a moot point whether either of them fully understood the procedure.²⁶ Instead, they focus exclusively on the other method, which is directing the hyleg to the malefic planets and their aspects.

Placidus, who took a scholastic-Aristotelian view of celestial mechanics, believed the daily rotation of the celestial sphere from east to west to be the only true motion of the heavenly bodies. The apparent motion of the planets through the zodiac in the opposite direction was thought to be entirely due to the varying resistance of their own respective spheres: Saturn, the lightest of the planets, follows the diurnal motion with barely any delay at all, whereas the dense and heavy moon lags behind by thirteen degrees per day. According to Placidus, the zodiacal aspects formed by such apparent movements were relevant only when measured between planets: the only true relationship between the heavenly bodies and the horizon or meridian is based on the diurnal motion, and must be measured by aspects *in mundo*. Worsdale upholds this

²⁴ Pace Curry, *Prophecy*, p. 132, hyleg and apheta are synonyms, and there seems to be no reason for singling this astrological doctrine out as an 'arcane interpretive point without any possible physical rationale'. Certainly it would not have appeared so to either Ptolemy, Placidus or Worsdale, although it has been less in vogue since the 20th century. Hyleg (with several variant spellings, such as *hylech*, *alhileg*, etc.) is a Medieval Latin form of the Arabic (*al*)-*hīlāj*, which in its turn is derived from Middle Persian *hīlāk*, 'releasing' – a translation of the Greek word ἀφέτης, 'releaser, starter', also directly Latinized as apheta. Several older authors, being unfamiliar with other classical languages than Latin, Greek and Hebrew, mistakenly imagined the word hyleg to be derived from Hebrew *hālakh* 'go'; cf. Partridge, John, *Opus Reformatum* [hereafter Partridge, *Opus*] (London: Awnsham and John Churchill), p. 137; Worsdale, John, *Genethliacal Astrology* [hereafter Worsdale, *Astrology*] (Newark: Ridge), p. 116; and Oxley, *Planispheres*, p. 265 – the latter two almost certainly copying a footnote from Sibly, Ebenezer, *A Complete Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology* (London: Green & Co.), p. 463.

²⁵ See Worsdale, *Astrology*, pp. 122 f. for the mention of *horimaea* (spelt *horimea*); Worsdale, *Philosophy*, pp. 101 ff. for a horoscope which would merit the use of *horimaea*.

²⁶ More than a century earlier, Partridge had called this technique (which he did not name) 'a thing known to very few of our Age, either Theoretically [*sic*] or Practically' (Partridge, *Opus*, p. 94). A worked example, although not very detailed, is found in Partridge, John, *Defectio Geniturarum* (London: Benj. Tooke), pp. 205 f.

convention, although without expounding on its underlying philosophy; but Oxley challenges it:

Now let us ask those who are deeply versed in these matters; since we see that the Sun and Moon are directed to the Aspects of other Planets both in the Zodiac, and in Mundo, would it not be equally rational to direct the Ascendant and tenth House [that is, the horizon and meridian], to the Aspects of the Planets, both in the Zodiac and in Mundo?²⁷

In support of this contention Oxley proceeds to cite the horoscope of King William IV, who, when his ascendant was directed to Saturn's square in the zodiac at the age of 27 years and 5 months, had the misfortune to break his left arm.²⁸

These alterations to the Placidian teachings were all simplifications, or instances of what we may call a streamlining process, eliminating special rules and exceptions to produce a single mode of directing, a single doctrine of aspects, and a single procedure for calculating length of life. But there were also simple differences of opinion, one instance being the correct calculation of the so-called Part of Fortune. According to Ptolemy's well-known definition, this is a point always as far removed from the ascendant as the moon is from the sun, so that it becomes, as it were, a 'lunar ascendant' (σεληνιακὸς ὠροσκόπος).²⁹ The traditional computation of this distance by degrees of ecliptical longitude did not satisfy Placidus. 'I willingly confess', he wrote, 'that, with regard to the ☉ [Part of Fortune], I have laboured a long time, and have not been able hitherto to find any truth in it'.³⁰ Convinced by his admiration for Ptolemy that the truth must nevertheless be there to find, he sought to reinterpret the definition found in the *Tetrabiblos*.

Placidus' first attempt at finding an alternative Part was to project its position not along the ecliptic, but along the Moon's apparent orbit through the zodiac. He abandoned this model, however, to embrace the one proposed by Adriano Negusanti of Fano, Italy (d. 1685), who wanted the Part to be projected along the Moon's circle of declination. This mode of calculation results in the Part generally occupying a point in

²⁷ Oxley, *Planispheres*, p. 198.

²⁸ Oxley gives the King's birth data as 21 August, 1765, at 3:54 a.m., the right ascension of the midheaven being 29°15' and the ascendant 17°28' of Leo. The accident took place on 21 January, 1793.

²⁹ *Tetrabiblos* III.11.

³⁰ Cooper, *Primum Mobile*, p. 308. James Wilson, in *A Complete Dictionary of Astrology* (London: William Hughes), pp. 305 f., rejecting the concept of the Part entirely, saw in this statement a strong proof of astrology: '[Placidus] could find truth in the planetary configurations, because their effects are founded on the immutable laws of nature, but when he came to investigate the effects of the ☉ he could "find no truth in it," because there was none.'

space distant not only from the ecliptic, but from the zodiac as a whole; and followers of Placidus therefore generally refused to assign any zodiacal position to it.³¹

In his early writings, Worsdale championed this doctrine of the Part of Fortune ‘calculated according to the Rules of the learned PTOLEMY, so amply laid down by that immortal Master of the predictive Science, by giving it the same Latitude, and Declination as the Moon’.³² Three decades later, however, he wrote: ‘Nothing can be more absurd than allowing [the Part of Fortune] to claim the same Latitude and Declination as the Moon.’ Instead, Worsdale now advocated a third method of calculating the Part of Fortune *in mundo*, apparently devised by himself.³³ Oxley, on the other hand, affirms that Placidus alone had understood Ptolemy’s intentions, but adds:

It has hitherto been generally believed, that if the Part of Fortune was found according to its Mundane Position, that its place in the Zodiac could not be known, this I have heard asserted by very expert artists, but I have here shown the method, by which this can be done with very great exactness.³⁴

This desire to assign every point a place in the zodiac is another example of the streamlining tendency.

³¹ Being located outside of the zodiac, the Placidian Part of Fortune cannot receive any zodiacal aspects; and as it is not carried across the sky by the diurnal motion, it is equally unable to form any aspects *in mundo*, and therefore restricted to the passive role of receiving such aspects from other planets. The point that, although an artificial semi-arc may be assigned to the Placidian Part of Fortune from its horizontal and meridian distance in order to determine its house position, the Part does not in fact describe such an arc by diurnal motion, was lost on some later astrologers; cf. Sepharial (pseud.), *Directional Astrology* (London: William Rider & Son), pp. 81 f.

³² Worsdale, *Astrology*, pp. 212 f. Placidus’ method will in fact give the Part the same declination as the moon but not the same latitude. Although Worsdale was of course mistaken in ascribing the doctrine to Ptolemy, perhaps the most surprising part of his statement is the use of the word ‘amply’. As noted by William Lilly in *Christian Astrology* (London: John Macock), p. 553, ‘Ptolomey [...] in all his writings was extream short’.

³³ See Worsdale, *Philosophy*, pp. 16 ff., 128 ff. The method consists in computing the oblique ascensions or descensions of the sun and moon under their own poles and projecting the difference from the eastern horizon along the celestial equator. The point reached is the oblique ascension or descension of the Part of Fortune, which is then reassigned to the ecliptic and given the right ascension and declination of its ecliptical degree, despite Worsdale’s assertion that it ‘can only be directed in Mundo’.

³⁴ Oxley, *Planispheres*, p. 160. Oxley appears to have misunderstood the common objection. Although it is certainly possible to project the place of any celestial object, real or imagined, onto the ecliptic, the Placidian Part of Fortune will nevertheless remain an extra-zodiacal point in the great majority of cases.

Finally, certain changes made to the Placidean system were the result of misunderstanding. Placidus had advocated the method of proportional semi-arcs for house division as well as for directions. As the calculations were cumbersome and time-consuming, he also published tables which could be used to approximate the semi-arc system by means of poles and circles of position – concepts familiar to astrologers of his day.³⁵ By frequently repeated misrepresentations, this method came to be accepted by many as the true Placidean system, and was used exclusively by both Worsdale and Oxley.³⁶ Other misconceptions with more far-reaching consequences include the gradual reinterpretation of the concept of ‘converse’ directions, a topic which will require a separate investigation and to which I hope to return soon.

Thus we see that the second wave of Placidean teachings in Britain, following the hiatus that spanned most of the eighteenth century, was characterized by a tendency towards simple and uniform principles. The lack of a continuous tradition inevitably led to some misunderstandings of astrological doctrine, but also made it possible to dislodge astrological techniques from theoretical frameworks no longer felt to be relevant. The works of Worsdale and Oxley, and of their junior contemporaries such as ‘Raphael’ (Robert Cross Smith, 1795 – 1832) and ‘Zadkiel’ (Richard James Morrison, 1795 – 1874), confirmed this simplified version of Placidus’ system as the standard of modern astrology – a transitional stage preparatory to the Theosophical reinvention of the art at the end of the nineteenth century.

³⁵ A circle of position is a pseudo-horizon passing through a celestial body, the zenith of this horizon being known as the pole of the body in question.

³⁶ Among the more well-known proponents of the method in the 19th and 20th centuries were R. J. Morrison (Zadkiel I), W. R. Old (Sepharial) and E. C. Kühr.

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