

Reviews of Books

History, Prophecy and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420. By Laura Ackerman Smoller. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1994. xii + 233 pp. £26.50. ISBN 0 691 08788 1.

Pierre d'Ailly (Petrus de Alliaco) was born in Compiègne in 1350 or 1351. He studied at the College of Navarre of the University of Paris, receiving his Doctorate of Theology in 1381. Between 1384 and 1389, he was the Grand Master of Navarre and, in 1389, he was elected as Chancellor of the University of Paris. He left the university 1395, having been awarded the bishopric of Le Puy. In 1396, he became bishop of Noyon; in 1397, he was appointed the bishop of Cambrai; and, in 1411, he was named Cardinal by the schismatic 'anti-Pope' John XXIII. D'Ailly is best remembered by church historians for the pivotal role he played as papal legate towards the resolution of the Great Schism at the Council of Constance in 1414. In his own day and for immediately successive generations, however, much of his fame rested upon the wide diffusion of an enormous body of scholarly writings: his commentaries on Aristotle's *De anima* and *Meteorologica*, his *Quaestiones* on Joannes de Sacrobosco's *De sphaera* and his series of essays, written primarily on themes relating to geography and astronomy, collectively known as the *Imago mundi*. Whereas modern historians are unanimous in their praise of d'Ailly as a skilled politician, those who have focused on his writings have been less than kind, citing him as lacking in originality, as a mediocre encyclopaedist or, in the worst instance, as a barely competent plagiarist. They have soundly criticized his extensive writings on calendar reform and, in particular, have scorned his clear advocacy of the pseudo-science of astrology in his attempts to trace concordances between astronomical and theological events.

Laura Ackerman Smoller's book is a most welcome reversal of this jaundiced view of d'Ailly's writings. Supported by a number of arguments which are both learned and common-sensical, Smoller offers the very simple premise that our understanding of d'Ailly is flawed because we have failed to ask the right questions. We have failed to see him as a man of his times and failed to appreciate the effect that a painful upheaval, such as the Great Schism, might have on an intelligent man whose life was devoted to the sanctity of the Church. Smoller reminds us that the Great Schism (1378-1414) was seen by many of d'Ailly's generation as a clear signal of the approaching Antichrist and the first stage of an imminent Apocalypse. Arnold of Villanova, for example, had preached that the Antichrist was due to appear in the year 1378 and Saint Vincent Ferrer claimed in 1404 that the recent surge of false miracles was certainly an indication that the End was nigh. As early as 1380, d'Ailly seems to have shared this view, with his writings indicating that he felt the Antichrist might come with the turn of the century. The Schism itself was the immediate preamble to the Antichrist ('ante diem domini assertit futuram esse quamdam dissessionem sive divisionem ecclesie dei immediate preambulum antichristi': cited by Smoller, p. 190. n. 75). By 1403, however, d'Ailly had altered his doom-laden beliefs and began to argue that disaster could be averted if the Church were able to heal itself. With the authority of the Church so greatly weakened by the Schism and the heretical teachings of itinerant preachers, he felt a

need to look elsewhere for a sign confirming that the End was not at hand in order to strengthen the resolve to end the current crisis. Between 1410 and 1414, d'Ailly turned to astrology (or 'natural theology' as he called it) searching for such a solution. In particular, he turned to Albumasar's (Abû Mas'har) *De magnis conjunctionibus* and Roger Bacon's *Opus maius*, where he found detailed descriptions of the astrological tenet of Great Conjunctions, the belief that all great moments in history are and were, in some way, presaged by an apparent conjunction or coming-together of the outer planets (Jupiter and Saturn) in the sky. Smoller deftly and convincingly traces d'Ailly's shift from apocalyptic defeatism to cautious optimism, demonstrating how his concentration on calendar reform (in both the *Vigintiloquium de concordantia astronomice veritatis cum theologia* and the *Concordantia astronomie cum hystorica narratione* of 1414) can be seen as part of a concerted effort to convince himself and his fellow councillors at both the Council of Pisa (1409) and the Council of Constance (1414) that there was still hope for mankind – d'Ailly's astronomical calculations having shown that the Antichrist was not due until 1789, at least.

Smoller's central premise is convincing and this important book not only offers new insights into the mind and personality of Pierre d'Ailly, but also provides an intriguing model of (using her own words) 'why a person would become involved with astrology . . . [and] how one would go about gaining the necessary knowledge' (p. 6). The only criticisms one might have are minor. Definite traces of this book's origin as a doctoral thesis remain in both the tone and in the apparent need to state and restate a number of basic arguments. One also felt slightly disappointed that certain larger issues were not addressed. In setting up the argument that d'Ailly's prime concern was to help heal the Schism by pointing out that an Apocalypse was astrologically impossible, Smoller fails to provide any sense of how d'Ailly's peers reacted to the *Vigintiloquium* and the *Concordantia*. Did his astrological sermons and eschatological theses actually play any role in the healing of the Great Schism? Smoller records the fact that d'Ailly wrote to John XXIII to explain the bases of his new-found hope and that he corresponded with Henry of Hesse, who had also changed his mind about the impending End, arguing that a Church restored would help avert disaster. But is there any evidence that people took any notice of what d'Ailly said or wrote about the stars? Furthermore, does the successful conclusion of the Council of Constance have any bearing on the fact that d'Ailly was one of the few writers who supported a belief in astrology who managed to escape censure during the 1494 Parisian trial of Simon de Phares? To this end, the book raises as many questions as it answers. Another feature of the book which might be welcomed by some is Smoller's valiant attempt to synthesize the rudiments of astrological doctrine and vocabulary into a thirteen-page primer. Unfortunately, it seems to be an impossible and necessarily thankless task whose rationale is akin to appending a basic grammar and philosophy textbook on to the front of every tome of French verse. One pines for the day when this practice can be abandoned. Finally – a footnote – to state that the oft-repeated phrase of 'Sapiens dominatur astris' was 'wrongly attributed to Ptolemy' (p. 151 n. 35) is less helpful than pointing out that it can be traced to an extremely influential astrological text known as the *Centiloquium*, which was erroneously but consistently attributed to Ptolemy from late Antiquity well into the eighteenth century. Even Aquinas cites the phrase as 'ut Ptolomaeus dicit in centiloquio' at least eight times in his collected writings.