

FIELD OF VIEW

“...things in heaven and earth...”

Ahead of 21 December, Jane Green looks at literary conjunctions across the ages



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Will this month's Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn on the 21st improve your love life, or your career? Will there be thunderbolts and lightning and other very, very frightening things? Does its apparition herald a new messiah or monarch? War, flood, famine, plague and pestilence? Like astronomers – and astrologers – of centuries past, feel free to associate your own pattern of events to this super-close alignment.

Celestial alignments have excited, inspired, 'influenced' and frightened humanity throughout history. This 'conjunctionitis', as I call it, has resulted in predictions and interpretations in literature too.

Aristotle, in his work *On the Causes of the Properties of the Elements*, comforted readers by assuring them that Jupiter and Saturn conjunctions caused "mortality of races" and "depopulation of kingdoms".

Later, Arab astrologer Albumasar wrote in his *De magnis conjunctionibus* (886) of three conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter: the 'great one', a 'greater' and 'the greatest', each occurring over longer epochs respectively. For centuries this influenced Christians,

among them the scholastic thinker Roger Bacon, who took up the conjunction cudgel in his *Opus Majus*.

In the Middle Ages, Italian poet and astrology sceptic Dante Alighieri acknowledged a preoccupation with the configuration of stars and earthly events below. He was anticipating a Messiah to purge Christianity, the religious establishment, of its evils. In the latter part of his *Purgatorio* (XX.13-15 and XXXIII.40-45) he made a passing reference to a conjunction. But it was his son, Piero, who imagined that this was a prophetic reference to the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter (along with Mars) in 1345, 24 years after Dante's death in 1321. Again, feel free to interpret at will!

And staying with Will, the great bard himself, Shakespeare, employed numerous astrological, nay, astronomical references in his works, and these also included a few planetary conjunctions. In *Henry IV, Part II*, Prince Hal proclaims, "Saturn and Venus this year in conjunction! What says th'almanac to that?" But this celestial observation was somewhat carnal in nature: a metaphor for Falstaff kissing a prostitute with the unfortunate moniker Doll Tearsheet!

Shakespeare's characters often professed undying love when planets 'cosied up' in the zodiacal belt: Claudius for Gertrude in *Hamlet*, whose love was "so conjunctive to my life and soul"; Queen Margaret for Suffolk in *Henry VI, Part II*, his "lovely face" ruling "like a wandering planet" over her. Both were references to planetary conjunctions. We can only imagine the literary fireworks ignited when Jupiter and Saturn 'kiss' on 21 December 2021!

Perhaps this time the gas giants' 'meeting' will be more agrarian in nature, as penned by WB Yeats in his poem *Supernatural Songs*. "If Jupiter and Saturn meet, What a crop of mummy wheat! The sword's a cross; thereon He died. On breast of Mars the Goddess sighed." Saturn, with his sickle, is often portrayed as the grim reaper; conversely, Jupiter embodies fruitfulness and generosity – yin and yang, harvest and growth, mummery or mumbo jumbo? You decide!

But however bad your 'conjunctionitis', whatever known or unknown influences emanate from the sky, be sure to step outside later this month and try to catch the historic Great Conjunction for yourself this winter solstice. 🌌