

Planetary Symbolism and Medieval Literature

Currently the field of astrology is in a time of self-reflection and many astrologers are reviewing the foundations, applications, and values implicit in their work. This article argues for a fully multidimensional focus of astrological symbolism. Many good examples of the varieties of astrological application are found in some of the best literature of the medieval era. Here I will focus on Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and also look at features of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Reconsidering Archetypes

A recent issue of *TMA* (Feb/Mar 2011) entitled *Archetypal Roots of Astrology* prompted me to think about astrological symbolism and the concept of archetypes. Many modern astrologers consider the symbol systems of astrology, particularly the planets, to be archetypes, universals of our experience.

The distant roots of archetypal astrology can be found in the Platonic tradition. According to the later Platonic tradition, independently standing universals (or "Ideas") accounted for certain knowledge and ethical norms within a hierarchical vision of reality. Later this vision informed Christianity and the medieval vision of the universe.

In our modern era archetypes have been rendered along the lines of human psychology. This should come as no surprise, since its modern application stems from psychologist Carl Jung and his followers. In this view, archetypes are universal motifs of human development that reside in the collective unconscious. They manifest as personal issues in an individual's life and in a culture's politics, art, and stories or myths.

In a desire to apply modern psychology to astrology, many modern astrologers have been drawn to the idea of archetypes. The four elements and the signs of the zodiac are sometimes cast as archetypes but mostly it is the astrological planets that are designated as archetypes.

Although a popular concept among many astrologers, there are some problems with it. One difficulty that Jung did not have to face is philosophical, or should I say, metaphysical: what is the role of astrological archetypes in bringing together the sky's planets and their motions

with human beings and their motions? Attempts to solve this problem using “new science” or holistic spirituality are in their infancy. The more urgent problem, however, is that archetypal astrologers have reduced astrological symbolism to an psychological application.

If astrology’s planetary symbols are confined to psychological archetypes, work with clients is confined to discussion of personality characteristics and difficulties. What is then sacrificed is the *lived world* of the client, with his or her actual relationships, family, job or – these days – lack of one. We have also sacrificed the divinatory aspect of astrology embodied in the tradition of horary and much event astrology. Even mundane or historical astrology suffers: if astrological symbolism is applied to vicissitudes of *Zeitgeist* rather than the changing conditions of peoples’ lives, we get a rarefied version both of history and of astrology’s range of application. When we have lost the multidimensional quality of astrological symbolism, astrology has lost much of its power.

I propose to take a step back and look at the range of astrological symbolism that is possible for us. We find help in a surprising place, on the shelves of any good bookstore.

Why Medieval Literature?

Why literature? Literature, like astrology, employs symbols, metaphors, and analogies to convey meaning. An astrologer applies astrological conditions to different life situations and thus uses symbolism to present the meaning and outcome of a life situation to a client. Although astrology’s techniques are based on a particular astronomical approach, the art of astrology is more like that of a poet or dramatist than a scientist.

Why medieval? This was time when most people accepted astrological causation and thought of the world astrologically. This is not to say that everybody loved the work of astrologers, and there was plenty of condemnation of the astrologer’s art – especially by Dante. Yet astrological symbolism was pervasive in much of the art and literature of that time. This combination of brilliant writing and an astrological outlook should be a valuable resource for astrologers. This article is hopefully a step in that direction.

Dante's Grand Poem



One of the finest large-scale works of literature ever, Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an allegory about this earthly life in the form of the Christian afterlife. An intensely personal poem, it depicts one man's spiritual journey from despair and confusion toward reconciliation and purpose. In its one hundred cantos, the pilgrim Dante tours Hell, Purgatory, and then Paradise, encountering various characters in all three realms. There is much astrology in the *Divine Comedy* and I have written about it extensively elsewhere¹

Dante uses the varied descriptions of planets throughout the *Divine Comedy*. In the *Inferno* we are presented astrology's planets in their *elemental modes*. In the *Purgatorio* the planets' significance is *psychological*: the seven layers of Purgatory's mountain, purging the Seven Cardinal Sins that correspond to astrology's seven classical planets. The physical planets reside in Heaven, and in the *Paradiso* we find various classes of the redeemed among the various planetary spheres. Here we find *spiritual* applications of planetary symbolism.

Let's look at Mars and Saturn where we find elemental, psychological, and spiritual symbolism in the three regions of the afterlife.

In the Seventh Circle of Hell are the various classes of the violent; below in the Eighth and Ninth Circles are regions for different kinds of fraud and treachery. These regions are imagined from the symbolism of the astrological malefics Mars and Saturn. In the Seventh Circle we find bare lifeless gnarled trees and desert sands with flames descending with a red river of blood flowing through this place. Further below in the Eighth Circle we are in a realm of Saturn providing increasingly claustrophobic confinements for the fraudulent, and then utter cold at the very bottom where murderous traitors – cast as killers without compassion – are trapped in a lake of ice.

In Purgatory, the place of purification and preparation for Heaven, each of the Seven Cardinal Sins are purified. Mars corresponds to the sin of anger and Saturn to sloth. On Purgatory's Mountain the ledge to purify anger is permeated with by a thick acrid smoke that

renders all without sight; the penitents upon Saturn's ledge are in a continual sprint around a wide track.

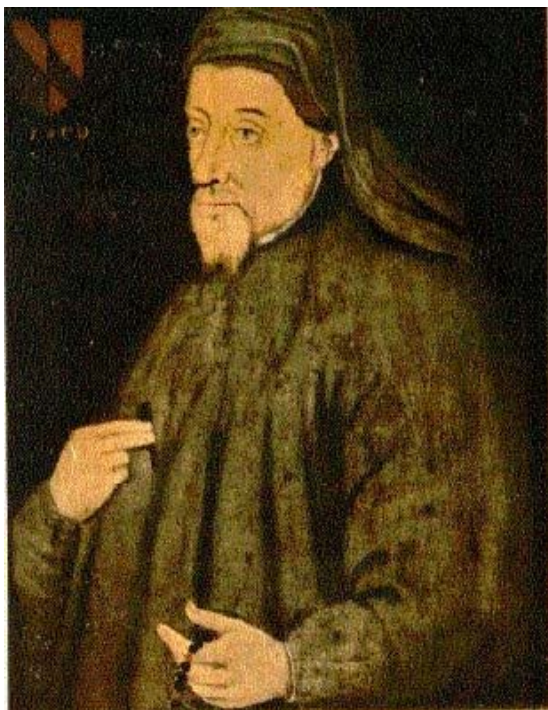
These planetary correspondences become clearer in the *Paradiso*. In Heaven knowledge and a fierce sense of purpose replace Purgatory's thick blinded angry Mars. The saved souls there are crusaders and martyrs, those who perpetrated or suffered violence for the cause of God, and they are sparks of light on a great cross.

In Heaven the contemplative life has replaced the spiritual inertia of Saturn's slothful presence in Purgatory. The Sphere of Saturn is a quiet austere place where the pilgrim converses with an important monastic reformer from the eleventh century and the founder of Christian monasticism from the sixth century. Although the Sphere of Saturn is the uppermost of the planetary spheres there is heaviness in this place.

Dante's work displays a strong varied use of astrological symbolism that gives a fuller range of meanings to astrology's planets. Modern astrologers may focus on situational, psychological, or spiritual features of planetary symbolism, but Dante uses all of them together to illustrate the multi-level nature of the medieval universe.

Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales*

The *Canterbury Tales* consist of introductions and stories by people on a pilgrimage to Canterbury to view the remains of the martyr Thomas of Beckett. Here we are given many different characters and perspectives.



Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is incomplete in many ways. At the time of the poet's death in 1400, some tales were not finished nor did he leave behind a sequence for the tales. But the *Canterbury Tales* is incomplete in a more radical and perhaps intentional way: its world is ambiguous and it is unclear what is serious and what is ironic, whether a character or tale is a caricature or a sympathetic presentation.

I will confine myself to planetary symbolism from the Knight's Tale and the Prologue and Tale from the Wife of Bath. They contrast strongly with one another: the Knight's Tale looks backward toward medieval epic and romance; the Wife of Bath is a vivid and very modern character portrait. While the epic-like Knight's Tale is a sober reflection on the vicissitudes of Fortune and the role of Providence; our interest in the Wife of Bath is more psychological. In the Knight's Tale Venus and Mars are contrasted and intertwined and we get an interesting depiction of the Moon. The lengthy introduction by the Wife of Bath is ribald and penetrating, and here Mars and Venus come together in one person – the Wife herself.

The Knight and his Tale

The Knight's Tale is high-minded and full of noble words and gestures of courtesy that may seem quaint to the modern reader. Yet the Knight's Tale does not shrink from the gruesome possibilities of human life. Modern readers may also find the knight's depiction of women to be quite shallow. Chaucer will counter these limiting qualities by other presentations tales, including the Wife of Bath who we will discuss below. Nonetheless, the Knight's Tale is a great story and is full of astrological symbolism. In Chaucer's day the Knight's Tale was one of his most popular Canterbury Tales.

The Knight's Tale is set in ancient Greece and brings together astrological symbolism and motifs from ancient Olympian mythology. Many modern astrologers think of both astrological planets and Olympian motifs together indicating the archetypal natures of astrology's planets, including those discovered in modern times. An early version of this melding may be found here in Chaucer's tales.

Mars and Venus are seen as contrasting but intersecting cosmic principles: the Knight's Tale interfuses warfare, with all its senseless butchery, and love as lofty but maddening and powerful. The story itself concerns two noble but imprisoned cousins from Thebes.

Arcite is the nature of Mars; Palamon is the nature of Venus. When you first meet Arcite and Palamon they



are both found barely alive in a heap of dead bodies of defeated soldiers. They are then imprisoned for life by the victorious Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Languishing a long time in a prison tower, Palamon first glimpses the fair Emily from the window and first thinks she is the goddess Venus and declares his love for her. Arcite also sees Emily and also swears eternal devotion to her and the two men quarrel.

Sometime later, Arcite becomes free on the condition that he does not return to Athens on pain of death. Back home in Thebes, deprived of the sight of the fair Emily, he becomes ill with the dark choler (associated with Saturn) until the god Mercury tells him to return to Athens. In disguise, Arcite finds work as a laborer and eventually becomes the Duke's knight and a retainer in Emily's household. Finally, years after Arcite's release, Palamon escapes from jail in the dead of night. Palamon flees Athens and is hiding at dawn in a grove outside the city.

On this Friday morning (Friday being the day of Venus), "by aventure (closer to our word 'accident') or destiny", Palamon overhears a nearby knight exclaim how he is mortally wounded by Emily's eyes – it is heartsick Arcite! Palamon angrily jumps out of the bushes and proclaims that only he, Palamon, can love Emily. Countering this Venus-like protest from Palamon, Arcite pulls out his sword and, in Mars fashions, threatens to kill him. Arcite proposes that they fight to the death next morning and Palamon agrees.

The following day -- Saturday and thus governed by the planet Saturn -- the two men meet for battle. They fight all day but accident or destiny closes in again. Riding in a hunt is Duke Theseus with his wife Hippolyta and sister-in-law Emily and others, and they happen onto the same grove. Theseus stops the fight. When Palamon tells Theseus and the women who they are, the angry Duke, invoking Mars, decrees that they both be executed immediately. Suddenly he is interrupted by the weeping of the women who beg for mercy for them. Theseus calms down, remembers his own youthful follies of love, and decides that in one year Palamon and Arcite will return with a hundred fellow knights each to have a tournament battle – and whoever is judged the winner will marry Emily.

The World Amphitheatre

What follows is a feast of the varied modes of planetary symbolism. It also follows a convention of epic literature toward excessive articulation that the poet follows quite deliberately. Here Chaucer moves beyond individual psychology into universal themes of human existence, and for the astrologer reader they merit close examination.

In the intervening year Theseus has built a gigantic and lavish amphitheater for the contest. A mile around and sixty paces high, this coliseum seems vast like the world itself. This structure also seems shaped like the Wheel of Fortune whose continuous rotations provide for the temporary ups and downs of our lives. Around the great stadium Duke Theseus has built temples for Venus at the East gate, Mars at the West, Moon/Diana at the North, and the South gate is for him and his entourage.

The temple of Venus in the East, cast in white, is not an idealization of Venus the Goddess of love but is multidimensional and amoral and ironic. All around are paintings and carvings: wailing and sighing people who cannot sleep who are lovers in the agony of desire, and portraits of these figures wearing golden garlands:

Plesaunce and Hope, Desir, Foolhardynesse,
Beautee and Youthe, Bauderie, Richesse,
Charmes and Force, Lesynges [deceit], Flaterye,
Despense [expenditures], Bisynesse, and Jalousye. ²

Also depicted are instruments of music and feasting, singing and dancing, clothing and adornment. There is a pleasure garden and wall paintings of famous heroes and their follies of love. Venus, the all-powerful goddess of love, spins the world as she likes.

The goddess herself is depicted naked, floating in a large sea, half-covered with waves. She holds a stringed instrument in one hand, on her head is a garland of roses, and doves fly above. Cupid stands just below with his arrow.

In the West is the temple of Mars and its description is famous for its extreme expression. The overall color of the temple is red, of course. Its paintings include a miserable forest with gnarled knotty trees and hideous bushes,³ and a painting of a temple made of burnished steel with doors of adamantine rock. Accompanying dark portraits illustrate the qualities of felony, fear, warfare, war, bad luck, and madness. Some scenes depicted are difficult to behold, including an act of suicide through putting a nail through one's head, and a

boar devouring an infant in its cradle. There are also portraits of Mars-like professions: a (scalded) cook, a barber, a butcher, and a blacksmith.

The god Mars is on a chariot looking grim and cold. He is surrounded by two Mars-like geomantic figures. A wolf is at Mars' feet, looking at the remains of a person the wolf had just devoured.

In the North is the temple of the goddess Diana, the goddess affiliated with the Moon. Her temple is rendered with less detail but with many interesting features. Diana was the chaste goddess of hunting who can be quite vindictive when displeased. Depicted are various transformations – Callisto who was changed into the stars Ursa Major, Daphne who was turned into a tree, and Actaeon who, when he was caught spying on the naked goddess bathing, was changed into a deer and devoured by his hunting dogs. The goddess herself is clothed in green and has hunting dogs at her feet; a nearly full Moon is below. Her gaze is toward the realm of Pluto, the Underworld.

Where is the lunar symbolism here? Certainly this is not the psychologically-rendered Moon of modern astrology. There are two features I would like to mention. One is the quality of wildness: the concept of hunt is rich in meaning as a journey through darkness and the untamed nature of the forest. The second consideration is that of Diana's chastity – this is not virginity in the sense of sexual purity but of being unaffiliated with a man by marriage or any other formal (i.e. subordinate) relationship. In this sense "chastity" is akin to being ungoverned and carries the possibility of its own wildness. This is the Moon as the luminary of the night.

The South gate is for Duke Theseus and his entourage, including his wife Hippolyta and his sister-in law Emily. Throughout the Knight's Tale, the Duke embodies the world's ordered governance and everybody in the Tale takes their orders from him. In this way he is like astrology's Sun, but he is also the god Saturn who as we will soon see is calling the shots from Olympus. (If you consider the amphitheater's South gate to be Saturn, the four gates of the four directions you arrive through their domicile lords at the rulers of the cardinal points of the zodiac, although Aries and Libra would be reversed.)

Supplications to the Deities

At the appointed time the two knights return to Athens with their one hundred knights each. Chaucer makes use of planetary days and hours to depict the always-turning Wheel of Fortune as a modern astrologer might use an individual's transits to depict a person's changing life circumstances.

In the third hour before dawn in Monday – in the hour of Venus – Palamon visits the temple of Venus to make supplications and sacrifices. Palamon is not concerned with the winner or loser of this fight, or any share of fame or glory, but only that the goddess give him his love Emily. The statue shakes and makes a sign, meaning to Palamon that she gives consent to his desire.

In the hour of sunrise on Monday – the Moon's day and hour -- Emily herself makes supplications and offerings to the Goddess Diana. Emily discloses her wish to know no man and remain devoted to the goddess Diana. She asks the goddess to help Palamon and Arcite get over their love for her. However, the answer from the goddess is that Emily will marry one of these men, a decree that Emily accepts.

In the first Mars hour of Monday, (the fourth hour) Arcite visits the temple of Mars to make his offerings and supplications. Arcite wants to *win Emily*; he will do the work, the god Mars will get the glory and praise. He asks that he win the battle the next day and the statue answers with a dim murmur that says "Victory!"

The scene changes: now we are among the Gods above. Venus is upset that Mars has promised Arcite victory. Saturn, however, with the widest circle of power and being particularly difficult in the sign Leo, promises that although Arcite will have his victory, Palamon will marry Emily in the end.

Turning Fortune's Wheel

Planetary days and hours continue to depict the ups and downs of fortune. On Tuesday morning – the day of Mars -- Palamon and his knights enter from the East, under the temple of Venus; Arcite and his men enter from the West under the temple of Mars. The two sides fight vigorously all day but at the end of the day Palamon is defeated and must retire from the field. Theseus proclaims Arcite victorious and the winner of Emily.

However, at sunset on Tuesdays the planetary hour belongs to Saturn and the god takes command. While Arcite is taking his victory lap, a Fury bursts from the ground and startles Arcite's horse, the knight falls and Arcite receives an injury to his head. For the next several days Arcite is further sickened by swellings and blockages (Saturn afflictions) throughout the body, and in a few days he dies. Palamon and Emily are especially heartbroken by Arcite's death. The funeral for the fallen knight is grand and solemn and Palamon returns to Thebes.

Several years later the matter at hand is not war (Mars) but peace (Venus). Theseus desires to make a stronger alliance with Thebes. He summons Palamon back to Athens and Emily to court and they meet once again. Theseus decrees that to cement further ties between Athens and Thebes and "to maken a vertu of necessitee", Emily and Palamon will wed. This came about and the two lived happily ever after.

Now we will move far from the cosmic concern and symbolism of the Knight's Tale into the character and personality and the Wife of Bath.

The Wife of Bath: A Medieval Feminist? Not really.

By now it's good to hear from a woman even if it's from a male poet. The Wife of Bath is one of literature's most vivid and enigmatic creations. Here astrology's planetary symbols are about the physiognomy, behavior, and inner being of an individual. In this way the Wife of Bath is a creation that would be familiar to the modern reader.



In the General Prologue we are introduced to her wide and overflowing head gear, her red complexion and red stockings, the fact that she had already been married five times, that her teeth have a gap in them, and that she is a seasoned veteran of pilgrimages. She overdresses and her physical appearance is overdone. Her love of finery, of sociability and gossip, and especially her penchant for love and sex are all Venusian.

Her prologue is over eight hundred lines of rambling, vivid, and occasionally raunchy discourse, and is all about

her. The Wife's depictions of the battles of the sexes seem true even to this day, but there also seems to be something shallow and sad about her.

Sparing the reader the complexities of Middle English, here are the lines in translation that speak of an astrological chart for her.

I'm truly born of Venus, most certainly,
 In all my feelings, but my heart belongs to Mars.
 Venus gave me desire, and all the parts
 I needed, but it was Mars that made me daring.
 My astral ascendant was Taurus, with Mars sharing
 The sky. Alas, alas! that love should be sinful.
 I followed the path my stars placed me in,
 I had no choice but to be what I have been.
 I never was good at holding back: my chamber
 Of Venus was open to any man who was able.
 And yet, remember, I wear Mars on my face
 And also in another private place.⁴

She has Taurus rising and Venus is the lady of the Ascendant since Venus governs Taurus – but Mars is in her First House.

Further on, when comparing herself to her last husband the 20-year old Jannkin, she notes a fundamental antithesis between his profession – being a “clerk” or scholar -- and women in general: Mercury favors wisdom and loves science and Venus wants a good time. Mercury tends to be a scold to Venus. She notes that these two planets' conditions of essential dignity: where Venus is exalted Mercury is fallen (Pisces) and where Mercury is exalted Venus is fallen (Virgo).⁵ Since the Wife of Bath seems solely occupied with talking about herself, perhaps she has Venus in Pisces ruling her Taurus Ascendant.

Is the Wife of Bath a woman of Venus corrupted by Mars? Ordinarily a Venus-like physical form would be quite attractive and pleasing, yet her complexion is red and her face bears the mark of Mars: neither feature would beautify her in the poet's eyes. She is sociable and voluble but not charming; she loves people and company but her presence is a bit strong. For her, sex is an intrinsic delight and also a weapon – when young she would exhaust her old husbands demanding their fulfillment of the “marriage vow”. At other times she would

withhold sex to assert herself with a husband. She also boasted of her many ways to attract men.

Toward the end of her prologue she talks at length about her fight with her last husband who had been reading and discussing his favorite book, a collection of tales of “wicked wyves.” She angrily tears some pages out, he hits her and she loses consciousness. When she comes to, Jannkin apologizes and cedes to her “mastery” and “sovereignty” in their marriage. At her request he burns the book and they live happily ever after. One must wonder, having heard all this, whether any sane person would want this particular woman to have “mastery” and “sovereignty.”

Finally she begins her Tale that is more focused and is only half the length of her monologue. The Wife of Bath seems to change as she tells a story that is about Mars being tamed by Venus. A Knight has raped a woman; instead of being sentenced to death, the queen sends him on a yearlong journey to find out what it is that women want. Finally he meets an ugly old hag who promises to tell the right answer if she may have one wish. The Knight, desperate for his life, agrees and they approach the queen.

What do women want? They want mastery and sovereignty of their lives, over their marriages: they want to make their own choices. Indeed this turns out to be the right answer and the knight may keep his life – but now he must marry the ugly old woman.

In bed on their wedding night he’s completely depressed. When he tells her why, she responds with a learned discourse on the true meaning of virtue and nobility that remain some of Chaucer’s most moving lines. She then gives him a choice – she can become beautiful but she may not be faithful (a favorite motif in the *Canterbury Tales*) or she remain as she is and will always be most loving. Finally the knight gets it right – “you decide, my lady”, he says. When he pulls back the curtain the woman is now young and beautiful – and loving, too. They live together happily ever after as man and wife.

Is this just an old woman’s fantasy about making herself young and beautiful – and loving – again? Does Chaucer also depict the redemptive power of the imagination, the ennobling of the mind and pen that could fashion a story like this? Or is it the redemptive power of Venus that has made the Wife of Bath – in the guise of the hag – beautiful again?

While the Wife of Bath tells her tale she has become Venus and Venus has attained mastery and sovereignty over Mars, represented by the shallow and lusty knight.

But Chaucer will not let well enough alone. Here's how the Wife of Bath concludes her Tale: may Jesus Christ send us husbands that are meek, young, and fresh in bed, that we wives will outlive them, but may Jesus shorten the lives of those men who will not be governed by their wives, and to the old angry men who are miserly with their wives, may God send them a pestilence!⁶ The Wife of Bath has re-emerged from her Venus-like fantasy; Mars has now reasserted himself once again and her sweet story ends bitterly.

We have hardly touched upon the astrological possibilities contained in these two major literary works by Dante and Chaucer. The poets' uses of planetary symbolism can educate, entertain, and inspire the modern astrologer. These two medieval works also provide us with greater understanding of astrology's development, but most especially expose us to a diversity of astrological symbolism.

Recommended Reading:

For Dante one could begin with Mark Musa's translations: *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, *Paradise*, 1986: New York, Penguin. For greater depth and for the original Italian text facing the translation and for expert commentary, I recommend Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez: *Inferno* (1996), *Purgatorio* (2003), and *Paradiso* (2010). New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press. Recommended also is Robert and Jean Hollander: *Inferno* (2000), *Purgatorio* (2003), *Paradiso* (2007) New York: Doubleday.

For Chaucer: Benson, L. (ed.) *The Riverside Chaucer, Third Edition* (1987) Boston: Houghton Mifflin. This is the standard text for current Chaucer studies and contains the Middle English version of Chaucer's poem. There are several versions of *The Canterbury Tales* in modern English: the one used here was translated by Burton Raffel (2008) New York, Modern Library.

For a systematic study of astrology in *The Canterbury Tales*, I have used Curry, Walter. *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*. (revised edition 1960). New York, Barnes and Noble

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¹ *Between Fortune and Providence: Astrology and the Universe in Dante's Divine Comedy*. Projected publication 2012, Wessex Astrologer.

² RC (*The Riverside Chaucer*) 1925-1929; BR (Burton Raffel translation) 1060-1064

³ Its source is clearly *Inferno* 13 and Dante's depiction of the region of Hell for those who have killed themselves.

⁴ RC and BR 609-620

⁵ RC and BR 697-710

⁶ RC 1258-1264; BR 397-403