

Untying the Knots of the Twelve Letter Alphabet

by Joseph Crane

The Twelve Letter Alphabet, sometimes called the twelve "Archetypes," underlies much of the presentation of planets, signs, and houses in modern Western astrology. In my view, this has led to the distortion of much of astrology's fundamental symbolism. Many other astrologers have come to the same conclusion, yet this system persists.

This article, the result of many years of frustration with the conventional presentation of astrology, has as its goal that astrologers question their explicit and implicit use of the Twelve Letter Alphabet. A case can be made for putting this system away forever, and I attempt to make that case here. For newer students I'd like this article to be a "patch" to decrease their confusion and help them think things through when they encounter different versions of astrological symbolism. For more experienced astrologers and astrology teachers, I would like to stimulate some long-overdue conversation.

What is the Twelve Letter Alphabet?



When stated nakedly, this doctrine maintains that the Planets = Signs = Houses. For example, the First House is of the same nature as Aries and its ruling planet Mars, called the "First Letter"; the Second Letter is made from the Second House, Taurus, and Venus, and so on up to the Twelfth House, Pisces, and Neptune. Following this model, we sometimes read statements such as "the Second House is like Venus," the "Eleventh House or Aquarius," and so forth. When astrology books describe a particular planet's placement through houses and signs, e.g. "Pluto (or other planet) in Leo or the Fifth House", their authors are making a correspondence of a particular planet and the house based on the Twelve Letter Alphabet.

One can also use the Twelve Letter Alphabet for interpretative purposes. My natal chart has Neptune in the first house and Mars in Pisces. According to my first astrology teacher, this means that in my natal chart the First

House and Mars are modified by the Pisces/Neptune influence, so that I have problems with anger or motivation, or maybe I'm passive aggressive. I was struck by this interpretation's seductive simplicity, and also that it was wrong.

This particular blending of houses with signs (and their ruling planets) took root in traditional medical astrology, whereby either Aries or the First House is signifier of the head, Taurus or Second House signifier of the throat, etc. Centuries later, perhaps beginning with *The Astrology of Personality* (1936), Dane Rudhyar differentiated between "event-oriented" and "humanistic" perspectives on the astrological houses and recast all the traditional house depictions to fit psychological and spiritual interests. In the early 1970's astrologer Zipporah Dobzyns articulated the Twelve Letter Alphabet that was linked with interpreting a natal chart from psychological or spiritual points of view.

Surely, one can take a psychological approach to natal astrology without resorting to the Twelve Letter Alphabet. Much of my astrological work over the past 20 years has been to demonstrate the importance of the "condition of the soul" in the natal astrology of previous eras, and the effectiveness of its techniques for that purpose. Additionally, when the Twelve Letter Alphabet has taken over as the template for astrological symbolism, other fields of astrology (horary, electional, and event astrology) take on a diminished value. It is important to note that these branches of our art are concerned mostly with external situations, not the processes of psyche and soul. When learning these important branches of astrology, people should not have to learn astrology all over again to apply its symbols outside the psyche.

"You're just promoting traditional astrology over modern astrology – once again." You might say. No, I reply, I am promoting astrology as it is, with a long heritage and coherent symbol system that is relevant across all applications of astrology. We just need to find out more about it.

Many astrologers state that the Twelve Letter Alphabet should be used carefully, because houses are not exactly signs and ruling planets aren't signs either. Thus you might say, "A lot of presentations say that the Twelve Letter Alphabet is a good teaching tool for new astrology students but one shouldn't take it too far, so what's the problem?" Well, if a "teaching tool" is not to be trusted in actual practice on and can create misunderstanding, why use it at all?

Throughout astrology's history there have been other ways to look at houses and planets together. Students and professional astrologers are often surprised that in the past the first house was sometimes correlated with Saturn, the second with Jupiter, and so on, in the descending order of the planets. (Try it out for all Twelve Houses – it doesn't work too badly.) A more attractive system, however, is that of the house joys shown in the diagram on the left. Each of the seven visible planets has a favorite house to inhabit. This works far more powerfully than the Twelve Letter Alphabet to understand the connection between planets and houses, and so I will present the house joys throughout this article.



Letter by Letter

By tying together the separate threads of signs, planets, and houses the Twelve Letter Alphabet has created knots that need to be untied for astrology to be coherent. For this article I take my inspiration from a fine series of columns by Glenn Kessler in the Washington Post called "The Fact Checker". It bestows different numbers of "Pinocchio's" to politicians' statements and advertisements based on degrees of untruth. Here, the more knots you see, the "knottier" are the problems correlating house, sign, and governing planet according to the Twelve Letter Alphabet.

1st House (Aries, Mars) ***

This area is critically important for interpreting an astrological chart. I always begin looking at an astrological chart by noting the Ascendant, its planetary ruler, planets in the First House, and planets closely aspecting the Ascendant degree. In natal astrology, these factors together represent the characteristic style and temperament of the native. The First House has been called the house of "life," and issues about physical and mental health also reside in this place. In a horary chart, the Ascendant and First House signifies the person who asks a question. In an electoral chart or event chart, these factors signify the initiation of an event. In natal astrology these are the first and most powerful factors to be considered, far more than the Sun sign or Moon sign.



The wide variety of possibilities of human character and behavior cannot be "archetypically" tied to Aries or any particular sign, Mars or any particular planet. All of us have different possibilities that can be traced to different signs and planets, particularly the one that shows up in a chart – there's no reason to call Aries the First House of the "natural houses." Aries, as a cardinal fire sign is a natural home for Mars, emphasizes the decisive but impulsive and possibly destructive activity of Mars.

The cardinal fiery sign Aries and its ruling planet Mars are not always appropriate to most situations in which we find ourselves. In fact, we usually don't burst into new things but instead we're more likely to watch and wait and find an "in." Mars is traditionally a "malefic" and the fiery red planet often causes people more harm than good.

Mars also has a greater range of activity than is attributed to the sign Aries: Mars is dignified elsewhere than in Aries. Assimilating the planet Mars to the sign Aries over-simplifies the complex and interesting nature of the red planet, making it appear more like an impulsive sixteen-year-old male than a planet that can work quietly and in a focused way toward a goal, as when Mars inhabits its other signs in which it has dignity.

Mercury, not Mars, is in its joy in the First House. When we consider that what we often need when meeting the world is a diverse range of responses, Mercury, not necessarily Mars, is a good planet to have in this important position.

2nd House (Taurus, Venus) ***

The concerns of the Second House are straightforward but using the Twelve Letter Alphabet has made them complicated. The Second House is about money, funding, and the "substance" of the native – period. Taurus, the earthy fixed sign, is a fine place for physical pleasure and comforts and a basic kind of simplicity. (Note that Venus is its domicile ruler and Moon its exaltation.) Avarice tends to make life very complicated – but this is not Taurus! Nor should money be confused with "value" that is sometimes attributed to the Second House. The Second House is about a concern we all have in our lives that has many personal and social implications, but the bottom line is that it's just money.



As the planet of beauty and adornment, Venus is not the planet of money but of "nice stuff." Venus is more interested in the aesthetics and style of a newly-built home rather than its display of the native's wealth. Venus should not be confused with the financial people who brought us the Great Recession of 2008 – that's closer to Mercury in its less appealing amoral and all-too-clever manifestations.

Instead, Jupiter is the traditional planet of wealth (and its social display) and was a signifier of the "substance of the native" along with the Second House and the Lot of Fortune.

3rd House (Gemini, Mercury) *

Correlating the Third House with Gemini poses less of a difficulty, mostly because the common significations of the Third House – primary school, neighbors, short trips, etc. – correspond more closely with our understanding of the sign Gemini. I am, however, bothered by the association of "lower mind" with the Third House, for this devalues mind in its operations in ordinary life.

Gemini's and Mercury's ranges of activity cannot be reduced to one astrological House. Likening the Third House to Mercury trivializes the planet of the marketplace, of the clever lawyer and glib politician, the person behind the "technical support" desk, and the person who organizes your wedding or funeral.

The Third House was originally that of "brothers" and was given Mars as a corresponding planet and the signification of this house as siblings has survived to modern times. Yet there is another meaning for the Third House: opposing the Ninth, this was the Place of the Moon Goddess and the Moon is in its joy here! The Third and the Ninth were both associated with dreams, prophecy, and divination.

One can trace the Moon's interest in the Third House with the development of meaning to the present day, for it was the Moon, not Mercury that many cited as the planet governing messengers and messages—communication in general. It was probably from reading Ptolemy that the Third House received the domain of "lower education," in his attribution of planets to stages of human development. After the first four years of life governed by Moon, in the following years of Mercury children would begin to receive their education.

4th House (Cancer, Moon) ***

Let's first talk about Moon. In contemporary astrology the Moon is considered a planet of feelings and emotions (and that odd word "nurturing"), but we can go further by asking this: what are feelings and emotions for? What purposes does nurturing serve?

Feelings and emotions serve us by constantly bringing us back to our bodies and their needs, our world and its constant changes, demanding from us that we make constant adjustments to preserve homeostasis and to grow. Moon is a planet not only about the feminine but also about adaptability and change and, even more than Mercury, is the ultimate planet of mutability. Nurturing oneself or another is simply an intense form of responsiveness. The Moon's activity is rhythmic and its essence is watery – the element water is powerful and potentially destructive but flows and accommodates. We can look at the watery nature of our bodies as lunar. In horary and electional astrology the Moon often represents the flow of time from past to future as it departs from aspecting one planet and applies to the next.



The Moon governs Cancer, a watery but cardinal sign that is the time of the maximum amount of light in the Northern Hemisphere when the Sun is placed there, and the longest arc in the daytime when it is ascending. Cancer is a fluid but personalizing sign. Moon and Cancer are not the same as each other but they are a good fit. Cancer is a fine home base for the Moon, for there the Moon is ostentatiously emotional, or, in a man, rather moody.

This is very different from the significations for the Fourth House. This house is "under the earth" and is about one's origins and foundation – home, family, and ethnicity. It was originally the Place of the Father, for that is how the family name and property were passed along in traditional Western cultures. Moderns can certainly add mother into the mix, if in keeping with the Fourth House and one's "homeland" roots and to reflect greater gender equality than in the traditional cultures in which astrology operated. None of this – foundation – is Moon or Cancer, however.

5th House (Leo, Sun) ***

This one bothers me, almost as much as affiliating Saturn and Capricorn with the Tenth. "Letter Five" distorts the Fifth House, Sun, Leo, and the creative processes all in one ill-considered move.

As it is in trine to the sign of the Ascendant, the Fifth House has always been considered a fine place but has had conflicting significations as the place of children and pleasurable activities. To attempt to bring pleasure and children together under the heading "creativity" does not solve the problem.

The Fifth House is a place of entertainment, hobbies, even what we call "love affairs" (although that's a newer signification). Of the Twelve Houses, the Fifth House is surely the "party house". To nobody's surprise, then, the benefic Venus is the planet whose "joy" is in the Fifth House. Venus is the planet of pleasure and amusement and a "good time", possibly rendering a Venus-like person shallow but fun to be with. Not surprisingly the Fifth House was called the Place of "Good Fortune". Its emphasis on pleasure renders the Fifth more a conformist than creative place – what feels good is what you do.

This is not the Sun, who is the maestro of the Solar System and the astrological planet that brings us a sense of ourselves that radiates onto the larger world. Sun represents our qualities of leadership and our fame and reputation, also the bright light of intellect. Sun cannot also be about "hobbies" and entertainment and "love affairs", for these all lack a profundity that is solar.

Is the Sun the planet of creativity? Yes, if we do not confuse creativity with talent, for there are many people who are talented in an area but do not approach it creatively. Instead, creativity is the ability to see situations uniquely, "out of the box", and thus think and act unpredictably. I remember a cartoon in Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* many years ago: on a gravestone were engraved the words, "Even the Creator of the Universe Didn't Know What This Man Would Say Next." One can even say that creativity is the essence of our being human.



Creativity is not the result of being eccentric but from shaking off our "mind-forged manacles" of unreflective thinking, perhaps a mind focused on doing or saying what feels good right now. I would never give creativity to the Fifth House, the "party house".

6th House (Virgo, Mercury) **

The Sixth House is cadent and unconnected to the Ascendant; it thus signifies some of life's difficulties and one of them is sickness. Another is slavery, servitude, or what today we might call "employment" (especially in less skilled jobs at present in the United States).

There's nothing sickness-oriented about Virgo, although there is plenty about Virgo, and its ruling sign Mercury, that can be about health. These are the familiar associations of Virgo with a healthy lifestyle, diet and exercise and natural remedies, and the like. This fits well with Virgo being earthy and mutable. These are not Sixth House matters but bring us, instead, back to the First House.



As befitting astrology's historical place serving the "one percent", the Sixth House was about one's potentially untrustworthy servants or (in ancient times) slaves. Today we can call this the "day job." Because the Sixth House is in a trine relationship with the Tenth, it was also used as a vocational indicator. Modern astrologers tend to look at the Sixth as being an "employee", distinguished from a prestigious "career" that is the Tenth.

The modern signification of the Sixth House as the "daily grind" – not our morning coffee – seems appropriate, since it was the slave or servant or (too often) the modern employee who is often assigned tasks that are tedious or mind-numbingly repetitive and brainless. Yet none of this is Virgo or Mercury.

Mars is in its joy in the Sixth. This was the House of "Bad Fortune" and, looking at Mars positively here, we often need Mars to help us climb out of our misfortunes – even though Mars may have caused some of them.

7th House (Libra, Venus) **

If the First House is oneself, then the Seventh House is the Other – all kinds of others. If one has a question about a significant other, the person asking the question is signified by the First House and the person asked about is signified by the Seventh House. Depending on the situation, a significant other may be one's lover (hypothetical or real), marriage partner, best friend, or the other party in a contractual transaction in which you are involved – a buyer if you're selling, a creditor if you are borrowing. A significant other may be also an opponent – in sport, politics, or war. Although concord and harmony make for better karma in the long run, Libra and its governing planet Venus are not the always the best match.

Libra and its ruler Venus is as out of place with respect to the Seventh House as Aries and its ruler Mars is to the First House – both deny the variety of life-situations of oneself and with other (Seventh House). There's clearly a resemblance between the 7th place of enemies and married or relationship partners. And Libra, the air cardinal sign governed by Venus, has themes of partnership and mutuality. But then you're stuck with having to align Libra and Venus with one's adversaries!

8th House (Scorpio, Mars, Pluto) ***

This one must be taken apart piece by piece, for everything is wrong about how the Eighth House has been depicted by modern astrologers.

The Eighth House, like the Sixth (and the Twelfth that I will discuss shortly), is unconnected to the Ascendant and represents some kind of undoing. In this case it is death and the manner of death that is the undoing. In ancient times this place was called "Idle," for planets there did not live up to their potential. In the other wheel of houses that liken the First House to Saturn, the Eighth House affiliates with Saturn. The Eighth is just not a happy place. Medieval astrologers did give the Eighth some life by attributing to it a partner's money (as the Second House from the Seventh House), but that seems a small improvement on the basic meaning of the Eighth.

None of the above is concerned with the fixed water sign Scorpio. Combining the deepening experience of the water element with the intransigence of a fixed mode, and its ruling planet Mars, Scorpio rightly has the attribution for hanging on, but it's hanging on for dear life, not death. You might say, "But Scorpio could die for a worthy cause," but that is from its intensity of devotion to larger purposes and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for them. Scorpio is also drily pragmatic – to quote General Patton with Sun in Scorpio, the soldier's goal is not to die for one's country but to get the enemy to die for his. Scorpio's strong, fixed water drive often tends toward obsessiveness, resentment, and even cruelty – but these are also manifestations of hanging onto life, not death.

The modern assimilation of Scorpio to death is a result of bringing in the outer planet Pluto, a planet that is cold, powerful, and brings intense experience and situations. Mars, the traditional ruler which manifests in ordinary life as Scorpio does—unlike the outer planet Pluto—is the more appropriate planet to govern Scorpio.

Is the Eighth a place of sexuality? Only accidentally, for along with Scorpio, the Eighth House was given the genitals as the body part of govern. Sexuality does cover a wider range than body parts and wider range of astrological possibilities than Scorpio or Mars. Linking Pluto with sexuality seems a particularly bad idea, for Pluto's version of sexuality is closer to rape (as in the abduction of Persephone) than ordinary experiences of intense pleasure or the affirmation of romantic love.

Still less is the Eighth House – Scorpio – Mars or Pluto about transformation. Partly this is because we have an overly romantic notion of transformation. When we ask ourselves how real change occurs, it is either resulting from extraordinary – and usually painful — situations, or sometimes from incremental changes over a long time. In either case, they do not change us from one person into another, change our "form", but instead bring about other dimensions of or the fulfillment of who we already are. We are not transformed – or different – but completed.



9th House (Sagittarius, Jupiter) *

We tend to liken Jupiter to philosophy and religion and the attribution of Jupiter to the 9th House fits fairly well. (Jupiter is also the planet associated with the Ninth in the wheel of houses that begins with Saturn as the First.) The Ninth was the place of the "Sun God" in ancient astrology and was strongly associated with public religious practice; yet, like the Third, it was also associated with dreams, prophecy, and divination. The Ninth House being associated with higher education or long journeys is a later addition.

The planet in joy in the Ninth House is the Sun and, for a place that is cadent, the Ninth gets a lot of sunlight and the Sun can be happy here. It also fits well with the deification of the Sun's power in many cosmologies and religions throughout history. It may also conform to the image of Sun as a planet of higher intellect, as the light of reason.

10th House (Capricorn, Saturn) ****

Astrologers after my lifetime or yours will look at this affiliation with bewilderment. Archetypally mixing the House of career, reputation, and fame to Saturn and Capricorn is itself enough to throw out the entire Twelve Letter Alphabet system.

You might retort, "But it's the place of one's boss!" I answer that there are many kinds of bosses and they're not all oppressive. The dimensions of leadership and mentorship – solar and not saturnine factors – are prominent Tenth House factors.

The 10th is the traditional place of one's "action" – career, calling, fame and reputation. I include a larger sense of "vocation", so that if you work retail by day but are a political activist or animal rights advocate otherwise, the latter would be included within your Tenth House. If a "lifestyle" includes neighborhood vigilantism, being a "survivalist", or attending a lot of funerals, that person's Tenth House would qualify as Saturnine.



Capricorn, as the cardinal earth sign, governed by a heavy nocturnal (feminine sign) Saturn, and the place and time of least light in the Northern Hemisphere, is completely out of place in the public and daylight-filled Tenth. Because the Tenth is place of authority, it is far closer in meaning to the Sun than the gray planet Saturn.

11th House (Aquarius **, Saturn or Uranus ***)

In ancient times the 11th, the "Place of the Good Spirit (or daimon)", was a place of fortune and abundance. According to traditional sources Jupiter is in joy in the Eleventh, befitting a place that is considered so fortunate. (The Eleventh is the House opposite the 5th, the Place of Good Fortune and the joy of Venus, the other benefic.) The Eleventh House became the place of "hopes and wishes" and later the place of friendship and social groups; "hopes and wishes" is more in line with the original meaning of the Eleventh House.

Is this like the fixed air sign Aquarius? The "Water-Bearer" has a linear mental quality and a tendency to become conceptual that is not particularly like the Eleventh House in its original meanings. Aquarius is a sign of

social responsibility and objective mind, and Aquarius relates well to a diurnal (masculine sign) Saturn that is a lighter Saturn than the one who governs Capricorn. However, if you confine the Eleventh House to friendships and social groups, the affiliation with the diurnal Saturn isn't such a problem.

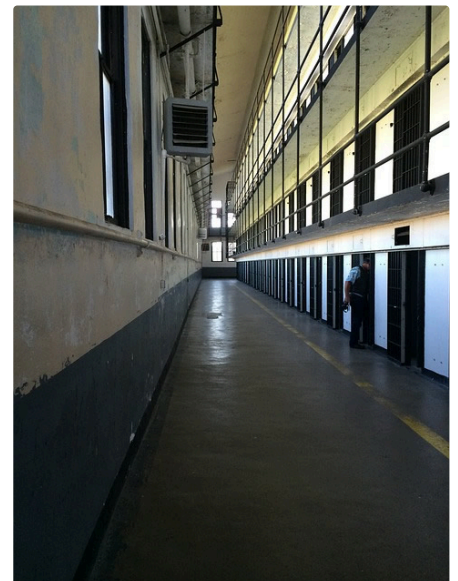
Things become much more confusing when astrologers mix up Aquarius with the outer planet Uranus, the planet of eccentricity, suddenness, and genius, and then try to bring in the Eleventh House. Uranus is quite different from the fixed mental "human" sign Aquarius. Uranus is rebellious, radically individualistic, and is deliberately outside convention. Aquarius, the sign opposite Leo, is humanitarian and oriented more toward groups and cultures than individuals. To bring this confusion to the Eleventh House only makes this problem worse; it obscures the original benevolent and protective quality of this house which is well demonstrated by Jupiter's traditional association.

12th House (Pisces, Neptune) ***

There are many difficulties here, and many are based on the distorted ways that the sign Pisces has been defined. But first let's look at the Twelfth House by itself.

Like the Sixth and Eighth, the Twelfth is also disconnected to the Ascendant and is also a place about life's difficulties. The Twelfth is a cadent house that in ancient astrology was the Place of the "Bad Spirit." In the outer world the Twelfth is where we locate prisons, confinement in institutions, and dark hidden places. More internally, this is the place of being haunted – by previous karma, psychological "unfinished business," and other manners of "self-doing" that come about because of what we cannot see. Psychological astrologers have looked to the Twelfth House for unacknowledged factors that may wreak havoc on one's person and within one's relationships. This is in keeping with the qualities of this house.

This all seems very different from the mutable watery sign Pisces that is flowing, changeable, and can develop different disguises for its personal and social roles. Pisces, as a quality of mind, has a strongly intuitive nonlinear bent. Unlike the planet Neptune, however, natives with prominent Pisces placements manage to maintain their identity even if that identity is not well-defined. Both the sign Pisces and its purported ruler Neptune are a far cry from the vice grip many of have experienced when in conditions of external or internal confinement.



Jupiter, the great benefic and the traditional ruler of Pisces, is even farther away from the significations of the Twelfth House. Jupiter – especially in the feminine sign Pisces – brings intuition of possibilities that is often called "faith" or "hope". The Twelfth, however, is where cold reality comes at us from

behind often with harmful intent; it is far closer to Saturn than Jupiter. And Saturn is, of course, the "joy" of the Twelfth House.

What Do You Gain from Not Using the Twelve-Letter Alphabet?

For the beginner, it would become easier to learn astrology, all kinds of astrology. The planets would have their own realms of meaning, including different manifestations within the psyche and in outer events, qualities, and things in the world. The planets would relate to signs through dignity and debility that allows us to better understand the effects of all the signs on all the planets. The houses would remain ways to assess planetary strength and to represent different players in a horary, event, and electional astrology. One would not value natal astrology over the latter but see them all as interrelated, all parts of the same great work.

The more advanced student or new professional astrologer would be less inclined to look for overarching themes of a chart but to let the chart disclose information that answers specific questions. This will increase one's ability to see a chart for what it contains and for practical applications to the lives of our clients.

For the veteran astrologer, it's an opportunity to find other possibilities for interpreting natal charts, such as using the house joys discussed above. More broadly, it's an opportunity and to view Western astrology as a continuum extending across the centuries, not something that has come and will go with modern psychodynamic or New Age sensibilities. Knowing, however, that most "experts" change their minds only at knifepoint and beyond, my expectations are lower for professional astrologers than for newer students. The unexpected does happen, from time to time, and I would be happy if this article sparks some good discussion among seasoned astrologers about these important matters.