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Astrological Poetry in late medieval Wales: the case of Dafydd Nanmor's 'To God and the planet Saturn'

Mark Williams

Abstract. This paper examines the major astrological poem which survives from late medieval Wales, Dafydd Nanmor's 'Cywydd to God and the planet Saturn'. A close reading of the poem suggests that actual horoscopes, rather than just a vague knowledge of astrology, were accessible in Wales at the end of the Middle Ages. As a result, Dafydd Nanmor's poem can now be dated to September 1479. This is set in the context of the sociology of English astrology at the end of the Middle Ages; by the middle of the 15th century, astrology was percolating down from the court an universities into the cultural life of the merchant classes, and it is argued that the spread of astrological material to Wales in the same period forms part of the same process.

Medieval Wales lagged behind England in terms the appearance of astrology in literary texts. The history of Welsh poetry can offer no figure to rival Chaucer's deep knowledge of and literary interest in the art. Some astrological material was known, however; the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta Secretorum* was translated into Welsh in the early 15th century, for example, and in its discussion of the medicinal properties of plants and gems, a sound knowledge of the signs of the zodiac is recommended as essential for the practising physician.[1] Further, the seventh book of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* (c. 1137) provided the vivid image of Merlin as a comet-interpreting seer, and Welsh translations of the *Historia* were immensely important and influential.[2]

1 See 'HAFOD 16 (A Mediaeval Welsh Medical Treatise)', ed. I. B. Jones, *Études Celtiques* 7 (1955-56), p. 304.

2 See M. E. Owen, 'The Prose of the *Cywydd* Period', in A. O. H. Jarman & G. R. Hughes, (eds.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature 1282- c.1550* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 336-37.

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The dearth of developed astrological imagery in Welsh literature until the late Middle Ages is probably to be explained as a consequence of Wales' lack of large urban centres, a royal court, or university. To appear in literary texts, astrology had thus to be subject to appropriation by native poets, whose tradition was in many ways a conservative one. The greatest of all medieval Welsh poets, Dafydd ap Gwilym (fl. 1350), does make a small number of references to the signs and planets, but he is exceptional.[3] It was only at the turn of the 15th century that astrology began to have an impact on Welsh poetry more widely. It is the purpose of this article to examine the most striking Welsh poem on an astrological theme, the 'Cywydd i Dduw a'r planed Satwrnws', or 'Poem to God and the planet Saturn', by Dafydd Nanmor (fl. 1450-90). A *cywydd* is a Welsh metre popular in the later Middle Ages, consisting of highly ornamented seven-syllable lines, which proceed in rhyming couplets. The poem in question was last edited in 1923, and a new edition of Dafydd Nanmor's works edited to modern standards is a desideratum in the field. The poem is pressed for historical information, and I endeavour to set it within its cultural and intellectual context. By doing so, I hope to shed light on the status of astrology within Welsh literary culture at the end of the Middle Ages.

Dafydd Nanmor and his poem

Dafydd Nanmor was born near Beddgelert in Gwynedd, probably around 1430, though he spent most of his adult life outside north Wales. The bard received patronage in South Wales, in the homes of Rhys ap Meredudd of Tywyn, near the mouth of the river Teify, and at the hands of Rhys's sons and wider kindred. 'Y Ty Gwyn ar Daf' (Whitland), in Carmathenshire, is said to be the location of his grave. His poetry is characterised by a love of intellectual play, and features acrostics, word-play on the names of God in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and miscellaneous bits of tradition such as the signs which were expected to appear before Judgement Day. Astrology thus fitted well with the poet's fondness for poeticising scraps of religious lore and scientific knowledge.

The poet produced three astrological poems, of which I discuss here only the lengthiest, the poem to God and Saturn. The other two are verses

3 See T. Parry, *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1979), p. 194, for the occurrence of *planedsygn* ['a planet-sign'] in the poem 'To a Wave on the River Dyfi'.

on the signs of the zodiac, one connecting the signs to the parts of the body—a poetic version of the 'Homo Signorum' or zodiacal man—and the other linking them to the winds and the compass-points. Morfydd Owen has demonstrated that these poems are closely connected to a late 15th century medical manuscript, NLW MS 3026, formerly known as Mostyn 88 (see fig 1, p. 22).[4] Created between 1488 and 1498, the colourfully illustrated astrological section of the MS is in the hand of the poet Gutun Owain, Dafydd Nanmor's contemporary. The astrological information contained in this MS would not allow someone to draw up a horoscope: rather, it contains simple tables of planetary hours and various diagrams, probably for the purposes of phlebotomy. But with it, we have evidence for a link between the fashion for astrological manuscripts, medical texts, and the professional poets as an intellectual class in the late 15th century. Such a link will be important later.

Though he was not a prophetic poet as such, it is my contention that the astrological elements of his poetry can be best understood by reference to the Welsh prophetic tradition. Prophecy had long been part of Welsh poetry, at least as far back as the *Armes Prydein Uawr* ['Greater Prophecy of Britain'], written around the year 930, which foretold the defeat of the Saxons by the remnants of the Britons. The 15th century, however, saw Welsh vaticination given a new lease of life, reaching its climax in the fulfilment represented by Bosworth Field and the ascension of Henry Tudor.[5] But it was also a significant period in the history of astrology, during which the science of the stars attained greater public currency, and began to percolate down from the court and reach more ordinary people. Thus Dafydd Nanmor's astrological poems are located at a sensitive historical point.

Dafydd's long 'Poem to God and the planet Saturn', is, as its editors remark, 'a lengthy discourse on the planet Saturn, and its evil influence on the lives of men, ending with a religious exhortation'.[6] As we have

4 See M. E. Owen, 'Manion ?Meddygol', *Dwned* 7 (2001), pp. 43-63, and for MS Mostyn 88/NLW 3026 see her 'Prolegomena i Astudiaeth Lawn o Lsgr. NLW 3026', in I. Daniel & M. Haycock, et al., (eds.), *Cyfoeth y Testun: Ysgrifau ar Lenyddiaeth Gymraeg yn yr Oesoedd Canol* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 348-84.

5 See C. Lloyd-Morgan, 'Prophecy and Welsh Nationhood in the 15th Century', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1985), p. 9.

seen, the poet's verses on the zodiacal signs are somewhat static and schematic, reflecting visual images and tables of medical and calendrical knowledge. The poem to God and Saturn, on the other hand, shows some grasp of the cyclical patterns made by the planets through the zodiac, and pays little attention to the signs; it is rooted in a specific time (which I argue below was mid-September 1478) rather than presenting the reader with a versified version of a commonplace medical or scientific schema.

The poem begins with a sequence of dramatic questions, asking what category of learned man might be able to explain the nature of the ominous planet, its path and orbital pattern, and where such a person might be found. Two alternatives for its cycle are described in somewhat obscure terms, one lasting one hundred years, one lasting thirty. The poet seems to show some knowledge that the planet spends two to three years in each zodiacal sign. The role of Saturn as direct agent of the plague is handled, which is attributed to the planet's having strayed from its orbit. It is asked whether Saturn is being used as an agent of God's vengeance to punish sinners, especially those who are churchmen and gentry. The poet then turns to the conclusion that, although the plague represents God's judgement, the planet is not itself to blame, and that the virtuous will enjoy the peace of heaven despite the tribulations of the world.

Assessing the tone of the poem with regard to its astrological material is difficult. Its first part seems to dramatise a *lack* of comprehension, an interpretative vacuum. The poet queries whether various kinds of people may be able to explain the portent, the volleys of questions skillfully creating a sense of urgency, of a thronged and querulous populace nervously anticipating disaster. The people who are called upon make up the intellectual elite of late 15th century England and Wales:

Pa hen frawd llên yn y llys?
Pa feistr o art o bart i bo?
Pa uthraidd ddoctor? Pa athro?

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6 *The Poetical Works of Dafydd Nanmor*, ed. T. Roberts & I. Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1923), [hereafter *The Poetical Works*] p. 197. In quotations below from the edn. of Roberts and Williams, I have made a small number of silent editorial corrections, usually of spelling. The syntactical structure of the poetry also translates awkwardly into English, and I have rearranged clauses in my translations to maximise clarity for the Welshless reader. In many cases a very dense Welsh phrase needs some expansion to make good English.

Pa ddyn rhwydd? Pa Dduw i'n rhaid?
Pa ddewin? Pwy a ddowaid
Pa beth ydyw, wiwryw wedd,
Saturnus y teheirnedd?
Os planed blin dynghed yw
A lithrodd marwolaethryw,
Bwy a luniodd? Ba luniaeth?
Bywiog yw, ne bwy a'i gwnaeth?[7]

What old learned friar in the court [can help us]?
What Master of Art from some district?
What wonderful doctor, what learned teacher?
What generous man? What God [will aid us] in our extremity?
What diviner? Who will explain
what [manner of] thing it is (seemly manner of appearance),
Saturn of the Kings?
If it is a planet of ill fate
which glided along in deadly fashion,
who fashioned it - it's like a living creature! -
what Providence created it?

The whole poem in effect answers the series of questions which it poses here, as the poet answers his own queries in religious terms. We can read the poem then as an undercutting of astrological knowledge, with the awe and confusion engendered by the conjunction being set next to the poet's faith in God and his justice.

The terms used by the poet for the kinds of people who might understand the effect of Saturn give us significant clues as to what classes of society were thought of as possessing astrological expertise in late 15th century Wales. The first is the 'hen frawd llên y llys', 'an old friar of lore of the court', which associates astrological learning with ecclesiastical, written learning and with the court. As Hilary Carey has demonstrated, astrology had become deeply embroiled in court politics during the late 14th and early 15th centuries, and thus the poem may reflect this association.[8]

7 *The Poetical Works*, p. 101.

8 See H. Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1992) [hereafter

The second term for those who might potentially understand Saturn's nature is 'meistr o art', 'Master of Art'; this clearly refers to a University-educated individual, being a calque on Latin *magister artium*. The 'uthraidd doctor', 'wonderful doctor', is the next likely candidate, and here we find a revealing ambiguity, as doctor could refer to a physician, or possibly again imply a university education. As the MSS Hafod 16 (which contained the Welsh *Secreta Secretorum* mentioned above) and Mostyn 88 imply from their respective ends of the 15th century, some knowledge of natural astrology would have been an essential part of the physician's body of knowledge. The adjective 'uthraidd' means 'remarkable' in both positive and negative contexts, so here we should translate as 'excellent' or 'wonderful', rather than 'frightful', although it is possible that behind the use of the word lies a suggestion that there is something slightly sinister or reprehensible about the possession of such knowledge. An 'athro' is a teacher or instructor, probably here in the sense of a university scholar. At line 23, the poet calls again for an 'athro':

Oes a wypo, athro vthr,
Yn y dwyrain, nod arvthr,
Ne yn y gogledd arfeddfyd,
Ne ba ran o bedwar ban byd,
Beth yw anian y blaned,
Na'r llwybr ar wybr a red?[9]

Does anyone - some wonderful scholar
in the east, or in the north,
or in any part of the world's four corners -
recognise its terrible purpose or its intention,
or know what the planet's nature is,
or the path it travels in the sky?

Again, the planet's movements and purpose are represented as needing a skilled, scholarly interpreter. These professionals correspond to the classes of experts in the science of the stars in the *early* 15th century, the

Carey, *Courting Disaster*], pp. 92-116 for the development of medieval astrology as a 'royal art'.

9 *The Poetical Works*, p. 102.

schoolmen and scholars. By the time the poem was written, the sociological picture of astrology in England had shifted somewhat, and the bond between astrologers and the universities had loosened. But it is fair to say that during the poet's lifetime, astrology did retain a place in the humanistic curriculum of the universities, and certainly was important in court life, and had an intimate connection with the practice of medicine.

An example of the kind of scholar whom the poet might have had in mind is Lewis (or Lewys) of Caerleon (d. ?1494), the astronomer and physician. Lewis' colourful career amply illustrates the role of the university scholars in fostering the study of Arabic astrology in the English universities, and also shows that at least one educated Welshman was among their number. In Lewis' case, it is not clear whether he was an actual member of either of the universities, but he certainly had connections of some sort with the astronomers and mathematicians of Merton College, as he collected and annotated the works of earlier astronomers and astrologers associated therewith, as well as making a gift of astronomical tables to the college, and to the university of Cambridge.[10] The example of Lewis shows us the kind of person expected to possess astrological knowledge in the late 15th century, and illustrates the bond of astrology with the universities, at precisely the time it was fraying.

Returning to the poem, the sudden shift from calling on scholars to asking 'pa Dduw..?', 'what deity?', is slightly startling and expresses a note of desperation, anticipating the poet's eventual judgement that the source and remedy for the plague lies in humanity's relationship with God. Finally, the poet rhetorically asks if a 'dewin' could explain the origin and nature of the planet. Coming from the same root as 'divination', from medieval Latin *deuinus*, 'dewin' is one of the numerous terms in Welsh for a creator of prophetic poetry, though the primary meaning seems to be 'soothsayer, seer', with the poetic element the secondary one. The poet is setting up an opposition between religious faith and the learning of the schoolmen who operate within the framework of the natural science of the universities, and perhaps also the royal court. This opposition has faint echoes of the continuing debate within medieval society on the morality of astrology, but it also suggests

10 See P. Kibre, 'Lewis of Caerleon, Doctor of Medicine, Astronomer, and Mathematician (d. 1494?)', *Isis* 43, no. 2 (1952), pp. 102-3.

that the poet was well-informed about the status of astrology in contemporary England.

An astrological dating for the poem

The *cywydd* to God and Saturn is unique among Dafydd Nanmor's astrological poems in that it is concerned with a planetary body having an effect upon human life at a particular moment in time. The poem thus moves beyond the 'natural' astrology involved in agriculture, medicine and time-keeping, into so-called 'judicial' astrology, which involved mathematical knowledge of planetary movements. I do not mean that the poet himself was an astrologer, but that he was exposed to more than the kind of largely non-mathematical astrology found in Mostyn 88, as suggested by his accurate roll-call of types who might be able to interpret the portentous astrological phenomenon.

At this point it is necessary to define 'natural' and 'judicial' astrology in more detail. Both Dafydd Nanmor's poems on the signs of the zodiac make use of 'natural' astrology, which consists of any use of astrological correspondences or symbolism which does not require an ephemeris to be employed, and which was a ubiquitous and on the whole uncontroversial part of the later medieval worldview.[11] Thus it can take into account the position in the zodiac of the sun and moon, as these can be worked out in one's head. It can also make use of abstract systems such as the planetary hours, as discussed above, which make use of astrological symbolism without bearing any relationship to the actual movements of the planets. 'Judicial' astrology, however, requires the drawing up of a horoscope, whether for a person (genethliacal astrology), or to find an answer to a given question (horary astrology), or to choose a propitious time for some undertaking (electional astrology). Whilst the two poems to the signs are unquestionable evidence of Dafydd's medical interests, and thus show knowledge of natural astrology, his poem to God and Saturn is philosophically deeper and, I argue, shows evidence of an acquaintance with judicial astrology.

Roberts dates the poem in his edition to 1478, as that year featured the only major visitation of plague in England and Wales since 1369, despite a localised outbreak at Oxford in 1471. 1478 did indeed see a remarkable astrological conjunction, likely to have been deemed inauspicious according to the tenets of 15th century astrology. At the risk of an

11 For the distinction, see J. A. Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 175-83.

Ussherism, I suggest that the most appropriate point of that year was within a few days of the beginning of September. Around this date, the Sun, Mercury, and Saturn were conjunct in the sign of Virgo, forming baleful aspects to the planets Mars and Jupiter in Scorpio and Gemini respectively. In medieval and Renaissance astrology, Saturn and Mars were of course termed the 'malefic' planets, both having an injurious effect, with Saturn being the 'greater malefic' and Mars the 'lesser'. On the date suggested above, they were in the worst possible aspect according to traditional astrology, that is, standing in a 'square' or 90° angle to one another. Mars was also strong in Scorpio, its so-called 'night-house' where it was believed to act in a hidden and secretive fashion. Saturn was conjunct the Sun, a very unfortunate aspect, and one which in a nativity would have been considered to make the native dour, unlucky, and given the aspect to Mars, prone to unexpected and violent death. The presence of Mercury in its own sign of Virgo, which might otherwise have tempered Saturn's malign influence, was cancelled out by its closeness to the Sun, rendering it ineffective, or 'combust' in medieval terminology. Virgo was also traditionally associated with health in general. The conjunction is also in square aspect to Jupiter, which would suggest some kind of disaster for royalty and the Church. An astrologer in 1478 might very well have interpreted this configuration to portend large-scale loss of life (Sun, Saturn) through plague (Virgo), erupting unexpectedly (Mars in Scorpio), and afflicting the socially elevated (Jupiter) as much as the masses.

D. Myrddin Lloyd has described the poem as capturing the 'awe and fear and wonder' felt in the face of this astrological configuration, but perhaps here he misleads.[12] His statement might be taken as suggesting that it was visible to the naked eye, perhaps like the comet of 1402 which has attracted such interest among Welshmen and had been taken as a portent of the success of Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion. This is in fact far from being the case, Saturn and Mercury being far too close to the sun to be actually visible, and as Jupiter and Mars were on opposite sides of the zodiac. In short, some considerable astrological knowledge would have been necessary to be aware of the ominous configuration, and we need to ask via what channels such information might come to late 15th century Wales.

12 D. Myrddin Lloyd, 'Dafydd Nanmor', in A. O. H. Jarman & G. R. Hughes, (eds.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature 1282- c.1550* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 180.

There were certainly Welshmen of the period who were expert in astrological theory and techniques. Lewis of Caerleon has already been mentioned as an example of an expert in astrology and mathematics. But if we turn to Dafydd Nanmor's somewhat older contemporary, the gentleman-poet Ieuan ap Rhydderch of Llangeitho in Ceredigion (c. 1390-1470), we find a fellow poet who has left us with a fascinating account, albeit a bombastic and self-congratulatory one, of the experimental science which formed part of his university education. This was probably at Oxford, and the description is to be found in his 'Cywydd y Fost' [Boasting Poem], and shows his enthusiasm for the astrological learning which was a firm if minor part of the university curriculum in the early 15th century. The relevant section (lines 29-52) is worth quoting at length; the multiple bracketed asides are characteristic of the poetry of the period, as a result of the intricate metrical demands of the form.

Dysgais yn graff, wiwbraff wabr,
Diwybr restrlwybr y astrlabr;
Hwn a ddysg i'r hen ddisgibl
Ar rod, heb wybod o'r Bibl,
Rhif a modd, unfodd iawnferf,
Rhod wen y ffurfafen fferf,
A'i channaid gwrs a'i chynneddf
Â'i cheingau a'i graddau greddf.

Dysgais, ystriciais ystrac,
Deall modd y sodïac,
A'r saith blaned, dynghed dygn
Diddicson, a'u deuddecsygn,
Y rhai a elwir yn rhwydd,
Diddig air, Deuddeg Arwydd,
Eu henwau, wych luniau achlân,
A'u hunion gwrs a'u hanian.
Traethais ddeufwy ar ddwyweus,
Talm mawr ar lyfr Toloméus:
Rhyw bwynt fyth ni rhy beintier,
Rhyfedd sôn, rhifoedd y sêr.
Llawer dysg, ffysg philosoffr,
Llyfr mad, a gaffad o'r goffr.
E rannwn, gwypwn gapital,

Eres Aristoteles ditl.[13]

I studied the clear, ridged motion
of the astrolabe eagerly (a fine, great reward);
this is taught to the old student
by means of a numbered and patterned wheel
(without study of the Bible)
just like a true word:
the circle of light of the mighty firmament,
and its bright course and its nature,
and its subdivisions and proper degrees.

I learned (I got it in one)
how to understand the shape of the zodiac,
and the seven heavenly bodies (grievous fate),
its twelve divisions also (pleasant discourse)
- those that are freely referred to
as 'the twelve signs' (a delightful phrase) -
their names as well, all excellent forms,
along with their proper sequence and their nature.
I spoke twice as much with [my] two lips,
A fulsome piece, on the basis of Ptolemy's book;
[But] a certain subject is never depicted,
Oddly – [that is,] the *number* of the stars.
A great deal of learning (lively [was] the philosopher),
A beneficial book, was obtained from his treasure-store.
I would set down (I know the chapter)
Aristotle's strange volume.

This passage is very dense, but Ieuan ap Rhydderch's enthusiasm for the science of the stars comes across clearly. That this experimental science was in part astrological, rather than merely astronomical, can be determined from two sources. Firstly, we know that astrology was part of the curriculum in at the universities at the time, as part of the *quadrivium*, and was a topic of discourse and interest among the scientific humanists associated in particular with Merton College in the late 14th and early 15th

13 *Gwaith Ieuan ap Rhydderch*, ed. R. Iestyn Daniel (Aberystwyth: The Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2003), pp. 50-51.

centuries.[14] Secondly, the language is astrological, the seven planets being immediately associated with 'dynghed dygn' [sad fate], and the references to the books of Ptolemy and Aristotle surely refer to the *Tetrabiblos*, or perhaps the *Almagest*, and to Aristotle's *De Sphaera et Mundi* or to the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta Secretorum*. The importance of the latter for astrological medicine we noted above.

Astrological peculiarities in the poem

Ieuan ap Rhydderch boasted of his academic study of the zodiac, the planets and Ptolemy; Dafydd Nanmor's knowledge of the details of planetary movements was clearly more amateur. In fact, his poem betrays some confusion about them. In lines 33-42, which are unfortunately rather obscure, the poet lists various time-periods characteristic of the planet's movements. He ascribes to Saturn a 'cwmpas' [circuit, orbit] of a hundred years, and a 'rhagawr' [pre-eminence] of thirty years:

> *Can mlynedd cyn aml heinion*
> *Yn y sêr yw einioes hon.*
> *Mae enw marwolaeth mynych*
> *Yn anfon gwreichion o'r gwrych.*
> *Deng mlyned, argywedd gwawr,*
> *Ar higain yw i rhagawr.*
> *A hyn i trig hon, nid rhwydd,*
> *Ynghôr y devddeng harwydd.*
> *Hon a smydir o wir wedd,*
> *Daer blaned, bob dair blynedd.*[15]
>
> A hundred years before frequent outbreaks of contagion
> In the stars does this one live.
> The name of general death

14 See Carey, *Courting Disaster*, pp. 58-78, for the 'Merton Circle'. She writes of the situation in Oxford in the 14th century that 'although all members of the Arts Faculty acquired a basic grounding in astrology, those with a particular interest in the subject developed their art by private research and discussion…' (*Courting Disaster*, p. 53.) See also J. A. Weisheipl, 'Curriculum of the Faculty of Arts at Oxford in the Early Fourteenth Century', *Mediaeval Studies* 26 (1964), p. 172, for the situation in the previous century.

15 *The Poetical Works*, p. 102.

Is sending sparks from the torch.
Thirty years (injury of dawn)
Is its time of pre-eminence.
And older does this one dwell (it is not free)
In the circle of the twelve signs.
It moves from its true appearance -
Fervent planet - every three years.

The 'rhagawr' presumably means that the planet holds sway for thirty years at a time.[16] Further, the planet undergoes some kind of 'movement' from its 'true appearance' every three years. Finally, in lines 49-50, the poet tells us:

Heinnys yw yn hanes sêr
Hon ddwy flynedd a haner.[17]

Pestilential is this planet in the story of the stars
For two-and-a-half years.

There is some confusion here, perhaps deliberate obscurantism. First, the actual orbit of Saturn is roughly twenty-nine and a half years, not the one hundred the poet suggests. However, this is an inaccuracy which also appears in the *Llyfr Ffortun Bangor*, a collection of 17th century prognosticatory texts, including poems on the various qualities of the planets.[18] It is curious that this text replicates the poet's error some two hundred years later. The *Llyfr Ffortun* also gets the orbital period of every planet, except the sun and moon, quite wrong. (Here, of course, I am using the terms 'planet' and 'orbit' in their loose astrological senses.) Could traditional but quite inaccurate orbital cycles of the planets,

16 Gilbert Ruddock notes that Saturn is ascribed a thirty-year cycle in the section 76 of the MS Peniarth 17 version of *Delw y Byd*, the Welsh translation of Honorius Augustodunesis' *Imago Mundi*. The translation dates from the middle of the 13th century, and Ruddock suggests that it is probable that Dafydd Nanmor knew the text (G. Ruddock, *Dafydd Nanmor* [Caernarvon: Gwasg Pantycelyn, 1992], pp. 77-79).

17 *The Poetical Works*, p. 102.

18 'Llyfr Ffortun Bangor', ed. I. Williams, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 3 (1926), pp. 90-119.

including Saturn's hundred-year revolution, have been part of the medical lore known to Dafydd Nanmor and occur again in the *Llyfr Ffortun*?

The other time-periods the poet mentions are closer to the astronomical facts. The planet's thirty-year 'rhagawr' is near to its actual orbital time of twenty-nine and a half years, and it does indeed move zodiacal signs every two and a half years. Thus we may ask whether the 'two-and-a-half years' refers to the duration of the plague, or to time taken by Saturn to travel through the sign of Virgo. Perhaps it is wrong to expect consistency from the poet, as a mixture of erroneous tradition and astronomically accurate information is consistent with Dafydd Nanmor's interest in obscure lore, as noted above. The poet himself either did not have a clear idea of Saturn's movements, or, perhaps more likely, was deliberately working miscellaneous scraps of lore into his poem. The poet comes across as having considerable awareness of judicial astrology, but not as a practitioner, and indeed he does not appear very sympathetic towards it. There is a distinct undertone of scepticism, indeed a sense of the vanity of astrology when measured against faith in God.

Aside from the oddities in the description of the planet's orbit, certain phrases suggest that it was not entirely clear to Dafydd Nanmor how to characterise the planet. The epithets 'oer' [chilly] in line 60 and 'blin' [weary] in line 47 are entirely consonant with the standard medieval and Renaissance iconography of Saturn: the frigid, exhausted old man on his slow journey around the edge of the universe, immediately before the sphere of the fixed stars. Most distant and slowest of the pre-modern planets, it was associated with lead and the final stages of life, illness, decrepitude, and death. But other details in the poem seem to resemble a comet more than a planet. Images of fire and sparks are persistent: at line 18, Saturn is 'Uwch yr haul fal ochr hoewlamp' [above the sun like a lively lantern]. In the following line it has 'modd fflamol' [a fiery manner], and in line 36 (as we noted above) the planet 'anfon gwreichion o'r gwrych' [sends sparks from the torch]. Its orbit is an 'eirias araul' [a sunny (i.e. blazing?) torch] at line 29. In lines 55-59, the poet ascribes the plague to Saturn's breach of its orbit, its going 'o'i chwrs allan' [out of its path]. This fanciful deviation from traditional astrological symbolism is telling, rather resembling depictions of comets, the appearances of which seemed to disrupt the orderly pattern of planetary cycles.

The elision between the standard astrological imagery of Saturn and that of something more comet-like is suggestive. The most famous comet in question appeared in March 1402, and, as we know from the Chroniclers, gave tremendous encouragement to the rebellion of Owain

Glyndŵr.[19] An interesting poetic description of the event survives in the 'Cywydd y Seren' [*Cywydd* of the Star], possibly by Gruffudd Llwyd ap Dafydd ap Einon (c. 1380-1420), once misattributed to Iolo Goch, but in fact several years too late to be authentic.[20] The poem juxtaposes three significant comets: the Star of Bethlehem, the comet interpreted by Myrddin (Merlin) for Uthr (Uthr Pendragon) in *Brut y Brenhinedd*, and the comet of 1402. *Brut y Brehinedd* is the generic term for the Welsh translations of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*. The relevant section of the *Brut* is, as stated above, Book 7, corresponding to the Latin *Prophetiae Merlini*. By the 15th century these were well-assimilated into Welsh tradition and existed in at least three Welsh versions; the 'Cywydd y Seren' echoes the text closely at times.[21] The section describing the 1402 comet runs as follows:

- A'r drydedd, cymmyredd cêd,
I Wynedd wiw a aned;
Yn anian fawr, yn un fodd,
Un-sail, ac yn un ansodd;
Yn gannaid ruddel felen,
Yn gadr ei phaladr a'i phen.
Pawb achlan o'r lle'r hanwyf
A ofyn im, eofn wyf,
Budd a ddaw i'r llaw lle'r êl,
"Beth yw y seren boeth awel?"
Myfi a wyr llwyr loyw-ryw

19 For Glyndŵr's own interest in prophecy, see D. Johnston, *Llên yr Uchelwyr: Hanes Beirniadol Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg 1300-1525* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005) p. 353.

20 The poem may however in fact not be by Gruffudd either; though it was ascribed to him in the first edn. of *Gwaith Iolo Goch ac Eraill*, ed. H. Lewis, *et al*. (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1924), the 1937 second edn. removed the poem, and it has not been included in Rhiannon Ifans' recent *Gwaith Gruffudd Llwyd ac Eraill* (The Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth, 2000).

21 For the textual history of the Welsh translations of this subsection of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, see B. F. Roberts, 'Copïau Cymraeg o *Prophetiae Merlini*', *National Library of Wales Journal* 20 (1977), pp. 14-39.

Deall hyn, a dillyn yw.
- Dur yw ei phaladr, neu dân,
A draig i'r Mab Darogan.[22]

And the third comet (a gift of honour),
is born to worthy Gwynedd;
mighty in nature, with the same will,
the same foundation, the same quality [?as the other portents];
dazzling, crimson-coloured, tawny,
its tail and head are prodigious.
Absolutely everyone where I am from
questioned me (I am not afraid,
Victory will come to his hand where it may pass):
- 'What is the nature of the hot star of wind?'
I myself know full well in bright fashion
all this learning, it is refined:
fierce is its ray, or its fire,
and [it is] a dragon for the 'Man of Prophecy'.

The 'Man (or 'Son') of Prophecy' was the Welsh term for the prophesied redeemer who would return to lead the Welsh to throw off the Saxon yoke and retake the whole of Britain. Various historical figures were identified by contemporary prophetic poets with the 'Man of Prophecy' during the Middle Ages. But the point of this passage is that Geoffrey of Monmouth's scene of Merlin interpreting a comet has become assimilated to the persona of the Welsh prophetic poet, who is figuring himself as Merlin's heir and the successor to his skills. A number of other examples of this image survive in 15th century Welsh prophetic poetry, enough to make it clear that the literary trope of the poet-as-interpreter-of-comets was a widespread one. Viewed in this light, Dafydd Nanmor's puzzling elision of the characteristics of chilly Saturn with a fiery comet begins to make sense: it represents the skillful elision of an older, 'native' topos with the newer astrological learning. The poet thus lends astrology an archaic sheen in his poem, weaving it into the repertoire of mantic skills associated with the Welsh professional poet.

22 *Ceinion Llenyddiaeth Gymreig*, Vol. I, ed. O. Jones (Glasgow & Edinburgh: Blackie, 1876), p. 20.

Horoscopes in late 15th century Wales?

We have seen, therefore, that the details of the poem suggest that Dafydd Nanmor and the poets of late medieval Wales had an interest in astrology, and that they may well have had access to more detailed information about planetary movements than has hitherto been suspected. The poem to God and Saturn suggests that Dafydd was somehow directly aware of the spectacular astrological phenomena of September 1478. One other example from the period exists of an astrological configuration being enshrined in verse. This is the September *awdl,* or 'stanza', of the B-text of the 15th century 'Englynion y Misoedd' ['Verses on the Months'], and it betrays astrological knowledge. These collections of gnomic verses associated with the twelve months, existing in several versions, seem to have been composed in the middle-to-late 15th century, despite indications of contemporary belief in its great antiquity.[23] A detailed account of this astrological reference has been published by Nicolas Jacobs, so I will summarise.[24] Jacobs shows that the September verse in the B-text contains a variant which refers to a 'planed' [planet] conveying information associated with the birth of the 'Son of Prophecy'. The first lines of the September stanza run:

Mis Menni [=*Medi*] *mynaig planed*
mwynieithus mor a[*frif*]*ed*
knawd gwyr a meirch yn lludded
knawd aeron ac yd ddved
mab darogan a aned
a'n dwg o'n dwgn gaethiwed….[25]

Month of September, a planet speaks;
Gentle-tongued, expansive is the sea;
The flesh of men and horses is weary;
Ripe is the flesh of corn and fruits;
A Son of Prophecy is born,
Who will take us out of our grievous captivity…

23 For internal reasons, as indicated below, the version of the B-text under discussion seems to date from the late 1480s.

24 N. Jacobs, ''Englynion' y Misoedd: Testun B neu Fersiwn Llansteffan 117 a Pheniarth 155', *Dwned* 6 (2000), pp. 9-24.

25 Ibid., p. 16.

This can only refer, he argues, to the birth of Prince Arthur, eldest son of Henry Tudor, on the 16th September 1486. And indeed, Jacobs shows that there were very significant astrological aspects formed on that day. In astrological terms, the moon was conjunct Mars in Gemini, and both were in 'trine', or an angle of 120° to Mercury in Libra, a fortunate aspect in medieval astrology. Venus in Leo was halfway between Mercury and the conjunction of the moon and Mars, forming a similarly propitious 60° angle, or 'sextile', to both. Jacobs' discussion omits the Sun-Jupiter aspect and the signs in which the planets are placed, but these may well be important. In particular, Venus and the Sun are in 'mutual reception', that is, being placed in each other's natural signs (the Sun rules Leo and Venus rules Libra.) This configuration was considered highly significant in medieval astrology, and equivalent to a conjunction between the planets involved. It is also significant because Venus (ruling the sign in which the Sun is placed) is in Leo, the sign of royalty. The Sun in Libra is also in a 'square' or 90° aspect to Jupiter, which was considered less favourable, but this is mitigated by the fact that Jupiter is the 'greater benefic', the most benign of the planets. The overall pattern would undoubtedly have been considered highly fortunate for a royal birth, presaging a long and successful reign—somewhat ironically given Prince Arthur's unfortunate demise aged fifteen in 1502.

Jacobs cautiously argues that this astrological configuration must have been perceived by naked-eye observation, rather than by the drawing-up of a horoscope using an ephemeris and tables of latitude. But the astrological pattern at the birth of Prince Arthur would have been considered rather spectacular, and its exceptional quality is seriously reduced if we limit ourselves to what would have been obvious to the naked eye. Mercury would have been visible in the evening and Venus in the morning, as they are both nearly at their maximum distance from the Sun; according to Jacob's argument, the sight of Mercury would have been rare enough in northern latitudes for it to be considered a portent in and of itself, and that therefore the 'planed' of the poem is Mercury.

A counter-argument can be raised against this interpretation. Jacobs' date for the poem corresponds to an intricate and propitious *astrological* pattern, but to a much less vivid *astronomical* pattern visible to the naked eye. In such a context, there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the possibility that the new-born prince's nativity could have been known to a Welsh poet, especially given the huge importance of the Tudor dynasty to Welsh hopes as embodied in the corpus of Welsh prophetic poetry. If we accept that the 'Son of Prophecy' here can only be Prince Arthur, and

that naked-eye observation is to be taken as the source of the reference to a 'planed', then one has to argue that the unusual astrological pattern is largely coincidence, because most of it would have been quite invisible.

Further, Hilary Carey has shown that astrology had become embroiled in court politics during the 14th and early 15th centuries, often dangerously, and that by the end of the 15th century this 'Royal Art' had become the victim of its own success and was becoming more widespread outside court culture.[26] This means that we can be more or less certain that a horoscope for Prince Arthur would have been erected, as there is considerable evidence for Henry Tudor's interest in astrology. His relationship with the Cambridge physician and astronomer-astrologer Lewis of Caerleon, whom we have already met, was strong enough for the latter to be cast into the Tower by Richard III in 1485, as a result of his patron's support for the Duke of Buckingham's conspiracy against the king. Lewis apparently put the time to good use, occupying himself by calculating canons for tables of eclipses.[27] Between roughly 1490 and 1503, the Italian astrologer William Parron (his Italian name is lost) became attached to the royal court, where he dedicated a defence of astrology to the king and published single-sheet prognostications.[28]

Conclusion

Thus we have evidence not only for Henry VII's interest in astrology, and also for the dissemination of astrological knowledge through the social classes in the 15th century, but for specific interest in such knowledge on the part of a number of Welsh poets professionally concerned with prophecy. I would argue that Dafydd Nanmor's '*Cywydd* to God and Saturn', when juxtaposed with the other evidence quoted above, suggests that access to and understanding of detailed astrological information, perhaps via people who had seen a particular horoscope, would have been

26 Carey, *Courting Disaster,* pp. 154-63.

27 See Kibre, 'Lewis of Caerleon', p. 102. Carey notes that Lewis would have been 'more than likely…[to have] provided astrological judgements, as well as medical advice and political favours, to his noble clients', and that in 1486 he was honoured by being made a knight of the king's arms in St George's Chapel, Windsor. (Carey, *Courting Disaster*, pp. 156-7.)

28 For a fuller description of Parron's career, see C. A. J. Armstrong, 'An Italian Astrologer at the Court of Henry VII', in E. F. Jacob, (ed.), *Italian Renaissance Studies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 433-54.

perfectly feasible for a Welsh poet in the late 15th century. The poem to God and Saturn, despite its eventual opting for a religious explanation for the plague of 1478, suggests that Dafydd Nanmor was well-informed about astrology, perhaps from a fellow-poet such as Ieuan ap Rhydderch, with his university education, or Gutun Owain in his role as scribe of the astrological section of Mostyn 88. We must therefore revise our conception of the intellectual resources of the poets of late medieval Wales, and accept that the infusion of astrology into Welsh literary culture may have been both more learned and more direct than scholars of the period have previously supposed.

Fig 1: NLW MS 3026c, formerly known as Mostyn 88, p. 26, with acknowledgements to the National Library of Wales.