

THE DAYS OF THE MOON: SCIENCE, MAGIC OR POETRY?

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The thirty days of the moon is a widely spread medieval poem in rhyming couplets preserved today in nine manuscripts copied in the 15th century, two printed editions (1528 and 1547) and two 16th-century manuscript copies. The poem, as the title suggests, dealt in its 754 lines with the characters, things and qualities associated to any of the 30 days of the moon. Biblical parallelisms for each day, predictions of the future by the day of birth, appropriateness of each day for the consecution of ordinary things (travelling, getting recovered from illness, getting married, letting blood, realization of dreams), or possibilities of escaping for fugitives or of recovering lost property are the main points of the poem. The purpose of this paper is to try to determine the status of this poem both in the late medieval period and in the Renaissance. By examining some textual and extra-textual factors, such as the authorship, the audience or readers, the textual contexts, the language, the purpose of the poem, the role of astrology, and the literary theory, I will try to establish the position that this poem occupied within the corpus of astrological tracts of a more learned tradition or among the literary pieces of the time.

The thirty days of the moon is a medieval poem preserved in nine manuscript copies of the 15th century, two early printed texts (one of 1528 and another one of 1547), and two 16th century manuscripts copied from the printed editions. This poem has been classified under the name of “Lunary” or “popular moonbook that take heed of the moon alone, giving perpetual prognostications according to the thirty days of the moon” (Taavisten 1988: 23). The genre seems to comprise texts in prose and in verse with a common principle: all the texts represent a form of lunar prognostics. This particular poem, which in one of the printed editions appeared under the title of *De Cursione Lune*, was composed in rhyming couplets and it is 754 lines long. It starts with a prologue and the poem itself is divided into thirty sections that correspond to the thirty days of the moon cycle, being the first day that of the new moon.

The same structure is repeated along the poem for each of the days. In the first place, there are biblical parallelisms which provide each of the days with certain features proper to the significance of the event that happened on the same lunar day. This is followed by predictions for the future personality of the child born on that day, and the everyday life things that should be done or avoided.

Among these, we find advices for travelling, getting married, letting blood, or predictions for getting recovered from illnesses, realisation of dreams, possibilities of escaping for fugitives and possibilities of recovering lost property.

In a way the contents of the poem could be considered a medieval counterpart of our zodiacal signs, although zodiacal predictions lived together with lunar predictions at that time. The first day of the moon cycle is described in this way:

The fyrst day of the moone Adam
 Our forfather into this world cam
 That day is good witouten syn
 All thyng for to begyn
 The childe that is borne that day
 He shall be noble and wise parfay
 And of longe lyfe withouten fayle
 But often he shall be in great trauayle.
 And who so that day take sycknesse
 He schall langure longe as I gesse
 With great payne scope he shall
 And therefore thanke god of all.
 And what thou metest in thy slepe
 God in his mercy therof take kepe
 For it shall tourne the to ioy and blysse
 Therof giue vs grace not to mysse.
 But that day is ne tyme gode
 In no maner to be leten blode
 To let the blode on no vayne
 Who so wyll be withouten payne.

My purpose in this paper is to try to establish the status of this poem in the 15th and 16th centuries, to determine what position occupied among other astrological texts, if its orientation was of a scientific nature, or whether it was more connected with the literary activities of that time, or if this connection between poetry and science derives into something closer to popular magic.

Astrology during the early middle ages, in the Christian world, lost part of the power and impact that it had previously enjoyed in the classical period. The Fathers of the Church condemned the astrological theories since these were essentially against one of the basic principles of Christianity, that is, that man has been created free to choose. Astrological determinism was not compatible with the idea of free will. St. Augustine, for example, in his *De Doctrina Cristiana* says that “to desire to predict the characters, the acts, and the fate of those who are born from such an observation, is a great delusion and great madness” (St. Augustine: II, 22). But in spite of the efforts of the Church, astrology was part of people’s lives and eventually some of the astrological principles were accepted. St. Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* made a distinction between what he called “astrology” and “astronomy”, being astronomy acceptable since it was just a descriptive science making no judgements. The conflict between them continued during the middle ages, but by the time of the composition of the

poem astrological elements and Christian elements could intermingle showing no trace of this conflict. In fact, the Christian elements are used in the poem to give it verisimilitude and to grant it a kind of respectability, eliminating at the same time the fear produced by the dark and unknown world of “what cannot be explained”, by connecting well-known images and characters with the associations between the position of the stars and human life, showing in this way the influence of the macrocosm in the microcosm, and giving God a special role within the macrocosm.

These connections do not occur in treatises of technical astrology, in those texts that conformed the discipline that was one of the Seven Liberal Arts, and that had the status of a science. Even in the poetical dissertation on astrology made by John Gower in his *Confesio Amantis* connections of this kind are absent. The reason for this may be that the readership of the learned treatises was quite different from the audience or readers of popular lunaries in verse. The former were read by people who sought knowledge, the latter were read to or by those that wanted to get a practical benefit from that knowledge. The group of readers of learned treatises were then, those that saw astrology as something theoretical and at the same time did not question its scientific status. The group of readers of popular lunaries saw it as something practical, something which triggers relations of cause and effect which are not based on rational experiences, and in this sense this practical astrology gets close to sympathetic magic.

The biblical references serve here a magic function as well, because given that like is known by like, each biblical character or event gives each day specific properties formerly attached to any of these characters. So the Christian elements which are part of the poem to make a distinction between astrology and the hermetic tradition, that is, to avoid the superstition traditionally associated with magic, become new elements incorporated to the same system.

At the same time, these Christian elements taken mainly from the Old Testament, provide the poem with a kind of fictionality which is not proper of the scientific treatises either, but fits perfectly within the literary works of the time of the composition of the poem. The references are the same as those we may find in most of the stories of the Mystery Plays that were performed in the 15th and 16th centuries, and even the beginning of the prologue is quite similar to the beginning of the *Noah* play in the Chester Cycle:

God that all this worlde hath wrought
And all mankynd hath made of nought (*The Thirty Dayes of the Mone* 1-2)

I, God, that all this world hath wrought
Heaven and yearth, and all of nought (*Noah* 1-2)

These were in fact popular prayers which were, according to Rossell Hope Robbins, in wide circulation within the corpus of Middle English verse. Moreover, the poem was probably composed to be performed in front of an audience, an audience which was supposedly from all social levels as we can deduce from what we read in the prologue: “Therefore, lordynges, lesse and more/, Lysten all to my lore” (23-4) and “How we shuld here, heyghe and lowe/, Our destenyys

and our happys knowe" (49-50).

The idea of a unified general audience does not seem plausible, and these lines should be considered probably just as literary formulas, although within the context of astrological determinism "the high" and "the low" are going to become equals, since the destiny marked by the position of the moon at the moment of birth is the same for those born under the same lunar circumstances. In any case, it seems that the audience for whom this poem was composed was not the most literate part of the population. The topics dealt with, and the language used to compose the poem (a plain language intended for being understood by everyone) indicate that this poem was not for the instructed.

The audience of the poem and its purpose are closely linked. It is intended for the lower classes and the purpose, then, must meet their needs. In the prologue of the poem it is stated that the poem "wryten they be for ouer profyte/ for oure solas and our delyte" (11-12). So, profit, comfort and delight are then supposed to be the three main functions of the poem, functions that, are clearly connected to those attributed to both the poetics and the rhetoric during the Middle Ages: *docere, movere, and delectare*. The poem has a didactic function, and it teaches truth, not fiction, as we read on lines 19-20: "For I shall tell you no fable/ But thynges bothe good and able". So to begin with, it teaches that there are forces in the universe that man cannot control, and it teaches that our destiny does not depend entirely upon us, but at the same time it shows that on everyday life the human being has the possibility of choosing, and it teaches how one should choose. Secondly, the poem provides comfort for those who choose according to the advise given in the poem, since their election will give them a better living, and all this will help them to make the misfortunes of their lives more acceptable. Lastly, the poem, when performed before an audience or when read, represents a form of entertainment according to the taste of that time, and as such it provides delight. Considering that it serves this threefold function (*docere, movere, and delectare*), the text would be more in the literary tradition than in the scientific tradition where the texts do not need to be a form of entertainment, although they must have a didactic function and in many cases they must provide comfort as well.

In a sense, from the Aristotelian point of view the theme of the poem would not conform to the principles that would make it poetry, since the form (verse) is not what determines its nature, and its partly scientific status cannot be considered a form of imitation (Preminger et alii 1974: 108); on the other hand, for Plato and the Neoplatonists the poem would perfectly fit under such denomination. Proclus, for example, in his work *On the Nature of the Poetic Art* distinguished three kinds of poetry related to the three faculties of the soul: the poetry produced by divine inspiration which is related to intuition, the poetry produced by reason, related to the rational soul, and the poetry produced by fancy (Preminger et alii 1974: 314). The second type, that produced by reason, is essentially didactic and presents the lore of science in attractive forms (Preminger et alii 1974: 312). This is precisely the kind of poetry we are dealing with in *The Thirty Days of the Moon*.

When the poem came to the printer in the 16th century, the editors who decided

to print this text, decided at the same time about its nature. Robert Wyer, who was one of these editors, became a famous English printer who printed mainly religious and scientific treatises. The fact that this poem was printed at least in two occasions is probably indicative of its wide diffusion and popularity. The most important difference between the poem in manuscript form and the poem in print, lies in the fact that in the 15th century this piece of work was anonymous and in both renaissance editions the poem was attributed to Aristotle. According to A. Minnis “works of unknown or uncertain authorship were regarded at that time as apocryphal and believe to possess an *auctoritas* far inferior to that of works which circulated under the name of *auctores*” (Minnis 1984: 13). Scientific works relied mainly on authorities that were their basis and their support and as Foucault says “scientific texts were accepted as ‘true’ only when marked with the name of their author” while literary pieces “were accepted, put into circulation, and valorised without any question of the identity of their authors” (Foucault 1969: 149). Taking into account these appreciations, we could say that in the 16th century the nature and status of this poem changed even though the text was not altered at all. At this time it was considered science more than anything else, even if it shares very few features with other scientific works of the time. It was probably just the projection of a popular view of the scientific lore, widely accepted and understood during the 16th century by a great part of the population.

This view would agree with that of several authors in the Renaissance. Sidney, for example, in his *Defence of Poesie* states that the form that is used to compose this particular work, that is, verse is “but an ornament and no cause to Poetrie, since there have bene many most excellent Poets that never versified, and now swarme many versifiers that need never ansvere to the name of Poets” (Duncan-Jones 1989: 218). So probably in accordance with the taste of the people of the 16th century, the emerging literary theory, the new conventions adopted for poetry, the topics dealt with in the poetry of the Renaissance and the general changing of attitude, what was composed a century earlier for profit, comfort and delight will eventually lose its primitive function and, consequently, should have acquired a new one: as any other *auctoritas* it should have served as basis for other works, it should have been a model, it should have been cited by other authors and it should have remained as time went by. Nevertheless, the destiny of this poem was nothing of that kind. Beyond the 17th century there are no traces of the poem at all. It was of no interest for science and it was of no interest for literature, so it was forgotten.

From our perspective, the nature or the status of this poem is then difficult to establish. It was science, magic and poetry during the time in which it circulated and was popular, but apart from the diachronic variation in its nature, there are different levels in which any of these three conceptions (magic, science and poetry) have a distinctive relevance. At the textual level, due to the implications of what we read, we cannot but consider the poem “poetry.” At an interpretative level, due to the relations that are established within the poem, it should be considered “magic.” And at a contextual level that goes beyond the text itself, its literal or anagogic interpretation, the poem could be considered “science.”

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