

PRELUDE

Two thirteen-year-old boys were having a fistfight in the classroom, surrounded by a gaggle of cheering classmates. A smaller boy at the back of the room, acting as lookout, sounded the warning as the teacher approached and the children quickly ran to their seats with an innocent look on their faces. The teacher, known only as “Master Roger”, rolled his eyes as he walked into the class – he’d heard the commotion, of course, and shrugged it off. They were bright kids, and he wasn’t going to discipline them for letting off steam. After all, they were sitting down now, quiet as mice, and it was time for the class to begin.

“Why is astrology the finest of all the arts?” asked Roger. A couple of hands shot up. “Is it because the whole of nature can be represented by just seven planets and twelve signs, instead of having to test everything individually?” asked one boy, the class swot. “Yes, very good, William, but what else?” Another boy, who’d been looking out of the window and apparently not paying attention – the one who’d started the fight, in fact – smirked and butted in. “It’s because you can tell the future and that gives you power over other people!” The teacher nodded benignly. “Very good, Robert, I’m glad that somebody has been listening to my lessons.”

This depiction of children being taught astrology is not a scene from Harry Potter, but a reconstruction of a real class in a real school in twelfth-century England. The school in question was the Cathedral School at Hereford; it is still an active school, and is one of the oldest schools in the country. The teacher was known simply as “Master Roger”, and to later historians as “Roger of Hereford”. The subject being taught – horoscopic astrology – was new, too, at least to scholars in Christian Europe. Roger was teaching cutting-edge stuff – he’d read the latest texts from the Islamic world that had recently been translated into Latin, and had compiled these exciting new techniques into a textbook for his students – the first such textbook in England.



Figure 1.1: Hereford Cathedral.

I can sense eyebrows being raised reading this. One might expect a school attached to a cathedral to be focusing on religion, or teaching children to sing hymns. Why would a schoolteacher in the twelfth century have been teaching children astrology?

Surely the Catholic Church – and England was entirely Catholic, as it would be for another four centuries – has always been thoroughly opposed to astrology, as it is today? On top of that, why would Islamic texts be taught in a Christian school, at a time when Christians and Muslims were fighting over Jerusalem in the Crusades?

However, as astrologers, we may have more practical questions than that. Never mind WHY Roger was teaching astrology – we want to know WHAT he was teaching. Are there any exciting new techniques in Roger's textbook? Can we use these techniques today and incorporate them into our own astrology practice? The answer to both of these questions is "yes". Roger didn't directly innovate – all his techniques came from somewhere, but several have been lost and are unfamiliar to most astrologers today. Many

seem quite strange techniques, but do they work? The only way to answer that question is to try them yourselves, and see!



Figure 1.2: Hereford Cathedral School.

I'm fairly confident that you won't have seen Roger's textbook before. This is because it has never been published, and has never been translated into English, or any other language. Roger was teaching in an English school but, like all English scholars of the time, he wrote in Latin. He was writing in the 1170s, long before the printing press, so his textbook exists only in a small number of manuscripts spread across Europe – all handwritten, which is what “manuscript” literally means. Producing the book that you are reading now wasn't a simple case of looking at an earlier translation and commenting on it. It meant hunting down the existing 22 manuscripts, comparing them, working out the scrawling Latin handwriting with its many abbreviations and then translating that Latin into English. In common with most twelfth-century texts, the wording is confusing to a modern ear, even when translated into English, and the techniques are sometimes obscure so the book needs to be analysed to make sense of it.

The lengthy business of hunting down Roger's manuscripts and making sense of them occupied me for the best part of a decade, and was the topic of my PhD, which you can freely download.¹ However, the thesis goes into a lot of academic detail about the format of the manuscripts, an analysis of the Latin, and an examination of Roger's sources and techniques – but it doesn't give a complete translation of what Roger wrote. I started off doing my PhD with the aim of hearing what Roger had to say and making this information available to astrologers today, so after completing my thesis I was very keen to produce a book aimed at astrologers, not academics – which I hope is what I've done with this book.

What I've aimed to do in this book is to give Roger a voice – a modern voice, where instead of talking to you in Latin or archaic English, he can go through his techniques and explain them to you in modern English. Roger's original text doesn't have many worked examples, although as a teacher Roger probably would have done worked examples in the class in front of the students, so I've included numerous examples in this book. I want to recreate for you the experience of learning astrology in Roger's classroom, but from the comfort of your own twenty-first-century home rather than a hard classroom bench.

So – sit in your favourite chair, grab a cup of tea, and let Roger teach you his version of astrology starting off with simple techniques and building on them, and look at the examples I've provided to illustrate them. Then try them out for yourself. Roger was a brilliant teacher, but he's been silent for over eight hundred years. Now, at last, we can let him speak again!

¹ Chris Mitchell, 'Roger of Hereford's *Judicial Astrology*: England's First Astrology Book?', PhD thesis (2019), <https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.11793636>.