

# Dancing and Dicing with Death: literary evidence for some lost wall paintings in Wales<sup>1</sup>

by

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*The survival of medieval wall paintings is a matter of chance, and what survives is not necessarily representative. Documentary and literary evidence can give us an insight into what has been lost. In Wales, traditional vernacular poetry suggests the existence of a possible three depictions of the Dance of Death, as well as other representations of the figure of Death. These add to the very small number of surviving examples of the art of the macabre and suggest that the cult of the memento mori was more widespread in Wales than has hitherto been argued.*

Our knowledge of medieval wall paintings is almost entirely dependent on the accident of survival: and we should not assume that patterns of survival are random. Discoveries over the past decade at Llanarfarn in the Vale of Glamorgan serve as a reminder of how much there may be yet to be revealed, but they have survived precisely because the parish was too poor to do major building work on the church in the nineteenth century. Nor was there a wealthy local landowner prepared to put money into church building to outshine the Nonconformists. Elsewhere, in wealthier or more populous parishes, we have occasional records of paintings stripped from walls or destroyed when old churches were demolished and rebuilt. At Llanblethian, a few miles from Llanarfarn and the parish church for the town of Cowbridge, painted plaster was scraped from the walls in 1896-97 as part of a major renovation campaign. The architect, Charles Fowler, recorded the painting (which he seems to have interpreted as the Instruments of the Passion, though it probably formed part of a Sunday Christ) but saw no reason to save it.<sup>2</sup>

By that date, William Morris had already established the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. It was the architect G.E. Street's destruction of wall paintings at Burford that triggered Morris's concern, and he actually called the Society 'Anti-Scrape'.<sup>3</sup> In spite of Morris's efforts, though, wall paintings continued to be lost: many of those recorded by Keyser in 1883 no longer survive.<sup>4</sup> Even at Llanarfarn, the lower part of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy is missing, damaged when George Pace built a small vestry by the south door in the 1960s.

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We have some evidence for what has been lost. As well as antiquarian descriptions, there are references in wills and in churchwardens' accounts. It is not always possible to be sure whether references are to wall paintings or to three-dimensional carvings. In 1491, John Keyser of East Peckham (Kent) left 6s 8d for 'the payntyng of the image of our lady of Pitie' and 10s for 'the payntyng of the image of Saint Christofer'.<sup>5</sup> These have been assumed to be wall paintings but three-dimensional images were also painted: the same will left 6s 8d for the repair and gilding of the rood. As late as 1540, Edmund Flatchere, vicar of East Malling, asked for burial before the picture *and* image of the Virgin Mary in the chancel there.<sup>6</sup> Rather clearer are the churchwardens' accounts. In Halesowen in 1512-13, a painter from 'Bromycham' (Birmingham) was paid 19s 'for pentyng the dome'.<sup>7</sup> Most if not all the references to the Sunday Christ appear to be of paintings rather than carvings.<sup>8</sup> Most explicitly, in 1530, John Wadeluff asked to be buried in All Saints' Church, Darfield (E. Yorks.) 'betwene the pictor of Seynt Sondag and the pictor of Seynt Erasmus in the north syde of the church'.<sup>9</sup>

Wales has few medieval wills and no pre-1558 churchwardens' accounts. There is however a considerable body of poetry in Welsh which is still a largely untapped resource for belief and practice in the late medieval church. Until recently, most writing about this poetry has been in Welsh and has been concerned largely with philology and the technicalities of establishing and editing texts. More recently, an ever greater amount has been made available in translation and it is being increasingly used as a source for culture and society as well as belief.<sup>10</sup>

The position and hierarchy of the bards was laid down in Welsh law from the early period. As portrait and religious painting grew in prestige in mainland Europe during the Middle Ages, so dawned the age of the professional artist who could command considerable fees. In Wales however, the poet already had this status. The professional paid poet had existed for centuries in a system which has been described as very similar to the professional closed craft guilds which gave them certain privileges and kept membership closed to the select few.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to consider why this role of the professional poet should continue to exist in Wales throughout the medieval period while other societies were seeing this move to the visual arts. There is no doubt that Welsh princes and nobles wanted to emulate the new culture that spread into Wales from the east – indeed, there had always been cross-fertilisation of ideas since possibly pre-Roman times. However, the very identity of Welshness was under threat following the Norman invasion of England. As the Normans started moving into Wales, they brought with them a Norman-French way of life. This had already changed English (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) culture and life beyond all recognition and it is perhaps as a reaction to this that some Welsh customs were held on to so tenaciously. After the fall of the Welsh princes, it was the gentry, the *uchelwyr*, and the clergy who were the main patrons of traditional poetry. While some of this class spoke English (and possibly, in the earlier part of the period, French), Welsh was their main language, and the poetry they commissioned was thus accessible to all. Many of the descendants of the Norman invaders became culturally and linguistically bilingual and were enthusiastic patrons of the bards.

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Welsh is nearer to modern Welsh than English of the same date is to modern English, so the task of analysing this poetry is to that extent

easier. However, interpreting the poetry requires an understanding of the context of its commissioning and performance, and of the very rigid structures of Welsh verse forms.<sup>12</sup> This was poetry composed for oral performance, so its audience was not confined to the literate. In most cases it was only written down some time after its composition, often not by the poet. It was usually composed to commission, sometimes to a tight time frame. Much of our material about religious belief comes from a genre of poems known as *marwnadau*.<sup>13</sup> This translates roughly as ‘elegies’, but there is nothing elegiac about them. Anticipating the ‘Renaissance cult of fame’ by centuries, they focus on praise for the deceased person’s virtues and achievements, and on outpourings of grief for their loss.<sup>14</sup> Some appear to have been composed for performance at the time of the funeral, possibly at the funeral feast; others may have been performed later, at the commemorative feasts for the month’s mind or year’s mind.<sup>15</sup>

In order to interpret and analyse the poetry, it is first necessary to understand the principles of how it is constructed. The earliest Welsh poetry is believed to date from the sixth century and developed into a unique style called *cynghanedd*. This development continued throughout the centuries and was in use in a modified format during the medieval period. Such poetry remains popular to this day and it relies heavily on the fact that in Welsh there are nine consonants which may undergo a change called mutation. These mutations are governed by specific grammatical rules; for example, the word for cat in Welsh is *cath* which has the consonant c as its first letter. This particular consonant can mutate in one of three ways: to say my cat this becomes *fy nghath* where the c has become ngh; to say your cat then it becomes *dy gath* where the c has mutated to a g; finally her cat would be *ei chath* with the c this time changing to a ch.

*Cynghanedd* also requires a strict methodology of how sentences are written within a poem. Perhaps the easiest of these rules governs the number of syllables that a line may have; this number is dependent upon the type of *cynghanedd* being used. There are then rules concerning the use of consonants within a sentence. Any consonants in the first half of a line have to be repeated in the second half. For example, if we look at a line from Guto’r Glyn’s work:

Llif Noe yw’r llefain a wnawn

It can be seen that the ll, f and n in the first half of the line are repeated in the second half. The *cynghanedd* is further complicated by the need for rhyme; often there will be rhyme within a sentence as in the following line from Dafydd ap Gwilym:

Trugaredd, ddisymlwedd serch

Here the internal rhyme of *edd* occurs. Most often, the rhyme occurs at the end of lines similar to that of English poetry.

Thus, it can be seen that when Welsh poets compose their poems in the *cynghanedd* style, there are some quite severe restrictions on which words may or may not be included if the poem is to work. When a poet had happened upon a particular line which conveyed the message which he wanted, he often re-used this line in other poems. It must therefore be recognised that the poet may have chosen a specific word not necessarily for its meaning but more for it to fit within the *cynghanedd*; the meaning that the poet is trying to give to a line or series of lines in the poem may need to be inferred rather than understood

directly from the words used. In the hands of an accomplished practitioner this produces poetry of great force and emotional charge. For less capable poets, though, it can mean their work becomes formulaic, as, being forced to choose words to fit the structure, it can degenerate into incomprehensible doggerel. All this has to be borne in mind when using the poetry as evidence.

With all those caveats, though, the poetry is a remarkable resource, providing us with evidence for lost carvings as well as wall paintings. As Glanmor Williams pointed out some years ago, it is the poems which provide us with much of our evidence for the statues and shrines of the Virgin Mary in places like Penrhys.<sup>16</sup> There are poems to no less than fifteen rood screens in Wales. Virtually all the screens have vanished or have left only traces in the church buildings, but some of the poems have crucial detail about the appearance of the carvings. It is the poems of Tomas ab Ieuan ap Rhys, Gwilym Tew and Hywel ap Dafydd ap Ieuan ap Rhys, for example, which suggest that the roods at Llangynwyd and Brecon may have depicted the thieves as well as Christ, and that Brecon in its final form also included the symbols of the four Evangelists.<sup>17</sup>

The poems are particularly important for their information on a genre of wall paintings less likely to turn up in other sources – the art of the macabre. Like cadaver tombs, wall paintings of the story of the Three Living and the Three Dead and the Dance of Death seem to modern eyes designed to terrify, and this may have been part of their purpose. They had a more constructive aspect, though: they reminded of the imminence of death and the need to prepare. The story of the Three Living and the Three Dead – three kings or three young noblemen, out hunting, confronted by three rotting corpses who warn them ‘As we are, so you will be’ – was a reminder of the vanity and transience of worldly pleasures. Depiction of Death dragging all social orders into a fatal dance had an egalitarian aspect to it: all are equal in the face of death.

Little of this art has survived in England, though we do have literary references to the famous Dance of Death in the Pardon Churchyard at Old St Paul’s.<sup>18</sup> For some idea of how this might have looked, we have to turn to the surviving paintings of the Dance in places like Tallinn and Lucerne, and to records of destroyed paintings like the one at Lübeck.<sup>19</sup> There were wall paintings of the Dance in the Guild Chapel at Stratford-on-Avon, painted cloths and tapestries at Long Melford, Bristol and Salisbury (and possibly among the hangings in the Tower of London). A single stained glass panel showing Death dragging a bishop into the dance survives at Norwich; there are painted panels at Hexham, misericords in Windsor and Coventry, and the rib vaulting of the Lady Chapel at Rosslyn in Midlothian.<sup>20</sup> There are also of course illuminated manuscripts depicting scenes like the Three Living and the Three Dead, and early printed versions of the Dance of Death (the most famous probably being Holbein’s, planned in the 1520s, first published in its final form in 1538 and with numerous editions since).

Evidence for the art of the macabre is even more sparse in Wales. The recent discovery of a wall painting of Death and the Gallant at Llancarfan in the Vale of Glamorgan (Fig. 1) has intriguing comparisons with the similar painting at Newark (Norfolk) and the lost painting in the former Hungerford Chapel in Salisbury Cathedral, but by its uniqueness it emphasises the scarcity of other surviving examples in Wales.<sup>21</sup> While there are some poetic references to the Dance of Death, it is often referred to as

the ‘Dance of Paul’s’.<sup>22</sup> This was a common name for the Dance and does not always mean the specific version of the Dance at the Pardon Churchyard, but in at least one of the poems it clearly does. A *cywydd* by Lewys Glyn Cothi in NLW MS Peniarth 54 describes how

Ynghappel powls i gwelais  
ddawns drud i ddwyn oes o drais.

*In the chapel of Paul’s, I saw  
A cruel dance to take a life by violence.*<sup>23</sup>

Wales has only three examples of the cadaver tomb, at Llandaff, Tenby and St Dogmael’s, and all could be described as fairly anodyne, with none of the worms, toads and other creatures which appear on cadaver tombs and brasses elsewhere.

All this might lead one to suspect that the culture of the macabre had less influence in Wales, and this would be in line with the relative lack of emphasis on the pains of Purgatory and the need to prepare for death which is found in later medieval Welsh poetry. There is however a small but significant body of poetry which could be described as macabre. The most famous example is probably Dafydd Ddu Hiraddug’s description



Fig. 1  
Death and the Gallant at Llancarfan in the Vale of Glamorgan  
*Ian Fell*

of a cadaver, *Awdl sanctaidd am ddiwedd dyn a'i gorff*:

Y corff afrifed i bryfed mewn budr gaered	<i>The corpse that was full of excess in a dirty closed place</i>
Yn fwyd i bryfed heb ged gydweidd ...	<i>As food for insects without worthy blessing ...</i>
Y llygaid glwysion yn dyllau crynion,	<i>The beautiful eyes now rounded holes</i>
Yn llawn o gynrhon, myn gwirionedd;	<i>Full of maggots, in truth;</i>
Y genau gweddus a fu chwarcus,	<i>The comely mouth, which was so playful,</i>
A fu ryfygus, yn oer ei agwedd,	<i>And was haughty, sad its form</i>
Yn dwll mingamddu, yn ambell ei gary,	<i>A sardonic black hole, unlikely to be loved,</i>
Yn dyllgorn digddu, ddygn ddifiroedd;	<i>Black sorrowful nape, pathetic loneliness:</i>
A'r dannedd gwynion fal hen ebillion	<i>And the white teeth like old pegs</i>
Yn esgyrn llwydion budron bydredd;	<i>Dirty grey putrid bones</i>
Yr hirion freichiau a'r heirdd esgeiriau	<i>The long arms and the beautiful legs</i>
Yn ffustiau gïau; hogagr bydredd!	<i>Are sticks with gristle: offensive and putrid!<sup>24</sup></i>

While there are no references in the poetry to specific Welsh depictions of the Dance of Death, or to other forms of the art of the macabre, this is entirely in line with the nature of traditional Welsh poetry of the medieval period. It piles up metaphor and reference, using language which depends on resonance to create a 'thick text' of description by allusion. It is necessary to read between and behind the lines to attempt to arrive at their inspiration. Lewys Môn's *marwnad* to Sir Thomas Salisbury of Lleweni (Denbs.) begins

Para gwymp i w'r y god?	<i>What kind of fall for the man of pride?</i>
Pa loes Angau Powls yngod?	<i>What agony the Death of Paul's nearby?<sup>25</sup></i>

The use of the word *yngod* (nearby) raises the intriguing possibility that there was a Dance of Death near Lleweni. Several of the orders of friars were known for their enthusiasm for the Dance, which they used in their sermons. Lleweni is near Denbigh, which had a Carmelite friary. Perhaps a more likely candidate, though, is the Dominican friary at Rhuddlan, a few miles to the north. The Dominicans were particularly fond of using macabre imagery in their sermons, and some of the most famous European examples of the Dance, at Basle, Colmar and Bern, were in Dominican cloisters.<sup>26</sup> The misericords of their friary at Brecon (now Christ College, Brecon), include a crudely-carved Death figure, though to modern eyes he looks endearing rather than terrifying (Fig. 2).

There is a more vivid image from the Dance in another of Lewys Môn's poems. His *Marwnad Siôn Grae* (to John, 2nd Baron Powis, d.1504) describes the activities of the 'knaves called Death':

pob pennaeth, sywaeth, o'i swydd	<i>every chieftain, alas, from his office</i>
a lusz yn ôl ei ysgwydd:	<i>does he drag by his shoulder:</i>
Diriad ydyw'r aderyn;	<i>A conqueror is the bird;</i>
dwyn sy fyw i'r dawns a fyn:	<i>taking who is alive to the dance as he wants:</i>
lladd Iarll hir, llaw deau'r llu;	<i>killing a tall nobleman, the right hand of the force;</i>
llin brenin oll yn braenu.	<i>a whole king's lineage putrefying.<sup>27</sup></i>

The images of Death dragging the chieftain by his shoulder and the king's lineage putrefying are vivid but could have been inspired by any one of the many versions of the Dance. However, the image of a bird dragging the living into the Dance does not appear in any of the surviving versions, nor in any of the other literary evidence.<sup>28</sup> The image is so idiosyncratic that it suggests a specific visual inspiration.

As his name suggests, Lewys Môn came from Anglesey, though he died and was buried at the Cistercian abbey of Valle Crucis near Llangollen.<sup>29</sup> Anglesey had a



Fig. 2

Death, from the misericords at Brecon Friary

*Madeleine Gray*

Franciscan friary, and the Franciscans like the Dominicans made extensive use of the Dance of Death in their teaching activities.<sup>30</sup> However, Anglesey's Franciscan house is at Llanfaes, east of Beaumaris and at the furthest point of the island from Lewys Môn's early home in the commot of Llifon. Many of Lewys's poems are addressed to the Gruffydd family of Penrhyn, who seem to have been among his leading patrons. The Gruffydds had a connection with the Dominican friary in Bangor, and members of the family were buried there.<sup>31</sup> This is perhaps a more likely source for Lewys's inspiration. The Welsh estates of the de Greys were in the area around Welshpool and Montgomery. It is difficult to think of an obvious location for a Dance of Death in that area. Lewys Môn seems to have lived at the abbey of Valle Crucis in his declining years, but that is a difficult journey to the north.

There may be a clearer Anglesey connection in another poem which seems to reflect a specific depiction of the Dance of Death. Dafydd Trefor was a contemporary of Lewys Môn, and Lewys is mentioned in Ieuan ap Madog's *marwnad* for Dafydd.<sup>32</sup> Dafydd Trefor was probably from Llanddeiniolen near Caernarfon but served for most of his life as priest of Llaneugrad and Llanallgo in Anglesey. His *marwnad* for Owain ap Maredudd of Porthaml in Llanidan (Ang.) includes the most detailed Welsh description of the Dance:

Ai ti, Angau, wyt yngod,  
 Carrau a gên, gŵr y god,  
 A'i sgrwd tyn o'r ysgrîn tau,  
 Gawell esgyrn a gïau? ...  
 Yn ledio i'r Dawns, leidr dyn:  
 Ledio'r Pab yn ddi'rabedd  
 A'i fwrw fo'n frau 'n ei fedd:  
 Dwyn 'r emprwr o dŵr ei dad,  
 Tynnu'r ymherodr tanad,  
 Ac ni pherchi gwedi gwin  
 Na barwniaid na brenin;  
 Y newyddian yn weddol  
 O'i grud a dynnud yn d'ôl;  
 Ti ei â'r balch tua'r bedd  
 I'r un rhod o'r anrhydedd.  
 Dyfynnaist hyd y fynwent  
 Bawb o'i radd, o'i bybyr rent ...

*Is it you, Death, who is nearby,  
 Hocks for cheeks, the bogeyman,  
 And your taut skeleton from your shrine,  
 A crate of bones and gristle? ...  
 Leading to the Dance, the thief of man:  
 Leading the Pope mercilessly  
 And striking him frail into his grave:  
 Taking the emperor from his father's tower  
 Pulling the fiery emperor beneath you,  
 And you do not respect after wine  
 Neither barons nor a king;  
 You constantly remove the newly born  
 From his crib to follow you;  
 You take the pompous towards the grave  
 To the same fate from honour.  
 You summoned to the cemetery  
 Every one from his grade, from his zealous benefice...<sup>33</sup>*

As with Lewys Môn's poem, some of the imagery here reflects the standard pattern of the Dance of Death. The taking of popes and rulers, the taking of the infant from his cradle, the taking of 'every one from his grade' – these can be found in most surviving versions of the Dance. However, the image of a ruler being pulled from his tower seems to be unique.<sup>34</sup> The word 'tŵr' is usually translated as tower, keep or stronghold: it can be used for a stately house or court, but in any case, it is unique. Like the bird in Lewys Môn's poem, it seems to derive from a specific visual source, and in the case of Dafydd Trefor's poem an Anglesey origin seems the most likely. It is possible that both Lewys Môn and Dafydd Trefor were inspired by the same painting, but it is also possible that we are looking at evidence for not one but two Dances of Death in north Wales.

While these two poems offer the clearest indication of an actual visual source, there are others with descriptions of Death that may derive from paintings or other depictions. In a *marwnad* for Siân Gruffydd (d.1505 or 1506), a daughter of the Penrhyn family who was the first wife of Sir William Herbert of Colebrook (Mon.), Lewys Morgannwg has an image of death as a game of dice:

Chwarae ag angau nid gwiw;  
 Rhy gadarn yrhawg ydyw.  
 Duw sydd, fal disiau iddaw,  
 Ar ennil oll i'r un llaw.

*Playing with Death is not worthy;  
 It is always too steadfast.  
 It is God, [it is] like [playing] dice for him,  
 Who will win everything in the one hand.<sup>35</sup>*

There is some ambiguity here: is it Death or God who is playing dice? The whole poem is ambiguous, first claiming that Siân was taken by God, then saying that Death fetched her from God's side. The idea of God playing games with human lives is an old and contentious one. As Jean Wilson pointed out in her study of a tomb carving which complained about precisely this subject, 'When Albert Einstein announced that God does not play dice with the universe, he was taking sides in an extended debate ... Stephen Hawking has announced that "God does play dice with the universe. All the evidence points to his being an inveterate gambler who throws dice on every possible occasion"'.<sup>36</sup> Terry Pratchett, of course, said 'Most of the gods throw dice but Fate plays chess, and you don't find out until too late that he's been using two queens all along. Fate wins.'

His Death figure is prepared to play chess but admits he prefers the card game Cripple Mr Onion.

The most likely interpretation of Lewys Morgannwg's image, though, is that it is Death who is casting the dice: as Lewys says, 'playing with Death is not worthy'. The best-known analogy to this is probably the famous wall painting of Death playing chess with a knight at Tåby near Stockholm in Sweden, the painting which inspired Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*. Other comparable examples relate to the Devil rather than Death. Leonard Kurtz records (without sources, unfortunately) examples (possibly from medieval mystery plays) in which the Devil is shown gambling, even gambling with God.<sup>37</sup> Maximilian Rudwin similarly claims that '[a]ccording to medieval tradition the two parties contending for our souls often resort to gambling as a means of settling their disputes', but again without sources, and the specific examples he cites are all post-medieval.<sup>38</sup> In a nineteenth-century example, the pseudo-mystery play *Le Prince des Sots*, written by Gérard de Nerval in 1830, the Devil is playing at dice with an angel, with human souls as the stakes. The angel cheats, in order to win as many of the souls as possible from the Devil, and the Devil, who has been cognizant of the questionable behaviour of the angel, threatens to pull out all her feathers and thus prevent her return to heaven if she cheats again. De Nerval may have been working from memories of medieval originals, but it is difficult to know what they might have been.<sup>39</sup>

These examples, though, relate to the Devil rather than to Death. In this context it is worth remembering that Death in medieval literature is not in fact an evil figure. In the English morality play *Everyman*, God describes Death as his 'mighty messenger', and in the Welsh morality *Ymddiddan yr Enaid a'r Corff* ('The Debate of the Soul and the Body'), the angel describes Death to the strong man: 'Kenadwr yw e yr Jesu' ('He is Jesus' messenger').<sup>40</sup> This may be the meaning of Lewys Morgannwg's rather compressed and opaque statement: Death may be playing dice, but ultimately he is acting under God's orders.

Dice appear elsewhere in the context of death. In the lower right-hand corner of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Triumph of Death*, a backgammon board and dice are among the games abandoned by a group of foolish and dissolute players as they try to escape a threatening army of skeletons. Here, though, it is Death's victims rather than Death who are the players. Similarly, in the so-called Knoblochtzer Totentanz, a printed German edition of the Dance of Death with woodcut illustrations (probably published by Heinrich Knoblochtzer and inspired by Guy Marchant's 1486 edition, so usually dated 1486/88) one of the figures being dragged away by Death is a *Spieler* or Gambler with three dice.<sup>41</sup> In her edition and translation of the original Danse Macabre poem from the cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, Sophie Oosterwijk suggests that Death's warning to the Bishop, *Vostre fait giet en aventure*, could be translated as 'Your fate depends on a throw of the dice', though the original does not specifically mention dice. Playing dice and cards was usually regarded as reprehensible: in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, King Demetrius, a gambler, is humiliated when the King of Parthia contemptuously sends him some golden dice, and the three young men whose fate is the main subject of the story are drinking and playing dice in a tavern when they see a funeral, decide to kill Death and end by murdering each other. Dice also appear in the iconography of the

story of the Crucifixion. Full representations of the Instruments of the Passion include the dice which the soldiers cast for Christ's seamless robe. Here again, dice are used in a pejorative sense.<sup>42</sup>

There are possible comparisons from an earlier date. Board games, some involving dice, are a recurring feature in Viking boat burials. Mark Hall's study of these suggests that they are mainly a reflection of shipboard life and the culture of the warrior élite. Some games, however, are laid out in a style indicating that the deceased was in a winning position, in a game either against those who survived him or against a supernatural opponent.<sup>43</sup>

Another vivid image which may suggest a visual stimulus can be found in another poem by Lewys Morgannwg. In his *marwnad* for Sir Richard Herbert of Montgomery, he says

Chwarae'r bêl y mae gelyn  
Nos a dydd am einioes dyn.  
Chwarae ag angau nid gwiw;

*The enemy plays the ball  
Day and night for the lifetime of a man.  
Playing with death is of no avail;*<sup>44</sup>

One's first instinct is probably to interpret this as a game of football, the Dance of Death as the ultimate game of *cnappan*.<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, Jean Wilson cites numerous slightly later examples of the use of tennis as a metaphor for the random cruelty of the gods and the uncertainty of fate. The repentant villain Bosola in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* says

We are meerey the Starres tennys-balls (strooke, and banded  
Which way please them)<sup>46</sup>

while Sir Philip Sidney grieved that

In such a shadow or rather pit of darkness the wormish mankind lives, that neither they know how to foresee nor what to fear, and are but like tennis-balls, tossed by the racket of the higher powers.<sup>47</sup>

These are perhaps rather classicising attitudes. Calvin, taking a more conventionally Christian perspective, insisted that God does not play games with our fate:

[T]he flesh incites us to contradiction, as if God were making sport with men by throwing them about like balls. It is, indeed, true that if we had quiet and composed minds ready to learn, the final outcome would show that God always has the best reason for his plan ...<sup>48</sup>

However, if we look again at the figure of Death and the Gallant in Llancafân, the Death figure is dragging the young man out of the window and into the churchyard. It may be that the most appropriate ball game for Death would be fives, which was often played in churchyards.<sup>49</sup> It could be played against the windowless walls of a church tower, or even against the north wall of the church. There are numerous examples of churches where lattices or shutters have been installed to protect windows. Some churches went so far as to provide steps cut in buttresses to enable balls to be rescued from the roof. Much of our evidence for this comes from the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when determined efforts were made to prevent the playing of games in churchyards, but the game can be traced at least to the later medieval period: the notes by Caroe & Partners mention a court case concerning fighting during a game of 'ball' in the churchyard at Beckington in 1498 which probably refers to handball. The game also appears in more literary contexts, albeit nearly a century after Lewys Morgannwg. According to John

Florio's translation of Montaigne, 'The gods play at hand-ball with us, and tosse us up and downe on all hands'.<sup>50</sup>

These two images from Lewys Morgannwg do not derive from as clear a visual source as the images of the Dance of Death, but they may have had a visual inspiration. Lewys came from Tir Iarll in Glamorgan (the area covered by modern Maesteg, Kenfig and Margam) and may also have lived in Cowbridge. As the two *marwnadau* discussed above suggest, though, he was active all over south and mid Wales. Following the death of Tudur Aled in c.1526, Lewys Morgannwg became the chief poet of Wales, and he was described by Glanmor Williams as 'a kind of semi-official *bardd y brenin* ("king's poet") in south Wales'.<sup>51</sup> It is difficult, therefore, to suggest possible sites for wall paintings which might have inspired his imagery. What all these poems suggest, though, is the very strong visual imagination in much medieval Welsh poetry. We are accustomed to thinking that, what other cultures did in material culture (commemoration of the dead, veneration of the saints ...), the Welsh did in poetry. However, we may also have to bear in mind that the poetry itself can sometimes offer evidence for material culture which has been lost.

## NOTES

- 1 This article is based on ideas first explored in David Hale's PhD thesis, 'Death and Commemoration in Late Medieval Wales' (unpublished University of South Wales PhD thesis, 2018, available online at <https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/en/studentthesis/death-and-commemoration-in-late-medieval-wales/7d14b42e-a69b-4968-9398-aad3b96748e0>). We are grateful to his examiners and to his external supervisor Ann Parry Owen of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies for overseeing the translation of the poems. We are also grateful to several members of the medieval-religion.jiscmail list (<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=MEIEVAL-RELIGION>) and the Church Monuments Society for contributing to our discussions of the medieval iconography of death.
- 2 C. B. Fowler, 'Discoveries at Llanblethian Church, Glamorganshire', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 5th ser. Vol. 15 (1898), 121-31, at pp. 125-6; available online at <https://journals.library.wales/view/2919943/3011708/16#?xywh=-1891%2C-201%2C6161%2C4005> [accessed 21.10.19]. The painting, illustrated in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, showed a saw, a sword and a flail dripping with blood, which was what led Fowler to identify it as the Instruments of the Passion. The presence of the saw makes it much more likely that this was part of a 'Sunday Christ', a depiction of Christ's wounded body surrounded by local farming and craft implements as a warning against Sabbath-breaking.
- 3 For detail of Morris's involvement with SPAB, see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: romantic to revolutionary* (London, rev. ed. 1977), 226-42; see also A. E. Donovan, *William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* (London, 2007).
- 4 C. E. Keyser, *A List of Buildings in Great Britain and Ireland Having Mural and Other Painted Decorations* (London, 1883).
- 5 L. L. Duncan, 'Ecclesiological Notes respecting the Deanery of Shoreham, Kent', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 23 (1898), 134-49, at p. 147; TNA PROB 11/8/618.
- 6 Our italics. Duncan, 'Ecclesiological Notes' p. 144; TNA, PROB 11/28/495.
- 7 F. Somers, ed, *Halesowen Churchwardens' Accounts (1487-1582)* (Worcestershire Historical Society, 1952) 33 (the figure is mistranscribed in R. Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings* (Woodbridge, 2008) 108 as xiss).
- 8 A. Reiss, *The Sunday Christ: sabbatarianism in English medieval wall painting* (Oxford: BAR British Series 292, 2000), 18-20.
- 9 J. Raine, ed, *Testament Eboracensia: A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York* vol. 5 (Surtees Society, 79, 1884) no. 213, 299.

- 10 See, for example, C. A. McKenna, ed, *The Medieval Welsh Religious Lyric: poems of the Gogynfeirdd, 1137–1282* (Belmont, 1991); N. G. Costigan, *Defining the Divinity: medieval perceptions in Welsh court poetry* (Aberystwyth, 2002); B. Lewis, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Saints and Shrines* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies Medieval and Modern Welsh Series 14, 2015); and the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies' Guto'r Glyn project <http://www.gutorglyn.net> and the ongoing Saints of Wales project <http://www.welshsaints.ac.uk/>.
- 11 Dafydd Johnston provides a comprehensive background to the role of the poet in medieval Welsh society in *Llên yr Uchelwyr: Hanes Beirniadol Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg 1300-1525* (Caerdydd, 2005).
- 12 For more on this see Lewis, *Saints and Shrines*, 30-54.
- 13 On the *marwnadau* and the distinctive Welsh perspective on death and commemoration, see Hale, 'Death and Commemoration in Late Medieval Wales', a detailed study in English of this very useful resource, with translations of many of the key texts.
- 14 On the Renaissance cult of fame see e.g. P. Sherlock, *Monuments and Memory in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2008).
- 15 These were the celebrations held a month and a year after death.
- 16 G. Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (Cardiff, 1976), 492-94.
- 17 C. James, "'Y Grog Ddoluriog Loywrym": Golwg ar y Canu i Grog Llangynwyd', *Llên Cymru* 29.1 (2006), 64-109; M. Gray, 'Good thief, bad thief: some thoughts on the medieval cross slabs of south Wales', *Welsh Journal of Religious History* 7 & 8 (2012-13), 24-38.
- 18 A. Appleford, 'The Dance of Death in London: John Carpenter, John Lydgate, and the Daunce of Pouyls', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38, 2 (2008), 285–314; S. Oosterwijk, "'Owte of the ffrensse": John Lydgate and the Dance of Death', in eadem, "'Fro Paris to Ingland"? The danse macabre in text and image in late-medieval England' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leiden, 2009), 99–136, online at <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/13873/03.pdf?sequence=15> (accessed 14 December 2012); eadem, 'Death, memory and commemoration: John Lydgate and the "Macabrees Daunce" at old St Paul's Cathedral, London', in *Memory and Commemoration in Medieval England: Proceedings of the 2008 Harlaxton Symposium* eds C. Barron and C. Burgess (Harlaxton Symposium Proceedings 20, Donington, 2010), 185–201.
- 19 For illustrations of many of these, see <http://www.dodedans.com/Eindex.htm> (accessed 24.04.19).
- 20 S. Oosterwijk, 'Of corpses, constables and kings: the Danse Macabre in late medieval and Renaissance culture', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 157 (2004), 61–90, available online at <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/13873>.
- 21 C. Rouse, *The Dance of Death Painted Panels on the Markham Chantry Chapel* (Newark, privately published, 1978); F. Douce, *The Dance of Death Exhibited ...* (London, 1833), 52–53. See also D. Griffith, *The Material Word. Vernacular Inscriptions in Late Medieval England* (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming). We are grateful to David Griffith for discussing his ideas with us and allowing us to see sample chapters in advance of publication. For more general aspects of the art of the macabre in medieval Wales, see M. Gray, 'The "Dawns o Bowls" and the macabre in late medieval Welsh art and poetry', *Studia Celtica*, 47 (2013), 41-57.
- 22 For an overview, see A. Breeze, 'The Dance of Death', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 13 (1987), 87–96.
- 23 Transcription and translation by Dafydd Johnston: we are grateful to him for providing us with this and for discussing the poem's significance. For an edition of this poem, see D. Johnston, 'Cywydd newydd gan Lewys Glyn Cothi', *Dwned*, 18 (2012), 49–60.
- 24 R. G. Gruffydd and Rh. Ifans eds, *Gwaith Einion Offeiriad a Dafydd Ddu o Hiraddug* (Aberystwyth, 1997), 107-08. Translation by David Hale. For the full text and translation of the poem see Hale, 'Death and Commemoration', 317-20.
- 25 E. I. Rowlands ed., *Gwaith Lewys Môn* (Caerdydd, 1975), no. 59 ll.1-2 (p. 208). Translation by David Hale.
- 26 F. Douce, *The Dance of Death ...* (London, 1833), 36. We are grateful to Chris Buckley for leading us to this reference. See also C. Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England* (London and New York, 1997), 69.
- 27 Rowlands, *Gwaith Lewys Môn* no. 83 ll. 75-80 (p. 298); translation by David Hale. For the full text

- and translation of the poem, see Hale, 'Death and Commemoration', 362.
- 28 We are grateful to Sophie Oosterwijk for checking and confirming this.
- 29 *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, online at <https://biography.wales/article/s-LEWI-MON-1480> (accessed 03.04.19).
- 30 Oosterwijk, 'Fro Paris to Ingland', 62. Available online at: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/13873> (Accessed 17 January 2016).
- 31 Hale, 'Death and Commemoration', 121.
- 32 *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, online at <https://biography.wales/article/s-DAFY-TRE-1528> (accessed 03.04.19).
- 33 Rh. Ifans, ed, *Gwaith Syr Dafydd Trefor* (Aberystwyth, 2005) no. 4 ll. 1-4, 14-26 (p. 38); translation D. Hale. For the full text and translation of the poem, see Hale, 'Death and Commemoration', 394-96.
- 34 Again, we are grateful to Sophie Oosterwijk for checking and confirming this.
- 35 A. C. Lake, ed, *Gwaith Lewys Morgannwg* (Aberystwyth, 2004), no. 88 ll. 39-42 (vol. 2 p. 457); translation D. Hale.
- 36 J. Wilson, "‘Anyone for Tennis?’: The lost brass to Captain Gervase Scrope in St. Michael’s Coventry", *Antiquaries Journal* 87 (2007), 357-64, quotes on pp. 357-58.
- 37 L. P. Kurtz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature* (New York, 1934), 221, referencing Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (Chicago and London, 1931), 142-44.
- 38 Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* 142-43, quote on p.142.
- 39 Cited in Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, 142. The play was never published but was reworked as a novel. For the play see Louis Ulbach’s introduction to the novel: Gérard de Nerval, *Le Prince des Sots* (Paris, s.d.), available online at <https://archive.org/details/leprincecessot00nerv/page/n7>.
- 40 G. Jones, *Three Welsh Religious Plays* (Bala, 1939), 256-57.
- 41 Available online at <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/totentanz1488/0002/scroll> (accessed 05.04.19). We are grateful to Sophie Oosterwijk for this reference.
- 42 See, for example, L. H. Cooper and A. Denny-Brown, ed, *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture, With a Critical Edition of ‘O Vernicle’* (Farnham 2014), esp. p. 11.
- 43 M. A. Hall, 'Board Games in Boat Burials: Play in the Performance of Migration and Viking Age Mortuary Practice', *European Journal of Archaeology*, 19:3 (2016), 439-55, DOI: 10.1080/14619571.2016.1175774. Online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14619571.2016.1175774> (accessed 02.04.19). We are grateful to Karen Schousboe for this reference.
- 44 *Gwaith Lewys Morgannwg* no. 76 ll. 49 – 51 (vol. 2 p. 420); translation D. Hale.
- 45 *Cnappan* is the Welsh version of medieval freeform football.
- 46 D. Gunby, D. Carnegie, A. Hammond and D. DelVecchio, ed, *The Works of John Webster* (Cambridge, 1995), vol. 1 p. 569 (Act 5 scene 4).
- 47 Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, ed. M Evans (Harmondsworth, 1977), 817.
- 48 J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles, ed. and trans., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, 1960), vol. 1 p. 211 (Book I ch. XVII). Norton translated this as 'tennis balls' but the original French is 'pelottes'.
- 49 The following section is based on a detailed study of architectural evidence for the playing of fives in churchyards, written by Caroe & Partners: see [http://www.caroe.co.uk/fives\\_research.php](http://www.caroe.co.uk/fives_research.php) and the downloadable pdf (accessed 15.04.19).
- 50 Florio, J. (trans.) *The Essays ... of ... Montaigne*, ed. D. MacCarthy, 3 vols (London, 1928), III. ix (III, 201).
- 51 Williams, *Conquest to Reformation*, 540.