

Stanzas and Self-Inflicted Wounds
The Original Works of Iolo Morganwg
An Essay Prepared For
Academic Skills, Course HPHP4902
University of Wales, Trinity Saint Davids

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November 22nd, 2022

Introduction

One of the primary forces behind the history, language, literature, music, culture, spirituality, and politics of what would become Modern Wales is, unfortunately, shrouded and shadowed by a posthumous label that carries with it the impact of Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter* or Nixon's Watergate. The unpardonable sin for those who labor in public or academic life:

Forgery.

That force, the 18th and early 19th century bard, Edward Williams, known more commonly as Iolo Morganwg, is accused of faking some of *The Welsh Triads*, and wholly inventing poetry falsely ascribed to the famous 13th century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym.¹ From casual reading or web-based research to serious academic study, the mark is ever present, as a suffix to his name, and instantly discredits and devalues the sum of Iolo Morganwg's corpus of work. The damage thereof is not only detrimental to his legacy but, given his extraordinary talent and love for Wales, was also a wholly unnecessary and self-inflicted wound.

A collection of his English prose, published in 1794, called *Poems, Lyric and Pastoral*, demonstrate that the bard's original content, those writings not disputed as *his*, could have had the same power, weight and positive influence on Welsh revival, on their own merit, without him ever needing one syntax of a claim of some discovered hidden manuscripts by Taliesin, or the questionable find of one new miniscule of Dafydd ap Gwilym's poetry.

This essay exams that work in general and one poem in particular, *Stanzas Written From London*.

Iolo Morganwg's Importance to the Welsh Revivalism of the 18th Century

Historian Janet Davies, writing in her *The Welsh Language A History*, describes Morganwg as 'the most exotic figure in the whole of the Welsh language and its literature.'². Akin to the renown America Founding Fathers from the same era, who were at the same time farmers, theologians, physicians and scientists, Williams lived a full and complex life. He was an antiquarian, stone mason, philosopher, patriot, poet, collator of medieval texts and Unitarian firebrand.

Mary-Ann Constantine, a key contributor to the University of Wales *Iolo Morganwg Project*, a callosal academic project conducted in 2007 whereby Williams's primary source letters, unpublished works and other documents were collated, studied and analyzed from a diverse perspective by different scholars, adds weight to the premise that Morganwg needed no imposter works, adds:

Within Wales, Iolo Morganwg still has a powerful reputation (and not just in academic or literary circles) as a pivotal figure in a period of national revival, a bringer of a potent blend of inspiration and confusion to almost every branch of cultural life.³

¹ Mary-Anne Constantine, *A Rattleskull Genius The Many Faces Of Iolo Morganwg* ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 124-127

² Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language A History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 59

³ Mary-Anne Constantine, *The Truth Against The World Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery*, ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 7

This door of influence during an era of Welsh Revivalism was opened by an extreme drive to provide for his family, and a unique, itinerant lifestyle.

Iolo Morganwg, was born Edward Williams, in Penn Onn in Glamorgan, Wales on March 10, 1747. From an early age, he followed his father's occupation, pursuing a career as a journeyman stone mason. Like a modern business traveler who has a home base but spends long days and weeks away from home, Morganwg established connections, relationships and knowledge of not just the local issues and passions of South Wales, but also Kent, Bristol and especially London.

From his youth, the bard was fascinated with medieval manuscripts and the history of Glamorgan. But these passions, although exposing Morganwg to academics, leaders, and even royals, did not provide a living for a young man with a family. This produced a unique perspective and lifestyle; a traveling stonemason poet, who was perpetually in debt while 'rubbing elbows' with Welsh expatriates, English royalty, English and writing societies and influential clergy from all over the British Isles.

Morganwg catalogued his journey and struggles, living in parallel and often paradoxical worlds, in a mass of letters to his spouse, his son, his lenders, and his rivals and friends in what The Iolo Morganwg Project refers to as a 'dizzying amount' of primary source documentation.⁴

Amongst these struggles are found Iolo's desires to be at once respectful to the English Crown whilst also influencing a populist revolution, to be opposed to the doctrines of the Catholic and Anglican church without causing such offense as to close the ears of his doctrinal opponents, to restore the ancient traditions he so revered from South Wales without devaluing the contributions of Welsh culture so well preserved amongst his northern rivals.

And lastly, how to progress the history of Wales in an overly English-run world.

Against this backdrop, during one of two long stints residing and working from London, were the *Stanzas Written In London* composed.

The Theme and Structure of *Stanzas Written In London*

London is a poem containing twenty-two stanzas written in English but using the Welsh *cynghanedd* strict meter methodology.

The theme of *London* is Iolo's deeply personal longing to escape the excesses, and corruption of England's cosmopolitan capital, to return once more to the magical, pure and simple rural life of Glamorgan. More than just a scathe against English versus Wales dynamics, he holds himself accountable for being seduced by London. It opens:

1.
When the bright morn of life appears

⁴ University of Wales, Center for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, *Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales* (2015)
<<https://www.wales.ac.uk/en/CentreforAdvancedWelshCelticStudies/ResearchProjects/CompletedProjects/IoloMorganwgandtheRomanticTraditioninWales/IntroductiontotheProject.aspx>> [accessed November 2022]

In retrospective view,
I mournful dwell on vernal years,
When time, unmarked by galling cares,
On wings of pleasure flew.

2
O blissful hours ! ere led astray
By Fame's alluring tale;
When Reason's undisputed sway,
Could every wayward thought allay;
Could o'er my heart prevail.

3
Why, Cambria, did I quit thy shore ?
The scenes I loved so dear
With wounded feelings ranking sore
I languish, and thy loss deplore,
In Folly's hateful sphere.⁵

Longing for South Wales, he laments the loss of his current muse, or inspiration, looking sadly and longingly back to its primal source, which is Glamorgan.

4
Dear native land! Though thoughtless Pride
Contemns thy peaceful plains,
By Virtue's energy supplied.
The joys of Nature still abide
Amongst thy cheerful swains.

5
Sad Memory recalls the day,
When o'er thy lawns alone,
Exploring Fancy's mazy way,
My Muse first tried her infant lay,
Made first her efforts known.⁶

⁵ Morganwg, Iolo, *Poems, Lyrical and Pastoral*, Volume I.
(London: Printed for the author by J. Nichols, sold by J. Johnson; Philadelphia,
1794, pp. 14-15

⁶ Ibid. p. 15

Stanzas 6-9 continue the poetic accolades of his native lands, then in the 10th, the bard, reading his return, pleads, 'Receive thy bard! He speeds again with truth replenished mind, to range once more thy humble plain, and pass through life a rural swain.'⁷

Then the mood and subject changes to London, the spot of his current circumstance.

11

O, London ! let me turn away
From thee my saddened eyes ;
With drooping foul, to grief a prey,
Long have I spent the joyless day,
Beneath thy tainted skies.⁸

Morganwg next explores the corruptive influences of London over the next several stanzas, holding both the city, and his own shortcomings, in contempt, crying in the 14th, '14 How throngs around her giddy train, Blind to the charms of truth ;Vice loudly chaunts her siren strain ; Exerts her wily skill to gain. The unexperienced youth.'⁹

Lastly, as a microcosm of the universal Fall and Redemption ethos, Morganwg finds conviction and redemption, seeing his folly then rising in conviction, fleeing London for his beloved Wales, thanking divine sovereignty and grace for his liberation and return to faith and reason.

18

Whilst envied Virtue nobly warms
Thy yet unconquered mind,
Fly from her vile, polluting arms
Nor gaze on meretricious charms;
Nor cast one look behind.

19

O fly ! nor let thy generous heart,
Submit to her control :
She'll soon find out its weakest part ;
Will haunt thee with insidious art,
And fascinate thy soul.

20

Bright Reason ! 'twas thy powerful hand
Preserved me from the snare,
From schemes by fell Temptation planned ;
I heard thy call, thy mild command,

⁷ Ibid. pp. 17-18

⁸ Ibid. p. 19

⁹ Ibid. p. 20

And blessed thy guardian care.¹⁰

Cynghanedd in Saes – The Overlooked Genius of Stanzas Written In London

Another scholar and contributor to the Iolo Morganwg Project, Ceri W. Lewis writes, ‘every bard was strictly enjoined to eschew, the quantity of stress of syllables, and the intricate system of consonantal alliteration, internal rhyme and balanced stress known as *cynghanedd* in Welsh.’¹¹ The poetic genius involved in Morganwg’s ability to introduce a Welsh methodology into English prose (especially given his self-perceived struggles with writing what he called ‘his English scribbles’¹² was a groundbreaking, and seldom celebrated contribution not only to Welsh revivalism but to the development of English literature and poetry as well. Had the bard stayed in this course, introducing the world to the magic and mystery of Wales through his talent and technique, history’s timeline may have had a different trajectory; the label of ‘forger’ dropped.

Conclusion - The Importance of the Timing of *London*

Moreover, Mary-Anne Constantine speculates, though not dogmatically, that *London* may have been written in the 1770’s during Morganwg’s first long stay in London, and not in the 1790s, during his second.¹³

This is very significant. The publication work was grueling and almost destroyed the indebted poet, as he had to raise subscriptions to minor works to fund the effort. The various versions and incomplete manuscripts show labor in this regard spanning over two decades. If *London* was released informally as a stand-alone work, or read in Morganwg’s circles in London, then the wide acclaim it received predated his alleged period of forgery, which is said to have taken place between his stints in London, and after 1777.

In the mid-1770s, Morganwg was viewed as a credible contributor, poet and thinker; being commissioned to write political slogans, short essays and poems read by and admired by royalty.¹⁴

This suggested fact shows that the weight of Iolo Morganwg’s English prose could have easily retained open doors of opportunity, with the weight of credibility, to teach his passions. connected to South Wales and that the immortal and infamous wound of plagiarist and forger are very much self-inflicted.

Poet Gwyneth Lewis best eulogizes the man and matter, declaring:

He knew full well his muse was wild,

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 22

¹¹ Ceri. W Lewis, *A Rattleskull Genius The Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg*, ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009)

¹² Mary-Anne Constantine, *A Rattleskull Genius The Many Faces Of Iolo Morganwg* ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 124-127

¹³ Ibid. p. 125

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 127

that sooner or later she would demand
more than the usual tributes.

He mastered London manners, the crafts of his age, the pamphlets of
his dreams, and won his place...¹⁵

¹⁵ Gwyneth Lewis, *The Truth Against
The World Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery*,
ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), poem insert prior to introduction page.

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