

What light do the extant sources shed on medieval Welsh nunneries?

Relatively little is known about the communities of religious women in medieval Wales which may be due to the lack of formal communities for religious women. Within Ireland, there were only around 64 nunneries and 15 in Scotland. England had over 100 nunneries whilst in Wales, there are only 3 confirmed long-standing nunneries.¹ The limited provision of religious houses for Welsh women has meant that there is also a lack of sources to provide insight into the lives of those who entered these religious communities. What sources we do have, such as poetry addressed to nuns, gives us valuable insight into the attitudes towards female religious spaces as well as motivations for the provision or lack of provision to female religious communities.

Nuns were largely recruited from the noble and gentry families and provided a career for girls whose only other alternative would have been marriage. Medieval nunneries served a number of functions. As well as being a course of life to girls with no other option, they also provided spiritual facilities for those wished to dedicate their life to praise of God. They also fulfilled other functions such as a place for education for nuns and as boarding houses for well off wives and widows.² The lowest ranks of society, the poor labourers, had no need to get rid of his daughters if they were unable to marry, as they could still earn a wage through others means such as working in the fields. Tradesmen and artisans were in a similar position as, although ideal for them to find their daughters husbands, they could still apprentice her to a trade.³ These reasons, coupled with a lack of dowry to pay to the nunneries, meant that nuns were largely recruited from noble women whose only options were marriage or a convent.⁴

Nunneries were often poor. During the later Middle Ages, there were thought to be around 138 nunneries in England, excluding double houses of the Gilbertine order which housed both brothers and nuns. The majority of English nunneries were small and poor. The largest and richest houses were all in London and south of the Thames; with only four of these houses having gross incomes of over £200 and only three having more than twenty inmates.⁵ The nunneries recorded in Wales were also very small and poor and held vastly smaller incomes and inmates than those of England. The Benedictine Priory founded in Usk was the only one of its order and was founded by the Clare family. The nuns at this priory were left £6 13s 4d, as well as two cloths of gold by Elizabeth de Clare (Elizabeth de Burgh) following her death but despite this, a request was made by Adam of Usk on behalf of the nuns requesting indulgences to the impoverished nunnery.⁶ In 1535, before the suppression the priory was valued at £55 and was inhabited by the prioress, Elen Williams, and five nuns.⁷ The Llanllugan nunnery was a Cistercian house founded by Maredudd ap Rhobert, whose charter was granted between 1216 and 1236. A tax assessment of 1377 records an abbess, four nuns and a chaplain named Griffin. At the time of the Dissolution in 1536, there were only three nuns recorded. In 1535, the priory was assessed as deriving an income of £9 6s

¹ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008), pp176-177

² Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, edited by M.M. Postan, (Cambridge University Press, Canto ed, 1997), pp81-82

³ Eileen Power, *English Nunneries C.1275 to 1535*, p6

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Eileen Power, *English Nunneries C.1275 to 1535*, pp2-3

⁶ Janet Burton and Karen Stober, *Abbeys and Priors: Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 2015), pp210-211

⁷ Burton and Stober, *Abbeys and Priors*, p211

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from temporalities and £13 8s 8d from spiritualities.⁸ The final Welsh nunnery, Llanllyr, was also a Cistercian house and is thought to be founded by Lord Rhys ap Gruffudd of Deheubarth and subjected by him to the abbey of Strata Florida. The nunnery was described as being small and poor and during an assessment under papal taxation in 1291, it was found to have 1200 acres of land and 60 sheep while earning an annual income of £7 10s.⁹ Little is recorded about the nunnery, but the abbess was the recipient of a praise poem, and that at the time there were four nuns present within in the nunnery. During the dissolution survey of 1535, it was recorded that the abbess Elizabeth Baynham, refused to cooperate with the commissioners and the site was suppressed in 1537, after which the abbess received a pension of £4 until at least 1539.¹⁰ There is mention of a fourth nunnery at Llansanffraid-yn-Enfael although this has not been confirmed by the findings of a charter. In some versions of the tale of the monastery at Llansanffraidd the abbot of Strata Marcell, Enoch, was said to have made many of the virgins in the convent pregnant and ‘fled with one of the nuns’. In some versions of the story, he only made one of the nuns pregnant.¹¹ It is unlikely that there was a nunnery at Llansanffraidd due to the lack of documentary evidence and the conflicting details of the tale of Enoch. It is more likely that this story was used to demonstrate the dangers of mixed communities of the male and female religious.

There is little evidence for religious houses for women in what are considered the original ‘Celtic’ areas closely associated with Britain, namely Cornwall and Brittany. There is very little evidence for the existence of religious houses for women in Cornwall in the early Middle Ages. Lynnete Olsens’ work shows evidence for only one possible monastery for women in pre-conquest Cornwall, that of St. Sitofolla. It is possible the lack of provision for communities of the female religious has something to do with a common connection between the Celtic origins of the traditional laws and practices which reflected a different perception of the role of women in the community compared to other areas of Western Europe at this time.¹²

The sizes and incomes of these nunneries in Wales differed vastly from those in England and were vastly lower than those of the institutions of their male counterparts. Whereas the net incomes of Llanllugan, Llanllyr, and Usk c.1535 were £22, £57, and £55 respectively, of the thirteen Cistercian abbeys in Wales whose net incomes we have records of, only two had incomes less than £50. Eight of these abbeys are recorded to have incomes between £100-£200.¹³ The difference in incomes between male and female houses demonstrate a lack of willingness to invest in religious communities for women in which they are encouraged to remain virgins. It is more likely that private devotion rather than claustration was the preferred method of religious devotion for Welsh women. One such reason for this may be due to the payment of *amobr*, a marriage fee, and the likelihood it could be paid more than

⁸ Burton and Stober, *Abbeys and Priories*, pp121-122

⁹ Burton and Stober, *Abbeys and Priories*, p123

¹⁰ Burton and Stober, *Abbeys and Priories*, pp123-124

¹¹ Jane Cartwright, ‘Abbess Annes and the Ape’ in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, ed by Janet Burton and Karen Stober, (University of Wales Press, 2013), p191

¹² Gwentyth Richards, *From footnotes to narrative: Welsh noblewomen in the thirteenth century*, (University of Sydney, 2005), p203

¹³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality*, p183

once. If this was the case, it is then unlikely that Welsh lords would encourage foundations where women could remain perpetual virgins.¹⁴

As well as a lack of willingness to invest in female communities by men, the lack of religious houses for women may be explained by the fact that Welsh women were not in a position to found nunneries on their own. Women in England were instrumental in founding a number of medieval English nunneries as, although minimal, they had rights to inherit property in the absences of male heirs. According to Welsh laws, women could not inherit land nor receive a dower in land on their husbands death, and instead their dowry consisted of moveable goods rather than land or property.¹⁵ As a result of this Welsh women would not have had the land to offer up to house these communities even if they wanted to. Under Welsh native laws, women appear to have had greater moveable property rights than other Western European women despite their inability to inherit land outside of special circumstances. Thus, it is possible that elite Welsh women, and possibly all free Welsh women, were more highly valued in their society or community especially as marriage partners, as because of the moveable property they would be able to bring to the marriage.¹⁶ The Welsh Law of Women provided that if her husband died, the wife was entitled to half of the common pool of chattels and moveable's of the marriage which often included livestock. Putting aside land ownership, Welsh women may have been better off financially than women in other western medieval societies in that it was possible for them to support themselves into their widowhood and may not have such need of nunneries.¹⁷

The association between the male religious houses and female religious houses is telling of attitudes towards female religious communities. The Cistercian order in its early years, generally tended to ignore women, even religious women, and an early statute forbade Cistercian abbots and monks from blessing nuns. This implies that women, even devout ones, were part of a world renounced by the Cistercians.¹⁸ It has been suggested that many post-Conquest women's houses in England originated from informal groupings which eventually, whether voluntary or not, adopted a rule. This may have been to allow a role of protection for members of the community to resist pressure from their families or even could be due to the possible threat to ecclesiastical authorities who would put pressure on them to come under male supervision.¹⁹ Political reasons may have also influenced the founding of nunneries in medieval Wales alongside the misogynistic nature of the Cistercian order. Whilst founding male houses could be a way of enhancing the donor's status and protecting the land and churches, houses for women were seen as more vulnerable and in need of continued protection.²⁰ This may have meant in times of instability and conflict between the Welsh and English lords they would have been less likely to found houses in need of constant protection.

¹⁴ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality*, pp194-203

¹⁵ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality*, p203

¹⁶ Gwentyth Richards, *From footnotes to narrative: Welsh noblewomen in the thirteenth century*, (University of Sydney, 2005), pp203-204

¹⁷ Richards, *From footnotes to narrative*, pp204-205

¹⁸ Madeline Gray and John Morgan-Guy, "'A better and frugal life': Llanllugen and the Cistercian women's houses in Wales,' in *Archaeologica Cambrensis*, 154 (2005), p97

¹⁹ Gray and Morgan-Guy, 'A better and frugal life,' p107

²⁰ Gray and Morgan-Guy, 'A better and frugal life,' p109

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Holy women were dependent on priests to perform mass and hear confessions and as such female convents could not be wholly self-sufficient. Due to this there appears to be a close connection between the religious houses for women and particular male abbeys.²¹ There are no descriptions of monastic life recorded by the nuns themselves and all of the extant evidence appears to have been written by men. No devotional literature by Welsh women has survived and it is even likely none was composed in the first place. The lack of these sources raises questions as to how much education- whether formal or informal- was given to the female religious.²² One of the letters sent to acknowledge the reparations for damage to Llanllugen nunnery was written by a monk on behalf of the abbess. It does appear to have been common practice for a proctor to write letters on acquittal of war damages on behalf of both abbesses and abbots.²³ If there was a lack of education for Welsh nuns, it may explain the lack of written sources coming from the women who inhabited these nunneries.

One example of sources relating to Welsh nuns is in the form of poetry. Although these poems mentioning nuns are composed by men, they can still give some insight into the attitude toward religious communities and even potentially to the lives of nuns. In the Middle Ages, Welsh poetry was largely composed in praise of individual patrons. In the age of the princes, the royal courts provided stable, long-term patronage but after the loss of independence in 1283/4 poets began to undertake regular 'bardic circuits' to visit patrons across a wide region. Monasteries became a valuable port of call on these journeys and abbots became patrons of the poets in the same way as the secular nobility.²⁴ Abbots provided patronage for poet in similar ways to noblemen and were members of the same social classes, and as a result of this the praise poetry aimed to them is worldly and materialistic in tone. In many cases, the poets delight in elaborating on the gourmet foods and fine wines which they had in the abbeys.²⁵ Whether exaggeration by the poet or not, the fact that it was written of the presence of fine wines and foods in abbots, shows the vastly different standards of lives between the male religious and the female religious. Female religious houses were reported to be very poor and due to their reliance on farming and agriculture it is unlikely they would have been able to partake in fine wines and gourmet foods like their male counterparts.

Writing of religious women is vastly different. Religious women are very rarely named in sources. We have the names of the women in charge at the time of the dissolution and occasionally the names of individuals appear in documents such as poll tax records.²⁶ Poetry involving religious women were different from those of their male counterparts too. For the most part, poetry involving Welsh religious women fell into the category of love poetry, with the exception of a cywydd apparently on the behalf of Abbess Annes of Llanllyr. Bleddyn Owen Huws notes that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a common pattern could be found across the cywydd gofyn genre. Almost all of them praised the potential gift bearer, introduced the person making the request, described the gift in detail and then provided an ending to the poem. The poem requesting a gift for Abbess Annes follows this pattern

²¹ Jane Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Ape' in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, ed by Janet Burton and Karen Stober, (University of Wales Press, 2013), p191

²² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality*, p185

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Dafydd Johnston, 'Monastic Patronage of Welsh Poetry,' in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, ed by Janet Burton and Karen Stober, p177

²⁵ Johnston, 'Monastic Patronage', p180

²⁶ Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Ape', p192

exactly. However, instead of praising the gift requested- as usually happens in the *cywydd gofyn*- the poet heaps scorn and derision on the animal.²⁷ Apes were commonly kept as a pet during the Middle Ages. However, nuns were particularly criticized when they kept pets consider frivolous and common pets considered appropriate for them included hunting dogs and cats used to kill vermin.²⁸ This then may explain why the ape is described in a negative manner as is atypical of these kinds of poems as it would have been considered highly inappropriate for a nun to receive these kinds of gifts as they were expected to live a minimalistic lifestyle. Despite the negativity in describing the ape, there is no attempt to portray Annes in a negative fashion. She is described as being a holy girl and the reputation of 'holy Llanllyr' is not called into question either.²⁹

According to the Bardic Grammars, nuns were to be praised for their holiness and pure way of life and their devotion to God. They were seen as an appropriate object of praise poem in a similar way to a *gwreicda*- noblewoman- and a *morwyn ieuang*- young maiden.³⁰ Among the love songs of the medieval Welsh *cywyddwyr*, there is a small sub-genre of these poems addressed to nuns as if they were available to be courted. There are few medieval examples of formal praise poetry in Welsh to abbesses and religious women which has survived compared to that of men of the church.³¹ Much of the poetry to religious women is erotic, some of it surprisingly explicit. The praise poems and elegies to women are largely directed to married women, in which they are praised for the Christian values of piety, charity and hospitality within the domestic context.³² In some poems the poet presents himself as a love suitor and the nun to whom he declares himself to is cast in the conventional literary role of the coy or disdainful maiden who as to be persuaded into the woodland. However, this role was considered inappropriate to the actual social identity of the nuns in the same ways as it was for other noblewomen to be wooed by poets such as Dafydd ap Gwilym.³³ The virtues of the nuns as holy women are more or less ignored in favour for their virtues as chaste women in the same manner as Dyddgu and other noblewomen are praised.³⁴ In the poem 'Cyrchu Lleian', the poet tells the subject of the poem to go to 'proud Llanllugen' in search of a nun to woo.³⁵ Similar to that of the poem for Abbess Annes, Dafydd ap Gwilym makes no attempt to speak badly of the Llanllugen house and instead refers to it in a positive manner. This suggest that even when speaking of the nuns at these institutions in an inappropriate manner, the same inappropriateness does not extend to the institutions themselves.

Within the poem 'Cyrchu Lleian', the *llatai* is to entice a nun from her nunnery of Llanllugen. In the poem, 'Caru dyn lygeitu lwyd', the poet tries to get the nun to renounce her vows, something which would have been impossible in medieval times. The only way for a nun to leave at this time would have been to run away and even then the authorities would have sent to capture any errant nuns and return them to the nunnery. The punishment for this

²⁷ Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Ape', p195

²⁸ Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Ape', pp196-197

²⁹ Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Ape', p199

³⁰ Helen Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns' in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21, (1991), p87

³¹ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p87

³² Gray and Morgan-Guy, 'A better and frugal life,' p110

³³ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p88

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cyrchu Lleian,' *dafyddapgwilym.net*, <<https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>>

would have been excommunication for both the nun and the man who seduced her.³⁶ This would have been common knowledge to the poet and the fact that the seduction of nuns is a common theme within the corpus of Welsh love poems suggests that the vow of religious women were not taken as seriously as a man's vows would have been. Within both of these poems, the poets seek for the trysts during the summertime, which is often associated with finding love. This further shows how the poet dismisses the vows the nuns would have undertaken which would have prevented them seeking romance with the poet.

During a time in which chastity was strictly imposed upon all noblewomen, there seemed to be little difference between praising a nun's beauty and inviting her for a woodland tryst and doing the same with any other well-born girl.³⁷ Within 'Y Ferch o'r Fynachlog Faen', the poet repeatedly insists that he has had no inappropriate contact with one of the nuns but the exaggerated manner in which he protests his innocence implies the opposite. He uses exaggerated phrases such as 'woe to me...why we have been slandered' and 'swears by the Ten Commandments'.³⁸ The constant insistence of the pureness of the nun implies the opposite of what the poet is claiming and again demonstrates how a nun's vows may not have been taken seriously. In the poem 'Cyrchu Lleian', the poet praises the beauty of the nuns and describes the one he seeks to entice to the woods as a 'fair girl'.³⁹ He uses similar language in the poem, 'Gwahodd Dyddgu', in which he is praising Dyddgu as a 'fair girl of talented nature' before inviting her to meet him in a meadow.⁴⁰ These similarities show how praise poems to nuns function in the same way as the other love poems- as praise poems to noble women who represent the values of uchelwyr society and serve to enhance the accomplishments and prestige of the men who own.⁴¹

An ambivalence of women's behaviour is expressed through the language of the nuns' poems in Welsh because it is here that the tension is at its most explicit and irreconcilable. In 'Cyrchu Lleian', the nuns are 'convent choirgirls' but also beautiful with exposed foreheads, symbolic of sexual availability. They are also described as 'god sisters to Morfudd', which could be considered a contradiction as one implies a spiritual bond while the other implies sexual experience.⁴² The corpus of cywyddwyr love songs show how the virginity of women is prized by the Church as well as secular noble society, which needs to produce healthy heirs. As a result, they are wooed with offers to abandon their virginity, abandoning what amounts to a separatist position and serving the patriarchy instead with their freedom to produce heirs.⁴³

Welsh poems differ from the Continental examples in that they are spoken entirely by male subjects and addressed primarily to male audiences- female figures are to be passive and virtually non-existent except as extensions of the male ego, a female ideal existing to be possessed as a man. The subject position of the Welsh poems is specifically male, whereas in the Continental examples, the subject position and hence the implied readership is largely

³⁶ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' pp92-93

³⁷ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p98

³⁸ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' pp110-112

³⁹ Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cyrchu Lleian,' dafyddapgwilym.net, <<https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>>

⁴⁰ Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Gwahodd Dyddgu,' dafyddapgwilym.net, <<https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>>

⁴¹ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p98

⁴² Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p103

⁴³ *ibid*

female.⁴⁴ The Welsh poems belong to a different kind of popular tradition than those of the Continental examples. Continental nuns songs, unlike the Welsh praise poems, are part of a wider literary tradition of moralizing and teaching lessons directed specifically aimed at controlling their behaviour, in particular their sexuality.⁴⁵ The few surviving nuns songs in Welsh draw attention to the fact that the genre of the woman's lament, which nuns songs form a significant part of in Continental literature, is entirely absent from the dominant literary tradition of medieval Wales. Women are not given a voice in uchelwyr society, whether as nuns, wives, or mothers, and appear in these roles as defined by male writers or poets without being able to speak for themselves.⁴⁶

Alongside poems, the female saints of Wales are also a good indicator of the importance of religion to women in medieval Wales. Hagiographical texts strongly associated native saints with a particular foundation and for the most part, sanctity seems to have been generally conferred. Most of the native saints' cults- in particular those of female saints- were confined to a particular locality. Excepting Gwenfrewy, few of the native female saints of Wales seem to have been considered of major political importance.⁴⁷ The Lives of universally popular saints, such as those of Margaret of Antioch, Katherine of Alexandria, Mary of Egypt, Mary Magdalene, and Martha were translated into Welsh sometime before the mid-fourteenth century. As with the traditions associated with the female Welsh saints, many of these universal female saints' Lives are violent and centre around the perpetual struggle to preserve the saints' virginity. With the exception of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, all of these holy women are virgins, and their sanctity and spiritual strength are linked with their physical purity.⁴⁸ This shows the importance placed upon remaining virgins within the eyes of the church and how this was prized above marriage. Although virginity was valued as the ultimate state of being, the necessity of aristocratic families to produce heirs meant that in real terms, marriage was the desired stage for an aristocratic woman in western Europe during the thirteenth century.⁴⁹ The fact that these Lives were universally popular shows how despite the need for marriage to produce heirs, the role of chasteness was still highly valued among the noblewomen of Wales.

Although there are few surviving sources relating to the lives and experiences of Welsh women within nunneries, the sources we do have can be considered useful in telling us how religious women were perceived. The fact that religious women do not appear in official records, save for a few examples such as those in charge of nunneries at the time of the dissolution, coupled with the authorship of literature about the female religious being from males, implies that although women were preferred to be chaste, the vows taken by nuns were often not taken seriously. Welsh nuns were often the subject of explicit and erotic poems in which the poets attempted to woo them away from their vows and suggests that these vows of chastity were not taken seriously and women were preferred to be chaste but

⁴⁴ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p104

⁴⁵ *ibid*

⁴⁶ Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p105

⁴⁷ Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales' in *Medium Ævum*, 2002, Vol. 71, No. 1 (2002), p6

⁴⁸ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins,' p9

⁴⁹ Richards, *From footnotes to narrative*, p202

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still produce heirs. This is perhaps one of the reasons for a lack of provision for female claustration and that it was instead preferred for private devotion within the home.

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