



Postgraduate Dissertation coversheet & feedback form:

<i>For completion by student:</i>		
Student Name <i>Joanne Louise Toft</i> Student <u>University</u> Email: <i>2015507@student.uwtsd.ac.uk</i>		
Module code: <i>HPEN7021</i>	Student ID number: <i>2015507</i>	Educational support needs: <i>Yes</i>
Dissertation title: <i>Ace of Cups.</i>		
Supervisor: <i>Dr Paul Wright</i>	Word count: Creative work: <i>12,570</i> Reflective essay: <i>2,165</i>	
I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism. Signed <i>JL Toft</i>		
Email submission: if you are submitting this form via email, please tick this box X ☐ (as a substitute for your signature) to confirm that you agree to the above declaration.		
<i>For completion by the first marker:</i>		
Comments:		

First Marker's Mark:	<i>Date:</i>
Signature:	
<i>For completion by the second marker:</i> Comments:	
Second Marker's Mark:	Date:
Signature:	
Agreed internal mark:	Date
Signature 1 st marker:	
Signature 2 nd marker:	

Proposed Mark:
Signature of External Examiner:
Final Agreed Mark:
Comments (to indicate how the final agreed mark has been arrived at):

Joanne Louise Toft

MA Creative Writing

HPEN7021 Creative Project (Dissertation)

Ace of Cups

Contents

Creative Work	Page 6	Word count 12,570
Reflective Essay	Page 46	Word count 2,165
Bibliography	Page 55	
Appendix A	Page 58	
Repository Form	Page 61	

Ace of Cups.

Prologue.

The rough hands of John Sullivan grip my arm, he smells of old sweat, beer, and sawdust. I look up at his weathered face. His eyes are fixed on the crowd, impatient on the riverbank, like hungry cattle jostling for position. His jaw fixed, he marches me through the gaggle of neighbours towards the waiting clergymen.

People hiss and mutter, 'Uppity bitch, cunning woman, ha! More like a conning woman.' Someone hawks the phlegm from their throat and spits. I feel it land on the back of my neck, and it trickles down my spine. Cowardly fingers pinch and poke the cheeks of my arse, my chemise tightens at my belly as someone tries to lift it to shame me, but John keeps dragging me onward.

I refuse to look around. If I fall, they will be on me like stray dogs, venting their misery upon me. I will not struggle; I will not risk them discovering the flint blades hidden in my folded cuffs. My only hope is tucked at my wrists, to sever the ropes that will bind me to the ducking stool. If they decide to hang me, I will open a vein.

I try to shut out the image of Patience Mayne after a week in gaol. Her nose swollen, eyes blackened and her thin grey hair matted with blood. Shivering on the gallows, she had cried pitifully and offered her purse and her house to the clergy.

A child screams and breaks through the crowd. My Alys, in her rose madder dress that she had so proudly shown these neighbours just last week. She clings to me, her thin arms encircle my waist, and she sobs at my stomach. I stroke her auburn hair with my free hand and try to swallow the lump in my throat. John Sullivan stands awkwardly still gripping my arm.

'It will be over soon. Don't fret sweetheart. It will be over soon.'

John Sullivan's wife bows her head; the wide brim of her hat hides her eyes. She who I sat up with when her first child had suffered months of colic and walked the fields with him red faced and screaming, so she could sleep.

Henry pushes through the crowd and runs his hands through his greying hair. He is breathing hard and sweating from his chase across our fields. He comes in close, puts his arms around us and roughly breaks our daughter's embrace. Wordless, he pulls her away, but she twists, trying to keep her eyes on me. I hear her sob and the crowd closes in.

I stand numb. The hairs on my arms raise in a vain effort to warm me, and as I am shoved in front of the clergy, the weak spring sunshine does nothing but expose my near nakedness.

They think they shame me.

I will not cower or beg. I will not!

The mayor, pristine in his black wool suit and crisp, white lace collar, is flanked by the vicar and the verger, the hems of their vestments muddied and damp. As John ties me to the ducking stool, they read out the charges. I cannot hear what they are saying for the pounding of my heart and the ringing in my ears.

Time has slowed.

I take a deep breath, and another as he tightens the ropes. There is a cut on his cheek from where he shaved this morning; he is close enough to kiss.

A giggle bubbles up from my chest, and John's frown of confusion makes me laugh harder, like a drunken uncle at a wedding. He steps away from me and looks to the mayor who is still reading aloud from his list of accusations.

'Undertaking the treatment of Gerald Thorndyke, with total disrespect to our honourable Doctor and hard-working Apothecary.'

Without that poultice of southernwood and goose grease the infection from the splinter in his hand would have spread and been a slow death. He had no money

to pay me, or anyone else...and I had plenty of training at my grandfather's knee. The Healers of Myddfai have more knowledge than these puffed-up fools with letters after their names.

I bite my tongue.

'Interfering in a man's right to chastise his wife.'

Yes, I dragged Daniel Jones off his wife after he split her lip and kicked her to the ground. Shame on every person in the market who stood by and watched.

'Denying the will of God and prolonging the agony of Susan Mason; God rest her soul, and that of her unborn child. May they both be at peace now.'

Yes, I failed her. Three days she battled so bravely, I tried every technique I ever heard of, ever read, but the child was breached in her womb, tangled in the cord. Her silence at the end haunts me more than her screams.

Yes, I am guilty, guilty of it all.

Something hits me between the eyes and lands in my lap. A fresh sheep turd, firm but wet. The crowd laugh and now the Vicar starts to shout to be heard.

John has not bound my hands, or my ankles. I do not think he has done this before. Surely, he did not volunteer for this job. He has wound the hemp rope around my waist three times to secure me to the chair. I can reach into my turned-up sleeve, the flint blade is still there.

My eyes meet the serpentine stare of Malachi. I hold his gaze with equal intensity, then he smirks.

Two willing volunteers step forward and put their weight behind the boom, and I am swung through the air on the other end of it, and over the river.

With a wave of the mayor's hand, I am dropped like a bag of kittens into the raging foam, its roar drowns out that of the crowd. I grip the blade and feel the sting as it cuts the palm of my hand.

The icy water takes my breath away, I fight not to breath it in.

1...2...3...4...5...

I know I can hold my breath for the count of twenty.

6...7...8...9...

My lungs begin to burn.

I can do this. I can do it.

The river is too fast; I am dragged at by the ghosts of those who have drowned before me.

10..11...12...13

I have to let my breath out. Slowly...slowly...

14...15...16

My head breaks the surface of the river. I take a breath; I am blinded by my wet hair. I take another ragged breath.

With frozen fingers I worry at the rope at a place under my arm. The blade slices through the worn fibres, I feel each strand fray and snap. I grip the severed ends tightly and pray the onlookers merely see me holding myself with fear and cold.

My hair is plastered across my face like a mask and my teeth start to chatter. I choke down the urge to scream as the vicar quotes his favourite Bible passage. 'Let the woman learn in silence and with full subjection. I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.'

'Hang the witch!' screams Malachi, but the mayor's voice cuts over him.

'Duck her again!'

I take a deep breath and fight to hold it as I drop like a stone. Bubbles and white noise rush at my face. I push with all my strength, the last few fibres of the rope snap and I am released. The river roars in my ears as I fight to remain beneath its

surface, but it carries me swiftly into its boiling channel. I come to the surface, draw breath, then dip my head again.

Please, don't let them see me.

My bare feet graze over rocks, my knees crack on a submerged boulder. The pain forces me to the surface for another breath. I've passed the bend in the river, I'm out of sight of the crowd.

My leaden limbs flounder, I try to flail towards the riverbank, to the apple tree where I have squirreled my bundle of clothes. It's so very close. But the current drags me, like an errant child. A jagged pain in my shoulder as I collide with something hard, unmoving; and now I'm fighting to keep my head up, my mouth is full of water, I gasp and cough. I go under, the river rages all around me, I fight to come up again.

I try to lie on my back, like I taught Alys in the summer. Calm, spread your arms wide and let yourself float. But I strike another rock, with my head and it hurts, through the cold numbness it really hurts. My limbs are leaden and disobey my thoughts; I drag like I have been crippled, bumping on the stoney riverbed.

I scrabble with clawed fingers; my last breath burns and as my body betrays me.

I almost did it, I almost escaped. I thought I had been so clever, allowing them to find me in just my chemise. I thought I could swim well enough, planned well enough. It was all for naught.

Who will find my body? Will I wash up on the bank by the mill for my neighbours to stare at my nakedness and have nightmares about my dead staring eyes. Or shall I travel further downstream, to the washer women who risk drowning, every time they wade in fully dressed. Shall I stay with the unfortunate ones and haunt the river with them? Shall I pass out to sea to feed the fishes and the sea monsters? Shall I be legend in the village, talked of in hushed tones, as a warning to children?

Something hard scrapes past my ear. It scratches, pokes, pricks, and pushes at me. My hands grab and grab again at rough bark, and I breakout of my watery grave, break the surface and I am reborn.

Inhale! Inhale!

Coughing, lungs burning, I embrace my saviour. Twigs scratch my ribs, but its gnarled body buoys me up.

Chapter One

The creamery was cool and smelled faintly of sour milk. Around her, shelves of mellow, yellow cheeses sat like small moons, maturing in the gloomy light of the north facing window. A neat stack of butter, wrapped in waxed paper, stood ready for the weekly market. She was glad that she didn't have to face the crowds.

A breathless voice echoed from the main house.

'Hello! Hello! Henry, are you home?'

'Della, my good woman, is something amiss? Here, please sit'

Alys wiped her hands and tucked an errant strand of hair back under her cap.

'Malachi insisted that I bring your tea. I told him you were running low. He's such a darling boy.'

Darling boy...

Alys snorted and rolled her eyes, loitering at the kitchen door as she tried to force her face into a more pleasant expression.

'We are both fortunate with our offspring.' Henry agreed.

‘Oh Henry,’ Della sighed, ‘you have no idea how much your company has meant to me since my Arthur left this world. Malachi does his best, but he is so busy with his work. You are lucky to have Alys at home with you, but it is such a shame that Rhiannon prevented her from making a good marriage. ‘Tis waste of a good girl! I fear that the bloom of youth is fading fast.’

Alys clenched her fists and backed away unseen. Her cheeks burned, and she hurried past the creamery and into the kitchen garden. Jaw clenched, she wrung her apron and paced the narrow path; lavender and rosemary released their heady scent as she brushed past. She stomped back to the door, her mind scrambling in her mother's defence. But she froze in the threshold and bit her lip.

Curse that woman and her damn opinions.

I will not give her anything else to mardle about.

Alys turned and walked slowly back to her garden, legs suddenly leaden she sank into the warm grass and let sadness overwhelm her. Grasping her knees to her chest, she buried her face in her milk-stained apron and sobbed; her breath jagged, she rocked back and forth.

The gentle drone of bees caught her attention.

Lavender to calm the mind.

Taking a few flower heads in her hands, Alys crushed them to release the oils and rubbed them into her temples. She breathed in the heady scent and leaned back against the kitchen garden wall. The warm bricks radiated heat into her shoulders, she put her head back and shut her eyes.

I could have been married by now though; I could have a brood of children too...or, I could have died in my childbed.

Alys opened her eyes and contemplated the red kite drifting lazy circles in the summer sky.

I wish I had known Mother, properly. All my memories of her, they feel so dim compared to that terrible day...

Where are the rest of her things?

Alys got up from the floor and smoothed her dress. The well- washed linen, once a dark nettle green, now pale and faded. Henry had never noticed that it had once been Rhiannon's, or if he had, he had never acknowledged it.

The attic!

Damn, there's too many people about the house to go searching now...

* * * * *

The whole house rose next morning with an air of expectation. Alice and Mary milked the cows whilst her father and Colm readied the scythes for the itinerant labourers. Four lean men arrived, sinewy and tanned; they sat at the kitchen table and ate their eggs and bacon in silence until Henry came in.

‘The dew is dried off; we are ready to start.’

The four nodded their appreciation to Maeve and traipsed out to the fields, donning their wide brimmed straw hats.

Alys tutted and fetched the broom, ‘Dear God they stink.’

‘So would you if you had to sleep in a barn and wash at the pump.’ said Maeve.

Mary rolled her eyes from behind her mother's back as she placed a tray of cakes in the oven.

Alys brushed harder and sent clouds of dust out of the door.

Colm, Maeve's son, came in from the yard and trailed muck on the tiled floor.

Alys glared at him and opened her mouth to berate him when her father shuffled in from the hall.

'Alys, your writing is so damnably small I can't make out what we owe the seed merchant.'

Alys let the broom clatter against the wall and followed her father into his study, wrinkling her nose at the tobacco smoke.

'Ten shillings,' Alys pointed to a line in the ledger. 'You know the jewellers sell eyeglasses now.'

'I'm not some whey faced preacher.' Henry snorted and scowled at his daughter.

'What's this?' he jabbed a finger at another entry.

'Three piglets, the one's Colm took to the market last month.'

He pointed at another entry.

'Two barrels of beer, for those that help with the mowing.'

Henry snorted in irritation 'My coat is missing a button; I need it mending by Sunday.' He said and gestured to the crumpled garment on his armchair.

'Yes Father, I'll do it now before I go out to the fields.' Alys sighed and escaped before he could think of another chore for her.

Smoke filled the kitchen, Alys flung down her father's coat and rushed to the oven. Covering her hands with her apron she pulled out a tray of what should have been cakes but were now coal black lumps. The acrid smoke caught her throat and coughing hard she dropped the tray as the heat seared through the apron to her fingertips. Mary came running in from the garden 'Oh Alys, are you hurt?'

'Where have you been? These cakes are ruined! What are we going to feed the labourers at supper? I don't have time to make more and neither does your mother!'

Mary's face crumpled 'I'm sorry...I... I'

'She were helping me!' Maeve appeared behind her, a large bowl of raspberries at her hip.

'We have no more eggs and are nearly out of sugar!' berated Alys.

'Then they can have bread and jam, and there's plenty of cheese.' Maeve stated firmly.

'And we have raspberries and cream,' added Mary.

Alys pursed her lips, retrieved her father's coat, and returned to the hall, slamming the kitchen door as she went. As she made for the work room and her sewing kit, Henry put his head out of the study. 'Alys! If you don't improve your mood, I shall ask the mayor for the Scold's Bridle!'

She eyed him with disgust, but held her tongue and walked away.

Alys had seen one of the fishwives forced into the metal contraption, the tight metal bands locked around her head, a metal plate between her teeth. Blood and drool had dripped down her chin as they had paraded her through the town, then left her chained in the square for the whole of market day.

No one...no woman, haggled over the prices that day.

Surely, he wouldn't do that to me...?

Scythes swung with military timing under a punishing sun, working every field in the village one by one; the mayor made a great show of awarding a fat hog to the fastest mower. Alys followed behind the mowers, along with the other women and children, throwing the cut grass in the air with large forks to help it dry faster. Sweat ran down her back, and she gladly took a jug of small ale from Maeve. She removed her hat and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and watched the buzzards circle overhead.

The next day they turned the grass again, and at lunchtime after much deliberation by Henry and Colm, the hay was judged dry enough to stack.

Nobody berated the farm workers that Sunday for sleeping in the pews during morning service; although Colm received a sharp elbow to the ribs from Maeve when he started to snore. After church Henry went to have his dinner at Della's, and Alys found herself alone in the house.

Suddenly nervous in her own home, she made her way upstairs. Maeve had left the windows open to air the bedrooms, and the breeze tickled the hairs at the nape of Alys's neck. In a nook at the end of the landing, a wooden ladder with broad steps led up to a small door. Gingerly she climbed, and as she reached

the top step, she caught a toe in her skirt and staggered through the doorway. Dust motes danced in shafts of light streaming through the grubby glass. The air in the attic was stuffy; a butterfly, orange and black, fluttered perilously close to the spiders' webs that netted the window. Alys tugged at the latch and thumped the frame with the side of her fist. It gave. She held her breath as the butterfly felt the breeze, then it danced away; through the kitchen garden, over the wall and Maeve's cottage, and out of sight.

Alys turned and surveyed the three beds, the mattresses sagging and moth eaten; there was a stocking on the nearest, abandoned in the rush to leave, the darning needle in its toe dull and rusting. She went to the bed furthest from the door, and kneeling on bare floorboards she groped underneath for the box that had not been touched in over a decade.

Her fingers found the smooth wood and as she dragged it from its hiding place the disturbed dust made her nose itch. Alys sneezed twice and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. The box was at once familiar, but strangely smaller than in her memory.

Tiny feet skittered behind her, making Alys jump. A small furry body dashed across the room and disappeared into a gap under the eaves. Hand on heart she let out her breath and forced herself to calm her racing pulse, then she turned her attention back to the box. It was locked.

Reluctantly she put her head under the bed and squinted in the gloom, but there was no sign of the key; nothing, except mouse droppings and lines in the dust where she had scrabbled about. She sighed and rubbed her forehead.

It must be ten years or more since I found Mam's box and hid it up here.

Alys thought back to the day she had sought solace in her mother's workroom. She had run her hand along the bookcase; its shelves bare of all the books her mother had treasured. From the hall had come Mary's voice calling her name, insistent that she help strip the beds. Alys had hidden under the desk just as the door creaked open and heard Mary huff and then shut the door with a bang.

She had uncurled herself from the cramped space, realising that she had been crushed against a polished wooden box. The key was still in the lock, and it clicked quietly as she turned it to open.

Inside she had discovered her mother's keepsakes. A lock of auburn hair, tied with a green ribbon, that was still as soft and lustrous as when it had been cut from Alys's head on her first birthday. Tiny, knitted booties, and a linen pouch, containing teeth so small that Alys had looked at them in fascination. A fierce determination that the last of her mother's things should not be burned flared inside her, so she snuck out of the workroom and headed to her own bedroom. She got as far as the upstairs landing before hearing Maeve and Mary's voices in her room as they were stripping her bed. Alys tiptoed past the half open door to the end of the landing and looked around for somewhere to hide the box. Her only option was the maids' attic room, abandoned since her mother's death.

The Key! What did I do with the key?

She frowned and wracked her mind.

I would have worn an apron then too, smaller than the one I wear now. But that would have been washed dozens of times after that day. What did I do with that wretched key? How could I be so dim witted?

Hefting the box onto one hip, Alys navigated the stairs with care. She took it to her room, placed it on her bed, and stood back to study its construction. Chewing her fingernails, she fleetingly considered breaking the lock until she examined the hinges and saw they had small pins holding them together.

Maeve's 'odds n sods jar, all the bits we find in pockets on laundry day. I'm sure I put small pliers in there recently.

Dashing from her room, she flew down the stairs, leaping the last two in haste. Going through the quiet kitchen, she grabbed the jar from the scullery and upended its contents onto the well-worn table. Pins, old scissors, nails, buttons, and the pliers clattered onto the smooth wooden surface... and a key. Small and ornate, and filled with possibility.

Is that it? Is this the key to the box?

She scooped the remaining contents back into the jar and shoved it back onto the scullery shelf, then ran back upstairs. Heart racing, Alys's hands were shaking as she turned the box to face her and tried the key in the lock. It moved smoothly, with a click, and she raised the lid.

She took a moment to survey the top layer of contents; it was just as she replaced them all those years ago.

One by one she took them out and placed her childhood keepsakes upon her bed: the lock of hair, bootees and pouch of baby teeth were still pristine. Then came pieces of paper, ink drawings of meadow flowers and birds, then some folded pieces of paper containing fragile dried flowers, gifts Alys had made for her mother. But there was something odd about the box, the dimensions felt wrong.

The base, Alys realised, was thicker than its sides.

Tapping the wood with her fingers it sounded hollow; she was convinced that there was a hidden space in the box.

She tried to pry the piece of wood with her fingernails, but they were too short to gain purchase, so Alys fished the small knife from her apron pocket. The blade slid easily between the inner wall of the box, and the false bottom. She eased the piece of wood from its setting, revealing the hidden contents.

Wrapped in a finely woven wool that had muffled any movement were two objects. Alys picked out the first, a leather-bound notebook, and then a small square parcel, tied up in a silk scarf. Alys marvelled at the colours in the expensive fabric, vibrant pink, and purple hues.

Her fingers fumbled the knots and before she could fathom the contents; dozens of brightly coloured cards fell from her lap and scattered like leaves on her bedroom rug. She bent to pick them up, but as she turned over the first one, she realised it was no ordinary playing card. This one had a picture of a hand holding a jewelled chalice, overflowing with water. She picked up another, a picture of a tower with flames coming from the windows and people falling through the air. Alys stared for a moment at the cards and then dropped them as if she had been scalded.

Oh Mother, no, No! This can't be right; it cannot be true.

She had seen cards like these before. Last summer at the fair, an elderly woman travelling with a band of players had offered to tell Alys and Mary's fortunes. Maeve had dragged the girls away, as Mary protested loudly. Her mother hissed at her 'Quit acting the maggot Mary, folk are watching.'

Aly sat frozen, her throat dry. Shadows grew longer and she felt as if her mind would split in two.

Mam always tried to help people...she did...I saw it, every day, even if they couldn't pay. This...this is divination, it is a sin, it was only Sunday last that an entire sermon...

The sound of a pony and carriage clattering into the yard below her window broke her paralysis. Alys gathered the cards and with panicked fingers and fumbled them back into the secret compartment. She bundled the childhood keepsakes on top and shoved the box under the bed. Having forgotten to stow the diary, she slid it hastily under her pillow.

Trying to push the feeling of guilt away from her, she smoothed her apron and hurried downstairs and out into the yard. Malachi was helping her father down from the carriage, helping Henry to untangle himself from Della's petticoats.

Henry spotted her. 'Daughter! Come help your old father.'

Malachi laughed 'Can it be right that our parents are out roistering whilst we are sensible and sober? We should join them next time Alys.'

Henry draped a heavy arm around each of them and Alys staggered slightly as she took his weight and walked him into the hallway, occasionally bouncing off the walls. In his study they deposited Henry in his armchair where he yawned and shut his eyes.

From the carriage in the yard came Della's shrill call 'Malachi! Maaa-la-chi!' 'Well, thank you for bringing him home.' Alys mumbled, unwilling to meet his eye.

Malachi opened his arms and stepped forwards to embrace her, but Alys backed away and side-stepped out of reach, grabbing a blanket and placing it over Henry's knees.

'Malachi!' Della's call loud and insistent.

Malachi made a mocking bow then left the room; Alys followed him to the front door and waved to Della, only for Malachi to turn swiftly on his heel, stride back, and grab her face in his two hands.

'I will have a taste of you, Alys.' He planted his fleshy wet lips on hers.

Alys was slow to react, then shoved hard at his chest and twisted her face away. Malachi walked off laughing as she skittered backwards and scrambled to shut the door on him. Wiping tobacco tainted saliva from her face she marched back into her father's study, her cheeks burning.

'Ah Alys, you are such a good girl. Do you know, I think we have a solution to our worries,' Henry slurred.

'What worries, father?' demanded Alys, 'Has something happened? Are you ill?

'I'm fine, but you Alys, you should be wed by now and giving me grandchildren to carry on with the farm.'

Alys frowned at him. 'But we are fine as we are. We have Maeve, Colm, and Mary. I do the dairy work and the accounts. We live well. I'm not an old maid yet, father!' Alys tried to make light of it, but her forced laugh sounded hollow even to her own ears; a feeling of unease crept up her spine.

'But you should be wed by now. If it were not for...' he looked away and sighed.

'Anyway, Della and I have been speaking, and Malachi has agreed.'

'Agreed to what?'

'That you and he should be married!'

'Father, tell me you're not serious.' The colour drained from Alys's face. 'No!

How could you? He just forced a kiss on me! He is a leech.'

'He's not that bad Alys, and he'll settle down when he has a good wife.'

'No, please father...'

'A good wife is all he needs to keep him occupied. You can still run the farm. I shall sign it over to him on your wedding day.'

'No! I won't marry him! He just tried to force himself on me!'

'I'm going to bed, and you should count yourself lucky that he would have you.'

'My God! Father, do you not think that you should have discussed this with me first?'

'Alys, that's enough!' Henry stared her down with bloodshot eyes. 'I'm not discussing it. Help me upstairs.'

Gritting her teeth, Alys manhandled Henry up the stairs, his and let him drop heavily onto his bed.

How dare he! How bloody dare he!! They'll have to carry me kicking and screaming down the aisle.

Angry tears pricked her eyes by the time she reached her own room, and she lay down on her bed and screamed into her pillow.

Why can't they just leave me be?

Her fingers touched the notebook, and she fought the urge to launch it into the empty hearth.

The memory of stale wine and tobacco on Malachi's breath, his lips, slick and insistent on hers intruded on her thoughts. She got up and poured water from her jug into the basin on her washstand. Taking her washcloth Alys scrubbed

hard at her face, then dabbed on rose water to calm the redness; the fragrance soothed her and she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She tried to push away the memory of her mother being dragged from the house by the mob, the servants running out of the back door in terror. How she and Father had silently watched the stream turn white in the following days, as they poured gallons of milk away. Many mornings that summer Henry had remained in his bed. Alys frowned, unable to remember how she had managed before Maeve had turned up with two small children in tow. A bedraggled godsend who had lost her husband and their tenancy within a month of each other.

By the following spring, Della's husband, Mathew, persuaded Henry to take up his stall in the market again. Mathew defended them; he even defended Rhiannon's memory 'As everyone knows that witches curdle milk, so there can't have been no witch in that house.'

I wish Mathew was still here...he was a good man. He would have talked some sense into my Father. Mathew knew Malachi's true nature; he had no delusions about his own son.

Alys lay down on her bed, rolled onto her back, and started to browse the diary. It was strange to see her mother's handwriting in something other than the farm ledgers, the neat loops and curls interspaced with pictures and strange symbols. There were recipes, moon phases, and notes where she had found different plants; and every now and then Alys's name. Curiosity kept her reading; her mother had noted events that Alys had long forgotten. The first time she had pulled a calf when its mother had been struggling to birth it, and something about how their pigeons had followed Alys around the garden.

Strange, I don't remember that.

Saturday 25th April 1671

How easily they mouth their prayers on Sunday and then spend the rest of their week making sly business deals. These pillars of the community who treat their families poorly, and their employees worse. I have seen the bruises on the Minister's wife. They have seen fit to fine me for non-attendance at church, though I confess I have missed a few days during this last month. Henry is livid and says that if I continue to embarrass him then he shall cast me out.

If it were just me, I would happily leave this minute. But I cannot drag Alys away from her comfortable life just to throw myself at the mercy of my brother. I do not know that I can have any confidence in him, either.

There is little choice it seems, but to make myself smaller and more biddable.

Wednesday 29th April 1671

These last three nights I have barely slept, and when I do my dreams are vivid and full of terror. Unknown hands grab and pinch me, and then I am drowning.

And yet, during the day nothing seems different except the feeling of the storm on the horizon.

I must prepare.

Thursday 30th April 1671

We swam today, Alys and I, at the bend in the river at the bottom of the furthest field. The water is freezing still, but the weather is fine and warm, so it was pleasant to lie in the grass afterwards to dry off. Alys swims like a fish, much like my brother at her age. I can't tell her. One slip of the tongue and it will be the gallows not the ducking stool. She is too young to keep such a secret without showing her distress. But I have never held her so tightly as I did tonight. I pray to all the gods, and the goddesses that we shall not be separated for long.

Sunday 3rd May 1671

We attended church this morning. I had such a peculiar feeling during the last hymn. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled as if someone were poking me with dry straw. I turned to look who was in the pew behind, but it was, as always, the Johnson family, singing piously with their eyes closed. But across the aisle Malachi caught my

eye. He smirked in a way that gave me gooseflesh, and I was most unsettled for the rest of the service.

Afterwards, whilst Henry and Alys talked with our neighbours, I was alerted to the sound of crows around the side of the church. I followed the urge to see what had excited them and witnessed a pair flapping and cawing close to the ground. They flew to the roof when they noticed me, and there where they had been, lay a broken slate. I looked up and they were sat in the space where the slate tile had come from. I stared stupidly for some moments at the shattered roof tile and then felt drawn to pick up the smaller pieces and stowed them in the pocket of my petticoats.

* * * * *

Alys rolled her shoulders, trying to ease her stiff neck, as she wandered out to the barn. The mist settled into small beads on her clothes and hair, and as she squatted next to the first cow in to be milked, she rested her head against the warm flank and closed her eyes. With an easy rhythm she pulled on the sagging udders, slowly filling the bucket until the stream of milk slowed. Mary came and emptied the bucket into a churn, then brought the next cow to Alys, so that she hardly needed to rise from her stool. Eventually the last of the herd was milked, and the last frothy bucket tipped into the churn. Mary stretched and rubbed her back.

'Help me move this Alys, it'll be lunchtime soon. You look washed out.'

Taking the other handle of the metal churn, she helped heft it across the yard to the creamery and they were almost through the door when the bottom of it caught on an uneven flag stone. The two women staggered, the milk sloshed and rolled against its containment; arms straining Alys braced and battled to keep the churn upright, but Mary went down on her knees, and the churn went with her. It hit the ground with a dull clang, and a white tide flooded the narrow area between the house and the creamery. Alys felt close to tears, a vein in her

temple throbbed unbearably; she offered Mary her hand and pulled the girl to her feet.

Henry chose that moment to wander through and check on them.

'Oh, stupid girls! Look at my shoes Alys, my best shoes. Look at them.'

Alys silently guided her father back to the kitchen door, fetched a chair and proceeded to remove his shoes, whilst Maeve tactfully placed a cup of tea and a slice of cake in his hands.

'Give me those shoes and go back to your chores, I'll see to this,' she winked at Alys and turned back to mollify Henry.

On the yard, Mary was making a thorough job of sluicing with buckets of water, Alys joined her with a broom to clear the last of the milky mess. The sunlight breaking through the clouds bounced off the puddles making her vision dance. With exaggerated care they moved the last churn and set to work making butter; working in silence they could hear Henry bemoaning them in the main house. Colm put his head around the creamery door, 'What have you girls been up to this morning? Have you been upsetting Henry?' He smirked and gave Alys a wink.

'Don't.' Mary pointed a warning finger at her brother, 'We've had a shocking bad morning and we don't need your cheek.'

'Ma says dinner is ready...Alys you look pure green, are you going to hurl?'

Alys shook her head, but that made the room tilt and she staggered, putting a hand to the wall. Mary put an arm around Alys's waist and guided her slowly through the kitchen and up to bed. She helped Alys loosen the stays on her corset and placed a cold compress on Aly's brow before tip toeing from the room.

She returned a while later. 'Mam said to bring you tea, and there's a piece of cake if you want?'

Alys smiled weakly. 'Thank you,' she whispered.

'There's been a message from Della.'

'Oh,' Alys couldn't bring herself to ask.

'You're invited to supper, on Friday evening. At the Black Boar.'

* * * * *

Henry opened the Inn door and ushered Alys ahead of him. She unfastened her cloak and felt her cheeks flush with the heat from the open fire and the crush of bodies. Henry's words were still ringing in her ears 'You will not embarrass me tonight, Alys, do you understand me!? You are damned fortunate that a respected man like Malachi has made an offer of marriage.' Her wrist ached where he had gripped her.

In the inglenook fireplace a young boy was turning a pig and several ducks on a spit, her stomach growled at the aroma. Henry stopped, shaking hands vigorously with Richard their neighbour who was red faced and sweating, and who sloshed his beer as he gesticulated at a table full of rosy cheeked farmers. 'Thank you for the offer, Richard, but we are dining with Della and Malachi this evening, I shall see you tomorrow,' Henry grinned and slapped Richard's back, waving a greeting to the men at the table, then he pushed Alys forwards through a sea of bodies. Laughter and apologies abounded as people stood on toes and tipped drinks. Alys coughed on tobacco smoke that someone breathed in her face as she squeezed her way through the crowd to the snug at the back of the room.

Della and Malachi were seated with two bottles of wine on the table, one already empty. Alys fixed her smile, her hunger suddenly gone. Malachi rose and gave them a half bow, 'Come seat yourself with my mother, I'll take the chair,' giving his seat up in the settle bench. He waved to a tired looking woman carrying a stack of greasy plates. She blew a stray hair from her face, nodded an acknowledgement, and returned quickly with a platter of pork, a whole duck and a tureen of the stew that had been bubbling over the fire. Malachi rose to carve the duck and loaded his mother's plate with the first, he offered the next duck breast to Alys; she shook her head 'No, thank you, I'll have the stew to start.' She took a gulp of her wine. A dish of herby roast potatoes arrived next, and Alys served Della, Henry, and Malachi before adding a few to her own plate.

Della noticed her lack of appetite. 'Alys you need to eat up, or you'll have a most boyish figure.'

Alys stared at her but said nothing, and took another gulp of the red wine.

'I believe Alys has a fine figure,' announced Malachi, and grinned across the table at her. She ignored him and refilled her glass. Malachi called for another bottle.

'Physical work is good for the body and the soul, keeps a person out of temptation. It takes a strong girl to pull a calf from the womb when the heifer is struggling,' said Henry, nodding at Alys.

'Oh, you shan't be doing that when you're wed, you'll be too busy breeding yourself,' Della laughed and elbowed Alys.

A loud crash directly behind them made the whole room stop and look around. One of serving girls stood staring at Malachi, pieces of a smashed jug scattered at her feet and a pool of dark beer spreading across the slate floor. A sob caught in her throat, and she fumbled to pick up the broken pieces of pottery, cutting her thumb in her haste. Blood smeared her apron as she collected the shards.

The older woman came out with a mop and shooed her back to the kitchen. 'I don't know what's wrong with her these days, away with the bloody fairies she is.'

Della offered Malachi the last of the stew. 'Thank you Ma. I'm always hungry,' he stared at Alys and smirked.

The piece of meat that Alys had just swallowed stuck in her throat. She tried to swallow again, but it was lodged. Saliva filled her mouth, and she felt panic rise in her chest. Alys took another gulp of wine, but it wouldn't go down, and for a moment thought that she would vomit at the table.

Oblivious, Della brought the conversation back to marriage 'We should ask the vicar about suitable dates,' she sighed, 'I do love a summer wedding.'

Alys forced herself to swallow the piece of meat; it felt like a rock going down, her gullet bruising as it did. She sat back and tried to steady her breathing, the

room felt as if it were closing in on her. The voices around her muffled and she slumped in her seat.

'Alys...Alys!' Henry's voice broke through the blackness. A pungent stink shocked her back to consciousness; Alys flailed at the bodies crowding her and tried to catch her breath.

I always carry smelling salts with me,' boasted Della to the sea of faces staring at her.

'Father, I need to leave. Please.'

Henry frowned at her, but Della was already on her feet with Alys's cloak over her arm. 'I was just the same before I was married,' she giggled girlishly.

'Weddings can be overwhelming for a girl; I can see that I shall have to take you under my wing. Malachi, help Alys outside, she needs air.'

Despite feeling that her legs might buckle underneath her, Alys managed to follow her father through the crowd under her own steam. Henry went to fetch the pony and cart, and Alys found herself trapped between Della and Malachi. His breath was hot on her neck; she tried to step away from him. 'Steady there Alys, I've got you.' He caught her about her waist, his fingers travelled up to her armpit, and she realised with horror he was groping her breast. She elbowed herself away from him and lurched towards the pony cart as Henry drove it to the front of the inn; Malachi was close behind her, his hands everywhere as he helped her up to her seat.

Henry drove them home in angry silence, she watched the bats in their erratic flight and twisted the ribbon of her cloak in her fingers. The clear night sky twinkled with a million stars that blurred with her unshed tears.

How can I protest this marriage when all my arguments rouse him to anger? Why does he refuse to see Malachi's poor character?

'Father, I should like to come to market tomorrow.'

Time is running out. How can I find the right words to persuade him?

'If you are well enough,' he said grudgingly as they clattered into the farmyard. She tried to smile at him as he clambered down from his seat, but he turned his back and ambled unsteadily to the house. Alys led the pony around to the stable, and as she hung the harness up on the beams, Maeve popped her head around the door. 'How was your evening? You've been on my mind the whole time.'

'I... I was taken ill. Della seems to think I fainted with excitement,' Alys choked back tears. 'They are arranging my wedding, they say within weeks! Maeve, I can't, I can't!'

Maeve shook her head and grasped Alys's hands. 'I don't know what I can do to help you.'

* * * * *

Alys watched the dawn light creep into her room and heard the cock crow. Her pillow was still damp with tears, but her mind buzzed with renewed determination.

I must impress Father today, make him see how much he needs me at home... without irking his sensibilities. God forbid I should make him feel like an old man.

Colm already had the pony harnessed by the time Alys had bathed her swollen eyes and had breakfast. She and Mary brought the baskets filled with butter and cheese and stowed them with two full churns of milk. As they left the farm Mary skipped alongside them to the end of the lane, calling excitedly. 'We are coming too! After the cows are milked,' Alys caught Henry's indulgent smile.

'The crowds should be out today with this fine weather,' stated Alys amiably.

'Aye.'

'I hope we sell out before the butter melts.'

‘Aye.’

Alys sighed and watched the swallows dart and dive; she wondered how so many birds could fly that close without collision.

They sat in awkward silence as the pony made her gentle descent down the road into town, and they were soon clattering along the cobbled street and into the Market Square. It was already bustling with traders, but Henry found a good spot in the shade, next to one of the fishwives.

‘Alys, go take the pony around the back of the tavern, here’s a few pennies for the Ostler.’

By the time she came back Henry had assembled some poles into brackets on the cart and was busy attaching a tarpaulin roof to them. The side panel was dropped down and clean linen sheets put on the floor of the cart to make a table. Quickly Alys set out their wares in neat piles, as the early shoppers were already arriving. By the time she had donned her apron Henry was already serving his first customer.

The morning passed in a blur of exchanges with housekeepers, servants, housewives and children running errands, most of them wanting their dairy produce early before the day grew warm. Once she caught a lingering side-eye stare from a short woman with a huge pregnant belly, who looked away when Alys caught her eye. As she disappeared into the crowd Alys realised it was one of the maids who had once occupied the attic. She tried to remember her name, but it escaped her.

Henry was enjoying the gossip with his long-standing customers, so Alys kept serving the rest. She filled peoples’ jugs with milk and sold it by the cupful for the young and the elderly who needed a drink in the street. By midday, the stall was practically sold out.

Henry gave a couple of beggar children the last two pieces of cheese.

‘Them little beggars is like rats, there will be twice as many next week now you fed them,’ scolded the fishwife. ‘They’ll be robbing us blind.’

‘I don’t like to see a child go hungry.’

'You've a heart as soft as your cheese,' she laughed and stacked her stinking baskets to carry home.

'Alys, go fetch the pony whilst I take down the stall. Don't forget to thank Ostler,' Alys tried not to roll her eyes and forced a smile instead.

He still speaks to me like I am a child. How am I to persuade him that I don't need Malachi for a husband?

As she rounded the back of the tavern, Alys's bladder reminded her that she had not relieved herself since home that morning. Suddenly her need was urgent, and with too many people about the place to simply squat, she decided to risk the tavern privy.

The stench hit her as she reached the door, but her urgency overruled the urge to gag. She covered her nose with her apron and entered.

On quick inspection the long bench, with a half dozen bottom sized holes cut out, appeared cleanest at the far end. The wood was worn smooth and she tried not to imagine how many backsides had been here before her as she relieved herself.

On the other side of the privy wall the sound of someone crying and retching. Alys fought hard against her own gag reflex. Then she heard a familiar voice. 'You stupid bitch, you didn't take it, did you?' It was Malachi's voice, steady but filled with anger.

Ragged sobs came from a young female. 'But... but you said you loved me. I thought...'

'What?' he snapped, 'That I'd marry **you**? The poor relation of the tavern keeper? You actually thought I would take a serving wench as a wife?' A cold, cruel laugh escaped him. 'I will get you more of that medicine, and this time, You. Will. Take It!'

The girl sniffed and coughed.

'And you had better keep your mouth shut or I shall be letting people know what a cheap little whore you are.'

'But I have never lain with any man but you. You know that, Malachi,' her voice high and full of fear.

'Really?' he sneered 'and who is going to believe that? A serving wench with a full belly. It could have been any of your customers.'

Alys held her breath.

'When I return later you will take the medicine, or it will be the worse for you,' his voice was low now, and Alys had her ear pressed against the wooden panel.

'I asked you nicely before, now I'm telling you. I'm not having any more of this nonsense.'

Alys sat in shock, whilst the young girl sobbed. 'Yes, Malachi.'

'Sir! You don't call me by my name in public, ever!'

'Yes, Sir.'

The reek of shit and piss was suddenly too much for Alys; she felt hot and as if she would faint again. She stumbled to the privy door, gasping for breath.

Malachi was already stalking back to the tavern; she watched his lean figure disappear out of sight. Then she turned and made eye contact with a young girl, the serving wench that had dropped the jug of beer in the tavern the night before. Her face was pale, eyes red and puffy, she wiped her nose and covered her face with her apron.

'I'm so sorry Miss, I didn't know,' her sobs came out muffled, 'I didn't know you were betrothed.'

'We are not betrothed!'

'But his mother, she said...'

'We are not!'

The girl dropped her hands from her face.

'He's not going to marry me.'

Alys didn't know what to say.

'My Uncle will put me out on the streets,' the girl started to cry again, 'I can't go home, Ma has too many mouths to feed as it is. That's why I came here.'

'But he cannot leave you like this. He should do the right thing by you.'

It would be my way out if he married her.

'He won't,' the girl looked defeated. 'I'll take his medicine and hope it works. I shall go to hell for this.'

'It's him who should go to hell for this, not you. He knew what he was about.'

'You won't tell anyone!'

'No, I won't.' Alys already knew that was a lie.

'Promise.'

Reluctantly, Alys promised. 'I have to go; my father is expecting me back with the pony.'

In a daze Alys held the mare whilst the ostler took off the hobbles. Jenny's coat was warm, and as she smoothed her, she breathed in the musky, comforting scent and leaned her head on the pony's neck. The big muscle on the animal's shoulder twitched as a horsefly landed. Alys's hand slapped down on it hard and fast before it had chance to bite, and Jenny snorted in appreciation. Alys looked at the bloody mess of the dead horsefly in her hand.

If only Malachi were so easy to deal with.

She led the pony through the maze of people packing up their stalls and the last few customers haggling for leftovers. Maeve and Mary were back, their baskets heavy with shopping. Mary was wearing a new ribbon at her throat, blue to match her eyes.

Alys's fingers fumbled on the buckles as she harnessed the pony, her head buzzing with anger.

'Look lively girl,' called Henry, 'or you'll be milking in the dark. Mary, you can sit up front with me, there's no point in Alys driving, she'll put us in the ditch the mood she's in.'

Alys bit her tongue and went to sit on the tail board with Maeve; the bustle of the closing market, wagon wheels, and the clatter of horses on the cobbles afforded them a degree of privacy.

'What's wrong, love?' asked Maeve in a low tone.

"Oh, Maeve it's awful.' Alys felt her throat tighten 'I was in the privy, I overheard Malachi threatening a girl.' She bit her lip, 'I can't say more, I promised.'

'I can guess the rest.' Maeve's face flushed with anger, 'Does the girl have anyone to help? Anyone she can turn to?

'No, she is only here as a favour to her family. He's making her take medicine to get rid, or he's going to tell everyone she is a whore, and she'll be out on the streets.'

'Evil bastard. There's a special place in hell for men like him.' Maeve spat.

'The poor lass.' She shook her head and pursed her lips, then sighed, 'She'll have to do what he says, or she will end up with the gutter whores.'

I have to say something to Father.

She picked at a loose thread on her apron.

Surely, I won't have to marry Malachi if I tell him about the girl.

She stared at the town, slowly getting smaller in the distance.

But you promised. You promised not to tell.

Maeve guessed.

That's not the same as telling.

What if Father tells her uncle, or the churchmen...

I cannot do that do her.

*But I must do **something**.*

* * * * *

Taking charge at milking time, Alys rushed the cows into the milking shed and out again before Mary had barely pulled her bucket clear, making them kick out and splatter shit.

Mary got up, her cheeks flushed. 'I'm going to feed the chickens.'

Damn, damn! Bloody Malachi!

Alys clapped a hand over her mouth as if she had said the words out loud.

I'll be talking like a fishwife soon if I'm not careful.

He wouldn't want me then though, not if I swore and stank of rotten fish.

Supper dragged; the conversation about the price and quality of sheep and who was bringing geese to next week's market made her want to bang her head on the table. She was up and collecting plates to be washed before the last spoon had been put down. Maeve gave her a long look.

Eventually her father finished imparting the market gossip to Colm and the two farm lads and made for his sitting room. Alys was hot on his heels.

'Father, I need to talk to you.'

'Can it wait until the morning? It's been a long day.'

'I...no, I don't think it can,' she faltered.

'Then what is it, Alys? Spit it out.'

'It's Malachi...'

'I'm not discussing this!'

'Please Father, listen to me.'

'Alys!!'

'He's got a girl with child. A young girl!' the words came out in a rush.

Henry glowered at his daughter, 'Then more fool the stupid girl, she should know better unless she's some common slut.'

Alys looked at him, appalled.

'It's not you is it, Alys?'

'No.'

Henry gave her a stare that bore into her soul.

'No!' she repeated, sounding shrill to her own ears.

'Then I don't want to hear any more about it. Am I clear?'

Alys gritted her teeth.

'Am I clear, Alys?!'

'Yes Father.'

Alys stormed upstairs to her room and pulled her mother's diary from under her pillow, flicking through the pages until she got to the last few days before Rhiannon had been torn from her life.

July 30, 1671

One of the cows escaped through a hole in the hedge last night, we spent much time searching for her. I went to the edge of the woods to see if there was any sign, she wasn't there but Malachi was. I hailed him to ask for his help, but he looked so startled by my appearance that I asked him if he was well. To my surprise he quite rudely told me to mind my own business and then lectured me on how important it was to his apothecary work that he collect plants. Then he scoffed at how I'd never understand with me being a farmer's wife. I was going remind him of the calendula salve I used to make for his napkin rash when he was a baby when I noticed the broken foxglove flowers in the grass. Not a plant that an apprentice apothecary should be dabbling with. He saw me looking at them and marched away.

July 31, 1671

I spent much of last evening going through my family's book of plants and their uses. It is with a heavy heart that I must concede to my suspicions.

Foxglove ~ Digitalis.

Symptoms of poisoning: Vomiting, Diarrhoea, Drooling, Loss of Appetite and Abdominal Cramps

These are the very symptoms which Della tells me that Arthur has been suffering from this past week.

Advanced Symptoms: Irregular heartbeat, weakness, dizziness, difficulty walking, slow or absent pulses, changes in breathing, and collapse.

I must find a way to intervene.

August 1, 1671

I failed, and in such a dreadful fashion.

Having gone to visit Della when I thought Malachi would not be there, I asked about the teas and tinctures that he gives his father.

But Dolores informed me that Malachi administers them himself. She was so glowing in her account of her only son, one would not recognize him from the person that I know him to be.

(He has long since avoided me since I caught him stealing from his father's purse.). As I left, my head full of thoughts how to proceed now, Malachi stepped from the bushes at the end of Millers Lane. He accused me of sticking my nose into other people's business and told me that bad things happen to witches that interfere with his life. He laughed in my face.

A fear grows in me now. Only last month two ladies were accused of witchcraft and were put on the ducking stool by the clergy. In these times it takes very little to ignite hysteria against a Cunning woman.

I must hide anything that may incriminate me.

August 2, 1671

I have never had such a sleepless night. I know trouble is coming. Today I will hide clothes and money in the woods, and I shall carry a sharpened flint in my pockets. My ancestors will help me through this, of that, I am sure. I thank the Gods that I at least have my cunning skills, unlike the poor old people who are so unjustly accused.

If my escape goes well, I shall make my way back to my brother's farm. At least the Welsh have more respect for their cunning folk, and even if he will not take me in, I

could make a living as a healer. Some will remember my grandfather, I shall have to rely on his name and reputation until I gain my own.

But Alys, oh my darling girl, I cannot take you with me. As I write this, I am suddenly sure you shall read it some day. They would hunt us both down if I try to run. Better that the fools believe I am dead and you may have a good life with Henry. My heart aches, but there is no other way. The day will come when the puritans no longer have this merciless grip over our country, and I shall see you again, my darling girl. Tomorrow, we shall swim in the river, and I shall practice holding my breath.

Alys's head swam with her new knowledge. Bile rose in her throat, and a sudden need for fresh air sent Alys running downstairs to the back door. Dry heaving, with tears streaming down her face, she shivered on the dark threshold. Quiet footsteps on the slate floor behind her alerted Alys to another's presence. It was Maeve, who offered her wool shawl and draped it gently around her shoulders as she stood looking out into the dark.

'You're half frozen, come back in and I'll stoke the fire,' Maeve's weathered face was creased in concern. 'Sit down and tell me what ails you.'

Faltering, through sobs and shivers, she told Maeve everything. The nearest person she'd had to a mother these past years asked gentle questions when she faltered, and calmed her when hysteria threatened to overwhelm her, until her story was told. A movement at the kitchen door made both women turn; it was Henry.

'That's enough! Alys, go to your room.' He ran a calloused hand through his hair.

'Father, Malachi killed Arthur. I am sure of it!'

'Enough! I won't have this...this nonsense. You will not embarrass me in this fashion.'

Alys drew breath to argue, but he turned his attention away from her.

'Maeve. I trust you will not encourage my daughter's hysteria. I will not have servants that are less than loyal to me. Do you understand me?'

'Yes Sir.'

Would he make them homeless again, after all they have done?

Doesn't he consider them family, after all this time, after all their help during our darkest days?

For a moment they all stood frozen. Henry crossed his arms and glared at Maeve until she bobbed a curtsy, walked to the pantry, and shut the door.

Alys ran like a doe, past her father, leaping the stairs two at a time and shut herself in her room. Breathing heavily, her heart hammered as if it would burst from her chest.

I cannot marry Malachi. I cannot share a house...a bed with him.

I cannot stay here...

What can I do? What can I do?

I have no agency, no money...Oh God...help me...please!

If I marry him...if I become his wife...

Alys shuddered.

If I displease him, he will poison me too.

It would be better to die in childbirth...

Maybe...maybe... I shall go to the river and do away with myself now?

She recoiled at her dark thoughts, pushing hard against that greatest of sins, but they came circling back to her, like wolves appearing and disappearing in the woods, stalking her, waiting for her to fall. She drifted at the edge of sleep and a childhood memory crept in; years ago, when they were still children, Colm had laid a wire snare to catch a rabbit for the pot. When she had gone with him to check, the snare was drawn tight around the bloody stump of a foot. The animal had gnawed through its own leg to escape the noose. She had laughed

uncomfortably at Colm mimicking the three-legged rabbit running away from the snare. Running for its life.

The cold light of dawn crept in, and Alys opened her eyes to see a pair of young crows fluffing their new feathers as they huddled on her windowsill.

They watched her as she splashed her face at the washstand, dampened her hair, and arranged it neatly under her cap.

Della was in the kitchen; her face flushed with excitement as she chatted to Maeve. She stopped as Alys entered the room and rushed to her. 'Here she is! Our bride to be! Such news Alys, I have spoken to the vicar, the date is set...September 15th. We have three weeks to prepare!'

'That... that is very soon,' Alys tried to swallow her panic. 'I should start milking. Mary will be on her own.'

'Nonsense Alys, I've set Henry and Colm to help her, you have more important tasks to see to.' She took a firm grip of Alys's arm and marched back through the hallway, calling over her shoulder, 'Maeve, bring that bag up to Alys's room, and pins!'

The next hour saw Alys stripped down to her bodice and linen shift.

'Not to worry love, I'm sure your father will open his purse for a new chemise. Now try this on,' Della held out a finely woven wool skirt, black as night and taped at the edges with a fine ribbon. Alys stepped into it and allowed herself to be laced up; next a doublet that fastened with glass beads.

'My wedding present to you Alys. I think it suits you very well.'

'I...I... Thank you Della. I have never worn anything so fine. It is too generous.'

'Nonsense! The wife of a respected gentleman should be well dressed. See here where it can be let out when your belly grows,' Della winked. 'I dare say you don't need to be educated in the ways of procreation, being a farmer's daughter.'

'I should take it off; I really do have chores to do.'

Della frowned at Alys's lack of enthusiasm. 'Yes, of course, I'm busy too! I'll see myself out. Be sure to hang it up and don't let it get motheaten!'

Maeve and Alys both curtsied as she left, then Alys hissed, 'Get me out of this...this Puritanical horror.' She scrabbled at the knots Della had tied to attach the skirt to the doublet, fumbling the dozens of shiny glass buttons that did up the front, fighting the urge to rip them off.

'Alys, stop! Let me help you.'

'You can't help me. Nobody can.'

Maeve grimaced and sighed, 'Such is the lot of women. I will always be here for you Alys, you know that. I have regarded you as my daughter these last twelve years.' Her nimble fingers undid the buttons at Alys's wrists.

'You truly have been like a mother to me Maeve,' Alys pulled on her everyday skirt and took a deep breath. 'I have good reason to believe that my mother may still be alive.'

Maeve's jaw dropped 'How can this be?'

'In her journal. She wrote down everything leading up to her ducking. I told you that she believed that Malachi poisoned his father. Malachi was her accuser.'

Maeve reached out for Alys's hand, 'They searched the river for her, sweetheart. I do not know how she could have survived.'

'She did!' Alys insisted, 'She planned it all, she could swim, she had flint, sharpened to cut herself free, she hid clothes and money further downstream.'

'Alys, sweetheart, this is too fantastical.'

'But it is possible. They never found her body. Don't you see, she's alive. I'm sure she is!'

'But where would she have gone? Do you know how many places turned us away when we were evicted? People are rarely kind Alys; surely someone would have seen her.'

'I believe she went back to her family in Wales. That's where she came from. Her family sell the limestone that we sweeten our fields with. I think she went back to them.'

If there is the slightest chance that my mother is alive, that she is living in Wales, then I shall have courage. Like she did. I must make a plan, like she did.

* * * * *

The chickens scattered as Henry flicked his whip at the pony and set off for town, whistling tunelessly as he left the yard. Before he went, he had rubbed her arm and told her almost tenderly. 'I'm glad you have seen sense Alys. You have always been a good girl, I know you will be a good wife.' Alys had forced a smile and avoided his eye.

As he drove out of sight Maeve came and hugged her for the longest time, tears running freely down her ruddy cheeks. She handed Alys a large parcel of food, wrapped in linen, then proceeded to lecture Alys about avoiding vagabonds and thieves in the forest. Maeve then pulled the large sausage that was protruding from the bundle. 'If all else fails love, give them a clubbing with this,' nervous energy turned to hysterical laughter.

Alys wiped her eyes and had to force herself to seriousness. 'What will you tell father when I am gone?'

'I shall be as surprised as he is.' Maeve rubbed Alys's arm. 'Don't you fret about me; and Mary and Colm know nothing,'

'Thank you for everything. Really, thank you,' her throat tightened and she hugged Maeve, the comforting smell of soap and cooking made it hard to let go. 'Send word when you are settled!'

Alys nodded and walked away, she didn't trust herself to turn around and wave goodbye.

What shall I say if I come upon one of the neighbours? I can't say I'm just going for a walk, not with this bundle of food under my arm.

Her nerves jangled but the road out of the hamlet was eerily quiet. At the last house in a small row of cottages, their neighbour Geoffrey was hoeing rows of vegetables his garden; his head bowed under a wide brimmed hat. Alys crept by guiltily on the other side of the hedge. She practically tiptoed her way to the

junction where the narrow lane met the King's highway, then she paused and looked back.

Come on, you can do this. Mother did it. I'm sure she did.

Alys forced herself to walk with purpose, she cut slices of cheese and sausage with her small kitchen knife and ate as she went. Two crows bounced from tree to hedge, keeping her company, croaking encouragement. Alys tossed them a small cube of cheese each.

Father would be enraged to see me feeding the crows.

Mother put scraps out for the birds during the winter.

A steady thrum reverberated in the distance.

Horses! A lot of horses. A lot of men...are they coming this way?

Alys looked to the hedge on her right; it was full of blackthorn and impenetrable. The only gateway was a good walk back, in the direction that the horses were coming from. On her left was open scrubland which ran down to the river. Panic rose in her chest. The crows circled above her cawing loudly, as she looked up, they flew to a stunted apple tree some twenty yards from the road. She ran, stumbling over tussocks of old grass and fell, face first at its gnarled trunk. The impact jarred her bones and she stifled a sob as the drumming of hooves came closer. Alys lay still as a newborn fawn and kept her eyes shut tight as she listened for any change in their pace. But there was none, the horses kept their steady canter past her, the loud jingle of spurs and weaponry getting fainter as they carried on down the road. Cautiously she raised her head and noted the uniforms were different to that of the local militia. The sound of more hooves approaching prompted Alys to duck her head into the grass again, but this time

keeping a small aperture in her hood to peep through. More soldiers in bright scarlet coats, swords at their hips and pistols at the front of their saddles cantered two abreast along the road.

Where are they going? Should I go warn Maeve?

No, they won't pass the farm.

What could I do against dozens of armed men anyway?

She lay there a while longer until the sound of her heart stopped beating in her ears and she dared to lift her head. Old leaves had stuck to her face, and the front of her dress was muddy. As she sat up, she caught sight of something that looked out of place in the grass. It was fabric, faded and greened, only the change in texture differentiated it from the grass. Alys pulled at it and the fabric tore like fresh bread. The lining of it was still bright, red and green striped; it was a woollen shawl which seemed familiar. She looked down at herself and realised that it was the same woollen cloth that lined her short cloak. She tore at the bundle and found it contained a long-handled knife, a draw string purse which was heavy with coins, and a bundle of clothing which was also in the throes of decay.

Is this the bundle which Mother hid? Why did she not retrieve it?

Did she drown after all?

Alys choked back tears. She put her face back to the grass, squeezed her eyes tight and wished herself into the earth.

What shall I do now? I can't go back, to Father, to Malachi...I can't... I won't!

She gripped the drawstring purse her breathing shallow and fast.

I have money. More than I had when I left home.

I will keep going, keep going to Wales.

Reflective Essay.

The work I have submitted forms the first 38 pages of a novel which will have an expected word count of 75-85,000 words and is historical fiction set between 1671 and 1685. My protagonist works through a hero's journey story arc: leaving her ordinary life to overcome peril and challenges, gain wisdom and skills to return home transformed. I consider this to be a feminist piece as it explores the lack of civil liberties suffered by women at that time and the cruelty wrought upon any form of rebellion. There is also an occult element to the story with the introduction of tarot cards and the running theme of birds as being spiritually significant. The crows initially appear as watchers but later guide Alys, my protagonist, to safety. The occult element will develop significantly as the story unfolds.

Genre

Although historical fiction maybe be seen as escapism 'which demands a level of self-conscious forgetting'¹ and by this very act 'derive pleasure,' I would also consider my reader demographic² to be intellectually curious, and often knowledgeable about their favourite time periods. In writing this genre one needs to be aware that it is not only the visual descriptions that need to be consistent with the time period, but also the attitudes and behaviours of the day, or as Rhona Martin suggests "you will find yourself with a contemporary story in fancy dress."³ This may not be problematic to all readers; as a degree of empathy is often involved in a reader's immersion in any novel, and that it may be part of the enjoyment to consider one's own actions and reactions to the events portrayed.

¹ Jerome De Groot. *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*. (New York: Routledge, 2016) p153

² Research suggests that women are the biggest consumers of historical fiction. Therefore, I imagine my readership would be women not dissimilar to myself, who have a love of all things historical, but do not necessarily want to read academic works for pleasure. M.K.Tod, *A Writer of History* (2014) <https://awriterofhistory.com/2014/11/20/reading-historical-fiction-varies-by-gender/> [Accessed 20/3/2026]

³ Rhona Martin. *Writing Historical Fiction* 2nd edition. (London: A&C Black, 1995) p9

But I have aimed to hold myself to a higher standard of authenticity, because as a reader I find a lack of research to be a great irritation.

I would place my novel between popular and middle brow genre fiction based on the amount of historical research that I have undertaken, equating my work to that of SJ Parris. Her Elizabethan series features monk turned spy, Giordano Bruno, and is grounded in well researched places; he also interacts with contemporary figures including Queen Elizabeth I and Francis Walsingham.⁴ Mine is also an adventure story, with my protagonist finding herself in a series of situations to be negotiated in order to continue her journey; by the end of the novel she will have travelled from the West Country to Jamaica, getting shipwrecked on the west Wales coast, before returning home to confront her nemesis.

Evolution of the genre.

It can be said that ancient works such as Homers *Iliad* and *Odyssey*⁵ (8-7BCE), Chaucer's *The Knights Tale*⁶ written during the medieval period, and Renaissance plays such as Shakespeare *Richard II*⁷ (1597) maybe regarded as historical fiction as they were all written more than 50 years after events, as were Daniel Defoe's classics *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*. But the genre was not formally recognised until the 19th century with authors like Sir Walter Scott and Leo Tolstoy using history and their heritage to explore social and political themes. In recent years a great many female writers have used the genre to highlight feminist issues such as gender-based violence, bodily autonomy, and

⁴ S.J.Parris, *Heresy*, (London: Harper Collins, 2011) p32

⁵ I recently read an adapted feminist retelling by Madeline Miller. *Circe*. (London:Back Bay Books-Little,Brown and Company.2019)

⁶ Helen Cooper. *The Canterbury Tales*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023)

⁷ William Shakespeare; Ann Thompson. David Scott Kastan. *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. (London: A&C Black. 2010) p789

financial abuse, putting female characters as their main protagonists and effectively pushing to rewrite history from a less male centred perspective. For example, in Philipa Gregory's *Tidelands*, her protagonist faces the choice of whether to be tortured on the millwheel for witchcraft or face hanging, as she has covered up her daughter's thieving (both women also to be outcast for being pregnant.). This is much like my prologue where Rhiannon faces the ducking stool or hanging, because she has the temerity to usurp the gentleman medics. My intention is to show a greater degree of authenticity to the plight of women in that period than the more romantic 'bodice-ripper' romance novels of Mills and Boon.

Tense, Italics, Conversation and Diary Entries as devices.

I wrote the Prologue as a foil to the less dynamic start of Chapter one, writing in the first person, mostly present tense to show the internal dialogue and focalised point of view of Rhiannon, thus giving immediacy to her predicament. I needed this scene to engage my readers from the start and end it on a 'cliff-hanger' as a ploy to keep them intrigued. Then in Chapter 1, the narration changes to a limited perspective in the third person as Alys's story unfolds, enabling me to reveal her world in greater detail. We only see what Alys sees.⁸

The use of italics was my device to reveal Alys's inner thoughts and motivations in the first person, especially when she conflicts with the male characters and has little personal agency.⁹

But in large part I have used 'tell' mode to impart substantial amounts of information in a short space. This is an often-used technique by many successful novel writers, including the likes of SJ Paris, Ben Aaronovitch and Philipa

⁸ see for example page 12: 'The sound of a pony and carriage clattering into the yard below her window broke her paralysis. Alys gathered the cards with panicked fingers and fumbled them back into the secret compartment.'

⁹ for example page 13: 'How dare he! How bloody dare he!! They'd have to carry me kicking and screaming up the aisle.'

Gregory,¹⁰ all of whom have inspired me. Interspaced with the aforementioned tell portions and italics are conversations that give greater insight into my characters,¹¹ slow down the story telling and bring the scene greater importance. Rhiannon's diary entries also enabled me to show insight into the character's back story, and to give my protagonist another level of motivation to leave home.

Character Development.

If I take my protagonist Alys for instance, my intention is to show her competence as a female farmer, doing the physical work whilst also running the farm accounts. This is juxtaposed against her lack of autonomy, both on a personal level domestically and in society as a rule. The mere threat of physical violence is enough to silence her, and she is aware of how this threat affects all women.¹² But besides the work and personal dynamics of seventeenth century life I also wanted to portray more of Alys's personality. She is introverted, she avoids going to the market until she needs to prove herself to her father, and she easily irritated; she slams doors and must fight her natural inclination to argue. How

¹⁰ Philippa Gregory *Tidelands* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2019) p 177: 'Alinor thought that James might have taken tertian fever, a sickness that lingered in the mire, striking visitors, and staying with them for life, coming back three times a year and so earning its name.'

¹¹ I liken this to Philippa Gregory, *Tidelands* p176: 'Will that be all, Mrs Reekie?' as if Alinor were a guest and not a servant like him. 'That's all,' she said. 'Tell Rob to come here after breakfast. I'll speak to him from here. But nobody is to come in until I know what ails the tutor.'

on page ? Of my story Alys's lack of agency is displayed in the conversation with her father

'Anyway!' he roused himself, looking pleased again, 'Della and I have been speaking, and Malachi has agreed.'

'Agreed to what?'

'That you and he should be married!'

'Father, tell me you are not serious.' The colour drained from Alys's face. 'No! How could you? He just forced a kiss on me! He is a leech.'

¹² p8. 'Henry put his head out of the study, 'Alys! If you don't improve your mood I shall ask the Mayor for the scolds bridle!' Alys eyed him with disgust but held her tongue and walked away.

She had seen one of the fish wives forced into the metal contraption, the tight metal bands locked around her head, a metal plate between her teeth. Blood and drool paraded her through the town, then left her chained in the square for the whole of market day. had dripped down her chin as they had

*No one...no woman, haggled over the prices that day.
Surely, he wouldn't do that to me...?'*

much of this is due to the trauma of losing her mother to a violent act, the conditions of women at that time, or Alys's true personality is debatable, but she is strong-willed and by the end of the novel does gain a degree of personal freedom. Her fitness and youth are implied through the physical work she does and her being of marriageable age.

Occultism

Although my novel is not high fantasy and is firmly rooted in a real time and place(s) there is a magical element that runs through the story, with the emphasis on realism. The use of tarot cards as a prophetic tool and the aforementioned crows that become Alys's guides take my novel out of straightforward historical fiction. As the story develops beyond the pages that I have submitted, prophetic dreams, ritual trance and telepathy are also used to drive the plot. Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave*¹³ does something similar, with the use of prophetic dreams and animals that provide signs and direction to the young Merlin, without resorting to *Harry Potter* style magic. Thus, I believe that my novel would be appreciated by the occult community.

Language.

Part of my research was taken up with the language of the day. I read *The Diary of Samuel Pepys Volume 4* (1663), written in the first-person telling style of a typical diary entry, in language that is somewhat familiar to our modern ear, for example page 285:

'Up and to church without my wife, she being all dirty, as is my house.'¹⁴

¹³ The young Myrddin's prophetic dream about Ambrosius:

'I hid in the brushwood stack at the corner of the shed, and I think I fell asleep. When I woke I saw the bull, over by the standing stone. He was grazing there, quite quiet. Then you came with the rope. The bull charged and you roped it, and then jumped on its back and pulled its head up and killed it with a knife.'
Mary Stewart, *The Crystal Cave* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1970) p141

¹⁴ Samuel Pepys *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: a new and complete transcription/ Vol.4: 1663*. (Gravesend: Bell Publishing, 1971) p285

And also, *Moll Flanders*, first published in 1722 but set in the late 1600's, which gives the modern reader a little more to interpret:

'The Woman appear'd to be an experienc'd Woman in her Business, I mean as a Midwife, but she had another Calling too, in which she was as expert as most Women, if not more.'¹⁵

This led me to consider whether to write all my dialogue with greater authenticity to the period, as in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*¹⁶ which leans into archaic language slightly more than the average historical writer, thereby making the reader work a little harder.

My choice was to use a slightly more formal speech pattern to that which we use every day, being careful to avoid modern expressions such as 'Are you ok?', exchanging it for something period appropriate such as 'Are you well?' and making Malachi 'a leech' rather than a creep or predator; I aim to bring a flavour of the era without making my readers work too hard or need to reach for a dictionary during every conversation. I have aimed throughout to suggest the language of the time with a light touch. In Rhiannon's diary entry for example, the first line reads:

'How easily they mouth their prayers on Sunday and then spend the rest of the week making sly business deals.'

Research

Historical fiction has evolved from when I first read the genre as a teenager. Barbara Erskin often drops words that are not of the era into her 'time-slip', novels for example 'Did you enjoy our little show?'¹⁷ when play, mystérie or interlude would have been more appropriate nouns to use in her 14th century

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*. (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2004) p128

¹⁶ 'Spies, he means. To see how she will take the news. To see what Queen Catalina will say, in private and unleashed, when she has slipped the noose of diplomatic Latin in which it will be broken to her that the king would like to marry another lady.'
Hilary Mantel *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009) p21

¹⁷ Barbara Erskin. *Kingdom of shadows*. (Time Warner, 1988) p644

novel. This makes me wonder if this was a deliberate choice with thought to her American readership, or whether her publisher's desire for regular new works and her habit of choosing different time periods for every book leaves her with less time to ponder and research every detail. With this in mind it was unsurprising to discover that *Wolf Hall* took five years of research and three years to write, despite Hilary Mantel's lifelong interest in Thomas Cromwell, acknowledging that she was "30 years late" in starting the project.¹⁸ With this knowledge I have allowed this novel to progress at its own pace, rather than rush the process and risk feeling unsatisfied with the final result. Modern readers have high expectations of their historical fiction, being better educated through television and the internet. My own journey through the genre started with film adaptations of classics such as *The Three Musketeers*¹⁹ and *Moll Flanders*²⁰ which prompted me to read the books, thus giving me the foundation for my research. Background reading also came from works by historian Ronald Hutton²¹ and with a great amount of information gleaned from Ian Mortimer's *The Time Travellers Guide to Restoration Britain*.²² My methodology also includes immersion into the Restoration period via factual television programmes such as Alice Roberts' *Britain's Most Historic Towns*,²³ and fiction such as *Black Sails*.²⁴

¹⁸ Hilary Mantel 'How I came to write Wolf Hall' *The Booker Prizes* (2023) <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/hilary-mantel-how-i-came-to-write-wolf-hall> [Accessed 3/1/26]

¹⁹ Alexandre Dumas. *The Three Musketeers*. (Kindle: Zenith Blue Ridge Books. 2025)

²⁰ Daniel Defoe. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*. (New York: Norton Critical Editions. 2004)

²¹ Ronald Hutton, *The Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)

Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006)

²² Ian Mortimer. *The Time Traveller's Guide to Restoration Britain 1600-1700*. (London: Vintage. 2017)

²³ Bowles and others, *Britain's Most Historic Towns: Restoration London Series 3 episode 2* (2022) Prime Video

²⁴ Dir. Jonathan E. Steinberg, Toby Stephens and Hannah New, *Black Sails* (2016) Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment Deutschland

The empirical experience of having lived on a working dairy farm for more than a decade gives me first-hand knowledge of handling cattle and the process of making hay. But mechanical farm machinery was not in use in the seventeenth century, so I used several sources to check that anecdotal evidence, and my own presumptions were in fact correct. Sources included the aforementioned *The Time Travelers Guide to Restoration Britain* by Ian Mortimer, who details the amount of itinerant labour used in the 17th century,²⁵ and YouTube videos by living history groups²⁶ for the actual process of haymaking.

Grammatical devices.

Being meticulous about using British animals for every simile, for example ‘the crowd, like hungry cattle jostling for position’ and the ‘gaggle of neighbours’ was an important consideration in keeping with my historical theme, and to underscore the rural setting of the scene. ‘Scythes swung with military timing under a punishing sun’ combines alliteration²⁷ and imagery to start a new scene

²⁵ Ian Mortimer. *The Time Travellers Guide to Restoration Britain* (London: Vintage. 2017) p72

²⁶ Zoyland Heritage Fund *The Battle of Sedgemoor* <https://youtu.be/tar25yUhJS8> [Accessed 16/1/26]

²⁷ My fondness for alliteration may also be seen in much of my poetry, for example:

Superstition

To squint across the low tide
at mottled Curlews on desolate mudflats,
their silence before evensong calms the mariner

Cormorants raise their wings;
silhouettes of plague doctors
drying in the saline breeze.

I remember the suicidal Swifts;
smashing into windows and cupboards.
Shit flicked, blood flecked, into oblivion

Side eye sly
Crow meets my eye.
On thickened thoughts,
I think recognise your voice
from that other life

Pin prick motes that sparkle,
a presence in the liminal;
What winged element is this?

as an alternative to beginning a new chapter, as it follows on from Alys's inner thoughts and takes the reader from a close conversation indoors in the previous paragraph to a wide observation of the landscape.

Foreshadowing.

The scene in the attic, where Alys 'thumped the [window] frame' to allow the butterfly to escape, foreshadows Alys's own need to leave imminent peril. This metaphor also slows the pace of the story whilst likening the auburn-haired Alys to the orange butterfly, and Malachi and the patriarchy to the spider and its web.

Continuing Research.

My research continues, because the first draft of the rest of the novel, although nearly complete, was sometimes referenced with a swift Google search as I was in the throes of writing. The second draft will be more thoroughly researched as it explores themes of piracy, trans-Atlantic shipping, and slavery.

As a white middle-aged woman, I can only presume empathy for the suffering endured and as such I will look for a sensitivity reader before I go to publication. Even so I am aware that these stories may be considered 'not mine to tell,' but with my protagonist travelling from Bristol to Jamaica during the seventeenth century it would have been disingenuous to leave out the practice of slavery, thus 'whitewashing' my story.

With all this in mind, I am well on my way to completing my first novel.

Bibliography

Abbot, Robert. 1588-1662. *The young-mans warning-peece or A sermon preached at the buriall of William Rogers apothecary with an history of his sinfull life and woefull death together with A post-script of the use of examples dedicated to the young-men of the parish especially his companions* (1639) <https://doi.org/info:doi/>

Anselment, R. A. "The Wantt of health": An Early Eighteenth-Century Self-Portrait of Sickness. *Literature and Medicine*, 15(2), 225–243. (1996) <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.1996.0014>

Attwood, David, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll Flanders*, BBC and Amazon Prime Video vols (1996)

Bailey, Christine and Patrick Bizzaro, 'Research in Creative Writing: Theory into Practice', *Research in the Teaching of English*, 52 (2017), 77–97

Barker, Pat, *The Silence of the Girls*, The Women of Troy Series, First United States edition edn, 1 vols (New York: Doubleday, 2018)

Bauer, Margaret D. "THE EVOLUTION OF A Genre: Literary Historical Fiction." *North Carolina Literary Review* no. 22 (2013): 42-43, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/evolution-genre-literary-historical-fiction/docview/2547655687/se-2> (accessed April 24, 2026).

Best, Michael R., 'Medical use of a Sixteenth-Century Herbal: Gervase Markham and the Banckes Herbal', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 53 (1979), 449–458, in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/44450932>>

Borman, Tracy, *Witches, James I and the English Witch Hunts* (London: Vintage. Random House Ltd, 2014)

Bowles, D., Roberts, A., & Robinson, B. *Britain's Most Historic Towns: Restoration London* - Series 3 - Ep 2. Britain's Most Historic Towns. (2022) EDUTV.9963730. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/EDUTV.9963730>

Bradbury, Ray, *Zen in the Art of Writing*, 1st edn (New York: RosettaBooks, 2017) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/2442722/zen-in-the-art-of-writing-pdf>>

Cardiff University *Woven Histories of Welsh Wool and Slavery*. (2023) <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2723578-woven-histories-of-welsh-wool-and-slavery> [accessed 11/4/25]

Cooper, Helen, *The Canterbury Tales*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023)

Cueva, Edmund P. and Shannon N. Byrne, *A Companion to the Ancient Novel*, 1st edn (West Sussex, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2014)

Cunnington B H. The "Brank" Or Scolds' Bridle' *The English Illustrated Magazine.*, 26.(1905) <https://doi.org/info:doi/>

De Groot, Jerome, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (London: Routledge, 2016)

- Defoe, Daniel, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2004)
- Dumas, Alexandre, *The Three Musketeers*, (Kindle: Zenith Blue Ridge Books, 2025)
- Elmer, Peter, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- Erskine, Barbara, *Kingdom of Shadows* (London: Time Warner, 1988)
- Esselmont, Brigit, *The Ultimate Guide to Tarot Card Meanings*, 3rd edn (USA: Amazon, 2019)
- Gibson, Marion, *England's Witchcraft Trials* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2022)
- Gosden, Chris, *The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present* (London: Viking, 2020)
- Nightwatching*, Dir. Peter Greenaway and others, FilmConfect, 2013
- Gregory, Philippa, *Normal Women* (London: William Collins, 2023)
- Gregory, Phillipa *Tidelands*, 1st paperback edn (London: Simon and Schuster, 2019)
- Hart, Emilia, *Weyward*, Hardback original edn (London: Harper Collins, 2023)
- Hartland, E Sidney. 'The Physicians of Myddfai' *The Archaeological Review.*, 1(2). (1888) <https://doi.org/info:doi/>
- Historical Practices: Author Rilla Askew on Writing Historical Fiction *Journal of Women's History*, 34 (2022b), 124–131
- Howell, Rachel, 'Review: A Cultural History of Tarot, by Helen Farley and I. B. Tauris', *Nova Religio*, 15 (2011), 136–137
- Hutton, Ronald, *The Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)
- Hutton, Ronald, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006)
- Hyland, Tina, *Divining Literature: A History of Tarot* (eScholarship, University of California, 2022)
- King James Version. *The Bible* (London: Collins, 1611/1769)
- James II, K. of E. (1688). *The King's letter to the Earl of Feversham upon his leaving Whitehall, together with the Earl of Fevershams letter to his Highness the Prince of Orange after the Kings departure.*
- Launer, J., 'The Medics of Myddfai', *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, 98 (2005), 73–74
- Lucier, Makiia, 'Writing Historical Fiction', *Knowledge Quest*, 42 (2014), 78–80
- Mantel, Hilary, *Wolf Hall*. (London: Harper Collins, 2019)
- Mantel, Hilary. 'How I came to write Wolf Hall', *The Booker Prizes*. (2023) <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/hilary-mantel-how-i-came-to-write-wolf-hall> [3/1/26]

- Margaronis, Maria, 'The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century', *History Workshop Journal*, 65 (2008), 138–160
- Martin, Rhona, *Writing Historical Fiction*. (London: A&C Black, 1995)
- Miller, Madeline, *Circe*, First Back Bay paperback edition edn (London: Back Bay Books - Little, Brown and Company, 2019)
- Mount, Toni, *Medieval Medicine* (Stroud: Amberley, 2016)
- Newman, Simon P. *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (London: University of London Press, 2022)
- Parris, S. J., *Heresy* (London: Harper Collins, 2011)
- Parris, S. J., *Traitor's Legacy* (London: Harper Collins, 2025)
- Penner, Sarah, *The Lost Apothecary* (London: Legend Books, 2021)
- Pepys, Samuel; Latham, Robert. Mathews, William. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: a new and complete transcription/ Vol.4: 1663*. (Gravesend: Bell Publishing, 1971)
- Rochester, John W. o. and Patrick Lyons, *Rochester*, 1. publ. edn (London: The Guernsey Press Co., 1993)
- Shakespeare, William; Thompson, Ann. Kastan, David Scott, *Arden Shakspeare Complete Works*. (London: A&C Black, 2010)
- Shepherd-Robinson, Laura, *The Square of Sevens* (London: Atria Books, 2023)
- Black Sails*, Dir. Jonathan E. Steinberg, Toby Stephens and Hannah New, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment Deutschland, 2016
- Stewart, Mary, *The Crystal Cave* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970)
- Tod, M. K., 'Reading Historical Fiction Varies by Gender' *A Writer of History*. (2014)
<<https://awriterofhistory.com/2014/11/20/reading-historical-fiction-varies-by-gender/>>
[accessed 20/3/2026]
- Wainwright, Rosie and others, *Woven Histories of Welsh Wool and Slavery*
<https://www.commonthreadspress.co.uk/products/woven-histories-of-welsh-wool-and-slavery> [accessed 26/11/25]
- Wilson, Anne, *Magical Thought in Creative Writing*, 1. publ. edn (Stroud, England.: The Thimble Press, 1983)
- Zahedieh, Nuala, 'The Rise of 'King Sugar' and Enslaved Labor in Early English Jamaica', *Early American Studies*, 20 (2022), 576–596
- Zoyland Heritage Fund, *Battle of Sedgemoor*, 2026 vols
<<https://www.zoylandheritage.co.uk/>> [accessed 16/1/2026]

Appendix A

The year is 1685 and **Alys Chapman** is living a quiet life with her widowed father on their dairy farm in the West Country. Unmarried, and traumatised having witnessed her mother, **Rhiannon**, apparently drown on the ducking stool over a decade earlier, Alys is shocked when she finds her mother's hidden diary and a deck of Tarot cards.

From the diary she learns that **Malachi**, the lecherous apothecary to whom she is betrothed, is the accuser who set the mob upon Rhiannon, and who likely murdered his own father.

Rhiannon's diary also hints at the possibility of her still being alive, and as her body was never found, Alys escapes, with the intention of finding her mother's family in Wales.

The naive Alys relies on the generosity of strangers, learns the healing arts from a Maltese mystic, and is seduced by the absconded soldier **Darius**, whom she has revived after an unsuccessful hanging.

Despite the wild birds that appear to guide her, Alys ignores her intuition until Darius reveals his true nature. Alys leaves him, and dressed as a boy, makes her way to Bristol. Intending to find a ship for the short trip to Carmarthen, she is instead press ganged by privateers and finds herself crossing the Atlantic with **Captain Margam**, who soon discovers her female identity.

Arriving in Jamaica, a carriage accident on the way to Captain Margam's plantation diverts Alys to a Maroons camp. During a shamanistic ceremony **Zarene** (an escapee from Margam) guides Alys to receive a premonition of the earthquake that will decimate Port Royal. The escaped slaves are uncomfortable with an outsider in their midst but also have qualms about letting her go. Zarene covertly takes Alys back to the site of Captain Margam's accident, where he is still unconscious.

Zarene disappears into the forest once they've dragged Margam to his plantation gates, leaving Alys to meet Margam's wife. It's **Rhiannon**, Alys's mother, under an assumed name.

Rhiannon is living in a gilded cage, and with her is Zarene's daughter **Zola**. The child has the gift of prophecy that Margam is keen to exploit; she can also

communicate telepathically with her mother. This becomes apparent when Alys is duped into taking Zola for a walk to the river, where Zarene is waiting in a small boat to rescue her daughter.

Margam, on hearing that Zola is missing, beats Alys publicly and then drags Rhiannon back to the house where he sexually assaults her. Alys follows them and kills him with one blow to the back of the head.

Due to the premonitions Margam's ships are prepared to sail, so Alys and Rhiannon begin their escape back across the Atlantic.

Darius, who witnessed the aftermath of Alys killing Margam, blackmails the women into giving him 'The Angelique,' although ship's crew refuse to accept his authority.

Locked in their cabin, Rhiannon and Alys reconnect and spend the Atlantic crossing delving into the divination arts after Alys dreams of her father being in peril. Rhiannon also makes known her close connection to **Clauneck**, ships bursar, who is usurps Darius as Captain.

In the Bristol Channel a storm sets in and the shipwrecks on a sandbank. Although many of the crew survive, they are faced with the Pembrey Hatchet Men. Guided by cabin boy **Francis**, Alys, Rhiannon, and Clauneck make it off the beach to the safety of his aunt's Inn. From a window they watch the Militia who have rounded up the Hatchet men, and with them Darius, who is wanted for absconding from his regiment and for highway robbery.

A carriage journey sees the four of arrive in Carmarthen, where they are looked after by Clauneck's sister who is running his pub.

Alys dreams about her father again, so Clauneck, who is launching a smuggling venture, takes her back to the West Country on his way to France.

She reaches the farm in time to prevent Malachi from poisoning her father, **Henry**. Running to escape Malachi, Alys stumbles through a herd of cattle, upsetting the bull which charges Malachi and kills him. **Colm**, her father's herdsman, drags Alys to safety.

Henry proposes that Alys should marry Colm and take on the farm, which Alys refuses, and is locked her in her room until she submits.

Alys escapes, this time with money, life experience, and a growing trust in her intuition. She makes for the harbour and another adventure.

**University of Wales: Trinity Saint David
E-Thesis Deposit Agreement**

Details of the Work

I would like to deposit the following item in the digital repository maintained by the University, and/or in any other repository authorized for use by the University:

Title Ace of
Cups
.....

This item is a product of my own research endeavours and is covered by the agreement below in which the item is referred to as “the Work”. It is identical in content to that deposited in the Learning Resources Centre, subject to point 4 below.

I agree that the University of Wales: Trinity Saint David may electronically store, copy or translate the Work to any approved medium or format for the purpose of future preservation and accessibility. The University is not under any obligation to reproduce or display the Work in the same formats or resolutions in which it was originally deposited.

UW: TSD Digital Repository

I understand that work deposited in the digital repository will be accessible to a wide variety of people and institutions, including automated agents and search engines via the World Wide Web.

I understand that once the Work is deposited, the item and its metadata may be incorporated into public access catalogues or services, such as national databases of electronic theses.

I agree as follows:

1. That I am the author or have the authority of the author/s to make this agreement and do hereby give the University of Wales: Trinity Saint David the right to make available the Work in the way described above.
2. That the electronic copy of the Work deposited in the digital repository and covered by this agreement, is identical in content to the paper copy of the Work deposited in the Learning Resources Centre of the University, subject to point 4 below.
3. That I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the Work is original, and to the best of my knowledge, does not breach any laws including those relating to defamation, libel and copyright.
4. That I have, in instances where the intellectual property of other authors or copyright holders is included in the Work, gained explicit permission for the inclusion of that material in the Work, and in the electronic form of the Work as accessed through the open access digital repository, *or* that I have identified and removed that material for which adequate permission

- has not been obtained and which will be inaccessible via the digital repository
5. That University of Wales: Trinity Saint David does not hold any obligation to take legal action on behalf of the Depositor, or other rights holders, in the event of a breach of intellectual property rights, or any other right, in the material deposited.
 6. That I undertake to indemnify the University of Wales: Trinity Saint David against all actions, suits, proceedings, claims, demands and costs occasioned by the University in consequence of any breach of this agreement

Name ...JL Toft.....

Date 11/5/2026.....