

Task 1: The Depiction of Nuns in Medieval Welsh Poetry

Introduction – The Church in Medieval Wales

What is surprising about medieval Welsh Poetry written about nuns is the lack of reverence you expect to hear towards representatives of the church. Instead of treating nuns as separate from society and on a different level from secular women, they were instead treated much in the same manner as any other women. Given the power and influence of the church at the time, one may assume this kind of disrespect would not have been tolerated, but this does not seem to be the case.

When trying to understand why medieval Welsh poets addressed nuns the way they did, and how they got away with it, it can be helpful to first establish the religious environment in which these poems were written. By the Middle Ages, Christianity had a significant hold on Wales. The “Age of Saints” in Wales ran from the fifth to the sixth centuries and left a lasting mark on the religious fabric of the country, typified by the various shrines and pilgrimage sites which evolved over time around their reported settlements.¹

As the role of the church in society evolved, there was a clear shift from the notion that worship was an individual action taken on for the good of one’s own soul, to a new model where priests and nuns were tasked with praying for the souls of others, in particular for the lords, kings and emperors who sponsored their cause.² The opportunity for nobles to outsource their salvation did not go to waste and churches, monasteries and nunneries began to spring up under their new patrons. The flourish of monastic houses across Europe grew with such fervor that, by 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council was

¹ K. Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c. 1100-1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p 1.

² J. Burton & J. Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), p 2.

concerned about dilution of the effort to save souls and implemented a rule that no new orders could be established from thereon out.³

Interestingly, however, the monastery craze did not appear to rampage Wales as much as it did through England. Scarcely more than 40 religious houses are believed to have existed in Wales by the end of the Middle Ages.⁴ By contrast, in England at the start of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536, more than 800 abbeys and priories were operating.⁵ One may think this was due to the size of Wales in relation to the size of England, wherein a smaller country like Wales would not have the landmass available to sustain a large number of churches. The land area comparison website mapfight.xyz calculates that England is just over 6 times the size of Wales in land area.⁶ Certainly this would have been a factor in how many religious houses could have coexisted in a given area, but one sixth of the 800 houses in England would still equate to more than 130 houses in the same relative land mass for Wales, not 40. When reviewing data specific to nunneries, Wales was at an even greater dearth; by the late Middle Ages around 150 nunneries were operating in England compared to three (confirmed) in Wales.⁷

Aside from having available space for such institutions, there would have been a need for individuals to run them. Population figures from the Middle Ages can be difficult to pinpoint with much accuracy given the lack of records specific to this purpose. The timing of the various bouts of plague through the centuries can also greatly impact the population, so it is important to compare figures from the same period as closely as possible. The population of England in 1346 is estimated to have been 3.7

³ J. Burton & J. Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), p 6.

⁴ K. Stober, "The Social Networks of Late Medieval Welsh Monasteries.", in *Monasteries and Societies in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, edited by J. Burton and K. Stober (NED-New Edition: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), p 11.

⁵ "What Became of the Monks and Nuns at the Dissolution?" English Heritage <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/dissolution/> [Accessed 26 February 2022].

⁶ England size compared to Wales <https://mapfight.xyz/compare/england-vs-wales/> [Accessed 26 February 2022].

⁷ J. Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 176-208, (p. 177).

million.⁸ Thirty years later, Wales is estimated to have had a population of 125,000, the smallest population of the British Celtic regions (Scotland is believed to have had nearly 350,000 and Ireland half a million).⁹ Further impacting how the public engaged with religious houses would have been the fact that it was the Cistercian order which was more prevalent in Wales, compared to the (Norman aligned) Benedictines in England. The Cistercians were more focused on independence and solitude, which would likely have muted how engaged monks and nuns would have been with poets and the “outside world”.¹⁰ With fewer religious houses, and fewer religious figures to engage with the broader public or other religious orders, there could have been less social pressure to conform to an expected theme for poems about nuns.

A third possible factor shaping religious attitudes in Wales was the evolution, though disputed, of a more distinct style of a “Celtic Church”, where the rules may have been a bit lax, compared to other Christian countries, with respect to what was “proper”.¹¹ While medieval Wales does not seem to have been any less devoted to Christian ideals than its neighbors, if a more distinct form of worship evolved with fewer regulations and dogma, this could have contributed to looser attitudes towards nuns and the less reserved way in which poets expressed themselves with respect to nuns in Wales compared to other countries.

There are other theories regarding additional economic, social and political factors that may have contributed to Wales not having a significant proliferation of religious institutions in the Middle Ages. Suffice it to say, the macrotrends discussed here (limited available land to build, a smaller overall

⁸ J. C. Russel, ‘Late Ancient and Medieval Population’, from *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 48(3) (1958), pp. 1-152 (p. 105).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁰ H. Fulton, ‘Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns’, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 87-112 (p. 98).

¹¹ J. Cartwright, ‘Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales’ in *Medium Aevum*, 71(1), (2002), pp. 1-28 (p. 2).

population, and a less rigorous religious framework) would all have helped to shape the attitude towards nuns by medieval Welsh poets.

Medieval Welsh Poetry

Welsh poets were historically commissioned to praise whoever hired them for this purpose, generally limited to wealthy princes of the region. The political winds of change blew through Wales from the late thirteenth century onward, threatening this steady source of income. As a result, poets turned to landed gentry and monasteries for employment, and these groups quickly joined in on what was essentially the ultimate social media platform of medieval Wales: poetry.¹²

Hundreds of Welsh poems are known to exist from this period, and those with a religious tone often focused on saints, pilgrimages in Wales and abroad, and various popular religious shrines.¹³ Pilgrimages would have been a significant source of income for a church, which would explain why church leaders would commission poems praising their site and bringing in more pilgrims and their donations.¹⁴ Not surprising for commissioned works, these poems tend to be very complimentary of the monastery and abbots living within. In one such example, poet Gutun Owain praises Abbot Dafydd ab Ieuan's hospitality, saying the "table where we dwell, it is better than the feast of Celliwig", invoking the imagery of King Arthur's Court and the presumed abundance which would have been found there.¹⁵

Aside from the praise poems, there are also many examples of unrequited love poems from this period. Gruffudd ap Dafydd ap Tudur (c. 1300) writes of a "Silent Girl" he yearns to be with, saying "Gracious maid...be pleased to speak to me...speak a ready word for my sake." He continues to explain

¹² D. Johnston, 'Monastic Patronage of Welsh Poetry.' in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, edited by J. Burton and K. Stöber, 1st ed., (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 177-90 (p 177).

¹³ K. Hurlock, *Medieval Welsh Pilgrimage, c. 1100-1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 34.

¹⁵ D. Johnston, 'Monastic Patronage of Welsh Poetry.' in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, edited by J. Burton and K. Stöber, 1st ed., (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 177-90 (p 181).

the torture he feels from not being with her and how “because of her, no sleep for me.” The girl is not named, but she is suggested to be from the upper tier of society as “fair court’s offspring” and the “meek, soft-voiced maid at the fair court of Eitun.” Interestingly, he also throws some jabs at the church, saying “before Pope’s law and his fussing, everyone did the deed of love with his lover blamelessly,” bemoaning the fact that love trysts were no longer in fashion.¹⁶

Could these love poems have been another form of praise in a commissioned work? Possibly, though one poet, Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr (c. 1150-1200), writes “A Love Poem for Efa” in which the poet makes a point to state he was not hired to write it. Efa was a daughter of Madawg ap Maredudd, last King of Powys, and the poem appears to convey genuine feelings for her (which are, again, not returned!). A dejected Cynddelw writes “the maid prized me not...the young maidens who conversed with her...were wary of Cynddelw the poet.” Again, the tortured poet begs “treat me not, maiden so that I lose sleep” and claims he is “seeking no payment for what I sing.” The poem frequently paints Efa as a stoic figure, Cynddelw claiming “she trusts me not...let her not doubt me...let her not scorn me. Scorn she caused me before she dismissed me.”¹⁷

If anything can be said for these medieval Welsh poets, they were persistent and dramatic and did not shy away from using as many words and literary devices as they needed to get their point across. “A Love Poem’s” translator, Joseph P. Clancy, notes that this work is also the first Welsh poem in which a love messenger is employed, in this case his horse, a “spirited prancer”.¹⁸ I very much wish a response could have been captured. Were Efa really as distant as Cynddelw claims, I can only image how her eyes would have rolled at such dramatics!

While these examples show how poets could express their feelings and maintain a sense of decorum towards the social mores of the day, not every poem was as reserved. Writing between 1340-

¹⁶ J. P. Clancy, ‘The Silent Girl’, in *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 180-2.

¹⁷ J. P. Clancy, ‘A Love Poem for Efa’, in *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 141-4.

¹⁸ J. P. Clancy, ‘Notes to pages 139-144’, in *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 374.

70, Dafydd ap Gwilym pulled no punches in his poem translated as “The Girls of Llanbadarn”, in which his very first words are: “Passion doubles me over” as he wishes:

Plague take all the parish girls,
Because, frustrated trysting,
I’ve had not a single one.¹⁹

The fact he could get away with cursing women with the plague, which would have been ravaging Wales during the period he wrote it, or well within living memory of it, speaks to how broad the spectrum of the acceptable treatment of women could be in the Middle Ages.²⁰ This certainly would have also been a factor in how freely poets felt they could be in their poems to nuns.

The Treatment of Nuns in Welsh Poetry

Very few medieval Welsh poems praising nuns are known to exist, likely as a result of the economic hardships of nunneries impacting their ability to commission such works.²¹ The cloying prose which was bestowed upon the abbots in this period is in stark contrast to the raw emotion expressed in the poems directed to nuns. As such, it is very unlikely the poems to nuns were commissioned pieces. Instead, they are believed to be genuine summations of the feelings of the poet’s desire for the nuns as sexual objects and not revered as the means to spiritual salvation.²²

A collection of poems to nuns have been compiled by Helen Fulton in her article “Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns”. The five poems Fulton shares exhibit many of the same themes discussed previously in the poems of admiration and desire for Efa and the Silent Girl. Much as Cynddelw could

¹⁹ J. P. Clancy, ‘The Girls of Llanbadarn’, in *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 186.

²⁰ P. Carradice, “The Black Death Hits Wales”, March 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/6142417d-a7c4-30b6-9041-b90af449fbe0> [accessed 7 March 2022].

²¹ H. Fulton, ‘Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns’, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 87-112 (p. 87).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

not sleep as a result of his desire for Efa, the unknown poet of the second work Fulton shares about a “Pale, Dark-Eyed Girl” states he is “unable to eat” due to his desire for the nun.²³

In an interesting contrast to the Silent Girl poem, the fourth poem Fulton included about the “Girl from the Stone Nunnery” also shares what didn’t happen between the poet and the nun, however the tones are completely different. In “Silent Girl”, the poet is frustrated and tormented by the woman’s silence while the poet of the Stone Nunnery Girl is boastful and practically giddy in his proclamation that “nor was there any conversation or bond at all between us.”²⁴ The denials of impropriety with the nun are so plentiful and ferocious in “The Girl from the Stone Nunnery”, you can practically read the “wink, wink” between every line!

Not to be left out, Dafydd ap Gwiliam also made a confirmed appearance in Fulton’s article. As with the women of Llanbadarn, where he was trying to seduce any of the parish girls, Dafydd again exhibits a lack of specificity in his desire of the nuns, seeking out any of “the girls of Mary”, “some nuns”, “a fair girl from the choirstall” or “the chantress from the choir”.²⁵ The two works cited herein by Dafydd ap Gwiliam certainly seem to paint him as a very persistent, yet indiscriminate, suitor!

These comparative examples demonstrate the common themes between love poems to secular women in medieval Welsh society and those of nuns, but it is surprising that nuns would not have been seen as off-limits to suitors given their position as “brides of Christ” and their devotion to religion. It is possible that the unattainable nature of their status could have made the nuns more desirable, but the same could be said for noble women who would have been of a higher social class than the poets. Female saints in Wales were praised for their piety, so there was an understanding of religious women

²³ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

²⁵ H. Fulton, ‘Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns’, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 87-112 (pp. 106-7).

being of an elevated status, and often noble women were compared to these saints.²⁶ Why, then, would medieval poets have chosen, and more so have been *allowed* by society, to write about nuns with the same carnal passion as laywomen?

One possible reason is one modern readers can relate to: money. While not commissioned works, poems to nuns were likely read on the circuit poets traveled from manor to castle and priory to monastery and would have been a kind of calling card for each poet. The marketing team at the company I work for have shared that advertisements which evoke an emotional response (laughter, pity, even anger) will get better engagement and drive revenue compared to something which is plain and forgettable. Human behavior can't have changed much over the centuries, so it could have been that these love poems to nuns were just indecent enough to elicit a response which made the poet memorable and more likely to be hired for a commissioned work! In particular to men of the cloth who had taken a celibacy vow, it could have also been a rare source of salacious literature they were not able to enjoy on their own. If so, they would have been unlikely to admonish the poet for his actions and discourage future readings.

An alternative explanation behind these poems to nuns may be found in the religious symbolism within these works. Poems often demand reflection, upon which a message may be realized that was not immediately apparent. Could this have been an objective of medieval Welsh poems to nuns? Is there a deeper message to be taken from what, on the surface, seems a lascivious outpouring of lust and desire? Lust is one of the seven deadly sins, and no doubt medieval monks heard many a confession around this topic. Conversely, medieval nuns in Wales were not allowed to hear confession, so there were no holy women to whom these poets, all presumed male, could unburden their souls.²⁷ Love

²⁶ J. Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 176-208, (pp. 194-6).

²⁷ J. Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 176-208, (p. 205).

poems to nuns may have been a veiled way for the poet to make such a confession directly to the source of their sin and affliction: a woman. In this way, these poems may represent an allegory of the downfall of the “modern” medieval man.

It is well known that the Bible depicts the original sin of mankind as coming about from Eve giving in to the temptation of the Devil in the Garden of Eden. Much in the same way, poems directed to nuns also single out these women as able, and maybe even willing, to give in to temptation and join the poet for an illicit tryst – often in a natural setting. The nuns have become the “forbidden fruit” which tempt the poets to do that which they know they should not. In the poem attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym, Fulton translates his words as “Saints from everywhere forbid me the beautiful bedroom of girl-saints” as he tries to entice a nun “to the leafy grove”.²⁸ Clearly Dafydd understands that which he is longing for is not approved by the church.

In the final poem cited by Fulton, the poet tells the “Wise Nun” he is addressing “My task is to pray” and he asks her “what will be the outcome?”.²⁹ This task is either self-imposed or, possibly, the penance he has been assigned as a result of a confession to a priest regarding his desire for the nun. He too is reflecting upon the notion that his feelings for the nun are not appropriate and are indeed sinful.

In keeping with the suggestion that there is an aspect of sin purposefully implied in these poems, an Ape is chosen as the subject of one poem related to a nun. At the turn of the fifteenth century, medieval poet Huw Cae Llwyd wrote a poem reportedly on behalf of an Abbess named Annes requesting an Ape.³⁰ Some theories suggest the poem was written in jest, as poems of request tend to be very positive about the gift yet poor Abbess Annes is supposedly requesting a “lout” with “dirty leathered” skin, “mottled legs” and “lice”.³¹ While not impossible to believe a nun would have a pet,

²⁸ H. Fulton, ‘Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns’, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 87-112 (p. 106).

²⁹ H. Fulton, ‘Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns’, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 87-112 (p. 112).

³⁰ J. Cartwright, ‘Abbess Annes and the Ape’ in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, edited by J. Burton and K. Stöber, 1st ed., (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 191-207, p. 192.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

and monkeys and apes were known to have been kept in this period, the theme is likely a reference to a saying from the period which stated that unmarried women were doomed to “lead Apes in hell” as eternal punishment for their celibacy and spinster ways.³²

By requesting an Ape for Abbess Annes in her corporeal life, Huw has essentially taken it upon himself to initiate the nun’s spiritual punishment on Earth instead of waiting for God to make this decision in the afterlife. In a way, he could be transferring his sins onto her by wishing such a fate upon her; his sin manifested in the form of a vile Ape which she will now be burdened with. Much in the same way confession to a priest would wipe the spiritual slate clean, Huw’s poem trying to give an Ape to Abbes Annes could have been a metaphor for him unburdening his sin upon a nun in a way he would not have been allowed to do in person. Whether this would have been cathartic for him or a more aggressive move against female religious figures is difficult to say, but the saying was not a casual mention by Huw.

The sentiment of leading Apes in hell was prevalent enough in society to be referenced a century later in another poem. Katherine Philips was English but eventually married a Welshman and lived in Wales in the early seventeenth century.³³ Her poem, “A marry^d state”, takes a cynical look at marriage, and it is interesting to note she was single at the time she wrote it. Her poem was not a wistful look back at a lost freedom but instead a spirited rallying cry of independence. She praises a carefree single life without “blustering husbands”, the “pangs of childbirth” and “children’s crys”, but what struck me was her final line of the poem: “There’s no such thing as leading Apes in hell.”³⁴ Her closing line is meant to rebuke the notion that unmarried women would be doomed in the afterlife. She likely would

³² G. B. Needham, ‘New Light on Maids ‘Leading Apes in Hell’ in *The Journal of American Folklore*, 75(296) (April-June 1962), pp. 106-119, p. 109.

³³ K. Gramich, and C. Brennen, *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology*, trans. by K. Gramich and others (Powys: Honno, 2003), p. xxiii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

not have appreciated the request made for poor Abbess Annes, but Huw clearly selected a subject that audiences across Wales would have understood.

Conclusion

The depiction of nuns in medieval Welsh poetry is not out of step with the common themes and sentiments expressed towards other Welsh women in poems of the era. Yet they are surprising in the sense that one would expect their lustful themes to amount to blasphemy and have been scandalous and ruinous to a poet's career. This may have been the outcome, as we do not know for sure who wrote four of the five poems Fulton references to know their fate. More than likely, however, these poems were enjoyed and oft repeated as a ribald source of entertainment for potential patrons of the poets.

The poets likely got away with trying to tempt nuns away for a tryst because of a more relaxed attitudes towards religious in Wales as a result of fewer religious houses and personnel to run them and police the population's behaviors. However, these poems could also have been justified as a form of confession by the poet to unburden their tortured souls directly to the nuns or as an allegory of the fall of mankind by women engaging in sinful behavior.

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