

**“YM MÊR EI HESGYRN”:
THE POETRY OF ALIS FERCH GRUFFUDD (fl. 1540–1570)¹**

In conducting my research for this paper I came across the following statement from a dissertation by Ruth Willey Hughey, written in 1932: ‘the writings of the women should furnish more accurate sources for their cultural history than ... addresses to them or references about them in literature by men’.² Eighty years on, this is particularly relevant to research on the life and poetry of Alis ferch Gruffudd. Eight poems are attributed to her in Cathryn Charnell-White’s volume *Beirdd Ceridwen*,³ but no comprehensive study of these works exists in any book or article hitherto published. In this paper I intend to give an overview of the influences on Alis of her family on her mother’s side, and link these influences with some pieces of her poetry. I aim to show that her works must be considered extremely important when researching the influential Mostyn family, but also that they are significant within the field of Welsh women’s poetry, an area largely untouched until the end of the last century, owing to the neglect of women’s poetry by the compilers of anthologies.

In researching Welsh women’s poetry of the Early Modern period establishing biographical facts can be a hard task. It is difficult to determine exactly when Alis was born, but on the evidence of various sources I believe it was around 1520. In the effort to form clearer biographical details about her, a major advantage is that

¹ A paper presented at the Conference of the Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, „Opening the Vaults: researching Welsh family archives c. 1500-1850“, at Gloddaith Hall, St. David’s College, Llandudno, 23 August 2011.

² http://jcmurphy.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/_cultural-interests-of-women-in-england-from-1524-1640_/.

³ Cathryn A. Charnell-White (gol.), *Beirdd Ceridwen: Blodeugerdd Barddas o Ganu Menywod hyd tua 1800* (Llandybïe, 2005).

she was a daughter of two very influential and well known families, her father being the poet-aristocrat Gruffudd ab Ieuan ap Llywelyn Fychan, and her mother being Sioned (or Janet as she is known in some sources), the daughter of Richard ap Hywel of the Mostyn family. Her grandfather on her father's side was also a poet, as is stated in *The Family of Griffith of Garn and Plasnewydd*:

[Ieuan] was also a master ... of the very complicated and difficult rules governing the composition of Welsh verse ... Speaking of his *Cowydd ir Crûd*, Mr. Ifano Jones ... says: "Ieuan ap Llywelyn Vychan in his *Cowydd ir Crûd* is not, in *cynganedd* and language, as classic as Gruffydd ab Ieuan ... but in lucidity and freedom of speech, and in flow of emotion ... Ieuan ap Llywelyn Vychan is better."⁴

It is evident therefore that the poetic tradition was in her bones,⁵ and the substantial information we have about her family gives her work a particularly interesting context.

What ensured that poetry by some women such as Alis ferch Gruffudd was included between the covers of manuscripts? As already stated, Alis's roots were firmly embedded in two very important aristocratic families of the period who took great interest in the poetic and literary traditions of Wales. Her father was a poet, and a close relationship with an established male poet was very beneficial to the preservation of her work. The Mostyn family was also extremely supportive of bardic culture in general and had a long tradition of patronage. Thomas Mostyn,

⁴ T. A. Glenn, *The Family of Griffith of Garn and Plasnewydd in the County of Denbigh* ... (London, 1934), 84–5.

⁵ See Cathryn A. Charnell-White, „Alis, Catrin a Gwen: tair prydyddes o'r unfed ganrif ar bymtheg. Tair Chwaer?“, *Dwned* 5 (1999), p. 92.

Sioned's brother, was amongst the most important. As *The History of the Family of Mostyn of Mostyn* notes:

Thomas Mostyn followed the traditions of his family in his unstinted patronage of the bards, by whom it would appear that he was greatly esteemed because of the genuine interest he took in Welsh literature.⁶

He was also responsible for establishing the famous Mostyn library, which contained many important manuscripts, including copies of *Brut y Tywysogion* and *Brut y Brenhinoedd*. An important feature of Renaissance life, exemplified in this library, was the preservation of important literary works in order to showcase them to family and friends. By that time many more people could read and write, and there are numerous examples of poets writing their own collections of poems in manuscript, or copying their poems in familial manuscripts so that noble families could show them with pride to their friends and relatives.

This family also played a pivotal role in the Caerwys eisteddfod of 1523. Thomas Mostyn was one of the commissioners, as was Richard ap Hywel, who also presided at the eisteddfod. It may be that the Mostyns were patrons of this event and that it was held at one of their homes close to the town, as Gwyn Thomas suggests in his book, *Eisteddfodau Caerwys*. Such was their connection with this eisteddfod that the town square is known as 'Sgwâr Mostyn'.⁷

⁶ Lord Mostyn and T. A. Glenn, *History of the Family of Mostyn of Mostyn* (London, 1925), 84.

⁷ Gwyn Thomas, *Eisteddfodau Caerwys* (Caerdydd, 1968), 52.

Her family played an active role in educating Alis, but also influenced her in relation to her marriage. Marriage in a patriarchal society was an all-important badge of honour, and if certain women decided not to marry, they could be perceived as a failure and a possible problem, as they had the power, knowingly or unknowingly, to unsettle and disrupt social expectations:

They were “masterless,” that is, not members of a male-headed household, at a time when greater stress was being laid on the authority of the husband and father, and so were perceived as a possible threat to the social order.⁸

A female who did not conform to expectations would be a source of embarrassment and disappointment to her family, especially one that was well known and well off. Marriage during the Early Modern period was not merely a matter between two people: it affected the extended family and the community.

Another important development that had an effect on beliefs about marriage was the Protestant Reformation, and the core belief that women were created to serve their husbands and to raise children. It is said that Richard ap Hywel turned to the new religion, as Mostyn and Glenn state:

Richard ap Howel, who for some time prior to his decease had been sinecure Rector of Whitford ... gives, under list of sinecure Rectors of Whitford: 1535, Dominus Richard ap Howel. He abjured Papal Supremacy, 1535 (meaning he became a Protestant) ...⁹

A century later another descendant of the Mostyn family, another Thomas Mostyn (1651–1700?), also turned away from Catholicism, even though his wife

⁸ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 2000), 76–7.

⁹ Mostyn and Glenn, *Family of Mostyn*, 70.

stayed loyal to the old religion. It is said that the chapel in Gloddaith was used to hold Catholic services during this period.¹⁰ Many members of the Mostyn household shifted their religious beliefs, though the exact nature of Alis's beliefs remains undetermined.

Marriage was also actively promoted for financial reasons, especially among the aristocracy. As both the Mostyns and Alis's father's family were from the higher ranks of society, it would be very unlikely that a man from the lower ranks would please them. In 'Y Gŵr Delfrydol'¹¹ ('The Ideal Husband'), Alis answers a question that is raised by her father Gruffudd: what sort of husband does she intend to marry? She answers with confidence that she intends to look for a beautiful and young husband, a very different idea to what her father would like as a son in law, namely a rich old man.

To Alis's family a man who could provide honour, status and financial security would be the most suitable candidate, and it could be said that these would be characteristics of the older man. But neither money nor status was on Alis's list of desirable qualities:

Hardd, medrus, campus, ped caid, - a dewr
I daro o bai raid;
Mab o oedran cadarnblaid
A gŵr o gorff gorau a gaid.

¹⁰ R. Alun Charles, „Teulu Mostyn fel noddwyr y beirdd“, *Llên Cymru* 9 (1966–67), p. 96.

¹¹ Gwen Saunders Jones, ‘“Fy nhad a ddywede am hyn” : agweddau ar farddoniaeth Alis ferch Gruffudd’ (Bangor University PhD thesis, 2010), p.63–4.

Fy nhad a ddywede ym hyn – mai gorau
Ym garu dyn gwrthun,
A'r galon sydd yn gofyn
Gwas glân hardd, ysgafn ei hun.¹²

(Beautiful, accomplished, splendid – if he can be had – and brave / to strike
where there need be; / a youth in age, wall-strong / and a man of the finest body
to be had.

My father told me this – that best / for me is to love a repulsive man, / yet the
heart asks for / a lad pure, lovely, and light of its own.)¹³

Alis's poetry reveals her rebelling against the social expectations of her time and
the expectations of her family. As A. D. Carr states:

Marriage, then, made the Mostyns: not one marriage but a series of
advantageous matches in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries...In
these marriages there was no sudden wild whim or passion; they
were the fruit of prudent calculation and land, status, and local
influence took precedence over eugenic or romantic
considerations.¹⁴

But romantic considerations are important to Alis, who wants a man with a good
body, as opposed to a wealthy one. As well as this, in her second line Alis

¹² Gwen Saunders Jones, 'Fy nhad a ddywede am hyn', 63–4. Based on the edited version by Cathryn A. Charnell-White, *Beirdd Ceridwen*, poem 22, p.77. The poem can be found in the following manuscripts: Cwrtmawr 25, 3, 103; Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru 11993A, 14; Jesus College 88, 44; Llanstephan 49, 132. The second englyn does not appear in Jesus College 88, 44 which reflects two possible bardic traditions. Other differences include 'Gŵr medrus ... gŵr dewr' in the first line of Jesus College 88, 44; 'wrth Anghenraid' in the second line of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru 11993A, 14; 'y gŵr o gorff' in the fourth line of Cwrtmawr 25, 103.

¹³ Translation from Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson (eds.), *Early Modern Women Poets: an Anthology* (Oxford, 2001), p.13.

¹⁴ A. D. Carr, 'The Making of the Mostyns: The Genesis of a Landed Family', *Trafodion Anrhydeddus Gymdeithas y Cymmrodorion* (1979), p.139–40.

speaks of a man who would be ready to hit someone if necessary, a quality that might not be present in the man that her family wants her to marry. We therefore see in Alis a rare breed, not content with most women wanted out of a marriage, namely economic security and social prestige.

In the third line of 'Y Gŵr Delfrydol' Alis says, 'y galon sydd yn gofyn' – it is the heart that asks. Even though this line may seem simple at first glance, it could be said to add many layers to Alis's portrayal of herself to her audience, as well as elucidating what women really long for. The opinions expressed within these eight lines are very realistic, because even though Alis wants the superficial characteristics of good looks and the like, she also turns the audience's attention to the internal characteristics. But why was Alis so reluctant to marry?

In a patriarchal society the wife was an object formed and shaped by her husband's connections – be it through blood ties or through the union of marriage. It is therefore possible that other women in the community felt themselves under immense pressure in exactly the same way as Alis. Through her poetry we hear the echo of the feelings of a young woman who opposes the powerful forces that compel her to assume conventional social roles.

Unlike the male poet, who depended on composing stereotypical and repetitive praise poetry to earn a living, the female poet of the sixteenth century did not need to conform to a role, and as a result had complete freedom to write about

subjects that mattered to her, to compensate for the social barriers that restricted her life. Woman's weakness becomes a voice of protest, and through her words we get a sense of how strong her feelings are to escape from the identity created for her by her family.

Her family's influence on her poetry can also be seen in 'Tair ewig o sir Ddinbych l'w tri chariad' (Three hinds from Denbighshire),¹⁵ where she again rebels against commonplace assumptions about love, friendship and society. This is a poem which derives its metaphor from the hunting of hinds in the woods: three men „hunt“ the three women in the poem, who are possibly sisters of Alis. But after all the flirting and the leading on by the women, the poem closes with the suggestion that the best way to complete the „catch“ is to go down the old-fashioned route of arranging an appointment in the woods, without the use of any hunting dog: *Gore it cyngor bwyntmannu / Mewn coed, heb illwng un ci!*¹⁶ (The best advice for you is to make an appointment / In woods, without releasing a single dog).

Though some scholars are unsure of the attribution to Alis, the cheeky and flirty humour present in the poetry certainly echoes much in Alis's other works, as for instance her suggestion that the gentlemen will not be having their 'meat' today:

*A heddiw ni wŷyr bonheddig / Na'u cael, na phrofi mo'u cig*¹⁷ (And today no

¹⁵ See Gwen Saunders Jones, 'Fy nhad a ddywede am hyn', Chapters 3 and 4 for a detailed discussion.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.155. Based on the edited version by Cathryn A. Charnell-White, *Beirdd Ceridwen*, poem 21, p.76, lines 47–8. The poem can be found in the following manuscript: Mostyn 131, 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.152. Based on the edited version by Cathryn A. Charnell-White, *Beirdd Ceridwen*, poem 21, p.76, lines 35–6. The poem can be found in the following manuscript: Mostyn 131, 8.

gentlemen / Will have them, or taste their meat). Hunting was a popular sport and a very popular literary theme during the Early Modern period, and this popularity alone could have influenced Alis; but it may be that other sources much closer to home were very influential too. As women themselves did not usually hunt, they would be spectators of the sport rather than competitors. It is said of Alis's great-grandfather:

Hywel, (called the "Dun Stag") son and heir of Ieuan Fychan of Pengwern and Mostyn, [succeeded to the estates in 1457-8 ... and in NLW MS 1560C,] and ... he is called "of Pengwern," where, from a contemporary poem, we know that he was living at Rhiw'r Hyddod (the Slope of the Stags), about 1459.¹⁸

Whether or not Alis was aware of this fact, this is vital information in the piecing together of the context of her work.

Most of what is known about the hunting techniques of the medieval and early modern period come from literary sources, particularly the hunting manuals, such as *Y Naw Helwriaeth* (The Nine Huntings). What is interesting is that Peniarth 155, one of the manuscripts that contain *y Naw Helwriaeth*, was copied from an original (now lost) in the possession of Richard ap Hywel.¹⁹ This is an extremely important finding with regards to the context of this poem, as Richard was Alis's grandfather. It could be that Alis herself was familiar with the original lost version, especially as Peniarth 155 was not copied until 1561–2. The original could have been written when Alis was a young girl.

¹⁸ Mostyn and Glenn, *Family of Mostyn*, 56.

¹⁹ William Linnard, 'The Nine Huntings: a re-examination of *Y Naw Helwriaeth*', *Bwletin y Bwrdd Gwybodau Celtaidd* 31 (1984), p.119.

Alis's family may well have played a central role in relation to the performance of this poem. The concept of the hunt as an analogy for a love story, and the story played out in Alis's poem, suggest that it was written for a specific social event, with the hall or the home being used as the setting for the 'woods', Alis and her two sisters as the three women, and male guests playing the three men. Because the theme was already popular in the poetry of the period, the audience could relate to the performance played in front of them, as well as to the content of the poem. Furthermore, it could be that the three men were performing as part of a feast or celebration in Alis's family home, and that Alis gave them an answer in the form of the poem, the morning after the night before. It is known that Sir Thomas Mostyn (1535?–1618) took great interest in preserving this Welsh poetic tradition:

The historic hospitality of the Welsh gentry was rapidly breaking down ... The institution of household bards was slowly dying, and the poets themselves were presently to turn their talents to themes other than the chanting of their patrons' doings. Amid these shifting scenes Sir Thomas Mostyn remained true to the traditions of his house ... Mostyn Hall continued to be so noted for its hospitality that it came to be called "the hostel of the whole of Wales" ... and the bards were ever welcome.²⁰

How then should we evaluate and interpret the Mostyn family's influence on Alis's poetry? One of the most obvious influences was how the family immersed themselves completely in the poetic and literary culture of the period, and how this was transferred to Alis. The period in which she was born encompassed

²⁰ Mostyn and Glenn, *Family of Mostyn*, 100.

major changes and developments such as the Renaissance: among women humanism never spread beyond a tiny elite, but as Alis was part of this elite, she was able to take advantage of the privileges that came with her social position:

This was ... the culture in which the European, humanist influences encouraging intellectual opportunities for women were developing. It was in this household and atmosphere that Catrin, Alice and Gwen, daughters of his first marriage to Janet [Sioned] ferch Richard Mostyn, were brought up during the first half of the sixteenth century.²¹

It is also said that her grandfather on her father's side went to university in England to expand on his learning:

Ieuan must have received an education far above the common, very probably at one of the English Universities.²²

Another advantage that came with her family connections was the fact that her poetry was included in Welsh manuscripts. Compared with other female poets of the early modern period, to have eight surviving poems attributed to her is a considerable number.

But her family was an influence on her poetry in other, more negative ways. She highlights weaknesses in the social order that were accepted without question, and through these weaknesses we hear a young woman expressing her own observations on society: this is surely one of Alis's major strengths. She was obviously a very bright and witty character, who could put forward a strong argument on behalf of women when required.

²¹ Nia Powell, „Women and strict-metre poetry in Wales“, in Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (eds.), *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales* (Cardiff, 2000), 135.

²² Glenn, *Family of Griffith*, 84.

What makes her special is her ability to adapt the usual poetic themes to her own intentions, by transforming what her audience accepted as convention. For example, in the poem about the three hinds, it is the women who do the chasing, only to dash the men's hopes of ever 'catching' them; this is perhaps Alis's 'unique selling point'. As Nia Powell says:

In the work of Alice, there is a strong note of satire and lightness akin to the work of the less exalted or inferior poets called *clêr*, entertainers whose sharp satire and defamatory work was not considered to qualify them as members of the bardic order. Since the work of only a few male *clêr* ... has survived, the survival of light-hearted material by Alice in written form suggests that her fame may have lain in more serious work now lost.²³

The Mostyn family, in particular its female members, deserve greater exploration by collaborative scholarly effort:

Dim ond trwy gydweithio â'n gilydd a rhannu ein gwybodaeth y gallwn gasglu ynghyd y darnau gwasgaredig a cheisio eu rhoi mewn trefn, er mwyn gweld y darlun yn ei gyfanrwydd. A thrwy'r gwaith ymchwil hwn y mae gobaith nid yn unig inni ailddarganfod lleisiau'r gorffennol ond hefyd agor cil y drws ar agweddau pwysig eraill ar ein hanes fel merched ac fel Cymry.²⁴

Dr Gwen Saunders Jones

²³ Powell, 'Women and strict-metre poetry', p.137–8.

²⁴ Kathryn Curtis, Marged Haycock, Elin ap Hywel a Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Beirdd Benywaidd yng Nghymru cyn 1800', *Y Traethodydd* 141 (1986), p. 25.