

Wales and the Welsh in Gaskell's fiction: Sex, Sorrow and Sense

JO PRYKE

Elizabeth Gaskell used North Wales for the setting and source of two magazine stories. More famously, the tragic episode in *Ruth* when Bellingham abandons the pregnant girl, is also set there. The stories are 'The Well of Pen-Morfa', published in 1850 in *Household Words*, and 'The Doom of the Griffiths', published in 1857 in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in America, and then in *Round the Sofa* in 1859. In between came *Ruth*, published in 1853. There is significant use of specifically Welsh aspects of the setting in this crucial part of the novel. The integral nature of the Welsh context of the two stories adds considerably to their interest.

I shall look at three aspects of the 'Welshness' of these three pieces of fiction. First there is the role of Gaskell's personal experience and knowledge of the area. This is clearly evident in the use of authentic and realist detail, as well as in the poignant combination of beauty and sadness in the subject matter. Second it is interesting to note how she employs received cultural images of Wales as an attractively romantic place, which she herself would have absorbed. At this period increasing tourism was making this version of Wales yet more appealing to the reading public, because it was somewhere they might actually go. Finally there is the use of the obverse of this stereotype, the idea, simultaneously and equally commonly held, of Wales as primitive and morally backward. As part of this, it is intriguing to find, embedded in the stories, and even hinted at in *Ruth*, a discussion of Welsh attitudes to sex before marriage. The stories and the Welsh chapters of *Ruth* are centrally about sex and love, though there is a crucial difference between the short stories and the novel in the treatment of the moral aspect of these interesting subjects. As so often, Gaskell takes a 'riskier' approach to morally sensitive matters in the short fiction than she does in the full length novel. In the stories she allows herself to look at the possibility that the rural Welsh courtship customs of the period had some merit, despite the scandal they caused to contemporary English commentators.

It is probably useful at this point to provide summaries of the two stories, since they may be unfamiliar to some readers, and perhaps not readily to hand. I assume, however, that *Ruth*, its agenda and context, are familiar to readers of this Journal.

Introduced by the narrator as a story heard from a local inhabitant, 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' is set back one generation, a time period which combines the realism of an attainable memory period with sufficient distance to enhance a story with some degree of romance and significance. It opens with leisurely description of the place and its people, emphasising that this is 'Welsh Wales' and accenting its 'primitive', 'peculiar and wild'

nature. (*MC*, pp.123-4) The detailed, carefully realist scene setting claims personal experience on the part of the writer, and suggests common knowledge: 'Most of us know how very pretty Welsh women are'. (*MC*, p.126) The village beauty, Nest, lives with her mother, Eleanor. Nest was the name of the twelfth century princess used by the Welsh bards as the symbol of beauty, so the name suggests the stock figure of an extremely beautiful young woman, a regular feature of nineteenth century Welsh travelogues. Nest is remembered as particularly pretty when carrying a pitcher of water on her head, also a familiar image from travel books. One morning, dressed unsuitably but becomingly in her best cloak and hat, (another familiar picture book image), she goes out with her betrothed, Farmer Williams, 'she to the well, he to some farming business'. (*MC*, p.127) Encumbered by hat and cloak she slips on the smooth rocks by the well, and is so badly injured that she is crippled for life.

Her lover gradually ceases even to visit her, so her mother visits him, and demands to know, since he is 'not church-tied', the truth of his intentions. The farmer is forced to state that he and Nest 'were troth plight; but we are not. I cannot - no one would expect me to wed a cripple.' (*MC*, pp.131-2) When Eleanor reveals this hard truth to Nest, her response is extreme mortification and bitterness. She turns inwards, and will not open her heart even to her mother who, heartbroken, eventually dies. Stricken with remorse, Nest is counselled by an itinerant Methodist preacher to try loving someone else. She adopts a wild and tempestuous local idiot girl and cares tenderly for her before dying, old before her time, by the well.

While 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' is a realistic treatment of a tale set one generation back, the melodramatic 'The Doom of the Griffiths', set in the same area, tells of the working out of a legendary curse, sufficiently long ago for the house of the Griffiths to have sunk, at the end, into 'damp, dark ruins'. (*MLL*, p.269) The image of Wales, increasingly popularised in the nineteenth century, as a place with a distant, romantic past, a people of pure, non Saxon, non Norman blood, and its own, ancient language, is emphasised in this story. The narrator introduces it in the first person, as a part of her sympathetic knowledge of Welsh history, lore and custom. The Welsh language is used several times. The placing in history and legend is underpinned by realist, precisely detailed present tense description of the geographical setting, drawing the reader in: 'If you go from Tremadoc to Criccaeth, . . .' (*MLL*, p.231) suggests accurately that people were going there, while introducing a suitably 'gloomy' and 'ghastly' scene for the story.

The curse was put on the Griffiths family by Owen Glendower, the 14th century Welsh nationalist figure who heroically fought the English, after his friend Griffiths plotted against him. It was that the line would end with the murder of the eighth generation Griffiths by the ninth. The time has arrived. The widowed Robert, of uncertain character after a semi-educated youth, is rare in the locality for his sobriety and 'collection of Cambrian antiquities': 'his stock of MSS would have excited the envy of

Dr. Pugh himself himself'. (*MLL*, p.232) The work of Pugh, a noted Welsh scholar and antiquarian, is in the catalogue of the Portico Library in Manchester, an institution for general readers, for 1816-56. This reference again shows Gaskell suggesting knowledge common to herself and her readers. Robert's passionate and irresponsible character is specifically related to the Welsh context of an isolated, irresponsible gentry. After devoting himself exclusively to his son, Owen, he suddenly marries again, without warning. Owen's rage and pain anticipates the picture of Molly Gibson in a similar situation in *Wives and Daughters*. The stepmother prefigures Mrs. Gibson, middle aged, graceful and deceptively charming, with a child of her own of amoral character. She turns father against son, so that Owen keeps out of the parental home and frequents the local inn, scene of harp playing and singing familiar to readers from travelogues. There he meets the local beauty, another Nest, who has the reputation of being rather free with her favours. He marries her secretly and, now virtuous and devoted, she bears a child. The stepmother tells Robert of the secret marriage and its offspring, emphasising, significantly, not Nest's lower social status, but the light character she is said to have, and casting doubt on whether Owen is even the child's father. The enraged Robert comes to their cottage, snatches the baby from Owen and hurls it at Nest, yelling the Welsh word for prostitute, which Gaskell does not translate. Later he refers to Owen as 'witol', an old English word for cuckold. The child's head hits the dresser, - another picturesque Welsh feature - and it is killed. In a final encounter between father and son on a cliff-edge, the older man falls to his death. Owen, Nest and her father set out for Liverpool, but are lost at sea. Thus the curse is fulfilled, the line is ended, and 'a Saxon stranger holds the lands of the Griffiths'. (*MLL*, p.269)

In *Ruth*, the eight chapters set in North Wales cover the crucial period when the direst consequences of unmarried sex for a woman are made clear: desertion and pregnancy. The Welshness of the setting is less integral to the episode than it is to the stories, but there are common features. The opening of the episode locates it firmly in a context of Welsh tourism and its trials: cold, rain and boredom. However, the other Wales for which the visitors crowding the inn have come is presented too: the mountains, waterfalls and Welsh speaking natives of the travel literature. Its downside is indicated later with frustratingly monolingual natives, and children persistently begging. The sensuous presentation of the natural setting for Ruth's and Bellingham's walk, and the powerful evocation of the uselessness of beauty for consolation in sorrow are also to be noted. Significantly, a distinction is made between the condemnatory attitude of the English tourists to Ruth's unmarried state and the tolerance of the inn landlady. While this is attributed to her appreciation of Bellingham's money overcoming morality, a recognisable English stereotype of Welshness, she is nothing but kind to Ruth. Even more notable is the reaction of the good Mrs. Hughes, Mr. Benson's landlady, to Ruth's pregnancy: she does not, reports the disapproving Miss Benson, 'see the thing in a moral

light'.(RU, p.118) Thus, while *Ruth* is premised on the assumption that sex before marriage is wrong, a different attitude on the part of the Welsh is just hinted at.

Turning now to Gaskell's personal context of experience and knowledge of Wales, John Chapple has given us the picture of her relations, the prosperous quarry and mine owning Hollands, and her visits to their comfortable house Plas Penrhyn near Festiniog, from girlhood onwards.¹ Gaskell's love and knowledge of the North Wales scenery and countryside would have been the result not only of staying, touring and walking in the area, but also of the talk at Plas Penrhyn, when Uncle and Cousin Sam regaled their visitors with stories and gossip of local colour. Gaskell herself learned some Welsh, and displayed her usual energetic curiosity in finding out about Welsh language and legends, which she put to use in her Welsh stories.

An interesting early letter shows her thinking about Wales as a wild and primitive place where 'respectable', 'innocent people' commit 'crimes' because of the attitudes and expectations of their particular social setting: 'I think the Welsh gentry seem not to have progressed beyond what the English were two centuries ago. The Lord of the Manor is so completely a little king, and may do what he likes, without being questioned, for every body seems to consider justice and revenge in their own hands, and the scanty population make the crimes not be heard of'.² This is an early appearance of the idea that morality is to some degree the product of and subject to, environment; it is one that is often implicitly discussed in Gaskell's fiction, being part of her characteristic argument for understanding, while not condoning, wrong doing. She employs it in both the magazine stories and in *Ruth*.

At the same time it is clear that North Wales was her paradise place, such as many people have from childhood, which they want to show to a new beloved, or where they later find peace in times of trouble. In the same series of letters the exuberant 21-year-old remarks: 'In what part of Wales are the Collinsons. I hope they will rave of it when they come back. They are not worthy to go if they don't'.³ Elizabeth and William did a Welsh tour for their honeymoon in 1832, taking in Plas Penrhyn, and she took refuge there after the publication of *Mary Barton* in 1848. However, North Wales had agonising associations for Gaskell too, for it was on a holiday there in 1845 that her baby William died. In fact, although she went to Plas Penrhyn after *Mary Barton*, she does not seem to have gone to Wales much after that. (Of course, after that she had the money to travel elsewhere, which she so assiduously did.) Two major experiences of her life: her honeymoon and baby Willie, sex and sorrow. The two are intimately linked in both her Welsh stories, and most powerfully in *Ruth*.

In addition to this personal context, images of Wales of a romantic, picturesque nature were part of the common knowledge of educated people at the period in which Gaskell was working. Gaskell could have assumed an awareness of Wales in terms of its

literary and artistic representation, and as a place of antiquarian interest, on the part of her readers, and comfortably relied on its attraction for them.

Popular 'good' literature promoted the image of Wales. The readable Thomas Gray's interest in early Welsh lore and literature resulted in his poem 'The Bard', romanticising the suppression of the Welsh bards by Edward I, published in 1757. This very popular work was 'regarded as a fine example of the Sublime, and it exerted a considerable influence on the imagination of both poets and painters'.⁴ Notable literary Romantics, including Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron, toured the area, leaving records in prose and poetry, reinforcing its image for the educated as specially nourishing to the sensibilities. Gaskell's mainstream education and general reading would have given her plenty of material, both to enhance her personal experiences of the beauties of North Wales, and to rely upon as common knowledge among her readers.

It has been argued that the discovery of landscape as a visual experience 'was an immensely important phenomenon in eighteenth century Britain. It created an outlook which eventually became the property of the common man'.⁵ For images of wild landscape, representations of Wales seem to have led the way. A major figure in eighteenth century landscape painting is Richard Wilson, who was himself Welsh, some of whose most memorable pictures are of Snowdonia, serene under Italianate skies. Gainsborough, Turner, and later Cotman, Girtin and David Cox, were among artists attracted to North Wales. Thomas Pennant, working in the 1770s and 1780s, was the leading exponent of the illustrated 'Tour'.⁶ His volumes of illustrated travelogue of North Wales were reprinted regularly for a hundred years. Many followed suit, entering the growing market for volumes illustrated with the technique of steel engraving. Developed early in the nineteenth century, this made the dissemination of repetitive images of picturesque Snowdonia relatively easy and cheap.⁷ Thus popular images of Wales were begun before, and were perpetuated and developed during the period when Gaskell was writing. Reading through nineteenth century travel books on Wales listed in the 1856 catalogue of the Portico Library, and others in the Manchester and Liverpool University libraries, yields a repetitive picture of a region of craggy peaks, dark valleys, dramatic waterfalls and rivers, and romantic ruined castles and abbeys, populated by women wearing round black hats, becoming to the young, who are always strikingly attractive, and usually playing the harp or (if hatless) carrying a pitcher of water on their heads.⁸ A writer's remark at the end of the century expresses neatly the pertinence of the context of cultural awareness which I am suggesting for Gaskell's Welsh fiction: 'the public cannot recognise the charm, the beauty, even the outlines of nature save in the stereotyped impressions of an art which they have gradually assimilated'.⁹

The travel books, as well as the accompanying descriptions in the volumes of engravings, all emphasise the antiquarian attractions of Wales, its links with the early British, pre-Saxon past, its role as home to those resistant to the Saxon invader. An

interest in the remote past of legends and folk tales, the past uncorrupted by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, was of course a characteristic of some manifestations of the Romantic movement, like the interest in uncorrupted nature. This interest in, and romanticisation of the 'true British' past was developed in the historical and travel writing and fiction of the Victorian period. A travel writer in 1861 emphasises how the Welsh, 'unlike the English . . . are of unmixed race', while going on contentedly to announce that 'old feuds however are now happily forgotten'.¹⁰

With the development in the later part of the eighteenth century of appreciation of wild landscape, and the vocabulary of the 'Sublime, the Beautiful and the Picturesque', North Wales became a favoured place for those in search of the experience of an uncorrupted nature and antiquity. It had the advantage of being nearer and more accessible than Scotland and the Lake District for those coming from the South or Midlands, and was, obviously, convenient for the North West. Moreover, during the period of wars with France, in the first part of the nineteenth century, it provided, with its wildness, its foreign language, and peasant costumes and customs, an acceptably adventurous and exotic destination for people who would in quieter times have gone travelling on the continent.¹¹ Later, with the rapid urbanisation of the North West, North Wales, even as it was being increasingly modernised by commercial and industrial activity, became an ever more popular Victorian holiday destination. Whether going to Wales, or reading fiction about it, educated people expected a certain kind of experience. The comment of an early nineteenth century travel writer nicely illustrates the point that ideas of romance and beauty are acquired ideas. The alleged 'inquisitiveness' of the Welsh, always asking tourists why they have come, is put down to their 'limited ideas', in which 'there could seem no inducement to repay the trouble and expence of a journey'.¹²

There was, however, another side to Gaskell's and her public's image of Wales. This ambivalence is well shown in the opening of *The Well of Pen-Morfa*:

Of a hundred travellers who spend a night at Tre-Madoc, in North Wales, there is not one, perhaps, who goes to the neighbouring village of Pen-Morfa. The new town, built by Mr Maddocks, Shelley's friend, has taken away all the importance of the ancient village - formerly, as its name imports, 'the head of the marsh'; that marsh which Mr. Maddocks drained and dyked, and reclaimed from the Traeth Mawr, till Pen-Morfa, against the walls of whose cottages the winter tides lashed in former days, has come to stand, high and dry, three miles from the sea, on a disused road to Caernarvon. (*MC*, p.123)

At first glance, it looks as if the mention of a Romantic poet, Shelley, is serving to bring to mind the Romantic associations of the area. However, he is 'Mr Maddocks's friend',

and Mr Maddocks is an arch moderniser, leaving the old way of life 'high and dry'. Shelley's sojourn there, in fact, ended disastrously after he lost his initial enthusiasm for Maddocks's project, and espoused instead the cause of the labourers.¹³

Now the activities of Maddocks were only what the Hollands were up to, writ large. In fact, prominent Unitarians were a major force in commercialisation and industrialisation throughout Wales. Interestingly, they were also very active in promoting Welsh identity and cultural pride.¹⁴ Gaskell's relations were a minor example of this; her entrepreneurial cousin Sam Holland not only settled permanently at Plas Penrhyn and learnt Welsh, he established a school, became High Sherriff of Merioneth and eventually Liberal M.P. for the area from 1870 until 1885. Fellow Unitarians in South Wales were prominent in early Welsh nationalism, in discovering, or 'inventing' Welsh musical and literary culture, and reviving eistedfods.

However, the two pronged approach of improving the Welsh yet respecting their culture was unusual. A more common English attitude, romantic stereotypes notwithstanding, combined disdain for their backwardness, ignorance and poverty with the belief that it was the Welsh culture and language that caused them. Such ideas were both expressed and reinforced by a cause celebre of the period when Gaskell was working, the 'Treason of the Blue Books'. This was the name given by some enraged Welsh to the Report, commissioned by Sir James Kay Shuttleworth when he was secretary of the Committee of Council on Education, on 'The State of Education in Wales', published in 1847.

The three Commissioners of Inquiry, all English, Anglican and non-Welsh-speaking, found a dreadful standard of education in every respect, and commented freely on the causes. Three main points were made, all infuriating to the Welsh to this day. A Welsh historian describes it as a 'biliously racist onslaught' and concludes, 'Anglo-Welsh relations have never really recovered from this poisonous ego-trip by three arrogant and ignorant lawyers'.¹⁵ A key element in their analysis of Wales' benighted state was the role of the Welsh language, its prevalence being held responsible for the widespread backwardness and ignorance caused by the cultural isolation it produced. Secondly, having relied heavily for evidence on Anglican vicars, the Commissioners' comments expressed violent anti-non-conformist prejudice, claiming that non-conformity was another major cause of the deplorable state of affairs. Non-conformist preachers' mass open air meetings were described as the occasions for perfect orgies of sexual activity. In 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' Gaskell refers to and rejects such attacks, in the glowing picture of David Hughes, a representative of the numerous and 'much abused' Wesleyan preachers 'in this part of Wales'. (MC, p.136) However the most purple passages in the Report concern the third element in the general depravity: the 'disgraceful state of the common people in Wales in the intercourse of the sexes', and in particular 'the barbarous

practices which precede the rite of marriage'.¹⁶ The Report received sensationalist coverage in the English press, confirming derogatory English stereotypes of the Welsh.

The commissioner who reported on North Wales, Henry Vaughan Johnson, announced that its 'besetting vice' was 'incontinence'. The vicar of Nevin told him, 'Want of chastity is flagrant. This vice is not confined to the poor. In England farmers' daughters are respectable; in Wales they are in the constant habit of being courted in bed.'¹⁷ This is a reference to the practice of 'the little wedding', or 'bundling'.¹⁸ It meant 'staying up all night together in the woman's place of residence, after the old folks had gone to bed, either without their knowledge or with their tacit consent. This took place either in the kitchen beside the fire or in a bedroom, on or in the bed'.¹⁹ This could go on for regularly for years, unless pregnancy resulted, in which case marriage normally followed. It seems likely that this was a continuation of the pre-Reformation practice of betrothal at the church door, followed by the marriage in church after the couple had slept together for a period and the bride become pregnant. In a history of marriage practices, the custom of bundling 'unknown elsewhere outside Scandinavia and New England', is described as an 'all but universal practice among the lower and middling sort' in England and Wales at least until the eighteenth century. Evidence is cited to suggest that it continued into the nineteenth century among the 'lower sort' and more generally in remote areas such as Wales.²⁰ In 1814 the Reverend Bingley refers to it as 'the mode of courtship' of the peasantry in 'part of Caernarvonshire, Anglesea, and Merionethshire'.²¹ The Kay Shuttleworth Report shows that it was still flourishing in North Wales at mid century. Gaskell was certainly aware of it. As we have seen, the distinction between the two stages of being 'troth plight' and 'church-tied' is specifically made by Eleanor and Farmer Williams in 'The Well of Pen-Morfa'. The special nature of 'Welsh courtship' is the point on which the plot 'The Doom of the Griffiths' turns.

The Rev. Bingley offers a sociological gloss on 'this strange custom'. It 'seems to have originated in the scarcity of fuel, and in the consequent unpleasantness of sitting together, in the colder parts of the year without a fire'. With a pre-Victorian tolerance he comments, 'Much has been said of the innocence with which these meetings are conducted. This may be the case in some instances, but it is a very common thing for the consequence of the intercourse to make its appearance in the world within two or three months after the marriage ceremony has taken place. The subject excites no particular attention among the neighbours, provided the marriage be made good before the living witness is brought to light'.²² Again placing the matter in the context of a poor society, he goes on to point out that 'both parties are so poor, that they are necessarily constrained to render their issue legitimate, in order to secure their reputation, and with it a mode of obtaining a livelihood'. This confirms what the outraged Welsh defenders contended, that illegitimacy was lower in Wales than in many parts of England.²³

Clearly, to work well, bundling would require strict faithfulness on the part of the pre-marital lovers. Desertion by the man could have disastrous consequences for the woman if she were already pregnant, while a woman would be regarded as a very risky proposition if she had more than one such relationship, since she could be carrying a previous lover's child when she took up with a new one. The relative purity maintained by 'monogamous', socially sanctioned bundling was not perceived by the Victorian clergy, but certainly was by Gaskell. She also saw the dangerous implications for the emotions, and the possibilities for 'crimes by innocent people'. She put her perceptions to use in her Welsh stories, once from the female point of view, in 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' and once from the male, in 'The Doom of the Griffiths'.

The furore created by the *Report* must have been common knowledge in the Holland family circle, including the well informed Gaskell household, quite apart from the fact that, at least by the time Gaskell was writing her Welsh stories, she actually knew Sir James Kay Shuttleworth quite well. They would not, though, have been surprised by the findings, after many happy hours of Uncle Sam's gossipy Welsh stories. Nor would they, as dissenters themselves, religious kin to the Unitarians promoting Welsh culture, and part of a Unitarian tradition of investigating and understanding the living conditions of the poor, have been at all sympathetic to the condemnatory gloss put on them, whether in regard to the Welsh language, the role of nonconformity, or even, possibly, the relaxed attitude to premarital sex. With regard to the latter, their local knowledge would have given them an awareness of its causes, and generally non-disastrous consequences: marriage and subsequent fidelity. The English public, however, including the readers of magazine stories, would have been able to draw from the sensational press coverage of the Report confirmation of the view of the Welsh as dim and backward, and in particular gained fresh and spicy images of sexual incontinence to add to their derogatory stereotypes.

Thus there is an ambivalence in the context of ideas about Wales within which Gaskell herself wrote, and in which her readership can reasonably be located. On the one hand, it is a wild and picturesque region, populated by interestingly 'foreign' people, with exceptionally beautiful daughters, leading appealingly simple lives, untainted by the deleterious effects of progress, the inheritors of an ancient, 'true British' language, the medium of a pure uncorrupted culture of religion, song and story. The other side of the Janus face of the Victorian image is of rural Wales as dirt poor and barbarically uncivilised, its beauties bleak and harsh, its people narrow, ignorant, and sexually promiscuous, given to violent excesses of feeling and action, imprisoned within a language that could handle only traditional notions and religious rhetoric.

Material for both these views can be found in Gaskell's Welsh stories of sex and sorrow, but unambiguous support for neither. We should note that in these stories Gaskell avoids loaded words like 'backward' or 'progress'. Indeed, in 'The Doom of the

Griffiths', she takes care to remark that, to her knowledge, the modern Welsh gentry are 'not a whit behind their Saxon equals in the expensive elegances of life'. (*MLL*, p.247)

The Welsh stories utilise the ambivalence of the Wales-awareness of Gaskell and her readers in relation to a specifically Welsh aspect of the interesting topic of sex and its possible attendant sorrow: the customary pre-marital non-chastity. Within the limits of short and readable magazine fiction, they examine the social attitudes and expectations that would go with the custom of bundling. They suggest to me that Gaskell had heard all about local courtship and marriage customs at Uncle Sam's and thought about them with her usual non-judgemental acuteness. The plotting of the stories enacts her conclusions. The crucial incident in each is an utterance concerning pre-marital sexual behaviour. In each case this leads to the story's emotional climax, a violent manifestation of extreme anger and bitterness, in 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' turned inward, in 'The Doom of the Griffiths' turned outward. These stories explore two questions: could not bundling, the custom of North Wales, certainly if conducted according to conventions which forbade 'going all the way', as it traditionally was, actually be a good system, promoting happiness? On the other hand, though, if something happens to disrupt the system, what then are the likely practical results and emotional consequences?

First, bundling regularised mutual sexual pleasures, in themselves joyful and life-enhancing, which might otherwise be experienced anyway in a more haphazard way. This is illustrated in *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, where the main story is prefaced by the tale of another local beauty, who ventured out of Wales to London, was seduced and then deserted, returning to Pen-Morfa to live alone, and bitter, with her deformed child. However, the picture of Nest after accepting her lover contains no shadow of sin or guilt. Her mother is happy and Nest is radiant: 'who could be so selfish as to be sad, when Nest was so supremely happy; she danced and sang more than ever; and then sat silent, and smiled to herself: if spoken to she started and came back to the present with a scarlet blush, which told what she had been thinking of'. . . . 'that was a sunny, happy, enchanted autumn.' However, 'the winter was nigh at hand; and with it came sorrow'. We should note the phrasing in this passage: 'one fine frosty morning' Nest goes out 'late' 'with her lover', on her fateful errand. The implication is that they go out together, from the same house. If you are aware of the context of Welsh custom, the suggestion is clear that it has been a bundling night. Nest and Williams are 'troth plight' but not 'church-tied'. The narrative, taking up the hint of the prefatory tale, explicitly avoids suggesting that if only they had got married in the autumn, all would have been well, for later Eleanor is given words to suggest guilty hindsight on that golden time: 'oh, miserable me! to let my child go and dim her bright life!' (*MC*, p.133) Nevertheless, such a conclusion is open to the reader.

The story also shows Williams' reasonable point of view: a farmer in a poor area, he cannot be expected to take on a disabled woman as his wife. Thus he is an 'innocent

person' who commits a crime as the result of following the custom of his community.²⁴ The crime is the emotional devastation his decision wreaks on Nest, and this is the central event of the story. Sleeping together, or doing everything but, the story suggests, may generally be an attractive and sensible arrangement, but the hostages to fortune are dangerously great, both for one's practical, and for one's emotional life. A rather modern conclusion for the time.

In 'The Doom of the Griffiths', the problem with Nest is her reputation for inconstancy, pre-marriage, not, it seems, her own lower social status. Thus another problem with bundling is pointed out: 'giddy' girls, who simply like to please. The landlady of the pub where Owen meets her warns him in veiled terms about Nest. In a passage showing Gaskell's knowledge of Welsh and its idioms, the woman quotes a 'triad' in her own language, for which the translation is then given: 'Three things are alike: a fine barn without corn, a fine cup without drink, a fine woman without her reputation'.(MLL, p.245) A little later, the narrator explains the basis for this hint: 'Nest was very giddy, and . . . she was motherless. She had high spirits and a great love of admiration, or, to use a softer term, she loved to please; men, women, and children, all, she delighted to gladden with her smile and voice. She coquetted, and flirted, and *went to the extreme lengths of Welsh courtship*, till the seniors of the village shook their heads, and cautioned their daughters against her acquaintance. If not absolutely guilty, she had too frequently been on the verge of guilt': presumably, with different lovers. (MLL, pp.245-6 my italics) Owen's stepmother emphasises this to his father, and this is the cause of his extreme rage.

Here, the problem of possible desertion by the female lover is illustrated. Robert suspects that, given her reputation, Nest's child will not be a Griffiths. Owen, naive after his unnaturally isolated upbringing, has no such suspicions; we are given a picture of the idyllic happiness, similar to that of Nest and Williams before the accident in The Well of Pen-Morfa, of the young couple's secret early married life. So, without interference, that case could have worked perfectly well, too. However, Robert calls Nest a prostitute because of her previous behaviour, and Owen a cuckold. His emotional storm leads him to commit an 'innocent crime', for he is merely throwing the baby back to its rightful parent, as he thinks, when it hits the dresser and is killed. To complete the disastrous chain of consequences, in the ensuing conflict Owen accidentally - 'innocently' - pushes his father to his death. Clearly, another problem of general pre-marital sex is raised here: on the one hand, it enables people to experiment and change their minds about who they want to sleep with for the rest of their lives, which is perhaps a good thing if they don't go to, or beyond 'the extremes'. The 'giddy' Nest settles down nicely, once she has found the right man. However, the consequences of serial partners are dangerous for the man, who cannot be sure of the ownership of offspring, and hence also for the woman,

who will risk social ostracism, and bear the brunt of the violent, uncontrollable emotions of the male who suspects her of inconstancy.

Gaskell criticism has often noted the danger associated with the power of sex in her writing. In addition Uglow in particular has emphasised how often Gaskell's stories show the terrible consequences of the loss of control in violent emotion, especially anger.²⁵ In these two stories we find Gaskell exploring the potentialities for both kinds of danger, within the 'controlled laboratory conditions' of people who go to the 'extreme lengths of Welsh courtship'. Quietly and unobtrusively, but acutely, she is taking an undogmatic look at the scandalous possibility that it might be acceptable for people to engage in sexual activity before they are married. That it probably isn't, because the risks are too great, is the typically pragmatic, sensible, conclusion of Gaskell's sad and sexy Welsh stories.

NOTES

¹ J A V Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell. The Early Years*, Manchester: MUP, 1997, Chapter 16, pp.296-309.

² J A V Chapple, 'Before "Crutches and Changed Feelings": five early letters by Elizabeth Gaskell (nee Stevenson)', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol.4, 1990, p.9.

³ Ibid. p.15.

⁴ Ed M Drabble, *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford: OUP, 1985, p.66.

⁵ Ed D Moore, *Wales in the Eighteenth Century*, D Moore, 'The Discovery of the Welsh Landscape', Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1976, p.127.

⁶ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Wales*, London: printed for Benjamin White, 1784.

⁷ Moore, pp.141-2.

⁸ A French Traveller, *Journal of a Tour and Residence in Great Britain during the years 1810 and 1811*, 1815. A Native Artist, *Cambria Depicta: a Tour Through North Wales illustrated with Picturesque Views*, 1816.

Dr. S H Spiker, Librarian to the King of Prussia, *Travels through England Wales, and Scotland, in the year 1816*, 2 vols, 1820; J Tillotson, *Picturesque Scenery in Wales*, London: T J Allman, 1861; Rev. W Bingley, *North Wales, delineated from two excursions through all the interesting parts of that highly beautiful and romantic country, and intended as a guide to future tourists*, 2nd edn., London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1814.

⁹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol.1, *Swann's Way*, London: Vintage, 1996, p.255.

¹⁰ Tillotson, Preface.

- ¹¹ Elisabeth Beazley, *Madocks and the Wonder of Wales*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967, p.17.
- ¹² Bingley, p.492.
- ¹³ Beazley, pp.92-7; R Holmes, *Shelley. The Pursuit*, London: Quartet Books, 1976, p.180.
- ¹⁴ Gwyn A Williams, *The Welsh in their History*, London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982, pp.43-61,66,95-102.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p.160 and note p.169.
- ¹⁶ *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, appointed by the Committee of Council on Education, in 3 parts, Part I: Carmarthen, Glamorgan, and Pembroke, Part II: Brecknock, Cardigan, Radnor, and Monmouth, Part III: North Wales*. London: 1848, p.534.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. pp.534-5.
- ¹⁸ Bingley, p.504; Beazley, p.20; Lawrence Stone, *The Road to Divorce. England 1530 - 1987*, Oxford: OUP, 1990, p.61.
- ¹⁹ Stone, p.61.
- ²⁰ Ibid. p.65.
- ²¹ Bingley, p.504.
- ²² Ibid. pp.504-5
- ²³ W Gareth Evans, "A Barrier to Moral Progress and Commercial Prosperity", *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, No.123, June/July 1997, p.92.
- ²⁴ It is interesting to note the contrast with the representation of industrial working class attitudes in *Mary Barton*, where Mrs. Wilson was married by her faithful lover despite being crippled in an industrial accident. A factory worker's wages could support a family; a married woman's duties were confined to running the small urban home, which indeed became a sign of respectability.
- ²⁵ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell. A Habit of Stories*, London: Faber and Faber, 1993, p.96.