

Resources and Texts: Teaching Notes

Poetry to the shrine at Penrhys

This poetry is complex, allusive and difficult to interpret! We have to read between the lines. We also have to remember that the poets were in a way the PR people of their day. They were supported by patrons like landowners and the abbey, and they composed poetry that would please their patrons. On the other hand, they were writing for public performance (unlike modern poets whose work is written down, published and sold) so we can assume that what they wrote was acceptable to a wide audience.

From the descriptions of the statue, Mary is standing, with Jesus in her arms, bending over to kiss him. It is an image of tender motherhood: but she is also crowned, an image of power. Does the 'golden hand' mean the statue was gilded, or is it a metaphor? 'Llaw' can also mean 'authority, control' and perhaps more importantly 'skill, touch': so 'llaw'n euraid' might be figurative, 'healing hands'.

Gwilym Tew's reference to 'mass bread and holy water' suggests there was a church on the site. We know from other sources and from the modern appearance of the site that there was a holy well there: this is the 'foaming water' Rhisiart ap Rhys describes, and Lewys Morgannwg mentions the sick being baptised there.

The legend is that the statue appeared miraculously in an oak tree and could not be moved from the spot.

The poets give a long list of people who went there for physical and mental illnesses, as well as sailors who had been rescued from storms at sea. Mary was described in a famous medieval hymn as 'maris stella', the star of the sea.

They may have walked, or travelled on horseback. Gwilym Tew's reference to going on his knees might mean he did the last climb on his knees out of devotion, or it might mean he was exhausted by climbing the steep hill to the shrine. Or of course it might mean he was on horseback, carrying a huge candle on his knees. If you could, you brought a candle of your own height as an offering. If you could not afford that, you measured yourself or the person you were praying for with some candle-wick, wrapped it around and made a short candle. This was called 'measuring yourself to the saint'. Some people brought wax models of

themselves or of the part of the body that needed healing. These could be made into candles for the shrine. Lewys Morgannwg's 'llaswyr' could have been a psalter or the 'llaswyr lleiaf' or Book of Hours, with devotions to the Virgin Mary. The word is sometimes used figuratively for the rosary, the set of beads which guided you through prayers and meditations on the Virgin Mary.

Elsbeth Mathew seems to have been an unmarried daughter of the great Mathew family of Radyr Court, north of Cardiff. She looked after sick pilgrims on their way from Llandaff to penrhys and sent offerings to the shrine, but she does not seem ever to have gone there herself. She may have regarded herself as a 'beguine', a woman vowed to a religious life but outside a convent, devoted to looking after the sick and needy.

Students can use their imaginations to try to reconstruct some miracle stories from the very brief references in Lewys Morgannwg's poem – a dead man brought back to life, another received safely into heaven, a dumb man able to speak two words, possibly the 'mea culpa' ('through my fault', the opening of the prayer of confession – so he could make his confession and be absolved), the blind and the mentally ill healed, a deaf man who hears and a wound that speaks, a man who is able to leave his crutches and walk. The very brief references may suggest that the miracle stories were well known and did not need to be repeated in full.

The destruction of the shrine

It is difficult now to understand the strength of feeling about these shrines, and the reasons for their destruction. Latimer, Cromwell and their fellow reformers had genuine cause to worry that people were in danger of worshipping statues and venerating saints rather than directing their prayers to God. They were also worried that people were relying on activities like pilgrimage to save them, when the reformers believed that only a person's faith could help them.

William Herbert was instructed to dismantle the shrine because he was a local landowner, with local credibility. The very obsequious tone of his letter is partly the custom of the time but also suggests his eagerness to please Cromwell and secure more work from him – but

his description of the statue as Our Lady contrasts with Latimer's crudity. Herbert clearly had difficulties and was unable to do it quietly, as he had been instructed – he had an audience.

Several reasons have been suggested for the delay. He may have had more difficulty than he was prepared to admit. He would not want to look incompetent, and he may also have been protecting local people. Finally, it is just possible that the delay would have allowed a replica statue to be made.

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