

Alis ferch Gruffydd ab Ieuan ab Ieuvan ap Llywelyn Fychan (c. 1520-1570)

*Côf a lithr, llythrau a geidw.*¹
—Welsh proverb

ALIS ferch Gruffydd was the daughter of Gruffydd Son-of-Ieuan-the-Son-of-Ieuan, a nobleman and poet from Llewenne Fychan in northeast Wales, near St. Asaph. Her mother was Gruffydd's first wife, Jonet, the daughter of Richard ab Hywel, a nobleman who fought for Henry against Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field (1485). (Gruffydd's father Ieuan is likewise said to have espoused the Lancastrian cause.)

Of Gruffydd and Jonet's six surviving children, at least two – Alis and Catrin – were poets, though their Muses had little in common. To Catrin are ascribed “Gweddio ac wylo I'm gwely” (“I sob in bed”); and “Iesu Duw Iesu dewisaf ei garu” (“Jesus, God Jesus, I choose to love him”): the first is an antisemitic meditation, weepy with shame for sin and painful to read (said in one manuscript to have been written when the poet was sick); the second is a poem of religious adoration, much in the same vein.

The oeuvre of Alis ferch Gruffydd is represented by just a few surviving englynion – those reproduced here, plus a cywydd that Alis is said to have composed to make peace between Grigor y Moch and Davydd Llwyd Lwdwn. Witty Alis was clearly influenced in her verse and song by Gwerful Mechain (see *Women's Works*, volume 1).²

Catrin married Robert ap Rhys, of Ysbyty Ifan, a Catholic priest (clerical celibacy was not enforced among Celtic Christians in pre-Reformation Wales). About 1540 Alis married David Lloyd ap Rees of Vaynol, a marriage that produced five surviving sons, all of whom became churchmen. Gruffydd ab Ieuan's second wife, Alis ferch John (who was about Alis's own age), may be the “young maiden” referenced in Alis's englyn on her father's proposed marriage. Old Gruffydd won the debate concerning his virility: by his second marriage he had three sons and two daughters.

**Pan ofynne ei thad yn wr gweddw beth
a ddoede hi am iddo amcanu priodi
llances o lodes:**^o

gan Alis ferch Gruffydd

“YN gleiriach bellach heb allu (Duw n borth!)
ond or barth ir gwelu.
Gwanwr ai ben un gwnnu
ni thale dim ich ael ddu.”

Llances o lodes lwydwen feinael
a fynne gael amgen.
Hi a rodded yn ireddwen.
Chwithe nhad aethoch yn hen.”

[*Ateb*]

“RHAI a heurai o hiroed, or blaen
fyned draen im troed.
Dyls yw ngorph llei delwy.
Dygwyl y ffair digloff wy.”

**When her father, a widower, asked her what
she would say concerning his intent to wed
a young maiden:**

Trans. DWF

“POPPA, barely can ye get
(God'elp ye!) up from hearth to bed.
An ancient gent with snow-white head
your black-eyed wench cannot content.

A fine and fair-browed teenaged lass
would sooner have another.
Fresh and true she would be mated.
Too bad, father, that you're dated.”

[*Response*]

“SOME said simply, long before,
Time's thorn would make me limp. My trusty
members still be sound. On festival-
and fair-days, nought can hold me down.”

¹ *Côf* ... *geidw*] Memory slips, letters remain.

² *Cywydd*] “Gwn achos a'm gwanychai,” in N.L.W. MSS Cwrtmawr 14, f.72; NLW 6681, f.404, Peniarth 221, f.5; and B.L. MS Add. 10313, f. 34r.

**Englynon o waith Alis pan ofynodd
ei thad pa fath wr a fyne hi °**

gan Alis ferch Gruffydd

HARDD, fedrus, campus—pes caid—a dewr
i daro, o bai raid;
mab o oedran; cadarn blaid;
a gwr o gorff gorau a gaid.

Fy nhad a ddywede ym hyn: mae gorau
ym garu dyn gwrthun.
A'r galon sydd yn gofyn
gwas glan hardd ysgafn ei hun.

Englyn ateb (Alis ai cant) °

gan Alis ferch Gruffydd

NID wylo, ond cwyno i'm câr yr ydwy'
tra rodwy' y ddaear
na alle fod yn llai' i fâr
na dilyn Gwen o'r Dalar

**Englynon written by Alis when he asked
her what sort of husband she would like**

Trans. DWF

HANDSOME, skillful, fine—if such there is—and bold
to strike, as th' case requires;
in age, lusty; an ally strong;
a build most manly, that's a must.

My father told me this: 'twere best for me
with a loathsome fool to couple.
Nonetheless, the heart desires
a lad who's handsome, fresh, and supple.

Englyn in response (Alis sang this)

Trans. DWF

I'LL NOT sob, my Love, but only bitch of the one
whom I'd have bet the world
would never be so untrue
as Gwen of Talar to pursue.¹

Folk verses

Though little has survived from Alis's pen, the centuries-old tradition in which she composed is represented by anonymous folk verses, some of which were handed down for generations before being recorded on paper: *hen benillion* (the “old verses”) have played an important role in the history of Welsh literature and popular culture. Composed chiefly in four-line englynon, poets and performers troped on familiar themes, some few of which, luckily, were at last transcribed by antiquarians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here are two among many, undated, that were written for a woman's voice:

Drwg, naill ffordd neu'r llall °

Anon.

DRWG am garu, drwg am beidio,
drwg am droi fy nghariad heibio
Drwg am godi'r nos i'r ffenest' –
“Da yw bod yn eneth onest.”

Drwg am garu cudyn crych,
drwg am wisgo amdani'n wych,
drwg am fynd i'r llan y Sulie –
Drwg a gawn pe 'rhoswn gartre!

Rhwymyn o Glân Briodas °

MI feddyliais ond priodi
na chawn ddim ond dawnsio a chanu –
Ond beth a ges ar ol priodi
ond “Siglo'r crud” a “Suo'r babi”!

Either Way, Damned Good

Trans. DWF

DAMN'D for liking, damn'd for coy,
damn'd for jilting a lover-boy.
Damn'd at night for a window raised—
“It's good for girls to be chaste.”

Damn'd for liking curly hair,
damn'd for stylish girls' wear,
damn'd Sundays when to Mass I go—
Damn me if I stay at home!

Bond of Holy Matrimony

ONCE, I thought that marriage with me
such a song and dance would be –
Yet what have I when married
save “Rock the crib!” and “Hush the kid!”

¹ *Gwen o'r Dalar*] Gwen of Talar (Welsh *talár*, unplowed headland in a field).