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Elves, Crusaders and the Quest for a Plot: An Examination of the Historical and Mythical Inspirations behind Mary Webb's *Armour Wherein He Trusted*

Abstract: *Armour Wherein He Trusted* was Mary Webb's final novel. Unfinished at her death, it was published posthumously in 1929 and tells the story of a young Saxon knight and his marriage to a mysterious Welsh bride, who claims elfin heritage. While contemporary reviewers were mixed in their criticism, many noted her experimental style, which differed from her previous rural novels, not least in its eleventh-century setting. However, more recent scholars have given the novel little attention or have even been dismissive of it. This article seeks to redress that balance and also proposes new approaches to Webb's work. In an effort to suggest possible outcomes for the unfinished story, the current author asks whether such gaps in the text may be filled through an examination of potential sources of inspiration, including Shropshire folklore, specifically the legends of the Saxon warrior Wild Edric and his wife Godda, Arthurian legends, and *The Mabinogion*, something the author believes previous scholars have largely overlooked. The article also analyses how Mary Webb may have drawn inspiration from her own social and family situation in the years leading up to her death.

Keywords: Mary Webb, Shropshire, folklore, Arthurian legends, *The Mabinogion*, Wild Edric

1. Introduction

Armour Wherein He Trusted (hereafter *AWHT*) is arguably Mary Webb's most overlooked novel, understandably perhaps, as it was unfinished when she died, and was eventually published in 1929 as a fragment, around two years after her death. Contemporary reviewers, although mixed, generally commented favourably on her more experimental style, noting its development from her earlier writing (Coles 1978: 292), while also noting that it lacked the vivid descriptions of landscape that made her previous works more memorable (Coles 1978: 294). More recent

reviewers have not always been as kind, with Michele Aina Barale dismissing the work as “her weakest novel”, describing it as repetitive of early themes in Webb’s writing and deeming the experimental use of language as “embarrassing” (Barale 1986: 147). Conversely, Webb’s main biographer, Gladys Mary Coles, considers the novel to be Webb’s “most intriguing” (Coles 1990: 139), noting her development of style and her effective use of first-person narrative (Coles 1990: 136). We may see, therefore, that to some extent, the novel itself is/was “between worlds,” as it remains unfinished, and is stuck in a transitional phase. However, this is also something inherent in the text itself, as the story, being unfinished, leaves the reader wondering about the outcome. This article seeks to offer some suggestions about potential developments and endings of the novel, based on an examination of possible inspirations behind the characters and the plot, not least, Webb’s use of local fairy lore and the deteriorating marriage of the author and her own rapidly ending life¹. Furthermore, this article will highlight specific examples of Mary Webb’s use of Shropshire lore and Arthurian legend – elements largely neglected in most recent studies of her work (e.g. Davie 2018; Radford 2007; Seigel 1991). As such, while unable to provide concrete conclusions concerning the text’s plot, the article aims to generate interest in the so-far much overlooked work through an examination of Webb’s possible inspirations and personal situation, hopefully stimulating further research into her technique and life.

2. The final novel

Mary Webb (1881–1927) was born and raised in rural Shropshire, the daughter of a schoolteacher². Her father, George Meredith, of partly Welsh heritage, instilled in her a love of literature, folktales, and the Shropshire countryside. Although she was also an essayist and poet, Mary Webb is chiefly known for her novels, all set in rural Shropshire. Her use of landscape, folklore, and regional dialect has drawn comparisons with the works of Thomas Hardy³, of whom she was a great devotee.

¹ As such, the article will approach the text itself and Webb’s personal circumstances from both a “vertical” and “horizontal” axes, as demonstrated in Susan Stanstead Friedman’s interpretation of Julia Kristeva’s theoretical approach, where a horizontal axis refers to the “text as a transaction between writer and reader”, and the vertical axis refers the relationship with other texts (Friedman 1993), something which will be particularly important in this article when examining potential influences in folklore.

² Biographical information is based, for the most part, on Coles (1978).

³ See: Hill (2025: 81–103), Radford (2004: 56–60), Siegel (1991: 131–146).

Her five completed novels (written between 1916 and 1924), set in the 19th and early 20th centuries, are, to some extent, typical models of the rural novel. *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, as it remains in fragment, contains several features which demonstrate a move away from her earlier style and subject, not least through changing the physical and the temporal narrative spaces, thus accounting for the above-mentioned comments relating to experimental form and development.

One of the most notable aspects which sets the novel apart from its predecessors is its eleventh-century setting, during the reign of William Rufus (William II) and at the time of the First Crusade. While Webb's earlier works are set, at most, within a century of her own lifetime, and contain references to rural lifestyles, language and customs which would, arguably, be, to some extent, familiar to readers and those Shropshire people amongst whom she lived and sought inspiration, *AWHT* utilises a large amount of historical research, including that of knightly culture and archaic language⁴. A second aspect which distinguishes the novel is Webb's experimental use of language. While she had previously used Shropshire dialect in her work, *AWHT* sees her attempt to utilise older forms of language to create a style of speech closer to that of the medieval period, which, as noted above, has met with a mixed reception. A third feature of *AWHT* is its settings. Webb's previous novels had been almost entirely based in her home county of Shropshire, although in her fourth book, *Seven for a Secret* (1922), some characters take short journeys into neighbouring Wales. In *AWHT*, not only does Wales play a greater role, but part of the narration relates to the main protagonist leaving the British Isles to go on a crusade to the Holy Land. This greater distance from Shropshire shows a development in Webb's style and possibly an increasing focus, or preoccupation, with distance and space, as shall be examined at a later point. It also highlights Webb's reduced use of spatial and geographical descriptions, which have been noted as one of the stronger points of her earlier works. The novel's fourth, and major shift in Webb's style, is her choice of narrative and narrator. In her first four novels, the narrative is in third person; however, this changed with her later works. While Webb had used the first person in what is arguably her most famous work, *Precious Bane* (1978 [1924])⁵, that novel's narrator, Prue Sarn, is female; the narrator of *AWHT*

⁴ This is a major departure from her similarity to Hardy, in that the Dorset author did not set any of his novels in such a distant historical period, despite having an interest in history.

⁵ *Precious Bane* was Webb's fifth and final completed novel. It won the prestigious Prix Femina Vie Heureuse award (a British version of the French Prix Femina) in 1926, a year before her death, and it was the work which inspired a speech by the then prime minister Stanley Baldwin, which created a posthumous interest in her work.

is male, something which also differs from her previously female protagonists. It is apparent then, that rather than simply being an “embarrassing”, “repetitive” piece, as Barale suggests, *AWHT* can be seen to demonstrate several developments in writing Webb’s style as well as, perhaps, a conscious move away from her more Hardy-esque style of rural novel. Similarly, it can be seen to explore several themes which, while perhaps appearing in her earlier works, are tackled differently.

Both Coles (1978: 290) and James H. Thrall (2020: 234–259) consider *Armour Wherein He Trusted* to be an exploration of the struggle between physical and spiritual love. Thrall writes in greater depth about the apparent discussion within the text regarding Christianity and the nature-based mysticism which Webb often espoused (Thrall 2020: 234–235). He further suggests that the text explores Webb’s relationship with Christianity in different terms than she had previously done, also appearing as a reversal of her earlier stance, which often suggested rejection. As such, Thrall states “Webb is almost constructing a cautionary tale that on several levels advocates obedience, self-denial and specifically male control of self and others within the strictures of an at times harshly portrayed Christianity” (Thrall 2020: 234). A particular tool Webb uses to craft this tale is setting it in the medieval period. Thrall notes that “the ‘other worldly’ aspect created by such a distance in time may have allowed her imaginative space to experiment with the fictional possibilities of considering magic ‘real’” (Thrall 2020: 246), whereas, in previous works, Webb is critical of both Christianity and certain folk practices or folk beliefs, which are believed in by her characters (Thrall 2020: 207)⁶. In *AWHT*, less critical comment is made of supposedly supernatural or magical elements and beliefs; indeed, there is not only Webb’s characteristic use of folklore, but a greater influence of medieval lore and literature, much of which relates to magic. Accordingly, Webb’s utilisation of aspects of ancient legends, medieval mythology and romances will be explored below (see sections 2–5).

The importance of medieval history and romances is apparent from the start of the novel, as the narrator, Lord Gilbert of Polrebec, is shown to be a familiar character from medieval romances, a soldier-turned-holy man⁷. Formerly a young

⁶ In *The Golden Arrow*, the ghostly legend of the Dark Riders is dismissed by the old shepherd John Arden as “unrighteous tales” (Webb 1935 [1916]: 44), while in *Gone to Earth*, the main protagonist, Hazel Woodus, believes she has received several supernatural signs advising her to meet her tormentor, the lecherous Jack Reddin. However, unbeknown to her, each of the “signs” has a rational explanation, such as the fairy music she thinks she hears, being her father practising his harp (Webb 1979 [1917]: 176).

⁷ The figure of a former warrior-turned-holy man is not uncommon in both medieval romances and historical reality, as Jean LeClercq points out in his work, *Monks and Hermits in Medieval Love Stories* (LeClercq 1992: 347).

crusader, but now the ageing abbot of a Welsh monastery, his narrative begins with his recollection of meeting his (then) wife-to-be, the mysterious Nesta Llanvihangel, a young Welsh woman who claims descendancy from the Fairy people and the magician Merlin. Nesta is the waiting-woman of Lady Powis, the wife of Gilbert's feudal lord, and it is at a banquet held by Lord Powis that the character of Ranulph Jorwerth, the king's escheator, is introduced⁸. Jorwerth and Gilbert take an instant dislike to each other, whilst both having an obvious sexual interest in Nesta. It is apparent that Jorwerth will become a major antagonist at a later point, although this point has not been fully reached by the end of the fragment. Whilst courting Nesta, Gilbert begins to experience religious visions and a calling to go on crusade, which he eventually does, after marrying her. After being away for seven years, he hears news from his mother that Jorwerth is showing an aggressive interest in Gilbert's family estate and that Nesta seems to be displaying a lack of loyalty towards his family. It is at this point that the novel ends.

As Coles notes, the Introduction to the 1929 edition of *AWHT* describes the fragment as "curiously complete" (Coles 1990: 135). This is because the fragment ends with the letter from Gilbert's mother describing Jorwerth's arrival at the castle and Nesta's apparent betrayal. As such, while the text is complete in itself, it ends with a cliffhanger. Thus, the reader is left uncertain about how the story will develop. Abbot Gilbert does make clear in his recollections that he has lost Nesta and that she is dead, but the reader is not told about the circumstances, although it may be guessed that Jorwerth has a hand in it. It is here that the literary scholar could play the role of detective and examine some of the possible inspirations for characters and plot which, in this author's opinion, Webb has used. These, it must be stressed, are based on supposition, but also a knowledge of Shropshire folklore, something Webb used extensively in her work but which many previous scholars have largely overlooked.

3. Wild Edric, folklore and fairies

Webb's use of folklore in her work is well noted and is often seen as providing the narrative with a local, rural flavour (Coles 1978: 136; McNeil 1971: 132). However, scholars note that several other Modernist writers used it sometimes

⁸ An escheator was an officer responsible for supervising "escheats", the return of property to the feudal overlord or crown in the case of the owner being outlawed or there being no legal heirs ("Escheator" 1998: 627).

for inspiration in plot and symbolism. Adam Lansing Smith states, “[A]spects of the myths surface in an extraordinary variety of novelists and poets working in the Modernist mode, one of the central characteristics of which was what Eliot called “the mythic method”. This method was to establish a parallel between the ordinary details of daily life and an ancient myth” (Smith 1990: 50). Among the myths used by various authors, Arthurian texts were especially popular⁹. Mary Webb was familiar not only with such stories but also with *The Mabinogion* and Shropshire folklore (Coles 1978: 72), which had similar themes, as this article shall show¹⁰. The suggestion that *AWHT* is influenced by such mythology is reinforced by both the literary practices of her period and her own prior use of folklore for inspiration in works such as *Gone to Earth* (1979 [1917]) and *Precious Bane* (1978 [1924]). Additionally, Webb was versed in hagiographies of a variety of medieval figures¹¹. In the case of *AWHT*, it shall be argued that Webb was able to use both local mythology and genuine documented history to create a narrative plot and develop the characters within.

The primary sources for the novel’s characters, this author suggests, are the Shropshire legends of Edric the Wild (Wild Edric) and his wife, Lady Godda. Edric is both a historical and a mythical figure whose stories, particularly of his ghostly ride with a train of warriors, inspired aspects of at least two of Webb’s earlier novels, *The Golden Arrow* (1935 [1916]) and *Gone to Earth*. Although Coles has commented on this usage, many other authors, strangely, overlook it. Scholars such as Siegel (1991) and Barale (1986) pay little attention to Webb’s use of Shropshire folklore and mythology. Additionally, while Edric is occasionally mentioned by authors such as Coles (1978: 163), the figure of Godda has received even less attention from scholars, something this author considers a limit to deeper analysis. A particular example is the work of Radford (2004; 2007), who interprets Webb’s novel *Gone to Earth* through the Classical myth of Demeter and Persephone. However, while he makes a brief mention of the legend of Wild Edric’s ride in relation

⁹ Smith cites T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce among those authors who utilised Arthurian legends (Smith 1990: 50).

¹⁰ Webb’s knowledge of both Arthurian and Classical mythology is evident through the numerous references in her 1917 collection of essays on nature titled *The Spring of Joy* (Webb 2016 [1917]): for example, she makes mention of, amongst others, Vivian of the Lake (Webb 2016 [1917]: 50), Merlin (Webb 2016 [1917]: 114) and Palomides, a Saracen knight at Arthur’s court (Webb 2016 [1917]: 31). She also wrote a poem entitled *Isolde*, inspired by the tale of Tristan and Isolde (Webb 1946: 40).

¹¹ *Spring of Joy* mentions several figures, including St. Bernard of Quintavalle and Odoric of Pordenone (Webb 2016 [1917]: 36, 87). Additionally, Rosalind Davie notes Webb’s interest in the work of Dame Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century female hermit and mystic (Davie 2018: 44).

to European mythology of the Wild Hunt (2007: 167, footnote 89), he apparently overlooks parallels in local mythology concerning Edric and Godda, such as her abduction by Edric and eventual return home (see below). This omission and imbalance concerning the female figure are something this article seeks to address.

Wild Edric was a Saxon nobleman at the time of the Norman invasion of 1066. His family possessed extensive lands in Shropshire and the border regions. He initially engaged in a campaign of resistance against the Normans but eventually submitted to their rule, possibly even accompanying William I on a military campaign against the Scots. His tale, however, becomes rather murky, especially since he seems to have rebelled against Norman rule a second time in 1075. According to some reports, he was captured and sentenced to lifelong imprisonment, with his lands confiscated and passed into the hands of a Norman nobleman, before disappearing from history. There is, however, one version which suggests he escaped imprisonment and fled to the mountains of Wales (Burne 1883: 26–27; Hall 2014: 94; Palmer 2004: 72).

The historical figure of Edric may have served as a partial basis for Webb's Gilbert. Like Edric, the young knight is a Saxon in the Norman court (albeit that of William II), something Jorwerth makes a pointed comment about at the banquet (Webb 2008 [1929]: 14). Additionally, the lands which he owns either correspond to or are in the vicinity of those historically owned by Edric, such as Condor/Conover, where Edric was allegedly born (Palmer 2004: 58). Gilbert's castle is that of Polrebec, the old name of the Shropshire village of Castle Pulverbatch, close to the area of The Stiperstones, a place synonymous with Wild Edric (Davies 1990: 44). The remains of a castle, with a later Norman motte and bailey, are still visible today (Coles 1978: 291). However, in addition to the possible historical basis of the character of Gilbert, we might consider Edric's greater influence through legend.

Wild Edric's legendary status is perhaps better known, and it is well documented in the works of the pioneering folklorist Charlotte Burne¹², whose writings on Shropshire folklore Mary Webb was well acquainted with¹³. Although Webb does not write about supernatural figures in a fantasy style, she does incorporate beliefs in the supernatural within her stories¹⁴. As noted, James H. Thrall suggests

¹² Charlotte Sophia Burne (1850–1923), who was the first female editor of the journal *Folklore* and the first female president of the Folk-Lore Society (1909–1910), published numerous works on Shropshire and Staffordshire dialect and folklore. She undertook pioneering fieldwork and devised new methods of collecting materials (Ashman et al. 2000).

¹³ See Webb's *Foreword* to her novel *Precious Bane* (Webb 1978a [1924]: 7).

¹⁴ This is particularly apparent in *Gone to Earth*, where the lead character, Hazel Woodus, is frequently described with reference to fairies and elves.

that the temporal distancing of the medieval period may have been Webb's method to explore deeper ideas of mysticism and religion, being set in a period when the supernatural was more readily accepted as reality (Thrall 2020: 246). Certainly, there is more focus in *AWHT* on the importance of fairy and elfin powers, suggesting an attempt to recreate medieval romances and chivalric tales. Wild Edric's own story bears a similar resemblance to such texts.

According to legend, Edric was once riding through a forest when he was enchanted by the singing of some fairy women¹⁵. He kidnapped one and forced her to do his will. Eventually, she agreed to marry him but warned him that he should never rebuke her for her family, otherwise she would return to the world of Faerie, and he would die alone. They lived happily for many years until one day, in a fit of anger, he made a comment about her sisters, whereupon she disappeared, leaving him to live out his days alone, pining for her (Burne 1883: 59–60).

In other variants of the legend, he is imprisoned under the ancient hill known as The Stiperstones (which he once owned) as punishment for betraying England to the Normans (Burne 1883: 28). The Stiperstones are also surrounded by ancient mines, believed to be the entrance to Faerie, where he and his wife, Lady Godda, reside, waiting for when England is threatened by war, at which time, Edric and his warriors ride across the borderlands and The Stiperstones. Charlotte Burne records a supposed witness to the ride, who described Edric and Godda riding with their train shortly before the Crimean War.

She was with her father ... and she heard the blast of a horn ... Then they all came by; Wild Edric himself on a white horse at the head of the band, and the Lady Godda his wife, riding at full speed over the hills. Edric had short black, curly hair and very bright black eyes. He wore a green cap and white feather, a short green coat and cloak, a horn and short sword hanging from his golden belt... the lady had wavy golden hair falling loosely to her waist, and round her forehead a band of white linen, with a golden ornament in it. The rest of her dress was green, and she had a short dagger at her waist (Burne 1883: 28–29).

The evocative image of the ghostly riders features in both *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth* where legends of Dark Riders are frequently referenced, most notably in the latter, where the legend of the deathly harbinger, the Black Huntsman,

¹⁵ Charlotte Burne (1883: 59) refers to Godda and her sisters as elves, within a chapter headed *Fairies*. Hall points out that the terms “elf” and “fairy” have often been treated as interchangeable, the latter having apparently replaced the former over time. As Hall considers this “a working assumption which requires fuller examination” (Hall 1990: 20), I shall use the terms interchangeably and direct interested readers to Hall's article, *Elves on the Brain: Chaucer, Old English and Elfin* (Hall 2006).

is ultimately embodied by the tragic foxhunt (Coles 1978: 163–167; Hill 2025: 97). Therefore, it is feasible that Webb decided to use Wild Edric once again, and these legends can be seen to have influenced her depictions of Gilbert and Nesta.

In *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, Abbot Gilbert's account opens with his recollection of meeting Nesta for the first time. He is riding through a forest when he hears a group of women singing. As he approaches, he is captivated by the beauty of Nesta. He cries out that he has been enchanted by a fairy woman, whereupon she reveals herself as Lady Powis's lady-in-waiting. The scene is very reminiscent of Edric's first encounter with Godda, the impression reinforced by Gilbert's description of his attire as "my best green coat and my hat with a grey goose feather" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 2), similar to that which Burne's informant saw Edric wearing. More importantly, throughout the novel, Nesta regularly refers to her supposed fairy bloodline, notably explaining to Jorwerth, "I come from Cymru [Wales], sir ... and my home is in the waste, and my lineage is elf-lineage, and for our sign, it is the churn-owl with a kingly crown upon his head" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 15). When asked the location of her home, she replies, "It lies betwixt Salop and Radnor¹⁶. It lies between life and death. It is betwixt and between all things" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 16)¹⁷. Earlier, she told Gilbert, "My mother has magic. She is of Merlin's line" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 7).

Nesta herself exists between worlds. Being Welsh¹⁸, she is distinct from the Saxons and the Normans. Additionally, she is from the borderlands and, supposedly, of elfin stock, suggesting an aspect of fairy euhemerism, the nineteenth-century scholarly belief that elves and fairies were, in fact, descended from earlier human tribes displaced by incomers (compare Silver 1986: 143). Nesta's Welsh identity reflects a recurring theme in Webb's novels, where Wales has connotations of magic and the supernatural, such as Hazel Woodus's mother, a Welsh Gypsy who leaves her a book of spells in *Gone to Earth* (Webb 1979 [1917]: 12). Nesta's bloodline to Merlin also highlights her "betweenness" racially but also raises questions about her character, as Merlin himself, in some of the early Arthurian texts, is the offspring of a demonic union with a human woman and is often portrayed as a dubious character himself (Pasiut 2023: 137).

¹⁶ Salop is the old name for Shropshire as well as the county town Shrewsbury.

¹⁷ This echoes Webb's description of the Shropshire borderlands in an earlier novel, *Seven for a Secret*, as "the country that lies between the dimpled lands of England and the gaunt purple steeps of Wales – half in Faery and half out of it" (Webb 1929 [1922]: 17).

¹⁸ The word "Welsh" derives from the Old English term for foreigners, or speakers of Brythonic languages. See: *Origin and History of "Welsh"* (n.d.).

Gilbert, like Edric, is a Saxon lord who marries a fairy woman, whom he then somehow loses and spends his days in solitude; in Gilbert's case, in a monastery. It can therefore be suggested that there is strong evidence of the influence of Shropshire legends upon the text. Furthermore, an examination of other texts and tales which were arguably inspirational to *AWHT* may suggest several possibilities of how the plot develops.

As Abbot Gilbert relates, he has lost Nesta, but he does not elaborate on how before the fragment ends. It is likely that, at some point, Gilbert also loses his lands and possessions, just as the historical and mythical Edric lost his. Webb may have intended Jorwerth to seize Polrebec's estates and, considering his hostility towards Gilbert and his predatory behaviour towards Nesta, to seize his wife as well. Such an action would presumably prompt Gilbert to undertake some vengeful rescue, perhaps resulting in Nesta's death and his own withdrawal to monastic life. The question is, how such a chain of events might come into play. As the legends of Edric and Godda appear to form the basis for the characters and events of the novel, an examination of other folklore and medieval literature might provide clues regarding the rest of the plot. Before these texts are examined, it is necessary to consider how and why Webb introduces a different kind of masculinity, a chivalric one, than that seen in her previous works, based largely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century rural life.

4. The Web(b) of masculinity

While dashing action may seem unusual in Webb's works, it is worth examining the development of her male characters throughout her novels, and the archetype which Coles refers to as "The Flockmaster". Tracing the concept from Webb's 1916 poem of the same name (Webb 1946: 61), and her 1917 novel *The Golden Arrow*, Coles describes The Flockmaster as "a personification of love", and an idealised male protector (Coles 1978: 46). In *The Golden Arrow*, he is personified as the father of the protagonist Deborah Arden and appears to have been initially based on Mary's own father, who had died in 1909. John Arden is a shepherd whose character is that of a kind, fatherly and caring man who protects both his family and his flock. Deeply attuned to nature, he occasionally enters mystic trances. He stands in marked contrast to his daughter's lover, and later husband, Stephen Southernwood, a well-read young preacher who also works as a foreman at the local mine. To some extent, this book-learned young man represents the figure of Henry Webb, who,

as Stephen does to Deborah, married Mary and took her away from her family home, replacing her late father. While Stephen is not portrayed in the role of The Flockmaster, being emotionally and spiritually disturbed by the landscape and his married life, he represents an alternative form of masculinity which must develop spiritually, as he begins to do by the end of the novel. At one point, he abandons Deborah to go to America, causing her to suffer a mental breakdown. Stephen's return as a profoundly changed man illustrates his spiritual development resulting from his experiences in America. Coles considers his changed character to demonstrate a shifting of the status of Flockmaster onto him (Coles 1978: 41). This could reflect Henry himself replacing Mary's father as the main male figure in her life.

The multiplicity of masculinity is demonstrated to a greater extent in Webb's second novel, *Gone to Earth*, where the young half-Gypsy girl, Hazel Woodus, is caught in a love triangle between the lustful local squire, Jack Reddin, and the emotionally repressed but kindly preacher, Edward Marston. The male characters represent polarities of masculinity between which the inexperienced Hazel must choose: Edward's intellect and gentility against Reddin's more nature-based, brutish sexuality. A second important point about *Gone to Earth* is that Jack Reddin is at least partly based on the figure of Wild Edric himself. Reddin's masculinity is reflected in his passions for bloodsports and deflowering maidens. His association, in Hazel's mind, with the ghostly Black Huntsman, and his participation in the hunt at the end of the novel, are compared by Coles with the legend of Wild Edric's Ride (Coles 1978:163). Additionally, his attempted seduction of Hazel after taking her to his mansion and the eventual rape in the wooded area of Hunter's Spinney certainly suggest parallels with the Persephone myth, as examined by Andrew Radford (Radford 2004; 2007) but also Edric's abduction of Godda, which, considering Webb's knowledge and use of Shropshire folklore, is possibly the stronger influence. Reddin is therefore linked to old landowners, sex and warlike hunts, and the historical and mythical story of Shropshire itself. He is "of the land" and somewhat a force of unbridled nature, as opposed to the well-mannered, restrained character of Edward Marston, who himself tries to "civilize" Hazel by marriage and through an education in social airs and graces at the hands of his disapproving mother. In some ways, Edward is the more chivalrous side of the Edric archetype. Having used Edric as the inspiration for masculine characters in *Gone to Earth*, Webb would seem to explore it further in *Armour Wherein he Trusted*.

Other versions of the Flockmaster archetype, seen in male characters of Webb's later novels, are seemingly based on Henry Webb, Mary's husband. For example, Amber Darke, a young woman trapped in the suffocating family environment

of *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920), becomes enamoured with Michael Hallows, her brother's visiting friend. Hallows's intellect stimulates Amber's own and gives her a kind of liberation from her stultifying existence. In this instance, The Flockmaster has developed from the fatherly figure of John Arden (George Meredith), through the educated, if spiritually lost, figures of Stephen Southernwood and Edward Marston, to the young, intellectually and romantically stimulating Michael Hallows whose relationship with Amber, Coles considers to be based on that of Mary and Henry Webb (Coles 1978: 99). This semi-autobiographical thread running through Webb's novels, and the fusing of different masculine attributes into her male characters, develops further with her fifth and last complete novel, *Precious Bane*, and may be seen to come to a peak in *Armour Wherein He Trusted*.

Arguably, the most developed figure of The Flockmaster is that of Kester Woodseaves, the love interest of Prue Sarn. According to Coles, Kester embodies Webb's attempt to create a "higher reality, and, in doing so, to demonstrate the human potential of inner wholeness" (Coles 1978: 259), combining moral, spiritual and physical ideals. Although Coles likens him to Michael Hallows (Coles 1978: 258), Kester's character incorporates certain aspects which make him not only a more complete form of masculinity but also one closer to nature and to the Shropshire culture which Mary Webb so adored. Whereas Hallows is a former lecturer at a theological college, suggesting a learned, intellectual spirituality and masculinity, Kester Woodseaves is an itinerant weaver. He is sexually desirable to women, as seen by the reaction of both the younger and older females at his first appearance, at the love-spinning (Webb 1978 [1924]: 100). This sexual element in a single male character is more pronounced in *Precious Bane* than in earlier works, suggesting that Webb's Flockmaster has now not only freed himself from the sexual repression of Edward Marston, but has combined and controlled the libidinous urges of Jack Reddin, further demonstrating the progression of Webb's male characters.

Kester is also a man of principle with strong views on social justice, disliking blood sports, politicians, and shameless women. He is also shown to be well educated, especially for one of his social class (Webb 1978 [1924]: 111). Not only does he do all his own cooking and mend his own clothes, something unusual for a man, but, being from a rural background, he can also do physical work in the fields.

A significant skill of Kester's is that he is a champion wrestler, a sport which may be seen as widely associated with rural communities¹⁹. This physical prowess

¹⁹ While wrestling was both widespread and extremely popular in England in the nineteenth century, its status declined in the twentieth century (Huggins 2001: 37; Tripp 2023: 74–95). While certainly not solely a rural pastime, it is largely represented as such in fiction, particularly in the

is a novel aspect compared to earlier Flockmasters. His wrestling fame not only gives him a certain level of respect but also demonstrates control and self-mastery. As the American author John Irving points out, being a practising wrestler himself, “Wrestling is not about knocking a man down – it’s about controlling him” (Irving 1996: 23). This is something which becomes evident in Kester’s final confrontation with the brutal and exceedingly strong Huglet, when the former rescues Prue from a witch-hunting mob. Kester challenges Huglet, a mob ringleader, to wrestle, then humiliatingly defeats him by throwing him into a body of water (Webb 1978 [1924]: 287). The wrestling match demonstrates not only Kester’s courage in challenging a larger, stronger opponent, but also his discipline and intelligence in the way he defeats him.

This intelligence is demonstrated earlier when, attempting to stop a bull baiting, Kester offers to take on every man. When no one steps forward, he is challenged to take on the dogs himself, which he does. Unknown to the challenger, Kester is friendly with all but one of the animals and easily restrains them, except the final one, which badly mauls him until Prue kills it. (Webb 1978 [1924]: 142–153). Still, his goal is achieved and the bull baiting stops. Like a hero, he puts his life on the line to safeguard others.

Kester is portrayed as Prue’s protector and guardian; an educated, moral, brave, and physically capable man, as well as displaying a highly spiritual nature. He was also inspired by Mary’s husband. Wrenn cites Mary’s brother, Kenneth Meredith, as saying the character is “a faithful portrait of Henry Webb” (Wrenn 1964: 88). Additionally, the surname “Webb” is derived from the Old English word “webbe” and refers to a weaver²⁰. This further demonstrates how Mary Webb’s real-life environment fed into her novels, something which shall be considered further with regard to *Armour Wherein He Trusted*.

As well as providing inspiration for her male hero, Henry may also have influenced not only the action of *Precious Bane*, but also Mary’s shift into the world of medieval romances and heroic quests. In 1917, Henry Webb published an epic poem based on the Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*. This ancient text features wrestling between the princely Gilgamesh and the beast-like Enkidu, who later aids the prince in fighting animals and monsters, including a supernatural bull (Penjak 2013: 50). Mary had helped edit her husband’s work and would have been familiar

nineteenth century, in works like Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and various novels by R.D. Blackmore, such as *Lorna Doone*. It should also be noted that it appears in heroic epics like *The Iliad*, *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* (Penjak et al. 2013: 50–53).

²⁰ See: *Webb History, Family Crest and Coat of Arms* (n.d.).

with the original. Considering how Kester bests the brutal Huglet, as Gilgamesh does Enkidu, but also takes on the dogs at the bull baiting, it is possible that the event is meant, at least partly, as a parody of the heroic deeds of ancient legends, such as Gilgamesh or Hercules²¹. In Kester, there is a figure comparable to those of literature who travel around doing good deeds, being educated, chivalrous and skilled in martial arts: the knights errant of medieval romances and mythology. As such, Webb can be seen to elevate the rural romance to a level comparable to that of medieval romance. It may therefore be argued that the next point of progression for her male characters was a shift from rural romance and wrestling towards a medieval romance of swordplay and knightly action.

Through the character of Gilbert Polrebec, Webb illustrates the progressive stages of her Flockmaster archetype. From his courtship of Nesta to his fading years as a monk, he is portrayed at various stages of his life and in different stages of masculinity. He appears as the volatile young knight, tender lover, zealous crusader, and wise elderly abbot who has reached a spiritual peak. The evolving different aspects of his own character in many ways mirror other masculine figures of Webb's novels. The young Gilbert displays some of the arrogance of Stephen Southernwood (*The Golden Arrow*), the impetuous nature and sexuality of Jack Reddin and aspects of Edward Marston's piety (*Gone to Earth*), as well as Michael Hallowes's intellect (*The House in Dormer Forest*) and Kester's physical and spiritual prowess. These aspects, or stages of masculinity, eventually culminate in the pious abbot, an equivalent to the fatherly Flockmaster of *The Golden Arrow*, John Arden. However, because the text is unfinished, it is unclear how Gilbert progresses to his final state.

Another major factor with the character of Gilbert is that he is both Webb's first male protagonist and narrator. By having the aged abbot narrate his story, Webb makes a major shift in style, illustrating the male experience rather than the female. Additionally, it traces the character's development and self-awareness internally, rather than through the viewpoint of either the external narrator or, as in *Precious Bane*, a female narrator. Furthermore, by framing or embedding the main story as Gilbert's reminiscences, the narrative suggests a form of medieval balladry or storytelling with a reminiscing narrator (compare Bacskai-Atkari 2015: 325). This demonstrates that Webb, in an attempt to create an image or atmosphere of the Middle Ages, would require different sources than the folklore collections that

²¹ It is an intriguing question as to whether this had an influence on her characterisation of Kester as a wrestler and his combat with the dogs, but it is one which requires greater research in the future.

enriched her earlier novels that were based largely on nineteenth-century or early twentieth century rurality. It is necessary, therefore, to examine other medieval sources which may have influenced *Armour Wherein He Trusted*.

5. Medieval romances and Celtic epics

Webb's narrative shift from nineteenth-century rural Shropshire to the world of medieval chivalry is further reinforced by references to other legendary tales in *Armour Wherein He Trusted*. As previously noted, the use of Arthurian romances and mythologies can be seen in the work of several Modernist writers. It is necessary, therefore, to examine how Webb uses such works and what may have been her motive in doing so. Considering Adam Lansing Smith's above-cited statement that the use of the mythic establishes parallels between ordinary and mythic life (Smith 1990: 50), this may well illustrate to a greater degree how Webb's final novel not only took inspiration from her own life situation but also illustrated her mindset towards contemporary events and situations at the time of writing.

The questing knight, or knight errant, is a familiar figure in medieval romances and Arthurian cycles, probably the most famous of which is the search for the Holy Grail. The knight may leave home for several reasons, but usually in the search for wealth, adventure or spiritual gains, whilst often, undergoing an experience which brings him some kind of self-realisation or enlightenment²². However, while many tales of errant knights focus on the experiences of the warrior himself, there is also the lesser shown side of such a situation, that of the family and friends he leaves behind. *Armour Wherein He Trusted* sees Gilbert Polrebec, leave his recently married wife to join the First Crusade, following a series of religious dreams and visions as well as a visit by a mysterious knight, who summons him in the name of Peter the Hermit, the real-life leader of the First Crusade. As such, Gilbert fulfils the role of questing knight by leaving home in search of religious/spiritual fulfilment, thus leaving his family behind. At this point, it may seem that the connection to the mythical Wild Edric ends, although parallels still exist if one considers the historical Edric, who may have accompanied William I on campaign. Alternatively, the inspiration and ensuing narrative might be seen as drawing on diverse sources, particularly the Welsh epic *The Mabinogion*.

²² See: Turner (2026).

There are recognisable references and allusions to *The Mabinogion* throughout *AWHT*, with the mention of Rhiannon (Webb 2008 [1929]: 21), an important female character (Davies 2007: xxv). Elsewhere, Gilbert's comment, "I looked upon my love's face ... like the soft petal of some thick, fragrant flower" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 5) suggests the character Blodeuwedd, a woman made of flowers (Davies 2007: 58). Gilbert himself, by leaving and losing his wife to follow knightly adventure, resembles the character Owain, from the tale *The Lady of the Well* (Davies 2007: xxiv) and is, to some extent, reminiscent of the questing Arthurian knight Peredur, who, as a country bumpkin, leaves his mother, and later his wife, to go in search of adventure (Davies 2007: xxiv). This connection is strengthened by both Nesta herself and Gilbert's pious Aunt Gudrun's mention of the Nine Witch Women who dwell in Nesta's family home in Wales. In *The Mabinogion*, the young knight Peredur, upon learning they have killed or maimed members of his family, fights the nine sorceresses, eventually storming their stronghold and killing them (Guest 1998 [1906]: 124–156)²³. If this was an inspiration for the novel's unwritten plot, it could suggest a broader conspiracy against Gilbert involving Nesta's family as well, explaining Nesta's apparent change in attitude towards her husband, although the legend of Wild Edric may again prove useful.

As related by Charlotte Burne (Burne 1883: 60), Edric's loss of Godda results from his making an insulting comment about her family. Similarly, there are several points within *AWHT* which might suggest tensions between the maiden of elfin stock and the Polrebec family, such as Aunt Gudrun's Christian distrust of Nesta or even Gilbert's mother crying out "It is the Elf King" when a mysterious stranger knocks at the door (Webb 2008 [1929]: 50). Perhaps Webb intended such slights to eventually enrage Nesta, separated from her husband, to the point of rebelling against her in-laws. That Nesta has also brought a maid from her home in Tochswilla could further suggest a potential plan to undermine the Polrebec household. As Gilbert's mother writes to him in the Holy Land, "She hath brought back... a little yellow witchwoman to be her tiring maid. She is most strange, and I am feared of her" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 62). The narrative at this point, reflects Gilbert's confusion, and

²³ The Nine Sorceresses appear in other branches of Arthurian myth, in various guises. Intriguingly, the character of Morgan le Fey is occasionally listed as one of their number, a woman who appears in different roles relating to Arthur and Merlin. She is sometimes cast as Arthur's half-sister, at other times she is represented as his lover and adversary (Knight 2009: 39), as well as being portrayed as Merlin's pupil and nemesis (Pasiut 2023: 135). However, Webb's mentioning of the witches may be just a linguistic device. It is not unusual for Webb to "name-drop" a character from legends with no explanation, as is the case with Ned Pugh or even Wild Edric himself in *Precious Bane* (Webb 1978 [1924]: 140).

potentially that of the intended reader, as to what is happening at home in Polrebec. Unfortunately, the fragment ends shortly after and the reality remains unrevealed.

The possibility of some kind of planned conspiracy is strongly implied, given the suggestion of Nesta's disloyalty at the end of the fragment, where Gilbert's mother complains that Nesta takes Jorwerth refreshment in the mother's prized goblet²⁴. Certainly, Coles is sure that Nesta is being disloyal to her husband in his absence (Coles 1978: 294). This is highly probable considering Nesta's alleged elfin bloodline and the representation of elves and fairies in older literature and ballads as being often capricious and devious towards humans, especially knights²⁵. The question raised by this apparent betrayal, is how it finally results in the loss of Nesta and Gilbert taking the cloth.

It may be that through this apparent unfaithfulness, Webb intended to create a similar triangle to that of *Gone to Earth*, where the half-Gypsy girl Hazel is torn between the brutish squire Jack Reddin and her preacher husband, Edward Marston. Whereas that novel sees Hazel eventually choose her husband, *AWHT* might have resulted in the betrayal of Gilbert and his eventual withdrawal from society. Alternatively, Nesta may die as a result of Gilbert's reaction, sending him into exile as a monk. Gilbert's monastic retreat may mirror Edric's withdrawal, imprisonment or banishment from society. However, there may have been other reasons that Webb chose this fate for her knightly narrator. To examine this, it is necessary to consider the environment in the Polrebec household, which may also illustrate Webb's own situation whilst writing the novel.

6. The Women of Polrebec: doubts and miscommunications

As noted, *AWHT* stands apart in Webb's oeuvre as her only novel with a male narrator. As such, it differs markedly from her previous works in that the female experience and voice are largely absent. For this reason, Nesta's thoughts and motivations, in the later stages of the novel, remain largely inaccessible to the reader, who, like the protagonist, receives only that part of the story which Gilbert encounters, at times via his mother, and subsequently relates. While Webb may have planned

²⁴ The dispute around the goblet also suggests events in Peredur's tale, where whosoever the Empress serves a goblet of wine (in this case, Peredur) is challenged to a duel (Guest 1998 [1906]: 148).

²⁵ In folk tales such as *The Elfin Knight* (Campbell 1980: 51–60) or ballads such as *Tam Lin* (Child 1890: 335–358), young questing knights are enticed into Faerie and trapped. Similar themes are found in poetry, such as John Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci*.

to include a revelation or justification of Nesta's behaviour and motivations, the fragment finishes before this is done. It is possible that Gilbert was meant to receive news or an explanation before the end of the novel, but this is not forthcoming. Therefore, it is once more necessary for the researcher to attempt to play detective and consider the events of *AWHT* from Nesta's perspective, as this might not only provide possible motivations for the character but also potential plot twists.

As Nesta's voice is absent, understanding her behaviour requires the researcher to analyse it from a different viewpoint, not just the one Dame Polrebec presents. To do this, the situation of the Polrebec household and the possible relationships and psychological states of the residents of the castle must be analysed and taken into consideration. A useful tool in this process is the application of what Gabriela Tucan refers to as "blending", which considers how a person may form a concept of a perceived reality through combining received information, or "inputs"²⁶. The information may come from different kinds of experience, be they observed, read or performed. By considering potential inputs, it may be possible to analyse a character's thought processes and motivations. In the case of *AWHT*, cognitive blending usefully frames both Gilbert's position and the situation in Polrebec Castle.

Both Gilbert's input and that of the reader are informed by his mother's letters (four in seven years), but also by an awareness, through Gilbert's recollections, of the sometimes childlike and capricious nature of Nesta herself and, more pointedly, the hostile figure of Jorwerth. The young Gilbert strongly dislikes the king's escheator. Jorwerth is both antagonistic towards Gilbert, referring to him as "Saxon" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 14), thus emphasizing his Norman, "conqueror", status, and sexually aggressive towards Nesta, biting her hand on her wedding day (Webb 2008 [1929]: 43). Additionally, he is presumably in a position, as king's escheator, to seize Polrebec family's lands, as Wild Edric's own lands were taken from him (Palmer 2004: 72). This conflation of input information, coupled with his temporal and geographical distancing from the events, undoubtedly, disturbs him. Although the fragment ends at the arrival of the fourth letter, the presumed reader can assume that Gilbert's anxiety, anger and helplessness (due to his inability to act from his current location) will increase on his long journey home, possibly creating a greatly distorted idea of the situation in Shropshire. Consequently, this may result in a misreading of the real state of affairs and an action on Gilbert's

²⁶ "Blending" utilises Gilles Fauconnier's concept of "mental spaces", whereby a concept of a supposed "reality" is formed via cognitive experience, which may not be truly representative of reality (Fauconnier 1994: 240). A blended space is formed by (at least) two "inputs" of experienced information being combined and refined to create a "generic space" (Tucan 2013: 43).

part which may have tragic consequences. Alternatively, he may be unable to leave his crusade, ultimately remaining through loyalty to Peter the Hermit. As such, it may be that Webb intended him to observe events at home through the medium of his mother's letters, eventually realising that his inaction has cost him greatly, and his spiritual reward for crusading becomes of questionable value.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent "evidence" of Nesta's betrayal, it is also possible that this itself is a plot device by Webb to distract both Gilbert and the reader. Just as Hazel Woodus, in *Gone to Earth*, is led tragically astray by what she mistakenly takes for fairy signs, Gilbert, too, may be deceived by distorted information, made worse by his geographical and spatial distancing from events. It is therefore necessary to consider the environmental context of life in Polrebec Castle and the relationships among the females of the house, something which may demonstrate possible misreadings of the situation that are subsequently relayed to Gilbert.

Dame Polrebec reports that "Nesta grows... more cold towards us, I cannot tell why" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 62) and that she has been home to Tochswilla twice, returning with the mysterious maid. As well as Aunt Gudrun's distrust of the family of witches, Gilbert's mother writes to him about Nesta's apparent behaviour in offering Jorweth the goblet, "Yet should not a daughter-law behave discourteous to the relics and treasures of the family into which she hath come" (Webb 2008 [1929]: 63)²⁷. Furthermore, she has been seemingly unperturbed by Jorwerth's visits to their home. Subsequently, by the end of the novel, the reader may observe not only the increasing antipathy towards Nesta from the women of the Polrebec household, but potential seeds of distrust and divided loyalty being planted in Gilbert's mind.

What is absent from this communication is Nesta's voice. In Nesta, Webb portrays a young woman, the daughter of seemingly petty nobility, who is taken from her position as maid-in-waiting to the wife of a feudal lord into marriage. Consequently, she lives in her husband's family home. As such, she has gone from being an important family member in her own lands to a servant in another, and finally to arguably the lowest member of the new family, subservient to her husband's family and isolated from her previous social circles. Additionally, Nesta is an outsider, culturally and ethnically within the Norman/Saxon environment in which she now resides. Coupled with this, the newly married wife is abandoned

²⁷ One might also consider whether this dislike of the new female incomer also reflected Mary's feelings towards the young student who threatened her marriage.

by her husband to go on a crusade. This isolation and change in social status would presumably foster a level of discontent. When combined with the attitude of the Polrebec women, it is understandable that she would wish to return home for some time and bring a maid who spoke the same language. Unfortunately, this increases Dame Polrebec's discomfort and the mutual sense of alienation. It does not, however, prove that Nesta is disloyal. Her apparent apathy towards Jorwerth, her greeting him with her mother-in-law's goblet, and her unexplained visits to Tochswilla, while perceived as potentially treacherous, may also suggest a plan of defence against Jorwerth's actions. Nesta, knowing of his attraction towards her, may seek to subtly manipulate him while gaining support from her own family in the case of needing to defend Castle Polrebec. This would require secrecy and explain Nesta distancing herself from her in-laws. The sudden end of the novel gives no clue as to whether this potential plot device will be used. However, as various tales in *The Mabinogion* involve similar intrigue, it also adds uncertainty as to how Webb might have planned the novel to develop.

While the fragmentary nature of the novel leaves many questions open and unanswered regarding the plot, the text also raises questions about its relationship to Mary Webb's own life situation at the time of writing and whether this was another source of inspiration for the novel. The possibility that Webb meant *AWHT* to reflect her real-life relationships might also be considered through an analysis of the characters. Nesta's Welshness was possibly a reference to Mary's own self-identity, viewing Wales as her "ancestral country" (Coles 1978: 72). Conversely, Henry Webb's family came from East Shropshire, and their English name reflects their Anglo-Saxon heritage. On a more personal note, Henry's mother very much disliked Mary, feeling Henry had married below his station (Coles 1978: 147) and that his wife was neglecting him (Coles 1978: 242). This seems a likely inspiration for the attitude of Gilbert's family towards Nesta. To understand this potential link between the novel and Webb's life situations, it is necessary to examine aspects of her health and marriage at that time.

7. The declining marriage of the hero and author

As well as basing characters on real-life figures and family members. Mary Webb also drew inspiration from situations that reflected her emotional life. For example, Prue Sarn, the narrator of *Precious Bane*, has a harelip, which makes her the target of rumour and distrust, something Mary herself seems to have experienced

due to the visual effects of Graves' Disease (goitre, bulging eyes) and a thyroid condition she had suffered from since her teens. It may therefore be argued that her own marital situation and psychological state at the time of writing *AWHT* strongly influenced its themes.

Throughout her married life, Mary had lived with a morbid fear of separation from her husband and of abandonment, perhaps caused by the death of her beloved father (Coles 1978: 100). This fear of rejection and separation is hinted at in *The Golden Arrow*, with Deborah's breakdown after Stephen's desertion. Webb also suffered an intense form of homesickness when separated from Shropshire²⁸. This was especially problematic when Henry found work in different areas, or when it was deemed beneficial for Mary's career to be nearer to London. At times, the couple would travel to Shropshire so Mary could write, but eventually, Henry's reluctance to commute and a breakdown in their relationship meant Mary travelled there on her own.

As the marriage became increasingly strained, Mary was terrified that Henry was planning a separation, not least because of his increasingly close relationship with a teenage female student. During this period, Mary was living alone in Shropshire, trying to work on her novel under considerable mental stress. Her mental state was such that even when she eventually returned to live with her husband, assured that he was not planning to separate, she attempted to burn the manuscript, only for Henry to rescue it (Wrenn 1964: 100). Coles suggests that Webb's work at this point displays evidence of her mental condition, her fear of abandonment (Coles 1978: 292) and that her use of a first-person narrative in *AWHT* enhances her own voice through that of the narrator. The narrator's story of his own fear of separation from his spouse and his worry about potential infidelity does, to some extent, mirror Mary's own state (Coles 1978: 294). Nevertheless, there is another aspect that Coles overlooks, which may further enhance the idea that Mary Webb was writing of her own concerns.

In the last few years of her life, Mary's mental condition had worsened, exacerbated by her Graves' disease²⁹. Around the time she started work on *AWHT*, she was diagnosed with pernicious anaemia, a terminal condition in the early 1920s. Although Henry kept the diagnosis from her, it seems likely that she knew she was dying as her physical condition declined drastically (Coles 1978: 306). Coles points

²⁸ Coles describes this using the Welsh word *hiraeth*, a deep longing for something lost, especially for Wales, which Webb herself used (Coles 1978: 114).

²⁹ The hyperthyroid phase of the disease can result in symptoms of emotional stress, anxiety and depression (See: Johansson et al. 2023).

out that a sense of fatalism is found in the novel, it being “pervaded by a powerful sense of impending fate towards which all is tending as the fragment fades” (Coles 1978: 310). Abbot Gilbert is aware that his own time is short and, like Mary Webb herself, he must hurry to finish his tale (Coles 1978: 306).

Mary’s situation was not helped by Henry’s behaviour, and the title of the novel, *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, seems to reflect a shift in thinking in its author. It is a biblical quote from the Book of Luke, which must have sounded loud and hard in Mary’s mind, “When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace: But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils” (Luke 11:22, *The Holy Bible*). In Mary’s case, the “armour” was her husband, whom she had considered her protector and soulmate. That sense of security seemed threatened by a teenage girl, whom Henry even invited to Shropshire to visit parts of the county which had previously been so special to the Webbs. In Mary’s mind, if not also in reality, she and Henry were moving apart, which triggered the aforementioned fear of a legal separation. Considering the context within which she was working, it is relatively easy to trace some of the themes of the novel to her own personal situation: fear of separation, the distancing of oneself from a partner to carry out a sacred task, fear of betrayal and an awareness of impending death as well as a sense of a lost Eden through the collapse of a marriage are all present, both in Webb’s life and her novel. It is noteworthy that *The Golden Arrow*, Webb’s first novel, written in the early years of her marriage, expressing the doubts and fears of a young woman moving away from the family home and transferring affection to a new man, ends with the hopeful return of the chastened Stephen Southernwood to the wife he abandoned: Her final novel is based on the last days of a man who abandoned his wife and eventually lost her. By adopting a male voice for *AWHT*, Webb reverses the point of reference. While Sir Gilbert appears to be expressing Mary’s concerns about her own condition, his voice might also be that of Mary Webb addressing her own fears for Henry, soon to be left alone by the death of his once beloved wife. Just as Godda predicted to Wild Edric that a rejection of her would leave him alone, it is possible that Mary also foresaw her own Edric alone once she had returned to the Faerie land of her fathers.

8. Conclusion

Armour Wherein He Trusted, as noted by several scholarly authors and literary critics, is a flawed work which is generally found lacking compared with Webb's other novels (Coles 1978: 292). However, as has been demonstrated, it is, to some extent, Webb's most experimental work. Although Webb does, as Barale suggests, utilise earlier themes from her own works (Barale 1986: 147), by placing the story in a remote historical period, within a different social class, and adopting a first-person narrative, she distances her style from her former field, the rural novel. More recently, authors like Thrall have found it to be a much richer source of subject matter than Barale suggests. This article, while acknowledging Thrall's work, has focused less on literary interpretation than on the novel's technical aspects, especially the materials that may have influenced Webb, specifically medieval legends and romances, as well as the author's own life circumstances, all of which have been largely overlooked by both biographers and literary critics. The article has suggested that Webb's interest in Shropshire folklore not only may have provided her with inspiration for scenes and characters but could also offer clues about her intended ending for the work. Additionally, it considers Webb's use of the mythical as a way of allegorising aspects of her personal experience within her writing. In this way, this article aims to shed further light on the more technical aspects of her writerly craft. The present author hopes that these suggestions will encourage a re-examination of Webb's use of local legends and myths in her earlier works, while also promoting further research into Webb's oeuvre in general and *Armour Wherein He Trusted* specifically. In doing so, the article may help scholars and readers alike to "fill up the glats in the song"³⁰ (Webb 2008 [1929]: 11) and perhaps arrive at a fuller understanding of the core concept of the unfinished novel.

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³⁰ "Glat" is a Shropshire dialect word for "a gap" (Jackson 1879: 176).

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