

Gwyneth Lewis

'Advice on Adultery'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Gwyneth Lewis was born in Cardiff in 1959, to Welsh-speaking parents. Her father taught her English when she was two, to entertain her while her mother was in hospital giving birth to her sister. She attended a bilingual school in Pontypridd, before studying English at Cambridge University. In the 1980s, Gwyneth Lewis was at Oxford, carrying out doctoral work on the eighteenth-century antiquarian and forger, Iolo Morganwg. She also studied at Harvard and in the Graduate Writing Division of Columbia University, and worked for a time as a freelance journalist in New York, before returning to Britain to work as a TV director and producer for the BBC. Lewis’s poetry was met with immediate acclaim when she began to publish in the 1990s. Unusually, she has always written in the medium of English and Welsh; her first book, *Sonedau Redsa (Redsa’s Sonnets, 1990)* was followed by the English-language *Parables and Fables (1995)* and *Zero Gravity (1998)*, which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for poetry. The first writer to be named Wales’s National Poet, in 2005–6, her words appear in six-foot-high letters on the front of the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff Bay. Lewis has spoken publicly about her struggle with depression, and explores mental health issues in her book *Sunbathing in the Rain: a Cheerful Book about Depression (2002)*. Marked by an interest in science and theology, Gwyneth Lewis’s writing also reflects a sense of wonder and fascination at the workings of language, which she ascribes to her bilingualism.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Advice on Adultery' is from the sequence 'Welsh Espionage', in Gwyneth Lewis's first English-language collection, *Parables and Faxes* (1995). The title seems to have a confessional ring, appearing to promise frank advice derived from lived experience, in the manner of an agony aunt or uncle. Importantly, however, Gwyneth Lewis has refuted the label of the 'confessional' writer. She is perhaps more interested in the processes by which we construct and 'put on' a sense of identity, through the language(s) we use.

We might also notice the title's wittily (wickedly) double meaning: on the one hand, it appears to offer a moral warning about adultery, but read another way, it promises advice on how to commit adultery. The poem, of course, plays with both meanings, refusing to offer a single standpoint of moral authority.

'Parables'; 'Espionage'; these words resonate with the themes of doubleness and deception that permeate Lewis's writing. The critic Alice Entwistle sees treachery as a keynote of Lewis's poetics, a motif that she connects to Lewis's bilingualism (1). Lewis has explicitly figured her bilingualism in terms of betrayal, stating in an interview that it is 'still regarded in some quarters as a betrayal of the Welsh language' (2). Significantly, she surmounted this problem by embracing a kind of 'double life', as a poet who writes in both languages. This poem, then, looks at how standards –of behaviour and morality (particularly those relating to gender and sexuality) are constructed through language. It also explores the hazards, tensions, and pleasures that are generated when you move between different linguistic worlds.

Form.

The form of this poem is more complex than might initially appear. It is arranged, wittily enough given the subject matter, in six-line stanzas (sestets). Written mostly in free verse, it also makes use of iambic pentameter. Together with the regular use of enjambment, this serves to approximate the rhythms of the speaking voice. The influence of traditional Welsh strict-metre poetry can also be seen in the poem's frequent use of alliteration and sound correspondences, which often link the first and second parts of the lines. The stanzas, too, are linked to each other by repetition: the final words of each line are the same in each stanza, although they are presented in a different order each time. In this way, the poem calls attention to its own craftsmanship and artifice – an artifice that mirrors the deception and play-acting of the characters in the text.

(1) Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Re-writing Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 96.

(2) Gwyneth Lewis, interview with Alice Entwistle (unpublished, November 2006).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 6.

The opening lines of the poem appear to offer advice to one who has committed, or who is thinking about committing, adultery: **'The first rule is to pacify the wives'**. In fact, the speaker's use of the second person would seem initially to position us, the readers, as the adulterers. But who is doing the seducing here? The speaker's confident tone and use of the word **'rule'** in line 1 act to present the advice as a statement of fact, a prescription for right action. However, the poem as a whole is more ambiguous and undecidable in tone. Its frequent shifts in perspective deny the reader any clear moral standpoint from which to read events; it is all, the text would seem to suggest, a manner of seeing - or saying.

The rhetoric here mimics, rather comically, love guidance in a woman's magazine (we are reminded of Lewis's background in journalism), or eighteenth-century etiquette manuals for middle-class female comportment. A tension is also subtly introduced between purity and impurity. The speaker's declaration that **'You're pure of heart'** seems a little disingenuous (can anyone claim that they are completely so?), especially when backed up in the next line by the claim that you **'know the value of your youthful looks'**. This suggests that the addressee has a canny, even self-interested awareness of her (or his) effects on others; perhaps her **'golden', 'pure'** appearance is therefore deceptive, mere artifice. The reported comments on the interlocutor's **'lovely back'** introduce a central image to the poem. The **'back'** becomes a motif for gossip (talking behind someone's back), and deceit (going behind someone's back). It also points to a kind of denial or evasion of self-identity in the text, for although she is always being talked about, the identity of the addressee is never fully revealed; she always has her **'back'** to us.

Lines 7-12.

Line 7, **'In work they treat you like one of the men'** highlights the sense of gender fluidity and instability in this poem; previously depicted as a young, romantic heroine, reminiscent of the idealised figure of the Petrarchan sonnet, the addressee's gender identity is blurred by the wives' talk, when she is figured as being **'like one of the men'**. The irony here inheres in the use of double-edged meanings. The wives' **'hope / you'll never have children... it ruins your looks'** could be read in the sense that they wish the young person will avoid their fate, or as a curse on youth and beauty, reminiscent of the witches and evil queens of fairy tale. The speaker's recommendation to **'pacify the wives'** in line 1 seems to reiterate a stereotypically patriarchal attitude, presenting the wives as hysterical and childish. Yet this perspective is gradually mocked and undermined as the words of the poem undergo subtle shifts in meaning. Here, for instance, the phrase **'dicky heart'** derives its humour from the punning use of 'dicky' (which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, can mean of inferior quality, sorry, poor; in bad condition, unsound, shaky, 'queer'). The word also carries associations with 'small' (dicky bird) and the childish term for penis. Though they seem to profess wifely concern, then, the women's language acts to send up the unfaithful husbands who form the subject of their talk.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-18.

'Heart' takes on a different meaning in line 13, as part of the idiomatic construction '**beating heart**'. Contrasting the vitality of the addressee with the over-the-hill-ness of the male objects of her quest, it also hints, disquietingly, at a kind of violence hidden behind the sexual and power relations of office life. This stanza also conjures and explores the tension between truth in poetry (as suggested by the speaker's reference to '**The fact...**') and unsurety ('**Cross your fingers**'). The act of '**Cross[ing] your fingers**', moreover, underlines the 'double-crossing' at the heart of this poem.

These lines also display Lewis's technical virtuosity. Words are linked together across different lines by sibilance (**wives/stare/sourly/Cross**) – an effect that conjures, perhaps, the angry 'hissing' of whispers at office parties. Patterns of assonance link together the first and second halves of the lines (parties/heart, affair/men). In this way, words are looped together in a tangled web of meanings that reflects the tangled web of personal relations in the office.

Lines 19-30.

The allusion in line 19 to '**A trip to the Ladies**' reinforces the everyday vision and colloquial register of the poem. This choice of phrase reveals gender as a kind of construction in language: the writing on the toilet door defines and separates out 'Ladies' from 'Gents' artificially – just as the English and Welsh languages are separated from each other in the social world. Stock phrases embedded in everyday speech, such as '**men will be men**' perform the same function, the poem would seem to suggest. Exposing how this use of language acts to excuse and naturalise the men's behavior, the text subtly adopts a more questioning tone. Its ironical knife-edge again hinges on its use of double-edged meanings. '**She knows you're innocent, but the wives, /well, jump to conclusions from the way it looks...**' masquerades as an expression of support, but is actually a tacit accusation. The addressee's imputed conviction that '**They don't understand**' points to the theme of non-comprehension. The speaker's advice to '**stick with the men**' since '**only they are au fait with affairs of the heart**' speaks of the bilingual's (often fickle) preference of one language over the other on the basis of it being better at expressing her innermost feelings. The use of untranslated French here points to a sense of complicity with the gender group defined as '**the men**', suggesting that the addressee (or perhaps, the speaker) considers herself an initiate into their supposedly sophisticated language community.

Lines 31-9.

These lines undercut the romantic discourse of the previous stanzas with a narrative of betrayal. The man's claim that '**looks / aren't everything**' seems disingenuous in the context of the attention devoted to the addressee's looks in previous lines. This semantic backtracking is reinforced by his betrayal of her confidence: 'He's told the men', who ostracise her with their '**smirk[s]**' and '**wink[s]**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-9 (continued).

The **'broken heart'** points, perhaps, to the anguish faced by young women in a social arena bent on their objectification. Yet it also conjures the sense of fracture and loneliness at the **'heart'** of the bilingual subject, who never quite belongs to any one language culture. The poem ends, however, on a note of **'hope'**, presenting the addressee's capacity for shape-shifting as a source of empowerment: **'Ignore the men, start sleeping with the wives'** turns the poem's conventional, 'heteronormative' world-view on its head, and emphasises the irrepressible vitality at the heart of language's deception.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Critic Katie Gramich has commented on Gwyneth Lewis's 'formidable technical dexterity' and 'apparently unlimited metaphorical scope', and these qualities are clearly evident in this poem (3). Lewis has frequently expressed the condition of being a bilingual poet in terms of adultery, writing in her preface to *Keeping Mum* (2003) that 'it's a difficult domestic arrangement, but it holds' (4). She characterises her use of English words as something thrilling and illicit, accompanied by a lingering sense that she has betrayed her 'mother tongue'. 'Advice on Adultery' explores these tensions, without (contrary to what the title might imply) trying to resolve them. As the title of the collection from which the poem is taken, *Parables and Faxes*, suggests, Gwyneth Lewis is a poet attuned to the modern world. Grounded in the mundane realities of office life, 'Advice on Adultery' is rather prescient, anticipating the flurry of gossip and opinion that is a feature of life in the internet age. Yet it also draws upon Lewis's interest – stemming from her doctoral work on eighteenth-century forgery – in questions of authenticity in poetry, and the slipperiness of meaning and identity as expressed in language. This poem finds joy and creativity in language's duplicitousness, as well as the 'duplicity' of the (bilingual) writer. The play of different voices and perspectives points to Lewis's sense of '[t]he friction, fluidity, cacophony, and subversive impulse of bilingual poetry' (5).

(3) Katie Gramich, "The Shapes She Makes": Contemporary Welsh Women Poets', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 62 (1999), 68–74 (p. 70).

(4) Gwyneth Lewis, Preface to *Keeping Mum* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2003), p. 9.

(5) Laura Pfeffer, 'Challenging Tongues: The "Irreducible Hybridity" of Language in Contemporary Bilingual Poetry', *Synthesis*, 4 (2012), 149–167 (p. 149).

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Who is speaking here? Whom is she or he speaking to?

How many different meanings are attached to the word **'heart'**? What do these different meanings suggest?

Is this a poem more about love and relationships, or more about language?

Do you think the speaker's advice is any good?

PHOTOGRAPHS

• <http://www.gwynethlewis.com/img/gl-3.jpg>

• <http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/content/categories/l/55770c23cc5c0.jpg>

The first image shows Lewis in front of the words of her poem inscribed on the Wales Millennium Centre, emphasising her role in Wales's cultural self-definition following devolution and the formation of the National Assembly in 1998. The second image portrays the poet as a vibrant and outward-looking figure, and serves as the cover shot for her recent book, *Quantum Poetics* (2015).

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The writer's own website provides up-to-date biographical details, as well as helpful descriptions of and insights into her different publications, in English and in Welsh:

<http://www.gwynethlewis.com/>

The Poetry Archive website offers a detailed biography of the poet – including some of her important literary influences – and downloadable audio recordings of the poet reading her own work:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/gwyneth-lewis>

The author page on the Seren publisher's website gives a simple summary of Gwyneth Lewis's career and publications, including her writing for television and the Welsh National Opera:

<https://www.serenbooks.com/author/gwyneth-lewis>

All links are clickable

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