

## HUGHES, GAINOR (1745 - 1780), fasting woman

**Name:** Gainor Hughes  
**Date of birth:** 1745  
**Date of death:** 1780  
**Parent:** Hugh David  
**Parent:** Catherine David  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** fasting woman  
**Area of activity:** Religion  
**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

Gainor Hughes was christened on 23 May 1745 at Llandderfel parish church, Meirionethshire, the daughter of Hugh David, Bodelith, and his wife Catherine. Gaenor, Gaunor and Gaynor occur as variant forms of her name. During her short life she became well-known enough to merit a notice of her death in the *Chester Chronicle*, together with the attention of the most prominent poets of the ballad tradition in north Wales. It is in these sources that we find contemporary information about her life; they may be supplemented by oral tradition as preserved many years after her death in the writings of Robert Edwards (Derfel Meirion; 1813-1889), a local Methodist stone-mason.

Contemporary interest in Gainor Hughes centred on her fast of almost six years' duration, during which time she refused sustenance other than spring water sweetened with a small amount of sugar or occasionally with a drop of weak ale. The fast originated, it was suggested in a 1778 report in the *Chester Chronicle*, in an illness which led to three days' loss of consciousness, and to a subsequent repulsion towards the odour of meat. Unsurprisingly, her physical condition eventually reflected this shortage of nutrition: the ballad-singer Grace Roberts referred to the weakness of her body and to the 'great pain' which she suffered. It was not her physical appearance but her spiritual life which most engaged her contemporaries, however. The fact that she survived without food was a miracle in the eyes of the ballad-singers, and [Elis Roberts](#) (Elis y Cowper) set her alongside central Biblical characters who were saved from starvation and adversity through 'God's great miracles'. For Roberts and for his contemporary [Jonathan Hughes](#) of Llangollen, Gainor was living proof of the veracity of verse 4: 4 in Matthew's gospel, with its claim that man does not live by bread alone but rather by the words of God and his wondrous grace. In an intense piety, Gainor would shout and cry her praise of God, bearing witness through prayer to a spiritual world, Hughes reported. Elis Roberts likewise emphasized her readiness to pray and praise the Lord, morning and evening. Unambivalent mention of Gainor's visionary experiences is in short supply in these texts. However, Elis Roberts's first ballad about her was published alongside an account of a contemporary, Sion Robert, who visited the opposite poles of heaven and hell; this may suggest that Gainor was also viewed as being party to such encounters. The ballads appeared consistently throughout the fast: three years had passed when Roberts produced his first in 1777; four years when Jonathan Hughes created his; and Roberts returned to the subject again in 1779, shortly before Gainor's death,

when five years and two months had gone by. It was in this final year of her life that Grace Roberts 'from Bettws y coed in the parish of Llanfor', who evidently knew Gainor, and Evan James (Ieuan ap Iago; died 1804) from Llanfachreth sang their poems to the fasting lady, the last in the cywydd metre.

The reports published in the *Chester Chronicle* suggest how Gainor may have become a legend during her lifetime, with visitors travelling between forty and fifty miles to see her; by the time of her death, people fuelled by curiosity had been visiting her for some time. Grace Roberts suggested that Gainor's relationship with these inquisitive people was not always positive: 'I heard some bickering that she was without salvation', she sang, coming to Gainor's defence by noting that she found such visitors at fault.

For a fuller picture of Gainor's life we must turn to later sources, evidence provided by 'old men and women (around twenty-seven or twenty-eight of them) whose words I set down from their speech', says a 'Brief Memoir' ('Byr Gofiant') attributed to one Hugh Thomas. The memoir was preserved by Robert Edwards (Derfel Meirion) and copied by a nephew of his, Edward Edwards, in 1897. [David Robert Daniel](#), who published the material in *Cymru* (1910), criticized the claim that it drew on evidence from 'some old people' who remembered Gainor Hughes. It is difficult to assess Daniel's critique because of the ambivalence of his testimony about the authorship of the 'Brief Memoir' and the part played by Robert Edwards, in particular, in its making. Notwithstanding the uncertainty about the details of its composition, the impression it gives of Gainor's history enriches our knowledge of her substantially. We gain a glimpse of her life before the beginning of her 'illness': she was a good singer who frequented the church in Llandderfel to sing psalms - although she would not go there for any other purpose, it is suggested, 'since she was not a member of the Church of England at the time'; and we find that, as a frail woman, she may have been of poor health for some time. After she became ill, we learn of her interactions with the community from the tranquillity of her bed: of the 'bunches of flowers which the children would gather and pin around it', giving her 'extraordinary pleasure'; of her acquaintances Thomas and Ellis Williams, Ty'n Llys, who would visit her early on a Sunday to hear her pray and to read selections from the Bible chosen by her; of her particular friend, John Ellis of Cwmorwr in the parish of Llangwm, 'who had experienced a vision' and who came to talk to her for hours on end; of the 'Church of England people' who came often to Bodelith to sing to her, until a group from Llangar church offended her by getting drunk at the inn in Llandderfel on their way home; and of the gentry from London, it is claimed, who came to see her in their carriages, filing into her narrow room in 'ones or twos'. We hear more about her abhorrence of food and its odour, and how every nook and cranny had to be blocked to prevent the steam from reaching her when soup was being boiled; or how she fainted after her sister Gwen came into her chamber with a loaf of white bread under her apron, so intolerable was the effect of the bread's aroma. Contemporary accounts of her spiritual experiences are amplified, and they are now described as 'visions'. She would see her fellow-creatures some 'in a good place, and the others she would see in a bad place'. Memories were preserved of a vision of her landlord, named 'Cyffyn', whom she saw 'with insects crawling on his gums'; or Evan Davies, Cae Pant, who was rewarded with 'a very good place' for his generosity to the poor. Efforts by her visitors to find out more about her visions were not always answered, however, and she sometimes reported that 'she did not have permission to say what she saw, because people were so lacking in faith'. These musings reflect lines in Roberts's last ballad, where God's providence is said to be shown to her secretly, 'unbeknown to people', lines which may explain the lack of information provided in the contemporary sources.

Gainor Hughes was buried at Llandderfel cemetery on 14 March 1780. As suggested by the evidence cited, which was drawn from oral testimony, interest in her persisted locally. Her story was notable enough to draw the attention of the artist [Edward Pugh](#) (c.1761-1813), who mentioned her in his posthumously-published *Cambria Depicta: A Tour through North Wales* (1816); and a new wave of interest surfaced from the 1870s onwards, possibly under the influence of the story of [Sarah Jacob](#) (1857-1869), the young Carmarthenshire girl whose death was covered in the Welsh press at the turn of the 1860s. One question which was not satisfactorily answered by authors such as [John Peter](#) ('Ioan Pedr') and David Robert Daniel was the identity of the poet whose two englyn stanzas were engraved on Gainor Hughes's gravestone. Peter held that they were the work of Jonathan Hughes and, after some deliberation, Daniel agreed, although he did not believe that the poet's name had ever appeared on the stone. Manuscript evidence, however, suggests that the poet was John Rees (Rice) of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant. The gravestone was already in poor condition when Daniel conducted his researches into the life of Gainor and he noted that it had been moved from its original position. In 2010 a new stone to note her burial was placed in Llandderfel cemetery by a local heritage society, although it was not set in the exact position of her grave.

## Author

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