

‘Tradition and Rural Modernity in Mary Webb’s Shropshire: *Precious Bane* in Context’

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*Precious Bane* (1924), which won the *Prix Femina Vie Heureuse* prize on its publication in 1924, is set in rural Shropshire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It straddles the end of the Napoleonic wars and tells the story of Prue Sarn who was born with a cleft-lip and is believed to be a witch by many in the local community, and her brother Gideon, who is determined to re-establish the family farm on a more profitable basis following the sudden death of their father. The story of Gideon and Prue intersects with that of the local cunning-man Beguildy, with whom the Sarn family have a long-running feud. Beguildy disapproves of relationship between Gideon and his daughter Jancis, and the fall-out from their betrothal has tragic consequences for everyone involved. The novel challenges the post-Enlightenment hierarchical opposition between a supposedly enlightened modernity, and the allegedly ignorant superstition of those whose lives are still structured around traditional ways of understanding the world.<sup>2</sup> This distinction has often been central to the promotion of what Karl Bell calls the ‘mythification of the modern.’ (119) Bell has in mind the uncritical assumption that all things modern are a source of progress, especially when, as is often the case, the modern is understood to mean a world dominated and structured by instrumentalism and *laissez faire* capitalism.

In the foreword to *Precious Bane*, Webb remarked of country life, ‘there is a permanence, a continuity [...] which makes the lapse of centuries seem of little moment’ (6). Stanley Baldwin would later promote the novel because, to his mind, it represented the ‘countryside within an aesthetic of timelessness’ (Miller 94). It is comments such as these, rather than the text of the novel itself, that have led critics to view Webb as an unimaginative and conservative writer. Glen Cavaliero argues that ‘there is no social awareness [...], no knowledge shown of agricultural problems, no attempts at social criticism.’ (145) Jeremy Burchardt, that in their rejection of rural modernity, ‘minor writers of rural life (particularly Mary Webb and Sheila Kaye-Smith)’ perpetuated ‘a deeply reassuring’ message as they equated ‘England with a timeless countryside.’ (76) Such views do not take account of the nuanced response to the countryside that emerges from *Precious Bane*. Danielle E. Price explores the way in which Webb was co-opted by the heritage

industry through W. Reid Chappell's *The Shropshire of Mary Webb* (1930) and W. Byford-Jones's *Shropshire Haunts of Mary Webb* (1937). Price rightly observes that 'much unnatural intervention is required [on the part of the heritage industry] to preserve areas in their [supposedly] natural state' (243) and goes on to consider the way in which *Gone to Earth* (1917) and *Precious Bane*, Webb's two most important novels, confront 'forms of control that are often coded as protection.' (226) Price's is the most incisive response to *Precious Bane*, but she does not challenge the idea that Webb's novel constitutes a glimpse into the past by offering a vision of an unchanging countryside. Notwithstanding the early nineteenth-century setting, this essay demonstrates that, when the various relevant contexts are considered, *Precious Bane* emerges as a novel that is deeply engaged with the social, economic, and ecological conditions of rural England during the twentieth-century interbellum. Far from representing the countryside as an unchanging place, we see rural north-east Shropshire at a critical juncture in its history. The essay focuses on *Precious Bane*, but occasionally references *Gone to Earth*, written seven years before, to illustrate the way Webb's response to the confrontation between tradition and modernity changed over time.

*Precious Bane* represents a countryside in transition as residual traditional culture confronts a rural modernity shaped by capitalist ideology. Burchardt's view that, as well as being a site of agricultural production, the countryside should be regarded a place that is consumed (or devoured) for leisure (2), is also a product of this version of modernity. Andrew Radford suggests that Webb sees progressive modernity as 'poisonous' (140), but modernity is not necessarily progressive, especially when it is shaped by destructive forms of ideology. Webb explores the potential of traditional ways of seeing to enable the renaturing of landscapes depleted and increasingly denatured by normalised exploitative capitalist farming practices. The rural fiction of the period is generally seen as a distinct kind of writing that has little in common with the dominant literary movement of the inter-war years, but *Precious Bane* is a product of both traditions. The novel is, as Dominic Head suggests is the case in the best rural fiction, 'a considered response to modernity (and [a...] critique of it), rather than an attempt to disengage from it.' (30) It is also informed by one of the defining characteristics of modernism: 'the capacity to recognise one's own world view as *a* world view' (M. Bell 11) In *Precious Bane*, the provisional and 'mythopoeic' (M. Bell 11) qualities of both traditional beliefs and practices and different versions of rural modernity are explored through the

fraught relationships between Prue Sarn; the first-person narrator, her atheist brother Gideon (who rejects tradition, and fully embraces modern *laissez faire* capitalism) and the cunning-man Beguilty (who exemplifies tradition).

### Cunning-Folk and Traditional Culture

By the early 1920s, when Webb was working on *Precious Bane*, the study of traditional culture had become established as the discipline of folklore. There was an 'unquestioned assumption that the data [folklorists...] collected [was...] old' and 'the association of folklore with "relics" and "remains" made it easy to think of folklore as fossil' (Bennett 29). Most folklorists viewed their discipline as historical in orientation, and this is in turn reflected in the way folkloric material was adopted within literary culture. It was seen by several modernist writers as a repository of past belief systems which by implication could not be advocated as a progressive alternative to modernity. Folkloric material could nevertheless aid creative reflection upon the ills of contemporary culture. In his famous essay 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', published in the *English Review* for April 1921, which reflects on his own practice as much as that of Joyce, Eliot had remarked upon the way myth could aid an understanding of the present: 'Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and [...] significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious.' (177) Yeats repeatedly asserted the importance of myth and folklore as a source for poets. In a review for *The Speaker* in 1893 he remarked that 'folk-lore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light.' (188) The way in which folklore was conceptualised by folklorists and used by modernist writers informs Jed Esty's view that the revival of interest in traditional forms in literature and culture reflected an 'insular pastoral nation – [that was] increasingly a figment of literary imagination' (24) One must look away from modernism for a different response to traditional forms. As Head observes, 'the better writers in the rural tradition [like Webb] utilize a corresponding (although much lower key) method of interrogating and [crucially] resuscitating tradition.' (3)

The development of Webb's treatment of traditional material is most apparent from a comparison of *Gone to Earth* and *Precious Bane*. Andrew Radford reads *Gone to Earth* through the kind of modernist interpretive framework discussed in the previous paragraph as a modern feminist retelling of the Persephone myth and a critique of progressive modernity (152-71). He foregrounds the tragic elements of the myth (Persephone's abduction), while downplaying the more demotic associations with local agrarian magic and fertility cults. It is possible to see Hazel's interest in natural magic and love of non-human nature as primarily a reflection upon the value of (elements in) traditional culture. Hazel is 'enchained to the earth' (71) in the traditional sense that the fate of all living beings is bound-up with the continued vitality of an inspirited earth. This is a common strand in magical thinking (Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic* 133-4), and not necessarily a product of Hazel's Welsh heritage as Lucy Thomas suggests (43-5). In Radford's reading, as in Carol Seigal's earlier account of *Gone to Earth* (138-46), this plot strand is subsumed into the sexual exploitation triangle in which Hazel marries the prudish Baptist minister Edward Marston and is then raped by the predatory yeoman-squire Jack Reddin (before being killed by a pack of fox hounds as she tries to protect Foxy, an orphaned fox she has befriended). The novel certainly explores the destructiveness inherent to patriarchy, and the way in which cruelty to all living things is often bound-up with patriarchal masculinity. It is more difficult to see *Gone to Earth* in Radford's terms as a critique of modernity, after all patriarchy is not a product of modernity. Nor is the representation of tradition closely tied to the changing agricultural landscape. The relationship between tradition and rural modernity certainly interested Webb though, which is why the romantic interest becomes secondary to interlinked thematic strands centred around traditional ways of seeing and modern farming practice in the much more sophisticated *Precious Bane*.

Mary Webb saw traditional belief systems as having some beneficial, or even progressive qualities, and as an important source of protective mechanisms for non-human nature in the face of rural modernity, rather than simply a repository of material that could be adapted to give 'shape and [...] significance' to contemporary events. The historical orientation of folklore was therefore more of an issue for Webb than the modernist writers discussed in the foregoing paragraph. The fact that early folklorists had used the idea of

cultural evolution to carve out a scientific space for folklore, distinct from archaeology and the emerging discipline of anthropology, was particularly problematical. As Gillian Bennett points out, folklorists endeavoured to show that 'the customs and beliefs of the peasantry [labouring people in the countryside] are the remains of the primitive culture of ancient Europe' that had survived into modernity (33). There is a moral inflection to all this that reflects the wider middle-class view (folklorists generally came from a middle-class background), that the traditional beliefs of labouring people constituted 'ignorant gullibility and vulgar credulity' (Moran 138).<sup>3</sup>

The survival explanation in folklore is the main reason that there was reluctance among novelists like Webb to write about witchcraft and magic as contemporary and is also the reason she felt the need to verify the 'nearly two hundred instances of traditional legends, beliefs, or customs' represented in *Precious Bane* (McNeil 133). In her foreword to the novel, she acknowledges her debt to *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings* (1883): 'My thanks are due to the authors of *Shropshire Folklore* for the rhymes "Green Gravel" and "Barley Bridge", and for the *verification* of various customs which I had otherwise only known by hearsay' (7, my italics).<sup>4</sup> But in the same foreword, Webb also remarks that she had 'been fortunate not only in being born and brought up in its [Shropshire's] magical atmosphere, and having many friends in farm and cottage who, by pleasant talk and reminiscence have fired the imagination, but also in having the companionship of such a mind as was my father's – a mind stored with old tales and legends that did not come from books' (6-7). The imagery here is ambiguous in the sense that the atmosphere of the place in which she lived most of her life is magical as in inspiring, but also magical as in shaped by myth, legend and preternatural beliefs.

Notwithstanding the early-nineteenth-century setting, the evidence does indeed suggest that magic would have formed an important, if shrinking, part of the lives of people in early-twentieth-century rural Shropshire. In 1883, only a few decades before *Precious Bane* was written, Charlotte Burne, the principal author of *Shropshire Folklore* (Webb's main written source for traditional culture), had observed that 'the belief [in magic] was so deeply rooted' in the lives and minds of the people of Shropshire that it would be easier 'to alienate them from the Church than to weaken their faith in witchcraft.' (1, 143) Such deeply-rooted

belief systems would take more than one or two generations to disappear, and recent historical studies have demonstrated that belief in witchcraft was still widespread in England during the first half of the twentieth century (Davies, *A People Bewitched* 271-93). Writing about the Midland counties at the turn of the nineteenth century, Thomas Waters suggests that one 'reason people told [folklorists] stories about witchcraft from the past was to avoid talking about witches who were believed to be operating in the present.' ('They seem to have all died out' 152) The question of whether people continued to believe in and practice witchcraft is important, although the fact that this has been the primary focus of academic research has obscured the multifaceted nature of magical thinking. For Mary Webb, and many others, magic was not only or even primarily about witches and witchcraft, and the aspects of magical belief and practice that did not relate to witchcraft were more important.

The conventional historical narrative is that magical belief and practice declined rapidly during the nineteenth century, and that cunning-folk like *Precious Bane's* Beguildy had pretty much disappeared from the English countryside by the end of it. (Cunning-men or -women were also variously called wise-men or -women, wizards, conjurers and warlocks in different parts of Britain.) Owen Davis argues that 'cunning-folk should be defined [...] most crucially by their role as unbewitchers', so 'when there was no longer a need to explain misfortunes in terms of witchcraft [towards the end of the nineteenth century], people no longer gained reputations as witches, and cunning-folk effectively went out of business.' (*Popular Magic* 187-8) That this definition of cunning-folk is an over-simplification, is evident from the fact that they survived well into the twentieth century. As Ronald Hutton observes, the cunning-craft, rather than dying out, 'changed character' as 'some of its traditional functions atrophied, and others developed.' (110) Davies himself found plenty of evidence that cunning-folk were operating throughout Britain until at least the 1920s (*Popular Magic* 187). Thomas Waters uncovered evidence of cunning-folk operating in the Midland counties during the first two decades of the twentieth century ('They seem to have all died out' 147-8). In Webb's Shropshire, Charlotte Burne discovered several cunning-folk working during the 1870s (1, 146-9 and 169). The sparsity of newspaper reports treating the day-to-day activities of cunning-folk does not mean that magical belief was rare, even in towns, because 'only the most violent and sensational manifestations of witchcraft belief were

reported by the press.’ (Waters, ‘Belief in Witchcraft’ 102) The regular day-to-day activities of cunning-folk would not have been newsworthy, and it was these activities, such as the sale of charms, herbal remedies, alternative healing therapies, and interventions in the spirit world, that developed and fed into other magical currents.

Ironically, despite their changing function, the association with *maleficium* continued to inform perceptions of cunning-folk amongst some groups within society. This view was reinforced by sensational accounts of cunning-folk in newspapers and other media (Davies, *Murder, Magic, Madness* 50-82).<sup>5</sup> Because of their supposedly primitive world-view, they were generally represented negatively in fiction too. William Bentinck Forfar’s *The Wizard of West Penwith* (1871) is loosely based on events in the life of a real cunning-man who ‘was a notorious character at St. Just, some fifty years ago’ (iii). Fisher operates under a false name (his real identity is not revealed), has few if any redeeming characteristics, and is responsible for many crimes, including a vicious murder (30-6). Charlotte Yonge’s *The Cunning Woman’s Grandson: A Tale of Cheddar a Hundred Years Ago* (1889) is an entirely fictional account, although it is indebted to local legends, and the cunning-woman of the title is an unrepentant fraudster. Even Thomas Hardy’s Conjuror Trendle is represented unsympathetically (White 68-79). This portrayal of cunning-folk is in line with the nineteenth-century middle-class view (particularly amongst the new medical establishment) that they were fraudsters or at best ‘quack doctors’ who took advantage of ‘ignorant gullibility and vulgar credulity’, but they were not always represented in this way. The source for Arthur Morrison’s *Cunning Murrell* (1900) is easy to identify because the author made no attempt to disguise it and did not change the name of his central character. James Murrell (1785-1860), a cunning-man from Hadleigh in Essex, was ‘well-known’ on both sides of the Thames estuary during the first half of the nineteenth century (Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture* 114). Morrison represents him sympathetically as a man who genuinely wished to help his neighbours, and believed he had a vocation that gave him ‘dominion over all evil things’ (310). Webb’s wizard is a more complex individual than the cunning-folk represented in these novels.

Beguildy is more akin to an early-twentieth-century cunning-man, perhaps reflecting the origin of the character in Webb’s own encounters with cunning-folk, and this is apparent

from the kind of services that he provides. Despite his complaint that most who came to him were ‘young maids with no money or old men who wanted someone cursed cheap’ (23), he is not called upon to bewitch or un-bewitch anyone during the narrative. Almost all the requests for assistance that he receives relate to illness or injury. Even Gideon, who does not approve of the wizard, acknowledges that he has a ‘salve for every sore’ (45). When we first encounter Beguildy, he is getting ready to ‘cure an old man’s corns’ (31). Later we learn that he had treated the miller’s daughter Polly for various ailments – chin-cough (whooping cough), ringworm and measles (89-91). Mrs Beguildy gets him out of the way for the love-spinning by arranging for a relative to request help with ‘her man’s toothache’ (95). At the turn of the nineteenth-century, many remedies offered by cunning-folk were at least as effective as the remedies offered by professional medical practitioners, and, because clients believed the cures were rooted in magic, they might have had greater psychological benefit (Davies, *Popular Magic* 110-111). The practice of foraging for efficacious herbs and then developing remedies would also make cunning-folk sensitive to the intrinsic power and value of non-human nature. Cunning-folk depended upon a non-human nature that was populated by a diversity of wild plants and trees, rather than the monoculture landscapes produced by modern capitalist farming practices.

Beguildy also provides, or has offered in the past, a ghost-bottling service, for which there was still demand in Shropshire at the end of the nineteenth century – the service was also offered by some Church ministers (Burne 1, 103-42). Many later Victorians and then Edwardians were interested in spirits, how one might communicate with them, and the media through which they could be controlled or contained (Wilburn 359-81). Because his healing services are rooted in the magical power of non-human nature, for Beguildy this sense of the world as inspirited, rather than simply material or mechanistic, extended to the non-human natural world too. In her study of the anthropology of magic, Susan Greenwood convincingly argues that the belief that not only human beings, but also non-human beings and even plants are inspirited, is a centrally important part of almost all varieties of magical belief and practice (*The Anthropology of Magic* 133-4). This is the aspect of magical thinking that most informs the world-view of Prue Sarn, and it is one of the main reasons that she is drawn to Beguildy, a bridge between the destructive elements of magical belief centred around *maleficium*, and what Prue believed were beneficial elements of magical belief.



There are many moments in *Precious Bane* that suggest the attitude to non-human nature represented, if not entirely exemplified by Beguildy, is threatened by a modern materialist world view. Beguildy wants to make a living through his magic and is angry that Mrs Beguildy would like him to get a 'proper' job (37). He is not respected in his community as much as his predecessors would have been, particularly by those who, like Gideon, have embraced the instrumentalism and profit-seeking aspects of rural modernity. His sense that he is slighted manifests itself in meanness and petulance. He mischievously targets the more privileged members of his community (through the comical raising of the naked Venus stunt, and the ghost bottling service ridiculed by Mrs Beguildy), but these are people who should know better, and can afford to spend a few pounds satisfying their indulgences. Magical activities such as these are certainly bogus, although they are harmless in comparison with the more destructive actions of a Fisher or a Trendle. That said, both Beguildy and Gideon are bitter and vengeful when they believe their plans have been disrupted by a rival. Beguildy's firing of Gideon's rickyard because he objects to the latter's betrothal to Jancis sets in motion a train of events that has disastrous consequences for everyone. But by abandoning Jancis in retaliation, Gideon is more responsible for her death, especially when one considers that he knew she was carrying his child. Indeed, Prue is strangely drawn to Beguildy, and did not believe he was wholly accountable for his actions: she was 'always sorry' for him, 'though dear knows, he was the villain in our story.' (158)

### Rural Modernity

The most important relationships in *Precious Bane* all involve the wizard and reflect Webb's scepticism about the hierarchical opposition between a beneficent modernity and primitive traditional ways of seeing and understanding the world. Prue Sarn, the first-person narrator, has more reason than most to resent magical beliefs. The association with witchcraft that casts a shadow over Prue's life derives in part from the Sarn family's history, but mainly from the magical beliefs surrounding her cleft-lip. In the dispersed community around Sarn, 'the younger ones had been brought up on tales of how [...Prue] roamed the country at night in the body of a hare' (279) and even her father believed that she had the 'devil's mark on her' because a hare had crossed her mother's path when she was pregnant (20). But she

has a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship with Beguildy, the person within her community most responsible for the perpetuation of magical beliefs. She is sceptical as to the potency of his magic and asserts that he 'said he could do a deal that I don't believe he ever could do' (15). Yet in the same sentence she claims that 'he dabbled in things that are not good for us to interfere with' (15), suggesting that there is some mystery about the extent of his powers. Then she states that he was 'one of Lucifer's men', but immediately corrects herself: 'not that Beguildy was wicked, but only empty of good' (15).

As Andrew Radford argues, in *Gone to Earth* Hazel Woodus's world view is shaped by her gypsy mother's 'natural magic' (167). When Hazel's mother died, 'she left her treasure – an old, dirty, partially illegible manuscript-book of spells, charms and other gipsy law – to her daughter.' (12) Similarly, in *Precious Bane*, notwithstanding her ambivalence about Beguildy, the wizard does more to shape Prue's world-view than anyone else in and around Sarn, including the weaver Kester Woodseaves. She has reason to feel grateful to him personally, because he is the only individual in her acquaintance willing and able to teach her how to read and write. Her brother Gideon allows Prue to learn so that she can 'keep accounts' and 'write' to help make a financial success of the farm (44). For Gideon education has a limited purpose; if it does not contribute to profitability, then it is pointless. Prue sees education very differently and believes that it should not be trimmed to fit the requirements of individuals with such a restricted view of the world. She sees it as akin to 'a big window opening', and muses to herself that with an education 'who knows what you metna see?' (45) In some important respects, the 'window' was opening before she learned to read and write. This is because Prue's 'education' has as much to do with the traditional beliefs and practices exemplified by Beguildy, and his connection with, and knowledge of the non-human natural world, as it does any supposedly progressive formal education. Either way, the wizard (and what he represents) facilitates Prue's more open, imaginative and enquiring way of seeing both human and non-human nature, which in turn leads her to question Gideon's myopic obsession with the extraction of profit from the land.

As Price observes, Webb critiques 'a world in which people acquire power by treating other people and nature as no more than resources, rather than as living entities with whom they are connected' (242), but to fully understand Prue's unease about her brother's approach to

farming, it is necessary to say more about rural modernity. *Precious Bane* is set during the most transformational period of England's agrarian revolution (1700-1850), when the introduction of capitalist farming practices was accompanied by dramatic social change (Overton 8-9). The narrative begins in 1810, when Gideon is seventeen and Prue fifteen (24) and spans several years (it is not clear how many). But most of the narrative is devoted to the period immediately following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, and the subsequent introduction of the Corn Laws (61). It therefore encompasses a particularly fraught period in the social history of rural England. Quality of life for agricultural workers had been in decline from the middle of the eighteenth century (Wells 29-53). But the Napoleonic Wars delayed some of the harshest effects of enclosure, and the decline of other traditional social structures such as service or living-in hiring (Archer 11). Following the pioneering work of the Hammonds in *The Bleak Age: England 1800-1850* (1934) and Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude in *Captain Swing* (1969), there is now broad agreement that the end of the war ushered in a prolonged decline in wages and quality of life for agricultural workers (particularly in the arable land of southern England), which culminated in the Swing Riots of 1830-32 (Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor* 60-1). The situation was not as bad in other parts of England as in the south and south east. In regions with developing industrial centres, wages were higher because agriculture had to compete for a limited pool of labour (Wild 47). Pastoral and mixed farming areas also fared better. There is some truth in William Cobbett's view that 'the richer the soil, and the more destitute of woods; [...] the more purely a corn country, the more miserable the labourers' (207).

Most of lowland Shropshire was, and still is, a traditional mixed farming area, so more small-holdings survived and traditional social structures like service did not wither so quickly after the Napoleonic Wars (there was still some unrest and there were a few swing riots). Gideon is atypical for the period in that he only grows arable crops. He is also driven by a myopic desire to extract as much profit out of the land as he can, which Prue finds bewildering: 'it do seem queer to spend every bit of time and strength on the land, like a mother with a child, and then not love it. It's as if the mother cared nought for the child, but only to sell it.' (120) Simon Miller sees this passage as exemplifying Webb's vision of the countryside as 'natural landscape in which agricultural production was at best incidental, and at worst antagonistic.' (93). Price remarks that 'for the most part, Webb's novels critique the control

of nature' (241), and later that 'it is hard to argue with Miller's point that farming in *Precious Bane* is depicted as "antagonistic," but significantly she also suggests that 'it does seem that other ways of envisioning farming are possible' (230). Price does not go on to explore the significance of her insight in the context of the way *Precious Bane* represents a changing agricultural landscape. Prue is questioning a destructive approach to farming the land here, rather than the importance of agriculture (and the control of nature that this must involve) for rural communities or the nation. Farming does not necessarily entail a disregard for the land, the health of the soil, or non-human nature more generally. Prior to the nineteenth century, the georgic notion of cultivation as requiring conservation and stewardship rather than maximal extraction for the market had generally informed British agriculture (Landry 54, 68-9 and 243-5).

Farming is much more central to the narrative in *Precious Bane* than it had been in *Gone to Earth*, although as Andrew Radford notes of the latter, the environs of the nature-destroying Jack Reddin's Undern estate exemplify 'modern sterility.' (163) In *Precious Bane* Webb is inviting the reader to make a connection between different epochs in British rural history, not so much to highlight a connection between two different periods of agricultural decline as Head suggests is often the case in the rural fiction of the 1920s and 30s (p. 12 and pp. 56-91), rather to investigate the opposition between sustainable traditional ways, and destructive modern ways of seeing the land. The representation of Gideon is as much informed by late-nineteenth-century high farming as it is the post-Napoleonic-war slump in agriculture. High farming involved 'a preference for maximum production at any cost' in terms of the destructive consequences for human and non-human nature (Holderness 151). The practices introduced during this period led to the hyper-intensive, chemically-managed monoculture farming we have today, and even in the late nineteenth century involved degradation of the already limited habitat available for non-human nature, and widespread use of manufactured artificial fertilizers such as superphosphates (Williamson 94). The decline of high farming at the turn of the nineteenth century may have been beneficial for non-human nature in some respects, but by the 1920s, when *Precious Bane* was written, 'most of England continued to be farmed [...] at high levels of intensity.' (Williamson 140) During this period many farmers came to view profit as the primary good, and the world

(including the land) as a repository of resources that could and should be manipulated to maximize profit.

The representation of Gideon shades into caricature because his myopic pursuit of profit and power is shown to be grotesque. Jack Reddin, the decadent squire in *Gone to Earth*, believed that 'women, servants and animals were in the world' only for his 'benefit' (211). In Gideon this selfish philosophy becomes even more perverted because of his capitalist ethos and is the 'precious bane' (130) that poisons everything in his and his family's life. It is represented in exaggerated terms to demonstrate that a value system which says profit is all that matters cannot be good, either for the individual who adheres to it, or for the rest of society and the wider environment. The maximum extraction approach to labour relations, in a world where the traditional beliefs and practices which mediated between human beings (for example traditional social structures within rural communities) no longer exist, is dramatized through Gideon's treatment of his workers (Prue and his mother) in *Precious Bane*. Gideon forces Prue to swear on the Bible 'to hire [herself...] out to him [Gideon] as a servant, for no money [and...] be as biddable as a prentice, a wife, and a dog.' (42, Webb's italics)<sup>6</sup> He is so committed to the capitalist mantra that all must contribute to profit that he murders his mother because she has become an unproductive burden to him. Gideon forces her to look after the pigs by the mere, even though this makes her rheumatism worse, and when she is no longer physically capable of doing even this exclaims: 'And there's Mother, [...] as was used to help a bit, no use and less than no use. A heavy burden! We'll never pick up now she's like that.' (239) Once he has badgered her into saying that she would rather be dead, he poisons her with hemlock tea. Gideon's attitude to his mother is not that dissimilar from our contemporary desire to extract as much work as possible from the unproductive ill and disabled. As Marshall Berman observes of the capitalist class in general, Gideon consumes everything else around him; humankind, non-human nature and the ecosystems that support both (Berman 100), but his ethos is ultimately self-consuming too.

As a product of supposedly rational modernity, Gideon is dismissive of magical beliefs and prophecy. He 'mostly laughed at signs and bodings' (86-7). He can take on the role of 'eater' for his deceased father's 'sins' because he thinks the process is nonsense: 'what harm, to drink a sup of your own wine and chumble a crust of your own bread?' (35) But *Precious*

*Bane* shows Gideon's world-view to be unstable because it lacks the connectivity provided by traditional ways of seeing the world. Ironically, he is destroyed by the magical beliefs that he had laughed off as nonsense at the beginning of the narrative, and his *volte-face* is more striking given that, throughout much of history, women were believed by men to be the more susceptible to superstition. The seven whistlers that Gideon hears when returning from Lullingford market (86), and later Beguildy's prophesy that Gideon 'sleeps on his face [and...] them that does drowns' (91), worry Prue and foreshadow his suicide at the end of the novel. In the end though it is Gideon's growing sense of his own unbalanced behaviour that reduces him to the level of a superstitious Huglet or Grimble and leads him to follow Jancis into the mere.<sup>7</sup> Prue's more sensitive and empathetic world-view, bound up with a respect for the beauty and mystery of non-human nature, proves to be more resilient, and represents a strong critique of a rural modernity that is destructively exploitative.

### Magical Nature

Both metaphorically and literally, Prue's revelation, whilst looking out from the window in the loft at Sarn, is her educative 'window' to a deeper understanding of the *real* world: 'there came to [her...], a most powerful sweetness that had never come to [her...] afore. It was not religious, like the goodness of a text heard at a preaching. [...] It was beyond that. On all things there came a fair, lovely look, as if a different air stood over them.' (58) Moments like this enable Prue to escape, for a time, from the world of rural modernity, where intensive farming practices destroy the very source of her new awareness and knowledge in non-human nature. (Gideon's return to Sarn often breaks the 'spell' during such moments 'which [would come...] but seldom' (59).) But the moment has more general significance too, because it evokes a pre-modern way of seeing and being. It is not the product of a supposedly progressive education. Nor is it to do with organised religion, when the parson told her it 'was the power of the Lord working in her', she was not so sure as it 'had naught in it of churches, not folks, praying nor praising, sinning nor repenting.' The moment is rooted in the inexpressible, indefinable beauty of wild nature; 'it had to do with such things as bird-song and daffodowndillies rustling, knocking their heads together in the wind.' Modernity often values only that which can be owned or quantified (or ascribed a monetary value), but this is not something for which one could or should seek to quantify,

‘for when the nut-hatch comes into her own tree, she dunna ask who planted it, nor what name it bears to men. For a tree is all to the nut-hatch, and this was all to me.’ (59)

Prue’s epiphany is the most important of the ‘infinitely precious [...] memoried glances and [...] murmurs’ (6) of the older traditional way of seeing the world that are represented in *Precious Bane*. At the time, many writers and thinkers were anxious about the modern disconnect between the human and the non-human, and some explored tradition for alternative ways of seeing and being - most prominently D. H. Lawrence (McCarthy 199-212). The reason for this anxiety is that almost all forms of modernity (including varieties of rural modernity) assume a hierarchical relationship with a subordinate non-human nature. We see ourselves as separate and distinct from non-human nature, on which we then seek to impose meaning and (in)significance (Guénon 59). The reason that tradition was a source for alternative ways of seeing and being is identified by John Berger in his influential essay ‘Why Look at Animals’ (1980): ‘the nineteenth century [...], saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by twentieth-century corporate capitalism, whereby every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken.’ (12) The study of ethnoecology repeatedly finds a strong link between traditional belief systems, and the protection of wild nature’s ecosystems (Milton 84). Prue’s epiphany represents a momentary reconnection with this lost traditional sense of immersion in, and unity with place and wild nature. In Heideggerian terms ‘non-human beings in their place are essential to human well-being, to the well-being of the earth.’ (Maly 53). Magical beliefs and practices (such as Prue’s repeated premonitions that it is dangerous to disturb nature’s balance) often played a role in sustaining the connection (Hviding 168-9).

Where Webb departed from writers like Lawrence and Eliot (Yeats too in some respects) is in her sense that there was a progressive germ in elements of the traditional culture of people within ordinary working communities (like the Shropshire village in which she grew up). Webb does not unquestioningly celebrate tradition in *Precious Bane*, as is apparent from the ambivalent representation of Beguildy, or the cruelty of Huglet and Grimble, although the latter’s behaviour is primarily driven by sadistic enjoyment of the suffering of other beings (whether human or non-human). But this progressive germ owes something to the kind of traditional charms and signs of foreboding which often originate with Beguildy.

As they do Hazel Woodus in *Gone to Earth*; who can feel ‘things [in non-human nature] crying out as have been a long while hurted’ (72), forebodings worry Prue – she felt that ‘summat forbeded’ (79) at Sarn during Gideon’s custodianship of the farm – because they imply a lack of balance in human relationships, and in relationships between humankind and non-human nature. Prue’s feeling for wild nature anticipates magic as ‘nature religion’ over fifty years before it became a major element in 1970s pagan witchcraft (Hutton 415). This mind-expanding “‘religion of ecology” with a central conception that there is immanent value in all things’ (Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic* 22), could not be more different from the tradition as excuse for brutality of a Huglet or a Grimble. Hutton argues that in Britain modern pagan witchcraft did not adopt the pagan belief in an animated world ‘teeming with spirits’. Instead, it was marked by ‘a preoccupation with great primal forces – Earth, Sky, Corn, Vegetation, Nature, Mother, Father’ (130-1). Isn’t this a version of an animated world too? To worship the magical power and sanctity of the earth is not so far away from the pagan belief that the earth has life or soul diffused through it. Beguildy’s interest in the spirit world is not quite the same thing, but as is often the case in *Precious Bane*, he does represent a bridge to an alternative way of seeing the world.

Prue is caught between destructive rural modernity and destructive forms of traditional belief and practice, therefore in one sense the best place for her is the fairy-tale into which she escapes during the *dénouement* of the novel. The ending of *Precious Bane* echoes the ending of *Gone to Earth* in which Jack Reddin, also on horseback, spectacularly fails to rescue Hazel Woodus from a rampaging hunt (286-8). Radford suggests that the real tragedy is Hazel’s failure to reproduce, but this reading is rooted in the very patriarchal view that women’s lives are meaningless unless they have children. Hazel’s connection with non-human nature is not a ‘meagre compensation’ for her lack of fertility – it renders her a far more complete person than any of the other principle characters in the novel (169). That Kester Woodseaves successfully rescues Prue from her tormentors (who want to ‘duck’ her to establish whether she is a witch), and carries her off on his horse, does appear to be out of key with the dominant tragic tone of *Precious Bane*. But only if one reads the novel as a ‘loam and lovechild’ narrative, rather than as an exploration of the opposition between Prue’s balanced and empathetic traditional sensibility and destructive ways of seeing and being. The rescue has a symbolic function because it suggests that Prue’s way of seeing does



have a future through her uniting with a figure who symbolizes an agricultural landscape in which there is space for non-human nature. Mary Webb had her own view of the elements of traditional culture that were worth saving, and it was always those that helped to foster and sustain healthy and mutually beneficial relationships between human beings, and between human beings and non-human nature. As Price notes, Kester forcefully rejects destructive traditions (249), but he does not reject all traditional forms, and as Prue reflects he seemed to be 'part of the fair meadow' (141). Significantly, the traditionally biodiverse meadow supports a much greater range and diversity of non-human nature than Gideon's profitable monoculture landscape.

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#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Novels of agricultural life, also known as loam and lovechild novels were popular during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels are probably the best-known of the type today, but in the 1920s Webb (particularly after Stanley Baldwin had endorsed her work) and Sheila Kaye-Smith were widely read. Webb wrote to Thomas Hardy on 5 September 1922, addressing him as 'the greatest exponent of the wild human heart since Shakespeare', and asked if she might dedicate to him her forthcoming novel *Seven for a Secret: A Love Story* (Hardy 6, 153). Hardy agreed, and the dedication reads 'To the illustrious name of Mr Hardy whose acceptance of this dedication has made me so happy'.

<sup>3</sup> See also K. Bell 117-29. Interestingly, and somewhat contradictorily, there was considerable interest in spiritualism amongst the middle-classes during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Burne was one of several female folklorists and folk-song collectors working in the Shropshire area at the turn of the nineteenth century (see Trolley 7). But in terms of the influence on Webb, Burne was the most important.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of the trial of a Staffordshire (a county adjacent to Webb's Shropshire) cunning-man see Hoyle 56-61.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect the representation of Prue is in line with many other accounts of witches and witchcraft in nineteenth-century literature that 'reinforce traditional concepts of femininity, associating acceptable womanliness with passivity, submission to authority, and chastity (or with guilt and repentance).' (Moran 147) Moran does focus on texts that confirm her view, for example Eliza Lynn Linton's *Witch Stories* (1861) or Elizabeth Gaskell's *Lois the Witch* (1861), and the representation of Prue does not entirely fit her model. In her person, Prue combines acceptable and unacceptable womanliness. On the surface, she is a flawed specimen of womanhood, certainly in the eyes of Gideon, who thinks she will never marry, and in the eyes of the people of

Lullingford, who think she is a witch. Even Prue's mother sees her as manly because of her size, strength, and failure to stop growing.

<sup>7</sup> Gideon has a lot in common with the industrial magnate Gerald Crich in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) who is 'gradually revealed to be a figure of inner emotional vacuity and nihilism whose exertion of social and economic power arises from a compensatory need.' (M. Bell 68)

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