

Prompt: Analyse the Life and cult of St Melangell in the wider context of medieval hagiography. Is this typical of medieval Welsh feminine sanctity?

Word Count (excluding footnotes, bibliography, assignment headings, and this line): 4,278.

The Life and cult of Saint Melangell, the Welsh patron saint of hares, are at once both unique and typical among Welsh saints. Being a female Welsh saint, hers is a case already quite uncommon, as there are considerably fewer female Welsh saints than male. This is especially the case for female Welsh saints for whom any *vitae* or substantial stories survive – which aside from Melangell herself appear to be limited to the Saints Gwenfrewi, Non, Dwyn(wen), and Brigid (a composite of “a number of Brigid, especially St Brigid of Kildare (who herself was probably a mixture of the ancient goddess Brigid and an historical nun of the same name, St Brigid of Cill-Muine), a St Brigid who lived in North Wales, and the Swedish St Brigid”).¹ It is to these four female Welsh saints that Melangell’s Life and cult shall be most compared.

In her *vita*, Melangell is recorded to be the daughter of a king ruling over a place in Ireland rendered *Iowchel* in Welsh.² In the genealogies, her father is listed as either Cwylch or Cynelch, son of Tudwal Tudglyd of the line of Maxen Wledig (Tudglyd’s whetstone being one of the Thirteen Treasures of the Isle of Britain), and her mother is given either as Ethni or Ethin “the Irishwoman”.³ She escapes thence to Wales in order to avoid an unwanted arranged marriage, where she is later found by Prince Brochwel Ysgithrog while he is out hunting, his discovery of her engaged in “praying as devoutly as possible” serving as the introduction to her tale.⁴ Here already, just in her basic identity and the opening of her story, several parallels can be found with the other popular Welsh female saints named above.

¹ Henken, Elissa R., *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987): p. 161

² Pryce, Huw, ‘A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*’, *The Montgomeryshire Collections: Journal of the Powysland Club*, 82, (Welshpool Printing Company, 1994), Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 23-40, p. 40.

³ ‘Genealogy of the Saints (Continued)’, *The Cambro-Briton*, 3: 28 (April, 1822), 335-338, p. 337: this source lists Melangell’s father’s name spelled “Cwylch” son of “Tudwal Tudglyd” and her mother’s spelled “Ethni Wyddeles”; Rees, W. J., *Lives of the Cambro British Saints of the Fifth and Immediate Succeeding Centuries, from Ancient Welsh & Latin MSS, in the British Museum and Elsewhere, with English Translations, and Explanatory Notes*, (Llandovery: William Rees, 1853), pp. 268 (Cymraeg/Welsh) & 596 (English/Saesneg): this source lists Melangell’s father’s name spelled “Kynelch” son of “Tutdawal Tutclut” and her mother’s spelled “Ethin Wydeles”; Bromwich, Rachel, ed. & trnsl., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*, 4th edn., (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 260.

⁴ Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, pp. 39-40.

Saints Non, Brigid, and Dwynwen all are the daughters of kings as well – Non being the daughter of Cynyr of Caer Goch, Brigid being the daughter of an Irish king called Dubtach (or Dubthach) and his slave woman Brotseach, and Dwynwen being one of the many saintly daughters of the famous Welsh king Brychan Brycheiniog.⁵ As for Saint Gwenfrewi, there is “uncertainty as to the royalty of her father” who is rendered with a variety of names beginning with T from across different sources, although some records indicate her father was “simply a man of high estate”.⁶ Baring-Gould & Fisher insist that “Gwenfrewi’s name does not occur in any early Welsh pedigrees of saints. She cannot have belonged to a royal family”.⁷

St. Brigid, of course, also crosses the Irish Sea to Wales just as St. Melangell does, but Brigid does so in miraculous style via a piece of turf in Welsh lore (and this is echoed in Irish lore in the Life of Modwenna), while the mode of St. Melangell’s transport is not given.⁸ St. Dwynwen’s case is a bit blurred, as there is no mention of her crossing the Irish Sea in her story from the Iolo Manuscripts, nor does there appear to be reference to it in her surviving folklore, which has regained popularity (and continues to do so) as a part of the modern revival of the celebration of her feast day.⁹ However, there were prayers towards the beginning of the early modern period which “claim[ed] that Dwynwen miraculously walked across the Irish Sea for fear of Maelgwn Gwynedd.”¹⁰ Saints Gwenfrewi and Non failed to flee their aggressors (resulting in great violence committed against them), and their Lives and stories do not involve crossing the Irish Sea.

⁵ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 159: “Non is established in the genealogies as the daughter of (C)ynyr. *Bonedd y Sant* describes her as ‘Nonn verch Kenyr o Gaer Gawch yMynyw’, and gives her maternal line as, ‘Nonn vam Ddewi oedd uerch y Anna uerch Ythur bendragon’, p. 161: “The *cywydd* [by Iorwerth Fynglwyd] contains elements from the traditions of all the Brigids, ... the parentage of the composite Brigid ... is that of the saint of Kildare, who was daughter to an Irish king, Dubthach, and his bondmaid”, p. 231: “The *Cywyddwyr* and genealogies have kept note of Dwynwen’s being the daughter of Brychan and of her settling in Anglesey”; Baring-Gould, Sabine & John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints: The Saints of Wales and Cornwall and Such Irish Saints as Have Dedications in Britain*, Vol. 1, (London: Honorable Society of the Cymmrodorion, 1907), p. 268: “Brigid was the daughter of Dubtach, son of Demri, eleventh in descent from Fedlimidh Rechtmar, king of Ireland in the second century of the Christian era. Her mother’s name was Brotseach, a slave in his house”; Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 2, (1908), p. 387: “Dwyn or Dwynwen is the Welsh patroness of true lovers. She was the daughter of Brychan Brycheiniog...”; Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 4, (1913): p. 22: “Non, sometimes styled Bendigaid, or the Blessed, was the daughter of cynyr of Caer Gawch, in Menevia, by Anna, the daughter of Gwrthefyr Fendigaid”.

⁶ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 151.

⁷ Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 3, (1911), p. 188.

⁸ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 164: “Iorwerth Fynglwyd tells of Brigid’s journey from Ireland to Wales on a piece of turf. ... A similar account is given by Concubran in the Life of Modwenna who is said to have sailed with Brigid and two others from Ireland on a piece of ground which later attached itself to the coast near Conway”.

⁹ Morganwg, Iolo, & Taliesin Williams (ab Iolo) (trns.), ‘Dwynwen’, *Iolo Manuscripts...*, (Llandoverly: William Rees, 1848); Gwyndaf, Robin, *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru/Welsh Folk Tales*, (Caerdydd: Amgueddfeydd ac Oriolau Cenedlaethol Cymru/Cardiff: National Museums & Galleries of Wales, 1995), p. 33 (ochr Cymraeg/Welsh side) & p. 37 (English side/ochr Saesneg).

¹⁰ Cartwright, Jane, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 2022), p. 89.

Given that the women who crossed the Irish Sea succeeded in avoiding not only marriage but also violence, while those who could not do so were caught and suffered at the hands of their attackers, one must wonder if the crossing of the Irish Sea symbolized some sort of refuge, magical transition, or miraculous protection beyond the simple practicality of making oneself harder for enemies to pursue. Again, Dwynwen here is a blurry case, for her story in certain versions of folklore read that Maelon Dafodrill raped her, while the Iolo Manuscripts say that he only “left her in animosity, and aspersed her...”.¹¹ Since in some versions of her story, Dwynwen is heartbroken but able to preserve her virginity before taking up the veil of religious devotion, while in other versions she is sexually assaulted, it induces wonder as to which of these versions the additional detail of her walking across the Irish Sea was affixed (or both, or another version entirely). Given the success of the other saints in avoiding violence by traversing the Irish Sea, this author is inclined to lean towards the version in which she is not assaulted being the more likely candidate for the seafaring feature, but lacking further records, this can ultimately only ever be conjecture.

Another characteristic which St. Melangell and all four of the other Welsh female saints here-reviewed share is that of beauty, hardly a surprising attribute to be assigned to holy persons of noble lineage in posthumous narrative, especially for women, whether they actually were so in life or not.¹² Despite their attractiveness as wives to potential suitors (and regardless of whether their bodily autonomy is ultimately respected or not), all five women refuse marriage and/or willing sexual relations with high-status men in the secular sphere, instead preferring to live their lives in chastity and religious devotion. This symbolizes not only turning away from the sins associated with sexual ‘pollution’, ‘defilement’, or ‘pleasures of the flesh’ but also simultaneously represents the saints turning down the opportunity to live a life of material ease and wealth, refusing the temptation of Mammon, that great enemy of the Christian faith.¹³ Melangell refuses marriage to “a great and noble man of Ireland”, Brigid refuses marriage to “the chief bard of King Laoghaire”, and Gwenfrewi turns down and runs from the advances of “Caradog, ... a youth of royal blood” for which he beheads her.¹⁴ Non would have remained a virgin if not for the sexual assault committed against her, and Dwynwen’s case is muddled, as previously discussed.

¹¹Gwyndaf, *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru/Welsh Folk Tales*, p. 33 (ochr Cymraeg/Welsh side) & p. 37 (English side/ochr Saesneg): “In his anger Maelon raped Dwynwen and left her”; in-line quote: Morganwg & Williams (ab Iolo) (trnsf.), ‘Dwynwen’, *Iolo Manuscripts*, p. 474.

¹²Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, p. 39 “In that bramble bush indeed he found a certain virgin [Melangell] beautiful in appearance...”; Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 150: “Gwenfrewi, perhaps because she is a heroine and perhaps because of her holiness, is said to have been very beautiful. In *Buchedd Beuno*, she is described as the fairest maiden in the world”; p. 157: “The two aspects of Non which are repeatedly mentioned [in poetry] are her beauty and her generosity”; p. 162: “The nun [St. Brigid], lovely is her form...” and p. 166 “fair, healthy maiden [Brigid]...”; Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 2, p. 391: “[Dwynwen] The fair daughter of Brychan the Aged”; Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p.91: “Her poet’s gift, [O] fair one, you’d be blessed...”.

¹³*The Holy Bible*, KJV, Matthew 6:24: “No man can serve two masters ... Ye cannot serve both God and mammon”.

¹⁴Melangell: Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, p. 40; Brigid: Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 1, p. 271; Gwenfrewi: Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 3, p. 188.

The preservation of virginity as the expression of sanctity is strong across the Lives of medieval female saints, and the Welsh are no exception –

“Virginity may almost be considered a prerequisite for feminine sanctity, and one begins to see a pattern emerging in the traditions of the female saints that is quite different from the male saints’ Lives. ... The encounter with male sexuality is the only major element in the biographical pattern which appears with any consistency for the Welsh women saints.”¹⁵

Indeed, a substantial portion (if not the entirety) of the actions of all the female saints under consideration revolve around their attempts to maintain chastity and to facilitate other women’s ability to do so as well. Of the five (including Melangell), only St. Brigid (the bulk of whose lore is originally from Ireland, which likely explains the difference) has a fully-fledged *vita* as might be more expected of a male saint, beginning with her birth and childhood rearing with a Druid before telling of her return to her father’s house, her ensuing experiences of abuse and her family’s attempts to sell her or marry her off, followed by her active performance of myriad miracles.¹⁶ As for Saints Melangell, Gwenfrewi, and Dwynwen, their stories begin with their determination to remain virgins upon reaching puberty (or, in Dwynwen’s case, not to have premarital intercourse) – and this serves as the foundational reason for the miraculous events later tied to them. Without the prerequisite of virginity having been met, there likely would have been nothing perceived as holy about these women to begin with, regardless of their degree of devotion or any miracles they may have been capable of. The significance of this context for the wonders and miracles attributed to the female saints will be a point of speculation later.

One might argue that St. Gwenfrewi has a fuller life than most medieval female saints, as her story begins in her childhood. However, the beginning of St. Gwenfrewi’s story is not so much about her as about her uncle, St. Beuno. He is unwilling to teach her without first being granted quite a hefty tract of land (which her parents cannot afford, and are forced to request it of their local king).¹⁷ This is a notable detail for a saint (Beuno) who should be a paragon of generosity – he instead shows himself to be quite greedy towards his own relatives who he presumably knows cannot afford it. One gets the impression he does not actually wish to teach the girl and so is demanding exorbitant compensation. In keeping with these attitudes, after being martyred (and resurrected), St. Gwenfrewi later had to move about being transferred from one male saint to the other (who, one would assume, should all have been willing to extend generosity and hospitality, especially towards a fellow devotee to the religious life), once explicitly mentioned as due to the saint’s “not want[ing] to be troubled with her”.¹⁸

¹⁵ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, pp. 85-6.

¹⁶ Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 1, pp. 268-71.

¹⁷ Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 3, p. 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 189.

This may serve as a hint towards the reason for the dearth of nunneries and female saints in Wales – women in this role simply do not appear to have been much-valued or wanted, even by other contemporary saints, despite the popularity of their folklore and shrines with the lay population (which is not unlikely to frequently have come about posthumously, and so would serve as no motivation to their contemporaries – another point in support of the idea that “the only good virgin ... is a dead virgin”).¹⁹ Perhaps this points to a general societal unwillingness to tolerate the lifestyle of female religious in practical everyday life in medieval Wales. Indeed, it is unsurprising that defying their fathers’ and/or rulers’ wishes (their legal overlords), not allowing themselves to be treated as property or sex objects when such was the social expectation, and depriving their kings of *amobr* were not smiled upon in medieval society – the surprise instead is that other medieval societies, also brutally misogynistic, were so much more willing to accommodate it. In Wales, it seems the female religious were only valued once they were already sainted and popular fairy-tale-like miracles had been attached to their names – which cannot happen if they are not first permitted and enabled to live devoted, saint-like lives in the first place.

The first instance in which Gwenfrewi is actually active is in the usual predictable circumstance – after having been spotted and made the object of lust by a man, in this case a royal who had been out hunting.²⁰ The story of St. Non, too, begins with her being discovered by a royal while he is out hunting.²¹ Such recurring themes are reminiscent of the First Branch of the Mabinogi, in which Pwyll serves as yet another example of a noble who goes out hunting and selfishly takes what he pleases without regard (and, to drive home the metaphor, this leads to the later mirrored narrative with the explicit opportunity to breach the autonomy of a woman in his interactions with Arawn’s queen, where he demonstrates character growth by showing restraint).²² Knowing the usual outcomes of encounters with royal hunters, it must have been quite the surprise to the medieval audience (and perhaps, to women in the audience, a welcome relief) to find that the royal out hunting who happens upon St. Melangell (Prince Brochwel Ysgithrog) does *not* immediately attempt to kidnap, rape, or murder her, but instead actually respects her autonomy – and not only that, but he freely grants her land without demanding anything in exchange!²³ Even the author of Melangell’s *vita* seems enamored, perhaps even stunned, by the prince’s behaving

¹⁹ Quote: Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 87; regarding the lack of nunneries: McAvoy, Liz Herbert, ‘Anchorites and medieval Wales’, in *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy, (Boydell & Brewer; Boydell Press, 2010), p. 209: “During the later period, there were only ever three religious houses for women, as opposed to 150 in medieval England, sixty-four in Ireland and fifteen in Scotland, ... Moreover, these nunneries themselves were equally sparsely populated... suggesting either that Welsh women did not find religious enclosure an attractive option, or that it simply was not a way of life made available to the vast majority of them” and p. 210: “It would seem that in the Wales of the Middle Ages, married womanhood was held in much greater esteem than the life of an enclosed nun...”.

²⁰ Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 3, p. 188.

²¹ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 156: “...the king raping Nonita while out hunting, ...”; Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 2, (1908), p. 289: “Rhygyfarch had a peculiar notion of inspiration, for according to him it was ‘virtus divina’ which led Sant to violate the virgin Non.”.

²² Davies, Sioned (transl.), *The Mabinogion*, (Oxford University Press, 2007).

²³ Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, pp. 39-40.

respectfully, generously, and reasonably, lavishing him with praises such as “illustrious”, “excellent”, and having “pure generosity” right from the first lines of a story that is not even about him – except, of course, insofar as it *is* actually about him.²⁴

In fact, Melangell’s safety is not overtly threatened at any point throughout her very short *vita*, a rarity indeed for a medieval female saint of any nation, being as they were “frequently abducted, threatened with rape or forced marriage, tortured and decapitated” as was the case for Gwenfrewi and Non (and, in some versions, also for Dwywnwen).²⁵ For virtually every other female saint, it is almost as if there is an expectation that they must endure unnecessary and egregious violence and suffering at the hands of men as punishment for not relinquishing their chastity. Whether this is merely because they are women for whom the expectation of the times was submission (especially to a man who outranks them), or as some sort of rite of passage ‘required’ for a female saint to ‘prove’ her devotion by refusing to yield even when facing torture, rape, or certain death, is unclear. If the *vita* were centering Melangell, it very well may have been required (per the genre) for the tale to include some sort of violence towards her, or at minimum the threat of it, in keeping with every other female saint’s *vita* known to this author.

The reason for this very exceptional case of the utter lack of violence in Melangell’s story could very well be the fact that the story is not actually about her – it is about Prince Brochwel Ysgithrog and his granting of land rights. This is borne out in the fact that, in an eight hundred and eighty-one-word story that is supposedly about St. Melangell, over half of it – fully five hundred and twenty words – are devoted to the prince, either describing him, telling of his actions or speech, or describing the actions of his sons. Only two hundred and seventy-seven words (about 25.8%) are actually spent on describing Melangell, her actions or speech, or her virgins. A further forty-three words are used for the afterthought of the impotent threat of “Elise” appended to the end of the tale, whose punishment by death (which most saints’ *vitae* seem to relish describing the violent and often fantastical method thereof) is mentioned only vaguely as “an end most wretched.. and [he] perished suddenly”.²⁶ The final forty-one words are the direct closing remarks of the narrator making toothless threats of “divine vengeance” against those who “violate” the place and wrapping up with a tidy praise to God.²⁷

The above statistics combined with the fact that the threat and death of Elise is, frankly, extremely vague and boring, and that no mention is made of St. Melangell’s relics, it is certainly possible that the purpose of this *vita* is not to convey much of anything about Melangell at all (which it does very little, after all). Indeed, it appears that the intent is not to draw pilgrims with interesting stories of relics or fascinating miracles, as the singular “miracle” of a hare hiding beneath one’s skirt seems very mundane compared to the miracles of other medieval saints and

²⁴ Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, p. 39.

²⁵ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 86.

²⁶ Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, p. 40.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 40.

does not seem so much to demonstrate power as happenstance (and Melangell was fully passive throughout the event, besides – a detail that will be further scrutinized later). This is not to say that protection of animals was not a popular *topos* in the Lives of saints, as “[o]ne of the major themes that appears in the stories of the saints of the early Celtic Church is how intimate they were with animals, and how much they valued the contributions animals made to their lives”.²⁸ The theme of the saint offering protection to a hunted animal, even specifically a hare, also occurs in the Lives of other medieval saints (though they are not Welsh) such as St. Anselm and St. Martin, although their stories explicitly teach morals of compassion and protection of the innocent, standing in contrast to St. Melangell’s passive silence on the event of the hare running to her for protection.²⁹ Indeed, the crux of St. Melangell’s part in the story aligns perfectly with the usual application of the *topos* of the hunter and the saint, as “[t]he question of sanctuary often arises over an animal which seeks refuge from the king’s hunt at the feet of the saint.”³⁰

The intent, as made obvious by the excessively explicit wording of the *vita* itself to the point of its beginning to take on the air of a legal document, is merely to give a bare-bones saint’s story with the hare hiding in her skirts serving as an obvious metaphor for the rights of sanctuary from secular rulers.³¹ These sanctuary and land rights at the center of the narrative are instated by the actual protagonist of the story, Brochwel, who goes on to tediously list the specific rights of the “free tenants called abbots” in his monologue (a fact which turns suspicions towards one of them having written the *vita*) before the narrator lists the sons of Brochwel who likewise “decreed that the said place of Pennant Melangell should be a perpetual sanctuary, asylum ... confirming the acts of the said prince.”³² Indeed, what small part Melangell plays in her own story is totally passive aside from her “establishing certain virgins” at Pennant Melangell: she flees Ireland in reaction to the initiative of her father, she passively spends the years uneventfully in isolation before her encounter with Brochwel, she passively prays while the hare hides under her skirt, the dogs retreating before her requires no instigation on her part but is merely a passive side-effect of her holiness, she only speaks to answer the prince’s direct inquiries, and she makes no demands

²⁸ Sellner, Edward, ‘Celtic Saints and their Kinship with Animals’, *The Furrow*, 68: 1, (Maynooth, Ireland, January 2017), 33-41, p. 33.

²⁹ Dominic, Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, (Boydell & Brewer; Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 1-3, 16, 118, 128, & 130.

³⁰ Henken, Elissa R., ‘The Saint as Secular Ruler: Aspects of Welsh Hagiography’, *Folklore*, 98: 2, (Taylor & Francis, 1987), 226-232, p. 228.

³¹ Petts, David, ‘De Situ Brecheniauc and Englynion Y Beddau: Writing about Burial in Early Medieval Wales’, in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 14: Early Medieval Mortuary Practices*, ed. by Sarah Semple & Howard Williams, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), p. 170: “The presence of a saint’s body or relics became an increasingly important way of asserting a sphere of influence over an ecclesiastical property in the ninth to tenth century, as well as becoming increasingly important commodities in their own right. Most of the Saint’s lives written in the eleventh and early twelfth century are clearly intended to help validate claims to property and associated rights in the face of increasing pressure from Normans, as well as in internecine tensions over ecclesiastical jurisdiction. For example, the Life of St Cadog ends with a series of charters recording the gifting of land to the saint and his monasteries”.

³² Pryce, ‘*Historia Divae Monacellae*’, p. 40.

of him nor displays any further power to get her lands or sanctuary rights – he simply chooses to bestow them onto her fully of his own accord.³³

St. Melangell is not alone in having the limelight pointed away from herself in her own story. Such is a theme which runs through the *vita* of Saint Gwenfrewi and the story of St. Non, as well. The only action Gwenfrewi takes in her own story, aside from founding a convent (which only occurs in one version of her *vita*), is consistently to run away or otherwise move from place-to-place as she is required to in reaction to the spurring of men. It is Beuno who builds the church, Beuno who curses Caradog and causes his death, and Beuno who miraculously restores Gwenfrewi's head to its rightful place. The miracle of St. Gwenfrewi's blood causing the well to spring forth – the crux of her cult and her fame – is entirely passive on her part, being simply a function of her exceptional purity, much as with the miracle of Melangell. It appears that we have here another story of a female saint that is not really about her – but rather about a male saint (Beuno) with Gwenfrewi serving merely as a plot device to explain why the stones at Holywell have red spots, followed by a terse obligatory wrapping-up of her Life.

Meanwhile, St. Non's assault not only went entirely unpunished, but the rape was painted as if it were an inescapable destiny for the sake of the birth of David, and it was the rapist who was given the angelic prophecy of the coming of St. David before the fact, not Non.³⁴ That the rape was shameful was still acknowledged in the story, but the shame was put onto the victim rather than the attacker, as “two stones appear[ed] to hide *her* shame” (emphasis added).³⁵ One must wonder, if the miracle of stones appearing to “hide her shame” was possible, why not the divine retribution so often befalling those who attack or threaten a saint – why not one of those miraculous stones crushing her assailant? Non had to be at least willfully a virgin in order to be perceived as ‘pure enough’ to be the mother of a saint so important as David, which meant she could not be the wife of St. David's father. Alas, St. Non's story is a quintessential illustration of Western society's Madonna-whore complex. St. Non's very existence in the narrative was solely for the purpose of serving as a vessel for the birth of a male saint who far outshone her, the bearing of whom is almost certainly the only reason she herself was sainted – a harsh reminder of the status of medieval Welsh women, even popular saints.³⁶ Although Cartwright additionally notes that “... in Wales a number of mother saints are recorded and this is particularly noticeable

³³ Pryce, *Historia Divae Monacellae*, p. 40.

³⁴ Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 2, p. 188: “And the angel further informed him [Sant] that these gifts [the stag, the honey, and the fish] would symbolize the virtues of a son who – notwithstanding that he had embraced the monastic life – would be born to him”.

³⁵ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 156.

³⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 92: “The female saint's virginity, it appears, can be compromised when the conception of a male saint is at stake...”, Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 4, p. 22: ““What is known of S. Non is to be found, almost entirely, in the Life of S. David by Rhygyfarch, and in the Lives based upon it”, and Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 156: “Non is best known in Welsh tradition as David's mother, so much so, that ... David can be referred to simply as ‘mab Non’. The only narrative tradition known about Non is in association with David, and that comes almost entirely from David's Lives”.

in the genealogies,” virtually nothing of their stories survives (if indeed they ever had stories aside from mention as mothers of male saints), and we are left to wonder if, like Non seems to have been, these mothers were only sainted in order to elevate the positions of their sons.³⁷

The examples of Saints Melangell, Gwenfrewi, and Non – whose brief and passive *vitae* and traditions seem to be nothing more than window dressing around land and sanctuary claims (Melangell), the origin story of red spots on stones and the spring itself at Holywell (Gwenfrewi), and a tool to elevate the holiness of another male saint (Non) stand in stark contrast to the traditions behind Saints Brigid and Dwynwen, whose stories feature the heroines taking direct action and leading the situation. Even in the much more concise content of St. Dwynwen’s stories (by comparison to the plethora of stories and poems comprising the traditions of St. Brigid), hers is a tradition filled with miraculous divine interventions which she herself initiates (as opposed to a man initiating on her behalf, or receiving them passively). It is Dwynwen who controls the fate of Maelon (or Maelgwn, depending on the version), leading both to his freezing and, through her mercy, his restoration, as well as controlling her own emotions and fate. She even determines which will be her most prominent saintly intercessory powers herself, rather than their being passively assigned to her at God’s determination. She accomplishes all this by none other than interacting directly with God herself, who not once but four times grants her pious pleas (first in response to her wish to “cure her of her love” – which in some versions is granted by an angel rather than by God directly, and the remaining three times God directly grants her wishes to unfreeze Maelon, to intercede for “all true-hearted lovers”, and to never marry).³⁸

This is not to say that the cults of passive female saints such as Melangell, Gwenfrewi, and Non were unpopular – quite the contrary. St. Melangell’s feast day is found in at least one late medieval liturgical calendar to be the only saint’s feast day marked in red (denoting its primacy) aside from the patron saint of Wales himself.³⁹ In addition, St. Gwenfrewi was “one of the most renowned Welsh saints” and is “one of the few native female saints for whom official prose Lives survive”, while St. Non was “commemorated at several different locations in south Wales, and her cult also transferred to Brittany, Ireland, Cornwall and Devon”.⁴⁰ Indeed, Saints Gwenfrewi and Melangell are two of the nine saints whose shrines are “particularly popular” still in the modern day as pilgrimage destinations.⁴¹ Additionally, all five of the discussed female

³⁷ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 5.

³⁸ Morganwg & Williams (ab Iolo) (trns.), ‘Dwynwen’, *Iolo Manuscripts*, p. 474; Gwyndaf, *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru/Welsh Folk Tales*, p. 33 (ochr Cymraeg/Welsh side) & p. 37 (English side/ochr Saesneg).

³⁹ Huws, Daniel, ‘Llyfr Melangell: Ail-Greu Llyfr Defosiynol’, (2002) 21-27, pp. 23-4: “...mae’r calendr yn un trefnus, a’r gwyliau wedi eu graddio’n dri dosbarth trwy sgrifennu mewn coch, glas a du. Golyga hyn mai diben litwrgaidd oedd i’r calendr ... O droi at y seintiau Cymreig, dau yn unig sydd yn y radd uchaf, mewn coch: Dewi a Melangell (27 Mai) ... Ond yr {yl fwyaf arwyddocaol, a hithau mewn coch, yw eiddo Melangell”.

⁴⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, pp. 72 & 95.

⁴¹ Regarding pilgrimage to Holywell and Pennant Melangell: Keulemans, Michael & Lewis Burton, ‘Sacred place and pilgrimage: modern visitors to the shrine of St. Melangell’, *Rural Theology*, 4: 2, (2006), 99-110, p. 99.

saints have healing wells associated with their names or their holy sites, and miracles are still reported to occur at Pennant Melangell in present times.⁴²

There appear to be four primary factors which differentiate the supernatural abilities of these saints from those of perhaps more condemnable origins: virginity, beauty, and noble lineages – which are valuable in the eyes of men – and piety, which is valuable in the eyes of God. It is not the miraculous abilities themselves which set these saints (or any saints) apart. After all, later folklore also attributes traveling over the sea, difficulty finding help, the bringing forth of a wellspring, and curses befalling their enemies, to the witches of Llanddona – the primary differences being they were poor, not considered conventionally attractive, and not virgins, as their power was passed down from mother to daughter rather than through devotion to God.⁴³ One must wonder then, had these women such as St. Melangell not been born to royalty or men “of high estate”, or not been virgins, or not happened to have been beautiful by the standards of their day, but still lived devout lives and had the same miraculous events attributed to them – would they then have been perceived as witches, their power assumed to be sourced from the magical and diabolical, rather than the miraculous and divine?⁴⁴

There have been substantial overlaps in the themes of the *vita* of Melangell and the traditions of the other female Welsh saints we have examined. These include: 1. their royal (or at least high-born) paternal lineage, 2. their insistence on maintaining their virginity, 3. their setting up or leading of convents and/or hermitage, 4. three of the five of their stories being catalyzed by a royal huntsman, 4. two (or three, depending on the source used for Dwynwen) of their having crossed the Irish Sea, 5. four of the five of their stories beginning at puberty when their chastity is challenged by a male or an arranged marriage, 6. all of them being associated with holy healing springs, and 7. three of the five of them not even being the main driver or focus of their own *vitae*, it seems reasonable to class St. Melangell’s story as fairly typical of Welsh feminine sanctity. The rather significant exceptions – Melangell not being subjected to violence and her

⁴² Regarding their healing wells: Murphy, Luke John & Carly Ameen, ‘The Shifting Baselines of the British Hare Goddess’, *Open Archaeology*, 6, (De Grutyer, 2020) 214-235, p. 226: “...the complex [of Pennant Melangell] includes Ffynnon Cwm Ewyn, a spring ... purported to offer remedies to rheumatism, scrofula, and skin conditions during the Middle Ages”; Baring-Gould & Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, Vol. 2, p. 389: “Ffynnon Fair at Llanddwyn continued in great repute for many centuries”; Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 141: Holywell is the site “whose origin the story [of St. Gwenfrewi] explains”; *Ibid*, p. 157: “[Non has] a number of wells ... small offerings, such as pins, were left in it ... It was said to ebb and flow, and be particularly efficacious for eye complaints”; St. Brigid’s well at Kildare is well-known. Regarding examples of miracles attributed to visits to Pennant Melangell: McLees, Nun Nectaria, ‘Melangell with a Thousand Angels’, *Road to Emmaus*, 10: 1/36 (2014).

⁴³ Gwyndaf, *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru/Welsh Folk Tales*, p. 32 (ochr Cymraeg/Welsh side) & p. 36 (English side/ochr Saesneg): “Siân Bwt was barely four foot tall. She was a dark-faced woman, poorly dressed, with two thumbs on her left hand. The witches came ashore almost dead from hunger and thirst and, according to tradition, commanded that a spring of clear water should appear on the beach. The water issued forth at their feet. They lived by begging and cursing and it was believed that their power descended from one generation to the next, especially from mother to daughter”.

⁴⁴ Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, p. 151: “*Buchedd Beuno*, which names her father as Temic fab Eliud, and *Vita Wenefrede*, which names him as Teuyth Eylud filius, indicate that he [St. Gwenfrewi’s father] is simply a man of high estate”.

story involving the protection of a hunted animal (not atypical of saints' *vitae* in general, but not a feature of other known Welsh female saints, granted, they are few) – must, however, be taken into account, as these are what most make St. Melangell's tradition stand out from her Welsh female religious peers in the literary sense.

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