How are medieval Welsh women depicted in poetry? Analyse a range of medieval poems in your response.

The cannon of Welsh poetry from the Middle Ages is abundant with male bards, and yet sparse of female poets, though we know women were writing during this time.[1] Despite the lack of surviving material written by women, the poetry of the Middle Ages frequently features female subjects. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan writes that 'Welsh women are highly visible in Middle Welsh poetry and prose, but almost invariably as characters or subjects'[2]demonstrating the plenitude of literature featuring women whilst also highlighting the lack of extant material written by them. Here we will seek to explore the various portrayals of women during the Middle Ages in Wales. Through an analysis of several poems and genres, we will endeavour to determine how Welsh women are depicted during the medieval period.

The extant poetry of the earlier medieval period is primarily focused on the heroism of men in battle and so does not feature women prominently. Attributed to Aneirin,[3] *Y Gododdin*[4] is comprised of elegies to fallen warriors, reflecting the poetry of the *Cynfeirdd*[5] which sought to create a picture of male courage. Krista Kapphahn terms the early Welsh poetry an 'excessively masculine affair'[6] highlighting the focus on traditional male roles. Ironically then, the lack of women featured *is* a form of depiction in itself as women are 'other' to the heroes of these poems. Kapphahn states that the image of women 'consists primarily of contrast'[7] thus showing

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[1] For discussion on female poets in Wales see Cathryn A. Charnell-White 'Problems Of Authorship And Attribution: The Welsh-Language Women's Canon Before 1800' in *Women's Writing from Wales before 1914* (Routledge: 2021).

[2] Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'More Written About Than Writing', in Pryce, H. (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.149.

[3] We know very little about Aneirin other than the poems attributed to him. For discussion see Ifor Williams, *Canu Aneirin*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1938).

[4] *Y Gododdin* is found in the *Book of Aneirin* which has been dated to 1250-1300, see Huws, D., *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000). There is dispute over the date of the actual poem, with Ifor Williams hesitant to date it, scholars generally regard it being composed sometime between the 6th century and 10th century. For analysis and discussion see Williams, I., 'The Gododdin Poems' in *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry* ed. by Bromwich, R. (University Press Cambridge, 1980), pp. 50-69 and more recently, Koch, J., *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff:University of Wales Press, 1997).

[5] The *Cynfeirdd* is the name given to the earliest Welsh poets, dating from before 1100 AD, with the poetry being termed *hengerdd* or 'oldest poetry'. For discussion see A. T. E. Matonis, 'Traditions of Panegyric in Welsh Poetry: The Heroic and the Chivalric' *Speculum*, vol. 53, no. 4, (1978), p. 667.

[6] Krista Kapphahn 'Constructions of Gender in Medieval Welsh Literature' (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Aberystwyth, 2009), p. 6.

[7] Kapphahn, 'Constructions of Gender in Medieval Welsh Literature, p. 10.

how women are defined for their lack of male characteristics. The limited mentions of women are in relation to the men, as mothers or a rare glimpse into the emotional impact of the men's battle with 'Eudaf's daughter's, Gwananhon's strife,'[8] offering no real portrayal or active participation in events. Matonis tells us that 'a clear picture of the heroic ideal emerges from this poetry'[9]further highlighting how descriptions of masculinity define the ideal of femininity in opposition to it. The slightly later *englynion chwedlonol*[10] of 'Canu Heledd'[11] offers a possibility of a rare female perspective although likely one originating with a male writer. Nevertheless, the intention to offer a glimpse into the female experience of war during this time gives insight into the impact of war on women. For Dorothy Ann Bray 'the emphasis is not on the battle itself nor on the heroic deeds of her brothers, but on the aftermath of war'[12] thus incorporating women's lived experience into the narrative. As Jenny Rowland points out 'the stories behind the *englynion* are realistic'[13]demonstrating that this portrayal of a grieving woman is likely an accurate one. However, we still do not receive a full portrait of women's lives through this narrative, as Rowland observes, 'the poet chose not to relate Heledd's story, but rather her response to events'[14] highlighting the lack of depiction of the full lives of medieval women in the earliest Welsh poems.

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[8] Aneirin 'Y Gododdin' in Clancy, Joseph P. *Earliest Welsh Poetry*. (Macmillan, London & New York, 1970), p. 33.

[9] A. T. E. Matonis, 'Traditions of Panegyric in Welsh Poetry: The Heroic and the Chivalric' *Speculum*, vol. 53, no. 4, (1978), p. 667.

[10] *Englynion chwedlonol* is the Welsh form of longer narrative saga poetry, written in englyn form. An *englyn* is a shorter poetic verse form, featuring the strict *cynghanedd* form, with the added challenge of less space within which to convey the intended message or imagery. For discussion on the early and developing *englyn* form see Kenneth Jackson, 'Incremental Repetition in the Early Welsh Englyn', *Speculum*, vol. 16, no. 3, (1941), pp. 304-21. There are four principle types of *cynghanedd- Cynghanedd groes (criss-crossing), cynghanedd sain (sonorous), cynghanedd draws (bridging)* and *cynghanedd lusg (echoing)* with many possible variations. For a detailed explanation on *Cynghanedd* see Mererid Hopwood *Singing in Chains - Listening to Welsh Verse* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2015).

[11] 'Canu Heledd' is thought to date from between the 9th-11th century, found in *Llyfr Coch Hergest, The Red Book of Hergest*, which itself is dated by Daniel Huws to approximately 1382-1400. For discussion see Rowland, J., 'The Prose Setting of the Early Welsh Englynion Chwedlonol' *Ériu*, vol. 36, (1985), pp. 29-43 Huws, D., 'Llyfr Coch Hergest' [The Red Book of Hergest]' in *Cyfoeth y Testun: Ysgrifau ar Lenyddiaeth Gymraeg yr Oesoedd Canol* ed. by Daniel, R. Iestyn; et al., (Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2003), pp. 1-30.

[12] Dorothy Ann Bray, 'A Woman's Loss and Lamentation: Heledd's Song and "The Wife's Lament"' *Neophilologus,* (1995), p. 147.

[13] Jenny Rowland, 'The Prose Setting of the Early Welsh *Englynion Chwedlonol*,' *Ériu*, vol. 36, (1985), p. 32.

[14] Rowland, 'The Prose Setting of the Early Welsh *Englynion Chwedlonol*,' p. 41.

Turning now to the poetry written during the *Gogynfeirdd*[15] era, where we see a departure from the singularly focused heroic poetry to the beginnings of the *canu serch* genre.[16] Some of the earliest *canu serch,* is attributed to Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd (1120–1170).[17] In 'Gorhoffedd Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd,' commonly translated as 'Hywel's Boast' or 'Exultation,'[18] we receive the mention of several women. Starting with 'Gwenllian whose complexion is like the Summer's day,'[19] we see the use of *dyfalu*[20] connecting women with nature. Here Gwenllian is compared with the warmest season, thus evoking feelings of warmth, youth and fertility, the original Welsh being 'Gwenllian lliw hafn'[21] stating she *is* the colour of Summer. Spring and summer are common motifs utilised to symbolise a time for being amorous. With 'Gwladys, the young and modest virgin,'[22] we see praise for virginity. Michaela Jacques observes that she is 'covertly eroticised in the description of her chastity'[23]demonstrating how the juxtaposition of desire and virginity is often employed. Further to this, Laura Radiker states that in medieval poetry 'maidens are not to be so amiable as to threaten their maiden-like status'[24]thus placing women in the dual position of being the prized object and in danger of falling from this status if the union were ever to be consummated. The final part of the poem lists several anonymous women, their names notably absent, appearing solely as numbers, seen with 'Keuais deir a

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[15] *Y Gogynfeirdd* or 'Earlier poets' were also called the *Beirdd y Tywysogion* or 'Poets of the Princes' writing beterrn approximately 1100-1482, were so named for composing under the patronage of Welsh princes. For detailed discussion see Parry, John J. 'The Court Poets of the Welsh Princes' *PMLA*, vol. 67, no. 4, (1952), pp. 511–20, Fulton, H. 'Literature of the Welsh Gentry: Uses of the Vernacular in Medieval Wales', in *Vernacularity in England and Wales, c. 1300–1550*, ed. Elisabeth Salter and Helen Wicker, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 195–218.and McKenna, Catherine. "Performing Penance and Poetic Performance in the Medieval Welsh Court." *Speculum*, vol. 82, no. 1, (2007), pp. 70–96.

[16] *Canu serch,* meaning love poetry or songs, most associated with the *Cywyddwyr* poets writing between c.1300–1600.

[17] Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd was a poet during the *Gogynfeirdd* era of poetry, yet being the son of Owain Gwynedd, ruler of Gwynedd he was not a professional bard. At the end of his life he became ruler of Gwynedd, dying in a battle which took place at Pentraeth, Ynys Mon. For more detail on this point in Welsh history see Davies, J., *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 125.

[18] The translation that will be used here is Thomas Stephens's version, found in *The Literature of the Kymry* (William Rees, 1849), pp. 51-56, here Stephen's entitles the poem 'Howel's Delight'. For detailed analysis of the entire poem as well as the 'Gorhoffedd' attributed to Gwalchmai ap Meilyr (fl. 1130-80) see Lea, A.E., *Contextualizing the 'Gorhoffeddau' A Study in the Intellectual Background of Two Medieval Welsh Poems*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University 1995)

[19] Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd 'Gorhoffedd Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd,' in Thomas Stephens *The Literature of the Kymr,y* (William Rees, 1849), p. 54

[20] *Dyfalu* is the poetic technique of using extended metaphor or similitude to build imagery.

[21] Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd 'Gorhoffedd Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd,. 54

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 54

[23] Michaela Jacques 'Sexual Discourse and Structural Unity in Hywel Ab Owain Gwynedd's Gorhoffedd' *Studia Celtica*, vol. 52, (2018), p. 118.

[24] Laura Radiker, 'Traditional and Courtly Themes in a Medieval Welsh Elegy to 'G6ann Wargann Wery' ('A Fair Virgin, Meek and Mild')),' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 24/25, (2004), p. 107.

phedeir a ffawd'/ 'I had a third and a fourth with prosperity'[25]showing the absence of any personal description, yet the use of 'keuais' or 'I had' denoting that women are a consumable item. As Jacques notes of the original Welsh, 'the repetition of keueis throughout this last section serves to reinforce the speaker's agency,'[26] with 'I had' displaying the boasting discourse used around women. This early *canu serch* poetry then, lays the foundations for the depiction of women as physical objects of desire, framed by the poet's lust for them.

Additionally, there is contention as to the authorship of the poem due to the duality of its content.[27] An *awdl*[28]following the strict metre form, the first half of the poem is dedicated to praise of Gwynedd, written in the form of *cyhydedd naw ban.*[29] The second section deviates from this form and is devoted to portrayals of women. However, as Lea points out the two halves can be united through being 'an expression of the Celtic concept of the land personified as a woman'[30] illustrating that linking women with the land is a common motif used in Celtic literature. This is exemplified by the much debated idea that the character of Rhiannon in *The Mabinogion* is a land sovereignty Goddess.[31] Jacques uses the word 'conquest'[32]to denote Hywel's listing of women, a term which further solidifies the relationship between land and women. To the medieval male poet, both are physical sites to be claimed and conquered. Furthermore, when we consider the time during which Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd was writing, the politically unstable landscape of Wales during the 12th century, we can see the importance placed on land. In his *History of Wales,* John Davies tells us that during the rule of Hywel's father, Owain Gwynedd, 'on several occasions between 1158 and 1163 there were campaigns against him by the forces of the English crown'[33] pointing to the turbulent background upon which the poem was devised. This context also brings to the poem connotations of dominion, with both territories and women situated as sites for control and incursion. Further to this,

[25] Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd 'Gorhoffedd Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd,' in Thomas Stephens *The Literature of the Kymr,y* (William Rees, 1849), p. 55.
[26] Jacques, 'Sexual Discourse and Structural Unity in Hywel Ab Owain Gwynedd's Gorhoffedd,' p. 119.
[27] For further discussion on the authorship and dating of the poem see Gwyn Williams *Welsh Poems, Sixth Century to 1600* (University of California Press, 1973).
[28] An *awdl* is a long form strict metre poem, and using *cynghanedd.*
[29] *Cyhydedd naw ban* is a poetic structure featuring nine syllables per line.
[30] A. E Lea, *Contextualizing the 'Gorhoffeddau' A Study in the Intellectual Background of Two Medieval Welsh Poems*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University 1995) p. 148.
[31] For discussion on Rhiannon as Goddess see Sessle, Erica J. 'Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess through the role of Rhiannon' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 14, (1994), pp. 9–13.
[32] Jacques, 'Sexual Discourse and Structural Unity in Hywel Ab Owain Gwynedd's Gorhoffedd,' p. 119.
[33] Davies, J., *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 125.

Jacques notes of the namelessness of the women that 'as signs they are empty, unspecified and undefined,'[34]accentuating the lack of true characterisation. Hanna Hopwood also observes that often 'the poems of the *canu serch* genre are addressed to unnamed women with very few biographical facts available to link the subject in the poem to real people'[35]showing that the poem offers the idea of a woman rather than a depiction of real Welsh women at this time.

Dafydd ap Gwilym continues this association of women with nature in his own *canu serch* poetry. Helen Fulton tells us that Dafydd's poetry is 'intimately connected with his love of nature'[36]showing that perhaps here, women largely exist as a feature to exercise his imagination upon, rather than providing a true portrait. This is illustrated in his *cywydd,*[37] 'Morfudd Fel yr Haul'[38]wherein he compares his desired object of love, Morfudd, to the sun through the use of *dyfalu.* Susan Johns writes that 'Medieval poets and writers deployed a stock range of images drawn from late-Classic ideals'[39]and this can be seen Dafydd's poetry. As with the stereotyped classical portrayals of women, here women are presented in an idealised way and not as they truly are, as whole, human women. Dafydd overtly references classical writing by comparing his potential lovers to women of mythology, describing one woman as 'a second Elen,'[40] invoking Helen of Troy. Francesca and Rhys Kaminski-Jones tells us that 'this mirroring of the Classical in the Celtic has often been bound up with the perceived prestige of Classical antiquity'[41]showing the influence of the classical period on medieval ideas of beauty and identity.

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[34] Jacques, 'Sexual Discourse and Structural Unity in Hywel Ab Owain Gwynedd's Gorhoffedd,' p. 119.
[35] Hanna Hopwood, 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2016), p. 53.
[36] Helen Fulton, 'The Love Poetry of Dafydd Ap Gwilym' *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association,* (1978), p. 36.
[37] The *cywydd* is a poetic form wherein poems are composed in strict metre. It was a popular form during the medieval period and is still in use today. For discussions on the *cywydd* form see *Genres y Cywydd* ed. by Bleddyn Huws and Cynfael Lake (Talybont: Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2016).
[38]Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Morfudd Fel yr Haul', https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+214130+compareNotesEng.anv+edEl=213177&localEl=214130&titleEl=213165 [Accessed on 24/04/2026].
[39] Susan M. Johns 'Beauty and the Feast: The Cultural Constructions of Female Beauty and Social Interaction in Twelfth-Century Wales', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 30, (2010), p. 108.
[40]Dafydd ap Gwilym 'Ei Gysgod' / 'His Shadow' https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+128304+compareSimpleEng.anv+edEl=127981&localEl=128304&titleEl=127969 [Accessed on 21/04/2026].
[41] Francesca Kaminski-Jones, and Rhys Kaminski-Jones in 'Introduction' to *Celts, Romans, Britons: Classical and Celtic Influence in the Construction of British Identities*, (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 13.

As with the classical period, there is an emphasis in the *canu serch* on beauty being equated with youth and this is how we see most women depicted. However, we witness the reverse in Dafydd's lament to Morfudd's aged appearance in 'Morfudd yn Hen.'[42] Dafydd tells us that 'she was once fair'[43]revealing his belief that Morfudd is not as desirable with age. In her work *The Beauty Myth,* Naomi Wolf writes that 'aging in women is "unbeautiful" since women grow more powerful with time'[44] and whilst Wolf is speaking of more modern beauty standards, this can be applied to medieval Wales where older women did potentially have more power. Young women in medieval Wales held very little agency, their primary role being, as Morfydd Owen informs us, a 'unifying force between kins,'[45]through marriage. Women's other function was as mothers, being the 'genetrice in whose person lay the future of her husband's kin'[46] showing the limited choices for noble women at this time. Dorothy Dilts Swartz states that 'a woman's status in early societies often reflects her usefulness'[47]showing how younger women would be prized for their fertility. Yet providing usefulness is not the same as holding power. The potential for additional influence then, came with age for women in the Middle Ages. As is set out in *Cyfraith Hywel,*[48] the Welsh laws, when women entered marriage, they would receive wedding payments termed *cowyll*[49] following their wedding night. As Swartz notes, 'gifts presumably either from this first marriage or later ones belonged to the woman herself'[50]displaying the assets that women were entitled to. Further to this, even though Dafydd

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[42] Dafydd ap Gwilym 'Morfudd yn Hen' / 'Morfudd Grown Old' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+269223+compareSimpleEng.anv+edEl=269001&localEl=269223&titleEl=268989> [Accessed on 22/04/2026].

[43] Dafydd ap Gwilym 'Morfudd yn Hen' / 'Morfudd Grown Old' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+269223+compareSimpleEng.anv+edEl=269001&localEl=269223&titleEl=268989> [Accessed on 22/04/2026].

[44] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 14.

[45] Morfydd Owen 'Shame and Reparation: Women's Place in the Kin' in *The Welsh Law of Women* ed. By Jenkins, D. and Owen, M. E (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p.40.

[46] *Ibid.,* p. 40.

[47] Swartz, Dorothy Dilts. 'The Legal Status of Women in Early and Medieval Ireland and Wales in Comparison with Western European and Mediterranean Societies: Environmental and Social Correlations' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 13, (1993), p. 110.

[48] *Cyfraith Hywel* or the Law of Hywel Dda are the medieval Welsh laws associated with Hywel ap Cadell or Hywel Dda (Hywel the good). Hywel Dda governed Wales in 10th Century AD and is credited with the codifying of the medieval law. For discussion and the full laws see *The Law of Hywel Dda - Law texts from medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins (Y Lolfa, 2025).

[49] As noted in *Cyfraith Hywell*, *Cowyll* was payable to a woman by her husband following the wedding night. For the Law of Women tractate see *The Law of Hywel Dda*, - *Law texts from medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins (Y Lolfa, 2025).

[50] Swartz,'The Legal Status of Women in Early and Medieval Ireland and Wales in Comparison with Western European and Mediterranean Societies: Environmental and Social Correlations,' p. 112.

Jenkins finds that the Welsh Law of Women in *Cyfraith Hywel* makes no provision for widows, commenting that 'the wife would have no land,'[51] in practice this may not have been the case. Emma Cavell observes that for some widows;

> English models of women's landholding (not all of them for dower) were adopted and refashioned in a manner that also catered to the broad parameters of the native legal system and to the domestic political dispensation of thirteenth-century Wales[52]

This shows then that there was potential for women to expand upon the rights set out in the Law of Women tractate. Cavell also notes that we can view 'aristocratic women as agents of legal and social change in thirteenth-century Wales,'[53] demonstrating the potential for increased power in later life for medieval Welsh women.

Furthering the depictions of idealised physical beauty is the focus on women's hair, a significant motif in medieval Welsh poetry. Hanna Hopwood tells us that 'the images used by the Welsh poets are also in keeping with the courtly European literature of the period'[54]indicating the potential influence of French *amour courtois* or *fin amour* poetry.[55] Robert Bartlett finds that 'an equation of long hair with high birth is found in many medieval societies'[56]thus demonstrating the significance of hair being used to depict women as being of noble status, elevating them in the poetry. In the work of Dafydd Nanmor (fl. 1450 – 1490) we see these conventions adhered to as he writes 'The truly beautiful woman with hair like the flower of the broom'[57] comparing his subject's hair with flowers. This echoes the descriptions of Olwen in *How Culhwch Won Olwen* with 'Yellower was her hair than flowers of the

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[51] Dafydd Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women' in *The Welsh Law of Women,* ed. By Jenkins, D. and M. Owen, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 85.

[52] Emma Cavell, 'Widows, Native Law and the Long Shadow of England in Thirteenth-Century Wales' *The English Historical Review*, vol. 133, no. 565, (2018), p. 1418.

[53] *Ibid.,* p. 1391.

[54] Hanna Hopwood, 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature,' p. 50.

[55] *Amour Courtois,* meaning 'courtly love' and *fin amour* meaning 'refined love' are the names given to the genre of love poetry in medieval France. For further discussion on the genre, see Bryson, Michael, and Arpi Movsesian, 'The Troubadours and Fin'amor: Love, Choice, and the Individual' *Love and Its Critics: From the Song of Songs to Shakespeare and Milton's Eden*, (Open Book Publishers, 201)7, pp. 121–94.

[56] Robert Bartlett, 'Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 4, (1994), p. 44.

[57] Dafydd Nanmor, trans. by Hanna Hopwood, Hopwood, H., 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature,' p. 51.

broom'[58]and is reminiscent of the conjuring of Blodeuedd with 'they took the flowers of the broom.'[59] This repeated comparison then shows the beauty standard of the time, with the poetry of the *Cywyddwyr* reflecting prose conventions also. In 'Gwallt Morfudd'/ 'Morfudd's Hair'[60] we see Dafydd ap Gwilym's praise for Morfudd's 'grove of pure gold'[61] making the comparison to the precious commodity. The Welsh for gold, 'aur' and variants upon this are mentioned five times to fully emphasise this, the association with gold enhancing the woman's worth. This is further reiterated in 'Morfudd Fel yr Haul,'[62] with the simile of Morfudd being like the sun creating a feeling of unattainability, both with her ethereal beauty and as a lover for Dafydd.

Furthermore, in the Middle Ages, most women were expected to keep their hair covered, with Hopwood noting that 'the inclusion of references to the other features of the face suggests that a woman was obliged to hide her hair'[63]thus highlighting the control placed on women's appearance. Bartlett finds, particularly in the depictions of married women, that in having flowing hair they are 'unloosing bonds, both physical and metaphorically,'[64]illustrating that the focus on hair goes beyond merely a physical description, symbolising a freedom often unavailable in the reality of medieval women's lives. Fulton writes that the *canu serch* sought to picture an 'ideal of freedom in direct opposition to types of imprisonment, whether by marriage or in a convent'[65]offering a glimpse of a life very different to the actual existence of medieval women. A carefully crafted fantasy where women can frolic for hours in the woods with a caring, attentive lover. The price to enter this daydream being her virginity, with multiple poems expressing the wish for the subject to relinquish her virginity. In 'Merched Llanbadarn,'[66] Dafydd ap Gwilym complains that he can seduce 'neither a virgin (a pleasant

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[58] *How Culhwch Won Olwen* in *The Mabinogion* trans. S. Davies, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 192.
[59] *The Fourth Branch* in *The Mabinogion* trans. S. Davies, p.58.
[60] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Gwallt Morfudd'/ 'Morfudd's Hair' trans. by Dafydd Johnston <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> [Accessed on 17/04/2026].
[61] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Gwallt Morfudd'/ 'Morfudd's Hair' trans. by Dafydd Johnston <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> [Accessed on 17/04/2026].
[62] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Morfudd fel yr Haul',/ 'Morfudd Like the Sun,' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+214130+compareNotesEng.anv+edEl=213177&localEl=214130&titleEl=213165> [Accessed on 24/04/2026].
[63] Hopwood, 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature,' p. 253.
[64] Bartlett, 'Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages,' p. 54.
[65] Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, *21*, (1991), p. 102.
[66] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Merched Llanbadarn'/ 'Girls of Llanbadarn' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+253098+compareSimpleEng.anv+edEl=252861&localEl=253098&titleEl=252849> [Accessed on 23/04/2026].

desire)/ nor a little girl nor hag nor wife'[67] displaying the preference for seducing a virgin. Virginity was prized and politicised during medieval times. As noted, a young woman was 'obliged to preserve'[68] her purity to be of use for familial benefit, whereas the Church revered virginity as a rejection of the material.[69] *Cyfraith Hywel* displays this significance placed upon virginity by stating that if a woman is deemed to be a 'twyllforwyn' or 'false virgin,'[70]then she is 'found to be corrupted'[71] and must be held to account. Cartwright observes this would be by 'means of sexual humiliation'[72]shaming the woman publicly, thus highlighting the control exerted on women through the policing of their virginity.

In addition to the idea of virginity being a recurring theme in medieval poetry, is the unusual strand of *Canu Serch*, the works written to nuns. In 'Cyrchu Lleian'/ 'Wooing a Nun,'[73] Dafydd ap Gwilym sets out his wish to seduce a 'fair girl.'[74] The girl in question being one from 'proud Llanllugan,'[75]a Cistercian nunnery in Powys.[76] The translation of 'wooing' in English implies a more gentle approach than the original Welsh 'cyrchu,' one meaning of which can be to attack.[77] That said, 'cyrchu' can also be used with the idea of seeking or moving toward

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[67] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Merched Llanbadarn'/ 'Girls of Llanbadarn' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+253098+compareSimpleEng.anv+edEl=252861&localEl=253098&titleEl=252849> [Accessed on 23/04/2026].

[68] Owen 'Shame and Reparation: Women's Place in the Kin,' p. 45.

[69] For discussion on virginity and religion see Rieder, P. M., 'The Uses and Misuses of Misogyny: A Critical Historiography of the Language of Medieval Women's Oppression', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 38, no. 1, (2012), pp. 1–18

[70] For discussion on these terms see Cartwright, J., 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose' in Bernau, A. et al. *Medieval Virginites* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.63.

[71] *The Law of Hywel Dda*, - *Law texts from medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins (Y Lolfa, 2025).p. 49.

[72] Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose' in Bernau, A. et al. *Medieval Virginites* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.63.

[73] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cyrchu Lleian'/ 'Wooing a Nun,' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> [Accessed on 14/04/2026].

[74] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cyrchu Lleian'/ 'Wooing a Nun,' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> [Accessed on 14/04/2026].

[75] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cyrchu Lleian'/ 'Wooing a Nun,' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> [Accessed on 14/04/2026].

[76] Llanllugan was one of only three nunneries in Wales at this time, the others being Llanllyr and Usk. An additional site possibly existed at Llansanffraid, yet this is uncertain, see Jeanne Mehan 'The Search for San Ffraid' (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2012).

[77] Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru entry for 'cyrchu' lists the primary usage as 'approach', 'fetch', 'seek' and further uses as 'attack' and 'assault' < https://welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html?cyrchu> [accessed on 20/04/2026].

someone. Fulton translates 'Cyrchu Lleian' as 'Fetching a Nun,'[78] which might be the more fitting translation. Fulton describes the poem as 'bold to the point of blasphemy'[79]showing the bawdiness of the language used towards both nuns and religious figures. In the poem, Dafydd refers to the nuns as 'Mary's girls,'[80]emphasising their status as virginal as the Virgin Mary had a strong cult in medieval Wales.[81] Cartwright notes 'the poet's perception of the female religious as corruptible virgin'[82]and so perhaps the idea of religious women was an additional level of temptation to explore through poetry. The *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid,*[83] the Welsh Bardic Grammars, set out several strict guidelines as to how noblewomen should be appropriately referred to, including the qualities of humility and generosity.[84] Similar instructions were set out relating to nuns with Cartwright noting that they tell us 'a nun should be praised for her holiness.'[85] The poetry of the bards who seek to corrupt nuns directly contravenes these rules then. As mentioned with regards to the wider genre of *canu serch*, the subjects of these poems are rarely named. Therefore, it could be that the idea of a corruptible virgin nun is a trope, used by the male poets to exercise their poetic skills, extending the metaphor of enticing a virgin, varying the conceit for the audience. Fulton calls the poetry to nuns a 'variant form'[86] of the *cywyddau* addressed to noble women, given that the majority of the nuns in question would likely have been of the same class. As Fulton also points out 'women of the lower classes virtually never became nuns…they actually had more options than noblewomen'[87]showing that committing to a nunnery was one of few choices a higher status woman could make at this time.

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[78] Fulton note the title given by Thomas Parry in *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* and translates it as 'Fetching a Nun', 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, *21*, (1991), p .88.
[79] Helen Fulton, 'The Love Poetry of Dafydd Ap Gwilym' *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association,* (1978), p. 32.
[80] Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cyrchu Lleian'/ 'Wooing a Nun,' <https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> [Accessed on 14/04/2026].
[81] For further discussion on the Welsh cult of Mary see Jane Cartwright 'The Welsh Cult of the Virgin Mary' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales,* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).
[82] Cartwright 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales', p. 177.
[83] For the grammars see *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid* ed. by G.J. Williams and E.J. Jones, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1934).
[84] Hanna Hopwood translates the following from the Grammars; 'A girl is praised for her appearance and loveliness and discreet nature, and humility and the excellence of her manner and actions, and generosity and virginity and praiseworthiness and nobility and modesty and kindness and to her love and desire belong' *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid*, ed. by G. J. Williams and E. J. Jones (Cardiff, 1934), p. 16 as cited in Hopwood, 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature,' p. 132.
[85] Cartwright 'The desire to corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales'' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 188.

[86] Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, *21*, (1991), p. 98.
[87] *Ibid.,* p. 96.

Another erotic poem to a religious woman is one by Hywel Dafi, entitled 'Cywydd Merch'/ 'Poem to a Girl,'[88] a voyeuristic work describing the illicit observation of a woman praying to the Virgin Mary. Hywel describes watching her 'reciting psalms from her mouth/ On her knees before Mary'[89]juxtaposing religious imagery with the sexual connotations of her listed body parts. Though much of the *canu serch* poetry involves the male view of the female, Lloyd-Morgan emphasises the heightened lustful tone here, calling the work a 'classic male sexual fantasy.'[90] The framing of women through the male perspective is visually doubled through the limited perspective of the secreted voyeur as seen with 'Between two fine bed curtains if only I could have her.'[91] The drawn out description is pornographic in tone, fetishising the woman as an inventory of parts to be visually consumed, rather than seeing her as a complete woman. As Helen O'Sullivan observes of the device within the wider genre 'we are almost reading an auctioneer's catalogue of attractions'[92]and just as modern cinematic depictions of women use slow camera pans across female body parts to this effect, so too do the male poets with their words. In her work on the male gaze,[93] Laura Mulvey observes that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female'[94] and we see this in the poetry of the medieval period. Women are not active participants in a mutual relationship, but blank subjects for fantasies to be projected on to. On medieval erotic poetry, Dafydd Johnston writes that 'these terms do not necessarily imply that such material would have had an arousing effect on its original audience'[95]and when applied to the bawdy

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[88] Hywel Dafi *Gwaith Hywel Dafi* ed. by C. Lake (Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru, 2015), p. 499. Translations here are from Lloyd-Morgan, C., 'More written about than writing' in Pryce, H. (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 159 and Cartwright, J., 'The desire to corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales'' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 193, each use will be indicated.

[89] Hywel Dafi 'Cywydd Merch'/ 'Poem to a Girl' trans. by Lloyd-Morgan, C., 'More written about than writing' in Pryce, H. (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 159

[90] Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'More written about than writing' in Pryce, H. (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 159.

[91] Hywel Dafi 'Cywydd Merch'/ 'Poem to a Girl' trans. by Cartwright, J., 'The desire to corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales'' in *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 193.

[92] Helen O'Sullivan, 'Developments in Love Poetry in Irish, Welsh , and Scottish Gaelic, Before 1650' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 1976), p. 199.

[93] For her theory on the male gaze see Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen*, 16, I3, Autumn, (1975), pp. 6–18 which although a theory developed for film media, is equally applicable to literary texts.

[94] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen*, 16, I3, Autumn, (1975), p. 11.

[95] Dafydd Johnston 'Erotica and Satire in Medieval Welsh Poetry' in Ziolkowski, J., ed., *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages,* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) p. 60.

sexual language found in the *ymrysonau*[96] between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain, for example, this feels a valid statement.[97] Here, however the same cannot be applied, differentiating then between poetry that is erotic and poetry that is pornographic, with Dafi's piece being more in line with the latter. Additionally, Mulvey details that 'fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object'[98]and we see this in many poems in the genre including 'Dai neithiwyr, delwi a wneuthum'/ 'Last night at a distance,'[99] which Fulton also attributes to Hywel Dafi. In the piece we see an intricate description of a woman's face, seen with 'her sweet breath from her nostrils; and a chin, colour of ocean flood, which reaches to her cheek, lively on a slim white neck'[100]illustrating, as Mulvey describes, 'the image of woman as (passive) raw material'[101] to which the male poet can assign his ideas. Fulton notes that in the poem 'the girl's features also conform to the highest standards of feminine beauty'[102]further illustrating the lens of the male gaze through which medieval Welsh women are firmly positioned.

The *canu serch* addressed to nuns and religious women seems further disturbing when the historical context of attacks on nunneries are considered. Cartwright finds that there are 'numerous examples of saints and nuns who plucked out their eyes or cut off their noses in order to avoid marriage or rape'[103]demonstrating the fear of rape at this time. This was not an unfounded fear as Nerys Patterson finds that 'rape was not an improbable danger'[104]during this time. Jane Schulenberg observes that during the Nordic raids of the 11th century, 'the nuns heroically attempted to protect their virginity by mutilating themselves'[105]as multiple sites were

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[96] *Ymryson* was a form of dialogic poetry, whereby poets would engage in debates and exchange critiques of one another. Several poets engaged in this style including Gwerful with Dafydd Llwyd. The genre is exemplified by the long back and forth compositions of Edmwnd Prys (1544 - 1623) and Wiliam Cynwal (d. 1588) To read further on this see Williams, Gruffydd Aled. 'The Poetic Debate of Edmwnd Prys and Wiliam Cynwal.' *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, (2004), pp. 33–54.
[97] For the *ymrysonau* between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain see Gwerful Mechain, 'Ymddidan rhwng Dafydd Llwyd a Gwerful Mechain'/ 'Conversation between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain', ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 82.
[98] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' p.14.
[99] Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p. 109.
[100] *Ibid.,* p. 109.
[101] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' p. 18.
[102] Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' p. 93.
[103] Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales', *Medium Ævum*, Vol. 71, No. 1, (2002), p. 14.
[104] Nerys Patterson, 'Woman as Vassal: Gender Symmetry in Medieval Wales' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 8, (1988), p. 39.
[105] Jane Schulenburg, 'Women's Monastic Communities, 500-1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline' *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 2, (1989), p. 276.

destroyed and that the legacy of this was 'a toll in human suffering and psychological trauma,'[106] likely passed on throughout the medieval period. As Owen states 'the most extreme violation a girl might suffer was the forcible termination of her virginity by rape'[107]with *Cyfraith Hywel* making it clear the high levels of compensation owed for this crime.[108]Though the Law tractate concerning rape and compensation make clear the gravitas of the crime, we do not have the full picture regarding actual figures on rape, just as we often still do not today.

Poetry which potentially moves beyond the idealised beauty stereotypes of the *canu serch* by focusing on women's other qualities, is that of the *canu mawl, canu gofyn* and *canu diolch*[109] Here, the *Beirdd yr Uchelwyr* would praise and beseech their patrons for material support and there are multiple poems addressed to patronesses. and this can also be seen in Guto'r Glyn's poetry. In 'Request for an Irish mantle from Elen daughter of Robert Puleston of Llannerch,'[110]Guto'r Glyn lavishes praise upon his patroness in the seeking of a tradition woollen cloak. Guto'r Glyn calls upon three other notable women called Elen, a commonly used device by male poets, as in alluding to well-known figures, the poet is aligning his subject with them and their qualities. Hopwood states that the *canu mawl* poetry 'portrays the ideal woman as beautiful, chaste but fertile, rich, from good lineage and with good morals'[111] showing that the genre does not particularly transcend traditional depictions. Yet, that *canu mawl* and *canu gofyn a diolch* addressed to women exists suggests that medieval women did have the power to grant or at least influence such requests. As mentioned, we know from the Law of Women tractate in *Cyfraith Hywel* that women were able to keep their own assets and receive their share of marital goods during divorce too. Additionally, noting the difference in descriptions between the *canu serch* and praise of noblewomen in *canu mawl*, Marged Haycock

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[106] *Ibid.,* p. 276.
[107] Owen, 'Shame and Reparation,' p. 49.
[108] Owen tells us that 'if a woman, who is a virgin, be raped her attacker is expected to pay *amobr* to the lord…and *cowyll* to the girl as well as her *sarhaed* or *wynebwerth'* Owen, 'Shame and Reparation,' p. 49.
[109] *Canu mawl* is praise poetry, for further discussion on women and *canu mawl* see Hanna Hopwood, 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2016), see For further discussion on *Canu Gofyn* and *Canu Diolch* see Bleddyn Owen Huws *Y Canu Gofyn a Diolch c.1350-c.1630* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).
[110]Guto'r Glyn 'Request for an Irish mantle from Elen daughter of Robert Puleston of Llannerch,' ed. by Alaw Mai Edwards accessed 10/04/2026 at <https://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/>
[111] Hopwood, 'Highlighting Hair: What can be revealed from reading hair in Medieval Welsh literature,' p. 132.

writes that 'physicality was kept firmly in check'[112] which we see here with an emphasis on generosity, rather than beauty. In his piece 'To thank Joan Burgh daughter of William Clopton of Wattlesborough for her care,'[113] Guto'r Glyn elevates Joan to that of saintly status, praising her hospitality and food as being healing. St Gwenfrewy is alluded to with Guto'r Glyn stating Joan's wine and mead 'had a greater healing effect'[114] thus elevating her position to miracle worker. However, despite the poem being addressed to Joan, her husband is mentioned several times with 'she and Sir John are the stars of saints'[115]suggesting that he is the true intended figure of praise in the poem. Although there are far more *canu mawl and canu gofyn a diolch* addressed to men, for both genders it remains the case that the poems exist because the poet was requesting something or was required to praise their patron. Again, positioning the female subjects as situated in relation to the male poets desiring something from them, or using them as a means to flatter their male relatives.

Most of the women we have seen featured in poetry thus far have been noble women, due to the society the poets were composing in. The intensive level of training of the Bards excluded women and working class men from professional poetry. Upon the formalised bardic grammars Llewelyn Hopwood notes that 'one of their primary functions was to make it harder for uneducated, amateur poets to practice the profession'[116]showing the difficulty for potential lower class writers during this time. Therefore little poetry survives featuring lower class women yet we know women had varied lives in medieval Wales, working across towns in several occupations, as shown in the court rolls recorded at the time.[117] Deborah Youngs points out that 'for much of the twentieth century the working lives of medieval Welsh women were

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[112] Marged Haycock, 'Where cider ends, there ale begins to reign': drink in medieval Welsh poetry' (Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic: 2000), p. 23.
[113] 'To thank Joan Burgh daughter of William Clopton of Wattlesborough for her care,' <https://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/> [Accessed on 19/04/2026].
[114] 'To thank Joan Burgh daughter of William Clopton of Wattlesborough for her care,' <https://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/ >[Accessed on 19/04/2026].
[115] 'To thank Joan Burgh daughter of William Clopton of Wattlesborough for her care,' <https://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/> [Accessed on 19/04/2026].
[116] Llewelyn Hopwood 'Sounding Different in Medieval Wales: Unorthodox Speech in the Poetry of Beirdd Yr Uchelwyr (*c*. 1300–*c*. 1600),' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 41, (2022), p. 197.
[117] The Court Rolls are legal records detailing various aspects of medieval life including criminal trials and convictions and land disputes. For the rolls see The National Library of Wales <https://archives.library.wales/index.php/court-rolls> [Accessed on 26/04/2026]]

ignored'[118]showing how it is only very recent research that has begun to focus on this aspect of women's lives and as such there is likely a large gap in the scholarship. One such occupation was that of the ale-wife and several poems do feature the stock character of the 'ale-wife' or tavern mistress. Youngs points out that working class women were abundant in the 'classically feminine ventures of victualling and brewing'[119]citing that 'in fourteenth century Ruthin, women dominated those breaching the community's assize of ale.'[120]Marged Haycock tells us that 'the position of being an ale-wife offered a unique place in society for women during medieval times'[121] demonstrating that it gave women an alternative. The stereotype of the ale-wife is often harshly depicted in poetry, certainly in stark contrast with the romanticised portrayals of the *canu serch* and ideals of generosity in the *canu gofyn.* In his englyn, 'I Dafarnwraig Anonest'/'The Dishonest Ale-wife,'[122]Richard Hughes offers a derogatory portrait of the brewing mistress. Hughes describes her as being a 'diawles'[123] or a 'female devil' though no reason is given for such a diatribe. Perhaps as a working woman, the ale-wife was threatening to the patriarchal status quo, disrupting power dynamics as potentially an ale-wife could refuse to serve a male customer. This perhaps reveals a fear surrounding women being in control in public spaces and therefore men's lack thereof. Haycock further states that ale-wives were able to 'conduct themselves independently of their spouse'[124]showing the increased freedoms available to women working in these roles and so the portrayals of ale-wives in poetry serve to show the subversion of women's perceived roles in medieval society.

From this selection of poetry then, we see that Welsh women are depicted in a number of ways in medieval poetry, yet almost always in relation to men. They may be the idealised potential lovers of the *canu serch*, patronesses of the *canu mawl* or even working women, yet they remain framed by the male gaze. The commonality of these portrayals is that they are almost always

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[118] Deborah Youngs, 'The Townswomen of Wales: Singlewomen, Work and Service, c. 1300–c. 1550' *Urban Culture in Medieval Wales*, ed. by Helen Fulton, (University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 163.
[119] *Ibid.,* p. 166.
[120] *Ibid*., p . 166.
[121] Marged Haycock 'Where cider ends, there ale begins to reign': drink in medieval Welsh poetry' (Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic: 2000), p. 24.
[122] Richard Hughes 'I Dafarnwraig Anonest'/'The Dishonest Ale-wife' trans. by Marged Haycock in 'Ale-wives in Welsh Poetry c.1450-1650,' *Medieval Welsh Literature and Its European Contexts: Essays in Honour of Professor Helen Fulton,* (Boydell and Brewer, 2024), p. 23
[123] *Ibid.,* p. 23
[124] Marged Haycock 'Ale-wives in Welsh Poetry c.1450-1650,' *Medieval Welsh Literature and Its European Contexts: Essays in Honour of Professor Helen Fulton,* (Boydell and Brewer, 2024), p. 22.

defined by their relationship to men. It is my hope that future scholarship will uncover more female voices to give expression to the fullness of Welsh women's lives throughout the ages.

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