

The poetry of Gwerful Mechain¹ is one of the few extant sources we have of writing from medieval women in Wales.² Her corpus of work is the largest now remaining, though mostly in manuscripts copied after her death.³ Katie Gramich states that Gwerful:

often speaks with a female voice and overtly sees things from a woman's point of view, taking her peers to task for their male arrogance, but she jousts with them verbally as their equal, confident in her own craft and opinions⁴

I believe this can certainly be seen throughout Gwerful's body of poetry and that there is more to explore within her work in order to examine the motivation behind her choice of words, form and wider themes. Here, we will look closely at several of Gwerful's poems⁵ to assess the ways in which she maintains a clear female perspective whilst responding to her male counterparts. We will also explore the context within which her poetry is situated to determine how far this statement is true of Gwerful's work.

Turning firstly to Gwerful's religious poetry, in 'Dioddefaint Christ'/'Christ's Passion'⁶ we find an example of a medieval religious *cywydd*,⁷ a prevalent genre during this time.⁸ As Barry Lewis

¹ We do not have a full biography of Gwerful Mechain (fl. 1460-1502) but do know that she lived in Powys, was married and had a daughter named Mawd. For more detail see Katie Gramich in 'Introduction' to *Mechain G, The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K. (Canada: Broadview Press, 2018) p. 7.

² Though we have names and a few surviving poems from several female writers, Gwerful's collection is the most abundant with 14 poems extant and a further 5 likely to be attributable to her but not certain. For further discussion attribution of Gwerful's poetry see *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac eraill* ed. by Howells, N.A., (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2001) and

on women in medieval poetry 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).

³ Gwerful's poetry can be found in multiple manuscripts written in the centuries following her death, though none survive from the time she was writing. Her most copied work is 'Dioddefaint Christ'/'Christ's Passion' which features in 68 surviving manuscripts.

⁴ Katie Gramich in 'Introduction' to *Mechain, G The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K. (Canada: Broadview Press, 2018) p. 8.

⁵ I will be using the translations of Katie Gramich and for the English translation will be using the literal translations as opposed the Gramich's rhymed translation unless otherwise stated. For the translations see *Mechain, G The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K. (Canada: Broadview Press, 2018)

⁶ Gwerful Mechain 'Dioddefaint Christ'/'Christ's Passion' *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 23.

⁷ 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)

⁸ Religious praise poetry was a prevalent genre in the Middle Ages, for a discussion on the relation of court poets and their religious poetry see McKenna, C. 'Performing Penance and Poetic Performance in the Medieval Welsh Court', *Speculum*, vol. 82, no. 1, (2007), pp. 70–96. Lewis, B. 'Welsh Poetry and English Pilgrimage: Gruffudd Ap

notes, ‘The Passion of Christ is, of course, a major theme in medieval Welsh religious poetry, and one which grew steadily in importance’⁹ with several poets composing in this genre, including the earlier writers Dafydd ap Gwilym (fl. 1340-1370), Gruffudd ap Maredudd (fl. 1352-1382) and later Catrin ferch Gruffudd ap Hywel (fl. c.1500–55). Though the work is centered upon Christ, early on in the poem we are offered the perspective of Mary, with ‘It was cold for Mary, who was a sign,/ As she waited for his martyrdom.’¹⁰ That Mary only occupies two lines within the poem is powerful rather than dismissive, highlighting her being a mother desolately watching her son die. Gwerful’s original Welsh, ‘Oer oedd i Fair, arwydd fu/ Wrth aros Ei ferthyru’¹¹ displays skillful use of the *cywydd* form with rhyming couplets and alliteration. The use of vowels and soft consonants, almost wills the speaker to quieten their voice upon saying the words. When we compare this with the violent imagery of ‘Glaw gwaed o’r gweliau gwiw’/ ‘a rain of blood from the worthy wounds’¹² we see the contrast in sound. The alliteration of the explosive consonant of ‘G’ causes a cacophony effect urging the reader to slow down, to almost stumble over the words. Thus reflecting the horror of the content and increasing the tension in the piece. Gwerful is also working within the poem’s strict metre too, adhering to the heptasyllabic form, displaying the simultaneous skills of language and structure being employed. Writing upon earlier Welsh poetry, John J. Parry says that ‘much of its effect came from the sound, from the elaborate structure of rhyme and alliteration’¹³ and we see this here in Gwerful’s work. The importance of sound reflects the orality of medieval poetry and as Catherine McKenna notes ‘oral performance...was the original medium of publication’¹⁴ during the Middle Ages. Many of the forms used for poetry such as *cyghanedd*¹⁵ are as Gwyneth Lewis says an ‘excellent mnemonic device’¹⁶ supporting the view

Maredudd and the Rood of Chester’, *University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies Research Papers*, (Aberystwyth, 2005).

⁹ Barry Lewis, ‘Welsh Poetry and English Pilgrimage: Gruffudd Ap Maredudd and the Rood of Chester’, *University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies Research Papers*, (Aberystwyth, 2005) p. 3.

¹⁰ Gwerful Mechain, ‘Dioddefaint Christ’/ ‘Christ’s Passion’, *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³ John J. Parry, ‘The Court Poets of the Welsh Princes’ *PMLA*, vol. 67, no. 4, (1952), p. 515.

¹⁴ Catherine McKenna. ‘Performing Penance and Poetic Performance in the Medieval Welsh Court.’ *Speculum*, vol. 82, no. 1, (2007), p. 86.

¹⁵ *Cyghanedd* refers to the arrangement of sound within a strict metre poem using syllabic stress, alliteration and rhyme. For a detailed explanation on *Cyghanedd* see Mererid Hopwood *Singing in Chains - Listening to Welsh Verse* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Gwyneth Lewis, ‘Extreme Welsh Metre’ *Poetry*, vol. 205, no. 2, (2014), p. 166.

that poetry at this time was to be performed rather than read. Lewis notes that Gwerful is a ‘rare female’¹⁷ and with her writing here she demonstrates her capability of matching her male contemporaries in this complex form.

A traditional genre with which Gwerful does not engage is that of *Canu Gofyn* and *Canu Diolch*,¹⁸ or ‘asking and thanking poetry’, wherein poets would beseech their patrons for desired items through compositions designed to praise and amuse.¹⁹ *Canu Gofyn* and *Canu Diolch* were legacies of the age of the ‘Beirdd y Tywysogion’ or ‘Poets of the Princes,’²⁰ the bards performing in the princely courts of Wales until the end of Welsh independence in 1284.²¹ These poets were so central to court life, they feature in *The Law of Hywel Dda*²² with ‘when a song is required to be sung, the chaired bard starts, first of God, with the second of the king to whom the court belongs’²³ showing the almost ritual inclusion of poets in court. No reference is made to female bards in the tractates thus confirming women’s exclusion from professional performance and therefore patronage. This, perhaps then, explains Gwerful’s lack of *Canu Gofyn* and also eulogies and elegies in her oeuvre because, as Gramich states, ‘she was not obliged to’²⁴ write them. As R. R. Davies surmises ‘the law of women was essentially personal, familial and largely extra-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ An example being Guto’r Gyn’s ‘Diolch i Gatrín ferch Maredudd o Abertanad a’i gŵr, Dafydd Llwyd ap Gruffudd, am bwrs’/ ‘To thank Catrin daughter of Maredudd of Abertanad and her husband, Dafydd Llwyd ap Gruffudd, for a purse’ in which he praises his patrons as ‘Addwynaf cwpl o ddynion’/ ‘The finest couple of people’ accessed 10/03/2026 at <<https://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/>>

²⁰ The ‘Poets of the Princes’, in Welsh ‘Beirdd y Tywysogion’, also called Y Gogynfeirdd or ‘Earlier poets’ (approx. 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.

²¹ In 1282 the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and following conquest by Edward I in 1284 meant Wales was no longer independent or governed by princes, thus ending the age of the ‘Beirdd y Tywysogion’. After this time, poets would continue to be patronized but by the gentry, thus gaining the title ‘Beirdd yr Uchelwyr’ or ‘Poets of the Nobility.’

²² Hywel ap Cadell or Hywel Dda (Hywel the good) ruled in 10th Century AD over much of Wales and is synonymous with the codifying of the medieval law For more detail and the full laws see *The Law of Hywel Dda - Law texts from medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins (Y Lolfa, 2025).

²³ *The Law of Hywel Dda, - Law texts from medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins (Y Lolfa, 2025).p. 20.

²⁴ Gramich in ‘Introduction’ to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 8.

curial'²⁵showing the disparity between genders, with men being discussed in terms of public life and women being confined to the private, domestic sphere.

However, for certain medieval women such as Gwerful, this domestic setting could also be the place where literacy was nurtured. As Cathryn A. Charnell-White notes, some women 'through their association with literary fathers or husbands, can also be said to have benefitted from the support of a familial bardic circle'²⁶ demonstrating how, although excluded from formal bardic education, women were able to access the relevant knowledge required to master the poetic forms. Though part of a minority, Mechain was not a singular female voice writing in the medieval period²⁷suggesting that it was not unusual for high status women to learn in this way. It is thought Gwerful herself learned the techniques from Dafydd Llwyd (c.1395–1486) with whom she engages in poetic exchanges.²⁸ Llewelyn Hopwood, writing upon the formalised bardic grammars²⁹ states that 'one of their primary functions was to make it harder for uneducated, amateur poets to practice the profession'³⁰showing the purposeful exclusion of female and lower class male writers. However, being excluded from professional bardic life can be viewed as a blessing for Gwerful and her female contemporaries, being unburdened of having to adhere to particular rules. As Charnell-White states, 'by turning in male circles, she transgressed both social and bardic mores

²⁵ R.R. Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage' in *The Welsh Law of Women* ed. By Jenkins, D. and Owen, M. E (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p P. 97.

²⁶ 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) p. 15.

²⁷ We know of several female writers including Gwerful Fychan (b. c.1430), Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd (fl. c.1460), Alis ferch Gruffudd ab Ieuan ap Llywelyn Fychan (b. c.1500), Catrin ferch Gruffudd ap Hywel (fl. c.1500–55), Elsbeth Fychan (fl. c.1530) and later Angharad James (1677– 1749). We also have names of several more women with no surviving poetry and it is important to note the potential confusion on attributing poems to both female and male writers and the reasoning behind a lack of surviving written material for other female poets. For further discussion see Charnell-White, 'Problems Of Authorship And Attribution: The Welsh-Language Women's Canon Before 1800', in *Women's Writing from Wales before 1914* Aaron, J., ed. (Routledge, 2021), p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁹For the grammars see *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid* ed. By G.J. Williams and E.J. Jones, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1934)

³⁰ 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.

of female propriety'³¹showing how Gwerful was able to disrupt social norms from within the establishment. Writing on professional bardic life, Patrick Ford tells us that:

Poets visiting houses outside of their own circuit area were required to carry a document in 'writing' (ysgrifennu) from a pencerdd 'chief poet' stating what degree they held; otherwise no rewards would be given³²

Being born to a wealthy family, and having no patron to appease, Gwerful would have had no need for a 'reward' and so her work freely resides outside of this rigid system. Gramich states that 'as a married woman from a high-status family, it is probable she enjoyed the freedom to write on whatever subjects she wished to'³³showing that Gwerful was able to offer her opinion without fear of consequence. The patriarchal structure that sought to exclude women provides both a catalyst, in terms of subject matter, and a clear channel for Gwerful's words to flow, unbound by the regulations of the bardic schools or patronage. Gwerful's poetry inhabits a liminal space, firmly rooted in the tradition through her skill and yet external to it being one of such few female voices. However, Liz Herbert McAvoy and Dianne Watt seek to 'up-end the idea that these apparently different and separate literary cultures constitute a hierarchical binary'³⁴showing the view that, although it may appear that women were writing in a completely separate sphere, they were still part of the culture as a whole.

We can see this dual relationship Gwerful has with contemporaneous male bardic culture and her desire to exert a wholly female view point in 'Cywydd y cedor'/'Poem to the vagina.'³⁵ The poem begins in a satirical fashion, poking fun at her fellow poets. Gwerful teases their courtly love poetry with how 'They praise a girl's hair'³⁶ yet leave 'the middle without praise'³⁷pointing out their

³¹ 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), p. 22.

³² Patrick K. Ford 'Performance and Literacy in Medieval Welsh Poetry.' *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 100, no. 4, (2005), p. xliv.

³³ Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 8.

³⁴ Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt. 'Introduction: Women's Literary Culture and Late Medieval English Writing' *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 51, no. 1, (2016), p. 3.

³⁵ Gwerful Mechain, 'Cywydd y cedor'/'Poem to the vagina' *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 40.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

avoidance of the vagina.³⁸ Gwerful parodies their own compositions upon their genitals, such as Dafydd ap Gwilym's 'Cywydd y gal'³⁹ by following their form to emphasise her point about the lack of poetry to the vagina. This shows Gwerful's direct engagement with her male peers and their work, as Gramich posits 'taking her peers to task',⁴⁰ here in a humorous yet meaningful manner. Helen Fulton notes that 'often in Dafydd's poetry, praise of nature is seen as a means to an end'⁴¹ and we see that Gwerful also employs metaphors of nature yet to a different effect. Unlike male poets who seek to make flattering comparisons or 'fruitless praise'⁴² as she taunts, Gwerful equates the vagina wholly *as* nature with the powerful image 'Great proud forest'⁴³ displaying her detailed use of *dyfalu*.⁴⁴ Jane Cartwright calls the work 'a celebration of the female body'⁴⁵ and we can see this with 'You are a body of boundless ability'⁴⁶ showing the reverence Gwerful extends to the vagina. Not solely praising the physicality, Gwerful writes 'The place I love, delicate and healthy'⁴⁷ showing the association of the physical body parts with the feeling of love. Continuing to link emotion with the vagina, Gramich translates 'A'r cedor clyd, hyder clær'⁴⁸ to mean 'The snug vagina, clear hope'⁴⁹ and it is true that in a medieval context 'hyder' denoted having hope or faith. Yet 'hyder' can also mean 'confidence' so perhaps Gwerful is playing on this double meaning to state the trust she has within the greatness of the vagina.

Despite its transgressive nature, Gwerful's poetry is possibly not immune from an internalization of patriarchal attitudes. Miles Latham questions whether Gwerful's work could be 'a result of internalized misogyny, a reflection of the belief that women achieve value by being prepared for

³⁸ In this paragraph, 'vagina' will be used in the generalized context as Gwerful uses it to denote the female genitalia, not differentiating the labia, vulva or cervix.

³⁹ Dafydd ap Gwilym 'Cywydd y Gal' in Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p.147.

⁴⁰ Katie Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 8.

⁴¹ Helen Fulton 'The Love Poetry of Dafydd Ap Gwilym' *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, (1978), p. 26.

⁴² Gwerful Mechain, 'Cywydd y cedor' / 'Poem to the vagina', ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ *Dyfalu* is the poetic technique of using extended metaphor or similitude to build imagery.

⁴⁵ Jane Cartwright 'Women Writers in Wales', in Herbert McAvoy, Liz, and Diane Watt, eds., *The History of British Women's Writing. Volume One, 700-1500* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p. 68.

⁴⁶ Gwerful Mechain, 'Cywydd y cedor' / 'Poem to the vagina', ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

violent penetrative sex'⁵⁰and we do see Gwerful passively describe the function of the vagina as 'a bush to hold a penis'⁵¹showing that she potentially relates it as being for the purpose of men. However, Gwerful also speaks of the vagina as 'full of passion,'⁵² indicating a reciprocal female lust, with her original word 'serch' also being a synonym for a romantic type of love. The title of 'Cywydd y cedor' could be read as a reduction of a full woman to a single part, reflecting the fetishization of a singular female body part for male sexual gratification,⁵³ though the title itself may never have been used by Gwerful, only coming into use in later manuscripts.⁵⁴ In wider medieval society however, we do see a narrowed focus upon the vagina for reasons of control and chastisement. In the Welsh laws regarding virginity, *The Law of Hwyl Dda* states that a potential 'twyllforwyn' or 'false virgin' should have their genitals exposed, seen with 'let her shift be cut off as high as her groin'⁵⁵ thus publicly shaming her. From this then, we see that the vagina was a highly politicised body part in medieval times, with Cartwright noting that 'a girl's sexual and reproductive organs were not considered to be private parts'⁵⁶and were the concern of her family. Therefore, Gwerful's revelry in the vagina's beauty can also be deemed a politically subversive act by reclaiming it as a place of veneration, seen with the adjectives 'Tender and lovely.'⁵⁷ The triumphant call to action in which she implores 'To all you upright poets,/ Be prolific in your songs to the vagina'⁵⁸is perhaps seeking a change both in the culture of courtly love poetry and of the wider attitude towards women and sex.

Though we have previously seen the high level of poetic skill shown by Gwerful, her level of proficiency has been called into question here in 'Cywydd y cedor.' Gramich finds multiple

⁵⁰ Miles Latham 'Noble Bush: Sex-Positive Feminist Linguistics in Gwerful Mechain's "Cywydd y Cedor"' *Sigma Tau Delta Journals* (2024) p. 251.

⁵¹ Gwerful Mechain, 'Cywydd y cedor' / 'Poem to the vagina', ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 45.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵³ For a study on modern attitudes to the vagina and male appropriation see Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger 'The Perfectible Vagina: Size Matters' *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 3, no. 3, (2001), pp. 263–77.

⁵⁴ Other manuscripts give the title 'Cywydd y gont'.

⁵⁵ *The Law of Hwyl Dda*, - *Law texts from medieval Wales*, trans. and ed. Dafydd Jenkins (Y Lofa, 2025).p. 49.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ Gwerful Mechain, 'Cywydd y cedor' / 'Poem to the vagina', ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

‘unconventionalities’⁵⁹ deviating from the strict *cynganedd sain*⁶⁰ form. We see this most notably in terms of the syllabic structure and internal rhyming pattern which appears here often incongruent with this form of *cynganedd*. With this being a vibrant, lively work though, it can be viewed that any movement from perfect technique is a choice upon Gwerful’s part, suiting the poem’s spirit. Gramich further notes that divergence from the strict form allows for a ‘much looser, more fluid and racy kind of verse’⁶¹ showing Gwerful’s intentionality in having the structure reflect the content. As we have seen in Gwerful’s devotional poetry, she is undoubtedly capable of writing in traditional metre. Though it may not adhere to the strict rules of *cynganedd sain*, Gwerful’s use of the form still allows the words to flow in a similar fashion. Her use of internal rhyme, seen with ‘Mul frwysg, wladaidd rwysg’⁶² still allows a quick tripping of the words to increase the poem’s vitality, displaying her poetic dexterity.

Also written in response to the work of her male contemporaries, yet very different in tone, is ‘I ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch’/ ‘A response to Ieuan Dyfi’s poem on Red Annie.’⁶³ Though this poem is a reactionary work to Dyfi’s original piece,⁶⁴ it is powerful in its own right. Unlike the *ymryson*⁶⁵ poetry of duelling replies, this is more comfortably situated within the

⁵⁹ Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 13.

⁶⁰ There are four principle types of *cynganedd*- *Cynganedd groes* (criss-crossing), *cynganedd sain* (sonorous), *cynganedd draws* (bridging) and *cynganedd lusk* (echoing) with many possible variations. For a detailed explanation on *Cynganedd* see Mererid Hopwood *Singing in Chains - Listening to Welsh Verse* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2015)

⁶¹ Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 13.

⁶² Gwerful Mechain, ‘Cywydd y cedor’/ ‘Poem to the vagina’, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 40.

⁶³ Gwerful Mechain, ‘I ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch’/ ‘A response to Ieuan Dyfi’s poem on Red Annie’, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 64.

⁶⁴ Ieuan Dyfi (fl. 1482 – 1500) was a poet contemporary with Gwerful. Dyfi composed 5 poems for his lover Anni Goch with ‘I Anni Goch’/ ‘To Red Annie’ sparking this response from Gwerful. For the poem see Ieuan Dyfi ‘I Anni Goch’ ‘To Red Annie’ in Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 110. For further discussion see M. Haycock, ‘Merched Drwg a Merched Da: Ieuan Dyfi v. Gwerful Mechain’ *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, 16 (1990), pp. 97-110.

⁶⁵ *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.

Querelle des Femmes tradition.⁶⁶ Joan Kelly, writing on the emergence of *Querelle des Femmes* states that ‘in these writings, women took a conscious stand in opposition to male defamation and mistreatment of women’⁶⁷ showing the disruption of a male dominated genre and foundational contribution to feminist thought. This can be certainly be applied to Gwerful’s work here as she takes a ‘conscious stand’ against Ieuan Dyfi’s diatribe. In his misogynistic attack, Dyfi lists several women he believes to be corruptors and deceivers of men seen with, ‘Because of Polixena’s smile / Good Achilles was killed through treachery’⁶⁸ showing the allusions he uses as evidence to condemn all women. In her riposte, we see Gwerful attempt to counter Dyfi’s appropriation of women throughout history and literature with her own carefully curated list. Although herself invoking women as subjects perhaps here, it is done so to subvert the narrative laid out by Dyfi and forms a completely different gaze through which the women Gwerful chooses are framed. As Cartwright notes, this also ‘demonstrates the breadth of Gwerful’s knowledge and learning’⁶⁹ as being on par with her male peers. In Dyfi’s work, women are the downfall of men, seen with ‘Wise men have themselves/ Been disgraced because of a woman’⁷⁰ showing how Dyfi has positioned himself as victim. Gwerful plays with this image by writing on the women behind historically abhorrent men with ‘And Pilate’s wife, to her credit,/ Told the whole truth’⁷¹ offering an alternative view which centres women. Whilst still alluding to women in relation to their male kin, the repetition of ‘wife’ may be a purposeful reiteration to emphasise the countless stories of women’s suffering in marriage.

⁶⁶ Literally translated as ‘The woman question’ or more commonly ‘The dispute of women’, the *Querelles des Femmes* debate took place through literature from approximately C.1400 to the late 18th Century on the role women should play within society. For more discussion see Lloyd-Morgan, C. ‘The ‘Querelle des femmes’: A Continuing Tradition in Welsh Women’s Literature’ Ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchison, Carol Meale and Lesley Johnson *Medieval Women - Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, (Brepols, 2000) pp 101-114 and Kelly, J. ‘Early Feminist Theory and the ‘Querelle Des Femmes’, 1400-1789’ *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1, (1982), pp. 4–28.

⁶⁷ Joan Kelly, ‘Early Feminist Theory and the ‘Querelle Des Femmes’, 1400-1789’, *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1, (1982), p. 6-7.

⁶⁸ Ieuan Dyfi ‘I Anni Goch’ ‘To Red Annie’ in Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 117.

⁶⁹ Cartwright ‘Women Writers in Wales’, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Ieuan Dyfi ‘I Anni Goch’ ‘To Red Annie’ in Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 113.

⁷¹ Gwerful Mechain, ‘I ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch’/ ‘A response to Ieuan Dyfi’s poem on Red Annie’ ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 69.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the common view of women being responsible for the behaviour of men is still being perpetuated here. The idea that women are the moral compass for men would later become popularised in the Victorian Era with the idea of ‘The Angel of the House’⁷² and it is likely the essence of it existed much earlier. Joan Hoffman describes the role of ‘The Angel of the House’ as providing ‘spiritual support for her man; to tame his baser instincts; and to uphold the all-important bourgeois social values of order, peace, and happiness’⁷³ and we can see these idealised qualities in several of the women mentioned by Gwerful. She speaks of ‘Gwerydd’s wife, content and good,/ Made peace’⁷⁴ and then Judas’ mother who ‘Was faithful and noble and loved her husband’⁷⁵ displaying it is the traditionally feminine qualities of peacekeeping and acquiescence that are being valued here. However, Gwerful also includes women who she sees as righteously pointing out the wrongs committed against them with ‘Gwendolin took her revenge/ For her wrong’⁷⁶ offering examples of women taking action. Using adjectives such as ‘graceful and good’⁷⁷ and ‘wise’⁷⁸, Gwerful offers an alternative view of women being corruptors, that they are in fact, morally superior than the men they are associated and reside on the right side of history with rather than just offering ‘spiritual support’ for them.

The final section of the poem sees the tone change with a more serious direct address of ‘Tell me Ifan, I’m asking you’⁷⁹ showing this is no longer just scathing satire. With her statement ‘No woman could, fornicator,/ Ever rape a man,’⁸⁰ Gwerful boldly exposes the difference in violent acts between men and women. We see that, though this is a defense of Anni Goch, it too is in defense of all women. Further to this, Gwerful writes ‘some of us are evidently bad’⁸¹ with the use

⁷² This is the Victorian concept of the ideal woman being resigned to the domestic sphere and upholding values within the home. The concept was named in 1854 by Coventry Patmore in his poem ‘Angel of the House.’ For discussion of this idea see Joan M. Hoffman, “‘She Loves with Love That Cannot Tire’”: The Image of the Angel in the House across Cultures and across Time’ *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 42, no. 2, (2007), pp. 264–71.

⁷³ Joan M. Hoffman, “‘She Loves with Love That Cannot Tire’”: The Image of the Angel in the House across Cultures and across Time’ *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 42, no. 2, (2007), p. 265.

⁷⁴ Gwerful Mechain, ‘I ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch’/ ‘A response to Ieuan Dyfi’s poem on Red Annie’, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 67.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

of ‘us’ showing her solidarity or as Gramich states is Gwerful demonstrating her ‘strong feminist alliance’⁸² aligning herself with all women. Gwerful writes ‘Is it good for a woman to lose her possessions,/ When she gets old and her appearance and troubles show’⁸³ reflecting the wider concerns of women of the time. From the law tractates on women, Christopher McAll analyses that women approaching later life ‘cease to be of interest to the Irish and Welsh lawyers’⁸⁴ showing how *The Law of Hywel Dda* reveal the same issues Gwerful seeks to bring to light in her poetry. This poem shows that although Gwerful was from a high status family, she was aware of the issues affecting women of all classes and sought to address these inequalities. What begins, therefore, as a specific address to Dyfi opens into a broader social commentary as Gwerful uses Dyfi’s piece as a springboard from which to launch her own feminist polemic and address the extended societal issues behind Dyfi’s behaviour.

The dialogic poems between Gwerful and Dafydd Llwyd are lighter and more playful in tone. This *ymryson* back and forth tradition was popular in medieval Welsh poetry. These ‘versified debates,’⁸⁵ as Jerry Hunter calls them, were often harsh in tone featuring multiple insults between the duelling poets, though the exchanges between Gwerful and Llwyd are erotic rather than adversarial. As Hunter notes, these interchanges ‘can be thought of as reflecting joking relationships’⁸⁶ showing that the words we read on a page often cannot be taken for the truth. Therefore the often suggested idea that Gwerful and Llwyd were lovers is likely to be false. As Charnell-White points out, there has been a tendency for ‘too literal a reading of their poetic discourses, which were often satirically framed’⁸⁷ revealing then that the content is unlikely to be reflective of an actual sexual relationship. More possible, is that the dialogues between Gwerful

⁸² Katie Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁸⁴ Christopher McAll ‘The Normal Paradigms of a Woman’s Life’ in Jenkins, D. and M. Owen, eds. *The Welsh Law of Women*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p.21.

⁸⁵ Jerry Hunter ‘Professional Poets and Personal Insults: Ad Hominem Attacks in Late Medieval Welsh Ymrysonau’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 13, (1993), p. 54.

⁸⁶ Jerry Hunter ‘Professional Poets and Personal Insults: Ad Hominem Attacks in Late Medieval Welsh Ymrysonau’ p. 60.

⁸⁷ Charnell-White, ‘Problems Of Authorship And Attribution: The Welsh-Language Women’s Canon Before 1800’, p. 21.

and Llwyd are a performative play on words, designed to entertain and stretch their bardic skills. Dafydd Johnston notes on erotic poetry that ‘these terms do not necessarily imply that such material would have had an arousing effect on its original audience’⁸⁸ showing that the content was instead a way to push one another’s respective boundaries, both in terms of skill and content. In ‘Ymddidan rhwng Dafydd Llwyd a Gwerful Mechain’/ ‘Conversation between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain’⁸⁹ the content is explicitly sexual and Llwyd provokes in *englyn*⁹⁰ form with ‘Does a stranger have any dish,/ And a long sheath which would contain this?’⁹¹ Gwerful’s reply of ‘here’s a hairy pit , until you get tired, Dafydd’⁹² shows her rising to surpass his initial proposal with even bawdier language, suggesting a competition perhaps. Here we see perhaps the clearest example of the idea that, as Gramich states, Gwerful ‘jousts with [her male peers] verbally as their equal’⁹³ showing her operating on the same level. From our external perspective, we do not see an excluded woman vying for her place, we see two peers engaging in comparable word play.

Finally, let us examine now Gwerful's poetry which is often overlooked and yet importantly offers ‘the woman’s point of view’ spoken of by Gramich earlier. In her *englyn*, ‘I’w morwyn wrth gachu’/ ‘To her maid as she shifts,’⁹⁴ Gwerful describes a commonplace action familiar to all women and yet an act that is still a taboo subject in public today. The use of the strict metre form with an unlikely subject challenges expectations whilst also serving as a showcase for her abilities. As Gramich points out ‘Gwerful rises to that challenge with characteristic verve’⁹⁵ demonstrating her adeptness at playing with imagery whilst adhering to literary conventions. Describing the

⁸⁸ 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.

⁸⁹ Gwerful Mechain, ‘Ymddidan rhwng Dafydd Llwyd a Gwerful Mechain’/ ‘Conversation between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain’, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 82.

⁹⁰ An *englyn* is a shorter poetic form, still featuring the strict *cynganedd* 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.

⁹¹ Dafydd Llwyd, ‘Ymddidan rhwng Dafydd Llwyd a Gwerful Mechain’/ ‘Conversation between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain’ ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 83.

⁹² Gwerful Mechain, ‘Ymddidan rhwng Dafydd Llwyd a Gwerful Mechain’/ ‘Conversation between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain’, p. 83.

⁹³ Gramich in ‘Introduction’ to Mechain, *G The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 8.

⁹⁴ Gwerful Mechain, ‘I’w morwyn wrth gachu’/ ‘To her maid as she shifts’, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 94.

⁹⁵ Gramich in the footnotes to Gwerful Mechain, ‘I’w morwyn wrth gachu’/ ‘To her maid as she shifts’, p. 95.

stream of water as 'bwa o ddwr'⁹⁶ as Gramich translates, in her poetic version, to 'rainbow arch of water'⁹⁷, conjuring a pleasant image of an action often deemed unpleasant. The use of 'bwa' could also signify a transgression into a more male realm as 'bwa' is also the term for bow as in 'bow and arrow'. More likely to be associated with the male version of urination, this invokes the male dominated pursuits of hunting and war. Regarding the imagery of a bow and arrow, we know that Gwerful was familiar with the story of St Ursula, who according to her Life was killed by this weapon.⁹⁸ In 'I ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch' 'A response to Ieuan Dyfi's poem on Red Annie,' Gwerful writes, 'In Cologne there was a surge,/ That took the eleven thousand/ Virgins to their depths'⁹⁹ alluding to the Life of St Ursula and demonstrating her familiarity with the story. Perhaps here then, we have a metaphor of a traditionally male weapon, one used against women, yet here joyfully utilised. This is, admittedly, a far reaching conjecture and as Cartwright notes 'It is possible that the Life of Ursula (which follows the traditional vita) was not translated into Welsh until the sixteenth century'¹⁰⁰ so at the time Gwerful was writing, the circulating version of the Life may have not included this detail. Nevertheless, with this poem Gwerful playfully reminds us that women's bodily functions are carried out with purpose and power too, rather than as passive actions, offering a uniquely female view unavailable to her male contemporaries.

If, as Gramich states, Gwerful is an 'equal' to her male contemporaries, then the question must be asked as to why she is not featured more prominently within the canon of Welsh poetry? Discussing women's writing in medieval England, McAvoy and Watt make a point which is true also of Welsh literature that 'while we have gained substantial insights into the role of women in medieval literary culture, the traditional canon has remained fundamentally unchallenged'¹⁰¹ showing its stagnancy. This builds upon on early feminist literary critical thought

⁹⁶ Gwerful Mechain, 'I'w morwyn wrth gachu' / 'To her maid as she shits', ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 95.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.94.

⁹⁸ For the Life of St Ursula see Baring-Gould, J. and Fisher, S. 'St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins' in Baring-Gould, J. and Fisher, S. *The Lives of British Saints* Vol IX (London: Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, 1913) pp. 312 – 347. For St Ursula's connection with Wales see Cartwright, J. 'The Middle Welsh Life of St. Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins' in ed. Cartwright, J. *The Cult of St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016) pp. 163 – 186.

⁹⁹ Gwerful Mechain, *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 69.

¹⁰⁰ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales', *Medium Ævum*, Vol. 71, No. 1, (2002), p. 12.

¹⁰¹ Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt. 'Introduction: Women's Literary Culture and Late Medieval English Writing' *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 51, no. 1, (2016), p. 8.

that the literary canon needs re-examining to determine the reasons female writers have been excluded. Elaine Showalter tells us that 'literary historians tend to assume that writers who have passed out of favor or disappeared were unfit to survive'¹⁰² with them failing to examine the socio-political and cultural reasons that poets such as Dafydd ap Gwilym are regularly quoted yet women like Gwerful Mechain are not. We should instead, as Lloyd-Morgan states 'question the reasons for that paucity'¹⁰³ because as Jane Aaron observes 'much work remains to be done'¹⁰⁴ in this area, both stressing the point that there is a gap in scholarly research regarding the female writers of Wales. We know Gwerful's work was popular, being preserved in multiple manuscripts 'long after her lifetime'¹⁰⁵ as Gramich notes. Yet, as attitudes changed in the centuries since Gwerful was writing, so too did the extent to which her work could viably be shared. Writing in 1933, Leslie Harries, as quoted in Gramich's introduction to Gwerful's work, postulates that 'in the light of the twentieth Century, Gwerful Mechain is nothing more than a whore'¹⁰⁶ displaying the attitude to sexual content prevailing in the modern era. Gramich notes that this is reflective of a 'conservative Welsh Nonconformist culture'¹⁰⁷ leading up to the time Harries was researching and although thought has progressed since Harries was writing, Gwerful is still noticeably absent from popular cultural inclusion. Long held images of what constitutes the idealised Welsh poet may also have contributed to Gwerful's diminished popularity over the centuries compared to her peers. As Katie Gramich states 'the Welsh bard has traditionally been regarded as male'¹⁰⁸ and even though we know now this is not the case, the imagery of Taliesin, and later Dafydd ap Gwilym, being the definitive representative of bardic culture still remains. Continued scholarly examination of Gwerful's poetry and her female contemporaries will surely help to remedy this view.

Considering Gramich's earlier statement then, from this exploration into the poetry of Gwerful Mechain, we can see how she skillfully and confidently shares her views through poetry, offering

¹⁰² Elaine Showalter, 'Literary Criticism' *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1975), p. 438.

¹⁰³ Lloyd-Morgan, 'More written about than writing', p. 163.

¹⁰⁴ Jane Aaron, 'Introduction' in *Women's Writing from Wales before 1914* Ed. Aaron, J., (Routledge: 2021), p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 11. See Leslie Harries 'Barddoniaeth Huw Cae Llwyd, Ieuan ap Huw Cae Llwyd, Ieuan Dyfi, a Gwerful Mechain ' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, UW, Swansea, 1933).

¹⁰⁷ Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 11

¹⁰⁸ Katie Gramich in 'Introduction' to Mechain, G *The works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. by Gramich, K., p. 7

a unique female viewpoint. By participating in a male dominated pursuit, Gwerful not only transcends women's expected roles at the time but does so with expertise and knowledge in complex forms. Much of Gwerful's work remains revolutionary today in terms of subject matter still being avoided. We can take inspiration from Gwerful's views that celebrate the female body and even elevate simple bodily functions to worthy literary subjects. Her work also highlights that women's voices and experiences are still in need of amplification as several of her discussion topics in relation to the treatment of women are still in continuance today. It is my personal hope to see greater celebration and inclusion of Gwerful Mechain, both within Welsh culture and wider society as a whole.

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