

HPCS7004

Women in the Middle Ages:

Sources from the Celtic Regions

Assignment 2

Compile a portrait of any 'real' medieval woman from the Celtic regions. What sources can be used and how reliable are these sources?

Joan/Siwan

Jan Ryan – 2430163

May 2026

This essay will consider the life of Joan, known as Siwan in Wales, who was the illegitimate daughter of King John of England and wife of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, ruler of Gwynedd. It will identify and assess the available sources and what they reveal about Joan's early life, her marriage to Llywelyn and subsequent role as a member of both the Angevin and Venedotian ruling dynasties. It will also reflect on what these sources can show about the roles played by aristocratic women and attitudes to illegitimacy and adultery in the early thirteenth century.

Some scholars have doubted whether there are sufficient sources available to inform the study of women in medieval Wales, citing the destruction of records during the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century as a reason for the absence of women from accounts of the Age of Princes. However, more recent scholarship has demonstrated that records can be found and that perhaps the 'Silences of the Middle Ages' resulted from the fact that 'those who were writing history – usually men – did not see women as suitable subjects for study'.¹

Because of Joan's position in the courts of both countries, there are official records of her travel, diplomacy and involvement in managing property and arranging the marriages of her children. There are also surviving letters from Joan, Llywelyn, Kings John and Henry III which are particularly useful when considering Joan's diplomatic role and her relationship with her husband, father and brother. It is assumed that these sources provide a reliable account of historical events.

Joan's activities were recorded by contemporary English and Welsh chroniclers and explored in contemporary and modern literature. The Iorwerth redaction of the Welsh law codes, known as the Law of Hywel Dda, was produced in Gwynedd during the time that Llywelyn and Siwan ruled the principality, and can provide an insight into how the court operated as well as perhaps representing a commentary on aspects of the behaviour of the royal couple.²

Joan's father, King John of England, was born in 1167 and was the youngest son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. His rule, which followed the death of his brother

¹ Gwennyth Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), p20.

² Robin Chapman Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', *Speculum*, 77.4 (2002), pp. 1107-1127 (p. 1127).

Richard I, lasted from 1199 until 1216 and was marked by unrest, rebellion and despotism, culminating in him being forced by a group of barons to sign Magna Carta in 1215.³ It was common for medieval Kings to have large numbers of illegitimate children, both recognised and unacknowledged. Chancery, pipe and judicial rolls identify ten of John's illegitimate offspring, of which Joan was the oldest daughter. Throughout his reign, John had a reputation as a womaniser, and his pursuit of the wives and daughters of the nobility was a contributory factor in several baronial rebellions.⁴ In spite of his reputation for being untrustworthy and cruel, he was recognised as 'a doting father'.⁵

Little is known of Joan's early life. In common with most illegitimate female children of medieval monarchs, the date and place of her birth and the identity of her mother are not recorded.⁶ John spent much of his early life in France and was there from 1187 until he returned to England in 1189 to marry Isabella of Gloucester. It is therefore likely that Joan was conceived at this time.⁷ The Tewkesbury Annals refer to Joan's mother as '*Regina Clemencia*', leading historians to identify two possible candidates – Clemency, wife of Nicholas of Verdun or Clémence de Fougères, granddaughter of William de Hommet.⁸

Patent rolls record that on 24 November 1228, Henry III ordered that Susanna, the youngest daughter of Joan and Llywelyn, was to be handed over to Nicholas and Clemency for safe keeping, possibly as a hostage, although with explicit instructions that she was to be kept 'without deceit or ill or suspicious intent'.⁹ Clemency is mentioned by name in the writ which may indicate that she had a particular interest in the child, which would be the case if she were Joan's mother and, therefore, Susanna's grandmother.¹⁰

³ Ralph V. Turner, *King John* (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 20, 48 and 252.

⁴ Ralph V. Turner, 'The Illegitimate Offspring of King John', in *Medieval People: Social Bonds, Kinship, and Networks*, 37 (2022), 147–184 (p. 149).

⁵ Danna R. Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales: Power and Politics of King John's Daughter* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2021), p. 2.

⁶ Louise J. Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', in *Thirteenth Century England VIII*, ed. Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell, and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), pp. 49–60 (p. xx).

⁷ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 2.

⁸ Turner, 'Illegitimate Offspring of King John', p. 178.

⁹ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 127.

¹⁰ Turner, 'Illegitimate Offspring of King John', pp. 178–179.

The other candidate to be Joan's mother, Clémence de Fougères, became the second wife of Earl Ranulf III of Chester in 1200. Ranulf was involved with both John and Llywelyn in struggles for power on the northeastern border of Wales. There appears to have been a strong connection between Ranulf and Llywelyn's families, culminating in the marriage of Joan and Llewelyn's daughter Elen to John the Scot, Ranulf's nephew and heir. Scholars have argued that the fact that John granted Twyford manor, which formed part of Clémence's dower lands, back to Ranulf after it had been confiscated by the crown indicates a possible familial relationship between Clémence and John.¹¹

The case can be made for either of these women to be Joan's mother as both John and Joan continue to have contact with them throughout their lives. However, the fact that Clemency of Verdun was granted custody of Susanna may make her the stronger candidate.

Joan first enters the official records in 1203 when the Norman pipe rolls record a payment for a ship to take a daughter of King John from Normandy to England.¹² It is not known where Joan had spent the early part of her life or what type of education she received. In her biography of Joan, Danna Messer speculates that she may have spent some time in the Cistercian abbey at Fontaine Guérard near Rouen as John granted alms to the abbey in February 1203, which could have been a gift of thanks for the care that Joan had received.¹³ According to Messer, Joan was betrothed to Llywelyn 'some time before 15 October 1204' and that in spite of the Worcester annals claiming that the marriage took place in 1206 she argues that it is much more likely to have occurred in February or March 1205.¹⁴

Following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, marriage between the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh elite was frequently used for political ends – for the Welsh to preserve their independence and reduce the likelihood of invasion by forging alliances with the English nobility and for the English to gain access to lands in

¹¹ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 14 and Turner, 'Illegitimate Offspring of King John', p. 79.

¹² Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', p. 82.

¹³ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 45.

Wales for their descendants.¹⁵ By the 1170s, the political geography of Wales had taken the form that would largely endure until the conquest of the country by Edward I at the end of the thirteenth century, with native Welsh rulers of the major principalities, marcher lords controlling the border lands and some English barons holding lands in the south. Within the area that became known as *pura Wallia*, rule had been consolidated by the dynasties of Deheubarth, Powys and Gwynedd, albeit with subdivisions and many underlordships.¹⁶

Although the focus of this essay is on Joan, it is important to briefly describe Llywelyn's life before the marriage to understand why both sides considered the union to be desirable. Llywelyn's parents were first cousins, Iorwerth Drwyndwn and Princess Marared, daughter of the King of Powys. The exact date of Llywelyn's birth is not recorded but is estimated to be circa 1173.¹⁷ Gerald of Wales asserts that Llywelyn began his campaign to seize power from his uncle Dafydd ab Owain in 1188 but the basis for this claim is unknown.¹⁸ It is known that he defeated Dafydd's forces at a battle near the mouth of the river Conwy and that by 1197 he had won control of Gwynedd and he became the de facto leader of native Wales.¹⁹ Shortly after acceding to the English throne in 1199, John issued a charter supporting Llywelyn's rights to the lands he had won since 1197 and this was followed by a treaty in 1201 which effectively brought Llywelyn and many of the Welsh lords into 'the king's service' and they agreed to pay homage to the English King.²⁰

It is unclear if Llywelyn had been married before the union with Joan. Under Welsh law, it was not necessary for a church ceremony to take place for a couple to be considered married and no distinction was made between the inheritance rights of the children of different types of union.²¹ Llywelyn had a relationship with Tangwystl which produced a daughter, Gwenllïan, and a son, Gruffudd, and he attempted to

¹⁵ Abigail Cengel, 'Bridging the Gap: Marriages between Welsh and Anglo-Norman Aristocracies', *Wittenberg History Journal*, XVI (Spring 2012), pp.59-68 (p. 59).

¹⁶ R. R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063–1415*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 213-215.

¹⁷ Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Davies, *Age of Conquest*, pp. 216-239.

²⁰ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 32-33.

²¹ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 25-37.

arrange a marriage for himself with the daughter of Reginald, King of Man, for which he received a papal dispensation in 1203 although the marriage did not take place and the request to the Pope was withdrawn in February 1205. Papal dispensation would have been required for this marriage due to consanguinity in that the woman had previously been married to Llywelyn's uncle Rhodri.²² Llywelyn's change of strategy on his future marriage appears to indicate that he valued an alliance with England to the east, rather than strengthening his relationship with Gwynedd's traditional ally to the west.²³ Messer argues that a letter from Pope Innocent III in 1205 also indicates that Llywelyn had been married to a sister of Ranulf III of Chester, although her name is not recorded and there is no further corroborating evidence for this.²⁴

The location of Joan and Llewelyn's marriage is not recorded although it may have been at Worcester as John was in the city in March 1205 and may have attended the wedding. It appears that there was a tradition of using Worcester cathedral for marriages between Anglo-Normans and Welsh rulers, and the wedding of Eleanor de Montford to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth's grandson via his relationship with Tangwystl, took place there in 1278. Following the wedding, John assigned the manor of Ellesmere to the couple as part of Joan's marriage portion.²⁵ For John, a marriage between Joan and Llywelyn would keep the Welsh ruler within the sphere of English influence and also serve to check the ambitions of Ranulf Earl of Chester to gain control of land in Gwynedd.²⁶

There are no official records of Joan from the time of her marriage until 1211. Sources disagree on the number and names of Joan's children. Bartrum identifies ten children of Llywelyn in his Welsh Genealogy, of whom he ascribes only three to Joan: Margred, Angharad and Dafydd, indicating that both Glwadus Ddu and her younger sister Elen were the children of Tangwystl.²⁷ It seems unlikely in the case of Glwadus as her Mortimer descendants claim Joan as an ancestor to strengthen their

²² Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 44, Davies, *Age of Conquest*, p. 194 and Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 45.

²³ Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', p. 83.

²⁴ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, pp. 39-40.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 45-47.

²⁶ Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', p. 83.

²⁷ Huws et al., *Bartrum Genealogical Project*, Cyff_G1.zip, image "Gwynedd 12" < [Bartrum Genealogical Project - Aberystwyth University](#) > [Accessed 24 April 2026].

rights to the English throne.²⁸ Richards identifies Gwladus Ddu, Elen and Margaret as the legitimate daughters of Joan and Llywelyn.²⁹ On the other hand, Messer claims that between 1205 and 1210, Joan gave birth to three daughters, Gwladus Ddu, Marared and Elen and subsequently produced a son, Dafydd, who was probably born in spring 1212 and a final daughter, Susanna, who would later be placed in the custody of Nicholas and Clemency of Verdun, and was born between 1217 and 1219.³⁰ In common with many male historians, Davis's genealogical chart of the dynasty of Gwynedd only tracks the male line. He claims that Llywelyn had at least four unnamed daughters and two sons, Gruffud and Dafydd, but he does not indicate who the mothers of these children might be.³¹

Following her marriage, Joan assumed the role of the consort of the ruler of Gwynedd with responsibilities for extending hospitality to visitors to the Venedotian court. Although there are no official records of Joan carrying out this role during her early married life, there are many examples from contemporary literature, including the *Mabinogian*, which portray the Welsh queen personally providing visitors with a cup of mead to signify the desire for peace.³² In the biography of Gruffedd ap Cynan, who ruled Gwynedd in the early twelfth century, the duties of Queen Angharad are defined as 'both a hostess and a counsel-woman' and it is likely that Joan followed this example.³³

The Law of Hywel Dda is also a useful source for understanding the expectations of the Queen in terms of providing hospitality and gift giving, decreeing that she must 'provide mead to the chief huntsman' and 'give a gold ring to the court justice'.³⁴ Indeed, the Iorwerth redaction of the law codes provides a detailed description of the organisation of the King and Queen's households. It lists sixteen officers who serve the King and eight for the Queen, which were: the steward; the priest; the chief

²⁸ Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 54.

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 43-70.

³⁰ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 55.

³¹ Davies, *Age of Conquest*, p. 240.

³² *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 179.

³³ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, pp. 48-49.

³⁴ Susan M. Johns, 'Queenship and Narratives of Power in Welsh Medieval Sources', *Women's History Review*, 30.5 (2021), 738–753 (p. 744).

chamberlain; the handmaid; the doorkeeper; the cook; and the candleman.³⁵ The rights and duties of each of these officers are set out in detail and taken together can build up a picture of how Joan's household may have operated on a day-to-day basis. For example, in the case of the Queen's Steward:

It is right for him to control the food and drink in the chamber. It is right for him to wait on the Queen with food and drink. He is entitled to a third of the dirwy of the Queen's officials. His lodging is with the King's steward.³⁶

This demonstrates that the Queen operated a parallel bureaucracy to the King, controlling a separate, but connected, sphere of influence with its own functions and responsibilities.³⁷ While the duties of the twenty-four main officers of the combined court seem to provide a credible description of how it may have operated, the descriptions of eight additional officers offer a reminder that while the laws can provide a useful insight they need to be treated with scepticism and as 'a form of literature rather than an objective record of events'.³⁸ The description of the duties of the Footholder provides a good example of this:

It is right for him to hold the King's feet in his lap from when he begins sitting at the banquet until he goes to sleep, and to scratch the King; It is right for him to eat from the same dish as the King, with his back to the fire.³⁹

This passage perhaps echo's the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* and the description of King Math and his virgin foot holder, Goewin, although with clear differences of gender and function.⁴⁰

Another indication of the personal authority and cultural influence which Joan may have exercised is that the lorwerth redaction contains French loan words.

Furthermore, descriptions of the Queen's court in other versions of the law codes do not mention the cook, candleman and chamberlain. An increase in the size of the

³⁵ Dafydd Jenkins, *Hywel Dda The Law: Law Texts from Medieval Wales*, rev. edn (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2025), pp. 28-31.

³⁶ Jenkins, *Hywel Dda The Law*, p. 28.

³⁷ Joan did not have the title of Queen, as Llywelyn was not referred to as King, but her role clearly maps to the description of the role which has been translated into English as 'Queen' in the law codes.

³⁸ Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', p. 1127.

³⁹ Jenkins, *Hywel Dda The Law*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁰ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 53.

court could demonstrate an increased status for the Queen's household perhaps as a result of Joan's position in the Angevin royal family.⁴¹ However, it is important to note that any authority that Joan may have exercised in Gwynedd ultimately derived from her relationship with Llywelyn and that in defining the Queen's role as a provider of hospitality and a bestower of gifts the law codes may imply that she should have no political or policy making role.⁴²

English and Welsh official records, chronicles and annals refute this idea that Joan was not involved in the operation of political power. From 1211 until two years before her death in 1237, she carried out many diplomatic missions to mediate between Llywelyn and John until the English King's death in 1216 and then subsequently with her half-brother Henry III⁴³. This was a period of turbulent relations across the Marches and the border with *pura Wallia*, with military incursions in both directions, and seizing of lands followed by short-lived peaceful episodes.

John had supported Llywelyn's expansion south from Gwynedd and relations appeared cordial in 1209 when Llywelyn paid homage to John at Woodstock and John subsequently gifted a set of falcons to Joan and Llywelyn.⁴⁴ However, the situation changed in 1210 when John sought to reassert his authority over Wales and to curb Llywelyn's growing power. In 1211, John led two incursions deep into Gwynedd forcing Llywelyn to accept humiliating terms to secure peace.⁴⁵ Welsh chronicles record that Joan was sent as envoy to negotiate this peace, and the subsequent treaty had far-reaching implications for the future of the Venedotian dynasty.

According to the Laws of Hywel Dda, a system of partible inheritance operated, and illegitimate children inherited on the same basis as their legitimate siblings. However, under the treaty, Llywelyn agreed to implement primogeniture under which Joan's

⁴¹ Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', p. 83.

⁴² Danna R. Messer, 'A Model of Welsh Queenship: Joan of England and the Thirteenth-Century Principality', *Women's History Review*, 30.5 (2021), 747–766 (p. 757).

⁴³ It is outside of the scope of this essay to provide a detailed analysis of the many diplomatic missions which Joan undertook. Relations between England and Gwynedd followed a repeating pattern of periods of conflict, intervention by Joan who is then awarded manors in England, a period of peace followed by renewed conflict during which time previously bestowed manors may be taken away. For details see Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, pp. 55-96, 115-130 and 166-181.

⁴⁴ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 57.

⁴⁵ Turner, *King John*, pp. 138-139.

eldest male child would become the *edling*, or heir to the principality, thus disinheriting Tangwystl's son Gruffudd. If Llywelyn died without legitimate heir, his lands would revert to the English crown. At the time the treaty was signed, Joan was pregnant with her only son, Dafydd, who was born in Spring 1212.⁴⁶

This fundamental change to the understanding of legitimacy in Wales was further consolidated in 1226 when Llywelyn, supported by Henry III, issued two petitions to Pope Honourius III to declare both Dafydd and Joan to be legitimate. The papal decree which legitimises Joan refers to 'her birth occurring at a time when King John of England was unmarried, fathering her by an unmarried woman'. In this way, perhaps Llywelyn hoped to avoid civil war on his death and to secure the principality for Dafydd and his heirs.⁴⁷

Evidence of Joan's diplomatic role during the reigns of Kings John and Henry III can be found in the *acta* of Welsh rulers which includes references to six petitions and letters produced by Joan, only one of which is preserved in full – the other five are identified from other documents and chronicles. Several chroniclers, including Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris refer to a letter from Joan to her father, dated before 14 August 1212, warning him of a plot by English barons to overthrow him if he continued his military campaign in Wales. There is no independently corroborated evidence that John received such a letter.⁴⁸

More reliable evidence is found in letters patent from John in December 1214 and 1215 instructing the sheriff of Gloucester and steward of the royal household respectively to release Welsh hostages following petitions to the King from Joan. In the letter of 1215, John states that he is releasing a hostage to 'our beloved daughter Joan' demonstrating the affectionate nature of their relationship.⁴⁹

The *acta* contains reference to the 1226 decree from Honourius III legitimising Joan discussed above and a letter patent of 1235 from Henry III granting a pardon to

⁴⁶ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, pp. 65-67.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 10 and 67.

⁴⁸ Huw Pryce (ed.), *The Acts of Welsh Rulers 1120–1283* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), p. 445.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 446.

Robert son of Reginald for the death of William son of Ralph...’ in response to a petition from the ‘Lady of Wales’, the title by which Joan was known in this period.⁵⁰

The most interesting entry relating to Joan in the *acta* is a letter to Henry III sent between 1218 and 1237.⁵¹ Messer argues that the letter must have been sent between 1230 and 1231 during another period of turbulent Anglo-Welsh relations. Joan uses the letter to emphasise the previous affectionate relationship between herself, Llywelyn and Henry and to implore her brother ‘on bended knee and shedding of tears’ to return to good relations with them. This letter provides the only existing document in Joan’s own voice, couched as it is in the diplomatic formalities of the time. Whether or not she was the sole author of the letter, it provides reliable evidence of her role as intermediary between the two courts.⁵²

If Messer’s dating of the letter is correct, it was sent shortly after a period of great controversy in Joan’s life. In 1230, after twenty-five years of marriage, she was accused of adultery with the marcher lord William de Braose who had been captured by Llywelyn’s forces during the Ceri campaign of 1228.⁵³ Much complexity surrounds the events of this time, which have come to define Joan’s story in historical and fictional retellings from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Fictional portrayals of Joan’s life tend to focus on the affair, most notably in Saunders Lewis’ Welsh language play *Siwan*.⁵⁴

William de Braose secured his release from captivity by paying a £2000 ransom, agreeing not to take up arms against Llywelyn again and that his daughter Isabella would marry the *edling*, Dafydd.⁵⁵ According to accounts compiled much later, William and Joan had become close during his captivity and the couple were caught together in compromising circumstances in either a glade or in Llywelyn’s chamber.⁵⁶ The affair is included in contemporary Welsh and English sources including the ‘*Annales Cambriae*, *Brut y Tywysogyon*, Roger of Wendover, and the annals of

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp.446-488.

⁵¹ Pryce (ed.), *Acts of Welsh Rulers*, p. 447.

⁵² Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, pp. 169-172.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 134.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. xx.

⁵⁵ J. J. Crump, ‘The Repercussions of the Execution of William de Braose’, *Welsh History Review*, 10.4 (1981), 383–406 (p. 200).

⁵⁶ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, pp. 136-138.

Chester, Margam, Tewkesbury, Waverley, Winchester and Worcester'.⁵⁷ The contemporary Welsh chronicle *Brut y Tywysogyon* records that:

In this year, William de Breos the Younger, lord of Brycheiniog, was hanged by the Lord Llywelyn in Gwynedd, after he had been caught in Llywelyn's chamber with the king of England's daughter, Llywelyn's wife.⁵⁸

In a letter to the bishop of Chichester, Nicholas, abbot of Vaundey gave a more detailed account of William's fate:

On 2nd of May, at a certain manor called 'Crokein', he [William] was made 'Crogyn', i.e. hanged on a tree, and this not privily or in the night time, but openly and in the broad daylight, in the presence of more than 800 men assembled to behold the piteous and melancholy spectacle.⁵⁹

Public hanging was an unusual punishment in these circumstances and could indicate that it was not only adultery which provoked this reaction from Llywelyn. As a member of a powerful marcher family and vassal of the English king, a daytime hanging in front of many witnesses was considered shocking, as can be seen from the reaction of Nicholas of Vaundey above. The play on words in this letter, linking the place name Crokein, where the events supposedly took place, with *Crogyn*, the Welsh word for hanging, may indicate a deliberate attempt to sensationalise the events. Against expectations, Henry's response to the affair was muted. He wrote a letter three months later stating that this was a domestic matter that Llywelyn could deal with as he saw fit.⁶⁰

In contrast to Anglo-Norman common law with its focus on punishment of the perpetrators of crime, Welsh law was based on compensation, or *sarhaed*, for the victims in the case of loss of property or injury to honour. *Sarhaed*, was paid to the victim depending on their status. The Iorwerth redaction states that:

⁵⁷ Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', p. 89.

⁵⁸ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 139.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 139.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 140,

If it happens that a woman commits a gross offence, whether giving a kiss or allowing fondling or copulation with her, that is sarhaed to her husband. If intercourse with her happens, that sarhaed it augmented by one half.⁶¹

Llywelyn's *sarhead* was:

... a hundred cows for every cantred he has, and a red-eared bull for every hundred cows, and a rod of gold as tall as himself and as thick as his little finger, and a plate of gold as broad as his face and as thick as the nail of a ploughman who has been a ploughman for seven years.⁶²

While this should not be taken literally, it indicates the principle which was in operation in early thirteenth century Gwynedd. In deciding to publicly hang William, it could be that Llywelyn used the accusation of adultery as an excuse to demonstrate his power over the de Braose family, who were hated by Welsh lords for acts of violence they had perpetrated over many years.⁶³

Scholars have argued that the lorwerth redaction may have been altered in response to Joan's adultery, particularly in that a couple could be accused of adultery if anyone saw 'the man and the woman emerging from the same bush one on either side of the bush'.⁶⁴ However, descriptions of the offences taking place outdoors only appear in antiquarian accounts and not in any extant contemporary sources.⁶⁵ Of course, sixteenth century historians may have had access to sources which are no longer available but we have no evidence of this.

The Chester annals record that Joan was imprisoned for a year. She was released from custody in 1231 and appears to have resumed her previous role at court and as an emissary between her husband and her brother until shortly before her death at Aber in 1237. According to *Brut y Tywysogyon*, Llywelyn founded a Franciscan abbey in her honour at Llan-faes in Anglesey. It may be that whatever happened with

⁶¹ Jenkins, *Hywel Dda The Law*, p. 48.

⁶² Jenkins, *Hywel Dda The Law*, pp. 5-6.

⁶³ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 140,

⁶⁴ Sara Elin Roberts, 'Emerging from the Bushes: The Welsh Law of Women in the Legal Triads', in *Law: Literature and Society* (CSANA Yearbook), ed. by J. F. Eska (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), p. 68.

⁶⁵ Messer, *Joan, Lady of Wales*, p. 157.

William de Braose was less important to Llywelyn and Henry than ensuring that Joan's son Dafydd remain as the legitimate heir.⁶⁶

Joan's life is well documented compared to other noble women of the early thirteenth century. Official records and correspondence provide reliable evidence of her movements and diplomatic activities and there is evidence of her management of her estates and property. Chronicle evidence is less reliable in that it reflects the bias of the chroniclers and their sponsors but nonetheless it can give an important understanding of how Joan was perceived by contemporary and near-contemporary writers.

Literary texts such as the *Mabinogian* can tell us much about how the royal household may have operated. Later literary works based on Joan's life focus on her alleged affair with William de Braose and cannot be relied on to provide historical evidence. However, they are useful to understand her continuing influence on English and Welsh cultural imagination and show how the lives of historical figures can be used to meet modern political objectives.

While the Welsh law codes must not be interpreted literally, the sections on the operation of the court are likely to reflect its day-to-day operation. It is possible that the Law of Women was used as a commentary on Joan's behaviour, and some scholars argue that this is evidence of her adultery. More rigorous questioning of the source material from 1230-1231 is needed as much ambiguity remains as to what occurred and the explanations which historians have given for the actions of those involved are unconvincing.

Despite the wealth of sources, large parts of Joan's life remain undocumented including the date and place of her birth and the identity of her mother. Less is known of her activities during periods of relative peace between Gwynedd and England and even the number of children she had has been contested. Scholars continue to define Joan by her lifecycle stages of daughter, wife and mother and she often appears in indices of secondary sources under the entries for her father, husband or brother rather than being referenced in her own right. While recent scholarship has focussed on uncovering the lives of medieval Welsh women, work

⁶⁶ Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', p. 93.

remains to be done to firmly position them centre stage in the stories of their own lives.

Bibliography

- Cengel, Abigail, 'Bridging the Gap: Marriages between Welsh and Anglo-Norman Aristocracies', *Wittenberg History Journal*, XVI (Spring 2012), pp. 59-68
- Charles-Edwards, T. M., 'Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 23-39
- Crump, J. J., 'The Repercussions of the Execution of William de Braose', *Welsh History Review*, 10.4 (1981), 383-406
- Davies, R. R., *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063-1415*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Davies, Sioned, trans., *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Gray, Madeleine, 'Four Weddings, Three Funerals and a Historical Detective Puzzle', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (2000), 47-66
- Huws, Bleddyn, et al., *Bartrum Genealogical Project* (Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth University, 2020) < [Bartrum Genealogical Project - Aberystwyth University](#) > [Accessed 24 April 2026]
- Jenkins, Dafydd, *Hywel Dda The Law: Law Texts from Medieval Wales*, rev. edn (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2025)
- Johns, Susan M., 'Queenship and Narratives of Power in Welsh Medieval Sources', *Women's History Review*, 30.5 (2021), 738-753
- Messer, Danna R., *Joan, Lady of Wales: Power and Politics of King John's Daughter* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2021)
- Messer, Danna R., 'Medieval Monarchs, Female Illegitimacy and Modern Genealogical Matters: Part II: Joan of England, c. 1190-1236/7', *Foundations*, 1.4 (2004), 294-298
- Messer, Danna R., 'A Model of Welsh Queenship: Joan of England and the Thirteenth-Century Principality', *Women's History Review*, 30.5 (2021), 747-766
- Pryce, Huw (ed.), *The Acts of Welsh Rulers 1120-1283* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005)
- Richards, Gwennyth, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009)
- Roberts, Sara Elin, 'Emerging from the Bushes: The Welsh Law of Women in the Legal Triads', in *Law: Literature and Society* (CSANA Yearbook), ed. by J. F. Eska (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), pp. 58-76

Stacey, Robin Chapman, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', *Speculum*, 77.4 (2002), pp. 1107-1127

Turner, Ralph V., 'The Illegitimate Offspring of King John', in *Medieval People: Social Bonds, Kinship, and Networks*, 37 (2022), 147–184

Turner, Ralph V., *King John* (London: Longman, 1994)

Wilkinson, Louise J., 'Joan, Wife of Llywelyn the Great', in *Thirteenth Century England VIII*, ed. Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell, and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), pp. 49–60.