

Compare and contrast Gwerful Mechain's 'Cywydd y Cedor' with Dafydd ap Gwilym's 'Cywydd y Gal'. In your view, was 'Cywydd y Cedor' written in response to Dafydd's 'Cywydd y Gal'?

Authorship of poetry in the Middle Ages is an interesting area, with the attribution of particular poems to particular authors being largely an editorial decision – even a marketing ploy¹ - due to the matter that recording generally took place latterly, as a result of the both oral tradition and the lack of a printing press.² Factors for consideration in what was, and still is, ultimately a process of attribution include such things as the reliability of individual manuscript traditions, the reliability of the source, the stylistic features of the work in question, accompanied by the language, topics, life, and references employed by the 'author.'³

Regarding Welsh Middle Age poetry in general, there is only one female poet for whom a substantial body of work survives: Gwerful Mechain.⁴ Authors of poetry in Wales and throughout the archipelago were believed to be largely male, with the assumption that when females wrote, they generally wrote for pleasure, and were

¹ Helen Fulton in; Jane Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales' in *The History of British Women's writing 700 – 1500*, by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). p. 63.

² J. M. Banks, 'An Introduction to Editing Manuscripts for Medievalists', *All Complete Monographs 1*. (2012). pp. 3 - 6. See also: Wales' First Permanent Printing Press, *Wordcatcher 2019* < <https://wordcatcher.com/wales-first-permanent-printing-press-why-did-it-take-so-long-mel-hopkins/>> (Accessed on 17 February 2022)

³ J. M. Banks, 'An Introduction to Editing Manuscripts for Medievalists', *All Complete Monographs 1*. (2012). pp. 1 - 17.

⁴ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.7.

somewhat marginalised.⁵ Evidence of anonymous poems believed to be written by women have been taken to support such a notion,⁶ and, as Jane Austen notes in '*Persuasion*,' 'the men (are) all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all.'⁷ However, the contributions of a 'surprising number' of female authors in Welsh literature between 1430 and 1555,⁸ sheds light upon their material positions and concerns, in a period whereby a full 'understanding of Welsh medieval history... demands the recognition of the experience of women.'⁹ The introduction to the '*Book of Margery Kempe*,' for instance, perhaps hints that she was writing her own auto-hagiography, via her consistent use of the third person 'creature', and thus indicates the importance of religious dedication amongst women,¹⁰ which provides a complement to the religious poetry of Gwerful Mechain. Indeed, the instructional and moral genre was incredibly important within the Middle Ages throughout Europe,¹¹ although John Koch notes how in Wales, the

'Anglo-Norman conquest opened the door to innovation not only through continental influences. Rather, a reordering of the existing native classes liberated the

⁵ S.G. Michols, 'Medieval Women Writers: Aesthesis and the Powers of Marginality', *Yale French Studies* 75: *The Politics of Tradition* (1988). p. 71.

⁶ K. Gramwich, 'Orality and Morality; Early Welsh Women's Poetry', *Cardiff University Online* (no date). p. 4. (<http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/Essays%20ACUME/AcumeGramichfinal.pdf> (Accessed on 29 February 2022))

⁷ Jane Austin, *Persuasion* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006). p. 108.

⁸ Jane Cartwright in; Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, *The History of British Women's Writing 700 – 1500* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). p. 12

⁹ G. Richards, 'From Footnotes to Narrative', *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, *University of Sidney Online Journal*. p. 3. <

<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/1097/02whole.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>> (Accessed on 13 February 2022)

¹⁰ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Penguin, 2005). Kindle E-book

¹¹ Eileen Powers, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). pp. 75 – 76.

most learned poets from the patronage of a tradition based in dynastic aristocracy who were anachronistically haunted by the ideals of the heroic age and viewed love and marriage through the myth and sovereignty of Britain.¹²

Thus, it is within this context that we find the poems of '*Cywydd y Cedor*' and '*Cywydd y Gal*'. Whilst the 'decapitation of 1282 removed barriers between popular and courtly registers, allowing a fresh literary beginning,'¹³ it is still surprising that given the gender demographics of poets within this era, possibly the two most notable are Dafydd ap Gwilym and Gwerful Mechain. Upon first reading two of their poems however – namely '*Cywydd y Gal*' and '*Cywydd y Cedor*' – it appears that a covert link is in existence, which may indicate the subservience of female literature. It seems that both comprise similar themes, motifs and styles, and thus it is necessary to delve deeper into the backgrounds of each poet, alongside the poems themselves, in order to ascertain the true purpose of each work of art, and to examine the potential for any relationship between them.

The poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym were first published in 1789, by William Pughe¹⁴ and were seen to be written within the context of 'the destruction of (the) country's

¹² J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991) p. 637.

¹³ J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991). p. 637.

¹⁴ Maelog, *Poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym: A Welsh Bard of the Fourteenth Century* (London: Henry Hooper, 1834). p. 11.

freedom.¹⁵ They were further popularised by Thomas Parry, who published an edition of his poetry in 1952, and aimed to follow a 'common sense approach' to reconstruct the 'original work of the poet.'¹⁶ Residing in Wales in the middle of the fourteenth century – circa 1320 to 1370 – Dafydd ap Gwilym was the born to a family of prosperous noblemen.¹⁷ There is no evidence that he ever travelled beyond the Welsh Marches, and thus the accomplishment of being named 'one of the greatest poets of the Middle Ages' is spectacular, to say the least.¹⁸ Indeed, Dafydd ap Gwilym was described by John Koch as 'the single greatest figure in fourteenth century Welsh literature;' second only to Chaucer, in England, due to history of the Welsh language.¹⁹

Believed to still influence the composition of Welsh Strict Metres, the popularity of Dafydd ap Gwilym's work is evidenced by around two hundred poems existing within his canon, although not all scholars accept all poems.²⁰ He brought to popularity a new cywydd, and introduced a topoi concerning nature, whilst showcasing the use of loan words from French, Middle English and Latin.²¹ It is through the work of Dafydd ap Gwilym therefore that glimpses can be gained of the 'cosmopolitan social reality of the

¹⁵ Maelog, *Poems of Davyth ap Gwilym: A Welsh Bard of the Fourteenth Century* (London: Henry Hooper, 1834). p. 11.

¹⁶ H. Foulton, 'Editorial Method: Thomas Parry and Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 15 (1995). pp. 12- 15.

¹⁷ Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* 2019 < <https://biography.wales/article/s12-DAFY-APG-1340> > (Accessed on 13 February 2022)

¹⁸ A.H. Diverres, 'Romance Philology', *Berkley Publications* 24 (1988) pp. 246 - 248

¹⁹ J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dayfdd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991). p. 635.

²⁰ Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* 2019 < <https://biography.wales/article/s12-DAFY-APG-1340> > (Accessed on 13 February 2022)

²¹ J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dayfdd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991). p. 636.

reconstituted Welsh upper-class.²² His extant work comprises love and erotic poetry alongside religious, elegies, eulogies, debate poetry and satire,²³ thus illustrating the (possibly male) concerns of the day. However, the genre of poetry that is perhaps most interesting is that of satire, which is 'essentially a subversion of the familiar ideas of the traditional eulogy.'²⁴ It is within this genre that '*Cywydd y Gal*' can be found, of which twenty-one manuscript copies exist.²⁵

Drawing to mind the Old French fabliaux tradition of disparaging male genitals,²⁶ alongside the 'inherited native tradition,'²⁷ '*Y Gal*,' as it is sometimes known, is translated into English as 'the penis.' It is clear from the beginning of the opening stanza that in this particular penis – that of Dafydd himself, given the allusions to attempted self-control, alongside the use of the word 'us' – does warrant some stern attention, in that it is responsible for a law-suit.

'By God penis, you've got to be guarded

Kept an eye and hand on,

²² J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991). p. 636.

²³ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 2. < <http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022) See also: Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* 2019 < <https://biography.wales/article/s12-DAFY-APG-1340>> (Accessed on 13 February 2022)

²⁴ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 2. < <http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

²⁵ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 147.

²⁶ Eileen Powers, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). p. 21.

²⁷ J. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context by Helen Foulton', *Speculum* 66 (1991). p. 637.

For this reason, pole with head held high,
Better from now on and forever;
Net for a cunt's wing, it is necessary to
Bridle your snout to avoid complaint
To keep you in check so that you're not accused
Once again.'²⁸

It is known from Diane Luft amongst others that Dafydd ap Gwilym had two lovers – Morfudd and Dyddgu, whose identities could have been pseudonyms - and therefore it is likely that the poem was written in response to the discovery of one of these affairs,²⁹ which may possibly have held the potential to wield unintended consequences regarding his relationships with his patrons, given the norms and values of the day. Thus, the context sets the scene well – as do previous poems such as '*Morfudd like the Sun*'³⁰ and whilst seven copies of this poem are found within manuscripts which attribute it to the female poet Gwerful Mechain, it is thought that these all originate from one source, whom is less reliable than those who make up the bulk of attributions.³¹ Furthermore, the style of this poem fits well with that of those reliably accredited to Dafydd ap Gwilym; perhaps most amusingly, that it

²⁸ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 147.

²⁹ D. Luft, 'Genre and Diction in the Poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym: The Revelation of Cultural Tension', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 18/19 (1999). pp. 278 – 279.

³⁰ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 2. <
<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

³¹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 147.

invents his manner of 'Taliesinic praise'³² to form a strong rebuke, via utilisation of his popular dyfalu technique.

This technique – which involves stringing together a plethora of similitudes, often in metaphorical form³³ – was believed to have been popularised by Dafydd ap Gwilym in fourteenth century Wales,³⁴ and can be literally translated as 'guessing/to guess' in English. This heaping of similes and metaphors can be observed throughout '*Y Gal*' including allusions to violence when he remarks that:

'To me you're the vilest of rolling pins,
Horn of the codpiece, don't rise up or wave about;'³⁵

This use of visual metaphor is in keeping with the orality of the bardic tradition, with the reference to the rolling pin drawing to mind associations with domestic violence, or at least violence per se.³⁶ Furthermore, evidence from archaeology and mythology indicates the importance of the horn in hunting and warfare,³⁷ thus solidifying this link

³² The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 1. <

<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

³³ Dyfalu, *Poetry Magnumopus* (2017) < <https://www.poetrymagnumopus.com/topic/961-dyfal/>> (Accessed on 20 February 2022)

³⁴ Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* 2019 < <https://biography.wales/article/s12-DAFY-APG-1340>> (Accessed on 13 February 2022)

³⁵ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 147.

³⁶ Piotr Chruszczewski, Hans Sauer and Magdalena Bator, *Mostly Medieval: In memory of Jack Fisiak* (Wroclaw: AE Academic Publishing, 2020). p. 347.

³⁷ P.K. Ford, 'Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed', in *The Mabinogion and Other Welsh Tales*, by Patrick K Ford (London: University of California Press, 1977). pp. 35 – 57. For archaeology see: Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the British Isles* (Oxon: BCA Publishing, 1991). p.10.

and presenting the penis as a symbol of loathsome preparedness for violence: it must not 'rise up' to hunt or do battle again.

However, '*Y Gal*' could in fact be read as a poem of male boasting; indicating that male concerns with their penis size were already embedded firmly within the masculine psyche by the Middle Ages. As Dafydd ap Gwilym was known to be bound to several patrons from the landed gentry,³⁸ his use of 'elements of frivolity which characterise the genre'³⁹ would have needed to be based upon the socially acceptable humour of the day: audience matters. Indeed, as his trade was possibly learnt from the court of his uncle, Llewelyn ap Gwilym,⁴⁰ it could be argued that he was well-aware of his need for continued popularity. Accordingly, this humorous boasting disguised as disparagement can be seen via the vast number of visual metaphors utilised. Dafydd's penis is a 'head of a conger eel,' is 'longer than a big man's thigh,' is a 'leatherhead that's called a tail,' and 'a club that causes lust.'⁴¹ Here we find tongue-in-cheek allusions to the 'phallogenic' culture of the time,⁴² in which bardic tradition included

³⁸ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 1. <
<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

³⁹ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 7. <
<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

⁴⁰ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 2. <
<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

⁴¹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). pp. 147 – 151.

⁴² Russell Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the invention of Western Love* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). p. 24.

not only the mastery of twenty-four poetic devices,⁴³ but also, the possession of a large penis! This firmly places the poem within the satire genre.

The Old French troubadour tradition indicated that extramarital love and chivalric adventure 'extolled a life of adventure'⁴⁴ and whilst there is some argument that the Welsh tradition developed independently⁴⁵, the similarities can clearly be seen, although in parody form. Through a series of metaphors in keeping with the dyfalu style, therefore, the poem reaches a crescendo of abuse by instructing the penis to:

'Lower your head, stick for planting offspring.'⁴⁶

The command here is in keeping with the slightly earlier trend for instructional writing, as evidenced by the inclusion of the directive 'you',⁴⁷ and thus '*Y Gal*' ends on a more serious note. Still written in the modern colloquial style, Dafydd mirrors his initial opening rebuke when he observes that:

'It is hard to keep you under control,

⁴³ Extreme Welsh Meter by Gwyneth Lewis, *Poetry Foundation* 2017 <
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter>> (Accessed on 15 February 2022)

⁴⁴ Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1983). p. 32.

⁴⁵ The Literary Context by H.M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym.net* (no date) p. 2. <
<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/docs/The%20Literary%20Context.pdf>> (Accessed on 31 January 2022)

⁴⁶ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). P. 151.

⁴⁷ It could also be argued that it allows the poet to distance himself from his actions and the potential law-suit, implying a somewhat determinist approach to sexuality.

Cold waterfall, woe to you indeed!⁴⁸

Your lordship is often rebuked,

Evident is the evil done by you.⁴⁹

Thus, via satire, the moral tale is clear to see. In an era where virginity was highly valued until marriage, and marital fidelity was the expectation in both religion and law⁵⁰ - and even, to some extent, chastity was expected within marriage itself⁵¹ - the satirical poem takes on the form of a biblical parable, and links to the '*Ten Commandments*.'⁵² Thou must control '*Y Gal*.'

It is precisely the allusions to '*Y Gal*' that led the work of Dafydd ap Gwilym to be linked with that of Gwerful Mechain, who wrote a similarly erotically titled poem. A poet who similarly moved in literary circles,⁵³ Gwerful Mechain was most notable for her '*Dioddefaint Crist*,' of which sixty-eight manuscript copies are extant,⁵⁴ many of which cite her name as author. Like Dafydd ap Gwilym, what is known of her life is limited: current knowledge however, indicates that she lived between 1460 - 1502, and that she married John ap Llywelyn Fychan, bearing at least one child named Maude.⁵⁵ What

⁴⁸ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). P. 151.

⁴⁹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.151.

⁵⁰ Morfydd E. Owen and Dafydd Jenkins, *The Welsh Law of Women* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017). pp. 7 – 25.

⁵¹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Penguin, 2005). Kindle E-book

⁵² Ten commandments, *Britannica* 2017 < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ten-Commandments> > (Accessed on 19 February 2022)

⁵³ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 8.

⁵⁴ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 22.

⁵⁵ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 8.

is particularly interesting about the life of Gwerful Mechain, is that the corpus of poetry attached to her authorship indicates that the Welsh bardic and poetic tradition has never been exclusively male. Indeed, the failure of Lesley Harries to include her work in his 1933 thesis publication⁵⁶ indicates the extent to which the work of women within medieval literature has been since marginalised, possibly by the non-conformist chapel culture.⁵⁷ As a consequence, the notion that 'women's position in Welsh medieval society was not necessarily as inferior or submissive as the legal texts suggest',⁵⁸ remained hidden until more became known of their roles and contributions. Indeed, it is now known that Gwerful Mechain was by no means a unique feminist warrior, battling oppression in order to gain entry to the literary world. Rather, she followed the likes of Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Margery Kempe, and many others.⁵⁹ It is true that extant female literary work is less plentiful than that of their male counterparts, but it does exist. Furthermore, as evidenced via the self-confessed collaboration between Margery Kempe and her male literate priest,⁶⁰ it may be that traditional literary historiography employed too narrow a definition of authorship, and thus ignored the work of women.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Lesley Harries in; K. Gramwich, 'Orality and Morality; Early Welsh Women's Poetry', *Cardiff University Online* (no date). p. 3. (<http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/Essays%20ACUME/AcumeGramichfinal.pdf> (Accessed on 29 February 2022))

⁵⁷ K. Gramwich, 'Orality and Morality; Early Welsh Women's Poetry', *Cardiff University Online* (no date). p. 2. (<http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/Essays%20ACUME/AcumeGramichfinal.pdf> (Accessed on 29 February 2022))

⁵⁸ Robin Frame, *Ireland and Britain 1170 – 1450* (London: Hambledon Press, 1998). p. 1.

⁵⁹ Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, *The History of British Women's Writing, 700 - 1500* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). pp. xviii – xxvi.

⁶⁰ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Penguin, 2005). Kindle E-book

⁶¹ Virginia Wolfe, *A Room of One's Own* (Cambridge: e-artnow books, 2013). Kindle E-book

The mixed genres, combative tones, and lack of need to 'sing for supper'⁶² indicate that Gwerful Mechain was indeed a contemporary of the male poets of the day, with some suggesting that she learnt her craft from Dafydd Llwyd, with whom she appears to have employed poetic interchange with,⁶³ in a style of 'sexual banter and boasting.'⁶⁴ It is precisely this reputation that has led some scholars to believe that she wrote '*Cywydd y Cedor*' – her most erotic poem – in response to '*Cywydd y Gal*.' Evidence of previous dialogue is found when, in an apparent response to the love poetry of Gwerful, Dafydd Llwyd alludes to similar concerns as those expressed by Dafydd ap Gwilym, when he remarks that:

'You send me love messengers
To greet and annoy me,
Many praise poems and songs
To trick me to come out of my house.'⁶⁵

Indeed, this manner of poetic dialogue is a key feature of the work of Gwerful Mechain, whereby she engages in the same styles as her male counterparts, but often introduces the female voice. From this view-point, her other work becomes relevant when considering the motivations behind '*Cywydd y Cedor*.' Response poetry can be seen

⁶² Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.9.

⁶³ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018).

⁶⁴ Jane Cartwright in; Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, *The History of British Women's Writing 700 – 1500* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). p. 67.

⁶⁵ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.135.

in her poetic defence of '*Annie Goch*,' who was originally disparaged in the tradition of the antifeminist '*querrelles des femmes*,'⁶⁶ in a highly misogynistic cywydd composed by Ieuan Dyfi.⁶⁷ Writing in the late fifteenth century, Dyfi employed what Paul Zumthor calls a 'register' which can be observed within a 'broad spectrum of poetic types'⁶⁸ to offer a huge 'sequence of exempla' illustrating the evils of women.⁶⁹ Gwerful Mechain uses the same techniques against him, after initiating her dialogic poem with the introduction 'woe to any person without skill,' thus affirming sisterhood and the female voice from the beginning. Gwerful Mechain thereafter demonstrates her own learnedness – in relation to biblical and classical traditions – by counteracting Ieuan Dyfi's lists of deceitful women with one comprising an 'exempla of virtuous women throughout the ages.'⁷⁰ Including such women as Queen Dido of classical times, Queen Gwendolen of Britain, the mother of Judas and Pilate's wife,⁷¹ Gwerful Mechain shows that she is not only as skilled as her male counterparts in employing the cywydd, but that she is also in possession of similar levels of knowledge. Accordingly, it may be that these poetic interchanges were not limited to direct colloquial style responses, with Gwyneth Lewis, amongst others, supporting the belief that her erotic poem '*Cywydd y Cedor*' was clearly written in response to '*Cywydd y*

⁶⁶ Russell Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the invention of Western Love* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). p. 7.

⁶⁷ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). pp. 110 – 119.

⁶⁸ Russell Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the invention of Western Love* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). p. 7.

⁶⁹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 111.

⁷⁰ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 65.

⁷¹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). pp. 64 – 73.

Gal' by Dafydd ap Gwilym.⁷² This assertion is particularly interesting, given that he was not the only poet of the times to write about the male phallus in such a way, with Dafydd ab Edmwnd describing it as a 'repulsive shaft.'⁷³ Accordingly, such a conclusion must be based upon more than titling alone.

'*Cywydd y Cedor*' is translated in English to '*Poem to the Vagina*,' and appears to be a poem written as a challenge to her male contemporaries.⁷⁴ Witty, full of praise, and rebuking of the traditions of courtly love poetry, Mechain begins by taking issue that:

'Every drunken fool of a poet is quick
In his pompous vanity'

Here, she again shows that she can employ the same poetic techniques as her male counterparts, utilising the *cyghanedd* as a form of patterning. Indeed, it has been argued by Jane Cartwright that she 'parodies poems in the courtly love genre,'⁷⁵ whilst Cathryn Charnell-White in '*Problems of Authorship and Attribution: The Welsh*

⁷² Extreme Welsh Meter by Gwyneth Lewis, *Poetry Foundation* 2017 < <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter> > (Accessed on 15 February 2022)

⁷³ Dafydd ap Gwilym's penis under law in medieval Welsh poetry, *Purple Motes* 2007 www.purplemotes.net (Accessed on 1 February 2022)

⁷⁴ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 41.

⁷⁵ Jane Cartwright in; Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, *The History of British Women's Writing 700 – 1500* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). p. 68

Language Women's Canon Before 1800' notes how she uses male styles against them.⁷⁶

The subject of Gwerful Mechain's notorious rebuttal is the poetic tradition of praising almost every part of the female body, but leaving 'the middle without praise',⁷⁷ and thus her focus is similar in physical substance to that of Dafydd ap Gwilym. The tradition against which she protests appears to have been deeply embedded within the poetic culture of medieval Wales – and Europe overall – with the combination of the chivalric code and the courtly love scene, believed by some to have originated in Provence,⁷⁸ being deeply entrenched. The matter that female authors were considered to write for enjoyment,⁷⁹ and that Gwerful herself not under the control of any patrons, may have led her to feel free to create a poem which later led to her being labelled as 'nothing more than a whore,'⁸⁰ alongside her other works. She showed an 'unembarrassed relish for sexuality,' in a poem which Katie Gramich argues is 'deliberately provocative'⁸¹ against the culture of the time. This reaction against cultural norms is not a key feature however of '*Y Gal*' and so it may be that the similarity ends with the title.

⁷⁶ C.A. Charnell-White, 'Problems of Authorship: The Welsh Language Women's Canon Before 1800', *Women's Writing*, 24:4 (2017). p. 6.

⁷⁷ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.43.

⁷⁸ Jennifer G. Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Dallas: Praeger Publishing, 2011). p. 32.

⁷⁹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.43.

⁸⁰ Lesley Harries, K. Gramwich, 'Orality and Morality; Early Welsh Women's Poetry', *Cardiff University Online* (no date). p. 3. (<http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/Essays%20ACUME/AcumeGramichfinal.pdf> (Accessed on 29 February 2022))

⁸¹ K. Gramwich, 'Orality and Morality; Early Welsh Women's Poetry', *Cardiff University Online* (no date). p. 1. (<http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/Essays%20ACUME/AcumeGramichfinal.pdf> (Accessed on 29 February 2022))

However, utilising the techniques of her male counterparts, and akin to Dafydd ap Gwilym, Mechain employs the *dyfalu* to compose what could be seen to be a satirical praise poem to the vagina, which precedes the '*Vagina Monologues*'⁸² by centuries. Essentially parodying poems in the courtly love genre, Mechain – in a style reminiscent of '*Cywydd y Gal*' – employs a series of metaphors to stack up images of the female genitals. The vagina is thus 'the palace where children are born,' and a 'sultan of ode.' It is the 'quim beneath the cloth,' and a 'pure court of feathery fat.'⁸³ Mechain also alludes to what John Koch terms 'the sovereignty of the female,'⁸⁴ which is believed by many scholars of Celtic mythology to be firmly embedded within Welsh literature and wider culture. With metaphors including 'the sour grove,' and the 'open circle strong and bright,' she brings to mind the proposed ancient Pagan culture of the isles and the power of the feminine, interwoven with nature.⁸⁵ Whilst the combination of romance and sexuality with nature was believed to be a relatively new inclusion in Welsh medieval poetry, born out of the chivalric court-scene,⁸⁶ it can be seen in the ancient Sumerian myth found in '*The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*,' in which the sovereign queen asks:

⁸² Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (London: Virago Press, 2001). Kindle E-Book

⁸³ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). Pp. 43 – 45.

⁸⁴ J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991). p. 636.

⁸⁵ Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997). p. 22.

⁸⁶ C.S. Lewis. 'The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition'. *Cambridge University Press Online* (2013). pp. 1 – 10. See also: Background to Romance: Courtly Love, Medieval Literature 2002 < <http://cola.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/engl513/courtly/courtly.htm> > (Accessed on 19 February 2022)

'Who will plow my vulva?

Who will plow my high field?

Who will plow my wet ground?'⁸⁷

Thus, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that the core of what could be an ancient belief system in mythological femininity could have travelled to Wales over millennia either via migration or small-scale communication in a trade network,⁸⁸ and been somewhat appealing to educated women of the day. Furthermore, this focus upon nature can be seen in Welsh culture in the work of Taliesin in his use of *dyfalu* in '*Song to the Wind*,'⁸⁹ a metaphorical form and genre that was utilised also by Dafydd ap Gwilym in '*The Wind*,'⁹⁰ and so again showing a potential but tenuous link between the two poems, and indicating a possible origin.

Moreover, mythological interpretations aside, the existence of '*Cywydd y Cedor*' in thirteen manuscripts⁹¹ indicates that its explicit nature, like that of '*Y Gal*,' did not shock its audience. Furthermore, despite its ownership and praise of the vagina, alongside the rebuttal of holy men who themselves 'don't abstain, highest blessing, when they

⁸⁷ Diane Wolkenstein, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). pp. 30 – 49.

⁸⁸ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2003). Kindle Ebook.

⁸⁹ Celtic Literature Collective, *Song to the Wind* (2007) <
<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/t17.html>> (Accessed on 14 March 2022).

⁹⁰ Poetry Foundation, *The Wind by Dafydd ap Gwilym* (2007) <
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/57511/the-wind-56d23b188f238>> (Accessed on 14 March 2022).

⁹¹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.40.

get a chance,⁹² the cywydd embodies the same internalised misogynistic view about the importance of penis size in its ending:

‘A bush to hold a penis two hands wide;
A girl’s thicket, precious ringlet of greeting,
Noble bush, may God save it.’⁹³

It is perhaps such matters that have solidified views held by many scholars throughout the ages to believe that ‘*Cywydd y Cedor*’ was written in response to ‘*Cywydd y Gal*.’ Indeed, the two cywydd are similar in many ways, which could be seen to support the notion that Gwerful Mechain wrote this poem as a form of direct response; in a similar fashion to the ‘*Annie Goch*’ poetry.

Both poems do make excellent use of the dyfalu technique to paint a visual picture through a series of cleverly employed metaphors, however the nature of these is substantially different; one is focused upon praise, whereas the other on complaint. In ‘*Cywydd y Cedor*’ the resulting imagery is of a warm and comforting place, very much grounded within the domesticated world of the home via allusions to textiles, which generally were deemed to be the domain of women.⁹⁴ Indeed, the Book of Margery

⁹² Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.45.

⁹³ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.45.

⁹⁴ Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1983). pp. 99 – 101.

Kempe notes how women were 'advised by men to spin, rather than meddle with visions.'⁹⁵ Mechain labels the vagina as 'the quim beneath the cloth' and a 'little curtained seam on a lovely white cunt,' for example, whilst explicitly calling it 'snug' and so creating an imagery of a homely, welcoming place.⁹⁶ This is in direct contrast to the imagery of the penis presented by Dafydd ap Gwilym in '*Cywydd y Gal*.' Here, the penis is amusingly dangerous, and warranting control. It is big, strong and a menace to self and society:

'... it is necessary to
Bridle your snout to avoid complaint
To keep you in check so that you're not accused
Once again.'⁹⁷

A plethora of metaphors create the imagery of mistrust and dislike. The penis is compared to a 'gooses neckbone,' with its 'jowly skin' creating a 'neck with a wet shaft and a milky head.'⁹⁸ It is in no way comparable to the 'body of boundless ability'⁹⁹ that is the vagina. Furthermore, there is no mention of reproductive abilities in '*Y Gal*'¹⁰⁰ and yet these form the centre of praise in '*Y Cedor*':

⁹⁵ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Penguin, 2005). Kindle E-book

⁹⁶ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). pp. 43 – 45.

⁹⁷ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). P. 147.

⁹⁸ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). pp. 149 – 151.

⁹⁹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.43.

¹⁰⁰ Although the previously mentioned reference to 'stick for planting off-spring' could be taken as such.

'There with his best magic,
He sang before nightfall,
His tongue giving fruitless praise
To God in his gifts and forgiveness.
But he leaves the middle without praise,
That palace where children are conceived,'¹⁰¹

The indignation and frustration expressed therefore, appear not to centre around the lavish descriptions of the penis, but rather on the lack of praise for the vagina. It does not appear to be an either-or debate poem, but rather a quest for recognition in a society which still disparaged women for their sexuality, and yet felt able to juxtapose this with notions of chivalry and courtly love.¹⁰² Thus, one poem is celebratory whilst the other forms a rebuke, and so accordingly it does not appear that '*Cywydd y Cedor*' was written in response to '*Cywydd Y Gal*.'

However, it must be acknowledged that both cywyddau begin with rebukes, although their focus is not the same. The intended target of Mechain's rebuke is the male class of the day, whom she takes to task for their male arrogance and male stance.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.43.

¹⁰² Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1983). pp. 31 – 33.

¹⁰³ J. Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales; in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700 – 1500*, by Liz H. McAvoy and Diane Watt (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012). p. 65.

‘To sing of the girls of the lands
In fruitless praise all day long
But quite incompletely, by God the Father.’¹⁰⁴

Here we see Gwerful Mechain ‘call out’ in indignation, a trend evidenced by many others including Christine De Pizan in ‘*The Letter of God and Love*’,¹⁰⁵ whilst making use of the techniques of the Welsh Strict Metre to allow for memorability and act as a mnemonic device.¹⁰⁶ The rebuke offered by Dafydd ap Gwilym on the other hand, is to himself; although he distances himself as much as possible by referring to his penis as a distinct entity:

‘You’re a trouserful of lechery,
Leatherneck, like a goose’s neckbone;
Of deceitful nature, hull of debauchery,
Doornail that causes evil and trouble.’¹⁰⁷

‘*Cywydd Y Gal*’ is consequentially more humorous than ‘*Cywydd Y Cedor*,’ and as Mechain’s other response poems echo the styles of their intended targets – as

¹⁰⁴ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018).pP.41.

¹⁰⁵ Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). pp. 279 – 286.

¹⁰⁶ Extreme Welsh Meter by Gwyneth Lewis, *Poetry Foundation* 2017 <
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter>> (Accessed on 15 February 2022)

¹⁰⁷ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.151.

illustrated by 'Annie Goch' – it is unlikely that her poem here was written in a similar manner. In 'Y Gal' the grotesque imagery achieves the aforementioned purpose of frivolous satire, whereas 'Y Cedor' is more serious, urging poets to be:

'More prolific in your songs to the vagina

Let them proliferate and gain reward.'¹⁰⁸

It is a poem with a serious message, whereas 'Y Gal' brings to mind bardic banter, although with a moral undertone. Indeed, as John Ruskin notes: 'the more beautiful the art, the more it is essentially the work of people who feel themselves wronged.'¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, given the consistent use of cyghanedd in 'Y Gal' and the regular deviation from it in 'Y Cedor' it is further unlikely that the latter was written in response. Whilst Dafydd ap Gwilym makes excellent use of the one-line sound arrangement form, whereby one half should mirror the other via the utilisation of the cyghaneddion sans technique, Gwerful Mechain regularly does not – although shows that she can, for example with the line 'clawdd I ddal cal ddwy ddwyllaw'¹¹⁰ - leading Katie Gramich to argue that she at times abandoned metrical conventions on purpose,

¹⁰⁸ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.45.

¹⁰⁹ John Ruskin in; Extreme Welsh Meter by Gwyneth Lewis, *Poetry Foundation* 2017 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter>> (Accessed on 15 February 2022)

¹¹⁰ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p.44.

to create a 'much looser, more fluid and racy kind of verse.'¹¹¹ This itself indicates that she did not see herself as subservient to the male poets of the day; she was actively involved in constructing literary culture.

Another perceived similarity between the two cywydd is their utilisation of the aforementioned nature imagery, with John Koch crediting Dafydd ap Gwilym for its popularity;¹¹² thus again indicating the potential for '*Y Cedor*' to be a response poem. Indeed, references to nature are evident in both, with '*Y Gal*' referring to the penis as a 'sappy hazel branch' and a 'stick for planting',¹¹³ and the pubic hair in '*Y Cedor*' being described as 'a great proud forest,' 'a bush to hold a penis,' and a 'noble bush.'¹¹⁴ This common theme in the latter led some to propose the title of '*Ode to Pubic Hair*,'¹¹⁵ although it is clear through references to the 'quim' that this is unlikely to be the case. Thus, whilst such similarities do not necessarily add much to the debate regarding the nature of Mechain's cywydd, they do draw to light the nature of titling poetry, and how this might have impacted the supposed relationship between the two poems.

¹¹¹ K. Gramwich, 'Orality and Morality; Early Welsh Women's Poetry', *Cardiff University Online* (no date). p. 7. (<http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/Essays%20ACUME/AcumeGramichfinal.pdf> (Accessed on 29 February 2022))

¹¹² J.T. Koch, 'Reviewed Work: Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context, by Helen Fulton', *Speculum*, 66 (1991) p. 635.

¹¹³ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). P.149 – 151.

¹¹⁴ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). P.45.

¹¹⁵ Gwerful Mechain's "Ode to Pubic Hair" and other bawdy poetry, *Poeta Doctus*, 2012 < <https://bryansentes.com/2012/08/25/gwerful-mechains-ode-to-the-pubic-hair-and-other-bawdy-poetry/>> (Accessed 21 February 2022)

As authorship itself was not a matter of upmost importance in the Middle Ages, due to the matter that all literature was viewed as ultimately being authored by God, and was simply an instance of the reordering of language,¹¹⁶ the work itself often went without titles; possibly due also to the oral traditions of the times, meaning that there is limited agreement regarding the amount to which oral composition has left its mark on the manuscript texts.¹¹⁷ Problems with authorship itself can be illustrated by the mis-accreditation of a poem to the father of Alis ferch Gruffudd ab Ieuan – it was believed to have been written by up to five different people, including Gwerful Mechain¹¹⁸ – and the further issue of titling adds to the complexity of interpretation. This is exemplified particularly well by Mechain's aptly titled englyn *'Iw gwr am ei churo*.¹¹⁹

'A dagger through the collar of your heart – on a slant

To the bone of your chest;

Your knee breaks, your hand peels,

And your weapons to your entrails.'¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Extreme Welsh Meter by Gwyneth Lewis, *Poetry Foundation* 2017 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter>> (Accessed on 15 February 2022)

¹¹⁷ B.F. Roberts 'Oral Traditions in Welsh Literature: A Description and Survey' *Oral Traditions* 3/1 -2 (1988). p. 71.

¹¹⁸ J. Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales; in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700 – 1500*, by Liz H. McAvoy and Diane Watt (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012). p. 61.

¹¹⁹ 'To her husband for beating her'

¹²⁰ Katie Gramich, *The works of Gwerful Mechain* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018). p. 89.

Often cited as one of the earliest poems about domestic violence by a woman,¹²¹ the englyn credited Mechain with the title of being a 'medieval feminist'¹²² who had a 'strong sense of justice and morality.'¹²³ However, this reading is wholly influenced by the title, which was likely to have been added much later, possibly at manuscript stage, in an attempt to impose order.¹²⁴ Whilst many have taken the poem to indicate that Mechain herself was a victim of domestic violence, Margaret Howell, however, argues that it may be a curse issued on behalf of all women who experienced such violence.¹²⁵ Contrarily, it could be more radically interpreted as a violent curse in and of itself, in the absence of male violence, as there is no mention of it at all, other than in the title. Thus, this particular englyn illustrates how the titles issued by manuscript transcribers can influence the perception of the poetry itself, and it could be that it is this feature which has ultimately led to the belief that '*Cywydd Y Cedor*' was written in response to '*Cywydd Y Gal*,'

Given the current knowledge therefore, whilst it is impossible to falsify the idea of '*Y Cedor*' being an example of response poetry with absolute certainty, it is unlikely to be the case. What can be falsified however, is the view that Gwerful Mechain was an

¹²¹ To Her Husband for Beating Her by Gwerful Mechain, *Rattle.com* 2017 < <https://www.rattle.com/to-her-husband-for-beating-her-by-gwerful-mechain/>> (Accessed on 14 February 2022)

¹²² On the Gleeefully Indecent Poems of a Medieval Welsh Feminist Poet, *Literary Hub* 2019 < <https://lithub.com/on-the-gleefully-indecnt-poems-of-a-medieval-welsh-feminist-poet/>> (Accessed on 14 February 2022)

¹²³ Medieval Poetry, *The Conversation* 2019 < <https://theconversation.com/medieval-poet-who-wrote-about-domestic-abuse-female-sexuality-and-in-praise-of-vaginas-128252>> (Accessed on 20 February 2022)

¹²⁴ H. Pryce, 'Lawbooks and Literacy in Medieval Wales' *Speculum* 75 (2000) p. 29.

¹²⁵ J. Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales; in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700 – 1500*, by Liz H. McAvoy and Diane Watt (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012). p. 67.

unconventional feminist, isolated on the borders of the bardic tradition. Rather, her canon of work seems to illustrate that 'Mechain engages in poetic dialogues with her male contemporaries using the same forms, metres, tropes and vocabulary as they are.'¹²⁶

¹²⁶ J. Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales; in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700 – 1500*, by Liz H. McAvoy and Diane Watt (London: Palgrave Macmillan2012). p. 65.

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pp. 185 – 213.

