

Assignment One - Women in the Middle Ages: Sources From the Celtic Regions (HPCS7004)

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Gwerful Mechain

‘She 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 opinions’ – Katie Gramich¹

Two poems, one dedicated to the Passion of Christ (*dioddefaint Crist*) and one to the cunt/vagina (*gont/cedor*) might seem strange fellows, but both cohabit the corpus of a late fifteenth century Welsh poet.² Such is the scope of Gwerful Mechain. She lived from c. 1460 to c. 1502, born to Hywel Fychan and his wife Gwenhwyfar in the cantref of Mechain, Powys.³ Her family was a well-established member of the nobility, their social circle rich with patrons and poets.⁴ She became wife to John ap Llywelyn Fychan and mother to Mawd, and she appears to have been actively involved with the bardic scene of her contemporaries.⁵ Very little more about her life is known, but her poems were popular in their time, and some of her opinions and close relationships can be deduced from them. There is uncertainty about how many poems can confidently be identified as hers: fourteen are ‘indisputably’ Gwerful’s; an additional five probably are; and some other anonymous works may be attributable to her; making a total of forty poems altogether.⁶ Her ‘Passion of Christ’ was copied into no less than forty-nine manuscripts.⁷ Others too were preserved in writing, but it is ‘impossible to establish’ whether any copies of her works were made during her lifetime or were passed on as part of the oral

¹ Katie Gramich, ‘Introduction’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain: A Broadview Anthology Of British Literature Edition*, ed. and trans. by Katie Gramich (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2018), pp. 7-19 (p. 8).

² Gwerful Mechain, ‘Dioddefaint Crist’ and ‘Cywydd Y Cedor’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain: A Broadview Anthology Of British Literature Edition*, ed. and trans. by Katie Gramich (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2018) pp. 23-31 and 40-45.

³ Gramich, ‘Introduction’, pp. 7-8.

⁴ Helen Fulton, ‘Cywyddwyr’, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 543-548 (p. 545).

⁵ Gramich, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

⁶ Gramich states that forty poems are ‘ascribed to Gwerful Mechain in the manuscripts’, but that she follows Nerys Ann Howells’ thinking that only fourteen ‘indisputably’ are, therefore ‘erring on the side of caution’. Gramich, ‘Introduction’, pp. 11 and 14. In the *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001*, the various extant versions of her poems are counted as forty. Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan, ‘Introduction’, *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology*, ed. by Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan (Glamorgan: Honno, 2003) pp. xvii-xlii (p. xxi). Also see ‘Through the process of textual recovery, nineteen of the forty poems attributed to Gwerful Mechain have been deemed authentic by Nerys A. Howells’. Cathryn A. Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders: Women Poets In Ireland, Scotland, And Wales Up To c. 1500’, in *Women And Medieval Literary Culture: From the Early Middle Ages to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Corinne Saunders and Diane Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 457–477 (pp. 461-462).

⁷ In 1990 Lloyd-Morgan records a count of forty-nine, ‘Cafwyd hyd at 49 o gopïau o un gerdd ganddi, sef ei Chywydd i’r Iesu’. Gramich uses Lloyd-Morgan’s count from 1990 in both *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain* and *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001*, but gives a count of sixty-eight manuscripts in the former and forty-nine in the latter. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, ‘Gwerful, Ferch Ragorol Fain’: Golwg Newydd Ar Gwerful Mechain’, *Ysgrifau Beirniadol XVI*, ed. by J.E. Caerwyn Williams (Denbigh, Wales: Gwasg Gee, 1990) pp. 84-96 (p. 85). See also Gramich, ‘Introduction’, p. 11. See also Gramich and Brennan, ‘Introduction’, *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460-2001*, p. xxi. A count of sixty-nine manuscripts, based on Nerys A. Howells’ work, is given in Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders’, p. 462.

tradition and entered textual copies later.⁸ Extant poetry from female writers are rare from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but was Gwerful especially unusual, and did she, as Katie Gramich says, speak specifically and openly on perspectives and matters pertaining to women? Do her poems reflect the normal bardic customs of the period and how confident and skilful is Gwerful compared to her male contemporaries? She certainly wrote poetry aimed at some of them, but did she take them to task for their 'male arrogance'? Throughout the following exploration of these three questions the direct translations of Gwerful's poems, from the Welsh into English by Katie Gramich, are used unless stated. Translations of works by other poets are referenced.

The professional bards of the late thirteenth to early sixteenth century Wales were known as the *Beirdd y Uchelwyr* (Poets of the Nobility).⁹ It took nine years of training to qualify as a licensed bard so that as a poet one could enter the circuit of courts and homes of the aristocratic and wealthy.¹⁰ Those families saw fit to patronise them and safeguard Welsh culture by commissioning poems and manuscript copies for personal entertainment and status, and this continued until the end of the bardic era in the seventeenth century.¹¹ Praise poetry of this era was less panegyric and more personal, and included the patron, and his wife, home and belongings in the subject matter. In the fourteenth century, whilst poets did still compose elegies, eulogies and praise poems in the old style, like the long form *awdl*, some traditional metres began to fall out of favour and themes relating to religion and love became more popular.¹² Dafydd ap Gwilym (c. 1320 -1350/70) popularised the 'newly developed metrical form of the *cywydd*', particularly the *cywydd deuair hirion*: couplets of seven syllables which rhymed 'asymmetrically' (alternating stressed and unstressed final syllables).¹³ He and his contemporaries richly embellished their *cywyddau* with the *cynghanedd* (consonance or harmony) belonging to the bardic tradition of the thirteenth century.¹⁴ *Cynghanedd* adds to the pleasing sound of a performed poem. There are four types of *cynghanedd*: *Groes* (Cross Harmony); *Draws* (Partial Cross Harmony); *Sain* (Sound Harmony); and *Lusg* (Drag Harmony).¹⁵ Increased use of a

⁸ The earliest extant copy of Gwerful's work is in the sixteenth century. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Women And Their Poetry In Medieval Wales', *Women And Literature In Britain 1150–1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge and New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), pp. 183-201 (p. 186).

⁹ Prifysgol Cymru / University of Wales, 'Poets Of The Nobility', *Prifysgol Cymru/University Of Wales* (2026) <<https://www.wales.ac.uk/cawcs/research/poets-nobility>> [accessed 16th March 2026].

¹⁰ Gwyneth Lewis, 'Extreme Welsh Meter', *Poetry*, (2014), 162-171 (p. 166) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43591673>> [accessed 18th March 2026].

¹¹ Fulton, 'Cywyddwyr', p. 547.

¹² Ceri W. Lewis, 'The Content Of Poetry And The Crisis In The Bardic Tradition', *A Guide To Welsh Literature, Vol 2*, ed. by A. O. H Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Swansea: Christopher Davies (Publishers) Ltd, 1979), pp. 88-111 (p. 99).

¹³ Rachel Bromwich, 'Dafydd Ap Gwilym', *A Guide To Welsh Literature, Vol 2*, ed. by A. O. H Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Swansea: Christopher Davies (Publishers) Ltd, 1979) pp. 112-143 (p. 116). For the term *cywydd* often referring to the specific form of *cywydd deuair hirion*, and originally having no *cynghanedd*, see Dafydd Johnston, 'Cywydd', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 542-543 (p. 542).

¹⁴ Bromwich, 'Dafydd Ap Gwilym', p. 116.

¹⁵ In *cynghanedd groes* the consonants in the first half of a line repeat in the second half in the same sequence; in *cynghanedd draws* the consonants in the first half of a line are repeated, however one or more consonants at the beginning of the second half are not part of the repeat; in *cynghanedd sain* the first and second sections of a line rhyme, and the second and third sections of the line share consonantal repetition; and in *cynghanedd lusg* the penultimate syllable rhymes with the final syllable of the first part of a line. Lines are sometimes divided by an obvious *caesura* (break), such as a comma. Rhian M. Andrews, 'Introduction', *Welsh Court Poems*, ed. by Rhian M. Andrews (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. xxvii-li (pp. xlii-li).

technical device called *dyflau*, prolonged descriptions involving ‘imaginative comparisons and hyperbolic similes’, also emerged in the fourteenth century.¹⁶

The following example, lines twenty-five to thirty-two of Dafydd ab Gwilym’s *Merch yn Ymbincio* (Girl Dressing Up), demonstrates the rhyming pattern of the *cywydd* in bold and various examples of *cynganedd* underlined.¹⁷ Lines thirty-one and thirty-two are also an example of *cymeriad*, which links the ‘beginning of two or more consecutive lines’ via repeating consonants or vowels.¹⁸

25 Mair! ai gwaeth bod y mur gwyn

Dan y calch, doniog cylchyn,

 No phe rhoddid, geubrid gŵr,

Punt er dyfod i'r peintiwr

29 I beintio'n hardd bwyntiau'n hoyw,

Lle arloes â lliw eurloyw

 A lliwiau glân ychwaneg,

 A lluniau tarianau teg?

25 Mary! Is it worse that the white wall

 be under whitewash, a fortunate covering,

 than if a pound were given, man's false price,

 to the painter to come

29 and beautifully paint elegant divisions [of a coat of arms],

 the bare space with a lustrous golden colour

 and other splendid colours,

 and pictures of handsome shields?¹⁹

By the time Gwerful was composing her poetry, in the late fifteenth century, this blend of old and new remained, although three forms of the *cywydd* metre were no longer commonly used, the *cywydd deuair hirion* and the *englyn* were routinely the preferred metres, and compositions were still

¹⁶ Bromwich, ‘Dafydd Ap Gwilym’, pp. 126-127.

¹⁷ The poem and translation are found at Swansea University And The Centre For Advanced Welsh And Celtic Studies, ‘Edited Text: 138 - Merch Yn Ymbincio’, *Dafydd Ap Gwilym.Net*, (2026) <<https://dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>> [accessed 18th March 2026]. Lines twenty-five and twenty-eight illustrate *cynganedd* draws; lines twenty-six, twenty-nine and thirty *cynganedd groes*; twenty-seven and thirty-two *cynganedd sain*; and line thirty-one *cynganedd lusc*. Richard Morgan Loomis, *Dafydd Ap Gwilym: The Poems*, (New York: Centre for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1982) p. 26.

¹⁸ For an explanation of *cymeriad*, see Andrews, ‘Introduction’, *Welsh Court Poems*, pp. xlv-xlvi.

¹⁹ Swansea University And The Centre For Advanced Welsh And Celtic Studies, ‘Edited Text: 138 - Merch Yn Ymbincio’.

adorned with *cynganedd*.²⁰ Gwerful's 'Passion of Christ' is a devotional seventy-six lines of carefully composed *cywydd*, again the rhyme is in bold and the *cynganedd* underlined:

- 1 Goreudduw gwiw a rodded
 Ar bren croes I brynu Cred,
 I weled, weithred nid gau,
 O luoedd Ei weliau,
 5 Gwaed ar dâl gwedi'r dolur
 A gwaed o'r corff gwedi cur.
 Drud oedd Ei gallon drwydoll
 A giau Duw I gyd oll.

- 1 A worthy great God was placed
 On a wooden cross to redeem Christendom,
 To see, not a false act,
 From the host of his wounds
 5 Blood paid after the pain
 And blood from the body after blow.
 Dear was His heart pierced through
 And all of God's sinews.²¹

The *englyn* is a brief, four-line verse form, in which each line contains *cynganedd* of repeating consonants and rhyme.²² Gwerful's poem 'To her maid as she shifts' displays not only the nature of the *englyn unodl union* lending itself to an epigram, but also her word craft and willingness to be inventive with her topics:

- 1 Crwciodd lle dihangoes ei **dŵr** – 'n grychiast
 O grochan ei llaw**dwr**;
 Ei deudwll oedd yen dadwr,

²⁰ The other three forms of *cywydd* are *Cywydd Deuair Fyrion* (four syllables per line); *Cywydd Llosgyrnog* (two, three or four eight-syllable lines followed by a seven-syllable line); and *Awdl Gywydd* (quatrains of seven syllable lines). Johnston, 'Cywydd', p. 542.

²¹ Mechain, 'Dioddefaint Crist' *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 22-31.

²² Gramich, 'Introduction', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, p. 15. There are two forms of *englyn*. The *englyn unodl union* is comprised of a *toddaid byr* and a rhyming couplet of seven-syllable lines. This creates a structure as follows: the first two lines are a unit of sixteen syllables broken into ten and six syllables; the main rhyme is on the seventh, eighth or ninth syllable of the first line and is repeated at the end of the following three lines; the last three syllables of the first line form a *gair cyrch*, an addendum after the main rhyme; and each line has *cynganedd*. The *englyn proest* has a basic structure of four seven-syllable lines with three beats each, and a main end rhyme. Andrews, *Welsh Court Poems*, pp. xlii-xliv.

Baw a ddaeth, a bwa o ddŵr.

- 1 She squatted where her water escaped from – cascading
From the cauldron of her pants;
Her two holes bubbling
Dirt came, and a bow of water.²³

Gwerful's ability to engage with *cynghanedd* and the metric formalities of professional bardism are evident in both these poems, and throughout the rest of her corpus. Two *englynion*, which are most probably Gwerful's, exhibit her skill in dramatising an experience or painting her thoughts in an evocative and succinct way. 'The Snow' portrays getting lost in a blizzard and 'The Grave' captures the essence of 'lonely finality'.²⁴ In each poem the *cynghanedd* adds to the imagery, beautifying the sentiment and scene. It also appears that she chooses to flout bardic conventions in some of her less reverent poems, where the *cynghanedd* becomes more random.²⁵ This could indicate Gwerful's roots in an additional, less stringent tradition, one of orality, akin to that of song called '*hen benillion*'.²⁶ These 'old verses' are free-metre poetry forms, or metres without strict *cynghanedd*, and were thought of as that for more popular consumption, often composed by bards of the lower orders and very much a tradition amongst women, and therefore rarely written down.²⁷ This secondary style is simpler, frequently humorous and filled with the mundane or the passion of human existence.²⁸ It is only in the second half of the sixteenth century that this type of poetry gained 'sufficient esteem among educated people to be committed to writing in any quantity'.²⁹ Around this time, reciting them to the accompaniment of the harp became the late evening, after drinks, entertainment for both sexes, particularly young people.³⁰ Gwerful reached beyond this poetic oral tradition into the male dominated realm of the strict bardic metre, expertly sitting in both genres.³¹ Gwerful rightfully deserves the title *Cywyddwyr*, used to describe the bards of the fourteenth to sixteenth century skilled in using this particular form, but she was not a professional *Beirdd y Uchelwyr* because she did not engage in writing praise poetry for the native elite.³²

Many of Gwerful's contemporaries similarly 'belonged to the same socio-economic class as their patrons' and some, like her, were also not reliant on patrons at all, Dafydd ab Edmwnd (*fl.* 1450-97) for example.³³ Whilst gender 'precluded women from formal bardic training', a woman with high

²³ Mechain, 'I'w Morwyn Wrth Gachu', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 94-95.

²⁴ Mechain, 'Yr Eira' and 'Y Bedd', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 104-107.

²⁵ Gramich, 'Introduction', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 12-13.

²⁶ '*Hen benillion*' mean 'old verses', and the songs and poems were often of unknown authorship. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁷ E. Wyn James, 'Ballad Implosions And Welsh Folk Stanzas', *Ballad And Ballad Studies At The Turn Of The Century*, ed. Nicolae Constantinescu (Bucharest, Romania: Editura Deliana, 2001), pp.101-117 (pp. 103-104).

²⁸ Gramich, 'Introduction', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, p. 1).

²⁹ James, 'Ballad Implosions And Welsh Folk Stanzas', pp. 103-104.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

³¹ Lewis, 'Extreme Welsh Meter', p. 166.

³² Fulton, 'Cywyddwyr', p. 543.

³³ Dafydd ab Edmwnd was not 'financially dependent on his craft', see Dylan Foster Evans, 'Dafydd Ab Edmwnd', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 551 (p. 551). Dafydd ab Edmwnd taught two more of Gwerful's contemporaries Gutun Owain (*fl.* 1450-98) and Tudur Aled (c. 1465-c. 1525) see Dylan Foster Evans, 'Gutun Owain', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 859 (p. 859) and Dylan Foster Evans, 'Tudur Aled', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 1697 (p. 1697).

social status had ‘access’ to professional and amateur poets in a ‘courtly and performative context’.³⁴ This is presumably how Gwerful met some of her contemporaries as visiting friends or passing poets in her father’s house. She is mainly associated with fellow Powys poets, Dafydd Llwyd (c. 1395-1486) and Llywelyn ap Gutun (c. 1460-1500), with the possibility that the former, although older, was both her lover and teacher.³⁵ The poems exchanged between the three of them reveal a somewhat teasing relationship. Dafydd even sends his onetime student, Llywelyn, as his *llatai* (poetic messenger) to Gwerful, parodying the manner of courtly love convention.³⁶ In his taunting reply to Dafydd, Llywelyn says he is a ‘messenger who makes discord’ and insinuates he would make a better lover to Gwerful on account of their comparative age, rather than a man who is grey and a ‘withered stump of old age’.³⁷ This close knit comradeship is possibly reflective of the amateur status of both her and the poets alongside whom she trained, like Llywelyn ap Gutun and Ieuan Dyfi.³⁸ One of her most well-known poems is a long response to Ieuan Dyfi’s (*fl.* late fifteenth century) poem about Anni Goch. Although there are thirty-four copies of his original and only five of hers, the existence of these copies shows that she was ‘an active participant in the poetic community of her time’ and her reply ‘popular enough to be recorded’.³⁹ Her notoriety did extend beyond her ‘amateur bardic circle’, but there she met some criticism and satire from certain quarters.⁴⁰ A pair of question-and-answer *englynion* about ‘who loves more passionately’, man or woman, are also attributed to Dafydd ab Edmwnd and Gwerful in several manuscripts, and is a poetic example of *querelle des femmes* (dispute of women), a European tradition in which the differences between the sexes were probed.⁴¹ It should be noted that Gwerful’s contemporaries might have included other ‘Welsh medieval gentlewomen poets’ who were even less attested than the slightly earlier aristocrats Gwerful Fychan (b. c. 1430) and her daughter Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd (*fl.* 1460s).⁴²

Ieuan Dyfi’s complaint about his seemingly fickle lover Anni Goch (Red Annie) was also in keeping with the *querelle des femmes* whereby misogynistic moaning was a convention on one side of the

³⁴ Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders’, p. 460.

³⁵ For Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn, Powys as skilled *cywyddwr*, see Fulton, ‘Cywyddwyr’, pp. 544-546 and 548. For Dafydd Llwyd as Gwerful’s teacher and lover, see Gramich, ‘Introduction’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 8, 13 and 16.

³⁶ In this particular three-way exchange Gwerful also writes a poem about Dafydd and the ‘bad’ messenger, Llywelyn ap Gutun. Mechain, ‘I Llywelyn Ap Gutun’ and Dafydd Llwyd, ‘Cywydd Llateiaeth I Werful Mechain Ac I Yrru Llywelyn Ap Gutun Ati Yn Llatai’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 54-63 and 120-133. The three-way poetic episode parodies the ‘love messenger convention belonging to the realm of courtly love’ just as Dafydd ap Gwilym had done in some of his poems. Dafydd Johnston, *Canu Maswedd Yr Oesoedd Canol / Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry* (Cardiff: Tafol, 1991), p. 24.

³⁷ Llywelyn ap Gutun, ‘Ateb I’r Cywydd Llateiaeth’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 126-133.

³⁸ For Dafydd Llwyd training Ieuan Dyfi and Llywelyn ap Gutun, see Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders’, p. 461.

³⁹ Adelaide Greig, ‘The Extraordinary Medieval Women: Responding To The Critical Reception Of Gwerful Mechain’s Poetry’, *Melbourne Historic Journal: Narratives And Power*, 47 (2020) 43-55 (p. 49) <<https://journal.mhj.net.au/index.php/editions/article/view/5/7>> [accessed 13th March 2026].

⁴⁰ Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders’, p. 461.

⁴¹ Mechain and Dafydd ab Edmwnd, ‘Pwy A Gâr Fwya’f’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 100-101. For *querelle des femmes* as an ‘intellectual debate over the status of women that occurred in the early modern period, between the 1400s and 1700s’; the main arguments being whether ‘men were superior to women’ or whether ‘women were equal or superior to men’, see Eric Wilkinson, ‘Strength And Superiority: The Theme Of Strength In The Querelle Des Femmes’, *De Philosophia*, Vol 1 (2021) pp. 1-2 <<https://dephilosophiauottawa.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/the-theme-of-strength-in-the-querelle-des-femmes-vol-1.pdf>> [accessed 28th March 2026].

⁴² Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders’, p. 459.

debate.⁴³ The pair had been taken to court for adultery, but Anni had pleaded not guilty, stating that she had been raped.⁴⁴ Gwerful's response stands with Anni's accusation:

65 Ni allodd merch, gordderchwr,
 Diras ei gwaith, dreisio gŵr.
 Dig aflan, o ddi gyfle,
 Ymdynnu a wnâi, nid am ne'.
69 Gad yn wib, godinebwr,
 Galw dyn hardd gledren hŵr.

65 No woman could, fornicator,
 Ever rape a man, your doings are wicked.
69 Evil, jealous man, if the chance came,
 You would be pulled down, not towards heaven.
 Stop your attacks, adulterer,
 Calling the lovely woman a whore.⁴⁵

The *cywyddau* of Ieuan and Gwerful are not only complementary in theme, but also in structure, suggesting a performative pairing and their origin within Dafydd Llwyd's circle.⁴⁶ Ieuan names well-known men to put his case of having been deceived, and Gwerful more than matches this with examples of her own.⁴⁷ Her good education is evident here as she weaves in both wronged and wise women, some of them linked to the tales that Ieuan has referenced. She cites women from 'classical' and 'biblical' sources and from 'Welsh history': Dido, Tonwen, Gwendolen, Marcia, and Elen, all queens in their own right or the powerful wives of rulers; Genuissa the mediator; the mother of Judas Iscariot; Susanna the spy; and finally a judgment by Sybil the oracle.⁴⁸ The serious and unhappy circumstance into which the poem was written does suggest Gwerful as a 'champion for women' here, and for those of a different class than herself, providing insight into her views about the treatment of women by her peers.⁴⁹

⁴³ Ieuan Dyfi, 'I Anni Goch', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 110-119.

⁴⁴ Whilst the original matter occurred c. 1502, in 1517 it was revealed by the courts that Anni Goch had been sold to Ieuan Dyfi by her husband, who she was accused of plotting to kill. Charnell-White, 'Beyond Borders', p. 470.

⁴⁵ Mechain, 'I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi Am Gywydd Anni Goch', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁶ Charnell-White, 'Beyond Borders', p. 468.

⁴⁷ Ieuan Dyfi refers to the semi historical Myrddyn Wyllt (Wild Merlin); biblical characters Samson and Solomon; historical characters Alexander the Great, Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Ovid; and mythological characters Jason (Argonauts), Paris (Troy), and Brutus (Troy). Ieuan Dyfi, 'I Anni Goch', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 110-119.

⁴⁸ Greig, 'The Extraordinary Medieval Women', p. 49. For notes about the women, see Gramich, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 64-73.

⁴⁹ Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Gwerful Mechain', *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Medieval Women's Writing in the Global Middle Ages*, living edn., ed. by M.M. Sauer, D. Watt and L.H. McAvoy (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) p. 3 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76219-3_21-1> [accessed 23rd March 2026].

Gwerful responded to the poems and actions of other men too. Her poem to the vagina is undoubtedly inspired by Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem to the penis, which is found in twenty-one manuscripts, and in five of them mistakenly attributed to Gwerful.⁵⁰ Her *cywydd* uses *dyflau* in a similar way that his does, conjuring vivid imagery and metaphor in real praise of female biology, sexuality and sensuality: 'table of song with its double in red'; 'a sultan of an ode'; 'pure court of feathery fat'; 'little curtained seam'; 'and 'precious ringlet of greeting'.⁵¹ Additionally, she subverts a convention called *descriptio pulchritudinis* in which the woman's body is objectified systematically via description of the hair, eyebrows, facial features, breasts, arms, hands, legs and feet.⁵² Gwerful maintains that the best part is missed out in this type of methodical homage and in a stunning double entendre suggests the poets' tongues could be put to better use.⁵³ Medieval references to oral sex in general are rare and likely taboo, rarer still to the actual experience of cunnilingus and tasting the 'sour grove'.⁵⁴ She finishes her own celebration by asking God to save the 'noble bush'.⁵⁵

Gwerful's poem 'Jealous Wives' is a nod to either Dafydd Llwyd's 'The Poet's Revenge' in which 'Jealous One's radiant mistress' is used in the context of taunting fellow poet, Llywelyn ap Maredudd, or to his poem, aimed at a man called Iago, specifically satirising jealous wives and praising non-jealous noblewomen.⁵⁶ She 'inverts' the motif of the jealous husband and her tutor's satire, by initially agreeing with Dafydd Llwyd and then complaining in similar way that women guard their husbands closely too.⁵⁷ In her advocacy of an equal playing field in the realm of love and female sexual satisfaction she again uses *dyflau* to list the many things a woman will give up before letting others have their husbands' 'bigger than usual cock': her mother, brothers, cousins, and sisters; cattle, plough oxen and sheep; house and land; and frying pan, trivet and headdress.⁵⁸ The property, animals and household objects cited demonstrate Gwerful's knowledge of Welsh law which outlines the specific possessions a women may keep, or have a share of, in the case of divorce.⁵⁹ Gwerful also refers to a poetic predecessor and possibly to poem(s) that have not survived, when she describes lust not love as a driving factor:

9 Meddai i mi Wenllian,
 Bu anllad gynt benllwyd gân,
 Nid cariad, anllad curiaw,

⁵⁰ Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cywydd Y Gal', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 146-147.

⁵¹ Mechain, 'Cywydd Y Cedor' *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 40-45.

⁵² Charnell-White, 'Beyond Borders', p. 465.

⁵³ Lines nineteen to twenty-two: 'Duw yn ei rodd a'l oddeff, / Diffwrwyth wawd o'l dafwd ef. / Gado'r canol heb foliant / A'r plas lle'r enillir plant,' – 'His tongue giving fruitless praise / To God in his gifts and forgiveness. / But he leaves the middle without praise, / That place where children are conceived,'. Mechain, 'Cywydd Y Cedor', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 42-43.

⁵⁴ Miles Latham, 'Noble Bush: Sex-Positive Feminist Linguistics In Gwerful Mechain's "Cywydd Y Cedor"', *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle: Journal Of Creative Writing*, Vol 99, with *Sigma Tau Delta Review: Journal Of Creative Writing*, Vol 21, (Dallas: University of Texas, 2024) pp. 248-253 (pp. 250-251).

⁵⁵ Mechain, 'Cywydd Y Cedor', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 44-45.

⁵⁶ Johnston, *Canu Maswedd Yr Oesoedd Canol*, pp. 100-101. For the mention of Dafydd Llwyd's 'Cywydd dychan i'r eiddiges a moliant i'r wraig fonheddigaid oedd eiddigus' (A satirical cywydd to the jealous wife and praise to the noblewoman who was not jealous, no. 80), see reference 44 in Charnell-White, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 464 and 475.

⁵⁷ Charnell-White, 'Beyond Borders', p. 464.

⁵⁸ Mechain, 'I Wragedd Eiddigus', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 46-53.

⁵⁹ Lloyd-Morgan, 'Gwerful Mechain', p. 3.

Yr awr a dry ar aur draw.

9 Gwenllïan told me,
That at one time grey-haired song was indecent,
Not love, but lustful pining,
Now it turns toward gold yonder⁶⁰

Two other poems convey Gwerful's thoughts about the specific actions of men. One directed towards her father and one towards a husband. These may or may not be based on personal experience. The former chastises her father for taking a younger wife. The *englynion* are accompanied and joined together by introductory prose, creating an unusual piece.⁶¹ This narration indicates it is probably Gwerful's work. The poem itself explains that her father is a 'grey-haired man with a randy disposition' and that the 'girl' he has married is 'in her heat, white hot' and 'deserves better'.⁶² She concludes that 'you, father, have got old'.⁶³ The other poem, a well-constructed *englyn*, is vivid curse against the perpetrator of domestic violence:

1 Dager drwy goler dy gallon – ar osgo
I asgwrn dy ddwyfron;
Dy lin a dyr, dy law'n don,
A'th gleddau i'th goluddion.

1 A dagger though 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.⁶⁴

Gwerful does not 'censor' her anger and neither does she 'remain silent for fear of retribution'.⁶⁵ This overt expression bears a similar transparency with which she conveys female desire, by wishing for a 'lad beside the bush'.⁶⁶ Both rage and yearning go against the medieval notions of the meek noblewoman who may be the object of desire but never herself be the active participant. However, it would be a mistake perhaps to view this as a voice completely 'free of patriarchal constraints'.⁶⁷

Gwerful's poems do portray life as a woman, right down to the annoyance at wet 'petticoats' in the rain, and, in part, her words express female passion, longing and outrage, but there is no proof that all

⁶⁰ A sole poem survives for Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd (*fl.* c 1460), but Gwerful's reference indicates they possibly knew each other or that she had heard her poetry. Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd, 'Nid Er Da Bara'n Y Byd', *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001*, p. 1. For Gwerful's poem extract see Mechain, 'I Wragedd Eiddigus', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 46-47.

⁶¹ Mechain, 'Ynghylch Ei Thad', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 98-99.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Mechain, 'I'w Gŵr Am Ei Churo', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 88-89.

⁶⁵ Greig, 'The Extraordinary Medieval Women', p. 50-51

⁶⁶ Mechain, 'Llanc Ym Min Y Llwyn', *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 92-93.

⁶⁷ Greig, 'The Extraordinary Medieval Women', p. 53

of them are autobiographical.⁶⁸ It is possible that the ‘dominant themes of Dafydd Llwyd’s bardic circle’ encouraged exploration along some of these lines and that it was fashionable to create performative verse about misogyny, ‘wicked women, jealous husbands’, lovers, and ‘bawdy anticlerical satire’.⁶⁹ It is also entirely possible that these subjects became popular in the late medieval era because women had begun, or were attempting, to enter the male dominated world of strict meter poetry, and the topics arose in the same way that women have always received backlash against many a glass ceiling and have had to hold their own against banter and the misogynistic refrain ‘only joking’. Coincidentally, these themes are also present in the poems produced around the same time by the Inveraray circle, Scotland, which included the aristocratic mother and daughter poets, Iseabal Campbell and Iseabal ní Mheic Cailéin.⁷⁰ Gwerful’s poetry does exhibit what appears to modern eyes a brave and refreshing feminist take, but she may not have seen herself that way. With her works copied into ‘manuscript compilations’ owned by women, Gwerful’s voice was an inspiration to other women, including other female poets like Angharad Jones, Marged Dafydd and Alis ferch Gruffudd ab Ieuan, in the following centuries.⁷¹

However, despite some sixty-six female names present amongst the four thousand Welsh poets from the earliest medieval period to the nineteenth century, there are surely many more medieval Welsh women ‘hiding’ or hidden behind anonymous and unpublished poetry.⁷² This means their voices no doubt played their part in various levels of society yet remain difficult to detect.⁷³ Disappointingly, their grievances, like Gwerful’s, appear similar to those who rage against domestic violence and sexual assault today, or even those who just express the ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ tightrope that women still walk. The following is from an anonymous *hen benillion* belonging to the oral tradition long before it was written down in the seventeenth or eighteenth century:

Blamed for courting, blamed for not,
 Blamed for throwing over my lover,
 Blamed for getting up at night to the window;
 The right thing to be is a virtuous girl.
 Blamed for falling in love with curly hair.
 Blamed for dressing smartly,
 Blamed for going to church on Sundays,

⁶⁸ Mechain, ‘Gwlychu Pais’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 90-91.

⁶⁹ Charnell-White, ‘Beyond Borders’, pp. 462-463.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Gwerful’s poetry is known to have formed part of the ‘Red Book’ of Angharad James (1677-1749), poet and harpist. Gramich, ‘Introduction’, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, p. 12. The manuscripts of Marged Dafydd, also known as Margaret Davies (c. 1700-1785), are the only known source for one of the *englynion* written by Gwerful, see Shannon Rose Parker, *The ‘Celts-Briton’ In Scottish Gaelic And Welsh Language Poetry, 1746-1826*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2024), pp. 115-116 <<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37378872>> [accessed 23rd March 2026]. Alis ferch Gruffudd ab Ieuan creates a similar poem to Gwerful’s ‘About Her Father’, see notes Gramich, *The Works Of Gwerful Mechain*, p. 99.

⁷² Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, ‘Women And Their Poetry In Medieval Wales’, *Women And Literature In Britain 1150 –1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge and New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), pp. 183-201 (p. 184).

⁷³ Adelaide Greig, ‘The Extraordinary Medieval Women: Responding To The Critical Reception Of Gwerful Mechain’s Poetry’, *MHJ Vol 47* – p. 52

Blamed I'd be if I stayed at home.⁷⁴

As Gramich says, Gwerful did see and express things from her point of view, a woman's point of view, appearing to do so unfettered by patriarchy. However, it is worth considering whether she was not alone in this type of feminine expression, just unique in her preservation and in having her name put to works.⁷⁵ Accordingly, is it possible that because she chose to play the men at their game that she was remembered or that her poems that engaged in the jibing rhetoric gave her a notable boost? Is this also why the only surviving *englyn* of the earlier Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd is because it is a response to a poetic insult from a man?⁷⁶ The poets surrounding Gwerful wrote poems with detailed sexual or satirising content. Llywelyn ap Gutun uses extensive *dyflau* to describe 'A Man and Woman Making Love', and Dafydd ab Edmwnd mocks fellow poet Guto'r Glyn's testicular problem in a lengthy *cywydd* filled with description after description.⁷⁷ Dafydd Llywd complains about being worn out from one young woman demands and that he caught a sexually transmitted disease from another poet's mistress or relative.⁷⁸ Whilst some of Gwerful's phrasing may imply internalised misogyny, overall she portrays the joy of consensual sex and exhibits a healthy regard for female anatomy and pleasure. Maybe this circle was the safe, permissive space in which Gwerful could express female desire and go head-to-head with men, or was a certain type of poem the price of entry? It is difficult to mentally untangle a young talented Gwerful, eager for poetic tuition and for whom a poet forty years her senior lusted, from the grown woman with agency who clearly missed her mentor's affections when he goes a-wandering in more ways than one. Where the power truly lies within these dynamics is at the core of how Gwerful is engaging with her contemporaries, unfortunately only the possibilities can be laid out not a verdict.

Gwerful may have experienced a level of poetic parity within her immediate sphere but would not have been permitted to be a professional poet and possibly was not accepted as a performing poet far beyond that amateur social clique. With a cursory retrospective lens she does appear 'extraordinary' and 'modern', feminist even, as she 'subverts the common conception of medieval women as passive.'⁷⁹ Certainly, she is not an acquiescent happenstance and displays a mastery when employing 'the very poetic genres and tropes that diminish women, and deny them agency', turning them into an 'alternative female gaze'.⁸⁰ She argues her side of *querelles des femmes* with a voice that is clear and capable, comedic and serious, witty and educated. She interacts on a poetic par with the male poets she knows and breaks the rules of the craft, but Gramich's assertion that she jousts with them as their perceived 'equal' might be a stretch in light of the gender inequality of the time and of the views expressed by her contemporaries. She did take them to task on certain actions and aspects of their character, such as violence or sexual predation, and made a name for herself doing so it is true, but whether her surviving poems are a small representation of her output and she actually used her talent on other topics more widely is unknowable. Poems like the 'Passion of Christ', and 'The Snow' and 'The Grave' if they are Gwerful's, indicate that her lost legacy is potentially rich in beauty, sensuality and artistic observation equal to that of her wit-filled comebacks, considered criticisms and verses centred on or in response to men.

⁷⁴ Lloyd-Morgan, 'Women And Their Poetry In Medieval Wales', p. 184.

⁷⁵ Greig, 'The Extraordinary Medieval Women', pp. 50-51

⁷⁶ Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd, 'Nid Er Da Bara'n Y Byd', *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001*, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Johnston, *Canu Maswedd Yr Oesoedd Canol*, pp. 112-115 and 124-129.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-101 and 106-109.

⁷⁹ Greig, 'The Extraordinary Medieval Women', p. 48

⁸⁰ Charnell-White, 'Beyond Borders: p. 471.

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