

(2) Compare and contrast any two poems by Gwerful Mechain: *Cywydd y Cedor* & *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi*.

Word Count (excluding footnotes, bibliography, assignment headings, and this line): 4,092.

Within the body of poetry that was written by Welsh medieval women, Gwerful Mechain's works continue to stand out as both the most numerous, with a total of at least 18 poems, and among the (if not *the*) most well-known.¹ Living from approximately 1460-1502, she was the daughter of Hywel Fychan and Gwenhwyfar in either Mechain or Llanfechain, both in Powys.² Her works have sometimes been confused with those of Gwerful Fychan, and understandably so, as they have the same given name, lived during roughly the same time period, and were both related to the Fychan family, which appears to have produced several other medieval poets, including women poets such as Elsbeth and Jane Fychan.³

Mechain's surviving poetry was composed in the traditional Welsh strict-meter form called *cynghanedd*, which translates roughly to "harmony" in English, featuring various combinations or styles of internal rhyme and alliteration.⁴ While she was almost certainly not considered a "professional" bard, as this designation was reserved for strict-meter poets who were sponsored by nobility and composed primarily praise poetry, eulogies, and elegies and were exclusively male to current knowledge, Mechain's works as an "amateur" were on-par with her male peers of the era and consisted of similar topics and styles.⁵ In fact, many of her remaining works are

¹ Jane Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales' in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, Vol. 1, ed. by Liz H. McAvoy and Diana Watt, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 63; Jane Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales', *Medium Ævum*, 71: 1 (2002), p. 12; Cathryn A. Charnell-White, 'Problems of Authorship and Attribution: The Welsh-language Women's Canon before 1800' in *Women's Writing from Wales before 1914*, ed. by Jane Aaron (Routledge, New York: Routledge, 2020), Chapter 1, sub-section: Strict-metre poetry; *The Works of Gwerful Mechain* ed. & trns. by Katie Gramich, (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2018), p. 7; Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Gwerful Mechain' in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Medieval Women's Writing in the Global Middle Ages*, ed. by Michelle M. Sauer, Diana Watt, and Liz Herbert McAvoy, (2022), Abstract.

² *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, pp. 7-8.

³ Charnell-White, 'Problems of Authorship and Attribution: The Welsh-language Women's Canon before 1800' in *Women's Writing from Wales before 1914*, Chapter 1, sub-section: Strict-metre poetry.

⁴ *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, pp. 14-16; Mererid Hopwood, *Singing in Chains: Listening to Welsh Verse*, (Gomer/Y Lolfa, 2004/2016) discusses the techniques of *cynghanedd* throughout.

⁵ *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 8: "[Mechain] engages in poetic dialogues with her male contemporaries, using the same forms, metres, tropes, and vocabulary as they ... she jousts with them verbally as their equal, confident in her own craft and opinions ... It is notable that Gwerful does not appear to have written in several of the conventional genres of her day; there are no praise poems to patrons, eulogies, or elegies among the poems by her that have survived"; Charnell-White, 'Problems of Authorship and Attribution: The Welsh-language Women's Canon before 1800' in *Women's Writing from Wales before 1914*: "[Mechain] was ... associated with some of the most prominent professional poets of her day, as well as the amateur poets of her locality, thus attesting to the permeable boundaries of professionalism and amateurism in the strict-metre world", subsection: 'Poetic circles'.

replies to her male contemporaries, some which spurred full-on poetic “dialogue”.⁶ Whether Mechain was perceived as dabbling in a field not “meant” for women by her amateur poet peers or by contemporary society, and whether her works were seen as controversial at the time of their recitation or transcription, still seems to be an unsettled question among scholars.⁷

Supporting the perception that her works were not seen as particularly unusual or inappropriate are the facts that her erotic works were written down across numerous manuscripts (unlike the modern era up until the recently-begun 21st century, where her works were purposefully omitted from publications due to their being perceived as immoral or improper), and that fellow (male) bards interacted and responded to her in similar fashion, rather than rebuking or ignoring her.⁸ On the other hand, she openly complained of misogyny and rape (and possibly also husbands beating their wives) at a time when such was not only common but accepted, indirectly refers to cunnilingus in her poem *Cywydd y Cedor* in a time when such was likely to have been seen as a sin, was not under the pressure to preserve her bardic reputation against accusations of indecency since she was not a professional, and she was not regarded wholly without criticism in her own time.⁹

What is not a matter of debate, however, is that Mechain’s works are increasingly becoming known in the modern day and celebrated as both fine examples of medieval women’s poetry in general as well as glimpses into the thoughts and experiences of specifically medieval Welsh women – many of which still speak to issues faced by women in current times. Indeed, her writing is illustrative of a complex and learned woman who could spin poetic tapestries of

⁶ For example: *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, ‘To Llywelyn ap Gutun’ pp. 54-63, poems number 7-10 between Gwerful Mechain and Dafydd Llwyd pp. 74-87, ‘Who Loves More Passionately?’ pp. 100-1.

⁷ *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 41, footnotes: “The boldness and explicitness of Gwerful’s erotic poem does not appear to have shocked her contemporaries, but it ensured that her work was neglected and concealed for many years by embarrassed male scholars after Wales became ‘a nation of Nonconformists’ in the nineteenth century”; Manon Ceridwen James, *Women, Identity, and Religion in Wales: Theology, Poetry, Story*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), Chapter 4: “However, a religiously repressive attitude towards sexuality is a relatively recent phenomenon as Welsh women’s poetry shows”; Dafydd Johnston, *Canu Maswedd yr Oesoedd Canol/Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 23: “In a sense Gwerful’s very existence as a poet was a challenge to the male-dominated bardic establishment, and the element of challenge is most prominent in her erotic poems. They challenged social prejudices which held that women should not openly admit to their sexuality. They challenged male poets who presented a respectable picture of the female body, and who saw women merely as objects of men’s lust”.

⁸ *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich features a discussion of Leslie Harries omission of Gwerful Mechain’s work from his 1950s anthology of poetry and statement in his MA thesis where he suggests Mechain “should not be judged in the light of the moral principles of this century” and then goes on to label her as “nothing more than a whore” by twentieth-century standards, pp. 10-11.

⁹ Charnell-White, ‘Problems of Authorship and Attribution: The Welsh-language Women’s Canon before 1800’, in *Women’s Writing from Wales before 1914*: “She [Mechain] was satirized cruelly on one occasion at the court of the Bishop of Bangor; it is implied that, by turning in male circles, she transgressed both social and bardic mores of female propriety: ‘Gweiddi y mae Gweirfyl, gwiddon – ysgethrin [Gwerful, horrible hag, is shouting]’” subsection: ‘Poetic circles’; discussion of the social and religious reaction to cunnilingus in the Middle Ages: Miles Latham, ‘Noble Bush: Sex-Positive Feminist Linguistics in Gwerful Mechain’s “Cywydd y Cedor”’, *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle: Journal of Creative Writing/Sigma Tau Delta Review: Journal of Critical Writing*, 99/21, ed. by C.S.T. King, (Dallas: University of Texas, 2024), pp. 250-1 discuss Mechain’s bucking of the medieval taboo against cunnilingus, which it is argued was viewed as sinful by the church by record of its requiring lengthy penance; *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 8: “But as a married woman from a high-status family, it is probable that she enjoyed the freedom to write on whatever subjects she wished to; it seems likely that she avoided genres such as praise-poems simply because she was not obliged to ‘sing for her supper’”.

immersive imagery and intense emotion revolving around subjects as disparate as the passion of Christ and the praise of the female reproductive organs, as serious as rebuking misogyny and as crass as poking fun at her own maid's squatting to relieve herself.¹⁰ It can be surprising and refreshing in the current age to become aware of a woman of long centuries past so unabashedly sharing her sex-positive and feminist views and responses with her contemporaries (if not a bit disappointing to note that progress regarding attitudes towards women and female bodies has perhaps not come as far, in some regards, since medieval times as the current population may generally believe). As Tomos Owen of Cardiff University puts it, she is "a fascinating writer to think of nowadays: so much of her work seems relevant in a world of #MeToo..."¹¹

Although Mechain produced cynganeddion in both *cywydd* (longer poems consisting of seven-syllable lines in rhyming couplets ending with alternating syllabic stress) and *englyn* (four-line stanza) forms, here it is two of her *cywyddau* which will be compared, namely *Cywydd y Cedor* (The Cywydd of the Vagina), a 50-line poem and *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi am Gywydd Anni Goch* (In Answer to Ieuan Dyfi for his Cywydd of Red Anni; henceforth abbreviated to *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi*), an 80-line poem.¹² It must be noted here, however, that the Welsh version of this poem given in *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology* ("An Anthology") has 89 lines rather than 80.¹³ It is my determination that the additional nine lines have likely been added by way of a transcription error in which the nine lines beginning "Yn gwir hardd, ai gwir hyn?" (line 33) and ending "Ac o'i galon pe gwelen" (line 41) on page 16 have been mistakenly inserted in between the lines "Gwraig Gonstans, a gafas gynt" (line 32) and "Y Groes lle y lladdwyd Iesu" (line 43 in *An Anthology*). These nine lines are not present in this position in the Welsh version transcribed by the same editor (Gramich) in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, nor are they present in the entry for *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi* in Charnell-White's *Beirdd Ceridwen*.¹⁴ The lines are not translated in the English version on the opposite-facing page in *An Anthology*; they do not make sense in the context of this portion of the poem discussing Elen, and they are an exact copy of the same nine lines further down in the poem which occur between "Dywed Ifan, 'rwy'n d'ofyn" (line 72) and "Dywed Ifan, ar dafawd" (line 83) on page 18 and which do make sense there. Thus, I have deduced the doubled insertion of those nine lines in the segment referring to Elen in *An Anthology* is in error.

Cywydd y Cedor and *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi* both have strong feminist, pro-women, and chastising-of-men tones even by modern standards, but through these poems, Mechain communicates her support of fellow women and frustrations with men in ways both similar and very different. In *Cywydd y Cedor*, we see what would today be referred to as body positivity in her shameless celebration of the female body by way of specifically and explicitly centering that most often-ignored and (still) taboo organ: the vagina. She begins by setting the stage with the

¹⁰ The related examples are: *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, 'Dioddefaint Crist/Christ's Passion' pp. 22-31, 'Cywydd y Cedor/Poem to the Vagina' pp. 40-45, 'I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi am Gywydd Anni Goch/A Response to Ieuan Dyfi's Poem on Red Annie' pp. 64-73, and 'I'w Morwyn wrth Gacu/To Her Maid as She Shits' pp. 94-96.

¹¹ Lauren Cocking, 'On the Gleeefully Indecent Poems of a Medieval Welsh Feminist Poet', *Lit Hub*, 9 August 2019.

¹² Gwerful Mechain, 'I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch/A Response to Ieuan Dyfi's Poem on Red Annie' in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. & transl. by Katie Gramich, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), pp. 64-73.

¹³ Gwerful Mechain, 'In Reply to Ieuan Dyfi for His Cywydd on Red Annie' in *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology*, ed. by Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan, (Honno Classics, 2003), pp. 14-19.

¹⁴ Cathryn A. Charnell-White, 'I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi am Gywydd Anni Goch', *Beirdd Ceridwen: Blodeugerdd Barddas o Ganu Menywod hyd tua 1800*, (Cyhoeddiadau Barddas, 2005), pp. 56-8.

reason for need of such a poem in the first place – a reason which rings true to this day – with a snarky criticism of the erasure of this part of the woman’s body by male poets. Denunciation of the male in conjunction with elevation of the female is a theme that will resurface in a more serious vein in *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi*.

The wider poetic treatment of this literally unmentionable organ serves as a symbolic mirror of the way women themselves were viewed by society at-large. Like the vagina, that part which most outwardly marks the female body as female, women themselves were the simultaneously glorified incarnate perfections and condemned, easily discarded objects of male sexual desire. They were the simultaneously revered, beloved mothers and inhumanly flawed and polluted, mere vessels of the birth of the next generation.¹⁵ They were the simultaneously exalted, sought-after, and all-consuming goal of many a man and yet also the censored and repugnant lesser, not only unworthy of mention but so often forbidden from possessing a voice, invoking hostility and mockery when stepping out of their designated place of unquestioning obedience and hiding silently in plain sight.¹⁶ Mechain holds no qualms in highlighting the unjust quiet regarding the quim despite its so often being the unspoken but understood ultimate objective of all the men’s praises to begin with – and, by extension, the failure to consider females as whole persons themselves.

She continues by alluding to yet another unmentionable, and this even more unmentionable than the vagina itself as illustrated by her approaching it obliquely even in the face of such an otherwise overt piece – the act of oral sex. Miles Latham makes a convincing argument for the interpretation of the “diffirwyth wawd o’i dafawd ef” (line 20, “tongue giving fruitless praise”) which also “gadu’r canol heb foliant” (line 21, “leaves the middle without praise”) as a double-entendre for both the empty waxing rhapsodic of lusty bards skipping over mention of that which they actually seek and also their neglect of paying due “praise” to the vagina with their tongues in the physical sense.¹⁷ It may also be meaningful here that the word *gwawd* is used in the first of these two lines, which can have the opposite meanings of both “song of praise, eulogy; exaltation” and also “mockery, derision, ridicule”, the former being the older attested

¹⁵K. R. L. Kapphahn, *Constructions of Gender in Medieval Welsh Literature*, (Aberystwyth University, 2009), p. 13: “The early church owed much of its gender philosophy to Aristotle, who supposed that since in most animal species the male is the larger and more agile, that masculine superiority was the natural order of the universe, and to question it would be detrimental to the entire community”; Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2: “Since they [the Church and the aristocracy] were in agreement in placing woman in subjection to man, neither the concept of marriage nor the law took note of her as a complete individual ... The fact which governed her position was not her personality but her sex, and by her sex she was inferior to man” and p. 3: “[T]hey [the common folk] went to their churches on Sundays and listened while preachers told them in one breath that woman was the gate of hell and that Mary was Queen of heaven”, and p. 8: “Disobedient wives were liable to correction by force. Canon law specifically allowed wife-beating...”

¹⁶ Charnell-White, ‘Problems of Authorship and Attribution: The Welsh-language Women’s Canon before 1800’, in *Women’s Writing from Wales before 1914*: “She [Mechain] was satirized cruelly on one occasion at the court of the Bishop of Bangor; it is implied that, by turning in male circles, she transgressed both social and bardic mores of female propriety: ‘Gweiddi y mae Gweirfyl, gwiddon – ysgethrin [Gwerful, horrible hag, is shouting]” subsection: ‘Poetic circles’, and “Pseudonyms such as Gwenddydd chwaer Myrddin (Gwenddydd, sister of Merlin), Siân Samson (Jane, daughter of Samson) and Gwen Arthur (Gwen, daughter of [King] Arthur) hint at male poets ventriloquizing women’s voices, often satirically”, subsection: ‘(Re)constructing a female canon’.

¹⁷ Latham, ‘Noble Bush’, pp. 248-252; Gwerful Mechain, ‘Cywydd y Cedor’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. & trnsl. by Katie Gramich, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), pp. 42-5.

meaning but the latter interpretation also known to record since at least the late 16th century.¹⁸ This puts the latter meaning's first known reference in writing about eighty years after Mechain's approximate lifetime, but it could have interesting implications if its latter meaning were known in spoken word (and, if arising as a new meaning at the time, perhaps itself a bit sarcastic and slangy in that usage) before its first written attestation in such a way. Especially juxtaposed against the word from the following line also translated here as "praise", *moliant*, which not only means "praise" or "eulogy" but carries a wholly positive and even idolizing nuance of "worship or veneration accorded to God", could the use of *gwawd* be Mechain intentionally pointing out the reality for females and their defining organ as a target for conflicting concurrent condemnation as well as adoration, where there instead should be pure reverence comparable to that set aside for God (*moliant*)?¹⁹

Having acknowledged the lack of admiration for the "plas lle'r enillir plant" (line 22, "palace where children are conceived"), Mechain goes on to right this injustice by taking up the task herself.²⁰ In what can only be assumed to be the translators settling upon a slightly different distillation of the various versions of the original Welsh poems from their numerous manuscripts, Dafydd Johnston records the following lines (23 and 24) as "a'r cedor clyd, *rhagor* clae'r | tynerdeg, cylch tw'n eurdaer" ("and the warm quim, clear *excellence* | tender and *fat*, bright fervent broken circle") [emphasis added] while Katie Gramich renders the same lines as "a'r cedor clyd, *hyder* clae'r | tynerdeg, cylch tw'n eurdaer" ("the snug vagina, clear *hope* | tender and *lovely*, open circle strong and bright") [emphasis added].²¹ They also choose to translate "a'r cedor clyd" and "cylch tw'n eurdaer" differently, emphasizing divergent nuances of the words *clyd* and *tw'n*, and the *taer* portion of *eurdaer*.²²

Mechain unambiguously declares her love for her vagina and gladness for its health before continuing on to extol its virtues in more metaphorical ways for the remainder of the cywydd, making use of a technique known as *dyfalu* (conjecture; liken, compare) whereby she "uses her ingenuity to describe an object in a series of inventive ways, in a multiple and cumulative comparison".²³ While Johnston asserts that *dyfalu* was used "often with a pronounced riddling quality" and that "its effect is always to make the object in question seem unusual or strange", there appears to be nothing mysterious or odd about *Cywydd y Cedor*, the subject of which is plainly spoon-fed before the *dyfalu* begins, rendering any riddling rather pointless. Nor is the picture painted one that makes the vagina seem "unusual or strange" but instead openly celebrates it.²⁴

Perhaps what is "unusual or strange" about Mechain's work is not how her use of *dyfalu* shrouds the subject in mystery but rather how the cywydd as a whole blatantly reveals the vagina in vivid

¹⁸ Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru [GPC], "gwawd", <<https://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html>>.

¹⁹ GPC, "moliant".

²⁰ Mechain, 'Cywydd y Cedor' in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 42-3.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 42-3; Mechain, 'Cywydd y Cedor', in *Canu Maswedd yr Oesoedd Canol/Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry*, pp. 40-1.

²² GPC, "clyd"; "tw'n"; "taer".

²³ GPC, "dyfalu"; *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 14.

²⁴ Johnston, *Canu Maswedd yr Oesoedd Canol/Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry*, pp. 23, also pp. 28-9 in Dafydd ap Gwilym's *Cywydd y Gal*, the penis is likewise mentioned up-front before the *dyfalu* begins, which also seems to be at odds with Johnston's insistence on a "riddling quality" or the point being to make the subject "seem unusual or strange".

natural imagery (English translations given are Johnston's/Gramich's/Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru's [where the lattermost differs or gives further nuance]) – *bloneg blu* (line 28, “fat’s plumage/feathery fat”), *pant* (line 31/47, “valley/hollow”), *clawdd* (line 32/48, “ditch/bush”), *llwyn sur* (line 46/44, “sour grove”), *fforest falch iawn* (line 47, “very proud forest”), *breisglwyn/trwsglwyn* (line 49, “thick grove/thicket”), *berth addwyn* (“lovely/noble/excellent, elegant bush”). She presents the vagina and pubic hair as scenes of beautiful landscapes and majestic trees or bushes rather than as something unsightly or ugly to be ashamed of. She also showers her subject with positive and regal comparisons and adjectives throughout, marking its power – the aforementioned *plas* (line 22, “palace”), *tyner* (line 24, “tender”), *eurdaer* (line 24, “strong/fervent and bright/gold”), *cywrain* (line 25, “perfect/delicate/skillful; expert; cleverly wrought”), *diball ei allu* (line 27, “boundless/unfailing [its] strength/ability/power”), *cwrt difreg* (line 28, “faultless court”), *ddawn ddifreg* (lines 36 and 47, “perfect/faultless gift”), *freisged frig* (line 37, “highest blessing/stout treetops”[?]), *sawden awdl* (line 43, “sultan of an ode”), *sidan* (line 43, “silk”), *sêm fach* (line 44, “little seam”), *wen wiw* (line 44, “fine bright”). She even gives it a pleasant disposition: *ymannerch*, *annerch* (lines 45 and 49, “greeting”), *llawn yw o serch* (line 46, “full [be it] of love/passion”), and tops the whole list off with an affirming *Duw’n borth iddo* (line 50, “God save it”)!²⁵

Indeed, it is the fact that Mechain is *not* obscuring the vagina in cryptic metaphor or addressing it as some otherly, bizarre, unknowable thing which is in itself “unusual or strange”. She bucks the standard approach to the vagina by addressing it directly as something familiar (which to her it, of course, is) and deserving of brazen commendation. Mechain does not forget to ensure she circles back around to her original indictment of *prydyddion sythion* “proud/upright/erect poets” just before the end, inciting them to spread lavish praise of the vagina throughout the land, insisting that even (*g*)*wŷr eglwysig* “men of the church” cannot help themselves before it, such is its power.²⁶

Unlike in *Cywydd y Cedor*, where Mechain addresses her complaint to all male poets, in *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi*, she rebukes a specific individual, answering Ieuan’s *cywydd* with one of her own. Whereas she uses colorful and creative *dyfalu* to build up beautiful metaphorical imagery in *Cywydd y Cedor*, Mechain instead relies heavily on an almost legally dry list of examples of virtuous women in *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi*, a direct response to Ieuan’s attack on Anni’s reputation as well as his demonization of all women in general. Mechain’s lengthy catalog in her reply not only drives home her rebuttal of Ieuan’s slander towards women but also displays how well-educated she is to have known of all these figures and their deeds in the first place, using her extensive knowledge to build up a convincing counter to Ieuan’s condemnation.

Mechain does not reveal her scholarship cards from the beginning, however. She instead begins with solidarity towards the individual who was the primary target of Ieuan’s diatribe, lamenting that Anni is unloved “because she is dark” (line 4, “*er ei bod yn ddu*”, literally “because of her being black”), leading to the inference that Ieuan has cast Anni aside in favor of someone of lighter complexion and/or hair.²⁷ It is interesting to note this medieval reference to a man leaving

²⁵ Mechain, ‘Cywydd y Cedor’, in *Canu Maswedd yr Oesoedd Canol/Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry*, pp. 40-3. Mechain, ‘Cywydd y Cedor’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 40-5; GPC “*eur/aur*”, “*taer*”, “*cywrain*”, “*gallu*”, “*breisged*”, and “*brig*”.

²⁶ *Ibid* both references for Mechain above in footnote 25; GPC “*syth*”.

²⁷ Mechain, ‘I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 64-5.

a woman due to preference for someone with lighter skin and/or hair color, given that preference for blondes and lighter skin tones is still a topic of research over five hundred years later.²⁸ It seems, much as with taboos surrounding women's bodies, that some prejudices sadly have not significantly improved in half a millennium. She jabs that color is unimportant "when night falls" (presumably when intercourse is more likely to occur and when color cannot be seen in the dark) and calls Anni [y]r ddu ddoeth "the wise dark one", insinuating Ieuan is foolish for choosing another woman for such a shallow reason.

After this short show of support for Anni, Mechain begins the hefty undertaking of arguing against Ieuan's accusations regarding the nature of women in general, wielding a trailing list of examples from across history and the Bible to prove it (presumably of women who she considered virtually unassailable). She gives a token nod to admit some women are indeed bad, as Ieuan has claimed – "*Rhai drwg yn amlwg i ni*" (line 12, "Some of us are evidently bad") – to shield against any argument of her presenting all women as blameless, before she gets down to the business of both proving Ieuan wrong and stacking an irrefutable defense of women.

Dido, the renowned Queen of Carthage, is given as the first example, and Mechain does not fail to take advantage of the opportunity to draw a parallel between Dido's *ddu rudd* "dark-cheeked" face of famed beauty and Anni.²⁹ There may also be a comparison here between Dido being abandoned by Aeneas as Anni was abandoned by Ieuan, although one would hope Mechain is not suggesting that Anni may be so grief-stricken as to take the drastic measures taken by Dido in response to her desertion. Gwenddolen is likewise comparable to Anni, as she was left behind by her husband King Locrinus of the Britons for another woman.³⁰ Could Mechain be suggesting that Ieuan should fear the possibility of a similar fate to King Locrinus, who was killed (along with his army) by Gwenddolen and her army when she took over his kingdom? Or perhaps she is merely hinting that Ieuan ought to be grateful to Anni for not making him the target of lethal vengeance?

The examples turn away from obvious comparison with Anni with the third of the twelve mentions, as "Dyfnwal's wife" Tonwen is praised for her averting mass death (in stark contrast to Gwenddolen listed just before) by *preventing* two armies from attacking one another, placing herself in harm's way by standing between them.³¹ Marcia is praised for creating the law code *Lex Martiana*, and Tonwen's literal stand for peace is comparable to (if more dramatic than) the accomplishments of "Gwerydd's wife" Venissa, who also brought peace but by the more mundane method of mediation.³² Mechain then changes focus from British history to religious as she lists the venerable deeds and lives of women Biblical figures, saints, and martyrs which may

²⁸ For example: B. Fink, et al, 'Hair Colour and Skin Colour together Influence Perceptions of Age, Health and Attractiveness in Lightly Pigmented Young Women', *International Journal of Cosmetic Science*, 40 (2018), 303-312; Cynthia M. Frisby, "'Shades of Beauty': Examining the Relationship of Skin Color to Perceptions of Physical Attractiveness", *Facial Plastic Surgery*, 22: 3 (2006), 175-9; Piotr Sorokowski, 'Attractiveness of Blonde Women in Evolutionary Perspective: Studies with Two Polish Samples', *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 106: 3 (2008), 737-744; Viren Swami and Seishin Barrett, 'British Men's Hair Color Preferences: An Assessment of Courtship Solicitation and Stimulus Ratings', *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 52 (2011), 595-600.

²⁹ Mechain, 'I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi' in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 66-7; *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 67, footnotes.

³⁰ *Ibid* both above.

³¹ *Ibid* both.

³² *Ibid* both.

have been intended to pack a bit more sting for Ieuan, with the frequent examples of good women who maintained their virtues in spite of less-than-honorable men. She closes her list with “Sibyl”, which Gramich takes to be a reference to any of several such-named persons from the Greek “Sibylline Oracles”, and Mechain goes out of her way to highlight their “judgement on liars”, implying that Ieuan, too, is a liar.³³

It is perhaps telling that Mechain sets out in her description of “good” women by stating that they *urdda dyn* “honour a man”.³⁴ In what way(s) it is telling is up for speculation, but it seems probable that she is displaying here an acknowledgement of the standards for what constitutes a “good” woman in her society at the time, or perhaps she is framing her argument for her intended male audience (namely Ieuan), who she might expect would need to be given examples of women who benefitted men in order to be convinced. Whether knowing her audience (be that Dyfi or the male-dominated society in which she lived) or perhaps even a bit of internalized misogyny was ultimately at play, Mechain leans into the expectation of “good” women as subordinate to, and for the benefit of, men by participating in the common practice of erasure. She does this not only by making a point of how several women displayed their virtue by way of supporting men but also via referring to seven of the women in this piece not by their own names and identities but rather in that way we may be more accustomed to expecting from the Middle Ages – by their relationship to men.

Dido, despite her historical fame and her own name being well-known, is not *Dido* in the cywydd but *Merch a helethe Eneas* “a woman who magnified Aeneas” (line 15), Tonwen is not herself but *Gwraig Ddyfnwal* “Dyfnwal’s wife” (line 19), and we have also *Mam Suddas* “the mother of Judas” (line 27), *gwraig Beiled* “Pilate’s wife” (line 29), and *Gwraig Edgar* “Edgar’s wife” (line 39) – the lattermost being a vague enough reference that it has led to uncertainty as to her identity.³⁵ A shame, especially considering mention of “Edgar’s wife” takes up six lines of the cywydd, second in length only to Anni herself and to another unnamed woman (the “good wife” Elijah went to) and equal to the amount of space afforded to “Sybil”. Most of the women – seven of the twelve total listed as virtuous – only received two lines of the cywydd.³⁶ While it is possible that no erasure was intended and her referring to more than half of the women solely by their relationship to men could have been merely to make her desired meaning fit into the number of syllables and stress pattern required for constructing cynghanedd, it still communicates a message of women’s identities being reliant on their relationships to men, especially given the societal context, the opening of the list with “some are good and honour a man”, and Mechain’s skill in crafting cynghanedd. Even so, she is sure to list a full dozen instances of famously capable, intelligent, and/or pious women (not counting the 11,000 virgin martyrs; only counting individuals) and does not neglect to point out that “[m]ore than a few girls, | Have abilities and manners better than men’s”.³⁷

Not being one to let the main point of her message be lost, Mechain pulls no punches as she brings her whip cracking back down onto Ieuan with a stinging series of censures (calling him

³³ Mechain, ‘I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 70-1, lines 58-62; *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 71 footnotes.

³⁴ Mechain, ‘I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 66-7, line 14.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 66-9; *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 69 footnotes.

³⁶ Mechain, ‘I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 66-71.

³⁷ Mechain, ‘I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi’ in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, pp. 70-1, lines 55-6.

“evil”, “jealous”, “roving”, implying he is a “fool”) and accusations (“fornicator”, “adulterer”, “sinning at both ends” and insinuating Ieuan is a rapist as well, which may mean that Mechain was aware of Anni accusing him of rape) before closing the cywydd with an acidic suggestion that he and men like him (“false men”) take their wounded egos to God for succor.³⁸ This stands in contrast with the tone of her closing rebuke to her fellow poets in *Cywydd y Cedor*, which almost humorously invites her male counterparts to correct their wrongs by belting out poetic praises in every corner of the country to draw more ardent acolytes to the cult of the cunt.

While the tone of *Cywydd y Cedor* was both sincere and light-hearted, both uplifting of women in general and critical of the practices of male poets, *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi* is a personal attack and yet also simultaneously lashes out in a visceral way at the greater misogyny of her society that enables and encourages the objectification, vilification, and abuse of women at-large. The anger, and the need to defend woman-kind, is much more palpable in *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi*, where not only is Mechain’s attack more personal and caustic, but her reply is so scathing in its rebuke and so formulaic in its defense that there is also a sense that Mechain herself has been attacked personally. In a way, she *has* been, for public tirades against women like that of Ieuan not only reflected a wider societal misogyny that Mechain and other women of her era lived with daily, but they also threatened to intensify that misogyny, especially when coming from influential or popular voices such as Ieuan’s may have been. This reality in which Mechain lived renders her cywydd in response to Ieuan not only a defense of Anni and of women’s reputations and dignity, but also a defense of women’s (including her own) safety and what little autonomy they had. She is biting back against a much deeper and more universal threat, wrapped up in and exemplified by an individual instance, and this may be what drives Mechain to such searing reproach of Ieuan, even if she may not have known Anni personally.

Although both pieces are in support of women, *Cywydd y Cedor* is a lyrical example of body positivity and lifting taboos around the female body by way of presenting the female sex organ in a favorable and valued light (or at all), whereas *I Ateb Ieuan Dyfi* is a combination of personal attack and remonstrance supported by an almost sterile list (by comparison with the vibrant imagery in *Cywydd y Cedor*), highlighting that women are worthy of decent treatment due to their capacity for goodness. Ultimately, both serve as arguments for women’s basic humanity – an argument which, at the time, was unfortunately one which needed to be made. As Gramich puts it, “[Mechain’s erotic poems] are playful and humorous, though they undoubtedly have a serious feminist undertone and purpose.”³⁹

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 72-3; Cartwright, ‘Women Writers in Wales’ in *The History of British Women’s Writing*, p. 67:

“...Gwerful makes the point that ‘No girl, adulterer [...] has ever raped a man.’ This is particularly poignant because Llinos B. Smith has uncovered references in the records of the Hereford Consistory Court which reveal that Anni alleged that Ieuan Dyfi had raped her”.

³⁹ *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, Gramich, p. 17.

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