

Gwerful Mechain (c. 1462-1500)

Prof. Jane Cartwright

Women's literacy

- Poets of the Princes – no female poets recorded
- Poets of the Nobility C14 and C15 – some female poets, e.g. Gwenllïan ferch Rhirid Flaidd; Gwerful Mechain the only Welsh female poet for whom a substantial corpus survives.
- Lloyd-Morgan: ‘...women’s access to literacy, even at its most basic level, appears to have been rare, and restricted mainly to a minority within the most privileged social groups’

‘It would be a great mistake to assume that literature and the written word must perforce go hand in hand....Literature need not require literacy’.

(Oral tradition important)

C. Lloyd-Morgan, ‘More written about than writing? Welsh women and the written word’, in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. Huw Pryce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 149-165, (149, 163).

Gramich and Brennan: ‘...poetry belongs centrally to the Welsh bardic tradition: it is clearly not part of a feminine sub-culture nor of a separate female tradition....’

K. Gramich and C. Brennan, *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology* (South Glamorgan: Honno, 2003), p. xvii.

Her Life

- Gwerful Mechain daughter of Hywel Fychan of Mechain in Powys.
- Her genealogy is available in P. C. Bartrum, *Welsh Genealogies*, 1 Idnerth Benfras 2.
- She was married to John ap Llywelyn Fychan and had a daughter called Mawd (her sister also appears to have been called Mawd).
- Close relationship with the poet Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn; some have assumed they had an affair; Enid Roberts – they may have been related; did she learn *cynghanedd* (the strict metres) from him or was it merely that they moved in the same literary circles?

- Establishing 'the canon' difficult for any medieval poet, particularly so for some of the women poets as little of their work survives (style, structure, themes, attributions in the MSS – often to more than one poet).
- Gwerful Mechain often confused with Gwerful Fychan (daughter of Ieuan and wife of a poet called Tudur Fychan).
- Poetry censored Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem 'Cywydd y Gal/Poem to the Penis' omitted from the 'canon' originally published by Thomas Parry *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* (UWP 1952) and Gwerful Mechain's 'Cywydd y Cedor/Poem to the Vagina' wrongly attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym later.
- Some poems – not certain if the poet is responsible for them – Nerys Ann Howells (ed.) *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain* (2001). 18 poems accepted as her work and 5 others which are attributed to her 'of uncertain authorship'.

‘Cywydd y Cedor/ The Female Genitals’, ed. and trans. Dafydd Johnston

cyn y nos canu a wnaeth,
Duw er ei radd a’i addef,
diffrwyth wawd o’i dafawd ef:
gadu’r canol heb foliant
a’r plas lle’r enillir plant,
a’r cedor clyd, rhagor clawr,
tynerdew, cylch twn eurdaer,
lle carwn i, cywrain iach,
y cedor dan y cadach.

he pays homage to God’s greatness,
fruitless eulogy with his tongue:
leaving the middle without praise
and the place where children are conceived,
and the warm quim, clear excellence,
tender and fat, bright fervent broken circle,
where I loved, in perfect health,
the quim below the smock

Sawden awdl, sidan ydiw,
sêm fach, len ar gont wen wiw,
lleiniau mewn man ymannerch,
y llwyn sur, llawn yw o serch,
fforest falch iawn, ddawn ddifreg,
ffris ffraill, ffwrwr dwygaill deg,
breisglwyn merch, drud annerch dro,
berth addwyn, Duw'n borth iddo.

Canu Maswedd yr Oesoedd
Canol/Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry, pp.
41-43

[...]Sultan of an ode, it is silk,
little seam, curtain on a fine bright cunt,
flaps in a place of greeting,
the sour grove, it is full of love,
very proud forest, faultless gift,
tender frieze, fur of a fine pair of
testicles,
a girl's thick grove, circle of precious
greeting,
lovely bush, God save it.

Dafydd ap Gwilym, 'Cywydd y Gal/The Penis'

Casaf rholbren wyd gennyf,
corn cod, na chyfod na chwyf;
calennig gwragedd-da Cred,
cylorffon ceuol arffed,
ystum llindag, ceiliagwydd
yn cysgu yn ei blu blwydd,
paeledwlyb wddw paladflith,
pen darn imp, paid â'th chwimp chwith;
pyles gam, pawl ysgymun,
piler bôn dau hanner bun,
pen morlysywen den doll...
CMOC/ MWEP, pp. 28-29

I consider you the vilest of rolling-pins,
horn of the scrotum, do not rise up or wave
about;
gift of the noble ladies of Christendom,
nut-pole of the lap's cavity,
snare shape, gander
sleeping in its yearling plumage,
neck with a wet head and milk-giving shaft,
tip of a growing shoot, stop your awkward
jerking;
crooked blunt one accursed pole,
the centre pillar of the two halves of a girl,
head of a stiff conger with a hole in it...

‘Dioddefaint Crist/ Christ’s Passion’

Goreudduw gwiw a rodded
Ar bren croes i brynu Cred,
I weled, weithred nid gau,
O luoedd Ei welïau,
Gwaed ar dâl gwedi’r dolur,
A gwaed o’r corff gwedi’r cur.
Drud oedd Ei gallon drwydoll
A gïau Duw i gyd oll.
Oer oedd i Fair, arwydd fu,
Wrth aros Ei ferthyru...

trans. Gramich p. 23

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
Blood paid after the pain
And blood from the body after the blow.
And all of God’s sinews.
It was cold for Mary, who was a sign,
As she waited for His martyrdom...

68 MSS copies; Enid Roberts – inspired by
stained glass image at Llanwrin Church,
Howells Oswestry.

‘I’w gŵr am ei churo/To her husband for beating her’

‘Dager drwy goler dy galon – ar osgo

I asgwrn dy ddwyfron;

Dy lin a dyr, dy law’n don,

A’th gleddau i’th goluddion.

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[A dagger through your heart’s stone – on a slant

To reach your breast bone;

May your knees break, your hands shrivel

And your foes take your weapons to make you snivel.]

K. Gramich and C. Brennan, *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology* (South Glamorgan: Honno, 2003),
p. 13.

How do you read the poem? How do we know it is her husband? Poet’s persona? How do we know he has been beating her?

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A response to Ieuan Dyfi's poem on Red Annie

Ni allodd merch, gordderchwr,
Diras ei Gwaith, dreisio gŵr.
Dig aflan, o dôi gyfle,
Ymdynnu a wnâi, nid am ne'
Gad dyn hardd gledren hŵr.
Efô fu'n pechu bob pen,
Ac o'i gallon pe gwelen'.

trans. Gramich, pp. 72-73

European tradition *La Querelles des Femmes*

No woman could, fornicator,
Ever rape a man, your doings are wicked.
Evil jealous man, if the chance came,
You would be pulled down, not towards
heaven.
Stop your attacks, adulterer,
Calling a lovely woman a whore.
You're the one who's been sinning at both
ends,
And in your heart if we could see into it.

Poems of uncertain authorship (could be by her or another poet)

- 'Pwy a gâr fwyaf/Who loves the most?' (with Dafydd ab Edmwnd?)
- 'Gwerful yn ateb Dafydd Llwyd/Gwerful answers Dafydd Llwyd'
- 'Ynghylch ei thad / Concerning her father'
- 'Yr eira / the snow'
- 'Y bedd/ The grave'

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