

Assignment 1

Write an essay of 4,000 words on :

How are medieval nuns depicted in medieval Welsh poetry?

The aim of this essay will be to compare and consider various sources to look at how medieval nuns are depicted in medieval Welsh poetry. The complexities around considering how women, and in particular medieval women and nuns are depicted, is potentially challenged by the lack of extant primary sources from the Medieval period, and whilst there are secondary sources and academic interest, this would seem to be an area of history that would welcome further investigation and academic engagement. To attempt to provide a rounded view of medieval nuns, we will consider not only literary evidence but also physical evidence as this may help to frame the question and also the answer, or at least establish some different areas that could be worth further examination to delve more into the lives of women in general in this period, and nuns and religious women in particular. The areas that we will consider will include praise poems, courtly love poems and request poems, as well as looking at other sources for poems such as those from the Continent; the woman's "voice"; and the establishment of physical locations with the building of monasteries and nunneries; as well as looking at the challenges that scholars face when considering the medieval period in general, and medieval nuns in particular.

It has to be noted that during the earlier Middle Ages most literature was composed and transmitted orally, with literacy being extremely limited and usually confined to clerics, and this would have a direct impact on the availability of information and primary sources

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surrounding women in general, and specifically nuns, with any literary references being written by and usually for men, although it should be noted that this would slowly change as women started reading and writing. There is no firm evidence of any Welsh manuscripts written by women until the early Modern period, and whilst women were reflected in some earlier manuscripts such as female saints Lives, if you compare the evidence that is available regarding men, then it would appear that women are really underrepresented. Cartwright notes that 'there are no descriptions of monastic life recorded by the nuns themselves [with] all extant evidence [appearing] to have been recorded by men'¹, and Cartwright continues to note that 'no devotional literature or mystical works by Welsh women have survived'² although Fulton does say that 'the Bardic Grammar acknowledges a wider tradition of literature addressed to nuns'³. This would suggest that the lives of nuns were potentially not considered important enough to document and whilst 'extant evidence relating to nunneries in Wales is sparse ... and few sources name specific religious women, occasionally the names of individual nuns appear in documents such as poll tax returns'⁴ taken at the time.

¹ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 185

² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 185

³ Helen Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, Vol. 21 Summer (1991), pp.87-112 < [https://contentstore-cla-co-uk.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/EReader/Index?guid=83c913fd-9885-eb11-85aa-](https://contentstore-cla-co-uk.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/EReader/Index?guid=83c913fd-9885-eb11-85aa-281878520afa&pcid=1694833&t=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJqdGkiOiIzODhkNzc1MC03OGQ5LTJlZGUtOTkxNy0xMjEzYjMyMTMiLCJuYmYiOiJE2NDg2NTM0NjEslmV4cCI6MTY0ODY1Mzc2MSwiaWF0IjoxNjQ4NjUzNDYxLCJpc3MiOiJlEQ1MiLCJhdWQiOiJSZWFKZlRlQyYxXwo6ZAAXq2A-eH3veJwYcyiwDcSulMXYTjGUhPPQ&b=False)

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⁴ Jane Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Ape', *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, eds. by Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, 1st ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 192
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhj49.20>. [accessed March 2022]

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During the Medieval period, a woman's status was dependent upon the woman's nearest male relative under whose protection or authority they resided, and this was compounded by the fact that women were not fully autonomous under the law. In society, great emphasis was placed on a woman's virginity, as well as 'her piety and Christian virtue'⁵ and this was evidenced not only in the law but also in vernacular literature, such as *The Mabinogion* with tales of virgin births and virginity tests taking place. As noted by Power, the inclusion of women in law and literature would have 'profound social effects for centuries to follow'⁶, and Power continues that 'what passed for contemporary opinion came from two sources – the Church and the aristocracy'⁷.

To start the deeper dive into the topic, it is worth noting that during the medieval period approximately one hundred and fifty nunneries were established in England, about sixty-four in Ireland and fifteen in Scotland – compared to just three in medieval Wales, namely two Cistercian abbeys and one Benedictine priory. Cartwright comments that there was a Cistercian abbey at Llanllŷr which was founded before 1197, another Cistercian house for women at Llanllugan founded between 1170 and 1190, and a Benedictine priority at Usk which was in use prior to 1135⁸ and Fulton notes that 'convents were for women of the aristocratic or wealthy bourgeois classes [where] women could retired honourably to ... or be

⁵ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 177

⁶ Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M M Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.1

⁷ Power, *Medieval Women*, p.1

⁸ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 178

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forcibly sent there⁹. It has also been suggested that there may have been another Cistercian nunnery at Llansanffraid Cwmteuddwr which was mentioned by Gerald of Wales in three different versions of a 'tale of how Enoc, abbot of Strata Marcella was tempted by one of the nuns and eloped with her, only to regret his actions and return repentant to his abbey'¹⁰ whereupon he retained his name and status although the nun remained 'anonymous and sinks without a trace [which] demonstrates that historical accounts [are] biased towards the activities of men'¹¹.

The challenges around this particular tale are that Gerald of Wales's stories all differ slightly and these differences could, as Cartwright notes, be potentially deemed as fictional or semi-fictional because the 'criticism was too close to the mark for comfort'¹² whilst 'serving to illustrate the dangers ... to be involved in caring for a community of women'¹³. These discrepancies also mean that it is impossible to accurately say which story, if any, is a true reflection of the situation and it could be that Gerald of Wales 'aimed to entertain rather than offend [whilst noting that] tales of sexually active nuns and pregnant abbesses were immensely popular in the Middle Ages'¹⁴ along with 'the tale of the pregnant abbess who was comforted by the [Virgin] Mary [which was] translated into Welsh and included in the *Gwyrthyeu e Wunvudedic Veir* (The Miracles of the Blessed Virgin)'¹⁵ which Cartwright

⁹ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 96

¹⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 178

¹¹ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 95

¹² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 180

¹³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 179

¹⁴ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 180

¹⁵ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 180

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highlights as being one of the most popular tales of its time, and would potentially have been retold to a wider audience consisting of men and women from all levels of society. This kind of oral story telling is one that was prevalent during the Medieval period and served to provide a platform to reinforce traditions, as well as providing moral guidance, and because it was spoken or potentially acted out, this meant that the “message” was delivered to a wide audience.

Turning now to look at poems and poetry, it is interesting to note that Fulton says that ‘among the love songs of the medieval Welsh *Cywyddwyr* [Poets of Nobility] there is a small sub-genre of poems addressed to nuns, as if they were maidens available to be courted’¹⁶ and ‘they are a variant form of the kind of secular love poems addressed to women of noble birth’¹⁷ which is also echoed by Cartwright when she comments that since ‘most of the nuns described in Welsh poetry belong to the *Canu Search* tradition (courtly love poetry) rather than *Canu Mawl* (more formal praise poetry, then [the nuns] are not identifiable as particular individuals’¹⁸ and rather they represent a type of person – in this case a virgin, who is ‘pure and potentially corruptible, yet often unobtainable’¹⁹ which Fulton agrees with when she says that ‘a nun was an appropriate object of praise poems to women, along with a noble-woman and a young

¹⁶ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 98

¹⁷ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 98

¹⁸ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 193

¹⁹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 193

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maiden ... [and] the nuns were to be praised specifically for their holiness and pure way of life, their heavenly love of God and other spiritual virtues'²⁰.

Praise-poetry is poetry that usually is sponsored by a member of the medieval nobility, the so-called *uchelwyr* (literally 'high men), and this 'disparate group was united by the marks of *uchelwyr*-status, namely ownership of land ... and material prosperity' ²¹. 'Praise poems which eulogize the holy virtues and devotion to God of particular religious women amply fulfil the requirements laid down in the Bardic Grammar for poems to nuns'²² and those who were able to compose praise-poetry, such as Guto'r Glyn (c. 1435-1493), were highly sought after by the *uchelwyr*. Poets such as Dafydd ap Gwilym not only excelled at praise-poetry, but also at other forms of poetry - namely love or courtly love poetry and as noted by Fulton, the 'poems are ... not intended as satires on the formal praise songs to nuns [as they appear to be] genuine love poems in their own right'²³ and they echo the same language that Dafydd ap Gwilym used when he was trying to woo a noblewoman.

Turning now to consider some love poems that have been addressed to nuns and to examine them in the wider contexts of literature to and about nuns, Fulton has edited five love poems which we will look at in more detail to establish the historical context of nunneries in the

²⁰ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 87

²¹ Barry J Lewis, *Opening up the Archives of Welsh Poetry: Welshness and Englishness during the Hundred Years' War*, University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, p.3
<<https://www.cymru.ac.uk/Resources/Documents/Research/OpeningArchivesWelshPoetry.pdf>> [accessed March 2022]

²² Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 87

²³ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 88

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medieval period, and also to see if we can establish why there composed and for what kind of audience they could have been intended for²⁴.

The first poem to consider is '*Cyrchu Lleian*' (Fetching a Nun) which has been edited by Thomas Parry as number 113 in *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*. The poem begins by sending a *llatai* (love messenger) to the convent to find some nuns. Fulton highlights the use of plural nouns until the last third of the poem where it moves to the singular, and this shift in tempo is reflected in the text which has gone from the poet saying that if the nun will not come then to get the chantress, 'the one who knows how'²⁵ which Fulton suggests is concerning one specific nun who is 'practised in love and who therefore by implication is not as virginal as the other nuns'²⁶. Cartwright also suggests that as there were so few nuns at the nunnery (of Llanllugan), then 'it is also possible that Dafydd was happy to entice any one of them...and that he [Dafydd] wishes to adulterate the brides of Christ'²⁷.

For the second and third poem, Thomas Parry has included them in his edit and has listed them as apocryphal poems. '*Caru dyn lygeitu lwyd*' is 'dismissed by Parry as being very simple in its style and seems to be characteristic of a fifteenth-century composition [and it is] found in seventeen manuscripts. In this poem, the context is about trying to 'persuade the nun to

²⁴ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 88

²⁵ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 89

²⁶ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p.89

²⁷ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 188-189

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renounce her vows....which was impossible in medieval times'²⁸. Fulton continues to explain that should a nun run away from a convent then the local authorities would be tasked in capturing errant nuns and returning them to the nunnery, with excommunication being the ultimate penalty should a nun leave, or a man seduce or attempt to seduce a nun²⁹. Cartwright comments that 'the nun ... is not so much an object of praise [but] the object of the poets lust'³⁰.

The third poem '*Dal neithiwyr, delwi a wneuthum*' (A Nun's Face) can also be found in modern anthologies and 'is more poetically skilful than the previous one'³¹. Whilst this one does not specifically state the woman is a nun, there is the use of imagery to suggest that 'the tailor who has dressed the girl in black all around her face'³² is suggestive of a nun's habit or whimple and Cartwright comments that 'the juxtaposition of black and white in a nun's colouring [suggests] both purity and potential sinfulness'³³. Fulton notes that the poem (and others) use what seems to be almost a "standard" way of describing a girl's beauty – 'working down from the top of the face to the chin [is] the conventional descriptive practice in medieval literature'³⁴ and the continued descriptive phraseology that is used in this poem is reminiscent of other poems, and is used to highlight the feminine features and beauty of [the nun] by declaring that her 'forehead is white, her brows are dark, her eyes are large but her

²⁸ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p.92

²⁹ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 92

³⁰ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 190

³¹ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 92

³² Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 92

³³ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 191

³⁴ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns* p. 93

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nose is not, her cheeks are red, her neck is long and slender...'³⁵ which emphasises all the positive and beautiful attributes of a person.

Poems four and five rely on the 'rhetorical device of *occupation*'³⁶ in which by repeatedly asserting a negative, then this actually implies a positive, such as 'the more the poet insists that he did not meet the nun and put his arm around her [then] the more likely it becomes that he was in fact her lover'³⁷.

Fulton concludes that the content of the five poems demonstrate the conventions of *cywyddwyr* 'with the additional tension arising from the fact that the women were nuns'³⁸. The use of conventional images 'of a girl's beauty, the poet's declaration of love, the motif of love in secret, the use of a *llatai*, and the lament of unrequited love ... are all themes shared by the poems to nuns and the general corpus of medieval Welsh love song.'³⁹ The poems to nuns 'function in much the same way as other love poems'⁴⁰ and they heap praise onto the noble women 'who represent the values of *uchelwyr* society'⁴¹ and from whose ranks the majority of nuns came from. These women – both noble and nun – shared (potentially) a very common background so by including nuns in these love poems, the nuns 'were praised according to the *uchelwyr* standards of female virtue, that is, beauty, purity and total

³⁵ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nun*, p. 93

³⁶ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 92

³⁷ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p.94

³⁸ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 92

³⁹ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p.92

⁴⁰ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p.98

⁴¹ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 98

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passivity'⁴². Fulton does suggest that there is a possibility that some of the nuns may have been known to the audience for whom the praise or love poem was created and recited to, and the audience would primarily have been abbots, monks and clerics and Fulton cites the story about Enoc who ran off with the nun, and suggests that both the nun and Enoc would be known and remembered by those at Strata Marcella, and that they 'would add to the appreciation of the joke'⁴³.

Fulton has raised an interesting question which is that if love poems were created to 'support the position of the *uchelwyr* and a specific audience, ... then why do so few of these poems exist [today]' and continues by flagging that there is 'evidence of a fairly flourishing tradition of *chansons de nonnes* (nuns' songs) in French, German and Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and yet almost nothing comparable exists in either English or Welsh'⁴⁴. Fulton does look to address this question in a couple of different ways by saying that perhaps the idea that the poems would always be spoken (and written down) by males and received by male audiences meant that the 'female figures [were] so passive as to be virtually non-existent except as extensions of the male ego'⁴⁵ and that women were controlled at all times and were not allowed to think or act for themselves in *uchelwyr* society. Powell comments that 'it was only from the last sixteenth century that the importance of recording poetry ... was fully

⁴² Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 99

⁴³ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 99

⁴⁴ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 99

⁴⁵ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 104

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appreciated as a means of preserving the legacy of the past⁴⁶ and this would potentially correlate to the lack of surviving manuscripts and texts.

Another type of poem that was common in Medieval times was a “request” poem (*cywydd gofyn*) which occurred frequently in the ‘poetry of *Beirdd yr Uchelwyr* (The Poets of the Gentry)⁴⁷, which ‘replicates a common pattern, namely praising the gift bearer; introducing the person making the request and noting what the gift is [that is being] requested; describing the gift in detail and providing an ending to the poem⁴⁸, and an example of one would be a poem called ‘Abbess Annes and the Ape’ which purports to be from a medieval nun requesting an ape. As noted by Cartwright, ‘whilst most poem to Welsh nuns fit into the courtly love tradition and fail to identify their subjected ... the poem which names Annes belongs to the wider tradition of praise poetry and more specifically poems of request and thanks’⁴⁹.

In conclusion, whilst ‘few medieval examples of formal praise poems in Welsh to abbesses and religious women have survived, compared to those addressed to the men of the church’⁵⁰ there are some examples which have survived which do highlight the various traditions, and, ‘according to the Bardic Grammars, [praise a nun] for her holiness and pure way of life, her

⁴⁶ Nia Powell, ‘Women and Strict-Metre Poetry in Wales’, in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales*, eds. by Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 129-159, p.138

⁴⁷ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 186

⁴⁸ Cartwright, *Abbess Annes and the Ape*, p. 195

⁴⁹ Cartwright, *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, p. 200

⁵⁰ Fulton, *Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns*, p. 87

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chastity and heavenly love of God and other spiritual values'⁵¹. As noted by Cartwright, there is 'relatively little known about communities of religious women in medieval Wales'⁵² and this could, in part, be down the fact that compared with say Europe, Wales was a relatively small country with a small number of *uchelwyr* from which the nuns would predominately have come from. These existing poems primarily seem to deal with women as almost two-dimensional figures who are characterised only by their beauty and their breeding, whilst other early verse deals with other themes such as war or the heroic ideal – both of which do not feature women. Whilst Dafydd ap Gwilym did help to establish the idea of praise poems, the "voice" that has been established in these poems is definitely a male voice, and they appear to be – at least in part - more about lust than courtly love. It has to be recognised that poetry was something that was procured – whether as a token of love, or as a means of praise, and the poet, who may have been a professional court poet for example, would expect some sort of payment for his works and these patrons would usually have been male.

By looking at the few examples that do exist and comparing them with other examples from say their European counterparts, as well as other literary works, and incorporating landmarks, buildings and physical features, then a small sense of what it meant to be a medieval nun in medieval Wales does briefly appear, but it feels as though the current evidence is very sparse and lacking in detail. This in turn means that very little is really known about medieval Welsh nuns and in order to understand more about their lives, then more investigation and

⁵¹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 188

⁵² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 177

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academic engagement is needed, although the challenges around the lack of extant sources will make this very challenging indeed. The question asked at the start of this essay was “how are medieval nuns depicted in medieval Welsh poetry” and it would seem that perhaps one answer might be say that they really are not depicted and that the emphasis is on the male voice rather than the female point of view. The lack of information surrounding day-to-day activities in any of the three nunneries that did exist coupled with the lack of information particularly around who actually lived in the nunneries is one that is still a huge challenge and is not easily resolved. The glimpses that have been seen are potentially intriguing and the stories that have been told around potential characters who may or may not have existed such as the Abbess of Annes, are ones that may never be answered.

Word count : 3,657 words

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HPCS7004 Women in the Middle Ages : Sources from the Celtic Regions

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