

Vive La Difference

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Abstract:

In this essay I seek to compare and contrast works by two celebrated Welsh poets from the medieval time. The poems are *Cywydd y Gal* by Dafydd ap Gwilym [DG] and *Cywydd y Cedor* by Gwerful Mechain [GM]. The translations of the titles of these poems (see below) will explain the *double entendre* of the title to this essay. The two poems superficially could be regarded as a pair and there are many similarities in style and content. Perhaps *Y Cedor* was written as a riposte to the earlier *Y Gal*. On closer examination it will be seen that there exist significant differences both in content and style and that there is little evidence to suggest that GM was referring or responding to DG's *cywydd*.

Historical Background

These two poets were by no means contemporaries because DG was a 14th century poet and GM was not born until c 1460. The oeuvre of each of these poets is not reliably known because of the way in which the poems have been transmitted and collated over the centuries. This is mainly from manuscript copies many of which include only a limited subset of the poems and often the titles and attribution is unreliable. What is certain is that the canon of works by DG is far more substantial than that of GM. In fact there exist 147 poems accepted as definitely the work of DG¹, whereas only 14 for GM². To carry out a comprehensive comparison of the two poems it is necessary to look far beyond the meaning of the text. Medieval poetry was usually performance poetry often accompanied by music³. The form and structure of the verses and the various poetic devices utilised are significant.

Because the sound of the words and phrases is so important, it will be necessary for

¹ Swansea University, *Dafydd ap Gwilym*, 2020
<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/essays/awduraeth_authorship/index_eng.php/>, [Accessed 15th March 2022].

² K.Gramich, *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, (Ontario: Broadview Press 2018), p.14.

³ S.Harper, 'Dafydd ap Gwilym, Poet and Musician', essay 2007, <http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/essays/sally_harper/index_eng.php/>, [Accessed 15th March 2022]

some of the comparisons to be based on the original text in Welsh. I hope that my own very limited ability with that language will not impair my task too much.

Before looking at the text of the two poems, it is necessary to learn something of the life of each of the two poets. We must also understand the poetic devices used (most of these have names in Welsh with no English translation available).

Dafydd ap Gwilym

DG was born in c1315 in a mansion near Aberystwyth. His ancestors were said to be prosperous noblemen who had served Norman lords in South West Wales⁴. He is possibly the most prolific of Welsh Medieval poets with an accepted oeuvre of close to 150 poems⁵. He is also thought to have been an accomplished harpist and it is probable that many of his poems were performed for his many patrons with musical accompaniment.⁶

DG had several contemporaries many of which were his personal friends and between them were responsible for introducing the *cywydd*. This employed a strict poetic metric form the most common of which consists of 7 syllable rhyming couplets alternating the stress of the final syllables. The *cywydd* was also expected to include *cynganedd* (harmony). This is a technique which uses alliteration, assonance, consonance and internal rhymes⁷. This made the *cywydd* appealing for the musical sound of the words as much as for their meaning. DG was a master of these

⁴ Johnston, D., (2018). DAFYDD AP GWILYM (c. 1315 - c. 1350), poet. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 15 Mar 2022, from <https://biography.wales/article/s12-DAFY-APG-1340>

⁵ Swansea University, http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/essays/awduraeth_authorship/index_eng.php [Accessed 15th March 2022]

⁶ S.Harper.

⁷ Trylyansow (Cornish software localisation project), Benjamin Bruch, Welsh Cynganedd, <<http://www.kernewegva.com/PDFs/Cynganedd.pdf>>, [Accessed: March 15th 2022]

techniques and did much to promote their popularity. He also experimented with variations of *cynganedd* and the rhyming couplets. For example, in *Mis Mai* (The Month of May), the word *Mai* is consistently the last word of each rhyming couplet forming what is described as a 'monorhyme' (all lines of the entire *cywydd* rhyming).

The same technique is used in *Yr Haf* (Summer) where the word *haf* ends each couplet. DG also liked a type of alliteration in which each line of a section of the *cywydd* begins with the same letter. A good example is the first 14 lines of *Morfudd fel yr Haul* (Morfudd like the sun) in which each line begins with 'G' (most with 'Gw').

DG also frequently used a technique known as *dyfalu*. This is where the poet uses a series of imaginative similes or metaphors to describe an object or person.

DG's work includes elegies to his friends, eulogies to his patrons and poems celebrating nature. However, his main preoccupation is with sexual love and his lack of success in this area. The most famous *cywydd* is '*Y Gal*' (The Penis) and it is this 46 line poem which is one of those I propose to discuss in this essay.

Gwerful Mechain

GM was born c1460 the daughter of Hywel Fychan from Mechain in Powys⁸. This is mentioned in a manuscript principally of the work of DG⁹. Confirmation of this comes also from *'llateiaeth I Gwerful Mechain ac I yrru Lleywelyn ap Gutun ati yn llatai'*. This is a poem by Dafydd Llwyd, a contemporary of GM.

GM's family is described as 'high status' ¹⁰, she married John ap Llywelyn Fychan and had a daughter called 'Mawd'. She lived from c1460 to c1502 according to 'several sources' ¹¹

⁸ Gramich. P.7.

⁹ Ibid (referencing manuscript 3057D in the National Library of Wales)

¹⁰ Gramich, p.8.

¹¹ Ibid.

Although she is regarded as a very important voice in Welsh poetry, the number of works definitely attributed to her is small. In fact according to Gramich, only 14 poems are definitely by GM, with a further 5 probably by her¹².

GM wrote generally in the forms of *cywyddau* or *englynion* (a 4 line poem with all lines rhyming except that the first line contains a *sangiad* - an added 'aside'). She did not always adhere strictly to the rules of the metric form of the *cywyddau* and has been criticised for this. For example, Leslie Harries wrote 'I came across a number of mistakes in the original *cynganedd* and prohibited faults'¹³ Gramich notes that according to Nerys Ann Howells these so called mistakes are not evident in her most famous work '*Dioddefaint Crist*' (The Passion of Christ), but are frequently seen in her erotic poetry¹⁴. This suggests that GM was perfectly capable of adhering the strict rules of the poetic metric forms but sometimes chose to ignore them for her own reasons.

¹² Gramich, p.11.

¹³ Ibid, p.12.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.13. (quoting Nerys Ann Howells, *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill*)

Perhaps her most famous poem (I refuse to call it 'notorious' as it has been described¹⁵) is '*Y Cedor*'. This has been variously translated as 'The Vagina'¹⁶), 'The Cunt'¹⁷, or 'The Female Genitals'¹⁸ (Johnston, 1991)). The literal translation of *cedor* in modern Welsh is 'Pubic Hair' but had she written in English I doubt if she would have chosen that title – and certainly not 'The Female Genitals'. It is quite possible that *cedor* was a term which represented at the time a colloquial vernacular expression in medieval Wales. The word 'cunt' clearly had a medieval Welsh equivalent in the word '*cont*' or '*gont*' which appears twice in the poem (lines 31 and 42). Perhaps 'The Quim' might be an appropriate modern English equivalent. However the original poem was probably not given a title by GM. The 50 line *cywydd* entitled '*y cedor*' by GM is the second poem I examine in this essay. I shall discuss how these two poems are similar, how they differ, what each poet was trying to say and what poetic and language techniques they employed to achieve their objectives. I shall also consider how sure we are that both poems have the correct attribution and whether the later poem (*Y Cedor*) was written as a response to *Y Gal*.

¹⁵ Gramich, p.17.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.41.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.41 (footnote)

¹⁸ Dafydd Johnston, *Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry*, (Cardiff: Tafol, 1991), p41.

Manuscript Sources - Attribution

Poems were not published as books or anthologies in medieval times. Mostly they were recited or performed by the poets with or without musical accompaniment and committed to writing in manuscripts often at the request of wealthy patrons or noble households. A large number of such manuscripts exists for each of the two *cywyddau* discussed here. We know there are at least 68 manuscripts which include one or more of GM's poems¹⁹. At least 13 manuscript copies of '*y cedor*' are known to exist²⁰ and there is no suggestion that the poem is the work of any other poet.

There exist 21 manuscripts which include '*Y Gal*' and in at least 5 of these the poem is misattributed to GM²¹. The notes to *Y Gal* on the excellent website

<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php> state that 7 manuscripts misattribute the poem to GM although these seven manuscripts all derive from a common source.²²

The poetry of DG and GM were primarily intended to be performed and initially there may have been few – if any – written copies. Only three of DG's poems have been

¹⁹ Gramich, p.11. (quoting Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan)

²⁰ Ibid, p.40. (footnote)

²¹ Ibid, p.147. (footnote)

²² Swansea University, <<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>>.

found in contemporary manuscripts and there are no manuscript copies of any of the others until the middle of the fifteenth century and the first time that a substantial number of poems by DG are to be found in written form was not until about 1525.

Some important manuscripts are lost but their contents may be inferred by references to it in later manuscripts. One, known as 'The Vetustus', which dates from the early sixteenth century and written on vellum is thought to have been a collection of 60 poems by DG commissioned by a wealthy nobleman.²³

The reason why the existence of multiple manuscripts is important is that the text of the poems is not consistent between various sources. Neither is, necessarily, the attribution or the titles. The text of the poems we have now is based on an assumption based on a comparison of manuscript sources.²⁴

There are stylistic differences between the two poets, which I will discuss below, confirming that *Y Gal* should properly be attributed to DG.

²³ Swansea University, Dafydd Johnston (2007), *The Manuscript Tradition*, <http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/essays/llawysgrifau_manuscripts/index_eng.php>, [Accessed: 15th March 2022].

²⁴ *ibid*, *The Principles of the Edited Texts*.

Before examining the way in which the poets used language and metric form, it is necessary to consider what messages the two poems were intended to convey.

The two cywyddau

Y Gal is a complaint addressed to the poet's own penis due to its uncontrollable behaviour. He refers to the need for it to be kept in check because of a law-suit (Line 3).

'By God penis, you must be guarded
with eye and hand
because of this lawsuit, ...
more carefully for evermore;'

DG is probably referring to a legal case taken against him by the husband of his would-be mistress Morfudd which he mentions to in a *cywydd* '*Y Gwynt*' (The Wind)

²⁵ by DG.

²⁵ Swansea University, <<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>> (Y Gwynt)

In line 5-6 he comments on the effect of the lawsuit by saying:

‘... because of
complaint a bridle must be put on your snout
to keep you in check so that you are not indicted’

He refers twice more to the lawsuit. Lines 40 and 41:

‘Door-nail which causes a lawsuit and trouble.
Consider that there is a writ and an indictment,’

He goes on to describe in more and more exaggerated terms his penis using a wide

range of colourful metaphors. In fact, in this 46 line *cywydd* he employs no fewer

than 35 examples of this type of *dyfalu*:

Line 3	‘straight-headed pole’	
Line 5	‘net quill of the cunt’	
Line 9	‘vilest of rolling pins’	
Line 10	‘horn of the scrotum’	
Line 11	‘gift of the noble ladies of Christendom’	
Line 12	‘nut-pole of the lap’s cavity’	
Line 13	‘gander sleeping in its yearling plumage’	
Line 15	‘neck with a wet head’	
Line 15	‘milk-giving shaft’	
Line 16	‘tip of a growing shoot’	
Line 17	‘crooked blunt one’	
Line 17	‘accursed pole’	
Line 18	‘centre pillar of the two halves of a girl’	
Line 19	‘head of a stiff conger with a hole in it’	
Line 20	‘fresh hazel pole’	
Line 22	‘chisel of a hundred nights’	
Line 23	‘shaft of the post’	
Line 24	‘leather-headed one who is called ‘tail’’	
Line 25	‘a sceptre which causes lust’	
Line 26	‘the bolt of the lid of a girl’s bare arse’	
Line 28	‘a whistle for every fucking day’	(intended literally)
Line 31	‘round pestle’	
Line 31	‘expanding gun’	
Line 32	‘a searing fire to a small cunt’	
Line 33	‘roof-beam of girls’ laps’	
Line 34	‘the clapper of a bell’	

Line 35 'blunt pod'
Line 36 'snare of skin'
Line 37 'nostril with a crop of two testicles'
Line 38 'a trouserful of wantonness'
Line 39 'neck of leather'
Line 39 'a goose's neckbone'
Line 40 'pod of lewdness'
Line 41 'door-nail'
Line 43 'stick for planting children'

DG commands his penis to keep under control because of the 'writ and indictment'.

What DG is probably commenting about here is how absurd is the lawsuit which prevented him from enjoying the favours of his mistress Morfudd (other poems by DG refer to his frustrations in gaining her favours). However, he seems to be sneakily taking the opportunity to boast about his own manfulness and virility. Maybe he had to deal with other lawsuits or complaints because he ends the *cywydd* by saying:

'Often is your lord rebuked,
Obvious is the rottenness through your head.'

(Translations by Dafydd Johnston)

In the poem, DG treats his penis as if it were an independent being – somehow detached from himself. The legal action, writ and indictment to which he refers, he

claims, are nothing to do with DG himself, the target of the complaints being is his uncontrollable member!

It has been stated that the visual comparisons DG uses here (*dyfalu*) are a distinctive feature of his work and much less prominent in *Y Cedor*. Also the fluctuation between complex lines and those without *cynghanedd* is typical of DG and less prominent in *Y Cedor*.²⁶

Y Cedor is a poem which seems to be a natural partner to *Y Gal* but perhaps this is only because of the poems' titles. It is probable that neither HM nor DG chose titles for the poems – these were likely to have been created in the manuscript copies.

HM has a quite different message from that evident in *Y Gal*. Her complaint is about male poets who, when describing women's bodies in their love poems, ignore compliments about the most important part of their bodies. 'Every foolish drunken poet', she claims, 'declaims fruitless praise' on their hair, brows above the eyes, soft breasts, arms and hands. She continues by urging the proud poets to 'let songs to

²⁶ Swansea University, <<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>>, (notes to 'Y Gal'), [Accessed: 15th March 2022].

the quim circulate'. GM's use of *dyfalu* is not as extensive as DG's and exists in two

separate places within the *cywydd*. In lines 22 to 34, she is describing the vagina:

Line 22	'the place where children are conceived'
Line 24	'bright fervent broken circle'
Line 27	'a body of boundless strength'
Line 28	'a faultless court of fat's plumage'
Line 30	'circle of broad edged lips'
Line 31	'a valley longer than a spoon or a hand'
Line 32	'a ditch to hold a penis two hands long;'
Line 34	'song's table with its double in red'

In lines 43 to 50 the *dyfalu* refers more to the pubic hair and here GM has used imagery from the natural world for her descriptions.

Line 43	'it is silk'
Line 44	'little seam'
Line 44	'curtain on a fine bright cunt'
Line 45	'place of greeting'
Line 46	'the sour grove'
Line 47	'very proud forest'
Line 47	'faultless gift'
Line 48	'tender frieze'
Line 48	'fur for a file pair of testicles'
Line 49	'a girl's thick grove'
Line 49	'circle of precious greeting'
Line 50	'lovely bush'

These comparisons, far fewer than in *Y Gal*, are mostly praising these parts of the

woman's body but her descriptions do not imply the type of personal boasting which

was a feature of DG's poem. Neither does she anywhere suggest that she is

referring to her own genitals specifically.

Metre and *cynghanedd*²⁷

There are four elements or ‘rules’ to the type of *cywydd* (known as ‘*cywydd de uair hirion*’ [poem of two long lines])²⁸ employed by both poets here.

1. Rhyming couplets of seven-syllable lines.
2. The final syllables alternate between accented and unaccented.
3. Each line should include *cynghanedd* (harmony). This is a pattern of alliteration, assonance, consonance or internal rhyme. There existed a wide variety of types of *cynghanedd* having the generic description of ‘*cymeriad*’ (character) . These are examined in some detail by Benjamin Bruch in his ‘Guide to Welsh, Cornish and Breton Verse’ .²⁹
4. The *cywydd* should include elements of *dyfalu* (comparing and describing).

This involved the frequent use of multiple metaphors, similes and comparisons to describe (usually) an object or a person.

²⁷ Benjamin Bruch, Welsh *Cynghanedd*, <
<http://www.kernewegva.com/PDFs/Cynghanedd.pdf>>,[Accessed: March 15th 2022]

²⁸ R.Bromwich, *Dafydd ap Gwilym – A selection of Poems*, (Llandysul: Gomer Press 2003), introduction p.xv.

²⁹ Bruch, <http://www.kernewegva.com/PDFs/Cynghanedd.pdf>),

It has to be remembered that there were probably about 130-140 years between the writing of these two poems. It would have been expected that both language and metric forms would have evolved during this time but in both cases the differences were minor. DG's *cywyddau* were composed at the very beginning of the emergence of this form – indeed, he may have had some influence in its concepts. Both DG and GM adhere to a greater or lesser extent to the metric rules but there are some significant stylistic fingerprints to be found.

I referred earlier to DG's tendency to incorporate multiple lines beginning with the same letter as a type of alliteration. This is evident in lines 15-20 of *Y Gal* all of which begin with the letter 'P'. This is an example of a type of ornamentation called *cymeriad*. (character). This is not evident in *Y Cedor* (or indeed in any of GM's poems).

Both poems largely adhere to the seven syllable rule but there may be some exceptions. In *Y Cedor*, line 15 could be said to contain 8 syllables:

'A moli gwen, len loywlun'. Possibly *Y Gal* has as many as 3 lines with too many syllables:

Line 15: *'paeledwlyb wddw paladflith'*

Line 28: *'chwibanogl gnuchio buenydd'*

Line 38: *'lledr d'wddw, lun asgwrn gwddw gŵydd'*

It is possible that some of these two-syllable words were treated as monosyllabic when recited or sung such as *wddw* and *gwddw* (neck in English).

The alternating stress on the last syllable of each line is not observed by both poets consistently. They generally achieve this by alternating the last word in each line between a single syllable word and one with 2 or more syllables.

It is the use of *cynghanedd* (internal line harmony) by GM which was complained about by Leslie Harries in an MA thesis written in 1933.³⁰ He claimed that GM had made 'a number of mistakes in the *cynghanedd* and prohibited faults'. This thesis also claimed that 'In the light of the twentieth century, Gwerful Mechain is nothing more than a whore',³¹ so the value of Harries's thesis is open to question.

³⁰ Gramich, p.112. (footnote)

³¹ Gramich, p.11.

There are many examples of the use of *cynghanedd* by HM . Lines 25 and 26 are good examples of consonance:

'lle carwn I, cywrain iach,

Y cedor dan y cadach'

Lines 47 and 48 are good examples of alliteration

'fforest filch iawn, ddawn ddifreg,

Ffris ffraill, ffwrwr dwygaill deg'

According to Gramich, in *Y Cedor* 'there are large numbers of unconventionalities in the strict metre form' in particular lacking the 'full alliterative correspondence between the second rhyming word and the last part of the line'. However, Gramich also suggests that this could be intentional and producing a '... much looser, more fluid and racy kind of verse').³²

By comparison, DG's '*Y Gal*' makes extensive use of many different types of *cynghanedd*. These are some examples:

³² Gramich, p.13.

Line 10 *'corn cod, na chyfod na chwyf'* Alliteration and *'cynhanedd sain'*

where a line is divided into three parts. The first part shares a rhyme with the final syllable of the second part (*'cod'* and *'chyfod'*), and one or more consonants from the second part are repeated in the third part (*'na chyfod'* and *'na chwyf'*).³³

Line 21 *'Hwy wyd na morddwyd mawrddyn'* Consonance

Line 22 *'hirnos herwa, gannos gŷn'* Double alliteration

Line 23 *'taradr fal paladr y post'* Assonance

Line 39 *'hwyl druth oll, hwy drythyllwg'* Extended assonance

These are but a few examples of DG's mastery of language and the principles of *cynhanedd*. It has been said that DG had an amazing richness of vocabulary using his own extensive knowledge of the language of Welsh poetry from previous centuries but also words from French origin which had been infiltrating the Welsh language since the Norman conquest.³⁴

³³ Bruch

³⁴ Bromwich, Introduction p.xix.

Y Cedor as a riposte to Y Gal

As I mentioned above, the titles of the two *cywyddau* do suggest that GM might have had DG's work in mind when she wrote *Y Cedor*. It is quite likely she was aware of much of DG's oeuvre but was her poem written in response to *Y Gal*?

I do not believe there is any evidence that this is the case and a careful reading of *Y cedor* contains no suggestion that she intended it as a response. The main reason is that nowhere does she refer to any part of *Y Gal* and the two poems are not really similar in any way apart from the use of *dyfalu* to describe the male and female genitals. However, GM's metaphors celebrate an important part of the female anatomy – nowhere does she refer to her own specifically. DG, on the other hand, writes in a more comic vein apparently criticising his own organ as uncontrollable but at the same time emphasising its qualities as a thinly disguised boast of his own virility. If GM had intended the poem as a response, I believe that she would have included references or ripostes to some specific lines in *Y Gal*.

Summary

Two very interesting *cywyddau* by two celebrated medieval Welsh poets. They were not contemporaries by any means, writing more that 100 years apart, but the form and structure of the works are surprisingly similar. When the works of these two poets were collated into printed anthologies (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), sometimes the prudery of the time omitted these poems. Bromwich's book 'Dafydd ap Gwilym Poems' does not include 'Y Gal' because it was also omitted in the book by Thomas Parry of 1952.³⁵ A scholarly edition of the work of GM did not appear until 2001, according to Gramich. This was '*Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill*' by Nerys Ann Howells'.

The main differences are that GM's poem is a feminist, light-hearted celebration of the female genitals. DG's poem is a comic description of his own unruly penis, written as a response to legal actions taken by his would-be mistress's husband, and implying pride in his own manhood.

³⁵ T.Parry, *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1952.

The lack of any direct references to any specific parts of '*Y Gal*' in HM's poem would suggest that '*Y Cedor*' was probably not intended to be a riposte or response to '*Y Gal*'.

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16th March 2022

Text of the poems

‘Y Gal’ (The Penis)

<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/eng/3win.php>

[Accessed: 16th March 2022]

Select Poem 85 and display ‘Edited Text’ and ‘English Translation’

‘Y Cedor’ (The Vagina)

https://allpoetry.com/Cywydd-y-Cedor#orig_8580609,%20.otitle_8580609

[Accessed: 16th March 2022]

Select the tab ‘Welsh’. Ignore the English translation tab (which I believe is Google’s attempt!)

<https://allpoetry.com/The-Female-Genitals> (English translation)

[Accessed: 16th March 2022]

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