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More written about than writing? Welsh women and the written word

CERIDWEN LLOYD-MORGAN

Most papers in this volume are, explicitly or otherwise, concerned with men and their contact with the written word. To establish the degree to which women had access to books or to a written culture is far more problematic. Little if any detailed research has yet been undertaken on this subject with reference to Welsh women, and the present chapter is intended only as a preliminary overview, which will, I hope, be superseded by further work by other scholars. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that even in those western European countries such as England, France or Germany, on which much research has already been done, 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. Small wonder that Lesley Smith and Jane Taylor suggested recently, referring to studies of English and continental European women, that 'solid archival research offers convincing and depressing evidence of a female oral world and a male textual world, where women listened rather than read, heard rather than preached'.¹

Welsh women are highly visible in Middle Welsh poetry and prose, but almost invariably as characters or subjects. In the prose tales, from those of native provenance such as the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* to the later romantic tales which have encountered French influence in the course of their evolution, strong female characters stand out by reason of their great individuality and often resourcefulness, but of course they are essentially fictional beings. None the less, the poetry of both the *Gogynfeirdd*, the poets of the princes, and the later *cywyddwyr* includes songs for and about real women. There, however, women are often portrayed by these male poets as lovers, such as Dafydd ap Gwilym's Dyddgu and Morfydd, or potential lovers, whilst women from noble families are commemorated in elegies, when their importance may often be identified as their lineage,

their suitability as someone's wife, or their capacity to bear sons, only very rarely for their learning. That the fourteenth-century poet Rhisierdyn should state that Myfanwy, wife of Goronwy ap Tudur of Penmynydd in Anglesey, had learned to read ('Llythyr a ddysgodd') appears to be quite exceptional, even for women of such high rank.² Thus their presence in the men's poetry is defined largely in terms of their gender and their relationship to the masculine world. This need not mean, however, that women's role within medieval Welsh literature was a somewhat passive and/or marginal one. In this chapter I hope to show that there is evidence that women did have a more active and creative role in the production and transmission of literature, but I shall consider first of all the question of literacy amongst Welsh women and the related questions of book ownership and patronage.

At this point it must be stressed that I shall be limiting my remarks to indigenous, Welsh-speaking women, rather than women of English or Norman families. There was, of course, contact and intermarriage between these groups, but it seems unlikely that any other than women from Welsh-speaking families would have owned, read or written books in Welsh, or been involved in the production and transmission of literature. Inevitably it is mostly women from Norman or Angevin families whose names appear in written documents such as charters or correspondence. An early exception is *Thaderech* daughter of *Katherech*, party to three charters from Glamorgan which G. T. Clark dated c. 1197.³ By the fourteenth century it is not uncommon to find women as parties to deeds.⁴ Similarly, cases are recorded of women with Welsh names attaching their own seal to a document, for example the *Thaderech* mentioned above and also Gwenhwyfar, widow of Hywel ap Gruffydd, who issued a receipt for ten marks in respect of war damages in November 1284.⁵ None the less, although being party to a deed or attaching one's seal to a document may indicate a person's status, wealth or power, or reflect the importance attached to a written record by an individual or their community, it certainly does not prove that that individual – or indeed anyone but the scribe – could either read or write.⁶

One area which has provided generous materials in other cultures is, of course, iconography. But in Wales iconographic evidence of any kind from the medieval period is scarcer than in England or some continental countries, and visual representations of medieval women

with books are hard to find. Wendy Armstead, for example, in her research on misericords in Welsh churches has not found a single instance of a woman being depicted with a book.⁷ There are, however, two well-documented examples of stained-glass windows with such images, both of them in Gresford parish church near Wrexham, and both from the very end of the fifteenth century. In both cases St Apollonia, the patroness of the toothache sufferer, appears holding her dentist's pincers in one hand and a book in the other. However, Gresford is not far from the English border, and there is a strong possibility that the artist and craftsmen were not all local, but English, or English-influenced. In his study of stained glass in north Wales, Mostyn Lewis draws attention to the similarity in style between much of the work from the second half of the fifteenth century surviving in the north-east and glass in York Minster, suggesting that artists and artisans from England may have been responsible;⁸ this would be analogous to the production of inlaid tiles by itinerant specialists in Cistercian abbeys.⁹ A further problem with the St Apollonia windows, of course, is that the woman with the book is a saint, and a foreign saint at that. Similarly, another window in Gresford church, dated 1498, shows St Anne praying in her garden with an open book before her, and at Llandyrnog, again in east Denbighshire, the east window (c. 1500) depicts the Annunciation, with an open book on Mary's lap. These are all conventional treatments of common religious scenes, and it cannot, therefore, be assumed that such visual representations have any genuine link with the realities of contemporary Welsh cultural life, at least as far as women's relationship with books is concerned. By the same token, the *vitae* of Welsh female saints must be approached with caution. Although the Life of Gwenfrewi (St Winifred) states that her father decided to 'devote' her to the liberal arts, we are not told how or where this occurred or whether she was first taught to read and write.¹⁰ The *vita* also states that St Beuno gave her daily Scripture lessons, but again this statement need not imply that Gwenfrewi was literate, for cases are attested in England of illiterate women who had an extensive and exact Bible knowledge acquired aurally.¹¹ Moreover, in the realm of hagiography biographical statements often owe more to convention or eulogy than to fact, and this consideration, as well as the lengthy time gap between the supposed lifetime of the saint and the surviving texts, means that they may not be reliable. In short, the *vita* of a saint – especially one who apparently survived beheading –

can not be taken as evidence for normal, secular female experience at a given period.

Another area where visual evidence might be found and is available in profusion in other cultures is manuscript illustrations. In France and Germany women, some of them named, are known to have worked as illuminators: one of them, Claricia, included a portrait of a young girl swinging on a letter Q in a twelfth-century psalter from Augsburg.¹² Unfortunately, however, the Welsh manuscript tradition is largely one without pictures. We cannot boast substantial illuminated manuscripts filled with detailed miniatures which provide a window – or even a distorting mirror – on contemporary life. Manuscripts can be found containing scribal doodles, sketches, caricatures, diagrams or even the occasional illustration, but the number which contain a planned series of more than two or three pictures is tiny. Three of these will serve to show the comparatively low level of development of a visual tradition in indigenous manuscripts.

The first is Peniarth MS 23 in the National Library of Wales, copied in the late fifteenth century. It is the latest of the three, written in Welsh, and contains a version of *Brut y Brenhinedd*, a Welsh translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. It contains a large number of pictures of kings and queens, mostly very crudely executed. A number of the queens are depicted holding various objects, generally symbols of royal power, and there is not a book amongst them. Two further illustrations are included, *hors série*, one showing the Crucifixion and the other the Nativity. The latter is extremely unusual in so far as it shows a completely barebreasted Virgin Mary, but again, understandably, books are absent.

My second example is Peniarth MS 28, containing a thirteenth-century Latin redaction of native Welsh law, and remarkable for its series of more than twenty illustrations.¹³ These are closely related to the text and so include, for example, officials of the king's court, animals, trees and so on. There are only two depictions of women: one (fo. 5^r) shows a woman and a man kissing, probably representing two servants, whilst the other (fo. 17^v), stands at the beginning of the section devoted to the law concerning women, and shows a woman carrying a dish. Like the laws themselves, these illustrations reflect only certain aspects of female experience, those relating to their role in relation to men. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no linking of women with books. The only person shown with a book is the court judge, pictured with what is presumably his law-book.

More promising at first sight is NLW MS 17520A, now known as the Llanbeblig Hours from its provenance, the parish in which the castle and town of Caernarfon are situated. This manuscript contains six miniatures, one of them depicting the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary having an open book on her lap, as in the Llandyrnog Annunciation window. Again this is a commonplace feature of a standard religious image, and in that sense it is purely conventional, but it is worth noting since visual representations of any female in close proximity to a book in medieval Wales are not plentiful. Moreover, the first owner of this manuscript was a woman, which suggests that the book was commissioned for her if not by her. Her death, in 1413, was noted in the manuscript by a hand not that of the main scribe, but her name, Isabella Godynogh, is an English one. Although it is not impossible that Isabella was of mixed parentage or had married into an English family, it cannot be established that she was Welsh by birth and language. The town of Caernarfon, of course, was a borough, established as part of the Edwardian settlement, and remained largely dominated by English incomers until the Acts of Union.¹⁴ It seems likely that this was the social context to which Isabella Godynogh belonged, so the Llanbeblig Hours cannot be taken as evidence about book ownership or literacy among Welsh-women.

However, this link between a woman and a religious book raises the wider connection between literacy and religion in medieval Wales. In general, this connection was a very close one, since so many of the surviving manuscripts containing Welsh literature, including secular literature, have links with religious houses, notably the Cistercian houses, including Strata Florida in Cardiganshire, Neath and Margam in Glamorgan and Basingwerk in Flintshire. The Cistercian abbeys also – in contrast to the Benedictines – recruited locally and tended to ally themselves with native rulers rather than with the English, even though they might suffer as a result.¹⁵ We must consider, therefore, whether the Cistercians' involvement in the physical production of Welsh books, and with literacy in general, ever extended to women, and, more specifically, whether Cistercian nunneries for Welsh women provided access to books as well as teaching women to read and even to write. Outside Wales, in Germany and Flanders especially, there is evidence of much scribal activity amongst nuns, even into the fifteenth century.¹⁶ Amongst English nuns, however, the level of education was not always very high, especially in the four-

In terms of lay ownership of books, the evidence is also absent or hidden. We have no large body of surviving wills for men or women such as are available in many parts of England and provide valuable information about female ownership of books: men's wills may include bequests of books to female relatives, and women's wills bequests of books to relatives of either sex.²² Probate evidence is not necessarily representative, however, for only a very small percentage of the population would leave written wills, survival rates will vary from place to place and at different periods, and most potential female testators would be unmarried or widows. Within the archives of the ecclesiastical probate registries in Wales, now held at the National Library, no wills survive from before the 1500s, and they are mostly available only from the 1560s at the earliest. Despite considerable variation from one archdeaconry to another, it can be said that surviving wills are rare until the end of the sixteenth century; the same is true, for example, of the Welsh wills that were preserved at the Chester District Probate Registry. Further wills of Welsh testators were proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, and here the survival rate is better, but even in this group, wills are scarce before the second half of the sixteenth century. Wills were proved at Canterbury rather than in Wales if the testator held property in more than one county or had a complex or extensive estate; hence they reflect the most privileged stratum of society. Yet even here women's surviving wills are few and far between. From Glamorgan, for example, one of the counties where gentry might boast a comparatively high standard of living compared with those in, say, the north-west, and where there was a strong tradition of literary and manuscript production, only eleven wills survive from before 1500. In just one of these cases the testator was female: Agnes Rodney held lands in Herefordshire and in Glamorgan, but her will, dated 1420, mentions no books. Furthermore, in view of her name and Hereford connections her cultural and linguistic identity is at the very least open to doubt. Between 1500 and 1536 a further eighteen Glamorgan wills proved at Canterbury survive, but none of them was made by a woman.²³ A very small number of stray wills of women with Welsh names has been preserved amongst other archives at the National Library of Wales and county record offices, but the numbers are still too small to be statistically significant, and even these appear to contain no references to books.²⁴

None the less, other documentary evidence about female ownership

of books does exist,²⁵ and we do have one possible, albeit isolated, case of a woman patron commissioning a text from a male cleric. This is the Welsh translation of the Athanasian Creed or *Quicumque vult*, which opens with the following statement by the translator: 'Thus, since I understood that you, honoured Efa daughter of Maredudd, wished to have the Creed of St Athanasius in Welsh, I took upon myself a little labour to turn this Creed into a language that you can read and understand.' There then follows a discussion of translation as an art. Finally the text ends with this colophon: 'This is called the Creed of St Athanasius and Brother Gruffudd Bola translated it from Latin into Welsh for the love and honour of Efa daughter of Maredudd ab Owain.'²⁶

Efa's brother, Gruffudd ap Maredudd, was active around 1265–82 so presumably she too lived in the third quarter of the thirteenth century. The family was a noble one, with a long tradition of patronage. It is significant that in Efa's day her brother Gruffudd undoubtedly commissioned two translations from Latin into Welsh: another religious text, the *Transitus Mariae*, and a secular narrative, the *Chronicle of Turpin*. The words of Gruffudd Bola addressed to Efa, 'ieith y gellych ti y darllein' ('a language which you can read'), prove that he knew that she was literate in Welsh; it was not the skill of reading but the Latin language that was the obstacle between her and the text. The translator must also have assumed that she was an intelligent, even an intellectual woman, otherwise he would scarcely have wasted time expounding translation theory. However, the exact wording casts a doubt on whether she actually commissioned the text herself. Gruffudd Bola says that he 'understood that she wished to have' a Welsh version of this text, and that he has undertaken the task for the love and honour he bears her ('yr caryat Eua . . . a'e henryded'), and also for the good of her soul and her comfort ('Hynn weithon a gymereis i arnaf y wneuthur yr lles ysprydaul a didanuch yti ac yn enryded y'r Trindaut o'r nef'). This sounds less like a commission than a man of the cloth giving a woman a text he thinks is good for her. (I take *didanuch* in this context to mean 'solace', 'comfort').²⁷ A further difficulty is that the formulae used by Gruffudd Bola differ from those used when men commission work for themselves. Another translator, Madog ap Selyf, states that he undertook work 'o adolwyn a deissyf' ('at the request and desire') of Efa's brother, Gruffudd, whilst in the late fourteenth century the scribe Hywel Fychan and the translator Syr Dafydd Bychein, working for

Hopcyn ap Thomas and Rhys ap Thomas respectively, use 'o arch a gorchymun' ('at the request and command') or 'o arch a dymunet' ('at the request and wish'), both of which imply a deliberate request or a command by the patron directly.²⁸ Reluctantly I suggest, therefore, that it is safest to leave open the possibility that Efa may not have commissioned the translation herself, at least directly: it could well have been her brother, for example, who actually commissioned it. Whatever the truth of the matter, however, at least we have in Efa ferch Maredudd an unambiguous case, in the thirteenth century, of a woman who could read Welsh, but not Latin, and who owned at least one text.

It is possible that other women had texts copied for them in an indirect fashion. My colleague Graham Thomas recently suggested to me, only partly in jest, that Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch (the White Book of Rhydderch, now Peniarth MSS 4-5 in the National Library of Wales), one of the most important Middle Welsh manuscript compendia, could perhaps have been intended not for Rhydderch ab Ieuan Llwyd of Llangetho, with whose name it has become associated, but for his wife. The gender of the audience of both the native and French-influenced tales included in this manuscript is uncertain, but it is significant that a group of *vitae* of female saints, namely Catrin, Marged and Mary of Egypt, were included, and copied as a series.²⁹ It is worth noting that lives of these particular saints are often found in books owned by women in England.³⁰ The White Book also contains, in close proximity to these *vitae*, copies of other Christian texts relating to females: an account of Elen's finding of the True Cross, the miracles of the Virgin Mary and the *Transitus Mariae*.³¹ Whilst great caution is necessary in linking particular texts with a particular kind of audience at a period where the social context of literature is not richly documented, further research might reveal more about the composition in terms of gender of the audience for whom these medieval Welsh texts were intended.

There are a few scattered references within literary texts to contact between women and the written word, including at least one case in the White Book itself. This is the reference in the second branch of the *Mabinogi* to Branwen secretly sending a letter to her brother Bran to tell him of her plight, attaching the letter to the wing of a pet starling. The bird flies to Bran in Wales and the letter is discovered and read. However, this episode poses a number of problems. First, it is possible that the detail of the letter was not present in the original

version, for the preceding sentence describes how Branwen 'reared a starling . . . and taught it words and instructed the bird what manner of man her brother was'. If the bird could convey the message orally, there would be no need for the letter, which may well be a later accretion. It is significant that when Bran receives the letter the text does not state that he himself read it, and the use of the impersonal form of the verb, in contrast to the personal form used for his reaction, strongly suggests that the letter was read aloud to him: 'And when the letter was read he grieved to hear of the affliction that was upon Branwen.'³² It must be stressed also that these are fictional, even mythical characters, and so cannot be taken to reflect any contemporary reality, at the time of the copying of the White Book or earlier; but it would still be unexpected, to say the least, to find that an aristocratic male was unable to read whilst his sister could write.

References in medieval poetry can be equally inconclusive. A poem by Hywel Dafí of Gwent, who was active between 1450 and 1480, opens with the poet looking through a keyhole at a girl reciting psalms before an image of the Virgin Mary: 'a'i llafar oll mewn llyfr aur, / adrodd gair bron Mair o'i min / salmau ar dalau'i deulin' ('with all her speech in a golden book, / reciting psalms from her mouth / on her knees before Mary').³³ The context and the description of the book as 'golden' suggest an illuminated book of hours or psalter, and since the girl in this classic male sexual fantasy is later referred to by name as Gwenonwy, the poet clearly indicates that she is Welsh. Unless the fantasy extends far beyond the sexual element, the poem does provide a rare example of a woman in possession of a book. The description of her dress, even allowing for hyperbole, defines her as a lay woman of some wealth, which in other European contexts would be entirely consistent with ownership of such a book. It is perhaps significant that the poem is attributed to a poet from south-east Wales, where one might expect ownership of books to be more common, especially since there are comparatively few surviving books of hours or other volumes for personal devotion produced in Wales or owned by Welsh families. It should not necessarily be assumed, however, that the object of Hywel Dafí's fantasy could read. Outside Wales, learning the psalms was often regarded as sufficient education for girls, and in England the psalter was accordingly one of the commonest books in female ownership recorded in wills, so that if a woman was to own any book at all, this would very likely be a psalter.³⁴ But ownership of a book cannot be taken as proof of

literacy, and an illuminated manuscript could be seen by its owner primarily as a religious icon or a status symbol rather than as a text to be read. It should also be remembered that even in communities which placed great value on the written word within their religious devotions, such as the English Lollards and the Cathars of Languedoc, women's literacy, even of the most basic kind, lagged far behind that of men, with the women learning their texts aurally.³⁵ The poet does not describe the woman as reading, he states only that she was reciting the psalms and that the text was available to her in the book. The use of the term *adrodd* ('to recite'), seems in fact to preclude actual reading. It may well be that Gwenonwy had learned her psalter by heart, but used her illuminated book as an aid to devotion, and, perhaps, a symbol of her wealth and status. The inclusion of an image of the Virgin Mary in the scene glimpsed through the keyhole may imply that she was in a private chapel, a further indication of her social position.

If the evidence for women owning books or reading them is limited, so far I have found no instance of a woman scribe in medieval Wales. Many scribes are anonymous and it is possible that women were involved in literary book production, but it is striking that there appear to be no known cases of named women copying extant literary manuscripts in Welsh before the early eighteenth century. By the sixteenth century, however, there is far more evidence of simple literacy: for example, Richard Owen's reference in 1552, in his translation from the Latin of *Dysgeidiaeth Cristionoges o Ferch* ('The Instruction of a Christian Woman') to women reading his text or hearing it read.³⁶ From the sixteenth century too there survive letters from female members of the noble families associated with Clennau and Gwydir, although it is worth noting that those ladies wrote in English not Welsh.³⁷ As far as the medieval period is concerned, however, extant letters of Welsh provenance and sent by women seem to be restricted to non-natives, whether Norman or English.³⁸

But the lack of evidence of women's involvement in the physical production of manuscripts does not mean that they were not involved in the production of literature. Early examples of active female participation in the indigenous oral culture are found in the account by Gerald of Wales of the woman who accosted Henry II of England at St David's and quoted one of the prophecies of Merlin, and the reference in *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* to the *gureic brud* ('woman of prophecy') Tangwystl, although these women were

probably transmitters and at best adapters rather than original composers of their pronouncements.³⁹ But women were authors too. The survival of a substantial and varied corpus of work by Gwerful Mechain, a Montgomeryshire poet of the late fifteenth century, shows that Welsh poetry was not a purely male preserve as some would like to think.⁴⁰

In the case of Gwerful Mechain's male contemporaries and even predecessors, it is sometimes possible to find manuscript copies of their poems made during the poet's lifetime. The fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, at least one of whose poems was attributed to Gwerful and vice versa, can boast a contemporary manuscript, whilst a hundred years later Lewys Glyn Cothi, for example, is known as a scribe as well as a poet. But in Gwerful's case not one manuscript seems to have survived from her lifetime, and much of her output is found only in late, even very late, manuscripts. The great disparity between the versions of her poems found in copies of the sixteenth, seventeenth and even eighteenth century suggests that the poems had subsisted mainly in the oral tradition. This is not to say that the oral medium was irrelevant for the men: on the contrary, oral performance of Welsh poetry has remained important into modern times. Available evidence from the medieval period onwards for men, and from the eighteenth century in the case of women, reveals that literacy was no obstacle to individuals continuing to give priority to the oral medium when it came to poetry as opposed to the more utilitarian applications of the written word. Hence a woman like Ann Griffiths used writing for letters, but rarely for composition of her hymns. Thus the absence of a substantial body of evidence of women being actively involved in reading and writing should not necessarily be taken to indicate the absence of the involvement of women in literature, whether composing, transmitting or receiving.

It has been argued in the past, notably by scholars such as Morgan Watkin and Saunders Lewis, that Welsh noble households were thoroughly Normanized at a comparatively early date, and it is undeniable that by the fourteenth century French literature had become a major influence on Welsh literature, as the flowering of translation and evidence for French manuscripts circulating in Wales demonstrate. But this does not mean that there existed to any extent amongst Welsh women what one might call a 'boudoir culture' that might have fostered a text-based literary culture such as existed in parts of continental Europe. It is hard to imagine Welshwomen of the

later Middle Ages enjoying the kind of life led by noble women in Languedoc, for instance. Outside the Normanized areas the standard of housing was poor; the physical geography and climate of their country were unconducive to the way of life cultivated by their noble counterparts in France. (A quick glance at the best-quality Welsh manuscript of the fourteenth century and at a middling-quality French manuscript of the same period provides an eloquent visual commentary on the difference in material culture.)

The political and military unrest that broke out periodically both before and after the Edwardian conquest deeply affected women's lives. The nunnery at Llanllŷr suffered serious depredations during the late thirteenth century, whilst lay women were left to run and to defend estates and fortified dwellings whilst their husbands were absent on campaign. It is because she died fighting on behalf of her husband that Gwenllïan, daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan, has become a national heroine, honoured by the Welsh women's organization Merched y Wawr. Throughout the Middle Ages, even in the most cultured families, women like Gwenllïan became involved in violent struggles or affected by them. A further example is provided by Elen Gethin, wife of Thomas ap Rhosier Fychan or Vaughan of Hergest (c. 1400–69), who came to own the famous late fourteenth-century manuscript compendium, the Red Book of Hergest, now Jesus College MS 111 in the Bodleian Library, which acquired its name from its stay with the Vaughan family at Hergest. The family were also noted patrons of literature, the poet Lewis Glyn Cothi being one of those who regularly benefited from their hospitality and generosity, and Elen also patronized the visual arts by commissioning an elegant tomb for her husband when he was beheaded in 1469 after the battle of Edgecote. However, she is also remembered for killing with her own hands her cousin, Siôn Hir ap Phylip Fychan, because he had killed her brother, Dafydd Fychan of Llinwent, demonstrating unequivocally the normal co-existence of high culture and low violence.⁴¹

Even in the more privileged classes, then, Welsh women could not be sure of a quiet, domestic existence, any more than could their husbands. In these circumstances literacy and books were a luxury that many women – or their menfolk – could not afford. But we should not forget that the written word was not the only way to preserve literature, especially poetry; and it was not always the best way. Where male poets moved from one court or house to another

in search of patronage, of course, they might feel it was in their best interests not to allow written copies to circulate without their control. One poet, of either sex, could share a poem with innumerable listeners, and the poem would live after the poet died, as certainly seems to have happened in the case of Gwerful Mechain. Books were also expensive and vulnerable to loss in times of military conflict or unrest when even the religious houses were not immune to depredations, on top of the usual risk of fire in medieval houses. Bearing these factors in mind, as well as the nature of the native culture where even the most exalted literature, created for the highest social classes, still had its roots in the oral medium, it is not surprising that the relationship between literacy and literary production and transmission should differ from that obtaining in certain other European cultures. We cannot assume that because evidence is available in greater profusion in England, France or Germany, a similar pattern must have obtained in Wales, but all the evidence has simply disappeared. A lack of evidence from within Wales should lead us instead to question the reasons for that paucity. In the case of women and their relationship to literary culture, it would be unwise to assume that there had once existed a substantial body of documentary or visual evidence of medieval Welsh women as readers, scribes, patrons and book-owners, but that somehow it had all mysteriously disappeared. What we know of later centuries, for which more information is available, demonstrates that a written text was not a *sine qua non* for women poets or for their audience. The fact that the women seemed to have more written about them (or ostensibly about them, mediated by male perceptions and assumptions) than they themselves set down in writing did not mean they were excluded from, or even chose to distance themselves from, the production and transmission of literature.

As we gradually and belatedly rediscover our history as Welsh-speaking women, it would be a great mistake to assume that literature and the written word must perforce go hand in hand. A worse mistake would be to assume that no 'great' literature could be produced and transmitted without the intervention of the written word. The fact that the available evidence, scarce as it is, suggests that Welsh women living in the Middle Ages had only restricted access to written texts does not mean that they could not have a highly developed word-culture, a culture of which we can be proud. Literature need not require literacy.

NOTES

- 1 L. Smith and Taylor (eds.), *Women, the Book and the Godly*, pp. x–xi. This volume together with L. Smith and Taylor (eds.), *Women, the Book and the Worldly* and *idem* (eds.), *Women and the Book* contain a wide range of essays on all aspects of women's literacy in England and continental Europe during the medieval period.
- 2 *Gwaith Sefnyn*, ed. Jones and Rheinallt, pp. 61, 95 (*Moliant Myfanwy wraig Goronwy ap Tudur o Benmynydd*, line 13). I am most grateful to Dr Nerys Ann Jones for this reference.
- 3 *Cartae*, ed. Clark, vol. 2, pp. 232–3, 244; vol. 6, pp. 2310–11. The last example is also calendared in Birch, *Descriptive Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. 24–5, where it appears amongst documents of the thirteenth century.
- 4 The Plymouth Deeds at the National Library of Wales, for example, include a number of such cases, from 1363 onwards, relating to lands in Flintshire.
- 5 See *Littere Wallie*, ed. Edwards, p. 122, no. 213. In both her case and that of *Thaderech* a conventional formula within the document refers to their sealing. For the late twelfth-century seal of the wife of Gruffudd ap Gwenwynwyn, see D. H. Williams, *Catalogue*, pp. 26, 71, no. D.32.
- 6 Cf. Smith, below, p. 211 and Carr, below, pp. 225–31.
- 7 Personal communication; Wendy Armstead is currently preparing a PhD thesis (University of Wales) on misericords.
- 8 M. Lewis, *Stained Glass*, p. 4; for photographs of the St Apollinaris windows, see *ibid.*, plates 16–17.
- 9 J. M. Lewis, *Welsh Medieval Tiles*, p. 3.
- 10 *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae*, ed. Wade-Evans, pp. 288–9, §3 ('liberalibus artibus . . . tradere').
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 290–7, §7. On Lollard women, see McSheffrey, 'Literacy', esp. p. 165.
- 12 See e.g. Labarge, *Women*, pp. 230–3, Petersen and Wilson, *Women Artists*, pp. 11–16 (for the Clarcia initial see Fig. II.4).
- 13 Reproduced in Huws, *Peniarth 28*.
- 14 Williams-Jones, 'Caernarvon', p. 97.
- 15 See, for example, G. Williams, *Welsh Church*, pp. 19–20.
- 16 See, for example, Labarge, *Women*, pp. 223–4.
- 17 For the most comprehensive account to date, see D. H. Williams, 'Cistercian nunneries'.
- 18 *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. Brewer *et al.*, vol. 2, p. 248; vol. 4, pp. 168–9; vol. 6, p. 59.
- 19 *Littere Wallie*, ed. Edwards, pp. 89, 132, nos. 176, 234.
- 20 *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, ed. Parry, pp. 298–9.
- 21 *Gwaith Huw Cae Llwyd*, ed. Harries, pp. 69–71: 'Mae merch wen, caenen y côr, / Yma i'th ofyn, math Ifor: / Abades, o dduwies dda, / Llan-llyr wen, llawn lloer yna. / Dâm Annes sy'n damunaw / O bai i'ch llys, âb o'ch llaw' (lines 21–6). Keeping pets was also a common practice in convents outside Wales: see, for example, Labarge, *Women*, pp. 100–1.
- 22 See, for example, Meale, "' . . . alle the bokes'", and Dutton, 'Passing the book'.
- 23 *Glamorgan Wills*, ed. Riden.

- 24 For a comprehensive survey of surviving wills relating to Wales, see Chandler, 'Will in Medieval Wales', esp. pp. 47–8, 123–70, 136–9, 181–3, 233–63. Chandler notes that barely 3% of wills with Welsh connections proved before 1550 contain bequests of books, and found no such instances in women's wills. From a survey of wills from all sources she lists a total of eleven extant wills made by women before 1500, and thirteen between 1500 and 1540 (pp. 233–63); for our present purposes, however, these figures are slightly inflated, because they include women – like Agnes Rodney – who were domiciled in England but owned land in Wales, and women with overtly non-Welsh personal names, whose Welsh linguistic or cultural identity is at best uncertain.
- 25 See Smith, below, p. 206.
- 26 For complete text, see 'Credo Athanasius', ed. Lewis. For discussion, see also J. E. C. Williams, 'Rhyddiaith grefyddol', pp. 331–2.
- 27 See *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. *diddanwch*.
- 28 For these and similar examples, see Lloyd and Owen, *Drych yr Oesoedd Canol*, pp. 228–31.
- 29 Peniarth MS 5: see J. G. Evans, *Report*, vol. 1, p. 310. Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch also contains a copy of the *Credo Athanasius* translated for Efa ferch Maredudd; Rhydderch ab Ieuan Llwyd was the great-great-grandson of her father, Maredudd ab Owain: see *ibid.*, p. 311, and Huws, 'Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch', 19–20.
- 30 See, for example, Dutton, 'Passing the book', pp. 47–50.
- 31 See J. G. Evans, *Report*, vol. 1, p. 311.
- 32 *Pedeir Keinc*, ed. Williams, p. 38; translation from *Mabinogion*, trans. Jones and Jones, p. 32.
- 33 *Canu Maswedd*, ed. Johnston, pp. 58–61, lines 6–8.
- 34 Blamires, 'Limits of bible study', pp. 3–4; Meale, "' . . . alle the bokes'", pp. 130–2, 136, 144.
- 35 McSheffrey, 'Literacy', and Biller, 'Women and texts'. In the context of medieval England, Felicity Riddy has stressed the importance of the oral/aural context of the literary culture of both nuns and pious laywomen, which she describes as 'a textuality of the spoken as well as the written word', which might begin in the book but was 'then transmitted among the women by word of mouth': "'Women talking'", esp. pp. 110–12.
- 36 *Rhagymadroddion*, ed. Hughes, p. viii, quoting Peniarth MS 403D ('ir holl verched or jaith honn, ar ai darlleo neu a glywo i ddarllain').
- 37 See *Clenennau Letters*, ed. Jones Pierce (and unpublished vol. 2 at NLW) and NLW, *Calendar of Wynn Papers*.
- 38 *Calendar of Ancient Correspondence*, ed. Edwards, pp. 20, 75, 184.
- 39 *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. Brewer *et al.*, vol. 6, p. 108; *Historia Gruffud*, ed. Evans, p. 7.
- 40 See Lloyd-Morgan, 'Women and their poetry'.
- 41 See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, pp. 996–7.