

Orality and Morality: Early Welsh Women's Poetry

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Two years ago the Welsh feminist press Honno published a wide-ranging bilingual anthology of Welsh women's poetry which I co-edited and provided much of the translation.¹ One of the first poets included in the anthology is the fifteenth-century Welsh-language poet, Gwerful Mechain, and I have to admit that probably the most enjoyable and the most challenging part of the work for me was translating her work into English. I found myself working late into the night and reading my translating efforts out loud and often collapsing into hysterical laughter – my family were beginning to get a bit worried about me.

Part of the reason for my enjoyment was that Gwerful's verse, much of which is erotic and deliberately provocative, has a strong oral quality, despite the fact that she is working within the venerated Welsh bardic tradition of strict metre verse. This is a tradition which, for many centuries, was assumed to have been exclusively male. Yet, as our anthology showed, the tradition is not, and never has been, exclusively male. Women poets have been active in Wales from the earliest times, though relatively few works by women from the earliest periods of the tradition have been preserved. Female voices occur in some of the ninth century saga verse, notably the 'Canu Heledd' (Heledd's song), though the composition of these poems remains anonymous. Nevertheless, the survival of a substantial body of work by Gwerful Mechain, is a testimony not only of the existence of women poets at this time but of their full participation in the dominant poetic culture and the discourse of the time.

In other words, Gwerful Mechain's poetry belongs centrally to the Welsh bardic tradition: it is clearly not part of a feminine sub-culture or a separate female tradition; on the contrary, Mechain engages in poetic dialogues with her male contemporaries, using similar forms, metre, tropes, and vocabulary. I say 'similar', not identical, because in my view Gwerful's work frequently contains more echoes of the oral tradition than do those of most of her male peers. She also

frequently adopts a specifically female point of view, and takes the men to task for the arrogance and exclusiveness of their male stances, but she attacks them not from the position of marginality or outsidership but rather as a full participant in the tradition, confident of her own craft and relishing what she depicts as the privilege of her female Otherness.

One of the most immediately striking characteristics of the poetry of Gwerful Mechain and the female poets of the sixteenth century is the easy co-existence in their oeuvre (depleted as it often is by loss of manuscripts) of devotional and erotic works. Although in the twenty-first century many Welsh people have distanced themselves from organized religion, it is nevertheless true to say that the influence of Nonconformity still looms large in Welsh culture. Even those who have no direct connection with any of the Welsh Nonconformist sects are aware of the way in which Welsh history and culture has been shaped by that extraordinary efflorescence which was the Methodist Renaissance of the eighteenth century. After the nineteenth century had put paid to the impassioned ecstasy so vividly portrayed in the poems of Ann Griffiths, Nonconformist religion came to be equated for some Welsh people of the later twentieth century with narrow-mindedness and sexual prudery. Perhaps this is why Gwerful Mechain's unembarrassed relish for sexuality comes as such a surprise, particularly when it becomes clear that this relish is not considered by the poets concerned to be incompatible with religious devotion. Above all, perhaps, it is the humour and *joie-de-vivre* of Gwerful which is most impressive: she is a celebratory poet in the widest sense of that word. It might indeed be argued that the female poets of this period had more freedom than many of their male counterparts in that they were not obliged to sing empty praises of their patrons in order to earn their daily bread. On the contrary, their praise is reserved for those things which in their view were truly worthy of praise, whether they be the female genitals or Jesus Christ.

The fifteenth and sixteenth century Welsh female poets were therefore not afflicted with the self-destructive dilemma of the 'poetess'. This was a creature of a later age, namely, the early nineteenth century, with perhaps the Anglo-Welsh

poet Felicia Hemans as the most representative of all. Germaine Greer has eloquently described the classic poetess:

The poetess accepts that she must display characteristics associated with femininity, such as delicacy, modesty, charm, domesticity, hypersensitivity and piety, as well as the filial, sororal, and maternal affections. What the poetess does not aspire to is the revelation of gut truths of womanhood, or any negative feelings of rage, contempt, protest, despair, or disbelief... The poetess typically presents a sanitized version of herself; she and her poetry are deodorized, depilated and submissive... The poetess's stride is encumbered by a train of esses.²

Fortunately, there is nothing 'deodorized, depilated or submissive' about Gwerful Mechain. Indeed, I would argue that it is her very lack of inhibition and her head-on engagement with the 'gut truths of womanhood' that has prevented most of their work from seeing the light of day until quite recently. In point of fact, Gwerful Mechain's poetry, along with that of three of her male peers, was the subject of an University of Wales MA thesis by Leslie Harries as far back as 1933, but when he came to publish his research as a book twenty years later, he decided not to include her work along with the others. The reason for this strange decision can be found in the attitudes displayed in the thesis itself, where Harries states, for example:

Y peth pwysicaf i'w gofio wrth feirniadu barddoniaeth Gwerful Mechain, yn enwedig ei chaneuon aflendid, yw na dylid ei barnu yng ngoleuni egwyddorion moesol y ganrif hon. Tueddiadau ac egwyddorion ei hoes hi ei hunan a benderfyna safon ei gwaith. Yng ngoleuni yr ugeinfed ganrif nid yw Gwerful Mechain namyn putain, ond yn ei chanrif ei hun yr oedd canu caneuon aflan yn beth cyffredin bron, yn enwedig ar y Cyfandir.³

(The most important thing to remember in evaluating the poetry of Gwerful Mechain, especially her pornographic songs, is that she should not be judged in the light of the moral principles of this century. The tendencies and principles of her own age are those which determine the standard of her work. In the light of the twentieth century, Gwerful Mechain is nothing more than a whore, but in her own century singing dirty songs was more or less a common thing to do, especially on the Continent.)

Harries extols the allegedly ‘enlightened’ morals of early twentieth-century Wales, when, for example, unmarried girls who fell pregnant were ignominiously expelled from chapels, and when women who married were debarred from the professions. Also interesting is his attempt to pass erotic poetry off as a foreign, perhaps essentially French, habit, thus conserving Wales’s image in traditional terms as the pure ‘land of the white gloves’ (*gwlad y menig gwynion*).

Despite his own prejudices, Leslie Harries carried out extremely valuable work in preparing scholarly editions of a range of Gwerful Mechain’s poetry. The task is tricky because her poems – there are about two dozen extant, though there are quite a few other anonymous works which may be by her – appear in many different manuscript versions. This, in itself, as Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan has pointed out,⁴ is testimony to the popularity of Gwerful Mechain’s work: her ‘cywydd’ to Jesus Christ, for instance, is found in no fewer than forty-nine different manuscripts. Also notable is the fact that her poetry seems to have been known and admired by later Welsh women poets, as indicated by its appearance in manuscript copies such as the ‘Red Book’ of Angharad James.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that there existed in Wales alongside the relatively erudite strict-metre poetic tradition an oral, popular tradition of song, consisting of ‘hen benillion’ (old verses) of anonymous authorship. Some critics believe that the anonymous authors of these lyrical verses, often very simple and proverbial in style, and dealing with elemental human passions and experiences, were predominantly women. Certainly, the oral tradition has proved influential on the work of a number of later Welsh female poets, from Ann Griffiths to Nesta Wyn Jones. It may even be that the alleged laxness which Leslie Harries and other male critics have censured in the strict-metre verse of Gwerful Mechain can be seen to derive from the influence of the folk verse traditions upon her. She is taken to task by Harries for ‘not keeping to the rules very carefully’. He shakes his head in despair over Gwerful’s ineptitude: ‘Deuthum ar draws nifer o wallau cyghaneddol a beiau gwaharddedig’⁵ (I came across a number of mistakes in the cyghanedd and prohibited faults). For those unfamiliar with cyghanedd, I should explain that it is a complicated system of

sond-linking within a line, involving alliteration and internal rhyme. The permitted variations are rigorously laid down and adhered to, even by modern strict-metre poets.

What Harries does not consider is that Gwerful may not have been particularly concerned to keep carefully to the rules but that she adopted an attitude to composition more analogous with the composers of the anonymous verses which were passed on orally from generation to generation. That Gwerful Mechain's own poetry was often preserved in this way is suggested by Harries, who concludes from his struggle to produce scholarly editions of her poems from the manuscript sources that 'the copies were frequently written down from memory and that they had been corrupted by those who copied them, or those who recited them' (bod y copïau'n fynych wedi eu codi oddi ar gof a'u llygru gan y rhai a'i copïai, neu a'u hadroddai).

Welsh women's poetry (in both Welsh and English, from the seventeenth century onwards) tended to circulate in manuscript copies and orally. It was not until 1850 that the first fully-fledged volume of Welsh poetry by a woman, namely *Telyn Egryn*,⁶ was published. The National Library of Wales contains a wealth of handwritten books of poems belonging to women – personal anthologies, really – mainly dating from the eighteenth century and containing the work of a wide range of female and male poets. Women poets themselves, such as Angharad James and her sister, Margaret Davies, kept such books; only a fraction of this neglected manuscript material has so far appeared in print.

Fortunately, the lack of a scholarly edition of the work of Gwerful Mechain has finally been amended, with the publication in 2001, of Nerys Ann Howells' *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill*⁷ ('The Work of Gwerful Mechain and Others'). The title of Howells' valuable work is a neat riposte to Leslie Harries's *Gwaith Huw Cae Llwyd Ac Eraill* (*The Work of Huw Cae Llwyd And Others*); Gwerful Mechain was, in 1933, among the Others, the 'also rans', but in 2001 she takes pride of place. One interesting observation made by Howells in her introduction is that the so-called 'faults' in the cynganedd of Gwerful's verse are not observable in her poem to Jesus Christ – the evidently very popular work

found in many manuscripts and characterised by its sincere devotion and piety. On the other hand, Gwerful's erotic verse is full of such 'faults', suggesting that when she wanted to write conventionally and correctly, she was perfectly able to do so, and when she didn't want, she enthusiastically broke the rules.

In the sample of her work that I'm going to show you, the cywydd to the female genitals which I've translated as 'To the vagina', there are large numbers of unconventionalities, especially lines known as 'cynghaneddion sain bengoll.' Cynghanedd sain is a type of line with an internal rhyme but there has to be a full correspondence between one half of the line and the other, which Gwerful frequently chooses not to do. The result, in my view, is a much looser, more fluid and racy kind of verse. Given that scholarship suggests that these poems were frequently composed in an improvisatory way in competition with other bards who were also close friends – a bit like the poetic competitions of modern times – it seems likely that the poems bear the mark of this oral composition. What clinches this theory for me is the fact that Gwerful's editor, Nerys Ann Howells, suggests that there are strong similarities in voice, tone and technique between the poems of Gwerful and the male bard whom we know she was close friends with, namely Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn. These two poets both take liberties with cynghanedd and end up creating a kind of humorous private discourse strongly reminiscent of their speaking voices.

I promised you a taste of Gwerful's verse and here it is – perhaps her most notorious poem in praise of the female genitals, a poem which appears to be a female riposte to Dafydd ap Gwilym's bombastic 'Cywydd y Gal', a poem in praise of the penis. So that you can get an impression of the sound of the language which is so important in Welsh verse, I'll read the original Welsh poem but you can follow along with me in the English translation. This also spares my blushes to an extent since I know that most of you won't be able to understand the extremely rude words I'm about to say!

[[Link to reading of poem](#)]

I hope you enjoyed that! I think it's a good example of the energy and inventiveness of Gwerful's poetry. Clearly, it's not meant to be taken entirely seriously but on the other hand – she has a point!

I'll turn now to some concluding remarks. In his introduction to the theme of this conference, Stephen Knight refers to orality and literacy as 'two interfacing and dialectically related receptive modes' and I think that the poetry of Gwerful Mechain, with its mixture of highly literary strict metre and the racy, fluid transgressions of strict metre rules, demonstrates this vigorous dialectic. The scholarly work of Leslie Harries which I have quoted and the general neglect of Gwerful Mechain's work by scholars until very recently also shows that, as Stephen Knight suggests, 'orality and literacy are not simply opposed,' but are 'hierarchised, with literacy dominant.' I hope that a new realization of the oral qualities of Gwerful's verse might contribute to a proper and long-overdue appreciation of her achievement.

[Texts]

Gwerful Mechain (1462-1500)

I'r cedor

Pob rhyw brydydd, dydd dioed,
Mul rwysg wladaidd rwysg erioed,
Noethi moliant, nis gwarantwyf,
Anfeidrol reiolf, yr wyf
Am gerdd merched y gwledydd
A wnaethant heb ffyniant ffydd
Yn anghwbl iawn, ddawn ddiwad,
Ar hyd y dydd, rho Duw Dad.
Moli gwallt, cwnsallt ceinserch,
A phob cyfryw fyw o ferch,
Ac obry moli heb wg
Yr aelïau uwch yr olwg.
Moli hefyd, hyfryd tew,
Foelder dwyfron feddaldew,
A moli gwen, len loywlun,
Dylai barch, a dwylaw bun.
Yno, o brif ddewiniaeth,
Cyn y nos canu a wnaeth,
Duw yn ei rodd a'i oddef,
Diffwyth wawd o'i dafawd ef.
Gado'r canol heb foliant

A'r plas lle'r enillir plant,
 A'r cedor clyd, hyder clear,
 Tynerdeg, cylch twn eurdaer,
 Lle carwn i, cywrain iach,
 Y cedor dan y cadach.
 Corff wyd diball ei allu,
 Cwrt difreg o'r bloneg blu.
 Llyma 'nghred, gwlad y cedawr,
 Cylch gweflau ymylau mawr,
 Cont ddwbl yw, syw seingoch,
 Dabl y gerdd â'i dwbl o goch,
 Ac nid arbed, freuged frig,
 Y gloywsaint wŷr eglwysig
 Mewn cyfle iawn, ddawn ddifreg,
 Myn Beuno, ei deimlo'n deg.
 Am hyn o chwaen, gaen gerydd,
 Y prydyddion sythion sydd,
 Gadewch yn hael, gafael ged,
 Gerddau cedor i gerdded.
 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 ffrail, ffwrwr dwygaill deg.
 Pant yw hwy no llwy yn llaw,
 Clawdd i ddal cal ddwy ddwyllaw.
 Trwsglwyn merch, drud annerch dro,
 Berth addwyn, Duw'n borth iddo.

To the vagina

Every poet, drunken fool
 Thinks he's just the king of cool,
 (Every one is such a boor,
 He makes me sick, I'm so demure),
 He always declaims fruitless praise
 Of all the girls in his male gaze.
 He's at it all day long, by God,
 Omitting the best bit, silly sod:
 He praises the hair, gown of fine love,
 And all the girl's bits up above,
 Even lower down he praises merrily
 The eyes which glance so sexily;
 Daring more, he extols the lovely shape
 Of the soft breasts which leave him all agape,
 And the beauty's arms, bright drape,
 Even her perfect hands do not escape.
 Then with his finest magic
 Before night falls, it's tragic,
 He pays homage to God's might,
 An empty eulogy: it's not quite right:
 For he's left the girl's middle unpraised,
 That place where children are upraised,

The warm bright quim he does not sing,
That tender, plump, pulsating broken ring,
That's the place I love, the place I bless,
The hidden quim below the dress.
You female body, you're strong and fair,
A faultless, fleshy court plumed with hair.
I proclaim that the quim is fine,
Circle of broad-edged lips divine,
It's a valley, longer than a spoon or hand,
A cwm to hold a penis strong and grand;
A vagina there by the swelling bum,
Two lines of red to song must come.
And the churchmen all, the radiant saints,
When they get the chance, have no restraints,
They never fail their chance to steal,
By Saint Beuno, to give it a good feel.
So I hope you feel well and truly told off,
All you proud male poets, you dare not scoff,
Let songs to the quim grow and thrive
Find their due reward and survive.
For it is silky soft, the sultan of an ode,
A little seam, a curtain on a hole bestowed,
Neat flaps in a place of meeting,
The sour grove, circle of greeting,
Superb forest, faultless gift to squeeze,
Fur for a fine pair of balls, tender frieze,
A girl's thick glade, it is full of love,
Lovely bush, blessed be it by God above.

Two *englynion* by Gwerful Mechain

I'w gwr am ei churo

Dager drwy goler dy gallon – ar osgo
I asgwrn dy ddwyfron;
Dy lina dyr, dy law'n don,
A'th gleddau i'th goluddion.

Gwynflawd, daeargnawd, oergnu

Gwynflawd, daeargnawd, du oergnu – ym mynydd,
Manod wybren oerddu;
Eira'n blât, oer iawn ei blu,
Mwthlan a roed i'm methlu.

Two verses from the *hen benillion* (folk poems) for comparison

Os wyt yn fy ngweled yn felyn fy lliw
A thithau gyn wynnied â'r eira ar y rhiw,
Ystyria di, lencyn, - na fydd yn rhy falch,-
Mai drutach o lawer yw saffrwm na chalch.

Gwych ydyw'r dyffryn, y gwenith, a'r yd,
A mwyndir, a maenol, ac aml le clyd,
Y llinos a'r eos ac adar a gân;
Ni cheir yn y mynydd ond mawnen a tân.

To her husband for beating her

A dagger through your heart's ire – on a slant
To reach your breast bone
May your knee break, your hand wither
And your weapons go to your enemies.

White flour, earthflesh, cold fleece

White flour, earthflesh, black mountain with cold fleece,
Cold black snow-laden horizon;
A plate of snow, frozen feathers,
A soft snare set to trap me.

If you see me too yellow in hue
And you as white as the snow on the slope
Consider, my lad – don't you be too proud
For saffron's worth far more than chalk.

Fair are the valley, the wheat, and the corn
And pastures and manors and places so neat
The linnet and nightingale and all the songbirds;
There's nothing on the mountain but fire and peat.

¹ Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan, eds, *Welsh Women's Poetry* (Dinas Powys, 2003).

² Germaine Greer, *Slip-shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* (London, 1995), pp.xv-xvi; p. 37.

³ Leslie Harries, *Barddoniaeth Huw Cae Llwyd, Ieuan ap Huw Cae Llwyd, Ieuan Dyfi, a Gwerful Mechain* (MA thesis, University College of Wales, Swansea, 1933) p. 26. My English translation follows.

⁴ Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, "'Gwerful Ferch Ragorol Fain": Golwg Newydd ar Gwerful Mechain,' *Ysgrifau Beirniadol* 16 (1990), 84-96.

⁵ Harries, p. 25.

⁶ *Telyn Egryn*, ed. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan and Kathryn Hughes (Dinas Powys, 1998).

⁷ Nerys Ann Howells, *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill* (Cardiff, 2001).