

## Gwerful Mechain (c. 1462 - c. 1505)

*Mor felys rhag marfolaeth [To Love is Sweeter than to Kill]*  
—to Ieuan Dyfi (l. 26)



WERFUL MECHAIN is the only the female poet of medieval Wales with a substantial body of work to have survived. This may be so, in part, because the male scribes who controlled the transmission of Welsh poetry were amused by Gwerful's saucy and frank celebration of sexual intercourse; but it is also because Gwerful was respectful of the complex Welsh poetic meters. As noted by Katie Gramich, Gwerful does not represent a separate female tradition or feminine subculture but "belongs centrally to the Welsh bardic tradition"; she "engages in poetic dialogues with her male contemporaries, using similar forms, meter, tropes, and vocabulary."<sup>1</sup> Like Shakespeare's Beatrice a century later, but in real life, Gwerful Mechain transgressed conventional restrictions on feminine speech: in her verbal fencing with Dafydd Llwyd and Ieuan Dyfi, she gave as good as she got. One suspects that Gwerful could have held her own in any Cnapan locker room in fifteenth-century Powys.



"Mechain" is not a patronym, but a place: Gwerful was the daughter of a nobleman, Hywel Fychan ap Hywel, of Mechain, in Montgomeryshire (northern Powys). Her mother was named Gwenhwyfar. She had three brothers, Dafydd, Madog and Thomas; and a sister, Mawd. Gwerful is closely associated with Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn, who may have been her bardic master; he is also identified, in his verse and hers, as Gwerful's lover, either before or during her marriage John ap Llywelyn Fychan ap Llywelyn ap Deio (by whom Gwerful had a daughter, Mawd, evidently named after her sister).

The manuscript record ascribes a total of 38 poems to Gwerful Mechain, not all of which have been accepted by Welsh scholars, but this is partly to her credit. Gwerful was so highly esteemed in the two centuries after her death that some scribes attributed to her poems that were written by the great Dafydd ap Gwilym. Sadly, most scholars outside Wales have diverted their blushing gaze from Gwerful as if she were a whore scrawling obscenities on a latrine wall. Where Gwerful has been noted at all in scholarship, it is typically no more than a passing mention in which she is identified as a writer of "salacious verse." Leslie Harries edited some of Gwerful's poems as early as 1933 for his MA thesis, together with the work of male bards. But when Harries published his thesis, he dropped Gwerful, not wishing to be tainted by her feminine lubricity. That has everywhere been the story of Gwerful's legacy. As of this writing, Gwerful continues to be excluded from the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, unlike her male contemporaries Tudur Aled, Dafydd ab Edmwnd Llywelyn Glyn Cothi, Gruffudd ab Ieuan, Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn, and Siôn Tudur (and others).

Happily, Gwerful's extant verses have recently been gathered and edited by Dafydd Johnston and (more completely) by Nerys Ann Howells.<sup>2</sup> The English translations published here for the first time are indebted to the Welsh texts of Johnston and Howells. Gwerful is represented in *Women's Works* by eight single *englynion*; a dialogue in five *englynion*; plus three *cywydd*. (The particular form of *englyn* preferred by Gwerful consists of four lines with a syllabic count of 10/6/7/7, linked by rhyme and the obligatory *cynganedd* – internal rhyme and consonantal correspondence.)

Gwerful's most notorious poem, her "Cywydd y Cedor" (*Cywydd of the Bush*) is a poem in praise of her own "gont," a poem that answers or provokes Dafydd ap Gwilym's "Cywydd y gal" (*Cywydd of the Penis*). Gwerful lampoons the newly fashionable Petrarchan tradition of hyper-praising every female body part except the unmentionable one that the woebegone male lover has had in the back of his mind although not on the tip of his tongue. Gwerful's position: if the bards of Wales cannot supply some greater pleasure than to speak of star-like eyes and coral lips and pearl teeth, they need not apply.

Gwerful's "Cywydd i Wragedd Eiddgeddus" (To Jealous Wives) makes a mockery of bourgeois commitments to monogamy while at the same time lampooning a double standard: literature throughout the medieval and early modern periods exhibits an obsessive masculine anxiety about cuckoldry, while affirming the husband's right to play

<sup>1</sup> Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan, *Welsh Women's Poetry, 1460-2001* (2003), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Johnston, ed., *Canu Maswedd Yr Oesedd Canol* (1991); Howells, ed. *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill* (2001). The English translations published here for the first time emulate but do not strictly duplicate the internal rhyme and syllabic structure of Gwerful's originals; for which readers are referred to the Welsh texts of Johnston and Howells.

around. Gwerful's narrator challenges virtuous housewives to let hubby chase a skirt when he so wishes – in fact, let it be her own skirt that he chases (because she's not a fast runner, when the moon is full and the man is well-hung).

The “Ymddiddan Rhwng Dau Fardd,” or Conversation between Two Poets (Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain) is a seduction poem on the model of Tudur Penllyn's “The Welshman and the Englishwoman”; but Gwerful's verse points toward a happier climax than between Tudur's repressed Englishwoman and his randy Welshman. It's possible that the “Conversation” was written entirely by Gwerful, or as a collaboration with Dafydd. (Not infrequently, dialogues of this sort began as an impromptu contest of wit between poets, composed on the spot, much as improvisational comics might do in our own culture, at a comedy club.)

Gwerful's “Cywydd in reply to Ieuan Dyfi for his cywydd to Anni Goch” invites a fuller introduction than these others. Until recently, not much was known about Ieuan Dyfi except that he composed five poems addressed to a certain “Anni Goch”; in one of which he cites Anni as a supreme example of the plain fact that women throughout history have been fickle and perfidious.

Llinos Beverley Smith reports the back story, drawing on historical research that ought to have won her a Pulitzer Prize: in 1501/2, two accused sinners were summoned to the Leominster Consistory Court, to answer allegations of adultery. The accused: Ieuan Dyfi, poet; and Anni Goch of Norton, the wife of John Lippard. Anni pleaded not guilty. She was given a few days to gather her “compurgators” – fellow Christians who would testify under oath, on pain of excommunication, that the accused was indeed innocent. Ieuan, however, freely confessed to having had sex with Anni Goch. His line of defense (Adultery is what Welsh poets *do*) cut no mustard with the Church magistrates. For his penance, and as an example to others, Ieuan Dyfi was sentenced to be whipped eight times around Presteigne Church.

Dyfi's unlooked-for confession put Anni Goch in a bind: she now stood at risk of punishment not only for adultery, but for perjury. In her second appearance in church court, Anni therefore brought four compurgators who swore that the sex with Ieuan Dyfi was non-consensual: Anni, they alleged, had been raped. The accused thereby escaped a whipping at the cost of Ieuan Dyfi's reputation. (Among the bards, rape was a crime committed by cowards, losers, and Englishmen; whereas adultery was a prime virtue, a strain of Welsh heroism, by both sexes, as old as the language itself.)

Ieuan, having confessed to good sex but not to sexual assault, responded with a cywydd fiercely denouncing womankind, and condemning dark-haired, dark-eyed Anni Goch in particular as a second Eve. Gwerful Mechain, outspoken champion of women's sexual freedom (and possibly a friend of Anni Goch), objected to Dyfi's generalized misogyny: in her “Cywydd in reply to Dyfi for his cywydd to Anni Goch,” Gwerful praises women not just as the fair sex but as the smarter one; while mocking Ieuan Dyfi as a petulant buffoon.

In 1517 Anni Goch and John Lippard were back in Church Court. (Gwerful Mechain was now long dead, or at least retired; Anni Goch was still going strong.) Someone – possibly the father of the bride – accused Lippard of bigamy, alleging that he had contracted marriage to a local woman without ever having divorced his first wife, Anni Goch. Lippard, appearing before the church court, confessed to the betrothal, but he denied bigamy, on grounds that he disavowed his marriage to Anni Goch long ago, after she plotted to kill him.

Anni, answering a subpoena, confirmed that her cohabitation with John Lippard had lasted only six months, back in 1500/1. She now acknowledged having committed adultery with Ieuan Dyfi and two other randy fellows; whereupon her husband Lippard, she alleged, had *sold* her to Ieuan Dyfi. The poet was no longer available for comment.

Weighing the various testimonies, the church court judged Anni Goch's account the most credible: John Lippard for his penance was therefore obliged to be whipped around the churches of Presteigne, Norton, and Byton; a marathon hazing designed to show other Welshmen the Lord's displeasure with such husbands as John Lippard. Moreover, Lippard was commanded on pain of excommunication to restore full conjugal rights to his spurned wife, Anni Goch, within three days (Smith, 1993).

The “Cywydd in reply to Dyfi” is Gwerful's last known poem. She is presumed to have died not long after.

## Wyth Englynion

gan Gwerful

### [1. *Llanc ym min y llwyn*]

*Rhown fil o ferched, rhown fwyn lances  
Lle ceisiais i orllwyn,  
Rhown gwyn, mawr, rhown gan morwyn  
Am un llanc ym min y llwyn.*

3

### [2.] *Y Gwahaniaeth*

*Dau beth odiaeth didol - siom gariad  
(sy'n gyrru'n gynhwynol):  
Gwen ireiddwen gain raddol  
sy ffrind a minnau sy ffôl.*

4

### [3. *Dyferu Wlyb*]

*Fy mhais a wlychais yn wlych – a'm crys  
A'm cwrsi sidangrych;  
Odid Gwyl Ddeinioel foelfrych  
Na hin Sain Silin yn sych*

5

4

### [4. *I'w Thad*]

*Gweles eich lodes lwydwen, eiddilaidd°,  
Hi ddylai gael amgen:  
Hi yn ei gwres, gynheswen,  
Chwithau 'nhad aethoch yn hen.*

### [5.] *I'w Gwr am ei Churo*

*Dager drwy goler dy galon—ar osgo  
I asgwrn dy ddwyfron,  
Dy lin a dyr, dy law'n don,  
A'th gleddau i'th goluddion.*

5

### [6. *Pwyllwch*]

*Dyn tanboeth annoeth ni bydd ynad – byth  
tra fo bath ar ddillad  
dyn distaw. A Duw yn dystiad,  
ymaros a gaiff mawrhad.*

### [7. *Dianc y Bardd*]

*Ni wn o'r byd hwn I b'le tynna I ffwrdd,  
na pha ffordd a gerdda;  
Na pha wlad rad a rodia,  
Na pha le rhag angau'r a.*

### [8. *Swydd Wag*]

*Och! lety, gwely gwaeledd, anniddan  
Anheddle i orwedd –  
Cloëdig, unig annedd,  
Cas gan bwbyw cwsg y bedd.*

## Eight Englynion

trans. DWF

### Boy in the Bush

I'd give a thousand gals, a tender bride,  
Most maids, beatitude besides,  
Where I for ambush lie in wait,  
For'a single lad by the bush-hedge.

1

### The Difference

One sad ex, two exquisite love-extremes  
(A man's instinctual drive, it seems):  
Gwen, blest, so fresh and beautiful.  
So one's the friend, and one, the gull.

2

### Dripping Wet

My smock is wet and manky. My shirt is  
Soaked. Crumpled, my silk hanky.  
Hardly by Deiniol's Day will I –  
Nor e'en by Saint Sulien's – be dry.

3

6

### To Dad (on his young girlfriend)

Cute: I now have seen your grey-white match.  
She'll find herself a substitute:  
She has fire. You have – just desire.  
You, Dad, can only act your age.

### To her Husband for Striking Her

Through your heart's rough choler may a dagger<sup>7</sup>  
Plunge to the bone of your breast,  
Your knee snap, your hand rot off,  
Your own guts ensheath your blade.

### Keep Calm

A fiery fool can never be a judge,  
Even when he drapes himself  
In silence. God be witness:  
Patience is what wins respect.

### The Artful Dodger

I don't know where on earth to hide my head,  
Nor which pathway I might wend,  
Nor what blessed ground to tread,  
Or where to go, to dodge the end—

### Vacancy

Ugh! poor accommodations, lousy bed,  
What a place to settle in –  
Locked room, solitary, deep.  
A common nuisance: cemetery sleep.

<sup>3</sup> *min y llyn:bush-hedge* ] *lit.*, edge (or lip) of the bush (or grove).

<sup>4</sup> *a...ffôl* ] *literally*, and I, so foolish.

<sup>5</sup> *Ddeinioel:Deiniol* ] (d. 584), bishop of Bangor in the kingdom of Gwynedd; his feast day is Sept. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Silin:Sulien* ] probably Sulinus or Sulien, the Breton saint of Cornouaille and Domnonée, whose feast day is 1 Oct.; but possibly St. Sulien/Sulian/Silin (29 July).

<sup>7</sup> *goler:choler* ] 1. heart's *collar* (rib); 2. *choler*, heart's anger.

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