

The Medieval Feminist
BBC Radio 4
Presented by Carys Eleri
Produced by Alice McKee

CARYS ELERI: One day, in one of the lockdowns of 2020 - I live in Wales, so you know, there were a few - I was writing, which meant... I was scrolling. What started as a hunt for inspiration somehow got lost in a blur of bad news and newly upgraded living rooms. And as I sank further into my feed, that spark of inspiration slipped further and further from view. Until....

SARA HUWS: *Pob rhyw brydydd, dydd dioed, Mul rwysg wladaidd rwysg erioed, Noethi moliant, nis gwarantwyf, Anfeidrol reiol...*

CARYS: I came across a video of my friend Sara doing ASMR. That stands for “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response” - which is a fancy way of saying “tingly whispers”. She was reading medieval Welsh poetry by a woman called Gwerful Mechain. I turned up the volume expecting something about hills or God or both.

[MUSIC: Watermelon Sugar by Harry Styles, medieval version]

SARA: *Yn anghwbl iawn, ddawn ddiwad, Ar hyd y dydd, rho Duw Dad.*

GWERFUL MECHAIN: He always declaims fruitless praise, of all the girls in his male gaze. He's at it all day long, by God. Ignoring the best bit, silly sod. He praises the hair, gown of fine love. And all the girls' bits up above. He pays homage to God's might, an empty eulogy; it's not quite right. For he's left the girl's middle unpraised, the place where children are conceived, the warm bright quim, he does not sing, the tender, plump, pulsating, broken ring.

CARYS: Hello, Gwerful. Where have you been all my life? I'd never heard anything like it and I'd certainly never heard of her – Gwerful Mechain. Google says she lived from around 1460 to 1502 in Powys, and is the only female Welsh medieval poet whose work has survived. Best known for her “Poem to the Vagina”, which you just heard. Little else is known about Gwerful's life, but as I listened to her voice, channelled through Sara on my screen, I realised she was a woman way ahead of her time - one who delighted in the indecent. A woman after my own heart.

My name is Carys Eleri and I want to find out who Gwerful Mechain was, what inspired her to write so rudely, and why the hell I've never heard of her.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: 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.

KATIE GRAMMICH: Gwerful wrote “Cywydd y Cedor”, that is the “Poem to the Vagina”, I think as a direct response to the very famous poem by Dafydd ap Gwilym, “Cywydd y Gal”, that is, “Poem to the Penis”.

CARYS: Professor Katie Gramich, who spent her career liberating women's writing from the archives and has just published the first full translation of Gwerful's work into English.

KATIE: Gwerful's poem is a flight of fancy, really. She shows how adept she is at what is known in Welsh as “dyfalu”, using your imagination to come up with absolutely brilliant and unexpected similes for things. And this is what “Cywydd y Cedor”, is really all about, it's describing the female sexual organs in absolutely magnificent, unexpected, beautiful terms.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: For it is silky soft, the sultan of an ode. A little seam, a curtain on a niche 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.

SARA: So I got loaned a really nice microphone. It made me feel so fancy, I felt like Mariah Carey...

CARYS: This as my friend Sara Huws of ASMR fame. Sara is a historian, academic and an expert on pretty much everything

SARA: ...and I just thought well, what can I get away with doing with this before I have to give it back and I did have, yeah, I had really long nails at the time and had been wasting hours on the internet. I don't know what happened, I just looked over at the shelf and I just thought, d'you know what, I think Gwerful's "Cywydd y Gont" would make some really good ASMR. Because that sound draws you in, even if you don't understand Welsh, it's gorgeous to listen to. And then, bam, you've just enjoyed some medieval Welsh women's history. Ha! Have it. It was the most elaborate thirst trap I think ever [laughter] put together [laughter].

CARYS: You translated the title as "Poem to the Vagina". But other people have translated it differently, haven't they?

KATIE: It's quite difficult to translate Cedor...

CARYS: Katie Gramich.

KATIE: ...a more correct translation would be "vulva", but I was thinking, "Poem to the Vulva", it sounds too clinical. It sounds like some doctor's written it, you know. [laughter] That is completely against the joie de vivre of Gwerful's poem. She does use more rude words in the poem itself. I don't know if I'm allowed to say the rude word, am I? [laughter] So I thought vagina was a more neutral term in a way.

[MUSIC: Shut Up by Stormzy, medieval version]

CARYS: If you know anything about Welsh medieval poetry, you'll have heard of Dafydd ap Gwilym. His "Poem to the Penis" is pretty infamous. So it bugs me that I'd never heard of Gwerful or her response.

KATIE: Dafydd ap Gwilym and Gwerful Mechain were not contemporaries. Dafydd wrote at least a hundred years before, but Gwerful read and clearly enjoyed Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem, but she thought, "Hang on a minute. This is all very one sided. Why are we praising the male member when female sexuality is just as wonderful?"

DAFYDD AP GWILYM: You're longer than a big man's thigh, an all night hunter, always worth a try. A chisel working hard for a hundred nights, the eye in your head has a girl in its sights. You think you can catch every maiden in town, but stop, some of them will bring you down.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: 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.

KATIE: And so she wrote the "Poem to the Vagina" to upbraid Dafydd ap Gwilym, and other male poets, for omitting to celebrate female sexuality. And course, Dafydd ap Gwilym wrote many, many wonderful love poems. But the praise that he gives is to the woman's face, her hair, her beautiful figure and so on. But, as Gwerful says, he leaves the middle unpraised! [laughter]

DAFYDD AP GWILYM: You're a peg for the lid on a girl's bare bottom. A whistle for blowing, spring and autumn. Curving pestle, you growing cannon grim. You'll be purgatory for a small girl's quim.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: 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.

SARA: She absolutely schools them in how to describe it. It's eloquent, it's filthy. It is so humorous and it's slightly relatable as well.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: A girl's thick glade, it is full of love, Lovely bush, you are blessed by God above.

CARYS: I was so bowled over by Gwerful's blatant celebration of the vagina. How was this written in the 15th century? This is Cardi B territory. She certainly didn't beat about the bush. I wonder who else caught the sharp end of her pen.

KATIE: Gwerful was very much part of her own little coterie of poets. We have still extant poems that she wrote to her male peers Dafydd Llwyd and a couple of other poets of the time. The craft of strict meter poetry, which really is quite difficult to master, was passed on from father to son. We don't really know who Gwerful Mechain learnt the craft from but learn it she did. It's possible that it could have been from Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn, with whom she exchanged quite a number of poems.

[MUSIC: No Scrubs by TLC, medieval version]

DAFYDD LLWYD: Your nag is narrow and thin, believe me- My girl, if you ride him out so free, Beware, your privates will hurt to the nth degree.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: Listen, a wild girl's nature does not split- Your eyewash means nothing- I will sit, Like a queen on my noble steed: The sinews of my ring are strong as steel.

KATIE: And these poems are jousting poems, if you like, they're sparring. And it's clear that these contemporary poets are exchanging poems in order to have fun with each other, to try to outdo each other, and to elicit another poem from the other, you know, in response to their poem. It's very clear that Gwerful Mechain is competing with her male peers on the same level, you know, she's not part of some kind of female subculture at all. She's very much on par with her male peers and she's enjoying writing poems in competition with them.

[MUSIC: Skwod by Nadia Rose] "Guess who's back, but you never left / Yes I did, I rose from the dead / And now I'm here to kill them with flows / And some punch lines that'll go over your head"

NADIA ROSE: I've been to some poetry slams, and you know, just getting in with the clicks, love it, and rap for me is like poetry in motion.

CARYS: This is Nadia Rose, a rapper from Croydon who's never been one to bite her tongue. Gwerful was pretty much the medieval equivalent of an MC, so I want to talk to Nadia, to find out what might have motivated Gwerful.

Can you tell us about those early rap battles with lads on the estate?

NADIA: It was supernatural. I mean like...If somebody said something a bit out of line or a bit rude, just on a normal one, you might get into a bit of an argument, a bit of a fight, but it was like as soon as it was with the music and everybody knew it was just rap battling. There was this energy. There was love, because it was us being able to show our talent, our skills. So it was super fun, I mean being the only girl was a bit scary at the time, but yeah, I felt liberated, like hey, look at me in this space.

[MUSIC: Murder by Nadia Rose] "So how is she the baddest if I been winnin' / Pree me on the features how I been spinnin' / I been the baddest out here / I just step on to a tune and cause a madness out here like / Your honor, I'm sorry but it was me / I just killed everybody in the scene like, murder..."

NADIA: I've always seen, like, sparring, whether it be in boxing or it be in rap, it's like a challenge, you know, there's this adrenaline and this want to be the better. You know, you want to prove yourself and you have your opponent there and the aim is to come out on top. So I think being challenged generally is always good because you're gonna want to do better than you've been doing before.

CARYS: And it's collaborative isn't it?

NADIA: Yeah, exactly.

CARYS: You create together. You co-create.

NADIA: Yeah, exactly. There's a lot of research that goes into battle rap. You wanna know your opponent inside out, what to kind of prod about them, that might turn them over a little bit. And yeah, you find out a lot about people.

DAFYDD LLWYD: Gwerful, Hywel of Mechain's sweetie, Slender and sassy, won't reply. You're there somewhere but in what place, what distant land do you hide your face?

GWERFUL MECHAIN: He comes and goes according to his whim: I'll bet an Englishman could do better than him. And yet it was Dafydd who was at fault, Wise, handsome, lovely and yet he called, this swarthy incompetent to take his message, and now, mark my words, we have the wreckage.

SARA: I mean in Wales, we do have this tradition, more recently of things like punka, where you do have the call and response. For example. Mari Llwyd, you know, the big horse's skull. When it calls round your house, it will insult you and you insult it back, until you let it in the house. You come up with insults off the bat and you show your virtuosity, in coming up with these things. You get that moment where you are bouncing off somebody else, and you are in harmony, in poetic harmony with somebody.

KATIE: The exchange of insults is very common in lots of very different cultures. Gwerful Mechain is evidently au fait with that idea that she is in competition with her peers and she is there to show off her skills. So I think it's to do with confidence, actually. If you can keep up with your peers and write insults in poetic form to them, it shows that you're just as good as they are.

CARYS: There are so many of these fantastically filthy poems, where Dafydd and Gwerful are clapping back at each other. It seems like their poetic beef inspired Gwerful to get even more creative with her vulgarity. But why did Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful rile each other up so much?

KATIE: The exchanges with Dafydd Llwyd are various. Sometimes they're making fun of each other and sometimes they're complaining, but there is a suggestion, because they're talking very often about sexual matters, that they may have been more than teacher and pupil. They could have been lovers.

DAFYDD LLWYD: Tell me, lovely girl, whose brows are slender, Your expression is tender; Do you, strange girl, have a big enough receptacle, A sheath long enough to accommodate this tackle?

GWERFUL MECHAIN: Dafydd before you're pooped, here's a downy crater to tame your pecker. I'll come to you if your love is true, bold lad, for I like what I can see of you; The best thing in life is thrusting fast, it's fun, And striking the flint, before firing the gun.

KATIE: But she is much crueller to another poet called Ieuan Dyfi, who wrote an absolutely excoriating poem about a former girlfriend of his called Anni Goch, or Red Annie. He really takes this woman to task. He takes her apart.

[MUSIC: WAP by Cardi B, medieval version]

IEUAN DYFI: A maiden she was without equal and yet for me, she turned out lethal. But I'm not the only one who has ever been duped. Many great strong men have to women stooped. Great noblemen, sages, leaders of men have met disgrace because of women.

A woman it was who marred the grandeur of Greece, A woman it was who caused Merlin's decease. The sickly sweet wife wrought price Madog's shame, I know what she did: women are all the same.

KATIE: And so Gwerful, fair play to her, she steps up to the plate and she writes a poem defending Red Annie and telling Ieuan Dyfi off for being such a horrible ex-boyfriend. [laughter]

GWERFUL MECHAIN: Oh Ieuan Dyfi, do come along, When you say girls are bad, you're just plain wrong. It was a woman who made Aeneas rich: Dido was noble, and dark as pitch. Gwenddolen was one who got her own back, When her will wasn't done; she just had the knack.

Intelligent Marcia, Cuhelyn's consort, sorted our laws and cleaned up the court. Tell me, leuan, I'm asking you. Tell me now, isn't all of this true? Tell me leuan, do you think it's just, for a wife to be chucked when her husband's lust decides she's too old for him? I can't mend your pretended pain. Let God heal your precious bane.

KATIE: It's really quite a tour de force of erudition apart from anything else. She's showing off! It's not just the fact that she can reel off these examples from history, of wonderful women. She is also showing, through her own making of the poem, how clever women are.

CARYS: So how would you say that you craft a diss-track, from start to finish, tell me about the process.

NADIA: It's a lot of research, right? So you want to find out all their social media...

CARYS: This is rapper Nadia Rose.

NADIA: ...you wanna find out who's their friend still, who they've fallen out with that might have some goss, yeah, or some extra tea. Cos that's always a killer. If someone thinks that something isn't out, but you know it? It's like, oh my god.

CARYS: Ooh nice.

NADIA: OK. And then you want to kind of structure, it in a way where you do not use all your ammunition, so you have just a few things you could drop, whether you was clashing anybody. And then you intertwine those with some of the, quotation marks "personals", you drop some of the "personals" in there. You think about how you're going to deliver it, your demeanour as you're dropping it. Y'know, you have to make sure that it's really all gonna tie into this fireball of fire. [laughter] Sorry, I'm getting excited thinking about it.

CARYS: [laught] So great.

NADIA: But ultimately the aim is to come out on top and make sure that you have structured your thing to a T, then you know you've got that final bar that's like [gasp] "ooooh". That's the reaction you want to get, "ooooh". And just - [gunshot sound effect].

CARYS: There's clearly a fine art to the diss track. One that was respected, even back in the Middle Ages, one that Gwerful had mastered, and it's incredibly empowering to read. I do most of my feminist take-downs on Twitter, so it's shocking to learn that a woman here in Wales was doing the exact same thing so many years ago. She was truly a poet who knew no bounds, even when it came to other women's husbands.

[MUSIC: Bad Guy by Billie Eilish, medieval version]

GWERFUL MECHAIN: Jealousy is the strangest attitude: It's no good thinking that everyone's lewd; When you might consider, it's not really nice, You might even say it's a terrible vice, But wives take on this an inconvenient stance, They're so suspicious, they look at me askance!

KATIE: Gwerful wrote this poem, "I wragedd eiddigus", "To Jealous Wives". And it's definitely feminist, but it's coming at feminism from a slant angle. She tell off women who are too possessive about their husbands. In other words, she tells off wives for not allowing their husbands to share their sexual favours with her.

CARYS: [laughter] Brilliant!

GWERFUL MECHAIN: My friend Gwenllian told me one time, that she'd heard sung a dirty old rhyme, that said it wasn't love on which women are sold, that yearning which thrives on unreachable gold, But what really gets wives going, bless their little cotton socks, is, pardon me for saying it, the love of good, big -

KATIE: It's celebrating female sexuality and instead of condemning female promiscuity, she is championing it and saying "let's have a bit more sharing here, girls!".

CARYS: [laughter]

GWERFUL MECHAIN: Don't get het up, just believe me when I say, all these Mr Bigs are after me, desperate for a lay, But these damn wives, so respectable, won't give up their pricks so delectable.

KATIE: It's full of really quite surreal imagery. The husband's penis is seen as like some sort of precious jewel that's kept in the casket. It's weirdly disconnected from his body and it's something that the wife jealously guards. It's a very strange poem, but very enjoyable.

CARYS: Welsh, as a language, you know, it's my first language and it's very kind, and it's very sweet. I think something's happened where this sexual language has stopped existing in the Welsh language. So I read her stuff and it's really erotic. People don't have this language any more, we tend to switch to English. Loads of people say, Welsh isn't sexy and we turn to English in bed, which is really mad!

KATIE: Well, I think you should read more Gwerful Mechain! [laughter]

CARYS: [laught] Ok, fine. Deal!

CARYS: Gwerful herself was totally uncensored, which is probably why her poetry feels so modern. So why has it been hidden away?

KATIE: In the early twentieth century, her work was studied by scholar called Leslie Harries. This was back in 1933. So it seems quite surprising nowadays that it's been all this time. And yet a complete Welsh edition of her work didn't come out until 2001.

CARYS: But this isn't just a case of "it was a different time". There's another dimension to it here in Wales - in the mid nineteenth century, the Blue Books were published. Historian Sara Huws.

SARA: So the Blue Books were a report that was published that looked at the state of education in Wales. They came to some recommendations, some of them were quite cruel about the language and were very very cruel about women's morality or lack thereof, especially where I'm from in West Wales.

KATIE: The Blue Books suggested that Welsh women who are promiscuous and unchaste and so on.

CARYS: Professor Katie Gramich.

KATIE: And so the chapel culture had to insist that Welsh women were paragons of virtue. Gwerful Mechain didn't fit that at all. The reason why her work was suppressed by scholars like Leslie Harries was that he was quite literally embarrassed by her work. So when he brought out a book of other poets of the period, he actually left out Gwerful Mechain.

SARA: But reading those books, y'know, where they do describe Welsh Women's morality, our lack of shame at nudity, at having children out of wedlock, at premarital sex and this being a huge problem. It did feel very strange to read that and think, actually, they're writing about me, they're writing about us.

CARYS: Gwerful Mechain, she was pretty frowned upon for being so outspoken about her sexuality and it's mad how I don't think things have moved on, but do you feel that, has happened to you?

NADIA: Oh, yeah, definitely. There's this idea, there's certain things that women shouldn't say, so then putting it to music on top of that. I've had things like "what about the little girls that are listening to you, your influence on them?" Men at times, feel a bit, I don't know what the word, maybe, threatened. They don't like to see a woman that is confident and comfortable in her sexuality and herself. Y'know, they want to call me words like "slut" or "whore" or "what does your mum think about

this?" It's ridiculous that you're saying this to me because you'll happily listen to a man saying it, but from me, it has to be questioned as something else.

CARYS: It feels like Gwerful's poetry has never been more relevant. She was calling out misogyny hundreds of years ago. And in one poem her subject matter becomes more serious. This time, Gwerful, isn't playing for laughs. "To her husband, for beating her."

KATIE: This is a short poem, which is really a curse. It's written in the voice of a woman. It's simply cursing the husband who has beaten her and wishing terrible, terrible things upon him. It's tempting, because the voice is so immediate, to think that this is an autobiographical poem. But of course, we can't know that. In fact it's just as likely to have been her, writing in the voice of another woman, because we know that she is a poet who stands up for other women.

SARA: It's is very raw. It's very visceral. It's quite a shocking piece.

GWERFUL MECHAIN: A dagger through your heart's stone – on a slant, To reach your breast bone; May your knees break, your hands shrivel And your sword plunge in your guts to make you snivel.

CARYS: I wish we'd learned about Gwerful in school. You know, I knew about all of these other poets for all these years and it was never mentioned.

SARA: I think when I first found her poetry, I thought it was like a modern parody, I was like "hang about". Cos I'd been used to kind of blue poetry from male poets in Wales and it was all a bit like "ooh, boobies" - and even though Gwerful's work is quite out there and quite blue, it comes from such a different place. It knocked me sideways to be honest, when I first read it.

[MUSIC - PROMISCUOUS GIRL, MEDIEVAL VERSION]

NADIA: There have been a lot of boys that I grew up with have made waves. You know, Stormzy my cousin, Section Boyz. In terms of the girls I'd say there's been a few, but being from the ends and knowing how many girls there were that were just incredibly talented, seeing how much have actually pushed through, it's nowhere near as many as it should be.

KATIE: I think that sparring is particularly important for a female practitioner. You're in the same field as your male contemporaries. You're not hidden away somewhere scribbling away on your piece of paper. You're there out in public, showing what you can do and really giving an example to future generations of poets.

CARYS: So this girl, I think she seems about nineteen, twenty years old, and she's just tweeted: "Sometimes you need to do a Gwerful Mechain and write a poem to your pussy" That's great that a whole new generation of people are being challenged by Gwerful now.

SARA: I mean when you tell people you're into like medieval Welsh women's history, you may as well be saying, like, "yes, I crocheted this out of my cats hair". And I think that Gwerful's work, it challenges our notions of what a medieval woman would have been like and she does it with so much style, it's quite irresistible as a body of work.

CARYS: I can't help but imagine the impact it would have had on so many of us growing up, had we had access to Gwerful's work. To be inspired to write and argue and flirt in our mother tongue. I wonder how many more Gwerfuls there were. How many glorious righteous scandalous works have been hidden away forever? And how many fabulously indecent stories of Welsh women are yet to be written? I best get my pen.

[MUSIC TO END].