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# AN UNEDITED WELSH POEM

FROM *PENIARTH* 49:

*CYWYDD Y GAL*



*James Doan*

One of the few surviving examples of Medieval Welsh erotic verse is *Cywydd y Gal*, or "Poem of the Penis." The poem exists in some eleven manuscripts from the late 15th and 16th centuries, most of which are now housed in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. In seven of these, including MS. *Peniarth* 49, the poem is either directly or indirectly ascribed to the 14th century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, and in the remaining four to the 15th century poetess Gweirful Mechain.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I shall be concerned with establishing the authorship of the poem taking into consideration internal linguistic and metrical evidence.

The poem, or *cywydd*,<sup>2</sup> is in the form of a riddle. The poet addresses the penis metaphorically throughout the poem, as a stick or stake, a roll of wood, a staff, an eel, a green hazel stick, a long chisel, a horn, and so forth. The principal conceit is that it is a goose's neck and head. The poet refers to its eye, its dewlap, its muzzle, and its testes (*ceilliai*) which one assumes are the wattles. The poet alternately berates the penis for rising at inopportune moments and belittles it by saying that it is more like a green hazel stick than the thigh of a large man. The poet also charges that, because of its indiscretion, he will not get the New Year's gift that he desires, the lap of good women of the Faith.

The poem appears as number 94 on folios 101b and 102a of *Peniarth* 49. The poem is twenty-eight lines long. Lines 12 to 20, and line 23 may be corrupt, for the normal line in a *cywydd* is seven syllables in length, and these lines vary between four and six syllables. Most of these lines also lack *cynganedd*, a complex

system of alliteration and internal rhyme which is generally found in the lines in the rest of the poem.

The poem is printed below in normalized Welsh orthography. An English translation follows. A copy of the poem in its original form is given in *Appendix I*. Notes on the vocabulary are given in *Appendix II*. There is almost no punctuation in the manuscript, and both spelling and capitalization are often arbitrary. Therefore, all punctuation and capitalization reflect my own interpretation of the poem. Emendations of spelling are noted in *Appendix II*.

### *Cywydd y Gal*

- Rho Duw gal: rhaid yw gwiliaw  
 Arnad â llygad rhag llaw.  
 Am hyn o hawl pawl pensyth  
 Yn amgenach bellach byth
5. Adain corff rhaid ydyw,  
 Rhag cwyn rhoi ffrwyn yn dy ffriw  
 I'th atal fel na'th dditier.  
 Unwaith un clærwaith o'n clêr,  
 Cassaf rholbren wyd gennyf.
10. Corn cod na chyfod na chwyf  
 Calennig gwagedd da Cred,  
 Cyfol arffed.  
 Dwddw pwl adwith,  
 Paid â'th chwimp chwith,
15. Pawl ysgymun,  
 Dau hanner bun.  
 Lysywen den doll  
 Fal pawl irgoll  
 Wyd na morddwyd mawrddyn.
20. Herw gan nos hir gŷn,  
 Trosol wyd ar air traserch.  
 Clohigyn clawr moeldin merch,  
 Llygad eich iaden  
 A wyl pob gwreignith yn wen,
25. Call a dwl, ceilliai dy lwyth,  
 Croen dagell, ffroen, dwygaill ffrwyth.  
 Lledrad wyd o anlladrwydd,  
 Llun asgwrn gwddf gŵydd.

*Poem of the Penis*

May God give a penis: need there is to watch  
 Over thee with an eye hereafter,  
 For this, from the claim of the stiff-necked stake,  
 Otherwise, forever more,  
 Wing of the body, need there is,  
 Lest complaint, to put a bridle in thy face  
 To restrain thee so that thou be not charged.  
 Once one bright work of our minstrels,  
 Most hateful roll of wood thou art with me.  
 Horn of a cod neither rises nor will I get  
 A New Year's gift from good women of the Faith,  
 The claim of a lap.  
 Swelling, a fit of misfortune,  
 Cease thy strange whim,  
 Accursed stick,  
 The two halves of a maiden.  
 Eel of the thin hole,  
 (More) like a green hazel stick  
 Thou art, than the thigh of a large man.  
 A raid with night, a long chisel,  
 A staff thou art for a word of great love.  
 Clasp of the cover of the bare bottom of a girl,  
 The eye of your head  
 Watches every pretty little wife happily,  
 Wise and stupid, the testicles of thy tribe,  
 Skin of dewlap, muzzle, two testes of fruit.  
 A theft thou art of wantonness,  
 Shape of the neck-bone of a goose.

*Meter of the Poem*

Although the *cywydd* meter may have existed prior to the 14th century, it was Dafydd ap Gwilym and his contemporaries who developed and perfected it by means of rhyme and *cynghanedd*. There are three basic forms of *cynghanedd*:<sup>3</sup> *C. groes* which involves only alliteration, *C. lusk* which involves only internal rhyme, and *C. sain* which combines the two. The first line of this poem is an example of *C. groes*. By dividing the line in half we see that every consonant in the first half corresponds to a consonant in the second half prior to the accented syllable, which always falls on the penultimate of polysyllables in Welsh. Thus, we find:

*Rho Duw gal / rhaid yw gwiliaw*

An example of the second type of *cynganedd*, *C. lusk* is found in line 9. Again the line is divided in half, and the final syllable of the first half is "echoed" by a syllable in the second half. Thus,

Cassaf rholbren / wyd gennyf.

*Cynganedd sain* is somewhat more complicated. Instead of being divided in half, the line is divided into thirds. As in *C. lusk*, there is internal rhyme between the first and second parts, and as in *C. groes*, there is alliteration between the second and third parts. Thus, we find in line 2 of the poem:

Arnad / a llygad / rhag llaw.

In all, thirteen, or almost one half of the twenty-eight lines in this poem contain some form of *cynganedd*.<sup>4</sup>

*Authorship of the Poem*

MS. *Peniarth 49* is a collection of poetry, primarily works attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym, made at the request of Dr. John Davies of Mallwyd (ca., 1526). The manuscript appears to be divided into four parts.<sup>5</sup> The fourth part, which concerns us here, begins with *cywydd* 79 and continues until the end of the manuscript, *cywydd* number 138. At the beginning of this section is written: "Quae sequuntur descripta sunt ex vetusto codice membranaceo script circa 1526" ("What follows was transcribed from an old parchment manuscript circa 1526"). The manuscript from which this part of *Peniarth 49* was copied may have been partially illegible, since the transcriber has left several gaps in the poems, including number 94, as noted above. He must have had access to only one manuscript since he did not attempt to fill in these gaps, and there are no variant readings for any of the poems in this section.

There appears to be a relationship between this part of the manuscript and *Hafod 26*, which is a collection of poems by Dafydd ap Gwilym transcribed by or for Thomas Wiliems toward 1574. The latter manuscript contains all the poems found

in this part of *Peniarth 49* and in the same order, with the exception of two. The only poem which is missing is number 94. According to Thomas Parry, this was perhaps because either Thomas Wiliems or his patron decided that the *cywydd* was not suitable to be included.<sup>6</sup>

*Peniarth 49* was copied by Thomas Parry and published by the University of Wales Press in 1929, however with minimal notes and no critical apparatus. In 1952, Thomas Parry published a critical edition of the complete works of Dafydd ap Gwilym, entitled *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*. In this work he refers to *Peniarth 49* as the most important large collection of poetry by Dafydd "because of its size, its known sources and the usual correctness of its readings."<sup>7</sup> While he includes most of the poems found in *Peniarth 49* in *Gwaith D. ap G.*, he excludes number 94, *Cywydd y Gal*. In a note on this poem in the Introduction he states that it is "one of the best of its craft" among Welsh erotica, and that there is better evidence to support its attribution to Dafydd ap Gwilym than to Gweirful Mechain.<sup>8</sup> In a recent anthology of contemporary Welsh erotica, the editor states his belief that Thomas Parry did not see fit to include the poem in *Gwaith D. ap G.*, "although there is no doubt concerning [Dafydd's] authorship," implying that Parry's decision was based on the then morally unacceptable nature of the poem.<sup>9</sup>

Dafydd ap Gwilym apparently flourished during the second half of the 14th century (ca., 1340-70), and so was roughly contemporary with Geoffrey Chaucer with whom he is often compared. He lived in the time following the loss of Welsh independence in 1282 with the death of the last Welsh Prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. Anglo-Norman boroughs had grown up in the shadow of the Edwardian castles during the interlude, with the result that French literary influences had found their way into the traditional Welsh bardic art. Dafydd shows a familiarity with not only the French *trouvère* tradition, but also the *fabliau* tradition, in several of his poems.<sup>10</sup> However, as Rachel Bromwich has suggested, it is possible that Dafydd may have taken the subject matter of some of his poems from the *clêr*, or folk-poets, who composed in the popular *traethodl* meter from which the *cywydd* meter was derived.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, none of this *clêr* poetry, which may have contained obscene material, has survived, although the *clêr* (who are mentioned, by the way in line 8 of *Cywydd y Gal*) continued to exert their influence on Welsh poetry at least until the 16th

century. The lyric poetry which has survived from the earlier period is quite literary and generally devoid of any continental, particularly ribald, elements. It is generally elegiac poetry dedicated to the wife or daughter of the bard's patron, for example, the Maiden song (*Rhieingerdd*) to Efa daughter of Madog ap Maredudd by Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr (fl., 1155-1200).<sup>12</sup> The "Boasts" (*Gorhoffedd*) of Hywel ap Owain Gwynedd (d., 1170) and Gwalchmai ap Meilyn (fl., 1130-80) are possible exceptions to this rule. In both these poems the poet states his love for women at the same time he states his love for battle.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast with the lyric poetry, much of Dafydd ap Gwilym's poetry is sexually candid, even bawdy, in tone. In the much-anthologized *Trafferth mewn Tafarn* ("Trouble in a Tavern"), for instance, the poet describes his attempt to seduce a tavern maid, which is frustrated when he inadvertently knocks over a brass pot on the way to a tryst with her, awakening three Englishmen who raise a hue and cry mistaking him for a thief.<sup>14</sup>

*Cywydd y Gal* is also attributed to Gweirful Mechain (fl., ca., 1470-1500). *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* says she "was deeply moved by jealous wives and scurrilous poets . . . whom she castigated with broad and biting humour"; her poems "were born of the whim of the moment" and she "produced an occasional striking *englyn* (a short, generally 21-syllable poem)."<sup>15</sup> If *Cywydd y Gal* was written by Gweirful Mechain, it may have been intended as a satire on the type of poetry which had been introduced by Dafydd ap Gwilym. Also ascribed to her is *Cywydd y Gont* ("Poem of the Pudendum").

### *Language of the Poem*

Although *Cywydd y Gal* is not found in the earliest known manuscript of Dafydd's poetry, *Peniarth 48*, written prior to 1450,<sup>16</sup> nor directly attributed to Dafydd in *Peniarth 49* (yet coming between two poems which are credited to him), there is considerable linguistic evidence in favor of Dafydd's authorship. The poem contains technical, legal terms which are virtually unknown in 14th century Welsh outside of Dafydd's poetry, although becoming more common later on.<sup>17</sup> One of these terms is *ditier* (line 7) derived from Middle English *endyte*, *indyte* (Modern English *indict*), meaning "to charge, accuse." In another of Dafydd's poems, *Cywydd y Gwynt* ("Poem of the Wind"), this word occurs in connection with *etail* (from *atal*, "to hinder, restrain"). In describing the wind Dafydd says:

Ni'th *dditia* neb, ni'th *etail*  
 Na llu rhugl, na llaw rhaglaw.

No one *charges* thee, nor *restrains* thee  
 Neither the swift host, nor the governor's hand.

Compare this with lines 6 and 7 of *Cywydd y Gal*:

Rhag cwyn rhoi ffrwyn yn dy ffrwi  
 I'th *atal* fel na'th *dditier*.

Lest complaint, to put a bridle in thy face  
 To *restrain* thee so that thou be not *charged*.

The connotation is the penis must be restrained from fear it will be charged in court, and involves the word *dditier* in an unusual context.<sup>18</sup>

The word *doll* (lenited form of *toll*, feminine of *toll* meaning "hole") is also rare outside the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym. The word appears in the line referring to the penis as "lysywen den doll" (eel of the thin hole). The use of *cod* in a figurative sense to mean scrotum in *Cywydd y Gal* is a usage which is not attested to in English until the late 14th century (*O.E.D.*). *Corn*, which is cognate with English "horn," appears to have a double meaning which the English word does not.

In conclusion, there are at least four reasons why this poem should be attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym. The poem is included in a relatively early manuscript which also contains much of the known poetry of Dafydd. Second, the poet consistently makes use of the strict *cywydd* meter and *cynghanedd*, both characteristic of Dafydd's poetry. The use of an extended conceit, or *dyfalu*, is again characteristic of Dafydd (for example, *Cywydd y Gwynt* cited above, in which the poet also addresses an inanimate object as though it were alive, in this case to serve as a love messenger, or *llatai*). Third, the tone of the poem agrees with the bawdiness of much of Dafydd's poetry. Finally, the poem contains a number of words which are found in the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, but are rare otherwise.

Undoubtedly, many nuances of meaning in the language of the poem now escape us, but the richness and diversity of imagery are still apparent, placing "The Poem of the Penis" among the higher ranks of Welsh versecraft.



*Appendix I*

- 101b Rho Duw gal Rhaid yw gwiliaw  
 arnad a llygad rhag llaw  
 Am hyn o hawl pawl pensyth  
 yn amgenach bellach byth  
     adain corph rhaid ydiw  
 Rhag cwyn rhoi ffrwyn y dy ffriw  
 Ith attal fal nath dditier  
 vnwaith vn clauerwaith on cler  
 kassa Rholbren wyd gennyf  
 korn kod na chyfod na chwyf  
 kalennig gwragedd da cred  
     kevol arffed  
     dwddw pwl adwyth  
     paid ath chwimp chwith  
 pyl           pawl ysgymmyn  
 p             dav hanner bvn  
               lysywen den doll  
               fal pawl irgoll  
     wyd na morddwyd mowrddyn  
     herw gannos hir gŷn  
 Trosol wyd ar air traserch  
     Clohigyn clawr moeldin merch
- 102a           llygad ych iaden  
 A wyl pob gwreignith y wen  
 call a dwl ceilliai dylwyth  
 croen dagell ffroen dwygaill ffrwyth  
 lledrad wyd o anlladrwydd  
     llvn ascwrn gwddw gwydd

## Appendix II

1. Rho — 3rd sing., subjunctive of *rhoi*, *rhoddi* “to give”; gal — lenited form of *cal* “penis”
2. Arnad — 2nd, sing. form of preposition *ar* “on, over”
3. Hawl — “claim, right”; pawl — “pole, stake, stick” (Eng. *pole*)
4. Bellach byth — Mod. W., *byth bellach* “evermore, forever”
5. Adain — “wing”; corff — “body” (Latin *corpus*)
6. Cwyn — “complaint”; ffrwyn — “bridle”; ffriw — “face, appearance”
7. Atal — “to hinder, restrain”; ditier — present, impersonal, subjunctive form of *ditio* “to charge, accuse” (Mid. Eng. *endyte*, *indyte*) (*G.D.G.*, p. 531, 573)
8. Claerwaith — *clær* + *gwaith* “bright work”; o'n — *o* + *ein* (’n), 1st, plural, infixed pronoun; clêr — “poets, minstrels” perhaps from Mid. Irish *cliar* “clergy; a company, band, train.” The word does not appear in Welsh until the 14th century, where it is used as a synonym for bards (W. *beirdd*).
9. Cassaf — superlative of *cas* “hateful”; rholbren — *hol* (Eng. *roll*) + *bren* “wood”
10. Corn — “horn”; cod (Eng. *cod* “bag, pouch; scrotum, as in *codpiece*, *O.E.D.*); chyfod — 3rd, sing., pres., ind. of *cyfodi*, *codi* “to rise”; chwyf — 1st, sing., pres., subj. of *cael* “to get” (unattested), used in a future sense (?), with aspiration of both verbs after the negative particle, *na*.
11. Calennig — “New Year’s gift; later, any gift” (Calan, “New Year”), *G.D.G.*, p. 514; Cred — “faith, belief; the Faith, Christendom,” *G.P.C.*
12. Cyfol (cywol) — from *cyfolu* (*cywolu*) “to claim,” *G.B.G.G.*

13. Dwddw (dwddu) — colloquial form of *dywyddu* “to spring, fill with milk; to drop, give birth to; to labor, travail; to swell,” *G.P.C.*; pwl — “fit, attack, paroxysm”
14. Paid â — “cease” (Lat. *patior*, “I suffer, endure”); chwimp — “image, form; touch, whim”; chwith — “left, strange”
15. Ysgymun — “excommunicated, accursed”
16. Bun — “maid, maiden”
17. Lysywen — lenited form (vocative) of *llysywen* “eel”; doll — lenited form of feminine of *twell*, “hole,” or archaic form of *tyllog*, “holey,” in either case with lenition of adjective *den* from *ten*, “thin,” which may refer to *llysywen* or *doll*.
18. Irgoll — *ir* “green” + *coll* “hazel”
19. Morddwyd — “thigh”; mawrddyn (emended from mowrdyn) — *mawr* “great, large” + *dyn* “man”
20. Herw — “raid”; gan nos (emended from gannos) — “with night”; gŷn — lenited form of *cŷn* “wedge, chisel”
21. Trosol — “lever, crow-bar, bar; staff”; traserch — “great love, infatuation”
22. Clohigyn — *cloig*, “clasp, hasp, latch,” *G.P.C.*; clawr — “cover, surface”; moeldin — *moel* “bald, bare” + *tin* “bottom”
23. Eich (emended from ych) — “your”; iaden — *iad*, “skull, pate,” by analogy “head”
24. A — the relative pronoun. It is unclear whether the subject is *llygad* “eye” or *gwreignith* “pretty little wife” or “wife nest” (*gwraig* + *nyth*). Wyl — lenited form of *gwyl* (from *gweld*, “to see”) or *gwŷl* (from *gwyliaw*, “to watch”)
25. Call — “wise”; dwl — “stupid” (Eng. *dull*); ceilliai — pl. of *caill*, “testicle”; dy lwyth (dylwyth) — “thy tribe” or “household”

26. Croen dagell — “skin of dewlap,” with lenition of *tagell* in close compound; ffrwyn — “nostril, muzzle”; dwygail — (dual of *cail*); ffrwyth — “fruit, vigor”
27. Lledrad — variant of *lladrad*, “theft”; anlladrwydd — “want-onness”
28. Llun — “form, image, shape”; asgwrn — “bone”; gwddf — “neck”; gŵydd — “goose”

*Abbreviations used:*

G.B.G.G. — *Geirfa Barddoniaeth Gynnar Gymraeg*, J. Lloyd-Jones, 1931-63.

G.D.G. — *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, Thomas Parry, ed., Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1952.

G.P.C. — *Geriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1950-

O.E.D. — *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1971.

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*Notes*

1. Thomas Parry, ed., *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1952, p. clxviii.
2. *Cywydd* — one of the strict meters of Welsh poetry formed of seven-syllable rhymed couplets containing alliteration and internal rhyme (*cynghanedd*). Generally the rhyme involves one stressed monosyllable and an unstressed final syllable of a polysyllabic word.
3. Respectively “cross harmony,” “drag harmony” (from *llusgi*, “to drag”), and “sound harmony.” There is a subtype of *cynghanedd groes* called *C. draws* (from *draw*, “yonder, away”) in which some of the syllables in the middle of the line are excluded from alliterating.
4. Lines 1 and 25 contain *C. groes*; lines 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 26 contain *C. sain*; lines 9 and 23 contain *C. lusg*; and lines 21 and 27 contain *C. draws*.

5. According to Thomas Parry (*Peniarth* 49, Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1929, p. vii), the first and fourth parts appear to be in the same hand. Dr. Gwenogvryn Evans felt that these parts may have been copied by Dr. Davies himself (*loc. cit.*).
6. Parry, *Gwaith*, p. cxviii.
7. Parry, *Ibid.*, p. cxii.
8. Parry, *Ibid.*, p. clxxiii.
9. *Englynion Coch*, Y Lolfa, 1973.

While the poem has still not been published in Wales in a critical edition or translation into English to my knowledge, it was recently reprinted in a special limited edition in Aberystwyth, in wrappers intended to simulate a "French letter" (condom).

10. Rachel Bromwich, *Tradition and Innovation in the Poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym*, U. of Wales Press, 1972, p. 25; "Influences upon Dafydd ap Gwilym's Poetry" in *Poetry Wales*, Spring, 1973, pp. 44-55.
11. Bromwich, *Tradition*, p. 48. She has also suggested the possibility that the French poetic conventions may have entered the poetry of the *clêr* as early as the 12th century by means of oral or written sources (Bromwich, *Influences*, p. 55).
12. *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, ed. by Thomas Parry, pp. 25-27; English translation in *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*, ed. by Anthony Conran, pp. 104-5.
13. *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, pp. 37-8; *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*, pp. 108-10; 117.
14. English translations in *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*, pp. 142-44; Kenneth Jackson, ed., *A Celtic Miscellany*, "A Night at an Inn," pp. 227-228; and Joseph Clancy, ed., *Medieval Welsh Lyrics*, New York: 1965, pp. 24-6.
15. *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography Down to 1940*, London: 1959, p. 325.
16. Parry, *Gwaith*, p. cix.
17. Parry, *Ibid.*, p. 531, 573.
18. Concerning Dafydd's use of English borrowings, Rachel Bromwich states: "And when these borrowed words are used, they are employed far more often than not in a figurative sense, in that they are used right out of their normal prosaic context, to give the shock and stimulus of the unexpected." Citing another example of his use of *ditio* in *Cywydd yr Eos*, "Poem of the Nightingale," she says that it is "indicted, that is, legally charged and then banished from Coed Eutun" (*Tradition*, p. 42).