

6. Dafydd ap Gwilym

Dafydd ap Gwilym is one of the most famous and written about Welsh poets. Therefore, there will be no attempt here to recapitulate material already abundantly available. An authoritative and comprehensive online collection of all Dafydd's known works, including notes and commentary in both Welsh and English is available at www.dafyddapgwilym.net.

This small section will focus on poetry originating from his life on the borders of south Ceredigion. For a poet so well researched, there are only a few snatches of information about the life of Dafydd ap Gwilym beyond the riches of his poetry. The latter half of the 14th century seems to have been his most prolific (Bromwich, 1982, xiii).⁵⁹

Llywelyn ap Gwilym - Uncle and Patron

In the *moliant* and *marwnad* poems to his uncle Llywelyn ap Gwilym (DapG.net, 5,6), Dafydd shows he lived for a while not far from the banks of the Teifi. Llywelyn was a powerful, educated man, constable of Newcastle Emlyn, son-in-law to the great Rhys ap Gruffudd:

Llywelyn a'u myn ym ynni - a grym

Llawenfab Gwilym, erddrym wrddri,

Llai ymadrawdd cawdd i'n coddi - no chaeth

Llywodraeth a wnaeth a maeth i mi.

Llafuriawdd, berthawdd i borthi - digeirdd,

Llys ym mryn y beirdd, lle heirdd yw hi,

Llywelyn wills for me might and vigour,
the joyful son of Gwilym, a splendid [and]
powerful king,
less angry words to anger us than a serf,
He exercised dominion, and gave me sustenance.
He had built, he embellished to sustain the great,
a court on the poet's hill, a place for those who
are fair,
a place that's never closed, [a place] of constant
welcome.
A place that's used to wine and to serving

Lle gnawd cael gwasgawd a gwisgi - dillad,

Llety anghaed, wastad westi.

Lle cynefin gwin a gweini - heilgryn,

Lle chwyrn, llwybr tefyrn, lle beirw Teifi.

(DapG.net, 5.13-22)

drinking horns,

a lively place, a tavern-pathway, where the Teifi
bubbles.

Translation from DapG.net 5.13-22

In this praise poem Dafydd uses a more formal metre than the *cywydd* form for which he is known. The poem starts with *three englyn unudol union*, followed by eighteen couplets of *toddeidiau*. The emphasis is on a cymeriad with ‘*Ll*’ in the first word of all the lines, ten of these being a rhyme on *Lle* (place), and also, of course, the first letter of his uncle’s name. In the notes to the poem, Dafydd Johnston suggests (DapG.net 5.17-18) that the possible subject is the celebration of an additional building to Llywelyn ap Gwilym’s court. Perhaps this repetition of ‘place’ underlines this subject? Dafydd uses the opportunity to celebrate his uncle’s patronage of poets and especially to acknowledge the support he is receiving (5.13,16).

Rachel Bromwich comments on Dafydd’s time with his uncle:

Here then on the banks of the Teifi, and in fruitful and sympathetic communion with his uncle, it is indeed most likely, ...that Dafydd ap Gwilym first began to compose poetry which treated of new and lighter themes in a new and more personal vein than had hitherto been customary, and in the newly-developed metrical form of the cywydd. (R.Bromwich, 1997,99)

In the *marwnad* to his uncle Dafydd acknowledges Llywelyn’s learning, his skill with languages and poetry (6.9-12), his teaching and his every mastery (*pob meistrolwydd*) (6.23). The awdl shows Dafydd standing at the grave, using the image of a son unable to get his father to open the door to let him into his court: ‘Before now, Llywelyn,.. You never closed a house against me; you were the mighty lord of song, open for me mute man’ (6.5-

8, trans DapG.net). Dafydd Johnston (1983,2) recalls R.G. Gruffydd suggesting that this is reminiscent of the serenade genre where the excluded lover cries through a closed door to his sweetheart, asking her to let him in. It is observed that a similar graveside image is used in Llywelyn Goch's elegy for Lleucu Llwyd, where the poet calls out for 'the dark door of the earth to open' ('*Agor y ddaearddor ddu*') (GLLG,12.14).

Murder and Intrigue

The *marwnad* not only reflects Dafydd ap Gwilym's loss, affection and gratitude for all his uncle did to support him, it also indirectly tells a story of intrigue and murder:

Gwr nid gwas, a las o loes archoll - dur,

Pwnc truan oerwan am eurwas - yw hyn

Honni mawr alanas,

Dihareb yw hon, dywirir - ym mro

A laddo a leddir.

(DapG.net 6.69, 73-74, 77-78.)

It was a man, not a boy who was killed by the
agony of a steel wound,

This is a story of a cold blow about a golden man
proclaiming of a great homicide,

This is a proverb, it will be proved true in the
land

'He who kills will be killed.'

There is much speculation about the background to the events Dafydd describes in the poem. The notes (DapG.net 6) point out that Llywelyn was the son-in-law of one of the most powerful people in Wales at the time, so it would have been unwise for the Norman establishment to arrange for Llywelyn's death. By reference to an article by D.J Bowen (1995) it is suggested that the poem hints at retribution using the old Welsh laws, so perhaps the death was the result of some kind of local or family dispute. There is much left unanswered.

The *marwnad* is written in a formal *awdl* metre, with a series of 35 *englynion unodl union* with the exception of three *englynion proest* (6.49-52, 85-88, 129-132). Given the dates of

installation of a new constable to Newcastle Emlyn the *marwnad* was probably written around 1346 (H.W Edwards, DapG.net, The Literary Context, 3). Dafydd would probably have been in his twenties. For the occasion of a *marwnad* to a close relative Dafydd continued to use an *awdl* metre. It would be left to later contemporaries of Dafydd to begin the tradition of using the *cywydd* in formal praise poems and *marwnadau* (Bromwich, 1999,129).⁶⁰ It probably wasn't until the end of the fourteenth century that the *cywydd* became more widely used as a form suitable for the commemoration of a patron's death.⁶¹

The last verse sees Llywelyn buried in the churchyard of the abbey at St Dogmaels (Llandudoch) just opposite Cardigan on the other side of the Teifi. It is interesting that Dafydd says of Llywelyn, his 'wisdom has gone there' [to Llandudoch], because the abbey was known for its library. A 13th century copy of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* from the abbey has survived and is now in St John's college Cambridge.⁶² Perhaps some of Llywelyn's library went with him to the abbey?

The Pilgrimage to St David's

The next poem of Dafydd ap Gwilym's includes death, but is more typical of his work, a *cywydd* putting him and a woman at the centre of the plot (DapG.net 129). In this case Dafydd, with familiar entertaining melodrama, imagines a young woman has caused *his* death by breaking her promise to him (129.7-8). In remorse, and to make amends the girl takes a pilgrimage to the shrine of St David, starting off from the Isle of Anglesey. This journey from north to south along the western perimeter of Wales probably reflects the obstacles met by the poet on his own journeys, visiting fellow poets in the north and returning via the homes of *uchelwyr* to entertain and find women to woo along the way.⁶³ After traversing the estuaries of the north the girl crosses the main coastal rivers that flow out of Ceredigion: The Dovey (*Dyfi*), Rheidol, Ystwyth, Aeron and finally the Teifi. Dafydd's poetic pilgrim is a kind of avatar for his own travels in the county:

A dwfn yw tonnau Dyfi,

Deep too are the waves of Dyfi,
freezing water, against her.

Dŵr rhyn, yn ei herbyn hi.

Rheidol, gad er d'anrhydedd

Heol i fun hael o fedd.

Ystwyth, ym mhwyth, gad ym hon,

Dreistew ddwfr, dros dy ddwyfron.

Aeron, ferw hyson hoywserch,

Gad trwod fyfyrglod ferch.

Teifi deg, tyfiad eigiawn,

Gad i'r dyn gadeirio'r dawn.

Durfing drwy'r afon derfyn

Yr êl ac y dêl dyn.

DapG.net 129.29-40

Rheidol, for the sake of your good name,
give passage to a girl generous with mead.
Ystwyth, deep violent water,
in recompense let her over your breast for me.
Aeron, loud torrent of a lively lover,
let the celebrated girl through.
Fair Teifi, filler of the ocean,
let the girl's blessings flourish.
May the girl come and go
safely through the boundary river.

Translation DapG.net

This poem exhibits many of the characteristics of Dafydd, because it uses love as a device to describe nature. He does this in a way that is entertaining and appealing to the experience of his listeners. Speaking directly to the rivers in the second person asking each in turn to let the girl cross (129.31-40) is very much in the style Dafydd uses when he addresses nature asking for its help, sometimes as a messenger (*llatai*) or in this case help with obstacles to be overcome. In Welsh river (*afon*) is a feminine noun and so each river is spoken to as a woman: The Rheidol has to keep her good name, the Aeron a lively lover (*hoyserch*), fair Teifi... In the *cywydd* form the poem flows like the rivers with a rhythm that lets the *cyghanedd* emphasise the dangers of each crossing.⁶⁴

Dyddgu and Tywyn

Having arrived where the Teifi flows into the sea, Dafydd has come to the meeting point for poetry and commerce in southern Ceredigion at the time, *Tywyn*. The place on the estuary near Ferwig, that would become the home of the family supporting Dafydd Nanmor and Lewys Glyn Cothi. The same family with ancestors from Cuhelyn Fardd also gave birth to Gwilym Gam, father of Dafydd.⁶⁵

It is also interesting that this place of poetic influence is mentioned by Dafydd ap Gwilym in the context of one of his great loves, Dyddgu. This dark haired beauty, daughter of a nobleman *Ieuan ap Gruffudd ap Llywelyn* (DapG.net 86.1-3) is the inspiration of nine cywyddau by Dafydd. She ‘represents the poet’s ideal of aristocratic womanhood... Dafydd’s aspirations to achieve Dyddgu’s love clearly represent a celebration of the native Welsh nobility, in which his audience can also participate.’ Fulton (119)

Dy ferch, gwn na ordderchai,

Feinwen deg, o’th faenwyn dai.

Ni chysgais, ni weais wawd,

Hun na’I dryll, heiniau drallawd.

Duw lwyd, - pwy a’m dilidia?-

Dim yn fy nghalon nid â

Eithr ei chariad taladwy.

O rhoid y moll, ai rhaid mwy?

Ni’m câr hon. Neu’m curia haint.

Ni’m gad hyn o’m gad henaint.

DapG.net 86.13-22

Your daughter, slender beauty from your white
stone court,

I know she would not be courted.

I have not had a wink of sleep,

I have not woven any poetry, pangs of distress.

Holy God (who will assuage me?),

Nothing goes into my heart

But her precious love.

If I were to be given all, would I need more?

She does not love me. Sickness wastes me.

Even if she lets me live to old age she will not let
me sleep.

Translation DapG.net

Dafydd uses a roebuck as a love messenger (*llatai*) to bound across the sandy heathlands around Tywyn toward the noble Dyddgu. He is ever hopeful of securing a kiss through his messenger, yet there is also a sense of exaggerated helplessness, providing the familiar trope of the thwarted lover to entertain the listener. One suspects if Dyddgu had been a flesh and blood suitor she would have had to reluctantly accept becoming a device for entertainment in local courts:

Debre'r nos heblaw'r fosydd

Dan frig y goedwig a'I gwŷdd

Â chusan ym, ni'm sym seth,

Dyddgu liw eirblu eurpleth.

DapG.net 46.37-40

Come by night past the ditches
under the branches of the forest and its trees
with a kiss for me, the straight-backed girl won't
disappoint me,
[from] Dyddgu the colour of snowflakes with
bright plaits.

Translation DapG.net

References

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Footnotes

⁵⁹ See also the notes to the marwnad to Dafydd's uncle poem 6 in DapG.net (<http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net/AnaServer?dafydd+14846+printNotes.anv+poem=6>) where it suggests that Llywelyn must have lost his appointment as constable by 1347. It is agreed that the moliant and marwnad are early poems, thus the dating of Dafydd's output to the latter half of the 14th century.

⁶⁰ Llywelyn Goch's *marwnad* to Lleucu Llwyd for example.

⁶¹ The *marwnadau* of Lewys Glyn Cothi and Dafydd Nanmor in the previous chapters are evidence of this. It has been suggested by Rachel Bromwich (1997, ch 6) that the fake *marwnadau* written in *cywydd* form by Dafydd to other poets of the period, and by others to Dafydd, such as Gruffudd Gryg, are connected with the development of the *cywydd* for the *mawl* and the *marwnad*. See also (DapG.net, notes on poem 20, *Marwnad* to Madog Benfras). Dafydd Johnston (1993, xix) suggests that it was 'Iolo Goch who was responsible for the crucial step of adapting the *cywydd* as a medium for traditional praise-poetry.'

⁶² <<http://cadw.gov.wales/daysout/stdogmaelsabbeyandcoachhouse/?skip=1{=en>> accessed October 5th 2016.

⁶³ The *ymryson* (argument) poems with Gruffydd Grug, for example, put Dafydd in the north of Wales. His *cywydd* beseeching the river Dyfi (DapG.net 51) to let him cross on his way back to his love, Morfudd, from the North is another example of the obstacles a poet and other travellers would face on their journeys through Wales.

⁶⁴ There is a recording of the poem being read here : <<http://lisweb.swansea.ac.uk/projects/dag/audio/129.mp3>> accessed October 7th 2016.

⁶⁵ Thomas Parry (1979) describes Dafydd ap Gwilym's family tree in the introduction to his collection of Dafydd's work. Xiv. He also offers some thoughts about the origins of Dyddgu xxv.

⁶⁶ *Dyfal* - 'to make a simile or comparison, liken, compare; describe any object (horse, plough, ship, a maiden's tresses, &c.) by means of numerous comparisons (an ingenious literary device in which the medieval

‘cywyddwyr’ *revelled and excelled), delineate, depict.*’ - Geriadur Prifysgol Cymru. (<http://welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html?dyfalu>)