The Extraordinary Medieval Woman: Responding to the Critical Reception of Gwerful Mechain's Poetry

Adelaide Greig

Gwerful Mechain was a female Welsh poet during the fifteenth century. While little is known about her life, scholars generally agree she hailed from amongst the lower nobility of Montgomeryshire, a district of Wales, and was married to John ap Llywelyn Fychan, with whom she had a daughter. She is the author of the largest body of poetry by a medieval Welsh woman to remain extant for modern readers. While also the author of religious work, she is best known for her poetry which explored the feminine condition, including experiences of sex and marriage.[1] The reception of Gwerful's work within literary scholarship from the twentieth century onwards has ranged from the ambivalent, to the delighted, to the downright derogatory. The first half of this article will examine the reception of Gwerful's work both within her own time and contemporary scholarship, and argue ultimately that it is her status as a female poet most notable for her writing regarding women's experiences that has led to such divergent responses. I aim to establish Gwerful Mechain as an example of a historical woman who broke the mould expected by her society and continues to deviate from our modern assumptions of what a medieval woman might be. Having done so, in the second half of this article I discuss whether using terms such as 'extraordinary', 'bold' and 'modern' to describe such historical women, is helpful in the pursuit of rewriting history without a patriarchal lens. An androcentric record of history has promoted the idea that women who were outspoken, vital, self-assuredly sexual, and cognisant of the world were indeed rarities, extra-ordinary in the literal sense of being divergent from the standard, and not-of-their-time. I argue that to finally acknowledge the immeasurable number of women who are unrecognised by the historical record it is necessary to adjust the language used when discussing those whose lives have been, as least in part, remembered.

To begin a discussion of both medieval and contemporary attitudes towards Gwerful's work, I will begin with responses not of aversion or admiration, but rather those of apathy. Passive dismissal on behalf of the scholarly field has not been due to Gwerful's status as a poet or even a medieval poet, but

[1] Dafydd Johnston. *Llên yr Uchelwyr: Hanes Beirniadol Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg 1300 –1525.* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 412.

rather due to her being a female medieval poet. Poetry is of great import to the Welsh cultural identity and therefore to the scholarship which discusses it. It is easy therefore to discount Gwerful's choice of literary form as the source of indifference towards her work. A touch of 'Celtic magic', as Gywm Williams wrote, pervades the Welsh art form; an 'awareness at the same time of contrary seasons and passions, a mood in which the poet brings into one phase the force of love and war, or summer and winter, of holy sacrament and adulterous love', distinguishes it from the work of the English.[2] As a region, society and culture, Wales has faced centuries of invasion and disruption from its more powerful neighbours, and poetry has served as a uniting force in preserving the identity of Welshness, a voice singing boldly in the face of this oppression. Despite this deep significance of poetry to Welsh culture, female poets were not exempt from pervasive patriarchal attitudes which deemed their work to be of less importance than their male counterparts. As Nia Powell comments, 'This elusiveness in such a central element of Welsh culture indicates a more general and long-standing marginalisation of women in matter of importance in Welsh society'.[3] It is possible that the lack of extant texts from female poets is because their work stayed more firmly within the oral tradition; as the parchment and ink required to record writing were precious resources they were more likely to be channelled into preserving the work of men.[4] Even when their work was textually recorded, an issue faced by literary historians is the large lapse of time between the supposed composition of the work and its publishing in manuscript form. This, along with the anonymity with which the work of female writers was often published, makes it difficult to establish the identity or lives of the women behind the small amount poems that are extant.[5] *Y Mynegai i Farddoniaeth Gymraeg y Llawysgrifau (*The Index to Welsh Poetry in Manuscript), contains records of over four thousand Welsh poetry manuscripts from before the nineteenth century and only sixty-six of these can be reliably attributed to women writers.[6]

It is also unlikely that lack of interest for Gwerful's work is due to her being a writer from the medieval period. The Welsh poetic tradition continued

[2] Gwyn Williams. *Welsh Poems: Sixth Century to 1600*. (London: University of California Press, 1974), 9.
[3] Nia Powell. 'Women and Strict-Metre Poetry in Wales', in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales*, eds. Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (University of Wales Press: 2000), 129.
[4] Lloyd-Morgan, Ceridwen, 'Women and their poetry in medieval Wales', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150 –1500,* ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), 188.
[5] Ibid, 185.
[6] Ibid, 184.

throughout the late-fifteenth century in which Gwerful was writing, albeit with a focus on hopeful patriotic prophecies for the new Tudor dynasty by bards such as Dafydd Nanmor.[7] The fifteenth century in Wales also saw a shift towards secular book production, often completed by the poets themselves, in efforts to have their work recorded and codified, in copies kept in the libraries of their patrons.[8] In scholarship surrounding English literature, writing from the medieval period has traditionally suffered dismissal due to its supposed frivolity and romanticism[9]. In contrast, since the beginning of the twentieth century and the establishment of modern literary scholarship, medieval poetry has occupied a principal position in the study of the Welsh art form. The late Middle Ages are considered a "golden age" for Welsh bardic tradition, during which the art form reached the peak of its development.[10] In 1944, when Thomas Parry published the first comprehensive history of Welsh poetry from the sixth to twentieth centuries he provided a 'literary canon that not only defined the aspirations and identity of a cultural group but a nation into being.'[11] Parry's book devoted an entire third of its chapters to work from the early to late medieval period, and in doing so, as Helen Fulton notes, 'records, but also constructs, a canon of medieval Welsh literature… works and authors considered to be hallmarks of literary greatness and absolute evidence of the genius of Welsh-language writing from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries'.[12] Gwerful's status as a poet from within the medieval period has not been the source of an academic apathy towards her, but rather a self-fulfilling cycle in which less work by female writers is textually recorded. Therefore the overall body of work affirmatively attributed to women is insignificant enough to be ignorable, and thus is follows that women do not receive recognition as significant writers within a canon, and are less likely to be acknowledged or studied.

While the past thirty years has seen an influx of scholarship regarding Gwerful, notably the work of Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan and Dafydd Johnston who are

[7] Philip Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism, and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17-18.
[8] Helen Fulton, 'Literary Networks and Patrons in Late Medieval Wales' in *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, eds. Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 142.
[9] Larry Scanlon, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100 – 1500*, eds. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.
[10] Dafydd Johnston, *Llên yr Uchelwyr: Hanes Beirniadol Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg 1300-1525* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), xi.
[11] Helen Fulton, 'Matthew Arnold and the Canon of Medieval Welsh Literature', *The Review of English Studies* 63, no. 259 (2012): 204.
[12] Ibid, 205

referenced throughout this article, she has received considerably less attention within the scholarly field than her male counterparts. A complete scholarly edition of Gwerful's work did not appear until 2001, *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill* by Nerys Ann Howell, and an English translation was not published until 2018, *The Works of Gwerful Mechain,* translated and edited by Katie Gramich. In Joseph P. Clancy's book, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, published 2003, a glossary which provides ample information on almost every other (male) writer chosen for the volume, the summary of Gwerful is limited to, simply, 'the only woman poet of note in this period'.[13] Not only is this statement misleading, and should read perhaps, 'the only female poet of this period of whom a considerable amount of work remains extant', but the lack of any other given information about Gwerful's life and legacy is, at best, careless and, at worst, impertinent. An obvious comparison can be made to another medieval Welsh poet, Dafydd ap Gwilym, who, writing only half a century or so prior to Gwerful, was also a lower member of the aristocracy and is most well-known for his romantic and introspective reflections on his loves and lusts. These works include "Merched Llanbadarn", regarding going to church on Sunday to ogle women and "Cywydd y Gal", a poem in praise of the penis. The erotic nature of his poetry has not prevented Dafydd ap Gwilym from being considered as one of Wales' greatest ever writers. While his more erotic works were omitted from earlier collections, for example that of Thomas Parry, an English translation of his work, *Dafydd ap Gwilym: the poems,* was published by Richard Loomis in 1982, almost forty years before such a feat was achieved for the poet who could be considered his direct female counterpart.[14]

Dafydd ap Gwilym's status as a canonical writer of Welsh poetry was not questioned by twentieth century scholarship, despite the sexual and personal nature of his work; this is particularly intriguing when compared to the reception of Gwerful's poetry. Scholarly work which, rather than ignoring the existence of Gwerful, treats her disparagingly, focuses specifically on the sexual content within some of her poems. One of the earliest academic mentions of her work comes from a 1933 University of Wales masters' thesis by Leslie Harries, but any mention of Gwerful was omitted when the thesis was published in book form[15]. Furthermore, while her work is discussed in the original thesis, Harris denounces her as a writer who 'should not be

[13] Joseph P. Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 302.
[14] Dafydd Johnston, 'Rhagair' in *Cerddi Dafydd ap Gwilym* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), xiv.
[15] Katie Gramich, 'Introduction', in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. Katie Gramich (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 10.

judged in the light of the moral principles of this century'. She is 'in the light of the twentieth century …nothing more than a whore' and 'the tendencies and principles of her own age are those which determine the standard of her work'.[16] The 'Blue Books Report' of 1848, a study conducted by Westminster into the state of education in Wales which concluded that the Welsh were immoral and lowly, resulted in attempts by the general Welsh population to present themselves as chaste and respectable.[17] Harris's marked and ostentatious distaste for the erotic nature of Gwerful's poetry is very possibly a misogynistic view of sexually empowered women combined with his desire to appear disapproving of her lustful heathenry. Gwyn Williams, in writing *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry* (1953), comments 'we occasionally find women who master the rules of versification' before mentioning Gwerful, but rather blushingly excuses himself from any in-depth discussion of her work 'and whether she and Dafydd ap Gwilym (some scholars have argued the two were romantically involved) exchanged the *englynion* to each other's private parts, which are still extant' as these are 'questions which can hardly be discussed and settled whilst the material is considered unprintable. [my parentheses]'[18]. The sexual nature of Dafydd ap Gwilym's poetry and his reputation as a man who 'made love in almost every part of Wales'[19] does not prevent him from being discussed and analysed as a great and deeply respected writer throughout the rest of William's book.

The aspects of Gwerful's work, namely her womanhood and sexuality, that left her either unconsidered or vilified by scholarship written prior to the rise of feminism within academia in the 1980s, have made her a figure of interest since then. In the introduction to her English translation edition of Gwerful's work, Katie Gramich writes, 'It is refreshing to hear such a bold and uncensored voice speaking to us from over five hundred years ago,'[20] Similar sentiments can be seen in Angharad Price's review of the Gramich's book, stating 'Gwerful is the boldest, most accomplished and most combative female poet of medieval Wales… This important edition… bring[s] her extraordinary voice to the attention of a wider audience'[21]. In *The History of Women's Writing*,

[16] Leslie Harries, *Barddoniaeth Huw Cae Llwyd, Ieuan ap Huw Cae Llywyd, Ieuab Dyfi, a Gwerful Mechain*, trans. Katie Gramich, (MA Thesis, University College of Wales, Swansea, 1933), 26.
[17] Katie Gramich, 'Introduction', in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. Katie Gramich (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 9.
[18] Gwyn Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 12, 131.
[19] Ibid, 130.
[20] Gramich, 'Introduction', 17.
[21] Angharad Price, "Review of *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*," review of *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, by Katie Gramich, back cover, 2018.

700-1500, a discussion of Gwerful concludes with exactly the same phrasing of Gramich, stating 'Roughly three hundred years before Ann Griffiths composed her hymns orally, female poets [were writing poetry]… often with a high level of wit and intelligence providing viewpoints which strike us as *surprisingly modern* [my emphasis]'.[22] Dafydd Johnston describes Gwerful's secular poems as 'gerddi beiddgar am rywioldeb benywaidd [bold poems about female sexuality].[23] In *Medieval Bodies*, Jack Hartnell writes that Gwerful, expresses a femininity divergent from her peers, she 'clearly felt empowered enough to writing witheringly of her counterpart male authors'.[24] It is not difficult to understand why terms such as 'extraordinary', 'refreshing', 'bold' and 'modern' spring to mind when reading Gwerful's poetry. Her poetry shows her to be, in many ways, the antithesis of what a medieval woman is generally supposed to be.

Gwerful appears 'extraordinary' and 'modern' to one reading her now as an outspoken and active woman, as she subverts the common conception of medieval women as passive. In her deconstruction of female heroes and heroines within chivalric romances, Maureen Fries observes:

> 'Romance, as a depiction of the warrior class's idealisation of itself, actually centres upon male heroes and not female love-objects. As was consistent with medieval religious, political and moral theories, men are the agents of the action and women- when they are the heroines – the instruments… Romance females are patriarchally predicated by passive verbs; to romance males belong active ones.'[25]

Gwerful's writing, however, demonstrates that she was far from passive and silent when she believed there was something that needed to be said, even in the context of directly challenging a man from within her society. Her dialogue with her male poet contemporary Ieuan Dyfi is an excellent example of this. Dyfi, having been 'scorned' by a woman named as Anni Goch and allegedly assaulting her in response, wrote a misogynistic missive regarding the fickleness of all women. Gwerful responds to Dyfi's writing with a mastery of the *cywydd* poetry form and righteous pride in her gender. The piece titled 'I

[22] Jane Cartwright, 'Women Writers in Wales', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, eds Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 69.
[23] Johnston, '*Llên yr Uchelwyr'*, 413.
[24] Jack Hartnell, *Medieval Bodies*. (London: Wellcome Collection, 2018), 206.
[25] Maureen Fries, 'Female Heroines, Heroines, and Counter-Heroines: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition', in *Arthurian Women*, ed Thelma S. Foster (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63.

ateb Ieuan Dyfi am gywydd Anni Goch' (A response to Ieuan Dyfi's poem on Red Annie) is wonderful to read:

> Susanna yn sôn synnwr,
> Syn a gwael oedd sôn y gwyr,
> …Mwy no rhai o'r rhianedd,
> Gwell no gwyr eu gally a'u gwedd.
> Brenhines, daeres dwyrain,
> Sy' abl fodd, Sibli fain,
> Yn gynta' 'rioed a ddoede
> Y down oll gerbron Duw Ne':
> Hithau a farn ar yr anwir
> Am eu Gwaith, arddoedyd gwir.
> Dywed Ifan, 'rwy'n d'ofyn,
> Yn gywir hardd, ai gwir hyn?
>
> …Susanna was good and full of good sense;
> The men's rumours of her were to give offence.
> Girls are the mildest of creatures,
> They're better than men, in skill and features.
> Queen and heiress of the Orient
> Was the Sibyl, most excellent,
> She was the very first to say
> That 'fore God there'd be a Judgment Day;
> For her wisdom all revered her
> She was named truth-teller of the future.
> Tell me, Ifan, I'm asking you,
> Tell me now, isn't all of this true?
> (70-71)

In this piece, Gwerful shows herself to be educated in classical, biblical, and Welsh history, as well as a skilful poet. While thirty-four manuscript copies of Dyfi's original piece are extant, and only five for Gwerful's response, the existence of any textual recording of her work shows that she was an active participant in the poetic community of her time: she was able to present a response to him that was popular enough to be recorded, even if for fewer times.[26] Gwerful's more explicit work, the most infamous being "Cywydd y cedor" (Ode to the Vagina), makes for an equally delightful read:

[26] Cerdiwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'The 'Querelle des Femmes': A Continuing Tradition in Welsh Women's Literature', in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., (Turnhout: 2000), 107.

Am hyn o chwaen, gaen geryff,
Y prydyddion sythion sydd,
Gadewch yn hael, gafael ged,
Gerddau cedor I gerdded.
Sawden awdl, siden ydiw,
Seem fach len ar gont wen wiw,
Lleiniau mewn man ymannerch,
Y llwyn sur, llawn yw o serch,
Fforest falch iawn, ddawn ddifreg,
Ffris ffraill, ffwrwr dwyfaill deg,
Pant yw hwy no llwy yn llaw,
Clawdd iddal cal ddwy ddwylaw.
Trwsglwyn merch, drud annerch dro,
Berth addwyn, Duw'n borth iddo.

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 niche bestowed,
Neat flaps in a place of meeting,
The sour grove circle of greeting,
Superb forest, faultless gift to squeeze,
For a fine pair of balls, tender frieze,
Dingle deeper than hand or ladle,
Hedge to hold a penis as large as you're able,
A girl's thick glade, it is full of love,
Lovely bush, you are blessed by God above.[27]

The intention of this article is not to say that the appeal of Gwerful's work for modern readers should not lie in the joy of reading something composed over five hundred years ago which comprises of a women writer presenting witty ripostes to a male writer's sexism, or that Gwerful's work is not or should not be seen as relatable for the modern reader. Rather, I argue that labelling Gwerful as 'extraordinary' or 'modern' due to this reaction limits the abilities of a historian to create a more nuanced discussion regarding of the lives of women

[27] Gwerful Mechain, *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, trans. and ed. Katie Gramich (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 44.

such as Gwerful who have remained at least partially remembered within the historical record. The use of the term 'extraordinary' further ingrains the notion created by a patriarchal recording of history that historically intelligent, opinionated, and talented women were few and far between, an anomaly of their time. As the 'modern' is established in contrast to the 'medieval', using such language also carries the implication that the silencing and disregard for women's voices are forces which only occur in the past, from which a 'modern' woman is emancipated.

More than fifty years ago in 1976, Susan Mosher Stuard reflected on the impact of creating 'extraordinary' medieval women within the academic consciousness:

> an unbridgeable gulf lay between work by and about women and the serious concerns of the academic community. Few women bridged that gulf. They learned their lesson far too well and simply refused to reach for that deeper level of comprehension which integrates women's position into the texture of social history… In fact, the most remarkable women from the medieval period are the victims of this tendency... Usually, the notable woman is viewed as an anomaly, extraordinary in vigour and ambition, an exception to her age. More pertinent issues such as why these remarkable figures were produced and tolerated in their age and the nature of the social context which fostered their talents, were seldom raised.[28]

Stuard's writing preceded a growing interest in the study of medieval women throughout the late twentieth century which continued into the 2000s, nonetheless her comments remain relevant. If women who exist within the historical record are remarked upon only for being an 'exception to their age', the possibilities for finding new insights about their lives, and the lives of other women who are unrecorded within extant sources, are limited. This is particularly pertinent for medieval historians for whom producing an anti-androcentric historical narrative can prove a certain challenge. The main historical accounts of the period were produced by monks with a keen focus on political, religious, and military history—realms which feature almost exclusively wealthy men. By overlooking women within their records, monks and clerics have prevented modern historians from accessing their lives and stories. Feminist scholarship has attempted to fill these gaps with a greater focus on social and familial history, fields in which woman were granted a

[28] Susan Mosher Stuard, 'Introduction', in *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 2.

larger role, but this has not necessarily deterred the idea of the 'extraordinary' medieval woman.[29]

Instead, discussions of how few women exist within the historical consciousness have inevitably led to varying opinions as to why this is the case. Specifically, in relation to female authors, scholars such as Alexandra Barratt have argued that as the written word had authority, as a tool of God, and women were told they were unsuited to holding authority, medieval women were psychologically and socially conditioned to avoid writing as an endeavour. Others such as Lauren Finke have argued, often framed within the famous quotation by Virginia Woolf, 'Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman', that women did write, and they did play a substantial role in society, but the issue is that their achievements were not equally appreciated and therefore not equally documented.[30] I contend that is reasonable to take a middle ground within these two approaches. It is correct to say that women are the traditionally oppressed gender within Western society, and that during the medieval period, women of varying classes were denied the opportunities and agency of some of their male counterparts. It is reasonable to claim that this oppression was most likely internalised, as it still often is, and medieval women limited themselves as they believed it was their role to do so. Due to these same social prejudices, it is also justifiable to state that even when women succeeded beyond the constrictions placed upon them, or within the womanly endeavours to which they were set, a patriarchal chronicling of history would have rejected their efforts as inconsequential. Medieval women were for the most part both oppressed and otherwise ignored. Describing the medieval women whose lives and achievements have survived in the record as 'extraordinary' and 'modern' exacerbates the well-established assumption that is a rarity for a medieval woman to have lived a dynamic and complex existence.

Women, even in the medieval period, played an integral role in the fabric of society. There would have been countless remarkable medieval women who lived productive and fascinating lives. As Rubin commented in 1998, 'These women of secular life, embedded in families, facing the dangers of child-

[29] Miri Rubin, 'A Decade of Studying Medieval Women, 1987-1997', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 46 (1998), 213.
[30] Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 209

bearing, the tensions of matrimony, the contradictory demands of community and church, were always at work'.[31] The description of extant medieval women as 'extraordinary' serves a doubly negative purpose. Such rhetoric reduces the women who are labelled thus as notable only as anomalies, and in Gwerful's case her life inseparable from her work. It also disregards that extraordinary women were not in fact few and far between, they were simply ignored by an androcentric historical record which considered their lives unimportant.[32]

Labelling Gwerful as 'modern' falls into a wider argument regarding the construction of modernity as the antithesis to the medieval. There exists an anxiety within modernity to establish itself in opposition to the era most commonly associated with archaism, muck, and prejudice. As Trigg and Prendergast comment, '[a]s modern subjects it is absolutely crucial to distinguish ourselves from the medieval and yet there often arises an uncanny and uncomfortable recognition that we are not so different after all'.[33] I argue that the desire to describe Gwerful as 'modern' springs from this uncomfortable recognition. Gwerful writes an admonishment to her husband for beating her:

> Dager drwy goler dy gallon--- ar osgo
> I asgwrn dy ddwyfron;
> Dy lin a dyr, dy law'n don,
> A'th gleddau i'th goluddion
>
> A dagger through the collar of your heart--- on a slant
> To the bone of your chest
> Your knee breaks, your hands peels
> And your weapons to your entrails[34]

Gwerful is rightfully infuriated in this passage, nor does she censor herself, or remain silent for fear of retribution. Her voice is active and free of patriarchal constraints. In claiming her for the 'modern', it reinforces our belief that now is better than then, that a woman capable of expressing her anger could only

[31] Rubin, 'A Decade', 214.
[32] Paula M. Rieder 'The Uses and Misuses of Misogyny: A Critical Historiography of the Language of Medieval Women's Oppression', *Historical Reflections* 38, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 4.
[33] Thomas A. Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg, *Affective Medievalism* (Manchester University Press: 2019), 11.
[34] Gwerful Mechain, *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, trans. and ed. Katie Gramich (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 88-89.

do so if representative of some premature harkening of a better, later time in which women are allowed to speak of their reality. It is more uncomfortable to recognise Gwerful as a medieval woman who suffered and railed against domestic violence, a situation in which many modern women still find themselves. It is a fact that Gwerful lived as a medieval woman, not a modern one, even if it is disconcerting that in some ways the plights of the latter have not changed since those of the former.

For historians' attempts to write accounts of medieval women's lives it is particularly pertinent to be as precise as possible to counteract the lack of sources within the historical record. This includes being careful with language and, as I have argued, rethinking the use of terms such as 'extraordinary' and 'modern'. For a concluding example of writing I turn not to Gwerful but one of the pieces signed 'anon', as Woolf once said. Although it is impossible to confirm the writer of this medieval Welsh lyric, the content heavily implies it was composed by a woman:

Drwg am garu, drwg am beidio
Drwg am droi fy nghariad heibio,
Dwrg am godi'r nos i'r ffenest';
Da yw bod yn eneth onest.

Drwg am garu cudyn crych,
Drwg am wisgo amdanai'n wych,
Drwg am fynd i'r llan y Sulie,
Drwg a gawn pe 'rhoswn gartre.

Blamed for courting, blamed for not,
Blamed for throwing over my lover,
Blamed for getting up at night to the window,
The right thing to be is a virtuous girl.

Blamed for falling in love with curly hair
Blamed for dressing smartly,
Blamed for going to church on Sundays,
Blamed I'd be if I stayed at home.[35]

[35] Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Women and their poetry', 184.

These words, as much as they could have been written yesterday, do not necessarily make their writer anything other than an everyday medieval woman. There is no era in which women were incapable of articulating critiques of their society, and of living full lives in which they loved and lusted and considered their place in the world. In his chapter, 'Irregular Histories: Forgetting Ourselves' Smith reflects on the duty of the historian attempting to find and bring previously unheard voices to the forefront of the historical record:

> New approaches to the Middle Ages would have to assume that new kinds of history can be written by looking at the edges of memory, by examining what traces are left of events that the Middle Ages did not choose to regard as memorable. We would have to grapple with the problem of discussing texts and events that are not, in the medieval terms, memorable, that are not fit subjects for the practices of deliberate memory, shadowy events at the margins of texts that are not part of the enduring memory of medieval culture. In one way or another, they have been deliberately forgotten. Recalling these is part of the obligation we have as readers of the distant past.[36]

In recalling these deliberately forgotten memories, it is also necessary that we give them the credit due. Women such as Gwerful, along with all the women writers whose names we will never know, if considered as 'extraordinary' and 'modern', lose what is their true significance: they lived as medieval women within a medieval society and, despite their dismissal by both the medieval historical record and early medievalist studies, spoke with voices true and strong enough to remain, if only fragmentarily, extant for readers centuries later. To deem them anything but does a disservice to their memory and to the memory of women from all ages who, despite being left unrecorded by pen, paint, or artefact were, indeed, extraordinary.

[36] D Vance Smith, 'Irregular Histories: Forgetting Ourselves', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism and Debates*, eds Holly Crocker and D Vance Smith (New York: Routledge, 2014), 218.