

“The Right Thing to be is a Virtuous Girl”: Women in Medieval Wales

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‘Dear son of God’ she said.

‘Alas that I was born!

Two good islands have been destroyed because of me’ (Ford 70)

With these words, Branwen, daughter of Lyr, the character from whom the second branch of the *Mabinogi* takes its title, dies broken-hearted over the devastation that has occurred around her. The *Mabinogi* is a collection of traditional Welsh tales compiled around the fourteenth century. In Branwen’s branch, or section, Bendigeidfran, the king of Wales and the brother to the titular character, had agreed to the king of Ireland’s request to marry Branwen. This union would create a bond between the two kingdoms, and ideally ensure a sense of loyalty and amity. The union, however, is ultimately futile. Due to mistrust, Branwen’s husband consents to his people’s desire to abuse and alienate the Welshwoman from direct contact with her husband, resulting in a war between her kin and the Irish people. The strong prospects that had

prompted the marriage fail to provide any fruits beside the deaths of both of Branwen's brothers, her husband and their son.

The *Mabinogi* presents an example of Welsh courtly literature. Literary works such as this recount social norms and expectations. In these works, authors told of fantastic events in a setting that an elite audience would recognise and identify with. The basic precepts of the worlds made sense to those listening to or reading the works. Therefore, they record how they understood the world to work. In it, we see the roles and duties deemed appropriate to men and women as well as the punishments dealt out to those who transgress them. Branwen's position in this tale allows the reader to examine the social role of women in marriage and the behaviours expected from them. It also opens a window on the position of a married woman between her natal kin and the kin group she married into, the responsibilities that her natal kin held in relation to the women and how the behaviour and welfare of a wife could affect these two groups.

To address the biases present in individual genres, and to present a more nuanced view of the society these sources emerged from, I will bring together sources from two additional genres. The second genre that will be examined is comprised of law codes and legal precepts. What differentiates this genre from the literary sources popular at court is that they offer the proscriptive view of the material and social realities of life. These tracts record a worldview popular among the elite members of society including the class of specialised legal professionals. The tracts and triads, which are three sentences relating to a particular triad used as a mnemonic device by the Welsh lawyers using these texts, map how they thought society ought to work and the methods they deemed appropriate to attempt to pursue these ends. Texts such as the 'Laws of Women' from the traditional legal codes the *Laws of Hywel Dda* inform readers how legal professionals, their patron and lords thought marriages ought to work and how women were supposed to act both in preparation for marriage and in their roles as wives. The ideals of this portrayal of the network of relation placed women in an ultimately untenable positions between the two kin groups they were tied to through blood and marriage.

This paper will end by looking at folk poems and other literary works to examine how female poets seemed to view marriage and their roles as wives, and to glean some hints as to how they may have managed to reconcile ideal and reality. It is my hope that this approach may help to spur further research along these lines. In particular, further insights into gender studies as well as the lives and networks available to non-elite members of society may benefit greatly from studies bringing together multiple literary genres as well as additional source types. By delving even deeper than the scope present in this work and taking an interdisciplinary approach the line between the material world and the intellectual world present in medieval Wales and other societies may be brought more into focus.

Interest in the Welsh 'Law of Women' increased dramatically around 1980 with the publication of *The Welsh Law of Women*, a collection of essays edited by T.M. Charles-Edwards and Dafydd Jenkins. This book brought together a number of the leading Welsh scholars of the time to look at the social and cultural aspects of this section of the Welsh law codes. Since then, many scholars continue to work with this source, using this legal lens as a window on the normative role perceived for women as an elite audience conceived of it. In particular, Sara Elin Roberts used the legal triads included in some redactions of the law codes to argue for independent Welsh legal development concerning women and their rights in society (Roberts 2008).¹

This paper adds an additional dimension to previous studies on medieval Welsh women by incorporating literary and poetic sources to the discussion allowing for a more nuanced view wherein the inherent biases of the different source types may be balanced by the viewpoints and purposes of others. Through this process the line between a social ideal as perceived by an elite audience and the everyday realities of life for women in medieval Wales may be examined. This last portion is, understandably, the most difficult point and will form the capstone of the paper. It will serve as both an endpoint and the invitation for future work along these lines.

¹ These triads were three sentences on a legal code thought to be used for educational and mnemonic purposes.

The law codes of Wales are called *The Law of Hywel Dda*. The name is taken from a tenth century ruler whose might allowed him to rule as the overlord of the majority of Wales. Traditionally, legal professionals tied the legitimacy of the laws to this king whom they believed codified and promulgated the various tracts of law throughout Wales (Thornton). Many of the extant manuscripts include a prologue describing how Hywel Dda called a council to review and revise the laws of Wales. Scholars, however, have cautioned against reading the prologue at face value. (Jenkins, 'Introduction' viii) The Welsh legal tradition, related as it was to Celtic legal traditions, may share in the propensity for including pseudo-historical information in the prologues of law texts in order to bolster the authority of these documents (ibid).² By tying the authority of the law codes to a semi-mythic and revered figure such as Hywel Dda, Welsh legal professionals worked to make the laws unassailable both to the encroaching English dominion and, to a certain extent, the Church.

There are extant manuscripts of the law codes in both Welsh and Latin. The majority are the 35 vernacular manuscripts that survive with five additional Latin manuscripts. The Welsh law books are organized by particular redactions of which three are extant alongside the Latin manuscripts that draw from them. These are the *Cyfnerth*, the *Iowerth*, and the *Blegywyrdd*. Information in the prologue suggests that the *Cyfnerth* represents the oldest and simplest tradition, followed by the *Iowerth*, with *Blegywyrdd* being the most recent redaction (Pryce, 'Lawbooks and Literacy in Medieval Wales' 37). More than the age of their compilation the aspects that distinguish the redactions are the general order and phrasing of the laws within the various tractates, the area in Wales from which they seem to originate, and the peculiarities in their incipits (Edwards 148). Scholarly consensus considers the point of origin for the *Cyfnerth* and *Blegywyrdd* redactions to be in Southern Wales while the *Iowerth* redaction represents the tradition common in Gwynedd in Northern Wales (Roberts 59-60).

Despite the common name of the law books Hywel was not portrayed as the sole creator of the laws. Extant manuscripts record that the law

² Jenkins relates that one Irish text stated that St. Patrick himself had approved of the laws included in the code.

was later modified by princes such as Bleddyn ap Cynfyn of Powys, who died around 1075, and Rhys ap Gruffdd of Deuheubarth, who died in 1197 (Davies, 'The Twilight of the Welsh Law, 1284-1536' 144). The law codes freely note judges and princes who understood the laws in a particular way. These individuals, however, did not hold the same position in the minds of authors as that held by Hywel Dda. Unlike the contemporary figures who practiced the law and made lasting changes of practice, Hywel alone served as the figurehead of the codes. This earlier ruler, whose distance in time allowed him to serve precisely the functions that the Welsh needed at any particular time, acted as a unifying figure for the Welsh. He was a symbol of power and cultural solidarity that became more important as England increasingly gained control of Welsh lands.

Extant manuscripts have been found to date from the mid-thirteenth century up until the fifteenth century (Edwards 142).³ In this period of time the Welsh laws were still the law of the land. This was applicable to a greater or lesser extent both in Wales itself, continuing after Edward I's conquest and consolidation of Welsh rule in the late thirteenth century, and in some of the Marches along the borders (Edwards 142). It is actually at this juncture when the majority of the extant manuscripts were produced. In this way the production of the law books, if not merely the promulgation of an ongoing code of law, may have been a subtle rebellion against English rule. The fact that these texts became so important to legal practitioners at a time when English cultural authority began to be asserted indicates that some Welsh royal houses may have been willing to disregard Welsh legal practice if and when it suited them (Stacey, 'Learning to Plead in Medieval Welsh Law' 123). The attachment of the Welsh tradition to one of the early Welsh kings embodied in the written word gave them the appearance of stability and the protection of royal and legal precedent. In this way they became a concrete symbol of the independence and strength of cultural tradition of Wales and the Welsh despite English rule.

³ There are many later manuscripts as well, but these were primarily copies of older manuscripts made by antiquarians. Thus the intention of the copy is different from the codes written by earlier authors.

This symbol of Welsh identity is reflected in the languages used in the manuscripts. Of the surviving manuscripts all but five are written in Welsh rather than Latin. The law codes account for more than a third of extant Middle Welsh manuscripts written between 1250 and 1400 CE (Pryce, 'Lawbooks and Literacy in Medieval Wales' 33). The earliest of the Latin texts were written at some point in the late thirteenth century, therefore postdating the earliest extant Welsh manuscript by approximately half a century (Harding 140). In the majority of the extant texts the law codes tend to be the only document recorded in the manuscript. To put it more clearly in this period the law texts written in Welsh were preserved alone rather than in a compilation of documents. This suggests that the laws were held in fairly high regard by the authors. The laws possessed a utility in and of themselves, rather than serving merely as textual expressions of authority. Lawyers needed to be able to have the texts at hand in order to consult them.

Legal professionals were common in Wales. In both Wales and Ireland, members of this social group kept and maintained the traditional practices while at the same time subtly adapting them to contemporary concerns (Jenkins, 'Introduction' xv). The Law was actively adapted and edited by anonymous scribes and lawyers which preserved older laws, often more similar to Irish laws, alongside newer laws that seem to suggest a closer kinship with thirteenth century Anglo-Norman laws (Davies, 'Twilight of Welsh Laws' 145). Thus the Welsh laws seem to possess certain dynamism. The legal profession appears to have had the ability to tweak and adjust the laws to work without obvious shows of formality such as the proclamations of the Anglo-Saxon kings that were made when laws were added or adjusted.⁴ This seems to reflect that Welsh law rather than being set down by a legislative figure was formed around the needs of the people of the society (Harding 137). Of course, this would work more toward the advantage of the landed classes such as those families that could afford to have a member devoted to practicing law. The law books themselves seem to be in many cases personal collections of the laws collected by lawyers for their own use.

4 The Anglo-Saxon comparison can be seen in *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*. ed. and trans. F.L. Attenborough. cf. The laws of the later kings Alfred and Aethelstan.

This is suggested by the fact that every individual manuscript is slightly different than the others. Besides content, the sizes of the manuscripts vary considerably. While some seem to have been transcribed by expert scribes and bound in large presentation volumes, many are small texts written in a non-professional hand. These smaller versions could fit within an individual's sleeve or another pocket and therefore be immediately accessible should the need arise to consult the Law (Jenkins, 'Introduction' xxi). The manuscripts also show a great deal of wear suggesting continuing use of the volumes over long periods. The intensive use of the codices, along with the fact that the content of the law evolved throughout the period, indicates it was not merely held in high regard for what it meant symbolically to a sense of Welsh identity. Rather than this its importance derived as much from its cultural significance as from its practical use. Law texts were needed for utility as much as ideology. They straddle the ideology of society and the practice of law at the time they were written. Through these lenses, one can view the customs and norms of the society as the authors and their patrons conceived them. Thus the law codes can act as a laboratory for attitudes and opinions concerning the proper order of society. Furthermore, a major point in setting out this ideal order was to establish the position of women therein.

'Concerning the Laws of Girls and Women'

In the majority of the extant manuscripts, the 'Law of Women' opens the second main group of law tractates, the 'Laws of Country'. Tractates included in this section of the code set out the laws for the wider Welsh community. They relate to the processes, as well as anticipated possible malfunctions, that occur in the social community. The codes relate to issues that could arise in society and the ways that wrongs might be rectified. Overall, the purpose of these tractates seems to be the protection of the country. They were meant to prevent or contain any situations that could threaten the bonds that held the community together.

The positioning of the 'Law of Women' at the head of this section of the codes suggests the importance of women, marriage and the bonds forged through this institution to the welfare of the kingdom. The

Cyfnerth redaction of this tractate opens with the laws concerning the establishment of a union. In particular, the focus at the outset in these texts is set firmly on calculating the value of the economic exchanges that occurred during marriage for each level of society (Jenkins, 'The Cyfnerth Text' 137). These three payments were known as the *gobr/amobr*, the *cowyll* and the *agweddi*.⁵ In the Iowerth redaction, and to a certain extent the Latin and Blegywyrð as well, the tractate opens not so much with the establishment of a union as with the disintegration of one.⁶

O deruyd y wreic bot rodyeit idi, ydan y hangwedi y dyly bot hyt ym pen y seith mlyned; ac o cheiff teir nos o'r seithet bl6ydyn ac yskar onadunt, rannent yn deu hanher pob peth a u oar y helo oc a uo udunt

If it happens that a woman has givers, she is entitled to be under her egweddi until the end of seven years. And if she gets three nights from the seventh year and they part, let them divide into two halves everything that is theirs which is in their possession. (Charles-Edwards, 'The Iowerth Text' 163)

These lines open up the Iowerth redaction's version of the tractate. In these two sentences, the situation seems quite simply set out. Each member of the married couple ought to take half of their shared property. This becomes more complicated as the text continues as the author of the Iowerth redaction then moves to carefully set out exactly which person received which items from the household. As the list grows the separation of items increasingly suggests a more figurative meaning to the section (Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style' 1111). Items such as the traditionally male broad axe and other large, unwieldy items are designate as the woman's due while the man receives the smaller wood axe and the sickles (Charles-Edwards, 'The Iowerth Text' 163). Throughout this section the separation of goods suggests the breakdown of society. Warfare, protection of the household and country, feasting and

5 In the glossary to his translation of the *Law of Hywel Dda*, Dafydd Jenkins translated *gobr* or *amobr* as a fee paid to the woman's lord upon marriage or if a single woman was found to be sexually active. *Cowyll* was a payment made to the woman upon her marriage. The *agweddi* or *egweddi* referred to the portion of the property owned by a married couple that the woman was entitled to should the marriage end before seven years had passed.

6 In the Cyfnerth redaction, this section is not considered until much later in the tractate

hospitality become impossible (Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style' 1116). By placing this section at the head of the tractate that begins the 'Laws of Country', the author reveals the importance of marriage for the life of the country. The marital union, in this instance, acts as the keystone of social order. Divorce signals misrule and chaos. This section, then, acts less as a guide to the actual separation of shared goods than as a sign of the social necessity for marriages to remain intact unions and for women to remain in their proper positions under the authority of their husbands.

Whether married or unmarried a woman's position in society was in some ways symmetrically linked with the position of her brother or another male of her position in society from her birth (Patterson 31). In reference to the coming of age of children the Laws state:

O'r pan anher y mab ene uo pedeyr blyud ar dec e dele bot urth noe e tat, a'e tat en argluyd arnau; ac ny dele cosp arnau namen un e tat, ac ny dele un keynnyauc o'e da en henne o amser namen a uedhor e tat, ac ny dele maruty arnau ket boet maru en henne o amser, namen bot en eydau y tat e da oll a uo yn y warchahadu, canes y tat en henne o amser a dele altep trostau am pob peth. O'r pan anher ene uo deudeg bluyd e dele bot urth noe y that. Em pen e petwared uluyden ar dec e tat duen e uab are r argluyd a'e orchemyn ydau, ac yna e dele enteu guruhau e'r rgluyd a bot urth ureynt e argluyd, ac ef ehun byeu attep trostau o pob haul a ouynher ydau, ac ef ehun byeu medu e da; ac ny dele a tat y usedu o hene allan muy nac estraun, ac os maed, gan kuynau o'r mab racdau, ef a uyd dyruyauc ac a wna yaun e'r mab o'e sarhaet. O'e deudeg bluyd allan e dau bronneu a chedor arney ac e blodeuha, ac ena e byd oet ydy e rody e ur. Ac o henne allan, ken y chaff our, e dele medu er eydu, ac ny dele bot urth noe e that o hene allan onyt ef ehun a'e men.

From when the son is born until he is fourteen years old, it is right for him to be at his father's platter, with his father as lord over him . . . At the end of the fourteenth year, it is right for the father to take his son to the lord and to commend him to him . . . and [for him] to be dependent on the lord's status . . . From when [a daughter] is born until she is twelve years old it is right for her to be at her father's platter. From twelve years old . . . she is of age to be given to a husband; and from then on, even if she

does not take a husband she is entitled to control what is hers. (Jenkins,
The Laws of Hywel Dda 130-32)

Both the male and female children are recognized as moving beyond the direct control of the father at the age of puberty (Patterson 36). At this point one would expect that the youth began to transfer into the house of another man; a higher status lord for a son and a husband or 'lord' for a daughter. At this point both sexes would be expected to contribute to the benefit of their respective lords. In the case of the woman, this would be through her household labor and fertility (Patterson 36). The codification of a woman's transference from one male head to another, one the father figure and the other a legally recognized sexual partner, implies that in this society women were understood to contribute less to society as a whole. In the same way that a man was below a lord who inhabited a higher position in the social hierarchy, the woman was below a man, a person who was of a sex considered to hold a higher position in the social hierarchy.

There could be many reasons that affected the social position of the female sex. A man had a range of culturally approved ways to contribute to society. Men were deemed more useful in agricultural labour and they could fight in military campaigns. It is true that women in Wales, as well as in Ireland at times, appeared on the battlefield and perhaps even acted as military strategists but this practice does not seem to be considered entirely approved of and was very uncommon after the sixth century, if it ever existed at all (Swartz 113-14). At the time of the recording and compilation of the Laws it would seem that a woman's most important function was as a means of continuing her husband's line.

Returning to the code above, it is significant that the age of maturity for a daughter is slightly younger than that of a son. A male child's transition happens as he leaves his father's house and rule upon entering into the house and rule of his lord. This change is almost entirely shown through one's social ties and responsibilities. The transition from childhood to adulthood for a female child was marked primarily by the physical changes in her body rather than by community relationships and responsibilities as it was for a male.

A girl entered marriageable age just before the physical signs of puberty emerged. In a section of the laws on marriage and possible fraud the text states: 'If it happens that her breasts and pubic hair have developed and she has menstruated, then the law says that no one knows what she is, whether maiden or woman' (Jenkins, *The Laws of Hywel Dda* 49). This was noted because it directly affected a girl's ability to marry. An unmarried young woman who had reached puberty became suspect. The most assured way for a man to be sure that the bride he was taking was as free of risk as possible was for her to be a prepubescent virgin. Girls remained with their immediate family until marriage partly in order to ensure that they could protect their virginity (McAll 8-9). Rather than sending a young girl out to fosterage where individuals only distantly related to her may not closely guard her, having her stay in the family home allowed the girl's kin to keep her from any mischief. This arrangement allowed any potential husband to receive a surety from an intended bride's kin on her virgin status (Owen 48). The intimate kin group would be in a position to swear upon her virginity for it had been their duty to ensure that the girl had been protected.

This is not to say that virginity solely related to moral purity. The writers of these texts decided to include for reasons outside of the influence of the church and religious concerns alone (Owen 47). The risk of taint referred to the economic liability of a woman of childbearing age having had sex with another man before marriage and therefore being pregnant with another man's child. The virginity of a bride was economically beneficial for both the woman's kin and for the man. This benefit for the woman was reflected in the payment of *cowyll* to the woman after her husband took her virginity. The fact that the laws seem to suggest the preference for having a daughter married before she had entered puberty suggests the economic nature of marriage. Despite this, however, it seems though a woman was recognized as being of marriageable age at twelve, outside of the nobility, most Welsh women entered their first marriages in their late teens (Herlihy 73). It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that many of the codes refer to the fear of a fraudulent virgin. If the majority of women in Wales were being married at the age of twelve, when they first became of an age at which they might

get pregnant, then the laws would have little need to consider how, and in which cases, a man might be compensated for the fraud.

The modern notion of marriage cannot be applied directly to the union to which the Laws refer. The laws included a list of nine legally valid sexual unions. These unions ranged from the highest, the *guraig briod*, which means marriage in modern Welsh, to the lowest, the deception of a virgin (Charles-Edwards, '*Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc*' 35). In practice, the law codes recognized any form of sexual union or cohabitation between a man and a maiden or woman as a legal marriage in that it was capable of producing legitimate children (Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage in late Medieval Wales' 104). Therefore, men who spent a series of successive nights with a woman were subject to payments not unlike those required in legitimate marriages. 'Whosoever sleeps three nights with a woman . . . let him pay her a steer worth 20 p and another worth 30 p and another worth 40 p. And if he takes her to house and home . . . he is bound to share with her as with a wife with bestowers' (Jenkins, *The Laws* 50). In this code, the phrase woman with bestowers denotes a woman given in marriage by her kin. It is a higher designation of wife than a woman who had married against the wishes of her family or who seemed to freely fraternize with men. Wives given in marriage by bestowers possessed rights to a certain portion of the marriage property in order to sustain them in case of widowhood.

The arrangement of this code suggests that each steer reflected payment to the woman for each night spent together. This not only reflected the legal recognition of a union being made but also served as a disincentive for the man to abandon or "misuse" the woman. Should he choose to sleep with her and then leave her, the chance that she might be pregnant was seen to have increased with each night they spent together. This makes that particular woman a risky or undesirable potential partner were she to try to marry another man after the fact. The cost of a brief union, therefore, seems to serve as both an incentive to remain in a regularized union and as a potential economic protection for the woman should she find herself set aside, unable to enter a more established union afterwards and/or with child.

Rape was treated in a similar way. The Laws do not strictly distinguish between the rape of a virgin and the rape of a non-virgin

(Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women' 86). Both a virgin and a non-virgin could, if they were able to prove rape, receive similar payments. The laws do not treat rape as a moral issue but rather as an injury such as other bodily attacks were treated. Rape did not affect the standing of a preexisting union. In fact, under the laws a rapist paid both the woman and her husband in turn for the offense. The woman received payment for the assault upon her person and the husband received payment for the insult that derived from an attack upon an individual under his protection, as well as the sexual misuse of his wife.

For the non-married women, as noted above, rape created a legally recognized union. In a paper on laws concerning rape, Lisi Oliver noted that one of its three meanings of the word used to distinguish rape from other forms of illicit sex, *forcor*, is 'appropriates' ('Forced and Unforced Raped in Early Irish Law, 94).⁷ The idea of rape as appropriating seems to fit into the notion of unions as economic arrangements. In this case, the rapist could be seen as taking one of two things. Either the rapist is appropriating the woman herself, which would imply that the woman was seen as a commodity, or he could be taking over an economically viable form of her labour. Since the rape was seen as a union, the laws stated that the woman ought to receive her *cowyll*, and other payments, which she would receive if a marriage ended before seven years (Charles-Edwards, 'The Iowerth Text' 171). The arrangement of such payments suggests that it was not that the woman herself was taken in cases of rape. Rather, rape was seen as a theft of a form of approved sexual labour. Thus, in rape, the wronged women suffered an act of violence against her own honour and the forced, inappropriate application of what in legal matters may be seen as one of her roles in a marriage. In these situations the wronged, unmarried woman received the payments rather than one of her male relatives.

The Shames of Women and the Shame of Kln

⁷ Oliver's paper primarily deals with the Irish laws concerning rape, but there is a fair resemblance between the two system on this issue. The paper notes that the Welsh cognate for the Irish *forcor* is *fflet*.

The position of women in society and in her network of kin, along with her role in marriage, required that both women and men subscribed to ideas about proper and improper behaviour for women. To help build this mindset the law codes included social incentives for proper behaviour and disincentives for any transgressions against established social mores. Shaming punishments and practices helped to foster an anxiety about committing such actions and a desire to live within the boundaries set by the community (Elias 114). In this way women became active participants in the cultivation of the roles of and the acceptable behaviour for girls and women. Shame and the anxiety it provoked could be used both as punishment and as a prod toward proper thought and action.

The careful use of shaming can be found both in the law codes and in the cultural mindset that surrounded them. One of the triads included in the laws seems to attempt to explain the three economic exchanges that occurred around marriage as payment to women for the passage from girl and virgin to woman and wife (Owen 48-49).

Tri chy6ilyd mor6yn yssyd: vn y6 dy6edut o'e that 6rthi 'mi a'th rodeis y 6r'; eil y6 pan el gyntaf y g6ely y g6r; trydyd y6 pan el gyntaf o'r g6ely ym plith dynyon. Dros y kyntaf y rodir y hamobyr y'r argl6yd; dros yr eil y rodir y chy6yll idi hitheu; dros y trydyd y dryt tat y heg6edi y'r g6r

The shame of a maiden is threefold: first, when her father declares in her presence that he has given her to a man; secondly, when she enters her husband's bed; thirdly, when upon rising from the bed she comes among people. And therefore, for the first amwaybyr is given, for the second cowyll, for the third egweddi if she is left. (Fletcher 159)⁸

This triad carefully sets out the three payments that can be given to a woman when a marriage is contracted and if her husband leaves her before seven years passed. What is key in this triad is the catalyst of these payments. It is for the shame that a woman experiences naturally as she grows up and becomes a sexual being that these payments are made.

8 Q.118. *Amwaybyr* is a variant spelling in the Latin Redaction for the *amobr* Welsh text taken from Bleg. triad collection.

The changing status and role of the woman as she comes of age almost seems to be envisioned as a gauntlet of shame. In this arrangement, a girl feels shame upon the communal realization that she is nearly at puberty and thus ripe for marriage. This is repeated as she loses her virginity on her wedding night. Finally, she is granted the third potential payment for being seen by the community as woman who has had sexual relations even though she is now accepted as a wife. The young bride feels shame for the change in her classification in the village. Though she is married, and has not lost her honour, she no longer possesses the desirable quality of virginity. Her loss is common knowledge in the community. Sex and adulthood for women is charged with a sense of anxiety. Even in the acceptable process of a woman's life, a sense of embarrassment surrounded changing sexual status that could only be countered if she remained married.

Rituals of shame became more pointed when provoked by sexual misconduct. Whether or not a potential bride truly possessed her virginity drew particular attention. Brides who had reached puberty before marriage required an oath from seven members of their immediate family in order to establish their virginal status (Charles-Edwards, 'The Iowerth Text' 167). If a woman refused to seek these oaths, the assumption erred toward her non-virginity:

Os hitheu ny mynn y diheyra⁶, lladher y chrys yn guu⁶ch a'e gwerdyr, a roder dinawet bl⁶yd yn y lla⁶ g⁶edy ira⁶ y losg⁶rn. Ac o geill y gynhal, kymeret yn lle y ran o'r argyfreu. Ac ony eill y kynhal, bit heb dim.

If she does not wish to be vindicated, let her shift be cut off as high as her genitals and let a year-old steer with its tail greased be put into her hand. And if she can hold it, let her take it as her share of the agryfrau. And if she cannot hold it, let her have nothing. (Ibid.)⁹

A woman, and by extension her kin-group, who refused to swear that she was a virgin was regarded as untrustworthy social outcasts. The potential marriage would be dissolved, leaving the woman without the financial and social support that it would provide.

⁹ *Agryfrau* entered the law codes as the Welsh term equivalent to the English dower. This is an alternative spelling of *agweddi*, used in Jenkins translation of the law code on page 49

For her assumed fallen status, the laws provided a ritual of public shame as the process through which she had to endure in order to keep some portion of what would have been her share of the marital property. The *Lowerth* redaction has the woman go in public showing her genitals. This state of undress gives a concrete sign to the community of her lack of shame in both her inability to prove her virginity and the assumption that she has participated in sexual misconduct. As she attempted to maintain her grasp upon the tail of the steer, in an exposed state, her transgressed would be emphasised. Through this process, the woman's failure was made public knowledge. It also allowed the community to view the punishment for inappropriate action.

Even when a woman maintained her virginity until her marriage and fulfilled her role and duties as a wife, the risk remained that she could invite shame upon her family. Branwen, the character with whom the paper began, is such an example. When she married the King of Ireland, Branwen fulfilled her role as a Queen and wife insofar as this was conceived by the author and audience. Moreover she provided her husband with a male heir.

No great lord or lady in Ireland would come to see Branwen to whom she didn't give either a brooch or a ring or a precious gem that would be remarkable to see given away. In all that, she spent the year in high regard . . . And then she conceived, and . . . a son was born to her. (Ford 64-65)

Despite all of this, Branwen's husband was swayed by the rumours of his court and turned against her. He sent Branwen away from his presence. She is set to perform the tasks of a servant in the kitchen, where the King has the cook beat her daily. As wives, women maintained their links to their natal kin alongside the kin-group they entered through their marriage. Thus, any insult to a woman directly affected her male kin (Owen 47). This occurred either through actions taken against a woman, or through a woman's own failure to act. Thus, if a woman was aware that her husband was committing adultery, it was her responsibility to take actions to end the affair. If the offense was repeated and the wife failed to leave her husband she gave up her right to her *wynebwerth* 'for she is a shameful woman' (Jenkins, *Hywel Dda* 53). The *wynebwerth* was

the face value or honour price of the woman. It was paid to her for insults that her husband committed against her, and through her, to her kin (Owen 51). Therefore, if a woman failed to either prevent her husband from committing adultery, or if she left her husband if he proved to be repeatedly unfaithful, she lost her honour. This is expressed through the cessation of her claim to *wynebwerth*.

The ties that women maintained to their natal kin gave the kin-group a certain amount of responsibility for the protection of a woman relative even after her marriage. If a woman was mistreated in her marriage, the insult was felt not only by the woman herself, but also by her male kin (Roberts 67). The honour of the entire group could be tarnished if they did not rectify this unwelcomed situation. In Branwen's case, when her kin in Wales found out how she was being treated, war broke out between the two kingdoms for the slight against the honour of the Welsh nation as a whole.

The position of women in society as portrayed in Welsh literature and law is fraught with tension. They held duties and had responsibilities to both their husbands and their kin. Legally, husbands were recognized as the lords of their wives. Therefore obedience to one's husband was a necessity. Yet women were also responsible for safeguarding the honour of their natal kin. Failure in any of these counts invited shame upon the woman and all of the people to whom she was connected, either by blood or by marriage. In the extreme case of Branwen, the inherent instability of her position led to the death of all of the men attached to her along with hundreds of Welsh and Irish soldiers.

Coda: Folk Poems and the Lived Experience of Marriage

I thought that in marrying / I would have nothing but dancing and singing;
/ But what did I get after marrying / But rocking the cradle and hushing
the baby? (Lloyd-Morgan 184)

Up to this point, women have appeared in the narrative as remarkably passive participants in Welsh culture. In the Welsh laws coverture saw the woman's legal person subsumed by her husband (Smith 26). The law codes, and the literary depiction of women, portray them as entirely under the guardianship of their closest male kin, whether father,

brother, uncle or husband. Accepting this view absolutely, however, simplifies the position of women to the point where it would seem that they lacked any modicum of agency.

Hen bellion are traditional Welsh folk-verses. These four-line poems, composed anonymously, flourished with the oral tradition of the Welsh countryside. It has been suggested that women may have arranged many of these works (Lloyd-Morgan 183).¹⁰ In these poems the lived experience of women could be expressed. This ranged from their dissatisfaction in married life, like that shown in the verses at the head of this section, to painful recognition of the multifarious and, at times, contradicting duties and responsibilities of women. '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 ...' (Lloyd-Morgan 184). This poem suggests a keen awareness of the fraught position of women. Women were expected to attract a husband and yet they risked being accused of misconduct for acting in a flirtatious manner. The virtuous girl of the poem is an impossible ideal to live up to. It lacks concrete substance.

Beyond the folk tradition, some women held socially significant positions both in the domestic sphere and in the wider community. In some of the extant poetry, marriage is shown as a co-operative endeavour, built around mutual support and the interdependence of the couple (Lloyd-Morgan 14). Through the network of kin and clients, Gwenyth Richards argues that Welsh noblewomen possessed a distinct ability to wield power (238). This placed women in socially vital positions in their roles as wives. Like Branwen in her role as queen, women provided the centre and core of hospitable gestures for the family (Smith 26). As the guardians of the social welfare of the family, women held far more power than allotted to them in the law codes. In practice, women were socially and legal inferior to men. This, however, did not fully inhibit their ability to hold positions of importance in their families. In some cases, women were able to use their role to become the centre of their domestic sphere and to build ties for their families in the

¹⁰ These poems were written down by antiquarians in the Early Modern period, but Lloyd-Morgan seems to suggest that the tradition has roots in the medieval period.

community. Rather than static and wholly subject to the roles and positions granted to them in texts written largely by men for an elite audience, the place of women in their communities and in society was far more fluid and flexible. By looking at different genres of texts, as well as moving towards an interdisciplinary approach combining written evidence with material sources, the range and shades of roles open to women may slowly come into focus.

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