

Reconstructing Medieval Poetry¹

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This paper discussed the use of digital technology for on-line scholarly editions and the implications which it has for editorial methodology. The Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies is currently undertaking a five-year research project (2008–12) to prepare a new electronic edition of the poetry of Guto'r Glyn, that is fifteenth-century praise poetry. That edition will be modelled on an electronic edition of the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, *www.dafyddapgwilym.net*, which was produced by collaboration between colleagues in the Welsh departments at Swansea, Cardiff and Aberystwyth, and published in 2007. Dafydd ap Gwilym was a fourteenth-century lyric poet who composed in the same poetic mode as that of Guto'r Glyn, and his work presents similar challenges to the modern editor.

Late medieval Welsh poetry presents a rare combination of artistic compositions and popular transmission which resulted in very complex textual histories. Poems were composed without recourse to writing and first transmitted orally, in some cases for up to two hundred years, and the texts were subject to inevitable failures of memory and creative recomposition. When a written tradition became common in the sixteenth century copyists adapted texts further according to the linguistic and metrical norms of their own period. As a result we find substantial variations between surviving versions of the poems, and editors are faced with the challenge of how best to present these to a modern readership.

A purist answer is to treat the earliest manuscript texts as primary evidence worthy of study as cultural artefacts in their own right. But that is not a very satisfactory answer because the earliest text is not necessarily the best, and rarely does any single manuscript offer a fully satisfactory text throughout the poem. The composite text, drawing on as many manuscripts as necessary, has therefore generally been adopted by editors of medieval Welsh poetry as the best solution.²

The paper then presented the Dafydd ap Gwilym website, showing how differing user groups (Welsh and English, academic and popular) are catered for by various possible ways of presenting the edited text. Using a split screen the text of a poem can be viewed in combination with either Modern Welsh paraphrase, English translation, notes in either language, or one of several early manuscript versions. Recorded readings of the poems are available in mp3 files which are particularly valuable for non-Welsh-speaking users, serving to emphasise the aural appeal of the *cynganedd*.

The presentation of full manuscript texts (sometimes as many as ten for a single poem) would not be possible in a printed edition due to lack of space. These can also

¹ This is a summary of the presentation delivered at the forum.

² For a discussion of the theoretical issues relating to the concept of an original text, see Dafydd Johnston, 'Egwyddorion y testunau golygedig', in the Introduction to *dafyddapgwilym.net*.

be viewed in parallel with digitised images of the manuscript, thus focusing attention on the material aspect of the poem's transmission. Variant readings can be viewed by clicking on any line in the edited text which brings up a list of manuscript readings for that line in a separate window, generated dynamically from the manuscript texts. This facilitates comparison and reveals patterns of correspondence and adaptation much more readily than the fragmentary variants familiar from printed books.

As an example of editorial method a line from Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem addressed to the wind, 'Y Gwynt' (*dafyddapgwilym.net*, poem 47, line 63) was considered. The edited text, based on the majority of the manuscripts, reads:

Dos at Forfudd felenllwyd
Go to fair-haired Morfudd Llwyd.

As it stands this line contains no *cyghanedd*, which was perfectly acceptable in the mid-fourteenth century (although full *cyghanedd* was required in every line of later *cywyddau*). However, the previous standard edition of Dafydd ap Gwilym's work, edited by Thomas Parry (Caerdydd, 1952, p. 310), gives a version of the line which has *cyghanedd lusg* (the third word rhyming with the penultimate syllable of the fourth):

Dos at feinwen felenllwyd
Go to a fair-haired grey beauty.

There is also a third variant occurring in one manuscript version, also with *cyghanedd lusg* although using two different words:

Dos at Forfudd lle'i cuddiwyd
Go to Morfudd where she is hidden.

The most economical way of explaining the existence of these three variants is to assume that the two versions of the line that have *cyghanedd* were attempts to introduce *cyghanedd* into a line which originally had none. If 'Dos at Forfudd felenllwyd' is taken to be the starting-point then each of the other two versions could have been produced with the same motivation by changing only one word, since each has one element in common with the original line. Two key editorial principles are in operation here: firstly, that metrical features should not be used to create an artistically ideal text, but rather as flexible guidelines bearing in mind the types of changes made by copyists, and secondly, that manuscript readings should be considered in their totality as evidence of a process of transmission, rather than choosing one apparently suitable reading and ignoring all others.

Another feature of the new edition which takes advantage of the abundance of space in the electronic medium is the presentation of manuscript relationships by means of individual stemmas for each poem, recognising that each has its unique

transmission history. As a simple example the stemma for poem 150, ‘Morfudd yn Hen’ (‘Morfudd Grown Old’) was shown, in which all the manuscript texts are presented as deriving from a common exemplar. However, the earliest manuscript, Hafod 26 (c.1574), contains four extra lines not found in any of the other nine manuscripts. If the earliest manuscript were to be followed as a matter of principle simply by virtue of its date, then these lines would have to be included, as they are in Thomas Parry’s edition as follows:

Heno ni chaf, glaf glwyfaw,
Huno drem oni fwyf draw.
Hyrdaint serch y ferch yw ef,
Henlleidr unrhyw â hunllef.³

*But tonight I shall not have (a sick one who is ailing)
One wink of sleep unless I’m there:
It is a bout of the girl’s love,
An old thief, like a nightmare.*

Inclusion of these lines would then require emendation of the stemma to show the other manuscript texts deriving from a defective intermediary.

Attention was drawn to the danger of a circular argument here, and it was emphasised that the stemma has no absolute authority in itself, being nothing more than a visual representation of the editor’s interpretation of the manuscript relationships based on the edited text. The circle can be broken by use of parallel evidence from other poems, rather as knowledge of scribes’ tendency to ‘improve’ lines without *cynghanedd* was useful in determining the original reading in the line from ‘Y Gwynt’ discussed above. These four lines also occur as the last lines of ‘Serch fel Ysgyfarnog’ (‘Love like a Hare’, poem 75, lines 69–72), where they are found in the majority of the manuscripts. There are several other instances of lines which seem to occur in more than one of Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poems, and in most cases the lines in question are well attested in one poem and feature in only one version of the other. The logical explanation for this recurring pattern is that contamination has occurred between poems during the process of either memorial or even written transmission, perhaps in this case facilitated by the connection of lines beginning with *h-*. These lines were therefore rejected from the edited text of ‘Morfudd yn Hen’, and the stemma accordingly gives no priority to the Hafod 26 text.

This editorial decision is particularly important for the impact of the poem, which has been much admired particularly for the striking imagery of the eight-line concluding paragraph in Parry’s edited text. The conclusion of the new edited text is less personal but still contains the most memorable images, and serves as a fitting

³ Thomas Parry (ed.), *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* (Caerdydd, 1952; second edition 1963), p. 369. The translation quoted is from Gwyn Thomas, *Dafydd ap Gwilym: His Poems* (Cardiff, 2001), p. 273.

illustration of the quality of poetry which *dafyddapgwilym.net* seeks to present to a new audience:

Hudolaidd y'i hadeilwyd,
Hudoles ladrones lwyd.
Henllath mangnel Gwyddeleg,
Hafod oer; hi a fu deg.

*She was created bewitchingly,
Thieving grey witch.
The old beam of an Irish mangonel,
A cold summer-house; she was once fair.*