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The Ugly, Greedy Crane of Medieval Wales

Lee Raye

Abstract. Most medieval depictions of the crane (*Grus grus*) emphasise its nobility and importance for falconry; however, medieval Welsh poetry provides a topos of an ugly, greedy creature. This paper contrasts the two attitudes and suggests possible origins with reference to classical literature, naturalistic observation and Marxist interpretations of class conflict.

Keywords. Crane; *cywyddwyr*; history of wildlife; extinction; falconry

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The Noble Crane

The crane (*Grus grus*) was a common native British breeding bird until around 1550. The final reference to it building nests is in the *Description of Pembrokeshire* in 1603,¹ but there are no other references to it breeding from after 1550, meaning this is probably a late anomaly.² Even after the species was lost as a breeder, however, the western flyway migration path still passed through Britain, and the crane continued to be a seasonal passage migrant throughout the seventeenth century.³ The crane is notably referred to as a migrant, not a breeder, in Francis Willughby's (1676-8) *Ornithologia*.⁴

Traditional scholarship suggests that drainage of wetlands was the deciding factor in the loss of the crane from Britain.⁵ However, even Britain's modern, depleted wetlands are capable of sustaining large viable populations of cranes (2,500 individuals in East Anglia alone),⁶ and

¹ Dillwyn Miles, *The Description of Pembrokeshire by George Owen of Henllys*, (Llandysul, 1994), 140–43.

² M Shrubbs, *Feasting, Fowling and Feathers* (London, 2013), 67; Derek William Yalden and Umberto Albarella, *The History of British Birds*, (Oxford, 2009), 140.

³ Shrubbs, *Feasting, Fowling and Feathers*, 65.

⁴ Francis Willughby, *Ornithologia*, ed. John Ray (London, 1678), 274.

⁵ Yalden and Albarella, *The History of British Birds*, 140.

⁶ A. Stanbury and UK Crane Working Group, "Changing Status of the Common Crane in the UK," *British Birds* 104 (2011): 432–47; Fiona Mathews and David W Macdonald, "The Sustainability of the Common Crane (*Grus*

wetland drainage did not begin in earnest until the seventeenth century in any case.⁷ This implies that over-exploitation was the deciding factor, as Stanbury and Shrubbs have argued.⁸ Eventually though, even the supply of migrating birds dried up, and the crane was only a rare migrant from 1700.⁹ The population that formerly migrated through Britain has either been lost or altered its route. Over the last century, the crane has returned to Britain. The bird has begun to recolonise the Fens, and a reintroduction project is ongoing on the Somerset Levels.¹⁰

Before it declined, the crane seems to have been one of the best-loved species of Britain. It is the most frequently mentioned wild bird in place names and also the most frequently depicted in Insular medieval art manuscripts, other than the dove and eagle which were religious icons.¹¹ Crane remains are the most common wild bird fauna excavated from human habitation sites between the mid-fifth and mid-eleventh centuries (meaning cranes were commonly exploited), and they seem to have been one of the few species hunted for the table continuously from the Mesolithic to the late medieval period.¹²

Focusing in, we can reconstruct some of the significance that the crane had in Wales by looking at the medieval Welsh law codes. The main reason for the crane's popularity seems to have been its status as a game bird for falconry and hunting. In the Iorwerth lawbook tradition of the Welsh 'Laws of Court' (although not in other lawbooks), the crane is one of the three pre-eminent birds. Any day on which the court falconer catches one of the three pre-eminent birds, he is granted three gifts and three signs of the king's favour.¹³

Grus) Flock Breeding in Norfolk: Insights from Simulation Modelling," *Biological Conservation* 100, no. 3 (2001): 323–33.

⁷ Christopher Taylor, "Fenlands," in *The English Rural Landscape*, ed. John Thirsk (Oxford, 2000), 179–82.

⁸ A. Stanbury and UK Crane Working Group, 'Changing Status of the Common Crane in the UK,' *British Birds* 104 (2011): 432–47; Shrubbs, *Feasting, Fowling and Feathers*, 70.

⁹ Serjeantson, 'Extinct Birds.'

¹⁰ Stanbury and UK Crane Working Group, 'Changing Status of the Common Crane in the UK.'

¹¹ S Boisseau and D W Yalden, 'The Former Status of the Crane Grus Grus in Britain,' *Ibis* 140, no. 3 (1998): 482–500; William Brunson Yapp, *Birds in Medieval Manuscripts*, (New York, 1981), 13.

¹² Yalden and Albarella, *The History of British Birds*, 117; 139; Naomi Jane Sykes, *Norman Conquest: A Zooarchaeological Perspective*. (Southampton, 2001), 63–64.

¹³ Aled Rhys Wiliam, *Llyfr Iorwerth: A Critical Text of the Venedotian Code of Medieval Welsh Law*, (Cardiff, 1960), 7–8.

The Blegywryd and Latin A lawbooks contain an even more specific clause:

Tres aves non debent occidi in terra non sua sine licentia ipsius cuius terra est: scilicet, aquila, grus, corvus, id est, kycveran; quorum occisor xl denarios reddet.¹⁴

Tri edyn ny dylyir eu llad ar tir dyn arall heb ganhat: eryr, a garan a chicuran: y neb a'e latho, talet dec a deugeint ariant.¹⁵

Three birds that ought not be struck down on another's land without permission from the one whose land it is: the eagle, the crane and the raven. Anyone who may strike them down pays 40 pence [Blegyrwryd: fifty pence].

The Welsh version of this law is also found in two Cyfnerth lawbook manuscripts (NLW 20143 and BL Cotton Cleopatra B.v), and in Latin D. The presence of the law across these different Welsh law codes raises the possibility that it may have existed as a law prior to the presumed separation and codification of the law codes as we have them from the thirteenth century.¹⁶ It is also echoed by a variant version of another law in two other Cyfnerth manuscripts (Harley MS 4353 and the Bodorgan MS) which dictate that the king should be given the legal value whenever a crane is slain.¹⁷ In practice, both of these laws obstruct ordinary people from hunting the crane, and make crane meat the special preserve of the rich landed gentry. Only the gentry have the rights to cranes on their land and can pay the king for the pleasure of a hunt if necessary.

From a modern perspective, it is easy to assume that the Welsh laws protecting the bird were inspired by environmentalist concerns. By the thirteenth century when the lawbooks were compiled the crane was already probably in decline.¹⁸ However, this altruistic explanation is probably not accurate. It is clear that the elites protected their high status game from ordinary consumption regardless of their relative abundance. A good example is the famous protection of the common mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) by the English crown.¹⁹ The laws were more probably in place to ensure that nothing external affected the abundance of elite prey; they

¹⁴ Hywel David Emanuel, *The Latin Texts of the Welsh Laws* (Cardiff, 1967), 128.

¹⁵ Sara Elin Roberts, *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff, 2007), 80–81, 136–37.

¹⁶ see: Thomas Mowbray Charles-Edwards, *The Welsh Laws*, (Cardiff, 1989), 14–21; Morfydd Owen, 'The Animals in the Law of Hywel,' *The Carmarthenshire Antiquary* 41 (2009): 5.

¹⁷ Roberts, *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales*, 66–67.

¹⁸ Sykes, *Norman Conquest: A Zooarchaeological Perspective*, 64.

¹⁹ Umberto Albarella and Richard Thomas, 'They Dined on Crane: Bird Consumption, Wild Fowling and Status in Medieval England,' *Acta Zoologica Cracoviensia* 45 (2002).

were not implemented out of any respect for biodiversity. Despite the crane's decline, the bird continued to be consumed in great numbers. 204 cranes were obtained for the feast for the consecration of George Neville as Archbishop of York in 1465.²⁰ Less than a century later, crane eggs were given crown protection in England and later Wales with the *Acte ayenst Destruccon of Wyldfowle*, (25 Henry VIII: c.11) which assigned a 20 d. fine for destroying eggs. The only birds attributed this level of protection were the crane and great bustard (*Otis tarda*), both then in terminal decline in Britain.

There is also some corroborating evidence showing that the crane was protected in some way as the preserve of the rich even when it was still relatively common. In the archaeological record, crane remains are almost exclusively reported from elite sites from 1150-1500.²¹ The early popularity of the crane for falconry among elites is demonstrated by the letter of Ethelburt of Kent to St. Boniface (c.748-54 AD). Along with his letter, Ethelburt sent tribute of two woollen cloaks and a 3.5 lb gold-lined silver drinking cup. All Ethelburt asked in return was Boniface's prayers, and a pair of falcons large enough to hunt cranes, presumably non-native gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*) as Gurney points out:²²

Duos falcones quorum ars et artis audacia sit grues velle libenter captando arripere et arripiendo consternere solo.²³

A pair of falcons of such cleverness and courage that they will without hesitation attack cranes, and, having caught them, will bring them to earth.²⁴

The art of taking cranes through falconry is clearly something Ethelburt had had demonstrated to him, and it is possible that he was aware or had been shown St. Boniface's previous gift of falcons to King Ethelbald of Mercia (745-6 CE).²⁵

However, the crane became the special preserve of the elite classes in the second half of the medieval period; from the eleventh century onwards. This is the period when commonly exploited land was enclosed into forest, warren, and hunting park for the elites of society, and

²⁰ John Henry Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, (London, 1921), 86–87.

²¹ Yalden and Albarella, *The History of British Birds*, 139; Sykes, *Norman Conquest: A Zooarchaeological Perspective*, 64.

²² Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, 23.

²³ Michael Tangl, *Die Briefe Des Heiligen Bonifatius Und Lullus*, (Berlin, 1916), 229–31..

²⁴ Ephraim Emerton and Thomas F X Noble, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, (Columbia, 2000), 157.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

when hunting with hounds and with birds of prey was forbidden to ordinary people.²⁶ This change is often attributed to the Norman invasion, given William the Conqueror's epitaph in the *Peterborough Chronicle (Anglo Saxon Chronicle E)*:

He was fallen into avarice,
and he loved greediness above all.
He set up great game-preserves, and he laid down laws for them,
that whosoever killed hart or hind
he was to be blinded.
He forbade [hunting] the harts, so also the boars;
he loved the stags so very much,
as if he were their father
also he decreed for the hares that they might go free.
His powerful men lamented it, and the wretched men complained of it ²⁷

However, there was already a seminal elite hunting and falconry culture in Britain before the Norman conquest, as the quotations above partially demonstrate.²⁸

As Albarella & Thomas have argued²⁹ elite hunting for cranes was not hunting for sustenance. The majority of meat eaten in the medieval period was from domesticated species, especially chicken and goose. Crane meat does not even seem to have been especially tasty compared to the meat of domesticated animals. Albarella & Thomas point out the sixteenth century reference in Muffett where cranes are described as 'hard, tough, gross, sinewy, and engendring melancholique bloud, unfit for sound mens tables'.³⁰ This is presumably why medieval recipes call for the use of strong sauces with crane. One from the fifteenth century suggests condiments of overpowering flavour: pepper, ginger, mustard, vinegar and salt.³¹ Rather, the bird was eaten as a status symbol. As a game bird, the crane would have gained prestige from its size. At 4.5-6kg it is 5x heavier than a pheasant

²⁶ Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside: The Classic History of Britain's Landscape, Flora and Fauna*, (London, 1986), 130–41; Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, 40–41, 51–52, 85; Richard Almond, *Medieval Hunting*, (Stroud, 2003), 93–95.

²⁷ Michael Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 1998 ed. (New York, 1996), 221.

²⁸ Sykes, *Norman Conquest: A Zooarchaeological Perspective.*, 1–2; Dafydd Jenkins, "Hawk and Hound: Hunting in the Laws of Court," in *The Welsh King and His Court*, ed. T. Charles-Edwards, M.E. Owen, and P. Russell (Cardiff, 2000), 255–80.

²⁹ Albarella and Thomas, "They Dined on Crane: Bird Consumption, Wild Fowling and Status in Medieval England."

³⁰ Thomas Muffett and Christopher Bennet, *Healths Improvement* (London, 1655), 91–92. This edition was published well after Muffett's death.

³¹ Thomas Austin, *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery Books* (London, 1888), 78, 116.

(*Phasianus colchicus*).³² Not only would the bird have produced the most meat, its size made it a challenge for falconers. If hunters were determined to take it through falconry, it could only have been caught using the strongest and most high-status birds of prey,³³ exotic gyrfalcons along with Britain's native peregrines (*Falco peregrinus*). Despite its taste and high price, crane meat was a mark of distinction at the table, and many of the final references to the bird come from accounts of elite feasts³⁴. For example, the *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII* make many sixteenth-century references to obtaining cranes for the table, including a letter from 1528 complaining that wild fowl are hard to come by but enclosing eight cranes, six curlews, six 'mewed knots', three 'gray birds' and one heron.³⁵ References like these, coming from a period when cranes were already in decline, suggest over-exploitation to be an important factor in their extirpation, as suggested above.³⁶

It is worth emphasising the irony of this situation. Conservationists reintroducing species today are keen that the species involved should be perceived positively, to prevent it being re-extirpated.³⁷ Conversely, a key factor in the extirpation of the crane from Britain was over-exploitation of a minority group of rich elites who perceived the crane in a very positive light. This scenario also applies to some species in the modern period. For example, as Krishna explains, in India, the tiger (*Panthera tigris*) had a very poor reputation during the unsustainable colonial rule of the Raj.³⁸ Over 8,000 individuals were exterminated between 1875-1925 to free up land for agriculture and for 'pest control'. After the end of colonial rule in India, attitudes changed, and nature reserves were set up specifically to protect the animal as part of Project Tiger. However, the tiger population in India has nevertheless continued to decline over the last 20 years, due mainly to the efforts of international poachers (once again on behalf of a rich (black-market) elite). The tiger is not unpopular; on the contrary, demand

³² Rob Hume, *Complete Birds of Britain and Europe*, (London, 2009), 100, 170.

³³ see: Owen, 'The Animals in the Law of Hywel,' 20.

³⁴ Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, 169–71.

³⁵ J. Brewer, *The Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, from the Reign of Henry VIII*, vol. 4.2 (London, 1872), 158.

³⁶ Shrubbs, *Feasting, Fowling and Feathers*, 70; Serjeantson, "Extinct Birds."

³⁷ IUCN *Guidelines for Reintroductions*, 5.2.

³⁸ Nanditha Krishna, *Sacred Animals of India*, (New Delhi, 2010), 36–39, 239–41.

for tiger products is too high. The key lesson for conservationists here is that local attitudes to a species need to be sustainable, sometimes positive is not good enough.

The Ugly, Greedy Crane

The high status and deep popularity of the crane is an important aspect of its portrayal in the medieval period, but, as this paper will set out, the bird was not universally admired. We can detect a strong tradition of satirising the crane, especially in Welsh literature of the second half of the medieval period. The main negative attribute assigned to the crane is its greed. In Welsh poetry the bird is lambasted for its voracious appetite, and even its craned posture may have represented the bird's unwillingness to ever stop eating.

Here, I would like to start by giving five examples of ugly, greedy cranes in Welsh literature, and save my discussion of possible origins of the topos until the conclusion:

(#1) *Canu y Meirch*, is one of the poems of the legendary Taliesin, attributed to late twelfth or early thirteenth century.³⁹ Part of this poem is dedicated to listing the shapes Taliesin has been in. Some of these shapes are accompanied by a brief generic description. For example, when Taliesin was a wildcat, he was speckled and lived in trees. When he was a shout, he was a shout in battle. Here is the description of the crane:

Bum garan gwala gwelet golwc.

I've been a crane; with his gaze eyeing up his fill.⁴⁰

The generic crane therefore is one that it is looking for food. This is perhaps not what we expect from one of the three pre-eminent birds of the Iorwerth law code, but it fits exactly with other references to the bird in Welsh literature.

(#2) Gerald of Wales also gives an account of the crane in his *Topography of Ireland*. In this account he is generally positive about the crane, and (elsewhere) he even derides the Irish nobility in general for not being civilised enough to eat the bird.⁴¹ In the *Topography* Gerald

³⁹ Marged Haycock, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth, 2007), 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁴¹ A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin, *Expugnatio Hibernica: The Conquest of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis* (Dublin, 1978), 96 (L33).

borrowed a famous piece of folklore which was everywhere else applied to the ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) throughout the pre-industrial period:⁴²

Avis eadem tam calidum, tam igneum jecur habet, ut ferrum forte ingestum transire nequeat indigestum.⁴³

This bird [the crane] has such a warm and fiery liver that, if it should eat iron, it will not let it through undigested.⁴⁴

Gerald cites this piece of folklore as a moral story, to illustrate how Christians should have their own ‘bowels aflame with the fire of charity’, just like he uses the story of sentinel cranes to illustrate that Christians should be vigilant.⁴⁵ However, the folklore of the ostrich was so pervasive and well-known in the case of that bird that although it originally dates from antiquity, it was still believed, (and tested) in the Tower of London menagerie even as late as 1791.⁴⁶ This seems therefore an unusual mistake for Gerald to have made, but makes more sense given the contemporary reputation of the crane in Wales as a glutton.

(#3) Dafydd ap Gwilym’s fourteenth century poem to his shadow *Ei Gysgod* provides another comparable portrayal of the bird. It is written partially in *dyfalu* style, where the satirist heaps up scornful comparisons upon his opponent.⁴⁷ Many of the descriptions of the shadow here utilise a variant of the world-upside-down topos. Dafydd’s shadow is like a proud horse-breeder playing on a wooden hobby horse, or a terrifying bogeyman shaped like an innocuous bald monk. His shadow is also compared to a heron and crane.

Grŷr llawn yn pori cawn cors;
Garan yn bwrw ei gwryd,

A heron stuffed with eating marshy stalks
A crane extended to full span,⁴⁸

⁴² Thierry Buquet, ‘Fact Checking: Can Ostriches Digest Iron?’, *Medieval Animal Data Network (MAD) Peer Reviewed blog21*, 2013, <http://mad.hypotheses.org/131>, accessed: 01/10/2016.

⁴³ James Francis Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera: Topographica Hibernia et Expugnatio Hibernica*, , vol. 5 (1867), 46–47.

⁴⁴ John O’Meara, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, (London, 1982), 40–41.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Daniel Hahn, *The Tower Menagerie* (London, 2004), 173–74; H Rackham, *Pliny Natural History: Books VIII-XI* (Harvard, 1947), 292–3 (X.1); Buquet, “Fact Checking: Can Ostriches Digest Iron?”

⁴⁷ Rachel Bromwich, *Dafydd Ap Gwilym*, (Llandysul, 1982), xviii–xix.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 192-3.

This time the ridiculous images are the idea that a heron/crane would ever be full, or the idea that a crane (generally a craned over bird) would ever straighten up. A comparable reference can also be seen in *Dychan i Drahaern Brydydd Mawr*, where Casnodyn satirises his subject as having ‘ais grëyr’ (heron ribs), critically implying that he is bent over and does not stand up straight.⁴⁹

However, Dafydd’s reference appears slightly uncertain from an eco-sensitive perspective. The first line fits the crane rather than the heron. While cranes are omnivorous, herons are carnivorous; herons do not browse like cranes.⁵⁰ It is possible that medieval observers were not aware of this, and seeing herons around wetlands believed that they grazed just like cranes. However, this still does not explain the different exploitation methods of the two species. Herons remain motionless, ready to ambush approaching prey, whilst cranes stand with heads down continuously eating. The description of the heron here thus suggests that Dafydd is loosely conflating the terms used for the two wading birds, which was a common practice even before the crane began to decline in abundance.⁵¹

(#4) The crane’s appearance is also subjected to satire in another unedited poem (*Cywydd i ofyn garan a bytheiades a’u dyfalu* by Gruffudd ap Dafydd ap Hywel (fl. 1480-1520),⁵² although more for its gangly legs than for its greedy bent posture. Surprisingly, despite the scorn the crane is subjected to in this poem, the poet explicitly requests a tame crane and hound for in payment for the poem. There is evidence that cranes were commonly kept in captivity elsewhere in Wales; they are identified as one of the three common *aves mansuetae* in the Latin A law code.⁵³ The simultaneous satire of the creature and desire to possess one suggest that abuse of the crane was not in earnest; this was just a species which it was popular to satirise.

(#5) Another commonly censured attribute of the crane was its voice. Criticising this aspect of the crane was not unique to Welsh literature. Isidore of Seville popularised the idea that

⁴⁹ R. Daniel, *Gwaith Casnodyn* (Aberystwyth, 1999), 82.

⁵⁰ Hume, *Complete Birds of Britain and Europe*, 139, 170.

⁵¹ Yapp, *Birds in Medieval Manuscripts*, 14–15; although see contra: Dylan Foster Evans, ‘‘Cyngor Y Bieden’’: Ecoleg a Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg,’ in *Llenyddiaeth Mewn Theori*, 2006, 41–80.

⁵² Arthur Howard Williams, ‘Adar Y Cywyddwyr’ (Aberystwyth University, 2014), 170–74.

⁵³ Emanuel, *The Latin Texts of the Welsh Laws*, 147.

the Latin word *grus* was onomatopoeic, and referred to the bird's croaking cry.⁵⁴ This was popularised in the Bestiary tradition.⁵⁵ Our example is in *Dychan i Dre'r Fflint ac i'r Pibydd*, a text of uncertain authorship commonly associated with the fifteenth century poet Tudur Penllyn.⁵⁶ This poem satirises the sound of a man playing the bagpipes by comparing the sound to the cry of a crane:

Garan annoddef lle y gwery
An insufferable crane where he plays.⁵⁷

Alternate versions all also assign negative characteristics to the crane:

Llais garan yn llaes gery
The voice of a crane, blowing melancholically.⁵⁸

Garan unllais yn geru
A monotonous crane calling⁵⁹

As an aside, the noisiness of the crane is also satirised in Gaelic literature. In a medieval interpolation into the Middle Irish *Betha Colum Cille*,⁶⁰ St. Columba is criticised by a hostile queen. She calls him a *corrclerech* (crane-cleric) and refuses to give him peace and quiet (*nibam sidhachso fris*) unless he reverses a decision about the local kingship. The reason for this is obscure. Herbert interprets the phrase as 'craned cleric'⁶¹ suggesting Columba was being criticised for his crane-like hunched-over appearance, along the lines of the examples

⁵⁴ Stephen A Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, (Cambridge, 2006), 264.

⁵⁵ Terence Hanbury White, *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, (New York, 1954), 110; Richard Barber, *Bestiary*, (Woodbridge, 2006), 127.

⁵⁶ Thomas Roberts, *Gwaith Tudur Penllyn Ac Ieuan Ap Tudur Penllyn* (Cardiff, 1958), xxv–xxvi. Roberts explains that the manuscripts attribute this poem to either Lewys Glyn Cothi or Tudur Penllyn. In one manuscript (Peniarth 60) the poem seems to be a holograph by Tudur Penllyn. The poem is not written with Tudur Penllyn's usual orthography, but the poem could have been recorded by someone else. If the poem is a 'forgery' it is a very early one.

⁵⁷ Thomas Roberts, *Gwaith Tudur Penllyn Ac Ieuan Ap Tudur Penllyn*, (Cardiff, 1958), 53.

⁵⁸ W. Davies, *Gwaith Lewis Glyn Cothi*, (Oxford, 1837), 390.

⁵⁹ D.J. Bowen, *Barddoniaeth Yr Uchelwyr* (Cardiff, 1957), 58.

⁶⁰ Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1996), 215, 217.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 245, 267.

above. Strangely, Columba is commonly associated with cranes.⁶² The earliest example of this is an episode (I.48) in *The Life of St. Columba* where Columba demonstrates his divine prescience when he orders a monk to keep watch for a lost migrating crane.⁶³

The comparison with cranes continues in our current text, *Betha Colum Cille*. In anger that the queen called him *corrclerech*, Columba transforms her into a crane, with her maid *ar cneit* (on account of her groaning). The end of the poem uses the same term to emphasise why the curse was appropriate from an auditory perspective:

Mairid beos, do-gniat cnetá,
A nDruim Ceta cen sena

They still live and make complaint
In Druim Cet, without denial.⁶⁴

These two women who dared to complain against one of Columba's decisions are now transformed into cranes, birds who always sound like they are complaining. The story may have been intended to convey the misogynistic moral to listeners that women should not complain or speak against men.

Transformation into crane is also used as a punishment for women in two other Gaelic texts: In *Duanaire Finn*, Aoife daughter of Dealbhaath was turned into a crane by Iuchra, out of rivalry in love for Ilbhreac. Aoife was a crane for 200 years in the court of Manannán mac Lir, and her pelt was later made into Manannán's magical crane bag (*corrbolg*).⁶⁵ Similarly, in the fifteenth century version of *Agallamh na Senorach* from Dublin Royal Irish Academy MS. 24, Oisín has a conversation with Miadhach daughter of Eachdhonn Mor. Miadhach and her foster-sister Morann were in love with the same man. Morann complained to her foster-father about the rivalry, and Miadhach was turned into a crane by Eachdhonn when she refused to give up the affair. She had been a crane for 295 years when Oisín talked to her,

⁶² Anne Ross, "Ésus et Les Trois<< Grues>>," *Études Celtiques* 9 (1961): 405–38; Richard Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (London, 1995), 311–12; Ian Finlay, *Columba* (London, 1979), 23–24.

⁶³ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 150. The bird is translated as a heron by Sharpe, but the term used is *grus* (crane) and the crane would have been more common than the heron in this period, especially as a migratory bird. Interestingly, even this crane is greedy, Adomnán explains it is *esurientem* (hungering). W. Reeves, *Vita Sancti Columbae* (Dublin, 1857), 90–91.

⁶⁴ Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba*, (Oxford, 1996), 245, 267.

⁶⁵ Eoin MacNeill, *Duanaire Finn*, Part 1 (London, 1908), 21–22, 118–19.

meaning that longevity seems to have been part of the crane curse.⁶⁶ Amusingly, when *Betha Colum Cille* is read from the perspective of these stories, Columba is cast into the traditional role of a rival for the attention of Aodh, the king. These Gaelic crane stories are reminiscent of the Welsh tradition, but not quite parallel to our texts. Just like in the Welsh corpus, cranes in these stories are portrayed negatively, in that being turned into a crane is a punishment. However, these texts do not criticise the appearance or appetite of the crane, so they cannot fit into the topos of the ugly, greedy crane.

Discussion

The five Welsh references criticising the crane, together with the references praising the crane in the first section, represent opposing portrayals of the species. While Welsh literature does have a strong genre of the pre-eminent crane, as attested especially in the Welsh *Laws of Court* (presented above), the negative references present an alternative, previously overlooked, portrayal of the crane. They do not form an especially uniform group. Whilst #1 and #2 clearly refer to the crane's greed, in #3, technically the heron is the greedy bird and the crane is just very bent. Reference #4 criticises the bird's legs and reference #5 the bird's voice. However, they can all (with the possible exception of #5) be loosely categorised as part of an ugly, greedy crane topos.

The last aim of this paper is to discuss possible origins of the topos.

First, the origin of the topos may have been natural. Cranes commonly forage on agricultural crops, especially when other food sources are scarce.⁶⁷ This would have been most notable in the winter migration, when west-Europe's breeding cranes would be bolstered by a hungry migrating population from northern Europe.⁶⁸ This could provide a natural origin for the ugly, greedy crane topos. This same observation probably inspired the classical legend of how a Pygmy tribe used to go to war with cranes each year to prevent damage to their harvest

⁶⁶ Nessa Ni Shéaghdha, *Agallamh Na Seanórach*, vol. 3 (Dublin, 1945), 84–91; Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition* (Oslo, 1931), 418–19.

⁶⁷ G. Nowald, 'Cranes and People: Agriculture and Tourism,' in *Cranes, Agriculture and Climate Change* (Wisconsin, 2010), 60–64.

⁶⁸ see: Shrubbs, *Feasting, Fowling and Feathers*, 70.

(*Iliad* III:7; Pliny VII:26/2),⁶⁹ a legend also retold in the *Book of Monsters* which is preserved with *Beowulf* in the Nowell Codex.⁷⁰

The second possibility is that the topos may have originated in the tale of Philoxenus, known from classical antiquity. This gluttonous minstrel wished for a neck longer than a crane's so that he could enjoy food for longer.⁷¹ The earliest reference to this legend is in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (III.10)⁷², but this is only a brief note. It is unclear therefore how well-known the legend was in Wales at the time of our authors, and whether this legend started the topos, or whether the legend gained currency later on.

There seems to be a reference to this legend in English literature of the sixteenth century. In Spenser's (1590-1596) *Faerie Queene*, the titular character's opposite, Queen Lucifera is accompanied by embodiments of all the mortal sins. This includes Gluttony, who rides on a pig, eats great feasts and lets the poor starve:

And by his side rode loathsome Gluttony,
Deformed creature, on a filthie swyne;
His belly was upblowne with luxury,
And eke with fatnesse swollen were his eyne,
And like a Crane his necke was long and fyne,
With which he swallowed up excessive feast,
For want whereof poore people oft did pyne;
And all the way, most like a brutish beast,
He spued up his gorge, that all did him deteaste.⁷³

As South has pointed out, the crane is central to the passage.⁷⁴ Just like the medieval crane, Gluttony is simultaneously hideously deformed of body and graceful and 'fyne' of neck. There are some early references to the legend in Middle English, but it was becoming more popular in the early modern period as evidenced by its inclusion in Thomas Browne's (1646) *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. Still, this early modern reference would have seemed very familiar

⁶⁹ E.V. Rieu, Peter Jones, and D.C.H. Rieu, *Homer: The Iliad* (London, 2003), 45 (III.1); H Rackham, *Pliny Natural History: Books III-VII* (Cambridge, 1942), 522–525 (VII.2).

⁷⁰ Moriz Haupt, *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* (Berlin, 1863), 11.

⁷¹ Malcolm H South, 'A Note on Spenser and Sir Thomas Browne,' *The Modern Language Review*, 1967, 14–16.

⁷² Robert Williams, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1869), 93.

⁷³ Carol V Kaske, *Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene: Book One* (Indianapolis, 2006), 59–60.

⁷⁴ South, 'A Note on Spenser and Sir Thomas Browne.'

to an audience from medieval Wales. If Queen Lucifera represents the worst kind of monarch, Gluttony represents ordinary people's fears about the greed of the rich. If our authors were aware of the early English references to this legend, it could have inspired the Welsh topos, just like it inspired Spenser.

This brings us to a third, more complicated possibility. The topos may have been a projection of ordinary people's opinions of the landed gentry. A Marxist interpretation of the topos is, at first sight, possible, and worth considering in some depth. Single-minded greedy hunger is exactly the attribute exhibited by the elites looking to feast on the largest, highest-status game birds. The best evidence for this comes from popular opinion towards the sport of falconry. Hunting and falconry were often condemned in the medieval period as frivolous and corporeal (rather than spiritual). A good example of this comes from William the Conqueror's epitaph (quoted extensively above), where William is said to be 'fallen into avarice' for his privatisation of public land, and introduction of poaching law.⁷⁵ Hunting and falconry were generally treated with suspicion by religious writers as worldly pleasures and sometimes banned.⁷⁶ Even more secular figures of the later medieval period sometimes criticised them. For example, the Welsh courtier Walter Map reflected on Henry II's ardour for the venery arts like this:

... canum et auium peritissimus et illusionis illius audissimus.

... a great connoisseur of hounds and hawks, and most greedy of that vain sport.⁷⁷

The topos of the ugly, greedy crane may therefore have been popularised as a projection of national or religious feelings about the venery arts, hunters and falconers. Since the birds literally stole food from ordinary people, (cranes often forage on agricultural land)⁷⁸ but were protected from retribution for frivolous falconry and the sumptuous banquets of the rich elites, it is easy to see how they could have become associated with greed.

In the thirteenth century a public relations exercise to make the venery sports seem less self-indulgent and more socially responsible was carried out by John I over two religious holidays

⁷⁵ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 221.

⁷⁶ Rudolph Willard, 'Chaucer's text That Seith That Hunters Ben Nat Hooly Men,' , *Studies in English*, no. 26 (1947): 209–51.

⁷⁷ M.R. James, *Walter Map: De Nugis Curialium, Courtiers' Trifles*, , ed. C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), 476–77.

⁷⁸ Nowald, "Cranes and People: Agriculture and Tourism."

1212-1213.⁷⁹ He caught seven cranes on the day of the Feast of Innocents and fed 50 paupers for each one caught (350 paupers total). He also fed 100 paupers after catching nine cranes at Candlemas.⁸⁰ Gurney has explained this exercise as an incentive for ordinary people to leave cranes alone, but a single feast does not seem like a long-term incentive to prevent poaching by the starving.⁸¹ Presumably those involved would have preferred John to spend his prize-money providing a steady supply of ordinary food. The aim instead seems to have been to associate crane hunting with charity. Kings were expected to feed poor people during religious holidays anyway, so it did not cost John anything. The attempt was unsuccessful. The venery arts maintained a high lustre at court and a low reputation in religious settings. A class conflict reading of the crane in medieval society is therefore justifiable. It is probable that some of the poor reputation of falconry helped popularise the Welsh topos of the ugly, greedy crane.

However, whilst antipathy towards the venery arts may have inspired the antipathy towards cranes, the topos of the ugly, greedy crane does not symbolically convey class-criticism, even where used as satire.⁸² This is clear from our texts. The portrayal of the crane in Gerald of Wales is not satirical and the bird is portrayed as a moral exemplar. Gruffudd ap Dafydd ap Hywel is describing the crane itself, not referring to a human at all. In the poems by the legendary Taliesin and Dafydd ap Gwilym, the authors are referring to themselves as cranes, which also makes a class-critique improbable. Admittedly Dafydd was self-satirising, but all the other human objects of comparison are poor (herdsman, shepherd, pilgrim, black-friar in rags) so the comparison with the crane is probably not intended to satirise him as a wealthy elite. The person being satirised by Tudur Penllyn is a professional (although English) piper, not a member of the gentry or aristocracy.⁸³ Further, whilst the class interpretation of the greedy crane topos is tempting, it can only have a limited value for medieval Wales.

⁷⁹ Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, 49–50.

⁸⁰ H. Cole, *Documents Illustrative of English History in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1844), 250, 253.

⁸¹ Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, 49–50.

⁸² A comparable, but more short-term example of natural imagery being used to encrypt subversive social commentary is the depiction of frogs in the sixteenth century to comment on the close relationship between Elizabeth I and Francis, Duke of Anjou & Alençon. Doris Adler, “Imaginary Toads in Real Gardens,” *English Literary Renaissance* 11, no. 3 (1981): 235–60.

⁸³ Helen Fulton, “Class and Nation: Defining the English in Late-Medieval Welsh Poetry,” in *Authority and Subjugation in Writing of Medieval Wales*, ed. Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (Basingstoke, 2008), 191–212.

Medieval Welsh literature is not conducive to the preservation of class-subversive topoi. The sources we have which describe the crane negatively come mainly from Welsh poets from 1300-1500. This is the time of the *cywyddwyr*, when professional poets and their literature were patronised by the landed gentry of the *uchelwyr*.⁸⁴ The landed gentry would hire poets for live performances as well as commissioning the production of manuscripts. In the fourteenth century, the poets themselves were often born from rich families, and had a similar education to their patrons. The close relationship between the *cywyddwyr* and the *uchelwyr* means our texts are unlikely to contain socially progressive morals or question the establishment in their writing.

Dafydd ap Gwilym is the author we know the most about. At times he affects to be a wandering scholar (*clêr*), meeting women in bushes after dark, and getting involved in tavern brawls, but clearly this is part of his poetic persona.⁸⁵ In reality he was wealthy enough to travel as he chose, and as Fulton has shown, much of his work is dedicated to developing the illusion that his patrons, the elite *uchelwyr*, still had complete authority in Wales.⁸⁶ He was not interested in writing socially subversive literature, except perhaps in his adaptation of the grotesque realism mode which emphasised sexual freedom and showed some cynicism towards organised religion.⁸⁷ This kind of humorous poetry seems to have been welcomed by the *uchelwyr*.

The most probable origin of the greedy crane topos is therefore that it was inspired by nature or by the story of Philoxenus. While the topos of the greedy crane may have been popularised to some degree by class satire, its use by the well-connected and secular *cywyddwyr* poets demonstrates that this moral either did not exist or had worn-off by the fourteenth century.

⁸⁴ Helen Fulton, 'Literature of the Welsh Gentry: Uses of the Vernacular in Medieval Wales,' in *Vernacularity in England and Wales, c.1300-1550.*, ed. Elizabeth Salter and Helen Wicker (2011), 199–223; Eurys I Rowlands, *Poems of the Cywyddwyr*, (Dublin, 1976), xi–xii, xvi–xx.

⁸⁵ Bromwich, *Dafydd Ap Gwilym*, xiii.

⁸⁶ Helen Fulton, 'The Poetic Construction of Authority: Dafydd Ap Gwilym and the Uchelwyr,' *Parergon* 10, no. 1 (1992): 15–34.

⁸⁷ Liam Anton Brannelly, 'Laughing Together: Reading Dafydd Ap Gwilym through the Bakhtinian Lens,' CONF, in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* (2013), 70–82.

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