

## A Guide to Welsh, Cornish, and Breton Verse

### Welsh *Cynghanedd*

The **cywydd** is perhaps the best-known traditional Welsh verse form, and features heptasyllabic lines grouped in rhyming couplets. In each couplet, a stressed syllable in one line rhymes with an unstressed syllable in the other line. Normally, each line must exhibit one of the four forms of *cynghanedd* ‘consonance.’ Other types of ornamentation (like **cymeriad**) are also common.

	Caru y bŷm, cyd curiwyf, A mwy neu ddeufwy ydd wyf; Cyfragod cariad tradof,	<i>I have been loving, though I am languishing, and I am [now loving] more or twice more [than before]; watching over a very gentle love,</i>
4	Crupl y cur, croyw epil cof. Cadw a orwyf i'm ceudawd Cariad, twyllwr, cnŵr cnawd. Cynyddu, cwyn a wyddiad,	<i>pain's cripple, clear offspring of memory. I have kept love in my breast, deceiver, gnawer of flesh. It's increasing (it knew pain)</i>
8	Y mae i'm bron, mam y brad, Cynt no thyfiad, cread craff, Corsen o blanbren blaenbraff. Ceisio heiniar o garu	<i>in my breast (mother of deceit) quicker than the growth (a powerful creation) of a rod on a thick-topped planted tree. It was my aim to seek a crop of love</i>
12	Yn briod fyth i'm bryd fu.	<i>appropriately and continuously.</i>

**Cynghanedd Groes** : The consonants in the first half of the line repeat in the second half. Consonants at the end of each half-line are often ignored.

<b>Y mae i'm bron, mam y brad,</b> m m br (n)   m m br (d)	<b>Crupl y cur, croyw epil cof.</b> cr pl (r)   cr p l c(f)
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**Cynghanedd Draws** : Like *cynghanedd groes*, except that one or more consonants at the beginning of the second part of the line do not participate in the *cynghanedd*.

<b>Caru y bŷm, cyd curiwyf,</b> c r  (b m c d) c r (f)	<b>Cadw a orwyf i'm ceudawd</b> c d   (r f m) c d (d)
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**Cynghanedd Lusg** : An syllable earlier in the line (stressed or unstressed) rhymes with the stressed penultimate syllable of the line. Normally only allowed in the first line of a couplet.

<b>Cyfragod cariad tradof,</b> <u>ad</u> ad	<b>Ceisio heiniar o garu</b> ar <u>ar</u>
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**Cynghanedd Sain** : A combination of *cynghanedd lusg* and *cynghanedd groes* or *draws*. The line is divided into three parts. The first part shares a rhyme with the final syllable of the second part, and one or more consonants from the second part are repeated in the third part.

<b>Corsen o blanbren blaenbraff.</b> <u>en</u>   <u>bl n</u> <u>bren</u>   <u>bl n</u> <u>br</u> (ff)	<b>Cariad, twyllwr, cnŵr cnawd.</b> <u>wr</u>   <u>cn wr</u>   <u>cn</u> (d)
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**Cymeriad** : A device used to link several adjacent lines or stanzas through the repetition of the same consonant, word, or phrase at the beginning of each line or stanza.

**Sangiad** : A short ‘poetic aside’ or exclamation (often about half a line of verse) which stands out from the main narrative flow of the poem; shown between parentheses in the translation above. Medieval Welsh poets often used *sangiaidau* to help provide the required *cynghanedd* in a line.

Benjamin Bruch

Text and translation of *Hwsmoniaeth Cariad* by Dafydd ap Gwilym from [www.dafyddapgwilym.net](http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net)

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A **cywydd** can have any (even) number of lines: usually at least twenty and sometimes over one hundred. But there are many other traditional Welsh poetic forms which are shorter — and perhaps less intimidating for a first try at **cynganedd**.

An **englyn** is a short poem of three or four lines which may be regarded as the Welsh version of a haiku. Like haiku, *englynion* are sometimes written in a series (often with a shared word or phrase linking the components). As in the *cywydd*, each line of an *englyn* must exhibit some form of *cynganedd*.

The most popular form is the **englyn unodl union**, which consists of four lines of 10, 6, 7, and 7 syllables. All four lines rhyme with one another, although the rhyming syllable in the first line is usually the seventh, eighth, or ninth syllable of the line. This rhyming word is followed by a pause (called a **gwant**, and indicated by a dash), and the remaining one to three syllables (the **cyrch**) alliterate, or rhyme with the beginning of the second line. Lines 3 and 4 must feature a rhyme between stressed and unstressed syllables, as in a **cywydd**.

x x x x x x A - x x x  
x x x x x A  
x x x x x x A  
x x x x x x A

Cusan hoen huan henhäu—yn brudd  
Ym a'm lludd am em llu;  
Clod les datod, lwys deutu,  
Clo ar fin dyn claeaf fu.

c. *sain* – Cusan : huan, hoen huan : henhäu  
c. *groes* – Ym a'm lludd : am em llu  
c. *sain* – Clod : datod, les datod : lwys deutu  
c. *draws* – Clo ar fin (dyn) claeaf fu

*A kiss from one of the sun's colour keeps me from aging sadly  
on account of a multitude's treasure;  
composing of beneficial praise, two lovely sides,  
it was a lock on the lips of a gentle girl.*

Note the rhyme between **brudd** at the end of line 1 and **lludd** in the first half of line 2; because line 3 ends with an unstressed syllable (**deútu**), line 4 must end with a stressed syllable (**fú**).

An **englyn penfyr** is much the same as an **englyn unodl union**, but has no fourth line:

x x x x x x A - x x x  
x x x x x A  
x x x x x x A

In an **englyn cyrch**, all the lines have seven syllables. Lines 1, 2, and 4 rhyme with one another, and line 3 rhymes with the word before the caesura (shown here as |), which falls somewhere in the middle of line 4:

x x x x x x A  
x x x x x x A  
x x x x x x B  
x x x B | x x A

The **englyn milwr** is one of the oldest and simplest forms, comprising three seven-syllable lines which share an end-rhyme. There are some Late Cornish poems which resemble this form:

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Text and translation of *Englynion y Cusan* by Dafydd ap Gwilym from [www.dafyddapgwilym.net](http://www.dafyddapgwilym.net)

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x x x x x x A  
x x x x x x A  
x x x x x x A

Another variant is the **englyn proest**. Here, the four seven-syllable lines do not rhyme with one another, but rather are linked by **proest**, a kind of half-rhyme in which the final consonants (if any) are identical, but the vowels differ. A vowel or diphthong can make *proest* only with another vowel or diphthong of the same class. In Cornish, these four classes would be:

1. All long vowels
2. All short vowels
3. All y-diphthongs (**ey, ay, oy, ei**)
4. All w-diphthongs (**iw, yw, ew, aw, uw**)

Thus **tan** can make *proest* with **glin, hen, ton, troon, Lun** and **leun**, but not with **mynn** (since the **y** is short) or **meyn** (which contains a diphthong). **Karr** makes *proest* with **torr** and **berr**, but not with **or**, where the **o** is long. And **to** (which lacks a final consonant) makes *proest* with **da, le**, and **hi**, all of which have long vowels in final position, and no final consonants.

### Further Rules, Exceptions, and Tips

1. A double consonant can answer a single consonant in consonantal *cyghanedd* (c. *groes*, c. *draws*, or c. *sain*), so **py le** can be answered with **pella** (**p l : p ll**) and **henn yw** with **hanow** (**h nn : h n**). Note, however, that **an enys** cannot answer **ynnos** or **enos** since the two **ns** in **an enys** are separated by a vowel, and cannot be run together in speech.
2. You can treat the glides **y** and **w** as part of a diphthong, so they do not have to be repeated in consonantal *cyghanedd*. Thus the sequence of consonants in **gwas** can be answered by either **gweus** (which treats the **w** as a consonant) or **ages** (which treats it as part of a diphthong **wa**).
3. The consonant **h** does not always need to be answered in consonantal *cyghanedd*. Thus the phrase **unn darn** may be answered by **yn hy dorn**, where the **h** of **hy** does not count as part of the consonant sequence **n d r n**.
4. In Middle Welsh poetry, an **f** (the equivalent of Cornish **v**) is often ignored in consonantal *cyghanedd*, so it would be quite appropriate to use forms like **manna'** or **gene'** in Cornish.
5. Middle Welsh poetry sometimes allows an **n**, **r**, or **m** to go unanswered in consonantal *cyghanedd*, particularly if it appears at the beginning of a line of verse or just after the caesura. One could thus write **Ny'n gorras yn y garr ev**, a line of *cyghanedd groes* where the initial **n** of **Ny** does not participate in the repetition of the consonant sequence **n g rr**.
6. Cornish *cyghanedd* might allow the consonant **gh** [x] to be answered by **h**, especially since both sounds could be reduced to [h] in the Tudor and Late Cornish periods. Similarly, **hw** could be answered by **w**, since some texts show little or no distinction between the two.
7. Early Welsh poetry often shows a kind of proto-*cyghanedd* (sporadic alliteration, consonant repetition, and internal rhyme) which does not always follow the strict rules used by later writers. This may be more suitable than full *cyghanedd* for writing in Cornish.
8. Many modern Welsh poets continue to use the traditional strict metres, but some are introducing *cyghanedd* to other types of verse forms (the limerick, the sonnet) or even to blank verse. Feel free to experiment!

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### Breton Kenganez

Breton poetry also shows complex patterns of internal rhyme, although the forms used are less intricate and more flexible than those of Welsh strict-metre poetry. This system of internal rhyme is sometimes referred to today as **kenganez**, which is a literal translation of the word *cynghanedd* into Breton.

Rhyme schemes in Breton poetry are often very simple, with poems and plays often grouping lines as a series of couplets (**AABBCCDD...**) or in quatrains with identical end-rhymes (**AAAA, BBBB, CCCC**). Perhaps the most intricate verse form found is the six-line stanza used in poems like the Middle Breton *Buhez Mab Den*:

Orgouillous cablus dymusur	<i>Proud, unmeasurably guilty!</i>
Gra goap a-z port a-z sort ordur	<i>Make a mockery of your conduct, such a waste as yours!</i>
Soyng ha conyur e-z asurancc	<i>Think and reflect on your self-assurance!</i>
4 Breman da hunan pe-ban out	<i>Now, you, wherever you come from,</i>
Ha hoaz ma-z y pan chenchy rout	<i>and wherever you go, when you change your path,</i>
Ha cret ez-edout en doutancc	<i>believe that you are in danger!</i>

Here, the ends of the six lines rhyme **AABCCB** — a typical pattern in the Middle Cornish dramas as well. But whereas Cornish verse usually has seven-syllable lines, Breton favours even numbers, and lines of eight or twelve syllables are especially common. Also unlike Cornish verse, each line of this Breton verse includes one or two sets of internal rhymes:

orguillous : cablus : dymusur  
port : sort : ordur  
soyng : conyur, conyur : asurancc  
breman : hunan : ban  
y : chenchy  
cret : edout, edout : doutancc

In each case, the penultimate syllable of the line (whether stressed or unstressed) rhymes with at least one previous syllable in the line. In addition, the end-rhymes of lines 1 and 2 (dymusur : ordur) match the internal rhymes of line 3 (conyur : asurancc), and a similar relationship can be seen between lines 4, 5, and 6 (out : rout, edout : doutancc). It is usual to have at least one internal rhyme per eight-syllable line, and triple rhymes (like port : sort : ordur in line 2) are common. Lines with two sets of internal rhymes (like 3 and 6) are also found, and verse written in twelve-syllable lines may exhibit even more complex patterns.

As with Welsh *cynghanedd*, Breton poetry allows for a bit of flexibility, and the internal rhymes need not always be perfect. While the internal rhymes (and the end-rhymes) of Breton verse often involve unstressed syllables, it is not usual for unstressed words — prepositions, articles, particles, and conjunctions like **dhe**, **an**, **y**, or **ha** in Cornish — to participate in the internal rhyme.

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Middle Breton text from *Trois poèmes en moyen-breton*, ed. Roparz Hemon (DIAS, 1981)

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## Cornish Verse

Traditional Middle Cornish verse shows much less ornamentation than medieval Welsh or Breton poetry. Like Welsh and Breton poets, Cornish writers used a syllabic metre, in which the number of syllables per line, and not the number of stressed ‘beats,’ was the most important metrical feature. Most lines of medieval Cornish verse have seven syllables, although four-syllable lines are also common, and may have been used in to create a heightened sense of emotion or urgency.

Middle Cornish verse is written in stanzas of four to fourteen lines, and over 200 different stanza forms are found in *Pascon agan Arluth*, the *Ordinalia*, *Beunans Meriasek*, and *Bewnans Ke*. However, most of these can be described as variants of one of three basic types:

### Type I. ABABABAB and variants (alternate rhyme):

en tas a nef ym gylwyr	<b>A</b>	7
formyer pup tra a vyt gvrys	<b>B</b>	7
onan ha try on yn gvyr	<b>A</b>	7
en tas han map ha'n spyrys	<b>B</b>	7
ha hethyv me a thesyr	<b>A</b>	7
dre ov grath dalleth an beys	<b>B</b>	7
y lauaraf nef ha tyr	<b>A</b>	7
bethens formyys orth ov brys	<b>B</b>	7

(*Origo Mundi*, lines 1-8)

Basic unit: **AB** (lines rhyming alternately)

- Most stanzas have eight lines; four-line stanzas are also common
- Usually, all lines are the same length (either seven or four syllables)
- Variants with six, ten, and twelve lines are also found, although they are quite rare
- Sometimes the rhyme changes halfway through (**ABABCBCB**), although this is probably a sign of desperation on the part of the poet

The Type I stanza is more common in the older texts, particularly *Pascon agan Arluth* and the first part of *Origo Mundi*; it is much less prevalent in *Beunans Meriasek*, and is not found at all in the surviving portions of *Bewnans Ke*. Later writers may have considered the form too plain (because it offers little room for rhythmic variation) or too difficult (since it requires two sets of four rhyming words).

### Type II. AABCCB and variants (tail-rhyme):

ihesu a fue anclethyys	<b>A</b>	7
hag yn beth a ven gorrys	<b>A</b>	7
gans ioseph ha tus erel	<b>B</b>	7
y leuerys ef yn weth	<b>C</b>	7
datherghy an tressa deth	<b>C</b>	7
y wre pur wyr hep fyllel	<b>B</b>	7

(*Resurrexio Domini*, lines 1-6)

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A common variant, particularly in *Resurrexio Domini*, has short **B** lines:

ef yv an profus ihesu	<b>A</b>	7
a leuer y vos map dv	<b>A</b>	7
a nef huhel	<b>b</b>	4
divithys a nazare	<b>C</b>	7
tre a wlascor galile	<b>C</b>	7
pur thyowgel	<b>b</b>	4

(*Passio Christi*, lines 325-330)

Basic unit: **AAB** (couplet + single line)

- Most stanzas have six lines
- Often, especially in *Passio Christi*, the two couplets have the same end-rhyme (**AABAAB**)
- One or both of the **B** lines may be reduced to four syllables (**AAbCCb**, **AAbAAb**, **AAbCCB**)
- Variants with all short lines are also common (**aabccb**, **aabaab**)
- The usual form may be reduced to five lines by reducing one couplet to a single line (**AABAB**, **ABAAB**); in this case the single line must rhyme with the couplet in the other half of the stanza
- Particularly in the *Ordinalia* and *Beunans Meriasek*, the stanza may be lengthened by changing one or both of the couplets to triplets (**AABCCCB**, **AAABCCCB**)
- In *Beunans Meriasek*, an extra pair of lines is sometimes added to create an eight-line stanza (**AABCCBCB**)
- The basic pattern may be repeated to form a nine-line stanza (**AABCCBDDb**)
- A ten-line form in which the couplets have been replaced by quatrains is also found (**ababccdedec**); in this variant, all the lines have four syllables:

a vynyn ryth	<b>a</b>	4
na tuche vy nes	<b>b</b>	4
na na wra gruyth	<b>a</b>	4
na fo the les	<b>b</b>	4
ny thueth an pris	<b>c</b>	4
erna gyllyf	<b>d</b>	4
then nef thum tas	<b>e</b>	4
may tewhylyf	<b>d</b>	4
arte thum gulas	<b>e</b>	4
the gous worthys	<b>c</b>	4

(*Passio Christi*, lines 875-880)

The Type II stanza is found in all the Middle Cornish dramas, and it is the prevalent verse form used in the *Ordinalia* (except for the first part of *Origo Mundi*) and *Beunans Meriasek*. While there are many variants, the basic **AABCCB**, **AABAAB**, and **AAbCCb** forms are the most common. More exotic and asymmetrical forms like **AAbCCB**, **AABAB**, **AABCCBCB**, and **AABCCCB** are found primarily in the later texts, especially *Beunans Meriasek*.

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### Type III. ABABcDDC and variants ('hybrid'):

me yw gylwys duk bryten	A	7
ha seuys a goys ryel	B	7
ha war an gwlascur cheften	A	7
nessa 3en myterne vhell	B	7
kyng conany	c	4
aye lynneth purwyr y thof	D	7
gwartheyvyas war gvyls ha dof	D	7
doutis yn mysk arly3y	C	7

(*Beunans Meriasek*, lines 1-8)

Basic structure:

*Frons*: a **Type I** or (less often) a **Type II** stanza

*Cauda*: four or five lines rhymed **abb(B)A** with a short (four-syllable) *bob* at the beginning

The *bob* is often grouped syntactically with the *frons*

- The Type III stanza most commonly consists of eight lines with a short fifth line (**ABABcDDC**)
- Other lines in the stanza may also be reduced to four syllables (**AbAbcDDC**, **AABAABcddC**)
- Very rarely, the fifth line is lengthened (**ABABCDDC**)
- The *cauda* may be extended by adding an extra **D** line (**ABABcDDDC**)
- In *Beunans Meriasek*, an extra pair of lines may be added to the end of the stanza (**ABABcDDCDC**)
- The *frons* may be extended to eight lines (**ABABABABcDDC**)
- The *frons* may be a Type II stanza (**AABCCBdEED**, **AABAABcDDC**)

The Type III stanza may ultimately be derived from the Middle English *thirteener*, a verse form with thirteen lines rhymed **ABABABABcDDDC**. It is very rare in the *Ordinalia*, more common in *Beunans Meriasek*, and is the most prevalent stanza type in *Bewnans Ke*. While the most typical Type III form in the later plays is **ABABcDDC**, there is considerable variation in line length and stanza structure. In almost all variants, however, the *bob* — the first line of the *cauda* — is a four-syllable line.

Further information on medieval Cornish verse forms, including those used in *Gwreans an Bys*, may be found in:

Bruch, Benjamin. *Cornish Verse Forms and the Evolution of Cornish Prosody, c. 1350-1611*. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2005.