VEXILLUM

the undergraduate journal of classical and medieval studies

Issue 5

2016

Funding for *Vexillum* provided by
The Medieval Studies Program at Yale University

Issue 5

Available online at http://vexillumjournal.org/

The Troubadour's Woman:
Mirroring the Male Gaze in Early Medieval Literature

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The famed "lady" of the medieval courtly love narrative is introduced into medieval literature by the French troubadour poets of the twelfth century. They come singing her praises, conjuring with their poems and their songs the ideal—and original—cruel, fair mistress of affections. This is the domna*, an archetype upheld in later literary tradition by famous figures like Isolde and Guinevere. The* domna *is a complicated figure; she is at once chaste and erotic, married and yet destined to be worshipped only by men who are not her husband. The* domna *is accorded tremendous power from the beginning—if the troubadours who bring her about are to be believed, she controls their hearts and their appetites, their minds and their souls and whether or not they live. But is this power a power at all? Or is this figure a mere construction of the male gaze, manipulated and agitated in turn so that these male authors can look back on the true objects of their affection—themselves? The* domna *is ultimately a canvas upon which the troubadours paint their own self-portraits, illustrations of pious sacrifice, romanticized struggles, and introspections on the concept of love that can only persist so long as the* domna *herself remains distant from the lover, absent from the passion she is said to inspire and consequently stripped of any ability to respond.*

The study of courtly love is perhaps best understood as a study of paradoxes. It is a cultural clime in which men—knights and courtiers both—are encouraged to pursue the favor and ardor of married women while the women are applauded for bestowing such. Intimacy is expected, while consummation is condemned, and it is from this precariously balanced social code that the figure of the *domna* — the famed "lady" of the medieval courtly love narrative who is all at once adored, coveted, and thoroughly forbidden— emerges into western literature as a foundational archetype composed of contradictions. Introduced into medieval literature by the French troubadour poets of the twelfth century, the *domna* is an enduring archetype reincarnated most famously by later famous figures like Isolde and Guinevere. The *domna* is a complicated figure; she is at once chaste and erotic, married and yet only worshipped by men who are not her husband. The *domna* is accorded tremendous power from

the beginning—if the troubadours who bring her about are to be believed, she controls their hearts and their appetites, their minds and their souls and whether or not they live.

The *domna* is she who "is in full control while the knight owe[s] her absolute obedience and submission without hope of tangible reward."[1] However, close critique of her earliest depictions in the troubadour poetry that would engender the courtly love narrative reveals that she is, in fact, bound by the same power she is venerated for holding. Her only means of influence over the male authors, who claim to worship her, stems from allowing herself to be objectified, by turns either glorified or vilified by the troubadour poets whom this work now contemplates. Troubadour poetry begins the literary tradition of courtly love as it is bound to narrative, elevating in the fictional what neither Ovid nor Andreas Capellanus could fully explore in their semi-serious "how-to-guides" to the arts of love—the figure of "the lady" as she influenced the poet-speakers of the troubadour canon.

Who is this "lady," this *domna*, and is her power over the poet a real force to be reckoned with, or is she merely a means of first exploring and then displaying maleness on the page? Is her role best compared to the way that Camelot's monsters and villains exist solely to be vanquished by Camelot's knights, adding glory to the Round Table and distinction to the individual members? Or is it possible that the position of *domna* in troubadour poetry, the foundational first texts of the courtly love tradition, allows women to both exercise personal agency and express sexual desire, albeit in a carefully coded fashion? If courtly love can be defined as a "stylized and idealistic relationship between a knight and his lady"[2] based "on the feudal relationship between a knight and his liege lord,"[3] then it must be interpreted through the figures whom it centralizes: the poet-lover and the lady-loved. The evolution, then, of the *domna* as she is depicted by different poets must be the guide through which her power is determined to be either earnest in force or a simple literary device.

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[1] Pamela J. Porter, *Courtly Love in Medieval Manuscripts* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), 19.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

Troubadour poetry encompasses a range of attitudes concerning the practice of romantic love at court and outside of marriage. However, following the definition given above, the poetry of a select few rises above the rest in allowing for a clear picture of the lady as she progresses throughout time. The works of Jaufre Rudel, Marcabru, and Bernart de Ventadorn together possess all of what would become the tropes of courtly love literature. Jaufre Rudel wrote in the early twelfth century and he, "unlike Bernart de Ventadorn, [was] not concerned specifically with [his] courtly relationship to a particular *domna* or [his] position in society."[4] It is no coincidence then that he is credited as the inventor of the *amor de lonh*[5]—love from a distance. It is a love that does not necessitate the presence of the *domna* to be a present force within the poet. Rudel's poetry is chronologically some of the earliest of the canon to be identified as troubadour poetry. As such, his *amor de lonh* is particularly significant because it constructs a concrete standard on which the love literature to come would be built. His work emphasizes the strength of love's bond, often equating the romantic impulse with the religious. An example of this conflation is found in Rudel's "When in May":

> I have faith that the Lord will grant
> I see this love from far away;
> but for every good, it brings
> two evils, since it lies so far away.
> Oh, that I might be a pilgrim there
> so that her fair eyes
> could behold my staff and cloak.[6]

The "two evils" brought by this love that dwells so far away directly address the inherit paradox upon which courtly love is based. Theoretically, courtly love consists of desire devoid of action (that is, consummation). Instead, love finds its release in gifts of song and, later, deeds of battlefield glory. It is a

[4] L. T. Topsfield, *Troubadours and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 43.
[5] Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, eds., *The Troubadours: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 67.
[6] Anthony Bonner, ed. and trans., *Songs of the Troubadours* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), 63.

solitary experience, a one-sided love, because the desire a *domna* inspires necessitates her distance from the lover. The lady whom Jaufre Rudel writes of is herself distant both sexually and actually, a twofold distance that makes her doubly inaccessible. In spite of this distance, his love is ever present, dominating every aspect of his being from how he feels to how he measures his faith in God. Note that he believes *for* the privilege of seeing his lady again. He would venture to her as a pilgrim to a shrine, his devotion as pure and presented as equally righteous because there is neither hope nor expectation of physical reward. In exalting the *domna* to the status of a religious icon, this troubadour manages to sanctify her—and yet it is he himself whom he canonizes by highlighting his own piety and his own soul which he saves by faithfully serving a longing he can never satisfy. In this way, the distant *domna* is made to embody his own sacrifice. She is both the catalyst to his goodness and the canvas upon which he illustrates it.

Rudel's words frame the rules of courtly love; they express the proper way in which to practice it as though it is the only way. They present a romanticization of romance itself—not the lady these troubadour speakers purport to romance.

> They speak the truth who call me greedy,
> Desiring love from far away,
> For no other joy so delights me
> As that in love from far away,
> But what I most want I cannot have
> . . . What I most want I cannot have[7]

The subject of the speaker's love being fulfilled, of him ever actually procuring the lady who is the cause of such pain, is never considered as a realistic outcome. In fact, it could be theorized that true love has no outcome so long as "outcome" is synonymous with "ending." The goal of Rudel's love is simply to remain in love—suspended, as opposed to falling. Rudel's work puts forth desire, rather than ownership,

[7] Bonner, 64.

as the relevant issue at hand and it is from that division between wanting and having that the *domna* derives her initial ambiguity. She is either a figure that is liberated from patriarchy and empowered by the scopophilia that can never be more, or she is objectified by a voyeuristic fetishism that actually requires her absence—and moreover, her inability to respond in any way to the professed affections—in order to function.

If the *domna* cannot be owned, she cannot be classed according to the gender hierarchy. In his *Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis contends that marriage as an institution throughout the Middle Ages existed strictly within the bounds of business.[8] From that, it is no great leap to surmise that women—within the bounds of marriage—existed as the means through which that business was conducted. The generalization is that women are property and marriage is the trade that guides the buying and selling of them as such. Women are to be given in marriage by fathers and received by husbands; to be elevated as mothers of children, who are in turn legitimized only through the nuptial bond; and to be defined as wives and mothers, by their husbands and sons, after they are no longer defined as daughters. Marriage is, in short, a medieval woman's context.

The *domna*, however, has no such concrete claims on her identity. To remove a woman from the realm of marriage changes her position drastically and alters her personhood by *giving* her a personhood. Readers of Rudel's poems are not required to know who his lady's husband is, who her father is or who her sons might be. She simply *is*, a woman operating outside the jurisdiction of matrimony inasmuch as her identity is not linked to her status as a wife or mother. However, this apparent freedom only extends as far as she *is* Rudel's beloved—his muse, his object of romanticized affection, his means of exploring his own decidedly sensual emotions.

Rudel's poetry differs from later tradition in that the lady herself is scarcely to be seen in much of his work. His songs place the speaker's struggle in the forefront, mentioning the distance of his lady

[8] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1958), 13.

as the cause of his pain but concentrating on his own feelings rather than her many virtues. “The lady” is not nearly as relevant a figure within the poem as the heartache that she supposedly causes. However, in suggesting that she cannot be obtained and in never once making mention of to whom she might already belong, Rudel does bequeath the lady with independence even if he fails to reward her with relevance. Is that sufficient cause to reason that she is consequently a powerful figure?

Marcabru, like Jaufre Rudel, writes in the twelfth century and is one of the first troubadour poets to be recognized as such. L.T. Topsfield calls him “the most inventive and original of all the troubadours”[9] and certainly, both Marcabru’s depiction of love and the lady to whom such love is addressed differs greatly from the other troubadour poets. Just as Rudel must be noted for gifting unto love’s literature the *amor de lonh,* Marcabru sets the standard for *fin’ amors.* It is a concept that will be explored thoroughly throughout the rest of the later courtly love canon, from Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* to Dante’s *Paradiso.* Marcabru’s *fin’ amors* refines Rudel’s *amor de lonh* by solidifying the implied link between “true love” and piety, emphasizing love’s innate influence over the morality of its practitioners.

If Rudel can be said to have glorified the pain of a true and chaste love, then certainly Marcabru celebrates the virtue it has the ability to both awake and enforce.

> Marcabru judges the sexual behavior of the nobility in the light of the Christian ethic and the classical humanism of the great scholars of his day, and condemns it as adulterous, sterile and disruptive, for the individual person and for society. He offers a remedy of rational behavior which will bring social order and individual happiness. This remedy is Fin’ Amors.[10]

He condemns contemporaries for failing to practice love as it was practiced in days past, for gratifying lust over, essentially, longing. “Love was once virtuous and straight/But now it’s twisted and jagged,” Marcabru writes in “I’ll Tell You Plainly”:

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[9] Topsfield, 70.
[10] Topsfield, 72.

Love was perhaps once dear
But now it has turned vile
And virginity's a thing of the past
Listen![11]

Marcabru's castigation of evil lovers and false love defines true love and virtuous lovers by default. His speaker's words sift love's practices until there is a vast difference between indulging carnality and aspiring to something purer, something true and respectable and even righteous in the sight of God.

What is perhaps most intriguing about Marcabru's premise is the way in which he expresses it through a woman. No longer is the lady a silent source of pain of pleasure, to be used for the poet's own introspection. Nor is she even, necessarily, a lady, as his *pastorella* technique demonstrates:

The other day, beside a hedge,
I came upon a humble shepardess,
A person full of joy and wit,
Daughter of a peasant girl . . .
"Young girl," I said, "a gentle fairy
Blessed you, when you were born,
With a beauty unequaled by that
of any other peasant girl,
and it would be increased yet more
if only once you'd let me
lie on top, with you beneath."[12]

Marcabru's speaker is a nobleman hunting for immediate and physical gratification, exhibiting exactly the kind of careless carnality that Marcabru otherwise condemns. However, instead of allowing his identity as poet to intervene and speak directly to the erring nobleman, Marcabru chooses to exact a lesson through the "humble shepardess." Of all of the available techniques, of all of the characters or authorities he could have called upon, a woman is the means he selects to deliver the proper moral:

"Sir, a man beset with folly

[11] Bonner, 48, stanzas V-IX.
[12] Ibid., 54, stanza VII.

> Swears promises, and guarantees;
> But though you might do me homage,
> My Lord," said the peasant girl,
> "I will not for a meager entrance fee
> Exchange my virgin state
> For that of whoredom!" [13]

The nameless shepardess continues. As the nobleman continues to pressure her, this time with compliments and that time with debate, the young woman of this poem disdains to become a mere object. In addition to exhibiting a will, she demonstrates the ability to reason—to argue and to confound a man who surpasses both her socioeconomic station and her female position in a patriarchal hierarchy. Here Marcabru brings the lady of courtly love literature to life, not only as a lady loved, but a human being.

> . . . But each kind seeks
> Its own: madmen seek madness,
> Courtly men courtly adventures,
> And peasant men peasant girls.
> Old people say that to lose
> All idea of proportion
> Shows a lack of common sense.[14]

Such indiscriminate behavior not only shows a lack of common sense; it also raises questions of equality between the pursuer and the pursued, the love that is offered and the lover to whom it is offered. Had the shepardess succumbed to the nobleman's desires, she would have dishonored the both of them and placed them both in Marcabru's own contempt for practicing the "false love"[15] derided in the first of Marcabru's poems presented above.

[13] Ibid., 55, stanza X.
[14] Ibid., 55, stanza XII.
[15] Ibid., 48, stanza VII.

In this same work, the poet admonishes that "men who follow women's wisdom will surely come to ill,"[16] implying that it is women who hold the power to direct the course of love's virtues. Should they succumb to male lust, they do both themselves and their lovers a supreme disservice. Should they refuse all carnal advances, they succeed over baser inclinations and instead inspire the men who would pledge their love to aspire to something higher.

L. T. Topsfield, too, finds Marcabru's concentration on individual agency to be directly indicative of the quality of a specific individual's love: "This ideal of perfect, true and complete love, Fin' Amors, is rarely found, for love takes its quality from the qualities of those who practice it."[17] What Topsfield perhaps does not mention is the significance of Marcabru's "lady," who is sometimes not a lady at all, but rather a peasant. Nevertheless, she remains the object toward whom desire is directed, and to whom the ability to cause pain or end it, to defend chastity or dispense with it, is given by the poet. In short, Marcabru's *domna* has the power not only to determine the quality of the love she accepts, but in doing so, to also either raise or debase the quality of the lover.

Marcabru and Jaufre Rudel both use either the presence or the absence of the *domna* to propose that love has the ability to purify instead of debase. Marcabru argues that love ought to purify and that anything which does not is not love. Rudel maintains that a love beset by lust can only destroy itself and end itself by creating a carnal end rather than perpetuating the mental and spiritual process of being in love. In the works examined above, Rudel and Marcabru each treat the lady as a means; if the goal is spiritual elevation, then the lady is the means through which such an elevation is accomplished. She marks and measures the journey of the male lover from a man beset by carnal lust to a noble, humble servant who, in the image of Christ separated from the Father, is at every turn serving, striving,

[16] Ibid., 49, stanza XII.
[17] Topsfield, 83.

and sacrificing amid the absence of the one from whom he draws his strength and on whom he focuses his ardor.

In this context, the *domna* is not an end within herself, though she graduates from being a mere figure in Rudel's distant love to being a vocal, reasoning force in Marcabru's *fin' amors*. So who does she become? And which is more powerful—being the way through which men reach righteousness, or being the destination that men seek to reach? If both involve objectification, is there any disparity between the two?

Bernart de Ventadorn's writings hail from later in the twelfth century than Jaufre Rudel's or Marcabru's, falling within the end of the first troubadour period and the beginning of the second. Bernart's work adds to the beauty of the earlier tradition by filtering his subject through the conventions already established by his predecessors. Ventadorn's lady is very clearly the ideal lady of courtly love's imagination: virtuous and cruel, sexual yet chaste. She is both a suggestion and a presence within Bernart's poems, possessing a physical form, various character traits, and reported actions, all while inspiring Bernart to ruminate on his own internal turmoil:

> It is best that she should
> Bend me to her every wish,
> For then, if she does me wrong
> Or puts me off, she'll have compassion.[18]

In the work of Bernart de Ventadorn, the feudalistic submission of lover to lady emerges in full. Her authority over the speaker is complete; he admits it freely and often. However, working within this very same piece there is something that seemingly undermines the complete submission that the speaker claims he offers and which courtly love's definition demands:

> . . . And if she takes her time,
> It's not for me to blame her—

[18] Bonner, 86, stanza VI.

> But if only she could mend her ways!
> . . . I have always wanted you,
> For nothing else so pleases me,
> No other love so tempts me.
> O wise, gentle lady, may He
> Who fashioned you so beautifully,
> Grant me that joy which I await.[19]

This speaker very openly engages with the idea of sex, something that Rudel never considered and Marcabru condemned outright. Possession of the *domna's* body is the goal that this speaker has in mind, and it is the end toward which he is working.

The poles are set thus: "the lady" of courtly love's literature is either *a means* to practice righteousness or *the ends* to be sexually achieved—either an instrument or a sinner. Bernart accords her the capacity to cause extreme suffering or equally intense joy. Her love warms his speaker despite the coldest winters[20] and deafens him to other "shouts or screams."[21] Indeed, separation from her is causing the lover to die on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, this same speaker, so enthralled, is still objective enough to issue his lady an ultimatum:

> ...Who ever saw a man do penitence
> For a sin not yet committed?
> The more I beg, the crueler
> She becomes, and unless she changes,
> we'll be forced to part.[22]

It is to be specially noted that Bernart de Ventadorn's speaker exchanges *domnas*, an unheard-of caprice and a completely unprecedented exercise of free will. It is personal agency operating apart from Love, outside of the *domna*, and this is all the more momentous in view of the fact that Bernart de Ventadorn, just as Jaufre Rudel invented the *amor de lonh* and Marcabru created and defined *fin' amors*, is

[19] Ibid., 87, stanzas VI-IX.
[20] Ibid., 87, stanza II.
[21] Ibid., 90, stanza III.
[22] Ibid., 86, stanza V.

understood to be the first troubadour who united all of the tropes and really concretized what both troubadour tradition and courtly love literature comprise. That his speaker can even have an agenda apart from Love, once he has supposedly been overwhelmed, ought to automatically discount the lady and whatever influence she was purported to have. Instead, what Bernart's writings provide is a definition of power as it operates within the bounds of courtly love. His work explains the paradox at the heart of having a powerful woman as a literary device anywhere within the medieval tradition. It does so by, at last, placing the power of the *domna* within a context, limiting it with one essential proviso: the *domna* may indeed wield incredible authority over her lover, but she may, under no circumstances, withhold her love from that lover.

Should a *domna* withhold her love, she forgoes the privileges of being a lover's lady and she may then be exchanged for some more willing woman. The *Allegory of Love* admits that within the courtly canon, "[t]he lady is allowed free choice in her acceptance or rejection of a lover in order that she may reward the merit of the best . . . By admitting a worthy lover to her favors she does well."[23] To exclude any 'worthy' lover, however, the lady "truly is a woman," as Bernart De Ventadorn's speaker laments:

> She doesn't want what should be wanted, and desires what is forbidden . . .
> Since nothing serves me with my lady,
> Not prayers, pity, or the rights I have,
> And since my love displeases her,
> I'll never speak of it again
> But rather part from her and leave. [24]

To be a bit more direct, the lady at the center of the courtly love tradition may have authority over every thing except herself, own any body save her own. It is a power, but only to a very certain, very circumscribed, extent.

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[23] Lewis, 34.
[24] Bonner, 92, stanzas V and VII.

In idealizing romantic desire but shunning consummation, courtly love eliminates the need for the famed lady to be an active participant in her own love affair, and in doing so allows the lover full control over the literal narrative of their relationship. The troubadour's *domna*, accorded nominal power, is ultimately a canvas upon which the troubadours paint their own self-portraits—illustrations of pious sacrifice, romanticized struggles, and introspections on the concept of love that can only persist so long as the *domna* herself remains distant from the lover, absent from the passion she is said to inspire, and consequently stripped of any ability to respond. It is this lack of response that makes such sexless passion possible and makes courtly love as a system plausible.

Of courtly love, Lewis's *Allegory* concludes "that love is a 'kind of chastity," in virtue of its severe standard of fidelity to a single object. The lover must not hope to succeed, except with a foolish lady..."[25] If these lovers, the first of which being the troubadours, "must not hope to succeed"[26] in attaining the lady, then it must be resolved that the courtly lovers are in fact seeking to attain something else, that this single object is an ideal, not an individual. The *domna* may not be a wife to be owned, but she *is* a symbol created in the image of her makers to express their own piety, their own morality, their chivalry, and ultimately their own self-worth. In conclusion, the *domna* may indeed be a lady, but she is not quite a person.

[25] Lewis, 34.
[26] Ibid.

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