

“LO ROSSINHOLS S’ESBAUDEYA” (70, 29):
BERNART DE VENTADORN, COURTLY ETHICS
AND THE CATALAN TRADITION

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Bernart de Ventadorn (...1147-1170...) is one of the most renowned troubadours of the so-called classical period. His exquisite craftsmanship, the delicate elaboration of his songs, the variety of emotions portrayed in his poetry make him one of the best known troubadours at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Love is the exclusive subject of his forty-five extant songs. While Bernart’s influence over French and German love poetry has been widely acknowledged, less attention has been paid to his legacy in Catalan lyric. Many of the ideals that Bernart helped to establish and promote as a manner of living for the courtly lover subsist and are developed in Romance lyric of the Eastern Iberian Peninsula in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In order to present some examples of this influence, we will identify courtly ideals in one of his songs and we will track their fortunes in Catalan love lyric at the end of the Middle Ages.

The song that we have chosen, “Lo rossinhols s’esbaudeya” (70, 29 in Pillet-Carstens repertory), illustrates one of the characteristic features of Bernart’s poetry: the diversity of attitudes towards love and towards the lady. These are woven into the fabric of discourse as the changing mood of a lover whose luck is uncertain. The fanciful nature of love brings the lover up and down on an emotional roller coaster that makes him both praise and blame the lady. In fact, if Bernart’s poetry has achieved fame over the last decades of the twentieth century, it is not only thanks to his portrayals of the perfect, submissive courtly lover, but also thanks to one of the most popular antifeminist tirades in troubadour lyric, stanzas IV and V of “Can vei la lauzeta mover” (70, 43):

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|----|
| IV. | De las domnas me dezesper. | 25 |
| | Ja mais en lor no-m fiarai, | |

s'esbaudeya.” The seven full stanzas of the text present us with a variety of motifs that, while already present in classical troubadour lyric, enjoy a remarkable success in Catalan lyric of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Among them are the image of the courtly lover as a potential target for mockery and deception, the uselessness of strictly observing the courtly love code, the depiction of the lady as a whimsical and cruel character, and the personification of Love as an accomplice of the lady's tricks. In our reading of the text we will identify these features and track their resonance in the works of later Catalan and Valencian poets:

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|------|--|--------------|
| I. | Lo rossinhols s'esbaudeya josta la flor el verjan, e pren m'en tan grans enveya qu'eu no posc mudar no chan. Mas no sai de que ni de cui car eu non am me ni autrui e fatz esfortz car sai faire bo vers, pois no sui amaire. | 5 |
| II. | Mais a d'Amor qui domneya ab orgolh et ab enjan que cel que tot jorn merceya ni-s vai trop umilian. C'a penas vol Amors celui qu'es francs e fis si com eu sui. So m'a tout tot mon afaire c'anc no fui faus ni trichaire. | 10 15 |
| III. | C'aissi com lo rams si pleya lai o-l vens lo vai menan, era vas lei que-m guerreya aclis per far so coman. Per aisso m'afol'e-m destrui, don a mal linhatge redui, c'ams los olhs li don a traire s'autre tort me pot retraire. | 20 |
| IV. | Soven me rept'e-m plaideya e'm vai ochaisos troban, e can ilh en re feuneya, | 25 |

- vas me versa tot lo dan.
 Gen joga de me e-s desdui,
 que d'eus lo seu tort me conclui. 30
 Mas ben es vertatz que laire
 cuida tuih sion sei fraire.
- V. Om no la ve que no creya
 sos bels olhs e so semblan
 e no cre qu'ilh aver deya 35
 felo cor ni mal talan,
 mas l'aiga que soau s'adui
 es peyer que cela que brui.
 Enjan fai qui de bon aire
 sembla e non o es gaire. 40
- VI. De tot loc on ilh esteya
 me destolh e-m vau lonhan,
 e per so que no la vey
 pas li mos olhs claus denan.
 Car cel sec Amors que-s n'esdui 45
 e cel l'enchaussa qu'ela fui.
 Ben ai en cor del estraire
 tro que vas midons repaire.
- VII. Ja non er, si tot me greya
 qu'enquer fin e plaih no-lh man, 50
 que greu m'es c'aissi-m recreya
 ni perda tan lonc afan.
 A sos ops me gart e-m estui,
 e si non em amic amdui,
 d'autr'amor no m'es vejaire 55
 que ja mais mos cors s'esclaire.
- VIII. Enaissi fos pres com eu sui
 Mos Alvernhatz, e foram dui,
 que plus no-s pogues estraire
 d'en Bel Vezer de Belcaire. 60

IX. Tristan, si no-us es veyaire,
mais vos am que no solh faire.¹

I. The nightingale rejoices beside the blossom on the branch, and I have such great envy of him that I cannot keep from singing, though I do not know of what or of whom, for I do no love myself or any other. Yet I force myself to write good verse even though I am no lover.

II. Whoever courts with arrogance and deceit gets more from love than one who pleads every day and goes about most humbly; for Love hardly wants one so honest and true as I am. Thus she [Love] has spoiled everything for me, since I was never a deceiver or cheater.

III. Just as the branch bends wherever the wind takes it, so I was bent to do the command of her who wars with me. For thus she ruins and destroys me, and thus stoops to bad behavior. I offer her both eyes to pluck out if she can reproach me with any other fault.

IV. Often she blames me and argues with me and finds complaints against me, and when she does anything wrong, she turns all the injury toward me. She acts nobly indeed when she tricks me and amuses herself condemning *me* for *her* own wrongs!² But then it is true that a thief thinks all men are his brothers.

V. No one sees her who would not believe her beautiful eyes and her appearance, nor think that she should have an evil heart or wicked desire. But the water which flows quietly is worse than that which roars. Whoever seems gracious and is not so at all practices deceit.

¹ Text and translation in Stephen G. Nichols' edition (Bernart de Ventadorn 1962, pp. 125-128). I have introduced some changes to Nichols' translation, namely the gender marks for Love's personification: in Nichols' rendering, Love is either a male character or a thing ("it"), but, considering that it appears as a female character in Provençal texts (including the present one; see v. 46), I have amended Nichols' translation in accordance with this.

² Italics in Nichols' text.

VI. From every place where she may be I turn and go far away, and in order that I may not see her, I pass by her with my eyes closed. For Love follows the one who flees and shuns the one who pursues her. Indeed I have a mind to escape from her until she returns to my lady.

VII. In truth I will not do anything about it, even though it grieves me to seek peace and to offer her no quarrel; for it is hard for me thus to renounce and lose such long suffering. I regard her needs and dedicate myself to her, and, even if we two are not friends, it does not seem to me that my heart glows more from any other love.

VIII. May my Alvernhart be taken just as I am, and we would be two, and he would no longer be able to withdraw from the Bel Vezer of Beauclair.

IX. Tristan, even if it does not seem so to you, I love more than I used to.

STANZA 1

The first conventional motif in this text is the parallel between love and song, or, more precisely, between the act of loving and the act of singing. In this poem, the topos of singing is used to show the singer's task, usually associated with loving, under a new light: the lover says that he's feeling the urge to sing because of the nightingale, a bird often linked with the act of loving and love songs. But Bernart challenges the expectations of the audience by stating that he wishes to sing although he is not *amaire*, that is, he is not in love. This severing of the conventional association between love and song reveals a search for novelty and a wish of surprising the audience: after the initial astonishment, Bernart's public would surely be possessed by curiosity to know how this dissociation has taken place, and why the troubadour is singing, if it is not for love. This initial deception of the audience's expectations reveals itself as a clever rhetorical artifice aimed at capturing the public's attention, while the poem develops according to the pattern of a conventional love song.

STANZA 2

It is at the beginning of the second stanza that this conventional development becomes clearly visible. Taking Love as one of the characters in lyric fiction, the lover blames her behaviour: she rewards unfaithful lovers, forgetting the loyal ones³. This motif is somewhat frequent in classical troubadour lyric, but will be constantly present in Catalan poetry of later centuries. One of the poets who used this topic to display the decadence of courtly ideals is Pere Torroella (c. 1420-1475). In the satiric poem “Doleuvos, enemorats”, he describes a brothel visited by men from all professions and social conditions; no courtly lover, though, is to be found there. The poet witnesses how men who do not practice courtly love satisfy all their needs easily and quickly. This makes him think about lovers who behave in a gentle way (“fan lo gentill”, v. 91) and long for the good things that he saw mistreated (“desigant / los béns que viu maltrectar”, vv. 75-76). While courtly lovers forget what they really must do (“oblidant lo qu-és degut”, v. 94) and obtain nothing but jealousy and anger (vv. 91-96), other men gather all the benefits in exchange for presents and material goods, because

dones, ab avinentesa,
basten més donas cobrar
que virtuts, amor ne abtesa
(vv. 78-80; 2004, pp 99-103)

Women would receive presents more gladly than virtues,
love or talent.

These verses dwell on the old antifeminist topic of women's materialism, but also portray courtly virtues as naïve and ridiculous, in contrast with men who combine a pragmatic mentality with sexual vigour and economic power.

Although the first verses of the stanza are about lovers in general, from verse 14 onwards the song focuses on the particular case of the lover. He illustrates the principle exposed in the previous verses: after having served his lady nobly and faithfully, he has not been rewarded by Love.

³ Since *amor* is a feminine word in Provençal language, Love appears as a female character in troubadour lyric.

Complaints about Love's behaviour are far from unusual in Provençal love lyric. In "Mout a amors sobrepoder" (167, 38), Gaucelm Faidit (...1172-1203...) depicts a lover who regrets his own impotence to rebel against Love:

Mout a Amors sobrepoder,
 qan lieis, que poign'en mi aucir,
 mi fai desirar e voler,
 e vol q'ieu l'am e qu'il m'azir;
 per q'amdui fazem ses faillir
 tot son coman d'aquest afaire,
 (vv. 1-6; 1965, p. 362)

Love has an excessive power, for she makes me desire and want her [the lady], who strives to kill me, and wants me to love her and her to hate me; for this reason, we obey her will without failure in this matter.

The personification of Love as a character of the lyric fiction is a common feature in the works of Catalan and Valencian poets inspired by the troubadour tradition. Gilabert de Próixita (...1392-1405...) shows a lover who makes Love responsible for the fate of his sentimental affair in "Amor aysi m'ha fayt sentir":

Amor aysi m'ha fayt sentir
 ab faç plasen son franch perer,
 qu'eras m'a tant sobrat poder
 que ges no-m say d'amar partir
 (vv. 1-4)

Love has made me feel her true will with a pleasant face, and now she has overpowered me so that I cannot depart from loving.

Amor, si-m volguessets aucir
 e que no-m fessets tant doler,
 ffer m'iets sobiran plaser,
 car morria tot mon cossir;
 (vv. 8-11)

Love, if you wanted to kill me without making me endure so much pain, you would please me enormously, as all my sufferings would die too.

Be-m fayts, Amor, languen finir,
si muyr axi per ben amar
ab lieys, qui es dona ses par.
(vv. 19-21; 1954, pp. 49-52)

Love, you make me die out in languishing if I die for loving her, who is a lady beyond compare.

In “Apoderat d’emor, per son poder,” Joan Berenguer de Masdovelles (...1442-1476...) portrays a lover who goes a bit further: he admits that his feelings for the lady are exclusively due to Love’s power, as he does not consider any lady as worthy of love:

Apoderat d’emor, per son poder,
en vos amar forsat, enpes ma son,
per so com crech que vuy dona del mon
tant no marex ni deu per dret aver
(vv. 1-4; Aramon i Serra 1938, pp. 217-218)

Under Love’s command, and by her power, I have been forced and compelled to love you, as I think that no lady in the world deserves love, nor must fairly have it.

In “Gerregar vull ab amor he m’aymia”, also by Joan Berenguer de Masdovelles, the lover considers Love and the lady as two foes successfully allied against him:

Gerregar vull ab amor he m’aymia,
si be no pusch seguons conech, guonyar
si no la mort, per tal guerra menar,
car llur poder es gran, he senyoria.
(vv. 1-4; Aramon i Serra 1938, pp. 175-176)

I want to make war against Love and against my lady friend, although, as far as I know, I could win nothing

but death in such a war, for their power and dominion
are strong.

As this example shows, in some cases Love's unfair behaviour is aligned with the lady's reprehensible attitude. Love plays the role of a bad lord, an unfaithful master who does not abide by his part of the feudal agreement. One of the complaints of courtly lovers against the lady is that the deal between master and servant has been broken by her actions. The claims that the lover formulates against Love echo the invectives against the lady; moreover, the similarities between the lady and Love are reinforced by the fact that Love is a female character in lyric fiction.

STANZAS 3 & 4

The examples that we have just discussed serve as an introduction to the contents of the third stanza. Here, the lover leaves Love and turns to the lady. Her character presents some similarities with the personification of Love described by the lady's suitor in the previous verses: in spite of the lover's obedience and submission, the lady confronts and destroys him. He brands her attitude as indicating *mal linhatge*. By placing the lady and Love together in the enemy's ranks, the lover allows himself the possibility to blame them. The criticism of the lady's actions continues in the fourth stanza: the lover describes her as a playful and capricious character that fools him only to blame him for her own mistakes.

STANZA 5

The fifth stanza introduces a new element in the text: the lady's physical beauty. The praise of the lady's ravishing allure is a conventional element in courtly love lyric. However, the present situation is slightly different: the lover has not praised the lady so far; protests against the lady's attitude rather than singing her virtues occupied him. This context gives a different sense to the depiction of the lady's beauty. In this song, her pleasant appearance works as a counterpoint to her inner cruelty. Through the opposition between the lady's external and internal qualities, the lover stresses the unfairness of her nature: nobody who sees her can believe that a vile heart exists under such a lovely appearance. The final verses of the stanza convey a covered accusation by

means of a generalization: a person who seems good-natured and does not act as such is a cheater.

The contrast between the lady's external beauty and her inner cruelty is used in courtly lyric to enhance the negative features of her character. This motif enjoyed popularity in troubadour-inspired Catalan love lyric. In "Ès vostre cor d'acer, ab tan fort temple", the Valencian poet Joan Roís de Corella (...1443-1497...) gives voice to a lover who dedicates a whole song to describe the torments that love is inflicting upon him, and concludes that all his trouble comes from the lady's beauty:

És tot mon dan perquè en vostra imatge
 mostrar no es pot la crueldat coberta;
 ans vostre gest, que par sia benigne,
 quan vull pintar, tinc davant per exemple
 (vv. 17-20; 1983, p. 54)

All my pains come from the fact that your image cannot show the hidden cruelty; on the contrary, when I want to depict you, what I have in front of me is the benign look of your countenance.

There are a number of Catalan songs where the only positive trait in the lady's portrayal is physical beauty, among a powerful set of negative moral features⁴. The motif of the lady's deceptive appearance as opposed to her inner faults reflects the old antifeminist cliché that associates women with the material world and, subsequently, with lies and falsehood. The appearance of the lady tempts the lover, making him believe in her goodness, and, finally, dragging him into the ruin of sexual love⁵.

STANZA 6

Here the lover expresses his intention of avoiding and shunning the lady in the future. All at once, he declares that Love runs away from those who seek her and follows those who avoid her. Thus, the parallel between the lady and Love becomes clear:

⁴ See, for instance, Joan Berenguer de Masdovelles' "Amor tots jorns me presenta" and "En vida muyr, he morint puix guarir" (Aramon i Serra 1938, pp. 92-94).

⁵ Bloch 1991, pp. 25-31.

the lover plans to use with his lady the same strategy that he would use with Love, as they behave similarly. The listener might have the impression that both characters have become interchangeable within poetic fiction. Verses about the lady and about Love are interspersed because the actions of both characters are assimilated.

STANZA 7

The lover ends up surrendering to Love and declaring that he will continue serving his lady. The justification for his decision deserves some attention, though: he believes that giving up this affair would mean wasting all the effort he has put into it. The struggle for love is seen as an investment that should not be thrown away. After the criticism of the lady's actions by the lover, it is likely that the audience would interpret these words as a display of cynicism. Love service is a long term enterprise that must earn the lover some compensation for the pain he has endured. The stanza closes with declarations of love for the lady, and the lover expresses his desire of submitting himself to her. These verses culminate the shift in discourse's direction beginning with the first stanza: at the start of the song, the poetic voice declared that he was not in love; as we read on, the characters of Love and the lady appear, and the lover finds an opportunity to blame both for their behaviour. The fact that blame is shared between Love and the lady shields her from receiving all the criticism for her actions. Although the song ends with the conventional expressions of fidelity and submission, the composition as a whole displays original and witty strategies for presenting the usual topics in a new light, surprising the audience, and breaking the oneness of poetic discourse by intertwining positive and negative aspects of the lady.

In the previous pages we had an opportunity to demonstrate that lyric motifs used by Bernart de Ventadorn in mid-twelfth century were inherited by Catalan and Valencian poets, and still resonant three centuries later. Although Pere Torroella, Joan Berenguer de Masdovelles, Joan Roís de Corella and other poets rendered a faithful reworking of the classical themes, their choice of the materials to be revisited was far from unselective. The disparagement of courtly conventions and the negative depiction of the lady's features are in keeping with the historical context of the late-medieval crown of Aragon. The pessimistic view on the classical courtly topics mirrors the anxiety of Aragonese nobility

facing the emergence of trade and bourgeois families. The prospect of losing the privileges traditionally reserved to the knightly elite throws a gloomy patina on the old courtly code, revealing its inefficiency to obtain prestige in a world increasingly driven by monetary interests (as Torroella's poem shows). Thus, the commentary on the transmission of the classical troubadour heritage to Catalan and Valencian poets of the late Middle Ages allows us to grasp the spirit of a crucial period in Western history, when the forces anticipating modern European societies called into question the old aristocratic values.

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