

## WHO ARE CERVERÍ'S WORST ENEMIES?

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I  
Una re dey a Deu grazir:  
c'anch nuyls hom no-m fe desonor  
que no la-l vis sofrir major,  
d'onta, de nafrar o d'aucir  
o de pus mal que mort sofrir,  
donan als amics gran dolor.  
(ll. 1-6)

I have to be thankful to God for one thing: never did a man dishonour me without enduring an even greater dishonour, suffering shame, injury, or death, or harm worse than death, thus greatly paining his friends.

This provocative opening stanza poses a number of questions for any reader: who is this bold, self-righteous speaker? What gives him the right to speak in such a tone? And, who are his nameless enemies? Medieval audiences had a reasonably easy time working out these kinds of questions. Those who heard the piece sung at the royal court of Aragon, where it was composed, were more than likely familiar with its author, the troubadour Cerverí de Girona, one of the most significant poets of the time. If later readers knew the poem from a compilation similar to the only *chansonnier* that has preserved it until present times, they would have had access to at least one hundred and three other pieces by the same troubadour, which give useful clues to understand this self-referential piece.<sup>1</sup> Modern readers, on the other hand, are not as

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<sup>1</sup> Cerverí's section in MS *Sg* (Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, ms 146) is quite likely to proceed from a monographic *chansonnier* kept in the court milieu (see Cabré 2001). The written transmission of his works is attested from an early period: Pere the Great's son Jaume (later King Jaume II of

well equipped to decipher the poem, since both available editions give a rather vague account of its meaning, focusing only on its apparent character as a diatribe, an open, , attack on Cerverí's enemies, markedly threatening in the quoted exordium.<sup>2</sup>

Since the subsequent stanzas fail to provide straight answers to the questions posed by these opening lines, my gloss of Cerverí's poem will try to emulate the exegetic strategies available to the medieval public, by combining a close reading of the poem with the information from the troubadour's corpus and the historical background, which would have been well known to his original audience. As one of the last troubadours, Cerverí de Girona was the heir to a two-centuries-old troubadour tradition, which he considers a source of knowledge and authority.<sup>3</sup> He proudly mentions his 'ancestors,' invoking them as authorities on Love, the supreme value for worthy, courtly men ('Segons c'an dit per ver nostr'ancesor, | hom ses amor a menz valor que layre'), while apologising for not being able to unravel a complex love question despite being an expert, as a troubadour ('si tot suy trobayre').<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Cerverí also presents himself as very well attuned to the cultural and intellectual trends of his time, be they the newly fashionable poetic genres, such as the elaborate dance-songs imported from the Angevin court, or the heated thirteenth-century intellectual controversies, such as the debate on the correct use of public speech or on the status of troubadours (public speakers *par excellence*). The fact that Cerverí's poetry reflects such contemporary issues implies, first, that his own education and background were

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Aragon) was the first known owner of a copy of his works, defined as two *libri Cerverini*. On MS *Sg*, see Ventura (2009 [2006]) and Cabré & Martí (2010).

<sup>2</sup> BdT 434a, 76. I quote from the edition of Cerverí's works I am preparing and will make available at <[www.narpan.net](http://www.narpan.net)> and <[www.rialto.unina.it](http://www.rialto.unina.it)>. See the brief comments and the scant interpretative notes of Riquer (1947, 292-93) and Coromines (1988, I, 332-40).

<sup>3</sup> Archival documents regarding Cerverí attest to his professional service to Pere the Great of Aragon from 1267 to 1285 (see the documents listed by Riquer 1989). However, he was probably well-known as a troubadour before that date, while being in the retinue of the viscount of Cardona, and he is very likely to have died during 1285 (see Cabré 2010, 21-24).

<sup>4</sup> The quotation is from *Lo vers de paradis e d'infèrn* (BdT 434a, 30). See Riquer (1947, 207-10) and Coromines (1988, I, 306-10).

open to these influences, and second, that he expected his audience at the royal court in Aragon to be familiar with them.

Cerverí composed his vast corpus mainly while at the service of King Pere the Great of Aragon, starting well before his accession to the throne, when Pere was crown prince and already had a good share of political concerns as well as showing his own initiatives in terms of cultural policy.<sup>5</sup> During this twenty-year period, Cerverí produced a wide range of lyrics, from ferocious *sirventes* and witty verse narratives to *cansos* and didactic moral *vers*, not forgetting his *pastorelas*, the above-mentioned sophisticated dance-songs, some comic poems, and even a few devotional pieces. This succession of genres and topics follows the progression of Pere's political career: first as a troubled prince, fighting to assert himself as a political player, both within the Ghibelline party and against his siblings, while striving to establish his court's reputation for courtesy and chivalry, as suited his Catalan cultural inheritance and his Ghibelline sympathies; afterwards, as a reigning monarch, determined to impose his policies on the quarrelsome nobility and to claim his wife's rights to the crown of Sicily. Thus, in the early period, Cerverí composed his fashionable dance-songs, which help to portray Prince Pere's court as knowledgeable in courtesy and poetry, his panegyric verse narratives and his acerbic *sirventes* against his protector's enemies, as well as some *cansos*. After Pere's accession to the throne, Cerverí's poetry acquired a more didactic, moderate tone, especially in his *vers*, and often dealt with topics within the range of *regimen principum*, while he also continued to compose love poetry, in *vers* or *canso*. He strove to compose poetry worthy of a dignified royal court, abandoning frivolity and patent self-justification as well as slander.

While serving the interests of Pere the Great in his poems, Cerverí puts to good use –and shamelessly displays– his technical ability, his poetic wit and, often, his sense of humour. Perhaps his most powerful poetic tool is the use of his own *persona*. All through this varied poetic corpus, Cerverí mirrors his immediate context, that is, Pere's court. Not only does he serve his protector's interests by portraying the court as a centre of courtesy, but he also uses this background in his self-representation as a poet. In the manner of

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<sup>5</sup> The political and cultural environment at the court of Pere the Great and Cerverí's involvement is first sketched in Cabré (1999) and further developed in Cabré (2010).

other contemporary satirists, notably Rutebeuf, Cerverí presents himself in his poems both as a wise counsellor, invested with moral authority, and a mercenary jongleur. In turn, his self-abasement satirizes the courtly society. This accounts for the high self-regard he expresses in the exordium cited above, matching his self-portrayal in a number of poems as a learned and wise adviser, who fearlessly speaks the truth and acts as the arbiter of the court's morals. This is the voice we hear in his doctrinal poems, as well as in his political poetry, where the troubadour has an even greater need to establish himself as an authoritative figure.

All of these factors are essential to understand Cerverí's poetry, enabling us to see beyond the seeming platitudes (frequently of a moral nature) that often disguise a specific and poignant meaning. This is particularly true of his *sirventes* and other political pieces, where moral motifs are deliberately chosen to give an appearance of righteousness and impartiality to his attacks.<sup>6</sup> But it is also the case of 'Una re dey a Deu grazir', whose opening mimicks the indignant militant tone of those political poems. Cerverí's attitude calls to mind pieces like his *Acuyndamen*, a war declaration of sorts, where the troubadour announces an aggressive poetic campaign against false and despicable enemies: 'Eras veyretz motz prims e cars / e leus e plas per entendre clars / e manta greu rima ritxa / contra-ls totz croys ples d'enjan / qui meton pretz en soan' (ll. 1-5) 'You will now see polished and rare words and others easy and simple, with a clear meaning, and many grave, rich rhymes, against all wicked men, full of deceit, who despise merit.'<sup>7</sup> Cerverí's *sirventes* offer numerous portrayals of these vile characters, guilty of all felonies and misdeeds, equally harmful to courtesy and society. In this light, the opening lines of 'Una re dey a Deu grazir' could be a first step to establish the troubadour's rightfulness and truthfulness, before launching into a catalogue of sins and crimes committed by his enemies (who usually happen to be also Prince Pere's). The reference to this earlier body of poems is unquestionable, but we must bear in mind

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<sup>6</sup> For a general analysis of Cerverí's *sirventes*, the rhetoric strategies he chooses and their historical background, see Cabré (2006).

<sup>7</sup> BdT 434a, 23. See Riquer (1947, 54-58) and Coromines (1988, I, 217-25). The letters sent by the nobility to the king to warn him they no longer considered themselves his vassals (as was the case at several points during Cerverí's active career) were known as *acuindaments*.

that this poem is addressed to King Pere, and therefore, as we mentioned earlier, it no longer belongs to a time when Cerverí's patron promoted such bellicose poetry.

In his opening statement, the troubadour does not make it clear how exactly harm will come to his enemies. The question might be answered in some poems where he uses this belligerent and boastful poetic *persona*, as a poet possessed of a *saber* that he wields as a weapon. *Lo vers dels escolars* is particularly illustrative in this sense.<sup>8</sup> This poem presents knowledge as a means of becoming feared, honoured and obeyed, loved by God, appreciated and promoted to high positions, a professional profile that Cerverí claims in most of his self-portraits. The piece is addressed to his sons and lists the advantages of learning in order to encourage the boys to apply themselves to studying. Among other advantages, such as serving their friends and making them proud, or finding advancement in the service of powerful lords, some of the benefits mentioned are much less scholarly than one might expect: 'Can ja per tot aço no aprendatz, / pels enemics que faretz escuxendre' (ll. 29-30) "If you do not study because of those reasons, do it because it will crush your enemies." This representation of knowledge as a lethal weapon further takes a moral turn: the displeasure of seeing them gain an elevated position and behave properly will harm their enemies and give great pleasure to their friends.

Cerverí's allusions in "Una re dey a Deu grazir" echo his earlier poems, well known to his audience, and yet the sense of this particular text remains deliberately vague. The style and the speaker are both recognizable, but who are his enemies? The second stanza does not clarify this point:

II  
 Negus no-s cuig a mi cobrir,  
 que be vey part prim cobertor  
 qui-m vol be o-m lauza folor  
 e qui m'es fis o-m vol trazir,  
 e poria-ls mal establir  
 mas us hay de Nostre Seynor.  
 (ll. 7-12)

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<sup>8</sup> BdT 434a, 26. See Riquer (1947, 248-51) and Coromines (1988, II 14-18), as well as the commentary in Cabré (2010, 336-37).

Nobody should think they can conceal matters (or themselves) from me, for I see, as if through a thin veil, who wishes me well or who approves my follies, who is faithful to me and who wishes to betray me, and I could fix them up badly, but I follow the way of our Lord.

It seems clear by now that we need a gloss similar to the ones Cerverí offers in other poems, such as his *alba*, where the extraordinary lady he reveres, described as the clear opposite of ordinary ladies who inspire the common sort of troubadour love, unsurprisingly turns out to be the Virgin Mary.<sup>9</sup> In the present poem, however, the troubadour holds the explicit exegesis back. This is comparable to his political poetry (equally obscure to a modern audience), where contemporaries must have had a detailed knowledge of recent events, since only previous familiarity with the subject-matter allows recognition. In the second stanza, Cerverí has further established himself as a sage who can tell right from wrong, friend from foe, truth from falsehood, even if confronted with a deliberate attempt to deceive him. As for his enemies, we only know that they intend to harm him and are a treacherous bunch.

Having completed his self-portrait as a fair, forgiving, but powerful figure, in the third stanza the troubadour begins to introduce some hints regarding the paradoxical nature of his relationship with his enemies, which may help reveal their identity to a knowledgeable audience:

### III

E si-m volon mal far ne dir  
ne blasmar, no-n dey far clamor,  
que leu son de mi venjador  
qui-s fan, reponden, escarnir;  
quez azaut me de lor partir,  
car il retenon lo piyor.

(ll. 13-18)

And if they want to do me wrong or speak ill of me, or criticize me, I should not complain, since they will soon be my avengers, by making themselves sneered at, while

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<sup>9</sup> BdT 434a, 8. See Riquer (1947, 51-54), Oroz (1972, 410-17) and Coromines (1988, I, 206-10).

being reprimanded; I will gladly part from them, since they will remain worse off.

We finally learn something else about these nameless enemies and the way harm comes to them: by trying to hurt Cerverí, they harm themselves. What is more, they are somehow bound to him: any attempt to be parted from him will leave them worse off.

At long last, the fourth and fifth stanzas bring a turning point, which has been interpreted by previous editors as evoking an anecdotal meaning. Cerverí insists on the treachery of his enemies and also on their paradoxical relationship, but he also introduces 'love' in his discourse, previously centred only on his enemies and himself. The troubadour wonders whether he can take 'his love' away from his enemies. Martí de Riquer (1947, 293, note to l. 21) interprets this as an allusion to powerful people, one of whom might be the lady's husband: he understands that Cerverí is considering whether he can literally, physically, remove his lady from an enemy milieu. Joan Coromines (1988, I, 334-35) follows this track and reads this stanza as further proof of the close relationship between *Sobrepretz*, the troubadour's lady, and the Cardona milieu, where some enemies of Cerverí's resided, thus giving a definite biographical, anecdotal meaning to his reading of the poem:<sup>10</sup>

IV

Be podon a mi desseruir,  
 pus d'els meteus son trazidor,  
 pero no·ls pusc tolre m'amor  
 per nuyl fait ne la·ls posc jaquir,  
 ne·m poria tant affortir  
 que ja·ls pogues tolre valor;

V

ans auria tout gen servir,  
 enseynamen, pretz e lauzor,  
 dous ris, bels oyls, fresca color,  
 azaut cors e gen acuyllir,  
 a leys qui·m fay penan languir,

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<sup>10</sup> See also Coromines (1988, I, 263) for his far-fetched account of the relationship between and Cerverí and *Sobrepretz*.

si no gardava tan s'onor.

(ll. 19-30)

They may well deserve me, for they will be betraying themselves, but I cannot take my love away from them on no account, nor can I abandon my love to them, nor make myself so strong that I might take worth away from them; otherwise, I would have taken fair service, good breeding, merit, value, praise, sweet smile, beautiful eyes, fresh colour, pleasant body and fair hospitality, from her who makes me languish in pain, if I did not have such regard for her honour.

After restating that his enemies' betrayal would be harmful for them, Cerverí also insists on the bond between him and them. I would argue that the mention of love might obliquely refer to the troubadour's beloved but, in the first place, it indicates that love constitutes the bond with his enemies. That is another paradox, which becomes fully explained when the identity of these enemies is gradually uncovered, although it is never actually 'revealed.' A further hint is contained in the fifth and last stanza, where the lady is clearly present and the theme of love is fully established. Departing from his enemies and diminishing them would also mean lessening the lady's honour. Consequently, still another link is established: this time, Cerverí's relationship with his enemies is equated to his service to the lady. As Coromines points out, this might refer to the troubadour's parting from the lady, causing him to stop composing love poetry that praised and honoured her. The reason for this departure, however, is not clear: both Riquer and Coromines, link it to Cerverí's enemies, identified as powerful people in the lady's milieu.

I believe the enemies are much closer to home, and they should be identified with the troubadour's eyes. This is never clearly stated, but such an identification fits all the oblique references to Cerverí's ambivalent relationship with his enemies, and also some of the motifs and expressions used to define it. Furthermore, 'sight' is the theme that structures the two *tornadas*:

VI

Na Sobrepretz, can vos remir,  
e leys dels cartz, hay gran douçor.

VII

Nostre rey vey tan enardir,  
c'a tots sos amichs fa temor.

(ll. 31-34)

Lady *Sobrepretz* (Above-Merit), when I behold you, and the lady of the thistles, I feel great sweetness. I see our king becoming so aroused that he makes (even) his friends fearful.

In short, the poem turns out to be a love piece: a complaint against the troubadour's treacherous eyes, responsible for his having fallen in love, guilty of having fed this love and his folly, and of having tried to disguise reality from him. In this way, Cerverí's recreates a well-known psychomachia, widespread in medieval lyric and romance: the quarrel between the lover and his eyes or his heart, the organs responsible for originating his love according to medieval psychology – a love that has been unrequited or has turned sour, painful, doubtful. This is part of the contemporary interest in sentimental themes, psychological discourses and love theory: a trend that, in narrative genres, runs from the *romans* of Chrétien de Troyes to the Occitan *Flamenca*, but it is also present in thirteenth-century lyrics.

Cerverí makes use of this topic elsewhere in his works in a more open way. In *Dança balada d'en Cerveri*, his faculties accuse the troubadour of having behaved foolishly. Even more explicitly, in the *Estempida* "Si com midons es belayre" Cerverí shows how he has been betrayed by his heart that allowed itself to be stolen by the lady's eyes.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the most interesting clue concerning the meaning of "Una re dey a Deu grazir" is contained in "De pena'n mal e de mal en martire."<sup>12</sup> In this internal debate, the troubadour accuses his heart and eyes of treason, since they have sided with Love to make him aim at an unattainable object, turning him into a martyr of love. He is furious with his disloyal eyes and is prepared to die if that will also cause the death of the traitors: "Per dan dels

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<sup>11</sup> BdT 434,9c and BdT 434a, 59. See Riquer (1947, 12-14 and 68-71) and Coromines (1988, II, 212-14 and I, 170-74).

<sup>12</sup> BdT 434, 6a. See Riquer (1947, 318-21 and Coromines (1988, II, 306-16).

hulhs vulh la mort me destrenya: / per ço que·ls ulhs muyren yeu  
vulh morir, / pus tant los platz que vars la mort m'enpenya / eu  
diray tant que·ls hulhs feray aucir.” (ll. 20-24) “To harm the eyes, I  
want death to destroy me: so that my eyes die, I want to die; since  
it pleases them so much when she pushes me to death, I will say so  
much that I will have my eyes killed.”

Similar motifs can be found in other troubadour lyrics, such  
as in the corpus of Lanfranc Cigala in “Non sai si-m chant,” where  
he formulates accusations against his heart and eyes of having  
betrayed him to Love.<sup>13</sup> The troubadour finds himself blameless  
and considers his treacherous companions to be entirely  
responsible for his pitiful situation: “Pero ben dic que·il colpa non  
es mia, / anz es tota de mos fals compaignos, / q’a guerrers ai·l  
cor e los oills amdos.” (ll. 16-18) “Since I say appropriately that the  
fault is not mine, but it is entirely the fault of my false companions,  
because both my heart and my eyes are my enemies.”

However, it is in a *cantiga* by Johan Soarez Coelho that the  
motif of treacherous eyes is expressed in terms most akin to “Una  
re dey a Deu grazir.” The *trobador* wants to take revenge against his  
treacherous eyes by hurting them in the worst way, that is showing  
them the lady and then removing them from this vision. His  
revenge is also the poet’s worst pain.<sup>14</sup>

Non me soub’ eu dos meus olhos melhor  
per nulha ren vingar ca me vinguei.  
E direi-vus que mal que os matei:  
levei-os d’ u veían sa senhor,  
*e fiz seu mal e do meu coração*  
*por me vengar d’ eles, e por al non!*

<sup>13</sup> BdT 282,16. See Branciforti (1954, 116).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Non me soub’ eu dos meus olhos melhor’ (CLXIV, Vasconcelos 1904, II, 328-29). Consulted at the *Base de datos da Lírica Profana Galego-Portuguesa (MedDB)*, 2.3, Centro Ramón Piñeiro para a Investigación en Humanidades, <<http://www.cirp.es/>>. *Cantigas de amor* frequently refer to the effects of looking at the lady, to the first time the poet saw his lady, to the poet’s tears and other motifs related to the role of the poet’s eyes. Seeing the lady is their most fervent wish as well as the cause of severe pain. For example, in ‘Ai senhor freiosa, por Deus’, D. Denis describes the sight of the lady as harmful to him and his eyes (unless the lady takes pity on him). For an overview of the range of the *olhos* motifs in Galician-Portuguese lyrics, see Tavani (2002, 178-79).

Ca me non podian per nulha ren,  
 sen veê'-lo mui bon parecer seu,  
 fazer gran mal. Mais ¿que lhes ar fiz eu?  
 Levei-os d' u a viian por én!  
*E fiz seu mal e do meu coração  
 por me vengar d' eles, e por al non!*

E na sazon que lhes eu entendi  
 que eles avian de a veer  
 mayor sabor, pero me de fazer  
 mui grave foi, levei-os eu d'ali,  
*E fiz seu mal e do meu coração  
 por me vengar d' eles, e por al non.*

E na vengança que d' eles preendi,  
 gran mal fiz a eles e a mi.

Nothing pleased me more than taking revenge on my eyes, when I avenged myself. And I will tell you how I killed them: I took them where they could see their lady, *and I hurt them and my heart, to take my revenge on them and for no other reason!* For I could not harm them, other than by showing them her beautiful presence. But, what else did I do to them? I took them where they could only see her. *And I hurt them and my heart, to take my revenge on them and for no other reason!* And when I thought they were enjoying this sight more, although it was very hard for me, I took them away from there. *And I hurt them and my heart, to take my revenge on them and for no other reason!* And the revenge I took severely hurt them, and me as well.

The parallels with “Una re dey a Deu grazir” are considerable. Coelho’s poem not only elucidates the identity of Cerverí’s enemies, but also attests to the circulation of this motif in the Iberian courts in terms similar to those chosen by the Catalan troubadour.<sup>15</sup>

Johan Soares Coelho, a Portuguese *trovador*, active at the court of Afonso III of Portugal up to 1279, seems to have

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<sup>15</sup> Some instances of reciprocal influence between Catalan and Galician-Portuguese poets (involving Cerverí) have been studied recently by Betti (2003) and Billy (2006), on occasions with mutually contradictory results.

sojourned in the Castilian court. He exchanged satirical *cantigas* with several Galician and Portuguese *trovadores*, and the love poems he addressed to an *ama* ('nurse') kindled a poetic controversy that provoked numerous replies, particularly from the milieu of Alfonso X of Castile.<sup>16</sup> These circumstances make the similarity between 'Non me soub' eu dos meus olhos melhor' and Cerverí's poem the more relevant, since the Catalan troubadour travelled to King Alfonso's court in 1269 as a member of Prince Pere's entourage. Despite the widespread circulation of the topic of the deceitful eyes, Cerverí succeeds in making the motif original by mimicking his own political poetry and his well-known voice as a moral scourge. By holding back the clues to identify the central motif of his poem -- treachery of his own eyes -- he manages to surprise his audience and flatter those capable of identifying the traitors, while showing his wit and awareness of fashionable topics. This seems a becoming manoeuvre for a self-styled learned poet, but it might also be a meaningful strategy for his patron. Cultural connections between the court of Pere and his neighbours include the importation of dance-songs from the milieu of his enemy Charles of Anjou. This poem might witness the interaction --not devoid of political connotations -- with the circle of his brother-in-law Alfonso of Castile.

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<sup>16</sup> There are conflicting hypothesis about the location and dates of the *ama* debate: see Beltran (1994), Oliveira (1994, 170-71), Correia (1996), Tavani (2002: 407), Beltran (2005, 52-65), and Fernández (2005, 154-58). These particulars should be clarified in some detail in order to further the study of a possible link between the poems by Coelho and Cerverí.

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