

## FAMILY MATTERS

Isabel de Riquer  
&  
Andreu Comas

Imagine, for a moment, a day of celebration in the court of King James I of Aragon in the mid-thirteenth century. It doesn't matter whether the court is convened at the Royal Palace in Barcelona or in any of the crown's other possessions. In the hall are the monarch and the Heir Apparent, Prince Peter, surrounded by their family, high counselors, their scribes and their vassals. Before them all stands Cerverí de Girona. Silence falls on the assembly: Cerverí is the court's most famous troubadour, and he's about to perform a brand-new song. The audience listens attentively; the minstrels play their instruments, and a few moments later Cerverí begins to sing in falsetto.<sup>1</sup>

Cerverí's songs were always full of surprises, such as the *Vers estrayn*, odd tongue-twisting, childlike games that hid the words of the poem among random groups of letters: *Taflamart faflama hoflomom maflamal puflumus siflima eflementrefleme boflomonaflamas geflemens...*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term "falset", used to refer to an affected voice, appears in Old French literary texts from the late Twelfth Century, like *Roman de Renard: Dist Chantecler*. [...] *je dirai une chançon:/ n'avrai cousin si environ/ qui bien n'entende mon fauset*, ed. M. Roques, II, vv. 4374-4377 ("Chantecler [a rooster] says: I'll sing you a song / there's no cousin in the area / who won't understand my falsetto").

<sup>2</sup> Francesco Ugolini was able to decipher the phrase concealed within this *Vers estrayn* with the use of the *Vers breu*, found in manuscript Sg: *Tart fa hom mal pus sia entre bona gens (Taflamart faflama hoflomom maflamal puflumus siflima eflementrefleme boflomonaflamas geflemens...)*. Francesco A. Ugolini, «*Il canzoniere inedito di Cerverí di Girona*», *Atti dell' Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, 5, Roma, 1936, p. 547 - 548. Editors: Martín de Riquer, *Obras completas del*

Try as they might, the members of the audience understood nothing.<sup>3</sup>

Cerverí's repertory was also extremely varied. One day he might sing an *alba* (the most erotic genre of troubadour love poetry) dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the next he might challenge his audience with a long and complex poem on the decadence of certain customs. Cerverí wasn't afraid to cast harsh *sirventes* at the king for his treatment of his sons or his vassals, nor did he hesitate to express his joy at the symbolic wedding engagement between Catalonia and Aragon. One day he surprised his listeners with a furious criticism of women; and on another occasion he flattered his sovereign with praise for his senile love affairs. When, in 1269, Prince Peter traveled to Toledo to visit his brother-in-law, King Alfonso X of Castile, Cerverí offered him encouragement for the long journey with the *Cançó de Madona Santa Maria* (Song of Our Lady Saint Mary). Then, to top it off, he composed a masterful *Cobla in sis lengatges* (*Cobla* in Six Languages). Folquet de Lunel, Dafinet, Paulet de Marselha and the other troubadours in Prince Peter's entourage must have been astonished.

Among Cerverí's 114 lyric compositions – which make up the most extensive repertory of any Occitan troubadour – one finds examples of hermetic significance and ornate verse alongside songs inspired by folk music, masking the composer's great skill beneath an apparently simple style. The Catalan troubadour, author of five narrative poems and of *Proverbis* (which he signed with his true name, Guillem de Cervera) renewed Occitan poetry by using genres and compositional styles that his predecessors had rejected as excessively common. He borrowed from the themes and poetic forms of folk-inspired Galician-Portuguese poetry as well as from French poetic tradition, and his innovative creations were

---

*trovador Cerverí de Girona*, Barcelona, Instituto español de Estudios Mediterráneos, 1947, p. 279-281; Joan Coromines, *Cerverí de Girona, Lírica, I*, Barcelona, Curial, 1988, p. 234 -238.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Bonner composed an ingenious 'translation' of Cerverí's *Vers estrayn*: **Iflimit iflimis haflamard foflomor mefemen toflomo eflemerr aflamioflomong goodfloomood peofleomeople**, which conceals the phrase: "It is hard for men to err among good people". *Songs of the troubadours*, edited and translated by Anthony Bonner, Schocken Books, New York, 1972, p. 220-222.

immediately successful in the Catalan court.

Three of his songs, the *Viadeyra*, the *Espingadura* and the *Gelosesca*, are the sad tales of women who find themselves in a particular situation. The *chansons de malmariée*<sup>4</sup> that inspired Cerverí were the laments of young women married to elderly men, narrated in first person from the point of view of the unhappy bride. Far from being limited to France, these songs were popular across Romance-speaking Europe. In the French *Laisette*, *En un vergier lez une fontenele*, and in many other poems, the protagonists are beaten by their *malz mariz* or *gilos* (Bec II, 10, 14, 35, 144; Mölk 9, 22). Still other songs tell of jealous husbands who constantly spy on their brides (Bec II, 9, 148) or who imprison them in their homes (Bec II, 35). All of these young wives bemoaned the fact that their families had sold them off to rich old men (Bec II, 13; Mölk 39), and contrasted their withered husbands with their sweet *dolz ami* (Bec II, 5, 8, 14, 17; Mölk 8, 9); all dreamed of cuckolding their hated spouse and boldly said so (Bec II, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14). Some went even further: the three talkative young ladies (Bec II, 9) and the Occitan *Coindeta* (Mölk 8) prayed for the death (from natural causes, one would suppose) of their husbands.<sup>5</sup>

Among these *chansons de malmariée*, however, Cerverí's *Gelosesca*<sup>6</sup> clearly stands out. The Catalan troubadour told of the profound outrage of an especially determined young woman who prays to God for the death of her husband (*don Deus mala ventura* v.1, *que no viura catre jorns* v. 5,...*que-l auzira* v. 7), an old man so repulsive (*fera criatura* v.17, *fexuch, fals ne enich* v. 19, *veyll ruat* v. 21) he causes her to age prematurely (*ab sa suor me malmet e-m madura* v. 22), and who deprives her of her beloved (*car lo solaz me tol de mon amich* v. 2). This singular protagonist, however, chooses not to wait on the benevolence of divine providence; along with her mother and her lover, she conspires to murder her husband, *lo fals gelos enich*, stanza II. Medieval practice offered no end of "solutions" for

---

<sup>4</sup> The term *chanson de malmariée* was coined by scholars in the begging of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe a type of song sung in a woman's voice.

<sup>5</sup> Examples taken from Pierre Bec, *La lyrique française du moyen âge, XII et XIII siècles*, 2 vols., Paris, 1977, and from Ulrich Mölk, *Romanische Frauenlieder*, Munich, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> 434a,1a. Editions: Kurt Lewent, *And old provençal chanson de mal mariée*, «The Romanic Review», XXXVII, 1946, p. 3-19; M. de Riquer 1947, 8 p. 16-18 and J. Coromines, *Lírica*, II, 1988, 102, p.232-234. Text Riquer.

such an unpleasant marriage; to ensure their success, the conspirators choose a combination of black magic, religion and potions. The ointment our young bride places on her husband's wrist could have come from one of the many collections of *experimenta* that compiled both traditional remedies and "scientific" formulas. The curse made to tie around the victim's neck reflects another common medieval practice that survives to this day: the use of phylacteries or scapulars, amulets bearing protective (or, in this case, harmful) words or phrases.

While Cerverí was prone to experiment with different genres, his *Gelosesca* goes beyond a simple imitation of the *chansons de mal mariée*. In addition to rendering a folk style palatable to a courtly audience, he tells a story that surpasses the bounds of the usual plot of the unhappy bride. No other song had ever described a more repulsive *gilos*, a crueller wife or a more miserable household. And none had imagined a murder like the one that Cerverí described in the *balada* he dedicated to "the Lady of the Thistles," the mysterious *Sobrepretz* and Prince Peter of Aragon.<sup>7</sup>

#### GELOSESCA

- I Al fals gelos don Deus mala ventura  
 car lo solaz me tol de mon amich,  
 e·m da mal pus lo pris, car tan me dura.
- II Pero d'aytan me tenc per be segura  
 que no viura catre jorns, aço-us dic, 5  
 que·l pausaray sus el pols tal untxura  
 que·l auzira, lo fals gelos enich.  
 E a'm fatxa una bon'escriptura  
 mos amis douz, que sus el col li lic,  
 e ma mayre, que tot jorn lo conjura. 10

---

<sup>7</sup> *Donn'als Cartz* (The Lady of the Thistles) is a *senhal* (pseudonym) Cerverí uses to refer to Sibila of Empúries, the wife of one of his protectors, Viscount Ramon Folc V of Cardona. It refers to the thistles (*cartz*) on the Cardona coat of arms. The Heir Apparent of the Crown of Aragon was referred to as the *Enfans*, and Cerverí often referred to Prince Peter (who would later become Peter the Great of Aragon) by this name. The identity of the lady Cerverí calls *Sobrepretz* (High Merit) in many of his compositions remains a mystery.

- III Sabetz que-m fa-l gelos laia figura  
 can s'es colgatz, sol del dir ay fastich:  
 l'esquenaça-m gira, c'a negr' e dura,  
 e pus aspra que fuylla de jaric,  
 e puys rimfla e polsa ses mesura. 15  
 Si-n breu de tems de negre me'n abric,  
 car anc no vi pus fera criatura!
- IV Luyn es de gaug, pres d'ir' e de rancura  
 qui marit a fexuch, fals ne enich,  
 qu'eu o say be, per ma desventura, 20  
 c'un veyll ruat me deren mey amic,  
 c'ab sa suor me malmet e-m madura;  
 qui-l ve, si-s vol tardar de mal destrich,  
 diga'l que Deus li do bona pastura.
- V La domn'als Cartz e Sobrepretz atura 25  
 valor ab si, e-l Enfans a cor ric  
 de mantener pretz e patz e dretura.

GELOSESCA

- I  
 Let God give misfortune to the false *gilos*,  
 for he's the one that keeps me from my love  
 and since we wed, he's harmed me by not dying.
- II  
 But now I know – I have no doubt about it –  
 he won't live four more days – you can be sure – 5  
 for on his wrist I'll place a certain ointment  
 that's sure to kill the angry, false *gilos*.  
 And my sweet love a perfect curse has written  
 for me to tie around my husband's neck  
 and all the day my mother recites curses. 10
- III  
 But you must know how hideous a figure  
 the *gilos* bears when he lies in our bed:  
 he turns his back to me, all black and callous  
 and rougher than a leaf of holly-oak

and then he snores and wheezes without quarter. 15  
 If only I might soon dress in black clothes–  
 I’ve never seen a more repulsive creature!

IV

Too far from joy, too close to ire and rancour  
 is she who has a false, dull, angry spouse.  
 I know this well, to my immense misfortune: 20  
 my friends gave me a wrinkled, senile man  
 who with his sweat has caused me to age quicker.  
 Just say: “Good day!” and send him on his way  
 if you should find him and don’t want to suffer.

V

The *Domn’als Cartz* and *Sobrepretz* are holders 25  
 of a great worth, and *Enfans* has the heart  
 he needs to maintain peace and justice.

**Isabel de Riquer** is Doctor in Romance Philology and Professor of Romance Literature at the University of Barcelona. Her dozens of books – editions, translations, anthologies, monographs – have brought medieval literature in Occitan and French to a wide audience of Spanish and Catalan readers. She is the author of numerous articles on medieval epic, lyrical and narrative texts in Old French, Occitan, Galician-Portuguese, Italian and medieval Catalan. Member of the Council of the *Institut de Recerca en Cultures Medievales* (IRCVM), she also serves on many editorial boards.

**Andreu Comas** is graduate student in Romance Philology at the University of Barcelona. He also collaborates with the *Rolde Aragonés de Barzelona* to encourage the use and study of the Aragonese language.