

THE INVENTORS OF ROMANTIC LOVE
The Troubadours of Occitania

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Michael Mills, Professor of Psychology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles says of romantic love, "It was on the plains of Africa about 4 million years ago . . . that the notion of romantic love probably first began to blossom - or at least that the first cascades of neuro-chemicals flowing from the brain produced goofy grins and sweaty palms as men and women gazed deeply into each other's eyes."

I am confident, and I hope this learned and worldly wise group would agree, that romantic love, which adds such delight to our lives, is more than biological secretions. I find that I resonate more with the literary critic, theologian and Oxford don, C. S. Lewis, who, among other scholars, believes that the concept of romantic love came into being with the appearance of the Troubadours of Occitania in the 12th and 13 centuries. To quote him, "The troubadours effected a change which has left no corner of our ethics, our imagination, or our daily life untouched, and they erected impassible barriers between us and the classical past and the oriental present. Compared with this revolution, the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature."

That is, indeed, a sweeping statement. But who were the troubadours, and what did they do to have such an enormous impact in shaping western culture? The first troubadour poem of record was produced in 1096 by Guillaum, IX Duke of Aquitaine and VII Count of Poitou, grandfather of Eleanor. Within twenty years troubadour poetry was all the rage in Occitania and had spread to Italy and Catalonia. By the middle of the thirteenth century the Occitanian troubadour culture was virtually extinguished by the savage Albigensian crusade against the heretical sect of the Cathars. Parenthetically, the religion of the Cathars, though occurring in the same place and time as the troubadours, was an extremely ascetic religious sect, and therefore the antithesis to the glorification of the senses which was the mark of the troubadours.

Within that relatively brief 150 year span the four hundred known troubadours and a score of trobairitz, or women troubadours had created a new conception of love which has profoundly molded the western psyche, and was probably a major factor in redefining the role of women in western society. Dante Alighieri, in his Divine Comedy, freely acknowledged his debt to the troubadours and pays tribute to them as his inspiration, and Tristan and Iseult, perhaps the greatest epic of romantic love, is said to be the result of the encounter of the courtly love of the troubadours with Celtic myth.

If the troubadours did not invent romantic love, they certainly institutionalized it by creating in "courtly love", a ritualized approach to erotic love which elevated the lady in a startling reversal of her actual status in medieval Europe. Courtly love, whether or not it was entirely new, was without a doubt the moving spirit behind a new poetry, the first European literature in the vernacular.

So let's take a look at what exactly was the art of courtly love, why it arose in the south of France at that particular time, and the poetry of the troubadours which was the vehicle, if not the creator, of courtly love. To do that we must first examine the role of women in eleventh and twelfth century culture, and what factors made Occitania ripe for entirely new images of male and female, love and passion, images which today, 800 years later, still shape our literature and mold our lives.

In the late middle ages, the area we now call France was not at all a national entity, but a collection of essentially autonomous duchies and counties, loosely connected through feudal ties. Occitania, which included most of the area south of the Loire River and north of the Pyrenees, was not a political entity, but it found an identity in a common language, Langue d'Oc, the language in which "yes" is pronounced "oc". France was always considered a foreign country with a foreign language.

Having been more extensively colonized by the Romans, Occitania had more in common both linguistically and culturally with Italy and Spain than with France. Also contributing to the cultural flowering in Occitania was a measure of affluence due to improved agricultural techniques, increased commerce with the Middle East and the economic stimulus of the crusades, as well as that of the throngs of pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela. Finally, the Church had little influence in the area, and feudalism was less firmly entrenched, both of which factors contributed to the generally better position of the aristocratic women in the area.

The simple fact is that the South of France was more civilized than the North. Certainly, the glittering court of the Dukes of Aquitaine became a cultured center of the arts in the early eleventh century under the civilizing influence of the powerful figure of Agnes of Burgundy, third wife of Guillaum the Great, whose grandson was to become the first known troubadour.

The word, troubadour, derives from the Occitanian word, trobar, to invent or devise, and the troubadours of Languedoc were well-named, for theirs was the first European literature in the vernacular; they created an astounding new status for women, and they invented, in "cortezia", or courtly love, one of the most powerful forces shaping the culture and lives of the western world.

In the Middle Ages marriage had nothing to do with love. It was primarily a matter of status and property. Women were married at the will of their parents, usually in their early teens, and were useful only in bringing dower to increase the domain of their husbands and in producing male heirs to preserve his lineage. Into this loveless milieu burst forth like a nova the troubadours and courtly love, giving women an exalted status completely out of keeping with the reality of their position in society.

In courtly love the lady became midons or domna, terms coined to indicate the lady love as liege lord, with the suitor offering himself as her vassal or servant. One of the later and most critically acclaimed of the troubadours, Arnaut Daniel, was most admired by Dante, who wrote in his Purgatorio, "In love songs and in romances he surpassed everyone." His stance as suitor is clear in the following:

Would that I might be hers

With my body, not my soul,
For it wounds my heart more than a blow from a rod
That her slave does not enter where she is.
For my being clings to her
Like the bark on the branch,
For to me she is the tower and palace and chamber of joy,
And my soul will have double joy in Paradise
If ever I enter there through loving truly.

The object of love was unfailingly a married woman, and therefore the poems of the troubadours were paeans to adultery. Another well-known troubadour from Poitou, Cercamon, writes to his lady thusly, even asking God to further his highly illicit cause:

Holy Savior, grant me haven there
Where she, the fairest dwells, and we
May kiss at last and love may share
In true accord. She'll give to me
All she has promised, and then go
At dawn, possessed and mine, although
Harshly the jealous brute behaves.

There is little doubt about the identity of "the jealous brute".

One of the women troubadours, or trobairitz, as they were called, was the Countess of Dia, and she sings to her lover:

Handsome friend, charming and kind,
When shall I have you in my power?
If only I could lie beside you for an hour
And embrace you lovingly -
Know this, that I'd give almost anything
To have you in my husband's place,
But only under the condition
That you swear to do my bidding.

There is a difference of opinion as to whether the poetry glorifying adultery was reflecting the actual situation in the courts of the time. In reading a book from the U C Berkeley library, The Troubadours at Home, by Justin Smith, a book published in 1899, I came across a passage which read, "There was certainly less immorality than a suspicious reader would imagine." Neatly inked in the margin was the comment, "How does he know?"

How indeed? After all, there is no question that the moral climate in Occitania was more relaxed than in northern France, primarily because of the secular spirit of the region. The Church, of course,

condemned adultery most vigorously, but was ignored by the males. Among the aristocracy, abduction, seduction and rape were rampant. Eleanor of Aquitaine was the daughter of Guillaum X, himself the product of the abduction of the Viscountess of Chatelleraut by Guillaum IX, the first troubadour, who, when he was threatened with excommunication, was not the least concerned.

Women were severely punished for adultery, even to the death penalty, but since conviction required the evidence of two eye witnesses, and also that the man be apprehended with his trousers down, there were few incidents of actual punishment.

In trying to decide whether the troubadours were celebrating adultery or merely the fantasy of adultery, we should take note that most of the male troubadours were men of humble birth, and that their position in court depended on the largess of the reigning lord. More often than not, the object of the poet's amorous offerings was the wife of that very same reigning lord. Finally, the songs of the troubadours were not secret messages between lovers; they were sung publicly to entertain the court. The obvious conclusion seems to be that the subject of the songs was more likely to be fantasy than reality.

If courtly love poetry did not reflect real life, what inspired such a radically new ideal of the relations between the sexes? But before we examine the inspiration underlying the remarkable flowering of the troubadours, perhaps we should look at a few of the individuals who represent the flowering of this exuberant new art form.

The first known troubadour, Guillaum, IX Duke of Aquitaine and VII Count of Poitou, was a larger than life figure. He was variously described by his admirers as "daring, gallant and full of mirth; one of the most courtly men in the world and the cleverest at deceiving women", and by his detractors as being "a buffoon and so inclined to evil that he indulged in all manner of vices, the enemy of all decency and holiness." During his reign from 993 to 1030 he held splendid court, setting the tone for the region of Languedoc.

At his second excommunication for refusing to renounce his mistress the Viscountess of Chatelleraut, he defied the archbishop, who was quite bald, with the words, "The comb shall part your wayward hair before I give up the viscountess." His poetry vacillates between the ecstasy and the anguish which love can cause:

Every joy must abase itself,
And every might obey
In the presence of Midons.
A man who wins the joy of her love
Will live a hundred years.

The joy of her can make a sick man well again
Her wrath can make a well man die.
The wise man can become foolish.

The courtliest man become a churl,
And every churl a courtly man.

Those are strange words of meekness and submission for a lordly man who boasted of his prowess at seduction, but his image of courtly love spread throughout Occitania, and had become popular in Italy and Spain within his own lifetime. For all his rascally ways and defiance of the Church, Guillaum ended his days with a farewell to love and a plea for clemency for his sins:

Since I desire to sing, I vow,
I'll sing of that which makes me sore.
In Limousin and Poitou now
Love's servant I shall be no more.

Prowess and joy have been my love.
Farewell to them. All that must cease.
I turn at last to him above
In whom all sinners find their peace.

Typical of the troubadours to follow Guillaum was Bernart, who was born in humble circumstances, son of a baker on the estate of the Viscount of Ventadour. His biographer tells us he was handsome and courteous, and the viscount became fond of him and his songs. But the viscount had a young and beautiful wife, and she, too, became fond of him, and he was banished by the jealous viscount. From there he went to the court of Eleanor, and he made wonderful songs for her, "But then", his contemporary biographer says, "The King of England married her and took her off to England. . ."

As did Guillaum, Bernart eventually abandoned the world, songs and secular pleasures. He withdrew to a monastery and lived a cloistered life until he died. The following probably was composed for Eleanor of Aquitaine:

I love Midons and cherish her so much,
I have never dared to speak to her of myself,
But she knows my sorrow and my pain,
And when it pleases her she gives me comfort and honors me,
And when it pleases her I make do with less.

And then he agonizes when she spurns his love:

My love has failed and powerless lies;
Devotion bears for me no right.
She laughs to hear my deepest sighs -
Then silently I'll leave her sight.
I cast my love of her away.
She struck and I accept the blow.

She will not speak and I must stray
In exile. Where, I do not know.
My song is dying, and away
All love and joy I cast, and go.

The women troubadours, or trobairitz, number only twenty. They were all aristocrats, and their poems, while all about love, are significantly different from those of the males. They are much more individually oriented, arguing for a real, as opposed to a symbolic importance. They are also quite playful, as if the women were playing a game of love, while the men seemed to be deadly serious.

The Countess of Dia defines the rewards of love as being youth and joy. She writes:

I thrive on youth and joy,
And youth and joy keep me alive,
For my friend's the very gayest,
Which makes me gay and playful.

Many of the poems of the trobairitz are tensons, or poems in dialogue, alternating verses with another, usually male, poet. This is one of Maria de Ventadour, daughter and wife of viscounts. She engages the troubadour Gui d'Ussel in such a poetic dialogue:

Gui d'Ussel, I'll ask you this: when a lady
Freely loves a man, should she do
As much for him as he for her,
According to the rules of courtly love?

Lady Maria, my reply is this;
That the lady ought to do exactly
For her lover as he does for her,
Without regard to rank.

Gui, the lover humbly ought to ask
For everything his heart desires,
And the lady should comply,
And she should honor him the way
She would a friend, but never as a lord.

Lady, here the people say
That when a lady wants to love,
She owes her lover equal honor,
Since they're equally in love.

Gui, when suitors seek a lady's grace

They get down on their knees, and say;
"Grant that I may freely serve you, Lady,
As your man," and she receives him.
Thus to me it's nothing short of treason
If a man says he's her equal and her servant.

The poetry of the troubadours, except for the occasional quaint phrase, seems quite modern to our ears. We are so steeped in the romantic tradition of modern Europe that we mistake it for something both natural to the human species and universal, but such is not the case. Jack Lindsay, in The Troubadours and Their World, writes, "The troubadours reached a new dimension, a new level of consciousness, a dimension we still inhabit." Courtly love, the forebear of modern romanticism, appeared quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc, and has become the staple of our fiction, and indeed, the ideal for bliss and happiness in life.

No such ideal exists in ancient literature, even in the case of Ovid. His Art of Love is in reality an ironic poem on the art of seduction. Nor does one find the romantic ideal of courtly love to be echoed in the writings of the orient. Likewise the Tales of Genji and the Ramayana abound in sexual escapades, but they are just that - escapades, not the agonies and joys of being in thrall to an adored one.

And it is exactly the state of being in thrall, of experiencing an enchantment, which seems to me to be the inspiration of the troubadours. The troubadour, Uc de St. Cire, says, "To be in love is to stretch toward heaven through a woman." Prominent among the rewards the troubadours speak of in their poetry are joy and youthfulness. Now, nothing contributes to a spirit of joy or a feeling of youthfulness as does being newly in love, in the thrill of the enchantment stage of a love affair.

The philosopher, Ernest Becker avows that there are only two ways to experience a radical change: to undergo a nervous breakdown and to fall in love, and falling in love is much the more pleasant. The English author and theologian, Charles Williams, agrees, saying that falling in love is an intense personal experience, a moment of violent change, bestowed on the romantic by forces beyond his control.

It is that feeling of being in love that seems to have been the goal of the troubadours. Their paeans to love really transcended the stated object of their love. And considering that the love poems were sung aloud in the assembled company of the court, it seems even more likely that the state of being in love was the purpose of the troubadours rather than the actual consummation of that declared love. Denis de Rougemont, the Swiss theologian, said of Tristan and Iseult, "They do not love each other; they love being in love."

Just as the joy of being in love is one of the world's most pleasurable experiences, the experience of rejection or loss of a love is one of the most exquisite agonies. Both those feelings, of the ecstasy and the agony of being in love, exaggerate the feeling of being alive. Bernart of Ventadour sums it up when he writes, "I love because I live. I live in order to love."

In courtly, or romantic love, the troubadours have bequeathed to us a roller coaster ride of experience, from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of despair, adding a titillating, breathtaking, walking-on-air, heart-in-the-throat dimension to human life.

I say three cheers for those long ago romantics whose legacy we still enjoy.