THE WORLD OF THE TROUBADOURS

Medieval Occitan society, c. 1100–c. 1300

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1993
First paperback edition 1995
Reprinted 1998

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Paterson, Linda M.
The world of the troubadours: medieval Occitan society, c. 1100–c. 1300 /
Linda M. Paterson.
p. cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 35240 1
1. Provençal poetry – Social aspects – France, Southern.
2. Literature and society – France, Southern – History. 3. France, Southern – Social life and customs. 4. France – Social life and customs – To 1328. 5. Troubadours. I. Title.
PC3308.P33 1993
849'.1109 – DC20 92-37723 CIP

ISBN 0 521 35240 1 hardback
ISBN 0 521 55832 8 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Occitan identity and self-perception

'Occitania' (pronounced 'Oxitania') is an unfamiliar word to most people outside France, and even to many French. Yet virtually everyone has heard of the troubadours: those medieval poet-musicians who 'invented' Courtly Love and who profoundly influenced the poetics and sentiment of Europe from the twelfth century to the present day. Usually they are associated with Provence, or the south of France. But Provence is, and was, only a small part of their lands of origin, which stretched from the Pyrenees and the Alps to the Auvergne and the Limousin. And the 'south of France' implies a nation-state which was far from being the reality in their time. If the French invasion during the Albigensian Crusade of the thirteenth century brought about the annexation of large parts of Occitania to France, this had not been a foregone conclusion, for in many respects Occitania had closer and more natural ties with its Mediterranean neighbours, particularly Catalonia.

For those who define regions by political boundaries, Occitania never existed, comprising as it did several shifting, conflicting and independent political territories. Chief contenders for power until the Albigensian Crusade of the early thirteenth century were the dukes of Aquitaine, the counts of Toulouse and the kings of Aragon-Catalonia. When Guilhem IX came to power in 1086, the dukes of Aquitaine, though nominal vassals of the Capetian kings of France, effectively controlled a greater part of present-day France, ruling Poitou and Aquitaine as far as the Pyrenees. This territory passed to the Plantagenets after Eleanor of Aquitaine's marriage to the future Henry II of England in 1152 and his accession to the throne in 1154. The Languedoc, from Toulouse to the Rhône, was dominated by the counts of Toulouse. Aragon and Catalonia, united in 1137 under Ramon Berenguer IV, held the Roussillon and enclaves in the upper Languedoc; its count-kings struggled with the counts of Toulouse

throughout the twelfth century for control of Provence, entertaining ambitions to create a Mediterranean state from the Garonne and Ebro to the Alps. Occitania also contained many other independent or semi-autonomous areas, such as the Pyrenean baronies of Béarn, Bigorre, Comminges and Foix, or the Auvergne, in theory directly dependent on the duchy of Aquitaine rather than the French crown, which eventually wrested titular control of the region from the Plantagenets in the late twelfth century. Many cities fell outside the dominance of the main territorial lords: Albi, Carcassonne, Béziers, Agde and Nîmes were controlled by the powerful Trencavel family, Narbonne and Montpellier had their own independent rulers, Marseille remained independent of Provence until 1252, while Toulouse, the only city of any size apart from Saint-Gilles theoretically under the control of the counts of Toulouse, was by the end of the twelfth century well on its way to becoming an independent republic.

The identity of Occitania lies not in its political boundaries but in its language and culture.[1] Occitan is a Romance or neo-Latin language, like French, Catalan, Franco-Provençal, Castilian, Portuguese, Italian, Sardinian, Romanian, Rheto-Romansh and Dalmatian. Its geographical extent has not changed significantly since the Middle Ages, though the number of native speakers has diminished dramatically. At the Pyrenees the Occitan language borders on Basque to the south-west, Castilian to the south and Catalan to the south-east. Its northern linguistic frontier starts at the confluence of the Garonne and the Dordogne and follows the course of the Gironde northwards to include the Limousin and part of Marche and the Auvergne, cutting the Rhône above Valence and passing south of Grenoble to join the Italian frontier. From here, with the exception of enclaves of Occitan dialects in the Piedmontese Val d'Aosta and Val di Susa, it coincides with the political frontier down to the Mediterranean. To the north-east, the Occitan frontier excludes part of the Dauphiné, which together with Savoy, western Switzerland and Franche-comté makes up the linguistic area of Franco-Provençal. An area of interference between Occitan and French, known as the crescent, includes parts of the Angoumois, Poitou, the Limousin, Berry, Marche, Auvergne and Bourbonnais. The Occitan linguistic domain therefore occupies, with a few

[1] See A. Armengaud and R. Lafont, *Histoire d'Occitanie* (Paris, 1979), pp. xi–xv.

additions at the margins, approximately a third of present-day France.[2]

In the Middle Ages the Occitan language was defined in opposition to other languages. From the twelfth century the troubadours sometimes referred to it as *lengua romana* as opposed to Latin. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries some municipal documents named it *roman* by contrast with the *langue du roi*, and literary texts opposed it to *frances*. The Catalan grammarian Raimon Vidal de Besalú called it *lemosi*, as opposed to *parladura francesca*, while the term *proensal* or *proensales* seems to have been preferred by Italians for whom southern Gaul was still the *Provincia romana*, whose inhabitants, the *Provinciales*, were differentiated from the *Francigenae* of northern France. Dante seems to have been the first to use the expression *lingua d'oco*, opposing it to the languages of *oïl* and *si* ('yes' in Occitan, French and Italian). The term *occitan* was used by the official administration in the fourteenth century, in such terms as *lingua occitana*, *respublica occitana*, *patria linguae occitanae* and *Occitania*. In southern France today, the term *Occitan* is not without political charge. But medievalists prefer it because it avoids the ambiguity of an epithet linked to any one small part of the wider whole.[3]

Culturally, Occitania's medieval identity is marked by the troubadours. They and their literature spill over the linguistic boundaries just described, for not only did they travel abroad in search of patronage, especially to northern Spain and Italy, their language was adopted by Alfons II of Aragon as the official literary language of his court, as part of his strategy of furthering his political ambitions in Provence. There are many books about the troubadours; this will not be one of them, though it is motivated by the desire to understand the realities of the society in which they lived. They will therefore only be called upon for this purpose, for otherwise they would need the book to themselves. How did they see their own geographical, political and ethnic identity?

Their geographical world is bounded by Iceland to the north, the Nile to the south, and Hungary and the Holy Land of the Crusades to the east. They divide it between Christians and pagans, having only a hazy idea of their geographical frontiers. By contrast to the

[2] P. Bec, *La Langue occitane* (Paris, 1963), pp. 8–16 and his entries in Armengaud and Lafont, *Histoire*, pp. 110–15.

[3] Bec, *Langue*, pp. 64ff.; G. Colón, 'La dénomination *langue d'oc* en deça des Pyrénées', *Mélanges d'études romanes du moyen âge et de la renaissance offerts à M. Jean Rychner* (Strasbourg, 1978), pp. 85–91, and J. Duvernoy, *L'Histoire des cathares* (Toulouse, 1979), p. 195.

northern French romance writers, the troubadours are little stirred by the mythical Orient. Within Christendom, they have a rather clear sense of regional identity. The twelfth-century Occitan *Song of Antioch*, for instance, mentions crusaders coming from about thirty regions: Normans, Poitevins, Burgundians, Provençals, Limousins, Basques, Germans, Welsh, Irish, Danish and so on. But outside the world of their main literary patronage – Occitania, Spain, France and Italy, 'regions' are essentially countries: England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Germany or 'the Empire', Portugal. France they always view as a foreign country. Italy means Lombardy, or its individual independent cities: Milan, Pavia, Cremona, Asti, Genoa, Verona, Ravenna, Faenza. Best known outside Occitania are the regions of the northern Iberian peninsular: Portugal, Galicia, and especially Castile, Navarre, Aragon, Catalonia.[4]

Linguistically, the troubadours perceive as foreign Breton, English, German, Frisian, Flemish, Angevin, Bavarian, Greek, Scottish and Welsh. Aside from Angevin, the speech of northern France, Spain and Italy provokes no explicit comments on difficulties. Some Catalan and Occitan authors could certainly understand French, and the poet of *Girart de Roussillon* tried to create a fusion of French and Occitan. Frequent exchanges between troubadours in Occitania, Italy and Spain created a certain internationalism, an interest and ability in foreign languages, reflected for example in their multilingual poems, which was not shared by the less open-minded French. Within Occitania, local differences must have been considerable: for example the fourteenth-century inhabitants of the Pyrenean village of Montaillou were conscious of a local dialect spoken by a thousand people at most.[5] However, dialectal differences within Occitania appear to have played little or no role within troubadour culture, the poets establishing from the outset a literary language or *koinē*.

Ethnically the troubadours define themselves principally in

[4] E. Schulze-Busacker, 'French conceptions of foreigners and foreign languages in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', *RP* 41 (1987), 24–47; L. Paterson, 'Stéréotypes géographiques et ethniques en Occitanie aux XII^e^ et XIII^e^ siècles', *Actes 2^e^ congrès*, forthcoming; W. M. Wiacek, 'Geography in the Provençal poetry of the troubadours of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', *Mélanges d'histoire littéraire, de linguistique et de philologie romanes offerts à Charles Rostaing* (Liège, 1974), pp. 1235–43; K. D. Uitti, 'The Old Provençal *Song of Saint Fides* and the Occitanian concept of poetic space', *Esprit Créateur* 19: 4 (1979), 17–36; J. Tattersall, '"Terra incognita": allusions aux extrêmes limites du monde dans les anciens textes français jusqu' en 1300', *CCM* 24 (1981), 247–55.

[5] E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan, de* 1294 *à* 1324 (Paris, 1975), p. 440.

opposition to Saracens and Jews. Despite non-literary evidence of a certain racial tolerance in the South, Occitan poets show little sign of this much-vaunted *convivencia*. Their literature occasionally presents friendly Saracens from Spain or the east, but these are the exception. Usually Muslims appear as negative stereotypes. The *Song of Antioch*, in line with other crusading literature, paints some as black, with blood-red throats, eyes and palms, eaters of raw flesh and barking like dogs. Jews are tarred as the murderers of Christ, wicked, avaricious, the scum of society.[6]

If the Occitan poets share the ethnic and religious prejudices of the Christian world, they rarely evoke persistent ethnic stereotypes within the Christian part of it. They associate certain regions or towns with types of activities or production, such as Montpellier with gold, Narbonne with cloth, Châtillon with stonemasons, and so on. Certain regions were known for their military specialities, for example dart-throwers from Gascony, Navarre and the Pyrenees. Others were renowned for certain artistic or jongleuresque characteristics: Guerau de Cabrera reproaches the jongleur Cabra for not knowing how to finish a piece of music with a Breton modulation, or to dance and juggle like a Gascon jongleur. But ethnic remarks such as 'potbellied Poitevins' or 'Catalan sociability' tend to spring from the ephemeral context of political conflict or patronage. Before the Albigensian Crusade, the most frequently stereotyped are the Bretons, with their notorious self-deluding 'Breton hope' and grief for the death of Arthur. They also are coupled with Normans as importunate jongleurs.

The Albigensian Crusade led to a political awareness and sensitivity to foreign occupation, giving birth to the stereotype of the drunken Frenchman, hostile, vicious, covetous, sadistic and tyrannical. Non-Occitan sources reinforce this image of the drunken Frenchman with bloodshot eyes. From the end of the twelfth century certain troubadours identify the French with prowess at arms, by contrast with the Occitan joy of love. This corresponds to a real cleavage of values; chivalric values and rituals were well developed in France at this time, but had made little impact on the south.

A few Occitan debate poems contrast people of different regions. At the time of the Albigensian Crusade the troubadours Monge and Albertet composed a *partimen* about the French and the Occitans.[7]

[6] For further details, see Paterson, 'Stéréotypes', forthcoming.

[7] M. de Riquer, *Los trovadores* (3 vols., Barcelona, 1975), p. 1135.

Monge stresses the higher standard of living of the French, their liberality, their better food, clothes and armour, and their skills as soldiers. The Occitans he denigrates as poverty-stricken, avaricious brigands and courtly fools. Albertet praises the open and generous hospitality, gaiety and sociability of the southerners, and their concern to compete with each other for a high reputation through their speech and actions. He claims they were the first to invent the notion of service at table, whereas a guest in France or Poitou can easily starve. He criticizes the surliness of the French, and their lack of hospitality. A *tenso* between Raimon de las Salas and Bertran, dated after August 1216, poses the question: who are better at making war, feasts and gifts, the Lombards or the Provençals?[8] Raimon praises Provençal jongleurs and ladies, disparaging Lombard women as big and surly. Bertran retorts that Lombards dislike the showiness and pleasure produced by jongleurs and female company, since they lead to adultery and bastards foisted on unsuspecting husbands. This discussion takes up the theme of a bilingual *tenso* between Raimbaut de Vaqueiras and a Genoese woman, composed in about 1190. To the masculine solicitations of a Provençal speaking his own language, the Genoese bourgeoise replies not only in Italian but in a tone which subverts the courtliness of her interlocutor. By rebuffing his advances she also rebuffs his culture and the language in which it is expressed, taking refuge in the established feudal and Christian system of marriage.[9] These thirteenth-century poetic contests about regional rivalries may suggest a growing sense of ethnic identity, but except where France is involved, they are outward-looking and playful, involving contact with rather than rejection of others.

In fact the Occitans were more frequently the target than the instigators of ethnic stereotyping. From the eighth century onwards, non-Occitan authors labelled them as unreliable and prone to numerous vices. Orderic Vitalis censured the irresponsibility of the Aquitanians and Gascons who followed Guilhem IX to the First Crusade.[10] In the Old French *Chanson d'Antioche* the spy who passes information to the pagan King Corboran is a Provençal. This

[8] Riquer, *Trovadores*, p. 1096.

[9] S. Gaunt, 'Sexual difference and the metaphor of language in a troubadour poem', *MLR* 83 (1988), 297–313. On explicit nationalism in troubadour poetry and the Middle Ages, see Schulze-Busacker, 'French conceptions', p. 32.

[10] M. Chibnall (ed.), *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis* (6 vols., Oxford, 1969–80), V, pp. 333–1.

Provençal spy is also found in the crusading chronicles of Tudebod and Robert the Monk. Not surprisingly perhaps, the Occitan crusading chronicler Raimon d'Aguilers prefers to assign this unflattering role to a Turk. The French Suger, abbot of Saint-Denis, attacked the arrogance of the men from Auvergne who 'have the audacity to claim they are brothers of the Latins'; Orderic Vitalis referred to 'the natural ferocity of the Gothic race' (that is, the inhabitants of what was formerly Gothia or Septimania, bordering the Mediterranean from the Pyrenees to the Rhône).[11] Raoul de Caen accused the Occitan crusaders of avarice and greed. He scorned their unwarlike spirit, hinted at their effeminate tastes and dwelled on their powers of endurance in times of famine when they were content to eat roots and pods.[12] The latter trait corresponds to the behaviour of crusaders in general in the face of famine, or of the very poor, and these partisan insults perhaps genuinely reflect the relative poverty of the southerners.

In the eleventh century it was the people from Auvergne and Aquitaine who, according to ecclesiastical fulminations, corrupted the morals of the French and Germans by their jongleuresque fashions in dress and shaving.

> In about the year 1000 of the incarnate Word, when King Robert married Queen Constance of the region of Aquitaine, thanks to the queen men of all the vainest frivolity began to stream from the Auvergne and Aquitaine into France and Burgundy. Perverted in their customs and dress, their armour and horse trappings badly put together, they shaved their hair from halfway down their heads, went beardless like jongleurs, wore the most disgusting yellow boots and leggings, and were entirely devoid of any law of faith or peace. And so alas the whole of the French people, until recently the most decent of all, together with the Burgundians, seized avidly on their abominable example, till at length everyone came to conform to their wickedness and infamy.[13]

From a more positive perspective, Jean de Marmoutier ascribed to the Poitevins a virtually innate facility for composing rhymed songs.[14] The idiosyncratic twelfth-century *Pilgrim's Guide* saw the Poitevins as 'vigorous and warlike, skilful in handling bows, arrows and lances in

[11] H. Waquet (ed.), *Suger: Vie de Louis VI le Gros* (Paris, 1929), pp. 232–3; Chibnall, *Vitalis*, pp. 356–7.

[12] Radulfus Cadomensi, *Gesta Tancredi in expeditione Hierosolymitanas*, in *RHC*, III, pp. 617 and 651.

[13] *Rodulphi Glabri Historiarum libri quinque*, ed. and transl. J. France (Oxford, 1989), pp. 164–7.

[14] L. Halphen and R. Poupardin, *Chroniques des comtes d'Anjou et des seigneurs d'Amboise* (Paris, 1913), p. 195.

war, courageous on the battle front, swift riders, elegant in their dress, handsome of face, witty, very generous, free with their hospitality.' The Gascons however it judged 'frivolous in their speech, garrulous, mocking, debauched, drunkards, gluttons, poorly dressed in rags, and penniless'; hospitable but coarse-mannered, they would sit round the fire eating without a table and drinking all from the same goblet, and were not ashamed to sleep all together, servants, master and mistress, on a thin layer of rotting straw.[15]

These remarks apparently reveal that non-Occitans are much more inclined than Occitans to pass moral censure on foreigners. No doubt this has much to do with the fact that the non-Occitans are ecclesiastics, and the Occitans secular poets. Still, the contrast highlights a certain cosmopolitan openness on the one hand and an intolerance of difference on the other. The northerners betray an irritation over their inability to control their unruly southern neighbours.

The present book is an attempt to understand something of the realities and particularities of medieval Occitan life. It is meant for the general reader as well as for students and academic specialists. I hope that the latter will forgive statements of what may seem obvious, and the former will not be deterred by excursions into technical detail. Original research is mixed with synthesis of existing historical studies: for example, I have little new to say about the Cathars, but quite a lot about knights. My sources have been eclectic and include chronicles, medical and scientific writings, legal and religious documents; but I have exploited literary texts more than historians usually do. Literature cannot be taken at face value, but if appropriately questioned it can yield much about the mentality and practices of the society producing and receiving it, through what is taken for granted or found problematical, and above all in the assumptions built into its use of language.

The focus of the book is on people rather than events, and social groups rather than individuals. Inevitably there is more readily accessible information about the dominant groups – the male aristocracy – than the dominated or marginalized – commoners, women, children. I have aimed for a broad view, but it is bound to be incomplete and selective. The medical profession has perhaps received more than its fair share of attention, yet the history of

[15] J. Vielliard (ed.), *Le Guide du pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle* (Mâcon, 1938), pp. 17–33.

Occitan medicine is a fascinating one, and medical writings remain a rich untapped source for social historians. A word about names: within the limits of common sense I have tried to retain proper names in the language appropriate to the person: hence a Catalan king may be called Alfons, a Castilian one Alfonso.

I shall follow this introduction to the particular character of Occitan society by raising one of the most vexed questions of the region's history: its so-called feudalism.