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Introduction

Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay

The troubadours, like other celebrities, need no introduction. They are part of the furniture of our cultural knowledge, an unforgettable heirloom in the European heritage. Who has not heard of the courtly world they ornamented and entertained, voicing for it the exquisite refinements of medieval love? For a glamorous period, this tradition of poet-composer-performers (460 of whose names we know) dazzled Southern French and neighbouring European courts with their songs (some 2,500 of which survive) in which passion and decorum are craftily combined.[1] Although this period was relatively short-lived (c. 1100–c. 1300), its spark was sufficient to light the broader flame of subsequent European poetry. The rise of courtliness, in the senses both of 'courtly love' and 'courtly living', in which the troubadours played a determining role, helped to shape mainstream Western culture; while their commentaries as moralists, and as political and cultural critics, provide vital testimony to the attitudes which underlie and helped to form our own.

The significance of the troubadours is acknowledged in the space assigned to them in many different academic contexts: as part of the history of European poetry and music; as evidence for the history of social, gender and sexual relations, and the political and ideological world of medieval Europe; as a strand in the linguistic diversity of the Romance languages. The range of these contexts, however, suggests the complexity of the phenomenon. Many of the troubadours had international careers in their lifetimes, and were doubtless differently understood by different audiences; this continues to be the case. Thus in France, troubadour scholarship is fed by regional interest but in the United States (where the troubadours feature in comparative literature courses) it is upheld by their potentially universal appeal; in Italy the

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troubadours are studied as a step in the formation of Italian literature but in England as an aspect of the literature of medieval France. The troubadours thus elicit a diversity of approaches, as this volume shows. In particular, the last decade has seen the production of some challenging and innovative studies, and the overturning of some previously cherished views; the time has come, we feel, to synthesise this work for the less specialist reader. The purpose of this Introduction, then, is to introduce not so much the troubadours themselves as the scholarly work addressed to them, in order to provide readers with a context in which to situate the chapters of this book.

The different approaches taken to the troubadours have, at a most basic level, affected the terminology used to describe their language. The earliest scholar to document their usage was François Raynouard, whose extraordinary *Lexique roman* was produced between 1838 and 1844. Raynouard chose the word *roman* because he believed that the form of Southern French used by the troubadours was a faithful reflection of the vernacular Latin spoken in the Roman empire, more so than any other Romance language; it alone thus deserved to be called 'Roman'. In the late nineteenth century, however, the regional poet Frédéric Mistral headed a revival of the language of Provence, and claimed the troubadours as his poetic predecessors. For a long period, under his influence, the term 'Provençal' was used to refer to the medieval literary language. Gradually it has been overtaken by the term 'Occitan', a backformation from the word Occitania used as early as the thirteenth century to denote the whole of the area of Southern France. The term Occitan accords with the broad subdivision of medieval Romance languages according to the word for 'yes', a subdivision recognised in the Middle Ages: in the North of France, the word *oïl* (now *oui*) gave rise to the *langue d'oïl*, in Italy there was the *langue de si*, and in the Midi the *langue d'oc*. The area within which Occitan was spoken is indicated on the map on p. xiii: it runs from just south of the Loire in the West to the Italian Alps and down into Northern Italy in the East.

The term Provençal is especially misleading given that the earliest of the troubadours all came not from Provence, but from Poitou and Gascony. In so far as the language of their compositions has any dialectal colouring – and it is remarkable to what

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an extent it appears to have been a literary standard or *koiné* – it is Limousin (from the area of Limoges), the area which produced the first great troubadour of love, Bernart de Ventadorn. Indeed, it was not until the careers of Raimbaut d'Aurenga and Peire Rogier, past the middle of the twelfth century, that we find troubadours in Provence proper. Nor does troubadour culture halt there: it continues south and east into Italy, as well as due south into Catalonia and Spain. Throughout two centuries of movement the literary language remains much the same, a passport to intelligibility in a wide range of European courts. (To say that troubadour language is standardised does not mean that it had fixed forms. Morphology and orthography vary widely, posing problems to the novice reader. For assistance with these problems, consult Appendix 3.) Of course Occitan literature did not cease at the end of the thirteenth century, but by that date the heyday of the troubadours was past. There has been a continuous, if small-scale, Occitan literary tradition through to the nineteenth-century revival, and there is now a reasonably flourishing regional literature. But that lies outside the scope of this book.[2]

The pioneering work of Raynouard aside, troubadour scholarship was established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by a series of extraordinarily gifted German philologists, who recognised the centrality of the troubadours both to literary history and to the study of Romance philology; chief among these were Karl Bartsch, Gustav Gröber, Emil Levy and Carl Appel.[3] They opened up the field by producing large numbers of critical editions and reference works that remain unsurpassed. The contribution of German scholars to the production of basic research tools has continued unabated throughout the twentieth century. Only in Germany is work on major dictionaries and reference works still actively pursued.

Early troubadour scholarship in France had a softer edge to it. Though some early twentieth-century French scholars produced editions, they tended to be less ambitious than those produced in Germany and the most significant Francophone contributions to troubadour studies were interpretative general studies that might be regarded as at best still useful, at worst unreadable (Jeanroy, Hoeppfner). The most brilliant minds among early French medievalists (Gaston Paris, Joseph Bédier) were drawn to texts written

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in the *langue d'oïl*, possibly for political reasons of which they themselves may not have been wholly conscious, and paid scant attention to the troubadours.[4]

The main themes of early twentieth-century criticism both in and outside France were undoubtedly biography and love, and they were picked up by a range of critics, particularly as the vexed questions of the origin of 'courtly love' and the sincerity of courtly poetry were debated (Lewis, Bezzola, Denomy, Nykl). Little attention was paid to the formal dexterity or literary merit of troubadour poetry by scholars of this period, which is perhaps surprising given the attention their lyrics were receiving, precisely because of their formal complexity, from contemporary poets such as T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. Indeed, some critics from the first part of this century did not try to conceal their dislike of the formal ingenuity of the texts to which they devoted their professional lives (Jeanroy).

The interest in love and in the eroticism of the troubadour lyric was maintained in Francophone criticism after the Second World War in a number of studies that are now generally considered idiosyncratic (Nelli, Camproux, Lazar), but outside France in the decades after 1945 it is possible to identify distinct national schools of troubadour scholarship and then, more recently still, critical movements that are defined more by theoretical orientation. If, in the 1940s and 1950s, lone scholars across the globe were making significant contributions to the field, particularly by producing major critical editions (for example Martín de Riquer in Spain, or Walter Pattison in the US), Germany and Italy were undoubtedly the two main centres of troubadour scholarship.[5] The most significant German critic of troubadour poetry in the postwar period was undoubtedly Erich Köhler, whose publications were to influence his contemporaries and subsequent generations of German critics: Pollman, Mölk, Liebertz-Grün, Kasten, Leube-Fey. Steeped in German hermeneutics and Marxist theory, Köhler argued vigorously that the troubadour lyric mediated the tension between the different sections of the nobility and that the erotic 'love' to which the songs were ostensibly devoted was invariably a metaphor for other desires, other drives. Poetics were thus a cover for politics. German scholarship after Köhler was rigorous, challenging and searching.

In Italy meanwhile, equal rigour was being applied to philology

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and textual criticism (Del Monte, Toja, Roncaglia, Avalle). As Romance philologists, Italian scholars of this period were primarily interested in the language and Latinate culture of the troubadour lyric. This approach is still very much in evidence among their students today and thanks to this tradition, Italy probably has more practising Occitanists than any other country in the world. The difference in approach of the two main schools of the post-war period is best illustrated in an exchange of articles between Aurelio Roncaglia and Erich Köhler on the nature of the so-called *trobar clus*, published in *Cultura Neolatina* in 1969 and 1970: the former insists upon the learned, literary and Latinate culture of the troubadours and litters his article with philological comments on the texts, the latter concentrates on the social dynamics that he believes are mediated therein and on the value of troubadour hermeneutics.

By 1969, however, the effects of new theoretical approaches to the study of literature were already being felt in medieval studies. Although the main structuralist studies of medieval vernacular lyric were in fact devoted to the lyrics of Old French poets (the *trouvères*), their influence upon troubadour scholarship is discernible in a number of major publications (Bec, Cropp, Thiolier-Méjean, and more recently Van Vleck) that take as given Zumthor's notion of *la circularité du chant*: that is, the view that medieval lyrics are self-referential formal displays dependent on the recycling, within the closed world of the genre, of a limited repertoire of formal constituents.

The influence of structuralism is perceptible as much in the resistance it engendered as in the disciples it attracted. Indeed, perhaps two of the most significant anglophone publications on the troubadours of the 1970s – Paterson's *Troubadours and Eloquence* and Topsfield's *Troubadours and Love* – were either explicitly (Paterson) or implicitly (Topsfield) responding to the structuralist premise that medieval lyric could be seen simply as a play of convention and form. Trained in the Cambridge school of practical criticism, Paterson and Topsfield breathed new life into troubadour scholarship by constructing arguments around close readings of poems. They paid attention to form and rhetoric as markers not of generic adhesion but of personal engagement, and extolled the individuality of troubadours over the homogeneity of the tradition. The purely literary appreciation of the troubadours evinced

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in Paterson and Topsfield's work was also typical of a number of important publications produced in the US in the 1960s and 1970s by scholars whose main interest was comparative literature: critics such as Goldin and Wilhelm influenced a generation of later North American comparatists (for example Spence, Kendrick) by devoting attention to the literary practices of the troubadours in relation to other European poetry and in the light of the prevailing New Criticism.

In the 1980s, the troubadours became the subject of increasingly sophisticated and challenging research. The publication in the early 1980s of two major studies of intertextuality (by Grüber and Meneghetti) was particularly significant. These scholars drew attention to the self-reflexive hermeticism of the troubadour lyric and to the sophisticated processes of citation, imitation and transformation that characterise the tradition. Following on from this, the late 1980s and early 1990s can perhaps best be characterised as a period of demystification: concentrating either on irony and play (Gaunt, Kendrick, Kay) or subjectivity and gender (Kay, Huchet, Cholakian, Gaunt), and armed with the findings of structuralist and poststructuralist scholarship, critics continued to turn away from taking the ostensible subject matter (i.e. love) of the courtly *canso* seriously and sought to reveal (like Köhler, only with different agendas) the underlying aesthetic, psychic and political dynamics of the tradition. If, until this point, troubadour lyric had often been held up as the most refined and moving celebration of civilised heterosexual love (Lewis, Topsfield), prevailing wisdom by the late 1980s saw it as a sophisticated game men played with each other.

Since 1945, then, concerted efforts have been made to downplay (or at the very least to reinterpret) the significance of what made troubadour poetry famous in the first place: love. As will be evident from this book, love is by no means the only subject matter for troubadour lyrics, but it is clearly the dominant theme. The demystification of the 'myth' of courtly love was undoubtedly urgent in the post-war period, but perhaps the time has come now to reassess the nature of love in troubadour poetry and to take what the troubadours said about themselves seriously again. In this respect – and in many others – troubadour studies are taking on fresh impetus. Thus, as we approach the end of the 1990s, troubadour scholars seem, like many other medievalists, to be

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returning to history (Paterson, Harvey) and to manuscript studies (Nichols in this volume, Burgwinkle) with renewed vigour. They are also turning to the broader corpus of troubadour lyric (Ghil, Léglu in this volume) and therefore are better able to set the love poetry in a context that helps relate it to broader social, cultural and psychic structures.

All these contemporary approaches, as well as the influence of much of the post-war criticism we have just outlined, inform this book. And as our contributors build on recent work, so they also point to potential directions for research. The troubadours are an essential part of our cultural past, and the scholarship upon them whose history we have here outlined has an exciting future.

NOTES

1 For details of the corpus, see especially Pillet-Carstens, *Bibliographie* and Frank, *Répertoire*, both in Appendix 3.
2 For the history of Occitan literature, consult Lafont and Anatole, *Nouvelle histoire*.
3 For works by these and the other scholars mentioned in this Introduction, consult the Bibliography and Appendices 1 and 3.
4 See Bloch and Nichols, *Medievalism*, on how medieval scholarship was affected by factors other than strictly academic ones.
5 There were, however, notable Belgian Occitanists in the post-war period, such as Lejeune and Pirot.

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CHAPTER 1

Courtly culture in medieval Occitania

Ruth Harvey

Shortly before Christmas 1182, the Limousin troubadour Bertran de Born spent time at the court at Argentan in Normandy and this is what he says about it:

> Ja mais non er cortz complia
> on hom non gab ni non ria:
>   cortz ses dos
> non es mas parcs de baros.
> Et agra·m mort ses faillia
> l'enois e la vilania
>   d'Argentos,
> ma·l gentils cors amoros
> e la doussa cara pia
> e la bona compaignia
>   e·l respos
> de la Saisa·m defendia. (III, 49–60)

(A court where no one laughs or jokes is never complete; a court without gifts is just a paddock-full of barons. And the boredom and vulgarity of Argentan nearly killed me, but the lovable, noble person, the sweet, kind face, the good companionship and conversation of the Saxon lady protected me.)

These lines raise a number of questions, many of which have wider implications for an appreciation of medieval courtly culture. What was a court and who would have been there? What was the significance of the women often celebrated in troubadour songs? Who were the troubadours and what was their place in court society? Although we can only reconstruct the immediate conditions of troubadour performance as hypotheses, this chapter will outline some of the factors which shaped the social context of the lyric.

The presence of an Occitan poet at a court in Normandy was rather unusual: generally speaking, troubadour activity was

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focused on a region further south.[1] Troubadours received a welcome in the courts of Northern Italy from the second half of the twelfth century, while in Occitania the centres of culture and power frequented by these poets generally looked towards the South, across the Pyrenees. Those of Spain, especially Aragon and Catalonia, while ever preoccupied by the reconquest of lands from the Moors, looked north. Ever since the Provençal heiress Douce married Count Ramon Berenguer III of Barcelona in 1112, the Catalan house had claimed the county of Provence and it was ruled by Aragonese-Catalan princes until the mid-thirteenth century. But these claims did not go unchallenged: Toulouse in particular repeatedly asserted its rights to Provence, both through alliances and by military action.[2] The lesser lords of the Midi were inevitably caught up in this protracted struggle for domination over the lands from the Ebro to the Garonne and beyond the Rhône.[3] Into this network of ambitions, alliances and conflicts were also drawn the kings of England. When Eleanor of Aquitaine was divorced from Louis VII of France in March 1152 and in May remarried Henry Plantagenet, Count of Anjou and heir to the Anglo-Norman realm, she took with her her vast inheritance of Poitou and Aquitaine: Henry II ruled over lands from Hadrian's Wall to the foothills of the Pyrenees, including the Limousin and Périgord, where Bertran de Born's castle of Autafort was situated and where much of the internecine strife among the Plantagenets was fought out.[4] In consequence, the homeland of troubadour poetry was hardly a peaceful place.

Occitan lords were prominent in the early crusading effort, both in the Spanish *reconquista* and in Syria, and some settled there,[5] so that many noble families of Occitania had relatives in the Christian states of the Middle East or in Spain. Probably the most famous love-song, Jaufré Rudel's celebration of *amor de lonh*, was inspired by a journey to the Holy Land, and other troubadour songs exhorted knights to take the cross.[6] Peirol and Gaucelm Faidit are thought to have gone on crusade themselves, and Raimbaut de Vaqueiras accompanied his patron, Boniface of Montferrat, on the ill-fated Fourth Crusade. Paris, on the other hand, was relatively peripheral for many, at least until the Albigensian Crusade brought Frenchmen into Occitania in large numbers. This protracted and violent incursion did not, however, sound the death-knell for the troubadours' art, as has often been claimed,

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for there are at least as many poets attested in the century which followed the crusade as from the 120 years which preceded it. They produced more *sirventes* and fewer and less interesting *cansos*, and as the decades passed their creative talent diversified into new genres and avenues of expression.[7] In its heyday, the courtly culture to which the troubadours belonged was European rather than restricted to the South of France and, in their later influence, the troubadours stimulated the production of lyric poetry in courts far beyond Occitania.

Occitania itself was a large, uncentralised and diverse region. It included increasingly wealthy, urban centres such as Toulouse, Avignon, and Montpellier, which developed their own municipal government,[8] as well as small, isolated communities in inaccessible, mountainous areas such as the Carcassès, where 'the mountains were savage and the gorges terrifying', and even local men could get lost and fail to find the castle they sought.[9]

That such diverse conditions gave rise to a variety of traditions, customs and socio-political institutions is not surprising, and it is in this light that the vexed question of 'feudalism' in the Midi should be considered. Only a few, marginal areas in Occitania displayed seigneurial structures analogous to the Northern French feudal model, whereby vassals 'held land from' a lord in return for the obligations of military service and counsel and homage, involving the subordination of vassal to overlord and close vassalic ties of personal dependency. Rather, the norm among the aristocracy seems for a long time to have been *convenientiae*, egalitarian contracts between individuals in which each party promised fidelity and non-aggression, respect for the life, limb and rights of the other. The precise location of the grant or castle was specified and the vassal undertook a limited number of obligations in respect of it. To hold lands as a *fidelis*, then, meant not a general loyalty of vassal to overlord, but a specific and limited loyalty in respect of a particular castle,[10] and resulted in much looser vassalic ties with little suggestion of liege-homage, submission to and dependency on one lord alone. During the twelfth century, tighter controls and conditions began to be imposed when a lord was in a position of strength, and most dramatically after the Northern French crusaders crushed the Toulousain lords. Overall, historians have noted the diverse nature of seigneurial institutions across Occitania.[11]

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