

BOOK REVIEW

Linda Paterson, *The Troubadours* (Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 2024), pp. 256. Hbk.£16.95 ISBN 9781789149197.

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The vibrant world of the troubadours – the twelfth and early thirteenth century poet-musicians of southern France – is gradually giving up more of its past glories to contemporary researchers, not least among them scholars who, like Linda Paterson embrace music as well as documents and so enrich our total perception of a great era. In her recent book, she offers a fascinating insight into the literary, musical and social environment of these extraordinary personalities. Their Provençal name was *trobador*, possibly derived from *tropador* – writer of tropes. Most were both poets and composers but not necessarily performers, that task being routinely assigned to jongleurs or minstrels. Their songs, written in the vernacular – the Occitan language of Southern France – are for the most part highly imaginative and the structure of the verses often ingenious. The musical style is generally syllabic, cast within a narrow vocal range and embroidered by melismatic ornamentation. Values of the notes are rarely indicated, suggesting a degree of improvisation in performance.

A strength of this study is that the writer avoids such undue analytical concentration on the structure and style of the lyrics and music as would dehydrate the work of human interest. Whilst being duly cognisant of the techniques underpinning the work of these artists, the structural craft of both words and music is considered within a finely drawn historical perspective and within the context of the social and political environment from which they were forged. The colourful, often indiscreet and invariably entertaining social relationships and edgy political alliances alluded to in the lyrics are given space to heighten interest in the artists' personalities and careers and to engender interest in the music in which the words are couched. The reader is therefore able to appreciate the impact of these artists more than would be possible simply by an isolated vivisection of text and score and allows for a holistic appreciation of the contributions of eight troubadours influential in the areas they found most congenial – love, war and the court – Guilhem IX, Jaufrè Rudel, Marcabru, Bernart de Ventadorn, Arnaut Daniel, Bertran de Born, Raimbaut de Vaqueiras and Folquet de Marselha. These individual studies are complemented by an account of the female troubadours – the *troubairitz* – notable especially for their moral and political opinions often delivered in the form of feisty dialogue exchanges.

A theme which the troubadours found irresistible was that of love, in all its manifestations, extending from rampant sensual desire to restrained ethical sensitivity. Thought to be the earliest troubadour, Guilhem IX (1071–1127) Duke of Aquitaine and Gascony, and Count of Poitou from 1086, devoted much of his considerable poetic skill to the creation of burlesque songs, some disarmingly graphic. Paterson carefully balances references to sexual abandonment with passages of exquisite delicacy touching on love's need for patience, courtesy, sympathy, accommodation to others' needs and polite speech at court, all intrinsic elements of an acknowledged code of courtesy. Courtly love, insisted Guilhem, was invested with moral principle – sexual love progressing through platonic love, then married love, culminating in the experience of natural goodness and a sense of self-worth. This accounting of courtly love was strengthened by the remarkable contribution of Jaufre Rudel (fl.1130–1147) who wrote persuasively of love thwarted by the tyranny of distance – *amor de lonh* – love from afar. Rudel's bewailing of the anxiety and frustration resulting from love's lack of tangible fulfilment is placed sensitively within the troubadour tradition.

Noted by Paterson as one of the most influential troubadours, Marcabru (fl. 1129–1148) proved himself to be a key figure in the development of courtly ideals, accusing the wealthy of miserliness and denigrating the courts as places of personal rivalry. He deplored the decline of courtly values amongst the aristocracy, railing in his verses against the immorality of various noblemen who presumably, on hearing his verses, would have had little trouble in recognizing themselves. Marcabru defined courtliness as embracing moderation, noble speech and loving relationships and, as with other troubadours, saw a distinction between different kinds of love: false love (*fals amar*) and love based on joy, self-control, mutuality of desire, trust, purity, honesty, courtesy, liberality, monogamy and other virtues.

Paterson writes insightfully on what she describes as Marcabru's verbal craftsmanship – his eloquence, his hostility to glib, imprecise and corrupting use of words and his facility with various word plays – puns, repetitions and use of colour to suggest meanings – and his use of nature imagery as a conveyer of truth and moral order. Expressive lyrics, alluring rhythms and suggestive imagery are the trademark of Bernart de Ventadorn (1145–1195), acknowledged as one of the most accomplished love poets of all time. Paterson highlights his remarkable ability to convey emotional intensity through the intimacy and musicality of the words, exemplified most poignantly in the Lark song. Here the unbearable sweetness of passion is cruelled by the pain of separation and the agony of unfulfilled love, depicted graphically as the melody follows the fateful movement of the lark. Paterson draws attention to Ventadorn's ability to appreciate love beyond erotic sensationalism, thereby isolating a key element of troubadour love: sincere, faithful affection.

The contribution of the trobairitz is treated insightfully, with attention drawn to the creation of *sirventes*, a form stiffened with strong moral and political opinion, often expressed with a fervour bordering on invective. Examples are given of lovers' exchanges which credit the amorous world of acceptance and rejection from the feminine standpoint as being more intuitive and sensitive than those of their male counterparts. Rich with obscurity and obfuscation, and overlaid with stylistic ingenuity, not to say complexity, the remarkable work of Arnaut Daniel

(1150–1210) is well treated, and the reference to what is known as ‘extent’ or ‘6 factual’ in the art of change ringing in bells as an example of the single appearance of the rhyme word in each stanza is brilliant.

Without diluting their fascination with courtly love and its various manifestations, the Troubadours extended their interests to the world of political intrigue and were not hesitant to align themselves with particular causes. Guilhem IX became involved in armed expeditions against Islam, a campaign against the Moors in Iberia and led his own crusade in Iberia. Marcabru also ventured beyond the confines of courtly love to drum up support for the crusades, touching on Christian-Muslim conflicts in Spain, applauding heroic efforts against the Saracens and urging support for further engagements. Francis of Assisi was notably caught up in to the world of the troubadours in southern France in his youth, with his name Francis beginning as a nickname relating to his time in France. Bertran de Born, even whilst embroiled in the intrigues of the Plantagenets in 12th century Aquitaine, specialized in the production of *sirventes* – lyric poetry modelled on the tunes and verse forms of the cansos – in which he incited participation in tumult, wars and general mayhem. Settled in the view that peace corrupts, Bertran saw no impediment in enlisting violence as a practical antidote, and this predisposition energized, not only a call to arms, but a robust attitude to amorous liaisons. As a result, much of his love poetry commended physical beauty as a competitive incentive for the fulfilment of amorous relationships. The relationship between troubadours and chivalry was given substance by Raimbaut de Vaqueiras (1165–1207) whose sense of identity was intimately tied up with military life, an association given vivid authenticity by injuries sustained at the Siege of Constantinople. Paterson identifies the chivalric ideals extolled by Raimbaut that gave rise to the concept of the noble warrior: martial prowess, loyalty to vassals, courtly manners, courtly love, protection of the needy and religious devotion. Of interest is also Raimbaut’s lyric innovation of the use of multilingualism.

Folquet de Marselha (c.1150–1231) spent twenty years as a troubadour, known as Fulk, before becoming the bishop of Toulouse. Paterson gives an extended account of his life and work and a fascinating analysis of his transition to life in a monastery. His verse from this later, ecclesiastical period ranks amongst some of the finest Christian writing, not only of his era, but of subsequent generations.

This work is a vivid and sympathetic study of the contributions of notable troubadours. That they are considered individually gives opportunity for their work to be appreciated in detail and in the context of their careers as a whole. Examples of poems are excellent and give a compelling insight into the troubadours’ sympathies, moods and attitudes. Reproductions of illustrations are clear, and the bibliography is exhaustive. This excellent work by Linda Paterson will take its place as an integral part of the history of an extraordinarily fascinating and multi-layered literary and musical phenomenon.

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