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The Rhetoric of the Troubadours

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Abstract

The medieval troubadours were no wandering musicians, casually improvising their songs as they strolled from town to town, but trained artists who lovingly crafted their songs to please and woo their listeners. The art of rhetoric deeply affected the art of the troubadour. First, the art of rhetoric divided composition of a speech into five well-defined parts. The troubadours consciously molded their songs according to these parts. Second, the medieval troubadour theorists then developed a system of genres, adding their own layer to the ancient art of rhetoric. Each genre demanded a specific topic, such as love, and a peculiar approach to that topic. Finally, the art of rhetoric also inspired a close union of the poems and their melodies. The troubadours were no wandering musicians, casually improvising their songs as they strolled from town to town, but trained artists who lovingly crafted their songs to please and woo their listeners.

Keywords

Troubadours, musicology

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The Rhetoric of the Troubadours

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“The troubadours aimed, above all, to be convincing” (Smith 1995, 400). According to Aristotle, the function of rhetoric is “to see the available means of persuasion in each case” (35). So the art of rhetoric was particularly well suited to aid the troubadours as they endeavored to make their poems and songs convincing. Seeking a method to train the novice orator in the art of rhetoric, the ancient Greeks and Romans developed a detailed system of rhetoric; a system that continued to be used throughout the Middle Ages. These rules covered every aspect of crafting a speech: from choosing a topic, to further developing the topic, to fleshing it out with words, to memorizing the speech and, finally, to delivering the speech. The troubadours modified this rhetorical system and composed their poems following these adapted rhetorical rules. Medieval theorists then codified these rules, making them specific to the art of the troubadours and developing detailed genres for troubadour songs. The art of rhetoric influenced not only the composition of poems, but also the composition of melodies and their relation to the poetry. “What on the whole caused the poetry of the troubadours. . . to supersede the details of their actual lives is their artful use of language or, in a word, rhetoric” (Smith 1995, 401).

Troubadour poetic theory was based on the rhetoric and grammar theory of the medieval period, as inherited from the Ancient Greeks and Romans. There were five parts to the composition of a speech in classical rhetoric, as laid down by Aristotle in *On Rhetoric*, Cicero in *De inventione*, and an anonymous ancient Roman writer in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. These were *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronunciatio* (Rhetorica).

The first part, *inventio*, involved finding or choosing the appropriate or necessary material for the speech, or, in the case of the troubadours, for the song or poem. For the troubadours, there were five parts to choosing one’s material—where, what, what kind, how, and why. “Where” refers to the people the poem will be about. According to Callihan, one should consider people as a category, so that “where?” is asking “where in the category of people will I find the people for my poem?” “Will I go to the place where peasants are? or where the upper class is?” “What” deals with the subject of the poem. A large number of troubadour poems deal with courtly love, a very theoretical and philosophical love, but they have other subjects also, such as sorrow. “What kind,” which is determined by the “what” and “where,” refers to the social class of the poem. Will it be “honorable or disreputable” (Aubrey 1996, 71)? “How” deals with the adornments and

figures of speech the troubadour employs to clothe the subject with words. Finally, “why” refers to the purpose of the poem. Why did the poet write it? On what occasions will it be sung? What is the intended effect on the listeners?

Dispositio, the second stage of composition, was the arrangement of the material in a logical fashion. While classical rhetoric would have had five subdivisions of *dispositio*, these were more suited for a persuasive legal or political speech; therefore, the troubadour theoreticians simplified it to three subdivisions. First, the beginning served to introduce the topic and whet the appetite for what was to follow; second, the middle developed and laid forth the topic in its entirety; finally, the end concluded and finished the topic. As Geoffroi de Vinsauf, a medieval troubadour theoretician, said, “Let the poem’s beginning, like a courteous attendant, introduce the subject with grace. Let the main section, like a diligent host, make provision for its worthy reception. Let the conclusion, like a herald when the race is over, dismiss it honorably” (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 133).

The third part, *elocutio*, concerned the embellishment of the material. There were two subcategories of *elocutio*. The first, *ornatus difficilis*, consisted of tropes, or figures of thought. Figures of thought force the listener to think about the subject differently, because they approach the subject in an unusual manner (Callihan 2009). Metaphors and personifications are examples of tropes. Bernart de Ventadorn used the song of a nightingale as a metaphor for love in his poem *La dossa votz ai auzida* (*I have heard the sweet voice of the wild nightingale*) “*La dossa votz ai auzida,*” “I have heard the sweet voice of the wild nightingale” (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 89). For the troubadours, this type of ornamentation came to be known as *trobar clus*. Troubadour repertoire written in the *trobar clus* style was more difficult to understand, because of the techniques they used. For example, writing very short stanzas forced the poet to condense the subject into few words (Aubrey 1996, 202). Another popular *trobar clus* technique was alliteration, such as Arnaut Daniel used in this line, “Sols sui qui sai lo sobrafan qe·m sortz” (qtd. in Smith 1995, 401). Using the same rhyme words for several verses is another *trobar clus* device (Aubrey 1996, 203). Arnaut Daniel used this device in his *sestina*, employing the words “m’intra”, “ongla”, “s’arma”, “verga”, “oncle”, and “cambra” – which rhyme in Langue d’Oc – (qtd. in Hill & Bergin, 103) as the ends of lines in every stanza.

Ornatus facilis, the second subcategory of *elocution*, was more flowery, consisting of figures of speech, or turns of phrase. The subject matter itself was quite easily understood, but the presentation of it was arranged in a unique way designed to catch the listener’s attention (Callihan 2009). In troubadour theory this type of ornamentation became known as *trobar leu*. An example of the troubadours’ employment of *trobar leu* would be the repetition of the word “dawn” in the last line of every stanza in an *alba*. *Trobar leu* comprises the majority of the extant troubadour repertoire, since it was easily accessible to the listener and was more popular than *trobar clus*.

The fourth part of preparation, *memoria*, was simply the memorization of the material. Ancient Greeks and Romans and people in the medieval period mentally

placed parts of their speech or poem in physical places, such as a house and its various rooms and areas, in order to memorize it. For example, in his imagination a troubadour might have positioned the opening stanza of a poem in the atrium of his house, setting in array various objects around the room that he could associate with ideas in the poem.

Fifth, *pronunciato* was the delivery of the speech, or for the troubadours, the song. The medieval theorist Grocheo considered this extremely important, because this was the stage where the poetry and music was actually realized. He refers back to Aristotle who split song into the *forma*, music, and *materia*, the poetry. Thus, though the *materia* was developed in *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*, the music, probably also developed in *elocutio*, must be included in the *pronunciato* stage in order for the song to become real (Aubrey 1996, 76-77).

Further, the three different styles of rhetoric also influenced troubadour songs. These styles were *gravis*, high, *mediocris*, middle, and *adtenuata*, low. A poem in the *gravis* style required a weighty and serious tone. The *mediocris* style would be polite and decorous, but not too serious. Coarse and vulgar humor marked poems in the *adtenuata* style. These different styles affected all the parts of rhetoric, but were determined in the *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. Generally, a troubadour would use a low ordering and adornment of poetry for a low topic, though he could use high *dispositio* and *elocutio* for a low subject if he desired a particular rhetorical effect (Aubrey 1996, 71).

The troubadours' system of song genres demonstrates more clearly the actual application of the *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* principles to the troubadours' poems. While troubadours probably did not have particular genres in mind as they composed, medieval theorists constructed genres based on the themes of poetry and style of music. Scholars generally agree that early troubadours would not have had specific genres in mind as they composed. "(Pierre) Bec showed that among the earliest troubadours. . .there occur no operative terms or concepts of genres within the domain of lyric song" (Paden 2000, 29). Medieval theorists, such as the anonymous author of *Doctrina de compondre dictats*, Raimon Vidal, and Guilhem Molinier, in the thirteenth and fourteenth century studied the troubadours' songs and established the system of genres that scholars now use to categorize them. In summarizing Molinier, Paden says "Thus. . .the system of the principal genres became an authoritative, retrospective generic grid" (Paden 2000, 32).

In her discussion on genres, Aubrey points out that if a troubadour used the rules for specific genres laid out by the theorists, they would do so only after the *inventio* stage of rhetoric. Authentic troubadours would not begin by choosing a genre, but by choosing a subject. They would then apply the rules of the theorists (Aubrey 1996, 83). Paden proposes that the rules for genres would actually have been used in competitions for compositions of troubadour songs in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. "These contests. . .required a set of rules for accurate

judgment, and these rules required prescriptive definitions of the genres. To these rules we owe the system of the lyric genres” (Paden 2000, 35). But even though most troubadours would have followed their own creative instinct as they composed, rather than a set of rules, the system of genres does provide a good tool for analyzing the songs of the troubadours (Aubrey 1996, 82).

Some medieval theorists categorized songs into sixteen or more genres (Paden 2000, 30). A closer examination of some of the more common and important genres will further demonstrate rhetoric’s role in the composition of a song. Songs classified as *canso*, or *chanson*, are the majority of extant troubadour songs. Love is generally the subject of the *canso*. Thus, Guilhem Molinier says, “A *chanson* must deal principally with love or with praise. . . . A *chanson* must have a stately melody” (qtd. in Paden 2000, 31). But the *canso* could deal with love many different ways. “*Cansos* could be simple expressions of adulation or unmitigated complaints about the beloved’s cruelty” (Aubrey 1996, 78). So if, in the *inventio* stage of composition as he asked the question “what?” a troubadour chose love as his topic, his finished product would belong in the *canso* genre. The *canso* would generally have been in a *gravis* style, but written in *trobar leu*. The following are the first two stanzas from a *canso* by Bernart de Ventadorn complaining of the fickleness of his lady.

I have heard the sweet voice
Of the wild nightingale,
And it has so pierced my heart
That it has lifted
And softened all the worry and
Mistreatment that love gives me.
And I will very much need
Another joy in my sorrow.

Any man who does not dwell
With love has a truly miserable life,
He who does not steer his heart
And his desire toward love.
For everything must surrender to it,
And the cry of the birds must resound,
Likewise the field and pasture and garden,
Dale and plain and forest. (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 89)

Theorists also indicated for each genre whether to compose a new melody for the poem or borrow an old one. Aubrey frequently refers to the *Doctrina de compondre dictats*, one of the earliest and most detailed treatises describing the genres (Aubrey 1996, 86). According to the anonymous treatise, when composing a *canso* one should “give it as beautiful a new melody as you can” (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 90).

The *pastora*, or *pastorela*, also deals with love but in a different way. *Pastora* literally means “peasant girl” and speaks of a nobleman attempting to woo or seduce a peasant girl or shepherdess (Aubrey 1996, 95). The *canço* was written in the tradition of courtly love, but the *pastora* spoke of a very physical love, sometimes bordering on crude. This difference arose in the *inventio* portion of the compositional process; the troubadours answered the question “where?” by deciding to include a peasant, rather than only speaking of nobles. Then they would have answered “what?” by choosing physical love, rather than theoretical love. And in answering “what kind?” the troubadours would have picked a lower class. As it dealt with a lower topic, the *pastora* would generally have been in a *mediocris* or *adenuata* style. The *trobar leu* was probably also the type of embellishment used for this style, since it was intended for popular enjoyment. The poem was generally written with the nobleman as narrator (Paden 2009, Pastourelle). The following are the second and third stanzas from a *pastorela* by Marcabu.

I came to her across the level ground.
 “Girl,” I said, “beautiful, I am
 Unhappy because the cold is piercing you.”
 “Lord,” this peasant’s child said to me,
 “Thanks be to God and the woman who nursed me,
 It’s nothing to me if the wind ruffles my hair,
 Because I feel good, and I’m healthy.”

“Girl,” I said, “you’re sweet and innocent,
 I came out of my way to keep you company;
 For a peasant girl like you should not,
 Without a comrade near by,
 Pasture so many cattle
 All alone in such a place.” (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 96)

For the *pastorela* the anonymous theorist prescribes a melody that would be unfamiliar to the hearers. “And you can give it . . . a new melody or a foreign melody that is no longer current” (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 95).

Another genre, the *planh*, mourns the death of a loved one. Usually, a *planh* was composed for the death of a nobleman, often the patron of the troubadour. “A *planh* might celebrate the lamented one’s life, or describe the miseries of the abandoned” (Aubrey 1996, 79). Thus, as it deals with a more somber topic, the *planh* would be in the *gravis* style. Though the composition of a *planh* was probably expected on the death of a patron and its form ritualized, the grief it expressed was probably quite real.

It no doubt was amongst the duties of courtly poets
 to deplore the loss of the latter (protector). . . .But in
 spite of this there is the true ring of sorrow in most
 of these songs, a fact which shows the frequent

existence of genuinely cordial relations between the poets and their noble patrons. (Hueffer 1878, 134)

The melody of the *planh* was usually borrowed from another song, frequently a *canso* (Paden 2009, Planh). The following are the first and second stanzas from a *planh* composed by Gaucelm Faidit on the death of Richard the Lion-Hearted.

I have just heard about such a great loss,
 Alas, and the greatest sorrow that I have ever had,
 That I must speak in song, weeping,
 And recount that he
 Who was the chief and father of valor,
 The noble, valiant Richard, king of the English,
 Is dead, oh God, such a loss and such sorrow!
 Such a terrible word, so cruel to hear,
 That whoever can bear it has a hard heart indeed.

The king is dead, and a thousand years have passed
 Since there has been such a great sorrow, or since
 Such a thing happened, or indeed since there was a
 Man like him,
 So generous, so noble, so brave, so meritorious;
 I don't believe that even Alexander, who conquered
 Darius,
 Was so generous or so giving,
 Nor was Charlemagne or Arthur so noble;
 For throughout the world, in truth,
 He made some fear and others praise. (qtd. in
 Aubrey 1996, 100)

The *alba* is a genre of songs that speak of lovers being parted at dawn. *Alba* literally means “dawn” and the songs generally used the word, *alba*, in the refrain at the end of each stanza (Poe). The person singing the song is usually a watchman guarding the lovers, but occasionally in later songs, the singer is the lover or the lady (Hueffer 1878, 87). The *Doctrina* calls for the *alba* to praise or blame the dawn, the adored lady, or love, but frequently the *alba* expresses concern for the lovers as the dawn approaches (Aubrey 1996, 102). The troubadours would probably have composed the *alba* in a *gravis* or *mediocris* style. According to the *Doctrina* the *alba* required a new melody. The following are the first two stanzas from an *alba* composed by Guiraut de Bornelh. The narrator is a friend acting as a sentinel for the lovers.

Glorious King, true light and splendor,
 Almighty God, Lord, if it please you,
 Be a faithful help to my companion,
 For I have not seen him since the night came on,

And soon it will be dawn.

Fair friend, whether you sleep or wake,
 Sleep no more, I pray you;
 In the east I see the star growing that
 Brings the day, which I knew well;
 And soon it will be dawn. (qtd. in Aubrey 1996,
 103)

The melodies of the troubadours' songs, while they were probably developed in the *elocutio* stage, also played an extremely important role in the final part of rhetoric, *pronunciato*. Since the composition of the melody was part of the rhetorical process, troubadours kept a close relationship between their poetry and melody. The melody of the above *alba* will demonstrate some ways in which the poetry and the melody were related.

1. Rei glo - ri - os. ve - ray lums e clar - tatz.

2. tatz po - de - ros. se - nher si a vos platz.

3. al mieu com - paynh si - as fi - zels a - iu - da.

4. qu'ieu non lo vi pus la nuech fo ven - gu - da.

5. et a - des se - ra l'al - ba.

Example 1. *Rei glorios* by Guiraut de Bornelh. (qtd. in Aubrey 1996, 103). [Listen](#)

First, the stanzas of this *alba* are grouped in pairs by rhyme scheme and theme. Likewise, the lines of the melody are somewhat paired as well. The first two lines are identical and the last two lines begin the same way. Also, the opening of the

third line is repeated halfway through the fourth line (Aubrey 1996, 104). Second, “for most troubadour melodies, each syllable gets one or two pitches. In this context, a syllable which gets considerably more pitches, is thus set off as more prominent thereby receiving a particular emphasis” (Mahrt 1994, 119). In this *alba*, there are a few melismas, but the one at the end of the fifth line is particularly noticeable. This is the only melisma that consistently falls on a single word, that is, the word “alba.” Thus, the melody supported the theme of the song, the coming of the dawn, as “alba” was emphasized not only by its repetition in each stanza, but also by this melisma.

In conclusion, the art of rhetoric deeply affected the art of the troubadour. First, the art of rhetoric divided composition of a speech into five well-defined parts. The troubadours consciously molded their songs according to these parts. Second, the medieval troubadour theorists then developed a system of genres, adding their own layer to the ancient art of rhetoric. Each genre demanded a specific topic, such as love, and a peculiar approach to that topic. Finally, the art of rhetoric also inspired a close union of the poems and their melodies. Since the poem without the melody was an incomplete song, in *elocutio* and *pronunciato* the troubadours carefully shaped their melodies to support and complement their poetry. Thus, the troubadours were no wandering musicians, casually improvising their songs as they strolled from town to town, but trained artists who lovingly crafted their songs to please and woo their listeners.

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