TROUBADOURS

Troubadours were the courtly poets who sang in 12th- and 13th-century Provence. *Trobar* meant "poem" in the language of Provence. Troubadours considered themselves poets set to music; they created the first important poetry in vernacular speech, rather than Latin. By romanticizing the concept of love, they permanently changed Europe's view of women.

The poetry of the troubadours grew in the distinctive culture of southern France—the regions of Aquitaine and Provence. Their language, known as Occitan or Provençal, was a halfway point between French and Spanish. Among their cultural differences from the rest of Europe, women had always had more rights of inheritance and sometimes ruled as countesses or duchesses. This region had more contact with both Muslim and Christian Spain, and their poetry may have been influenced by Arabic poetry.

During the 12th century, the poetry sung at the small courts of Provence, Toulouse, Aquitaine, and Poitou elevated women to a new, powerful status. The songs developed conventions that permitted them to express strong feelings and make sexual innuendos without explicitly targeting or shaming any particular women. Most songs were addressed to *midons*, "my lady," who might be the lord's wife or any other woman. The songs addressed her intimately and personally, as though she, listening, would know that the song was addressed to her, without her name being used. Some used plain language, but later troubadour poetry invented sophisticated conventions of allusion, euphemism, and metaphor. Nobody knows if the poets also composed their own music or how they sang the songs.

The first known troubadour was Duke William IX of Aquitaine. Beginning at his court, five more generations of Provençal troubadours spread out over the region. At least half were nobility, and as many as 15 were noble women. Other troubadours were trained jongleurs who wrote for their patrons and their ladies.

Bertran de Born and Arnaut Daniel were famous troubadours whose lives were typical of their time. Bertran de Born was a minor nobleman, the lord of Autafort (or, in French, Hautefort). He was a vassal of Eleanor of Aquitaine (granddaughter of the first troubadour) and queen of England, and her son Richard the Lionhearted of England. De Born's political fortunes went up and down as he sided against the king in a rebellion and then won back his favor (and his castle). He entered a Cistercian abbey in old age and died there around 1215. Arnaut Daniel, another prolific and famous troubadour, was probably a professional jongleur, and he seems to have been well educated. A *raza*, a troubadour's introductory legend, claims that Arnaut performed for Richard the Lionhearted in a competition at his French castle.

Their songs were written down, though existing manuscripts do not date to the earliest times. Many songs were written long after they had been composed. Different versions of the same song can be found in different collections. The collections of the time were made for aristocrats and are hand lettered and painted. They gave the lyrics and melodies, but medieval methods for writing music did not include a good system for indicating rhythm.

Some troubadours wrote very sophisticated poetry in their songs. They developed the form of the *trobar clus*, the poetry of allusion and symbol to cloak the direct meaning. Some of the forms of poetry he pioneered have survived into modern use, including the sestina (which uses the same six words to end...
lines in each stanza, but in a different order). Troubadours preferred complicated rhyme schemes, often repeating rhyming words and whole lines.

By the 14th century, the style spread to Germany, where the composers and performers were known as minnesingers. The ideal of courtly love became a fixed part of Northern Europe's culture, and it continued to influence songs, poetry, and popular customs long past the close of the Middle Ages.

The classic troubadour song described an ideal of unfulfilled love. The poet has fallen in love with a noble lady whose beauty was perfect and ideal and whose mind was refined and wise. The poet is not able to tell the lady of his love, but it may be seen in sighs and tears. He suffers, and the truth of his love is in the depth of his sufferings. His rivals jealously criticize him to the lady, and he trusts in her noble judgment to disbelieve their lies. He hopes she will grant benevolence and mercy on his suffering and give her love to him.

In a culture of arranged marriages, these ideas were very new. The ideal of courtly love elevated emotion and denigrated marriage, which was often about property and family alliances. Although arranged marriages were often happy, they could also involve great disparity in age or temperament. Divorce was unknown, although some nobility successfully divorced by petitioning the pope to dissolve the marriage on the grounds that their spouse was a cousin. (Eleanor of Aquitaine divorced the king of France this way and remarried the king of England.)

The noble ladies who talked about courtly love rejected love within a marriage because the relationship had been forced on them. It was not possible, they said, to love without free choice. Therefore the only valid love was love for someone other than one's spouse. Troubadour songs explicitly celebrated adulterous love, although many songs praised this love only as an ideal, rather than as a sexual relationship. The lady of the songs was usually a noble and powerful lady, and real adultery with her could be very dangerous. It is impossible to know how much the songs explored fantasies, rather than telling about actual Provençal social reality.

Troubadour music was very popular with ladies. It permitted them to discuss and express emotion that did not previously have a place in official culture. The poems of female troubadours tended to be more personal, less ideal, and more deeply emotional than the conventional male troubadour songs. They expressed hurt feelings, joy, longing, and doubt. After the troubadour songs opened up the world of emotional expression in literature, European poetry never went back to the early medieval fare of epics. Postmedieval stories and songs were more likely to celebrate personal lives and feelings long after the troubadour style had faded.

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Further Reading


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