

History

Ideals of Gender and Romance Portrayed in the Literature of Courtly Love

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Abstract

Courtly Literature arose in 12th-century France and moved across Europe. Male troubadours and female trobairitz, lyrical poets of courtly literature, express their sexual and romantic desires through songs and novels. Most scholarly literature on courtly love focuses on the words of male troubadours who were the main consumers and creators of courtly literature, although nearly one in twenty troubadours were women. The poems by female troubadours, or trobairitz, offer an important and unique view into how women at the time embraced the idea of courtly love and responded to the male-dominated literary genre. This paper examines how male and female troubadours began to explore platonic and sexual love through courtly literature, which sets the stage for modern-day romance and courtship, adding 'love' to the equation of marriage above socioeconomic considerations. Dichotomies between dominance and submission, as well as the poet's portrayals of each other, suggest the effects of religious and gender norms. The Catholic Church during the time denounced carnal pleasures as inordinate and imposed rigid rules on marriage. This paper explores how the writings of troubadours and trobairitz may reflect a larger conversation of idealized relationships, despite societal restrictions.

"I am like the unicorn which is stunned in looking,
fascinated, at the virgin. Happy with its torment, it falls
into her lap; prey offered to the traitor who kills it. So it

is with me: I am truly put to death by Love and my lady.
They took my heart, and I cannot recover it.”¹

In this way, French count Thibault de Champagne confesses his undying love for a maiden, a key aspect of courtly love. Courtly love originated from twelfth-century French love literature under troubadours or lyrical poets. Troubadours often focused on sexual desire and explored ways in which they could express their love, rejecting the Catholic Church’s condemnation of carnal pleasure.² It quickly gained popularity throughout Europe, meeting audiences from Italy to Germany.³ Courtly love mainly influenced male poets like 12th Century Frenchman Chrétien de Troyes, who discussed masculinity and chivalry through fictional *romans*, or romance novels. And while this sentiment of an admirable knight affected by masculine desire prevails throughout courtly literature, most of which was written by and for men, women also composed their own pieces: twenty out of the four-hundred named troubadours were female.⁴ Female troubadours (trobairitz) replaced the suitor’s position as the heartsick romantic and also used courtly literature to portray their idealization of love.⁵ Genres within courtly literature, like jeu-parties and tensons, sang of courtly conversations between troubadours on the nature of relationships.⁶ Courtly love allowed men and women to engage in discourse, reflecting societal debates on temperament, marriage, and platonic and sexual love against a backdrop of gender and religious constraints.

Depictions of gendered tropes in courtly literature revealed debates between male troubadours and female trobairitz about each other’s weaknesses. Chrétien De Troyes’ *Erec and Enide* portrays women as garrulous, where the knight Erec threatens his maiden Enide, “she should not again be so rash as to let a single word escape her lips.”⁷ Annoyed that her voice attracted three robbers, Erec suggests that women were too talkative and attracted the wrong company, which is

¹ Thibaut de Champagne, *Poèmes d’amour des XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, ed. Emmanuèle Baumgartner (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1983), quoted in R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 150.

² Laurie A Finke, “The Rhetoric of Desire in the Courtly Lyric,” *Feminist Theory, Women’s Writing*, 29-74, (London, Cornell University Press, 1992), 37.

³ Georges Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 74.

⁴ Matilda Bruckner, Laurie Shepard and Sarah White, *Songs of the Women Troubadours*, (New York, Routledge, a member of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), xv.

⁵ Finke, “The Rhetoric of Desire,” 30. Bruckner et al., *Songs of the Women Troubadours*, 105.

⁶ Doss-Quinby et al., *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 73.

⁷ Chrétien de Troye, *Arthurian Romances*, (England: Penguin Books, 1991), 73.

why they needed to be silenced.⁸ Enide then agrees with his words and laments about her negative qualities, saying: “How I regret my pride and effrontery ... May my tongue be completely disgraced.”⁹ Chrétien de Troyes’ disliked verbose women, and even had Enide concede to her ego-centric insolence. As a result, courtly literature acted as a mouthpiece and suggested male discontent with the supposed loquacity of women. Moreover, he introduces the virtue of submissiveness through these critiques, describing a fantastical apologetic maiden who wavers under male authority. His work denotes how courtly literature conformed with religious and societal attitudes towards verbose women, who also viewed talkative women in a negative light.

The trobairitz characterized men as talkative and deceptive, reflecting courtly literature’s power as a medium for discourse between lovers. One troubadour complains about men’s behavior; “All these men, who were good troubadours, pretended to be loyal lovers ... he is love’s deceiver and behaves like a traitor, for he publicly speaks ill for that in which he has most hope.”¹⁰ Gossiping men were condemned, and women used courtly literature to bemoan the hypocritical words of male troubadours, who professed their love to maidens but threatened consequences if the lady refused to respond in kind. In another poem, a maid urges her benefactor to love her suitor lest he dies of heartbreak, prompting the lady to call her lover “vain, mad, and inconstant.”¹¹ The lady condemns her lover’s selfishness and only desire to possess her body. Another lady warns that “men are consummate flatterers,”¹² scheming and lying to achieve sexual favors. Women used courtly literature to remind men of their deceitful natures too, responding to their accusations of treachery and verbosity. Female trobaritz’s wariness extended to greater anxiety over gossip, where Comtesse de Dia prays that “he [her lover] disbelieve whoever speaks false words to him,” aware of the damage slander can cause to her reputation.¹³ Her words suggested the fleeting relationships of courtly love, entailing the need for clear communication between lovers. Meanwhile, a lady warns Raimon de las Salas that “troublesome and savage people ... make war against us” through their spiteful words.¹⁴ Her observation reflects the importance of female courtly literature in responding to their vilification through courtly literature, defending their character while pointing out

⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 99.

¹¹ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 93.

¹² Doss-Quinby et al., *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 81.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 87.

flaws in their lovers. This tit-for-tat exchange also manifested in the question of fidelity.

Questions of deception, garrulousness, and infidelity, were central to the arguments of religious authorities. The Church charged that women were, according to John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople, liars and extravagant chatterboxes.¹⁵ Aquinas, wary of a woman's uncontrollable body and emotional temper, noted men's superior intelligence and reason.¹⁶ Women were also seen as temptresses, stemming from the biblical story of Adam and Eve, where Eve encourages Adam to eat the apple.¹⁷ Augustine concurred, commending women who had control over their sexual impulses since he viewed them as intrinsically perverse and promiscuous.¹⁸ The innate corruption within women described by the Church suggested the widespread perpetuation of those myths in society—cliches so overused that they were consciously or unconsciously advocated for in religious settings.

Male courtly literature draws on these religious views and describes women as sexually unfaithful and treacherous. In the story *Tristan and Isolde*, Isolde engages in sexual trickery when Brangaene replaces her and consummates with Mark, who does not notice the switch.¹⁹ In *Cligès*, Fenice deceives her husband Alias with a potion. The concoction causes Alias to believe that he is having sex when it is only a dream, preserving Fenice's chastity.²⁰ While the focus on potions highlights how women were characterized as tricksters, the lengths to which she goes to remain chaste shows the author's interest in preserving her virginity. Male anxieties of infidelity were also exacerbated by negative religious views of women's promiscuity, implying courtly literature's greater implications in societal beliefs about women. In another anecdote, King Arthur's magical drinking horn spills over him, which indicated that his queen had cheated on him.²¹ *De Dame Guile*, a short poem, warns of a woman's cunning and fakery, writing: "She wears a braid of foolish pride ... [and a] dress of false envy bordered with fakery."²² Both poems imply men's fear of uncontrollable women, where men would never be able to glean their lover's true goals or possible affairs. This anxiety continues in another knight, who falsely accuses his

¹⁵ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 14-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 310-311.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁸ Duby, *Love and Marriage*, 9.

¹⁹ James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 151.

²⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 189.

²¹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 96.

²² Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 21.

maiden of adultery: “No, you liked it and were pleased by it!—You never tried to stop him ... [You] will follow me naked and on foot until I’ve cut off [the knight’s] head.” The implied violence highlights the knight’s hysteria, and while he acted as an antagonist in Chretien de Troyes’ story, the knight’s worries allude to greater societal anxieties over the promiscuity of women. Chretien’s anecdote suggested the influence of negative gender norms and church ideals and implied the power of courtly literature as a medium to voice these concerns. Relative distrust of women within courtly literature, exacerbated by religious ideology, caused female troubadours to push back against those narratives, highlighting the hypocrisy and problems of men.

Men’s fidelity was constantly called into question by women troubadours, or *trobairitz*, who lamented unfaithful knights and celebrated reciprocated fidelity. A lady demands Raimbaut d’Aurenga to “have you this loyal always,” implying her anxiety that Raimbaut would have separate affairs.²³ A female troubadour advised Italian Bertran de Pojet to value faith and truth; fidelity remained an important issue for women.²⁴ Moreover, *trobairitz* Alamanda berates Giraut de Bornello for courting another lover in front of his lady, calling his actions a breach of contract. Another lady complains that: “It isn’t fair that another love takes you away ... remember what our agreement was.”²⁵ *Trobairitz* used courtly literature to remind men of their vows of loyalty, alluding to discussions that happened between men and women on constancy. Their desire for loyalty also denotes a growing consensus in the requirements for a relationship; reciprocated fidelity emerges as a constant theme throughout women’s courtly literature. When both sides are fidelity, happiness abounds, as French *trobairitz* Comtesse de Dia writes; “because my lover is the very gayest, therefore I am charming and since I am true to him, it is proper that he be true to me too.”²⁶ In this way, women explored the requirements for a perfect union through courtly literature while admonishing men for their infidelity.

Female troubadours also criticized men as boastful and wicked, suggesting continued discussions regarding treachery. The Countess de Dia writes “With him ... I’ve been tricked and cheated,”²⁷ and her words reflect courtly literature’s power in revealing men’s deceit. Almucs de Castelnou mirrors the lady, commanding her lover “to repent the grave

²³ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 17.

²⁶ Finke, “The Rhetoric of Desire,” 58.

²⁷ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 53.

wrong [you have] done to me.”²⁸ Ysabella attacks her ex-love Elais Cairel as “a deceiver,” and urges him to “go back and live in the monastery.”²⁹ Ysabella’s attack is two-fold: She refers to Elais as treacherous but also implies that he is sexually incapable, hence her cheeky reference to the monastery where celibacy was a requisite. Since women used courtly literature to redirect accusations of deceit and trickery to their male peers, their work again reflected ongoing commentary about gender and moral character. Courtly literature, however, extended into the question of masculinity and expression of love.

Tournaments legitimized men’s chivalry and masculinity, but they could also reflect a discourse on platonic love. In Arthurian Romances, ladies hosted tournaments to find a suitable knight and partner. Lady Wurst and the Lady of Pomelegoi organize a game to find husbands, promising their love to the winners,³⁰ while Herzelayde, a German maiden, hosts the knights Gahmuret and Parzival who battle to become her husband.³¹ Although women seem to gain power through organizing these tournaments, Georges Duby argues that Courtly Love was a man’s game, which through fighting characterized the masculine and gruff qualities of men, justifying their right to the maiden.³² Erec engages in gruesome battles, hitting an offending knight’s head three times, breaking his helmet, and slicing through his opponent’s skull, cracking it open.”³³ This masculine aggression validated the power structure where men were physically stronger, which is why they held power in society. James Schultz agrees, adding that men allowed women to be on a pedestal since it was only a play,³⁴ and suggests that Courtly Love was a system that did not reflect reality. These stories on masculine prowess, however, marked a shift in courtly literature to the discussion of non-sexual love. Bravery and courage were now seen as requisites for a maiden’s love, and the knight Cligès “for love of [his maiden], fought back bravely ... so that she might hear tell only of his strengths and skills.” And while these tournaments highlighted the chivalry and courtliness of men, they also suggested how men were supposed to express their love; through battling and persevering despite hardships. So important is this trope that Chrétien includes a scene where Enide complains that Erec’s love for her is causing him to forget his knightly duties.³⁵ Courtly literature encouraged men and women to surmise the

²⁸ Ibid., 49.

²⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 273.

³¹ Schultz, *History of Sexuality*, 124.

³² Duby, *Love and Marriage*, 33.

³³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 49.

³⁴ Schultz, *History of Sexuality*, 185.

³⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 68.

qualities necessary to be loved, and they conclude that only through courageous and noble actions can men gain the favor of their lovers.

Even female troubairitz described the need for noble knights. A lady notes that “he who risks heart and body ... deserves help from a lady of worth,”³⁶ admiring the knight’s courageous actions in his quest for love. “Break lances, make banners fly. He who acts thusly fulfills his obligation,”³⁷ another lady asserts. One maiden goes as far as to concede that “however many unfavorable attributes a good knight may amass, he remains valiant forever.”³⁸ Troubaritz expected men to act with bravery and valor as proof of their nobility, and their discussions reflect the dissemination and idealization of platonic love. Masculinity was used by female and male poets to determine the worthiness of a knight for a maiden, and they explored ways in which men could communicate such love.

One way was to protect maidens from mythical beasts and antagonistic knights, reflecting men’s masculinity and the development of platonic love. Yvain defends maidens against two demons terrorizing their town while also safeguarding a woman in a land dispute with her sister.³⁹ In addition, he fights against a villainous knight for Lady Lunette while she is wrongly imprisoned for an affair.⁴⁰ Women relied on knights as a refuge, with a female troubadour writing to a knight: “Please lend me your protecting presence.”⁴¹ By highlighting men’s chivalry, male courtly literature encouraged men to safeguard maidens too, signifying that as a new requirement for platonic love. Men now needed to use their strength to protect women, rather than demonstrating it in a game. This idealization of men’s roles in love stories was also reflected in ladies.

Male courtly literature often romanticized the physical beauty of female lovers. Schultz notes how German writers Johnasdorf, Gottfried, and Morungun focused on the red lips of ladies, as well as their eyes and the radiance of their bodies.⁴² The light was a sign of nobility, emphasized by Jacques Goff, and in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Cligès*, the male protagonist Alexander praises his maiden Soredamor’s brow and notes her eyes, saying that they were as bright as candles and gave her whole

³⁶ Doss-Quinby, *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 88.

³⁷ Doss-Quinby, *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 91.

³⁸ Doss-Quinby, *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 97.

³⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 361; *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁴² Schultz, *History of Sexuality*, 23-24.

face a warm glow.⁴³ Other German writers including Wolfram, Parzival, and Condwiramus agreed, calling them the ideal perfection of the body.⁴⁴ Clothes and other accessories accentuated their beauty, and Isold's gold ring complemented her blond hair.⁴⁵ Erec describes Enide's dress with equal fascination, writing how her white dress was simple and pleated, indicating the purity that illuminated her face.⁴⁶ The relative consistency between the categorization of "beautiful" women reflects a fantastical figure that arose out of courtly literature and suggests the evolution of platonic love to include physical beauty. Writers debated what constituted perfection and peak attractiveness, setting their standards and ideal qualities.

In addition, male courtly literature discussed and fantasized about the idea of "perfect love." Friedrich Von Hausen enjoyed the power such fantasies gave, saying: "It still brings me great pleasure that no one can prevent me from thinking of her close to me."⁴⁷ His fantasies allow his beloved to remain perfect and untainted by other people, and Fenis agrees to a more negative degree, noting: "I am striving after a foolish delusion."⁴⁸ Their phrases reflect a growing understanding that love could be determined through reverie and imagination too, instilling a more open attitude towards the various facets of platonic love. French troubadour Jafure Rudel relates to Fenis, saying that there is: "no other joy than the pleasure of distant love," citing the euphoria an envisioned perfect person provides.⁴⁹ Italian troubadour Bertran de Born literalizes these fantasies, declaring: "I shall go everywhere purchasing of each lady one beautiful image, to make one beautiful lady."⁵⁰ Bertran's creation of an ideal woman is a central theme throughout courtly love and is similar to French count Thibaut de Champagne's fascination with virgins, where the maiden transcends reality and becomes the ultimate object of achievable infatuation. Discussions of platonic love were heightened to philosophical and whimsical musings, alluding to the increasing discourse on the different ways poets could express their love. Women also weighed in on the topic of romanticization, differing in their opinions.

Some female troubadours emphasized their shyness, preferring a more indirect approach to an ideal relationship. We see this in women

⁴³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 133.

⁴⁴ Schultz, *The History of Sexuality*, 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 42.

⁴⁷ Schultz, *The History of Sexuality*, 112.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 155.

⁵⁰ Finke, "The Rhetoric of Desire," 51.

depicted by male writers like Chretien de Troyes. He writes in *The Knight of the Cart* of a bashful lady who expresses her love for Lancelot: “Do not consider me ill-bred for telling you what I believe.”⁵¹ Their words allude to societal and religious pressures which condemned women as talkative and verbose. An anonymous female troubadour assents, saying that she was extremely smitten with a knight, although “everybody says it isn’t proper for a lady to plead her case with a knight.”⁵² Female troubadours found themselves in the confusing position of not being able to express their affections since male courtly love set a rigid hierarchy where it was the man’s duty to grovel for love at his maiden’s feet.

Other women pushed back against this narrative in various poems, asserting their right to choose. Castelloza claims that “when it happens that a lady loves, she ought to court the knight if she sees prowess and knightly worth.”⁵³ However, she also admits that she’ll “set a very poor example to other loving ladies: usually a man sends messages.”⁵⁴ Castelloza realizes that by declaring her feelings and wishes, she forfeits her power as the indifferent lady and takes the place of the begging suitor. She relishes, however, the opportunity to express her feelings, deciding that “he’s a great fool who blames me for loving you because it suits me well.”⁵⁵ The opposing narratives from Castelloza and other female troubadours suggest the wide spectrum of opinions within courtly literature on the best way to acknowledge love, as well as a backlash to restrictive gender norms. The questions of assertiveness were especially important in courtly literature discussions about sexual love, which were influenced by the Church’s restrictions on carnal desire.

According to the Church, people conducted sex solely for the propagation of humankind; pleasurable intercourse was sinful, demonstrated when Tobias apologizes to God before consummating his marriage with Sara; “We will be in our wedlock ... And now, Lord, you know, that it is not because of lust ... but only for the love of posterity.”⁵⁶ Gregory of Tours, a bishop, mirrors Tobias’ views and writes that children born on Sunday will be crippled,⁵⁷ whereas Bonaventure, an Italian theologian, discusses the corruption related to semen.⁵⁸ The Church drew parallels between sexual desire and moral

⁵¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 223.

⁵² Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶ Jacqueline Murray, *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages*, (Toronto, The University of Toronto Press, 2010), 60.

⁵⁷ Duby, *Love and Marriage*, 10-11.

⁵⁸ Schultz, *the History of Sexuality*, 69.

decay, which may have exacerbated their anxieties over sexual tolerance. The sexual restrictions imposed by the Church were also worse for women, due to religious authorities' strict guidelines for women's roles in marriage. Abott Adame advised the Countess du Perche that she should give her body, or *dilecto* (love), to her husband, who is allowed to use and exploit it in any way. Her soul, or *reverencia* (reverence) however, is reserved for God.⁵⁹ St. Ida of Herfield, a female saint, agreed with Adame, suggesting a consensus among papal authorities on marriage norms.⁶⁰ As a result, women usually also had no say in choosing partners and were expected to serve their husband's sexual desires. The Christian author Tertullian goes further, arguing for the need to sequester unmarried women from the public views because "every public exposure of an honorable virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape."⁶¹ His words note the extent of these restrictions to the mobility and freedom of women, which were met with ire by noblemen and even other theologians; historian Guibert of Nogent is quoted by Duby exclaiming: "The priests have planted a cross in this woman's loins?"⁶² His humor acts as a rejection of these religious restrictions, and courtly love perhaps became popularized because it allowed people to freely voice their desires and fantasies. Religious curtailments on sexual love led to lively discussions within courtly literature on the nature of sex.

Sexual dominance in Courtly literature manifests as romanticized rape, reflecting a greater discussion on sexual love. Perceval, an aspiring knight, forcibly kisses a maiden, and thought; "she resisted mightily ... her resistance was in vain, for the boy kissed her repeatedly, twenty times as the story says."⁶³ The maiden's inability to resist his advances shows the sexual power of men over women in courtly literature, and Schultz highlights this in the *Eneas Romance* during Eneas's consummation with his wife Dido, where: "[he] took possession of the lady ... Nevertheless, she opposed his suggestion and he laid her down ... she was unable to defend herself. He did as he wished so that he gained her favor in a manly fashion."⁶⁴ Rape advances a man's masculinity and courtliness, but is also idealized and promoted. Sexual dominance was expected from men, illustrated when people mocked Baldwin VI for not forcing his wife to bed - his peers assumed he would do so to satisfy his love, and ostracized him when he decided not to.⁶⁵ Male courtly literature revealed new discussions between troubadours on the topic of sexual love and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 96-97.

⁶⁰ Duby, *Love and Marriage*, 28.

⁶¹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 101.

⁶² Duby, *Love and Marriage*, pg. 29.

⁶³ Ibid, 389.

⁶⁴ Schultz, *History of Sexuality*, 152.

⁶⁵ Duby, *Love and Marriage*, 31.

domination, something that had been restricted and condemned by religious authorities.

In response to male aggression, women became wary of sexual relationships. At times, this was on the advice of men; Wolfram Von Eschenbach warns women to be careful about choosing whom to give their virginity to, as sexually promiscuous women were looked down upon. Women lost their chastity and their subsequent power while men improved their reputation and masculinity through these marriages.⁶⁶ Women also shared this view, and Christine de Pizan advises women to be shrewd in their relationships, and that “the greater esteem in which she holds herself regarding men ... the more she will be revered[.] ... [No] good can come of ... receiving too many man friends.”⁶⁷ By elevating themselves through honor, Pizan suggested that women could shield themselves from gossip and protect their reputations, albeit voluntarily restricting their power to choose, which decreased their freedom and independence. Their words alluded to female anxieties about the impact of male fantasies and romanticized rape, as well as circulating ideas on what sexual relationships should look like.

Still, women wished for sexual control and dominance within courtly literature, similar to their male counterparts. A trobairitz attacks men for their gossip and sexual restrictions, telling a: “foul-tongued, jealous man [that] don’t think that I’ll be slow to please myself with joy just because it may upset you.”⁶⁸ Although it is unclear if she is finding joy by herself or with multiple men, she is clearly incensed towards the men around her who may be talking about her sex life and wishes to freely find joy whenever. Likewise, one anonymous woman complains about her chastity, wanting “to hold my knight in my arms one evening, naked . . . when I will have you in my power . . . be sure I’d feel a strong desire to have you in my husband’s place.” Another writes “I pray that I may press you in my arms.” Courtly literature allowed trobairitz to explore sexual dominance in ways analogous to male troubadours.⁶⁹ The creation of a loyal liege, similar to men’s ideals of submissive women, manifested as a fantasy where the female troubadour had resolute power over their relationships. Maria de Ventadom exclaimed that a lover needed to follow a lady’s every command, even when the lady proclaimed that a mountain was plain.⁷⁰ Maria also countered Gui D’Ussel’s argument that men should become equals with their lovers,

⁶⁶ Schultz, *History of Sexuality*, 168.

⁶⁷ Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, (England: Penguin Books, 2003), 96.

⁶⁸ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 13.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁰ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, xxxv.

noting that “I rightly consider him a traitor if, having given himself as a servant, he makes himself an equal.”⁷¹ Trobairitz understood their supposed elevated position in courtly love and strove to strengthen it, marking male troubadours with a lower social status that ensured women’s dominance. Female courtly literature reflected larger discussions between men and women on the topic of sexual love, where similar wishes for dominance were expressed.

Their work also clashed with the restrictive marriage norms. One female troubadour wrote; “And I want to love him, no matter who blames me. No father or mother can make me change my mind.”⁷² Female troubadours complained about marital problems too, oftentimes shunning their husbands for lovers, with one poet promising that “if he won’t let me be or lead a good life ... I’ll get my revenge: I’ll lie with my lover all naked.”⁷³ Trobairitz celebrated sexual freedom and utilized extramarital affairs to avenge themselves against abusive or toxic husbands, and another cheeky poet declares that “never on account of my husband will I stop saying that my lover lay with me last night.”⁷⁴ Their words rejected gender and religious norms that both looked down upon sexual desire and dictated marriage; one trobairitz writes that “he has not ravished me to make me a nun.”⁷⁵ In many ways, courtly literature expounded upon trobairitz’s contempt for their limited marriage options and required chastity, acting as a societal critique on gender norms. Their descriptions of sexual fantasies and control also denoted a need for sexual fulfillment within these relationships. One female troubadour laments that “I am poorly rewarded in my husband; I will compensate for it with a lover.”⁷⁶ Trobairitz frame additional lovers as necessary to ameliorate a dull sex life, freely expressing their wishes and emphasizing their right to a more satisfying relationship.

Another way that women showed power was by rejecting certain double standards in their society, suggesting the increased discourse courtly literature created. Oftentimes, bachelor knights hoped to elevate their position by marrying a woman of higher status. A lady who wished to court a man of a higher status, however, was seen as greedy and uncourtly. Azalais de Porcairagues notes that “a dompna’s [lady’s] love is badly placed who pleads with a rich man ... For the men say that love

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

⁷² Doss-Quinby et al., *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 137.

⁷³ Doss-Quinby et al., *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 154.

⁷⁴ Bruckner et.al, *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 183.

⁷⁵ Doss-Quinby et al., *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 190.

⁷⁶ Doss-Quinby et al., *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, 221.

and money do not mix.”⁷⁷ Female troubadours also discussed other double standards. Azalais d’Atier warns Clara d’Anduze that not forgiving her lovers would be seen as harsh and unkind, forcing Clara to offer unreciprocated kindness to avoid malignant gossip. Men were not similarly required to be forgiving, and courtly literature allowed Trobairitz to highlight and discuss these paradoxes.

Courtly literature encouraged the discussions between troubadours on the definition of platonic and sexual love, which were affected by religious and societal views. Male stereotypes stemmed from the Catholic Church’s portrayal of women, which denoted how society viewed women as well. Male writers portrayed their masculinity and power through courtly literature while debating the nature of love, switching between fantasies and rape. Courtly love also allowed female writers to express their desire for sexual dominance and fantasies too, reflecting an ongoing discourse and evolution on the meaning of romantic love. The trobairitz redirected accusations of infidelity and talkativeness back to their male peers, rejecting rigid social and religious structures that demanded silence and constrained their freedom.

In the end, courtly literature served as a medium to describe men’s and women’s fantasies, and desires, and suggested the intellectual idealization and discourse on romance. Troubadours enjoyed giving each other the illusion of complete dominance and used courtly literature to express their anxiety but also their hopes for perfect love. Azalais de Porcairagues puts herself at her lover’s mercy provided that he asks “nothing wrong of” her.”⁷⁸ She gives minimal power to her lover, cleverly ensuring that each action he takes will first have to go through her approval. Meanwhile, a male troubadour cockily tells his lover: “Lady, I have power and boldness ... for I could beat you lying down . . . [but] I prefer to let you be my conqueror.”⁷⁹ Courtly Love was just a play, a game, and this man knew that although he was acting submissive, he could easily overtake his maiden. He allowed her, however, to be “his conqueror” because such foreplay made him seem courtlier and more faithful. Their work suggested a renewed interest among troubadours in the discussions of sexual and platonic love, either by defining it in terms of themselves through masculinity or writing of others when discussing loyalty and submissiveness. They searched collectively for a perfect union, which differed from marriages at the time that were made solely for economic gain. Courtly love revealed the underlying social tensions

⁷⁷ Finke, “The Rhetoric of Desire,” 64.

⁷⁸ Bruckner et al., *Songs of Women Troubadours*, 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

between men and women and their varying views, a rich discourse that explored one of mankind's most treasured phenomena—love.

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