

MUS 528 (2023): Assignment for Week 6

To be completed and returned by 11pm on Tuesday night in Week 6. Please bring your answers to class.

Feel free to go straight to the questions under Issues #1 and #2 below. This introductory text is just a way of contextualizing the inquiry.

The idea of the questions that follow is to read the *vidas* in a different way. Our aim is not to gather the factoids which they present as true, but to recover the value system in which the authors have embedded them. Here's how to go about it.

Let's begin by reading the *vidas* strictly in terms of what they *don't* say. That's often more revealing than what they *do* say. There are many questions about the troubadours that are of great importance to us, yet on which the authors of the *vidas* cannot be bothered to say much. Surely that must tell us something. Our job is to identify these blind spots, and figure out how they connect with other themes.

In the case of our eleven *vidas*, I think there are two issues that are both raised and answered by the *vidas*. The authors' blind spots will lead us to them. To this end I ask you to answer the 33 questions below. (Short answers are okay, provided they are based on close reading, not cursory glancing. One way or another, you are going to have to read the texts with great patience.) The questions are meant to foster awareness of the two issues, or at least of the evidence that leads me to think they are important.

As to the first issue, you may notice a historical pattern emerging already during the answering of the questions. That will place you in a position to agree or disagree with my own idea of how it all fits together.

(You already know that my ideas are nuts—uninhibitedly so, since the evidence will purge them of all idiocy in any case. Yet the adventure of thinking creatively about evidence is invigorating in my experience. Having the courage to be wrong about something is better than discarding evidence for fear of being even a tiny bit wrong. There is no worse wrong to commit than discarding evidence. Thus sayeth your Dutch Uncle.)

But on the second issue, I will not be providing my own explanation. That leaves you free to do your own creative hypothesis-building. Just take a walk on the proverbial wild side, and let your fancy run free. We will rein in our fancies before long.

Issue #1 – His Own Man

A. Individuality in *vidas* and art.

Open your troubadour photo album, and answer the following questions on the basis of the pertinent *vidas* distributed in the handout.

1. Why is Peire d'Alverne depicted with a grey beard?
2. Who are the two persons standing beside Girautz de Borneill?
3. Who is the woman standing next to Gauselnis Faidit?
4. Why does Arnauz de Mervoill have a bald head?
5. Why is Perdigons shown playing the viol?
6. Why are Naimeries de Piguillan and Peirols shown seated on a horse?
7. Why is Folquet de Marseilla depicted as a prelate?
8. What is the castle doing in the image of Raimons de Miraval?

These eight troubadours can be recognized immediately by the things they are depicted with, just like saints are made identifiable by their attributes. The exceptions are Bernautz de Ventadorn and Arnautz Daniels. They have the exact same outfit: a robe lined with ermine fur, an ermine collar, and a coif. Ermine fur was very expensive; only nobility and royalty could afford it. So the two individuals were not thought to be poor. But the images alone do not tell us how to distinguish Bernautz from Arnautz.

B. Background.

9. (About any given troubadour:) What sort of environment did he come from—a village in the countryside, the city, a castle, or some other place?
10. Was he of low birth or high birth? Or middle class (*burgher*)?
11. What did his parents do for a living?
12. Do we learn anything else about his parents—quirks, character traits, whatever?

C. Musical Talent and Abilities (“*nature*”)

13. What were the musical and poetic talents he was born with?
14. Was he notable for lacking certain talents?
15. Was he handsome or ugly in appearance?
16. What was his singing voice like?
17. Were his poems and songs considered to be of high or of slight artistic merit?
18. Did he play an instrument?

D. Education (“*nurture*”)

19. What do the *vidas* tell us about the professional training and education which troubadours received? Are any troubadours mentioned as being teachers in their own right?
20. When a *vida* credits a troubadour with “letters” (i.e. literacy in Latin), is there an implication that other troubadours were, by default, unable to read or write? NB. There was no shame in this. Royals and nobles were as a rule illiterate – as were, of course, the middle and working classes. Literacy was the specialisation of clerics..
21. Is there a sense of professional brotherhood and solidarity among troubadours? Or was every troubadour living and operating independently from the others?
22. Are troubadours often said to have spent time in each other’s company? Are they sometimes friends ?

My Own Interpretation, FWIW.

When capsule histories of Medieval musicians make a point of naming their teachers, it usually means that authors are concerned with genealogy, lineage, and succession. It's the idea of the family tree which confers the accumulated authority of the ancestors on the present generation. It also suggests that the tradition is more important than the persons who pass it on. Their job is to be faithful to the art as they received it. In a couple of weeks we will see a great example of this in the famous treatise of Anonymous IV (c.1280).

On the other hand, the *vidas* in the handout make no mention whatsoever of teachers, masters, schools, or tests (Qu.19). Their concern is with the troubadour as an artistically independent individual, a natural talent, who doesn't owe anything to anyone—least of all a tradition. This is confirmed by the emphasis on the talents he was born with, including his engaging personality and handsome appearance (Qu.13–16 and 18). Who needs lessons when the art, the music, and the poetry come naturally to the troubadour?

In the *vidas*, this point is presented in the same narrative pattern every time. If the troubadour was of low birth, the *vida* will hasten to point this out, and throw in the abject poverty and low moral character of his parents for good measure. Why? Do readers really need to know, for example, that Bernart de Ventadorn's father was a lowly servant who heated the ovens in a castle for the baking of bread? What was that information good for? It may have been true, but then so many other things are.

Yet it is precisely this background that helps readers to appreciate the exceptional talents that allowed Bernart to escape it. What else could have freed him from the suffocating prison of his background?

This explains why the *vidas* often comment on the personal styles of the troubadour, the particular merits of their music and poetry, and their unique qualities as musical performers. They are individuals in every respect (Qu.17).

It also explains why almost every troubadour in the photo album is shown with something to identify him by, something to set him apart from the others (Qu.1–8).

Moreover, it explains why there is no mention of professional organisation in guilds or brotherhoods. There is no community sense: each troubadour is on his own (Qu. 21).

Nor do we find that any two troubadours were personal friends, that they travelled together, or helped each other out. In fact we rarely hear of any friends at all, or of family members (Qu.22). The troubadour, by all appearances, is not only the prototypical lonely genius, but a prima donna as well.

Finally, and most tellingly, all troubadours write of their own accord, out of free will, not on commission or on command. They make themselves and their own personal feelings the absolute center of their poetic universe. It behooves others to listen. No matter how poor they may have been, this liberty and dignity was enjoyed by all who identified as troubadours.

In 12th-c. French society these points were all taken as self-evident. Lords knew, as if by tacit agreement, that troubadours must be accorded that professional dignity—just as the court jester had total immunity almost no matter what he said. It was just what you were supposed to do.

Issue #2 – The Lord’s Wife

E. The Forbidden Fruit

23. Does the *vida* suggest that the love between troubadour and the lord’s wife was consummated? If it wasn’t, does the *vida* still hint at sexual or physical attraction?
24. Do the authors of the *vidas* speak of lighthearted dalliances, which, along with the songs, might have added a *frisson* of excitement to the lady’s lonely existence behind castle walls? Or is it rather a clandestine affair in which desperate and equal lovers were risking their lives? Or do the *vidas* maybe relish the ambiguity between the two?
25. Does the *vida* ever express disapproval or moral outrage at the apparent adultery?
26. Were ladies themselves desirous to engage in clandestine courtship with the troubadour, even before they had met him? Did any lady initiate a love relationship?

F. Love Poetry

27. Does it ever happen that a troubadour is (a) in love with a married lady, yet (b) writes no songs about her?
28. Do the *vidas* mention songs that are about something other than the lady?
29. Do *vidas* give us the names of the lady and her husband? The troubadour himself does not normally name them, probably for fear of discovery.
30. Were the *vidas* not slanderous, in broadcasting allegations that seemed calculated to sully the honor of noble ladies, and to mock the vigilance of their husbands?

G. The End

31. Did the troubadour ever find happiness in love? Was he actually in pursuit of romantic love?
32. Did he find happiness in his marriage (if he was a married man)? Do we learn the name of his wife? Is she of interest to the story?
33. As for the lord—lending patronage to a troubadour, what was in it for him?

My sense is that there must be some kind of deal here that was advantageous to all. Maybe a kind of role play that people of high birth loved to engage in. The troubadours may not have been commissioned or commanded to write their songs, but the love songs nevertheless cover only the narrowest slice of the human experience. Evidently there was not a great deal of scope for variation. It’s as if the feelings were already predetermined by convention—all they needed to do was to find a lady who could be claimed to inspire them.

If any of this rings even remotely true, then what were the advantages for the three parties—troubadour, husband, and wife? Your thoughts.