“NA MARIA, PRETZ E FINA VALORS”: A NEW ARGUMENT FOR FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

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The manuscript attribution of “Na Maria, pretz e fina valors” to Bietris de Roman has caused no small amount of controversy among critics, for even those who accept the attribution often struggle to account for what appears to be the sole Occitan *canso*, or courtly love lyric, written by one woman for another. The speaker in the poem praises “Lady Maria” for her beauty, nobility, and many other virtues; begs her to grant the speaker “so don plus ai d’aver gioi esperansai” (13), declares Maria to be the source of all her happiness and that “per vos vauc mantas ves sospiran” (16); and implores that she not love any “entendidor truan” (20). The poem’s use of the love language characteristic of the *canso* has elicited a range of interpretations, from arguments that the poem is an expression of same-sex desire to outright denials of female authorship altogether. Yet few have considered whether the poem might be participating in conventions that readily accommodate the language of desire within the exchange of political and social fidelity. While no reading of “Na Maria” can offer conclusive evidence of the sex of its author, the

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Medieval Association of the Pacific Conference at the University of California-Los Angeles in March 2007, in a session honoring Dhira Mahoney; I am delighted to honor Dhira as mentor with this article on patronage between women. I would also like to thank the members of the Potter College Faculty Writing Group at Western Kentucky University for their helpful comments and suggestions.

2 Though one might be tempted to resolve the problem by concluding that “Na Maria” is in fact a song in praise of the Virgin Mary, there is little in the poem that substantiates a spiritual reading. For example, the terms “pretz” and “valor” used to describe the addressee generally refer to courtly worth in particular, and as Paterson points out, “valor” can also mean “estate” or “property” (“Fin’amor” 35). Moreover, it is difficult to imagine to what the “entendidor truan” might refer in the context of a Marian lyric.
one I submit here offers another means by which to reconcile female authorship with a female object of courtly devotion.

Many readers who accept the manuscript attribution conclude that the poem must represent one of the few, if not the only, extant examples of a medieval lesbian love song. Indeed, in the biographical notes that accompany her edition of trobairitz poetry, Meg Bogin comments wryly that “Scholars have resorted to the most ingenious arguments to avoid concluding that [Bietris] is a woman writing a love poem to another woman” (176). John Boswell cites “Na Maria” as one of the “few poems exemplifying this [gay artistic] tradition” that survive into the thirteenth century (265), and Pierre Bec surmises that, if “Na Maria” is in fact written by a woman, then “ce serait sans doute le seul poème ‘lesbien’ de toute la lyrique Occitane” (198). The “if/then” nature of this argument is significant: for such readers, a lesbian author – or at least speaker – is the natural and logical conclusion, since a sexual relationship is taken for granted. Even those who acknowledge that we need not necessarily conflate the identities of poet and speaker still insist upon the poem’s queer nature. Bec sees “Na Maria” as a “contre-text,” a text that speaks against a culture’s dominant ideology “en conformité avec un code littéraire donné mais aussi en rupture avec lui” (8). For Tilda Sankovitch, as well, the poem strains against normative boundaries, regardless of the actual likelihood of Bietris’ lesbianism:

Whether the poem is or is not an articulation of lesbian desire is less important than the ludic strategy that takes place here: a woman poet uses all the terms a troubadour might address to a woman, but instead of addressing them to a man, she speaks them to a woman. It is precisely the unsettling derailing of the reversal, the surprising twist imposed on the expected scheme, that brings out the ludic and subversive aspect of the poem. Bietris is playing, perfectly, at being a man, using all the right words, but knowing very well that her femininity, even if hidden behind her linguistic cross-dressing, erases the “manliness” of the discourse. (122)

However, other readers argue that the poem cannot be female-authored precisely because this would imply a celebration of homosexual desire, which is virtually non-existent in medieval Occitan poetry. Thus an explanation must be sought for the manuscript rubric that names Bietris as the poet. Although in his 1888 edition of troubadour and trobairitz poetry Oskar Schultz-Gora initially accepted the manuscript attribution of “Na Maria” as female-authored, he later revised his
position, arguing instead that Bietris de Romans was a corruption of
Alberico da Romano (234-35). A century later, Elizabeth Wilson Poe
took up this argument again, adding that Alberico is the most likely can-
didate because of his patronage of Uc de Saint Circ, whose influence
she sees at work in the poem (147-49). Poe implies that we are too eager
to accept a female identity, but as William Paden notes, she offers no
argument as to why the author could not have been a woman, or why
Alberico is more likely to have been the author than is Bietris (Paden
111-12).

Nonetheless, resolving any linguistic objections to the manuscript
rubric does not mean that scholars accept its claim for female authorship
– once again, because it is assumed that the poem refers to sexual love.
François Zufferey convincingly argues that the rubric does not in fact
create any linguistic problems, showing that the form Bietris for Beatritz
is well attested in Old Provençal, yet he, too, dismisses a female attribu-
tion for the poem on the basis that “nothing in the text confirms that the
love at issue is lesbian” (32) and that “the discourse of Na Bietris has a
frankly masculine resonance” (33), presumably alluding once again to
the erotic nature of its language and its female object. Merritt Blakeslee
also excludes “Na Maria” from his study of the trobairitz because he
sees no internal or textual indication of femininity (69 n.15), though he
does not specify what he would consider such indication to be. While
neither Zufferey or Blakeslee suggest an alternative attribution for the
poem, both conclude that, in the absence of any additional evidence to
the contrary, its author must be male.

As opposed as these positions concerning Bietris’s authorship may
seem, they share one basic and, I would argue, faulty assumption: that
the erotic language in the poem must be taken as a literal expression of
sexual desire. If, however, we do not take this for granted, new possibili-
ties for understanding the poem and the question of its authorship arise.
The most convincing explanation thus far comes from Angelica Rieger,
who proposes that the expression of female affectivity in “Na Maria” is
not atypical in Occitan poetry, and that the intimate language which
strikes modern readers as sexually charged is in fact a conventional
articulation of sympathy and friendship: “Bietris addresses Maria only
in a manner customary for her time and world; she expresses her sympa-
thy for her in a conventionally codified form – which the choice of
genre would support – just as one, or better, a woman, speaks with a
female acquaintance, friend, confidante, or close relative” (82). In “Na Carenza al bel cors avinenz,” for example, Carenza’s courtly compliments paid to Alaisina Iselda echo several lines in Bietris’ canso: “N’Alaisina Yselda, ’nenghamenz, / prez et beltatz, iovenz, frescas co- lors / conosce c’avez, cortesia et valors / sobre tottas las autras conoscenz” (9-12). Compare this to the opening lines of Bietris’ canto:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Na Maria, pretz e fina valors} \\
&\text{e.l giosi e.l sen e la fina beutatz} \\
&\text{e I acuglir e.l pretz e las onors} \\
&\text{e.I gent parlar e l’avinen solatz} \\
&\text{e la douz cara e la gaia cuendansa} \\
&\text{e.I ducz esgat e l’amaros semblan,} \\
&\text{qe son en vos, don non avetz egansa,} \\
&\text{me fan traire vas vox ses cor truan. (1-8)}
\end{align*}
\]

Just as Carenza exalts Alaisina, so does Bietris exalt Maria, declaring that “beutas e valors vos enansa sobra tutas” (17-18). As Rieger observes, such sentiments also appear in Azalais d’Altier’s \textit{salut} to lady Clara, followed by even more emphasis on the affection felt by the speaker: “dic vos ben aitan en ver / qez anc donna senes vezar / non amei tan d’amor coral” (15-17; Rieger 86-88).

Rieger’s detailed analysis shows that the love language we find in “Na Maria” fits within the conventional mode expressing friendship between women. It is worth adding that affectionate and admiring dedications from a female poet to another woman are not unusual, either. Na Castelloza addresses “Ia de chanter non degra aver talan” to “Domn Na Mieils” (54), perhaps another trobairitz (Bruckner, Shepard, and White 147), and in the envoi of “Ar em al freg temps vengut” Azalais de Porgairagues sends her \textit{canso} “ves Narbona” to “lei cui isois e iovenz guida” (50, 52), a likely reference to Ermengard of Narbonne, powerful viscountess and patron of both male and female troubadours (Cheyette 2001, 170). Indeed, Azalais’ \textit{envoi} echoes Bietris’ own when she sends her song to Maria “car en vos es gauss’e alegansa” (23).

I would take Rieger’s argument further, exploring the poem not only as the expression of female friendship but also as an exchange of social capital within the system of feudal patronage. The assumption shared by those who would deny the poem female authorship as well as those who insist it is an expression of sexual devotion between women becomes
problematic when we discover that the same language of love and desire is used to express loyalty in explicitly political contexts. Historian Frederic Cheyette cites multiple examples of oaths of vassalage or of fidelity in which the participants grant their love along with their allegiance and receive the love of their liege in turn, and in some cases bequeathed the love of their vassals as part of the family estate: “an lor omes a amar et a chartener e a rasonar e tener ab eus, o que il los aen, de totas lor nautgas” (Ermengard 233). C. Stephen Jaeger devotes much of his monograph, Ennobling Love, to an exploration of the ways in which the language of royal favor and patronage draws on the idiom of mutual love, often with far more passionate overtones than those we see in “Na Maria,” and apparently without any concern that such language would be understood as referring to a sexual relationship. Constance of Brittany, for example, sends Louis VII of France a proposal of political alliance expressed in the language of love: “I wish your highness to know that I have long dwelt on the thought of you, and that while many men have offered me many gifts of love, I have never accepted any. But if it should please your generosity to send any token of love to me, who loves you beyond what words can convey, be it a ring or anything at all, I would hold that more precious than the whole world. . . .” (Deslisle 16:23; qtd. in Jaeger 104). Nor is such language limited to exchanges between the opposite sex. Among the many examples Jaeger provides is Alcuin’s passionate language celebrating Charlemagne’s recovery from illness: “The sweetness of your sacred love abundantly refreshes and soothes the ardor of my breast every hour, every minute; and the beauty of your face, which I constantly dwell upon in loving thoughts, fills all the channels of my memory with desire and an immense joy, and in my heart the beauty of your goodness and your appearance enriches me as with great treasures” (Alcuin to Charlemagne, Epist. 121, p. 176; qtd. in Jaeger 48). In sum, “it is possible for medieval writers to say – in public documents – that a king loved his courtier vehemently, embraced him with the flames of intimate love, kissed him, slept with him, shared the same clothes, and ate from the same dish; it is possible for a cleric/courtier to say that he longs to kiss his archbishop-friend and to sink into his embraces, that he licks his ‘viscera, bathes his chest with his tears, and longs to fuse their two souls into one – and none of these formulations was received as an indication of an illicit [that is, homosexual] erotic attachment”
(Jaeger 14-15). In such a culture, members of the courts who composed 
the primary audience for troubadour and trobairitz poetry would likely 
have had little difficulty accepting Bietris’ expression of love for Maria 
as conventional.

It is thus that we return to that old canard, courtly love, the definition 
of which still haunts the scholarship even of those who contest its exis-
tence. This is not the place to offer an extensive argument concerning 
the nature of courtly love, or fin’amor, so I will only briefly outline my 
own understanding of the concept. I would argue that fin’amor can be 
considered a secular version of caritas, in that it requires the subordi-
ation of individual pleasure or gain to the benefit of the society of the 
court. This love serves to unite individuals into a cohesive community 
of the faithful, much as Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians seeks to 
resolve the disharmony and discontent that threaten that community’s 
stability. The celebration of fin’amor in troubadour poetry helps reify 
the identity of the court as a community of the blessed, so to speak – 
those who are privileged with the refined sensibilities necessary to 
appreciate and practice it. For the courtly audience, “love – that is, 
fidelity and service, and the expectation that service would be rewarded 
– was at the heart of their social being. The loyalty of lords, of castellans 
and knights, without which dynastic politics would have become a mas-
querade and armies a sham, depended on these ideals and expectations. 
Here was the substance of honor and worthiness, the actions that won 
praise, the source of the troubadours’ ‘joy’” (Cheyette, Ermengard 238).

Moreover, we cannot underemphasize the performative nature of 
courtly poetry. It is an opportunity to demonstrate publicly one’s mem-
bership in the elite society of the court and to declare loyalty to its val-
ues. As Cheyette argues, the “eroticization of the ideology of faith and 
loyalty” that we find in troubadour and trobairitz poetry “served both to 
implant the proper ethos and to elaborate the code of behavior that made 
it visible” (Ermengard 247). Jaeger makes the importance of public per-
formance of love language even more explicit: “It is a social and politi-
cal gesture, part of an extensive public discourse expressing aristocratic 
patterns of behavior. Its ambitions are social and political, not sexual. . . . 
Acting according to a widely idealized pattern – love, compassion, 
courage – displays the actor’s acceptance and embodiment of a society’s 
or a community’s ethical values. It makes him or her admirable, gives 
prestige (what medieval poets would call pretz, valor, and werdekeit). It
demonstrates worth, raises status, and coalesces political support” (18-19). In Occitania we find a particular emphasis on the “culture of fidelity,” as Cheyette terms it, which evolved as a response to the complicated and shifting network of allegiances that characterized Occitan politics during the time of the troubadours. Such a culture required not only oaths binding parties legally; it also required “a code of social and moral values fostering the cohesion and self-valuation of the medieval Occitan court” (Paterson, “Fin ’amor” 43), a way to “turn fidelity itself into a passion” (Cheyette, Ermengard 232). This is found in the lyric expression of fin’ amor and the poetry of the troubadours.

It is important to note that this relationship works in both directions, reinforcing the courtly reputations of patron and vassal: the former receives public praise and is given an opportunity to demonstrate magnanimity, while the latter enjoys recognition and approbation of his or her claim to the civilized qualities and refined manners that distinguish courtly life (Paterson, “Fin’ amor” 34-35). Cheyette suggests that the canso implicitly compares or contrasts the behavior of the patron to the invented beloved. He cites Bernard de Ventadorn’s canso in which the speaker decries his lady for her failure to uphold her obligations under the oath of fidelity and refuses to serve her any longer; this song is dedicated to Bernart’s patron, Ermengard of Narbonne, of whom Bernart claims “c’om non pot dire folatge” (“La doua votz ai auzida” 60). This compliment, Cheyette argues, implies that Ermengard “is the exact opposite of the traitorous lady in the lyric” (“Women” 171). As Cheyette notes, this contrast would have the effect of reassuring Ermengard of Bernart’s continued loyalty, given her exemplary conduct. Conversely, though, I would add that it might also serve as a warning: if the patron does not behave in the manner demanded by the feudal contract, then the oath of fidelity may be forfeit.¹

The exchange of female feudal loyalty is hardly out of keeping with the time and custom of the trobairitz milieu, but many critics have been slow to recognize this. Although the notion of feudal metaphors and the patronage implied within these metaphors have become commonplace in troubadour scholarship, less emphasis has been placed on their sym-

¹ Such a view may be substantiated by “Asissi cum es genser pacors,” a canso by Raimon de Miraval, in which the speaker suggests he may be willing to abandon his current patron in favor of the king of Aragon. See Cheyette, Ermengard 240-42.
bolic function in the songs of the trobairitz, even while their presence is acknowledged, largely because it has generally been assumed that such metaphors cannot reflect the lived reality of medieval women and that women’s participation in the feudal network was limited to serving as a “conduit of status” between lord and vassal (Finke 45); in other words, women themselves are powerful only insofar as they are able to influence their husbands, the true wielders of power and favor. Sankovitch argues that what makes “Na Maria” and all other trobairitz poems subversive is that women have appropriated male roles; while noblewomen “enjoyed certain political, economic and social privileges, and played central roles as organisers, animators and audiences of cultural manifestations,” such roles are “essentially voiceless” ones, and thus speaking itself becomes “nothing less than subversive” (115).

However, work by historians such as Cheyette, Martin Aurell, and Linda Paterson shows that, in fact, aristocratic women in late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Occitania – what is today southern France – enjoyed far more political autonomy than their sisters in the rest of Europe, and were full participants in the exchange of feudal service and loyalty. Paterson notes that Occitan charters of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in particular provide evidence of numerous women giving and receiving oaths of fidelity as or from vassals (World 221). The following is a representative oath of fidelity, in keeping with Occitan feudal custom, which Ermessen, Viscountess of Avignon, swears to her liege lady Azalais, Countess of Forcalquier, circa 1102-1105:

Aus tu Adalax committissa, filia Adalax committissa! Eu Ermessen, mulier Rostagno Berenguero, non ti decebrai de ta vida ne de ta membra que a tuo corpore juncta sunt, ne homo nec femina per meum consilium ne per meum consintiment, ne non ti decebrai des castels ne las civitates de Provincia des Durencia en za de las tres partes, non las ti tolrai ne tolre las ti farai, ne homo nec femina ab meum consilium ne ab meum consintiment. (Brunel 11-12)

[Hear ye, Azalais, Countess, daughter of Azalais, Countess! I Ermessen, wife of Rostaing Berenguer, will not, by ruse, deprive you of life or members, nor will man or woman by my counsel or consent; nor will I, by ruse, deprive you of the three quarters of the castles in the cities of Provence on this side of the Durance; and I will not take them from you nor will I have them taken from you, nor will man or woman with my counsel or consent.]

4 Translation provided by Frederic Cheyette in “The House of Provence,” Maria of Montpellier: A Life (National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar, 1983), 64, courtesy of Dhira B. Mahoney.
Moreover, the conventional language of oaths of fidelity takes great care to be gender-inclusive, preferring to employ *homo nec femina* rather than grammatically gendered but semantically neutral pronouns such as simply *homo* or *persona* (Cheyette, “Women” 160-61).

That women did in fact engage in the exchange of service and favor supports another interpretation for the lines in Bietris’ *canso* that have usually caused the greatest amount of consternation: “mi donetz, bela dompna, si.us platz, / so don plus ai d’aver gioi esperansa” (12-13). Like *fin’amor, gioi or joi* is notoriously difficult to define, and seems to mean something slightly different for each poet. Bernart de Ventadorn popularizes the notion of *joi* as personal or individual happiness, with a particular emphasis on sensual or sexual pleasure, and this is the sense that most critics of “Na Maria” seem to accept. But Bernart’s notion was far from the only one. Raimon de Miraval, for example, conflates individual satisfaction and pleasure with the “joy of the court,” in which “the lover subordinates desire and passion to the needs, manners and rules of the community” (Topsfield 223). More generally, Paterson identifies *joi* as a “social and moral quality belonging to *cortesia*” or courtliness, which conventionally is “said to arise from love and to be impossible without it” (“Fin’amor” 34, 35). It is this quality of *joi* that the *canso* singer strives to obtain from the song’s patron or patroness.

Charles Camproux’s etymological analysis of the word offers another facet of meaning we must take into account. Occitan *joi* was not borrowed from the *langue d’oil* but is instead a plural neuter form derived from the Latin noun *jacula*, “qui prit le sens de cadeaux, recompense, prix octroyés à celui qui avait bien joué le jeu, qui avait gagné au jeu” (Camproux 65-66). Of all the troubadour and trobairitz lyrics, the *canso* was the most prestigious and thus the best suited to assist the poet as he or she jockeyed for status, since the convention of supplication opens up the reciprocal obligation of liege to vassal – both within the immediate context of the song and within the sphere of courtly patronage. The *joi* that Bietris wishes to have from Maria may well be the recognition of the poet’s passionate devotion and loyalty as evidenced within the conventions of the courtly *canso*, a recognition that obtains significant social capital in the Occitan “culture of fidelity.” Thus when we read of

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5 For the sake of consistency, I will employ throughout the standard form *joi* rather than the variant *gioi* that appears in “Na Maria.”
patient and loyal love service and the *joia* expected in return in troubadour and trobairitz poetry, we cannot assume that its expression here is purely figurative of romantic love. It is entirely plausible that the joy Bietris hopes for is precisely the sort of courtly reward that this definition of *joia* attests to, and not necessarily sexual gratification at all. In light of this, “Na Maria” no longer seems either surprising or subversive.

My aim here has not been to prove that Bietris was not or could not have been lesbian, as if such a thing could be proven or disproven on the basis of a single literary text. Nevertheless, many of the arguments against a female author for “Na Maria” are grounded, explicitly or implicitly, in the assumption that the love it expresses is sexual in nature. In showing that this assumption is not grounded in the sociohistorical context of the poem, I have provided a way of thinking about the poem that opens up a space for continued discussion and exploration of women in Occitan society and the community of troubadours and trobairitz.

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**Works Cited**


Azalais de Porgarragues. “Ar em al freg temps vengut.” In Bruckner, Shepard, and White, 34-37.


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