

The Canso

The texts of troubadour songs deal mainly with themes of chivalry and courtly love. Most were metaphysical, intellectual, and formulaic. Many were humorous or vulgar satires. Works can be grouped into three styles: the *trobar leu* (light), *trobar ric* (rich), and *trobar clus* (closed or veiled). Likewise, there were many genres, the most popular being the *canso* (love song), but *sirventes* (sociopolitical song) and *tensos* (debate songs) were especially popular in the post-classical period.

The *canso* or *canson* or *canzo* (Old Occitan [kan'su]) was the most popular song style used by the troubadours. It was, by far, the most common genre used, especially by early troubadours, and only in the second half of the 13th century was its dominance challenged by a growing number of poets writing *coblas esparsas*. (A *cobla esparsa*, literally meaning “scattered stanza” in Old Occitan, is the name used for a single-stanza poem in troubadour poetry. They constitute about 15% of the troubadour output, and they are the dominant form after 1220.) The *canso* became, in Old French, the *grand chant* and, in Italian, the *canzone* (such as with Dante).

A *canso* usually consists of three parts. The first stanza is the exordium, where the composer explains his purpose. The main body of the song occurs in the following stanzas, and usually draw out a variety of relationships with the exordium; formally, aside from the envois (an address, a “sending forth,” to the poet’s beloved or to a friend or patron, and typically expresses the poet’s “farewell” and hope that the poem may bring them some benefit, such as the beloved's favors, increased patronage, and so on), which are not always present. A *canso* is made of stanzas all having the same sequence of verses, in the sense that each verse has the

same number of metrical syllables. This makes it possible to use the same melody for every stanza. A prime example of this is Arnaut Daniel's "L'aur'amara" ("The Bitter Air"). The first three stanzas are as follows:

The bitter air
makes those bough-laden woods
barren,
which the sweet one thickens with leaves,
and the gleeful
beaks
of the wandering birds
it keeps stammering and dumb,
couples
and single ones,
therefore I endeavor
to act and speak
pleasantly
to many for the sake of her
who has cast me low from high,
for whom I dread to die
if grievance isn't erased.

So bright it was,
my first enlightenment
in choosing
her about whom my heart believes my eyes.
I don't care for

secret.
inviting becks
of another woman, if she turns away
my rare
entreats:
but it is joy
to me to hear
her wish;
I shall follow the fair words
of her who has taken me so much
that in serving her
I am devoted from head to toe.

Hist, Love!
am I welcome?
To display,
I fear, if you repel me,
such words
(ill)
that you'd better cut this,
since I'm a faithful lover,
dear
and not fleeting;
but my firm, strong heart
makes me conceal
in many directions that,
albeit I deny it,

I'd need a kiss my hot
heart to refresh,
since other remedies are useless.

The Sirventes

A *sirventès* is a poetic composition typical of Occitan, or troubadour literature, from a formal point of view similar to that of the the genre of love song (Occitan *cançon*), but with very different themes. It is a genre of troubadour poetry, conditioned by the content. After the *canço* song, it is the most widespread genre among preserved troubadour poetry. It's called that because it uses the melody of an existing song. This was so for reasons of time, of opportunity in its appearance and so that it was easily remembered by everyone, since people knew the music and only needed to learn the lyrics and the known music also contributed to its diffusion.

Sirventès is technically either a moralizing poetry, a personal attack, a political attack or propaganda, a rebuke of customs, etc. The most important variants are the following:

- 1) Moral servanthood: Blames bad customs or abuses of certain social classes, gives precepts of behavior, criticizes the degeneration of the customs of the knights.
- 2) *Sirventès* personal: It is an attack, satire or invective against people hated by the troubadour author of the *sirventès*.

- 3) Political servanthood: The troubadour becomes a spokesperson for a country, a lord or a policy that he defends while attacking the opposite country, lord or policy.
- 4) Literary service: It is about manifestos, exhibition of literary tastes, criticism against the way of doing certain troubadour.

The political *sirventesos* are important for knowing the attitudes of Western Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries, for example:

The actions of some kings of France and the Crown of Aragon.

The war of the Church and France against the Albigensians, with the absence or intervention of the Crown of Aragon.

The Eastern Crusades (crusade song).

The political affairs of Italy, among the later troubadours, either of Italian origin or settled there after the Crusade against the Albigenses.

Gender boundaries, of course, are not absolute.

There was also the *sirventès-cançó* (a term not invented by modern critics but already used by the troubadour Falquet de Romans), which participates in both genres—the love song and the sociopolitical song—, dedicating some stanzas to a specific content of the *sirventès* and others to a specific content of the song. As for the content, it is a poem of circumstances, generally satirical, that can in principle deal with any topic (moral, political, literary criticism), except love. The *sirventès* have been divided into four categories:

a) Morals: directed against the decadence of chivalric customs, the corruption of the clergy, etc. It was cultivated by the troubadours Marcabré, Peire de Boussignac, and Peire Cardenal.

b) Political: rivalries between feudal lords, criticism of institutions such as the monarchy, the Inquisition or the Pope. The theme of the Crusades, particularly the Albigensian, also frequently appears in them. Its main representative is Bertran de Born.

c) Literary: criticism of the works of other troubadours. It was cultivated by Peire d'Auvergne and the Monk of Montaudon. (Within these there is a variant, the *serventes-ensenhamen*, in which the troubadour addresses the minstrel to explain to him what repertoire he should know.

d) Personal: fundamentally these are insults towards the personal enemies of the troubadours. It was cultivated, among others, by Bertran de Born and Guilhem de Bergadà.