

The Troubadours: Spring & Love

“New life: the woods are leafing out”
 (“Ab la dolchor del temps novel”)

New life: the woods are leafing out
and every type of bird is shouting
now in its specific tongue,
all versions of the latest song.
The time is sweet—a man should find
the ease which most is on his mind.

From there (where it would please me best
to be) so far I've had no word—
until I can be reassured
by her of what I'm hoping for,
I don't dare go there any more
and so can neither laugh nor rest.

This is how our love is now:
it's like a fragile hawthorn bough
that trembles on the tree all night
and rattles under hail and rain,
but next day feels the spreading light
on twigs which soon are pushing green.

That branch reminds me of a morning
when we made an end to war
and when she gave me precious gifts:
her ring, her friendship, and her love.
Dear God, may I live long enough
to get my hands inside her shift!

And I don't hold with all that guff
about adoring from far off.
You know how their chatter goes:
those fancy pants should get a life.
No matter what the others boast
of love, we've both the loaf and knife.

~ Guilhem d'Aquitania (William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, "The First Troubadour")

No other early poem that I know carries the cast of feeling suggested and dramatized in *Ab la dolchor del temps novel*, which begins with the season that would become emblematic of all the love poetry of the troubadours, and of the great period of their poetry as a whole: spring. The month of May.... In view of what would happen to the troubadour tradition the intimidation brought on by the church and by the crusading horrors that heralded the Inquisition, and the abstraction and sublimation of the erotic urge, and the stylized idealization culminating in the otherworldly projection of Dante's eternal Beatrice—it is a relief to know that the tradition began with a passion that was unquestionably mortal and physical....

And here, in one of the first love poems of the troubadours, the hawthorn, known too in English as the mayflower, the may: the wild, white (or occasionally pink or red) flower opening clusters or corymbs, with an almondy fragrance [also associated with the musty aroma of sex] not altogether sweet, and needle-sharp thorns, that came to symbolize in troubadour tradition the season of love and the hope of its return, of seeing it again.

The rose came later, in the poetry and in the season. Weeks after the moment Guilhem described, in which drifts of minute hawthorn petals glittered in the still freezing nights, some of the mayes would still be in flower as the first eglantines opened their single corollas, which seldom lasted for more than a day. And for Guilhem's vassal, Jaufré Rudel, the flowering hawthorn represented the end of winter, while the first eglantines opening, and song of the nightingales (they begin to sing in Aquitaine in the last days of April) announced the coming of spring....

Guilhem's clear, immediate poem, its unabashed sensual hunger, its season, its hawthorn in flower, passed into the poetry that would come after him, [my emphasis] which he would never know anything about. His lyrics and those of the later troubadours were not (in their time) simply read. They were sung over and over, and were known by heart, not only by their singers but by many in their audiences, as popular songs are in every age....

Guilhem's invocation of the hawthorn flower to represent something so personal, so intimate and spontaneous as the love between him and his beloved, was in fact already deeply rooted in tradition. In the Occitan region the arrival of the month of May as the returning season of love had been celebrated with festivals since long before Christianity. The rites of spring were remnants of fertility ceremonies

practiced in the time of the Roman occupation and among the Celtic peoples long before that. The name of the month, and of the mayflower in English, is thought to be a derivation from Maja or Maia, the earth goddess in many religions and from Magia, the ancient one, the earth, in Sanskrit, and from Megha Indo-European, meaning “great.”

Festivals in honor of the spring were held all through the Aquitaine and in Spain as far south as Andalusia. On the first of May, women and girls made decorations of hawthorn flowers to celebrate the arrival of the month, during which young men wore a “cap of youth” and *love was indulged, we are assured, without the restrictions and obligations that held it in check throughout the rest of the year.* [my emphasis] Women, even married women, enjoyed, it is said, their old freedom. They elected a queen representing the season for them, and the young men elected a “chief of youth” who alone had the right to wear hawthorn flowers at the festivals, and the flowers may have symbolized other privileges. The festivities, and perhaps some of the privileges, continued in parts of those regions up until the First World War.... Hawthorn flowers were long used in love potions. As late as the nineteenth century, peasants in the Languedoc did not exchange marriage vows or hold weddings in the month of May.

~ W.S. Merwin, *The Mays of Ventadorn*

Two Different Examples of the Troubadour Theme of Spring & Love in the Nineteenth Century

Love, as is told by the seers of old,
Comes as a butterfly tipped with gold,
Flutters and flies in sunlit skies,
Weaving round hearts that were one time cold.

~ Algernon Charles Swinburne (poet, 1837-1909), "Song"

Love seems to beautify and inspire all nature. It raises the earthly caterpillar into the ethereal butterfly, it paints the feathers in spring, it lights the glowworm's lamp, it wakens the song of birds, and inspires the poet's lay. Even inanimate Nature seems to feel the spell, and flowers glow with the richest colours.

~ John Lubbock (British naturalist and entomologist, 1834-1913)