

Trends in Historiography

Romance and Writing: Interpreting the Lyric Domnas of Occitania

by Aubri E. Thurmond

"I'll ask you this: when a lady freely loves a man, should she do as much for him as he for her, according to the rules of courtly love?"¹ These words are attributed to Maria de Ventadorn, a woman composing in the lyric tradition of the troubadours. From 1100-1300 A.D., Occitania (Southern France) produced over 400 troubadours whose poetry shaped the concepts of romantic love in the West. Their poems, written in *langue d'oc*, were expressions of *fin' amor*, or courtly love.² According to Paul Zumthor, "*Fin' amor* strives toward a desired but unnamed good, bestowable only by a lady, herself identified only by an emblematic pseudonym: a dialogue without reply, pure song, turning into poetry the movements of a heart contemplating an object whose importance as such is minimal."³ The troubadour was symbolically dependent on the favor of his lady, therefore seemingly giving her power and humbling himself.⁴ *Fin' amor* was the source of all courtly values.⁵ However, there were also women troubadours, called *trobairitz*, in Southern France. The name *trobairitz* comes from the root *trobar*, meaning to compose and the feminine suffix *-airitz*, literally meaning "a woman who composes."⁶ The female troubadours did not refer to themselves as *trobairitz*. In fact, the term *trobairitz* is only found once in 13th century literature: in the romance *Flamenca*, when the heroine calls her maid

¹ As quoted in Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours* (Scarborough, England: Paddington Press Ltd., 1976), 99.

² *Ibid.*, 15, 38. [*Langue d'oc* was the name of the language spoken in Occitania during the Middle Ages.-Ed.]

³ Paul Zumthor, "An Overview: Why the Troubadours?" *Handbook of the Troubadours*, ed. F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith Davis (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 15.

⁴ Bogin, *Women Troubadours*, 49, 55-57.

⁵ Moshe Lazar, "Fin' amor," *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, ed. F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith Davis. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 67.

⁶ William D. Paden, "Introduction," *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Woman Troubadour*, ed. William Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 13.

a “good trobairitz” for composing the perfect response to her lover’s note.⁷ The number of trobairitz known by name is debated. Meg Bogin claims there are twenty; Matilda Bruckner claims twenty-one, and Veronica Fraser claims as many as forty.⁸ It is likely that the trobairitz authored a portion of the anonymous poems from this period, but their canon currently stands at roughly twenty-three compositions to which some scholars choose to add or subtract. They also composed in a narrower time frame than the troubadours, from 1170 to 1260 A.D.⁹ Originally the trobairitz set their poetry to music, but only one still survives with the music intact: *A chantar m’er de so no volaria* written by the Comtessa de Dia.¹⁰ Almost all the trobairitz knew at least one troubadour and some trobairitz were in fact the very lady whom troubadours were writing about.¹¹ The troubadours and the trobairitz both composed the same types of poems: the *canço*, a love song; the *tenso*, a debate poem; and the *sirventes*, a satirical poem with political or social themes. However, the *gab*, a boasting poem in which the writer boasts of his seduction of women, is a genre exclusive to the troubadours.¹²

The poems of the trobairitz are also considered expressions of courtly love; however, their poetry is unique. While, the trobairitz are more realistic about love, they do not idealize their relationships.¹³ They speak frankly and often rebuke their lover for the sorrow he has caused.¹⁴ Meg Bogin explains, “They represent the first female voices we have from a culture that has hitherto been known only through its men.”¹⁵ Recent scholars agree that the trobairitz perspective of courtly love differs greatly in some areas from that of the troubadours; however, they do not agree on what that perspective is exactly. The poetry of the troubadours and the trobairitz share some of the same characteristics, yet trobairitz poetry has characteristics all its own, particularly in addressing authority and convention. The following is a historiographical examination of scholarly

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bogin, *Women Troubadours*, 11; See also Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, “Fictions of the Female Voice: The Woman Troubadours,” *Medieval Woman’s Song: Cross Cultural Approaches*, ed. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 131 and Veronica Fraser, “Two Contrasting Views of Love in the Songs of the Troubadours and the Trobairitz,” *Tenso* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 24.

⁹ Paden, “Introduction,” *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 14.

¹⁰ Maria V. Coldwell, “Jouglers and Trobairitz: Secular Musicians in Medieval France,” *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 48.

¹¹ Bogin, *The Women Troubadours*, 64.

¹² Fraser, “Two Contrasting Views of Love,” 24-25.

¹³ Bogin, *The Women Troubadours*, 13.

¹⁴ Fraser, “Two Contrasting Views of Love,” 43.

¹⁵ Bogin, *The Women Troubadours*, 69.

interpretations of the trobairitz distinctive perceptions of courtly love through three separate yet intertwining ways of thought: reversal of power status; feminist construction; and sincerity.

Scholars are in agreement that trobairitz poetry is similar to that of the troubadours in specifically two ways: use of the language of feudalism and humility-exalted. According to the scholarship, the power structure inherent within the feudal system provided the basis of power structure of romance for both the troubadour and the trobairitz. In her article, "The Provençal Trobairitz and the Limits of Courtly Love," Marianne Shapiro notes, "The trobairitz liberally employ, as do their masculine counterparts, the lexicon of feudalism tempered by that of economic exchange, connoting the status of love relation as a kind of pact and a means of exchange."¹⁶ Meg Bogin, who renewed interest in the trobairitz with her work, *The Woman Troubadours*, sees the ceremony of homage as "the central metaphor of troubadour love poetry, the vassalage of man to woman."¹⁷ Joan Ferrante agrees, commenting that the troubadour "takes the posture of a vassal, offering his service for her reward."¹⁸ Matilda Bruckner examines the works of three trobairitz and finds the language of feudalism in the poetry of each. In her poems, the Comtessa de Dia "uses the vocabulary of feudalism to describe herself and her lover, both in terms of their rank and in terms of their virtues."¹⁹ Maria de Ventadorn describes the act of homage in her poetry as "the formula for every troubadour lover who offers humble service to his lady."²⁰ The poetry of Castelloza "includes the institutionalization of power in the feudal hierarchy of lord and vassal, with its ceremonies of homage and justice."²¹

The trobairitz and the troubadours also share the theme of humility-exalted. For Shapiro, courtly love was founded "upon a reversal of the two halves of the *humilis/sublimis* paradox, that of humility which exalts its possessor."²² Again, Bruckner looks to the poetry of Castelloza and finds "the gap between herself and her *amic* widens with each stanza, gives her a kind of superiority even as she humbles herself. This is the very paradox of

¹⁶ Marianne Shapiro, "The Provençal Trobairitz and the Limits of Courtly Love," *Signs* 3, no.3 (Spring 1978): 568.

¹⁷ Bogin, *Woman Troubadours*, 21.

¹⁸ Joan M. Ferrante, *To The Glory of her Sex: Woman's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 190.

¹⁹ Bruckner, "Fictions," *Medieval Woman's Song*, 142-143.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Shapiro, "The Provençal Trobairitz," 561.

the troubadour lover, who constantly plays the game of humility-exalted.”²³ Scholars agree that these two themes – feudalism and humility-exalted – are characteristic of both trobairitz and troubadour love lyric.

The recurring theme most noted by scholars in trobairitz poetry is that of pain and suffering. In her text, “Two Contrasting Views of Love in the Songs of the Troubadours and the Trobairitz,” Veronica Fraser notes, “the trobairitz are more preoccupied with the problems of *fin’amor* than with its joys.”²⁴ She continues, “she is much more disposed to lament the loss of love and the harshness of the beloved, whom she reproaches for his pride and boastful conduct”²⁵ Shapiro writes, “the trobairitz narrow their choices [of topics] to those which emanate from an agonistic stance.”²⁶ Maria Coldwell, in her “*Jouglersesses and Trobairitz: Secular Musicians in Medieval France*,” observes that the trobairitz composed in an “adversarial style” and that their *cansos* were “generally complaints against unfaithful lovers or evil gossipers.”²⁷ Examining the grammatical structure of their poems, Ferrante concludes “they use many more negatives, sometimes to express strong feelings, but usually to describe frustration or despair.”²⁸ Finally, Tilde Sankovitch, while commenting on William Paden’s study of Castelloza, adds that her “almost exclusive insistence on pain and suffering separates her from the prevailing troubadour model.”²⁹ The trobairitz distinguish themselves from the troubadours by expressing severe unhappiness in love relationships.

Additionally, there are some commonalities in trobairitz poetry which have attracted some scholars but not others. For instance, Shapiro makes observations about the male lover, or *amic*, in trobairitz poetry. She argues that in none of the trobairitz poems does the male lover stand as the personification of courtly virtues as she does in the poems of the troubadours.³⁰ She also notes of the trobairitz “that no poem is dedicated to a masculine patron,” which is significant because almost all troubadour poems are dedicated to a patroness.³¹ Bruckner and Ferrante comment on the nature of the love relationship in trobairitz poetry. In her text, “The

²³ Bruckner, “Fictions,” *Medieval Woman’s Song*, 146.

²⁴ Fraser, “Two Contrasting Views of Love,” 25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Shapiro, “The Provençal Trobairitz,” 565.

²⁷ Coldwell, “*Jouglersesses and Trobairitz*,” *Women Making Music*, 47.

²⁸ Ferrante, *Glory of her Sex*, 191.

²⁹ Tilde Sankovitch, “Lombarda’s Reluctant Mirror: Speculum of Another Poet,” *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Woman Troubadours*, ed. William Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 186.

³⁰ Shapiro, “The Provençal Trobairitz,” 564.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 570.

Trobairitz," Bruckner corroborates with Paden, writing "that women are more likely to sing of love already initiated but disrupted."³² Ferrante agrees, noting that the relationships have a past and the trobairitz are "lamenting for something that once was."³³ Moreover, Fraser observes that the trobairitz were concerned with their station as women. She draws on the poetry of three trobairitz: Castelloza, Garsenda, and Azalais de Porcairagues. Castelloza and Garsenda are aware of the restrictions placed on them as women in regards to open expressions of love, and Azalais mentions a fear of pregnancy and disgrace in her poetry.³⁴ Although none have captured their attention like pain and suffering, scholars have noted several characteristics unique to the trobairitz canon.

In examining trobairitz poetry, the first of the three perspectives mentioned above is that of a reversal of the traditional power structure present in troubadour poetry. The trobairitz do not ignore hierarchical power structures, rather they address them openly. Amelia E. Van Vleck, Ferrante, and H. Jay Siskin and Julie A. Storme comment on Castelloza's insistence on composing. In one of her poems, she writes "I know well that it pleases me, even though everyone says that it's very improper for a lady to plead her own cause with a knight."³⁵ Van Vleck, in her work on Castelloza, notes "she finds herself facing a widely held view that it is inappropriate in another way – simply because she is a lady, and ladies should not compose poems presenting love-arguments to men."³⁶ Ferrante states that "she rejects the woman's double role as object, at once passive and submissive."³⁷ In their text, "Suffering Love: The Reversed Order in the Poetry of Na Castelloza," Siskin and Storme contend that Castelloza "shows both respect and disdain for convention" and that "she rejects anyone else's authority with regard to her own behavior."³⁸ Castelloza is not alone; the Comtessa de Dia also insists on her right to compose. She writes, "a woman who understands about worth should set her understanding on a worthy valiant

³² Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "The Trobairitz," *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, ed. F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith Davis (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 226.

³³ Ferrante, *Glory of her Sex*, 66.

³⁴ Fraser, "Two Contrasting Views of Love," 33-36.

³⁵ H. Jay Siskin and Julie A. Storme, "Suffering Love: The Reversed Order in the Poetry of Na Castelloza," *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Woman Troubadours*, ed. William Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 122.

³⁶ Amelia E. Van Vleck, "'Tost me trobaretz fenida:' Reciprocating Composition in the Songs of Castelloza," *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Woman Troubadours*, ed. William Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 97.

³⁷ Ferrante, *Glory of her Sex*, 193.

³⁸ Siskin and Storme, "Suffering Love," *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 122.

knight...and dare to love him openly.”³⁹ Ferrante comments on the Comtessa’s confidence in her worthiness and in her ability to express her love, writing “there is nothing self-effacing about the countess.”⁴⁰ Bruckner also notes that the Comtessa considers “the active role of courting in song as appropriate for the lady.”⁴¹ The troubadour Bernart Arnaut engages Lombarda in a *tenso*, in which he calls her his “mirror” and plays a word game with her name – “I should like to be Lombard for Lombarda.”⁴² She responds also with a play on words, making herself both Lady Bernarda and Lady Arnauda, but then she remembers her own name, a symbol of being and autonomy. In her book, *Writing the Voice of Pleasure: Heterosexuality without Women*, Anne Callahan notes, “If she were represented merely as the feminine version of a man’s image (his reflection in a mirror, so to speak) she herself would have no image when she looked in the mirror. The poem recognizes the power of representation and celebrates a woman’s right to represent herself.”⁴³ Finally, Fraser points to a *tenso* between three women discussing the pros and cons of marriage and motherhood. Two sisters, Alais and Iselda, ask Lady Carezza, an older woman, if they should get married. According to Fraser, Lady Carezza replies that they should take Knowledge for a husband, “suggesting a life of contemplation and study” instead.⁴⁴ It is clear that the trobairitz were aware of and concerned with the structure of power. Bruckner describes them as “ladies and women who play with and against the balance of power and hierarchy between the sexes that constitute so much of the interest in troubadour lyric and *fin’amor*.”⁴⁵

In addressing the structure of power, where do the trobairitz place themselves within it? In the troubadour lyric, the male poet praises and pleads for the love of the *domna*, the silent desired lady on a pedestal. What happens to the balance of power when the *domna* speaks? This is the question of reversal in trobairitz poetry that has attracted scholars’ attention. Few scholars accept trobairitz poetry as a true reversal in the balance of power. In her article, “Loading the Canon: For and Against Feminist Readings of the Trobairitz,” Caroline Jewers argues that the trobairitz make

³⁹ Ferrante, *Glory of her Sex*, 194.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bruckner, “Fictions,” *Medieval Woman’s Song*, 137.

⁴² Sankovitch, “Lombarda’s Reluctant Mirror,” *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 188.

⁴³ Anne Callahan, *Writing the Voice of Pleasure: Heterosexuality without Women* (New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2001), 67.

⁴⁴ Fraser, “Two Contrasting Views of Love,” 41-42.

⁴⁵ Bruckner, “The Trobairitz,” *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 223.

good use of troubadour lyric, “reversing the customary courtly equation.”⁴⁶ However, she gives very little explanation for her interpretation, quickly moving on to something else. In her piece, “Images of Women and Imagined Trobairitz in the Beziers Chansonnier,” Genevieve Brunel-Lobrichon writes, “rather than benefitting from the system of *fin’amors*, in which the poet-lover puts them on a pedestal and begs their favors, the system is reversed.”⁴⁷ She even contends that the usual topoi in troubadour poetry are reversed.⁴⁸ Like Jewers, Brunel-Lobrichon does not provide much support for her interpretation. Finally, although she does not address the issue directly, Fraser suggests a reversal of roles when she says of the male lover, “he is often cruel and indifferent, and in this he resembles the haughty distant lady of many troubadour songs.”⁴⁹ The troubadour, in some respects, is now the *domna*.

The arguments for a change in the power structure, yet against a complete reversal, are much stronger and much more prevalent in the literature. According to Shapiro, the *domna* cannot leave her pedestal, take her lover’s place as singer, and leave her former place unattended “without exciting a polemic that would attack the core of the *humilis/sublimis* paradox as it pertains to the hierarchy of courtly love.”⁵⁰ Although initially it would seem this is what the trobairitz is doing, Shapiro contends that it is not a complete reversal. A total reversal would “transform her into a mortal and desiring creature, like a man.”⁵¹ Instead, the trobairitz write in such a way as to remain the desired object – “the capsized situation in which desire must express itself as the wish to be possessed.”⁵²

Bruckner agrees with Shapiro that there is an alteration in the power structure but not a complete reversal. She refers to Shapiro’s observations and then continues to add her own, contending that “the lady who begins to sing does not completely vacate her position in the asymmetrical balance of power between *domna* and lover.”⁵³ Bruckner observes that when addressing herself in third person, “she is *domna*,” yet the trobairitz “allow that designation a range of variations that exceeds the troubadours’ desire to

⁴⁶ Caroline Jewers, “Loading the Canon: For and Against Feminist Readings of the Trobairitz,” *Romance Quarterly* 41, no.3 (1994): 8.

⁴⁷ Genevieve Brunel-Lobrichon, “Images of Women and Imagined Trobairitz in the Beziers Chansonnier,” *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Woman Troubadours*, ed. William Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 219.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁹ Fraser, “Two Contrasting Views of Love,” 31.

⁵⁰ Shapiro, “The Provençal Trobairitz,” 562.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 563.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 562.

⁵³ Bruckner, “Fictions,” *Medieval Woman’s Song*, 137.

fix her in the positive mode of their hopes and desires or the negative one of their fears and complaints.”⁵⁴ The Comtessa de Dia is both the active singer and the passive *domna* when she writes, “It pleases me that he is worth more, the one that I most desire to have me.”⁵⁵ In her poetry, the Comtessa affirms her courtly values while reproaching her lover for being haughty and ignoring her. Bruckner notes, “Both lady and lover thus share the attributes of the *domna* courted in song, while only the Comtessa herself assumes the male role of courting, singing, and loving.”⁵⁶ Bruckner also sees the same in Castelloza’s poetry. She writes, “Castelloza insists on being a *domna* who serves her love with a combination of self-effacement and self-proclamation that echoes the feminine stance of the troubadour lover before his lady but transforms it as an expression of the woman’s own desire.”⁵⁷ The position of the trobairitz is that of “lyric *domna*,” a name given by Castelloza to women who choose to court their lovers.⁵⁸

Scholars continue to be in agreement regarding the treatment that trobairitz show the balance of power within their writings. Coldwell maintains that the trobairitz had to adjust the troubadour lyric in order to stay within its limits. She argues, “In their poems the woman troubadours did not simply switch roles with the men and elevate their male lovers to pedestals; rather, they remained the objects of desire and expressed a wish to be worshipped properly.”⁵⁹ Anne Callahan also cites Shapiro, almost excessively. She contends that there is a reversal, not in power, but in the identification of who desires and who is singing.⁶⁰ In her *tenso* with Guid’Ussel, Maria de Ventadorn writes, “the lover ought to do her bidding as toward a friend and lady equally, and she should honor him in the way she would a friend, but never as a lord.”⁶¹ Because the position of *domna* holds power, Bogin contends that Maria “has no interest in equality; she wants superiority.”⁶² Van Vleck, like Bruckner and Bogin, argues the trobairitz does not want to give up her position as *domna*, writing the trobairitz “moves to restore power to her poetry’s speaker by reinstating the conventional roles.”⁶³ She “prompts the addressee (*amic*) to act as

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Coldwell, “Jouglersesses and Trobairitz,” *Women Making Music*, 47.

⁶⁰ Callahan, *Writing the Voice*, 68-69.

⁶¹ Bogin, *The Women Troubadours*, 73.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Van Vleck, “Reciprocating Composition in the Songs of Castelloza,” *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 95.

amador/prejador – and thus by voicing love-pleas – as *trobador* – so that she can vacate the demoralizing post of *amairitz/trobairitz* and claim the powerful position of *domna* now occupied by another.”⁶⁴ Lastly, in her Introduction to *Medieval Woman’s Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, Anne Klinck observes, “they adopt the conventional values of ennoblement through the service of love, fidelity to the beloved, and secrecy in love, but they combine rather than invert the roles of favor-bestowing lady and wooing, striving lover.”⁶⁵ The literature is consistent; the *trobairitz* upset the balance of power by composing, while preserving it by retaining the position of *domna*, the desired object.

The second element of focus in the scholarship is that of a feminist reading of the *trobairitz* poetry. Three scholars in particular—Callahan, Bogin and Ferrante—argue in favor of a feminist reading of their poems. Writing in the 1970s, it is likely that Bogin, whose work provided a starting place for recent scholars, was heavily influenced by the Feminist Movement. She acknowledges this in her introduction, stating “the many thousands of women who are the Woman’s Movement, to whom I owe my own awakening.”⁶⁶ Through reading their poetry, Bogin concludes exactly what the *trobairitz* desire: “to be acknowledged for who they are, as women and as individuals, and a determining voice in how the relationship is conducted.”⁶⁷ It is easy to see how Bogin’s own experience leads her to assign common desire to an entire group of women, who in reality may or may not have all wanted the same thing. She again reminds her reader of the setting in which she writes. “This book comes into being at a time when women everywhere, not for the first time in history but with a new historical consciousness, are re-examining the past in order to situate themselves more authentically in the present.”⁶⁸ Ferrante follows Bogin’s lead, also writing in a feminist perspective. She contends that “the *trobairitz* respond to the female situation by speaking out for themselves (or for their characters), asserting their need to take action or to express themselves. All of them, religious or secular, are aware of themselves as women and speak to women in their audience.”⁶⁹ Ferrante even goes so far as to call the *trobairitz* feminists. She writes, “the women here might be seen as feminists by virtue of the life they led or the works they produced, though they are not

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁵ Anne L. Klinck, “Introduction,” *Medieval Woman’s Song: Cross Cultural Approaches*, ed. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 9.

⁶⁶ Bogin, *The Woman Troubadours*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁹ Ferrante, *Glory of her Sex*, 9.

necessarily feminist in all their opinions. That should not be held against them. A woman who does not fight sexual stereotypes with her words but who does in her actions makes a significant and positive contribution to the history of women."⁷⁰ Lastly, Callahan also takes a feminist perspective of the trobairitz. She gives a literary tip-of-the-hat to Bogin for being the first to see that the trobairitz view on courtly love challenged the balance of power and differed significantly from that of the troubadours.⁷¹ Callahan argues the *domna* of the troubadours is, in reality, the Feminine Other. "The couple in the romance is a chimera. There is no couple. There is only the feminized male and his idealization of an imaginary Other."⁷² Most importantly, when the *domna*, the Other, speaks she "gives voice to the unrepresentable."⁷³ Like Ferrante, Callahan too attributes feminist voice to the trobairitz. She concludes, "women who assume the writing position do so against the system which structures heterosexual eroticism and supports anti-feminism. Their unconventionality becomes part of the story they write."⁷⁴ For Bogin, Ferrante, and Callahan; the trobairitz used their poetry as a feminist tool of expression.

Alternatively, other scholars critically challenge a feminist reading of trobairitz poetry. Bruckner and Jewers are among the most outspoken. Bruckner does not deny the value of examining trobairitz poetry against the idea of the Feminine Other or in terms of a feminist voice. She acknowledges, "We have everything to gain by analyzing their songs with respect to the Other of the troubadour system" and that the "act of speaking out – and its converse – remaining silent – have emblemized a whole spectrum of feminist projects."⁷⁵ However, Bruckner concedes that a feminist reading of the trobairitz is also a presentist reading. She pointedly notes, "to consider the trobairitz as a group already represents an interpretation of their poetry as a kind of feminist project, in as much as the poems and poets themselves, as well as most of the manuscripts that include their songs, do not segregate them or treat them as a group to be differentiated from the male troubadours."⁷⁶ In the thirteenth century, the trobairitz were not a separate group from the troubadours; instead they were fully included in the game of courtly love. Bruckner continues her observation, writing, "it is as if, as soon as we leave the contemporary culture of the trobairitz themselves,

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷¹ Callahan, *Writing the Voice*, 64.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷⁵ Bruckner, "Fictions," *Medieval Woman's Song*, 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 241n 19.

their existence as a group asserts itself and proclaims the anomaly of their appearance as female poets singing in a male dominated world.”⁷⁷ Jewers is a bit more scathing in her criticism of a feminist interpretation, especially of Bogin, mentioning her several times by name. She contends alongside Bruckner, that the trobairitz were not considered a separate group by their contemporaries. She reiterates that the trobairitz were not represented any differently than the troubadours in their *vidas* or in the song books.⁷⁸ Additionally, they were not referred to as trobairitz – a name conferring difference. In fact, there are “no special references to their unusual status as authors” until many centuries later.⁷⁹ The trobairitz and the troubadours “belonged to the same rarified artistic social circle” and therefore “wrote from the same cultural standpoint.”⁸⁰ Lastly, Jewers contends that separating the trobairitz from the troubadours is detrimental to the scholarship. She writes, “We obscure important issues of interpretation by treating the trobairitz just as a separate group” and “to interpret the poems of the trobairitz from a purely contemporary standpoint is to suppress their contribution to troubadour aesthetics.”⁸¹ Clearly, scholars are in disagreement regarding a feminist approach, yet it is equally as clear that the gender is a significant aspect of authorship. Bruckner notes, “The gender of the speaking voice is a powerful signal to the literary public that cannot be discounted among the rhetorical effects of a lyric poem.”⁸²

The third, and final, facet of trobairitz scholarship is the question of sincerity. Were the trobairitz expressing personal feelings and life experience, or were they participating in an art form that focused on love relationships, including fictional ones? Again, scholars disagree and the division seems to follow that of a feminist reading noted above. According to Bogin, the trobairitz poetry was personal: “The most striking aspect of the women’s verse is its revelation of experience and emotion.”⁸³ They “wrote in first person singular” and they used their poems “as a vehicle of self-expression.”⁸⁴ Relying on the one extant poem of Azalais de Porcairages, Bogin observes the poetry has “a sense of urgency that makes them more like journals than like carefully constructed works of art.”⁸⁵ She rejects the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Jewers, “Loading the Canon,” 9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁸¹ Ibid., 2,5.

⁸² Bruckner, “The Trobairitz,” *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 222.

⁸³ Bogin, *The Women Troubadours*, 67.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

possibility that trobairitz poetry was performed at court like that of the troubadours, writing that the poems “are so personal that it is difficult to imagine that they were sung before an audience.”⁸⁶ Bogin’s perception of the trobairitz poem as a personal expression leads her to an understanding of Occitan women. She concludes, “because their subject was themselves, the poems provide a valuable record of the feelings of historical women who lived and loved during the rise of *fin’amors*.”⁸⁷ Likewise, Callahan interprets the trobairitz poems as expressions of personal feelings. She argues that the trobairitz want “to love and be loved as flesh and blood women; they want to have real relationships with men, both as sex partners and as valued friends.”⁸⁸ Ferrante also reads their poems as conveying real life experience. She notes that the trobairitz “speak forcefully about their love.”⁸⁹ They “address their *cansos* directly to the men who are the objects of their love, while troubadours mainly write about, rather than to, women who remain at a social or emotional distance.”⁹⁰ For those in the feminist school, which Bogin, Ferrante, and Callahan surely are, the trobairitz speak with sincerity, conveying actual feelings and experiences.

Conversely, other scholars argue against the idea of sincerity, instead considering the personal quality of trobairitz poetry an aspect of their art form. Again, the literature continues to follow the feminist reading divide. Bruckner considers “the question of sincerity as understood in the context of a lyric tradition which claims to equate and represent lived experience a song,” a “recurrent red herring of troubadour criticism.”⁹¹ She argues that the trobairitz, like the troubadours, use “rhetorical play which sustains the appearance of spontaneity and feeling.”⁹² Modern readership has a tendency to read the “I” of the trobairitz as evidence of personal expression and experience. It is for this reason, Bruckner argues, that “we have to remember that the original public of these songs was probably neither so gullible, nor so ready to confuse poetic skill with true-life confessions.”⁹³ The poetry of the trobairitz only appears to convey personal feelings as part of a lyric form. Bruckner finds, “they, like the troubadours, operate in a lyric whose fiction is to make us believe its own claims to speak truthfully from the heart.....so, we should credit the trobairitz with their

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁸ Callahan, *Writing the Voice*, 66.

⁸⁹ Ferrante, *Glory of her Sex*, 191.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹¹ Bruckner, “Fictions,” *Medieval Woman’s Song*, 128.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Bruckner, “The Trobairitz,” *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 213.

rhetoical skill in making art look real.”⁹⁴ Jewers joins Bruckner, writing “creating the illusion of articulating one’s most private sentiments is a central feature of the troubadour *canso*, and it is in this context that we should assess the lyrical introspection of the trobairitz.”⁹⁵ She continues, observing that their “lyrics are perhaps less about love than about writing about love.”⁹⁶

The question of the trobairitz sincerity is connected in the literature to their intention to perform their poems. Bogin’s skepticism is already noted above. However, Bruckner takes a different stance. She argues that the *tensos* “remind us that troubadour poetry lives in performance, in the face-to-face of songs produced and received in the courts of the *langue d’oc*. What these songs show us, in some sense, is that women are expected to participate in song as a social activity.”⁹⁷ Van Vleck, agrees, challenging the notion, which she contributes to Bogin, “that they had no audiences as such: that their songs were performed privately or were given very limited circulation, primarily in written form.”⁹⁸ She looks to the writing of Castelloza to make her case. Castelloza writes, “Yet I make songs to make your good name heard; which is why I cannot keep from making everyone praise you.”⁹⁹ Van Vleck contends that Castelloza “lays claim to a substantial audience, since she causes her praise of her *amic* to be heard and repeated by *tota gen*, ‘everyone’.”¹⁰⁰ Lastly, Coldwell points out that their poems were originally set to music, which can be seen as an indication of public performance.¹⁰¹ An understanding of the trobairitz poetry as art, and not personal revelation, leads scholars to believe they were intended for an audience.

A connection appears in the literature between a feminist reading of trobairitz poetry and the question of sincerity. Scholars in the feminist school-Bogin, Callahan, and Ferrante-view the trobairitz as feminists, asserting the trobairitz right to speak out while also viewing trobairitz poems as sincere expressions of personal emotions and experiences. For those against a feminist reading of the trobairitz, namely Jewers and

⁹⁴ Bruckner, “Fictions,” *Medieval Woman’s Song*, 150-151.

⁹⁵ Jewers, “Loading the Canon,” 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁷ Bruckner, “The Trobairitz,” *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 206.

⁹⁸ Van Vleck, “Reciprocating Composition in the Songs of Castelloza,” *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 107.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁰¹ Coldwell, “Jouglerses and Trobairitz,” *Women Making Music*, 48.

Bruckner, the opposite is true. In her criticism of Bogin, Jewers gives a possible explanation for the connection. She writes, "If one views the trobairitz as excluded by sexual difference, it is logical to imagine them writing as individuals beyond the boundary of poetic convention, articulating their own thoughts."¹⁰² Bruckner also connects sincerity with the feminist perspective, contending, "Meg Bogin's twentieth-century feminist response is equally colored by the notion that the women poets have expressed their feelings without artifice in the songs they sing."¹⁰³ The connection is not mentioned by any of the feminist scholars, nor is its inverse addressed in the literature. Due to the small number of extant trobairitz poems, it is not possible to prove or disprove either perspective. However, the issue of sincerity is clearly and closely tied to arguments for or against a feminist interpretation.

The scholarship regarding the trobairitz has three main areas of focus: power reversal, feminist construction, and sincerity, which are all interrelated on some level. Scholars agree that the balance of power changes when the silent *domna* chooses to speak, but that there is not a complete reversal of roles. The trobairitz identify the *domna* position with power and therefore attempt to retain that role while taking on the additional role of speaker. Although most scholars agree on this point, their conclusion leads to different understandings of the trobairitz. Scholars with a feminist perspective view the trobairitz as an activist, pushing the limits of patriarchy by asserting her right to speak out and in turn, they interpret their poems as representations of actual feelings and events. Those who argue against the feminist perspective view the trobairitz as part of a courtly and lyric culture who participated in an art tradition by manipulating the troubadour form to suit their gender, and in turn, they interpret their poetry as art appearing to be experience. The literature is, therefore, somewhat divided into two schools of thought on the basis of feminism and sincerity.

Unfortunately, there are issues with the trobairitz scholarship. The first, which at this time is unavoidable, is the small number of existing trobairitz poems and the little historical information presented in the *vidas*.¹⁰⁴ With so few sources, it is difficult for scholars to create a complete picture of the trobairitz: who they were, what they wrote about, who they were writing for, why they wrote; and yet, that is essentially what they do. The second is that many scholars use their own translations from the *langue d'oc*. For

¹⁰² Jewers, "Loading the Canon," 2.

¹⁰³ Bruckner, "Fictions," *Medieval Woman's Song*, 128.

¹⁰⁴ *Vidas* is the term for a brief prose biography, written in Old Occitan, of a troubadour or trobairitz.-Ed.

instance, Bogin, Bruckner, Fraser, and Shapiro use their own translations; Van Vleck uses Paden's translations; and Sankovitch uses those of Perkal-Balinsky and Boutiere-Schutz.¹⁰⁵ In doing this there is no standard and the temptation is present to modify the translation just enough to reinforce one's argument. Finally, scholars approach the trobairitz with underlying presentism – some more faintly than others. While presentism can have a place in historical scholarship, and it can be difficult to avoid completely, the ways in which it influences the scholarship should be addressed within the scholarship. As Bruckner has pointed out, female troubadours may not have been unusual at all in 13th century (there is no way of knowing), but in a twenty-first century perspective they seem a rare phenomenon. The issues in the present scholarship only leave room for further scholarship and hopefully, further discoveries, which lead to more concrete answers about these 13th century lyric *domnas*.

¹⁰⁵ Bogin, *The Women Troubadors*, 77; See also Bruckner, "The Trobairitz," *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 201n 1; See also Fraser, "Two Contrasting Views," 44n 4, 45n 16; See also Shapiro, "The Provençal Trobairitz," 560n 1; See also Van Vleck, "Reciprocating Composition in the Songs of Castelloza," *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 109n 2; and Sankovitch, "Lombarda's Reluctant Mirror," *The Voice of the Trobairitz*, 193n 3.