

IMMUTABLE LOVE: TWO GOOD WOMEN IN MARCABRU

Marcabru is commonly called a moralizer in Provençal studies. In his poetry, the world is a moral battlefield, a psychomachia. But unlike Prudentius' optimistic victories of the virtues over the vices, in Marcabru the troops of fickle, lying *Amar*, which is "lust" in Marcabru's vocabulary and the most dangerous of the sins in his view, are always routing the forces of *Amor*, which is "Good Love" or "love" in all its positive connotations.¹ It is Marcabru's pessimistic view of the results of these conflicts which makes him a moralizer and a complainer. In his diatribes against the sin and rot of the world, Marcabru is engaging and persuasive because of his wit, his invention and his vigor, but he is often repellantly righteous and crude. The range of Marcabru's tone is, I believe, normal because he does not approach virtue always as an abstraction, but rather localizes virtue in the bodies of noble men and women; consequently, he is primarily concerned with the decay of the nobility and cannot forgive them their moral failures. But if he is hard on the men, he is more unforgiving of the sins of the women. Thus Marcabru has always had a reputation as a misogynist, a view encouraged by the thirteenth-century writer of one of his *vidas*: "dis ma de las femnas e d'amor."

Now, his two best and most sophisticated poems, *A la fontana del vergier* (I) and *L'autrier jost'une sebissa* (XXX),² are generally considered apart from his moralizing works because they contain no diatribes. They most certainly are different since the women in these poems appear in the most favorable possible light, as embodiments of the constancy and truth that are essential to Marcabru's understanding of good love. But I intend to show that they are moralizing poems as well: The battle is fought in different terms.

L'autrier jost'una sebissa is the first known *pastorela* and the most famous. Some valuable work has been done on its position within the genre and on its implied social content,³ but it is important as well to see it within the context of Marcabru's other work. Since the poem is neither a description nor an interpretation of the actual world, but a fantasy, it is possible here for virtue to win out against the lust of the narrator. The contest between him and the shepherdess is one of constant setbacks for the would-be lover.

The narrator, playing the role of the horseman, finds a shepherdess, bundled up against the cold weather (ll. 5-7) like a peasant's daughter, "si cum filla de vilana". (l. 4). He offers her his company and tells her that she ought not to be out alone "ses parelh-paria" (without a well-suited companion, l. 19). She rejects his notion of what is fitting for her and adds that, whoever she may be, she at least can tell the difference between sense and folly, implying that he cannot:

22–23 . . . qui que.m sia
Ben conosc sen o follia

It is she, not the narrator, who introduces the idea of reality and counterfeit into what seems to be a simple country seduction:

27–28 . . . tals la cuid'en bailia
Tener, no.n a mas l'ufana.
Some think they have it (a true match) in their power, when they actually have nothing more than the boast of it.

These lines recall the similar image of the upside-down state of the world, in *Aujatz del chan com enans' e meillura* (IX):

14–15 Li sordeior ant del dar l'aventura
E li meillor badon a la pintura.
The worst have good fortune in giving, while the best gawk at the picture of it.

They also recall Marcabru's frequently repeated ideas about the false nature of lust, for example, *L'iverns vai e.l temps s'aizina* (XXXI, stanza 4):

Bon'Amors porta meizina
Per garir son compaigno,
30 Amars lo sieu disciplina
E.l met en perdicio
Ai!
Tant cant l'avers dura, sai,
Al fol, semblan d'amor fai,
35 Hoc,
E quan l'avers fail buzina.
Good love brings medicine to cure its companion, while lust punishes its own and sends him to perdition, Ai! While the money lasts, I know, lust makes a semblance of love to the fool, and wanders when the money runs out.⁴

After the shepherdess' unambiguous declaration that the differences are clear in her mind, and that reality is important and, moreover, recognizable to her, the horseman quits what had been a direct line of persuasion, and embarks on a series of flatteries, hoping to win her through the invention of a false set of ancestors for her:

29–32 Toza de gentil affaire
Cavaliers fon vostre paire
Que.us engenret en la maire,
Car fon corteza vilana.
Lass of fine demeanor, your father must have been a knight, who begat you on your mother, who must have been a courtly peasant woman.

The girl, whose sprightly answers have serious meaning, answers that this is not so: her ancestors go back as far as the eye can see to the sickle and the plow (ll. 36–38). She is legitimate, not the fruit of such a union as the horseman has in mind. She then drops a tiny hint which he ignores.

We should take it as a serious remark, since she has claimed to know the truth when it presents itself to her:

40–42 Mas tals se fai cavalgaire
 C'atrestal deuria faire
 Los seis jorns de la setmana.
 But such a one makes himself a knight who should do the same
 (as her ancestors) six days of the week.

We discover that while he may be a real knight,⁵ for some reason, at least, in her eyes, he is lacking in some essential quality of knighthood. But it may also be that he is a fraud altogether: he is deceitful in his outward form, while she is not, for she presents herself as a shepherdess and is one.

The difference between truth and seeming is an important one here. Marcabru often uses the word *semblan* to mean “semblance”, as he does for example in the lines already quoted from *L'iverns vai e.l temps s'aizina*, and in these lines from *En abriu* (XXIV):

7–8 Denan vos fara semblan bon per meillor
 Per servir gen, a talen rnal per pejor.
 In front of you he will give the semblance of a good man striving for
 the best in being courteous, but he has the nature of a wicked one
 striving for the worst.

On the other hand, he consistently uses the word *semblansa* to mean a manifestation of an inward good, as in these lines from *Bel m'es quan son li fruich madur* (XIII):

9–16 Fals amic, amador tafur,
 Baisson Amor e levo.l crim,
 E no.us cuidetz c'Amors pejur
 C'atrestant val cum fetz al prim;
 Tots temps fon de fina color,
 Et anse d'una semblansa;
 Nuills hom non sap de sa valor
 La fin ni la comensansa.
 False friends, lying lovers all debase Love and raise up sin. But don't
 believe that Love is worse for that, for it is always worth what it was
 at the beginning; it is always of a fine color, and always of a single
 manifestation. No man knows the end or the beginning of its worth.

And the opening lines from XVIII:

Dirai vos senes doptansa
 D'aquest vers la comensansa;
 Li mot fan de ver semblansa.

Dejeanne felt that the third line meant that the words have the appearance of truth, but it seems rather that Marcabru is saying that his words will make the truth manifest to all who would hear him, a boast in perfect Marcabrunian style.⁶

Marcabru's use of these words is important, because it makes it possible to use Marcabru's own vocabulary to describe the two characters in the *pastorela*. If the horseman is not a true knight, then his appearance is a *semblan*, a false appearance, while the shepherdess is a *semblansa*, a true appearance. The affair becomes more than a routine encounter between a horseman and a peasant woman. It becomes an encounter between truth and falsehood, between her insistence on freedom from illusion and his holding to illusions of himself as well as of her. She is, in one sense, like *Amor*; always of one demeanor; he is the fickle *Amar*.

Because he chooses to be unaware of her seeing through his knightly charade, he can blandly continue his appeal with an extravagant praise of her beauty, and then make the blunt proposition:

47-49 E seria.us ben doblada,
Si.m vezi'una vegada,
Sobira e vos sotrana.

Your beauty would be redoubled, if only once I could see myself
above you and you beneath me.

What is strange in her rejection of him in her answering stanza is not her reaction to the proposition, for in fact she says nothing about it, but her increasing annoyance at his unseemly praise. Perhaps when she says "pois en pres m'avetz levada" (since you have raised me in worth, l. 52), she is referring to what he might regard as a favor to her in his stooping to offer himself temporarily to her; she treats this offer and its condescension with disdain and turns to leave. (ll. 54-6).

It seems at this point that the horseman reacts at last to what she has been saying all along, for he begins to alter, albeit slightly, his approach in favor of a praise of appropriateness and honesty:

60-63 Qu'ab aital toza vilana
Pot hom far ric compaignatge
Ab amiatat de coratge,
Si l'us l'autre non engana.

For with such a peasant girl, a man could make pleasant company,
with heartfelt friendship, so long as one does not deceive the other.

His unconscious irony is not lost on her, and she repulses him with a jab at his dishonesty, by telling him that his offer is mad and untrue, and that she is unwilling, for a small entrance fee, to exchange her virginity for the name of a whore (ll. 68-70). The horseman then says the only thing that sounds like something that Marcabru himself might say (cf. *A l'alena del vent doussa*, l. 10: "Jauzis son parelh en son loc," "each gives joy to his own mate in his own place"); that is, he begins to argue that all creatures must follow their natures (or Nature):

71-75 Toza, tota creatura
Revertis a sa natura
Pareillar e pareilladura

Devem, ieu e vos, vilana . . .
 Lass, every creature behaves according to his nature; You and I
 must prepare for intimacy.

He makes his mistake in assuming that he and she are equals, thus meant for each other by the force of natural law. But the law of pairs that she sees sets each in his proper class:

78–83 –“Don, oc; mas segon dreitura
 Cerca fols sa follatura,
 Cortes corteza aventura
 E.il vilans ab la vilana;
 En tal loc fai sens frai'ura
 On hom non garda mezura;
 So ditz la gens anciana.”

–“Milord, yes, but by right, the madman follows his madness, the courtly man a courtly adventure, and the peasant with the peasant woman belongs. Sense is lacking where man does not preserve balance; so s aythemem of old.”⁷

If he is not a true knight, but descended from peasant stock, as she has hinted earlier, then she is throwing his pretense back in his face: They would have been equals if he had been honest to his own real nature. Her insistence on truth comes back and back. Were she not so bright and witty, she would be merely a mouthpiece for the author. As it is, although Marcabru has cast himself in the role of the horseman, his mental, and most attractive, presence is through the shepherdess and all her speeches.

In the *tornada*, or coda, when the horseman in frustration begins to insult her, she replies not to the words he pronounces at the moment, but to his general tone:

88–90 –“Don, lo cavecs vos ahura,
 Que tlas bad'en la pintura
 Qu'autre n'espera la mana.”

–“Milord, the owl warns you that some gape at the picture, while others want the real thing.”

These lines reinforce the moral that Marcabru has tried to make plain all along in his poetry, and in allegorical form here, that reality is better than unreality, disillusion better than illusion, truth better than falsehood, constancy better than inconstancy.

The rightly acclaimed masterpiece of Marcabru's poetry is the beautiful *A la fontana del vergier*, the *romance*. Karl Vossler speaks of its “Monumentalität und Ruhe, die durchaus vollendet und klassisch ist!”⁸ The situation is this: in a charming garden setting, the young man (the speaker) finds alone “selha que no vol mon solatz” (the lady who refused my solace). Here the poet and the young man give away the ending, and the poem is exposed as more than a simple love story. The young man makes a pretty speech to the lady, in which he imagines that the lovely scene is making her happy, and when he suggests that she might listen to what he says, “tost li fon sos afars camjatz” (everything about her changed).

This line suggests that her whole behaviour changed radically. In the clearest possible terms, she had been sitting there on the gravel giving all appearances of being in a good mood, which appearance encouraged him to make his speech. When he spoke, she changed her aspect and began to lament her absent lover. If she had been weeping all along, he would not have approached her with a line about how pleasing the weather was. His utter confusion prepares his second speech a little later on. His bewilderment at first also makes the tense of the verbs of lines 15–16 clearer:

Dels huels poret josta la fon
E del cor sospiret preon.
Her eyes did weep into the fountain and her heart did sigh deeply.

She had not been weeping before, but only began when he spoke to her. Perhaps his saying that she looked happy reminded her of the grief she had blessedly forgotten for a moment. Perhaps simply the sound of a human voice brought her out of the reverie into which she had escaped.

The lady's first words are not an answer to him, but a diatribe against the forces of the world that have conspired against her: Louis VII and the shame of Jesus who has let the infidels take the Holy Land, where her lover has gone:

17–28 Ihesus, dis elha, reys del mon,
Per vos mi creys ma grans dolors,
Quar vostra anta mi cofon,
Quar li meillor de tot est mon
Vos van servir, mas a vos platz.

Ab vos s'en vai lo meus amicx,
Lo belhs e.l gens e.l pros e.l rix;
Sai m'em reman lo grans destrictx,
Lo deziriers soven e.l plors,
Ay! Mala fos reys Lozoicx
Que fay mans e los prezicx
Per que.l dol m'es en cor intratz!

Jesus, she said, king of the world, through you my great sorrow grows greater, for your shame confounds me, because the best in all the world go to serve you; but be it as you will. With you has gone my love, the handsome, the noble, the worthy, the rich: here I am left with great distress, wanting often and weeping. Ay, may Louis be damned, who issued the commands and the prayers, which brought sorrow into my heart!

In these two stanzas the woman is talking about herself: She is more hurt and more wounded by her lover's absence from her than she is concerned for his safety on the Crusade. It never occurs to her that his pain and suffering, emotional and physical, might be equal to hers or greater. Her grief excludes everything outside herself, including her lover, because grief is a stronger emotion in her than love. To talk of her this way takes away some of her grandeur, but the grief that displaces grandeur in her personality also replaces it and leaves the lady a more emotionally immediate and human character in the reader's mind.

If her lover could have gone so far away, she concludes in the last lines of the poem, he must have loved her very little, much less than she loved him:

41-2 . . . mas pauc mi tey
 Que trop s'es de mi alonhatz.

Naturally, then, she is furious when her private thoughts, leading to this conclusion, are interrupted by the would-be lover. Her expression of grief may be egocentric, may be wrongly inspired, but it is still her overriding emotion at the moment. The young gallant is trespassing on her private emotional territory. Thus she will not only be impervious to his approaches but will also resent them.

In view of this reading, the second of the gallant's speeches is extraordinary in its bad timing, and so reveals a good deal about him and perhaps also about Marcabru's own views on the courtly way of life:

31-35 Belha, fi.m ieu, per trop plorar
 Afolha cara e colors;
 E no vos cal desesperar,
 Que selh qui fai lo bosc fulhar,
 Vos pot donar de joi assatz.

Lovely lady, said I, by crying too much one ruins the face and the complexion; and you shouldn't despair so, for he who made the trees give leaf, will surely give you joy.

Next to the lady, he is a ridiculous figure, in fact, more crass than ridiculous. He will not hear her speech as a refusal of his attentions, and foolishly persists in his advances. She has let him know that his changes for her regard are nil, but he ignores this warning and remembers only her earlier appearance. In terms of courtly love, the announcement that there existed a suitor with prior claims who had all the lady's heart should have made him desist; by continuing, he degrades his own class and hers and all its ideals. It is possible that Marcabru intended here to show that the classes that claim to adhere to the courtly standard abuse it the most; that for them it is hardly more than a pose for the public; that, when no one is looking, a sensible young man takes what he can find and encourages the woman to do likewise. But it is also possible that the young man stands as a solitary traitor to his class, to the courtly standard. He may be an unworthy member of the courtly world, just as the horseman may have been an unworthy knight. If the entire class is not a *semblan*, at least this young man is.

The young man expects that after the lady's burst of tears, she will consent to listen to his plea, having done her duty to her absent lover. And it is at this point that the meaning of "selha que no vol mon solatz" suddenly strikes the mind with all its force: it is presented at the beginning as a device to warn the audience that this young man would meet with no success, that this poem was something new. It is a kind of bewilderment

that shows in this line, which only gains its full value in the last stanza, when she refuses to acknowledge that she is playing a courtly game and insists on her grief. It is only in the last stanza that the profundity of the grief appears, and along with it, her inconsolability. The would-be suitor and consoler has missed the point at every level. Thus on a social level, these two people may be equals, but not emotionally. Wellborn he may be, but he is a fool and a lout. While the horseman of *L'autrier jost'una sebissa* has at least the success of being answered, this young man fails even to find a level of simple conversation.

This romance, then, shares some basic characteristics with *L'autrier jost'una sebissa*. In each, the woman is the spiritual center, unmoving, impervious to the man's entreaties. In each, the man has an almost comic role, because his movement is graceless. In the *pastorela*, he gives the impression of moving around the woman trying to block her departure; in the romance, he must shift around to get into her range of vision. He is mutable, she is not. Even in the romance, where the lady's behavior changes, she is faithful to her position once she has had a chance to express it. Each woman embodies a changeless abstract: the one, honesty; the other, grief. The man in each case is as unmoved spiritually by her as emotionally the woman is by him. He continues to try to find her approachable side, never once understanding that his nature, his eagerness to please, his mutability, his unawareness of her steadfastness, all disqualify him as her equal on a moral plane. There is no possibility of equality in the personal sense that could make *amor* succeed. For Marcabru, love is always of one manifestation, and these women are very real embodiments of his value of unity.

But beyond considerations of the men's failures in dealing with the women, there is the relative failure of the lady by the fountain next to the shepherdess. The shepherdess speaks for a virtue, and the lady is faithful only to a much narrower and more private frame of mind. In addition to immutability, Marcabru's ideal of *amor* includes values of self-control, generosity and tolerance. The lady has none of these. She fails to find perfect love because she loves herself more than she loves another; the young man fails even more seriously because he does not respect the lady's sorrow and because he seeks only his own pleasure. The people in this poem find no *amor* because they are capable only of self-love.

The concepts that are clearly spelled out in the admittedly moralizing poems are seen from another perspective in these two beautiful poems. Instead of harrowing vice and bewailing decay, Marcabru makes his virtues comely in their steadfastness. Of the two women, the shepherdess embodies the greater virtue, which is truth, and in her, truth is bright, smiling, and attractive. He does not rail at the faults he sees, but shows them as silly or unappealing. In these gentle fantasies, the pessimistic

sound of the diatribe is gone. We are not warned against vice, but are shown such a charming virtue that we lean toward it naturally.

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Notes

1. The opposition of two or more kinds of love (true and false, holy and unholy, Caritas and Cupiditas) is a commonplace in the Middle Ages, but for its specifically Christian application in the work of Marcabru, see Guido Errante, *Marcabru e le fonti sacre dell'antica lirica romanza* (Florence: Sansoni, 1948): D. Scheludko, "Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte der altprovenzalischen Lyrik," *AR*, 11 (1927), 173–312; 12 (1928), 30–127; 15 (1931) 137–206; for Marcabru's reaction to earthly love among the early troubadours, see James J. Wilhelm, *Seven Troubadours* (Pennsylvania State UP: University Park, 1970).

2. J.-M.-L. Dejeanne, *Poésies complètes du troubadour Mardabru* (Toulouse: Privat, 1909). The roman numerals refer to his order. Both poems can also be found in almost all anthologies, including the most recent, Hill and Bergin, *Anthology of Provençal Troubadours*, second edition, revised and enlarged by Thomas G. Bergin, with the collaboration of Susan Olson, William D. Paden, Jr., and Nathaniel Smith (Yale UP: New Haven, 1973).

3. The most recent and complete review of scholarship on the *pastorela* is Ada Biella, "Considerazione sull'origine e sulla diffusione della 'pastorela,'" *CN*, 25 (1965), 236–267. For special treatment of this *pastorela*, see Erich Köhler, "Marcabrus *L'autrier jost'una sebissa* und das Problem der Pastourelle," *RJ*, 5 (1952), 256–268, and Leo Spitzer, "*Parelh-Paria* chez Marcabrun," *Romania*, 73 (1953), 78–82. Wilhelm, p. 83–84, sees this poem as consonant with Marcabru's other work, but as an affirmation of Christian brotherhood.

4. The opposition of the two terms *amor* (true love) and *amar* (lust) is the clearest in this poem. In many others, *amor* is used when lust is clearly meant, but this may be a scribe's fault, and not Marcabru's choice.

5. Spitzer, *op. cit.*, thinks that he is a real knight and that the shepherdess is defending Marcabru's concept of social equality between lovers. Köhler, *op. cit.*, also thinks he is a real knight and says that the shepherdess is defending the natural order of class separation. He says further that Marcabru is completely original in giving this rôle to a member of the peasant class.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 87. For other examples of the negative use of *semblan*, see IV, 19–20; XVII, 25–28; XXV, 34–35; XXXIII, 43–46; XXXIX, 54; XLIV, 17. For *semblansa*, see XVIII, 5–6; XXXVII, 37–38. Also see XIV, *Contra l'ivern que s'enansa*, 11. 13–18:

Mos talans e sa semblansa
So e no so d'un entalh,
Pueys del talent nays semblan
E pueys ab son dig l'entalha
Quar si l'us trai ab mal vesc
Lo brico, l'autre l'entalha.

(This is a song of his own love and his own foolishness as well as of the foolishness of others who love.)

My desire and its manifestation are of one form: yet are not, because my desire creates a rôle, since she shapes this rôle with her words, and if the one (desire) draws the fool to the trap, the other (rôle) ensnares him.

7. Cf. *Bel m'es quan son li fruich madur* (XIII):

33–34 Greu er je que fols desnatur
E a follejar non recim.

Impossible for a fool to change his nature and not fall again into folly.

The shepherdess is also using the familiar Marcabrunian argument about the damage done to society by men and women of high birth and position who cheat on one another. Marcabru especially dislikes the man who locks up his own wife so that he might chase another's wife; he suggests that a wife treated this way might bear her husband her guardian's children (e.g., IV, V, XI).

8. "Der Trobador Marcabru und die Anfänge des gekünstelsten Stiles," *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1913), 55.