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“Sweet Power of Song”: Troubadours and the Question of Poetic Voicing in British Romanticism

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In the opening of John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, the poetic subject wishes for “a draft of vintage”, a sip of wine tasting of “Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth”. A synaesthetic blend of flavour, heat, and meridian melodies, this “beaker full of the warm South” contributes to stimulating the kind of abandonment conducive to a simultaneously receptive and creative passivity.¹ This is undoubtedly familiar Keatsian territory. Yet, before resorting to negative capability to unlock and explain away the “draft of vintage”, we may pause to note that, through the reference to Provençal song, the ode intersects with contemporary discourses on the medieval Southern figure and poetic art of the troubadour. Keats’s reference to song throws into relief the axiomatic link between medieval Provence and the beginnings of European music and poetry, confirming the Occitan linguistic domain as an originary site of Western cultural modernity. In the preface to her translation of Jean-Baptiste de Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye’s ground-breaking *Histoire littéraire des troubadours* (1774) as *Literary History of the Troubadours* (1779), Susanna Dobson introduced these long-forgotten authors as “the ancient Provençal poets, and the fathers of modern literature”.² If, in “A Defence of Poetry” (1821) Percy Bysshe Shelley defined Dante as the “first awakener of entranced Europe” and his poetry “a bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and antient world”, the Tuscan bard and the structure he erected rested on earlier foundations laid by those Shelley styles the “Provençal Trouveurs or inventors” and their art of the *gai saber* or “joyous science”.³ In the Romantic period, this conception of Old Occitan poetry became widely accepted and, in time, indisputable, as Denis de Rougemont put it in *L’Amour et l’Occident* (1939): “Que toute la poésie européenne soit issue de la poésie des troubadours au douzième siècle, c’est ce don’t personne ne saurait plus douter”.⁴

¹ ll. 11-15, John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 346.

² *The Literary History of the Troubadours*, London, T. Cadell, 1779, p. vi.

³ *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, eds Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, New York and London, Norton, 2002, pp. 528, 526, 525.

⁴ Denis de Rougemont, *L’Amour et l’Occident*, Paris, Union Générale d’Editions, 1962, p. 61. For the use of “Old Occitan” instead of “Provençal”, see Walter Cohen, *A History of European Literature: The West and the World from Antiquity to the Present*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 92.

Keats's "draft of vintage" encapsulates the widespread interest, among Romantic-era authors, in a medieval Occitan literature more and more accurately known through increased scholarly investigation between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.⁵ As William Paden notes, nineteenth-century British literature featured a steady output of works on the troubadour theme as well as directly inspired by medieval Occitan lyric. For the Romantic period, he lists Keats's "Ode", Eleanor Ann Porden's epic *Coeur de Lion; or, the Third Crusade* (1822), and the monthly review *The Troubadour* (only six issues of which appeared in 1822), and, for the Victorian age, Robert Browning's *Sordello* (1840) and "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli", and Algernon Charles Swinburne's compositions inspired by Old Occitan verse and on the troubadour Jaufré Rudel, in particular.⁶ Expanding Paden's list of authors and works, this essay explores further Romantic-era literary engagements with troubadour discourse and assesses their significance and implications, seeking to correct visions of a nostalgic and conservative phenomenon or a mere commercially profitable fashion. Instead, taking its cue from Keats's "Provençal song", it recovers the meta-literary import of the figure of the troubadour and his song and, in turn, their role in Romantic-era reflections on artistic *poiesis* and, as Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" indicates, their place in the formation of cultural modernity.

In her perceptive examination of Romantic-period medievalism, Elizabeth Fay suggests a distinction between a conservative mode associated with "knighthood, chivalry and honour", and a Whig and Radical approach celebrating "the earlier structures of the past before political systems were corrupted by commercialism in order to locate more primitive or 'natural' models".⁷ The former characterizes prose fiction, whereas the latter features in poetry that proclaims the primacy of verse in the Middle Ages, when "poetic power" translated into a "textual virility" endowed with an "enormously potent form of linguistic performance".⁸ Accordingly, Fay argues, non-conservative medievalisms "tend to be associated with the troubadour or bard rather than the chivalric knight", for the poet-singer conveys "the combined pursuit of artistic mastery and political resistance that perfectly answered the contingencies of a historically turbulent moment".⁹ In contrast to the "chivalric conservatism" found in Walter

⁵ Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1977, pp. 14-16.

⁶ William B. Paden, "Provençal and the Troubadours", in *Ezra Pound in Context*, ed. Ira B. Nadel, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 184.

⁷ Elizabeth A. Fay, *Romantic Medievalism. History and the Romantic Literary Ideal*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, p. 3.

⁸ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, p. 3.

⁹ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, pp. 3, 4.

Scott and William Wordsworth, the “radical troubadourism” of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley re-imagines the Old Occitan poet as the bearer of a “spirit of modernity and secularization that could anticipate their own struggle with audience, politics and historical self-realization”.¹⁰

Fay’s exploration of Romantic medievalism is unusual in its attention to the troubadour type, and so partly remedies the widespread critical neglect of it in the ample bibliography on Romantic-era bards, balladeers, minstrels, scalds, and *improvisatori*. But her remarks are not without problems, especially if we attend to the troubadour as a culture-specific type and not as yet another face in a Romantic gallery of “embodied figure[s] of poetic imagination”, as transpires from Fay’s casual phrase “the troubadour or bard”.¹¹ For a start, it is difficult neatly to separate authors and texts on an ideological-political basis because of the inbuilt multiformity and instability of troubadour discourse. Scott, for example, made a crucial contribution to the popularization of the troubadour theme through the novel and not poetry; the troubadour is often also a warrior in Romantic-era texts; and, in the versions produced by women writers, his power is not necessarily a manifestation of virility (textual or otherwise). Still, drawing upon the strengths of Fay’s argument, this essay examines the troubadour theme as a narrative-lyrical device for measuring the value and meaning of the poetic act, within the broader frame of troubadour discourse, that is, the construction of Old Occitan literature and culture crystallizing in the Romantic decades. In the following analyses, the troubadour and his “Provençal song” appear in various guises in prose fiction and verse as *loci* of poetic-musical creation and performance, a productive topos informed by the period’s multiplying scholarly investigations of troubadour poetry and *gai saber*.

The rediscovery and re-evaluation of medieval Occitan poetry was part of the broader long-eighteenth-century investigation of the medieval origins of European cultural history, and what made the troubadour tradition especially relevant was its independence from classical precedents. As August Wilhelm Schlegel noted, in his 1818 review of François-Juste-Marie Raynouard’s *Choix de poésies originales des troubadours* (1816-21), the *gai saber*, which was “not drawn from the source of books” or from “models reputed classical”, promoted a lyrical poetry based on “an individual feeling and situation” and laid the ground for a representation of the self which was a major watershed between modern and ancient literatures.¹² Madame de

¹⁰ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, pp. 7, 15.

¹¹ Susan Manning, “Antiquarianism, Balladry and the Rehabilitation of Romance”, in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. James Chandler, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 65.

¹² [John Wilson,] “Observations on the Provençal Language and Literature, by A. W. Schlegel”, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. IV, n. 21 (December 1818), p. 301.

Staël, of whose *salon* at Coppet Schlegel was a member, had decreed in *De la littérature* (1800) that the moderns' superiority over the ancients resided in their "talent d'exprimer une sensibilité plus délicate, et de varier les situations et les caractères par la connaissance du coeur humain", a view that is compatible with the fact that the "Occitan courtly love lyric" was an absolute novelty, "a turning point in the history of European literature".¹³ Relatedly, Romantic-era scholars explored the connections between troubadour lyricism and its performance: the musical component of troubadour art was a recurring theme in Romantic-era examinations of the first poetic school of European modernity. In *De la littérature du midi de l'Europe* (1813), Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi drew a lively picture of the *tensos*, "où des troubadours combattaient en vers devant de grands princes ou des cours d'amour", conjuring up the image of a knight who, "une harpe entre les bras", opens a poetic combat, while "un autre s'avancait à son tour, et chantant sur le même air, répondait par une strophe de même mesure, et le plus souvent sur les mêmes rimes".¹⁴ He added that "souvent les troubadours chantaient eux-mêmes leurs *treuves* dans les cours et les fêtes; plus souvent ils les faisaient chanter par leurs jongleurs", and provided a detailed account of the tale of Richard the Lionheart's imprisonment in the castle of Dürnstein, after the Third Crusade (1189-92), and the subsequent identification of his place of confinement by the *trouvère* Blondel de Nesle, after long peregrinations, through the singing of a composition for two voices, to which the king eventually responded.¹⁵

Though adverse contemporary opinion criticized Sismondi's work for its lack of original research and inaccuracy, it was a major source for the increasing number of articles on the troubadours in early nineteenth-century British periodicals, which also regularly highlighted the interrelations between singing and writing, that is, the literal lyricism of Old Occitan verse. The unidentified author of "The Poetry of the Troubadours", published in the *New Monthly Magazine* for March 1821, pointed out that "all their verses were generally written for music, and sung by the Troubadour, or his *Jongleur*, to the harp", and that in this conjunction lay "the full effect" of their compositions.¹⁶ This commentator deemed the musical dimension so crucial as to observe that manuscripts of troubadour poetry were now reduced to "dead and spiritless relics [...] preserved in the cabinets of the learned", because "the voice of

¹³ Madame de Staël, *De la littérature*, ed. Gérard Gengembre and Jean Goldzink, Paris, Flammarion, 1991, p. 181; Cohen, *History*, p. 161.

¹⁴ Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, *De la littérature du midi de l'Europe*, 4 vols, Paris, Treuttel et Würtz, 1829, vol. I, pp. 94, 138-139.

¹⁵ Sismondi, *De la littérature*, pp. 163-4.

¹⁶ "The Poetry of the Troubadours", *New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1 (March 1821), p. 283.

the poet, which gave a soul to their beauty, is silent, and the strings of his harp, which enhanced their harmony, are molding in dust”.¹⁷ Nonetheless, some idea of the troubadour’s blend of “the character of poet, composer, and musician” could still be garnered from accounts of the musical and performative skills of Pons de Capdueil and Peire Vidal.¹⁸ In April 1823 the *New Monthly* returned to this subject in an article entitled “On the Troubadours”, which explored song, music, and performance with reference to King Richard I’s poetic activities during his imprisonment at Dürnstein, reproducing the second stanza of a composition where the sovereign laments “the length and severity of his confinement”.¹⁹ The performative nature of troubadour art re-emerges in a reference to the poetic contest of the Floral Games at Toulouse and their supposed founder, the Lady Clémence Isaure.²⁰ In the same year, the entry for “Music” in the sixth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* recorded the troubadours’ seminal role in the history of modern music, reminding readers that “the term troubadour [...] implies poetry as well as music”, and remarking that their extant airs contain “[t]he germs of the future melodies, as well as the poetry of France and Italy”, and that “[t]he most ancient strains that have been spared by time, are such as were set to the songs of the troubadours”.²¹

The performativity inherent in Old Occitan verse is a mainstay of troubadour discourse in the Romantic era and determines its relevance to reflections on literary *poiesis*. It relates directly to contemporary concerns with the performance of the textual and “embodied figure[s] of poetic imagination” such as minstrels, balladeers, *improvisatori*, and bards, concerns that bore directly on the period’s interest in “mediality” (the media-related conditions of the literary) and its “nostalgia for immediacy”.²² If many of these figures speak of civilization in its infancy, the troubadour is fraught with an originary status of special import. As the *New Monthly* article “On the Troubadours” declares from the outset, the Old Occitan poets “claim the proud distinction” of “softening [...] the general asperity of manners”, “originating and promoting the desire of leaning”, “proclaiming and recommending the blessings of social intercourse”.²³ A testimony of the infancy of European and Western civilization, troubadour verse is a harbinger of modernity, and of Romantic literary and cultural modernity in particular,

¹⁷ “The Poetry of the Troubadours”, p. 283.

¹⁸ “The Poetry of the Troubadours”, p. 284.

¹⁹ “On the Troubadours”, *New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 7 (April 1823), p. 372.

²⁰ “On the Troubadours”, pp. 374-5.

²¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica or A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Miscellaneous Literature. Sixth Edition*, 20 vols, Edinburgh, Archibald Constable and Co; London, Hurst, Robinson and Co., 1823, vol. XIV, p. 494.

²² Manning, “Antiquarianism”, p. 65; Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane, “The Medium of Romantic Poetry”, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 241, 247.

²³ “On the Troubadours”, p. 370.

enshrining the power of poetry – what Paul Hamilton calls its unbounded potential “to reconceive and re-order experience”, which Shelley defined in the concluding paragraph of his “Defence of Poetry” as “the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature”.²⁴

The conjunction between troubadour discourse and poetic potency is explicitly presented in the opening section of Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s narrative poem *The Troubadour* (1825), where the narrator invokes the “sweet Power of Song” in the portrait of the eponymous character’s formative years, a time when “genius rises like a spring / Unnoticed in its wandering” to engender poetic creativity more irresistibly vigorous than love itself: “I know not whether Love can fling / A deeper witchery from his wing / Than falls sweet Power of Song from thine”.²⁵ Previously, Walter Scott had outlined the implications of troubadour discourse and the complex nature of its modernity in *Paul’s Letters to his Kinsfolk* (1816), an episodic narrative inspired by his journey to the Netherlands and Paris in 1815.²⁶ A first-hand testimony of the immediate post-Napoleonic moment, *Paul’s Letters* records a visit to the field of Waterloo, depicting the locals’ lively trade in mementoes from the battle, as English visitors are “rushed upon” by men, women, and children “holding up swords, pistols, carabines, and holsters”.²⁷ Scott/Paul describes this phenomenon in half-amused, half-fascinated tones, and ends up bargaining with “eagerness” and “zeal” and purchasing a cross of the *Légion d’honneur* and two cuirasses.²⁸ He also obtains “a relique of greater moral interest” from a lady “whose father had found it on the field of battle” – a manuscript book of French songs “bearing stains of clay and blood, which probably indicate the fate of the proprietor”, two of which – “Romance of Dunois” and “The Troubadour” – he proceeds to transcribe in translation.²⁹

The three octaves of iambic tetrameters of “The Troubadour” are threaded through with familiar medievalizing images and themes: love and honour, military glory, the celebration of

²⁴ Paul Hamilton, “Romanticism and Poetic Autonomy”, in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, p. 440; *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 535.

²⁵ [Letitia Elizabeth Landon], *The Troubadour; Catalogue of Pictures, and Historical Sketches*, London, Hurst, Robinson and Co; Edinburgh, Constable and Co, 1825, pp. 10-11.

²⁶ On *Paul’s Letters*, see John Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott*, Oxford and Cambridge MA, Blackwell, 1995, pp. 185-6. “The Troubadour” enjoyed considerable success in the nineteenth century thanks to numerous musical settings, among them those of John Stevenson, Stefano Cristiana and Carl Maria von Weber. See *Musical Settings of British Romantic Literature. A Catalogue*, ed. Bryan N. S. Gooch, David S. Thatcher, and Odean Long, 2 vols, New York, Garland, 1982, vol. I, pp. 1021-2.

²⁷ Walter Scott, *Paul’s Letters to His Kinsfolk*, second edition, Edinburgh, Constable; London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown and John Murray, 1816, p. 216.

²⁸ Scott, *Paul’s Letters*, p. 218.

²⁹ Scott, *Paul’s Letters*, p. 219. The actual manuscript book is kept in the library at Abbotsford (catalogue number Z.AT.982). I am grateful to Kirsty-Archer Thompson, Abbotsford’s Collections and Interpretation Manager, for this information.

the beloved lady, and the troubadour's departure for war, where he will find death. Music, voice, and performance emerge in the second quatrain of each stanza, the refrain sung by the troubadour marching to battle ("harp in hand, the descant rung"; "the minstrel-burthen still he sung").³⁰ "Romance of Dunois" is the version of a poem by Alexandre de Laborde ("Partant pour la Syrie / Le jeune et beau Dunois") inspired by Napoleon's Egyptian adventure of 1798. Set to music, it became a hugely popular song. In stirring tones, it tells of a young crusader ambitious to "prove the bravest knight, and love the fairest fair", who eventually secures both the Christian army's victory and the hand of his lady-love.³¹ As Scott/Paul remarks that the meaning of both poems depends on "the place and manner in which they were obtained", we are asked to read these modern versions of medieval verse as historical and cultural bridging devices.³² And precisely such implications ground their significance as reworkings of the troubadour theme.

True to his antiquarian leanings, Scott/Paul notes that, in comparison with the "reliques of minstrelsy" one might have found left at Agincourt or Crécy, these texts are the mere "stock in trade of the master of a regimental band"; yet, stressing that these are contemporary visions of a chivalric past "brought close to our own times", he sets store by these simulations of troubadour verse as enabling modernity to see itself in the mirror of the past, albeit a counterfeit mirror.³³ In the third edition, Scott specified that "Paul has since learned that these two romances were written by no less a personage than the Duchesse de St Leu", that is Hortense de Beauharnais (though, as noted above, "Romance of Dunois" was by Laborde).³⁴ Daughter of Josephine, wife of Louis Bonaparte (and therefore Queen of Holland during the empire) and mother of the future Napoleon III, she was a patron of the arts, as well as a writer and an accomplished musician and composer. After the fall of the Napoleonic regime, she went into exile in Switzerland, at the *château* of Arenenberg, where she continued to promote the *style troubadour* cherished by her mother (the *troubadour* paintings at La Malmaison followed her there), and animated a literary salon that earned itself the *soubriquet* of "the troubadour academy".³⁵ Reworking two of her medievalizing poems/songs, Scott did not merely introduce his readers to popular and fashionable Continental compositions, but also delineated a complex

³⁰ Scott, *Paul's Letters*, p. 211.

³¹ Scott, *Paul's Letters*, p. 220.

³² Scott, *Paul's Letters*, p. 213.

³³ Scott, *Paul's Letters*, p. 224.

³⁴ Scott, *Paul's Letters*, p. 222. Hortense de Beauharnais, who was made Duchesse de St. Leu by Louis XVIII, set "Dunois" to music.

³⁵ Jean-Baptiste Honoré Raymond Capefigue observes that "le salon de madame Hortense de Beauharnais était l'académie des troubadours", in *L'Europe pendant le Consulat et l'Empire de Napoléon*, 10 vols, Brussels, Wouters, Raspoet et C., 1842, vol. IX, p. 160.

frame of written and oral transmission linking past and present, France and Britain. As the modern poet-composer adopts the voice of the medieval warrior-poet, Scott removes the troubadour from consumerist nostalgia and archaism, transforming him into a crucible of questions of *poiesis* – orality and inscription, original and simulacrum, medieval and present-day minstrelsy – against the backdrop of the Napoleonic aftermath.

Some of these questions resurface in Scott's novel *The Talisman* (1825), which reprises the troubadour theme within the historical and cultural setting of the Third Crusade (a few weeks after the arrival of King Richard I at Saint-Jean d'Acre on 8 June 1191) in ways that reflect the transnational currents in twelfth-century European literature. An outstanding instance of Romantic-era orientalist historical fiction, the novel features themes of transformation (the disguises worn by Saladin and Sir Kenneth), cross-cultural encounters and clashes (the alternating relations between Saladin and King Richard), and the contact zone (whenever Christians and Muslims share their cultural backgrounds, as in the mingled musical sounds heard in the Crusaders' encampment in chapter 7, Volume I). Interestingly, the comparison between Richard and Saladin turns out to be almost exclusively in favour of the Muslim, who possesses higher chivalric and diplomatic skills than the Western monarch.³⁶ Yet, though the latter's portrait is far from faultless, Scott celebrates him as "no mean proficient in the art of minstrelsy" and a patron of poets in the tradition of his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, the daughter of the 'first' troubadour, William IX of Poitou, and herself a patroness of Old Occitan poetry (Bernart de Ventadorn resided at the English court under her protection in 1152-5).³⁷

The novel's third chapter provides an early reference to the *gai saber* ("minstrelsy and [...] the *gai science*"), when the severe crusader Sir Kenneth, the crown prince of Scotland in disguise, debates with the emir Sheerkof (Saladin in one of his many disguises) the pre-eminence of devotion to sacred things by "prayers and holy psalms" over secular poetry.³⁸ Then, chapter 13, Volume IV, features an extended treatment of the troubadour theme and the power of song, when Blondel de Nesle – a Norman *trouvère*, but here more of a transcultural embodiment of poetic creativity – enters the tent of King Richard, who is receiving crucial news of the numbers in his army from one of his barons, Thomas de Vaux. Blondel is dressed simply, but wears "on his bonnet a gold buckle, with a gem" and, around his neck, "hung in a

³⁶ David Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 93.

³⁷ Sir Walter Scott, *The Talisman*, preface by W. M. Parker, London, J.M. Dent, 1991, p. 82.

³⁸ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 38.

scarf of sky-blue silk a wrest [...] the key with which a harp is tuned, and which was of solid gold”.³⁹ Setting into relief the poet-singer’s precious ornaments, in proto-sociological fashion Scott advertizes the prestige attached to the poetic craft among the powerful in medieval times, as well as emphasizing Blondel’s function at this point in the plot, as his arrival suddenly moves the discussion from military strategy to poetry.

To be sure, on one hand, Richard’s prioritizing of art over war is a sign of his flawed monarchic agency; but, on the other, it is an acknowledgement of the revolutionary softening of “the general asperity of manners” and cultivation of “the desire of leaning” and “the blessings of social intercourse” ascribed to troubadour culture in the *New Monthly* 1823 essay quoted above. Accordingly, the king welcomes Blondel by styling himself “a guild-brother of the joyous science”, simultaneously playing the roles of disciple (“Blondel is my master in the science of minstrelsy and music”), critic, and commentator.⁴⁰ Also, his address to the poet-singer conjures up a fascinatingly wide cultural map: “welcome from Cyprus, my king of minstrels! – welcome to the King of England, who rates not his own dignity more highly than he does thine [...] And what news, my gentle master, from the land of the lyre? Anything fresh from the *trouveurs* of Provence? any thing from the minstrels of merry Normandy?”⁴¹ The association of the French word *trouveur* with Provence, instead of the appropriate *troubadour*, is intriguing. It is unlikely that Scott ignored the difference between Northern and Southern poetic traditions and denominations: in the slightly later *Anne of Geierstein* (1829) he made a point of defining the troubadours “a race of native poets of Provençal origin, differing widely from the minstrels of Normandy, and the adjacent provinces of France”.⁴² Rather, I wish to suggest, this peculiar formulation is meant to indicate the transnational network of creativity to which Richard and Blondel belong, and which Edgar Taylor explored at length in the dissertation prefacing his and Sarah Austin’s collection of *Lays of the Minnesingers, or German Troubadours of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, published in the same year as *The Talisman* and a copy of which was owned by Scott.

Subsequently, Richard celebrates Blondel as an inspired genius, in terms resonating with the aural aspects of troubadour discourse: “thy noble qualities are like a fire burning within, and compel thee to pour thyself out in music and song”.⁴³ The theme of voice is emphasized further in Richard’s statement “I would sooner ride my best horse to death, than

³⁹ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 269.

⁴⁰ Scott, *Talisman*, pp. 270-1.

⁴¹ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 269.

⁴² Walter Scott, *Anne of Geierstein*, ed. J.H. Alexander, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 318.

⁴³ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 269.

injure a note of thy voice”, to which Blondel tellingly replies “My voice is, as ever, at the service of my royal patron”, thus pointing out the interconnection between poetry and power and, implicitly, the power of song.⁴⁴ These preliminaries are followed by Blondel’s intoning a composition, “The Bloody Vest”, presented as a paradigmatic instance of voicing and its effects: “His full, manly, mellow voice [...] thrilled on every ear, and to every heart”.⁴⁵ During a pause in the performance, the king and Blondel debate the technical aspects of the poetic craft, such as metrical innovation, before the poet resumes his skillful “act of recitation”, which once again deeply affects his audience, which, besides the monarch and Thomas de Vaux, includes Queen Berengaria and the king’s cousin Edith Plantagenet.⁴⁶

This layered scene of poetic performance and reception intimates that Scott’s fictional hybrid of *trouvère*-troubadour is no mere token of historical and cultural ‘local colour’. Blondel is a concrete example of the civilizing role of literature and an expression of the literary exchange network of medieval Europe, with Old Occitan verse as its energizing centre. This character therefore embodies the process instigated by the twelfth-century flourishing of troubadour poetry which, as Walter Cohen explains, “establishes what in time become continent-wide norms, thereby converting European literature from a merely geographical marker into the designation of coherent forms and themes”.⁴⁷ King Richard’s tent hosts a fictionalized *mise en scène* of this cultural-historical actuality, while also contextualizing it in ways consonant with Scott’s socio-historical concerns. The scene celebrates the figure of the poet as a promoter of civilizing forces in contrast with the warlike and brutally primitive spirit of Richard’s barons; by the same token, it sets into relief the correlation between poetic creation and reception, on one hand, and the institutions of political power, on the other. And, in this context, women’s agency gains full visibility.

Though the debate on poetry, its features, merits, and relevance is reserved to the king, Thomas de Vaux, and Blondel, yet the most significant moments in the reception of the poet’s song pertain to the queen and Edith Plantagenet. This gender distribution mirrors the widely accepted fact that women were instrumental in instigating the civilizing process in medieval times, a process which Scott described as the “high and reverential devotion to the female sex, which forms the strongest tint in the manners of Chivalry”.⁴⁸ It also reflects Scott’s valuing of

⁴⁴ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 270.

⁴⁵ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 273.

⁴⁶ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 275.

⁴⁷ Cohen, *History*, p. 92.

⁴⁸ “Essay on Chivalry”, in *The Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott*, 28 vols, Edinburgh, Robert Cadell; London, Whittaker and co., 1834-36, vol. VI, p. 40.

the role of women as consumers and patrons of poetry from medieval to contemporary times, a situation he reproduces in the frame of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), where the titular poet performs for the assembled Ladies of Buccleuch, which is also a reference to Scott's declaration that the poem originated from the Countess of Dalkeith's desire to become better acquainted with Scottish traditions.⁴⁹ In this light, Queen Berengaria's welcome rehearses notions about women's central place in courtly culture and the production and reception of poetry; however, it is also bound up with questions of power, since we are told that she "knew well that her royal husband's passion for poetry and music almost equalled his appetite for warlike fame", and so "took anxious care to receive [Blondel] with all the flattering distinctions due to one whom the King delighted to honour".⁵⁰ Significantly, Berengaria rewards the poet-singer with a "rich bracelet" that compounds the king's gift of a "ring of considerable value": both monarchs perform a moment of official sanctioning of poetry in the context of political power and artistic patronage.⁵¹

This codified reaction, carefully staged by the monarchs, contrasts with the emotionally spontaneous one of Edith Plantagenet, whose "simple and graceful" salute introduces another facet of the power of song.⁵² Deeply subjective, Edith's response to the "The Bloody Vest" is unrelated to questions of poetic technique or institutional power: it is an emotionally charged reception translating Blondel's composition into personal, intimate impulses. Though Richard deems her "insensible to the sound of the harp she once loved", the princess is deeply moved by a song that speaks to her current plight, as her royal cousin is pressuring her into accepting Saladin's proposal of marriage.⁵³ Since Edith's refusal is motivated by "honour and conscience", she anteposes personal integrity to political and dynastic reasons. Another of Scott's contrastive female couples, like Rose/Flora in *Waverley* (1814) and Rowena/Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* (1819), Berengaria and Edith convey two different but intertwined conceptions of poetry – one related to the institutional sphere, the other to the intimate domain of personal feelings and values.⁵⁴

Scott's awarding of prominent roles on female characters in this scene ties in neatly with the re-elaboration of the troubadour theme in Romantic women's poetry from the 1820s, a decade that, in fiction and verse, was deeply marked by the success of *Ivanhoe*. In actual fact,

⁴⁹ See Alison Lumsden and Ainsley McIntosh, "The Narrative Poems", in *The Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Fiona Robertson, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 272.

⁵¹ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 277.

⁵² Scott, *Talisman*, p. 272.

⁵³ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 277.

⁵⁴ Scott, *Talisman*, p. 278.

women had been major promoters of troubadour discourse from the outset (as in the contributions of Susanna Dobson and Madame de Staël mentioned above), and, in addition, commentators never failed to stress the presence of women troubadours (*trobairitz*) in the collections of Old Occitan verse. On these premisses, in 1820s verse by women the troubadour theme acquires particular visibility within the production of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, whose *The Troubadour* was followed by *The Golden Violet* (1827), where the external frame of the Floral Games contains lyrical and narrative compositions attributed to a multicultural and multiethnic cohort of male and female poets aspiring to the golden prize. Landon had already employed the Floral Games as the setting for the climax in *The Troubadour*, where, after many adventures, the eponymous hero Raymond returns to Toulouse and his beloved Eva, regaining her love by taking part in and winning the competition, of which she is the supreme judge. In a brief note heading *The Golden Violet*, Landon indicates that the poem's title comes from the "Festival alluded to in the close of the Troubadour", and that she has drawn information about it from Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-81).⁵⁵ Taking her cue from his account of the "edict" with which Clémence Isaure allegedly summoned "all the poets of France", Landon reinterprets the Floral Games as a transnational pageant of performance and reception peopled with poets from Provence, Normandy, Scotland, Germany, Christian Spain, the Holy Land, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Islamic Andalusia, and England.⁵⁶ They perform in the presence of Countess Clemenza, who takes on the role of Scott's King Richard, with all attendant attributes and prerogatives.

The Golden Violet offers a wider-ranging engagement with the troubadour theme than Landon's more explicitly titled poem of 1825, centred on a protagonist who, though styled a troubadour, is more "a warrior who carelessly throws off a couple of songs when the mood strikes him".⁵⁷ In contrast, by conjuring the scene of poetic creation, delivery, and reception as more variously layered and resonant, the 1827 text reflects the fact that, as Glennis Stephenson remarks, "[t]hroughout the poem, Landon continually sets up divisions only to undermine them, makes claims concerning the distinction between male and female poetic gifts only to disprove them in the very act of writing".⁵⁸ In *The Troubadour* Landon celebrated the "sweet

⁵⁵ L.E.L., *The Golden Violet, with Its Tales of Romance and Chivalry: and Other Poems*, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1827, n. p.

⁵⁶ Thomas Warton dedicates a paragraph to the Floral Games and their founder "Clementina" Isaure, Countess of Toulouse, in *The History of English Poetry from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols, London, J. Dodsley, 1774-81, Vol. I, p. 467.

⁵⁷ Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon. The Woman Behind L.E.L.*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 66.

⁵⁸ Stephenson, *Letitia Landon*, p. 69.

power of Song”, yet refrained from exploring its implications in connection with the troubadour theme; in contrast, in *The Golden Violet* she addresses such implications by setting them in the context of Old Occitan culture, that is through a situated representation of the culture-bound status of the power of song in it and, more generally, in Europe’s transnational poetic scene. As in Scott’s *Talisman*, women are once again awarded a pivotal part in this process.

Landon’s reconfiguring of poetic authority and the relationship between poetry and power centres on Countess Clemenza, to whom she attributes the invention of the poetic contest, the choice of the prize (the golden violet which decorates her hair and which, at the end of the poem, is not awarded to any of the competitors, since Landon leaves readers free to decide), and the power of song, since Clemenza is also a poet (during a pause of the contest, she intones the song “My heart is like the failing hearth”⁵⁹). Both supreme authority and performer, the countess embodies and sums up the troubadour tradition and its authoritativeness. Her primacy is then extended further by the presence of the Provençal lady Marguerite, a *trobairitz*, who sings “The Queen of Cyprus”; a Greek poet named Eulalia, who sings a song of heartbreak and loss, and whose name anticipates that of the protagonist of Landon’s “A History of the Lyre” (1829), the Italian Eulalie; and finally the key voice in this performative mosaic, the last poet, Amenaïde, to whom “was trusted that fine power / Which rules the bard’s enthusiast hour”.⁶⁰ Yet another of Landon’s *personae* conveying her poetics of doomed emotionalism and “narcissistic self-destruction”, Amenaïde embodies the “ruin’d mind” overwhelmed by unbridled passion (“her least emotion / Swept like the whirlwind o’er the ocean”).⁶¹ Unlike Berengaria or Edith in Scott’s *Talisman*, Clemenza is independent from male authority of any kind, and “Young knight”, “Warrior”, and “Baron” answer her summons to the festival, leaving aside their masculine activities of hunting, fighting, and ruling.⁶² As the key-stone in the poem’s architecture of voices and songs, she transfers the troubadour poetic tradition wholesale into a female-dominated dimension and, by the same token, ties the power of song (“the spell of the minstrel’s art”⁶³) to such values as the democracy of art, the choral and inclusive nature of poetry, and the transnational and transcultural multiplication of experiences and points of view.

⁵⁹ L.E.L., *Golden Violet*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ L.E.L., *Golden Violet*, p. 155.

⁶¹ Lucasta Miller, *L.E.L.: The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, The Celebrated Female Byron*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2019, p. 30. L.E.L., *Golden Violet*, pp. 155.

⁶² L.E.L., *Golden Violet*, p. 21.

⁶³ L.E.L., *Golden Violet*, p. 21.

In 1819, the year of *Ivanhoe*, Felicia Hemans inaugurated another approach to the troubadour theme and the power of song through shorter forms with her poem “The Troubadour, and Richard Coeur de Lion”, from *Tales, and Historic Scenes, in Verse* (1819), later republished in *The Literary Souvenir* for 1826. This 130-line composition in octosyllabic couplets, comprising a narrative frame and an embedded song in ballad meter, reprises the tale of Blondel and King Richard, taken from William Russell’s *History of Modern Europe* (1818), which in turn drew upon Sainte-Palaye’s *Histoire littéraire des troubadours*. If this chain of sources confirms that Romantic-period literary versions of the troubadour theme firmly relied on the scholarly tradition rooted in eighteenth-century antiquarianism, it also, to some extent, qualifies Hemans’s composition as intertextually conventional. However, at closer inspection, she appears to resort to these sources and the familiar and possibly trite legend of Richard and Blondel as the starting point for a radical revision of the troubadour and his song.

After an opening filled with historical and geographical notations related to the crusades and Blondel’s journey, voice and song take over when he arrives on the banks of the Rhine: “But hark! that solemn stillness breaking, / The Troubadour’s wild song is waking”.⁶⁴ At this point, the poem turns into a *tenso*, as we start to hear “another tone” of a “well-known voice” that continues and concludes Blondel’s song.⁶⁵ The narrative arc is eventually rounded off by a prophecy of the king’s liberation and return to his jubilant kingdom: “[...] a thousand harps with joy shall ring / When merry England hails her king”.⁶⁶ The poem highlights the troubadour’s song and its power very much *à la* Walter Scott: as in *The Talisman*, the king is associated with his poet, whose art is at the service of the monarch, while the final reference to “merry England” (the phrase recurs frequently in both *The Talisman* and *Ivanhoe*) illuminates the historical-political import of Blondel’s poetic performance, that is, its contribution to restoring the legitimate monarch, consolidating the state, and ensuring its happiness.

Hemans returned to troubadour singing and its power a few years later, and this time from a radically revisionary prerspective, in three compositions published in the *New Monthly Magazine* for August and September 1824, respectively entitled “Troubadour Songs” (“The Warrior cross’d the ocean’s foam” and “They rear’d no trophies”) and “Troubadour Song” (“The Captive Knight”). The latter reprises the motif of the troubadour in captivity, but avoids the triumphantly inflected plot culminating in the liberation of the singer-warrior. After setting

⁶⁴ ll. 53-54, Felicia Hemans, *Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 159.

⁶⁵ ll. 101-104, Hemans, *Selected Poems*, p. 160.

⁶⁶ ll. 129-30, Hemans, *Selected Poems*, p. 161.

the scene, the poem shifts to the dramatic monologue of the singer-warrior who, imprisoned in a seemingly Saracen (“paynim”) keep, sees a Christian army pass in the distance. On this occasion, however, the “captive’s voice” has no effect, his cry for help is unheard and, eventually, “hope is past”.⁶⁷ At the start, the troubadour’s voice is drowned out by the sound of military trumpets despite the narrator’s invocation “Cease awhile, clarion! clarion wild and shrill”, whereas at the end his voice trails off into silence.⁶⁸ Breaking with the conventions of the troubadour theme, Hemans creates a situation of powerless voicing, and enacts a significant splitting of that act of voicing: on one hand, the captive’s voice is not explicitly that of a troubadour and his words are not presented as a song; on the other, his lament is conveyed by the voice of the titular troubadour, a persona of the poet, who therefore takes over and ventriloquizes the troubadour’s power of song.

Hemans develops this pattern further in “The Warrior cross’d the ocean’s foam”, where the voice of the troubadour as singer-warrior is completely absent. Described in the third person, he is silent, in a text organized on two parallel planes – the warrior’s and his beloved’s:

The Warrior cross’d the ocean’s foam,
For the stormy fields of war;
The maid was left in a smiling home,
And a sunny land afar

His voice was heard where javelin-showers
Pour’d on the steel-clad line;
Her step was midst the summer-flowers,
Her seat beneath the vine.⁶⁹

Here, the mode of the *tenso* is not reproduced literally but rather mediated by the poetic voice and converted into a contrast between male and female, masculine and feminine, dimensions, graphically highlighted by the italicized possessives. In this fashion, Hemans emphatically genders the troubadour’s song, within which the warrior’s cosmos confronts the world of domesticity and the affections through a conflict that ultimately brings death to the abandoned woman and not to the man (“again he cross’d the seas”). Moving death from

⁶⁷ *The New Monthly Magazine* 11 (September 1824), p. 216.

⁶⁸ *The New Monthly Magazine* 11 (September 1824), p. 216.

⁶⁹ *The New Monthly Magazine* 11 (August 1824), p. 80.

battlefield to home, Hemans inflects the troubadour theme through her hallmark contrasts between male ethos and female values, chivalry and domesticity, the epic and the affections; and, while transposing the troubadour into her own poetic idiom, she once more appropriates his voice, agency and power.⁷⁰ Finally, in the three brief stanzas of her third troubadour composition of 1824, “They rear’d no trophy”, Hemans returns to the theme of war, heroism and chivalrous death. In an inversion of the “Romance of Dunois”, the fighter falls on an Eastern battlefield (“the Syrian wilds his record keep”) and is buried in an unmarked grave (“They rear’d no trophy”), his death glorified as a supreme act of military heroism (“a banner is his shroud”).⁷¹ Inevitably, this warrior is silent: the only voice we hear in the three quatrains of this “Troubadour Song” is the poet’s.

In these short compositions blending narrative and lyric in its etymologic sense (“related to song and voice”), Hemans reinvents and reorders some of the distinctive features of the troubadour theme. Unlike her 1819 poem on King Richard and Blondel, these later poems abolish any culture-specific traits in favour of a more generic medievalism. As if the references to the troubadour were nods to a by-now familiar type or even stereotype, the themes Hemans connects to this figure mirror those in her catalogue-poem “The Themes of Song” prefacing her collection *National Lyrics, and Songs for Music* (1834). These include devotion to woman (“deep, holy, fervent love, / Victor o’er fear and death”) and the premature death of a warrior (“a chieftain's crested brow / Too soon [...] struck down”), which, together with the other themes of song, are presented as universal through the anaphoric “Where’er” at the start of each stanza.⁷² In this light, the troubadour in Hemans’s three shorter poems seems to have been emptied of any reference value, in line with a tendency to recycling and eclecticism resulting in a proliferation of troubadour simulacra capable of satisfying a demand for stylized literary representations that, echoing Virgil Nemoianu, may be seen to characterize late, or “Biedermeier”, Romanticism.⁷³ Yet, by the same token, through this hollowing out of the troubadour figure Hemans sets her own verse and voice into high relief as condensations of the

⁷⁰ See Susan J. Wolfson, “‘Domestic Affections’ and ‘the spear of Minerva’: Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender”, in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, pp. 128-66. The score for “The Warrior cross’d”, composed by Hemans’s sister, Harriet Hughes, stresses the male-female contrast through tonal variations: *spiritoso, animato, con spirito* for the former, and *piano, dolce, molto espressivo* for the latter. Felicia Hemans, *Troubadour Song. The Words by Mrs Hemans, the Music by Her Sister*, London, I. Willis, [1830], p. 4.

⁷¹ *The New Monthly Magazine* 11 (August 1824), p. 80.

⁷² Felicia Hemans, *National Lyrics, and Songs for Music*, Dublin, William Curry; London, Simpkin and Marshall, 1834, pp. 3-4.

⁷³ On the “Biedermeier” aesthetic of late Romanticism, see Virgil Nemoianu, *The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the Age of Biedermeier*, Cambridge MA-London, Harvard University Press, 1984.

power of song. In these “Troubadour Songs” she extracts the figure of the warrior-poet from the more detailed, historically and culturally contextualized treatment in “The Troubadour, and Richard Coeur de Lion”, but also of Scott’s and Landon’s works, inserts it into a narrative-lyrical mould and keys it to the formal, thematic and ideological coordinates of her own poetic discourse. Ultimately, Hemans harnesses the troubadour theme and the power of his song to a celebration of female poetic art – a power paradoxically conveyed by a male figure who is the embodiment (but an emptied one) of chivalrous virility and the male voice.

Hemans’s modifications of the troubadour type confirm that its Romantic-period appropriations and redeployments do not invariably correspond to a formulaic medievalism. Hers and Landon’s adoptions of the troubadour are not merely additional facets of a sentimental and mannered cult of the Middle Ages, just as the *mode troubadour* more comprehensively cannot be entirely reduced to a consumeristic phenomenon. Similarly, in Scott, troubadour verse is relevant as a mainstay of the multiform foundations of post-classical European literature, a starting point of progress and civilization. Charged with the potency of an originary figure, the Old Occitan poet-performer and warrior-singer becomes the vector of a reflection on the power of poetry and verbal creation, and of its culture-making value as a seminal force of modernity. In different but converging ways, Scott, Landon and Hemans also cast the troubadour as an emblem of authorial pre-eminence, a figurative tool for remarking the capital importance of the role and function of the poet and literature *tout court*. Therefore, the troubadour in their texts condenses some of the major tensions agitating Romantic-era literature such as writerly authority, literature and institutional power, the craft of poetry, gender in the formation of cultural history and identity, and the nature and function of *poiesis*. What may at first seem a clichéd signifier is, in fact, a nexus of meta-literary questions about literary creation and its bearing on the formation of the cultural system of modernity, compressed in “a draft of vintage”, a taste of wine infused with “Provençal song, and suburnt mirth”.