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Voices of Women Troubadours: Themes of Power, Marital Institutions, Sexuality, and Freedom

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Abstract

In this essay, I will examine some of the poetry of the eleventh- and twelfth-century women troubadours who lived in Occitania (southern France), focusing on the themes of freedom, sexuality, and resistance to heteronormativity and the various marital institutions in their writing. The first part of this essay will assert the various ways in which the Occitan noblewomen were not solely at a severe disadvantage to their male counterparts, but also, contrary to popular belief, held political roles and control over their bodies. The second part of the essay will focus on the two poems written by the trobairitz, with the intention to both compare the ways in which they criticize secular and religious marital institutions and contrast the modes of their proposed resistance. While the first poem, "Alais, Yselda, and Carenza," is anonymous and resists forced marriage by suggesting that women enter a Cathar convent, the second *canso* is untitled, written by Bieris de Romans, and confronts medieval patriarchal oppression by illustrating an intimate connection between two women, undermining an archetype of a medieval marriage that has roots in heteronormativity and heterosexism as a result. The primary purpose of this essay is to assert that trobairitz research should not only continue exploring themes of gender discrimination, gender bias, and gender roles in the medieval culture, but also not disregard the numerous instances of women's resistance to patriarchy, misogyny, sex hierarchy, and the constructed superiority of heteronormative views. Furthermore, as a contemporary society, it is critical for us to not attach bias to any works of literature written in a distant past, for it promotes misunderstanding and prejudice. It is crucial to examine the many disadvantages that medieval aristocratic women were subjected to while also acknowledging the privileges of aristocratic women, stemming directly from their connection to the nobility in the first place.

Keywords: troubadours, troubadour poetry, trobairitz, Bieris de Romans, religion, marriage, heteronormativity, gender

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The women troubadours, known in Old Occitan as "trobairitz," are significantly outnumbered by male troubadours: twenty to one.[1] Of more than 2,500 extant troubadour poems, only forty-six by trobairitz survive.[2] This helps us to understand that these women, who were a "minority even in their own social class,"[3] almost all belonging to the Occitan aristocracy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and located in southern France, were writing during a time when there was a strong prevalence of gender binaries, gender roles, and severe discrimination against women in particular. The trobairitz are not representative of the majority of women living in the medieval era. Numerous archives provided evidence that most known trobairitz were daughters, sisters, and wives of male Occitan aristocrats.[4] The trobairitz had some political agency because in certain regions of Occitania, many noblewomen were lords who ruled lands and had property rights. The trobairitz had some religious agency and reproductive freedom because some women not only resisted both secular and religious marriages[5], but also refused to have children and chose religious paths instead (whether through Catholicism or Catharism). These noblewomen enjoyed numerous legal privileges and an environment, which allowed for them to be surrounded by well-known male troubadours.[6]

It is often disregarded or forgotten that the aristocratic society of medieval France "*routinely* produced politically prominent ruling women," or female lords (*dominae*).[7] Many women "ruled lands, either in their own right or on behalf of absent husbands or minor children."[8] Some Occitan women gave and received vassalic or fidelity oaths and presided over law courts as countesses and viscountesses.[9] In Champagne, between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, aristocratic women "enjoyed similar property rights to men and property passed to either sex according to family circumstances."[10] In western Pyrenees and the Adour basin, "younger daughters received a dowry and were usually *better off* than younger sons"; furthermore, in these regions, it was the woman who "authorized the marriages of [her] children or allowed them to leave home," not a man.[11] Women's authority also "depended more on the

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[1] Linda M. Paterson, *The World of the Troubadours (Medieval Occitan Society, c. 1100-c. 1300)* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 260.

[2] Paterson, 260.

[3] Paterson, 228.

[4] Isabel de Riquer, "Towards the Discovery of the Trobairitz in the Writings of Catalan Authors," Reial Acadèmia de Bones Lletres / IRCVM / Universitat de Barcelona, No. 17: Spring 2021, https://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/SVMMA/article/view/35930.

[5] The first kind of marital institution was created by the Catholic Church and it placed emphasis on consent and an inability to divorce and remarry. The second was adopted by a medieval secular society in an attempt to strengthen political alliances; divorce and remarriage was not only common, but was required to efficiently navigate volatile political situations. The two marital institutions were in opposition.

[6] De Riquer, 170.

[7] Kimberly A. LoPrete, "Women, Gender and Lordship in France, c.1050–1250," *History Compass* 5/6 (2007): 1921, accessed July 25, 2021, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00474.x.

[8] Paterson, 221.

[9] Paterson, 221.

[10] Paterson, 223.

[11] Paterson, 226.

personal status and social rank" than on "gender."[12] It is also important to note that Occitan noblewomen were beneficiaries of two Roman codices: "The Code of Justinian, compiled between 528 and 533" and "The Theodosian Code of 394-95."[13] The Code of Justinian asserted that the woman's husband "[could] not claim ownership [of his wife's dowry] or pass it on to his own heirs,"[14] and the second code "gave sons and unmarried daughters an equal share in their father's estate."[15] These two codes not only acted as a way for some women to exercise political control but to also exercise, while not fully, their power and freedom of choice: they were able to own and rule their lands and able to inherit an "equal share" of their father's lands, and with inheritance came the ability and choice for women to "[act] as lords of fiefs and vassals" and manage their land holdings.[16]

It is no surprise that the medieval era was a breeding ground for severe gender discrimination, yet it is crucial to point out that aristocratic women were at an advantage compared to women who were not members of the aristocracy. However, it is still important to examine one of the primary sources of misogyny in Occitan society: medicine, or to be more specific, in Salernitian medical theory and Aristotelian teachings. For example, it was considered that "female sperm" was "cruder" than a male sperm, and that the male fetus was produced in the right side of the uterus, not on the left side, which was believed to be "sinister."[17] The Aristotelian belief that the male fetus became "human" after forty days and the female after ninety continued well into the eighteenth century, being especially prevalent in the medieval period.[18] Medical practitioners would learn ideas such as that women are "defective" men or that women's sexual organs were not "normal" or "positive," unlike men's.[19] Menstruation was believed to be a "curse of Eve" and a sign of a woman's "fallen state."[20] In some regions, women were particularly vulnerable to violence in their marriage because the law dictated that "masters," or men, were allowed to "punish domestic offenses, such as theft and insult, without recourse to the courts, when these were committed by the master's wife, serfs, freedmen, etc."[21] In Ariège, "wife-beating" was "routine" in "households of all social classes."[22] Adultery was considered to be "normal" if a man committed it, but if a woman committed adultery, that was regarded to be a "serious crime."[23] In twelfth-century Rouergue, adultery of married women was equated to "homicide" and "witchcraft."[24] Rape was considered a serious crime because it undermined a man's "rightful control over the woman's sexual relations"; rape was a crime

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[12] LoPrete, 1925.
[13] Bogin, 22.
[14] Bogin, 22.
[15] Bogin, 23.
[16] LoPrete, 1926.
[17] Paterson, 270.
[18] Paterson, 270-71.
[19] Paterson, 271.
[20] Paterson, 271.
[21] Paterson, 238.
[22] Paterson, 238.
[23] Paterson, 233.
[24] Paterson, 233.

against the male guardian or a husband, not a woman.[25] After briefly examining some of the instances of power and the many disadvantages medieval women were subjected to, it is now time for us to transition to the next part of this essay: analysis of the two poems by the trobairitz, where we will have the opportunity to get more insight into themes of resistance, marriage, and intimacy.

In the "late thirteenth-century Occitan dialogue poem"[26] "Alais, Yselda, and Carenza," the anonymous trobairitz reveals to us the many aspects of the dichotomy between women's power and its absence. First, I will introduce the poem in greater detail and then examine how it reflects a larger conflict between the Church, which argues for a consensual marriage and prohibits divorce, and a secular society that perceives the marital institution as a way to strengthen or modify political alliances. Both kinds of marriages negatively impacted women, and, in many ways, stripped them of their political and personal powers. The "two sisters," Lady Alais and Lady Iselda, are asking for Lady Carenza's advice on marriage and having children. The first sister contemplates staying "unwed" because it would "please [her]" for two reasons: "making babies doesn't seem so good / and it's too anguishing to be a wife."[27] The second sister remarks on how "making babies" "is a huge penitence" because "[her] breasts [would] hang way down," presumably as a result.[28] Because both sisters are considering staying "unwed," the trobairitz demonstrates here the possibility that both kinds of marriages contained their fair share of negatives for a woman entering such a relationship, regardless of whether it was secular or religious. Both kinds of marriages infringed upon their innate, natural rights such as freedom of thought and expression and the individual's capacity for self-determination. In the case of a twelfth century religious marriage, the Church insisted on exogamy ("prohibitions against marriage between individuals related by blood or affinity to the seventh degree"), indissolubility (prohibitions against remarriage after divorce), and consent of both parties "without interference from their families."[29] In practice, however, consent was "more a fiction than a reality."[30] The Church was making women "subject in law to their husbands' authority"[31] and providing *male* aristocrats "with a ready method of repudiating an unwanted [female] spouse" due to the Church's ambiguous and flawed affinity and incest prohibitions.[32] Women were extremely vulnerable to violence within a religious marriage[33] and were not allowed to refuse to have sex with their husbands when they wanted it,[34] despite the Church, ironically, considering sexual pleasure to be "moderately sinful."[35] The Church "discouraged female initiative in sexual

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[25] Paterson, 240.

[26] Paterson, 228.

[27] "Alais, Iselda, and Carenza," lines 6-8.

[28] "Alais, Iselda, and Carenza," lines 10-11.

[29] Paterson, 229.

[30] Paterson, 229.

[31] Paterson, 238.

[32] Paterson, 236-37.

[33] Paterson, 238.

[34] Paterson, 272.

[35] Paterson, 273.

matters" and "proscribed contraception and abortion, even if the mother's life was in danger."[36] In addition, the Church allowed only one position for intercourse: where it left the "man on top, in his rightful place in the social and divine hierarchy."[37] Church Fathers believed that women were "contaminated" and that "virginity alone could truly detoxify the female sex."[38] A secular marriage was just as degrading as a religious one. In a secular marriage, aristocratic families used the marriage institution "to negotiate alliances and consolidate their resources and power"; "personal taste," affection, and love were not of any concern to the family.[39] Because secular marriages favored practices such as divorce and remarriage, which allowed flexibility and an appropriate response to volatile political conditions,[40] it comes as no surprise that similarly to religious marriages, women were also the "pawns of men."[41] Women were simply passed down from one man to another, and frequently married and/or remarried "as a result of violence" in the political sphere.[42] By remaining "unwed," Lady Alais and Lady Iselda can, arguably, escape some of these humiliating, dangerous, and insulting implications of religious and secular marriages. Both kinds of marriages were in tension, mainly because the secular male aristocracy was especially resistant to the changes that the Church implemented, especially those concerning divorce,[43] but neither such resistance nor tension provided women with freedom or dignity. If anything, this resistance made it easier for men to get a divorce (on the basis of incest, adultery, affinity, witchcraft, etc.), and further reinforce women's status as "commodities for male exchange."[44] The very word "unwed" reveals to us themes of secular and religious marriages, and how both were viewed negatively by some, if not most, women. A lot of women desired an escape from rules and teachings of those who made them feel less than human. When one of the sisters states that marriage to a male lord is "anguishing," the speaker suggests that she associates marrying a male lord with feelings of torment, desolation, and a yearning for something more—beyond the restrictions of a patrimonialised society and the many connotations of female inferiority being continuously reinforced by religious, secular, familial, and medical institutions. One of the most popular routes of escape was religion, or to be more precise, the idea of entering a convent or a "marriage with God."[45]

One of the sisters contemplates marrying "Coronat de Scienza"—a Cathar name for Christ[46]—instead of a male lord. Women who wanted to enter a marriage with God had to do so outside the bounds of an official framework[47] because the Church followed the Roman rule of

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[36] Paterson, 279.
[37] Paterson, 273.
[38] Bogin, 11.
[39] Paterson, 229.
[40] Paterson, 229.
[41] Bogin, 10.
[42] Paterson, 239.
[43] Paterson 229.
[44] Paterson, 224.
[45] Bogin, 145.
[46] Bogin, 145.
[47] Paterson, 242.

fixing the age for female consecration at forty.[48] Short life expectancy and family pressures contributed to the particular difficulty of maintaining provisional vows.[49] Catharism was outside the bounds of an official framework; it was also considered to be a "medieval heresy"[50] or "a subversion of the social order of Western Christendom"[51] that "attracted women in considerable numbers."[52] The speaker of the poem could very well be one of these women, and even if she isn't, the anonymous trobairitz is raising awareness of significant issues such as planning a way out of secular and religious marriages in order to have freedom over one's body and mind. For many women, Catharism served as a "refuge"[53] from marriage. Because Lady Carenza argues that in a marriage to a male lord, it is not possible for a woman to sustain or cultivate qualities like "learning," "merit," "beauty," or "distinction,"[54] she implies that in a marriage with God, a woman is able to do the opposite: remain true to herself and receive protection from divine forces. Deciding to not marry a male lord and instead, pursue a spiritual journey through Catharism is an act of choosing, and Lady Carenza is urging the sisters to make a choice for themselves. These choices are far from numerous but refusing marriage and entering a convent is still a choice, and one that grants women some agency and control over their lives. However, while Catharism may sound appealing at first glance, it has many drawbacks. For instance, Cathars commonly believed that women were "instrument[s] of the Fall of heavenly spirits," and there were "many cases of intense Cathar hatred of women and their bodies."[55] The poem reflects both the freeing act of a woman being able to make a choice for herself, but also emphasizes the many limitations women were faced with due to Church Fathers, Catharism, and secular marriage. Even a marriage with God would not solve all the problems. In addition, of course, it is immobilizing to have only two possible choices—entering a marriage with God or entering a marriage with a male lord—that ultimately, decide one's whole future, and it is correct to insist on the numerous limitations of male courtly discourse—whether that discourse is manifested through male troubadour poetry or dictated by a system that discriminates against women. However, it is also wrong to overlook instances when the trobairitz were not immobilized: when they did not submit to the marital institutions and instead, through poetry, voiced their concerns on how women are treated in society.

The speaker's word choice, "penitence" (in relation to having children), can also reveal to us something that is both groundbreaking and ambiguous. "Penitence" is synonymous with feelings of guilt, shame, and repentance. The speaker may be suggesting that she would, hypothetically, feel the need to repent and seek God's forgiveness if she were to have children in a loveless marriage. The speaker could also be hinting at her desire to repent to herself for not claiming control over her body and allowing the system to affirm control over her "breasts" and

[48] Paterson, 241.
[49] Paterson, 241.
[50] Paterson, 249.
[51] Paterson, 250.
[52] Paterson, 249.
[53] Paterson, 250.
[54] " Alais, Iselda, and Carenza," line 14.
[55] Paterson, 251.

reproductive organs.[56] By rejecting marriage, the speaker is reclaiming her power—especially over her reproductive organs. It should be noted that at the time, ten percent of women died in childbirth, and on average, women in aristocratic societies had “between four and seven children who reached maturity.”[57] Hence the probability of death in childbirth was very high, and in a society where embryology “underpinned a belief in male superiority,”[58] it can very well be that the speaker did not want to face early death. It is also worth pointing out that through the usage of the word “penitence” in relation to the thought of giving birth to children, the female speaker may be unconsciously experiencing thoughts of internalized misogyny or sexism. The speaker could be experiencing “penitence” toward herself (if she were to give birth) because she would no longer be a “virgin,” and the Church Fathers taught that “virginity alone could truly detoxify the female sex.”[59] The sisters may desire to stay “unwed” because they were inspired to do so due to misogynistic motives of Church Fathers; the speaker could feel shame for being “contaminated” and having to “detoxify” her mind and body in the first place. In other words, the underlying reasoning of remaining “unwed” could be sexist, or a combination of both internalized sexism and the desire to break free.

This essay will also examine a *canso* written by Bieris de Romans in the first half of the thirteenth century,[60] which, similarly to “Alais, Yselda, and Carenza,” tackles themes of marriage, but also introduces a new topic of same-sex love between women. There is hardly anything known about Romans. We only know that she lived in the northeast of Montélimar and was the mother of Falquet de Romans, a famous male troubadour.[61] The poem contains a female speaker who addresses her words to a woman named Maria. The female speaker praises Maria’s “perfect beauty,” and “honor and distinction”[62]; she also states that Maria has a “sweet face” and a “loving expression,”[63] which draws the female speaker “toward” Maria.[64] The female speaker begs Maria to “give” her what brings the “most hope and joy”[65] because the female speaker’s “desire and heart” are set on Maria and all of the female speaker’s “happiness” “stems” from Maria.[66] The speaker then also states that no other woman “surpasses”[67] Maria, since her “merit and beauty” is “above all other [women].”[68] In the second to last stanza, the speaker begs Maria again, but for a different reason this time; she urges Maria to not “love a deceitful suitor.”[69] From first glance, it may appear that the female speaker has romantic feelings toward Maria, which is

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56 “ Alais, Iselda, and Carenza,” lines 10-11.

57 Paterson, 269.

58 Paterson, 270.

59 Bogin, 11.

60 Bogin, 132.

61 Bogin, 133.

62 Romans, lines 2-3.

63 Romans, lines 5-6.

64 Romans, line 8.

65 Romans, lines 12-13.

66 Romans, lines 14-15.

67 Romans, line 18.

68 Romans, lines 17-18.

69 Romans, line 20.

one of the hypotheses that some scholars have (alas, not the most popular hypothesis). Angelica Rieger[70] points out that because the *canso*, a "typical genre for a love-poem,"[71] came to us in an "uncertain form"—meaning it is a product of subjective and also literary translation—homosexuality could be "corrected 'in' or 'out' [of text]."[72] The female speaker could be speaking to a female acquaintance, a confidante,[73] or an intimate friend,[74] as opposed to a lover, because trobairitz allowed for "considerably more affectivity"[75] and sympathy in their writings—which may be deemed as "erotic" by a modern audience, instead of "simply tender."[76] Nevertheless, the text contains explicit erotic elements[77] such as the speaker's plea for Maria to avoid deceitful male suitors and, instead, to grant her love to the female speaker. Here, we may be witnessing a larger argument concerning marriage to a man in the medieval period in general, similar to the first poem. The idea of avoiding deceitful suitors, who are men, for the sake of one's honor, may be suggestive of the speaker characterizing all men altogether as deceitful[78] and insisting on intimate connections with women instead. However, deceitful male suitors do not need to necessarily correlate with men in relation to their specific gender but can merely refer to the larger frameworks or conventional archetypes of patriarchy instead. The female speaker is warning Maria to be careful with deceitful lovers, who may embody religious and/or secular institutions, and also to remain cautious of their ability to erase her good qualities.[79] This is very similar to what we witnessed in the previous poem, where Lady Carenza implied that in a marriage to a male lord, cultivating qualities such as learning or beauty is impossible. Unlike the earlier poem, in Romans' *canso*, the proposed escape from marital institutions is not that of entering a convent; here, there is a lot of focus on a relationship between two women, where a cultivation and fostering of good qualities of both partners can occur. Romans' *canso* resists notions of secular and religious marriages in a distinctive way: through suggesting that love, affection, and happiness may be obtained through a relationship (platonic or not) between two women, not a male lord and his wife (who he most likely married/remarried to strengthen and/or modify a political alliance). While patriarchy in general is presented as deceitful, Romans emphasizes how the female speaker is drawn toward Maria with a "pure heart," not deceit.[80] Not

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[70] Angelica Rieger, "Was Bieiris de Romans Lesbian? Women's Relations with Each Other in the World of the Troubadours" in *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Women Troubadours*, ed. by William D. Paden. University of Pennsylvania Press.

[71] Rieger, 73.

[72] Rieger, 81.

[73] Rieger, 82.

[74] Rieger, 90.

[75] Rieger, 90.

[76] Rieger, 82.

[77] Rieger, 87.

[78] Rieger, 81.

[79] Romans, 24.

[80] Romans, line 8.

only does the trobairitz suggest women are not deceitful, but she also associates feminine features with emotional comfort, “joy,”[81] and “happiness.”[82]

The question of potential same-sex attraction, observed in Romans’ *canso*, is a highly debated topic in trobairitz research. I lean toward the notion that Maria and the female speaker were in an intimate relationship, although the question of *how* intimate still stands. Historically speaking, there is hardly any information about same-sex relations of women in the medieval period, especially prior to the fourteenth century. There are only approximately twelve women for the entire medieval period who could be explicitly associated with same-sex romance—all of whom are from the fifteenth century.[83] There is some evidence regarding the criminal accusations which some women faced, but none in southern France. For example, in 1477, a “reputed lesbian” drowned in Speier; and in 1444, two women were charged with a “vice against nature [or] sodomy.”[84] Hence, same-sex love and/or sex between women was not unheard of. Interestingly enough, some early Christian penitential manuals discouraged erotic activities between women, but specifics are frequently absent in such manuals.[85] If the woman was having oral sex with another woman, the punishment for that was “fairly light.”[86] If, however, a phallus-like “instrument” was being used, such activity had a “more serious punishment.”[87] While same-sex male relationships are not a focus of this essay, it is important to say that unlike male gay relationships, lesbianism was not as widely talked and/or known about. For instance, the majority of medieval physicians solely discussed male homosexuality, not lesbianism; the majority of authors of penitentials “either ignored lesbianism [completely]” or “rated it a lesser sin than male homosexuality”; and most theologians “either overlooked or trivialized same-sex relations between women.”[88] It does appear to be as if most people were closing their eyes on lesbianism. One explanation to such phenomenon is that lesbianism was labeled as “relatively unproblematic” for the sole reason of “same-sex intimacy between women” being unable to “[produce] bastards nor [introduce] false heirs into lineages.”[89] To put it another way, lesbianism was not harmful to patriarchy and feudalism because it did not attack or infringe upon political alliances, constructed male superiority, childbearing, and strategic marriages. In Romans’ canso, it is not as much as *explicit* lesbianism that undermines the misogynistic teachings and laws, but the mere notion of two women having a healthy and intimate relationship (not necessarily

[81] Romans, line 13.

[82] Romans, line 15.

[83] Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 9 (2000): 3, accessed September 17, 2021, http://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/leslbian-24grammata.com_.pdf.

[84] Bennett, 3.

[85] Heather Rose Jones, "Sex Between Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance" (presentation, SCA's West Kingdom Collegium, November 10, 2010). https://www.alpennia.com/lhmp/essays/sex-between-women-middle-ages-and-renaissance.

[86] Jones.

[87] Jones.

[88] Bennett, 5.

[89] Bennett, 5. This argument was originally introduced, however, in John Boswell’s book *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century.*

sexual). Instead of reinforcing ideas of female inferiority through marriage, internalized sexism, religion, or medicine, the female speaker praises another woman for her mind, character, heart, beauty, honor, hospitality, and virtue; it is the very opposite of what Church Fathers taught or what the secular society strived toward. The underlying theme of possible lesbianism questions certain principles of heteronormativity and heterosexism that were ingrained in society such as the assumption that heterosexuality is the sole “normal” sexual orientation and that a heterosexual relationship is superior to all others. By presenting two women, who are, arguably, in a much healthier relationship than those women who were married off to men as part of a political scheme or plunged into the Church Fathers’ male-favoring hands, the whole notion of a heterosexual relationship being considered as superior breaks down. The theme of same-sex intimacy questions the *necessity* of childbearing and asks the uncomfortable question of why male heirs are required and/or often considered to be superior to female heirs. By questioning the requirement of childbearing, we also see same-sex intimacy subtly tackle themes of true consent and its widespread absence and a woman’s control over her body (e.g., freedom to choose to have children or not, freedom to have sex or not, freedom to use contraception or not, freedom to give birth or not, freedom to engage in sexual activity with someone who does not identify as male or not, etc.). The very notion that in Romans’ canso, the two participating characters are not male and female, but instead, two women who share an intimate connection, implies critique of how in medieval society, a marriage or a relationship consists of two parties: one of whom is superior and the other correspondingly inferior. The depiction of two women demonstrates the possibility of a relationship where there are equal partners. Among other things, this *canso* envisions love and respect between two people and highlights the many dangers associated with the marital institutions in both religious and secular sense.

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