

**”Oh how I love the springtime gay...” by the troubadour Bertran de Born**  
translated by Lady Isolde de Lengadoc

**Background**

The troubadours comprised a movement of poets, songwriters and performers active between about 1100 and 1300 CE.<sup>1</sup> Although they are often discussed in the same breath with the trouvères, singer/poets from contemporary Northern France, the troubadours are distinct geographically, linguistically and stylistically. They flourished in Occitania, also called “The Midi” – the region “encompassing Aquitaine, Périgord, Limosin, Auvergne, Gascony, Langeudoc, and Provence in the south of present-day France.”<sup>2</sup> With the exception of some multilingual forays,<sup>3</sup> troubadours composed their poems in the *lang d’oc*, also called Old Occitan or Old Provençal, a relative the *lang d’oïl* of the trouvères (Old French) and other Romance languages. They established the theme of courtly love, or *fin amors*, in Old Occitan, which was to endure in European literature throughout and beyond the middle ages.<sup>4</sup>

Although many troubadours were widely traveled,<sup>5</sup> they were not all the wandering minstrels of popular imagining. Bertran de Born was the lord of Hautfort, an estate in Limosin.<sup>6</sup> He is believed to have been involved in the unsuccessful rebellion against Henry II, during which he lost his lands. After writing a moving lament for the king’s son, his lands were returned.<sup>7</sup>

Bertran de Born is most famous for his extensive body of war poetry. Although it is tempting to interpret poems such as “Oh how I love the springtime gay” as an ironic portrayal of bloodthirsty, and perhaps bored, nobles, it is important to keep in mind the political atmosphere of the times and Bertran’s participation in it. *Fin Amors* emerged as a reaction to the knightly ethic of physical prowess and right of authority through brute strength. Although values such as education, hygiene and courtliness were coming into vogue, the old knightly ethic was still very much a part of Occitan life.<sup>8</sup> Bertran de Born was no stranger to war, was keenly concerned with defending his lands, having lost them once, and seems to have been a whole-hearted supporter of the knightly ethic. Indeed, prowess and courage seem to be a moral constant, a comforting standard by which to judge men, running through the poetry of this particular troubadour.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aubrey, Elizabeth, “Occitan Monophony.” *A Performer’s Guide to Medieval Music*. Ed. Ross W. Duffin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 122-133. See page 122.

<sup>2</sup> Aubrey, Elizabeth. *The Music of the Troubadours*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. See page 1.

<sup>3</sup> A descort by Raimbaut de Vaqueiras includes stanzas in Occitan, Italian, French, Gascon and Galician-Portuguese, Aubrey 15.

<sup>4</sup> Bogin, Meg. *The Women Troubadours*. New York: Norton, 1980. See page 38.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example Bernart de Ventadorn and Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, Aubrey 9 and 14.

<sup>6</sup> Pade, William D. *The Poems of the Troubadour Bertran de Born*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Bogin, Meg. *The Women Troubadours*. New York: Norton, 1980. See page 30.

<sup>9</sup> Paden, 34, 35.

## Text

This poem appears in nineteen medieval manuscripts, only five of which attribute the work to Bertran de Born.<sup>10</sup> This is more attributions than are given to any other alleged author of this poem, and the poem fits extremely well both stylistically and thematically with the rest of de Born's work. Therefore, although the origin of the piece remains uncertain, Bertran de Born is the most likely author.

There are ten stanzas in total, including three tornadas (short stanzas that often appear at the end of troubadour poetry). The first four stanzas appear in every manuscript, the first five in eleven, although in two manuscripts the order of the fourth and fifth stanzas is reversed. The ninth stanza appears in the same eleven manuscripts that include the first five. Stanzas six through eight, which bring the theme of love into the poem, and ten appear sporadically throughout the remaining manuscripts.<sup>11</sup> Scribal error was a frequent occurrence in the transmission of the troubadour canon, and there are undeniable mistakes in attribution in most of the manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> I have thus chosen to include only the first five stanzas and the ninth in my translation, as these are the most reliably transmitted portions of the poem.

The first five stanzas are identical in meter and rhyme, and the last stanza, the tornada, is structurally identical to the last three lines of any of the preceding stanzas. The diagram that follows represents the number of syllables and rhyme of each line of a full stanza.

8	A
8	B
8	A
8	B
6'	C
8	D
8	D
6'	C
8	D
8	D

The rhymed sounds are the same in each stanza, linking each stanza of the poem with the rest. Unlike English, each part of speech in Old Occitan ends with the same sound, making rhymes much easier to find. For this reason, I have chosen only to link the C lines from stanza to stanza. Keeping every rhyme consistent throughout the poem would render modern English far more stilted than the original Occitan, but I did want to maintain some link between stanzas, in deference to the original rhyme scheme. The C stanzas differ from the rest in syllable count as well, so I decided to use these distinct lines in this way, to strengthen the link between stanzas.

Old Occitan poetry was syllabic, as opposed to the syllabotonic poetry to which our modern English ears are accustomed. This means that lines contain a specific

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 336.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Aubrey, 29.

number of syllables, but that stress may fall anywhere. Thus, we find lines such as, “*Car mais val mortz qe vius sobratz.*” that seem to scan in familiar iambic tetrameter in the same position as lines such as “*Tro q'a mains colps pres e donatz,*” which in order to scan iambicly would have to contain awkward stresses on function words such as “*e*” (and) and “*q'a*” (to which). This was the norm for the troubadours, so I have translated this poem into iambic lines (the norm in English since before Shakespeare) of the same syllable count. The only deviation is in the C lines, which in the original include a consistently unstressed seventh syllable at the end of the line. This weak syllable is a remnant of the rhyme, thus scholars tend not to include it in the syllable count, preferring to indicate it through the use of an apostrophe. I have omitted it altogether, for the sake of rhyme and word choice.

In translating this poem, I relied heavily on William D. Paden’s collection of Bertran de Born’s poems. His literal prose translation provided an excellent touch-stone, but his extensive glossary of the words used in the poems was really indispensable. Many words in Old Occitan are cognate to words in modern Spanish, French and even English (ie *cavals*, *amors*, *baron*), but the language contains numerous false cognates as well. A glossary such as this compiled by an accomplished Occitan linguist<sup>13</sup> is an invaluable tool for anyone hoping to translate troubadour works.

I chose to maintain meter and rhyme not just to be faithful to the texture of the original, but also in the hope that I can marry my translation with the song’s melody in the near future. Although not all troubadour songs have survived with intact melodies, this one has, and troubadour poetry was meant to be sung. Maintaining the syllable count and rhyme will make it possible to match words to melody.

What follows is Bertran de Born’s poem presented in the original Old Occitan and my rhymed translation presented in parallel text for your comparison.

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<sup>13</sup> Paden is also the author of *Introduction to Old Occitan*. MLA, 1998, an excellent overview and tutorial of the language of the troubadours.

## Occitan

*Bertran de Born*

*Be.m plai lo gais temps de pascor,  
Que fai fuoillas e flors venir!  
E plai me qand auch la baudor  
Dels auzels que fant retintir  
Lo chant per lo boscatge!  
E plai me qand vei per los pratz  
Tendas e pavaillons fermatz!  
Et ai grand alegratge  
Qan vei per campaignas rengatz  
Cavalliers e cavals armatz.*

*E platz mi qan li corredor  
Fant las gens e l'aver fugir,  
E platz me qan vei apres lor  
Granren d'armatz corren venir,  
E platz m'e mon coratge  
Qan vei fortz chastels assetgatz  
E.ls barris rotz et esfondratz,  
E vei l'ost el ribatge  
Q'es tot entorn claus de fossatz,  
Ab lissas de fortz pals serratz.*

*Et atressi.m platz de seignor  
Qand es primiers a l'envazir  
En caval, armatz, ses temor,  
C'aissi fai los sieus enardir  
Ab valen vassalatge.  
E pois qe l'estorns es mesclatz,  
Chascus deu esser acesmatz  
E segre.l d'agradatge,  
Que nuills hom non es ren presatz  
Tro q'a mains colps pres e donatz.*

*Massas e brans, elms de color,  
Escutz traucar e desgarnir  
Veirem a l'intrar de l'estor,  
E maing vassal essems ferir,  
Don anaran aratge  
Cavail dels mortz e dels nafratz.  
E qand er en l'estor intratz,  
Chascus hom de paratge  
Non pens mas d'asclar caps e bratz,  
Car mais val mortz qe vius sobratz.*

*E.us dic qe tant no m'a sabor  
Manjar ni beure ni dormir  
Cum a qand auch cridar, a lor  
D'ambas las partz, et auch bruir  
Cavals voit per l'ombratge,  
Et auch cridar, aidatz aidatz  
E vei cazer per los fossatz  
Paus e grans per l'erbatge,  
E vei los mortz qe pels costatz  
Ant los tronchos ab los cendatz.*

*Baron, metetz en gatge  
Castels e vilas e ciutatz  
Enans c'usqecs no.us gerreiatz.*

## Rhyming Translation

*Isolde de Lengadoc*

Oh how I love the springtime gay  
That brings the leaves and flowers out!  
As much to hear the merry way  
Of birds who throw their song about  
To echo through the glen!  
So much I love a meadow fair  
Festooned with tents whose banners flare!  
And oh! what rapture then  
When ranks upon that field prepare,  
Each armored knight upon his mare.

I love it when the scouts compel  
The landed gentry there to flee,  
A multitude of knights will swell  
In hot pursuit and mounting glee.  
And how I love it when  
I see a crumbling castle tall  
Besieged, with broken, tumbling wall,  
The host advances then  
Through sharpened staves contrived to maul  
And ditches where the dead men fall.

So too I love the brave seignor  
Who mounted, fearless, armored bright  
Rides first into the fray and gore  
For thus does he inspire with might  
And valor all his men.  
And when the battles escalate  
Each man must cheerfully await  
To follow him again.  
For 'till a foe you desecrate,  
Your manhood's only second-rate.

Club and sword and colored helm  
Perforated, crumpled shield  
Immediately overwhelm  
The vassals fighting on the field.  
Bewildered horses then  
Run frantically, their riders bled.  
And when they're charging full ahead,  
All brave and worthy men  
Must look to hacking arm and head –  
A coward's worth less than the dead.

I tell you – sleeping, food nor drink,  
Holds half the savor as the time  
I hear both sides cry, "Too the brink!"  
And when the panicked horses whine  
And flee without their men.  
I hear the cries of "Help!" in vain  
And see them tumble, knight and thane,  
In ditches on the fen.  
Their splintered lances still remain  
Upon the meadow, in the slain.

Pawn your castle baron,  
Your town, your city, all your store,  
'Ere ever you stop making war.