

»AISSI CO'L PEIS«: THE DELICATE EROTIC
OF BERNART DE VENTADORN

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No one would ever dream of accusing Bernart de Ventadorn of the delicacy typical of Guillaume IX. Nonetheless, although this Fra Angelico of medieval lyricism¹ never trespasses the limits of a most delicate reserve,² it is evident that the quality of his desire had yet to attain the more non-carnal passion of a Dante. Bernart does not seek to meet his *domna* in *Paradiso*; her private chamber is heaven enough for him.

Keeping that in mind, one may wonder if there are not perhaps some indirect allusions to the erotic beneath the polished elegance of Bernart's *cansos*. Let us consider, for example, the second stanza of »Be m'an perdut lai enves Ventadorn«:

Aissi co'l peis qui s'eslaiss' el cadorn
e no'n sap mot, tro que s'es pres en l'ama,
m'eslaisseï eu vas trop amar un jorn,
c'anc no'm gardeï, tro fui en mei la flama,
que m'art plus fort, no'm feira focs de forn;³

(vv. 8—12)

The simile here is that of the unwary fish, attracted by bait, caught on a hook, and, by implication, cooked in a flame. This would appear to be the poem's central image⁴; its metaterm is contained therein, i. e., loss of control.⁵ If we examine the original language more carefully, moreover, we may question if there is not some ambiguity here. It is true, of course, that within context the surface meaning of *peis* is »fish«. But may it not also be an indirect reference to the *membrum virile*? At first glance, such a suggestion may seem startling. On the other hand, is it really? If we look up the *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, we discover that von Wartburg had

¹ Léon Billet, *Bernard de Ventadour, Troubadour du XII^e siècle* (Orfeuil: Tulle, 1974), p. 173.

² Billet, p. 152.

³ Moshé Lazar, *Bernard de Ventadour, Troubadour du XII^e siècle, Chansons d'amour* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1966), p. 92.

⁴ »Bernart habitually uses a central image not only to give colour to the meaning of a song but also to point its structure...« (Sarah Kay, »Love in a Mirror: An Aspect of the Imagery of Bernart de Ventadorn,« *Medium Aevum*, 2, L11 [1983], 278).

⁵ David Carlson, »Losing Control in Bernart de Ventadorn's 'Can Vei La Lauzeta Mover,« *Romance Notes*, 3, XXIII (Spring 1983), 272. Although Carlson uses this term with regard to another *canso*, it seems to me it is still applicable here.

come upon only one example in Old French of a word derived from Latin *penis*, i. e., *pe*, significantly found in Old Provençal in Peire d'Alvernhe.⁶ Although it is true that in Provence Latin *ē* did not evolve into *ei* as in the North of France, nonetheless as Frede Jensen notes:

... the poetic device consisting in the replacement of closed E by the diphthong *ei* in rhyme position affects closed E generally and regardless of its etymological sources.⁷

Jensen further remarks that this diphthongalization occurs before *s*.⁸ Ergo, *penis* > *pein* > *pei*. The dropping of the final *-n* after *e* is normal in limousine, the dialect of Bernart.⁹ Of course, one may argue that the word found in V. 8 is *peis*, not *pei*. In this regard, allow us to call to the reader's attention that already in the late 12th century, the period when Bernart lived, there are clear indications in MSS that the final *-s* dropped in a prae-consonantal position.¹⁰ Therefore it is conceivable that in this case *peis* could have been pronounced *pei*: »Aissi co'l peis qui...« Would this make sense within context? What does the poet say? Clearly Bernart says he is on fire. He is in the midst of a flame that burns him more strongly than the fire of an oven. From this point of view, this *peis-pei* would appear to be an indirect and subtle reference to sexual excitement on the part of a male.

What is implicit here becomes somewhat explicit in the next stanza when Bernart praises the less than spiritual charms of his lady:

No'm meravilh si s'amors me te pres,
que genser cors no crei qu'el se mire:
bels et blancs es, e frescs e gais e les
e totz aitals com eu volh e deziere.¹¹

(vv. 15—18)

Like the »fish«, Bernart is hooked on the bait, which is evidently the lady's »cors«. He is not praising her soul at this point. Which brings us to that unusual word *cadorn* (v. 8). Carl Appel, after pointing out that this is the only place the word shows up, suggests that *cadorn* might be derived from *cordon*:

Wir finden bei Mistral unter *cordo* »corde« auch die Bedeutung »vermille, corde garnie d'hameçons et de vers«. So ungefähr haben wir in V auch *cordon* aufzufassen, und man könnte nun etwa *cadorn* aus *cordon* (*crdon* > *cardon* und, durch Metathese oder Verkennung des Wortausgangs, > *cadorn*) ableiten wollen.¹²

⁶ Walter von Wartburg, *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Basel: Zbinden, 1958), 8. Band, p. 189. Wartburg is somewhat doubtful of this derivation and suggests that *pe* < *pedem* might be more appropriate.

⁷ »Deviations from the Troubadour Norm in the Language of Guillaume IX« in Hans-Erich Keller, *Studia Occitanica in memoriam Paul Remy* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Press, 1986), II, 352.

⁸ Jensen, »Deviations«, p. 353.

⁹ Camille Chabaneau, *Grammaire Limousine* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1876), p. 104.

¹⁰ Mildred K. Pope, *From Latin to Modern French* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1934), p. 220. Even if it is argued that Bernart lived a little before this period, it can easily be pointed out that phonological changes always proceed more rapidly than the orthographic.

¹¹ Lazar, p. 92.

¹² Bernart von Ventadorn, *seine Lieder, mit Einleitung und Glossar* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1915), pp. 71—72.

Assuming that *peis-peï* is ithyphallic by implication and that the bait is the lady's lovely *cors*, as does seem to be the case, would it be outside the realm of possibility that *cadorn* also might have an erotic undertone? We think not. Acknowledging that, down through the centuries, people have used various euphemisms for the more intimate parts of the body, permit us to suggest that this *cadorn* or »little cord« might well be a veiled reference to that part of the lady's *cors* which is homologous to the phallus or *peis*. Given the erotic ambiance of these verses, this suggestion would appear to be logical and perhaps even ineluctable.

To back up our argument, let us look briefly at two images found in Guillaume IX. In »Campanho, tant ai agutz d'avol conres«, we find v. 5: »No m'azauta cons gardatz ni gorcs ses peis.«¹³ To the lubricious troubadour, guarded *cons* would hardly be pleasing since they are being guarded against all *membra virilia*, including his own. The »gorcs ses peis« would seem to be an imaged repetition of the same idea. The fishpond, this moist hole in the ground, could well be interpreted as a symbol for the *cons*. In that case, »ses peis« would mean, not only »without fish«, but more symbolically and more significantly »without phalli«, *peis* being the plural of *pei*. Is it for nothing that one folk motif involves conception from eating fish?¹⁴ In another *canço*, »Farai un vers, pos mi somelh«, Guillaume IX. describes a sexual adventure with two willing wives: »Ueit jorns ez encar mais estei / En aquel forn.«¹⁵ It is unmistakable that in this circumstance the troubadour is referring to sexual heat. Could not one understand the *forn* or »hot oven« as being a yonic symbol? It does seem likely. And even though Bernart operates on a more refined level, it would appear probable that, in the final analysis, the heat so prevalent in v. 12 of »Be m'an perdut . . .« is not really any less carnal: »que art plus fort, no'm feira focs de forn«. The soul of the poet may be enkindled more deeply, but his flesh is not any less incandescent. One recalls J. D. Burnley's scholarly investigation of *fin* as in *fin'amors*:

... it can also be used... as an intensifier to indicate vehemence of feeling or desire.¹⁶

Not unlike the medieval attitude toward leprosy, the troubadours considered love an *ignis sacer*, a *feu saint*,¹⁷ the purpose of which was to enable the sufferer to gain greater merit.¹⁸

What we have said does not in the least detract from Bernart de Ventadorn's reputation as »le divin chantre du bel amour«.¹⁹ Hopefully what we

¹³ Alfred Jeanroy, ed., *Les Chansons de Guillaume IX, duc d'Aquitaine* (Paris: Champion, 1967), p. 5.

¹⁴ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1935), V, 304. I hesitate to bring up *Moby Dick*, but recent criticism has suggested that the Great White Whale, a sperm whale by the way, is a gigantic phallic symbol swimming around in an ocean of primordial passion.

¹⁵ Jeanroy, p. 12, vv. 77–78.

¹⁶ »Fine Amor: Its Meaning and Content,« *The Review of English Studies*, 122, XXXI (May 1980), 133.

¹⁷ Lawrence Wright, »Burning' and Leprosy in Old French,« *Medium Aevum*, 1, XVI (1987), 104.

¹⁸ Wright, p. 105.

¹⁹ Billet, p. 173.

have accomplished is to point out that beneath the apparent simplicity²⁰ of his *trobar leu* lies a complex network of sensual nuances. The lack of grossness does not mean that Bernart has left his body behind. On the contrary, the erotic is far from being absent as we have seen in the phallic and yonic symbols: *peis*, *cadorn*, *forn*. The subtlety of his expression makes the difference. The *cansos* of Bernart de Ventadorn incarnate the quintessence of romance: desire. Not his the sputtering flame of the uncultivated rustic, but rather the rarefied fire of a *fin amans*. The alert reader will not be insensitive to the delicate erotic of this poetry of refined passion.

²⁰ Georges Tardieu, »Thèmes et Motifs Communs au Poète Ventadour et au Roi de Navarre Thibault de Champagne«, *Bulletin de la Société des Lettres, Sciences et Arts de Corrèze*, LXXXV (1982), 149.