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## A “Game of words”: Why were “insult *tensos*” performed in Occitan Courts?

### Abstract

What was the purpose of insulting, aggressive exchanges between nobles and joglars/troubadours in the Occitan courts? Why should nobles have allowed themselves to be reviled by their social inferiors and then appear to demean themselves by answering their opponent? There are many early examples of personal public attacks in theatrical conditions, dating at least from Greek times. Several possible reasons are suggested in regard to these Occitan *tensos* and four works are examined in order to elucidate the problem. Some study has been made of the social and economic status of the nobles and how they may have been viewed by their contemporaries at the time these *tensos* were performed to determine whether there was a political or social purpose to these exchanges.

### Keywords

There are a number of Occitan *tensos* between nobles and *joglar*/troubadours which are of a very insulting nature with seemingly aggressive exchanges. Why should lords have allowed themselves to be insulted in the courts by their social inferiors and then appear to demean themselves by answering their opponent? There are several possible explanations.

First, as argued by Jeanroy the very genre of the *tenso* probably arose from the *joglars'* habit of exchanging dramatic, humorous verses of a satirical nature or which appear to ridicule the opponent in front of the public in order to draw a crowd to their performance.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the *joglars* themselves probably had a tradition of hostile, defamatory exchanges, which could in part explain their willingness to use the same tactics in front of a courtly audience. Jeanroy also considered that exchanges of *sirventes* influenced the development of the genre: the *sirventes* were generally personal attacks on someone named or a comment or satire on current events, personal *sirventes* usually taking the form of a list of insults.<sup>2</sup> Such *sirventes* would sometimes provoke a response, especially if the person addressed was himself a composer of verses.<sup>3</sup> This aspect of comedy is very ancient, since 'the characters of many extant Greek comedies indulge in liberal and often obscene abuse both of each other and of

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Jeanroy, *La Poésie lyrique des troubadours*, 2 vols (Toulouse: Edouard Privat; Paris: Henri Didier, 1934), II, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> *La Poésie lyrique*, II, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> *La Poésie lyrique*, II, pp. 248-9.

real contemporaries. Aristotle took it for granted that comic poets would use slanderous and indecent language'.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that insulting *tensos* represented an acceptable form of humour to their contemporaries. Adam de la Halle's *Le Jeu de la Feuillée*, first performed in 1276 in Arras,<sup>5</sup> is a French example of medieval theatrical satire of members of a contemporary group, although, unlike the Occitan *tensos*, it is situated in local, urban, bourgeois society. It is assumed that the characters represented in *Le Jeu* were present at its performance and that they accepted seeing themselves lampooned in front of the townspeople – it is even considered possible that they played their own parts.<sup>6</sup> Therefore comic satirical performances directed at members of the audience or at those on stage were not unknown in Europe at the time of the *tensos*.

What did two troubadours/*joglers* talk about when they exchanged defamatory verses? They used insults regarding the person of their opponents, the women with whom they associated, and their personal habits.<sup>7</sup> They also made accusations of becoming drunk in taverns, playing dice, frequenting prostitutes and of having a degenerate appearance, as in the piece *Magret, pojat m'es el cap* (PC 231,3 = 223,5)<sup>8</sup> involving Guillem Rainol d'At, whose *vida* says he was a knight and a good troubadour of *sirventes*,<sup>9</sup> and Guillem Magret, said in his *vida* to be a *joglar*, a good composer of *sirventes* and *coblas*, and to have frequented the taverns where he lost his money at gaming.<sup>10</sup> Another exchange of insults between troubadours/*joglers* is a *tenso* between Taurel and Falconet (neither of whom are really identifiable), *Falconet, de Guillalmona* (PC 438,1 = 148,2), possibly composed in northern Italy c. 1214. Taurel criticises the woman the other is supposed to love and is in turn disparaged for his cowardice in battle. The piece contains a number of allusions to historical events which cannot be identified.<sup>11</sup> These are exchanges between equals, or so it appears, but the matter of insults and abuse is more intriguing when a noble and a troubadour/*joglar* are involved, since we might expect their exchanges to be of a different nature.

Léglu proposes two functions of 'manipulation of invective and direct attack in poetry', first the desire to provoke a response and secondly to control. She suggests that control

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle *Poetics*, ed. by Malcolm Heath, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. lxii.

<sup>5</sup> Adam de La Halle, *Le Jeu de la Feuillée*, trans. by Jean Dufournet (Paris: Flammarion, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Normand R. Cartier, *Le Bossu désenchanté: Etude sur le Jeu de la Feuillée* (Geneva: Droz, 1971), p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> *La Poésie lyrique*, II, p. 252.

<sup>8</sup> Fritz Naudieth, 'Der Trobador Guillem Magret', *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*, 52 (1914), pp. 81-144., 136-40.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Boutière and A.-H. Schutz, *Biographies des troubadours* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1964), pp. 495-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Biographies*, pp. 492.

<sup>11</sup> V. De Bartholomaeis, 'Tenson de Taurel et de Falconet', *Annales de Midi*, XVIII (1906), pp. 172-195.

may be done by inspiring shame in the addressee but not necessarily action, for example through lampooning. Alternatively, the insult creates a feeling of superiority in the audience, when aspects it perceives as negative are projected onto the addressee, for example in the process of scapegoating. [...] If these two functions are combined, the purpose of insult songs emerges as a competition with the aim of symbolically defeating the opponent through the manipulation and projection of traits agreed by the social group to be negative.<sup>12</sup>

Léglu's comments support Riquer's belief that the *tensos* reflect the customs of knightly jousts in which a winner must be declared<sup>13</sup> – a point which is driven home by the frequent requests for judges. Aurell likens the *tenso* insult works to 'Shouting Matches' practised by certain societies as a ceremonial form of avoiding actual military confrontation; he sees the context of the insult *tensos* as aggressive, but with the function of verbally channelling the inherent violence of the opponents who may detest one another – or *joglars* who may speak on behalf of their patrons, thus representing such feelings for them.<sup>14</sup>

Did the insults exchanged in *tensos* relate to real events or gossip concerning the personal situation or character of the participant(s) on the receiving end in order to bite and serve a purpose? As Bergson suggested, comedy is usually related to the customs and ideas, or rather the prejudices, of a given society and 'en règle générale ce sont bien les défauts de l'autrui qui nous font rire, – quitte à ajouter, il est vrai, que ces défauts nous font rire en raison de leur *insociabilité* plutôt que de leur *immoralité*'.<sup>15</sup> Some insult *tensos* must have been 'looking for laughs' for effect, but it would seem that others were truly personal attacks on the opponent, for example the *tenso* (discussed below) between Gui de Cavaillon and Falco (PC 192.2a = 147.2). Nevertheless, if some impromptu composition was involved, *tensos*, unlike an exchange of *sirventes* or *coblas*, were not likely to have been prepared with time for too much reflection, so it must be assumed that the participants were ready to face their opponent and accept the insults thrown at them in front of their public, admitting at the outset the possibility that the humour involved might turn against them. In regard to this 'game' of insulting humour, Aurell proposes that 'le rire ridiculise l'interlocuteur, très souvent un adversaire politique',<sup>16</sup> which follows the same line of thinking as Léglu's theory of control mentioned above.

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine Léglu, 'A Reading of Troubadour Insult Songs: the *Comunals* Cycle', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 22 (1996), pp. 63-83., pp. 63-4.

<sup>13</sup> Martin de Riquer, *Los Trovadores: historia, literaria y textos, Letras e ideas, second edn, 3 vols* (Barcelona: Studia, 1992), 1, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Aurell, *La Vielle et l'épée: Troubadours et politique en Provence au XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1989), pp. 88-91.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire : Essai sur la signification du comique*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Aurell, 'Le troubadour Gui de Cavaillon (vers 1175-vers 1229): un acteur nobiliaire de la croisade albigeoise', *Les voies de l'hérésie: le groupe aristocratique en Languedoc (XIe-XIIIe siècles)*, *Actes de la 8e session d'histoire médiévale du Centre d'Études Cathares, Couiza, 1995*, 2 (2001), pp. 9-36. (p.11).

The genre of the *sirventes* is inherently that of satire and criticism, many works containing provocative accusations against nobles. The two *sirventes* of Bertran de Born directed at Alphonse II of Aragon, *Pos lo gens terminis floritz* (PC 80,32) and *Quan vei pels vergiers desplegar* (PC 80,85), are examples of vituperative insults directed at someone of high rank from a lesser noble. Bertran had personal grievances against the king and his dislike of Alphonse has been described as ‘blind and bitter hatred’,<sup>17</sup> so these *sirventes* were serious in intent and politically motivated, used by Bertran as weapons against Alphonse<sup>18</sup> The king never replied to any of the calumnies of Bertran, whose account of events has been described as unreliable.<sup>19</sup> The attempt to slur the reputation and character of an opponent in this way can also apply to *tensos*. Nevertheless, although many *sirventes* and some *tensos* are strong verbal attacks on persons of high social rank and even if Jeanroy was correct in thinking that the genre of the *tenso* arose from the *sirventes*, too close a comparison cannot be made since only *tensos* are necessarily exchanges between participants probably performing in public.

Two works involving insults between a lord and a troubadour/*joglar* are those between Bona-fe and Blacatz (PC 98,1 = 97,10 and PC 98,2 = 97,11). Blacatz (1195-1239), lord of Aups in Provence, was a patron of troubadours and debated on several occasions. His character is not easy to define from the corpus of works remaining or from historical evidence. The *vida* talks of his generosity, courtesy and bravery, but both Isarn d'Entrevennes and Bona-fe accuse him of avarice<sup>20</sup> and Sordel also makes the same accusation in a *sirventes*, *Non pueis mudar qan luecs es* (PC 437,21). The latter, however, wrote a *planh* on the death of Blacatz in which he says that he has lost a good lord and friend and that all noble qualities have perished with his death, *Planher volh En Blacatz en aquest leugier so* (PC 437,24). Bec comments that 'ce célèbre *planh* est en réalité un pur *sirventes*. La déploration funèbre proprement dite ne dépasse pas la première *cobla*: tout le reste n'est qu'une satire, d'une rare violence, contre la lâcheté de certains princes européens.<sup>21</sup> It is likely therefore that the *planh* was a pretext to put across the other message rather than an expression of sorrow on the loss of Blacatz. Nothing is known of Bona-fe, who was probably a *joglar*, apart from the comments made about him by Blacatz in these two *tensos*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> L. E. Kastner, 'Bertran de Born's Sirventes Against King Alphonso of Aragon', *Modern Philology*, 34 (1937), pp. 225-248, 225-48 (p. 228).

<sup>18</sup> Martin de Riquer, 'La littérature provençale à la cour d'Alphonse II d'Aragon', *Cahiers de Civilisation médiévale*, 2 (1959), pp. 177-201. (p. 188).

<sup>19</sup> 'Bertran de Born's *Sirventes*' (p. 234).

<sup>20</sup> *La Vielle*, pp. 84-85

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bec, *Nouvelle anthologie de la lyrique occitane du Moyen Âge* (Editions Aubanel, 1970), p.270-43.

<sup>22</sup> PC 98,1 = 97,10: *A Critical Edition of the Medieval Occitan 'Tensos' and 'Partimens'*, ed. by Ruth E. Harvey and Linda Paterson, 3 vols (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009 (forthcoming)).

Both pieces were probably composed about the same time and are likely to date from Blacatz's youth.<sup>23</sup> If they are previous to the death of Blacatz's father, it is probable that Blacatz did not have a court of his own at the time and that they took place in the court of some other noble. Blacatz's comment that any nobleman tolerating Bona-fe in his court was committing a vile deed (ll. 33-4 of PC 98,2 = 97,11) implies that they are guests of someone else. This remark could have been meant as a criticism of the lord in whose court they were exchanging these lines and of whoever had incited Bona-fe to begin the two exchanges, as well as an indication that the *joglar* would not be welcomed in his own court, if he had one. From the little we know of him, Blacatz appears to have been a sociable person, perhaps considered to be a 'good sport' ready to spar with *joglars* in debates and, as seen in these works, at times he was prepared to use earthy language. The jousting element which was probably important to many nobles who debated is well defined by Aurell and would have given Blacatz a good reason to take part in a competitive exchange:

le dialogue en vers est un exercice de style qui se présente comme une joute oratoire. Le savoir-faire rhétorique, l'agilité mentale et l'ironie incisive font briller en société. Les plus experts des troubadours écrasent leurs adversaires par leurs mots d'esprit.<sup>24</sup>

Opportunities to forge a reputation for himself and to shine in society (which could be politically useful) may have been attractive, and even irresistible, to Blacatz. As suggested by Gaunt, linguistic skills and the ability to compose would have been admired and 'the poem is a symbol of virility which enables the poet to assert his masculinity'.<sup>25</sup>

The two pieces are similar in content, consisting mainly of accusations against Blacatz and insults made in return to the *joglar*. It must be supposed that Bona-fe, who opened both, was intending to provoke Blacatz and amuse the assembled company and clearly Blacatz, the noble, who uses the same vulgar tone as his opponent, was ready to enter the game. In fact, neither of these works is really a *tenso* (or *partimen*) – they are purely exchanges of insults, since no question is asked, the participants do not answer the comments made by the other, nobody is said to have won and no judge is proposed.

In *Seigne'N Blacaz, pos per tot vos fail' barata* (PC 98,1 = 97,10)<sup>26</sup>, Bona-fe begins by saying that the 'genz hermitana' (l. 2) are calling on God to punish Blacatz. Presumably, he is referring to monks living in a monastery, so it would seem that Blacatz has done them some

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<sup>23</sup> *La Vielle*, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> 'Le troubadour Gui de Cavaillon. (p. 20).

<sup>25</sup> Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 149.

wrong, perhaps either by not making an expected donation or by attempting to take some land from them. Blacatz was a wild young man and had actually attacked and damaged ecclesiastical institutions, causing trouble on the roads of Provence before the death of his father, Blacatz d'Aups. On inheriting his father's large territory he came to the court of Alphonse I to ask for pardon in view of the many services his father had rendered and swore allegiance to the Count in war, subsequently paying homage to the young Alphonse II.<sup>27</sup> These details would partly explain the accusations made by Bona-fe in these two works and thus justify Aurell's conclusion that they were composed when Blacatz was young. Bona-fe suggests that Blacatz has many enemies – if the facts concerning his rowdy behaviour are accurate, this could well have been true – and that his own archers have fled home to Aups where the larder is empty, literally, that there is no meat left in the meat store (ll. 7-8). The inference is obviously that Blacatz is unable to pay his men to fight for him; a further accusation of poverty (or at least lack of *largueza* from Blacatz), is made in stanza III where Bona-fe accuses him of falling on such hard times that he has had to pawn his wife's cloak in order to eat and thus she no longer has any fine clothes to wear.<sup>28</sup> He then mentions Aiol (l. 4), to demonstrate Blacatz's situation. The naming of Aiol by Bona-fe is of interest (as obviously the *joglar* was aware of the story and expected those present to know what he was referring to. Aiol is the hero of a *chanson de geste* in Picard. His father's lands in France had been unjustly taken from him and after many adventures Aiol recovers his father's territory. Early in the story Aiol arrives in Poitiers looking poverty-stricken on an old horse and is mocked for his miserable appearance by the inhabitants of the town. Bona-fe certainly chose to mention Aiol assuming that the audience would understand the comparison with Blacatz, since he tells Blacatz at the outset that wealth is hidden from him, thus setting the tone of his attack by accusing the other of being penniless. As if the other had not even spoken, Blacatz tells Bona-fe that he has no scales on his eyes, his hair is white and wooly and he has been punished for theft. In stanza IV, Blacatz says that due to his blindness, people give Bona-fe a turd instead of a fruit, a hound in place of a hare, mislead him as to his whereabouts and give him disgusting things to drink instead of soup and wine. In stanza V the *joglar* mentions a truce and once again speaks of hermits as well as Templars. There are no records to show what truce is being referred to, but it probably relates to local fighting in the area. The repetition of the anger of the hermit folk certainly makes it seem that this is a direct reference to recent events involving a monastery or monasteries. By saying that many a sheep had

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<sup>26</sup> PC 98,1 = 97,10: *A Critical Edition*.

<sup>27</sup> *La Vielle*, p. 78-9.

<sup>28</sup> We know that he was married to Laure, the daughter of Bonifaci de Castellane. For the family tree of Blacatz: *La Vielle*, p. 80.

pissed down his neck (l. 36), Bona-fe accuses Blacatz of stealing sheep, implying that he has not only taken lands from the monasteries but their sheep too (the suggestion being that he had carried them away on his shoulder) but we do not know whether it can be taken literally that Blacatz himself rustled sheep. There is a *sirventes*, *S'ieu trovava mon compair' en Blacatz* (PC 106,24) composed by Cadenet in which he says that if Blacatz does not mend his ways and make peace with Jesus Christ he will end up in Hell after his death. As Kemp-Pfister comments 'les deux premières strophes portent un avertissement moral à l'adresse du seigneur Blacatz'.<sup>29</sup> It can be supposed that the exchanges with Bona-fe took place during Blacatz's wild young days and that his misdeeds were common knowledge and talked of. Blacatz replies to these accusations with another series of insults on Bona-fe and his inability to see. In stanza VII, the *joglar's* states that Blacatz has no money to give and lives on scraps, to which Blacatz's final insult, addressed to 'N'Orbacha',<sup>30</sup> saying that it looks as if tree-creepers have nested in his belfry (ll. 53-5) probably means either that his eye-sockets resemble rats' nests or that his mind is muddled. The only true response to Bona-fe is thrown in by Blacatz at the very end of the exchange when he says that he is able to give to anyone who asks (l. 56). It may literally be said that he has the last word here by attempting to defend himself against accusations of poverty and the inability to practice *largueza*.

Since there are no records of Bona-fe, whose only surviving works are these two *tenso*s, and unless the name is a *senhal* for a known performer, we must rely on the content of these pieces to form an opinion of him. Blacatz insinuates in *Seingne'N Blacatz, talant ai que vos queira* (PC 98,2 = 97,11) that the *joglar* had been blinded by a noble as a punishment, perhaps as a result of theft at a fair as mentioned in the *tenso*. How could Blacatz appear to know so much about the personal life of an apparently miserable *joglar*? Maybe Bona-fe had some function in the court where the debates took place and was not just a passing performer, so Blacatz had heard speak of him.<sup>31</sup> It would seem unlikely that a noble would bother to listen to gossip about a *joglar* unless there was talk around him of the matter at the time. Having no other information about Bona-fe's blindness, it must be assumed that the insults represent some truth, that the *joglar* had indeed lost his sight and was probably in a wretched condition. It was not unknown for a lord to have someone mutilated. Aurell talks of the 'cruauté des cours judiciaires des seigneurs laïques de Provence' and gives examples of severe

<sup>29</sup> Josef Zemp-Pfister, *Les poésies du troubadour Cadenet* (Bern, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1977), p. 358.

<sup>30</sup> Literally 'Sir Blind Man' (E. Levy, *Petit Dictionnaire Provençal-Français* (1909), p. 269.)

<sup>31</sup> Paden proposes that some *joglars* might have been given minor employment in the courts, such as gatekeeper, as compensation for performing: William D. Paden, 'The Role of the Joglar in Troubadour Lyric Poetry', in *Chrétien de Troyes and the Troubadours: Essays in Memory of the Late Leslie Topsfield*, ed. by Peter S. Noble and Linda M. Paterson, (Cambridge: St. Catherine's College, 1984), pp. 90-111.



punishments meted out.<sup>32</sup> Blacatz raises the same subjects as in the first piece, by talking of Bona-fe stealing at a fair for which he has been branded on the forehead and suggests that the *joglar* is led by a rope, although he does not say by whom. If these facts were not true, the remarks would be somewhat ridiculous, so it is probable that this was Bonafe's real state.

By constantly insisting on the *joglar's* inability to see and on his abject state, Blacatz must be hoping to make him appear unreliable and stupid thus deflecting Bona-fe's comments on himself. Bona-fe, however, is not thrown by the lord's obvious dismissal of him as a reliable witness and continues along the same lines – possibly, he was put up to this by other people present. Aristocrats generally obtained riches in the form of booty from battle and were subsequently able to be generous. Thus by criticising Blacatz's poverty Bona-fe is suggesting that he is unable to fight nobly and acquire the necessary wealth to practise *largueza*.<sup>33</sup> Maybe he had not been as generous as the *joglars* would have liked him to be in the court where they were debating and this *tenso* highlights that for everyone present. Blacatz is presented by Bona-fe as a poor warrior, a braggart and a poverty-stricken miser who hoards his money. Although we cannot judge all aspects of Blacatz's personality, the characteristic of boasting, is mentioned on more than one occasion, so it may be an indication of his true nature – or at least of the persona he dons in his compositions.

Bona-fe opens *SeingneN Blacatz, talant ai que vos queira* (PC 98,2 = 97,11) by telling Blacatz that he wants him to give him some land, including the fief of Guillem de Barriera, which would then make Blacatz as worthy as Sir Raimon Oblacheira, but neither of these men has been identified – or they may not have even existed – so the implication is lost on us. Perhaps he is referring to territory which Blacatz may have taken from someone of this name. Blacatz makes personal insults in regard to his opponent without replying to Bona-fe's accusations. He ironically addresses the *joglar* as 'En Bona-fe', until the last stanza, when he merely uses his name. By telling him in stanza II that the man who blinded him was a true gentleman and making a similar remark about his attitude to crippled beggars as in the previous *tenso*, Blacatz shows his contempt for the miserable situation of his opponent. Bona-fe's claims in stanza III that Blacatz is feared at night, comparing him to a thief or a den of wolves, resemble his accusation in the previous piece that Blacatz had stolen sheep. These repeated accusations suggest again that the works took place not long after the events being

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<sup>32</sup> *La Vielle*, pp. 87-8.

<sup>33</sup> *La Vielle*, p. 86.

referred to. Bona-fe talks of an attack at La Cadière (l. 15), which may have been an unrecorded skirmish, returning here too to the hermit people and the Hospitaliers (l. 17) claiming that they are aware of Blacatz's poverty, so he continues to stress the supposed poor financial situation of the noble. Bona-fe mentions Blacatz's 'latest lady' (l. 25) whom he likens to a *soldadiera*, saying that she is old and wealthy. The word *soldadiera* has been translated as 'trollop'<sup>34</sup> and whatever its context it is generally taken to mean a woman of loose morals, so its use would have been defamatory. He does not say that she was in fact a *soldadiera* – the word may have been used as an insult in the same manner that 'pute' might be used in French today to insult a woman without actually meaning that she was a prostitute. According to the same translation she is an 'excellent raiser of cattle' (l. 28 'bona norrigueira') and she makes cheese. Maybe she is a landowner with cows or sheep. Aurell has assumed that Bona-fe is talking about Blacatz's wife and has understood l. 28 to mean that she feeds him well. However, Laure de Castellane came from a family hardly richer than Blacatz's own which does not justify claiming that he had married her for her money. It seems surprising that Bona-fe would go so far as to compare Blacatz's wife with a *soldadiera*. It is more probable that he is talking of Blacatz's mistress or of an older woman who is supposed to be having a relationship with Blacatz and perhaps giving him money.<sup>35</sup> These are all assumptions, however, and it is equally possible that there was no truth whatsoever in these lines and that they were merely an attempt to smear Blacatz's character. Blacatz does not comment on the woman but finishes again on a vulgar note.

The principal interest of these exchanges is that there are two and that they use similar themes. Blacatz is accused of avarice and the *joglar* insulted on his physical appearance and way of life. The personal references are now obscure although the audience was probably well aware of their meaning; without contemporary records to give us valid clues it is no longer possible to understand all the implications. Soltau expresses surprise at 'such a noble lord' debating in this manner with a *joglar* who is not of the 'best kind'. He refers to Jeanroy's comment that *tensos* are not truly aggressive and that 'le fait seul de poser une question sous une forme poétique ou d'accepter cette forme pour y répondre prouve qu'il n'y a pas entre les interlocuteurs de véritable hostilité',<sup>36</sup> but Soltau disagrees with this assumption and proposes that the works were performed after too much wine.<sup>37</sup> This is not a satisfactory answer either, as it is unlikely that they took place the same evening, so this does not really solve the puzzle

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<sup>34</sup> *A Critical Edition*

<sup>35</sup> *La Vielle*, p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> Alfred Jeanroy, 'La tenson provençale', *Annales du Midi*, 2 (1890), pp. 281-304; 441-262. (p. 456).

as to why the noble would have been ready to take part in a second exchange of the same kind. It is likely that Blacatz was young and did not take life very seriously.

Interestingly, the next *tenso* also appears to involve a troubadour/*joglar* who has been maimed. He seems to have lost his tongue and his opponent insinuates that it was a deliberate act. The manuscript for this piece only gives the names of the participants as Falco and Gui. Gui, identified as Gui de Cavaillon,<sup>38</sup> was a Provençal lord who was a knight at the court of Alphonse II of Provence; on the death of the Count he retired to his lands, but then joined the Count of Toulouse and fought loyally first with Raimond VI and then with Raimond VII, during the Albigensian Crusade. At the end of his life, he lost his money and most of his lands. The identity of Falco, who, according to the information gleaned from this work, was probably a troubadour/*joglar*, is unknown. He may have been the same person as the *joglar* Falconet<sup>39</sup> who exchanged a *tenso* with another *joglar* named as Faure, *En Falconet be•m platz car etz vengutz* (PC 149,1 = 148,1) in which the participants appear to respect Gui de Cavaillon, but attack various members of the Baux family who were Gui's enemies, having destroyed his castle and taken some of his land.<sup>40</sup> The accusation by Falco in the present work that Gui has no money would imply that the piece is posterior to his having lost his estates. Since there is mention of a Count Alphonse who has been Gui's protector and who has armed him, this is probably a reference to Alphonse II, Count of Provence. Jones suggests that the *tenso* is unlikely to have been written before 1209 (date of Alphonse's death), since in stanza VI. Falco says 'del comte don enquer vos sove', which could mean that the Count was dead.<sup>41</sup>

*Falco, en dire mal* (PC 192,2a = 147,2) is an exchange of mutual insults, each participant trying to outdo the other in front of an audience. Gui opens by asking why Falco, whom he identifies as an ordained monk, has left the monastery, saying that he has heard ill of him, but Falco never answers this question. Therefore, in this piece, as in the case of the two works between Bona-fe and Blacatz, each has his say but the expected form of a *tenso* is not followed; there is no dilemma posed, in this case merely a personal question asked to open the exchange. The only occasion where any kind of answer is given is when Gui tells Falco in stanza III that it is right that a marquis has had his tongue cut out and Falco replies that he

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<sup>37</sup> Otto Soltau, 'Die Werke des Trobadors Blacatz', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 23 (1899), 201-248 (pp. 214-5).

<sup>38</sup> Andrea Brusoni, 'Problèmes d'attribution dans le chansonnier de Gui de Cavaillon', *Bulletins de l'Association internationale d'Etudes occitanes*, numéro 14, 14 (1998), pp. 25-29., 25-9 (p. 25).

<sup>39</sup> David J. Jones, *La Tenson provençale* (Paris: 1934), *La Tenson provençale*, p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> 'Le troubadour Gui de Cavaillon'. (pp. 24-7).

would rather be cut than touched by the other's axe (ll. 38-40). Gui's remark shows the same attitude to the *joglar's* condition as that shown by Blacatz to Bona-fe. However, it is not surprising that nobles at the time took this approach to punishments given to others of lesser social status. Falco's reply to Gui's opening stanza is an accusation of poverty, a statement that the lord's household live on ill-gotten gains and he says that Count Alfonsfo has given him expensive 'accoutrements'. In stanza V, Gui implies that the *joglar* is destitute and in a pitiful state. Gui adds that after being maimed, Falco had returned to the hospital, so perhaps Falco returned to the monastery to be cared for by his brother monks, but that the lure of the taverns and life outside the monastery had been too great, as implied by Gui. It seems that Falco has really had his tongue cut out, but the marquis who is supposed to have had Falco punished in this way is not identified, neither is the cause of the act. If this is not some metaphorical allusion, but a reality, Falco could no longer have been a *joglar* who recited texts. He could, of course, still have performed other acts sometimes associated with *joglar's* such as dancing, mime or acrobatics. However, one might imagine that the loss of his 'working instrument', that is to say his tongue, would have made such a profession extremely difficult to maintain. Thus, if Falco were speechless, he would have had to at least scribble his responses for another person to recite them. Since Gui tells us that Falco had been an ordained monk, it is feasible that he could read and write. If the piece had been composed in advance, Gui could have read both parts, but it is difficult to imagine that he would personally have recited insults to himself. In fact, assuming that the participants had composed together before the work was presented to an audience, each would have been aware of the other's text and Gui would have presumably been in a position to withdraw – the fact that he does not do so suggests that a type of humour is involved which he is prepared to accept. This may conceivably be true of all the verbal dialogues, but it is impossible to verify whether there was any close collusion between participants of *tensos*. There is always the possibility that Falco, as a troubadour, had a *joglar* to perform his compositions or that one had been assigned to him on this occasion. In stanza IV, Falco says:

Senher Guy, c'ad un pal  
degratz estre crematz  
per los mortals peccatz  
44 c'avetz fatz far ancse:

(Lord Gui, for you ought to be burnt at a stake for the deadly sins you have so often caused to be committed)<sup>42</sup>

Falco's taunt is interesting. Although this work has not been definitely dated it was probably composed in the early days of the Albigensian Crusade. Pierre de Castelnau was assassinated

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<sup>41</sup> *La Tenson provençale*, p.86

<sup>42</sup> *A Critical Edition*.

in January 1209 and Raimond VI, Count of Toulouse, was suspected of being involved; the Count joined the crusaders against the heretics in 1209 in an attempt to save his territory. Béziers was taken by the crusaders in July of the same year and the population massacred; Carcassonne followed the same fate in November. Having been excommunicated for a second time in 1211 and unable to come to terms with the Pope, Raimond VI rallied the Midi against the French from that time onwards. Many heretics were burned between 1210 and 1213 and Falco and Gui may have been debating during this period. Gui was a close and faithful ally of the Counts of Toulouse, definitely known to have been among the followers of the Count by 1215.<sup>43</sup> The suggestion by Falco that Gui should be burned at the stake could well be an oblique reference to those who might have gone to their death in this way partly as a result of Gui's earlier actions.

Falco terminates by stating that Gui had never cared for the interests of his brothers-in-law who were in need, although he had been knighted and received gifts from Count Alphonse; he adds that Gui's sister had had many an unbridled palfrey thanks to the Count (ll 70-2). It is curious that he should say this after suggesting that Gui had not helped his brothers-in-law. The Count may have given gifts, such as horses, direct to the sister or Gui may have done so as a result of the Count's generosity. Perhaps this was an "off-the-cuff" comment by Falco with no reference to anything specific, but it could also be an accusation regarding the sister. The metaphor of mounting a horse to denote the sexual act is well known from the time of Guilhem IX's *Compahno, farai un vers...covinen* (PC 183,3).<sup>44</sup> Possibly, the unbridled horse represents a lover to be tamed and that Falco is insinuating that the sister had lovers from the Count's court or even the Count himself. A slur on Gui's family would have been insulting.

Since this work is in the same vein as the two *tenso*s discussed above between Bona-fe and Blacatz, it raises some questions. Were insults regarding the physical disabilities of those socially inferior common from nobles? Was a lord who had fallen on hard times susceptible to insults rather than pity whatever his loyalties? Both cases seem likely. Aurell states that 'plusieurs troubadours ont raillé la déchéance de Gui de Cavaillon dans les poèmes qui reflètent l'attitude méprisante du milieu aristocratique à l'égard de ses membres connaissant des difficultés matérielles'.<sup>45</sup> Since this *tenso* was presumably performed in a court, the audience may have found it appropriate for Falco to take such a tone. As *largueza* was

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<sup>43</sup> 'Le troubadour Gui de Cavaillon. (p. 21).

<sup>44</sup> J-C. Payen, *Le Prince d'Aquitaine. Essai sur Guillaume IX, son oeuvre et son érotique* (Paris: Champion, 1980).

<sup>45</sup> 'Le troubadour Gui de Cavaillon (p. 30).

considered by troubadours to form an essential component of the courtly image of the noble, the lack of it, or the inability to be generous, was therefore despicable. Since Gui is regarded as being poor, he has lost the status of a courtly man, thus permitting the *joglar* to take advantage of this situation by insulting and criticising him, as may have also been the case between Bona-fe and Blacatz. This approach may explain the aggressiveness of the insults in works such as the present one. Brusoni has described Gui as 'un homme singulier, capable de descendre dans l'arène de la *tenson* avec les armes et avec la poésie',<sup>46</sup> which, as already suggested, was probably the case of Blacatz too.

The general impression created by Gui that Falco frequents the taverns, that he is poor and of lowly social status may have been true, but it is also a manner of comparing one way of life to another, of attempting to denigrate the social situation of a troubadour/*joglar*. It certainly seems from these *tensos* involving personal insults that, unless the entire content of *tensos* is fictional (which on the whole it does not seem to be), those debating generally knew something of the personal life of their opponent.

The fourth insult *tenso* to be examined is between Bertran de Gourdon, who is certainly a lord although his precise identity is uncertain, and Peire Raimon de Toulouse who is also difficult to identify as there were several troubadour/*joglars* of that name. Since he is said to be 'de Toulouse' Harvey and Paterson suggest that he was the Bertran de Gourdon from Baziège, rather than the one from the Lot, Baziège being much closer to Toulouse. In addition this *tenso* borrows the versification of a Cadenet *canço*, *Ai, dousa flors ben olenz* (PC 106,5), making the Toulouse area likely because Cadenet was known to be at the court of Count Raimond VI c. 1200–20.<sup>47</sup> This exchange is therefore likely to have taken place some time during that period and it is probable that both the versification and the music were not only known to the participants but to the audience too.

Bertran, the noble, opens by insulting Peire Raimon's intelligence and dismissing his ability as being of no value in 'good society', presumably implying that he lacked skill as a troubadour and *joglar*; he says that he will no longer remunerate him. In reply, he is told that he is weak, cowardly and mean, and then Peire Raimon defends his profession. The lord now changes his

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<sup>46</sup> 'Problèmes d'attribution (p. 29).

<sup>47</sup> A *Critical Edition*. They also note that the structure and rhyme-endings of Cadenet's *canço* are used in a *partimen* between Eble and Gui d'Ussel, *Gui, e-us part mon esciens* (PC 129.3 = 194,10) and 'with the

tune totally and tells the troubadour that he is skilful, composes good songs and knows how to debate. As a result, he is praised and told that he is generous, courageous and noble. They both terminate by reversing their attitudes and exchange insults once again. Such an exchange resembles an 'exercice de style' rather than propounding important ideas.<sup>48</sup>

From Bertran's opening words it seems as if Peire Raimon had performed at his court (he is called *joglar* in l. 25) and received payment or gifts, has returned, perhaps to ask for more, and has been refused any further reward. Bertran refers to the Angevin denier (l. 3), which was minted in Angers and widely circulated in many regions during the time of Henry Plantagenet. It was one of several coins of various origins used at the time, including the 'esterlin' (sterling) which was minted in England.<sup>49</sup> Bertran's praise in stanza III suggests that Peire Raimon is a skilled troubadour and then it seems as if Bertran is suddenly at a loss, repeating earlier accusations without bringing in any new ideas. There is an indication that Peire Raimon sung in honour of Bertran in the court and now considers that he has not been sufficiently rewarded (l. 52-4). Presumably, this *tenso* has survived because the verse-form, and maybe the music, was popular. The subject would have been well understood by those present – haggling over payment for services rendered is an everlasting topic. However, it is noteworthy that the habitual accusation of the lack of *largueza* by the noble is an element of the insults made by the *joglar*. The work indicates that some discussions were related to very basic, down-to-earth subjects which may have amused the spectators.

The word *mestiers* (ll. 8, 14, 21) can be given a number of rather different meanings. It can mean trade or profession, but used with certain verbs can mean to have needs.<sup>50</sup> Its use in this composition suggests in stanza I that the lord refuses payment whatever the troubadour may be able to perform; in stanza II that Peire Raimon is defending the profession of a troubadour; and in stanza III it is a reference to the troubadour's repertoire, as Bertran has just praised his manner and then goes on to say that his songs are *gai*. It is of note that the troubadour illustrates great generosity in stanza IV by the wealth of Paris, when they are in the south. Paris was a rich city, larger than Toulouse or any other southern town, so may have represented immensity, wealth and greatness. In the same stanza, the troubadour praises the lord as loving *joi* and *joven*, which, of course, were both virtues to the troubadours in the

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additional refinement of alternation of the 'a' and 'e' rhymes' in a *sirventes* of Peire Cardenal', *Pos ma boca parla sens* (PC 335,41).

<sup>48</sup> PC 84,1 = 355,19: *A Critical Edition*.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Favier, *Les Plantagenêts: Origines et destin d'un empire XIe-XIVe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), pp. 445-51.

<sup>50</sup> Levy, *Petit Dictionnaire Provençal-Français.*, p. 247.

courts.

This *tenso* does not have any socio-political overtones, but was an entertainment which must have been tolerated both by the participants and their audience. The volte-face by both participants is a clear indication that the ludic aspect of the works, and perhaps the ability to compose and perform, were more important than the actual veracity of the subject matter. In such instances it seems evident that Erich Köhler's sociological readings cannot be applied too closely to the corpus of *tenso*s. Through his study of the arguments of the *tenso*s he proposed that their content indicated the cares of those in the courts particularly regarding their position in society and their desires to improve themselves, but the totally ludic attitude taken in pieces such as this suggests that such theories cannot be universally applied.

### **Conclusion**

From the four works examined, it can be seen that there is no rule regarding which participant should open. That is to say, the two works between Bona-fe and Blacatz are introduced by the *joglar*, whereas in the other two, the lord opens the debate. They all begin with an attack on the opponent, so it is likely that a riposte in the same vein was expected. This leads us to believe that all the participants were prepared to enter the arena and 'use fisticuffs'.

We began by asking first of all why lords allowed themselves to be insulted in the courts by their social inferiors. It probably would have been difficult for someone such as Blacatz or Gui de Cavaillon, known to be adept at composing, to refuse to take part in a *tenso*. As seen above, there are several kinds of insult works, which may not all have been composed for the same purpose. It is probable that the participants were generally encouraged to take part by someone else and one of them may have been asked to antagonise the other in an attempt to cause him to lose face. Who might have put them in this situation? On some occasions, the lord in whose court both the noble and the *joglar* were guests may have done so and as their host he was able to impose his wishes. Since it is not known precisely where most of the debates occurred we cannot ascertain whether or not the nobles in these works were guests of somebody who was of more importance than themselves, but this may have sometimes been the case and then perhaps not only the *joglar* but the noble too was obliged to do as he was asked. One might suppose that if a *joglar* insulted his host in his own court he would not receive payment from him – although possibly some of the guests would have been delighted to pay for the performance.



Some pieces, such as the one between Bertran de Gourdon and Peire Raimon de Toulouse were likely to have been nothing more than an entertainment for the participants and their audience, but others, such as the work between Gui de Cavaillon and Falco, may have been genuine attacks on individuals with attempts to show weaknesses on the part of a lord, sometimes in quite a vicious manner. Thiolier-Méjean has pointed out that ‘dans l’éthique médiévale, l’art de louer et de blâmer occupe une place dont l’importance n’est plus à démontrer’.<sup>51</sup> Both the participants and the audience may therefore have been ready to accept such blame as an inherent part of the art of rhetoric. As Thiolier-Méjean has noted, from the twelfth century onwards the lord was often criticised in satirical and moral works, the principal complaint being that he was not only insufficiently generous, but he had often earned his fortune by dishonest means. If a lord was not sufficiently lavish with his court, then it was considered right to blame him.<sup>52</sup> Medieval performers were probably poor, their livelihood uncertain, and some troubadours and *joglars* were dependent on nobles as benefactors. It seems that Blacatz and Gui de Cavaillon were not wealthy enough to practise *largueza* and therefore received criticism which the audience found acceptable in the mouth of a *joglar*. These works, like many *sirventes*, probably played a similar role to our contemporary satirical press or television programmes showing up social or political weaknesses of the system or abuse of their position by those in power. Perhaps the nobles who were attacked in this way in the courts were fortunate, since they were in a position to answer back and refute the charges made against them, although they do not always seem to have done so. If Blacatz had actually taken lands which did not belong to him, he is being exposed in front of the court entourage for his lack of courtly behaviour and moral principles, but he does not answer the charges. Probably doing so would have been seen as a weakness.

An important aspect to bear in mind is that of performance. It may be that insult works were generally presented in a burlesque manner with comic gestures and facial grimaces. If this were so, the reception of the exchanges would be quite different from our contemporary one based on a textual point of view and the audience would have viewed the presentation as an amusing event rather than an exchange to be taken seriously. One component of literature has been proposed by Bec, who has identified a ‘contre-texte au Moyen Age’, suggesting that any body of literary work at some point ‘prend du recul par rapport à elle-même, puis elle se nie

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<sup>51</sup> Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean, *Les Poésies satiriques et morales des troubadours du XIIe à la fin du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Nizet, 1978), p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> *Les Poésies satiriques et morales*, p. 255.

en tombant volontairement dans le burlesque, le scatologique ou l'obscène'.<sup>53</sup> Some insult *tensos* may be considered as a 'contre-texte' in regard to Occitan lyric poetry taken as a whole and it is possible that they may have been seen by their contemporary public in that light. Nevertheless, it may have been important for the lord to win the discussion in order to prove his status and not lose his good name, which could affect his political position.

We asked secondly why the nobles appear to demean themselves by answering their opponent. The works of Blacatz give the impression that he enjoys the opportunity to 'hit back' in the same manner. That the subject matter of the insults or accusations in all the above-examined exchanges does not provoke a direct response is interesting and suggests that from the outset the aim of both parties was merely to revile the other in some way, rather than initiate a debate. As a result, the lord does not really come down to answering the *joglar*, but merely gives 'tit for tat'. Thus, he does not demean himself but participates in a game of words.

It cannot be determined whether there were any serious consequences to these exchanges. It is plausible to suppose that a participant who was justifiably dishonoured by a *joglar*, or one who has put up a poor show, could lose his credibility and reputation among his peers which could do him harm, not only socially, but politically. Such was certainly the purpose of Bertran de Born's *sirventes* against Alphonso II and therefore similar tactics may have been intended in certain insult *tensos*. This could be the incentive for enemies of the noble participant to encourage the *joglar* to initiate such an exchange.

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