[...]
"E perché tu di me novella porti,
sappi ch'i' son Bertram dal Bornio, quelli
che diedi al re giovane i ma' conforti.
Io feci il padre e 'l figlio in sé ribelli;
Achitofèl non fé più d'Absalone
e di Davìd coi malvagi punzelli.
Perch' io partì' così giunte persone,
partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!,
dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone.
Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso."[54]

I truly saw, and still seem to see it,
a body without a head, walking just like
the others in its dismal herd;
the body carried its severed head by the hair,
swaying in its hand, in the fashion of a lantern;
and it looked at us and said: "Oh me!"
[...]
"And because you will carry news of me,
know that I am Bertran de Born, he
who gave comfort to the young King.
I made father and son turn against each other;
Achitophel did not do more with Absalom
and David, through his malevolent provocations.
Because I severed people so joined,
severed now I bear my brain, alas!,
from its origin, which is in this body.
In this can be seen my retribution."

But despite the fact that most of these poets are men, a number of these poems both come from and represent the female perspective. Some represent a kind of breaking of boundaries one might not initially expect. Take a look, for example, at a piece called *Na Maria*, attributed to a poet named Bietris (or Bieris) de Romans.

Na Maria, pretz e fina valors,
e·l joi e·l sen e la fina beutatz,
e l'aculhir e·l pretz e las onors,
e·l gen parlar e l'avinen solatz,
e la dous car' e la gaja cuendansa,
e·l dous esgart e l'amoros semblan
que son en vos, don non avetz engansa,
me fan traire vas vos ses cor truan.

[54] *Inferno*. Canto 28.118-23, 133-42. In *La Divina Commedia. Inferno*. Edited by Ettore Zolesi. (Rome: Armando, 2009), 470-71.

Per que vos prec, si·us platz que fin' amors
e gausiment e dous umilitatz
me posca far ab vos tan de socors,
que mi donetz, bella domna, si·us platz,
so don plus ai d'aver joi e'speransa;
car en vos ai mon cor e mon talan,
e per vos ai tot so qu'ai d'alegransa
e per vos vauc mantas vetz sospiran.

E car beutatz e valors vos enansa
sobre totas, qu'una no·us es denan,
vos prec, si·us platz, per so que·us es onransa,
que non ametz entendidor truan.
Bella domna, cui pretz e joi enansa,
e gen parlar, a vos mas coblas man,
car en vos es gajess'e alegranssa
e tot lo ben qu'om en domna deman.[55]

Lady Maria, for your esteem and pure worthiness,
joy, wisdom, and pure beauty,
graciousness and praise and distinction,
noble speech and delightful company,
sweet face and lively charm,
the sweet glance and the amorous appearance
that are in you without deception,
I am drawn to you with nothing false in my heart.

For this, I pray, please, let true love
Delight and sweet humility
Give me, with you, the relief I need,
So you will grant me, beautiful lady, please,
What I most hope to enjoy.
Because in you, alas, are my heart and desire
And for you, alas, are all my joys
And for you, I go, freely sighing many sighs.

And since beauty and merit advances you,
superior to all others, for there is no one before you,
I pray you, please, by all that brings you honor,
do not love those with false intentions.
Beautiful Lady, whom praise and joy advances,
and noble speech, my verses are for you,
for in you is merriment and all delight,
and every good thing one could want in a woman.

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[55] Bietris de Romans. "Na Maria, prètz e fina valors." In *The Women Troubadours*. Edited by Meg Bogin. (New York: Norton, 1980), 132.

On an initial reading, this poem seems very much to be an erotic poem written *by* a woman *to* a woman. But though there is no explicit mechanical "here is what I'd like us to do" suggestion in the poem, neither does the poem present one person's unconsummated adoration for someone else; rather, it seems to be a jealous lover trying to fend off a rival. Probably a male rival, since the idea seems to be that the potential other suitor would betray Maria, while the speaker of the poem would not. What we seem to have here is a poem in the tradition of Sappho, the ancient Greek poet who wrote much of her verse describing her erotic longings for beautiful women: "Toward you bare-shouldered beauties my mind / surely never changes."[56] Thus, *Na Maria* is neither poetically unprecedented, nor in any way to be considered outside the realm of human erotic experience.

And yet, there is no shortage of arguments that present this poem as being nothing at all like it appears. These arguments explain away the apparent lesbian eroticism of the poem through the use of a couple of arguments that we will see again and again with only minor variations. First up, the religious or spiritualizing argument that sublimates love into worship:

This is obviously a metaphor for the Virgin Mary.

This is, in fact, exactly the suggestion that Daniel E. O'Sullivan makes, as he reads *Na Maria* as if it were addressing "the Virgin Mary."[57] O'Sullivan argues that the line "qe mi donetz, bella dompna, si·us platz, / so don plus ai d'aver esperansa" ["so you will grant me, beautiful lady, please / what I most hope to enjoy"] should be interpreted in the context of "Marian songs, [in which] the singer makes similar requests of the Virgin where the hoped-for reward is eternal salvation."[58] And though the critic acknowledges that "the question of asking Mary to shun deceitful lovers or suitors (*entendidor*) may seem odd given the Virgin's role in helping to save all of mankind,"[59] he does not let that difficulty discourage him. Plowing right ahead, he spins the poet's request in the direction of prayer: "such requests for divine intercession must be made sincerely, thus the qualification that such people must not be deceitful (*truan*)."[60] Thus, the critic manages to erase the lesbian eroticism that seems evident on the text's surface, and allegorizes that eroticism in the traditional way (as seen in the example of the historical treatment of the *Song of Songs*), by transforming its energy into a vehicle of divine love.

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[56] "ταὶς κάλαισ᾽ ὔμμιν <τὸ> νόημμα τᾶμον / οὐ διάμειπτον" (Sappho. *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus*. Edited by David A. Campbell. [Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1982], Fragment 41, p.86).

[57] "Na Maria: Courtliness and Marian Devotion in Old Occitan Lyric." In *Shaping Courtliness in Medieval France: Essays in Honor of Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner*. Edited by Daniel E. O'Sullivan and Laurie Shepard. (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2013), 184.

[58] Ibid., 195.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

If that line of argument fails to convince, there's another line of attack. This time, it comes in the form of a historicism that assumes that every human expression of a particular time and place can necessarily be explained by and reduced to the majority standards of that time and place (a position that leaves no room for dissent or "non-normative" desires and points of view, thus subverting and containing the possibility of any such dissent or desires):[61]

No, this poem is merely expressing the contemporary reality of an affectionate, but non-sexual regard between women.

This is the argument of Angelica Rieger, who attempts to bury the passion of the poem through a series of relatively dry remarks on the rhetorical reversals it contains (focusing like a laser on otherwise marginal issues will often suffice when it is necessary to argue away the elephant in any given room):

> [c]omposed by a woman and addressed to another, it acquires a special position not only within the works of the trobairitz but within the entire Occitan literature of the thirteenth century. Since the troubadour typically speaks to the domna, it is clear that the inversion of this configuration in the poems of the trobairitz may be regarded as a marginal phenomenon; that the masculine element should be eliminated, however, so that the lyrical dialogue takes place exclusively between one woman and another, is an extraordinary rarity.[62]

Rare though its female address to another female may be, and as *apparently* erotic as its language is, Rieger argues that we misread the poem if we see it as expressing sexual desire:

> The poem is indeed by a woman, addressed to another, but nevertheless does not concern a lesbian relationship. In addition to the [...] rejection of homosexuality within troubadour poetry, which makes a public, positive depiction of such a relationship very improbable, the poem does not contain any indecent passages either. Bieiris addresses Maria only in a manner customary for her time and her world; she expresses her sympathy for her in a conventionally codified form—which the choice of genre would also support—just as one, or better, a woman, speaks with a female acquaintance, friend, confidante, or close relative. In short, the colloquial tone used between women differed from that used today, and what modern readers deem erotic was simply tender.[63]

As Reiger would have it, the poem "does not concern a lesbian relationship" because that would be "improbable," and therefore evidently impossible. But to speak of a "rejection of homosexuality within troubadour

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[61] As Rita Falski has complained, historicism of this stripe has bound us into "a remarkably static view of meaning, where texts are corralled amidst long-gone contexts and obsolete intertexts, incarcerated in the past, with no hope of parole" (157).

[62] 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*. Edited by William D. Paden. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 73.

[63] Ibid., 82.

poetry" is a very careful circumscribing of the argument, since troubadour poetry exists within the context of a wider cultural and poetic practice in which homosexuality is very much part of the picture. One need only look at Alain de Lille (Alanus ab Insulis), and his twelfth-century *De Planctu Naturae* for confirmation. Herein, Alain questions Nature about love and sexuality, and explains the prevalence of same-sex relations through a reference to the gods of Antiquity: "Jupiter, for the adolescent Ganymede, transferred him to the heavens, and bore for him there a strongly proportional desire in translation—while he made him his cupbearer at the table by day, he made him the subject of his bed by night."[64] Though Alain portrays this state of affairs as the result of a fallen Nature who has "betrayed her God-given responsibility by placing sexuality ion the hands of Venus [and her] moral licentiousness,"[65] the very existence of the discussion makes Rieger's immediate dismissal of the possibility of homosexuality in *Na Maria* problematic.[66] Further evidence can be had in the poetry of Hilarius, or Hilary the Englishman, of whose five surviving love poems, four are written to boys.[67] His poem, *Ad Puerum Anglicum*, makes the idea fairly clear:

Puer decens, decor floris,	Demure boy, beautiful as a flower,
Genma micans, velim noris	Sparkling jewel, if only you knew
Quia tui decus oris	That the glory of your eyes
Fuit mihi fax amoris.[68]	Has set my love on fire.

Such poetry makes plain that *Na Maria* exists in a context in which same-sex desires themselves exist, and are expressed in powerful verse. But Rieger will

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[64] "Jupiter enim adolescentem Ganymedem transferens ad superna, relativam Venerem transtulit in translatum; et quem in mensa per diem propinandi sibi statuit praepositum, in toro per noctem sibi fecit suppositum" (Alain de Lille. *Alani de Insulis doctoris universalis opera omnia*. In *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Volume 210. Edited by Jacques Paul Migne. [Paris: Apud Garnier Fratres, 1855], col. 451B).

[65] Barbara Newman. *Gods and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 87.

[66] The example of Alain de Lille only scratches the surface of the possibilities here. For other examples, see the discussions of the anonymous twelfth-century poem "Altercatio Ganimedes et Helene" in Newman (2003), as well as in John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1980), and Rolf Lenzen, "Altercatio Ganimedis et Helene." Kritische Edition mit Kommentar. In *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* Bd. 7 (1972), 161-186. As Thomas Stehling argues, "[t]he recurrent reference to classical literature in medieval homosexual poetry represents more than just an appeal to a shared education; it may also be interpreted as an attempt to place homosexual love in a respectable context. [...] Engaged like other poets in this great revival of classical learning, poets writing homosexual verse learned to employ this respect in a particular way" (Thomas Stehling. "To Love a Medieval Boy." In *Literary Versions of Homosexuality*. Edited by Stuart Kellogg. [New York: Haworth Press, 1983], 167).

[67] Stehling, 161.

[68] Hilarius."Ad Puerum Anglicum II." ll.1-4. *Hilarii Aurelianensis Versus et Ludi Epistolae*. Mittellateinische Studien und Texte. Vol. 16. Edited by Walther Bulst und M.L. Bulst-Thiele. (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1989), 46.

have none of it. In her argument, one that works by the erasure of the very possibility of non-majority desires, she tries very hard to force this female-voiced poem to revolve around a man, not as rival for the poet's sexual desires and affections (which would apparently require the presence of "indecent passages"), but as the wrong choice of man among what are presumably better choices of men. Thus the critic redefines the expressions of desire in the poem in terms of a wish that Lady Maria make the right choice of a male suitor:

> But however one may choose to read it, as disparaging men in general or as an attempt at categorizing good and evil, the fact is that the male element is introduced by this phrase, albeit in a manner contrary to that of the other texts. The secret (so) that both women are hiding is therefore connected with a man or with men in general. We will not be able to resolve it, since all the conjectures in this triangle must remain hypotheses: Does Maria have a choice between several admirers, and is she to decide on the "right one," and are Bieiris's words spoken out of a sort of maternal concern that this young, beautiful, and intelligent woman might choose the wrong one? Or does the man in question stand between the two women, and is Bieiris's poem an appeal to Maria not to take him, thereby making herself and Bieiris unhappy? The list of possible situations could certainly go on, but the two cited may suffice to demonstrate that Bieiris's canso—following the feminine lyrical tradition—revolves around the absent third party, the man.[69]

But both O'Sullivan's and Rieger's decorous explanations get strained by the second stanza. Let's look again at the poem's second stanza to demonstrate the problem:

> Per que vos prec, si·us platz que fin' amors
> e gausiment e dous umilitatz
> me posca far ab vos tan de socors,
> que mi donetz, bella domna, si·us platz,
> so don plus ai d'aver joi e'speransa;
> car en vos ai mon cor e mon talan,
> e per vos ai tot so qu'ai d'alegransa
> e per vos vauc mantas vetz sospiran.[70]
>
> For this, I pray, please, let true love
> Delight and sweet humility
> Give me, with you, the relief I need,
> So you will grant me, beautiful lady, please,
> What I most hope to enjoy.
> Because in you, alas, are my heart and desire
> And for you, alas, are all my joys
> And for you, I go, freely sighing many sighs.

[69] Ibid., 92.
[70] Bietris de Romans, ll.9-16.

These lines are practically drenched in anxious desire—the voice we hear begs for *relief*, and the fulfilment of *desire*. In the meantime, she sighs as she walks abroad, praying that "fin' amors" (true love, pure love, love that regards the beloved not as a means but as an end) will give her the heart of the woman she so desperately admires. It seems tenuous, at best, to argue that what she prays her *bella domna* will grant her is to make a good choice of a male suitor. As the poem concludes, the desiring feminine voice praises Maria as the embodiment of all that is itself desirable: "for in you is merriment and all delight, / and every good thing one could want in a woman." This, along with the warning "do not love those with false intentions," especially when paired with the claim "I am drawn to you with nothing false in my heart"—sets the female voice of the poem directly in opposition to, and rivalry with those "entendidor," the (grammatically, at least) *male* wooers who will betray and lie to Maria. As Meg Bogin has observed, "Scholars have resorted to the most ingenious arguments to avoid concluding that [Bietris] is a woman writing a love poem to another woman,"[71] and this, perhaps, is the best indication that Bietris *is* in fact writing a love poem—in the style of Sappho—to another woman: *the scholar doth protest too much, methinks*.

Rieger, amusingly, finds it necessary to admit that "[t]he possibility of an element of female jealousy (which might even bear lightly homoerotic characteristics) need not be ruled out entirely." But she is, nevertheless, determined to "substantiate that Bieiris's poetic motivation does not spring from a lesbian relationship."[72] Alison Ganze, however, argues undauntedly in the familiar and predictable what *appears* to be X is *actually* Y style of the hermeneutics of suspicion, that it is a "faulty assumption […] that the erotic language in the poem must be taken as a literal expression of sexual desire," before she goes on to assert that "'Na Maria' fits within the conventional mode expressing friendship between women."[73] Note how Ganze's gesture makes the poem safe, conventional, predictable, and not-at-all-disturbing to conservative sensibilities. *It's just about women being friends*. What *appears* to be erotic longing, is *actually* just friendship. What *appears* to be [fill in the blank] is *actually* [fill in the blank differently]. William Burgwinkle argues along the same lines when he suggests that a poem (*Tanz salutz e tantas amors*) perhaps by the mid-thirteenth century troubadour Uc de Saint Circ, though written in the voice of a woman named Azalais, "mocks all future discussions of whether ladies writing to ladies might be lesbians by simply pulling the linguistic rug from beneath *the supposed signs of sentiment, the words in question*"[74] Once in the habit of suspicion, of regarding words as *always* or even *usually* meaning something other than they merely *seem* to mean,

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[71] Meg Bogin. *The Women Troubadours*. (New York: Norton, 1980), 176.
[72] Rieger, 92.
[73] Alison Ganze. "Na Maria, pretz e fina valors": A New Argument for Female Authorship." *Romance Notes*, 2009, Vol.49 [1], 25, 26.
[74] William E. Burgwinkle. *Love for Sale: Materialist Readings of the Troubadour Razo Corpus*. (New York: Garland, 1997), 100, emphasis added.

it appears that the habit is never broken. Thus, in predictable fashion, Burgwinkle argues that love poems are not actually love poems, because they are *really* something else, in this case, a kind of currency for exchange:

> whole love songs should probably be seen more as a sort of currency in these Southern courts than as personal love missives. They were apparently highly prized and exchanged between poets and patrons, poets and other poets, and the lords and ladies of rival courts. Their value was determined by collective fantasies of worth [...]. The "Lady" in such songs is often more an empty signifier than a flesh-and-blood woman. As in much of classical literature, the woman is an allegorical stand-in for something else. [This could be] an actual woman at court, the court itself, a fiefdom or castle, a male patron, or an empty category.[75]

With the inclusion of the "empty category," the critic has just argued that what appears to be X is not only *not* X, but is potentially *anything in the entire world other than* X. Burgwinkle decries the fact that troubadour love poems "continue to be read as personal love missives, as the expression and proof of a pre-existing 'real' of heterosexual [but never, apparently, otherwise] rhetoric rather than as musings on language," repeating the by-now overfamiliar critical move that reduces poetry to language or a kind of meta-discourse in which poetry always and only speaks of itself, before he declares that his argument will "show just how deeply representation, even of what *seems* to be the most personal nature, is imbued with issues of profit, marketing, and self-promotion."[76] Everything in that statement that comes after "seems" is the not-X of the formula. Troubadour love poems *seem* to be personal, but are *actually* [fill in the blank]. This same basic argument is made so often, about so many different poems, plays, novels, etc., that one begins to wonder if it is hard-wired into the academic mind. What Harold Rosenberg once called "The Herd of Independent Minds"[77] is alive and well and publishing books and journal articles.

What we encounter in troubadour poetry, if we allow ourselves to see it, is a crossing of boundaries, a stepping outside of assigned roles, a use of love as a kind of resistance to or rejection of the ordinarily assigned categories or roles. This boundary-crossing challenges the idea of faithfulness in marriage, and what might be called the heteronormativity of typical thinking about sex and desire—what is appropriate, allowable, and thinkable from a specifically heterosexual *and* marital perspective.

In the spirit of crossing boundaries, and moving outside the appropriate, allowable, and thinkable, let us look at the troubadours for a moment from a perspective outside that of the specialist scholars in the field. The popular myth and religion scholar Joseph Campbell wrote perceptively about the troubadours

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[75] Ibid., 100-01.
[76] Ibid., 11, emphasis added.
[77] *Commentary* 6 (Jan 1, 1948), 244-52.