

“Alone stand I.”:

The strange case of the troubadour Arnaut Daniel and the *trobar clus*



A close-up on a Hawthorn Hedge (the inspiration for my piece), from Getty Images

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Table of Contents

Original Poem.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Historical Context: Arnaut Daniel and the <i>trobar clus</i>	4
Troubadour Love Poetry and “L’aur amara”	6
“Alone stand I.”, My Original Work on Poetic Love for the 21st Century.....	7
Conclusion and Discussion	8
Bibliography	9
Appendix A	10

“Alone stand I.”, after Arnaut Daniel’s “L'aur amara”, c. 1200

Alone stand I.
 Mem'ry surrounds,
 Biting
 'Mid mistral's fangéd blow;
 Unseen
 Claws
 On Ill-Favor's paws;
 The past's fell hounds,
 Near
 In the drear.
 Deep, thy absence
 Is an aching
 Quickthorn
 Which hedges me
 Within a lonely vale,
 While I'm dying
 For thy sun's smile in my
 sky.

 I look and sigh
 over the grounds,
 Floating
 Ghost-like in cagéd woe
 Between
 “Was”
 And all of my flaws
 “Shan't be” expounds.
 Jeer,
 End-of-Year!
 Thy cold offense
 Is weakening
 And worn,
 Compared to she
 from whose leaving I quail:
 Thy chill coiling
 Heaven be, were she
 nearby.

Here, mother-die
 Bloomed all around
 Last spring.
 My love, whispering low,
 Seem'd keen,
 Cause
 For blossoming haws,
 Sweet without bounds!
 Cheer
 From thee, dear!
 Along the fence
 Green and flow'ring,
 Reborn
 I'd lie with thee.
 Now Flora's charms do fail:
 There is nothing
 But cockspurs, my throat
 to tie.

 But hist! Hard by
 Philomel sounds,
 And wings
 From nest of may buds. No
 Athene
 Vase
 Should show the true cause
 Of her unbound
 Fear,
 Though the ear
 Too well can sense
 Why she must sing:
 To mourn,
 With grim beauty,
 Her bitter, vengeful tale:
 The vile lapwing,
 From whose violence she
 must fly.

Thy keening cry,
 May Queen uncrowned,
 Doth ring!
 Nightingale in late snow,
 Thy scene
 Draws
 From my mind due pause
 At thy renown.
 Clear,
 Must I steer
 From sour pretense
 That I might wring
 Rough-shorn
 Fruit from a tree
 Whose branches elsewhere
 trail:
 Whitethorn's brief sting
 Fades come Spring, spirit's
 ally.

 Like a maid shy,
 Dawn peeks sky-bound,
 Wellspring
 Of hope in Prime's first glow!
 Serene
 Laws
 Of Nature's First Cause
 Spin a new round
 Year.
 May's premiere
 Is the incense
 Which floret's bring;
 This morn
 I am set free
 From self-lashing travail:
 No longer cling
 To what might have been, or
 why.

 Go I now hence
 Chained by nothing;
 Reborn
 From Loss' debris
 Rises poet Ishmael,
 And this I sing:
 Thou thy own Self dignify.

Executive Summary

“Alone stand I” is a new poem directly modeled after the period exemplar, Arnaut Daniel’s “L’aur amara” (The bitter breeze). Its form and function copies the intricate rhyme and structure of the *trobar clus* style that Daniel was a master of, while attempting to add contemporary commentary on the pitfalls of the traditional poetic love-lorn speaker in the exemplar. Finally, although the original piece was written in the 12th century in Provençal, much of the language and imagery of my own piece is inspired by Ishmael Stedfast Reed’s 16th century English romantic sense.

Historical Context: Arnaut Daniel and the *trobar clus*

Arnaut Daniel is a fascinating historical figure. A traveling troubadour from the end of the 12th century, he is given the credit for the invention of the sestina, a famously complicated poetic form involving a rotating series of repeated ending words (“Arnaut”). This attribution makes perfect sense for a leading poet of the *trobar clus*, or “closed verse” style, defined by the online Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature as “a style...characterized by deliberate obscurity, metrical complexity, allusive and difficult language, and intricacy of rhyme schemes” (“trobar clus”). It seemed to come from a desire to direct work at a courtly, well-read audience, who might better appreciate the virtuosity of their complicated works. They were, as author S.C. Hickman describes, “respected performers among the aristocracy”. Daniel’s mastery was such that, even centuries later, he was considered a giant in the poetic world. 100 years after Arnaut Daniel stopped writing, Dante famously placed Daniel in the *Purgatorio*. In it, Dante labeled him a “greater craftsman of the mother tongue” (XXVI, 117) whose “love songs... / [were] without peer” (XXVI, 118-119). Arnaut Daniel then gives a speech written in Provençal (the only break from Dante’s Italian verse in the whole *Comedy*), although my translation of *The Divine Comedy* renders this speech in Middle English to achieve the same effect (Alighieri 515). Clearly this was a significant figure for Dante to give him the unique honor of allowing him to “speak” in his native language.

And in fact, a survey of Arnaut’s works confirms his mastery of, and adherence to, the *trobar clus*. Normally, French and adjacent-language poetry is syllabic and uses lots of rhyme, using a consistent number of syllables and repeating sounds to maintain a beat -- which Arnaut regularly plays with to achieve fascinating syncopation unusual in this time period.

For example, in his poem “Quan chai la fuelha”, each stanza’s lines have 5, 6, 5, 6 then 4, 7, 4, 7 syllables. He maintains a fairly regular ABAB BABA 2-rhyme scheme in this piece, splitting the stanza into two slightly different “flavors”. The first two stanzas are reprinted below for you to count, so you can see this is an intentional choice, rather than some accident:

Quan/ chai/ la/ fuel/**ha**
dels/ aus/sors/ en/tres/**sims**
el/ freg/ s'er/guel/**ha**
don / se /ca 'l /vais /e'l /**vims**,
del/ dous/ re/ **frims**
vei/ sor/ dez /ir/ la /bruel/**ha**:
mais /ieu/ sui/ **prims**
d'Am/or/ qui/ que/ s'en/ tuel/**ha**.

Tot/ quan/ es /ge/**la**,
mas/ ieu/ no/ puesc /fre/**zir**
qu'a/mors/ nov/el/**a**
mi/ fa'l /cor /re /ver /**dir**;
non /dei/ fre/**mir**
qu'A/mors/ mi /cue/br'em/ ce/**la**
em /fai /ten/**ir**
ma/ va/lor/ em /cap/de/**la**

The exemplar poem my own work is based on, “L’aur amara”, is *much* further afield. A prime example of the true master of *trobar clus*, Arnaut Daniel wrote this poem with an overwhelming 11-rhyme scheme which only repeats each stanza, rather than many internal repetitions to help maintain a beat. Further, the syllable counts stray much wider than the 4-7 range from the previous work at 1 to 7. Here is the first stanza and the final coda of the poem:

L'aur amara	4, A
fa'ls bruels brancutz	4, B
Clarzir,	2, C
que'l dous'espeis'ab fuelhs,	6, D
e'ls letz	2, E
Becx	1, F
dels auzels ramencx	5, F
te babs e mutz,	4, B
Pars	1, G
e non pars,	3, G
per que m'esfortz	4, H
per far e dir	4, C
Plazers	2, I
a manhs per lei	4, J
qui m'a virat bas d'aut,	6, K
don tem morir	4, C
si l'afans no m'asoma.	7, A

x 5 + the CODA, a half-stanza that ties up the poem by repeated the second half of the stanza pattern once more:

Fez es l'acrotz:	4, H
qu'el cor remir	4, C
totz sers	2, I
lieis cui dompnei,	4, J
ses parsonier Arnaut,	6, K
qu'en autr'albir	4, C
n'esfort m'entent'a soma.	7, A

The full poem “L’aur amara” in its original Provençal, as well as two different translations for comparison, can be found in Appendix A. Matching 11 different rhymes in English each stanza with such syllable restrictions is no easy feat, and I am not surprised that only a few poets like Ezra Pound took the challenge to translate the piece and *also* maintain the original rhyme and rhythm.

Troubadour Love Poetry and “L’aur amara”

“L’aur amara” follows the common poetic trope of a speaker out of favor with his revered love, a topic as popular in the 12th century as the 16th, across much of the poetic landscape. Fascinatingly, there are many comparisons between Daniel’s poetry here and Arabic verse, which may have reached Provence through Iberia. “The Iberian Peninsula, the meeting point of France and Spain (the Pyrenees), harbored an exchange of culture in the twelfth century” (Hickman).

For a one small interesting parallel, both the Arabic *ghazal* style and many of Daniel’s poems (including “Laur amara”) include the “takhallus” or self-naming device, in which the poet names themselves in the poem (“Ghazal”): Daniel’s coda includes the line “ses parsonier Arnaut” (113). More widely, both the *ghazal* and Daniel’s poetry seems to focus more on a more loose collection of images and feelings, rather than one coherent narrative. For example, Hafiz writes:

“ O beautiful wine-bearer, bring forth the cup and put it to my lips
Path of love seemed easy at first, what came was many hardships.
With its perfume, the morning breeze unlocks those beautiful locks
The curl of those dark ringlets, many hearts to shreds strips.”

The first two lines establish the image of a cup-bearer passing around wine, but quickly shift in the next couplet to describing the “perfume” of the “morning breeze” and the “locks” of a missing lover (2). The connection seems to be that the speaker in the poem is reminiscing about the love that is now having “difficulties” (1). Similarly, Arnaut Daniel’s poem shifts each stanza, between images of “wandering birds” in “the bitter air” in stanza 1, to the more religiously connoted brightness of “my first enlightenment” in stanza 2, and the physical sense of needing “remedies” like “a kiss my hot / heart to refresh” in the third. In the essay “Forbidden Desire: Arnaut Daniel, Mathematician and Troubadour”, Hickman explains:

“Many characteristics of love, as expressed by the troubadours, are found in the lyrical tradition which originated among the *Udhri* poets of the seventh-century Arabia: the elevation of a lady into an object of veneration, humble submission to her capricious tyranny, the emphasis on the need for secrecy, the idea of love as a source of moral and social refinement, and belief in love’s potentially destructive power.” (Hickman)

And in fact many of these ideas are discernible in “L’aur amara”. Daniel writes how “my firm, strong heart / makes me conceal” (45-46), and that he is “serving her” and “Devoted” (33-34).

“Alone stand I.”, My Original Work on Poetic Love for the 21st Century

I found one problem as a poet that I wanted to tackle with my own piece. I find this characteristic “chivalric” worship/enslavement to a disinterested woman to be a problematic, sometimes dangerous, expectation to place. Hundreds of think-pieces have been written since the birth of the #MeToo movement to unpack how, as far back as the middle ages, the idolatry and self-flagellation of ‘nice guys’ has led to bitter and resentful gender relations and a normalization of harassment as a demonstration of romantic commitment. Even worse, the false expectation of sexual fulfillment (Daniel’s “a kiss my hot / heart to refresh”) in exchange for this behavior. To combat this thematic content, my own romantic speaker gives up his moaning and submission to the distant lover in favor of self-love and dignity.

My piece centers around the hawthorn, a “consistent symbol of carnal love” according to Susan Eberly in “A Thorn Among Lilies: The Hawthorn in Medieval Love Allegory”. She goes on to provide examples from multiple poetic sources, such as the ‘Court of Love’ which describes “the floures fresh and branch and blome / and namely hawthorne brought both page and chrome” as part of a May day tradition. In Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale”, too, Arcite “maken hym a gerland of the greves / were it of modebynde or of hawthorne leves” in order to woo Emily, his chivalric love. And so my own piece uses the cycle of the hawthorn plant, which has thorns, berries, and buds, to represent the cycle of wounding and healing the speaker must go through to get out of what I consider a toxic cycle of worship and disillusionment. My speaker begins “[hedged]” (14) by “quickthorn” (13) (one of the many names for hawthorn in English which is sharp like “claws” (6) of “the past’s fell hounds” 8)), alluding to its major purpose as a thick, thorny hedgerow in England. Spiritually and physically, the speaker is confined by sharp pains of love unreturned. This jibes with Eberly’s description of “hawthorn,[which speaks] to us... of the separation that occurs when humankind chooses carnal love to the exclusion of spiritual love.” (47).

However, like the hawthorn’s bare spikes are renewed with clusters of bright berries come spring, and green again, so too does my speaker find themselves renewed, not by a new lover, but by a new love of the self. He finds the dawn to be “like a maid shy” (86), his “wellspring / of hope” (88-89), hinting that he has taken the natural refreshment of the world to be his new “maid” rather than some new object of affection. The hawthorn naturally has a strong-smelling blossom, which my speaker describes as “the incense / which floret’s bring” (96-97), demonstrating the connection between the spiritual and physical: winter’s “cold offense / is weakening” (29-30) and making way for “Spring, spirit’s ally” (85).

This transition in mindset is precipitated by symbolism. The speaker doesn’t think the “fruit” (82) is meant for him: he realizes in a turn that it is “pretense” to think he could “wring / rough-shorn” love from someone who does not want him back, here symbolized as bruising fruit when picking it from a plant (79 - 84). My piece presents this idea with the Classical connection between nightingales, which summers in English hedge (“Nightingale”), and Philomel.

Philomel was an Athenian princess who, the story goes, was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus. Tereus “was... / pricked on by his lustful nature” (Ovid 6.458) and, in Ovid’s hideously physical description, ties her up and cuts out her tongue so she cannot tell anyone what happened

(6.550-556). After a vengeful confrontation between Philomel, her sister Procne, and Tereus, the Gods intervened: “they were suspended on wing. [Philomel] transformed to a nightingale, / made for the forest” (6.668-669). Procne was turned into a swallow, and Tereus into a “hoopoe” (6.673), reimagined as the “lappewincke” (6041) as John Gower retells it in his 14th c. work *Confessio Amantis or Tales of the Seven Deadly Sins*, to warn against the dangers of lust. I chose to use the lapwing rather than the hoopoe to maintain image consistency with the English environment.

And so in my piece, the hidden gem in the thorny hawthorn hedge is the nightingale’s famously beautiful song, which the speaker hears as “Philomel sounds” (53) by which he can “sense / Why she must sing: / To mourn / With grim beauty, / Her bitter, vengeful tale: The vile lapwing, / From whose violence she must fly” (42- 48). This story connection in the speaker’s mind helps him to realize that, in insisting on pursuing this love interest who has left him, he is not so different from Tereus, “pricked” by his own internal thorns to commit atrocities. Although yes, in the past the speaker (identified as Ishmael in the piece, but certainly isn’t exactly me) did “Last spring / My love... Lie with thee” (37-48), that time has passed, and he mustn’t “cling / To what might have been, or why” (84 -85).

Conclusion and Discussion

Ultimately I think “Alone stand I.” is one of the more difficult pieces I have tackled yet. I have always been attracted to the metric and rhyming schemes of period poets from Provence to Persia, but Arnaut Daniel’s form for “L’aur amara” is positively unique in Period, from what I can tell. Tackling it in English, which has *many* more ending sounds and less room for elision was such an interesting puzzle. I did have to stretch a few sounds into imperfect rhymes, and strain English grammatically flexibility to its limit, but it is otherwise very close to the original.

I chose to focus on a more narratively coherent, somewhat chronological structure for my poem, rather than the more pondering nature of Daniel’s original, and for the same reason as my other changes: adapting the form of the *trobar clus* for a contemporary listening and reading audience. Inspired by post-Period poems like “Ode to a Nightingale” by Keats and “The Darkling Thrush” by Hardy, I thought having some consistent natural world to visualize, or actions to follow as the speaker thinks, would really help the modern reader comprehend some of the more opaque syntax and technical elements, like the classical allusion. I also significantly changed some of the thematic elements from the original, to poetically comment on the weaknesses of the original conception of love.

Working with this particular troubadour poet has helped me realize how wide the world of troubadour poetry is, and to continue in the *trobar clus* style! In the future, I’d like to better match the images and themes of Continental writers, rather than sticking to period English verse -- the hawthorn hedge, lapwing and nightingale, and language like “thou” and “thee” are particular to my comfort with the English poetic landscape.

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Appendix A: "L'aur amara" by Arnaut Daniel

"L'aur Amara" Original Text	Arnaut Daniel: Complete Works Translation	"L'aura Amara" translated by Ezra Pound
<p>L'aur amara fa'ls bruels brancutz clarzir, que'l dous'espeis'ab fuelhs, e'ls letz becx dels auzels ramencx te babs e mutz, pars e non pars, per que m'esfortz per far e dir plazers a manhs per lei qui m'a virat bas d'aut, don tem morir si l'afans no m'asoma.</p> <p>Tan fo clara ma prima lutz d'eslir lei don cre'l cors los huelhs, non pretz necx mans dos aigovencx d'autra, s'esdutz rars mos preiars: pero deportz m'es ad auzir volers; bos motz segrei de lieis don tan m'azaut qu'al sieu servir sei del pe tro c'al coma.</p> <p>Amors, guara! sui be vengutz? Cauzir tem far, si'm dezacuelhs tal detz pecx, que t'es mielhs que't trenx, qu'ieu sui fis drutz, cars e non vars; ma'l cors ferm fortz me fai cobrir mainhs vers, qu'ap tot lo nei, m'agr' ops us bais al caut cor refrezir, que no'i val outra goma.</p> <p>Si m'ampara, silh que'm trautz,</p>	<p><i>The bitter air makes those bough-laden woods barren, which the sweet one thickens with leaves, and the gleeful beaks of the wandering birds it keeps stammering and dumb, couples and single ones, therefore I endeavour to act and speak pleasantly to many for the sake of her who has cast me low from high, for whom I dread to die if my grievance isn't eased.</i></p> <p><i>So bright it was, my first enlightenment in choosing her about whom my heart believes my eyes, I don't care for secret inviting becks of another woman, if she turns away my rare entreats: but it is joy to me to hear her wish; I shall follow the fair words of her who has taken me so much that in serving her I am [devoted] from head to toe.</i></p> <p><i>Hist, Love! am I welcome? To display, I fear, if you repel me, such words (ill) that you'd better cut this, since I'm a faithful lover, dear and not fleeting; but my firm, strong heart makes me conceal in many directions that, albeit I deny it, I'd need a kiss my hot heart to refresh, since other remedies are useless.</i></p> <p><i>If he agrees, he who is tormenting me, to make me closer</i></p>	<p>The bitter air Strips panoply From trees Where softer winds set leaves, And glad, Beaks Now in brakes are coy, Scarce peep that wee Mates And un-mates. What gaud's the work? What good the gleees? What curse I strive to shake! Me hath she cast from high, In fell disease I lie, and deathly fearing.</p> <p>So clear the flare That first lit me To seize Her whom my soul believes; If cad Sneaks, Blabs, slanders, my joy Counts little fee Baits And their hates. I scorn their perk And preen, at ease. Disburse Can she, and wake Such firm delights, That I Am hers, froth, lees Bigod! from toe to earring.</p> <p>Amor, look yare! Know certainly The keys: How she thy suit receives; No add Piques. 'Twere folly to annoy I'm true, so dree Fates; No debates Shake me, nor jerk, My verities Turn terse, And yet I ache; Her lips, not snows that fly Have potencies To slake, to cool my searing.</p> <p>Behold my prayer,</p>

<p>d'aizir qui es de pretz capduelhs, dels quetz precx qu'ai dedins a rencx l'er for rendutz clars mos pensars: quieu fora mortz mas fa'm sufrir l'espers que'lh prec que'm brei, qu'aisso'm te let e baut, que d'als jauzir non val jois un poma.</p> <p>Doussa car'a totz aips volgutx, sofrir m'er per vos manhs erguelhs, quar etz decx de totz mos fadencx don ai manhs brutz pars; e guabars de vos no'm tortz ni'm fai partir avers, c'anc non amei ren tan amens d'ufaut, ans vos dezir plus que Dieu silh de Doma.</p> <p>Ara't para, chans e condutz, fornir al rei qui te rucuelhs, quar Pretz, secx sai, lai es doblencx, e mantegutz dars e manjars: de joi la't portz. son anel mir si'l ders, qu'anc non estei jorn d'Arago que'l saut no'i volgues ir; mas sai m'an clamat: "roma!"</p> <p>Fez es l'acrotz: qu'el cor remir totz sers lieis cui dompnei, ses parsonier Arnaut, qu'en autr'albir n'esfort m'entent'a soma.</p>	<p><i>to that epitome of worth, of the mute prayers which huddle inside me shall be made to her clear my thoughts: that I would be dead but it helps me endure that expectation which I endear her to shorten, which alone keeps me gay and joyful, since of other joys none's worth a minnow.</i></p> <p><i>Sweet visage, laden with all qualities, to endure from your hands shall be pride, since you are the end of all my follies, because of which I have suffered many ill slander; but scoffing doesn't turn me from you nor makes me part [from you] wealth, since never have I loved with less vanity anything: rather, I long for you more than those of Doma long for God.</i></p> <p><i>Now get ready, you lyrics and song, to show before the king that welcomes you, since Worth, blind here, is doubled there, and kept is the habit of giving gifts and food: gladly I bring you there. Ah, for her wondrous ring to behold! Never have I been far from Aragon without, all of a sudden, craving to go there; but here they have shouted: "Stay!"</i></p> <p><i>The rhymes are done: let the heart behold every night her who suits her absent Arnaut, since in other thought I cannot put my whole will.</i></p>	<p>(Or company Of these) Seeks whom such height achieves; Well clad Seeks Her, and would not cloy. Heart apertly States Thought. Hope waits 'Gainst death to irk: False brevities And worse! To her I raik, Sole her; all others' dry Felicities I count not worth the leering.</p> <p>Ah, fair face, where, Each quality But frees One pride-shaft more, that cleaves Me; mad frieks (O' thy beck) destroy, And mockery Baits Me, and rates. Yet I not shirk Thy velleities, Averse Me not, nor slake Desire. God draws not nigh To Dome, with pleas Wherein's so little veering.</p> <p>Now chant prepare, And melody To please The king, who'll judge thy sheaves. Worth, sad, Sneaks Here; double employ Hath there. Get thee Plates Full, and cates, Gifts, go! Nor lurk Here till decrees Reverse, And ring thou take Straight t'Arago l'd ply Cross the wide seas But 'Rome' disturbs my hearing.</p> <p>At midnight mirk In secrecies I nurse My served make In heart; nor try My melodies At other's door not mearing.</p>
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