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 Independent Study  
 Thesis

*Pos Mi Sonelb: Covert Craft in Two Poems  
 by Guillaume IX of Aquitaine  
 in Light of Catullus 10 and 32*

The Bayeux Tapestry, 232 feet long and 20 inches high, is a document recounting the episode of the Battle of Hastings, which occurred in the year 1066. Both an historical and artful rendition, it is made of soft fabric, apparently designed for portability, and contains both images and text, which make the tapestry, in the words of Suzanne Lewis, “accessible to the minimally literate reader through simple grammatical constructions and rudimentary vocabulary” (19). The various episodes within the tapestry, eight in total, mostly deal with the preparations for war and the actual event of the fighting. The presence of love is notably absent, for the most part, in the pictorials. One does not expect images representing love to appear in it, to be sure.

Below the *Duxit Har Oldum Advuilgelm Um* heading (plate 14), seemingly out of nowhere, is a marginal depiction of a man and woman, both nude. Among the details are the following: the man with his arms outstretched toward the woman, phallus erect; and the woman with her right hand covering her face, her left hand directed at the ground. They are fixed there, sewn on the tapestry, fated never to meet or touch.

What is odd about this small pictorial is the coloring of the man's hands. While the outline of his body is sewn with black thread, the outline of his hands are sewn in reddish brown. His hands attract attention due to their odd coloring. The notion that this man stands tortured from his yearning for the woman (thus the outstretched and highlighted hands) is an important one. The woman conversely is portrayed differently: she looks on the defensive, her left hand either pointing toward the ground or covering her crotch out of embarrassment, her right hand protecting her face from the man's gaze. Doubtless this "position" at first shows the man as the aggressor, causing the woman only to be reactive and not proactive. But it also exposes, upon further analysis, the woman's domination over the man, as the man's posture is hunched forward, as if in supplication, while the woman is relatively straight-backed—a secular goddess. The work of the artist, in this particular example, sneaks upon the viewer in a way that completely subverts his or her expectations of what the detail of marginalia conveys.

This is a fitting introduction to the work of Guillaume, the seventh Count of Poitiers and ninth Duke of Aquitaine, the earliest troubadour whose poetry is extant. The artistic subversion of expectations occurs rather frequently, particularly in his burlesques, which will be featured below. First, a consideration of him as an historical figure would prove interesting, if not enlightening. Much

is known about him. His prominence as a political figure and secular lord in the post-Norman Conquest era of the Middle Ages accounts for the slew of written information which documents much of his eventful life. Often these disclose something about Guillaume's personal character, almost invariably focusing on his love for women and the finer, more delicate luxuries available to nobles of his high stature. Traces of his apparent wit and charisma can be detected in his songs. There is much speculation as to why Guillaume started writing these songs circa 1106. Gerald Bond has observed:

Possible factors include: the new appeal of Robert of Arbrissel and of the belief in the superiority of women; the death of [Guillaume's] mother in 1105; the wholesale destruction of his Christian army [during a Crusade], leading him to doubt the omnipotence of divine providence; new claims to independence by vassals in Limousin and Poitou; the success at secular courts of contemporary Latin poets; and, perhaps, a mid-life crisis. (*Poetry li*)

In two of Guillaume's burlesques, songs 5 and 6, particularly interesting is the element of surprise, a key element in most good poetry. Song 5, "I Shall Do a Song, Since I am Dozing," on the most basic level, thrills by the paradox of the speaker "dozing / and riding and staying in the sun" (vv. 1-2). The paradox is made more complex by his writing of the poem in the midst of his dozing and

riding, implied by use of the present tense. Out of a similar artifice of complexity and paradox, song 6, "I Want Everyone to Know," contains a good deal of irony and mix of narrative and lyric, featuring a *gap* that subtly and unexpectedly acquires, midway into the poem, a sexual meaning. The speaker turns away from discourse about his excellence in the art of song-writing and of love-making, respectively. He then shifts into a mode of narrative, at whose final stanza, according to L. T. Topsfield, the poetic content is driven "below the level even of the *humilis style*" (283). Song 6 undergoes significant and startling change in its progression from beginning to end.

In these songs is the essence of gratification delayed, in the sense that the full extent of what Guillaume suggests in them is not absolute until sufficient and painstaking analysis of the works is undertaken. While in the modern era, people want gratification quickly, this is not so in the world of Guillaume's poetry; patience yields rich results. Guillaume is perhaps using classical devices to delay his audience's gratification and to force patience in them, in the Catullan, Vergilian, and Ovidian traditions. There is a literary connection between Guillaume and the Roman poet Catullus, yet unexplored in detail. A study of the two poets—the latter being the more famous one—will illuminate Guillaume's work in light of the classical tradition and its pervasive element of surprise. Surely there is no direct correlation between the poetry of Catullus and the songs

of Guillaume: Catullus' poetry, with the exception of a marriage hymn, was lost to the medieval ages and was not discovered until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Still it is unfortunate that the Roman poet has acquired such popularity among reader and critics whereas the latter has not, even as both poets use intrinsically similar motifs and devices in their work, and all of these devices contribute to the postponement of gratification so important to the art of the poetry.

For example, much of the premise of the works of both poets relies on some sort of breaking through a threshold or door: in song 5, the Ladies of the castle have to invite the "pilgrim" to the chamber and "under her cloak" (v. 37); in poem 32, the speaker beseeches the woman not to bolt the door (v. 5). Even the poet's use of the word "enoios" ("troublemaker") in 5 can be associated, according to Gerald Bond, with the later use of the word by troubadours in their indicating all those "who block true love" (*Poetry* 67). The speaker in Catullus 32 urges the imperative, emphasizing the foreboding presence of the threshold: "Let no one bar the door today" (v. 7). Thresholds, natural obstacles, must be crossed on the way to love or sex. And yet the effort required to cross the threshold does not seem to silence any of our speakers' boasts. Both speakers are hyperbolic, one boasting that he has had sex with the two women 188 times, the other boldly predicting "nine consecutive fucks" (v. 8; my translation). Such motifs appear to be the standard ones preceding the act of sex, each creating a

level of expectation among the audience, one expectation of which must convey the idea of the conventional man with his conventional and stereotypical baggage. In this manner of setting up a seemingly standard play of events, the potency of the element of surprise is enhanced.

As many critics have noted, the first four stanzas of Guillaume's song 6 contain double entendres that humorously allude to both the art of writing and the art of loving. However none of this is apparent until the sixth stanza, which is the "pivot of the poem" (Bond 168). The speaker calls himself the "perfect master" (v. 36), a name which could suggest his mastery in virtually any art. The explanatory clause that follows this epithet destroys any ambiguity about the subject matter at hand: "Never will my woman-friend have me at night / and not want to have me the next day" (v. 37). The speaker has emerged singing about his prowess in the sexual arts. Again, the element of surprise is pervasive by Guillaume's skillful withholding of all the facts until the final movement.

The appearance and bossy behavior of the speakers in works of both poets are similar. In Catullus 32, the take-charge speaker uses the imperative voice consistently: "Tell me to come at noon" (v. 3); "Let no one bar the door" (v. 5); "You shall stay at home" (v. 6); "Prepare yourself" (v. 7). As John R. Heath has observed, the greatest of the speaker's demands is less in the language than in the implication of these demands. The speaker "is in fact suggesting a particular

sexual *schema*—*mulier superior*, the woman in the top or ‘riding’ position”; “a survey of this literary tradition will reward us by revealing that although a woman who participates in this activity may be physically above the man, she is beneath contempt” (Heath 33). In the penultimate line of Catullus 32, the word “supinus” is mentioned. It “possesses strong sexual connotations”; and it is a “specific term in Latin sexual vocabulary for the bottom position in intercourse” (Heath 32). The speaker is asking of the woman what even prostitutes in Catullus’ era would refuse to do. But in truth the speaker is weak within, heavily reliant on the woman. In a dramatic turn of events, the woman has acquired the traditional masculine role of being on top in an unconventional position. Because the speaker “can only command Ipsitilla to command him” (Heath 31), he relies on the woman intrinsically for his pleasure. Explicitly the man seems to be boss over the woman’s actions; but her non-response is what implicitly controls his mood and behavior. The man’s “tree of life” (v. 15) tears through his tunic has him in torture, similar to the fate of the man featured in the short analysis, above, of the Bayeux Tapestry.

Guillaume’s paradoxical singer and rider experiences the same defeat. When Lady Agnes introduces to the speaker the “troublemaker” (v. 55), the russet cat, and, along with Lady Hermessen, brings “behind [the speaker] the wicked / and treacherous cat; / one of them drag[ging] it from [his] ribs to [his]

heels" (vv. 63-6), they are ensuring two things: the more obvious and practical, that he is mute and will therefore not speak of their affair with him; and the more subtle and perhaps underhanded, that the scars on his back will prevent him from taking any other position than that of what we today would call the missionary. By scratching and wounding his back thus, the Ladies most importantly ensure that their mute will have no say as to what sexual position they might attempt. It would be too painful to lie on his back (and wounds) and beg for a decidedly seamy sexual encounter in the way poem 32's speaker would have it. We are also led to doubt the sincerity of Guillaume's speaker, as he would not be able to sit on his saddle so soon after suffering such wounds, sitting and riding on his horse an act he articulates early in the poem. This adds complexity to the poem, and now even the question of whether he is really dozing comes into play: does he mention his sleepiness in an attempt to communicate an indifference which may not be there? It does seem that he is trying too hard to convey the sense that he is stoic and to express his masculinity. For, in fact, he has been beaten by the two Ladies and his "tackle almost broke" (v. 81).

The speaker in Catullus 32 does not suffer the same near-castration experience, nor does he bear the brunt of feminine attack. Instead he lies in wait for his lover, with fertile or plump penis "punch[ing] a hole through his tunic and bedcover" (v. 11). Poem 32's speaker exudes virility and the sense of being

“well-fed” (v. 10), having just eaten, and is now prepared for sex with Ipsitilla, whom he calls pseudo-endearingly his “delight [and] charm” (v. 2). Song 5’s speaker also prepares for his bout of love with a feast: “the bread was hot and the wine was good / and the pepper thick” (vv. 47-8). Catullus and Guillaume are both working on the same kind of poem, with similar, standard motifs which warn people of the future, probable fiesta. What is surprising is the non-conventional sex that follows. The effect of the food imagery is to tease us with the prospect of the sex to come, though not necessarily prepare us for the exact consequences or manner of the sex—and in this controlled manner of teasing lies the art. And meanwhile the men might as well be impotent, due to the lack of sex they will experience, or to the tremendous and hurtful amounts of it. They suffer at the feminine touch.

Control itself plays a major role in the works. Guillaume and Catullus seem to treat the man-woman relationship with the same dynamic of power. As Kenneth Quinn implies about Catullus 10 through a comparison with a Horace poem, the features *scortillum* (“little whore”) is not at the “beck and call” of the man (224). She speaks intelligently (and her interruption will be the cause of Catullus’ speaker’s rage). Quinn continues on the woman:

What shows her less *venusta* and *lepida* than on his first appraisal of her is her failure to respect the limitations of her role within a

man's world; to appreciate that men are entitled to boast without being embarrassed by a nuisance of a girl [...] who hasn't the sense to realize that what a man says in conversation [...] isn't to be pressed. (224-5, my italics)

Yet in spite of the traditional roles justifying the speaker's behavior and censuring the girl's, the speaker mocks himself. When the girl speaks, forcing him to admit a white lie, the scattered word order (which the inflective Latin allows) reflects a nervous speaker, eager to search for the proper diction and to get the conversation over as quickly as possible.

Catullus is unpredictably self-mocking in the presence of women in his poetry; in poem 10, the speaker is publicly embarrassed by a *scortillum*, a friend's girlfriend; in poem 32, the speaker is vocally demanding of his woman, yet implicitly passive: his speech is littered with jussive and imperative verbs, yet the speaker is a tortured one, the torture resulting from a kind of tension which can only be resolved by the addressed woman's compassion.

The same goes for Guillaume's speaker in song 5. Despite his early moral statement about the woman who chooses to adulterate with monks [that she should be set "on fire with a torch" (v. 11-2)], he truly never finds himself any objective perch from which to make such a prudish—and hypocritical—observation. He himself partakes in this "wrong." By being the ostensible

pilgrim and copulating with the Ladies, he himself is in effect acting as catalyst to it. When he alludes to the imagery of the fire, is he also alluding to its connotations of ardency in the courtly sense of the word? This is also a classical use of the term: just as Cupid's arrow would inevitably hurt (and love in the ancient world was considered as painful), fire would, too. Guillaume's speaker wishes love on the Ladies in the same way they gave love on him—with painful results. There is vengeance. After all, he is the victim in his narrative: even as he begins the song as a self-righteous dispenser of moral wisdom, he ends up drawing this particular moral code from unflattering personal experience. Thus he seems biased, sour in his loss. Again, there is a clue to the speaker's intention that is unflattering and self-mocking.

The most interesting and socially-relevant twist in songs 5 and 6 resides in the way Guillaume has manipulated the cultural tradition, subverting listener-expectancy. In "I Shall Do a Song," the speaker is at first authoritative (morally, at least), sure that "a lady does not commit a mortal sin / who loves a loyal knight, / but if it is a monk or priest, / she is in the wrong" (vv. 7-10). Yet at the end of the song, the male-speaker's dominance—moral or physical—over the Ladies Agnes and Hermessen is much in doubt. Guillaume has skillfully turned the tables on his socially-conventional male speaker, as well as on the expectations of the reader. He elevates the women featured and shames the man. Guillaume's

own notoriety as a womanizer only would have strengthened the element of surprise for his audience, who would have expected bawdy and pro-masculine lyrics, not lyrics working toward the exalting of women. Bond writes: "A second, more tragic confrontation between the Count and the Church on the issue of adultery occurred in 1114 when his own extramarital affair [...] became the center of dispute" (*Poetry xxxi*). Listener-surprise would have been heightened due to Guillaume's own experience as a womanizer who would treat women in a manner opposite to what his courtly poetry would champion.

Guillaume's speaker in song 5 is passive. At the start of the narrative, the speaker implicitly predicts the sexual outcome of his encounter of the two women by the way he refrains from giving them any sign of his intelligence and non-muteness—all this in order to win their trust and have sex with them. So, apparently, his fate is in his hands, and he convinces the women that he is what they are looking for: Lady Agnes says, "We have found what we are looking for; / Sister, for the love of God let us give him lodging, / For he is indeed mute / and our secret will never be known through him" (vv. 31-6). At this, the probability of gratification for the speaker is high, and torture not an issue.

By wounding him, the women allow him no option of his imposing upon them any of his wishes. In the end, his masculinity is subverted, and there is both the impotence of his penis and of language, as can be seen in the "last four lines

of the poem [which] mark the convergence of discourse and sexuality, as the narrator recognizes his inability to describe the sickness which results from this hyperbolic sex" (Rollo 305). While he has paradoxically communicated his silence by use of the nonsensical language at the beginning of the song, he has also paradoxically communicated his pain by not saying anything at all. Such is the paradoxical and ironic essence of Guillaume's poetic skill.

In this same song, Guillaume has created a level of expectancy in listeners by means of the rhyme scheme *aaabcb*, which, according to James J. Wilhelm, "resembles [...] anonymous, rollicking popular songs"; and by means of the meter, whose "eight-beat accentual measure" recalls a hymn of morning praise out of the *Analecta Hymnica* (Wilhelm 41). Knowledgeable listeners, familiar with vespers, would also have recognized the play on the standard four-line stanza, of rhyme-scheme *aaaa*, which was used in liturgical hymns. Listening to this particular rhythmic nuance, the audience would have thought that song 5 was to be a ribald piece about Christianity, nothing more. The final *tornada*/couplet notwithstanding, song 5's meter does not change in any dramatic fashion, the rhyme scheme not at all; therefore there is no signal that would clue the readers in to the real subject matter other than the song's own content of words and articulated meaning. Guillaume has constructed the poem such that it betrays, at the start, what it is not: a song thumbing its nose at Christian religion. Rather,

its focus is on love and its physical manifestation, which will come as a pleasurable surprise to the listener. Such clever manipulation of the meter in the subverting of reader-expectations can also be found at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which, until its third line onward, seems to be either the beginning of a love lyric or epic.

While in religious song “melodic pitch and phrasing were supposed to punctuate and clarify the meaning of the verbal text” (Kendrick 133), Guillaume has sought to keep ambiguous his subject by muting the potency of his meter. Ultimately the expectation for the standard, ribald popular song would have been subverted: even if the verb “turn” (v. 5) foreshadows the sure metamorphosing of “love” (v. 5) into “evil” (v. 6), the object of this turning is the knight, and nowhere does the speaker mention his knighthood. The speaker's identity is shrouded in mystery, and is open to discussion. This mystery enriches the text.

The speaker in song 6 spends less time telling of his troubles and more time boasting about his prowess, first artistic and then sexual. Bond argues that the seemingly disparate halves of the song are intimately and skillfully connected. Guillaume has “concerned himself with formal technicalities throughout the poem and is proud of the result: the lines are tightly controlled, the rimes are pure, and the poem is cast in *coblas doblas*, perhaps for the first time in the language” (Bond 166). Such craft betrays a very potent underlying subject matter

which has its effect in the deft maneuvering of the song's movement. Yet there must be disagreement with Gerald Bond's point that there is "really only one boast in the poem: that the Count is a master at the game of love in all its complexity" (169), his skills in song-craft notwithstanding. The speaker's boasts, in fact, are many. He boasts of his song-craft, going as far as predicting the state of its completion (vv. 6-7); he boasts of his ability to perceive what is sensible or foolish, recalling, perhaps, song I, amid whose topic of folly lies the indecision between two women. Perhaps it is through this allusion to song I and its women that Guillaume hopes to smooth his leap from discussing song to discussing love. Because there is no certainty as to the chronological order of the poems, critics must only theorize.

Endlessly allusive, therefore, Guillaume's poetry is based on the artistic device of the postponement of gratification, in such a way that the audience will fully appreciate his work after some meditative and mental work. Song 5 features a mystery speaker. The only clue of his identity comes into play when, playing the idiot, he blathers, "Babariol, babarial, barbarian" (vv. 30-1), a sort of mantra with parallels in the conjugations of inflected languages. As such, the speaker seems learned, knowing enough about language to fake being ignorant of it. Perhaps he is not merely a pilgrim but a cleric. As David Rollo has argued, the cleric is "recognizable through the form of competence upon which is very status

is theoretically predicated: the cleric is an initiate of learning, he is literate and holds relative mastery over discourse" (302). Taking Guillaume's poetical ability into account, critics must believe that the mention of the sinful and adulterous "monk or priest" in stanza 2 is there for a reason; that the speaker feels sufficient angst against the cleric to write this song. The speaker perhaps is writing against the women who have harmed him. Of course, the major irony is that the speaker does not achieve vengeance successfully by the end of the poem; his very experience with the "russet cat" (v. 51) exposes him as a sexual maniac, keen to suffer the claws of a cat if only for a sexual encounter with the two women. Similarly, the depiction of him at the end as he triumphs over his screwing the women "one hundred and eighty-eight times" (v. 80) is immediately subverted in the next line, when the listener learns that his debauchery has been met with a price: his "tackle" (v. 81) nearly breaks.

Of song 6, David Rollo writes, "the prefatory stanzas not only formally withhold the promised poetic epiphany—in thematizing surrogate activities, they spiral away from the very eventuality of performance" (297). By promising to prove his poetic skills at the beginning of song 6, and then "digressing" into the subject of love, the speaker unhinges reader-expectation by withholding indefinitely the promised epiphany or gratification. At the opening stanza the speaker commences his series of boasts with a sense of urgency: "I want everyone

to know..." (v. 1). The tone is one which leads listeners to believe that what will follow will be a piece of discourse full of conviction, and will not stray from the subject matter, that is, the concept of the *vers* or *trobar*. Indeed, listeners expect the entire song as they hear it to be complete only at its end, for the speaker "can produce the song itself [...] / when it's laced up" (vv. 6-7). But the speaker does not remain stagnant throughout the song. In fact he heightens the level of his boast of his song-craft with the inclusion of his omniscient ability to know and hence segregate all people from each other: "I know well who speaks well of me, / and likewise who wishes me harm, / and I know well who laughs at me; / and if the worthy are happy with me" (vv. 15-8). Presume, then, that this omniscience includes necessarily an understanding of the audience—a presumption that would explain for the speaker's confident intentions of trying to unite the seemingly disparate love and song, as he leaves the job of uniting to the intelligent reader.

From the start Guillaume has given his audience intermittent hints in order to ensure that the shift in stanza 6 seems almost logical—yet still surprising—to the average ear. Prominent of these foreshadowing hints is the "cushion" (v. 25), which connotes the bed-couch. The recurring motif of the game of love appears literally in stanza 2 (v. 11) and more implicitly as "the sweet game" (v. 30) in stanza 5. Guillaume has structured these hints such that he teases the audience

with these details, deftly increasing or decreasing the psychic distance between himself and the first few apparent details hinting at the final subject of love.

When stanza 6 does arrive, the reader feels an enormous sense of satisfaction at the resolution. Such pleasure can be attributed to Guillaume's craft as talked about earlier. When the speaker meets inevitable sexual failure, throwing the die that is "biased towards failure," reproducing the "same disappointing performance first obtained" (Rollo 298), his boasts must be forgotten in the listeners' emerging uproar of fun directed toward his repetitious failure in bed, for the speaker has failed to deliver in at least one of his two major boasts. He is not as adept at loving for he is doomed to failure.

The question remains whether he has crafted a good enough song to merit his first boast. According to Rollo, closure is never reached. The song is never finished, and the love is never consummated (299). It seems to this writer, however, that closure is reached for the very same reasons. Guillaume's intention out of this burlesque song seems to be ribaldry, and he has achieved the humor required; he also has deftly subverted the believability of the boasts so that they, at the song's end, have absolutely no substance. There is finality in this final irony. He has ironically produced this wonderful song "brought forth from [his] workshop" (v. 3) with whose simultaneously- and dually-subverted boasts he has

ingeniously found completion. The essence of his work is, therefore, their unpredictability and in the way they postpone the audience's pleasure.

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