



"Just as the elephant" | "Atressi cum l'orifans"

Text Information

Author | Rigaut de Berbezilh

Language | Occitan

Period | 12th Century

Genre | Songs

Source | Appel, Carl, editor. *Provenzalische Chrestomathie. Mit Abriss Der Formenlehre Und Glossar*. 5th edition. Reisland, 1920.

Collection | Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/rigaut_just_elephant/

Transcription, translation and introduction by Johannes Junge Ruhland.

Introduction to the Text

"Atressi cum l'orifans" (PC 421.2: "Just as the Elephant") is a *canso* attributed to Rigaut de Berbezilh. There is contention as to when the troubadour was active: 1140–1157 or 1170–1210 (Varvaro 1960, 9–30). This lyric has attracted commentary because, like other songs by Rigaut, it relies on animal imagery to further the singer-lover's rationale. If one dates Rigaut's activity to 1140–1157, "Just as the Elephant" is one of the earliest Romance texts to attest to the circulation of such imagery, at times in direct connection with the *Physiologus*. The "I" likens himself to the elephant, the bear, the phoenix, and the stag, as well as Daedalus (who stands for Icarus). These animal images thematise the opposing or the conjoining of up and down, pain and improvement, death and revival, fleeing and returning, and are linked to the complex feelings of love that the "I" expresses. Amelia Van Vleck has discussed the way in which these elements, along with elements denoting spectacles or trials, are picked up by words denoting excess, such as "sobramar" (loving excessively) and "trop parlar" (speaking too much) (1993, 232).

The reference to the "cortz del Puey" (court of Puy) is one of the rare testimonies to the existence of a poetic contest in Puy-en-Velay. More generally, the poem emphasises the communal nature of the lover's endeavour, supported as he asks to be by his fellow "fis amans" (refined lovers), and his ability to stand is dependent upon them. The reference to Daedalus also deserves mention because, although what is said about him applies to Icarus, it attests to some form of knowledge about Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Introduction to the Source

"Atressi cum l'orifans" is extant in a large number of manuscripts, which may indicate that when *chansonniers* were composed, Rigaut's works were held in higher esteem than in scholarly assessments. Across manuscripts, the lyric changes, be it in the order of stanzas, the presence/absence of stanzas, single words and phrases, linguistic makeover, or the presence of a written melody (extant in two manuscripts). Rigaut seems to have been popular in Northern French *chansonniers*, although Eliza Zingesser has shown that this came at the cost of making Rigaut look birdlike, almost a madman (2020, 49–80).

This translation is based on the edition of the lyric by Carl Appel (1920, 70–71, item 29), with adapted punctuation. The reference edition remains that by Alberto Varvaro (1960, 106–134).

Further Reading

Appel, Carl, ed. *Provenzalische Chrestomathie. Mit Abriss Der Formenlehre Und Glossar*. 5th edition, Reisland, 1920.

Rigaut de Berbezilh. *Liriche*, edited by Alberto Varvaro, Adriatica, 1960.

Van Vleck, Amelia. "Rigaut de Berbezilh and the Wild Sound. Implications of a Lyric Bestiary." *Romanic Review*, vol. 84, nr. 3, 1993, pp. 223–40.

Zingesser, Eliza. *Stolen Song. How the Troubadours Became French*. Cornell University Press, 2020.



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Atressi cum l'orifans

que, quan chai, no·s pot levar
tro l'autre ab lor cridar
de lor votz lo levon sus,
et ieu vuelh segre aquel us
quar mos mesfagz es tan greus e pezans
que, si la cortz del Puey e lo bobans
e l'adregz pretz dels leials amadors
no·m relevon, ia mais no serai sors;
que denhesson per me clamar merce
lai on preiars ni razos no·m val re.

E s'ieu per los fis amans

non puosc en ioy retornar,
per tostamps lays mon chantar
que de mi no y a ren plus;
ans viurai cum lo reclus,
sols, ses solatz, qu'aitals es mos talans,
quar ma vida m'es enuegz et afans
e gaugz m'es dols e plazers m'es dolors,
qu'ieu no suy ges de la maneira d'ors
que, qui be·l bat ni·l te vil ses merce,
adoncs engrayssa e melhuya e reve.

Be sai qu'amors es tan grans

que leu me pot perdonar,
s'ieu falhi per sobramar
ni renhey cum Dedalus,
que dis qu'elh era Jhezus
e volc volar al cel outracuians,
mas Dieus baisset l'orguel e lo sobrans;
e mos orguelhs non es res mas amors,
per que merces mi deu faire socors,
que maint luec son on razos vens merce,
e luec on dregz ni razos no·s ave.

Just as the Elephant

Which, when it falls, cannot get up
Until the others, through their trumpeting,
Make it stand up with the sounds they emit,
5 I too want to follow this custom,
Because my wrongdoing is such a heavy burden
That, if the court of Puy, and the pomp
And the rightful merit of the true lovers
Do not get me back up, I will never be up on my feet again;
10 So may they deign to plead for mercy on my behalf
There where begging and arguing do not help me.

And if I, thanks to the refined lovers,

Cannot recover my joyfulness,
I will abandon my singing forever
15 Because there's nothing left of me;
Instead, I will be living like a recluse,
Alone, without solace, for such is my state of mind;
Because my life bothers and pains me,
And joy feels like sorrow and pleasure like pain,
20 Because I am not at all like the Bear,
Which, when one beats it thoroughly and holds it in contempt, without mercy,
Fattens, improves, and flourishes.

I know full well that love is so magnanimous

That it can easily forgive me,
25 If I failed it by loving excessively
Or if I behaved like Daedalus,
Who said he was Jesus,
And who wanted to fly to the sky in his arrogance
(But God abated his pride and his superiority);
30 And my pride is nothing but love,
Which is why Mercy must come and rescue me,
For there are many instances in which arguing wins against mercy,
And instances in which legitimacy and arguing do not prevail.



A tot lo mon suy clamans
de mi e de trop parlar;
e s'ieu pogues contrafar
fenix, don non es mas us,
que s'art e pueys restortz sus,
ieu m'arsera, quar suy tant malanans,
e mos fals digz mensongiers e truans
resorsera en sospirs et en plors
lai on beutatz e iovens e valors
es, que no y falh mas un pauc de merce
que no y sion assemblat tug li be.

Ma chansos er drogomans
lai on ieu non aus anar
ni ab dregz huelhs regardar,
tan sui forfagz e aclus;
e ia hom no m'en escus.
Mielhs-de-dona, que fugit ai dos ans,
er torn a vos doloiros e plorans;
aissi quo-l sers, que, quant a fag son cors,
torna morir al crit dels cassadors,
aissi torn ieu, domna, en vostra merce;
mais vos no-n cal, si d'amor no-us sove.

Tal senhor ai, en cui a tan de be
que-l iorn que-l vei non puosc faillir en re.

Belh Bericle, ioys e pretz vos mante;
tot quan vuelh ai, quan de vos me sove.

I complain to everyone
About myself and about my vain discourse;
And if I could imitate
The Phoenix, of which there is but one,
Which lights up in flames and then recovers,
I would light myself up in flames, because I am so unhappy,
40 And my false, mendacious and vile utterance
Will resuscitate as sighing and as weeping,
There where beauty and youthfulness and worth
Are, for it does not take more than just a little of mercy
For there to be everything that is good in one place.

45 My song will be a fixer
There where I do not dare to go
Nor to look with a straight eye,
So much am I guilty and constricted;
And indeed no one seeks to justify me.
50 Best-of-a-Lady, from whom I have fled for two years,
Now I turn to you in pain and crying;
Like the Stag, which, when it has run away,
Returns to die when the hunters shout,
So do I return, Lady, to your mercy;
55 But you do not care, and you are forgetful about love.

I have a lord in whom there is so much goodness
That when I saw him I could not wish for more.

Beautiful Beryl, joyfulness and worth assist you;
I have all that I want when I think about you.