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Essay

## The Breton Lai as protest, mirror and proverb

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**ABSTRACT**

A Breton lai or lay is a lyrical, narrative poem written in couplets and refrains and is based on Greek, Arabic and Persian poetic structures and themes. Lais were mainly composed in France, England, the Pays-Bas and Germany during the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. The Breton lai was similar in purpose to Skolian Roman Fescennine which were songs sung by invited guests at banquets. Breton lai evoked the ancient Persian ghazal in a “tribute” culture with distinctive Breton irony. The Breton Lai’s enormous contribution to the linguistic and performance cultures of Europe impacted language development for centuries with contributions from the houses of Anjou, Saladin, Hohenstaufen and their descendants.

**Key words:** Divine office, Antiphons Greek and Persian poetic traditions, linguistic cultures

## INTRODUCTION

The Breton lai, the Greek skolia and the Persian ghazal have one feature in common: the performance context is similar and the form is open to reinvention. In trade partnerships, linguistic skill and sharp wit was celebrated in performance in order to “enclose” “disclose to advantage” or “cover” while trade partnerships and deals were formed. This article will briefly examine the financial and cultural relationships between the lai, skolia, Fescennine, Early Christian hymnodic tradition including the Phos Hilaron and Marian antiphon and ghazal art.

## MAIN ARTICLE

The roots of lai development are found in ancient Greek and Arabic Persian culture. Often extolling the virtues of the gods or heroic men, Greek *skolia*, an ancient form, were improvised to suit the occasion and were accompanied by a lyre, which was handed about from singer to singer as the time for each scolion came around. "Capping" verses were exchanged, "by varying, punning, riddling, or cleverly modifying" the previous contribution. Skolia are often referred to as 'banquet songs,' 'convivial songs' or 'drinking songs' or 'blessing songs.'

The term also refers to poetry composed in the same form. In later use, the form was used in a more stately manner for chorus poetry in praise of the gods or heroes. Skolia originally performed as dionysian rites were smoothly transformed into skolia performed as “apollan” apologia for the state. Reinterpreted by Christian hymn writers from the same period, the *Phos Hilaron* and the *Oxyrhynchus hymn* constitute the earliest extant Christian Greek hymn texts reasonably certain to have been used in Christian worship at the end of the communion meal; they are neither drawn from the Bible nor modeled on Biblical passages. They are improvisatory in nature, and reflect Egyptian “permissions” that freed the ecclesiastical head from constraint (trans):

[ ] together all the eminent ones of God [ ]

night] nor day (?) Let it/them be silent. Let the luminous stars not [...],

[Let the rushings of winds, the sources] of all surging rivers [cease]. While we hymn

Father and Son and Holy Spirit, let all the powers answer, "Amen, amen, Strength, praise,[and glory forever to God], the sole giver of all good things. Amen, amen.

(*Oxyrhynchus hymn*, or P. Oxy. XV 1786)

The *ghazal* is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter. A ghazal may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain. The form is ancient, originating in ancient Arabic poem in Arabia long before the birth of Islam. It is derived from the Arabian *panegyric qasida*.

Bretonese *Lai* poetic structure provided a similar format for trouveres to retell epics, tragedies, fables or comedies in a variety of vernaculars. The tradition of “capping” may explain the curious “circular” variation quality of traditional Breton *lai* refrains. The secular English term is a loan from the Old French 13th century *lai*. The origin of the French term itself is not clear and may be a loan from the German *Leich*, meaning *lai* or funeral, reflected back in ironic terms by the English meaning for Lake meaning sport or play. Musical settings were improvisations on standard melodic forms for the Breton *lai*.

The Leich MF 165, 10: *Swaz ich nu niuwer maere sage* is a poem about the complaints of a spurned lover by minnesinger Reinmar von Hagenau d. 1205. It was so popular that poet Walther von der Vogelweide d. 1230 included it in his obituary. This minnesinger repertoire was collected in the Codex Manesse, Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift completed in 1330 for the Manesse family in Zurich. The text of *Swaz Ich* expresses traditional themes of the troubadour or minnesinger in the court of love in a brilliant reworking of the line structure of the Breton *lai*; *abc adc be def gf*. It is a retort to Marie de France's fabulist contemplation on the subject.

*Swaz ich nu niuwer maere sage,*

*des sol mich nieman frâgen: ich enbin niht frô.*

*Die friunde verdriuzet mîner klage,*

*swes man ze vil gehoeret, dem ist allem alsô.*

*Nû hân ich sîn beidiu, schaden unde spot.*

*waz mir doch leides unverdienet, daz erkenne got,*

*und âne schulde geschiht!*

*ichn gelige herzeliebe bî,*

*ez hât an mînen fröiden nieman niht.*

Bretonese *lai* structure of couplets and refrain also recall the Arabic Persian *ghazal* which had spread into [South Asia](#) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century due to the increased traffic between Eastern and Western trade partners. Therefore, a performance culture developed to display the cultural influence [of Sufi](#) mystics and the courts of the new Islamic [Sultanate](#). Trade partnerships with the Middle East and Asia included a transmission of court culture to Frankish Gall centers of trade and power in Cadiz, England, Sicily, Paris, Utrecht, Aachen, Nijmegen, Ghent, Mainz, Leipzig and Wörtzburch in the form of luxury trade, poetry, music and art.

Persian poetry was promoted by strong court patronage and was popular because of the demand for panegyrics and the ??? ???? "exalted style."<sup>1</sup>

In some forms each couplet in a Ghazal ends on the same word or phrase *radif* and is followed by the couplet's rhyming word *qafia*. In the case of Archbishop William of York's *lai*-antiphons, the "honored one" is William Fitzherbert, a young man who had inherited a behest from Henry I, assisted Thurstan of York in diocesan and international business, provided security detail for Fulque of Anjou and Mathilda of Winchester, confessed Stephen of Blois, informed Henry of Winchester and was reappointed by Adrian IV, Nicholas Breakspeare. Within twenty years William had been appointed, deposed and reappointed to one of the most powerful ecclesiastical Sees of the kingdom.

William of York's antiphons recall a modified ghazal form suitable for a spiritual leader and this model--a sharply realized portrait done in the French Latin style with Persian and Greek overtones--provided a model for the court poets of the day. This mixture of cultural influence spoke volumes about his range of influence and his pattern of association. Musicians performing his divine office would have been able to demonstrate the ability to improvise 'sur,' melody and 'lai,' rhythm; the arrangement of rhythmic *lai* in a cycle known as *taal* formed a foundation over which improvised scales or *raga* were played. It is likely that Sufi renderings of the ghazal included a processional "spinning" dance, via Saladin's court and performance culture.

*Iubilemus regum regi qui concedit nos his regi per Guillelmi*

*Merita Iesu nostra fiducia honor noster et gloria amor virtus leticia*

*Vita vertias et via iustorum pax et patria tua nos clemencia*

*Guillelmi per suffragia de mundi meseria transfer ad palacia.*

Like William of York's Latin antiphons, the poetic form of the Breton *lai* was structured around stanzas of 5 or 6 lines containing couplets and refrains. The accompanying music was varied, not repeated. It is this characteristic that distinguished the *lai* from the *rondo* and the *ballad*, that is, the *lai* in its original construction was an open form that lent itself to creative addition and accretion

of “facts” that could distort or illuminate according to the lights of the patron. Henry II maintained this tradition through his patronage of Marie de France in a clever reversal of female and male roles in Alienor’s fashionable “court of love.”

The Angevin court’s Marie de France’s ironic rendering of Aesop’s Fables were recast statements about the limitations of caste, sexuality and race using a *lai* sequence hymn structure: *y aa bb cc dd*, typical of the Marian antiphon sung by Sicilian mariners to ward off shipwreck. Medieval sequences were processional and always sung before the Gospel as a celebration of high feasts, including the Eucharist. Their origins were Poitevin.

*Saveir poez par ceste fable*

*la maniere de meinte gent*

*mult le puet l’um veeir sovier*

*ki tant se vuelent eshalcier*

*e en tel liu aparagier*

*ki n’avient pas a lur corsage*

*ensurquetut a lur parage*

*A meint en est si avenu*

*cum a l’asne ki fut batu*

(*Fabeln*, p. 56)

Pontefract’s motto *Post mortem patris pro filio*, Latin for “After the death of the father, support the son,” was a reference to the repairs after the English civil war (1642–1651) but may have entered Yorkshire culture at a much earlier date. The motto is embedded in the glosses of the Oscott Psalter glosses of 1261. Ancient

biblical role models for Maria are evoked in the lines as a reminder of lineage and patronage and “right to rule, hinting at the patroness’ identity;” *Beate Marie virginis/ sumptum de verbis et sensibus psalmorum david a beato Anselmo archiepiscopo cantuarie.* Furthermore, the business of “post mortem” was often cared for by a female ruler.

The poem refers to St. Anselm Bec who died in 1109 just as Bec Abbey was becoming one of the most influential abbeys in the Anglo-Norman kingdom of the twelfth century and his favour would have been sought by young acolytes. The Breton lai glosses in the Oscott Psalter inform the reader of William’s “place” in this world. His associates, his relative guilt are described to the Bec faithful:

*'Cil est benure /*

*Ki nest pas ale /*

*As conseils as feluns:/*

*Ne estut el sentier /*

*Out Ceus Ki uunt pecher /*

*Ne as seges a bricuns'.*

*'Willelme ki me escrit /*

*Seit de deu beneit /*

*Kil nul a rachete.*

*Est li doint la grace.*

*Kil maigne vant la face*

*kant sera trepasse' (f. 215r).*

By the time Marie de France's Aesop's fables entered Dutch culture via Jacob van Merlant's (d.1300) translations of Vincent de Beauvais' (d. 1264) "Speculum Historiale" English and Burgundian edicts on the wool trade and the broken trade relationships that evolved were mirrored in popular art forms. Van Merlant hints in *Spiegel Historiael* at an earlier source for the fables and adroitly points attention to the "mixed" heritage of a poetic tradition that expressed cultural attitudes of the day, using a *lai* sequence Marian hymn structure without a refrain, *aa bb cc dd ee:*

*In Cyrus tiden was Esopus*

*De Favelare wi lessent dus*

*Die favela conde maken*

*Hoe beesten en vogle spraken*

*Heirute es gemaect Aviaen*

*Eñ andere boeken sonder waen*

*Die man Esopus heet, bi namen*

*Waren oec die si bequamen*

*Die havet Calfstaf eñ Noydekyn*

*Ghedict en rime scone eñ fyn.*

The famous 14th century French allegorical *Roman de Fauvel*, traditionally attributed to French royal clerks Gervais de Bus (d. 1338) and Chaillou de Pesstain, tell of Fauvel, a [fallow](#) or "muddy beige" colored horse who has risen to prominence in the French royal court in a series of interlocking songs in a variety

of formats. William of York's antiphons and Marie de France's fables provide a context for an artistic consideration of the problems of rising to prominence in a privileged rank coming from a "mixed" racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural background.

The hero's name in this poetic genre forms the name *fauvel* or "false veil," in an [acrostic](#) outlining a sin for each letter: *Flatterie Flattery, Avarice Greed, Vilenie Guile, Variété Inconstancy, Envie Envy, and Lâcheté Cowardice*. Gervais de Bus (1310,14) and Chaillou de Pesstain's (1316-7) superimpositions upon the Marian antiphon *In Mari Miserie*, from the *Roman de Fauvel*, BNF fr. 146, 1316, referenced the famous motets from the Montpellier Codex. In this way, Bus and Pesstain could make sport of their target without their target's knowledge and could thus avoid facing charges of slander and damage. Poetic devices illustrate the intended performance culture of blended Christian and "Levant" references of the ghazal *lai*, *aa b cc bb*:

*In Marie miserie maris stella*

*erantes cotidie a procella*

*defende nos et precare*

*Dominum pie*

*ut at portas glorie*

*nos trahat per hoc mare*

*nos que Fauvel faciat superare*

(Montpellier Codex, 61, 99v, 6-7, 1250-1300, Paris, Franconian)

The *lai* reached its highest level of development as a musical and poetic form in the work of Guillaume de Machaut d. 1377; 19 lais composed by the famous 14th century *Ars Nova* composer survive. The musical settings of these *lai* are the most sophisticated and highly developed among Machaut's secular works. Machaut's

use of *Lai* poetic form reshapes the original Breton line structure of two long phrases, two short and a refrain.

*Amis, t'amour me contreint*

*Si qu'il me convient descrire*

*Le martyre*

*Qui empire*

*Mon corps et mon cuer esteint*

*Et de grieés si m'enseint*

*Que je ne saroie eslire*

*Le meins pire;*

*Dont matire*

*N'ay qui à joie me meint.*

Machaut's legacy is followed in a famous example of Dutch "gheselle" lied, Egidius waer bestu bleven (Anonymus) which has been performed in Dutch culture since 1400. This "gheselle" is a direct descendant of the Persian ghazal "quasidat al burda" tradition or "mantle poem" in which a tribute or lament for an admired one and signals a rite of passage for the one who inherits the cloak. It's interwoven structure aba bbab aab aab aab aab preserved the poetic outline of the Breton *lai* with repetitive expansions to allow the listener to comprehend the meaning if performed in a tavern setting. It begins thus, inscribing the grief of friend and equal:

*Egidius waer bestu bleven*

*Mi lanct na di gheselle mijn*

*Du coors die doot du liets mi tleven*

Examples of late medieval uses of the Lai form are also found in the work of Pierre de Nesson. The *Lay de Guerre* was composed by Pierre de Nesson to mourn the defeat of the French at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415; “*Guerre*” is portrayed as the “author” of the poem who proclaims against a rival, “*Paix*.” Nesson’s *Vigiles des Morts* renders the ancient sequence hymn structure y aabbcc x as a modified lai in a rhyming scheme aa b c cb, using closed line pairings to emphasize the closed nature of death.<sup>2</sup>

*Et lors, quand tu trépasseras,*

*Dès le jour que mort tu seras,*

*Ton orde chair commencera*

*À rendre pugnaise pueur.*

*Que ne gouttes-tu de sueur*

*Quand tu penses que ce sera ?*

Hartmann Schedel, a student in Leipzig from 1462-12 had returned from Padua with sketchbooks of lute tablature published in the *Schedelsche Weltchronik*, a collection of humanist contemplations by press in 1493, Nuremberg, commissioned by Sebald Schreyer (1446 – 1520) and Sebastian Kammermeister (1446 – 1503). The printing press allowed this book to be widely distributed and this meant that Schedel’s tablature could enjoy an extended life in the popular culture of Germany.

Schedel was a student of Johannes Ciconia (c. 1370–1412) who was a **composer** and **music theorist** of the late **Middle Ages**. Ciconia was born in **Liège**, but worked most of his adult life in **Italy**, particularly in the service of the papal chapel(s) and at Padua cathedral. Although Ciconia lived in Italy, he continued to compose

French *virelai*, a forme fixe descendant of the Breton *lai* in the 15th century and popularized as instrumental music.

The lied *Myn trud gheselle* (anonymus) was compiled in Schedel's tabulature books and stands as a classic of the genre for lute. It is likely that the melody and text were copied from the collection of Heinrich von Luffenberg who lived and worked between c.1390 and 1460 in the Swiss canton of Argovia, southern Germany and Alsace. He was the author of a vast body of works, comprising of spiritual hymns, didactic epics and religious prose. A manuscript had been housed in the Strasbourg Library for centuries until a fire destroyed it in the late 19th century. A copy did survive, however and this had allowed scholars and musicians to maintain the tradition.

Jacob Obrecht's 1457/8 – 1505 "Roman" *Liedteksten* or Little Songs, attained pan European fame around 1500. Deeply imbedded in the culture, the texts of the *liedteksten* evoked Bretonese *lai* and provided both a snapshot of harsh reality of those who fell from grace in a rigid caste system. Since Obrecht's usual compositions were masses for the church, his instrumental renderings of the *lied* stood outside of his standard repertoire. He may not have known the lyrics of these popular songs because the performance of the *lai* or *lied* by 1500 was instrumental. "T'meiskin was jonck" or "The Maiden was Young" is typical of the ironic lyrical Pay-Bas commentary of love and lust in a time of occupation. Performances of Obrecht's lieds in towns like Ghent, Brussels, and other occupied towns along the Rhine signified the state of financial success or crisis and the social station of the main "players" depending on the season and year using the flexible format of the *virelai*.

The courtly song genre seems to have held little appeal for Obrecht, as the songs overwhelmingly survived without text, graced with lighthearted or folk titles. Many, and perhaps most, seem to be explicitly instrumental and are of modest length. Obrecht's polyphonic instrumental settings of these famous drinking songs helped him to pay off debts at a time when his patronage was uncertain. Obrecht's elegant settings of delightful melody was what made him famous, inspiring treatments of the same themes in Pieter Bruegel's ironic painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559).

*Meisje, is je kutje rauw?*

*Dat zijn zo mijn eigen zorgen.*

*Laat me eens voelen, doe niet zo flauw.*

*O, wacht tot overmorgen.*

*Want goed doorkneed*

*Is zo je weet*

*Tweemaal zo heet.*

*Ja, wacht tot overmorgen.*

In a similar way, William of York's antiphon settings were performed in Sarum Rites for royal coronations for centuries. An accretion of meaning echoes through the 16th century rewritten antiphons; William's Divine Office is recast as a Divine comedy of characters who provide a biblical mirror for the stylized images of the ghazal world--garden, desert, winehouse, prison and its supporting cast of characters.

The ghazal-lai format of Divine Office antiphons provided a "play" structure to express William's mysticism and longing for the divine. The private, secular performances of William's Vespers, Vigil, Nocturnes and Matins services were for prelates and ruling class and on those occasions matters of state were dealt with behind the scenes. The fourth Matins verse describes "relations" between Martha, Mariam, Rachel and Liam in double entendre while the seventh responsory describes the discretion, patience and faithfulness of the hosting culture in which William lived.

MV4 / marthe ministerio copulat mariaM rachelis amplexibus fruitur post liam /()

MR7 / fide fuit phinees ut iob mansuetus paciens ut israel ut noe discretus /()

The Breton Lai served as both a pointed commentary on the business deals

conducted on foreign soil and the roles of a subservient host culture.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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[View](#)

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