

## The Love of the Skylark

Sandra Chen

**In a Tortoiseshell:** In this **close-reading** paper written for the Humanities Sequence, Sandra begins with a detailed **analysis** of a poem's text to make larger arguments about its meaning.

### *Excerpt*

The skylark then loses its upward movement but never its joyful manner. Here, Snodgrass diverges slightly from the Occitan text, which reads “s’oblid e·s laissa chazer”—to be more exact than “oblivious” and “drift[ing],” the skylark forgets itself and lets itself fall. These verbs allow for a more direct comparison between the bird and the speaker, who later loses himself and is “chazutz,” or fallen. Unlike the speaker, however, the skylark maintains control and positivity in its descent, choosing to “let [it]self” fall “for all [its] heart is glad and gay.” The lark loses itself not in pain but in its own “doussor,” or sweetness; in this way, its fall indeed resembles a more carefree “drift,” as expressed in Snodgrass’s translation.

However, sweetness twists into desire as the speaker moves from observation to reaction. He begins the transition with the interjection “Ay!” which rhymes with the preceding word “gay”—the same is true in the original Occitan, with “Ai!” and “vai.” The immediate repetition of the same sound creates a forward momentum as the speaker is “seize[d]” by “great envies,” emphasizing the force of his emotions. The exclamation point—the first end mark in the whole poem—also accentuates this passion, as the speaker’s bitter outburst cuts off the skylark’s happiness mid-sentence. The rhyme further reinforces this sudden subversion of joy into jealousy, as it effectively turns grievance into a distorted echo of contentment.

The speaker then reveals the lady of his heart, the object of his passion. He immediately characterizes her as someone “who pays love no return,” establishing the unrequited desire that defines fin’amor. The interjection “Ay!” again marks a significant turn; not only does she fail to “pay,” but she in fact “steals, through love’s sweet theft.” The use of the adjective “sweet” to describe a crime echoes and subverts the “doussor” of the skylark, confounding the bird’s pure heart and the speaker’s corruptive love. The seemingly paradoxical phrase “sweet theft” also exemplifies the irrational and masochistic pleasure of fin’amor derived from unfulfilled desire.

Upon looking into himself, the speaker no longer sees his lady at all. “Her two eyes” become “bright mirrors” as he displaces her being with his own image. The symbol of the mirrors,

a metaphorical culmination of the verbal reflection throughout this *cobla*, reveals that the speaker's *fin'amor* is not truly about the lady at all—with no true identity of her own, she is merely a reflection of his desire. This is made especially clear in the original language when the speaker directly addresses not his lady but the mirror—in other words, his own image. While Snodgrass's translation does not shift perspective, the third repetition of “Ay!” effectively signals the fundamental change toward reflection and ruination.

The final line of the *cobla* reflects back on the poem's opening image, “mirror[ing]” Narcissus's “streams” with the skylark's “skies.” This connection is surprising, as the bird had been a symbol of sweet freedom, not a “captive” to desire like Narcissus and the speaker himself. No mention of the sky appears in the original text, which only parallels Narcissus with the speaker as they lose themselves, with the Occitan verb “*se perdre*.” The translation's reference to the skylark actually offers an antithesis to the original's portrayal of loss: whereas the bird loses itself by forgetting all but its own joy, the speaker loses himself by seeing only his lack thereof.

Through the first three *coblas* of the poem, Bernart demonstrates the self-regarding and self-destructive quality of *fin'amor*. Lost in the reflection of his desire for the lark's joy and his lady's love, the speaker finds his own demise. Like Narcissus, as alluded to in the third *cobla*, he is obsessed more with the appearance of his suffering than the character of his beloved. In the rest of the poem, he further depersonalizes his lady, claiming that she “acts as any woman would” after pronouncing women “all the same.” In reality, it is the speaker who falls as any troubadour lord would, with his eyes so lost in desire that he loses all joy. The skylark, however, is a foil to the speaker and all courtly lovers, falling with its heart so lost in joy that it loses all desire, a symbol of unrestrained love antithetical to the formal ethics of *fin'amor*.

*Author Commentary*

Sandra Chen

This paper was my last of five written for the first semester of the Humanities Sequence (HUM216-217). The assignment was the same for all five: a close reading of a passage of our choosing from the works we read. This was a pretty new type of writing for me, and I really enjoyed learning to investigate poetry and prose on such a micro level. For this paper, I chose an excerpt of “Can vei la lauzeta mover” by Bernart de Ventadorn, a poem in the troubadour tradition that I found to be rhetorically and emotionally rich. Given that this was my last assignment for the class, I wanted to challenge myself to somehow push my writing further. As all of my previous papers had dealt with only the English translation of the texts we read, I decided this time to try and bring in some analysis of the original language—in this case, Occitan.

I should note that I cannot read Occitan—I had never even heard of the language beforehand. It is, however, a Romance language, and with my study of French, I could make out certain grammatical structures and cognates. To grasp the meaning of the Occitan in comparison with the translation, I met with Professor Heller-Roazen to discuss the rhetorical features that interested me in the English passage and to see how they appeared in the original poem. Through that office hours appointment, I discovered some interesting deviations between the original and the translation, as well as some surprising parallels. As I began to outline my paper, I sent an email to Professor Heller-Roazen with a few more specific translation questions. With his guidance, I began to write a paper analyzing the poem’s self-centered depiction of fin’amor, the central subject of the troubadour tradition at-large, supplemented with references to the original language to add dimension and complexity.

The bridging of two languages was key to my approach, but my final paper still used the English translation of the poem as the primary focus, the Occitan as secondary. As with all of my HUM papers, I combed through the passage line by line, trying to understand how each small choice contributed to the development of meaning. My paper closely follows the course of the poem, citing each notable word and phrase so as to interpret how they all fit together. I identified a great number of interesting rhetorical choices, from rhyme and repetition to juxtaposition and allusion, which together created a complex portrait of fin’amor. Ultimately, I was less interested in imposing a singular strict thesis onto my reading of the poem, and more invested in finding a path through the poem that traced its nuances on the scale of individual words, in both English and Occitan.

*Editor Commentary*  
Rosamond van Wingerden

In this paper, Sandra strikes a neat balance between the two key aspects of a close reading assignment: detailed analysis of the text and a broader argument supported by that analysis. Beginning with a line-by-line reading of the text, Sandra first provides ample evidence that will be used to support her argument, examining the poet's word choice (in the original Occitan and in translation), stylistic devices such as repetition, and symbolism. She then draws on that evidence to make a broader point, demonstrating how the poem's formal features contradict what might be an immediately obvious reading of the text and point to a more nuanced interpretation. Finally, Sandra considers the poem's relationship to its literary context, generalizing from the speaker of this text to the protagonists of the troubadour tradition. Starting with word-by-word analysis of a single text, Sandra arrives at a sophisticated argument.

Sandra's paper is an exemplary response to a close reading prompt. Unlike many papers, close reading assignments don't necessarily involve joining a "scholarly conversation." Instead of searching the library for secondary sources, the writer gathers evidence by analyzing the text word by word and line by line, taking note of any striking features without yet attempting to fit them into a thesis. Then she reviews her evidence, observing the themes and patterns that emerge. Only now does she begin to think about a broader argument for her paper. Sandra's paper models that process, beginning with close textual analysis and building up to a larger claim.

Close-reading papers often risk running into one of two problems. First, they may stick too closely to the analysis stage, becoming lists of a text's formal features that stop short of advancing a larger argument about the text. This often happens with authors who are skilled at analysis but lack the confidence to assert their own opinion about the text. If you find yourself in this position, remember that your reading of the text is precisely what allows you to make your own argument. As long as your point is thoroughly rooted in the text, it can be a valid thesis for your paper. The other, more common pitfall is the opposite problem: some authors try to make a sweeping argument about the text, its entire genre or historical period, or vast themes like love or human nature, forgetting in their enthusiasm that their idea is nowhere to be found in the text itself. In this type of assignment, it's important to hew closely to the text and make only claims that you can support with textual evidence. In this paper, Sandra deftly navigates both close reading and thematic analysis to make a compelling argument anchored in the text.

**Works Cited**

Bernart. "Can vei la lauzeta mover." Translated by W.D. Snodgrass, BOA Editions, 1998.

## **Bios**

**Sandra Chen '23** is from Pleasanton, California, and is currently undecided on a concentration within the humanities. At Princeton, she has escaped her comfort zone to try new experiences, from joining theater organizations like the Playwright's Guild to tutoring in prison through the Petey Greene Program. She wrote this essay as a first-year.

**Rosamond van Wingerden '20** is a Comparative Literature major from the Netherlands pursuing certificates in Vocal Performance, Music Theater, Ancient Greek, and Russian and Eurasian Studies. Her research focuses on Russian and Italian opera, and she sings with the Princeton Opera Company on campus. She is also a member of the Edwards Collective. She wrote this as a senior.