



Jaufre# Rudel, his 'distant love', and the death of the distant lover in his vida

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Jaufré Rudel, his 'distant love', and the death of the distant lover in his *vida*

AUGUST 23, 2021 | By Gregory Nagy

2021.08.23 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In the medieval textual tradition recording the songs of a troubadour named Jaufré Rudel, who dates back to the 12th century BCE, we read references in his Song 5 to 'a distant love', *un amor de loing*, experienced by the poet in the melancholy role of being in love—hopelessly but joyously—with an unidentified lady who is unattainable, beyond reach. Such an unreachable love, as we read in his Song 2, is 'a love from a distant land', *amors de terra lonhdana*. In a medieval text dating from a later period, the 'distant love' of the troubadour is explained in terms of a love story about the life and times of Jaufré Rudel himself in the role of the distant lover, who, as we will see, literally dies for love. But this death of the lover is a happy ending of sorts, since the story pictures the troubadour in a moment of rapture as he dies in the arms of his lady love. She had been unattainable in life but is now embracing him at the moment of his death. In the cover illustration for my essay here, I show a medieval illumination accompanying the relevant text and picturing the same story.



Manuscript illumination, death of the troubadour Jaufré Rudel, From BnF ms. 854 fol. 121v. [Image via Wikimedia Commons.](#)

§1. The story itself is preserved in not one but several medieval texts that cannot be traced back to a single archetype. I show here only one major version, which follows manuscripts “I” and “K” as distinct from manuscripts “A” and “B” (Boutière and Cluzel 1964:16–19):

Jaufres Rudels de Blaia si fo mout gentils hom, princes de Blaia. Et enamoret se de la comtessa de Tripol, ses vezer, per lo ben qu’el n’auzi dire als pelerins que venguen d’Antiocha. E fez de leis mains vers ab bons sons, ab paubres motz. E per voluntat de leis

vezer, et se croset e se mes en mar, e pres lo malautia en la nau, e fo condug a Tripol, en un alberc, per mort. E fo fait saber a la comtessa et ella venc ad el, al son leit e pres lo antre sos bratz. E saup qu'ella era la comtessa, e maintenant recobret l'auzir e-l flairar, e lauzet Dieu, que l'avia la vida sostenguda tro qu'el l'agues vista; et enaissi el mori entre sos bratz. Et ella lo fez a gran honor sepellir en la maison del Temple; e pois, en aquel dia, ella se rendet morga, per la dolor qu'ella n'ac de la mort de lui.

Jaufré Rudel, of Blaye, was a very noble man, prince of Blaye. He fell in love with the Countess of Tripoli, without ever having seen her, because of the good things he heard being said about her by pilgrims who came from Antioch. And he made about her many verses with good melodies but with weak wordings. And because he longed to see her, he took up the cross [= joined the Crusades] and set out to sail the seas. He fell ill in the ship and was taken to Tripoli, to an inn, near dead. The Countess was notified about him, and she came to him—came right up to his bed, and took him in her arms. He recognized that it was the countess, and, instantly, he recovered his sense of hearing and his sense of smell [for smelling her perfume], and he praised God for keeping him alive long enough for him to have the power of vision to see her. That is how he died, enfolded in her arms. She had him buried in the house of the Temple, honoring him greatly. Then she became a nun, that same day, because of the sorrow she felt over his death.

§2. The text of this story, together with the illumination that we saw further above, is saying in a different way what the text that records the actual songs of the troubadour is saying about his 'distant love'. We see here differences in genre.

§2.1. In the case of the songs composed by Jaufré Rudel, the first-person 'I' of the composer may simply take the role of the person who is singing or, alternatively, some role that fits not so much the historical person but rather, say, the generic persona of a melancholy lover. Either way, the composer is technically the *troubadour*—or, to write this French version of the word in the native language of Jaufré Rudel, he is the *trobador*. In previous publications (as, for example, in [Nagy 2016.11.03](#)), I refer to the poetic language of the troubadours as "Provençal," but others prefer a more general term like "Occitan"—or, to say it more simply in French, *langue d'oc*. In this poetic language, I should add, there exists a separate word for 'performer', which is *joglar*, matching the word for 'composer', which as we have seen is

trobador. Just as I use the French version for *trobador*, which is *troubadour*, for *joglar* I will hereafter write simply *jongleur*.

§2.2. Pursuing the point I made about differences in genre, I now turn to the case of the story about our melancholy poet, as I quoted and translated it above. Here the first-person ‘I’ of the composer has been converted into a third-person ‘he’, and a casual reader may be tempted, at first sight, to interpret this ‘he’ as the historical figure identified as Jaufré Rudel, whose life and times can be dated to the twelfth century BCE. Here too, however, as in the case of the songs composed by Jaufré Rudel, we need to reckon with questions of genre. In this case, the form of the story that tells in prose about the death of the poet in love is known as a *vida* or ‘life’ in Provençal poetic language. The *vida*, as the ‘life story’ of a given troubadour, has been aptly described as a prose “prelude” that was recited by a jongleur who would then proceed, after the recitation, to sing the composition of the given troubadour (Boutière and Schutz 1950:xii–xiii; Boutière and Cluzel 1964:viii). This description of the *vida* applies also to a related Provençal prosaic genre, the *razo* (from Latin *ratio*), which was the equivalent of a ‘commentary’.

§3. In such performances, by jongleurs, the actual songs composed by troubadours in some earlier era could be brought back to life again. After a prosaic retelling of the life and times of a given troubadour, with or without further commentary, the jongleur would proceed to sing the songs of the troubadour.

§4. All this is not to say, however, that “troubadours in some earlier era,” as I have just now referred to poets like Jaufré Rudel, cannot be seen as potential jongleurs in their own right. The troubadours whose songs were performed and occasionally even explicated by jongleurs in a later era could themselves have performed as jongleurs in their own “earlier” era. Like any jongleur in a later era, the troubadour himself could perform his own compositions. He too, like a jongleur, could be accompanying himself on a string instrument, and the singing could even make room for dancing, as we see in the illumination that I show below, where ladies are seen dancing to the song of a troubadour—and, potentially, they would be singing along with the troubadour.



Troubadour and dancers. Illumination from the Romance of Alexander, Bodleian MS 264, fol. 97v. [Photo](#) © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, CC-BY-NC 4.0.

§5. The observations I have made here about troubadours and jongleurs stem from a note I once wrote in the book *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Nagy 1990:80n40, 2§50) in the context of analyzing various constructs of authorship as found in ancient Greek poetic traditions (pp. 79–80, 2§§50–51). In my analysis, I was comparing such constructs with parallels to be found in other poetic traditions—parallels that are only typological, that is, not historically related to each other. And among the parallels I highlighted was the Provençal custom, as just described, where a jongleur would recite a *vida* or a *razo* about a given troubadour before proceeding to sing a song composed by that troubadour (again, 2§50n40). I now epitomize the relevant aspects of what I formulated in the course of my typological comparisons (again, pp. 79–80, 2§§50–51):

The appropriation of a historical person by the poetic tradition in which that person is composing can be visualized in the following general schema of progressive phases, constructed from specific examples of performance conventions taken from a variety of mutually unrelated traditional societies (bibliography for the examples is provided in the footnotes for pp. 79–80, 2§§50–51):

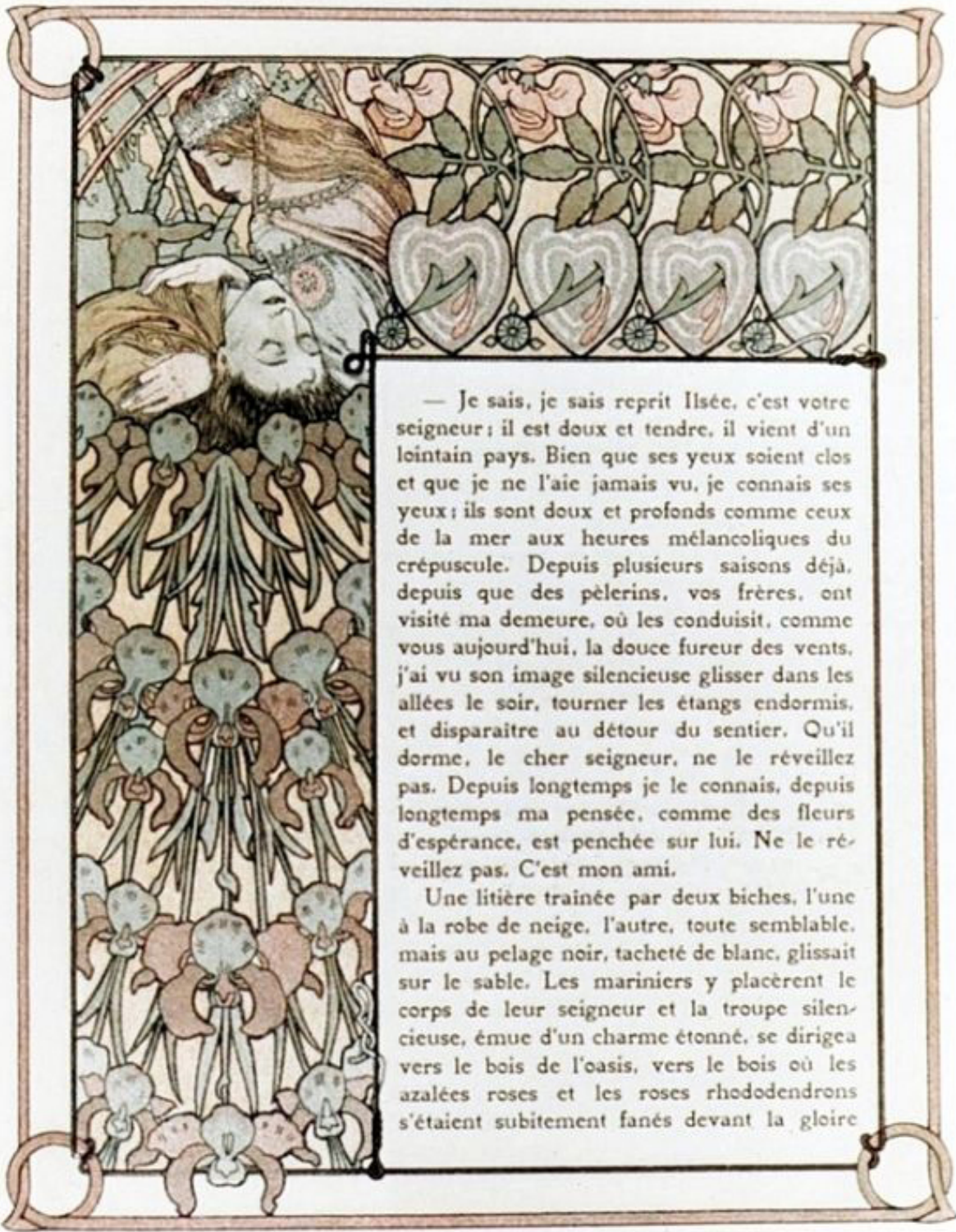
- 1) At a phase of a given tradition where each performance still entails an act of at least partial recomposition, performer “L” publicly appropriates a given recomposition-in-performance as his or her own composition.

2) At a later phase of the tradition, performer “M” stops appropriating the recomposition of the recomposition as his or her own composition and instead attributes it to the predecessor “L”; this attribution is then continued by successors “N” and “O” and “P” and “Q” and so on.

3) In the process of successive recompositions by “NOPQ...,” the self-identification of “L” is recomposed often enough to eliminate the historical aspects of identity and to preserve only the generic aspects (that is, the aspects of the poet as defined by traditional activity as a poet; also by being the predecessor of those who continue in the tradition).

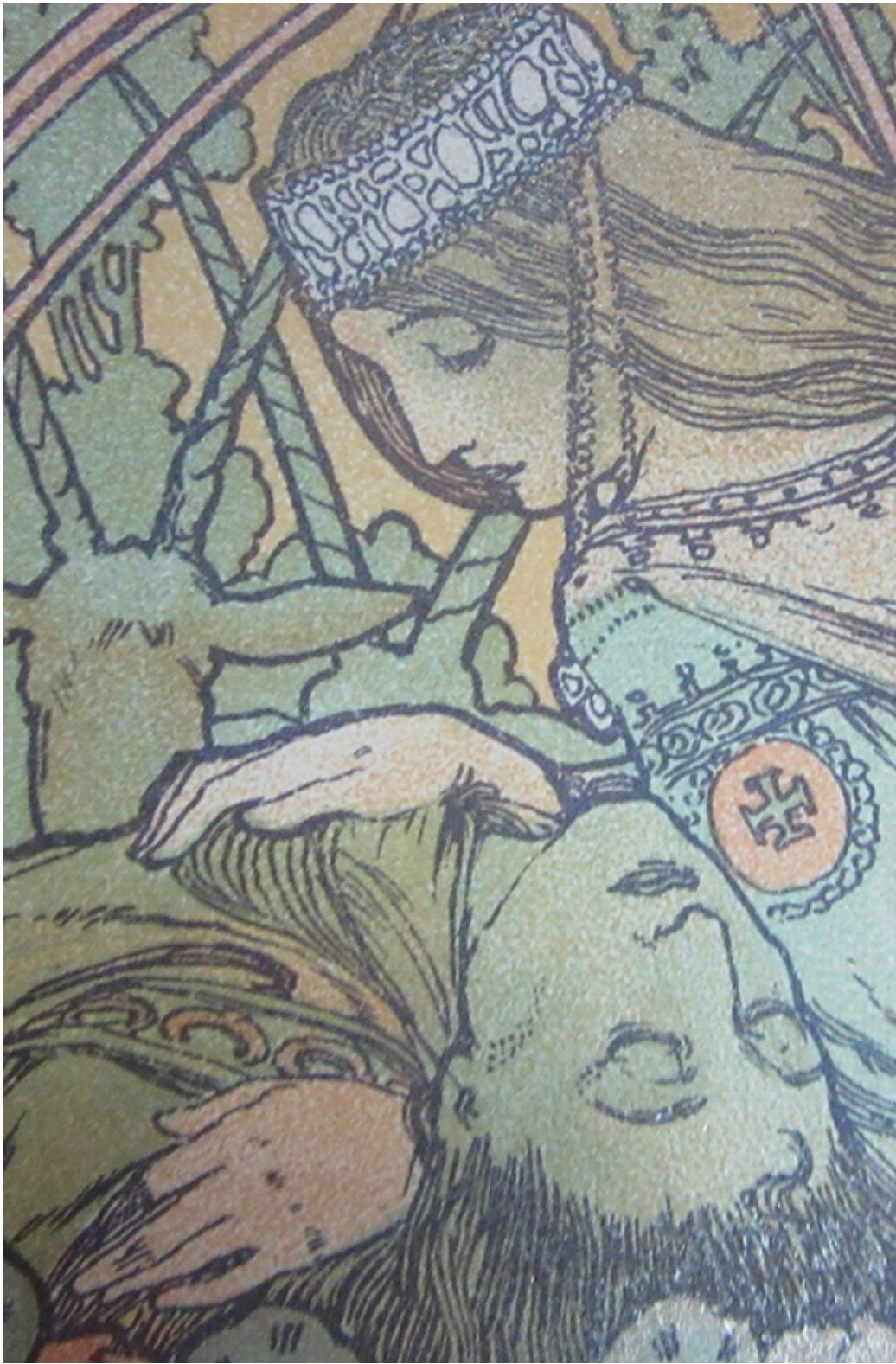
§6. The key to loss of identity as a composer is loss of control over performance. Once the factor of performance slips out of the poet’s control—even if the performers of the poet’s poetry have traditional comments about the poet as a composer—the poet becomes a myth; more accurately the poet becomes part of a myth, and the myth-making structure appropriates his or her identity.

§7. And the myth can continue to be recomposed, seemingly without end. In the case of the mysterious ‘countess of Tripoli’, my own personal favorite example of recomposition is the role of Sarah Bernhardt in the play of Edmond Rostand, *La princesse lointaine* (1895).



— Je sais, je sais reprit Ilsée, c'est votre seigneur; il est doux et tendre, il vient d'un lointain pays. Bien que ses yeux soient clos et que je ne l'aie jamais vu, je connais ses yeux; ils sont doux et profonds comme ceux de la mer aux heures mélancoliques du crépuscule. Depuis plusieurs saisons déjà, depuis que des pèlerins, vos frères, ont visité ma demeure, où les conduisit, comme vous aujourd'hui, la douce fureur des vents, j'ai vu son image silencieuse glisser dans les allées le soir, tourner les étangs endormis, et disparaître au détour du sentier. Qu'il dorme, le cher seigneur, ne le réveillez pas. Depuis longtemps je le connais, depuis longtemps ma pensée, comme des fleurs d'espérance, est penchée sur lui. Ne le réveillez pas. C'est mon ami.

Une litière trainée par deux biches, l'une à la robe de neige, l'autre, toute semblable, mais au pelage noir, tacheté de blanc, glissait sur le sable. Les mariniers y placèrent le corps de leur seigneur et la troupe silencieuse, émue d'un charme étonné, se dirigea vers le bois de l'oasis, vers le bois où les azalées roses et les roses rhododendrons s'étaient subitement fanés devant la gloire



Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), the death of Prince Jaufre. From a retelling of the Rudel story by Robert de Flers, *Isée, Princesse de Tripoli* (1897), p. 121.



Mucha's poster of Sarah Bernhardt in Edmond Rostand's play *La princesse lointaine* (based on a retelling of the Rudel tale by Robert de Flers), 1895. Photo, Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain.

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PP. See Nagy 1996b.

PH. See Nagy 1990.

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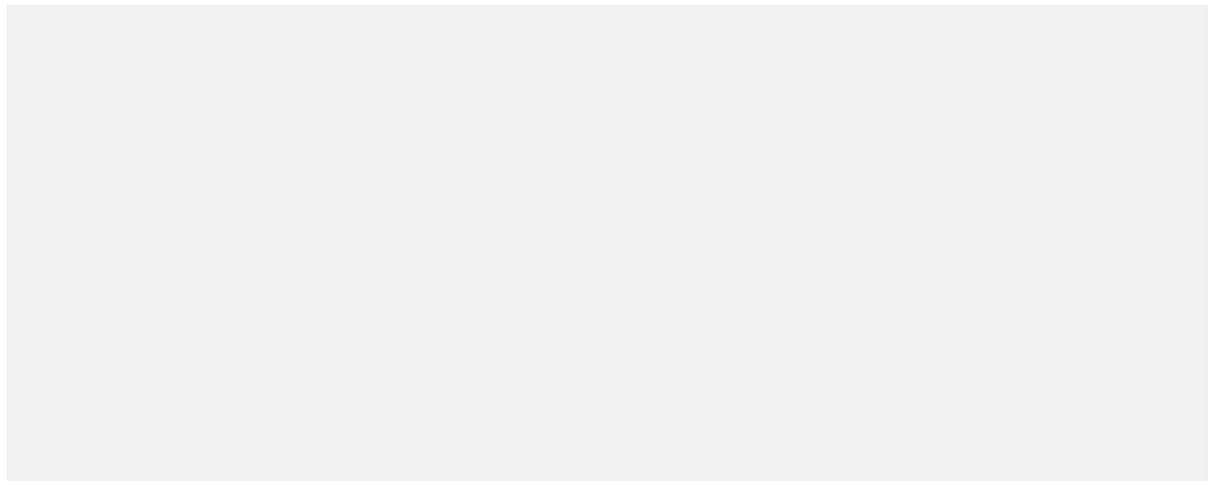
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