

Chapter 9 Primary Source Activity

Though few women had the opportunity to be educated, a small group of women poets had a chance to be heard (textbook pages 225–226). Among them were women troubadours, a small group of aristocratic women in southern France. Their poems are more personal, giving a picture of their real lives. One popular form of lyric was the tenson—a dialogue between two speakers, usually a man and a woman. Here is part of a tenson in which Maria de Ventadorn (born about 1165) exchanges opinions with the troubadour Gui d’Ussel. ♦ *As you read, notice what the poem reveals about the attitudes of medieval women. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

A Woman Troubadour Speaks Her Mind

Gui d’Ussel, because of you I’m quite distraught,
for you’ve given up your song,
and since I wish you’d take it up again,
and since you know about such things,
I’ll ask you this: when a lady
freely loves a man, should she do
as much for him as he for her,
according to the rules of courtly love?

Lady Maria, tensons
and all manner of song
I thought I’d given up,
but when you summon, how can I refuse to sing?
My reply is that the lady
ought to do exactly for her lover
as he does for her, without regard to rank
for between two friends neither one should rule.

Gui, the lover humbly ought to ask
for everything his heart desires,
and the lady should comply with his request
within the bounds of common sense;
and the lover ought to do her bidding

as toward a friend and lady equally,
and she should honor him the way
she would a friend, but never as a lord.

“ . . . for between two friends
neither one should rule.”

Lady, it’s embarrassing
to argue that a lady should
be higher than the man with whom
she’s made one heart of two.
Either you’ll say (and this won’t flatter you)
that the man should love the lady more,
or else you’ll say that they’re the same,
because the lover doesn’t owe her anything
that doesn’t bear love’s name.

Source: *The Women Troubadours*, by
Meg Bogin (W.W. Norton, 1976).

Questions to Think About

- As the poem begins, why does Lady Maria say she is upset with the other troubadour?
- How does Gui d’Ussel answer when Lady Maria asks him about equality in a relationship?
- Identifying Central Issues** What does Lady Maria seem to be saying about the equality of a man and a woman in a relationship? (Keep in mind that she is of higher social rank.) Why is this discussion unusual for the Middle Ages?
- Activity** Think of your own attitudes on equality and then plan an imaginary dialogue between male and female friends about how people ought to treat each other in a relationship. Write a short dialogue, in verse if you want.