The Lady from Plazensa

Una domna leyal
Sai icu qu’es de Plazensa
Mas estai en Valensa
   Per mielhs gardar Sanhflor
   E Mirabel que te,
   E Cortezo, per què
Gazanha Benaven
   E Belhjoc franchamen,
E ten Guarda e Verona mandan,
E·s bateget lo jorn de sant Johan.¹

IN THIS STANZA, Aimeric de Peguilhan (10, 40: Per razo natu­ral) describes and praises a lady, otherwise unidentified, but in all likelihood a patroness: “I know a loyal lady who is from Piacenza, but she lives in Valensa, in order better to guard San Flor and Mirabel, which she holds, and Cortezo; therefore she wins for herself Benaven and Belhjoc freely, and she holds in fee Garda and Verona. She was baptized on Saint John’s Day.”

Since proper names often serve to localize and identify the innumerable vague “ladies” that people the Provençal lyrics, it might seem that we could hardly fail to discover what lady it was that Aimeric had in mind here. We know where she is
from, when she was baptized, where she lives, and the names of seven other towns or castles that belong to her. Unfortunately, even a superficial probing among these names reveals that they are less informative in a literal sense than one might expect. This is no new discovery of mine, but a conclusion reached by various scholars long ago. The place names are genuine, and every one can be pinned down to a specific city or town, though sometimes it would be hard to say which of several similarly named localities is meant; but no matter which choices we make, we find that it is impossible to relate them all to any historical person or family. No real lady could conceivably have been connected with all these places. Why, then, did the poet name them as belonging to her?

Writing in 1899, Nicolà Zingarelli answered this question. First he went through the list of names, localizing each in the most likely fashion; then he added:

... senza che alcuno di questi sia allusivo a rapporti reali con la dama. Quando il poeta dice che guadagna Benevento, e tiene Garda, e comanda in Verona, non bisogna credere che ella possedesse queste città: come quando il buon predicatore rimproverava ai suoi uditori perché andavano tutti a Piacenza e nessuno a Verona, non voleva dire che vi andassero davvero! E così dove il poeta dice che la sua dama si battezzò il di di san Giovanni bisognerà intendere un’allusione a gioia, gioia, se non a quello speciale significato di “grazioso” che annotavano gli ecclesiastici e teologi, e Dante stesso, al nome di Giovanni.²

The cities, therefore, are set down in these verses, not for themselves, but only for the sake of their names. If the lady is said to be from Plazensa, it is because she is pleasing (plazen).
She lives in Valensa only in the sense that she is worthy (valen). The other names suggest other attributes of the lady: San Flor ("holy flower"); Mirabel ("fair glance"); Cortezo ("courtesy"); Benaven (perhaps "benevolence"); Belhjoc ("good manners"); Garda ("prudence"); Verona ("sincerity"). In short, this list of place names is nothing but a series of puns, whose purpose is to suggest various good qualities of the lady in question.

Aimeric de Peguilhan was not the first to employ this device, nor is he the best known practitioner of it. Peire Vidal, in the poem Tant an ben dig del Marques (364, 47), says this about another lady (probably Azalaïs of Montferrat, married to Manfred of Saluzzo):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Que fag e dig e parvensa} \\
\text{A de Monbel e d'Argensa} \\
\text{E de Monrozier color} \\
\text{E sa camb' es de Valflo}r.
\end{align*}
\]

In his edition of Peire, Anglade renders this: "dans ses actes, dans ses paroles et dans son maintien, elle ressemble [aux dames de] Montbel e d'Argence, elle a la couleur de celle de Montrosier et sa maison est de Valfleur." 4 De Bartholomzeis rejects this interpretation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I due editori stampano bensi i nomi di luogo con la maiuscola, ma si direbbe non abbiano afferata la ragione della menzione di essi... In realtà si tratta anche qui di giochi di parole: "Monbel" (Mombello del Monferrato) e "bello"; "Argenza" (Argence, sul Rodano... o Argenta nell' Emilia) e "gent" gentile; "Monrosier" (il Monterosa: "rosa" la pianta) e "color roseo"; "Valflor"... e "fiore." 5
\end{align*}
\]
The reason why De Bartholomaeis uses the expression “si tratta anche qui di giuochi di parole” is that he takes an earlier passage (lines 1–8) of this poem in the same way:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tant an ben dig del marques} \\
\text{Joglar truant e garbier,} \\
\text{Que tuit en son vertadier,} \\
\text{Qu’ieu no sai que m’en disses;} \\
\text{Pero sua es valensa,} \\
\text{On bons pretz nais e comensa,} \\
\text{E i renovela valor} \\
\text{E n fai dir vera lauzor.}
\end{align*}
\]

Speaking of line 5, De Bartholomaeis says:

Tanto il Bartsch quanto l’Anglade stampano “valensa” col v minuscolo. Non già che qui si tratta della Valenza del Monferrato, e tanto meno di qualcuna delle altre Valenze d’Italia e degli altri paesi. Il nome della cittadina che rientrava ne’ domini del Marchese, serve al trovatore per un gioco di parole (“valen”): uno di que’ bisticci di cui, in questo e in altre poesie, P. V. fa addirittura un abuso.

Likewise, De Bartholomaeis sees a punning allusion to a city in these lines (21–24) of the same poem:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{E m fier al cor ses falhensa} \\
\text{Ab un cairel de plazensa} \\
\text{Fabregat el fuec d’amor,} \\
\text{Temprat de douxa sabor.}
\end{align*}
\]

“She strikes me in the heart with a dart from Piacenza (or a dart of pleasure).”
Torraca, writing in 1901, anticipates De Bartholomaeis in taking Valensa (line 5 of this poem) as a place name:

. . . Era costume di questo trovatore far giochi di parole con nomi di luoghi; qui gioca sul nome della città di Valenza, tra Casal Monferrato e Alessandria, e sul nome astratto valenza, che in provenzale significa valentia, e più sotto giocherà in simil modo.7

"Più sotto" refers to lines 37–40 (Monbel, Argensa, Monrozier, Vallflor), which we discussed above. Torraca does not see a pun in line 22, "Ab un cairel de plazensa," which he translates simply "con un dardo di piacere."

Avalle, the most recent editor of Peire Vidal’s poems, agrees with Torraca and De Bartholomaeis about the punning allusions in lines 37–40, but he specifically rejects De Bartholomaeis’s use of capital letters in lines 5 and 22, and takes both valenza and plazensa as abstract nouns.8 I think he is wrong on these two points, but these are hardly matters that one can prove or disprove.

In another poem, Pus ai ubert mon ric thesaur (364, 38), Peire Vidal offers a whole catalogue of place names which both De Bartholomaeis and Avalle interpret as puns, though they disagree with each other and with earlier editors (Bartsch, Anglade, Torraca) as to whether certain specific expressions are place names or not.9 Also, De Bartholomaeis believes that all the places named (even the most unlikely-sounding ones, like Esquiva-mendics and Melhs-m’en-veriha) really did exist, while Avalle feels that Peire invented some of the names to make his point; he adds, however, "ma la questione è oziosa." Anglade does not comment on the names except
insofar as he tries to identify them one by one; the presumption is that he took them quite literally as places owned by or connected with the persons mentioned in the poem.\textsuperscript{10}

In three stanzas, Peire piles up place names in praise of a lady, in whom Avalle sees once more Azalaïs of Saluzzo. Here are some of the pertinent verses:

\begin{verbatim}

Per sieu tenh Vertfuelh e Monlaur
E servo·l plus de cent castell
E tres ciutatz ses tot revell;

Color fresc'a ab cabelh saur
Et anc non obret de pinzell,
Mas Mongalhart e Daurabell
Li platz qu'a sos ops retenha.
Beljoc no vent ni empenha,
E mi fai Montamat tener
E Bon-repaus per miels jazer;
E per m'amor platz l'Ostals-rics
Et es sieus Esquiva-mendics;
Et al marques non es destrics,
Si·m dona Segur e Clavai
E a liei Cardon' e Monjai.

By themselves, Vertfuelh and Monlaur might not appear unusual; but in context with all the names that follow in the next stanza, it seems likely that they are intended to give the idea of a triumphal wreath ("green leaf") and \textit{laur} ("laurel"). Here is Anglade's translation of lines 37–48:

Elle a une couleur fraîche avec une chevelure blonde sans s'être jamais servie du pinceau; mais il lui plait de garder pour
elle Montgaillard et Daurabell. Elle ne vend ni ne met en gage Beaujeu, elle me fait tenir Montamat et Bon Repos pour mieux coucher. Pour mon amour lui plaît la Riche Maison (ou Hostalrichs), et Esquive-Mendiants lui appartiennent; et ce n'est pas un embarras pour le marquis [de Montferrat] s'il me donne Ségur et Clavai et à elle Cardona et Monjai (Monjoic?).

There is no special comment on any of this, though in the glossary, Esquiva-mendics is explained "nom d'une localité imaginaire." It seems perfectly clear, however, that all these places, whether real or not, are mentioned for the sake of their names alone. The lady does not use a brush (for makeup); she keeps Montgalhart and Daurabell for her use—galhart ("gay," "merry"); daurar ("to gild"); bell ("beautiful")—and evidently needs no other cosmetics. She does not sell or mortgage Beljoc (probably "good manners," as I suggested for Aimeric de Peguilhan, though, of course, joc can mean many things). She lets me hold Montamat and Bon-repaus—amat ("beloved"); bon-repaus ("good rest"), with the added clarification per miels jazer. For my sake she likes Ostal-ric ("rich dwelling"), and Esquiva-mendics is hers—esquivar ("to avoid, refuse"); mendic ("poor," " miserly," " perfidious"). Segur is "sure," "safe," and Clavai perhaps connected with clavar ("to lock"). Cardona suggests car ("dear") and don or dona ("gift"), while Monjai is "Mount Joy."

The rest of this poem, particularly stanza VI (lines 61-72) is so obscure and has been interpreted in so many ways that it does not make a very convincing instance of the punning use of place names, although that is how Avalle and De Bartholomaeis take it. Apparently Peire Vidal has turned from
praising his lady to attacking Marquis Manfred Lancia (Lanz’aguda):

E Lanz’aguda tegna·l Maur,  
Ab Dur-os et ab Negra·pell,  
E Trencan-nut e Mal-coutell  
E Crebacor e Compenha  
E Roignas ab que s’estrenha.  
Mal-matin conques e Mal-ser,  
Quan det trega per pauc d’aver.  
Sicus es Villans e Montantics,  
Malas-meissos e Viels-espics,  
E Cava-dens e pueis Lombrics,  
E Cordolors e Fastic-fai  
E Malamortz e Vida·l-trai,

Anglade prints many of these expressions with small letters and takes them for common nouns, which he translates as best he can. Places are known with names like some of these, and Avalle lists them. Others may have been fanciful inventions of the poet. The sense of several of the names is obvious: crebacor ("heartbreak"); Compenha ("mud") (cf. compenh) and, of course, Compiègne; Roignas suggests ronha ("itch," "filth"); Mal-matin and Mal-ser ("bad morning" and "bad evening"); Villans ("rustic," "boor"); Montantics ("old") (antic); Malas-meissos ("bad harvests"); Viels-espics ("old cars of grain"); Cava-dens ("tooth-hollower"); Lombrics ("worms"); Cordolors, cor ("heart") and dolor ("pain"), the compound usually taken in the sense of "compassion"; Fastic-fai ("make-disgust"); Malamortz ("bad death"); Vida·l-trai ("take his life").
These are the two poems in which Peire Vidal makes the most obvious use of place names for the purposes we are discussing. In fact, these are the only two I can find that contain clear instances of such puns.

Among the other troubadours, similar usages are less common than I had at first supposed. I have come across only three or four other cases, and not all of those are beyond contradiction. Here, for example, is a stanza (lines 13–24) from Peire Guilhem de Luserna’s poem Qi Na Cuniça guerreja (344, 5):

E qill mou guerra ni tenza  
Non cosel c’an en Proenza  
Dompnejar,  
Qe ben poira semblar  
Folz, e portar penedenza  
Per la soa malvolenza,  
Don m’anpar;  
Pero de Luzernas gar,  
C’orgoill ni desconoiszenza  
No i troban luec ni guirenza,  
Quil affar  
De lai son tuit de Plasenza!

De Bartholomaeis has this comment: “I nomi di ‘Proenza,’ ‘Luzerna’ e ‘Plasenza’ non contengono, come alcuni critici hanno creduto, allusioni geografiche, ma sono addotti puramente per giuochi di parole.” Proenza, of course, suggests pro (“good,” “excellent,” “meritorious”); the common noun luzerna means “lamp”; and Plasenza suggests “pleasure.” The editor of Peire Guilhem, Guarnerio, prints plasenza with a
small letter and does not comment on the puns implicit in Proenza and Luzerna. In another poem (344, 3), the same poet says:

per q'eu me voill ab iei tenir
et ab los pros de Proenza.\textsuperscript{14}

Here, the pun is made quite explicit, but the editor does not call attention to it.

In one of the poems of Peire Bremon Ricas Novas, there are these lines (he is speaking of joglars):

\begin{verbatim}
C'un sai de part Plazenssa
    que, si · m consegua,
    per aitan cum val Argenssa
    viu no · m laissaria.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{verbatim}

Plazenssa is not especially convincing as a pun, but Argenssa is surely to be connected with argen ("silver," "money"): "he would not leave me alive for all the money in Silverland."

The same word, argen, was probably in the mind of Torcafol when he wrote:

\begin{verbatim}
Qui · us tolia Vivares,
l'Argentieira e · l Solas,
on lor comtatc mainz orbes,
mesures vos hom lo vas;
que quant Pons-tortz vos passia
e Sainz-Laurens vos vestia,
siatz totz paubres e ras,
que sieus es anquer, si · os plas.
\end{verbatim}
After trying to identify the first three names, the editor (Appel) adds: "Mais est-ce bien de noms de lieux réels qu'il s'agit ici, ou n'est-ce plutôt un exemple de cette sorte de jeu de mots dont parle Tobler dans 'Verblümtter Ausdruck und Wortspiel in altfranzösischer Rede,' p. 2?"  In addition to the argen in Argentieira, the poet is in all likelihood thinking of viure ("to live") or viu ("alive") in connection with Vivares, and solatz ("joy," "companionship") with Solas: "If one took away from you life, money, and companionship. . . ."

And now, finally, two poems by Peire Cardenal. The first is a cobla, or poem of one stanza (461, 96), which appears in the manuscript without any indication of authorship, but among the authentic poems of Peire:

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Domna que va ves Valensa
Dieu enan passar Gardon;
E deu tener per Verdon
Si vol entrar en Proensa.
E si vol passar la mar
Pren un tal governador
Que sapcha la Mar major,
Que la guarde de varar
Si vol tener vas lo Far.
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The editor, René Lavaud, translates thus:

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Une dame qui va vers Valence (vers la valeur) doit auparavant passer le Gardon (doit dépasser "je garde don," ne pas être avare); et elle doit se diriger le long du Verdon (suivre le "vrai don," être généreuse) si elle veut entrer en Provence ("prouesse," excellence). Et si elle veut traverser la Mer.
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("l'Aimer," l'Amour), elle prend le pilote tel qu'il connaisse la Mer Majeure ("l'Amour Majeur," le grand Amour) et qu'il la garde d'échouer si elle veut aller vers le Phare (le Phare est le port de Messine; au fig., le Phare lumineux, le Port du bonheur. Le pilote sûr sera l'amant sincère, le troubadour initié).

In a longer poem, the sirventes Qui s vol tal fais cargar (335, 44, lines 33-35), Peire Cardenal has this to say about certain men of rank:

Aquist ric home non son ges de Valensa
Ans son de Gap e d'Albrac, deforas Fransa;
De Bauzac e de Cruas es lur semensa.

Ces puissants hommes-là ne sont pas de "Valence" (valeur) mais plutôt de "Gap" (jactance) ou d"Albrac" (boue), hors de la "France" (franchise); de "Beauzac" (tromperie) et de "Cruas" (cruauté) est leur race.16

In both of these poems, the wordplay on place names is fairly obvious, but Peire Cardenal does not seem to have used this device anywhere else. Furthermore, as far as I can discover after some searching, this closes the list of Provençal poems containing such puns.

Only six poets, then, indulged in this verbal play to a degree that would make a modern reader aware of what they were doing. The six are: Peire Vidal, Aimeric de Peguilhan, Torcafol, Peire Bremon Ricas Novas, Peire Guilhem de Luserna, and Peire Cardenal. It would seem that Peire Vidal invented this little word game; for his poem seems to be the first in point of time. Perhaps "popularized" would be a better word
since this sort of play on place names, like puns in general, can hardly be said to have been invented. Such things go beyond literature, even beyond writing. But Peire Vidal probably did give this particular kind of pun a certain vogue among his fellow poets; and the ones who followed his lead were also quite close to him in time. All, in fact, were his contemporaries or only slightly his juniors. It seems that all the poems we have quoted here were written between approximately 1195 and 1240. Peire Vidal was a popular poet. His poems were well known and his metrical forms widely imitated. It is not surprising that a mannerism like this one, appearing in the songs of so influential a poet, was also the subject of a certain amount of imitation.

The actual place names used for this purpose reveal some imagination now and then, but Valensa and Plazensa keep cropping up again and again, not to mention Beljoc and the towns based on the word argen. Perhaps it was the limited number of real localities available for punning references that kept other poets from indulging in Peire Vidal’s game. Rather than declare that their ladies too were from Valensa or Plazensa, they decided to praise them in other ways. All in all, the decision, conscious or unconscious, was a wise one, because the joke was beginning to wear a little thin.


6. Quoted from Avalle’s text, p. 107. All the poems of Peire Vidal will be quoted in the reading of Avalle.


10. Anglade, Number xlv, p. 143. Ernest Hoepffner, in his posthumous *Le Troubadour Peire Vidal* (Paris, 1961), pp. 140-41 and 171 ff., agrees fundamentally with Avalle and De Bartholomaeis that Peire is punning on place names both here and in the poem *Tant an ben dig del Marques*; as one might expect, there is some disagreement on details.


12. Avalle, pp. 294 ff.; De Bartholomaeis, loc. cit.; Hoepffner (pp. 172 ff.) takes a number of the “place names” as common nouns.


16. *Revue des langues romanes*, XXXIV, 20. The article by Adolf Tobler to which Appel refers here was reprinted in an expanded version as an “An­hang” to Tobler’s *Vermischte Beiträge* (Leipzig, 1906), II, 211–63. In this article, Tobler brings together a large number of puns and other bits of word­play from Old French, including some like the ones we have been considering in Old Provençal. By way of preface, p. 214, he mentions in passing a few of the Provençal examples that we have cited, as well as some from other languages. There is, I think, little likelihood that there was any influence from our Provençal poets on these other writers; and most if not all of those named by Tobler are somewhat later in time than our poets. The place names cited by Tobler from Old French are: Blangy, Monpansier, Bauliant, Bordeaux, Chanteleu, Clugny, Ronchères, Roncheroles, Cornouaille, Empire, Femenie, Gales, Matcelon, Mentenai, Niceroles, Niort, Noyon, Tremblay, and Vaucelles. In general, these seem to me less convincing as puns than our Provençal examples.


18. Ibid., p. 113.

19. See, for example, in I. Frank’s *Répertoire métrique*, I, 111 ff., the number of poems that have the same metrical form and rimes (al, ir, ieu, en) as Peire Vidal’s poem *Anc no mori per amor ni per al* (364, 4).