

Nothing is so romantic as the mysterious group of Medieval poets known collectively as the Goliards. They are sometimes called the Wandering Scholars, or the Clerici Ribaldi. There are many theories about who these poets were, and what precisely started the movement of these wanderers. The Goliards belong to the 11-12th centuries, and were variously monks, at least nominally, or students, or youthful drop-outs, who wandered from town to town, university to university, and pub to pub, composing poems and singing them in exchange for the comforts of life, such as wine, or perhaps just because they felt like singing. One theory is that Peter Abelard (1079-1142) was the original Goliard, and in his passionate youth he turned his monkish attention to more earthly matters, such as his love for Heloise. Some of the love poetry in the collection of Medieval poems known as the *Carmina Burana* may well be by Peter Abelard, and originally sung to Heloise. It may have been this escapade that prompted Bernard of Clairvaux to give him the nickname of Goliath, for this very Philistine activity, and this may also have been responsible for the story of a mythical Bishop Goliath, to be identified with Abelard, who was said to be the father of the Goliardi. The mystery will probably never be solved, and the more earthly poems of Abelard never be precisely identified. His later hymns, also written for Heloise (but when they both were safely tucked away in monasteries), are about very heavenly concerns, such as Sabbath Vespers.

The Goliards were youthful students, and were concerned with earthly matters such as are familiar to students of every age and place. Poems about money, usually the lack of it, food, wine, women, love, the springtime (probably written in winter term), gambling, or the foibles of mankind appear in scattered manuscripts. Devout churchmen were horrified at the wanderers; in fact, wandering had long been, for most monks, a diabolical activity. St. Benedict, in his *Rule*, spoke sternly against the habit of wandering, and commented that it was better to be silent about the unhappy subjects of conversation of these *gyrovagi*, as they were known in the 6th century, who *semper vagi numquam stabiles, et propriis voluptatibus et gulae illecebris servientes*. And of course, one was not supposed to be concerned with food and drink either, or dancing and singing and joking, as forbidden by many Church Councils, such as at Narbonne in 506 (*Clericum scurrilem et verbis turpibus jocularitatem ab officio detrahendum*) and at Auxerre in 578 (*Non licet presbyterio inter epulas cantare vel saltare*).

Certainly all the disapproval of the centuries must have made rebellion sweet to these later Medieval scholars, who wandered about telling whoever would listen that *In taberna quando sumus non curamus quid sit humus*, perhaps followed by a series of enumerated toasts to everyone on earth, *bibit miles...rudis...soror...mater...pater...*, ending the lengthy list with *bibit mille!* The latter song sounds very much like an upgraded version of *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*. Such sinfulness was preached against, of course, by such notable men as St. Thomas of Celano, who in the 13th century wrote the *Dies Irae*, that splendid polemic hymn used by Verdi, accompanied by furious kettle-drumming, and by many other composers and singers before him.

Perhaps final exams were on the mind of the poet who sang: *Omittamus studia; / dulce est desipere / et carpamus dulcia iuventutis tenerae; / res est apta senectuti / seriis intendere*. Calamities occurred as frequently to students then as now, and probably caused as often as not by running out of money. In any case, the Goliards attributed to a pagan and capricious *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi* many of their ills: *Quicquid enim florui / felix et beatus, / nunc a summo corruui / gloria privatus*. If *Fortuna* was one power in the universe, another was money: *In terra summus rex est hoc tempore Nummus / Nummum mirantur reges et ei famulantur*.

Many of the songs are rollicking exhortations to sing, such as *Tange, sodes, citharam / manu laetiore, / et cantemus pariter / voce clariore!* And others illustrate why the Goliards were sometimes called *clerici ribaldi*. Love could be gently expressed in poems about spring and maidens. Other poets were far more explicit about their desires: *Ut in lignis / ardet ignis / sic cum subducitur, / sic mens mea / pro te, dea, / fervet et comburitur*, followed by a catalogue of the charms of various bodily parts, leaves us no doubt that the poet was concerned not so much with his heated *mens*.

Still others are really lovely poems about spring and its arrival, and although they may have been meant to celebrate the more lascivious pleasures, they are very attractive on their own, especially in the middle of a Canadian January: *Ecce gratum / et optatum / ver reducit gaudia: / purpuratum / floret pratium, / sol serenat omnia. / iam iam cedant tristitia! / Aestas redit, / nunc recedit / hiemis saevitia*.