

INTRODUCTION

Critical cluster: between gender and genre in later-medieval Sepharad: love, sex, and polemics in Hebrew writing from Christian Iberia

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When the Jews of al-Andalus found themselves, through migration or the vicissitudes of thirteenth-century conquests, living in Christian lands, their composition and consumption of Hebrew writing, both sacred and profane, evolved in multiple ways. Without completely abandoning the models and tastes of earlier centuries, Jews living in or near Christian lands in the later Middle Ages developed a new relationship with Hebrew writing that was at once deeply conservative—their own writing serving as a vehicle of cultural differentiation in contrast to the Christian majority—and radically innovative—transforming the models developed in previous centuries under Muslim rule. In this context, the forms of writing—poetic, exegetical, narrative, polemical—became an essential part of Sephardic Jewish expression as it responded to a host of rapidly shifting models, contexts, and practices. In the midst of this flux, the representation of gender and sexuality, which was in turns both traditional and creative, took on a vital new importance in the exploration of such questions of form.

The five articles gathered in this cluster aim to reflect on the relationship between gender and literary form in Hebrew texts from Iberia written after the fracturing of Almohad dominance in the early thirteenth century, which marked a shift in power dynamics that brought many new Jewish communities to reside in the Christian kingdoms of the north. Although each essay focuses on a different text or author—and all the authors considered here are male, as is the case for most surviving Hebrew texts¹—the underlying questions behind each intervention are how male authors in the later Middle Ages represented male and female identity, sexuality, and gender in Hebrew texts, how those representations differed and changed in different forms of writing, and why they did so. It should be obvious that this cluster is in no way comprehensive in exploring these questions, nor does it intend to be. The editor's goal in organizing this material is merely to raise such questions within a coherent group of texts, and hopefully to open the door to further work on the same issues.

The need for such efforts, however modest, cannot be denied. The study of gender and sexuality in medieval Hebrew sources is still in its early stages, and work exploring the impact of

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¹In poetry, for example, only one poem in Hebrew by a female author is known, that of the (unnamed) wife of Dunash ben Labrat in the tenth century. Some evidence survives of women's letters, petitions, and wills, especially in the Cairo Genizah, and more sources survive from Jewish women in other languages. On the question of Hebrew sources by female authors, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 1–5; and the section on “Writing and Printing by Women” in Tallan, “Medieval Jewish Women” (2006 version).

gender in the Jewish production of literary, artistic, and religious culture continues to be a major desideratum within the various fields dedicated to the study of medieval Iberia. This is in part due to the fact that historiography about medieval Jewish women was very scarce until recently. This lack brought with it a more general lack of reflection on questions of male and female identity, on relations between men and women, and on the construction and representation of gender, whether in historical or literary sources. Given the predominant focus on intellectual history in the various fields of Judaic studies ever since the foundational efforts of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism” or “Jewish Studies”) movement in the nineteenth century, the question of gender in the study of medieval Judaism, whether from a historiographical, sociological, or a literary critical perspective, has always been a marginal one.² While this might seem odd from our current disciplinary perspectives in which, in the wake of the linguistic and cultural turns, the “intellectual” can hardly be conceived without being linked to the “ideological,” and “history” has tended increasingly to denote “representation” rather than mere presentation, such conceptual shifts are themselves relatively recent in the study of medieval Jewish historiography, which has only gradually interacted with the critical insights of other disciplines in the humanities. Even as late as 1990, Hava Tirosh-Rothschild stated in an assessment of the current “state of Jewish studies” that “if medieval Jewish history is to adopt new trends, I suggest that we look to the social sciences rather than to the humanities to find our new models and research tools.”³ The general disciplinary belatedness of many areas of Judaic studies is also a specific critical belatedness in the introduction of gender issues (and other interpretive categories from the humanities) into the historical study of medieval sources.

Nevertheless, despite this belatedness and the overall fragmentary and disparate nature of many of the sources, there has been some very important work on gender within recent historiography. It is useful to signal here, in naming some important examples of this work, the difference between the history of women or men on the one hand, and the history of gender, on the other. By “history of gender,” I mean historical work reflecting on the social, religious, and intellectual construction and representation of sexual identity and difference.⁴ Such historical views can also be differentiated from related theoretical criticism of medieval sources according to the tools and terms of feminism, on the one hand, and queer theory, on the other. While all of these approaches are different, they inform each other and overlap in many important ways, and a truly comprehensive discussion of gender and sexuality in medieval sources would need to take account of each of them individually and in terms of their numerous points of intersection. For reasons of space, only a cursory overview of relevant sources can be given here.

Modern discussions of the history of women in medieval Mediterranean Jewry must begin with Shelomo Dov Goitein’s monumental study of the Cairo Genizah (“store room” of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat), *A Mediterranean Society*. In volume 3 (1978), Goitein offered not only an extensive treatment of questions of marriage and family life, but a specific discussion of “the world of women” as depicted in Genizah documents.⁵ Studies in the 1980s by Yom Tov Assis and Enrique Cantera Montenegro, in the Sephardic realm, and Ivan Marcus and Judith R. Baskin, in the Ashkenazi world, have shared important insights into sexuality and gender norms in Jewish societies.⁶ Baskin has written numerous studies on medieval women’s

²Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 19.

³Tirosh-Rothschild, “Response,” 141.

⁴For a discussion of the implications of such assumptions about the differences between biological sex and social gender, see Gaunt’s remarks in *Gender and Genre*, 10–16.

⁵This discussion was continued by Kraemer, “Spanish Ladies”; and “Women’s Letters.”

⁶Assis, “Double Marriages in Spain” and Assis, “Sexual Behavior”; Cantera Montenegro, “La mujer judía”; Marcus, “Mother, Martyrs, and Moneylenders.” On Baskin’s work, see n. 7, below.

history, including the place of women in the *Sefer Hasidim* and the copying and use of Hebrew manuscripts by women.⁷ In the 1990s, Renée Melammed extensively studied the intersection of gender, conversion, and crypto-Jewry among Sephardic Jews, themes recently taken up by Paola Tartakoff as well.⁸ The entire field of medieval Jewish women's history has been altered by an important study by Abraham Grossman, which is now partly available in English under the title *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*.⁹

Recently, this work has begun to show even more sensitivity to critical categories of feminist and gender studies. David Nirenberg's "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain" has followed up on earlier work by examining conversion in light of specific questions of sexual relations across religious boundaries. Elisheva Baumgarten's *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* has provided a masterful study of women's experiences of family life in Ashkenazi societies. Ron Barkai's *History of Jewish Gynaecological Texts in the Middle Ages*, following up on his earlier *Les infortunes de Dinah*, and Carmen Caballero-Navas's *The Book of Women's Love and Jewish Medieval Medical Literature on Women* and her recent essay "Secrets of Women" have all presented original new work on medical writing about women's issues in Hebrew sources. In taking account of these various sources and the trends of research they represent, Cheryl Tallan has compiled a very useful working bibliography of women and gender in Hebrew sources, which is periodically updated. While not comprehensive, it offers an optimistic picture of the trends in current historiography.¹⁰

In contrast to this recent work, literary criticism has given much less attention to gender and sexuality in medieval and early-modern Hebrew writing, the study of which has been slow to adopt such questions even in comparison to the study of other periods of Hebrew literary and religious history.¹¹ As Tova Rosen and Eli Yassif noted in 2002, "the theoretical questions which preoccupy current literary criticism—discourse and reality, fictionality, theories of reading, ethnicity, power structures, gender relations, sexuality, and others—have hardly been explored in our field."¹² The striking lack of work on gender in medieval Hebrew literature stands out as even more egregious in comparison with the study of other medieval literatures.¹³ For example, the

⁷Baskin, "From Separation to Displacement"; Baskin, "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages" (1998, which reconsiders some of Goitein's material, and 2004, an overview); and Baskin and Riegler, "May the Writer Be Strong."

⁸Melammed, "Sephardi Women" and Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel?*; Tartakoff, "Jewish Women."

⁹The original 2001 Hebrew text, *Hasidot u-mordot*, was reissued in 2003. The English version, *Pious and Rebellious*, translates about three-fifths of the original text. For a full list of sources and original citations, the original should be consulted.

¹⁰Tallan, "Medieval Jewish Women."

¹¹Three contributions within the study of early rabbinical writing are Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*; Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, which concludes with a brief consideration of medieval Jewish ideas; and the recent study of rabbinic gender metaphors by Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor*. Most significant among considerations of gender in modern Jewish letters are the essays edited by Sokoloff, Lerner, and Norich in *Gender and Text*. See especially Norich's introduction, "Jewish Literatures and Feminist Criticism"; and Sokoloff, "Gender Studies." It is telling that the collection edited by Davidman and Tenenbaum, *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, includes articles on biblical studies and early rabbinical writing but jumps seamlessly to the modern period, with only a two-page meditation by Tirosh-Rothschild on the place of gender in the historiography of medieval Jewish philosophy. See "'Dare to Know,'" 107–8. Sokoloff's article in this collection, "Modern Hebrew Literature," provides a point of contrast with this silence about medieval writing, also evident in other considerations of women in Hebrew literature such as Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey*, which says very little on medieval sources.

¹²"Study of Hebrew Literature," 270.

¹³For a lucid overview and bibliography of such work over the last twenty years, see Caviness, "Feminism."

1993 special issue of *Speculum* edited by Nancy Partner, which was devoted to “Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism,” does not include a single reference to Jewish writing or Hebrew sources. While this special issue proved to be a watershed in the field and medieval studies has increasingly drawn from the insights of gender studies over the last two decades, a survey of the most important publications on these subjects reveals a marked focus on English—and to a lesser extent Romance—sources, and an equally marked ignorance of Hebrew writing. Left to itself, the field of medieval Hebrew literary studies has until very recently hardly raised the question of gender in any serious way.

There are, of course, important exceptions. While a few relevant studies were published in the 1970s, such as Norman Roth’s discussion of the “Wiles of Women” motif in Hebrew writing, the treatment of gender began to emerge as a more constant focus beginning only in the late 1980s and appearing with more frequency in the mid-1990s. In 1986, Dan Pagis contributed a sophisticated essay on the representation of women in Italian Hebrew poetry while Raymond Scheindlin offered a useful introduction to the intersection between gender and form in Hebrew love poetry.¹⁴ In 1993, Jacob Lassner’s *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* was a noteworthy innovation in its comparative literary-critical approach to the history of the representation of the figure of the Queen of Sheba, although the medieval material considered in his study is mostly from Islamic sources. More focused on Hebrew writing, Judith Dishon wrote in the following year a useful overview of the representation of women not only in poetry but also in prose.¹⁵ Susan Shapiro and Julia Schwartzmann have also published interesting studies of gender in medieval philosophical and exegetical writing.¹⁶ Although much of the scholarship on gender in the literatures of the Iberian Peninsula has been guilty of the same omissions as the wider field of medieval studies, a few scholars, such as María José Cano, have explicitly worked against this tendency.¹⁷

Despite these and other tentative forays and solitary efforts, it was Tova Rosen’s path-finding work *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Literature* (2003) that offered the first sustained interrogation into the subject; in doing so, it definitively introduced the questions of gender studies into the study of medieval Hebrew literature.¹⁸ Her book has become a touchstone for any discussion of gender in medieval Hebrew letters, as is clear from the diversity of recent scholarship making use of her insights. Despite recent comparative work in the last eight years, *Unveiling Eve* has yet to be matched by any study of similar scope.¹⁹ All of the essays presented in this cluster can thus be said to follow directly in the wake of Rosen’s work. Recognizing the marginal place of Hebrew (and Arabic) sources in the wider field of medieval studies, the contributors to this cluster also share a common commitment not only to encourage work on gender and sexuality in the study of medieval Jewish culture, but also to disseminate knowledge about the Hebrew sources relevant to the study of gender to a wider readership among medievalists in general.²⁰

¹⁴Pagis, “Controversy”; Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death*, 77–89.

¹⁵Dishon, “Images of Women.”

¹⁶Shapiro, “Matter of Discipline”; Schwartzmann, “Gender Concepts.”

¹⁷Virtually no mention of Jews or Hebrew writing is made in the collected studies, Blackmore and Hutchenson, *Queer Iberia*, or Lacarra Lanz, *Marriage and Sexuality*, but see Cano, “El tratamiento de las mujeres.”

¹⁸See also Rosen’s earlier “On Tongues Being Bound”; her brief article, “Literature, Hebrew”; the review essay on Rosen’s work by Matti Huss, “Gender Studies”; and Huss’s earlier “Misogyny.”

¹⁹For some recent work, see Einbinder, “Jewish Women Martyrs”; Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 126–32, and especially “Arabic Poetics”; Hamilton, *Representing Others*, 47–102; and Gutmann-Grün, *Zion als Frau*. For two recent explorations of gender in medieval Kabbalah, see Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*; and Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*.

²⁰The absence of any mention of Rosen’s study from Caviness’s recent retrospective overview, “Feminism” further underscores the need for such interdisciplinary, comparative work.

The title of this cluster, “between gender and genre in later-medieval Sepharad,” is meant to be a direct allusion to Simon Gaunt’s study, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, which was the first work to pose in a serious way the direct connection between the *theme* of gender and the *form* of the medieval written sources that represent it.²¹ This consideration of the conjunction of gender and genre in medieval French literature has been followed by a host of other texts employing a similar lens, both within and beyond medieval studies.²² Nevertheless, Gaunt’s insights have proven particularly fruitful as a model here. The essays in this cluster begin with his observation that “the construction of gender is a crucial element in any ideology, and ... the distinct ideologies of medieval genres are predicated in part at least upon distinct constructions of gender.”²³

As Gaunt and many others have emphasized, “gender” and “genre” derive from the same root, *generis* (declined from *genus*), meaning “kind,” “sort,” or “genus.” The division of semantic labor that associated “gender” with sexual kind in particular and “genre” with literary type came long after the composition of the sources considered here. At their core, the two terms amount to different usages of the same word. The weak distinction between “gender” and “genre” is even more evident in the Romance languages where a single term (Fr. *genre*, Sp. *género*, Cat. *gènere*, Port. *gênera*, It. *genere*, Rom. *gen*, Gal. *xénero*) refers to both the *genre* of written works and the grammatical *gender* of words, and in varying contexts can also refer to the concept of *gender* as a category of critical thought. The significant semantic overlapping of the terms “gender” and “genre” invites reflection on the vital connection between literary form and ideological content, the inevitable intersection of sexual and textual politics. It is the working argument behind the articles collected here that, in Gaunt’s words, “genre cannot be fully understood without a consideration of gender.”²⁴

While Gaunt and earlier critics have explored the term “genre” as a tool of literary analysis, a comment on its meaning here is in order. The use of this term as an organizing concept throughout these essays is a general one, taking “genre” to mean the “form” of a text together with its “content.” Genre here signifies a writer’s use (or distortion) of an accepted and recognized form as the appropriate vehicle for a certain content (e.g. the use of poetic discourse to represent and discuss love, rhymed prose to represent misogynist fiction, non-rhymed prose to discuss philosophical and religious doctrines, etc.). As Fredric Jameson argues, “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public.”²⁵ Each form or combination of forms is understood to be the product of a deliberate choice by the writer for the expression of specific ideological intentions. While any number of such ideological assumptions and intentions—economic, religious, political, or otherwise—could potentially be examined in relation to the form of the text, the interest here is to question how issues of gender and sexuality in particular find expression in different forms of writing. One assumption underlying this questioning is that neither “gender” nor “genre” is a fixed concept, but on the contrary, that both are constructed and modified in different social and religious contexts.

The topics examined in the following essays (misogyny, queenship, homoeroticism, sodomy, love, lust, chastity, virtue, and inter-religious polemical debate) all are jointly concerned with the

²¹A few earlier studies that built on this interplay of related concepts include Brabant, *Politics, Gender, and Genre*; and Nelson, “Gender and Genre.”

²²For reflections on the intersection of the terms and concepts “gender and genre” in the context of other medieval literatures, see Treharne, *Writing Gender*; Weisl, *Conquering the Reign*; and more recently, Poor and Schulman, *Women in Medieval Epic*.

²³Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 1.

²⁴Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 16.

²⁵Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 106.

expression or representation of gender and the ways that such representations conflicted with and determined (or were determined by) questions of genre, form, and the use of texts. The types of writing examined here (poetry, religious polemic, biblical exegesis, *maqāmāt*-style rhymed prose) are not meant to present a comprehensive picture of all relevant genres. They constitute only a sample of the many possible literary and artistic forms that could be compared in their representation of gender and sexuality. The same comparison aimed for here could easily be expanded to include other issues and forms, both written and visual, such as manuscript illumination, liturgical objects and sculpture, historiography, mystical writing, devotional and liturgical poetry, music, and others. Along the same lines, the questions asked here could easily be posed about medieval Hebrew sources from beyond Iberia. Not only could the same approach bear fruit in relation to Hebrew writing from more northern Jewish communities (as Susan Einbinder, Judith Baskin, and Ivan Marcus have already demonstrated), but it could also be used to explore medieval Jewish sources in other languages (Arabic, Aramaic, and the Romance languages) as well as in post-expulsion writing in Hebrew and other languages in the early-modern period. While our analysis would surely be deepened with a wider purview and more inclusive sweep of texts, forms, and periods, the main question pursued here—how does the representation of gender intersect with the genres of Hebrew writing from late-medieval Iberia—would remain the same.

The origins of this collection of essays lie among the unexpected but always welcome fruits of collaborative research. The idea for this cluster emerged from the ongoing work of a four-year collaborative endeavor entitled, “INTELEG: The Intellectual and Material Legacies of Late-Medieval Sephardic Judaism: An Interdisciplinary Approach.”²⁶ This project, funded by a four-year Starting Grant from the European Research Council, covers work completed between 2008 and 2012 by five team members, including Jonathan Decter (Brandeis University), Arturo Prats (Universidad Complutense, Madrid), Javier del Barco (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid), Ryan Szpiech (University of Michigan), and Esperanza Alfonso (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), who is also the Principal Investigator on the project. Conceived initially as a forum to highlight current work by some of the current INTELEG researchers, this cluster has also been expanded to include a related essay by Alexandra Cuffel (Ruhr-Universität Bochum). In addition to the ongoing individual projects of each team member, the INTELEG project will also be highlighted at the upcoming exhibition, “Biblias de Sefarad: las vidas cruzadas del texto y sus lectores” (“Sephardic Bibles: The Intersecting Lives of the Text and its Readers”), which is being organized by Dr. del Barco and will take place from February through April, 2012, at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

The first essay, “Medieval portrayals of the ideal woman,” by Esperanza Alfonso, analyzes the use in late-medieval Bible commentaries (mainly from Sepharad and Provence) of the image of the *eshet hayil* (“ideal woman,” Proverbs 31:10), the subject of an acrostic poem found in the final twenty-two verses of the book of Proverbs. By tracing the changing form and meaning of this image, especially as it evolved after the thirteenth century, Alfonso aims to show how this representation in later-medieval Hebrew exegesis was used not only to express beliefs about gender but more broadly to express different opinions about the meaning of figurative and allegorical language and philosophical rationalism. In particular, she demonstrates that the philosophical and exegetical understanding of matter and form in gendered terms, while based on categories from the tradition of Maimonides and his commentators, did

²⁶More information is currently available on the project website: <http://www.lineas.cchs.csic.es/inteleg>

not follow a single trajectory. Instead, the image of the ideal wife crossed between philosophical and literary texts in multiple ways.

The second essay, “The love poetry of Shelomoh ben Reuben Bonafed: Hebrew poems and courtly love,” by Arturo Prats, turns to the representation of love in the Hebrew poetry of fifteenth-century Aragonese poet Shelomoh Bonafed (d. after 1445). Prats follows how Bonafed’s representation incorporates a generic form that shifts in the fifteenth century, both reworking aspects of earlier love poetry (Hebrew and Arabic) and also inventing a new genre that needs to be understood apart from earlier forms and contexts. By situating Bonafed’s verse not only in context of Hebrew literary history but also more broadly as part of cross-linguistic Iberian literary trends in the fifteenth century, Prats shows that the representation of gender and love in poetry was of a piece with the evolution of genre and form. Equally importantly, he signals the importance of considering Hebrew writing from this period in a comparative, multi-lingual and multi-cultural context.

The third essay, “Ibn Sahula’s *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* as restorative polemic,” by Alexandra Cuffel, focuses on the prose work, *Tale of the Ancient One*, of thirteenth-century Jewish writer Isaac Ibn Sahula. By tracing out the representations of male and female identity in the text, Cuffel shows how Ibn Sahula inverts traditional misogynist imagery found in other Hebrew and Arabic *maqāmāt* (rhymed prose) collections. In this, he uses gender as a critique of fellow Jews of the courtier class in thirteenth-century Toledo and associates maleness with violence and lust while using femininity to represent his own creativity and the purity of the people of Israel. Cuffel’s examination of Ibn Sahula’s innovative *maqāmāt*-style work demonstrates how the inversion of meaning conveyed by gender imagery does not necessarily imply the inversion of generic form.

The fourth contribution, “A Hebrew ‘sodomite’ tale from thirteenth-century Toledo: Jacob Ben El’azar’s story of Sapir, Shapir, and Birsha,” by Jonathan Decter, analyzes the depiction of pederasty in one of the stories of the *Sefer ha-Meshalim* (Book of stories) by thirteenth-century Toledan Jew Jacob Ben El’azar. By comparing the relationships of two men, Birsha and Sapir, with the adolescent boy Shapir, Decter shows how this depiction of male–male relations, in dialogue with both Andalusian and Christian models of male friendship and love, reflects the shifting Jewish views on homoeroticism in the context of the hybrid culture of thirteenth-century Toledo. Decter contrasts the delicate subject of homoerotic imagery with the implicit didacticism of the exemplary narrative to show how Ben El’azar used his prose tale as commentary on acceptable gender roles in friendship and love.

In my own contribution to this cluster, “Converting the Queen: gender and polemic in the *Book of ‘Ahitub and Salmon*,” I explore the role of queenship in a fifteenth-century anti-Christian Hebrew dialogue about the nature of true religion entitled *The Book of ‘Ahitub and Salmon*. I first demonstrate the centrality of the queen in the text as the most important character and the prime mover of the entire plot. Contrasting this with the predominantly male perspective and voice of most religious polemical writing, I argue that the queen both represents Lady Wisdom but also serves as an important counterpoint to the Virgin Mary, constituting a central part of the text’s anti-Christian message. My essay explores how the blending of narrative and exegetical forms in the construction of late-medieval polemical arguments centers around the depiction and defense of female agency.

These studies intersect and overlap in numerous ways. For example, three of the essays (Decter, Cuffel, Szpiech) discuss texts connected with the *maqāmāt* tradition of rhymed prose, but each example offers radically different representations of gender. Both Decter and Cuffel focus on prose texts representing the multi-confessional world of thirteenth-century Toledo. However, while Decter’s study focuses on contrasting notions of male homoeroticism, Cuffel’s analysis considers lust and sexuality within the context of inter-confessional and intra-

confessional polemical arguments. While Cuffel's article and mine both consider prose texts connected with Hebrew polemical writing, Cuffel shows how misogynist imagery could be deployed as the barb of a polemical thrust, while my own focuses on the inversion of a traditionally male discourse of polemical argumentation as a carefully elaborated anti-Christian polemical strategy. Similarly, Decter and Prats both explore the intersection of gender roles and amorous desire, but do so to very different ends. Prats demonstrates the dichotomies of love as both an irrational madness and as the adoration of a perfect, idealized beloved, while Decter sketches the dichotomies of male eroticism as either chaste or sodomitic. While Prats shows the place of the idealized woman within the context of Shelomo Bonafed's constellation of poetic images, Alfonso traces the evolution of the image of the "ideal woman" in terms of shifting exegetical norms in biblical commentary. My consideration of the polemical use of exegetical representations of gender contrasts with Alfonso's study of the juxtaposition of such representations within the context of changing philosophical ideas as well.

Despite their fruitful intersections, the persistent differences among these texts remain significant and it is not the intention of this cluster to erase or deny those differences by over-emphasizing their points of contact. It is thus important to note in that regard that although the title of this collection implies a certain singularity in the Hebrew writing of late-medieval Iberia (a "Sephardic" tradition), this is in some measure a factitious product of our historical categories. The comparison of these texts here is not justified on the basis of a single, shared "Sephardic" identity, but rather depends on an obvious linguistic unity, a partly shared historical context, and a common pool of locally circulated intellectual and religious writing. Also, although thirteenth-century Castile was culturally very different from fifteenth-century Aragon, the writers in both periods and locations shared a common fate of working as Jewish minority groups within relatively similar Christian majority societies. For all their differences, these groups had far more in common with each other than they did with their Jewish contemporaries to the north. While bringing these essays together here does not mean to imply a total unity of culture or experience among different post-Andalusi Jewish communities in Iberia, it is the editorial assumption behind this cluster that a certain cultural coherence, albeit vaguely defined, unites these texts and authors enough to merit linking them here.

In each of these essays, the form of writing serves as a locus for the analysis of larger social representations of gender and identity. By focusing on genre as a fluid concept in the production of medieval Hebrew writing in the Iberian Peninsula after the twelfth century, these studies all contribute to a deeper understanding of Sephardic textual cultures and communities in both theoretical and historical terms. The essays collected here are offered as an invitation to further work on issues of gender and sexuality in Hebrew sources in particular and in Iberian and medieval literatures more generally.

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Medieval portrayals of the ideal woman

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The final twenty-two verses of the biblical book of Proverbs (31:10–31) are written in the form of a complete alphabetic acrostic from *Aleph* to *Taw* and offer a detailed description of the ideal woman, who is portrayed as a capable and industrious wife. This distinct literary unit had a particularly fruitful life in post-biblical times. In this essay, I offer a glimpse into the history of its interpretation, specifically focusing on late medieval readings of the passage. Scholarship in the field often describes the late medieval exegetical tradition on this section in particular—and on the book of Proverbs in general—as fossilized in Maimonides’ philosophical allegory. In addition, and probably as a result of the aforementioned assumption, scholars usually consider that medieval authors disregarded all aspects relating to women and women’s lives, in favour of philosophical categories. The following pages question both of these commonly held views.

Keywords: gender; exegesis; medieval Hebrew literature; women

“What a rare find is a capable wife; her worth is far beyond that of rubies.” This is the first verse of Proverbs 31:10–31, the tenth and last unit in the book. The poem, a complete alphabetic acrostic from *Aleph* to *Taw*, sets out a description of the *eshet hayil* (woman of valour or ideal wife).¹ According to the biblical portrayal, a capable wife is industrious, forward-thinking, wise and pious. Her husband has full confidence in her; she tirelessly provides for her household, gives alms to the poor, and looks to the future cheerfully. Like so many other biblical passages, this distinct literary unit had a life of its own in post-biblical times. The fact that it was a poem with a complete acrostic, and the nature of the female model it presented, stirred the exegetes’ minds and creativity. This essay has a particular interest in late medieval readings of the pericope but offers a brief survey of the earlier and later Hebrew exegetical traditions as well in order to present them in context. The fact that most late medieval commentaries were written by Iberian and Provençal authors means that the main geographical focus of this study is on Sepharad and Provence. Moreover, beyond biblical commentaries, interpretative interest in the *eshet hayil* grew shoots in literature and various other areas of Jewish cultural life. The following pages pay attention to these various manifestations, with an eye toward intersection and cross-fertilization between Jewish exegesis and Hebrew literature. Scholarship in the field often describes the late medieval exegetical tradition on this passage in particular and on the book of Proverbs in general as fossilized in Maimonides’ philosophical allegory. In addition, and probably as a

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¹There are thirteen other alphabetic poems in the Hebrew Bible, namely Nahum 1; Psalms 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; and Lamentations 1–4. In addition to Proverbs 31:10–31, only Psalms 111, 112, and 119, as well as Lamentations 2 and 3, where a transposition of the letters *ayin* and *peh* occurs, are complete. See Klausner, “Acrostics: Post-biblical.” The only medieval author to have treated the acrostic form in detail is the fifteenth-century exegete Isaac Arama. See his *Sefer Mishle*, 107–8.

result of the previous assumption, scholars usually consider that medieval authors disregarded all aspects relating to women and women's lives, in favour of philosophical categories. The following pages will challenge both of these commonly held views.

The rabbinic tradition

Many rabbinic texts have a bearing on the portrayal of the ideal woman as described in Proverbs. Besides scattered passages, there are *midrashim* (collections of interpretations of biblical texts) such as *Midrash Mishle* (Midrash on Proverbs), *Midrash Eshet Ḥayil* (Midrash on the woman of valour), and *Midrash Tanḥuma* that interpret the whole biblical passage in sequence. There have been conflicting claims regarding the time and place in which these anthologies were compiled. Recent scholarship generally considers *Midrash Tanḥuma* to be a ninth-century collection and dates *Midrash Mishle* to the mid-twelfth century, with *Midrash Eshet Ḥayil* appearing later, at the end of the thirteenth.² The compilation of these texts, generally known as *Midreshe Eshet Ḥayil*, thus was in circulation at the same time as many of the biblical commentaries that will be brought under analysis in the following pages.

As for the interpretation of the *eshet ḥayil* in this rabbinic literature, whereas numerous passages consistently interpret the *eshet ḥayil* as a symbol for the Torah, late aggadic (non-legal) *midrashim* tend toward a literal interpretation and identify the qualities and deeds embedded in her description with those held by praiseworthy women mentioned in the Bible.³ Thus, *Midrash Eshet Ḥayil*, to quote only one example, expounds the first twenty verses of the acrostic poem as referring to various women, from Noah's wife and Sarah to the Shulamite and Ruth. These *derashot* praise the biblical characters presented as embodying the virtues of Proverbs' ideal wife of on account of actions they performed for the well-being of their husbands and families.⁴

Early medieval sources

A vivid contrast between literal and predominantly allegorical interpretations of the poem under examination is clearly observable in the first generations of medieval exegetes in the East. Between 960 and 990, the Karaite Yefet ben Eli wrote a remarkably literal commentary on the *eshet ḥayil*,⁵ while his contemporary Saadia Gaon made a clear distinction between the *zāhir*

²In her Master's thesis, "Midrash Eshet Ḥayil," Yael Levine indicates that *Midrash Eshet Ḥayil* appears in printed editions at the end of *Midrash Mishle*, which in her view was probably written by the mid-twelfth century. Since the colophon of the Parma manuscript which contains *Midrash Eshet Ḥayil* points to 1270 as the *terminus ad quem* for its writing, it seems to have been a later addition. See Bregman, "Tanḥuma Yelammedenu," and Levine, "Eshet Ḥayil."

³The terminology used to designate different interpretive approaches to the Bible varies considerably, both in the Hebrew sources and in modern scholarship. In this paper I will refer to the interpretation of the rabbis as *midrashic* or *derash*, that is an interpretative mood that explains the text, intertextually, by relation to other biblical texts, in this case by reference to virtuous women in the Bible or to the Torah itself. One can also look at the double explanation the rabbis offer of the *eshet ḥayil* as an opposition between the literal—reading the text as the portrayal of the ideal wife—and the allegorical—where she would stand as a symbol for the Torah. When understood in this second way, as literal versus allegorical, a distinction is to be made between allegory as propounded by the rabbis and other types of allegories such as philosophical allegory. Since Hebrew terminology as used in the sources also varies, in what follows I will use the Hebrew terms and explain them in notes where necessary.

⁴See Valler, "Who is Ēšet Hayil," 85–97, which surveys rabbinic sources on the *eshet ḥayil* focusing on her identification with Sarah and Miriam. For a full treatment of these compilations see Levine, "Midreshe Eshet Hayil."

⁵Wechsler, "Arabic Translation."

(“apparent meaning”; *nigleh* in Hebrew) of the passage and its *bāṭin* (“inner meaning”; *nistar* in Hebrew).⁶ In his consistently literalistic approach to the *eshet ḥayil*, Yefet ben Eli describes her as a rare, resolute woman who encompasses all virtues. He summarizes the portrayal by asserting that two things are desired of a woman: first, lineage including noble descent, noble parentage, and good stock; second, discernment, including propriety, a generous and contented nature, piety, resolution and skill, for a wife is her husband’s helper. When beauty is added to these qualities, it is not to be seen as dishonourable because she receives it from God. Ben Eli elaborates on her discernment as described in verse twenty-six, “Her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with kindly teaching,” by remarking: “When she speaks, she speaks with wisdom, knowing as well the revealed laws of God in accordance with the disposition of her heart, and so expressing them and instructing the people. This shows that she studies the Book of God and knows its precepts.” All of these qualities, he concludes, are combined in the matriarchs.⁷

In contrast to the aforementioned rabbinic strand which sees in the *eshet ḥayil* a symbol for the Torah, Saadia Gaon identifies her with both the *‘āqil* (“wise man”; *ḥakim* in Hebrew) and the *sālīḥ* (“righteous man”; *kasher* in Hebrew). Hence, in Saadia’s view, the pericope is to be understood as a *mathal* (“allegory”; *mashal* in Hebrew) that provides a guide for the improvement of the body in its literal, most superficial sense, and, by analogy, as a guide for the improvement of the soul and the intellect if one follows its inner meaning. This reading sets out a theory of knowledge that is consistent with Saadia’s philosophical system, where food, clothing and shelter (part of the *nigleh* here) are not obstacles but complements to the love of wisdom and the search for understanding (here described as the *nistar*).⁸

As far as the Western exegetical tradition is concerned, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries Rashi and an unknown commentator whose work was attributed to Abraham ibn Ezra wrote linear commentaries on the book of Proverbs which, respectively, epitomize the early medieval Ashkenazi and Sephardic styles of biblical interpretation. Rashi, who is known for drawing heavily from rabbinic sources, offers a twofold interpretation of the passage: a literal-contextual meaning he describes as *meliṣah* and an interpretation that follows that of the rabbis, and which he describes as *mashal*. The former is merely a paraphrase of the biblical text meant to clarify its precise meaning in context, whereas the latter is a detailed explanation of the allegory identifying the *eshet ḥayil* with the Torah and those who study it.⁹

For his part, the pseudo-Ibn Ezra gives a literal-contextual interpretation of the *eshet ḥayil* with an emphasis on grammar and aesthetics and reads the passage as a portrayal summarizing the ideal woman’s qualities.¹⁰ Like his predecessor Yefet ben Eli, this author notes the purity

⁶Saadia Gaon, *Mishle*.

⁷See Wechsler, “Arabic Translation,” 308.

⁸Goodman, “Saadia’s Ethical Pluralism,” 417.

⁹Note the difference in terminology with regard to Saadia. While Saadia used the term *mathal* (*mashal* in Hebrew) to describe a twofold interpretation of the biblical text (“allegory”) according to its superficial meaning (*zāhir/nigleh*) and its inner meaning (*bāṭin/nistar*), Rashi uses the term *meliṣah* to denote the literal meaning and *mashal* to denote the interpretation of the rabbis. For Rashi’s commentary, see the standard edition in *Mikra’ot Gedolot ‘Haketer*.

¹⁰The commentary attributed to Abraham ibn Ezra was published in 1880 by Driver and in 1884 by Horowitz. In this paper, references are to Driver’s edition. The Qimḥis, a family of Provençal scholars, also wrote literal commentaries on the passage during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although the authorship of the commentary traditionally attributed to David Qimḥi (which only runs through chapter twenty-one) remains a matter of controversy. In his commentary, Joseph Qimḥi (1105–1235) mostly shows interest in grammatical matters and disregards the gender issues involved in the passage. Moses Qimḥi (1160–c. 1230) interprets the Hebrew term *ḥayil* (lit. strength) as *mamon* (wealth) and comments on Proverbs 31:10 as follows: “Who could find a woman who makes profit by means of her wisdom?” He acknowledges her industrious character

of the *eshet hayil*, which he interprets as the purity of the body, meaning that the woman's husband trusts her to keep herself pure and chaste. In addition, she cares for her husband and her household during her lifetime. The pseudo-Ibn Ezra also accords the *eshet hayil* a diligent, independent and industrious character, as she has the initiative to purchase wool and flax from the markets, plant a vineyard with her own hands, and sell her own hand-made products to the merchant. Furthermore, he emphasizes her wisdom and intelligence, although in his explanation of verse twenty-six he perceives her teaching activities as limited to the instruction of young girls and other women.¹¹

Beyond the realm of the purely exegetical and throughout the early Middle Ages, the *eshet hayil* was also a source of inspiration in literature. In an article on the importance of the *eshet hayil* in Jewish ritual, Yael Levine studies several earlier examples of the biblical passage's specific use in liturgical poetry written in the East. Among them is a *qerovah* (a certain type of liturgical poetry) from the first half of the seventh century written by one of the earliest *payyeta-nim*, Yannai, in which the first hemistichs of the *eshet hayil* are inserted at the beginning of every verse. The concept of purity is central to this poem, as is the case with Ben Eli's commentary and that attributed to Ibn Ezra. An anonymous wedding poem found in the Cairo *genizah* written to complement all the benedictions in the evening *'amidah* (prayer) also turns to verses from Proverbs 31:10–31.¹² It is clear, as Yael Levine has indicated, that in addition to its use in eulogies and matrimonial contexts the text was read as a *hesped*, that is, the part of the sermon recited at the funeral service for a woman, a tradition that Levine claims was specifically Sephardic. The practice of quoting verses on tombstones to praise the deceased was also widespread.¹³

The capable wife of Proverbs also took on a life of her own in literature written on the Iberian Peninsula. Following some of the earlier practices seen above, these literary texts set forth specific literal interpretations of the biblical passage. Within this tendency, verses are sometimes used to frame a particular story or cluster of stories. Such is the case in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, a twelfth-century manual for use by the clergy written in Latin by Pedro Alfonso, a Jewish convert to Christianity formerly known as Moshe Sefardi.¹⁴ The author advises his intended readership on bad and good women in chapters eight through fifteen, with a conversation between student and teacher regarding women acting as the general framework.¹⁵ In the *midrashic* vein, a biblical quotation (Ecclesiasticus 25:23) serves as the starting point for an argument developed in connection with the book of Proverbs: the teacher, who does not want to appear lascivious, refuses to provide his student with examples of women's wiles, but the student continues to ply him with questions, noting that no one accused Solomon of lewdness when he discussed women's wiles in the book of Proverbs. Acquiescing to his student's persistent curiosity, the teacher tells him five stories of treacherous women who fool their husbands, often assisted by an older female character. All five tales were well known at the time of the work's composition and can be traced back to much earlier oriental collections. When the student arrives at the decision never to marry, apparently

but indicates it was not her but God who planted a vineyard (Proverbs 31:17), as it was not the custom of women to plant vineyards—in other words, to work the land. For the Qimhis' commentaries, see Talmage, *Commentaries on Proverbs*. Scholars also debate whether Judah and Samuel ibn Tibbon wrote commentaries on Proverbs; the latter is known to have commented on passages of Proverbs in his commentary to Ecclesiastes.

¹¹For this commentary, see *Mikra'ot Gedolot*.

¹²Levine, "'Eshet hayil,'" 340–41.

¹³Levine, "'Eshet hayil,'" 344.

¹⁴While the focus of this essay is on Hebrew sources, reference to the *Disciplina Clericalis* is pertinent on account of its proximity to the literature under analysis here. When it comes to literature, the sources actually defy any clear separation between the traditions in contact. On this proximity see below, 134–35 and 140–42.

¹⁵Alfonsi, *Disciplina Clericalis*, 119–27 ed.; 58–69 trans.

under the influence of the stories' implicit morals, his teacher gently reminds him that there are exceptions to the rule of female treachery, as exemplified in the passage of the *eshet hayil*.¹⁶ The section concludes with a final tale of a woman who uses her own shrewdness to help a good man recover his money from strangers.

In chapters eight through fifteen, then, Pedro Alfonso uses a biblically based backdrop with *midrashic* overtones as a frame in which to insert the philosophical sayings and oriental tales which were making their way into the Iberian Peninsula by the twelfth century. His is also, however, an exercise in biblical exegesis. He reads the representation of women in Proverbs literally as an opposition between good and bad women, although the former are rare, along the lines of a medieval literary debate. The *Disciplina Clericalis* constitutes one of the earliest emblematic examples of what some call a *mudejar* literature whose values, topics, genres and style are shared by Jews, Muslims and Christians throughout the Iberian Peninsula and, by extension, into Provence, with countless manifestations in Arabic, Hebrew and all the Romance languages spoken therein, particularly in the domain of wisdom literature.¹⁷

As had been the case in the East, on the Iberian Peninsula verses from the *eshet hayil* also made their way into Hebrew elegies on women. While, to the best of my knowledge, none of the extant Sephardic elegies systematically quotes all the verses of this specific biblical passage, they do use some to describe the virtues of the deceased. Moses ibn Ezra's elegy in honour of Isaac ben Mashkaran's mother is just one such example.¹⁸ Evidence of the use of verses from the pericope on women's tombstones is only found in medieval Iberia in later periods, but it is reasonable to assume that this practice was also common in earlier times.¹⁹

As a side note it is worth adding that, paradoxically, inasmuch as the exegetical tradition on Proverbs is predominantly Sephardic, evidence of the use of the whole section as a poetic canvas comes not from Sepharad but rather from twelfth-century Ashkenaz, where Rabbi Eliezer ben Judah of Worms, or Ba'al ha-Roqeah, wrote an elegy in response to the martyrdom of Dulcia, his wife, in the form of a verse-by-verse commentary on the *eshet hayil*.²⁰ In accordance with the content of the passage, he describes his wife as in charge of family economics, taking under her protection the students in the *yeshivah*, teaching laws and ritual observances to their daughters, regularly attending the synagogue, stitching parchment, sewing dresses for brides and providing food for weddings. This portrayal is generally seen as accurately describing the specifics of women's particular situation in medieval Ashkenaz.²¹

Maimonides and the post-Maimonidean tradition

(a) *The Eshet Hayil in the Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*

In the late twelfth century, a few passages from Maimonides' *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn* (*Guide of the Perplexed*; *Moreh ha-nevukhim*) brought about, somewhat indirectly, a major paradigm shift in the interpretive history of the *eshet hayil*. Maimonides' understanding of the ideal wife of

¹⁶Alfonsi, *Disciplina Clericalis*, 126 ed.; 67 trans.

¹⁷On this concept and its uses, see, for example, Márquez Villanueva, *El concepto cultural alfonsí*, 262 n. 19.

¹⁸See Moses ibn Ezra, *Shire ha-ḥol*, 1: no. 137.

¹⁹See, for example, two fourteenth-century inscriptions on women's tombstones included in Cantera Burgos and Millás Vallicrosa, *Las inscripciones hebraicas*, 90–91 and 98–99.

²⁰Edited in Haberman, *Sefer Gezerot*, 164–67. Another illustration of this invocation of the language of some of the verses in Proverbs 31:10–31 in Ashkenaz may be found in Jacob b. Solomon of Avignon's account of his daughter's death from the plague in 1382. See Einbinder, *No Place of Rest*, 112–15.

²¹See Baskin, "Dolce of Worms"; Stow, "Jewish Family"; and Marcus, "Mothers, Martyrs and Money-makers."

Proverbs, whom he treats only tangentially, is in line with his overall approach to the book of Proverbs in particular and to biblical texts in a more general sense. In his introduction to the first part of the *Guide*, Maimonides writes that he will explain the meaning of certain equivocal, derivate and amphibolous terms in the Bible, as well as very obscure *amthāl* (allegories; *meshalim* in Hebrew) occurring in the books of the prophets which have both an external sense and an internal one.²² In Maimonides' view, Solomon, to whom tradition attributed authorship of Proverbs, wrote the book in the form of metaphors and allegories whose external meaning contains wisdom which is useful for the welfare of society, and whose internal meaning conceals a philosophical truth. Among allegories, Maimonides argues, there are those in which each term conveys meaning, and those in which the text as a whole conveys meaning.²³ The passage on the *eshet ish zonah* (married harlot) in Proverbs 7:6–21 is the example he adduces for the second type.²⁴ It describes how a young man devoid of understanding is seduced by a married woman. In keeping with the second type of allegory he has established, Maimonides interprets the passage, on the inner level, as “a warning against the pursuit of bodily pleasures and desires.”²⁵ Solomon—Maimonides continues to argue—likens this harlot, who is a married woman, with matter, the cause of all bodily pleasures, an allegory that pervades the whole book of Proverbs. In contrast to his warning against the married harlot, which also runs throughout the book, Solomon ends with a eulogy of the *eshet ḥayil*, her antitype, who in Maimonides' words is “a woman who is not a harlot but confines herself to attending to the welfare of her household and husband.”²⁶

Maimonides revisits the topic of the married harlot and the woman of virtue in Part III of the *Guide*. Here he compares the nature of human matter, which is never found without form, with that of a married harlot, who has a husband but never ceases to seek out other men.²⁷ The married harlot stands for human matter, which is never free and is subject to corruption, while the woman of virtue stands for that special kind of human matter which is excellent, suitable to the intellect, and hence easy to control.²⁸

Maimonides is not the first medieval author to advocate a philosophical reading of the text: his predecessor, Saadia Gaon uses this biblical passage to convey his theory of knowledge as well. However, while both Saadia and Maimonides interpret the inner meaning of the text in philosophical terms, their readings are remarkably different. For Saadia, the *eshet ḥayil* stands for the wise man and the righteous man, while for Maimonides, she stands for the matter of the ideal man. In Saadia's system, the improvement of the body is a necessary component for living in the world, and as such it is retained in the *nigleh*. Maimonides, however, fully familiar with

²²Moses ben Maimon, *Moreh ha-nevukhim/Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, 1: 12; trans. in *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 1: 13 (hereinafter Maimonides, *Guide*).

²³In his translation of the *Guide* into English, Pines uses the term “parables.” I prefer here “allegory” for the sake of consistency.

²⁴The example Maimonides chooses for the first type of allegory is the dream of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 27:12–13). Diamond, “Jacob vs. The Married Harlot,” examines possible motivations for Maimonides' choice and juxtaposition of these two texts, and concludes that Jacob is portrayed in Genesis as the antithesis of the young man who is seduced by a married harlot in Proverbs, both texts hence showing a common concern with man's rejection of bodily pleasures and ascent to perfection.

²⁵Maimonides, *Guide*, 1: 12 ed.; 1: 13 trans.

²⁶Maimonides, *Guide*, 1: 13 ed.; 1: 13 trans. See Klein-Braslavy, “Maimonides' Strategy,” which brings under scrutiny the three types of literary units which are concerned with “woman” in the *Guide*, namely word (*ishah*), metaphor (*eshet ish zonah* in Proverbs 6:26) and allegory (*eshet ish zonah* in Proverbs 7 and *eshet ḥayil* in Proverbs 31:10–31).

²⁷Maimonides, *Guide*, 2: 367 ed.; 2: 431 trans.

²⁸Maimonides, *Guide*, 2: 370 ed.; 2: 433 trans. On the relationship between the two allegories (Proverbs 7 and Proverbs 31:10–31) and both antithetical types of women, see Klein-Braslavy, “Maimonides' Strategy.”

Aristotelian categories, dismisses the improvement of the body in his reading of this passage since, in his view, intellectual growth and knowledge of the intelligibles, that is, concepts grasped by thought, are the ultimate—indeed the only—purposes of human existence.

(b) The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century exegetical tradition

Maimonides did not make additional comments on Proverbs' woman-of-virtue passage. Nonetheless, the Maimonidean model, based on an Aristotelian understanding of matter and form, was to have a far-reaching impact on all subsequent generations of Jewish commentators on the passage not only in Sepharad, but also in Provence, Italy and beyond.²⁹ Beginning in the thirteenth century, Jewish commentators on the pericope incorporate philosophical allegory into their readings of the text, though they dwell on either the superficial or inner meaning in ways that vary significantly. Moreover, some authors ignore philosophical allegory entirely and propose readings based on alternative hermeneutical approaches to the biblical text which either follow tradition or are a product of their own minds.

Reconstruction of the interpretation of Proverbs 31:10–31 by Jonah Gerondi (c. 1200–1263) shows that he explains this passage, and the rest of the book, in accordance with its literal meaning.³⁰ In his paraphrase of the twenty-two verses, Gerondi succinctly portrays the *eshet ḥayl* as a cultured woman in charge of her household who is generous with the poor and fearful of God. On the basis of this literal reading, he places emphasis on the ethical value of the text, according to which the woman appears as the foundation of the house and helps her husband successfully fulfil the Torah and the commandments. Her biblical model is Abigail, who, according to 1 Samuel 25:33, saved her husband and children from David. Gerondi, who studied in France and Provence and gained fame as a moralist within the anti-Maimonidean camp, keeps himself at a distance from philosophical allegory and interprets the passage in line with his ethical doctrine.

Also in the thirteenth century, Zeraḥiah ben Shealti'el Ḥen, who was active in Catalonia and moved to Italy later in his life, wrote a commentary on Proverbs that clearly follows in Maimonides' footsteps. In his view, Solomon closes the book of Proverbs with a beautiful and celebrated *melīṣah*³¹ on the qualities of the ideal woman, which Zeraḥiah very succinctly explains, only to emphasize the fact that this woman is to be equated with good matter obedient to the intellect. According to Zeraḥiah's reading, it was Solomon's purpose to warn man against the pleasures of the body and to urge him to acquire the intelligibles, the true aim of all human existence.³²

Roughly contemporary with Zeraḥiah, the Provençal author Menahem ha-Me'iri argues that the passage can be read according to its *nigleh* as describing the qualities in the ideal wife, or to its *nistar*, where this ideal wife would stand for "good matter with a natural predisposition to receive

²⁹In her article "Gender Concepts," Schwartzmann looks at a small group of Jewish commentators mostly in the post-Maimonidean traditions and examines their views on three gender-related issues, namely the father/mother duality, the personification of wisdom, and, more pertinent to the present study, the "strange woman" versus the "woman of valour" or "ideal woman" prototypes. Pages 196–200 specifically address the latter two issues. More recently, Grossman, *He Shall Rule Over You?*, has considered the representation of and attitudes toward women in the work of medieval Jewish authors, frequently mentioning Maimonides' reading of both the "married harlot" and the "ideal woman," and his influence on later exegetes of the biblical text.

³⁰The manuscripts that have transmitted Gerondi's commentary on Proverbs are not complete; hence, some editions do not go beyond Proverbs 25. Gloskinos' edition (*Sefer Mishle*) reconstructs the missing sections based on quotations extant in other sources.

³¹Like Rashi, Gerondi uses the term *melīṣah* to denote the literal-contextual interpretation of the passage.

³²See Zeraḥiah ben Isaac ben Shealtiel Ḥen, *Imre Daath*, 84.

form in an appropriate way.”³³ Furthermore, Ha-Me’iri takes care to remind his readers of the interpretation propounded by the rabbis who identified the *eshet ḥayil* with the Torah, and briefly summarizes Saadia’s interpretation as well. This survey of different possible interpretations aside, Ha-Me’iri clearly dwells on the literal level and accordingly proceeds to explain the biblical passage verse by verse, ignoring all other possible interpretations.

Also in Provence, though a little later on, the commentary of Joseph ibn Kaspi (1279–1349), a well-known supporter of Maimonides, argues that the passage should be read according to its literal sense—a poetic *melīṣah* in his terms—as a guide to practical behaviour along the lines of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, rather than interpreting it as expressing any alleged inner meaning.³⁴

In all the aforementioned thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century commentaries, reference to Rashi is only made by Me’iri, indirectly and in passing, when noting the rabbis’ association between the *eshet ḥayil* and the Torah, an association that Rashi had also made in his commentary. It is worth noting, however, that Rashi’s commentary in fact had an important bearing on other Sephardic authors in this period. Probably in the mid-thirteenth century, an anonymous exegete wrote a commentary on the book of Proverbs which today is only extant in an extremely fragmentary form. Fortunately, the section on the last twenty-two verses of Proverbs has survived and evinces a literal approach that often draws from Rashi.³⁵ Moreover, the fourteenth-century Castilian exegete Joseph ibn Joseph ibn Naḥmias wrote a twofold interpretation of the *eshet ḥayil* rooted not in the opposition between *nigleh* and *nistar*, but in Rashi’s of *melīṣah* and *mashal*.³⁶ His comments on this pericope are a patchwork of juxtaposed passages entirely drawn from Rashi and from the thirteenth-century anonymous commentary cited above. Similarly, another anonymous commentary written in Iberia in the fifteenth century, though it lacks most of the section on the passage under analysis, begins with a reference to Rashi’s interpretation thereof.³⁷

This occasional but very significant presence of Rashi in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Sephardic works notwithstanding, the impact of Maimonides’ exegetical categories persisted throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Two fourteenth-century authors, Levi ben Gershon, or Gersonides (1288–1344),³⁸ and Abraham ben Isaac ha-Levi Tamakh (d. 1393), recognize the *nigleh/nistar* duality and clearly favour the *nistar*, that is, the philosophical allegory. The latter stands out as the only late medieval Sephardic exegete to have devoted an entire work to the final acrostic poem in Proverbs.³⁹ Drawing heavily on rabbinic literature and inserting digressions in his running verse-by-verse commentary, Tamakh follows Maimonides’ lead and extensively elaborates on the text on the basis of the opposition between good matter and the intellect.

Interest in literal exegesis seems to have enjoyed a revival at the beginning of the fifteenth century. While most exegetes make a distinction between *nigleh* and *nistar*, they also tend to manifest a more pronounced inclination toward the *nigleh*. Thus, Isaac Shem Ṭov ibn Shem Ṭov, whose work remains in manuscript form,⁴⁰ and Moses Arragel, who includes discursive glosses in his translation of the Bible into Castilian,⁴¹ interpret the *eshet ḥayil* from a

³³See Menaḥem ha-Me’iri, *Perush ha-Me’iri*, 292.

³⁴See Joseph ibn Kaspi, “Ḥaṣoṣerot Kesef,” 130–31.

³⁵I am currently working on a complete edition of this manuscript, MS Hunt 268. The only surviving sections from Proverbs are chapters 1–3:1 and 28:5–31:31. See Alfonso, “In Between Cultures.”

³⁶Joseph ibn Naḥmias, *Perush ‘al Sefer Mishle*, 189–91.

³⁷*Ohel Dawid*, no. 559 (folios are not numbered).

³⁸See *Mikra’ot Gedolot*.

³⁹Edited in Feldman, “Perush R. Abraham.”

⁴⁰The commentary on Proverbs included in BnF, MS heb. 261 is attributed to Isaac ibn Shem Ṭov.

predominantly literal viewpoint but recognize a hidden meaning. Unlike them, David b. Solomon ibn Yahya interprets the passage exclusively on the literal level.⁴² Isaac Arama, on the other hand, writes a very personal, atypical commentary that defies classification. While he follows a certain distinction between *nigleh* and *nistar* in most of his commentary on Proverbs, he parts therefrom when commenting on the last twenty-two verses.⁴³

This survey of exegetical approaches to the passage on the *eshet hayil* among late medieval Sephardic and Provençal authors shows that in spite of the fact that philosophical allegory had a considerable impact on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors, preference for the *nigleh* continued to be an option and explanations other than philosophical allegory were also possible.

(c) *On exegesis and gender*

Aristotelian-Maimonidean categories had an impact not only on late medieval hermeneutics, but also on gender views, something that becomes particularly apparent when it comes to interpretations of the *eshet hayil*. As expounded above, many authors disregarded the literal meaning of the text—that is, the description of the ideal wife’s qualities—in favour of gendered philosophical categories which mapped the relationship between the ideal wife and her husband on to that of good matter and the intellect. This shift from the superficial to inner levels of interpretation translated into a disregard for women, their lives and the social values surrounding them, all of which were elements pertaining to a literal-contextual interpretation of the text.

Aristotelian categories influenced interpretations of the text which sought to identify its inner meaning, but it is important to note that they also had a bearing on the superficial level. Aristotle’s gender polarity in fact cuts across diverse areas of his philosophical system: it creates parallel hierarchies in the social and metaphysical orders and has important applications in the realm of ethics.⁴⁴ In Aristotle’s framework, male and female are radical opposites within the species. Women, both average and exceptional, are thus identified with the properties of matter vis-à-vis men, that is, they subsequently represent privation, passivity, negation and infertility, with their intellectual faculties either disregarded or blatantly dismissed. In this respect, the overwhelmingly negative association among post-Maimonidean authors between the female and matter is not confined to the inner level of interpretation, but also leaves a clear imprint on literal readings of the text, even among those who do not approach the biblical text as a philosophical allegory or are opponents of philosophy. In contrast to former interpreters who emphasize her valour, intelligence and independent and industrious character, late medieval commentators begin to describe the “ideal woman” or “woman of valour” not in opposition to the “married harlot” of Proverbs, but as an exception to female nature as embodied and represented by the latter. Henceforth, the *eshet hayil* is conceived as a *rara avis* and only praised inasmuch as she behaves contrary to female nature. Thus, the reconstruction of Jonah Gerondi’s reading of the passage evinces that references to intelligence, diligence, initiative, and independence with regard to the ideal woman significantly decreased with respect to prior literal commentaries. The scarce number of lines Zerahiah devotes to explaining the *eshet hayil* according to its literal meaning testifies to his lack of concern for women and women’s qualities. As for Joseph ibn Kaspi, while opposing an allegorical understanding of the poem, warning against a search for an inner level of

⁴¹See *Biblia (Antiguo Testamento)*, 800–801.

⁴²David ibn Yahya, *Qav we-Naqi*, 61r–62r.

⁴³See Arama’s commentary in *Sefer Mishle ‘im perush Yad Avshalom*, 103–8. For Arama, every man has two wives—a virtual one in charge of his intellect, and a real one who is responsible for his material welfare. On Arama’s views, see Schwartzmann, “Gender Concepts,” 199–200.

⁴⁴See Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 1: 120 and 1: 351–55.

interpretation in it and reading it as a treatise of Aristotelian ethics, he limits his comments to a few verses and understands the rest as self-explanatory on the superficial level. Ibn Kaspi argues that the word “wisdom” in verse twenty-six cannot possibly allude to “knowledge of either the natural or the divine world” but can only allude to practical knowledge, as explained in Aristotle’s *Ethics*.⁴⁵ Gersonides, for his part, largely dismisses the *nigleh*, blatantly ignores all qualities listed in the biblical passage, makes no reference whatsoever to the *eshet hayil*’s initiative or knowledge, and instead describes her as a humble creature, wholly subservient to her husband.⁴⁶

(d) *On gender and genre*

In addition to and in combination with this influence of Maimonidean-Aristotelian categories on the *nigleh*, there is another factor which impacts on gender issues in literal interpretations of the passage under examination: the commentator’s acquaintance with and use of literary prose works on the vices and virtues of women. To the best of my knowledge, scholars have not paid the attention due to this component.⁴⁷

Menahem ha-Me’iri’s is, arguably, the most prominent example to be adduced in this regard. In his explanation of the whole passage’s literal meaning, he presents the *eshet hayil* as the mainstay of the household and brings to bear a saying by unidentified *hakhame ha-musar* (men knowledgeable in literary culture): “Do not look down on valiant women, for some women are better than men.”⁴⁸ Ha-Me’iri gives examples of what these *hakhame ha-musar* identify as the virtues of the *eshet hayil*:

the one who abandons the rules of her father and learns the laws of her husband to the point of being taken for her husband’s daughter, the one who is kind with her husband, even when he gets upset with her, the one who shows respect for him in good and bad times, in her youth and in her old days, the one whose feet are heavy in leaving the house, and her hands quick in giving alms to the poor, the one who is devoted to her task and undertakes the work of the house [as one more] among her maidservants, the one who breast-feeds her [own] children and does not give them to wet nurses,⁴⁹ the one who listens and does not rush to give a response, the one who does not join trouble-making women, the one who says “I am full” when she is hungry, the one who is pleased with the guests her husband brings to the house and who serves them as a maidservant.⁵⁰

⁴⁵See Ibn Kaspi, “Hašoferot Kesef,” on verse 26. While women have the same kind of reason as men, they are only capable of true opinion and not of true meaning. On this matter see Allen, *Concept of Women*, 1: 103 and 1: 358.

⁴⁶For this commentary see the *Mikra’ot Gedolot*.

⁴⁷Two notable exceptions, both relating to the Song of Songs, are Japhet, “The Lovers’ ‘Way,’” and Liss, “Commentary on the Song of Songs.”

⁴⁸Ha-Me’iri, *Perush*, 291.

⁴⁹Kanarfogel, “Attitudes toward Childhood,” includes a short survey on nursing practices in medieval Jewish society. For halakhic sources discussing breast-feeding and wet-nursing practices, see Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 119–53. Emanuel, “Christian Wet Nurse,” discusses the specific legislation regarding the use of Christian wet nurses. These three studies take issue with Jewish practices in medieval Christian lands. Kanarfogel’s study is merely an overview; Baumgarten’s analysis remains limited to Ashkenaz; and Emanuel’s focuses on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence. Nonetheless, the points they raise and conclusions they reach are applicable to other locations and times in medieval Jewish societies. From Christian and Jewish sources alike it becomes clear that the practice of wet nursing was widespread, particularly among wealthy families. Jewish legal rulings discussed whether it was desirable or not and show concern and reservations when the wet nurse is not Jewish. It is only reasonable to think that the negative assessment of the practice in this passage was the product of similar concerns. The relationship between text and context remains, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵⁰Ha-Me’iri, *Perush*, 291.

Ha-Me'iri compares Solomon's literal description of the *eshet hayil* to this and other portrayals of women by unnamed sages. What makes this passage in Ha-Me'iri's commentary interesting is the fact that it actually borrows from *Mishle he-'Arav*, a book of Hebrew rhymed prose.⁵¹ This book, which consists of fifty chapters composed in a combination of prose and verse, was probably written in the early thirteenth century by a certain Isaac, whose identification remains a matter of some controversy. His book presumably translates a work originally written in Arabic by a Muslim author, or at least he claims as such in the introduction.⁵²

This is by no means the only instance in which Ha-Me'iri uses Hebrew rhymed prose in his work. In his commentaries on Proverbs and Psalms he quotes two other Hebrew narrative works that were translated from Arabic to Hebrew by Abraham ibn Ḥasday in the thirteenth century: *Ben ha-Melekh we ha-Nazir* (The prince and the monk); *Bilawar wa-Yudasaf*, a translation of the legend of Balaam and Josaphat;⁵³ and *Sefer Musere ha-Filosofim* (The book of the philosophers), a translation of *Kitāb Ādāb al-Falāsifa*, compiled by the ninth-century Eastern scholar Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq.⁵⁴ Versions of these two works in Castilian were very popular and circulated broadly throughout the late Middle Ages. Additionally, in his commentary on Proverbs, Ha-Me'iri draws from Solomon ibn Gabirol's *Mivḥar ha-Peninim* (Choice of pearls), as well as from *Sefer Mishle Hokhmah* (Book of wisdom proverbs) and *Mishle Ḥakhamim we-Ḥidotam* (Proverbs and riddles of the sages).⁵⁵

While previous authors are known to have inserted passages from collections of sayings and maxims in verse and meter into their exegetical writings, Ha-Me'iri seems to have been among the first to bring long quotations of Hebrew rhymed prose into his biblical commentaries, and he was undoubtedly the first to do so with regard to the last section of Proverbs.⁵⁶ In this practice, several other exegetes would soon follow his lead. The first was the early fourteenth-century Castilian commentator Joseph ibn Naḥmias. Ibn Naḥmias quotes from *Ben ha-Melekh we-ha-Nazir*, *Mivḥar ha-Peninim* and other similar works in his commentary on Proverbs, but does not do so in the section on the *eshet hayil*, and as such I will only mention him in passing. The work of a later author, Joseph b. David b. Yaḥya, is far more interesting for the purposes of this study, so I will defer consideration of Ha-Me'iri's legacy to the analysis of a later generation of exegetes below.

Turning our attention to literary sources, the early thirteenth-century *Mishle he-'Arav*, from which Ha-Me'iri draws in his commentary, devotes three chapters to women: chapter forty-five, "Do not take a wife on account of her wealth or her beauty, as both will pass away and you will be left only with shame"; chapter forty-six, "Do not entrust any woman with your secrets and curse her delicate words, lest she ensnares you"; and the aforementioned chapter forty-seven, "Do not look down on valiant women, for some women are better than men." All three chapters make extensive use of Proverbs 31:10–31 when describing good women.⁵⁷

⁵¹David Torollo is currently finishing a dissertation on *Mishle he-'Arav* which includes a critical edition of the text.

⁵²Besides his reading of Proverbs 31, Ha-Me'iri goes back to chapters forty-five and forty-seven of *Mishle he-'Arav* when commenting on Proverbs 11:16, "A graceful woman obtains honour; ruthless men obtain wealth"; 12:4, "A capable wife is a crown for her husband, but an incompetent one is like rot in his bones"; and 14:1, "The wisest of women built her house, but folly tears it down with its own hands."

⁵³See, for example, Ha-Me'iri, *Perush*, 28, 35, 39, etc.

⁵⁴See, for example, Ha-Me'iri, *Perush*, 28, 39, 88, 91, etc.

⁵⁵See, for example, Ha-Me'iri, *Perush*, 28, 32, 35, 38, 39, etc.

⁵⁶Joseph Qimḥi (1105–1070), for instance, integrates, without notice, passages from his *Shekel ha-qodesh* (The holy shekel), a collection of sayings and maxims in verse and meter, in his commentary to Proverbs.

⁵⁷Chapter forty-seven includes four anecdotes and two poems. In her article "Descriptions of the Ideal Woman," Dishon notes that one of the anecdotes, where a princess receives ten rules for a successful marriage

Two additional passages included in thirteenth-century works which are similar to those included in *Mishle he-'Arav* provide further evidence of the quotation of verses from the *eshet ḥayil* in literature. In *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, a collection of fables in rhymed prose, Isaac ben Sahula (b. 1244) retells the story of a married harlot and her pious husband. As part of the story, the latter, ignorant of his wife's behaviour and foolishness, paints a portrayal of the ideal wife which echoes the last passage in Proverbs. In this portrayal, the ideal wife comes across as necessarily subservient to her husband, confined to the house, chaste and modest.⁵⁸ Later in the story, the man's wife, who refuses to leave the house in the hope of meeting her lover, will describe the townswomen as lascivious harlots, quoting verses from Proverbs 7.⁵⁹ Likewise, in Judah al-Ḥarizi's (1165–1225) *Tahkemoni*, and in the midst of a poetic contest between Ḥever, the protagonist, and his son, the former returns again and again to the biblical figure of the *eshet ḥayil* to describe the ant, while the latter describes the flea.⁶⁰

These are only three among many other examples in medieval Hebrew literature in which the *eshet ḥayil* takes a most prominent position. Reference to her became a *locus classicus* for authors taking the woman's side in the debate regarding their wives and virtues.⁶¹ The authors of these works concur in stressing that not all women are suitable for marriage, but only the exceptional ones modelled on biblical characters, all of whom exhibit the attributes and qualities of Proverbs' capable wife. Needless to say, the discussion formed part of a larger literary phenomenon with countless examples in contemporary Arabic and Romance literatures. This fragmentary background tradition had developed into a literary genre of its own by the fourteenth century, as evidenced by Christine de Pisan's response to the thirteenth-century 22,000-verse poem *Roman de la Rose*. Christine actually quotes the passage on the capable wife in the defence of women she puts forth in her *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (Book of the city of ladies). The genre best known as *Querelle des femmes* (Women's quarrel) had simultaneous manifestations in various European countries. In it, women became the subject of philosophical, theological, scientific, political and literary debates held by men.⁶²

Later developments

Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy seems to have proven particularly fertile ground for elaborations of the *eshet ḥayil* both in biblical exegesis and in literature, with the borders between

from her mother before leaving her house, is also quoted in *Menorat ha-ma'or*, a wisdom book by the fourteenth-century author Isaac Aboab. This indicates a wide circulation of wisdom contents across genres, a matter that deserves further scholarly attention. See also El Cheikh, "In Search for the Ideal Spouse."

⁵⁸Isaac ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 176–78.

⁵⁹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 180–82.

⁶⁰Judah al-Ḥarizi, *Tahkemoni*, 143.

⁶¹In the Jewish tradition, 'Ezrat ha-Nashim (In defence of women), a work written by an unidentified Isaac in either Castile or Provence in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century in response to Judah ibn Shabbetai's *Minḥat Yehudah Sone' ha-Nashim* (The offering of Judah, the women-hater), dated to the same period, as well as *Ohev ha-Nashim* (Women's lover), written one century later in Provence by Yedaya ha Penini of Beziers, side with the pro-women camp. Additionally, several collections of rhymed prose stories include tales positioned on both sides of the debate. On Hebrew debate literature regarding women, see Dishon, "Images of Women," and Roth, "Wiles of Women Motif." In *Unveiling Eve*, Rosen offers a highly sophisticated close reading of various texts in this genre.

⁶²The medieval literary debate over women has generated a voluminous body of literature. For a comprehensive recent survey and text anthology, see Blamires, *Case for Women*, and Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Women Defended*. For medieval Spanish literature, see Archer, *Problem of Woman*, and the anthology, *Misoginia y defensa*.

both literary genres constantly traversed and blurred.⁶³ The running commentary on the passage written by Joseph b. David ibn Yaḥya (1494–1534) is a paradigmatic example. To start, it is predominantly literal. Only at the end does he remark briefly that the *eshet ḥayil* might be interpreted as a metaphor for the community of Israel among nations, or as a rational soul among souls. His detailed, direct line-by-line commentary on the pericope draws from that of his relative, David ibn Yaḥya, which was published in Lisbon in 1492. As such, Joseph picks up on gender issues already hinted at by his predecessors and develops them further.⁶⁴

Like some prior commentators, Joseph attributes this passage to Bathsheba who, when instructing her son Solomon, listed sixteen characteristics that, in her view, were representative of the ideal woman.⁶⁵ In Bathsheba's account, one finds both a description of the nature of women and a portrayal of the *eshet ḥayil*. The latter stands in clear contrast to all other women in that she takes on additional tasks to those that are proper for women, and also in that her attributes are clearly opposed to those that typically characterize the feminine. Thus, the *eshet ḥayil* not only oversees the household's goods and limits its expenses—two tasks proper to women—but she also buys wool and linen in order to make garments for her family members. Moreover, she makes extra garments in order to sell them and invests the profit she obtains; she also sells the household's old, worn rugs to the Canaanite, purchasing new items with the money obtained.

The ideal woman is not subject to physical and emotional change. This point is clearly made in verse twelve: "She is good to him, never bad, all the days of her life." To this Ibn Yaḥya adds:

She remains perfect and does not change ... even at those moments in which it would be fair to be bad to [her husband] because he had changed, or blamed her for no reason, or associated with adulterous women. On these occasions she does not give bad in return, but good, as she knows that he is her master and she must submit to him despite the many censurable qualities that she might find in him.⁶⁶

Similarly, regarding verse fifteen, "she rises when it is still night," Ibn Yaḥya remarks that this runs counter to the habit of weak and pampered women who are accustomed to lying in bed all day. Thus, the *eshet ḥayil*'s strength stands in vivid contrast to the softness and faintness of heart that typically characterizes females.

Joseph ibn Yaḥya seems to be particularly concerned with physical and emotional changes in old age. The *eshet ḥayil*, he asserts, "does not have the quality of old women who, since they are ruled by decrepitude, do not stop yelling and fighting with everyone in the house. On the contrary, she smiles and shows a pleasant face."⁶⁷ Along the same lines, Ibn Yaḥya's comments on verse twenty-six read: "In her old age she does not yell; neither does she utter foolishness. Rather, when she opens her mouth it is only to pronounce [words of] wisdom." He specifies, however, that wisdom involves good counsel offered to women who are pregnant and about to give birth, or

⁶³The *eshet ḥayil* had already come to the attention of Italian exegetes who wrote commentaries on Proverbs in earlier centuries. Such is the case with Immanuel ibn Solomon of Rome (1261–1328), who reads the ideal wife as a symbol for the soul in its relationship to the intellect, to name one example. See his *Book of Proverbs* (pages are not numbered).

⁶⁴Joseph ibn Yaḥya, *Perush Hamesh Megillot*, 88–89.

⁶⁵See, for example, Arragel's reading in *Biblia (Antiguo Testamento)*, 800.

⁶⁶Ibn Yaḥya, *Perush Hamesh Megillot*, 88.

⁶⁷In Aristotelian ethics, women are deemed prone to anger as a result of their weak souls, and this characteristic fully justifies that the house cannot be left under their control. See Allen, *Concept of Women*, 1: 360.

to those who suffer and are weak. Likewise, “her kindly teaching” refers to what she finds when she prays and reads the Torah.⁶⁸

While Ibn Yahya does not acknowledge drawing on literary sources, his presentation of the ideal woman both as the antithesis of the strange woman of Proverbs and as an inversion of female nature is reminiscent of contemporary imaginative literature on women. In fact, when commenting on how few women possess all sixteen qualities present in the *eshet hayil*, he remarks: “In old times, it was common to ask friends about women’s wiles and virtues.”⁶⁹ This vague comment could arguably refer to treatises on women’s merits and demerits. His description of the ideal woman actually reveals his conception of the idle and wicked nature of married women and caricaturizes them in old age; this conception was widespread in literary prose works on the merits and demerits of women written in the Iberian Peninsula between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries.⁷⁰ In her analysis of this literature, Tova Rosen has brought attention to the presence and importance of female change and exchange and analysed in detail the transformation from ideal bride to monster that marriage brought about in men’s minds. She rightly argues that it was not a matter of two attitudes, one good and one bad, imbedded in the representation of women, but rather of a misogynist attitude in the descriptions of both feminine wiles and virtues alike.⁷¹ However, one does not need to go as far back in time and place to make sense of Ibn Yahya’s comments, since from the fifteenth century onwards various Italian authors engaged in a heated debate on the nature of women which lasted for about a century. Ibn Yahya’s portrayal of the ideal wife should be more properly read against this backdrop. As had been the case in former periods, this debate in Hebrew was part of a larger literary phenomenon in the vernacular.⁷²

Examples of verse-by-verse glosses on the *eshet hayil* in both eulogies and elegies become more visible in Italy throughout this period. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Italian scribe and itinerant teacher R. Abraham Sant Angelo wrote a eulogy upon the death of Maharam Padovah (d. 1565), a senior member of the Venetian rabbinate. His eulogy concludes with a verse-by-verse gloss of the alphabetic *eshet hayil* section which understands her as the soul of the late rabbi, a symbolic projection that was common in kabbalistic works.⁷³ Here again exegesis and literature cross paths, though this time with the influence running from the realm of exegesis toward that of literature.

Similarly, the well-known Italian rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon, born in Venice in 1471 and exiled to the Ottoman Empire, wrote a work entitled *Shevah ha-Nashim* (Praise of women) in 1496.⁷⁴ This work contains a request for financial support from a former Jewish patroness in Italy

⁶⁸Medieval scholars held different views regarding the study of Torah by women. On this matter, see Grossman, *He Shall Rule Over You?*, 113–18 (on Maimonides); 400–401 (on Ha-Me’iri); 429 (on Ibn Kaspi); and 476–78 (on Arama).

⁶⁹See Ibn Yahya, *Perush Hamesh Megillot*, on 31:10.

⁷⁰See above, 134–35 and 140–42.

⁷¹Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 107–8.

⁷²Dan Pagis studies this debate in “Ha-pulmus ha-shiri.” In contrast to earlier examples from the Iberian Peninsula, Pagis remarks, participants in this later debate wrote their work in poetry and not in rhymed prose.

⁷³Midrashic sources had already identified the *eshet hayil* with masculine characters. See Levine, “‘Eshet hayil’ ba-pulhan,” 339.

⁷⁴I have not had the opportunity to read this work, which to date remains in manuscript form. It is extant in two manuscript copies: MS Parma, de Rossi 1395, and MS 782, de Gunzburg. My comments on this work rely on Tirosh Rothschild’s description in “In Defense of Jewish Humanism.” See also her *Between Worlds*, 64–66. Pagis, “Ha-pulmus ha-shiri,” 283, takes this work as a manifestation of the debate on the merits and demerits of women that took place in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. Unlike all other participants in this debate, Messer Leon wrote his eulogy in prose, but—Pagis says—he acknowledges already having written on the topic in poetic form. If this was true, what he wrote has not come down to us. In her

who has been identified as Laura, the wife of a banker named Samuel b. Jehiel da Pisa. In his poem, Messer Leon turns the consonants of *ḥayil* into an acronym of *Hemdat Ya'aqov Laura* (The beauty of Jacob is Laura) or *Ḥakhamah yafah Laura* (Laura is wise and beautiful). In his treatment of biblical women, Messer Leon not only rejects philosophical commentaries on Proverbs, but also defends the use of non-Jewish sources in his commentary. In contrast to works by philosophical allegorists, his survey of female characters identifies the *eshet ḥayil* both with specific biblical characters and Roman and Greek examples, drawing heavily from Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* (On famous women) and Petrarch.⁷⁵

Messer Leon goes further to say that the *eshet ḥayil* is well versed in the Torah and secular sciences and educates her children to lead a life guided by the Torah and good deeds. These affirmations strikingly diverge from many previous commentaries on Proverbs' verse twenty-six in which the capable wife's wisdom tends to be limited to the knowledge of practical matters transmitted to younger women in the house or knowledge of the Torah is only mentioned in passing. None of the earlier commentators, of course, make any reference to her knowledge of secular sciences. Whether Messer Leon's literal interpretation of the *eshet ḥayil* actually draws from the realm of human activity, as Hava Tirosh-Rothschild and Pagis argue, or from literary sources, pertains to a different inquiry and lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

Conclusion

In these pages I have sought to present the medieval interpretive tradition of the biblical passage describing the ideal wife. In the course of that tradition, the Aristotelian/Maimonidean gender polarity, which maps the relationship between woman and man on to that of matter and form, undoubtedly had a considerable impact on subsequent sources in terms of both exegetical style and gender views. However, post-Maimonidean sources are not univocal and reveal themselves to be significantly more fluid in their readings of Proverbs' last twenty-two verses than one might initially think. Even when exegetes follow philosophical allegory, their emphasis on or preference for either the *nigleh* or the *nistar* varies significantly. Moreover, there are sources which actively engage with the rabbinic tradition that escapes Aristotelian/Maimonidean categories, while others convey a very personal and original reading by the commentator. Besides running commentaries, the *eshet ḥayil* enjoyed a life of her own in literature and this essay has also tried to account for that life, with particular emphasis on the cross-fertilization between literary works and running biblical commentaries, as well as on the permeability of both to gender views. The afterlife of the pericope in medieval Hebrew literature opens a window to a much broader textual, literary, and cultural map where gender views and genres have simultaneous manifestations in various literatures in contact. In the realm of literature, gender polarity is a widespread category that seems to erase national and religious otherness. This idea is masterfully conveyed at the very end of the fifteenth century by Sempronio, Calixto's servant in *La Celestina*, when he states:

Read your histories, study your philosophers, examine your poets, and you shall find how full their books are of women's vile and wicked examples. Listen to Solomon, where he says women and wine make men curse. Consult with Seneca, and you will see how widely he reckons them. Hearken unto Aristotle. Gentile, Jews, Christians and Moors, all of them agree on this.⁷⁶

study, Tirosh Rothschild, "In Defense of Jewish Humanism," 37, suggests this work could be meant as a refutation of Abraham Sarteano's anti-feminine poem, *Sone' ha-nashim*.

⁷⁵See Adelman, "Educational and Literary Activities." On the broader Italian context, see Franklin, "Woman's Place."

⁷⁶Quoted in Archer, *Misoginia*, 341.

This essay has intentionally kept the search at the level of the text, avoiding any automatic correlation between the portrayal of and attitude toward women in the sources under analysis and women's lives and vital conditions during the time period in which these sources were written. Understanding the text as a reflection of the society in which it was produced instead of a world parallel to it, and explaining attitudes towards women and the feminine in Hebrew sources as influenced by the majority culture in which Jews lived poses methodological problems that I have tried to avoid.

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The love poetry of Shelomoh ben Reuben Bonafed: Hebrew poems and courtly love

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This essay explores the extant love poetry in the *diwān* of Shelomoh Bonafed, one of the most important poets in the first half of the fifteenth century in Aragón, working to place his writing in its broader literary context beyond its obvious connections with earlier Andalusí tradition. As part of this context, it considers Bonafed's Hebrew texts in relation to the surrounding Romance literatures of the period, above all those produced in Aragón around his lifetime. By examining Bonafed's concept of love and the imagery and poetic structures that he uses to represent it, it locates his poems within the unique literary context of the first half of the fifteenth century. Through a detailed consideration of his little-known love poems, this study maintains that Bonafed revived classical models and reworked them in order to construct and convey the cultural identity of a Jewish elite that continually redefined itself against the majority Christian society on the one hand and against the swelling *converso* population on the other.

Keywords: Bonafed; Aragón; poetry; conversos; courtly love

Love poetry is often seen as an independent “genre,” and perhaps the most emblematic of all, in the lyrical production of any society or culture. Such an assumption is certainly implicit in classic studies of what is known as Hispano-Hebrew literature. In the traditional classifications of Andalusí Hebrew poetry and, by extension, of all Hebrew poetry written in the peninsular Christian realms, love poetry is usually treated as one of the genres of classical Arabic poetry consumed and produced by the Andalusí literary figures who “adapted” and “adopted” it. Thus, most studies of medieval Hebrew love poetry focus on identifying the genetic origins of the genre in classic Arabic literature by tracing in Hebrew love poems common *topoi* or expressions which reinforce a relationship of interdependence between the two literatures. Such analysis tends not to pay much attention to the specific details of how Jewish societies differed over time and space, and it conceives of “medieval Hebrew literature” as a continuous whole from the time of its origins until the expulsion of 1492.

Nevertheless, studies by a number of recent scholars have succeeded in breaking down this traditional assumption and have started to place the literature produced by Hebrew authors in the peninsular kingdoms within specific cultural contexts. The work carried out by Eleazar Gutwirth,¹ Ángel Sáenz-Badillos,² Judit Targarona,³ and Raymond P. Scheindlin has been of

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¹Gutwirth, “Social Criticism”; “World Upside Down”; and “Leer a Bonafed.”

²Sáenz-Badillos, “Relaciones”; “Selomoh Bonafed at the Crossroad”; and “Selomoh Bonafed, último gran poeta.”

³For example, Targarona Borrás, “Los últimos poetas hebreos.”

particular importance in this regard.⁴ My intention in this article, which seeks to follow the trend established by these works,⁵ is to contextualize the love poetry written by Shelomoh Bonafed (?–after 1445), an early fifteenth-century Hebrew poet from the kingdom of Aragón. I do this by placing him firmly within the cultural and social framework in which he lived, rather than examining his work in relation to the Hebrew love poetry that had been written two centuries earlier in al-Andalus or that which was composed half a century later outside the Iberian Peninsula. My aim is to offer a literary contextualization of Bonafed’s love poetry by examining contemporary literary productions on the theme of love that will aid in a reading of his poems. This does not mean that I consider it necessary to reject all comparisons with the Hebrew love poetry of previous periods. However, I hope to show that Bonafed’s practice was to re-use and re-establish this tradition, furnishing it with new forms and a new meaning within his own cultural and social context, that of early fifteenth-century Aragón.

In this article I will consider the various poetics of love which were common in the literature of Bonafed’s time to understand his own poetry, attending, in particular, to the recurrent motifs of love in both Provençal and Romance (Catalan and Castilian) literature, and the techniques of poetic composition that can help us to situate Bonafed’s love poetry within its context. Before beginning, however, I would first like to outline the corpus of texts by Bonafed that I have drawn upon. There are four love poems and other works by Bonafed in which the theme of love is mentioned or plays a central role. The first of these poems appears in a letter written to a woman called Simha, which is entitled, “To a beautiful girl whom I liked.”⁶ Another two poems were addressed to a woman by the name of Malkah,⁷ and the fourth work is a *muwaššah* (strophic song) addressed to a woman called Sol (Šemeš).⁸ In addition to these works, the theme of love is also dealt with in a wedding poem addressed to the bridegroom Yosef on the occasion of the famous wedding in Agramunt,⁹ in a poem of praise addressed to (Yosef) Vidal ben Labi (Gonzalo de la Caballería, 1365–c. 1456) on the occasion of “the passing of winter and rain and the coming of the season which is the time of love”;¹⁰ in three poems containing a dispute on the subject of “love” between Bonafed and the young poet Yahšeel ha-Qaslari, who rebukes his master Bonafed for professing illicit love for a woman;¹¹ and, finally, the theme is also a feature of three other poems in which Bonafed defends himself against the attacks of another young poet who disapproves of his beloved, who may or may not be the same woman as in the one previously mentioned. In these last three poems,

⁴For example, Scheindlin, “Secular Hebrew Poetry”; and “Hebrew *Qasida*.” There are many important scholarly contributions that focus on contextualizing the Hebrew literary production on the area of Ashkenaz into their Romance (French) or German-Christian cultural milieu. For one article of particular importance in this area, see Japhet, “The Lovers’ Way,” which focuses on the impact of chivalry literature and a discourse of courtly love on a thirteenth-century Hebrew commentary on the Song of Songs from northern France.

⁵Of particular importance to my work is the article by Sáenz-Badillos, “Selomoh Bonafed at the Crossroad.”

⁶I will cite poems by the first words of their first verse and their place in the ms. Mich 1984 of the Bodleian Library of Oxford: “On my forehead, your face” (*be-mišhi huqqequ*), fols. 15v–16v.

⁷“The doe rejected me” (*bi me’anah ’ofrah*), fols. 16v–17r; “The sun on her cheek” (*Šemeš be-lehyah*), fol. 17r.

⁸“Sol rose” (*Šemeš zarehah*), fols. 103v–104r.

⁹“A singing dove among birds” (*Yonah be-tok sipporim*), fols. 56r–57r, entitled by Bonafed himself “Golden crown” (*‘ateret paz*). Poem published in Vardi, “Wedding in Agramunt,” 169–96.

¹⁰“Rejoice, O heart, prisoner of hope” (*Aloz lev ’asir tiqva*), published in Schirmann, *Ha-širah ha-‘ivrit bi-Sefarad u-ve-Provans*, poem 450, 623–25.

¹¹The three poems comprising this dispute are Yahšeel’s poem reprehending Bonafed (“You, my friend, only you” (*le-ka dodi le-ka*), fols. 38r–39r); Bonafed’s reply to Yahšeel (“Remedy came to me from a channel” (*te’alah ‘aletah*) fols. 39v–40v) and another reply by Bonafed to Yahšeel (“Do not rebuke me, I pray you” (*‘al na’ taribeni*), fols. 40v–41r).

Bonafed asks other poets for assistance in calming his beloved's father, who has come between the two lovers, and ends by bewailing the fact that the father has sent his daughter on a sea journey to Sicily in order to prevent the girl from enjoying further contact with him.¹²

Contrary to first impressions, poems with an amorous theme do not constitute a majority in the writings by Bonafed that have come down to us, and I would go so far as to say that the same is true of the poetic works of other contemporary authors. Poems of praise or condemnation make up most of Bonafed's works, although something can also be learned about the conception of love poetry and its topics in Bonafed's work from an examination of some of his other poems.

By the fifteenth century, the various Romance cultures had already developed a rich and sophisticated culture that incorporated the use of Latin and works produced in that language. These were works that had come down from the Romans themselves but also included works written in the medieval period, within an incipient pre-modern vernacular production in which humanism was the element that had begun to transform the cultural panorama.¹³ The first half of the century saw a massive translation of Latin or Italian works into Castilian and Catalan, which became the "literary languages" of the fifteenth century.¹⁴ It is within this context of emerging vernacular literatures, in which a series of different cultural and national identities were under construction, that the Hebrew literature produced by Bonafed and other Hebrew poets of his time must be located.

The literary panorama of fifteenth-century Aragón can be seen as divided into three main bodies of writing. First, there was the literature of the troubadour tradition, with works composed in Provençal/Occitan or *langue d'oc*. This kind of literature was widely known at the courts of the region of Provence itself, but was also familiar to the kingdoms of Aragón and Castile. A second group was that of texts written in Latin, and a third that of the literatures produced in Castilian, Italian, Catalan and other Romance languages that were, in turn, enriched by the profusion of translations among those languages and from Latin. The Hebrew literature produced by Bonafed can be seen as another group to add to this assortment of written traditions, and it is important to realize that these different literatures were in no way isolated or cut off from each other.¹⁵ The theme of love provides a way to illustrate this link. In what follows, therefore, I will explore how the different concepts of love and its literary treatment in these various Romance traditions are important to an understanding of Bonafed's work.

The concept of love that seems to be common to all of these traditions is that of a dialectical opposition, which is sometimes resolved and, on other occasions, firmly opposed, between a "human" or "carnal" love and a "pure" or "spiritual" love pertaining to the divine rather than the human sphere. The poetic tradition of the troubadours of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was still consumed by readers and courtly audiences through the troubadours, *jongleurs*, and books of the fifteenth century. This long and rich tradition can be seen to have altered its conception of love over time if we examine the different authors and periods of its production. However, it is possible to identify two main strands or tendencies. In one of them, poets dedicated

¹²"After being sold, my heart" (*lebabi 'ahre nimkar*) 17r–17v. The name of the beloved appears to be Sun, perhaps the same Sun as in the poem "Sol rose" (*Šemeš zareḥah*), fols. 103v–104r; and the poem "I tore my heart when I tore" (*lebabi qera 'tiw be-qor 'i*), fols. 17v–18r, written after tearing up the letter received from the young poet. The signature of the poem is "My heart and my soul" (*libbi we-nafši*), fol. 18r; and the poem "Cry for him sick with love" [*sic*] (*bekhu 'ahabah*) fols. 18r–18v, written by Bonafed after hearing of his beloved's departure on a ship bound for Sicily.

¹³For the beginning of humanism in the Iberian Peninsula, see Gómez Moreno, *España*.

¹⁴For translations in the fifteenth century, see Alvar and Lucía Megías, *Repertorio*.

¹⁵The other literary tradition which should perhaps be mentioned is the one in Arabic, certainly not marginal to the theme of this article, although this would need to be the subject of a different study.

their poetry to a concept of love that was highly charged with sexual desire and eroticism. Such poetry was occasionally addressed to married women, as for example in the poems of Bernat de Ventadorn¹⁶ or in the concept of love found in Andreas Capellanus, twelfth-century author of *De Amore* (On love). In the second strand, the concept of love swaps its human sexual referent for that of divine contemplation. In this kind of poem, interest focuses on the “love of God,” though expressed in human words. The aim of such poetry is to pursue perfection in faith instead of indulging in the banal play of courtly love. This tendency is exemplified by the work of a poet such as Marcabru¹⁷ or in Mangfred Armengaud’s *Breviari d’amor* (Breviary of love).¹⁸

In this tradition, “carnal” or “passionate” love is considered a form of madness or folly (*fols*) that has to be controlled by “moderation”¹⁹ if it is not to become destructive, whereas spiritual love, as a reflection of divine love, is “pure.” This conception is formulated in the scholastic tradition²⁰ and is reflected in various vernacular poetic works and essays, such as the treatise on love by biblical exegete Alonso Fernández de Madrigal, known as “El Tostado” (1410–55), in which the author explains a man’s need to love. In this text, carnal love or “passion” is responsible for detaching the lover from reason, since reason is perceived as the only thing that can cure or save men from the impassioned love which drives them mad. The text is presented in the form of a dialogue, as a reply to a “brother” who has scolded El Tostado for falling in love. El Tostado justifies his infatuation and momentary madness or detachment from reason in the following terms:

You reprehended me, brother, because the love of a woman perturbed me, or virtually exiled me from the bounds of reason, which leads you to express wonder as at some novelty. And because the complaint caused by love was then my jailer, I had not the liberty to satisfy you with a worthy response, but now that inasmuch as I have been abandoned, not by love but rather by passion, I would like to rid myself of the offence of which you accuse me, contradicting your rebuke, because you forgot that subject of which you are a scholar. And in order that you may believe that in loving I did the right thing and in loving I did not err in being perturbed, I put to you these two conclusions: firstly, that it is needful for a man to love; and secondly, that it is needful for he who loves properly and truly on occasions to be perturbed.²¹

A very similar text appears in Bonafed’s poem “You, my friend, only you” (*le-ka dodi le-ka*), where Yahḥseel ha-Qaslari rebukes Bonafed for his “desire” and expresses wonder that an “intellectual” man, that is, a man with the ability to reason, can allow himself to be deceived by carnal love and abandon his rationality:

¹⁶A late twelfth-century troubadour, representative of the “*trovar leu*” or “light style.” See Riquer, *Los trovadores*, 1: 342–418.

¹⁷A mid-twelfth-century troubadour who worked at several peninsular courts. He is the paradigmatic representative of the “*trovar clus*,” or “closed style.” See Riquer, *Los trovadores*, 1: 170–220.

¹⁸Bolduc, “Breviari d’Amor,” 409. For an explanation of the anti-Cathar content of the book, see 419 ff.

¹⁹For a brief description of the term see Riquer, *Los trovadores*, 1: 88–89.

²⁰For a complete description of the scholastic concept of love see Morgan, “Natural and Rational Love,” 45.

²¹Cátedra, *Tratados*, 55. “Reprendísteme, hermano, porque amor de muger me turbó, o poco menos desterró de los términos de la razón, por que te maravillas como de nueva cosa. Et porque la quexa por amor cabsada era entonçes mi prisionera, non ove libertad para te satisfazer con digna respuesta, mas agora que ya quanto me desanparó no el amor, mas la pasión, quiero apartar de mí la culpa de que me acusas, contradiciendo tu reprehensión, porque diste a olvido aquello que eres estudioso. E porque creas que en amar fize cosa devida e, amando, no erré en me turbar, pongo e fundarte he dos conclusiones: primera, que es neçesario al omne amar; segunda, que es nesçesario al que propia e verdaderamente ama que algunas vezes se turbe.”

I wonder at the fact that someone perfect in his intellect as you are
 goes after love²² and its vanities.
 How could you, turban of my head, be infatuated²³ with a stranger?²⁴
 How could you desire²⁵ her beauty or her voice?
 The faults of a great man are counted,
 but they are inscribed in the book with a stylus of iron.²⁶

Bonafed answers the young poet in terms that are reminiscent of those used by Alonso Fernández de Madrigal. He admits to the impotence of man in the face of desire and cites examples of biblical archetypes representing surrender to uncontrolled carnal desire and which justify the momentary madness brought on by this kind of love:

Do not rebuke me, I pray you, because of the love for that dove
 that afflicts with her tricks whoever knows the wisdom.
 Listen to my weeping, my beloved, because love is like a spark.
 Look what happened to Amnon, Sekem and Dinah.
 The law and the precepts of her love are fire, and I am sulphur.²⁷

The use of biblical archetypes to exemplify madness and the pain of carnal love is a feature of other poems by Bonafed on the subject of love.²⁸ One example can be seen in another reply made by the poet to the reproaches of Yaḥseel in the poem “Remedy came to me from a channel” (*te’alah ‘aletah*):

Look what Love did in the past with Sekem’s desire
 for Dinah, to the extent that he was circumcised.
 Is it not incredible that Amnon could have loved his sister?
 Or that Dalilah tied Samson?
 Alas, for none of them suffered a pain comparable to mine.²⁹

This biblical motif is repeatedly found in the Hebrew literature of the period and also in Provençal and Castilian literature, in both cases when referring to carnal love. The following Provençal poem by Marcabru takes the form of a dialogue between Catola and the poet. We can find evidence referring to the mighty Samson and his wife, showing that she had withdrawn her love for him at the moment he was annihilated:

²²Proverbs 5:19. The reference is to the whole passage, because the next verse quotes the following verse.

²³In the original context of Proverbs 5:19–20: “Find joy in the wife of your youth ... be infatuated with love of her always. Why be infatuated, my son, with a forbidden woman?”

²⁴Proverbs 5:20.

²⁵He uses the same verb used in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14) to prohibit desiring or coveting the wife of another.

²⁶That is, the sins of a great man are few in number, but worse in quality. “You, my friend, only you” (*le-ka dodī le-ka*), fols. 38r–39r, verses 20–22:

וְאַתְמָה עַל שְׁלֵם שְׂכָל כְּמוֹתָךְ / בְּלָכְתוֹ אַחֲרַי אֶהְבֶּה וְהִבְלֶה // וְאַיִךְ תִּשְׁגֶּה פֶּאֶר רֹאשֵׁי בָרָה / וְאַיִךְ תִּחְמֹד בְּיַפֵּיהָ אוֹ בְּקוֹלָהּ // וְהַגְדוֹל
 חֲטָאֵיו הֵם סְפִירִים / בְּעֵט בְּרָזֶל כְּתוּבִים עַל מְגָלָה

²⁷“Do not rebuke me, I pray you” (*al na’ tariveni*), fols. 40v–41r, verses 1–3:

אֵל נָא תְּרִיבֵנִי עַל אֶהְבַּת יוֹנָה / יוֹנָה בְּתַרְמִיתָהּ כָּל יוֹדְעֵי בִינָה [r41] // בִּינָה הִגִּיגִי דוֹד חֲשֵׁק כְּמוֹ כִּידוֹד / וְרָאָה דְּבַר אֲמִנּוֹן וְשָׁכַם וְגַם דִּינָה //
 אֵל דִּינָה וְנֹת חֲשָׁקָה אֲשֶׁר וְאֵנִי גְּפִרִית / דִּלְקוֹ בְּעֵץ לְבִי בַּל יֵאֲכַלְוּהוּ נָא

²⁸This motif is also used in the wedding poem to Yosef. See Vardi, “Wedding in Agramunt.”

²⁹“Remedy came to me from a channel” (*te’alah ‘aletah*), fols. 39v–40v, verses 25–27:

רָאָה מָה עֲשִׂתָה קִדְּם בְּחֲשָׁקוֹ / שָׁכַם דִּינָה עָדִי שָׁב מוֹל בְּעֶרְלָהּ // הִתְאַמֵּין בְּאֶהוֹב אֲמִנּוֹן אֲחוֹתוֹ / וְשָׁמְשׁוּן אֵיךְ אֲסָרְתָּהּ דְּלִילָהּ [v40] //
 אֶהְיֶה כִּי אֵין כְּמִכְאוּבֵי בְּכֻלָּם / כְּמוֹ לֹא עֶרְכָה יַפֵּיהָ בְּתוֹלָהּ

Do you not know how love betrayed Samson? ...
 Catola, the love of which you speak
 switches deceitfully the dice.
 Solomon and David warn you
 to take good care of yourself after a good success.³⁰

This deployment of pairs of biblical lovers to exemplify carnal love is found throughout fifteenth-century Romance literature, where classical lovers are often used alongside others from the Bible. One example is the same motif in two of the treatises of Alonso Fernández de Madrigal,³¹ in his *Breviloquio de amor e amiçicia*, which has a chapter exemplifying the passion of Phaedra and Hippolytus by reference to that of Amnon and Tamar,³² and in the previously cited treatise, the *Tratado de como al hombre es necesario amar*.³³

One central feature of love poetry, and of amatory literature more generally, is that of its use as a “religious metaphor,” as for example in the construing of a carnal relationship as a spiritual union with the divine.³⁴ The religious and secular spheres are seen not as two separate worlds, but as sharing the same symbolic world, with common referents used in both.³⁵ The sublimation of the poet’s love for his lady is the epitome of a superior and unique love, that is to say, divine love.

This phenomenon has been identified in all the peninsular literary traditions, from Arabic to Provençal. In the love poetry of Bonafed, we also find numerous religious metaphors, many of them already employed in Andalusí poetry, but charged with a new meaning in contemporary Romance literature. This may be the case in Bonafed’s use of sacrificial metaphors or imitations of liturgical poems in amatory and playful contexts. Romance poetry of the period included so-called “*misa de amores*” (love masses),³⁶ love poems composed to resemble the words of a mass in which the god of love is adored, with numerous quotations in Latin to round off the various stanzas of the poem. In Bonafed’s *muwaššah* entitled “Sol rose” (*Šemeš zareḥah*), we find a composition with an identical function, using the model of a liturgical poem with a clearly amatory content. As Gutwirth has pointed out, Bonafed imitates the form of a *mustajab* (“response”), a type of *seliḥah* or penitential song which belongs to the sphere of the liturgical and not to purely playful courtly poetry, the environment within which the composition seems at first to fit.³⁷ Each stanza ends with a biblical verse containing the name of the beloved in Hebrew: “Šemeš,” that is, “Sun” or the Castilian female name “Sol.”

In Castilian *cancionero* poetry,³⁸ there are various examples of love poems that take their structure from liturgical compositions, such as the *miserere* of Francisco de Villalpando³⁹ or various similar “love masses.” There are numerous examples of the use of biblical verses inserted

³⁰ *Amics Marchabrun, car digam*, in Riquer, *Los trovadores*, 1: 192: “Non saps d’amor cum traís Samson? ... // ... Catola, l’amors dont parlarz // camja cubertament los daz; // aprop lo bon lanz vos gardaz! // ço dis Salomons e David.”

³¹ See Catedra, *Tratados*.

³² Catedra, *Tratados*, 22.

³³ Catedra, *Tratados*, 53 ff.

³⁴ For the “religious metaphor” in fifteenth-century Castilian poetry, see Lida de Malkiel, “La hipérbole sagrada.”

³⁵ This same idea is suggested with reference to the world of art in Camille, *Medieval Art of Love*, 22.

³⁶ See for example Juan de Dueñas, “Misa de amores” in Juan de Dueñas, “*La Nao de Amores*” or the love mass composed by Suero de Ribera (c. 1410) in Alonso, *Poesía de Cancionero*, 191–95.

³⁷ Gutwirth, “*Muwaššah*.”

³⁸ About the *cancionero* poetry and its importance in the fifteenth century, see the introduction to the anthology edited by Dutton and Roncero López, *La poesía cancioneril*, 5–49.

³⁹ Álvarez Pellitero, *Cancionero de Palacio*, poem xciv, 78.

at the end of love poems, as in the poem “Pues mi triste corazón” (“My sad heart”) by Pedro de Santa Fe,⁴⁰ which uses a verse in Latin taken from Matthew 26:37–38 as the last verse of each stanza: “*tristis est anima mea*” (“my soul is sad”). Another example of the same phenomenon in the *cancionero* poetry is the “Dezir de Maçias,”⁴¹ with two stanzas which use a verse from Matthew 27:46 in Latin and Aramaic. Just as these texts make playful use of the Bible and Christian liturgy, so the *muwaššah* of Bonafed devoted to Sol performs the same game, although in this case basing itself on Jewish liturgy and the Hebrew Bible.

Another frequent motif in the love poetry of the period, which is also linked to this interaction between the religious and the amatory, is that of the sublimation of the lady and her transformation into a quasi-divine being. The concept used often in Provençal literature of the beloved as a unique and unequalled beauty who exceeds all other women eased the process of ascribing these virtues to the Virgin Mary, thereby sacralizing love poetry. For obvious reasons, this association of the poet’s beloved with the Virgin Mary does not occur in Hebrew literature, but we do find characterizations of the beloved as a unique being superior to all other women and to whom all must show their respect and recognition as the greatest and most beautiful (and sometimes the most wise) woman.

These idealizations respond to a scholastic conception in which beauty helps men to desire perfection and, by means of this search, come to God. The beloved and her perfect beauty thus become a reflection of divine perfection. However, as we have seen in the dialogue of El Tostado, and in Bonafed’s reply to Yaḥseel, the danger lay in carnal love and in the unbridling of the passions. If this love of pure beauty turns into sexual desire, it is transformed into a kind of madness, known as “derangement,” in which passion overthrows reason.

There are many examples of descriptions of the beloved as unique and superior.⁴² Thus, in Castilian poet Juan de Mena (1411–56):

The ladies beholding you
all make petitions to God
for they ask and wish
to see themselves made as you are.
But I doubt that the Lord is able to
reproduce with his hand
your image in this world
even though He is Almighty.”⁴³

In *La Celestina*, in the sixth act, Calisto describes Melibea’s beauty as follows: “For all those [women] who are alive today and hear of her, do curse themselves and complain to God, because he did not remember them when he made my lady.”⁴⁴ Likewise, in one of the most paradigmatic works of chivalry, “Percival or the tale of the Grail,” the lady is written of in the following terms: “In truth, for the theft of people’s hearts God made in her a prodigy, since after her He did not

⁴⁰Álvarez Pellitero, *Cancionero de Palacio*, poem c, 94–95. For this poet, see Vendrell de Millás, “La corte literaria.”

⁴¹Álvarez Pellitero, *Cancionero de Palacio*, poem ccl, 232–33. The attribution of the poem to Macias is uncertain.

⁴²For the motif of the beloved as one of God’s masterpieces see Lida de Malkiel, “La dama,” 179–290.

⁴³Van Beysterveldt, *La poesía amatoria del S. XV*, 165: “Las damas que vos otean // reclaman todas de Dios, // porque piden y dessean, // a ssi mismas que se vean // fechas tales como vos: // mas dibdo si el Soberano // se pusiesse con su mano // con quanto poder alcança, // en este siglo mundano // facer vuestra semejança.”

⁴⁴Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, 190: “Pues quantas hoy son nascidas que della tengan noticia, se mal-dizen, querellan a Dios porque no se acordó dellas quando a esta mi señora hizo.”

create another like her, nor had He created another before.”⁴⁵ This is also a recurring motif in the poems of Bonafed, as can be seen from the two following examples. Speaking to the reader, Bonafed urges:

Do not reprove me for the love that I feel! Compared to her
the rest of women are only imitations [literally, statues].
She is the mother of all that is precious, the one whose beauty is inscrutable,
when she was created, the model for all ladies was completed.⁴⁶
The sun is ashamed of being compared with her because if her face
spat in the face of the sun,⁴⁷ would it not bear its shame?⁴⁸

A similar image appears in Bonafed’s poem, “On my forehead, your face” (*Be-mišhi huqqequ*):

There is no defect in the glorious presentation of your splendour
but the dust from which the Rock created you.
That is why I believe that the right hand of God modelled you
from the distant beginnings of your universe.
What did you leave for the rest of women if you have put
upon your shoulders, oh dove, all beauty and all greatness?

For the other girls there is only a percentage⁴⁹ extracted from the harvest [literally, fields] of your beauty,⁵⁰

they collect the remains⁵¹ from your vineyard.⁵²

We also find in Bonafed the need for others to recognize the incomparable beauty of his beloved and to bow down in recognition of this truth. This also occurs in novels of chivalry, highly popular in the fifteenth century, such as the story of Percival, mentioned above, where the defeated knights must recognize the superiority of the conquering knight’s beloved or pledge obedience to her.⁵³ In a similar vein, Bonafed invites his rival to recognize the insuperable beauty of his beloved:

⁴⁵Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval o el cuento del Grial*, 66.

⁴⁶Her beauty is the canon for feminine beauty. “Her beauty” is the subject of the verb “complete.”

⁴⁷Passage taken from Numbers 12:14. In this passage Miriam is punished with scales (skin disease) and Moses prays to God to heal her. God replies: “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted.” This probably alludes to a custom in which the father spits in the face of a woman upon accusing her of something and she is banished or shut out of the community for a short period of time. In this case the lady is so beautiful that she is superior to the sun (which is even paler than her) and she is the one who can make it feel shame.

⁴⁸“The doe rejected me” (*bi me’annah ‘ofrah*), fols. 16v–17r, verses 6–8:

אַל נָא יִרְיֹבוּנִי בְּחֶשְׁקֵי זֹאת הַכִּי / נִגְדָה שְׂאֵר נְשִׁים תְּמוּנַת צָלָם // אִם כָּל יִקָּר לֹא נִחָקָר יִפְיֶה וְעַת / הַבְּרָאָה מִבְּנֵי עֲלָמוֹת שְׁלָם // שְׁמַשׁ
עָרוֹךְ לָהּ נִכְלָמָה כִּי תִאָרֶה / יְרוֹק בְּפִיָּה הֲלֵא תִכְלָם

⁴⁹A donation for the priest. A portion of the harvest that is set aside to be paid as a tax to the Temple. See Numbers 18:12.

⁵⁰The only beauty that other girls have is a portion of the whole of the beauty that belongs to the beloved.

⁵¹The grapes that are left after harvesting a vineyard, given as remains to the poor.

⁵²“On my forehead, your face” (*Be-mišhi huqqequ*), fols. 15v–16v, verses 15–18:

וְאִין תְּסָרוֹן בְּכֶשְׁרוֹן הוֹד הַדְּבָר / לְבַד כִּי מַעֲפָרִים צוֹר הַקִּימָךְ // וְלִכְן אֶאֱמִין כִּי יָד יִמִּין אֶל / תְּצַבְךְ מִכְּנֵי פֹכְבֵי מְרוֹמְךְ // וְנִמָּה נִשְׁשֶׁת אֶלִי
בְּנוֹת בְּעַת שְׁמַת / צְבִיָּה כָּל צְבִי וְיִקָּר בְּשִׁכְמְךְ // תְּרוֹמוֹת מִשְׁדֵּי חִמְדְּךְ לִכְלֹן / וְעוֹלָלוֹת חֵן תְּעוֹלְלָנָה בְּכַרְמְךְ

⁵³For instance, the episode of Anguingueron’s defeat by Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, 75.

Go, my friend, prepare the chariot of friendship,
let us go after her and bow down to her.
Come with me, look upon her beauty and offer
to her creator exclamations for her immense beauty.⁵⁴

This need for others to recognize the superiority of the beloved over all other women is carried over into the concept of the suffering of love, another widely used concept in the literature of the *Cancioneros* and one that also appears in the love poetry of Bonafed. The lover has to be recognized as the one who suffers most as a result of his love, as expressed by Valencian poet Ausiàs March (1400–1459) when he wrote: “I am that very extreme lover.”⁵⁵

Bonafed also speaks of his incomparable suffering and boasts of being the epitome of the lovesick: “I love but I suffer, and I have become the father / of all the victims of love sickness, there is no other like me.”⁵⁶ Similarly, in another poem, Bonafed compares himself with different paradigmatic lovers, remarking, “Alas! For none of them suffered a pain comparable to mine, / in the same way that there is no lady comparable to her in beauty.”⁵⁷ The suffering caused by love is understood as a torture or penitence which becomes bearable and even desirable if one thinks of a final union with one’s lady or if she one day deigns to remember her beloved, thereby freeing him from his agony. This conception of suffering as something desirable because it leads to love or because it is preferable to a life without love, can be found in numerous poets of the *Cancioneros*, as well as in Bonafed’s poetry. For example, in the poem to Simḥa, Bonafed explains to his beloved why he punishes himself with the passion he feels for her:

Since your wish is to make me suffer
I will enjoy my suffering and I will not blame you.
For me it is easy to suffer a thousand years of pain
in exchange for spending one day of happiness enjoying your taste.⁵⁸

In another poem, written to Malkha, Bonafed says, “I would prefer the worst plague⁵⁹ or the fetid tomb⁶⁰ / to being without her love.”⁶¹

This presentation of the suffering of love as something to be desired in the hope of eventual acceptance can be seen in many poets of the *Cancioneros*, as for example in Sánchez de Badajoz’s poem:

Even if your cruelty lasted a thousand years
and then you forgot me,
I would have rest in Hell,

⁵⁴“Remedy came to me from a channel” (*te’alah ‘aletah*), fols. 39v–40v, verses 29 and 30.

לכה דוד צח רתום רכב ודידות / ונגלך לה וגשתתנה למולה // לכה אתי בחן יפיה ותתן / אלי יוצרה תשואות חן בחרן לה

⁵⁵Ausiàs March, *Páginas del Cancionero*, 187, verse 41: “Yo sòn aquell pus estrem amador.”

⁵⁶“The sun on her cheek” (*Šemeš be-lehyah*), fol. 17r, verse 4:

אָתאב אָבל אָדאב וְאָהנה אָב // חוּלי אָהבים מְבלי שְׁנֵה

⁵⁷“Remedy came to me from a channel” (*te’alah ‘aletah*), fols. 39v–40v, verse 27:

אָהה כִּי אִין כְּמִכְאוּבֵי כְבָלִם / כְּמוֹ לֹא עָרְכָה יִפְיָה בְתוּלָה

⁵⁸“On my forehead, your face” (*be-mišiḥi ḥuqqequ*), fols. 15v–16v, verses 35–36:

וַיַּעַן כִּי לְהַעֲצִיבֵי רִצּוֹנֵךְ / בְּעַצְבֵי אֲשַׁמְתָּה לֹא אֲאֻשִׁימֵךְ // וְקָלִים לִי סְבוּל אֶלְךָ שְׁנֵי חַיִל / בְּעַד יוֹם גִּיל בְּהַתְעַנֵּג בְּשַׁעֲמֵךְ

⁵⁹Isaiah 1:5. Literally, “head of sickness” or “sick head” in the biblical context of the quotation.

⁶⁰Isaiah 38:17. Literally, “a tomb with no good,” but in the commentary of David Kimḥi, it reads, “and this is the tomb in which the corpse decomposes.”

⁶¹“The sun on her cheek” (*Šemeš be-lehyah*), fol. 17r, verse 5:

רֹאשׁ לְחַלֵּי שְׁחַת בְּלֵי טוֹב / לִי אִם מְבַלֵּי חֲשָׁקָה אֲנִי הָיָה

my lady, if only you would choose
a fortunate day to remember me.⁶²

Physical descriptions of the beloved place great emphasis on her face and on her lover's sense of sight. The sense of sight acquires a capital importance and the face of the beloved is an image that is indelibly engraved on lovers' retinas by their gaze. Thus in the poem of fifteenth-century Catalan poet Jordi de Sant Jordi (?–1425), the poet declares that the image of his beloved is engraved on his forehead (or his eyes),⁶³ and that it cannot be erased even by death:

On my forehead I carry your beautiful likeness,
for which reason I rejoice day and night,
for contemplation of the very beautiful figure
has left [engraved] the imprint of your face
in such a way that even if I die the form will not wither,
rather, when I am completely out of this world,
those who carry my body to the sepulchre
will see your sign on my face.⁶⁴

Bonafed uses this motif of the image of the beloved engraved upon his forehead/eyes, but in his work it serves to certify that the beloved cannot attempt to injure him by throwing stones at him, for this would mean throwing stones at her own image, placed as it is on the poet's forehead/eyes:

Your face and figure are inscribed on my forehead,⁶⁵
Oh gracious doe!, Would you kill yourself
shooting against my face the stones of your diamonds
with the mighty right hand of your love?⁶⁶

This idea of the importance of the gaze and the image of the beloved is deeply rooted in the troubadour love tradition and in that of so-called courtly love. In the world of art and artistic objects the importance of this gaze and the image perceived by the lover becomes patent.⁶⁷ The woman is usually the emitter of the light that is captured by the man's gaze. One interesting example of a graphic representation of the "look of love" is found in an early fifteenth-century Italian tray painted in oils that is conserved in the Louvre Museum.⁶⁸ In this painting, a group of paradigmatic lovers including Tristan, Lancelot or Samson kneel in a circle and look upon a

⁶²Taken from Van Beysterveldt, *La poesia amatoria*, 168 (poem 1045 by Sánchez de Badajoz): "Y aunque mil años durasses / en tu saña y me oluidasses, / allí ternia reposo, / señora, si señalases / vn tiempo tan venturoso / en que de mi te acordasses."

⁶³Riquer, the poem's editor, explains that the meaning of the word "lo front," usually translated as "forehead" or "front part" should be understood in this poem to mean "eyes," since the poet looks upon his beloved with such adoration that her image is engraved on his eyes, which are in his "forehead." I have taken Riquer's interpretation into account in my translation of Bonafed's verse.

⁶⁴Jordi de Sant Jordi, *Jordi de Sant Jordi*, 147: "Jus lo front port vostra bella semblança // de que mon cors nit e jorn fa gran festa, // que remiran la molt bella figura / de vostra faç m'es romassa l'empremta / que ja per mort no se'n partra la forma, / ans quant seray del tot fores d'est segle, // çels qui lo cors portaran al sepulcre // sobre ma faç veuran vostre signe."

⁶⁵Probably "my eyes," as in the poem of Jordi de Sant Jordi: *Jus lo front port vostra bella semblança* (*Jordi de Sant Jordi*, 37). The first verse is identical.

⁶⁶"On my forehead, your face" (*be-mišhi huqqegu*), fols. 15v–16v, verses 1–2:

בְּמִצְחִי הוֹקְמוּ צְלֵמְךָ וְגַלְמְךָ / צְבִיטת הוֹ הַתְּהַרְגִי לְעֵצְמְךָ // בְּקִלְעֵ יְמִינוֹ עוֹ אֶהְבֶּתְךָ / לְמוֹד פְּנֵי בְּאֵבְנֵי יְהוֹמְךָ

⁶⁷For the look of love, see the chapter on the subject in Camille, *Medieval Art of Love*, 27–49.

⁶⁸*Venus Venerated by Six Legendary Lovers*. Birth tray made in Florence, c. 1400. Musée du Louvre. Image and extensive commentary in Camille, *Medieval Art of Love*, 19.

female figure identified with Venus—rays are directed from their eyes to the woman’s sexual organs.

The vision of the face or figure of the beloved is not only physical. It is also present in the imaginary world of the poet, in dreams or mere thoughts. One of the best-known figures of courtly love is that of the contemplation of the beloved through the eyes of the mind. Thus, in the work which might be considered the compendium of courtly love *par excellence*, the treatise by Andreas Capellanus entitled *De Amore*, we see how the physical presence of the beloved is not necessary to a vision of her, for her image is always in the lover’s thoughts:

The man says: “Although I rarely find myself in your presence physically, in my heart and soul I never leave you; for since you are my constant thought I do not cease to be in your presence, and this makes me see always with the eyes of my heart the treasure to which I aspire and this brings me as much turmoil as joy.”⁶⁹

In Bonafed’s poem “On my forehead, your face” (*be-mišḥi ḥuqqequ*), addressed to the young Simḥa, there is a section in which the young woman’s beauty is described, but through a dream vision of the poet. Bonafed declares that he alone sees her image and that he remembers her face in his mind:

While I am dwelling in the place
where the hardness of separation hides,⁷⁰
I calm [my] thoughts with the vision of her power.⁷¹
I spend pleasant moments gazing at the glory
of your face and body with the eyes of my heart.⁷²

In the troubadour tradition and the literary tradition of so-called “courtly love”⁷³ there exists a terminological and conceptual repertoire with which Bonafed’s poetry seems to share common values. Several concepts appear frequently in troubadour poetry and have been widely discussed by scholars, obtaining varying results that depend on the application given by each poet to this terminology or to the diachronic development of the concepts.⁷⁴ This terminology refers to different features of courtly love, to the virtues and moods of lovers or to the social universe in which these poets write. This terminological repertoire varies over time and often changes its referents, but I will now mention some of the different concepts used by Bonafed in his poems.

⁶⁹Andreas Capellanus, *De Amore*, 132: “The Man says, ‘Although I rarely view your presence bodily, nevertheless I never depart from it in heart and soul. My constant thinking of you brings me often into your presence and makes me, with the eyes of the heart, see constantly that treasure about which my intention revolves, and it brings me pains and much solace.’ [“Homo ait: Licet me raro corporaliter vestro repraesentem aspectui, corde tamen et animo a vestra nunquam abscedo praesentia; assidua namque de vobis habita cogitatio saepe saepius me vobis praesentem constituit et illum thesaurum, circa quem mea versatur intentio, cordis me facit oculis semper aspicere poenasque mihi affert et solatia multa.”]

⁷⁰Also, “a place where the dove’s power hides.”

⁷¹This could also be read as “I flatten [my] thoughts with the vision of her power” or “I compare the thinking to the vision of her power,” or “calm my thoughts with the vision of her power.”

⁷²“On my forehead, your face” (*be-mišḥi ḥuqqequ*), fols. 15v–16v, verses 19 and 20:

בעוד אשכחון בהקדיון עז פרידה / אשו רעיון בהזיון תעצומך // ועתותי ערבים לי בשורי / בעין לב הוד תמונתך נגשמך

⁷³This is not the place to discuss the controversial concept of “courtly love” and its implications for the history of Romance literature. For a summary see, for example, Topsfield, *Troubadours and Love*; Moore, “Courtly Love”; Ferrante, “Cortes’ Amor.”

⁷⁴For a more detailed description see the introduction to Riquer, *Los trovadores*.

The first of these concepts is that of the “art of love.” This notion was not original to the Provençal tradition and had appeared in classic treatises such as Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*.⁷⁵ Ovid’s work was widely known and profusely copied during the early fifteenth century. The term implies the conception of love as something that is constructed by following certain rules and it is found with this same meaning in a poem by Bonafed, which reads as follows: “I will look forward to the day in which our work⁷⁶ of love will // be completed and I will sit you in the lap of my love.”⁷⁷ The Hebrew term used here is “*mal’ekhet ’ahavenu*,” “our art/craft of love,” which parallels the concept as used in the amatory tradition of Romance and Provençal literature.

Another of the concepts which appears in the love poetry of Bonafed and which he seems to share with the other Romance traditions of his time is that of the “labours of love,” a concept with a long and varied life and one which is also found in the repertoire of Provençal courtly love, where the “labours” are understood as the deeds a knight must perform or the adventures he must undertake in order to win his lady’s favour or the final prize of union with her. In a poem written by Bonafed to his friend Yosef Vidal ben Labi (Gonzalo de la Caballería), we find this same concept expressed by a Hebrew term which is a calque of the Romance term “labour”: “*avodah*”:

Give strength, lovers!⁷⁸ Give strength to the wine [literally, daughter of the wine]
which will suddenly enrich the heart of poor and insignificant men.
Be strong in your love, and suffer your labours ...⁷⁹

Perhaps one of the most frequently recurring concepts in Bonafed’s amatory poetry is that of the “law of love,” widely used in fifteenth-century *cancionero* poetry, both Castilian and Catalan, and also in the troubadour tradition. This concept is central in Provençal amatory literature and even provides the title of the treatise on Provençal poetics composed by Guilhem Molinier de Tolosa, *Leys d’amor*, which had been commissioned by the literary academy known as the *Consistòri del Gai Saber*.⁸⁰ This concept is also found in the *Roman de la rose*,⁸¹ the emblematic allegorical tale of courtly love, which was also widely known in fifteenth-century Aragón. This work contains a section in which the character embodying Love explains his “commandments” or “laws,” which must be respected by lovers. Love becomes a legal code of conduct that must be respected by lovers if they wish to succeed. These commandments instruct lovers in “good love,” and are compulsory for any good knight.

In the wedding poem that Bonafed composed for Yosef, the bridegroom at a wedding in Agramonte,⁸² Bonafed describes a scene in which the bride, beneath the nuptial canopy, holds in her hands some “tables of the law,” like those held by Moses at the revelation of Sinai. The tables described by Bonafed carry engraved scenes of biblical lovers in idyllic gardens surrounded by rivers and glades. The tables contain the “laws of love” and the scenes serve to instruct the

⁷⁵Ovid, *Obra Amatoria*.

⁷⁶Ars = מלאכת אהבנו, the same expression as Ovid’s title of his treatise on love, *Ars amatoria*. It may have something to do with the “works of love” that also appear in Text 6, verse 27.

⁷⁷“On my forehead, your face” (*be-mišhi huqqequ*), fols. 15v–16v, verse 38:

ואזחיל יום אשר תשלם מלאכת / אהבנו בהיק דודי אשימך

⁷⁸“Deeds of desire or love,” “the ones who belong to love.”

⁷⁹“Rejoice, O heart, prisoner of hope” (*’aloz lev ’asir tiqva*), in Schirmann, *Ha-širah*, 2: 625, verses 14–15:

תנו עז מתי חשק תנו עז לבת גפן / אשר תעשיר פתאום לבב רש ואיש נקלה // והזקו באהבתכם וסכלו עבודתכם

⁸⁰Anglade, *Las Leys d’amors*.

⁸¹Guillaume de Lorris, *Le roman de la rose*, 19.

⁸²For this event see Vardi, “Wedding in Agramunt.”

lovers with visual examples.⁸³ The bride becomes the “sage” who transmits the laws of love. Bonafed describes the image as follows:

I see the doe and she holds in her hands something resembling the tables of the law,
it is the Law of Love with which she instructs those who love.
There are engraved the lovers⁸⁴ in relief⁸⁵ and there
are the effigies of the damsels forged⁸⁶ by love.⁸⁷

On some occasions, Bonafed’s verses can only be understood by reference to the kind of *topoi* and concepts found in Romance amatory literary traditions, and especially in those of the troubadours. Without such references, the interpretation of certain verses would be impossible, as in the poem in which Bonafed rebukes his beloved in the following terms: “Is it fair, turtle dove, that you wrong your friend / with gentle responses⁸⁸ and that the orphan suffers⁸⁹?”⁹⁰ The key to understanding this particular verse lies in the concept of “gentle responses.” The beloved confuses her lover with “gentle responses,” but she does not allow herself to be conquered and neither does she accept his love. This is a well-known theme in courtly love poetry. At the beginning of the *Roman de la rose*, the main character falls in love with a lady who “spoke to him and treated him with good manners.”⁹¹ The beloved receives the lover with “good manners,” regaling him with a “good reception,” but she soon rejects him and refuses to love him. The figure of “good manners” becomes an allegory in the *Roman de la rose*, and is characterized as a handsome young man who is the son of courtesy and is presented in verse 2789 as “Bel Accueil” or “Good Welcome.”⁹²

In this verse Bonafed seems to refer to the Provençal concept of the beloved’s “welcome” with her “gentle responses,” and he appears to follow the Romance amatory courtly tradition of his time. The same motif appears in the work of several troubadours, such as Rigaut de Berbezilh:

If your hard heart
were the equal of the courtesy

⁸³It is necessary to mention here the abundant depictions of love scenes in ivory caskets and mirrors in fourteenth-century France. An enormous collection of such scenes can be seen in the permanent exposition at the Musée du Louvre. As an example, see Camille, *Medieval Art of Love*, 54.

⁸⁴“Those who desire/suffer the pangs of love.”

⁸⁵Ezekiel 23:14. Some commentators refer to the colour “carmine” or “red.” Others interpret this as referring to a form of engraving in relief, or a drawing. The second meaning seems most suited to the context.

⁸⁶In the sense of casting (melting) the metal in a die to make a statue. Love has been the creator of these images engraved in stone and cast in metal. The word “image” also means “mould” or “die.” The same verb can also be used to mean “join” (see Vardi, “Wedding in Agramunt,” 193). If this were the case, it would be love that “joined” the pairs of lovers alluded to by the poet in the verses that follow.

⁸⁷“A singing dove among birds” (*yonah be-tokh šipporim*), fols. 56r–57r, published in Vardi, “Wedding in Agramunt,” verses 13–14:

אַרְאָה צְבִיָּה וְעַל יְדָהּ כְּלוּחוֹת בְּרִית / תּוֹרַת אֱהָבִים אֶלֵּי דוֹדִים מְאַלְפֶת // שְׁמָהּ תְּקוּקִים בְּנֵי חוֹשְׁקִים בְּשֶׁשֶׁר וְשָׁם / תִּכְבְּנִית עֲלֵמוֹת אֲשֶׁר
אֱהָבָה מִצְרַפֶּת

⁸⁸This plays with the reference to the proverb in Proverbs 15:1 “A gentle response allays wrath, a harsh word provokes anger.” In this case “a gentle response” causes more pain to the lover, because it is gentle but not positive.

⁸⁹He is playing with God’s order in Jeremiah 22:3 “do not wrong the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.” Bonafed is accusing the beloved of not fulfilling God’s law. She is “doing wrong to the fatherless.”

⁹⁰“On my forehead, your face” (*be-mišhi huqqequ*), fols. 15v–16v, verse 22:

הַטּוֹב יוֹנָה אֲשֶׁר תּוֹנֵי עַמִּיתְךָ / בְּרוּךְ מַעֲנֶה וְיִתְעַנֶּה יְתוּמָךְ

⁹¹See Guillaume de Lorris, *Le roman de la rose*, 19.

⁹²Guillaume de Lorris, *Le roman de la rose*, 190.

which makes your conversation so pleasant,
it would be easy for you to think of me
that I would rather kill myself
than beg you ...⁹³

A similar motif can be found in Berenguer de Palou:

She does not promise, nor concede,
nor remove, nor lack nor lie,
but she knows how to say no so gently
that at the time you believe
that she has acceded to all of your supplications.⁹⁴

In this article, I have sought to illustrate the relationship that exists between Bonafed's poetry and Romance literature. While the connection between the motifs of fifteenth-century Hebrew literature and their Andalusí Hebrew counterparts is clear, this connection derives from the fact that there will always be formal literary parallels between the "classical literature" adopted by a later society as a "cultural banner" and the real literary production of that society. However, there is a difference between what fifteenth-century poets said about "their literature" and what they actually wrote.

These poets claim to consider themselves the heirs of a tradition that went back to the biblical prophets and took in a number of Andalusí poets, mainly Yehuda Halevi, the Ibn Ezras (Abraham and Moshe) and Shelomo ibn Gabirol, to end in Shelomo de Piera and Bonafed himself. However, the literature of Bonafed and Shelomo de Piera is not a straightforward attempt to recreate the literature of another time and another culture, even though it is written in the same Hebrew language. It is, rather, a "new literature," created for a different society that shares a common cultural framework with the other Romance literatures of its period. I hope this article will help to contextualize the literature written by Bonafed within its time and cultural complexity.

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⁹³Riquer, *Los trovadores*, 1: 294: "Si.l vostre durs cors fos taus // com la cortesia // que.us fai d'avinen parlar, // leu pogratz de mi pensar // qu'anz m'auseria // que.us preges"

⁹⁴Riquer, *Los trovadores*, 1: 304, "Ilh no promet ni autreya // ni estria ni falh ni men, // mas de no sap dir tan gen // qu'ades cuydaretz que deya // totz postres prex obecir."

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Ibn Sahula's *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* as restorative polemic

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This essay explores the ways in which Isaac ibn Sahula (1244–c. 1284) drew upon philosophy, medical theory, astrology, and animal lore, both to polemicize against Christians and Muslims and to goad his Jewish readers to correct spiritual behavior in his *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*. Christians, Muslims, and "bad" Jews are portrayed as having degraded their intellect by following fleshly lusts or false wisdom. In losing their intellect, they have lost the quality that made them superior to animals. His use of animals to portray the "inhumanity" of most humans adds a level of irony to his work, but also becomes a part of his arsenal of symbolism, which he deftly uses to criticize the religious claims and behavior of non-Jews. In some instances loss of intellect feminizes his opponents. However, Ibn Sahula's use of gender symbolism does not fall along neat dichotomies of male-spiritual, female-material. Rather, non-Jews are often characterized by hyper-masculinity, violence, and excessive lust, whereas Ibn Sahula portrays himself as a woman giving birth, Israel as maiden or woman in need of going to purify herself in a miqvah. His manipulation of gender symbolism, like his use of animals, is part of a broad defensive polemic aimed at Christian and Muslim criticism of Jews.

Keywords: Ibn Sahula; masculinity; femininity; knowledge; animals

Isaac b. Solomon ibn Sahula's *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* (Fables of the distant past, c. 1281) is a collection of instructive fables, its rhymed prose marking it as a *maqāma* (a literary genre first developed in the Arab-speaking world, characterized by the use of rhymed prose interspersed with poetry, often used to recount a series of playful, interrelated tales). Like both Arabic and Hebrew exemplars of the genre and related texts like *Alf layla wa-layla* (*One thousand and one nights*) and the fable collection, *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (*Calila e Dimna*), *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* is a frame narrative, in which debate between the main characters, in this case "Isaac" (namely the author himself) and his unnamed opponents, forms the overarching frame for a series of tales in which the contestants attempt to affirm the superiority of their own worldview.¹ Ibn Sahula's *maqāma* consists of a series of complexly interwoven fables where animals and, more rarely, humans debate with one another in a battle of morality and science. Sets of fables are contained in chapters or "gates," each consecrated to a specific moral issue. The didactic purpose is complicated by the multiple layering of tales within individual narrative sequences, which renders the task of determining the viewpoint represented by a particular story especially challenging. Characters frequently discourse at length on questions of medicine, climate, and astrology, making *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* a scientific, as well as a literary and moralizing work. As a

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¹On the genre of the frame narrative see Wacks, *Framing Iberia*, and Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby*.

number of scholars have indicated, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* is also one of several thirteenth-century Kabbalistic and literary works that critiqued the behavior of Jewish courtiers in Alfonso X's Castile.² In addition to this critique of Jewish courtiers, I contend that Ibn Sahula also polemicizes against Christian and Muslim behaviors and pursuits in an effort to disenchant members of his own community from certain kinds of study, literature, and courtly culture.

Ibn Sahula (b. 1244) was a physician and a Kabbalist from Castile, learned in traditional rabbinic lore. In addition to *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, he also wrote a Kabbalistic commentary to the Song of Songs, and possibly one other *maqāma*. He probably knew Kabbalist Moshe de León (1250–1305), and he refers to *Midrash ha-ne'elam*—one of the oldest strata of the *Zohar*, the thirteenth-century Jewish mystical text that served as the foundation of much subsequent Kabbalistic thought. In addition, he studied with Moses of Burgos, another Castilian Kabbalist. He traveled widely, both in Iberia and in the Middle East.³ These travels, his profession, his scholarly interests, and his increasing frustration with his Jewish contemporaries, who pursued scientific and secular learning but contented themselves with only basic religious knowledge, profoundly shaped this text. In the preface to Gate One in *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, the author portrays himself as having wandered widely in Christian and Muslim lands—'Edom' and Egypt, respectively—to become the chosen warrior of God upon his repentance for unspecified sins.⁴ His battling immediately takes on biblical proportions as he faces his first foe, Goliath, the Philistine champion whom the future king David defeated while still a boy in service of the Israelite king Saul.⁵ Yet neither Goliath nor Isaac employ traditional weapons. At first Goliath derides his opponent's intellect, and then moves on to his song, until Ibn Sahula regains his courage and thinks: "I will take my moral tales, the song of my praises, the eloquence of my riddles and my fables, and I shall strengthen them and clothe them [with] vengeance against the traitors and they shall wage war with a sharpened sword."⁶ Fortified with this determination, Isaac eventually casts a stone into the forehead of each "opponent" (מקשה "maqsheh," literally, one who makes difficulty) who desires to devour/destroy understanding and wisdom.⁷

This passage, and—as I shall show—many like it, indicates that Ibn Sahula saw himself as engaging in a religious war of words and intellect in which the fables and moral stories serve to represent and ultimately defeat his opponents. For these fables, Ibn Sahula drew upon philosophy, astrological theory, and animal lore both to polemicize against Christians and Muslims and to goad his Jewish readers towards correct spiritual behavior. Specifically, I suggest that he targeted elite Jews who were part of (or were attracted to) the culture and intellectual activities of the court of Alfonso X. These Jews, in his view, had become too enamored of fields of study he deemed false or inappropriate, such as astrology, or with the power and luxury offered by the different courts of Alfonso X, his son Sancho, or the neighboring Muslim kingdoms.⁸

²Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 111, 114–23, 131, 135–38; Baer, "Historical Background;" and Baer, "Todros."

³Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 111–12; Green, "Rabi Isaac," 393 onwards; *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Sahula." On the composition of the *Zohar*, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*.

⁴Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 24/25–30/31.

⁵1 Samuel 17.

⁶ואקח מוסרי ושיר מהללי, ומליצת חידותי ואת משלי, ואהזיקם ואלבישם נקם, על הבוגדים ריקם. ויערכו מלחמה בכלי הרב לטושה. Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 34/35, lines 132–36. Although I am indebted to Loewe's translation, for the purposes of this article I have chosen to provide my own, slightly more literal translations of the cited passages from *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, rather than Loewe's rhymed poetic one.

⁷Loewe translates this word as "cynic" throughout the text.

⁸On this group of Jews and the intellectual pursuits encouraged by Alfonso X see Hecker, "Face of Shame," 29–67; Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 114–24, 130–34, 136–38; Wacks, *Framing Iberia*, 25, 86–128, 131,

His choice to formulate his critiques within a *maqāma* at a moment soon after the Castilian translation of the Arabic fable collection *Kalīla wa Dimna*, and in the wake of several earlier Hebrew *maqāmāt*, in addition to his emphasis on medicine and astronomy in his argumentation, all reflect the cultural milieu of thirteenth-century Toledo and the surrounding areas. In drawing from these disciplines, Ibn Sahula attempted to appeal to the literary and scientific proclivities of the Jewish elites.⁹ He sought to demonstrate that the learning and lifestyles of both Christians and Muslims were inferior to the rewards of Jewish piety, even as he criticized his contemporaries' sexual and social misconduct.¹⁰ He did so by portraying Christians, Muslims, and certain Jews as having degraded their intellect by following fleshly lusts or false wisdom. In so doing, they lost the quality that made them superior to animals. His use of animals to depict the inhumanity of most humans adds a level of irony to his work, but also becomes a part of his arsenal of symbolism, which he deftly employs to criticize the religious claims and behavior of non-Jews. In some instances, loss of intellect feminizes his opponents; for example, in one fable the lion has indulged his appetites to an extreme degree, in contrast to his wise, supremely learned, and rational advisor, the stag. The lion is described as sick and ritually impure: *davah* (דוה), a word which likens him to a menstrually impure woman.¹¹ However, Ibn Sahula's use of gender symbolism does not fall along neat dichotomies of male-spiritual, female-material. Rather, non-Jews and Jews of whom Ibn Sahula disapproves are often characterized by hyper-masculinity, violence, and excessive lust, whereas Ibn Sahula himself or other characters possessing greater wisdom and rationality than those around them are frequently feminized or overtly female. Women, or supposedly weak, preyed-upon animals regularly represent Jews and the path of rational self-control, in contrast to the uncontrolled bestiality of those who rule over them. By providing women and "weak" animals with a positive valence, Ibn Sahula refutes earlier or contemporaneous Christian and Muslim anti-Jewish polemic which either likened Jews to undesirable animals, feminized them, or attributed chronic disease or sickly humors to them.¹² In the process of refuting feminizing anti-Jewish polemic, Ibn Sahula also subverts

168, 193; Gampel, "Letter to a Wayward Teacher," 91, 104–6; Ilan, "Jewish Community in Toledo," 65–95; Doron, "Poetry of Todros," 282–90; Assis, "Jewish Physicians," 36–37, 38–40, 43–44, 46–48; Assis, "Sexual Behavior," 26–29, 42–43; Oron, "R. Todros," 47–51; Burns, "Stupor Mundi," 1–13; Roth, "Jewish Collaborators," 59–71; Baer, *History of the Jews*, 1: 236–77; Baer, "Historical Background," Baer, "Todros;" and Alfonso X, *Astromagia*, 9–74. My thanks to Joel Hecker for allowing me to read and cite his article before its publication.

⁹Loewe notes Ibn Sahula's connections and proximity to Jews in Toledo in his introduction to *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* (xv–xviii).

¹⁰On immorality in the Castilian Jewish community and efforts to counter it see Hecker, "Face of Shame," 29–67; Gampel, "Letter to a Wayward Teacher," 94–97; Ilan, "Jewish Community in Toledo," 69, 82–95; Oron, "R. Todros," 47–51; Assis, "Sexual Behavior," 39–47; Baer, *History of the Jews*, 1: 236–77; Baer, "Historical Background," 35–41; Baer, "Todros," 24–48. Similar behavior existed among Jews in Aragon. Assis, *Golden Age*, 285–96.

¹¹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 98/99, line 652; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 205–7; Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 17–18, 83–86, 90, 93–95.

¹²On the use of animal imagery in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim polemic, see Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 51–53, 198–239; Stow, *Jewish Dogs*; Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*; Epstein, "'Ways of Truth Are Curtailed and Hidden,'" 205–31; Epstein, "Elusive Hare," 70–86; Miyazaki, "Misericord Owls," 23–49; and Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 82, 97–98, 145–55, 174, 258–59 n. 35. While Jews frequently portrayed themselves as rabbits or stags, in Christian polemic Jews were not always symbolized by harmless creatures. On feminizing or disease-related polemic against the Jews see Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 156–82; Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, 82–85, 92–96, 119–21; Biller, "'Scientific' View," 137–68; Resnick, "Medieval Roots," 241–63; and Johnson, "Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 273–95.

many negative tropes of women, both actual and allegorical, that circulated in Iberian poetry and *maqāmāt*.¹³

Reason besieged: passions, violence, and wrong learning

According to the prologue to *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* the author is “armed,” and his book is a fortress whose riddles will free the soul of the person who is able to solve them. His parables will obscure the “Moabite song” and go against Yemen and the descendants of Edom who say that Hebrew is of lowly descent.¹⁴ The introduction continues in a similarly combative vein, although it is initially illness rather than the language of battle that is evoked. Ibn Sahula writes for lords (השרים, *ha-sarim*) and common people (העמים, *ha-'amim*) alike to show the beauty of the holy language, since many turn their efforts to the “books of the heretics [*minim*],” the “wisdom of the Greeks” and the “proverbs of the Hagarines and Ammonites”; they are like the sons of Kushites (Ethiopians) and children of Keṭurah, too busy to occupy themselves with the Torah apart from the most basic prayers and precepts, and thus, are sick.¹⁵ The book, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, will rouse them from their sickness and take away their lusts, for it relies on the Torah and Talmud and not on the books of the Muslims or Christians.¹⁶ Ibn Sahula’s continual reference to “*minim*” (“heretics”), Edom (a common Hebrew epithet for the Christians), and to geographic terms such as “Yemen” or “Egypt,” or biblical figures that evoke Islam, like Hagar, Keṭurah, or Ishmael, point to the polemical nature of his composition.¹⁷ Martial imagery in the prologue resumes as wisdom and intellect prepare for war, and continues into the introduction to Gate One, in the form of the battle between Goliath and Ibn Sahula.¹⁸ This work is no mere war of language: rather, it is a battle of the mind against Muslims, Christians, and those who imitate them. Yet intellect can be applied wrongly, as several of his stories demonstrate.

In Gate One, “In praise of intellect and wisdom to give the foolish cunning, knowledge, and craftiness,” one of the *maqshim* tells a tale, ostensibly to demonstrate the inability of learning to offer good fortune or protection.¹⁹ Yet entwined within the story are the tools for its own unraveling and a fierce critique of court culture and Islam. In Egypt, a learned (משכיל, *maskil*) man who “was researching everything hidden” (היה חוקר כל תעלומה) was reduced to begging for food, until heat and a prolonged drought dried out his brain to such a degree that he lost his mind and

¹³On negative depictions of women or the feminine in medieval Iberian Hebrew literature, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 10–18, 68–71, 103–19; Díaz Esteban, “Elogio y vituperio de la mujer,” 70–77; Roth, “Wiles of Women,” 145–65.

¹⁴Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 5, 6, 7, lines 3–8.

¹⁵Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 8/9–10/11. By the term *ha-sarim* (השרים) (the lords) I suspect he means those who served at the king’s court, whereas *ha-'amim* (העמים) (the people) refers to the educated public, though not those with political or communal power. We may presume his audience to have been educated, given their interest in, and capacity to study, the philosophy and literature of non-Jews, and, of course, to read Ibn Sahula’s own work. On Jewish interest and reading of non-Jewish vernacular literature for entertainment and objections to such behavior see *King Artus*, 50–60.

¹⁶Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 10/11–12/13 especially lines 30, 34–36, 50–54.

¹⁷Keṭurah probably refers to Islam, since she was the handmaiden of the patriarch Abraham, and as such sometimes seems to be associated with Egypt in Kabbalistic texts. However, the identification is not certain. On this figure in thirteenth-century Kabbalistic sources see Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 110–14, 120–22. On Esau and Edom see Yuval, *Two Nations*, 1–20, 58–59, 98–115, 139–40, 212–13, 230–32, 263, 270–71, 275, 290.

¹⁸Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 14/15, lines 81–84. On Goliath, see above.

¹⁹ודעת ומזמה, בתלפתאים ערמה, במהלל השכל והחכמה, לתת לפתאים ערמה, ודעת ומזמה (Ibn Sahula *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 42/43). See Proverbs 1:4.

memory, becoming no better than a beast (הבהמה, *ha-behemah*).²⁰ Mocked by the crowds, he reaches the gate of the palace, where the king and queen hear him muttering. For amusement's sake, they grant him the status of lord, honor him, give him clothing, and provide delicacies to eat, while similarly honoring his wife and sons. For two years he remains among the lords, entertaining the king as a fool. Once the heat and drought lift, however, instead of speaking silliness, he quotes Isaiah 19:11: "Utter fools are the nobles of Tanis, the wise men of the advisors of the Pharaoh" (אך אולים שרי צאן חכמי יעצי פרעה).²¹ He then further reproaches his audience:

You quarrel with me about the precious gift of my speech
And you seek sins from my words.

Is not the fool and the mad man among my enemy
The sons of vanity who hate me and [who are] my adversaries?

I was taught eloquence from my youth
And intelligence and understanding from my boyhood.²²

Beaten on suspicion of having faked his madness, he returns to his family and affirms that "a little folly is honored more than wisdom" (Ecclesiastes 10:1), implying that the man thought himself better off as a fool at court. Indeed, the *maqsheh* affirms that he told this parable as a warning against mixing with wise men (החכמים, *ha-ḥakhamim*). Fools may not be trusted either, however: the one who busies himself with wisdom is rendered desolate when right, and damages his soul when wrong, so one is better seeking enjoyment, creating a turban or headdress from the good of this world.²³

The narrator roundly condemns this conclusion, but clues that his opponent is wrong are already contained in the story itself for those readers sufficiently learned in scripture to recognize the allusions. The reference to the turban recalls Isaiah 22:18, in which God threatens to wrap around Himself as a turban those who have sinned—specifically who ate, drank, and made merry in the face of war, rather than repent (Isaiah 22:12–13)—and to carry them to a distant land to die. By evoking this biblical passage as part of the *maqsheh*'s moral to the story, Ibn Sahula alludes to the dire fate of those who would choose to follow his opponent's advice. The larger context of the passage, in which the people become a target of God's wrath because of their frivolity, indulgence, and impiety, creates a further parallel with the *maqsheh*'s parting words, since to accept his suggestion would mean aspiring to a similar degree of merriment, comfort, and lack of interest in God. Ecclesiastes 10:1, quoted by the unfortunate protagonist upon his homecoming, only superficially upholds life as a fool as preferable to that of a wise person. The rest of the chapter in Ecclesiastes is devoted to indicating the doom which a fool

²⁰Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 44/45–46/47, lines 21–37. The word translated for "Egypt" is *Zo'an* (צאן) usually translated "Tanis," drawing from Isaiah 19:11, which the protagonist will quote in full later in the story (see below, footnote 21). The entire chapter in Isaiah is about Egypt. See Loewe's comments in Ibn Sahula *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 44 n. 3.

²¹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 46/47–50/51, lines 38–94. On Tanis, see above, n. 20.

²²Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 50/51, lines 96–98). Alternately one could translate) תריבונני עלי חמדת אמרי / ותבקשו חטאת מדברי / הלא סכל ואיש הולל תצרי / בני הבל אשר שונאי וערי / למדוני מליצה מנעורי / השכל והבין מבהורי / the penultimate line as "They taught me eloquence," potentially implying that his adversaries were the ones who taught him. However, in this case, I think that an impersonal "they" is intended.

²³Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 52/53–54/55, lines 118–20, 126–29, 130–34. On the meaning of תשם, compare with Genesis 47:19, Ezekiel 12:19, 19:7. On the meaning of *zaman* (זמן) in this passage, see Loewe's comments in Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 11 n. 10. Loewe translates *ha-ḥakhamim* as "intellectuals," which may be the intended meaning, but "the wise [men]" also implies one who is religiously learned.

creates for himself and for any who listen to him rather than to a wise man. The passage also enumerates the misfortunes of a land ruled by a king who surrounds himself with foolish, unrestrained advisors, rather than well-controlled ones. The whole chapter, therefore, serves as a condemnation of the Egyptian king's court, his advisors, and of the lifestyle of the protagonist when he lived as a fool/lord at court. This embedded critique echoes the one pronounced by the hero himself upon regaining his sanity, which strongly suggests that the learned man's poem is the true moral of the parable, not the one voiced by the *maqsheh* at the end. Thus, both the poem and the entire tale exalt the learning of one's youth—presumably basic (Jewish) religious learning—over the frivolities extolled by the *maqsheh*, and warn of the dangers of abandoning the first in favor of the latter.

While foolishness or ignorance are clearly pitted against wisdom and learning, this dichotomy is not the sole focus of Ibn Sahula's intended polemic. Throughout *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, the author reminds his readers that intellect is the one characteristic that distinguishes humans from other animals.²⁴ In this particular story, to enjoy the protection, honor, and riches associated with the king's court, the protagonist must literally become like a beast, through the loss of his mind. If he must become a beast to join the court, by implication the advisors, the king and queen, and their subjects must also be like beasts because they valued a fool (*sakhal*, סכל) over intellect (*sekhel*, שכל). Such a depiction could be interpreted as a stinging criticism of courtiers of any kind, Jewish, Christian, or otherwise. Indeed, the learned man-turned-madman resembles the elite Jews to whom—Ibn Sahula states—*Meshal ha-Qadmoni* was addressed. At the beginning of the story the protagonist is described as “a learned man in his affairs, where is the pious man, where is humble one?” (alternatively, “woe/alas for the pious man, woe/alas for the humble”) (איש משכיל בעניניו אי הסיד אי ענו).²⁵ The last half of this line echoes death laments within the Mishnah and Talmud for deceased rabbis, biblical figures, or other admired or loved individuals.²⁶ As such, the phrase implies loss, as if the pious and humble had died or disappeared. While Ibn Sahula may have intended this remark to foreshadow the vicissitudes the protagonist is soon to face, the rabbinic contexts that this wording evokes implies the utter dearth of piety and humility. Either Ibn Sahula is suggesting that the man's own piety and humility are going to disappear as a result of his poverty or participation (witting or otherwise) in court, or he is intimating that the protagonist of this tale never possessed these qualities at all. The latter impression is strengthened when a few lines later the man's neighbors apply the first part of Jeremiah 9:23 “let the wise not boast in his wisdom” to the unfortunate intellectual.²⁷ The verse of Jeremiah directly following this one, wherein the people are commanded to boast only in their knowledge of God, provides the key to understanding the protagonist's status. The intellectual has pursued the wrong kind of wisdom. He, like the Jews in the introduction to *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, possesses learning, but not religious learning, and he is more preoccupied with his affairs than with religious observance. Judging from the extended context of Jeremiah

²⁴See for example Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 92/93–98/99; 2: 336/37. Compare with 1: 22/23. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1: 73, tenth proposition, 209–12.

²⁵Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 44/45, lines 22–23. Loewe translates this passage “A man, who, shrewd enough in his affairs—not modest, nor one given much to prayers—.”

²⁶*Babylonian Talmud* (henceforth abbreviated BT), tractate Berakhot 6b. Also compare with BT Sanhedrin 11a, BT Bava Batra 91a–b, Semahot 1: 9. On this genre see Feldman, “Rabbinic Lament,” 51–75. For the meanings of א (translated here as “alas” or “woe”) and related terms such as הוי, הו, and ו see the entry in Jastrow, *Dictionary*. My thanks to the anonymous reader who pointed out the rabbinic origins of this phrase, and the necessity to interpret this section of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* in light of the phrase's Talmudic meaning. All interpretation and errors are my own.

²⁷Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 44/45, line 32.

9:23 and the discussion surrounding Job 11:6, from which the phrase “all secrets” is taken, the learning that the protagonist does pursue refers to the workings of the world: that is, in this medieval context, science. The people, like Job’s friends, mock the scholar for such pursuits and for boasting about them. Presumably, they, again like Job’s companions, will be rebuked in the end. The moment of the scholar’s redemption is marked by his recitation of scripture to critique the world around him and a return to the learning of his youth; the very path on to which Ibn Sahula hopes to steer his readers. Thus, the parable serves as a warning to those Jews who engage in scientific learning without observance or study of the Torah.²⁸

While the criticisms of court life and courtiers seem apropos to any number of potential scenarios, in this specific instance, by locating the court in Egypt, Ibn Sahula seems to be targeting a Muslim court.²⁹ Furthermore, the king’s choice to give clothing to his new advisor also suggests a Muslim background, for caliphs and sultans in Egypt (and elsewhere in the Muslim world) commonly gave robes of honor to their wazirs.³⁰ While Ibn Sahula may have meant Egypt literally, Egypt is more likely to be a symbolic substitute for the Muslim powers with which Alfonso X continued to battle sporadically in al-Andalus.³¹ Jews in Toledo and other frontier towns retained close cultural ties to Muslim Spain in the thirteenth century.³² Ibn Sahula’s comments, therefore, were aimed to discourage excessive fascination or affiliation with Muslim elites or learning, marking as foolishness the pursuits patronized at their courts, like poetry, fables, philosophy, etc., which, according to Ibn Sahula’s introduction, were so distracting to his co-religionists. According to the story, the Muslim political realm was a place of suffering for those who fell out of favor. Characterizing the court as raising a madman to high rank reworked and expanded Jewish and Christian anti-Muslim polemic in which the Prophet Muḥammad is portrayed as insane, demon-possessed, or epileptic.³³ The court’s own madness, bestiality, and futility are hinted in the *maqsheh*’s introduction to the story, where he describes the fate of Nebuchadnezzar’s advisors, who were executed because they could not describe and interpret the king’s dream.³⁴ Readers of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* would have recalled the eventual fate of Nebuchadnezzar: to lose all reason and roam the field eating grass like a beast (Daniel 4:22–30). The protagonist’s own story most clearly parallels that of the Babylonian king, yet the *maqsheh* indicates that the man is comparable to the court advisors of Nebuchadnezzar, not Nebuchadnezzar himself. Ibn Sahula’s readers are left to wonder if ultimately the king in this story will himself become mad, struck down by God for regaling in his own power and his presumption that any king

²⁸Others also criticized courtier Jews for their lack of religious learning. Todros b. Judah Halevi Abulafia, *Gan ha-meshalim*, vol. 2, poem #570, lines 19–21; Gampel, “Letter to a Wayward Teacher,” 98–101, 105–7; Baer, “Todros,” 29, 47–49. On Ibn Sahula’s view of the limitations of scientific and philosophical knowledge in comparison with that of the Torah and the secrets of the Kabbalah, see Lachter, “Spreading Secrets,” 111–38.

²⁹Scholars working on visual polemic have been inclined to interpret Egypt as symbolizing Christians, not Muslims. See Harris, “Polemical Images,” 105–22; Narkiss, *Golden Haggadah*, 46. However, see David Qimḥi’s commentary on Joel 4:19, Isaiah 24:5, 13; 34:1; 44:5; 52:1; 63:1; Jeremiah 9:23; 49:7; Obadiah 2; Psalms 125:3, in which Egypt and Ishmael are identified with Islam, and Edom with Christendom.

³⁰Sanders, *Ritual, Politics*, 23–24, 28–30; Sanders, “Robes of Honor in Fatimid Egypt,” 225–39; Petry, “Robing Ceremonials in Late Mamluk Egypt,” 353–77. Egyptian rulers were not the only ones to confer robes on their favored advisors. See Sourdél, “Robes of Honor,” 137–45; Allsen, “Robing in the Mongolian Empire,” 305–13. To the best of my knowledge, no one has studied whether this practice was common among Andalusí rulers.

³¹Recall that Ibn Sahula had traveled in the Muslim world.

³²Gampel, “Letter to a Wayward Teacher,” 90–95; Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine and Medieval Society*, 39–42; Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture*, 14–20.

³³Maimonides, *Epistle to Yemen*, section 4; Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 27–31, 69–70, 246, 280.

³⁴Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 42/43, lines 11–14.

could attain power without the help of God. The *maqsheh* had condemned his protagonist for his arrogance and boasting, yet the structure and allusions within the account insinuate that this king of Egypt, like his Babylonian analogue, possesses the greater arrogance and will suffer the same bestial spell, to return to reason only at God's whim, when the king is ready to recognize God's power. Such a move knits closely together the protagonist and the king—that is, I propose, a Jewish courtier, and a Muslim ruler—and portrays them both as sinful, yet redeemable. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century exegetes and Kabbalists likewise depicted Islam and sinful Jews as occupying a middle ground between being redeemable and being dangerous outsiders.³⁵ Ibn Sahula's tale is a playful, literary version of the same stance.

Within this same gate is a lengthy tale designed to counter the story of the intellectual in Egypt. It features a king—a lion—who hunts excessively until many of the animal inhabitants flee to another land. Deprived of his food source, the lion turns to his advisors, a fox and a stag. The fox appears to give good advice, urging the king to move to another land too, but when pressured to assure the king that he will find a source of nourishment, the fox offers his own flesh, and in the process makes himself sound distinctly unhealthy and unappetizing. Then he suggests the stag as a healthy alternative, remarking on the stag's lowly ancestry. Faced with such insinuations, the stag must come before the lion and prove his superior ancestry and learning, if only to dissuade the lion from eating him. The fox conspires in a rebellion against the king, is executed, and eaten, after which the lion and his court travel to a better land and live peaceably with the other animals.³⁶

This story is the first of many which feature a predatory animal who hunts excessively, until the less carnivorous creatures who are suffering as a result must use their wit and intellect to attempt to change their plight, or turn to a higher authority for rescue. Whether or not they succeed generally depends on whether a *maqsheh* or "Isaac" is telling the story. Broadly speaking, these patterns follow Jewish biblical and medieval precedents in which Israel was regularly symbolized by deer or other pastoral, often domesticated, animals, in contrast to the other nations, which were represented by predators.³⁷ Sometimes creatures' roles correspond to traditional animal symbolism that was common in literary and visual polemic. The lion, for example, was an ambiguous symbol in Jewish lore. On one hand it possessed messianic associations in the context of the lion of Judah. On the other, it was also depicted as extremely dangerous and violent, and—in part because the Christians saw the lion as symbolic of Christ—was sometimes associated with Christianity.³⁸ The dog, who in *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* duplicitously leads a cow to her death, served likewise as a negative symbol for the religious Other in medieval Jewish-Christian-Muslim discourse.³⁹ In any case, Ibn Sahula did not always follow such conventions.

³⁵Hecker, "Face of Shame," 29–67; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 22–23 n. 31, 27, 90–91 n. 296, 130–35, 155–66; Kiener, "Image of Islam in the *Zohar*," 43–65; Cuffel, "Matter of Others," 249–84; Cuffel, "Call and Response," 88–89, 92–94. On Ibn Sahula's use of and connection with the Kabbalah, see Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 111–38.

³⁶Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 54/55–114/115, 130/131–150/151.

³⁷Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 43–44, 51–53, 198–99, 210–11, 220–25, 233; Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 16–38, 51–54, 104–12; Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 120–28.

³⁸Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 1, 49–50, 55–58, 104, 107–12; Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 50, 135; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 51–52, 203, 205–9, 220. See the story in Berechiah ha-Naqdan, *Mishle*, 55–56, fable #47, and Berechiah ha-Naqdan, *Fables*, 87–88, fable #47.

³⁹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 114/115–130/131; Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 25, 29, 133–34 n. 56; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 42, 44, 76, 152, 203, 204, 210, 216–20, 223, 230, 232, 239; Stow, *Jewish Dogs*, 14, 25–36, 54, 67, 75, 122, 141–44; Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses*, 104–6. When dogs were portrayed negatively, their violence, devouring, barking, or dirtiness was usually emphasized. In this case, the dog is condemnable primarily because of his deceitfulness, which results in the cow's

Frogs were generally negatively valenced whereas storks were positive symbols, yet in the fable of the stork and the frog, the roles are reversed.⁴⁰

I would suggest that such reversals or the use of ambiguously valenced animals (the dog was also valued for its fidelity and ability to protect) indicate individuals or types of people of similarly ambiguous status, poised between being an ally, a member, or lord of the Jewish community, and being a dangerous outsider.⁴¹ The fable of the lion, the fox, and the stag is reminiscent of the political conflict between Alfonso X and his son Sancho, which began at the end of the 1270s. Sancho diverted some of the revenue gathered by Jewish tax-collectors for his own purposes, hastening a military defeat for Alfonso in 1279. Alfonso imprisoned many of the Jewish elite. Don Isaac b. Zadoq (known in Spanish sources as Zag de la Maleha) was hanged, and another Jewish official close to Sancho was dragged through the streets until he died.⁴² If Ibn Sahula indeed intended his readers to draw parallels between this fable and recent political events, the lion would represent Alfonso X himself, and the fox and the dog (the tale of the dog and the cow is recounted by the lion to indicate the treachery of the fox) would be courtiers (Jews?) who rebelled or turned against their fellows to gain safety and royal favor.⁴³ The fox's comment that the stag is of lowly birth and thus unworthy of the lion's regard or protection reflects the frequent rivalry between the higher, long-standing nobility and recent additions from the lower nobility and merchant class to Alfonso's court.⁴⁴ That the fox is supposed to represent not merely a Jewish courtier, but one intimate with the king and responsible for collecting taxes may be seen when the fox goes to set traps for the other animals.⁴⁵ Two Jewish men identify him as one who has been the "slave" of the lion who eats and drinks from his cup and will find himself in trouble if he cannot provide for the lion's table. Loewe identifies the phrase "two Jewish men" as coming from Exodus 2:13. In this passage Moses attempts to stop two Hebrew men from fighting, at which point they challenge him: "Who made you lord over man [us]?" (Exodus 2:14). The biblical parallel suggests that the fox, like Moses at the time, was a Jew working for a king overseeing his fellow Jews, complicit in their

death, but indirectly, not because the dog attacked her. The fable of the dog and the cow is a story told within the fable of the lion, the fox, and the stag, and is thus part of Gate One.

⁴⁰Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 2: 556/557–560/561, 598/599–610/611. Compare with *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 280/281, lines 1404–8 in which the stork is an innocent victim, rather than a predator. On storks see Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 56–58; Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 102. On frogs and toads, Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 140–41, 342 n. 81, 343 n. 91; Lipton, *Images*, 43–45.

⁴¹For positive images of dogs see Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses*, 89–104; Judah b. Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, #1146. On dogs as "dangerous" (precisely because they are close companions to humans but may turn against their masters), see Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 216–17.

⁴²Ilan, "Jewish Community in Toledo," 82; Oron, "R. Todros," 48; Baer, *History of the Jews*, 1: 129–30; Baer, "Todros," 27–31, 34–36; O'Callaghan, *Alfonso X and the Cantigas*, 163–65; O'Callaghan, *Learned King*, 247–56. Loewe also argues for seeing this fable in this context. See his comments in Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: lxxxviii–xciv. On shifting tax laws as a source of conflict under Alfonso X and the economic and political background to the struggles between Alfonso and Sancho see Doubleday, *Lara Family*, 68, 75–92.

⁴³The dog betrays the cow because he is jealous of the human farmer's care of the cow, in contrast to his quasi-abusive treatment of the dog, which goes as far as refusing to feed him. Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 114/115.

⁴⁴Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 82/83, lines 459–67. Gampel, "Letter to a Wayward Teacher," 92–94; Baer, *History of the Jews*, 1: 120–21; Doubleday, *Lara Family*, 70–72. I think this kind of rivalry, rather than some kind of precursor to *limpieza de sangre*, as Loewe suggests, is the background for this passage. For Loewe's discussion see Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: ci–cv.

⁴⁵On these events see O'Callaghan, *Alfonso X and the Cantigas*, 163–65; O'Callaghan, *Learned King*, 247–56.

oppression.⁴⁶ Embedded in the comment about sharing the lion's table is a snippet from 2 Samuel 12:3 in which a poor man shares his food with his only sheep, only to have it stolen by a rich man. Perhaps Ibn Sahula intended the fox to be analogous to the sheep in the story, but I suspect that he was alluding to the abusive tax-collecting practices of wealthier Jews. By criticizing the fox, he condemned those who became enmeshed with the Crown's exploitation of the Castilian population, including his fellow Jews.⁴⁷ The fox, like such courtiers, is an ambiguous figure because, even though he belongs to the community of animals/Jews subject to the whim of the king, he is willing to endanger those around him for his own benefit, or that of the lion (king).

The lion himself is a source of loyalty and fear in the fable. The ox and donkey debate whether to flee or rebel in the face of the lion's brutal culling of his subjects.⁴⁸ The donkey argues that one should wage the war of intellect rather than literal war, and he warns of the dire consequences of rebelling against the king.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, he ends his discourse by saying that God will smite the lion, or that the lion will die in battle, indicating a wish for vengeance even if he is unwilling to advocate rebellion.⁵⁰ The stag, while far from ever directly criticizing the lion, indirectly condemns him when the stag expounds upon intellect and the higher soul, in particular, emphasizing good governance, and characterizing the rational soul as in control and freed from desires and worries about the body. The details of the fable itself demonstrate that the lion is sorely lacking in these qualities, and thus is bestial.⁵¹ By contrast, the stag (and his father before him) is knowledgeable in all the sciences, philosophy, and Torah, and furthermore is pious in his behavior. He requests God's aid and regularly provides money for scholars and listens to them.⁵² The stag, therefore, in contrast to the intellectual of Egypt, the fox, or the dog, is an ideal courtier, educated in scientific matters and respectful of religious ones. The lion, like his symbol in Jewish lore, can be a benefactor and savior, but can also be a destructive killer.⁵³ The conversation between the ox and the donkey and the fate of the fox indicate that the lion is due loyalty, but is feared rather than loved. The lion is redeemable, as suggested by his agreement with the stag and his voyage to the holy land, but only when the lion listens to the stag.⁵⁴ One may imagine that Jews felt much the same way about Christian kings: desirable when beneficent and willing to be directed by Jewish leaders with the community's best interests at heart, but otherwise, as dangerous as a hungry lion.

Masculine excess

I have argued elsewhere that among Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, violent, rapacious behavior was associated with bestial lack of intellect and an

⁴⁶Of course, identifying the fox with Moses also potentially places him in a positive light, or at least a more sympathetic one.

⁴⁷Baer, *History of the Jews*, 1: 123–30, 250–53; and Baer, "Todros," 27–31, 33–37, 48. For contemporary criticisms of members of the Jewish community along the same lines see Jonah Gerondi, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, Gate Three, #43. Compare with #60, 67, 70.

⁴⁸Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 58/59–64/65.

⁴⁹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 60/61, 62/63, lines 197–203, 220–30.

⁵⁰On Jewish desire for vengeance against Christians see Yuval, *Two Nations*, 92–130, 143. Yuval focuses on Ashkenaz, however, the existence of similar sentiments in Iberia is not surprising despite the lack of martyr-ological ideology there. Yuval characterizes Mediterranean Jews as "more restrained." *Two Nations*, 172–73.

⁵¹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 90/91, lines 552–53, 563–70, 96/97–98/99, lines 624–63; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 206–7.

⁵²Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 84/85–92/93, 100/101, lines 490–507, 525–70, 686–93.

⁵³On the lioness incident, see Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 148/149–150/151. On her possible identity, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: xciv.

⁵⁴Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 146/147–150/151.

illegitimate “hyper-masculinity.”⁵⁵ This connection is evident in the set of exchanges between the rooster and the hawk contained in Gate Two, which is dedicated to the praise of repentance. Similar to the lion in the previous section, the hawk hunts indiscriminately, causing distress to the birds around him.⁵⁶ The hawk unapologetically embraces the identification as “a man of strife” (איש מדון) Jeremiah 15:10) whose malice and anger are “cruel without mercy” (אכזרים) Jeremiah 50:42). Each time anyone attempts to reproach him, the hawk responds לא ירהמו by killing the nestlings of birds like the stork and the dove, particularly symbolic for their innocence and piety. Given the stork’s famed attachment to its young, the hawk’s behavior seems especially cruel, very much in keeping with the passages in Jeremiah.⁵⁷

Yet amid the various disputations about violence and the value and necessity for repentance, excessive sexual desire and correct sexual practice regularly reappear as themes. The first tale that the rooster narrates in his effort to move the hawk to repentance is, appropriately enough, about a brigand who encounters a seemingly poor man, a *nazir* (נזיר) consecrated to God. The *nazir* offers the brigand as much wealth as he desires if he will return home with him. Eventually the brigand does so, and is so impressed by the learning and piety of both the *nazir* and his students that he repents of his ways and becomes a scholar.⁵⁸ As a result the *nazir* chooses his penitent companion to be his son-in-law, evoking the Talmudic passage, BT Pesaḥim 49a-b, which advocates marrying one’s daughter to a scholar rather than to one of the ‘*ammei ha-’arez*’ (literally, “people of the land”) because to do the latter is tantamount to giving her to a lion as prey.⁵⁹ BT Pesaḥim equates intercourse with an ‘*am ha-’arez*’ to having sex with a beast, making her accursed according to biblical law (Deuteronomy 27:21). It also asserts that such a man, like a lion, has no (sexual) shame, and tears and devours his prey. By evoking this passage, Ibn Sahula presents an obvious parallel with the brigand’s former life of violence and ignorance, contrasting with his new role as a scholar. Yet the analogy between BT Pesaḥim 49a-b and the protagonist hints at a number of elements in the brigand’s behavior not explicitly stated in the main story: sexual violence and impropriety, and the equation of such characteristics to animalistic status. This comparison links violence and exploitation of all kinds with wrongful, uncontrolled, masculine sexuality which deprives the individual of his human status. Insofar as the robber is intended to be the counterpart of the hawk, the hawk himself embodies a bestial form of masculinity defined by its violence.

Whether Ibn Sahula intended his caricature of the hawk as a polemic against powerful Christians, Muslims, or Jews is not clear. The traits Ibn Sahula emphasized combine two common Jewish criticisms of Christianity: promiscuity and violence.⁶⁰ At one point the hawk seems to be paraphrasing from Matthew 7:3–5, which would also seem to hint at a Christian identity for the hawk.⁶¹ Furthermore the manner of the hawk’s death—to be hanged on a tree—is reminiscent of the manner of death of Jesus, which the Jews regularly characterized as demonstrating his

⁵⁵Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 146–49, 198–200.

⁵⁶The story of the hawk, the rooster, the grouse, and the eagle span *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 200/201–326/327 with intervening stories told by the protagonists. For the initial distress that prompted the rooster to confront the hawk see Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 200/201–202/203, lines 513–16, 532–34.

⁵⁷Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 280/281, lines 1403–8, 1: 290/291, lines 1521–25; Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 56–58; Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 102.

⁵⁸Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 206/207–240/241. Loewe translates *nazir* as “monk” which is a possible meaning, given that the man studies the Mishnah and Talmud as well as the Torah (1: 222/23, lines 763–64). However, I think that Ibn Sahula intended the word to be understood in the sense described in Numbers 6:1–21, rather than giving it a Christian connotation.

⁵⁹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 240/242–242/243.

⁶⁰Qimḥi, *Sefer ha-Berit*; Qimḥi, *Book of the Covenant*, 32–33; Nachmanides, *Vikuaḥ*, 312, para. 49; Nachmanides, *Disputation*, 674, para. 49.

wicked, cursed and therefore non-messianic status, although the phrase also evokes the death of Haman, the prototypical enemy of the Jews.⁶² On the other hand, since the story is initially said to take place in Egypt, Ibn Sahula may have meant the hawk to represent a powerful Muslim. In his *Epistle to Yemen*, Maimonides also depicted Muslims as unrestrained and animalistic in their sexual pursuits and as violent toward the Jews. However, these tropes were more frequently applied to Christians than to Muslims.⁶³ While a case for the hawk being a symbol for either Christian or Muslim lords could be made, I would suggest that the hawk represents Jewish courtiers who were merciless in their financial dealings with less privileged Jews, and promiscuous in their behavior toward women, Jewish or otherwise.⁶⁴ Near the end of the story, a substantial portion of the tale is dedicated to proving that the other birds have enough witnesses to condemn the hawk. Prior to that point, both the rooster and the grouse go to some lengths to argue in favor of their right to reprove the hawk.⁶⁵ This anxiety in *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* reflects a general ambivalence within the Castilian Jewish community about the appropriateness of trying to reproach one's fellow lest one shame him, on the one hand, and the moral obligation to correct his wrongs, on the other.⁶⁶ That the birds should be so concerned with these questions of reproach and lawful witnesses suggests that the hawk is a member of the Jewish community. Viewing the hawk as representative of a Jewish courtier makes the polemic within Ibn Sahula's narrative even more trenchant than if it were intended to represent Christians or Muslims. This hawk/Jew has stepped so far beyond the pale of acceptable, righteous behavior, that in his death he is equated with Haman and/or Jesus, symbolic of the very worst enemies of the Jews. Like the Christians, the hawk is violent, promiscuous and lacking the control and intellectual capacity that would make him a true Jewish man, as embodied by the rooster, the bird who, along with the grouse, takes it upon himself to reprove the hawk, and to report his evil deeds to the eagle, lord of all the birds.

Violent hyper-masculinity is not the only sexual issue at stake between the rooster and the hawk. After the first story, the hawk rebukes the rooster for chastising him, when the rooster himself is guilty of lechery since he has frequent intercourse with his wives. Here Ibn Sahula is playing upon the Talmudic text BT Berakhot 22b in which scholars are exhorted to avoid frequenting their wives as roosters do hens.⁶⁷ The rooster admits that one should not be hypocritical,

⁶¹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 248/249, lines 1046–47. Matthew 7:3–5 “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”

⁶²Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 304/305, line 1668; Esther 8:7. For depictions of Jesus as the “hanged one” see, for example, Joseph b. Nathan Official, *Sefer Yosef ha-meqane*, 52, 53, 56, 86–87; Qimḥi, *Book of the Covenant*, 68–69; *Polemic of Nestor*, 1: 98–9, 119, 122 and 2: 95, 105, 106, #5, 104, 119. I have only included references to the Hebrew version of *Nestor ha-Komer*, since that seems to be the idiom from which Ibn Sahula was drawing the most.

⁶³Maimonides, *Epistle*, chapters XIV and XVIII. Of course we have more Jewish anti-Christian polemic than anti-Muslim polemic. On this issue and on Jewish anti-Muslim polemic generally see Brann, *Power in the Portrayal*.

⁶⁴Jonah Gerondi, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, Gate Three, #60, 64, 95; Todros b. Joseph Halevi Abulafia, *Zikhron Yehudah*, #81, 45b–46b; Gampel, “Letter to a Wayward Teacher,” 92–107; Baer, *History of the Jews*, 1: 250–53; Baer, “Todros,” 27, 31–34, 36–44; Ilan, “Jewish Community in Toledo,” 72, 74–75, 78–86. Jews in Aragon faced similar problems with some of their elite. For this aspect, see Assis, *Golden Age*, 238–41, 242–44, 270–73, 288–96.

⁶⁵Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 248/249–250/252, 284/285–286/287, 296/297, 300/301–304/305.

⁶⁶Hecker, “Face of Shame,” 29–67. Also see Jonah Gerondi, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, Gate Three, #72–73. Compare with Gate Three, #45, 58 where the concern seems to be with giving false testimony and rumor.

⁶⁷Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 248/249, lines 1052–56.

but then proceeds to define his own sexual behavior as legitimately diverting excess youthful vigor in a discreet and pious fashion within matrimony.⁶⁸ At one point the rooster seems to defend polygamy and marriage or sexual relations with captive women, interweaving into his discourse sections from Deuteronomy 21:10–14, which outlines under what circumstances Jews may have sexual relations with captives and how they must treat these women.⁶⁹ At the same time the rooster staunchly condemns dressing as a woman, crass jokes, promiscuity, and adultery.⁷⁰ He proceeds to recount a lengthy parable about a king who set out to test his two advisors by sending them to clean his palace, which had fallen into disrepair. The king provides them with a horse and fine clothing. One servant does well, whereas the other one not only does not clean the palace fully, but appears dirty before the king, his royally gifted robes besmirched. The king and court deplore this advisor's poor performance and personal hygiene and send him to prison.⁷¹ Significant for our purposes is the rooster's explanation of the allegory. According to him, God is the king, the servants are the sons of Israel, and the clothing and horse are intellect and morality (השכל ומוסר) respectively. The palace itself is the human body and the dirt is "the boiling of the blood, its vigor/and its arrogance, and the strength of nature and the preponderance of semen./ His [the king's] command to clear the house and to prepare it is a metaphor for sexual intercourse / to procreate or to lighten the burden on him (the servant or son of Israel)."⁷² The advisor who changed in and out of work clothes to keep his courtly apparel clean is one who "rules over his inclination/passion" (מושל ביצרו), has intercourse at the time proscribed by the Torah, with women with an official marriage contract rather than with prostitutes. The "good" advisor's reward, symbolized by the jewels granted him by the king after this advisor's work was completed, are good sons.⁷³ The filth of the failed advisor indicates such a man's lack of mind or morals.⁷⁴ The rooster asserts that he understands the dirty man's sickness:

For his heart is hot, and the heat and the moisture he has
 As an inheritance is a difficult contract. For it is ordained by the nature
 Of the blood, a red shield of his strength and the veins of his testicles
 And his red arteries, it conceives seed, it lengthens his days.
 Therefore I have prepared for myself women in purity as a crown
 Of glory, and I increase in holiness my children and my sons, they
 Are seed of the Holy One blessed be He, I did not turn my heart
 To a foreign woman, I did not join the company of the doers of wickedness
 And I praise the wife of my bosom and I do not profane my seed.⁷⁵

The rooster's parable and his elucidation constitute a debate about the nature of true or correct maleness within Judaism. Both the rooster and the failed servant—symbolizing the hawk—have an overabundance of hot blood (and, therefore, an overabundance of seed),

⁶⁸Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 250/251, 260/261–262/263, 276/277, lines 1078–79, 1197–1203, 1359–72.

⁶⁹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 254/256, 260/261–262/263, lines 1111–12, 1197–1202.

⁷⁰Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 260/261–262/263, lines 1190–92, 1195–97, 1201–2.

⁷¹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 262/263–270/271.

⁷²תיחת הדם ותקפו/ורהבו והתגברות הטבע ויתרון הזרע/מצותו לבער הבית ולהכינו כנוי למשגל/לקיום מינו או להקל המשא אשר עליו (Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 272/273, lines 1298–1301).

⁷³Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 272/273, lines 1304–13.

⁷⁴Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 276/77, lines 1345–48.

⁷⁵כי יחם לבבו והחם והלחות לו \ למורשה חזות קשה. כי נסמך אל טבע \ הדם מגן גבריהו מאדם וגידו פחדו \ ועורקיו מאדימים יראה זרע יאריך ימים. \ על ען הכינותי לי נשים בטרה, לפצירת \ תפארה וארבה בקדשה ילדי ובני הם \ זרע ברכ ה" . כי לא נפתה לבי על אשה \ זרה ועם פעלי און לא ארחתי לחברה \ ואת אשת חיקי אתהלל וזרע לא אהלל. (Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 276/77, lines 1359–67). On זרע as "testicles" see 277 n. 118.

emphasizing the masculine virility of both. What is different is the way in which each character employs this virility, and how able each of them is to control it. The virility of the bad servant is constant, uncontrolled, and ultimately without issue. The rooster, on the other hand, has ample, legal outlet for his plentiful seed, resulting in many children. Considering the servant's behavior and sexuality in connection with the hawk's, the difference is even greater. While the rooster has many children, not only does the hawk have none, he deprives others of theirs. Thus the war-like, predatory ethos, which makes the hawk so like the Christians, also makes him the antithesis of virility. Ibn Sahula is writing just as Christians in other areas of Europe are beginning to feminize Jewish men by portraying them as fearful, unable or unwilling to fight, and even suffering from monthly (or annual) bleeding like women.⁷⁶ Ibn Sahula's complexly intertwined set of tales deftly refutes such Christian assertions by suggesting that the very characteristics which Christians (and their imitators) consider manly robs them of any true demonstration of masculinity—godly offspring—and worse, proves their lack of intellect and, by extension, humanity.⁷⁷

The rooster's declarations about correct sexuality seem to address another division within the community, namely the acceptability of multiple wives and concubines. The Jewish practice of having two wives continued to be practiced in Christian Spain. However, some were beginning to call such family arrangements into question, and to wonder if the decree that the Ashkenazi R. Gershom b. Judah (c. 960–1040) had made against polygamy should be applicable in Spain. Arguments for and against the legitimacy of concubinage and polygamy continued into the fourteenth century.⁷⁸ Seemingly, Ibn Sahula favors continuing to allow marriage to more than one wife, although he is aware of opposition to this position. From a literary perspective, proclamations in favor of multiple wives advance his assertions of Jewish, masculine prowess, while remaining within the bounds of Jewish law. However, the question of servants, in particular Muslim slaves or maid servants, was much more volatile. Most moralists, Kabbalists, and legal officials roundly condemned the common custom of having intercourse with these women, as well as other sexual relations out of wedlock.⁷⁹ If the rooster represents the author's own views, Ibn Sahula seems to take a middle ground, condemning promiscuity and any kind of sex outside of marriage, but allowing the marriage of "captive women" if done within the strictures laid down in the Torah. His position is not absolutely clear, however, for although he cites Deuteronomy 21:10–14, he also boasts that he "did not turn [his] heart to a foreign woman." This remark suggests that he also thought this behavior to be undesirable, even if technically within the bounds of acceptable Jewish masculinity.

⁷⁶Resnick, "Medieval Roots," 241–63; Johnson, "Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 273–95; Biller, "Scientific View," 138–43; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 156–82; Biale, *Blood and Belief*, 105–6; Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 140–54. For this weakness among Jewish men in a more military context see Jacques de Vitry, *La Traduction de l'Historia Orientalis*, 129; Jacques de Vitry, *Libri duo*, 159–60.

⁷⁷Compare with the debate between the ram and the goat, where similar issues of correct sexual behavior, masculinity, and fertility are at stake. Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 156/157–198/199.

⁷⁸Baer, *History of Jews in Christian Spain*, 1: 254–56; Assis, "Sexual Behavior," 36–40; Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 70–77, 78–82, 84–87; Gampel, "Letter to a Wayward Teacher," 95–97.

⁷⁹Jonah Gerondi, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, Gate Three, #64, 94, 95; *Zohar* I. 131b, II. 3b; Baer, *History of Jews in Christian Spain*, 1: 256–57; Baer, "Todros," 31–33, 36–44; Baer, "Historical Background," 37–38; Assis, "Sexual Behavior," 36–45; Ilan, "Jewish Community in Toledo," 80, 82–84; Cuffel, "Matter of Others," 268–70, 274–76, 278–79; Hecker, "Face of Shame," 29–67; Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 135–40; Gampel, "Letter to a Wayward Teacher," 94–97.

Feminine identity and wise women

Given Ibn Sahula's efforts to create clear poles of rational, fertile Jewish masculinity, in contrast to the unfruitful maleness of the uncontrolled animal passions of Gentiles and the Jewish elite, any depiction of himself or Jews in general as feminine may seem counterproductive. Yet in the introduction to Gate One, he explicitly likens himself to a woman suffering labor pains to express his great fear of the opposition he faces.⁸⁰ His depiction of himself as a trembling, birthing female in the face of battle resembles the feminizing characteristics that the medieval chronicler of the crusades Jacques de Vitry applied to Jews in his *Historia Orientalis*.⁸¹ Rather than rejecting such associations, in this instance Ibn Sahula embraces them, but in the very process of doing so he also subverts their negative meanings. The biblical passages that he uses to evoke this imagery involve a people facing terrible military odds, whose only hope of rescue is mercy and rescue by God.⁸² These comparisons are very apropos as the poet faces Goliath in his metaphorical war. However, in choosing that biblical struggle to represent his own contest, Ibn Sahula has selected the scriptural prototype *par excellence* of the righteous weak overcoming the strong. Thus, the choice to compare himself to a woman in her most vulnerable state is akin to Jews adopting weak, preyed-upon, and even impure animals to represent themselves. In the end, the despised and supposedly inferior will triumph, just as David defeated Goliath.

This connection between weak animals, laboring women, and Jews becomes more apparent in the fable of the lion, the fox, and the stag. In face of the lion's predations, "all those who eat grass are like a woman writhing in childbirth" (וכל-אשר \ עשבים יאכלו כיוולדה יהילו).⁸³ In Isaiah 13:8, from which Ibn Sahula draws his wording, men become like women in their suffering because of their extreme fear, much as they do in the biblical passages Ibn Sahula applied to himself in the introduction to this section of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* and in Jacques de Vitry's depiction of Jews. Applying this kind of anguish to the herbivores emphasizes the intended identification between the animals and women/Jews. As in David/Ibn Sahula's battle with Goliath, however, the herbivores ultimately prevail, though in this case not through fighting, but by going to a better place where there is plenty of food and none to prey upon them. In either instance, the victory of those who are laboring like women effectively counters Christian anti-Jewish polemic that underscored Jews' supposed femininity as indicative of God's punishment and rejection. In the biblical verses chosen by Ibn Sahula, the author hints at the possibility that these pains may be due to Jewish sin, for in these verses, the suffering is a direct consequence of a punishment from God. Within the contexts of the stories in *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, however, he effectively insists that the feminized, weak Jews occupy higher moral and intellectual ground than their persecutors, and will be rescued by God. Moreover, the specific choice of women in childbirth to represent Jews in their weakened but redeemable state points to the productive nature of that suffering, much like the fertility of the rooster indicated his righteousness in contrast to the hawk.

In any case, not all feminizing imagery is positive. The stag compares the soul which is cut off from the intellect to a prostitute who renders herself impure in the process of delighting men, and to an adulteress who will let no "hakham" (wise one/sage) wash her, slandering and despising the Talmud, and dishonoring the commandments.⁸⁴ Rosen points out that in medieval Hebrew

⁸⁰Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 32/33, 34/35, lines 129–30, 149.

⁸¹Jacques de Vitry, *La Traduction de l'Historia Orientalis*, 129; Jacques de Vitry, *Libri duo*, 159–60. Vitry portrays Jews as fearful, suffering from bleeding rather than childbirth. He was among the first Christian authors to use such imagery against the Jews. On Jewish men menstruating or bleeding regularly as a form of Christian polemic, see above, note 12.

⁸²Isaiah 21:3; Psalms 48:7; Jeremiah 2:31.

⁸³Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 64/65, lines 234–35. Isaiah 13:8.

⁸⁴Ibn Sahula, 1: 102/103, lines 696–708.

literature the soul was frequently cast as a woman, whether harlot-like, impure, and menstrual in sin, or a loving wife or daughter when righteous.⁸⁵ This theme draws from the common biblical trope in which sinful Israel is depicted as a whore.⁸⁶ While Ibn Sahula had many models upon which to draw, his reference to the sinful harlot/soul not waiting to be washed by the “*hakham*”—whom Loewe interprets as referring to God—points to Ezekiel 16. In this chapter, God washes the naked Israel, who is still wallowing, abandoned in the blood of childbirth, clothes and adorns her, only to have her turn harlot, chasing after the luxuries of all the other nations, and indulge in their idolatries, and lascivious behavior, even going so far as to sacrifice her own children to idols. This passage is particularly graphic and harsh because it emphasizes Israel’s feminine impurity (like menstrual blood, blood from childbirth was impure, (Leviticus 12:2–7)) and her brutality toward her children. The similarities between Ezekiel 16 and this portion of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* increase in the following stanza. There the stag describes the fate of such a sinful soul, which is to descend to the land of the dead, an “impure land” (ארץ טמאה) where there are not only adulterers but Philistines (non-Jews who are the enemies of Israel), diviners (קסמים), soothsayers (בעונונים), and magicians (כשפים), who are burning and in pain. The assortment of magic workers is the same found in Deuteronomy 18:10. One category which Deuteronomy includes but Ibn Sahula does not is one “who consigns his son or daughter to fire” (מעביר בנו ובתו באש), an activity similar to that of the whoring, impure Israel in Ezekiel 16:20–21. Those readers familiar with scripture would have recalled the missing element of the foursome in Deuteronomy 18:10. Had the readers also connected the passage with the one in Ezekiel, they would have seen the “soul” as the epitome of the “bad” woman: impure, sexually disloyal, and murderous toward her children.

The chasing after wealth and despising God’s law in both Ezekiel and in this passage from *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* is in keeping with Ibn Sahula’s polemic against courtier Jews. However, the stag’s words are directed at the lion, who again, as I and others have suggested, probably represents Alfonso X.⁸⁷ This factor alone would suggest that Ibn Sahula was targeting Christians in this passage. The identification and the polemic behind it becomes especially biting when keeping in mind that Jesus was portrayed as a denizen of hell in the uncensored versions of the Babylonian Talmud, and in the *Toledot Yesu* tradition (a kind of Jewish “anti-gospel”) Jesus was a magician and the son of a menstruating woman, something Jewish chroniclers, polemicists, poets, and Kabbalists regularly underscored.⁸⁸ The repeated allusion to female impurity in the stag’s discussion of the soul “gone wrong” coupled with references to magicians and Gentile enemies of the Jews strongly suggests that Ibn Sahula directed his exhortation not to sinners in general, but more specifically to Christians, and in particular Christian rulers. In this scenario, the impure, menstruating, murderous Christian soul joins the souls of others were also impure, such as homicidal magicians and idol worshipers. Essential to this anti-Christian polemic is a negative femininity. Like the contrast between the productive and destructive masculinity of the rooster and the hawk respectively, the feminization of the wicked soul stands in contradistinction to the positive one of Ibn Sahula and the pastoral animals earlier in the narrative. If indeed Ibn Sahula intended his readers to recall Ezekiel 16 and Deuteronomy 18:10 as they read this section of the fable of the lion, the fox, and the stag, then this negatively feminized soul kills her young rather than give birth to them, and turns away from God in her sin, rather than toward Him.

⁸⁵Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 83–102.

⁸⁶See, for example, the book of Hosea, where that theme predominates.

⁸⁷For this aspect refer to the first section of this article.

⁸⁸Cuffel, “Matter of Others,” 253–62, 271–72; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 119–31; Deutsch, “Evidence of an Early Version of *Toledot Yesu*,” 177–97; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 45–62.

The overtly female, human characters in *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* demonstrate the same capacity for good and evil as Ibn Sahula's metaphorical females. In one parable, contained in Gate Two, on repentance, the young wife of a pious old Muslim outwits her husband and runs off to Egypt with her lover.⁸⁹ Embedded within it is a disquisition about the qualities of an ideal wife, making the story a kind of debate about good vs. bad women, which was a common narrative technique in *maqāmāt*.⁹⁰ In Gate Five, "In praise of the fear of the Awesome One [God], the remnant is found" (במהלל היראה הנוראה השארית הנמצאה) is another parable in which a woman, a concubine (אשה פלגש) is the heroine who uncovers a plan by the noblemen to kill the prince and his offspring because a group of astrologers had convinced them that this was a propitious time for rebellion and the prince was doomed to die.⁹¹ Rather than the concubine, it is the prince who explains at great length the true relationship between the spheres and stars and the Earth, and the reasons why the astrologers are wrong.⁹² Yet she is the only one besides the prince who has enough wisdom (הכמה, *hokmah*) and intellect (שכל, *sekhel*) to grasp that the astrologers are wrong and wicked. Ibn Sahula further endorses her intelligence saying that "she was ... shrewd (enough) to direct men's hearts and to think" (היא ... ערמה יודעת להמשיך הלבבות לחשב מחשבות).⁹³ She is also the audience for the prince's discourse on the planets, not the misguided men, implying that she is the only one able and worthy to understand it.

Indeed, the concubine perfectly exemplifies the values implied in the title of the gate or chapter of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* in which her story is contained, for in her fear or reverence of the correct path—refusing to kill her child or rebel against her king—she is the only one who survives. The lords who did rebel are killed. Similarly, in 2 Kings 9:4, from which part of the gate's title is taken, those who remained loyal to King Hezekiah in face of an Assyrian siege also survive, whereas God puts the Assyrians to death. Her decision to save her child, in contrast to her own father's murderous intentions toward the boy, is reminiscent of the contrast between the fertile rooster and the murderous hawk, who was likewise prone to kill the young. Thus good "femininity," like "good" masculinity, is marked by fertility and the protection of young, whereas evil continues to be characterized by predatory, self-serving violence. Taking a more metaphorical approach to the concubine's story, the concubine could potentially symbolize Jews who show the proper reverence for God and the correct kind of wisdom and knowledge which leads her to turn to God (represented by the prince). Construed in this way, the tale becomes yet one more example of a long-standing trope extant in the Bible, medieval Hebrew literature, and Kabbalah, in which Israel is represented by a woman and God by a king.⁹⁴ Such an interpretation is in line with Ibn Sahula's overall goals, and in keeping with the Kabbalistic threads within his *maqāma*.

These details place the concubine well ahead of her masculine counterparts in the traits which Ibn Sahula valued most of all: wisdom and intellect. In depicting her thus, Ibn Sahula subverts the frequent association of women with the body, wickedness, or at least bodily desire, and the

⁸⁹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 166/167–192/193.

⁹⁰Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 174/175–178/179; Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 103–23; Diaz Esteban, "Elogio y vituperio de la mujer," 71–77; Brann, *Compunctious Poet*, 138–41.

⁹¹Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 2: 626/627–686/687, especially 634/635–638/639.

⁹²Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 2: 638/639–682/683.

⁹³Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 634/635, lines 886–88.

⁹⁴For references to metaphorical use of women in biblical and medieval literary sources see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 10–18, 68–71, 83–123; Diaz-Esteban, "Elogio y vituperio de la mujer," 67–78; Roth, "Wiles of Women," 145–65. In the Kabbalah, such symbolism is ubiquitous and commented upon by many scholars. For examples, see Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 272–80, and *Circle in the Square*; Schafer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 83–86, 88, 90; Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*; Green, "Shekhinah," 1–52.

irrational that existed in medieval Hebrew as well as in Arabic and Western Christian literature.⁹⁵ Ibn Sahula's choice to place a woman at or near the pinnacle of intellect accords with his overall strategy within *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* to exalt those who seem weak or in some way undesirable, whether that be due to gender or type of animal, in order to demonstrate the benefit of true wisdom. For Ibn Sahula, gender is a metaphorical tool by which he conveys his messages. However, gender is less important than being the *right kind* of male or female. Similarly, in making animals his primary means for demonstrating the value of the very characteristic that they are supposed to lack in real life—rationality—Ibn Sahula slyly suggests that not all humans are truly human. By abandoning intellect and wisdom, some people have become not only inhuman; they are less than the animals who instruct them. Both the structure of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*—centered around debates between seemingly impious rogues and the more religious narrator who has repented from his youthful misdeeds—and Ibn Sahula's claims about the primacy of Hebrew need to be seen in light of earlier Jewish poets from al-Andalus, and even poets and *maqāmāt* writers from Christian-ruled Castile. These poets and *maqāmāt* writers also sought to prove Hebrew's worth in relation to Arabic or debated the value of imitating the themes and forms of Arabic poetry. In the process, these authors frequently portrayed the pursuit of such endeavors as the follies or the sins of youth once they had turned to more religious subject matter, much as Ibn Sahula does in his preface to Gate One.⁹⁶ For example, in his own *maqāma*, al-Ḥarīzī (1165–1225) uses imagery similar to that of Ibn Sahula as he also extols wisdom and intellect which, in quasi-personified form, assist him to battle against Esau and Ishmael (Christianity and Islam) in order to restore the primacy of Hebrew.⁹⁷ *Maqāmāt* also frequently incorporated sermons and explored moral issues, albeit in a playful fashion.⁹⁸ Yet Ibn Sahula's project remains fundamentally different from that of al-Ḥarīzī and other Hebrew authors of *maqāmāt*, for Ibn Sahula objects not merely to the imitation of the literature or language of other cultures, or to Jewish misbehavior or lack of learning, but to the beliefs, intellectual pursuits and behavior of Muslims, Christians, and, of course, of those Jews who followed their lead. Thus, as Baer has indicated, the primarily didactic goals of the *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* remain in keeping with other moralizing literature such as *Sefer Sha'arei Teshuvah*, by the Catalan Jonah Gerondi (d. 1263), or the *Raya mehemna*, a fourteenth-century extension of the *Zohar*.⁹⁹ I would agree with the contention that Ibn Sahula sought to promote deep knowledge of Judaism (through Kabbalah) and presented such knowledge as “ideal” and “inaccessible to rational speculation.”¹⁰⁰ I would further add that tales such as the one of the concubine and the prince in *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* posit true understanding of God as the key to the knowledge of worldly secrets, which some of Ibn Sahula's more scientifically but less piously inclined contemporaries pursued so avidly. Thus, while criticizing the pursuit of scientific and literary virtuosity derived from and cherished by Christian and Muslim courts, Ibn Sahula simultaneously enticed his Jewish audience with promises that, if only they would follow his recommended path of learning, greater knowledge of these fields would come.

⁹⁵Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 16–18, 84–86.

⁹⁶Brann, *Compunctious Poet*, 18–24, 27–39, 88–99, 106, 109–12, 123–38; Ibn Sahula, *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, 1: 22/23–28/29.

⁹⁷Judah al-Ḥarīzī, *Taḥkemoni*, 63–72; Judah al-Ḥarīzī, *Book of Taḥkemoni*, 5–12; Drory, “Al-Ḥarīzī's *Maqāmāt*,” 69–72.

⁹⁸Brann, *Compunctious Poet*, 138–41; Monroe, “Misinterpreting False Dreams,” 415–35; Tanenbaum, “Of a Pietist Gone Bad,” 297–319; Young, “Preachers and Poets,” 190–205.

⁹⁹Baer, *History of Jews in Christian Spain*, 1: 436–37 n. 17; Baer, “Historical Background;” Lachter, “Spreading Secrets,” 112, 118, 121, 130–32, 136–38.

¹⁰⁰Lachter, “Spreading Secrets,” 111–38, especially 112.

Integral to Ibn Sahula's efforts to redirect his co-religionists' behavior and course of study was an ongoing polemic against Christians and Muslims. According to Ibn Sahula, not only were their scientific and literary productions inferior, but they themselves were violent, sometimes impure, lacking in intellect, and, thus, also deficient in the most essential quality of humanity. In *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, gender is a crucial tool for marking whose behavior is desirable and whose is not, although the categories of male and female do not carry in themselves positive or negative traits. Rather, productive, fertile masculinity and femininity—sometimes represented quite literally by offspring—which is directed toward knowledge and obedience to God is validated in contrast to exaggerated gender performance. Exaggerated or excessive masculinity is represented by sexual rapaciousness and violence, whereas wrong femininity is indicated by ritual impurity. Both of these negative genderings are regularly marked by infertility, symbolizing the sterility of pursuing worldly learning and pleasures without deep knowledge of God. On a more concrete level such gender symbolism was also designed to censure sexual practices in Christian Iberia that did not lead to the production of unambiguously Jewish children. Such duality of function is characteristic of *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*, for in it Ibn Sahula sought to address intellectual and social ills simultaneously.

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A Hebrew “sodomite” tale from thirteenth-century Toledo: Jacob Ben El’azar’s story of Sapir, Shapir, and Birsha

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The purpose of this article is to provide a close reading of a thirteenth-century Hebrew narrative by Jacob Ben El’azar of Toledo that recounts the tale of a “sodomite” who meets a violent end. The story focuses on the amorous affair of Sapir, an adult male, his beloved Shapir, a male youth around the age of puberty, and Birsha, a nefarious old man who lures Shapir away from Sapir, though Sapir ultimately seeks out Shapir and is reunited with him. Sapir and Birsha dispute over the boy and ultimately submit their case before a judge. The judge declares that Birsha deserves the death penalty, though he is spared this sentence and ordered only to forfeit the boy. Nevertheless, Sapir and Shapir take the law into their own hands and brutally murder Birsha. At the heart of the narrative is the tension between two models of eroticism between males, epitomized by the relationships of Sapir–Shapir and Birsha–Shapir, one sanctioned and the other condemned. The question that will be dealt with here is to determine what exactly distinguished the two relationships. Was Birsha considered a “sodomite” as opposed to Sapir, despite the fact that they both loved the male youth Shapir? Were they distinguished by their age, the nature of their desire, their sexual “identities,” their sexual acts, or other behaviors? (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, argued that the notion of sexual “identity” did not emerge until the modern era and that pre-modern societies thought only in terms of sexual acts. I largely agree with this evaluation though I will maintain that the categorization in the narrative under discussion distinguished between individuals who desired males and females versus those who desired males only.) In order to unravel this complicated narrative, we must delve deeply into the construction of sexuality within medieval Hebrew literature and more broadly within medieval Jewish culture—so enmeshed within its Islamic and Christian environments. I will argue that the identification of Birsha as a “sodomite” resided in his obsessive, mendacious, and violent qualities and not in his choice of love object, much less his sexual “identity.” Before presenting the narrative and my reading, I review some of the history of scholarship on homoeroticism in medieval Hebrew literature in order to provide a counterpoint to the methodological underpinnings of the present study. Throughout the study, I engage a variety of source types—Arabic homoerotic poems and narratives, Andalusī Hebrew poems, Christian reports of Muslim sexuality, exegetic and legal sources—in order to convey the highly specific and culturally circumscribed forms of homoeroticism assumed in Ben El’azar’s story.

Keywords: homosexuality; sexual identity; Hebrew poetry; Toledo; crime and punishment

Homoeroticism in medieval Hebrew literature

Few topics in the study of medieval Hebrew literature have generated so much controversy as the presence and significance of homoerotic motifs in poems by authors as esteemed as Solomon Ibn

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Gabirol (c. 1021–58), Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141) or Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164). Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of medieval Hebrew literature who encountered intimations of desire for a male beloved—generally a boy around the age of puberty—in poems penned by male authors tended to discount such references in any number of ways, such as assuming that a beloved marked grammatically as a male was actually a female, that the poetic speaker was female, or that the authors’ intent was strictly allegorical.¹ Meanwhile, some scholars saw in the homoerotic theme testimony to the Jewish emulation of Arabic literature and hence to thorough Jewish assimilation (in the most optimistic sense) within medieval Islamic society, however disagreeable the theme itself may have seemed.

These ambivalent attitudes toward homoerotic motifs typify the complex place that medieval arabized Jewry occupied within the social and political agenda of Emancipation-era Jews in Europe. The moderns generally claimed the medievals as their predecessors and sometimes proudly presented themselves as Oriental with all the mystique of wisdom and exoticism that the term carried. At the same time, modern European Jews sought to portray themselves as capable of integration within a European identity that was defined in contradistinction to the Orient, envisioned as Europe’s opposite in every respect.² Muslim homoeroticism had already fascinated the “West” at least since the Crusades, when supposed evidence of Muslim sexual transgression—including the sodomizing of Christian men of “every age and rank” (including bishops)—was marshaled in order to incite the Christian devout to march to Jerusalem.³ In the modern era, Western scholars imagined Arabic literature (both with condemnation and envy) as a testament to a world of sexual indulgence and permissiveness; this view is exemplified in the “Terminal Essay” to Sir Richard Burton’s translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, in which the author expounds upon the existence of a “Sotadic Zone” where “the Vice” (by which he meant pederasty) was practiced and condoned from the Mediterranean to Japan.⁴ European Jewish scholars identified simultaneously as the Western subject and the Eastern object of their study, which resulted in the uneasy, even dissonant, compromise of embracing the fact of Jewish imitation of Arabic literature while distancing themselves from the connotations of otherness, deviance, effeminacy, and *luxuria* (presumably) associated with the homoeroticism contained therein.

Beginning with the appearance in 1995 of a landmark article by Jefim Schirmann, “The Ephebe in Medieval Hebrew Poetry,” a number of scholars have acknowledged less ambivalently the presence of homoerotic motifs in Andalusī Hebrew poetry, though disagreements have continued as to whether the literary elements necessarily reflect the desires or practices of their

¹Extreme liberality with gender transposition has led to notorious misreadings, as in Egers, “Das stammeldne Mädchen.” Brody, in his commentary on Judah Halevi’s poetry, accepts a male beloved when explicit male attributes are present but assumes the beloved to be female in the absence of such indicators. See Judah Halevi, *Shirei ḥol*, 2: 235 (re: poem 20), 2: 322 (re: poem 113). At many points in his commentary on Moses Ibn Ezra’s poetry Brody explains the term “[male] gazelle”—it seems to me, female gazelle.” Moses Ibn Ezra, *Shirei ha-ḥol*, poem 18, line 2; poem 134, line 33, poem 179, line 1, poem 249, line 1. By contrast, Sha’ul ‘Abdallah Yosef (a Jewish merchant from Baghdad involved in the India trade) does not suggest gender transposition in his commentary on Judah Halevi, *Giv’at Shaul*.

²On some general dynamics, see Kalmar and Penslar, “Orientalism and the Jews,” xiii–xl, and other useful essays in this volume.

³Boswell, *Christianity*, 278–83 and the translation of the spurious letter of Alexius Comnenus to Count Robert of Flanders in the appendix, 367–69. See also Wright, “Masculine Allusion,” 1–23 n. 1.

⁴Burton argued that this “perversion of the erotic sense” was owed to a “blending of masculine and feminine temperaments” that required “the pitiful care of the physician and the study of the psychologist.” See Burton, *Book of the Thousand and One Nights*, 10: 205–53. Again, see Wright, “Masculine Allusion,” 18 n. 6; and Rowson, “Categorization of Gender,” 50–79.

authors or, more generally, those of medieval Jews. Whereas Schirmann praised the tradition as belonging to a homoerotic world literature that included Greeks, Arabs, Persians and “figures of modern poetry” including Shakespeare and Walt Whitman, and believed that the poems presented a kernel of social reality,⁵ his critic Neḥemiah Allony attempted to defend the reputations of medieval Hebrew authors by dismissing their creations as literary games, imitations of Arabic models whose contents the authors in no way condoned. In doing so, Allony promoted a fantasy of Jewish filial piety and (proto-Zionist) political yearning in the Middle Ages:

[It is] without much sorrow that we are willing to give up the high place among the famous world poets, and content ourselves with the *special way of life of our people* in the Middle Ages. Their very intimate and close family life was illumined by light of the Bible and its interpretation of Rabbinic literature, and by a glowing desire for redemption and revival ...⁶

In the 1980s, Norman Roth published several articles on the homoerotic motif in medieval Hebrew secular and liturgical poetry and furthered the case for social reality by including information from medieval *responsa* literature, which testified that sexual relations between males did occur and that the punishments meted out were no more severe than in cases involving unsanctioned sexual acts between males and females.⁷

Preoccupation with the question of the social reality of authors’ sexual practices—did they or didn’t they?—has largely obscured any serious treatment of the *poetics* of homoerotic Hebrew poetry from the medieval period. In her systematic treatment of gender in medieval Hebrew literature, Tova Rosen notes the affinity between the depiction of male and female beloveds in Andalusī Hebrew verse—particularly their beauty, cruelty, and domineering speech—and maintains that the beloved boy essentially played the “‘female’ position in the relationship.” Yet, she also maintains—correctly—that homoerotic and heteroerotic verse should be treated separately, both for “reasons embedded in cultural circumstances, as well as for reasons related to gender criticism.”⁸

As far as Arabic literature is concerned, great strides have been made by, among others, Everett Rowson, toward non-essentializing treatments of homoeroticism. Amidst a staggering corpus of sources that developed over centuries, such scholars have begun to chart the diachronic development of homoerotic motifs and to analyze their structural, rhetorical, and literary dimensions from the perspective of gender.⁹ Thus far (and the work is far from complete), this body of scholarship has begun to scrutinize the precise vocabulary involved in medieval Islamic sexual practices and tastes, the complicated structures into which such terminology was embedded, dimensions of gender ambiguity and fluidity, and the rhetorical dimensions of homoerotic writing as distinct from suggested social practices.

⁵Schirmann, “Ephebe.”

⁶Allony, “Ha-ṣevi ve-ha-gamal,” 16–42; Allony, “The ‘Zevi,’” 321 [italics mine]. See also Schirmann’s response “Ḥeḡer ha-shirah,” 404, and the back and forth between the two in the Israel press, *Ha’aretz*, 14 July 1961 and 21 July 1961. On the continuation of the controversy in the Israeli consciousness, see, for example the vitriolic response by Rafael, “Shaḥtzanut,” to an article by Zemaḥ and Rosen. The argument for literary fashion is discussed by Pagis, *Hebrew Poetry*, 47; Levin, *Me’il tashbeṣ*, 315. Also, Citron argues for allegorical readings of erotic poetry, “Aspects of Love,” 119–25.

⁷Roth, “‘Deal Gently with the Young Man’”; Roth, “‘My Love Is Like a Gazelle’”; Roth, “‘Fawn of My Delights’”; Roth, “‘Care and Feeding of Gazelles,’” all discuss the image. See also Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death*, 89.

⁸Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 203 n. 1.

⁹Rowson, “Homoerotic Liaisons”; Rowson, “Traffic in Boys,” 193–204. See also the sources above in notes 4 and 5 and the collection of essays in Rowson and Wright, *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*.

The application of such questions to the Andalusī Hebrew poetic corpus has not been undertaken. In fact, an integrated treatment of homoeroticism in medieval Jewish writing—including texts that are legal (practical and theoretical), rationalist, Kabbalistic, exegetic, epistolary, and literary—remains a desideratum, despite the number of works that have been dedicated to *eros* or masculinity throughout Jewish history and more localized treatments of homoeroticism in rabbinic or medieval Jewish culture.¹⁰ In the discussion below, I do not attempt any such comprehensive review, though the limited issues presented by Ben El‘azar’s story lead to the treatment of a handful of literary, legal, and exegetic sources. Much of the discussion will revolve around the dynamics between penetrator and penetrated within the homoerotic encounter and the possible meanings of the term “sodomite.”

The pederast tale

One area of homoerotic writing that Jewish writers did not cultivate in al-Andalus was the pederast tale, which had appeared by the thirteenth century in Arabic writing in a number of literary forms (narrative poems, rhymed-prose narratives, historical texts, travelogues). Distinct from a text in which a speaker merely expresses homoerotic desire, the pederast tale recounts through narrative an adult male’s—usually frustrated—pursuit of a male adolescent (sometimes of a different religious faith). This often leads to his mental illness, neglect of his religious duties, or a good old slap in the face. Only in rare instances does the sexual union occur.¹¹ One reason for the delay in Hebrew writing is that Hebrew literary fiction—whose prosody derives from the Arabic *maqāma* tradition—emerged relatively late in al-Andalus, toward the end of the Almoravid period, and really took hold only once the centers of Jewish life in Iberia were located within Christian domains.¹²

The first Iberian Hebrew author to take up the pederast tale was Judah al-Ḥarizi (1166?–1225), born in Christian Toledo, who translated into Hebrew an Arabic *maqāma* by al-Ḥarīrī of Basra (1054–1122) in which an old man appears in court to accuse a youth of killing his son. The judge of the trial turns out to be a pederast, infatuated with the accused boy.¹³ Although al-Ḥarizi elsewhere mutes the homoerotic tone of a *maqāma* by al-Hamadhānī (967–1007) by substituting an eroticized male figure with a female, he preserves the integrity of al-Ḥarīrī’s chapter.¹⁴ Al-Ḥarizi also wrote a small amount of homoerotic verse of his own.¹⁵

The narrative that will be treated in the remainder of this article is by al-Ḥarizi’s younger contemporary, Jacob Ben El‘azar (thirteenth century), also from Toledo, and best known as a Hebrew grammarian and as translator of the Arabic collection of human and animal fables *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (*Calila e Dimna*). The story under discussion is included in the author’s untitled

¹⁰See Biale, *Eros and the Jews*; Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*; Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*; and Wolfson, *Language, Eros, and Being*. Medieval social historians have generally seen some social reality behind the poetry, deferring to Schirmann’s authority. See, for example, Ashtor, *Jews of Moslem Spain*, 1: 366–99; Goitein, “Sexual Mores,” 49; Assis, “Sexual Behavior,” 50–51.

¹¹For the poetry of Abu Nuwās, see Wright, “Masculine Allusion.” For a travelogue in which a Qur’ān teacher loses his knowledge due to his obsession with a youth, see Ibn Jubayr, *Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 296. For a slap in the face, see Ibn Ḥazm, *Ring of the Dove*, 90. See below on al-Ḥarīrī. Also Rowson, “Homoerotic Liaisons”; and Rowson, “Two Homoerotic Narratives,” 158–91.

¹²On the rise of the Hebrew rhymed prose narrative, see chapter 4 in Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*.

¹³The boy turns out to be the son of his accuser, who is none other than the ubiquitous protagonist of the *maqāmāt*. He used the boy as his co-conspirator to win money from the pederast judge and other pederasts.

¹⁴Other homoerotic episodes by al-Hamadhānī, including scenes of anal penetration, are not taken up by al-Ḥarizi (in fact, such scenes were edited out of the modern edition by Muhammad ‘Abdu).

¹⁵In *Tahkemoni*, chapter 50.

collection of ten narratives, partially published in 1939 by Jefim Schirmann and later published in its entirety by Yonah David under the title *Sipurei ahavah shel Ya'aqov Ben El'azar* (The love stories of Jacob Ben El'azar).¹⁶

Ben El'azar's fifth chapter begins by introducing the lover Sapir—whose name means Sapphire—as a dweller in the “land of lions” where he “hunts gazelles” (namely, beloveds). From amongst the “male and female gazelles” he captures, he selects the male youth Shapir—whose name means “beauty”—to be his beloved. The story describes how Sapir:

placed [Shapir] in his command, laid him down in his lap, fed him from his bread, placed the gazelle in his trap and caught him in his snare. His desire continued to grow such that when he was apart his soul departed, for it was bound to his soul. In his cheek his sun rose; his night was the hair on his head. His love began to trouble and oppress him and he said: “How my desire has weakened me! Was I not only dallying?”

The tent-pegs of desire that had pierced his heart tortured him and the nails of love became fixed in his soul and he said: “From the beginning you were faint, now your strength is small and you suffer. If once you dallied with love, now love dallies with you many times over.”

At this point, Birsha Ben Mesha appears on the scene. When he peers at the youth he nearly collapses, his mouth goes dry, and he plucks hair off his head. He bows before Shapir, who inquires about his distraught and desperate state. Birsha tells Shapir that he had a son “with an appearance like a prince” who had fled from him, and that it is for his departure that he now weeps. Because of Birsha's appearance, specifically his grey hair and long beard, Shapir takes him for a paragon of piety, a pious judge, for “a beard and belly is half of being a rabbi.” Shapir greets Birsha with an honorific poem and then converses with him: “Behold, my soul clings to you and desires you! Tell me, from what land and what people do you hale?” Birsha replies that he has come from Sodom and is the judge of the territory “from Sodom unto Leshah” (Genesis 10:19).

When Sapir falls asleep, Birsha and Shapir vanish. Sapir awakes, grows despondent, and throws his body to the ground flailing upon the dust. He then goes to seek out his beloved and ultimately finds him with Birsha at the “spring of Rogel” (1 Kings 1:9).¹⁷ Sapir immediately embraces and kisses Shapir, and the latter says to him: “I am but a youth [*qaton*], so do not think I have transgressed! I saw his beard and white hair, and heard his words smooth like a woman's! He stole me with his smooth speech. I did not know that his beard was shame [*harafot*] and that he would hunt me thrust upon thrust [*madhefot*].”¹⁸ Sapir forgives him and—as is the case in many of the love stories in this collection—lover and beloved retreat to a natural body of water, in this case a spring “pure like the face of a gazelle.”¹⁹ Yet the encounter with Birsha has not come to an end. Enraged with jealousy, Birsha attacks Sapir, leading to the story's dramatic conclusion, translated here in its entirety:

¹⁶I have discussed this book as a product of the hybrid environment of arabized Christian Toledo. See chapters 4 through 7 in Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*.

¹⁷The story is somewhat more involved here, though the details are not important. Sapir joins up with a group of “gazelles,” which includes his sister Eqdah. He goes into a river, shouts out “like a lion,” and those around him think that he has died. They sprinkle water on his face and he revives. Another character appears on the scene and leads Sapir to Shapir.

¹⁸The term *madhefot* appears only once in the Bible (Psalms 140:12). The translation here is that of Brown, Driver, and Briggs in the *Hebrew and English Lexicon*. The root of the word means “to push, drive.” The Psalm addresses the fate of the “evil and violent man,” that “they” (unnamed subject) will hunt him “*madhefot*,” which might mean “with much or repeated pushing” or possibly to the “places to which one is pushed.” Here, it is Birsha, the evil and violent man, who does the “pushing.”

¹⁹Ben El'azar, *Sipurei ahavah*, 46, lines 163–64.

And [Birsha] rose up against Sapir the hunter and the two of them wrestled in the field. Birsha said: "Let there be no strife between us. Behold, there is a city nearby (Genesis 19:20) where there is a judge of truth who can testify against the living that he was murdered by the dead! He will decide between us, lay his hand on both of us [in judgment] (Job 9:33). His name is Arioch and he spills the blood of the innocent." They came to the city, which was called "Foolishness" since there are no men there. They came to the judge who subverts the rights of the stranger and the orphan. Each told his story and what had happened to him. [The judge] became full of wrath, struck his hands together (Numbers 24:10) and rebuked Birsha by saying: "Get away from me, you despicable and contemptible man! This man deserves the death penalty!" He called out in a loud voice: "Because of this the Earth bears guilt! (Hosea 14:1) He is guilty, he has incurred guilt. Because of this the lad will not go with you and you will go on your way." When Birsha heard [the judge] say "forfeit the boy!," he said: "He came here as a foreigner and now he acts as judge! (Genesis 19:9) The boy is my son; I begat him and he is my only son, and you have snatched him from my hand." When Sapir heard [Birsha] lording himself²⁰ over the youth, his spirit departed and he was despoiled, he acted like a madman and languished, he spoke senselessly and blasphemed and cursed more than a woman in travail. He fell to the ground and flailed about; he was poured out like water. The gazelle [Shapir] called out to him: "My love, my love," but there was no sound, no one to answer, no one to behold, and no one to turn (in attention). The gazelle Shapir took a handful of the water of love and sprinkled it on [Sapir's] face. The burning subsided and he opened his eyes. He took the hand of the gazelle Sapir and shouted because of his great passion, and the gazelle wept with him. He recited:

Brothers in desire are brothers in sickness! They alone are brothers of ruin.
In their hearts, birds grow new wings each day,²¹
For my heart is like a darting bird, flying in every direction.—
Lovesick, liver-stricken, apart from him [I am] like a passing shadow.

[He recited such that] even the brutish man could understand.²² But what happened to the youth? The gazelle Shapir said: "Have you seen the beard of Birsha, that it is a beard of wickedness? For all its length and breadth, the best of it is trouble and sorrow! It holds the venom of asps! This, my lord, is what fooled me. The wearer of the beard stole me, he enticed me." The judge pitied²³ Sapir and his beloved, and placed [Birsha] in his charge. They beat Birsha and wounded him severely. They pressed him between the doors. He died; they dragged [his corpse] (Jeremiah 15:3) and tossed it upon the dung heap.

As is often the case with medieval Hebrew literature, the story is thick with biblical allusions that add layers of intertextual irony. The story is particularly laden with references to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18–19). Birsha shares the name of a king of Gomorrah (Genesis 14:2).²⁴ Mesha is a king of Moab, an iniquitous nation that God also condemns to destruction (2 Kings 3:4; Amos 2:1; Zephaniah 2:9). When Birsha suggests retreating to "a city nearby," he is quoting the words of Lot, who hopes to flee in order to be spared the fate of the destruction of Sodom. Although Birsha may hope to find refuge like Lot, he suffers the fate of "his people" (the Sodomites). The judge who pronounces Birsha's guilt is named Arioch, a king of Ellasar who makes war against King Bera of Sodom and King Birsha of Gomorrah (Genesis 14:1). The name of the judge thus hints at Birsha's imminent downfall. The irony here is thick. Birsha perceives the judge as wicked though his name suggests his righteousness,

²⁰*Mistolel*, only occurrence in the *hitpa'el* verb form, in Exodus 9:17. Possible translations include "thwart," "exalt over," "lord over." Ibn Janāh translates (into Arabic), *al-takabbur*; *al-ta'azzum*, "acting haughtily."

²¹A sign of restoring strength, or of rejuvenation, can be found in Isaiah 40:31.

²²Emendation based on Psalms 92:7.

²³Literally, "the judge's eye took pity upon."

²⁴In Islamic tradition, Gomorrah is also identified as one of the towns of the people of Lot. See Leemhuis, "Lūṭ and His People," 107.

since he waged war against the iniquitous people of Sodom and Gomorrah.²⁵ The story of these cities is evoked again when Birsha says of Arioeh that “he came here as a foreigner and now he acts as judge!” These are the Sodomites’ very words to Lot in Genesis 19:9.

One of the more interesting aspects of the story is its conclusion, including the trial, condemnation and murder (or execution) of Birsha. Judges and trials are common enough in the Arabic corpus and are included in a handful of homoerotic poems and stories.²⁶ Sometimes it is the judge himself who plays the part of the pederast. Ben El‘azar undoubtedly knew such episodes as al-Ḥarīrī’s tenth *maqāma*, either in the original or in the Hebrew translation of al-Ḥarīzī. Perhaps a more noteworthy precedent is a twelfth-century Arabic poem by the Almerian Muḥammad Ibn al-Farā, which Matti Huss has introduced into the discussion of a Hebrew *maqāma* from thirteenth-century Egypt to which we will return shortly. The poem involves a man who brings a boy before a judge for refusing his advances. Seeing the lovesick poet’s tears streaming down his face, the judge exclaims to the boy: “Will you thus kill one of our famous poets? If he dies now, who can succeed him?” Then, according to the poem, the judge orders that “the roses be plucked” and that “the mouth be kissed freely.” Upon the judge’s command, the boy ceases to resist and, as the poet writes: “I embraced him forthwith, as if I were the letter *lam* and he an *alif* entwined,” referring to the common ligature of two Arabic letters whose orthography evokes physical conjoining and likely the position of anal penetration. The poem ends with the boy asking the poet’s forgiveness for his earlier refusals.²⁷ It is also possible that Ben El‘azar knew the stories of his contemporary Shihāb al-Dīn al-Tīfāshī (1184–1253) in *Nuzhat al-albāb fīmā lā yūjad fī kitāb* (The entertainment of hearts concerning what is not found in any book), in which men and their young male prostitutes settle accounts before a judge.²⁸ As expected, the judge generally favors the pederast and certainly does not question his tastes.

The reader attuned to the norms of the Arabic pederast tale would expect Ben El‘azar’s story to conclude with the pederast escaping unscathed, lovesick, perhaps mad or humiliated, or even attaining union with his beloved. Yet Ben El‘azar’s story takes a final turn whereby Birsha is handed over to Sapir and Shapir, who take the law into their own hands and effectuate the pederast’s violent death. I know of no classical Arabic pederast tale that ends with the murder of the pederast.²⁹ Unlike most pederast tales, Ben El‘azar’s story stands out for not simply exploiting the trope of pederasty for canned humor or as a pretext for verbal play.

An important Hebrew parallel to Ben El‘azar’s tale is the aforementioned anonymous Hebrew rhymed prose narrative from thirteenth-century Egypt.³⁰ It seems unlikely to me that Ben El‘azar knew this story, but it too includes the detail of a trial scene and a negative verdict against a pederast. In the tale, a pederast cantor, a convert to Judaism, stands before a judge, complaining

²⁵Of course it is illogical for Birsha to suggest going before a judge he considered unjust. The scene is included for the enjoyment of the reader, a typical device in Ben El‘azar’s writing.

²⁶On trials in Arabic literature, see Bürgel, “Language on Trial,” 189–204. See further below on the poem by Ibn al-Farā.

²⁷The poem is translated into English by Nykl, 256–58; see also Huss below, n. 30.

²⁸Al-Tīfāshī, *Nuzhat al-albāb*.

²⁹Although there is one *maqāma* by the Tunisian Ibn Sharaf that features a pederast who dies of exhaustion after failing to ensnare his beloved, this should be taken as a variation on the humorous representation of the pederast consumed by his desire and not as a condemnation of the practice per se. See Hāmeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*, 233. However, in the Arabic popular epic *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* (which was written after *Sefer ha-meshalim*), the killing of pederasts by the protagonist Baybar is a repeating motif. See Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, 3: 304.

³⁰The fragmentary episode was originally published by Israel Davidson in 1928, and was recently republished and analyzed by Matti Huss, “Maqama of the Cantor,” 197–244.

of a beautiful boy who had promised him affection in exchange for money. The cantor complains that the boy's refusals and demands for more money forced him to hock his holy books and ritual objects (his *mezuzot* and *tzitzit*). The judge soon sees that it is not the boy who is guilty of a crime but rather the cantor who sold "the words of the living God ... for the abominations of males, the love of male youths."³¹ The judge rebukes the cantor, pronounces him a "cantor of folly [*tijlah*] rather than a cantor of prayer [*tefilah*]," and rules that he be cursed, flogged, and expelled to a foreign land.³² The story suggests that "the abomination of males" is a foreign vice introduced into Judaism by converts, though—notably—the punishment is flogging and expulsion and not stoning.³³

It is noteworthy that the fate of Birsha is even more severe than that of his Egyptian counterpart, for the chapter ends with his brutal murder. Does Ben El'azar's story suggest a Jewish rewriting of the Arabic pederast tale that ultimately undermines its celebratory atmosphere such that no reader could assume the author's approval of pederasty or male-male eroticism? Neḥemiah Allony might have seen the story as testimony to the Jews' "special way of life" in the Middle Ages whereby they inhaled the air of the surrounding atmosphere but exhaled something more pure and moral. While the redirection of Ben El'azar's tale does seem significant, it would be overly simplistic to attribute the shift to *a priori* assumptions of Jewish moral purity.

How exactly are we supposed to understand Birsha's crime? Is the issue that Birsha is a sexual "deviant" of some sort? Importantly, this is not the only narrative in Ben El'azar's collection to conclude with the violent death of a licentious character. The eighth chapter features Akhbor—a wine-drinking aristocrat with a sexual appetite for his maidservants, a black maidservant in particular—who is beaten and murdered by these very women. It is also noteworthy that Akhbor also wears a long beard of false piety, which becomes a subject of much literary play within the narrative. Akhbor's "deviance" should be located either in his lust for the black woman or in his seemingly unbounded indulgence.³⁴ Thus, improper sexual acts whose retribution is violent, extrajudicial death are portrayed in Ben El'azar's book both within same-sex and opposite-sex contexts.

Was Birsha's crime simply that he chose a male youth as an object of desire? Such a reading would seem impossible since Sapir, one of the story's protagonists, is also a lover of youths, both male and female. Let us scrutinize the distinctions between the two homoerotic relationships within the narrative—Birsha's passion for Shapir, which is condemned, and Sapir's passion for Shapir, which is sanctioned. First, there are differences in age among the three characters. Birsha is advanced in years, as evidenced by his long beard and grey hair. Shapir describes himself to Sapir as young (*qaton*) and his youth is reinforced by his apparent naïveté. Sapir's exact age is somewhat ambiguous; he is described in the text as a "man" (*ish*), probably suggesting an adult male but not a man of old age. Hence, although the age discrepancy between Birsha and Shapir is greater than that between Sapir and Shapir, the latter relationship is still a bond between a grown man and a boy, probably somewhere around the age of puberty (in another story in the collection, the beautiful (male) "fawn" Maskil is specifically identified as being thirteen years of age).

³¹1a, lines 13–14.

³²2a, lines 6–9.

³³Huss connects the sentence to a responsum by Ibn Abitur, where the biblical "death by stoning" is replaced with the lighter flogging (Ibn Abitur does not mention expulsion). Also, according to Maimonides' discussion of Mishnah Sanhedrin (see below), flogging is prescribed for non-penetrative acts within forbidden unions. It is conceivable that this cantor was not stoned because his desire for anal penetration was not fulfilled.

³⁴See chapter 6 in Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*.

It is conceivable that the age span between Birsha and Shapir is the key issue. The story might simply be a variation on the theme of the “dirty old man” who pursues a nubile maiden, the old lech whose desire to unite beauty with decrepitude offended sensibilities even if it did not violate legal proscriptions.³⁵ In this case, the offense would have been compounded by its illegality and, more importantly, the fact that a “proper” relationship, at least one that corresponded to the expected social hierarchy, had already been established between Sapir and Shapir. This is partly convincing, though the text does not dwell on Birsha’s old age per se. His grey hair and beard are not signifiers of agedness, desexualization, or impotence so much as learning and piety, or at least this is how Shapir misinterprets them.

Perhaps Birsha deserved to die simply for snatching the beloved that rightfully belonged to Sapir. Birsha had abducted Shapir to “the spring of Rogel,” a biblical place name where Adonijah had tried to muster support in usurping the throne from Solomon (1 Kings 1:9). Hence the place name evokes taking what rightfully belongs to someone else. Another character who winds up dead in Ben El‘azar’s collection is a menacing horseman who disrupts a lovers’ tryst by “the River of Love,” though in this case there is no successful abduction of the beloved.³⁶

“Sodomite” love

The most relevant question is: What did Ben El‘azar precisely intend by casting his villain as a “sodomite”? Essential to any meaningful discussion of pre-modern sexuality is a punctilious and contextual treatment of its vocabulary, especially since words can be misleading due to accretions that have accumulated over time. As Mark D. Jordan has discussed, an abstract noun such as “sodomy” emerged in Latin Christendom only in the eleventh century to denote “a previously unspecified range of human acts, activities, or dispositions” and was not used initially in the limited sense of anal penetration (preponderant in Anglo-legal literature, for example), but was employed with wider application, which could include this specific sense.³⁷ For Peter Damian (c. 1007–1072), who coined the term “sodomy” in his *Book of Gomorrah*, the sodomitic vice encompassed four subcategories—masturbation, the mutual grasping of male genitals, inter-femora penetration (between the thighs), and the anal penetration of males (the most severe offense)—all of which deserved punishment.³⁸

In classical Arabic, the abstract noun *liwāṭ* was generally applied to the anal penetration of a male.³⁹ The term derives from the name Lot and thus refers to the practices of Lot’s people (not of Lot himself). A *liwī* was a male who played the active role of penetrator in a male–male relationship (a different term was reserved for the adult male who desired to be penetrated, which was seen as a medical, pathological, and possibly incurable, condition).⁴⁰ The penetrator/penetrated dynamic is abundantly present in classical Arabic poetry. If we consider the example above by Ibn al-Farā, the poetic speaker clearly assigns himself the part of the penetrator (the *lam*) while the beloved boy plays the part of the penetrated (the *alif*).

³⁵I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* who suggested that I explore this argument further. There is significant precedent in Hebrew letters for the old man who pursues a young maiden. See the summary by Huss, *Meliṣat ‘Efer ve-Dinah*, 46–50. An important distinction between Birsha and ‘Efer in *Meliṣat ‘Efer ve-Dinah* is that ‘Efer is sexually impotent while Birsha is not. Physically, Birsha seems quite robust and agile (he wrestles with Shapir).

³⁶Ben El‘azar, *Sipurei ahavah*, chapter 6.

³⁷Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, 161. See also below on the Qur’ānic reading of the story of Sodom.

³⁸See Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, 46.

³⁹The “Lesser *liwāṭ*” could designate the anal penetration of a female. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. “*Liwāṭ*,” V: 776–79.

⁴⁰Rowson, “Categorization of Gender,” 56–65. Also, Monroe, “Striptease,” 116.

A Hebrew poem from the eleventh century, a mere couplet by Solomon Ibn Gabirol, might be described as a defense against a suspicion of holding a sodomite's desire: "Ruddy one [*adom*] who comes from Christendom [*edom*], / By God, I love you, but not like the love of the People of Sodom."⁴¹ What exactly was intended in the verse by "love of the people of Sodom"? Anal penetration? Same-sex eroticism more generally? Sexual violence? The answer cannot be derived with certainty from such a short text. Part of the question is how medieval Jews understood the "sins of Sodom and Gomorrah" mentioned in Genesis 18:20. In the biblical text, the sins likely pertain to the violent contravention of the laws of hospitality rather than male-male desire. Notably, in their comments on Genesis 18:20, none of the major biblical commentators identify the sins with sexual transgressions, but instead refer to improper business dealings and denying the rights of the poor more generally, which is also the prevalent image in the *midrash*.

On the other hand, although medieval commentators were not in complete agreement as to what the Sodomites meant by the word "know" when they ordered Lot to "bring them [his male guests] out so that we might *know* them" (Genesis 19:5), both Rashi and Abraham Ibn Ezra read some sort of same-sex relation, likely anal intercourse or rape.⁴² Further, Ibn Gabirol was likely aware of the Muslim understanding of the "sins of the People of Lot." In the Qur'an, the sins are associated specifically with a desire for men, "You come lustfully to men rather than women, nay, you transgress beyond bounds" (7:80–81). Also, in 27:29, "Do you come unto men, cut the way, and commit indecency in your assemblies?" (29:27–29). Some early Qur'an commentators identified "cutting the way" with "highway robbery" and the rape of male strangers.⁴³ Certainly by Rashi's day, the "sins of Sodom" were associated with male rape in Christendom.⁴⁴ Thus, it seems clear that Ibn Gabirol's association with "the love of the people of Sodom" was sexual in nature and likely included anal penetration. There was certainly something to distinguish this type of desire either from chaste love or from some other variety of eroticism, lest Ibn Gabirol would not have sought to distance himself from it.

It is striking that Ibn Gabirol assumed the addressee's suspicion of "sodomite" love (whether or not the encounter was real or imagined is debatable and very much beside the point), particularly given the addressee's provenance from Christendom (it is also unclear whether the addressee was a Christian or a Jew from Christendom). Already by Ibn Gabirol's time, news had become widespread in Christian Iberia and elsewhere in Europe of the prisoner Pelagius, a beautiful Christian youth who rebuffed the advances of the emir of Córdoba (soon to become Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III), refused to convert to Islam, and was ultimately executed (or martyred, as Christian tradition would have it).⁴⁵ Although medieval Christian writing is not without its homoerotic dimensions (further below) and Arabic literature includes stories of male youths who spurn their older admirers, the short poem by Ibn Gabirol reflects how the author, as an Andalusí speaker, imagined what an addressee from Christendom might have presumed about his sexual predilections.

⁴¹Solomon Ibn Gabirol, *Shirei ha-hol*, 268.

⁴²Rashi, "*mishkav zakhur*" (lying with a male); Ibn Ezra, "*kinnui lishkhivah*" (a euphemism for lying). Moses Ben Nahman and David Qimhi have different opinions, though Qimhi recognizes the sexual interpretation of others.

⁴³See Fred Leemhuis, "Lūṭ and His People," 107–9.

⁴⁴On the history of Christian interpretations of Genesis 18–19, see Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*; Noort and Tigchelaar, *Sodom's Sin*.

⁴⁵On the incident as reported in a passion authored by a priest Raguel, see Bowman, "Beauty and *Passion*," 236–53; on the evolution of Pelagius as a figure in various medieval sources, including the "cult" of St Pelagius, see Jordan, "Saint Pelagius," 23–47. Hutcheson, "Sodomitic Moor," considers the depiction of the "sodomitic" Moor here to be more the exception than the rule in medieval Iberian vernacular literature.

In any case, the word “sodomite” does not seem to have been used as a term of art in medieval Jewish legal sources. Rabbinic and medieval Hebrew lacked a specific term for anal penetration, much less “sodomy,” though it recognized a distinction between the male that played an active sexual role (*shokhev zakhur*, one who lies with a male) and the one who played a passive role (*nishkav le-zakhur/nirba' le-zakhur*, one who is laid by a male).⁴⁶ As in Arabic “vice lists,” the organizational dichotomy between penetrator and penetrated is presumed in Maimonides’ commentary on Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:4, the source text of which concerns “those who should be stoned (to death)” including a male who has intercourse with his mother, his father’s wife, his daughter-in-law, a male, or a beast; a woman who has intercourse with a beast; a man who has intercourse with a betrothed maiden; and other (non-sexual) offenses. Maimonides comments briefly on the Mishnah, noting that a man is also to be stoned if he is the passive partner in a male–male encounter (*nirba' le-zakhur*).⁴⁷ Maimonides then uses this opportunity to “mention very many fundamental principles concerning forbidden unions.” Sexual acts are first divided between unions that are necessarily forbidden (namely between an adult male and a male or a female who is unlawful to him under all circumstances—mother, sister, etc.) and those between an adult male and an unmarried female who could possibly become lawful to him. Within the “forbidden unions,” sexual offenses are organized according to whether or not acts involved penetration, irrespective of the sex of the partner. In fact, exemption from punishment is maintained for cases in which the would-be penetrator is not erect.⁴⁸

Andalusi Hebrew poems also convey a distinctive set of dynamics, and indeed mechanics, that hinge on the penetrator/penetrated dichotomy. The homoerotic encounter generally presumes engagement between an adult penetrator and a penetrated youth around the age of puberty (as in Arabic poetry, the ideal age of the penetrated is usually designated between the beginning of puberty, when a soft down first appears on the boy’s face, until the sprouting of a true beard). An adult male did not maintain an identity as “homosexual” or “heterosexual” (which are purely modern, in fact forensic, inventions), but rather normative male attraction encompassed a range of objects suitable for desire among free women, slaves, and male youths, all socially inferior to an adult male. Of course, this is not to say that all sexual acts within such bonds were religiously or legally sanctioned, but only that there was no expectation of hetero-normativity as far as desire was concerned. The issue was one of the perceived structure of—and inter-relation among—various sexual acts. Although playing the role of penetrator might have been legally prohibited or morally opprobrious, it did not signify effeminacy or unnaturalness. Anxiety was centered around the adult male who sought being penetrated, something which violated the expected social hierarchy.⁴⁹

Among the most explicit Hebrew poems on the homoerotic motif, one notable for relating an encounter in a first-person voice and for a seeming mutuality of desire, or at least willingness, is a *muwashshah* by Moses Ibn Ezra, here (partially) in Scheindlin’s poetic translation:

The joy of my eyes and my heart’s delight—
A fawn at my left and a cup in my right!

⁴⁶See also Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 194–97, on this terminology in rabbinic literature.

⁴⁷Following Rabbi Akiva; see Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 197.

⁴⁸In Maimonides, treatment of “forbidden unions,” vaginal penetration and (male and female) anal penetration are treated together, whereas lesbianism and masturbation are also treated together because (presumably) neither one involved penetration. On Arabic vice lists, see Rowson, “Categorization of Gender.”

⁴⁹Again, see Rowson, “Categorization of Gender,” and the essay on dream interpretation by Oberhelman, “Hierarchies of Gender.”

...
 Come, my gazelle, give me something to eat;
 The mead of your lips makes our banquet complete.
 ...
 He listened, and let me come home with him.
 He did what I wanted, obeyed every whim.
 By day and by night we dallied within.
 I took off his clothes and he took off mine.
 He offered his lips and I drank of their wine.⁵⁰

Although the ages of the characters are not specified, it is likely that the relationship presented here is between an adult male and an adolescent wine pourer. The language of the Hebrew is even more intimate and erotic than in the translation. “He listened” is more literally “he was seduced” (*niftah*); “he offered his lips and I drank of their wine” is more literally “I suckled his lips and he nursed me.” Most significantly, the idiom appropriately translated here as “he did what I wanted, obeyed every whim” might be rendered most plainly as “he inclined his shoulder to the yoke of my burden.” Because this is poetry, we must look beyond the common usage of the idiom to consider the meaning of the actual words and allow the visual image to suggest itself. As in the poem by Ibn al-Farā, the image conjures the physical position of anal penetration and the submission of the passive partner to his active partner’s “burden.”⁵¹

Still, the question remains as to whether understanding a “sodomite” as a penetrator of male youths sufficiently explains Ben El’azar’s story. Was Birsha a “sodomite” but Sapir not because the former penetrated Shapir but the latter did not? The text is far from clear on the question of whether Sapir’s relationship with Shapir included anal penetration. The bond between the two was hardly devoid of eroticism. Sapir lays Shapir in his lap, feeds him, and grows lovesick over him. Sapir plays an active role and Shapir a passive one. Might the “love” between the two have been nothing more than an eroticized form of friendship? Perhaps. In the Islamic world, which included its Jewish population, eroticism was part of the discourse of male–male friendships that were clearly chaste, evidenced, for example, in many letters and epistolary poems.⁵²

It is also important that Ben El’azar’s narrative was composed not only against the backdrop of the Arabic speaking world but also within Christian Europe, since Toledo was a crucible of Islamic-Christian hybridity. In Christian writing, the subject of “sodomy” (in the sense of anal penetration) had emerged as focal point of discussion by the thirteenth century. In a well-known, path-breaking, and controversial book, Boswell posited in 1980 that Christian culture prior to the twelfth century was tolerant of erotic relationships among men, a tolerance that broke down with the urbanizing, ecclesiastical and intellectual shifts that occurred across Europe. While this is not the place to revisit the spate of reviews, critiques, and advancements of Boswell’s thesis (that continue to this day), let it suffice to say that intimate, passionate male–male relations were, at least for a time, depicted favorably and often with erotic overtones by literary authors in Christian Europe, and that “sodomy”—in the sense of anal penetration—ultimately arose as a suspicion and charge against male friendships.⁵³

⁵⁰Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death*, 97.

⁵¹Although Roth, “Deal Gently with the Young Man,” 45–46, translates “and he gave his shoulder to my burden,” he still interprets the verse idiomatically and suggests that the boy may have been paid.

⁵²See Goitein, “Formal Friendship,” 488–89 (although some of Goitein’s conclusions should be revisited); Kraemer, *Maimonides*, 362.

⁵³The most salient critique of Boswell is the consistent use of anachronistic and essentializing terms such as “gay” and “homosexual” to describe the range of pre-modern same-sex relationships.

C. Stephen Jaeger has argued in his book *Ennobling Love* that professions of male–male love, often with a clear erotic sensibility, were an inextricable dimension of public bonds of loyalty and the performance of panegyric in Europe. Although authors consistently praise men who “sleep together” or “eat together,” neither of these practices seems to have entailed sodomy in the sense of anal penetration. Matthew Kuefler has argued that twelfth-century royal and ecclesiastical authorities, in creating new patterns of obedience, sought to undermine traditional male solidarity by leveling charges of sodomy.⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, the shift to courtly social behaviors in which suitors professed love for their ladies also contributed to the perception of homoeroticism as deviant or as a threat to a new masculine identity.⁵⁵ To this we might add that Christian perceptions of homoerotic elements of Islamic culture triggered a new anxiety toward male friendships and modes of professing loyalty.

In Ben El’azar’s story, the acts explicitly depicted between Sapir and Shapir are limited to Sapir’s laying Shapir in his lap and feeding him (thus similar to the ideals studied by Jaeger, though the active-passive element seems distinctive and we wonder whether these are only euphemisms for sexual acts). Thus the story might be read as an exploration of the limits of male–male relations that arrives at a formulation that condemns anal penetration while upholding a model of male–male love that is nonetheless erotic. It is not impossible that the relationship between Sapir and Shapir was intended as one of simple friendship, even paternalism, though this seems unlikely.

We need not assume that Sapir would penetrate a male any less than he would a female (presumably vaginally) had his selected object of desire been female. Sapir was likely no different from most lovers of male youths we find in medieval Hebrew and Arabic literature, who generally held attractions for male and female youths and considered anal penetration to be a part of the male–male sexual encounter. There is little reason to assume that anal penetration was less a part of Sapir and Shapir’s relationship than of the relationship suggested between characters in Moses Ibn Ezra’s poem. If so, the question remains as to why Birsha was considered a “sodomite” as opposed to Sapir.

Perhaps Birsha’s crime was simply false piety and misrepresentation. He is clearly mendacious. When Birsha appears distraught soon after his appearance in the narrative, the reader is likely to see his story about a lost son as fabricated to cover his infatuation and to entice naïve Shapir. Even if the reader is misled at this point, the lie is surely given to Birsha’s claim when he directs a similar story toward the judge in which he purports that Shapir is the lost son.

Most significant, in my opinion, is the violence that characterized Birsha, a quality also associated with the original Sodomites. Shapir says that he was unaware that Birsha would hunt him “thrust upon thrust” (*madḥefot*), a word with possible overtones of rape (the root of the word means “to push,” the plural form suggests repetition or degree).⁵⁶ Further, Shapir states that he did not know that Birsha’s beard was “shame” (*ḥarafot*), a word that carries a special valence of sexual shame associated with improper union and rape, as in the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:13. Amnon had asked his sister to lie with her, but she responded: “Don’t brother. Don’t force me. Such things are not done in Israel! Don’t do such a vile thing. Where will I carry my shame [*herpati*]?” Yet the rapist of a female would probably not be considered a sodomite. The identification of Birsha as a sodomite seems to require two conditions: the sex of the beloved and the violence of the sexual act.

⁵⁴Kuefler, “Male Friendship,” 145–81.

⁵⁵In addition to the loyalty a knight showed his lady, which in many ways defined his masculinity, knights maintained intimate relationships with other men whose homoerotic dimensions have been studied. See Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry*; Mazo, “Knighthood,” 273–86.

⁵⁶See above, n. 18.

Attraction for a male youth, whether on the part of Birsha or Sapir, seems a given in the author's world. Birsha is a readily recognizable social type, and there is nothing about his choice of sex object per se that marks him as a deviant. There is certainly nothing effeminate about Birsha or Sapir for being attracted to Shapir.⁵⁷ What distinguishes Birsha from Sapir is a more singular sexual fixation or obsession that leads him to mendacity and violence. Sapir, on the other hand, has genuine sexual prowess, broader and normative tastes for males and females, and apparently knows how to eschew the sins of Sodom, whatever those might have been. Ben El'azar condemns the sodomite to the fate of "his people" even as he upholds eroticism between an adult male and a male youth.

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⁵⁷The only evidence to the contrary is that Birsha and Sapir are associated with female characters at two points. Shapir states that Birsha's speech is "smooth like a woman's," evoking the harlot in Proverbs, who ensnares virtuous males with her cunning and enticing speech. Also, in his desperation Sapir shouts "like a woman in travail." However, I do not believe that Birsha and Sapir are truly meant to be feminized.

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Converting the Queen: gender and polemic in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon*

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The fifteenth-century *Book of 'Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* (*Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Ṣalmon*), a Hebrew anti-Christian prose narrative from Iberia written in the wake of the 1413–14 Disputation of Tortosa, tells the story of a just queen who ruled an island without any worldly religion. After deciding to seek the true religion by sending out three wise men, who later return as a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian, respectively, the queen holds a debate between the Christian and the Jew. When the Muslim, who arbitrates the debate, adjudicates in favor of the Jew, the whole island joins the queen in converting to Judaism while the Christian hangs himself in disgrace. This study focuses on the role of the queen as a narratological device and as a polemical tool. It argues that the queen is presented as a symbol of both reason and wisdom—a sort of Lady Wisdom—and as a counterpoint to the Virgin Mary. In this way, the figure of the queen constitutes a Jewish response to Christian arguments according to both rational proofs and religious authority.

Keywords: *Book of 'Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon*; *Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Ṣalmon*; Jewish-Christian polemic; conversion; queenship; gender; medieval Iberia; Tortosa

There was once a queen who ruled a strange and distant island. She was a good and just queen, but had not heard of any worldly religion. Her people, while upright by nature, lived without laws. One night, as she lay awake in her bed thinking with confusion on the true path, she was resolved to call together her wisest men. The next morning, after telling her concerns to a group of her advisors and dignitaries of her court, one wise man proposed sending out emissaries to look for the true religion, and so three of the best men, Ṣalmon, 'Eqer, and 'Aḥiṭub, were sent on the journey. Ṣalmon found himself in Muslim lands and converted to Islam. 'Eqer ended up in Constantinople and converted to Christianity. 'Aḥiṭub came to know a wise old prophet who taught him the ways of the Jews, eventually leading to his conversion to Judaism. Seven years later, all three returned to the island, each as a representative of one of the three Abrahamic religions. When 'Aḥiṭub the Jew and 'Eqer the Christian began to argue about their differences, the queen authorized a debate between them to determine the one true religion, and for two days each put forth arguments concerning the themes of repair in Jewish–Christian disputation. When Ṣalmon the Muslim intervened to support the arguments of 'Aḥiṭub, he and all the others on the island finally professed the truth of 'Aḥiṭub's religion and converted to Judaism, while 'Eqer refused conversion and hanged himself in disgrace. 'Aḥiṭub then spent many days teaching the queen the intricacies of Jewish belief.

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Such is the story told in the fifteenth-century polemical fiction known as the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* (*Sefer Aḥiṭub ve-Ṣalmon*). The text, written in rhymed Hebrew prose with poetry interspersed, is of uncertain authorship but is attributed to one “Mattityahu,” possibly Mattityahu ha-Yiṣhari, one of the Jewish spokesmen at the Jewish–Christian Dispute of Tortosa of 1413–14. While the authorship of the text is uncertain, there is no doubt that the text was written sometime in the first half of the fifteenth century in Iberia, very possibly in the 1420s in the wake of the Tortosa debate but certainly before 1453.¹ The work is anti-Christian and contains strident Jewish arguments on numerous common points of polemical debate, including the trials of Israel in the diaspora, the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the Messiah, and the Christian notion of the supersession of the Israelite covenant by the New Israel of the Christians.

Given the historical significance of its content and the unconventional and fascinating plot through which the anti-Christian polemical content is dramatized—as well as the fact that it is one of the last few texts in rhymed Hebrew prose to survive from medieval Sepharad—it is striking how little critical attention this work has received. Although mentioned repeatedly in studies of polemics since it was brought to critical attention in the nineteenth century, the text lay in relative obscurity—except for a very short selection published by Hayyim Schirmann in 1956—until 1998, when a single exhaustive edition and translation made the work available to a wider scholarly public.² Because the text has been so little studied, there remain many potentially fruitful ways to approach it: in terms of its response to arguments made at the Disputation of Tortosa; in comparison with other Hebrew polemical texts and/or with other Hebrew rhymed prose texts; in comparison with other works attributed to Mattityahu ha-Yiṣhari such as the *Begidat ha-Zeman* (The perfidy of time), a moralistic work in rhymed prose about a man who abandoned a life of family and piety in pursuit of a younger woman; in terms of its manuscript history (it survives in ten manuscripts); or its influence on later writers such as one Mordekhai Ha-Sofer, who wrote an altered version of the story in which ‘Aḥiṭub marries the queen and becomes king, among other possible perspectives.³

My approach here is a less obvious and more modest one, but one that I think can underscore the literary value of the text above and beyond the wealth of useful scholarly information that can be generated about it. The aim of this essay is to examine the role of queenship in the text both as a narratological device and as a key part of the polemical arguments of the author. Therefore, I deliberately leave aside the many pending questions about authorship, date, and manuscript history in an effort to focus on the *story* within the text. Too often the plot of polemical and disputational texts is treated as little more than a vehicle for the argument, and not enough credit is accorded to the narratological design of the story or to its readerly impact. While it is sometimes inappropriate to apply modern narratological insights to premodern examples, in the case of *'Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* one must confront the fact of the elaborate narrative frame in examining the polemical content and historical context reflected in the text. As Eleazar Gutwirth has

¹The question of authorship is complicated by the question of dating. The Mattityahu identified as the author of the *Begidat ha-Zeman* (The perfidy of time) has been understood to be the same as the author of the *Sefer 'Aḥiṭub*, although this has not been proved. Recently, Zvi Malachi, “Life of Matityah ben Mosheh,” 456, has argued that the author of the *Begidah* wrote the work in 1450 at the age of 50, thus making it impossible that this same Mattityahu was the person known to have participated at the Disputation of Tortosa—he would have been only thirteen or fourteen years old. In any case, it is only probable, not certain, that the same person wrote the *Sefer 'Aḥiṭub* and the *Begidah* and the question of the author of the *Sefer 'Aḥiṭub* remains open.

²Schirmann, *Ha-Shirah ha-Ivrit*, 2: 650–58. The entire text has been edited and translated into Castilian in a critical edition by Juan Carlos Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica.”

³Malachi, “Life of Matityah,” 1: 457.

argued, we must not read polemical arguments as “disembodied theological ideas carried out in a vacuum” because “polemics are related to other phenomena such as humor, class, sex and age differences and tensions.”⁴ The generally unrecognized complexity of the characters, voices, scenes, and plots of polemical texts can provide a rich source for critical analysis beyond the simple summary and analysis of the theological arguments these elements convey.

Breaking away from the generic constraints of a strictly scholarly historical methodology and approaching it instead from a literary-critical perspective, we can highlight the value of the text as a key source among texts of late-medieval Hebrew prose literature. It is my contention that the queen—considered *as a character* and not merely a mouthpiece for the author’s words—represents the central protagonist of the story. She is at once the prime mover of the entire plot and the most important symbolic expression of the polemical intent of the text. It is through her faith and devotion that the three wise men seek and find the true religion, and it is with her private instruction about the nature of sacrifice and the hereafter that the narrative concludes. The queen constitutes a direct riposte to Christian arguments, playing a double role as both an evocation of Lady Wisdom and, even more importantly, as a fictional counterpoint to the Virgin Mary. By analyzing the role of the queen in the dialogue according to this symbolism, it is possible to show how consideration of gender could directly affect the form and content of late-medieval Jewish–Christian polemics.

This approach and argument might first seem strange because the importance of the queen in the text is not immediately apparent on reading the text. In fact, male voices and characters dominate the *Book of ‘Aḥiṭub* from beginning to end. The opening frame of the text begins in the imperative voice of the male author: “Hear me, my brothers and my people (*aḥi ve-‘ami*).”⁵ This call from male author to male reader is reinforced immediately in the confessional tone of the author himself, identifying himself by name and lamenting that, “I have seen the humiliation of our diaspora.”⁶ In the opening poem that follows, he continues his preemptory call to beware of Christian power. He commands of his readers, “Awaken, uncircumcised of heart, before those who pull (*moshekhei*) your prepuces!” The author’s declared didactic intent both to delight through witty, jocular allusion (*derekh halaṣah*) and to instruct and upbraid through allegory (*derekh mashal*) is an approach taken by male writers in addressing male readers, a tradition of skilled orators with a serious intent. The author states that he intends to guide readers toward correct study and behavior, offering his book as a tale of wisdom written, “so that men give up books of vanity (*sifrei ha-havalim*).”⁷ In all of these details, the text seems overwhelmingly directed at male readers.

The characters too—Šalmon, ‘Eqer, ‘Aḥiṭub, the old sage who teaches ‘Aḥiṭub, and the unnamed advisors and men of the kingdom—are all male. Not only is the queen the only female character in the entire narrative, she participates in a relatively small percentage of the action, appearing, by my rough estimate, in no more than 20% of the text. The majority of the text is taken up by three larger sections (unmarked in the text itself) in which the queen is entirely absent. In the first, the three male protagonists, Šalmon (who becomes Muslim), ‘Eqer (who becomes Christian), and ‘Aḥiṭub (who becomes Jewish), journey off the island of their birth in search of truth. In the second, each presents his respective findings upon returning to the island. In the third and longest section, ‘Eqer and ‘Aḥiṭub debate various points of their faiths, drawing from common topics of Jewish–Christian polemical tradition. Even though each of these longer sections is mediated by a few brief pages of action or dialogue by the queen, the

⁴Gutwirth, “Gender, History, and the Judeo-Christian Polemic,” 260.

⁵Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 1. All English translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁶Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 1, 3.

⁷Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 2–3.

queen herself appears in only a slim portion of the text overall; only in the final section of the text, which constitutes just under 10% of the text, does the queen—who in this section receives private instruction after her conversion from ‘Aḥiṭub about certain questions of Jewish belief—appear and speak with consistent regularity. Although she is seemingly a secondary character, this is clearly not the case, as I will show later in this essay.

The dominance of male characters is in keeping with the nature of the work as a theological disputation and polemic. Unlike the polemical discourse found in most desecration accounts, Marian legends, or the majority of saints’ lives, polemic and disputation themselves are exclusive and learned modes of discourse that derive ultimately from male religious and theological categories. In earlier works of the same form, such as the *Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian* of Peter Abelard (1079–1142), or in the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Sages* by Catalan polymath Ramon Llull (1232–1315), or—most directly relevant here—in the *Kuzari* of the twelfth-century Iberian Jewish poet/philosopher Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141), in which a Jew, Muslim, and Christian all present their religions to the king of the Khazars, the characters are all male.⁸ The lack of important female characters, besides the queen, in the *Book of ‘Aḥiṭub and Ṣalmon* is underscored by the fact that the key transition in the text—the conversion of ‘Aḥiṭub to Judaism—occurs after ‘Aḥiṭub’s lengthy apprenticeship to a wise old (male) sage, a common trope found in numerous earlier texts of the genre.

Finally, despite the fact that there are no female characters besides the queen, gender *is* a central concern of the characters throughout the story. The tacit presence of gendered images from Jewish–Christian polemic within the text of the ‘*Aḥiṭub* heightens the significance of the stark gender lines between the characters. As Alexandra Cuffel has recently shown in detail, both Jewish and Christian polemicists regularly made use of imagery of female corporality as polemical weapons, and this discourse of disgust about the body—especially the female body—only reinforced the association between theological truth and masculine identity. Just as Christian writers such as Jacques of Vitry or Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075–1129) could criticize Judaism by feminizing Jewish men and even linking them with menstruation, so Jewish polemicists could attack Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus by describing Mary’s womb with revulsion.⁹ The text of ‘*Aḥiṭub* makes certain use of this tradition in various parts of the narrative. When ‘Aḥiṭub himself is learning the principles of Jewish faith from the old sage, he is taught that “God is not a body or a corporal force, and is not, as in the words of the Christians, ‘ignorant of Spirit’ *sekhlei ha-ruah*, namely, by being incarnated) ... nor will you see in him material or form or change or mutation.”¹⁰ Before he meets the old Jewish teacher, ‘Aḥiṭub has already decided against following Christian belief because he believes that “it lacks foundation that the Divinity should be born from a woman and come out of a place of filth and fetidness (*tinofet u-vashah*).”¹¹ The presence of these arguments and others like them reinforces the gendered subtext underlying the entire narrative. The polemical genre of the text is founded on a male theological discourse in which women and women’s bodies are shared tools of attack and insult.

⁸For a basic introduction to the *Kuzari*, see the recent edition of the Hebrew translation with a new English translation by N. Daniel Korobkin; see Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, 1–17. For a more scholarly overview of the reception and shaping of the text in the Middle Ages, see Adam Shear, *Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity*, 1–93.

⁹Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 166–68; see 117–24 for a general discussion. See also Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 153–59. For a comparison with a northern European Jewish treatment of this issue, see David Berger, *Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, Hebrew, 5–6, English 44, 350–54.

¹⁰Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 35.

¹¹Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 22 and the discussion at 247–55.

Moreover, the discourse of misogyny in polemical writing participates in a more general discourse of misogyny in religious and secular writing in Iberia by writers of all faiths.¹²

Given this overwhelmingly unified perspective constituted by a male authorial voice, a predominance of male characters, and a distinctly male discourse of theological polemic, the importance of the queen is not immediately apparent. Yet a close examination of the places where the queen does appear shows that each of these sections constitutes a key interval around which the larger plot hinges. In fact, it is precisely because the text is, on the surface, part of a standard discourse of theological polemic that the ongoing presence of the queen at key moments throughout the text can be appreciated as even more decisive within the work's overall argument. The actions of the male protagonists depend on the queen's actions and decisions and the value of the arguments proffered by the male characters is determined finally by the queen's own assessment. Her critical importance is belied by her fleeting presence, while in reality the plot could not function without her constant intervention through both action and contemplation.

A hint as to the queen's centrality to the plot lies in the fact that she is the *first* individual character to appear in the text. On the island, "there reigned an important woman, the *glorious daughter of a king*, descendant of the Queen of Sheba. She had vassals, magistrates, and dignitaries, and she judged her people with justice and rectitude. She possessed riches and glory and power and inclined her people to the good. She spoke in peace to all her kind and her people." In contrast to the queen, who is described in terms of her individual characteristics and actions, the men on the island are only described as a group. They are "her people" who "were just but without manners or laws (*bli nimusim ve-ḥokim*)."¹³ The other characters, described in general as "dignitaries and magistrates ... sages ... great men," receive no individual treatment and do not speak until long after the queen has dominated the opening of the story with her thoughts and words. At the same time, although the queen is described as a "daughter of a king," her power does not depend on any other male character. Nuria Silleras-Fernández has shown in her examination of queenship in fifteenth-century Christian Iberia that the authority of most medieval queens was recognized and undisputed only "when it was based, whether explicitly or implicitly, on the higher authority of a male figure."¹⁴ By contrast, this "daughter of a king" rules alone in the text and it is nowhere implied that her authority is subject to a higher male authority elsewhere. The treatment of the queen as an individual singles her out from the very opening of the text.

One concrete possibility suggested by this depiction is to see the figure of the queen as a veiled allusion to the Aragonese queen, María de Castilla (1401–58). As wife of King Alfons the Magnanimous of Aragon (r. 1416–58), who spent most of his rule abroad in his pursuit of the crown of Naples, she served as lieutenant of the Crown of Aragon in his absence. Her independent regency spans the period when the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub* may have been composed, thus making her a meaningful figure with whom to compare the character of the queen in the text. The two queens do resemble each other in some aspects: although both inherit their power from a man, both ruled alone and without his oversight.¹⁵ Like the queen in the text, María displayed some evenhandedness in working with non-Christian faiths, and although her treatment of Jews was not universally positive, some of her later actions earned her a reputation for being a

¹²The most important treatment of misogyny in Jewish sources is Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*. For an introduction to Christian misogynist discourse in Iberia, especially in connection with contemporary medical discourses, see Michael Solomon, *Literature of Misogyny*, 1–16 in particular. For a more general discussion of medieval misogyny in literature, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*.

¹³Lara Olmo, "Edición crítica," 7–8.

¹⁴Silleras-Fernández, *Power, Piety, and Patronage*, 5.

¹⁵On María's independent rule, see the recent study by Theresa Earenfight, *King's Other Body*.

protector of the Jews of the kingdom. María began her lieutenancy in 1420, six years after the Disputation of Tortosa, and in 1422 she wrote to the Dominican friar, Pere Cerdà, urging him—according to her own words, not for the first time—to desist from his harassment of Jews, and threatened to punish any friars who would not comply.¹⁶ Also, in 1438, she permitted Jews of Cervera to have doors that opened both to the Christian and to the Jewish quarters, allowing them more freedom of movement.¹⁷

Such facts make it tempting to speculate that the representation of the queen in the *Book of 'Ahiṭub* might offer a veiled reference to María, but despite the parallels between the two queens, the differences are abundant. Because she was only a lieutenant regent ruling in place of her living husband, María, like many queens of Aragon, was never crowned. The queen in the text, by contrast, is specifically described as “crowned” and sitting on a “throne.”¹⁸ In addition, the queen in the *Book of 'Ahiṭub*, who does not marry (except in the later version of the text by Mordekhai Ha-Sofer),¹⁹ seems to inherit her crown from her father, whereas María only came to rule through marriage after her father, Enrique III of Castile, left the crown of Castile to her younger brother Juan II upon his death in 1406. Most importantly, unlike the queen in the text, María never organized or oversaw a polemical debate between Christians and other faiths and obviously never converted. Such differences make it hard to see the fictive queen as a direct allusion to María. The uncertain dating of the text, moreover, leaves open the possibility that it may have been composed between 1414 and 1420, before her lieutenancy even began. Nevertheless, although no certain connection can be made between the two queens without a more firm dating of the text and a clearer understanding of the context of its composition, the possibility that the rule of María de Castilla may have informed how the author understood and chose to represent queenship cannot be discarded either.

The importance and independence of the queen in the *Book of 'Ahiṭub* is not only evident in the opening description of her character, but is emphasized repeatedly in details throughout the text. One detail indicative of the queen's role is the fact that not only is she the first character to appear; she is also the first to speak, and the other individual characters who do speak do so *in response* to her speech to them. It is only after the queen calls her people together and bemoans the lack of religion and direction among her subjects that another character speaks, and even he goes unnamed. After she finishes her speech, “one of the men, who was an honorable chief (lit. ‘head of fifty’), arose” and spoke, proposing to send emissaries off the island.²⁰ Although this unnamed character first suggests the idea that guides the rest of the plot, he does so in response to the queen's own words and actions, and does so only with her approval. In fact, all that occurs in the text is a consequence of the queen's own agency, which can be traced back to a key moment in the opening of the text. Reflecting on how best to worship God, an idea came to her that would drive the rest of the plot of the text:

It happened that time passed and the queen stayed in bed. Sleep had gone from her eyes and rest was not sweet to her in her bed, on account of the great confusion in her mind and the diversity of opinions. Then there came to her mind a profound plan (*'eṣah 'amuqah*): to find a way to order her people so there would not be different opinions. In the morning, she sent for her dignitaries ...²¹

¹⁶Archive of the Crown of Aragon, Cancillería Real, Registros, #3110, printed partly in Carreras i Candi, *L'aljama de juhéus*, 56–57.

¹⁷Hernández-León de Sánchez, *Doña María de Castilla*, 104; Roth, *Conversos*, 52.

¹⁸Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 83, 103.

¹⁹Malachi, “Life of Matityah,” 1: 457.

²⁰Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 9.

²¹Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 8.

This revelatory moment is the spark that ignites the rest of the plot. Without it, none of the other male characters would be moved to action or contemplation.

We can appreciate the centrality of this opening scene by recognizing its similarity to other revelatory scenes that serve to drive the unfolding of the plot in other texts. In the *Kuzari*, for example, we read that the King of the Khazars was a convert to the religion of the Jews: “to [the king] came a dream (*in takarrara ‘alayhi ru’yā*), and (it appeared) as if an angel addressed him, saying: ‘Your way of thinking is indeed pleasing (*marḏī*) to the Creator, but your way of acting is not pleasing.’”²² After repeated dreams, the king called together three sages, a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim, eventually choosing Judaism as the true religion. Similar scenes of an imperious nocturnal visitor exhorting action and change appear in numerous medieval Hebrew texts in the later Middle Ages. In the autograph “memoirs” of the convert to Judaism, Johannes (Giuan) of Oppido (converted 1102, called Obadiah the Proselyte [*ha-ger*] after his conversion to Judaism) —a text preserved in fragments from the Cairo Genizah—Johannes “had a dream: he was officiating at the main church of Oppido ... and beheld a man standing to his right opposite the altar. He [said] to him, ‘Johannes!’”²³ Similarly, in the conversion narrative found in the Hebrew anti-Jewish polemic *Moreh Ṣedek* (Teacher of righteousness, now preserved in Castilian translation) by Abner of Burgos (c. 1270–c. 1347, known after his conversion to Christianity as Alfonso of Valladolid), the author tells us that, “in the great anxiety that I had in my heart and from the toil I had taken upon myself I grew tired and fell asleep. And I saw in a dream vision a great man who said to me: ‘Why are you asleep? Understand the words I am speaking to you, and straighten up.’”²⁴ After waking from this and similar repeated dreams urging him to change his faith, he converted to Christianity.

Likewise, such scenes can be found in Romance literature of the same polemical genre. The beginning of the *Book of Aḥiṭub* bears a curious resemblance to that of Lull’s *Book of the Gentile*, in which we read:

In a certain land there lived a Gentile very learned in philosophy, who ... had no knowledge of God, nor did he believe in the Resurrection ... whenever the Gentile thought about these things, his eyes filled with tears and weeping and his heart with sighs and sadness and pain ... while in the midst of these thoughts and tribulations, the Gentile conceived in his heart the idea of leaving his land and going to a foreign land, to see if he could find a remedy for his sadness.²⁵

Lull himself, as he is represented in his autobiographical *Vita Coetanea* (Contemporary life), himself is “called” to a life of missionizing and religious dispute when “one night [as] he was sitting beside his bed,” he had the first of a series of visions of Jesus that eventually moved him “to turn over in his mind what service would be most pleasing to God.”²⁶ Such nocturnal callings even turn up in non-religious courtly romances such as *Erec and Enide* of Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1135–c. 1185), in which the protagonist, while in bed, is made to realize that he has wrongly turned away from a life of chivalry.²⁷ In such texts, both polemical and non-polemical, the bed is a common symbol of a crossroads at which a decisive change or conversion to a new life may begin, a place from which one can be “called” from slumber to a heightened state of attention

²²Judah Halevi, *Kitāb al-radd*, 3.

²³Golb, “Autograph Memoirs,” [Hebrew] 96; “Autograph Memoirs,” 3.

²⁴Abner of Burgos, *Mostrador*, 1:13.

²⁵Ramon Lull, *Doctor*, 86.

²⁶Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 11–12.

²⁷In one pivotal moment when Enide tells Erec that his knightly reputation has declined from spending too much time in bed with her, Erec realizes his error and returns to a life of tournaments (Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec*, 208–12).

or awareness. Scenes of nocturnal revelation evoke the liminal state of sleep and dreams as a door to a deeper consciousness of prophetic understanding. The fact that in *The Book of 'Ahiṭub and Ṣalmon* the queen is the *only* character with such a revelatory scene further emphasizes the importance of her character as a prime mover of the story. Her desire to find a “way to order her people so there would not be different opinions” is not a mere polemical formula, but is essential to her development as the text’s central character.

Accepting this point leads to further questions about the message and structure of the text. How does the text make use of this characterization? Within the context of this predominantly male discourse of religious apologetic, why is the queen highlighted as the key character around which the rest of the plot revolves? The answer to these questions, I believe, lies in the queen’s role not only as a plot device but also as an expression of the overarching *polemical* argument of the text. In particular, I propose, she is characterized in two distinct ways, both of which contribute to the disputational, anti-Christian aspect of the text. First, she is evocative of Lady Wisdom, *Sophia*, or philosophy, who guides and judges the actions of men with wisdom. Secondly, though no less importantly, she plays the role of a virtuous, anti-Mary, holy figure whom God singles out as a vehicle for salvation but who remains a thoroughly human, female character untouched by any miraculous annunciation.

These two aspects correspond to the two primary methods by which theological polemics between Jews and Christians were waged in the later Middle Ages. As Amos Funkenstein has pointed out, most Christian polemic before the twelfth century was predominantly an exercise in citation of biblical authorities as proof texts, *auctoritates*. The twelfth century saw an important expansion of the traditional foundation of polemical argument to include not only biblical proofs but also rational argument (*ratio*) as a parallel foundation of argument.²⁸ Following the apologetic work of writers such as Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109), who provides one of the first rational apologies for Christian belief in his *Cur Deus Homo* (Why did God become man?) from 1098, writers such as Gilbert Crispin (c. 1055–1117), Petrus Alfonsi (conv. 1106), and Odo of Tournai (1050–1113) began to rearticulate traditional polemical arguments on the basis of rational proofs. In response to this new methodology, a new dyad, *ratio et auctoritas*, emerges in the twelfth century as the enlarged foundation of arguments that had previously been supported only by biblical authorities. Daniel Lasker has also noted that this timing coincides with the emergence of the first “treatises totally dedicated to defending the Jewish position and contending against the Christian one.” Jewish anti-Christian writing, especially after this period, is similarly “replete with philosophical arguments.”²⁹ The induction of reason and philosophy into religious disputation after the eleventh century made the field of polemical contest larger and more difficult to control for both Jewish and Christian writers.³⁰ In a work as explicitly polemical as the *Book of 'Ahiṭub and Ṣalmon*, this need was felt all the more acutely.

It is thus not surprising that the representation of the queen as a rationalistic *Sophia*, the embodiment of *ḥokhmah*, Wisdom, occurs repeatedly in the text. She is repeatedly described as “intelligent” (*mashkilah*)³¹ and as one “adorned with the crown of intelligence” (*ba-nezer ha-sekel nesukhah*).³² She leads her people to good, and when she speaks, her mouth is filled with wisdom (*ḥokhmah*).³³ Correspondingly, her manner of action and thought is determined

²⁸Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 178–80.

²⁹Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 2, 11.

³⁰For an overview of the use of reason in polemical writing, see Gilbert Dahan, *Les intellectuels chrétiens*, 423–40; and Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters*, 167–218.

³¹Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 8, 199.

³²Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 73, 81.

³³Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 7.

constantly by wisdom and logic. When faced with various conflicting ideas from the three male protagonists, she pleads, “Come, let us take wise council in order to found the religions on their base.”³⁴ Even after ‘Aḥiṭub wins his argument with ‘Eger and teaches the queen in private, she demands that he explain his arguments about sacrifices with a “logical explanation” (*sebara*),³⁵ a term opposed in rabbinic writings to “traditional” authorities and interpretation (*gemara*).³⁶ Through these allusions, the queen repeatedly is said to embody wisdom and it is no surprise that she is converted through logic and rational argument.

The queen’s embodiment of wisdom is reflected in her depiction as a Solomonic figure, one who arbitrates fairly in the disputation between ‘Eger and ‘Aḥiṭub. In listening to the disputation, she “sits on her throne” and is not quick to judge. Even after the first day of presentation, she enjoins her people to “withhold judgment for now” and to not draw conclusions before all the evidence be presented.³⁷ Her association with Solomon as the female embodiment of Wisdom is also evident in the text’s use of scriptural verses from Proverbs, where wisdom (*hokhmah*, translated as *sophia* in the Septuagint) is depicted as a woman. At one point on the second day of debate when the queen agrees with ‘Aḥiṭub’s argument about the lack of prophetic references to the Virgin Mary, she uses the words of Proverbs to affirm to him that “you destroy the objections of ‘Eger ... *the answer of your tongue* (Proverbs 16:1) has shot forth your strength.”³⁸ When she then inquires to whom the prophets were referring when they mentioned a “young woman with child” (Isaiah 7:14), ‘Aḥiṭub answers by using the words of Wisdom herself, speaking “*with righteousness [in] all that I say*” (Proverbs 8:8). Such statements echo the author’s own statement in the introduction to the work that he wrote this story in order to inspire men to “give up books of vanity” (*sifrei ha-havalim*), a pronouncement reminiscent of the condemnation in Ecclesiastes 1:2 (believed in the Middle Ages to have been articulated by Solomon himself) of the world as “vanity of vanities” (*havel havalim*). In keeping with these evocations, we are also told in the very opening of the text that the queen is also a “descendant of the Queen of Sheba,”³⁹ a woman who, in 1 Kings 10:1–13, heard of Solomon’s alleged wisdom and “came to test him with hard questions,” after which “Solomon gave [her] ... every desire she expressed.” Given that numerous rabbinic and later medieval texts associated the legend with a sexual encounter between Solomon and the queen,⁴⁰ the association of our queen with the Queen of Sheba carries a veiled suggestion that she might likewise literally be a descendant of Solomon himself.

The queen’s role as a sort of Lady Wisdom figure has important polemical consequences in the anti-Christian message of the text. In her final discourse on the corporality of God, the queen’s squire says to ‘Aḥiṭub that “logical explanation (*sebara*) proves it and my opinion is in agreement that God, blessed be he, is not a body and is not endowed with material, and any who believes in the materiality [of God] is a heretic and a traitor.”⁴¹ This judgment given on the basis of rational explanation, to which the queen agrees, is a direct rejection of the Incarnation, showing the queen’s wisdom to be a natural opponent to Christianity. Although, like Solomon, she is depicted as a fair judge who withholds her judgment until a full debate is held, she cannot help but find the words of the Christian ‘Eger to be foolish. When he presented his summary of Christianity, the queen “scoffed within her and despised ‘Eger’s words in her

³⁴Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 80.

³⁵Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 206.

³⁶Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 165.

³⁷Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 103.

³⁸Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 126.

³⁹Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 7.

⁴⁰Lassner, *Demonizing*, 24–25.

⁴¹Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 208.

heart.”⁴² When she calls Şalmon to offer his perspective on the debate and he rejects ‘Eger’s faith in favor of ‘Aḥiṭub’s, his judgment “seemed good in the eyes of the queen.”⁴³ As an embodiment of reason—one of the foundations of proof in the Christian–Jewish debates of the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries—her “wisdom” emerges within the text as part of the author’s carefully constructed anti-Christian message.

The queen’s wisdom, however, is only one part of her character. She is at the same time deeply religious, and her piety constitutes the second means by which her character is an essential part of the polemical project at work in the story. Following what Gilbert Dahan has called the “enlargement” of authority in polemical writing after the introduction of both reason and post-biblical sources, reason and authority come to function in tandem as dual poles of polemical proof.⁴⁴ The importance of this dual foundation of truth as a necessary strategy for argumentation by the author of the text is evident in the concluding remarks of ‘Aḥiṭub in his religious instruction of the queen. When she asks for understanding about the use and nature of sacrifices, ‘Aḥiṭub introduces and contrasts the teachings of both Maimonides (1138–1204) and Naḥmanides (1194–1270), figures who embody the teachings of reason and of religious and mystical authority, respectively, in Jewish tradition.⁴⁵ This double response to the menace of Christian argumentation is further represented by the queen herself, who not only embodies wisdom and the rational grounds on which Christian belief could be refuted and overturned by Judaism, but also represents religious authority in the text, providing at the same time a scriptural rejection of Christianity. Equally, the queen, in her role as Lady Wisdom, can be interpreted as a sort of anti-Virgin Mary, a religious authority (*auctoritas*) opposed to Christian views in her reasons and in her faith.

Although the queen is actually described explicitly as an “authority” when ‘Eger “asks permission (*reshut*) from the queen and authority (*rashut*),” the most developed aspect of the depiction of the queen as a religious authority is her longstanding, natural piety.⁴⁶ We are told in the very first description of the queen that, “She got up early and stayed up nights in order to pray, and twice daily she raised her hands to the God of the Heavens.”⁴⁷ When she sends her three emissaries off the island to find truth, she directs them on their mission by evoking God (*‘El Shaddai*) “who had created them” along with heaven and earth and the holy hosts.⁴⁸ This devotion to truth and naturally pious devotion to God continues throughout the text and manifests itself again in the concluding section in which ‘Aḥiṭub teaches the queen about Judaism after her conversion. The sincerity of her devotion is dramatized when “a day arrived in which the sovereign was praying in the morning and her soul awaited her creator. She sighed for her devotion and was overcome with awe (*yir’ah*).”⁴⁹ The queen’s natural faith motivates the search for truth in the opening of the text and refines and deepens the understanding of truth at the end of the text.

Moreover, if we look closely at the imagery and language by which the queen’s piety is described, we can see repeated allusions to Christian language describing the Virgin Mary. For example, at the end of the debate when the queen prepares to call Şalmon to offer his judgment, she is offered lavish praise. In words taken from a description of Solomon, the text states that “There the queen of the Shadow of Zion *sat on her throne*. Her face shone *like the moon*.”⁵⁰

⁴²Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 70.

⁴³Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 196.

⁴⁴Dahan, *Les intellectuels chrétiens*, 441.

⁴⁵Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 209–13.

⁴⁶Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 189.

⁴⁷Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 8.

⁴⁸Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 11.

⁴⁹Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 199–200.

⁵⁰Lara Olmo, “Edición crítica,” 190.

Traditionally referred to by many Christian writers as the “star of the sea,” or *stella maris*, Mary had come to be associated with the moon in Christian commentary from the twelfth century on. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, interpreted the verse in Revelation 12 (“a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet”) as a description of the Virgin.⁵¹ In the crucifixion scene in the thirteenth-century Psalter of Robert of Lindsey, abbot of Peterborough (?–1222), Mary is associated with the moon as a witness to her son’s crucifixion along with John, who is associated with the sun.⁵² By the fourteenth century, Mary was depicted as standing on a crescent with rays of light beaming from her hair.⁵³ The comparison of the queen’s face to the moon may be taken as a tacit evocation of Mary.

This veiled image becomes even more obvious in light of the description that follows: the queen “blushed with splendor, exhaling a fragrance like a *lily among thorns*, like a queen *adorns herself with jewels*, a belt of grace extended over her.” The Christian description of Mary, according to the verse from Song of Songs 2:2, as “a lily among thorns,” is similarly common in medieval commentary appearing in writings by Peter Damian in the eleventh century and Alan of Lille in the thirteenth, among others.⁵⁴ Thirteenth-century French monk Helinand of Froidmont (c. 1160–after 1229) takes this description as a symbol not only of Mary’s beauty but also of her chastity in a fallen world.⁵⁵ The queen’s “belt of grace” is, in the same way, evocative of Mary’s description as “highly favored” or “full of grace” (Luke 1:28). Such images recall the opening scene in which “a profound plan (*‘eṣah ‘amuqah*) came into her mind” and the queen first received her inspiration to send out her three truth seekers, a scene similarly reminiscent of the Annunciation. In the context of these evocative parallels, the very identity of the queen as a queen similarly could suggest the common description of Mary as *Regina caeli*, “queen of heaven,” *Regina misericordiae*, “queen of mercy,” or *Regina virginum*, “queen of virgins.”⁵⁶ Even the association of the queen with the “queen of Sheba” could be taken as an evocation of Christian interpretations linking this figure to Mary.⁵⁷

This depiction of the queen as a wise, anti-Virgin figure emerges from a particularly polemical context that centered on the Virgin Mary. Not only was Mary a lightning rod in the debate over the theological significance of the Incarnation of God in Jesus; she was also, in anti-Christian Jewish polemics, an embodiment of the corruption of the material world that was wholly incommensurate with God’s exalted nature. Such attacks are made in the early Hebrew *Life of Jesus* (Toledot Yeshu), a scurrilous anti-Christian story in which Jesus is conceived when Mary is seduced into sex (or raped) by a Roman soldier.⁵⁸ Such themes became very common in later Jewish anti-Christian polemics. Among the clearest attacks within polemical literature on the Incarnation through the criticism of the womb and body of Mary is found in the ninth-century Arabic *Account of the Disputation of the Priest* (*Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Usquf*), translated by the twelfth century into Hebrew as *The Book of Nestor the Priest* (*Sefer Nestor Ha-Komer*). The text viciously attacks the notion that God “dwelt in the innards [of a woman] in the filth of menstrual blood and in the dark confinement of the womb.”⁵⁹ Contemporary with this, Joseph Kimḥi’s (1105–70) dialogue

⁵¹ *Patrologia Latina*, 183: 431–32, 438.

⁵² Rubin, *Mother of God*, 245.

⁵³ Rubin, *Mother of God*, 277.

⁵⁴ For Peter Damian, see *Patrologia Latina*, 144: 753; for Alan of Lille, see 210: 65, 247.

⁵⁵ Rubin, *Mother of God*, 155.

⁵⁶ On these common descriptions of Mary, see Rubin, *Mother of God*, 175, 251, 288; and Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 295.

⁵⁷ Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 218–19; Rubin, *Mother of God*, 288.

⁵⁸ Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 129; Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 5.

⁵⁹ *Polemic of Nestor*, 1: 53; 2: 28; cf. Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 77–80.

between believer and unbeliever in *The Book of the Covenant* (*Sefer ha-Berit*) sees the Jewish believer exclaiming, “How shall I believe that this great *Deus absconditus* needlessly entered the womb of a woman, the filthy, foul bowels of a female?”⁶⁰ In Christian writing, this same trope is reflected by the Jewish voice of Leo in the polemic of Odo of Tournai.⁶¹ This trope of Mary’s corruption is recapitulated repeatedly in later anti-Christian literature, especially after the twelfth century, and it participates in a more general discourse of the female body as a place of pollution and corruption.⁶² In the fourteenth-century *Teacher of Righteousness* of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid, the Jewish “Rebel” exclaims that, “I am very surprised at this that you, the Christians, say that God entered into the womb of the woman, which is a dirty and contaminated place” (*es lugar suzio e enconado*).⁶³ Such arguments were repeated by Abner/Alfonso’s polemical interlocutors such as Moses Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas (fl. late fourteenth century), who depicts similar incredulity about a “pure spiritual Creator ... in the darkness of the womb and the dirt of the body.”⁶⁴

The suggested double signification of the queen in the *Book of ‘Ahiṭub* as both Lady Wisdom and an anti-Virgin Mary can thus be seen as more than a double-pronged response to Christian anti-Jewish arguments based on both reason and written authorities. It is also a logical product of traditional evocations of wisdom as female that simultaneously depicted the corruption of man through the sin brought by female corporality. As Emily Francomano explains, this pairing was particularly resonant in Iberia: “In the Hispanic context, feminine personification of intellectual faculties and truths consistently come up against equally authoritative common-places that construct the female body as the site and vehicle of moral and intellectual corruption.”⁶⁵ By hinting that the queen was an anti-Virgin Mary, resembling Mary in many aspects yet rejecting the Incarnation and corporality of God, her depiction as Lady Wisdom in the *Book of ‘Ahiṭub* and *Zelmon* is in this way given a sharper polemical edge as a condemnation of both rational and text-based (authoritative) arguments in favor of Christianity. The double valence of the queen’s character is thus an implicit inversion and rejection of the Christian arguments of ‘Eger.

The centrality of the queen as an embodiment of both philosophical and devotional meaning is, moreover, reflective of the concrete historical context in which the text of the *Book of ‘Ahiṭub* appeared. Not only was Mary a figure of deep devotion among polemical writers such as Francesc Eiximenis (c. 1340–1409), whose *Vita Christi* was among the most popular Iberian treatments of Mary in the early fifteenth century, a text imitated by other writers such as Juan López de Salamanca (c. 1385–1479) in his fifteenth-century *Vida de la Virgen*.⁶⁶ Even more importantly, she was a central point of contention and debate in contemporary Jewish–Christian disputations, as can be seen in the surviving protocols of the Disputation of Tortosa in 1413–14 and also in contemporary anti-Christian works such as the *Refutation of Christian Principles* (*Biṭṭul Iqqarei Ha-Noṣerim*), written by Ḥasdai Crescas (c. 1340–1410/11) in the early fifteenth century.⁶⁷ At Tortosa, former

⁶⁰Joseph Kimḥi, *Book of the Covenant*, 36.

⁶¹Odo of Tournai, *On Original Sin*, 95, and Resnick, “Odo of Tournai,” 473–75.

⁶²Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 77–83, 119–37, and see above, n. 9. On the trope of the female body as a site of corruption for the soul in other Hebrew sources, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 93–95.

⁶³Abner of Burgos, *Mostrador*, 2: 7.

⁶⁴Shamir, *Rabbi Moses*, 2: 99.

⁶⁵Francomano, *Lady Wisdom*, 2.

⁶⁶This text by Juan López de Salamanca is preserved in BNE MS 103. I am grateful to Cynthia Robinson for pointing this manuscript out to me. Robinson is currently tracing the influence of such works on later fifteenth-century representations such as the “Gozos de la Virgen” by the Marqués de Santillana, *Poesías completas*, 2: 200–1.

⁶⁷See Ḥasdai Crescas, *Refutation*, 57–58, 72.

Jew Jerónimo de Santa Fe (d. 1419, born Yehoshua Halorki) argued against important Jewish intellectuals such as Yosef Albo (c. 1380–1444) about, among other important issues, the nature of the Virgin Birth and the use of rational argumentation in the defense of Christian principles, focusing one discussion on the perpetual virginity of Mary before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Like Santa Fe, who also made such arguments in his own polemical writing, anti-Jewish writers such as Alonso de Spina (d. c. 1491) took and developed the same arguments later in the fifteenth century.⁶⁸ Although, as noted above, it is not certain if the author of the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub*, called “Mattityahu” in the text, was the same “Mattityahu ha-Yiṣhari” who actually participated in the Tortosa disputation, it cannot be doubted that the representation of the queen in the text in terms evocative of the Virgin Mary and of Lady Wisdom was informed by contemporary discussion of Mary in Jewish–Christian disputation.

When viewed together, the text’s various overlapping images and themes in the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub* evince that the fictive queen is not only the central character whose development guides the entire narrative, but is also one of the primary vehicles for polemical argumentation in the text, a dramatic embodiment of the anti-Christian arguments offered by 'Aḥiṭub himself in his debate with 'Eqer. In her role as queen with the characteristics of both Lady Wisdom and the Virgin Mary, she is not merely a stock figure meant to hold together larger pieces of the plot, but is a carefully conceived epitome of the essence of the entire text. This reading—in addition to showing the inherent *literary* value in polemical texts like the *Book of 'Aḥiṭub*, texts often cited for their arguments but rarely “read” for their structure, characters, and language—also suggests more generally the importance of interpreting inter-confessional dialogue beyond the limited generic constraints that intellectual historians and medievalists too often impose upon their sources. In the confrontational context of fifteenth-century Iberia, this successful, explicitly gendered combination of argumentation based simultaneously on philosophical reason and devotional authority, *Sophia* and *Maria*, not only made the queen a compelling literary character. It also transformed her into a sharp polemical weapon and a powerful apologetic defense, one whose symbolic meaning would become increasingly resonant on the long road towards 1492.

Acknowledgements

This research is part of a collaborative project entitled, “The Intellectual and Material Legacies of Late Medieval Sephardic Judaism: An Interdisciplinary Approach,” directed by Dr Esperanza Alfonso (CSIC). I wish to thank the European Research Council for its support of this project with a four-year Starting Grant and to thank Dr Alfonso for her ongoing coordination as Principal Investigator of the project.

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⁶⁸At Tortosa, part of session 40 focused on the meaning of the verse in Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, a young woman will conceive,” focusing on the term for “young woman,” *almah*, often translated as “virgin.” Also under discussion was the mysterious writing of the Hebrew letter *mem* as “closed” (as it should appear at the end, not the middle of a word) in the word *marbah*, “increase,” in Isaiah 9:6 (or 9:7), which was interpreted as a sign of Mary’s inviolate womb. See *La Disputa de Tortosa*, 2: 323–24 and 1: 295–98; and Raimundus Martini, *Pugio fidei*, 738; McMichael, *Was Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah?*, 197–225. For Jerónimo de Santa Fe’s later work, see *Errores y falsedades*, 154–55, and *Contra Iudaeorum*, 532b and 535b–536a.

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