

Love and Race in a Thirteenth-Century Romance in Hebrew, with a Translation of *The Story of Maskil and Peninah* by Jacob Ben El'azar*

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The Story of Maskil and Peninah is a romance, cast in the Arabic genre of the *maqamāh*, and written in biblical Hebrew by a Jewish author in thirteenth-century Christian Toledo. This cultural juncture, anchored in the work's historical circumstances is, as I intend to show, also reflected in the complexities of the story's plot: an army (apparently Christian) invades a Muslim territory; its commander falls in love with an Arabic princess taken captive; the couple encounter a black giant warrior and, after killing him, live happily ever after.

Very little is known about the author, Jacob Ben El'azar (in Castilian, Abenalazar), who lived in the late twelfth to early thirteenth century. He was also the author of compositions on popular philosophy (in Hebrew) and of a Hebrew grammar (in Arabic), as well as the translator (from Arabic to Hebrew) of the famous Arabic narrative collection of *Kalilāh and Dimnāh*.¹

The Story of Maskil and Peninah (translated below) is the sixth of ten rhymed pieces in Ben El'azar's narrative collection known as *Sefer ha-meshalim* (Book of Fables), dated

* Dedicated to Sheila Delany, whose interest in medieval Hebrew literature encouraged me to translate this text.

1 On Ben El'azar's work, see Schirmann and Fleischer, *The History of Hebrew Poetry*, 222-55, and the bibliography therein. *Kalilāh and Dimnāh* is a collection of stories translated from Sanskrit to Persian, from Persian to Arabic, and then from Arabic to Hebrew. It entered European literature through a Latin translation by an Italian Jewish convert.

c.1233.² All stories are written in elegant, heavily ornamented rhymed prose studded with (usually short) metrical poems.³ This form is known in Arabic as *maqamāh* (pl. *maqamāt*, and translated into Hebrew as *maḥbereth*).

In a poetic school which excelled at classical (metrical) poetry and prided itself on its achievement,⁴ the writing of narratives in rhymed prose was seen as a novelty. Introduced not much before the mid-twelfth century, the vogue of the *maqamāh* peaked during the first half of the thirteenth century, mainly in Castile (but also in Catalonia and Provence).⁵ Judah al-Ḥarizi (1165-1225), Ben El'azar's older Jewish contemporary and compatriot, is considered the master of the Hebrew *maqamāh* and the Jewish counterpart of al-Ḥariri, the champion of the Arabic genre who wrote in eleventh-century Iraq. Judah al-Ḥarizi's first endeavour was a translation of most of al-Ḥariri's fifty exemplary Arabic *Maqamāt*. Later, he wrote his own *Sefer Taḥkemoni*, a collection of fifty Hebrew *maqamāt*. By naming the narrator of *Sefer ha-meshalim* "Lemuel, son of Ithi'el," Ben El'azar certainly alludes to al-Ḥarizi's *Maḥberoth Ithi'el*, and thus to his affinity to the al-Ḥariri-al-Ḥarizi tradition of the classical *maqamāh*.

In his polemic introduction to *Sefer ha-meshalim*, Ben El'azar directly responds to the challenge of the Arabic *maqamāh*, claiming that Hebrew is no less fit than Arabic "for praise and abuse, for poetry and prose."⁶ But while al-Ḥariri and al-Ḥarizi's witty *maqamāhs* told anecdotes about eloquent rogues, charlatans, and beggars, Ben El'azar uses this same form to tell his own romance-like love stories.

2 *Sefer ha-meshalim* survived in a single manuscript, copied in 1268. Five of its ten stories have been published by Schirmann in "The Love Stories of Ya'acov Ben El'azar." The complete collection, inaccurately titled *Sippure ahavah* (Love Stories), was published by David. To the best of my knowledge none of the stories has been fully translated into English. For a discussion and partial translation of Ben El'azar's first and seventh stories, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 95-102 and 159-67. Jonathan Decter's recent book *Iberian Jewish Literature* translates and discusses many sections by Ben El'azar (see his index). For an overview of *Sefer ha-meshalim*, see Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 136-39. For *The Story of Maskil and Peninah*, see Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 182-83 and 204, and Melamed, *The Image of the Black*, 160-63.

3 For the Arabic and Hebrew genre, see Drory, "The *Maqamāh*," 190-210, and Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 107-10 and 126-36.

4 On Hebrew poetry in the Jewish Golden Age in Muslim Spain (950-1150), see Scheindlin's introduction to *Wine, Women, and Death*, and Brann, *The Compunctious Poet*.

5 For an overview of early Hebrew rhymed prose, see Pagis, *Hebrew Poetry*, and Schirmann and Fleischer, *The History of Hebrew Poetry*.

6 In her discussion of Ben El'azar's introduction, Drory highlights the fact that this rivalry between Hebrew and Arabic took place in a Romance-speaking environment; Drory, *Models and Contacts*, 215-32.

The Story of Maskil and Peninah ends where it begins — in the allegorical Kingdom of Beauty. The decline in the number of young beautiful men and women (“gazelles”) in the kingdom endangers its continued existence. The story’s happy ending — the marriage of Maskil, the cultured boy, and Peninah, the pearly girl⁷ — saves the kingdom and guarantees its continuance. The King of Beauty sends messengers to every province to find an heir and thus secure the kingdom’s future. Handsome and learned Maskil is found and proclaimed crown-prince. Later, following a rumour that the “Lands of the Arabs” are abundant with “lovers,” Maskil invades Arab territory and takes captive many gazelles, male and female. He falls in love with one of them, an Arab girl of noble descent called Peninah. While feasting and enjoying themselves in a paradisaical setting (the typical *locus amoenus*), they are suddenly confronted by Cushan, a gigantic, black-skinned warrior, who claims Peninah. Peninah encourages her terrified beloved to fight him. After Maskil has killed Cushan, the loving couple return to their Dwelling of Delight to live there happily ever after, “spending their days in peace and their years in joy.”⁸

The translation offered below aims at a middle path between being too literal and too liberal. “Translation’s thief that addeth more” is Andrew Marvell’s label for the over-interpretative translator. For clarity’s sake (rather than just for the sake of elegance), I have smoothed out certain difficult or cumbersome expressions; the occasional awkwardness of the English translation reflects awkward constructions in the Hebrew original. Scholars have related stylistic oddities in *Sefer ha-meshalim* to errors and additions introduced by the copyist of the work’s single manuscript.⁹ Additionally, biblical phraseology, while elevating the style, often interrupts the smooth flow of the text by introducing ambiguities and irrelevant reverberations. The resulting enigmatic style is challenging not only for the translator but also for the Hebrew reader. Where a biblical phrase (not just a single word) is involved, I have consulted standard English translations of the Old Testament. Whereas in a classical Hebrew poem all lines are monorhymed, I have reproduced rhyme only where it suggested itself in English without causing any deviation from the original. In the prose sections, virgules mark the locations where rhymes appear in the original Hebrew but not in the translation; in the in-set poems, virgules represent the metrical caesura between two hemistichs.

7 The six appearances of *peninim* (pl. of *peninah*) in the Hebrew Old Testament are variably translated into English as coral, ruby, and pearl.

8 The final lines of Ben El’azar’s text, see p. 167 below.

9 David, *Love Stories*, 7 and 10 n. 11.

The Story of Maskil and Peninah

Thus spoke Lemu'el, son of Ithi'el:¹⁰ It came to pass that the [male-] gazelles¹¹ grew up; / their dawn-bright faces darkened,¹² / and they grew wings like eagles.¹³ / The she-gazelles were [then] lazing in front of shiny mirrors.¹⁴ / And it came to pass that their beauty had just vanished, / and was sought but not found. / Then the King of Beauty¹⁵ rose furious / and said, "After this has happened, is there any hope left for Beauty?" / And he reproached all the servants around him / and grew hot with anger / and said, "Let all gazelles, female and male, / be sought in all provinces of the Land of Beauty!" / The couriers were dispatched post-haste / for the King's command was urgent.¹⁶ / They roamed hither and thither / until they found the loveliest of all male gazelles [resting] in his bed-chamber / and brought him before the King of Beauty. / And the King saw that he was most lovely indeed, and without blemish. / Charm was poured over his face — / but death rested in his eyes, / [as with his eyes] he shot those who loved him, / whom neither shield nor weapons could help.¹⁷

And the King said in his heart, "Is there anyone like him surrounded by beauty? / The Covenant of Beauty is inscribed — and fulfilled — in his face."¹⁸ /

10 This is the pseudo-biblical name of the fictional narrator in all of Jacob Ben El'azar stories.

11 Following both Arabic love poetry and the biblical Song of Songs, a "gazelle" (Heb. *ofer*; fem. *ofrah*; syn. *tzevi* / *tzeviah*) is a graceful young boy or girl who is an object of erotic desire.

12 Their pale faces darkened because their beards were beginning to grow, i.e., they had reached puberty.

13 Following Isaiah 40:31. *Ever*, in biblical Hebrew, is "a large wing." In Talmudic Hebrew, it may refer to any limb, including the human penis.

14 This obscure sentence may indicate that the young women reached puberty and were already waiting to be impregnated. The mirrors allude to "bemar'oth ha-tzov'oth" (Exodus 38:8), i.e., the brass mirrors donated by the Israelite women for the making of the brass laver in the Tabernacle. Midrash *Tanḥuma* adds that the Israelite women in Egypt beautified themselves in front of those same mirrors in order to arouse their husbands and thus become pregnant. Targum Yonathan explains that by looking at the brass laver (made of their mirrors), the women could watch the reflection of the high priest performing the rituals, and that having intercourse immediately after that guaranteed that they would give birth to righteous children.

15 A personification of the Platonic Idea of Beauty.

16 Following Esther 3:15.

17 The penetrating and lethal gaze of the desired boy or girl resembling an arrow shot from his or her bow (i.e., eyebrow) is a common topos in medieval Arabic and Hebrew poetry.

18 The boy's first facial hair is commonly likened to black-on-white calligraphic writing. The metaphor of a covenant inscribed in the boy's face highlights the inextricable relationship between the Platonic Form of Beauty and its embodiment in the boy's beautiful face.

All that he lacks is the kingship.”¹⁹ / And he [the King of Beauty] swore in the name of Beauty, / saying, “In the face of the gazelle shall I dwell! / He will be crown-prince and rule my people!” The gazelle that put moonlight to shame / was thirteen years old. His name was Maskil,²⁰ / and all who saw him were consumed with passion for him. / His kingdom was thus established and secured, / and he sat on his throne. And he [the King] made this song and said,

Children of Love and Beauty admit / they are slaves to the gazelle’s charm.
They all fear his bright radiance; / they all bow and bend to him.
All rays radiating from their cheeks / are captured on his.
Resting on his cheek, / ashamed, those rays prepare to
Shoot arrows back at his lovers. / Halt, O gazelle, lest they are destroyed!
He planted his love in lovers’ / hearts, and there it took root;
He fastened it with nails of beauty, / lest it move or falter.
Lovers fell sick with your love; / astounding was their fall.
But how sweet and charming / it is to be sick with your love!
Thus Children of Love have / convened, for they all love you!

And after that it came to pass that his ministers and all his councillors / and his judges and all his poets / told him, “We have heard that the Land of the Arabs / is bountiful with lovers!” / Hence, the gazelle hastened to harness his horses / and [gather] all the battalions of his kingdom. / And with him were all Love’s folk, / young as well as grey-haired. / Arriving there, after walking all night through the wilderness, / they beheld, spread over the battle-field, / the nobles of that land — / gazelles and she-gazelles, / fawns and hinds, / bright as the sun, / striding to and fro in the streets of Love. / The fire of passion and its flame were kindled in them / and they began dallying, / kissing and hugging. / Then came out the she-gazelles / dancing, and playing their tambourines, / wearing, like brides, all manner of jewels and trinkets, / earrings, bracelets, and veils. / They played their songs of love and passion, as this was their Festival of Love. / And swift as lightning, Maskil’s army hurried, took them captive, plundering all their belongings, / and then returned safely home.

19 1 Samuel 18:8.

20 Literally, “learned” or “enlightened.” The linkage between Beauty and Intellect is typically Platonic.

And there was a young girl there / called Peninah,²¹ / a princess whose beauty
could devour hearts. / Maskil put her in a hiding place, / locking her inside him,
among his heart's ponderings, / barring her from coming and going. / When Pen-
inah saw his lovely face, / red as blood, / she made this song and said,

The beloved's face is ruddy; / hence, his name — Edomite.²²
His face is perfumed with [aromatic] oils, / rich and refined.
A lovely [rose-] bed grows on his cheek, / circled by Cushite²³ [guards].
He who draws near / is sentenced to death — or to life.

Hearing her words / and the excellence of her song and music, / his love for her
grew and his affection increased. / She became his spouse and sister, / his desire
and essence-of-life, / his spirit and soul, / his sun and light, / a dress to his skin. /
His eyes were never satisfied looking at her, / for he loved her. Thus, he made
this song:

My soul's desire and light! / My eye's pupil and sight!
Her memory revives my soul; / she's the hind of my delight.
Unrivalled among stars; / none shines as bright.
Roses bloom in her cheeks, / far and wide glows her light.
When her radiant cheek meets the sun / — day turns into night!

She was his soul [-mate] from birth. / She was his only garment. / She fed him
with her hands / and lulled him to sleep between her breasts. / They [Maskil and
Peninah] were so small, / lovelier than pearls. / Their love was so pure and inno-
cent, / and they both knew nothing. / And the girl was hidden from sight, / and
the boy was completely ignorant.

One day she told him, "Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields to lie
among the henna bushes,²⁴ / as is the lovers' custom!" / Hence, he hurried and
rose up from his lounge / and harnessed his chariot. / Boys and girls came out

21 For a literal translation of the name, see note 7 above.

22 "Edomite" (from *adam*) connotes colour (red/ruddy) as in Song of Songs 5:10. In the Talmud, "Edom" refers to the Roman Empire; in medieval Hebrew, to Christian lands.

23 The biblical word for black Africans, as Cush was the son of Ham (Genesis 10:6).

24 Song of Songs 7:12.

then / strolling along the streams. / They stopped by the banks of the River of Love, / where the nobles were accustomed to entertain and amuse themselves. / The gravel resembled sapphires / lapped by waters, / surrounded by lovely trees / among whose long branches / and tall tops / all kinds of birds were flying, / jumping, and chirping. / The valleys were planted with beds of balsam, / whose scent was spreading afar, to this side and to that. / They dallied with the breasts of Pleasure, / and covered [themselves] with the hair of Delight. / They sat in the shades of Peace, / enjoying themselves happily and cheerfully. And he made a song and said,

A river whose water is balm for the sick, / flowing over gravel of sapphires,
Tall fruit-trees grow at its waters, / with fowl of all kinds gathered in them.
Sounds of doves and swifts and songs of [human] singers / ascend, and the
band's music goes up.

If sorrows be heavier than sand / they would flee then over valley and
mountain.

Let lovers drink Love's wine / over rivers whose waters ease [love's] pains.

As they [Maskil and Peninah] were eating the food of Joy / and drinking the wine of Peace and Calm, / a stormy wind came whirling / and howling / and with dust and dirt / and trumpet blasts. / The valleys quivered / and the hills trembled. / And they [Maskil and Peninah] were afraid and full of dread / and shook / and cried out loudly and bitterly / and shifted as within a sieve that is shaken to and fro.²⁵ / Maskil rose from the riverbank, / shuddering at what he saw. / And he was the first to go [and look] out. / Up there was a horseman²⁶ / wearing arrogance and pride / and bellowing as he came closer. / He looked like / a vast multitude, / and when Maskil got closer to him, he realized that he was black. / Frightened, he withdrew / and mumbled, "This Cushite has come here / for no reason other than to take my soul away!" / He was gigantic; he had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot²⁷ / with which he could lay waste fortified

25 The references are to apocalyptic phrases in the Prophets (Jeremiah 4:24; Amos 9:9; Nahum 1:5; Micah 1:4).

26 The description of the warrior and his horse, here and in the following paragraph, is a mosaic of prophetic allusions (Nahum 3:3; Isaiah 13:4, 66:6; Jeremiah 5:17, 39:18; Zechariah 3:2; Psalms 55:8).

27 Based on the description of the giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17:4; 1 Chronicles 20:6).

towns. / His stature blocked out the view of hills. / His width was six cubits and a span. / His face [was as black as] a piece of wood pulled out of the fire / and his eyes were like embers, / and he was as swift as a stag.

And Maskil said to himself, “He must be one of those giants of legend! / That noisy wind coming out from his throat / must be an evil spirit!” / And the Cushite barked at Maskil, / saying, “Alas for you, Maskil! Leave the gazelle and do not torment her — / if you wish to escape with your life!” When Maskil heard the words of the black man, he grew furious and swore [by God], / “He who placed heavenly lights in Peninah’s face — / put coals in yours; / [He who] made Peninah a delight to behold — / distorted [your shape] and made it unlike any other creature.²⁸ / [He will devise it so that] before you get to behold the gazelle / your body will depart from your soul.” / And he made a song and said,

Blessed be the Rock who made you an odd creature, / putting coals in your
face

And embers in your eyes; / who holds you up as a byword to the nations.

Have you come here today / to claim the gazelle

And remind [me] of your sins? / Has your wickedness incited you to

Rely on your stature / and trust your might?

Enormous as you are — / your haughtiness will be brought down to the
grave!²⁹

If you descend from devils / and demons are your kin —

I will chant names [of demons] / to help me hack your horns!

And if you are of Adam’s sons — / I will silence your uproar!

Animals will watch your fall / and birds will be dazed at your disgrace!

And the Cushite’s rage at him grew hot / and he spoke foolishly until he exhausted all his words / and his tongue broke / and he dribbled down his beard. / Furious and frenzied he hurried to Maskil / and said, “You may not know me; my name was perhaps not told to you / that you want to fight against me. / I am of the Cushites and my name is Cushan. / The world’s bravest champions have faded away before me like smoke — / and you intend to fight Cushan

28 A reference to the blessing “Blessed be He who created strange creatures” (*Birkath meshaneh ha-beriyoth*).

29 An allusion to the demise of the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:11.

Rish'atayyim³⁰ / over a female or two?"³¹ / Maskil returned then to Peninah / and spoke to her softly, / [to which] she answered, "Do not let his arrogance / and his haughty tongue / scare you! / Go and brace yourself / and fight the Amalekite."³² / Hence, Maskil toughened and took up his arms. / Peninah, too, went out with him and took her stand at his side / to see what would happen to him. / And Cushan the Cushite approached / and his face was burning like a furnace / and smoke came out from his nostrils.³³ / And he made a poem and said,

Will a suckling-lamb fight a lion / or will a kid beat a steppe-wolf,
That you intend to fight a champion / for whom swords are straw?
Singing maidens praise heroes for slaying thousands — / me they hail for
ten thousands!³⁴

To which Maskil answered: "You go on persisting in your folly! You have insulted gazelles / and shamed hinds. / But as you heaped abuse on them in your fury, / so will your mother be bereaved!"³⁵ And he made a poem and said,

Fools' folly will destroy them; / inanity will kill the inane.
Know you not that a bold gazelle may prevail / by melting a lion's soul
with his eyes?³⁶
You are but a Cushite — and / Cushites are nothing to me!
Their beholders seek peace / — while they wish ever to fight.
Peninah and her pearly face / and teeth resemble a flock of ewes just shorn,
Lions devour their prey with their might / — she devours hearts with her eyes.

30 This is also the name of the King of Aram-on-the-Two-Rivers (Judges 3:8). The pair-plural *ayyim* (in *rish'atayyim*) doubles up Cushan's *rish'ah* (wickedness).

31 *Raham rahamatayyim* (following Judges 5:30), from *rehem*, "uterus," is used as a synecdoche for "woman."

32 An echo of the words of Moses to Joshua (Exodus 17:9). The Amalekites were the bitterest enemy of the biblical Israelites.

33 As in the description of the Leviathan in Job 41:20.

34 After David killed Goliath, "the women sang as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7).

35 Samuel's words when killing Agag, the Amalekite king (1 Samuel 15:33).

36 A dainty gazelle overpowering lions is a common motif in homoerotic poetry.

And the Cushite grew even more furious and said, “Even as I declared / war on you — I did not make haste to fight you / and spoke to you softly / as you are much younger than me.” / And Maskil looked at this quarrelsome Cushite and said to himself, “Malice came, / then shame, / and now he will claim my deposit.”³⁷

And he saw Cushan pointing at him both his bow and his spear. / He wore a coat of mail, / a brass helmet on his head, / and was covered by his shield, / and was walking and staring / and making a song / praising his shield:

My shield is like the moon and the sun; / like them it is round.
 Arrow and spear will not break through it. / My javelin flies like a bird.
 A fighter without such a shield / will be despoiled. Loathsome and wretched
 will he be.
 Blessed be the craftsman who / conceived a shield such as that.

And he loudly urged his horse on / who flew like a crane or a swallow. / Seeing [Cushan’s] red horse, Maskil grew ever more afraid, / since it was unlike any horse in all of the Land of Edom. / And this is the description of the horse and his form / and his feats and exploits: / his tail [was] mighty, / his neck, thunder;³⁸ / the grandeur of his snort, horror; / his ears, upright and alert, / like a flock of even-shorn sheep;³⁹ / his mane, like serpents; / his face, damp and dry; / his haunches, like ornaments.⁴⁰ / Swift as a stag / with hoofs like flint, / he rescues his rider from between narrow straits / and saves him from his foes’ hands. / With his hoofs he crushes rocks, / splits flint, / triumphs over armies, / flies over hills, / leaps over valleys, / pursues and seizes [his victim], and none is delivered [from him]. / He runs without stumbling; / his hoofbeats are never slowed and his galloping never hindered. / And he made a poem and said,

37 The “deposit” may refer to Peninah, whom Maskil is obliged to guard, though it may also refer to the speaker’s soul, about to be taken from him by the Cushite. In Judaism, the human spirit is believed to be a deposit given by God at the person’s birth and returned to God at death. (Likewise, the human spirit is deposited in God’s hands during sleep and is returned at awakening.) The notion of the spirit as a deposit is present also in Psalms 31:6 in the Hebrew Bible, which, literally translated, reads, “Into thine hands will I deposit my soul.” KJV (Psalm 31:5) replaces “deposit” with “commit”; other versions have “commend.”

38 Following the depiction of the mythical Leviathan in Job 39:19.

39 Following the depiction of the beloved woman in the Song of Songs 4:2.

40 Also from the beloved’s depiction in the Song of Songs 7:1.

[Lo,] a horse that glides like an eagle or / a ship or a light cloud.
He runs without a whip or / stick or rod.
He turns not right or left / nor does he twist or curve.
Tight-tailed, neck-stretched, sharp-eyed, < . . .⁴¹
A whisper — and he halts. / A shout — and he becomes weightless.
His hooves are flint-hard, / displacing stones where he treads.
Red gold cannot buy it, / nor can its price be weighed in pure gold.

Seeing Cushan's horse and chariot and arms, / Maskil was overwhelmed with horror. / And Peninah then said to him, "How comes it that you are so fearful / that you stand trembling before him?" / When Maskil saw her radiant face / and lovely eyes, / he braced himself until his heart was again brave as a lion's, / and he swore that the Cushite would be dead before the day was over. / And the boy charged at him with furious force, / and the Cushite ran toward him raging and storming / and the battle between them reached its height / and the rage grew in their hearts / and the dust came up from the ground / and they approached each other, this one shouting / and the other one bellowing, / until their lances broke / and the horses' feet were afflicted with thorns / and they resorted to their bows / and hid themselves behind shields and barriers / and shot arrows / and dealt wounds / and ran to and fro / until their bows broke / and turned into a pile of debris. / Then they fought with lances / until the shields broke and became useless; / then they fought with their bare arms / until they both bled, / and they clashed, drawing closer / until they were pushing against each other, and did not tire / until they could not be seen from under the dirt that covered them, / since dirt and dust were all over / and one could not tell who fell and who rose; / the one was coming from the right and the other from the left, / the one going up and the other down, / the one bellowing and the other pushing, / the one swearing and the other cursing, / and neither able to overcome the other.

And the Cushite went up the hill, / and Maskil and Peninah stayed in the valley. / And they took new weapons / and stepped forward, ready and armed. / And Maskil exclaimed to the Cushite, "Why do you, evil Cushite, howl and shout at me? Do you reckon that days should speak? / Or that multitude of

41 Expression unclear.

years should compose words? / Or elders should teach [military] knowledge? / Or old folk should utter wisdom?⁴² / For by wise counsel thou shalt make war⁴³ / and not by the size of the person and his stature.” / And he made a poem and said,

Do you think that only a man of great size / and stature has strength,
 And you boast, saying that / wisdom lies in the multitude of years?
 Folly's mother gave birth to you, / and Fraud, indeed, was your wet-nurse.
 Silliness raised your body, / and Blame nurtured your flesh
 So that it rises over all valleys. / Why, then, are you so haughty?
 I am young, yet my deeds / are many and vast.
 This heart of mine is full of guile / and stratagems in war.
 This horse of mine flies like a bird / and climbs ramparts like a champion.
 This lance of mine, ever satiated with foe's blood, / never hungers or thirsts.
 This sword of mine harvests men / as a sickle reaps corn.
 This spear of mine has a blade / wrapped in magic and horror.
 My hammer is ready to smite Cush / and his club and his raised-up arm.
 What is now between me and you? / And how will a worm reach the Pleiades?
 And what is a Cushite compared to a gazelle? / A pebble in a sling?⁴⁴
 And who is Cushan? — furnace face! / And what is a Cushite and all his clamour?
 He is not worth the dust trodden by / the beloved damsel, the perfect gazelle,
 Who stole her beauty from the stars / and stripped off the sun's light.

And the Cushite ran fiercely / and Maskil rose furiously / and beat him with his lance / as the Cushite was approaching him haughtily and maliciously. / And he died and his bowels spilled out / and his head fell on his thighs. / And Peninah rose with song and music / and all the she-gazelles sang with her about their deliverance.⁴⁵ / They returned then to the riverbank where they had been eating and drinking, / and they quenched their thirst with love, / not having enough of it. / And he married her / and their love grew ever stronger / and they played

42 Maskil challenges the conventional idea that military superiority depends on either the fighter's physical size or his age and experience.

43 Proverbs 24:6.

44 Alternatively, “a pebble in a pile of pebbles” (as in Proverbs 26:8), compared to the gazelle, who is a precious gem.

45 As in 1 Samuel 18:7, and see also note 34 above.

the flutes / and feasted. / And when they rode from the rivers and gardens / back to the Dwelling of Delight, / they passed by the [corpse of the] Cushite and saw his flesh-folds black as coals / and his body dry like stale bread. / And they took stones and heaped them into a cairn, / known to this day as the "Cushite Cairn." / And Maskil and Peninah lived peacefully and compassionately ever after, / spending their days in peace / and their years in joy.

Discussion

The few critical readings (mostly in the form of tangential comments) of *The Story of Maskil and Peninah* treat it literally, as an innocent and straightforward romance.⁴⁶ However, certain markers (such as symbolic personal and place names, atemporality, mythical or exotic geography, allusions to Platonic ideas, and the like) may alert the reader to the shift to an allegorical mode.⁴⁷ The discussion below offers a three-tiered reading: a literal reading of the work as a conventional romance, an allegorical reading treating it as a love story between the human Intellect and Wisdom, and, finally, a historicized reading which sees the piece as anchored in the Muslim-Christian conflict in Spain.

The union of Maskil (literally, "the enlightened one," "the philosopher") and Peninah (literally, a gem; signifying beauty, preciousness, and wisdom),⁴⁸ seems to illustrate the Platonic nexus of Eros, Beauty, Intellect, and the idea of the Good. In Plato, and especially in the *Phaedrus*, love and physical beauty play an important role in the philosopher's enlightenment. The couple's union can be understood as celebrating the victory of Reason, Beauty, and Love over Folly, Ugliness, and Violence — which are all represented by the monstrous Cushan.

Cushan is the couple's ultimate "other." If they are perfect humans, Cushan is a beast, a demon, a monster, or, at best, a human mutation. If they embody purity, goodness, and intelligence, Cushan is black, evil, defiled, and stupid. If they symbolize culture and

46 See Scheindlin, "Love Stories," and Schirrmann and Fleischer *The History of Hebrew Poetry*, 238-39. The latter also compare it to the contemporaneous tale of "Aucassine et Nicolette" (dated 1220).

47 Schirrmann regards this and other stories as ambiguous or semi-allegorical (Schirrmann and Fleischer, *The History of Hebrew Poetry*, 227-28), and so does Dexter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 144. Huss offers a key to differentiate allegorical from non-allegorical narratives, arguing that although the name Maskil was adopted from a previous allegory (see note 51 below), Maskil in Jacob Ben El'azar's story is a "simple" (i.e., non-allegorical) character; Huss, "Allegory and Fiction," 112 n. 60.

48 In three of the word's six occurrences in the Hebrew Old Testament, *peninim* (pl. of *peninah*) are related to wisdom (Proverbs 3:15, 8:11; Job 28:18). While *peninah* in modern Hebrew is unequivocally "a pearl," in biblical Hebrew it may refer to other gems, too. See also note 7 above.

finesse, he represents a total lack thereof. And finally, while “Their love was so pure and innocent, / and they both knew nothing,” he is characterized by excessive sexuality. Black Cushan’s unbridled sexual appetite renders him here the enemy of true and pure Platonic love. His passion for the white woman highlights the Manichean clash between good/white and evil/black.⁴⁹

The allegorical reading of this story is supported by its similarities to other allegorical stories in *Sefer ha-meshalim*,⁵⁰ and also by other contemporaneous Hebrew allegorical romances in the form of the *maqamāh*. An earlier allegorical *maqamāh* tells of the love of Maskil, the Lover of Wisdom (that is, a philosopher), and Yemimah (representing Wisdom, parallel to Sophia).⁵¹ The emergence of the Jewish allegorical romance (in Spain and in the East) coincides surprisingly with what C. S. Lewis perceived as a formative moment in (European) literary history. With the *Roman de la Rose* (c.1230), secular romance turns into an amatory allegory, claimed Lewis, and “men’s gaze [is] turned inward.”⁵² The Hebrew allegories discussed here show that a similar and parallel shift occurred at that moment in Hebrew literature, too.

The romance themes⁵³ in the *Story of Maskil and Peninah* are obvious: the lovers are noble and young, the ambience is courtly, and the geography, partly mythical; the lovers overcome obstacles before they happily unite; the hero wins the love of his beloved after slaying a monster or a giant;⁵⁴ and the young hero derives his wondrous strength from the extraordinary love which burns within him.

Most discussions of the story have been preoccupied with the question of the possible sources of these romance themes in Ben El’azar. Hypotheses vary; some scholars point to Arabic epics, others to European romances, and yet others to a combination of

49 For the implications of Cushan’s ethnicity, see below.

50 And especially by its first story which is a full-fledged allegorical romance (discussed by Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 95-102). For the question of allegory in Ben El’azar, see Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 141-45.

51 The story of Maskil and Yemimah has been published and discussed in Yahalom “‘Said Tuviah ben Zedekiah.’” For further discussion, see also Schirmann and Fleischer, *The History of Hebrew Poetry*, 273-78. Its writer, Yosef ben Shim’on, Maimonides’ favourite student, died in Aleppo, Syria, before 1226. The “real” Maimonides features in this story as the patron of all philosophy-lovers. Not only is the protagonist here called Maskil, too, but the villain’s name is identical as well — Cushan Rish’atayim.

52 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 113.

53 Lower-case “romance” is here used for the literary genre, and upper-case “Romance” for Romance language(s) and culture(s).

54 This theme leans also on the biblical victory of young and inexperienced David over Goliath, the horrendous Philistine warrior (1Samuel 17).

the two. Given that at the time when *Sefer ha-meshalim* was conceived, Toledo was populated by many Muslims and Arabicized Jews and had already been ruled for over a century by Romance-speaking Christians, Ben El'azar may have been exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences.⁵⁵ In any case, Ben El'azar's love-stories bear witness to the taste of his Jewish readership, who enjoyed reading, in Hebrew, tales of love and adventure similar to those told in their new, Romance-speaking environment.⁵⁶

The hypothesis that Ben El'azar drew on materials in Romance (and that he intended to write a romance) was first raised by Hayyim Schirmann, who, in an article published in 1962, challenged the community of Romance scholars to comment upon Ben El'azar's affinity to Romance literature. Raymond Scheindlin continued in this path, arguing that, in spite of their Arabic elements (similar to those of *A Thousand and One Nights*), and despite the lack, so far, of strict parallels in Romance literature(s), these love stories are "akin to the world of Romance and remote from that of the Arabic *maqamāh*."⁵⁷ In a recent study of Iberian Jewish literature focusing on the transition from al-Andalus to Christian Spain, Jonathan Decter discusses the topic of intercultural relations. He maintains that romance elements from Arabic narratives and epics and from Romance narratives interpenetrate each other in these love stories. However, he notes a dynamic shift away from the classical *maqamāh* and toward a growing dominance of the burgeoning European romance.⁵⁸

This movement in cultural space is thematized in the plot itself. Reading the narrative along its geographical and ethnic coordinates yields an alternative reading to the allegorical one offered above. That Maskil comes from a Christian territory is hinted at by Peninah's reference to him as "Edomite" (in her poem "The beloved's face"). Peninah herself is a young Muslim princess whom Maskil, the crown-prince, takes captive. The remark about Cushan's horse, which is "unlike any horse in all of the Land of Edom," is certainly uttered by a narrator who (like the author and like the protagonist Maskil) comes from "Edom," that is, the Christian realm of Spain. Compared to the realistic "Land of Edom," the "Land of the Arabs" is an idealized and idyllic site inhabited by herds of

55 For parallels to a theme by Ben El'azar (a duel between two women dressed as men) in both Arabic and French narratives pertaining to the Crusades, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 161-66.

56 Within just over half a century (c.1150-1200) most Iberian Jews fled from Muslim to Christian Spain, or, as a result of the *Reconquista*, found themselves in Christian, Romance-speaking regions. See also p. 171 below.

57 Scheindlin, "Love Stories by Ya'acov Ben El'azar," 19.

58 See Decter's section "Between Arabic and European Literatures" in his *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 118-24.

“gazelles” who are preoccupied with love, beauty, and refinement, as well as music and dance. However, this Arab land is not found beyond rivers and mountains, or in a remote, imaginary Orient, but just across the border from the protagonist’s kingdom. Hence, with all its romanticized and nostalgic attributes, this Arab land refers simply to the Muslim territories in Spain, which Christian troops often raided during the *Reconquista*.⁵⁹

In the allegorical reading offered above, Cushan the Cushite symbolizes metaphysical evil. But whom does he stand for in this historical-literal reading? Whom does he represent in the Iberian *realpolitik* which underlies the story? Following biblical usage, the Cushites are the sons of Ham, that is, black Africans (see note 23 above). Given that sub-Saharan slaves were used by the North African Berbers in their recurrent invasions of the Iberian Peninsula, it is possible that Ben El‘azar’s Cushan is such a black African warrior. Alternatively, the term “Cushite” may refer to a dark-skinned Berber fighter. With the Berbers being comprised of diverse nomadic groups (including sub-Saharan Africans), the term “Cushite” may be taken here to mean “Moor” (and just like “Moor,” it may inaccurately conflate Arabs, Berbers, Muslims, and sub-Saharan Africans). I think it is enough to say that the term is inaccurate.

Understood thus, the battle between the “Cushite” and the “Edomite” in this story reflects the clash between Islam and Christendom in Iberia (and perhaps also elsewhere), and the victory of the latter. In fact, the combat between the “Edomite” prince and black Cushan is foreshadowed in Peninah’s metaphor of an “Edomite” surrounded by “Cushites” in her poem “The beloved’s face.” This reading of “Cushites” as Muslims is further supported by a poem by Abraham Ibn Ezra (1093 - after 1167) about the game of chess, where he refers to the red and black chess pieces as, respectively, “Edomites” and “Cushites.” The movements on the chess-board vividly represent the tactical moves of the Christian and Muslim forces on the battlefield:

Kings stand by, aligned with their camps,
 about to fight and determine their fate.

 a man who sees them there arrayed
 might think that they were Christians and *Moors*.

59 According to Ibn Khayan’s chronicle, after seizing Muslim towns, Christian victors indulged in what they considered the physical delights of the Arabs: luxurious attire, music, and women; cited in Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 104.

The *dark* fighters at times the victims —
the ones emerging triumphant are red,
and sometimes when the Christian king
is mortally wounded, the *Muslims* win.⁶⁰

The poet's biography may shed further light on this poem. Abraham Ibn Ezra learned of the conquest of Cordoba by the Almohad Berbers (1148) while in exile in Italy. In his elegies he bitterly laments the bloody persecutions, by the Almohads, of Jewish communities first in North Africa and later in the Iberian peninsula. As for Jacob Ben El'azar, he was a resident of Toledo during the peak of the *Reconquista*. In 1212, the year when Pope Innocent proclaimed a Crusade against the Muslims in Spain, the decisive battle of Las Navas de Tolosa took place from which the Muslims never recovered; a coalition of Christian kings under the leadership of Alfonso VIII of Castile subsequently drove the Muslims from central Iberia to a small enclave in the south.

However, in *The Story of Maskil and Peninah*, the narrator's attitude toward Arabs is noticeably ambivalent. Whereas the term "Cushites" (conflated with Berbers, as indicated above) invokes fear and repulsion, "Arabs" suggests beauty, delight, and tender feelings of love. In both Ibn Ezra and Ben El'azar, the term "Cushite(s)" epitomizes the horror of Almohad militant Islam. The term "Arab(s)," on the other hand, is distinctly positive and points nostalgically to the Andalusian past with its sensual and splendid courts and its extensive learning. Though Toledo had been recaptured in the *Reconquista* more than a century earlier, Ben El'azar and his Jewish contemporaries were still steeped in Arabic culture and *mentalité*, which they were then preserving, transferring to, and translating into their Romance Christian environs. Hence, the narrative theme of the invasion of Arab land and the capturing of its symbols of beauty, its "gazelles," may represent the longing of exiled Arabicized Andalusian Jews for their cultural past. Read thus, the story problematizes historical issues of territory, border, conflict, contact, relocation, cultural transition, and hybridity.

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60 "An Ancient Battle," ll. 7-8, 15-16, and 59-62, in *The Dream of the Poem*, ed. and trans. by Cole, 179-80 (emphasis added). Cole translates "Cushim" variously as "Moors," "dark," and "Muslims." For a discussion of blackness here and elsewhere in Ben El'azar, see Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 120, 146, and 166-67; and Melamed, *The Image of the Black*, 160-69, 259, and 262-63.

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