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Words as Swords in the Battle between Prose and Poetry

The Second Story of Jacob ben El'azar's Sefer Ha-Meshalim

Isabelle Levy and David Torollo

THE TOLEDO IN WHICH JACOB BEN EL'AZAR was born in the second half of the twelfth century was a cosmopolitan center comprising myriad peoples, languages, religions, and literary traditions.[1] In the wake of its conquest by Christian forces in around 1085, Toledo counted among its inhabitants a vast number of learned men who came to the city in search of knowledge from the different regions of the known world. This gathering of intellectuals spurred on and facilitated the translation of the Arabic corpus—books from an array of disciplines well preserved in Toledan libraries—attesting to the intellectual fluorescence of the nearly bygone Andalusi era and its dispersion to Christian Europe.[2] The writings of Ben El'azar provide

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1. This introduction does not intend to be a comprehensive history of Jewish literature written in medieval Christian Iberia; rather, it seeks to contextualize Ben El'azar's story in its literary and cultural climates so that the reader may more fully appreciate the author's virtuosity. For detailed information on the matters treated in this introduction, see the bibliographical references in the following notes.

2. On the phenomenon of translations into Hebrew by Jewish authors made in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iberia, see Abraham S. Halkin and

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a precious glimpse of multifaceted Toledo, and the present translation seeks to offer the reader a window into this special literary-historical context. Rather than present a study of the second story of *Sefer ha-meshalim* that focuses on one particular claim, we provide a series of commentaries that highlight and explicate the story's key themes. In a way, this presents an argument regarding the plurality of literary, linguistic, philosophical, and religious traditions that coalesce majestically in Ben El'azar's work. At the same time, we aim to leave space for the text to speak for itself in the hope of fostering productive comparative inquiries.

Jacob ben El'azar was an active participant in the translation efforts of thirteenth-century Toledo, having rendered the famous collection of fables, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*—translated from Middle Persian into Arabic by 'Abdallah Ibn al-Muqaffa' in the eighth century—into a high register of Hebrew rhymed prose.[3] Even so, as a model medieval polymath he worked beyond the capacity of translator. In addition to composing two Hebrew philosophical works, *Sefer pardes rimone ha-ḥokhmah va-'arugot bosem ha-mezimah* (Book of the orchard of pomegranates of wisdom and the flowerbed of counsel) and *Sefer gan ha-te'udot va-'arugot ḥuqot ḥamudot* (Book of the garden of wisdom and the flowerbed of precious statutes), his chief work was a Judeo-Arabic grammatical treatise on the Hebrew language, *Kitāb al-kāmil* (The complete book). This work, which is not extant, enjoyed great popularity in the learned circles of the time, evidenced by David Kimḥi's numerous citations from it in his equally famous *Sefer ha-shorashim* (Book of roots).[4]

Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, "Translation and Translators," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik (2nd ed.; Detroit, 2007), 20:94–102.

3. The translation of that same work made by a certain Rabbi Joel a few decades earlier into simple prose was the rendering translated into Latin, and hence to many of the European languages. The complexity of Ben El'azar's translation into elaborate rhymed prose was not necessarily the reason for its lesser dissemination. An edition of these two Hebrew versions of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* can be found in Joseph Derenbourg, *Deux versions hébraïques du livre Kalilah et Dimnah* (Paris, 1881).

4. Although not very extensive, for not much is known about Jacob ben El'azar, a brief overview on his life and works can be found in Jefim Schirmann and Ezra Fleischer, *Toledot ha-shirah ha-'ivrit bi-Sfarad ha-notsrit u-vi-drom Tsarfat* (Jerusalem, 1997), 224–40; Abraham David, "Jacob ben Eleazar," in *Encyclopaedia*

The practice of translating Arabic works into Hebrew accorded Ben El'azar and his fellow Jewish authors of thirteenth-century Iberia the opportunity to expand the possibilities of the Hebrew language with respect to linguistic expressions, vocabulary, and grammar. Up to this point, biblical Hebrew had been used in theological commentaries, synagogal poems (piyyutim), and secular poetry, which had adopted Arabic prosody and themes. But the translation revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries challenged Jewish translators further, for in the process of rendering texts into Hebrew they encountered a plethora of scholarly topics, among them philosophy, botany, medicine, astronomy, exegesis, wisdom literature, and belles lettres. Beyond providing non-Arabic-speaking Jewish communities in Iberia, Provence, and soon enough in the rest of Europe with an immense repertoire of knowledge in Hebrew until then unknown to them, such efforts also helped increase the versatility of the Hebrew language that faithful and efficient translations demanded.[5]

This newfound versatility of Hebrew prompted authors to compose, for the first time in the history of the Hebrew literature, secular narratives in rhymed prose that followed Arabic models. Indeed, it is not by accident that some of the best thirteenth-century Hebrew prosaists were also active translators. Consider, for instance, Ben El'azar's contemporary, Judah al-Ḥarizi, who composed his Hebrew *maqāma*, *Sefer Taḥkemoni* (Book of Taḥkemoni), only after having translated into Hebrew the Arabic *maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī of Basra. Moving beyond translation into the realms of philosophy and politics, al-Ḥarizi states in his introduction to the *Taḥkemoni*

Judaica (ed. Berenbaum and Skolnik), 11:31; and Isabelle Levy and David Torollo, "Romance Literature in Hebrew Language with an Arabic Twist: The First Story of Jacob ben El'azar's *Sefer ha-meshalim*," *La corónica* 45.2 (2017): 280–83.

5. The practice of translation, however, was still a matter of debate. Judah ibn Tibbon, for example, prioritized the "word-for-word" approach when rendering works from Arabic into Hebrew in Provence, bringing about what scholarship knows as Tibbonide Hebrew. On the opposite side was Maimonides, who in a letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Judah's son and translator of his *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* (Guide of the perplexed) from Arabic to Hebrew, asked him to translate his work following a "sense-for-sense" approach, fearing that readers would be lost in translation if a word-for-word approach was followed.

that he aims to prove that Hebrew is as fit as Arabic for the composition of such secular rhymed-prose narratives.[6]

Jacob ben El'azar also tried his luck as author of a Hebrew *maqāma* with his early thirteenth-century collection of ten prosimetric stories.[7] The only surviving manuscript (MS Cod. Heb. 207, Bavarian State Library, Munich) preserves what is known as his *Sefer ha-meshalim* (Book of stories), also titled *Sipure ahavah* (Love stories) in some of the excerpted editions, since half of the stories arguably treat love as their subject matter.[8]

Sefer ha-meshalim has captivated scholars of medieval Hebrew literature for decades. As a product of Christian Toledo in the first half of the thirteenth century that readily displays the author's knowledge of both the Arabic and Romance traditions, the text is an invaluable cross-cultural

6. *Maqāma* (pl. *maqāmāt*) is an Arabic word meaning "assembly" or "session," and it defines a kind of composition in rhymed prose in which a storyteller narrates his encounter with a protagonist, often disguised until the end of the story. When the protagonist reveals his identity, both men part company. On the Arabic *maqāma*, see Rina Drory, "The Maqāma," in *The Literature of Al–Andalus*, ed. M. R. Menocal, M. Sells, and R. P. Scheindlin (Cambridge, 2000), 190–210; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History of a Genre* (Wiesbaden, 2002); and Carl Brockelman and Charles Pellat, "Makama," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2012, Brill Online Reference Works, September 1, 2023, https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/entries/EIEO/COM-0634.xml?rskey=qWMpvf&result=1.

7. While the Hebrew version does not always mirror the Arabic precedent precisely, Jewish authors referred to this new genre as *maqama* (Hebrew pl. *maqamot*) or the Hebrew equivalent *maḥberet* (pl. *maḥbarot*). On Hebrew *maqāmāt*, see Dan Pagis, "Variety in Medieval Rhymed Narratives," in *Studies in Hebrew Narrative Art: Throughout the Ages*, ed. J. Heinemann and S. Werses (Jerusalem, 1978), 79–98; and on the development of Hebrew prose in Christian Iberia, see Jonathan P. Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature: Between al-Andalus and Christian Europe* (Bloomington, Ind., 2007), 99–101.

8. See, for example, Jefim Schirmann, "Sipure ha-ahavah shel Ya'akov ben El'azar," *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem* 5 (1939): 211–66; Yonah David's edition of the work: *Sipure ahavah shel Ya'akov ben El'azar* (Tel Aviv, 1992); and Raymond P. Scheindlin, "The Love Stories of Jacob Ben El'azar: Between Arabic and Romance Literature," in *The Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, ed. D. Assaf (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1994), 3:16–20, all of whom opt for a title related to love.

work of literature and can serve as a compelling and fitting example to the burgeoning field of comparative studies of the medieval Mediterranean.[9] The first story is a philosophical allegory presented as a love story,[10] the second (the subject of this commentated translation) is a debate on the merits of prose and poetry, the third is a poetic competition,[11] and the fourth is a disputation between a quill and a sword.[12] The fifth story tells about the love between a man and a boy,[13] while the sixth recounts the story of two lovers who defeat a giant in battle.[14] The seventh sets forth the episode of a young man who has two female lovers,[15] and the eighth tells of a hypocrite who preaches piety to collect money from his audience and spend it on vices.[16] The ninth story describes a young man's courtship

9. For recent scholarship that takes this crucial comparative approach, see Sharon Kinoshita, "Mediterranean Literature," in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, ed. P. Horden and S. Kinoshita (West Sussex, 2014), 314–29; and Karla Mallette, *Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Chicago, 2021).

10. For an English translation and commentary on the first story, see Levy and Torollo, "Romance Literature."

11. For a commentary on the third story, see Tovi Bibring, "Léger comme le faon, fort comme un lion: Nouvelles considérations sur 'La compétition des poètes'; La mise en abyme du poète dans le troisième cahier de *Sefer ha-meshalim* de Yaâkov ben Eléazar de Tolède," *Yod* 23 (2021): 205–21.

12. For a Spanish translation and commentary on the fourth story, see Amparo Alba Cecilia, "El *Debate del cálamo y la espada*, de Jacob ben Eleazar de Toledo," *Sefarad* 68.2 (2008): 291–314; and for three possible interpretations of this tale, see David A. Wacks, *Double Diaspora in Sephardic Literature: Jewish Cultural Production before and after 1492* (Bloomington, Ind., 2015), 45–54.

13. For an analysis of this tale, see Jonathan P. Decter, "A Hebrew 'Sodomite' Tale from Thirteenth-Century Toledo: Jacob ben El'azar's Story of Sapir, Shapir, and Birsha," *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 3.2 (2011): 187–202.

14. For an English translation and commentary on the sixth story, see Tova Rosen, "The Story of Maskil and Peninah by Jacob ben El'azar: A Thirteenth-Century Romance," *Florilegium* 23.1 (2006): 155–72.

15. For a Spanish translation of the seventh story, see Ángeles Navarro Peiro, "Un cuento de Jacob ben Eleazar de Toledo," *El olivo* 15 (1962): 49–82.

16. For an English translation and commentary on the eighth story, see Tova Rosen, "The Story of the Crooked Preacher by Jacob ben El'azar," in *His Pen and*

of a princess,[17] and the tenth and last tale recounts the narrator's adoption of a wolf cub and a human orphan.[18]

In the translation that follows, Ben El'azar narrates a heated debate between a poet—the Man of Poetry—and a prosaist—the Man of Prose. In so doing he models the genre of disputations, which was widespread across diverse literary traditions, in which two entities, human or otherwise, engage in a quarrel praising their own virtues and pointing out the contender's faults. Well aware of the arguments against the falsehood of poetry in both the Arabic and Hebrew traditions, Ben El'azar lays out a clever disputation, filled with numerous biblical quotations, in which ambiguity reigns: in many instances, it is up to the reader to decide whether an argument is convincing, logical, or even true, and to consider what truth means in the context of a mixed-form composition that embraced fictionality.[19]

Ink Are a Powerful Mirror: Andalusi and Other Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Ross Brann on His 70th Birthday, ed. A. Bursi, S. J. Pearce, and H. M. Zafer (Leiden, 2020), 231–58.

17. For a detailed analysis of this story, see Wacks, *Double Diaspora*, 54–63; Tovi Bibring, "Fairies, Lovers, and Glass Palaces: French Influences on Thirteenth-Century Hebrew Poetry in Spain; The Case of Ya'akov ben El'azar's Ninth Maḥberet," *JQR* 107.3 (2017): 297–322; Carlos Santos Carretero and E. Macarena García García, "La historia de Sahar y Kimah, de Jacob ben Eleazar: Traducción y estudio lingüístico–literario," in *Aspectos actuales del hispanismo mundial: Literatura, cultura, lengua*, ed. C. Strosetzki (Berlin, 2018), 1:240–51; Tovi Bibring, "A Medieval Hebrew French Kiss: Courtly Ideals and the Love Story of Sahar and Kima by Ya'akov ben El'azar," *JQR* 109.1 (2019): 24–37; and Isabelle Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros: Between Poetry and Prose in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Bloomington, 2022), 89–111.

18. For expanded descriptions of each story, see Jefim Schirmann, "Les contes rimés de Jacob ben Eléazar de Tolède," in *Études d'orientalisme dédiées à la mémoire de Lévi-Provençal*, ed. R. Brunschvig (Paris, 1962), 1:285–97. For analysis of gendered aspects of the tales, see Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia, 2003); and Decter, "A Hebrew 'Sodomite' Tale," 187–202.

19. For further reading on fictionality in the Hebrew *maqamah*, see Drory, "The Maqāma."

The episode begins with the arrival of the narrator, Lemuel ben Itiel, to a place of study where scholars are in the process of debating the best type of discourse. After an initial round of appraisals, personifications of prose and poetry are called upon to argue the superiority of their respective attributes. Toward the end, a group of wise men judges the arguments of both contenders and decides whether prose or poetry is the winner and, in turn, which represents the best type of speech.

THEMATIC KEYS

The following sections comprise a series of commentaries that complement key thematic aspects of the text to highlight its drawing on diverse literary traditions as it grapples with the historically significant literary debate on the relative merits of poetry and prose. While the sections apply to the whole story, each one draws on passages in which the theme in question is especially relevant. As noted earlier, we made a conscious decision to make the translation the focal point of this study; rather than present a comprehensive analysis—which would risk tedium, given the sheer quantity of biblical intertexts—these notes seek to guide the reader through a series of explanatory case studies, both to provide context and to outline concepts that illustrate the author's connection to his complex literary and cultural environs.

Stringing Pearls

In the opening of the story, the narrator describes the scene he encounters as follows: "They were discussing selected utterances and delightful sayings and compiling pearls from the sayings of wise and intelligent people." The notion of compiling or stringing pearls is not mere literary flourish; it is crucial to both the classical Arabic and biblical Hebrew contexts in which Ben El'azar was immersed. Indeed, the stringing of pearls is directly related to the classical Arabic idea of poetry in which the term meaning verse is *naẓm*, literally "ordered" or "stringing," as in the stringing of pearls, while the term for prose is *nathr*, which literally means "scattered." These paradigms of poetry as an evenly strung necklace and prose as scattered gems appear repeatedly in this story.

Ben El'azar perhaps had in mind Ibn Ḥazm's eleventh-century Arabo-Andalusi treatise about love, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma* (The ring of the dove, or The dove's neck ring). In addition to being the only such treatise on love

composed in Arabic in al-Andalus, the *Ṭawq*, like *Sefer ha-meshalim*, is a prosimetrum, alternating prose and verse. Its prose, also like that in *Sefer ha-meshalim*, incorporates copious metapoetic elements, engaging in detailed discussions of poetry that the accompanying poems explicate. And although the title does not use the term *naẓm*, it refers directly to a necklace and accordingly recalls poetic composition.[20]

Equally crucial to Ben El'azar's reference to pearls is the biblical Song of Songs, which mentions pearls and stringing three times. Further, medieval Jewish thinkers linked these biblical instances with Arabic poetics: in his Judeo-Arabic treatise on Hebrew poetics, *Kitāb al-muḥāḍara wa-l-mudhākara* (The book of discussion and conversation), Moses ibn Ezra (ca. 1055–after 1135) offered the biblical Hebrew word *ḥaruzim* as an equivalent of *naẓm*: he explains that *ḥaruzim* was taken from the expression *tsavarekh ba-ḥaruzim* (your neck strung with pearls) from Song of Songs 1.10. It is notable that although the treatise is in Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew letters), Ibn Ezra sought a biblical Hebrew equivalent for this technical poetic term. The Song of Songs refers again to this kind of stringing in 4.2, with reference to teeth, and 6.6, in which the beloved's neck is compared to ivory.

Given his work as both translator and exegete and his keen awareness of Arabic poetics, Ben El'azar was undoubtedly familiar with the notion of *naẓm*. For instance, Poetry critiques Prose as follows: "I wonder why your words are counted separately and your sayings are all scattered, *as if a spirit poured out on them winnowing [them] with shovel and sieve*." Indeed, this technical vocabulary reveals Ben El'azar's familiarity with the terminology of words as strung or scattered while illustrating his deep preoccupation with the relative merits of poetry and prose.

Arguments: Prose versus Poetry

The issue of whether prose or poetry is superior occupies the entire story, as the speaker in the story's opening asks, "Which one of the types of discourse is most effective for a man to converse in and be praised?" This was a hotly debated topic across literary cultures of the Middle Ages, from clas-

20. The title appears in the only extant manuscript, dated 1338: MS Or. 927, Leiden University Library (https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/view/item/1567570).

sical Arabic and medieval Hebrew to medieval Latin and early Romance treatises that dealt with the relative merits of poetry and prose.[21]

Ninth-century classical Arabic thinkers seem to favor poetry over prose, while eleventh-century theorists seem to favor prose, excepting Ibn Rashīq who adamantly favors poetry. Ben El'azar's arguments echo many of the lines of argument set forth by Ibn Rashīq (1000–1063/64 or 1070/71), whose book on poetics, *Al-'Umda fī maḥāsin al-sh'ir wa-ādābihi* (The pillar on the good qualities of poetry and its customs), opens with a discussion titled "Chapter on the Excellence of Poetry" ("Bāb fī faḍl al-shi'r"). Ben El'azar, like Ibn Rashīq, notes that poetry is entertaining and makes all people happy, including royalty, and that it also preserves historical events, all within the frame of a beautiful form. Indeed, the Man of Poetry explains, "Poetry is written in men's books because it praises their friends, and on feast days *the king brings me to his chambers*, [for] *I sharpen the mind of the king* and the army around him [in preparation] *for battle or any scuffle*." By drawing on arguments from classical Arabic writings, Ben El'azar fleshes out a response to the question posed earlier in the story.

In the Hebrew context, Moses ibn Ezra, who wrote secular and devotional Hebrew poetry and the previously mentioned treatise on poetics, expresses some ambivalence about poetry in that same treatise—an ambivalence that Ben El'azar's Man of Prose brings to the fore in his disputation.[22] Indeed, even while the Man of Prose provides the traditional arguments in opposition to poetry, he further claims the supremacy of prose by

21. For a full review of the debates in each tradition, see Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros*, 10–39. See also Jonathan P. Decter, "Belles-Lettres," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Middle Ages: The Christian World*, ed. R. Chazan (Cambridge, 2018), 6:787–812, for research on the positioning of "Hebrew literary writing between Arabic and European vernacular literatures" (788) that includes comments about medieval Jewish literary theorists, metapoetic aspects of this tradition, and a discussion of the kinds of genres viewed as most suited to particular topics—which touches on the poetry vs. prose debate in ways key to the present inquiry.

22. For further reading on Ibn Ezra's ambivalent stance toward poetry, see Dan Pagis, "Trends in the Study of Medieval Hebrew Literature," *AJS Review* 4 (1979): 140; Raymond P. Scheindlin, "Rabbi Moshe Ibn Ezra on the Legitimacy of Poetry," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976): 112–13; and Ross Brann, *The Compunctious Poet* (Baltimore, 1991), 59–83.

arguing that it provides the building blocks of all composition, from which poems ("thieves of my words") draw. In the twelfth century, Maimonides (1138–1204) was wary of poetry not for its form but for the potential of its contents to blaspheme Hebrew and to cause unseemly behavior. Although Ben El'azar does not address impropriety, the Man of Prose's focus on the lying, fraudulent aspects of poetry insinuate an improper use of Hebrew.

Throughout the story, Ben El'azar exhibits a clear grasp of contributions of Muslim and Jewish thinkers to these debates and a familiarity with the standard lines of argument on both sides, as subsequent examples from the text will show. It is less clear that Ben El'azar was familiar with the Latin and nascent Romance writings on this topic, but we mention the principal chronologically relevant texts for the reader's reference: in the Latin West, Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland focus on defining the categories of composition in their respective thirteenth-century Latin works rather than judging the merits of each form; and in an early Romance language investigation, Ramon Vidal's thirteenth-century Occitan *Razos de trobar* (Guidelines for troubadour composition) focuses on poetry, with hardly any mention of prose as a category of merit. Perhaps the focus on poetry in initial Romance theorizing helps explain Ben El'azar's bold poetic experimentation in this story (discussed in the section on metapoetics) and his preoccupation with poetry as conveyor of "the rules of the lovers of wisdom" in other stories of the collection.[23]

Poetic Terminology

Before exploring further how Ben El'azar's Man of Poetry and Man of Prose enlist these arguments to harangue each other, the reader must first be attuned to the technical poetic vocabulary at play in the story—vocabulary that both personified characters use repeatedly to rail against their opponent. For starters, the idea of measuring verse is particularly relevant to Ben El'azar's setting in thirteenth-century Christian Iberia, in which Hebrew poetry derived its secular and devotional compositional forms from Arabic poetry: classical Arabic poetry was based on quantitative meter and a variety of fixed poetic forms that Jewish poets adopted for

23. *ve-zot torat yedide ha-tevunah*. See Ben El'azar, *Sipure ahavah*, 16; trans. in Levy and Torollo, "Romance Literature," 291. For further context, see Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros*, 69.

use in Hebrew verse beginning in the mid-tenth century in al-Andalus, and even though Hebrew is not naturally a quantitative language with long and short syllables proportionally represented (as is Arabic), this system of measure quickly became conventional.

Accordingly, it is with utmost intention that Ben El'azar incorporates the following lines about measurements: "The saying of a sage follows three conditions: *length, weight, and capacity*. The words of the sages are considered one and *united on the scale*." These statements interweave key biblical citations (Lev 19.35, Job 6.2, respectively) that contain double meanings related to poetics: "length, weight, and capacity" would immediately recall the reader to the original biblical context of Lev 19–20, in which the Ten Commandments are repeated, followed by additional instructions for the Israelites, including not to falsify weights or measures, and descriptions of the penalties for particular transgressions. Onto this immediate context, the well-informed reader of poetry would layer the additional meaning of units of measurement as components of poetic composition: the length of the syllables, words, and verses—all crucial to the composition of Hebrew poetry—are placed on par with the Ten Commandments.

In the second instance, drawn from Job, Job contemplates the weight of his misfortunes if placed on a scale and in the subsequent verse says that they would be heavier than the sand of the sea. Moving from the juridical context of measure to a personal scale of measurement, Ben El'azar adds an additional layer of meaning, and in so doing, he informs the reader that the argument between the Man of Poetry and the Man of Prose will be a heated debate with both legal aspects (we will see this with the jury that judges the case at the end of the story) and personal agendas at work (particularly the vindictive, lying nature of Poetry, discussed in further detail). The Man of Poetry repeats this line of argument throughout the story (e.g., "They have no meter or measure, as if they were barefoot and *wearing torn garments*"), making it especially conspicuous in the highly unconventional poem that he recites a few passages later, explicated in the next key.

Metapoetics

There are only two poems in the story—a notably small number, given Ben El'azar's preoccupation with the idea of poetry in the other stories of the collection—and both are recited by the Man of Poetry. The first is a truly bizarre composition, one that we argue is unprecedented across Hebrew

poetry up to this point in both its form and content. The poem, whose form and content work together to present an ironic metapoetic discourse, manifests the notions of weight and measure just discussed:

> I extract any hint of *thorns and thistles* from myself
> *to strengthen the crack in the house*;
> all my words [are weighed] *on a scale of righteousness* with *an honest measure*,
> while yours *with a short, minuscule measure*.

The poem is itself about poetry: for starters, "house" (*bayit*) is the technical poetic term for a verse, stanza, or strophe. To flesh out this metapoetic vein, the poem picks up on additional concepts that Ben El'azar highlights in the prose passage just discussed ("The saying of a sage follows three conditions: *length, weight, and capacity*. The words of the sages are considered one and *united on the scale*"). Voiced by the Man of Poetry and using the same poetic terminology of measurement, the poem in question equates the perfection of Poetry's craft to moral soundness and honesty—a highly ironic claim, given both the reputation of poetry as lying (a topic addressed in the next section) and the story's conclusion in which Poetry does, in fact, triumph by lying.

To add to the irony, the structure of the poem itself is highly unusual: rather than following the conventional quantitative metrical system that Jewish poets adopted from Arabic poetics in tenth-century al-Andalus and used exclusively for rhymed, metered poetic composition, in which all verses followed the same meter throughout, this poem has verses of unequal length. This is a remarkable deviation from convention, the unprecedented form visibly undercutting the "honesty" of Poetry's words in an ironic metapoetic inversion.

In his edition of *Sefer ha-meshalim*, David indicates four verses: the first and third follow the same meter, and the second and fourth have a shorter length and a different pattern; the first and second verses rhyme, and the third and fourth rhyme.[24] If in fact the author intended to divide the verses this way, the reader can see a further blending of form and content: the shorter verses of the poem (2 and 4) pertain to negatives, and the fourth is a jab at prose, with its "short, minuscule measure." Perhaps,

24. Ben El'azar, *Sipure ahavah*, 24, ll. 31–34.

then, the short verses are meant as warnings of the inelegance and "scattered" quality of prose, to use the terminology of the period.

The manuscript, however, suggests a different understanding of this poem. Indeed, the other important point regarding the exceptionality of this poem is found in the stichometry of the one extant manuscript containing *Sefer ha-meshalim*. Although it does not differentiate from the prose and poetry as markedly as some manuscripts featuring prosimetric texts do, it does distinguish clearly: in distinction from the two columns on each folio that delineate the rhymed prose portions of the story, the traditional opening that indicates to the reader that a character is poised to recite a poem (*va-yisa' meshalo va-yo'mar*) receives its own line, as do the lines of rhymed, metered verse that follow.[25] While modern editor Yonah David opts for four verses, as just discussed, the medieval copyist designated three verses, each with the appearance of equal length and without regard for rhyme. Of course, the presentation of verses of equal length was still not according to the standard way to measure quantitative meter but rather created the appearance of three lines of poetic verse. In other words, it seems that the copyist knew to read these lines as poetry because of the presence of the standard opening but seems not to have understood the form or meter of the poem itself, which was clearly an anomaly in Hebrew poetry of the period.

Whether we opt for the four-verse poem featured in David's modern edition or the three-verse structure in the sole manuscript, we must ask, Where did Ben El'azar get the idea to break with centuries of Hebrew poetic practices in Iberia? Perhaps he was influenced by Romance poetry, which relied on syllabic, not quantitative, meter and which often comprised verses of varying lengths. If he were, in fact, invoking Romance poetics, he would perhaps be the earliest, though not the only one of his era to do so: scholars have argued that Toledan poet Todros Abulafia, of the generation following Ben El'azar, toyed with Romance metrics in his Hebrew poetry, as did late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century Italian Jew Immanuel of Rome in some of his Hebrew poetry.[26] Ben El'azar's use

25. MS Cod. Hebr. 207, f. 32v, Bavarian State Library, Munich.

26. See Wacks, *Double Diaspora*, chapter 3, "Poetry in Diaspora: From al-Andalus to Provence and Back to Castile." For a discussion of Immanuel of Rome's adaptation of Romance poetic forms, see Dvora Bregman, *The Golden Way: The*

of Romance meter and form is a historically reasonable possibility: if he were, as is thought, in Toledo in the first half of the thirteenth century, he would have encountered Occitan and Galician Portuguese troubadours singing their lyrics—lyrics that engaged a different approach to poetic composition.

The element of Romance thematics in Ben El'azar's work has been a topic of great interest and seems to be at play here with respect to poetic meter, even though this particular story of *Sefer ha-meshalim* otherwise has negligible Romance content.[27] Once the potential for Romance is considered, however, the poem becomes increasingly complex: Does the Man of Poetry mean to tell us that the existing categories of "good" poetry are passe, that poetry is a worthless medium, or something else altogether? We cannot be sure, but the key takeaway is that the unprecedented form of the poem has confounded both medieval and twentieth-century readers who have attempted to classify it.[28]

This conjecture about the aberrant verse length requires further contextualizing with respect to *Sefer ha-meshalim* as a whole. Indeed, it would seem more logical for Ben El'azar to have experimented with Romance metrics in the stories in the collection that more overtly nod to Romance ideas of poetry and courtliness, such as the ninth story. Yet, despite the fact that numerous Romance elements appear in the contents of the ninth story and arguably inform its plot, the forms of its poems adhere to classical Arabic conventions. There is a chance, of course, that this poem could have been copied incorrectly, in which case this entire argument is moot. But we propose that the poem reflects Ben El'azar's broader effort to experiment with Romance elements throughout the collection in a variety of ways, from formal to thematic.

Hebrew Sonnet during the Renaissance and the Baroque, trans. A. Brener (Tempe, Ariz., 2006).

27. For scholarship on the Arabic and Romance elements in *Sefer ha-meshalim,* see Schirmann, "Les contes rimés"; Schirmann and Fleischer, *Toledot ha-shirah ha-'ivrit,* 224–40; Scheindlin, "The Love Stories"; Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature,* 99–206; Wacks, *Double Diaspora,* 34–63; Levy and Torollo, "Romance Literature"; and Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros.*

28. For a discussion of this poem and its broader context, see Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros,* 10–39, and especially 14–15.

Poetry as Lying

Perhaps the most complex and incriminating of all aspects of poetry in the medieval context is the notion of poetry as lying—an idea expressed across literary traditions, from ancient Greek to classical Arabic to medieval Latin and Romance. The classical Arabic argument provides an important backdrop for Ben El'azar's treatment of poetry in this debate, even though Ben El'azar was a Jewish author writing *Sefer ha-meshalim* in Hebrew in Christian territory. In the classical Arabic context, poetry was at once regarded as the artistic form par excellence, interspersed into all prose treatises regardless of subject matter, and simultaneously regarded with suspicion: the Qur'an, which defines poetry as a medium of lies (26.222–227), also explains that the Prophet Muhammad was specifically not trained as a poet because if he had been, anyone could have claimed prophethood by reciting poetry (36.69–70). In other words, while poetry can be termed the ultimate human achievement, it is inherently conflated with lies because it exists imperfectly and profanely, with respect to divine Scripture. On a metatextual level, the form of the Qur'an is *saj'* (rhymed prose), that is, not rhymed, metered verse, and in the pre-Islamic period, *saj'* was associated with seers.

In the Jewish context, the issue of holiness at stake preoccupied Maimonides, who worried that the composition of poetry in Hebrew would sully the holy tongue. A slightly later contemporary of Ben El'azar, Shem Tov ibn Falaquera (1223/28–after 1290), forcefully denounced poetry in both the form and content of his Hebrew composition *Sefer ha-mevaqesh* (Book of the seeker), noting how poetry keeps the thinker from reaching a higher intellectual understanding.[29]

Accordingly, the mind of the medieval reader jumps to this complex figuration of poetry as a medium of lies when the Man of Prose recites the following lines: "Here are the best things of poetry: *fraud and treachery*! Are not the verses of poetry [intended] to deceive since they are emptiness and falsehood? They deceive both the souls and minds of people *through their lies and boasting*." Indeed, the obsession with poetic falsehood—or in

29. The scenario for Falaquera is admittedly more complex, given that Falaquera mapped out his composition with the understanding he would halt the use of poetry partway through, which renders the Seeker's famous renouncing a necessary plot element: see Brann, *The Compunctious Poet*.

our case the personification of poetry as a lying and deceitful man—fuels the story's dramatic plot.[30]

In a subsequent passage, the Man of Prose links the lying nature of verse with the previously mentioned poetic formulation of "house" (*bayit*) as stanza. Reclaiming the word *bayit* allows the Man of Prose to argue that *his* words facilitate Poetry's ability to build an edifice of lies: "Have you not built houses, walls, towers, *banks of perfume*,[31] *and spacious upper chambers*[32] out of my words?" Indeed, Prose further figures himself as providing the building blocks for poetry, in essence positioning himself as the more ancient and elemental of the two forms: "Your eyes and your mind are only made of my sayings." This, of course, renders Poetry a thief: "Poems are my enemies, thieves of my words."

A closer examination of the interwoven biblical passages in this context provides a snapshot of how these constant allusions impress on the story—and on the reader—multiple layers of meaning. To express the way Poetry taints the goodness of words, Ben El'azar relies on two consecutive biblical citations, from Ezekiel and 2 Samuel. The former is employed to stress that words—that is, that which is precious, equated here with carnelian, chrysolite, amethyst, beryl, lapis lazuli, jasper, sapphire, turquoise, emerald, and gold, enumerated in Ezek 28.13—originate in and belong to prose. Accordingly, poetry uses, but does not own, these precious words. In the second citation, the Man of Prose refers to musical instruments from 2 Sam 6.5 to associate musicality with poetry. In the biblical passage, this levity directly precedes and perhaps creates the jovial mood that spurs on Uzza's audacious and inexcusable grasping of the ark. In the context of our story this translates as follows: prose uses words honestly and truly, whereas poetry takes these same words and, by embellishing them in overwrought ways, corrupts them. The reader could pursue this manner of explication throughout the story, amounting to a dizzying labyrinth of layered meanings.

30. For a more detailed discussion of poetry as lying, see Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros*, 12–16.

31. Song 5.13.

32. Jer 22.14.

Prose in Its Literary-Historical Context

The Man of Prose's response to Poetry's complex and ironic poem contains the expected objections to poetry: poetry consists of lies; it is empty of true meaning; not even wise men can understand its meaning. Prose, he argues in contrast, offers the reader comprehension and clarity.

This notion of the universal comprehensibility of prose is particularly interesting given that Ben El'azar translated Ibn al-Muqaffa''s Arabic translation of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* into Hebrew. For the moment, we will leave aside that Ben El'azar rendered the Arabic into Hebrew *rhymed* prose, replete with biblical citations and additional layers of meaning,[33] to focus instead on the contents of the translator's introduction to *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, in which Ibn al-Muqaffa' describes how a range of readers are poised to obtain varying degrees of understanding and wisdom from the book's contents, depending on ability and social status: "Because such a book combined entertainment with wisdom, the wise would study it for its wisdom, and the simple for its value as entertainment; young pupils and others would be delighted to read it and it would be easy for them to memorize. When the young person reached maturity and grew in knowledge, he would ponder what he had memorized—as it had been recorded and inscribed in his heart without his knowing its true nature—and would come to realize that he had acquired a great treasure."[34] In his rebuttal, the Man of Prose makes a strikingly similar comment about prose, not only regarding its accessibility but also about the wisdom it contains. In this way, the reader is further reminded of Ben El'azar's polymath environs that prompted his range of intellectual inquires to coexist across the range of his writings.

33. For a fascinating comparative discussion of the Castilian and Hebrew translations of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* with respect to their Arabic source text, see Luis M. Girón-Negrón, "How the Go Between Cut Her Nose: Two Ibero-Medieval Translations of a *Kalila wa-Dimna* Story," in *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile*, ed. C. Robinson and L. Rouhi (Leiden, 2005), 231–59.

34. 'Abdallah ibn al-Muqaffa', *Kalīla and Dimna: Fables of Virtue and Vice*, ed. M. Fishbein, trans. M. Fishbein and J. E. Montgomery (New York, 2022), 23.

The Trial

The wise men presiding over the debate deem prose "arrogant" and reason that if prose simply relies on placing words together, "is that not just talking?" The judges claim that words alone without structure can potentially be even more dangerous and deceitful than poetry: if words are just scattered (to use the period's technical term for prose), the meaning could be subject to interpretation and might occlude the difference between the "sacred and profane": in prose "the sacred and the profane are difficult to distinguish, *the noble indistinguishable from the wretched*, their positions nearly identical, instead of becoming clear and joined through the meter of the poem, *like holes in the ground and in rocks*."

The potential confusion in distinguishing between sacred and profane is one that is more likely to be ascribed to poetry, not to prose, especially in a culture that used biblical Hebrew to construct its profane poetry well before such a use in prose, in which every turn of phrase had biblical redolence that could be interpreted and reinterpreted in its new context. Indeed, this is a standard argument against poetry in the context of Islamicate Iberia: poetry risks blasphemy in its seductive potential to challenge scriptural divinity.

It seems odd that Ben El'azar would have his "judges" reverse the course of the debate to indict prose for its potential to cause confusion. Still, in a different way, this sacred/profane dichotomy resonates with prose in Ben El'azar's context: Arabic rhymed prose (*saj'*), which predates prose and poetry and which was associated with pre-Islamic divination, is also the form of expression of many qur'anic passages. The interesting upshot is that Ben El'azar pointedly figures the judges as aligned with poetry—that is, the medium of lies—which in turn reflects their own deceptiveness.

The Man of Poetry responds to the favorable judgment by enumerating all that he will compose/build: he will build not just houses (i.e., stanzas or strophes) but also garrisons. In incorporating militaristic vocabulary, Ben El'azar invokes the quintessential medieval arms versus letters debate, one that he recreates in the fourth story of his *Sefer ha-meshalim*. Here the reference is highly ironic, given that it is Poetry who proposes battle against his detractors. Though he will fight with words ("I will take every word"), the implication is one of action, not one of reaching an agreement by writing and reason.

In rebuttal, Prose says to the judges, "Why are you happy with this? You are paying attention to false utterances!" He continues as follows: "The prophets of poetry just yesterday started to prophesy, *new ones who came just lately*; but you will not be able to find poems in your mouths that your ancestors would have valued in the past." Indeed, the Man of Prose responds to Poetry's cry to battle by emphatically rehearsing points that have already come up in the story, here creatively drawing on different biblical citations than in earlier articulations of the same arguments. Interestingly, Prose's argument here is derived from the Qur'an's complicated relationship with poetry: he invokes *saj'* (Arabic rhymed prose) and its precarious implications, and he recalls the Qur'an's denouncing of poetry and poets.

What is missing in his response is that humans create poetry, and human poets can certainly never be compared with the divine, or run the risk of such a comparison. Perhaps this aspect of the argument regarding the inimitability of the Qur'an is absent because it relies on an Islamic context that does not have a perfect parallel in Judaism. Yet perhaps this confusion on the part of Prose is intentional; perhaps Ben El'azar's parodic personification intentionally alludes to the deification of Poetry and accepts the according blasphemy. As mentioned earlier, poets of the Andalusi Hebrew Golden Age quickly adopted Arabic poetics without dwelling on the potential for blasphemy; such accusations could later be written off with the conventional "error of youth" poems, and poets from Ibn Ḥazm to Moses ibn Ezra indeed wrote such verses and their subsequent disavowals.[35]

Even so, Ben El'azar was geographically and contextually distant from this practice of the Jewish Andalusi poets; in Christian Iberia he was strikingly close to emerging Romance poetics—poetry that, while it also certainly offered such "conversion" and "error of youth" poems, also readily deified the beloved and was more often than not metapoetically self-referential. For Romance poetry, which was inherently profane and decisively removed from the sacred context of Latin, poetry was an audacious substitution for divinity, and the beloved was the vehicle for its fruition. This Romance-esque formulation of deifying the beloved is one that Ben El'azar experiments with in the ninth story of *Sefer ha-meshalim*.

35. On poets' repentance of writing poetry in youth, see Brann, *The Compunctious Poet*.

And yet in this story, Prose seems to take the moral high ground. The omniscient narrator, and not the embittered Man of Prose, informs the reader that "judges had abandoned a fair trial." In this way, the narrator of the story has inserted his own opinion regarding the judges' ruling on the debate—that is, the judges ruled unfairly, and prose, not poetry, should have prevailed. This means that in the prose versus poetry debate—which exists outside of the frame of the judges and the "trial"—the narrator/storyteller/author deems prose superior. While this is in line with the compositional trend of Ben El'azar's period, in which there was an increased interest in Hebrew prose composition (and translation), it is unexpected in the context of *Sefer ha-meshalim*, a collection of ten prosimetric stories, all of which feature rhymed and metered poetic passages, and a number of which treat poetry not merely as a textual feature but as a component crucial to the plot and ethos of the narrative.[36] Indeed, Ben El'azar's treatment of poetry in the seventh and ninth stories of the collection fits with the burgeoning Romance notions of poetry, particularly love poetry, as ennobling and of mastering the art of poetry as a key to ethical comportment—goals that could not be further from the mind in this story, in which personified Poetry is the unethical antihero.

Personified Poetry admits to engaging in falsehood and to believing in his right to engage in falsehood to achieve his win. The self-aware wickedness attributed to Poetry, which is framed within the narrator's oversight of the debate between personified Poetry and Prose—itself framed within Ben El'azar's *maqama*-esque collection—is striking, again raising the question of Ben El'azar's reason for condemning (or drawing sustained attention to) writing and reading poetry. This might be self-reflective, the author's display of his ability to write a debate and to engage in this particular debate, or it might be the author's witty attempt to acknowledge the objective pettiness and insignificance of his compositional endeavor.[37]

36. For a discussion of the role of poetry in *Sefer ha-meshalim*, see Levy, *Jewish Literary Eros*, 40–88.

37. Bibring has suggested that these opposing figures might represent the roiling internal debate of an erudite intellectual, i.e., Jacob ben El'azar; see Tovi Bribring, "Du réel au fictif—une réflexion sur les fonctions du narrateur dans quelques contes de Yaakov ben Elazar," *Revue des études médiévales* 20 (2019): 312–18.

Perhaps his reference here to Job (32.2) is his own effort to show the (sanctified) strength of poetry: "Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, was angry—angry at Job because he thought himself right against God." Poetry feels justified in lying to prove himself right. And as creator of the narrative, Ben El'azar, in turn, places himself in a position of power and control regarding what is right and wrong, enlisting Scripture to articulate his position. Still, the fact remains that Prose, not Poetry, is judged falsely in our story and is likened to Job: "I am right; God has deprived me of justice. I declare the judgment against me false" (Job 34.4–5).

Surely composing a series of fantastical stories is in no way comparable to the travails of Job, but at the same time, something might be said about the value of persisting in artistic creation amid a nagging awareness of the potential for real-life danger. Ben El'azar's Man of Poetry does what he must to hold on during a period when the Hebrew-via-Arabic *maqāma* blossomed, which coincided with Alfonso X enlisting Castilian as a language of political relevance and with the creation of new lyric paradigms by Occitan and Galician Portuguese troubadours.

It is unclear why Ben El'azar painted this incriminating portrait of poetry in the second story. It is also impossible to know whether there were any similarly minded stories of the collection not extant in the only copy of the manuscript, or whether Ben El'azar even intended for the stories to be read as a whole. Perhaps he is reminding the reader that poetry, the medium traditionally associated with lying, can be used to good or bad ends and that it is up to the writer and reader to judge its purpose in each context.

Despite these uncertainties, the reader is left with the distinct impression of Ben El'azar's mastery of both poetry and prose, his knowledge of the debates regarding their relative merits, and his awareness of both Arabic and Romance literary contexts; he knows what is at stake in this literary experiment—one that reveals a cultural and political awareness befitting a polymath of early thirteenth-century Toledo.

A Concluding Warning

In the closing poem of the story, the Man of Poetry tells the reader, "Poetry can be like a necklace around the neck or a choker on the throat." In other words, read at your own risk, for it is up to the reader to understand poetry properly. But he adds that intelligent people will work to understand and value poetry: "without poetry, the understanding of intelligent people

is considered but a drop in a bucket." Indeed, poetry and prophecy coalesce in this cryptic closing of the story, with citations from Isaiah, included here:

> Truly, it was for my own good that I had such great bitterness; you saved my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast behind your back all my offenses [Isa 38.17].

> Truly, I shall further baffle that people with bafflement upon bafflement; and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the prudence of its prudent shall vanish [Isa 29.14].

The Man of Poetry, who undercuts an argument made earlier by Prose ("If I speak words of wisdom, I make them comprehensible,"), seems to be saying, Yes, poetry—and perhaps all writing—is full of lies, but it might prove insightful, and at the very least, it will be entertaining.

And so, in what follows, we offer the first complete translation into English of this story, which is at times baffling, with its layers of meanings and roundabout sayings and its nods to the diverse contemporary literary environs. We also hope it is edifying and entertaining in its creative staging of a debate that captivated the imaginations of medieval thinkers who navigated a breathtaking array of intellectual, literary, religious, and political contexts.

THE TRANSLATION

This translation is based on the Hebrew text in Yonah David's edition.[38] The numbers in brackets, for example [32a], refer to the folios of the only surviving manuscript: MS Cod. Hebr. 207, Bavarian State Library, Munich. Biblical references are in italics in the text, reflecting their conscious and vast use, and are identified in footnotes. In the preceding thematic keys, we have chosen to explicate further a few such biblical intertexts that illustrate this literary practice particularly well.

Wherever possible, the translation maintains a direct rendering of the original, except for instances in which it impedes the reader's understanding of the text, in which case we have made slight alterations to allow the text to flow more naturally. We have chosen this method deliberately in the hope of facilitating comparative scholarship by making the text available to readers unfamiliar with the Hebrew text without the imposition of idioms

38. Ben El'azar, *Sipure ahavah*, 22–27.

in present-day English. Indeed, we opted to highlight rather than smooth out the often hazy and roundabout expressions in the text that reflect both its composition in an unspoken language and constant use of biblical citations, woven together to create a new storyline with accrued intertextual meaning. In this way, we aim to give readers an accurate sense of the narrative flow as a medieval reader might have experienced it.

TRANSLATION OF THE SECOND MAḤBERET FROM JACOB BEN EL'AZAR'S *SEFER HA-MESHALIM*

Poetry and Prose: A Discussion on Their Characteristics, Ending with the Victory of the Poet[39]

[32a] Thus said Lemuel ben Itiel:

I came to this place of study[40] where every secret and intellectual issue is brought to light: it was open to everyone who gathers wisdom, *the citizen and the stranger*,[41] *the craftsman and the smith*.[42] [There,] they were discussing selected utterances and delightful sayings and compiling pearls from the sayings of wise and intelligent people. Even though they were few, [they tore] *their skin off them*,[43] each of them took the goodness of each word, *as if skinning it*,[44] and was asked: "Which one of the types of discourse is most effective for a man to converse in and be praised?"

One of them said: "A versified [discourse], since it contains few words but many topics."

Another one said: "A modest man should utter *a phrase well turned*:[45] there is a [kind of] speech that uses sweet words, *like a bright spot that stays in his place*;[46] words said at the proper time are better *than all precious*

39. The title of the story does not appear in the manuscript and was assigned by editor Yonah David.

40. The Hebrew reads *bet ha-midrash*.

41. Lev 16.29; 18.26.

42. 2 Kgs 24.16; Jer 24.1.

43. Mic 3.2; 3.3. In this chapter, Micah reproaches the judges for committing injustices against the people, comparing them to a predator that devours its prey.

44. Lev 1.6.

45. Prov 25.11. The verse describes words fitly spoken as "golden apples served in a silver vessel."

46. Lev 13.23, 28. It seems that Jacob ben El'azar is equating the purity of that kind of speech with the purity of a person suffering from leprosy. According to the

objects,[47] and *something sinister settles in*[48] him who speaks according to *the desire of his heart*.[49] The speech of a fool *is fetid and putrid*,[50] *while the educated man's* [*speech*] *is radiant like the bright expanse of sky*;[51] the words of a simple man who acts recklessly *do not serve to winnow or to fan*;[52] *while the intelligent man keeps silent*[53] because *according to his intelligence, he is exalted*,[54] *formed with scraping tools*,[55] and the source of his intelligence and dominion are *in his cool upper chamber*.[56] The language of a sage is protected from any evil, *secured and ready for anything*.[57] The saying of a sage follows three conditions: *length, weight, and capacity*.[58] The words of the sages are considered one and *united on the scale*."[59]

Then, they spoke about issues of poetry, learned men, and types of meters, saying: "A sage's wisdom without versified [sayings] and a proper length *is like a burned cake*."[60]

Then, the Man of Prose was called there and disputed with the composer of poems, saying: "What is a poem and its content *if not fraud in his right hand*?[61] Here are the best things of poetry: *fraud and treachery*![62] Are

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biblical disposition, if the spot on the skin has not spread, the priest must declare that person pure.

47. Nah 2.10.

48. Ps 41.9

49. Ps 21.3.

50. Eccl 10.1.

51. Dan 12.3.

52. Jer 4.11.

53. Cf. Amos 5.13.

54. Cf. Prov 12.8.

55. Isa 44.13.

56. Jdg 3.20.

57. 2 Sam 23.5.

58. Lev 19.35. Although Ben El'azar is praising the perfection of a sage's saying according to different qualities, the biblical verse refers to a prohibition against falsifying measures of length, weight, and capacity.

59. Job 6.2.

60. Hos 7.8. The verse reads, "*a cake that has not been turned*," and therefore it burns in the oven.

61. Isa 44.20.

62. Isa 59.13.

not the verses of poetry [intended] to deceive since they are emptiness and falsehood? **[32b]** They deceive both the souls and minds of people *through their lies and boasting*."[63]

Upon hearing those words, the Man of Poetry became angry and said: "*Do you really dare to contend*[64] with poems dwelling in palaces while you are all *scattered over the hills*,[65] wandering and lost, *like sheep without a shepherd*?[66] All of you[r words] are separated from each other, *everyone seeking his own advantage*;[67] *you do not sustain the weak or bandage the injured*.[68] However, my poems are sweet to everyone who hears them, *like a flock of ewes*,[69] for they are perfect, honest, and appropriate; I honor and save the weak, *assemble the lame sheep and gather the outcast*,[70] and with the examination and interpretation of my words I can *bandage the injured*."[71] Then, he recited a poem, saying:

I extract any hint of *thorns and thistles* from myself[72]
to strengthen the crack in the house;[73]
all my words [are weighed] *on a scale of righteousness*[74] with *an honest measure*,[75]
while yours *with a short, minuscule measure*.[76]

63. Jer 23:32.

64. Jdg 6.31

65. 2 Chr 18.16.

66. 2 Chr 18.16.

67. Isa 56.11.

68. Ezek 34.4.

69. Song 4.2. The author evokes a beautiful image of a flock of ewes moving together at the same pace. At the same time, there is a phonetic pun, as *ketsuvot* means both "ewes" and "measured."

70. Mic 4.6.

71. Ezek 34.16.

72. Isa 5.6; 7.24, 25; 9.17.

73. 2 Kgs 22.5.

74. Lev 19.36; Ezek 45.10; and Job 31.5. In this last verse, Job asks God to weigh him on a scale of righteousness so he can know his integrity.

75. Deut 25.15.

76. Mic 6.10. The Man of Poetry is accusing the Man of Prose of deception, as the context of the verse condemns the small measures employed by the rich to deceive the poor.

The Man of Prose answered: "*You speak lies and rely on emptiness*;[77] *have windy words no limit*?[78] How much do your poems weigh on a scale? *You invent lies, all of you are fraudsters*![79] Is it not the case that poetry *lacks understanding*,[80] *a lack that cannot be made good*?[81] If I speak words of wisdom, I make them comprehensible: *from one end of the issue to the other*[82] my word is crystal clear, without lacking anything, and it is heeded by everyone when spoken softly; *even the minds of the thoughtless understand*![83] Every naive person rushes to speak with proper words, and the tongue of the stutterers rushes to speak clearly. The topics of your poems, though, are far away from the minds of people, for *their paths are crooked*;[84] indeed, if they are remote [like] palaces and the breath of kings, *which eloquent men will* [*dare*] *approach them*?"[85]

The [Man of] Poetry replied: "[Poetry's] glory resides in the meter, *a measuring rod in its hand*,"[86] and he continued: "Since you are not aware of the wickedness of all your parts, *you need not speak further*.[87] Did you not know that every word requires a large effort, and that composers of poetry are smart and famous? Their poetry is sweet, like poetry of freedom: *a desire realized is sweet to the soul*,[88] jewels of gold are all its expressions, and *it is like a bride bedecked with her finery*.[89] It is through poetry that all creatures become happy, *youths and maidens alike, old and young together*,[90] for it bandages the wounded, strengthens the weak, *gladdens*

77. Cf. Isa 59.4.
78. Job 16.3.
79. Job 13.4.
80. Prov 28.16.
81. Eccl 1.15.
82. Cf. Gen 47.21.
83. Isa 32.4.
84. Prov 2.15.
85. Ex 24.14.
86. Ezek 40.3.
87. 2 Sam 19.30.
88. Prov 13.19.
89. Isa 61.10.
90. Ps 148.12.

God and men,[91] *young and old, women and children*.[92] Poetry is written in men's books because it praises their friends, and on feast days *the king brings me to his chambers*,[93] [for] *I sharpen the mind of the king*[94] and the army around him [in preparation] *for battle or any scuffle*.[95] As far as your speech is concerned, it is tasteless and unscented, neither able to harm nor to please; it has no medicine in it, causing *a despondent mood*.[96] Your words are useless for fighting or slandering; they are *futile and worthless*[97] for comforting a mourner or *uplifting his heart*,[98] nor are they invited to a feast. I wonder why your words are counted separately and your sayings are all scattered, *as if a spirit poured out on them*[99] *winnowing* [*them*] *with shovel and sieve*.[100] They have no meter or measure, as if they were barefoot and *wearing torn garments*:[101] they *throw a deep sleep on anyone who listens to them*,[102] for *drowsing clothes them in tatters*.[103] Anyone pronouncing them *moans grimly*,[104] *like the gleaner of ears in the Valley of Rephaim*."[105]

[33a] The Man of Prose answered: "*Stop! Enough with your poetry*![106] *I have heard all the taunts* of your poems.[107] You have ridiculed me, made fun

91. Jdg 9.13.
92. Esth 3.13.
93. Song 1.4.
94. Cf. Ex 4.21.
95. Josh 14.11.
96. Prov 15.13.
97. Jer 16.19.
98. Deut 15.7.
99. Isa 32.15.
100. Isa 30.24.
101. Jer 41.5.
102. Cf. Job 4.13; 33.15.
103. Prov 23.21.
104. Isa 16.7.
105. Isa 17.5. In Abraham ibn Ezra's (1089–ca. 1164) commentary on this verse, the valley of Rephaim is described as a barren land where the harvest is poor. Although it is not clear where Ibn Ezra derives this explanation from, Ben El'azar appears to be following it.
106. Cf. 2 Sam 24.16; 1 Chr 21.15.
107. Ezek 35.12.

of me, *and struck my main points*;[108] against your master you have raised your hand: [do you realize] *whom have you blasphemed and reviled*?[109] You may be praised in houses and courts with happiness and songs, but have you not built houses, walls, towers, *banks of perfume,*[110] *and spacious upper chambers*[111] out of my words? Poems are my enemies, thieves of my words, and after stealing my sayings you've built a house and strengthened the crack: woe to the builder of houses without justice! *You have set boundaries*[112] using my best words: *woe to those who add house to house and join field to field*![113] You compose poems of lies, but you don't care about that; with your hand *you silence and mock men without being rebuked*.[114] You've made *holders to the poles*[115] out of my precious words, bringing words of falsehood closer, *joined to one another.*[116] How can you pride yourself by saying: *I measure words with the hollow of my hand*[117] and *a full blast comes against me*?"[118]

The Man of Poetry got very angry, stood up, took good and bad words, happy and sad words, *measuring* [*them*] *with a cord*,[119] and said: "I arose to compile words from every mountain and hill, from every valley and dale, from every gorge and pit: *I have gathered them from the ends of the earth*;[120] I took all words *once they were removed from the road*[121] and made joy out

108. Cf. Hab 3.13.

109. Isa 37.23.

110. Song 5.13.

111. Jer 22.14.

112. Cf. Ps 74.17.

113. Isa 5.8. The Man of Prose implies that composing verses is bad and despicable in the eyes of God, like *those who add house to house*, which is the first of a series of woes directed at people who commit injustices (see Isa 5.8–24).

114. Job 11.3.

115. Ex 30.4, etc.

116. Ex 26.3.

117. Cf. Isa 40.12.

118. Jer 4.12.

119. 2 Sam 8.2.

120. Jer 31.8.

121. 2 Sam 20.13.

of them, *becoming their chief cornerstone*;[122] I have looked for words of love and hate, *have tested them as one tests gold*,[123] have taken the scattered words from which I had *to tramp out reptiles and vermin*[124] and *made them a single nation in the land*;[125] I have collected words from the mouths of every man that can be used for every need or answer; I have turned [words that were] *running away from their masters*[126] into warlords, princes, and *treasures of kings*,[127] using them to praise lords and important people, like *a necklace around their neck, a bracelet on their arms*,[128] *a ring in their ears*,[129] and like the smell of myrrh for their nose. Whereas you, why do you smash your words? Is your language *too short*[130] and your mouth too heavy *that you are unable to talk*?[131] *Your advisor has perished*,[132] your tongue is burdened with every word, just *as a wagon is slowed*.[133] Why are your words so slow and why do your lips clog all the time? *Why does the clatter of your wheels come so late*?[134] The proof of a good speech is [when it runs as] *a stream of abundant prosperity*.[135] As for me, the speech of the poet is perfectly unified, *like a turtledove, a swift, and a crane*:[136] the chirping may obscure my words, but

122. Ps 118.22.

123. Zech 13.9.

124. Cf. Isa 7.25.

125. Ezek 37.22.

126. 1 Sam 25.10.

127. Eccl 2.8.

128. Ezek 16.11

129. Cf. Ezek 16.12.

130. Isa 50.2.

131. Jer 5.13.

132. Mic 4.9.

133. Amos 2.13. The verse explains that the wagon is slowed when it is full of grain, just as the tongue is slowed when it is full of words.

134. Jdg 5.28.

135. Isa 66.12.

136. Jer 8.7. According to the verse, they are unified in their understanding of the timing of their migration, despite being different species, much like different words that can be perfectly unified by a skillful poet.

their influence cannot be swept away; [*my words*] *shall run and not get tired, they shall march and not grow faint.*"[137]

The Man of Prose answered him saying: "Indeed poems praise, but they praise through lies: [people] *go after delusion and are deluded*.[138] Poems claim, 'We cheer up kings and important people and princes rejoice through us,' but this is not true: they end up perishing, because they ignore the discourse of *a just speaker*,[139] for they *prefer false words and delusional prophesies*,[140] *having been deceived by their speech*[141] and *beguiled by their lies*.[142] They seem to be happy with their false words, [without realizing that] the power of their poems resides in *making kings and ministers merry in malice*.[143] It turns out that in the best poems you write and the best composition you compose, you only speak falsehood. Poetry can take a royal word and *make a molten image*:[144] from the robbery of my words it builds and adorns its house, *a house taken by force*[145] *whose construction it will complete*.[146] Your poems are all robbery and theft: *that which was robbed from the poor is in your houses*[147] **[33b]** *because your eyes and your mind are only* [*made*] *of my sayings*,[148] to the point that when I say my words, you claim them as your poems and the songs of your lovers, *beautifully wrought and mined for you*;[149] you join my words and play them *with lyres, sistrums, and cymbals*.[150] And now, what are you doing here, *that you have come to make war on my country*?"[151]

137. Isa 40.31.
138. 2 Kgs 17.15; Jer 2.5.
139. Amos 5.10.
140. Cf. Isa 30.10.
141. Ps 78.36.
142. Amos 2.4.
143. Hos 7.3.
144. Jdg 17.4.
145. Job 20.19.
146. 1 Kgs 6.15.
147. Isa 3.14.
148. Cf. Jer 22.17.
149. Ezek 28.13.
150. 2 Sam 6.5.
151. Jdg 11.12.

The ministers of wise and intelligent people and the lords and representatives of understanding arose and rebuked those utterances, reproaching [the Man of Prose] for his speech. They said: "All these words are despicable and abominable. Regarding [the language of] prose, if its topics are vain and arrogant, *is that not just talking?*[152] Even if they are appreciated and very desirable despite being unmetered, *their seeds have shriveled:*[153] they are silenced by being spread like *shattered blocks of chalk*[154] *unrecognized in the streets*,[155] trampled underfoot by the feet of foolish men, *the feet of the needy and the soles of the poor*;[156] in them, the sacred and the profane are difficult to distinguish, *the noble indistinguishable from the wretched*,[157] their positions nearly identical, instead of becoming clear and joined through the meter of the poem, *like holes in the ground and in rocks*.[158] But this is not the case with the language of poetry, since its houses are covered by precious stones, and *no one is kept banished*;[159] its words are so close to one another that they become one, they are unified and do not split: if poetry does not place them together, they do not stick to each other, for *can two walk together without having met?*"[160]

At last [the Man of] Poetry stood up and said: "With precious and honorable words *I will build me a vast palace*.[161] I will bring them into the furnace of my thought and *encamp in my house as a garrison*.[162] I will put them onto the best scales until the speech, *refined sevenfold*,[163] comes out of one's

152. 1 Sam 17.29.

153. Joel 1.17. The judges of the debate are dismissing prose for being constructed from unmetered idioms. But here we have another phonetic pun relevant to the argument. The author evokes the image of shriveled seeds as a metaphor for the blandness of prose, with *peridot* meaning both "seeds" and "disjunct."

154. Isa 27.9.

155. Lam 4.8.

156. Isa 26.6.

157. Job 34.19.

158. Job 30.6.

159. 2 Sam 14.14.

160. Amos 3.3.

161. Jer 22.14.

162. Zech 9.8.

163. Ps 12.7.

lips; I will turn them toward the battles of poetry, *from the oldest in the order of its seniority*;[164] and then I will take every word used for mockery and *weigh* [*them*] *with a scale*."[165]

The [Man of] Prose said to the judges: "Why are you happy with this? You are paying attention to false utterances! *Are not my words good*?[166] You should ask those who glorify poetry and who *consider my words reckless*:[167] *Onto what do* [*poetry's*] *foundations lay*?[168] Is it not the case that some of my good sayings have been chosen and *measured by the 'omer*?[169] Don't you know that witty people spoke in prose *in ancient days*[170] and that for old sages prose was better than poetry? The prophets of poetry just yesterday started to prophesy, *new ones who came just lately*:[171] but you will not be able to find poems in your mouths that your ancestors would have valued in the past, and today *if your hearts are ravished by poetry*,[172] *clearly you are bent on mischief*.[173] You pick for yourself your own scales and weights, and *that is why* [*according to your own view*] *an ill judgment is not taking place* [*here*]."[174]

The discourse of the Man of Poetry prevailed over the discourse of the Man of Prose,[175] and the latter left the side of [the Man of] Poetry, furious and

164. Gen 43.33.

165. Isa 40.12.

166. Mic 2.7.

167. Job 6.3.

168. Job 38.6.

169. Ex 16.18. The *'omer* was a dry measure, literally "the quantity of grain in a sheaf." The Man of Prose implies that his sayings are perfect, as the verse states that each Israelite took a specific quantity of the flaky substance, i.e., the manna, which appeared in the wilderness. When measured by the *'omer*, every person had gathered the exact amount.

170. Ezek 38.17.

171. Deut 32.17.

172. Cf. Job 31.9.

173. Ex 10.10.

174. Cf. Hab 1.4, where the prophet complains of the injustice and ill trials taking place in the Kingdom of Judah.

175. Cf. 2 Sam 19.44, where the division between the men of Israel and the men of Judah seems to momentarily settle when the latter prevail and bring David back to Jerusalem.

in a rage, *for this had been decided and set by the officials*,[176] officials *taken as slaves by poetry*,[177] *as if shepherds had come and driven them off*.[178] They deemed it appropriate to crown the speech of poetry [superior] over every word and utterance, while the speech of prose was oppressed in the trial, for judges had abandoned a fair trial. The Man of Poetry was very happy because its language and [alleged] fraudulence had won, *considering it as very right*.[179] *Its glory ended up showing*[180] over the theft and the contempt, over *the fraud and the oppression*.[181]

Then, [the Man of Poetry] recited a poem, saying:

[34a] Wake up, my soul, and unveil
the mysteries of wisdom's words;
My soul, like a wretch who rises and is brought low,
elevate yourself above the best qualities of intelligent people;
[Even] the poem of a slanderer whose heart is akin to
his intellect can be fitting with the right tool;
For isn't an important, *expert, and wise*[182] poem,
balanced by a poet, able to cover suffering?
Doesn't an intelligent poem turn into a foolish one
if you pound it with my yoke?
Indeed, an intelligent mind is a house of glory,
but a foolish one is like the house of Hiel;[183]
On some occasions, poetry pulls [people] up,
out of the ditches and *pits of destruction*;[184]
Poetry can be like a necklace around the
neck or a choker on the throat;

176. Cf. 2 Sam 13.32
177. Cf. Jer 34.11.
178. Ex 2.17.
179. Job 32.2.
180. 1 Sam 4.21.
181. Jer 22.17.
182. Cf. Isa 3.3.
183. The Hebrew reads *bet ha-'eli*, referring to 1 Kgs 16.34. Hiel the Bethelite fortified Jericho at the cost of his two sons' lives, fulfilling Joshua's curse (Josh 6.26) against fortifying the city.
184. Isa 38.17.

But without poetry, *the understanding of intelligent people*[185]
is considered but a drop in a bucket.[186]

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185. Isa 29.14.
186. Isa 40.15.