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## From Midrashim to Merlin: the "Translation" of Jewish Commentaries in Heldris de Cornuälle's *Le Roman de Silence*

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**From Midrashim to Merlin: the “Translation” of  
Jewish Commentaries in Heldris de Cornuälle’s *Le  
Roman de Silence***  
Renee Scherer

While there has been a great deal of investigation into the sources of Arthurian legend, much of this has centered around the influence of Celtic legends and has depended upon a strictly Christian catalogue of comparative imagery. Many of the tales of Arthur contain allusions, however, to Jewish biblical commentaries and legends. These connections demonstrate the presence of a strong Jewish influence upon the development of medieval Arthurian romances. Critic Sarah Roche-Mahdi writes that Heldris of Cornwall, the name used by the author of *Le Roman de Silence*, “delights in turning and twisting a word, in lifting a phrase, passage, motif, plot from its context, reversing, expanding or purposefully suppressing it” (7). Heldris makes significant use of Jewish source materials in this process.

Heldris’ romance traces the story of the English King Evan’s decree against female inheritance, focusing on the young woman, Silence, who is raised as a male in order to circumvent the king’s order. In the course of the Romance, Silence becomes a troubadour, a member of Evan’s court, and an admirable example of knighthood. Silence’s relative success as a male is challenged when he is exiled from court until he accomplishes the seemingly-impossible task of capturing Merlin, who can, according to the sorcerer’s own prophecy, never be taken “except by a woman’s trick” (5803). Merlin directs Silence to action and the plot to conclusion: it is because of Merlin’s guidance and prophecy that Silence’s gender is revealed to the court.

The details of this Arthurian romance are not unique to Heldris: besides the many more traditional European and Christian influences that have been identified, *Silence* draws heavily upon the medieval Jewish tradition, including the Talmud and its commentaries. Merlin, particularly, is a translation of figures from Jewish legend. The wizard’s image and function are similar to those of both the Talmudic king of demons, Ashmedai, and the often-mysterious visitor and helper of Jewish folklore, the Prophet Elijah. I argue that Merlin is a contemporary translation of figures from Jewish tradition, and

that, while this translation necessarily removes the characters from a Jewish context, the cultural significance of the figures is maintained: Merlin remains an archetypal “wise fool,” even as the character blends details from multiple cultures. In this paper I will discuss the use of Jewish source materials in this Arthurian legend, beginning with an identification of the points of cultural transmission from Jewish sources to Christian writers. I will then analyze Merlin’s development from his midrashic precursors, and, through this association, identify a corresponding association between *Silence*’s King Evan and the biblical King Solomon.

### **The Context of Cultural Transmission**

In order to convincingly establish Merlin as an Anglicized Ashmedai, it is first necessary to explain how the presumably Christian authors of medieval Arthurian romances may have come into contact with Jewish source materials. Most cultural transmission can be explained by early exchanges between Christian and Jewish biblical scholars, and by the frequent intellectual, business, and social interaction between Jews and Christians in Western Europe. The status of Judaism in France is of particular interest because many Arthurian legends were recorded by French authors.

Jewish and Christian scholars of medieval Europe shared an interest in studying biblical commentary. From the time of the Church Fathers in the second-century C.E., early Christianity sought to maintain intellectual contact with Jews: early Christians studied Hebrew with Jewish teachers, showing that Christians could “learn from, and quote, the rabbinical tradition.” These scholars studied midrashic materials to the extent that “some legends and exegeses which appear in Jewish works for the first time in the seventh or eighth century had already been transmitted as Jewish tradition by the Church Fathers from the third through fifth centuries” (Leviant 74). We may easily accept that nascent Christianity would maintain scholarly ties to Jewish intellectuals, but what might have encouraged the much larger, stronger Church of medieval Europe to continue this interaction?

Proximity, as simple as it may sound, is a good explanation. Jewish and Christian scholars and laymen lived together in medieval towns, and had ample opportunity to engage in intellectual and social exchanges. Generally

speaking, personal relations between Jews and Christians were friendly in Western Europe through the end of the twelfth-century (79-80). Michelle Warren explains that cultural accommodation in eleventh and twelfth-century France included “relationships with rabbinical scholars in which Parisian theologians...sought to deepen their knowledge of biblical texts” (1001). Scholars of different faiths were able to discuss texts because of the close proximity of their centers of study and devotion. Medieval France was host to many Christian cloisters and abbeys, as well as centers of Jewish study: Paris itself was home to the Abbey of St. Victor, as well as to the Rashi school of exegesis (Leviant 75). The city was “famed as a center of Jewish learning from the eleventh century” (77), and the writings of these Jewish scholars were freely consulted by several monks of the St. Victor Abbey (75-76). The Jews consulted by the Christian Parisian scholars, Curt Leviant concludes, “were doubtless of the famous talmudic academies of Paris” (77). The dialogues between these Christian and Jewish scholars partially explain the appearance of midrashic material within Christian literature.

Scholarly work was not the only source of cultural transmission between the Jewish and Christian populations. Because social and economic contact between Jews and Christians were common (Warren 1001), Leviant tells that, “we can assume that unscholarly Christians also had opportunity to hear some Jewish legends” (80). He cites the employment of Christian servants on the Sabbath within Jewish households, visiting of neighbors, drinking wine, and exchanging gifts on holidays as the principle among these opportunities, creating “ample opportunity for the Jew to exchange stories with his Christian friends and thus add to the stream of oral folklore” (80).

A review of the historical relationship between Jews and Christians in Western Europe, especially in France, shows that the era easily permitted the transmission of ideas between cultural groups. Shared interest in biblical scholasticism and language, as well as intellectual and social proximity, contributed to the dissemination of Jewish writings, legends, and oral folklore to Christian neighbors and intellectuals.

### Trends in Cultural Translation

While Jewish populations enjoyed literacy rates considerably higher than those of their Christian neighbors, the two populations held somewhat disparate cultural views regarding the written word. Accepted literature among Ashkenazic Jews consisted mainly of the Jewish Bible, the Talmud, and the commentaries (midrashim). Literature among Christian courts and churches of Western Europe, however, supported not only scholars of the Bible and law, but writers of secular poetry and, of course, romances.

France of the early twelfth-century developed a much more restricted attitude towards its Jewish population: Jews were first expelled in 1182, and by the mid thirteenth-century faced a “radically reconfigured” French society. The destruction of Hebrew books and the burning of the Talmud in Paris demonstrate the antagonistic attitude towards non-Christian texts. It is this social context that has been used as evidence in “‘judaizing’ interpretations” of Chrétien de Troyes’ works, including *Conte de graal* (Warren 1002).

It is also in this time, coincidentally, that Jewish romances, written in Hebrew, appeared in France and Italy. Few of these romances remain, but evidence of their prevalence may be guessed by the necessity of a rabbinical decree against them by Rabbi Judah of Paris, who prohibited “both on Sabbath and weekdays the reading of ‘those tales of battles written in the vernacular’” (Leviant 56). A similar sentiment was made by Maimonides to Sephardic Jews, cautioning readers “that it was a ‘sheer waste of time’” to read such stories (57). These prohibitions against romances and other secular literature were rooted in a social tradition that upheld only religious texts, and some scholarly works, as worthy of study.

Such decrees are, we may presume, reactionary measures against popular texts. Hebrew writers did, in fact, translate and circulate forms of popular Christian texts, folklore, and legend; Jewish writers made these Christian source materials more appealing and acceptable to their largely Jewish audience through an editing process that effectively “judaized” the material. These writers attempted to recast otherwise banned romances in acceptable forms to an appeal to their pious, Ashkenazic audience. The writer of the 1279 Hebrew Arthurian legend *King Artus*, translated by Leviant, participated in this cultural translation. In this text—itsself an Arthurian legend—

entire sections of Christian matter are omitted, including Lecelot's visit to say Mass, and the presence of the Christmas holiday (59), while other Christian elements are retold in more culturally meaningful and acceptable ways. The grail and sword take on different names and meanings through biblical illusions, while the Christmas feast of Uter, through similar use of biblical illusions, can be interpreted as a Purim celebration (60). This very clear example of the "judaizing" of a Christian text is evidence of a strong tradition of cultural exchange between Medieval Jews and Christians; it is reasonable, then, to assume that Christian writers and translators would incorporate Jewish cultural material into their work, just as Jewish writers adopted Christian tales.

### **The Curious Case of *Silence***

Heldris' own romance adopts themes from Jewish sources and incorporates them into an Arthurian legend; the author does not blindly introduce these themes, however: the correlations between the characters and circumstances of the romance and those of the Jewish source materials are subtle and meaningful. *Silence's* depictions of the characters Merlin and King Evan owe many details to the talmudic legend of King Solomon and Ashmedai presented in Gittin 68.a. (Though the author's knowledge of this is unlikely, I would like to point out that the Ashmedai episode appears in a tract outlining suitable reasons for requesting a divorce. This correlation is tragically appropriate for adulterous Eufeme, and bitterly ironic for a dispirited Silence.) This tale was exceedingly popular, appearing in midrashim as well as surfacing independently in oral folklore. The 1602 *Mayse Bukh* ("book of tales") preserves the tale in its most popular form.

"Solomon and Ashmedai" seems a very clear parallel of the final events in *Silence*: Solomon is told by demons that he must capture the King of the Demons, Ashmedai, in order to locate the powerful *shamir*, a tool with which he might cut stone to build the holy temple. Solomon sends his trusted advisor, Benaiah, to capture Ashmedai. Benaiah tricks Ashmedai into drinking wine, then captures the sleeping demon. In *Silence*, Merlin's first sequence of laughs (6195-6224) mirrors the actions of the captured Ashmedai: the demon laughs at a man requesting shoes that will last for seven years and at a man digging for treasure. Heldris' character laughs at a peasant

carrying new shoes (6190-1), a leper begging for alms (6203-4), and a priest weeping at a funeral (6214-5). Once Ashmedai is brought to the king, he eventually tells Solomon the information he desires ("Solomon" 371-6). The following sections will investigate Heldris' use of this popular Jewish legend.

### **Merlin's Jewish Ancestors**

While scholars have identified the "Ashmedai" legend as a possible source for the "taming of the Wild Man" sequence in Arthurian romances—Lucy Paton identifies the motif within the 'Grisandole' tale (246)—critics Helen Adolf and Sarah Roche-Mahdi, analyzing Heldris' Merlin through a Jewish cultural context, do introduce discussion of the similarities between Merlin and the Prophet Elijah. Evidence for this argument abounds: Merlin and the Jewish prophet share many physical attributes; they also commonly fulfill simplistic roles as the characters both appear as humble/old men (184), they are both prophets of sorts, and neither figure has a traditional, literal death (183).

It is in the guise of an old man that Elijah roams among the people, directing them along their correct paths and lending his assistance where he may. Just like Elijah, though, Merlin "is a master of impersonation" (Stock 26). Heldris' Merlin appears twice in the romance as an old man offering assistance before he is seen as the Wild Man. The first time he is seen in "the guise of the wise old man at Cador's court" and the second time he is the old man who tells Silence how to capture Merlin (Roche-Mahdi 9). In his first appearance, Merlin convinces Cador that the errant youth returned to court is really his "son," Silence:

A certain old man examined the youth closely  
and saw what he was up to.  
He spoke his mind to the count:  
'That is your son Silence,  
he has learned the minstrel's art. (3559-63)

Merlin/the old man functions in this instance as a "mysterious helper" in much the same way as the Prophet Elijah does in talmudic legends. In his second appearance as the old man, Merlin tells Silence how to capture the famous wizard, instructing, "If you want to trap him / do as I tell you" (5968-9).

Again, Merlin appears in the role of “what folklorists call a ‘friendly helper’” (Roche-Mahdi 9).

Lorraine Stock’s observation that “Heldris’ incorporation of the story about Wild Man Merlin from the *Vulgate Cycle* seems to be connected more with the ultimate transformation of Silence than with Merlin himself” (25) is a valuable assessment of the role that Merlin actually plays. The Jewish source materials regarding Prophet Elijah often show him as a messenger or have him play a similarly passive role. Elijah is never a real *character* in midrashim or talmud; he is, instead, a device of the plot. Merlin’s own lack of character development is consistent with the Jewish depiction of the figure.

Roche-Mahdi argues that “the elements that persuade the reader [Merlin] is a genuinely ‘friendly helper’ are absent, and much is added that reinforces the impression that he is playing a malicious game” (17). This suspicion on the part of the reader is likely due to Merlin’s seemingly contradictory depictions: how could a character who seems to purposefully trick *himself*, after all, be seen as innocent or even sympathetic? Merlin does seem to appear in disparate depictions: the old man is transformed into something semi-human, something that operates outside of civilization’s rules. Merlin’s withdraw from humanity is very visual. He appears as:

a man all covered with hair,

as hairy as a bear.

He is as fleet as a woodland deer.

Herbs and roots are his food. (5929-32)

The contradictory nature of Merlin—his apparent role as a wise fool—is a reflection of the nature of his Jewish forefather, Ashmedai. The king of demons, when captured by Solomon’s servant Benaiah, does more than laugh at seemingly inappropriate moments: he also guides a blind man to his correct path, and cries when the pair pass a happy wedding (“Solomon” 373). These behaviors are odd because, 1) the audience does not expect a demon to help those in need, and 2) the audience cannot reconcile why the demon feels compassion for the new bride who, he says, will soon be widowed. These instances, however, demonstrate the wisdom of Ashmedai. The demon, like Merlin, appears to have ulterior motives for his actions, but each of these figures use “his brains, not his brawn” (Stock 26) to effect solutions.



The laughter of both Merlin and Ashmedai is powerful. This is perhaps because it is an abuse of the great wisdom held by Merlin/Elijah/Ashmedai. While the laughter of Ashmedai can be excused—he is a demon—Merlin’s laughter is harder to excuse. Merlin was only briefly depicted as a Wild Man, while Ashmedai is understood to permanently exist in his demon form. As a composite of the Jewish figures of the prophet and the demon, Merlin is expected to maintain, in some way, the “good helper” tradition of Elijah. Merlin’s judicial skill at the denouement may be similar to the arguments Elijah makes on the behalf of troubled Jews, but the goals of Merlin’s maneuvers are unclear. Roche-Mahdi describes Merlin’s laughter as “the distancing laughter of a supernatural being who mocks mortals for their blindness and their futile attempts to escape their destiny” and says his laughter is “the spiteful laughter of one who takes particular pleasure in revealing women’s secrets” (17).

### **A Last Argument for the Composite Character**

There is a strange and oft-overlooked image that clearly connects the medieval French Merlin with the Jewish prophet and demon: birds. Merlin’s name, of course, alludes to a specific bird; the character himself, as well as his talmudic ancestors, is meaningfully connected to avian imagery. Adolf describes the work of scholars to attempt to identify the meaning of “esplumoir Merlin” in Robert de Boron’s *Perceval* story, stating that the *esplumoir* has, thus far, been found to signal “an abode for a bird” (174). She tells that this link between a prophet (Merlin) and home for a bird (“*esplumoir*”) has Jewish origins: “Robert...had access to some Jewish sources...there do we find...an Otherworld Abode, called the Bird’s Nest” within both the *Zohar* and *Seder Gan Eden* (175). This heavenly Bird’s Nest is associated with the Jewish Messiah, and, through the Messiah, it is linked to Elijah, who “We must expect...to be present wherever the Jewish Messiah is mentioned” (182). Elijah and Merlin are both linked, then, to what is probably a very figurative, pious location that is associated with the soul’s home or gathering place.

Ashmedai, though, has a very profane link to bird imagery. At the end of the Ashmedai tale, Solomon’s wife reveals that the imposter already slept with her; the king’s advisors ask her “Did you look at his [the demon’s] feet?” She replies that the

man had come “with socks on his feet” (“Solomon” 375). This question alludes to a popular signal in Jewish folklore: demons, for whatever reason, have feet like birds (often chickens, but the precise species varies). Because the man who came to the queen was wearing socks, it is assumed that he was hiding his bird-like feet from her. Merlin, whose name already alludes to birds, is encompassed by these Jewish elements: the peaceful gathering place of souls, the domain of the Messiah and Elijah, relates directly to Merlin’s natural wisdom, while his connection to the bird-footed Ashmedai simultaneously condemns him to the role of an upstart and fool.

### **As Ashmedai, So Solomon...**

Heldris’ adoption of these Jewish motifs adds to the complexity of *Silence*: by understanding Merlin as a combined translation of Elijah and Ashmedai, the audience can also understand that Evan may be a translation of Solomon. The failing rule of Evan could correspond to the years of exile that Solomon faces when he is deposed by Ashmedai; Evan seems, with his many deficiencies, to at least be a likely parallel to a particularly gullible Solomon, who is tricked, according to legend, into giving the symbols of his office to the demon king. What critic Roche-Mahdi refers to as Silence’s “reproductive potential” (17)—the importance of Silence’s femininity especially at and following the denouement—may be a parallel, too, of a Jewish element. The *shamir* sought by Solomon has a male connotation through its associated with “stones.” While Silence’s femininity may be an inversion of gender, her fertility is paralleled by the promised prosperity that will occur once the *shamir* is obtained—principally, the construction of the temple and symbolic assertion of the security of the old Jewish faith.

### **The Universality of Carnival Critique**

The success of this cultural transmission is due, perhaps, to the shared carnival nature of the medieval source materials. Merlin and Ashmedai both laugh at and cause inversions of normal social order, thus introducing the carnival into their respective plots. *Silence* discusses an inversion of gender, shows Evan to be an inversion of a prosperous king, and depicts a Merlin who, above all, displays a multitude of contradictory attributes. Roche-Mahdi writes that *Silence* is an antiromance, and an example “of that subversive, secularizing literature that

bursts forth in the twelfth-century and is an endangered species by the later 1200s” (19). If *Silence* “subverts earlier romance” (19), it does so because Heldris transforms the stock “fool” character of Merlin into a complex jester: while the fool of folklore provokes laughter to demonstrate social wrongs, the presence of laughter and carnival in *Silence* illuminates not only social inequities themselves, but the faulty reasoning that causes social distress. Merlin’s ability to form this critique of Evan and his rule is analogous to Ashmedai’s own carnival disposition of Solomon.

Just as Hebrew translations of Arthurian romances were used by Hebrew poets to transmit moral and political concepts to the Jews of Western Europe, Christian writers used Jewish materials to introduce moral and political commentary. Heldris’ gendered inversion of romance conventions is enhanced by the introduction of Jewish motifs. These motifs allow Heldris to manipulate a preexisting allegorical world tradition that was deeply rooted within both Jewish and Christian contemporaries. The result of this manipulation is a timeless commentary that takes full advantage of the ability of carnival oppositions to illustrate social criticism.

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