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Arthur in the East: Cross-Cultural Translations of Arthurian Romance in Greek and Hebrew, Including a New Translation of *Ὁ Πρέσβυς Ἱππότης* (*The Old Knight*)

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Abstract

Ὁ Πρέσβυς Ἱππότης (or, *O Presbus Ippotes*, translated the *The Old Knight*) and שוטרא דלמ (*Melech Artus*, translated *King Arthur*) are the only extant medieval Arthurian romances in Greek and Hebrew, respectively. These poems, translated from French via an Italian intermediary, are more than simply translations across languages; they also translate across cultures and literary traditions. The Byzantine poet-translator of *O Presbus Ippotes* transforms the story of Arthur into the style and idiom of Homeric epic while the Jewish poet-translator of *Melech Artus* adopts the language of Biblical narrative. Because the Byzantine and Jewish cultures into which these Arthurian romances were translated were so radically different from the Western European Catholic tradition in which they had been originally composed, they demonstrate the ways in which medieval translators attempted to make their works not only linguistically, but culturally accessible as well.

Keywords

King Arthur, The Matter of Britain, Romance, Medieval literature, Byzantine literature, Hebrew literature, Translation, Homer, The Bible, Poetics

The Matter of Britain was one of the most widely translated subjects of medieval literature. As Alain de Lille wrote in the twelfth century,

> Whither has not the flying fame spread and familiarized the name of Arthur the Briton, even as far as the empire of Christendom extends? Who, I say, does not speak of Arthur the Briton, since he is almost better known to the peoples of Asia than to the Britons, as our pilgrims returning from the East inform us? The Eastern peoples speak of him, as do the Western, though separated by the width of the whole earth [. . .] . Rome, queen of cities, sings his deeds, nor are Arthur's wars unknown to her former rival Carthage, and Antioch, Armenia, Palestine celebrate his acts.
>
> (Anderson 13)

Arthur's fame was spread through bards and books, dispersed across the continent and translated into almost every language of Europe. These translations, moreover, were more than word-for-word recreations in a new language; as much as across language, they were also translations across cultures and literary traditions. In this, the Jews of Western Europe and the Byzantine Greeks were no different. When translating into Greek and Hebrew, and particularly when dealing with works of heroic literature and romances, poets and translators often attempted to synthesize the foreign material they translated into the idiom of their own literary traditions, which meant for them the Homeric epics and the Bible, respectively.

Despite the great number of extant Arthurian romances from Medieval Europe, only one remains in Greek and one in Hebrew, and these survive only in fragmentary form. The earlier of the two works, *Melech Artus*[1] in Hebrew, translated as *King Arthur* in English, was composed by an anonymous Jew in Sicily in 1279. The Greek work, *O Presbus Ippotes*,[2] conventionally translated as *The Old Knight*, was composed a century and a half later, most likely

[1] שוטרא דלמ

[2] *Ὁ Πρέσβυς Ἱππότης*

sometime between 1425 and 1450.[3] Both are translations of Old French Arthurian romances, possibly through Italian translations of the French. Though these texts are separated by as much as a century and a half and a large cultural divide, their authors' methods of translation and the means by which they achieve this cross-cultural synthesis are quite similar. Both works are relatively faithful translations of their sources at the level of plot. The poet-translators' choices of which sections from the larger corpus of Arthurian literature to translate and the style and diction into which they render them enable these poets to describe the Western European world of King Arthur's court in the idiom of their own cultures and literary traditions.

There exist several translations of Western European romances into Greek, including Greek-themed works such as *Ho Polemos tes Troades / The War of Troy*,[4] a translation of Benoit de Sainte-Maure's Old French *Roman de Troie* and a Greek *Teseid*, a translation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and common Western romances such as *Floire*

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[3] In *The Medieval Greek Romance*, Roderick Beaton proposes a date "some time between the first appearance of the story in French at the end of the thirteenth century and the date of the single manuscript, *c.* 1425-50" (144). He adds that "it is tempting to suppose that the date of the manuscript is also, in this case, the date of the translation" (144), but this is, unfortunately, ultimately unprovable. Bruce dates it to "about 1300" (28). A similar controversy lingers over the location of the poem's composition: "P. Breillat believes that the translation was executed before 1350 and probably in Cyprus. Conscious of the weakness of the linguistic argumentation, A. Garzya and R. Beaton reject the possibility of a Cypriot translation, but accept that the text came from a milieu where Greeks and Franks were in contact, between 1204 and 1453. K. Ciggaar has suggested recently that the text could have been inspired by a manuscript brought to Acre around 1270 by Prince Edward, the future Edward I of England" (Grivaud 279).

[4] Here and throughout this article, I will immediately follow the literal Greek work with a alphabetic transcription, separating the two with a forward slash. I will enclose the transcription within the quotation marks surrounding the Greek word when necessary.

et Blanchefloire.[5] Other romances originally composed in Greek share with these the flavor of the world of chivalric romance. Unlike *The Old Knight,* however, these works use the medieval Greek vernacular rather than the higher epic register. There is little doubt that the coming of the Crusaders and the establishment of Crusader kingdoms in mainland Greece and Cyprus contributed significantly to the introduction, development and evolution of the romance in Greece. For Arthurian literature in particular, however, significantly less evidence exists. The three hundred and seven lines of Greek political verse which comprise *The Old Knight* make up the entire extant corpus of medieval Arthurian romance in Greek. Moreover, as Roderick Beaton writes in *The Medieval Greek Romance*, "there is no reason to suppose that any more than the isolated episode of the *Old Knight* was ever translated into Greek: the six leaves of the extant manuscript cover all of the episode except its beginning and end, which would have contained sufficient material for one lost folio at either end, to make up a normal quire of eight" (145). Not only, then, is this the only surviving witness; it may very well be the only one that ever existed.

The Arthurian cycle did have a documented presence in the Greek world, however: among the elite of the Lusignan kingdom in Cyprus, a French author named Philippe de Novare describes a 1223 knighting ceremony for two of the sons of John d'Ibelin, the lord of Beirut: "At this knighting was the longest and most grand celebration that which was ever known on this side of the sea. There was much giving and much spending, and jousting and reenactments of the adventures of Brittany and the Round Table and there were many kinds of games."[6] Though significant insofar as it shows at least some knowledge of Arthuriana in the Greek

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[5] For more on the transmission, translation and composition of Greek romances, see Beaton, *passim*.

[6] "A cele chevalerie fu la plus grand feste et la plus longue qui fust onques desa mer qye l'on sache. Mout i ot douné et despendu, et bouhordé, et contrefait les aventures de Bretaigne et de la Table Ronde et moult de manieres de jeus" (Ciggaar 92). All translations are my own except where indicated.

world, Novare's description leaves some ambiguity about the nature of the event: "it is not entirely clear from the description whether this was a stage-play, in which case it appears to be the earliest known instance anywhere of the performance of an Arthurian story, or whether it was the participants in the jousts who dressed as characters out of the Arthurian cycle, in which case that too is a first" (Edbury 82).[7] Gift-giving, or largesse, was Arthur's foremost characteristic, and his giving of favors plays a large part in many Arthurian romances. It seems, therefore, possible that the entire affair was constructed around an Arthurian theme.

In *Le Royaume des Lusignans: Terre de Litterature et de Traditions*, Krijnie Ciggaar suggests a possible connection between the events at the knighting ceremony and *The Old Knight*. Suggesting that the Old Knight himself may be analogous to John d'Ibelin, this critic argues that "[o]ne can see a parallel with the situation of the barons in the West and those in Cyprus who, in opposition to their lord, did not wish to go to Palestine, unlike the previous generation who had conquered Jerusalem" (96).[8] Such an explanation seems more likely if one accepts Breillat's and Ciggaar's theories that the poem was composed in Cyprus, a position doubted by Beaton. As much as this single sentence from Philippe de Novare proves the presence of Arthurian knowledge in the Greek world before the period of *The Old Knight*'s composition, it points out only that such knowledge existed among the Western European Crusaders, who presumably brought that knowledge with them. It offers, however, no evidence that knowledge of the Arthurian cycle was present among the Greeks themselves, nor that, aside from *The Old Knight*,

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[7] The ambiguity Edbury notes comes from the non-specific nature of the Old French "contrefait," which means literally an imitation. I have translated it here as "reenactment;" in his translation, John LaMonte offers "reproduced" (66) while also noting "'recited' […] seems a good interpretation" (66, note 2).

[8] "On pourrait voir un parallèle avec la situation des barons de l'Occident et de ceux de Chypre qui, en conflit avec leur seigneur, ne voulaient pas aller en Palestine, au contraire de l'ancienne génération qui avait conquis Jérusalem."

there was any other literary production on the subject.

The single extant manuscript of *The Old Knight*, now housed in the Vatican as Codex Vaticanus 1822 and first published in 1821 by F.H. von der Hagen in *Poema Graecum de Rebus Gestis Regis Arturi, Tristani, Lanceloti, Galbani, Palamedis Aliorumque Equitum Tabulae Rotundae*, therefore remains the only literary evidence of the Arthurian cycle among Byzantine Greeks. The poem is a translation of Rusticiano da Pisa's *Gyrons li Courtois*. It tells the story of the eponymous Old Knight, who, in this fragment, is never named but, extrapolating from Rusticiano's work, is called Branor le Brun. He enters Arthur's court with his beautiful young niece, and whoever defeats him in a joust gets the niece as a prize. The Old Knight, however, defeats all of Arthur's knights. In the second half of the fragment, another newly-arrived damsel is at Arthur's court in search of a defender for her kingdom, which is under siege by the King of the Hundred Knights. None of Arthur's entourage, ashamed of being defeated at the hands of the Old Knight, is willing to help her. The Old Knight, therefore, as the cause of this shame, volunteers. He defeats the King of the Hundred Knights and saves the town, and at this point the manuscript breaks off.

At the level of plot, *The Old Knight* resembles *The Iliad*. The transformation of *The Old Knight* into the language of Homeric epic is not a new discovery.[9] As early as the mid-19th century, Charles Gidel noted several parallels between *The Old Knight* and *The Iliad*. For example, when Arthur himself decides to enter into combat over the objections of his wife Guinevere, he tells her: "Go tend to the adornment of the women's quarters and the children, / I myself will arm" (line 141).[10] Gidel notes the similarity to Hector's

[9] Beaton describes it as having "an element [. . .] of Homeric allusion" (144); Bruce sees it as "so strongly colored with Homeric phrasing and imagery that the lines produce the impression of a bombastic travesty or style of the *Iliad*" (28). Earlier scholars, such as Breillat and Gidel, also noted these similarities.

[10] Γυναικωνῖτιν εὐπρεπῶς κοσμοῦσα καὶ παιδίσκας.
Ἐγὼ δὲ καθοπλίσομαι.

command to Andromache at *Iliad* 6.490 when she, like Guinevere, urges him not to return to combat: "But you go into the house and attend to your own work, the loom and the distaff, and order your serving women to get to work; war is for men"[11] (Gidel 78). In both instances, the husband tells the wife not to concern herself with war, but to attend to the duties of the home.

Gidel notes other similar allusions to *The Iliad*. In *The Old Knight*, the prize for defeating the Old Knight in combat is the company of a young maiden. When Arthur does come face to face with the Old Knight, the latter chastises him, saying "Go away, my lord, this is not right. / The reward for the knights is my niece. / I find you have Guinevere as your lawful wife, / so beautifully and elegantly she complements your house, / even the most beautiful girl cannot come to you as a mistress." (line 154)[12] Gidel argues that this passage echoes Agamemnon at *Iliad* 1.111-114, when the Achaian king wishes to take a mistress: "I do not wish to receive this spectacular ransom in exchange for Chryses' daughter since I greatly desire to have her in my house. For I lust after her more than Clytaemnestra, my wife" (Gidel 78).[13] These and similar

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All references to the text of *The Old Knight* follow the line numbers of the attached translation.

[11] ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε
ἱστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε
ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι · πόλεμος δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει
πᾶσι.
Breillat 318, Garzya 273, and Browning 20 use the same example. All translations of *The Iliad* are my own.

[12] Ἄπιθι, λέγων, δέσποτα, μὴ παρὰ θέμιν δρᾷται.
Τὸ γέρας γὰρ τῶν ἱπποτῶν, ἀδελφιδοῦς μοι ᾽πάρχει.
Ἡ σὴ ζήτω σύνευνος Ντζενέβρα κατὰ θέμιν,
Ὡς εὐκλεῶς, ὡς εὐπρεπῶς κοσμοῦσά σου τὸ στέφος,
Καὶ μὴ πρὸς κοίτην ἔλθῃς σὺ κόρης εὐπρεπεστάτης.

[13] οὕνεκ' ἐγὼ κούρης Χρυσηΐδος ἀγλά' ἄποινα
οὐκ ἔθελον δέξασθαι, ἐπεὶ πολὺ βούλομαι αὐτὴν
οἴκοι ἔχειν · καὶ γάρ ῥα Κλυταιμνήστρης προβέβουλα
κουριδίης ἀλόχου, ἐπεὶ οὔ ἑθέν ἐστι χερείων,

Homeric allusions appear throughout the poem and are one of the ways in which the Western source becomes Hellenized.

As it alludes to Homer through verbal echoes and at the level of plot, *The Old Knight* also employs a Homeric literary style, particularly its use of that most recognizable Homeric device, the simile. For example, the description of combat between the Old Knight and Palamedes employs two Homeric similes: "Unshaken, the old man, the target he desired to hit, / Stood as mighty as an immovable stone. / Palamedes' spear shattered in his hand, / And he was knocked from his saddle and fell to the ground, / As a stone launched from a catapult / Hits a rock wall and is immediately deflected" (line 8).[14] Homer uses a similar metaphor to describe combat at *Iliad* 15.617: "But he could not shake them, despite his raging, for they formed a wall and held him, as a massive cliff alongside the grey sea withstands the sharp winds on their swift course and the swollen waves which crash upon it."[15] Indeed, in his *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad*, Bernard Fenik notes that "Diomedes [at *Iliad* 5.85] and Patroclos at his return to the scene in the corresponding passage (384) are compared to raging water (storms, torrents, rivers). This is in fact one of the two most common subjects for a simile that describes the destructive sweep of a warrior" (Fenik 20). The translator of *The Old Knight* makes the military prowess of his hero analogous to that of the great Homeric heroes by attributing to the Old Knight a simile drawn from the stock subjects of Homeric similes attributed to the great

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[14] Ἀτρέμας δ'ὁ πρεσβύτατος ἵστατο ῥωμαλέος,
Ὥσπερ τισ λίθος ἀκλινής, σκοποῦ τοῖς βουλομένοις.
Ἐν τῇ χειρὶ συνέτριψε τὸ δόρυ Παλαμήδης
Καὶ ἐφεστρίδος κατὰ γῆς ἐκπετασθεὶς ἐρρίφθη,
Ὥσπέρ τισ λίθος ἀφεθεὶς ἐκ πετροβόλου σκεύος,
Πρὸς πέτρον δὲ παραβαλὼν αὖθις παλινδρομεῖται.
[15]ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὥς δύνατο ῥῆξαι μάλα περ μενεαίνων ·
ἴσχον γὰρ πυργηδὸν ἀρηρότες, ἠΰτε πέτρη
ἠλίβατος μεγάλη πολιῆς ἁλὸς ἐγγὺς ἐοῦσα,
ἥ τε μένει λιγέων ἀνέμων λαιψηρὰ κέλευθα
κύματά τε τροφόεντα, τά τε προσερεύγεται αὐτήν ·

warriors of the ancient Greek epic.

Homeric imitation also occurs in the poem's three lion similes at lines 107, 149 and 290. Of all the Homeric similes, the lion simile is by far the most common type found in the *Iliad* (Fenik 32).[16] In *The Iliad*, the lion similes tend to be much longer and more elaborate than those in *The Old Knight*; the longest one, for example, runs nine full lines (*Iliad* 20.164) and compares Achilles, at the moment of his return to combat in *The Iliad*, to a wounded lion turning to engage the hunters who have provoked him. Through the use of such similes, the poet draws from the common stock of Homeric imagery to identify his new Western heroes with the traditional heroes of Greek myth.

In other, perhaps more minor ways, the poet-translator of *The Old Knight* adopts a Homeric style absent from his source material. At lines 71-2, for example, after the narration of several programmatic jousts, the poet asks: "And is it necessary for me to tell you and describe the many men / Who struck the chest of the old man with spears?"[17] In this line can be heard another Homeric echo. At *Iliad* 5.703, the narrator interrupts his story to ask a question: "Then who was the first and who the last cut down by Priam's son Hector and bronze Ares?"[18] This narratorial interrogatory, which also appears at *Iliad* 11.299 and *Iliad* 16.692, serves in Homer as an introduction to these Homeric warriors' greatest achievements in battle. In *The Old Knight*, it has a similar purpose: this is the height of the Old Knight's chivalric prowess.

The noun-epithet formula, another recognizably Homeric feature, can be heard in such phrases as the "nobleman Tristan," which appears four times (lines 58, 68, 118, 165), "the famous Lancelot" (lines 74, 93, 165), which appears three times, and any of the several uses of the epithet "steadfast" (lines 67, 76, 88, 102,

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[16] For a full catalog of lion similes in *The Iliad* and a more detailed description of their function, seeMueller 108ff.

[17] Καὶ δεῖ με λέγειν τὰ πολλὰ καὶ ᾽παριθμεῖν τοὺς ἄνδρας
Τοὺς βάλλοντας τὰ δόρατα τοῖς στέρνοις τοῦ πρεβύτου;

[18] Ἔνθα τίνα πρῶτον τίνα δ᾽ ὕστατον ἐξενάριξαν
Ἕκτωρ τε Πριάμοιο πάϊς καὶ χάλκεος Ἄρης;

122, 224, 238), used seven times to describe various heroes. Though neither of these specific adjectives appears in *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, this formulaic repetition of noun-epithets is a recognizably Homeric trait.

More Homeric still is the description of the combat itself. The translator describes standard Western European chivalric warfare, but does so in the language of Bronze Age Homeric warfare. The author of another Byzantine vernacular romance, *Ho Polemos tes Troados* / *The War of Troy*, for example, uses a much different, non-Homeric idiom when narrating combat than the author of *The Old Knight*. In that work, when Achilles and Hektor meet in battle, the narrator describes them as "κονταρὲς ἔδοκαν / kontares edokan," literally "they gave lances" (231, line 4411). At *Iliad* 5.145, however, Diomedes kills a man— "ὑπὲρ μαζοῖο βαλὼν χαλκήρεϊ δουρί / uper mazoio balon chalkerei douri" ("by throwing a bronze-tipped spear above his breast"). The translator of *The Old Knight* follows this Homeric diction rather than the vernacular diction: at line 7, for example, Palamedes "βαλλὲι τῷ δορατίῳ / ballei to doratio," which, in the context of *The Old Knight*, is better translated as "struck with his spear," though this phrase carries a decidedly Homeric echo: the verbs "βαλλὲι / ballei" for striking or throwing and "δορατίῳ / doratio" for spear verbally echo Homer at *Iliad* 5.145 rather than the vernacular expression "κονταρὲς ἔδοκαν / kontares edokan" favored by the author of *The War of Troy*.

The scene in both Chrétien de Troyes' *Le conte du Graal* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, in which Parzival kills Ither with a spear throw, illustrates the problem the author of *The Old Knight* must have faced in translating a Western romance, with its own set of heroic values, for a Byzantine audience. When Parzival, after killing Ither, demands his throwing spears, his squire replies: "I will not hand you any javelins: the Order of Chivalry forbids it"; rather, the squire "girded a sharp sword on him" (Wolfram 89). Indeed, A.T. Hatto's translation includes a footnote which reads: "It was *infra dig.* both to use missiles on one's enemies and to be killed by missiles" (Wolfram 81). The characters in *The Old Knight*, therefore, cannot fight in the Homeric fashion of spear throwing; it

was beneath their dignity as medieval knights. However, where the rules of Western European chivalry shunned the spear in favor of the sword, the rules of Homeric warfare do just the opposite: the spear is the Homeric weapon *par excellence*. This puts the author of *The Old Knight* in a strange linguistic bind: he wants to describe Homeric warfare in a context in which such warfare was considered shameful. He solves this problem by describing chivalric warfare with the diction of Homeric warfare.

A comparison of a passage from *Gyrons le Courtoys* which the translator of *The Old Knight* adapted demonstrates the way in which the discrete elements described above come together to achieve this Homeric effect. Rusticiano describes Palamedes' assault on the Old Knight:

> So [Palamedes] took up his position far off, and lowered his lance and spurred his horse and came at the knight who was equipped with a helm. But the lance did not pierce him. What can I tell you? Palamedes came in such a great way that he seemed not to be a knight, but a bolt of lightning and a storm. He strikes the knight very hard, and, when the tip of the lance reached, he struck him with all his force and shattered his lance. And, after the clash, he was so shaken by the blow in body and mind that Palamedes fell to the earth from his horse and was so dazed that he did not know whether it was night or day.
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> (Gidel 89)[19]

The French version has a narratorial interrogatory, a device that

[19] Gidel 89: "Lors s'esloingne bien d'ung arpent de terre, et baisse son glayve et hurte le cheval des esperons et vient vers le chevalier qui appareillé estoit de son heaulme. Mais lance ne print-il pas. Qu'en diroie-je? Palamèdes vint si grant alleure, qu'il ne sembloit pas chevalier, mais fouldre et tempeste. Il va férir le chevalier moult hardyment; et, quant ce vint au joindre du glayve, il le férit sur son escu de toute sa force et brisa son glayve. Et, après le débrisement, se hurta a luy de corps et de visaige si durement, que Palamèdes cheut à la terre a tout son cheval, et fust tellement attourné qu'il ne sçavoit s'il estoit jour ou nuyt."

the Greek translator preserves. However, what is in the French merely a stylistic convention becomes in the Greek a Homeric echo: the Greek translator changes the position and subject matter of his question, putting it at the end of one encounter and before a series of generalized nameless encounters, thus recalling the Homeric narratorial interrogatory. In the Greek translation, the fall from the horse is narrated almost verbatim from the French. This fall, however, is surrounded by two uses of figurative language: Palamedes is compared to a lightning bolt and a storm and, after he is struck, does not know if it is day or night. The Greek translator follows his French source in using similes and figurative language, but his similes are not those of a French poet, but of Homer. The French version from which the poet is translating is fuller and more detailed; its language is simpler and more transparent. But this transparency was not the Greek translator's goal; rather, his goal was to render this new and foreign heroic tradition into the ancient indigenous heroic idiom of Homeric epic, thereby imbuing the heroes of the Arthurian tradition with the stature and cultural value as that of the Homeric ones. The poet's adoption of formulaic Homeric style, diction and plot parallels create this new hybrid work.

Chivalric romances were also a feature of Jewish life in the Middle Ages. Robert Warnock describes "[r]eports of Jewish emulation of courtly ceremonial customs" at weddings, and even Jewish mounted tournaments (190). Such reports, Warnock notes, "are geographically and temporally diverse but occasionally fairly detailed" (190). Though there is no other evidence of Arthurian romance in Hebrew, an Old Yiddish account, called *Widwilt* or (*Fun) Kinig Artis Hof* or *Artushof* and originally composed in the fifteenth century, survives in three manuscripts (Warnock 192). Such a work, however, is significantly later than *Melech Artus* and suggests little about the presence of Arthurian romances several centuries earlier.

Unlike the Byzantines, however, who saw a flourishing of translations of Western vernacular romances, European Jewry produced far fewer. This is, no doubt, in part due to the fact that most medieval Jews, unlike Byzantine Greeks, were polyglots living among vernacular speaking populations, and therefore had less

need for works in translation. An additional factor, however, was that in many parts of Europe, Jews were forbidden by their rabbis from reading vernacular literature. Curt Leviant writes that "an authoritative Ashkenazic guidebook from the beginning of the thirteenth century, *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of the Pious) […] prohibits Jews from using romances for binding purposes," that is, to bind together sacred and secular literature in a single book, while, somewhat earlier, "R. Judah of Paris […] forb[ade] both on Sabbath and on weekdays the reading of 'those tales of battles written in the vernacular'" (51). Leviant notes that "[a]n interdict usually shows that the censured act is being performed," from which the conclusion can be drawn that many Jews were in fact reading vernacular literature. Again, however, it should be noted that they were not doing so exclusively in translation, but also in the original.

A different paradigm was at work among the Jewish communities of Spain and Italy. Thirteenth-century Jews were not only reading secular works in the vernacular, but were also writing them in Hebrew. Indeed, Leviant cites Yitzchak ben Shlomo's mid-thirteenth century *Mashal ha-Kadmoni* / *The Ancient Parable*: "[Ben-Shlomo] addresses himself to readers of non-sacred popular literature who read fables and parables in other languages and asserts that he wants to distract them from the 'books of Homer and other pagans'" (53). Other Sephardic Jews hoped that their success in writing in Hebrew would prove their language as powerful in terms of literary expression as the languages being spoken around them. Thus, Al-Haziri, around the turn of the thirteenth century, notes that he is only writing to prove that "the Hebrew language is unrivalled in clarity of expression and the beauty of its parables" (Leviant 58).[20]

It is between these two poles, then, of secular vernacular learning and sacred Hebrew learning, that *Melech Artus* exists. The translation, therefore, like its Greek counterpart, is more than a word-for-word transcription; it is not only a translation from a

[20] For other instances of Jewish knowledge of non-Hebrew works, see Sandler 71ff.

vernacular to a sacred language, but also a cross-religious adaptation, from Christianity to Judaism. This is evident from the very opening words of the work. The heading above the narrative reads "וואיצורטסדל," a transliteration from the Italian "la distruzione / the destruction," and suggests at the outset the major theme of the work. This idea is reiterated in the opening sentence: "This is the book of the destruction [דמשה] of King Arthur's Round Table" (Leviant 9). The word דמשה / hashmid, which Leviant here translates as "destruction," has multiple meanings in Hebrew. Howard Needler argues that "[t]he root *sh-m-d* has, and had, a different, and more common set of meanings than 'destruction,' and these are 'apostasy,' 'enforced conversion,' and 'religious persecution'" (240).[21] In Talmud and in medieval Hebrew, the word did indeed have this suggestion. But it also occurs frequently in the Bible, and more often than not refers to complete national destruction. In Deuteronomy, for example, when Moses tells the Israelites about the destruction of the former inhabitants of Canaan, he says that the land

> was formerly inhabited by Rephaim, whom the Ammointes call Zamcummim, a people great and numerous and as tall as the Anakites. The LORD wiped them out [מדימשיון], so that [the Ammonites] dispossessed them and settled in their place, as He did for the descendants of Esau who live in Seir, when He wiped out [דימשה] the Horites before them, so that they dispossessed them and settled in their place, as is the case. So, too, with the Avvim, who dwelt in villages in the vicinity of Gaza: the Caphtorim, who came from Crete, wiped them out [השמידם] and settled in their place.
>
> (Deuteronomy 2:20)

Moses describes the destruction, the "wiping out" of these peoples,

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[21] This is its meaning in, for example, Maimonides' "Letter of Apostasy," the "דמשה תרגיא / Iggeret Hashmad," the great scholar's response to the forced conversion of Jews in Moorish Spain.

in terms of a complete cessation of national existence. There is no indication here of the word's medieval definition. Shortly after describing the destruction of these nations, moreover, Moses prophesies the same fate for the Jews themselves; predicting that they will become corrupt and will worship idols, he vows: "I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess; you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out [דמשה וודמשת]" (Deuteronomy 4:26). Moses issues a similar warning later in Deuteronomy, telling the Jews that if they fail to heed the commandments, "The LORD will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out [רדמשה] because of your evildoing in forsaking Me" (Deuteronomy 28:20).

From the outset, then, the work evokes a world of Biblical allegory, wherein Arthur's Round Table and his realm become analogous to the peoples who have incurred God's wrath and, in particular, to the Jews who bring on themselves their own destruction through sinning. Later, the author makes clear that, like the destruction of the Temple, the destruction of the Round Table was caused by sin, notably the adultery surrounding Arthur's father and mother as well as his wife Zinevra and closest companion Lancelot, whose "evil desire was the cause of the destruction [דימשה] of the Table" (Leviant 29). Similarly, in his reference to "the evil traitor Mordred [who] passed himself off as a nephew for many years," there is perhaps also an allusion to the story of his incestuous conception, though the author here refers to him as "a bastard son, as you will see in the book of the destruction [דמשה]," rather than as a child of incest (Leviant 23).[22] Hashmid then suggests nothing less than a national destruction for Arthur's

[22] Rovang seems to agree, writing the following about this line: "This foreshadowing comment indicates that the author's moral interest is in how sin, especially adulterous lust, leads to destruction. His selection of Uter's desire for Izerna to the exclusion of an ocean of interlying episodes before the Grail Quest would be logical for an author with such an explicitly defined moral purpose" (5).

court similar to the feared destruction of the sinful Israelites in the Bible.

This national destruction associated with hashmid also alludes to one of the other major Biblical analogues to *Melech Artus*, the Book of Esther. When Mordechai refuses to bow to Haman, the latter decides "to destroy [דימשהל] all the Jews" (Esther 3:6). Acquiescing to Haman's demands, the king "sent the writs, in the hands of the envoys, to all the satrapies of the king to destroy [דימשהל] and slaughter and kill and murder all the Jews, from maidens to old women, small children to old men on that one day" (Esther 3:13). In Esther as well as Deuteronomy, l'hashmid / דימשהל indicates the destruction of an entire nation or kingdom, as the destruction of the Round Table does for Arthur's court. The author of *Melech Artus* justifies his work as a moral tale: that readers might learn from the sins of Arthur and his circle and therefore not face the same type of destruction that they, the ancient Israelites and other tribes have suffered.

The author claims that he has written his work "that sinners will learn the paths of repentance and bear in mind their end and will return to the Name" (Leviant 13). Perhaps the Jewish scribe really was concerned with these moral aspects and selected Arthurian romance as the best vehicle for conveying this message. It is also possible, however, that the author's claims in this regard help him justify his translation to a Jewish audience, and that he was simply Judaizing a common element of the introductory apology of the writers of medieval romances. Across Europe, in a variety of languages, authors of medieval romance often assert a moral or didactic lesson. Wolfram von Eschenbach, for example, writes that his *Parzival* also has a lesson for its readers: "I have yet to meet a man so wise that would not gladly know what guidance this story requires, what edification it brings" (15). He then asserts that, from his work, men can learn the value of loyalty, and women of modesty (15). In his *Erec and Enide*, Chrétien de Troyes offers a similarly Christian moral for his story. After saying that "it is right that all always aspire and endeavor to speak eloquently and to teach well," he claims that he is writing to "demonstrate and to prove that the man does not act wisely who fails to make full use of his knowledge so long as God grants him the grace to do so" (1). The

Jewish author of *Melech Artus* uses the same convention of the author's apology, but transforms these virtues, so highly valued in the context of Christian chivalry, into a distinctly Jewish one: repentance, a return to God.

The same Judaization of traditional Christian themes is evident in the other reason the author of *Melech Artus* gives for writing his tale: "The preservation of my physical well-being, for owing to my sins my troubles have grown and my laments increased, and I am immersed in a sea of perplexed thoughts. […] Therefore I have translated these conversations for myself in order to calm my mind, mitigate my grief, and dispel somewhat the bad times I have experienced" (Leviant 9). As Needler notes, however, "a thirteenth-century Jew seeking in literature a refuge from personal misfortunes hardly needed recourse to the translation of an Arthurian romance for that purpose: Hebrew scripture and liturgy offered an abundance of what must have seemed more appropriate matter for consolation" (240). Needler wonders, drawing on the other possible meanings for the root *sh-m-d*, "might the translation itself be some relic of its author's nearness to apostasy, or an attempt to grapple with it and perhaps even to exorcise a troubling influence conducive to that sin?" (240). The literary convention of the author's apology in medieval romance, however, as often suggests that it is an elaborate rhetorical piece rather than a real expression of the author's own state. In many medieval romances, the author writes an apology to justify his work, often explaining that the reading and writing of romances can numb the pain of unrequited passionate sexual love.

Gottfried von Strassburg, for example, begins his *Tristan* with a longer and more detailed author's apology in which he argues that reading love stories will ease the hearts of love-sick readers: "I have undertaken a labour to please the polite world and solace noble hearts" (42). He hopes that "with my story" lovers

> can bring their keen sorrow half-way to alleviation and thus abate their anguish. For if we have something before us to occupy our thoughts it frees our unquiet soul and eases our heart its care. All are agreed that when a man of leisure is overwhelmed by love's torment, leisure redoubles that

> torment and if leisure be added to languor, languor will mount and mount. And so it is a good thing that one who harbours love's pain and sorrow in his heart should seek distraction with all his mind.
>
> (Gottfried 42)

Gottfried connects the writing and reading of romances with the alleviation of a lover's sorrow. The author of *Melech Artus* similarly claims that he is writing his romance to ease a deep pain. In his case, however, he substitutes the illicit sexual passion of Gottfried's apology for his own spiritual suffering.

Another contemporary romance writer, Giovanni Boccaccio, writing in Italy shortly after the Hebrew poet, asserts that he, too, writes in order to take his mind off of his present suffering in love. In his *Filostrato*, Boccaccio's authorial persona, deeply distraught over his beloved's departure from Naples to Sannio, decides to give his sorrow "outlet from my sad breast in fitting lamentation, so that I might live[.] [. . .] And the way was this: that, in the person of somebody stricken with love as I was and am, I should tell my sufferings in song" (in Gordon 28). Just as his fellow Italian, the poet-translator of *Melech Artus* adopts the literary persona of a man who, because of deep suffering, writes to ease his pain. The poet-translator of *Melech Artus*, however, strips the element of passionate love and the celebration of adultery from his own poem. By retaining the conventional apology without its chivalric elements, the poet-translator brings his work more in line with Jewish morality. Like Boccaccio, moreover, whose love-sick persona may or may not be a reflection of the historical author's actual emotional state, there is no evidence either to prove or disprove the author's own state at the time. Needler's suggestion that the poet has turned to Arthurian romance in order to ease his own inclination to apostasy rests on the unsupported assumption that the author's apology is in fact an accurate representation of the psychological state of the man himself. It is just as likely, if not moreso, that the author is using a conventional rhetorical device, the author's apology, to justify his work.

After the author's apology, the narrative of the Arthurian romance proper begins, and this section of the text also echoes the

Bible. Leviant writes that the poet-translator's "choice of plot, additions and omissions, use of language, and treatment of certain passages to accent Jewish ideas, are all instrumental in the Judaization of the Arthurian romance" (62). As was the case with *The Old Knight*, it is impossible to know how much Arthurian romance was available to the author of *Melech Artus*, and what his principles of selection were for choosing which sections to translate. It is possible that the author of *The Old Knight* consciously chose those portions of his source which most easily lent themselves to plot parallels in *The Iliad*: a joust consisting in one on one combat with spears, followed by a siege of a city for the sake of a woman. It is equally possible that the poet-translator of *Melech Artus* also chose to translate those sections of the Arthurian cycle which had the most resonance for his audience, the Bible. In this vein, Leviant notes that

> the scribe may have purposely chose to begin with the Uter-Izerna theme, whose plot has a striking affinity to the biblical story concerning David, Bathsheba and Uriah. A Jew familiar with the Bible could hardly have failed to note the parallels. In both cases, a king falls in love with a married woman; he desires her and sleeps with her; the husband of the married woman is killed in battle, which enables the king to marry the already pregnant woman. Both women also bear a future king.
>
> (61)

By selecting this section to translate, the poet-translator of *Melech Artus* brings his Arthurian heroes into a Biblical world.

At the level of plot, as important as what the translator includes is what he excludes. A brief note here: though the source for the Jewish scribe was an Italian work, as evidenced by the fact that he includes Italian phrases verbatim, the Italian source is lost, and we must rely for such analysis on the Old French poem which was the source for the Italian. In the Old French account, "the occasion at which Uter meets Igraine is a Christmas feast. In the Hebrew version, however, the scribe makes no mention of Christmas" (Leviant 64). In this scene, too, the translator of *Melech Artus*

renders his work in ways that are evocative of Biblical scenes. The sentence in which Uter calls the feast during which he will seduce Igraine echoes the Biblical language of the Book of Esther, in which Ahashuerus calls a feast: "And he made a great feast for all the ministers and servants" (Esther 3:1). In *Melech Artus*, the phrasing is paralleled: "And the king made a great feast for all the people and the ministers" (Leviant 17). In the Old French original, Uther's is a Christmas feast; the Jewish scribe, however, through his

> omission of some details from the Arthurian text and careful choice of words, has […] managed to change a Christmas feast into what might be called a Purim feast. The scribe thus not only Judaizes by using biblical language to suppress a Christian element, but by means of biblical phraseology he also directs the Jewish reader's attention to various biblical stories.
>
> (Leviant 68)

Nor is this the only instance in which *Melech Artus* quotes from the Bible to create parallels between the two works. Leviant points out numerous examples from the stories of David, Samson, Exodus and other Biblical passages. Such instances are too numerous to recount here and are thoroughly documented by Leviant; one example, therefore, can serve as a paradigm for the author's method of translation. After describing the knights' quest for the Holy Grail, the Hebrew translator writes "that is the story of the Book of the Dish which is called *Libro di la Kesta del Sangraal*" (Leviant 25). Readers of Hebrew will note that the scribe transliterates the Italian for "the Book of the Holy Grail / Libro di la Kesta del Sangraal" directly from the Italian. But when referring to it by its Hebrew name, he calls it the book of the Dish [tamchuy / יוחמת]. He obviously knows his Arthurian romance, and knows what the grail is, since he himself uses the word in this very sentence, but he has opted instead to call it a tamchuy / יוחמת, which in Hebrew was a charity dish "from which food was

distributed to the hungry and needy" (Leviant 25).[23] The translator substitutes a holy Christian vessel for a Jewish charity dish, thus imbuing this most Christian of stories with a patina of Judaism.[24]

The authors of both translations selected from the larger corpus of Arthurian romance episodes which had analogs in their own traditions, thus implicitly comparing the British royal family of Uther, Igraine and Arthur to David, Bathsheba and Solomon in the Hebrew tradition and Agamemnon, Hector and Andromache in the Greek. Moreover, each poet adapted the style to suit his own culture's aesthetic: in the Greek case, for example, by elements, such as the Homeric simile and the use of the noun-epithet formula; in the Hebrew, the use of Jewish diction and themes replaced the overtly Christian elements in the Italian source. Translations of Arthurian romance were predominantly a vernacular phenomenon, yet these two poems, surviving only in fragmentary form, the unique examples of Arthurian romance in the languages of Homer and the Bible, provide some insight into the art of translation into the languages of their foundational texts.

Note on the Translation

R.H. Martin's translation, the only one in English, is now over thirty years old, and the present translation differs from it in several respects. First, though Martin notes in the poem's introduction that it is written in verse, he has translated it in prose. The present translation complements Martin's prose version by offering a verse translation following the poem's own line breaks. Second, Martin has opted for a transliteration of the heroes' names, using, for

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[23] This word retains this sense of charitable giving in modern Hebrew too; the Beyt Tamchuy / תיב יוחמת is the modern Hebrew for a soup kitchen: that is beyt / house, and tamchuy / charity dish.

[24] In modern Hebrew, tamchuy / יוחמת is no longer used for the Holy Grail; the Hebrew translator of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, for example, opted for a more literal translation, calling the Holy Grail "hagaviah hakadosh / עיבגה שודקה;" "kadosh / שודק" meaning "holy" and "gaviah / עיבג" meaning "grail," "cup" or "chalice."

example, Gaoulbanos, Artouzos and Ntzenebra for the familiar English names Gawain, Arthur and Guinevere (which he places in the footnote) used in the present translation.

Finally, the two translations differ in their treatment of the technical vocabulary of Homeric warfare. For example, Martin translates the Greek "doru" (discussed above) as "lance," a translation which obscures the poet's purposeful Homeric imitation, since lances were unknown to Homer. In attempting to maintain the Homeric feel of the original Greek, I have rendered this word as "spear," a weapon familiar to both an ancient and a medieval audience.

This translation also differs from Martin's with respect to the terminology of the technical words of literary production. For example, at line 240, the maiden speaks to knights who are about to go into battle. She has brought them the Old Knight, who, because of his age, is mocked and ridiculed. The knights wish she had brought one of Arthur's more famous heroes. She says there is no time to explain why she brought this knight instead of the others, and in her explanation uses the Greek word "dramatos," followed three lines later by the words "ainos" and "komodias." These are technical words describing generic distinctions among types of Greek literature, a distinction familiar to the poem's literate Greek audience. Martin translates this passage thus: "But the explanation of the deed I will tell another time. [. . .] But God will turn your jests into praise" (45). The maiden, however, is promising to do more than this. Her use of these technical terms designating genre promises that, with God's help, the story itself will be narrated in a different generic idiom: not that of comedy, a low genre used for mockery, such as that directed by the knights at the Old Knight, but rather a genre used for praising heroes, which they will sing after seeing the Old Knight's prowess. An alternate translation presented here retains these generic distinctions in a way familiar to an English audience: "I will tell the cause of this drama another time [. . .]. God will turn your comedies to stories of praise." The maiden's speech, like the poet's use of the archaic Homeric dialect, is shaded in a self-consciously literary fashion and retains the technical terms enhances this aspect of the poet's artistic vision. The current translation follows Breillat's edition.

The Old Knight

. . . holding rank.
Young men, maidens, mothers blessed with children,
and kings who are vassals of the king of Britain
looked on, stunned by the courage of the old man;
they were amazed at the beauty of the girl who accompanied him.
Palamedes, with a great barbarian shout, boldly
spurred his horse towards the old man and struck him with his spear.
Unshaken, the old man, the target he desired to hit,
stood as mighty as an immovable stone.
Palamedes' spear shattered in his hand,
and he was knocked from his saddle and fell to the ground,
as a stone launched from a catapult
hits a rock wall and is immediately deflected.
The attacker looked weaker than the attacked.
Going away in great shame, he threw off his armor.
He lay face down on the couch, unsuccessful in his quest.
Palamedes' thoughts were doubly disturbed:
both because of his failure and because of his desire for the girl;
never had anyone been strong enough to take such a blow from him.
and everyone dreaded and feared the old knight greatly,
for they all knew Palamedes' strength,
and they were amazed at the fortitude of the old knight.
When Palamedes had gone away full of shame,
the nephew of the king, the manly Gawain,
kneeling, spoke before the divine king:
"There is one here, my lord, who is not inclined to run away
from combat nor onslaught without your permission.
Love for Palamedes does not allow me to withdraw,
for you know we have been friends for a long time.
I will try to avenge my friend's defeat."
The king put armor on him with which to do battle.
With a high heart Gawain went though the palace.
He stretched out his right hand: "Greetings," he said, "knight
who has truly filled Palamedes with shame,
I have come to find him who defeated my friend.
Palamedes has been a friend to me for a long time."
The old one said, "Greetings, Gawain,
nephew of King Arthur of Britain.
But come, take up your position, you will not even touch me.

I acknowledge the grace of your mother Morgan
and your grandfather, the wondrous king of Britain,
who bears the name Uther Pendragon.
If perhaps the fall of your friend wounds your soul,
know well that you will share with him his suffering."
Thus he spoke, and Gawain took up his position far away
and struck the old man's chest with his spear,
and shared Palamedes' failure and suffering.
Galehot, the famed lord of the Titans,
seeing the king's nephew, like Palamedes,
fall violently from his saddle to the ground,
asked the king if he could do battle with the old man.
He summoned his squires and commanders,
who gave him his armor for combat;
he donned expensive armor to go against the old man.
The noble old man watched him.
His face broke into a smile; he scorned the gold,
He mocked most of all his frivolity.
The powerful nobleman, the knight Galehot,
asked the old one's name.
He answered: "I do not want to tell you.
You do not deserve to know my name.
That you are from the highest royal family
is clear to all those here from Britain.
But in my opinion you are a worthless use,
so take up your position in the same way,
strike me hard with your spear,
as did the nephew of the king, steadfast Gawain,
and before him the nobleman Palamedes."
Obeying him, he struck the old man's chest with his spear
and was knocked off his saddle to the ground like those before.
And is it necessary for me to tell you and describe the many men
who struck the old man's chest with their spears?
Everyone was knocked out of the saddle to the ground,
except steadfast Tristan and famous Lancelot;
These did not strike his chest with their spears.
The steadfast old knight honored them.
Everyone struck his chest with their spears,
and was knocked completely out of the saddle.
As a ship over stormy and violent waves
is destroyed, dashed by the wind upon the rocks
and crushed by the strength of the blow,

thus everyone fell and was proved powerless,
for the old knight was steadfast and strong.
He stood as steadfast as a column, laughing at the youths.
The king of Britain himself had no joy in this,
nor did those with him, nor those ruling under his sovereignty.
Hope remained only in Tristan
and in steadfast Lancelot: in their arms and in their strength,
and they cried out to do battle against the old man.
The pair was immediately ordered to undertake it.
Taking their armor, they stood in the lists,
and the famous Lancelot requested of Tristan
to let him first do battle against the old man,
for he truly feared the strength of Tristan,
lest he be proven better than the old man
and truly take the victory. At the table,
the steadfast feasters were called to arms,
and Tristan was a fresh newcomer among them.
Tristan granted Lancelot his request,
but immediately this decision distressed his soul,
so truly did he fear Lancelot,
lest he, victorious over that steadfast knight,
should take the reward from him, the girl who accompanied him,
and he would have to leave the combat unrewarded.
But it was not possible for Tristan to refuse this request.
Lancelot approached: "Greetings, knight," he said.
The most wondrous old man, the roaring lion,
in response asked him his name.
"I," he said, "am truly Lancelot of the Lake."
The old man replied: "Greetings, glory of youth,
but you are not yet the equal of your elders.
Nevertheless, I will provide you with a reward above all others:
I will take my spear too and strike it against your chest."
And, moving far apart, they struck with spears at one another.
Lancelot's spear shattered in his hand.
The old man felled Lancelot to the ground.
Going back again, he stood in the same spot as before.
Last of all came the nobleman Tristan,
and, having been greeted, he greeted him in his turn.
And truly he rejoiced secretly in his heart,
since he, being last, would have the reward alone,
he who had been called more powerful than steadfast Lancelot.
The aged noble knight, seeing him,

inquired of his name and his father's lineage,
for he did not seem to him to be from Britain.
"I am the son," he said, "of the king of the realm of Lyoness,
and Nephew of King Mark of Cornwall.
Tristan they call me, new among everyone here."
Hearing this, the old knight rejoiced:
Tristan would be hurled to the ground like Lancelot.
And the reward he gave was to strike at him with a spear too.
And moving far apart, they struck with spears at each other,
and everything happened in the same way as with Lancelot.
The king went pale in the face and roared through his teeth,
he cried out from his heart and became violently enraged.
Having called out to those around him, he put on his armor.
Guinevere was afraid lest he come off worse.
Kneeling before him she entreated him not to undertake this.
The famous and most wondrous king of Britain
said to her: "Go away, entreat me no longer,
go tend to adorning the women's quarters and the children.
I myself will arm for the benefit of my dinner companions."
Since Guinevere could not obtain her request,
she struck her cheeks with her hands and pulled her hair out.
All his retainers shouted, disturbed,
but his attendants' lament was but a game for the king
and, coming from throughout the house, they stood in the lists.
Nor did Arthur greet the old man, nor extend his right hand,
but stood as wild-eyed as a lion cub.
Seeing him, the old knight dismounted,
for truly he recognized the king coming toward him.
And he willingly stepped from his saddle to the ground,
and going toward him, he greeted him, kneeling like a slave,
and said: "Go away, my lord, this is not right.
The reward for the knights is my niece.
I find you have Guinevere as your lawful wife,
so beautifully and elegantly she complements your house,
even the most beautiful girl cannot come to you as a mistress.
If the fall of the knights wounds you violently,
I myself will truly become your friend and vassal,
and I am no exile, come here from a foreign land.
And if I show myself more powerful than knights of the table,
then this fame and glory is all for you;
you have an attendant equal to all the others."
When he heard this, the famous nobleman Arthur

willingly stepped from his saddle to the ground;
he hugged the old nobleman in greeting
and led him through the palace in high honor
to dine with the king and all his knights.
The old knight said: "This invitation of yours gives me joy,
but neither my name nor my face
will I show you at this time."
So saying, he bade him goodbye, extending his right hand,
and then, taking his leave, he went back to his house.
A maiden had just arrived on the scene,
she was the daughter of a high-born woman
who had been a suffering widow for a long time.
Everything she owned had been destroyed:
cities, citadels, babies, children;
her father and brothers were wiped out.
It happened that their neighbor was their lord,
the King of the Hundred Knights he was called,
and he had made many lawless raids.
Since she could not withstand the force of this lord,
she made a decision that was most wise indeed.
The girl stood by the king in the great hall.
The mother remained guarding the castle.
Rising from the brilliant feasters at the Round Table
when he learned of the lord's invasion,
the king replied to her forcefully and vehemently:
"You can see, child, the shame we have endured:
everyone was shamed by the strength of the old man.
Go now to your mother and her house.
Find a champion from among your other knights."
And she came from the house weeping bitterly.
All those present, seeing this, began to pity her,
and they gave their opinion: to ask the old man
for help and cooperation and defense against the lord.
The girl, wisely taking their counsel, obeyed.
Lamenting, she got on bended knee before the old man.
He said: "My body, daughter, has tired,
but since you have asked for help from among the knights,
and since you have found in me the cause of their shame,
I myself will provide your defense, girl,
since truly it was I who filled these men with shame.
Guide me to the village."
So saying, he left the king's house.

Towards evening they came to the castle
and everyone welcomed the girl's arrival.
The next day they welcomed their lord among them.
When the knight had gone inside the house,
he introduced his niece to the women
and became master of the house; he sat on the bed.
The old man stripped the helmet from his head
he took off his breastplate and all his armor,
and he goes to rest himself, to refresh his body.
And the dinner was held in honor of the old one.
Speaking about the aged knight's white-hair,
they mocked and reviled the girl's intelligence,
that it was a mistake for her to take that old man with her,
useless and worn-out for such a long time.
They wanted Lancelot to help them,
or the famous Tristan, or even Palamedes,
or the steadfast Gawain, or some one of the feasters
from the round table of the king of Britain:
but not an old man who leans on his cane.
"More likely he will ask us for help;
so give the old man a bed; he is weary,
and take him in peace to his own house.
And you, run back again to the king of Britain
and quickly take one of his knights from him,
so that, when it is morning, he can come with us
towards the lord who is coming towards us to ravage us."
The girl stood nearby, her eyes and face aglow,
and replied: "Do not blame me for this.
For I am not strong enough to take anyone from the table,
not Lancelot of whom you speak, nor Tristan,
nor steadfast Palamedes, not even Gawain.
He and he alone will undertake this for us.
I will tell the cause of this drama another time.
So go now to rest your bodies;
it is necessary for us to be quickly in arms.
God will turn our comedies to songs of praise."
And everyone went away; the hour was upon them,
groaning deeply, sighing, blaming the old man.
The next day, the sun was not shining brightly.
A scout came shouting the arrival of the lord.
And everyone readied their horses and armor.
At last, the knights came even to the old man.

"Get up," they said, "the lord has arrived."
Rising from his bed, he asked for his armor.
The old man also asked them for his morning food and drink.
And this seemed absurd to the men;
they thought the old man's strength was child-like.
They told the women: "Give the old man food."
They themselves armed for defense against the lord.
When the old man had eaten and drunk his wine,
he armed himself brilliantly and came out to the defenses.
But he did not go among those from inside the village,
but still alone, he watched the result of the battle.
Whoever saw him sneered, laughing at the old man
as powerless, as impotent, as entirely worn out.
When the arrows of the lord breached the interior,
they stretched out their right hands and drew their swords,
they gathered themselves together and came into the castle.
They seized the cattle, cut down the gardens,
plundered, laid waste, stripped the fields.
The old man approached them: "Greetings, knights" he said.
Having greeted them, he asked what was the cause
for which they waged war against the village.
Everyone who stood inside mocked him,
laughing from the battlements at the old man
and their mistress' daughter who had summoned him.
But as the old man knew that they were acting unjustly,
he gave them advice and counseled for the best,
that they should return the cattle and leave off the war.
When he could not persuade them, he tried to restrain them.
They mocked the wisdom and strength of the old man,
and they walked away down the road to return to their homes;
they were not to be restrained except by strength alone.
He immediately drew his sword, stretching out his right hand.
All at once he charged at them all in the battlefield,
He incited those inside, stirred them up, urged them on.
And they struck with their spears, driving everyone outside.
He slashed to the right, to the left, straight ahead,
he hurled their shields to the ground, crushed their armor.
He cut the helmets of steadfast bronze from the knights.
All those remaining fled wounded from the field.
Most of them fell victim to the old man's sword.
The lion cub himself made for the shelter of the citadel.
Everyone cheered, crowning the white-winged swan.

Men, women with children and the old people,
were pleased at the long-awaited defeat of the lord.
And they set a lavish table and wondrously praised him.
The girl recounted the fall of the brave men,
and all else that happened at the court of the king of Britain.
They thought it miraculous, as indeed they should.
The next day, he returned quickly to his house,
the old man having effortlessly shattered the might of the youths.
The queen of the castle with her daughter and servants
kneeled and spoke, begging the old man
to take a reward from them of infinite treasure.
He gracefully thanked the queen and those with her.
The reward he asked for in return for his pains was
that the girl should go to the royal palace
and give a report to the king of Bretania.
And so saying, he departed . . .

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