

MERLIN AND THE JEW. AN ANTI-SEMITIC MARIAN MIRACLE
IN THE CANTIGA 108 OF ALFONSO X

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1. *The genre of the “Miracles of the Virgin”*

The French and Iberian-romance literatures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are characterized by an extraordinary precociousness regarding the adaptation of themes taken from various repertoires. This precociousness is due to a specific socio-cultural environment, religious and aristocratic: the former was represented by the monastery, and the latter by the court. They were often closely related to one another and their cultural development was not comparable to that of the Italian counterparts. The lyrical and narrative texts born and spread within these realities, as well as manuscript sylloges, illustrative and musical presentations, are extremely rich and significant because they offer us the opportunity to observe the relationship between Western Christianity and the figure of the Other: the Jew, in this case. This compresence is the reflection of an often fertile multilingual, multiethnic and multireligious environment, well represented by the cultural fervour that characterized the court, otherwise very troubled, of Alfonso X of Castille, called *el Sabio* (“the Wise”, 1252-1284).¹ In the pages that follow I will focus on the genre of the “Miracles of the Virgin” practised by the Castillian monarch,² because within the several expressions of the so-called *narratio brevis*, this specific genre, hugely popular in the Early and Late Middle Ages, invites us to explore forms ranging from narrative to lyric (even sung), from Latin to the Romance languages, in a constant dialogue that does not break off when vernacular written languages gain ground and when lyric collections start circulating. Furthermore, while vernacular miracles are organized in collections that are themselves evolutions and adaptations of previous medieval Latin collections, the relationship between vernacular miracle literature and its sources – oral or written, sometimes very distant in time, sometimes very close, (such as those which originate in England or in Northern France) – helps us to appreciate the importance of the role played by a specific tradition in the stratification and codification of characters and types. As Valeria Bertolucci put it many years ago, it is in the Latin sources that we must look for the appearance of “realistic” situations, never before accepted as “literature”, as well as the choice of “low” protagonists – according to the categories of classical rhetoric – and the occasional presence of “naturalistic” details one would instinctively attribute to the vernacular poet’s inventiveness. Also, those peculiarly human traits from which supernatural beings are often not immune, so common in the miracles-genre – such as the Virgin’s frequent explosions of anger –, have been shown to be derived from the Eastern tradition.³

¹ The most important work about Alfonso X’s biography is still A. BALLESTREROS BERETTA, *Alfonso X El Sabio*, Salvat Editores, Barcelona 1963; see also A. D’AGOSTINO, *La corte di Alfonso X di Castiglia*, in P. BOITANI, M. MANCINI, A. VARVARO (eds), *Lo Spazio Letterario del Medioevo 2/II. Il Medioevo volgare, I, La produzione del Testo*, Salerno Editore, Roma 2001, pp. 735-785. I would like to thank my colleague and friend Giovanni Borrero for his constant advice and help in finding bibliographical material, as well as Eugenio Cozzani, whose B.A. final dissertation I supervised: E. COZZANI, *La figura dell’ebreo nelle Cantigas de Santa Maria di Alfonso X di Castiglia*, University of Pisa, academic year 2017-2018 (unpublished).

² J.F. O’CALLAGHAN, *Alfonso X and the Cantigas de Santa Maria, a Poetic Biography*, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln 1998.

³ V. BERTOLUCCI PIZZORUSSO, *Contributo allo studio della letteratura miracolistica*, «Miscellanea di studi ispanici» 6 (1963), pp. 5-72, now in EAD., *Morfologie del testo medievale II*, F. CIGNI (ed.), *Nuova raccolta di saggi e articoli*, Aracne, Roma 2017, pp. 175-230:182-183. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are mine.

The four hundred and twenty-six *Cantigas de Santa Maria* planned and redacted by Alfonso X (we do not know if he actually wrote them and, if he did, how many of them) are preserved in a small group of relatively homogeneous codices, of extraordinary importance for the poetical and musical heritage of Medieval Europe.⁴ In thirty of these *Cantigas* – a relatively small number considering the size of the Jewish population in Castile and the issues which, by then, their presence had come to raise in the kingdom – appear Jewish characters, sometimes in merely supporting roles, but more often as protagonists (usually as individuals, but sometimes also as a community). When we think about the vibrant controversy (mainly pertaining to the Anglo-Saxon academic world)⁵ about Alfonso X's presumed antisemitism and the ambiguous way in which he treats the Jewish presence in his oeuvre we must also consider that the *cantigas* reflect the monarch's own troubled but deeply-felt spiritual growth. The monarch, as we know, was the author of the *Siete Partidas*, a legislative treaty written in Castilian, fundamental in order to understand the regulation of the relations between Christians and Jews⁶ but he was, at the same time,

⁴ The manuscripts are indicated by the following letters: E=San Lorenzo de l'Escorial, Biblioteca de l'Escorial, B.I.2; T= San Lorenzo de l'Escorial, Biblioteca de l'Escorial, T.I.1 (facsimile edition, Edilan, Madrid 1979); To=Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, n.10069; F=Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Banco Rari 20 (facsimile edition Edilan, Madrid 1989-1991). From the textual point of view, E is the most complete witness: it contains 402 *cantigas*, plus 15 other texts about the feasts of the Virgin. T, that king Felipe II (1527-1598) ordered to be carried moved to the Escorial from the Cathedral of Sevilla, comes with an apparatus of wonderful miniatures (some 1264 illustrations), it is thus called *Códice rico*. It is incomplete and it is interrupted at the *cantiga* n.195. F in total contains 104 *cantigas*. It appears incomplete and many papers are missing, while the musical notation, which was originally planned, was not totally carried out. The miniatures are incomplete too. About the history of the manuscripts, see L. FÉRNANDEZ, *Cantigas de Santa María: fortuna de sus manuscritos*, «Alcanate» 6 (2008-2009), pp. 323-348. We can find fundamental comments about the reciprocal relationships among these manuscripts other than in W. METTMANN, *Algunas observaciones sobre la génesis*, in I.J. KATZ, J.E. KELLER (eds), *Studies on the "Cantigas de Santa María": Art, Music and Poetry*, Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, Madison 1987, pp. 355-366; S. PARKINSON, *The First Reorganization of the Cantigas de Santa María*, «Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa María» 1-2 (1988), pp. 91-97; M.P. FERREIRA, *The Stemma of the Marian Cantigas: philological and musical evidence*, «Cantigueiros» 6 (1994), pp. 58-98; V. BERTOLUCCI PIZZORUSSO, *Primo contributo all'analisi delle varianti redazionali nelle Cantigas de Santa Maria*, in S. PARKINSON (ed.), *Cobras e Son. Papers on the Text, Music and Manuscripts of the "Cantigas de Santa María"*, University of Oxford, Oxford 2000, pp.107-119 (now in *Morfologie del testo medievale II*, pp. 311-321); PARKINSON, *Layout and Structure of the Toledo Manuscript of the Cantigas de Santa María*, pp. 133-153; ID., *Layout in the Códices ricos of the Cantigas de Santa María*, «Hispanic Research Journal» 1 (2000), pp. 243-274. The relationship between Alfonso's authority and medieval procedure of the lyrical "canzoniere" is reexamined in V. BERTOLUCCI PIZZORUSSO, *Libro di autore e libro di autori. Il caso delle Cantigas de Santa María*, in P. BOTTA (ed.), *Canzonieri iberici*, I-II, Editorial Toxosoutos, La Coruña-Padova 2001, I, pp. 125-137, also in EAD., *Morfologie del testo medievale II*, pp. 331-338. About the organisation and the increase of the collection see J.T. SNOW, *The poetry of Alfonso X. An annotated Critical Bibliography* (1278-2010), Tamesis, Woolbridge 2012. About the relationship with the sources, the structure of the manuscripts and bibliographical indications about each miracle in itself, we find very useful the data bank: csm.mml.ox.ac.uk/.

⁵ After A. BAGBY, *The Jew in the Cántigas of Alfonso X*, «Speculum» 46 (1971), pp. 670-88, the question has been re-examined by G. ROITMAN, *Alfonso X, el rey sabio, ¿tolerante con la minoría judía? Una lectura emblemática de las Cantigas de Santa María*, «Emblemata. Revista Aragonesa de Emblemática» 13 (2007), pp. 31-177; E. FIDALGO, *Consideración social de los judíos a través de las Cantigas de Santa María*, «Revista de Literatura Medieval» 8 (1996), pp. 91-103. See also P. RODRIGUEZ BARRAL, *La dialéctica texto-imagen. A propósito de la representación del judío en las Cantigas de Santa María de Alfonso X*, «Anuario de Estudios Medievales» 37, 1 (2006-2007), pp. 213-243, and ID., *La imagen del judío en la España medieval. El conflicto entre cristianismo y judaísmo en las artes visuales góticas*, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona 2009; V. HATTON, A. MACKEY, *Anti-Semitism in the Cantigas de Santa María*, «Bulletin of Hispanic Studies» 60 (1983), pp. 189-99.

⁶ D.E. CARPENTER, *Alfonso X and the Jews: An edition of and Commentary on Siete Partidas 7.24. "De los Judios"*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1986. For an historical framework, see Y. BAER, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia-Jerusalem 1992; G. BOSSONG, *Die Sepharden. Geschichte und Kultur der spanischen Juden*, Beck, München 2008.

truly devoted to the Virgin Mary until the last tormented days of his life, when his reign was devastated by the contrasts among the aristocrats and finally by the war with his son Sancho.⁷

The specific antisemitic message that permeates his *cantigas* is consistently conveyed through a topical and exemplary language, entrusted to a poetical vernacular, the Galician-Portuguese, within precise and carefully planned prosodic structures (generally reproducing the “zagialesque” stanzas) already from the initial project of the collection,⁸ vastly enhanced by the performative dimension of the texts – a specific trait that distinguishes them from the prosaic Latin sources as well as from the concurrent European vernaculars. In fact, the *cantigas* were always accompanied by a melody, and destined to be performed with a refined instrumental support (which, in the codex called *de los músicos*, regales the viewer with an astounding iconographic experience). Generally speaking, the Jew of the *cantigas* is part of the poetic representation of a world comprised within the monumental authorial project directed by the Castilian monarch. Furthermore, the antisemitism may have its roots in the literary sources themselves of the *cantigas*, and we should not be surprised at its contradictoriness not only to the already mentioned *Siete Partidas*,⁹ but also to the linguistic-cultural blend that characterized the contemporaneous Toledo School of Translators, which availed itself of important collaborations with Jewish scholars. In the *cantigas*, the Jew embodies and humanizes the sin against God and against the Virgin so the invitation to conversion becomes the only possible solution in the religious universe envisaged by Alfonso, in view of incorporating within the society the Israelites who, according to some traditions, can be saved on Judgment Day.¹⁰

2. *The Jew in the Cantigas de Santa Maria*

As first Albert Bagby and, later, Paulino Rodríguez Barral convincingly argued,¹¹ in Alfonso X's program the Jew is describable according to at least five fundamental categories: 1) arch-enemy of Christianity; 2) the devil's ally; 3) symbol of greed; 4) traitor; 5) convert. To these, further supplementary figures may be added, that the iconographic program of Alfonso's collection helps to fix within the complex network of the relationships between text and image, such as the infanticide and the defiler. In the poetical reality of the individual, highly refined *cantigas*, yet, these categories are not always clearly defined, especially when the narrated miracle is woven within a web of texts belonging to earlier traditions. In *cantiga* 3, for example, the humble vicar Theophilus (Teófilo), in Cilicia, turns to a Jew to receive help from the devil. In a horrific nocturnal scene, the Jew takes him in presence of the devil, and makes him sign a paper in which he recants God and the Virgin. Marian cult and antisemitism can thus be considered complementary already from this debut *cantiga*. In the French (Gautier de Coinci)

⁷ J.T. SNOW, *Alfonso X retratado en las Cantigas de Santa Maria*, «Concentus Libri» 3 (1998), pp. 82-86.

⁸ Some essential studies are H. ANGLÉS, *La música de las Cantigas de Santa Maria del Rey Alfonso el Sábio*, I-IV, Biblioteca Central, Barcelona 1943-1964; M.P. BETTI, *Rimario e lessico in rima delle Cantigas de Santa Maria di Alfonso X di Castiglia*, Pacini, Pisa 1996; S. PARKINSON, *Meestria Métrica: metrical virtuosity in the Cantigas de Santa Maria*, «La corónica» 27 2 (1999), pp. 21-35; M.P. BETTI, *Repertorio metrico delle Cantigas de Santa Maria di Alfonso X di Castiglia*, Pacini, Pisa 2005; S. PARKINSON, *Questões de estrutura estrófica nas Cantigas de Santa Maria: estruturas múltiplas, assimetrias e continuidades inconsistentes*, in M. ARBOR ALDEA, A.F. GUIADANES (eds), *Estudos de edición crítica e lírica galego-portuguesa* (= «Verba» Anexo 67), Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela 2010, pp. 315-336.

⁹ See CARPENTER, *Alfonso X*.

¹⁰ On this aspect, see the excellent analysis of the story of the son of the Jewish glass worker in G. BORRIERO, «*Omnia tempus habent*»: per una lettura di CSM 4, in G. LALOMIA (ed.), *Forme del tempo e del cronotopo nelle letterature romanze e orientali*, Atti X Convegno Società Italiana di Filologia Romanza, VIII Colloquio internazionale *Medioevo romanzo e orientale*, Rome, 25-29 September 2012, Rubettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli 2014, pp. 453-478. See also V. BERTOLUCCI PIZZORUSSO, *La funzione 'tempo' nelle raccolte miracolistiche mariane*, in P. MENESES (ed.), *Sobre o Tempo. Actas do III Colóquio. Seção Portuguesa de l'AHLM*, Universidade dos Açores, Ponta Delgada 2001, pp. 151-168, now in EAD., *Morfologie del testo medievale II*, pp. 323-330.

¹¹ See BAGBY, *The Jew*, and RODRÍGUEZ BARRAL, *La dialéctica texto-imagen*.

and Castilian (Gonzalo de Berceo) versions of Theophilus's miracle (that in itself can be considered the archetype of the myth of Faust),¹² the Jewish character is well described, unlike what happens in the *cantigas* of Alfonso X, who resorts to using only one verse, *per conselho dum judeo* (l. 16), "on the advice of a Jew",¹³ to give us an extreme concentration (*cantiga* 3 is composed of just five stanzas) of the traits inherited from the previous collections.¹⁴ A contrasting example is that of *cantiga* No. 107 that takes us to a world close to Alfonso's in time and space. There we are told of a Jewish woman from Segovia, unique protagonist of the miracle, who is sentenced by her own community to be thrown from a high cliff. As she is falling, the sinner (probably an adulteress, as revealed by other popular versions of the legend, but here the sin is not specified) calls on the Virgin, who has mercy on all women, guilty and in trouble: if She will save her, the woman will not hesitate to become a Christian. She does not get hurt, because she does not fall on rocks, but at the foot of a fig tree; she then stands up and goes to Church, where she tells her story to the crowd collected there and then receives baptism. As is evident, here the Jewish woman is, exceptionally, a positive character who, through a martyrdom of a sort, is finally cleansed thanks to her invocation to the Virgin, who responds with her conversion. What is also highlighted is the condemnation of Jewish punishments and the fundamentalism of the woman's community.¹⁵

I would like to delve further into a case which is even more complicated, and in an intricate-relationship with its more or less hypothetical sources: the *cantiga* No. 108. Its content, briefly, sees a debate between an unexpected Merlin and a Jewish *alfaquin* (an Arabic word of debated etymology, that stands for someone expert in law and in religious matters as well).¹⁶ It takes place in Scotland, seen as a remote corner of the world; its combination of legendary elements and other, probably invented ones, should obviously strengthen the theme of the debate, focusing on the dogma of the incarnation. The Jew-*vs*-Merlin debate develops along "problematic", rationalistic lines with each of the *opponentes* explaining his reasons about the dogma. At its conclusion, Merlin, in virtue of his being the son of the Devil on his father's side, obtains from God that the Virgin has the son of the Jew be born with his face turned backward. When the father sees the child, he wants to kill him, but Merlin saves him and takes him under his wing, always using him as a warning to the Jews who refuse to be converted and persuading them to be baptized instead.

The text is contained, with minimal variants of form, in E and T as No. 108, and in To (final part, Appendix, as No. III).¹⁷ The *cantiga* is composed of ten seven-line stanzas (the Marian symbolism of the

¹² See, for example, P. TIMMONS - R. BOENIG, *The Miracles of the Virgin and Medieval "Spin": Gonzalo de Berceo and his Latin Sources*, «The Journal of Medieval Latin» 17 1 (2007), pp. 226-237.

¹³ All quotations from the *cantigas* refer to ALFONSO X, O SÁBIO, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, ed. W. METTMANN, I-IV, Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra 1959-1972. See also ALFONSO X, EL SABIO, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, ed. W. METTMANN, I-III, Castalia, Madrid 1986-1989.

¹⁴ See A. D'AGOSTINO, *Gli antenati di Faust. Il patto col demonio nella letteratura medievale*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2016. On the relationship between the text and the illustrative apparatus, underlining some anti-Semitic details which are absent from the Galician text, see RODRÍGUEZ BARRAL, *La dialéctica texto-imagen*, p. 217.

¹⁵ See at least A. BENAÏM DE LASRY, *Marisaltos: Artificial Purification in Alfonso el Sabio's Cantiga 107*, in I.J. KATZ - J.E. KELLER (eds), *Studies on the 'Cantigas de Santa María': Art, Music and Poetry*, Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, Madison 1987, pp. 299-312; M.R. PRIETO DE LA IGLESIA, A. B. SÁNCHEZ PRIETO, *La Cantiga 107 de Alfonso X y el proceso de transformación de la leyenda de María del Salto*, «Estudios segovianos» 95 (1997), pp. 155-226; A. ZINATO, "Esse ficar viv'e sãa,/logo me farei crischãa...": *Marisaltos la judía de Segovia* [Alfonso X, *Cantigas de Santa María*, n. 107, ed. W. Mettmann], in A. TAMAR (ed.), *El Prezente. Gender and Identity*, Moshe David Gaon Center for Ladino Studies, Ben-Gurion University of Negev, Beer-Sheva 2009, pp. 185-204.

¹⁶ E.K. NEUVONEN, *Los arabismos de las Cantigas de Santa Maria*, «Boletim de Filologia» 12 (1951), pp. 291-352; R. LORENZO, *Notas sobre léxico gallego-portugués y castellano*, in *Philologische Studien für Joseph M. Piel*, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1969, pp. 136-139; J. COROMINAS, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico*, I-VI, Gredos, Madrid, 1980-1983, I, p. 150.

¹⁷ METTMANN ed., *Cantigas de Santa María*, II, pp. 30-33, reproduced here without apparatus (the only substantial variation which is worth mentioning is: *saber* in v. 27 instead of *poder*). My personal prose translation takes into consideration D.E. CARPENTER, *A Sorcerer defends the Virgin: Merlin in the Cantigas de Santa Maria*,

number cannot be missed) with a three-line refrain followed by a pause, according to the zagialesque popular structure: A7B6B6|a7c7a7c7a7c7b6.

[C]omo Santa Maria fez que nacesse o fillo do judeu o rostro atras, como llo Merlin rogara.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar mal quen fillar perfia contra Santa Maria.</i> | 5 | o que non deveria". <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 45 |
| E daquest' oÿcontar que avêo a Merlin que ss' ouve de rezoar con un judéu alfaqui[n] que en tod' Escóga par, como disséron a mi[n], de saber non avia. <i>[D]ereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 10 | Poren te quero pregar que, com' eu de certo sei que o teu foi sen dultar, que o que te rogarey queras agora mostrar a este da falssa lei que anda con folia, <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> Que ssa moller empreñar foi; o que lle nacer en queras tu assi guisar que com' outr' o rostro ten adeante por catar, tenna atras, e des en and' assi todavia". <i>Dereit' e de s' end' achar...</i> | 50 55 60 |
| E começou a falar aquele judeu traedor ena Virgen e jurar muito palo Criador, que en ela incarna nunca quis Nóstro Sennor, nen seer non podia. <i>Dereit' e de s' end' achar...</i> | 15 20 | E o praz' uviou chegar que a judea pariu; mas ben se podó sinar quen aquel seu fillo viu, ca atal o gêerar fez Deus como llo pediu Merlin con felonía. <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 65 |
| Merlin ouve gran pesar u ll' oyu esto dizer e diso: "Se Deus m'anpar, ante podó ben seer; ca o que terra e mar fez per seu mui gran poder, esto ben o faria". <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 25 | Que o rostro lle tornar fez Deus o deant' atras, como lle fora rogar o fillo de Sathanas por en vergonna deitar a seu padre Cayphas, que ant' o non criya. <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 70 75 |
| O judeu a perfiar começou e disse: "Non podó Deus nunca entrar en tal logar per razon; ca o que foi enserrar en ssi quantas cousas son, como ss' enserraria?" <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 30 35 | Poren seu padre matar o quis logo que naceu; mas Merlin o fez guardar, que o mui ben entendeu, e polos judeus tirar | 80 |
| Merlin muit' a assannar se fillou e log' ali os gēollos foi ficar | 40 | de seu erro, pois creceu, con el os convertia. <i>Dereit' e de ss' end' achar...</i> | 85 |
| en terra e diss' assi: "Madre do que nos salvar vêo, este diz de ti | | | |

«Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa Maria», 5 (1993), pp. 5-24, as well as the Castilian version in J. FILGUEIRA VALVERDE, *Alfonso X el Sabio, Cantigas de Santa María, Códice Rico de El Escorial. Ms escurialense T.I.1*, Castalia, Madrid 1985, pp. 186-188, and K. KULP-HILL, *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, the Wise: A Translation of the Cantigas de Santa Maria*, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, AZ 2000.

[How Holy Mary had the Jew's son born with his face turned backwards, as asked by Merlin.
[rubric]

It is right that he who opposes Holy Mary should bring evil upon himself.

- I Regarding that, I heard what happened to Merlin, who argued with a Jewish alfaqui, who in the whole Scotland, as I was told too, had no rivals in knowledge. *It is right that...*
- II. That Jew, traitor, started talking about the Virgin, and swore upon God creator that never Our Lord wanted to become flesh in her, nor that it could ever be possible. *It is right that...*
- III. Merlin became very sad when he heard that, and said, "So God save me, it could be possible, because He who created the earth and the sea, thanks to His omnipotence, could do this as well". *It is right that...*
- IV. But the Jew replied: "There is no reason why God could ever get into a place like that: why He, who enclosed in himself the whole creation, should enclose himself [in that place]?" *It is right that...*
- V. Merlin became furious, and then he kneeled on the earth and said. "Mother of He who came to save us, this one says things that he shouldn't say about you. *It is right that...*
- VI. For this reason I want to pray you, since I know for sure that that is undoubtedly yours: what I ask you now is that you show him how he is following the false law and in the crazy error. *It is right that...*
- VII. and that, since his wife is pregnant, that whatever is born of her you order that just as other people have their face onwards so that they can look, his be turned backwards, and stays so all his life". *It is right that...*
- VIII. When the time was due and the Jew woman gave birth, he who saw her child crossed himself, that God ordered to be born like that, just like evil Merlin had asked. *It is right that...*
- IX. And God had his face turned backwards, as asked by Satan's son to shame his father Cayphás who once hadn't believed it. *It is right that...*
- X. This is why his father wanted to kill him as soon as he was born, but Merlin, who noticed it, had him not killed, and to save the Jews from their mistake, when he grew up, he showed him to convert them. *It is right that...*]

The *cantiga* is built according to a rigorous narrative structure, made of strophic cells. Each cell contains what happened to the various characters, and the facts are concentrated and weaved together in a particularly complex syntaxis (e.g. vv. 55-59; 67-69; 72-75; 80-84). The first two stanzas introduce the events: it is worth noticing that the first-person narrator relates facts he knows by hearsay and introduces us to the two main characters of a story that will develop itself in the past, along an extended timespan. They are Merlin the magician and the erudite Jew, whose name we will learn to be Cayphás (echoing, not by coincidence, the name of the High Priest who allegedly accused Christ), representatives of conflicting positions regarding the mystery of the Incarnation. In the third and fourth stanzas are distributed the arguments that the two *opponentes* call for in order to support their respective opinions, in accordance with the "scholastic" pattern of the *quaestio*: whether God, who created all, and who all contains, can or can not incarnate himself in the body of another being. The reply of the Jew is also based on a rationalist syllogism: God cannot enter in a place following reason, because He who encloses in himself all creation, cannot be enclosed. Merlin, as we are told in the third stanza, interrupts him opposing an argument that has a superior meaning: He who is Omnipotent and created the Universe, can do such a thing, too. The fifth stanza may be considered a transitory one: it tells about Merlin's dramatic genuflection as an extreme solution to the impossibility of convincing the opponent using rational arguments, and the scene thus introduces Mary as no longer the object of the dispute, but as the story's active protagonist. The Virgin is invoked to resolve the *quaestio*, both as God's intermediary and *advocata* on the just man's side, and as, in this specific case, a direct witness and protagonist in her own right. Stanzas six and seven are linked by a mild syntactic *enjambement*: they contain Merlin's long prayer to the Virgin, which ends with his request of a monstrous birth through a calculated effect of suspense. In stanza eight the historical thread of the narrative is picked up again in the past, thus following the natural course of time

and of the events.¹⁸ There follows the time of giving birth for the Jewish woman, then the revulsion of the father, the acknowledgment of the effect of Merlin's prayer – a wicked creature, and yet God's own ally as defender of Christians through evil actions aimed against His enemies, the Jews. Extraordinary, even for the narrator himself, is the conclusion of the whole story, that sees the deformed child, now grown up, following Merlin who uses him as a living exemplum to admonish and talk Jews into conversion. The iconographic apparatus of the *cantiga* deserves a brief mention: in T, as usual, it follows the text itself (c. 155v, Plate 4). These are the captions contained in the upper frame of the six miniatures disposed in three stripes to be read from top to bottom and from left to right, structured in perfect symmetry and correspondence to the content of the text:

- [1.] Como Merlin razonava con o judeu alfaqui en feito de Santa Maria.
[How Merlin discussed with the Jew *alfaqui* about Holy Mary].
- [2.] Como Merlin rogou Sancta Maria que nascess' o fillo do judeu o rostro a tras.
[How Merlin asked Holy Mary that the Jew's son be born with his face turned backwards].
- [3.] Como naceu o fillo do judeu o rostro avessass como disse Merlin.
[How the Jew's son was born with his face turned backwards the way Merlin asked].
- [4.] Como o iudeu quis matar aquel seu fillo e tolleull-o Merlin.
[How the Jew wanted to kill his son but Merlin took him away from the Jew].
- [5.] Como Merlin convertia os judeos con aquele judeycino.
[How Merlin converted Jews with that little Jew].
- [6.] Como bateavan os judeos que convertia Merlin con o judeycino.
[How the Jews, who had been converted by the little Jew of Merlin, were baptized].

The first picture shows the Jew with his left index finger raised and the right hand holding a book on its spine (visible proof of his knowledge), inside an apothecary's shop (recognizable by four shelves full of jars); opposite him, Merlin, slightly bending, raises the palm of his right hand. The *alfaquin* is reproduced with the typical features traditionally attributed to Jews in medieval iconography: a face with intense eyes, prominent nose, long wavy hair and a beard, surmounted by a brimmed round hat with beige wedges. The second picture, inside an identical architectonic frame, shows us Merlin kneeling down with his hands joined in prayer, with his back on the Jew. In the third picture, set in a bedchamber of the Jew's house, the woman in labour, surrounded by three female figures, is lying on the bed, protected from view by a curtain, as she looks in horror at the new-born child visibly deformed. Unlike her husband, the woman shows no typically Jewish traits, either in her attire or bodily features.¹⁹ The fourth picture is still set in the Jew's house: the scene is hectic – Merlin, helped by two male figures, seizes the new-born from the father, keeping him away at arm's distance, while behind the Jew is shown the mother's desperation. In the third and last stripe, the fifth and sixth miniatures present two different religious settings, respectively. In a synagogue, the father – in a position almost identical to that of the first vignette – is standing with his left index finger still raised (a detail not be found in the text) in a clearly polemical attitude. Around him, a group of eight Jews are now praying on their knees, facing Merlin who is standing at the far right of the picture, with a hand resting on the head of the Jewish child, now a young boy. The boy (whose Jewishness is heavily underscored by the miniaturist with a prominently hooked nose) is also standing in front of the magician, but his head, still reversed, is turned back towards the new Christians. The last picture shows the inside of a church, with a capacious baptismal font surrounded by three women and a young man standing. Inside the font, there is a figure on whose head the priest pours water from a jug according to the rite of baptism; on the right, high on a pedestal, the

¹⁸ See BERTOLUCCI PIZZORUSSO, *La funzione tempo*.

¹⁹ This aspect of the CSM in the Escorial manuscript has drawn the attention of S. LIPTON, "Where are the Gothic Jewish women? On the non-iconography of the Jewess in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*", «Jewish History» 22 (2008), pp. 139-177.

Virgin with Child enthroned. The images add important details to the elliptical descriptions of the text, but, most evidently, call the reader's attention on the integration of this narrative within the spiritual and religious program of the Castilian monarch. Without the six vignettes, the message of evangelization inherent to a *cantiga* such as *Merlin and the Jew* would not reach its full accomplishment. As Rodríguez Barral underlines, we are here dealing with a narrative that presents Judaism in the traditional light of its *obstinata malitia* (here personified by the character Cayphás) but also permeable to being evangelized, thus representing a perfect example of that ambiguity which, about the issue of Judaism, runs under the surface of the *Cantigas*. An ambiguity also detectable in the physical portrayal of the characters, especially in the miniaturist's exploitation of the conventionally Semitic silhouette.²⁰

3. The Merlin Question

In the vast Alfonsinian bibliography dedicated to the Judaic theme, only Carpenter's substantial article²¹ exhaustively investigates the vast cultural implications of *cantiga* 108, in combination with source-related problems and setting it within its specific literary context. First of all, the *cantiga* is put in relation with the Jewish-Christian polemics that characterized the first and second half of the thirteenth century²² and with the circulation of Anselm of Aosta's work, particularly his *Cur Deus homo* (composed in 1098 in Canterbury), and, next, with the famous debate held in 1263 in Barcelona, at the court of James I of Aragon, whose protagonist was the renowned rabbi Moshe ben Nahman Gerondi (Nachmanides).²³ That event needs not have inspired our *cantiga* directly, but it strongly contributed to defining a plausible religious background to the very conception of *cantiga* 108 within Alfonso's entourage.

Carpenter's in-depth investigation tackles the problem of Merlin's presence in the *cantiga*; with the aid of all the available material about the presence of Breton legends in the Iberian peninsula, as well as of all the extant works which reproduced parts of the Arthurian vulgate, Carpenter's contribution goes well beyond W.R. Davis's previous conclusions on the same subject.²⁴ As it is, our knowledge of Arthurian prose texts, both manuscript and in print, can easily justify Merlin's presence on a general scale. His Celtic and northerly origin make him a geographically and culturally marginal character within the world of the *cantigas*, but his presence in the Iberian peninsula does not come as a surprise given the diffusion in Castile of fragmentary texts of the *Arthurian Vulgate Cycle* in prose, eventually providing materials for printed editions such as the *Baladro del sabio Merlín* (Burgos 1498 and Seville 1535),²⁵ and

²⁰ RODRIGUEZ BARRAL, *La representación del judío*, p. 229. See also F. CORTI, *Retórica y semiótica visuals en la ilustración de las Cantigas de Santa María*, «Aleanate» 7 (2010-2011), pp. 215-233.

²¹ See CARPENTER, *Merlin in the Cantigas*. Previously, the *cantiga* 108 had drawn W.R. Davis's attention, in W.R. DAVIS, *Mary and Merlin: An Unusual Alliance*, «Romance Notes» 4 (1972), pp. 207-212.

²² J. LASKER, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages*, KTAV, New York 1977, pp. 105-134; D. BERGER, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1979; J. COHEN, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Cornell UP, Ithaca 1982.

²³ CARPENTER, *Merlin in the Cantigas*, p. 9. See also R. CHAZAN, *The Barcelona 'Disputation' of 1263: Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response*, «Speculum» 52 4 (1977), pp. 824-842; N. CAPUTO - L. CLARKE, *Debating Truth: The Barcelona Disputation of 1263, A Graphic History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

²⁴ Focused on the prophetic significance of the Arthurian character is B.D. MILLER, *That French Enchanter in King Alfonso's Court: Merlin in the 108 Cantiga de Santa Maria*, «Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa Maria» 10 (1998), pp. 51-60.

²⁵ See H.L. SHARRER, *A Critical Bibliography of Hispanic Arthurian Material, I, Texts: The Prose Romance Cycles*, Grant & Cutler, London 1977; ID., *Notas sobre la materia artúrica hispánica*, «La Corónica» 15 (1987), pp. 328-40; ID., *The Acclimatization of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle in Spain and Portugal*, in W.W. KIBLER (ed.), *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle: Text and Transformations*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1979-1986, pp. 175-90. See also the more recent P. GRACIA, *Arthurian Material in Iberia*, and EAD., *The 'Post-Vulgate' Cycle in the Iberian Peninsula*, in D. HOOK (ed.), *The Arthur of the Iberians: The Arthurian Legends in the Portuguese and*

the widespread presence of onomastics of Breton origins across the entire peninsula from the twelfth century onwards.²⁶

Carpenter, however, did not identify a specific Arthurian hypotext of *cantiga* 108 in the *Vulgate Cycle*, but, instead, in the *Prophecies de Merlin*, the Arthurian compilation in prose probably composed in Italy ca. 1250-1270 by a certain *maistre* Richart d'Irlande.²⁷ His hypothesis was twofold: one, that a common source of the episode narrated was used, independently, by both the Castilian monarch and the Franco-Italian author; two, and more likely, that the ambitious and culturally omnivorous Alfonso X – maybe via the contacts he had with the Italian Ghibelline, pro-Imperial party in the 1270s (the first phase of the *fecho de l'imperio*)²⁸ – became somehow acquainted with this bizarre work as well, and used a Merlinian prophecy about the dogma of the Incarnation for the Marian program of the *cantigas*. More recently, the relation between the *cantiga* 108 and the *Prophecies de Merlin* has been re-examined in the context of the presence of Breton elements in Galician-Portuguese medieval poetry, reviving the earlier more cautious hypothesis that at the base of the Alfonsinian re-elaborated version may lie the same, common source used by the Franco-Italian compiler.²⁹

Going back to Carpenter, though, it must be observed that the pertinent section of the *Prophecies* is only present in Antoine Vérard's late printed edition of 1498.³⁰ The initial part, including the rubric, is worth quoting here:

Spanish Worlds (Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages), University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2015, pp. 11-32: 271-288 (which includes an extensive bibliography of manuscript and printed texts); J.M. LUCÍA MEGÍAS, *The Surviving Peninsular Arthurian Witnesses*, *ibid.*, pp. 33-57; C. ALVAR, *The Matter of Britain in Spanish Society and Literature from Cluny to Cervantes*, *ibid.*, pp. 187-270.

²⁶ D. HOOK, *The Earliest Arthurian Names in Spain and Portugal*, Fontaine Notre Dame, St. Albans 1991; C. ALVAR, *Antroponimia artúrica: Ayer y hoy*, «Arba (Acta Romanica Basiliensia)» 24 (2013), pp. 21-51.

²⁷ See L.A. PATON (ed.), *Les prophecies de Merlin. Edited from Ms. 593 in the Bibliothèque Municipale of Rennes*, I-II, D. C. Heath, New York - Oxford University Press, London 1926-1927; A. BERTHELOT (ed.), *Les prophesies de Merlin (Cod. Bodmer 116) édité avec une introduction, un glossaire et un index des noms*, Fondation Martin Bodmer, Coligny-Genève 1992. A recent setting up, focusing on the ancient Franco-Italian redaction, is offered by N. GENSINI, *Appunti per le 'Prophecies de Merlin'. Nuove osservazioni sul ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Fr. 15211*, «Filologicamente. Studi e testi romanzi» 1 (2017), pp. 93-107, with copious bibliography.

²⁸ See, finally, L. DEMONTIS, *Alfonso X e l'Italia: rapporti politici e linguaggi del potere*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 2012. Merlin's capacity of attracting deformed figures, in particular with the face turned backwards, calls for a supplement of enquiry in a direction I can only hint at here. I am referring to Dante's "Indovini" (Fortune Tellers) of *Inferno*, canto XX, and the punishment they must suffer in the Fourth Bolgia of the Eighth Circle. This consists of an exemplary contrapasso possible models of which have been identified by ancient and modern commentators alike – from "Ottimo", to Pietro di Dante, to Robert Hollander (see R. HOLLANDER, *The Tragedy of Divination in 'Inferno' XX*, in *Id.*, *Studies in Dante*, Longo, Ravenna 1980, pp. 131-218) – mostly in the biblical and classical traditions, but never, to my knowledge, in the Breton-Arthurian one. For the vast bibliography on the subject, the on-line "Dartmouth Dante Project" (<https://dante.dartmouth.edu/>) is the source to go to. If anything, it is the mother's and the other women's horror in the T miniature (a detail without correspondence in the text of the *cantiga*) that might find an explanation in the miniaturist's possible reminiscence of Merlin's own birth in the Old French *Prose Merlin*, in which the monstrous aspect of the child (who is wildly hairy) provokes a similar reaction: see C. FÜG-PIERREVILLE, *Le Roman de Merlin en prose (roman publié d'après le ms. BnF français 24394)*, Champion, Paris 2014, ch. 15. I wish to thank dr Niccolò Gensini for this and other suggestions.

²⁹ P. LORENZO GRADÍN, *The 'Matière de Bretagne' in Galicia from the XII to the XVth Century*, in HOOK (ed.), *The Arthur of the Iberians*, pp. 118-161:127-131.

³⁰ I quote the text from PATON, *Les Prophecies de Merlin*, I, p. 492. The text of the *princeps* (also available in a Scholar Press fac-simile: see C.E. PICKFORD [ed.] *Les prophecies de Merlin: 1498*, I-III, Scholar Press, London 1975), is now accessible on the Web via www.gallica.fr in a 1503 exemplar (Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, RESERVE 4-BL-4244, 1); cf. PATON, *Les Prophecies*. The French print is not mentioned in HOOK (ed.), *The Arthur of the Iberians*, nor is Carpenter's contribution.

(f150rb) Du juif qui estoit bossu par derriere.

Vray fut que Merlin le saige prophete fut en Escoce et y demoura ung grant temps. Et a celluy temps qu'il estoit en celuy pais avoit mains Juifz qui moult contredisoient la nouvelle loy. Ung jour advint que le plus saige d'eux tencoit a Merlin et lui disoit encontre la vierge Marie. Lors se mist Merlin a genoulx et dist ainsi vrayement come Jesu Christ, le filz de Dieu, nasquit de la vierge Marie. Que vous dirois je? Avec celui clerc en vint ung qui la bouche avoit derriere, dont le chapellain tint grant parlement a lui, et encores estoit celui Juif et fut jusques au jour de sa vie. [...]

[Of the hunchbacked Jew.

You should know that Merlin, the wise prophet, was in Scotland and there remained a long time. At that time, in that country, there were many Jews who denied the Christian faith. One day it happened that the wisest of them disputed with Merlin about the Virgin Mary. Then Merlin kneeled down and spoke according to the truth, saying how Jesus Christ, son of God, was born of the Virgin Mary. What else should I tell you? Then another clerk came along, and his mouth was in the back of his head, with whom the chaplain discussed for a long time, and he was a Jew too, and such remained for the rest of his life [...]

There are many elements, as it is, that the French text, in the space of a few lines, shares with the *cantiga* 108, and that are worth mentioning:

- a. the Scottish setting;
- b. the “wiser” term attributed to the Jew;
- c. the form of the debate between the latter and the wizard;
- d. the Marian theme;
- e. Merlin’s genuflexion;
- f. the dogma of Incarnation;
- g. the motif of the Jew’s physical deformity (“bossu” in the rubric, “bouche derriere” in the text).

As Arthurianists well know, the *Prophecies Merlin* have had a wayward and diversified manuscript tradition, owing to their compilatory nature and relatively late composition. This tradition sees in Antoine Vérard’s *editio princeps* – of which the *Prophecies* occupy the third volume only – an attempt to connect the prophetic matter in prose to the content of the *Merlin* of the Arthurian *Vulgate*.³¹ Given this, it is also true that the print tradition provides us with narrative material previously unknown to the manuscript tradition. In particular, two characters represent here the receiver and the repository, respectively, of the wizard’s prophecies: *Maistre Tholomer* and *Rubert lo Chappellain*. It is impossible to establish how much is due to the invention of a late fifteenth-century redactor, or derived from earlier manuscripts now lost; what is certain is that the *modus editandi* of the Arthurian prose printers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relation established by Paton between the Vérard print of 1498 and the fourteenth-century MS fr. XXIX of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice – the composite product of different hands – suggest that the story of the hunchbacked Jew, or that of the Jew with his mouth on his shoulders, belong to an early phase of the text, which might have circulated in Italy (and in Spain?). Carpenter even suggests that in the rubric of the printed French text may be contained a misinterpretation of an earlier reading more in keeping with the content of the story, such as, for instance, *Du juif qui [avoit la bouche] par derriere*. The hypothesis is convincing, even if it does not account for the sudden appearance in the text of a deformed character about whom nothing else is known.

In conclusion, unless the existence is postulated of a common source circulating between Northern Italy and Castille within so restricted a timespan, the more plausible assumption, in my opinion, is that, starting from a now lost Old French (or Franco-Italian?) prose text, *cantiga* 108 has utilized all the elements previously mentioned, transforming, moreover, the fleeting character of the deformed Jew into the son of the blasphemer, whom Merlin himself will successively use as an instrument of conversion.³²

³¹ PATON, *Les Prophecies de Merlin*, p. 39.

³² It may be noted, in passing, that a little ahead in the French printed text, when *De la dame de la Doloureuse Marche qui sera clamee Dame en Kaifas* (f. 151) is mentioned, we have another, however small onomastic element that can be related to our *cantiga*.

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SUMMARY

The court of Alfonso X of Castile (called *el Sabio*, 1252-1284), characterized by a fertile multilingual, multiethnic and multireligious environment, offers a significant opportunity to observe the relationship between Western Christianity and the figure of the Jew. In thirty out of the four hundred and twenty-six *Cantigas de Santa Maria* attributed to Alfonso X and belonging to the genre of the “Miracles of the Virgin” appear Jewish characters. The *Cantigas* reflect the deeply-felt devotion of the monarch to the Virgin Mary but also his ambiguous attitude towards the Jews: anti-Semitism is already present in the Medieval sources of the genre and, as argued in this paper, is not in contradiction with the tolerant cultural climate of the School of Toledo. To show such ideological implications, the paper examines *cantiga* 108, where is staged a debate on the dogma of the Incarnation between the Merlin of the *Arthurian Vulgate* and a Jew.

KEYWORDS: Alfonso X; *Cantigas de Santa Maria*; Merlin and Jewish characters.

