There is something fascinating about the troubadours of medieval Provence. The idea, therefore, that Hebrew poets created a troubadour tradition of their own seems just as tantalizing today as it did some twenty years ago, when Hayyim Schirmann first remarked on this very possibility.\(^1\) Already in an important article from 1949, Schirmann discussed the features which one Hebrew poet, Isaac ha-Gorni, seems to have learned from the troubadours: the use of a senhal, or 'code name;' the frequent mention of musical instruments; and the poetic battles, or tens, that ha-Gorni conducted with other Hebrew poets of his day, such as Abraham ha-Bedarsi and Isaiah ben Devash.\(^2\) What this paper hopes to add to the discussion is a suggestion that more than incorporate various elements of troubadour poetry into his work, Isaac ha-Gorni actively cultivated a specific poetic persona in his poetry: the persona of a wandering professional troubadour, or, as they were called in the Occitan tongue, a jongleur.\(^3\)

Troubadour poetry is above all performance poetry. It was performed before an audience, whether in the hall of some great castle, or out in the marketplace before the crowds. It was accompanied by music: flutes, cymbals, harp or lyre.\(^4\) The poems reflect a specific dramatic persona, most often a love-stricken knight who vows eternal obedience to his scornful lady. And in order to enhance the public persona, prose introductions known as vidas and razon grew up around the individual trou-

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1 Personal communication by Dr. Ulf Haxen of the Royal Library, Copenhagen. I would like to thank Dr. Haxen for his perceptive comments on an earlier draft of this paper presented at the Colloquium for Medieval Hebrew Poetry, held in Oxford, July 2000.


3 The popular distinction today between the 'aristocratic troubadour' and the 'lowly jongleur' is not supported by the sources, which – at least in the later part of the troubadour tradition – appears to use the terms indiscriminately. See R. E. Harvey, 'Joglars and the Professional Status of the Early Troubadours', Medium Aevum 63.2 (1993) 321-343.


badours and jongleurs, possibly to be recited prior to performance. To give an example of one such vida:

Garin d’Apchier was a noble castellan from Gevaudan from the bishopric of Mende... He was a valiant and good warrior, and generous and a good inventor of poems, and a handsome knight. And he knew all there was to know about love and gallantry. And he composed the first descort which begins:

When the leaf and the flower bud
And I hear the song of the nightingale

The love-stricken knight is the best-known persona in troubadour poetry, but it is not the only, or, for our purposes, even the most important one. What is important is that we often find an altogether different persona in troubadour verse, specifically, a kind of vagabond poet with loose morals and scandalous reputation. This kind of poetic persona is less well-known to those of us who are not scholars of troubadour poetry, because it emerges in poems that rarely find their way into translation. These poems, known as sirventes joglaresc, consist of invective poems between two troubadours or jongleurs who exchange lusty insults deploring each other’s personal morals and lack of poetic talent. The language in such exchanges is not, generally speaking, exactly refined (or even polite!), and the following examples only summarize the main points:

Guillem Rainol d’Apt accuses the jongleur Guillem Magret of spending his time getting drunk and visiting the ladies of the night.7

Bertran, seigneur of Gourdon, accuses Peire Ramon de Tolosa of drinking, womanizing, and – worst of all! – writing bad poetry.8

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5 M. Egan (trans.), The Vidas of the Troubadours, New York/London 1984, xxvi-xxviii.
6 Egan, The Vidas of the Troubadours, 36.