Review Essay: Jewish Literary Eros: Between Poetry and Prose in the Medieval Mediterranean

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My recently published book, *Jewish Literary Eros: Between Poetry and Prose in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Indiana University Press, June 2022), presents a comparison of fictional writings across literary traditions of the medieval Mediterranean. It places secular texts by Jewish authors side by side with works by their Muslim and Jewish predecessors and Christian contemporaries to see how attitudes toward fiction, metaphor, pseudo-autobiography, allegory, and courting rituals vary or parallel each other in unexpected ways. The texts in question were written primarily between the twelfth through fourteenth centuries by Jewish authors in Christian Spain and Italy and comprise a mixture of poetry and prose, known as *prosimetra*. The writing of this period has traditionally been considered decadent, less brilliant and innovative than compositions by Jewish Andalusian predecessors whose writings, still in regular circulation today, have had an incalculable impact on Jewish intellectual, literary, scientific, and exegetical histories. I hope that I dispel this misconception in some small way: the next generations of texts form a continuum, one that both looks to past innovations while also considering new ways to create meaning for readers attempting to survive ever more precarious realities.

Thus, on the one hand, this study has less to do with the Jewishness of these authors than the astonishing literary hybridity of writers from across the medieval Mediterranean—writers from different faiths who spoke the same languages, shared the same secular cultural contexts, and studied the same philosophical commentaries, mathematical treatises, and scientific texts. Indeed, the literary forms and the varieties of love I highlight are far more evocative of social conditions and cultural values than the entertaining qualities of the works seem to indicate.

On the other hand, there is something particularly Jewish about the texts by these Jewish authors, despite their unmistakable borrowings from and adaptations of Arabic and Romance literary

forms and motifs. This *something* is at once both obvious and elusive; obvious, since secular texts written in Hebrew by Jews of al-Andalus, Christian Spain, or Italy are all in essence clever and brilliant pastiches of the Hebrew Bible, every word or phrase necessarily carrying with it a complex array of connotations that educated Jewish readers of the medieval Mediterranean would have noticed immediately and admired greatly. (There were a few detractors to secular poetry, of course, most famously Maimonides and his disciple ibn Falaquera, though Maimonides objected not to poetry itself but rather to its desecration of the Holy Tongue and its potential to lead men to engage in unseemly behavior.[1]) This something Jewish, though, is as elusive as it is obvious, since these authors broke new ground, experimenting with new literary forms and techniques: the resulting texts grapple with human love and poetics as intertwined and crucial steps toward ethical living, and regardless of intercalated biblical allusions the stories are removed from a Jewish context. At the same time, however, these authors openly declare their goal of creating texts that show the potency of the Hebrew language with the expressed hope of buoying their Jewish readers who were living in ever more precarious circumstances, facing persecution, forced conversion, forced migration. I must add that not all of the texts by Jewish authors featured in my book are in Hebrew; they also include works in Italian, Judeo-Spanish, and Castilian in the centuries following. In this way, the question of what makes a text particularly Jewish is even more challenging and amorphous.

To be clear, these authors were pious men who penned biblical commentaries and liturgical poems—Jacob ben El?azar the author of liturgical poems and Immanuel of Rome the author of extensive biblical commentary. But they were also secular polymaths, descendants of those who were trained in the Arabic tradition of *adab*, a word that in modern Arabic simply means literature but in the medieval period referred to a broad, humanistic education that any young man of means would have pursued. Like their Muslim counterparts, wealthy Jewish men in al-Andalus in the golden age of Hebrew letters (ca. 950–1150) studied these same subjects, one of which was poetry, poetic composition, and, what today we would call literary criticism. One of the most profound results of this flourishing humanism was the tenth-century adaptation of Arabic quantitative meter and thematics for use in Hebrew poetry, both secular and devotional; the same poets, such as Judah Halevi and Solomon Ibn Gabirol, composed both varieties.[2]

The later authors whose works are the focus of my book lived in Christian Spain and Italy, in periods of increasing unease and turmoil, their predecessors already having been driven from their beloved Andalucia by increasingly stringent Muslim rulers. Ben El?azar and Immanuel, for instance, composed masterpieces in Toledo and Italy (exact location unknown), respectively, amid fraught historical realities: ben El?azar had to contend with increasingly stringent papal and monarchical controls on Jewish businesses and religious practice, and while Immanuel's Christian counterparts deigned to exchange Italian sonnets with him, they made sure to refer to him as "Immanuel the Jew" (a moniker that has remained even today when some modern-day scholars of medieval Italian literature refer to him) and to position him in excrement-laden visions of hell in their own sonnets—forceful reminders that he and his fellow Jews were purportedly expelled from Rome by the Avignon papacy in 1321, though documentation of the edict is not extant.

In the past two decades, scholars have delved into the multiplicity of literary traditions of medieval Iberia, devoting studies to Hebrew and Sephardic literature within the Mediterranean setting, including, among others, wonderful books by Ross Brann (*Iberian Moorings: Al-Andalus, Sefarad, and the Tropes of Exceptionalism*); Jonathan Decter (*Iberian Jewish Literature*); Michelle Hamilton (*Representing Others in Medieval Iberian Literature*); S. J. Pearce (*Andalusi Literary & Intellectual Tradition*); and David Wacks (*Framing Iberia* and *Double Diaspora in Sephardic Literature*). These studies complement research collections that confront the multiplicities of medieval Iberia from a comparative perspective, such as *The Literature of Al-Andalus* (edited by María Rosa Menocal, Michael Sells, and Raymond P. Scheindlin); *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* (edited by Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Karla Mallette); and *Under the*

Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile (edited by Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Rouhi).

My contribution is a pause amid these broader studies; in slowing down to look at the intricacies of literary form and genre across traditions, I find particular moments of innovation among Jewish authors. Freeing themselves from the steady restraints of both meter and rhyme built into the fixed poetic forms employed by Hebrew poets of al-Andalus, some Jewish authors of prosimetric or polymetric texts explored new literary forms to address secular love. Although my most conspicuous examples come from certain Hebrew maqamas, I also consider other works, including Immanuel's Italian lyrics and polymetric Judeo-Spanish oral poems, and I broaden my discussion into experimental poetic and prose compositions from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. I situate these examples with respect to relevant sources in ancient Greek, classical Arabic, Latin, Castilian, French, Galician-Portuguese, Italian, and Occitan. When viewed in the comparative context of the medieval Mediterranean, the evolving relationship between the authors' combinations of literary forms and the theme of love adds nuance to our understanding of how Jewish literature of the period negotiates its position within Islamicate and Christian literary traditions.

The question remains: why love? Profane love is the only theme shared across prosimetra by authors of the three religions. While all Arabic treatises, no matter the subject matter, featured interspersed rhymed and metered poems, Romance-language texts—which evolved much later than classical Arabic works, mirroring the centuries' later development of distinct Romance languages—favored poetry and most often featured love stories; of the few extant Romance prosimetra, love is the choice topic. Yes, this is the realm of courtly love—a highly problematic term that I address thoroughly—a world of knights, princesses, and unrequited love; indeed, a world in which some Jewish authors were eager to take part. At the crossroads of these literary cultures, Jews of the medieval Mediterranean pushed poetry toward something new, combining dominant cultures' literary stylings, at times imbued with biblical Hebrew and Jewish thematics, and with an undeniably perceptive awareness of self and other.

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[1] For Maimonides’ opinions on poetry, see *Maimonides’ Treatise on Logic* (*Maq?la f? sin??at al-mantiq*), 48–49; Maimonides, *Mishna ?im perush*, Avot 1:16; trans. in Monroe, “Maimonides on the Mozarabic Lyric,” 20; and Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:435 (3.8).

[2] For a thorough overview of this cultural and literary landscape, see Scheindlin, “Hebrew Poetry in Medieval Iberia.”