TEXT AND CONTEXT: A JUDEO-SPANISH VERSION OF THE DANZA DE LA MUERTE

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Before leaving Spain in the fifteenth century, a Jew, *converso*, or Crypto-Jew copied down in Hebrew characters a series of diverse texts that were then bound together into a manuscript that found its way to Italy. Among the texts is a version of the Spanish Dance of Death. This manuscript (Parma 2666) found in the Palatina Library in Parma Italy, dates from the mid-fifteenth century. This manuscript miscellany contains several texts including a copy of Alfonso de la Torre’s *Visión Deleytable* and the *Proverbios de Seneca*. While the vast majority of surviving aljamiado manuscripts are texts written in Arabic, a few, like this one, have survived in Hebrew aljamiad. While most of these manuscripts are of a legal or religious nature—being law codes, community tax tables, sales receipts, or personal notes—only a handful contain copies of literary works. One is this aljamiado Danza, and another a Hebrew aljamiado version of the *Proverbios morales* of the thirteenth-century author, Shem Tob de Carrión.

While the *Proverbios morales*, which was declared a lectura reprobada by the Inquisition, have long been considered within the purview of the
so-called “converso question,” the existence of this Hebrew aljamiado version of the Danza de la muerte suggests that it too, like the Proverbios morales and the Coplas de Yoçef—both of which were recorded together in the aljamiado MS C—also circulated as edifying reading among Jews, Crypto-Jews, and New Christians at different stages of the religious spectrum. Like the Coplas de Yoçef and the Proverbios morales this aljamiado version of the Danza is unique and important in helping us reconstruct the cultural context of the conversos. The existence of this aljamiado version of the Dance of Death forces us to question what meaning this text (long thought to be Christian in nature) had for conversos and Jews living in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Iberia—the only people who would have been able to decipher this Romance work written in Hebrew characters. The Parma Danza offers us a glimpse of what conversos or Jews still living in Iberia were reading, transmitting, and discussing—and possibly how they were adapting foreign material to suit their needs, i.e. creating hybrid texts to meet their complex needs as Spaniards, whatever their confessional identity. In this study I compare this aljamiado version of the Danza to the only other existing Spanish manuscript version, focusing on important textual differences that mark this as a converso or Jewish one. I also suggest that, like the Proverbios morales, because of the Danza’s theme, it may have had a performative function not only in converso or Jewish funerals, but also in the celebration of the Jewish holidays of Yom Kippur and Rosh ha-Shanah—both associated with individual transgression and repentance, and, especially in the Diaspora, with the sins and forgiveness of the community.

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4 Diaz-Mas and Mota address, in the context of the Proverbios, how moral didactic readings could function in many different ways according to their audience, whether Jew, Crypto-Jew or devout New Christian (20–23). One example given is that of Genesis. While for Christian readers this text would not be problematic, for a Crypto-Jew it represented a way to revitalize their connection with the law of Moses (21). Diaz Más and Mota further give the example of one Ferrán Verde, a New Christian brought before the Inquisition. Verde admitted to reading not only parts of the Old Testament, but also Shem Tob’s Proverbios morales. While the Inquisitors felt these readings pointed to Jewish beliefs and a Jewish background, Verde claimed his intentions had nothing to do with Judaism, but simply read these texts, “por mi salvación y por me apartar de vicios,” (“for my salvation and to keep me from vice”) (21), an assertion that his extensive reading of the New Testament, various saints’ lives, and Diego de San Pedro would seem to support. The Proverbios morales were not read exclusively by Jews, but also valued by Christian readers such as the Marqués de Santillana and Don Pedro, el Condestable de Portugal. For a description of MS C of the Proverbios morales, see pages 11–13.