DON QUIXOTE—TALMUDIST AND MUCHO MÁS

José Faur
Netanya College

To the memory of Professor José Mair Benadrete:
Mentor and Friend

For in the beginning of literature there is myth,
as there is also in the end of it.
Jorge Luis Borges, Parable of Cervantes and the Quixote.

I

Jews from Moslem Spain played a major role in the transmission of certain literary genres and motifs to Provence. In Christian Spain, Jews loathed Latin. It was the language of the Church—or “la idolatría” as it was known among Jews and conversos. It had the odor of death and brought memories of killing and maiming and rape and pillaging and tearing of limbs and plucking of eyes: all done for the love of God. They would rather write in the vernacular. Anyhow, Latin was used for serious stuff, such as theology and philosophy, and thinkers with Jewish blood better tread carefully upon entering holy territory. What happened to Juan Luis Vives (1491–1540) and Fray Luis de León (1527–1591) and countless other thinkers was a warning to all New Christians. This is why conversos expressed their unique situation through literature—an area of little importance in the eyes of the Church. Nonetheless, caution was of the essence. Accordingly, camouflaged within the text were configurations of thought and emotion that could only be decoded by a chosen few. Hence the two dimensions of what eventually will be know as “modern literature”—the earmark of Western culture. It must be

1 See Ramón Menéndez Pidal, España, Eslabón entre la Cristianidad y el Islam (Madrid, 1956).
2 I remember as a child my parents’ debating whether to bring a tutor to help me in Latin, the language of tum’a, that is, impurity.
written in the vernacular and must contain a message decipherable only by a privileged public. In this precise sense, to be meaningful, literature—like Rabbinic hermeneutics—must be subversive; not by wrecking the normative, but by using it to point out at something beyond the ordinary. ³ (See below, II.)

This could help us understand a phenomenon never explored before Américo Castro (1885–1972). Christian Spain had no Middle Ages.⁴ If one were to compare the Latin chronicles produced in Spain from 1000 to 1250 to what was produced in England, France, or Germany, one would discover how meager and insubstantial they really are. Professor Lomax, who studied these chronicles, wrote:

One looks in vain for any Spanish chronicler to write about his reigning monarch one-tenth as critically as Matthew Paris writes about Henry III, and the contrast is even stronger when one compares the quantity of attention paid to the decade of, for example the 1230s: 1,900 words in Jiménez de Rada, as against 120,000 in Matthew Paris.⁵

These chronicles are notoriously dull, lacking depth and nuance. On the same subject he pointedly added:

In short, Hispano-Latin chronicles of this period are comparatively dull and lifeless, and even when dealing with the most exciting moments in the Reconquest are capable of hiding the sharp details of real life behind a veil of rhetoric. One of the first lessons learnt by any researcher into the subject is that any Latin chronicler which describes physical appearance, natural scenery or other realistic details can be crossed off, almost automatically, as a Golden-Age forgery.⁶

Spain is the only country in Western Europe that had no Renaissance. It did not participate even in such basic debates as the relation of reason to religion.⁷ How then are we to explain the Golden Age of Spanish literature, beginning around the second half of the fourteenth

---


⁶ Ibid.