One of the major problems in addressing the question of the humanistic aspects of Isaac Abravanel's literary work is to elucidate the intellectual paradigms that both allowed him to connect himself to humanistic discourse and constituted the framework of an understanding of himself as a financier, leader, and writer. Recent and less recent scholarship has revealed clear humanistic trends in Abravanel's work and life, including the use of classical literature, humanistic rhetorical conceptions, ancient and contemporary history, astrology, magic, and kabbalah, but also republican ideas and humanistic models of leadership. Still, much work needs to be done to get a clearer idea of his involvement in Renaissance culture and his assimilation of it. In other words, the question is less whether

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Abravanel borrowed humanistic conceptions in his Hebrew and Jewish work, than in which way and in which framework.

I would like to present in this paper what seems to me one of the central avenues of Abravanel’s assimilation of humanism. I rely in this paper on the work of Angel Gomez Moreno, Pedro Catedra, and Jeremy Lawrence, who convincingly established the existence of a 15th-century Iberian humanism different in many of its features from 14th- and 15th-century Italian humanism. Isaac Abravanel lived in the Iberian Peninsula—first in Portugal and then in Castile—until the Expulsion of 1492, when he fled to Italy. There he lived first in Naples, then in the Venetian cities of Corfu and Monopoly, and finally in Venice itself (which was uncommon for a Jew at the time) until his death in 1508.

Hence Abravanel experienced both Iberian and Italian humanism during his life. But his knowledge of Italian humanism predates his Italian period; it began in Portugal, where he was in regular commercial and literary contact with people in Tuscany, as we know from his letters to Yehiel da Pisa and other commercial documents. We may add that the literary success of Isaac Abravanel’s firstborn son, Yehudah—author of the Dialoghi d’amore—is a clear testimony of the integration of Don Isaac and his sons into Italian Renaissance humanism and culture.

The following pages will present what seems to me the central conceptual paradigm of Abravanel’s work: the tension between fortune and divine providence. It is important to stress that this conceptual duality is also a

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4 On this question, see C. Cohen Skalli, Isaac Abravanel: Letters (Berlin and New York 2007).