“ADONAI CON VOI” (1569),
A SIMPLE POPULAR SONG WITH A
COMPLICATED SEMANTIC ABOUT
(WHAT SEEMS TO BE) CIRCUMCISION

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Written words are symbols of spoken
words and spoken words are symbols
of mental experience.

Aristotle, On Interpretation

The portion “symbols of mental experience” (τον εν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημά-
των σύμβολα) leaves considerable room for interpretive maneuver. That
single texts are susceptible to different readings is a truism as valid
for medieval commentary on canonical works as it is for modern lit-
erary criticism variously practiced, on texts at large, with traditional,
structuralist, or post-structuralist methodologies. In the present report
I shall be concerned with a modest Italian popular song, specifically a
villotta, one of various lighter types of music in the sixteenth and early
seventeenth centuries. “Adonai con voi”—thus it begins—radiates jovi-
ality and at first blush appears innocuous; one might easily pass it by.
But, looking closer, one is struck by its “odd” vocabulary, which, when
probed, turns out to be so provocative as to raise broader questions,
of an epistemological nature, about poetry as a vehicle for transmitting
ideas and attitudes. What was the author trying to say and why? Whom

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1 Peri hermeneias, 1.1.1. I reversed the order of the two clauses (originally “Spoken
words … written words …”). In music, notated or performed “sounds” are similarly
representative of “mental experience.” Aristotle asserted that “rhythms and melodies
contain representations of anger and mildness, and also of courage and temperance
and all their opposites and the other moral qualities … [and that] when we listen
to such representations we change in our soul”: Politics, 8.5.6, trans. H. Rackham

2 Including the villanesca, the canzone napolitana, and the villanella: they appear in
works of greater and lesser composers from the 1530s on. On specific collections
of villotte, see below; and for Thomas Morley’s description of the villanella (and, by
implication, the villotta) as a form of rustic entertainment, in which composers “make
a clownish music to a clownish matter,” see his treatise A Plaine and Easie Introduction to
was he addressing? How did he conceive his remarks? How vicariously are we to conceive them: in earnest? in jest?

The verses under investigation—and I shall concentrate on the verses rather than the music, which, in the present case, is fragmentary (see below)—elude a facile explanation: they intimate more than they disclose. In their opaqueness, they typically illustrate the referential power of language, about which Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote that “nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid.” It is evident that the more meaning one can extract from a poem the more interesting it becomes. Yet the assets of multiplicity are usually countered by the liabilities of uncertainty. Whether these liabilities are to the detriment of the poetry is a question I will ask at the end.

1. What Is Special about “Adonai con voi”?

In its poetry and music “Adonai con voi” exemplifies what Alfred Einstein, with his fine-tuned sensibility to varying ethnic types in sixteenth-century Italian lyric poetry, called an ebraica, or “song about Jews.” Few ebraiche have been preserved: ten, perhaps eleven, of as many as can be identified, date from the last decades of the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries and may be ascribed to at least eight different composers, some of them major figures in Renaissance music.

3 The music is rife with its own problems of semantics, in connection with the poetry and apart from it: to what extent does the music reinforce the words? To what extent does it create its own meanings as sound formations? These are heavy questions that ordinarily would demand closer attention. Yet, for present purposes, they can be overlooked not just because the music is incomplete but because the poetry, as dependent as it is on the music for its presentation, can be separated from it for (at least part of) its understanding. Even so, I do in fact address the first question in describing ex. 1 below and, later on, in asking whether there is “anything ‘musically’ Jewish about ‘Adonai con voi.’”


6 In order: Alessandro Coppini, “La città bella,” entitled “Canzona de’ giudei” (late fifteenth century); Giovanni Seragli, “Per non trovar,” entitled “Canzona de’ giudei battezzati” (late fifteenth century); Giovanni Domenico da Nola, “Ecco la nimpha ebraica chiamata” (1545); Lodovico Novello, “Quatro hebbrée madonne siamo” (1546); Ghirardo da Panico, “Adonai con voi, lieta brigada” (1569; about which below); Orlando di Lasso, “Ecco la nimph’Ebrayca chiamata” (1581; same lyric as in Nola’s...