In one of the many books published in Holland relating to the Bekker controversies (1691–1694), the Reformed theologian Melchior Leydekker (1642–1721) expressed his growing alarm at the way new post-Cartesian forms of rationalist philosophy were progressively undermining the ascendancy of theological concepts in Dutch society. Indeed, he was inclined to see the challenge posed by philosophy as the chief issue in contemporary Dutch culture and held up what to him was the terrifying and disastrous specter of the traditional Christian “kerkelijke Republijk” [church Republic] being totally overwhelmed by a tide of freethinking, generated by the ideas of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bekker, which would finally give rise to “het rijk der philosophen” [the imperium of the philosophes]. Philosophy, he complained, especially among the young, was acquiring the upper hand over theology.\(^1\) Admittedly, Bekker, he granted, did not altogether share Spinoza’s views; yet on the subject of Satan, demonology, and witchcraft, he had openly contradicted “het generale consent van alle volkeren” [general consent of all peoples], the ancient Greeks and rabbinic Jews included, thereby promoting highly dangerous notions that lead directly to what he regarded as the evil of Spinozism.\(^2\)

A great many people, he agreed, had risen up to defend the beliefs of their ancestors, and of the Church Fathers concerning Satan and demons, defending such beliefs against the mockery and slander of the libertines and freethinkers. However, the Dutch Jews, he was sorry to say, were no longer among those defending the beliefs of their forefathers on these crucial topics. Menasseh ben Israel, he adds, in conversation with the Calvinist “pope” of Utrecht, Gijsbertus Voetius,

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had even scandalously admitted that “he did not know whether devils exist.” Thus, “de hedendaagsche Joden,” he lamented, “zijn mede in haar geheel Sadduceen” [the modern day Jews are likewise all Sadducees]. Some present-day Jews, he says, only concede the existence of good angels and not of bad. If Bekker, due to philosophy, was abandoning the Christian fold, held Leydekker, then in the process he was acquiring as allies not just mocking freethinkers but also the new Jewish Sadducees.

This philosophical rationalist streak in early modern western Sephardi culture was indeed destined to grow into something that can be usefully termed the “Early Jewish Enlightenment,” though this phenomenon should by no means be regarded as solely Sephardi in character. It was rather a pan-European phenomenon recognized as a fact by a number of writers, most notably the eloquent Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d’Argens (1701–1771). His highly successful and several times republished—and translated⁵—*Lettres Juives* (6 vols., The Hague, 1738), written during the first part of the six-year period that this Provençal nobleman resided in the Dutch Republic (1734–1740), centers around three fictitious Ottoman Sephardi Jews who show great personal refinement, speak several languages fluently, are always courteous, and exhibit an ardent interest in intellectual life alike in the Christian West and the Islamic world, delighting in the progress of learning, philosophy, and toleration.⁶ In this way, d’Argens used a literary device that was invented by Gian Paolo Marana in his *Espion Turc* of 1684, and subsequently employed by Montesquieu, in his *Lettres Persanes*, to striking effect.⁷ The book deservedly enjoyed something of a vogue in fashionable society, being prized for its wit, graceful style, and enlightened views, by Voltaire and Paolo Mattia Doria, among

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