ON BOOKS AND POEMS: POETIC EXCHANGES IN HEBREW POETRY IN AL-ANDALUS

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Abstract

Among the Jewish elite in al-Andalus, the art of poetry was a social phenomenon that crossed the borders of the purely literary. Writing was an inseparable expression of a way of life and, sometimes, a way of cultivating friendship. This relationship between friends reached a particular intensity in epistolary compositions. This article offers a general presentation of this group of poems and analyzes two very exceptional episodes. In the first, Moshe ibn Ezra asks Yosef ibn Sahl’s opinion on one of his poems. In the second, Ezra writes to Yišḥaq ibn Barun in order to request his book on comparative grammar.

The Epistolary Compositions: A “Dialogue” between Friends

Among the Jewish elite in al-Andalus, the art of poetry was a social phenomenon that crossed the borders of the purely literary. The Hebrew poets were a circle of friends who shared a poetic model that they enjoyed. Acceptance of this model as the standard was a sine qua non in order to gain admittance to this select group. The poetry that they created and “consumed” had a remarkable strength that removed barriers between people of different origins, social level, age, education, and so forth who joined this erudite aristocracy. In this milieu, writing is not done for financial gain; save in exceptional cases, there are no professional poets among them who earn a living from their verses.1 Writing is an inseparable expression of a way of life; composing is done

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1 It is true that personalities like Ḥashday ibn Shaprut, Shemuel HaNagid, or Yeqtī’el ibn Hassan have their own circle of courtier poets but, even in these cases, it is not always easy to establish clear-cut lines between the “protector” and the “friend.”
for pleasure, and as an expression of personality, and as a statement of one's outlook on life.²

Hebrew poetry in its Golden Age was considered a worthy and respectable activity, well suited to “noble gentlemen” for whom the verses are often a pivot on which relationships between “peers” revolve. And a glance at their ḫīwān is enough to confirm that not just a few of their poems find their raison d’être in the ongoing communication that they are nurturing—sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. Friendship in the broadest sense, with all of its meanings and nuances, is a frequent subliminal element in poems that reflect the social boundaries appropriate to an era and a milieu from which authors did not try to escape, even if they could.

This relationship between friends, often perceived as being the driving force behind the act of writing a poem, reaches a particular intensity in epistolary compositions. If, whenever one friend writes to another, the text becomes a means of communication, it is even more so when distance, however short, separates friends, so that the verses make contact possible between two absent friends.³ Thus, the words are traveling from one place to another, and they gain in meaning precisely for this reason.

The Hebrew poets of al-Andalus, by use of poetic exchange, found a suitable way of cultivating friendship. The links between sender and recipient exist and are, in general, embedded in the very origin of this type of poem, acting as a meeting point between distant voices. What supports these literary pieces is the demonstration of friendship between those who share a world of feelings and interests. They may already know each other well, they may have just begun to become acquainted,

² On the world of values that underlies this Jewish aristocracy that turns poetry into an art and a weapon, see R. Scheindlin, “La situación social y el mundo de valores de los poetas hebreos,” in R. Izquierdo Benito and A. Sáenz-Badillos, eds. La sociedad medieval a través de la literatura hispano-judía, VI: Curso de cultura hispano-judía y sefardí de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (Cuenca, 1988), 53–70; R. Brann, “La poesía en la cultura literaria hebreo de al-Andalus,” in J. Targarona Borrás and A. Sáenz-Badillos, eds. Poesía hebrea en al-Andalus (Granada, 2003), 9–25.

³ These words from C. Guillén, as well as many other ideas on the art of letter writing included in his book, Múltiples moradas: Ensayo de literatura comparada (Barcelona, 1998), have contributed much to the present essay. Guillén’s work, as well as G. Pontón’s work, Correspondencias: Los orígenes del arte epistolar en España (Madrid, 2002), served me well when approaching the subject that I am dealing with here. Their essays have given me a wider perspective on the literary forms used in the Andalusian Hebrew poetic correspondence.