

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SEPHARDIC READER'S NEGATIVE
EVALUATION OF CELESTINA¹

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A seventeenth-century Sephardic reader's censorship of *Celestina* appears in the anonymous text, *Diálogos entre dos hermanos, Obadía Ben Israel y Andrés Antonio, sobre la falsedad de los Evangelios y verdad de la ley de Mosseh, Primera [y Segunda] parte[s]*.² The manuscript, supposedly prepared in Morocco in the latter part of the seventeenth century and copied at least once in Rotterdam, is an apology for Judaism: it is but one of three extant copies of the work.³ Its intention is to convince

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² Ets Haim MS HS47 C14, Ets Haim Synagogue Library Collection, Amsterdam; currently on extended loan to The Hebrew University and National Library, Jerusalem. xiv + 295pp. + vi + xi.

³ Another manuscript text, copied in Rotterdam in 1710, bears date of original composition as 1662. Considering the widespread practice by the Dutch-based Sephardim of authoring apocryphal literature and including false frontispieces in published works, it is reasonable to conclude that the *Diálogos* belong to the Dutch Netherlands — probably Amsterdam or Rotterdam — and not North Africa. In addition, the later date is preferred to the former: cf F. Peeters-Fontainas, *Bibliographie des impressions espagnoles des Pays-Bas Méridionaux* (Nieuwkoop: 1965), 2 vols., and Harm den Boer, *La literatura hispano-portuguesa de los sefardíes de Amsterdam en su contexto histórico-social (siglos XVII y XVIII)*

Spanish *conversos* to return to their original faith. On the final pages of the two *diálogos* (294-5), Andrés, the long-lost brother disassociated from Judaism, voluntarily accepts circumcision and, in so doing, can achieve his 'soul's salvation.' The reference to *Celestina* [243] reads as follows:

Obadías [to Andrés]: ". . . y alla [244] en España, quando un muchacho sale de la Escuela, como no ha depreendido, ni leydo por otros libros que el de Celestina, y otros tales, sabe muy bien de que manera a de enamorar una moça, y como la ha de embiar el alcahueta, armar de noche la escala a la ventana, para escalar su casa, y honra, y finalmente que palabras le dira, para se la robar, y

(Amsterdam: Universiteit/Faculteit der Letteren, 1992). In the United Provinces of Holland the work's proselytizing effects could be most gainfully employed among the recent escapees from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition and the political unrest stemming from the Spanish War of Succession. Consult Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Los judeoconversos en la España moderna* (Madrid: Mapfre, 1992), ch. 4, "Los judeoconversos en el siglo ilustrado. Nuevos tiempos, viejos problemas," pp. 103-34, especially.

(2) For this second ms., see Walter C. Kraft, *Codices Vindobenses Hispanici: A Catalog of the Spanish, Portuguese, and Catalan Manuscripts in the Austrian National Library in Vienna* (Corvallis: Oregon State College, 1957), p. 39, no. 11630: *Verdad de la lei de Moseh aclarada en dos diálogos. Interlocutores: Andrés Antonio, Obadía Ben Israel. En Maruecos [sic] : Año 5442. Anno Christi 1662. Copiado por mi Jahacob Raphael Monis, en Roterdam, año 1710. 158 ff.*

(3) F. Eyssenhardt, *Die Spanischen Handschriften der Stadtbibliothek [Hamburg. Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek] (Hamburg: Verlag von Lucas Grafe & Sillem, 1897), Hispan. 5 "17 Jahrhundert Fortificación de la Fée. Dos Diálogos compuestos en Maruecos [sic]. son Ynterlocutores del Primer diálogo Andrés Anttonio[sic], Obadya Israel y Simha su muger.* This last text, Spanish Manuscript #47, olim Cod. MS hebraic 240 (olim Steinschneider #349), bears a second title, *Dialogo curioso de dos hermanos diferentes en la profession de su ley y arguyentes sobre la verdad de cada qual compuesto Por un secret[ari]o de sus Razones A honor del summo Dios y provecho de los deseosos de su salvaçion.* Its watermark (ii) appears to be a cuspidor-shaped goblet: W. A. Churchill, *Watermarks in Paper, in Holland, England, France, Etc. in the XVII and XVIII Centuries and their Interconnection* (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger & Co., 1935), includes many cup-like impressions, dated post-1636 and "Generally French," nos. 458-473, pp. cccxlv-ccclvii, but none very much like this one. The first manuscript's watermark, though, (consisting of two lions supporting two marble columns) and countersign (the letters AI) are quite similar to ones documented in Churchill. The watermark resembles, though does not faithfully copy, the Arms of [the City of] Amsterdam, numbers 1-15 and 17-78 (iii-xlvi); the countersign is identical to his number 62 (xxxviii), which, in turn, is identical to Joly's, number 37, dated 1700-1710. This manuscript, therefore, would appear to be a product of Holland, not Morocco.

dexarla deshonorada. Veis aquí el provecho que saca de lo uno, y el fruto que se sigue de lo otro.

Andrés: [¿] Y en la lengua hebrayca no ay tales historias?

Obadías: Nunca ubo, ny avra, quien tan atrevido sea, que las palabras de la lengua santa emplea en tales locuras, y vanidades.

Andrés: [¿] De manera, que no hay entre los judios Poetas, ni compositores?

Obadías: Sy hay muchos, pero todo lo que conponen son cantares endereçados en loor de Dios, como Psalmos, y semejantes. Sin haver nunca quien una sola palabra deshonesta escriviesse en tal lengua. Por que verdaderamente ella misma no la [245] sufre, a tanto que quando nuestro Señor mando a Noah, que metiesse consigo en la Arca los animales — dixo, las quatropneas que no son limpias, quizo poner tantas palabras, que parecen demasiadas, por no dezir animales suszios, todo por no meter esta palabra en su santíssima Ley, supuesto que se podía escuzar, y de aquí tomamos exemplo, y Doctrina, para no hablar, ny escribir cozas deshonestas en la lengua santa.

This anonymous reader's initial reactions of censorship toward *Celestina* adhere to an orthodox Jewish (and Christian) code of pre-marital piety and general moral conduct.⁴ Obadías, a voice for strict adherence to divine law, as professed in the Torah, then interpreted in the Talmud and Mishnah, considers the Spanish masterpiece an example of the prurient in literature. Such estimations are consistent with sixteenth-century invectives directed at the work by Spanish humanists, et alia.⁵

Obadías, though, is naïve. He is totally unaware of the literary historiography of the dispersed Sephardim. The assertion, "Nunca ubo, ny avra, quien tan atrevido sea, que las palabras de la lengua santa

⁴ See Ed. Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House, Ltd., 1989), pp. 461-5, s.v. "Marriage."

⁵ Ver C. Morón Arroyo, *Sentido y forma de "La Celestina"* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1974); Fernando de Rojas, *Comedia o Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, ed. Peter E. Russell (Madrid: Castalia, 1991), p. 64; and Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, ed. Dorothy Severin (Madrid: Cátedra, 1987), pp. 22-25.

emplea en tales locuras, y variedades" (244), is a hasty generalization, for he ignores the early sixteenth-century Hebrew translations of *Celestina*⁶ and the *Amadís*,⁷ and the numerous medieval Hebrew poems "on the good life."⁸

Célestine



⁶ Umberto Cassuto, "The First Hebrew Comedy: [Hebrew text], in *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut*, ed., Salo W. Baron and Alexander Marx (New York: The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1935), pp. 121-8; summarized in Umberto Cassuto's *Storia della letteratura ebraica postbiblica* (Assisi/Roma: Beniamino Carucci Editore, 1937), p. 142 (V 13) and p. 137 (V 7). The translation/version was undertaken by Josef ben Shemu'el Sarfathí, also known as Giuseppe Gallo, "delicato poeta vissuto fra Firenze e Roma, e morto nel 1527." For the extant introductory poems in Hebrew, see D.W. McPheeters, "Una traducción hebrea de *La Celestina* en el siglo XVI," *Homenaje a Rodríguez-Moñino*, Vol. I (Madrid: 1966), 399-411. Rabbi Joseph ben Samuel Tsarfati's 1507 or 1508 translation remains lost. Also useful is Dwayne E. Carpenter, "The Sacred in the Profane: Jewish Scriptures and the First Comedy in Hebrew," in *Fernando de Rojas and 'Celestina': Approaching the Fifth Centenary*, ed. I.A. Corfis & J. T. Snow (Madison, WI: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1993), 229-236.

⁷ See Zvi Malachi, *The Loving Knight: The Romance of Amadís De Gaula and Its Hebrew Adaptation (Turkey, c.1541)* (Petah-Tikva Israel: The Haberman Institute for Literary Research, 1982).

⁸ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, & Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publications Society, 1986).