Einat Davidi

The Jewish Auto-Sacramental Plays as Jewish Baroque Drama

One of the challenges facing Spanish philology in recent years is the study and research of *Converso Literature* as part of the corpus of Spanish Golden-Age literature. But the *converso*-corpus is far from a unified entity. And one of the important distinctions within it, in terms of the literary work's psychological and historical conditioning, is the distinction between *conversos* and *reconversos*. The literature of *ex-conversos* is a rich literature, written mainly in communities that Kaplan has described as “the communities of the western Spanish diaspora”, communities that were forged mostly in Protestant cities like Hamburg and Amsterdam and in enclaves of tolerance within Catholic countries, like Bayonne and Livorno. *Ex-conversos* and others persecuted by the inquisition migrated to these communities and were re-educated into Judaism in a community that was strict in its adherence to religious law, on the one hand, but also somewhat open to a Jewish modernity on the other. The epicenter of these communities was the bustling port city and hub of world economy at the time, Amsterdam. The city was the center of colonial trade, the stock market and banking, and home to the West India and East India companies. Due to its prominent status, in the Jewish history of the early modern period it earned the name “Jerusalem of the North” (Kaplan 1992; Israel 1985). This community produced a significant literary oeuvre both in the Iberian tongues (Portuguese and mostly Spanish) and in Hebrew. Every literary text written in the communities of the western Spanish diaspora by former Iberians, including works written in Hebrew that lie beyond the accepted boundaries of conservative philology, belongs to the literature of the Spanish Golden Age and must be studied and taught in the cultural, theological, philosophical and aesthetic contexts of the Spanish Baroque. In 1989, Harm den Boer published a detailed catalogue listing all the Jewish texts printed in Amsterdam, including all works of literature, and this catalogue can be of use to anyone wishing to teach and study this corpus (Boer 1988).

In this paper I wish to address a particular body of work within this rich literature: the group of dramatic works written by Jewish writers from these communities in the dramatic structure of the *auto-sacramental* genre. The genre of the *auto-sacramental* is unique to the Spanish Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and over the course of the eighteenth century it shuffled off the stage of history. Despite its resemblance to such medieval dramatic forms as the morality play and the mystery play, it has unique characteristics

that connect it more firmly with the early modern period – for instance, expressions of philosophical questions that were discussed intensively at the time (like skepticism and determinism), influences from the Spanish *comedia*, and the influence of Prudentius’ “*Psychomachia*.” The backdrop to the emergence of the *auto-sacramental* drama is the atmosphere of the Counter-Reformation. It is a liturgical drama, which in one way or another forms part of the ritual of the Holy Week procession during the Feast of Corpus Christi, a ritual that was imbued with special meaning in the Catholic countries during the Counter-Reformation. The themes expressed in the *auto-sacramental* plays are related, whether implicitly or explicitly, to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, which was known as a central point of contention between Catholic and Reform Christianity, while in the background, of course, lay the clash over Corpus Christi. As a type of agonal liturgical drama which is staged primarily in the springtime and celebrates the world’s salvation and the renewal of the cycle of life, this is the closest dramatic genre to the origins of Greek drama in the Eleusinian mysteries. It is an allegorical drama that is centered around a transformation and expresses the main impulse of the mental life of the Christian believer: repentance and conversion. The Eucharistic transformation is the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, which occurs as an effect of the word itself, and effect of language.

Its constitutive elements are allegories-prosopopeiaes; the combination of a psychomachic agon and a theomachic agon; a progression from reasonable to bad, to a crisis and from there to salvation, in line with the course of the life of Jesus; concealment and disappearance followed by revelation and a discovery of the truth; transformation and conversion whose deep meaning is sacrifice. Thus, this is a unique genre of Spanish Baroque, and given its close link to the Eucharistic sacrament, a Jewish *auto-sacramental* is, at least on the fact of it, not at all possible. But the period in which the *auto-sacramentales* flourished is also the time when Jewish converts to Christianity were able to emigrate or flee from the Iberian peninsula to northern Europe and convert back to the old-new religion. These Jews were “double” converts, and as a group for whom conversion and transformation was a central tenet of their consciousness as a very real mental and historical event requiring inquiry and interpretation, it is only natural that they should adopt a genre that revolves around conversion and transformation. And indeed, as my research into this subject suggests, a substantial number of the dramatic works produced in the communities of the western Spanish diaspora, as well as works that came under their influence, in Italy and even North Africa, are works with distinctly *auto-sacramental* characteristics. The body of work I have defined – the “corpus of Jewish and Hebrew *auto-sacramentales*” (Davidi 2019) – constitutes an example of a sophisticated, creative

and sometimes also subversive appropriation of a genre that is at least apparently tied inextricably to Catholic theology, to the myths that underlie it, and to the ritual of the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

The first *auto-sacramental* play by a Jewish author is the Portuguese play *Dialogo dos Montes*, written by Rehuel Yessurun (Paulo de Pina) in collaboration with Saul Levi Morteira (Polack 1975). It is not a Calderonian *auto*; rather, it conforms to the generic norms of plays by Gil Vicente, that is, to the *auto sacramental* in an early stage of its development, before it was ultimately crystallized by Calderón.

We don't have enough information regarding the performances themselves, but we do know that performing theater pieces in the synagogue was prohibited by the Maamad (the community board of government) in 1632 (and again in 1639). But we know from the records of Miguel de Barrios, who wrote a kind of poetic history of the community, that this play was staged inside the Beit Yaakov synagogue and we know also the identity of the actors in the play, for instance the identity of Moshe Gideon Abudiente, who would go on to assume key roles in the social and religious life of the Sephardi communities of Hamburg and Glückstadt. This fact more than hints at the deep acquaintance of the members of these communities, including their spiritual leaders, with this dramatic structure.

The play's content is agonal: seven anthropomorphized Biblical mountains battle with each other over who deserves to have the Torah given upon it. At the play's core, then, lies a dilemma, a weighing of options, judging, and eventually a decision and a choice. But the most clear-cut Jewish *auto-sacramental* written in an Iberian tongue is the 1665 play "*No hay fuerza contra la verdad*" (Nothing Can Stand Up to the Truth) by Miguel de Barrios.¹ Like part of Calderón's *auto*, the play is based on a particular historical event. Here the event is an *auto-da-fé* in Córdoba in which three Jews were burned at the stake. The historical event undergoes an allegorization designed to emphasize the element of Jewish martyrdom – dying for the sake of "*kidush hashem*," the sanctification of God's Name – and to present it as a theophany. The *auto-sacramental* structure suits this purpose because its characters are all allegorical, and theophanic sacrifice is its central theme. Miguel de Barrios also wrote a string of plays that bear a self-explanatory name: *Mosaic autos*. Through an allegorization of the community's institutions, the poet imbues its history with theophanic depth.²

¹ Re-edited by Scholberg (1962).

² For a detailed discussion of the dramatic development of the plays, see Lieberman 1996, 53–92.

Two plays by Antonio Enríquez Gómez also belong to this corpus, even if only to its outer margins – if the corpus is defined as a corpus of *reconvertos* – since Gómez did not convert back to Judaism but rather returned to Spain and there continued to publish under a pseudonym. The first is “*Loa sacramental de los siete planetas*,” an opening play that Gómez wrote for Calderón’s play “*La cura y la enfermedad*,” presented in Seville in 1659 (Enríquez Gómez 1987). The work is a sacramental loa for all intents and purposes, whose manuscript was discovered and author identified thanks to the work of Constance Rose. The second play is “*La culpa del primer peregrino*,” printed in Rouen in 1644, an allegorical drama centered on the character of the ambivalent, wavering man, the original sin, and exile and salvation as mental forces (Enríquez Gómez 1735).

The corpus also includes plays in Hebrew. First and foremost is the play “Prisoners of Hope” (*Asirei HaTika*, 1673) by Penso de la Vega, who is known primarily as the author of the first book on the stock market, a book that to this very day receives new translations and appears in new editions while its readers never suspect that its author was an observant Jew. “Prisoners of Hope” deserves to be called “the first Hebrew *auto-sacramental*”; moreover, it marks the first appearance of this genuinely Spanish genre in any non-Iberian tongue. Interestingly, it is also the first Hebrew-language drama to be printed.³ Thus, significantly, the first Hebrew-language theater piece ever printed is an *auto sacramental*.

In 1771 the play was reprinted in Livorno – not a small feat for a dramatic text. This fact attests to a degree of distribution of the text, which is of a piece with its influence on other Hebrew texts that I will address next. The play “The Celebrating Mass” (*Hamon Hogege*) by an unknown author exists in manuscript form and was attributed to Moses ben Mordecai Zacuto until Shirman disprove this assumption (Schirmann 1979, 146). This is a “mini” biblical *auto-sacramental* that uses the structure of the genre in a subversive and playful manner such that only identifying the genre makes the comic effect possible: Jacob, the father of the nation, occupies the role typically filled in this genre by the satanic villain, and from this ironic twist we can assume that the contemporary audience was familiar with the *auto-sacramental* structure.

The play “The Eternal Foundation” (*Yesod Olam*) by Moses Zacuto is also a biblical *auto-sacramental* but of greater breadth – it takes the biblical story of the transition from paganism to monotheism, of the young Abraham smashing the idols of his father Terah, and shapes it, in the spirit of the Christian Biblical ex-

³ According to Shirman, the first known Hebrew play is “*Zachut Bedichuta de Kidushin*” (צחוט בדיוחוטא דקידושין), but it was printed only in the twentieth century by Shirman himself. It was not distributed and therefore had no influence on readers of Hebrew. The first Jewish play ever printed was *Esther*, in Venice in 1619.

egesis, as a prefiguration of the seventeenth century conversion from Catholicism (*idolatría*) to Judaism (Zacuto 1874).

Finally, “Praise Be to the Upright” (*LaYesharim Tehilla*) by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (RaMCHaL), from 1743, is the latest play in the corpus (Luzzatto 1981).⁴ Situating it within this corpus may come as a surprise since in the standard historiography of Hebrew literature this important play is attributed to the Hebrew literature of Italy, a country regarded since Bialik as the cradle of modern Hebrew literature. Yet the RaMCHaL, who famously fled his persecutors who objected to the mysticism of his work, found shelter – lo and behold – in Amsterdam, Jerusalem of the North, and it is there that he wrote and also printed his great allegorical play. If we read the play through literary categories, we can see that it possesses all the essential characteristics of the *auto-sacramental*: it is an agonal play, whose characters are all prosopopeiaes divided into good and evil; in between stands the character of man who bears the burden of choosing, deciding and overcoming temptation; and the play depicts the grappling with deception and the mask, to discover the truth marked by salvation.

Conclusion

The corpus of *auto-sacramentales* is a symptom and an embodiment of the way in which Spanish-Catholic culture seeped into the heart of Jewish culture. But from the perspective of Spanish philology, the corpus is a telling expression of the radiation of Golden-Age Spanish culture beyond the Iberian peninsula, of a migration of literary structures that effectively severed them from the space in which they were organically created and of their subsequent evolution and perhaps universalization. The transformation and transmutation of the *auto-sacramental* genre, which to date has been considered unique to the Spanish Baroque, constitutes but also exemplifies a movement of aesthetic forms and conceptual forms from southern to northern Europe, with Jewish writing and the Jewish realm functioning as transformers and mediators of sorts between Catholic and Protestant countries.

From the point of view of Spanish philology, a discipline in which the study of seventeenth century literature tends to be conservative, the corpus demonstrates that Spanish Golden-Age literature influenced other cultural realms and that the writers of the communities of the western Spanish diaspora served

⁴ An English version: *Moses Haym Luzzatto's Lah-y' Shaw-riem Tehilaw*. Trans. Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein and Rebecca Fischel. New York: Bloch Pub. Co., 1915.

also as transmitters of this literature, including all the modes of thought that it expresses and carries with it. It is for good reason that this function of the Amsterdam writers as agents of a cultural transfer is not absent from Sullivan's monumental study of Calderón's influence on the German-speaking countries.

The *auto-sacramentales* genre took shape in very particular historical, cultural and theoretical conditions, and there is therefore a tendency to view it as a Spanish genre, local rather than universal. The inclusion of the varied corpus I described here, some of which is written in non-Iberian languages, within the corpus of this genre carries the potential not only to expand the corpus of Spanish Golden-Age literature and to move toward a less conservative and nationalistic and more modern notion of philology (or, indeed, "comparative literature"), but also to influence the controversial theory of the *auto-sacramental* genre. For it is precisely the *auto-sacramental* play, more than any dramatic genre, in Spain and beyond, that is the closest to the dramatic tradition out of which developed theatre in the West, the origins of Greek drama in the Eleusinian mysteries, and the Book of Job, as a paradigm of theatre that grows inexorably out of the question of the existence of evil within the Western understanding of God. If we dare to expand this perspective further and pry open the theory of *auto-sacramentales* (and in this task, identifying the corpus of Jewish and Hebrew *auto-sacramentales* is useful), then we will find that even a whole host of plays written after WWII, including "Waiting for Godot" and some of Grotowsky's works, are types of *auto-sacramentals*.

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