

Letras Hispanas

Volume 16, 2020

TITLE: *Jewish Poetry and Cultural Coexistence in Late Medieval Spain*

AUTHOR: Gregory B. Kaplan

PUBLISHER: Arc Humanities Press

YEAR: 2019

AUTHOR OF THE REVIEW: David Navarro, Texas State University

Gregory Kaplan's monograph collects a comprehensive analysis of Judeo-Christian cultural dialogue in medieval Iberia, supporting the original notion of *Convivencia* as coined by Américo Castro. In this case, and through in-depth study, the author identifies the strong intellectual sharing forged in Castilian monasteries on the Camino de Santiago [Way of Saint James] route, which served to transmit *cuaderna vía* [fourfold way] poetry from Christians clerics to Jews. This analysis challenges the concept of medieval interfaith coexistence built upon violence and oppression supported by other scholars in the field, such as David Nirenberg and Mark Cohen. Chapter 1, "The Birth of Castilian *Cuaderna Vía* Poetry," and opens with an introduction that guides the reader through the origins of the *mester de clerecía* [cleric's craft] poetry on Iberian soil. Kaplan explains the role played by French Cluniac monastic schools in the development of the *cuaderna vía* versification among Castilian clerics. The author identifies three main factors in support of this argument: the Camino de Santiago; the founding of monasteries conceded to the order of Cluny in northern Spain, and the phonetic changes adopted in the Castilian language. Kaplan asserts how the Castilian clerical *cuaderna vía* style served as a form of entertainment and education for pilgrims during rest breaks in their journey to Santiago, transforming these monasteries into cultural and commercial production centers,

attracting travelers and new residents from all backgrounds, including Jews. The popularity of the Camino, known through various illuminated guidebooks for pilgrims such as *Liber Sancti Jacobi* (Book of St. James) and *Codex Calixtinus* (Codex of Callixtus), coincided with the founding of several monasteries conceded to the Order of Cluny by Alfonso VI (1043-1109) and located along the Camino route, such as San Zoilo, in the town of Carrión de los Condes, and San Martín, in the town of Frómista. The Castilian clerics at these monasteries were heavily influenced by the Clunic tradition, leading to a *Castilianization* of the *cuaderna vía* techniques through the instruction of *mester de clerecía* to new generations of friars. These new poetic changes included the cultivation of fourteen-syllable verses rather than the Old French twelve-syllable *alexandrines* grouped in rhymed quatrains; the insertion of "accessus ad auctores," a medieval technique that contained an introductory summary to an author or book; and the use of apocope, or loss of word-final vowels (16, 21). Kaplan provides examples of these innovative changes, including the anonymous *Libro de miseria del omne* (Book of the Man's Wretchedness), *Libro de Alexandre* (Book of Alexander) and Gonzalo de Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* (Miracles of Our Lady).

In "Early Jewish *Cuaderna Vía* Poetry," Kaplan seeks to explain the origins of the so-called Jewish *cuaderna vía* as the result of cultural

encounters between Jewish writers and Christian clerics in monastic schools during the twelfth century. This approach constitutes, indeed, one of the most successful achievements of Kaplan's monograph, for it allows a new perspective on interfaith cultural contact and equilibrium achieved in medieval Iberia. According to the author, the growth of towns and new settlements near these monasteries along the pilgrimage route led to several communities, including Jews, transforming monasteries into commercial and cultural venues. The forging of this "interconfessional coexistence on the Camino" enhanced interfaith relations between Castilian clerics and Jewish authors who might have learned and composed the *cuaderno vía* style in their works for similar didactic and liturgical purposes (28). As examples of this early Jewish *cuaderno vía*, Kaplan examines the rhyme and topoi of three anonymous poems ascribed to Jewish authors: "El Dio alto que los çielos sostiene" (Lofty God Who Sustains the Heavens); "Quando el rey Nimrod al campo saldriya" (When King Nimrod Was in the Field); and the eighteenth-century Sarajevo ballad "Quando a Yerushalayim vide en tanta fatiga" (When I Saw Jerusalem in such Dire Straits). By analyzing the meter of these texts, Kaplan successfully identifies the influence of the French acoustic style in these compositions, shown by the common use of dodecasyllabic verses that appear combined with some sporadic fourteen-syllable Castilian alexandrines. Consequently, the author suggests an early cultivated but not yet mastered Castilian *cuaderno vía* by these composers. In addition, Kaplan explains the Jewish authorship of the poems based on three common features they share: the use of the term "Dio" instead of "Dios" which was perceived as a Trinitarian word by Jews; the insertion of Hebrew words and expressions; and the incorporation of Midrashic material, a popular technique used to explain exegetical interpretations, which serves as the storyline of the poems.

Chapter 3, "Proverbios morales, the Epitome of Jewish *Cuaderno Vía* Poetry," is focused on this most important surviving Jewish *cuaderno vía* work, by Castilian rabbi Sem Tob de Carrión (1290-1369). Through surviving documentary evidence and some remarkable insights, Kaplan suggests that Sem Tob, who is believed to have originally been from the town of Carrión de los Condes, studied at the near monastery of San Zoilo on the Camino route, and acquired Castilian poetics instruction from his interaction with clerical patrons. As a result, his masterpiece *Proverbios morales* is comprised of 725 stanzas of fourteen-syllable alexandrine verses and represents a mastery of Castilian syllabic computation (51). Sem Tob's extensive cultural collaborative with Christian clerics served also, according to Kaplan, to provide his *Proverbios* with a didactic purpose under a unique rabbinic voice. In this case, by employing an articulated *cuaderno vía* Castilian style, and addressing his work to King Pedro I (1350-1369), Sem Tob aimed to transmit an urgent message of interconfessional dialogue and social harmony in light of the growing anti-Jewish sentiment and Jewish sectarianism that threatened the kingdom. While the text contains several Old Testament references familiar to the Jewish public, Kaplan highlights some Christian works by Jewish converts alluded to in *Proverbios*, which might have played a pivotal role in contributing to legitimize anti-Jewish persecution: the twelfth-century compilation of moralizing tales *Disciplina clericalis* (Instruction on Life for the Educated), translated into Latin by converso Petrus Alphonsi in 1106, and used as a "handbook" for preachers during the thirteenth century, and *Mostrador de justicia* (Revealer of Justice), by anti-Jewish polemicist Abner de Burgos (1270-1347).

In "The Legacy of Jewish *Cuaderno Vía* Poetry," the final chapter of this monograph, the author guides us on a journey from fourteenth-century medieval Jewish *cuaderno vía* poetry to similar works transmitted orally outside of the Iberian peninsula up to modern times. The

texts of study in this section include the fourteenth-century fragmented Hebrew *aljamiento* poem “Coplas de Yoçef;” the seventeenth-century liturgical prayer “A ti, Señor, rogaré” (To you, Lord, I will Pray); and “El Dio alto que los çielos sostiene,” (Lofty God Who Sustains the Heavens), preserved orally among the Sephardic communities established in northern Morocco after the 1492 expulsion. The similarities these compositions share in metric, rhythm, and theme, such as a more consistent use of fourteen-syllable alexandrine verses and the lack of Hebrew terms, permits establishing the notion of an evident evolution of the *cuaderna vía* pattern techniques by these Jewish anonymous composers acquired in the early twelfth century and mastered in the following periods.

Kaplan’s remarkable contribution in the study of the adoption of Castilian medieval poetics by Jewish authors assesses and connects several centuries of Jewish poetic voices intertwined by the *cuaderna vía* versification. In addition, the author brings attention to examples of medieval works often excluded from the Castilian literary canon to show the multicultural context that shaped medieval Iberia. Kaplan’s monograph will be of interest to scholars of Castilian *mester de clerecía* and the role played by Cluniac monasteries on the Camino de Santiago as major centers of Jewish-Christian interconfessional collaboration, portraying a coexistence forged not on hostile persecution but instead intellectual exchange and dialogue throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.