

Vernacular Anxiety and the Semitic Imaginary: Shem Tov Isaac ibn Arduziel de Carrión and his Critics¹

The development of a vernacular literature is a key piece of the Spanish nation building project, and essential to the modern notion of a nation state. Although Antonio de Nebrija's *Gramática de la lengua castellana* is celebrated as the beginning of Castilian's status as an official national language, the process began far earlier, with the ambitious vernacularization efforts of Alfonso X 'The Learned' of Castile-León in the thirteenth century. As beneficial as the development of a prestigious vernacular was for the prestige and influence of the courts where it was practiced, it introduced an element of linguistic secularity into a literary world dominated by classical languages that were definitively identified with a specific religious group. Latin belonged to Christianity, Hebrew to Judaism, and Arabic (at least in Christian Iberia, if not al-Andalus) to Islam. But Castilian was, by virtue of its vernacularity, a common patrimony.

At the end of the fourteenth century, the massive conversions of thousands of Jews to Catholicism in the wake of the pogroms of 1391 introduced a new class of Christians whose ethnic Judaism challenged established markers of identity. This destabilization of the semiotics of identity caused no little anxiety among the communities of Old Christians.² A similar effect occurred with the spread of vernacular (Castilian, Catalan) literature that, unlike Latin, Arabic, or Hebrew, could no longer be definitively associated with any of the Peninsula's religious traditions. To write in one's own mother tongue instead of the classical language of one's religion was at once a great leveler and a great source of anxiety. Jewish and Christian voices both in Spain and abroad have since spent centuries debating the meaning of a secular vernacular literature in a culture where identity had long been expressed primarily in terms of religious affiliation or heritage.

The anxieties that accompanied both the increasingly tenuous situation of Spain's Jewish communities in the late Middle Ages, the social transformations brought about by massive conversions in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the ensuing obsession with ethnic purity demonstrated by the statues of *limpieza de sangre*, and Spain's eventual modernization, all crystallize around the work of Shem Tov de Carrión (ca. 1290-1360), author of the Castilian *Proverbios morales* (= *Proverbios*) and the Hebrew *Debate Between the Pen and the Scissors* (= *Debate*).³ In this essay, I will focus first on how Hispano-Hebrew writers voiced their anxieties over the use of the literary vernacular as background to Shem Tov's veiled critique of the literary vernacular. Then I will discuss how modern criticism of Shem Tov's works, and the role of of

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² Nirenberg, "Enmity," 153-54; Meyerson, *Muslims*, 11-12.

³ Shem Tov ibn Isaac Arduziel de Carrión, known also as Santob de Carrión, is the only known Jewish author of a major surviving work in medieval Castilian. His Hebrew works include the *Milhemet ha-`Et ve-ha-Misparayim* ('Debate between the Pen and the Scissors' = *Debate*), also known as *Ma`ase ha-Rav* ('The Rabbi's Tale'), the gnomic poem *Yam Qohelet* ('Sea of Ecclesiastes'), the *Vidui gadol* ('great confession'), known in Sephardic congregations, where it is still sung as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy, as *Ribbono shel `olam* ('Lord of the Universe'). In addition, Shem Tov wrote four *pizmonim*, or penitential hymns, and translated Israel Israeli's commentary on the liturgy, *Mitsvot Zemaniyot* ('Seasonal Duties'), from Arabic to Hebrew. Zemke, *Approaches*, 25-32.

Jewish authors in national literary history reveals modern critics' own anxieties about Spain's Semitic imaginary.

1. A national ambivalence/anxiety

Despite the frequent celebration of the cultural achievements of al-Andalus in public discussion, Spain's relationship with its Jewish and Muslim past is characterized by a blend of ambivalence and forgetfulness. The practice of Catholic nationalism, inaugurated by the Catholic Monarchs in Early Modernity and reimagined by Franco in the twentieth century, relied on clear narratives that defined national identity as Catholic and Castilian. Since Franco's death, the re-evaluation of Spain's multicultural and plurireligious history, in the words of Aurora Rivière Gómez, "dificultaba la definición de 'nosotros.'"⁴ Voices across the political spectrum simultaneously celebrate and suppress various aspects of the national Jewish and Muslim legacy. And while some theories of European Orientalism, most notably those of Edward Said, have been useful in studying how Spanish Arabists and Hebraists from both sides of the aisle have tried to make sense of al-Andalus and Sefarad, Spain is once again different from France, England, and Germany in that it is far more difficult to distinguish the national Other from the national Self. Carl Jubran, in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, explains this problem succinctly:

Spanish Orientalism is an internal process which involves the celebration of the 'other' within the historiography of Spanish national culture and identity. Although this represents a unique process which breaks down the model of binary oppositions presented by Said, and other postcolonial scholars, of the 'East/West' 'Christian/non-Christian', it is still a process concerned with modernization through imperialist aspirations. In this manner, this new process could be called an 'internal-Orientalism.'⁵

It is this internal Orientalism, the conflation of the other with the self, that distinguishes Spanish Orientalism. Spanish Hebraism is likewise heir to a tricky ideological legacy. Just after 1492, almost overnight Spain went from being the most important center of Hebrew studies in the Jewish world to the most important center of Hebrew studies in the Christian world. A bumper crop of newly converted Hebrew scholars flooded Spanish universities, which caused, as it did in other fields where Old Christians suddenly had to contend with highly skilled and motivated *conversos*, quite a bit of conflict.⁶ Unlike Spanish Arabism, Spanish Hebraism as a field was essentially founded by its own objects of study. What this means is that Spanish Hebraists, even more than Spanish intellectuals in general, are keenly aware of the Jewish contribution to national cultural patrimony.

Despite generations of Hebraists claiming Jewish achievements for Spain, the study of Spanish Hebrew literature has remained largely compartmentalized from that of the Peninsula's Romance literatures.⁷ This alienation from the national semitic legacy is not limited to Spain's

⁴ Rivière Gómez, *Orientalismo*, 21.

⁵ Jubran, *Spanish*, 45.

⁶ Wacks, "Spain's," 322-23.

⁷ Wacks, "Spain's," 317. Other scholars have written on this question in reference to the role of Hebrew and Arabic more generally. See Espósito, "Monkey"; Menocal, "Beginnings," Dangler, *Making*; Hamilton, *Representing*.

Jewish past, but is also evident—with variations—in the way that Spaniards represent their Andalusí and Morisco heritage. In her discussion of *Maurophilia* (i.e., ‘love of Moorish culture’) in the sixteenth century, Barbara Fuchs points up a contradictory tendency to celebrate Moorish culture when it is being celebrated *as Moorish culture*, and to disregard it when it appears, however blatantly, as part of *Spanish* culture. In one example, she describes the ‘Casa-Museo Árabe’ in Cáceres, Extremadura, which reproduces the inside of a house

as it might have looked under Arab domination,' with a clear emphasis on the exotic; incense and colorful silks are found everywhere. The reconstruction produces Moorishness as a difference within. Although the museum, in a city famed for its Renaissance palaces, clearly attempts to remind us of how widespread Moors and moriscos were throughout Spain, it paradoxically circumscribes the Moorish influence to one highly fanciful interior.⁸

As in Fuchs’ example, when Spanish literary scholars *do* showcase the achievements of Spanish Jews, they tend to segregate them from discussions of Spanish or Castilian literature. They are celebrated as Jewish culture, or perhaps as the culture of Spain’s Jews, or even “our Jews,” but not as simply Spanish. For example, the ambitious *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas* edited by Guillermo Díaz-Plaja in 1949 dedicates nearly fifty pages to the Hebrew literature of Spain. In those pages, José María Millás Vallicrosa, who authored the section, does not draw any significant connections between the authors he discusses and those writing in Castilian. As in the Middle Ages, Spain’s Jews tend to be ghettoized in modern literary history.⁹

What resonates even more strongly with Jubran’s thesis of ‘internal Orientalism’ is what Fuchs observes in her second observation—how the Semitic heritage of highly canonical Spanish cultural production “either goes unremarked or is swept under the rug.”¹⁰ She describes another museum, this one the home of celebrated author Lope de Vega (1562-1635). Fuchs observes that the décor in Lope’s house “features braziers, pillows on the floor, and a number of elements of what is clearly a Moorish heritage, yet there is no acknowledgement that the high Spanish culture here being celebrated owes anything to al-Andalus.”¹¹ There is a similar dynamic at work in scholarship on medieval Castilian writers. As we have seen, Jewish authors, whether writing in Hebrew or in Castilian, are celebrated as “Jewish,” even when their excellence is attributed to their host country. However, when the writing of a canonical Christian author such as Juan Ruiz demonstrates clear influence of Hebrew or Arabic literature, such influence is often minimized or denied.¹² So, if Shem Tov’s *Proverbios* is the “Moorish” room in the Cáceres Casa-Museo Árabe, his contemporary Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor* is Lope’s house: plainly reflective of a Spanish hybridity that is not always recognized and more often than not simply passed over.¹³

⁸ Fuchs, “Spanish,” 89.

⁹ Some noteworthy exceptions to this trend include: Sáenz-Badillos, “Intelectuales,” “Crossroads,” “Poesía”; Targarona Borrás, “Todos,” “Últimos”; Hamilton, *Representing*.

¹⁰ Fuchs, “Spanish,” 89.

¹¹ Fuchs, “Spanish,” 89.

¹² Wacks, *Framing*, 174-77.

¹³ Most recently, James Monroe has written on the subject of Juan Ruiz’s familiarity with Andalusí culture. See Monroe, “Elements.”

2. Ambivalence, now and then

This ambivalence surrounding the role of Jews and Jewish culture in modern Spanish national life echoes that experienced by medieval Castilians. While it is difficult to generalize about Jewish-Christian relations in Castile, and impossible to do so for all of Christian Iberia during the late Middle Ages, it is safe to say that Christian monarchs found some of their Jewish subjects tremendously useful, but were also bound by loyalty to the Church to hold the Jewish religion in disdain. It hardly needs to be repeated that generations of Christian monarchs and nobles of Castile and Aragon relied on Jewish courtiers for the daily administration of their courts and estates. As in al-Andalus, Jewish subjects served their kings as administrators, financiers, physicians, diplomats, and trusted advisors. The fact that they enjoyed no power base apart from the good favor of their king made them an excellent strategic choice to serve in very highly placed positions. Unlike Christian nobles, whose alliances with other high nobility sometimes pitted them against the crown, and Muslim subjects, who were suspected of having conflicting allegiances to Granada or other Muslim states, Jewish courtiers' only source of political power was to remain in the good graces of the King.¹⁴ This working relationship between Jewish courtier and Christian monarch existed side by side with the Christian theological contempt for Judaism. Unlike the Islamic doctrine of *dhimma*—protected Christian and Jewish minorities—that in theory guided the actions of Muslim Caliphs and Kings,¹⁵ Christian monarchs had no theological directive to tolerate Jewish subjects. Any tolerance they practiced was predicated on the Jews' status as a useful minority, quite a far cry from contemporary ideas about cultural diversity in the context of a representative democracy.

The good fortune of the Castilian Jews reached its peak during the reign of Alfonso X, 'the Learned' of Castile, who employed many Jews at court, including the Hebrew poet Todros ben Yehudah Halevi Abulafia.¹⁶ The fourteenth century in Castile was, for all Castilians, a difficult period marked by political strife, economic hardship, and social unrest. At mid-century the Black Death (1348) decimated all of Europe, and in 1369 the tyrant Pedro I 'The Cruel' of Castile was murdered by his illegitimate half brother, Enrique of Trastámara, who then assumed the throne in his stead.¹⁷ Don Juan Manuel, the author of the canonical story collection *El Conde Lucanor* and a contemporary of Shem Tov, characterized this period as a "doloroso et triste tienpo."¹⁸

Minorities, even privileged ones, do not fare well in such times, and the experience of the Jewish communities of Castile was no exception.¹⁹ In general there was increased dissatisfaction with the privileged role of certain Jews at court, where they served, among other positions, as tax collectors. Such sentiment boiled over both at court and in the popular sphere when disaster or mass hysteria struck the general populace. In 1320-21 there were a series of accusations of well poisonings against the Jewish communities, and in 1321 a band of shepherds from southern France who had been inspired by anti-muslim crusade preachers crossed over into Castile,

¹⁴ Wacks, *Framing*, 160-65.

¹⁵ Ye'or, *Dhimmi*.

¹⁶ Doron, "Dios," "Poet"; Targarona Borrás, "Todros."

¹⁷ O'Callaghan, *History*, 466; Valdeón Baroque, Saldrach i Marés, and Zabalo Zabalegui, *Feudalismo*, 54-81; Macpherson and Tate, introduction to *Libro*, 30.

¹⁸ Juan Manuel, *Obras*, 1: 208.

¹⁹ Valdeón Baroque, *Conflictos*, 34.

where they sacked the Jewish quarter of Tudela. Anti-semitic violence likewise accompanied the Black Death of 1348 and the Trastámaran revolution of 1369.²⁰

3. Shem Tov Between Hebrew and Castilian literary practice

This downward trajectory in Jewish fortunes coincided with the upward trajectory of the success of Hispano-Romance vernaculars as successful literary languages, and Jewish writers' negative attitudes toward the vernacular reflect increased anxieties over fear of discrimination and persecution on the one hand, and the temptations of conversion and assimilation on the other. During his reign in the second half of the thirteenth century, Alfonso X ('the Learned') operationalized Castilian as a courtly language, displacing the previously dominant languages of Church (Latin) and state (Arabic). This set Castilian on the track to status of Imperial language that it would ultimately assume in the age of the Catholic Monarchs, with its own grammar, navy, and missionary force. Critical discussion of Alfonsine vernacular literary practice has tended to focus either on its competitive relationship with Latin or on its function as a vehicle for the dissemination of Arabic learning in translation.²¹ The vernacular revolution in Spain coincided with a shift in the role of Hebrew writing, and of the expansion of Hebrew literary practice to occupy more secular spaces left vacant by the exile of Arabic. In al-Andalus, Jews wrote scientific and philosophic works in Arabic; in Christian Iberia they used Hebrew. This means that both Castilian and Hebrew were moving into territory once held by Arabic, sharing space with each other, and to a lesser extent with Arabic, in a sort of medieval literary "contact zone."²²

While there are dozens of Alfonsine-era translations into Hispano-Romance by Jewish translators,²³ before Shem Tov there is no surviving original vernacular work by a Spanish Jew. Jewish authors during this period were more concerned with enriching Hebrew as a literary language, and had little incentive, as did Christian writers, to write in Castilian. Hebrew was considered the language of literature and of rhetoric, and while Castilian Jews were more than able to write competently in their native language, Castilian was not valued as a serious literary language in the Jewish community. Furthermore, Jewish and Christian writers were responding to quite different legacies. Generally, literary Castilian as a sovereign language strove to define itself against both Latin and Arabic, while literary Hebrew had to deal mostly with the lingering legacy of Arabic.²⁴ Although Castilian drew a great deal of material from Arabic sources, Castilian literary practice was never 'in competition' with Arabic, as Hebrew had been for centuries in al-Andalus. A number of Hebrew authors from Christian Spain, most notably Judah al-Harizi (1165-1225),²⁵ proclaimed Hebrew's primacy over Arabic. At the beginning of the

²⁰ O'Callaghan, *History*, 466; Ben-Shalom, "Medieval," 175.

²¹ Márquez-Villanueva, *Concepto*, 43.

²² Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zone as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." Pratt, *Imperial*, 6.

²³ Faulhaber counts 143 extant translations from Arabic and Hebrew into Hispano-Romance vernaculars, of which we may safely assume the lion's share were translated by Jews. Faulhaber, "Semitica," 875.

²⁴ Brann, *Compunctious*, 123; Decter, *Jewish*

²⁵ Al-Harizi, *Tahkemoni*, 11. Al-Harizi's Hebrew *maqama*, *Tahkemoni*, has been edited by Toporovsky and Zamora. There are complete English translations by Reichert (literal) and Segal (verse), as well as excerpts in Carmi, 389-92, and Cole, 208-217. See also the complete Spanish translation by Del Valle and excerpts translated by Navarro Peiro, *Narrativa*, 100-22.

thirteenth century, just before Gonzalo de Berceo (often represented as the first Castilian poet) began to write, al-Harizi sounded a call to arms to save Hebrew from the dual threats of Arabism and ignorance. He claimed that Arabic owed its excellence to its origins in Hebrew, protesting that “its themes are derived from the Holy Tongue; and all its cherished tales snatched away from our books”.²⁶

It is curious that al-Harizi launches this attack on Arabic supremacy even as the Arabic poetic scene in Spain is moribund. His appeal speaks not simply to a need to define Hebrew against Arabic, but rather to a more generalized anxiety about the role of Hebrew in the intellectual landscape given the enormous vacuum created by the demise of Arabic as an official language. Hebrew authors writing in Christian Spain, but possessing a strong background in literary Arabic, such as Judah al-Harizi and Isaac ibn Sahula, continued the debate, eventually turning their criticism on the Hispano-Romance vernaculars—their own native tongues.

Late fourteenth-century Hebrew poets such as Solomon Bonafed (late fourteenth century – early fifteenth) and Solomon de Piera (ca. 1340- after 1417)²⁷ were certainly native speakers of Aragonese, but it is entirely possible that as early as the mid-thirteenth century, a Castilian writer such as Isaac ibn Sahula²⁸ might have spoken Castilian exclusively at home, even if he read Classical Arabic (which he certainly did) or was proficient to some degree in the Andalusi Arabic vernacular.²⁹ At the end of the thirteenth century, at the height of Alfonso X’s glorification of the Castilian vernacular, Isaac ibn Sahula likewise touts his Hebrew *Meshal Haqadmoni* (‘Fable of the Old Timer’) as a bastion of true Hebrew learning amongst imposters who simply repackage Arabic and Christian vernacular works: “Strong as a lion,/ his poetry will surely blot out/ the songs of the Christians/ His poem resounds, /while yours grows bitter and silent.”³⁰ He later states unequivocally: “I have not leaned upon the words of the Edomite [Christian], Ishmaelite [Muslim], Moabite, or Hagarite [Muslim].”³¹ Here it is interesting to note that while Hispano-romance was spoken (and written) by Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike, Ibn Sahula still refers to ‘The books of the Christians’ and in the following century, Samuel ibn Sasson refers to it as ‘their language.’³² These Hebrew-voiced assessments of literary uses of Hispano-Romance came during a period of intense literary vernacularization in Castile-Leon and Aragon, in which Jewish writers scarcely participated except as translators.

²⁶ All translations of this and other texts are mine unless otherwise cited.

²⁷ Both Bonafed and De Piera were members of the Zaragoza ‘Circle of Poets.’ Scheindlin, “Secular.” For Bonafed, see English translations of select poems by Carmi, *Penguin*, 430-31, and Cole, *Dream*, 314-19, as well as the Spanish translations and studies in Sáenz-Badillos, “Crossroads,” “Último.” For De Piera, see his Hebrew *Diwan* (ed. Bernstein), English translations of select poems by Cole, *Dream*, 299-304, and the Spanish translations and studies in Targarona Borrás, “Poemas,” “Lengua.”

²⁸ Isaac ibn Sahula was a late thirteenth-century Castilian kabbalist and writer who was a contemporary of Alfonso X ‘The Learned’ and the *Zohar*’s author, Moses of León. He is best known for his encyclopedic frame-tale narrative, *Meshal Haqadmoni* (‘The Parable of the Old Timer’). See the Hebrew edition and English verse translation of Loewe, the excerpts translated into Spanish in Navarro Peiro, *Narrativa*, 147-68, and those into English in Scheindlin, “Sorcerer,” and Wacks, “Ibn Sahula’s Tale,” as well as the study of the same tale compared with Don Juan Manuel’s *Conde Lucanor* no. 11 in Wacks, “Don Yllán.”

²⁹ Wacks, “Don Yllán,” 432 n 78.

³⁰ Ibn Sahula, ed. Loewe 5, vv. 6-7.

³¹ Ibn Sahula, ed. Loewe 13, vv. 50-51a.

³² Ibn Sasson, 76, no. 44, v. 2. Samuel ben Joseph Ibn Sasson was a Castilian poet writing in Hebrew during the reign of Alfonso XI (1312-50). His *Diwan* contains several poems that make mention of Shem Tov of Carrión. Habermann, “Ibn Sasson”; Chamiel, Introduction to Ibn Sasson, xi-xxx.

Whereas Andalusí Jews were well versed in, and wrote many important literary and Rabbinical works in the literary language of the dominant culture (Classical Arabic). Most documented Jewish literary production in Hispano-Romance from this period is popular, paraliturgical, or homiletic.³³

In light of this absence of Jewish voices *in* the literary vernacular of Christian Iberia, what do Jewish authors have to say *about* the vernacular? The issue is certainly not Jewish ignorance of Hispano-Romance. Spanish Arabist Julián Ribera lists several Andalusí authors who attested to Jewish and Muslim fluency in Hispano-Romance,³⁴ and Samuel Stern wrote that it “might almost be taken for granted [that Andalusí Jews] made everyday use of the Mozarabic [Romance] of its Muslim and Christian neighbors.”³⁵ In the eleventh century, Solomon ibn Gabirol lamented the sorry state of Hebrew letters amongst the Jews of Zaragoza, noting that “half of them talk the language of the Christians (*adomit*), and the other half Arabic (*bilshon benei kedar*).”³⁶ In the twelfth century, Maimonides makes reference to Andalusí Jews composing original poetry in Hispano-Romance.³⁷ Samuel Ibn Sasson (writing in the fourteenth century) scolded Shem Tov de Carrión himself for composing verse in Castilian.³⁸ A generation later, Solomon ben Meshullam De Piera writes a letter to Astruc Rimokh, chiding his fellow poet for having written him a letter in the vernacular.³⁹ While it is clear that Iberian Jews used the written vernacular for a variety of purposes, it was not their preferred language for learned secular literature. The critiques these particular poets voice are consonant with medieval Hebrew and Arabic scholarship that associated clear speech and reason with classical languages such as Hebrew and Arabic,⁴⁰ in contrast to “stammerers” and “babblers” who wrote in the vernacular.⁴¹ Such is the atmosphere in which Shem Tov writes his *Proverbios* some time after 1351.

Given this voiced Jewish disdain for the literary vernacular, it must have been liberating and even a bit transgressive for Shem Tov to write something ‘serious’ in his native language. This freedom allows for a kind of irony we don’t see in the Castilian translations of traditional wisdom literature, and is more characteristic of the Hispano-Arabic and Hispano-Hebrew *maqama* or of the *Libro de buen amor* of Shem Tov’s contemporary, Juan Ruiz. In one notable example, Shem Tov dedicates no fewer than 52 couplets to the value of knowing when to stop talking,⁴² beginning his discourse by reminding the reader that “la mejoría del callar non podemos/ Negar, mas toda vía convién que la contemos.”⁴³ In some ways, he was in virgin territory. Writing in Castilian, he was mostly free of any anxiety of influence. He did not stand in the shadow of Judah al-Harizi, or Isaac ibn Sahula, as he did when writing in Hebrew. He was not constrained by obedience to either Christian or Jewish doctrine or exegetical tradition.⁴⁴ Thus

³³ On evidence of Jewish preaching in Hispano-Romance during the Middle Ages and Early Modernity, see Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, 39-40, 408, and Gross, *Iberian*, 63 n 36.

³⁴ Ribera, *Disertaciones*, 12.

³⁵ Stern, *Hispano-Arabic*, 151.

³⁶ Ibn Gabirol, *Secular*, 1: 376, v. 8.

³⁷ Monroe, “Maimonides,” 20.

³⁸ Brann, Sáenz-Badillos, and Targarona, “Poetic,” 81; Díaz Esteban, “Debate,” 69; Ibn Sasson, *Avnei*, 76, #44.

³⁹ De Piera, *Diwan*, 89, no. 92, vv. 47-50.

⁴⁰ Zwiep, *Mother*, 14.

⁴¹ De Piera, *Diwan*, 89, vv. 47-50.

⁴² Arduziel, *Proverbios*, ed. Díaz Mas and Mota, 216-225, st. 566-618.

⁴³ Arduziel, *Proverbios*, ed. Díaz Mas and Mota 217, st. 567.

⁴⁴ Perry, *Moral*, 4-5; Díaz Mas and Mota, Introduction to Arduziel, *Proverbios*, 78.

unmoored from convention, he was at liberty to develop an individualized poetic voice—an unusual opportunity at a time when writers were valued for their command of stock tropes and stylistic conventions. Shem Tov was free to pick and choose materials as he wished. He could, for example, include salty bits of folk wisdom such as the following proverb:

Çierto es, y non fallesçe, proverbio todavía:
El huésped y el peçe fieden al terçer día
(ed. Díaz Mas and Mota 213, st. 542).⁴⁵

(It's true enough, the old proverb:
The houseguest and the fish both stink by the third day)

Readers and listeners responded enthusiastically to Shem Tov's text, which was well-received by the Castilian-speaking establishment.⁴⁶ In writing what Paloma Díaz Mas calls a "texto petitorio" Shem Tov's primary goal would have been to win the favor of his sponsor, if not literary fame.⁴⁷ However, quite unlike the Jewish Alfonsine translators, who were all but anonymous, Shem Tov could take the credit for his original work in Castilian. In writing a learned, secular text in the Castilian, Shem Tov anticipated the critiques of both his Christian and Jewish readers, the former who were liable to discount the teachings of a Rabbi, the latter to shun a Rabbi's vernacular writings.

4. Reception of the *Proverbios*

In what has easily become the most quoted passage of the *Proverbios*, Shem Tov requests that his Christian audience put aside their prejudices and focus on what he has to offer: "Non val el açor menos por nasçer de mal nido./ nin los enxemplos buenos por los dezir judío."⁴⁸ Shem Tov draws attention to his Jewish origins in order to validate the didactic soundness of his text despite the his status as member of a religious minority and lack of Christian moral/theological authority. He himself others the text for his audience, who have interpreted Shem Tov's difference in various ways in the half millennium of *Proverbios* criticism available to us.

Following this caveat, critics have tended to celebrate the work's success *despite* the religion of its author. Zemke astutely points out that the Marqués de Santillana, one of Shem Tov's earliest admirers, does not take issue with Shem Tov's religion, but only his status as a non-noble.⁴⁹ José Rodríguez de Castro, writing in Spain in the late eighteenth century, takes Shem Tov for a *converso*. He may have concluded that only a Christian could have been considered "uno de los Trobadores más célebres de su tiempo."⁵⁰ It is more likely that the opposite is true, that Shem Tov's novel profile as a Jew writing in Castilian allowed for the

⁴⁵ The *refrán* persists in oral tradition: "El huésped y el pece a los tres días hiede." Campos and Barella, *Diccionario*, 246, no. 1680. There are a number of variants recorded in Martínez Kleiser, *Refranero*, 358, nos. 31, 586-91. See also the Hebrew analog: "On the first day, a guest (*oreah*); on the second, a nuisance (*toreah*); on the third, a pest (*soreah*)!" Alcalay, *Basic*, 197, no. 1871.

⁴⁶ Zemke lists a number of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish authors who make reference to Shem Tov's writings. Zemke, *Approaches*, 34-46.

⁴⁷ Díaz Mas and Mota, Introduction to Arduziel, *Proverbios*, 23.

⁴⁸ Arduziel, *Proverbios*, ed. Díaz Mas and Mota 137, st. 64.

⁴⁹ Zemke, *Approaches*, 36-37 n 55.

⁵⁰ Rodríguez de Castro, *Biblioteca*, 198.

innovation he displays in it, innovation that earned the *Proverbios* its acclaim. In any event, the ways in which the question of the ‘Jewishness’ is articulated in criticism of the patently secular *Proverbios* is revealing of critics’ attitudes toward the Spanish Semitic imaginary.

The content of Shem Tov’s *Proverbios* is clearly secular. Any Jewish authorities on which Shem Tov draws are not cited explicitly, and there is nothing specifically “Jewish” about the work. He does not cite either the Hebrew Bible or the Rabbis, and the only specific reference to Jews is to himself: However, despite the work’s lack of potentially offensive Jewish doctrine or rabbinical teachings, critics have often commented on the “Jewishness” of both author and text. Despite (or perhaps owing to) this Othering of the work, the *Proverbios* were ‘discovered’ by the Castilian literary establishment as early as the fifteenth century, when the prominent patron of letters, Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marqués de Santillana, famously referred to him as a “grant trobador.”⁵¹

In 1863, the liberal literary scholar José Amador de los Ríos (see Andrew Bush’s essay in this volume), who is also the author of the first major Spanish-language treatise on Spanish Jewry (*Estudios*), included a section on Shem Tov’s *Proverbios Morales* in his *Historia crítica de la literatura española*. For him, Shem Tov’s work was not the voice of an embattled minority, but rather “el más fiel intérprete del sentimiento general de los castellanos respecto de las violencias y desmanes cometidos cada día, y la protesta más enérgica de los hombres honrados contra las no justificadas ambiciones que desgarraban sin piedad el seno de la patria.”⁵² He casts Shem Tov as nothing less than the embodiment of the national conscience in troubled times, a poet who shined “la luz de la moral en medio de las sangrientas nieblas que levantaba por todas partes el fratricida acero de los castellanos.”⁵³

The Don of Castilian letters, Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, whose expansive works on Castilian literature and Spanish history were key texts in the nineteenth-century nationalist project, takes a far more exoticizing approach to Shem Tov: “tiene un color oriental tan marcado, así en la lengua como en las imágenes, que á ratos parece escrita originalmente en hebreo y traducida luego por su autor al castellano.”⁵⁴ For him, Shem Tov’s writing is so exotic, he admits that “cuesta trabajo creer que este libro, tan profundamente semítico, tan desnudo de toda influencia clásica y cristiana, haya nacido en tierra de Campos.”⁵⁵ Others place Shem Tov simultaneously within Western (i.e. Greco-Roman) and Eastern tradition. José Cejador y Frauca (1915) identifies Shem Tov as a “Teognis castellano” after the Greek innovator of gnomic verse, while adding that the the author of the *Proverbios* also drew from Arabic sources, which lends his work “cierto colorido oriental.”⁵⁶ Romera-Navarro (1928) implicitly counts Shem Tov as a national poet whose work, as part of the philosophical and moral literature of the fourteenth century, is “fruto genuino del grave espíritu castellano.”⁵⁷

This tendency to exoticize is more pronounced under Franco. In 1943 Hurtado y Jiménez de la Serna writes of Shem Tov’s “carácter exótico de sabor oriental.”⁵⁸ Alborg, writing some 20

⁵¹ López de Mendoza, *Obras*, 451. Cited in Zemke, *Approaches*, 36.

⁵² Amador de los Ríos, *Historia* 4: 473.

⁵³ Amador de los Ríos, *Historia* 4: 474 n 1.

⁵⁴ Menéndez y Pelayo, *Estudios* 3: cxxv.

⁵⁵ Menéndez y Pelayo, *Estudios* 3: cxxvii.

⁵⁶ Cejador y Frauca, *Historia*, 1: 257.

⁵⁷ Romera-Navarro, *Historia*, 44.

⁵⁸ Hurtado y Jiménez de la Serna, *Historia*, 135.

years later, explains that the gnomic verse genre to which *Proverbios* belongs is “tan peculiar de la literatura hebrea.”⁵⁹ Del Río (1948) similarly imputes a Jewish/Hebrew specificity to Shem Tov’s didactic style, writing of the “eco hebraico de su moralidad.”⁶⁰

Writing in exile from Franco’s Spain, Américo Castro returns to the Republican approach of integrating the minority writer into the Castilian “spirit” or nation.⁶¹ For him, the folkloric tone of the *Proverbios* is “sancho-panezco.”⁶² At the same time, he observes that while Shem Tov’s contemporary Juan Ruiz introduces “poesía de corte islámico” into Castilian, Shem Tov himself “invade con su lírica hebraica la lengua literaria de Castilla.”⁶³ For Castro, Shem Tov is simultaneously a literary “invader” and an authentic voice of Hispanic folk culture, yet one who, at least on the intellectual plane, “sigue mirando hacia el Oriente, y no a la Europa Cristiana.”⁶⁴

5. Shem Tov’s *Debate between the Pen and the Scissors*

If Hispanists have emphasized the difference of Shem Tov’s literary voice in the *Proverbios*, the few scholars of Hebrew who have written on the *Debate* have downplayed its distinctiveness and are not in agreement as to its literary quality. Schirmann, for example, maintained that Shem Tov was merely typical of the “inferior literary tastes of his time,”⁶⁵ but Cole admires his “fluid rhymed prose.”⁶⁶ What is clear is that unlike his *Proverbios*, Shem Tov’s *Debate* lacks the status of novelty act. It is, when studied as an example of the late medieval Hebrew *maqama*, an original example of a demanding literary genre, but stands in good company with a long series of such texts by other Peninsular Jews. Here, for better or for worse, Shem Tov is just another Hebrew fiction writer, not a “Castilian Theognis” or a writer whose Hebraic background “invades” Castilian poetry.

Again, unlike the *Proverbios*, the *Debate* has a clear literary genealogy. It is a parody of the medieval Arabic and Hebrew literary debates between the Pen and the Sword,⁶⁷ couched in the stylistic conventions of the Hebrew *maqama* (rhyming prose narrative interspersed with poetry).

The debate takes place one cold winter’s day in which the narrator’s inkwell freezes solid, so that the narrator breaks his pen’s tip on the hard surface of the frozen ink. The scissors come forward to take the pen’s place, which leads to a debate between the two in which the pen and the scissors both extol the virtues of their respective techniques of writing. Unable to settle their differences, they agree to find a third party to judge which of them is the more fitting utensil. The pen goes out into the town and returns with a wise old man, who is told to look around the house and determine the purpose of each item in it. He picks up the pen and writes

⁵⁹ Alborg, *Historia*, 1: 175.

⁶⁰ Del Río, *Historia*, 106.

⁶¹ The constitutions of 1868 and 1876, and the Second Republic (1931-1933) all established religious liberty. Callahan, *Catholic*, 16, 25, 287.

⁶² Castro, “Aspecto,” 163.

⁶³ Castro, *España*, 562.

⁶⁴ Castro, *España*, 565.

⁶⁵ Schirmann, *Hebrew* 4: 529, cited in Einbinder, “Pen,” 264.

⁶⁶ Cole, *Dream*, 289. For a Spanish translation of the excerpts edited in Schirmann, *Hebrew* 4: 529-40, see Díaz Esteban, “Debate,” as well the (deficient) English translation in Shepard, *Shem Tov*, 79-97, and that in Colahan, “Between.” Complete and rigorous Spanish and English translations of the *Debate* are still wanting.

⁶⁷ Van Gelder, “Conceit”; Alba Cecilia, “Espada,” “Debate.”

with it, then picks up the scissors and uses them to trim his hair, fingernails, and moustache, thus settling the dispute.

While there is a sizeable bibliography on the *Proverbios*, Shem Tov's Hebrew work has attracted relatively little critical attention.⁶⁸ The few critics who have studied the poem have read it as an allegory representing either individual historical figures or personifications of various ideologies. Sanford Shepard reads it as a critique of the prominent *converso* and anti-Jewish polemicist Alfonso of Valladolid (formerly Abner of Burgos).⁶⁹ The editors of the complete Hebrew edition, Nini and Fruchtman, read it as a critique of a general "cultural decline" in the Jewish community of Shem Tov's day, in which the scissors represent ignorant but powerful men who come to dominate positions in the Jewish community traditionally held by scholars and Rabbis.⁷⁰ Einbinder discounts these readings, suggesting the alternatives of either a debate between kabbalists and rabbinites, or perhaps between Written and Oral Law or more generally a commentary on polysemy and the human tendency to come up with differing narratives of a single event.⁷¹ Most recently, Blackwelder-Carpenter has suggested that the *Debate* is a blueprint for cross-cultural understanding, while Zackin, in an erudite and penetrating study, reads the text as an indictment of the irresponsible uses of philosophy without proper grounding in traditional religious thought.⁷² Einbinder has suggested that perhaps none of these readings can ever be definitive, because ultimately the *Debate* is more about the predicaments of writing itself than about any specific historical or intellectual phenomenon.⁷³ In the same vein, Cole argues that "a straight one-to-one allegorical reading seems to be inconsistent with the details of the story itself."⁷⁴ Taken this way, rather than a snapshot or critique of a historical reality, we can understand Shem Tov's text as a sort of manual for critical thinking about writing and reading. This would put Shem Tov in league with other late medieval Iberian writers whose aim was to point up the instability of a single truth in an age when several flavors of Averroist and Maimonidean rationalism wrestled with monotheistic doctrine.⁷⁵

Despite the text's seeming resistance to definitive allegorization, I offer here another option: that the debate is one between Hebrew and Romance, with the pen representing the holy tongue and the scissors the vernacular. Einbinder's observation that the narrator resorts to writing

⁶⁸ On the *Proverbios*, there are major critical editions by González-Llubera, Shepard, Perry, and Díaz Mas and Mota; see also the following major studies: Shepard, *Shem Tov*; Perry, *Moral*; Zackin, "Jew."

⁶⁹ Shepard, *Shem Tov*, 31-38. For an introduction to the biography and works of Abner/Alfonso, see Carpenter, "Alfonso de Valladolid." Szpiech discusses the possible relationship between Abner/Alfonso and Shem Tov. Szpiech, "Testimonia," 337-38.

⁷⁰ Nini and Fruchtman, Introduction to Arduziel, *Maase*, 36, cited in Einbinder, "Pen," 6.

⁷¹ Einbinder, "Pen," 270. Readers of the Castilian *Libro de buen amor* will recognize this trope from Juan Ruiz's debate between the Greeks and the Romans, which emphasizes dual perspectivism and how two different parties will draw different conclusions from the same data set. See Parker, "Parable." Shem Tov also includes a discourse on this question in the *Proverbios morales*. Arduziel, *Proverbios*, ed. Díaz Mas and Mota 138-42, st. 70-95; Perry, *Moral*, 20-22, st. 213-313.

⁷² Zackin, "Jew," 201-03.

⁷³ Einbinder, "Pen," 274.

⁷⁴ Cole, *Dream*, 290.

⁷⁵ Between the twelfth and fourteenth century, a number of Peninsular writers experimented with putting into narrative practice some of the teachings of the *kalaam*, or rationalist theology, of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Maimonides (the Rambam). In particular, the figure of the unreliable narrator in the rhymed prose narrative fiction (*maqamat*) of Muhammad al-Saraqusti and Judah al-Harizi, as well as Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* (1334) and can be read as a sort of a workbook for rationalist thought. Wacks, *Framing*, 177-93.

with scissors only because he is concerned “with finding some means of expression in a situation where conventional methods have failed” supports this reading,⁷⁶ if we understand the ‘conventional’ methods as Hebrew and the ‘failure’ as the “worsening relations” (Perry’s words) between Jews and Christians in Castile during the second half of the fourteenth century.⁷⁷ Shem Tov, who, like most of the Jewish writers of his times, writes the *Proverbios* in the vernacular *because he has to*, because Hebrew is not an acceptable language for use at court. Likewise, the narrator of the *Debate* writes with scissors only because he cannot with a pen. The vernacular, for him, is not his first choice, but given the situation, it is his best choice.

Let us turn to the internal evidence in the *Debate* itself. Like other Hebrew poets who disparaged vernacular literature as ‘stammering’ and ‘babbling,’ Shem Tov seems to argue that writing with scissors is not really writing at all, but rather insubstantial nonsense. The scissors boasts that his writing is pure “form without matter” and “spirit without a body.”⁷⁸ He adds that his “letter alone ran to speak with you,” unaccompanied by ink or even paper.⁷⁹ Shem Tov is here concretizing the metaphor of writing that ‘lacks substance.’ For Shem Tov, it is the vernacular—whose words are *meant* to be spoken (but not written) that lacks substance, while Hebrew, never a vernacular language in Spain, is always written and carries the authority of Biblical tradition.⁸⁰

Even more convincing evidence for this allegorical reading is the pen’s invective poem against the scissors, in which he compares the ink with which he writes to divine blessing, seemingly claiming that God is on his side, and not that of the scissors: “Your writing,” he taunts, “returns empty and thirsty,/ but mine is sated with God’s goodwill, and filled with his blessing.”⁸¹ This identification of the pen with Jewish religious authority and the scissors with the language of the Christian government also resonates with the origins of the debate as a parody of the tradition of debates between the pen and the sword.⁸² The scissors are made of iron and are likened to two swords. In these debates the sword represents the nobility, and therefore temporal power, and the pen the clergy and divine power. In a Jewish context, the twin ‘swords’ of the scissors would likewise represent temporal power of the crown of Castile, and metonymically the official language of its court, while the pen would represent the Jewish clergy, and its official language, Hebrew.

This interpretation is further supported by the actions of the man brought in by the pen at the debate’s end to settle the score, a “needy man, a wise man full of wisdom, knowledge and subtlety.”⁸³

⁷⁶ Einbinder, “Pen,” 271.

⁷⁷ Perry, *Moral*, 3. See also Nini and Fruchtmann, Introduction to Arduziel, *Maase*, 36, cited in Zackin, “Jew,” 195 n 103.

⁷⁸ Arduziel, *Maase*, 61, vv. 319.

⁷⁹ Arduziel, *Maase*, 61, vv. 315-16.

⁸⁰ Even original Hebrew compositions by medieval authors are redolent of Biblical authority, as they are a sort of *bricolage* made from modules of Biblical utterances. Brann, *Compunctious*, 23-25.

⁸¹ Arduziel, *Maase*, 67, v. 398.

⁸² Einbinder notes that the narrator claims that the freezing of inkwell (the cessation of Hebrew poetic practice) has made him a laughing stock among “the members of my household” (l. 257), which seems to anticipate the critique of Ibn Saffon. Einbinder, “Pen,” 273.

⁸³ Arduziel, *Maase*, 73, vv. 497-98. Readers of classical *maqamat* will recognize this as Shem Tov’s analogue of the rogue antagonist of the narrator, typically an old man, a beggar, a student, or another economically marginalized yet learned individual whose intelligence and rhetorical skill dazzles his audience. See Drory, “Maqama,” 190.

Whereupon the pen led him to his tent, saying to him: ‘Sir, let it be pleasing to your eyes: here is the house before you, look upon its length and width, and upon all of the wares, the large and the small, within it. Put every utensil in its place, every raven according to its kind.’⁸⁴ Whereupon the man came leaning on his cane, turning this way and that, and he saw a jug of olive oil with a lamp in the back of the house. He made wicks and lit their lights. He found a needle (his clothes were torn) and he sewed up all the tears. And then, using his eyes as spies⁸⁵ he saw in the midst of all the tools a gold-shimmering pen,⁸⁶ flashing like lightning. Suddenly he became a quick scribe; he rushed to take it out from amongst the other utensils and wrote in a book before their eyes. And so, *groping at noon*,⁸⁷ he found the scissors, pared his fingernails, cut his hair, and trimmed his moustache.⁸⁸

This *hakham* or wise man, without uttering a single word, demonstrates the commonsensical conclusion that a pen is for writing and a scissors for cutting. The Hebrew language is fit for the writing of a sage, and the vernacular for more utilitarian purposes, like cutting your nails and trimming your moustache (i.e., business correspondence and other pragmatic communication). Though the pen is victorious, the author later praises the scissors (for cutting) and, in a move reminiscent of the authors of Arabic and Hebrew *maqamat* who undermine their own narrative authority,⁸⁹ admits that he has written the treatise using scissors—the illegitimate writing instrument—and not with a pen. “The entire thing,” he informs the reader, “was written very nicely without a pen in hand.”⁹⁰ This recalls the liar’s paradox (“This sentence is not true”). That is, if writing with scissors is illegitimate, and this treatise that proves this is written with scissors, what does this suggest about the reliability of the narrator and of the text itself? As I have mentioned, the resistance of this “slippery” text to a definitive reading,⁹¹ allegorical or otherwise, suggests that, like the *Libro de buen amor*, and Iberian *maqamat*, it is a sort of workbook for critical reading, a case study in ambiguity. This applies equally, if not more so, to Shem Tov’s *Proverbios*, with its cascade of metaphors of unstable or ambivalent meaning. True to his own observations in *Proverbios*, Shem Tov appears to give voice to (at least) two different understandings of the literary uses of dual perspectivism itself. In the *Proverbios*, it is an appeal

⁸⁴ The reference is to Deuteronomy 14:14, from a list of birds that are considered unclean and not fit for consumption by the Israelites.

⁸⁵ The Hebrew word for spy (*meragel*) derives from the root meaning foot or leg (*regel*), so that in Hebrew a spy is one who walks or runs around (i.e. explores; cf. English ‘gumshoe’). Shem Tov is here engaging in a bit of wordplay, suggesting that the scribe is using his eyes as spies to ‘run around the house’ as a spy ‘legs around’ enemy territory in order to report back. There may also be a play on the Castilian *mira* and the Hebrew *meraglim* (‘spies’), by which the spies are characterized as eyes that see (*mira*) while running about.

⁸⁶ Although the Hebrew *yeraqraq* (lit. ‘greenish’) would seem to suggest a green tone (Heb. *yaraq* = ‘green’), its usage in Psalms 68:14 compares the iridescence of a dove’s feathers to the shimmering of gold.

⁸⁷ The allusion is to Deuteronomy 28:29, which compares those who do not follow God’s law to blind men, who must grope their way around even in full daylight.

⁸⁸ Arduziel, *Maase*, 74, vv. 505-19.

⁸⁹ See Wacks, *Framing* 177-81.

⁹⁰ Arduziel, *Maase*, 80, v. 611. Nini and Fruchtman’s note clarifies that Shem Tov meant that “all of it was written with scissors.” Nini and Fruchtman, Introduction to Arduziel, *Maase*, 80 n 611.

⁹¹ Cole, *Dream*, 289.

for his Christian audience to consider the perspective of the Jewish minority, a sort of lesson in political proto-pluralism (two ways of seeing the world). However, in the *Debate*, it is a critique of vernacular learning relative to classical learning (two ways of writing about the world).

Shem Tov gives us a clue to this reading of the *Debate* in the episode of scissors writing found in the *Proverbios*. In this passage, Shem Tov describes how he mischievously sends a letter of scissors writing to an arrogant and foolish correspondent, in order to deprive him of the benefit of ‘real’ writing, which is of course done with a pen:

Un astroso cuidava, y, por mostrar que era
Sotil, yo le enviaba escripto de tijera.
El nesçio non sabía que lo fiz por infinta,
Porque yo non quería perder en él la tinta;
Ca, por non le deñar, fize vazia la llena
Y no·l quise donar la carta sana, buena:
Como el que tomava meollos d’avellanas
Para sí y donava al otro caxcas vanas,
Yo del papel saqué la razón que dezía;
Con ella me finqué, díle carta vazía.⁹²

(A wretch once thought [himself wise], and, to show him I was
Slick, I sent him scissors writing.
The idiot didn’t know that I faked him out,
Because I didn’t want to waste the ink on him;
So as not to dignify him, I made the full empty
I didn’t want to give him a good, whole letter:
Like he who takes the meat of the hazelnut
For himself and gives the next guy the empty shells,
I took out from the paper any meaning it had in it,
I kept it for myself, giving him an empty letter.)

Here Shem Tov boasts that in writing with the scissors, he “removed the reason” from the text. If we can read the pen as Hebrew and the scissors as Castilian, then Susan Einbinder’s suggestion that the *Debate* could be a kind of proto-nationalist Hebrew text rings all the more true, and would place Shem Tov next to other Hebrew authors of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who espouse what we might call proto-nationalist positions on the superiority of Hebrew over Arabic or the vernacular.⁹³ Einbinder likewise identifies the pen as instrument of Angelic discourse,⁹⁴ which foreshadows Solomon Bonafed’s view of Hebrew as the most fitting literary vehicle because it was the language in which the Angels spoke to God.⁹⁵

If this is true, and keeping in mind Shem Tov did in fact write the *Debate* (ca. 1345) before the *Proverbios* (after 1351) what is he saying about his own vernacular writing? Is he really reclaiming the vernacular as a secular space where Jewish writers can write morally

⁹² Arduziel, *Proverbios*, ed. Díaz Mas and Mota, 130-31, st. 40-44.

⁹³ Einbinder, “Pen,” 265. On proto-nationalism in medieval Hebrew poetry, see Brann, *Compunctious*, 16, 24.

⁹⁴ Einbinder, “Pen,” 267, cf. Arduziel, *Maase*, l. 575, ll. 581-2.

⁹⁵ Targarona Borrás, “Lengua.”

authoritative verse for a Christian audience? Or, as his parody of the scissors suggests, is it a cynical exercise in addressing the court in their own, inferior language? It is not likely that he would write in Hebrew for a Christian king, so he would here be ‘falling back’ on Castilian by necessity just as the man who needs to trim his nails must use a scissors and not a pen. If we read the critique of the vernacular in the Debate as a key, available only to a Hebrew-reading audience, the scissors writing episode in the *Proverbios* becomes a coded satire of the very man to whom Shem Tov dedicates the text. The *astroso* or wretch is Pedro I himself, and the ‘carta vacía’ devoid of reason and substance (by virtue of being written in the vernacular and not in Hebrew) is nothing other than the much celebrated *Proverbios*.

To sum up, Shem Tov’s critique of the vernacular in the *Debate* sheds new light on the meaning of the vernacularity of the *Proverbios*. It is as if Shem Tov is saying “fine, I’ll write you some ‘Jewish’ learning in the vernacular, but on my terms, and hardly anything authentically ‘Jewish.’” He is not about to fall into that trap. Experience had proved that talking Rabbis to royalty was a dangerous undertaking.⁹⁶ Jewish participation in the literary vernacular was an anxious undertaking. Jewish writers themselves were ambivalent about the validity of the vernacular as a literary language and guilt-ridden over ‘abandoning’ Hebrew at a time when conversion to Christianity seemed a gathering threat to the Jewish community. At the same time they were wary of a Christian public that was equally ambivalent about Jewish (and *converso*) participation in the dominant, vernacular culture. Both fears have been justified. Shem Tov’s ambivalence was the product of an increasingly unstable environment that led first to the pogroms of 1391 and ultimately to the disaster of 1492. Post-exilic readings of Shem Tov’s *Proverbios* have continued to voice Jewish and Christian anxieties over Jewish participation in (what would become) Spanish secular culture into the present day.

⁹⁶ In 1263, the Catalan Rabbi Nahmanides was invited by King Jaume I (‘the Conqueror’) of Aragon to debate the relative truths of Judaism and Christianity with the *converso* Pablo Cristiani. Despite royal assurances of freedom of expression in the debate, Nahmanides was later persecuted by the Dominican order, who objected to certain details of Nahmanides’ written account of the proceedings. Jewish delegates to the 1412-1413 Disputation of Tortosa, presided over by Pedro IV of Aragon, likewise feared for their lives. Maccoby, *Judaism*, 39, 83; Baer, *History*, 2: 210-11.

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