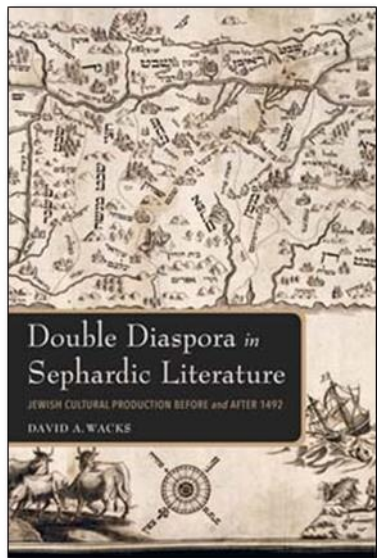


David Wacks. *Double Diaspora in Sephardic Literature. Jewish Cultural Production Before and After 1492*. Indiana UP, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-253-01572-3. 316 pp.

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The Iberian Jewish community experience is often divided into two distinct periods; the first one covers a large portion of Medieval history starting with the settlement of Jews in Iberia after their dispersion (*galut*) in 70 CE; the second one opens with their expulsion from Spain in 1492 into a new welcoming refuge in the Ottoman Empire. This journey of displacement from the Biblical Zion and later into the adoptive motherland of Sepharad serves as study for David Wacks's monograph on the double diaspora literary production of Sephardim and what constitutes Sephardic literature. The book opens with an analysis of the concept of diaspora in Judaic studies, critical theory and the social sciences. Chapter 1, "Diaspora Studies for Sephardic Culture," offers an overview of the significance of exile in Jewish thought. Taking as example the writings from Iberian Jews between the eighth and thirteenth century including

Hasdai ibn Shaprut, Abraham ibn Daud, Moses Maimonides, and Judah Halevi, Wacks explores the origin of Jewish diaspora as eschatological and providential, based on the result of a divine plan rather than human intervention. According to the author, this fact is what differentiates this type of diaspora from the rest; on one hand, it shows a level of cultural assimilation and cultural identity of the new land that has become a new home for the Jewish exiles; at the same time, this idea functions as an "undercover effect" for the Jews (28), reinforcing their divine mission sealed in the early books of the Hebrew Bible to prepare the world for the eventual coming of the Messiah.

Chapter 2, titled "Allegory and Romance in Diaspora: Jacob ben Elazar's *Book of Tales*," explores the first example of diasporic cultural production in "transition between Arabic-dominant and Romance-dominant host cultures" (34). In this case, Wacks analyzes thirteenth-century Jewish writer Jacob ben Elazar's Hebrew language work *Book of Tales* (*Sefer Ha-meshalim*). The text represents a new generation of Jewish writers who praise the importance of Hebrew versus Arabic by expressing various types of literary discourses to elevate this language. Making use of the allegorical objects of a sword and a pen, ben Elazar portrays the challenges and concerns experienced by the Jewish community in their new Christian environment. The sword, symbolizing the political power and warfare that characterized Christian rule, contrasts the pen, personified in the Jewish community as a body made of administrators, merchants, traders and royal advisers. The analysis of the *Tale of Sahar and Kima* within the collection shows, according to Wacks, an example of romancing the Jewish diaspora from a literary perspective. As it happened with Hebrew poets living under Muslim rule, where Arabic became the language of culture, Sephardic Jews living in Christian Iberia enriched the Hebrew language with Romance traditions, in this case, courtly

chivalric themes before the first Castilian examples written in this genre such as *Cavallero Çifar* appeared (58).

Chapter 3, “Poetry in Diaspora: From al-Andalus to Provence and Back to Castile,” discusses the poetry of Todros Abufalia’s *diwān* (circa 1298) as a product of dual diasporic literary streams; one is inherited from the Andalusī poetics and the other from the troubadour poetry developed in southern France and exported to Christian Iberia. Abufalia worked under the patronage of Christian king Alfonso X the Wise (1252-1284), but as opposed to the rest of his contemporary poets, who wrote and participated in the Alfonso’s *scriptorium*, he wrote in Hebrew instead of vernacular. This fact made Abufalia unknown in Medieval Spanish literary corpus despite his vast poetic production (65). Wacks explores Abufalia’s motifs for choosing for Hebrew “to demonstrate to leadership of that minority his relationship with (and allegiance to) the dominant political power” (80). This unique feature in the use of language served as an example of the blended traditions and political forces that shaped Abufalia’s combining diasporic aesthetics, from the Hebrew Andalusī poetic tradition to the troubadour poetics in Castilian soil.

The Sephardic resistance toward literary vernacularization is analyzed in Chapter 4, “The Anxiety of Vernacularization: Shem Tov ben Isaac ibn Arduziel de Carrión’s *Proverbios morales* and *Debate between the Pen and the Scissors*.” Shem Tov stands out as a key figure in the Iberian Hebrew letters for his literary contribution in the language of the hostland (Castilian) and the homeland (Hebrew). Shem Tov’s world was influenced by the upheavals that marked a decline in Christian-Jewish relations in fourteenth-century Castile. According to Wacks, this scenario forged an anxiety on the Hispano-Hebrew writers and the use of Castilian as a vehicle to critique the literary vernacular (99). Shem Tov’s Hebrew-written *Debate* has been generally interpreted as a critical allegory representing several historical figures of the religious spectrum such as the Converso anti-Jewish polemicist Alfonso of Valladolid. Taking into account the former analyses of the work by Nini and Fruchtman, Sandford, Cole and Blackwelder-Carpenter, Wacks argues the purpose of Shem Tov’s *Debate* as a “manual for critical thinking about writing and reading” (116). The debate between the scissors and the pen following the stylistic features of the *maqāma* pretends to establish the comparison between Hebrew language (pen) and its superiority over the vernacular (scissors), since it carries the authority of biblical tradition (121). On the other hand, his *Proverbios* composed in Castilian after the *Debate* are conceived in the form of priestly-rabbinic verse narrative following some of the features of the Christian didactic *mester de clerecía*. The work has been studied as an example of cultural integration that invites the audience to reflect a world of relativism and pluralism, without representing either Christian or Jewish doctrine. Wacks suggests that behind this general conception *Proverbios* can be also analysed as an example of a *diasporic* text in which the author is not writing in vernacular to please the Christian audience but also as a preamble of the decline of Hebrew as a literary language influenced by the conversion to Christianity and the acculturation to accommodate the dominant culture.

Chapter Five, “Diaspora as Tragicomedy: Vidal Benvenist’s *Efer and Dina*,” continues the study of Sephardim authors as a diasporic minority analyzing the tale *Efer and Dina* by fifteenth-century Zaragoza born Vidal Benvenist. Configured in the form of a European romance narrative, it portrays a tragic love story linked to the tradition of Hebrew parodies performed as part of the Jewish Purim celebration. The work represents an allegory for the moral integrity of the Jewish community of Zaragoza and its projection in the story of

Esther: Dina faces her challenges with her husband Efer's impotence while Esther is fighting against Haman and his desire to destroy the Jews. Both female figures symbolize the vicissitudes of the Aragonese Jewish community at the turn of the fifteenth century: persecution, secrecy and forced conversion (136). Although the work is written in Hebrew to shun the vernacular as literary language, Wacks suggests it contains contemporary thematic material specific to the Iberian context that provides the work with diasporic elements: the use of fauna, flora and a setting that evokes Zion but was written within the Iberian Peninsula; the human soul's struggle with the temptations of the material world and the realities of the new middle class, which resonate with contemporary vernacular works such as *Libro de Buen Amor* and *Celestina*; the theme of the unhappily married young maiden, *malmaridada* or *malcasada* (mis-married young girl) found in vernacular Romance tradition, which appeared in *cancioneros* and courtly poetry; and finally, the debate of the moral dangers of intellectual assimilation and materialism that endangered the integrity of the Jewish community of Zaragoza shifting the relationship of the Sephardim to the vernacular culture of their adoptive homeland.

The Sephardim double diaspora perspective after the expulsion and displacement of the Iberian Jewry is discussed in Chapter 6, "Empire and Diaspora: Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah* and Joseph Karo's *Magid Meisharim*." Wacks's approach to both works permits the exploration of the Sephardic reaction to exclusion and self-identification from two different perspectives. Verga and Karo stand out as two opposite Jewish voices in exile, whose conversion to Christianity while still in Spain was not accepted as genuinely Christian. Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah*, or the *Rod of Judah* published in Turkey in 1550, is a historiographical chronicle of ancient and medieval persecutions suffered by the European Jewry. Based on post-colonial studies by B. Du Bois, Paul Gilroy and Walter Mignolo, Wacks argues Verga's text initiates the development of Jewish historiography, non-existent until now, relying on intellectual tools of the dominant culture, embracing the humanistic ideas of sixteenth-century Christian writers and placing human decision and action over a divine plan as the primary engines of history (168). *Magid Meisharim* (The Preacher of the Righteous) by Joseph Karo (Toledo 1488–Safed 1575) represents an opposite perspective of diasporic feeling. In this case, it does so by the embodiment of mystical eschatology, divine redemption and contemplation of the nature of God through the study of Kabbalah and the Zohar relationship between the *Shekhinah* (God's feminine aspect according to kabbalistic doctrine) and the Jewish people (177).

The former experience and roles carried in the Spanish crown helped Sephardim to establish a new dominant social, cultural and linguistic group overshadowing the rest of the other Jewish groups living in the Ottoman lands, coinciding with the emergence of Spain as a world power. In his last chapter, "Reading *Amadís* in Constantinople: Spanish Fiction in the Key of Diaspora," Wacks analyzes the Sephardic cultural hegemony in the Ottoman empire, taking as example Jacob Algaba's 1554 Hebrew translation of the Spanish chivalric novel *Amadís de Gaula* (1508).¹ Published in Zaragoza by Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo, the text represents a knight hero of Spanish imperial desire (185); however, Algava's translation reflects a remix of the chivalric ideal addressed to a Jewish audience transporting the plot and

¹ Algaba's *Amadís* initiated a golden period of literary Sephardic production with the publication in 1553 of the Ladino version of the *Tanach* known as *Biblia de Ferrara* sponsored by Jewish patron Doña Gracia Mendes-Nasi. In Lazar, Moshe (ed), *The Ladino Bible of Ferrara 1553*, Labyrinthos, 1992, p. xvii.

its characters into a Sephardic setting. The hero and the Christian motifs around the Castilian text are replaced by Judaizing features. This technique, according to Wacks, allowed the Iberian Jews to still identify with their former land of origin and culture by enacting “Spanish culture on the Ottoman stage in a kind of Sephardic counter-nationalism that mimics and distorts Spanish imperial culture” (196).

An understanding of what Sephardic literature represents and its journey throughout history receives a remarkable addition with Wacks’s new work. Starting with a definition of diaspora, the author presents a strong critical analysis on the various aspects of Sephardic literary identity and its voices, still overlooked and under-represented in today’s Iberian medieval corpus. The book presents a convincing linear analysis of the double diaspora consciousness suffered by the Iberian Jews from the pre- and post-expulsion periods through a diverse selection of secular works. Wacks’s contribution permits to value the significance of these texts and their role of the diasporic experience of the Sephardic literature nurtured by the product of trauma and the blend of Hispanic and Jewish cultural values. Wacks opens the path to a yet-unexplored field of the Sephardic literature that not only expanded throughout the Mediterranean shores but also in the Netherlands and the New World in the forthcoming centuries.