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*Las Coplas de Yosef: Entre la Biblia y el Midrash en la
poesía judeoespañola (review)*

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Girón-Negrón, Luis M. and Laura Minervini, Eds. *Las Coplas de Yosef: Entre la Biblia y el Midrash en la poesía judeoespañola. Biblioteca Románica Hispánica IV. Textos 29. Madrid: Gredos, 2006. ISBN 84-249-2846-6*

Luis Girón-Negrón and Laura Minervini have combined their skills as philologists and literary scholars to produce this new edition of the anonymous fourteenth-century Hebrew *aljamiado Coplas de Yosef (Coplas)*. The *Coplas* relate the Biblical story of Joseph's enslavement at the hands of his brothers and later rise to power in Pharaoh's court (Genesis 37-50) using the *cuaderna vía* metrical form popular among Iberian clerics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This edition of the *Coplas*, based on MS V (also the basis of Moshe Lazar's 1990 edition) includes a historical-literary and linguistic study, text, notes, appendices that include transliterations and Hebrew transcriptions of other witnesses (MS C –the basis for González Llubera's 1935 edition of the *Coplas*– printed fragments TS1, TS2, and TS3, and fragment P), as well as a bibliography and index of lexical items. This text gives us a glimpse of the variety of story-telling traditions circulating among Spanish-speaking Jews during the fourteenth century, including literary sources such as the Midrash and Bible as well as popular oral traditions. Girón-Negrón and Minervini show us how, in this version of the Josephine tale, the anonymous Judeo-Spanish author(s) supplement the Biblical story with elements from these and other sources, producing a tale of fraternal betrayal followed by success in a foreign land that resonated with the Sephardim forced out of Spain in 1492.

Girón-Negrón and Minervini's study of the cultural context of this work (el "Estudio histórico-literario" 13-81) is one of the first to thoroughly investigate and speculate about what sort of post-Expulsion Judeo-Spanish cultural milieu produced Hebrew *aljamiado* texts such as the *Coplas*. While for the *Coplas* historical forces such as the Expulsion and Diaspora have unarguably erased many of the clues that other textual historians avail themselves of to locate the works they study, Girón-Negrón and Minervini nevertheless show how much information the physical manuscript and the text itself can yield to the astute codicologist, paleographer, linguist and literary scholar. Their historical-literary study begins with a detailed analysis of MS V (its colophons, hands, size and inscriptions) and examines the history of this codex as part of the fascinating *Casa dei Neofiti*, an institute for *judeoconversos* established in 1543 at the urging of San Ignacio de Loyola designed to provide for the material and intellectual needs of New Christians (24). Minervini and Girón-

Negrón suggest that MS V may have been copied, either directly or via another now lost intermediary copy, from a now lost printed version of Gershom Soncino (probably the “Gershon el nombrado” mentioned in the colophon included in MS V) whose existence is testified to in the TS fragments (87).

After a comparison of the Josephine story as presented in the *Coplas* to that of the Bible and the Midrash, Girón-Negrón and Minervini turn to the nature of the work’s *cuaderna vía* and what this might tell us about the anonymous author—this author who felt at home both in the Castilian language and literary forms of the moment and in the literary Hebrew of the Midrash and Pentateuch. The editors profitably revive the term Paloma Díaz Más first created to describe Shem Tob’s *Proverbios morales*, “*clerecía rabínica*”, in order to explain the genre to which the *Coplas* belong, as well as the breadth of knowledge and cultural formation possessed by its anonymous author, who, like Shem Tob, bridges two literary traditions, the Castilian and the Hebrew. Like the Christian clerics that composed in *mester de clerecía*, Shem Tob and the anonymous author of the *Coplas* share a similar intellectual formation, a fundamentally learned approach to poetry and its function, as well as a didactic vision of their own work (48).

After positioning this work in the context of other learned Judeo-Spanish *aljamiado* works, Girón-Negrón and Minervini discuss its potential function, looking specifically to the Sephardic context of the Diaspora. Like the *Proverbios morales*, they assert that the *Coplas* reflect, through the lens of the Jewish courtier, the stress and anxiety of the diasporic Sephardic subject (78). The content of the Josephine tale—this story of an exiled Jew living among Gentiles—made it the perfect vehicle for reflecting the Sephardic condition in the Diaspora, and Girón-Negrón and Minervini, like González Llubera before them, make a convincing argument that this particular version was used as a paraliturgical Purim play for Judeo-Spanish exiles and that it constitutes a “*joya hispanojudía del folclor purímico*” (79).

Minervini and Girón-Negrón then turn to the language of the text itself (“*Estudio lingüístico*,” 83-115), asserting that this version of the *Coplas* is a valuable witness to the evolution of a unique Judeo-Spanish literary language cultivated among first generation post-Expulsion Sephardim in the East. The mix of Hebrew (*shekinah*, for example), Arabic (*atahud*), Judeohispanic (*meldar*) and even a few learned Castilian (*actoridad*) and Portuguese (*falar*) terms, reflects, in these editors’ opinion, an early stage in the formation of what becomes some fifty years later a full-blown *koiné* dialect of Judeo-Spanish. This text from the 1530s reflects the post-Expulsion milieu of first generation Sephardim who are living in new diasporic communities and just beginning to mix with their new Ottoman and North African neighbors (113-14).

In this study Minervini and Girón-Negrón perform a detailed and systematic analysis of the transliteration of the Spanish text in Hebrew characters, as well as a comparison of the Spanish of the *Coplas* with other Hebrew *aljamiado* and Judeo-Spanish texts as well as with other peninsular dialects. Specifically they address the graphic representation, phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexicon of the work’s language. This manuscript conforms to the graphic system of medieval Hispano-Hebrew *aljamía* as

outlined by Minervini in *Testi giudeospagnoli medievali*. This manuscript is exceptional in that it is vocalized throughout, although the scribe sometimes confuses vocalic symbols such as *sereh* with *patah*. Some confusion between consonants that look very similar in Hebrew—for example, over a hundred cases of confusion between *resh* and *dalet*—leads Minervini and Girón-Negrón to conclude that this is evidence of a careless copyist who did not always understand what he was copying (86).

The bilingual Hebrew-Spanish transliteration (124-93) allows us to compare the original Judeo-Spanish version in Hebrew characters with the transliteration into Romance characters. Girón-Negrón and Minervini have chosen to regularize errors and variations (consistently noted in the apparatus), creating a text free from distracting diacritic marks and altered fonts that plague some diplomatic editions. The notes (213-326) are impressive and offer the specialist reader (the Hispanomedievalist, and/or scholars of Hebrew and Arabic language and literature) all sorts of information, including etymologies, cogent explanations of textual problems, detailed comparison with other existing copies including Arabic Iberian *aljamiado* documents, and contextualization of the work in the Midrashic literature of the *clérigo rabínico*. The discovery of so many Iberian and French Midrashic sources for the extra-Biblical material included in this version of the *Coplas* is one of the major contributions of this edition, and, in combination with the other texts and traditions to which this work alludes, such as the Arabic, illustrates the complexity of medieval Judeo-Spanish literature in fourteenth-century Iberia, as well as the intellectual background of its creators.

This will be the definitive edition of the *Coplas de Yosef*, and its accessibility makes it ready for incorporation into existing reading lists as a companion to Shem Tob's *Proverbios Morales*. The *Coplas* provide us with a compelling narrative that will stimulate discussions on many topics, including medieval Iberian literature and its social functions, diasporic identity and subject formation, the role of the Jews in Christian courts and as Castilian authors, the legacy of al-Andalus in fourteenth/fifteenth-century Judeo-Spanish culture, and Jewish culture and religious beliefs in general.

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