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*Beyond Faith: Belief, Morality and Memory in a
Fifteenth-Century Judeo-Iberian Manuscript* by Michelle M.
Hamilton (review)

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la fortuna de la obra de Acciaiuoli en el siglo XVI “para identificar la fuente a que accedieron los autores –esto es, el texto griego, una traducción latina, o en vulgar–, intentado establecer paralelismos con la traducción de Alfonso de Palencia” y “4.2. Recepción crítica de la traducción de Palencia” (clx-clxiv), o sea, su acogida en las bibliotecas nobles, su reedición, y los juicios sobre ella.

La controversia sobre estas figuras clásicas deja huellas en Cataluña con *Lo parlament e la batalla que hagueren Aníbal e Escipió* (ca. 1399-1410) de Antoni Canals, y en España en dos traducciones al castellano de la *Disceptatio super presidentia inter Alexandrum, Hannibalem et Scipionem* de Aurispa. Por lo tanto, la obra de Palencia, aunque más tardía, parece responder al mismo interés que ha provocado estas obras, y al incómodo sobre el rol de la nobleza que precede la guerra de las Comunidades. Esta falta, sin embargo, es insignificante en el contexto de la excelencia de la edición.

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Hamilton, Michelle M. Beyond Faith: Belief, Morality and Memory in a Fifteenth-Century Judeo-Iberian Manuscript. The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World 57. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014. 307 pages and 8 plates.

This study of MS *Parma Palatina* 2666 –which preserves six vernacular texts copied in Hebrew *alxamía* and references four lost titles– offers: Front matter (ix-xlvi); six chapters, (1) “Prooftexts: God and Knowledge in the *Visión deleitable*” (1-57); (2) “The Polemics of Sacrifice: Isaac and ‘Nuestro Padre’ Abraham” (58-87); (3) “Material and Translation: The Jewish Tradition and Fifteenth-Century Humanism” (88-135); (4) “The Art of Memory and Forgetting: The Judeo-Andalusi and Scholastic Traditions” (136-65); (5) “The Wisdom of Seneca: Humanism and the Jews” (166-204); (6) “The Place of the Dead: The Vernacular Dance of Death and the Legacy of the Judeo-Iberian Middle Ages” (205-48); Conclusion, “Textual Truths” (249-54); Bibliography



(255-88); and Index (289-307). These texts entail multiple challenges – philological, philosophical, historical, and sociological– and their publication represents an important advance. There is much to admire in this volume, but grounds for criticism, too; several varieties of errata mar the presentation.

These texts were, the author avers, read by courtiers who circulated between aristocratic Aragonese and Castilian households (xix, n. 27; 168-78; 185-91; 210) –for whom the ascent of Reason “divorces belief from any one religious tradition” (xlii)– and offer “a universal ethics that could appeal to Jews and *conversos*” (xxxvii). This compass rose orients the author’s exposition of “anxiety concerning the future of Judaism” (xxxii), involving “particular Iberian contexts” (xv), “a redefinition of individual belief” (249), and “truth that lies beyond any single faith or creed” (250) or “an emerging sense of modernity” (253).

The *Visión* is construed as a “space where the religious differences [...] are essentially erased” (4). The rationale for citing from a published Latin character MS of the *Visión* rather than from this MS is undeveloped (2 n3); two *alxamía* version variants are scrutinized, *providencia* (37-44) and *profeta ángel* (44-55). The former suggests “[t]he truth of providence, including the forms of magic, lies beyond rational thought, but not reason” (39), while the latter implies “a conscious effort to distance the *Visión* from the Christian tradition” (44). The absence from this version of two chapters that articulate “Christian beliefs”, possible later interpolations (57), marks that distance and a putative neutralization of “religious differences”. Here, and throughout, the author controls the literature via secondary sources. Citing “Christian and Jewish authorities” (23), Hamilton reads a text wherein Reason “proves the existence of a God who is remarkably devoid of either Jewish or Christian inflection” (24). Propaedeutic to perfecting the intellect (15), and attaining *eudaemonia*, the Liberal Arts curriculum underscores that Free Will, Determinism, Rationalism, Theurgy, Providence, and Prophecy antedate 14th-century Iberian theological debates such as those the author links to “anti-Jewish and *converso* sentiment, [...] dynastic strife and court betrayals” that motivated “works exploring the extent to which God controlled or intervened in earthly events” (41). In fine, the *Visión* allegorizes “the Neoplatonic rationalism of the Judeo-Iberian tradition” (49 n154), and conveys “*converso* spirituality” (58), making it a *vade mecum* for attaining “eternal happiness via prophecy” (55).

This edition and study of a poem evincing the *Akedah*, witness to “*converso* and/or Jewish belief” (xliv), raises several questions (cf. Septimus; Zemke). For example, vv. 11-15 are read thus: “Mas antes sin dilación / la razon bien conoçida / sigue una tal opinion / que por muy justa razon, seguirla me conbida”, where the editor reads יגיש as third singular present indicative “sigue” instead of first singular past preterit “seguí” (v. 13), thus interrupting the series of past tense verbs, “subió” (v. 2), “vi” (v. 3), “privaba” (v. 5), “quise” (v. 8), and “fize” (v. 16), and displacing the grammatical and notional subject (v. 13). This temporal and notional displacement makes the preceding volitional “non quise” (v. 8), the optative “mas ante sin dilación” (v. 11), and the causal “[l]a razon bien conoçida” (v. 12) nugatory. Had the first singular poetic voice not already subscribed “una tal opinión”, what would motivate the subsequent vow, “fize luego un tal pacto (v.16), to demonstrate belief in action, “[l]a yo mostrase en akto” (20)?

The editor reads vv. 36-40 thus: “Que digamos por enobar / es muy ereje opinion / pues afin de lo tentar / si la otra causa causar / ya sabía su entención”; “Let us say by way of interpretation / it is a very heretical view / *pues* (conjunction of cause, motive, or reason) for the purpose of testing him / if *la* (the) other cause to cause / already knew his intention”. The editor reads פויש as “pues” rather than an apocopation of “fuese”. Yet, the conjunction deprives vv. 38-39 of a conjugated verb. Verse 37 confirms the heretical tenor of v. 38. Omniscient God knows how Abraham will act. That He tested Abraham without an ulterior purpose contradicts orthodox understanding, an understanding appositely expressed by the imperfect subjunctive. The editor reads *si* with the manuscript (I emend *si[n]*), but reads *la* for *le* against the manuscript (v. 39). The emendation, “*si[n]* le otra causa causar”, syntactically parallels the previous negative clause, “sin aver conclusión” (v. 34), and both echo the *midrash*, “Sovereign of the Universe! You have told me “*Take now*” to no purpose! Said He to him: ‘No; it is to make you known in the world’” (*Bamidar Rabbah* 18:19). The pronoun *le* is written לֵי *hic et alibi* (vv. 32, 35, and 43) while the feminine definite article *la* is written הַלָּה throughout (vv. 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, and 21), never לָּה. Were לָּה accurate, one might translate “If the other cause to cause”, and read it as being the subject of “ya sabía su entención”. To claim “la causa causar” refers to God, the “distant mover” (75), disregards the adjective “otra”. Such a reading entangles a clause of purpose with an “IF” clause, denying both a conjugated verb. That “God was testing Abraham, but the latter, without knowing how the affair would end realized God’s intention (‘ya sabía su entención’), and so his willingness to obey”



(63) remains a dubious proposition. Finally, the subject of the verb “sabía” (v. 40) is consistently God (vv. 29, 32, 35, and 39), not Abraham.

The editor reads “[m]as mostró que'l platicar/ en la cosa que's perfecta/ le causa ser mucho mas dita” (vv. 41-43), interpreting “perfect” to mean “the mental exercise of being willing to sacrifice that which is most important” (62), understanding *platicar* as a form of *practicar*, consistent with certain philosophical usage. CORDE (1454 to 1486) identifies fifteen cases of the syntagm “platicar en” of which exactly *one* unambiguously conveys “to practice”, the remainder express “to speak about”. In the instant case, “platicar” more probably expresses “to speak about”, consequent with “le causa ser mucho mas dita”, “discussed” or “noted”, i.e., speaking about something.

References to parallel metaphors of light and darkness abound (65-73), and the *Akedah* is cited variously as *locus classicus* for Maimonidean accounts of converting potential into actual, a paradigm of martyrdom (83-84), or a trope inviting apostasy (85-86). Hamilton claims the poem counsels “relying on one’s own sense of right and wrong” (78), and connects the theological question of whether God nullifies His commandments with pogroms, forced conversions, the Barcelona and Tortosa disputations, and proselytizing (80).

The Hebrew-Romance glossaries pertain to “logic and the proofs required to prove the existence of the divine” (xli). Expanding on Hava Tirosh-Samuelson’s summary, “Aristotle’s reflections on happiness were very much a part of Jewish intellectual history” (111 n75), the author associates “Jewish and *converso* representations of belief” (92) with Aristotelian-Neoplatonism (94) and the incorporation of Scholasticism into Jewish theology (95). The author characterizes Moses Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of Maimonides’ *Treatise on Logic* as “this Provençal translation”, referring, surely, to the translator’s locale (118, 130). A verbatim quotation from James T. Robinson’s English translation of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Perush ha-Millot* is acknowledged with the call-out: “*Perush ha-Millot*, 43-44; See also Robinson ‘Samuel’” (122 n118). The Hebrew שפע, “emanation”, is therein glossed as *infuccion* and *virtud*, prompting speculation that the MS offers “descriptive accounts of what the experience of this type of intellectual emanation might be like” (134).

The *ars memoria*, “perhaps the best example of the hybrid nature of the collection” (xliv), is explicated via Cicero, Quintilian, Frances Yates and Mary Carruthers (141-48; Carruthers’ *The Book of Memory*, revised 2d edition [2008]

is cited, but page number references are consistently erroneous, thus I infer the source is the first edition). The author notes that “the placement of images into imagined *loci* is the crux of all mnemotechniques” (145), being a “practical skill, but also an ethical and moral duty” (153). The eclipse of Peter of Lombard’s *Libri IV sententiarum* by Aquinas’ *Summa* and a simulacrum of the cosmic spheres that appears in Jacobus Publicius’ *ars memorativa* illustrate how “perfecting the memory is a means to perfecting the intellect” (160) and “‘strengthening’ the faculties of the soul” (163).

Alfonso de Cartagena’s *Segundo Libro de providencia*, and the *Cancionero de Baena* congener debate poem, are situated at the nexus of the “nascent humanism of Iberia” (168). The former broaches fate, free will, and augury for the edification of courtiers enmeshed in “the patronage system of the royal courts” (184). Seneca’s dilemmatic tales are apposite for “Jew, *converso* or Christian, in the [...] Castilian court of Enrique IV” (182). Bio-bibliographies of Fernán Pérez Guzmán, Íñigo López de Mendoza, courts and *cancioneros* summon Jewish and *converso* poets associated with Castilian nobility (186). Whether the debate poeticizes “how best to ‘love’” (187) or an “obscene debasement of a courtly theme” (194), the poem is given short shrift.

The *Dance of Death* invites enumeration of Semitic traditions concerning death (xlv-xvi, 206, 213-15, 231-38), “the role of wealth, status, and wisdom in this world and the world to come” (205), as well as “issues of identity [...] and lack of equality”. The MS raises “the continued problem of finding a satisfactory place for the *conversos* and Jewish Iberians in Spanish history” (206). If this MS version “offers a new and unique reading” (209), the decision to reproduce Sola Solé’s Escorial b-iv-21 edition is perplexing. Personified Death addresses each victim in turn, assaying integrity and rectitude, and, Hamilton avers, in so doing “We become [...] Death itself” (207). Death’s imminence vitiates memory and dissolves identity, offering “a uniquely *converso* or Jewish reading”, by which “all are *not* equal in Death” (208). The author supposes the piece was performed (214), and speculates that public reading of the *Danza* might have administered a prophylactic or antidote to “beliefs empty of universal truth” (217). The author’s assurance that among “Judeo-Iberian circles” the Angel of Death was “associated with the idea of religious conversion” (224) is unsubstantiated. Details concerning plague mortality rates, Arabic, Hebrew, and Romance plague treatises, and accounts of the plague years (226-31) do little to adumbrate the *Danza*. A catalogue of Arabic and Hebrew avatars of the Angel of Death (231-



38), an Aragonese *alxamía* poem depicting Death the equalizer, the Qur'an, a thirteenth-century *tafsīr* written in Shiraz, and a fifteenth-century Aragonese Arabic *alxamía* text that describes "what happens to the body in the act of dying" (236), and the blasting horn motif that signals Death's arrival (237-38) is recited. Finally, Al-Gazālī's *Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* confirms that the Islamic "Angels of Death and Resurrection [...] were known in Iberia" (240). Yom Kippur, shofar lore, the Book of Life trope, penitential prayers, burial guilds, funeral customs, Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, and Eliyahu Capsali's *Sefer Eliyahu Zuta* (240-48) are recruited to conjecture that recent apostates might "be reminded on the holiest of holy days of what the spiritual stakes were for their conversion?" (247). Congregations judged the *Danza* apposite meditation on Yom Kippur?

There is much to admire in this volume –Hamilton's command of codicology, philosophy, and literary biography, the exhaustive cataloging of parallels and analogies– yet the collateral detail accumulated presumably to contextualize these texts overwhelms them, diminishing the attention given to the texts *per se*. The author's theoretical stance regarding identity invokes social fluidity, "difference [...] is ultimately contingent" (xxx), yet, the plight of the individual dissolves into a conflated *converso*/Jew subject (16), for whom a particular *converso*/Jewish hermeneutic "the *converso* voice" (216) is claimed. Attention to the above mentioned putative class of readers elides the unique predicaments of the individuals who populate it.

That the Rashi script used to record works expounding "universal ethics" (xxxvii) makes them legible only to "Jewish and *converso* readers with a knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet" (xxxvi) is a home truth. Hamilton argues that the MS records "texts designed to shape the inner life of *conversos*, crypto-Jews and Jews in fifteenth-century Iberia" (xl-xlvi). That is possible. But one repeatedly encounters the *modus operandi* "If A were certain, then B must [or could equally] be certain". This creates the impression that the texts serve as storehouses of illustrations for *a priori* conclusions: "I have used the various texts [...] to explore [...] strands of contemporary Iberian culture and intellectual currents such as humanism, scholasticism, Kabbalah and Judeo-Andalusi Aristotelianism to articulate and give shape to a redefinition of individual belief" (249). The thesis, "a redefinition of individual belief" and the title, *Beyond Faith: Belief, Morality and Memory etc.*, invite discussion: in what ways might "belief" stand to "religion"? Donald Lopez has written concerning religion that belief "is

neither natural nor universal” (28) but, rather, “appears as a universal category because of the universalist claim of [...] Christianity” (33). The inscribed texts and the evidence of the MS are significant, yet, it is individuals who interpret and reinterpret texts, constructing meaning and sense. The hermeneutic circle freights the interpreter’s agency over a text’s facility to encode itself verbatim into imagination. This monograph devoted to fifteenth-century *alxamía* Judeo-Iberian writings should stimulate further exploration of the subject area.

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This collection of highly informative articles comprehensively surveys a significant and wide-ranging topic in medieval and early modern Spanish literary and cultural history. In a substantial introduction, Alberto Montaner and Eva Lara closely define and usefully nuance the essential terms and