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ON THE ANDALUSI LITERARY INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

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First, thank you. When I was invited to participate in a roundtable at IMC Kalamazoo 2020, sponsored by *La corónica* and in honour of S. J. Pearce's award-winning book, I was honoured and excited for the opportunity. Recognizing a book such as Pearce's, one that centres both Jews and Al-Andalus, at a major medievalist conference is an important milestone. It speaks to the work that Michelle M. Hamilton, David Wacks, and others have done in recent years not only to make the Jewish culture of al-Andalus central to the study of medieval Spain but also to medievalists working in other (often Anglocentric and Christian-centric) fields. Thus, I take a moment to thank previous scholars for this work, and to thank *La corónica* for continuing to make space for recognition of *The Andalusí Literary Intellectual Tradition* even though the conference had to be cancelled amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pearce's book shows us how one Jewish scholar and intellectual, Judah ibn Tibbon, responded to the collapse of the intellectual culture that formed him and how he worked to preserve and transmit his culture in new circumstances. It is impossible not to mention that we are ourselves facing a challenging moment of change, in academia and beyond, with anxious uncertainty about both the immediate and long-term future. While I do not want to make any easy or cute connections between the two historical situations, I cannot help seeing at least a timely echo of relevance: even the complete elimination of the communal and institutional structures that gave rise to and supported the Jewish literary intellectual achievement in Al-Andalus, Pearce expertly demonstrates, did not mean its demise.

One of the great strengths of *The Andalusí Literary Intellectual Tradition* is its clarity. Pearce manages to explain complex cultural phenomenon in ways that are accessible to newcomers to Al-Andalus and Judaism without stripping them of their complexities. For this reason, her book will serve a lasting and much-needed purpose. I have long wished for an introductory bridge between Jewish studies and medieval studies, ideally one that does justice to both. As I will discuss below, I think medievalists who are not specialists in Jewish studies or Al-Andalus will gain much from this book. Yet, the book is so much more: in addition to providing excellent context for and explanation of two complex cultural phenomena, Pearce has moved our understanding of both forward and makes a strong argument for why and how we should understand a critically important moment in Jewish history.

Pearce's explanation of the term Judeo-Arabic provides a good illustration. She gives a good definition of how this term is mostly used to talk about a language, explains the history of this language and provides some of the relevant scholarly information about it—and all of this is done in a clear manner and in a way that a reader with no or little prior knowledge will have a useful working understanding of the term for the purpose of understanding her book and for broader benefit. But then, Pearce quietly adds another important layer, arguing that Judeo-Arabic is a culture.¹ This

¹ This is part of the central ideas the book explores as a whole, but it is introduced and cogently explained in pages 27-40.

argument, or perhaps I should say this clear articulation of the implications of the work of scholars such as Ross Brann and Rina Drory, is at this point not such a surprising one, except that I have never seen it stated in this way and with this substance.² When I read how Pearce presented the point, it all just clicked. The cultural definition, further, is the central argument of the book: Judah ibn Tibbon was working to create “a culturally Judeo-Arabic society even as it ceased to be so linguistically” (Pearce 35). It is through this lens that *The Andalusí Literary Intellectual Tradition* asks us to read Judah’s ethical will to his son, and it is through this lens that we should understand not just his intellectual project, but the Tibbonid legacy as a whole. This articulation of Judah’s project, moreover, is useful for thinking about other Jewish scholars from this same time and context. I am thinking specifically of Judah al-Harizi and his *oeuvre*, where the framing of Judeo-Arabic as a culture rather than primarily a language makes it much easier to place the poet’s seemingly contradictory statements about Hebrew and Arabic and the literary traditions each engage.

Another example of a simple statement that carries with it a lot of implications: Judah ibn Tibbon, says Pearce, “acknowledges [scripture’s] literary and cultural work by making the Hebrew Bible part of the discussion of poetry rather than making poetry part of the broader discussion of the Hebrew Bible” (101). While this sentence might seem unremarkable here, its elegant simplicity belies an important deeper point. With it, Pearce crystalizes and affectively expresses something profound about the playful relationship between scripture and poetry in the Andalusí literary traditions, which she then explains more thoroughly in the chapter that follows. For me, as a scholar of the same period and texts, this made immediate sense—it clicked—but someone coming new to Andalusí traditions will also gain insight and be able to begin with an understanding that will improve and shape their study.

Back to why I think *The Andalusí Literary Intellectual Tradition* has something significant to offer scholars who are not Hispanists or Jewish

² See for example Brann, “The Arabized Jews” and Rina Drory, “Bilingualism and Cultural Images.”

studies specialists. Look at the way Pearce describes her methodology: “This is a work that does not observe the traditional distinctions between academic study of literature, philology, philosophy and history” (11). While this book is certainly not the first to successfully cross these boundaries, we nonetheless continue to see the “traditional distinctions” upheld, and we still need to be reminded of and reintroduced to what we gain by not adhering to them.³ *The Andalusí Literary Intellectual Tradition* is a masterclass in the benefits and rigor involved in rejecting “traditional” scholarly boundaries. Despite the influence of critical movements like the New Historicism, we do not read enough medieval literature along with medieval philosophy or theology; we too often adhere to the divide between historians and literary scholars, which, while real in some ways particular to training and foundational methods, prevents certain kinds of rich intellectual investigation. Precisely because Pearce does a good job of introducing key ideas about the Jewish cultural tradition of Al-Andalus (without presuming readers’ knowledge), her book may serve as an impetus for the productive breaking of other traditional distinctions. For example, while the fourth chapter (pages 101-148) provides a very important analysis of the ways scripture—the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an—plays a role in the poetics of the Jews of al-Andalus, it also serves as an excellent introduction to these poetics.

In addition to its clear, important, and perhaps understated way of providing field-defining explanations of the fundamentals of study of the Jews of al-Andalus, this book also has many moments of sensitive and insightful close reading of primary sources. A good instance is the way Pearce shows that Judah ibn Tibbon’s lovely direction, “My son, make your books your companions, and your shelves and your bookcases your paradise and orchard,” echoes and reworks Dunash ben Labrat’s similar instruction, “Your Garden of Eden will be your holy books, and your orchard the Arabs’ books” (106). Pearce demonstrates how these two

³ This is evident in the way conferences and scholarly anthologies are often organized or put together, where calls for submissions or panels are often put together based on these distinctions.

sentences are dense with meaning, and she details how the similarities and differences between them open a window for understanding Judah's relationship to the literary heritage he seeks to transmit, and to understanding his personal message, both to his son and to other readers of his ethical will.

Finally, a concluding point, maybe minor to some. While *The Andalusí Literary Intellectual Tradition* is about many "big topics"—the intellectual tradition of the Jews of al-Andalus, the Tibbonid translation project, *etc.*—I found it also (or even mostly) to be about the relationship between a father and son, Judah and Samuel. This is perhaps stating the obvious, since the central text, written right into the book's subtitle, is the ethical will that one wrote for the other. In explaining so well the context for this will, and what Judah had hoped to convey with it, however, Pearce also allows us a moving picture of the relationship between them. As Pearce puts it:

The exasperation that has historically made this letter such a challenge for modern readers to dissect is in fact vexation directed at a son who was indeed a dutiful protégé but who also sought to answer the big literary, intellectual, and cultural questions for himself, drawing on distinct Andalusí models and writing as someone born into exile and so, perhaps, simultaneously much less and infinitely more of an exile than his father. Ultimately, the frustrated disdain that comes through in the text is a byproduct of the loss of al-Andalus that Judah is watching, knowingly, in real time. (9)

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