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A HORTUS CONCLUSUS OF ANDALUSI JEWISH STUDIES

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S.J. Pearce has spent a lot of time in the library, and it shows. When you walk into the reading room of the Bodleian or the Biblioteca Nacional, you can imagine her there, studying a manuscript, spending hours deciphering a single paragraph. *The Andalusí Literary and Intellectual Tradition* is what happens when she comes out of the library and steps to the podium to speak: you expect a lecture on paleography, or Arabic grammar, or Maimonidean philosophy, and to be sure you do get these in capsule form throughout the work, but the book is really a work of cultural studies, a collection of profound insights on the cultural work performed by translation built upon equally profound insights into the particulars: philology, poetics, codicology, paleography, library history, grammar, social history, exegesis, Qur'anic studies, rationalist philosophy. It is itself a metaphorical "Andalusí *hortus conclusus*" (94) of Jewish Andalusí studies.

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Pearce takes on the considerable task of explaining the contribution of the Ibn Tibbons to the history of Jewish translation, and more broadly, to the cultural history of Jews in Spain, Southern France, and by extension, Western Europe. It is a philology-driven cultural history that accomplishes a very difficult feat: Pearce successfully makes fine distinctions between various aspects of cultural production (poetics, translation, philosophy) and, most importantly, their significance and meaning for cultural history. She does so in a way that avoids the twin pitfalls of academic writing: discipline-specific jargon on the one side, and theoretical abstractions without clear grounding in specifics on the other.

Pearce excels at bringing the details to the non-specialist without lapsing into cliché or generalization. Take for example her explanation of how Jewish doctrine informs the work of Tibbonid translation: “defining the semantic range of the root Y-R-H becomes an exercise in affirming the central tenet of Judaism, namely, the oneness of God, the *moreh*, or *guide* of the dictionary entry” (157–58). This is a good example of how Pearce’s finely-grained philological analysis drives larger arguments about language and cultural history. Pearce is equally adept at crafting broader, big-picture formulations of cultural production, as when she breaks down for the reader the respective roles and relationships between language, scripture, and poetry in the Islamic world as “the three critical elements....not construed as identical or co-terminal but rather as components of a single, coherent literary-theological discussion” (102).

For Pearce, the value of Ibn Tibbon’s work is in repackaging the Andalusí Jewish curriculum as a “secularizing Andalusí cultural nationalism cloaked for a European Jewish audience” (126). Judah ibn Tibbon’s ethical will becomes in itself an index for Andalusí Jewish culture in exile, “the portable conversation and microcosm of the library” (53). His ethical will renders an entire culture translatable in the most literal sense of ‘bringing it over to the other side,’ here across the Pyrenees and across linguistic and cultural divides that separated Sephardi Jews from their Ashkenazi counterparts. One of the phenomena associated with this move is the transformation of Arabic into a Jewish language, much as later Sephardi



exiles would transform Castilian into a Jewish diasporic language, a process accomplished partially through biblical translation. Their *Ferrara Bible* not only made the Tanakh accessible to readers of Castilian; like the King James Bible, it allowed readers to hear the word of God in the vernacular, and the force of that intervention would shape Sephardic Spanish literary style for centuries. So too do Ibn Tibbon's translations make Arabic an essential part of the Sephardi cultural legacy. The difference is, while the *Biblia de Ferrara* brought over Hebrew poetics into Castilian, Ibn Tibbon's translations bring Arabic poetics and habits of thought over into Hebrew. Just as Andalusí poets like Dunash ibn Labrat and Samuel Hanagid Naghrela clothed Arabic figures in Hebrew words, Ibn Tibbon's translations read like "Arabic texts written with Hebrew words" (10). In both cases, the translations "[convey] the sociocultural prestige of the source language through literal translation" (Pearce 37).

Some of the most fascinating moments of the book happen when Pearce takes on the challenge of explaining the meaning and impact of Ibn Tibbon's choices in approaching translation. This is difficult work and it is where she is at her best at doing cultural history that is deeply rooted in philology. She explains, for example, that Ibn Tibbon's innovation in translating the grammarian Ibn Janah was to favor sense-for-sense translation over the more common Andalusí practice of word-for-word, more literal translation. According to Pearce, he does this here in order to "privilege sense and both cultural and linguistic intelligibility for the target audience" (Pearce 84). It is an example of observance in the breach (in translation) by which Ibn Tibbon breaks with Andalusí practice in order to better transmit the Andalusí cultural character and legitimacy of Ibn Janah's work. In Pearce's words, Ibn Tibbon's "engagement with that Andalusí tradition, even in his Provençal exile, bore on the extent to which he was willing to break from it" (Pearce 159). This innovation bears on Ibn Tibbon's capacity to create a culturally specific expansion of the semantic field attached to the translated word.

One of the fringe benefits of *The Andalusí Literary and Cultural Tradition* is just that: Pearce's deep knowledge of the subject enables her to provide

succinct capsule histories of facets of this tradition, some of which have not been synthesized in English before. For example, she provides the first English-language synopsis of main currents in the Andalusí school of Hebrew grammarians (81). In this short passage she manages to clearly delineate how Andalusí grammarians operationalize the principles Saadya Gaon lays out in his own philological works. Another lucid formulation of a complex cultural phenomenon is how these grammarians established “an Arabizing linguistic ground against which ornament, elegance, rhetoric, and poetry can indeed come out ahead of Scripture” (116). While her teacher Ross Brann wrote of the Tanakh as a “Jewish Qur’an,” (Brann 14 and 23) Pearce gives this idea a turn, writing of “the Hebrew Bible as an Arabic text” (79).

Despite the deep erudition and attention to technical detail that characterizes her scholarship, Pearce’s writing somehow manages to remain accessible to the non-specialist academic and general reader alike. Part of this is because of her conscious effort to minimize the use of theoretical jargon, but mostly it is just good, clear, economical writing. A good example is her characterization of what she calls Ibn Tibbon’s “poetics of translation, in which the words are the only things that change between the two languages while everything else that makes the source language a valuable mode of communication must remain the same” (34).

A related issue medievalists face is the problem of working with critical theoretical ideas drawn from modern and contemporary theorists. Given that their ideas are often the product of systems of thought and circumstances that are distant from those that produced the medieval texts we study, we face the dual challenges of retrofitting and justifying the use of these ideas for analysis of medieval cultural production. Pearce threads this needle deftly in “reconciling the notion of untranslatability that is an inherent characteristic of the doctrine of *iʿjāz* [infallibility of the Qur’an] with Benjamin’s assertion that it is Scripture that is uniquely translatable” (112). Benjamin’s ideas on scripture were formed in discussion of the Hebrew and Latin bibles, and the Qur’an is not a part of his world.



Pearce addresses the issue of anachronism directly. For her, while it is useful to draw analogies between medieval and modern cultural production, “drawing on modern points of comparison [is] never probative but can often be instructive” (171). That is, modern examples cannot be among the building blocks of an argument about medieval culture, but they are useful in capturing the reader’s attention and in illustrating concepts necessary to the argument. In typical medievalist fashion, let me turn this process on its head and explain her (modern) argument with a medieval example: this is similar to the distinction that Nahmanides drew in his disputation with Friar Paul in Barcelona (1263): while *aggadah* (narrative material in Jewish exegesis) is useful for explaining key concepts, it cannot form the basis of *halakha* (law).

Pearce’s tendency to keep theory in its corner ironically may make this book a kind of watershed for future theoretically-informed studies of Andalusí Jewish and Sephardic culture. She touches on a long list of topics that are ripe for theorization: books, reading, praxis, archives, anthologization, translation, and reception (for example, that of Samuel ibn Naghrila’s *After Proverbs*), to name a few. In this way it is an excellent companion to other recent books in the field that deal with literary, historical and cultural aspects of books, literacy and legal theory such as Heather Bamford’s *Cultures of the Fragment: Uses of the Iberian Manuscript, 1100–1600* and Jesús Rodríguez Velasco’s *Dead Voice: Law, Philosophy, and Fiction in the Iberian Middle Ages*.

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