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REVIEW ARTICLE

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JUDEO-SPANISH DRAMA: A STUDY OF SEPHARDIC CULTURE

Early this century, the Spanish senator, Dr. Angel Pulido visited a number of Sephardic communities in the Levant. He was amazed to find Jews—whose ancestors had left Spain at the end of the 15th century—who spoke Spanish as their mother tongue. The Sephardim were a historical anomaly. They were a distinctive Hispanic group living totally out of context with Spain or any other Spanish-speaking country. In their cultural isolation, the Sephardim preserved aspects of medieval Spanish culture—old Spanish vocabulary and pronunciation of words, medieval ballad traditions, folk sayings, etc. In short, Dr. Pulido described the Sephardim as “*españoles sin patria*,” Spaniards without a country.

Spanish scholars became swept up in a romanticized interest in the Sephardim. There was a fascination with Sephardim, living vestiges of medieval Spain. Scholars began to collect texts of ballads as chanted by Sephardim. Collections of proverbs were made. Studies of the history of Sephardic Jews grew in popularity.

The Supreme Council For Scientific Studies of Spain established the Instituto Arias Montana de Estudios Hebraicos in Madrid in 1939. The Institute continues to publish its quarterly journal, *Sefarad*, which focuses on Sephardic history and culture. During the 1960's the universities of Madrid, Barcelona, and Granada established chairs of Hebrew language, Jewish history, and Jewish literature. An institute of Sephardic studies was established in Madrid. In 1954, a Sephardic center was created in Toledo.

Spaniards have published a number of significant works dealing with Sephardic culture. The Instituto Ibn Tibbon of the University of Granada collaborates with Editorial Gredos to publish the *Biblioteca Universal Sefardi*. Among their publications are several volumes of

the *Me'am Lo'ez*, the great Judeo-Spanish Bible commentary, with introduction and notes. The books are printed in Latin letters rather than in the Rashi script of the original.

Ameller Ediciones in Barcelona issues the *Biblioteca Nueva Sefarad*, which includes volumes dedicated to aspects of Sephardic culture. Among the works already published are a basic Ladino-Spanish dictionary; a book of Judeo-Spanish proverbs, Sephardic stories, and other works. From a Jewish point of view, it is fascinating to sense the enthusiasm and dedication of non-Jewish Spaniards towards Sephardic studies.

The Instituto Arias Montano of Madrid has recently published a three-volume study by Elena Romero, "El teatro de los sefardies orientales" (Madrid, 1979). This work attempts to give a comprehensive picture of theatre among Levantine Sephardim. The volumes provide listings of the plays which were written by or translated by Sephardim, discussions of some of the major themes, selections from sample plays, a glossary, and other information. The author spent years researching this topic, and drew heavily from material dealing with drama which appeared in Judeo-Spanish newspapers. Romero's effort is primarily that of cataloging information. She does not provide too much insight into the literary or artistic value of the works, or their significance as sociological or cultural phenomena. Her research, however, provides the data which students of Sephardic culture will need in order to evaluate the role of the theatre in Sephardic life.

Romero has come up with a Sephardic dramatic repertoire totalling 684 works. This total includes original Judeo-Spanish plays, as well as translations into Judeo-Spanish. It also includes works written by Sephardim in other languages such as Turkish, French, and Hebrew. Almost all of the plays were published during the second half of the 19th century and the first several decades of the 20th century. Some appeared in Judeo-Spanish newspapers, others were printed separately; some were staged as full productions, while others may simply have appeared in print without ever having been acted out. They were performed in communities throughout Turkey, the Balkan countries, Greece, and in Sephardic communities in the Middle East. The large number of works and the wide area of their production are indications of the great popularity enjoyed by theatre among Sephardim.

As could be expected, many of the themes related to Jewish religious life. Purim plays were quite popular, as were plays based on the story of Joseph and his brothers. Historical figures such as Abravanel and Dreyfus also figured as heroes in many plays. How-

ever, there were also plays dealing with problems and situations of contemporary life. The repertoire included comedies and tragedies, full-scale productions and monologues.

For the most part, theatre among the Sephardim was a folk art. It was designed to entertain its audience as well as to instruct Sephardim in some basic truths. Since the masses of people were not highly educated, the story lines in general were fairly uncomplicated. The playwrights wrote for their immediate audiences, not for immortality.

Some of the plays described conflicts and tensions resulting from the clash between modernism and traditional religious values. The well-known Sephardic intellectual and author, Abraham Galante, wrote an interesting dramatic work based on a true event which occurred on the Island of Rhodes. All of the characters in the play are Greek Christians, not Jews. A young lady falls in love with a man who lived next door. The problem is that he is already married and has two children. When she is rejected by him, she takes revenge by killing his son. The crime is discovered, she is taken to court, and sentenced to death. In this story, powerful emotions are expressed, and the heroes ponder the question of whether they should follow their emotions spontaneously, or whether they should be bound by their tradition. The play is thoughtful and provocative, in spite of a number of literary shortcomings.

The significance of this play by Abraham Galante must be evaluated in several ways. First, it is significant that he presented to his traditional Sephardic audience a very emotional story drawn from contemporary non-Jewish life. Galante had a fine education, and he wanted the Sephardic masses to focus their attention on the non-Jewish world around them. But, more significantly, he confronted the masses with emotional and moral conflict. He felt that his audience needed to have these questions brought forth publicly. Published in 1906, this play is a cultural symbol of the intellectual ferment which was taking place in Sephardic communities. The influences of Western culture and of modern education were coming into conflict with traditional religious, communal values.

From newspaper reports about dramatic productions in Sephardic communities, it is clear that the plays drew capacity crowds. Drama provided not only a means of entertainment for the masses, but also a creative outlet for the intellectually gifted. Elena Romero has provided an important service by indicating the wide scope of Judeo-Spanish theatre, and the important role it played in the lives of the people.

Romero's study deals with theatre among the Sephardim of the Levant. It should be noted, however, that there was also an active

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Judeo-Spanish theatre here in the United States. The Judeo-Spanish newspapers published in New York indicate many dozens of productions which took place in New York, Seattle, Rochester, Atlanta, Portland, and in many other communities. The repertoire included not only works which were written and published abroad, but also dramatic creations which were written in the United States. The theatre was a basic ingredient in Sephardic cultural life. With the decline of the Judeo-Spanish language, few if any Judeo-Spanish theatrical productions are being produced anymore. Yet, the vast dramatic literature which was produced within the Sephardic communities is a testimony to the imagination and creativity of Sephardic Jews of past generations. The Spanish world is increasingly aware of the dynamics of Sephardic cultural life. The Jewish world, I believe, also needs to increase its awareness.