
The University of Chicago Press, after a hiatus of fifteen years, has reissued in paperback George Zucker’s translation of Paloma Díaz-Mas’ essential overview of the history, language and literatures of the Sephardic Diaspora. What most sets this work apart from other panoramic histories of the Sephardim (such as those of Gerber or Benbassa and Rodrigue), is that Diaz-Mas is a philologist who gives equal time to socio-historical topics on one hand, and literary-linguistic topics on the other. To wit, she divides her work into sections on “Historical Background” (33 pages), “History of the Sephardim” (35 pages), “Language” (38 pages), “Literature” (48 pages), “The Sephardim and Spain” (26 pages), and “The Sephardim Today” (28 pages). As befits her training and appointment of Professor of Spanish Literature at the Universidad del País Vasco, she is particularly strong on the linguistic and literary issues, and includes very interesting and detailed sections, for example, on what she refers to as the “Adopted Genres” of modern Sephardic literary practice, namely Journalism (132-36), Narrative (136-39), Theater (136-145), and Autograph Poetry (145-48). This section, in addition to a fascinating aside in the section dedicated to the “Second Diaspora” of Sephardim in North America (62-66), brings to light, among other facts, the existence of an active Ladino press in New York City during the early twentieth century.

The chapter on “Spain and the Sephardim,” original to the 1992 English translation, is particularly commendable in its assessment of the ways in which Sephardim and their relationship with Spain have been imagined by Spaniards. Díaz-Mas keeps a safe critical distance from her material, even holding herself accountable for romanticizing the Sephardim in her own creative writing (168-69).

Zucker’s translation is respectful of Díaz-Mas’ original text, while accessible to non-hispanophones and non-specialists alike. He has made sound decisions in adopting a notional rather than hyperliteral translation, and especially in reproducing the original text of Ladino sources accompanied by his English translations, “to let the Sephardim speak in their own voice” (viii). This is particularly beneficial for readers who remember enough high school Spanish to appreciate the original language but for whom the Spanish edition would not be accessible.

There are a few areas where Zucker might have improved his interpretation of Diaz-Mas’ work. Despite his useful “Translator’s Additional Bibliography” consisting of English language texts on Sephardic topics, neither he nor Diaz-Mas has updated the bibliography since the 1992 hardcover edition of Zucker’s translation. In the last fifteen years, a good deal of work has been published in all of the areas covered by Diaz-Mas, and it seems a disservice to readers both general and specialized to have let this detail slip. In addition, there are a number of typographical errors and faulty transliterations from Hebrew or from Spanish phonetics to English. He refers to the prominent thirteenth-century Catalan Rabbi Nahmanides by the incorrect acronymic “Rambam” (5) (Maimonides was the Rambam, Nahmanides the Ramban). The transliteration of the
Aramaic betrothal ceremony in the section on Marriage (5) contains several errors, and we later learn of the Romance Bible of a Rabbi Moshe Arragel of “Guadalara” (102) (Guadalajara). However, these and other such errors are on the balance cosmetic and do not detract substantially from the book’s appeal. In any event they are probably more telling of editorial policy than of the scholarship of either Díaz-Mas or Zucker.

Perhaps the strongest recommendation I can give this book is that it got me excited to learn (and teach) more about some of the overlooked areas of Sephardic language and literature. With the exception of the runaway popularity of the Sephardic ballad and song tradition, historical studies have tended to dominate the field both in the academy and among the general readership. Like Díaz-Mas and Zucker, I am a professor of Spanish with an interest in Sephardic studies. And while there exists a great deal of Sephardic literature, from rabbinic musar (ethical) treatises to journalism and modern novels, almost none has been edited in a Romanized, glossed format accessible to students of Spanish literature. This book not only brings together a wealth of bibliography and cultural information delivered in an effective and engaging narrative, it underscored the need to make these materials available for a larger audience of students of Hispanic culture. While the great majority of you gentle readers are Historians who may not think of Sephardic culture in these terms, the current rise of Spanish in the US and increasing interest in Jewish culture in the mainstream has created the perfect storm for Sephardic studies in North America. And Díaz-Mas and Zucker’s book is an excellent tool for exploiting this interest and parlaying it into productive academic and public discussion.

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Works cited