Beginning in the tenth century, Andalusi Jews, who were highly educated in Classical Arabic poetics and linguistic theory, began to write poetry that took its poetic personality from Classical Arabic tradition, and its language from the Hebrew Bible. The great writers of this tradition, such as Samuel ibn Naghrela, Moses ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi, came to be the bane of high school students throughout Israel, as did Berceo, Jorge Manrique, and Garcilaso in the Spanish-speaking world. In Spain (and among hispanófilos), however, these indigenous Hebrew authors are virtually unknown except by professional Hebraists and a few general readers with an interest in Jewish Spain. Fortunately, hispanists interested in the Hebrew literature of Spain are fortunate to have at their disposal a number of excellent works on the topic in both Spanish and English, to which we may now add *Iberian Jewish Literature*.

At first glance, Jonathan Decter’s book on the Hispano-Hebrew literature of the 11th-13th centuries may not seem required reading for Hispanists specializing in Early Modernity. Despite a recent spike in popular interest in the Hebrew poetry of Medieval Spain, and notwithstanding the obvious importance of *converso* (but not Jewish) writers, Early Modernists do not typically go out of their way to read academic studies of Hispano-Hebrew literature. With *Iberian Jewish Literature*, Decter gives us a few good reasons to read outside the box. Paying careful attention to the endnotes, a Hispanist lacking Hebrew stands to learn from him a great deal about Hebrew poetics and poetic sensibilities in Spain. His study is the first to focus on the poorly understood transitional period between Muslim and Christian rule. He is also the first Hebraist working in English to give serious consideration to the Romance context of Hispano-Hebrew authors writing in Christian Iberia. For Hispanists, Decter challenges us not only to rethink the relationship between the Romance and Hebrew literatures of medieval Iberia, he also calls us to expand our notion of the novel in Spain by studying the thirteenth-century Hebrew rhymed prose narrative in terms of novelistic discourse.

Decter presents Hispano-Hebrew literature *en su salsa*, that is, in the context of the Andalusi tradition from which it springs, and to which it reacts in the new sociopolitical context of Jewish life under Christian rule. His book complements recent interest in the role of Islam in Early Modern Spain (Fuchs; Perry; Quinn) and the more popular interest in Hispano-Hebrew poetry (Cole; Menocal). Hispanists specialized in the Early Modern period will appreciate Decter’s insistence on breaking with some of the less productive critical habits of his predecessors, particularly when it comes to categories of cultural identity and literary influences. One of his main (and most important) arguments is that the entire question of “Islamic” or “Christian” influence on the Hebrew authors he studies is in itself problematic, and he warns us against “pigeonholing authors into singularly Islamic or Christian contexts” (15). We might further interrogate the idea that the official religion of a governing power is a reliable indicator of cultural practice within the realm. After all, what does it mean to be a
monarch of a “Christian Spain” when at least some of your subjects are practicing Islam and speaking Arabic well into the 16th century?

Although this is clearly a book intended primarily for readers with some familiarity with medieval Hebrew literature, and although Hispanists generally are ignorant of the basics of his field, Decter is not equally ignorant of ours. He opens his first chapter (“Space: Landscape and Transition” 19-38) with an epigraph by everyone’s favorite árabe manchego, from the scene where Alonso Quijano’s niece begs the canon and the barber to burn her uncle’s books. Decter is not (to my knowledge) some sort of closeted Cervantista; he is addressing the problem of what happens when one confuses literary convention with reality, and Don Quijote is of course the best example at hand. “Had Don Quixote been set in eleventh-century al-Andalus,” he muses, “rather than the unified Spain of the sixteenth century, he would think himself a courtier sipping wine in palace gardens” (19) instead of a besotted knight errant after the fashion of Amadis de Gaula. One of the most studied aspects of Hispano-Hebrew poetry is its relationship to Classical Arabic poetry (Schippers; Drory). In this chapter, Decter provides an overview of landscape imagery (garden, forest, desert) typical of Classical Arabic poetry and its transformation in the writing of Hebrew poets active in the Christian kingdoms of Iberia and Provence.

In the second chapter (“Form: Varieties of lamentation and estrangement,” 39-71), he explains the function of the qasida (ode) as “Arabic literature’s nostalgic form par excellence” (43) and how Moses ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi manipulate the conventions of this genre in negotiating their transitions from al-Andalus to Christian Iberia. He avoids clichés common to discussions of convivencia and “Arab influence,” focusing instead on the odes of Judah Halevi and Moshe ibn Ezra as a “response to cultural transition” (71), the production of two Jewish authors bridging literary cultures. In doing so, Decter gives some very sound close readings of previously untranslated poems and makes improvements on some already translated texts. His translations are quite good and avoid the excesses of both verse and hyperliteral translators.

The commonplace of the hortus conclusus is well familiar to students of the poetry of the second Spanish Siglo de Oro (the first being that of the heyday of Hispano-Hebrew poetry during the 11th-12th centuries). Decter’s study of its importance in Hebrew poetry in chapter three (“Imagery: The Protean Garden” 72-98) explores the metonymic use of the Andalusi garden (think Generalife) as a trope symbolizing Al-Andalus among Hebrew writers in Christian lands (87).

In chapter four (“Context: Imagining Hebrew Fiction between Arabic and European sources” 99-124), Decter describes the Hebrew maqama (rhymed prose narrative) “as a form that emerged through a complex interaction of Hebrew, Arabic, and European literatures” (100). In this chapter he gives an excellent overview of the Hispano-Hebrew maqama (103-105) before addressing the disproportionate emphasis in the scholarship on the Arabic background of the genre. Following the lead of Robinson and Rouhi, he further deconstructs the idea of cut-and-dried categories of “influence” by emphasizing the emergent character of the literary text as a site of “a process of negotiation” (106). The maqama is of particular interest to Hispanists because of its

geographic and chronological coincidence with the Castilian *mester de clerecía* and specifically, its influence on Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor* (Hamilton).

Chapter five (“Structure: Literature in Transition” 125-56) locates the Hispano-Hebrew *maqama* within the study of modern novel, and will be particularly useful to Hispanists looking for an enhanced Iberian background for writers such as Cervantes, Alemán, and Zayas. Much as narratologists view the novel as a Bakhtinian polyphony, Decter sees the *maqama* as a genre that hosts a multiplicity of “layers of rhetoric and irony” beneath which lies “a sophisticated discourse about al-Andalus, the past and cultural transition” (128). The highlight of the chapter is Decter’s sophisticated discussion of how Arab and European values of courtly love are articulated in the stories of Jacob Ben Elazar. His study of Elazar’s proto-*mujer varonil* mentions a couple of Arabic sources but misses the contemporary Castilian analogue *Doncella Teodor*, despite Margaret Parker’s monograph (141). Nonetheless, many will be thrilled with this “new” witness to a theme beloved of Hispanists.

Chapter six (“Voice: *Maqama* and Morality” 157-74) returns to the problem of authorial voice and realia in the *maqama*. In a discussion of the how authors of *maqamat* depict episodes of wine drinking, Decter stresses that it is more important to understand how such cultural practices “are refracted by the texts” (157), and to resist the temptation, as earlier critics have failed to do, than to see them as reflective of actual practice. The seventh and final chapter (“Space: Landscape, Geography, and Transition,” 175-206) will be of particular interest to those working on the representation of the East in the *Novela sentimental*, as it deals with the section on the geography of the Islamic world in Ben Elazar (199-206).

If the prospect of diving right into a relatively specialized study of medieval Hebrew literature is daunting, you might start off with something a bit more elementary, such as the introduction to Cole’s anthology, or perhaps the panoramic histories of either Sáenz-Badillos or Navarro Peiro. In any case, for the critic interested in the Hebrew literature of the kingdoms later to be known as Spain, Decter’s book stands on its own, and his treatment of the theory of the novel, of literary articulations of the Andalus past, and of the engagement between Hebrew and Romance literatures will prove instructive and very useful to scholars of medieval and Early Modern Peninsular literature.

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Works Cited


