**“RHYMES SO GOOD THE LIKES OF WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN SEEN IN ALL THE LAND OF SPAIN”: MEIR OF NORWICH AND FRIENDSHIP POETRY**

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In her essay about Meir of Norwich, “Meir b. Elijah of Norwich: Persecution and Poetry Among Medieval English Jews,” Susan Einbinder notes that Meir’s poetics is “a stubbornly individualistic blend of two distinct traditions”—that is, in some ways it aligns with the poetic traditions of the German–Northern French poets; in others, with the poets of Spain.¹ She further speculates that “this hybrid style might have evolved into a unique type of Hebrew composition” had not the expulsion of the Jews of England brought an end to this community and its developing culture in 1290. In keeping with her observations, I will show here that Meir portrayed himself poetically as part of a social network, albeit a very limited one, constructed by and modelled after the social networks that enabled the flourishing of the Hebrew poets of Spain. While this of course neither proves nor disproves Einbinder’s theory about a growing community of Anglo-Hebrew poets, I argue that this Spanish influence supports the idea that Meir strove to construct such a community, if only in verse.

The most relevant of Meir’s poems are found on folios 116v and 117r of Vatican Library MS Hebrew 402.² Meir’s first piece in this manuscript consists of a series of sixteen quatrains. These quatrains initially seem to be individual poems, each marked by its own poetic trick (of which more in a moment). The quatrains are then followed by a poem with the first line ידידי כזברי את (When I Recall My Companion). Only when one reads this second poem does it become clear that the preceding quatrains are part of a single poem, and, in fact, that the two units are connected: the latter poem offers an explanation of the former sixteen-quarain poem, and both were penned by Meir of Norwich. These two poems, then, form a small cycle, and I argue that they belong to a genre common in the poetics of the Spanish Jews, a panegyric known as the friendship poem or שירי ידידות (shirei yedidut). Part of what allowed the flourishing of Hebrew poetry in Spain was the development of a class of Jews who could support poets writing in Hebrew, a patronage system


² A. M. Habermann edited and published all known poems by Meir of Norwich as an appendix to V. D. Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich* (London: The Jewish Historical Society of England, 1967). It should be noted that these poems appear scattered among two different manuscripts, and even in the manuscripts themselves they are not located all together. Further, vowels are not marked. I rely here on Habermann’s edition for the vowels. This is significant because vowelling impacts meter.
modelled after the system employed in the Muslim world of the time. One function of the friendship poem as a genre was to thank patrons and encode networks of patronage into one’s writing. Meir’s small poem cycle seems to function in a similar fashion.

In the second poem, “When I Recall My Companion,” Meir reflects on the titular anonymous companion and notes that the good deeds this friend has performed on the poet’s behalf have stimulated the desire to form a covenant with him; however, he cannot find sheep or fattened calves with which to perform the ritual. This, of course, is a literary conceit. While Meir alludes to how animal sacrifice was used as part of making a covenant with God in the Bible, such covenant making was not part of Jewish custom—and certainly not in the Middle Ages. So Meir devises an appropriate substitute: “My thoughts answered,” he writes, “that I should butcher / my name [Meir] into sixteen parts.”

That is, out of the four letters of his name Meir forms his sixteen quatrains, each beginning and ending with the letters of his name in order: מ (mem), א (aleph), י (yod), ר (resh); thus, the first couplet starts and ends with mem mem, the second with mem aleph, and so on, to yield the sixteen quatrains that precede “When I Recall My Companion” in Vatican MS Hebrew 402. Further, and a significant part of the second poem, in which Meir reflects on his friend or patron, is dedicated to the challenges Meir he faced in writing the first sixteen-quatrain poem, including some places where he was forced to break his form, for example:

And in the sixth part a letter is missing,
Since two alephs do not fuse when
At the end of a word, so ה will replace her.

And:

The last of the pieces is missing a ר,
For in verses there is no word

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4 Another was to praise one’s peers, i.e., other poets. Both kinds of poems served to create a literary network amongst the school of Spanish Hebrew poets.

5 All translations are my own.
With two reshes at its head, except for רר
(But she for a letter of love is not fitting).

He even notes that three of the words he must substitute are taken from the Talmud, another indication that he is influenced by medieval Spanish poetics, as the poets of Spain used biblical Hebrew in their poetry. While Meir has to break his formal principle, the fact that he lists this as a break is telling. Further, he explains that, in addition to using the letters of his first name to frame the poem,

אֵלָה הַמַּכְסָא שֵׁם מַעֲרַי בַּתוֹךְ
רָשִׁים אֵלֶּה אָבֹתֵיכֶם חֲקֶקֶים

You will find my name Meir inside it
And the name of my father and his signs written.

That is, in the final quatrain he has added another acrostic, created by the first letters of the middle words in each line, to spell out: Meir son of Rabbi Elijah the Seer.

Having signed his name in this way, Meir compares the poem created by the placement of the letters of his name on both sides of each line to one of the most significant covenant-making moments in the Bible, known as “the covenant between the pieces”: “And it came to pass when the sun went down, and there was thick darkness, behold a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces” (Gen 15:17). In this biblical episode, Abraham has followed God’s command to cut up several animals—a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, and the covenant is sealed when God’s fire (the furnace and torch) consumes the sacrifice while Abraham is between the pieces of the animals. In the last line of “When I Recall My Companion,” Meir explicitly links the covenant of the pieces to the act of reading the quatrains that he has written for his benefactor:

וְלָלֶת מֹשֵׁל יַדְיֵיךְ בְּינָי בֵּיתיךָ
כְּוָם אֶפֶּהֶרֶת בִּרְחָת לְאִיתֶךָ

If you, my friend, pass through its pieces,
My covenant with you is made and fixed.

The conceit of not being able to find a suitable animal to make a covenant with his benefactor allows Meir to develop this rich allusion, based on the covenant of the pieces, and the resulting idea of the poet butchering his name and using the pieces to form a poem that he can gift to a friend is a suggestive one. Meir, with an allusion that is both self-confident and self-effacing, in this way makes the poet-patron relationship a divine one.

In addition to a high degree of rhetorical sophistication, Meir’s two-poem cycle demonstrates a remarkable refinement in terms of its use of poetic forms and networks. In addition to the poems’ underlying narrative structure, the creative acrostic strategy unpacked in the previous paragraph resonates with the poetics of the

6 רר, *rir* means “pus” or “discharge” in English.
school of the Jews of Spain, where authors frequently showcased their technical skills by composing whole poems with similar limitations, such as starting each line with the same letter, avoiding a specific letter throughout, and so on. I have not seen Meir’s specific formal device—using predetermined letters to frame each line of a poem—used anywhere else in medieval Hebrew poetry, however, and the result would therefore seem to confirm Einbender’s view that his approach was a “stubbornly individualistic” one drawing on multiple traditions including, but not limited to, Spanish poetics. Similarly, while some of Meir’s sixteen quatrains employ the precise quantitative metrical system developed by the Hebrew poets of Spain, others do not.

One of the functions of the friendship poem genre here, I think, is to discursively construct the school of Hebrew poetry in Spain, where creators (the poets) and supporters (the patrons) are written into the tradition through the poems dedicated to them. We can certainly understand Meir’s poems, even in this brief overview, as his attempt to construct an English school of Hebrew poetry from mixed traditions that include and evoke the Spanish. It is of course impossible to speculate about where Anglo-Hebrew poetry might have gone from there had it not been interrupted. In Vatican Hebrew MS 402, however, a contemporary marginal assessment can be found after the cycle I have just discussed:

חרוזות לא היה להם כמותן בכל ארצות ספרד לטובו

Rhymes so good, the likes of which have not been found even in all of the land of Spain.7

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7 My thanks to Pinchas Roth for sending me scanned microfilm pages from the manuscripts where Meir’s poetry is found. Free digital access to Vatican MS Hebrew 402 is now possible via the online DigiVatLib (DVL), at https://digi.vatlib.it (search “Vat.ebr.402”).
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Abstract: This short essay explores Susan Einbinder’s observation that the poetics of the medieval Anglo-Jewish poet Meir of Norwich show a unique mix of borrowing from the poetic schools of both Ashkenaz and Sepharad. Boyarin argues that Meir was discursively creating a school of Anglo-Hebrew poetics, one that he imagined drew from both of these established schools. Focused on two linked poems dedicated to an anonymous benefactor, this essay shows how Meir used a specific genre of poetry—the friendship poem—that was at the heart of the medieval Hispano-Hebrew poetic school and argues that Meir was constructing a (perhaps aspirational) English parallel.

Keywords: Meir of Norwich, Anglo-Jewish literature, friendship poems, Spanish Jews, Vatican MS Hebrew 402