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*El cancionero de Šelomoh Ben Reuben Bonafed (s. XV)* by  
Arturo Prats (review)

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*Prats, Arturo. El cancionero de Šelomoh Ben Reuben Bonafed (s. XV). U de Granada, 2020. 2 vols. ISBN: 978-84-338-6634-9.*

For the first time, Hispanomedievalists have access to the extensive literary *corpus* of the fifteenth-century Ibero-Jewish writer Šelomoh ben Reuben Bonafed, thanks to Arturo Prats's lucid Spanish translation and his philologically rigorous companion edition of Bonafed's Hebrew originals. An extension of the dissertation that Prats produced under the supervision of the late Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, this two-volume edition of Bonafed's complete works not only captures a major Ibero-Jewish voice in its poetic and historical specificity; it also introduces a whole generation of scholars to a distinctly Hispano-Semitic poetic practice—that is, the tradition of epistolary versification that arose among *kat ha-mešoreim*, literally, “el grupo de poetas” or, as many have come to know them, the “poetas de Zaragoza” (27).

The first volume, consisting primarily of Hebrew texts sourced from twenty-six manuscripts housed in libraries in Israel, the United States, and Europe, also features an elegant introduction to this poetic brotherhood that largely endured in spite of the increasingly dire circumstances that Spanish Jewry had to confront in the fifteenth century. Prats begins his *précis* of the Zaragoza poets with an overview of the familial and social bonds connecting the Jewish writers: the group's first representative, Šelomoh de Piera (ca. 1340-1418), served Benvenist ben Labi de la Caballería and his father Šelomoh as secretary to the family and teacher of his children, Bonafós and Vidal Benvenist. This latter child, also a poet, went on to inherit his father's fortune, becoming one of the most influential figures in the Kingdom of Aragon. As Prats notes, it was Benvenist's proximity to power that helped to precipitate his conversion at the behest of Fernando de Antequera in 1414 during the Disputation of Tortosa (29). The conversion seems to have marked a shift in Benvenist's literary production, there being no extant poems that bear his name after this date; however, he continued to produce translations, increasingly from Latin to Castilian. A relative, Vidal Abevenist, is the third pillar of the group and the author of the well-known work of fiction *Efer ve Dina*. It is to Abevenist that the authorship of *La composición literaria (ha-halaṣah)*, in truth a collection of letters composed by members of the group, has been attributed (31). The somewhat arcane familial links between sundry Vidals and their patrons is distilled, helpfully, in a family tree.

Although born outside this branch of the family, Bonafed (ca. 1390-1485) styled himself as a core member of the Zaragoza poets and produced the greatest



number of compositions among the poets in this group. Little is known about the poet, save the rough biographical details sketched in his correspondence and poems, including those surrounding his religious and linguistic formation: Bonafed studied under his rabbinically trained father before mastering Latin, probably under the tutelage of a Christian cleric (33). Itinerant, having resided in numerous cities throughout the Kingdom of Aragon, Bonafed maintained wherever he traveled a lively correspondence not only with the other Zaragoza poets, but with a number of Jewish intellectuals located across the Peninsula and North Africa (35). In assessing the legacy of Bonafed and his epistolary *confrères*, Prats offers a compelling synthesis of the existing scholarship on the primary names of the Hebrew-language literary circuit in fifteenth-century Zaragoza.

Many have sought to situate the group's aesthetics within the social history of an Iberia on the eve of Inquisition: the Zaragoza poets, eschewing as they did the Romance *kharja* as well as certain experimental meters that distinguished the Hebrew poetry of medieval Spain and Provence, have sometimes been described as a bastion of Hebraism and aesthetic conservatism. The possibility of antiromance sentiment among Iberian Jewry has become a productive site of inquiry elsewhere in Hispanomedievalist studies—notably, in David Wacks's 2015 exploration of "vernacular anxiety" in the Castilian writer Shem Tov's mixed-language literary output (97-126). Echoing Raymond P. Scheindlin, Prats offers the alternative explanation that, in much the same way that later poets returned to the Greco-Roman classics, the Zaragoza poets sought to revivify Hebrew verse by appealing to antiquity. Prats elaborates on this theme with a summary of the parallels between Romance-speaking and Hispano-Semitic rhetoricians (33-37). The author ends his introductory study of the Zaragoza poets by underscoring once again the social *milieu* in which this linguistically nostalgic body of poetry emerged: a Jewish-Aragonese lettered elite that prized *adab*—an applied literary intelligence or cultural refinement—and whose members went to great lengths to demonstrate their superior sensibility through spirited (and belletristically-engaged) correspondence.

The first volume's front matter concludes with a meticulous discussion of the transmission of Bonafed's *œuvre* across the centuries, as well as the editorial criteria applied in the present edition. In the first section Prats draws distinctions between his five categories of source material: *cartas*, *recensiones o cancioneros de autor*, *códices literarios o cancioneros*, *cancioneros tardíos*, and *ediciones modernas y filológicas*. He expands at length, and with considerable

critical acumen, on this five-part scheme, providing a crash course in Ibero-Jewish transmission history from which all scholars of medieval Iberian literature, not just Bonafed specialists, stand to benefit. In the next section Prats proceeds to identify the source of each Hebrew text—a Herculean ecclotic effort that led him to consult an additional twenty-one manuscripts beyond the five texts that serve as his base. Next, the histories and material specificities of several manuscripts and print editions of Bonafed's work are explored at length. Following the bibliographic appendix is a list of the many historical personages implicated in Bonafed's correspondence and literary production—the scholarly equivalent of *dramatis personae*, as it were—which will prove eminently useful to those seeking to understand Bonafed's production in its social dimension. At this point there is a break in the text and a dramatic change in formatting. The Hebrew text, which is pointed for vowels, runs contrary, of course, to the Castilian front matter. Readers are expected to advance from right to left, starting with the back cover. Separate pagination for the Hebrew text helps to alleviate any confusion that might emerge from the bimodal disposition of the text. The dual format is in some small measure an affecting illustration of the cultural hybridism that so spectacularly distinguishes medieval Iberia. The Hebrew texts are accompanied by an extensive critical apparatus largely comprised of intertextual resonances with the Hebrew Bible.

The second volume of Prats's monumental project includes, in addition to his Spanish renderings of Bonafed's poetry, correspondence, and rhymed prose, brief descriptions of each text, blending thematic, historic, and intertextual analysis. One can imagine Prats's summaries being of particular use to comparativists without previous training in Hispano-Semitic letters. As for the translations proper, Prats's Castilian renderings are obviously the product of deep erudition and his longstanding engagement with this poet. They are also musical in their way, a notable accomplishment given the linguistic difference separating the two languages and the accuracy to which Prats has committed. Consider, by way of an example, the opening *salvo* to the love poem “Remedio me ha llegado de una acequia (*te 'alah 'alelah li*)”:

Remedio me ha llegado de una acequia  
que mana de las aguas del estanque de la inteligencia (1: 139)  
*te 'alah 'alelah li mitte'alah 'ašer mimmei berekat bin 'aşulah  
neharah naharah li minehar šir venahal mimmequr 'ab ba' be-  
nahalah.* (2: 266)



While it would be impossible to reproduce the rich consonance of the Hebrew text in a scholarly translation, Prats comes very close. This is but one felicitous example of a translation with much of the liveliness one might expect from a Hebrew writer who constantly attempted to surpass his correspondents in sonic-rhetorical games.

For those that do not know Hebrew, and even for those who have mastered the language, Prats's two-volume edition of Bonafed's complete works has unearthed a singular (and singularly Jewish) poetic voice. One could make quibbling criticisms on the edition's formatting, such as the omission of the Hebrew-script first lines in the index to the translations, as well as of the first lines in Spanish in the index to the Hebrew originals. It is far more important, however, to note that Prats has singlehandedly made Bonafed's output, as well as the fascinating literary networks it points to, accessible to comparativists eager to denationalize their understanding of medieval Iberia and embrace its polylingual literary inheritance.

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## **Work Cited**

Wacks, David. *Double Diaspora in Sephardic Literature: Jewish Cultural Production Before and After 1492*. Indiana UP, 2015.

*Tomás Faci, Guillermo. El aragonés medieval: lengua y estado en el reino de Aragón. U de Zaragoza, 2020. ISBN: 978-84-1340-056-3.*

Guillermo Tomás Faci's thoroughly researched and well-written book represents a welcome and much needed addition to the history of Aragon. As the author notes in the Introduction, few historians of pre-modern Iberia have endeavored to follow Peter Burke's call for a "social history of language." This neglect is not arbitrary. A rejection of nationalist narratives that anachronistically link these languages to the present, a tacit abandonment of language studies to other disciplines, and the continued politicization of language in Spain have all dissuaded historians from pursuing the topic. Scholarship on the Aragonese language remains particularly neglected for a variety of reasons, including its short-lived tenure as a written language