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IMITATIONS OF ARABIC
IN HEBREW ANDALUSIAN POETRY

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A large Jewish community has lived in Spain since pre-Christian times. After the defeat of the Christian Visigoths in Spain by the Arabs in 711 CE, a large Jewish colony remained in Muslim territory. The Jews lived in the countryside as well as in the towns. Some of the latter were even inhabited exclusively by Jews. They were members of all classes of society and practised a very wide range of professions. They even took part in warfare, a possible consequence of their attachment to the land.¹

Their social position in Andalusia probably accounts for the exceptional development of a secular Hebrew literature in Spain which was totally different from Jewish literature in Hebrew elsewhere. The Andalusian literature flowered at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century and is generally known as the Golden Period of Hebrew literature². During the eleventh century, in particular, secular Hebrew Andalusian poetry was in full bloom. This century was a period characterized by the disintegration of the Western caliphate and the rivalry between the courts of the petty kings (the so-called mulūk at-țawā'īf)³.

Arabic poetic conventions were adopted in Hebrew Andalusian poetry, and the style of Arabic poets was imitated; only the language differed. There is a suggestion of the influence of Biblical writing on this poetry⁴, through

2 E. g. MASHA ITZHAKI: Ani haš-Šar ("I am the Poet"). Tel Aviv 1986, cover text: "Secular Hebrew poetry in Spain belongs to the central chapters in Hebrew literature during its generations and many studiosi occupied themselves with it. This book (Ani haš-Šar) deals with capita selecta from the works of the great Hebrew poets of the Golden Age in Spain: Šemuel han-Nagid, Šelomo ibn Gabirol, Moše ibn ʿEzra and Yehudah hal-Lēwi."
4 Cf. DAN PAGIS: Hidduš u-masoret be-širat ha-ḥol: Sefarad we-Italyah ("Change and Tradition in the Secular Poetry: Spain and Italy"). Jerusalem 1976, pp. 62—64.
the use of purely scriptural Hebrew, but this is only superficial: the old language is used to express Arabic ideas. The only exception is perhaps that no references are made to Arab tribal history or Arabic poets, instead Hebrew poets and Biblical names and tribes are mentioned.

The flowering of Hebrew Andalusian poetry also coincides with the rise of Arabic Andalusian poetry with its relatively independent development with respect to Oriental Arabic poetry. The poets of Andalusia felt an intense rivalry with the rest of the Arabic world, a point which is apparent in contemporary anthologies and collections of poetry.

With respect to the relative independence of Andalusian Arabic from Eastern poetry, Western scholars have been occupied with the question to what extent Andalusian poetry had its own character in comparison with Arabic poetry in the East. In general little consideration is taken of the rise and flowering of Hebrew Andalusian poetry and whether this poetry is a receptical for Andalusian or Oriental Arabic themes and motifs.

In this paper I intend to give some examples of Hebrew Andalusian poems and their Arabic antecedents. I will confine myself to the four main poets of what is called the Golden Period of Hebrew poetry, namely Šemuel han-Nagīd (993—1056), Šelomo ibn Gabirol (1021—1055), Moše ibn ʿEzra (1055—1138) and Yehudah hal-Lēwī (1074—1141).


These poets seemed to be inspired largely by Oriental Arabic rather than by Andalusian Arabic models. This impression is already apparent from Moše ibn ʿEzra’s poetic treatise, the only Judeo-Arabic Poetics, entitled *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍara wa-l-Muḍākara* (‘Book of Teaching and Memorizing’). In this work the author explains how to compose poetry in the manner of the Arabs.  

The eighth chapter of the book is particularly important for the study of the Arabic examples imitated by Hebrew Andalusian poets. Moše ibn ʿEzra speaks of twenty-three figures of speech discussed in Arabic poetic treatises such as the *Ḥilyat al-Muḥāḍara* by al-Ḥātimī (d. 388/998) and the *Kitāb al-ʿUmdah* by Ibn Raṣiq (d. 456/1065).  

The chapters on figures of speech have examples from the Koran, Ḥadīṣ, Arabic poetry, followed by examples from Hebrew Holy Scriptures and, finally, contemporary Hebrew Andalusian poets. The aspects of the various stylistic figures that show parallels are particularly stressed in the quoted Arabic poetry lines. This indicates perhaps a certain device which the Hebrew poet used in order to facilitate the practice of composing poetry.

In the following we will give some examples as to how symmetrically structured Arabic lines were used as a basis for making Hebrew lines.


When Moše ibn ʿEzra deals with the figure of taqṣīm (‘partition’), whose purpose he explains as (127a) “that the poet wants to explain that which he started with, leaving behind no part of the motif required, but bringing it to our notice”, while this does not necessarily imply symmetry, he nevertheless gives a symmetrical line of Arabic poetry as an example, which was not quoted in any of the earlier theoretical Arabic works. The line he uses is taken from the poet al-Mutanabbi (no. 228: line 4):

4. Insomnia for the eyelids, a sun for the one who looks, illness for the bodies, musk for the one who sniffs.

Moše ibn ʿEzra also quotes two verses from his own poetry (poem no. 66:15—16), which were based on the same verse by al-Mutanabbi:

16. Zamir le-koʃ ozen we-ʿedan la-yegar / qereš le-miškan ha-ʾemet u-beɾiāh. (kāmīl)
15. Honey for the tasting mouth, the sun’s light for the eye of the beholder, fragrant myrrh for the smelling nose,
16. Singing for the ear, a pedestal for a precious thing, a table and board for the truth of the covenant.

The remaining Arabic example that Moše ibn ʿEzra quotes under this heading, comes from the poetry of Imraʾ al-Qays. It is a much-quoted verse in the various Arabic works on literary theory. The verse, from Imraʾ al-Qays’ muʾallaqāt (line 60) runs as follows:

14 We quote the numbers of al-Mutanabbi’s poems referred in Al-Mutanabbi: Diwān. Ed. FRIDERICUS DIETERICI. Berlin 1861.
15 We quote the numbers of Moše ibn ʿEzra: Šīr ʿa-hu-Ḥol I. Ed. HAYYIM BRODY. Berlin 1935/5695.
60. La-hū 'ayṭalā zahyin wa-sāqā na'āmatin /
     wa-‘irḥā‘u sirḥānin wa-taqribu tatfali // (tawil)

60. It has the flanks of a gazelle, the legs of an ostrich,
    the swift gait of a wolf and the quick dash of a fox’s cub.

Moše ibn 'Ezra goes on to give an example of how to imitate this verse
from his own oeuvre17:

Wel-lo hēn 'ofarim we-zohar me’orim /
we-ša‘ (!) gat kefirim we-nidbat ‘ananim. // (mutaqārib)

It has the beauty of does, the glittering of stars, the roar of young lions,
and the generosity of clouds.

We can conclude from the above mentioned ‘translations’ of Moše ibn
'Ezra that although he took over the parallel structure of the Arabic verses,
he did make some changes. In the first example he substituted ‘negative attri-
butes’ such as insomnia and illness by positive ones and continued the taqṣīm
in the next line. In the second example he substituted two references to the
animal world with two references to the cosmic world.

In other chapters on figures of speech, for example, tashīm (‘making
striped fabrics’), we see the same tendency towards symmetry in the quoted
examples.18

Not only the quotations in the eighth chapter of the Kitāb al-Muhāḍara,
but many of those in the other chapters of this book are also derived from
lines of Arabic poetry which are of Oriental origin. With the exception of
some raḡaz lines in a ninth century translation of the Psalms by Ḥafs al-Qūṭī
— which is a special case — the only quoted line of poetry by an Andalusian
poet comes from the oeuvre of Ibn Muqāna.19

The reason why Hebrew Andalusian poets took mainly Oriental Arabic
examples as a model must lie in the fact that at that time Arabic Andalusian
poetry was establishing its own identity as a poetical form, but it was not yet
sufficiently strong to be taken as an image basis in the same manner as
Oriental Arabic poetry. The more independent development of Arabic An-

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17 This line is not to be found in Moše ibn 'Ezra’s Dīwān, although similar
lines are to be found there.

18 See Moše ibn 'Ezra: Al-Muhāḍara wa-l-Muḡākara. Bodleian Ms. NEU-
BAUER no. 1974, 129ab; see on tashīm A. F. M. VON MEHREN: Die Rhe-
torik der Araber. Kopenhagen/Vienna 1853, p. 175; Al-Ḥātimi: Ḥilyat
II. p. 30.

19 Ḥafs al-Qūṭī mentioned in Moše ibn 'Ezra: Al-Muhāḍara wa-l-Muḡā-
kara. Bodleian Ms. NEUBAUER no. 1974, 23b, 128a and Ibn Muqāna
ibid. 154b; cf. the Oriental poets Abū Tammām (ibid. 43a, 49a, 50a, 60b,
62b, 97b, 99b, 105a, 126b, 143a) and al-Mutanabbi (ibid. 49a, 58a, 127a,
129a, 135a, 142a, 144a, 144b).
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... also contemporary with the rise of the Hebrew Andalusian poetry. Thus it could hardly be taken as an example. The only genre of poetry which Hebrew Andalusian poets consciously copied from their Arab Andalusian colleagues was that of strophic poetry: the muwassahat could be considered to be a typical Andalusian invention, but it came into being a century before (i.e. in the tenth century).^20

The Hebrew Andalusian poets not only copied conventional poetic themes from the East, such as wine and love themes with apple descriptions^21, but they also imitated lines from individual poets such as al-Mutanabbi (915—955) and Abû Tammān (806—846). A famous example of an individual imitation is the ‘fever poem’ by Moṣe ibn ʿEzra whose lines seem to be almost literal ‘translations’ from the ‘fever poem’ by al-Mutanabbi.22

The close connections between the two poets can be seen in several forms: in poem no. 125 Moṣe ibn ʿEzra describes his fever and in some places he uses the same words as the poet al-Mutanabbi in his famous fever poem (no. 255). Both fever poems have identical rhymes (on mīm) and metre (wāfīr), which indicates conscious imitation on the part of Moṣe ibn ʿEzra. In addition there are a number of motifs in common. Al-Mutanabbi wrote his poem when he was in Egypt at Kāfūr’s court, although he felt as if he was in exile, far from Syria. His poetry lines testify to his isolation from the people who surround him (lines 8—9). There then follows a passage about his pursuit of perfection, which is in clear contrast with his actual feelings due to his illness and having a fever which prevented him from rising from his bed. Similarly, Moṣe ibn ʿEzra, in his poem, speaks of his perfection, which removes him from the understanding of the people (no. 125: lines 4, 5).

Other similarities between both poems present themselves in the description of the fever itself. Al-Mutanabbi says:

20 b. My drunkenness is heavy, but not from wine (i.e. from fever);
21. It is as if the woman who visits me (i.e. the fever) is ashamed, because she only visits me at night.


In his poem Moše ibn ḤEzra has an almost identical line:

12. The sister of illness visits me at night,
    because she is ashamed to show her face in daylight.

Moše ibn ḤEzra speaks about his so-called love relationship with his fever in line 13. He waits for the hour of her arrival:

13. I was waiting for her, but it was not out of love
    that she was visiting my face nor to ask me how I was doing.

The fever settles in the bones of both poets as an uninvited guest. Al-Mutanabbi describes how, when the fever reached him, his skin was too small for his breath or his soul and how the fever came punctually every night as a beloved one to a rendez-vous, going away again the following morning, but she is not a truly beloved one and the exalted glances of the poet are not laden with the passion of love:

26. I look forward to the hour that she will visit me,
    without any longing but with the glances of one passionately desiring;

27. She comes (in the evening) at the fixed time, but this punctuality is a vice,
    when it throws you in great distress.

In lines 14, 15, 16 of poem no. 125 of Moše ibn ḤEzra he tells in a similar manner how the fever dwelt in his bones as a stranger. Later the sweating Moše ibn ḤEzra describes his slenderess: he has become so thin, that he is only recognisable by his voice (line 20):

20. I have become so thin that nobody can recognise my body
    when I lie down on my bed — until he hears my voice.

This notion is borrowed from a small love poem of al-Mutanabbi composed during his youth. In this poem the poet says (no. 1):

3. It is enough slenderess for my body that I am a man
    whom you can see only when I speak to someone.

In both fever poems al-Mutanabbi (no. 255: line 19) and Moše ibn ḤEzra describe the loneliness of a sick person, who is living far from his beloved.

In his poem Moše ibn ḤEzra says that those whom he wants to see are in reality far away (no. 125: line 24). This is the origin of his spiritual disease, which cannot be cured by any surgeon; only the word of a cultivated man can heal his illness. Al-Mutanabbi also has an illness beyond the cure of doctors. But both poets stress, in more or less similar lines, that their morality does not suffer.

Al-Mutanabbi says (no. 225):

28. When I am ill, my power of endurance is not ill.
    When I have fever, my endurance has no fever.

Echoes of these lines are to be found in Moše ibn ḤEzra’s poem no. 125, when he states:

26. I am weakened, but my thoughts are not weakened.
    I am ill, but my ideas are not ill.

Al-Mutanabbi was a particularly popular poet who was frequently imitated by Andalusian poets. This is apparent from the motifs of poetry descrip-
tion copied from his work by a number of Hebrew Andalusian writers. Al-Mutanabbi offers his Maecenas “the garden of his tongue”\textsuperscript{23}. The difference between the Maecenas and other human beings is that common people pluck the word at the moment of budding, whereas the Maecenas plucks it when it flowers.\textsuperscript{24} Al-Mutanabbi’s verses are scattered and omnipresent in the world, having no special abode on the earth. The poet says (no. 193: 9—11):

9. I have scattered verses for you which go constantly, having no particular abode on the earth;
10. Rhymes which when they leave my mouth, jump over mountains and bathe in the seas;
11. I have composed verses about you, which are never said by anyone (before and after), and which have gone where even the moon has never ventured.

Moše ibn ’Ezra calls his verses young maidens “not yet known by a man” alluding to the Arabic motif of poems which are original and untouched like a virgin. Moše ibn ’Ezra wrote that his poems adorn the necks of the Days, and that they are filled with precious stones and laudations. With a reminiscence of al-Mutanabbi he says about the diffusion of his poems: “Without feet they traverse the depths; without shoes they cross the mountains”. His poem no. 109: lines 35—48 goes as follows:

35. When the poems reach the (heavenly) orbit of my tongue, then the Pleiades are obscured in their orbit above the earth;
36. I gave birth in order that they may decorate the necks of the Days, (they are) filled with precious stones and laudations.
37. Without feet they traverse the depths; without shoes they cross the mountains;
38. So that they are not to be forgotten in the mouth of the creatures: until at the end even the Days and Nights are forgotten.

In his youthful poetry al-Mutanabbi portrays himself as a lonely prophet, to whom the people who surround him do not want to listen (no. 11: lines 18, 36):

18. My stay in the land of Nakhla is like the stay of Christ among the Jews.
36. I am amidst a people — may God face them with his grace! — a foreigner like the (prophet) Šāliḥ among the Ṭāmūd.

Sometimes we find more general phrases of self-praise by al-Mutanabbi, in which the feelings of loneliness and alienation are perceivable (no. 198: lines 23—24):

23. The horses, the night, the desert, they know me; the sword, the lance, the paper, and the pen also.

\textsuperscript{23} al-Mutanabbi: \textit{Dīwān} (cf. note 14) no. 137: line 39.
24. Lonely in the deserts, I became a friend of the wild animals; even the hard grounds and the hills were confused because of me.

The Hebrew Andalusian poet Selomo ibn Gabirol uses the same Mutanabbian expressions speaking of his unpleasant experiences with the uncultivated Saragossians. He describes himself as living among ignorant people as Moses stayed among the Egyptians and Abraham among the Chaldeans (no. 113: line 23).

23. Our relationship with the people of my cruel Time is like that of the Egyptians with Moses and that of the Chaldeans with (Abraham) the Teraḥite.

Al-Mutanabbi’s lines on alienation in terms of familiarity with the wild animals may have inspired Moše ibn ‘Ezra in his description of his wanderings in the north of Spain where he lived in exile (no. 175: lines 13—20);

15. With the animals of the wood are my ways and I appear like a bird coming from the top of the mountains of prey;

17. I wander, travel after travel; and I do not give myself rest nor do I leave myself peace.

The populace which the Maecenas gives access to, are not Arabs, according to al-Mutanabbi, but Barbarians. Elsewhere al-Mutanabbi speaks about the poet of bad poetry as being like the ravings of human beings who have pleurisy. Al-Mutanabbi considers all other poets as composing only plagiarism. The poet shoots his enemies with his poems as if the latter were projectiles. He judges himself to be in the fore of poetry, whereas Time does nothing but imitate and transmit his poems.

The poet also broaches the theme of the tendency of contemporary poetry to become corrupt. Poetry in general has declined and deteriorated (cf. no. 236: line 55).

The Hebrew Andalusian poet also takes up this theme, but his emphasis lies on the ignorance of his contemporaries in appreciating and understanding poetry. He stresses this point by quoting a Mutanabbian expression: “they are ignorant, not knowing their own ignorance and not knowing our knowledge that they are ignorant”. Moše ibn ‘Ezra says on this theme (no. 109: lines 31—34):

31. My poems are like a graceful diadem, but which mortal being still recognizes the pearl-beauty of a poem and its words?

32. How would virgins not yet known by a man be married to ignorant men?

In Moše ibn ʿEzra’s *envoi* the poet contrasts his poetic capacities with those of the ignoramus. This is a similar satire to that seen in the Arabic poems of al-Mutanabbi, and in the Hebrew ones of Šelomo ibn Gabirol. He calls his poetry lines “towers to entrench oneself behind, because have not the ignorant demolished the lines of the daughters of poetry?” or “silver rings”, and he concludes (no. 158: line 47):

47. When (other) poets hasten to speak, then the stars of the Great Bear are crying unto them: ‘Simpletons, keep shut your mouth!’

Moše ibn ʿEzra boasts in many of his poems about his own poetic capacities. He satirizes his ignorant contemporaries who know nothing about poetry. He often calls the ignorants surrounding him ‘donkeys’31. Ignorant people bark as a dog does to the moon.32 They cannot comprehend his thoughts and knowledge. How could they, since these thoughts reach the Great Bear? The poet wrote, in a manner reminiscent of al-Mutanabbi, that he “picks the flowers when they open, while they (the ignorant poets) gather only grass”33.

Another example of an Andalusian poet rebuking ignorant men and bad poets is Šelomo ibn Gabirol34. For example, in poem no. 123 he first describes poetry as being “like myrrh, balm, and precious stones of onyx”; “at times like honey, at other times like venom of snakes”. He then goes on to vituperate bad and plagiarizing poets. He felt that his poetry was heavy and abundant, when weighed against silver (line 1). He continues:

5. Plagiarists are toiling without avail: they will be consumed before they will reach any level.

6. They are coming in darkness and slime and are dragged from evil unto evil;

7. How could you equate lions with oxen! May God lacerate you in the mouth of a lion!

In poem no. 121 he rebukes those who make poems while not being able to create them (just as Ibn Ḫafāʤa was to do later in Arabic Andalusian poetry35). He then took up the general theme of the decline of poetry:


3. The connoisseurs and the men with insight have passed away and live in exile or wander around;
4. Then there have risen up singers, who recited poetry, but soon showed their stupidity;
5. They stammered their poetry in broken verses, which are too meager to find their way;
7. They spread over themselves a covering of infamy. They fill and pave their poetry with barbarous stumbling.

In some of their poems the Hebrew Andalusian poets take over the Mutanabbian and Ma‘arrīan concept of being born in a wrong period of time. This concept was also used by Šemuel han-Nagīd (poem no. 39: line 20) as well as by Moše ibn ‘Ezra (no. 214: line 38; no. 158, line 32; ‘Anaq VI: 5). Šelomo ibn Gabirol uses this same theme to denounce his contemporaries who pretend to compose poetry. This is a strong argument for him not to compose poetry, or so he says in his work (no. 101: line 24):

24. For what reason should I speak any longer: because the World once was good, but I came only, when it was near to its end.

Finally, it should be said that his self-praise is often combined with satirical themes. In the following fragment, however, it is linked to a rather sententious motif, as we shall show here, where the famous motif of the Abbasid poet Dī‘ālī is used (‘Bad poetry perishes before its authors; but the good one remains, even if its composer is dead’)37. Poem no. 108 goes as follows:

3. Do not turn to words of emptiness; learn my poetry and you will know the truth;
4. Bad poetry kills the soul of its composers; the poetry is already dead, whereas the composer still lives;
5. The fame of good one runs through the world like the moon which rises anew every time at the beginning of every month.

Following in the footsteps of his predecessors Šelomo ibn Gabirol and Moše ibn ‘Ezra, Yehudah hal-Lēwī38 calls his contemporaries beasts for having described the same kind of spiritual isolation as his fellow poets. He expresses himself in line 15 as follows:

15. I pass my time without equal minded persons or colleagues, with people like elephants, peacocks and apes (i.e. the stupid, see also poem no. 88: line 21).


The predilection of the main Hebrew Andalusian poets for the Oriental Arabic poet al-Mutanabbi is probably closely connected with the latter’s attitude towards the ignorants who knew nothing about poetry and who were like donkeys. The Hebrew Andalusian poets identify themselves with al-Mutanabbi and interpret his attitude as the poet in his ivory tower. They feel themselves alienated from a society consisting of people who have no interest in poetry whatsoever.