

INTRODUCTION

Critical cluster: between gender and genre in later-medieval Sepharad: love, sex, and polemics in Hebrew writing from Christian Iberia

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When the Jews of al-Andalus found themselves, through migration or the vicissitudes of thirteenth-century conquests, living in Christian lands, their composition and consumption of Hebrew writing, both sacred and profane, evolved in multiple ways. Without completely abandoning the models and tastes of earlier centuries, Jews living in or near Christian lands in the later Middle Ages developed a new relationship with Hebrew writing that was at once deeply conservative—their own writing serving as a vehicle of cultural differentiation in contrast to the Christian majority—and radically innovative—transforming the models developed in previous centuries under Muslim rule. In this context, the forms of writing—poetic, exegetical, narrative, polemical—became an essential part of Sephardic Jewish expression as it responded to a host of rapidly shifting models, contexts, and practices. In the midst of this flux, the representation of gender and sexuality, which was in turns both traditional and creative, took on a vital new importance in the exploration of such questions of form.

The five articles gathered in this cluster aim to reflect on the relationship between gender and literary form in Hebrew texts from Iberia written after the fracturing of Almohad dominance in the early thirteenth century, which marked a shift in power dynamics that brought many new Jewish communities to reside in the Christian kingdoms of the north. Although each essay focuses on a different text or author—and all the authors considered here are male, as is the case for most surviving Hebrew texts¹—the underlying questions behind each intervention are how male authors in the later Middle Ages represented male and female identity, sexuality, and gender in Hebrew texts, how those representations differed and changed in different forms of writing, and why they did so. It should be obvious that this cluster is in no way comprehensive in exploring these questions, nor does it intend to be. The editor's goal in organizing this material is merely to raise such questions within a coherent group of texts, and hopefully to open the door to further work on the same issues.

The need for such efforts, however modest, cannot be denied. The study of gender and sexuality in medieval Hebrew sources is still in its early stages, and work exploring the impact of

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¹In poetry, for example, only one poem in Hebrew by a female author is known, that of the (unnamed) wife of Dunash ben Labrat in the tenth century. Some evidence survives of women's letters, petitions, and wills, especially in the Cairo Genizah, and more sources survive from Jewish women in other languages. On the question of Hebrew sources by female authors, see Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 1–5; and the section on “Writing and Printing by Women” in Tallan, “Medieval Jewish Women” (2006 version).

gender in the Jewish production of literary, artistic, and religious culture continues to be a major desideratum within the various fields dedicated to the study of medieval Iberia. This is in part due to the fact that historiography about medieval Jewish women was very scarce until recently. This lack brought with it a more general lack of reflection on questions of male and female identity, on relations between men and women, and on the construction and representation of gender, whether in historical or literary sources. Given the predominant focus on intellectual history in the various fields of Judaic studies ever since the foundational efforts of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism” or “Jewish Studies”) movement in the nineteenth century, the question of gender in the study of medieval Judaism, whether from a historiographical, sociological, or a literary critical perspective, has always been a marginal one.² While this might seem odd from our current disciplinary perspectives in which, in the wake of the linguistic and cultural turns, the “intellectual” can hardly be conceived without being linked to the “ideological,” and “history” has tended increasingly to denote “representation” rather than mere presentation, such conceptual shifts are themselves relatively recent in the study of medieval Jewish historiography, which has only gradually interacted with the critical insights of other disciplines in the humanities. Even as late as 1990, Hava Tirosh-Rothschild stated in an assessment of the current “state of Jewish studies” that “if medieval Jewish history is to adopt new trends, I suggest that we look to the social sciences rather than to the humanities to find our new models and research tools.”³ The general disciplinary belatedness of many areas of Judaic studies is also a specific critical belatedness in the introduction of gender issues (and other interpretive categories from the humanities) into the historical study of medieval sources.

Nevertheless, despite this belatedness and the overall fragmentary and disparate nature of many of the sources, there has been some very important work on gender within recent historiography. It is useful to signal here, in naming some important examples of this work, the difference between the history of women or men on the one hand, and the history of gender, on the other. By “history of gender,” I mean historical work reflecting on the social, religious, and intellectual construction and representation of sexual identity and difference.⁴ Such historical views can also be differentiated from related theoretical criticism of medieval sources according to the tools and terms of feminism, on the one hand, and queer theory, on the other. While all of these approaches are different, they inform each other and overlap in many important ways, and a truly comprehensive discussion of gender and sexuality in medieval sources would need to take account of each of them individually and in terms of their numerous points of intersection. For reasons of space, only a cursory overview of relevant sources can be given here.

Modern discussions of the history of women in medieval Mediterranean Jewry must begin with Shelomo Dov Goitein’s monumental study of the Cairo Genizah (“store room” of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat), *A Mediterranean Society*. In volume 3 (1978), Goitein offered not only an extensive treatment of questions of marriage and family life, but a specific discussion of “the world of women” as depicted in Genizah documents.⁵ Studies in the 1980s by Yom Tov Assis and Enrique Cantera Montenegro, in the Sephardic realm, and Ivan Marcus and Judith R. Baskin, in the Ashkenazi world, have shared important insights into sexuality and gender norms in Jewish societies.⁶ Baskin has written numerous studies on medieval women’s

²Rosen, *Unveiling Eve*, 19.

³Tirosh-Rothschild, “Response,” 141.

⁴For a discussion of the implications of such assumptions about the differences between biological sex and social gender, see Gaunt’s remarks in *Gender and Genre*, 10–16.

⁵This discussion was continued by Kraemer, “Spanish Ladies”; and “Women’s Letters.”

⁶Assis, “Double Marriages in Spain” and Assis, “Sexual Behavior”; Cantera Montenegro, “La mujer judía”; Marcus, “Mother, Martyrs, and Moneylenders.” On Baskin’s work, see n. 7, below.

history, including the place of women in the *Sefer Hasidim* and the copying and use of Hebrew manuscripts by women.⁷ In the 1990s, Renée Melammed extensively studied the intersection of gender, conversion, and crypto-Jewry among Sephardic Jews, themes recently taken up by Paola Tartakoff as well.⁸ The entire field of medieval Jewish women's history has been altered by an important study by Abraham Grossman, which is now partly available in English under the title *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*.⁹

Recently, this work has begun to show even more sensitivity to critical categories of feminist and gender studies. David Nirenberg's "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain" has followed up on earlier work by examining conversion in light of specific questions of sexual relations across religious boundaries. Elisheva Baumgarten's *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* has provided a masterful study of women's experiences of family life in Ashkenazi societies. Ron Barkai's *History of Jewish Gynaecological Texts in the Middle Ages*, following up on his earlier *Les infortunes de Dinah*, and Carmen Caballero-Navas's *The Book of Women's Love and Jewish Medieval Medical Literature on Women* and her recent essay "Secrets of Women" have all presented original new work on medical writing about women's issues in Hebrew sources. In taking account of these various sources and the trends of research they represent, Cheryl Tallan has compiled a very useful working bibliography of women and gender in Hebrew sources, which is periodically updated. While not comprehensive, it offers an optimistic picture of the trends in current historiography.¹⁰

In contrast to this recent work, literary criticism has given much less attention to gender and sexuality in medieval and early-modern Hebrew writing, the study of which has been slow to adopt such questions even in comparison to the study of other periods of Hebrew literary and religious history.¹¹ As Tova Rosen and Eli Yassif noted in 2002, "the theoretical questions which preoccupy current literary criticism—discourse and reality, fictionality, theories of reading, ethnicity, power structures, gender relations, sexuality, and others—have hardly been explored in our field."¹² The striking lack of work on gender in medieval Hebrew literature stands out as even more egregious in comparison with the study of other medieval literatures.¹³ For example, the

⁷Baskin, "From Separation to Displacement"; Baskin, "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages" (1998, which reconsiders some of Goitein's material, and 2004, an overview); and Baskin and Riegler, "May the Writer Be Strong."

⁸Melammed, "Sephardi Women" and Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel?*; Tartakoff, "Jewish Women."

⁹The original 2001 Hebrew text, *Hasidot u-mordot*, was reissued in 2003. The English version, *Pious and Rebellious*, translates about three-fifths of the original text. For a full list of sources and original citations, the original should be consulted.

¹⁰Tallan, "Medieval Jewish Women."

¹¹Three contributions within the study of early rabbinical writing are Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*; Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, which concludes with a brief consideration of medieval Jewish ideas; and the recent study of rabbinic gender metaphors by Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor*. Most significant among considerations of gender in modern Jewish letters are the essays edited by Sokoloff, Lerner, and Norich in *Gender and Text*. See especially Norich's introduction, "Jewish Literatures and Feminist Criticism"; and Sokoloff, "Gender Studies." It is telling that the collection edited by Davidman and Tenenbaum, *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, includes articles on biblical studies and early rabbinical writing but jumps seamlessly to the modern period, with only a two-page meditation by Tirosh-Rothschild on the place of gender in the historiography of medieval Jewish philosophy. See "'Dare to Know,'" 107–8. Sokoloff's article in this collection, "Modern Hebrew Literature," provides a point of contrast with this silence about medieval writing, also evident in other considerations of women in Hebrew literature such as Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey*, which says very little on medieval sources.

¹²"Study of Hebrew Literature," 270.

¹³For a lucid overview and bibliography of such work over the last twenty years, see Caviness, "Feminism."

1993 special issue of *Speculum* edited by Nancy Partner, which was devoted to “Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism,” does not include a single reference to Jewish writing or Hebrew sources. While this special issue proved to be a watershed in the field and medieval studies has increasingly drawn from the insights of gender studies over the last two decades, a survey of the most important publications on these subjects reveals a marked focus on English—and to a lesser extent Romance—sources, and an equally marked ignorance of Hebrew writing. Left to itself, the field of medieval Hebrew literary studies has until very recently hardly raised the question of gender in any serious way.

There are, of course, important exceptions. While a few relevant studies were published in the 1970s, such as Norman Roth’s discussion of the “Wiles of Women” motif in Hebrew writing, the treatment of gender began to emerge as a more constant focus beginning only in the late 1980s and appearing with more frequency in the mid-1990s. In 1986, Dan Pagis contributed a sophisticated essay on the representation of women in Italian Hebrew poetry while Raymond Scheindlin offered a useful introduction to the intersection between gender and form in Hebrew love poetry.¹⁴ In 1993, Jacob Lassner’s *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* was a noteworthy innovation in its comparative literary-critical approach to the history of the representation of the figure of the Queen of Sheba, although the medieval material considered in his study is mostly from Islamic sources. More focused on Hebrew writing, Judith Dishon wrote in the following year a useful overview of the representation of women not only in poetry but also in prose.¹⁵ Susan Shapiro and Julia Schwartzmann have also published interesting studies of gender in medieval philosophical and exegetical writing.¹⁶ Although much of the scholarship on gender in the literatures of the Iberian Peninsula has been guilty of the same omissions as the wider field of medieval studies, a few scholars, such as María José Cano, have explicitly worked against this tendency.¹⁷

Despite these and other tentative forays and solitary efforts, it was Tova Rosen’s path-finding work *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Literature* (2003) that offered the first sustained interrogation into the subject; in doing so, it definitively introduced the questions of gender studies into the study of medieval Hebrew literature.¹⁸ Her book has become a touchstone for any discussion of gender in medieval Hebrew letters, as is clear from the diversity of recent scholarship making use of her insights. Despite recent comparative work in the last eight years, *Unveiling Eve* has yet to be matched by any study of similar scope.¹⁹ All of the essays presented in this cluster can thus be said to follow directly in the wake of Rosen’s work. Recognizing the marginal place of Hebrew (and Arabic) sources in the wider field of medieval studies, the contributors to this cluster also share a common commitment not only to encourage work on gender and sexuality in the study of medieval Jewish culture, but also to disseminate knowledge about the Hebrew sources relevant to the study of gender to a wider readership among medievalists in general.²⁰

¹⁴Pagis, “Controversy”; Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death*, 77–89.

¹⁵Dishon, “Images of Women.”

¹⁶Shapiro, “Matter of Discipline”; Schwartzmann, “Gender Concepts.”

¹⁷Virtually no mention of Jews or Hebrew writing is made in the collected studies, Blackmore and Hutchenson, *Queer Iberia*, or Lacarra Lanz, *Marriage and Sexuality*, but see Cano, “El tratamiento de las mujeres.”

¹⁸See also Rosen’s earlier “On Tongues Being Bound”; her brief article, “Literature, Hebrew”; the review essay on Rosen’s work by Matti Huss, “Gender Studies”; and Huss’s earlier “Misogyny.”

¹⁹For some recent work, see Einbinder, “Jewish Women Martyrs”; Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 126–32, and especially “Arabic Poetics”; Hamilton, *Representing Others*, 47–102; and Gutmann-Grün, *Zion als Frau*. For two recent explorations of gender in medieval Kabbalah, see Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*; and Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*.

²⁰The absence of any mention of Rosen’s study from Caviness’s recent retrospective overview, “Feminism” further underscores the need for such interdisciplinary, comparative work.

The title of this cluster, “between gender and genre in later-medieval Sepharad,” is meant to be a direct allusion to Simon Gaunt’s study, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, which was the first work to pose in a serious way the direct connection between the *theme* of gender and the *form* of the medieval written sources that represent it.²¹ This consideration of the conjunction of gender and genre in medieval French literature has been followed by a host of other texts employing a similar lens, both within and beyond medieval studies.²² Nevertheless, Gaunt’s insights have proven particularly fruitful as a model here. The essays in this cluster begin with his observation that “the construction of gender is a crucial element in any ideology, and ... the distinct ideologies of medieval genres are predicated in part at least upon distinct constructions of gender.”²³

As Gaunt and many others have emphasized, “gender” and “genre” derive from the same root, *generis* (declined from *genus*), meaning “kind,” “sort,” or “genus.” The division of semantic labor that associated “gender” with sexual kind in particular and “genre” with literary type came long after the composition of the sources considered here. At their core, the two terms amount to different usages of the same word. The weak distinction between “gender” and “genre” is even more evident in the Romance languages where a single term (Fr. *genre*, Sp. *género*, Cat. *gènere*, Port. *gênera*, It. *genere*, Rom. *gen*, Gal. *xénero*) refers to both the *genre* of written works and the grammatical *gender* of words, and in varying contexts can also refer to the concept of *gender* as a category of critical thought. The significant semantic overlapping of the terms “gender” and “genre” invites reflection on the vital connection between literary form and ideological content, the inevitable intersection of sexual and textual politics. It is the working argument behind the articles collected here that, in Gaunt’s words, “genre cannot be fully understood without a consideration of gender.”²⁴

While Gaunt and earlier critics have explored the term “genre” as a tool of literary analysis, a comment on its meaning here is in order. The use of this term as an organizing concept throughout these essays is a general one, taking “genre” to mean the “form” of a text together with its “content.” Genre here signifies a writer’s use (or distortion) of an accepted and recognized form as the appropriate vehicle for a certain content (e.g. the use of poetic discourse to represent and discuss love, rhymed prose to represent misogynist fiction, non-rhymed prose to discuss philosophical and religious doctrines, etc.). As Fredric Jameson argues, “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public.”²⁵ Each form or combination of forms is understood to be the product of a deliberate choice by the writer for the expression of specific ideological intentions. While any number of such ideological assumptions and intentions—economic, religious, political, or otherwise—could potentially be examined in relation to the form of the text, the interest here is to question how issues of gender and sexuality in particular find expression in different forms of writing. One assumption underlying this questioning is that neither “gender” nor “genre” is a fixed concept, but on the contrary, that both are constructed and modified in different social and religious contexts.

The topics examined in the following essays (misogyny, queenship, homoeroticism, sodomy, love, lust, chastity, virtue, and inter-religious polemical debate) all are jointly concerned with the

²¹A few earlier studies that built on this interplay of related concepts include Brabant, *Politics, Gender, and Genre*; and Nelson, “Gender and Genre.”

²²For reflections on the intersection of the terms and concepts “gender and genre” in the context of other medieval literatures, see Treharne, *Writing Gender*; Weisl, *Conquering the Reign*; and more recently, Poor and Schulman, *Women in Medieval Epic*.

²³Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 1.

²⁴Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 16.

²⁵Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 106.

expression or representation of gender and the ways that such representations conflicted with and determined (or were determined by) questions of genre, form, and the use of texts. The types of writing examined here (poetry, religious polemic, biblical exegesis, *maqāmāt*-style rhymed prose) are not meant to present a comprehensive picture of all relevant genres. They constitute only a sample of the many possible literary and artistic forms that could be compared in their representation of gender and sexuality. The same comparison aimed for here could easily be expanded to include other issues and forms, both written and visual, such as manuscript illumination, liturgical objects and sculpture, historiography, mystical writing, devotional and liturgical poetry, music, and others. Along the same lines, the questions asked here could easily be posed about medieval Hebrew sources from beyond Iberia. Not only could the same approach bear fruit in relation to Hebrew writing from more northern Jewish communities (as Susan Einbinder, Judith Baskin, and Ivan Marcus have already demonstrated), but it could also be used to explore medieval Jewish sources in other languages (Arabic, Aramaic, and the Romance languages) as well as in post-expulsion writing in Hebrew and other languages in the early-modern period. While our analysis would surely be deepened with a wider purview and more inclusive sweep of texts, forms, and periods, the main question pursued here—how does the representation of gender intersect with the genres of Hebrew writing from late-medieval Iberia—would remain the same.

The origins of this collection of essays lie among the unexpected but always welcome fruits of collaborative research. The idea for this cluster emerged from the ongoing work of a four-year collaborative endeavor entitled, “INTELEG: The Intellectual and Material Legacies of Late-Medieval Sephardic Judaism: An Interdisciplinary Approach.”²⁶ This project, funded by a four-year Starting Grant from the European Research Council, covers work completed between 2008 and 2012 by five team members, including Jonathan Decter (Brandeis University), Arturo Prats (Universidad Complutense, Madrid), Javier del Barco (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid), Ryan Szpiech (University of Michigan), and Esperanza Alfonso (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), who is also the Principal Investigator on the project. Conceived initially as a forum to highlight current work by some of the current INTELEG researchers, this cluster has also been expanded to include a related essay by Alexandra Cuffel (Ruhr-Universität Bochum). In addition to the ongoing individual projects of each team member, the INTELEG project will also be highlighted at the upcoming exhibition, “Biblias de Sefarad: las vidas cruzadas del texto y sus lectores” (“Sephardic Bibles: The Intersecting Lives of the Text and its Readers”), which is being organized by Dr. del Barco and will take place from February through April, 2012, at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

The first essay, “Medieval portrayals of the ideal woman,” by Esperanza Alfonso, analyzes the use in late-medieval Bible commentaries (mainly from Sepharad and Provence) of the image of the *eshet hayil* (“ideal woman,” Proverbs 31:10), the subject of an acrostic poem found in the final twenty-two verses of the book of Proverbs. By tracing the changing form and meaning of this image, especially as it evolved after the thirteenth century, Alfonso aims to show how this representation in later-medieval Hebrew exegesis was used not only to express beliefs about gender but more broadly to express different opinions about the meaning of figurative and allegorical language and philosophical rationalism. In particular, she demonstrates that the philosophical and exegetical understanding of matter and form in gendered terms, while based on categories from the tradition of Maimonides and his commentators, did

²⁶More information is currently available on the project website: <http://www.lineas.cchs.csic.es/inteleg>

not follow a single trajectory. Instead, the image of the ideal wife crossed between philosophical and literary texts in multiple ways.

The second essay, “The love poetry of Shelomoh ben Reuben Bonafed: Hebrew poems and courtly love,” by Arturo Prats, turns to the representation of love in the Hebrew poetry of fifteenth-century Aragonese poet Shelomoh Bonafed (d. after 1445). Prats follows how Bonafed’s representation incorporates a generic form that shifts in the fifteenth century, both reworking aspects of earlier love poetry (Hebrew and Arabic) and also inventing a new genre that needs to be understood apart from earlier forms and contexts. By situating Bonafed’s verse not only in context of Hebrew literary history but also more broadly as part of cross-linguistic Iberian literary trends in the fifteenth century, Prats shows that the representation of gender and love in poetry was of a piece with the evolution of genre and form. Equally importantly, he signals the importance of considering Hebrew writing from this period in a comparative, multi-lingual and multi-cultural context.

The third essay, “Ibn Sahula’s *Meshal ha-Qadmoni* as restorative polemic,” by Alexandra Cuffel, focuses on the prose work, *Tale of the Ancient One*, of thirteenth-century Jewish writer Isaac Ibn Sahula. By tracing out the representations of male and female identity in the text, Cuffel shows how Ibn Sahula inverts traditional misogynist imagery found in other Hebrew and Arabic *maqāmāt* (rhymed prose) collections. In this, he uses gender as a critique of fellow Jews of the courtier class in thirteenth-century Toledo and associates maleness with violence and lust while using femininity to represent his own creativity and the purity of the people of Israel. Cuffel’s examination of Ibn Sahula’s innovative *maqāmāt*-style work demonstrates how the inversion of meaning conveyed by gender imagery does not necessarily imply the inversion of generic form.

The fourth contribution, “A Hebrew ‘sodomite’ tale from thirteenth-century Toledo: Jacob Ben El’azar’s story of Sapir, Shapir, and Birsha,” by Jonathan Decter, analyzes the depiction of pederasty in one of the stories of the *Sefer ha-Meshalim* (Book of stories) by thirteenth-century Toledan Jew Jacob Ben El’azar. By comparing the relationships of two men, Birsha and Sapir, with the adolescent boy Shapir, Decter shows how this depiction of male–male relations, in dialogue with both Andalusian and Christian models of male friendship and love, reflects the shifting Jewish views on homoeroticism in the context of the hybrid culture of thirteenth-century Toledo. Decter contrasts the delicate subject of homoerotic imagery with the implicit didacticism of the exemplary narrative to show how Ben El’azar used his prose tale as commentary on acceptable gender roles in friendship and love.

In my own contribution to this cluster, “Converting the Queen: gender and polemic in the *Book of ‘Ahitub and Salmon*,” I explore the role of queenship in a fifteenth-century anti-Christian Hebrew dialogue about the nature of true religion entitled *The Book of ‘Ahitub and Salmon*. I first demonstrate the centrality of the queen in the text as the most important character and the prime mover of the entire plot. Contrasting this with the predominantly male perspective and voice of most religious polemical writing, I argue that the queen both represents Lady Wisdom but also serves as an important counterpoint to the Virgin Mary, constituting a central part of the text’s anti-Christian message. My essay explores how the blending of narrative and exegetical forms in the construction of late-medieval polemical arguments centers around the depiction and defense of female agency.

These studies intersect and overlap in numerous ways. For example, three of the essays (Decter, Cuffel, Szpiech) discuss texts connected with the *maqāmāt* tradition of rhymed prose, but each example offers radically different representations of gender. Both Decter and Cuffel focus on prose texts representing the multi-confessional world of thirteenth-century Toledo. However, while Decter’s study focuses on contrasting notions of male homoeroticism, Cuffel’s analysis considers lust and sexuality within the context of inter-confessional and intra-

confessional polemical arguments. While Cuffel's article and mine both consider prose texts connected with Hebrew polemical writing, Cuffel shows how misogynist imagery could be deployed as the barb of a polemical thrust, while my own focuses on the inversion of a traditionally male discourse of polemical argumentation as a carefully elaborated anti-Christian polemical strategy. Similarly, Decter and Prats both explore the intersection of gender roles and amorous desire, but do so to very different ends. Prats demonstrates the dichotomies of love as both an irrational madness and as the adoration of a perfect, idealized beloved, while Decter sketches the dichotomies of male eroticism as either chaste or sodomitic. While Prats shows the place of the idealized woman within the context of Shelomo Bonafed's constellation of poetic images, Alfonso traces the evolution of the image of the "ideal woman" in terms of shifting exegetical norms in biblical commentary. My consideration of the polemical use of exegetical representations of gender contrasts with Alfonso's study of the juxtaposition of such representations within the context of changing philosophical ideas as well.

Despite their fruitful intersections, the persistent differences among these texts remain significant and it is not the intention of this cluster to erase or deny those differences by over-emphasizing their points of contact. It is thus important to note in that regard that although the title of this collection implies a certain singularity in the Hebrew writing of late-medieval Iberia (a "Sephardic" tradition), this is in some measure a factitious product of our historical categories. The comparison of these texts here is not justified on the basis of a single, shared "Sephardic" identity, but rather depends on an obvious linguistic unity, a partly shared historical context, and a common pool of locally circulated intellectual and religious writing. Also, although thirteenth-century Castile was culturally very different from fifteenth-century Aragon, the writers in both periods and locations shared a common fate of working as Jewish minority groups within relatively similar Christian majority societies. For all their differences, these groups had far more in common with each other than they did with their Jewish contemporaries to the north. While bringing these essays together here does not mean to imply a total unity of culture or experience among different post-Andalusi Jewish communities in Iberia, it is the editorial assumption behind this cluster that a certain cultural coherence, albeit vaguely defined, unites these texts and authors enough to merit linking them here.

In each of these essays, the form of writing serves as a locus for the analysis of larger social representations of gender and identity. By focusing on genre as a fluid concept in the production of medieval Hebrew writing in the Iberian Peninsula after the twelfth century, these studies all contribute to a deeper understanding of Sephardic textual cultures and communities in both theoretical and historical terms. The essays collected here are offered as an invitation to further work on issues of gender and sexuality in Hebrew sources in particular and in Iberian and medieval literatures more generally.

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