

THE AMBIVALENT CONVERSO CONDITION.
A REVIEW-ARTICLE OF
*THE EVOLUTION OF CONVERSO
LITERATURE: THE WRITINGS OF THE
CONVERTED JEWS OF MEDIEVAL SPAIN*

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The pivotal role played by *conversos* (Christians who descended from Jews, or who were themselves recently converted from Judaism) in Medieval and early modern Spanish culture is undeniable, particularly in the fifteenth century. Although in Iberia Jews had converted to Christianity throughout the Middle Ages, it was in the fifteenth century in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragón that conversions became widespread, both cause and consequence of profound social, political, and cultural change. Estimates of the number of conversions in Castile during the fifteenth century range from a conservative figure of 300,000 (Domínguez Ortiz 141) to a startling one of 600,000-700,000 (Netanyahu 234-45). Whichever number one chooses, however, it is clear that by the middle of the fifteenth century Castile had emerged as a Christian-*converso* kingdom whose population was confronted daily with vital questions of religious and cultural change and social, as well as personal identity.

The *conversos*, especially in the period from 1391 up to the promulgation of the Toledo statutes on purity of blood on June 5, 1449, constituted a large, new, socially ambiguous group in Castilian life. Given their tenuous circumstances, they and their immediate descendants were, as a result of conversion, faced with the problematic of belonging—of assimilation, social transformation, and recognition by their “Old” Christian coreligionists. Contrary to medieval Jews who lived as outsiders and formed part of a corporate body consisting of a group of permanent ‘others’ that existed detached from the Christian community, *conversos* were faced with the dilemma of forging strategies to overcome their forebears’ traditional condition of estrangement: to find ways in which to craft and negotiate new identities of likeness rather than divergence. The newly converted were placed in uniquely emerging interstitial cultural circumstances and were obliged to forge in-between social identities that called for the elaboration of new

individual or collective strategies of existence that produced new signs of identity, and, especially after 1480 and the establishment of the Inquisition, yielded inventive ways of collaborating with or contesting their relationship to society at large.

Gregory B. Kaplan's book on the evolution of *converso* literature in medieval Spain (but principally fifteenth-century Castile) has the merit of seeking to reanimate interest in this crucial formative moment in Spanish cultural history (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002. 168 pp. ISBN 0-8130-2475-7). His useful study comprises eight chapters in which he endeavors to trace an evolution in *converso* literary texts over the course of the latter half of the fifteenth century. To do this Kaplan first provides an historical overview of the *conversos* in medieval Iberia (Chap. 1) and then draws a theoretical frame that employs semiotics to identify and decode certain recurring distinguishing signs in the works of the late fifteenth-century authors and groups of authors that occupy his interest (Chap. 2). Despite the book's initial promise to reanimate interest in *conversos* and clarify the compelling formative role they played in society, however, the historical overview which serves as the base for Kaplan's study is impaired from the outset since it relies excessively on a number of disputable texts for its evidence: Kaplan's historical survey hinges on, among other things, Alfonso's X's *Siete Partidas*, which were not promulgated until early modern times and reflect more the king's imperial ambitions and juridical wish-list than any historical practice, plus miracles from the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* and Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* that are reworkings of Latin prose narratives with trans-Pyrenean ecclesiastical origins. Neither of these can be taken as faithful representations of the treatment or status of converts in late thirteenth-century Castilian society. In addition, while theoretically a semiotic approach in attempting to decipher a *converso* message in a "converso code" (32) would appear feasible—and certainly fashionable—in practice, it becomes more of an obstacle than a help in reaching the study's stated goal of finding some sort of ideological consistency—a common idiom of concern—across a broad spectrum of *converso* writers during the second half of the fifteenth century. At the very least, Kaplan's recourse to semiotics seems confining and, at the most, it strikes me as possibly even obtrusive in conveying what he discovers and wishes to say.

The *converso* voice in pre-Expulsion Spain is, in fact, anything but consistent and often quite explicit rather than cryptic and elusive. To be sure, it is marked by divers inflections and shifting subject positions of enunciation that can usually be better understood, and tempered, by consideration of such factors as an author's socio-economic status, class, gender, or even the genre that records the author's words. This

penultimate category is one that is also given short shrift—in fact no shrift at all—in Kaplan’s book. His study sidesteps the work of *converso* women completely and fails to mention even such a prominent *conversa* as Teresa de Cartagena, who flourished exactly at mid-century and whose exceptional writings are modulated as much by her gender and her infirm physical constitution as by her cultural and family genealogies, or any reaction to events at Toledo in the wake of June, 1449.

As far as genre is concerned, there is a striking absence of consideration given to the writing of history itself in Kaplan’s study: notably the work of prominent *converso* historians like Fernando del Pulgar, Alfonso de Palencia, Mosén Diego de Valera, and Alvar García de Santa María, among others. The latter historians all moved at one time or another in the intellectual circle gathered around the redoubtable archbishop of Toledo, Alfonso Carrillo (the subject of Kaplan’s Chapter 4), and all carefully crafted their chronicles of contemporary events to reflect both favor and disapproval of official and unofficial policies and events regarding Jews and converts from Judaism.

In the chapter on *conversos* and Carrillo’s humanistic circle, the preoccupation with nobility Kaplan identifies as a compelling *converso* anxiety is, when closely examined, a much more complicated affair than it seems on the surface. The debate concerning the relationship of virtue, deeds, and hereditary nobility, although it may have been exacerbated by the events of 1449, actually traces its most immediate roots back to the fourteenth-century Bolognese jurist, Bartolus of Sassoferrato in his *Commentaria* on Justinian (Book XII, title I, “De dignitatibus”), and was also a well-documented concern in the fifteenth-century trans-Pyreneean debates on nobility at the court of Burgundy. In fact, it had been a major issue in the polemic on social mobility and institutional transformations in Castile since the time of Alfonso X, who went out of his way to identify and codify new forms of nobility in his realms as he searched for a broad political base to counter the opposition of the aristocracy to his reforms. Similarly, it was critical to humanism’s focus on personal moral development and its espousal of the perfectability of the individual. If carefully studied, the debate’s origins can even be pursued back to the ancients, to Cicero in his *De Officiis* as well his *Tusculan Disputations*. Thus, more than an exclusive *converso* manifestation, the preoccupation with *nobilitas* and good works reflected a complex ideological genealogy that also touched upon the tension between arms and letters in fifteenth-century Castile.

While Kaplan is doubtless correct that many *conversos* were drawn to the debate on nobility, the book makes it appear as if it were a

uniquely *converso* interest. A more thorough understanding of the problematic posed by nobility, chivalry, and virtuous deeds in late medieval culture, its appropriation by *conversos*, and the full range of the controversy concerning it in pre-Isabelline Castile would greatly have enhanced an appreciation of the issue. In this regard, the work of such scholars as Julian Weiss (1990), Ottavio di Camillo (1996), Jesús Rodríguez Velasco (1996), and David M. Posner (1999) might have been helpful in balancing Kaplan's observations and have led to a fuller awareness of the subtleties of the problem and the range of the dispute.

The rhetorical deification and comparison of Isabel la Católica with the Virgin Mary in the verse of *converso* poets like Antón de Montoro and Íñigo de Mendoza, the object of Kaplan's Chapter 5, reveals—as the work of Elizabeth Leffeldt (2000) and more recently Barbara Weissberger (2002, 2003) has shown—as much about hyperbolic tropes that seek to empower and legitimate a female monarch as they do about any distinctive *converso* dissidence or special relationship with the queen. Leffeldt's research uncovers the paradoxes and contradictions that were produced by contemporary efforts to represent a strong female monarch upon whom many felt the fate of Castile depended after a generation of civil war. Leffeldt notes that in order to fulfill her role as an absolute monarch, Isabel “would have to transcend her fundamental female nature” (40) while ultimately “her legitimacy would rest in part on both a recognition and a subsequent rejection of her nature as a woman” (41). As a result, Isabel's redemptive role took on a distinctly transcendent as well as civic cast as her partisans opted to fashion her rhetorically as a woman who was both human and divine. The obvious simile was Mary, as it would be three generations later with Elizabeth I of England—Gloriana—the other Virgin Queen. In order to enhance Isabel of Castile's ability to govern, many of her partisans, *conversos* and “Old” Christians alike, thus sought to go beyond the mere assertion of the queen's mortal powers and portray her as celestial by equating her with the Queen of Heaven. The conceit was wide-spread and extended well beyond the confines of poetry, even into contemporary painting and iconography, as the triptych altarpiece by Juan de Flandes from the chapel of the Catholic Monarchs—now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.—strikingly demonstrates. The latter clearly depicts Isabel as the Virgin, transposing her face directly upon the figure of Mary, who holds the Infant Jesus (Prince Juan), orb in hand, on her lap.

Two of Antón de Montoro's contemporaries did, however, take umbrage and censure Montoro's poetic comparison of Isabel to Mary (Dutton, ID 6104) by tagging it as heretical. Both Francisco Vaca in a well-known response to Montoro (ID 6105), and Alvaro Brito in a lesser

known composition (“A Antón de Montoro sobresta cantigua que fez como ereje” ID 5210), doubtless aware of Montoro’s status as a *converso*, drew malicious attention to the sacrilegious, doctrinal implications of his comparison. Yet, Kaplan’s book is silent on this and appears unaware of the long tradition of admonishment and reproof directed against *converso* poets for their heterodox theological beliefs, as outlined in Charles Fraker’s important work on early fifteenth-century *conversos* in the *Cancionero de Baena* (1966).

In his study, Kaplan might have given more careful deliberation to the complex strategies of both conscious and unconscious self-fashioning, to invoke Stephen Greenblatt’s term, that *conversos* adopted to navigate the shoals of social uncertainty that lay before them. Self-fashioning is a complicated operation that involves a self-perception of who an individual is, an understanding of the social configuration of who that individual strives to be, and the way a representation of the latter is discursively crafted to portray the desired image as one’s own essential way of being.

By depicting *conversos* like Juan de Valladolid, the focus of Chapter 3, exclusively as a downtrodden denizen of the social periphery, Kaplan tends to identify him only with those margins—with what we call “popular culture”—and what we believe to be its fundamentally dissident nature. Yet, as Roger Chartier reminds us, the notion of popular culture, as determined only by those individuals who reside outside elite society, is “a reductive definition . . . because it ignores borrowings and exchanges, because it masks the multiplicity of differences, because it presupposes *a priori* the validity of a set of divisions that remains to be established” (169-70). In fact, given the historical record, it is quite probable that Juan Poeta, or de Valladolid, consciously appropriated and cultivated a textual persona of downtroddenness and social difference as a strategy for shaping a sympathetic reception among the aristocracy in order to guarantee his continued access to it and to the social and fiscal advantages it could offer him. Although the poetry alleges that Juan was the son of a “pregonero de Valladolid,” the analogous case of Juan Marmolejo, a target of Antón de Montoro’s satire whose *converso* family origins are mercilessly lampooned, is probably instructive. Accused by Montoro in verse of being a drunk, a scoundrel, a cuckold, a pimp, a thief, and a low-life Judaizer, Marmolejo’s poetic identity could not be farther from the historical truth. He was, in fact, the scion of one of the oldest, most powerful, and well-connected *converso* families in Andalucía: the Marmolejos of Seville, who had converted to Christianity a century before, during the reign of Alfonso XI, and had positioned themselves enviably close to the kingdom’s levers of power. Indeed, Juan

Marmolejo's grandfather, Francisco Fernández de Marmolejo, was both Pedro I's and Juan I's chief treasurer (*tesorero mayor*), and an individual whose descendants continued to enjoy exceptional social advantage and influence at court well into the sixteenth-century (MacKay X, 46).

It is all too easy to presume, as Kaplan's study does, from the *motes* and *pullas* directed at Juan de Valladolid that he was a rogue destined to live on the fringes of society. To be sure, his characterization by Pedro and Gómez Manrique, as well as by Antón de Montoro, is in all likelihood deceiving, principally because of the impertinent, offensive, outrageous depiction of the target of their satire, the indecorous quality of the reproaches, and the suppositions which since the nineteenth century have governed the perception of Juan de Valladolid, namely that he was a buffoon and popular poet, a sort of loquacious lumpen transformed and licensed to be brazen by his eloquence. Juan de Valladolid's presumed marginality and his own poetry's disrespectfulness, as well as his association with other *cancionero* poets of similar ill repute, especially Montoro, have led to the assumption that he and others like him were equals, and perhaps they were, though it is safe to say that they were not abject members of the outer fringes of society. When we bother to situate Juan Poeta within the wider compass of the historical and occasional settings of his verse, we see that they point less to a low-life lout than to an individual who moved with astonishing ease in elite society, only among the most powerful and best-connected individuals at court as well as across the physical geography of the aristocratic Mediterranean world. One thing remains certain from a reading of all the compositions by him and about him: Juan Poeta enjoyed exceptional social access and seems to have been amazingly influential at court. In this way, the book's analysis falls short of posing some important questions whose consideration might have changed what remains little more than a cursory conception of Juan de Valladolid's textual persona into something more substantive.

At one point in his study, Kaplan invokes postcolonial theory to support his semiotic analysis of the "*converso* code." However, the understanding and application of the term postcolonial here appears to contradict what it actually signifies in contemporary cultural theory. Although Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* is cited with due reverence, it is as if postcolonial meant only resistance to the hegemonic gestures of a majority, when in fact Bhabha's great contribution to our understanding of the negotiations of dominance and power in postcolonial circumstances implies the existence of continuously changing subject positions and subtle synergies of resistance, imitation, and cooperation that are employed in relations between subaltern

subjects and their masters. Bhabha's mimic man may embody as much a sign of the triumph of hegemony as any resistance to it (84-86).

The "*converso* code" and its cryptic messages identified in the book become doubly diffuse and obscure in what Kaplan defines as the "*converso* lament" (Chaps. 6 and 7), a type of allegory whose sense can only be gleaned by the most discriminating reader, obliged to look for well hidden meaning snugly tucked away between the lines. The *converso* lament—shot through with a sort of "by the Waters of Babylon" gloom—is a form of cryptic writing saturated with pessimism that seeks to express dissident, dangerous thoughts on the injustices heaped upon *conversos* after the establishment of the Inquisition and must perforce remain obscure. However, the book's efforts seem to work too hard at deciphering traces of *converso* dissension in the literary and linguistic strategies it examines. Kaplan's arguments might have been greatly simplified and enhanced had he consulted Stephen Gilman's essential article on this point, "A Generation of *Conversos*," rather than pursue obscure allegorical comparisons between topical antithetical images from love poetry (*locus amoenus/locus foedus, senex/puer, viridis/fulvus*, etc.) and *converso* persecutions of the 1490s. What is *converso* about these images is not apparent through a reading, no matter how sophisticated, that relies on an *a priori* assertion that the contradictory images are subversive simply because they are appropriated by *conversos* like Rodrigo de Cota, Diego de San Pedro, and Fernando de Rojas.

The question of a uniquely identifiable *converso* identity, and more concretely a coded idiom that *conversos* used to communicate with each other, is problematized and complicated by figures like Mosén Diego de Valera who, rather than adopt a position of hostility and contestation toward old Christians, fashioned an unambiguous identity of consensual proximity to Old Christians aimed at producing assimilation and a form of cultural erasure. Through Valera's expert reiteration of the themes and images of nobility in his treatises on that subject, in his poetry, and in his historical works, Valera demonstrated that a dominant ideology does not always have to be imposed but, in accordance with what Bhabha says, may be voluntarily accepted, and that dominance is created through a complex cultural interplay that involves both consent and willingness to move within a culture as much as it does oppression and resistance. A figure like Diego Valera tells us that the *converso* condition may express a volition that ratifies institutional power and that it may in fact be comprised of radically extreme, even contradictory, modulations as it occupies conflicting regions of the social spectrum. The existence of a *converso* identity as a well-defined discursive category reflecting contention, moral disaffection, and clearly

delineated anti-*castizo* subject positions, often espoused in the works of twentieth-century historians like Américo Castro and Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, needs to be reexamined. The traditional portrait of the *converso* as a marginal, alienated individual whose limited participation in mainstream society and public agency has come to dominate Spanish cultural history needs to be reconciled with late Hispanism's own discursive practices and the ideological assumptions which shaped it, especially during and immediately following the polarizing Civil War. But that is another matter. The fact is that there is no such thing as a typical *converso* other than as a product of a desire to reduce the intricacies of human lives and cultures to manageable texts. The binarism of the traditional historiographical construct of the *converso* cannot be reconciled with the complexity and diversity of the individuals whose religious and social identities were the subject of continuous negotiation and debate in Castile during the fifteenth century.

Converso views, as well as views on *conversos*, during the fifteenth century were, as figures like Diego de Valera, Fernando del Pulgar, and Teresa de Cartagena show, remarkably contradictory—as varied and complex as the individuals who professed them. The conception of the *conversos* as a caste that possessed a common dissident temperament in particular displaces their individual personalities away from their concrete historical circumstances and toward reductive generalizations. The image of the *converso* as an unwavering form of alternate transcendental self—the Other by whom the figure of the autonomous, unified Old Christian agent of history can be defined—needs to be rethought in light of the shifting reconfigurations of the subject and the heterogenous social discourses that can actually be found in fifteenth-century Castilian texts. To lay claim to a normative identity for *conversos*, or for that matter a “*converso* code,” is, put simply, to maintain the existence of a universal human category that did not exist. Close scrutiny of *conversos* reveals that they fail to constitute a monolithic Other but comprise a mass of others who, despite the totalizing narratives of Spanish cultural history are in fact all different for different reasons.

It is clear that *conversos* in the fifteenth century could fall all along the ideological and civic spectrum. Some like Diego de Valera dramatically contradict the stereotypical image of the *converso* as a homogeneous social type who shares a moral and political agenda with fellow converts. In Valera's case, it is absolutely certain that he had readily assimilated and mastered the discourses of the Old Christian ruling class, and identified with and become part of it. Other converts like Pulgar and Alvar García de Santa María also served their

aristocratically empowered patrons both loyally and well. Some *conversos* did, however, forge a resistance to Old Christians and adopted a posture of opposition, skepticism, and disaffection.

In the end, stripped of its theoretical veneer, Kaplan's book more than anything provides a useful, and timely, summary and synthesis of some things that we already know about late fifteenth-century *converso* authors and that had been proposed by two earlier generations of critics like Américo Castro, Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, Royston Jones, Francisco Márquez-Villanueva, Stephen Gilman, and Julio Rodríguez-Puértolas, among others. Although the book is disappointing, despite my disappointment and critical comments, Kaplan's efforts are nevertheless to be considered significant since they mark a renewed interest in *conversos* and their role in the complex cultural negotiations and broad transformations that permanently altered society in the Iberian Peninsula at the threshold of modernity. Much remains to be done.

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