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Micha Lazarus

Leon Modena's *Kinah Shemor*

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PROLOGUE

In 1584, shortly after his bar-mitzvah, the young Italian Jew Leon Modena (1571-1648) composed an eight-line poem so remarkable that it has never been rivalled in its own genre. Known as *Kinah shemor* in Hebrew, *Chi nasce muor* in Italian, this elegy for Modena's deceased teacher, Rabbi Moshe della Rocca, makes sense simultaneously in both languages. It stands at the head of an exiguous tradition of short poems, fragments, and fragments of memories of short poems, often composed by Jews and operating at the borders between Hebrew and romance vernaculars, Jewish and Christian communities.

Yet for want of a formal name, this tradition has long resisted absorption into the critical canon. To scholars of Hebrew and Italian poetry it is a curiosity more cited than studied; in the Anglophone world, it is all but unheard of. More than merely bilingual or macaronic, for Modena the form seems to have existed somewhere between language and music. Moreover, *Kinah shemor* presents a test case for some unusual problems of composition and editing alike. What constitutes a 'good' reading among variants of a poem whose purpose is to sound like something rather than to mean something, or when the choice between those variants is answerable to a parallel text

in a different language and with a different meaning?

This essay presents the first critical edition of the poem to take into account all three of its primary witnesses; provides an English translation of both the Hebrew and the Italian aspects of the poem; and outlines the poem's critical afterlife over the course of its first century in print. I begin in §1.1 with an account of the poem's composition and significance in the context of Modena's own life and interests. Writing about *Kinah shemor* in a few scattered places, Modena consistently drew attention to two aspects of its innovative form: its virtuosic wordplay, and its interstitial place between languages and ethnic communities. Both bear on the poem's form, genre, and function. In §1.2 I examine Modena's lifelong penchant for wordplay, in particular the acoustic, translingual wordplay of which *Kinah shemor* is the outstanding example. Rather than following previous scholarship and associating this linguistic device with the Hebrew riddle tradition or the genre of funeral poetry – though it was plainly contiguous to both – I argue in §1.3 that Modena focused directly on the acoustic interplay between the Hebrew and Italian languages, which he understood to operate more like music. Moving away from formal considerations, §1.4 then turns to the poem's function as a bridge between Christian and Jewish cultures. Proud of the respect and friendship he enjoyed across the aisle, Modena intended *Kinah shemor* to speak, literally, across languages and religions, uniting Christians and Jews in a brief community of wonder.

Part II presents a critical edition (and simplified transliteration where necessary) of the Hebrew and Italian texts and paratexts of *Kinah shemor/Chi nasce muor*, based on the three primary witnesses of the poem that survive. The first is Modena's autograph manuscript, inscribed between

1595 and his death in 1648, now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The second appears in *Midbar Yehudah*, an early collection of Modena's sermons printed in 1602: here the Hebrew and Italian texts of the poem appear whole, one after the other, in Hebrew characters and prefaced by a paragraph in Hebrew. The last version to appear in Modena's lifetime was in *Pi 'aryeh*, an Italian dictionary of words from rabbinical literature, which appeared in 1640 appended to the second edition of Modena's dictionary of biblical words, *Galut Yehudah*. In this final form the Hebrew and Italian texts are intercalated line-by-line in their respective scripts, and introduced by a paragraph in Italian (the sense of which differs from the Hebrew introduction of 1602).

The present edition is the first to take into account all three primary witnesses, whose variant readings offer clues as to the poem's compositional history. I supply English translation of and commentary on both the Hebrew and Italian aspects of the poem, as well as the paratexts with which Modena published the poem throughout his life. Modena himself recognised that the Hebrew in particular was exceptionally difficult to understand, due to the torsion, indeed distortion, required to twine these languages together. While many ambiguities remain, my translation has been guided by Modena's own lexicographical writings, in particular *Galut Yehudah*, his Hebrew-Italian biblical lexicon, which (I argue in §1.3) was closely related to the poem in his mind. Where multiple senses of Modena's Hebrew are available, *Galut Yehudah* can sometimes clarify the sense in which he was most likely to have understood it. I have thus attempted to resolve conflicting connotations, trace allusions, and render the poem in an English version as close as possible to Modena's intended meaning.

In Part III, finally, I return to the question of genre to explore the poem's critical afterlife in the first century after Modena's death. *Kinah shemor* is in the vanguard of a marginal tradition of similar attempts at homophonic poetry, many of them (in imitation of Modena's original) in Hebrew, but reaching into other languages as well. This tradition is generally thought of as a strictly modern phenomenon, indeed strictly modernist: examples can be found in the homophonic curiosities of Oulipo and jazz vocalese, and avant-garde experiment such as Celia and Louis Zukofsky's translations of Catullus, or David Melnick's *Men in Aida*. Modena's example and others, however, suggest that the tradition reaches back much further than the twentieth century. I have discussed elsewhere, in a study of acoustic imitation in Anglo-Italian Renaissance madrigals, the fact that a critical language to describe, and therefore locate, discuss, and study, instances of this device has only recently become even provisionally available (Lazarus 2021, 681-715). The struggles of early critics and bibliographers of Jewish literature to absorb *Kinah shemor* into the critical canon bear witness to the effect of anonymity on a nascent genre. In the absence of a standard label under which to categorize it, Modena's novel composition and the literary phenomenon it exemplifies have remained obscure outside specialist scholarship.

It should be clear from the foregoing description that, while this essay draws on the details of Modena's life, on relations between Jews and Christians in early modern Venice, on Hebrew literary forms and their reception in Christian scholarship, and on a host of other topics, it is above all a study of *Kinah shemor* itself and not of its many illuminating contexts. The astonishing virtuosity, the sheer brio, of Modena's poem have given it the distinction of

making the most dazzling cameo in any story which has the opportunity to claim it. The poem has been illuminated by those stories in turn: *Kinah shemor* has been studied as an instance of Hebrew funerary poetry, for example, and as an example of the Hebrew riddle tradition. But since the mid-seventeenth century, critical attempts to assimilate Modena's poem to contiguous genres have left the impression of missing the point somewhat, of accounting for the poem's more legible aspects at the expense of leaving its real *differentia* unremarked. Certainly, the semantic content of this lament for Modena's deceased teacher justifies its classification as funeral poetry. Yet Modena himself recognised, as we shall see, that the curiosity of the poem – the *point* of it – has little to do with its semantic content. Something is always left wanting when *Kinah shemor* is treated as an example of anything other than itself. Annexation of this kind has suppressed the poem's renown over the centuries, casting Modena's masterful composition as eccentric to some larger genre rather than as the central exemplar of its own.

My purpose in this essay is not only, therefore, to establish the text of *Kinah shemor*, to make it accessible to English-speaking audiences, and thereby to make more critically legible this largely unknown genre, of which more examples, in a range of languages, surely remain to be found. It is to do so by unfolding the qualities of Modena's poem that *differ* from the better-known frames of literary history into which it has more or less awkwardly been squeezed; to analyse it not as a maverick exemplar of an extant genre, but as a new form that evolved and borrowed from its literary neighbours without being circumscribed by them. I look for the nature of this new form in the thought of its inventor. Yet for all that I begin with Modena's life and times, and the few clues he

left us as to how he thought about his poem, this essay is not primarily an historical study of Hebrew poetry in the Venetian ghetto. Many other scholars would be far more competent to produce such a study. Rather, it is a study of a novel literary object, little understood and less imitated; of what that object is and how it came to be; and of how and why it has struggled to find a place in the ecosystem of poetry as we know it.

All translations herein are my own unless otherwise attributed. I have provided the original Hebrew for texts that have not elsewhere been translated. Where the sound of the Hebrew is relevant I provide transliterations according to the 'somewhat simplified system' set out by the editors of Leon Modena's autobiography: צ is rendered by *tz*, ת and ה by *h*, כ and ך by *v*; ׳ indicates ם and ״ is ץ (Modena 1988, ¹ xx-xxi).

My transliterations broadly follow modern Hebrew pronunciation, and consequently do not capture the sound of the language as it was spoken in Venice around the turn of the seventeenth century. Cecil Roth observed that 'the correspondence between the Hebrew and Italian texts will become clearer if the reader remembers the variants in the Italian (especially Venetian) pronunciation of Hebrew at this time, when apparently the *sh* sound was pronounced *s*, and *g* pronounced *i* or *y*' (Roth 1959, 307, note 1). One might add that the vowel *ayin* was pronounced with an audible pharyngeal *ng* (as it is still pronounced, and transliterated, in the liturgy of modern-day communities that follow the Western Sephardi *nusach*, such as those in London, Amsterdam, New York, and Philadelphia). As a result, '*colto vien l'huom*' in line 2, and '*ma vedran*' in line 6, would have echoed their Hebrew equivalents, 'כָּל טוֹב עֵיְלוֹם' (*col tov 'eylom*) and 'מַוֶּט רֶעַ' (*mavet*

¹ Hereafter '*Life of Judah*'.

ra^a), even more closely than my transliterations suggest. The same observation holds for the contemporary pronunciation of Italian. In Modena's 1602 printing of the Italian poem in Hebrew characters, the *-c* of *acerbo* (now pronounced 'ch' as in 'church') is transliterated with a צ (tz); the word in early seventeenth-century Venetian dialect may have been pronounced 'atzerbo', again closer to the Hebrew 'otzer bo' than modern pronunciation captures. Given that the poem hinges on the assonance between Hebrew and Italian as they were spoken at this particular place and time, it is regrettable to add still another acoustic variable in the interest of rendering the text audible to readers without Hebrew in the present day. But attempting to reconstruct the sound of early modern Venetian Hebrew and Italian would be a far more tentative exercise, and would only serve further to estrange the texts in question from their intended modern readership. Pragmatism has won over principle on this occasion.

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