

VIDAL'S *CANTIGAS* TO A JEWESS: INTERCULTURAL LOVE RELATIONSHIPS IN MEDIEVAL IBERIA¹**Yara Frateschi Vieira**

Universidade Estadual de Campinas

e-mail: yara_f_vieira@yahoo.com

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Resumo

As interrelações entre as três culturas – judaica, muçulmana e cristã – na Península Ibérica medieval passaram a ser estudadas, na segunda metade do século XX, a partir do que se convencionou chamar, de forma geral e com diversos matizes, a “convivência” (CASTRO 1948; SÁNCHEZ ALBORNOZ 1956). Paralelamente, estudos dedicados às relações entre as literaturas árabe, hebraica e cristã incorporaram também no seu âmbito indagações correlatas (BOSSONG 2010; PADEN 2005). Neste trabalho procurarei examinar, a partir dessa perspectiva, a inclusão das cantigas de Vidal no Cancioneiro profano galego-português. Por um lado, aspectos formais e temáticos nelas presentes evidenciam o esforço de assimilação, por parte do poeta, do repertório lírico galego-português, o que lhe garante lugar na coletânea poética; o fato de a rubrica designá-lo como “judeu” e à sua dama como “judia” denota, por outro, que a assimilação não é total, mantendo-se irreduzíveis certas áreas – como a religião e as relações amorosas / sexuais / matrimoniais – que o identificam, e à sua dama, como membros de minoria religiosa e social.

Palavras-chave: Vidal, Judeu d’Elvas, mulher judia, contactos amorosos, Península Ibérica medieval, “convivência”, aculturação, assimilação

Abstract

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, contacts between the three Iberian cultures – Jewish, Muslim, and Christian – have been addressed from the point of view of what has come to be known as ‘convivencia’ [coexistence] (CASTRO 1948; SÁNCHEZ ALBORNOZ 1956). At the same time, studies devoted to the Arabic, Hebrew, and Christian literatures of the same period have incorporated similar considerations (BOSSONG 2010; PADEN 2005). On this basis, the present article examines the inclusion of the compositions of the troubadour known as Vidal in the Galician-Portuguese songbooks. On the one hand, some of their formal and thematic aspects can be seen as proof of the poet’s effort to assimilate the Galician-Portuguese lyric repertoire, thus ensuring a place for him in the poetic compilation; on the other, the fact that in the rubric he is referred to as a “Jew” and his lady as a “Jewess” implies that assimilation was not perceived as absolute, as certain areas, such as religion and love/ sexual/ marriage relations, regarding which they both were identified as members of a religious and social minority still remained off-limits.

Key Words: Vidal, Jew from Elvas, Jewess, love relationships, medieval Iberian Peninsula, ‘convivencia’, acculturation, assimilation

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“Let us not forget Vidal, the Jew from Elvas, (...). He is almost the only one among troubadours who used biblical references in love songs.” This is how Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos sums up the originality of the troubadour Vidal, explaining in a footnote what she understood by *biblical references*: “The metaphor of the deer roaring through the waters.” (CV 1138 and 1139) (VASCONCELOS 1990, II: 624, n. 3)²

Luciana Stegagno Picchio, author of the first critical edition of the compositions of the Jewish troubadour (B 1605 and 1606 [I], V 1138 and 1139 [II]), also points out that “the poet is not held back by any of the limitations that hindered the other troubadours. (...) We are outside the rules of courtly poetry, in a climate of more liberated sensuality. The same sensuality, if you like, of the Song of Songs, (...)” (PICCHIO 1979: 78-83). In fact, a similar perception already informed the medieval imaginary, which attributed to both Jewish and Moorish women the stereotype of the exotic, seductive and fatal woman (NIREMBERG 1996, VIEIRA 2018).

More recently, Rip Cohen has examined the complex strophic structures of Vidal's two *cantigas*, suggesting that, instead of the long stanzas with short verses and unique rhyme schemes established by Picchio, we should transcribe them in long verses with internal rhyme, such as aaaBB and aaabBB. Cohen claims that these forms are very close to those of the Arab-Andalusian zajal, which allows him to conclude that they provide additional evidence to the exotic character of Vidal's songs already pointed out by Michaëlis and Picchio (COHEN 2010).³

The so-called “exoticism” of Vidal's compositions has been associated with the following elements: 1) “peregrinas e diferentes” (outlandish and different) images (PICCHIO 1979: 74-75) in the context of the Galician-Portuguese love song, such as the motif of the herbs, in I.3-4 and II.9-10; the comparison of the lover with the deer, in II.6-8; the vision of the “white breast” of the beloved, in I.5-6; the metaphor of the rose, in II.20-21;⁴ and 2) the rare strophic structure.⁵

We shall then examine the case of those images considered unusual. The strophic scheme cannot be examined here because it also involves the broader treatment of the question of the existence and origin of the long verse in the Galician-Portuguese lyrical tradition. For an analysis of the strophic scheme I refer, therefore, to the aforementioned study (COHEN 2010).

As I have already tried to argue on another work (VIEIRA 2016), the analysis of images considered “outlandish” or “different” leads us to weaken the argument of their “exoticism”. In what follows,

² The order of notes 3 and 4 is swapped on the page.

³ The same article has another version (which was kindly sent to me by the author, whom I thank) with a broader scope of analysis: “Tying the Node: Colometry and Internal Rhyme in the Galician-Portuguese Lyric”. The article cited here focuses primarily on Vidal's *cantigas*.

⁴ I quote from the edition of PICCHIO 1979, following its strophic layout.

⁵ According to Tavani's classification, there are only two songs with the scheme 64 (a b a b a b a c d c d c): B 1606 / V 1339, by Vidal, and one by Alfonso X (the *lauda* “Deus te salve, groriosa”); and, in the case of the scheme 71 (a b a b a b c d c d c), only B 1605 / V 1338, by Vidal. (TAVANI 1967: 97-98)

I will limit myself to exposing the conclusions I reached in this previous work, referring the reader to the more detailed analysis developed therein.

Thus, the motif of the herbs, that is, the effect of getting ill and mad thanks to the use of narcotic herbs, is also found in a *cantiga de Santa Maria* (CSM 334);⁶ the relationship between herbs and madness appears in a *cantiga* by Pero Garcia de Ambroa (B 1577);⁷ the relationship between ill and mad, in turn, in King Denis (B 594, V 197)⁸ and Airas Fernandes Carpancho (B 175).⁹ Therefore, on the one hand, the image finds a parallel in the vernacular poetic tradition: a complete parallel in the religious genre, and a partial parallel in the amorous and satirical genre; and on the other hand, it is strange enough in the love lyric to carry the necessary *shiver* of innovation to an already mature genre at the time of Vidal's composition (INDINI, M. L. 1993b: 679-680; OLIVEIRA 1994: 440; VIEIRA 2015). It is also worth remembering, as I have argued in another paper (VIEIRA 2015), that the troubadour was most likely a physician and therefore familiar with the medicinal use of narcotic herbs and their corresponding clinical literature.

As already mentioned, Carolina Michaëlis links the comparison of the “wounded deer” to Psalm 41:2.¹⁰ Picchio rightly refutes this approach, recalling that we are not dealing here with the biblical *cervus ad fontes aquarum*, but with the wounded deer seeking solitary death (PICCHIO 1979: 80). Although the image of the deer as a metaphor for the lover is present in the biblical Song of Songs,¹¹ and is also frequent in Andalusian Arabic and Hebrew poetry to refer the beloved, I have not found so far any instance that matches exactly Vidal's comparison.¹² However, the same image of the “wounded / speared deer” appears in two Galician-Portuguese troubadours: Pero Meogo (B 1186 / V 791)¹³ and João Mendes de Briteiros (B 861 / V 447).¹⁴ The former –earliest of the two– (OLIVEIRA 1994: 422-423; SOUTO CABO 2012: 280-281), left his mark on the poetry of later troubadours, especially King Denis, and the second, probably contemporary with Vidal (OLIVEIRA 1994:367-368), has a small but innovative production regarding themes and metric-rhythmic schemes (FINAZZI-AGRÒ 1993: 352-353). The very presence of the “*cervas*” (hinds), in II.8, finds a parallel in the composition B 1189 / V 794 by Pero Meogo, even as the same lexical

⁶ ll. 22-23: E sa moller con maldade enton vynno temperou / con ervas, como o dêsse a seu marid' a beber; l. 38: (...) E pois provou-o e foi log' ensandecer; l. 40 E assy andou ùu ano tolleit' e fora de sen. (ALFONSO 1989: 173-174)

⁷ ll. 4-5: vedes que fez per ervas que colheu: / do vivo mort' e do cordo sandeu. (LAPA 1995: 216-217)

⁸ Refrain: vo-lo ten louc' e tolheito. (LANG 2010: 284-285)

⁹ ll. 11-12: mais eu que por ssandeu [e] tolheyto / and' e como non moiro, catyvo? (SOUTO CABO, VIEIRA 2002: 50)

¹⁰ «quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum ita desiderat anima mea ad te Deus», *Nova Vulgata*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/bible/nova_vulgata/documents/nova-vulgata_index_lt.html [2020/12/05].

¹¹ *Canticum Canticorum* 2.9: «similis est dilectus meus capreae hinuloque cervorum (...»); 2.17: «similis esto dilecte mi capreae hinuloque cervorum (...»); 8.14: «fuge dilecte mi et adsimilare capreae hinuloque cervorum (...»): *Nova Vulgata*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/bible/nova_vulgata/documents/nova-vulgata_vt_canticum-canticorum_lt.html#2 [2020/12/05].

¹² On the use of the deer as a symbol in profane and religious literature, cf. ASENSIO 1957: 56-57; MÉNDEZ FERRÍN 1966: 54-83; MORALES BLOUIN 1981; LORENZO GRADÍN 1990: 248-254.

¹³ ll. 1-2: Tal vai o meu amigo con amor que lh'eu dei / come cervo ferido de monteiro d'el rei. (COHEN 2003: 419)

¹⁴ ll. 20-21: Pois mi assi faz o voss'amor ir já / como vai cervo lançad' a fugir. (FINAZZI-AGRÒ 1979: 86-92)

choice at the rhyme: “ervas” and “cervas” (herbs and hinds).¹⁵ Note here the dialogue between tradition and innovation that marked the production in the court of Denis (BELTRÁN 2007a: 177-193; GONÇALVES 1992: 146-155).

As for the reference to the “white breast” of the beloved, research has already discarded the hypothesis that we are facing a Semitic tradition, pointing, on the contrary, to the presence of the white-colour theme as an important element of the *descriptio puellae* in the Occitan troubadour lyric, in the *Ars Versificatoria* of Matthieu de Vendôme and in the *Poetria Nova* of Geoffrey de Vinsauf, as well as in the later peninsular poetry of Alfonso Álvarez de Villasandino (ALVAR 2008). On the other hand, a survey of the instances of the “white breast” theme in Andalusian lyric leads us to record the appearance of an expression that is not identical, but similar: *colo albo*, in two *kharjas*: A 14 and H 11 (CORRIENTE 1997: 285, 314-315),¹⁶ although the term “breast”, alone, appears in other *kharjas* with a strong erotic connotation (CORRIENTE 1997: 166).

Finally, the simile of the rose that emerges among the herbs raises the question of the occurrence of floral images in the Galician-Portuguese tradition and in biblical texts. This type of comparison is a favoured element of *descriptio puellae* between 1300 and 1400, both in Galician-Portuguese and Castilian (LORENZO GRADÍN 1990: 230-232; BELTRÁN 2007b: 116). In the case of the images present in the biblical texts, specifically in the Song of Songs, the Hebrew terms used in the *Septuaginta*, such as ἄνθος and κρίνον,¹⁷ and in the latin *Vulgata* such as *flos* and *lilium*,¹⁸ are not classified as corresponding to “rose”, although this term appears in some later Latin translations. Therefore, we should recognise that we are dealing with vernacular imagery, although Vidal, certainly familiar with the Hebrew Bible, could possibly have chosen to use –in romance language– a flower more in line with Western tradition.¹⁹

We cannot, therefore, claim that the elements examined so far are linked, indubitably, to a Semitic tradition –Hebrew or Arabic. On the contrary, they seem to point to extensive and fairly contemporary knowledge of Peninsular and perhaps even Occitan lyric. What, then, would have led scholars to hypothesise about exotic sources? I think it is possible to justify this assumption on the basis of the enlightening information provided by the rubric that precedes the first *cantiga*:

¹⁵ ll. 1-2: Enas verdes *ervas* / vi anda-las *cervas*. (COHEN 2003: 422)

¹⁶ White neck: *Qóllo albo*: «¡Madre, qué amado! Bajo la melenilla rubita, aquel cuello blanco y la boquita rojita»; *kól albo*: «Como prenda tenedme el collar, madre, en depósito a mi disposición; cuello blanco quiere ver mi señor, no quiere joyas». I stand by the Castilian version of CORRIENTE.

¹⁷ *Cant.* 2.1 ἐγὼ ἄνθος τοῦ πεδίου, κρίνον τῶν κοιλάδων. 2.2 Ὡς κρίνον ἐν μέσῳ ἀκανθῶν. <https://www.bibliacatolica.com.br/septuaginta/cantico-dos-canticos/2/> [2020/12/06]

¹⁸ 2.1 «ego flos campi et lilium convalium». 2.2 «Sicut lilium inter spinas». <https://www.bibliacatolica.com.br/vulgata-latina/canticum-canticorum/2/> [2020/12/06]

¹⁹ It will be necessary to study the medieval translations of the Bible in this specific case. Regarding the versions and allegorical exegeses of the *Song of Songs* in the medieval context, cf. MIRANDA 2020: 15-22.

*Estas duas cantigas fez // hũu judeu d'Elvas que avia nome Vidal, // por amor d'ũa judia de ssa vila // que avia nome Dona. E pero que é ben // que o ben que home faz // sse non perça, mandamo-lo screver: e non sabemus // mais dela[s] mais de duas cobras, // a primeira cobra de cada hũa.*²⁰

[These two *cantigas* were made by a Jew from Elvas whose name was Vidal, for the love of a Jewess of his village whose name was Dona. And since it is only right that the good that a man does is not lost, we ordered them copied: and we know of them no more than two strophes, the first strophe of each one.]

The characterisation of the troubadour and his beloved as Jews, an absolutely unparalleled instance in the set of Galician-Portuguese attributive and explanatory rubrics, has probably encouraged scholars to interpret these not-so-common images as coming from the particular culture of the minority group to which the poet belonged.²¹ We will return to this rubric below.

However, what should really draw our attention in the *cantigas* composed by a Jew and accepted in the general Galician-Portuguese compilation, are the features that adhere to the canon and not the other way around. There is only one other Jewish poet whose production was included in the collection: Dom Josep, who replies in a *tenção*, a dispute dialogue, (B 1315, V 940²²) to Estêvão da Guarda, scribe of king Denis (PIZARRO 1997: 1128), and therefore a contemporary of Vidal (OLIVEIRA 1994: 376-377). However, we have no evidence of any other of his compositions in Galician-Portuguese, nor do we have any historical-biographical information about him (INDINI, M. L. 1993a: 366; GONZÁLEZ 2017: 307-320).

Both Vidal and D. Josep composed in vernacular, in genres favored at court. It is worth mentioning here that another Jewish poet who frequented the Court of Alfonso X, Todros Abulafia, only wrote in Hebrew, despite being exposed, at least to a certain extent, to the influence of vernacular lyric production, (BAER 1981: 98-110; DORON 1986: 152; DORON 2000; COLE 2007; KIRSCHBAUM 2011; VIEIRA 2015). And that was the norm for Jewish poets living in medieval Christian communities, inside or outside the Iberian Peninsula, with rare exceptions (VIEIRA 2015).²³

²⁰ PICCHIO 1979: 85. Cf. also the edition by LAGARES 2000: 174. On the peculiarity of the rubric put before Vidal's *cantigas* within the corpus of rubrics that reached the compilers at a late stage, cf. LORENZO GRADÍN 2003: 120.

²¹ It is also worth noting that only since the second half of the last century has knowledge of medieval Arabic and Hebrew lyric poetry received greater attention, including the translation of sources into Western languages. For an analysis of this trajectory, especially for the English language, see ROSEN, YASSIF 2002.

²² LAPA 1995: 95-96.

²³ In the European context, a case to some extent comparable to that of Vidal, as far as acceptance as a poet in the vernacular is concerned, is offered to us by Immanuele da Roma (also known as Immanuel Romano, 'Immanu'el ben Selomoh, "Immanu'el ha-Romi, Manoello Giudeo, Manoello Romano, Emanuele Romano) (c. 1268-c. 1328-1367), who composed in Hebrew his main work, the *Mahberòt*, where one identifies, besides the influence of Arabic and Hebrew literature, also that of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In addition to adapting the form of the Italian sonnet into Hebrew, he also composed poetry in Italian, such as the *frottola Bisbidis* and sonnets that were highly regarded, as attested to by their poetic dialogue with Bosone da Gubbio on the occasion of Dante's death (BEKKUM 2007; GENOT-BISMUTH 1991; ALFIE 1998; https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/immanuel-da-roma_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ [2020/12/06]).

In other words, Vidal distinguishes himself from the vast majority of Hebrew poets who lived in the Christian West in the 13th and 14th centuries by seeking to integrate his poetic work within the framework of the most prestigious model within the production of the dominant group. Thus, he writes in Galician-Portuguese two love *cantigas*, which develop the predominant themes of the genre: the amorous suffering that leads to death, and the praise of the lady. In addition, he uses imagery adopted in the most recent and innovative compositions of the genre. As a result, he manages to have his songs favourably received by the compiler, who, in the rubric, justifies his endorsement precisely on the criterion of quality: *e pero que é ben que o ben que home faz sse non perça, mandamo-lo screver* (And since it is only right that the good that a man does is not lost, we ordered them copied). How can this literary inclusion be reconciled with the brand of social exclusion that the rubric itself made a point of recording? To answer this question, one must consider the broader context of relations between religious and ethnic minorities in the medieval Iberian Peninsula.

From the second half of the 20th century, it became impossible to discuss such relations without mentioning the debate on the concept of *convivencia*, initiated by Américo Castro in 1948, contested by Sánchez-Albornoz in 1956 and continued since then, until today, in the peninsular and international sphere (CASTRO 1948; SÁNCHEZ ALBORNOZ 1956; GLICK 1979: 6-13; GLICK, PI-SUNYER 1969: 138-153; ROMANO 1995; NIRENBERG 1996: 8-10; NOVIKOFF 2005; MANZANO MORENO 2013; SZPIECH 2013). The term, used in a vague and poetic way by Castro, indicated stability, mutual dependence, cooperation and coexistence (SZPIECH 2013: 138), and has been accepted by most of the later historians in this sense of harmonious coexistence. However, a review of Castro's theory has shown that the so-called *convivencia* can be more appropriately understood as coexistence founded, in part, on the systemic violence dominant in that society (SZPIECH 2013: 138; NIRENBERG 1996: 9). Glick and Pi-Sunyer note that the central phenomenon of medieval Spain is the bilateral encounter and adjustment of two distinct cultures –Muslim and Christian– with a third semi-autonomous entity, the Jewish culture, in a process anthropologists call “acculturation”. The circumstances of the medieval Hispanic culture would actually involve a state of «stabilized pluralism – a stage of arrested fusion or incomplete assimilation» (GLICK, PI-SUNYER (1969: 153). The conditions for the development of this stabilized pluralism are identified in particular places and times, specifically in the peninsular urban environment of the 13th and 14th centuries.

Of course, a historical-anthropological analysis not only exceeds my competence, but also goes beyond the narrow limits of the particular event we are dealing with here. However, such analysis provides an instrument that helps us interpret the dual and conflicting process inscribed in the episode of the transcription of Vidal's *cantigas* in the Galician-Portuguese compilation.

On the one hand, we see the obvious Vidal's impulse toward acculturation / assimilation when he composes his *cantigas* in the language of the dominant literature,²⁴ in its most prestigious genre,

²⁴ Jewish poets, as already mentioned, generally wrote in Hebrew; Glick e Pi-Sunyer (1969: 150) recall that language was, in certain communities (such as the Moriscos of Valencia), as important an element in maintaining cultural boundaries as religion.

and according to its canon. He incorporates some traditional aspects and also others that, though not totally outlandish, are innovative enough to cause a certain impact in the context of the lyric production of the first half of the fourteenth century.²⁵

On the other hand, the ambiguous reaction of the compiler is striking: he certainly expresses in unequivocal terms his admiration for the *cantigas* he “orders to copy”. However, he does not refrain from “branding” either its author or the lady for whom the compositions are intended as belonging to a minority: the rubric explicitly states (see above) that Vidal is a “Jew from Elvas” and that he composed the songs “for the love of a Jewess of his village whose name was Dona”. Therefore, this sign of acculturation or eventual assimilation (BORSTNER, GARTNER 2007) provided by the recognition of the quality of Vidal’s compositions, is constrained by two important barriers used to define and segregate the communities that coexisted in Portuguese society at the time. The first and most encompassing barrier is religion, together with its corresponding and distinctive practices, as read in the relevant texts found in the canonical sources and in the *Seventh Partida* of Afonso X, where the Jewish community is described.²⁶ Obviously, we cannot categorically state that the Portuguese Jews of the time constituted a separate social group solely and exclusively because of religion, but rather that religion was the defining element of the group as such. The second barrier, arising from the first, is related to sex. The prohibition of sexual contact, before or after marriage, between persons of different religion was common among both Jews and Christians (NIRENBERG 2002). Afonso X, referring explicitly to Jews who dare to have sexual relations with Christian women, states that they must pay with their lives for it (CARPENTER 1986: 92-93, *SP* 7.24.9).

Therefore, in the case of our rubric the compiler makes it clear that the assimilation undertaken by Vidal –and satisfactorily achieved, in poetic terms– finds in real life, however, two insurmountable barriers that he does not hesitate to highlight, in order to remove any doubts from the readers: the poet, although poetically expresses himself as a Christian, is nonetheless a Jew, which puts him at the margin of the poet community whose Christianity, of course, it is not necessary to mention; and his lady can only join the ranks of the “ladies” mentioned in love *cantigas* because she, too, is admittedly a Jew, lest someone think that the Jew from Elvas had dared to sing to a Christian woman!

²⁵ In this regard, it is worth recalling what Glick and Pi-Sunyer (1969: 140) say about the effects of acculturation as the main catalyst of cultural creativity, responsible for new mental constructs or, in relevant cases, transformative technological influences.

²⁶ «Judio es dicho aquel que cree e tiene la lei de Moysen segun suena la letra della e que se circuncida e faze las otras cosas que manda essa su lei» (*SP* 7.24.1). (CARPENTER 1986: 59-60).

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