

MELISELDA

The Sabbatean Metamorphosis of a Medieval Romance

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The romance is known as a poetic genre that recounts legendary histories of heroism of the feudal aristocracy including general themes of romantic love. It is an accepted fact that the romance was born and developed in the mid-12th century in France and spread to other parts of Europe including the Iberian Peninsula.



Besides its influence on the evolution of European literary creativity, the romance occupies an important place in Iberian folklore. This folklore constitutes at the same time an integral part of the

folklore of Jewish exiles from that peninsula. For five centuries it has been one of the main pillars of their popular literature that contributed to the preservation of their Sephardic identity.

In this article we shall deal with the adventurous tale of a Sephardic romance known in its various forms as *Melisenda* in Spain, *Beliselda*, *Melisenda*, *Bellisent* in France, *Benisela*, *Belisera*, *Felimina* amongst Maghreb Jewry, and *Meliselda* amongst Ottoman Jews. A French ballad of the Carolingian period known as *Melisenda Insomne* is probably the first known version of the

romance that, according to researchers, also was probably the main source of all its future variations existing in the folklore of the Sephardic communities in the Eastern Mediterranean and in North Africa.

One of the Castilian versions of the story is the following:

“Todos estan durmiendo, ala eksepsyon de Melisenda, la ija del Imperante, ke se esta sin reposo meneyando i volviendo en su kama, achakes de su amor por el Konte Ayueles / Salta de su kama, komo la pario su madre, se viste una kamiza (alcandora) delgada para tomar konseja. Una vieja noble, ke kedo selibatera la insinua de gozar de su manseves. / Melisenda no tiene menester de otras palavras para korrer al palasio del Konte Ayueles / En kamino enkontra al Ferdinandos, el paje de su padre, ke la menasa de avizar a su padre. Melisenda le demanda de emprestar la su punal para matar a los perros ke no la deshan durmir, kon el kual mata a Ferdinandos i korre jovialamente en su kamino. / Avre kon enkantes las puertas de la kamareta onde el konte Ayueles durme i amata las siete torshas ke la akularan, en despertando el konte. / Ala pregunta del konte ke kere saver ken esta en la kamareta, pretende ke es una Moriska, ke arivo por la mar. / El konte proklama ke aviya jurado de echar se kon kual mujer ke demandara sus favores aparte de Melisenda, la ija del Imperante i se echan endjuntos ala kama. / Ala demaniana, el konte dekuvre la verdad i kon repentimiento se adresa ala piedad del Imperante, ke los perdona...”⁽¹⁾

The Sabbatean Counterpart

In the 15th century, the romances were recited for all classes of people in Spain and Portugal. Thus, the first generation of Sephardic exiles from those countries brought with them a large treasury of romances, which were handed down through the centuries and were preserved until today.

Transmitted orally from generation to generation, the text and vocabulary were transformed. Parts of the texts disappeared and new parts were added. However, the basic themes and forms were mainly conserved. Five different versions relating to the story of the original romance of Melisenda have been identified in Sephardic folklore.⁽²⁾ One of these, collected amongst the Jewish Balkan communities is directly related to our subject:

*Esta noche mis kavalyeros
durmi kon una donzella,
ke en los dias de mis dias,
no topi otra komo eya.
Meliselda tiene por nombre,
Meliselda galana i bella
A la abashada de un rio
i a la suvida de un varo,
enkontri kon Meliselda,
la ija del imperante,
ke venia de los banios,
de los banios de la mare,
de lavarse i entrenzarse,
i de mudarse una kamiza.*

*Ansi traiya su kuerpo
komo la inieve sin pizare;
las sus karas koloradas,
komo la leche i la sangre;
las sus kaveyikos ruvios
paresen sirma de labrare;
la su frente relusiente
parese espejo de mirares;
la su nariz empendolada,
pendolika de notares;
los sus mushos korolados,
merdjanikos de filares;
los sus dientes chikitikos,
perlas d'enfilares.^(2, 3)*

(This night my cavaliers / I slept with a maiden / whose equal I have never met / in the best years of my life. / Meliselda is her name, / Meliselda elegant and beautiful / along the course of a river / and the slope of a hill / I met Meliselda, / daughter of the emperor / who came to bathe herself / in the waters of the sea / to bathe herself and refresh herself, / and to change her garment. / Thus she brings her body / pure as snow / with her rosy face, / like milk and blood; / her russet hair / like threads of gold; / her gleaming forehead / like a mirror; / her nose uplifted / like the quill of a scribe; / her red lips, / like the coral; / and her little teeth, / like pearls.)

It was on a Sabbath day in the month of December in the year 1655, when Sabbetay Sevi, after reciting the romance of *Meliselda* in the Portuguese synagogue of Izmir, declared himself to be the Messiah.⁽⁴⁾ Since then, this romance was included into the liturgy of the community of the Sabbatean believers.⁽⁵⁾

The Ottoman Experience in the Perspective of Jewish and Iberian Heritage

In our opinion, the adoption of the *Meliselda* romance into the liturgy of the Sabbatean believers may be clarified by investigating the reasons for using

themes of female eroticism in the religious and mystical traditions of the Ottoman Jews. Three sources appear to be the basis of this phenomenon. Firstly, the place of female and erotic symbolism in Jewish heritage. Secondly, the influence of Iberian heritage. Thirdly, the link with Ottoman mystical music.

For generations, many erotic songs were composed under the influence of the *Song of Songs* in the Bible. The content of this work is entirely secular and is inspired by the praise of erotic pleasure. However, the *Song of Songs* has been interpreted as the expression of God's love for the people of Israel and was included in Jewish liturgy.

In ancient times, the image of a feminine deity in the land of Canaan was a well-known phenomenon. This cult was part of the common heritage of the Hebrews and of those people who lived in the region. In time this cult disappeared from the religious beliefs of the Hebrews. However, another conception of female divinity appeared in their liturgy. Known as the *Shechina*, this concept was the expression of the divine presence in its feminine form and was conceived as the expression of God's love towards the Jewish people. This divinity was considered in kabbalistic literature as an emanation of God, which accompanied the Jewish people and kept watch over it.⁽⁶⁾



In Sabbatean belief, the image of *Meliselda* represents the earthly emanation of God, and the conception of union with the *Shechina* is considered as the event leading towards redemption. In a collection of Sabbatean liturgical hymns, a version of *Meliselda* appears together with poems about the Shechina presented in a mystical context.^(5, 7)

Yakov Frank, the leader of the Sabbatean movement in Poland, has also expressed his views on the subject:

“...In a dream...I saw the goddess who came to me appearing as a beautiful virgin... ‘Be united from now on and heed me; perhaps the salvation will come again’....”⁽⁸⁾

A study of the development process of the mystical and religious music of the Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire is also necessary in order to clarify this phenomenon.

We know that the Kabbalistic School in Safed under the guidance of Isaac Luria (1534-1572) was the principal source of mystical beliefs that developed among the Sephardim. Luria had adapted the Sephardic genre to the religious liturgy. We know that he composed many mystical and religious songs.⁽⁹⁾ Israel Nadjara (c.1555-c.1625) who was born and lived in Safed is considered the founder and most important figure of Kabbalistic music. His father, Moshe, was one of the pupils of Luria. The songs of Israel Nadjara, known under the title of *Zemiroth Israel* (Songs of Israel) published in Safed, Salonica and in Venice in the 16th century, had an important and widespread influence among the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean littoral.

Two peculiarities derived from Ottoman music mark the songs of Israel Nadjara. Firstly, he has adopted the forms of the *makam* and *usul*, which are at the basis of Turkish music.⁽¹⁰⁾ Secondly, he used the love themes that characterize Ottoman mystical literature.⁽¹¹⁾

Hayim Vital, the pupil of Luria, describes the comportment of Israel Nadjara:

“This person had the habit of singing with his arms bare. He became drunk while drinking and he ate and sang at the top of his voice.”⁽¹²⁾

This kind of behavior reminds one of the ritualistic customs of mystic Ottoman sects, which used to listen to music and drink in order to attain a state of ecstasy. Probably, this ritual influenced not only the manner in which Nadjara comported himself but more especially the tolerance and the approbation felt towards Nadjara and his works.

The poetical form – up to four metric lines in each stanza – used by Nadjara were adapted to the songs of the Ottoman Jews entitled *maftirim*.⁽¹²⁾ Similarly, the influence of the Turkish musical form used by Nadjara was so great that it

still continues to be used in our time and forms one of the most valuable creations of Turkish Sephardic religious music.

It is reported that the literature of love romances in medieval Spain are noted for their eroticism in which women, conscious of their sexuality, function like men and lead the action of the poems.⁽¹³⁾ On the other hand, female eroticism representing divine love is reported to be a well-known phenomenon in Spain of that period. In this context, popular and secular songs were used as liturgical hymns among the Christians. Among these songs known as “*a lo divino*” we find “*la morenika ke te pones*” which was also the probable source of a song composed by Nadjara.⁽¹⁴⁾

During the Arabian presence in the Peninsula, the Ibero-Sephardim became accustomed to Arabic music. This music is set to the same metrical poetry as Ottoman music. This is probably the principal reason for the adoption of this music by the Sephardic refugees. Rabbi Shelomo Mazaltov, during the same period as Israel Nadjara, introduced Ottoman melodies for Hebrew religious hymns and Judeo-Spanish songs. A musical genre known as *piyutim* that was a repertory of religious hymns and poetic songs was inspired by the Arab-Andalusian musical tradition of medieval Spain and was imported to the Ottoman Empire. This musical genre constituted the basis of the Ottoman-Jewish musical tradition known as *maftirim* that was developed in Edirne and is used until our own day. The texts of these hymns, modeled on the hymns of Nadjara, are also evident in the traditional Ottoman mystical religious hymns known as *ilahi*.

This was the special characteristic of all Jewish religious music, which developed in the Ottoman Empire. Classical Turkish music and traditional Turkish-Jewish music were part of the same Ottoman musical heritage. Throughout its history many Jewish composers and singers, who were active at the same time in Ottoman and Jewish circles, contributed in an important way to the formation of this heritage. For example, let us mention the name of Ishak Fresko Romano (1761-1808) who was the musical teacher of Sultan Selim III.⁽¹⁵⁾

Ottoman music was considerably influenced by the mystical music of the dervishes known for their humanistic and liberal attitude. Many composers, singers and musicians who belonged to the non-Muslim minorities contributed actively to the development of this music. Abraham Danon clearly mentions the major role of Ottoman mystical music in the development of the liturgical music of the Ottoman Sephardim.⁽¹⁶⁾

According to Galante, the composer Abraham Levi Hayat, known as Misirli, studied under teachers belonging to the dervish order such as Hodja Karami Efendi.⁽¹⁷⁾ Similarly, Rabbi Avram Mandil (1820-1883) known as Haham Aga used to sing in a *tekke*⁽¹⁸⁾ of the Mevlevi mystical order in Galata, Istanbul and was the teacher of the mystic Sheikh Ayatullah.⁽¹⁹⁾

Moshe Vital testifies that there is proof of strong links between the Jewish musicians in Turkey and the dervishes:

"All the cantors I have mentioned [Shem-Tov Chikiar, Salomon and Isaac Algazi, Eliyahu Hacohen] were strongly influenced by the dervishes' songs. The [dervishes] is a sect of religious Muslims in Turkey, with a long history of great religious influence, whose worship rituals consist of singing and instrumental performance that wonders the listeners' ear, and also by dancing for an hour or two. And what dances?! Whirling rhythmically on the two toes of their feet without losing their equilibrium. One of these sects, called the Mevlevi Dervishes, has amidst its ranks individuals who know how to sing and play wonderfully and exceptionally. I remember that as a child, I used to run away from home every Friday at noon (when I was not at school) to watch the dervishes' ceremonies at their mosques, and hear their beautiful melodies... Frequently, other Jewish music-lovers from Izmir used to attend [these ceremonies] to listen and enjoy... Each dervish knew not only how to sing properly, but also the art of Muslim song to its perfection. He would know the makams perfectly and his throat was created only for ornamented [singing]. From them our cantors learned their beautiful melodies and introduced them into our synagogues."⁽²⁰⁾

A final aspect in the study of the Sabbatean metamorphosis of the Meliselda romance is the possibility of a link between the feminine eroticism of Jewish mysticism and the eroticism of Ottoman mystical artistic creativity.^(21, 22) Eroticism in general and mystical love in particular in Ottoman poetry generally finds its expression in a masculine figure, not always clearly differentiated from feminine attributes.

Even if they are not openly expressed, the feminine erotic elements of this image may exist in its contextual implications. If we realize that erotic-mystic love cannot be isolated from eroticism in general and from its feminine features, the existence of this link in its non-verbal and symbolic form cannot be denied.

In our view, all these components - the Jewish, Ibero-Arab, Ibero-Christian, Sephardic and Ottoman aspects - transmit an authentic and unique character to the integration of the Meliselda romance within the context of Sabbatean lore. These aspects reflect at the same time the relevance of a multi-dimensional approach in the study of the Sephardic heritage.

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- (1) Armistead, Samuel G., "Melisenda and the Chansons de Gestes", *La Corónica*, 27, 1 (Fall, 1998), 55-68.
 - (2) These versions, including the one that appears in the text are mentioned by Manuel Alvar (Lopez), who attributes them to Jews of Salonica, Turkia, Tetuan, Alcazarquivir and the Balkans. See Manuel Alvar, *Poesia Tradicional de los Judios Españoles*, (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1966), 24-28.
 - (3) Damian, Alonso Garcia, *Literatura Oral del Ladino, Entre los Sefardíes de Oriente a Través del Romancero*, (Madrid: 1970), 85.
 - (4) This was reported by Thomas Coenen, who was a witness to the events linked to the declaration of Sevi's Messianism. However, the version of the romance is slightly different, the visage of Melisalda being described "shining as a sword" (*briando como una espada*); Only the first six verses appear in the text, indicating that this romance has a continuation. See Thomas Coenen, *Tziptot Shav shel ha-Yehudim kefi sheHitgalu be Dmutu shel Shabtai Zvi* [False Hopes of the Jews as Manifested in the Image of Shabtai Zvi], (Jerusalem: Dinur Center, 1998), 56.
 - (5) A version of the romance appears in a manuscript of songs and paeans belonging to the community of Sabbatean believers. See Moshe Attias, *Kansoniero Yehudi-Sefaradi*, (Yerushalayim: Hamahon leHeker Yahadut Saloniki, 1972), 356-357.
 - (6) Patai, Raphael, "The Goddess Cult in the Hebrew-Jewish Religion" in *On Jewish Folklore*, (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 56-68.
 - (7) See *Shirot veTishbohot shel haShabtayim* [Songs and Paeans of the Sabbateans], Copied and Translated from a manuscript by Moshe Attias, Remarks and Commentaries by Gershom Scholem, Preface by Yitzhak Ben Zvi, (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1948).
 - (8) Lenowitz, Harris; Sokolow, Nahum, Yacob Frank, ca 1726-1791, (Berkley, CA: Tree/Tzaddikim, 1978), 25.
 - (9) "Luria, Yithak Ben Shlomo", *HaAntsiklopedia haIsraelit haKlalit*, II, (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990), 309.
 - (10) Seroussi, Edwin "The Turkish *Makam* in the Musical Culture of the Ottoman Jews: Sources and Exemples" in *Israel Studies in Musicology*, 1991, V, 50-52.
 - (11) Yahalom, Yossef, "Shirat haKabala vahaReka haTurki Shela" [Kabbalistic Songs and their Turkish Background] in *Dimuy*, V-VI, (1993), 88-96.
 - (12) Seroussi, Edwin "Rabi Israel Nadjara Meatzev Zmirat haKodesh Aharey Girush Sefarad" [Rabi Israel Nadjara, the Composer of Sacred Songs after the Expulsion from Spain] in *Asufot*, IV, Jerusalem, 1990, 285-310. The original melodies of Nadjara's songs have not retained their identity across the centuries and were altered in the course of time.
 - (13) Deyermond, Alan, "La Sexualidad en la Épica Medieval Española", *Nueva Revista de*

- Filología Hispánica*, XXXVI, 2, (1988): 767-86.
- (14) Reported by Seroussi, *op. cit.*, Rabi Israel Nadjara ... 299-300.
 - (15) Anıl, Avni, *Anılar ve Belgelerle Musikimiz Sözlüğü* [The Dictionary of our Music through Memories and Documents], I, (Istanbul: Doyuran, 1981). Quoted by Pamela J. Dorn Sezgin, “Hakhamim, Dervishes, and Court Singers: the Relationship of Ottoman Jewish Music to Classical Turkish Music” in *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, Ed. Avigdor Levy, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), 576-75.
 - (16) Danon, Abraham, “Recueil de Romances Judéo-Espagnoles Chantées en Turquie”, in *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 32; 33 (Paris: 1896)102-23, 263-75; 33, 255-68. Quoted by Edwin Seroussi, *Mizimrat Qedem, The Life and Music of R. Isaac Algazi from Turkey*, (Jerusalem: Renanot, 1989), 33.
 - (17) Galante, Avram, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, II, (Istanbul: Isis, 1985), 114-115. Quoted by Edwin Seroussi, *op. cit.*, *Mizimrat...*, 1989), 33.
 - (18) Turkish word for the gathering place of *dervishes*. This *tekke* is known as *Galata Galip Dede Mevlevihanesi*.
 - (19) Galante, Avram, *Türkler ve Yahudiler: Tarihi ve Siyasi Tetkik* [Jews and Turks: a Historical and Political Study, (Istanbul: Tan, 1947). Quoted by Dorn Sezgin, *op. cit.* The use of the title *Aga* denotes clearly the affiliation of Rabbi Mandil to this order.
 - (20) Vital, Moshe, “Hartzaah beVeida haRishona shel haHazanim vahaMenatzhim beEretz Israel beYerushalayim” [Lecture given at the First Conference of Cantors and Conductors in Israel, Jerusalem], June, 1939, 1-4. Quoted by Edwin Seroussi, *op. cit.*, *Mizimrat...*, 33-34.
 - (21) Tietze, Andreas and Yahalom, Joseph, “Ottoman Melodies Hebrew Hymns, A 16th Century Cross-Cultural Adventure”, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Hungarica*, Ed. Györg Hazai, (Budapest: Akademia Kiado, 1995), 46-201.
 - (22) Çobanoğlu, Özkul, “Osmanlı Devleti’inde Kültürel Etkileşim Bağlamında Türk Edebiyatı ve Musevi Kültürü” [Turkish Literature and Jewish Culture in the Context of Interactive Culture in the Ottoman Empire], *Tiryaki*, VI, 42, (Istanbul: 2000), 33-36.
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