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Contents

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Piety on Stage: Popular Drama and the Public Life of Early Modern Jewish Confraternities

Abstract

In the summer of 1720, in the ghetto of Ferrara, the members of the devotional confraternity *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* (Daily Renewal) organized and staged public readings of Moses Zacuto's dramatic poem *Tofteh ʿarukh* (Hell Arrayed). The readings, which were held after midnight and included musical accompaniment by an instrumental ensemble, afforded the opportunity for the entire community to channel religious and aesthetical impulses into a public ritual of devotion, while supplying the members of the confraternity a platform from which to popularize both their rites and the underlying learned culture. The Ferrara readings were by no means an isolated phenomenon. Marking the observance of liturgical feasts with the organization of sometimes elaborate events, in which ritual enactment and entertainment were combined, was a staple of Jewish confraternal life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy. These performances, most of which were at the semi-professional or amateur level, went from dramatized readings to cantatas, to small oratorios, and often involved purportedly composed Hebrew poetry of considerable literary merit. By reconstructing the commissioning, performance, and audience reception of some of these works, this essay explores the ways in which devotional confraternities and akin groups used dramatic and music poetry to promote confraternal rituals and gain new visibility, thus also contributing to reshape the public sphere inside the ghetto.

Keywords: Early Modern Italy; Jewish devotional confraternities; Hebrew poetry for music; Hebrew dramatic poetry; Immanuel Frances; Moses Zacuto

1. Nocturnal Rituals

It is an August night in the ghetto of Ferrara, in 1720. The hour is past midnight and people are gathering again to attend the dramatized reading of *Tofteh ʿarukh* (Hell Arrayed), the dark, wildly imaginative poem on the afterlife fate of the wicked by the late Mantuan rabbi Moses Zacuto (c. 1625-1697).[1] For three weeks, between the fast days of the seventeenth of Tam-

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[1] A renowned follower and practitioner of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, a revered legal scholar and an extraordinarily accomplished poet in Hebrew, Moses ben Mordecai Zacuto was born in Amsterdam in the first decade of the 17th century into a fam-

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muz and the ninth of Av (two penitential holidays commemorating the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem by the Romans), the members of the local confraternity of watchers, called *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* (Daily Renewal), have been holding the readings daily, night after night, in front of an engrossed audience, spellbound by Zacuto's entrancing verse. At one time beguiled and horrified by the poem's morbid subject, the assembled crowd are not just passive spectators of a performance; rather, they actively participate in its production: together with the members of the confraternity, they chant in choir the hymns at the end of the reading, thus amplifying the auditory effect of the performance while also actualizing its liturgical purpose. Night after night, the audience is transported into the tenebrous world of Zacuto's poem: they stand at the deathbed of the unfortunate protagonist witnessing the fatal moment of his demise, they feel the claustrophobic enclosure of the tomb and the rotting and eating of the decaying flesh, they contemplate the aberrant landscape of hell, in which an indistinct mass of men, women, and children are enduring gruesome physical torments at the hands of a hoard of monstrous demons. Like the poem's dead protagonist, they are been judged and found guilty, and in view of their sins, embark upon an hallucinatory descent through the seven pits of hell, until they reach the floor of the deepest one – a dark and filthy receptacle into which all the uncleanness of the upper pits trickles down. From the depths of hell, looking up, they catch a brief glimpse of the divine light radiating from heaven; admonished to recognize the theological truth of hell, they are eventually exhorted to repent before their earthly life reaches its end. As the poem's potent narration unfolds, the spectators gathered in the Ferrara ghetto are bound for an immersive and transporting experience, in which the familiar space of the Jewish neighbourhood yields to the transcendent world of sin, punishment, and damnation conjured up by the reading. The nocturnal setting, whose atmosphere is intensified by the flickering light of torches and candles, and the musical accom-

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ily of *converso* descent. After a period spent studying at *yeshivas* in Eastern Europe, he moved to Italy, and from 1644 was active in Venice. In the city on the lagoon, he served the community in the ghetto as a rabbi, preacher, and teacher for almost thirty years, while at the same time working in the local Hebrew printing houses as editor and proofreader. Summoned by the Mantuan community to serve as their rabbi, in 1673, Zacuto moved to the city of the Gonzagas, where he remained until his death, in 1697. A vast bibliography has been devoted to his personality and intellectual production, which the following list does not intend to exhaust: Simonsohn 1977, 738-41; Schirmann 1979, 2.125–38; Pagis 1986, 28-33, 225-38; Benayahu 1988; Bonfil 2001; Bregman 2006; Bregman 2009. To Zacuto and some aspects of his work is devoted the monographic issue of *Peʿamim* 96 (2003). Further bibliography will be provided in the following of this article.

paniment of an instrumental ensemble, all enhance the theatrical dimension of the event. Accurately produced and collectively staged, this drama of piety allows the crowd in attendance to release religious feelings such as fear, contrition, and repentance, while channelling their aesthetic impulses into a public ritual of devotion. As for the members of the confraternity, the ceremonial setting of the readings gives them the opportunity to exert their agency by producing an event in which both the group's individual voice is being heard and the community's collective identity displayed. Altogether, the hosting of the performances provides the *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* a flexible, at one time approachable and solemn platform from which to popularize their rituals and the learned culture underlying them.

Marking the observance of liturgical feasts with the organization of sometimes elaborate events in which ritual enactment and entertainment were combined was a staple of Jewish confraternal life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy (Schirmann 1979, 2.68-74).[2] The Ferrara group *Ḥadashim la-bekarim*, which was behind the public readings of Zacuto's *Tofteh ʿarukh*, was dedicated to the study of Jewish traditional texts and the observance of special rituals such as the *Tikkun ḥazot* or Midnight Vigil, a nocturnal rite inspired by mystical theories, in emulation of customs originally established around mid-sixteenth century in the Jewish centres of Ottoman Palestine. In Italy the nocturnal watch, whose purpose was to commemorate the destruction of the ancient temple in Jerusalem and invoke its reestablishment, initially took form as a pre-dawn penitential ritual which rapidly spread among Jewish communities in northern and central Italy (Horowitz 1987; Horowitz 1989; Rivlin 1991, 152-5). Purportedly established groups, known as *Shomerim la-boker* (Morning Watchers) – a denomination denoting their focus of devotion – put together and customized, often with the involvement of local Hebrew *literati*, special collections of prayers and hymns to be recited during the gatherings of the groups (Benayahu 1998; Andreatta 2011). Some of these compilations were almost entirely made of newly or especially composed religious hymns, and most of them also integrated occasional poems in praise of the confraternity and its members. Their printing played a crucial role in disseminating Kabbalistic ideas and customs, as much as in tangibly advertising the sponsoring groups. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, societies of the kind *Shomerim la-boker* had become a staple of Jewish life inside the Italian ghettos, thus paving the way for the establishment of other confraternal groups, each with its own ritual specialization, such as those devoted to

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[2] Specifically, on the role of art music in the life of Jewish devotional confraternities, see Adler 1966, 55-64 (with regards to Mantua), 65-9 (Venice), 80-2 and 111-13 (Modena), 99-100 (Verona), 110-11 (Ancona).

the above mentioned Midnight Vigil, an observance by some considered a stricter course of devotion than the Morning Watch,[3] and of which Zacuto had been one of the earliest adepts and promoters.

The question whether the ritual practices observed within devotional confraternities and the underlying mystical theories were the exclusive domain of narrow groups of initiated Kabbalah adepts, or if instead these confraternities had a more popular character, is still a matter of debate. The first groups of watchers were mostly created at the initiative of local personalities who engaged in Kabbalistic studies or had some connection with the Palestinian centres, and it is likely that, on the example of the mystical sodalities active in the Land of Israel, also their Italian counterparts initially envisioned confraternal life as the realm of esoteric knowledge and practice, and as the dedicated setting of hard core elitist socialization revolving around Kabbalah (Fine 2003, 76-7). Over time, the proliferation of confraternities of this kind, sometimes with more than one group of watchers operating in the same town, and the customization of their nocturnal devotions brought about the popularization of the underlying mystical beliefs and, along with it, also their demystification. As scholarly research has underscored, something similar had happened also with the parallel penetration of Kabbalistic rituals into the realms of both domestic and synagogue observance (Hallamish 2000). As a matter of fact, by mid-seventeenth century, devotional confraternities seem to have lost their exclusive nature, while extant documentation attests to a change of strategy also in the public life of these groups. Since their inception, confraternities of the kind *Shomerim la-boker* had been providing members of the middle class an important setting for the expression of religiosity and a valuable frame in which to experience sociability. They also had been affording a unique opportunity for intellectual enrichment, in which like-minded individuals, particularly followers of Kabbalah, could keep abreast of new developments and trends, have access to state-of-the-art works in the field, contribute to their circulation and engage in scholarly debates (Tishby 1974). Now, in the attempt to achieve visibility and prominence within the communal structure, devotional confraternities started to widen the range of their ac-

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[3] A remarkable description of the rite of the vigil as practiced in the Venetian ghetto around mid-seventeenth century is included in the apologetic work *Derekh emunah: Via della fede mostrata a'gli ebrei* (*The Path of Faith Illustrated to the Jews*) by the Jewish convert to Catholicism Giulio Morosini (c. 1612-83), published in Rome in 1683. When describing the devotions observed by his former coreligionists, Morosini mentions two 'classes' of watchers: the first, whose rituals, as described by the author, coincide with the Midnight Vigil, are defined as "sommamente divoti" ("outmost pious"), while the second, whose members are said to belong to the *Shomerim la-boker* confraternity, are designated as "i meno divoti" ("the less pious") (Morosini 1683, 1.245).

tivities and to cater to members of the community at large by organizing public events of high visibility, not directly related to the specific rituals they observed, in which religious observance and entertainment were combined in a novel manner. In doing so, they came to carve for themselves a new, prominent role as cultural agents within the larger Jewish community. More generally, they also contributed to the reshaping of the public sphere inside the ghetto and to the redefinition of Jewish collective identity in reaction to the momentous social and intellectual transformations that were affecting Italian Jewry at the time. Thus, for example, the organization of nocturnal parades, where members of the confraternity marched through the alleys of the Jewish neighbourhood bearing torches on the occasion of liturgical feasts and communal celebrations, was not just an event of powerful visual impact and distinct theatrical nature; it was also a symbolic assertion of socio-political role and influence within a now more stratified and hierarchical Jewish community (Horowitz 2001), as well as an act of physical appropriation of the Jewish space inside the city.

2. Confraternal Entertainments

Celebrations held on the anniversary of foundation of a confraternity provided a similar opportunity. They typically included a banquet, but often afforded also the occasion for presenting the larger community with music performances and specially commissioned Hebrew poetry. Music composer Carlo Grossi (c. 1634-1688), who was active in Venice and the Veneto area in the second half of the seventeenth century, was commissioned the composition of a *Cantata Ebraïca in Dialogo [per] voce sola e choro* by a *Shomerim la-boker* confraternity (Grossi 1965; Adler 1966, 1.89-109; Pagis 1973, 206-7). From the Hebrew text of the *Cantata* (eight strophes of four hendecasyllables lines each with feminine rhyme ABBA), we learn that the piece had been commissioned on the occasion of the celebrations marking the annual anniversary of foundation of the confraternity, which, as it was the case for many of such groups, took place on the night of the Jewish holiday of *Hosha'na rabbah.* This festivity, which Italian Jews used to call the 'day of the great seal' (*yom ha-ḥotam ha-gadol*), marked the closure of the penitential period opening with the month of Elul and culminating on *Yom Kippur*, and hence also the final opportunity for obtaining divine forgiveness. Grossi, who was not a Hebraist, probably worked at the musical setting in collaboration with the anonymous author of the Hebrew text, who on his part was probably an affiliated of the sponsoring group. This circumstance seems to be confirmed by the punctual exposition of the purposes of the watch ("to wake with the dawn to pour [their] bitter soul in front of the Lord and thus

hasten the redemption and the coming of the Messiah" [4.2-3]),[4] and by the resort to technical terms and expressions typical of the language of the watchers, the same that we find deployed also in the paratextual elements of their prayer books, particularly prefaces and dedications. Grossi's *Cantata* was constructed, as its title indicates, as a dialogue between a solo voice ('a passerby') and a choir ('the companions [of the confraternity]'), allowing for the alternation of recitatives and *da capo* arias typical of this kind of musical compositions.[5] The relative simplicity of the choral parts indicates that they were likely intended for performance by a choir of amateur singers, probably the members of the confraternity themselves, whose musical capabilities, we may suppose, were less advanced. The solo parts, on the contrary, required the ability of a professional operatic soloist, probably somebody purposely hired for the event, whose performance, alternating with the parts sung by the confraternity's members, was meant to bespeak the group's standing and cultured refinement.

Acting, music, singing (and sometimes also dancing) were inextricably blended in early modern spectacles and public entertainments, and such phenomenon was particularly prominent in professional theatrical productions by Jews (Harrán 1999, 174-200). Although communal activities hosted by confraternal groups were mostly at the semi-professional or amateur level, they nevertheless tended to follow suit. Depending on the location and prestige of each group, the display of music and singing during confraternal events could reach the scale and elaborateness of full-fledged operatic productions, while the literary merit of the libretti, usually purportedly composed, was often considerable. The performance of the *cantata-quasi-oratorio Dio, Clemenza e Rigore* (*God, Mercy, and Severity*), a long and complex musical piece commissioned in the 1730s by the confraternity *Zerizim* (The Zealous) in Casale Monferrato, in the Piedmont region, was one of such highly performative affairs (Adler 1992). While the name of the composer has not reached us (two of the overture-symphonies, though, have been identified as belonging to contemporary Italian repertoire), we know that the initiative to perform was taken by Joseph Hayyim Chezighin, himself a member of the confraternity, who commissioned the libretto to S.H. Jarach, a refined Hebrew poet about whom, regrettably, no more is known besides his family name. From the extant documentation it emerges that the *cantata-quasi-oratorio* was performed at least twice

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[4] "*Lakum be-ashmoret we-lishpokh siaḥ la-El pedut yaḥish we-et mashiaḥ*".

[5] For a survey of the origins of this musical genre in seventeenth-century Italy and the different connotations the term cantata had among contemporary poets and composers, see Rau 1999, 226-62. The term, as used by Grossi, conforms to the Venetian music practice in which it designated the setting of a strophic poem to mixed vocal styles.

to mark the anniversary of the confraternity on the night of *Hosha'ana rabbah* in 1732 and 1733, and that Chezighin took part in the performances as *maestro di cappella* and harpsichord player. The theme of the piece aligns with the liturgical occasion it was meant for: on this last day of reckoning, a Defender (Mercy) and an Accuser (Severity) argue in front of the divine throne urging God respectively to forgive and punish mankind's sins. The dialectical confrontation between the two contenders, around which the poetic narrative revolves, and the ensuing dramatic tension are eventually resolved when God grants his final absolution, not without mentioning, in one breath, the merits "of those who study and together persevere" (*ha-lomdim ha-maḥazikim yaḥad*), an implicit allusion to the confraternity and its members. Built according to the typical pattern of Baroque cantatas with the prescribed alternation of arias and recitatives, a number of duets, and opening and concluding chorus parts, *Dio, Clemenza e Rigore* is a serious art music work the performance of which required trained singers and a professional music ensemble and whose source of inspiration lied in contemporary sacred opera. The libretti were the work of a poet who was familiar with the specific conventions of this musical genre and who, besides, was also endowed with a formidable command of the Hebrew language and the ability to put in place typical solutions of Baroque poetry. Thus, for example, the concluding duet between Mercy and Severity is built as a sequence of homophonic structures having though differing semantic meaning. The echo effect thus created not only provided the audience a remarkable auditory experience, it also engaged them intellectually and, in all probability, surprised and baffled them, while testing their discerning abilities and proficiency in the Hebrew language. The resort to echo structures, a "figure of excess" (Burgard 2019, 340-4) in which the doubling of the language instead of creating sameness of meaning disrupts it by introducing difference, was a favourite solution of contemporary poetry and, alongside metaphor, provided an apt arena in which Baroque poets could prove their mastery of artifice. Zacuto himself resorted to this sophisticated poetic device in several of his compositions, including *Tofteh 'arukh* (Bregman 2017).

This kind of productions, in which music was at the service of piety and entertainment was functional to rituality, allowed devotional confraternities to circumvent traditional rabbinical reservations against theatre, instrumental music, and recreation outside the few dedicated occasions in the Jewish calendar. This phenomenon also contributed to the rising popularity of sacred poetry for music among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jewish poets, most of them seemingly willing not to eschew from genres and forms of undisputable Christian origin. At the time when the musical society *Accademia degli Impediti* (Academy of the Hampered) was established in the ghetto of Venice – a feat whose remarkable occurrence can

be reconstructed thanks to the testimonies of some of its members (Harran 1998, 53-61) – the city had a thriving music scene and was becoming the place where opera, as we know it, would assume its defining nature as a mixture of theatrical and musical entertainment available to a large and variegated audience (Rosand 1990). But also in Florence, the city where opera, with its powerful combination of drama and singing, had moved, back at the end of the sixteenth century, its first steps, Jewish *literati* were writing Hebrew poetry for music and the commission of texts to be used as the basis of musical compositions falling into the definition of cantatas or small oratorios was actually a staple of local confraternal life. Sometime around mid-seventeenth century a *Shomerim la-boker* confraternity active in the Medici's city commissioned Hebrew poet Immanuel Frances (c. 1618 – after 1710)[6] a 'song for Purim' (*zimrat Purim*),[7] meant to be performed by soloists and a chorus with the accompaniment of instrumental music (Adler 1966, 85-7). As mentioned, the joyous festivity of Purim was the only occasion on the Jewish calendar during which most rabbis did not object to theatrical and musical spectacles being performed, and, on the contrary, even encouraged them (Schirmann 1979, 2.52-63). This holiday was also customarily marked by the organization of parties and banquets, events of inherently theatrical nature which provided the ideal settings for the recitation of poems, usually of comic or satirical character, and the performance of music. While the music scores to which Frances' composition was set have not been preserved, we can reconstruct the work's structure and the function of each of its sections thanks to the title the author indicated in Italian language and Hebrew letters for each part, as extant in his autograph collection of poems: the piece included four short arias (each of them termed arietta), three recitatives, and two parts for chorus. The alternation of freely rhymed verses of septenaries and hendecasyllables in the recitative parts and regularly rhymed strophic arias displays Frances' familiarity with the specific conventions governing the genre of the cantata in both its poetic and musical components.[8]

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[6] A native of Livorno, Immanuel Frances spent periods in Mantua, Florence, and North Africa, serving as rabbi, while authoring a sizeable and varied number of poetic compositions in Hebrew and the tractate of Hebrew poetics and rhetoric *Metek sefatayim* (Sweet Talk) (Rathaus 1995). He and his brother Jacob – himself an extraordinarily talented poet and one of the greatest representatives of Baroque poetry in Hebrew – were both vocal opponents of the growing influence of Kabbalah among Italian Jews and on these grounds suffered the ostracism of rabbis in Mantua and other Italian communities (Simonsohn 1977, 632-3).

[7] Frances 1932: no. 146 (*Hallel ʿim kol shirim*).

[8] Among Frances' compositions are three more poems for music that he wrote for the Jewish holidays of *Shemini ʿAẓeret*, the seventh day of Passover, and *Shavuʿot*. All

As we have seen, in this period, it was not unusual for Hebrew authors to write short-to-medium-length narrative pieces for music as a result of a specific commission, nor was it uncommon for them to collaborate with composers in the creation of musical works that included sung parts, or to write verse having in mind pre-existent melodies (Golden 2018). Among his fellow Hebrew poets, though, Frances was the one who most often wrote music poetry, a circumstance evidencing not just a high level of exposure to and familiarity with contemporary music, particularly sacred one, but also an unprecedented understanding of the inner adaptability of Christian poetical and musical genres to Hebrew paraliturgical verse and of the ensuing potentialities.[9] The significance of his production also lies in the remarkable number of such pieces he penned at the request of confraternities, since, being they the outcome of specific commissions, these compositions provide precious information on the nature, range of activities, and aesthetic expectations of the sponsoring groups. Thus, in 1670, Frances composed a dramatic poem at the request of a Florentine confraternity called *Anelanti* (in Hebrew, *Sho'afim,* 'those who yearn'),[10] for them to "perform with the cittern and the lute according to the art of music"[11] (Adler 1966, 83-5). Except for the sparse information we can glean from Frances' own introductory notes to the composition,[12] purpose and nature of the

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three built according to the same structure (two strophes of eight lines each alternating *settenari* and hendecasyllables according to the rhyme pattern ABBACCDD), they were all meant to be sung based on the melody of the Italian aria "Tra ferri chiusa e cinta [veggio]" (Frances 1932, nos. 140 [*Shurah kehillatekha*], 141 [*Eli ha-lo vakata*] and 142 [*Ẓuri terem hishma'ta*]; Schirmann 1979, 2.66-7).

[9] Preserved in Frances' autograph collection of poems is another remarkable Hebrew composition for music, in this case inspired by the biblical episode of the slaughter of the first borne, a hugely popular theme in contemporary Christian musical drama and the figurative arts (Frances 1932, no. 143 [*'Uri na Miẓrayim*]). As Frances' introductory note states, the text was composed "at the request of a synagogue cantor to be sung according to the melody of an utterly moving Italian lament" (Frances 1932, 158), whose title is unfortunately not mentioned. Frances' poem features a lamentation in which Pharaoh mourns the death of his own son, alongside all firstborn of Egypt. The piece was possibly meant to be performed during Passover communal celebrations.

[10] Frances 1932, no. 160 (*Wikkuaḥ shirah*).

[11] "*Mashmi'im kol 'ale 'ugav we-kinnor 'al pi ḥokhmat ha-muzikah*". Frances' remarks about the circumstance of the commission are included in the author's introductory note to the composition (Frances 1932, 195).

[12] According to Frances, the confraternity had its own seat, a house in which was hanging a shield with the group's motto and emblem, this last portraying the image of a tortoise intent to climb a mountain (Frances 1932, 203). It is worth mentioning that the iconography of a tortoise, in this case bearing on his shell a wind-filled sail, had been chosen to give visual expression to Cosimo de Medici's favorite maxim *festina lente* and could be seen in Palazzo Vecchio, as elsewhere in Florence.

commissioning group are not known. Nevertheless, based on the name of
the sodality, apparently alluding to messianic longing, and judging from
the character of some of the works they commissioned, it seems they func-
tioned as a sort of learned academy while also promoting some form of de-
votion of penitential nature. It is also clear that music and singing played
a prominent role in the life of the group and, as a consequence, also in the
communal events they hosted. The subject of Frances' dramatic poem, in
Hebrew titled 'Dispute in Verse' (*Wikkuaḥ shirah*), is the perennial battle
between good and evil inclination for establishing dominion over mankind.
In this case, the specific object of contention is the soul of a little child, who
is asked to contemplate, with the help of "the tube of observers, which in
Italian is called *canocchialo*"[13] the tortures inflicted to the damned in hell
and the beatitude of the just in paradise. Eventually, he will become per-
suaded of the necessity to follow the good inclination and reject the evil
one. Like in the case of Frances' *Song for Purim*, while the music scores
have not been preserved, we can nevertheless reconstruct the work's struc-
ture and the function of each of its sections thanks to Frances' introducto-
ry notes as extant in his autograph collection of poems. We thus infer that
the composition included arias, recitatives, and several duets. It also fea-
tured parts for three choruses: the first one, whose parts open and close the
piece, showcased the 'company of singers' (*kat ha-meshorerim*),[14] possibly
an allusion to the members of the confraternity, while the second and the
third represented, respectively, the wicked condemned to hell (*kat nedun-
im ba-gehinnom*), and the just dwelling in paradise (*kat noḥe ʿeden*). In their
part, the latter quote the confraternity's motto, *Ki im igaʿ agia* (No Reward
Without Labor), thus creating a cleverly constructed and at the same time
wishful allusion to the group's members and their acquired merits.[15]

[13] *Shefoferet shel ha-ẓofim (kaʾnokyaʾlo be-laʿaz)*. Notably, one of the first mentions
of Galileo's telescope in Hebrew literature.

[14] Frances' terminology seems to allude to the meaning of the term *meshorerim* in
seventeenth- and eighteenth-century synagogue practice, where it was used to indicate
an ensemble of two or three singers whose task was to support the performance of the
cantor, by chanting in unison or in parts, often according to improvisational singing
techniques. Quite common in Ashkenazic synagogue services, the presence of *meshore-
rim* is attested in Amsterdam in the first half of the seventeenth century and men-
tioned, although with the alternate name of *mesayyeʿim* (backing [singers]), also by the
Venetian rabbi Leon Modena in his response on art music for the synagogue (1605) (Ad-
ler 1966, 22-6).

[15] At the request of the same confraternity of *Anelanti*, Frances also composed a po-
em on the theme of Jewish exile, which, according to the author's introductory note,
the group performed twice, in two different local synagogues, possibly on the occasion
of one of the Jewish penitential holidays (Frances 1932, no. 147 [*Ana halakh dodi*]; Schir-
mann 1979, 2.69; Adler 1966, 85). In terms of structure and metrical solutions, the com-

3. From Paper Stage to Collective Ritual

The poetic structure staging a dialogue between two contenders, which, as we have seen, was a favorite form in music poetry commissioned by confraternities, was in itself not new to Hebrew literature (Yahalom 2008), nor to Hebrew poetry written in Italy;[16] neither was unattempted the poetic representation of the torments inflicted to the damned in hell and, contrasted to those, of the delights awaiting the just in paradise, a recurring theme in Hebrew literature written in Italy, grounded in the centuries-long familiarity of Italian Jews with Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Zacuto 2016, 35-42). Contemporary Counter Reformation culture, from homiletics to sacred poetry to the visual arts, was replete of depictions of the afterlife punishments, hell, and the day of judgment. In the affective religiosity of the time, where believers were encouraged to seek an emotional and sensorial connection to the contents of their faith, religious leaders and educators firmly believed in the formative task of evoking terrifying visions of the afterworld, whose mental visualization by the devotee was deemed at a time edifying and morbidly alluring.[17] Contemporary Jewish moralistic literature con-

position, whose scores are not extant, conforms to the genre of the cantata. It stages an allegorical representation in which the main character, called *Bat Ẓiyyon* (Daughter of Sion), gives vent to her despair after her beloved (an allegory for God) abandoned her and deserted her home, this being the Jerusalem Temple. Her lament is answered by a chorus of prophets (*kat nevi'im*), whose parts were likely performed by the confraternity members themselves. For the same group Frances probably composed also two other Hebrew poems falling into the genre of the cantata, both devoted to the theme of the redemption of the People of Israel. Although Frances did not leave any note explicitly linking these two compositions to the *Anelanti*, the topic treated and the fact that in both pieces one of the two extant parts was meant to be sung, again, by a choir referred to as the 'company of singers' (*kat meshorerim*), seem to indicate that also these two pieces were the result of specific commissions coming from the Florentine group (Frances 1932, nos. 144 [*Kawweh libbi qawweh*] and 139 [*Names tokh me'i*]).

[16] It is worth noting that in his *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, the Jewish playwright Leone de' Sommi mentioned the discovery and translation from Chaldean of a very ancient, unfortunately unidentified work titled *The Course of Life*, centered around the competition between the guardian angel and the tempter demon for gaining control over the soul of a young man. According to De' Sommi, the work was written in such excellent style and was so well devised "that one ought to think it was composed for representation, and even that it was, in fact, performed in public" [. . . Che non si può creder altro, se non che fosse composta per rappresentarsi, et rappresentata forse anco in loco publico] (De' Sommi 1968, 14-5).

[17] See for example the fortunate compilation *L'uomo al punto* (*The Man on the Brink [of Death]*), by the Jesuit Daniello Bartoli (1608-1685). First printed in Rome in 1667, and then reprinted in Venice in the following year, the work is organized in twenty chapters, each of them devoted to a different meditation revolving around the concept of

formed to the trend amidst a deep concern for illness and the momentous time of the passing, for the dying individual, and for the rituals ensuring a 'good death'.[18] It is this peculiar cultural atmosphere that explains why, after Zacuto's death in 1697, the fortuitous discovery of his dramatic poem *Tofteh 'arukh* among his unpublished writings did not remain a marginal episode in the author's posthumous fame, but triggered a chain of events, all linked to confraternal initiatives, that helped transforming a manuscript left in the drawer into a cultural sensation, thus paving the way for the Ferrara productions.

Mantua held an unmatched place in the history of Jewish theatrical practice as home to the extraordinary career of Leone de' Sommi (Jehudah Sommo, 1527-1592), one of the greatest playwrights, producers, and theatre theoreticians of the sixteenth century (Beecher 1993; Belkin 1997; Scola 2008). During Zacuto's lifetime, the town was still under the rule of the Gonzagas, but the court was no longer the designated arena for Jewish theatrical entertainments, while dramatic literature was yet to be confined to performance in public theatres. Although scant, there is evidence that Mantuan Jews were still engaging in theatrical activities, but much had changed in terms of nature of such productions, as, more in general, in the cultural and intellectual atmosphere permeating the Jewish quarter (Simonsohn 1977, 667-9). On the one hand, growing restrictions imposed on the Jewish community had curbed opportunities for Jewish theatre professionals to engage the Christian audience (Jaffe-Berg 2015, 121-44 and 2018, 677-9). On the other hand, a more religiously inclined climate within the Jewish quarter, partly fostered by the diffusion of Kabbalah and its customs, was

death. In his preface, before illustrating scope and aims of the compilation, the author remarks how "la morte anti-pensata [riesca] dispiacevole al gusto, ma salutifera al cuore" ("thinking about death ahead of time, although unpalatable, is salutiferous for the heart" [translation mine], Bartoli 1930, 1.3). On Counter Reformation imaginary concerning hell, see Camporesi 1990, 3-122.

[18] Several mystical beliefs and customs pertaining to death and the afterlife fate of the soul are included in *Ma'avar Yabbok* (The Crossing of the Jabbok) by the Modenese rabbi Aaron Berechiah Modena (d. 1639). First printed in 1626 in Mantua, and then reprinted several times in abridged versions, the book was a compilation of readings and prayers meant to assist and guide the believer during sickness, at deathbed, and through burial and mourning rites. For a description and contextualization of Modena's compilation, see Bar-Levav 1995. Lengthy descriptions of the punishments inflicted on the wicked in hell and of the blessings bestowed on the just in paradise were included in the fortunate manual on morals and religious conduct *Reshit Ḥokhmah* (*Beginning of Wisdom*) by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Elijah Vidas (also De Vidas). First printed in Venice in 1579, Vidas compilation became an instant bestseller and was demonstrably used by Zacuto as a sourcebook during the composition of *Tofteh 'arukh* (Zacuto 2016, 45-8).

giving rise to forms of intra-Jewish entertainments and spectacles, most-
ly of religious nature, whose natural frames, besides communal settings,
were scholarly and confraternal circles (Schirmann 1979, 2.63-80; Bregman
2003b). This rechannelling of creative impulses into religiosity and devo-
tion compelled the community to carve new opportunities out of the Jew-
ish liturgical calendar for theatre or music making, or for performanc-
es combining both practices, while Jewish *literati*, following the example
of what was happening outside of the ghetto walls, turned to religious and
biblical topics searching for inspiration.

In spite of a cultural atmosphere intensely preoccupied with devotion
and religiosity, and notwithstanding the popularity of sacred drama in the
surrounding Christian culture and among fellow writers, Zacuto's dramat-
ic works had never left the author's drawer, a remarkable circumstance if
we take into consideration that most of his occasional poems had been cir-
culated as *fogli volanti* and a sizeable number of his religious hymns had
appeared in print inserted in prayer books for special liturgical occasions
– most of them compiled by Zacuto himself (Lattes 2003). The descend-
ant of former Iberian *conversos*, Zacuto was endowed with a personali-
ty marked by austere religiosity. As a rabbi and a legal scholar, he was cer-
tainly aware of the negative reputation attached to theatre in Jewish tradi-
tion since Talmudic times,[19] as well as of the harsh opinions expressed by
some of his fellow rabbis concerning the moral appropriateness for Jews to
attend theatrical spectacles – let alone engage in theatre making – outside
of the few occasions in which such diversions were allowed, such as dur-
ing Purim.[20] Besides, Zacuto's two dramatic poems were not, strictly speak-
ing, meant for the stage. The first, *Yesod ʿolam* (*The World's Foundation*) cel-

[19] Rabbinical opposition to spectacles originally included also the circus which, to-
gether with theatre, was perceived as epitomizing the pernicious effects of Helleniza-
tion. Eventually, the Talmudic expression *bate tarteya'ot u-vate kirkesayot* ('theatres
and circuses') became a technical term indicating all kind of unsuitable entertainments.
Rabbinical hostility towards all Roman and Greek public spectacles had a counterpart
in Patristic tradition, as best exemplified by Isidore of Seville's influential *Ethymologi-
ae*, in which theatre was similarly grouped with circus and other entertainments of the
same sort (Jones 1982).

[20] See, for example, the *responsum* by one of Zacuto's contemporaries, Rabbi Samuel
Aboab (d. 1694), himself of *converso* descent, vehemently opposing the presence in the
Venetian ghetto of places designated and used for theatrical representations in which,
in his words, "men, women, children, modest daughters of Israel and trollops as well,
all gather" (*we-ne'esfu shammah anashim nashim we-taf benot Yisra'el ha-ẓenu'ot ʿim
ha-peruẕot*) (Aboab 1702, no. 4; Schirmann 1979, 2.56). It is worth noting that, while the-
atres kept on being condemned by rabbis as promiscuous and morally corrupting, the
writing of dramatic literature was never under attack and, in fact, this period saw the
highest number of rabbis and Jewish scholars engaging in it.

ebrated the biblical patriarch Abraham as the founder of the true monotheistic religion by sketching his life according to rabbinical sources (Melkman 1967; Rathaus 2011); the second, *Tofteh 'arukh* (*Hell Arrayed*), as mentioned, was a graphic, dark representation of the punishments inflicted to sinners in the afterlife according to Kabbalah (Hamiel 1949-50; Bregman 2003a; Andreatta 2019). While both incorporated typical theatrical elements, such as dialogues and stage directions, albeit minimal, they rather belonged to the genre of closet drama, a variety of dramatic compositions meant for silent reading or to be read aloud by one or several readers in front of a selected audience, instead of being performed on stage by professional actors (Straznicky 2002). In Italy, this literary genre had its roots in the humanistic tragedy inspired to Roman history produced within university and erudite circles, a phenomenon that is generally associated with the revival of classical Latin tradition. During the Counter Reformation period, closet drama morphed into the subgenre of the edifying tragedy and found one of its foremost Italian representatives in Benedetto Cinquanta (d. after 1635), a preacher affiliated with the Order of Friars Minor. His plays, inspired by parables from the Gospel, the life of saints, but also historical events, presented typical features, such as a scanty and linear plot, a preference for long monologues, no classical division of action, and frequent departures from the Aristotelian unities of place and time. Cinquanta's tragedies are in fact reminiscent of sermons: they display a similar meandering structure, built through addition and conceptual repetitiveness, and an analogous preference for lashing tones and terrifying images that balance for the limited dramatic action (Angelini, Asor Rosa and Nigro 1974, 203-11). Like Zacuto's dramatic poems, also Cinquanta's tragedies were not meant to be performed by actors during spectacles open to a general public, but rather to be read aloud in restricted gatherings, or simply for individual consumption. The incorporation of basic stage directions was aimed to dramatize the text, thus facilitating the reader (or listener) in his task of recreating a vivid mental representation of the situation portrayed. More than a theatre of action, this was a theatre of the mind, whose purpose was to conjure up an inward experience that, nevertheless, was expected to be by no means less gripping and emotionally impacting than the actual watching of a live performance on stage.

As a matter of fact, Zacuto himself took precautions in order to avoid the circulation or future publication of his two dramatic poems: in his will, he bequeathed all his unpublished writings to his wife Rachel, a bundle of works which included, besides *Tofteh 'arukh* and *Yesod 'olam*, also Zacuto's personal copies of two fundamental works of, respectively, Jewish legal and mystical tradition, the *Mishnah* and the *Zohar*, both inscribed with his own

marginal annotations.[21] Zacuto's widow, though, apparently allowed members of the *Ḥadashim la-bekarim*, the devotional confraternity that Zacuto himself had established in the Mantuan ghetto and that for years used to convene in the private study house (*bet midrash*) of its founder, access to the late rabbi's papers. A vivid account of the thrilling moment in which *Tofteh ʿarukh* was first located among Zacuto's unpublished papers and of the strong impression the work made on the members of the *Ḥadashim la-bekarim*, thus prompting the group's subsequent decision to bring it to Venice and have it printed as a book is included in the prefatory materials inserted in the first edition of *Tofteh ʿarukh*, printed in Venice in 1715:

ובהיותם מבקשים וחוקרים לזכות הרבים מצאו ספר אחד בכתבי הקדש של הרב זלה״ה אשר אין לא
מחירים על עונש הרשעים אשר במעדה נאדים והוחזקו מסותרי הרבים וסרוחי טבולים בראשיהם
ותולדותיהם כיוצא גיחם בנים משחיתים סוררים ומורים ולכן גמרו אומר להדפיסו בבאור כל מלה קשה
למען ירוץ הקורא בו אף מן הקטנים והצעירים.

[Always zealous in their studies for the benefit of the many, [the members of the confraternity] found a work among the teacher's writings that had no equal. It was devoted to the punishments inflicted upon the wicked (who [in hell] are being stewed like in a pot or snatched by a horde of demons and immersed by their head into filthy liquids!), whose vicissitudes could arouse regret into sinners, miscreants, and rebels. Therefore, they gave instructions that it be printed along with the explanation of all its difficult words, so that also the less educated and the young could easily read it.]
(Zacuto 1715, f. 2r [translation mine])

The strophe-by-strophe explication of the poem and elucidation of all its most difficult words were the work of the Mantuan scholar Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea (c. 1680-1743). A former disciple of Zacuto, Basilea was a follower of Kabbalah but also well versed in the sciences (Simonsohn 1977, 696-7; Ruderman 1995, 213-28). As Basilea himself recounts in the introductory note included in the first reprint of *Tofte ʿarukh* in 1744, he had resolved to compile the explicatory apparatus once he had realized that "the words of this work and its discourse had become impenetrable and that what was once transparent had turned obscure, so much so that the members [of the confraternity] had stopped reading it".[22] Thus, it seems that *Tofteh ʿarukh* had been circulated among the confraternity members well

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[21] The copy of the will was first located in the State Archives of Mantua by Shlomo Simonsohn (Simonshon 1977, 738n296). Its publication by Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini is forthcoming. I thank Prof. Ioly Zorattini for kindly allowing me to have access to it.

[22] "*Et divre ha-sefer we-et siḥo u-setumim we-ḥatumim ha-devarim we-ḥalone yediʿato atumim u-shekufim u-segurim ʿad ki ḥadlu ha-ḥaverim likrot bo*" (Zacuto 1744, f. [2v] [translation mine]).

before it was printed, possibly adopted as one of the readings used during the group's gatherings. Although, as already remarked, Zacuto probably had never intended his poem to be circulated, the confraternity's initiative was not, in the end, a complete betrayal of their teacher's expectations: this type of consumption, within a small, intimate group of people in the frame of religious study and devotional rituals of penitential nature, was in line with the mode of reading Zacuto probably had in mind when he wrote his poem. Besides, we may suppose that in the context of the confraternity gatherings, where the reading of texts as well as the recitation of prayers were customarily marked by a state of mental and emotional absorption known as *kawwanah* (intention), readers were expected to be concentrated on their assignment of extracting from the poem a moral teaching, rather than pursuing pure esthetical enjoyment. And for the reading to have its ritual effect comprehension of the text was crucial. With its intricate language and cryptic imaginary, *Tofteh 'arukh* apparently posed insurmountable challenges to the members of the confraternity, who probably possessed varying levels of familiarity with Kabbalistic literature. The elucidation of the poem's most difficult words was an indispensable tool, given Zacuto's frequent resort to rare words, his recurrent use of homophones and homographs and even, in a few cases, of purportedly coined neologisms. The printing of *Tofteh 'arukh* was a step towards the metamorphosis of the poem into a ready-made tool for both confraternal study and self-edification. Besides furnishing the poem with a material support and expanding it with the insertion of Basilea's apparatus (in itself a meta-text) the printing was also a move towards the circulation of *Tofteh 'arukh* out of the narrow circle of initiated readers, something consciously pursued by the confraternity, as Basilea's reference to "the less educated and the young" unambiguously reveals.

Indeed, transformed into a portable book, *Tofteh 'arukh* left the narrow premises of Zacuto's former study house, crossed the border of Mantua's ghetto walls and reached the city of Ferrara, then part of the Papal Territories, there to become the object of avid and passionate reception. Members of the local *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* confraternity started to use it during their gatherings following the practice of their Mantuan counterparts, until when, in the summer of 1720, they staged a series of dramatized readings of the text open to the entire community, thus shifting Zacuto's work from performance on the "paper stage" (Mullaney 2013; Willie 2013) to presentation in a public space. A vivid account of the Ferrara public readings and of the impact they had on the public in attendance is provided, in the flowery and allusive style then cultivated by Italian Hebrew writers, by Jacob Dan-

iel Olmo (c. 1690-1757),[23] the *massaro* of the Ferrara *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* group and the initiator of the performances:

אשר בשנת הת"ף בהתאסף ראשי עם קדש עדה קדושה מהדרין מן המידרין בק"ק פיראורה בחברת חדשים
לבקרים לתקן ולסדר לומר ברבים אחר חצות יום תיקון חצות בין המצרים ביני וביני עדי בוא הקהל
ואוספו אספה והנם תדיר מחורין לקונן על חרבן ציון אנוכי הקורא בו ומבאר עונשי גהינם קלין וחמורין
כל קבל דנא די תיכול פטרין לעורר ולחזק הלבבות גולויריין מיניה וביה כל פיות בקל קרנא משרוקיתא
קתרוס שבכא פסנתרין יפטירו בספר הלז ושרו בשירין.

[In the year 5480 [1720], the leaders of the confraternity *Ḥadashim la-beka-rim*, a saintly congregation of most pious men in the holy city of Ferrara gathered to publicly hold the Midnight Vigil 'within the straits'[24] every day, after midnight. People from the community came, gathering in large numbers and attending with regularity. And in order to mourn over the destruction of Zion, I was reading from the poem, illustrating the punishments inflicted in the Gehenna, from the mildest ones to the harshest, and how each [sin] is subject to a specific retribution; this with the purpose of moving and fortifying the hearts of the people in attendance. The music of a consorts of instruments (cf. Daniel 3:5) and the singing of chants concluded the reading.]
(Zacuto 1744, f. 3r [translation mine])

Olmo's account provides a rather accurate idea of how the performances were conducted: a single reader, Olmo himself, played the different roles in the poem (the dead protagonist and his antagonist, the demon), lending his voice to both characters. He also interspersed the recitation with explanations – likely delivered in Italian – of the meaning of the poem. The monophonic reading was interspersed with the singing of religious hymns by the choir of the spectators, while the musical accompaniment was possibly extended also to the recited parts. The approximate outcome, in terms of sound experience, must have resembled that afforded by a cantata, with its alternation of solo recitatives and arias sung by a choir.

By shifting confraternal devotions from the private space of the group's rituals to the public sphere of a communal ceremony, the Ferrara productions of *Tofteh 'arukh* mark a new level in confraternal outreach. They also evidence a novel understanding of the poem's nature and its inherent potentialities. An hybrid between moralistic and dramatic literature,

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[23] Olmo was the author of a 'sequel' to Zacuto's *Tofteh 'arukh*, a poem titled *Eden 'a-rukh* (*Paradise Arrayed*), consisting of a description of the delights awaiting the just in heaven. It had a similar structure to Zacuto's poem, only reversed. Olmo's composition was inserted alongside *Tofteh 'arukh* in some of its later reprints, starting with the 1744 printing.

[24] The expression traditionally indicates the three weeks between the 17th of *Tammuz* and the 9th of *Av*.

Zacuto's poem was designed to provide the reader an inward experience in the form of a penitential journey, whose occasion was not the quest for spiritual transcendence, like in a sizeable portion of Spanish theatre of the seventeenth century (Delgado Morales 2014), but rather a deep preoccupation with the pervasiveness of sin and transgression in human life, and the consequent yearn for conversion and reparation. The members of the confraternity must have sensed that the dramatization of extreme feelings enacted in the poem, on the one hand, and Zacuto's mastery at wrapping a religious and moralizing topic in the cloak of secular poetic forms, on the other, could well serve the group in their attempt to reach wider and more variegated audiences – both among the erudite and the uncultivated – outside the confraternal circle. At one time, they seem to have been aware of the poem's unsuitability for a conventional representation on stage: indeed, how to overcome the challenges posed by a theatrical representation of afterlife and hell? How to reproduce on the stage the decaying body of the protagonist, or the horrific torments inflicted on the crowd of the dead, or the frightful appearance of the demons? A dramatized reading could obviate the difficulties embedded into reenacting on stage the most graphic parts of the poem, while at the same time prompting the listeners to conjure up a vivid representation in their own mind by using the spoken word to guide their affects and imagination. In this respect, Olmo and his companions understood that the involution, obscurity, and linguistic complexity characterizing the poem were not just an exercise in Hebrew rhetoric, but were meant, rather, to enact the incantation of the word in the audience's minds. As such, they could also be used to unleash their fears and fantasies.

In fact, the members of the Mantuan *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* had already perceived the intrinsic affinity between *Tofteh ʿarukh*, with its underlying penitential ideology, and the rituals they were performing daily. In the end, the watchers' devotions channelled much more than messianic expectations, providing a frame for the expression of the devotees' sentiment of culpability for sins committed, their feeling of physical and spiritual impurity, and the consequent urge to expiate. The members of the Ferrara confraternity took this process a step further. By leveraging on the collective sense of guilt and fears, the public readings were extending the confraternity agenda to include the entire community by staging what was *de facto* a collective rite of atonement. Certainly, the cognitive and intellectual response of the audience must have varied according to differing levels of knowledge of Hebrew literature and exposure to Kabbalah and related texts; but in any event, the agency displayed by the confraternity in ritualizing a dramatized reading relied on the emotional receptiveness of the public in attendance or, in other words, on the fact that even those who had

only a flimsy grasp of the theological implications of denying the existence of hell, could nevertheless relate to the universal idea of death in its more lugubrious and morbid aspects. While Olmo's account mentions only the external elements of spectatorship, namely attendance and active participation in the event, it nevertheless contains hints that allow us to reconstruct, at least approximately, the audience's actual experience. The reference to some of the material and sensorial aspects marking the performance of Zacuto's poem, such as the use of music and choral chanting, combined with the nocturnal setting and the sombre overtones pervading the penitential celebration, enables us to recover the atmosphere of religious solemnity and dramatic tension permeating the event, and to gain some insight into the perceptual and interpretative response they elicited in the audience. An example of religious ritual combined with carefully orchestrated entertainment, the dramatized readings hosted by the Ferrara *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* were a form of social production that had larger implications than solely promoting the confraternal rites and gaining the group public visibility. Against the backdrop of the only public space allocated to Jews in the early modern Christian city, the meta-textual qualities of *Tofteh ʿarukh* and the meta-dramatic implications of the staged event in fact enabled both the audience and the confraternity of watchers to reaffirm and reinforce limits and domain of their own identity and precarious micro-society.

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