

**ON A KNOWN – UNKNOWN STROPHIC POEM  
FROM THE CAIRO GENIZAH:  
AN AUTHENTIC OR A PLAGIARIZED VERSION?<sup>1</sup>**

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The treasures of the Cairo Genizah, the bulk of which is deposited at the University of Cambridge, have immeasurably enriched our knowledge of the Mediterranean societies and cultures in the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Among the wide range of subjects covered by the Genizah, Mediaeval Hebrew poetry is undoubtedly one of the most important topics, offering to the student of this genre thousands of ‘old and new’ poems in Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic, which were composed by well-known and anonymous poets who lived in Spain, North Africa and the Near East between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The structures and styles of these poems usually followed in the footsteps of Arab poets who devised a system of rigid metres and rhyming. Nevertheless, many Hebrew poems deviated from the rules of Arabic composition and adopted a more flexible structure. Among the poetic genres of Medieval Hebrew poetry one finds the *muwaššah* (Heb. שִׁיר אֲזוּר) *i.e.* a strophic poem which consists of a few stanzas (normally between four and six) and rhymes that are repeated in each of the stanzas “internally and externally”.<sup>3</sup>

During my work on the Genizah documents I stumbled upon the following poem (T-S AS 121.215) of which two of its stanzas *i.e.* the second and third, appear in the second part of the collection of Love Poems by Moshe ben Ya‘aqov Ibn Ezra (circa 1065–1135):<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed information concerning the Cairo Genizah, see Reif 2000. For the contribution of the Genizah to Mediterranean studies, see *e.g.* S.D. Goitein 1967–93.

<sup>3</sup> For the *muwaššah*, see *e.g.* the works of Stern, Schirmann, Allony and Bacon.

<sup>4</sup> See Schirmann 1954–56 I, 362–7. (The dates of birth and death quoted by Schirmann (pp. 362, 365) should be corrected to: “born in 1065 at the latest and died after 1135”. See Schirmann 1965:219. See also, Brody 1935:266–8.

The equivalent stanzas  
as published by  
Schirmann 1954–56, I, 369 – 370

T-S AS 121.215  
(For textual comments,  
see Appendix 2)

Not in Schirmann  
and Brody

נלאאתי נשוא הכיל לאויב  
יהלוך רכיל ואני דל ואין  
משכיל בכל חשקו המדוני  
ובכל חטא (?) הנידוני סוד וג'

(13) לא אשכח ימי חלדי  
ליל שכבו אלי צדי  
על ערשי ומרבדי  
עד בקר נשקני  
ועסיס פיו הניקני

לא אשכח ימי חלדי  
ליל שכבו אלי צדי על ערסי  
ומרודי עד בוקר נשקני  
ועסיס פיו הניקני סוד וג'

מה נחמד וטוב דרכו  
מה מתוק פרי חכו  
אך שקר וריק נסכו  
התל בי ורמני  
ובלי חטא הדמני

יום לו כלתה עיני  
ולקול צללה אזני  
נחשתי ברב עני  
כס אחסן לה טני  
עסי ירגע וידכרני

יום לו כלתה עיני ולקול  
צללו אזני נחשתי ברוב  
עוני ביאצ'י עליש תطن אזני  
ترا محبوبي يذكروني

### Translation of T-S AS 121.215

The following English version is a free and rough translation of the poem,  
focusing on its contents rather than attempting to provide an artistic rendering:

I am weary to bear my feelings for an enemy  
Who slanders me and I am helpless as no one  
Understands his desire for a quarrel (?)  
While inciting me to sin (?)

Secret etc.

I will not forget all my life  
The night he lay on my side, in my bed,

On my luxurious coverlet. He kissed me till morning  
And suckled me the juice of his mouth                      Secret etc.

The day I yearned for him (lit. my eye died) and (his) voice  
Made my ear tingle as I used sorcery (?) thus committing a great  
Sin. By my honour! (lit. By my ‘whiteness’) Why does my ear tingle?  
I wonder if my beloved still remembers me

### A physical description of the document

The fragment, classmarked T-S AS 121.215, is one leaf written on recto, measuring 8.5 cm x 12.7 cm. It contains three stanzas in Hebrew, while each stanza consists of four lines instead of five in Brody’s and Schirmann’s editions. The last two lines of the third stanza end in one word in Hebrew, one word in Judaeo-Arabic and a rhymed *ḥarġa* (i.e. the ending of the *muwaššah*),<sup>5</sup> written in Arabic characters.

The metre used by the poet is ---v---,<sup>6</sup> while the rhymes are:

1<sup>st</sup> stanza ABCC

2<sup>nd</sup> stanza DECC

3<sup>rd</sup> stanza FGCC

As a result of the ‘re-arrangement’ of the poem, in each stanza there is:

- a. an internal rhyme in the sixth syllable: In the first stanza (הכיל רכיל משכיל), in the second stanza (חלדי צדי מרודי), while in the third stanza (עיני אזני עוני).
- b. an external rhyme in the three stanzas occurs also in the sixth syllable: in the first two stanzas (הנידוני – הנדוני, נשקני – הניקני), while in the last stanza (i.e. in the *ḥarġa* in Arabic) the rhyme is in the eighth syllable and is also ending in the syllable “ני”.

At the end of the two first stanzas, after the rhyming syllable, we find the words ‘סוד וג’ which probably refer to the beginning words of the poem as appearing in Brody’s and Schirmann’s editions: סוד לבי ומצפוני / גלו נחלי עיני.<sup>7</sup>

### Orthography

The handwriting is very clear, using the oriental letter and the text is fully vocalized, though inconsistently using the *plene* spelling. Thus the word נלאתי is spelt defectively, while the words נשוא, יהלוך, בוקר, ניהשתי, ברוב are written *plene*.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Stern 1974:33–41.

<sup>6</sup> See Schirmann 1954–56, I, 369 and II, p. 732.

<sup>7</sup> See Schirmann 1954–56, I, 369. See also Schirmann 1996:248, fn. 339. These lines are a refrain, which is repeated after each stanza, except the final.

The vocalization is usually in accordance with the grammatical rules, except the words אשכח and הלדי where the *segol* and *pataḥ* are interchangeable and הניקני which, in our version, is vocalized with *hataf-pataḥ*. The vowel of the ה in the word הנידוני seems to have been omitted by the scribe, either inadvertently or deliberately. The scribe has made two mistakes and amended them: in the fourth line of the first stanza the word for 'sin' is spelt היט and an א over the word, while the correct version הטא seems to appear in the margin on the right side of the page, partly illegibly. The second orthographic error occurs in the second line of the third stanza where the Judaeo-Arabic word צאללת is crossed out and replaced by the Hebrew word צללו which is written on top of the crossed out word.

### Language and style

The language and style of the poem, like all Mediaeval Hebrew poetry, are based on the Bible, that is to say, on the morphology, syntax and lexicon of biblical Hebrew, including many expressions and idioms that are taken from various books of the Old Testament verbatim. This fact demonstrates the poet's comprehensive knowledge of the Bible. However a few deviations from the original text are found in our version of the poem. The word המדוני which is not found in the Bible, though the pattern is common with names, consists of the noun מדון (quarrel, strife) and the common suffix " X " (Arabic: *yā' an-nisba*) to form an attribute or an adjective.<sup>8</sup> However, to keep up with the metre the ה is vocalized as 'He Interrogative'. Also the spelling of the words ערסי and מרודי is different from their spelling in biblical Hebrew (ערש and מרבד). While the spelling ערס is more common in post-biblical Hebrew, מרוד is not found anywhere else.<sup>9</sup>

Another mistake is the use of the plural צללו instead of the singular צללה. This is probably because the scribe, when replacing the Judaeo-Arabic word צאללת with the Hebrew word צללו, did not heed that the poet used the noun אזני in the singular (and not in the dual/plural, like in the case of עיני), in order to conform with the rhyme. Also the word ולקול is used instead of ולקולו as a poetic licence to keep up with the metre.

A few figures of speech are used by the poet to emphasize his anger at his friend's behaviour and his own innocence on the one hand, and his desire to make up with his beloved, kindled by a wave of nostalgia on the other. Thus, e.g. the words 'enemy', 'poor', 'juice', 'suckle' and 'white' are used as

<sup>8</sup> The word מדון is also a place name see Jos. 11:1 and 12:19.

<sup>9</sup> It is possible that the writer was influenced by the words פרוור – פרבר (architectural structure) where both spellings occur in the Bible, see, 1Ch 26:18 and 2 Kings 23:11.

metaphors, while the expressions ‘the night until the morning’, ‘my eye died’ and ‘my ear tingled’ are used as hyperboles.

The expression “my eye died” may also be regarded as a synecdoche.

### The contents

Since the first stanza appears here for the first time, but not, to the best of my knowledge, elsewhere, and certainly not in the version known to us, we do not know if it had been composed by Moshe Ibn Ezra himself or by someone else. One thing is however beyond doubt: our stanza fits the structure of the rest of the poem and its contents. The first stanza refers to a close friend of the poet who betrayed him, especially by casting a smear on him. Consequently, the poet regards him as his enemy and a quarrelsome person. Hence, the poet cannot bear this behaviour any more (גלאתי נשוא), and instead he can only feel helpless (ואני דל), as no one can explain (ואין משכיל) the desire of his former friend to fight (בכל השקר המדוני). Similar ideas are to be found in the known version.

The second stanza describes the intimate relationship in the past between the poet and his enemy today. The poet stresses the physical contact between the two of them, using both denotative and connotative phrases to illustrate their sexual relationship that is ‘an unforgettable experience’.

The third stanza expresses the longing of the poet for his friend whose voice reverberates in his ears and his attempts to use unlawful magic, in order to bring his friend back to him. The *ħarġa* repeats the idea of the tingling ear and stresses the poet’s wondering as to whether his friend remembers him. This is expressed by the idiomatic use of the verb in the passive تری meaning ‘I wonder’, which carries an element of uncertainty and hope.

The motive of love between males and homosexual relationship is not unknown in Mediaeval Hebrew poetry, which often deals with it in the context of love poetry. The issue is not unique to Hebrew poetry but may also be found in other cultures. Scholars who have researched the subject are not in agreement as to whether it is a real homosexual relationship or a figurative device used to stress the affections between people.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Schirmann 1955:55–58 and 1978: I, 97–105. Allony 1961:16–43. An abridged version of this article was published in Allony 1963:311–323.

### The two versions

Schirmann's version<sup>11</sup>, belongs to a collection of strophic love poems which contain three parts. The First and Second Parts consist of a two-line opening or beginning (*maṭla*' = a refrain) and five stanzas, while the Third Part begins with a two-line opening followed by only three stanzas. Moreover, each part has a different metre (Part I: -- --v--v-- Part II: ---v--- Part III: -v-----v--) and a different internal rhyme (Part I: AA BBBAA, CCCAA, DDDAA, EEEAA, FFFAA. Part II: AA GGGAA, HHHAA, IIIAA, JJJAA, AAAAA. The rhyme of Part III AA JJJAA has nothing to do with the rhyme of the first two Parts, since none of its stanzas rhymes in AA. Instead it rhymes as follows: LL MMMLL, NNNLL, OOOLL. However, as the Third Part differs from the first two Parts in its contents and its rhyme we may assume that it does not belong to the other Parts and is instead an independent love poem.

Our version has no two-line beginning but instead has three stanzas, where the second stanza is the third stanza, and the third stanza is the sixth stanza in the known version. Moreover, in Schirmann's version each stanza (except the opening one) consists of five rhymed lines, while in our version each stanza has been "condensed" into four lines, thus changing the rhyme altogether, though if re-arranged according to the rhyming syllables, the poem would have looked as follows:

נלאתי נשוא הכיל  
 לאויב יהלוך רכיל  
 ואני דל ואין משכיל  
 בכל חשקו המדוני  
 ובכל חטא הנידוני  
 לא אשכח ימי חלדי  
 ליל שכבו אלי צדי  
 על ערסי ומרודי  
 עד בוקר נשקני  
 ועסיס פיו הניקני

יום לו כלתה עיני  
 ולקול צללו אזני  
 נישחתי ברוב עוני  
 ביأعاليش تطن ادني  
 ترا محبوبي ينكرني

<sup>11</sup> See Schirmann 1954–56 I, 369–70.

It is clear that the metre in our version is not only different from the metre in Schirmann's version but it is also completely inconsistent, thus, "ruining" even the internal rhyme.

Lexical differences between the two versions are also found.

<i>The known version</i>	<i>Our version</i>
עני (distress; poverty)	עוני (my sin)
כּם אַחַסֵּן לֵה לֵה טָנִי (I think well of him)	عَلِيشْ تَطِنْ اذْنِي (why my ear tingles)
עָסִי יִרְגַע וְיִזְכְּרֵנִי (maybe he will remember me again)	تَرا مَحْبُوبِي يَذْכُرْنِي (I wonder /if/ my beloved /still/ remembers me)

### Conclusions

The existence of two versions of the poem raises a number of questions concerning the authorship and authenticity of the versions: Is the 'new' version more reliable than the one known to us hitherto? Is it an earlier or later version by Moshe Ibn Ezra himself? Is it a new version offered by an anonymous poet who believed his version to be more artistic? Is it an attempt to 'reconstruct' Ibn Ezra's poem from memory by one of his fans? Is it a plagiarised version?<sup>12</sup> Or is it an example of an "adoption", *i.e.* the incorporation of parts of well-known poems into a fresh text, a stylistic phenomenon known in Arabic as *taḍmīn*? Another possibility is that the poem under discussion is incomplete and another piece containing the other stanzas, if survived, is 'somewhere' in the Genizah collections.

Since we have no information about the writer of the first stanza of our version who had also introduced a few changes in the grammar, lexicon and the structure of the whole poem, nor have we any details about the scribe, it seems that all these questions will remain unanswered.

Finally, although proof of plagiarism is not sufficient, one cannot ignore the surprising similarity between the first stanza of our version and the beginning of the other version of our poem and the beginning of a strophic poem composed by Yitzhak Ibn Abraham Ibn Ezra (whose exact dates of birth and death are unknown, but assumed to have taken place during the first half of the twelfth century), which begins with the line: סוּד אַהֲבִים אֵיכָה יִכִּיל / לֵב וּדְמַע הוֹלֵךְ רַכִּיל and which also describes the poet's disappointment with a young intimate friend who turned against him<sup>13</sup>. The writer of the first stanza of our version was not

<sup>12</sup> Schirmann refers briefly to a case of plagiarism concerning the book *Ha-'Anaq* by Moshe Ibn Ezra (See Schirmann, 1954–56, I, 363).

<sup>13</sup> See, Yitzhak Ibn Ezra, *Širim* 21. See also the editor's comment on p. 62.

necessarily Yitzhak Ibn Ezra, but it is quite possible that our stanza was known to the latter.

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## Appendix 2

נלאתי נשוא (a) הכיל (b) לאויב (c)  
 יהלוך רכיל (d) ואני דל (e) ואין  
 משכיל (f) בכל חשקו (g) המדוני (h)  
 ובכל חטא (i) הנידוני (j) סוד וג'  
 לא אשכח (k) ימי חלדי (l)  
 ליל שכבו (m) אלי צדי (n) על ערסי (o)  
 ומרודי (p) עד בוקר (q) נשקני (r)  
 ועסיס (s) פיו הניקני סוד וג'  
 יום לו כלתה עיני (t) ולקול  
 צללו אזני (u) ניהשתי (v) ברוב  
 עוני (w) ביאצי (x) עליש (y) תطن אזני  
 ترا (z) محبوبي بذكرني

a. Isa. 1:14; b. Following Jer. 6:11; c. Jer. 6:25; d. Jer. 9:3; e. Following Jud. 6:15; f. Following Ps. 14:2; and 53:3; g. Following 2 Ch. 8:6; h. Jer.15:10; i. Deut. 19:15; j. Perhaps following Ps. 36:12; k. Ps. 119:16, 93.; l. Following Ps. 39:6; m. Following Gen.19:33, 35; n. Ezek. 4:4,5,8,9; o. Appears in the Bible three times as ערשי, whereas ערס is probably based on ערסא in Aramaic; p. Appears in the Bible twice as מרבדים (Pr. 7:16 and 31:22); q. Appears in the Bible 16 times; r. Following Cant. 1;19; s. עסיס appears in the Bible five times in the context of wine, e.g. Cant. 8:2. See also Rashi's commentary on the word; t. Following Ps. 69:4, 119: 82, 123 and Lam. 2:11; u. Following 1Sam. 3:11; 2 kings 21.12 and Jer. 19:3; v. Following Gen. 30:27 and perhaps Lev. 19:26; w. Following Hos. 9:7; x. In Arabic: "my white" and perhaps following Isa. 1:18. It may also mean here 'honour, reputation' Arabic بياض الوجه used here as an oath like بشرفي by my honour; y. In colloquial Arabic, consisting of (علي + اي + شيء) – why. z. Usually spelt in Arabic ترى

## Appendix 3

The poem as appearing in Schirmann's 1954–56 I, 369–70:

סוד לבי ומצפוני  
גלו נחלי עיני

מריב הקשה הָרָף !  
צבי למד טָרַף טָרַף  
עו פְּנִים קִשָּׁה עָרַף  
חֲשָׁקוֹ הֶעֱצִיבֵנִי  
וּבְלִי לֵב עֲזָבֵנִי

עֶפֶר דָּלְלוּ מִתְּנִי  
שָׁמַשׁ רַד לְמוֹל פְּנִי  
וּבְחֻצֵי שְׁתֵּי עֵינָי  
אֵת נוֹמֵי גְזֵלָנִי  
וּבְכָל פֶּה אֶכְלָנִי

לֹא אֲשַׁפַּח יָמֵי חֲלָדִי  
לֵיל שְׁכָבוֹ אֵלַי צָדִי  
עַל עַרְשֵׁי וּמִרְבְּדֵי  
עַד בְּקָר נִשְׁקָנִי  
וְעִסִּים פִּיּוֹ הִגִּימָנִי

מֵה נְחֻמָּד וְטוֹב דְּרַכּוֹ  
מֵה מְתוֹק פְּרֵי חֲכוֹ  
אֵד שְׁקָר וְרִיק גִּסְכּוֹ  
הַתַּל בֵּי וְרַמְנֵי  
וּבְלִי חֲטָא הִדְמָנִי

יּוֹם לוֹ כְּלָתָה עֵינִי  
וּלְקוֹל צִלְלָה אֲזַנִּי  
נִחְשָׁתִי בְּרַב־עֵנִי  
כִּם אַחֲסֵן לֵה טָנִי  
עִסֵּי יִרְגַע וּיְדַכְרֵנִי