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«MELISENDA», MYSTICAL SONG OF SABBATAI ZEBI

by Royce W. Miller

The famous pseudo-Messiah, Sabbatai Zebi, known all over Europe in his day (1626-1676), and accepted by many as the real Messiah, availed himself of his beautiful singing voice to sing love songs with a mystic meaning (see, for example, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, entries under «Shabbethai Zebi B. Mordecai» and «Pseudo-Messiah»).

One of these love songs has been preserved for us, possibly in the form in which he sang it, in Judaeo-Spanish, by the Sephardic Jews of Salonika. (1) It is an abbreviated form of a long narrative ballad, of which many forms are extant, some preserved by the exiled Spanish Jews of the Near East, others in the Spanish Peninsula. (2)

The longer ballad, as generally preserved, tells a supposed episode in the life of Melisenda (generally Melizelda among the Salonikan Jews), daughter of Charlemagne, in which she has a dream, seeks an interpretation from her ladies-in-waiting, and, as a result, goes out into the night in search of her lover, killing the watchman who tries to stop her.

A typical version of this ballad was preserved by Moshé Attias: (3)

Noche buena, y noche buena,
nochada de namorar.
No durmió la Melizelda,
la hiža del emperante.

De amores al conde Arželo,
el su amigo caronale (carnal),
bueñas daba en la cama,
como da el pese (pez) en la mare.

S'echó de la cama abašo,
como quien s'echa en la mare,
zapaticos de veyudo (velludo),
no se le siente el caminare.

Todas las damas durmían,
las que el Diez (Dios) le hay dado en parte.
— Dormíaš, las mis donzeyas,
dormid y aresfolgad.

Toda la que sabe d'amores,
el Dio no la hay de prebare (probare).
Un esfueño me hay soñado:
¿ Quién me lo habe de soltare?

Si me lo soltabe moza,
yo la había de cazare;
la ašugar (aguja) mía y suya
en un bastidor se lavre (borda).

Si me lo soltaba vieža
yo la tomaré por madre.
Todas cayaron a una,
ninguna respuesta dare.

D'ahí saltó una vieža,
vieža es, d'alta idade:
— Entre mientras que soš moza,
Sepáš el mundo gozare.

Cuando ya vos hazéš vieža,
no vos quieren los rapaz.
Por mí lo digo, la mezquina,
cuando era en vuestra idade,
de condes y duques era amada...

Agora, que me hize vieža,
ni los perros de la caye.
Esto que oyó Melizelda,
de cara a la caza se ía (iba);

quitó vistido lavrado,
y se vistió a la maraviya.
En medio del camino
topó al mozo del padre.

— ¿ Ónde vaš, la Melizelda,
estas horas por la caye?
¿ No supiteš, Melizelda,
el pregón de vuestro padre?

Fin después de medianoche,
que no hayga ĝente a la calle?
— Mi vezina está pariendo,
yo me vo (voy) por la cumadre.

Así biva, rapanico,
dame esta espada cortare,
cuando asiguió estos perros
que no me vengan de detrás.

El alguazel sin malicia,
el cuchiyó le hay dado,
Melizelda con malicia,
en su bel (medio) se lo enfincare.

Attias also preserves a medium-length version (4) which seems to serve as a link between the version just cited and the short version sung by Sabbatai Zebi. In the previously cited ballad the story is from Melisenda's point of view, ending with her going out into the night. The medium-length version shows how the story is continued, now from the point of view of the lover, Aryuelo (Arželo), and becoming nearly identical with the Zebi version after the introductory stanza is sung.

Esta noche, mis cabayeros,
durmí con una donzeya,
que en los días de mi días
no topí otro como eya.
Melizelda tiene por nombre,
Melizelda galana y beya.

A la abašada d'un río,
y a la subida d'un varo (vado),
encontrí con Melizelda,
la hiža del emperante.

Que venía de los baños,
de los baños de la mare,
de lavarse y entrenzarse,
y de mudarse una camiza.

Ansí traía su puerpo (cuerpo)
como la nieve sin pizare (pesar);
las sus caras coreladas (coloradas)
como la leche y la sangre.

Los sus cabeyicos rubios,
parecen sirmá (hilo de oro) de lavrare (bordar);
la su frente reluziente,
parece espežo de mirares (mirarse).

La su cežica (sus cejas) enarcada,
arcos ya son de tirares ;
la su nariz enpendolada (delgada)
pendolica de notares.

Los sus mušos corelados (labios colorados),
merjanicos (corales) de filares ;
los sus dientes chiquiticos,
perla d'enfilares.

Both the narrative and the assonance (a-e), except for a few irregularities, support our view that the short version which follows is a continuation of the longer one cited earlier, once we discount the first stanza as a borrowing from another Hispanic ballad. (5) The following version is the one sung by Sabbatai Zebi, according to Attias: (6)

Melizelda, Melizelda,
la hiža del emperante (emperador),
que venía de los baños,
de los baños a lavarse.

Ansí traía su puerpo
como roza en rozale ;
la su frente reluziente,
espada dulce cortare ;

la su cara alva, clara
como la leche y la sangre ;
la su cežica narcada,
como el arcol de tirante ;

los sus ožos son perticos,
parecen fino zabache (jet) ;
la su nariz perfilada,
pendolicas de notares ;

los sus bezos (lips) corelados,
parecen fino corale ;
la su boca agudica,
como un piñon a taparse ;

la su barva redondica,
manzanica de žugare (jugar) ;
la tavla de los sus pechos
a dos y a tres zugare.

It becomes fairly obvious, as the evidence is examined, that the ballad antedates the Expulsion from Spain, and must have been brought to Salonika by the exiles.

We generally assume a composition date prior to 1492 when a Spanish ballad is found among the exiled Jews as well as among some Spanish Peninsular collections. This dating will hold for the longer version, but we cannot be so certain of the dating of the shorter continuations of the ballad. The first known mention of the verse of «que venía (Melisenda) de los baños» dates from approximately 1560, (7) which means that one may assume an earlier date of composition for the ballad containing this opening line.

The date when Zebi's version was translated into Dutch (1667) (8) and the date of the beginning of the downfall of Zebi (1666) (9) also are significant in dating the ballad. Also, because Zebi's version was abbreviated, having lost much of its narrative, we may assume a somewhat earlier date for the original version.

Moreover, there are linguistic evidences of very early composition, such as the archaic *emperante* («emperor»), and other forms which were current in Old Spanish: *mientras* for «as long as», and *habe* for *ha*.

In Peninsular versions (10) the continuation of the narrative generally runs as follows: the girl goes to the palace of her lover, and gains her entrance to his bedchambre by describing herself as a *morica* from far away. In these versions she describes herself in language similar to that of the lover in the earlier-cited versions; this similarity makes it easy for us to believe that Zebi's version is adapted from the ones in which the girl describes herself. In the morning Count Aryuelo realizes he has been with the Emperor's daughter. He goes to the Emperor to confess, expecting to be given the death penalty, but, instead, he is forgiven, and the lovers are married.

Menéndez Pidal explains the origin of this story as follows (11):

El romance de Melisenda desarrolla una aventura repetida en muchas *Chansons de geste*. En el *Anseïs de Carthage*, por ejemplo, Lutisse entro en la camara de Anseïs, apaga los cirios que iluminan la estancia y se introduce en el lecho del caballero; el cual, al reconocerla después, se muestra también muy pesaroso, como el ayuelos (sic) del romance. El texto que doy, más completo que el conocido en las colecciones usuales, lo hallé en un pliego suelto de la Biblioteca Nacional de París.

Menéndez Pidal was the first critic to identify this ballad as the one sung by Zebi, although he first spoke of it as the longer narrative version. (12) Upon obtaining, through the services of Manrique de Lara, a Dutch translation of the ballad, he identified it with the shorter forms: (13)

Un pastor protestante holandés, que se hallaba en Esmirna en 1667, refiere que aquel Mesías entonaba, con alusiones místicas al *Cantar de los Cantares*, cierta canción amorosa española, de la cual da, traducidos al holandés, doce versos: Subiendo a un monte, / bajando por un valle, / me encontré a Meliselda, / la hija del emperador, / que venía del baño / de lavar sus cabellos. / Su rostro era resplandeciente / como una espada, / sus pestañas como un arco de acero, / sus labios como corales, / su carne como leche.

Menéndez Pidal feels that Zebi probably did not know of the longer forms of the narrative ballad. (14) Besides the religious, mystical use given to the shorter versions, the fact of finding so many versions in Salonika, none of which told the longer story, supports this view.

As we compare the ballads of Melisenda with the *Songs of Songs* (*Song of Solomon*), we are struck with their similarity. Again and again the writers on Zebi speak of his singing of Melisenda with mystical allusions to the *Song of Songs*, (15) in reference only to the shorter versions.

Interestingly, Chapter III of the *Song of Songs* is very much like our longer Melisenda ballad: the restlessness a night, searching the city for the lover until he is found, even to the watchman. Then follows Chapter IV with the detailed description of the physical beauty of the girl, from the lover's point of view, as in the Judaeo-Spanish versions, rather than from the girl's point of view, as in the Peninsular versions.

Thus, the total narrative falls into the same sequence, both in the *Song of Songs* and in our reconstructed version. Although we are reasonably certain that Zebi used only the shorter versions for his songs, the (perhaps unanswerable) question is bound to be raised: Was the whole ballad originally based on Chapters III and IV of the *Song of Songs*, rather than on the *Anseis de Carthage*? (16)

These «Melisenda» ballads may also be studied in connection with other Carolingian ballads (17) preserved by the Judaeo-Spaniards in exile. Here, we have limited our study to those aspects of «Melisenda» which add to the information already gathered together about Sabbatai Zebi.



NOTES

- (1) Attias, Moshé, *Romancero sefaradí, Romanzas y cantes populares en judeo-español*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Instituto Ben-Zewi, Universidad Hebrea, 2nd ed. with introduction in Spanish, 1961), Ballad 13a; cf. also Menéndez Pidal, Ramón, «Un viejo romance cantado por Sabattai Cevi,» *Medieval Studies in Honor of Jeremiah Denis Matthias Ford* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 185-190.
- (2) Cf. Attias, *op. cit.*, Ballad 33; Armistead, Samuel G. and Joseph E. Silverman, «A New Sephardic Romancero from Salonika,» *Romance Philology*, XVI, 59-82; Algazi, León, *Chants Séphardis* (London: World Sephardi Federation, 1958, 52ff; Danon, Abraham. «Recueil des romances judeo-espagnoles chantées en Turquie,» REJ, XXXII and XXXIII, romance 7; Durán, Agustín, *Romancero General* (Madrid: Rivadenegra, 1848-1851, Vols. X and XVI of BAE), Romance 322; Menéndez Pidal, *Flor Nueva de Romances viejos* (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe, Gl. Austral, 1963, p. 198.)
- (3) Attias, *op. cit.*, ballad 33.
- (4) *Ibid.*, ballad 13.
- (5) Cf. Menéndez Pidal, *Romancero tradicional*, vol. I (Madrid: Gredos, 1957), 222-223.
- (6) Attias, *op. cit.*, ballad 13a.
- (7) Menéndez Pidal, *Romancero Tradicional, loc. cit.*
- (8) *Ibid.*, 222; cf. also copy for note 2, p. 252.
- (9) Cf. Bernadete, José Mair, «Cultural Erosion Among the Levantine Jews,» *Homenaje a Millás Vallicrosa*, vol. I (Barcelona: CSIC, 1954), 141.
- (10) Cf. Durán, *op. cit.*
- (11) Menéndez Pidal, *Flor nueva*, p. 90; cf. also Entwistle, William, *European Balladry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 67, where he shows how Anseis may go back to the Bernardo legend.
- (12) Menéndez Pidal, «Catálogo del Romancero judeo-español,» *Cultura Española*, IV and V, ballad 28, note; cf. also Marcus, Jacob, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (New York: Meridian Press, 1960), pp. 261ff.
- (13) Menéndez Pidal, «Un viejo romance,» pp. 185-190; *idem*, *Romancero tradicional*, p. 222.
- (14) Cf. Menéndez Pidal, «Catálogo», ballad 28, where he first assumes the longer «Melisenda» to be that sung by Zebi; cf. also *idem*, «Un viejo romance», 185-190, where he shows why he decided in favor of the shorter versions; cf. also Marcus, *op. cit.*, pp. 261ff.
- (15) Cf. Menéndez Pidal, *Romancero tradicional, loc. cit.*, 222; cf. also Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, Vol. X (Leipzig: L. Schnauss, 1868), Chapters VI, VII, esp. p. 197.
- (16) Cf. Menéndez Pidal, *Flor nueva*, 90.
- (17) Cf. Attias, *op. cit.*, ballads 26, 27a.