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“A DISEASE OF THE IMAGINATION”: MAIMONIDES’ PRESENCE IN MEDIEVAL HEBREW LITERATURE (H)

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Scholars have already drawn attention to Maimonides’s hostility toward poetry as manifest through out his writings. To extant considerations I would like to add my notion that Maimonides’s denigration of poetry is also grounded in his overall gender perception.

Maimonides opposes poetry on logical grounds (it is contrary to “Truth”) and on psychological grounds (it derives from the “animal soul” and excites it). But for him the refutation of poetry is also moored in his systematically gendered ontology. The devaluation of poetry is a function of a total metaphysical hierarchy within which poetry is associated with all the inferior aspects of the system, with negativity, with absence—and with the female. On this theoretical basis, Maimonides also warns against songs that arouse “lust and fornication.” Poetry and music are “feminizing” as they evoke in the male typical feminine behaviors as excitability, irritability and emotionality.

It is accepted that these views of the Great Teacher contributed to the decline (both in terms of prestige and quantity) of Hebrew poetry in the thirteenth century. From this time on poetry is greatly replaced by the burgoining genre of the maqama. This genre of rhymed prose, mainly narrative and fictional, was considered – precisely for its rhyme – as poetry, with its practitioners called poets. **What was – or could have been – Maimonides’s attitude towards the *maqama*?** *Prima facie* it would seem that Maimonides would dismiss it just as he did with poetry. But, as a matter of fact, we know that he gladly accepted a *maqama* dedicated to him by his beloved student, Yosef ben Shime’on. Was Maimonides aware of the contradiction between his theoretical rejection of poetry and his practical acceptance of this poetic narrative, fictional, *maqama*? The answer lies in the contents rather than in form. With this *maqama* being an allegory, Maimonides could probably ignore the fictional erotic mashal and dwell exclusively on the spiritual nimshal. Hence, he considered allegory as legitimate, because being “not poetry.”

However, rhymed prose, allegorical and non-allegorical, was flourishing and imprints of Maimonidian ideas may be traced in it. The rest of my talk will review *maqamas* written in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Spain and Italy by Maimonides’s contemporaries/ disciples/admirers who incorporated his ideas about poetry and gender. (Among works considered will be: Alharizi’s *Tahkemoni*, Jacob ben Eleazar’s *Sefer ha-Meshalim*, Abraham Ibn Hasday’s *Ben hamelekh ve-ha-nazir*, Shem Tov Falaquera’s *Sefer ha-Mevakesh*, *Mahberot Immanuel ha-Romi*).