

Introduction: Through the Prism of Sepharad

Modern Nationalism, Literary History, and the Impact of the Sephardic Experience

Yael Halevi-Wise

In 2001, the Spanish novelist Antonio Muñoz Molina published a volume of loosely bound historical vignettes entitled *Sepharad*—a somewhat misleading title, considering that its narratives about communists and Nazis, Holocaust survivors, and unemployed Spaniards ostensibly have little to do with the actual history of Spain's Jews. Although the Sephardic experience occupies a small percentage of Muñoz Molina's book, Sepharad as a concept nonetheless hovers over all its historical junctures, binding them together.

This collection of essays about the history of Spain's Jews likewise focuses on Sepharad from a distance, obliquely, as a prism through which we examine different ways in which creative authors use the history and heritage of Spain's Jews to discuss their own national preoccupations at times of heightened political consciousness. With growing intensity from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, writers with completely different viewpoints from Germany, England, Latin America, North Africa, and even India found in Spain's roller-coaster history a useful metaphor, remarkably well suited to reimagining the image and political status of minorities in competing national agendas.¹ As is generally known, in 1492, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella asserted themselves against eight centuries of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula by establishing a policy of religious homogeneity that unraveled a multicultural balance of power—known as *convivencia*, or cohabitation—which, despite significant caveats, yielded many positive results for all three of the cultures involved, Christians, Muslims, and Jews.² The cataclysmic experience of Spain's Jews, who, after enjoying several centuries of (relatively) stable existence in Iberia, were caught up in a hysterical period of mass conversions and inquisitions,

2 Introduction

followed by a dramatic expulsion, has struck writers from completely different backgrounds—whether Sephardic or Ashknazic, Jewish or gentile—as a useful model for considering their own national and religious reconfigurations.

Although we approach the Sephardic experience obliquely—paying attention to how it has been strategically selected and even willfully misrepresented in interesting ways by writers from different backgrounds in a variety of times and places—our collection nevertheless remains grounded in the specific history and heritage of Spain's Jews and conversos.³ It thus differs from Muñoz Molina's attitude to Sepharad as a universal symbol of deracination and exile, so that from our point of view, Muñoz Molina's perspective becomes one possible variation of a phenomenon whose roots go back to the Enlightenment's attempts to reevaluate common attitudes to religion, ethnic minorities, and absolute forms of government.

Historical romances, which placed cultural identities in a comparative and historicized perspective, became the principal vehicles for the kind of politically engaged representations of Sepharad discussed in these pages. Primarily novelists, but also librettists, poets, and dramatists, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars became increasingly interested in showing how social systems that had reigned in the past could be reconfigured in relation to new attitudes toward the rights and responsibilities of states and individuals in modern polities. In this context, the cataclysmic experience of Spain's Jews at the end of the Middle Ages, turned into a model—occasionally even a gimmick—found to be especially good to think about when mulling over the birth and characteristics of modern nations.⁴

By the end of the eighteenth century, the clash between Enlightenment values and theocratic absolutism led to political platforms increasingly conceived not as God-given but rather as freely chosen according to rational principles. The status of all minorities, and notably that of Jews, then turned into an issue of widespread concern to writers, philosophers, and statesmen who sought to reconfigure a medieval society of orders into pluralistic nations governed according to modern ideas of progress. How to treat the Jews "rationally" became a major bone of contention at this time.⁵ And in an attempt to reevaluate old patterns of social relations between Jews and gentiles, the history of

Sepharad stood out as a particularly useful trope. Liberal intellectuals writing in the wake of the French Revolution regarded the theocratic absolutism that Spain chose at the end of the fifteenth century as a stark counterexample to the doctrine of religious tolerance that they were promoting. Spain and Portugal under the shadow of the Inquisition thus became a popular background for assessing different conceptions of sudden alienation, religious persecution, and split identity, projected into dramatic scenes of ruptured harmony, expulsion, inquisitorial trials, and marranism. To illustrate sephardism's literary and political characteristics, this introductory essay surveys such dramatic scenarios in the context of the Enlightenment's attitudes to despotism, and especially in the context of the cultural discourses that began to emerge from a counterclash between Enlightenment and romantic ideologies. This conflict between progressive and pluralistic agendas continues to generate tensions within liberal Western ideologies to this day.

Before launching into this historical survey, however, it is important to underscore in view of the current academic focus of Sephardic Studies, that until recently, the kind of sephardism examined here was found less in writings by Sephardim than in historical novels by Ashkenazi and gentile authors with no biographical links to Sepharad. Genealogical connections to Spain are therefore irrelevant to this study, except in those instances where Sephardic writers such as A. B. Yehoshua or Yehuda Burla deliberately use Sephardic history or their Sephardic heritage to promote cultural visions linked to their own ethnic backgrounds.

Discussions of actual Sephardic identity and its expedient appropriation are, of course, integral to most essays in this volume, as for example in Bernard Horn's analysis of Yehoshua's sephardism and Stacy Beckwith's assessment of Burla's modern Zionist Sephardic position. Yet even Horn's analysis of Sephardic elements in A. B. Yehoshua's novels positions this prominent Israeli author *away* from any narrow allegiance to his Sephardic ethnicity and stresses instead that Yehoshua's sephardism functions as an imaginative conceptual platform from which he promotes conversations across cultural barriers in ways that insist on sympathy for, and also from, other ethnicities, religions, and nations.

In our current cultural environment, it is rather to be expected that Sephardim would write historical sagas about their own "lineage"—and they do. The above-mentioned chapters attest to many such examples.

4 Introduction

However, this volume as a whole stresses an *unlikely* fascination with the history and heritage of Spain's Jews among writers from a wild variety of backgrounds: For why in the world should a Scotsman like Walter Scott or a British Indian fabulist with a fatwa on his head like Salman Rushdie concern themselves with Sephardic history? And why should the historical problems of Spain's conversos bother Homero Aridjis, a Mexican poet of Greek background, whose personal lineage bears no ostensible relationship to Sepharad? Here we are therefore less intrigued by the ethnic identity of Sephardim themselves than by the agendas of writers from diverse faiths, ethnicities, and national backgrounds who deliberately use the theme of Sepharad as a metaphor—as Edna Aizenberg has put it succinctly—through which to express ongoing preoccupations with political diversity in a variety of environments.

To define the scope of this project, we must therefore distinguish between sephardism as an expression of Sephardic ethnic identity and sephardism as a wider vehicle for representations of modern nationalism and postnationalism. In “Disappearing Origins: Sephardic Autobiography Today” (2007), Jonathan Schorsch confronts this issue head-on by confining his analysis of representations of Sephardic history to memoirs and autobiographical novels “by Jews who are not Ashkenazic”—an entirely justified choice in this case, given the extensive multilingual and international scope of this material alone.⁶ George Zucker similarly decided to focus on Sephardim as an ethnic group in *Sephardic Identity: Essays on a Vanishing Jewish Culture* (2005).⁷ However, if we deliberately move beyond Sephardic identity to consider the impact of Sephardic history on a variety of ethnic, religious, and national identities, how does our approach remain engaged with the sociology, folklore, and history of Sephardim and Mizrahim? For one thing, any comparative discussion of sephardism must rest on the bedrock of such research on Sepharad and Sephardim in order to anchor itself in a concrete knowledge of their history and heritage.⁸ It can in turn enrich Sephardic Studies by demonstrating that Sepharad occupies a far more central position within Western culture than has generally been realized. That the Sephardic experience exerted considerable impact on literary history, modern nationalism, and the general development of modernity is something that scholars of Jewish Studies have increasingly acknowledged.⁹ Yet only a wider awareness of sephardism

as a politicized literary metaphor can carry this awareness over to fields that intersect with Jewish Studies by showing that changing political epistemologies were negotiated in the modern imagination through a widespread interest, and occasionally even an obsession with Jews in general, and with Sephardic history in particular.

So how have creative writers imagined the Sephardic experience? What political and literary pressures have prompted their representations? What are they reacting against? To put it schematically: what exactly has been told, by whom, to whom, when, and where? To begin answering these questions—or at least give them some conceptual foundation and bibliographic coordinates—we offer twelve case studies of sephardism as a politicized literary phenomenon in key examples ranging from Germany, France, and England in the nineteenth-century to Latin America, North America, North Africa, and Asia in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. We approach sephardism as a form of literary expression that functions politically during heightened moments of historical consciousness in diverse national contexts. To keep our volume focused, we privilege historical fiction and drama over other forms of cultural expression such as historiography, folklore, or film, but this focus is not monolithic. We open, for instance, with Ismar Schorsch's identification of a German Jewish obsession with Sepharad among four interrelated venues of cultural expression: historical fiction, architecture, historiography, and liturgy.

The truth is that categorizations of all kinds tend to crumble when approached through the prism of sepharad: one religion folds into another, national boundaries are brushed aside in favor of supranational alliances, ethnic history intertwines with political history, and any series of historical events involving the Inquisition or the expulsion functions like a ready-made plot in a medieval setting. Sephardism is hence perfectly positioned to reconfigure conventional markers of identity by unsettling them through historical counterpoints: if Spain at the end of the Middle Ages tried to abolish religious pluralism, British novelists in the middle of the nineteenth century could use Sepharad either to promote ethnic diversity or to prove its undesirability; while a Marrano's identity could stand for treacherous falsity in one novel, in another it could symbolize a positive badge of steadfastness pushed to the point of martyrdom or a sign of persistent multiculturalism in the face of per-

secution. And recent cases of sephardism written from a postcolonial perspective enjoin us to altogether reconsider categories of ethnic identity and national politics. For example, the U.S. Latina novels that Dalia Kandiyoti analyzes blend Latin-American folklore into a North American platform of pluralism in ways that render obsolete traditional differences between Jews, Catholics, Hispanics, and Native Americans by historicizing them all through a Sephardic matrix.

Since sephardism functions as a politicized literary discourse, to trace its literary history is to dwell at least to some extent on the political histories of its different manifestations. This intimate link between literature and politics is illustrated most poignantly in two of our main examples—one from Victorian England in the middle of the nineteenth century and the other from Argentina after the fall of the military junta in 1983. The first example relates to Benjamin Disraeli, a convert from Judaism who became Queen Victoria's favorite prime minister; the second involves Marcos Aguinis, a patriotic Argentinean neurosurgeon, psychoanalyst, political analyst, and prize-winning novelist, who from the platform of his Jewish background has written extensively about Argentina's prospects as a democratic nation. Within their entirely different national and personal contexts, Disraeli and Aguinis participated vigorously in the most important political reconfigurations of their countries, while simultaneously writing best-selling novels depicting the history of the Jews of Spain and its colonies as a cultural model, against which their own societies were invited to reinterpret themselves.

As Michael Ragussis demonstrates, Disraeli's public image was intimately linked to Sephardic history, not only because he felt proud of his Sephardic heritage and "imbedded stories of Jewish persecution and flight under the Inquisition in an extremely popular series of novels," but also because he himself was eventually subjected "to the charge of crypto-Judaism."¹⁰ Sephardic heritage remained a badge of distinction for Disraeli, which he hoped would help make the public admire him, though the public was often ambivalent.

Marcos Aguinis likewise linked Sephardic history to his country's democratization process. After serving as secretary of culture, he published a highly acclaimed historical novel, *La gesta del marrano* (1991), which details the operations of the Inquisition in colonial Latin America as a way of bringing Latin Americans to realize that their current

difficulties with democracy and pluralism are in part ingrained in the continent's cultural heritage, as Edna Aizenberg shows in this volume.

Whether it seeks to promote nationalism, or to unhinge it, as in the postmodern and postcolonial cases examined by Dalia Kandiyoti and Efraim Sicher, sephardism tends to operate in the junctures between political systems. Its heroes and heroines are usually on the move, crossing borders. In fact, among the creators of sephardism, we find many figures of in-betweenness, such as the octroon playwright Victor Séjour, who traveled from Louisiana to Paris in the nineteenth century to stage a play about Spanish conversos, or intellectuals from around the Mediterranean who immigrated to Paris during the second half of the twentieth century, rekindling the buzz about marranism, as Judith Roumani shows regarding the idea of Sepharad among overlapping generations of francophone Jewish writers.

Spain's roller-coaster history at the end of the Middle Ages offers a malleable model that adapts itself quite conveniently to the various interests and levels of historical awareness of different authors. But when we assess discrepancies between historical data on Sepharad and these literary representations, we must also take into account that historians themselves have sometimes been ideologically tendentious, and that writers of fiction have sometimes tried to correct this. In *The Vale of Cedars* (1850), for example, Grace Aguilar sought to correct an influential account of the Spanish Inquisition written by John Stockdale, who systematically occluded the fact that throughout its four hundred years of operation, the Spanish Inquisition's primary targets had been descendants of Jews. Stockdale's history had been written to reinforce the Protestant character of the British nation at a time when Catholics and Jews were hoping for enfranchisement. Stockdale, as Michael Ragussis shows, preferred to keep both of these groups out of his nation, and so, in writing about the Inquisition, he tried to set Anglicans against Catholics without enfranchising Jews.

A stranger divergence from historical data occurs in Heinrich Heine's misrepresentation of Isaac Abarbanel, generally considered to be an icon of Jewish steadfastness at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Heine, however, turned him into a wishy-washy "nephew" who has little in common with the historical Abarbanel. As Jonathan Skolnik explains, Heine's view of Abarbanel did not derive just from

the poet's own intimate experience with assimilation and conversion: it also reflects an unfortunate scarcity of historical data at a time when Heine's peers in the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden (Society for Jewish Culture and Science) were just beginning to assemble the body of scholarship that later became the basis for modern scholarship on Jewish topics. Skolnik's essay thus reveals that one *can* learn history from Heine's unfinished historical novel *Der Rabbi von Bacherach* (*The Rabbi of Bacherach*) (1824–40), but in this case it is primarily the history of Heine's dilemmas in their contemporary context rather than Sephardic history per se.

On the other hand, many works of literary sephardism do offer accurate representations of the Sephardic experience in ways that both complement and enhance reliable historiographic sources. Homero Aridjis's description of the conversionist mobs of 1391 and Marcos Aguinis's portrayal of the Inquisition's inner mechanisms especially come to mind in this respect. Yet even in the hands of the most scrupulous and knowledgeable historical novelists, who spend months poring over archival material, all portrayals of Sephardic history are necessarily selective because of the aesthetic and structural conventions of literary plots and the extraordinary length and diversity of the Sephardic experience. Elena Romero's complaint that Ladino publications on Spanish topics dwell disproportionately on expulsion and inquisition, rather than on Sephardic luminaries or on Spain as a country in its own right,¹¹ makes sense when we keep in mind that the full spectrum of the Sephardic experience really does span periods of *convivencia* as well as inquisition, and that even the impressive creative output of Jews, Muslims, and Christians before the expulsion pales in comparison to the Golden Age of Spanish literature that followed the expulsion, in which converso authors and translators played a significant role both within Spain and abroad.

Sepharad Among the -isms

Sephardism as a politicized literary device belongs to a family of cultural discourses that from the end of the eighteenth century, and with renewed intensity in our own times, has tended to compare historical periods, ethnicities, and nations with an eye to reassessing ideas about

national reform and progress. Like its cousins medievalism, hispanism, and orientalism, the discourse of sephardism grew out of a tension between the Enlightenment's desire to reexamine all that had been thought in the past, and romanticism's distrust of the Enlightenment's idea of progress, which it sought to soften and even bypass by noting commonalities among different cultures and historical periods. One point of contact between the Enlightenment's call for change and romanticism's penchant for mythologization plays itself out in their mutual fascination with the Middle Ages as a counterpoint to modernity and progress.

As Howard Bloch and Stephen Nichols stress in *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (1996), "modernism was the hidden agenda of medieval studies. . . . The modern was a way of distinguishing between what was current and what was old or ancient . . . 'les anciens contre les modernes.'" An ostensible obsession with history thus operated "in the service of the present"—whether the present was perceived as already superior or in need of urgent repair.¹² Within literary history, sephardism's kinship with medievalism becomes particularly apparent in the Gothic novel. Often set in Spain or the Mediterranean, and regularly featuring Jews, though rarely in a positive light, the Gothic novel favored descriptions of inquisitorial dungeons and torture chambers, depicted as a threat against which modern forms of authority were implicitly compared.¹³

Sephardism of course intersects widely with orientalism as well, for both these discourses stereotype members of another race, faith, or ethnicity as a means of defining the self by comparison. Edward Said famously defined this type of rhetoric as a Western strategy for coming to terms with the Orient by aggressively misrepresenting Arab and Muslim cultures in order to dominate them.¹⁴ Dovetailing with such politicized attempts to mythologize "the Arab," sephardism likewise sets out to assess and reconfigure "the Jew," whether s/he is conceived as an exotic Oriental hailing from another time and place or as an integral but nonetheless estranged participant in the development of Western culture.¹⁵ However, sephardism is not only a type of orientalism: it is also a generator and catalyst for modern notions of the Orient. In *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (1987), Bernard Lewis notes that the nineteenth century's rediscovery of Al-Andalus emerged from a wider "cult of Spain, which formed an important component of the romantic movement."¹⁶ Muslim and Jewish historians then united to minimize

the negative aspects of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula, stressing instead its periods of successful multiculturalism. This idealization of Islamic tolerance (which, in this volume, Ismar Schorsch discusses in relation to a broader German Jewish complex of Sephardic supremacy), was fostered particularly by nineteenth-century German Jewish scholars, “who used it as a stick with which to beat their Christian neighbours.”¹⁷

But among the politicized literary discourses that emerged in the nineteenth century, hispanism is no doubt sephardism’s closest relative. One might even say that sephardism is a branch of hispanism, since representations of Jews or conversos in medieval or early modern Spanish settings appear whenever there is a larger interest in Spanish history, but the reverse does not necessarily follow. Thus, Alberto Gerchunoff’s appropriation of a Sephardic heritage for himself and his peers in 1910, within the framework of Argentina’s centennial celebration of its independence from Spain, corresponds to a general period of Latin American rapprochement with the mother country after a century of wariness.¹⁸ In contrast, sephardism had an unusually low profile in France, although hispanism flourished there throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831)—that delectable historical novel about Paris in the Middle Ages, better known as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—places an inquisitorial trial at the center of its plot, as does Walter Scott’s influential *Ivanhoe*. However, Hugo replaces *Ivanhoe*’s Jewess with a gypsy named Esmeralda; through her he activates both the “black” and “white” legends associated with Spain—an inquisitorial torture chamber and an eroticized flamenco-dancing gypsy with a Spanish name. Thus, an orientalized hispanism undoubtedly operates here, but since Hugo makes no reference to a Jewish subject, there is no sephardism.

Notwithstanding this last example, hispanism, medievalism, judaism, and orientalism were frequently intertwined in the cultural imaginations of nineteenth-century intellectuals, as demonstrated in the following remark by a Harvard professor of modern languages who, upon travelling to Spain in 1878, found it to be “as *primitive* in some ways as the books of *Moses* and as *oriental*.”²⁰ The broadened definition of hispanism proposed by Richard Kagan—not only a “study of the language, literature, and history of Spain by foreigners,” but also an analysis of “studies in Spanish art, music, and folklore”²¹—dovetails

with George Zucker's definition of Sephardic Studies as an academic endeavor that has been pursued for centuries, but has only recently been recognized as an academic field of inquiry: "The field, like the Sephardim themselves, refuses to be bound by limits set by outsiders—in this case disciplinary limits. The inherently interdisciplinary nature of Sephardic Studies . . . [ranges] from historical and sociological studies through Sephardic philosophy, language, literature, and the performing arts."²²

William Prescott's famous remark in 1837 that "English writers have done more for the illustration of Spanish history than for that of any other, except their own," which opens Michael Ragussis's study of Victorian representations of the Inquisition (in this volume), can be best understood in relation to a nineteenth-century ideology in which sephardism and hispanism vitally intersected.²³ Both these cultural discourses, along with medievalism and orientalism, emerged from the romantic movement's desire to *reconsider* the Enlightenment's revision of the past as a counterpoint to the present. Whereas for some writers, Spain symbolized religious fanaticism, a preindustrial resistance to modernity, and an opposition to progress, for others—particularly in Germany, looking toward Spain in opposition to France—"Spain was becoming the country of romantic yearning . . . [there was a] reversal of traditional attitudes towards Spain . . . motivated by a desire to seek an alternative to the cultural and literary values propagated by the enlightenment."²⁴ Even today, subtle differences within *liberal* Western ideologies continue to unfold through this tension between the Enlightenment's notion of progress and romanticism's idealization of cultural differences; the Jews' status sits uncomfortably in the midst of this crux.

The literary representation of cultural and historical differences that emerged from this tension—widely disseminated, as we shall shortly see, through Walter Scott's historical romances—took the shape of sephardism, hispanism, orientalism, and medievalism, with a growing crescendo toward the middle of the nineteenth century. Like orientalism, sephardism sets up a horizontal comparison between two or more cultures, but like medievalism or a historicized hispanism, it also goes "down into history" (as Judith Roumani puts it), to construct a "vertical" comparison between cultures in different epochs.

From its beginnings, no matter whether it took the form of warning scenes of persecution or idealized visions of *convivencia*, sephardism

tended to examine the consequences of political change at a time when change had become expected and possible in an age of revolutions. In this sense, sephardism participates in what Susannah Heschel calls “Jewish Studies as Counterhistory”: an expanded and refined awareness of ideological positions not only within Judaism but also within all the cultural positions with which Judaism intersects. As Heschel notes, Jewish scholars have been investigating and criticizing the construction of Judaism and its politics for over a century, but have yet to develop a concerted response to a “master narrative of Western history, which is rooted in traditions of Christian religious supremacy.”²⁵ By positioning representations of Judaism among intersecting representations of orientalism, hispanism, and medievalism, we can identify recurrent attitudes toward Jews and Jewish history in Western culture, and in this manner contribute to the counterhistorical enterprise that Heschel advocates.

Seminal projects such as Garb and Nochlin’s *The Jew in the Text* (1995); Cheyette and Marcus’s *Modernity, Culture and ‘the Jew’* (1998); Galchinsky, Biale, and Heschel’s *Insider/Outsider* (1998); and Sander Gilman’s many volumes on self-constructions and representations of Jews have established a critical set of parameters through which to discuss the complicated attitudes that have shaped representations of Jews and Judaism in Western culture.²⁶ With the advantage of being relatively more focused on a single, albeit complex, historical paradigm, this volume similarly brings forward the multivalenced cultural perspectives of creative writers who have emphasized different aspects of Spanish Jewish history to express their particular visions of national identity and progress. Thus, issues that are vital for understanding evolving Western ideologies of multicultural legitimacy and national identity can be productively observed across sephardism’s thematic and political spectrum. This is especially true regarding representations of conversos or Marranos, for if Jews in general “occupy a position of ambivalence and ambiguity that functions as a kind of counterhistory to the multicultural account of the West,” as Heschel underscores,²⁷ then the alleged dynamism of the Marrano—one of sephardism’s main constructs, discussed later in some detail—typifies this conceptual ambiguity by functioning as a sign of persistent multiculturalism within all sorts of competing national particularisms in the modern world.

Charting Sephardism's Literary and Political History

If we chart the most prominent cases of sephardism between 1800 and 2010 by their dates and places of publication, we notice two principal clusters (see figure on next page).

The first cluster occurs in England and Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century, and the second globally toward the last two decades of the twentieth century. In between, Alberto Gerchunoff and his neo-Sephardic Argentinean friends remind us of the physical transition between Europe and colonial environments, into which Old World literary and ideological models were imported. North African francophone writers similarly draw our attention to a converse movement of postcolonial subjects toward Europe. And the interruption of publications in Yiddish and Ladino in large centers of Jewish life such as Warsaw and Salonika marks the obliteration of these communities during the Holocaust.

With mounting insistence toward the middle of the nineteenth century, sephardism took the shape of historical romances responding to the new possibilities of political change made possible by an age of revolutions. Even more than the Dutch Republic's informal doctrine of tolerance during the seventeenth century, or the United States Constitution of 1787, the French Revolution's legislation of freedom of thought and civic equality at the end of the eighteenth century struck intellectuals across Europe and Latin America as an antithesis to the religious and political totalitarianism Spain had legislated at the end of the fifteenth century—and, as demonstrated by Prescott's remark, intellectuals in the United States likewise conceived of their own modernizing values in opposition to Spain. Whether they viewed these revolutionary developments with admiration or horror, writers across Europe and the Americas felt impelled to examine their own political identities and national prospects in light of modern possibilities of political reform, social liberalism, and religious emancipation. This imaginative impulse redoubled during the liberal revolutions of 1848 known as the Spring of Nations, when so many revolutionary groups around Europe tried to abolish absolutist regimes. The first wave of historical romances, operas, plays, and epic poems featuring the history of Sepharad took shape in this heady climate of political ferment and ideological transition.