

Mexican and Jewish Identity in *Herejía*, Sabina Berman's Play on Luis de Carbajal and the Inquisition¹

By

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Mexico is a nation with a restricted definition of nationality. The French cultural historian Jacques Lafaye defines Mexican nationality in terms of geography and religion: "Mexico is the combination of geographical zones and of ethnic communities which have in common the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Mexico City as an urban force."³ On the basis of such a definition, one must agree with Judith Laikin Elkin's comment

The centrality of race to the concept of *Mexicanidad* and the impossibility of Jews being included in *la raza* raise impassable barriers for Mexican Jews.⁴

By returning to the colonial period and dramatizing the particular experiences of the Carbajal family, Berman reminds her Mexican audience about the complexities of the Jewish presence in Mexico. Jews have been present since the inception of 'Mexico' (that is, that nation formed from the union of indigenous and European races), but their minority status based on religious and ethnic distinctions has made them all but invisible in the official national history. In focusing on the experiences of the Jews in colonial Mexico as they face the terror of the Inquisition, Berman seems to be in agreement with the historian Anita Novinsky, when she remarks that "[i]t is impossible, to begin with, to speak of Jews in Latin America during the colonial period without mentioning the influence of the Inquisition. It was the reality of the Inquisition that oriented the destiny of the Jews ..."⁵ By electing to call her play *Herejía*, Berman recalls immediately the historical religious subtext: the Inquisition's persecution of those whose adherence to church dogma departed from established or accepted norms.⁶ Because of the importance of the historical subtext, I believe it is useful to review some of the pertinent aspects of the history of Jews in colonial Mexico as a way to appreciate the play's impact and significance for contemporary Mexico.

Contrary to popular opinions, there is documented evidence that Jews arrived in New Spain from the very onset of the colonial period.⁷ In *Los judíos en la Nueva España*, Alfonso Toro states:

Fueron muchos los israelitas que pasaron al Nuevo Mundo, y que tuvieron parte en su conquista y descubrimiento, asi como en la formación de la sociedad colonial, pues se le encontraron en todas las clases sociales, ejerciendo toda clase de profesiones y oficios.

[there were many Israelites who went to the New World and who took part in its conquest and discovery as well as in the formation of colonial society; moreover, they could be found in all the social classes, performing all kinds of professions and occupations]⁸

Despite this acknowledgement that Jews had arrived in the ‘New World’ along with Columbus and had managed to persist in different colonies throughout the period of Spanish rule and into the era of national independence, the numbers and practices of the Jewish people intercalated among other peoples had received little attention in Latin American historiography until quite recently, as the investigations of Judith Laikin Elkin document.⁹ As one of the many marginalized ‘Others’ in Latin America, they remained relatively hidden as a subject of discourse for reasons that may be labeled as much pragmatic as historical and cultural. According to Spanish beliefs in the colonial period, “the religious view of life was extremely powerful, [so] it was easy to believe that a religiously different group was inferior.”¹⁰ While it is well known that Spanish Jews were forced by law in 1492 either to leave Spain or to accept conversion to Catholicism, they were also prohibited by the edict of 1523 from officially immigrating to the ‘New World’ as practicing Jews. Ever since the conquest religious issues and politics “have been linked closely” and the Catholic Church has long been identified with authoritarian power structures in Latin America to the detriment of any group with different beliefs.¹¹

Subject to prejudice, discrimination, and segregation, members of the Jewish community often found it wise to avoid visibility that could lead to victimization by the officials in power. Many lived as crypto-Jews, or those who appeared on the surface to follow the beliefs and rituals of the Catholic Church as New Christians but maintained their adherence to the Mosaic code of law in secret, in fear of the Inquisition. Because crypto-Jews only feigned formal assimilation and union with the majority, they were called ‘marranos’ (a pejorative word derived from ‘pigs’ that connotes a false profession of belief). Elkin observes that to this day, “Jewish marginality in Latin America expresses itself in a reluctance to

submit to scholarly inquiry for fear that the results of any study will be misinterpreted and turned against Jews collectively.”¹² She also adds that the Mexican Jewish community “has proved to be the most resistant” rather than the most accessible to North American (and I would add, Hispanic) scholars (137). Just as no new scholarship appeared on the Mexican Jewish community until the 1980s, relatively little was written about their presence as writers or as literary figures: both Jewish Argentine writers and the presence of Jewish motifs in Argentine literature have been studied in far greater detail.¹³ Although Berman is not the first Mexican writer to deal with Jewish motifs and experiences, she may well be the first to present *on stage* in Mexico both the Inquisition and its particular effects on a real family. She writes her play at a time in Mexican cultural history (post 1970s) when revisionist history has become the prevalent and acceptable

perspective.¹⁴ In the same manner that *Aguila O sol* questioned the myths and motifs of the conquest, *Herejia* challenges the doctrine of religious orthodoxy. She does not, however, repeat the same irreverent and cynical tone, but deals with the serious topic in a solemn and sober manner.

The Inquisition as a dramatic topic has rarely been treated. A comparison of *Herejia* with one of the more famous plays on the subject, *O santo inquerito* (1966), [The Holy Inquiry] by the Brazilian Alfredo Dias Gomes, shows that Berman's treatment is rooted in specific aspects of Jewish culture.¹⁵ While it is not necessary that an author be of Jewish descent or background to deal with Jewish subjects, one notes that Dias Gomes uses Jewish characters in the universal tradition of the stage Jew, as studied by Ellen Schiff in *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982). Like Berman, Dias Gomes makes use of a recorded historical event. In the mid-1700s in Paraiba, Brazil, a secret Jewish community consisting of over forty-eight members was discovered and denounced to the Inquisition. According to Anita Novinsky, "One woman, Guiomar Nunes, was burned at the stake. She became the inspiration for a play by Dias Gomes, one of Brazil's greatest writers."¹⁶ In Dias Gomes's play the Jewish woman, renamed Branca Dias, is accused and convicted of heresy, specifically of being a crypto-Jew, and burned at the stake for refusing to recant. Dias Gomes does not incorporate specific sociocultural behavioral elements that would distinguish the family as particularly Jewish in their actions. The play makes references to the general historical conditions that affected the Jews of Spain and Portugal as a result of the Edict of Expulsion of 1492, and to the practices of the Inquisition.¹⁷

The characterization of Branca and her father, however, fits the literary stereotype of the "belle Juive" and her repulsive father.¹⁸ Dias Gomes changes the name of the historical character from 'Guiomar Nunes' to 'Branca' or 'White' to show her purity and innocence: the use of the common surname Dias (not unintentionally, perhaps, an echo of part of the author's own name) raises her to a universal figure and encourages her identification not as "only a Jewess" but as "more than a Jew," for Dias Gomes considers her a symbol of all oppressed peoples and not the icon of Jewish persecution. Branca is described as the beautiful and innocent daughter of the crypto-Jew Samuel, who hides from his daughter her Jewish origins. Her relationship to the stereotype of the "belle Juive" is emphasized further when her innocent sensuality is used as the excuse for labeling her a heretic. Branca applies mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to Padre Bernardo to save him from drowning; when the priest realizes his own sexual attraction to her, he accuses her of heresy to mask his lustful feelings.

It is only after Branca is accused by Padre Bernardo of being a heretic that she is told the family secret: her grandfather had left Lisbon as a New Christian but had practiced Judaism in secret, as did her father. According to Branca, she was raised a Christian and so identifies herself as Christian:

Mas que querem? Que eu me considero uma herege, sem ser? . . . Não fui convertida, nasci cristão e como cristão tenho vivido até hoje," (100, 102)

[But what do you want: Should I consider myself a heretic although I am not? . . . I was not a convert, I was born a Christian and as a Christian I have lived to this day.]

Despite her definition of religious identity, as the daughter of a Jew she is considered Jewish by her accusers. However, no mention is made of her mother, whose Jewishness would be required for Branca to be considered a Jew by Mosaic Law. Dias Gomes does not take into consideration the Jewish need for maternal identity to be established in order for ethnic identity to be assumed; the point is ignored in the development of the play's actions, since the concern is not for religious accuracy but for symbolic efficacy. Branca is meant to be a symbol of all those who are persecuted by a totalitarian system. Dias Gomes uses the Holy Office to symbolize any dictatorial power structure that brooks no opposition. Because of Brazil's repressive political system at the time of the play's production, the playwright was able to avoid censorship and at the same time present his critique of oppression by using the practices of the Inquisition as an allegory for his contemporary situation.

Despite the polarity set up between the Inquisition and the Jew by the nature of the topic, in the actual enactment of the play no specific Judaic practices are presented on stage that would identify them semiotically through gestures or through the use of Hebrew, a direct linguistic sign that Berman employs. The spectator must accept each character's word or definition of religious affiliation, since only by linguistic labeling are they identifiable as Jews. It is ironic that Dias Gomes falls into the trap of repeating a stereotyped view of the Jew in a play that is meant to glorify religious freedom and question "whether or not the church has the right to legislate beliefs, restrict liberty or demand conformity to a particular set of religious principles."¹⁹ Branca, the daughter of a Jewish father, is treated as a heroine, a strong and steadfast figure who is willing to die for her beliefs--not for any abiding faith in Judaism, but for her belief in religious freedom. Her refusal to submit to torture, to acquiesce to persecution, is contrasted with the behavior of her father. Although he admits to his daughter that he is a crypto-Jew, he readily recants his faith under the threat of torture. He is derived from the same stereotype noted by Schiff for English drama, as "the repulsive father ... a creature accursed and apart."²⁰ The portrayal of Samuel, the professing Jew, as a despicable character, while the true heroes are the martyred Branca and her Christian fiancé Augusto, certainly continues a negative characterization of Jews that deconstructs the playwright's ostensibly tolerant perspective and plea for religious freedom.

In contrast to Dias Gomes's stereotyped account of Jews and his metaphorical use of the Inquisition, Berman defies stereotyping by emphasizing particular Jewish experiences.²¹ She emphasizes the Jewish identity of her characters by including not only the Hebrew language, but also the enactment of important events in the Jewish life cycle from birth to death. It is not just that a casual reference is made to circumcision, a wedding, a funeral, or the weekly Sabbath observances, but that the appropriate linguistic and kinesic signs are included on stage as verification of the Jewish nature of her characters. She documents the *religious* practices in the same way that she makes use of the ample primary sources in the archives of the Inquisition and the historical documents that relate to the lives of the Carbajal family: Berman uses the techniques of

documentary theatre to validate the somewhat controversial material, and to suggest her own dispassionate perspective and the explosive topic of the Carbajals' persecution and torture. Although the author provides a note to the play's script that cites the specific texts she used in the forming of the play, she does not use a realistic form of presentation nor a chronological order, but instead offers a theatricalized, or Brechtian, version of the information contained in documents: that is, she has selected key events that serve as synecdoches for the entire historical record of the Carbajal family. Instead of following a chronological development of events, she organizes the episodes to stress thematic developments. The first and last scenes, for example, portray acts of torture so there is no way the audience can forget the role of the Inquisition. She encourages the audience to witness events and maintain at all times the perspective of the judge, for the impartial judge was the participant missing from the drama of the Inquisition at the time its rites were performed.

A careful reading of the play text reveals that Berman was conscious that she was presenting material that would not be familiar to the general non-Jewish Mexican audience, to whom her play was addressed as much as it was to a Jewish audience. For example, it is important that Luis de Carbajal, el Mozo (the Younger, as he is called to distinguish him from his uncle the conquistador) reveal his decision to become circumcised as a sign of his firm adherence to Mosaic laws. In the scene that depicts his circumcision, he and his sister Viviana are alone in the countryside, and Viviana is translating into Spanish the Hebrew words of Bible an expository technique that fits in well with the plot's trajectory as well as with the audience's need to understand the action in Spanish. As Viviana reads the biblical injunction that commands Abraham to submit to circumcision as a sign of his acceptance of God, Luis goes through the actions himself. The stage directions indicate that he is behind a palm tree as he performs the circumcision, and Viviana and the audience hear him groan as a verification of the act. This sacred Jewish rite is not portrayed as a barbaric bloodletting, as the tortures of the Inquisition will be presented, but as a positive and joyous sign of consent, a confirmation of his Jewish identity. Berman's dramatic technique stresses the Jewish perspective, for Luis cries and laughs at the same time (*Llora y ríe*, 185), and his own perspective is immediately verified when a chorus of people shout "*Mazal Tov. Buena suerte. Felicidades*," (185); [*Mazal Tov. Good luck. Congratulations*]. The light dims on the scene of the circumcision and it is replaced by a wedding scene. As the light on stage grows stronger, the voices of acclamation grow mute, but clearly the clamor of congratulations applies both to the act of circumcision and to the wedding, a universally extolled act. Although weddings are common in both the Jewish and Christian worlds, the marriage ceremony presented on stage incorporates specific signs that mark it as a Jewish wedding: a 'hupa' is brought out, a rabbi performs the ceremony in front of witnesses, and the groom breaks a glass as the final gesture that the service is completed. It is significant that in the published play script Berman offers an explanatory note for the reader about the nature of the 'hupa' (186) that the members of the theatrical audience would not need since they would be witnessing the use of the actual object on stage.

Berman makes frequent use of the blending technique noted above, in which the action of one scene leads into the stage business of the next scene. The two scenes need not be related chronologically but are juxtaposed because of

thematic relevance. Another good example is found in the linkage of scenes eight and nine. The wife of the conquistador Luis de Carbajal, Doña Guiomar, is reviewing aspects of Judaic rituals with her niece Doña Isabel. The religious song they chant at the end of their scene is picked up in the following scene in which Luis de Carbajal, el Mozo is shown to be imprisoned for his judaizing practices. The stage directions describe him in the Jewish stance of prayer so distinct from the traditional Catholic kneeling position:

Calabozo. Luis de Carbajal, el Mozo, agacha y levanta y agacha el torso, en el movimiento usual de los judíos cuando rezan. Con voz baja continúa la oración que doña Isabel y doña Guiomar entonaban en la escena anterior. (164-165)

[Prison, Luis de Carbajal the Younger bends and raises and bends his body again, repeating the movements associated with Jewish prayer. In a low voice he continues the prayer that Doña Isabel and Doña Guiomar sang in the preceding scene.]

Luis notes that the light of the stars have entered his cell, signaling that the Sabbath has begun: his memory of his mother's prayers are recreated on stage when in a corner of the cell Doña Francisca appears and lights the Sabbath candles. The audience hears her recite the blessing in Hebrew, just as later in the scene another member of the family will intone the Kiddush, or the sanctification of the wine, and the blessing over the challah (165-66). Each character reproduces authentic aspects of Jewish ritual that are still performed today. By means of such a technique, the spectators witness not only the continuity of certain Jewish practices on stage, but the documentary context encourages them to think of the continuity of the actions beyond the stage, into real life. By presenting on stage a vivid reenactment of the particularities of Jewish life for both the men and women of the Carbajal family, Berman rescues them from their status of stereotypes. When she brings this marginalized group out of the wings into the spotlight, making visible their oppression, she also helps to defeat the objective of the Inquisition to silence and eliminate religious differences from the definition of Hispanic identity.

Berman's revisionist enterprise encompasses more than the decentering of Mexican national identity. She deconstructs some of the popular myths about Jews in Mexico and the true motives of the orthodoxy required by the Inquisition. She includes information that confirms some contemporary revisionist perspectives on the motives of the Inquisition, exposing its representatives not only as a vengeful "thought-police corps" as Dias Gomes also argues, but as a covetous economic power.²² Although there is evidence that the conquistador himself was a sincere convert to Catholicism, and he is presented in that way in *Herejía*, the play action shows that the motivations for the persecution of the family include interest in their wealth and extensive land holdings, as well as personal jealousies and animosities.

In *Herejía* Berman has created a text that exhibits her dual cultural and national identity and that strives to be true to both facets. She rereads the past to integrate into the official national record episodes that many would prefer to ignore or forget. *Herejía*, like *Aguila O sol*, exposes the lie inherent in the concept that Mexican cultural identity is a single, monotone, hegemonic voice. Moreover, in the clash between orthodoxy and

individual differences, Berman offers multiple centers of audience identification.

Herejía is a work of resurrection, a play that reverses the official record by turning legends and icons back into living human beings. The historical victory of the repressive Inquisition is proven ephemeral not only by the presence of the play text that gives voice to a people who were meant to be silenced, but also by the presence of an author whose identity is both Mexican and Jewish.

Notes

¹ This article is a version of Sandra M. Cypess's "Ethnic Identity in the Plays of Sabina Berman," which appeared originally in *Tradition and Innovation: Reflections on Latin American Jewish Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), edited by Robert DiAntonio and Nora Glickman, and for which we gratefully acknowledge permission to publish this abbreviated version. We hope that our reproduction of this seminal essay will inspire further studies on Sephardic topics related to Latin America. It should also be noted that Berman revised *Herejía* and renamed it *En nombre de Dios*.

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³ John Leddy Phelan, "Review of *Quetzalcóatl et Guadalupe, la formation de la conscience nationale au Mexique*" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 55.1 (1975), 501.

⁴ Judith Laikin Elkin, "The Evolution of the Latin American-Jewish Communities," in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, ed. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx (Boston: Allen & Unwin, . 1987), 314.

⁵ Anita Novinsky, "Jewish Roots of Brazil," in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, 34.

⁶ Some historians of the Inquisition believe that economic factors and political considerations as much as religious issues influenced the selection of victims. See Richard E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 5; Anita Novinsky, "Jewish Roots of Brazil," note 4 above.

⁷ See Seymour Liebman, *New World Jewry, 1493-1825: Requiem for the Forgotten* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982).

⁸ Alfonso Toro, *Los judíos en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Publicaciones del AGN, 1932), as quoted by Rafael Heliodoro Valle, "Judíos en México," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía* 81: 89 (1936), 222.

⁹ See Elkin, "Latin America's Jews: A Review of Sources," *Latin American Research Review* 20.2 (1985), 124-41; also, Elkin and Merkx note in their Preface: "Scholarly

research on Latin American Jewry has only recently come of age," *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, appears in note 3, ix.

¹⁰ George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger, *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination* 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 107.

¹¹ Daniel H. Levine, "Religion, Society and Politics: States of the Art;" *Latin American Research Review* 16.3 (1981), 185.

¹² Elkin, "Latin American Jews," 129.

¹³ See such works as Naomi Lindstrom, *Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989); Saúl Sosnowski, "Contemporary Jewish-Argentine Writers: Tradition and Politics," *Latin American Literary Review* 6:12 (1978): 1-14; and in Spanish, Leonardo Senkman, *La identidad judía en la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pádes, 1983), and *The Jewish Image in Brazilian and Argentine Literature*, (unpublished dissertation) New York University, 1983.

¹⁴ See Thomas Benjamin, "The Leviathan on the Zócalo," *Latin American Research Review*: 20.3 (1985), 2V.

¹⁵ For critical articles on "O santo inqùerito" written in English, see Sandra M. Cypess, "The Inquisition and the Jew in Latin American Drama," *New Horizons in Sephardic Studies* ed. Yedida Stillman and George Zucker (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); Leon F. Lyday, "The Theater of Alfredo Dias Gomes," *Dramatists in Revolt* Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard, eds. (Austin: University Texas Press, 1985) 221-242; George W. Woodyard, "A Metaphor for Repression; Two Portuguese Inquisition Plays," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 10.1 (1973): 68-75.

¹⁶ Novinsky, 42, note 10.

¹⁷ For an informative review of the Inquisition's role in Brazil, in addition to Novinsky's work, see Patricia Aufderheide, "True Confessions: The Inquisition and Social Attitudes in Brazil at the Turn of the XVII Century," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 10, 2 (1973): 203-240.

¹⁸ Ellen Schiff, *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jewish Contemporary Drama*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982).

¹⁹ George W. Woodyard, "A Metaphor for Repression: Two Portuguese Inquisition Plays," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 10.1 (1973): 70-71.

²⁰ Schiff, 4, 5.

²¹ Compare what Simpson and Yinger observe, note 9, about the relationship between stereotyping and the denial of individuality and difference: "One of the functions of stereotypes is shown by ... its failure to adjust to individual differences--to do so would be to destroy the discriminatory value of the stereotype"(154).

²² Liebman, p. 21; I follow the research of Greenleaf, Liebman, and Novinsky concerning the ulterior motives of the Inquisition. With regard to *Herejía*, this point is elaborated in greater detail in my article "The Inquisition..."

22. For an excellent essay that continues my reading of Berman, but uses the version of the play called "En nombre de Dios," see Priscilla Meléndez. "Sacra escritura y secreta oralidad en *En el nombre de Dios* de Sabina Berman." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 43, no. 1 (January 2009): 31-54.