

# MORE LIGHT ON GALDÓS' SEPHARDIC SOURCE MATERIALS: A REPLY TO A. F. LAMBERT

Vernon A. Chamberlin

Professor Lambert's study, «Galdós and Concha-Ruth Morell» (*Anales Galdosianos*, 8 [1973], 33-49), is a valuable contribution to Galdosian scholarship. Lambert demonstrates convincingly by means of documentation and his own careful thinking that Galdós was indeed intimate for a considerable period of time with a young lady who became a convert to Judaism. However, I must take exception to a major portion of his conclusion drawn therefrom. I do indeed admire Professor Lambert's conscientiousness in attempting to answer the question concerning what effect this relationship might have had on Galdós' literary creativity; but I am convinced that his conclusion is wrong on at least two counts.

In order to make my point, I shall quote an entire paragraph in which my own research is called into question and then serves as a springboard for further discussion.

The knowledge that Galdós had personal contact with a convert to Judaism is relevant to our understanding of those novels written after 1897 containing Jewish characters, especially of course the two *episodios nacionales*, *Aita Tettauén* and *Carlos VI, en la rápita*. An article has, in fact, been devoted to the characterisation of North Africa Sephardic Jews by V. A. Chamberlin. Chamberlin argues that Galdós acquired the information he needed to portray the customs and speech of the Sephardic Jews of Tetuán entirely from printed sources. The proof that he did not use living models or sources can be seen in «Galdós' mistakes with Hebrew words and an obviously artificial and inconsistent amalgamation of Judeo-Spanish linguistic forms in the mouths of his characters,» as well as in the fact that «the speech of Galdós' characters does have a decidedly Sephardic flavour, but it is certainly no transcription of the language as spoken in Tetuán, Morocco.» These undeniable facts certainly indicate that Galdós neither made a serious study of Judeo-Spanish as spoken in Tetuán nor had his work checked by an expert. They could, however, be used at least as convincingly to argue that Galdós leaned heavily on oral sources or even living models. For example, one of the Sephardic characters in *Carlos VI, en la rápita* curses a woman: «¡Hija de la *baranid-dah* enconada!» Chamberlin argues plausibly that this is an approximation to the Hebrew oath *bar-niddah* (son of a menstruating woman); but the mistakes Galdós makes here (both in transliteration and in making the oath apply to a woman) seem more likely to have arisen from misunderstood speech than from misread printed material. Chamberlin's argument fails to consider the possibility that Galdós was personally acquainted with Jews from other Sephardic communities (e.g. Bayonne) or even with Jews living in Spain. The purpose of Chamberlin's article appears to be to show that Galdós, through the use of imagination and his skills as a writer, was able to fuse second-hand information into a more artistically convincing whole than was a lesser writer such as Alarcón, who had nevertheless direct experience of the conditions he was describing. Such an argument is consistent with an enterprise which has characterised much recent work on Galdós: namely, the emphasis on the role of the creative imagination in his

novels and the downgrading of documentary naturalist elements associated with the «gar-bancero» gibe. Laudable as such an enterprise doubtless is, it is based, as I hope to show below, on a naïve understanding of the nature of artistic imagination.

Let us consider first of all the question of the expression «hija de la *baraniddah enconada*» (line 16 above). It may well be that some day we shall indeed have knowledge that Galdós did obtain some of his Judeo-Spanish linguistic material from oral sources or living models; however, «hija de la *baraniddah enconada*» serves only to prove once again that Galdós relied primarily upon secondary sources. Certainly Galdós did not personally hear this expression; nor did he acquire it from any Sephardic Jew living in Bayonne, or in Spain. Rather it came to Galdós from a non-Jew, Ricardo Ruiz Orsatti, who believed it to be Arabic! In a letter dated «Tánger, 23 de Febrero de 1905,» Ruiz Orsatti sent Galdós a list of Judeo-Spanish words and phrases under the following heading: «Palabras del castellano anticuado o de árabe españolizado de uso entre los judíos de Tetuán,» and under the subheading «Maldiciones,» he included «Hijo [sic] de la *baraniddah enconada* (hijo concebido durante la menstruación de la madre).» Thus indeed if «Chamberlin's argument fails to consider the possibility that Galdós was personally acquainted with Jews from other Sephardic communities (e.g. Bayonne) or even Jews living in Spain,» Lambert's argument, more to the point, fails to consider and record the fact that a gentile sent the expression to Don Benito from Morocco and that evidence thereof is preserved in the Casa-Museo Pérez Galdós in Las Palmas, as well as in Robert Ricards' «Cartas de Ricardo Ruiz Orsatti a Galdós acerca de Marruecos (1901-1910),» published in *Anales Galdosianos*, III (1968), 110-113.

Lambert's final statement in the above-quoted paragraph («Laudable as such an enterprise doubtless is, it is based, as I hope to show below, on a naïve understanding of the nature of artistic imagination») opens the way for a consideration (in his concluding paragraphs) of the fact that Galdós may have actually known the model for the character Mordejai-Almudena (*Misericordia*, 1897), and that the latter may have, in fact, been the blind Jewish beggar who brought Concha-Ruth Morell into contact with more prominent members of the Jewish community in Madrid before her conversion.

I am presently engaged in a study (a non-naïve one, I hope) to show that even in the case of Mordejai-Almudena, Galdós drew heavily upon the printed page, utilized once again material supplied by a non-Jewish friend in Morocco, and had in mind, *not so much* a model from the streets of Madrid, as one he read about in the *mellah* of Marrakesh, Morocco. Until this study is finished and can be presented to *galdosistas* for their acceptance or rejection, it is my considered opinion that the case for direct oral sources or living models has not been convincingly established. Professor Lambert's oral theory notwithstanding, we are very much indebted to him for entirely new material concerning Concha-Ruth Morell — and for a renewed interest in, and the need to consider further, the origins of Galdós' Sephardic source material.