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The Friulan Expatriate Ephraim Luzzatto, Physician, Hebrew Poet, *épateur des bourgeois*. Part I: Practising Medicine and Mocking his Patient in Georgian London

Abstract: The 18th-century physician and Hebrew poet Ephraim Luzzatto, born in San Daniele del Friuli and based in London, is the subject of in-depth treatment in three recent articles by the present author. In this couple of articles, instead, we briefly consider what is known about his temperament and irreverent attitudes (in Part I), as well as (in Part II) his satire in Hebrew verse of practitioners of the medical profession.

Key words: Ephraim Luzzatto, medicine in literature, Hebrew poetry (Italy, England).

1. Introduction

The physician and Hebrew poet Ephraim Luzzatto (1729–1792), born in San Daniele del Friuli and who died in Lausanne, graduated in Padua in 1751 (like many Jewish physicians) and settled in London in 1755 (according to Mirsky, not 1763, as claimed in earlier scholarship). In London, he was active as a physician, publishing there a book of Hebrew poetry in 1768. Some of his poems are a satire of the medical profession. A social gadfly, he on occasion adopted a mocking attitude even during a medical visit [1]. We survey the *status quaestionis* concerning Ephraim Luzzatto [2–4], and consider in particular his medical practice. In separate articles in the journals *Korot* (Jerusalem) [5] and *REEH* (Paris) [6], I discuss a tantalising possibility, within satire in the time of George III, when another physician in London, John Wolcot, published his mock epic *The Lousiad* on hygiene in the royal household. Half a century after Ephraim Luzzatto’s demise, a Portuguese scholar eventually inquired by letter with a relative of Luzzatto in Italy (who was unable to comment) concerning a reference he had found to the Hebrew poet having translated the *Lusiad*, Portugal’s national epic, and in fact, while Luzzatto was in London (where he was acquainted with local Jews of Portuguese ancestry), an acclaimed translation of the *Lusiad* into English was published. Did Luzzatto try his hand at translating at least parts of the *Lusiad* into Hebrew, perhaps hoping for reward from a patron? Given Luzzatto’s irreverent temperament, it may be that he reworked instead, into Hebrew verse, parts of *The Lousiad*. In Part II of the present article we translate and discuss Luzzatto’s Hebrew poems of medical satire within a selective survey of the history of satirising medicine.

2. Ephraim Luzzatto in Scholarship

“[T]he Hungarian-born Orientalist Adolf Neubauer (1831–1907) [was] on the staff of Oxford’s Bodleian library since 1868, when he began the daunting task of cataloguing its enormous collection of Hebrew manuscripts” [7, p. 649]. Neubauer in 1894 explained [8] how the Ambrosiana Library in Milan acquired that and other manuscripts — the brothers of Mosé Lattes donated his collection of manuscripts after his demise (“Professors Lattes, brothers of the deceased, have presented his fifty-two Hebrew MSS. to the Ambrosian Library at Milan”) — but the little that Neubauer knew about the life and death of Luzzatto was partly wrong (“It is stated that E. Luzzatto died at Losano [sic!] in the years 5552=1792 A.D.”).

A fundamental study on Ephraim Luzzatto is David Mirsky’s book [3, 4]. Luzzatto’s poetry book (the London 1768 edition) is reproduced in its entirety in facsimile at the end of Mirsky’s book [3, p. 101].

3. Biographical Information about Ephraim Luzzatto

Ephraim Luzzatto was born in the town of San Daniele del Friuli in 1729, into a well-to-do Jewish family. In his family in Friuli, Ephraim Luzzatto had the dialectal name *Franzin* (the poet Rachele Morpurgo, and the editor of her collected poems, Vittorio Castiglioni, stated that much) but in London he used to give his first name as *Angelo* [3, p. 49]. That the endearing diminutive *Franzín* was considered equivalent to *Ephraim* has parallels elsewhere, at a later date, in Galicia within the Habsburg

Empire: as signalled by Haim Schwarzbaum [9, p. 218], the emperor Franz Josef (Francis Joseph) was called informally by some Jews in Galicia by a Hebrew/Yiddish name, *Ephraim Yossel*, or even just *Yossel*, conveying a sense of proximity and reflecting a positive or at any rate non-negative attitude towards that particular monarch.

Like several other Italian Jews, Ephraim Luzzatto studied medicine at the University of Padua. In the early modern period, that university allowed Jews to enrol as student, but the fee they had to pay was much higher than the fee owed by non-Jews.¹ By the late 18th century, a young male Jew who could afford it, could even earn more degrees than as a medical doctor in northern Italy, as I pointed out in a review of a

¹ A list of Jewish medical or surgical graduates of the University of Padua between 1617 and 1816 can be found in [10]. It is tantalising that its author, Abd-El-Kader (or Abdelkader) Modena, the Italian military man, then historian of the Polèsine region — i.e., the estuary of the river Po — and upstream up to Rovigo, and librarian of the University of Padua, was given the Arabic first name *Abd-El-Kader* when he was born in 1841 into a Jewish family in Rovigo, a city in southern Venetia, then near the border of the Papal States. In 1875, another future scholar, the historian of Italian literature Abd-El-Kader Salza, was born into a Catholic family in Casale Monferrato in Piedmont. In a recent article [11], I have reconstructed the likely motives of that onomastic choice.

In 1840, Italy's Jews were shaken and in fear, because of the Damascus Affair: there were interfaith tensions between Muslims and Christians, because of the granting of civil rights to non-Muslims by both Sultan in Constantinople and Mehmet Ali, the ruler of Egypt (who during the last decade had been in control of Syria, and by 1840 was under pressure to accept a protectorate from France, his ally). Brother Tommaso of Calangiano, a Sardinian-born elderly vaccinator and moneylender, had been threatened by a "Turk" — a coachman — and then both the friar and his servant had disappeared. The Capuchins in Damascus (and then Rome) claimed that the Jews of Damascus had kidnapped them to use their blood in leavened bread for Passover. The French consul in Damascus, still new in the job, Benoît-Ulysses-Laurent-François, Count de Ratti-Menton, supervised torture sessions of imprisoned adult Jews, and held captive and starved dozens Jewish children. The Austrian consul, Merlato, was informed by an Austrian Jew who had managed to flee and reach him. Merlato exposed Ratti-Menton's actions, but in the face of an international outcry, the French government supported its consul.

In March 1841, Carlo Alberto (Charles Albert), the since recently crowned King of Sardinia, i.e., of Piedmont (the same who in 1848 granted a constitution and emancipated the Jews by the initiative of liberal politicians), found nothing better than honour the French consul in Damascus with a knighthood: by decorating him with the ribbon of a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus. When deciding to decorate Ulysse de Ratti-Menton, Carlo Alberto certainly reasoned that Fr. Tommaso, a Sardinian by birth, was his own subject. Moreover, Carlo Alberto wavered throughout his career between reform and reaction. In Rome, the Capuchins had been spreading propaganda emanating from their brethren in Damascus, and Italy's Jews were living in a climate of fear in the various states into which Italy was divided at the time. Did the parents of Abd-El-Kader Modena name (out of indignation) their baby son after a man who in Algeria had fought against France? France's July Monarchy had been fighting the Algerian emir Abd-El-Kader indeed, and he was beginning to be perceived by some as a Romantic hero. Then, in July 1860, in exile in Damascus, he protected local Christians from Druze militias, and was hailed through Christendom as a hero (Abraham Lincoln sent him two pistols, Greece gave him a medal, France increased his pension). This explains why Abd-El-Kader Salza was named after him in 1875.

Tommaso Caliò devoted a chapter to the effects in Italy of the Damascus Affair, in his book [12]. The blood libel has a long history, whose medieval medical strand initially claimed that just as the Fall in the garden of Eden caused Eve and all women to menstruate, likewise Jewish males menstruate as a consequence of the Passion, and that a "prophet" told them enigmatically that they needed Christian blood to be cured (intending that if they converted to Christianity, Christ's blood would save them), but they misunderstood. Somehow, this was taken to explain why Jewish males were supposed to menstruate but do not. Cf. [13–15].

The myth of male menstruation is discussed in [16, 17]. Rationalisation of male menstruation as haemorrhoids was discussed in [18–20]. Also see the discussion in a study by Gianna Pomata [21], of which English version exists [22].

book² about Benedetto Frizzi (1756/57–1844), a Jewish Italian physician and social thinker.

Ephraim Luzzatto earned his degree at the University of Padua in 1751. While in Italy, he wrote Hebrew poetry, typically occasion poems honouring acquaintances, but his themes are disparate, and he was clearly responding sometimes to some Italian-language poem that had come into fashion in Italy. This is the case of his reworking in Hebrew of verse by Metastasio.

It must be said that one can easily detect an Italianism at the very beginning of his excellent translation of Metastasio's poem "Primavera" ("Springtime"). This is poem no. 11 in the 1768 London edition of Luzzatto's collected poems. Luzzatto rendered the first line, "Già riede Primavera" ("Springtime is back") with "[H]en [h]a'avív higgíña" (הֵן הָאָבִיב הַגִּיעָה) — I am transcribing the Hebrew letter 'ayin with ñ because this approximates how Italian Jews used to pronounce it). He used the verbal voice in the feminine, both because he needed all lines in the poem to end by a paroxytone word, and because the Italian name for 'springtime' is feminine, even though in Hebrew it the noun *avív* is masculine. Such gender agreement being a calque from Italian, in contrast with the gender agreement required in Hebrew, is a licence traditionally found in Italian Jewish authors. Luzzatto could have obtained the correct Hebrew gender agreement by writing "Ñéd [h]a'avív higgíña" (עֵת הָאָבִיב הַגִּיעָה), i.e., "The *time* of spring has come", whereas he used

² [23], reviewing [24]. In [23] I stated, among the other things, the following: "One series of books of his was undertaken by his professor's suggestion, and applied a discipline spearheaded by the latter (a discipline embodying Enlightenment values on the relationship between the state and individuals) to Pentateuchal law, a subject with which the pupil was familiar. The professor was Johann Peter Frank (1745–1821), one of the main theorists of medical police (one sometimes comes across the form medical policy), i.e., public health policies, or hygiene to be regulated by the state. Medical police, the precursor of social medicine, is the subject of two studies by Rosen. Lesky provided an ample selection from Frank's nine volumes [25], *A System of Complete Medical Police (System einer vollständigen medicinischen Polizey* [sic], 1779–1827). Frank joined the faculty of the University of Pavia in 1783, the year when his Jewish student we are going to discuss enrolled there". See the chapters by G. Rosen, "Cameralism and the concept of medical police" [26] and "The fate of the concept of medical police, 1780–1890" [27], in his book *From Medical Policy to Social Medicine* [28]. Also see [29].

Frizzi published a journal in Trieste, and this is the subject of a paper by Arieti and Galvani [30]. In [23], I wrote the following, about his years at the University of Pavia: "Frizzi's treatises interpreting Pentateuchal law in the light of Frank's medical police were published in the years 1787–1790. Frizzi published on that same year also a commentary (praised by Condorcet) to a textbook in hydraulics, dealing with differential and integral calculus. Frizzi took regularly, at the University of Pavia, the mathematics course taught by Father Fontana, who was admired by Frizzi (in the book under review [24], p. 165). A Dominican father, Giuseppe Gianni, authored a poem celebrating the young Frizzi upon his graduation! ([24, p.] 150, fn. 21). An initiative of an anthology of poems in honour of Prof. Antonio Scarpa angered Scarpa's enemies within the Faculty of Medicine, and a jurist, Prof. Luigi Cremani ([24, p.] 150) denounced the three (allegedly unproficient) students promoting it to the Governor of Lombardy, Count Wilzeck. Cremani claimed ([24, p.] 151) that perhaps the overt editors were just strawmen. They had led about thirty fellow students in a demonstration to force the Revisor to permit the anthology to be published. The Governor decided that Frizzi (unlike the others, a Jew) was the real leader of the initiative. In his decree of expulsion on 3 June 1788, he listed first 'lo scolaro ebreo Frizzi', i.e., 'Frizzi, the Jewish student' ([24, pp.] 150–151). Frizzi was expelled from the university even though he hadn't taken his certification exam. He did his practice at the hospitals of Parma, Bologna, and Florence, thus, outside the Austrian domains. His petition (*supplica*) to be readmitted to the University of Pavia — this course of action being the only one that could lead to a remedy, Count Wilzeck's decree had stated, at his discretion ([24, p.] 151) — resulted in readmission to the university in 1789, and enabled Frizzi to take his exam for general practitioner in December 1789 (passing which gave him the right to freely practise medicine), after which her practised medicine for forty years in Trieste, where he was co-founder of the Jewish hospital ([24, pp. 14–15])."

hen for ‘lo!’ in order to render Italian *già* ‘already’ (*hen* is related to *hinne* ‘here [you are]’ which is equivalent to *ecco*).

Already while he was living in Italy, Ephraim Luzzatto was on occasion a maverick, such as when he was expelled from Trieste after running naked in the street, probably when not sober. Ephraim Luzzatto settled in London in 1763 to practise his profession in the hospital of the Portuguese Congregation. Mirsky has pointed out that as being a physician employed by a Jewish community in London as the doctor of poor coreligionists, Luzzatto’s income was modest. He was a gambler (a fellow gambler in Soho of actors — he once had a row with Baddeley, remembered for playing the role of Moses in *The School for Scandal*, and at his best when playin in the role of Jews or Frenchmen — or second-rate engravers), but as his means were limited, his bets were modest. He could exceed in alcohol consumption, and one day in Italy he ran out in the street naked, or almost naked. Within the Jewish community in London, Luzzatto was sometimes irreverent. Luzzatto was reportedly irreverent also while in London, including while on the job as a medical doctor. We devote a section to an anecdote about such behaviour.

Ephraim Luzzatto also wrote Hebrew poems while in London, but his papers were destroyed upon his death by ignorant people. There is a rumour that he had translated Camões’s *Lusiades* into Hebrew. What is left to posterity of Luzzatto’s poems is entirely in his first and only book of collected poems, apart from one poem that was added by the editors of later editions.

In 1792, on his way to Italy, Ephraim Luzzatto died in Lausanne, Switzerland. Actually Luzzatto had been seeking medical advice from André Tissot (a famous physician and a family friend) in Lausanne, and died there aged 63, according to his death certificate, which David Mirsky was able to peruse. Luzzatto had arrived there with Ann Davies, his non-Jewish English maidservant, and apparently found lodging out of town (because as a Jew he was not permitted to pass a night in Lausanne: it took sanctions on the part of the United States, the Netherlands, and France in the 1860s to force Switzerland to lift such disabilities from the Jews, including from visitors from those countries). Mirsky considers the statement, in the certificate, that Luzzatto died as a good Christian as being a formula having been applied mechanically by a Swiss official used to it, and not necessarily corresponding to an actual deathbed conversion. According to Luzzatto’s will, he left his assets to eleven heirs (nine of them non-Jewish), and the bulk was to be inherited by Ann Davies.

4. The Context of Ephraim Luzzatto’s Literary *Opus*

While surveying Hebrew-language Italian poets who came after the extraordinary person that Rabbi Moshe Ḥaim Luzzatto (1707–1747) had been³ — a controversial and persecuted Kabbalist from Padua who had to move to Germany, settled in the Netherlands, and then met a tragic end shortly after reaching the Land of Israel, a limpid author of prose in his appreciated conduct book *Mesillat Yesharim*,⁴ and an innovator in Hebrew literature because of his allegorical dramas⁵ — the Arkansas Hebraist A.B. Rhine provided the following outline of Ephraim Luzzatto’s life and poetry [38, pp. 47–49]:

³ Rabbi Moshe Ḥaim Luzzatto, acronymously Ramḥal, is the subject of many studies [31, 32].

⁴ Ramḥal’s *Mesillat Yesharim* is the subject of [33, 34].

⁵ Moshe Ḥaim Luzzatto’s plays are discussed in [35–37].

While all these minor poets, with more or less talent and inspiration sing only on special occasions, sing, as it were, to order, though their poems bear the stamp of modernity and they enlarged the scope of Hebrew poetry, the first truly modern lyric poet is Ephraim Luzzatto. Born at San Danieli [*recte*: San Daniele], Friuli, in 1729, studying medicine at the University of Padua where he took his degree in 1751, he settled in London in 1763 to practise his profession in the hospital of the Portuguese Congregation. In 1792, on his way to Italy, he died in Lausanne, Switzerland. His poems, under the title of ELLEH BENE HA-NE'URIM (*These are the Offspring of Youth*, first edition, London 1766; second edition, Vienna 1839), were all written in Italy, the closing poem in Padua. A highly gifted youth, possessed of a sensitive nature, and endowed with the power of imagination and of delicate, artistic expression, Ephraim Luzzatto lent a new note to the severe and strictly moralizing and didactic Hebrew muse by introducing the romantic lyric into Italian Hebrew poetry. As a Jewish poet he does not, indeed, neglect to sing of themes sacred to the Jewish heart. Thus, in 'AL HAR ZION SHE-SHAMEM (*Mount Zion, Ruined*) he bewails in lines stately, dignified, yet soft and tender, the ruins of the Holy City. He addresses himself to all nature, to the stars in their courses, to the sun, the moon, the earth, the sea, the mountains, to arrest their natural functions, and intercede with God in behalf of Zion; when a terrific storm breaks out, and above the din and confusion an angel admonishes him that the cause of Zion's ruin is to be sought in Jewish sinfulness. Equally beautiful are his sonnets (35, 36) on the same subject. His didactic sonnets, teeming with lofty moral and ethical thoughts, are couched in such graceful diction that the severity of their tone is softened by the beauty of the expression. His elegies are free from the extravagances of fancy and the exaggeration of praise so characteristic of most of his contemporaries. He is the first to introduce Metastasio to Hebrew readers, and his translation of *La Primavera*, following the rime [sic] and meter of the canzonette, is a work of art in itself. But it is in his romantic sonnets that he is at his best. Here he gives his poetic fancy free scope. For the first time Cupid and his arrows are introduced to the Jewish reading public in Hebrew (Sonnet 3, p. 9, Letteris' edition); and he treats the subject with the levity, though not with the license so characteristic of Italian poets. Love with him, is not the sacred, divine spark it is with his kinsman Moses Hayyim Luzzatto. With Ephraim Luzzatto it is rather human, all too human. In sentiment his exquisite love sonnets remind one of Petrarch and of the best in Italian literature, and in the delicacy of diction, beauty of style, and perfection of rime and meter of the best in Hebrew literature. The Orient and the Occident thus meet in the friendliest fashion in this child of sunny Italy. It is to be regretted that his poetic work ceased upon his leaving his native soil. His prosaic duties at the London hospital proved fatal to his poetic inspiration.⁶

5. Irreverence towards a Patient during a Medical Visit by Ephraim Luzzatto

Some funny anecdotes about Luzzatto were related — after a new edition of Luzzatto's collected poems was published by Letteris in 1839 — in an article entitled "Nachrichten uber Efraim Luzzatto", and authored by David Aaron de Sola (a cantor at Bevis Marks Synagogue in London and one with literary interests) because Franz Delitsch had asked him to do so. De Sola's article [1] appeared in early 1840. David Aaron de Sola, or David de Aaron de Sola (Amsterdam, 1796 – Shadwell, near London 1860), was a minister of the Bevis Marks Congregation in London from 1818, from 1831 he preached the first sermon in English ever given at Bevis Marks Synagogue. In 1836 he published an English translation of its prayerbook, and in 1860, of the Ashkenazi festival prayerbook. In 1839, with M.J. Raphall, he translated

⁶ Here Rhine [38] got it wrong. We are left with Ephraim Luzzatto's verse he had published, but he continued to write Hebrew poetry also while in London. Those later poems of his were not published while he was alive, which may have preserved them. His papers were destroyed after his death. There exist two different accounts concerning the circumstances and perpetrators of that disgraceful outcome.

18 tractates of the *Mishnah*, but then in 1842 it was published unpolished without their permission. In 1857, with the assistance of the composer Emanuel Aguilar, he published *The Ancient Melodies of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*. “A musician himself, de Sola composed a melody and setting of *Adon Olam* still used in both Sephardi and Ashkenazi synagogues in the United Kingdom”.⁷ surely that march melody for that hymn ending the service is his legacy with most impact. He wrote works in English, Hebrew, German, and Dutch. “He contributed frequently between 1836 and 1845 to the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* and to *Der Orient*, and published in German *A Biography of Ephraim Luzzatto* and a *Biography of Distinguished Israelites in England*. His chief work in Dutch was his *Biography of Isaac Samuel Reggio*, published in 1855 and afterward translated into English”.⁸



Fig. 1. David Aaron de Sola, or David de Aaron de Sola. As for Ephraim Luzzatto, no known portrait of his is extant.

One of the anecdotes reported by de Sola was discussed in 2009 by Mississippi Fred MacDowell [39], who reproduced p. 9 from de Sola’s article, along with a translation. With false deference to an ill rabbi, Luzzatto desecrated the Sabbath to his and his family’s face. MacDowell went on to provide a translation he made (the brackets are his own, whereas braces enclose replacements I am making):

One Saturday, summoned to the Chief Rabbi, [Luzzatto] requested a quill, ink and paper so he could write a prescription; but neither the rabbi nor anyone in his family would give these to him, because he was only a little inconvenienced, and he had his office nearby. But he had quill and ink in his bag, and tore out a page from his book and wrote something like this:

“Today on this holy Sabbath day, in the month of Shevat, in the year 5500 (ie, 1740), [when the weekly reading containing the verse, Ex{odus} 21.19 {was} Parshas {= pericope} Mishpatim] {which Luzzatto mentioned, by way of a name identifying it, the wording quoted from it} {*verappó yerappé*, ‘and he shall provide care leading to healing’} healing for the perfect haham {= rabbi}, the distinguished judge, the pious, the modest, etc. “greater than the title ‘rabbi’ is the name”, his honor, the rabbi . . . the Lord will send him healing . . . ”

Then came the prescription in Latin, followed by four satirical lines in Hebrew, which could no longer be recalled by the person who told me about this. This was rude and

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_de_Aaron_de_Sola

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_de_Aaron_de_Sola

callous to play with the patient's feelings and beliefs. I hope this anecdote is not true and question its authenticity, especially because of the well-known saying *de mortuis nihil nisi bene*, which {Hebrew *melitsim*, rhetoricians} have given with the same truth and more wit: {*aharei mot kedoshim emor*, i.e., three pentateuchal weekly readings named sequentially — “After the death {or Aaron’s two elder sons”, “Saintly”, “Tell” — the idiomatic usage of which is to prescribe that once persons are dead, one must portray them in the best light, leaving out their sinful actions}.

Als er eines
Samstags zu dem unpäßlich gewordenen Ober-Rabbi
geholt wurde, verlangte er Feder, Dinte und Papier,
um ein Recept zu schreiben; aber weder der Rabbi noch
seine Familie wollte dies ihm gewähren, da es nur ein
leichter Unfall war und er sein Geschäftszimmer in der
Nähe hatte. Da er aber Feder und Dinte in der Tasche
hatte, riß er ein Blatt aus einem Buche und schrieb unge-
fähr wie folgt: היום ביום שבת קדש * בהרש שבט שנת
התק"ל לסדר ורפא ירפא רפואה להחכם השלם הדין
המצוין החסיד העניו וכו' וגו' מרבן שמו כמהו"ר רי:
הקבה ישלח לו רפואה שלמה וכו' וכו'. Dann folgte
das Recept auf Lateinisch, und vier satirische Zeilen auf
Hebräisch, auf die der Referent sich nicht mehr besinnen
konnte. Dies war ein unzartes Spiel mit der Gesin-
nung seines Patienten und Ungleichgesinnten. Ich hoffe,
daß diese Anekdote nicht wahr ist und will an ihrer Zu-
verlässigkeit um so eher zweifeln, je beachtenswerther das
bekannte: *de mortuis nihil nisi bene* ist, welches die
hebräischen מליצים mit gleichviel Wahrheit und mehr
Witz ausdrücken: אחרי מות קדושים אמור.

Fig. 2. An anecdote about Ephraim Luzzatto’s behaviour during a medical visit to a rabbi in London, from de Sola’s article published in 1840.⁹

MacDowell pointed out an obvious inaccuracy: in 1740 (which is how MacDowell interprets the year de Sola mentioned), Luzzatto was not in London yet. At that time, he was a boy aged eleven. I suspect that de Sola stating an erroneous date depends upon the fact that the Hebrew year stated, **הת"ק** — that is 5500, is a round number. Something is missing: the decade and the units. Apart from that, as the month was Shevat, wasn’t the date in January or February 1741?

MacDowell mentions a hypothesis made in the scholarly literature, according to which the rabbi in the particular anecdote was in charge after Ephraim Luzzatto’s arrival in London: that hypothesis purported to identify the rabbi “on the basis of the

⁹ Reproduced in MacDowell, “A Shocking doctor prescription written by Ephraim Luzzatto” [39].

poor esteem which he was held as a scholar” [39]. I guess that is overreading the scant evidence we do possess: the identification does not need to be true. Luzzatto may have been referring to the notoriety of his patient as being a poor scholar indeed (not that Luzzatto himself could tell by direct knowledge). And yet, if Luzzatto had the whim of being irreverent, and he was wont indeed to act upon his whims, then he would have behaved that way regardless of the scholarly standing of his patient. It could have been any rabbi — perhaps except one who could get him dismissed by the Spanish and Portuguese community, but actually Luzzatto only held that post rather shortly, and lived off his private practice. In fact, it is rather shocking that the physician, Luzzatto, behaved in the manner described by de Sola, inside the house of the rabbi. A Jewish physician is permitted by rabbinic law to violate the Sabbath, but strictly within the limits required for him (or her) to provide medical care, or to be in the conditions so he (or she) to do so (such as by phoning, or by driving a car). In the situation at hand (which admittedly, was of a relatively minor illness of the rabbi), Luzzatto had to either write a medical prescription concisely, or go and fetch the drug prescribed directly. MacDowell hypothesised, in a footnote, that perhaps Luzzatto compelled the rabbi’s family to be accessories to Luzzatto’s own violation of the Sabbath.

In my opinion, Luzzatto offended the religious sentiments of those present as early as when he tore the page (tearing by itself is one of the actions not supposed to take place on a Sabbath), but he did much worse when instead of just prescribing a medication, he wrote a long text with flourishes, with biblical quotations, then extolling the rabbi, stating that he was such a great man that he deserved to be called just by his name with no rabbinic title (just as we would say “Einstein” rather than “Prof. Einstein”, and just as in the Talmudic literature the great Hillel is always mentioned with no title, whereas “Rabbi Hillel” was a minor talmudic sage from a few centuries later).

At the long last, Luzzatto wrote the medical prescription in Latin. He should have written only that, and signed, so a pharmacist would carry out what prescribed. At that point in the text, having written the medical prescription, Luzzatto added some satirical lines, and by now his mockery for the rabbi and the latter’s family was coming quite into the open. He had taken off the mask of feigned deference.

6. The Audaciousness of a Line of Dedication Scribbled by Luzzatto at a Friend’s Behest

Mirsky [3, p. 39] related about de Sola’s biographical article about Ephraim Luzzatto, and mentions that notwithstanding the paucity of biographical information, the anecdotes de Sola managed to collect were adopted by other authors¹⁰ because they are funny, and revealing about Luzzatto’s engaging as well as irritating personality.

One anecdote Mirsky himself related [3, p. 39] is about an occasional poem Luzzatto had written for a friend’s life event. That friend asked him to sign it, but Luzzatto refused at first, then added a line quoting from *Hosea* 11:9: “I did not want to sign, because EL (a god) am I, and not a man”. Confronted for his audacity in writing such a thing, Luzzatto retorted that his was not haughtiness, quite on the contrary, he had been displaying exceeding humility (“Kleinmuth”, in de Sola’s German), and that he

¹⁰ Nina Salaman authored an important study [2] about Ephraim Luzzatto. See R.N. Salaman, *Ephraim Luzzatto (1729–1792)*, “Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England),” 9, 1918–1920, pp. 85–102. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29777698>

was indeed E.L. (E[phraim] L[uzzatto]), and that he was not a remarkable man (“Gelehrter”, in de Sola’s German).

De Sola [1] acknowledged that the reply was witty, but that he was unimpressed by such a holy verse of Scripture being exploited for some frivolous pun. Mirsky [3, p. 40] drew inferences from that episode about social response to Luzzatto, and about his personality. His refusal to sign his name is taken by Mirsky to be an expression of Luzzatto’s unsavoury side,¹¹ whereas his adding the problematic line shows he could quickly come up with a display of virtuosity, which nevertheless was just some superficial and insensitive wordplay.

As for the medical prescription Luzzatto wrote for the rabbi in London, he wrote it with a mocking, mock-deferential attitude — as a mock-encomium — but it also is a special case, an outlier, of the category of mock-prescriptions, parodies of medical prescriptions popular in early modern Europe (e.g., mock-prescriptions from Italy were researched by Armando Bisanti [40] and Diego Zancani [41]).

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¹¹ It reminds me of an anecdote about the painter Amedeo Modigliani, who at a café drew a portrait of a lady, but when she asked him to sign it, he tore it apart.

¹² <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29777698>

¹³ In English, with a facsimile reproduction of Ephraim Luzzatto’s 1768 Hebrew book of poems.

¹⁴ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25781008>

¹⁵ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1450151>

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¹⁶ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1451090>

¹⁷ <http://onthemainline.blogspot.co.uk/2009/06/shocking-doctors-prescription-written.html>