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*Text as Faith in Andrés de Li's Thesoro de la passion*  
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# TEXT AS FAITH IN ANDRÉS DE LI'S *THESORO DE LA PASSION*

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## ABSTRACT

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Andrés de Li, an Aragonese *converso*, authored three extensive works from 1492 to 1494. This essay explores issues of authorial motivation in Li's *Thesoro de la passion* (1494), in particular practical considerations of marketability and product niche in the early devotional market. Textual evidence reveals a dynamic working relationship between Li and his Humanist printer, Pablo Hurus, offering a glimpse of the early Iberian printing industry. The essay also explores issues of authorial motivation in light of Li's religious identity, and how his desire to be accepted as a true Christian may have been a factor in both topic selection and in his inclusion of all typical Passion text elements, including anti-Semitic assumptions and conclusions. The nature of Li's "*converso* voice" within the *Thesoro* is also explored within the larger framework of the *converso* studies critical apparatus.

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It is often difficult, if not impossible, to understand the inspiration and motivation of modern authors; it may be even more challenging to determine a medieval author's intentions, to quantify and classify the factors behind the choice of topic, to explain the intended desires of the writer. In the particular case of late medieval devotional works, the motivation is somewhat easier to discern. Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas Bestul note in *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation* that "the primary intent of devotional literature is neither to delight nor to instruct... but rather to produce in the reader a receptivity, a frame of mind or emotional condition that prepares him or her for an encounter with the deity in the form of prayer, meditation, or contemplation" (2).

Some of the most popular and widely-circulated books of devotional literature in Iberia in the late fifteenth century were Passion texts. The first known of these printed in Castilian was the *Thesoro de la passion*, by the Aragonese *converso* Andrés de Li, and printed by Pablo Hurus in 1494. Li was a well-known businessman from Zaragoza who had published two other works with Hurus prior to the 1494 *Thesoro*; the *Reportorio de los tiempos* in 1492 and the *Summa de paciencia* in 1493. The business partnership between Li and Hurus was a successful one, and the production of the *Thesoro de la passion* was the final text in the duo's incunable trilogy.

Andrés de Li's three works offer an intriguing mix of cultural and

social influences: they spanned a wide range of medieval concerns, from calendars and medical topics, to discussions of Christian virtues, and finally, with the *Thesoro de la passion*, the death of Christ. In terms of authorial motivation, in this essay I contend that Li's Passion text served two very important practical functions. First, the *Thesoro* filled a niche in the highly profitable devotional book market. Second, and possibly more significantly for Li, the intensely Christian subject matter allowed Li to situate himself as a true believer in Catholic doctrine, thereby distancing himself from his *converso* heritage, a likely priority for Li following his appearance before the Inquisitorial tribunal in 1490. Li's choice of Christian topics was more than likely an attempt to distance himself from his precarious social status as a *converso*, and as such filled a practical as well as a spiritual purpose for Li.

As I have noted, devotionals like Li's *Thesoro* were very popular in the late fifteenth century. According to Cynthia Anne Baule, "as religious and lay cultures became increasingly intertwined during the later Middle Ages, lay readers themselves made reading an integral part of their own devotional practices" (11). Some of the most popular religious texts were the Passion stories, and with the advent of the printed book, many of these texts were reprinted in numerous, often highly-illustrated editions (Wilkins 217). Bartlett and Bestul have noted that while "it would be a mistake to view late medieval piety as completely homogeneous, its dominant expressions were notable for heightened degrees of emotionalism and a preoccupation with the tortured body of Christ and the grief of the Virgin Mary" (2). Passion texts including Li's *Thesoro* offered generous amounts of both of these essential devotional components. Li in particular is almost obsessively curious about the suffering of Mary, as well as her maternal relationship not only with Jesus, but also with John. All of these elements helped to humanize Christ and other key Biblical figures, and thereby made Li's edition that much more marketable.

In the prologue to the *Thesoro*, Li notes that he intentionally wrote the work in Castilian for those readers not well-versed in Latin, with the hope that it would reach those who usually read "cosas transitorias & vanas" (f. 1v). These readers would not only enjoy the details of the Passion story, but also would then use their free time more wisely: "No solo conuertiran el ocio en vtilidad: mas a vn aprouecharan a muchos otros en doctrina y enxemplos" (f. 1v).

It is certain that the Li/Hurus production of the *Thesoro de la passion* was motivated by more commercial considerations as well. While the sincerity of Li's faith is not disputed, there can be no question that the work was created to sell, and thereby turn a profit for its publisher. Devotional works were among the most profitable, and therefore, most often published works in late fifteenth-century Europe.

The absence of a Passion text in Castilian did not go unnoticed by Hurus, a fact that is attested to by Li in the prologue of the *Thesoro*:

Occurrio me aquello que muchas vezes hauia oydo a Pablo Hurus, aleman de Constancia, emprentador famosissimo en aquesta vuestra fidelissima y muy noble ciudad. El qual dezia estaua marauillado como a sus manos houiessem llegado libros & obras sin cuento para imprimir, y jamas en romance hauia visto, que nadi se houiesse acordado de pregonar el sagrado misterio dela passion del redemptor glorioso, la qual era fundamento del edificio de nuestra fe sancta catholica, exortando me por los merescimientos de aquella, me dispusiese yo a trabajo tan piadoso y tan meritorio. E quantoquiere, muy altos principes y muy poderosos, que yo tuuiesse, como reza el mesmo Jeronimo, por cosa muy ardua satifazer a sus ruegos. (f. 1r)

Devotionals were popular because they helped readers make the connections between what they read in the Bible and their own lives. To facilitate this incorporation of text into practice, many devotionals presented emotionally compelling descriptions of Christ's suffering in order to provoke an empathetic reaction on the part of the reader.

Literature such as passion meditations, miracle tales, and exempla made Christ's suffering body concrete for devout readers by describing in detail His wounded flesh. This intense concentration on Christ's broken body was meant to elicit feelings of compunction from the reader who would, ideally, recognize both the extent of God's sacrifice and love for mankind, and the fact that every individual is separated from God by sin. These feelings of love and despair lead to contrition where the reader's will is reoriented towards God, and to penance where the reader attempts to make satisfaction in an effort to close the gap that sin creates between the human and the divine. (Baule 11-12)

Li, too, takes the direct route to an empathetic reader reaction in the *Thesoro*. He continuously compares the perfection to be found in Christ's body, no matter the damage suffered during the Passion, with the imperfect physical condition of humankind. In Li's opinion, Christians should respect their own corporeal incarnations as reflections of Christ's perfect physical form. By examining the details of Christ's body, mankind can learn valuable lessons as to how they should act. They should not be vain, but should strive to be as virtuous and pure as Christ, to be as close to a reflection of Christ as possible. One passage in the *Thesoro* describes Christ's perfect hair, and then gives a contrasting human image:

No vemos ya hombre sin alguno sin cabellera, & aquella llena de azeytes & buenos olores, y el que tiene llano el cabello, tan tendido & concertado le trahe, que en la calle & en palacio para quien deuen, & ahun para senalar reuerencia en las yglesias a nuestro dios & señor, tienen por mayor pecado ofender



la majestad del cabello & de su concierto que la del cuerpo precioso de jesu christo nuestro señor. (f. 63r)

To be fair, Li does not limit his condemnation to men. He is quick to point out that the use of makeup by women is also a defamation of the sacred face as exemplified by Christ:

Pues si a las mujeres boluemos, no hay que dezir no hay ya ninguna de qualquier condicion que sea, que no trayga el rostro apostemado de afeytes, las cejas & los ojos alcoholados, açicaladas tales de soliman & otras cosas tan abominables, que tienen por cosa muy vergonçosa traer el rostro con que nascieron tanto que sería impossible creer que los que desuergonçadamente se componen, se acuerden delo que por su saluacion & remedio çufrio el redemptor de humana natura en su rostro precioso & bendito. (63r)

Humans must not adorn themselves, as to do so is to deface Christ's perfection. Li himself cites his memory of Jesus' holy face as being a reminder to live a better life: "Alumbra me señor conel resplandor de tu gracia bendita, porque la memoria de tu ymagen preciosissima, en mi sentimiento no se pueda ofuscar no tenga poderio el velo dela culpa & ignorancia" (63r)

Thus, Li strives to connect the appearance and actions of Christ during the Passion to the daily lives of his readers. In this way, he continues the tradition of other devotional works that attempted to instruct by provoking an empathetic response. Readers would feel closer to Christ, and would be inspired to live a more Christian life. In turn, they would seek out more avenues for enlightenment, primarily through other devotional works, prompting and promulgating the production of even more religious books. Obviously Li and his publisher Hurus, who was responsible for dozens of such devotional works, would benefit by this sequence of reader responses.

The second probable motivation behind Li's production of the *Thesoro de la passion* was its potential for confirming his status as a true and devout Christian, thereby distancing him from his *converso* status. Andrés de Li lived during the most difficult years for *conversos* in Iberia; following the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, the kingdoms of the peninsula were the loci of intensifying anti-*converso* bias. As Gregory Kaplan observes, "it was when Inquisition was in its infancy, until the outset of reform, that the alienated *converso* condition was most severely experienced" (31). All *conversos* were suspect, to be scrutinized as to the purity of their faith. Many were subject to attacks on their persons and property, and their activities were increasingly regulated by the *limpieza de sangre* statutes. Thousands of *conversos* were investigated by the Inquisition.

Andrés de Li was not exempt from such scrutiny. He was

investigated by the Inquisition in 1490, despite having sponsored the printing of numerous Christian texts, including Pablo Hurus' 1478 production of the Bible. In 1492, just two years after his trial, Li published the first of his three major works, the *Reportorio de los tiempos*. While the *Reportorio* is not an exclusively religious work, it does contain an ecclesiastical calendar, as well as numerous discussions of important religious matters.

Li's second work, the *Summa de paciencia*, appeared in 1493, a year after the *Reportorio*. In the *Summa*, he offers us some tantalizing insights into what it meant for him to live as a *converso* in Iberia. The subject of Li's second work was the virtue of patience, specifically how Christ's patient suffering could serve as a guide for Christians facing difficulties in their own lives. There are indications within the *Summa* that Li was aware that his work would be received with criticism. In fact, he writes that the *Summa* was appearing during "desenfrenados tiempos," and that he was certain that evil, malicious tongues would speak against it, in the same way that Seneca describes those dogs that "ladran y muerden mas por costumbre que por verdad ni razon" (*Summa* 144). Even though Li was writing on the most Christian of topics, he was still aware that his work would not be accepted without judgment or criticism because he was a *converso*, given the strength of the anti-*converso* sentiment of the time.

Li's third and most extensive work, the *Thesoro de la passion*, was published in 1494. The *Thesoro de la passion* is Li's own version of the *Vita Christi*, and is a text replete with Biblical and Classical references. Li's Passion story is a monumental Christian text. It does not falter in its retelling of the events of Christ's death, and hastens to demonstrate to Christians the applicability of the lessons gained from witnessing Christ's sacrifice to their own daily sufferings. Li's *Thesoro* is often a very personal work, with references to his own feelings of inadequacy and failure as a Christian. Li, however, never fails to point out the perfect example that Christ provides his followers. In doing so, Li may be seen as the perfect model of Christian penitence and contrition.

Nevertheless, Andrés de Li was still aware of his potentially precarious social position. In the prologue to the *Thesoro*, his concern is evident: "Y conosciesse por mayor el trabajo delo que mis fuerzas podia sufrir, acorde de aceptar sus ruegos teniendo por mejor esperar los baybenes y peligros delos parleros" (f. iv). There are other such references throughout the book but the most powerful statement is found in its conclusion. Li emphasizes that the writing of the *Thesoro de la passion* was the vehicle by which he could "reprehender a los necios o maliciosos, inconsideradamente quizá me querran morder por auer me en la obra presente en algo seruido delos ajenos estudios" (f. 82v).

Thus, there appears to be substantial evidence that Andrés de Li

was fully aware of the complexities of his *converso* status. This social self-awareness evidenced in *converso*-authored texts has been referred to in past critical studies as the “*converso* voice.” In early *converso* studies, some scholars concluded that *conversos* could be classified as a homogeneous group, and that whatever was written by one could be taken as representative of the entire body. In addition, it was usually assumed that *converso* writers often wrote with dual purpose; that is, to speak to Christian readers on one level, but also to convey a subversive, pro-Jewish message on the other.

Within the past decade, however, these assumptions have shifted significantly. With studies by Gayle Seidenspinner-Núñez, David Gitlitz and others, the new definition of the *converso* world, including the “voice” of its authors, involves a more heterogeneous approach to our understanding of the entire *converso* experience. It is now accepted that just as there was more than one *converso*, there were innumerable *converso* literary and artistic expressions. Thus, it is more apt to consider this as a moment when individual *converso* authors demonstrate an awareness of their social status in their literary productions, thereby illuminating readers to each author’s social self-awareness. Consequently, just as no two people have identical life experiences, no two *converso* authors would write with identical purposes or attempt to convey identical messages. Each work must be considered on its own merit, as unique representations of the lives of their individual authors.

As critical theory has shifted from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous view of the *converso* experience in Spain, many schemata have been created to describe and interpret the spectrum within which a *converso* could have experienced life. As would be expected, the level of identification with the Christian faith varied from person to person, and the critical apparatus reflects the degree of assimilation, ranging from those *conversos* who saw themselves as true Christians to crypto-Jews, although the size of this latter group has been exaggerated. The everyday conditions experienced by *conversos* also varied as a consideration of history and geography, as social restrictions and experiences varied widely between regions and over time.

A careful reading of both the *Summa de paciencia* and the *Thesoro de la passion* reveals beyond a doubt that Li felt himself to be a true Christian who neither understood nor accepted the social restrictions placed on him, especially the purity statutes. José Faur’s description of a faithful Christian *converso* could have been written specifically of Li: “one who wanted to assimilate into the Christian body and lose all contacts with Judaism... [in order] to avoid the massacres and persecutions of Christianity” (45). Li, from all textual indications, was a true Christian, and wished to be accepted as such by the society in which he lived.



In light of the textual evidence, then, Andrés de Li appears to have been a *converso* with an agenda. He wanted to be recognized as a Christian, and as such composed works that would support this desire. Thus, it is logical that Li would take up his own pen to inscribe himself as a witness to the death of Christ, and that he would follow the traditional structure of Passion stories. These were some of the most popular religious texts in medieval Iberia, as well as in other regions of Europe. Their content had evolved over centuries, and with each new rendition, Passion texts began to exhibit greater anti-Semitic bias; in doing so, these influential and widely-circulated works began to contribute to an increasing intolerance toward Jews.

Li's *Thesoro de la passion* was no exception: he did not exhibit any sympathy or softening toward the Jews and their supposed role in the death of Christ. Thomas H. Bestul, in *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society*, notes that the anti-Semitism found in many Passion narratives has often been ignored by modern scholars, and stresses the need for a careful examination of the roles of Jews in Passion narratives: "the formation of attitudes that led to growing hostility toward Jews in the later Middle Ages was not merely reflected in, but actively supported by, the way Jews were treated in the narratives on the Passion of Christ" (69).

The earliest known Passion text in which the role of the Jews is singled out is Ekbert of Schönau's *Stimulus amoris* (Bestul 79). The *Stimulus amoris* emphasizes Ekbert's particular revulsion at the "horror of contamination by physical contact with a despised class," a disgust that was shared by others and that was soon regulated by a series of law forbidding most social as well as physical contact with Jews (Bestul 85). Later Passion texts, including those by Bonaventure and Ludolphus, were successively more critical of the Jews, emphasizing and distorting their role in the death of Christ, and often inventing new reasons to justify the ongoing social isolation being mandated across the continent.

Andrés de Li's Passion text confirms this pattern of increasing anti-Semitism. In his *Thesoro de la passion*, he incorporates those attitudes adopted by Ekbert, Bonaventure, and others. Li demonstrates no sympathy for the Jews, nor does he excuse the culpable role he believed them to have played. There are many instances in the *Thesoro* where Li rails against the Jews, including special discussions of the suffering Christ endured at the hands of the Jewish people as He carried the cross, the extreme nefariousness of Jewish ecclesiastics, and, most tellingly, Judas' kiss.

At one point, Li wondered why furious angels did not descend from Heaven "para vedar tan ponzonoso ayuntamiento de boca tan hedionda como la de Judas" (*Thesoro* f. 31r). Li often refers to the Jews



as “malaventurados” (f. 32v), and as a “pueblo desaprouechado & maldito” (f. 33v).

Li does not merely imitate his sources; rather, he places special emphasis on certain events, in particular the description of the Jews spitting on Jesus’ countenance. Li describes the act of spitting as a “pestilence,” the same term used by Ludolphus in his *Vita Christi*: “Y con atreuimiento pestilencial y mortifero escupieron aquel diuino y luzido rostro, espejo delos angeles sanctos” (f. 42v). Li also takes care to align himself with his Christian readers, saying that “we must guard ... against spitting with the Jews on the face of our savior” (f. 42v). In this way, Li erects a barrier between himself and his *converso* heritage, further emphasizing his desire to be seen as a true Christian; he chooses to perpetuate the anti-Semitic tenets of earlier Passion texts. In fact, as a fully-assimilated Christian, it is likely that the notion of deviating from his source texts never occurred to him. There was no reason to question the culpability of the Jews in the death of Christ, and to do so would have been unthinkable to one who accepted the tenets of Christian doctrine as wholeheartedly as Li appears to have done.

All in all, Li’s choice of the Passion story, given the reading public’s appetite for such texts in the late fifteenth century, demonstrated a keen understanding of the commercial book market. Li explicitly stated his motivation for writing the *Thesoro*, that is, that the publisher Pablo Hurus had seen a market for a Passion text, specifically one written in Castilian. Moreover, the production of a Passion text that was true to the genre in casting Jews as the cause of Christ’s death, would have helped to buffer Li from any taint of his Inquisitorial investigation. Li and his works offer a fascinating insight into the complex social fabric of Iberia in the late fifteenth century, and especially into the ways that religious and social issues could be intricately linked to business choices. For Li, writing did more than contribute to his livelihood; it allowed him to express his faith, as well as his frustration with the society that questioned it.

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