Sara Coppio Sullam: Seventeenth-century Jewish poet in the ghetto of Venice

HELEN LENEMAN

MUCH of what we know of historical women is based on biographies. But as one feminist historian has pointed out, biographies are inherently limited because they do not relate to the lifestyle of the overwhelming majority of women who were not members of a small social elite, the upper class. Women (and men, to a lesser degree) who left a diary or letters, were exceptional because they had the leisure and ability to write. Uncovering the experience of a "typical" woman of any given era, or even defining this term, is far more difficult. Biography has also been limited because an analysis of how a subject fit into her social environment was not generally made. In a sense, biographies of women have tended to remove their subject from history.[1] This holds true for the four biographies of Sara Coppio Sullam which were written in the late nineteenth century.

Male writers in the nineteenth century who wrote about women suffered from the "pedestal" syndrome. They chose to write about women who could serve as role models, and then presented those women as paragons of virtue, intelligence, and talent. They failed to see such women as complex individuals living in a particular historical era. This is true for all four of Sara's biographers. The earliest biography, dating from 1863, was written by Rabbi Moise Soave, and based largely on material culled from Rabbi Leon da Modena's autobiography. Da Modena was the most prominent Jewish figure of his day, and a contemporary of Sara Coppio Sullam's. The same year, M. Levy, of Breslau, wrote

Sara's biography for a German periodical, recapping most of the same material. Soave had initially been inspired by a book dating from 1862 called *Les Quatre Martyrs* (The Four Martyrs) by A. F. Rio, a French Catholic. Rio wrote at length about Ansaldo Ceba in this book. Ceba was a Genoese monk who was one of the most famous writers of his day. He carried on a four-year correspondence with Sara, eventually publishing his letters while suppressing hers. Rio's volume brought Sara's name to light for the first time in two centuries. Ten years later, Leonello Modona published yet another biography of Sara, which contained much of the same material but also included all fourteen of Sara's extant poems. In 1877 Ernest David wrote a much lengthier biography, in French, utilizing material from all of the above.[2] All of these biographers presented Sara as a paragon of virtue for her resistance to conversion. At the same time, she was also described as exceptionally talented, educated, and beautiful. All of this may or may not have been the case; yet seen in historical context, her accomplishments were not as unusual as these writers believed.

Occasional references to Sara can be found in earlier publications. A volume of 1698 contains the following:

> In the ghetto of that city [Venice] was found Simone Copio, richer than all the other Jews. With his wife he had female offspring, that is, two daughters, Sara and Stella, both spirited but especially Sara, who enjoyed reading books of poetry and other curious subjects. Her father, to give her pleasure, was pleased when she opened an Academy in her house, where lettered men came to hear her discussions from surrounding towns of the Veneto region.

The "curious subjects" mentioned, Carla Boccato points out, were theology, philosophy, astrology, Jewish history and literature, music, and languages.[3] Prior to the Academy, or salon, that Sara opened in her own house, her father apparently opened one in his own where literary people from all over came to hear her. This was somewhat unusual since Sara was an adolescent at the time. Her father died when she was only fifteen.

There is far more known of the society in which Sara Coppio Sullam lived than of her life itself. Fourteen of her poems and her treatise, the "Manifesto," are all that remain. The irony is that she is known through letters she wrote which do not even exist any

more, those which she wrote to Ceba and which he probably destroyed. No biography has yet been written which places Sara in the context of her society: upper-class Jews living in the Venetian ghetto at the turn of the sixteenth century. Seeing her in this context takes away somewhat from her uniqueness, yet also increases an understanding of who she was, and how she could have risen to a position of such prominence while living in a ghetto. And though she may not be unique in the way her worshipful nineteenth-century biographers saw her, Sara remains a compelling, puzzling, and brilliant figure.

Apart from the salon in her father's house, nothing is known of Sara's early years. There is even uncertainty about the number of sisters she had. Simon Coppio's tombstone indicates three: Sara, the first-born; Rachel, also known as Diana or Stella; and a third, Lia, or Leah. Yet most sources indicate there were only two sisters. One theory has it that Lia stood for Rachel, and was poetic license in the epitaph. It may also have been a mania for a numerical complement. The mother and two daughters had the names of the three patriarchs' wives; they wanted to also mention the fourth, Leah.

There have been numerous theories about the variant spellings of Coppio. The fact that it can be spelled with either one or two "p's" is just a quirk of the Italian language. But Sara called herself "Coppia" as a rule. Soave attributed this to the Italian idiomatic practice of feminizing names in order to designate the female gender; a final "a" is the feminine form, "o" the masculine.[4] Vittore Colorni, the foremost scholar of Italian Jewish genealogy, agrees with this theory.[5] Modona believed Sara changed her name on a whim or fancy, though this was sheer conjecture on his part.[6] Historian Riccardo Calimani feels there are simply two different versions of the name.[7] The truth probably encompasses elements of all these theories.

Moise and Simon Coppio were wealthy, respected traders. They were well educated in Hebrew and other languages, as well as in ancient and modern literature. Simon Coppio encouraged his daughter Sara's studies. She read Greek and Italian classics in the original, though her greatest passion was the history of her own people. She was also reportedly gifted musically: she was said to have composed music to her own poems, and sung it while

accompanying herself on lute or clavichord. These facts can be culled from Ceba's responses to Sara's letters. It is similar to hearing one side of a telephone conversation: a fairly good educated guess can usually be made based on only the one side.

Around the year 1614 Sara was given in marriage by her mother (her father having died about ten years earlier) to Jacob Sullam, who was young, educated, and wealthy. His profession is not known, but his family had roots in Venice, Mantua, and Modena. Moise Sullam, Jacob's father, was a prominent man in Mantua, an important patron of the arts who had persuaded Salomone Rossi to publish his collection of synagogue songs. The Sullam family had supported Rossi in his musical education until he attained success. Thus, when Rossi published the collection, he dedicated it to Moise Sullam. The Sullam family was considered one of the most cultured Jewish families in Italy at that time. When Sara married, she called herself Sara Coppia Sullam. Apparently retention of the maiden name was not common, since several later biographers never realized she was married. They assumed Coppia was merely a middle name, and referred to her as Sara Sullam. She retained the name out of respect and love for her father, to whom she hoped to bring honor.

Almost nothing is known of Sara's married life. It is known that she had a daughter, Rebecca, in 1615, who died at the age of 10 months; her tombstone was recently found. Sara also had a miscarriage in 1618. Jacob survived Sara, as indicated in her epitaph, which calls her the wife of the living Jacob Sullam. The precise date of her death is known from the certificate in the archives. Her birthdate, however, is not known. Some sources indicate 1588 or 1589, others 1590 or even 1592. Her death was recorded thus: "On the 15th of February, 1641, Sara wife of Jacob Sullam died at the age of about 40 of continual fever, lasting three months, in the Ghetto Vecchio" [Old Ghetto]. Based on this, her birthdate would have to be moved up ten years. However, Boccato points out that not too much value should be attributed to the clerk's guess. It could have been approximate and completely wrong.[8] Apparently Sara looked good for her age, if indeed her appearance deceived the clerk to such a degree!

Her epitaph has traditionally been attributed to Leon da Modena. Translated, it reads:

This is the headstone of the modest Signora Sara, wife of the living Jacob Sullam. The afflicting angel shot an arrow, in the holy service; the angel removed and killed her. Sage among women, crown of the poor, she was a true friend and companion to the wretched. If today she is unredeemed, with the hope only of the worm and the moth, the time of redemption will come, when the Lord will say to her, "Return, return, oh my Shulamite."[9]

This last phrase is from the Song of Songs, and involves a play on her name, Sullam. There is also a play on her first name, in the word for "holy service," which is "sharet," but could be read as "sarat." It is probably as inaccurate to use an epitaph as a source of information as to use a nineteenth-century biography. There were certain literary phrases conventional in that era but unfamiliar in our own, which can be misinterpreted. There is no documentation indicating that Sara aided the poor. That could have been poetic license on da Modena's part, or perhaps it was based on a side of Sara that is unrecorded in history. Many sources agree that Sara was a highly educated woman. No other woman of her type, except perhaps liturgical poet Devora Ascarelli, has been found in the Jewish community. So perhaps she was truly a "sage among women" where the Jewish community of Venice was concerned.

Both biographers David and Soave wrote that the aristocrats who visited Sara in her salon always whispered to her, "Pity you were born Jewish!" Based on incidents in her life, it is known that attempts were constantly made to convert her; yet it is hardly accurate history to record what these writers merely imagine must have been said. There is only slightly more potential for accuracy in physical descriptions of Sara. She is believed to have been of medium build, dazzling color, with reddish-blond hair typical of Venetian beauties, such as those painted by Titian. Some of this is based on poems addressed to Sara. For example, one poem contains the line, "Won't you bathe the gold of your hair in the sacred fountain?" (baptismal font).

Modona shared other biographers' admiration of Sara. He found her strength of character in resisting continual attacks on her religion admirable. He felt she showed "true virile energy" against gossips and liars. These virtues alone, even without all the others she showed, "would have assured her a place in history."[10] An

earlier writer, Bartolomeo Gamba, wrote similarly in 1832. He felt that Sara was

> extraordinarily lettered, a perfect musician, poetess without peer and worthy of admiration for her letter-writing style. She needed rare spirit and indomitable energy to keep her head, never weakening, with the obsessive proselytes assailing her. She will always be admired for her unyielding attachment to the faith of her ancestors.[11]

Elsewhere this same writer had expressed regret that Sara's letters to Ceba were not preserved, because they were probably very important. He included her entire "Manifesto" in his collection of women's letters, closing his volume with it.

Venetian scholar E. Cicogna wrote a lengthy article on Sara in a Venetian journal in 1864.[12] In this article, Cicogna briefly discussed nineteen different sources that mentioned Sara, starting from the seventeenth century. It is an interesting list, comprised mostly of bibliographies and poetry anthologies. In some cases the facts listed in one source were taken directly from an earlier one. Very few of these seem to have had access to her original works. But the most significant fact is that Sara was mentioned at all, being, after all, a member of a minority group. It is proof that she attained enough fame and status in her day to be mentioned in anthologies two hundred years later.

Carla Boccato, who has researched and written more on Sara than probably any other scholar in Italy, writes:

> Of great beauty, with a very sweet voice, with graceful and pleasing manners, Sara was one of those chosen people on whom chance has bestowed superior intelligence and fascination, making them centers of attraction or natural guides of the society in which they find themselves living.[13]

One would like to think this an accurate assessment.

Modona, who published all fourteen of Sara's extant sonnets, felt her poetry "avoided the rhetorical flourishes, mawkish affectation and sentimental style characteristic of poets of her era. . . . Her concepts were always noble and elevated." He regretted the general abuse of rhyme, typical of her era, which forced her to

contort phrases and harm the clarity of concept. But "when she avoids this, her poetry shines with masculine vigor of style and nobility of feeling . . . liveliness and vivid images . . . feeling and passion that are always present."[14] Modona's admiration for Sara's poetry is such that he can only express it by saying it has "masculine vigor." The ultimate compliment, still, is to do something as well as a man.

Since Sara began writing poetry at an early age, she presumably continued writing throughout her life. But for unknown reasons, she did not wish to publish her works. It is thus only by chance that even those fourteen poems survived. They span the years 1618 to 1635. Four first appeared in the "Manifesto" in 1621. Four others appeared in Ceba's *Letters*. One of these was Sara's sonnet on the death of Ceba's brother. The three others later appeared in Louis Bergalli's anthology in 1726. One sonnet appeared in the publication *Rime Diverse* of Gabriele Zinano, published in 1627. These were Sara's only known poems until the Codex of Giulia Soliga was discovered in the nineteenth century; it contained five previously unpublished sonnets. All fourteen were published together for the first time by Leonello Modona.

Poetry can be the most personal form of literary expression. But in certain eras, convention was a limiting factor. The Renaissance and early Baroque periods in which Sara lived attached great importance to following certain proscribed literary forms. This was true even in letter-writing, but far more so in poetry. Thus it is necessary to almost ignore the form and try to extract the content alone. The style of Sara's poetry is more sixteenth century than seventeenth, and this can probably be attributed to a certain delay in the arrival of popular trends to the ghetto community. It is outside the bounds of this article to do a literary analysis of these poems. I will point out interesting aspects of certain poems, and translate some of the more important verses. These have not been translated into English before.

Sara wrote a particularly lovely poem on the death of Ceba's brother. Of interest is the view she expressed of the after-life of the soul:

> . . . He now blazes, a pure soul,
> converted into a shining white ray.

Turn your eyes, Ansaldo, to the east,
And you will see a new flame sparkling
Which only the hearts of heathens fear.

That light is your faithful brother,
A glowing comet against the Thracian
It shows itself, a menacing star.

The most often reproduced poem is that which Sara enclosed with the portrait she sent to Ceba. To modern eyes, it reads like a love poem. But the ideas expressed must be separated from the conventional form. In a poem such as this one, that becomes difficult to do:

The image is that of her, who in her heart
carries your sculpted image,
And who, with her hand at her breast shows the world:
here I carry my Idol, everyone adores him.

She holds in her left hand weapons of love
which were your poems; the place where she is wounded
Her right hand points to, and pale and bewildered
she says, Ansaldo, my heart is dying for you.

As a prisoner she comes before you,
Asking help, and she holds out to you
That chain, wherein is found my love, faithful and constant.

Please, accept the phantom of your devoted servant
And enjoy at least my imagined semblance,
That which cruel Fate denies to these eyes.

The portrait of herself that Sara had had painted portrayed her in chains. Ceba had asked her not to send any portrait at all, but she apparently felt compelled to disregard his plea. She obviously knew the portrait would affect Ceba strongly, and she enjoyed his affection and attentions. Her own expressions of love, such as this sonnet, have been labelled "Platonic" and typical of that era. The whole manner and style of expression are so foreign to a modern reader that it is almost impossible to determine from such a poem if Sara truly loved Ceba, and if this love bordered on the erotic or

was merely friendship. There is a certain sense that Sara enjoyed expressing herself in this way, that she was "in love with love." It was in fashion not only to write love poems, but also to be in love.

One of the poems included in the "Manifesto" indicated the degree of rabbinic education Sara had. In this poem she compared herself, though as an "unequal example," to Abraham in his battle against four allied kings. The passage she was referring to is found in Bereshit Raba, a rabbinic commentary on Genesis. She obviously included this reference in her poem to show off her erudition to her accuser, who would not have understood it. It is probably not reading too much into the poem, then, to attribute a certain mischievous streak to Sara.

One particularly lovely sonnet seems to speak in a very personal voice of Sara's own spirituality. The title is "To the Human Spirit":

Oh divine form of mortal life
and sublime end of God's works,
In which God expresses both Himself and His power,
and how He made you Queen of all He created.

The mind, which informs us, is where
the immortal and mortal are confined . . .
. . .
You depart, there where Heaven bends towards you.

Amazed in examining yourself, now you cease
all thoughts of transitory things,
since you discover yourself only when you approach God.

And to satisfy the human heart,
it is enough to know that the Angels themselves
are your custodians, chosen to serve you.

This poem stands apart from most of Sara's other known works in that it shows a more personal and spiritual side. My guess is that she wrote many more such poems, for her own pleasure, but did not want them in the public eye. It is almost like a personal musing on the human condition. Had diaries been more the vogue in Sara's

day than poetry, she might have left a diary. It is unfortunate indeed that her letters have been lost to history.

Sara Coppio Sullam was the only Jewish woman poet of her era who wrote secular poetry that is known today. Yet this poetry tells us more about the style of writing in the Renaissance era, than about the heart and mind of this woman.

1. Ann Gordon and Mari Jo Buhle, "The Problem of Women's History," in Berenice Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History* (Urbana, 1976), pp. 75–93.
2. Ernest David, *Sara Copia Sullam: Une Heroine Juive au XVII Siecle* (Paris, 1877). This volume is the source for most of the biographical material in this article.
3. Mandosio Prospero, *Biblioteca Romana Sen Romanorum Centuriae* (Rome, 1698), as quoted in Carla Boccato, "Lettere di Ansaldo Ceba, genovese, a Sara Copio Sullam, poetessa del Ghetto di Venezia" in *Rassegna Mensile d'Israele* vol. 40 (1974), pp. 169–91
4. Leonello Modona, "Sara Copia Sullam, sonetti editi e non editi" (monograph) (Bologna, 1887).
5. Conversation with Prof. Colorni
6. Modona, op. cit.
7. Conversation with Dr. Calimani
8. Boccato, op. cit.
9. My own translation from the Hebrew tombstone of which I took a rubbing. The Hebrew also appears in Soave's own writing in a letter which is bound into the David volume. The Italian translation by Boccato and the French by David are very loose.
10. Modona, op. cit.
11. Bartolomeo Gamba, *Lettere di Donne Italiane, raccolte e pubblicate* (Venice, 1832)
12. Emmanuele Cicogna, "Notizie intorno a Sara Coppio Sullam, coltissima ebrea veneziana," in *Memorie del R. Istituto Veneto di Scienza, Lettere ed Arte*, vol. 12 (1864), pp. 227–46
13. Boccato, op. cit.
14. Modona, op. cit.

Shmira

LOUIS GORDON

We are enlightened individuals, modern people, we seek freedom for ourselves and for all humanity, and in point of fact we are worse than the most diehard reactionaries.
—S. Y. Agnon, "The Doctor's Divorce"

UNLIKE most American colleges, the Hebrew University doesn't maintain a professional campus police force. Since the student body is composed of so many veterans and reserve soldiers, the University instead chooses to satisfy its security needs by requiring students residing in its dormitories to participate in tri-yearly three-hour shifts of guard duty, known in Hebrew as *shmira*.

Every student must man the least attractive three to six A.M. shift at some point during his academic career, so when I received the notice in my mail box informing me of my impending *shmira*, I grimaced at the thought of the inevitable duty to the university, and marked the date in my mind.

Shmira can be boring, and to ensure high attendance rates, the University authorities hit upon the brilliant scheme of making this activity coed, requiring two male roommates and two female roommates to patrol the dorms together. Yet for some reason, on the night that I was supposed to man the late-night shift, Moshe, my dashing Moroccan roommate, was nowhere to be found, and I walked over to the dorm office and reported for *shmira* alone.

If you're an American girl, *shmira* can be an opportunity to