

## Notes

The Disputed Heritage:  
Europe's Cultural Debt to the Arabs

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María Rosa Menocal wrote an article on the etymology of the word 'troubadour', published in *Romance Philology* in 1982, in which she maintained, as the Spanish Arabist Julián Ribera had done in 1928, that the word *trobar* derives from the Arabic verb *ṭaraba*, 'to sing, to play music; to be moved by joy or grief; to fill with delight'. When this proposal was originally made in 1928 as a simple solution to a philological controversy, it was immediately dismissed by Romance scholars as unworthy of discussion. The scorn provoked by this or any other suggestion that Europe might be culturally indebted to the Arab world began to intrigue Menocal even more than the actual evidence for such an influence. She became convinced that we should first examine our vision of the medieval period and the assumptions upon which it is based, 'for it is within such parameters that facts seem provable, theories logical, influence reasonable'.<sup>1</sup>

*The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* is thus primarily a study of cultural prejudice and the style, which is a little repetitive, is polemical in the best sense of the term. No doubt she will be criticized for her reliance on secondary sources and the paucity of quoted textual evidence. Yet she herself admits: 'I recount no facts that have been unknown or have remained unadduced by many in previous discussions. I will attempt merely to show why the texts, facts, and discoveries of others have seemed negligible or ignorable to so many Romance literary historians and to sketch out a perspective that would render them significant' (xiv-xv). Within this context, she has done a fine job.

In the first chapter, medieval literary historiography is defined as a myth-making process which can never be immune from political and ideological factors. Here Menocal concedes her debt to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, but notes that even Said ignores the Arab culture of medieval Europe because he takes it for granted that 'the real Europe is a Europe almost completely unaffected by hundreds of years of Arab domination' (22, n. 12). She makes the interesting point that what used to be called the New Criticism, with its emphasis on the 'text itself', has generally served to mask and hence to canonize 'historicocultural images' (3-4). Ever since the Renaissance, the essential continuity and unity of Western civilization from Ancient Greece has been the central myth of European cultural identity. Although few would now regard the medieval period as a dark slumbering hiatus between the modern world and Greek and Roman antiquity, scholars are still reluctant 'to accept as plausible and admissible an image of our own civilization, at one of its formative moments, as critically indebted to and dependent on a culture that was for some time regarded as inferior and, by some lights, as the quintessence of the foreign and the Other' (9). Even in Spain, where much scholarly work has been done on Hispano-Arabic culture (see James Monroe, *Islam and the Arabs in Spanish Scholarship* [Leiden: Brill, 1970]), the Semitic influence has been popularly perceived as a derailing one. In the opinion of Sánchez-Albornoz, Menéndez Pelayo and others of their generation, most of Spain's defects, in

particular her 'cultural belatedness' (a phrase coined by Curtius), could be attributed to the 'baneful de-Europeanizing influence of Islam' (11). But Menocal perhaps underestimates the extent to which in Spain such attitudes are now changing. On the other hand, she is excessively modest when she claims that her alternative vision of the mixed ancestry of European culture is merely a myth with which to displace prevailing myths (16). Surely literary history is more than myth-making.

In the second chapter, 'Rethinking the Background', Menocal rightly warns against the assumption 'that what is Arabic in medieval Europe is necessarily Islamic' (37). However, of course, it was this assumption which motivated Peter the Venerable to undertake c. 1142, with the help of Robert of Ketton, the first summary of Islamic doctrines: Islam was perceived as a source of moral degeneration because it had produced a civilization of superior wealth, luxury and technology which seemed to threaten Christian values. Ironically, as the author points out in a footnote, in this present period of Western cultural imperialism the roles have been reversed: nowadays Muslims condemn the West for its materialism and sexual permissiveness (68, n. 5). Nevertheless, modern examples serve to demonstrate that 'it would be naive to posit that ideological, political, or military conflict necessarily precludes important interaction at other levels' (46). This is Norman Daniel's basic thesis in *The Cultural Barrier: Problems in the Exchange of Ideas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 1975). The rumour, demonstrably without foundation, that there had existed a romantic attachment between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Saladin certainly aptly symbolizes what Menocal calls the seductiveness of the Other (51). After briefly mentioning the intellectual revolution, especially in the universities of Paris and Bologna, sparked off shortly after the turn of the thirteenth century by the translation into Latin of Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle, Menocal asserts, as I have done myself, that it is implausible to maintain that 'the Arabic influence . . . was limited to areas other than the literary' (58). Although songs in Arabic were not deemed worthy of translation, they could have been understood by many at the Aragonese and Sicilian courts; furthermore, many aspects of Arab culture must have been orally transmitted from translators, émigrés, musicians, servants and slaves.

The third and central chapter, entitled 'The Oldest Issue: Courtly Love', is largely based on my own work on this subject, as Menocal herself acknowledges. Why, she speculates, did Dante fail to discuss the origins of Provençal poetry in his *De vulgari eloquentia* (written c. 1303–1304) when he was normally so punctilious about establishing precedents? 'One is left to assume', she writes, 'that the question remains unasked either because the answer is too obvious to him and his readers to be worth setting out explicitly or because the question raised issues, and possible answers, that Dante did not, for some reason, want to discuss' (75). But the question of origins was repeatedly raised by later writers. Indeed, it is hard to think of any subject of literary scholarship which has provided such a fertile ground for speculation—on the relationship between men and women, life and literature, fact and fantasy, the courtly and the popular, the secular and the religious, the personal and the conventional, and so on. The 'Arabist' theory which can claim the distinction of being chronologically the first in Provençal studies, became 'virtually taboo' in the late nineteenth century when 'courtly love' was defined as a distinctively and peculiarly European phenomenon. As Menocal rightly says, this 'need to distinguish more coherently what was European from what was not was triggered by an expanding colonial experience' (82). The chapter ends by mentioning the discovery of the *kharjas*, first published by Samuel Stern in 1948, demonstrating some degree of interaction between Arabic and Romance. Yet the extent of interaction is still hotly debated, and Arabic and Romance disciplines continue to be highly segregated.

The fourth chapter, 'The Newest "Discovery": The *Muwashshahāt*', refutes the theory—to which few would now adhere—that a *kharja* can be studied independently from

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the *muwashshaha* to which it is appended. Two examples of the new Andalusian poetic genre (which was condemned by some Arab purists) are quoted in English translation to illustrate the point. Menocal suggests that the dialectical relationship of courtly and vernacular, and male and female, within the poetic form reflects the social structure of Al-Andalus. Yet she believes that the absence of true dialogue is an inevitable consequence of the ultimately solipsistic nature of the love expressed. The chapter ends by drawing attention to the fact that the two best-known rule-books of 'courtly love', namely Ibn Hazm's *Tawq al-Hamāma* (The Dove's Neck Ring) and the *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus, both end with a palinode because the theory of love which they expound is incompatible with Islamic and Christian orthodoxy. Menocal is probably correct in surmising that in each case the recantation was genuine, but the whole question is much less straightforward than she implies. These observations lead into a study of Dante, a poet who, instead of refuting courtly love, spiritualized it and transformed it into the service of God.

In the fifth chapter, on Italy and Dante, a very beautiful eleventh-century Arab-Sicilian song is quoted in Italian and English translation. This poem does indeed bear a striking resemblance to many later poems in the European courtly love tradition. Here we find 'the physical beauty of the white-faced Lady, her statuesque coldness and aloofness, the piercing and devastating effects of a single look of her eyes, the literally sickening effects of love and passion on the body of the lover, and so on' (118). It even contains some of the characteristic features of the *dolce stil nuovo* and Dante's *Vita nuova* in particular: the angelic or beatifying power of love, the confusion between dream and reality, and the topos of the 'giovanile follia'. Only fragments of the largest Sicilian *diwan* compiled by Ibn al-Qaṭṭā' survive, and few Arabic Sicilian poems are accessible to the non-Arabist. Much more work clearly needs to be done on this subject. But Menocal should know that five delightful short poems by the Sicilian poet Ibn Ḥamdīs are to be found at the end of Sa'īd al-Maghribī's *Rāyāt al-Mubarrizīn* (The Banners of the Champions), an important anthology of Hispano-Arabic poetry which was edited, with prose translations, by E. García Gómez (*El libro de las banderas de los campeones* [Madrid: Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, 1942]) and translated into English verse, sometimes very skilfully, by A. J. Arberry in *Moorish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1953). Both books deserve to be added to the useful bibliography.

Much of this chapter summarizes the thesis of Asín Palacios, which was developed by Cerulli, that the Islamic tradition known as the *mi 'rāj*, the Prophet Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven, was the basic idea for the plot and some of the particulars of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante could easily have had access to this tradition through Peter the Venerable's *Fabulae Saracenorum* and/or a text translated in Toledo by Bonaventura da Siena in 1264 under the supervision of King Alfonso el Sabio. It was precisely at this moment that another Tuscan, Brunetto Latini, visited Toledo and knowledge of the *mi 'rāj* may well have been imparted by him. Since Dante perceived Islam as a serious threat to Christianity and since the above-mentioned text was regarded as part of the Islamic sacred writings, his *Commedia* was conceived, whether consciously or unconsciously, as 'a challenge, a countertext, an anti-*mi 'rāj*' (131). The lower part of hell is a city of mosques, and it is here that the Averroist Guido Cavalcanti and the Epicurean Frederick II are condemned to languish. And Menocal suggests that the reason why Muhammad himself is punished as a schismatic rather than simply as a heretic was because he was associated with philosophical ideas which seemed to undermine Christianity; for Dante he symbolized 'the sowing of internal dissent in the Christian community' (130). As in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante could not bring himself to acknowledge openly any debt to the infidel race. The theory is persuasive. Yet it is ironic that Ibn Rushd—whose opinions were in fact misrepresented—should have had a deeper impact on Christian Europe than

on the Muslim world. Incidentally, in speaking of 'the Prophet's voyage *oltretomba*' (125), Menocal herself betrays a shallow knowledge of Islam.

The last chapter, which is thinner than the others, begins by comparing Dante and Boccaccio. It is here suggested that two stories in the *Decameron* (VI, 9, and VIII, 9) express dissatisfaction with Dante's harsh treatment of Michael Scot and Guido Cavalcanti (139). More important still, the *Decameron* belongs to the tradition of Arabic story collections such as the *Disciplina clericalis* and the *Thousand and One Nights*. The chapter then turns to general theoretical issues, mentions recent research on the relationship between Arabic and Hebrew linguistic philosophy and developments in medieval grammatical theory, and ends by reflecting that Hispanists would no longer need to complain about taking a back seat among scholars of European culture if Al-Andalus was restored to its rightful place in Spanish literary history (152–53).

To my mind, the first three chapters are undoubtedly the best. But, with regard to courtly love, there are two points which need to be made. First, Menocal gives the false impression that the Arab poetic tradition of chaste love originated in Al-Andalus, whereas it can be traced back to the poetry of seventh-century Arabia; it is associated with the Banū 'Udhrah, the Sons of Chastity, with Jamīl al-'Udhri (d. 701) in particular. Thus, for example, Muṭarrāf ibn Muṭarrāf, a poet from Granada (d. 1212), writes:

When the malady continues and sleeplessness persists on my eyelids,  
I find relief in my passionate yearning.  
For this was the way established by Jamīl  
and modern poets such as myself add even more to it today.

In poetry, as in religion, Spanish Muslims were generally highly conservative. Although the *muwashshaḥa* and the adaptation or invention of a feminine *kharja* were revolutionary, many of the themes of the *muwashshaḥa* had been treated since pre-Islamic times. Secondly, if Menocal had studied Arabic or Persian Sufi poetry, she would have discovered that Dante was not the first to spiritualize 'Udhri love. The story of the seventh-century poet Qays and his love for Laylah was first fully developed as a mystical parable by the Persian poet Niẓāmī (d. 1202–1203). The great mystic of Al-Andalus Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), who also likens himself to Qays, wrote: 'God cannot be seen apart from matter, and He is seen more perfectly in the human *materia* than in any other, and more perfectly in woman than in man'.

While I am bound to agree that the courtly love tradition is the most important literary topic in a book of this kind, there are other types of literature which have not been sufficiently studied in this context: Arthurian romance, wisdom literature, the picaresque genre, encyclopaedias, popular ballads or *romances*, beast fables and folk tales. The bibliography should provide information on the little work that has been undertaken on these genres. One book which springs to mind is E. L. Ranelagh, *The Past We Share: The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature* (London: Quartet Books, 1979). Medieval poetics also needs to be discussed; see C. H. L. Bodendam, 'The Origins of the Fifteenth-Century View of Poetry as *Seconde Rhétorique*', *MLR*, LXXIV (1979), 26–38 (concerning al-Fārābī's influence on French late medieval poetry) and 'Petrarch and the Poetry of the Arabs', *Romanische Forschungen*, XCIV (1982), 167–78 (concerning Petrarch's disparaging remarks about Arabic poetry which he had probably read in Ibn Rushd's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetria*).<sup>2</sup>

Since, as Menocal says, Ibn Rushd and Maimonides both wrote in Arabic and 'the destinies of the two Semitic cultures were closely intertwined' (148), the Judaic legacy also calls for more comment. It is only against this background that we can begin to understand the hermetic tradition in the Renaissance. And both Kabbalist and Sufi symbolism may be detected in later Christian writers; see Catherine Swietlicki, *Spanish Christian Cabala: The*

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*Works of Luis de León, Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986) and Luce López Baralt, *San Juan de la Cruz y el Islam* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1985). St John of the Cross is notably absent from the index; so, for that matter, is Ramón Llull. In such a wide-ranging book there will always be gaps and details to adjust. But one thing is certain: this book will make it difficult for medieval scholars to assume that knowledge of Arabic culture is irrelevant.

## NOTES

1 *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), xvii + 178 pp., xvi.

2 Other works worth adding to the bibliography are Titus Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972); Gustave E. von Grunebaum, 'The Arab Contribution to Troubadour Poetry', *Bulletin of the Iranian Institute*, VII (1946), 138-51; *Themes in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Dunning S. Wilson (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981); R. Arié, 'Ibn Hazm et l'amour courtois', *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, XL (1985), 75-89; Henri Pérès, 'La poésie arabe d'Andalousie et ses relations possibles avec la poésie des troubadours', *Cahiers du Sud*, special issue, *L'Islam et l'Occident*, Marseilles, 1947, 107-30; and Maxime Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, trans. Roger Veinus (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

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