BOOK REVIEWS

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History
Maria Rosa Menocal
University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987. xvii + 178 pages. Cloth $27.95

This book, admirable for breadth of reading and attractive for its uncramped sympathies, does three kinds of work. It urges the view that the West has repressed its literary debt to the Arabs, and is a sobering reminder (with some astonishing quotes) of the presence of much racism and chauvinism in literary and cultural history. It is a good—if at times chatty (as on Eleanor of Aquitaine) and often homiletic—guide to the evidence for the certain (as in philosophy) and possible (as in lyric poetry) impact of medieval Arab civilization, via Spain and Sicily, on the rest of Europe. Finally, it makes suggestions about how our ideas about medieval Romance texts (e.g., the love lyrics of the troubadours, but also the *Commedia* and the *Decameron*) might change if we read these texts on the assumption of Arab influence or (as in the case of Dante) a reaction against an Arab influence.

Scholars in many different fields will have to decide whether such an assumption is productive in solving problems or yielding interesting hypotheses. As an Arabist, I must record partial reservations about Professor Menocal's discussion of the Provençal love lyric in the light of the Arabic *muwashshahat*. These are strophic poems in which the mannered, courtly voice of the speaker is contrasted, at the end, with something said or sung in a colloquial and usually "uncourtly" manner. In Andalusian *muwashshahat* this concluding passage (the *kharja*) is often in a Romance language, or a mixture of Arabic and Romance. The voice in *kharja* is very often a female voice, which is "direct, to

the point, often startlingly so, and decidedly uncourtly" (100). Professor Menocal writes that in erotic *muwashshahat* "both voices express a lover's lament" and that "each one is saying, in his and her language and style, essentially the same thing." Since a reading "in which both lovers express something tantamount to 'I love you. Why don't you love me?' *to each other* would be incongruous," we must acknowledge that "the lament has no goal except its own expression" (102). Professor Menocal sees an analogous situation in the Provence: the poetry of the *trobairitz* is not a poetry written by cruel beauties, but a poetry of the same pining that is rehearsed by their male counterparts. Professor Menocal concludes:

> In being poetry in praise of itself and of poetry primarily, the poems actually subvert the apparent praise of love that the poet seems to be conveying to us. Is this really, as de Rougemont and others maintained, a glorification of such an attitude towards love? Perhaps in considering the Hispano-Arabic texts as part of the European body of courtly love poems, a different view might emerge. It would appear that the Arabic texts allow us to see, more clearly than could the Provençal poetry alone, that the poems embodying this love ideology could be read as excellent examples of a condemnation of the love whose praises they at first seem to be singing. (109)

There is philological trouble with this argument. Certainly, as Professor Menocal too notes, the game of refined love is undermined (by way of parody, for example) often enough in Arabic as well as in Provençal. But it is just not the case that most erotic *muwashshahat* conform to the pattern used for the argument, the pattern in which two unhindered lovers sigh for each other, and their gratuitous stalling can serve as the matrix of interpretation.

That pattern is not found when the poem is clearly written to a man and the woman's lament at the end can only be an example of longing—somewhat as in Abu Nuwas, a poet of the second Islamic century, a wine-song occasionally ends with a line quoted from a wine song. (Such are numbers 1 and 36 in García Gómez, *Las Jarchas romances de la serie árabe en su marco* [Madrid, 1965], a collection used by Professor Menocal.) Not when the poem is a panegyric, even though it may begin as a love lyric (conventional in Arabic) and end with a woman's love for the recipient of the poet's praise (numbers 7a, 17, 19, 29, 30, 34, 35, 38 in *Las Jarchas*) or where (5, 14) a kind of formal symmetry and emotional asymmetry is presented: the poet sighs for Ahmad and so do the women. Not when the *kharja* is introduced by *qultu*, "I said," where the lover is clearly *quoting* a woman's song, as in number 13: "I cannot conceal it . . . , I sing, making all known, as a girl who sings

this: no quiero, no, un amiguito más que el morenito" (in García Gómez's modern Spanish interpretation) or in 15, 24, 26, 28. There are many *kharjas*, of course, as Professor Menocal too notes, where the female voice does not fit the paradigm of perverse mutual pining, either because the obstacles are real, or because she is not the type given to pining. Examples are number 9 where the girl demands a position she fancies in bed and numbers 3, 4, and 11, where the girl invites the lover to come when the "jealous one" sleeps or the household spy is away. Fear of the jealous one (31) is nothing irrational; "Don't bite me, darling" (22) is not a case of unreasonable pining. The *muwashshahat*, in this collection, that conform to Professor Menocal's paradigm are numbers 12, 16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 37; possibly also 8 and 32—seven to nine texts out of nearly forty, some thirty of which are love poems. The Andalusian part of the famous collection by Ibn Sana-al-Mulk (Dar-al-Tiraz) yields numbers no more favorable to the theory.

It seems to me, incidentally, that the same theory again drives too hard when, in the chapter on Dante, Professor Menocal speaks of Francesca as being "as oblivious to her unnamed lover in hell as any of those voices in the poetic texts described in the previous chapter" (128). It is difficult to see what more they could do, those *due che 'nsieme vanno*, whose profitless love still makes them approach, in the cruelest of similes: "Quali colombe dal disio chiamate / con l'ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido / vegnon per l'aere, dal voler portate / cotali uscir . . ."—what more they could do to escape such a charge? Theirs has been a love of concupiscence, no doubt, and in that respect was self-centered, but I for one cannot believe that Dante, whether the character who faints for pity, or the writer who describes them as a pair of doves, sees them as oblivious to each other.

The chapter on Dante is suggestive, but not without a certain methodological awkwardness that seems to spring from the broad gauge of the hypothesis. Professor Menocal raises the possibility that Dante was moved to write "so magnificent an apologia for fundamental Christianity" because he was appalled at the "rationalist challenge to unreasoning faith" posed by radical Aristotelianism—in other words, Averroism (127). The work being therefore a kind of *Contra Arabos*, he cast it—so the argument goes—in a form borrowed from the Arabs: to defy the substance, he chose to match the form of the narrative of Mohammed's trip to the other world (the *mi'raj*, which was known in translation). "If this is what Dante was doing, the *Commedia* is a challenge, a counter-text . . ." (131). Here the reader may reach for Occam's razor, recalling John Freccero's evidence (see "The Prologue Scene" in *Dante: The*

Poetics of Conversion, Harvard UP, 1986, 1-28) for echoes in Dante of the Augustinian meditation, never lost sight of in the Middle Ages, on "philosophical presumption." Professor Menocal, who regards her hypothesis as confirmation of Freccero's views on the poetics of conversion (128) would say in response that in Dante's time Averroism was the form taken by philosophical presumption. Why then is Averroes in limbo and not in hell? Professor Menocal, aware of the problem, suggests that this is "perhaps explained by remembering how well known it was that the philosopher had incurred the wrath and condemnation of Islamic religious authorities" (126). But then, why write a countertext to the *mi'raj*, to a pious narrative which Dante may have believed was a sacred text of the Muslims, in order to battle the vogue of a philosopher whom Muslim orthodoxy considered an unbeliever? The hypothesis is thought-provoking, and logical awkwardness is no refutation. But until the edifice has more philological mortar, one is tempted to walk in it on tiptoe.

In some cases (as in that of the *Commedia*) the assumption of an encounter between cultures is necessary for Professor Menocal's argument. But the reader will ask whether we need to trouble our heads about the possible genetic tie between, say Arab and Provençal song before we can think about them in intelligent comparative studies. Professor Menocal wrestles with this problem, and is, wisely, not quite sure how to decide it:

> Thus, although it is possible to do comparative literary work when no genetic question is explicitly at stake or when this is not the major focus of a particular study, such comparative work in medieval studies has generally been limited, by common consent, to comparisons of texts that have been considered comparable in terms of the broadest genetic framework and relationships. It has not been sufficient, and perhaps it should not be, to note that two texts have shared features and then to compare those features that invite such comparative work. The implicit or explicit rule has been in force that there must be a plausible historical relationship between the texts, at least in terms of their being part of the same general literary universe (92).

Nevertheless, perhaps it will be one of the contributions of this book to prompt students of literature to try their hand at comparative studies *without* worrying about origins and influences. Professor Menocal shows us that we do so worry—and this might be the therapeutic insight that will allow us to relax. For example, the clash of "courtly love" and good love, the love that serious religious thought could approve, is common to many works, Arabic and Romance. One could conceive of a study that would not concern itself with *from where*, but only with *how*: how

the clash is defined, expressed, and perhaps exploited for literary tension. The differences, for that matter, may also come in for a less fractious and therefore more illuminating (or at least more pleasant) examination. "I am a slave to one whose master [legally, socially] I am" (*Las Jarchas* 37) expresses the normal social setting of the Arabic love lyric. Would it not be of interest to see how the differences in social setting must affect an informed reading of what is said to the inaccessible mistress, *mawla* or *midons*? Disagreements about particulars should not, then, obscure the great merits of this book. Apart from giving pleasure through its erudite ranging over vast material, it should cause readers to search their souls, to examine their preconceptions (e.g., "Westernness") and prejudices. These are benefits indeed.

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