MEDIEVAL PERSIAN COURT POETRY. By Julie Scott Meisami. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. 345 p.

Towards the end of her concluding chapter in *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, Meisami, outlining the kinds of studies of Persian poetry that may follow from her own, argues that this literature cannot be studied outside the multiple contexts that embrace it: pre-Islamic Iranian culture, Arabic tradition, and medieval literature as a whole. She goes on to make two crucial points: that "important parallels exist between Persian medieval literature and that of the West, parallels that cannot be considered the result of 'influence' but must be viewed as common responses to similar cultural circumstances" and that "it is also the task of such studies to restore the sense of Persian literature as *literature* lost by a discipline that has become increasingly the province of philologists and specialists in 'area studies,' who have lost contact with their own literary past" (310-311). This is a characteristically self-effacing comment, since it is precisely these multiple tasks that Meisami herself has just accomplished. And while she is undoubtedly correct that further studies of what is clearly a remarkably substantial corpus could profitably be added, a more assertive critic might justifiably have emphasized that it is Meisami who has thus altered the face of medieval Persian literary studies.

Her book is a treasure trove of information, tidily and intelligently presented, for the European medievalist, who probably knows next to nothing about Persian poetry. If, in recent decades, some of us have been pushed to learning some of the rudiments of Arabic and especially Hispano-Arabic courtly poetry (because of ever-accumulating indications of its proximity to and encounters with the courtly literatures of the rest of medieval Europe), the rich literary universe of the Persian courts has remained far beyond the Eastern horizon. In reading Meisami's book one realizes simultaneously why, in some measure, that has been the case, and why it is a shame which, fortunately, is now remediable. As her comments cited above indicate, it becomes readily apparent from her citations of her predecessors' work that little or nothing has been written on the subject that would be readable to anyone not intimately familiar with the Persian/Arabic philological tradition. (This is far from surprising to those of us who have found it equally difficult to find non-specialized information about Arabic and Hispano-Arabic medieval poetry, even when the latter intersects clearly with branches of Romance vernacular poetries.)

The shame of such inaccessibility is both apparent and predictable: in key areas such as language, themes, genres and, depending on one's readings, function, medieval Persian poetry does present stunning similarities and differences that shed light on our readings of the medieval courtly poetries with which we are on more intimate terms. Thus, to take but one of many possible examples, the initial description of the *ghazal*, or love poem, is a readily recognizable one: "The initial impression of spontaneity, or of 'sincerity,' produced by its ostensible status as a love lyric that expresses personal emotion gives way, on reading many such poems, to a conviction of its repetitiveness and extreme conventionality" (239). Who, reading through the Provençal corpus, or Petrarch's *canzoniere*, for that matter, has not had that same reaction, and then had to come to terms with it critically?

Meisami's own critical stand is, one gathers, a radical one vis à vis other Persianists, mostly due to the simple feat of treating her material as literature rather than as philological/historical documentation; this is precisely what makes her study accessible (along with the conspicuous clarity of her writing) to Europeanists who are, by and large, well beyond the earlier philological mode. She rejects,

for example, simplistic notions of the "factual relationship" between a poet and his love and, in a lucid discussion of the touchy issue of homoeroticism in the love poetry (an issue no less critical in discussions of Hispano-Arabic poetry in general, especially when one dares compare it to Provençal poetry) she ends intelligently by pointing out that, just as with female lovers, the factual basis verges on the irrelevant: "In *ghazal*, as in courtly love lyrics in general, it is the portrayal of this experience that is central . . . any similarity . . . to real persons is purely coincidental, while the experience itself is both an ideal and a fiction" (251). It is telling that almost all the critics she uses to "document" this and other comparable assertions are Europeanists who came to the same conclusions about the lyrics under their purview (Frederick Goldin, Lowry Nelson Jr., Paul Zumthor, Daniel Poirion, etc.). I dare say it is precisely her explicitly comparatist grounding in this regard, her ample application of readings from one tradition to elucidate texts from another that not only makes this study accessible (because of the familiarity of the critical language and notions evoked) to the Europeanists she is trying to reach, but that also, and probably no less importantly, makes the study all the more valuable for those who have, apparently, dealt with Persian literature in far different terms.

It must be said that Meisami has not avoided all the pitfalls of treading this difficult middle-path of speaking to two different critical traditions at the same time. She does succeed admirably in some of the rudimentary aspects of presentation: she provides her own translations of the Persian literature that sound right, sound like medieval courtly poetry, and are quite readable in and of themselves (although this reviewer can in no way judge their "accuracy") and she has uniformly translated all secondary citations from many languages, a real courtesy to her potential readers. But she has relied much too heavily on these secondary citations and often seems to have difficulty deciding which voice she is speaking in, which audience she is addressing. Thus, there are occasionally tedious discussions of arcane problems in Persian philology that do not appear to be of any interest or usefulness to the comparatist; these at times seem to be the kind of discussion she is rejecting elsewhere as irrelevant to the study of Persian poetry qua poetry. At the same time, her excessive reliance on citations, often very long ones, make it difficult to follow her own voice and analysis, chopping it up annoyingly and harkening once again to the more philological approach she seeks to transcend. In the difficult intermediary position she has chosen for herself she may have felt this degree of documentation necessary to establish the competence she clearly has in both areas. But it is too often a distraction from her own voice, which is clear and insightful enough to speak alone much more than it does. And her bibliography, in any case, is an excellent guide both to previous studies in the Persian tradition and to the sorts of Europeanist studies that have most influenced her.

Meisami's book has much to offer the medievalist who has studied Europe's lyric and romance genres without the benefit of even rudimentary knowledge of a tradition that, as this study makes quite apparent, is remarkably rich and sophisticated and compelling in its own right. It is a "corner" of the medieval world we as scholars are richer for knowing about and, as a surplus, it can frequently surprise us with its remarkable similarities and parallelisms to our own traditions. And that, too, raises interesting questions. Because Meisami is also intimately familiar with and an intelligent reader of the European traditions that coexisted with the Persian and Arabic ones (of places perhaps not as "far away" as we used to think), her book should become an indispensable primer on Persian court

poetry. Finally, we would be well advised to follow Meisami's own lead, in reverse, and see what light her readings of Persian poetry can reflect and refract on our readings of Europe's court poetry.

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DISTINGUISHING JONSON: IMITATION, RIVALRY, AND THE DIRECTION OF A DRAMATIC CAREER. By Geroge E. Rowe. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

The authorial commentary that ramparts *The Workes of Beniamin Jonson*—as the playwright courted risibility by calling them—threatens to crimp a critic's style. The phalanx of epistles, dedications, prologues, epilogues, inductions, choruses, interscenes, and intermeans makes us expositors on terms Jonson has dictated. The contrast with Shakespeare is stark: Shakespeare famously abides our question, while Jonson barely tolerates it; and the contrasting results in the realm of criticism (attributable to a variety of causes, only some in the authors' keeping) are also stark. Shakespeare is that into which we read, infinitely responsive, inexhaustible, the endlessly contestable corpus over which opposing armies of interpreters fight. However rowdy Ben Jonson was in life, he is in his gathered works, by comparison with Shakespeare, a site of critical consensus. He is, as it were, self-possessed, partly because he was, according to George E. Rowe, "the first English author to assert at length his control over the meaning of his own works" (p. 57). Rowe's book provides an excellent account of Jonson's anxious effort to pre-empt misinterpretation by his own prior interpretation; and symptomatically it suggests the cost of Jonson's success. Its terms are largely Jonson's. Other voices—which nowadays might be supposed to sound like feminism or psychoanalysis or Marxism or New Historicism—are muffled or silent. Its clear, intelligent univocality does not disturb the consensus.

Rowe's theme, and Jonson's, is distinction, in the sense of difference—the distinguishing characteristics which make a difference (and win distinction) in a rivalrous society. Rowe does an excellent job of explaining the dynamics of a system that operates only most visibly in the world of art. We imitate what we admire, which is also what we would become or overgo; hence imitation may be the expression of an envy that seeks to efface hierarchical difference. To keep the economy moving, the imitated must answer with further distinguishing gestures. Endless rivalry is the only alternative to the entropy threatened by imitative desire. (The scheme owes more to René Girard than to Harold Bloom.) The whole business is nicely summed up, as Rowe points out, in the Renaissance key word "emulation": "The act of emulating is both a recognition of the importance of imitation and an attempt to imitate (compete) in such a way as to create (ultimately) difference rather than similarity, and so to establish hierarchy and order out of the imitative tendency toward equality and (potential) confusion. It is a particularly militant form of comparison whose final goal is contrast" (p. 21).

That poets imitate poets is a common enough theme; but Jonson's authorial anxiety was especially provoked by the fact that audiences are also in the emulation game. Judgment belongs to the good poet (who must first be a good man); the audience that sets up to judge the playwright has gotten above itself. Moreover, as Rowe interestingly suggests, the audience's every act of interpretation parodies the writer in his distinguishing role as purveyor of meaning. The metatheatrical battery with which Jonson hedges his plays is aimed even more at that encroaching audience than at his fellow playwrights. In the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, a Scrivener reads out "Articles of Agreement, indented between the *Spectators* or *Hearers* at the *Hope* on the Bankeside, in the County