

## ARABIC CULTURE AND MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN LITERATURE\*

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The book under review takes up the question of Arabic influence on medieval European literature from the perspective of the attitudes which inform critical discussions of the topic. The author associates negative responses to suggestions of Arabic influence with a "myth of Westernness" inspired by European colonial attitudes toward the East, and presents considerable evidence for the cultural interaction of Andalusian and Sicilian Arabic culture with that of medieval Europe. While much of the material is familiar, the arguments for such interaction are convincing, and the readings offered of specific texts are thought-provoking; and though the book is somewhat marred by its polemic tone, it raises significant issues with respect to the aims and methods of literary historiography and comparative literary studies.

THE ARABIC LITERATURES OF MEDIEVAL SPAIN and Sicily do not occupy an important position in Arabic studies; the domain of a few specialists, they are typically viewed as peripheral to the tradition as a whole. Still less, being Arabic, are they considered relevant to European literary history, despite the close contacts between medieval Arabic and European culture in the Middle Ages. Menocal seeks to reawaken our awareness of the Arabic contribution to medieval European literature, which without its Arabic component is, she asserts, sadly truncated; her discussion raises issues which go beyond the boundaries of Arabic, Hispanic or medieval studies and which warrant serious attention.

Menocal argues that the resistance of many medievalists and most Hispanists to so-called "Arabic theories" of the origins of, for example, troubadour poetry stems less from scholarly objections than from the fact "that European scholarship has an *a priori* view of, and set of assumptions about, its medieval past that is far from conducive to viewing its Semitic components as formative and central" (p. xiii). (The designation of such components as "Semitic" is unfortunate; for while it includes the Hebrew element, it obscures the fact that many, if not most, of the bearers of Arabic culture in Andalusia and Sicily were of non-Arab origin.) The central question she wishes to raise is thus not one of influence but of method, of "why discussions of such possibilities had such a different cast from others that concerned the medieval period and its cultural milieu"

(p. xii); and in her first chapter she sets out to examine the assumptions that shape our view, as Westerners, of the medieval past.

Western hostility toward suggestions of Arabic influence on medieval European literature reflects what Menocal terms the "myth of Westernness"—defined as "the image or construct we have . . . of ourselves and our culture, an entity we have dubbed 'Western'," the product of a cultural history viewed as both unique and normative and assumed to be "in distinctive, necessary, and fundamental opposition to non-Western culture and cultural history" (pp. 1–2)—which constitutes an informing paradigm of modern historiography, literary and otherwise. Following the lead of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, she identifies the root of this myth as political: the need to assert Western superiority over the East, the Other, leading to a rejection of the possibility of fruitful contact with that Other, defined retrospectively as inferior and thus deserving of subjugation. She traces the myth's origins to the Renaissance re-discovery of its classical antecedents (no longer available only through Arabic) and their elevation to a central position in the cultural tradition, and its concomitant rejection of much of its medieval past, viewed as the darkest of Dark Ages. But the crucial period of its formation was the nineteenth century, "this moment of the high-pitched awareness of the particularity and superiority of Europe that came with the imperial and colonial experience and the post-Romantic experience with the Orient" (p. 6), a period which, not by coincidence, saw the development of both orientalism and philology as well as the beginnings of modern medieval studies and the rehabilitation of Europe's medieval past.

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But the dominant paradigm of medieval literary history was, I suggest, developed in the first half of this century, between the two world wars, largely as a response to European political and cultural fragmentation. Two seminal works of this period attempted to instill a sense of European cultural unity: Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), written during his exile in Istanbul (and described by Edward Said as "an act of cultural, even civilizational, survival of the highest importance" [Said 1984, 6]), which sought to define the essential styles of Western literature, and Ernst Robert Curtius' *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948).

Curtius' view of the European Middle Ages may be said to represent the canonical narrative of the period, and is both paradigmatic and exclusive. There is no place in it for non-European elements, nor does Curtius' "comparative approach" envision for such elements a formative role, as is seen by his handling of potential areas of comparison. Dante's meeting, in the *Commedia*, with the *bella scuola* of classical *auctores* becomes for Curtius an emblem both of the authoritative status of antiquity and of the Latin Middle Ages as "the crumbling Roman road from the antique to the modern world" (Curtius 1963, 19); the long chapter on Dante makes no mention of Arabic contacts (Asín Palacios' *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, first published in 1919, is ignored). Latinity is the source of all European culture: scholasticism's greatest debt is to Boethius, that of general knowledge to Isidore of Seville, that of literature to Fortunatus, all luminaries of the 6th century.

The Arabs, historically important because their "incursions" herald the end of antiquity, are culturally negligible because culturally unassimilable, in contrast to the Germanic peoples who helped to perpetuate Roman Latin culture. The true homeland of this culture is Romania, unified by the Romance languages; the multilingualism of its writers does not include Arabic, and indeed, in this Romania the Arabs are largely invisible. Their transmission of Greek learning is briefly noted (in the context of the scholastics' purification of Aristotelianism from Averroistic tendencies); but, in general, philosophy's debt to the Arabs goes unmentioned, although a Hellenized Jewish connection is admitted. The seven-hundred year Arab presence in Spain is dealt with by virtually ignoring that region until the sixteenth century; an excursus on "Spain's Cultural Belatedness" resumes the views of Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz ("España y Francia en la edad media," *Revista de Occidente*, 1923); the conjecture of earlier beginnings based on the presence of Romance *ḥarjas* in Arabic and Hebrew *muwashshahāt* is else-

where dismissed in a footnote. In a short section entitled "West and East" the influence of Arabic poetry on the poets of the *siglo de oro* is briefly admitted: Spanish Mannerism is termed a mingling of "the medieval Latin and the Eastern ornamental styles" (*ibid.*, 343) to its detriment, precisely because of its resemblance to Eastern literature.

Curtius' approach reflects what Claudio Guillén calls "the atmosphere (redolent with mythomania) in which the idea of national literature thrives" (Guillén 1971, 188). For Guillén, as for Menocal, the study of either Spanish or European literature is meaningless without consideration of its oriental components: "No definition of European civilization, and especially, of European literature, which excludes Spain or fails to take into account the impact of Islamic and Hebrew history on Europe is at all viable" (*ibid.*, 474, and see pp. 472-75). Yet can this view of medieval Europe, one-sided though it is, be attributed to negative political motives and specifically to a colonial mentality which views the Arabs as inferior? Certainly other, more complex factors influenced not only Curtius' approach, but the more extreme view of many Hispanists of Spanish literary history, which takes its normative form in the same period. Thomas Glick, discussing what he terms "the present polemic" of Spanish historiography (which, though its roots are in the interwar years, became clearly articulated in Américo Castro's *España en su historia* [1948] and Sánchez-Albornoz' response, *España: Una enigma histórico* [1956]), has shown that the focus of this polemic, not on "the definition of mechanisms and processes governing cultural contact and cultural diffusion but . . . [on] the issue of modal personality ('national character')" (Glick 1979, 7-10), may be traced to complex social-psychological motives which have their origins deep in the Spanish past: "Transposed into the historiographical field, subconscious fears became transferred into bias that underlies historical interpretation and contributes to misinterpretation" (*ibid.*, 3). In other words, a political interpretation of such difficulties in historiography oversimplifies what is, at base, a far more complex problem.

On the other hand, that such paradigms of national or literary identity based on myths of exclusivity and otherness are operative in contemporary criticism cannot be denied; nor can the fact that, as Menocal justly observes, they are reinforced rather than countered by the sibling disciplines of orientalism and philology. Orientalists, she states, "have been no more exempt from the prejudices of cultural ideology than the medievalist community as a whole" (p. 18, n. 5), and their studies reflect equally sweeping assumptions of the superiority and normative status of Western, and the

intractable otherness of non-Western, literatures. The contrast between the potential of orientalism to combat the "myth of Westernness" and its role in perpetuating the West's self-image is ably brought out in two very different studies of the discipline: Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance orientale* (1950; not cited by Menocal), which examines the impact of the "discovery of the East" on European intellectual life from 1680 to 1880, and Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which portrays the formation of the image of the East as Other, aided and abetted by orientalism's appropriation of its cultures as material for study.

Of the two, Schwab is the more successful in placing orientalism in its broad intellectual, and not merely political, context; sympathetic in his approach, he is also aware of the tension between the potential of this "second Renaissance" for creating a new "global humanism," and the development of orientalism itself into an increasingly specialized academic discipline (Schwab 1984, 4,8 and see pp. 1-8). His task was thus (as Said puts it) "to study the progress by which the West's image of the Oriental passes from primitive to actual, that is, from disruptive *éblouissement incrédule* to *vénération condescendante*" (Said 1984, 252). Said criticizes Schwab for his apparent lack of interest in "the economic, social and political forces at work during the periods he studies. . . . Never does he coherently put forward a thesis about Orientalism as a science, attitude, or institution for the European military, political, and economic control of Eastern colonies" (1984, 263). It is this dimension of orientalism which Said himself seeks to demonstrate by examining "the political questions raised by Orientalism," among them:

What sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like the orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novel-writing, and lyric poetry come to the service of Orientalism's broadly imperialist view of the world? . . . In fine, how can we treat the cultural, historical phenomenon of Orientalism as a kind of *willed human work* . . . in all its historical complexity, detail, and worth without at the same time losing sight of the alliance between cultural work, political tendencies, the state, and the specific realities of domination?" (1978, 15; author's emphases).

Said, as Menocal herself observes (pp. 21-22, n. 12), ignores Spanish orientalism (thus further contributing to the marginalization of Hispano-Arabic studies), preferring to concentrate on the more obvious excesses of the English, the French and the Americans—excesses

which are more easily explainable in terms of colonial and post-colonial political motives. For Said (and largely for Menocal) political considerations are central to Orientalism, defined as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (1978, 2). The East is thus defined as a mirror image of the West—an image all too familiar in the writings of, for example, G. E. von Grunebaum, whose approach to Islam Marshall Hodgson described as based on a "Westernistic commitment or outlook" which ensures that "the formative assumptions of Islamdom . . . are derived at least in part negatively, by way of contrast (what Islam *lacks*), from certain contrary formative assumptions he ascribes (in the Westernistic manner) at once to the West and to Modernity. . . . The formative assumptions he sees in the West, on the contrary, turn out to be central to what is most distinctly human" (Hodgson 1974, 2:362, n. 6).

But while ideology is clearly important in the formation of such an image (just as it dictates the search, by von Grunebaum and others, for an "essential Islam" which in all its lineaments would conform to that image), it may be argued that it most often represents an outlook which generates individual and collective misreadings, rather than a program, a conspiratorial effort to suppress the Other. To treat all instances of what is often openly hostile incomprehension as "at bottom" political (Said 1978, 299) fails to account for other factors which must also be acknowledged if we are to revise our attitudes toward historiography, literary and otherwise.

One such factor is undoubtedly academic vested interest and adherence to reductive methods of literary study, exemplified by the central position of philology—itsself (as Schwab shows) a product of orientalism—among these methods. For Curtius, philology was the key to unlocking the essential unity of European literature; orientalist see it as the means of uncovering the secrets of Eastern texts. But as Walther Bust observed, "No text was ever written to be read and interpreted by philologists" (quoted by Jauss 1982, 19); the philological method leads away from the consideration of texts as literature. Jaroslav Stetkevych once asked if Arabists are "basically . . . not even interested in literature, because we are philologists, historians, or disguised social scientists: in one word because we are 'orientalists'?" and was led, like Menocal, to inquire, "Why should our methods, our critical conceptual apparatus, the very repertory of questions we seem to be asking of literature be so far apart from what others do about and ask of literature?" (Stetkevych 1969, 148-49). Elsewhere he traced the



separation of orientalist philology from culture and literature to its pursuit of the "perfect text," about which, once achieved, the philologist "would more often than not decide either that it was not worth reading or that it ought to be used elsewhere—not in literature" (1980, 111). Philology's more recent heirs—structuralism, which often assumes that knowledge of the synchronic state of a language is sufficient for analyzing its texts, and the New Criticism, with its ideal of the text as self-sufficient literary artifact—perpetuate this separation of text from culture by removing it from its conditions of production and reception. Yet is it sufficient to argue (as Menocal appears to do) that such methods serve primarily to mask the input of ideology by positing objectivity while continuing to read non-Western texts in ways which reinforce the "myth of Westernness"? Is it not also the entrapment of philology in its own methodological limitations, its unwillingness to move beyond the text, which contributes to what Menocal terms the "double standard" of scholarship which plagues the study of medieval Eastern literatures?

That this double standard exists is beyond question. One form in which it manifests itself is the view (also an offshoot of philology), held by Europeanists and orientalist alike, that the methods employed in the study of Western literature are of dubious or negative validity for Eastern; another is the modification of the entire concept of "literature" as applied to the East, where "a distinction is made between poetry and other intellectual life that is difficult to reconcile with the unity of such traditions in virtually every other sphere of literary study" (p. 17, n. 4), leading to the divorce of literature from other areas of life. This distinction makes it possible to accommodate the historical fact of the transmission of scientific and philosophical learning (the emphasis being customarily placed on texts rather than ideas) by the Arabs to Europe, while assuming that such areas of culture have nothing to do with literature.

A problem that Menocal does not explicitly address is that in practice literature is defined, especially by orientalist, much as the individual critic wishes. The "molecular theory" of Arabic poetry, for example, derived originally from philology (cf. Ahlwardt's dictum that the "Arab mind" is unable to perceive anything but "singularities" [cited by Stetkevych 1980, 112–13]) was later linked (notably by von Grunebaum) to an "atomistic" world-view characteristic of "essential" Islam, and invoked in the analysis of all medieval Islamic poetry. On the other hand, when scholars like Gibb or von Grunebaum deplore the "literarization" of Muslim historiography (when that discipline was taken over by court secretaries), they divorce "literature"

(now defined as *belles-lettres*) from the ideally "objective" discipline of history (a distinction currently challenged by medievalists). To define literature either as the expression of national character or as consisting only of *belles-lettres* (a concept alien to medieval literary systems) yields equally reductive models; but the problem here is not merely one of ideological mythification but of methodological adequacy.

The double standard, as Menocal points out, also applies in matters of justification and documentation, a problem of particular importance for comparative studies. For while studies of Celtic or Germanic (as of Latin) contributions to European literature are admitted because their inclusion "does not challenge the boundaries of the image of the medieval period" (p. 8), and require little justification, comparisons of Hispano-Arabic with troubadour poetry (for example) must be extensively rationalized and rigidly supported by textual evidence, though in all likelihood such contacts as occurred between the two were non- or extra-textual, intercultural rather than narrowly literary, and literary documents are inadequate either to prove or to disprove their existence.

Thus Menocal concludes that traditional literary historiography, based on the canonical paradigm of the "Westernness" of European literature and the Otherness of non-European, is unable to bring about the much-needed revision of medieval literary history because it reads that history in terms of its "victors." She does not propose that we reject this narrative *in toto* (thus scrapping its many valuable achievements), but rather that we should discard "that part . . . that has eliminated the possibility of seeing in the Andalusian world the impetus for change and . . . that cannot imagine that a cultural force now seemingly alien to our own was once a part of its foundation" (p. 15), in order to create an alternative narrative which "does not shy away from the concept of a mixed ancestry for western Europe. . . [and] enriches rather than impoverishes the recounting of the story we already work with" (p. 16).

Such revisions have been attempted before, as Menocal's bibliography makes clear; and much of the material which she presents in the following chapters is familiar. Norman Daniel's studies on Islam and the West, Alice Lasater's *Spain to England* (1974), Pierre Gallais' *Génèse du roman occidental* (1974), Dorothee Metlitzki's *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (1977), and Vernet's *La cultura hispanoárabe en Oriente y Occidente* (1978) are only a few of the studies which, in the past two decades, have attempted to describe the contacts between Arabic and European culture as productive rather than confrontational. The restatement



of such material in the context of Menocal's criticism of traditional paradigms of literary and cultural history is, however, not unwarranted, especially since the view of medieval cultural exchange presented by Menocal in her second chapter ("Rethinking the Background") is somewhat less partial than that which characterizes the studies cited above.

Menocal focuses on four representative figures—William IX of Aquitaine, Peter the Venerable, Eleanor of Aquitaine and Frederick II of Sicily—and on the intellectual milieu of twelfth-century Paris. The panorama of cultural exchange—the presence of Arabic-speaking singers and musicians at European courts, the movement of scholars, translators, merchants, envoys, and poets between Europe, Spain, Sicily, and the East, the contacts furnished by pilgrimages, military engagements, marriage, and commerce, the activities of translators, the multi-lingualism which characterizes the period—is reconstructed in painstaking detail. Refuting the common equation of Arabic culture with Islam and its resultant opposition to Christianity, assumed to be the central and formative determinant of European culture, Menocal reminds us that Arabic was the prestige language of a high culture, and that those who learned it were more interested in the refinements of that culture than in doctrinal matters. (Exceptions such as Peter the Venerable—the first translator of the Koran—who warned against the seductiveness of Arabic culture precisely because he believed the Latins were ignorant of its association with Islam, or the Paris Aristotelians who opposed Averroistic "heresies," prove the rule.) Political and religious antagonisms, far from proving a barrier to cultural contact, often enhanced it: the fall of Toledo in 1085, for example, accelerated the diffusion of Arabic culture throughout Europe.

Stressing its polymorphic nature and the variety of ways in which that culture, "Arabic in expression and Andalusian and Sicilian in immediate point of origin" (p. 35), was disseminated, Menocal notes "the essential fallacy in assuming that what is Arabic in medieval Europe is necessarily Islamic or that what was originally something else (Greek or Persian, say) was not received as Andalusian" (p. 37). This has clear implications for comparative studies, and particularly for source studies; and here the academic double standard manifests itself once more. For while it is of genuine interest to the specialist that specific elements in Andalusian culture may stem from more ancient origins, the tracing of which provides information on patterns of cultural dissemination, the appeal to ultimate sources often provides a convenient rationale for bypassing the groups responsible for transmitting materials from their remote origins to their European recipients.

Such is the case in Donald Lach's *Asia in the Making of Europe* (1977), where the distinction between "Asia" and "Europe" and the focus on origins make it possible to minimize the role of Arabic culture as an agency for transmission. Lach (like many others) limits himself to textual evidence: "Because of the obvious complications involved in studying the migration of literary themes . . . the only certain ground to stand on is that provided by the actual translations of Indian works into Western languages" (Lach 1977, 1:27). This begs the question of intermediate versions, since none of these "actual translations" were made directly from Indian sources, and places severe limitations on his study; thus, while passing mention is made, with reference to the migration of Indian tales to Europe, of "intermediary Arabic, Syrian [*sic*], and Persian translation" (2:101), little attention is given to the actual contribution of such translations. The discussion of Dante's "Oriental sources" focuses on their Indian and Far Eastern origins (while Dante's "image of Asia" is said to be "founded upon the learned tradition deriving from Pliny, Solinus, and Isidore" [1:75]); there is no mention of the mosques of Dis or of the *Libro della scala*, and Lach is puzzled at Dante's placing the terrestrial paradise in Ceylon (one of its traditional locations in Arabic sources). Boccaccio and Chaucer were influenced (presumably without the help of Petrus Alfonsis) by Indian narratives (Kālidāsa, the *Rāmāyaṇa*) and Buddhist parables (the "Pardoner's Tale" resembles a parable from the *Vedabba Jataka*; Marco Polo is suggested as the source of imagery in the "Squire's Tale"); and the ultimate source of the *Secretum Secretorum* is identified as Indian. While all this is of undoubted interest, it in no way accounts for the form in which such materials actually reached Europe; India may well be the archetypal source of story, but the discussion of "the migration of tales to the West," based on the evidence of texts alone, is misleading, as it ignores both the importance of oral transmission and the fact that transformations and distortions are more likely in such transmission than in written translations. Moreover, Lach assumes that religious hostility between Christians and Muslims constituted an insurmountable barrier to cultural exchange, and concludes that the most important accomplishment of the Crusades was "bringing home to all of Europe the fundamental conflict and radical differences which existed between East and West" (2:109).

As Menocal rightly observes, the notion that literary contacts are primarily textual "is dependent on an anachronistic view of what constituted literature and assumes an arbitrary division between different segments of the intellectual and artistic communities" (p. 58). She is not the first to argue that studies of

cultural and literary exchange cannot be limited to textual contacts (nor confined to "literature" in the narrow sense of *belles-lettres*); in an age when the primary means of the transfer of knowledge was oral, "it requires no more than one instance of oral translation . . . to effect the transmission of a bit of literature from one language and culture to another. It is an anachronism to assume that developments in literature were solely a scholarly enterprise" (p. 60). We cannot imagine that Christians closed their ears when Arabs sang, told stories, or discussed ethics, philosophy, or love, or invoked the language barrier in an age when "foreign" languages were neither manifestations of the Other nor (in consequence) specialized academic disciplines, but tools of everyday social, cultural and commercial interchange.

Menocal also challenges the view "that influence means or implies servile copying, [or] that its effects result in a text that is indistinguishable from the one that has influenced it" (pp. 60–61). This position, with its roots in nineteenth-century philology, stresses *rapports de fait*, confuses "influences and textual similarities" and fails to distinguish between such similarities (which may be coincidental) and what Guillén calls "genetic incitations," that is, the impact of a variety of factors (literary and otherwise) on a writer prior to the composition of a specific text (Guillén 1971, 33–34). As Roger Boase has noted, "it is not the products that influence, but creators that absorb" (cited by Menocal 1981, 49); literary dynamics operate in complex and essentially unquantifiable ways. It is to some aspects of these dynamics that Menocal turns in her last four chapters, which focus less on questions of genetics than on broader issues of cultural and literary exchange.

Chapter 3 deals with the "oldest issue," that of courtly love and the poetry of the troubadours. The centrality of that poetry to the development of European lyric poetry made it the object of intense study by early Romance philology, and raised questions concerning the origins of vernacular lyric that still dominate much contemporary scholarship. Curtius' discussion of the beginnings of vernacular literatures was limited to French narrative poetry, presumably because a Latin connection could be clearly demonstrated; for many other scholars, however, courtly lyric has come to exemplify what is distinctively and uniquely "Western," and is bound up with images of European identity.

Theories on the origins of courtly love are myriad; but, Menocal argues, despite the wide range of sources suggested (Marianism, Catharism, mysticism, folklore, Ovidian imitation, and so on), the possibility of non-European, non-Christian sources is generally rejected. As the rise of this area of study came during the period when Europe was "shaping its views of the Arabs as

colonial subjects . . . the Arabist theory [of origins] not only ceased to be one of those theories advocated, denied, or discussed; it became virtually taboo"; only those theories which did not violate the "fundamental principle of Europeaness" were further developed (p. 82). This, it should be noted, is not strictly true; for while the "Arabic theory" is often ignored in the classroom, the vast literature on the subject testifies to the continuing vigor of the discussion; and it is of some interest to observe curious role reversals, in which an orientalist like Samuel Stern (the "discoverer" of the romance *kharjas*) opposes the notion of Arabic influence, while the admittedly chauvinistic Sánchez-Albornoz vigorously supports it.

Faced with the obvious parallels between European and Arabic love poetry and theory, some scholars argue that these similarities represent the parallel development (often from common, but ancient, sources) under parallel circumstances of traditions otherwise unrelated. Von Grunebaum's view is representative: "The interaction between East and West in the Middle Ages will never be correctly diagnosed or correctly assessed and appraised unless their fundamental cultural unity is realized and taken into consideration. It is that essential kinship of East and West that will account both for Europe's receptiveness to Arabic thought and to the (more or less) independent growth in the Occident of ideas and attitudes that on first sight appear too closely akin to their oriental counterparts not to be attributed to mere borrowing" (1952, 238). This is a curiously, but characteristically, fuzzy statement—where does kinship end and independence begin?—and to this view Menocal justly takes exception. "It would be more reasonable," she argues, "to assume something other than parallel development when one observes the appearance of quite similar and distinctive features in two schools of lyric poetry, one arising in the wake of the other, in two regions near each other and with no lack of communication, indeed with all sorts of traffic, between them" (p. 85). And indeed, one would expect not only similarities but differences, as any "borrowing" (a term which I suggest would be better subsumed under the medieval concept of *inventio*) would reflect adaptations both to individual temperaments (William IX's parody of courtly topics also assumes an awareness of such topics) and to specific aspects of the cultures in question (the virtual absence of adulterous love as a topic of Muslim poetry points primarily to differences between Muslim and Christian social structures rather than to doctrinal conflicts).

In chapter 4, on the *muwashshahāt*, Menocal criticizes the traditional limitation of comparative studies by criteria of historical filiation: texts are compared which are assumed to have some genetic relationship,

further established by means of the comparison, a hermeneutic circle which discourages synchronic studies which would illuminate the salient formal features of the texts in question (p. 92). While genetic issues can never be wholly ignored, Menocal suggests that the demonstration of filiation cannot be an *a priori* condition for comparative studies; and, by way of demonstrating "that our revisionist view of medieval European cultural and literary affairs can be of value for something more than establishing which came first or where any debt is owed" (p. 93), she offers a "metapoetic reading" of the *muwashshaḥa* in terms of its formal alterities.

Criticizing both Arabists and Romanists who treat the *muwashshaḥa*'s parts as separable and focus on either the Arabic portion or the Romance *kharja*, Menocal advances the view that the form's organicity is based on the opposition between a courtly, male speaker in the Arabic portion and a non-courtly, female speaker in the *kharja* (an opposition illuminated by Glick's description of the typical Andalusian marriage pattern as between "men who were bilingual Romance and Arab speakers, women who were monolingual Romance speakers" [Glick, 1979, 177]). This formal strategy has parallels in later Romance forms (the Provençal *canço*, the *pastourelle*, the dialogic poems of Countess Beatriz di Dia) which also employ contrasting registers of diction, specifically courtly versus colloquial (it is also parodied in William IX's "Farai un vers, pos mi somelh"). Menocal's analysis demonstrates the value of a synchronic approach not only in clarifying affinities between Hispano-Arabic and European lyric but in investigating questions of literary universals; but the approach also has its limitations, ignoring historical precedents (e.g., in the lyrics of Abū Nuwās) for the conclusion of a poem with a quotation in another register which would also be illuminating. Moreover, the emphasis on thematic fails to account for the ways in which the *muwashshaḥa*'s final *simṭ* prepares for the transition to the female, Romance voice, and the question of the form's musical component, particularly as it relates to Provençal lyrics, remains unexplored.

One might also inquire whether the reluctance of many scholars to deal with the *muwashshaḥa* in literary terms on the one hand, and on the other to consider the Romance *kharja* as an early stage of Romance lyric, stems not only from an assumption of the mutual exclusivity of the Arabic and European traditions, but from the popular nature of the poems themselves (a problem even more marked in the case of the *zajal*)? The notion that literary influence is mediated solely by texts reflects an elitist view of literature which posits an unbridgeable gulf between the literary-textual and the popular-oral levels of culture—a distinction which, as

Menocal notes in passing, is untenable. The interaction between these cultural levels, or registers, seen in the *muwashshaḥa* is peculiarly evocative of the polymorphic culture of Andalusia, and explains the incomprehension with which eastern Arab critics received it; but their prejudices should not be ours.

In chapter 5 ("The Anxieties of Influence") Menocal turns to Dante to propose a reading of the *Commedia* as, in part at least, a reaction to what the poet perceived as the pernicious influences of Arabic culture: the heresies of Averroism and of the poetry of selfish love. His negative judgment of the former is emblemized by his depiction of Dis (the lower part of hell) as a city of mosques (not, notes Menocal succinctly, "like mosques" [p. 126]) ringed by the circle of heretics and haunted by the shades of those (like Frederick II of Sicily, and Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti) who bear the taint of Averroism. Elsewhere Muḥammad is cleft in two, a schismatic punished not "as the prophet of Islam qua distant and little-known faith, but rather as the emblematic prophet and master of the dangerous philosophies and philosophers who . . . were tearing apart the Christian community" (p. 130). The poetry of courtly love—represented, in Dante's time, by the poets of the *scuola siciliana* and their Italian followers (notably Cavalcanti), and to which both Dante's *Vita Nuova* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere* provide counter-statements—is similarly emblemized by the picture of Francesca, self-absorbed and oblivious to the sufferings of her lover in hell. Menocal also takes up the question of Dante's relationship to Muslim accounts of the *mi'rāj*, available to him in the *Libro della scala* appended to Peter the Venerable's Toledan Collection, going beyond Asin's primitive conception of that relationship (based on the equation of influence with copying) to see in the *Commedia* an "anti-*mi'rāj*" demonstrating the falsity of Islam and the superiority of Christian belief. In this sense "Dante represents the very crossroads in the European absorption of and reaction to Arabic factors in the medieval world" (p. 135, n. 21)—a crossroads quite different than that envisioned by Curtius, where the centrality of Latin learning precluded contact with non-Latin elements.

A final chapter, "Other Readers, Other Readings," suggests further areas in which a revised narrative of medieval European literature would reveal its complexity and variety. Boccaccio's use of the story-telling tradition transmitted to Europe via the *Disciplina Clericalis* (a text which, along with others such as the *1001 Nights*, "should be part of . . . a systematic comparative investigation of narrativity in medieval story collections" [p. 141]); the development of such genres as the poetic encyclopedia and the mixed prose-poetry genre; the filiations of medieval European linguistic



philosophy with Arabic and Hebrew studies; and a variety of other issues suggest themselves (one might add, as others have done, the influence of Eastern elements on medieval romance and *chanson de geste*). Investigation of such issues would reveal that Arabic culture is important, often central, to the European tradition, rather than peripheral.

"A reconstruction of our views and definitions of what constitutes Spanish in this period is clearly as necessary, and potentially as beneficial, as new views and definitions of what is European." Menocal concludes:

These two notions are, indeed, inextricably intertwined. . . . If Hispanomedievalists shed light on the marvels and glories of Andalus, on its uniqueness and its decisive influence over the rest of Europe in this formative period . . . then they will undoubtedly reap the rewards. And if they help to establish that the twelfth, the thirteenth, or the fourteenth centuries and their literatures cannot be fully seen or clearly understood without looking first where others looked, to Spain, then this different kind of Hispanism will certainly be central to European studies (p. 153).

This falling back into the narrow confines of Hispanism rather than moving forward to confront the broader implications of her own arguments, seems to me the chief limitation of Menocal's otherwise provocative book, precisely because it returns the focus of the sort of comparative studies she advocates back to the point away from which her arguments implicitly lead: to European, and specifically "Spanish," literature, as distinct and definable entities. Guillén, discussing the "myth" of national literatures as psychological compensation "for injured pride, for the oppression of the individual, for the submission of the intellectual to the state," questions whether, before 1750, a writer in the Spanish *language* would consider himself *Spanish* in a modern sense (1971, 499–502), and argues that it is only when "Western" and "European" literature cease to be co-terminous, with the expansion of Europe and the rise of modern nation-states, that the notion of literature as the bearer of national identity comes into being [ibid., 473–75]. To speak of the "Spanish" literature of the Middle Ages is to reinforce this mythifying paradigm.

Further (Guillén observes), if one of the projects of comparative studies is indeed to clarify the development of national literatures, another, more important goal is the search for literary universals, in preparation for a history of *literature* as a system co-existing with other systems (social, political, economic), and which,

as a system, is more than an amalgam of its individual parts (ibid., 475ff.). "This search," he asserts, "will surely depend on the assimilation of a great deal of knowledge concerning the non-Western literatures, or to put it in academic terms, on the work of comparative literature scholars who have been trained as Orientalists" (ibid., 114). While Guillén's optimism in this respect is perhaps misplaced, as most orientalists are reluctant to venture out of their narrow areas of specialization, this is clearly the direction in which future comparative studies must proceed.

Thus it is not sufficient to re-incorporate Arab Spain into the medieval European tradition, to render it "European" rather than rejecting it as a manifestation of the Other; for whatever new definition of what is European may be achieved, the West's basic perception of its own unique and normative "Westernness" will remain unchallenged. For the Arabist, moreover, the effect is most likely to be the removal of Hispano- and Siculo-Arabic literature even further from the mainstream of Arabic studies, and to perpetuate the difficulty of undertaking comparative studies which would shed light on an as yet virtually unexamined question: the development of the vernacular literatures of the Islamic world.

To take an instance: is it pure coincidence that so many of the thematic motifs and imagery of later (twelfth- to fourteenth-century) Andalusian and Sicilian Arabic lyrics (idealized love, bacchic motifs, the emphasis on gardens, flowers, and so on), a preference for brief lyrics over the formal *qaṣīda*, the prevalence of similar structural patterns (notably ring composition), are reminiscent not only of Provençal poetry but of Persian poetry of the same period? Or do such affinities reflect a tendency of the vernacular literatures to free themselves from canonical modes of discourse in favor of others more responsive to their particular cultural ambience? Is it coincidence that allegorical narratives and "visionary recitals" developed in Andalusia and in Iran (as well as in Europe), but never achieved great popularity in the Arab East?

Such questions demonstrate that the issues Menocal raises are by no means limited to Hispanic studies, and that the implications of her call for a revision of the narrative of medieval literary history (and of academic curricula) go beyond a new definition of "European" literature. Comparatism is not an end in itself (however illuminating its findings may be), but a method, or rather a range of methods, whose validity must be constantly tested by application to periods and to literatures other than those with respect to which they were originally derived. Thus, for example, theories of narrativity based on studies of the novel, or of folklore,

may be tested against examples of medieval storytelling; notions of genre may be modified by comparison of Western schemes with those of systems which classify their genres somewhat differently, or which lack one or another of the "essential" European forms (for example, epic or drama); ideas of lyric, its registers and speaking voices, its structures and conventions, may be clarified in the light not only of the *muwash-shaha* but of earlier Arabic and later Persian lyrics. While, as Menocal points out, such studies may ultimately reveal filiations between Europe and the East, their greater value lies in their contribution to our understanding of literary systems in more general terms.

This, then, is my first quibble with this entertaining and thought-provoking book: that its author draws back from pursuing its full implications, and thus to some extent falls victim to the myth she is concerned to refute, that of the centrality and normative status of European literature. My second is with the emphasis on political motives (though these must not be discounted) to the exclusion of other, perhaps more ordinary failings—one of these being, to my mind (after intellectual indolence and the unexamined acceptance of received opinion), that the intractability of the texts themselves (whose subtleties can never be accounted for by philological analysis alone), coupled with insufficient literary knowledge (especially of pre-modern literatures) on which to base comparisons, leads to an intellectual impasse in dealing with those texts, a mental

throwing-up of hands reflective of an inability to grapple with them as literature. Our self-examination, as orientalist, medievalist, or comparatist, must take into account not only the ideological myths which form our attitudes, but the methodological ones as well; and the most significant myth which informs our efforts may prove not to be that of "Westernness," but that of objectivity, which proposes that a thing is knowable in isolation from its context. This is a myth to which, happily, Menocal herself does not subscribe, as her emphasis on the contextual nature of meaning makes clear.

In some ways, then, this book is disappointing; in many others, however, and particularly in Menocal's evocation of the polymorphic culture of the Middle Ages and her readings of various authors and texts, it is both stimulating and informative, and enriches our understanding of the period. There is, inevitably perhaps, a certain amount of repetition, the result perhaps of the author's enthusiasm for her subject and her wish to argue it comprehensively; but there is no question of her critical competence. Many important points are brought out in the extensive notes, which themselves make compulsive and compulsory reading. The book is thus of importance not only to specialists (whether Hispanists or Arabists) but to generalists and comparatists as well, as the issues which it raises have far-reaching implications for the historiography and criticism of the medieval world and its rich and varied literary tradition.

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