

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ARABIC ROLE IN MEDIEVAL LITERARY HISTORY. By María Rosa Menocal. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987. 178 pages.

María Rosa Menocal's *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* is a solidly researched and splendidly written study whose main attribute is its common sense. Plain, honest common sense is the most important critical tool needed for rethinking the cultural background of our medieval cultural heritage, and Menocal makes wonderful use of it in this re-exploration of the period's indebtedness to Arabic culture. This culture was, after all, the most advanced of the period, and to think that the whole of Europe had so little intellectual curiosity as to be oblivious of such centers of learning as Al-Andalus and Sicily borders on the unbelievable. But many medieval scholars have disregarded the Semitic presence in Western culture to the point of making any serious claim for Arabic culture "unimaginable—and thus unresearchable and unprovable" (p. xiii). Menocal's work is a truly important contribution that will help dispel the myth of Orientalism as a *bête noire* of medieval studies. I am confident that this courageous book will help render Arabic influence in Western medieval studies "imaginable, researchable and provable."

The author calls our attention in the first place to the thorny problem of the etymon of the word troubadour—*introuvable* as Leo Spitzer would pun—in Romance philology. Menocal's professor of Arabic mentioned matter-of-factly that the root *ṭaraba* (meaning "to sing," among other things) was the root of the European word troubadour. This

claim clashed with the *status quaestionis* in Romance philology, where somewhat fanciful Neo-Latin etymons completely overshadowed the Arabic etymon, which was deemed unworthy of serious attention. This initial "shock" set Menocal on her course of research: if she could help establish that the Arabic etymon was, in fact, "thinkable" in discussions of the origins of the word, then she could address more crucial matters: the origins of troubadour poetry itself, its relationship to the newly "discovered" *muwashshahāt* and *kharjas*, and Dante's "anxiety of influence," among other related problems. This is exactly what she does in her book.

As the author states in her Preface, she makes no new discovery concerning the West's indebtedness to medieval Arabic culture. She attempts, however, to show why the texts, facts, and discoveries of others have been so easy to ignore for so many Romance literary historians and sketches out a perspective that would render them worth taking into account. Her flexible style of scholarly argumentation is to be highly commended, especially in a field where exactly the opposite has been the norm.

In the first chapter, "The Myth of Westernness in Medieval Literary Historiography," Menocal addresses the deep-seated resistance on the part of literary historians of medieval Europe to serious consideration of any attempt to link early Western culture with its Arabic counterpart. María Rosa Lida was severely criticized by Sánchez Albornoz for daring to see Semitic influences in the *Libro de buen amor*, and Miguel Asín Palacios, one of the most maligned yet brilliant of European scholars, was denounced again and again for advancing the argument that Dante's *Commedia* was influenced by Arabic texts. (Asín's publication of the "Historia y crítica de la polémica" as an *addenda* to his 1943 edition of *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, reprinted by the Instituto Árabe de Cultura in 1961, provides clear evidence of the intolerance with which he had to deal in his professional work.)

Proof of our limited understanding of the culture of Al-Andalus is, as Menocal shows, the labeling of Stern's famous 1948 study of the *kharjas* a "discovery." Stern's article is much more accurately described as an "identification," for the *kharjas* were not lost or unknown: it was just that no one knew what they were. Romance and Semitic scholars, working independently, were unaware that this hybrid literature requires joint effort by Romanists and Orientalists. Misunderstandings like these are not uncommon in medieval scholarship. The Semitic presence in Europe has been rendered almost "untouchable," as attested to by Sánchez Albornoz's extremely harsh attacks on María Rosa Lida, and Louis Bertrand's comments, which Menocal justly considers to "verge on the unprintable." Bertrand observes that Arabs are "enemies of learning" and a "nullity as civilizing elements" (p. 24). The examples Menocal provides of the severe lack of appreciation of anything Arabic on the part of many Romanists are so dramatic that at times one wishes she had included them in her text and had not relegated them to footnotes.

There must be some reason for such a dramatic display of Western scholarly discomfort. Menocal addresses that problem in straightforward fashion, reminding us that the paradigm of Western culture we usually take for granted implies that Europe had a relationship with Greek and Latin culture that excluded all others. The Western sense of "self" implies an ancestral relationship with Graeco-Roman culture, a relationship dormant during the so-called Dark Ages. This notion of history tends to deny the medieval past and its heritage and harks back to a more worthy Classical ancestry. Menocal draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, arguing that the myth was further crystallized during the nineteenth century, when colonial experience with the Orient made Europe acutely aware of its own particularity and superiority. It was thus very difficult to portray the Middle Ages as a period in which a substantial part of learning was based on radically foreign and inferior Arabic culture. This is precisely why a medievalist studying the Latin foundations of medieval literature need make no apologies: he is not challenging the

tradition but instead adding evidence for its validity. But anyone attempting to study Islamic or Hebrew contributions to medieval Western culture does need to make an apology. Asín Palacios, María Rosa Lida, and Américo Castro did so, and so does Menocal. Menocal, however, always fair, reminds the reader that her view of a more complex medieval Europe—by no means exclusively Western—does not imply that we have to do away with the study of “canonized” figures and texts. Rather, we should add to these prestigious central figures others who will help bring those figures and their cultural background into focus. We should keep Aquinas and St. Augustine, but we should add Averroes and Ibn Hazm. Menocal thus commonsensically proposes not to limit but to enrich our view of medieval culture. I could not agree more.

The author goes on to “rethink the background” of medieval literature in her second chapter, and she reminds us that figures such as William of Aquitaine, Peter the Venerable, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Frederick of Sicily were profoundly Arabicized. It is of course obvious that their cultural milieux would be reflected in some way in their literary production. Let us examine here only a few examples of the diverse cultural world in which these figures really lived. After the First Crusade in 1100, William, a sophisticated man, remained for several years in Jerusalem, precisely when there is the clearest documentation of the virtually complete acculturation of the Crusaders to Arab ways. Restless and bored with traditional Christian society, William was twice excommunicated by the Church for his departures from orthodox Christian behavior. Furthermore, he frequently visited Spain, undeniably a world of cultural symbiosis, where, as the troubadour Ramon Vidal puts it, “totas gentz, Christians, Jusievas e Sarasinas, meton totz jorns lor entendiment en trobar et en chantar” (p. 33). And this was the very William who was to achieve fame as the father of courtly vernacular lyric poetry in Europe. To me, it is incredibly difficult not to think that he was indebted in some way to the music and poetry of a culture he knew so well. Menocal reminds us that it is anachronistic to assume that developments in literature were solely a scholarly enterprise or one of servile copying. It would have required no more than one instance of oral translation—one singer’s rendition in Provençal of the gist of a song in Arabic, for instance—to effect the transmission from one language and culture to another. The same must have been true of the remarkably Arabicized Sicilian court of the thirteenth century. Frederick, who wore robes embroidered with Arabic and who kept a harem and a royal bodyguard of Muslims, knew Classical Arabic so well that he was able to correct his own official translators. This unabashed patron of Arabic culture, who was also excommunicated on several occasions, was a poet and the benefactor of the *scuola siciliana*, the first poetry of the new Italy. Again, it is hard to believe that this new European poetry was untouched by Frederick’s Oriental milieu.

Europe was indeed being intellectually and artistically conquered by the Arabs. Menocal fails to mention, however, that not all medieval scholars were so shy about their debt to Islam. Spiritual writers such as Jean Gerson, St. Albertus Magnus, and Alanus de Insulis quoted Al-Ghazzali, Avicenna, and Averroes without any hesitation. The author argues that it would be naive to think that ideological and military conflict preclude interaction at other levels: witness the fact that smuggled blue jeans command staggering prices in the Soviet Union and that music of the West, like rock and roll and American jazz, is often sung by those who do not know the language of the lyrics they are singing and whose governments, for the record, vigorously deny its influence. Is it so hard to think that something parallel to what we witness every day in the twentieth century did not happen also in medieval Europe?

Menocal’s third chapter, “The Oldest Issue: Courtly Love,” renders Nietzsche’s theories on courtly love ironic. In his *Beyond Good and Evil*, the philosopher states that “love as passion is our European specialty—it absolutely must be of aristocratic origin,”

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"invented" by those "men of the 'gai saber' to whom Europe owes so much and, indeed, almost itself" (p. 71). Nietzsche would have been extremely uneasy to learn that an Arabic origin was proposed for this poetry, the veritable Holy Grail of Romance philology, as early as the sixteenth century. Gianmaria Barbieri's theory was reiterated by the Spaniard Juan Andrés in the eighteenth century, and Menocal strongly suspects that Dante's dramatic silence on the origins of Provençal poetry in his *De vulgari eloquentia* is due to the fact that the question raised issues that for some reason he did not want to discuss. A negative reaction was not long in coming, and the theories of a probable Arabic origin or influence on Provençal poetry were held in disrepute by such modern critics as Madame de Staël, Chateaubriand, and especially Schlegel, who disputes the validity of the Arabist theory on the ground that Arab society was too repressive towards women to have produced courtly love. Such reasoning is not only unsound but historically inaccurate. Arabs produced poems in praise of wine even though the Koran forbids consumption of alcohol—the *al-Khamriyya* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ is just one such example of an old genre turned mystical. The work of scholars such as Jean-Claude Vadet lends strong support to Menocal's arguments. In his *L'esprit courtois en Orient* (Paris, 1968), Vadet provides irrefutable documentation that courtly love was sung by the Arabs four centuries before the Provençal troubadours. Chaste suitors suffered the impossible love of a cruel, extremely beautiful lady in this Arabic love code (*naṣīb*) whose beginnings were in pre-Islamic Arabia. Schlegel's statement would probably surprise readers of 'Umar b. 'Alī Rabī'a, Bashshār or Al-'Abbās b. al-Ahnaf. The problem of the origins of troubadour poetry is, of course, far from resolved, and Menocal, with her usual openness, asks that Romance scholarship expand the canon of medieval courtly love poetry by including texts that parallel the poetry of Provence, even if this means Arabic texts. It seems evident that our duty as objective scholars is to do just that.

In Chapter 4 Menocal addresses the "discovery" of the *muwashshahāt* and the *kharjas*, a single poetic form that has usually been considered two distinct forms because of its bilingualism. This hybrid poetry is quintessentially Andalusian, and Menocal is really demanding that *muwashshahāt/kharjas* scholars be as richly hybrid as the poetry they are studying. That is, they should know Arabic, Hebrew, Mozarabic, and Spanish in order to deal effectively with this complex poetry from Al-Andalus—a sobering thought that tends to underscore, without any further comment, how utterly crossbred the first documented poetry of Europe really was. When taken as a unit, the love lament of both the *muwashshahāt* (where a man usually sings) and the *kharja* (sung by a woman) strikes the reader as being basically the same unrequitable love celebrated by the troubadours and their female counterparts the *trobairitz*. Menocal urges more serious study of the parallels between the Andalusian poetry and its Provençal counterpart, parallels that include the use of the vernacular and experimentation with rhyme.

The author goes on to examine Dante's "anxiety of influence" (Chapter 5) and argues convincingly that the *Divina Commedia* may be a secret challenge to Islam. She turns around Dante's undeniable literary proximity to the *Kitāb-al-Mi'rāj* or *Book of the Ladder*, so well documented by Asín Palacios, and explains the *Commedia* as a desire (conscious or not) on the part of the Florentine poet to write a counterpart to the *Mi'rāj*. It is by now established that these Islamic legends *di oltretomba* might have come to Dante's attention, but Menocal's theory is more than plausible because many medieval writers did just what she suspects Dante of doing. Witness Ramon Llull's *Cent noms de Deu*, written to combat the Islamic taboo with the hundredth name of God. Fray Luis de León's *De los nombres de Cristo* is still, in the sixteenth century, a reaction against this Islamic obsession. So why not Dante?

In her sixth and last chapter, Menocal reflects upon "Other Readers, Other Readings". Here I miss the inclusion of some important Spanish medieval figures who would have

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supported many of Menocal's arguments. Writers like Lull, who wrote in Arabic as well as in his native Catalan; Don Sem Tob de Carrión (fifteenth century), who wrote in Spanish and in Hebrew and who had both a Hebrew and a Spanish name (Rab Shem Tob ibn Ardutiel ben Isaac); and Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita, who rhymes in impeccable colloquial Arabic, exhibit simultaneous links to both European and Oriental culture.

Spanish culture is usually rejected in Western scholarship, as we can see by Said's disregard of Spanish Arabists in his *Orientalism* and by Mikhail Bakhtin's ignorance of Juan Ruiz in his otherwise excellent *Rabelais and his World*. Menocal ends her book addressing precisely this situation, although from another point of view: she suspects that Spain will be central in the study of medieval Europe when we alter our attitude towards Western literary history and stop considering the Semitic ingredients of our early culture to be merely peripheral. Ironically, Spain was most influential while Al-Andalus thrived.

In Menocal's otherwise splendid bibliography I miss a number of scholarly works on Spain's relation with Semitic culture, such as the contributions of Stephen Gilman, J. Rodríguez Puértolas, Juan Vernet, and F. Márquez Villanueva, as well as some mention of Juan Goytisolo's book on Spanish Orientalism, *Crónicas sarracinas*.

María Rosa Menocal's book is, all in all, a much needed book. She succeeds in reversing many traditional, long-held conceptions of medieval studies, and she provokes the reader into dealing, without naïveté, with the culturally complex and often Arabized texts of the Middle Ages. I can only hope that, in the future, medieval studies dealing with their possible Oriental counterparts need not be apologetic and that the subject matter will not be "unimaginable," "unresearchable," and "unprovable."

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