

MENOCAL, María Rosa, SCHEINDLIN, Raymond P. and SELLS, Michael (eds.), *The Literature of al-Andalus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, xii + 507 pp, illustrations, index.

The arrival of a new volume of the prestigious *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* on one's desk evokes a certain inclination to read through the work and comment on individual pieces – a common response to the task of reviewing a major new collective work. Proceeding thus in this instance would result in a catalogue of which contributions the reviewer did and did not like, and in many cases this approach is quite useful. Here, however, it seems more appropriate to comment on broader issues.

Like most of the volumes in this series, *The Literature of al-Andalus* is jointly edited. But in this case the guiding hands are not specialists in various fields of Arab-Islamic studies in al-Andalus, but rather a scholar of Romance studies (Menocal), a Hebraist (Scheindlin), and an Arabist (Sells). A defiant note is struck already only a few pages into Menocal's introduction when she comments that "if other volumes in this Cambridge series have been intended and written overwhelmingly for a public of fellow Arabists, this volume explicitly is not" (p. 8). Al-Andalus, she argues, is not just about "Arabism" (what this is remains unexplained). Is the literary culture and history of al-Andalus "really usefully understood in the single-language terms of modern national paradigms?" (p. 9). What is required is attention to "that

messy admixture of ethnicities and linguistic communities and cultural traditions and even religion that we mean to cover here with the term 'Arabic'" (p. 12). In particular, the editors plan to include the literature of non-Muslim communities in al-Andalus, and to include themes that are normally not covered in histories of literature, most particularly music and architecture.

The structure and tenor of the volume are in themselves quite novel. A first part on "the Shapes of Culture" (five chapters on language, music, spaces [= architecture], knowledge, and love) is followed by a second on "the Shapes of Literature" (three chapters on the *muwashshaḥ*, the *maqāma*, and the *qaṣīda*). We then have essays on ten different Andalusians, a voyage off to Sicily (three chapters on Norman poetry, Ibn Ḥamdīs, and Michael Scot), and a final part entitled "Marriages and Exiles" containing four chapters on the Mozarabs, the Arabised Jews, the Sephardim, and the Moriscos. Architectural asides appear in brief separate essays, and the work closes with Sells' translation of the *nūniya* of Ibn Zaydūn. The book exults in nostalgia, with romantic visions of the country, its monuments, culture and peoples evoked throughout.

The commitment to portrayal of the rich cultural diversity of al-Andalus is of course commendable, and in some respects it bears valuable fruit in this volume, for example, in a chapter on the *maqāma* (pp. 190-210) that adopts an inclusive approach and discusses Jewish as well as Muslim authors. It is also true that an interesting new perspective emerges when a body of Andalusian biographies includes not only the usual Muslim luminaries, but also such figures as Moses ben Ezra, Judah Halevi, Petrus Alfonsi, and Ramon Llull. But none of this is "pathbreaking", and it is excessive to claim that it comprises a "radical new approach". This inclusive approach has long been advocated by modern Spanish scholars and can be seen in Spanish-language histories of Andalusian literature. Within its proper historical limits it is also championed by the institution and scholars responsible for this journal.

These observations lead us to the heart of the problems with this book. First, it is unacceptably disengaged from almost any modern scholarship outside the Anglophone world. At the dawn of the 21st century, where would one expect to find much of the best scholarship on al-Andalus? Clearly al-Andalus itself, and also among Arab scholars; both of these circles are producing first-class work, "pathbreaking" if you will. But there are very few Spanish and no Arab contributors to this book, and there is no representation from European scholarship more generally. With the exception of two Israeli scholars, the authors are all scholars working in American universities. This is not a complaint about inequitable division of the "cake": the simple truth of the matter is that current scholarship on al-Andalus is not concentrated in the United States, and that proceeding as if this were the case cannot but produce less than satisfactory results. Spanish and Maghribi monographs and journals are poorly represented in university collections outside their home territory, except in the libraries of major international

centres. Hence, in this work important points are repeatedly missed for no apparent reason other than the fact that they appear in scholarship published in the Spanish or Arabic languages in Spanish or Arab publications.

It must also be said that while a broader picture of Andalusian Arabic literature is certainly a goal to be welcomed, it is in no way achieved in this volume. Rather, what one will find here is a curious distortion of certain basic historical realities. It goes without saying that as elsewhere, a Muslim majority in al-Andalus would not have been achieved until centuries after the first advance of Arab forces from North Africa. But also as elsewhere, this was the direction in which historical forces were steadily proceeding, and the rise of Islamic culture to a dominant position, supported by increasing political and economic resources, progressed even faster. In broad terms, then, Andalusian culture was largely Islamic, representing the interests and activities of a dominant and ultimately majoritarian Muslim population. In this volume, however, this Muslim majority is sidelined and marginalized in favour of attention to other sectors of society. These minorities, then, are highlighted without due attention to the majority perspective within which their own activities were embedded.

The same applies to the subject areas the editors have chosen to present. Architecture and music were undoubtedly important dimensions of Andalusian *culture*, but this is a history of Andalusian *literature*, and if architecture and music are to be explored in depth here, it would be essential to show how they facilitate our understanding of the literature under discussion. This relevance is asserted by Menocal (by insisting that they are "indispensable as foundational pieces of the puzzle", p. 18), the book repeatedly swerves off into, for example, asides on monuments, and one frequently encounters the celebratory (but hopelessly ambiguous) generalisation that the complexities of a certain dimension of culture reflect those of culture as a whole. But nowhere is the relevance to literature demonstrated or even discussed in depth. Indeed, as is conceded in this volume (p. 62), for example, much of "Andalusian" music does not even come from al-Andalus. The history of Sicily is also important, but why need it appear in a history of Andalusian literature? We are left to guess how the situation in Sicily "reveals the ways in which al-Andalus is a powerful and shaping cultural icon within Europe" (p. 19). Is the history of al-Andalus incapable of illustrating this influence itself? The biographies of ten Andalusians are all interesting and worth reading, but the choice of subjects is surely to be questioned. Ibn Rushd, for example, one of the greatest philosophers of medieval Islam, is passed over in silence and information about him must be chased up in vignettes scattered in chapters on other subjects. The volume also adopts a bizarre perspective on literature itself. There are extended chapters on a few genres of belles lettres, but the learned of medieval Islam, in al-Andalus as elsewhere, were expected to be adept in numerous fields of learning. Historically speaking, there is no justification for relegating history, *ḥadīth*,

law, Qur'ānic exegesis, theology, and philosophy to a single chapter entitled "knowledge" (pp. 96-125), where each of these fields, all of them important in medieval al-Andalus, is insufficiently treated and not without major errors (including, e.g., a misnamed ruler and misdating of a law school by several hundred years).

The curiosities and contradictions of this volume culminate in attitudes, expressed by Menocal and perhaps anticipating some of the criticisms above, concerning audience. On the one hand, we are told that a more traditionally arranged volume would have served specialist colleagues but not the wider public volume, and on the other, readers dissatisfied with the present volume are reminded that there are other works to peruse (pp. 17-22). The fact of the matter is that the more general audience is precisely the one poorest served by this volume. One passes among odd vignettes and metaphors on monuments through chapters that leave the essential social and cultural background poorly covered, more or less ignore the faith of Islam and the majority Muslim population as a cultural force, explore in their stead areas that seem to have little to do with literature, and misrepresent the dimensions of literature and cultural relations that Andalusis themselves would have found familiar.

Editors of a reference work are of course not obliged to follow any particular paradigm just because it is traditional; they are, however, required to come up with one that stands on its own merits and reflects the basic historical realities of the field, as these are understood at the time or in the light of some superior sense that the editors can provide. Where these considerations are concerned it is difficult to welcome this volume as an addition to the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*.

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