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THE MYSTERIES OF THE ORIENT: SPECIAL PROBLEMS
IN ROMANCE ETYMOLOGY

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One of the great mystery stories in Romance philology is the provenance of the Provençal verb *trobar* and its derivative *troubadour*. One of the most important working assumptions of mystery solvers in this field, otherwise known as Romance etymologists, is that the importance of Arabic in the development of the Romance languages is limited to a relatively few lexical borrowings, most of them identified long ago. A naive or novice detective would thus be most unlikely to actually search for an unknown etymon in Arabic; if she stumbled on a possible Arabic etymon quite by accident, as the writer once did, she would, at a minimum, have her natural faith in the objectivity and scientific bent of historical linguistics quite shaken.

The completely fortuitous discovery that many Arabists assume that the Arabic verb TARABA, 'to sing, to entertain by singing' is the word from which *troubadour* comes would be a startling one to most Romance linguists. The etymology of *trobar* and *troubadour* was one of the most hotly debated etymological problems in Romance, a kind of *cause célèbre* discussed endlessly by virtually everyone in the field in the last 150 years and yet one whose solution has been deemed to be 'introuvable,' as one scholar has punned

(Spitzer 1940:1). The overriding reason for the popularity of this particular etymological problem is that it was perceived to be of great importance for the eventual resolution of an even greater mystery, the question of the origins of troubadour poetry, a fair assumption based on the notion that in the case of the appearance of a new cultural phenomenon in a given society--medieval France in this case--the provenance of the name of such a phenomenon might provide a clue to the provenance of the phenomenon itself.¹

Given all of this it is remarkable to note the state of the art in research into the origins of this one word, as reflected in the OED, Romance etymological dictionaries, and textbooks of Romance linguistics,² as follows: There are two competing theories. The first had been postulated by Friedrich Diez, one of the father figures of Romance philology who speculated that the verb *trobar* came from the Late Latin fishing term *TURBARE*, as in the expression *TURBARE AQUAM*, meaning 'to disturb the water', an activity that supposedly made it easier 'to find fish'. From this the general meaning of 'to find' would have developed, and, in turn, the troubadours would have adopted the term because they 'found' their verses.³ Unfortunately, not only was the semantic derivation implausible, but it also did not work phonetically. *TURBARE* will not yield *trobar* in Provençal.⁴ The combination of these two serious defects discredited it, although one would hardly know that from what appears in many dictionaries. The principal rival theory, developed by Gaston Paris and Antoine Thomas, posited a reconstructed form, **TROPARE*. Its proponents paid scant attention to the semantic aspects of the etymon, which are highly problematic, and focused their attention on how well the derivation worked phonetically, something

the reconstructed form did indeed do rather well.⁵

There ensued endless and well-known quarrels over which of these two theories, or some variation thereof, was the most acceptable or, to be more accurate, which was the least unacceptable. The irony, however, was that in 1928, a Spanish Arabist and medievalist named Julián Ribera had pointed to the existence of a third possibility, an etymon that did not suffer from the severe inconveniences of the two bickered over by Romance scholars (Ribera y Tarragó 1928:140-43): Ribera drew attention to the Arabic *TARABA*, to the plausible phonetic developments that could have produced a Romance verb *trobar* from such an etymon, to the semantic congruities and to the fact that the lexical field with which one was dealing was that of music and lyrics, an area in which many other borrowings from Arabic into Romance had been established long before. The fairly complex details of the etymology as Ribera originally proposed it and as it can be modified today are more appropriately discussed elsewhere.⁶ The mystery to be further explored here is the fairly simple fact that a relatively viable Arabic etymon for a word in Romance was not only never identified by Romance scholars desperately in search of a plausible etymon for an important word, but even after the etymon was suggested by an Arabist, it was almost completely ignored, despite the fact that the only Romance solutions were, to say the least, suspect. The bulk of the attention ever paid to it is of the same quality as the following sentence on the matter pronounced by Jeanroy in his tome on the lyric poetry of the troubadours: 'L'étymologie arabe assigné par M. Ribera au mot troubadour ne convaincra certainement personne...'.⁷ Ultimately, Jeanroy's assessment, despite its patent lack of scholarly soundness, proved accurate, since although a few Arabists

have referred to this etymon from time to time, it has never been seriously discussed, to either refute it or substantiate it, by any Romance scholar, nor, consequently, is it to be found as even a possible derivation in any of the normal sources of information about Romance etymologies. At first glance the re-discovery of a highly promising and neglected clue would seem to point to the overriding importance of establishing a more viable solution to this famous etymological problem. Further consideration, however, would indicate that this and other specific etymological problems are symptomatic, and that the real problem is the intellectual framework and set of scholarly assumptions and procedures which led to the complete ignoring of this possible Arabic etymon.

Of all of the problems normally associated with doing the usually tedious work of etymology, particularly in the notoriously well-documented case of the Romance languages, one that is very rarely discussed is that of the scholars' bias. Nevertheless, the problem of scholarly biases, prejudices in the etymological sense of the word, is a serious one in the field of Romance etymology, particularly where the word in question has a possible Arabic etymon.

There are three major components, very much inter-related, that together have created and sustained an intellectual framework for dealing with the linguistic problem of the effects of the Arabic superstratum on the development of Romance, Spanish in particular, that is neither objective nor dispassionate in nature and which reflects many prejudices which should have no place in scientific inquiry. The first of these components is purely ideological in nature, and one that is difficult to summarize briefly, namely the reflection in this and other branches of scholarship of the overtly anti-Semitic

tendencies in Spanish history. The most succinct way in which this phenomenon can be described is to say that since 1492, and in certain cases long before that, Spaniards have been obsessed with trying to establish that they are Christians and Latins in essence, above all not Semitic, in any way. This obsession has not only 'tainted' the intelligentsia, and the scholarship produced by intellectuals, but it finds some of its most elegant expressions, sometimes disingenuously subtle, in the annals of scholarship (see especially Monroe 1970).

Linguistic study has not been exempt from this tendency, and from the earliest examples on we find one overriding approach to dealing with the influence of Arabic on Spanish, that of strict categorization and delimitation. The second component of this framework, then, is the specifically linguistic set of assumptions that exist about the kinds of linguistic interaction and subsequent borrowing that may have existed among the different linguistic communities, almost all bi-lingual, of medieval Spain. Every student of the history of the Spanish language learns, probably from Rafael Lapesa's *Historia de la lengua española*, that the only aspect of Spanish affected by that unfortunate interruption in the history of the real Spanish continuum known as the invasion of 711 was the lexicon, since the other, more essential aspects of the language, its phonology, acoustic framework, morphology, and syntax were resistant to alien influences. Moreover, the litany goes, only very specific areas of the lexicon were thus affected: nouns and adjectives were the nearly exclusive items borrowed and those denoting concrete items introduced into society by the Arabs, as well as some of the other terminology associated with both commerce and warfare. Specifically excluded are other

parts of speech (since that would often imply an incursion into morphology) and words that would reflect any sort of intimate interaction between Spaniards (a term reserved for Christians) and Moors, the term still used to designate people whose ancestry on the Iberian peninsula might go back, literally, for centuries.⁸ One observes here that this series of principles is flawed in two ways that transcend its obvious prejudicial underpinnings: it is based on the assumption that ideologically or religiously or racially divided groups will reflect divisions and antagonisms in their speech by keeping it as pure as possible of anything other than the minimum necessary interaction with a group to which it is in some way opposed. Even if we were to credit the sorts of views of racial and religious antagonism that are projected, inaccurately, some scholars believe, to the communities of medieval Spain, sociolinguistic research in recent years would seriously question the validity of this sort of assumption about people's linguistic habits (see especially Labov 1972). The second flaw is a procedural and methodological one: these delimiting characterizations were first made as observations in the context of historical linguistic studies before the middle of the 19th century, and their limitations are thus hardly incongruous. But what transpired is that these observations, made within that context of very limited analytical methods, were subsequently accepted as guidelines, and suggestions that there might be other traces of the period of Arabic-Romance bi-lingualism in the speech of the Spaniard of later times was rarely seriously investigated if it violated one of these tenets.

This observation leads to the final of the three major components of this framework: the practical problem, very much derivative of the other two, that Arabic is not seen

as a language that has to be learned in order to do work in this area. It is, of course, a logical corollary to the other two assumptions. After all, Arabic is the domain of Orientalists, certainly not Hispanists, and in any case it is hardly necessary in order to verify what is already known and can easily be found by referring to the already existing etymological dictionaries, such as Dozy's *Glossaire des mots espagnols dérivés de l'Arabe*.⁹ It should not be hard to surmise that such a state of affairs is hardly conducive to anything other than conserving the status quo, even when, in a case such as the to-do over the etymology of *trobar* and *troubadour*, a reasonable case is made for exploring the possibility that the status quo may not adequately reflect linguistic phenomena.

It should now be fairly clear why, if we turn again to the *tròbar*, *troubadour* etymology, it was never even considered as another avenue worth investigating: it was ridiculous a priori, as Jeanroy clearly meant, to assume that there could have been interaction between Muslims and Christians, especially French Christians, of the sort that would be reflected even in the possibility of such a borrowing, and it would give credence to the much feared and loathed theory that Provençal courtly love poetry had its origins in Islamic Spain; *trobar* is a verb, and it had long been known that verbs, especially those denoting anything so intimate and spiritual as lyric poetry, were never borrowed from Arabic into Romance; and finally, for the real skeptics in the audience, one could look it up in something like Dozy's *Glossaire*, the primary research tool for Romanists, who could not possibly be expected to know Arabic, and it was not there.

It would be possible to think that this is an idiosyn-

cratic example which could really be resolved as a special case, but it would be unlikely since whenever such a closed system is found in an area of scholarly discourse it almost invariably obscures more than one given item. Moreover, there are other examples, although few as striking as that of *troubadour*. One can immediately pick out several other cases of unresolved mysteries; we will briefly discuss two other major examples of traditionally troublesome etymologies in Romance which also have plausible Arabic etyma that have not made it into the mainstream or canon of Romance historical linguistics.¹⁰

One very interesting example is that of the etymology of Spanish *usted*, the third person singular pronoun used as the formal form of address. The traditional, and still prevalent explanation of its origins involves a phonetically arduous compression from *vuestra merced*, one which would perhaps seem less implausible if it were not for the existence in Arabic of the noun *USTAD*, whose dictionary meaning is basically 'professor', but which is commonly used, strangely enough, as a deferential pronominal form of address. The first suggestion that this might be a plausible etymon appeared in 1875,¹¹ but it was effectively discarded from further consideration in the supposedly seminal article on *usted* written some fifty years later by Pla Cárceles (1923:245-80). It is remarkable to note that Pla Cárceles took almost the exact same attitude towards the viability of *USTAD* as Jeanroy would take towards *TARABA*: he dismissed it as ridiculous, 'mera elucubración' not worthy of further consideration, and even went so far as to question the existence of such a noun in Arabic (Krotkoff 1963:329).

In 1963 there appeared in *Romance Philology* an article, written by a non-Romanist, one should add, exploring the

Arabic etymon in some detail and comparing it favorably, in every linguistic respect, to the traditional *vuestra merced* derivation, which by that point had been thoroughly canonized by Corominas (1954:762-63). In fact, if we disregard Krotkoff's polite demurrers to Pla Cárceles and Corominas, and verify the linguistic material he presents, which is impeccable, we find ourselves in an even stranger position than we are vis à vis the *trobar* derivation: a linguistically flawless etymon, presented in the most widely read journal of Romance linguistics, continues to be disregarded by Romance etymologists.¹² In the nearly twenty years since that article appeared very little has changed: one need only look at the most recent edition of Lapesa to verify this (1980:392-93). One is left with the distinct impression that something other than linguistic data *per se* is governing our judgements in this realm.

The other example that may be cited is a much more complex one: the verb *matar* in Spanish and its possible associations with the chess-related terminology which we know in various different Romance flexions. In its broadest configurations this problem is much like the other two already adduced: a problematic etymology in Romance for which a plausible Arabic etymon was pointed out and then disdainfully rejected, without the benefit of careful scrutiny by most Romance scholars who preferred to cling to one or more highly problematic etyma whose sole advantage, it would seem, was being 'indigenous'.¹³ While essentially the same problems exist for the *matar* etymology, the case itself is a much more complex one, which may be outlined as follows:

1. The verb *matar*, 'to kill' in Spanish, and its Old French cognate *mater* have no clear-cut Latin etymon and various different Latin-based solutions have been discussed by Romance scholars over the years.¹⁴

2. The suggestion has been made that it has an Arabic etymon, the same Arabic etymon we see in the different Romance flexions of 'mate' in the chess expression 'check mate'.¹⁵

3. Most Romance and English etymological dictionaries create needless confusion by listing the source of the chess terminology as 'Persian' or 'Arabo-Persian' or something of the sort. The consequence of this is a misrepresentation of both the direct source of transmission, which was undoubtedly Arabic, not Persian, as well as of the meaning of the sentence *aš-šhaikh mātā* in Arabic, meaning 'the king is dead, beaten'. The origins of the expression in Arabic are quite irrelevant to the discussion of its transmission into Romance, and Arabic sources show unequivocally that the expression had long before been fully Arabized.¹⁶

4. Almost all Romance etymological dictionaries dismiss the possible connection between the two, either without further explanation or on one of the following bases (for example, Corominas 1954:290-93):

- a) that chess was not introduced into Western Europe until much later than the earliest appearances of a form of *matar*.
- b) that there is no evidence for the implausible notion that the notion of 'to kill' in the chess expression could have been understood by non-Arabs and then expanded in its range of usage, detached from the expression that it was initially used in. This point is further 'supported' by adducing the problematic origins of the expression in Persian and Arabic, although this is actually a red herring.

It is disturbing to find, once again, that Romance scholars place themselves in an adversary position vis à vis a possible Arabic solution to an etymological problem¹⁷ and that scholarly discourse on such problems thus ends up being based on incomplete or distorted information about

the linguistic facts in Arabic as well as on highly questionable notions about linguistic interaction among speakers of the different languages in the Middle Ages. As a result of this ideologically conditioned stance the discussion of this etymological problem has been significantly obscured. As has already been noted, the question of the Persian origins of the Arabic expression have little or no bearing on the fact that the game of chess, and its fully Arabized terminology, was introduced into Western Europe by the Arabs, as early as the 9th or 10th centuries, according to most experts on the history of the game,¹⁸ thus in ample time to account for the earliest citations of *matar* in Romance. The extension of use from a presumably fixed and 'unparsable' borrowed expression to a new verb in Romance, with the meaning of the verb as it was used in the original expression in Arabic is, despite the skepticism of Romance scholars, both plausible in the abstract (if we dismiss certain dubious premises about the relations among adversary linguistic groups) and discernable in many Romance uses of the verb, notably in certain examples from outside the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁹ Finally, in this vein, it is important to note that this is one case, even more so than with *trobar* and *usted*, where without direct access to linguistic information about the possible Arabic etyma, the case can be so distorted and/or incomplete that its inclusion, however limited, in a discussion of different etymological possibilities, can not honestly be said to constitute an exploration of that possibility.²⁰

The conclusions to be drawn from this brief foray into the mysterious ways in which some Arabic etyma have been dealt with by Romance linguists are not very complex: the problem at hand is not that of the provenance of any number of specific words but rather of the way in which a

whole series of assumptions, an entire intellectual and ideological framework can so clearly shape the results of what we then go on to accept as dispassionate, scholarly research. The way in which Romance etymologists have dealt with certain cases of possible Arabic etyma has been consciously or--more likely, unconsciously--biased in ways one should not be willing to accept. It is to be expected that there will be substantial revisions in the ways in which we, as Romance scholars, approach these questions of so much importance in historical linguistics and that in the future our decisions on the provenance of given linguistic phenomena will be more objective in their nature.

NOTES

- 1) One should note that this particular etymology also became a touchstone in the quarrel over Neogrammarian principles and, by extension, it was often seen as a 'test case' in the debate over the validity of reconstructed versus attested forms.
- 2) Note in particular the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, v. 11, 1933:404, unrevised in later supplements, which is important in that it sets out to represent the 'state of the art' in research among Romance scholars.
- 3) Diez 1853:331-32. The position was further refined and defended by Schuchardt 1899, 1902, 1903, 1904.
- 4) The *turbare* > *trobar* derivation would require metathesis of the /r/, highly unusual in that phonetic context; the change /u/ > /o/ > /ou/ would also have been highly irregular; the development of /b/, yielding /b/ in Provençal and then /v/ in French is equally unlikely.
- 5) See Paris 1878 and 1902. All three notes are reprinted, with additional material, in Paris, 1906:615-26. The reconstructed form was also championed by Antoine Thomas, 1902 and reprinted, with additional bibliography, in Thomas 1904:334-43.
- 6) A detailed discussion of the linguistic aspects of all three etymological possibilities, with special attention to a reappraisal of the Ribera proposal appears in *Romance Philology* 36.137-53.
- 7) Jeanroy 1934:75, text and note 2. Of the many other discussions of the etymology that have appeared since Ribera's proposal came to light, and which ignore Ribera's suggestion completely, we cite

only a few of the best known: Spitzer 1940, Malkiel 1954, and Guiraud 1971. We further note it is not mentioned in any of the etymological dictionaries that have appeared since then, including Corominas 1954, which has an extensive discussion of the problem under *trovar*, vol. IV:608-11.

8) See especially the most widely used manual, Rafael Lapesa 1980. Lapesa's attitudes in this sphere were mildly criticized by Malkiel (1952) in a review of an earlier edition of the work, but the criticism was poorly received and no adjustments along these lines were made by Lapesa in subsequent editions.

9) Dozy and Engelmann 1869. A careful reading of the introduction to this reference work, the primary classic still used by Romanists working in this area, reveals explicitly that Dozy had as working assumptions all of those I have outlined above.

10) For practical purposes, we assume that the official or canonized version of an etymology is that found in the major etymological dictionaries and in the major handbooks of the histories of the Romance languages, such as Lapesa. It is from these two different kinds of sources, which of course draw on each other for information, that the 'public' at large gets its information.

11) In an anonymous article in *Revista Europea*, cited by Krotkoff 1963:329, n. 1.

12) Krotkoff 1963 points out that not only is *USTAD* quite clearly documentable in Classical Arabic as a general term of respect, akin to 'sir', but that in the spoken language it is the most common form of polite reference, serving functionally in the same capacity as a pronoun of address. There are no phonetic difficulties whatsoever in this derivation. Finally, Krotkoff discussed the question of the sporadic attestations of seemingly intermediary forms for the *vuestra merced* > *usted* derivation, pointing out that all the transformations, according to the citations from Pla Cárceles, appear to occur in a period of thirty years, that they are almost all from learned sources, whose authors 'influenced by notions of linguistic purity, may have tended to avoid such elements of everyday speech'. In sum, his basic points are convincing, if not irrefutable, and it is difficult to find any sort of basis on which to continue to ignore it. To my knowledge, there is no refutation of the argument that has ever appeared, although neither Lapesa nor Corominas (in later editions) cites it at all.

13) It is an interesting coincidence that *trobar* and *matar* are the two examples offered in Malkiel 1954:267 as constituting 'blind alleyways' because of the absence of significant variants.

14) The best resumé of the extended discussion is probably that of Corominas 1954, vol. III:290-93.

15) Besides the authors mentioned by Corominas, see Burke 1966, who reviews the salient Latin-based derivations and then makes a cogent case for the Arabic etymon, pointing out that the two major objections previously registered, can be overcome: the doubt that an 'aristocratic' game's terminology would have given rise to a term of widespread popular usage was more troublesome to Burke than it would

be to most of us today and he rebuts it with the oft-cited passage on the Arabicization of Christian youths by Alvarus of Cordoba; the argument over relative chronology is also a relatively simple one since historians of chess agree the game entered Europe as early as the 9th and no later than the 10th century (see note 18 below).

16) This inaccuracy, found in most dictionaries, has a significant bearing on the discussion, primarily because it suggests that MATA might not have meant 'is dead, beaten' in the chess expression, a suggestion which has no validity. See, for example, Bloch and Wartburg 1950:201.

17) Corominas 1954:292 claims that C. Michaelis is 'visiblemente obsesionada por la supuesta etimología.'

18) The authority on the subject, as far as we are able to ascertain, is still Murray 1913. This view of the chronology is well documented in an even earlier work on the subject, Forbes 1860, esp. chapter 15, 'On the Introduction of Chess into Western Europe by the Arabs', 184-198. Corominas' dismissal of the Arabic etymon principally on the basis of chronology is thus quite inexplicable.

19) For examples in Old French see Lamolfa Diaz 1973. In Italian, a fascinating example can be found in Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, ed. A. B. Quaglio, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 1, pp. 483-84 (4th book, chapter 96), which is a description of a chess game. In Provençal, the use of the verb *mat* in two poems by Marcabru, indicates it meant both 'to beat' and 'to kill', (Bergin, pp. 22-24, 'Vers I' and 24-26, 'Vers II'). The OED has ample citations of the verb 'to mate' in Old English meaning 'to kill'.

20) In this particular case, for example, the knowledge of Arabic syntax and morphology required to deal with a full sentence structure, as well as the question over what the origins of the expression might have been in Arabic itself, cannot be dealt with simply through recourse to a dictionary. Moreover, the fact that in Maghrebi Arabic the verb MATA appears to have shifted from being intransitive ('to die') to transitive ('to kill') deserves further consideration in this argument, consideration it is unlikely to get if etymological scholarship continues to follow the same paths it has in the past.

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