

Pride and Prejudice in Medieval Studies: European and Oriental

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Source: *Hispanic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Winter, 1985), pp. 61-78

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/474171>

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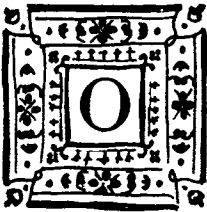
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## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES: EUROPEAN AND ORIENTAL



WE can begin with a very simple observation about how our scholarly structures approach the medieval world: those disciplinary, departmental and academic distinctions that are so fundamentally a part of our modern world (European versus Middle Eastern, Spanish versus Arabic, for example) are neither accurate nor fruitful ones for the medieval period.\* On the contrary, and this is the gist of what I would like to convey, the segregation of European (or Spanish, Italian, Provençal) from Arabic when we are discussing many important aspects of the Middle Ages and its cultural history is an anachronistic and misleading one. Whereas here we are neatly divided into groups of Romance Languages professors and students, on the one hand, and Arabic scholars on the other, in the Middle Ages the European speaker of Arabic was most likely also a speaker of Romance; Arabic was the language of much of the advanced learning and philosophy of Europe for some time and a twelfth-century Englishman who could not get his hands on good translations of Arabic texts in London was likely to set off to Toledo to get help in doing them himself.

\* This is the text of an informal talk given at the Luncheon Colloquium of the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Pennsylvania, in the Spring of 1984. It is published here without essential modification or notes. Some of the material included here has appeared previously in more formal and documented form, in *HR*, 49 (1981), 43-64 and in *RPh*, 36 (1982), 137-48. Much of the rest is part of a forthcoming book.

But, before pursuing that further, I'd like to begin by telling you about how I got into this disciplinary no-man's land in the first place. I will warn you that, like much autobiographical narrative, this may sound like a morality tale. It all started one day in Arabic class. I had begun studying Arabic when I was already well into my graduate studies in Romance philology, more as a juvenile and dilettantish lark than anything else, I now admit, motivated more or less equally by the fact that my husband was an Arabic major, by the fact that that would make me one of the only students in my department to study Arabic, and by the perception I had, soon to be discarded, that I was a good language learner.

One day during the first few months of first-year Arabic my teacher observed that one of the words on that week's vocabulary list had a Romance cognate, and that that would make it easier for some of us (I'm sure he looked at me) to handle the task of memorization. The verb in question was *taraba*, which means, among other things, "to sing," "to entertain by singing." Without batting an eyelash the professor let on that this was the word from which *troubadour* came. Since I was, of course, the only Romance languages person in the class, and a graduate student in philology besides (and thus supposed to know these things), he looked to me for confirmation. I was unable either to confirm or to deny his assertion: all I could manage was to look rather stupidly stunned, since I had never heard of such an etymology for the famous Provençal verb *trobar* and its related words, such as *troubadour*. In fact, I was floored by it since as a budding philologist I knew that this particular etymology, that of *trobar* and *troubadour*, was one of the most hotly disputed and most studied ones in the field. The suggestion, quite casually offered by someone who was an authority figure, that its root might be Arabic, seemed absolutely mind-boggling to me. I promised I would go check it out in the library and report on what I had found the next day in class.

What I knew already, of course, and this is what caused my great excitement (since I am normally a very calm person) was that Provençal or *troubadour* poetry had always been considered to be the first lyric poetry in Romance, providing the stylistic, linguistic and thematic bases for all other profane love poetry in Europe thereafter. A very large bulk of scholarship on the

troubadours had been devoted to the question of where their poetry came from since it seemed to break dramatically with most of the norms of poetry before it, since they started writing in a new language that had no previous literary status, and since their verse was thematically flagrantly un-Christian and, perfectly formed, seemed to spring up out of nowhere at the end of the eleventh century in Provence. Although there were many theories, none had received universal—or even majority—acceptance. But the special status of this poetic school was questioned, at least by some, when in 1949 a Hebreist named Samuel Stern “discovered” (I will explain later why this is an inappropriate term) the texts that are commonly referred to as the *kharjas*, short lyric pieces in Mozarabic (the Romance vernacular of Islamic Spain) which were “appended” (another highly questionable term) to the *muwashshahāt*, longer poems written in the classical language, Arabic, that is. It seemed to some that Provençal poetry not only wasn’t the “first” anymore, but considering how remarkable aspects of the Provençal courtly love lyric resembled the *kharjas*, the dark suspicion was now voiced that here was a possible solution to the riddle of where the first troubadours had found some of their inspiration: in the Hispano-Arabic world.

Thus, it seemed to me in my rather innocent way of reasoning, if the words *trobar* and *troubadour* themselves came from the Arabic, that would be magnificent evidence for just such a connection in the sphere of literary history. The possibility that there was such “proof” was especially tantalizing because I knew full well before I even ran over to the library that day, that the so-called “Arabist theory,” i.e., the theory that anything having to do with the troubadours came from the Hispano-Arabic world, was considered off-the-wall, dangerous, basically lunatic fringe by most serious Romance scholars.

What I thought I could find out about the word in an afternoon in the library in fact took me several years, and I think my Arabic professor to this day considers me one of the slowest students he ever had. Indeed, he has probably taken *ṭaraba* off the vocab lists—all with good reason, I’m sure. In any case, my report on that etymology, very briefly and quite simplified is as follows:

The *trobar* / *troubadour* etymology had been the object of great interest and much research in Romance philology, since the very

beginnings of that discipline, because it was seen, logically enough, as emblematic of the much larger question of the origins of the poetry itself and because there was no clear-cut Latin root from which it might have come. In fact, there wasn't even any general agreement as to what the word meant in the medieval Provençal texts. Guesses included "to versify," "to compose," "to invent verses," "to sing," "to recite poetry," among others. The earliest proposed derivation for the word, which came from a scholar who was one of the founding fathers of the discipline of Romance philology, was that it came from the Late Latin fishing term *turbare aquam*, "to disturb the water," an activity that supposedly made it easier "to find fish." From this the general meaning of "to find" would have come (*trouver* in modern French, whose connection with the poetic terminology is equally obscure), and then the troubadours would have adopted the term for what they did because they "found" their verses. Not only was this complicated derivation semantically implausible, but it suffered from the further defect, even harder to ignore, that it did not work phonetically—something philologists tend to be picky about.

A second possibility then came forth, very much in keeping with what was one of the great new activities of the time: reconstruction. Several scholars posited a reconstructed, i.e. hypothetical form *\*tropare*. Its proponents paid scant attention to what it would have meant and they could find no related words in any texts, but argued convincingly that as an etymon it was better than *turbare* because at least it worked phonetically. Unfortunately, this is not particularly convincing, but at least that is what a reconstructed form is supposed to do. Its major proponent, Gaston Paris, another great philological luminary, wrote an important article in which he tears apart the *turbare* proposal on the basis of its terrible deficiencies in terms of both meaning and phonetics, but ends the article with the tacit conclusion that his own reconstructed form is a last resort and that its only merit is that it works phonetically. But that, as I pointed out, is not a very lucid argument in its favor. Thus, in a debate that was so fierce and considered so important in the field that it is still assigned as a classroom problem in philology courses, Romance scholars tore each other's proposals, both of them tenuous at best, to shreds, and showed both to be highly unsatisfactory.

It is astonishing to discover that in 1928, with matters so unresolved and the issue still central, a Spanish Arabist named Julián Ribera noted that there was a more plausible etymon than either of those Romance scholars had been dealing with: the Arabic *ṭaraba*. Although Ribera had limited knowledge of Romance linguistics he made a cogent case which, with some refinements and elaborations, still stands up today. Ribera pointed out that the root *ṭaraba* had as one of its meanings "to sing," "to entertain by singing" (and this was its principal meaning in medieval Spain as per Dozy's *Supplément*). As some of you may know, this semantic branch of the word is still active in a derivative such as *mutrib*, which still means "singer" in Arabic. The nominal form *ṭarab* meant "song," which is, Ribera argued, principally what the troubadours' compositions are. This noun *ṭarab* in the spoken Arabic of Spain, as in the Maghreb, would have become *torob* and then *trob*, through regular phonetic change. Turning it into a verb in Romance is very easy and very regular: it is added to the first conjugation, as are all such borrowings and new verbs, and voilà, you have *trob-ar*, the exact form in Provençal.

Especially by comparison to the proposals coming from Romance scholars, this one is a gem in its clarity and in its soundness both phonetic and semantic, and one would think that Romance scholars, at the very least, would have received it as an interesting and possibly fruitful new path to explore, particularly considering the dead end they were at. If one were really naive, one would think those philologists would have jumped up and down with joy at the discovery. Ha! Nothing remotely like this ever happened. In fact, if one does not encounter this proposal under unusual circumstances, such as taking a first-year Arabic course, which your average Romance medievalist is unlikely to be doing, a student preparing a report on this much-debated etymology on which dozens of articles have been written since Ribera's proposal would have absolutely no way of knowing that the latter had even been made. Ribera's etymon was never even considered, seriously or otherwise, by Romance scholars. There is not a single etymological dictionary of English or a Romance language that gives the Arabic etymon as even a possibility, although they usually note that the question is "unresolved" and cite the two long ago discredited Latin forms as the possibilities.

Although certain Romance scholars were indeed aware that the proposal had been made, they either ignored it completely or gave it treatment such as that meted out by Alfred Jeanroy, the most eminent Provençal scholar of his time, who had all of this to say about it: "L'étymologie arabe assignée par M. Ribera au mot *troubadour* ne convaincra certainement personne." Period. No further comment.

Since Jeanroy's attitude was, and is, more the norm than the exception, the obvious question is: Why not? Why will it surely not convince anyone? Ah, the joys of first-year Arabic. In fact, the why-not question seemed so interesting to me that I abandoned all hope for the placid career I had expected to have, not to speak of the popularity among medievalists I had hoped for. Moreover, I have spent the better part of the ten years since that fateful day in Arabic class worrying about why so plausible and clear and rational an etymology was rejected, just because it was Arabic. That, in sum, is how I got into this field, or non-field. Let it be an object lesson to those of you who think learning some Arabic is a harmless pastime.

My answer to the why-not question, and to what effect that has had on our understanding of the "European" Middle Ages, is what I would like to sketch now—and I mean sketch—and I can only hope it doesn't ruin lunch for too many of you since by and large, as you can see from what I have already told you, it is not a very pretty picture.

The first and simplest answer, of course, is prejudice on the part of Europeans and Europeanists, which is an "Orientalism" of sorts, although I use the term somewhat differently from how Edward Said has used it. The best example I can give you for this is the one I have already started with, that of how the origins question vis-à-vis the birth of courtly love poetry has been dealt with. This question—how such a seemingly original and quite distinct school of poetry came to spring forth in Southern France towards the end of the eleventh century, has fascinated all students of Romance literature from Dante on. Interestingly enough, the first real "theory" to account for this phenomenon was the so-called Arabist theory—a little known fact.

It was first put forth by an Italian named Giammaria Barbieri in a work written in the sixteenth century which was widely disseminated throughout Europe. Barbieri postulated that it was

contact with the highly refined and prestigious courtly society of al Andalus, as speakers of Arabic called their Spanish homeland, where the performance of rhymed courtly-love poetry was an integral part of the life of the elite, that had stimulated the rise of a parallel phenomenon in the geographically adjacent courts of southern France. It proved to be quite a popular theory and in fact it was the regnant one for some time, standing unchallenged, really, until the beginnings of the nineteenth century. One of the most remarkable and widely respected proponents of the theory was an exiled Spanish Jesuit named Juan Andrés who in Italy (and in Italian) published what stands as one of the first comprehensive histories of European literature. Andrés was appalled that other Europeans did not understand the extent to which Spain, and that included Arabic Spain, had been the center and stimulus of culture and intellectual advancement in medieval Europe and his *magnum opus* was in great measure written to remedy that ignorance. The eight volume Italian edition went through numerous printings and other evidence indicates it was widely read during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when it was published, and for some years thereafter.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Arabist theory remained a very popular theory to discuss, with respectable partisans on either side of the question. But suddenly, rather mysteriously, the Arabist theory first ceases to be discussed and then becomes altogether taboo. In fact, and this is true in many Romance scholarship circles even today, it became something that was undiscussable, something that as Jeanroy might have put it would surely not convince anyone. So it is best left unmentioned.

What happened, of course, in the demise of this theory, is not that it was proved to be unsound or poorly grounded historically or textually (most Romance scholars disputing or dismissing it had never been within a mile of the texts). Rather, it was something completely removed from the specific problem itself that had changed: a European sense of self emerged in the nineteenth century, which was also the height of the colonialist period, and the prevailing attitudes precluded, consciously or subconsciously, any possibility of "indebtedness" to the Arabic world. Not only did Europeans develop a well-defined sense of who they were, but also of who the Arab, the "Other," was. And,



as Said has pointed out, the image of the Arab was a less than flattering one. Without wishing to enter further into the Orientalist polemic Professor Said has provoked, I think I can ask you to accept the statement that at the very moment when modern Romance literary studies were beginning, i.e. in the middle of the nineteenth century, it would have been inconceivable or very difficult for most Europeans to imagine, let alone explore or defend, a view of the "European" as being culturally subservient to the "Arab." To imagine that France's first literary flower, one that had been cultivated and idolized for so long as the first in Europe was not only not the first, but that it might be in any way derivative of the culture of people who were now politically colonized and culturally and materially "backwards" vis-à-vis Europeans was just too much. In all honesty, I think this is a perfectly human failing.

Of course, our views as Westerners vis-à-vis the Arabs have not much improved in the century and a half since then nor are our attitudes about the possibility of interaction in literary history radically more favorable. The medievalist directly confronted with the question today would most likely respond with the answer that there is no "proof" that such cultural-literary borrowing ever took place or that it could have taken place. As some have indicated, one would have to see a confession signed by William of Aquitaine, the first Provençal troubadour, to believe that he could have had any knowledge of Arabic poetry, let alone that he would have been willing to consider it a suitable model.

Well in fact, there *is* ample "proof" of both of these phenomena, particularly if we keep in mind that poetry at that moment was indeed, as Ribera pointed out, songs, and were appreciated not through their reading, necessarily, but through their performance set to music, the appreciation of which requires rather less than scholarly linguistic proficiency. And history tells us that William of Aquitaine, one of the most influential men of his time as well as the first troubadour, had ample opportunity to enjoy the songs of al Andalus. A half-dozen years before his birth, in fact, when Guillaume de Montreuil took the Arabic-controlled town of Barabastro, it was reported that he took back with him a thousand slave girls to the courts of Southern France. The language, songs,

and music of these captives, who performed at the courts, were far from unknown; indeed they were a familiar feature of a Southern France more tied to Iberia than to the Northern France that would eventually control it. It is a well-known story for many, but one ignored or passed by in Provençal studies. Less well-known is the fact that the Guillaume who captured this bit of booty was working for another Guillaume—the William who was the first troubadour's father. That the courts of William's childhood were far from ignorant of many aspects of Andalusian life, people, and its language is testified to by many other facts as well.

Indeed, even aside from that particular incident, everything we know about the geo-political ties of Southern France and Northern Spain (the modern terminology is quite misleading here) shows clearly the extent to which someone from Provence would have been in rather intimate contact with at least parts of the Hispano-Arabic world in the late eleventh century, a time when that world was at one of its several cultural apexes and reaching cultural and material heights that made northern Europe blush and would certainly have made many, especially those who could see it, envious. It is significant, for example, that this was the period of the flourishing of the *Muluk at-Tawaiif* during which, among other things, the *muwashshahāt* flourished. Of perhaps even greater significance for the fate of learning in Europe in subsequent centuries, we should remember that Toledo was captured by the Christians during William's childhood, in 1085, and it was this capture by an exceptionally enlightened Christian monarch, Alfonso VI, that would lead to the establishment of that city as the great center of translation and European intellectual commerce that would provide the bulk of the impetus and material for the so-called twelfth century Renaissance.

But we should also remember, in order to understand the closeness that was involved, that the Christian-controlled courts of Northern Spain were in many, if not most, cases quite far from the neatly and purely un-Arabic centers we often imagine them to be. Intermarriages, the casual co-existence of a variety of languages, cultures, poetries, costumes, religions, was the habit of the day and the sort of segregation we adduce implicitly or

explicitly is a projection of our own world much more than an accurate vision of that one. As the Catalán troubadour Raimon Vidal affectionately described it:

Totas genz, Cristians, Jusievas e  
 Sarasinas, meton totz jorns lor entendiment  
 en trobar et en chantar.

And our modern sense of geographical and linguistic divisions must, of course, be modified since the county of Barcelona spanned the western Pyrenees in those days and included areas that in modern times separate France from Spain. It remained largely under Arab control until well into the period of the first generation of troubadours. The Kingdom of Aragon, which was also immediately adjacent to Provence, was nominally Christian at the turn of the century, but many of the cities remained Arabic for some time thereafter.

However, we don't even have to rely on the common sense assumption that this closeness would have given William some sense of that other world and its amenities. His personal history guarantees that he had such a sense. He spent several years in Palestine after Jerusalem fell in the first Crusade, the years for which there is the greatest evidence of the virtually complete acculturation of the Crusaders to Arab ways. And he was part of the several crusade efforts into al Andalus itself, most notably the one against the fundamentalist Almoravids, who were to cause such upheaval there. But of even more proximate importance were his family ties: in 1094 William married Philippa of Aragon and even before that one of his sisters had married Pedro I of Aragon and another was the wife of none other than Alfonso VI himself, who had proclaimed himself "Emperor of Spain and of the Two Faiths." Even from this very sketchy picture you can see that the traditional picture drawn by literary historians of a William of Aquitaine as circumstantially unable to know anything about the Arab world of his time and its culture, is a seriously misleading one as is the notion that Provençal poetry sprung up in a cloistered Christian-Latin world. On the contrary, that vernacular poetry sprang up in close proximity and with much exposure to Andalusian culture at the moment of its great literary flourishing. Besides, William himself was, through family history and contacts and military adventures, regularly in and out of the Arab world. It seems to me more reasonable to ask

how William could possibly not have known, and in some detail, about Arabic court life with its luxuries, its poetry, and its kings who were poets and philosophers. And it is also reasonable to ask how he could have avoided hearing Arabic court songs—since he had probably been hearing them at home since early childhood, had ample exposure to them while courting his Spanish wife, and continued to hear them at his sister's house!

One of the principal manifestations of the anti-Arab prejudice in medieval studies is that the standards of "proof" are quite different for anyone positing Arabic influence from what they would be if one were making the same claim for a Latin or Greek source. And so it is, despite the well-known fact that most medieval Europeans had very limited access to much Latin literature and that Greek literature and philosophy were completely unknown to them (until Andalusians "restored" to Europe significant chunks of the Greek philosophical corpus, not just translated but annotated). A colleague of mine, a French Renaissance scholar, recently published a book on "Love's Fatal Glance," a study of the image of the arrow-shooting eyes in French Renaissance lyric poetry. In his chapter on the possible medieval sources for the imagery he points out quite mildly and politely that this was a very widely used image in Arabic courtly poetry (information, incidentally, given to him by my old Arabic prof, who clearly wishes to ruin everyone's career in my department) and that this might be its source in later European poetry. His argument is well documented and, in fact, quite sound.

But in a journal in which the book was recently reviewed, commentary yielded to shrill objection and the author was excoriated for having brought in something so irrelevant as Arabic and for ignoring the supposedly obvious sources: Latin poets, some of whom in reality were scarcely known in the medieval period, and the Greek tradition, which was even less well known. The reviewer barely mentions anything else in the book, although this is really an almost incidental part of my colleague's argument, part of the "background." I could cite literally hundreds of examples to prove it, but the point is that if it's Arabic you have to have it signed in blood by the poet himself, even to do the simplest type of literary comparisons. But if it's part of our "Western heritage" then, no matter how ludicrous the historical supposition, it's probably OK. Latin is the indispensable language requirement for a medievalist, but

the study of Arabic, the language of much of the great cultural achievement of the European Middle Ages, is not only not required for the medievalist but usually unheard of or unimagined, sometimes even prohibited, and in any case, one usually needs special permission to learn it! The most common phenomenon in the world is the specialist in the Spanish medieval period who not only knows no Arabic but cannot imagine why he should except as a dilettantish enterprise in learning an exotic language (remember my own case).

A further problem resulting from our prejudicial attitudes is the confusion between military or political antagonism, on the one hand, which certainly prevailed in medieval Europe between Muslim and Christian, and cultural borrowing or influence, on the other. What medievalists quite often assume or argue is that the two are mutually exclusive, the antagonism precluding the cultural influence, and yet this strikes me as an absurd assumption. If it were not, how would we explain such phenomena in our own time as Marxists in all of Europe and in Latin America wearing blue jeans and Soviet youth knowing Beatles' songs, lyrics and all, even if they don't know English? Partially, of course, this is a reflection of this being a "smaller" world. But it also reflects, as do many other phenomena in history, the fact that ideology and conflict hardly preclude cultural absorption and "influence."

At about the same time as Julián Ribera wrote his article on the *trobar* etymology, one of his students, who was to become an eminent Arabist in his own right, wrote a book called *La escatología musulmana en la "Divina Comedia"* in which he argued, to simplify it, that Dante had gotten his idea for the trip to the other world from the Arabic *mi'raj* tradition. I guess I don't have to tell you how often this book is assigned or even mentioned in Dante courses in Italy or in this country: if you guess almost never, you would be quite correct. Most Dante scholars have never even heard of it, even though it caused quite a to-do when it was published, and a bibliography of derivative studies published in 1965 is quite extensive (although it includes very few mainstream Dantisti.) The main argument against such a hypothesis—aside from the same old how-could-he-have-known-about-it? or he-didn't-know-any-Arabic kind is that Dante was as utterly Christian and as profoundly anti-Islamic as one could get, thus highly unlikely to have anything to do with those people.

Well, the answer to the first argument is a remarkably simple one: Romance vernacular translations of the *Kitab al Mi'raj*, the *Book of the Ladder*, as the principal relevant Arabic text is called, were widely disseminated in Europe at the time. One of the most important translators, commissioned for the task by Alfonso el Sabio, was a fellow Tuscan, one Bonaventura di Siena. Moreover, such translations were often appended to copies of a Latin work which Dante would have found most appealing: Peter the Venerable's *Toledan Collection* which includes a very strong anti-Islamic tract as well as translations of some of the "sacred texts" of Islam that "prove" the insidious nature of Islam. Some of these texts were spurious, but Dante, like other readers, was unlikely to know that. And, Peter himself recounts important aspects of the literary tradition which narrates the Prophet's trip from Jerusalem to Hell to Heaven, accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel.

Incidentally, Dante's much respected *maestro*, Brunetto Latini, happens to have been in Spain, in Toledo in fact, at the time Bonaventura was also there—translating the text in question. Whether Brunetto could have known about it and told Dante is a matter of speculation. But in any case, to assume that there was no way that Dante could have known about it strains credulity—he lived at a time and place in which fascination with and hunger for material translated from the Arabic was quite the rage.

The more important point, however, is that cultural influence is not necessarily a straightforward process by which one copies something from someone else. It certainly was not so in the case of the brilliant author of the *Commedia* and one is right to reject any simplistic notion of "copying" for him, or for William of Aquitaine, or for anyone else. On the contrary, one must recognize (as Juan Andrés noted two hundred years ago and many others have since) that Arabic culture was the prestige culture for Europe in this period of time, a sort of radical chic in some ways, and very influential particularly among artists and the intelligentsia, groups notoriously unlikely to follow the moral proclamations of the Church or the political dictates of the State. In fact, the more interesting possibility, as far as Dante is concerned, is that it was a *negative* Arabic influence that was most important in the creation of the *Divine Comedy*. Bologna, in Dante's lifetime, was a hotbed of radical Aristoleian, i.e. Averroist activity, which

had seduced among others, Guido Cavalcante, Dante's "primo amico," whose lost or probably lost soul haunts much of the *Commedia*. It is not hard to imagine that Dante, a very conservative Christian, strongly opposed to Averroism (with its belief that reason must precede and support faith rather than the other way around), and seeing many of the best minds of his generation seduced by such a philosophy, would have been inspired to write what is, for many of us, the greatest Christian apologia. If this is true, and if our understanding of cultural influence is sufficiently sophisticated, how could this not be a clear-cut case of the powerful influence of medieval Arabic culture on the development of European literature?

A further problem arising from this prejudice that encourages ignorance of the medieval Arabic world, as it flourished in Europe, is that we often confuse "Arabic" with "Islamic" and assume the two to be synonymous. In medieval Spain and Sicily, at least, few things could be further from the truth. Averroës, a Spaniard whose work on Aristotle made him the Freud or the Chomsky of medieval Europe was as reviled among the fundamentalist Muslims as he was among fundamentalist Christians, and his "secular humanism," as it would be called if he were considered a part of the European scene, earned him banishment from his beloved al Andalus. In fact, a large part of the Arabic culture which was so prestigious in the Middle Ages was rather un-Islamic, starting with the profane love poetry of the courts. Moreover, many "case histories" prove that this distinction, which we seem to be unable to grasp, was clearly made within the non-Arab European community of the time, particularly by the artists and the intellectuals. (Averroës, after all, *was* Aristotle in the twelfth century, and as one eminent historian of philosophy has noted, if by Averroism we mean studying Aristotle via Averroës and his readings of the Philosopher, then everyone was an Averroist.)

One of the most fantastic examples of this is the case of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, Norman, German, Sicilian, whose court at Palermo between 1225 and 1250, nearly two centuries after the Arabs had been politically deposed by the Normans, was as brilliant and refined a center of Arabic learning as any in the Middle East or in Spain. Frederick himself, who along with his grandfather is commonly referred to as the

“baptized sultan,” not only spoke, read and wrote Arabic but patronized all aspects of Arabic culture and learning that he found pleasing: everything from Averroës and Maimonides and other philosophers, to medicine, to astrology, to music and poetry. For a time Frederick’s court was a serious challenge to Toledo as *the* center of Arabic learning and translation in Europe. Amazingly enough, the first school of Italian vernacular poetry, which was also of the courtly love tradition, was born, guess where? That’s right, in Sicily, between 1225 and 1250, under the direct patronage of the same Frederick who sent for all of the Arab savants and translators trained at Toledo that would come to his court, a court where Arabic was not only one of the four official languages but the monarch’s native tongue. And it was widely perceived as the most brilliant in Europe, if a bit daring intellectually, and Frederick himself was widely referred to as *the stupor and immutator mundi*.

Yet, when one studies the *scuola siciliana*, that first group of Italian poets, the fact that they wrote in an ambience literally saturated with every aspect of Arabic culture, including profane love poetry, is never even hinted at. This is, in fact, a much more flagrant case of ignoring the obvious than that of William of Aquitaine, since it is indisputable, in the case of the *scuola siciliana*, that Arabic was a normal linguistic vehicle for that school’s patron (he was also one of its poets) and that in his knowledge of Arabic language and letters, as well as science and philosophy, he was probably the most accomplished “Arabist” of his day. Nevertheless, virtually no one who studies the *scuola siciliana* and its poetry is even remotely aware of this fact, or lets on that he is, and it is stated in every book on the subject that any and all influence on the nascent poetry is from Provence. This seems to me to be among the most astonishing examples of the sort of prejudice and ignorance of which Europeanists are guilty.

But it is not just the Europeans or their “Western” views that are to blame for this state of affairs. Traditional Arabic and Oriental studies have in most cases contributed in equal measure to the artificial but complete separation of the two fields of study. For starters, the study of Spanish or Sicilian Arabic history and culture has long been the poor cousin, the very poor cousin, of Arabic studies. One simply never “did” Spain or Sicily



if one could do Baghdad. I may not have to remind you that Ibn Khaldūn, the great Spanish-Arab philosopher who is now so popular among Arabists was “discovered” by Gibbon. To take a more pertinent example, it took me *years* even to ascertain whether there were any extant texts of the Sicilian-Arabic poetry I assumed must have been sung and written before and during Frederick’s reign—something I very much wanted to know for obvious reasons. With great difficulty and much perseverance I finally did find out that such poetry does exist but it is almost totally inaccessible since the Arabist who has most worked on it has published only a very limited edition of some of the poems of the “Diwan,” or song book, which survives, and he has translated only smatterings of the poetry, with the peremptory statement that it has no connection with any of the Italian poetry of thirteenth-century Sicily. Thus the rationale for why the poetry is kept inaccessible to Italianists and Romanists. But it is poetry written, I remind you, at the same time and in the same place, under the same patronage and, for all we know, in some cases by the same individuals as those who are part of the Romance *scuola siciliana!* (But there is consolation, perhaps, in the knowledge that Sicilian-Arabic poetry was not the only Arabic poetry that would have been known at Frederick’s court. Andalusian poetry, one should not forget, was the prestige poetry *especially* in Sicily.)

Unfortunately, this is not an idiosyncratic example. It is a great irony, in fact, that in his catalogue of sins committed by Arabists Edward Said chose to ignore the area of medieval studies altogether since he would have found there much more (and in many cases more legitimate) grist for his mill than in the case of scholarship on the modern period. But that is another question. Arabists, whether they be Italian or Egyptian, Spanish or Syrian, have been as segregationist in their attitudes as the Europeanists, and it is therefore hardly surprising that when one comes to undeniably cross-cultural texts, mass confusion and chaos has set in. The best example of this is certainly that of the *muwashshah* and its *kharja*, to which I alluded earlier.

You will perhaps remember that I said the *kharjas* were discovered by Samuel Stern. The term “discovery” is inappropriate because, in fact, both *muwashshahāt* and *kharjas* were known and even existed in printed form, for quite a long time. The

problem was that they were studied exclusively by Arabists who had either no knowledge of medieval Spanish or any notion that such knowledge might be relevant for a poetic text written in Spain in the tenth century. Thus, it was always assumed they were a mass of nonsense for God knows what reason appended to these poems in Classical Arabic. Since Stern figured out that it was not really nonsense, not quite, just the Romance vernacular of the time, matters have improved somewhat, not much.

Although massive research has been done and untold quantities of ink spilt, what has happened is that the poor poems, clearly the linguistically hybrid products of a culturally hybrid world (in which a divorce between what was Romance and what was Arabic was inconceivable), have been arbitrarily disembodied. The few Romance scholars that do study the *kharjas*, the refrains, quite often do so in a context in which the refrains of poems are analysed without reference to the main body of the poem. And Arabists do the converse and shrilly maintain that Romanists have no business having anything to do with these poems that are, in their eyes, part of the standard classical Arabic canon and thus the territory of Arabists alone. The quixotic scholar who believes the *muwashshahāt* and their *kharjas* are part of a world in which Arabic and Romance were not so neatly compartmentalized is likely to be ignored by the majority of his colleagues in medieval European studies and at the same time accused of being an amphibian—or worse—by Arabists who make no bones about what they think of such half-breeds. The irony is almost painful: even those monuments to a culture that knew no such distinctions (except as they complemented each other) are torn apart, because we seem to know no better way in which to view the medieval world except as a projection of our own.

But I don't want to close on so grim a note. It *is* sad and discouraging that so many Spaniards and Hispanists have not followed Juan Andrés' lead in pointing out to others studying the medieval European past that Spain, al Andalus, was very much at its center. It *is* stunning to read Curtius saying that Spain was "culturally belated" because it did not share in the fruits of the twelfth century Renaissance—and to see that he cites an eminent Spanish Arabist as his source for the assertions. But Andrés was *not* alone and those who respected his opinions and made them their own include some of our finest ancestors

as scholars, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, to name but the most prominent and remarkable. It is an illustration of how deeply embedded these prejudices are that in this area the views and work of Menéndez Pidal, so venerated and followed in other aspects of medieval and philological studies, rarely get more than lip service. And if we lavish respect and attention on Alfonso el Sabio and Frederick II, how long can we continue to ignore the language, literature and culture that so fascinated them and which they devoted their lives to studying and translating?

I firmly believe that it is possible to rekindle the pride in a part of our European ancestry that has too long been kept in the dark, an ancestry that includes the most eminent of medieval Europeans, Averroës, Maimonides, and Ibn Hazm, among many others. I should like to conclude by quoting part of a poem by one of the great poets of Spain and of Europe, Ibn al-'Arabi, a poet whose work I hope will one day be studied precisely in that context. It is the kind of world he himself evokes in his poetry. My own Arabic is quite insufficient to do it justice, and I quote from James Monroe's translation:

My heart has taken on every shape; it has become  
a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian  
monks;

And a temple for idols, and a pilgrim's Ka'ba,  
and the tables of a Torah, and the pages of a Koran.

I believe in the religion of love; wherever  
love's camels turn there love is my religion and my  
faith.

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