

Menocal, M. R., *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*. Pp. xvii + 178 (Middle Ages Series). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987. £26.55.

THE ARABIC ROLE IN MEDIEVAL LITERARY HISTORY is an impressive re-appraisal of the influence of Arabic culture and scholarship throughout medieval Europe, and it convincingly dismisses the idea that such influence was limited to the occupation of the Iberian Peninsula or to Crusader adoption of Saracen comfort. By demonstrating the range of Arabic influence in Europe, this study seeks to emancipate Medieval Arabic studies from the limited field of Hispanic Medievalism.

From her first description of how she discovered the Arabic root of the word *troubadour* (from *taraba*, 'to sing') – and then found that this derivation, established in oriental studies, was still considered invalid in Romance philology – it is evident that Professor Menocal feels herself to be addressing a readership unconsciously prejudiced against her thesis. The extent to which the author engages with such prejudice is almost the only limiting factor in this volume. Three of the six chapters are devoted to a discussion of the 'Myth of Westernness' and its implications. They show at some length how the long Arabic occupation of Spain has been perceived as only a negative influence, and that the knowledge and acceptance of Arabic culture in medieval Europe has been minimized in previous studies.

For many readers, therefore, it may be that

the central chapters of this book will prove the most persuasive, as they analyse the Arabic influence upon specific areas of literary study. A discussion of courtly love, with mention of Western and Eastern perceptions of courtship, suggests the range of this approach, and there is an interesting analysis of the 'negative' influence of Arabic culture on Dante. I found Chapter iv the most illuminating of all. It discusses the Muwashshahāt, a specifically Spanish development of Arabian literature. The Muwashshahāt takes the form of a poem written in Arabic, with the final strophe, or *kharja*, in Mozarabic, the vernacular of Moslem Spain. Because of this mixture of tongues, it is not accepted as a legitimate form in 'classical' Arabic poetry, and previous studies have sought to prove that the *kharja* is a separate form altogether. The poems quoted by Professor Menocal demonstrate, even in translation, how eloquent the blend of language and style can prove, and the study suggests a rich vein of cross-cultural influence. At this point the value of the earlier chapters is more evident, for they clarify the potential range of Arabic influence in various European courts and centres of learning.

Non-specialists will probably not admit the necessity of Professor Menocal's defence of her thesis, and wish for an extension of the relatively brief comparative studies. As the final chapter makes clear, however, this book deliberately addresses the specialist in an attempt to extend the parameters of Hispanic Medieval Studies.

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