

María Rosa Menocal. *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (Middle Ages Series), 1987. xvii + 178 pp.

(Reviewed by: Peter Heath, Washington University, St. Louis)

In the introduction to his classic study, (*Fi l-adab al-jāhili* [On Pre-Islamic Literature], Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1927), written in the early part of this century, the well-known Egyptian author and critic, Ṭāhā Ḥusain, argues for the reconstruction of literary studies in his country. The first step, he contends, is to undertake basic pedagogic reforms on the primary and secondary levels of education. Language instruction must be revitalized and a deep-seated love for Arabic literature must be instilled in the hearts of Egyptian children. At the undergraduate and graduate levels, the study of literature must be professionalized. How is it possible, he asks, to understand the history of Arabic literature, and critically evaluate its texts, without first undergoing appropriate preparation and methodological training? Literary preparation should consist of a good grounding in relevant secondary languages and literatures, including ancient (Akkadian, Hebrew, Latin, Greek), Islamic (Persian and Turkish), and modern European (French, English, German). Methodological training should impart a thorough knowledge of Arabic literary history and its poetic traditions and foster expertise in modern critical and comparative theory (Ḥusain, *Fi l-adab* 14-18).

In essence, Ṭāhā Ḥusain demands the creation of good schools and strong research universities, the latter driven by dynamic inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural programs of literary and historical study.

Few can deny that strong research universities, in which a student of exceptional ability can actually complete Professor Ḥusain's extraordinarily challenging curriculum, currently exist in this country and abroad. What is perplexing, however, is the degree to which the inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural programs he advocates still remain notable for their absence.

It is within the context of this latter issue that María Rosa Menocal's important and well-argued book raises timely and substantial questions. Her test-case is the comparative study, or more specifically the resistance to such (equally by Romance language scholars and Arabists) of the pre-modern literatures and cultures of the lands of the northwestern Mediterranean (present-day Spain, southern France, Italy). But her subject and her

methodology have wider implications. Menocal's central topic is the extent to which linguistic, cultural, and nationalistic considerations define the boundaries of scholarly disciplines; and how, once so defined, these boundaries thereafter determine not only our willingness to stretch scholarly perimeters but, in fact, destroy our hermeneutical awareness of their very existence, circumscribing not only how we answer questions but, more importantly, which questions are asked at all.

The "Matter of al-Andalus" is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Few subjects of literary inquiry exist which so strikingly combine such a substantial period of empirical historical and cultural interaction (lasting, after all, for seven hundred years) with so absolute a division of subsequent scholarly labor. Blithely ignoring historical realities, Hispanists study Latin and early Spanish texts, while Arabists work on Andalusian Arabic ones. Arabists study *muwashshahāt* without paying much attention to their Romance *kharjas*; Hispanists study *kharjas* intensely but ignore the main body of the Arabic poems within which they were composed. If such a situation did not actually exist, it would take the mind of a Jonathan Swift to create it.

As Menocal's study makes abundantly clear, the issue of the influence of Arabo-Islamic culture on medieval European literature has traditionally followed patterns of particularistic inquiry. Controversy concerning a specific topic, usually of a genetic nature, is generated — often by Arabists whose over-enthusiasm impels them to overstate their cases. Was Troubadour poetry not really an off-shoot of Andalusian love poetry? Was the concept of end-rhyme not adopted from the Arabs? Did Dante not "borrow" his theme of spiritual ascent from the Islamic story of the prophet Muḥammad's ascent to heaven? Once such questions are raised, the mighty hosts of Romance language scholars mobilize their forces, line up their ranks, and first attack, then demolish their perceived opponents' arguments. (The military rhetoric is intentional here.)

It is a major virtue of Professor Menocal's study that she wisely transcends this pattern of *ghazwa* (incursion) and *reconquista* over specific genetic controversies. Although she reviews the history of certain prominent altercations — devoting a chapter each to courtly love, *muwashshahāt*, and Dante — her goal is less to take specific stands on such issues than to deconstruct, and then reconfigure, our apprehension of the nature of their intellectual

structure. Polemics either for or against Arabic "origins" or "influences" are not her intent. Rather, two broader, more significant questions intrigue her. First, why is it that such arguments initially evoke such passion and animosity, only to be easily consigned to scholarly oblivion once they have been (ostensibly satisfactorily) addressed? And second, what are potentially fruitful lines of inquiry along which processes of cultural interplay between Arab and Frankish (to use the pre-modern Arabic denomination) cultures could be investigated. In a sense, she is less asking why literary history belongs to the victors, although this issue is pertinent enough, than why the war still continues, and, more poignantly, how we can finally make peace.

As in any wartime situation, discourse tends to be monologic, and those urging dialogue run the risk of not being heard. Menocal wisely refrains from intemperate scolding, offering instead an attractive vision of the rewards of peaceful coexistence. It is a vision in which cultural and historical distinctions are assumed but adopted as a framework within which movements of interplay, influence, or reaction (as in her suggestion of Dante's reaction against the intellectual threat that Arabism posed for him) are carefully explored. For such coexistence to come into being, however, participants must display a willingness to work toward it, on both practical and idealist levels. On the practical level, we must be willing to attempt those things which can be accomplished now, regardless of short-term imperfections. We must be prepared, for example, to organize courses in comparative Arabo-Hispanic medieval literatures on the undergraduate and graduate levels, despite the paucity of satisfactory translations or the temporary limitations on our individual linguistic expertise. Simultaneously, we must be idealistic in regard to envisioning the final ends toward which we move. We may have to overcome some impediments in order to attain our goals, but the mere ability to envision them may teach us that many now-perceived obstacles are more mental than real. As a scholar, for instance, who was expected to acquire knowledge of French, German, and even some Spanish, in order to pursue graduate studies in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literatures, I find Romance scholars' protestations concerning the difficulty of acquiring a working knowledge of Arabic or Hebrew less than convincing. All they are really saying is that they have not yet institutionalized such study as part of their graduate programs.

In short, the aim of María Rosa Menocal's important book is nothing less than to teach us how to see clearly, to rediscover and thus retrieve a cross-cultural scholarly domain of immense cultural richness and significant methodological value, a domain, however, whose investigation has been impeded by petty nationalistic animosities and indefensible disciplinary close-mindedness. It is to her great credit that she conducts her lesson in so modest and gentle a fashion, quietly coaxing and prodding rather than whipping us along. If her book has limitations, they are those of intent rather than execution, of audience rather than author. Focussing on horizons disclosed rather than revelations from above, Menocal does not attempt to guide us completely to the farther shore; rather, she surveys and charts for us initial courses. Once so invited, can we resist the voyage?