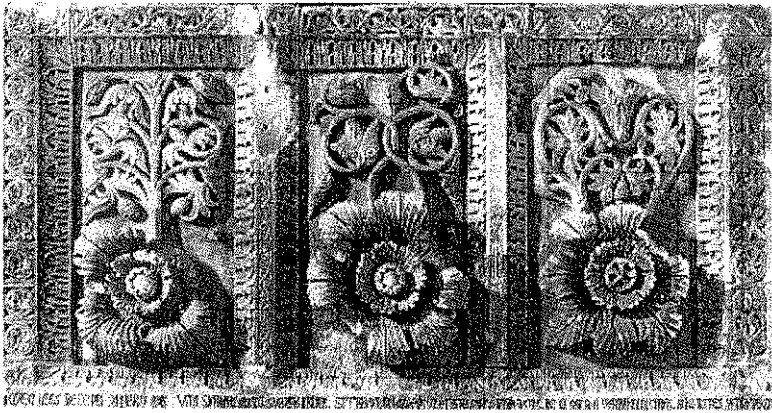


MARIA ROSA MENOCA

# WRITING WITHOUT FOOTNOTES

The Role of the Medievalist in Contemporary Intellectual Life



BERNARDO LECTURE SERIES, NO. 10

Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies  
State University of New York at Binghamton  
Binghamton, New York

© COPYRIGHT 2001  
Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies  
State University of New York at Binghamton

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

**Maria Rosa Menocal**

*Writing Without Footnotes: The Role of The  
Medievalist in Contemporary Intellectual  
Life*

1. Romance Philology
2. Medieval Literature: French, Italian, Spanish,  
Arabic, Hebrew, Mozarabic

ISBN 1-58684-131-9

Printed in the United States of America

# WRITING WITHOUT FOOTNOTES

## The Role of the Medievalist in Contemporary Intellectual Life



There used to be no story more famous in our branch of “the profession” than the story of Erich Auerbach’s writing of *Mimesis* in Istanbul. The German professor of Romance philology — which in practice meant teaching Old French, Old Provençal and Old Italian — was a Prussian war hero and survivor of the carnage of the First World War. But he was also a Jew and in 1935 the Nazis chased him from his position at Marburg University. In 1936 he went into exile, to Turkey, where he instructed “an audience mostly of well-brought-up young Turkish ladies who needed French” as his student Lowry Nelson, Jr. would say in a loving necrology. But it was there, in such extreme exile, with Europe and its cultures savaging each other, that Auerbach, without his languages and without his books, wrote *Mimesis*. Famously, very famously, with no footnotes, no bibliography and with the inscription (on the verso of the title page of the 1953 English translation): “Written in Istanbul between May 1942 and April 1945.” This, it was

always implied, was the explanation for this lapse in what we call “scholarship.”

I was first told the story as a graduate student in the 1970’s, a moment which I think can now be seen as oddly “transitional” in the history of literary studies: there were still some traces of that older universe to be glimpsed, degrees in Romance philology were still technically possible, graduate students were still told the story of Auerbach and, indeed, we were expected to really read *Mimesis*. But it was also mostly clear that this was all largely vestigial, that we were mostly being trained as scholars in one language and one literature and maybe even one century. Indeed, this was just one of the ways in which scholarship was being unambiguously defined, pragmatically if not explicitly; as a matter of greater specialization rather than greater vision and breadth. And the very notion that any of this had anything to do with true love or passion or cultural values or anything at the heart of the civilization of which we aspired to be a continuation — this would not have crossed anyone’s mind. And would, in any case, have been sneered at from both sides of the aisle, as the aisle was laid out in those days: many of the really old-fashioned philologists were by and large from the school descended from German Neogrammarians and as much interested in disembodied objective truth — the kind that can be “proven” with and in footnotes — as the other neos, the New Critics.

So I was puzzled, as I think anyone who really thought about the Auerbach myth must have been: was the moral supposed to be that it was a truly magnificent scholar who could write a whole book without a library and thus without notes or bibliography? If so, what were we being trained to do? It was more than clear that whatever the moral was it was certainly not that we should write our papers (let alone an entire book) without notes or a bibliography, as Auerbach had done. After all, literary scholarship in the “modern” period meant one version or another of grasping that our field was as “scientific” and “disinterested” as any other, above all it was about things that could be proven (or perhaps even be diagrammed or charted). Who would have suggested, out loud at least, that the footnotelessness of that book was not the small and in some sense unfortunate technical glitch that was the result of Auerbach’s cruel exile? Who among us, at that time, might have suggested instead that it represented an approach to our “profession” that was already disappearing: writing about literature out of supreme personal love and engagement with the texts, with an unspecialized vision of our public, of who we think we can and should write for, and also as moral leadership, as part of a resistance to the sort of deadly identity politics that made Auerbach the Jew no longer a good German.

If a quarter of a century ago this sort of notion of our work was disappearing but still visible on a retreating horizon — after all we did have to

actually read Auerbach and read it as a carefully crafted book that began with Homer and ended with Virginia Woolf — today the professional universe of which *Mimesis* is so romantically iconic is surely not only gone but also forgotten. Our freshly minted PhDs in Spanish will perhaps read the chapter on Dulcinea and I suppose there may be assistant professors in French who feel they should be familiar with Auerbach's chapters on certain French texts, and so forth... But what job from the current MLA job list would a young version of Auerbach — assuming one fell out of the sky from some distant planet — apply for among the dozens advertised for specialists in everything from “Southern Cone” literature to postcolonial lit? Would the search committee for a position for a Virginia Woolf specialist— a gender studies specialist, of course — consider the dossier of a person who had written one chapter on her in a book that began with a discussion of the difference between representations of reality in the Hebrew Bible and in the Greek epic? With no footnotes? To which questions, by the way, it is not fair to answer that one would of course hire someone of the quality of an Auerbach — because of course we cannot reap, in full bloom, what we do not sow and we do not nurture. If there are no Auerbachs out there and there are no “*Mimesis*” being published by our university presses these days or in the dossiers of professors coming up for tenure, surely it must be in some considerable measure because we have defined our profession in ways that

preclude or exclude that sort of “writing without footnotes.”

In the very gracious letter of invitation I was sent last spring asking me to give this year's Bernardo lecture one phrase stuck out conspicuously and attractively for me, a statement about my being in a position, because of my own work, to speak to “our reconceptualizing our place in the Academy.” The truth of the matter is that the problem at hand, the one revealed rather strikingly by seeing how alien an Auerbach would be in the Academy today, is really a vast one that has to do not just with “our” place within the Academy, but really of the Academy's place within our society. It would be hard to be oblivious to the phenomenon of the disappearance of the public intellectual — or, let us put it a bit differently, the phenomenon of the withdrawal of the Academy's humanists from the sphere of public intellectual conversations. And by extension, not surprisingly, the wide and damaging perception of the public that the Academy has abandoned its role as the home of the public intellectual, who can speak to the common reader. And it is most unfortunate that many of the most widely publicized statements about these indisputable facts come from individuals or groups who themselves have anti-intellectual agendas —so then we become defensive about this, or dismissive. It is rare, although not unheard of, to read public indictments of this coming from those of us who know, as a friend of mine said to me recently, that the sad thing is that

no right-wing disparagement of any given session of the MLA convention can actually capture how Lilliputian it has become in its concerns and in its languages.

This is the necessary, indeed, inevitable, context in which I take the invitation to speak about “reconceptualizing our place in the Academy.” The “our” in that sentence I will take to mean that branch of the profession that trained Eric Auerbach — along with Leo Spitzer — among many others— and, indeed, famous dropouts such as Ezra Pound and Friedrich Nietzsche. It used to be called Romance Philology but to the extent it survives it is now medieval studies and its descendant representatives are the medievalists in departments of modern languages. That very expression — “medievalists in departments of modern languages”— ought to give us pause, but so it is. And what I want to do is suggest that it is really up to us, to the medievalists who have in modern memory been the least likely community to provide intellectual leadership within the Humanities, or the leaders to Brave New Worlds, that it is actually quite naturally up to us —given the nature of our field, given the languages and the texts we have to work with, given the cultural universe we can evoke — to play the crucial role of restoring the faith of our society in the Academy’s traditional responsibility to provide intellectual leadership of a compelling public nature.

Now I realize this may sound far-fetched or even preposterous — it would to me if I were a

common reader or a modernist — given that the very adjective “medieval” in our society is synonymous with “backwards” and that the most conspicuous public use of that word in recent years was in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, and where the best one can hope for the image of a medievalist is some antiquarian eccentric with strong escapist tendencies, a figure like Tolkien, or whoever we imagine provides the material for the Monty Python skits. But as the example of Auerbach — let alone Nietzsche or Pound — might suggest, ‘twas not always thus. And I want to argue that it is fully within our grasp to change all of that and, even, that it is a part of our own moral responsibility towards the very medieval authors we profess to represent in the modern world, to change that.

In 1991 Salman Rushdie published his first piece of fiction after the notorious fatwa of 1989 — a fatwa which was, of course, invariably described as medieval, meaning (it goes without saying, doesn’t it?) anti-modern, backwards, unenlightened, and so forth. But let us leave that part of it aside for the moment, and reflect instead on that first post-fatwa Rushdie publication, much anticipated, of course. It was a book called *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* widely, indeed as far as I can tell universally, described by the press as an escape into fantasy or children’s literature, a book dedicated to Rushdie’s own son, whom he had not seen since he had gone underground in fear for his life, and a book which, it was suggested, understandably al-

lowed Rushdie to take a break, in the world of “pure entertainment” from the harsh political universe into which his *Satanic Verses* had cast him. Occasionally a reviewer mentioned the connection to the text we call “Arabian Nights” or “The Thousand and One Nights,” but there was no indication that this connection might suggest ways in which this was not so “innocent” or “escapist” a text.

In fact, of course, what is extraordinarily, wonderfully, “medieval” is this kind of highly engaged literary response to the threat of death, and students of Rushdie’s earlier novels, leading up to and including the *Satanic Verses*, should have known about Rushdie’s life-long aesthetic attachment to a medieval world which, from his perspective, is the quintessentially **enlightened** historical moment. Before he wrote *Haroun* as a tribute and as a gesture of solidarity with the triumphant storyteller Shahrazade, he had constructed his “postmodern” fiction in intimate dialogue with medieval texts and characters and ideologies — I can’t and won’t do an inventory but suffice it to say that the protagonist of the doomed *Satanic Verses* is a very Boccaccio-esque Saladin. None of this is ever given any more than, at best, lip service because, well, because Rushdie is studied by the people who do post-colonial literature — and because he is not studied by medievalists. Or, to put it only slightly differently, because the reviews of a contemporary book like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* in the *TLS* or in the *New York Review of Books* will be written

by an expert on contemporary Anglophone literature and probably able to discuss it in terms of the most au courant theoretical models — and certainly not by the local Don Juan Manuel or Boccaccio or Chaucer scholar who might be able to talk about how and why the framed tale — which in some ways in Europe can be said to begin with the Rushdie-like Petrus Alfonsi, an Arabized Jew living in London writing in Latin — was the most popular form of prose fiction throughout medieval Europe. Or why and how it is, indeed, the vehicle for resistance to the tyrannies of false pieties or unambiguous or self-righteous interpretations of Truth or Good. These things we would know in a universe in which medieval scholars also played the role of public intellectuals, which of course means “writing without footnotes” in the sense, here, that we write, first of all, cogently and intelligibly for the benefit of non-medievalists, our fellow academics in other areas of literature or cultural history, for those poor Rushdie people who don’t know from Petrus Alfonsi and don’t know any of the spectacular Saladin stories in the *Decameron* or in the *Conde Lucanor*; and secondly, of course, for that “common reader” out there (who I always imagine are our own undergraduates when they are grown up and have children and vote and pay taxes) and who really deserve to know that *The Thousand and One Nights*, just like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, has a significant existence outside the Disney universe of children’s “entertainment”. Indeed, one of the crucial lessons

everyone needs to take from the medieval aesthetics represented by the framed tale tradition is precisely that “entertainment” and morality – or immorality for that matter – are not hard-wired and contradictory dichotomies. On the contrary. We are all disgracefully habituated — and by we now I mean the “we” of the common reader and the general public and often medievalists as well — to see the Middle Ages as the “Age of Faith”— and the much-idealized Renaissance as the moment at which Doubt or Secularism or Reason or Humanism or some other un-backwards and good proto modern thing comes along. The truth, known to Rushdie although not to most of his critics, is of course quite otherwise.

One day this summer I was surprised and delighted to see a cover headline on that week’s issue of *The New Republic* that said: “Medieval Kansas.” Medieval Kansas? Even I, who am a collector of interesting uses of the word medieval, was momentarily baffled by what this might mean. But of course. The Kansas Board of Education had just ruled that Creation, rather than Evolution, would be taught. That Faith, rather than Science, was the rule of the day and the basis of Education. Medieval. This, it struck me, was a far worse violation than using medieval as a synonym for a homosexual rape, as it is in *Pulp Fiction*, since it is among the most distinctive virtues of the period to have assiduously cultivated the art of contradiction. Just go through the “top ten hits” in your head: Abelard’s

almost premonitory *sic et non* — it is of course yes **and** no, not or or instead of or rather than; the extraordinary *Commentaries* on Aristotle by Ibn Rushd which would be the basis of so much intellectual flowering and turmoil throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> century; Maimonides’ remarkable *Guide for the Perplexed*, a masterpiece of philosophical contemplation on the problem of the yes and no of Faith and Reason, most brilliantly studied in our own age by Leo Strauss; Aquinas’ *Summa*, which would, in its self-conscious attempt at summation and closure largely succeed in bringing the period to an end. It is precisely the hallmark of the medieval period to have not only permitted but, indeed, often encouraged — for reasons which we should all be discussing broadly and publicly — a philosophical stance which in graduate school we learned to call that of the “Double Truth.” It is the distinction of the culture of that period that it was the Age not of Faith but of Faiths.

First, of course of the Three Faiths, those of the Children of Abraham, or of the Three Rings in Boccaccio’s first Saladin story, where Saladin thinks he will be able to get the Jew to whom he owes money to corner himself into saying which one of the three is the True Faith. But of course no one in Boccaccio’s universe is so “modern” or uncomplicated as to get caught in that trap. And after that, of course, there is the addition of the fourth Faith — the Greek corpus and especially the works of Aristotle. This body of texts was at the very heart



of the medieval universe, alongside with the Revealed religions it did in fact contradict, and this was the direct trigger of the philosophical and theological revolutions that are marked by the works of Ibn Rushd, Maimonides and Aquinas. And what Rushdie knew, which the headline writers at *The New Republic* didn't know — some Yale undergrad who never took one of my courses, no doubt — is that the introduction of the Greek philosophical corpus takes place thanks to two centuries of extraordinary translation and commentary in Bagdad. The Caliphs are all not only devout Muslims but in fact as Caliphs the symbolic heirs to the religious authority of the Prophet himself — and it is they who oversaw and paid for and encouraged the translation of this body of philosophical and scientific texts. Among these men none was more renowned than the Caliph Haroun ar-Rashid — and it is this historic Haroun who was the basis for the character Haroun ar-Rashid in the *Thousand and One Nights* because — well, because he was such a character and when he was done being the Prophet's representative as well as the patron of translations of Aristotle during the day, he would, at night, disguise himself as a common man and wander the rowdy and motley and enormously entertaining streets of Bagdad. To carouse and to collect stories, to be character and storyteller.

The titular hero of Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the great Caliph Haroun, plays that role precisely because of his ability to be many

things, many “contradictory” things at the same time. It is not some cheap “meta-literary” allusion to make this clear connection to the *Thousand and One Nights*, and Rushdie is not escaping the political and moral horrors of the fatwa. On the contrary, he is defending himself first of all by placing himself in a long line of storytellers whose most distinguished exemplars are medieval and whose iconic representative is Shahrazade. All of whom understand that the virtue of literature is that it humbles us by making us see that facile answers — Orthodoxies — are traps. That, as Boccaccio might put it in his Saladin story, no doubt there is One True Faith, one original ring, among the three — but that no mere mortal should tyrannically assume to know, let alone enforce that Truth. Rushdie, who knows that the Haroun character of the *Thousand and One Nights* is also a reflection of the famous Caliph Haroun, is, no less, doing something like the opposite of what the headline writer of the *New Republic* was doing: he is saying, proclaiming loudly and publicly to the few who might understand, that the medieval world, where the representative of the Prophet is himself also the Patron of Aristotle and a bar-hopper at night — is a very superior place to our modern world.

Of course, Rushdie is really only right if our view of the medieval world is not limited, as it all too often used to be, to what we call the Latin West. That, as some of you know, was the subject of my first book (which, by the way, is a book that was

described in one prominent review as having the best footnotes the reviewer had ever read, or else she said that the best part of the book was its footnotes, I don't actually have the heart to go back and check). I actually believe now, some fifteen years after writing that book, that extraordinary progress has been made in many respects in developing that sort of Rushdie-like view, so that we understand now that we can't know Aquinas if we don't know Maimonides and we shouldn't talk about William of Aquitaine if we don't understand about al-Andalus and its innovative songs — or that when we read Chaucer we will want to know why he wrote a book on something called the Astrolabe, and who else wrote such books, and thus why poor Heloise, doomed never to have sex with the passionate Abelard again, would name their child Astrolabe. And yet, and yet. Eppur. Eppur, we still don't have medievalists who do — let's say, just for the sake of argument — Judah Halevi and Dante, even though it is a comparison made in Heaven: both poets who achieve great things writing spectacular profane love songs and then say, "well, actually, that's all a terrible trap that leads away from True Love," which requires that one renounce all that wonderful love poetry. And they sort of do and they sort of don't, and Beatrice and Zion, the Beloved, become both the greatest proofs and the greatest denials of what they have said about profane love and its vernacular songs.

But the reason we have so little of this sort of broad vision of a medieval culture which was at least that broad, and often far more flamboyantly so, well why is that? When I first contemplated this problem what seems to me a lifetime ago I saw the principal impediment to the development of such a vision as a rather crude, albeit powerful, prejudice "that Westerners — Europeans — have great difficulties in considering the possibility that they are in some way seriously indebted to the Arab world, or that the Arabs were central to the making of medieval Europe." To footnote myself — the only one in this paper. But I think I was seeing that far too narrowly and in any case I still believed, in my incredible naiveté, that there would be other works like *Mimesis* — and all I had to do was make sure that Judah Halevi was there along with Dante. But I was dead wrong about that and in the past several decades the narrowing of visions rather than its widening has been the norm: indeed, "identity" has become ever more narrowly and rigidly defined, and the point seems all too often to be not the **dissolution** of the dichotomous conceits of Self and Other (Christian and Muslim, European and Arab — German and Jew) but its **hardening**. Edward Said's extraordinarily influential *Orientalism* (which appeared in 1978) radically altered the intellectual landscape in ways not only I but many others believed would help clarify how we think about cultures and their identities, and alert us to the kind of prejudice vis-à-vis Arab culture I had seen as the

principal culprit. But I believe many of its premises have instead been almost perversely understood and absorbed as arguments for a greater, rather than lesser, degree of cultural and scholarly “purity.”

As with many seminal insights in intellectual history (one thinks immediately of “the anxiety of influence” or “the structures of scientific revolutions”) Said’s key concepts have suffered reductive simplification and damaging misapplication. The brilliance of the original work lay in its setting out the ways in which disciplines are rooted principally in ideologies, in cultural constructs that define one culture’s view of itself vis-à-vis another. But among the many ironies that abound in the institutionalization of Said’s analyses is that the thrust of the argument has become that any student (reader, interpreter, speaker) of another’s language (literature, culture) is virtually by definition indulging in a species of “Orientalism” and is per force treating the other as an “Other.” The widespread acceptance of this sophistry dovetailed perfectly with what I perceive as the most damaging institutional development in literary and cultural studies: nationalization. This division into discrete national languages, a division not just of our departments but then, inevitably, of our visions of cultures and our ways of reading literatures, has become the sad hallmark of our times, and it has rendered the problem of understanding and appreciating complex, necessarily contradictory cultural entities, even more difficult, I think, than “mere” prejudice ever did. Our fractured

visions are more fractured than they were ten and twenty years ago and are now overtly hostile to notions of cultural empires and seem to be mostly seeking to identify and champion the most discrete and least ambiguous “identities”. Indeed, the question is not whether an Auerbach, writing today, would hesitate to include Judah Halevi, or for that matter, Salman Rushdie into his meditations — who can seriously doubt that he would?— but rather why we, who should more aggressively consider ourselves descendants of Auerbach’s, of a tradition that can and does subsume everything from Odysseus’s scar to contemporary fiction, have allowed ourselves to become, merely, medievalists in departments of single, modern languages.

We don’t do Judah Halevi with Dante not because, not mostly because, anyway, we are prejudiced and are unwilling to accept that Islamic Spain and its inhabitants are part of medieval Europe and thus important members of the Western Canon. We mostly don’t do it because the academic universe is plagued with the terrible disease of “identity” as our society is — and Dante is studied by Italianists in Italian departments and Judah Halevi is ... well, if Halevi is studied at all he is studied as part of Judaic Studies or Hebrew Literature. In the terrible mess of reductionist identity politics that surrounds us inside and outside the Academy it is hard to say which is the chicken and which is the egg: do we teach Borges as part of the “Argentinean canon”— where, as a colleague of mine recently argued, he rightly be-

longs — because we live in a society that so narrowly defines identity? Or have we not ourselves been instrumental in allowing our culture to settle for such narrow visions? We who should have instead said that Borges is part of a canon, as he himself defined it, where an Argentinean author of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is utterly unknowable without Dante (an “Italian” author of the 14<sup>th</sup>) and without *The Thousand and One Nights* (which is perhaps 14<sup>th</sup> century Cairo and perhaps 17<sup>th</sup> century French and perhaps...19<sup>th</sup> century anglophone, in Borges’ favorite version). Or all of the above.

But at this point, whatever the chicken and whatever the egg, let us, as medievalists, lead the way out of that terrible place. To do so we have a thousand great stories we can tell, and to close I want to tell a small and very simplified part of the story I love the most. It takes place in the abandoned and much lamented home of many individuals with very complex and contradictory identities: al-Andalus or Sefarad or Spain. This was a historical moment and a culture that very easily qualified as “first rate” by F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous definition of what constitutes a first-rate mind, or intellect: namely, that it is able to hold two contrary ideas at the same time. This was a place that positively thrived and defined itself by holding two, and more like three or more contrary ideas at the same time which is of course why it did produce both Averroes and Maimonides. Not without difficulty, obviously, and not perfectly, and not without preju-

dices of every variety, and often by the skin of one’s teeth, but it did hold them, and for what was really a very long time, all things considered, a pretty solid two centuries. Which was ample time to produce all sorts of great stories.

Now, I might have chosen, among the thousands of Andalusian stories to tell you the “real” story of the Cid — which, when freshly read and not assuming it to be the foundational text for departments of the modern language called Spanish, reveals that a Christian known by an Arabic name is the indispensable ally of a Muslim who needs to defend his city against other Muslims. Instead, I will tell you a sister story, that of the man known as Isma’il ibn Nagrela in Arabic, which was his native tongue. In part his story is a companion to that of the Cid because it is from the same historical and political circumstances: that the universe of dozens of independent city states that is what al-Andalus became after the fall of the Caliphate of Córdoba, places with ever-shifting, and never simple political and cultural identities. And in part because this story too reveals how simple-minded our assumptions are, and how complex this different reality might be, and often was. The hero in this story is actually born in 993, during the very last years of the Caliphate. In Hebrew his name was Shmuel ben Yosef HaLevi and he was part of a well-off Jewish family. Like all educated Jews for at least a century in al-Andalus, aside from his religious training in Hebrew, he was thoroughly educated in every as-

pect of Arabic, philosophy as well as poetry and all its handmaidens. When the Caliphate of Córdoba is overthrown in 1013 HaLevi is one of many exiles of every religion who go into exile, and he ends up settling in Granada, where he becomes the first Nagid, the leader of the Spanish Jewish community by 1027, even though he was only 34. Slightly more surprisingly, perhaps, at least if you have bought all the stereotypes about the period, the Nagid (and he is thereafter known as Shmuel HaNagid) goes on to become not only the Chief Vizier of the Muslim kingdom of Granada, but the head of the city's Army. For the subsequent two decades, and until his death in 1056, he was apparently an extraordinarily successful military leader and was instrumental in establishing Granada as one of the most powerful of the Andalusian city-states of the post-Caliphal period. There is evidence that he and his son lay out the first palaces — and the first gardens — of what many years later will become the palatine city known as the al-Hambra.

But if the Cid is depicted as noble but barely literate and if his poem is part of an oral epic tradition, Shmuel HaNagid on the other hand not only writes splendid poems about his military exploits himself, but will eventually be canonized as the first and in some ways quintessential of the four great pillars of the Andalusian Hebrew poetry. Judah Halevi will be the last; and Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Moses Ibn Ezra are the two whose lives and works lie between the first and the last; and all of it

takes place in a period of a bit over 150 years, that extraordinary period in the history of Western lyric poetry from the beginning of the eleventh through the end of the 12<sup>th</sup>. The poetry of this period in all of the many languages in which it is written — Arabic, mozarabic, vernacular Hebrew, Provençal, what for Dante, from afar, looked like the Empire of Langued'oc — is perhaps the most unembarrassed and unrepressed marker of just how first-rate this historical moment and culture really were, just how many combinations of contradictory ideas could be held at once. Sometimes in the space of one love poem.

The story I am telling you is actually the story of the Golden Age of Hebrew poetry, completely emblematic of the principle of complex identity that our paradigms of “national languages” simply cannot see. The story begins, in fact, with poetry as it was not just written but regarded in Arabic. What was distinctive, or what may appear distinctive to some, is that at the heart of a culture that was Islamic was the adoration of secular poetry: its reading, its writing, its appreciation, its study, its recital were all necessary markers of basic cultural literacy. And much of the secular poetry that had this pride of place was far from orthodox by even the most liberal Islamic measures: the language of revelation — indeed, the language of God himself — was at the same time the language of a range of vernacular poetry that in any language, let alone in the sacred language, might be seen as prob-

lematic. And while we are used to accepting that English, and very much the same English, is the language of the King James as well as of Shakespeare's sonnets (which is, of course, what makes it a first-rate poetic language) the fact that Arabic functioned in much the same way is a surprise to many. But so it was, and so it is to many, still. Pious Muslims could recite the *Qur'an*, but then also everything else that Arabic could be and was used for, from pre-Islamic mu'allaquat that everyone knew were overtly pagan to a whole range of poetry from the Islamic period whose very "themes" were flagrantly anti-Islamic, everything from debauched wine songs to poems of unambiguously homoerotic love, even love poems where the difference between the Beloved and God himself is purposefully ambiguous. In this universe the more — and more diverse, and more extraordinary — uses that language could have, the more obvious its superiority. And speakers of Arabic were convinced of nothing if not of the superiority of their language.

And prominent among those speakers of Arabic were the Jews of al-Andalus, for whom Arabic was not only the native, maternal language but also the language that marked them, too, as cultured and educated men: It was noble vernacular **and** *grammatica*. It has been argued convincingly that the remarkable degree of acculturation — the profound Arabization — of the Andalusian Jews was due in great measure to those "contradictory" values that lay at the heart of that language and literature

obsessed culture: it was as easy to be a pious Jew who could recite a pre-Islamic ode or a homoerotic *qasida* as a pious Muslim. And it is clear that it is because they had completely absorbed, and believed in, the moral of what constituted a superior language that those same Andalusian Jews began, in the first part of the tenth century, to cultivate Hebrew as a language that could transcend its devotional and theological uses, and would aspire to be as versatile, as ambidextrous, as Arabic.

And so it is that in al-Andalus, for the first time in a thousand years, Hebrew is once again used as the language of a vibrant and living poetry — what we call secular and vernacular. The immensely successful Jews of al-Andalus (the Nagid is a dramatic but not misleading example) decide that their God and his language too should be great enough to transcend mere prayer, to not mind sharing the language of erotic love. This principle seemed natural to men who were, after all, as Arabized as any Muslim: Hebrew ought to be capable of being the vehicle for contradictory ideas, and it is because devout Jews had learned to love the same heterodox love poetry in Arabic that pious Muslims loved to recite that it became possible to read a Biblical text like the *Song of Songs* with its full compliment of erotic charges. And to decide that what had once made Hebrew great was precisely that ability to write poetry that not only lay outside the synagogue, but that might well contradict the teachings inside the synagogue.

It is thus in a series of direct extensions from Arabic to Hebrew, in what is certainly not adequately described by using the word “influence”—anxious or otherwise — that Hebrew flourishes here, in this place that we now call “Spain” and that is officially “covered” by Hispanists, as it does at no moment since that of David. This is an exemplary story of the Middle Ages in all sorts of ways, and perhaps most of all in its straightforward dismantling of the identity paradigms we are so accustomed to working with: is Halevi a Spaniard or a Jew or a writer of Hebrew or a part of the classical Arabic tradition? He is of course all of those things, and the fact we even ask such questions in such ways is what is wrong, and we can and indeed must help remedy that situation precisely because we have such stories and because these are the European Middle Ages. This is the sort of story that we should be telling and telling to a very broad public, first of all for our colleagues in the modern periods who believe that national divisions and identities are natural and that the pre-modern period is primitive in part because it is pre-national. And, no less, for the common reader, for all of the self-evident ways in which it speaks to our own most vexing, often searing political and moral and ethical and aesthetic concerns.

The most compelling argument to do this, to be “relevant” as many might well dismissively put it, in fact lies squarely inside those stories, in almost all of the great stories of medieval Europe: the story

of Dante writing his works in his desolate and infuriating exile, the story of the charmingly roguish and oft-excommunicated first troubadour Duke William of Aquitaine, the story of the greatest of all Sufis, Ibn al Arabi of Murcia, whose heterodox poem about the Religion of Love will take your breath away even today, and yet here was a man who understood his role as public religious leader perfectly well and would thus also write commentaries to his own poetry that would make it also be part of the orthodox world. Because it is, indeed, a very first-rate place — and very much at the opposite extreme of “medieval Kansas”— identity is always not only complex but contradictory and poets, as well as theologians and philosophers and translators, are always in the thick of it. Just as one can be an accomplished and indeed strident Aristotelian **and** a devout Christian or Muslim or Jew, one can be a sublime and visionary poet and be a part of the ferocious city council of Florence or the chief vizier of the city of Granada and leader of that city’s troops in battle. Which leads me to say, finally, that I do not really mean, as perhaps you all understand, that we abandon scholarship, or that the sort of incomparable knowledge acquired over a lifetime of study that good footnotes can represent should be put aside in favor of something more superficial. The point rather, to speak as a medieval might, now, is that scholarship **and** a public intellectual life are different and in some ways contradictory identities, both of which we should cultivate. The question is

no more to write with or without footnotes, exclusively, than it was for Dante to be a public figure or a poet, or for Shmuel Ha Nagid to be a good Vizier of a Muslim state or a good Jew, or for Siger of Brabant to be a terrific Averroist and Aristotelian or a good Christian. There were then, and there are now, those who want, tyrannically, to force those choices; and it is what prevails in modern Kansas. But so too in an Academy that has succumbed to the terrible temptation to define literature as if it were a narrow-identity sort of thing — to say that Borges is an Argentinean writer who is professed by specialists in Southern Cone Literature in Spanish departments — God save us. But our role, as heirs to the tradition of medieval literature and culture that is precisely where Borges finds kinship, and where Rushdie finds refuge from the tyrannies of the modern age, and where Auerbach understood he was a good Jew and a good German, our role must be to be partisans in their struggles against all those tyrannies.

**Writing Without Footnotes: The Role of the Medievalist in Contemporary Intellectual Life** is the ninth in a series of publications occasioned by the annual Bernardo Lectures at the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CEMERS). The series offers to the public lectures which have been given by distinguished medieval and Renaissance scholars on topics and figures representative of these two important religious and intellectual periods

“Writing Without Footnotes” argues that intellectual engagement with a public beyond the walls of our own specialties, and even beyond the walls of the academy, was long a commonplace and significant part of our work as professors and writers in the humanities. In reconceptualizing our place in the academy, a task called for by the variety of crises that threaten to make of literary studies a small and insular corner of that academy, it seems imperative to consider the principally negative effect of specializations that have followed the contours of national aspirations and national languages, as well as to critical language which excludes all but fellow specialists. Medievalists, in particular, with so much material that echoes so richly with contemporary concerns, have a special opportunity to lead the way in returning our work to that sphere of public intellectual conversations of which it was once a part.

**Maria Rosa Menocal** received her Ph.D. in Romance Philology in 1979 from the University of Pennsylvania, where she also taught before joining the faculty at Yale University. She is the author of a number of books on a range of comparative medieval literary and cultural topics, and the editor of the recent *Literature of Al-Andalus* volume in the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* se-



*Maria Rosa Menocal*

ries. Currently she is the R. Selden Rose Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and Director of Special Programs in the Humanities at Yale, and her most recent work, *A First-Rate Place*, is in press with Little, Brown, a non-academic book on the cultural history of medieval Spain.