

The Moors' earlier sighs

GEERT JAN VAN GELDER

María Rosa Menocal,
Raymond P. Scheindlin
and Michael Sells, editors

THE LITERATURE OF AL-ANDALUS
507pp. Cambridge University Press. £90.
TLS £80.
0 521 47159 1

A description of Granada by the eleventh-century Hebrew poet Ibn Gabirol (also known as Avicbron) opens *The Literature of Al-Andalus*: it concludes with the famous elegiac "Poem rhyming in N" by his Arab contemporary, Ibn Zaydun. The latter poem, taking six pages, forms all of Part Six, a mere envoi entitled "To al-Andalus. Would she return the greeting". This phrase echoes a line of the poem, which, however, does not bemoan the loss of al-Andalus but the poet's separation from his sweetheart, the Princess Wallada. In the nearly 500 pages that separate the two poems, the fascinating cultural mixture of Muslim Spain is presented in twenty-six chapters, interspersed with five brief essays on architecture.

Al-Andalus, not identical with present-day Andalucía, is the Arabic name for Muslim Spain, which covered almost all of the Iberian Peninsula shortly after the conquest in the eighth century but shrank inexorably until the fateful year of 1492, when Granada's Moor sighed his celebrated last sigh. Since then, to Arabs the name al-Andalus is tinged with nostalgia, a mixture of pride and sorrow, while Jews also had reason to mourn its loss: both groups were soon expelled or forcibly converted by the Catholic rulers of Spain.

Yet, in the Middle Ages, seen from the central Islamic countries and the Arab Middle East, al-Andalus was regarded as remote and somewhat peripheral, politically and culturally. The Andalusians themselves could not escape from feeling provincial and looking up to anything Oriental. An often-mentioned example is the great anthology *The Unique Necklace* by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih of Córdoba (d 940), almost all of which is Eastern material – not all of it, as Peter Heath claims, for a section is devoted to the Umayyad rulers of Spain and we find poems by the Andalusian poet al-Ghazal and by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih himself. *The Splendour of Social Gatherings*, an anthology by another Cordoban, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d 1071) is no improvement in this respect, although things had begun to change in his days. Ibn Hazm (d 1064) wrote a treatise on the superiority of al-Andalus, as did al-Shaqundi and Ibn Sa'id in the thirteenth century. Even in the East there was some interest in the Far West: witness the chapter on North African and Andalusian poets in the famous anthology *The Matchless Pearl of the Age* by al-Tha'alibi from Nishapur (d 1038). The greatest tribute to al-Andalus was written by a Moroccan author, al-Maqqari, more than a century after the fall of Granada, in his *Wafiq Perfume* (*Nafih al-tib*, ungrammatically given as *al-Nafih al-tib* on page 120). Seen from the viewpoint of Europe (or America, as we shall see), al-Andalus is far from marginal, of course. It served as a cultural conduit, together with Sicily (to which Part Four of the present volume is devoted), the importance of which for Western civilization cannot be overrated.

Much has been written on what distinguished Andalusian culture and literature from that of the rest of the Arab world. To a large extent al-Andalus shared with the East the same beliefs, ideals, manners, institutions, scientific knowledge and literary genres. Ibn Zaydun's style is closely modelled on that of Eastern precursors, such as al-Buhturi and al-Mutanabbi. However, there are some characteristics that are, if not exclusively Andalusian, at least prominently so. These are possibly the result of geography, and certainly of demography, for the population, consisting of Arabs, Berbers, Jews, imported slaves (often Slavs), and the "original" inhabit-

ants, themselves a complicated mixture already, made al-Andalus different from the East. As for literature, descriptions of tamed nature are known from the East, but the greatest poet in this genre, aptly nicknamed al-Jannan, "the Gardener", is the Andalusian Ibn Khafaja (d 1138), to whom regrettably no separate chapter is devoted.



A window in the Alhambra's Torre del Mihrab; from *Gardens, Landscape and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* by D. Fairchild Ruggles (275pp. Penn State Press; distributed in the UK by Eurospan. £54.95. 0 271 01851 8)

Another Andalusian literary novelty could be called, oxymorically, an important marginal phenomenon: strophic verse. The great bulk of Arabic poetry consists of poems with lines of equal length, all with the same rhyme (Ibn Zaydun's above-mentioned poem has fifty lines of twenty-seven syllables, rhyming in -ina). Two strophic forms with variable and sometimes complicated rhyme patterns, were developed in Spain, the *mawashshaha* in classical Arabic, but with a closing line (*kharja*) often in dialect, or even Romance, or a mixture, and the *zajal*, wholly in "vulgar" Arabic. Although these thematically rather unremarkable forms, lyrics for songs, were exported to the East where they were practised by many poets, they remained to some extent marginal. Not so in Western scholarship, where their origins, either in Arabic or Romance literature, were hotly debated, as were their alleged influence on the development of the Provençal lyrical tradition.

Tova Rosen, in her chapter "The Muwashshah", gives a fair summary of the debate, though she unfortunately mentions neither Gregor Schoeler's important contributions in German nor Otto Zwarg's recent *Love Songs from al-Andalus* (1997). Since the *mushwashshaha* is defined largely in terms of prosody and rhyme, it would have been helpful if at least one full poem had been given in transliteration and translation. Characteristically, this chapter, "The Shapes of Literature", takes pride of place in Part Two, before the chapters on the *maqama* (a prose genre) and the *qasida* ("ode"), which in traditional Arab eyes far surpasses the other genres in status.

According to the publisher's blurb, *The Literature of Al-Andalus* explores the "culture of Iberia" in its Islamic period; and it does this admirably. Among the chapters of Part One, "The Shapes of Cultures", are good surveys of language (Consuelo López-Morillas), music (Dwight Reynolds), and love (Michael Sells). The chapter on "knowledge" (Peter Heath), though useful, perhaps attempts to cram too much into too little space. Part Three, "Andalusians", singles out ten prominent people: the polymath Ibn Hazm (whose work on comparative religion is given the usual but meaningless title *Fisal* instead of the correct *Fasl*); the Hebrew poets Moses Ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi; Petrus Alfonsi, the Jew who converted to Christianity; the *zajal* poet Ibn Quzman; the classical poet Ibn Zaydun; the philosopher Ibn Tufayl; the great mystic Ibn 'Arabi; the scholar and "missionary" Ramon Llull; and the statesman and man of letters Ibn al-Khatib. To these ten names two may be added: the poet Ibn Hamdis (whose year of death is strangely not given) and the translator and scholar Michael Scot, who each have a section devoted to them in the Sicilian excursus. Truly a motley collection, and therefore representative of their equally variegated societies. Groups rather than individuals are the subject of Part Five, "Marriages and Exiles", with chapters on the Mozarabs, the Arabized Jews, the Sephardim and the Moriscos.

Almost all chapters are informative, thoughtful and well written. And yet one could imagine that some readers will be disappointed. The problem lies in the fact that the book is the latest volume in a series called *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (the four earlier volumes were reviewed in the *TLS* on September 7, 1984, November 29, 1991, January 24, 1992, and August 13, 1993). It may not be superfluous to mention that Cambridge, UK, not Cambridge MA, is meant, in view of the fact that all the editors and contributors of the present volume, judging by their academic rather than their ethnic affiliations, are either American or Israeli, and that even the spelling is US rather than UK; but only intemperate Euro- or Arabochauvinists would grumble about this. However, one wonders why "literature" in the series title has become "culture" in the blurb and the book. Whose decision was this? There is no trace of an editorial committee for the series as a whole, even though the first volume to appear listed five "General Editors" and no fewer than sixteen members of an Advisory Editorial Board. Although several of the five General Editors have reappeared as editors of subsequent volumes, the sixteen have sadly and mysteriously been eliminated: of the original twenty-one names not one is left in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*.

Is there a lack of vision? The well-written

introductory chapter "Visions of al-Andalus" by María Rosa Menocal disarmingly forestalls some criticism on these lines, but I do not feel wholly disarmed myself. We are told that, unlike the other volumes of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, "written overwhelmingly for a public of fellow Arabists, this volume explicitly is not". According to the blurb, it is "pathbreaking in its approach to the study of Arabic literature since it embraces many other related spheres of Arabic culture". Well, this has been done before, notably in the large and splendid work edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* (reviewed in the *TLS*, August 13, 1993), the qualities of which are generously acknowledged by Menocal. *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* manages to include some 250 pages on Arabic literature, which is more than one finds in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, filled as it is with matters non-literary or non-Arabic. The chapter on the *maqama* (a short narrative text, often picaresque, in ornate prose larded with poetry) by Rina Drory (who regrettably died last autumn) is excellent, but eight pages on Arabic against ten on Hebrew *maqamas* is surely unbalanced in a History of Arabic Literature. Rather than articles on architecture or Sephardim, one would have expected, for instance, a chapter on poetics and literary criticism. If Ibn 'Arabi is included, who wrote most of his works after he left Spain (and who has already received ample attention in the two volumes on Abbasid literature), why not mention Hazim al-Qartajanni from Cartagena and his important work on poetics, *The Path of the Eloquent*, written in North Africa? Ibn Rushd (Averroes) wrote an interesting paraphrase of Aristotle's *Poetics*, adapted to Arabic poetry; but he is not even included (after a "painful decision", as we are told) among the ten prominent Andalusians, being too famous already. His colleague Ibn Tufayl is among them, in spite of having received ample treatment in the volume on *Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*.

It is a pity that Beatrice Gruendler was not given more space to write on poetry. Her chapter on the *qasida*, the central genre in Arabic belles-lettres, is excellent, and her analysis of poems in terms of strophe – antistrophe – metastrophe convincing. This chapter ought to have been complemented with another on epigrams, for although Michael Sells deals with the amatory epigrams in his chapter on love, these are by no means the only kind. Many famous names of poets are either wholly lacking or only mentioned in passing: al-Sharif al-Taliq, Ibn Hani, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (mentioned only as anthologist), Ibn 'Ammar, Ibrahim Ibn Sahli, Abu l-Baqa' al-Rundi (who also wrote on poetics), al-Ramadi and many others. The last-mentioned is not given his due when Tova Rosen, following Samuel Stern's translation of a passage by Ibn Sana' al-Mulk, says that the *kharja* of a *mawashshaha* ought to be "garulous, like naphtha and cinders". The cinders sound odd here, but the Arabic, *ramdiyyan*, obviously means "in the style of al-Ramadi", a poet noted for his prosodical innovations.

Only fellow Arabists, for whom the book was not written in the first place, will take offence at the rather numerous minor inaccuracies, particularly in matters of transliteration, which is sometimes inconsistent, and at other times consistently wrong. Non-Arabists, however, might have been helped with an index of technical terms. The reader who wonders, for instance, what *muqarnas* means on page 91 will be left in suspense until page 373 is reached. Resembling al-Andalus in Arab history, or the *mawashshaha* in Arabic literature, or the Jews in al-Andalus, *The Literature of Al-Andalus* itself is important, yet somehow marginal to *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*.