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WHY IBERIA?

MARÍA ROSA MENOCA

My first instinct was to correct the title and rename this essay “Why Medieval Spain?” rather than “Why Iberia?” After all, I never say I work on or teach about “Iberia.” And yet the editors have got it just right to signal—using the geographic Iberia instead of the national Spain—that the terrible difficulty of finding worthy names is at the heart of the matter here, at the heart of why it is that the study of the cultures and peoples of the Iberian peninsula during the medieval period is as exacting, as stimulating, as important as it is. It is easy enough, and accurate enough too, to point out that the study of all premodern cultures brings with it comparable difficulties, that, for example, before there was a France or an Italy, it is also misleading to talk about what might have been French or Italian, and yet medievalists in those areas, as well as the man on the street, regularly do so. But in the case of the Iberian peninsula the misprisions reflected in the confusion of terms—when we call a Christian kingdom “Spanish” but an Islamic one “Moorish,” to take only one of dozens of egregious examples—are confusions both more severe and more meaningful. It is true that Dante is not an Italian, but rather a Florentine, and the distinction is far from trivial—indeed, for Dante, central. And yet the comparable distinctions in the Iberian peninsula are likely to be more searing, because they involve not just political but religious and ethnic distinctions. If we call Rodrigo Diaz, the Cid, a Spaniard, why not his contemporary Judah Halevi? And why do we so often—even among those of us who “know better”—persist in calling the Muslims of the Iberian peninsula “Moors” or even “Arabs”—thus grossly confusing religion and ethnicity and suggesting, every time we do, that to be a Muslim was always not to be a Spaniard, in the way that being a Christian was, or that confession is equivalent to ethnicity?

Of course, at this late date we all know the largest answer to these and other comparable questions: Spain defined itself as a modern nation through the expulsion not only of its Jewish and Muslim citizens but especially through the expulsion of the *memory* that they had ever been a part of the real body politic of “Spain.” It is not merely that after 1492 and 1609 (and everything in between) to be a Spaniard was aggressively defined as those who were not (and, better still, had never been) Christian; it is that this early modern definition of the national identity was transferred to the medieval past, and the medieval past rewritten and reimagined accordingly, as if the twelfth century were already longing for the sixteenth. This obliteration of the historical memory of the cultural and religious complexities of the medieval Iberian universe has long meant that the parameters that define how we talk about its languages and cultures are profoundly misshaped, which I mean not as a moral but as a historical statement: Alfonso X would no doubt have been startled by the suggestion that Arabic was not a vital part of the Castilian cultural universe or that Jews were not *Toledanos* or *Sevillanos*, nor citizens of his “Spain.”

Parts of this essay were first prepared for delivery at the conference The Persistence of Philology: Rethinking Comparative Literary History on the Twentieth Anniversary of The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History; that essay will be published in full in the forthcoming volume The Persistence of Philology: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History, edited by Suzanne Akbari and Karla Mallette.

It is of course the singular fact in European history—and now the word is out, almost everyone knows it—that the three Abrahamic religions long coexisted, in highly complex and always-shifting ways, in the Iberian peninsula. This has for some years now been both the distinction and the bane of “our” medieval studies, since not only the terminology but the most fundamental epistemological categories at our disposal—things as basic as the languages that are considered the legitimate or necessary ones for a medievalist to study in a department in which Spanish medievalists are trained—are still almost invariably at odds with what, explicitly echoing Americo Castro, we might call *la realidad historica*. Thus part of the answer to the “Why Iberia” question is that the moment is clearly at hand to begin to undo the damage of hundreds of years of misnamings and misperceptions; to revel in the great cultural wealth and complexity of medieval Iberia; and to contemplate the remarkable questions it poses—and only sometimes answers—about the precarious nature of cultural symbiosis and its relationship to religious difference, about the very nature of what we call “identity.” But we should perhaps not forget that the moment for this is at hand not because of the work we medievalists have done but rather because of extraordinary changes in the universe in which we live. And remember, too, that although it has only been very recently that the uniqueness of the legacy of this medieval world has become evident to many of those who are involved with Spanish culture, it has long been a mighty paradigm to the descendants and students of the “other” Spaniards, to those who have long prized the memory of al-Andalus and Sefarad.

But now “medieval Spain” has become relevant, even chic, in some quarters, and there can be no question of the starkly political nature of the transformation at hand: a field that was a real backwater in literary studies until not so long ago—indeed, until the very beginning of the twenty-first century—has come out of its traditional obscurity and into something that is practically a limelight. At the same time, the concerns that were once almost exclusively those of Arab writers—just what does al-Andalus mean? can its image help shape a better future?—have become the concerns of a much broader public in the West, just as the whole matter of whether it was a legitimate “Golden Age”—as Jewish historians and intellectuals of the nineteenth century long poignantly argued—has become a question argued not only in small Jewish circles but prominently on the cultural pages of the *New York Times*. All of this, of course, has happened thanks to the mostly tragic political events on the world stage in these last few years, beginning so shockingly with 9/11. Needless to say, these dramatic episodes are profoundly rooted in the history of the twentieth century. It is not, after all, as if the searing conflict between Arabs and Israelis, or the problems of Muslim communities inside Europe, or, indeed, the kinds of hostilities manifest in 9/11 were not around before the turn of the twenty-first century, during all those years that medieval Spain was not at all chic, all those years during which al-Andalus was a name that even some of our medievalist colleagues might never have heard of.

But, clearly, we are on the other side now of a “tipping point” or a “perfect storm” or whatever we want to call such a conjunction of events. And it is relevant to note that one of the factors in this complex transition, or so it seems to me, was Osama bin Laden’s own evocation of what he called the “tragedy of al-Andalus” in a number of his post-9/11 communiqués, and especially so in the choice of Spain itself as a target for a large-scale terrorist attack, after which, again, the ghost of medieval Spain—and here I do mean medieval Spain!—was explicitly evoked. Whatever the causes, the dramatic shift is undeniable: we now inhabit what I think was a previously improbable universe in which the history of medieval Spain—by which I mean the medieval history of what is now, *grosso modo*, Spain—is widely perceived, either openly or covertly, as tied to the political dramas of our times. Not only that: it is assumed that it is a history that can thus shed light and perhaps even provide guidance for the most searing and difficult political problems

of the twenty-first century. And this is true across the full political spectrum: Bin Laden's notion of the virtues of al-Andalus are at opposite ends of the political spectrum from those of many others, different as night and day from the memory of al-Andalus cultivated by so many writers, most notably what the late Edward Said made of it: "For me, and indeed for many Arabs, Andalusia still represents the finest flowering of our culture."⁸

Bin Laden's misinformed notion of the virtues of al-Andalus—Islamic hegemony over Christians, to put it not much more reductively than he does—are at polar extremes from Said's, which have to do with the ability of Islam in the Iberian peninsula not only to accommodate Christian and Jewish citizens but to unite them with Muslims within an Arabic and Arabicized cultural sphere. But this is indeed in all its chapters a history that lends itself with greater ease than most to a remarkable range of interpretations, including, especially, the most contradictory. This is either the age of *convivencia* or *reconquista*, to put it at its most blunt and facile, it is either about how the three Abrahamic religions did fruitfully coexist or about how, in fact, they could not; virtually every political lesson is potentially there to be extracted. But beyond a handful of pieties and self-evident generalizations it seems to me there is very little real *political* wisdom to be had here, certainly of that easy or unambiguous kind, which is what people want, the kind of thing that can be distilled into a soundbite or newspaper editorial or even a *New Yorker* article.

But there are all sorts of other insights to be had here, and all sorts of reasons to take advantage of the prominence that, thanks to a series of tragic events, medieval Spain—medieval Iberia, with its al-Andalus, its Sefarad, its Castile, its Aragon, its Galicia, and more, none of these fixed entities but all continuously shifting their definitions and spaces and languages—has lately acquired. These are our fifteen minutes, if we are its students. And we should use them to as great effect as we can, sometimes in the outside world but also, especially, inside the academy. The "Why Iberia" question is thus also answered by saying that because these extraordinary configurations of political events have turned many eyes our way—the eyes of colleagues and laymen alike—that it is the chance to explore and reveal what it can mean to work in the history of complex identities, and what it means to talk about very broad social issues—such as "tolerance"—when we are, in the end, students of cultural phenomena. Underneath all of the political limelight we confront some of the most enduring issues in literary studies.

The history of medieval Iberia is about as rich a case as one could wish for in which to explore the vexed questions of what the political has to do with the literary, the ideological with the cultural. It was in the politically catastrophic Taifas—and not in unified, prosperous, and relatively peaceful Cordoba—that Andalusian poetic culture reached its greatest glories. The comparison is conventionally made (and it is not a bad one) with the Italian Renaissance, when individual city-states had murderous attitudes toward each other, and yet it was out of that political chaos that great cultural achievement arose. But whether we use that particular analogy or another, or whether we focus on the eleventh century or another moment—there is no shortage of instances in which cultural achievement and political well-being correspond not at all, or even when they correspond inversely—the overriding question is one that I think medieval Iberia forces us to confront with particular force and, at times, poignancy: just what is the relationship of literature—and other aesthetic forms—to politics, to history as it is usually understood?

We face clichés here, and yet cannot get around them completely: one of the sometimes-vexing things about great art is that it is sometimes made by terrible people; and sometimes great art is made not by terrible or even wonderful people, but under terrible

⁸ Edward Said, "Andalusia's Journey" [Travel and Leisure December 2002: 178–94]. Although it appeared in a popular travel magazine Said's late-in-life meditation on the meaning of medieval Iberia is a brilliant, sometimes searing meditation on the problems of the moral and historical lessons to be gleaned from the contemplation of the period.

or at least imperfect social and historical circumstances, especially by our own exacting standards, which all too often we tacitly assume always to have been universal ideals. So if we measure and define the achievements of an age by its cultural profile perhaps we are ultimately making statements only about the cultural artifacts—and not really, or not necessarily, about the culture within which they were created. But of course there is a great deal more to it than that, and if there weren't—if we were to argue that there is nothing more than a random connection between aesthetic achievements and other aspects of history—then we would in fact be back at ground-zero, circa 1965 structuralism, or 1975 deconstruction, with nothing left except the “text itself.” And even in the mere asking of the “Why Iberia” question we have understood dramatically that this is not the case; we turn our attention to Iberia precisely because there is so much beyond the “text itself” at stake. Indeed, because the question arises from the political, and yet is answered via our contemplations of the aesthetic, it should soon enough be clear that just beneath the surface the question that is really being asked—or should be—is “Why does poetry matter?”

In the search for both contemporary and historical meaning, the role that poetry plays—and I mean “poetry” here as the icon of all the art forms—is perhaps the most difficult one, and thus the most indispensable, in part because what poetry can and does do is reveal the sometimes unbearable contradictions that political and ideological discourse rarely tolerates. It is from poetry, at the end of the day, that one can understand that this is the age of *convivencia* **and** *reconquista*. And it behooves us to remember that Américo Castro's insights about the profound intermarriage of the different peoples of Spain during the medieval centuries were initially based not on medieval texts but on his readings of the turmoil that lies just beneath the surface of the most “canonical” and “pure” works of Castilian literature in later centuries, when Spain had seemingly become something like the opposite of what it had once been. For Castro the very brilliance of the many masterpieces of this period came precisely from the veiled writerly struggles with the many repressions of the moment, those of society and those of the very memory of the earlier period. So the somewhat different, but perhaps complementary, position we might take, then, is to say that literature does indeed tell us a history—or histories, really—that other kinds of historical records obscure, that those of us who are historians of the aesthetic forms are also writing what Cervantes would slyly call a “verdadera historia,” a true history.

Indeed, in attempting to get a sense of the texture and tenor of a historical period, we might well ask why we should privilege the evidence of other forms—of documents overtly expressing church or state ideology, for example—over that of poetry? Not that those other kinds of documents and memories are not themselves “true” reflections, but rather that they may speak no more truthfully, or revealingly, about *la realidad historica*, than the poetic forms. Does the tough *reconquista* ideology articulated in the highly influential histories of Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada, his notion that Spain is defined in the struggle to expel the Moors, tell us what life and culture and even politics was really about at the turn of the thirteenth century, in the ascendant kingdom of Castile? Or is that reality more “truthfully” revealed in the thorough interweaving of Arabic and Latin on the walls of the Castilian church of San Román, a church that Rodrigo himself consecrated in 1212? Or even in the fact that Rodrigo was himself buried in a gorgeous gown, with an elaborately embroidered kufic border, a gown that was itself, in turn, one of many exchanges of gifts between Castilians and Andalusians? Gifts that speak to wars and treaties, surely, but also in great measure to cultural longing and shared tastes.

Obviously, the answer lies in fully accepting the “yes-and-no”-ness of the thing, of becoming so comfortable with the paradoxes that we can just assume they will be there and assume that at least part of our job is to dwell on them and what they might mean.

This we do not necessarily to resolve or explain away. Although I think sometimes that happens, we can explain why things that might seem paradoxical and contradictory to us were in fact perhaps not so contradictory in a different historical moment or culture. But, by and large, we should not play the role of normative exegetes to mystical poetry—trying to make poetry adhere to the rules set by the lawmakers; sometimes laws reflects the values and the normative realities of a society, but sometimes poetry—telling a very different story—does. A big part of the challenge and the pleasure of our work is the thinking and writing and teaching about medieval Iberia in all its gloriously messy inconsistencies and multiplicities, to be able to dwell on these contradictions and what they tell us about past societies, as well as our own. So, on the one hand, we should use the vast yes-and-no-ness of the cultures of medieval Spain—the flourishing of Arabic poetry in the politically disastrous eleventh century, the homoerotic lyrics of the rabbis, the “mudejar” architecture of the Castilians—to talk about the special properties of poetry, and the variety of complex relations it may have to its culture. But in doing so we are also able to learn and teach things about history—not just about “poetry itself” but also about the culture that begat or at least made possible the aesthetic forms of the moment, and often enough we learn things about society from aesthetic forms that would otherwise be unknowable.