theories and methodologies

Arabic in the Medieval World

CHRISTINE CHISM

OBSERVERS OF THE RECENT POLITICAL POLARIZATIONS OF WESTERN AND ISLAMIC CULTURE MIGHT BE FORGIVEN FOR CONCLUDING THAT WE are living in a new Middle Ages (Holsinger; Eco). Such narratives as "the clash of civilizations" (Huntington) and "the rise of the modern West" (McNeill; which beguiles with the dangerous fantasy of the fall of the atavistic East) have attained the status of cultural mythologies. Conversely, modern Arab cultures have never forgotten the shock of their first encounters with medieval Europeans in the Levant and al-Andalus: the legacies of crusade, countercrusade, occupation, and reconquest. Extremists have politicized the orientalist divide described by Edward Said to create their own postcolonial mythologies. We are now in danger of projecting current impasses historically backward until Islam and the West seem always to have been enemies, inimical by nature and throughout history. Doing so would reify East and West and render them monolithic. Most troubling, such mythologies obscure the uneasy, strategic, and often stunningly productive interchanges that enrich what might better be considered as a complex intercultural evolution. The deep roots of the encounter between Islam and Christendom—the influence of Arabic science, literature, and philosophy and of Islamic forms of thought, historiography, economics, and cultural practice—deserve a richer, less politicized examination. It would be useful to try to see medieval Islamic cultures write back, from a time before European hegemony, decentering and defamiliarizing their Western neighbors. What would a medieval world look like if it constructed itself not as a tedious intermission between classical and Renaissance enlightenments, but rather as a heterogeneous fretwork of contact zones, aversions, and transmissions between sophisticated and acquisitive cultures? This medieval world could better serve our own twenty-first-century global culture, whose multiplex networks exceed simple polarization. To this outcome, the study of Arabic writing in the premodern and early modern world is key.

This essay considers Arabic primarily as a language, differentiable from Arab cultures, ethnic Arabism, and Muslim cultures and reli-

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gious practices. Maimonides wrote in Arabic; Arabic was the original lingua franca of the Islamic world. Just as the Latin of Saint Jerome's Vulgate Bible, the patristic writings, and the liturgy lent Christendom a deep history and an ability to shape its traditions across a variety of disparate and feudalized local cultures, Arabic became the language of religious truth for the multifarious cultures of Islam. Without it there was no access to the three most authoritative sources of Islamic practice: the Qur'an (a series of revelations transmitted to the prophet Muhammad by God's messenger, the angel Gabriel), the *hadith* (collected and transmitted sayings of the Prophet with commentary), and the *sunna* (traditions of Islamic jurisprudence and cultural practice—in all their local variation). Such a lingua franca was necessary during the incredible eruption of Islam from its original outpost in the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula: westward across the breadth of North Africa to the Maghrib and al-Andalus; northward across Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Asia Minor; and eastward across the Sasanian Persian empire, into Transoxonia, Central Asia, India, and eventually into what is now Java. The many lands of Islam were bound together across huge cultural and linguistic differences through the Arabic language of the Qur'an and through shared religious practice—especially that of the greater *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca during *dhu-l-hijra*, the holy month of pilgrimage, when a pilgrim from the westernmost Maghrib could pray at the Ka'ba, stone the devil, and follow the frantic footsteps of Hagar alongside his religious compatriot from Java, a practical immersion in the variety and unity (*tawhid*) of Muslim religiosity.

Although significant works of scholarship, history, and literature were written in the many vernaculars of the Muslim world—particularly Syriac, Greek, Persian Pahlavi, Turkic, and Coptic, as well as the Jewish lingua franca of Hebrew—Arabic became the language of civil jurisprudence and law under the first ʿUmmawy caliphs and their ʿAbbasy successors, and, until the fifteenth-century advent of Ottoman rule, it remained a language of state and religious authority. Arabic also became the language of access to a great renaissance of scholarly translation, discovery, and debate.

This Arabic cultural renaissance was contemporaneous with a time of European feudal parochialization after the disintegration of the Roman Empire. European Christianity maintained an ongoing engagement with Judaism, the Asian religion out of which it had originated, and which it claimed, with obvious difficulty, both to encompass and to supersede. Its own subsequent splitting into Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches after the fall of Rome provoked further ongoing intellectual, theological, and military challenge and exchange throughout the Middle Ages. Medieval European Christianity continued, with varying degrees of unease, to assimilate the legacies of Greco-Roman antiquity, often in the appalled consciousness of how much had been lost—most of Aristotle, much of classical science, philosophy, literature, the engineering and architectural techniques that made the Roman ruins appear to eighth- and ninth-century Anglo-Saxon writers like the ancient works of giants.

Yet not all had been lost, as different parts of medieval Christendom began to discover. For most of the Middle Ages, Muslim societies were richer, more powerful politically and militarily, and more scientifically advanced than Europe. The ʿUmmawy Muslim conquest of Visigothic Spain brought a Muslim society of unparalleled richness and learning closer to other Christian realms, eventually sparking the Christian reconquest—a four-century snapping up of one taifa kingdom after another that culminated in the fall of Granada in 1492. The Norman occupation of Sicily and the guarded-tolerance policies of rulers like the Arabic-speaking William II taught Christian overlords the value of Arabic scholarship,

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art, and professional expertise. The Levantine crusades and countercrusades and the establishment of the Outremer kingdoms between 1095 and 1291 convinced Christian conquerors and settlers of the need to establish reliable rules of law and trade policy for a mixed citizenry at one of the richest entrepôts of the medieval world. And throughout the Mediterranean, as Janet Abu-Lughod attests, Christian merchants sought access to the rich trade circuits of central and southern Asia by negotiating with the representatives of Muslim rulers, traders, and bankers, learning new navigation technologies, double-entry bookkeeping, and number systems along the way. The resulting influx of Near and Far Eastern luxury merchandise left its mark on European high culture, from its spice-laden cuisines to its silk-and-fine-cotton couture.

We are only now beginning fully to appreciate the manifold influence the Islamic and classical Arabic traditions of western Asia and northern Africa had on European culture, though such scholars as Maria Rosa Menocal and Dorothée Metlitzki have made crucial inroads. To explore the eight hundred years of cultural encounter between medieval Islam and Christian Europe is an overwhelming proposition. The disparateness of the cultures involved, their internal heterogeneity, and the shifting local manifestations of combined and uneven development—in science, technology, written culture, and literary theory—make it impossible to treat this encounter globally without recourse to the orientalizing mythologies that do such terrifying ideological work. Yet a linguistic focus—on Arabic written culture, on the epistemologies it enabled, and on its scribal, literary transmissions and translations—at least offers a point of entry.

A knowledge of Arabic opens three large areas for medievalists to investigate. The first area concerns the translation and transmission of writing and knowledge into and out of Arabic and the uncertainties and desires such transmission engenders. The second area studies Arabic written culture itself: the history of the Arabic book; Arabic literary, exegetical, and historiographical traditions; and the archival and codicological practices associated with shifting cultures of patronage and censorship. As with Latin in the Christian West, the hyperextension of Arabic as a lingua franca for an enormous range of Islamic cultures caused both linguistic strain and rich creativity. Looking closely at these literary and cultural phenomena in the light of similar studies on European Christian written culture promises mutually decentering, comparativist insights. The third area explores intercultural encounters and their results: the influences stemming from the crusades, the Norman occupation of Sicily, and the reconquest of al-Andalus. None of these areas breaks new ground, yet all become richer when considered together, opening conversations between disciplinary areas that have previously been institutionally separated. The next part of this essay suggests the kinds of studies an Arabic-equipped medievalist might undertake.

Transmission and Translation

Islam's continually altering and often anxious uptake of its ancient and Hellenic antecedents parallels and intersects with Christianity's troubled relation to its Jewish and Hellenic predecessors. Both Islam and Christianity manage heterogeneous origins. Byzantine Greek Orthodox culture (which heavily influenced the ʿUmmawy caliphs) was Greek speaking but determinedly anti-Hellenic; the Byzantines were much more interested in exploring and establishing new forms of Christian writing, learning, and history than in mining secular learning from ancient and pagan sources. The Byzantine Empire placed a barrier between an eastern center of learning, in Persia and Mesopotamia, and a western one, in Egypt. These lands were then administratively unified by the early Muslim conquests of the Byzantine lands of the Fertile Crescent from Egypt to

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Persia (Berkey, *Formation*). When the ʿAbbasy caliphate came to power, moving the capital of the Muslim empire from Damascus to Baghdad, it drew on the local expertise of a diverse cultural mix—Christian and Jewish Aramaic speakers, Persian speakers, and Christian and Muslim Arabs. The early ʿAbbasy caliphs built their state in a multilingual, multireligious society already invested in ancient Greek and Persian textual study. The caliphs sponsored translation into Arabic of Pahlavi and Greek texts, a politically expedient way to assimilate, recognize, and co-opt the traditions, skills, and knowledge base of their heterogeneous polity. Knowledge became cultural capital fairly early and to an astoundingly profitable extent, and the caliphs' example was emulated at all social levels—from civil servants to the petty nobility to private citizens. The ʿAbbasy translation movement lasted two centuries, with determined support at virtually all levels of society (Gutas). By the end of the tenth century, almost every nonliterary and nonreligious Greek, Syriac, and Pahlavi (Sasanian Middle Persian) book available to Byzantine and Near Eastern culture had been translated into Arabic (often by way of Pahlavi), amounting to thousands of volumes (Gutas 11–27; Rosenthal). In the process, the Muslim scholarly class, the ʿ*ulama* ("those who know"), had been enriched, refined, recognized, and institutionalized as a signatory element in Muslim states (Berkey, *Transmission*; Chamberlain; Safi).

Yet was all ancient knowledge equally innocent, equally expedient, equally assimilable—and once translated and assimilated, did it stay that way? Close examination both of the subsequent history of the translation movement and of non-Muslim originating texts reveals a cultural oscillation between the canny cultural syncretism that spurred the translation movement and emergent purisms that sought to return attention to the Arab origins of the heterogeneous Muslim polity and purge it of non-Muslim elements. Not surprisingly, the anxious oscillation is most visible when the authority of religious texts is at issue. For instance, early *israʾiliyyat* writers (i.e., those whose writing pertains to non-Muslim, especially Jewish, texts) such as Ka ʿab al-Ahbar, Wahb ibn Munabbih, and, later, al-Tabiri, ʿUmara, and al-Thaʾlabi collected semihagiographic tales of the prophets (*Qissas al-Anbiyaʾ*) to establish a prehistory for Islam. They drew from ancient Jewish, Christian, and Greek sources tales of pre-Islamic legendary figures such as Alexander the Great, Hud (Noah), Joshua, Elijah, and Jirgis (Saint George), enlisting them as proto-Islamic prophets. Later reformist scholars like Ibn Taymiyya denigrated the *israʾiliyyat* writers, seeking to draw the Muslim ʿ*umma* ("nation") back to the essentials of Qurʾan, *hadith*, and *sunna* (Zuwiyya 3–5).

There were also epistemological reasons to question the authority of classical writers. Muslim scholars such as Rhazes, Ibn al Haytham, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) advanced their fields of study to the point that they superseded their source texts. As working experts in their fields, they generated critical reexaminations of Galen's medicine, Ptolemy's astronomy, and Aristotle's philosophy. Patrons increasingly commissioned original works in Arabic (Gutas 152–53). For a medievalist, investigating the fortunes of a classical text, during and after the translation movement, sheds light on the social uses and dangers of knowledge in Islamic cultures.

Of equal interest to medievalists is the eleventh- and twelfth-century movement of translation from Arabic into Latin—in Spain and southern France—impelled not so much by state sponsorship as by the avid curiosity of scholars and of clerical authorities, such as Peter the Venerable, who emerged to control the flow and character of Islamic knowledge. This translation movement brought the rediscovered texts of antiquity back into circulation, sparking a twelfth-century renaissance, which continued at full steam throughout the thirteenth century as scholars invented new

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cultures of professional and scholarly recognition for themselves by finessing the recovered and augmented Aristotle to the coalescing universities of Europe. It would be fascinating to delve backward from a text like Roger Bacon's *Opus Maius* or Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*—texts that articulate their non-Christian origins while fiercely defending the forms of knowledge and hermeneutics that Latin translations made accessible. Such study of cultural indexing, influence, and dissemination raises questions about the role of translation, the innocence of knowledge, the traces left by commentary, rearticulation, and response by a variety of interlocutors—not all of them Christian—resulting in a new and fascinatingly multiethnic archaeology of knowledge. Here medieval studies can usefully broaden and enrich recent theoretical conversations about translation, situation, and cultural performance—which generally derive from post- rather than precolonial dynamics—by foregrounding the shifting configurations of knowledge and power from before European hegemony and the fragmenting silences of subalternity.

Arabic Literary Culture: Language, Genre, Performance, Technology

This range of topics decenters teleologies of literary development and periodization that have become virtually reflexive in European literary studies: from memory to written record, from manuscript culture to print culture, from vellum to paper, from feudalism to the public sphere. Arabic culture had imported paper-making technology from China by 751, and its use became the norm almost as soon as the ʿAbbasy assumed power. The book-producing industry blossomed in the next two centuries, enlisting large proportions of urban citizens. Publishing houses and workshops sprang up in every major city; public and lending libraries (thirty-six in Baghdad alone) made books available to the citizenry. Many libraries contained tens of thousands of volumes (Thompson 351). For private collectors, affordable books were easily copied in workshops or printed from block printing presses, another Chinese import. There were enthusiast booksellers, such as Ibn al-Nadim, whose tenth-century annotated catalogue (*fihrist*) listed every book and scroll in every library he had come across and amounted to a survey of the state of Arabic knowledge in his time (Pinto). There were private libraries, libraries associated with schools, mosques, and universities, even opportunistic libraries along pilgrimage routes (Manguel 165–66).

Yet ancient oral and memorial traditions continued to flourish, often hand in hand with written culture. The art of memory (*dhikr*) prescribed the memorization and chanting of entire religious texts, preeminently the Qurʾan, while the hadith originated as oral traditions about the Prophet's everyday pronouncements and examples carefully learned by rote and passed down from his companions through a chain of transmitters' names (an *isnad*), so that each witness might be assayed and attested trustworthy. The works of the poet Abu-Nuwas (d. 815) were collected after his death by scribes from his audiences; it was thought that listeners absorbed a text more profoundly—through the mind—than readers, who took it in simply through the eye (Manguel 196–97). Ibn Jamaʾa advised his students in the thirteenth century that it was good to buy books but even better to carry them "in the heart" (Manguel 189).

The Arabic-book-production industry continued to flourish throughout the Muslim world until the colonial era, when European administrators systematically dismantled it. Printing presses with movable type had a delayed uptake partly because Ottoman policies forbade printing in the Ottoman Empire between 1483 and 1727. The first printing houses using Arabic letters were established in the Levant in 1733 and in Cairo in 1823, yet manuscript copying did not disappear;

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a mid-thirteenth-century Arabic version of the Alexander romance is preserved in two manuscripts found in Madrid that were copied in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The complexity of Arabic cursive letterforms, which differ according to initial, medial, or final placement, may also have played a role in abating the hegemony of print culture while inviting different, more coterie-oriented versions of the public sphere.

This tangled timeline makes nonsense of European developmental teleologies that divide oral and scribal culture, memory and writing, manuscript and print. It complicates periodization, urges more intertwined diachronies. In addition, from the eighth century on medieval Arabic writers evolved conceptions of the literary and the belletristic. They devised and debated sophisticated linguistic and grammatical theory and literary criticism and created a public sphere, challenging assumptions that such phenomena emerge only with modernity. Roger Allen magisterially surveys the long history of a medieval culture of letters, grammar, critical disputation, and aesthetic exploration (228–78).

We know that glimmers of this literary culture filtered into the consciousness of medieval European writers. For all its fierce anti-Muslim anxiety, Dante's *Divine Comedy* was imbued with imagery derived from the *Kitab al-Miraj*. Maria Rosa Menocal has argued for the influence of Arabic vernacular love poetry such as the *muwashshaha* on the vernacular love poetry that effloresced in southern France in the twelfth century. Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe* states its Arabic origins from the outset and goes on aggressively to claim its text as an English national heritage. Most tantalizing of all is *Alf layla wa layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights*), whose earliest extant version is a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript, recently edited by Muhsin Mahdi and later translated into English by Husain Haddawy. Taking back the *Nights* from its role as exhibit for the prosecution in antiorientalist polemic and reading it instead as a medieval text raises fascinating questions of literary influence or morphic resonance, sparked by its narrative complexity and its contemporaneity with two similarly brilliant, ventriloquistic, medieval story collections, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Like these significant medieval works, the *Nights* is aggressively heterogeneous in style, written in vernacular rather than classical Arabic and spanning prose story, classical poetry, popular proverb, and low-style lyric. Its narrative scope embraces not simply the life-giving productivity of narrative, as Sandra Naddaff attests, but also questions of Islamic faith, philosophy, the arts of rule, and encounters between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Even more compellingly during a period in which researchers obsessively seek female voices, its chief narrator is a woman who staves off her own death, reeducates a predatory king, and saves the women of the kingdom, all through her own narrative fecundity. Throughout its length, by incessantly exploring the consequences of slavery, poverty, and imprisonment, the *Nights* interrogates the impoverishing inequities of race, slavery, social class, and gender in medieval Islamic society. The narrative's line of questioning has much to teach scholarly and popular audiences today.

Writing from the Contact Zones

This last area is the most various: writing in Arabic that stages cultural encounters with Europeans, Christians, Jews, and pagans. The need for studies that allow the Saracen and the Jew to write back seems clear, given the burgeoning of recent scholarship delineating the fecund range of medieval European cultural fantasies about Islam, Saracens, Jews, and Arabic society, chivalry, and science (Southern; Tolan; Akbari). This scholarship has opened up new approaches to European romances, Corpus Christi plays, crusade

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chronicles, theological treatises, interreligious debates, embassy reports, and mercantile documents. Most interesting to me are the travel narratives, by writers like Marco Polo, the Italian merchant who served a Mongol emperor for over a decade; the probably fictional John Mandeville, who describes his service to the sultan of Egypt before delineating further travels eastward; Friar Orderic of Pordenone; and John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubuck, two thirteenth-century Franciscan emissaries to the Mongols.

It is rewarding to place such European accounts of the Near East and Asia next to the Arabic recollections of the Muslim travelers Ibn Jubayr, who journeyed from al-Andalus through the Levant and Norman-occupied Sicily on the eve of the Third Crusade, and Ibn Battuta of Tangier, whose twenty-nine-year journey encompassed the entire fourteenth-century Islamic world, sub-Saharan Mali, and, if you believe his account, Christian Constantinople. The extraordinary memoirs of Usamah ibn Munqidh cut a wide swath through the crusade-period Levant, modeling and defamiliarizing Islamic chivalric cultures. These Arabic texts make visible the complex heterogeneities of medieval Islamic culture—its religious sectarianism, lack of an organized clerisy or religious hierarchy, and different kinds of religious performance. The Arabic accounts reveal a different cultural geography, a world centered around Mecca rather than Jerusalem, sweeping from Java to the Maghrib, negotiating with China, succumbing to Mongols. Islam fades from monolith to metamorph, reshaped by many languages, religions, and peoples.

Coming at European medieval cultures from Arabic perspectives usefully decenters assumptions that we often no longer see. Such texts defamiliarize hoary concepts like chivalry and scriptural exegesis. How did Christian and Muslim forms of chivalry play differently in different societies? How did they find enough of a shared language of honor and advantage for historically Christian knights and merchants to serve Muslim sovereigns and vice versa throughout the period—an intercourse restaged in romance and epic, from El Cid to Marco Polo to Saladin, as a site for cultural fantasy in Arabic and European writings? What were the differences between and parallel evolutions of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim exegesis and interpretive practice (McAuliffe, Walfish, and Goering)? How did Muslims and Christians surreptitiously share imagery, tactics, shrines, saints, a–nd religious and exemplary historical figures (like Mary, Jesus, Saint George, and Alexander the Great)? How do Christian and Muslim writers thrust and counter with supersessional ideologies, originary preemptions, and parallel apocalypses? What abates such anxieties of influence at some times, enabling syncretism, and at other times sharpens them, propelling crusade, countercrusade, and inquisition?

Difficult, situated, and disparate as these comparatist questions must be (and learning Arabic in itself is no picnic), the rewards are clear. The current work of medieval Hispanists and Hebraists on al-Andalus offers a glimpse of the richness in store. Medieval studies in the twenty-first century needs to be better placed to interrogate persistent cultural mythologies of polarization and supersession. The inclusion of Arabic sources and perspectives replaces mythology with a constellation of nodes of contact, influence, appropriation, transmission, and rejection, whose connections can be redrawn as new areas of investigation emerge. Perhaps by examining the deep history of this strange coevolution we can rearticulate Western culture itself as a web of multicultural historical contingencies rather than the march of a manifest destiny. Perhaps we can realize, following Derrida, that we have never been only ourselves. This would be extremely timely, even beyond the conflicts engendered by the ongoing (mis)management of the Middle East. The contemporary global-

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ization of Western culture, the myriad forms of resistance to this culture, and, more interesting, the tactical redeployments of it from so many canny and well-leveraged claimants all warrant a careful examination of how western Western culture really is, has ever been, and can continue to pretend to be.

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