theories and methodologies

Medieval Mediterranean Literature

SHARON KINOSHITA

Always historicize!

—Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

Eurocentricity is a choice, not a viewpoint imposed by history. There are roads out of antiquity that do not lead to the Renaissance; and although none avoids eventual contact with the modern West's technological domination, the rapidly changing balance of power in our world is forcing even Western scholars to pay more attention to non-Latin perspectives on the past.

—Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*

[I]

THE LAST DECADE OR SO HAS SEEN AN EXPLOSION OF INTEREST IN "MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES." A HALF CENTURY AFTER THE ORIGINAL PUBLICATION of Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949), scholars in a number of disciplines have once again found the Mediterranean a productive category of analysis, as evidenced in a proliferation of conferences, edited volumes, journals, and study centers. This renewal of Mediterranean studies is part of an upsurge of interest in "oceanic studies," or, alternatively, "the new thalassology." In recent years, as Kären Wigen writes,

> [h]istorians of science have documented the discovery of longitude and the plumbing of underwater depths; historians of ideas have mapped the conceptual geographies of beaches, oceans, and islands; historians of labor and radical politics have drawn arresting new portraits of maritime workers and pirates; historians of business have tracked maritime commerce; historians of the environment have probed marine and island ecologies; and historians of colonial regimes and anticolonial movements alike have asserted the importance of maritime arenas of interaction. (717)[1]

In the field of medieval literature, on the other hand, "Mediterranean studies" has found much less purchase. An MLA database search for the keywords "Mediterranean" and "medieval" or "Middle Ages" yields a total of thirty-two entries, over half of which treat topics in intellectual or

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art history. Taking that asymmetry as a point of departure, this essay explores the different ways "medieval Mediterranean literature" might be conceived; how it would relate to the study of the medieval Mediterranean in other disciplines; and what linguistic, thematic, and theoretical modifications or challenges it would offer to the field of literature as currently configured.

A word is in order here on disciplinary location and training. New fields never arise in a vacuum: anyone interested in Mediterranean studies comes from somewhere and, particularly in the initial stages, that somewhere inevitably shapes the limitations and the possibilities of our approach to the medieval Mediterranean. As Djelal Kadir puts it, "Where the foot of the compass rests is inexorably the center" (2). From there, however, the compass can describe ever-wider concentric—and, eventually, decentered—circles. My own disciplinary home, medieval French literature, seems an implausible starting point for Mediterranean thinking: after all, for much of the Middle Ages, the French-speaking part of "France" lacked even a Mediterranean coastline. Nevertheless, "Mediterraneanizing" our frame of reference furnishes new questions, insights, and perspectives: even the most canonical Old French texts look different in the context of the medieval Mediterranean from the way they look in the context of the French nation and its attendant literary tradition.

Traces of French involvement with the wider Mediterranean world appear everywhere, once one sets out to look for them. Let me give two brief examples. The first is the *Chanson de Roland*—the most celebrated work of the French Middle Ages, easily read as a key text in the long history of orientalism and French nationalism (Kinoshita, "Political Uses"). To anyone familiar with Iberian history, however, the poem's opening scene, in which the pagan king Marsile promises Charlemagne a fortune in gold, silver, and precious silks to lift the siege of Saragossa and return to "douce ["sweet"] France," unmistakably stages an offer of *parias*—the tribute money Muslim kings routinely paid their Christian counterparts in what amounted to a medieval Andalusian protection racket. This means that the intransigence associated with Roland's famous line "Pagans are wrong and Christians are right" (line 1015) is less the poem's pervading ethos than a position to be won—a small difference, perhaps, but one that alters our understanding of the *Chanson de Roland*'s role in the purported history of the "clash of civilizations" (Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries* 16–24). My second example is Chrétien de Troyes's late-twelfth-century "Byzantine" romance, *Cligés*. In his prologue, Chrétien delivers a textbook example of the twinned topoi *translatio studii* ("the translation of wisdom") and *translatio imperii* ("the transmission of political power"), insisting on the historical migration of letters and empire from Greece to Rome to France. The narrative, on the other hand, makes frequent, apparently gratuitous mention of Mediterranean sites such as Toledo and Tudela, Caesaria and Candia, Antioch and Almería. In the twelfth century, Toledo and, to a lesser extent, Tudela and Antioch were important centers for the translation of prized Greek philosophical and scientific texts from Arabic into Latin (d'Alverny 445; Burnett 1043–44). At the same time Chrétien was composing *Cligés*, the English scholar Daniel of Morley, having made an intellectual pilgrimage to Paris, was quickly disillusioned by the experience; then, drawn by the reputation of Toledo in the *doctrina Arabum*, he continued his journey—later expressing his full satisfaction with what he found there (Kinoshita, "Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligés*" 52). For anyone interested in *translatio studii*, in other words, the lines of transmission of ancient Greek learning ran not through Rome and Paris but through Toledo and Tudela. To the knowing audience, the prologue's triumphal pronouncement of the march of Western civilization is slyly undercut by the text's casual but repeated allusion to the medieval Mediterranean.

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Other ways of Mediterraneanizing our approach to medieval French literature include

- seeking new congeners for Old French texts: reading the *Chanson de Roland*, for example, alongside not just familiar "Western" epics like the *Niebelungenlied* or the *Poema de mio Cid* but other roughly contemporary tales like *Digenis Akritas* or the *Sīrat ʿAntar* (Stevenson 93–96);
- exploring lesser-known texts structured by Mediterranean themes like commerce and connectivity, such as the mid-twelfth-century romance *Floire et Blancheflor* (Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries* 77–104);
- recognizing the impact of Mediterranean events on French literary history. Reflections of Charles of Anjou's conquest of Sicily (1266) and the Sicilian Vespers (1282), for example, may be found in the work of poets such as Rutebeuf, Adam de la Halle, and Adenet le Roi;
- acknowledging the significance of French as a Mediterranean language—in the literary koine known as Franco-Italian or as the preferred language of non-French authors like Brunetto Latini and Rustichello of Pisa.

Similar moves may also be made in other literary-linguistic traditions; the immediate relevance of the Mediterranean to Boccaccio and much Italian literature is obvious. But this is only the beginning of the utility and consequences of medieval Mediterranean studies.

[II]

As the preceding discussion makes clear, Mediterranean studies is less a way of defining or delimiting a geographic space (as in the famous formulation of the Mediterranean as the region of the olive and the vine) than a heuristic device for remapping traditional disciplinary divides. Most obviously, it displaces the nation as the default category of analysis that, even in our purportedly postnational age, continues to "ghost" our literary imaginings (Apter 43). Such a move is indispensable for the Middle Ages, a period in which "nation," in the sense of the nation-state, is an unwieldy anachronism. Structures of identity and allegiance were often poured into categories we would call local or regional—a recent history of medieval Europe lists the nationality of three successive thirteenth-century popes as "Roman," "Milanese," and "Genoese" (Backman 441)—and terms like "Spain" or "southern France" require quotation marks to indicate the distance between medieval understandings and our own.

Displacing the nation in turn calls into question the relation between states and national languages. In the medieval Mediterranean, multilingualism not only reflected different ethnic and confessional communities but also responded to practical political and cultural exigencies. The fact that Francis of Assisi expressed himself emotively in French or that the Spanish king Alfonso X of Castile composed his *Cantigas de Santa Maria* in Galician—curiosities when viewed from the modern perspective—appears unremarkable in a premodern Mediterranean in which Italians like Brunetto Latini, Martin da Canal, and Rustichello of Pisa wrote in French (ostensibly because that language was "more delightful and more widespread than all others") and the Seljuk sultans of Rum used Arabic and Persian (not Turkish) for internal affairs and Greek for their external correspondence with Christians (Zachariadou 202).

This "diversified linguistic and cultural ecology" (Borg 1), in which multilingualism is as often the norm as the exception, demands that we rethink the role of "national" literary languages. Here as in so much else, Hispanomedievalists—too long marginalized in medieval studies (Dagenais and Greer 440)—have taken the lead. Challenging the segregation of literatures into distinct literary traditions, they reconceptualize the literatures of the Iberian peninsula as a polysystem (Wacks 13), charting the use of

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Arabic as a shared cultural language formative in the emergence of distinctive Andalusi traditions—mediated through genres like the lyric (Menocal, *Arabic Role*) and the frame tale (Wacks)—in Hebrew and Castilian.

What difference this polysystem could make is suggested in Samuel Armistead's reading of a brief episode in the Catalan *Libre dels feyts* (c. 1244), an autobiography by the Aragonese king Jaume I, "the Conqueror." In the midst of his campaign against Muslim Valencia, the king recounts, a swallow built her nest atop his tent pole. Thereupon, "manam que no en llevassen la tenda tro que ella se'n fos anada ab sos fills, pus en nostra fe era venguda" 'I ordered that the tent not be removed until she and her children had gone, since she had come under our protection [in our faith]' (Armistead 1). Modern readers, Armistead explains, invariably take this as a "delightful vignette" revealing "an attractive note of personal intimacy and kingly compassion" on the part of a ruler better known for his campaigns of conquest. However, an early-thirteenth-century Arabic geographic dictionary (slightly antedating the *Libre dels feyts*) tells a remarkably similar tale about the seventh-century general ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs. According to this source, during the original Muslim conquest of Egypt a dove laid her eggs atop the general's tent pole, leading him to declare, "لقد تَحَرَّمَتْ بجِوَارِنا؛ أقرُوا الفسطاط حتى تَنْقُفَ وتطيرَ فراخَها" 'She is inviolable in our proximity (*jiwāri-nā*). Let the tent remain standing until she hatches her chicks and makes them fly away' (Armistead 2). From an Islamic point of view, ʿAmr's act signifies "the sacredness of the client," evoking "a whole system of values" rooted in ancient Arabian and earlier Semitic traditions. Without venturing into the question of intentionality and Jaume's (possible) manipulation of an important Arabo-Islamic social and cultural convention, Armistead underscores "the richly intercultural ambience of medieval Iberia, in which narrative motifs, anecdotes, and episodes could easily have migrated . . . from one linguistic community to another," insisting that "our perspectives on the development of medieval Hispanic literature . . . cannot be complete unless . . . the possibility of such exchanges is taken into account and . . . exhaustively explored" (3).

For Armistead and other Hispano-medievalists, notions like influence or reaction are insufficient to account for the linguistic and cultural polyvalence of medieval Iberia. Francisco Márquez-Villanueva has given the name "the Alfonsine cultural concept" to the creation of a new vernacular prose in mid-thirteenth-century Castille through King Alfonso X's programmatic sponsorship of translations from the Arabic. This was "a complex transformative moment in the cultural history of Iberia, a moment . . . marked by creative hybridity and selective permeability, the active and passive intersection of literary cultures" (234). Some scholars now reject "the reductive notion of isolated 'literary influences,'" speaking instead of "a shared cultural trajectory" (Girón-Negrón 234) and "a tight weave" (Menocal, "Visions" 16).

Though rich and distinctive enough to constitute a category of its own, the Iberian example nevertheless provides a paradigm for (re)thinking the literary histories of other places characterized by their multilingualism and multiculturalism. In the Middle Ages, islands like Sicily (Mallette, *Kingdom of Sicily*) or Cyprus (Grivaud)—along with Crete, Sardinia, and the Balearics—were enormously significant in ways it is hard to imagine today (Abulafia 11). In the premodern era, as Karla Mallette reminds us, "insular" meant not (as in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition) "cut off from intercourse with other nations, isolated; self-contained; narrow or prejudiced in feelings, ideas, or manners" ("Insularity" 27) but subjected to a "too promiscuous connectivity," which represented "an irresistible temptation to all states with imperial ambitions" (29) in ways that made such islands central to the history of the medieval Mediterranean.

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[III]

In their monumental study *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell paradoxically locate the unity of the Mediterranean in its geographic, social, and economic fragmentation. Moving away from essentializing definitions of the Mediterranean as a space or a culture, they begin from a "microecology" of "short distances and definite places" (terms from the title of part two), because such distances and places depend on local, small-scale interactions and connectivities. Mutatis mutandis, the Ottoman historian Palmira Brummett similarly emphasizes fragmentation and difference:

> I do not tend to think of the Mediterranean as an integral unit of analysis. For me, the sea is indelibly fragmented into its ports, islands, coasts, and their attendant interiors. It is divided into a set of city-linking itineraries, routes for the transmission of ideas, goods, and military forces. . . . It is not marked by ecological zones but by complex, overlapping, ethnolinguistic, commercial, and cultural identities. (10)

Although various empires attempted to coordinate this fragmentation and diversity within internal borders, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries changing political conditions made the western and, especially, the eastern Mediterranean a mosaic of competing political, cultural, and economic interests. The Aegean, for example, was

> an amazingly complex contested region. Greek states, French principalities, Turkish emirates, Venetian and Genoese colonies, the Hospitalers on Rhodes, Catalan adventurers, Serbian and Bulgarian kingdoms, and others established mixed relationships and fought among themselves to control the shores of the Aegean. No other region of Europe or the Mediterranean became a cynosure of so many ethnicities in such a small place. (Epstein 110)

On the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, Anatolia was

> [a] world of dizzying physical mobility—crisscrossed by overlapping networks of nomads and seminomads, raiders, volunteers on their way to join military adventures, slaves of various backgrounds, wandering dervishes, monks and churchmen trying to keep in touch with their flock, displaced peasants and townspeople seeking refuge, disquieted souls seeking cure and consolation at sacred sites, Muslim schoolmen seeking patronage, and the inevitable risk-driven merchants of late medieval Eurasia. (Kafadar 61)

At first glance, such "dizzying physical mobility" seems inimical to the production of literary culture. Yet this eastern Mediterranean world of conquest, commerce, and cross-confessional encounters produced the Byzantine border epic *Digenis Akritas* ("The Two-Blooded Border Lord") in the twelfth century and the great Sufi poet Jalal al-Din, or "Rumi" (named after his adoptive home in the central Anatolian sultanate of Rum, where his family had fled from eastern Persia), in the thirteenth; in the literatures of Latin Europe, it provided the indispensable backdrop for Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in the mid–fourteenth century, and the sprawling Catalan epic romance *Tirant lo Blanc*, in the late fifteenth.

The Mediterranean we have been taking as a category of analysis is, first and foremost, a sea—an extended body of water promising both opportunity and danger. In his *Vie de Saint Louis*, the French king Louis IX's biographer, Jean de Joinville, recalls their departure from the port of Marseille setting out on the Seventh Crusade:

> [C]hascun jour nous esloigna le vent des païs ou nous avions esté nez. Et ces choses vous moustré je, que celi est bien fol hardi qui se ose mettre en tel peril . . . en pechié mortel, car l'en se dort le soir la ou en ne scet se l'en se trouverra ou fons de la mer au matin. (sec. 127)

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> [E]ach day the wind carried us away from the lands of our birth. And I will show you this: that he who would expose himself to such danger while in a state of mortal sin is foolishly bold, for there you fall asleep at night without knowing if you might find yourself at the bottom of the sea by morning.

Nor is nature the only danger to be incurred on the high seas:

> From the twelfth century onwards, piracy was rampant, indeed endemic. . . . Every maritime city or state, and often, it seemed, every individual, with access to ships and weapons engaged in it. Crews were cosmopolitan, made up of volunteer adventurers from all locations; and they were ecumenical in their targets, caring far more for the size and contents of the victimized ship's hull than for the religion or ethnicity of its crew. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—that is, the period when the western Mediterranean societies surpassed their Byzantine and Muslim rivals and seized effective control of the entire sea—marked a high point for piracy, as the newly victorious Latin states competed for individual mastery of the sea lanes.
>
> (Backman 269)

This milieu forms the backdrop of what Francis Gingras has called "romans maritimes" (169)—romances like *Apollonius of Tyre* or *Floire and Blancheflor*, in which sea voyages provide the structure, and storms (along with pirates) constitute "la péripétie par excellence" 'quintessential *perpeteia*' (James-Raoul 220). In Mediterranean literature, pirates, though rarely protagonists themselves, are frequently agents of fortune—like the Saracens in the early-thirteenth-century *chantefable Aucassin et Nicolette* who "came by sea" and "assaulted the castle" of Torelore, carrying away "goods and male and female slaves," including the titular protagonists (sec. 34, lines 4–9). In *The Decameron*, day 5, tale 7, "Genoese pirates" (*corsari genovesi*) "raiding" (*corseggiando*) the Armenian coast set the plot in motion by abducting the young protagonist, Teodoro, and selling him into captivity in Trapani (sec. 4).

Piracy and the fractious world of the eastern Mediterranean come together in book 18 of the *Düstûrnâme*—a poetic account of the history of early-fourteenth-century Aydin.[2] Aydin was one of the short-lived *ghazi* emirates to have emerged in Anatolia following the collapse of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum in the wake of the Mongol invasions of the mid–thirteenth century. Its most prominent leader was Umur Bey, a charismatic military commander and close ally of the Byzantine emperors Andronicos III and John VI Cantacuzenos. Among his exploits was a raid on the island of Chios, circa 1329–30:

> sey ᵒ l gibi qan revān olmĭşidi
> kūh u ṣaḥrā gövdeler ṭolmĭşidi
> ol adayĭ cümle yaγma qĭldĭlar
> ḥalqile mālĭn qumāşĭn aldĭlar
> qomadĭlar ol adada bir ḥişār
> oldĭ yaγma ėli qĭldĭ cümle zār
> oγlan u qĭz u gelindür bī -ʿaded
> altun u gümişe ḥōd yoγidi ḥad
>
> (Mélikoff-Sayar, *Destân*, lines 321–28)

> Blood ran like a torrent;
> the mountain and plains were covered with bodies.
> They pillaged the island,
> seizing its people, their goods and fabrics.
> They didn't leave a single fortress intact;
> everything was devastated; there were only lamentations.
> They took innumerable boys, virgins, and young women
> and gold and silver beyond reckoning.

His raid complete, Umur returns home to revel in his accumulated treasure:

> döndi andan çĭqdĭ paşa Izmire
> ol γanīmet mālĭn anda kim dėre
> geldi Izmire Ḫĭżĭr beg serfirāz
> qardaşile gorişür ol kār ᵒ sāz
> iki gözlerinden paşayĭ öper
> bayrĭna başuban arqasĭn yėper
> qoqular sünbüllerin gün yüzile

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hurrem anuŋ oldï zībā sözile
Hïẓïr beg dėdi aŋa: « ey nevcivān
qïl baŋa bu qïṣṣa vaṣfïn dās ° tān
ol ɣazāyï paṣa çün ṣerh eyledi
her ne kim oldïsa bir bir söyledi
ṣād ° lïɣuŋ ḥaddï u pāyānï yoq
hem ɣanīmet mālïnuŋ oranï yoq
armaɣān ay yüzlü bī-ḥad vėrdi qïz
her biri biŋ qïzile degildi qïz
hem firenk oɣlanlarïn vėrdi güzel
saçlarïnuŋ müşkilin kim ėde ḥal
altun u gümiş u ṣaɣraq bī-şümār
armaɣān vėrdi aŋa ol nām ° dār
pencüyek çïqardï qïsmet eyledi
leşkerin cümle ɣanīmet eyledi
bāy u yoqsul anda çoq iḥsān bulur
ol ɣanīmetden qamu ṣādān olur (331–54)

The pasha returned to Izmir,
having collected all this booty.
[His elder brother] Hizir Beg came to Izmir,
head held high,
and met the pasha, that able man.
He kissed the pasha on his two eyes,
embraced him, pressed him to him, stroked
his back,
breathed in the perfume of his hyacinth
[-scented locks] and his sunny face;
his beautiful words filled him with joy.
Hizir Beg said to him: "O young man,
tell me the tale of your exploits."
The pasha told him everything that had
happened.
There were neither boundaries nor limits to
his joy;
there was no telling the richness of his booty.
He gave him a gift of numerous moon-faced
virgins,
each one peerless—one of a thousand.
He also gave him beautiful Frankish boys
so he could untangle their locks.
To these gifts, this man of great renown
added
gold, silver, and innumerable goblets.
He kept a fifth of the booty and divided up
the rest,
distributing it to his entire army.
The rich and the poor were overwhelmed:
all were filled with joy.

Besides providing an unlooked-for congener for day 2, tale 7, of *The Decameron* (Kinoshita and Jacobs 180–81), the *Düstûrnâme* hints at the literary-historical riches waiting to be discovered in the medieval Mediterranean.

[IV]

In our enthusiasm for things Mediterranean, we shouldn't lose sight of the political and ethical consequences of our intellectual choices. Like all maritime regions, the medieval Mediterranean is a modern cultural construct (Wigen 719). To take the Mediterranean as a category of analysis is to risk orientalizing it. Western historiography, as Brummett remarks, has often presumed the Mediterranean "to be 'ours' rather than 'theirs,'" casting it as "the space of Odysseus, Marc Anthony, Saint Paul, Boccaccio, the Crusaders, the pilgrims, the takers of the Grand Oriental tour (always going 'east,' more or less, and returning 'west,' if they can)" (10).

In literary studies, the possibilities opened up by the category Mediterranean run up against the limitations of our linguistic training and field expertise. For most medievalist readers of *PMLA*, versed in the major traditions of western Europe, the challenge is how to integrate texts composed in other medieval Mediterranean languages (including, but not limited to, Arabic, Byzantine Greek, Hebrew, and Turkish). If "the Mediterranean" is to function in an expansive way rather than a restrictive, self-limiting one, we must relinquish the requirement of field expertise and instead embrace collaborative inter- and cross-disciplinary work and develop principled ways of incorporating the unfamiliar (new regions, new languages, new disciplines) into our research and teaching.[3] In literary studies, treating works in translation remains a fraught question (Apter 41–64). For the medieval Mediterranean, however, it is imperative: even as we work toward increasing our own linguistic competencies and, especially, form-

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ing a new generation of scholars for whom the combination of "European" and "non-European" languages will be second nature, the advantages of teaching and perhaps even working in translation are, I think, worth the risks. María Rosa Menocal has made the case for reconceptualizing "medieval Spanish literature" to mean works not simply in Castilian but in Arabic and Hebrew—alongside other Romance vernaculars like Catalan or Galician—as well ("Al-Andalus"). And the discovery of an astonishing text like the *Düstûrnâme* should not have to wait for a critical mass of scholars conversant in pre-Ottoman Turkish.

Notes

All unattributed translations are mine. In the case of the *Düstûrnâme*, I have translated a French translation of the Turkish original.

1. See the special forum, "Oceans of History," in the June 2006 issue of the *American Historical Review* (official journal of the Amer. Hist. Assn.) and the response by Markus Vink. The March 2010 issue of *PMLA* will contain essays grouped under the title "Oceanic Studies."

2. An Ottoman chronicle recounting the history of the world from the creation down to the reign of Mehmet II, the *Düstûrnâme* was composed under the grand vizier Mahmud Pasha in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Book 18, which makes up about a third of the whole, was composed in a vernacular Turkish not yet embellished by the Persian and Arabic elements characteristic of later Ottoman court language; it narrates the history of the emirate of Aydin from 1307 to 1348 (Mélikoff-Sayar, Introduction 24–25, 28–29).

3. On the question of "teaching what you don't know" and the link between field expertise and the ideology of underdevelopment, see Ross 668–70.

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