THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

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   by Catherine Batt
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature</td>
<td>edited by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Warren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350–1500</td>
<td>by Kathleen Kamerick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England</td>
<td>by Elizabeth Scala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul</td>
<td>by Bonnie Effros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire</td>
<td>by Anne McClanan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images</td>
<td>edited by Désirée G. Koslin and Janet Snyder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady</td>
<td>edited by Bonnie Wheeler and John Carni Parsons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays</td>
<td>edited by David A. Boruchoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century</td>
<td>by Richard E. Zeikowitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eloquent Virgins: From Thecla to Joan of Arc</td>
<td>by Maud Burnett McInerney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture</td>
<td>by Angela Jane Weisl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capetian Women</td>
<td>edited by Kathleen D. Nolan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan of Arc and Spirituality</td>
<td>edited by Ann W. Astell and Bonnie Wheeler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries</td>
<td>edited by Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlemagne’s Mustache: And Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age</td>
<td>by Paul Edward Dutton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image</td>
<td>edited by Emma Campbell and Robert Mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queering Medieval Genres</td>
<td>by Tison Pugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism</td>
<td>by L. Michael Harrington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Middle Ages at Work</td>
<td>edited by Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer’s Jobs</td>
<td>by David R. Carlson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity</td>
<td>by John M. Ganim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Love in the Middle Ages</td>
<td>by Anna Klosowska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Women in the Middle Ages: Sex, Gender, and the Iberian Lyric</td>
<td>by Denise K. Filios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary Conjunctions: The Social Self in Medieval England</td>
<td>by David Gary Shaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages</td>
<td>edited by Kathryn Starkey and Horst Wenzel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medieval Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Jeremy du Quesnay Adams, Volumes 1 and 2</td>
<td>edited by Stephanie Hayes-Healy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature</td>
<td>by Elizabeth Allen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecstatic Transformation: On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages</td>
<td>by Michael Uebel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: New Essays  
edited by Lawrence Besserman  

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THE [EUROPEAN] OTHER IN MEDIEVAL ARABIC LITERATURE AND CULTURE

NINTH-TWELFTH CENTURY AD

Nizar F. Hermes
To my family, professors, and friends here and there!
CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments xiii
Note on Transliteration xv
Note on the Translation of Arabic Poetry xvii

Introduction: Be(yond)fore Orientalism; Medieval Muslims and the Other 1

1. Translation, Travel, and the Other: The Fascination with Greek and Oriental Cultures 11

2. European Barbarity and Civilization in Some Medieval Arabic Geographical Sources: Al-Maṣūdi and al-Bakri as Two Case Studies 39

3. Writing the North: Europe and Europeans in Medieval Arabic Travel Literature 71

4. Poetry, Frontiers, and Alterity: Views and Perceptions of al-Rum (Byzantines) and al-Ifranja (Franks) 135

Conclusion 171
Appendix of Translated Poetry 177

Notes 183
Bibliography 211
Index 227
Some Western scholars of the Middle East such as Bernard Lewis have too often claimed that medieval Arabs/Muslims did not exhibit any significant desire to discover the cultures, literatures, and religions of non-Muslim peoples. No less troubling is their contention that only Europeans are endowed with the gift of studying foreign cultures and traveling into alien lands. However, without intending to add fire to the already fiery polemic over Edward Said’s *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient* (1978), very few of Said’s critics and defenders alike have discussed the counter, or reverse, tradition of Orientalism, especially as found in the rich corpus of medieval Arabic literature and culture.

Through introducing and exploring a cross-generic selection of non-religious Arabic prose and poetic texts—such as the geo-cosmographical literature, récits de voyages, diplomatic memoirs, captivity narratives, and pre-Crusade and Crusade poetry, all of which were written from the ninth to the twelfth century (AD)—this work purports to show that there was no shortage of medieval Muslims who cast curious eyes and minds toward the Other and that more than a handful of them were textually and physically interested in Europe and the Euro-Christians they encountered inside and outside *dar al-islam*. Contrary to the monolithic impression left by postcolonial theories of Orientalism, the book also makes a case that Orientals did not exist solely to be gazed at. Before this came to be so, they too had directed their gaze toward the European Other(s) in a way that mirrored in reverse the subject/object relationship described as Orientalism.

Texts were selected based on my personal assessment of their importance, originality, and relative unfamiliarity in the West. My hope is that more Middle East medievalists and comparatists in particular will further lines of inquiry and argument concerning the various aspects of the largely neglected topic of medieval Arabic, nonreligious alterist writing.

The work is a revised PhD dissertation at the University of Toronto. The project might have never been finished without the insights and guidance of Professors John Fleming and Roland LeHuenen. It has been
my good fortune to learn from them, and I am enduringly grateful for their scholarly advice, unflattering trust, and unfailing support. I owe my gratitude as well to the University of Toronto’s medievalists Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross for their invaluable input and superlative stimulation. I am grateful too for Arabists and Middle East medievalists Professors Thabit Abdullah of York University and Walid Saleh and Andrew Lane of the University of Toronto for their constructive feedback, useful comments, and compelling suggestions. I would like also to offer my profoundest thanks to Professors Ian Richard Netton of the University of Exeter, Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi of Columbia University, and Ahmad Nazmi of the University of Warsaw for their most valuable suggestions, corrections, and references. 

Warmest thanks are also due to Professors Anne R. Richards of Kennesaw State University—in particular—Iraj Omidvar of Southern Polytechnic State University, and Mel Solman of Humber College for their wonderful edits and comments. The same is true for the anonymous reviewers and editors of journals and edited volumes in which some of the material in this book has appeared or is appearing in slightly different versions: “The Byzantines in Medieval Arabic Poetry: Abu Firas’s Al-Rumiyyat and the Poetic Responses of al-Qaffal and Ibn Hazm to Nicephorus Phocas’s Al-Qasida al-Arminiyya al-Mal’una (The Armenian Cursed Ode),” Byzantina Symmeikta: Journal of the Institute for Byzantine Studies 19 (2009): 35–61; and “Mirabilia Urbis Romae through the Eyes of a Ninth Century Arab Captive: Ibn Yahya’s Remarkable Account of Rome,” in Journeys to the West: The Occident as Other in Narratives of Travel, ed. Anne R. Richards and Iraj Omidvar (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming 2012).

Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to Professor Bonnie Wheeler, series editor of The New Middle Ages, for her faith in this project and her strong recommendation to publish it in the series; to Brigitte Shull, Joanna Roberts, and Kristy Lilas of Palgrave Macmillan for their guidance, patience, and professionalism; and to the anonymous reviewer for the insightful comments and suggestions.
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In order to make the text less burdensome for readers with no background in Middle Eastern studies, I have chosen not to use all the defamiliarizing diacritical marks established by rigid transliteration systems of the Arabic language into English. In short, with the exceptions of the ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (ʾ)—when it appears within or at the end of a word—and unless they appear in original titles or direct quotations, macrons and dots are not added. For the renderings of classical Muslim names, I have followed the conventions adopted by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (ʿAbd al-Rahman, for example). As for contemporary names of scholars, I use more common renditions (Abdurrahmane instead of ʿAbd al-Rahman).
NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION OF ARABIC POETRY

In light of the variety of approaches to the translation of classical Arabic poetry, I think it proper to clarify my own stance. In the present book, I have aimed not at producing a literal translation, which at best would serve some instructional purposes, but rather at capturing in the English literary idiom, the meaning and, above all, the poeticality of the Arabic originals. (xii)

—Jaroslav Stetkevych, The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in The Classical Arabic Nasib

Translating the idiosyncratically rhymed and metered classical Arabic poetry into modern Western languages is notoriously difficult, to say the least. One spends hours and hours deciding what to keep and what to sacrifice, especially amid the seemingly never-ending debate between the “literal,” or “word-for-word,” translation and the “interpretive,” or “sense-for sense,” translation (Peter France, The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation, 16). Briefly stated, while I have done my best to capture “quite literally” a number of the most essential keywords of a particular poem, I have somehow leaned to the second approach especially as, of course in my personal view, masterfully laid out and practiced by Professor Jaroslav Stetkevych and a number of his students, such as Michael Sells and Emil Homerin. In the present book, I do share the concern that what we need most in translating classical Arabic poetry are translations that “stand on their own as poems that can be enjoyed and appreciated,” to quote Emil Homerin (ʿUmar Ibīn Al-Farīdh: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life, 2). In short, I struggled to be faithful not only to the what but also to the how poets such as Abu Dulaf, Abu Firas, Ibn Hazm, and Ibn al-Qaysarani said, but at the same time, I have to acknowledge that I strove, perhaps more, to translate those poets in enjoyable (I hope) English poems that stand on their own. For readers of Arabic, the original Arabic poems appear in the appendix.