

and deserving to be conquered. Such xenophobia has been the result of fear of the unknown and the different combined with socio-economic needs to conquer other countries. Unfortunately, the legacy of these attitudes remains with us, but perhaps by better understanding the roots of our prejudices and fears, we can make headway toward conquering our own xenophobic projections upon others.

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MOHAMMED, COURTLY LOVE, AND THE MYTH OF WESTERN HETEROSEXUALITY

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Edward W. Said observes that Orientalism began its formal existence as a field of learned study during the Middle Ages, specifically, in 1312 with the decision of the Church Council of Vienne to establish a series of chairs in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac (49-50). As a polemical discourse, however, Orientalism starts earlier, some might say in

the twelfth-century Cluniac translations of Arabic texts organized by Peter the Venerable, whose avowed project was to provide knowledge of Islam so that Europeans might better resist it (Kritzeck 30). Norman Daniel remarks upon the absurd—and deliberate—“deformation” of Arabic originals that occurs in some of these Latin translations, most notably in biographies of Mohammed (*Islam* 229–49). In either case, as a discipline or discourse of cultural domination, Orientalism is ours as medievalists, and we haven’t done much with or about it since Said highlighted its origins in 1978.¹

One notable exception is Maria Rosa Menocal’s *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (1987), which maintains that Western medievalists largely ignore or occlude non-European events and influences.² Menocal argues that literary scholarship in particular, beginning with Dante, subscribes to a “myth of westernness,” a paradigm of the essential continuity between Greece and Rome and the modern West. Different conceptions of Western lineage—especially, according to Menocal, ones that propose a view of the medieval era as “the Age of Averroes,” an “Oriental period of Western history” (2)—meet resistance and hostility on a par with the reaction “once provoked by Darwin’s suggestion (for so was the theory of evolution construed) that we were ‘descended from monkeys’” (3).

I should like to take one step further than Menocal and propose that the idea of Westernness or Europeanness incorporates—perhaps even founds itself upon—a deeper cultural narrative: the myth of heterosexuality, or straightness. This myth does not simply prompt the “forgetting” of Eastern sources; it also encourages the outright distortion of them. In this commentary, I shall offer two examples of such “deformation” of Arabic material. The first is from the formative period of the myth of Western heterosexuality, the high Middle Ages, simultaneously the era in which the West forged its image of Islam and Mohammed. The second example is from our century and concerns one of the ways in which modern scholarship has constructed the origins of courtly love, the much-disputed socio-literary phenomenon also dating from the high Middle Ages.

When Europe of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries began to display increasing hostility to its own flourishing “gay subculture” (Boswell 243), I would argue that the West was at the same time formulating the myth of heterosexuality, the rhetoric of which sought to banish same-sex erotic passion as a source of anything—virtue, art—deemed culturally or morally valuable. When Andreas Capellanus, for instance, defines courtly or ennobling love as “a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the *opposite sex*” (28, italics mine), it is hard not to hear the myth of straightness in the making. Andreas and a host of other writers ranging from Peter Damien to Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun give expression to a paradigm shift that evidently took place in the high Middle Ages: the older classical ideal of same-sex (male) love and friendship as the model of virtue gives way to the medieval one celebrating heterosexual passion as the sole source of goodness.

The causes for this shift are not yet well understood, although the efforts of Boswell, James A. Brundage, David F. Greenberg and others have begun to yield plausible, albeit partial, explanations. The effects of the paradigm shift also await full exploration. Especially interesting is the possibility that the new genre of romance (and perhaps courtly love itself) register the displacement of classical male homoerotic passion into medieval homosocial bonding and/or heterosexual activity. Nor have we yet fully

examined the ways in which sodomy and (male) homoerotic passion were defended in this period, often by means of the discourse of friendship. My point here, however, must be restricted to the observation that Europe's creation of the myth of heterosexuality coincided with the construction of one of its central and enduring images of the East—the depiction of Mohammed and Islam. When European authorities deemed Islam a threat to Christianity, the myth and rhetoric of heterosexuality were available to them to combat the putative dangers of the new religion.³ In effect, Europe invented two Others at the same time: the Muslim and the homosexual (cf. Camille 90).

In the baldest way, the rhetoric of heterosexuality expresses itself in the medieval biographies of Mohammed I have alluded to above. The prophet's "otherness" is constructed and maintained not merely by portraying him as heterosexually lascivious, as, for instance, the myth of (white) sexual decorum creates the black man to be the promiscuous "womanizer." In addition, Mohammed is depicted, Daniel notes, as a "thoroughly debauched" sodomite with both men and women (*Islam* 142).⁴ Widespread among Christian writers, this image was pushed to absurd extremes, some Latins going so far as to assert that Mohammed himself contaminated the garden of nature in which his people lived by introducing sodomy into it (*Islam* 143).

The construction of Mohammed as sodomite paralleled the depiction of Islam as a sexually indulgent faith that condoned unnatural sex. The Western evidence for Muslim "turpitude" was sometimes altogether fabricated: the *Contrarietas*, for instance, simply interpolated a passage into surah II. 220 of the Qu'ran implicating Mohammed (Daniel, *Islam* 142). More typically, Western writers argued that surah IV. 20 licensed homosexuality in effect because it did not condemn the vice strongly enough. Daniel attributes the "venomous" attacks by Latin Christians on Islam to the Western propensity to compare its "more exacting moral laws (whether observed or not)" to Muslim practice, whereas he finds "no reason to suppose that there was any significant difference in sexual practices of all kinds" between the Arab world and the European (*Arabs* 233-34). These so-called more exacting moral laws, as I have suggested above, formed the spine of the myth of heterosexuality, and this myth determined one of the ways medieval Christianity distanced itself from Islam; in turn, the myth was maintained and further strengthened by casting Europe's major religious foe as homosexual.

In theory, both medieval Christianity and Islam condemned homosexual acts; in practice, homosexual behavior existed in both the European and Arab worlds, even if Daniel is correct in observing that the latter "exacted a lesser degree of decorum" concerning homoeroticism (*Arabs* 234). And both medieval Arabs and Europeans wrote homoerotic verse in relatively large amounts.⁵ When we turn to modern literary scholarship on the Middle Ages, however, we find that only some of this poetry has been "normalized," that is, heterosexualized: the Arabic, not the European (Latin) verse.

Thomas Stehling examines how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars discouraged translation, publication, and discussion of medieval Latin homoerotic verse (*Poems* xxx), but I find no evidence that the homosexual content of this poetry was explained away. On the contrary, medieval Arabic homoerotic poetry continues to be rationalized as straight. This rewriting occurs, I suspect, because of the role the Arabic verse has been accorded (however belatedly) in the formation of Provencal lyric, the foremost expression of Western romantic (heterosexual) love. Unlike medieval depictions

of Mohammed, which serve to distance a perceived enemy by casting him as the sodomitical Other, the modern heterosexualization of Arabic homoerotic poetry means to familiarize it, to render it a homologous, hence acceptable, forerunner of one of the West's most cherished institutions, courtly love.

Menocal recounts the stiff resistance earlier Western scholars mounted against Arabist theories of the origins of courtly love. For some time, she notes, such proposals were "virtually taboo, . . . undiscuss[able]" (82). But they have ceased to be heretical, witness Roger Boase's 1977 conclusion that the Arabist theory is overall the most likely explanation of the origins of courtly love. What may have eased the way for the growing, if grudging, acceptance of the Arabist theory can be seen in John Jay Parry's 1941 analysis of the candidacy of one Arabic poem, *The Dove's Neck Ring*, for the role of forerunner to courtly love.

Parry admits the possible influence of Ibn Hazm's work on troubadour lyric—or at least acknowledges the parallels between them—but only after he explains away the homoerotic portion of the Arabic poem. Noting that Ibn Hazm appears to sanction passion between two men—the *Dove's Neck Ring* contains numerous same-sex love lyrics—Parry heterosexualizes this poetic situation: ". . . among the Arabs," he explains, "public opinion required that if the beloved was a woman she must 'for decency's sake,' be spoken of as a man and referred to by masculine pronouns, adjectives, and verbs" (10). According to Parry, that is, what appears to be queer poetry is really straight poetry in disguise—in drag. This alleged Arabic convention of encoding a heterosexual poem as a homosexual poem, Parry speculates, may account for the troubadour practice of the male poet addressing his lady as his lord (*midons* or *senhor*) (10n34).

What Parry seems to resist, then, is not so much the idea that *Arabic* verse may have influenced Western poetry, but that *homoerotic* poetry in some way contributed to the development of the courtly lyric. I cannot debate here the specific issue of whether Ibn Hazm ever employed pseudonyms to conceal the gender of his addressee. This is a complex question as well as one to be answered by scholars trained in Arabic languages. Nor is there space to explore the possibly parodic use of *alleotheta* (the rhetorical device that substitutes one gender for another) in European homoerotic poetry (Stehling, *Poems* xxxi). But I do wish to observe that some specialists of Arabic are growing increasingly impatient with Parryesque denials of same-sex love in the literature of the medieval Muslim world. For instance, Norman Roth, who has written extensively on boy-love in medieval Arabic and Hebrew poetry (see bibliography), comments that this pederastic verse has often been rationalized as "allegory or mere literary device." He bluntly reiterates the case for its homoerotic nature: "as to allegory and literary cliché [in Arabic boy-love poetry], it is finally time to say right out that this is nonsense" (*Care* 114).

I share some of Roth's apparent frustration, yet, as I have argued here, the modern Western rewriting of medieval Arabic homoerotic poetry displays an internal logic: such explaining away is implicitly encouraged in a culture still ruled by the myth of heterosexuality, as predictable as the Western medieval image of Mohammed the debauched sodomite. The same mechanisms that are used to divide one culture from another—in this case, Islamic from Christian—function within a culture to establish hierarchies of domination, between men and women, gay and straight, and others. If prejudice and discrimination don't always begin at "home," as I believe it does in the way

that the sodomitical Mohammed is rooted in changing European responses to homosexuality, sooner or later such bigotry returns there to roost.

- ¹ Said's work builds on a solid foundation of earlier studies of medieval Orientalism by Daniel (*Arabs, Islam*), R. W. Southern, Bernard Lewis, W. M. Watt, W. W. Comfort, Samuel Chew, C. M. Jones, D. C. Munro, and others.
- ² Recent scholars who do consider Arabic influences on medieval English literature are Dorothee Metlitzki, Alice E. Lasater, and Katharine S. Gittes.
- ³ Since Western heterosexual polemic linked homoeroticism with idolatry on the authority of 1 Romans: 26 (Brooten 63) and since Latin Christians mischaracterized Muslims as idolaters (Daniel, *Islam* 309-15), homosexuality and Mohammed readily coalesced in European thought. Jews were also seen as idolatrous Others (Camille 90).
- ⁴ Throughout this essay, I discuss what Daniel distinguishes as the "official attitude" of Christian polemicists toward Mohammed and Islam. The unofficial or popular attitude, voiced, for instance, by the poets of the *chansons de geste*, maintains that Saracens are sexually indulgent, but not given to "unnatural" vices (Daniel, *Saracens* 73-78).
- ⁵ Thomas Stehling (*Poems*) translates verse from the European Latin tradition and Norman Roth from the Arabic-Hebrew tradition.

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RACIAL/RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL QUEERNESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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As the work of historians like Boswell, Moore, and Spreitzer strongly suggests, the medieval construction of sexuality is importantly intertwined with constructions of gender, race and religion. In "the formation of a persecuting society," the fortunes of