

KARLA MALLETTE, *LIVES OF THE GREAT LANGUAGES: ARABIC AND LATIN IN THE MEDIEVAL MEDITERRANEAN*, THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, CHICAGO – LONDON 2021, 264 PP., ISBN: 9780226795904

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This is an unusual book. It reads more like an extended essay rather than an academic monograph. Appropriately to the aim of the book, the author delights in language, and laces her exposition with references to popular culture ('Death Cab for Cutie', 'Hepburn-Tracy movie'), poetic expression ('Like words traced in the sand whilst the tide is out'), and even neologisms ('cathect' and 'gramatica') composed especially for concepts that are too subtle for ordinary language. Among her inventions appears to be description of the languages concerned (Arabic and Latin) as 'Alexandrian' – a term she finds more appropriate than 'cosmopolitan' (a term used generally as a *faute de mieux*) or 'great' (as in the title).

Altogether the book is very positive and upbeat. It is an evaluation of the shared virtues of Arabic and Latin: they are both learned languages; they both form entrées into the world beyond national boundaries; they both elevate the mind to a higher level of thought; they make their speakers or readers citizens of a global community. They differ in that the trajectory of Latin is from a language of empire which reached a second peak in the Renaissance and then slowly declined as the vernaculars gained in literary importance; whilst Arabic (as the pure and noble *fushā* language) entered the world all at once with the revelation of the Qur'ān and never lost its exalted position in the Muslim world. But there is a sufficient groundswell of likeness for them to be compared, and the book takes the form of a series of anecdotes, usually pairing Arabic with Latin. The self-consciousness of Arabic, by which the unity of the 'Abbasid empire was forged; the love of Latin (in the person of Petrarch) which helped shape the culture of the European Renaissance. The crossing of boundaries – the *limes* (originally, ridge/bank between two fields) in Latin; the *thaghr* (originally the front teeth, which separated the inside of man from the outside world) in Arabic – by merchants and scholars. For the exiled Dante, Latin was the language of the world, which had become his home. For Sibawayhi, an 'a'jam' (meaning a barbarian, and more specifically a Persian), pinning Arabic down in a grammar was a way to capture the scattered words and phrases he had gleaned from the nomadic Arabs, and form them into a

stable structure. Latin and Arabic were both languages of travellers, akin, as Mallette puts it, to a tribal rug (p. 81), beautiful and intricate, which made a home of whichever place it was laid out on. Latin and Arabic both became languages of religions, so unifying the whole people of a religion. But language also entailed narrative, and the spread of stories, especially the ‘fantastic tale’, is another theme of this book: ‘fabula’ in Latin translates *khurāfa* in Arabic, which in turn is the legendary figure who was carried off by the jinn and returned to earth with otherworldly tales. The last incident is described in the great unfinished Arabic-English lexicon compiled by the Victorian gentleman, Edward William Lane (1801-1876), whom Mallette calls « the spy in the house of language », because he spent years immersing himself in Arabic culture and delving into Arabic dictionaries in order to display the richness and variety of the Arabic language (which he often illustrated by parallels in Latin). A later chapter, provocatively called *Silence*, documents the progressive silencing of Latin (unevenly in different contexts) but at the same time explores the creativity of silence. In the view of Philip of Harveng, who wrote a treatise *De silentio clericorum*, silence was preferable to using the unruly vernacular languages. There are dangers as well as benefits in extending knowledge to those who are outside the élite speakers of Latin and the *fushā*, such as women and the riff-raff. The global reach of the Alexandrian languages also entails an elitism, which separates the *litterati* from the uneducated, the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ (Arabic was pure, morally good and beautiful in respect to incorrect speech). The social and ethical effects of the rise of the vernaculars and the advent of the printing press occupy the last pages of the book, which finishes with instances of contemporary authors’ choices of language, and ends with the example of how the varieties of a modern global language – English – can be used to imitate the kaleidoscope of al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt* in Michael Cooperson’s inventive translation, published in 2020 by New York University Press.

The range of this book is impressive. Perhaps more could have been said about the interaction of Arabic and Latin (in addition to the comparison between them), but this subject has already been introduced in a recent book edited by Daniel König: *Latin and Arabic: Entangled Histories* (Heidelberg, 2019). What Karla Mallette has done is to provide a paeon to Arabic and Latin (or, as she puts it in respect to Latin (p. 177) « a ballad for a language that is dead »). The theme keeps recurring, like a rondeau, and Mallette, being herself sensitive to the music of language, carries the reader with her from the opening phrases to the last chord.