Early Modern Europe was witness to an unprecedented interest in learning the Arabic language. This philological interest was connected to the evidence of Arabic similarity with Hebrew and the usefulness of Arabic grammars and dictionaries for studying the Holy Tongue. A field of knowledge was gradually created in which Arabic detached itself from its use as an instrument of proselytizing or diplomacy. This shift occurred through the translation and citation of Arabic sources, the purchase and cataloguing of Arabic manuscripts in the main libraries of Europe and an attempt to institutionalize the teaching of Arabic at universities. The exhaustive study of the Bible and its various textual traditions, the need to coordinate these with newly acquired knowledge of other languages, including Arabic, and the refinement of historiographic and philological tools which were the accompanying processes all contributed to dismantling the walls between sacred and profane history. This package of new knowledge can be labelled ‘Orientalism’. As applied by scholars to this period, the term refers to a crucial moment in the creation of Oriental studies in Europe characterised by the foundational activities of figures like Erpenius, Raimondi or Bedwell. This refers to both their works and their search for new texts with which to learn Oriental languages. Such ‘Oriental scholarship’ or early ‘Orientalism’ proved itself capable of creating basic critical, historical and philological tools which were problematic for extant textual and religious authority. The religious dimension was ever-present in a world dominated by polemics with the Europe of the Reformation and by the process of confessionalization.

Ever since James Monroe published his well-known book on Arabic studies in Spain, scholars have argued that Spain played no part in the development of
Oriental studies in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It seems as if Spain was almost an Oriental country rather than a producer of Oriental scholarship. Other European nations characterised Spain as ‘Oriental’ in an effort to challenge its imperial dominion over other European countries. This interpretation remained the norm in Italy, France, and the Netherlands, and it caused much consternation among Early Modern Spaniards themselves, who acutely resented representation of their country as one embedded in Judaism and Islam. Italians spoke of the ‘peccadiglio di Spagna’ (not believing in the Trinity) to refer, with irony and disdain, to the mixed origin of Spaniards and their ambiguous religious identity. Erasmus of Rotterdam, in a famous letter to Thomas More in 1517, explained why he had turned down an invitation from Cardinal Cisneros to travel to Spain to work on the Polyglot Bible, writing that he did not like a country that was so deeply semitized. This representation of the country affected the position of Spain in Europe and its aspirations within the Catholic world. In relation to Italy, it was especially painful when Spaniards were living their so-called ‘Italian hour’. The disdain provoked in Europe by the mixed origins of Spaniards created a game of mirrors in which Spain displayed a defensive attitude towards all belief deemed deviant within the heart of Hispanic Catholicism.

But it was during this same period that the study of Arabic and other Oriental languages, albeit fraught with difficulties, started to emerge, as we shall show in this contribution: in Spain, Arabic manuscripts were collected for noble or royal libraries, where they were catalogued and studied; chairs of Arabic were created at universities; Arabic sources were used for various scholarly endeavours, and Spanish scholars corresponded with their colleagues in other European countries and became aware of the role played in Rome by members of the Oriental Churches. However, such aspects will only be tan-

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