CHAPTER 11

Learning Arabic in the Overseas Factories: The Case of the English*

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Introduction: The Claims of Scholarship

One of the arguments consistently advanced for studying Arabic in early modern Europe was the practical utility of the language in light of Europe’s growing mercantile and diplomatic relations with the Arabic-speaking world. In the preface which they added to their father’s pioneering Arabic-Latin dictionary (the first ever printed), the Raphelengius brothers explained that one of the motives that had urged their father to undertake the work was his frequently being asked by merchants of his acquaintance to interpret Arabic letters for them.1 In 1620 the first full professor of Arabic at the University of Leiden, Thomas Erpenius, advised his students that they ‘could not fail to recognise’ how useful a knowledge of Arabic – the common language of Egypt, Libya, costal Africa, Arabia, and Palestine – would be for the purpose of ‘African and Asiatic journeys’.2 In 1648 the German scholar, Christian Ravius, recommending a knowledge of even a smattering of Arabic to his contemporaries in the

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commercial world, declared that: ‘a Merchant that can onely prattle, shall buy any ware cheaper, and at a better rate, than he that can speake nothing’.

On the face of it, these arguments were reasonable enough. The scholarly study of Arabic, especially as it developed in France, the Netherlands, and England, was closely intertwined with these countries’ diplomatic and mercantile interests in North Africa and the Levant. Many of the most distinguished Arabists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – men such as Guillame Postel, André du Ryer, Jacobus Golius, and Edward Pococke – gained first-hand experience of the Arabic-speaking world in the service of European embassies or commercial enterprises. Scholars occasionally served their governments by translating diplomatic correspondence, and at least one of the professorial chairs in Arabic established in the seventeenth century (the Thomas Adams professorship of Arabic at Cambridge) was funded by a merchant. However, in other respects these arguments were problematic. Firstly, although Europeans did trade in cities with large Arabic-speaking populations, such as Aleppo and Cairo, the seat of European diplomacy with the Ottoman Empire (which by the sixteenth century included Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and parts of Arabia) was in Istanbul. Here, it was not Arabic, but Turkish which served as the primary medium of communication; it might thus have been argued justly that Turkish, rather than Arabic, would have proved more useful to the requirements of diplomacy. Secondly, the stress on the practical usage of Arabic masked a divergence of interests between scholars and their contemporaries in the commercial and diplomatic spheres. Broadly speaking, Arabic studies were pursued in the early modern European universities for two reasons. On the one hand, it was conceived that knowledge bearing on various branches of the sciences, in particular mathematics, medicine, and astronomy, had been preserved in Arabic texts, sometimes as translations of ancient Greek authors and sometimes as original contributions. In many ways, this was a continuation of an urge which had impelled the study of Arabic in Europe in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, an interest in Arabic was spurred by the humanistic approach to interpreting the Bible. Scholars both hoped to profit from versions of the biblical texts preserved in Arabic by the various eastern churches, and to draw on Arabic literature in an attempt to reconstruct a linguistic and broader historical context within which to understand the Hebrew Old Testament. Neither of these two reasons had very much to do with the practical business of trade and diplomacy in the contemporary Arabic-speaking world. It is worth adding too that Arabic – more than any European language – differs in its written and spoken forms. Early modern scholars were almost exclusively

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