REVIEWS


"Perhaps the most violent humanistic debate of the twentieth century": thus does Federico Corriente describe the controversies surrounding the unique strophic poetry of medieval Al-Andalus. Such strong words scarcely seem exaggerated to those who have participated in, or followed from without, the impassioned arguments of scholars from several countries. In 1948 Samuel Stern revealed to the Western world that Hebrew muwashshahāt often ended in a refrain, or kharja, composed in a mixture of colloquial Andalusi Arabic and Romance. Almost at once, in 1952, Emilio García Gómez identified a group of Arabic muwashshahāt with the same kind of ending. Later investigations turned up more examples, and the number of kharajāt that contain at least one or two words in Romance stands today at almost seventy. (The attention focused on these poems has almost eclipsed the fact that purely Arabic kharajāt are vastly more numerous, totaling about 370.)

Early in this century Julián Ribera had posited the survival in the Iberian Peninsula, under Arab rule, of a native lyric poetry in the Romance vernacular—verse that would have been preserved continuously by the original Hispano-Roman inhabitants, and even been reinforced by the influx of new Romance speakers such as Christian slave-girls from the North. But no examples of such ancient poetry existed. Small wonder that the surfacing of the bilingual kharajāt was hailed as an almost miraculous confirmation of Ribera’s inspired guess. Here were brief lyrics (typically of only one to three lines), often singing of love, frequently placed in the mouths of women, and mixing the two spoken languages of al-Andalus, that famously tolerant and ethnically mixed society. Arab and Jewish poets, in incorporating these verses into their muwashshahāt, must have been reproducing the songs that they heard all around them. In doing so they created a new poetic form: the five-stanza muwashshaha in Classical Arabic (the Hebrew form is a derivative), ending in a piquant refrain in which the repeating rhyme of the poem is retained while the language itself switches to the colloquial mode.

Throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s Emilio García Gómez, who towered over the field of Arabic studies in Spain, elaborated virtually unchallenged his interpretation of the muwashshaha/kharja complex. He published all the known Arabic muwashshahāt whose kharajāt contained any Romance element, but only in transliteration; he also edited, in the same Latin-letter form, the unique manuscript of the azjal of Ibn Quzmān. García Gómez was convinced that both muwashshah and azjal were composed in a Romance metrical system that long predated these Arabic verse forms: the poets who composed them had ignored ‘arīḍ and taken as their prosodic base a syllabic, stress-timed rhythm. The “Romance” kharajāt were, at the same time, the fragmentary survivors of earlier strophic poems and the individual metrical models for the muwashshahāt in which they appeared. This scholar determined just what
the rhythm of each Arabic poem was—its number of syllables, the pattern of its stresses—and quoted "an ancient rhythmic parallel": an actual Spanish poem, often an anonymous popular lyric, composed in the same prosodic form. In a remarkable tour de force, García Gómez's Spanish translations of the muwashshahāt and azjāl were all rendered in the appropriate versification.

Corriente argues that this view, that Andalusi strophic poetry was in its essence shaped by Romance models, had its basis in a pro-Christian/European, anti-Muslim/Arab ideology. It was simply impossible for earlier generations of Spanish Arabists to believe that Islam brought to their country "anything more than some tens of thousands of barbarous and rapacious tribesmen" (14; this and all translations mine). By pushing back the origins of Romance lyric to pre-Arab times, these scholars felt that "the catastrophe of 711 was redressed by the moral and cultural victory of the so-called 'Hispano-Muslims', thus handily converted into genuine Spaniards avant la lettre" (14). On this bias the whole edifice of kharja studies has been built: the thematic and formal parallels with lyric poetry in other Romance languages, including that of the Provençal troubadours; the interpretation of difficult palæographic cruxes as Romance, rather than Arabic, words; the celebration of the supposed "féminine" (and therefore, native) element in the Romance refrains. Questioning or refutation of these views was not only met with vituperation by their principal exponent, but was difficult to support in the absence of reliable texts and editions. One of the most complete manuscripts of muwashshahāt containing kharajāt with Romance elements was until recently in private hands, unseen by all except García Gómez, who published its texts, as stated above, in transliteration only.

This scholar's prestige, his prolific output, and his iron control over the direction of Hispano-Arabic studies made dissent from his views for a long time almost unthinkable. But in the 1970's and 1980's voices of doubt began to be raised. Outside Spain, Arabists who were beyond the Spaniard's sphere of influence began to suggest alternative possibilities: T. Gorton and later G. Schoeler, that the meters of the muwashshah and zajal might obey strict rules of Khalilian 'arūd after all; R. Hitchcock, that words from the kharajāt previously interpreted as Romance might actually be Arabic. A. Jones published photographic facsimiles of the Romance and bilingual kharajāt and edited in Arabic the privately owned manuscript of Ibn Bishrī's ʿUddat al-Jalis. In the United States, J.T. Monroe continued to defend the origins of the kharja in Romance lyric, but with many significant departures from García Gómez's views and methods. And from within Spain F. Corriente became the first to approach this poetry from the viewpoint of a linguist rather than a literary scholar (he was the author, in 1977, of the first complete study of the medieval Andalusi Arabic dialect).

The volume under review constitutes Corriente's summing up of many years of thinking and writing about strophic poetry (the bibliography includes more than twenty of his previous publications on this topic). Chapter I defines the terms muwashshah, zajal (here cejel), and kharja (here xarja), and analyzes their structures, divided into strophic, metrical, linguistic, and thematic. For Corriente, the strophic arrangement, rhyme, and meter of these poems unquestionably obeys the norms of Classical 'arūd, though adapted to the phonology of Andalusi Arabic by the substitution of stress for length; more on this important issue below. As to the themes of the kharajāt, the author shows convincingly (39-69) that there is no detectable difference between those of the colloquial Arabic, and those of the Romance, refrains. Whether the subject is the lover and the beloved, love itself, the poem's...