

BOOK REVIEWS



Sahar Amer. *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures.* The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 252. ISBN: 9780812240870.

Crossing Borders is an exciting interdisciplinary work with much to offer scholars in medieval literature and culture, global feminism, and queer studies. Amer's book focuses on Etienne de Fougères's twelfth-century *Livre des Manières*, the thirteenth-century epic *Yde et Olive*, and Jean Renart's thirteenth-century romance *Escoufle* and puts these in dialogue with medieval Arabic erotic treatises, *The Story of Qamar al-Zaman and Princess Boudour* (from *One Thousand and One Nights*) and the courtly Arabic *zarf* tradition. The French texts, all of which feature female same-sex relations on some level, were chosen because of the previously unacknowledged Arabic intertext. Amer's central thesis is that shifting our readings of the French texts from a monocultural (read: Western) perspective to a cross-cultural perspective "renames" the medieval lesbian and challenges the traditional view that lesbians did not exist as a category in the European Middle Ages.

Amer argues convincingly that literary female friendships long thought to be secondary to heterosexual and male homosocial relationships in these works are far more complex, nuanced, and sexualized when read through the lens of medieval Arabic culture. Moreover, the Arabic intertext reveals "a textual strategy, a cross-cultural literary technique of speaking and of naming that which remained too dangerous to depict openly in medieval Europe" (16). The silence surrounding female homoeroticism in the European Middle Ages is revealed not to be so silent when read through this cross-cultural lens. For example, the unusual name of the cross-dressing character Yde is remarkably similar to the name of the first lesbian cited by Arabic authors in the tenth century, Iyadiyyah (where "iyyah" is a diminutive suffix in Arabic).

Amer's book proceeds from more obvious examples of intertext to more

subtle and complex “border crossings.” In her analysis of Fougères’s *Livre des Manières* in chapter two, Amer argues that the military metaphors Fougères uses for female same-sex relations (lance, joust, and shield) may have been drawn from Arabic texts that predate this work. These same metaphors (used for all erotic encounters) do not become common in French texts until the thirteenth century. This more obvious example of cross-cultural linguistic borrowing lays the groundwork for her later analyses of thematic and narrative “border crossings.”

Chapter three focuses on cross-dressing and looks at how the epic *Yde et Olive* crosses “sartorial lines” through its intertext with *The Story of Qamar al-Zaman and Princess Boudour*. Amer identifies not only gender as an identity position being negotiated through clothing in this text but also class and social status. In so doing, she demonstrates that traditional academic monocultural readings of medieval French literature are inadequate and oppressive on multiple levels. While *Yde et Olive* “recuperates the cross-dressed Yde and silences the transgressive voice of the ‘third term,’ the Arabic tale does not interrupt the workings of this ‘third term,’ and allows a move toward a new structure where heterosexuality is viewed as only one possibility in a larger chain” (86). The silencing of same-sex love in the French text is revoiced through its Arabic intertextuality, what Amer argues is a conscious textual strategy to name the nameless, here the medieval French lesbian.

In her analysis of Jean Renart’s *Escoufle* in chapter four, Amer argues that same-sex relations between women in medieval French literature can be found through a cross-cultural reading “without recourse to cross-dressing.” Amer expands previous scholarly work (such as E. Jane Burns’s *Courtly Love Undressed*) to show how the inclusion of Eastern materials as signifiers in the text allows us to reread other aspects of the text as cross-cultural. Amer’s analysis of the language used to describe female friendships and textiles is fascinating and shows how deliberately ambiguous the text is with its echoes of Arabic terms and stories. One example is the detail that the coat given to Aelis by the lady of Montpellier has no fastener. In the Arabic tradition, metaphors of unfastened robes are sexual in nature. Without the Arabic intertext, such subtle hints would go unnoticed.

In chapter five, Amer expands her analysis of *Escoufle* and looks further at how the cross-cultural character of Aelis opens up a liminal space for the resistant reader to explore female same-sex relations. Throughout the book, Amer acknowledges the influence of Roberta Krueger’s theory of the resistant medieval female reader who found a space to construct her own identity sometimes at odds with the dominant reading of a text. In *Escoufle*, Aelis supports

herself and her friend Ysabel through an embroidery business in Montpellier. Amer argues that the high status of women in the Arabic tradition of *zarf* or “courtliness” provided a template for the character of Aelis as an educated, cultured, and independent woman. As Amer notes, the influence of Arabic *zarf* on medieval courtliness is consistently downplayed or ignored in the academy today, despite a number of interesting books on the subject. (See, in particular, María Rose Menocal’s work.) While the origins of courtliness are not the focus of Amer’s book, it is a topic that medievalists need to rethink when teaching and researching courtly behavior in the West. Amer continues her cross-cultural analysis and reads Aelis’s entry into the Saint-Gilles household as the Countess’s friend as a case of lesbian ghosting with the establishment of a potential harem. Here Amer asks the reader to reconsider the Western view of the harem and to see it as a space where women could engage in same-sex friendships and loves. Ultimately, Amer’s cross-cultural reading of *Escoufle* (and these other texts) “re-voices” the silenced lesbians of the medieval West and identifies new spaces where medieval women could have contested the dominant virgin/wife/widow or virgin/whore schemas.

Somewhat surprisingly in a feminist book titled *Crossing Borders*, Amer does not reference the Latina feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on border theory and the identity of the *mestiza* (a woman of mixed race and/or culture). Aelis fits Anzaldúa’s characterization of the *mestiza* as a liminal and transgressive figure who provides these possibilities of alternate identity construction. Anzaldúa’s work on border crossings and multiple identity positions could provide additional insights into Amer’s cross-cultural perspective.

The political implications of Amer’s work are profound as she endeavors to find these female voices not just in medieval French literature but also in Arabic literature where they continue to be neglected and censored. In one of the most fascinating sections, Amer recounts her difficulties in accessing erotic Arabic texts in today’s world. An Arab bookseller in Alexandria, Egypt, refused to even show her an uncensored copy of the tenth-century Arabic erotic treatise, the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, to say nothing of actually selling her the book. At some points in her research, Amer had to use male intercessors to get copies of Arabic erotic works. While this lack of access is not the focus of her book, it speaks to the importance of work like Amer’s to feminist scholars today, both in the West and in the Muslim world.

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