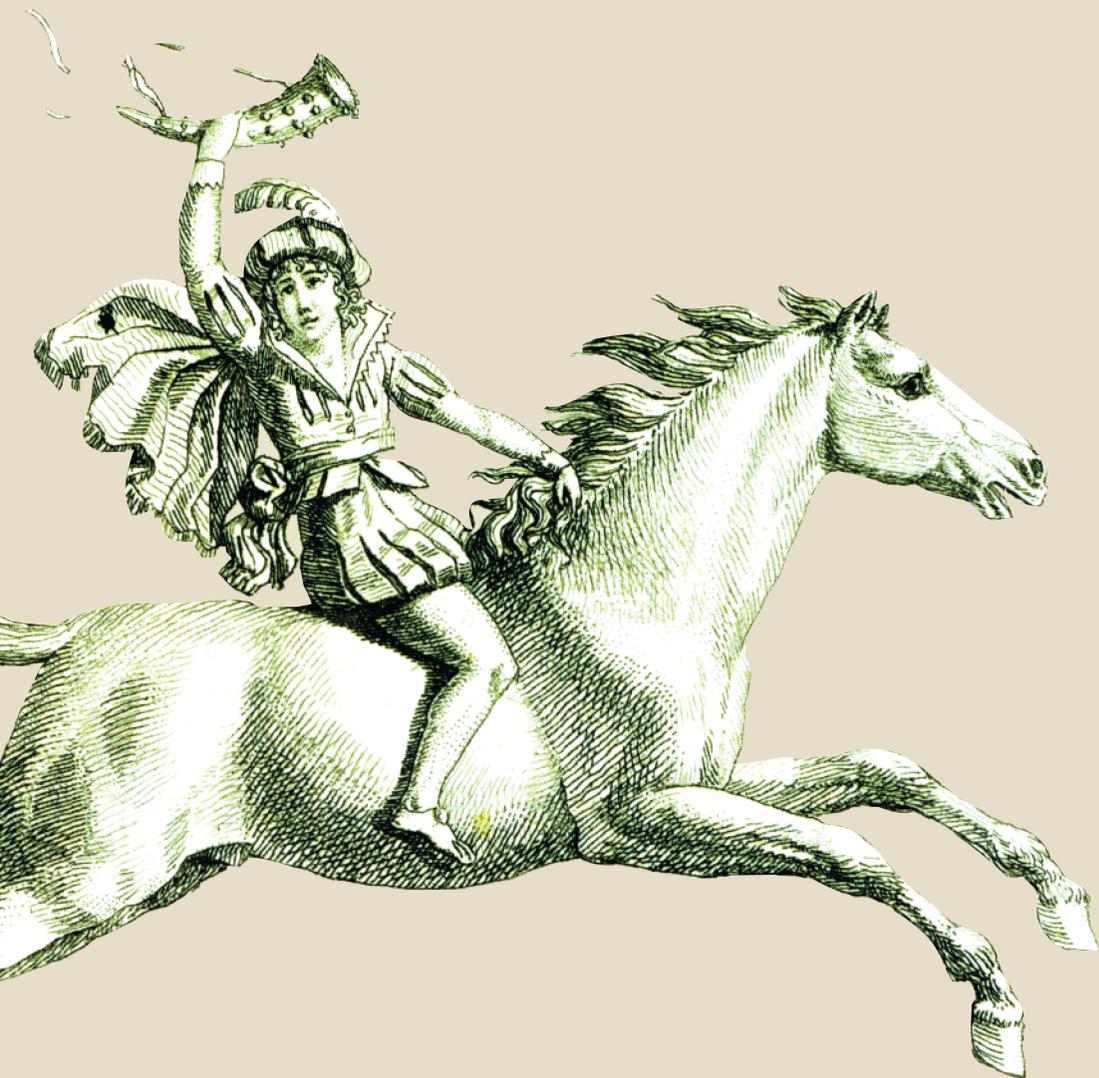Editor: KARL FUGELSO

Studies in Medievalism XXX

Politics and Medievalism (Studies) II

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Founded by Leslie J. Workman

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Studies in Medievalism

Studies in Medievalism provides an interdisciplinary medium of exchange for scholars in all fields, including the visual and other arts, concerned with any aspect of the post-medieval idea and study of the Middle Ages and the influence, both scholarly and popular, of this study on Western society after 1500.

Acknowledgments

Studies in Medievalism

I: Essays on Politics and Medievalism (Studies)

II: Other Responses to Medievalism

Illustrations

Two great principles divide the world, and contend for the master, antiquity and the middle ages. These are the two civilizations that have preceded us, the two elements of which ours is composed. All political as well as religious questions reduce themselves practically to this. This is the great dualism that runs through our society.

<div align="right">Lord Acton</div>

Preface

Selecting a timely theme for a volume to be published eighteen months later often requires considerable prescience, not to mention a little serendipity. But that was not the case with this installment of *Studies in Medievalism*. Indeed, this volume could hardly have been dedicated to anything other than political medievalism (studies), for its predecessor had far more accepted submissions on that subject than would fit into a single volume.

This volume therefore echoed its predecessor in calling for essays that build on particular examples of medievalism to address the following, larger questions:

> How exactly have professional and amateur politicians misconstrued, mangled, and manipulated the Middle Ages and to what end? How have politics influenced the development of medievalism and/or study of it? In what sense, if any, is it possible to have medievalism (studies) without politics? How might medievalism otherwise be deployed in professional or amateur politics?

And judging from the fact that this call for papers joined its predecessor in attracting an extraordinarily large number of responses, there can be little doubt that its theme has enduring resonance for contemporary scholars.

Indeed, given the current state of academic, national, and global affairs, the wonder may be that scholars of medievalism are writing about anything *besides* politics. Since the 2008 recession, populists have severely tested and often overturned the established political order in many regions, frequently with disastrous consequences for liberal values and their defenders. That, in turn, has often led to a backlash, particularly by academics and other intellectuals who have recently seen their priorities, funding, and sometimes entire institutions devastated by the opposition. And emotions on both sides are now being exacerbated by a global pandemic, authoritarian crackdowns, and other demonstrations of the many divisions between and within that larger polarity.

Amid past crises of such magnitude, many people found refuge in a halcyonic, often highly imaginary vision of the Middle Ages. But with ever-expanding knowledge of that era and with the growth of self-awareness and skeptical postmodern perspectives, such retreats have been more challenging and often displaced by a tendency to find medieval parallels for contemporary problems. Perhaps more than ever before, the era has become a tool to score political points about the present, be it that of the medievalist or their

examiner, as can be seen not only in the nine essays constituting the first, overtly thematic section of this volume but also in all four articles constituting the second, "open" section.

In the first section's opening essay, "Medievalism and Gulf-War Politics in Tariq Ali's *A Sultan in Palermo*," Louise D'Arcens discusses how Ali's 2005 novel, like two of the other four in his Islam Quintet, demonstrates how the Islamic world of the Middle Ages can be a particularly apt lens through which to see and refract the volatile geopolitics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While never losing sight of the ways in which the author intimately limns cross-cultural and interfaith friendships, she exposes how a "dynamic, sophisticated, and open-minded supranational *ummah*" spirals down into instability and conflict that overtly foreshadow the Middle East at the time Ali was writing. She finds a parallel to his many essays in which he fights the common assumption that contemporary Islam is a monolith divorced from its past and without hope for the sort of *convivencia* that, despite the downward spin of his plot, remains a possibility in the Palermo of his title.

Such deployment of the Middle Ages as a model of internationalism would, however, seem to be far less common than grounding later nationalism in that period, as Stephen Lahey observes in one particular branch of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century thought. In "Czech Political Medievalism: Tomáš G. Masaryk and Petr Chelčický" he traces the many ways in which Masaryk, as the driving force behind the 1918 formation of Czechoslovakia and as its first president, built his case on the model and tenets of Chelčický, who was an innovative fifteenth-century figure in Czech vernacular theology. Lahey then underscores that, even with reference to that particular predecessor, Masaryk was not alone in such attempts to legitimize contemporary politics by invoking the past, for Chelčický was recast quite differently by later scholars when they addressed the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948 and the 1989 disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Unlike those reinterpretations, which were somewhat constrained by the comparatively extensive and detailed documentation of Chelčický and his circumstances, reimaginings of Robin Hood would seem to have very few limits, as Alexander L. Kaufman underscores in "Robin Hood Political Memes: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, and the Far Right's Appropriation of the English Outlaw." Through a survey of political memes from the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the author traces the ways in which extremely conservative writers and artists, particularly in America, have warped the heroic Robin Hood and his ideology into "something nefarious and degenerate" that supposedly represents the plans and perspectives of Clinton and Obama. Particularly by recasting those two liberal leaders as sinister renditions of the English outlaw, these critics suggest that, rather than promoting a fair, righteous, long overdue transference of wealth from the

rich to the poor, the Democrats are cynically using that pretense to disguise their displacement of all capitalism with a communist redistribution that will above all reward the unworthy.

Another English hero, St. George, has been no less manipulated to advance political beliefs, though, as Susan Aronstein and Laurie Finke note in their study of Rory Mullarkey's 2017 play *Saint George and the Dragon*, he is primarily deployed to promote nationalism amid such moments of collective insecurity as England is currently undergoing. In "Cry George: Grounding English National Identity in the Age of Brexit" the authors examine how Mullarkey, on the one hand, links the medieval to the modern in suggesting that national, specifically English, identity endures unchanged and, on the other hand, illustrates how the past can be adapted to pull particular communities into that national identity. Through a postmodern reinvention of a time-traveling English icon, the playwright argues with reference to Britain's planned exit from the European Union that it is time for the country to free itself from such myths and legends that imprison its citizens in a misplaced and harmful nostalgia and thereby fuel an even more misplaced and more harmful optimism.

Some of that harm in terms of reinforcing derogatory national stereotypes is chronicled in John C. Ford's "'Once More into the Breach!': Allusions to Agincourt and the Medieval Past in Cross-Channel Political Reporting of Brexit." In combing through periodicals from Britain and France since the 600th anniversary of the October 15, 1415 Battle of Agincourt, and particularly since the British decided in June 2016 to leave the European Union, the author has found an extraordinary range of different ways in which this English victory over the French has been reimagined so as to support the contemporaneous agendas of the interpreter and/or their audience. Often building on extreme generalizations held by at least some of their compatriots, and sometimes embodying their opponents' reciprocal biases, myriad journalists defend or attack Brexit as a logical outgrowth of national tensions and traits that run in a continuous line back to that battle and the even earlier Middle Ages.

The influence of national identity, specifically German, on remembrance of a much more recent battle is the subject of Galit Noga-Banai's "Rest in Gold: A Medieval-Like Memorial for German Soldiers at El Alamein." Concentrating on the key mosaic of a German monument for their fallen at the 1942 turning point of WW II's Desert War, and building on earlier discussions of the site's architecture, the author argues that the monument's form and content overtly reference medieval predecessors and thereby invite pilgrimage of a medieval sort. Through medievalist parallels the moral and ethical implications of commemorating soldiers in the Nazi cause are skewed towards portraying them as martyrs akin to medieval saints.

Though the implications may be less dramatic, not to mention tragic,

nationalist politics are no less present in Leticia Álvarez-Recio's "Provenance and Reception of Iberian Chivalric Books in English from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century: The Case of Anthony Munday's *Palmendos* (1589)." In tracing ownership of the three extant copies from this book of conduct's first edition, Álvarez-Recio attempts to determine when and where it began to be taken seriously as a collector's item and as a subject of scholarship. The result is a powerful indictment of how nationalist biases in academia and publishing can impact the reception and dissemination of literary (and other) works.

Nor is nationalism absent from the way in which entire religious and cultural movements are received, as is explored by Ethan Doyle White's "In Woden's Shadow: Anglo-Saxonism, Paganism, and Politics in Modern England." While focusing on two Pagan groups that have emerged in England during the past thirty years but differ widely in belief, practice, and self-identification, the author demonstrates the range of not only non-Abrahamic religious systems but also the ways in which the early Middle Ages can be appropriated to support radically different agendas within the same realm of nationalistic bias. Through subjects who loudly, proudly, and often in a racist way claim descendance from the Anglo-Saxons and other communities wrapped in national, cultural, and ethnic stereotypes that are often quite exclusionary, elitist, and offensive, White foregrounds non-mainstream venues that are often ignored by academics but reveal just how widespread nationalism is in medievalism.

Indeed, one can hardly miss such nationalism in the most popular medievalist work of the twenty-first century, as Matthias D. Berger discusses in "The West Remembers (Its Premodern Self): Nation, Civilization, and the Insular Middle Ages in *Game of Thrones*." After outlining parallels between, on the one hand, the quasi-fictional states within the televised version of J. R. R. Martin's seven-book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* and, on the other hand, actual modern nations, Berger explores the ways in which the states in *Game of Thrones* relate in practice and concept to their medieval counterparts, and to modern geopolitics. Through a double game that builds on Martin's approach, the show runners suggest that modern disillusionment with internationalism, with the rise of authoritarianism, and with the decline of human rights go back to the Middle Ages yet are best expressed through a blatantly fantastical interpretation of that period.

Though often practiced in a conspicuously non-contemporary manner and though not explicitly political as such, another form of manipulation for gain, toxic masculinity, also suffuses *Game of Thrones* to such a degree and in such a way as to link the show and the Middle Ages to an emphatically modern concern. As Shiloh Carroll details in "The Emasculation of Theon Greyjoy," which is the first of four articles in the second, "open" section of this volume, the television program departs from the books on which it is based in that it

celebrates and rewards masculine dominance rather than merely highlights it. In such scenes as that mentioned in her title, the show runners have their characters and societies positively reinforce toxic masculinity instead of punish or discourage it, as a distinctly modern form of gender politics shares the stage with the more traditional politics discussed by Berger.

The extreme misogyny that often, indeed perhaps inevitably accompanies toxic masculinity may be more overt in the show than in the books, but as Karen A. Winstead notes in "George R. R. Martin and the Virgin Martyr: Misogyno-feminism and the (Ab)uses of the Past," Martin acknowledges and defends including it via a political maneuver not dissimilar to that the show runners use for including it and toxic masculinity. However, while Martin may indeed believe that, like the show runners, he is being faithful to the Middle Ages in including such misogyny, he is undoubtedly paralleling the medieval practice of setting sexual violence in a remote, supposedly barbarian past. As in many a virgin-martyr tale from the Middle Ages, he protects himself and his audience by celebrating sympathetic gender-bending heroines and condemning the men who abuse them amid a malignant persecutory culture that is set at a very far, and therefore presumably very safe, distance in the past.

Similar temporal distancing is employed in a popular 2018 novel with regard to its grounding in retellings of *Beowulf*, which S. C. Thomson argues in "The Composite Unity of the Entangled Self in Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife*" is a way not only to comment via historical parallel on such contemporary concerns as femininity and race but also to provide an innovative model for presenting artistic works and individual selves as composite constructs that are nevertheless profoundly individualized. By contrasting two key characters articulated through plural voices, Headley suggests the extent to which they and the novel as a whole comprise individual expressions grounded in a networked multiplicity. As Thomson notes, the author thereby invites the reader to re-examine not only *Beowulf* but perhaps also all other literary works as just such dualities between which lies not only the essence of each text but also, in the discovery of and participation in the process of the text's becoming, ourselves.

Of course, this journey is often highly constructed, as is evident in many of this volume's other articles and perhaps most conspicuously in the final one, Scott Manning's "Fit for Print, Not for Spectacle: Ringling Bros. and the Careful Exploitation of Joan of Arc." Through a survey of Ringling advertising from 1912 and 1913, the author demonstrates how this circus took advantage of the saint's popularity between her 1909 beatification and 1920 canonization to draw audiences to a biographic spectacle that adapted to not only contemporaneous expectations about her life but also national politics and other circumstances amid which the show would be seen. Once again, the Middle Ages is refracted through a political lens that makes them not only

more compatible with later tastes but also more useful for commenting on later circumstances.

The four articles of the "open" section thereby flow naturally out of the nine essays in the thematic section, as politics in general, and often in their most specific sense, are portrayed in all thirteen as never far from medievalism, or perhaps any other sustained reference to the past. As interpreters seek comfort, precedent, and/or legitimization in history, they inevitably reinvent it, even when attempting to adhere to what is supposedly known about it. And in that manipulation of the past, they, their agendas, and their circumstances are revealed. Thus, this volume of *Studies in Medievalism* offers a model for insight into not only postmedieval politics but also much else about the world since the Middle Ages and perhaps to any other circumstances from which history is referenced. As with so many other examples of the comparatively new and dynamic field it represents, it brings fresh perspectives to a past that may have much to teach us about improving, or at least enduring, the present and future.

I

Essays on Politics and Medievalism (Studies)

Medievalism and Gulf-War Politics in Tariq Ali's *A Sultan in Palermo*

Louise D'Arcens

One day in early 1991, as Tariq Ali was watching the coverage of the First Gulf War, he heard a commentator say "the Arabs are a people without political culture."[1] The statement incensed Ali on several fronts. First, he rejected its reduction of the diversity of Middle Eastern cultures into the flattening descriptor "the Arabs." Secondly, as a Pakistani Briton whose post-partition childhood was shaped by his family's commitment to Marxism, Ali rejected the statement's characterization of Islamicate cultures as religious rather than legitimately political. As a seasoned leftist and anti-colonial activist, he had followed the politics of the Middle East and the wider Islamicate world closely, writing journalism, nonfiction tracts, and creative works on a range of issues. Ali's chief objection to the throwaway remark was to what he saw as its ahistoricism – its dismissal at one stroke of centuries of conquest, governance, and struggle throughout the Islamicate world. Initially planning to write an essay to rebut these claims, he instead found himself travelling to Southern Europe and the Mediterranean to make an episode of the Channel 4 program *Rear Window*, "Islam in Spain: The Final Solution," recounting the history of Islam's influence on medieval European society.[2]

While visiting the palaces, fortresses, and mosques of the Islamic kingdoms of al-Andalus and Sicily, Ali found himself wanting to "bring back the people who had lived around there" for his modern followers.[3] The method he determined would best achieve this was fiction; and so out of this process the 1992 novel *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* was born.[4] Set during the

1   Talat Ahmed, "Interview: Tariq Ali," *Socialist Review*, November 2006 <http://socialistreview.org.uk/311/interview-tariq-ali>, last accessed August 2, 2019.
2   Claire Chambers, "Tariq Ali," in *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*, ed. Claire Chambers (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 33–55 (50).
3   Ahmed, "Interview."
4   Tariq Ali, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (London: Verso, 1992).

Inquisition in Granada in 1499–1501, it was the first of what was to be Ali's Islam Quintet, written across a decade and a half. No fewer than three novels in the Quintet are set in the period widely known as the Middle Ages. In addition to *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, *The Book of Saladin* (1998)[5] follows the rise of its eponymous warrior sultan as he unifies Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, while *A Sultan in Palermo* (2005)[6] is set in Sicily in the final year of the Norman king Roger II's life and rule. Ali's novels show that the medieval Islamicate world, especially in its exchanges and conflicts with the Christian West, continues to attract the modern imagination, offering a past that can be scaled up to offer commentary on volatile modern geo-politics, while also scaling down to offer intimate portraits of cross-cultural and interfaith friendship.

This essay will focus on *A Sultan in Palermo*, showing how it presents a dynamic, sophisticated, and open-minded *ummah* (supranational community) shaped by physical mobility and intercultural encounters within and between the Mediterranean, Levantine, and Arabian regions. Lest this seem too sanguine a portrayal, it is worth clarifying that the dominant condition for contact in this and all of Ali's novels is occupation. As this intercultural dynamism spirals into volatility and, eventually, conflict with the forces of the Christian West, Ali's Arab-Islamic diaspora becomes conspicuously analogous to the colonized and riven Islamicate sphere of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Ali is better known for his political activism, his journalistic commentary on Israel and Palestine, and his account of the Middle East and US neo-colonialism in his 2002 manifesto *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* is a post-9/11 response to Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* challenges Huntington's grandiose thesis of inter-civilizational conflict, which rests on a conviction that animosities between the West and the East emerge out of fundamentally opposed objectives and identities, and replaces it with Ali's own detailed account of intertwined global politics. His novels offer a fictionalized and historicist complement to his political commentary in that book; indeed, Ali's comment in *Clash of Fundamentalisms* that "the world of Islam has not been monolithic for over a thousand years"[7] points to the parallel thinking going on in his fictional and non-fictional writing, as do the allusions he makes to events from Islam's first centuries, many of which form the basis of the novel's narratives. The historical novel has long operated as a mode of soft political intervention, something that has been apparent

5   Tariq Ali, *The Book of Saladin* (London: Verso, 1998).
6   Tariq Ali, *A Sultan in Palermo* (London: Verso, 2005). All future references to this text are to this edition.
7   Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 274.

since Walter Scott allegorized British union in his 1820 novel *Ivanhoe*, set in England during the Norman occupation. It seems especially apparent, however, in novels whose author regards the novels, as Ali does, as a part of their larger political practice.

Given their determinedly Islamicate perspective, describing the novels as "medievalist" requires some justification. Some critics have expressed reservations about the colonizing gesture implicit in extending the term "medieval," with its stubbornly Eurocentric resonance, to societies whose histories owe little to the temporal coordinates of Western Empires or Christianity. Ali's novels, however, notwithstanding their focalization through Muslim characters, anchor their narratives in periods and events that are flashpoints in Islam's (frequently conflictual) encounters and intersections with Christianity and with Jewish diasporic cultures, and as such are able to be described as medievalist texts. He is careful not to treat Islamic–Christian contact as a phenomenon that simply adds color to Western history, but frames the novels' episodes within the story of Islam's fluctuating fortunes. His novels thereby shift the cultural center of gravity in such a way as to take for granted the powerful – and, his novels suggest, wholly beneficial – impact of Islamicate culture on Western Christendom. By viewing the Middle Ages through a transnational and transcultural lens, Ali's novels participate in the growing tendency to challenge the formerly prevalent Eurocentric and nationalistic views of the Middle Ages, offering instead What Sahar Amer and Laura Doyle call a Middle Ages that is "global" *avant la lettre*.[8]

A Sultan in Palermo

In his 2005 novel *A Sultan in Palermo*, Ali turns his attention to the Islamic culture of Norman Sicily. Set in 1153–54, which were the years leading up to the death of the Islamophilic Norman king Roger II, the Siculo-Muslims are facing the end of their centuries-long habitation of the island, where they have lived first as rulers in their own right and then as the majority population of the Norman kingdom of Sicily. Palermo's Muslims live in fear that the city is about to enter a new era of Christian despotism and forced conversions, in which the Norman bishops and barons will manipulate Roger's successor, his son William, who is presented as weak and uninterested in rule. The novel is suffused with a mood of precarity as it tracks the escalating fear that the ailing Roger will capitulate to these groups as well as to the Lombards who had taken up residence in Sicily as part of King Roger's father's attempts to latinize the island. This fear is realized when Roger agrees to the execution of Philip al-Mahdia, his trusted advisor and a covert Muslim, at which point

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[8]   Sahar Amer and Laura Doyle, "Reframing Postcolonial and Global Studies in the Longer Durée," *PMLA* 30.2 (2015), 331–438.

he loses the fragile goodwill of his Muslim allies. Anti-Norman rebellion is fomenting in the provinces, under the leadership of a charismatic figure known only as the Trusted One, and toward the end of the novel one town fights back and slaughters the Lombards who attempt to take it. Meanwhile the Emirs of Syracuse, Catania, and other southern Italian cities prepare themselves to resist the now untrammelled power of the barons. The novel's central narrative culminates in a Norman massacre in Palermo, and ends on a note of unresolved threat and danger, with the promise of more Christian pillage to come. Its coda, titled "Lucera 1250–1300," recounts what came later: the expulsion of the Muslims from the island in 1224 to Lucera in Apulia at the hands of that famous cultural Islamophile, Frederic II. Despite bringing Lucera into prosperity, after Frederick's death they are massacred, with only a few escaping to elsewhere in the Islamicate diaspora. As will be discussed later, this mixture of despair, resistance, and hope is as much a response to the historical moment in which Ali is writing as it is to the one he is portraying.

In her study *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, María Rosa Menocal offers a vivid reconstruction of the Norman Sicilian court, which she describes as a "virtuously incestuous" extension of the Andalusian *convivencia*. Although control over the island had been "lost by the Arabs to the Normans in the eleventh century" after two centuries of Muslim dominance, she argues that under Norman rule it was nevertheless "an even more vibrant center of Arabic learning."[9] In focusing on Sicily's Norman-Islamic culture, *A Sultan in Palermo* also elaborates on the portrayal of al-Andalus in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, depicting Sicily as a twin culture whose flourishing interfaith *convivencia* is nevertheless a fatally imperiled arrangement.

One condition that distinguishes this third medievalist novel from Ali's previous two is the immediacy and intensity of the geopolitical context surrounding its production, and its visibility within the text. While *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* was written in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, and the fragile Israel–Palestine peace process was the general backdrop at the time *The Book of Saladin* was produced, *A Sultan in Palermo* was written during a period of open East–West conflict and in a climate of intensified Western suspicion toward the Islamicate world in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attack on the US. Produced in the early stages of the Allies' military occupation of Afghanistan and later Iraq, the novel is less veiled than its predecessors in its allusions to contemporary events. It is difficult, for instance, not to see a parallel between, on the one hand, the US-led so-called "Coalition of the Willing" who invaded Iraq and, on the other hand, the novel's presentation of the Christian barons, bishops, and Lombards as a thuggish mass united

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[9]   María Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 49, 64.

only by mutual self-interest and anti-Muslim sentiment. Ali's novel adds to the literature that represents the medieval past in such a way as to condemn what the Normans did and what they have come to stand for in the long history of colonial conquest and neo-colonial incursion. It is also tempting to see the increasingly morally compromised Roger as a premodern avatar of Western leaders like the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, whose hawkish turn during the Iraq War disillusioned many of his erstwhile supporters. Ali ends his novel as his protagonist, the cartographer Muhammad al-Idrisi, sets out from Sicily seeking safe haven elsewhere in the Islamosphere. Recalling the dramatic television news footage coming out of Iraq at the time when Ali must have been writing or at least formulating the novel, it is hard not to be chilled by the novel's closing lines: "He would go to Baghdad, the city that will always be ours. The city that will never fall. The city that will never fall."[10] In terms of Baghdad's medieval history this could refer to the fall of Abbasid Baghdad, then the world's largest city, to the Mongol Empire in 1258; but it can safely be surmised that it is also evoking the more recent fall of Baghdad in 2003 to Western forces. And, finally, by foreshadowing a near future of Muslim displacement, statelessness, and devastation, Ali alludes proleptically and soberingly to the present moment of the novel's writing – and indeed to the decade and more beyond, the events of which have tragically confirmed its pessimistic vision.

The novel focalizes this larger story through al-Idrisi, who in 1154 completed one of the medieval period's most famous world maps as part of the larger *Tabula Rogeriana/ al*Kitab *al*-Rujari (long title: "The Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands"), a compendium of geographical knowledge compiled over the course of eighteen years with court patronage from Roger II. When the project is proposed in the novel, al-Idrisi underlines to Roger that it is Sicily's position at the "centre of the world," that is as a stopping point for people traveling both east and west, that renders it ideal for the collection of travelers' knowledge. Indeed, al-Idrisi himself comes to embody the cosmopolitan mobility of the Western Islamic intelligentsia, who circulated throughout its Western diaspora. Born in Ceuta on the North African coast, which was then part of the Andalusian *taifa* of Málaga, he was educated in Córdoba and traveled extensively around and beyond the Islamicate world, making it as far as Central Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Viking town of Jorvik (York). He lived in Sicily from young manhood until late in life, and is known to have died in Ceuta. Ali's technique in the Quintet of taking historical figures and rendering them allegorical is clearly visible in his portrayal of the intellectual alliance between Roger and al-Idrisi. On the one hand it produces this astonishing work of cartography; on the other it brings both of them under suspicion in their respective faith communities,

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[10] Ali, *Sultan*, 239.

with al-Idrisi losing cherished friendships over accepting Norman patronage. Al-Idrisi's relationship with Roger raises the broader question of the ethics of living under occupation. Although al-Idrisi has always felt safe under the patronage of Roger, whose devotion to the interfaith pursuit of knowledge is never in doubt, he is nevertheless increasingly plagued by a recognition of his complicity, and as the Normans become more menacing, he becomes actively involved in organizing resistance among the people of his estate.

The benefits he enjoys as a result of his protected cooperation are, moreover, contrasted throughout the novel with the life of Muslim Sicily's other famous son, the poet Ibn Ḥamdīs. Arabic poetry from the Islamicate diaspora is cited or directly quoted throughout Ali's quintet, but it is in *Sultan* that it takes on the status of pointed commentary, with Ibn Ḥamdīs being the most significant voice. Born in 1056 into a Sicily that was still Muslim but weakened by internecine strife between rival emirs, Ibn Ḥamdīs's reaction to the Norman conquest of Sicily was to leave the island in the 1070s, seeking both fame and refuge in al-Andalus. His career took him around the Western Islamic diaspora from Seville to Tunisia and Morocco, and eventually to Majorca, where he died. Like many another medieval poet, he is so famous today partly because of the survival of his compiled verses (*diwan*). Menocal points out that while we know that extensive composition took place in Sicily – for instance, she mentions a now-lost eleventh-century anthology of 20,000 Siculo-Arabic verses by 170 poets – Ibn Ḥamdīs's *diwan* is one of only two extant and is available in only two manuscripts.[11] What has made him equally if not more famous, however, is his ṣiqilliyyas – his Sicilian poems of exile in which he yearns nostalgically for both lost homeland and lost youth. When his verses are quoted in the novel, it is to meditate on the contradiction of a figure who chose exile as a kind of conscientious objection, but can never let go of the thought of Sicily, writing "Chain yourself to your beloved homeland/ Die in your own abode/ And as the mind refuses to try out poison/ Reject the thought of exile."[12] Ibn Ḥamdīs functions as a prick to al-Idrisi's conscience, making the latter feel like a collaborator. By the end of the novel, as al-Idrisi readies himself to depart for Baghdad after Roger's death, he quotes the following lines from the poet: "I exhausted the energies of war/ I carried on my shoulders the burdens of peace."[13] The choice to seek asylum from a brutally occupied territory rather than stay and fight to no avail is ultimately accepted. Again, given the political backdrop of composition, in which millions of people in the Islamicate East were seeking asylum from warfare and occupation, this is a pointed conclusion at which to arrive.

[11] Menocal, *Arabic Role*, 118.
[12] Ali, *Sultan*, 75.
[13] Ali, *Sultan*, 226.

The other poet who is frequently cited in the novel is not Sicilian, but is, rather, the single most famous Arabic poet of al-Andalus, Ibn Quzman. Among scholars of Arabic verse, Ibn Quzman is renowned for his innovative use of the *zajal*, a strophic verse form with established rhyme schemes rendered in a colloquial Hispano-Arabic that for scholars offers a valuable repository of the spoken Arabic of eleventh- and twelfth-century Muslim Spain.[14] But Ali includes him because his *diwan*, which celebrates everything from drunkenness to adultery and sodomy, encapsulates for Ali a medieval Islamic bon vivantism that he wishes to emphasize in order to counter the negative orientalism underpinning post-9/11 Western perceptions of Islam as fanatical and life-denying. In fact, despite the narrative pivoting on interfaith conflict, there is little actual religiosity in the world of the novel. Ali himself is open about wanting as an atheist to understand Islamic history, so it is unsurprising that the twelfth-century Sicily he gives his readers is a sophisticated and permissive secular society that might at most be called "culturally Muslim." In this vein al-Idrisi, about whose personal life historians know very little, has been gifted by Ali with a compelling and convoluted love life.

Al-Idrisi, who does heavy allegorical lifting throughout the novel, is also emblematic of medieval Islam's dazzling scientific rationalism. While Sicily might not have matched places like Córdoba, which gave birth to vital continuers of Aristotelian natural philosophy such as Ibn Rushd/Averroes, Ali makes much of al-Idrisi's polymathic pursuit of geographical and physiological knowledge. In some ways this operates as a counterbalance to the potential for Ali's novel, notwithstanding the author's early life in the Islamic diaspora, to lapse into an alternative orientalism, with its sexual permissiveness and its voluptuous, knowing women echoing Western tropes of oriental women. The text's medieval setting makes it all the more vulnerable to a premodern exoticizing that reinforces the orientalism.

Ali's novels flirt with romantic orientalism in an attempt to forestall the negative kind in his readers. With its broad-brush and openly ideological approach to medieval Sicily, Ali's novel forges a conceptual Islamic Sicily as a precursor and a parallel to rehabilitate twenty-first-century Islam in the eyes of his Anglophone readers, and to argue for the vision of a future geopolitical *convivencia*. In a world that seems more polarized than ever, it is not an unwelcome aspiration.

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[14] Menocal, *Arabic Role*, 21.