

*Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean*. Karla Mallette. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780226796239. Pp. 240.

Karla Mallette's newest monograph *Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean* is a historical portrait of two languages, how translation binds them, and the forces that pressured their evolutions. Garnering critical acclaim by receiving the 2021 Modern Language Association Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize in Comparative Literary Studies, Mallette's study consists of thirteen chapters, oscillating between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean, tracking how languages, mostly Latin and Modern Standard Arabic, served as ports of entry for commerce and intellectual exchange. For her field, she relieves medievalists of the nation state border markers which are anachronistic (and often ideologically contrary) to their objects of study. Instead, Mallette offers a potential framework that could serve the growing field of Mediterranean Studies. Despite these languages' dependency on students to acquire and apply them, both Arabic and Latin share an equally important place in a category she calls *Alexandrian languages*, a category defined by their "geographic and historical heft and scope; a capacious lexical reservoir... the deep blue future and a speculative past" acknowledging that the value of undertaking a study of Latin and Modern Standard Arabic lies in their contributions to vernacular languages, the development of their respective cultures, and overlapping geographic spaces (p. 12).

Mallette braves not only the workings of Arabic and Latin, but also brushes against vernacular Italian, Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew. Since her vision is broadly cast, refusing to exclude *any* language that would fit into the approximate timeframe of her project (which could be roughly sketched to be the revelation of the Qur'an to Mohammed in seventh century CE to the Paganini Qur'an in the sixteenth century), I will focus on methodology of connecting these languages together with particular attention to her discussion of the "tradition of tale" between Arabic and Italian. Mallette joins scholars such as Maria Rosa Menocal, Sharon Kinoshita, and Roberto Dainotto who have similarly worked to reimagine the region untethered by geopolitical boundaries and connected by cultural ephemera carried from one shore to another.

Among the most exciting contributions to scholarly conversations is her comparative explication of the Arabic term *hikāya* which spans from chapter eight and into nine. This topic is a steady foothold for her argument that Alexandrian languages are phenomena that *emerged* rather than merely

existed in a particular space or time. For contemporary readers of Modern Standard Arabic, *hikāya* would translate to “tale” or “story”. Mallette’s explication of this term, and the impact that it would have on the storytelling tradition following late antiquity, is rooted in Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus’s translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* which Mattā derives from Aristotle’s explanation of tragedy. In a word, *mīmēsis* denotes the means of propelling action within the theatrical tradition. She supports her assertion in a study of *Hikāyat Abū al-Qāsim (Tales of Abū al-Qāsim)*. This text, imbued with a “vivid recreation of verbal, aural, or physical phenomena,” forms a bridge between performance and text (p.108). Pushing boundaries of form for literary critics, Mallette’s observation of Petrarch’s self-identifying as *favola* in Sonnet 1 (“favola fui”) in *Rime Sparse* in comparison to Sonnet 254 (“La mia favola breve è già compita, / e fornito il mio tempo a mezzo gli anni”) is a helpful model for literary scholars who read texts comparatively, drawing not only on the method of tracing a path of sources and manuscripts but also on narratological methodologies.

Among her progressive moves, Mallette unearths battlefield shrapnel in literary studies that the next generation of scholars would rather treat as a painful memory than memorialize. Borrowing from literary studies about desire and narrative, Mallette recasts the term *cosmopolitanism* as a linguistic phenomenon fashioned by “social and sexual connectivity” (p.12). Welcoming readers from within and beyond academia, Mallette traces this key term to its familiar uses in American pop culture, citing how the term entered popular culture from Carrie Bradshaw and flashy celebrity-saturated magazine covers (p.11). In this sense cosmopolitanism has already been exasperated by sensual fantasy: the danger of bringing the conversation of universalism (for which she proposes an origin) to the term “cosmopolitan language” by pointing to a tenth century treatise by al-Fārābī called *Survey of the Sciences*, placing an essentializing comparison between the colloquial in the Arabic tradition and *vulgaris* in the Latin (p. 37). Mallette’s metaphor of cosmopolitan language as a tribal rug illustrates how mobility replaces the nation state: “They advertised a woman’s domestic competence and would play a utilitarian role, keeping her family warm and dry, once she is married. They have a meaning as well as linguistic objects – or, more precisely, as artifacts that communicate using a symbolic alphabet with only a notional connection to a spoken mother tongue” (p. 81). This gendering of cosmopolitan languages as a promise of maternal protection detracts from the excitement that Mallette’s project fosters and invokes the male-centered critic from the nineteen eighties.

Perhaps exorcising this spirit is not part of Mallette's goals. She invokes sympathy from the literary scholars who endure language study years into their professional training and invites non-specialists to enjoy the happy union of these two languages from seemingly disparate worlds. To satisfy the former audience, Mallette admits to *not* conducting a study of a philologist, a methodology she claims in her previous book *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean*. For her non-specialist audience, she offers a refashioned history of figures from the Italian *tre corone* and the Arab world. For example, she posits that Dante's politically brazen move of composing the *Commedia* in the fourteenth century vernacular is akin to Sībawayhi's work as a grammarian in the eighth century, offering the promise of a unified *lisān* by bringing Qur'anic grammar, pagan poetry, and the Bedouin oral tradition together. Mallette brings these two narratives of cultural history into the same volume. Scholars and language enthusiasts can appreciate Latin and Arabic as traditions wrought in comparable political and ideological exile. On the other hand, I suspect that Arabists would not be convinced with Mallette's etymological mapping of basic grammatical terms to suggest that Sībawayhi's encoded Arabic grammar to be understood as a linguistic 'outsider' during the expansion of Islam is adjacent to Dante's defense of the rise of Italian in *De vulgari eloquentia*. While Mallette forges some compelling connections between Latin and Arabic, it is likely that scholars may lose patience to excavate these delicate connections in favor of the literary histories from these two traditions that have been established elsewhere. Nevertheless, Mallette boldly approaches disciplinary fractures in comparative literary studies that many aspire to fjord with collegial legitimacy.

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*Geographies of Myth and Places of Identity. The Strait of Scylla and Charybdis in the Modern Imagination.* Marco Benoît Carbone. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022. ISBN: 9781350118188. Pp. 280.

*Geographies of Myth and Places of Identity. The Strait of Scylla and Charybdis in the Modern Imagination* is part of the Bloomsbury Academic series *Imagines*, dedicated to the reception of Classical culture in the visual and performing arts. The book consists of eight chapters, including introduction and

conclusion: the first half is mostly dedicated to conceptualizations and textual analysis, whilst the second one is prevalently based on ethnographic research. The book explores the way local communities, travellers, and authors have contributed to shape imagined and real spaces of Scylla in Calabria. It is based on a two-year ethnography on the Strait of Messina and combines a complex analysis of Scylla and Charybdis' historical representation with a focus on local identity and its imagined community. Indeed, Scylla and Charybdis are known as the terrible monsters tragically met by Ulysses during his journey, but their myth has been used and rearranged constantly to forge a special tie between the town of Scylla and Greater Greece.

The research combines textual analysis, historiography, and ethnography. Marco Benoît Carbone builds an effective and original discourse about the ideologies underpinning the representation of the Strait in the Euro-Atlantic context. Carbone analyzes various kind of media dedicated to travels in Southern Italy, as the ones linked to the Grand Tour. He also focuses on Homeric geographies as the tradition of locating myths on the map. However, the most stirring part of the book is devoted to ethnographic research in Scylla, where the presence of Hellenistic heritage in everyday life is pervasive. The informants mark insistently the jarring contrast between the lost Greek greatness and the everyday problems of Scylla's inhabitants, involving emigration, mismanaged politics, and lost opportunities of development.

However, this is not just a book about local cultural history and ethnography. Marco Benoît Carbone guides the reader through an existential journey around the deep South of Italy and raises questions on relevant and current topics, such as the identity-building process of Calabria. Since the introduction of the book, Carbone underlines the difficult path he took to complete it and the symbolic value of his personal odyssey. His experience as a native of the Reggio Calabria area and his eccentric position as an *émigré* in UK provides the book with an authentic and stimulant gaze. Indeed, *Geographies of Myth and Places of Identity* is based on the intermittent *nostos* of the author to the land of his origins, and it draws on both reconnection and lucid analysis of Southern Italy's dramatic circumstances.

The author adopts a critical approach towards the concept of "classics" and Euro-centrist appropriation of Greek culture by the West. *Odyssey's* myths and places have been shaped by literary, visual, and intellectual tradition, which has been used to articulate values and mark the borders of Western civilisation. In this vein, media produced a tendency to stereotype place and landscape, and shaped external gazes on Scylla as the ones of the locals. Carbone relies on two concepts to describe this context. On the one

hand, Bakhtin's chronotope is used to delineate the strong link between Scylla and Greater Greece. This bond is constructed by literature and reinforced by a regional specific narrative, which dialogues with international centres of cultural power. On the other hand, Foucault's *heterotopia* is used to explain Scylla and the South as a distant and contradictory place, a backward arcadia. In his critical analysis of three centuries of travel literature, Carbone highlights how Southern Calabria's landscapes are filled with symbolic correlation and *topoi* by foreign authors, especially in relation to the dominant themes of their time.

In continuity with the past, documentaries and current travel magazines make use of Odyssean tropes to describe Calabria as Hellas. At the same time, contemporary media convey the idea of picturesque, wild, and primitive South. In this framework, Scylla is the most extensively referenced Homeric landmark in the European books examined by Carbone. Indeed, the contested mapping of Homeric mythology is outlined and critically categorised by the author. Whilst "traditionalist" researchers, such as Cuisenier, reinforce the classical geography of Ulysses' journeys through new investigations, "enquirers" strive to revise mythological landmarks. Conversely, "heretics", like Felice Vinci, set the *Odyssey* in the Baltic Sea. However, Carbone underlines that Vinci's theories can be associated with pseudo-sciences. Moreover, the ethnographic investigation about the importance of Homeric mapping for Calabrians is one of the most fascinating parts of the book. In this respect, Carbone explains how a local biologist and some scuba divers spent their efforts to demonstrating the existence of a lost rock to establish a new historical version of the myth to be entirely based around Scylla. Carbone shows brilliantly how local manifestations of cultural heritage are linked to "banal ideology of localism". Statues, symbols, and evocations of the Homeric myths are part of everyday spatial and cultural references to Greek heritage in Scylla, whilst denizens cultivate frustrated expectations towards the exploitation of this resource.

Carbone highlights that Calabria lies on the border between Europe and the "Others", and, at the same time, it is itself a geopolitical Other-within. In this sense, local authors expressed nativist stances that can be explained through concepts as Herzfield's "Mediterraneanism" and Bertellini's "Southernism". In fact, Greek history is "invented" and used to enhance identitarian political discourse. Also, Carbone forges the term "Hellenicity" to describe a generic distillation of grand ideas and themes tied to the Ancient Greece, which are used to inscribe identities of Southerners into Europeanness. In this regard, Scylla epitomizes the *Mezzogiorno*, although describing specific peculiarities of the area. In other words, Scylla is a met-

aphor of Italian contradictions, which can catalyze debates about local and transnational identities and stress the importance of heritage in the quotidian. Thus, reading this book is strongly recommended for scholars of Southern Italy and any reader interested in any form of Meridionalismo. However, university students, and teachers of any level, local politicians, and historians should appreciate *Geographies of Myth and Places of Identity* as a source of inspiration.

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