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migration. These observations are well integrated into the book’s larger discussion of female agency, though their links to Oman’s condition of suspended animation could have been better signposted. A final chapter offers a retrospective on principle themes in the book.

The index is generally helpful, although key indigenous Arabic terms (e.g., sabla, khadim), informants, and non-Western authorities (e.g., Sultan Qaboos, Yahya al-Manthari) are often absent. Overall, I recommend this book for those interested in learning more about contemporary Omani culture and struggles for identity, especially gender and youth, in an oil-producing nation–state.


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This is an apparently unrevised dissertation completed in the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University in 1999 under the supervision of Per Nykrog and Susan Suleiman. It is published now by Ibex Publishers, which according to the company’s website produces “books about Iran in English and Persian.” Although this is not a book about Iran, it does seek to demonstrate the importance and vitality of Persian and, more broadly, Islamic culture as a backdrop to the European literature of the Middle Ages. This is a worthwhile pursuit, one carried out in the groundbreaking work of Maria Rosa Menocal and pursued more recently by scholars such as Karla Mallette (on Sicily), Sharon Kinoshita (on France), and Cynthia Robinson (on Spain)—to name only a few. The increasing common interest in such cross-cultural interactions, which have the potential to dramatically revise our understanding of the medieval past, has created a powerful appetite among readers, popular as well as academic, for books on this topic; unfortunately, Azinfar’s book does little to satisfy that hunger.

The book is organized into six chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion, each patterned around one main literary work. The exception is the opening chapter on “The Question of ‘Orientalism’ in the Medieval Texts” [sic], which uses The Thousand and One Nights to frame a theoretical overview of East–West relations in literary history. Despite the chapter’s title, Azinfar makes no effort to take stock of recent revisionist approaches to Said’s influential theory, especially those that seek to tease out the nature of Orientalism—if we can call it that—in premodern texts. Instead, the chapter draws extensively from Susan Suleiman’s work on 20th-century avant-garde literature and culture, Subversive Intent (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), to frame a treatment of selected medieval works and “examine the significance of their skeptical and subversive arguments” (p. 58).

These works, which are the focus of chapters 3 through 6, include The Thousand and One Nights, The Song of Roland, Dante’s Divine Comedy, the Middle English Pearl, and Chaucer’s House of Fame. The chapter on The Thousand and One Nights inexplicably cites Richard Burton’s 19th-century work instead of a contemporary scholarly translation based on Muhsin Mahdi’s modern edition, such as that of Husain Haddawy. In light of the colorful yet often bizarre hypersexualization found in Burton’s work, it is unsurprising that Azinfar identifies “homosexual moments” in The Thousand and One Nights, leading her to conclude that “homosexuality is hence part of the natural order of things” (p. 92). Although such a view might be accurately assigned to Burton’s vision of the Orient, the same is not necessarily true.
of The Nights itself. A similar carelessness appears in the following chapter, which places the Old French Song of Roland in the context of its “Persian prototype” Vis and Ramin (p. 101). As with The Nights, Azinfar cites an older translation of Vis and Ramin instead of the current scholarly standard, Dick Davis’ splendid work. More disturbing, however, is her misrepresentation of the prevalent view concerning the relationship of the Persian poem to European literary history: far from endorsing a history of “influence” of Vis and Ramin on poems such as the medieval European Tristan, as Azinfar claims (p. 115; cf. 133–34), scholars such as Peter Dronke take note of the common ground found in these medieval poems—that is, the intersection of human, erotic love with more detached, philosophical views of mankind’s place in the cosmos.

Subsequent chapters continue in the same vein, making sweeping arguments for the influence of the literature and philosophy of medieval Persia and, more broadly, the Islamic world on European poetry. It is crucial to emphasize that there are such arguments to be made: points of cultural interaction, whether through poetics, philosophy, medicine, or science, have repeatedly linked European and Islamic history and culture throughout the Middle Ages. Azinfar, however, does not make any such specific arguments, even where we might expect her to do so; after all, the dust jacket provided by Ibex Publishers cites Azinfar as the author of other books on philosophy, including Reconsidering Aristotle and The Event is Being: Existentialism, Philosophy, and Modernism. (I was not able to find any bibliographical record for these books in online sources.) Azinfar’s treatment of medieval philosophers such as Abelard and Boethius, found in Chapters 4 and 5, is remarkably weak, and references to philosophers of other periods (from the Marquis de Sade to Kant) are fleeting.

Atheism in the Medieval Islamic and European World bears many marks of its status as an unrevised dissertation, including not only the lack of scholarly citations more recent than the mid-1990s but also extremely long (sometimes as much as three pages) quotations from secondary sources and citations of conference papers from the 1990s in the place of their subsequent published versions (e.g., 69n5). There is no bibliography or list of works cited, and works cited in the footnotes are not listed by author in the short index, making them difficult to find. The topic is a fascinating one, and the effort to highlight the very real, substantial links between Europe and the Islamic world is of the utmost value, not only to scholars but also to the wider world today. It is to be hoped that the appetite of readers for books such as Azinfar’s Atheism is soon satisfied by more substantial fare.


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In this book, Avner Ben-Zaken intends to reread scientific and cultural exchanges between Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the century following the death of Nicolaus Copernicus (d. 1543), whose theory of heliocentrism was an important precedent for the scientific developments in the 16th and 17th centuries that are often glossed as the Scientific Revolution. In the introduction, Ben-Zaken argues that by tracing the way in which the theories of Copernicus circulated in the Eastern Mediterranean, and by contextualizing the cultural concerns and priorities of European and Ottoman astronomers, his book offers a “cross-cultural reevaluation of the ‘Scientific Revolution’” (p. 6). Yet, while Cross-Cultural Scientific Exchanges offers a series of fascinating studies that emphasize how for some Europeans interaction