



**Zemon Davis, Natalie. Leo Africanus Discovers Comedy:  
Theatre and Poetry across the Mediterranean**

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**Zemon Davis, Natalie.**

***Leo Africanus Discovers Comedy: Theatre and Poetry across the Mediterranean.***

Essays and Studies 51. Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021. Pp. 216 + 19 ill. ISBN 978-0-7727-2212-6 (paperback) \$39.95.

Ever since I read Natalie Zemon Davis's *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Hill and Wang, 2006), I have been enthralled by the story of al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi, better known to readers as Leo Africanus. His movement between Muslim and Christian worlds, his balancing act of navigating two different religious identities, and his intellectual curiosity all give those of us working on identity, religious conversion, and the early modern Mediterranean much to discuss. But what else is there to know? Is there anything we missed? Natalie Zemon Davis argues that yes, indeed, there is a lot more to know, and we missed quite a bit. In this splendid book, we learn that one of the missing links in al-Wazzan's story is how theatre functioned across time and space in the Mediterranean world. Zemon Davis probes the nature of theatre in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean to ask what al-Wazzan knew about it. Moreover, Zemon Davis is interested not solely in how a Muslim understood theatre in its Arabic and Italian contexts; rather, she is curious to what extent all of this can be linked to the centrality of the tradition of Aristotelian poetics across Arabic and Italian traditions. By using al-Wazzan as her guide, Zemon Davis aims to "look at parallels and divergences in the cultural trajectories of the Arabic/Islamic and the European/Christian communities" (16) to show the interconnectivity of the Mediterranean world, while also ensuring that cultural differences not be erased in the name of cosmopolitanism.

Accompanying the introduction and conclusion, Zemon Davis provides us with two fast-paced chapters that are *tours de force* of the history of theatre and poetry in Africa and Italy, respectively. In both cases, Zemon Davis zooms in and out, providing us with both a *longue durée* history of theatre and poetry as well as moments when al-Wazzan reappears; this underscores for the reader how oral storytellers in the Muslim world or how Passion plays in medieval Europe might have coalesced in the mind of al-Wazzan and influenced how he might have reacted to either or both. Most fascinating is Zemon Davis's ability to treat these lenses of analysis as deeply entangled. For example, she reminds

us that “[s]uch were the varieties of popular and comic drama being performed in the Granada where Hasan al-Wazzan was born, in the Fez where he grew up, in the Arab lands across North Africa, Arabia, and Syria, and in Istanbul where he traveled” (37). Likewise, Zemon Davis’s movement into Italy keeps al-Wazzan as the main actor, as “[n]ot long after his baptism in January 1520, Giovanni Leone could have easily been exposed to the current modes of Italian comedy” (104). Throughout, Zemon Davis presents al-Wazzan, theatre, and the myriad traditions of performance and poetry in Africa and Italy as key indicators of the interconnectedness of the premodern Mediterranean.

One of her cardinal topics is the influence of Aristotelian poetics in Mediterranean theatre and where it fit into al-Wazzan’s story. As scholars of the Mediterranean well know, Aristotle was a crucial ancient source across the premodern Mediterranean. Interpreted, translated, and commented upon by figures such as Ibn Rushd, known in English as Averroes, and the Dutch translator William of Moerbeke, Aristotle’s *Poetics* influenced theories of performance in interesting yet disparate ways. There was often little uniformity, and al-Wazzan would not have necessarily loved Italian theatre, just as an Italian probably did not see Arabic street theatre as equal to Italian theatre. In fact, European-style theatre as it existed as a staged performance with its elaborate costumes and stage sets never really caught on in the Arab world, and al-Wazzan probably would have seen it as a lesser artform. That said, Zemon Davis uses Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its wide reception to show that, while views of Aristotle were quite different and questions of genre were distinct, there remained a shared history of not only theatre but also of the classical tradition in pan-Mediterranean thought. Zemon Davis ultimately shows us that, for all the differences across the spaces al-Wazzan traversed, there was a lively world of theatre in streets, squares, and villages across the Mediterranean.

One frustration implicit in this book, as was the case in *Trickster Travels*, is that al-Wazzan left us only hints and traces of his views on certain things. In turn, we must infer a lot, and the subjunctive and conditional do a lot of heavy lifting. This is not a criticism per se, as we are all beholden to our sources. It is, if nothing else, a collective longing. I wish that al-Wazzan told us just a little bit more about shadow puppet theatre in Cairo or Machiavelli’s *La Mandragola*. But the fact that Zemon Davis got us to a stable enough position to ask such questions and many more—such as his views of music or Roman ruins or Renaissance art and architecture—reminds us that the early

modern Mediterranean, as fraught and divided as it was in so many ways, was a connected space where individual experiences meshed with shared traditions and cross-cultural encounters.

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