

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ARABIC LITERATURE

ARABIC LITERATURE IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

The sixth and final volume of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* explores the Arabic literary heritage of the period from the twelfth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Traditionalists have tended to characterize this period as one of ‘decadence’ and, having done so, to skip over its several centuries in the quest for more immediately interesting material stimulated by the re-encounter with the West from the end of the eighteenth century. Even though it was during this time that one of the most famous Arabic works of all time – *A Thousand and One Nights* – was created, this has not provoked a wide-ranging investigation of the period’s literature in general, whether elite or popular, and the period in question has continued to be viewed negatively. This volume seeks to rectify the situation. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards bring together some of the most distinguished scholars in the field to record as much as is known about the literary movements and aesthetic trends of this period. The volume is divided into parts with the traditions of poetry and prose covered separately within both their ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ contexts. The last two parts are devoted to drama, its origins and tentative development, and the indigenous tradition of literary criticism. As the only work of its kind in English covering the post-classical period, this book promises to be a unique resource for students and scholars of Arabic literature for many years to come.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AI</i>	<i>Annales Islamologiques</i>
<i>BEO</i>	<i>Bulletin des Etudes Orientales</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CHALABL</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres</i>
<i>CHALAND</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: The Literature of Al-Andalus</i>
<i>CHALMAL</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature</i>
<i>CHALRLS</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period</i>
<i>CHALUP</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 1st edn
<i>EI2</i>	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 2nd edn
<i>GAL</i>	C. Brockelmann <i>Geschichte der arabischen Literatur</i> , and Suppls. I–III
<i>IC</i>	<i>Islamic Culture</i>
<i>JA</i>	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
<i>JAL</i>	<i>Journal of Arabic Literature</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>QSA</i>	<i>Quaderni di Studi Arabi</i>
<i>WZKM</i>	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD: PARAMETERS AND PRELIMINARIES

INTRODUCTION

Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period is the latest, and probably the last, of a series of volumes entitled *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, the first of which was published in 1983. While it is the latest, its subject matter is not the most recent period in the Arabic literary heritage; the publication date of the volume devoted to that topic, entitled *Modern Arabic Literature* (ed. M. M. Badawi), precedes that of this volume by several years. The current work thus finds itself challenged to find a place in the midst of an organizational matrix that has already been established, in one way or another, by the other volumes in the series. Before proceeding with a discussion of the rationale for this volume, I propose to step back and consider some of the ramifications that have inevitably resulted from not only the subject matter of this volume but also the principles that have been adopted in its preparation as part of this series of works devoted to the Arabic literary tradition.

The term ‘post-classical period’ has not been frequently used in order to delineate a specific period in the development of the heritage of Arabic literature. Its use as the title of this volume is intended as a form of shorthand for what might otherwise have been dubbed (were it not for the cumbersome nature of the result) ‘the post-classical and pre-modern period’. In other words, this substantial central segment in the history of Arabic literary creativity suffers the fate of everything that is characterized by being in the ‘midst’ (as I noted above). As concepts, middle age, the Middle East and the Middle Ages are all defined by what lies on either side of them; one might suggest further that all these terms (and others like them) are also characterized by an extreme imprecision regarding their boundaries (as any middle-aged person will happily admit).

At this point it needs to be acknowledged that an alternative title to the one we have selected already exists. The Western scholarly tradition has assigned this period of Arabic literary history its own label, namely ‘the period of decadence’, a term that Arab writers describing the same era have dutifully

translated into its closest Arabic equivalent, '*asr al-inhibitāt*'.¹ As a topic of critical investigation, 'decadence' serves, needless to say, as a conduit to a number of potentially fascinating areas of research. In the analysis of several world cultures, such research has indeed produced important insights into the processes of literary creativity and of the continuity of the tradition. However, in the case of the Arabic and Islamic heritage, the application of this label to a substantial segment of the cultural production of the region seems to have resulted in the creation of a vicious circle, whereby an almost complete lack of sympathy for very different aesthetic norms has been converted into a tradition of scholarly indifference that has left us with enormous gaps in our understanding of the continuities involved. Such attitudes could be illustrated by a host of citations from works on various aspects of Arabic and Islamic culture, but the following is a representative sample:

The doors to the Islamic world were closed after the Crusades; parts of it began to consume others. Muslims simply marked time. In the realm of learning, there was just the rehashing of some books on jurisprudence, grammar, and the like; in crafts, there was no creativity and none of the old perfection; in tools and military skills, things were simply modelled on the old days . . . It was all killed off by the prolonged period of tyranny. Knowledge consisted of a formal religious book to be read, a sentence to be parsed, a text to be memorised, or a commentary on a text or a gloss on the commentary; there was only a small representation of the secular sciences, something to be made use of solely in order to know the heritage of the past.²

The writer here is the prominent twentieth-century Egyptian intellectual Ahmad Amīn (1886–1954). He admittedly belongs to a generation of writers who found themselves confronting all the dilemmas implicit in a process of cultural transformation that accompanied and followed the rapid importation of Western ideas and values to the colonized countries of the Middle East. Even so, I would suggest that these remarks are an accurate indication of the pervasive attitudes among both Western and Middle Eastern scholars towards the period that is the topic of this volume.

In the sections that follow, I will first examine the problematics associated with any attempt to compile a volume such as this, namely the writing of literary histories in general and Arabic literary history in particular. I will

¹ Robert Brunschwig dates this development in Western attitudes to the Islamic world to the latter half of the seventeenth century. See 'Problème de la décadence', in *Classicisme et déclin culturel*, pp. 29–51. At the conference of which this volume is the proceedings, the great Swedish orientalist Nyberg asked a series of extremely pertinent questions: 'What is cultural decadence? How do we measure its features? Is it the misery of the masses? Depreciation of economic measures? Lack of progress in the arts? Servile imitation of outmoded fashions that continue with no real driving force, thus stifling other creative forces? Do we have any kind of yardstick with which to measure such things? We Europeans are perpetually haunted by this notion of evolution. Is it a given that Islamic culture can be similarly measured?' (tr. from the French, p. 48).

² Amīn, *Zu 'amā' al-islāb*, p. 7.

then consider the corollaries of that investigation which have served as the organizing principles of this volume, and lastly discuss the reasoning behind the choice of contents.

LITERARY HISTORY: METHODS AND ISSUES

Any analysis of developments within a particular literary tradition will of necessity involve a process of fusion, of compromise even, between the organizing principles of two scholarly disciplines, those of literature and history. Earlier examples of historical surveys of the literary traditions of the Middle East share organizing principles with those of other world areas, in that the compromise just alluded to is tilted fairly heavily in the direction of history. The list of contents of such classic works as Edward Browne's *Literary History of Persia* (1902–24) or R. A. Nicholson's *A Literary History of the Arabs* (1907) point to a mode of organization that links the literary heritage to a historical framework based on the dynastic succession of caliphs, sultans and other categories of ruling authority. Within such a framework the creative output of the littérateur is placed firmly and squarely within its historical and social milieu, and the literary text is utilized to illustrate the linkage – often close – between literary production and the activities and priorities of the ruling elite.

During the course of the twentieth century, scholarly debate inevitably led to changes in approach to the study of both these major disciplines. As an example of just one of the catalysts for such a process of change, we can refer to what one might term the 'linguistic revolution' engendered by Ferdinand de Saussure's (d. 1913) *Cours de linguistique générale*, a work which led, among many other developments, to the radical distinction between '*langue*' (the system of language) and '*parole*' (the actual usage of the language by its speakers – with an emphasis on 'speech') and to the equally important dichotomy between the diachronic and synchronic approaches to the study of phenomena, the first implying an analysis through time and the second across time. Thus, alongside the more annalistic approaches to the study of history that use dates, dynasties and the succession of ruling elites as their organizing matrices, specialists in history are now just as likely to make such topics as plague, peasantry, the city, monetary supply and the impact of the wheel the organizing factors in their research and publication. Within such a framework the logic of time is, needless to say, always at least implicit, but as part of a synchronic approach it ceases to be the primary organizational focus. In literature studies, the New Critics advocated a radical concentration on the text itself and its interpretation, to the relative exclusion of all other considerations. Not unnaturally, this led in turn – at least initially – to a relative diminution of interest in the author of the work (and especially in his or her 'personality' or even 'soul');

a continued involvement in such an approach was tarred with the brush of the term ‘intentional fallacy’. More recently, some trends in literary criticism have focused on the relationship of the text and its interpretation to the process of reading. And, to conclude with a development that may be seen as combining the results of developments in the twin fields of history and literature, research on the nature of different types of discourse and on the function of narrative, not to mention challenges to the veracity of ‘facts’ and ‘sources’, has engendered some interesting notions whereby history, biography, autobiography and fiction all come to be seen as exercises in the composition of narrative texts, with as many features of similarity as of difference. In giving these few illustrations of research areas that serve to illustrate the processes of change within the humanistic disciplines during the course of the twentieth century, I need to emphasize that the scholarly environment being discussed is not one that has involved the substitution of one approach for another (however much the advocates of a particular vogue may have wished for such), but rather a gradual process of change and adaptation. What is clear is that developments in the study of both history and literature have inevitably had a considerable impact on the methods of literary history.

The lengthy and complex process whereby a systematic attempt has been made to render research in the humanistic disciplines more ‘scientific’, mostly through the elaboration of ‘theory’, has provoked much scholarly debate; Denis Donoghue’s account of developments in the literary sphere borrows a phrase from a poem of Wallace Stevens, *Ferocious Alphabets* (1984). As the study of history and literature has participated in this process, each discipline has developed its own theoretical corpus that strives to provide a rationale for the modes applied by the profession to its subject matter. In this process literary theory has come to be seen as the explanation (and often, justification) of principles applied to the interpretation and evaluation of texts (literary criticism). It is within such a context that the role of literary history has needed to be re-examined; the significantly named journal, *New Literary History*, is just one of many projects in that direction.

The concentration of literature studies on the text and its interpretation has led to an emphasis on the notion of genre and the problems associated with its use. Thus, while Benedetto Croce warns that genres have no useful function within the realm of aesthetics, Northrup Frye reminds his readers that, when the function of genres is to clarify affinities rather than to classify (and thus to exclude), they are of considerable value to literature scholarship.³ The process of ‘clarifying affinities’ among literary texts that appear to share

³ Benedetto Croce, *Estetica* (1902), cited in Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato*, pp. 726–35; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 247.

features in common – for example, the novel, the prose poem and the drama – automatically leads to the investigation of the organic processes of change whereby genres are transmuted into other forms and new genres emerge (the prose poem being just one modern example). It is, of course, a primary purpose of research into generic transformation to investigate the *continuities* that link genres and their processes of development to each other, and it is in this context that such investigations confront the principles applied in older modes of literary-historical scholarship, most especially that of ‘periodization’ (for which Arabic now uses the term *tahqīb*).⁴

Frye reflects the traditional rationale for periodization:

The history of literature seems to break down into a series of cultural periods of varying length, each dominated by certain conventions.⁵

Scholars in quest of an organizing matrix within which to survey the riches of the Arabic literary tradition as a whole have been able, like their colleagues specializing in other world traditions, to identify ‘a series of cultural periods’, but the ‘conventions’ that have been marked as dominating characteristics of each period have tended to be based on (or at least to include) the dynastic principles that we noted above; in other words they seek to categorize the literary output from without rather than within. The first great divide is one sanctioned by Islam itself: the one that distinguishes the Islamic era (beginning with the first year of the Hijra calendar, AD 622) from what precedes it. Whatever may be the artistic value attached to the poetry of the earliest era in literary activity in Arabic, the greatest quality attached to the period on the broader cultural, and particularly religious, plane is its status as precedent – the society of pre-Islamic Arabia and its language of public communication provide the context into which the Koranic message is revealed. The entire period that follows the Hijra is in fact the ‘Islamic era’, but it is broken down into sub-periods: the time of Muhammad and the early (‘rightly guided’) caliphs (622–60); the Umayyad dynasty (660–750); and the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), an era of five centuries that is often further subdivided into two or three periods – 1258 is the date of the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols. The period that follows is the subject of the present volume, and, as noted above, the centuries between 1258 and 1798 (the latter being the date of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt) have been conveniently labelled the ‘Period of Decadence’. However, the pattern of dynastic labelling provides an alternative to this further undivided period of five centuries of literary creativity, by identifying the

⁴ Among recent publications on this topic are: *Ishkāl al-tahqīb* and *Kitābat al-tawārikh*, both ed. Muḥammad Miftāḥ and Aḥmad Bū-Ḥasan.

⁵ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 28–9.

Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1516 as the dividing line between a ‘Mamluk’ period (the name of the ruling dynasty in Egypt and Syria) and an ‘Ottoman’ period. Lastly, the use of 1798 as a starting point for a ‘modern’ period breaks away from the dynastic pattern and presents the concept of ‘modernity’ as a mode for the examination of the role of the West as a major catalyst in the changes that had such an enormous impact on the regions of the former Ottoman empire and which, in the wake of the Second World War, became the independent states of today’s Middle East.

In broad outline it is this schema that has been adopted (and adapted) by *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. The first volume covers the first two eras that we have identified, ‘to the end of the Umayyad period’. The second and third concern themselves with the Abbasid period; because of its length the material is subdivided, but on topical rather than dynastic principles: the first is devoted to belles-lettres, while the second brings together discussion of a wide variety of other topics that in the narrower modern definition of the term ‘literature’ are considered to be ‘non-literary’. As with the schema above, the volume devoted to the modern period breaks away from the dynastic principle, and its contents are organized around the processes of generic development. The next volume in the series is devoted to the literary output of the Iberian Peninsula during the Islamic period; it marks a further breakaway from the dynastic principle in that the use of geography as a mode of organization serves to illustrate the unique qualities of that region as a cultural ‘melting pot’ through its multilingual communities and its contacts with both Europe and the Islamic East but at the same time has the disadvantage of separating off discussion of the writings of Arab littérateurs in Spain who affect and are affected by developments during both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods (and beyond). And into the midst of this series of volumes and principles *The Post-Classical Period* is now to be fitted.

DECADENCE AND MIDDLE AGES

As part of a discussion of periodization in Islamic history, Marshall Hodgson examines the implications of the term ‘modern’ in the context of a discussion of the ‘ancient-medieval-modern’ matrix that determines the framework of so much literary-historical writing.⁶ We have already noted above that the concept of modernity brings into play an element of not only time but also evaluation (the assumption being, one supposes, that the present time on which all historical perspective is of necessity based represents the most advanced stage in human development towards which the movement of ‘modernity’ constantly strives). In this context, the substitution of the terms

⁶ Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, pp. 283–4.

'classical' and 'decadent' (or 'dark' in the European context) for 'ancient' and 'medieval' makes this evaluative element yet more explicit. Decadence implies a process of falling away, of decline, and thus by implication brings the opposing concept of 'rise' into a clearly evaluative matrix of cultural change, that of rise and fall which has been beloved of many historians of European cultures. In this particular model, a 'classical' era is a time period in the distant past during which the cultural ideals of the group (in more recent centuries, frequently coterminous with the concept of 'nation') are established and illustrated through their exploration in artistic form, thus including literature. The result is a series of values, norms and forms (the 'classes' from which the term itself is derived) that are to serve as models for emulation by later generations. Within the governing matrix that we outlined earlier, such an era has, of course, to come to a close, and that process is usually linked on the political level to a process of fragmentation of authority and in the cultural sphere to a state of moral decline to which the term 'decadence' has often been applied. Adopting the wave image implicit in this rise and fall model, we may suggest that the temporal breadth of the 'trough' represented by such a dark or decadent period is not determined by internal factors but rather by the process of 're-rise' which is identified in retrospect (in other words, from within the 'modern') as marking the beginning of those intellectual trends and movements that foster the development of 'modernity'. As Norman Cantor suggests, albeit in a thoroughly iconoclastic fashion, the identification of a temporally defined 'classical era', with all its canonical connotations, mandates a process of *Inventing the Middle Ages*, and some form of 'renaissance' becomes thereby an implicit feature, a process of change (of 'rebirth') whereby the 'Middle' period ends and the 'modern' period begins. Within such a framework, the 'decadent' period is evaluated at both ends: a 'fall' leads to a descent from the ideals of classicism to something implicitly inferior, while the 'rise' of a renaissance (and the Arabic term *al-nahda* is a literal translation of the process of upward movement) promises something better. The following characterization of European culture, admittedly dated but nonetheless symptomatic, may serve as an illustration of this type of historical analysis and of the values that lie behind it; it is the opening of the chapter, 'Darkness and Despair', from a work entitled *The Eighteen Christian Centuries* by the Reverend James White:

The tenth century is always to be remembered as the darkest and most debased of all the periods of modern history. It was the midnight of the human mind, far out of reach of the faint evening twilight left by Roman culture, and further still from the morning brightness of the new and higher civilization.⁷

⁷ Reverend James White, *The Eighteen Christian Centuries* (New York, 1862), p. 219.

Moving from the theoretical to the more concrete, we may suggest that, whereas the historian of literature needs to be concerned with the forces involved in these processes of change – in other words, with continuities and discontinuities – the prevailing models of cultural history tend to provide us with divides, with endings and beginnings. The year 1258 which traditionally marks the close of what has been designated the Abbasid period was clearly an important turning point in a particular region and from certain points of view. However, a perusal of the two volumes of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* devoted to the period reveals some of the problems associated with the use of such a date and the principles lying behind it. Neither volume devotes much attention to the thirteenth century or even the twelfth, suggesting that, at least in the cultural sphere, the processes of change that may have occurred need to be sought in a different and probably earlier period. At the other end of our yet to be defined temporal spectrum the adoption of the year 1798 as a dividing point (which, in any case, is only valid for the case of Egypt) begs the question as to what indigenous cultural forces may have been at work during the eighteenth century in various regions of the Ottoman empire. The volume of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* devoted to the modern period, *Modern Arabic Literature*, elongates our area of potential concern even further in that it chooses not to concern itself in any detail with the precedents to the period that is its primary concern and identifies the year 1834 as the beginning of its first era.

All these issues, theoretical and practical, combine to suggest that the temporal purview of *The Post-Classical Period* needs to be of some seven centuries' duration, from approximately 1150 till 1850, thus incorporating discussion of not only the literary output of the central period itself but also the cultural continuities that link it to what comes before and after. In what follows, therefore, we will examine in turn some of the factors associated with the processes of change that make our period both 'post-classical' and 'pre-modern' before investigating some of the organizing principles that will govern our investigation of the lengthy era that lies chronologically in between.

TO POST-CLASSICAL FROM CLASSICAL

In a relatively rare invocation of the term 'post-classical' in the context of Arabic literature studies, Claude Cahen identifies a period beginning in the mid-eleventh century (as part of his discussion of historical writing), one that was 'marked . . . by a break in continuity owing to political upheavals, which not only altered frontiers but gave power to an aristocracy with no knowledge of tradition or even, in some cases, of the Arabic language'.⁸ The upheavals he

⁸ See *CHALRLS*, p. 216.

refers to involve a breakdown in the central caliphal authority, the beginnings of which may be seen as dating from an earlier period when the Abbasid caliphs began to rely on Turkish troops. With the weakening of the caliphal administration in Baghdad, the Shia Buyid dynasty first stepped into this perceived power vacuum in Baghdad (in 954) and later the Saljuq Turks (from 1055), thus completing a bifurcation process whereby they represented a secular centre of authority, while the caliph remained as a religious figurehead. This dispersal of power in and around the Abbasid capital of Baghdad was reflected in other regions of the Islamic empire. Exploiting the lack of centralized power, governors who had been appointed to administrative regions converted their offices into a series of local dynasties. The vastness of the Islamic domains and the extent of the diffusion and variety within them is aptly symbolized by the existence in the tenth century of three separate caliphates, in Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba.

While this decentralization of authority marks a clear departure from the organizational ideals developed during the earlier history of the Muslim community, it was at the same time a boon to intellectual life, in that the existence of so many centres of power and influence were sources of patronage for scholars and littérateurs. Indeed, two scholars, Adam Mez and Joel Kraemer, have written studies that characterize the era beginning in the tenth century as one of ‘renaissance’.⁹ In quest of forces that may have instigated such developments, they and other scholars identify as an important factor the measures that were forced upon the community of traditionalist religious scholars by the need to bring about reconciliation and indeed to innovate in the aftermath of the shock inflicted by the institution of the *mihna* (inquisition). The introduction of this examination process during the reign of the Caliph al-Ma’mūn in 833, whereby scholars and holders of official posts would be cross-examined regarding their beliefs, was indeed the insertion of something radically new into the life of the intellectual community of Islam, in that, as Tarif Khalidi notes, ‘quite apart from its momentous political and sectarian implications, [it] was an invasion of privacy and an assertion of power of the royal will over individual conscience on a massive scale’.¹⁰ In the wake of the cancellation of the *mihna* in 848, a principal means whereby traditionalist scholars sought to secure the acceptance of their own notions of proper Islam was through the establishment of educational institutions in which a systematic curriculum of study would be put in place to train and certify those who would henceforth be appointed to positions from which judgements and opinions would be

⁹ Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*; Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*. See also the comments of Wolhart Heinrichs in Drijvers and MacDonald (eds.), *Centres of Learning*, p. 120.

¹⁰ Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, p. 112.

sought. Students who completed the curriculum at these colleges (the subject of two detailed studies by George Makdisi) were awarded ‘the professional licence to teach and to profess legal opinions’.¹¹

During the Buyid era (from 945 till the mid-eleventh century) the tasks of retrospection and systematization, both of which were elaborated within the framework of challenges posed to traditional modes of thought by the availability of the fruits of Hellenistic scholarship, galvanized scholarly activities. The process was enhanced by the proliferation of power centres – in Rayy, Aleppo, Cairo and Cordoba, for example – which ensured that the products of these efforts would also reflect the enormous variety of the Islamic world and the increasingly cosmopolitan outlook of its scholars and littérateurs. In Baghdad itself, the munificence that the caliph could bestow on those who contributed to the administration and enlightenment of the court had long since been emulated by that of his ministers and other court officials; the case of the Barmakī family, who served as ministers to Hārūn al-Rashīd, is only the most famous among many examples. Beyond the capital itself, the career of the renowned poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) is emblematic of the opportunities that were available to a preternaturally gifted poet who, abundantly aware of the value of his own talents, would travel from one court and power centre to another in quest of patronage and reward. Much the same can be said about the life and travels of the great prose writer and controversialist Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī (d. 1023). One of al-Tawhīdī’s places of employment, the court of Rayy, may serve as an illustration of the stimulating intellectual environment that such centres could engender: in residence at various times were al-Tawhīdī himself (as a lowly secretary), the historian Miskawayh (d. 1030, who also served as librarian), the philosopher al-‘Āmirī (d. 992), the great stylist Abū'l-Fadl ibn al-‘Amīd (d. 970) and ‘al-Sālib’ ibn ‘Abbād (d. 995), a politician, patron of the arts, and also a writer and scholar of note.

As we seek to identify linkages and continuities that connect the earliest phases of our lengthy period to what precedes them, the above paragraphs attempt to survey, albeit with a reckless brevity, some of the features and personalities that contribute to what has been variously dubbed a golden age and a renaissance. In this context two of the littérateurs we have mentioned, al-Mutanabbī and al-Tawhīdī, may be seen as serving a useful Janus-like function. Both of them are abundantly aware of the literary heritage to which they are the heirs: with al-Mutanabbī it is the great poetic tradition of Arabic from its beginnings to the radical imagery of his predecessor, Abū Tammām

¹¹ George Makdisi, ‘Inquiry into the Origins of Humanism’, in Afsaruddin and Zahniser (eds.), *Humanism, Culture, and Language*, p.23. For more detailed analyses, see Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*; and his, *The Rise of Humanism*.

(d. 845–6); for al-Tawhīdī it is the towering figure of al-Jāhīz (d. 868–9). Looking forward, the inspiration that al-Mutanabbi's poetry was to offer to future generations of Arab poets finds an early illustration in the first collection of Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 1057), *Siqṭ al-zand*, although al-Ma'arrī's increasingly pessimistic vision and often iconoclastic views lend his later poems a particularly individual voice. In the context of prose genres, the career and interests of al-Thā'libī (d. 1038) are an apt reflection of an era in which the compilation and anthology genres were a preferred medium for the recording of erudite language-use and for the organization of interesting anecdote and debate that would both educate and amuse.

These two trends – compilation and elaboration, often in tandem – certainly represent a sizeable percentage of the output of the period that is the topic of this volume. They are the object of Ahmād Amīn's disparaging comments noted above, and they are clearly not the most admired literary traits among Western analysers of the cultural tradition of the Islamic Middle East, most especially those who have examined its output through the critical lenses of the romantic and post-romantic era; it is the need to acknowledge this latter aspect (and its historical context) that is underlined by Abdelfattah Kilito when he notes:

le style naturel est un style naturalisé, une convention d'écriture érigée en principe naturel. La convention dont il s'agit en l'occurrence est celle qui, au XIXe siècle, s'est établie en Occident sur les ruines de la rhétorique. A partir du moment où l'on considère la rhétorique comme la source de l' 'affection', de l' 'afféterie', tout discours qui s'y rattache explicitement est jugé artificiel. Dans cet ordre d'idées, le discours naturel serait celui qui refoule la rhétorique et prend ses distances vis-à-vis d'un corps de préceptes et de règles, qui continuent néanmoins à agir sur lui en sourdine.¹²

Natural style is a naturalized style, a writing convention raised to the level of natural principle. The convention involved here is one that, in the nineteenth century, was established in the Occident on the ruins of rhetoric. From the moment when rhetoric came to be considered the source of 'affection', of 'preciousness', all discourse explicitly linked to it was judged artificial. In such a system of ideas, natural discourse would be one that rejects rhetoric and keeps its distance from a body of precepts and rules, although they still manage to affect it, albeit in a muted fashion.

Two points need to be made here. First, there is clearly a need to adopt different criteria if we are to assess the literary aspects of the texts involved. As Stefan Leder and Hilary Kilpatrick point out in the course of suggesting just such a need, the process of compilation is itself an art, and the resulting monographs, anthologies and manuals imply – indeed, often exhibit – aesthetic criteria of

¹² Kilito, *Les Séances*, pp. 92–3.

their own that need to be examined.¹³ The second point is that the cultural profile that this picture paints is only a partial one. It is certainly true that the tradition of voluminous compilation, begun by such illustrious early figures as Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), al-Thālibī (d. 1038) and al-Rāghib al-İsfahānī (d. before 1100?), continued and developed to reach some sort of acme with the *Nihāyat al-arab* of al-Nuwāyri (d. 1332) and the great bureaucrat's vade mecum, the *Šubḥ al-ašā'* of al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418) – to be discussed in more detail in Musawi's contribution to this volume (Chapter 5). Furthermore, even though the features of the stylistic phenomenon in poetic discourse known as *bādī'* (use of figurative language) had been superbly analysed by 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078), the critical establishment exhibited a predilection for the compilation of mighty lists of poetic devices. This elaboration of the aesthetics of poetic expression finds an echo in the *inshā'* *dīwānī* school of prose-writing. As al-Tawhīdī's own accounts make clear, the residents of Rayy – including Abū'l-Fadl ibn al-'Amīd, Abu Bakr al-Khwārizmī (d. 993) and, for a short period, '*Bādī' al-zamān'* (the wonder of the age) al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) whose significance we consider below – had set themselves to develop a more colourful prose discourse; the trend that they set in motion is clearly seen in the self-conscious virtuosity of two later authors, companion members of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's (Saladin) staff, al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil (d. 1200) and 'Imād al-Dīn al-İsfahānī (d. 1201). Such tendencies acknowledged, there remains a plethora of creative output in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that does not fit the received model (and here, once again, I should emphasize that I am not including consideration of the literary output of the Iberian Peninsula where the efflorescence of literary genres of all kinds – not least, those of strophic poetry – suggests the need for a different and revised chronology). Mention could be made at this point of a number of littérateurs whose names stand out for various reasons: Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235), for example, whose mystical poetry with its imagery of wine and love established him as an Arab rival to the great Persian tradition; and al-Būsīrī (d. 1296), whose *Burda* (Mantle) ode in praise of Muḥammad became Arabic literature's most widely glossed poem.¹⁴ However, in considering these problems of assessing and reassessing criteria, I wish to concentrate on the genre of the *maqāma*, the topic of Devin Stewart's contribution to this volume (Chapter 7).

Following the pattern of other literary genres, the emergence of the *maqāma* within the Arabic literary tradition results from the fusion of a number of forms, styles and themes. Al-Hamadhānī, like so many others a visitor to

¹³ Leder and Kilpatrick, 'Classical Arabic Prose Literature'.

¹⁴ See Homerin, 'Reflections on Arabic Poetry'.

Ibn ‘Abbād’s coterie in Rayy, used his precocious talents to apply the current interest in elaborated discourse, and especially its most characteristic form, *saj‘* (rhymed and cadenced prose), to a depiction of the human foibles of his contemporaries, thereby producing vignettes of intellectual gatherings and social encounters that have been rightly seen as early glimmerings of the picaresque. However, while his pioneer role is acknowledged and indeed while modern analysers of Arabic fiction have looked to al-Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt* as a distant precedent to modern developments in narrative genres, it is his pre-eminent successor, al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122), to whom the indigenous tradition looks as the creator of the crowning achievement of the genre. By the yardstick of Western notions of what narrative and its genres were to become, al-Ḥarīrī has often been viewed as something of a spoiler in that, true to the aesthetics of his time, he turned his *maqāmāt* into displays of the incredible stylistic feats that a complete master of the Arabic language could achieve. Thus, like the poetry of al-Mutanabbī and al-Ma‘arrī, al-Ḥarīrī’s *maqāmāt* become the ultimate achievement and therefrom, for those in quest of points of closure, a convenient means of declaring a ‘classical’ period at its end. However, the *maqāma* is, by the very timing of its emergence, a ‘modern’ genre, and during the ensuing centuries it is clearly a preferred mode of literary expression. Those who make use of it constitute a who’s who of the intellectual elite of the period: a short list would include al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), Ibn Sayqal al-Jazārī (d. 1273), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Khafājī (d. 1653). Al-Ḥarīrī’s *maqāmāt* are required reading at the salon of al-Zabīdī (d. 1791) in Egypt and the acknowledged inspiration of Nāṣif al-Yāzijī’s (d. 1871) *Majma‘ al-Bahrayn*. The history of the *maqāma* thus serves as an excellent illustration of not only the prevalence of a literary genre throughout our lengthy period but also the different aesthetic criteria that ensured its continuing popularity. Of necessity this brief discussion of some of the issues connected with the establishment of precedents to our period and the rationales for their selection must be an open-ended one, if only because, as the above paragraphs have shown, much still needs to be considered or reconsidered. What emerges clearly from this survey, I believe, is that within a literary-historical context the year 1258 cannot serve as a useful divide and that the most significant processes of change in that context belong to an earlier period.

FROM PRE-MODERN TO MODERN

In the previous section we pointed to the need for further research on both individual authors and broader trends during those centuries that follow Arabic literature’s designated classical era. However, when we compare the information

and opinion available about the literary output of those centuries with what is known about the period that I earlier dubbed ‘pre-modern’, the former emerges as almost an *embarras de richesses*. If the ‘post-classical’ era is seen to be one of decline from the lofty heights of a golden age, then the period that follows the Ottoman conquests (1516 in the case of Egypt) emerges from literary histories as the nadir of Arabic literary creativity. That same fondness for elaboration that was emphasized above in connection with the earlier period and the seemingly endless pattern of emulation noted in Ahmad Amin’s quotation are the object of Tāhā Husayn’s disdain as he considers Arabic culture at the threshold of the process of change that marks the end-point of our period:

At the beginning of this [modern] era Arabic literature was content with its state, and confident that it was satisfying its readership’s need for artistic beauty expressed in words. It was also convinced of the ties linking it to decadent Arabic literature, believing that the latter constituted the highest form of literary writing, the closest possible to the ideals of literary aesthetics. At the beginning of and during the nineteenth century prose writers and poets believed they were fulfilling their duties if they crafted phrases and sentences according to the acknowledged manner of *badi‘*; by coining literary devices of various kinds and alluding to aspects of meaning that occurred to them perhaps but otherwise to a small percentage of other people. These readers in turn were convinced of the rectitude of this type of literature; the elite hankered for it while popular readers turned instead to *zajal*, *mawwāls*, and popular narrative forms.¹⁵

Tāhā Husayn draws attention here to an important feature of Arabic culture during the period covered by the present volume, namely the perceived divide between elite and popular forms of expression, a topic that we will examine below. However, the opinions he expresses towards Arabic literature during at least the two centuries preceding 1798 – that being a preferred date for the beginning of a ‘modern’ period in Egypt – reflect an attitude that, not unnaturally, has had a deleterious effect on the amount (and quality) of studies devoted to that era. As a corollary of that, any assessment of that process of change which is our focus in this section, one normally subsumed under the heading of *al-nahda* (revival, renaissance), is considerably hampered. For, any attempt to weigh in the balance the relative importance of indigenous and imported cultural factors confronts a lack of information (and interest) regarding the former and a superabundance regarding the latter. That the notion of *al-nahda* should be virtually equated with the importation and

¹⁵ Tāhā Husayn, *al-Jadīd* (1930); repr. in *Akhbār al-adab* 186 (2 Feb. 1997), 30. In his *Mustaqbal al-thaqāfa fi Miṣr*, tr. Sidney Glazer, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (Washington, 1954), Tāhā Husayn elaborated his view that Egypt should strive to emulate European cultural values and norms because, among other reasons, its geographical position on the Mediterranean already allied it, *nolens volens*, with the traditions in Europe.

adoption of European literary forms and criteria comes as hardly a surprise. That is not to say, of course, that the effect of such cultural confrontation was not indeed profound, but rather to point out the – hardly trivial – fact that the state of our information concerning the indigenous literary culture makes the view one-sided. At least one prominent modern Arab littérateur and critic has found the consequences of this heavily slanted approach to the nature and processes of *al-nahḍa* perplexing. Here is what Mīkhā'il Nu'ayma has to say:

I've often asked myself what we mean by the word *nahḍa*. Do we mean that we were not paying attention, but now we've woken up? Or were we flat on our backs and now we've stood up? Or that we were walking at the back of the procession of life, whereas now we're in the middle or even close to the front? As we take one step at a time, how are we to know whether we're moving forwards or backwards, or just staying where we are?¹⁶

Beyond the lack of continuity between an indigenous 'pre-modern' and 'modern' that are an inevitable consequence of attitudes such as those expressed above by Ṭāhā Husayn lies another significant cultural issue. In the same article published in 1930, he continues his discussion as follows:

When they read some literary texts that had originally appeared in the Abbasid era, they discovered a closeness to nature and a distance from artificiality; they discovered a role for feeling, sentiment, and intellect, and became aware of the distance between the lively literature they were now reading and the dead literature to which they had become accustomed; they also concluded that this ancient literature was in fact closer to their own sentiments and much more capable of expressing their emotions than the moribund 'modern' literature which only managed to reflect its writers' ability to collect and distribute phrases.

The seven-century period covered by this volume is now not only disparaged and indeed ignored for its values, but also vaulted over in order for the newly revived littérateurs of the nineteenth century to find inspiration in the glittering age of some nine or ten centuries earlier that we discussed in the previous section. The task of modernization, it appears, involves a double confrontation: first and most obviously, the challenge of what is regarded as the more advanced civilization and culture of the West (consider the number of books published in Egypt at the turn of the century about 'progress' and 'backwardness'¹⁷); and second, the perceived need, fostered within the context of the first, to deny the much cherished process within Arabic and Islamic

¹⁶ Nu'ayma, *Fatāwā*, cited in *Akhbār al-adab* 217 (7 Sept. 1997), 15.

¹⁷ For example, Demolins, *Sirr taqaddum al-inklīz*; and 'Umar (pseud.?), *Hādir al-miṣriyyīn*. For further discussion, see Allen, *A Period of Time*, pp. 25–8.

culture, whereby knowledge – regarded as a prized inheritance – is passed on from one generation of scholars to another.¹⁸

Thus, in a quest for linkages that might be seen as connecting what is ‘pre-modern’ in the Arabic literary tradition with what is ‘modern’, we find ourselves dealing with a predominant set of opinions that advocate a deliberate rupture with the immediate past and a disavowal of its value as creator of aesthetic values. So prevalent is the view and, one must add, so apparently omnivalent are its organizing principles, that few indeed are the studies that attempt to look at the period under different terms of reference. One such is Kenneth Cuno’s study, *The Pasha’s Peasants*, which, in examining patterns of rural landownership in Egypt between 1740 and 1858, abandons ‘the view of modern Egypt as Sleeping Beauty, according to which the country’s “awakening” as a modern nation was the result of contact with Europe’,¹⁹ and another is Peter Gran’s well-known work on Egyptian cultural life before Napoleon’s invasion, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism*, which paints a picture of an intellectual community that is far from being in the moribund state suggested by advocates of the preferred model. It is perhaps ironic that these two studies, with their lonely intimations of continuity, are both concerned with Egypt, the region upon whose patterns and phases of development the vast majority of models of modernization in the Arab Middle East have been constructed. Elsewhere in the region, needless to say, the patterns are quite different. What, one might ask as an example, are the equivalent patterns in a more geographically distant area such as Iraq and Morocco? More specifically, what alternative matrices of development do we adopt in order to account for the widely prevalent traditionalism of Iraq in the nineteenth century on the one hand and on the other the fact that it also fostered some of the most important modernist poets in the twentieth?²⁰

Events in the Middle East during the latter half of the twentieth century, and most particularly the June War of 1967, have led a number of Arab intellectuals to conduct a radical re-examination of the bases upon which the cultural values of the Arabs have been identified and studied.²¹ As part of attempts to define and categorize such concepts as *turāth* (heritage) and *asāla*

¹⁸ These values are discussed in Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*; and Stewart, ‘Capital, Accumulation, and the Academic Biography’.

¹⁹ Cuno, *The Pasha’s Peasants*, p. xv.

²⁰ ‘The study of nineteenth century poetry in Iraq would prove a rewarding field for the discovery of the reasons for the strength and supremacy of Iraqi poetry of the mid-twentieth century. But few historians have attempted an honest evaluation of nineteenth century poetry in Iraq.’ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, vol. I, p. 26.

²¹ Space does not permit a discussion of these studies here, but a useful summary of the primary figures involved and of the problems they address will be found in Boullata, *Trends and Issues*, esp. ch. 2; and Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*.

(cultural authenticity), a number of scholars have set themselves to examine not only the relationship to the heritage of the past but also the continuing need to re-examine (and, Laroui would maintain, reorganize) the perceived principles and phases of the region's modern history. The problems that we have just identified regarding the definition and processes of *al-nahda* are clearly part of this continuing scholarly agenda. However, whatever the shifts in assessment of the relative importance of indigenous and imported factors that may emerge from such continuing research, the above comments have made clear, I believe, the difficulty – perhaps the impossibility – of providing anything resembling a clear or comprehensive picture of literary creativity during what we have dubbed the 'pre-modern' period. Those segments of this volume that address themselves to that period and its problems must be considered initial contributions to what must be a lengthy and continuing project.

IN-BETWEEN: THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

Following the above investigations of our volume's necessarily fluid chronological boundaries, it remains for us to discuss some of the salient features of the period itself that have governed the choice of organization and contents. As already noted, previous studies of its literary production have tended to follow dynastic principles in dividing the period, using the Ottoman invasions of the sixteenth century and their cultural consequences as a convenient historical moment. In view of the changes wrought by Ottoman hegemony over a large portion of the Arabic-speaking world – not least that Turkish became the preferred language of administrative communication – this subdivision is clearly a valid reflection of processes of change that had a profound impact not only in the political and social spheres but also in the contexts and modes of literary production. However, for the purposes of this volume we have chosen to adopt as an organizing principle not a historical subdivision of this kind but rather one that makes use of criteria more closely linked to the analysis of the worlds of author and audience, those that distinguish between elite and popular literature.

As was noted above, this lengthy period was one in which the practice and art of compilation and anthologizing reached a kind of acme, and popular genres numbered among the materials subsumed within such activities. The narratives of the world-renowned collection, *A Thousand and One Nights*, are merely the most famous among a whole series of compilations of fable and other genres.²² Furthermore, if we incorporate within our rationale the relative

²² A survey of these works is to be found in Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*.

amounts of research that have been devoted to elite and popular literature of this period, it soon becomes clear that the fruitful linkages that have been established in recent times between literature studies and the social-scientific disciplines of folklore, anthropology and linguistics have engendered a large body of scholarship on Arabic popular literature. The primary division that we have selected thus attempts to reflect both the availability of the original sources themselves and the studies that have been devoted to them. John Carey prefaces his well-known study of the English literary intelligentsia, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, with the suggestion that the concept of the 'masses', a very deliberate coinage of the elite segment of this elite–popular dyad, was adopted with the avowed purpose of exclusion.²³ In the Arabic context, modes of differentiation and exclusion that were based on literacy, education and social class were closely mirrored in attitudes towards the Arabic language itself. The concepts 'popular' and 'masses' are enshrined in the very terms that are habitually used to describe the different levels of usage. The colloquial dialect that is the first language of every Arabic speaker is commonly referred to as '*āmmiyā* (popular, plebeian). By contrast, the standard written language – the medium of literary expression, with the discourse of the Koran as its inimitable yardstick – is designated *al-fuṣḥā*, not merely a technical term but also a value judgement implying the type of language that is 'more correct, more eloquent' (the morphological pattern of the word itself is the 'noun of preference', Arabic's comparative and superlative). In the Arabic context then, the categories of elite and popular bring into consideration not only the different impacts of writing and orality on modes of composition and reception – of creators and audience (with its various classes and levels of literacy and education) – but also the normative linguistic and stylistic values that were established by the literate intelligentsia within the context of the Islamic sciences and the development of the educational system that fostered their elaboration. Within such an intellectual milieu, 'polite letters' (a translation that attempts to capture at least two of the many connotations of the Arabic word *adab*, a term that is discussed in detail by Bonebakker in *CHALABL*) were a central participant in the intellectual life of the court of the Muslim ruler. To a large extent this community adhered rigidly to the set of norms that excluded examples of creativity which did not conform to the grammatical rules of *al-fuṣḥā*. That certain authors, rulers and periods stimulated the appearance of a number of what might be termed 'intermediate' levels of style is clear from the small, yet invaluable corpus of works that have come down to us in a 'lower' level

²³ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Preface. For comments on the Arabic context, see Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, pp. 45–51.

of language; the very existence of such a corpus warns the researcher against establishing ‘the concepts of elite and popular as static monoliths’.²⁴ Yet, in spite of occasional glimpses that tantalize with their possible implications, the values of the educated intelligentsia regarding appropriate language-use continued to hold sway and, to a large extent, still do.

For the period covered by this volume we have a reasonably large and what appears to be a representative sample of the literary productions of the elite, often centred around the court. Beyond those confines lay the world of popular creativity, one to which we have a series of references but of which relatively few early exemplars seem to have survived. Here a quotation from the introduction that the Egyptian oculist Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1310) wrote to his invaluable collection of three plays is instructive. He has composed some new plays, he says, because he has noticed that audiences are getting bored with the other presentations of plays which have been known for some time. Here an isolated comment seems to point to a whole context of creativity to which we have – at least thus far – very little access, no doubt because much of it was the product and reflection of popular modes of entertainment and transmitted orally from one generation to another. Much the same might be said, of course, about the apparently chance discovery of that other document that Antoine Galland translated into French beginning in 1704 and later bequeathed to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, namely a manuscript of a collection of Arabic tales of Indo-Persian provenance, *A Thousand and One Nights*. Through a considerable irony, this product of a Middle Eastern story-telling tradition that had been substantially ostracized by the intellectual elite was to take Europe by storm; its exotic imagery became an object of emulation, and its narrative themes and techniques had a profound effect on European art and aesthetic values. Meanwhile, the products of that same intellectual elite, duly recorded in writing within their own literary (and literate) milieu, adhered to their own aesthetic norms which, as the Western tradition of Arabic literary scholarship has clearly demonstrated, did not conform with Western critical expectations. Above all, it is Galland’s French translation of *A Thousand and One Nights* that marks the beginning of a continuing Western interest in Arabic popular narratives. The portion of this volume that is devoted to them and to the development of methods for their analysis is a reflection of that trend.

This subdivision of the literary output of this period thus invites us to consider alternative approaches to the application of aesthetic norms. In such

²⁴ Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 46.

a context we can do no better than to cite the views of Abdelfattah Kilito who outlines the issues with customary clarity:

Il nous semble plus approprié de considérer la poétique arabe en elle-même et d'éviter de la regarder comme une déviance par rapport à un modèle réalisé en d'autres temps, sous d'autres cieux. Le principe qui la gouverne doit être dégagé des caractéristiques qui lui sont propres, et non de caractéristiques à l'œuvre dans une autre poétique. La visée comparative ne peut être féconde que si elle se garde d'ériger le comparant en absolu souverain. Certes, l'approche négative peut être fructueuse, mais seulement lorsque, étudiant ce qu'une culture n'a pas fait, elle dégage ce qu'elle a fait, et non ce qu'elle aurait du faire. A défaut de cette précaution, les interlocuteurs restent prisonniers d'un postulat conquérant que ni l'indulgence condescendante, ni la dénégation farouche, n'arrivent à dépasser.²⁵

To us it seems more appropriate to regard Arabic poetics on its own terms and to avoid treating the subject as some kind of deviation from a model realized in other times and under other skies. The governing principle should be derived from characteristics that are intrinsic to it, not those of works from some other poetics. The comparative approach can be productive only when it affords absolute control to the comparing entity. To be sure, the negative approach can also be fruitful, but only when, in studying what a culture has not done, it manages to identify what it has done and not what it ought to have done. Without such precautions, interlocutors remain imprisoned in the throes of an all-conquering postulate, one that cannot be overcome with either a condescending indulgence or a savage denigration.

In bringing this introductory chapter to a close, I think it wise to reiterate in explicit terms what this volume in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* series does not attempt to do. It is one of the first attempts in a European language to treat the vast period between approximately 1150 and 1850 as a separate entity, indeed as an entity worthy of study at all within a literary-critical context. As such, it cannot fail to differ from the aspirations of the previous volumes in the series which, in spite of their differing organizational principles, have all endeavoured to present as comprehensive a summary as possible of the relevant segment of the Arabic literary heritage. While every effort has been made in planning this volume to provide as general a coverage as possible of the literary production of a seven-century period, it has to be admitted immediately that in several cases – involving genres, regions and sub-periods – anything resembling ‘coverage’ has not been possible, either because the relevant materials are unknown or unavailable to researchers, or else because the editors have been unable to find experts able and willing to write about those topics. Furthermore, it is very noticeable that, even when we consider the small number of studies that have concerned themselves with the literary output of this period, there is a heavy preference for the works

²⁵ Kilito, *Les Séances*, p. 136.

of the earlier ('post-classical') period over those of the later (post-sixteenth century, 'pre-modern'), a preference that is, of necessity, clearly reflected in the majority of contributions to this volume.

This compilation of studies thus needs to be viewed primarily as an introduction to the literary study of this much neglected period rather than as an attempt at assembling any sort of comprehensive summary of it, providing as much detail as published sources and scholarly interest have made possible. With that notion in mind, it is perhaps useful to draw attention to two principles that have been applied in the preparation of these individual studies for publication in this volume. First, there is inevitably a certain amount of repetition to be found within the individual contributions, most especially between the initial survey articles of each major subsection and the studies of more particular genres that follow them; not only that, but – what emerges as an extremely important feature of the study of the creative literary output of this period – such repeated references to authors and genres within different sections serve to illustrate the linkages between the elite and popular literary traditions. Since each contributor has approached the authors and materials involved in different contexts and from different points of view, the repetitions involved are intended to serve as examples of variegated cultural contexts and critical approaches to them. A second and anticipatable consequence of the contributions that are devoted to this lengthy and much neglected period is that they reveal different judgements regarding the aesthetics of the period as a whole and their underlying criteria. For al-Yousfi (Chapter 2), for example, the problems that come to a head within the post-classical period of Arabic poetry trace their origins to a much earlier period; for Jayyusi (Chapter 1) the result is indeed a period of decline in Arabic poetic creativity. In the realm of prose literature, the picture painted by Musawi (Chapter 5) and other contributors does not appear in the same light; indeed there is, for example, something of an efflorescence in chancellery writing and its analysis. This variation in the assessment of both creativity and reception is equally evident in the sections on popular poetry and prose, as the studies of Larkin (Chapter 10), Reynolds (Chapters 11, 12 and 14) and their colleagues make clear. Such differences of opinion concerning literary-historical periods and genres are, needless to say, part of the larger research agenda for the future, one that involves the identification of relevant and effective criteria for a more discriminating and less denigratory approach to the analysis of the creative output of the post-classical period, that being a goal towards which this volume aspires to present a new sense of direction and some illustrative models.

PART I

ELITE POETRY

CHAPTER 1

ARABIC POETRY IN THE POST-CLASSICAL AGE

INTRODUCTION

Arabic poetry in the post-classical period (*c.* 1250–1850) cannot in practice be studied in discrete fashion. Poetic events are not so clearly marked as to make it possible to designate a particular date for the beginning and end of an artistic trend or movement. In this particular case, it is imperative to examine the artistic background to poetry at the beginning of the period, to trace the chain of development and the often subtle changes in the various elements of the poem which may have affected the status of poetry during this particular period.

From the fourth/tenth century on, Arabic poetry underwent a number of processes of acquisition and discard. Between the fifth/eleventh and tenth/sixteenth centuries, one notices a succession of poetic phenomena of interest to anyone concerned with the way art changes. However, alongside new developments within the poetry itself, there is also a linear process rooted in earlier, more flourishing poetic periods, but especially affected during the period under consideration here by subsequent detrimental circumstances. The changes that beset this verse demand an exploration of the possible forces that underlay what critics and literary historians have called its ‘decline’.

This entire period is crowded with major political events; life was rarely free of external aggression and the consequences of such aggression. While the political history of the era is referred to in other segments of this volume, here we need to survey briefly what constituted the poet’s world as well as the background resulting from earlier history.¹ The history of the Arab world in medieval times was one of great cultural effervescence; a truly brilliant civilization was forged and served as a link between the older Mediterranean cultures

¹ For the purposes of this chapter we will use the terminology adopted by Marshall G. S. Hodgson (*The Venture of Islam*, Chicago, 1974):

- a. The primitive caliphal period (40–73/660–92)
- b. The high caliphal period (73–333/692–945)
- c. The earlier middle period (333–656/945–1258)
- d. The later middle Islamic period (656–909/1258–1503)

and the European Renaissance. Indeed, the Arabs, along with the other Muslim peoples – particularly the Persians, themselves the bearers of an ancient and luminous civilization – were the main force of enlightenment over those many centuries. It was the Arabs' ill fortune that, at this very point in their civilization, the Turks and Mongols should have become sufficiently strong and numerous to undertake an expansion through conquest; and that, simultaneously, European Christians should invade the Arab/Islamic world, wreaking havoc over large areas in the region. Eventually, however, there were two major outcomes: the predictable final expulsion of those who remained alien and aggressively oriented vis-à-vis the large and established world they had so wilfully and inimically engaged, namely the Crusaders; and the Islamization and, in many instances, the Arabization of the others from Asia, who had devastated the world of Islam but later adopted its religion and often its language.

ARABIC POETRY DURING THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

In order to place the poetry of the post-classical period in its rightful context, we need first to trace, albeit in brief, the course of its development from the classical zenith just noted to its eventual status in the post-classical period. For, while the independent internal development of the art² was indeed tempered to a certain extent by external life around the poet and thus partly conditioned the kind of poetry he wrote, the political and social factors that literary historians have proposed as the sole factors involved in this process of artistic change are utterly unconvincing.³

For the post-classical poet, echoes of great poetic works produced over centuries continued to reverberate in his consciousness. The Arab poetic language had largely originated in the desert and had built most of its poetic idiom in desert surroundings. Early Arab visual imagery had to compensate for the lack of means to draw objects in an ecology practically devoid of the tools for graphic art, by activating a visual imagery that made the art of description a major element in the classical Arab poem. By the pre-Islamic sixth century, Arabic poetry had achieved its first acme of perfection, with a syntax that was terse, well-knit and virile, and a rich and varied vocabulary which was to become the major basis for linguistic research in the Islamic period.

Half a century after the advent of Islam the poetic genre that had achieved ascendancy was eulogy (*madīḥ*). For the first three to four hundred years of the

² For further details see Jayyusi, 'Umayyad Poetry'; and her, *Trends and Movements*, vol. II, ch. 7.

³ See for example Dayf in his series of works, *Tārīkh al-adab al-'arabī*; Bāshā, *al-Adab fi bilād al-Shām*; and Farrūkh's series of works on *Tārīkh al-adab al-'arabī*.

Islamic caliphate, the most impassioned eulogies in Arabic were undoubtedly those written during the prime caliphal period, poems pulsating with life and pregnant with the vision of glory and infallibility. During the early period of Abbasid hegemony (750–945), and slightly into the earlier middle period (945–1258), language and poetic idiom could still display the influence of the vigorous poetic output of earlier centuries, but they also reflected a new urbanity, one that, with the rise of al-Mutanabbī in the first half of the fourth/tenth century, achieved a second acme that would serve as the basis for a poetic revival in the late nineteenth century and have a major impact on twentieth-century verse.

The development of Arabic poetry after the fifth/eleventh century presents a basic literary-historical problem: in both literary and aesthetic terms, why did poetry begin to lose its former zest and spirit?

There are several points to consider.

An unstable world

The first point is the changing context of poetry. Formerly poets had addressed themselves to a world that was, even in circumstances of war or internal commotion, ultimately stable. However, with the passage of time Islam's unique capacity to maintain an a-racial attitude brought about a transformation. Once converted, a new Muslim was accepted into the community of believers without undue regard for origin, race or colour. But while this may be regarded as a superior quality in Islam, it was not conducive to a continuation of the old stability. In the early centuries of Islam, poetry was still a major instrument for the caliph and his statesmen, both the vehicle for the best literary expression and the effective means of displaying the greatness of the caliphate and the significance of conquest and victory. Even during the times of al-Mutanabbī (d. 965), when various strong men had begun to rule over portions of the empire, the concept of poetry and its role in society still remained more or less stable. All this was to change rapidly after the fifth/eleventh century.

Theme and meaning

Theme and meaning are non-aesthetic elements in poetry, but they can, in certain circumstances, wield immense effect on the aesthetic ingenuity of poets. In classical Arab criticism a major controversy had arisen regarding content and form, meaning and language, and which of the two should be pre-eminent. With time, however, the stale, repetitive nature of themes and meanings impinged on the elements of emotion, vision, and attitude to life and living, thereby robbing poetry of its former verve and spirit, and what

al-Jāḥīz (d. 255/868–9) so aptly called ‘the sap of poetry’.⁴ A kind of tacit consensus develops that poetry had certain preordained themes, and that these were subject to a hierarchy of preference. For any poet with pretensions to be a *fahl* (major poet) the four crucial themes were: *madḥ* (eulogy, always given major prominence by classical critics because of its importance to the caliphal state, as noted above); *hijā’* (satire, also often linked directly to the state, or to the faction to which the poet adhered (Shia, Kharijite, etc.) and used as a potent tool against enemies); *fakhr* (the praise of self or tribe), very strong in pre-Islamic poetry but of continuing importance in Islamic times; and, fourth, *wasf* (description).⁵ Other themes such as *ghazal*, *‘itāb* (chiding a friend or lover, usually, for shortcomings), *rithā’* (elegy) as part of eulogy and *khamriyya* (a poem on wine), etc., were also discussed by critics. However, the selection of these four primary themes for the *fahl* poet (overlooking *ghazal*, despite the fact that it has always been a major theme in Arabic) points to the importance of statehood for the Arabs. Love poetry could have no possible use as a publicity tool for the state. It was regarded rather as a pastime or a congenial prelude to more serious topics, to be used in overtures to poems.

Almost every poet – and there were very many in the period under discussion here – regarded theme, with the exception of the love theme, in terms of this categorization; and constriction of theme became a basic problem for poetry, as constant repetition and an adherence to the same topics led to utter tedium. As early as the beginning of the fourth/tenth century, Ibn Ṭabāṭabā (d. 322/934) was speaking of the ‘ordeal’ of the poets of his day (*al-muhdathūn* – ‘modernists’), who could produce nothing new. Former poets, he asserted, had already accomplished all there was to accomplish; the meanings being produced by their successors were inferior, merely tedious and deserving simply to be discarded.⁶ In the fifth/eleventh century the poetic taste of the moderns was regarded as boring, and there was a general call for a return to the old methods of writing verse. Critics felt that their present century was suffering from a paucity of original and inventive works. ‘How is it,’ asked the North African critic Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawānī (d. 456/1064), addressing the new poets, ‘that with time you are growing poorer in poetic themes? Themes have not become fewer, only the tools [of poetry].’⁷

In the seventh/thirteenth century, another Andalūsī/North African critic, Hāzim al-Qarṭājannī (d. 684/1285), also wrote bewailing the state of eastern poetry. For two centuries, he said, poets there had lacked all sense of the essence

⁴ See al-Jāḥīz, *Kitāb al-bayawān*, vol. III, pp. 131–2.

⁵ See al-Marzubānī, *al-Muwashshab*, p. 274.

⁶ Ibn Ṭabāṭabā, *Iyar al-shi’r*, p. 9.

⁷ Ibn Rashiq, *al-‘Umda*, pp. 184–5, quoted in ‘Abbās, *Tārīkh al-naqd al-adabī*, p. 365.

of poetry, and had not, in that time, produced a single *fahl*.⁸ One senses that poetry was beginning to evolve in ways that would reflect a falling away from what Arabs felt were the best poetic standards. One might perhaps have expected that al-Mutanabbi's unmatchable verse, built on qualities that form part of the Arab poetic heritage and taste – his lofty eloquence, musical and virile rhythms, aphorisms on life and experience, brilliant imagery, occasionally nostalgic tone and deep insight into the human condition – would serve as a buttress for Arabic poetry after his death (as was the case with Andalūsī poetry after Ibn Zaydūn⁹). However, a state of inertia had set in, and poetry was seen to be veering towards decline.

The poet during these centuries seemed cut off from the warmth of human experience. There was not just a distinction between the objective and the subjective, between internal and external experience; there was outright rupture between them, with the internal world of the poet often buried or, as in the case of Ibn Nubātā al-Miṣrī (686–768/1287–1367), negotiated only on a superficial plane. There existed a wide breach between the self and the other, and invariably it was the other that triumphed. From this situation emerged the lack of particularity. The poet seems incapable of capturing the particular, of exploring inner experience and so arriving at the essence of life. He does not see beyond the expected, the recurrent, beyond the conventional routine and formality of externalized living.

In this period, it was only good religious poetry, Sufi and other, which captured the underlying dynamics of human essence and removed the discrepancy between experience and belief. A major trait of Arabic poetry is a dichotomy between what is secular and what is religious. The poet writing secular poetry is not really oblivious of God and religious principles, particularly religious taboos with regard to wine and sex, and he might allude to them in his verse. There are also occasional allusions to the divine in non-religious poems, especially in eulogies. However, rarely do we encounter a genuine spiritual conflict in poems where the poet describes wine drinking and frolicking. On the contrary, the treatment of the subject is often lighthearted, and the notion of sin and punishment is not usually a disturbing, heart-wrenching experience. Allusions to the divine in eulogies and other poetry are usually merely tagged on to glorify the other, to emphasize the greatness of the human through the glorification of God. Very rarely, outside directly religious verse, do we find the poet's apprehension of the world and human experience merging with any awed consciousness of the presence of the divine in all things.

⁸ al-Qartājannī, *Minhāj al-bulaghā'*, p. 10.

⁹ On this issue, see Jayyusi, 'Andalūsī Poetry', p. 345, where I discuss the concept of the propagator who reconnects poetry with its best traditions (Ibn Zaydūn being given as a prime example).

In fact, outside religious verse, a ‘pious’ introduction to a poetic theme hardly seems suitable to a poetry conventionally attuned to *ghazal* overtures. Poetic sensibility among lay poets did not usually envisage the world and the poet’s experience in it as part of a divine strategy. Secular and religious poetry ran parallel to one another, without actually meeting save on rare occasions.

Nor do we find in this verse a proper coherence between objective vision, usually of the eulogized person, and apprehension of the self, which tends to remain buried behind conventions and repetitive notions, deeply rooted in memory. This cannot be attributed simply to the tyrannical hold of the subject on the poet, for al-Mutanabbi had managed to achieve a perfect fusion between his unrelenting consciousness of self and the objective entity of the *mamduh* (object of the panegyric). In fact, al-Mutanabbi introduced into the eulogies a rare intimate voice pulsating with authentic feeling. In his famous *mīmiyya*, the last poem he declaimed at Sayf al-Dawla’s court, he expressed a truly wounded affection.

The repetition, the lack of thematic variety, the incapacity of meaning to apprehend the particular through the general and merge the subjective with the objective, all this led finally to a conformity that reinforced the various adverse influences, leading poetry inexorably towards aesthetic fatigue.

Diction and syntax

The steady urbanization of diction, a natural process for a poetry now transferred, in the works of major poets, to the ambience of city life (the major poets usually lived in the city, often moving from one city to another in quest of new patrons), was, as we see in occasional examples, veering gradually but very subtly towards the vernacular. This normal poetic tendency, found in many other languages and cultures and resulting in the elevation of the vernacular to a language worthy of poetic utterance, was eventually to cut a separate road for itself in Arabic. Even before the thirteenth century, some colloquialisms had begun to infiltrate the language of formal poetry, something that was to become a notable feature in the later centuries of the post-classical period. This phenomenon was eventually to meet with stubborn resistance, as the nineteenth-century modern renaissance in Arabic letters re-established the language of poetry on a firm classical basis, carefully avoiding any encroachment by the vernacular. Poetry in the many evolved Arabic vernaculars continued to progress separately, and a large, worthwhile body of poetry in the many vernaculars of the Arab world has now accumulated, remaining separate from established formal poetry, which still boasts a unified diction and idiom.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Chapter 10 on ‘Popular Poetry’ in this volume.

Quite apart from this autonomous tendency, there was a medley of other languages spoken around the poet and assailing his auditory sensibility. This must have created a tension in poets who took a distinctive pride in the inherited language of their great poetic heritage, leading to a resistance, albeit mainly unconscious, to any serious intrusion of extraneous factors in their art. Yet there were many instances where this spontaneous resistance almost failed, only to be reinforced once more by two abiding forces. The first was the perennial influence of the Koran, with its imposing quality of language and style which echoed continually in the subconscious of poets and writers in Arabic, and had its own profound impact on creative output over the centuries. The second was the love of classical poetry, which Arabs have cherished, to the point almost of obsession. It was inevitable that the general tension created by all these influences (absent in most other languages), together with other causes, would finally contrive to interfere with the natural and smooth development of the inherited idiom, causing it to deviate, in some way, from a purely autonomous course. There is, of course, no reason why the idiom of any poetic tradition should continue to draw upon the same old, inherited sources, for idioms develop with the times; but preceding criticism had often emphasized the quality of strength and virility (*fuhūla*) in poetry, and there was an ongoing argument regarding the new poetry written early in the Abbasid age between *al-shi'r al-muhdath* (modernist) and the inherited verse. Modernist examples had produced doubt and rejection in quarters loyal to the old.¹¹ But in the post-classical poetry under discussion here, the problem was both greater and different. There was, as noted above, a continuing struggle to resist the natural tendency towards a more colloquial orientation and towards any possible hybridization of the language of poetry through the infiltration of other languages.¹² Yet this struggle failed to revive the old verve and style or to safeguard the inherited identity of poetic syntax, which was in fact the element that suffered most. In much of this verse one notices a loosening of the syntax

¹¹ Those 'new' poets whose language and syntax showed genuine signs of change (such as al-'Abbās Ibn al-Aḥnaf (d. 193/809), Abū'l-'Atāhiya (132–211/748–826), Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī (320–57/932–68) and, above all, Abū Tammām (d. 231 or 232/845–6) were still able to produce a poetry characterized by correctness of diction and potency of address. In the view of many critics, the problem with these poets was rather one of approach and style: the poetry lacked faithful application of the modes of the inherited verse tradition and was regarded as deviating from the old bedouin standards.

¹² It is noteworthy that the intrusion of other languages into diction was noted long before this period. Al-Thā'libī (d. 429/1038) in his anthology, *Yatīmat al-dahr*, declares his preference for Syrian poets over those of Iraq and the surrounding regions: 'The Arab poets of Syria and round about are better than those of Iraq and round about... This is because they are nearer to the original regions of the Arabs, especially to Hijaz, and further away from Persia, so that their tongues have been spared the hybridization to which the Arabs of Iraq were exposed because of their proximity to the Persians and Nabataeans.' See the selections from this source edited by Muñir Kan'ān (Damascus, 1991), and compare the selections from poets in Syria, particularly those around the Ḥamdānī court of Sayf al-Dawla, in the first part of vol. I, with some of the poetry that al-Thā'libī quotes from other regions.

of the poem, of the well-honed progression of sentences and phrases which fit as if by magic – synchronizing, often perfectly, with both the syntactic and semantic divisions of the poem, and with the rhythmic compositions that hold them perfectly together. The old spontaneous balance between pairs of phrases or sentences (*mulā'ama*)¹³ – which was often impulsively forged from a contrasting strategy (*muqābala*) built into the poem in a balanced compound – was now often lost, and a kind of imbalance occurred, a lack of harmony in the smooth, well-established divisions within the two-hemistich line about which the critic Tha'lāb wrote with deep and original perception.¹⁴ The language was not just becoming steadily urbanized. It was also softening in some instances, sometimes to the point of near flaccidity, and the syntax was shedding that old fibre that had held words together in what sometimes seemed an inevitable style of writing; in short, it was losing the smoothness and eloquence of flow so characteristic of good Arabic poetry.

During the Abbasid period, imagery, a major element of the poem, had embarked on a course of complex metaphorical representations, achieving healthy and ingenious expression in the work of Abū Tammām (d. 231 or 232/845–6). During the post-classical period, imagery continued its headlong development towards the more intricate conceit, regardless of the need for a more lucid expression of experience in a stressful age. A high degree of complexity and affectation eventually resulted.

THE QUESTION OF EULOGY AND LOVE POETRY

Other major changes to the inherited poem were occurring simultaneously. As early as the beginning of what has been termed the ‘earlier middle period’ of the Islamic empire (945–1258), some of the basic (and cherished) elements of this poetry were showing signs of weakness. Due to changing circumstances, two major poetic themes had markedly lost their former elan. The first was panegyric; the second the love theme.

The issue of eulogy (madh)

In the numerous panegyrics written in the period, diction and content remained, by and large, stubbornly conventional, drawing as they did on

¹³ ‘*Mulā'ama*’ and ‘*muqābala*’ became important features later on in the age of poetic embellishments, used then with deliberateness. In the old poetry they existed spontaneously as normal features of the poem, in obedience to the dictates of the two-hemistich form, as the critic Tha'lāb (d. 291/904) realized.

¹⁴ In Tha'lāb's *Qawā'id al-shi'r* the patterns of syntax within the two-hemistich verse are discussed. The symmetrical division of the single two-hemistich line of poetry produces a distinctive syntactical arrangement whereby certain divisions within the verse and methods of distributing words gave rise to syntactic formations that were spontaneously internalized by poets when they were young.

the prototypes offered by the great eulogists of earlier times, such as al-Akhṭārī (19–91/640–710) in the Umayyad period, and Abū Tammām, al-Buhturī (206–84/822–97) and al-Mutanabbī in the Abbasid period.

By the time the Islamic empire reached its zenith in the first Abbasid age, poetry had come to be closely associated with eulogy. A poet's first concern became, apparently, the writing of panegyrics eulogizing the ruler or some dignitary in the hope of being compensated, usually financially. Poetry for pay came to be not just an accepted concept (in contrast to the state of affairs in pre-Islamic times) but a major incentive for writing verse at all. It became the principal genre of poetry, and the *dīwāns* overflowed with panegyrics to the eclipse of almost all other types. This created a major problem for poetry.¹⁵ It needs also to be noted that, while eulogy mostly targeted reward, spontaneous panegyrics did flow from the pens of some poets who, while proudly rejecting the idea of gain, still felt it paramount to write panegyrics on men in authority. Such was the case with the famous Shia poet al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (359–406/970–1016), who not only refused to accept any financial reward himself but even paid back the rewards accepted earlier by his poet-father.

By the end of the fifth/eleventh century, the panegyric itself had lost much of its original vigour and lofty purpose: to praise those whose deeds had brought honour and power to their people. As a disintegrating caliphate began to lose much of its former dignity, new rulers came to preside over small regions or single cities rather than the vast stretches of a unified empire. Many of these rulers were not even Arab, and did not much enjoy the rhetorical sweep in the Arabic poems of eulogists. The poet's enthusiasm was blunted; one can easily imagine his psychological difficulties and the artificiality that pervaded the writing of his panegyrics. These difficulties were substantially increased, too, in that the writing of panegyric had been compromised by the rules that critics had imposed on eulogy, establishing a set of requisite qualities for caliphs and high dignitaries that were to be emphasized by eulogies: courage, wisdom, authority, sagacity, clemency and chastity, while at the same time strongly discouraging the praise of such things as bodily qualities or riches.¹⁶

Even without these critically imposed rules and taboos, the nature of eulogy, targeting as it does people the poet fears and from whom he hopes to gain recompense, would impose certain constrictions. Poet eulogists soon discovered

¹⁵ While eulogizing for pay had become a standard profession, it was criticized by such great figures as Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (363–449/973–1058), who rejected the idea outright. Recognizing the indignity of writing for pay, Ibn Rashiq (*al-Umda*, vol. I, p. 51) commends those poets who prefer to maintain their self-respect.

¹⁶ In the fourth/tenth century both Ibn Ṭabāṭabā (d. 322/934), in *Iyār al-shi'r* (p. 12), and Qudāma ibn Ja'far (265–337/879–948), in his *Naqd al-shi'r*, pp. 68–72 and 214–18, had reiterated these points.

they did not have a vast reservoir of possibilities to draw upon. How many qualities could they attribute to any one human being, even to the greatest of men? If earlier eulogies had been passionate and often informed by a tone of sincerity and enthusiasm, it was because the poet was inspired and enthralled by the brilliance and greatness of the power which kingship symbolized at the time. But now a major confusion of standards, a disappointment at the consequences of political life, had intervened. The only innovation they could introduce was the pursuit of exaggeration, which diminished poetic appeal still further.¹⁷ Gone from these new examples were the genuine awe and deference given to the mighty ruler, the natural eloquence, the inventive imagery, and the supreme command of language and tone. Still later in this period, Arab critics themselves came to realize that most eulogy was now marked by two basic qualities: first, it did not stem from natural, genuine feelings; and, second, it was (one might suggest, characteristically) often untrue in its ascription of great qualities to the person eulogized.

Coming to the age of minor kingdoms and petty kings, eulogy encountered yet another obstacle: many of these alien rulers were not as rich or as spontaneously generous as the rulers of the earlier, more centralized state, and thus reward was not always forthcoming. Poets often humiliated themselves in seeking recompense for eulogy. Even a prince like Shihāb al-Dīn al-Tamīmī, nicknamed Ḥays Bayṣ (d. 574/1179), did not hesitate to mention compensation in his verse:

When reciters chant my eloquent verse about the just imam,
 Then ask, after the recital, about the liberal reward,
 Even if I were Prince of the Faithful, the eloquent Qiss,¹⁸
 What should my answer be?¹⁹

By the sixth/twelfth century, eulogists lead one to believe that life had clearly become less lucrative. Sibṭ ibn al-Ta‘awīdhī (519–83/1125–87) chides those who hold back their hand from giving; his poetry has humiliated him, he complains, because people do nothing except praise it, and yet one loaf of bread is better than all their praise. Even so, the first three sections of his *dīwān* are devoted to eulogy: to the caliphate in Baghdad, to ministers and great men, and to powerful families.

One of the most revealing examples of poets bewailing the degeneration of eulogy in their time is that of Egypt’s Abū'l-Ḥusayn al-Jazzār (601–79/

¹⁷ The greatest eulogistic exaggerations are to be found in Fatimid poetry of the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries. One poet, al-Mu‘ayyad fi'l-Dīn, addressed the Fatimid imam al-Mustanṣir (d. 486/1094) as follows: ‘You are not less than Christ. He was called God, why should we not call you God?’ See Farrūkh, *Tārīkh al-adab al-‘arabi*, vol. III, pp. 44–5.

¹⁸ He is alluding to Qiss ibn Sa‘īda al-Iyādī, the pre-Islamic orator famous for his eloquence.

¹⁹ Quoted in Farrūkh, *Tārīkh*, vol. III, p. 370.

1204–81). Having abandoned his work as a butcher to seek riches through verse, he is forced to resume his former trade:

Oh! do not blame me, Sharaf al-Dīn, if you see me a butcher.
 Why shouldn't I thank this profession and reject literature?
 Now it is the dogs that beg from me, while with poetry
 I was begging from dogs.²⁰

The Egyptian poet Sirāj al-Dīn al-Warrāq (615–95/1218–96) says:

I protect my dignity from people
 Who regard meeting the poet as equal to [meeting] death.
 Poetry's muse is hateful to them
 Even if brought to them by someone they love.²¹

It would appear that by this time eulogy had become the bane of Arabic poetry, a point explored further in al-Yousfi's chapter in this volume (Chapter 2).

The love poem (ghazal)

As we have already noted, urbanization had played a major role in diverting Arab poets from some of the fundamental, resilient qualities of bedouin life. The great influx of slave girls and boys (homosexuality was widespread in the Muslim empire during the Middle Ages) into the cities of the now disintegrating caliphate facilitated access to sensual pleasures, permitting, in effect, a legalized promiscuity. This was a basic factor in altering attitudes of yearning and regret that had suffused the old love verse, attitudes springing from deprivation and commitment to a code of honour and chastity. There was sexual satiety now, and the greater attention paid to sensual delights turned love to more fleeting, promiscuous relationships that stressed corporeal pleasures. Poetry came to reflect this satiety. Although the perennial reproach about abandonment of the lover by his beloved remained a regular feature of *ghazal* writing, it had by now become a mere repetitive cliché, retaining little or nothing of its erstwhile ardour.

The new life circumstances contributed greatly to the loss of the old spirit in poetry, whether the robust spirit of heroic eulogy, or boasting (*fakhr*), or the tender sensitivity that informed love lyrics. In the formal verse of this period one misses a sense of inborn freedom, a greater purity of mind, a tenderness towards the beloved. The flatness that resulted from a stilling of the passion led to a flaccid verse, rarely capable of imparting the emotional appeal of former love poetry.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 644.

²¹ Ibid., p. 683.

The only remaining avenue for passion was through Sufi poetry. Indeed, it seems clear that, during this lengthy period, Sufi poetry, along with other examples of religious poetry (such as the *bādī‘iyāt* (poems in praise of the Prophet) discussed by Homerin in Chapter 3) played a major role in rescuing Arabic poetry from the terminal flaccidity of an outworn art. Mystical and other religious verse was the principal genre to preserve the warm emotional and existential aspects of Arabic poetry to any extent; it managed to merge the oblique linguistic venture with complex meanings of profundity and universal appeal.

DESCRIPTIVE POETRY

The series of assaults on the region from east and west and the increasing decentralization of authority led to a gradual but relentless process of change that transformed the nature and direction of the creative environment. The poet, now a mere pawn at the mercy of princes and leaders who controlled his livelihood, was forced to look for a different kind of poetic expression – this time a more neutral one.

One line of escape that could still be viewed as a healthy release from tiresome external demands was through descriptive miniatures that had begun to appear towards the end of the third/ninth century. As noted above, early critics had identified description (*wasf*) as one of the four main subjects of good verse. By the sixth century AD, for example, the two main objects of description, the she-camel and the horse, had already acquired a standardized canon. In the second half of the third/ninth century, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (247–96/861–908) concerned himself with poetry as pure art. Turning to love and the description of gardens, flowers and other refinements that abounded in the Baghhdadi royal ambience, he established a special kind of descriptive poetry which became a genre in itself. He was the creator of what came to be called *wardiyāt* (rose poems), *zuhriyyāt* or *nawriyyāt* (flower poems) and *rabi‘iyyāt* (spring poems), etc., which became widespread in the fourth/tenth century and after. The following brief example is characteristic of his many tableaux:

As if the milky way were a running stream,
Daisies blooming on its banks,
As if the crescent were a bracelet in half,
The Pleiades a palm pointing at it.²²

Here was a poetry that concentrated on describing objects of nature, usually fragmented nature, in still life, and was the nearest we had to a poetry of

²² Ibid., p. 379.

art for art's sake. This genre, which became highly popular in both the east and in al-Andalus, was fully artistic, fully inventive and creatively demanding. Even though it lacked any active communication with the human condition, it nonetheless provided a solution for poets who had reached the end of their tolerance of the age of poetic utilitarianism, a refuge from the burden of eulogy. On this kind of neutral ground, erudition and inventiveness could shine through, independent of extraneous considerations.

During the period under study, poets continued to compose such miniatures with inventive, though often dispassionate, skill. Yet the search for novelty did not abate, as these purely descriptive examples were independent of other themes. As greater affectation seeped in and the impact of external forces became overriding, poets became increasingly preoccupied with linguistic devices applicable to all themes. Gradually a greater artificiality can be seen in the use of poetic conceits and the vast array of figures of speech fashionable at the time.

THE PROCESS OF DECLINE

As the post-classical period proceeded, poetry progressively lost its capacity to filter out extraneous linguistic intrusions and redundancies; its vigour diminished with each century during the lengthy Mamluk period (648–923/1250–1517). Insidious shortcomings became evident in various aspects of the poem, especially the waning of a genuine emotional impulse in many poets and a loss of the old precision and eloquent diction. Most important of all was the loosening of the poem's previous compactness of sentence and phrase, the fading of much of the old lustre and grandeur. As poets strove for contemporaneity under the shadow of an earlier triumphant eloquence that was no longer spontaneously possessed, their products display a helpless decline as they laboured under the burden of stale, repetitive structures. In retrospect, it is clear that a regression was inevitable. Arabic poetry had enjoyed a prolonged history of potency, and this lengthy and robust tradition had been nourished and sustained by the wide linguistic variety, inventive imagery, lofty eloquence and flowing rhythms of the Koran. However, poetry now found itself hemmed in by the circumstances of Arab life.

Among the most prominent features of this process was an ever increasing focus on ornamentation. It is certainly true that intricate figures of speech had become a primary feature of poetry during the Abbasid era (Ibn al-Mu'tazz's *Kitāb al-bādi'*, written in 274/887) and that they had initially been inventively used by such great poets as Abū Tammām, but during the long period under discussion here they developed into a mere profusion of embellishments and a highly mannered linguistic exercise. The poem became ever more trivialized,

with many later examples (especially during the Ottoman period) displaying a trifling preoccupation with amusement and polite exchange. Embellishments such as *jinās* (paronomasia), *tibāq* (antithesis) and *tawriya* (double entendre) and a variety of metrical tricks permeated the poetry of the Arabic-speaking world like a pervasive vogue for several centuries, indeed for far longer than fashions normally do. This was a time when poets moved away from those sources of creativity that had once been the essence of a free Arab spirit, linking creative expression to the roots of the soul and imbuing it with the vision and meaning of life and living. This alienation from the human heart and spirit, this preference for skill over spontaneity, for the limitations of a rigid and exacting style and the constrictions of formulaic rules and demands, over the expansive, the instinctive, the primordial, the impulsive, the tender, the passionate, the ardent, this was to be the scourge of Arabic verse for many centuries.

At base, writing in the poetic genre was highly resistant to change and dedicated to the imitative; a 'clever' brand of versification, devoted to witticisms and plays on words and sometimes characterized by a hedonistic tendency to depict dissolute behaviour, with poets such as Ibn 'Unayn (549–630/1154–1233) excelling in perverse and graphic sexual depictions, devoid of either aesthetic or human value. Poets perpetually sought to outdo each other in ever new inventions, spinning in a vacuum around each other.

How estranged had the Arabs of the urban centuries become from the values of the Arabs of old whose poetic attainments had become legend, who had aestheticized their contradictions through the eloquent sayings of their poets and made a principle out of them: tenderness, devotion and selflessness towards woman and love, but also a defiant and boastful self-centredness in tribal hostilities; gallantry and magnanimity, but also honourable vengeance; generosity and hospitality, but also a relentless aggression bent on plunder and the use of force for survival? This was the law of the desert, of scarcity and aridity, and it organized their life, gave it shape and challenge, and filled it with nostalgia, a constant sense of loss, a perennial craving for the impossible, for a constantly receding point of anchor, for a love that will never be requited. This would remain part and parcel of Arab folk songs, from Oman to Morocco – songs of longing, of hope and despair that seem inseparable from the Arab soul and its vision of life. They were also to reappear, and with great force, in some of the best formal poetry of modern times. They seeped into the verse of a great neoclassicist, Ahmad Shawqī (1869–1932), and also of a great innovator, Gibrān Khalil Gibrān (1883–1931). Thereafter they filled the poetry of the romantics of the twenties and thirties, and imbued the verse of great neoclassicists like Badawī al-Jabal (1907–82), before touching with splendid decorum the poetry of some leading modernists such as Adūnīs (b. 1929), Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–65) and Maḥmūd Darwīsh (b. 1941).

THE POETS

With regard to the poets themselves, the period we are dealing with is marked by a number of major characteristics. In the first place, numerous poets emerged throughout the length and breadth of the Arab-Islamic dominions. Second, in spite of the many internal feuds and external wars, and for all the varied types of dynasty that presided over different regions and cities, poets were, for the most part, at home throughout the ample regions inhabited by Arabs and Arabic-speaking people. Poets might move from one region to another that, at least in the context of the times, was reckoned remote, but, wherever they went, they would be recognized as Arab poets or poets writing in Arabic, and thus as participants in the living tradition of Arabic poetry. There was a basic concept of Arab literary identity – cohesive, inclusive and wide-ranging, and it made of poetry and literature not a regional but rather a national cultural output. The third characteristic – and a thoroughly disturbing one – was that poets were markedly similar in their output, themes, approaches and expectations. Of course there were different, even contrasting groups of poets, each attuned to poetry's distinctive, sometimes oppositional orientation (a good example is the opposition between Shia, especially Ismaili, poets and Sunni poets). Nevertheless, for all the differences reflected within the confines of each group, in elements of attitude and belief (the last merely a matter of theme) the main resemblances stand. Thus, just as we may find mystical or directly pious religious poetry throughout the Arabic-speaking regions, so we find everywhere debauched poetry reflecting a dissolute indifference to Islamic morality. Homosexual poetry was a widespread phenomenon, as were other themes like the bewailing of old age, reiterated ad nauseam and mostly employing the same set of motifs, similes and comparisons (for example, the comparison of white hair to day and black hair to night). The fourth characteristic, a crucial one, is that, despite the large number of poets that emerged, this period cannot boast a single great poet equal in stature and poetic gifts to any of the bards of earlier periods. More than six hundred years seem to have passed without the Arab world producing a poet whose verses could attract and hold the attention of major critics, either then or now, on the basis of poetic as opposed to purely semantic content. It is, of course, inconceivable that this long epoch should not have produced a single poetic genius. Many such were surely born, and yet the development of their talents was hampered by the standards and expectations in vogue during their lifetime.

Discussion of the main output of certain poets from various parts of this period will shed further light on the general situation and development of the poetry. In order to provide a context, the discussion will be prefaced by a very brief discussion of their immediate predecessors.

The major poets who came after the zenith of al-Mutanabbī were Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (363–449/973–1057) and al-Sharīf al-Radī (359–406/970–1016) – a markedly contrasting pair. Al-Radī, as noted earlier, was the last heir of the great Arab *fūhūl* poets, but one whose normally virile and well-knit style was sufficiently mellow and urbane to be influential in modern times. By contrast, al-Ma'arrī was a maverick with no familiar ancestors and no apparent heirs, one who coupled a wealth of original, profound and subtle views on the divine and the profane, on life and the afterlife, with a formidable capacity for paradox and refined irony and an exceptional command of language and style.

Many, but not all, among the two generations of poets directly following al-Radī and al-Ma'arrī continued to exhibit an inherited strength. The poetry of Ibn Nubātā al-Sā'dī (327–405/939–1015), an older contemporary of al-Radī – like him, originally from Iraq, but one who roved the Arab world to eulogize princes, ministers and dignitaries – still reflects the riches of emotion, the composed ardour and flowing rhythms found in good inherited verse. His contemporary, Abū'l-Fath al-Bustī (330–401/941–1010), is the author of a famous and well-knit *nūniyya* full of maxims and reflections on life and the world, beginning with the famous verse:

Too much prosperity diminishes a man.
All gain is loss except gain of pure virtue.²³

To this period also belongs the Iraqi Ibn Zurayq (d. before 428/1037), author of one of the most famous love poems in Arabic, the fine and much memorized 'ayniyya: 'Do not blame him, blame inflames him.' Then there is the Persian poet Mihyār al-Daylamī (d. 428/1037), whose *bā'iyya*, vaunting his Persian ancestry, has even so been memorized by millions of Arabs:

Kisra [Khosrow] is my father; his īwān is lofty
who among people can boast a father like mine?
I've taken the glory from the best of ancestors
and the religion from the best of prophets
Combining grandeur from all sides
The supremacy of the Persians, the religion of the Arabs.²⁴

²³ The similarity in metre, rhyme, tone and syntax between this poem and that of the Andalūsī Abū'l-Baqā' al-Rundī (d. 685/1286), mourning the fall of Cordoba to the Iberians, leaves no doubt as to al-Bustī's influence on the later poet.

Everything that reaches its fullness, will diminish
Let no one stand deluded by the good life.
Quoted by Farrūkh, *Tārikh*, vol. III, p. 49.

²⁴ *Dīwān Mihyār al-Daylamī*, p. 60.

The famous *lāmiyya* poem of the Arabized Persian poet Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Tughra'ī (453–515/1061–1121), beginning 'Authenticity of mind has protected me from error *** and the jewel of virtue adorns me', is still known among moderns for its virile yet confessional tone, challenging the vicissitudes of his circumstances.

Yet, for all the continuity of the old traditions in these and some other poets, there was a relentless, ongoing change in style, strength of language and poetic essence. The parallel phenomena of change and continuity that are so evident in the poetry of the eleventh and twelfth centuries may be seen as clear illustrations of a process that would be repeated constantly throughout the ensuing period under discussion here, with some poets still simulating the old rhetorical address while others veered towards a much more simplified mode of expression.

Ibn Sana' al-Mulk (545–608/1150–1212)

This famous poet from Cairo lived just before 1250, but a short perusal of his verse seems essential to show the way poetic weaknesses and decadent trends had already entrenched themselves in certain poetic contributions. He grew up in an affluent family and was able to study and mix with the prominent dignitaries and men of letters of his day. Ibn Sana' al-Mulk lived in a new urban age, which, for all its instability on the political front, had acquired newly established sets of social and literary relationships. The poetry demonstrates joy in friendship, deference to already established social conventions and a kind of communion of souls among men. The art of friendship had asserted itself, in a different kind of relationship from the one we find in early Islamic poetry, where the presence of such male friendship was not pronounced. Now, as a result of sustained urban life, an inner sociability had been formed, and one sees poets alluding to or directly eulogizing their friends as poetic peers.²⁵ Eroticism itself was now divided between the heterosexual and homosexual, with the latter often gaining the upper hand in the verse of Ibn Sana' al-Mulk and others.

His greatest patron was al-Qādī'l-Fādil (529–96/1135–1200), the senior administrator of Saladin, famous epistle-writer, essayist and poet, and a leader in the new style decked with embellishments and figures of speech (discussed in detail in Musawi's contribution to this volume, Chapter 5). His fame rests less on his status as poet than on his attempts to write innovative *muwashshahāt* and on his excellent book on the *muwashshah* genre, *Dār al-ṭirāz fī 'amal al-muwashshabāt*, in which he demonstrated a sensitive understanding of the

²⁵ See Farrūkh, *Tārīkh*, pp. 451–4; and see the introduction to his *dīwān* by the editor M. 'Abd al-Haqq, *Dīwān*.

intricate and to this day much misunderstood technique of this art and of its origins.²⁶

Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk wrote eulogies, *ghazal* (much of it homosexual), satire, *fakhr* and some descriptive poems. During the Ayyubid wars against the Crusaders, we see him praising Saladin's victories, especially the one at Tibnin.²⁷ Yet one senses immediately that the fire and passion of a genuine poetic reaction to a great victory are almost totally absent. Missing also from his long elegy on his mother, a *hamziyya*,²⁸ is the sense of grief one encounters in, for example, Ibn al-Rūmī's elegies, particularly the one on his middle son.

Yet this tepidity does not persist in all his poetry. Reading his long *dāliyya*²⁹ that begins 'Others fear death, not I', the first part of which is dedicated to vaunting his pride and status, one is impressed with a sense of emotional fullness that pervades this part of the poem, reminiscent – in its fiery words, its defiant tone, its well-phrased word order and its faithfulness to the inherited passion and balance within the poem – of *fakhr* poetry from pre-Islamic times:

I do not fear fate if it should strike me
nor avoid bitter death if it should rush at me

We recognize a familiar voice as the poet lets his words flow with a smooth lucidity. However, in the second part of the poem, on *ghazal*, one is immediately faced with a different orientation and a divergent, incompatible construction. What can have happened to rupture the smooth flow of diction in such a sudden and radical fashion? Nothing more nor less than a change of subject. The vaunting part of this *dāliyya* proves his complete mastery of the old order in writing verse, the well-honed, traditional poetic address which, when internalized by young poets, had become an integral part of the creative process. However, *ghazal* was one of the themes which, as already noted, had undergone a major change since the nostalgic and fervent love lyrics of the poets of the Umayyad era and the vibrant lyricism of a poet of the early Abbasid era such as Dīk al-Jinn al-Himṣī. Poets now lived in an age of sexual promiscuity (a trend noticeable in this poet's work), one in which various intricate figures of speech were the vogue for both prose and verse.

His large *dīwān* is, in fact, full of examples of deliberately laboured efforts to construct a verse bedecked with figures of speech, a new kind of phraseology

²⁶ See Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, vol. II, Appendix II, where there is a detailed discussion of his idea that the *muwashshah* was dependent on already existing tunes and that the authentic examples have no pre-existent metrical patterns in the Arabic *'arūd*. See esp. p. 758.

²⁷ See, for example, his *rā'iyya*, *Dīwān*, pp. 283–9, and his *mīmīyya*, *Dīwān*, pp. 688–91.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 2–6.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 165–71.

and diction. Ibn Sana' al-Mulk's poetry reflects his conscious effort to opt out of the old style, to innovate in a verse that had already lost its stamina and emotional core. For the reasons discussed above, Ibn Sana' al-Mulk's poetry, and that of many poets of his age, was not merely veering towards sterility and rigidity, but also combating the increasing infiltration of colloquialisms. However, the most sterile aspect of Ibn Sana' al-Mulk's verse appears in his attempts to invent embellishments and ornamentations. The more he strives to coin new words and demonstrate originality, the more his verse falls apart under the weight of artificiality. In his elegy on his own mother (the above-mentioned *hamziyya*), for example, he conveys his personal feelings in an inappropriate mix of unfamiliar words and awkwardly spun phrases.

His concentration on a search for novelty is one example of a decadent tendency that was already becoming prominent in the poetry of this period, as is his interest in aestheticism – confined in his case to concentration on embellishments and wordplay. A further symptom is his ‘poetic interest in corruption and morbidity’³⁰ encountered in highly obscene satirical pieces that reflect not only his own poetic shortcomings but also a failure of the era to uphold moral ideals. He makes use of sexual imagery of a graphic and repellent quality. The weaknesses we find in much of his poetry – the intrusion of occasional vulgarisms and his addiction to abstruse vocabulary with a merely artificial novelty but no aesthetic worth, rhythmic smoothness or semantic value – these are symptoms of a linguistic recession of serious dimensions, resulting from the poet’s limited apprehension of the poetic, his preoccupation with ornamentation, fanciful conceits and extravagant figures of speech that encumbered poetry and the way that diction was divorced from genuine emotion and from the eloquence that had afforded poetry its former grandeur.

Ibn 'Unayn (549–630/1154–1233)

In contrast with Ibn Sana' al-Mulk's affluent upbringing, the Damascene Ibn 'Unayn, another famous poet of the period, came from a poor family.³¹ He wrote eulogies, *ghazal*, satire and poems of longing for his home city of Damascus. Unlike Ibn Sana' al-Mulk, he failed to win favour with princes. Because of his harsh invective, he was banished from Damascus by Saladin and wandered from one region to another, engaged in trade and composing poem after poem to describe his homesickness for Damascus.³² On this topic Ibn

³⁰ See the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, s.v. ‘Decadence’.

³¹ On him, see Bāshā, *al-Shi'r fī bilād al-Shām*, pp. 297–308; Farrūkh, *Tārikh*, pp. 514–17; and see the introduction to his *Dīwān* by the editor Khalil Mardam Bek, *Dīwān*.

³² See the section on his poems of yearning for Damascus, *Dīwān*, pp. 68–90.

'Unayn's poetry shines, since the opportunity to demonstrate true feelings and a personal grief allows for a more genuine expression. He is certainly a better poet than Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk. Like the latter, he tried to rid his verse of repetitive words and phrases, and one can easily detect his often ineffective attempts to introduce novelty through the use of new and still unidiomatic words and the coining of new derivatives. However, far from vesting his language with aesthetic wonder and an escape from the humdrum and outmoded, such a technique manages only to shock the reader's sensibility with its alien effect, stunting any possible achievement of emotional and rhythmic fulfilment in the poem.

Ibn 'Unayn's profanity is even greater than that of Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk. He was a self-declared lecher, notorious in his day for the wantonness of his invective and the obsessive and often repugnant relish with which he depicts utterly reckless sexual escapades. Like Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk and others, he anticipates the post-classical period in the loss of charge and tension that mark good poetry. Much of his poetry is more like versified prose, even when describing experiences that should arouse passion in a genuine poet. In a short poem on death he flatly says:

Nothing is left for me except to die
 Just as others have died since Adam.
 Everyone will return unto his God
 and will meet what he has deserved.³³

SUFI POETRY

Interestingly, the kind of poetry we have just described, one that fails the test of art and time alike, was contemporaneous with some of the most interesting and enduring experiments in Sufi poetry. This is not to say that Sufi poetry was free of weaknesses, or that it was always able to produce verse in the best tradition of Arabic poetry. Yet, notwithstanding occasional faults, the Sufi achievement in Arabic verse is momentous: it revolutionized the language of poetry and vested it with mystery and all kinds of obliquity. Many of the faults that did exist sprang from the Sufis' attempt to overload their language with meaning and from their interest in expressing their often esoteric ideas – multilayered, subtle, paradoxical, antithetical, inclusive, gripping, ecstatic and often dreamlike – ideas for which immediate equivalents did not always exist. But, for all these linguistic difficulties (clearly seen, for instance, in Ibn al-Fārid's awkward use of rhymes in his *al-Tā'iyya al-kubrā* – discussed in Homerin's contribution to this volume, Chapter 3), Sufi experiments

³³ Ibid., p. 116.

developed an extremely supple diction, mainly because of the poetry's authentic emotional core. Muslim mystical poets experimented with words and their symbolic meaning with great audacity and often with great success. At times they succeed in expanding the semantic power of words to its furthest limits, discovering hidden modalities and investing them with a magic that is unforgettable:

My heart is busy with you, busy away from you.³⁴

or:

He [i.e. the Divine Being] annihilated them, spirit from body,
unveiled the curtains of eternity, and their souls passed
through.³⁵

or:

Leave off blaming me, savour the taste of love.
Then, when in the grip of passion, try to blame me.³⁶

or:

Masters, have you ever seen or heard
that two opposites would ever unite?
If only you had seen us in Rama, drinking cups of devotion without
[touching them with] fingers
while love between us carried on a sweet dialogue without a
tongue
You would have seen something that staggers the mind.³⁷

The essence of Sufi thought entered the lifeblood of the poem and informed its vision. Every thought they offered was an experience in itself. Reading it, our sensibility is modified. Sufis receive thoughts with their five senses, and find a correspondence between the body and the spirit, and between all the different sense modalities. This is well demonstrated in Ibn al-'Arabī's sense of the unity of the universe;³⁸ in al-Murtadā al-Shahrazūrī's (465–511/1073–1117) intricate descriptions of love for the Divine; in Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī's (550–87/1155–91) complex semantic antitheses; and in Ibn al-Fārid's concept of the 'correspondence' of the senses, seen especially in his long *tā'iyya* in which he mingles the functions of the different senses so as to reflect the totality of the relationship with God.

³⁴ From the *lāmiyya* of al-Murtadā al-Shahrazūrī.

³⁵ From the *ḥā'iyya* of al-Suhrawardī al-Maqṭūl.

³⁶ From the *tā'iyya al-kubrā* of Ibn al-Fārid (577–632/1181–1235).

³⁷ From the *nūniyya* of Ibn al-'Arabī (560–638/1165–1240).

³⁸ Other mystics such as 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) and al-Shushtarī (610–68/1214–70) also reflected this unity of the universe in their poetry.

For the purposes of this chapter the significance of the Sufi experiment is: first, to show the variety of poetic experience that was simultaneously taking place just before and during the post-classical period, with obviously diverse effects on language, syntax and style; and, second, to demonstrate how Sufi poetry, in contrast to much profane poetry, was able to sustain verse in a state of connectedness with the emotional core of experience. It was a mysticism with a genuine spiritual commitment, with a vision: esoteric, complex and mystical, but also apprehensible through the lucid inner logic of fine, meaningful verse. With its passionate zeal, creative freshness, mellow diction, and emotional and rhythmic flow, it managed to preserve the primary prerequisites of verse and protect Arabic poetry from the emotional atrophy that was threatening it. The symbolist successes of the Sufis, their cogent obliquities and many layered devices, represent a substantial addition to an already rich poetic heritage.³⁹

During this lengthy period another kind of religious poetry, primarily the *bādī‘iyāt*, or poems in praise of the Prophet, of which Sharaf al-Dīn al-Būṣīrī (608–96/1212–96)⁴⁰ was the acknowledged master, was also to uphold even more directly Arabic poetry's emotional core and passionate commitment in order to sustain a partial continuity with the great tradition of Arabic verse. Eulogies of the Prophet had been heralded much earlier,⁴¹ and had achieved reasonably cogent expression at the hands of the Baghdadi Jamāl al-Dīn al-Şarṣārī (588–656/1192–1258). While his verse has an uneven aesthetic and emotional appeal, it reflects the deep consciousness of Muslims during times when various religious creeds coexisted in the region: not only the various Islamic denominations (al-Şarṣārī was a fervent follower of Imam Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal) but also Christian and even Jewish currents of thought.⁴² His verse, like that of al-Būṣīrī, often hovers on the borderline of mysticism, even at times displaying clear mystical features, particularly when he focuses on the theme of divine love. Nevertheless, it lacks al-Būṣīrī's more cogent style and elevated mode of address.

Al-Būṣīrī came to Egypt from western North Africa and developed an early inclination towards a mystical orientation of Islamic piety. He seems to have lived ten years in Jerusalem, then moved to Medina in Hijaz where he stayed for thirteen years before returning to Cairo. It is interesting to read that, having failed to earn a livelihood through eulogy, he opted to teach the Koran to children. However, his religious bent inspired him to write the most

³⁹ The strangeness and idiosyncratic use of language, as well as occasional weaknesses in the verse of most mystics, from Ibn al-‘Arabī to Ibn al-Fārid, al-Suhrawardī and al-Shushtārī of al-Andalus, is clearly noticeable. For a comment on the diction of al-Shushtārī, see Sallām, *al-Adab*, vol. I, 251 note.

⁴⁰ On al-Būṣīrī's life, see Farrūkh, *Tārīkh*, pp. 673–80; Şalih, *al-Madā‘iḥ al-nabawīyya*, pp. 63–94.

⁴¹ For an account of the early experiments in this subject, see Şalih, *al-Madā‘iḥ al-nabawīyya*, pp. 15–34.

⁴² See for example his *ghayniyya*, *ibid.*, p. 122 and his *sādiyya*, *ibid.* p. 123, for which he chooses awkward and unfamiliar rhymes, alien to the repertoire of the poetic idiom.

renowned and constantly read eulogies on the Prophet, the famous *hamziyya* of 517 verses on the life of the Prophet of Islam and the Islamic mission (*da'wā*) up to the end of the rule of the four Orthodox caliphs, and the still more famous *Burda*, a *mīmiyya* of 160 verses, composed when suffering from a paralysis from which he is said to have recovered after the poem's completion. The smooth flow of words and rhythms, the intimate, ardent tone, the nostalgic mention of the holy places dear to Muslims, the well-constructed phraseology, have guaranteed this poet's abiding presence in the memory of Arabic-speaking Muslims.

It was this kind of verse that was eventually to become more influential. Purely mystical poetry could be very difficult for lay people to apprehend, but the eulogies of the prophet, albeit marked by recurrent touches of mysticism, remain more lucid and directly accessible.

Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr (581–656/1186–1258)

Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr (al-Bahā' Zuhayr) is another famous poetic figure, who, with his well-balanced, calm verse, heralded the Mamluk era. He was a man of upright character and probity, traits well reflected in his poetry. Born in the vicinity of Mecca, he spent most of his adult life in Egypt. He was a favourite of the Ayyubid ruler al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn, and remained loyal during the latter's imprisonment by his uncle al-Malik al-Nāṣir, who had been ambitious for power. When al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ left prison and went to Egypt in 639/1242, al-Bahā' Zuhayr joined him there and was well compensated for his steadfastness. Remarks by scholars and men of letters who knew him, along with the poetry itself, suggest an equable man of great generosity, decency and inner decorum, although these qualities do not prevent him from speaking satirically at times about people he found hard to tolerate.⁴³ Personal satire had become fashionable in this age, but al-Bahā' Zuhayr never descended to the obscenities of Ibn 'Unayn and Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk. Indeed he may be seen as providing some compensation for the numerous poets of decadent morality (*mujūn*) with whom the age abounded.

Al-Bahā' Zuhayr's poems are lucid and simple, a far cry from poetry decked out with complex embellishments. While he does use figures of speech, his artistic decorum provides a natural barrier against exaggerated artificiality. The paramount feature of his poetry is its pure lyricism, a quality sadly flawed in the case of other poets by incongruent diction and lack of harmonious flow. In al-Bahā' Zuhayr's verse, sound patterns, cadences and intonations, metrical coherence, sensuous quality and subjective mode all coalesce to make

⁴³ See Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr, *Dīwān*, pp. 178, 274, 275, 342 *et passim*.

this poetry the purest expression of a lyrical spirit that is many centuries old. Based on emotion, it does not, as al-Mutanabbi's verse does, involve an element of reflective intellectuality, but it is self-sufficient nevertheless in its expressed love of beauty, life and erotic encounters. An example of his love poetry that has remained in the culture's memory is the overture to one of his eulogies, a *lāmiyya*:

The beloved knew her value and played coy.⁴⁴

However, what this poetry lacks is some of the basic elements of elevated poetic expression. It is too tied to the occasion that gave it birth, thus keeping it bound to the immediacy of the here and now and largely incapable of being transferred to the subjective experience of the reader and thus linked to it. It also lacks a vision of life or of the future. While his many love lyrics do provide some indications of universal experience, they are rendered banal by replication as the poet endlessly reiterates the same ideas. Nor is ardour often found in these poems, as though love were a social habit, not a real event capable of shaking one's very existence.

For al-Bahā' Zuhayr poetry is part and parcel of daily life, faithfully mirroring his external experience. He has poems for every kind of daily interaction: a note of thanks, an expression of regret at someone's illness or mishap, a description of a state of mind, an invitation to a party, a meeting for pleasure. Affairs of the heart are all treated in similar fashion: a tryst made or not kept, a reminder of a love covenant, of a promise broken, suffering from separation, a courtship begun or ended, a messenger bringing good or ill tidings, and the perennial lament on lost youth:

Youth is gone, to no avail for me.
If only I'd done a thing in it that's pleasing
...
If only I'd eluded its mishaps!
And here I am today, lamenting what's been missed.⁴⁵

Al-Bahā' Zuhayr's poetry is a faithful reflection of the urban life of his times at its best, a life that still forms, to some extent, part of the Arab social tradition today. In fact, when one reads this poetry in its entirety, a picture emerges of an age over seven hundred years ago, with its social traditions and restrictions, its addiction to pleasure, its affluent comforts, its strict rules for social interaction, its splendour, its obligations, all of which were abandoned

⁴⁴ The Arabic text of the poem uses the masculine gender to refer to 'the beloved' in this instance, but it is hard to know whether he is talking about men or women, as the masculine gender was commonly used during the Middle Ages to allude to either sex. See p. 290 of his *diwān*.

⁴⁵ *Diwān*, p. 33.

by the true ascetics and Sufis of the age in their quest for freedom from such constraints and compulsions.

Despite its personal references, we are still far removed from the kind of subjectivity found in the great poetry of experience. In his verse there is a kind of divorce from the poet's inner life and authentic thoughts. Yet we can still sense, here and there, a fleeting rebellion, as if this constant socialization were a mask he was forced to don in order to endure. He refers, often, to the tricks he plays either on those who blame him or on others – the implication being that he deliberately eludes their scrutiny. In one of his shorter poems he says:

The blamer blames me for my fickle heart,⁴⁶
 Loving Sulaima today, Zaynab tomorrow,
 But there's a secret in all this.
 I have my philosophy for love:
 No lover but sings for me as I drink.
 It is to myself that I say the praises,
 It is for myself that I experience joy.

This is the 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'a (d. 712 or 721) syndrome par excellence. However, 'Umar (the renowned seventh/eighth-century *ghazal* poet) was capable, if not of ecstasy, then at least of a real and splendid celebration of love, coupled with a more particularized experience. One feels that al-Bahā' Zuhayr is not speaking of persons really important to him; it is as if the beloved were a kind of prototype, as if, finally, any beauty would do.

His poetry provides a fine example of language attaining the level and simplicity of common speech without sacrificing the authentic connection to the inherited idiom. It flows without impediment; there is no attempt to select incongruent words or to introduce unsuitable vocabulary which might obstruct the flow of the poem's diction and rhythm. Even when he uses words not commonly employed in poetry, as he often does, they seem to fit the verse's structure and rhythmic fluidity. One distinctive feature is his use of words hitherto unfamiliar to poetry and presumably used colloquially during his own time, words that are still part of the colloquial of some Arab countries but have not become formal language. For example, he uses two words, *līhāf* ('bedcover' or 'eiderdown') and *turrāḥa* ('floor cushion'),⁴⁷ both of which are still used in Lebanese and Palestinian colloquials; the same applies to his use of *bukrā* for 'tomorrow'.⁴⁸

This is indeed an age of irreconcilable contradictions. How, one might ask, could a single period produce Sufi poetry of such ecstasy and intensity of

⁴⁶ The 'blamer' (*al-'ādbil*) is a common negative figure in Arabic love songs, along with the more malignant *wāshī* (the person who gossips about the lovers and exposes them). See p. 21 of his *dīwān*.

⁴⁷ See his *fā'iyya*, *Dīwān*, p. 222.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

feeling, coupled to a vast vision of a divinity encompassing the whole world and permeating every atom in it, and yet, at the same time, produce that sometimes placid and dainty, sometimes obscene and crude, and almost always superficial apprehension of an experience devoid of vision and profundity? In al-Bahā' Zuhayr there is only the reachable, the moment of frolic, of joy, of hope for the immediate gift from a dignitary, of a morning shining with flowers and fragrance, of an evening brimming with friendship and drink; of no time beyond time; of a stolen kiss, of a meeting won or lost, of a little chagrin, a little chiding or praise.

Al-Shābb al-Zarīf (661–88/1263–89)

The Syrian poet Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Afīf al-Tilimsānī was born in Cairo, after his father – ‘Afīf al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Tilimsānī, a famous Sufi and a gifted poet – had emigrated from Tilimsān (Tlemcen) in North Africa to join other prominent Sufis. Shams al-Dīn is usually known by the nickname al-Shābb al-Zarīf (the elegant youth). He grew up in Cairo, but left it early in his youth when his father took a job in Damascus. The young poet was in touch with the men of letters of his day and gained a substantial following in Damascus, becoming a recognized poet there while still in the prime of youth. However, this provoked the envy of certain poets. Alien though it was to his own temperament, he was dragged into a battle of satire and counter-satire against them. ‘Why should poets deny me my honour?’ he asked,

Whenever I disappear [from the scene], they brandish their poems
proudly.
No wonder! In the absence of the sun the beauty of stars appears.⁴⁹

These poets managed to aggravate him, and his works include several poems that denounce their antagonism and hatred. When the situation finally became unbearable, the desperate poet went into seclusion and later died suddenly during his father’s lifetime.

Most of his poetry concerns *ghazal* and wine, but he also composed nature poetry, eulogies, elegies and verse on other topics. In addition he wrote *muwashshahāt* and, having been brought up in a religious family, wrote some *bādī‘iyāt*. He wrote cultivated verse that reflected an urbane outlook on the world. Relevant here is an observation made by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (791–837/1389–1434), a connoisseur of *bādī‘* and author of the prestigious *Khazānat al-adab*, a study of the poetic art of al-Sharaf al-Anṣārī, an immediate Syrian predecessor of Shams al-Dīn (by whom the poet was greatly influenced).

⁴⁹ *Dīwān al-Shābb al-Zarīf*, p. 79.

Al-Sharaf al-Anṣārī, says Ibn Ḥijja, took care to achieve harmony in his verse, implying that the poem ‘comes free from incongruence, like flowing water’ and adding that poets writing on love should not burden its simplicity with *bādī*‘ of any kind unless it comes easily and spontaneously to them. Most of the poetry of Shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn al-Anṣārī, he says, is characterized by this quality,⁵⁰ and the same remark can plausibly be made regarding the poetry of Shams al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī.

Al-Shābb al-Zarīf’s *ghazal* is in fact quite gentle and musical, and one wonders why the poems in question have failed to enter the broad, ever living memory of Arabic poetry. The following poem, for example, is truly lovely:

Conceal not what longing has made of you.
Proclaim your love: for all of us are lovers.
...
The one to whom you will reveal your love
Might help you yet. All lovers are comrades.
Grieve not! You’re not the first of lovers
Annihilated by the beauty of cheeks and eyes,
And if abandoned by your love, patience!
Love has its special ways. Again you might unite.⁵¹

While this reads very melodiously in Arabic, little is known today of this poem or of the poet and his work. This is perhaps because in places the language, for all the poem’s melodious sway, lacks the necessary immediacy; more importantly, it is because the expression is not a decisive avowal of an exclusive emotion. Love is linked merely to the beauty of the desired object of love, not to her real person, whereas it is always the particularity and exclusivity of love, its transcendence of beauty and physical qualities, that really matters. The whole period, it must be said, exhibits this deficit, the love it offers being more dependent on physical passion and desire than on any absorbing and abiding attachment. The lack of dedication, the concentration on transient relations based on outward attractiveness, is one of the most unconvincing features of this period’s profusion of *ghazal* poetry. Despite this particular poem’s strong avowal of suffering in love, it too is unconvincing. It fails to arouse the reader’s deeper emotions about the universal experience of love.

Safī al-Dīn al-Hillī (677–750/1278–1349)

Although no poet of the post-classical period can boast of having started a major trend in formal poetry, al-Hillī can at least claim to have embraced

⁵⁰ See Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī, *Khazānat al-adab*, p. 190; Bāshā al-Shīrī *bilād al-Shām*, p. 340.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

most trends and poetic genres of his time. He possessed a broad concept of poetry and was ready to embrace, with open-minded enthusiasm, every kind of innovative approach without being particularly attached to any. At the same time, his poetry is deeply rooted in the heritage of Arabic verse.

Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī was born and grew up in al-Hilla near Kufa. The murder of one of his uncles provided the initial incentive for the poet's belligerence, and he seems to have fought courageously in a battle waged to avenge this uncle's death, one that engendered one of the most famous *fakhr* poems in Arabic. Like Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk's famous *fakhr* poem, it stems from the heart of the old poetic tradition. The genre had clearly maintained its traditions and vocabulary, almost unaffected by the changes in language, syntax and tone. Although written in praise of his own familial relations and their exploits in battle, it has been adopted by later generations as a poem vaunting Arab virtues and courage in general. Here is the famous verse, memorized by almost all Arabs even up to this day:

White are our deeds, black are our battles,
Green are our tents, red are our swords.⁵²

Initially, as he proclaims in the introduction to his *dīwān*, he hated to eulogize for profit, since

I regarded poetry as dedicated to virtue . . . I promised myself not to eulogize a good man, however elevated, and not to satirize a mean one, however lowly

Therefore, I only composed what would uphold my name and bring me appreciation.

eulogizing just the Prophet or the great among my family,

and [only] satirizing at the behest of my friends.⁵³

Al-Hillī goes on to note that, after he had won fame as a poet, numerous wars and disasters forced him to leave his family, wife and city. Leaving Iraq in 701/1302 following the upheavals caused by warring members of the Hulagu dynasty, he seems to have made a living in commerce travelling from one place to another. Needing the support of a dignitary, however, he eulogized princes, especially al-Malik al-Mansūr Najm al-Dīn Ghāzī of the Urtuq dynasty in Mardin⁵⁴ for whom he composed twenty-nine eulogies, each based on a letter in the Arabic alphabet, with verses that begin and end with the same letter. These he collected in a volume called *Durar al-nuḥūr* (Jewels for Necks).⁵⁵ His *dīwān*, that he himself organized for posterity, is divided into twelve sections:

⁵² Ibid., p. 14.

⁵³ Al-Hillī, *Dīwān*, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid. See the end section of his *Dīwān*.

1. *Fakhr* and *hamāṣa* (bravery).
2. Eulogy, praise and thanksgiving.
3. Hunt poems (*tardiyāt*) and other description.
4. Friendship (*ikhwāniyyāt*), an important new subject in this age.
5. Elegy and condolence.
6. *Ghazal* and other erotic themes.
7. Wine and flower/nature poems.
8. Complaints and chiding (*'itāb*).
9. Gifts, apologies and the request for leniency.
10. Riddles and complex ideas.
11. *Adab*, asceticism and other things.
12. Funny and satirical anecdotes.

The firm control exerted by al-Hillī on his art is clearly indicated by his immense capacity to write in both the old and the new styles without seeming a stranger to either. Perhaps the one single quality that marks this poetry is its lower calibre as compared to other more efflorescent eras. Al-Hillī seems to have shared an affinity with all periods, not excluding his own – with its heavy dependency on embellishments and complex figures of speech. Yet, while al-Hillī's poetry might reflect considerable interest in *badi'* of all kinds, we do not meet the stark artificiality and the gross incongruence which mar the poetry of Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk.

Al-Hillī's poetry, like that of al-Bahā' Zuhayr, is a superb mirror of his age. The flagrant way poets spoke of wine drinking and homosexuality still remains a source of amazement; al-Hillī provides a prime example. As noted above, he has a whole section on wine ('the origin of all pleasure').⁵⁶ In one poem he urges his listener 'to commit the loveliest of sins':

Drink of it, a wine that brings spirits together,
abolishing their worries.
Drink sparingly: a little wine refreshes the soul,
and too much harms the body.
Then repent and ask God's forgiveness
You'll find Him merciful.⁵⁷

Al-Hillī also composed a substantial amount of erotic poetry, reflecting the essence of the tradition of love poetry in his time, more of a divertimento, a continuation of a tradition, than an expression of ardour and deep emotion. A polygamous outlook on love and sexuality was the vogue now, further complicated by widespread homosexual practices since a profusion of slave girls and boys furnished a great variety of choice. In one poem he can inform the beloved that he would lay his cheeks in the pathway of her shoes;⁵⁸ in another, he adopts a haughty tone, assuring the fickle beloved that:

I am not one to give up his honour in love
Although I'd give both my soul and my possessions.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 328.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 325–6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 266.

Elsewhere he chooses to compare homosexual and heterosexual love:

Spare me the tepidity of women
Refresh me with the briskness of boys.
One male's share of beauty is double that of a woman.⁶⁰

Al-Hillī is famous for his active interest in the new experiments in form that were affecting both formal and vernacular poetry, composing *muwashshah*,⁶¹ *musammat*,⁶² *dūbayt*⁶³ and poetry in other forms as well.⁶⁴ His experiments with poetic language are full of interest. We have seen how with al-Bahā' Zuhayr the simplification of language fitted the syntax and rhythms of his poetry. In al-Hillī a further dimension is added. He was aware both of the inherited poetic idiom he had mastered and of the vocabulary in use in his day, and showed great dexterity in incorporating words from the new vocabulary into the entrenched syntax of the inherited verse, so harmonizing the new with the old without hindrance to the assimilation of meaning or to the flow of the poem's rhythms. This is the basic difference between the linguistic innovations of poets like Ibn Sānā' al-Mulk and Ibn 'Unayn on the one hand and of al-Hillī on the other. However, his greatest weakness lay in his inability to speak with profundity and with the mind of a man of more urbane times. Although he participates easily enough in the poetic innovations of his age, he seems also to belong to previous ages. Unlike many poets of the post-classical period, he was not tepid in his expression of emotion, but he sometimes goes to such banal emotional extremes that the authentic emotional tenor of elevated poetry is lost, and the tone vulgarized.⁶⁵

Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī was undoubtedly a highly gifted poet, endowed with a poetic talent rarely encountered. By virtue of his innovations, his interest in new forms and the generally strong tone of his verse, he was indeed the best poet of this long period. Nevertheless, his frank avowals of coarse ideas and declarations of certain feelings and interests without the finesse and decorum to befit a major poetic figure, and, above all, his often unperfected poetic expression, all these preclude his placement in the higher echelon of poets in Arabic literary history.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 288.

⁶¹ Note, for example, the interesting form of a *muwashshah* he wrote (ibid., pp. 136–9).

⁶² See a *musammat* he wrote as an elegy, using the verses of Ibn Zaydūn's famous *nūniyya* on the Umayyad princess, Wallāda (ibid., pp. 234–7).

⁶³ See his attempt at writing a *muwashshah* in the metre of the *dūbayt* (ibid., pp. 125–7).

⁶⁴ See for example a *hamziyya* he built on two metres, imitating a similar work by another poet (ibid., p. 192).

⁶⁵ To give just a single example among many, he says, in an elegy on his slain uncle (ibid., p. 216): 'Shedding tears is mere hypocrisy if not mixed with flowing blood [from the eyes]'.

Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī (686–786/1287–1385)

Ibn Nubāta embarked on poetry in a period when eulogy had become so entrenched as to be synonymous with poetry.⁶⁶ He also lived in the age when numerous figures of speech, prolifically used, had taken hold of poets' imaginations.⁶⁷ His poetry bears witness to the weakening hold of poets and audience alike on what was poetic in verse, to the erosion of the relationship between poetry on the one hand and life and the inner soul of the poet on the other.

Ibn Nubāta was born and raised in Egypt, but spent most of his adult life in Syria, which at the time was politically united with Egypt. Having failed to make any profit from his verse in Egypt, he gained access to rulers in Syria who were prepared to compensate him for eulogizing them. The most important of these was al-Mu'ayyad al-Ayyūbī, better known to posterity as Abū'l-Fidā, the famous historian and author appointed by the Egyptian Mamluks to be ruler of Hama in Syria. He seems to have honoured Ibn Nubāta, and the poet wrote many eulogies on him, also elegizing him when he died in 732/1331.

Ibn Nubāta's copious *dīwān* is full of eulogies (a few of them in praise of the Prophet) and elegies; together these two genres comprise over 70 per cent of his verse. In fact almost all his longer poems are eulogies or elegies on important personages, other topics being treated in short pieces. His verse does, however, provide substantial material for the study of historical linguistics, for tracing the notable, if problematic, way that poetic language had begun to change seriously vis-à-vis previous ages. He was quite knowledgeable about classical poetry in all periods, habitually including excerpts (*taḍmīn*) from this vast repertoire, usually in the form of half verses or *ashtār*. What strikes one immediately on reading those lines with *taḍmīn*, is the difference in address and eloquence between these brief excerpts and adjacent verses. There is in Ibn Nubāta's verse a culpable nonchalance in the use of words, coupled, often, with an unaesthetic disturbance of the syntax of verse, resulting in a loss of fluidity, of the lucidity that should accompany eloquent utterance, and of the selectiveness characteristic of great poetry. Gone from this poetry is the old, effective sweep and rhetorical majesty of the verse; and gone, along with it, is that splendid usage of the telling phrase and the lucidity of intent which is so evident in even the most complex poetic constructions of some of the great poets of classical times.

⁶⁶ In one of his short pieces he begins with *ghazal*, then immediately moves to eulogy. See his large collection, Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī, *Dīwān*, p. 411.

⁶⁷ When Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 296/908) wrote his *Kitāb al-bādi'* in 274/887, he mentioned only seventeen kinds of *bādi'*. By the time of 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, over 150 kinds had been classified: see al-Nābulusī, *Nafahāt al-azhār*, pp. 3–5.

Ibn Nubāṭa's verse exudes the spirit of someone constantly at a loss as to how to deal with life, finding no means other than eulogizing powerful men. He was, in fact, dedicated to the act of asking, sometimes shedding part of his dignity in the process. Consider the following:

Sire, my wife requests new earrings.
 Witness my miserable state.
 I used to beg for poetry's worth but now
 I am begging for a pair of earrings.⁶⁸

He does manage to display a genuine sense of sorrow about old age, a theme that had become something of an obsession for Arab poets. He also writes descriptive poems, riddles, poems of yearning for his birthplace, Egypt, along with rather tepid depictions of events in his life, most importantly elegies for the many sons he lost, for the death of both his wife and concubines. In his elegy on his wife it is interesting to find him dwelling on her physical beauty, 'How can I forget a figure like the spear? or a face which every moon would commend, eyes which all gazelles would praise?'⁶⁹ This short poem only reflects his sense of loss to a degree; a greater intensity is to be found in his elegy for one of his concubines: 'It is as if I transferred her [when she died] from my eyes to my heart, for she had possessed all my six senses.'⁷⁰

In Ibn Nubāṭa's verse one senses little depth or philosophy of life. He has never attained any real prestige, nor has his verse been preserved in the annals of great poetry. While he is an almost exact contemporary to Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Ḥillī, the latter's place in the collective memory of Arabic poetry is assured, while that of Ibn Nubāṭa is not.

AFTER 1500

The poets of the later Mamluk age that preceded the Ottoman era remain largely uncelebrated in works of literary history. 'Umar Mūsā Bāshā, the scholar best known for his specialization on the Syrian poets of this era, closes his study with al-Shābb al-Zarīf. Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām has some brief references to various later poets in *al-Adab*, and the same applies to the works of 'Umar Farrūkh. This particular period is the focus of al-Yousfi's contribution to this volume, in which he considers not only the poets and poetry of the era but also the cultural factors that were involved in the determination of their aesthetics (Chapter 2).

⁶⁸ See Ibn Nubāṭa al-Miṣrī, *Dīwān*, p. 352.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 516.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 73–4.

The establishment of a vast Ottoman empire over Arab lands and other places beginning in the fifteenth century coincided with a long period of poetic decline, although it should be clear by now that such a decline had in fact already been in process for some time. Here again the religious angle proves crucial for the preservation of the language and rich heritage of the Arab world. The Muslim Ottomans had a profound respect for the Koran and Koranic and other religious studies, something that guaranteed the status of Arabic among religious savants and a select literary hierarchy. Indeed during the Ottoman era a number of Ottoman scholars of Arabic culture made significant contributions to the heritage. Nevertheless, the Arabic language and its literary expression were considerably weakened. To give a single example, Muḥammad Sayyid al-Kilānī, the author of a book on literature during the Ottoman period in Egypt, fails to cite a single example of good poetry throughout this long period (1516–1798). He extols what he terms its ‘sweetness, melodiousness and strength’,⁷¹ yet the examples he provides reflect a prosaic type of poetry, mere versification (including a number of syntactic, grammatical and other errors) but with nothing approximating the genuinely poetic.

However, this same period witnessed the rise to prominence of popular literary genres, both in verse and in the many heroic romances composed during a long era of subjugation (discussed in detail in both the Popular Poetry and Popular Prose sections of this volume – Parts III and IV). Some romances, such as *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazañ*, had been created earlier (Sayf was created in the eighth/fourteenth century), but a number of others were compiled during the Ottoman era. Urban and provincial settings provided a backdrop against which these delightful, mostly heroic tales, often interposed with a deformalized and sometimes vulgarized poetry, were narrated to gatherings of eager listeners.

It is impossible to surmise how Arabic verse might have fared if poetry in the vernacular had been free to flourish and develop in technique, semantics and profundity.⁷² However, this did not happen. As noted above, the eloquent Koranic language on the one hand – with its sublime echoes ever present in the ear – and, on the other, the weight of a rich and much admired poetic heritage – thousands of verses and half verses reiterated by Arabs as proverbial or reflective utterances in a wide variety of situations – constituted a barrier to any development of the vernacular as a major mode of poetic expression.

However, as noted above, the most common factor was the general perception of debility and emptiness, a divorce from crucial aspects of the human

⁷¹ See Kilānī, *al-Adab al-miṣrī*, p. 63.

⁷² In a longer study, creative literature in the many Arab vernaculars would merit close attention.

condition, a tepidity in emotion and a less potent syntactic formation. For the many reasons discussed above, but also because Arabic poetry was already many centuries old and had (like that composed in a number of other languages) moved beyond its era of classical efflorescence, these phenomena became more prevalent with the passage of time. In much altered circumstances, they were to form the direct but ineffective precedent for modern Arabic verse, which, by the mid-twentieth century, was destined to rise to a third zenith in Arab poetic history.

CONCLUSION

What did this lengthy era, full of significant political and social developments, contribute to the course of Arabic poetry on the one hand, and, on the other, to the knowledge of poetry as a universal art form? First, it provides fertile ground for various studies in the theory of literature, showing many aspects of the nature of 'change'. It also illustrates the effect of tradition on art, the hold that it has on the imagination of creative writers, the struggle during periods of change between various idioms and also between those forces of resistance and surrender that are a continuous part of the very stuff of poetry. The verse of this era also furnishes a unique source for linguistic studies, especially historical linguistics, and an example of the struggle that may ensue between various idioms and different levels of linguistic utterance at any one period. Also illustrated are the vast riches of the Arabic language in obliquities and its perhaps matchless capacity for ever new ramifications of meaning derivable from semantic root forms.

The ways in which the poetry of this period developed testify clearly to the relationship between art and the *Weltanschauung* of the artist; indeed no period of Arabic verse demonstrates this better. While this does not invalidate the notion of the inner, autonomous, purely artistic forces that are at work, directing the development of art and (especially) its capacity for acquisition and rejection, it does emphasize the dimension of the self and the role that an artist's vision plays in the direction of his or her craft. As has been demonstrated several times in this chapter, this proves to be a crucial dimension, particularly in the contrast between Sufi (and other religious) poetry and that of lay poets.

This study has also shown that poetry can experience major differences in treatment, language, emotion, elevation, attitude and tone between one theme and another, not only among different types of authors (religious and lay poets, for example) but also in the work of a single poet, as one follows the treatment of a single theme over time. This too is a crucial differentiation which should interest the critical historian of literature.

Although this study has been primarily devoted to a process of degeneration, there are quite a few instances where the period reflects the underlying, more robust forces in Arabic verse, and the enduring, latent power of a once great poetry, along with its enormous capacity for rejuvenation. The period forms a crucial, if dilapidated, bridge between two robust periods, and yet the very existence of verse as a major genre demonstrates the perennial importance of poetry for the Arabs and the deep reverence in which they have always held it. This, in and of itself, is no mean consideration.

CHAPTER 2

POETIC CREATIVITY IN THE SIXTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

INTRODUCTION

Studies in Arabic devoted to poetic output during the period between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries are characterized by a kind of anxiety caused by a painful awareness that Arabic poetry at the time had entered its era of decline and was facing a serious crisis. There is also some sort of consensus that the creative impulse motivating Arabic culture had begun to flag, to break down and indeed to disappear. Thence the concept of ‘period of decadence’ derived its influence and overriding ability both to colour the vision of all those who deal with the topic and to define the approach of scholars who make use of the term.

If one looks at works on the poetry of this period, one soon notices that, because the entire era is shrouded in obscurity, the methods and conclusions of those who have studied it consist of judgements regarding contents and their documentary dimension. However, the application of this simplifying instinct to research on this period does not result from a lack of familiarity with the poetry produced. The real reason is the serious conflict between desire and history that arises at the moment of reading: between what actually happened on the one hand – in other words, the dilemmas and ruptures that Arabic poetry found itself facing – and, on the other, what the researcher would like to have happened. For this very reason the opinions and attitudes adopted are founded on a system that of necessity leads either to an exaltation of the poetry of the period – extolling it to the very skies and considering it as a further developmental link in the course of Arabic poetic creativity through the ages¹ – or else to a process of contempt – whereby it is trivialized and discarded, being viewed as mere artifice that has managed to sweep aside the artistic achievements of Arabic poetry.²

Research on the history of Arabic culture and the period of ‘decadence’ is full of a curious kind of keening ritual; the portrait is dark and distressing, at the

¹ Adunis, *al-Thābit wa'l-mutāḥawwil*, vol. III, pp. 53–5; see also Bāshā, *Tārikh*, pp. 5, 77–8.

² See e.g. Lu'lu'a, *Manāzil al-qamar*, pp. 45–6; see also Maḥmūd Sālim Rīq, *Tarikh al-adab al-'arabi*, pp. 418–19; al-Ghazzī, *al-Adab al-tūnisī*, pp. 11–37.

cusp of a decline.³ Many scholars use political realities to explain the paralysis that afflicted poetic creativity, insisting that the turkicization policy during the Ottoman period was what swept everything away, poetry, belles-lettres and art. The operation becomes a mission to rescue the Arabic element and condemn the Turkish. With certain researchers in the Maghrib this racist approach to self-acquittal becomes more a question of regionality; they insist that it was only the Mashriq that went through a period of decadence beginning at the end of the Abbasid period, while the Maghrib saw a period of political and cultural efflorescence that came to an end only with the advent of imperialism.⁴ However, whether this instinct is racist or regional, it is still of significance. It suggests a kind of dismayed awareness of what actually happened, without the concomitant realization that this way of dodging history cannot alter what actually happened. Was Ottoman occupation really responsible for the decline in Arabic poetry during this period, or was it instead the methodology used by earlier generations of Arabs – in areas such as the manipulation and usage of poetic discourse, attitudes to language, meaning and modes of production – things that, in all their variegation, can furnish plenty of reasons for the crisis in which poetry found itself? What is the connection between the theorization of earlier Arab generations about poetry and poetics and their attitude to meaning on the one hand and on the other the state of regression and despondency in which poetry found itself during this period? Was not theory responsible for taking away the poet's freedom, by creating poetic categories, and fixing generic boundaries, possibilities, roles and means of production?

The majority of attempts at addressing the reasons for the poetic tradition's regression and weakness are based on a kind of explanation that requires the creative poetic element to be linked to the political and social. This type of research fails to take account of the fact that the connection between the creative act and its environment, be it political or social, is highly problematic: at the very moment that the creative act takes shape, it engages with not merely its present and its surroundings but also its particular history.

In the light of these premises I have read the poetry of this period and considered the problematics that it raises. I have come to realize that the period includes an enormous number of poetic collections and poets in both east and west of the region. In addition to poets such as Ibn al-Nahhās al-Ḥalabī (Aleppo, d. 1642), al-Amīr Manjak Pāshā al-Yūsuffī (Damascus, d. 1669), ‘Alī al-Ghurāb (Tunis, d. 1811), al-Kaywānī al-Dimashqī (Damascus, d. 1759) and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Fāsī (Morocco, d. 1712), al-Muhibbī mentions

³ See e.g. the views of Maḥmūd Sālim Rizq, *Tārikh al-adab al-‘arabī*, pp. 418–19; the same posture can be seen in al-Ghazzī, *al-Adab al-tūnisī*, pp. 11, 37, 418–20.

⁴ ‘Abbās al-Jarārī, *al-Adab al-maghribī*, p. 174.

in his *Nafḥat al-rayḥāna wa-rashḥat talā' al-hāna* the names of hundreds of poets (he cites the names of forty-seven from Damascus alone). In addition we also come across a number of other well-known poets, of whom I will mention some in the following list:⁵

Poet	Place	No. of poems	No. of verses	Year of death
Ibn al-Naqīb	Damascus	382	2,492	1670
Ibn Zārka	Shinqīt	25	694	1731
al-Mūsawī	Basra	85	3,851	1676
Abū'l-Ma'ālī al-Talawī	Damascus	160	2,908	1605
Ahmad al-Bahlūl	Tripoli	30	1,754	1701
al-Amīr al-Šan'ānī	Yemen	527	8,043	1763
al-Habasī	Oman	365	5,218	1737
al-'Ashārī	Iraq	189	4,856	1780
al-Kawkabānī	Yemen	116	2,667	1601
al-Muṭrān Germanus	Lebanon	275	3,275	1732
al-Hibāl Amīr Shu'āra' al-Yaman	Yemen	376	3,589	1668
al-Waraghī	Tunis	75	1,701	1776
'Abd al-Rahmān al-Mawṣilī	Damascus	90	994	1706
'Abd al-'Azīz al-Fishālī	Morocco	69	1,016	1621
'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī	Damascus	951	13,590	1730
Muhammad Rāshīd Bey	Tunis	11	190	1759
Muhammad al-Šafāqīsī	Tunis	85	712	1743
Muhammad 'Awwād al-Baghdādī	Iraq	217	2,414	1747

If one considers these collections of poetry from the point of view of their generic purposes, one notices that they are motivated from within by a kind of grudging awareness, based on the one hand on a desire to confirm their adherence to Arabic poetic norms and provide a continuity with the poetic output of the past, and on the other hand on a fervent wish to be open to fresh vistas and horizons with which the poetic tradition has had no previous acquaintance. The notion of authenticity to the tradition took the form of adherence to the genres of panegyric and lampoon, a sanctification of the values prized by earlier poets, and a resort to their techniques as inspiration for the engendering of metaphor, simile and figurative language. A fervent quest for innovation consumes the bulk of the collections, taking the form of new types of writing: puzzles, cryptograms and history in poetic form; and panegyrics,

⁵ *al-Mausū'a al-shi'rīyya*, website of al-Majma' al-thaqāfi (Abu Dhabi).

secular and prophetic, leading in turn to a kind of linkage between religious and poetic discourse. They are all indeed kinds of poetic practice that earlier Arabic poetry had not witnessed, and so some researchers⁶ regard them as a sign of innovation. However, a more careful examination of these contrived generic purposes, in the broader context of a desire to open new avenues that would free Arabic poetry from the artifice, frippery and mannerism that continued to plague it, soon reveals a quite different picture. On the surface they may give the impression of an internal dynamic at work within the poet and poetry and even suggest a search for new and unfamiliar topics in Arabic poetic history, but a reading of that same dynamic soon confronts us with an implicit acknowledgement that poetry finds itself in a crisis too severe to be confronted.

These disjunctions involve not only the level of the poetic text and the means of its production, but also the status of poet and poetry within society, the relationship of the poet to his text, and the ways he chooses to express the definition of poetry and of innovation. I have therefore decided to deal with the most important and far-reaching of these disjunctions, under the following set of headings.

FIRST DISJUNCTURE: THE LOW STATUS OF THE POET AND HIS DISCONTENT WITH POETRY ITSELF

This type of break impacts upon the relationship of the poet to his poetry. It reveals itself in expressions of doubt regarding the validity of the poetic event itself. Texts are replete with accounts of the way poetry and poets are despised. We read Ibn al-Nahhās al-Halabī, for example:⁷

Of panegyric I have planted for you the greenest of branches,
and on it Venus has thrown a bouquet of flowers
For in the eyes of sympathizers have been garlands, while those
of hatred have looked on in malice.
I have said: My fingertips will be moistened with fruits,
yet all they have garnered is hot-coals.

This tragic awareness of the crisis of poetry and the low status of its practitioners represents a new reality.

Poets give the overriding impression that the gap between poetry and its recipients is widening, leaving the poet himself in a state of isolation

⁶ See e.g. Bāshā, *Tārīkh*, pp. 5, 77–8.

⁷ His full name is al-Manalla Fātḥ Allāh ibn ‘Abd Allāh, known as Ibn al-Nahhās al-Halabī al-Madanī. He is considered one of the period's most important poets, so the majority of literary historians provide his biography: see al-Muhibbī, *Khulāsat al-athār*, vol. II, p. 257; and his *Nafḥat al-rayḥāna*, vol. II, pp. 507–8; al-Ziriklī, *al-A’lām*, vol. V, p. 333. For the quotation, see Ibn al-Nahhās, *Dīwān*, p. 70.

unprecedented within the Arabic poetic tradition. Manjak Pāshā al-Yūsufī addresses himself to this comprehensive sense of closed horizons and blocked paths, imprinting his feeling of isolation on the text's surface:⁸

A town devoid of beauty; not even
 a beloved to whom my heart can incline.
Even if I composed some poetry, tell me:
 to whom should I address my panegyric?

Al-Kaywānī al-Dimashqī describes the same crisis:⁹

Time has thwarted my goals
 since I have barred the road to humiliation.
Enough for me and for you, O time! You have wronged me
 and accused me of the sins of my forebears.

This serious historical decline in the relationship of the poet to his product and society was not the product of this particular historical period; rather it stems from a historically distant era. If we take a look at the writings of earlier critics and *penseurs*, we notice that, whether they are writing about poetic criticism and theory or composing histories of literature in general, they were completely aware of the fact that the trials of the poet and the crisis of poetry itself could be traced back to the moment when poetry was dislodged from its lofty position at the advent of Islam. Ibn Khaldūn (fifteenth century) talks about the period of silence that followed the advent of the Koranic text: ‘Tongues were stilled and fell silent.’¹⁰ This silence was not something chosen by the poet, but rather an event over which he had no choice. For the first time in the history of Arabic poetry the process of poetic communication is interrupted and the relationship between poet and listener is severed. People turned away from poetry and occupied themselves with ‘matters of religion, prophecy, and revelation’.¹¹

The decline that afflicted the process of poetic communication was not simply a gap in the process of Arabic poetry, but rather a total rupture that had a significant impact on its direction and brought about a major change in the poet’s status within society. Within the tribal structure that Islam set out to abolish the poet had held an unparalleled position, perpetuating the tribe’s glorious feats and exploits in his poems. Poetry had always been a vital presence, the tribe’s means of rescuing memories from the tyranny of forgetfulness and thus of guaranteeing their glorious feats and battles a continuing presence as time went by. It was poets who took on this great task, and society offered them a particular place in its collective *imaginaire* and enveloped him in a mythic

⁸ Manjak Pāshā al-Yūsufī, *Dīwān*, p. 121.

⁹ al-Kaywānī, *Dīwān*, pp. 67–9.

¹⁰ Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, p. 581.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

halo; as Ibn Sīnā puts it, 'he held the status of prophet'.¹² As far as poets were concerned, the new faith of Islam not only shunned the religious beliefs and values of their forebears (in itself a very bitter spiritual and psychological experience), but also constituted a significant clash of destinies. The struggle between the Prophet and poets was thus no less significant than the one between him and his enemies; indeed it was even more bitter and incisive.

SECOND DISJUNCTURE: PARALYSIS IN THE PROCESS OF POETIC COMMUNICATION

This disjuncture reveals itself through a tension in the relationship that is supposed to exist between poetry and audience. As a phenomenon it gives the impression of starting during this period, but in actual fact its roots go far back in the history and direction of Arabic poetry. Recipients of the poem are, of course, one side of the process of poetic communication; without them poetry's efficacy is destroyed, its social role nullified and its aesthetic function crippled. As a consequence the break in the relationship between poetry and its recipients leads to a breakdown in the process of poetic communication itself.

The causes of this disjuncture are numerous and varied: some involve the poet, his ability to anchor his poetry in the tradition, and his knowledge of the secrets and wonders of discourse; others are related to the decline that affected the language itself. The basic reason for this major break is that poets failed to ground their poetry in the tradition. That requires of them that they make their discourse conform with the needs and norms of poetry so as to produce something that is new and unprecedented while still remaining firmly grounded in the realms of poetry.

Historical circumstance also played a role in the lowered status of poetry. The early Islamic conquests and the mingling of languages and races that they brought about served as an incentive to a number of innovations in the realm of Arabic culture and as one of the most important factors in the process of impelling that culture to ask new questions and to introduce variety into its knowledge and experience. But at the same time this movement represented a danger to the Arabic language itself and to people's ability to master its particular genius and comprehend its rules. Al-Qarṭājannī (thirteenth century) addresses himself to this issue in blunt terms: 'People thought so little of poetry because they spoke foreign languages and were ill-disposed temperamentally. They had no idea whatsoever about the secrets of eloquence and its dynamic potential. They turned this deficiency into artifice. They are really to blame for it, and the situation still exists.'¹³

¹² al-Qarṭājannī, *Minḥāj al-bulaghā'*, pp. 122–4.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 124–5.

This foreignness did not come to light only during al-Qarṭājānnī's own period; it was a historical reality that had begun much earlier and continued after his death. All we need do is refer to the introduction to Ibn Manzūr's fourteenth-century dictionary, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, where we find him bemoaning the orphaned state and decline of Arabic:

My only aim is to preserve the fundamentals of this language . . . This is because of the variety and different sorts of languages I see dominant in this age, so that elaborate language has come to be considered a reprehensible form of speech and to speak [pure] Arabic is counted a fault . . . I have compiled this dictionary in an age whose contemporaries take pride in something other than their language.¹⁴

Thus the practice of poetry ceased to be a mode for the invention of new types of expression that could expand man's appreciation of his world. Instead it became mere versification, with gain and earning a living as the only goals. Poetry also ceased to be a form of writing that would reveal the poet's vision of the world and his attitude to mankind's problems; instead it became a piece of artifice to be bartered. This change impacted poetry, poet and recipient; and thus did the history of decline begin. What kept recurring was the chronic sense of imminent decline and disastrous closure, colouring the views of Arab intellectuals and theorists from the tenth century onwards. Ibn Ṭabāṭabā, for example, discusses it, detailing the trials and tribulations of poets during his own lifetime.¹⁵ Some modern studies emphasize this point too. İhsān ‘Abbās, for example, discusses the state of poetry in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, suggesting that literary Arabic was dislodged from its pedestal and replaced by the colloquial dialects.¹⁶ As a result of this process of removal, colloquial poetry expanded its purview considerably in both production and reception. Hasan Ḥusnī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb says much the same in his book, *Mujmal tarikh al-adab al-tūnisī*, where he notes that the decline of poetry in Tunis during the era known as the 'period of decadence' did not happen all at once, but was rather the result 'of the corruption of literary Arabic through prolonged periods of ignorance'.¹⁷

THIRD DISJUNCTURE: POETRY'S FUSION INTO ALIEN CATEGORIES

The heading of this section refers to the disappearance of the distinction between poetry and other genres; indeed poetry starts to conform to the expectations of other genres. This development does not happen purely by

¹⁴ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, vol. I, p. x.

¹⁵ Ibn Ṭabāṭabā, *Iyār al-shi'r*, p. 15.

¹⁶ ‘Abbās, *Tarikh al-naqd al-adabī*, p. 496.

¹⁷ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Mujmal tarikh al-adab al-tūnisī*, p. 235.

chance; it is more a matter of compulsion. The poet writes within a fixed linguistic system in a particular culture and a defined generic framework. The poet's creativity acquires its newness and individuality only from an awareness of those moments when it is supposed to break rules and restrictions and of those other moments when it is an adherence to those same restrictions and boundaries that becomes one of the requirements of change, invention and renewal.

The student of poetic practice during this period rapidly realizes that this third rupture led poets to dislike poetry, to become all too aware of the paralysis that had so gripped poetic communication, and to despair of the possibility of finding an audience that could rescue poetry from the contempt into which it had fallen. In such a period of confrontation poetry was subsumed into other types of literature. We can summarize some of these modes and forms under the headings below.

Poetry and the discourse of cryptograms

Under this category fall such things as puzzles, cryptograms, histories and embellished poetry. They all have in common the manipulation of words so as to make the intended meaning of the poet only decodable after a good deal of effort and tedium. The relationship between poet and recipient is now governed by the skill of the former in obscuring meaning – concealing his intended message by twisting language and using it in unintended ways – and by the ability of the latter to crack the codes and interpret the cryptograms. Here for example is 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī:¹⁸

*inna li'l-thā'i fi'l-ḥurūfi thabātun
 wa-li-bādī thabātīhi wathabātun
 ḥarfu sīrrin sāra bi-lā sarayān
 fī'l-mu'tanā jam'un la-hu wa-shatātun
 huwa hādhā hādhāwā-hādhā-wa-hādhā
 tatasāmā li-āyatīhi l-bayyinātu
 wa-huwa amrun muhaqqaqun fī umūr
 ka-shukhūṣ turi-ka-hā al-mir'ātu
 akhadhat zāhiran wa-a'tat khafiyān
 fa-sakāra shuhūdu-hā wa-suḥātu*

It does not take long to realize that these verses which shroud their meanings in deliberate obscurity participate in the construction of poetic discourse only

¹⁸ *al-Mawsū'a al-shi'rīyya*, website of al-Majma' al-thaqāfī (Abu Dhabi): *Dīwān 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī*. For obvious reasons, these lines are not susceptible to translation – or, at least, not one that will serve any 'meaningful' purpose. The original is transliterated so that the comments which follow can be contextualized.

through metre (*basīt*), paronomasia (*thabāt* in line 1; *sirr, sāra, sarayān* in line 2; and *amr, umūr* in 4) and antithesis (*jam'*, *shatāt; zahiran, khafīyyan; sakārā, suhāt*), all of them poetic devices that rely on, indeed sanctify, sonic imitation. However, the efficacy of such devices can be derived only from the core of poetic discourse when the imitation is multicoloured and multifaceted, constantly varying so that the sonic imitation does not become total, thus plunging the utterance into a monotony of mere repetition. However, al-Nābulusī's text is content merely to condone total sonic congruence, repeating the same consonants and thus the same phonetic resonances. The poet thus impoverishes language and overwhelms words. They in turn forsake him and turn the tables, plunging him into an abyss of artifice and mannerism.

These puzzles, cryptograms, histories and embellishment poems clearly emerge from a conception of poetry that is totally at variance with the early Arabic poetic corpus. While they might perhaps be considered merely as an extension and even an intensification of the very obscurity that is a regular feature of poetic discourse, in fact they differ from this type of obscurity in that language is converted into impenetrable puzzles. There is no cognizance of the obvious fact that, even if this type of writing manages to dazzle its recipient, it leads to a serious clash between the formal structural level and the semantic, since the former becomes the focus of a variety of attempts at creativity and is seen as the only basis for the construction of the aesthetic dimensions of speech. That said, it is nevertheless extremely simplistic to suggest that the 'erasure' of the space between poetry and obscurantist discourse is a distinct feature of the period usually termed 'the period of decadence'. The decline in poetic practice that saw texts become a kind of clash between the twin aspects of formal structure and semantic level emphatically did not have its beginnings in this period. It had been operating for some time within the very heart of Arabic culture, but manifests itself in this particular period with a particularly overwhelming force.

The use of poetry in the cause of historical dating also belongs in this same category; it was an especially popular mode among poets of this period. It involved composing a verse or half verse that conforms with the sense, metre and rhyme of the other verses. However, when the equivalent numerical value of each letter is added up, the sum total is the date of the year to which the poet wishes to refer. Here, for example, is a line from a poem written by Manjak Pāshā al-Yūsufī in which he records the date of the opening of a hostel built by the governor of Syria, Ṣāliḥ Pāshā, in AH 1075:¹⁹

¹⁹ Prince Manjak ibn Muhammad ibn Manjak ibn Abī Bakr ibn 'Abd al-Qādir ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Manjak al-Kabīr al-Yūsufī al-Sharkasī al-Dimashqī, mentioned by al-Muhibbī in *Khulāsat al-athar*, vol. IV, pp. 409–23; and in his *Nafḥat al-rayḥāna*, vol. I, pp. 136–60. See also

qāla dā‘ī al-bashar bushrā arrikhu fī sabīl Allāh khānun qad buniya

The date the poet-prince wishes to record in order to celebrate the occasion is found in the second half of the line, according to the common numerical value given to each consonant: *fī* = 80 + 10 (90); *sabīl* = 60 + 2 + 10 + 30 (102); *Allāh* = 1 + 30 + 30 + 5 (66); *khān* = 600 + 1 + 50 (651); *qad* = 100 + 4 (104); *buniya* = 2 + 50 + 10 (62), giving a grand total of 1075.

This process whereby the poetic text was turned into a document of historical record was considered a hallmark of poetic quality and high esteem, and so most important poets of the period sanctioned its use, including al-Khāl al-Talwī (d. 1705), al-Kaywānī al-Dimashqī,²⁰ Ibn al-Nahḥās and ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn al-Shākir (d. 1749) nicknamed *al-Bahlūl* (the clown). This last poet made this type of writing his preferred medium; so anxious was he to demonstrate his skill in it that he composed a panegyric in praise of his master, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), comprising 108 lines in which every single line computes to the same date, AH 1136.²¹ Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī – highly regarded in his lifetime as poet, littérateur, religious scholar and author of poetry, travel works, studies on mysticism, jurisprudence and the epistolary art, some ninety works – is recorded as delivering a glowing opinion of al-Bahlūl’s poem, something that is clearly not an ephemeral comment from someone with no knowledge of the principles of poetry, but rather a genuine evaluative judgement from a scholar well versed in Arabic poetics and the rules governing the creative process.

Poetry and religion

In *Naqd al-shi‘r* Qudāma ibn Ja‘far states explicitly that the realm of poetry does not recognize prohibitions and interdictions. ‘It has to be firmly stated . . . that all concepts are at the poet’s disposal, and he can use whichever ones he wishes without being denied the use of one about which he wishes to speak.’²²

Research on the poetry of this period soon reveals that poetic practice often led to an erasure of the gap between poetry and religion. Poets of this period believed that mere versification of religious and moralistic topics was sufficient to have their compositions subsumed under poetry; metre thus played its thoroughly misleading role of eliminating the gap between manneristic verse

al-Khafājī, *Rayḥānat al-alibbā*, vol. I, pp. 232–56; al-Ziriklī, *al-A‘lām*, vol. VIII, p. 224. The poem can be found in Manjak Pāshā al-Yūsufī, *Dīwān*, p. 71. Once again this line is not translated, but given in transliteration.

²⁰ See e.g. al-Kaywānī, *Dīwān*, pp. 172–3, 190–2.

²¹ al-Budayrī, *Hawādīth Dimashq al-yawmiyya*, pp. 9, 139.

²² Qudāma ibn Ja‘far, *Naqd al-shi‘r*, p. 17. See also al-Jurjānī, *al-Wasāṭa*, p. 64.

and real poetry. In the Maghrib we can mention Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim ibn Da'ūd al-Salwī who lived in the fifteenth century and wrote a complete collection of poems in praise of the Prophet called *Nawādir al-nizām fī sharaf sayyid al-anām* which consists of more than three thousand lines.²³ Then there is the *Dīwān* of 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Fāṣī in the seventeenth century,²⁴ and the work of al-Wazīr al-Sarrāj (d. 1736), *al-Hulal al-sandasīyya fil-akhbār al-tūniyya*, contains numerous extracts from panegyrics composed during this period. He suggests that the poets' overriding interest in religion and the spread of panegyrics and mystical poems is due to the tyrannical power exerted by the rulers at the time and the famine and plague that were the consequences of that rule.²⁵ Shaykh Muḥammad al-Nayfar also mentions this type of poetry in his work, *Urwān al-arīb*, and cites many poetic texts from the Husaynid period that clearly show poetry's conformity with the demands of religious discourse and at the same time its overwhelming mood of self-pity, affliction and misery. In the eastern part of the Arab world (the Mashriq) we note that 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī uses the introduction to his *Dīwān* to detail the topics that preoccupied poets in this period, the vision they had of poetry and its function, and what exactly they expected of it. We thus discover that religious panegyrics penned in response to the perceived demands of religious discourse are to be found in the poetry of Amīn al-Jundī, al-Kaywānī al-Dimashqī, al-Khāl al-Talwī, Ibn al-Naqīb al-Ḥusaynī, Ibn al-Nahhās al-Ḥalabī, Abū Ma'tūq Shihāb al-Mūsawī and others.

Poetry and classicism

A perusal of the poetry composed during this period soon reveals that, along with all the puzzles and cryptograms, the poetic collections include other poems that adhere rigidly to the goals and methods of older Arabic poetry. Such texts aspire to imitate the techniques used by the ancient poets, but without managing to reach the same level of aesthetic achievement as their forebears.

In *Nafḥat al-rayḥāna wa-rashḥat ṭalā' al-bāna* al-Muhibbī discusses Ibn al-Nahhās al-Ḥalabī and Manjak Pāshā al-Yūsufī, both of them poets whose careers during this very period demonstrate that creativity and foundation-building in Arabic poetry was still flourishing.²⁶ He even goes so far as to claim that Ibn al-Nahhās was renowned for his ability to craft idioms, while Prince Manjak's forte was in the invention of figures. However, when we read the

²³ MS in the Public Library in Rabat, Morocco, no. 360K. See 'Abbās al-Jarārī, *al-Adab al-maghribī*, p. 156.

²⁴ 'Abbās al-Jarārī, *al-Adab al-maghribī*, pp. 139ff.

²⁵ al-Wazīr al-Sarrāj, *al-Hulal al-sandasīyya*, p. 195.

²⁶ For al-Muhibbī's comments, see *Nafḥat al-rayḥāna*, pp. 507–8.

collected poems of these two poets, we soon realize that al-Muhibbi's fulsome praise can be viewed only as a desperate exercise in clutching at straws, a forlorn hope that poetry might regain its former status and position in society. It is indeed difficult to find any texts to justify al-Muhibbi's encomium; the majority sink into a shallow imitation of the modes and categories utilized by their poetic forebears.

Metaphors and images also participate in this act of borrowing from the heritage of the past. Thus we see the panegyric's subject being likened to towering mountains, lions, clouds and rain; all of which are blatantly copied in the collections of al-Amīr al-Šan'ānī,²⁷ Muḥammad al-Šafāqisī²⁸ and 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Fishālī.²⁹ We even see this classicizing tendency in the texts of al-Amīr Manjak al-Yūsufī who in many of his poems does at least display an individual approach to writing. He makes use of the older text as a motivating force that permits the poet simultaneously to achieve a linkage with the past and a separation from it; he imitates earlier kinds of writing, copying for example the *Rūmīyyāt* of Ibn Firās (d. 968) and many of the more familiar metaphors – sea and clouds in panegyric or boast poetry – to portray generosity.

CONCLUSION

The label 'age of decadence' then has displayed a remarkable ability to colour the dissertations of those who adopt its principles, concealing as much about the period in question as it reveals. In the current context what it replaces is something like 'the course of decline in poetry'. Not unnaturally the label casts a shadow over the topic under study here; the weakness that deepened the crisis of Arabic poetry and confronted it with a set of impossibilities is attributed to the political issues that mark the period in question.

For these reasons we have preferred to investigate this period as a gap or a break in the course of Arabic poetry. If we change our approach, not labelling the era as simply a 'period of decadence' but rather regarding it as a time when a steady decline in the Arabic poetic tradition reached its nadir, we soon discover that the crisis began much earlier; indeed its roots are to be found in the history of Arabic culture, concealed though they may be within the long history of Arabic poetry and the changes that it witnessed. Whether we examine the status of the Arab poet, his relationship with society, and the role he played socially and aesthetically; or the relationship of poetry to the older tradition of poetics and the extent to which it adhered to or broke away from those norms;

²⁷ *al-Mawsū'a al-shi'rīyya*, website of al-Majma' al-thaqāfi (Abu Dhabi): *Dīwān al-Amīr al-Šan'ānī*.

²⁸ Ibid., *Dīwān Muḥammad al-Šafāqisī*.

²⁹ Ibid., *Dīwān 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Fishālī*.

or the relationship of poetry to other literary genres and its ability to fulfil its role in responding to the social and aesthetic needs of Arabic culture, in all these cases we find that the issue of decline and weakness remains a central feature of the problems that fomented within the core of poetic practice and intensified even during poetry's most radical and innovative moments.

From the very outset Arabic poetry has included among its generic characteristics the potential to become a means of earning a living. This implies that the crisis of poetry and the lowly position the poet occupied are a direct product of the contradictions firmly embedded in the ancient Arabs' very concept of the word, in their definition of poetry and their expectations of it. When the poet converted poetry into a means of gain and earning a living, it was no mere passing event, but a crisis whose full impact was postponed until all the required elements could be in place, at which point it would become a means whereby poetry would be led inexorably towards artifice and the poet himself to inevitable contempt. This process of decline has its own history; there are periods of quiescence, others of activity and tension. It is not a linear movement through time but rather one that, in the process of application and accumulation, sometimes leaps forwards and at others goes into reverse. Whence comes the illusion that it did not exist before the period we are considering here, whereas it had actually been in relentless operation for ages before that time. Thus the substitution of a phrase like decline in poetry for 'age of decadence' becomes not simply a change of label or a widening of the temporal scope of the title, but rather a different way of examining the reasons that brought poetry to such a sorry pass and opened the history of its decline.

It is entirely reasonable that creativity in Arabic culture should have chosen to display itself through poetry, which stands at the forefront of the cultural scene throughout the classical period of Arabic literature and surpasses other literary genres in both status and function. However, at some point this same creative instinct chooses to alter its self-projection. The creative impulse shifts from poetry, the 'official' literature that Arabic culture had previously chosen to celebrate, to prose, and from official literature to other genres and categories that theoreticians of old had striven mightily to marginalize and ignore. Research on the narrative genres in Arabic culture, for example, shows that this very period witnessed the appearance of a whole collection of compositions concerned with the popular sagas (those of the heroes of popular imagination, like al-Zāhir Baybars, Princess Dhāt al-Himma, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, the Righteous Saints and their miraculous deeds, Sufis, and so on), not to mention the great story collection, *A Thousand and One Nights* (*The Arabian Nights*). (See Part IV on popular prose in this volume.)

An unnuanced application of the principles of historical development to an assessment of the changes that affected Arabic poetry in this period emerges as utterly simplistic, since it totally ignores what I would term the principle of alternatives and substitution. We only need to look at the corpus of modern Arabic poetry to confirm that poetic practice – with all its differences and its variety of aesthetic propositions – continues to maintain covert linkages with those many innovations and forms in poetic praxis that have previously been marginalized and ignored. The very fact that so many modern creative texts resort to these abandoned and largely overlooked writings is just one token of the fact that they are what truly embodies the principle of substitution. They have now taken over from official literature, impelling the creative power of Arabic writing towards new goals and peaks which guarantee that the fires of Arabic culture will continue to be rekindled.

CHAPTER 3

ARABIC RELIGIOUS POETRY, 1200–1800

By the thirteenth century, Arabic poetry had entered a phase of conservation as scholars and littérateurs sought to protect and preserve their Arab heritage. The recurrent Crusades and, above all, the Mongol advance challenged Arab culture and Muslim supremacy, which were shaken further in 1492 by the Christian reconquest of Spain. These same events, however, contributed to the creative growth in Arab religious poetry that occurred at this time. In particular, the mystical verse of Ibn al-Fārid and al-Būṣīrī's hymns to the Prophet Muḥammad struck a devotional chord, which continues to resonate within Arabic religious poetry and Muslim culture.¹

Reference to religion was common in classical and post-classical Arabic poetry. A poet might invoke the Koran and the fast of Ramadan, trace his lineage to a prophet, or compare his beloved's beauty to that of Joseph. But such features were standard, often clichéd elements of the poetic repertoire, and so alone should not define verse as religious. By contrast, numerous poems directly address concerns involving God, His prophets, and pressing matters of life and death. Many Sunni and Shia Muslims, together with some of their Jewish and Christian contemporaries, composed Arabic verse to place their joys and sorrows within religious contexts that would give them meaning. Not surprisingly, Arabic religious poetry assumes many forms, from the refined verse of professional poets to the vernacular prayers of pilgrims. This verse, then, is not restricted to a particular style or set of themes, though Arabic religious poetry has been closely associated with several specific genres, including *zuhdiyya*, or ascetic poetry.²

Reflecting life's vicissitudes and the human condition, ascetic verses were composed by many poets of the period, often in the popular quatrain form. Following the standards set by al-Ma'arrī (d. 1057) and other Abbasid poets,

¹ Homerin, 'Reflections on Arabic Poetry in the Mamluk Age'.

² Bellamy, 'The Impact of Islam on Early Arabic Poetry'; Hamori, 'Ascetic Poetry'.

later ascetic verse is generally pointed and concise like that of the Syrian poet 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Anṣārī (d. 1264):

Remember the terrors of death,
and your heart forgets its hopes.
So take what suffices you and be content;
leave the powerful to their riches.
If you speak a foolish word, know it will pass,
as will the one who said it.³

Such a life of pious circumspection should always be tempered by an acute awareness of one's shortcomings, as expressed in this couplet by the Christian Makridāj al-Kaṣīḥ of Aleppo (fl. eighteenth century):

O airy heights of heaven, is there a way
I might ascend to you with my aim and hope?
O my desire, my heart still longs for you,
but my steps are shackled by my sin.⁴

The stoic tone of ascetic poetry becomes more urgent in prayers seeking God's mercy in troubled times, particularly during periods of drought, famine or an outbreak of plague, which evoked these verses from the Cairene judge Ibn al-Tansī (d. 1449):

O God of creation, how great are my sins.
Have mercy, for You alone can forgive.
O my Lord, help a wretched servant
who kneels before the door of Your high home.⁵

Such verses are also linked to a second genre tightly bound to religion, elegy (*rithā'*). Once reserved for fallen warriors, Arabic elegy expanded in the Islamic periods to eulogize statesmen and scholars, friends and family. Religious beliefs, rituals and symbols are frequently invoked as the poet attempts to make sense of his loss and find solace in his faith. This work of mourning is vividly illustrated in the elegies composed by the Andalusian scholar Abū Hayyān (d. 1344) for his daughter Nuḍār. She had died from a debilitating disease and so her father sought consolation in an Islamic tradition that declared such victims to be martyrs:

When the Merciful issued His command –
and what is decreed must surely come to pass –

³ al-Anṣārī, *Dīwān*, p. 414; al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-shi'r al-'arabī*, pp. 285–305, 350–9. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Shaykhū, *Kitāb shu'ara' al-nasrāniyya*, pp. 498–500.

⁵ Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Nujūm*, vol. XV, p. 539; al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-shi'r al-'arabī*, p. 334; Dayf, *Ta'rikh*, pp. 342–7.

She left her life in its prime, a martyr,
 not one to dispute with death.
 Remaining calm, she bore witness thrice,
 died, and returned to Him.
 But she did not pass away until she saw,
 with rising soul, her place in the higher world.⁶

Other elegies strike a more sombre, even chilling note, as in the following verse on a drowning victim:

God decreed that I not forget my friend,
 for He drowned him in the water
 from which I take my drink!⁷

Death's tragic dimension is underscored further in the many elegies composed for fallen cities, especially Baghdad. The Mongol destruction of this Muslim capital in 1258 was accompanied by the slaughter of thousands of people, including the caliph and his family, and for many Muslims the end seemed near. Feelings of desolation and despair pervade the lamentations of survivors, whose sense of guilt and alienation from God find voice in verses such as these by Ismā'il ibn Abī Yusar (fl. thirteenth century):

Judgement Day befell Baghdad with its harsh command
 to turn and flee when they arrived.
 The Prophet's folk were seized, the men of learning, too;
 those left behind were swallowed by the hordes.
 I never wished to stay alive as others passed away,
 but God decrees other than we choose.⁸

Similar sentiments were expressed later in North Africa and Andalusia as Christian armies steadily advanced, but many poets, including al-Sharīf al-Rundī (d. 1285), also raised a call to arms:

How often the weak have called us to help
 as they were captured and killed, yet no one stirred.
 Have you severed Islam's bonds between you,
 you who are brothers and servants of God?
 Are there no souls brave at heart, no champions,
 no allies of righteousness?⁹

The same martial spirit is evident in numerous panegyrics for sultans and amirs, whether the Nasirids of Andalusia, the Almohads of North Africa, the

⁶ Homerin, 'A Bird Ascends the Night'. See also Bauer, 'Communication and Emotion'.

⁷ Ibn Taghīrī Birdī, *Nujūm*, vol. VII, p. 252; al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-shi'r al-'arabī*, pp. 162–76.

⁸ Jarrār, *al-Ghazw al-Maghūlī*, pp. 38–40, vv. 20–2; Shaykh Amin, *Mutāla' āt*, pp. 99–114.

⁹ Monroe, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry*, p. 334. Also see Jayyusi's translation in Sperl and Shackle (eds.), *Qasida Poetry*, vol. I, pp. 15–17; vol. II, pp. 112–19, 424.

Mamluks of Egypt, Syria and the Arab peninsula, or their Ottoman successors. The glorious victories of Muslims over their infidel foes are dramatically recounted in this verse, and while some poets no doubt hoped to profit from lauding the valiant efforts of their patrons, many poems convey a sense of gratitude and relief that the enemies of Islam have been put to flight.¹⁰

Beside these poems of holy war against the infidel is an abundance of other religious verse reflecting the personal struggle against selfishness and a sinful life. At times, this verse is tinged with asceticism, but quite often these poems take on a mystical hue as they revolve around notions of love and union with God or the Prophet Muḥammad. Many Arabic mystical poems are short and didactic to highlight teachings, as in this piece by the great Sufi theosophist Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240):

He praises me when I praise him,
and he worships me when I worship him.
In a state I confirm him
while in essence deny him.
Then he knows me while I know him not,
while I know him and so witness him.
So where is self-sufficiency
while I aid and assist him?
For this truth he created me,
so I know and find him.
Thus did the tradition come to us,
its meaning realized in me!¹¹

Brevity and paradox lend a creed-like quality to this poem, which concludes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s chapter on Abraham in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Bezels of Wisdom). The poem highlights the chapter’s main theme of the interdependence between creator and creation. In a complex rhetorical style reminiscent of earlier verse by al-Hallāj (d. 922), Ibn al-‘Arabī repeats verbs with different subjects, at times negating them for antithesis. Further, the pronominal suffix *hu*, found in every verse, becomes a sliding referent with three possible meanings – him/Him/it – grammatically reinforcing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ideas on interdependence. According to a tradition popular among the Sufis, God was a hidden treasure who desired to be known and, so, initiated creation. God’s self-knowledge, therefore, is dependent on His being known in and by creation. Thus, while enlightened believers praise and worship God, it could be said, relatively speaking, that He praises and worships them for helping to manifest Him. The realized gnostic discovers this reality within himself and so lives not according to his own selfish desires, but according to the divine will, which he finds throughout

¹⁰ E.g. Monroe, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry*, pp. 292–300, 338–88; Homerin, ‘Reflections’, 66–70, 79.

¹¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, p. 83; Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, pp. 1–48; Lings, ‘Mystical Poetry’.

existence. As God says in a famous tradition on mystical union referred to in the final verse of the poem:

And My servant continues to draw near Me through willing acts of devotion until I love him, and when I love him, I become his ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees.¹²

Ibn al-‘Arabī composed a great deal of poetry, found in many of his doctrinal works and in his *Dīwān* – a substantial collection of verse in various forms on a variety of subjects. The poems include several odes (sing., *qaṣīda*) and elegies along with numerous shorter poems on such topics as astral phenomena, dreams, the spiritual significance of the alphabet, the ninety-nine names of God and the chapters of the Koran. In addition, a few poems reflect newer poetic forms such as the five-hemistich quintrain (*takhmaṣ*) and the Andalusian *muwashshah*, a kind of strophic poetry (discussed in more detail by Larkin in Chapter 10), which was becoming popular in North Africa, Egypt and Syria. Ibn al-‘Arabī also compiled a second collection of verse, entitled *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Desires), consisting of about sixty odes and love poems (*ghazal*), to which he added a gloss on the mystical allusions within them.¹³ These latter poems are indicative of the trend in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries towards longer, more thematically complex mystical verse, which is invariably associated with the Egyptian poet ‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235).

Ibn al-Fāriḍ was a religious scholar, Sufi and poet, whose most famous work is the *Nazm al-sulūk* (The Poem of the Sufi Way), also known as *al-Tā’iyya al-kubrā* (Major Ode in T) since its end-rhyme is in the letter ‘ت’. This is a long poem of 760 verses, and so resembles other lengthy didactic poetic works composed around this time on Muslim jurisprudence, Koranic commentary and other topics.¹⁴ Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s focus was the arduous quest for spiritual transformation, and he relays traditional Sufi wisdom regarding such issues as ascetic discipline, unselfish love and mystical union. He does this, however, with a beautiful lyricism drawn largely from Arabic wine and love poetry, as when the beloved rejects her impudent suitor:

The open road to me is plain to see
for one right-guided,

¹² Homerin, ‘Tangled Words’; Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, pp. 63–115.

¹³ Ibn al-Arabi, *Dīwān*, pp. 135–6, 164–79, 206–10, 218–32, 313; Ibn al-Arabi, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, tr. Nicholson, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*; Lings, ‘Mystical Poetry’, pp. 250–1. See also Sells, *Stations of Desire*.

¹⁴ Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*; Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, pp. 41–5; Lings, ‘Mystical Poetry’; Sperl, ‘Qasida Form and Mystic Path’, pp. 65–81; al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-shīr al-‘arabī*, pp. 467–85.

But commonly the passions
 blind and lead astray.
 So I will expose your passion and who it is
 who has worn you out;
 I will sweep away your pretence to my love:
 you are love's ally, alright,
 But for its sake, not for me; as my proof,
 you have saved an attribute of yours.
 For you never loved me
 so long as you were not lost in me,
 And you will never be lost
 without my form revealed in you.
 So give up claim to love, and call your heart
 to something else to drive away your erring ways.
 Shun union's courtyard, that was not to be –
 here you are living; die if you be true!
 Such is love: if you do not die,
 you will win nothing from it;
 So decide on death or leave my love alone.¹⁵

Throughout the *Nazm al-sulūk*, Ibn al-Fārid assumes the role of the enlightened teacher, and to underscore his lessons he occasionally juxtaposes highly charged poetic language with appealing everyday subjects. In this respect, portions of the *Nazm al-sulūk* resemble the mystical narrative poems in Persian by ‘Aṭṭār (d. c. 1220) and Rūmī (d. 1273). In one instance, Ibn al-Fārid likens the human condition to a shadow play (for further detail, see Dorigo Ceccato’s contribution to this volume, Chapter 17). The material world is the backdrop for a person’s sense of self, which uses the five senses to produce an image of the world, similar to the way a puppeteer manipulates his puppets to perform his shadow play on a screen. Heedless individuals forget, however, that there is more to life than superficial qualities and personal desires. Just as the puppeteer removes the screen and stands revealed at the play’s end, so too must the mystic tear away his self-love that he might see again his divine origin. But, then, the mystic in selfless union also resembles a puppet, though now it is God who pulls the strings to act on the mystic’s behalf. Thus, the shadow play reveals another of reality’s hidden truths, and one stressed by Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis, namely that the creator only exists with his creation. The puppeteer relies on his puppets to perform his play, while God as creator is revealed only through His creation which, paradoxically, conceals His oneness. Therefore, the mystic who peers behind the screen of multiplicity

¹⁵ Ibn al-Fārid, *Dīwān*, pp. 95–6, vv. 96–102. See also Homerin, ‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid; Ibn al-Fārid, *The Mystical Poems*; and his *The Poem of the Way*; and Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 162–266.

finds only God, one and alone. This, declares the poet, is union's truth, and a central lesson of the *Nazm al-sulūk*:

In illusion's drowsy dream, the phantom shadow
 leads you to what shimmers through the screens.
 You see the shapes of things in every display
 disclosed before you from behind the veil's disguise.
 Silent, they seem to speak; still, they seem to move,
 shedding light, though dark,
 And you see two armies on land, at times,
 other times, at sea, in great companies.
 Courageous, dressed in iron mail,
 they stand their guard with swords and spears.
 The soldiers of land – knights on horse
 or mainly manly infantry –
 And the heroes at sea – riding the decks
 or climbing the lance-like masts –
 Are violently striking with shining sword,
 thrusting the brown strong-shafted quivering spear,
 Drowning in the fire of striking arrows,
 burning in the deluge of piercing hot blades.
 You will watch other shapes I have not mentioned,
 but I will trust in these choice few.
 All that you witnessed was the act of one
 alone within the cloistering veils,
 But when he removes the screen,
 you see none but him;
 No doubt lingers about
 the forms and figures,
 And you realize when the truth is shown:
 that by his light you were guided
 To his actions in the shadows.¹⁶

In addition to the *Nazm al-sulūk*, Ibn al-Fārid composed about a dozen shorter poems on love and longing, including his ode to mystical wine. These poems, too, reveal a dense rhetorical style (*bādī*) dominated by alliteration, antithesis and wordplay, which Ibn al-Fārid deftly employed to intimate his mystical view of life. This verse then set the standard for generations of later poets who consciously imitated his work in terms of style and religious content, as is evident in verse by the Iraqi poet ‘Āmir ibn ‘Āmir al-Baṣrī (d. c. 1330). Ibn ‘Āmir composed his own *Tā’īya* of over five hundred verses as a critique of Ibn al-Fārid’s teachings based on his own Shia mystical perspective. Ibn ‘Āmir was an active participant in one of several Messianic movements that arose

¹⁶ Ibn al-Fārid, *Dīwān*, pp. 165–7, vv. 679–80, 682, 688–93, 702, 704–6.

in the wake of the Mongol invasion, and his *Tā’iyya* expounds Shia doctrine with the hope that the Hidden Imam will soon return to rid the world of evil:

Imam of Right Guidance, how long will you hide?
 Bless us, Holy Father, with your return.
 Your army’s banners will appear before us
 and diffuse among us the fragrance of musk.
 That wondrous news will spread throughout the world,
 bringing with it smiles of joy and delight.
 Seize and set right time’s cycle and show mercy
 to dear ones, meek and in misery.
 You have been destined always for this command
 since God declared: ‘You are My caliph!’
 So we pray to you for victory,
 for truly we are in need –
 One like you is always called
 whenever disaster strikes.¹⁷

Another admirer of Ibn al-Fāriḍ was the Palestinian scholar and Sufī ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), who not only composed a mystical *Tā’iyya*, but wrote a long prose commentary on all of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s verse. In addition, al-Nābulusī left an account of his visits to Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s shrine in Cairo, where people fell into ecstasy during Friday poetry readings. This highlights an essential feature of Arabic religious verse, namely that it served primarily spiritual, as well as aesthetic, functions.¹⁸ For centuries, Sufis have recited verse in meditation sessions, while preachers have quoted poems in their sermons. The Ottoman official and preacher ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Farfūr (d. 1554) once admonished:

Leave the world to those who suppose
 they will find there balm for a broken heart.
 That is their belief, no, their mistake;
 if only the world contained its salvation.¹⁹

This accords well with the homiletic character of many short poems, like that of the Egyptian judge Muḥammad al-Ḥatādī (or al-Ḥatātī, d. 1641):

Be patient, don’t be anxious to change affairs,
 for man’s best choice is what God decides to do.
 Seek only the shade of God’s shadow
 in the garden of His words:

¹⁷ Marquet, *Poésie ésotérique ismaïlienne*, pp. 94–5, vv. 317–19, 321, 324–5; al-Shaybī, *al-Šila bayn al-taṣawwuf*, vol. II, pp. 115–26.

¹⁸ al-Nābulusī, *Dīwān al-ḥaqā’iq*, pp. 78–83; Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, pp. 78–83.

¹⁹ al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā’ira*, vol. III, p. 164.

'Am I not Your Lord?
and His blessings will embrace you.
So be strong, think nothing of your world;
be free by leaving it behind.
Don't fret about your fortune,
for God surely will provide.'²⁰

Above all, Arabic religious poetry often becomes a prayer, as in Ibn al-Tansī's lament, Ibn 'Āmir's *Tā'iyā* and in the following quintrain by 'Uthmān ibn Muḥammad Fūdī (aka Usman dan Fodio, d. 1816), the West African Islamic reformer and founder of the Sokoto caliphate:

O you who dwell in the highest of the high
O you who walk on the veils of glory
O you whose face shines brighter than the sun
Come to me with my sins. You are a refuge,
Aid me, protect me. Of such are you the source.²¹

As in this poem, Muslims frequently expressed their religious sentiments in many of the new verse forms which flourished during this period, including the popular strophic *muwashshah* and *zajal*. Both were preferred by some North African poets, especially the Sufi singer Abū'l-Hasan al-Shushtarī (d. 1268–9).²² Likewise, many Christian poets favoured these popular, more colloquial poetic forms, perhaps due to a poor knowledge of formal Arabic prosody or, more likely, to a desire to spread their faith among the masses, as was the case with the Syrian poet Mikhā'il Hātim (fl. seventeenth century):

O Jesus, my hope in you overflows;
truly, you are master over all things.
In your name, I begin my rhyming task
and oppose in my poem, my enemy's verse.
O living Jesus, accept my song,
and make me one who spreads the word of Truth:
You are glorified with the holy names!
You are praised by the human race!
You illuminate the darkness!
You are the First and Last for us!²³

But *zajals*, poetic riddles and other playful verse also reveal a lighter side to religion. Sometimes, poets excuse themselves from the fast of Ramadan, for

²⁰ Ibn Ma'sūm, *Sulāfat al-'ayr*, pp. 417–18, vv. 1, 7, 8; 'Am I not Your Lord', is from Koran 7:172. See also Dayf, pp. 346–7; Homerin, 'Preaching Poetry'.

²¹ Tr. Hunwick (with my slight modification of the final word), in 'The Arabic Qasida in West Africa', p. 90.

²² al-Shushtarī, *Dīwān*; Lings, 'Mystical Poetry', pp. 261–4.

²³ Shaykhū, *Kitāb shu 'arā' al-naṣrāniyya*, pp. 441–2; see also pp. 408–9, 431–2.

drinking wine, or both, as in the case of the Mamluk courtier and Shia poet Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī (d. 1349). The Koran exempts travellers from the fast, so the poet happily hits the road at the start of Ramadan:

Come with me if you're wise,
let's drink wine with young and old.
For fasting's not for one like me travelling
far from the table, jug in hand in July.
This is the ruling of Muslim sages
and the Prophet's words, on whom be peace;
Some even say the fast is wrong at times:
if one who fasts will die, then he must eat!²⁴

Humour turns to satire in other verses that ridicule charlatan Sufis, corrupt judges and a religious elite more often concerned with positions than piety. Conflicts between religious communities also surface; in the thirteenth century al-Būṣīrī railed against the influence of Christians within Egypt's bureaucracy, while the Catholic bishop and poet Sulaymān of Gaza (fl. sixteenth century) condemned both Muslim doctrine and Christian heresy. Similarly, in the seventeenth century, the Shia scholar Bahā' al-Dīn al-'Amilī (d. 1621) continued to denounce the Sunni usurpers of Ali's right to rule.²⁵ However, a more frequent target of invective verse was government officials who tyrannized the populace in the name of religion. In the following couplet, the Mamluk court poet Ibrāhīm Mi'mār (d. 1348) alludes to the Koranic edict to recite the name of God when butchering an animal, as he complains to the sultan regarding a rapacious official:

You have tried us with an amir
who praises God as he oppresses folk.
He's like a butcher among them,
reciting God's name as he slaughters!²⁶

The dominant tone of most later Arabic religious verse, however, was not invective but devotional, especially to the Prophet Muḥammad. In fact, during the post-classical period, poems in praise of Muḥammad formed a distinct genre, the *al-madiḥ al-nabawī*, the 'prophetic panegyric'. Of course, the earliest panegyrics for Muḥammad had been composed during his lifetime, and subsequent generations elaborated and catalogued the Prophet's fine qualities and miracles, which quickly attained mythic proportions.

²⁴ al-Hillī, *Die vulgärarabische Poetik*, pp. 115–18, vv. 1–2, 23–4, 27–30; al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-shi'r al-'arabī*, p. 391; Homerin, 'Reflections', 73–5; Harb, 'Wine Poetry'.

²⁵ al-Būṣīrī, *Dīwān*, pp. 12–15; Shaykhū, *Kitāb shu'arā' al-naṣrāniyya*, pp. 400–2; Dayf, *Ta'rikh*, pp. 680–2; Homerin, 'Reflections', 79.

²⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i al-zuhur*, vol. I, p. 612; al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-shi'r al-'arabī*, pp. 248–58, 339–49, 389–92.

But most of these works were in prose, and though some poets alluded to Muḥammad in their verse, few poems appear to have been directly addressed to him prior to the eleventh and twelfth centuries when several elements coalesced.²⁷ One factor was verse composed by Shia poets to praise Muḥammad's holy family and to commemorate the martyrdom of his grandson al-Husayn. Much of this verse sought heavenly intercession in times of oppression, frequently offering a critique of contemporary politics and society. Subsequently, Shia panegyrics served to praise and legitimize the Fatimid caliphs of North Africa, Egypt and Syria (reigned 909–1171), who claimed genetic and spiritual descent from Muḥammad via his daughter Fāṭima and her husband 'Alī, the first imam.²⁸ For similar reasons, the Fatimids sponsored *mawlid*s, or birthday celebrations, for members of this holy family, but Muḥammad's *mawlid* soon took precedence after the Ayyubids re-established Sunni rule late in the twelfth century. Under these counter-crusading sultans, the Prophet's birthday grew into an elaborate festival lasting several days, during which poets composed and recited panegyrics to the Prophet, and this tradition quickly spread throughout the Islamic world.²⁹

A third factor contributing to the genre was the mystical view of Muḥammad as a type of logos principle, often referred to as the *Nūr Muḥammad*, 'the Light of Muḥammad'. As early as the tenth century, Sufis asserted that God had created the universe with this primordial light which permeates all of creation, providing a source for spiritual illumination. Reflections of this light increasingly appear in Arabic religious poetry, including the mystical panegyric of the Iraqi poet al-Šarṣarī (d. 1258) and Ibn al-Fārid's *Nazm al-sulūk*.³⁰ Moreover, Ibn al-Fārid's verse was the model for the most famous panegyric of Muḥammad, the *Burda* by Muḥammad al-Būṣīrī (d. 1296). Al-Būṣīrī was a minor Egyptian bureaucrat, and a poet who based his poem on the ode by Ibn al-Fārid which begins:

Did Laylā's fire shine at Dhū Salam,
or did lightning flash at Zawrā' and 'Alam?³¹

Ibn al-Fārid's short poem is a meditation on the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina with several allusions to Muḥammad, while the *Burda* explicitly praises

²⁷ Mubārak, *al-Madā'ib al-nabawiyya*; Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, pp. 171–211; and her *Muḥammad*.

²⁸ Mubārak, *al-Madā'ib al-nabawiyya*, pp. 68–187; Dayf, *Tā'rikh*, pp. 239–56, 667–79.

²⁹ Von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, pp. 67–94; Shinar, 'Mawlid Celebrations'; Schimmel, *Muḥammad*, pp. 144–58; Homerin, 'Reflections', 78–9.

³⁰ Schimmel, *Muḥammad*, pp. 123–43, 187.

³¹ Mubārak, *al-Madā'ib al-nabawiyya*, pp. 189–214; Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, pp. 5–9.

the Prophet in most of its 160 verses. Nevertheless, recollections of lost love and the same nostalgic mood open al-Būṣīrī's panegyric:

Did memories of neighbours at Dhū Salam
make you mix your streaming tears with blood,
Or was it the wind blowing from Kāzīma,
or did lightning flash in darkness at Idām?
Why do your eyes weep still
when you told them to stop?
Why does your heart wander confused
after you told it to sober up?
Does the lover suppose love can be concealed
in flowing tears and a flaming heart?³²

The poet grieves for his thoughtless, sinful life, and so turns to the Prophet in hopes of salvation. For Muḥammad is God's chosen one, whose prophetic light will guide those gone astray:

How can his reality be grasped by those
asleep in this world, distracted by their dreams?
All that is known of him is: he is human,
and the very best of God's whole creation.
Each miracle brought by the blessed prophets
came to them from his light.
He is the sun of grace; the prophets are planets
reflecting his light to people lost in darkness.³³

Al-Būṣīrī details Muḥammad's exemplary character, his many miracles and victories over his enemies, but then the poem becomes a prayer as it ends with an appeal for forgiveness and Muḥammad's intercession on the poet's behalf:

O most generous prophet, I have no refuge
save you when the final Judgement comes!³⁴

According to legend, al-Būṣīrī had been partially paralyzed by a stroke when he composed this poem. The Prophet then appeared to him in a dream, threw his mantle (*burda*) over the poet, and healed him. Likewise in search of blessings and miracles, Muslims have copied and recited the *Burda* over the centuries, and the scholar and poet 'A'isha al-Bā'uniyya

³² al-Būṣīrī, *Dīwān*, p. 238, vv. 1–4. See Stefan Sperl's recent translation and insightful comments in Sperl and Shackle (eds.), *Qasida Poetry*, vol. II, pp. 388–411, 470–6.

³³ al-Būṣīrī, *Dīwān*, p. 242, vv. 50–3.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 248, v. 152; Sperl and Shackle (eds.), *Qasida Poetry*, vol. II, pp. 470–2.

(d. 1516) extols the amazing effects of pious praise in one of her own popular hymns beginning:

Praise of God's Prophet restores the soul;
it drives away doubt, worries and grief.
Spirits find rest, eyes cry in delight,
and bodies dance – you can't hold them back!³⁵

Similar motives continued to inspire Shia panegyrics to their imams, Christian poems in praise of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and verse recited as votive offerings at saints' shrines.³⁶ But al-Būṣīrī's *Burda* has had a special place, and even more than Ibn al-Fāridī's verse, this ode has been the subject of numerous commentaries and imitations in Arabic and other languages. Probably the most celebrated poem ever composed in Arabic, al-Būṣīrī's *Burda* is a hallmark of post-classical Arabic literature and among its most popular and enduring contributions to Islam and Arab culture.³⁷

³⁵ 'A'isha al-Bī'ūniyya, *Dīwān*, p. 25. Also see Homerin, 'Living Love', 211–34.

³⁶ E.g. Marquet, *Poésie ésotérique ismaïlitienne*, pp. 27–30; Shaykhū, *Kitāb shu 'arā' al-naṣrāniyya*, pp. 399–511; Mayeur-Jaouen, *al-Sayyid al-Badawī*, pp. 59–73.

³⁷ Mubārak, *al-Madā'ib al-nabawiyya*, pp. 215–64; Schimmel, *Muhammad*, pp. 181–9; Hunwick, *The Arabic Qasida in West Africa*, pp. 85–6; Sperl and Shackle (eds.), *Qasida Poetry*, vol. II, pp. 470–4.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF THE PRE-MODERN: THE GENERIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE *BAND*

INTRODUCTION

The processes of cultural change that affected the world of Arabic literature during the fifth/eleventh century reflect a situation in which certain cultural forms chose to remain aloof from all events and trends connected with modernization. As a result, other forms of expression, ones that were in closer contact with such events and trends and could thus give them expression, came into existence. It was at this time that a variety of sub-genres of poetry emerged, including the *muwashshah* and *zajal* in Spain, *'arūd al-balad* in the Maghrib, *mawāliya*, *qūmā*, *kān wa-kān*, *dūbayt* in the eastern regions (especially Iraq) and sung poetry called *al-humaynī* in Yemen (these genres are discussed in greater detail in Larkin's contribution to this volume, Chapter 10). These were all modernist genres, or, to cite Ibn Khaldūn's term for them, *muwal-lada*. It is precisely the general cultural influences that led to the appearance of these genres of expression that are also responsible for the emergence of the *band* genre as a new mode of expression.

The *band* is considered one of the literary modes of expression that emerged during the period of major cultural decentralization that early Arabic literature witnessed. The process engendered local cultural phenomena which, it would appear, were increasingly unwilling to tolerate the established norms of the higher culture. As a result, the *band* does not conform with many of the dicta of that higher culture regarding grammatical rules and discourse styles. Like the above-mentioned genres, the *band* did not conform with the rhythmical, stylistic or verbal structures that traditional Arabic literature had firmly established. Instead such structures were abandoned in favour of others that more closely matched the cultural environment that led to their very emergence. The genre emerged and spread initially in southern Iraq and its geographical extensions to the east and south. This, of course, is a region that from earliest times had witnessed cultural, linguistic, religious and racial incursions – Arab, Persian, Turkish, Islamic, Christian and Magian, not to mention a variety of popular beliefs, movements, sects and other categories of often conflicting endeavour. It is this fertile set of influences that are reflected in the *band* genre.

It was heavily influenced by them and responded to a number of their particular characteristics – in the process of nomenclature, in its rhythmic systems and in its subject matter.

The prevalent view is that the word *band* itself is of foreign provenance; it is seen as entering Arabic through mutual borrowings between Arabic and its neighbour languages, as part of the cultural exchanges within the region as a whole. In the Arabic lexicon the word *band* has come to mean ‘standard’ or ‘flag’, and anything connected with such military notions. According to Karl Vollers in his Persian–Latin dictionary, *band* in Persian conveys the sense of ‘imagination’, ‘thought’ or ‘expectation’. However, a major modern linguist, Father Anastas Mīrī al-Karmalī (d. 1367/1947), relies on the definition provided by Reinhart Dozy in suggesting that the word *band* is connected with the idea of language-games and brain-teasers. From the linguistic works of Vollers, Dozy and al-Karmalī we may conclude that the *band* is an original form of literary expression, but it has as yet not proved possible to establish the precise ‘genre’ of this particular form of writing. Indeed, the task of assigning this *band* form to a particular genre has proved troublesome for researchers. When the Iraqi poet Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahawī (d. 1355/1936) was asked about the matter, he replied that it represented ‘the mid-point between poetry and prose’.¹ This suggestion, namely that the *band* is a kind of half-breed genre, almost a conjunction, between poetry and prose, has aroused considerable interest. Researchers are divided into separate camps on the subject. One group maintains that it is verse discourse based on a specific and repeated metrical foot that continues throughout the text, but its rhymes and rhyming feet can be changed with no effect on the metrical pattern. The lines of poetry can vary in number of segments; each line consists of a single unit.² A second group regards the *band* as poetry pure and simple. Indeed they suggest that it is the form of early Arabic poetry that is closest to (modern) free verse; it is based on the foot of one of the metres of classical Arabic poetry, namely *hazaj*, and is not bound by the convention of two halves to each line (which is the norm in classical Arabic poetry).³ A third group considers the *band* to be metred, rhyming prose (*saj'*) with a strong resemblance to prose poetry.⁴ There is also a fourth group that subsumes the *band* within the category of riddles, cryptograms and puzzles, all of them literary genres of obscure origin, that are included among the categories of verbal art relished by later periods.

¹ al-Dujaylī, *al-Band fi l-adab al-'arabī*, p. H.

² Jamīl al-Malā'ika, *Mīzān al-band*, p. 5.

³ Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Qadāyā l-shi'r al-mu 'āṣir*, p. 195; Maṭlūb, *al-Naqd al-adabī*, p. 190; al-Hillī, ‘Shi'r al-band’, 37.

⁴ al-Ḥashimī, *al-Yaqīn*, vol. 1 (1922). The issue of *saj'* is discussed further in the contributions of Mūsawī and Stewart to this volume (Chapter 5 and 7).

This last group claims that the *band* is a type of rhyming prose (*saj'*) whose sentences are constructed on a specific rhythm and divided into short segments of metrical discourse, thus engendering various rhythms that convey the effect of poetry while not actually being so.

ORIGINS

The question of the historical origins of the *band* involves the history of its development, the region in which it emerged, and the influences that led to its appearance. The controversy can be clarified by dividing it up into the following sub-categories. The first is represented by the view of Muḥammad al-Hāshimī, who believes that the earliest text can be attributed to the famous linguist Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933) and that the earliest writers of *band* were Iraqis; indeed that was the only region where it was known.⁵ This opinion is based on the existence of a short text cited by al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1012) in his book, *Ijāz al-Qur'ān* (The Inimitability of the Koran). Al-Bāqillānī embarks on a detailed discussion of the exclusion of poetry from the Koranic text; he is at some pains to refute the notion that the Koran contains discourse that has the metrical features of poetry. It is as part of this discussion that he introduces the short text that al-Hāshimī regards as the first example of *band*.⁶

The second category is represented by the famous Iraqi poet al-Zahawī and by Father al-Karmalī. This view suggests that the *band* is of Persian and Turkish origin, and was adopted by the Iraqis, especially from the Persians. One of the meanings of the word *band* is a line of poetry that has a rhyme different from those of the rest of the lines in the poem,⁷ a kind of poetry that is widespread in Persia where it is regarded as a discredited and unauthentic type of poetic creation.

The third category can be represented by Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Hillī. He is of the opinion that the *band* developed out of the tradition of the *Epistles* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (Brethren of Purity), a model that developed relatively late and was subsumed within the artistic confines of traditional Arabic prose. According to this theory, writers of epistles developed literary modes of expression that were part prose, part verse, and at first done almost unconsciously. With time these styles developed and were used for personal themes without anyone being particularly aware that they were a kind of poetry. The styles became highly regarded and were much admired in southern and eastern regions of Iraq. Thereafter the *band*'s themes became more varied, and it was used to

⁵ al-Dujaylī, *al-Band fī'l-adab al-'arabī*, p. M.

⁶ al-Bāqillānī, *Ijāz al-Qur'ān*, p. 56.

⁷ al-Dujaylī, *al-Band fī'l-adab al-'arabī*, pp. J–K.

give expression to sentiments and personal relationships. It was also adapted for religious purposes – homilies, spiritual guidance and such categories – and was particularly prevalent in the eleventh/seventeenth century.⁸

Taking a closer critical look at these different theories, we can posit the following conclusions: they are based either on sheer guesswork – inflating the significance of ancillary matters in order to bolster historical claims – or else on the notion of rivalry between different national literatures and the necessities of mutual influence. It would appear that the *band*'s oral provenance led to a lack of critical concern, added to which is its acknowledged departure from prevailing stylistic, rhythmic and verbal structures. What is certain is that the first text in oral and recorded form which has come to light thus far is a collection of *bands* attributed to the poet Ibn Ma'tūq al-Mūsawī (d. 1087/1676). There are five *bands* in all, and their general conformity and organized structure lead one to the conclusion that they had precedents. Interest in the *band* began to develop soon after this, but it was analysed by scholars who knew nothing about the metrics of Arabic poetry and possessed none of the academic grounding in morphology, syntax and the like expected of a literary critic.⁹ Unfortunately reciters were no more knowledgeable than the authors themselves. All of which makes it impossible to say anything definite about the situation of the *band* in its earliest phases. In the eleventh/seventeenth century one writer of *band* was 'Abd al-Rā'ūf ibn al-Husayn al-Jadhafī (d. 1113/1701), while in the eighteenth we find up to fifteen writers, among whom are Balil al-Husaynī, al-Zaynī al-Baghdādī, al-'Asharī, al-Hā'irī, al-Biktashī and Ibn Khilfa, and in the nineteenth, 'Abd al-Ghaffār al-Akhras, al-'Āmilī, al-Muzaffar, al-Jazā'irī, al-'Idharī and al-Hillī. In the twentieth century the number goes down, and only a few writers seem interested in writing the *band*, among them al-Shalījī, al-Qazwīnī, Abū Ṭabikh and al-Wā'iz.¹⁰

RHYTHMIC STRUCTURE: BETWEEN POETRY AND PROSE

There is radical disagreement concerning the *band*'s rhythmic structure. Scholars divide into two completely separate and opposing camps: one claims the *band* is poetry, the other that it is prose. Early in 1922, al-Hāshimī, for whom the *band* is a kind of *saj'* discourse, noted that certain *saj'* segments in the *band* conform with the metrical pattern of *hazaj*.¹¹ This suggestion, grounded on the supposition that the *band* can be simultaneously linked to

⁸ al-Hillī, 'Shi'r al-band', 41.

⁹ Jamāl al-Dīn, *al-Īqā' fī'l-shi'r*, p. 224.

¹⁰ The complete list refers to the names to be found in al-Dujaylī, *al-Band fī'l-adab al-'arabī*, and Jamīl al-Malā'ika, *Mizān al-band*.

¹¹ al-Hāshimī, *al-Yaqīn*.

poetry and prose, drew the attention of scholars in the next generation to the need to examine its rhythmical structure. In that context, the views of al-Dujaylī come into play. He does not say whether the *band* is to be considered poetry or prose, but accepts al-Zahāwī's view that it constitutes a mid-point between the two. Even so, he notes that if it maintained a single rhyme, it would be poetry in the *hazaj* metre. His investigations lead him to the conclusion that the *band* uses the *hazaj* foot and its segments which are repeated four times in each line.

The poetess Nāzik al-Malā'ika devotes a complete chapter in her well-known book, *Qadāyā'l-shi'r al-mu'āṣir* (Problems of Contemporary Poetry) to a study of prosodic issues connected with the *band* genre. At first she rejects all views claiming that the *band* uses the *hazaj* metre alone and its basic foot (of the pattern *mafā'ilun*). Influenced by the urgent need to trace the origins of the modern free-verse poem (of which she is one of the pioneers), she proceeded to categorize the *band* as poetry that is free of the constraints imposed by the system of dividing lines of poetry into halves and of rhyme. Instead she suggested a pattern of repeated feet, that being the characteristic feature of free verse. She then determined that it combines the metres of *hazaj* and *ramal*, this fusion of the two constituting a new development in the metrics of Arabic poetry. Conforming to the general system of rhythm in the traditional Arabic *qasida*, it engenders innovation without departing from its basic principles.

These analyses by Nāzik al-Malā'ika, one of the outstanding theorists on the rhythmic structure of modern Arabic poetry and also one of its finest poets, are clearly highly competent. Even so, they fail to provide a complete picture of the rhythmic structure of the *band*. Here another researcher, Muṣṭafā Jamāl al-Dīn, enters the picture, suggesting that the *band* uses three metres – 'pure *hazaj*', 'pure *ramal*' and a third metre which is a fusion of the two as required by the nature of *band*.

However, even this is not the end of the story. Yet another specialist who has looked into the question is 'Alī 'Abbās 'Alwān. He suggests that the *band* has three metres – *hazaj*, *ramal* and *rajaz*. His reasoning is that the three metres are all in the circle of al-Khalīl's prosodic system that is called *mujtalab*; they can thus be easily distinguished because the musical measure in temporal terms is one and the same.¹² Another researcher, Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Hillī, adopts the same approach.¹³ However, Jamāl al-Malā'ika, who has devoted a valuable and detailed study to the rhythm of *band*, is of the opinion that the *mujtalab* circle on its own – with its three metres – is not sufficient to subsume within it all the issues connected with the *band*'s rhythmic patterns. Instead,

¹² 'Alwān, *Tatawwur al-shi'r*, p. 75.

¹³ al-Hillī, 'Shi'r al-band', 40.

he suggests a new circle that he terms the '*band* circle', thereby negating the possibility of the *band* having a predictable metrical pattern within al-Khalīl's system.

Opinions that regard the *band* as a prose genre are considerably fewer. Hardly a single study exists that deals with the rhythmic structure of the *band* as prose in the light of the rhythmic patterns of *saj'*, that being a varied, flexible and evolving rhythm. While the rhythmic systems of poetry may be characterized by a certain degree of stability, those of prose are anything but that. Influenced by the needs of speech transmission and relying on the demands of reception, the rhythmic systems of prose were continually being refashioned. And it was not merely themes that changed, but forms as well.

Al-Hāshimī had pointed to the prosaic nature of the *band*, regarding it as metred discourse in *saj'*.¹⁴ The historian 'Abbās al-'Azzāwī believes that, while the *band* does resemble verse, it is closer to prose or is a mid-point between the two.¹⁵ However it is al-Rāfi'i who is the most explicit. He states that it is a type of *saj'* writing whose sentences are based on rhythm; it is divided into short segments that orchestrate differing rhythmic patterns, thus lending them a poetic feeling even though they are not actually poetry.¹⁶ Unfortunately this suggestion has gone the way of all flesh, mostly for cultural reasons. First, the *saj'* mode of Arabic prose writing disappeared before the emergence of the *band* as a literary-historical problem, largely because the topic of *saj'* itself was not usually discussed in studies on literature; second, serious research on the *band*'s rhythmic structure *qua* poetry was adversely impacted by the furious arguments in Iraqi cultural circles over free verse and its rules. Other scholars joined with Nāzik al-Malā'ika in this fight, and as a result the problem of modern poetry produced a 'victory', one that inevitably demanded the creation of a history. It was in this context that the *band* came to be utilized, invoked as part of that very history.¹⁷

The general metrical structure of *saj'* demands a degree of rhythmic balance between phrases.¹⁸ Thus, some *saj'* segments require a conformity in metre and rhyme between the different phrases, making them equivalent to each other—neither of them longer than the other and each *saj'* unit mirroring the other(s), whereas other segments will be free of these requirements, with no expectation of equivalence. There are then two types. The first requires that the phrases should coincide on their rhyming syllable, with progressive degrees

¹⁴ al-Hāshimī, *al-Yaqīn*.

¹⁵ al-'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh al-adab*, vol. II, p. 192.

¹⁶ al-Rāfi'i, *Tārīkh*, vol. III, p. 413.

¹⁷ Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Sikulujiyat al-shi'r*, pp. 40–1.

¹⁸ For a study of the metrical qualities of *saj'*, see al-Mis'adī, *al-Īqā' fī 'al-saj' al-'arabi*.

of excellence; this starts with metrical parallelism of phrase and equality of length, then examines the balance between the final two words in the phrase alone (ignoring the others), and concludes by looking at congruence in the rhyming syllable without being concerned about balance in the remaining parts of the segment. The second type differs in its rhyming syllable between the two segments, and is of two sorts: in the first a metrical pattern is observed in all, or at least most of, the segments, along with a parallelism between one word and its metrical equivalent in the other phrase (this being regarded as the best kind of *saj'* in the prose realm), or else that the balance be observed only in the final two words; the second sort occurs in poetry and is termed *tasri'*.

What is noteworthy here is that the balancing of phrases involves a freedom to make them equivalent in one type but not in another; and the same with rhyme and the question as to whether the rhyme is internal to the phrase or at the end. It is also clear that general criteria existed for evaluating the excellence of *saj'*. Thus, if it was thought best that every pair of rhyming words (or perhaps even three or four, but no more) should rhyme on a single consonant, then anything that went beyond that could be regarded as excessively elaborate. If it was deemed aesthetically most pleasing for the segments to be balanced, or, if not, for the final part to be longer with the additional caveat that segments be in a single metre (even if not a single rhyming consonant), then equivalence and balance would be the anticipated result.

From the preceding paragraphs it emerges that five types of rhythmic system for *saj'* can be identified; together they constitute the rhythmic structure of Arabic prose in *saj'*. They are:

1. Phrases coinciding in metre and rhyming letter;
2. The two final words coinciding only in metre and rhyming letter;
3. The rhyming consonant coinciding and the phrases observing balance;
4. Differing rhyme-consonants and observance of balance with all, or most of, the words in the phrase;
5. Differing rhyme-consonants, but no observance of balance except with the two final words.

When different systems interact with each other, they adopt forms in accordance with the demands of the expressive mode required. A general framework is created, endowed with rhythmic patterns that sometimes accumulate rapidly and at others stay separate, forming a much more measured sequence. This principle can be illustrated with what is considered to be the first *band* known to us. It is by Ma'tūq al-Mūsawī who lived in the seventeenth century. It

begins: *Ayyuhā l-rāqid fi'l-zulma* (O you, lying asleep in the dark).¹⁹ Before we proceed to examine the rhythmic *saj'*-based structure of al-Mūsawī's *band*, we need to point out that, when the five systems we referred to above interact, they adopt forms that can be extrapolated from the principal sources that have focused on the topic.²⁰ Among the most important are:

1. A form in which the *saj'* segments can be of equal length and generally consist of two or three phrases which may coincide either in metre and rhyming consonant or else in the two final words of the segments, and in which the rhyming consonant may differ while the metre is the same, or vice versa;
2. A form where the second *saj'* segment is longer than the first;
3. A form where the second segment is shorter than the first;
4. A form where the second segment is longer than the first, the third is longer than the second and so on (which Devin Stewart has characterized as 'a pyramidal structure';²¹
5. A form consisting of two segments in *saj'* of equal or almost equal length, followed by another segment that is longer; a form that can be reckoned as having segments of varying lengths.

In Ma'tūq al-Mūsawī's *band* the *saj'* expressions adhere to the principles of rhyme and balance in their final phrases, but the internal rhythms vary, ranging from complete adherence, to relatively minimal departure from the norm, and to occasional complete departure. This flexibility and free intermingling bring with them variations in rhythm and eliminate any sense of monotony. The result is an obvious fluctuation in tone (*naghm*). The rhythmic patterning of *saj'* then cannot be regarded as a closed structure. The opening parts of each *saj'* expression are not regarded as part of the metrical pattern; there are many of these, ranging from consonants, to words, to short expressions. This manages to resolve the problem that has dogged previous researchers on the *band*'s prosody, namely the existence of the patterns termed *sabab* (cord) and *watad* (peg) at the beginning of the phrase. Furthermore no heed is paid to expansions at the end of expressions in the final unit of the *band*, something that has also aroused a lot of argument and that al-Zarkashī regarded as being common expansions in *saj'*.²²

¹⁹ al-Dujaylī, *al-Band fi'l-adab al-'arabī*, pp. 3–4.

²⁰ Arab rhetoricians have written in detail on the topic of *saj'*, its features, types and subdivisions. See e.g. al-'Askārī, *Kitāb al-sinā'atayn*, pp. 263–4; al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ al-a'shā*, vol. II, pp. 302–6; al-Suyūtī, *al-Itqān*, vol. II, p. 98; al-Zarqashī, *al-Burhān fi'l-ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. I, pp. 53–100; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mathāl al-sā'i'r*, vol. I, p. 238; and al-Qazwīnī, *al-Talkhīṣ fi'l-ulūm al-balāgha*, pp. 397–404.

²¹ Stewart, 'Saj' in the Qur'an', 127.

²² al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fi'l-ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. I, pp. 6ff.

PROSAIC FEATURES OF *BAND*

Previous paragraphs have clearly revealed the nature of the disagreement that colours debate over the rhythmic structure of the *band*. As we have already seen, such a statement does not necessitate compulsory emendments to *band* texts; indeed it manages to avoid unresolvable arguments about the rhythmic structure of the *band* as poetry, whether we are talking about pulse, poetic feet or metre. In the long run we cannot establish the typology of any kind of literary expression by relying on just one of its constituent elements. That implies that the rhythmic structure of the *band* cannot serve as the final arbiter in defining its generic nature. While scholars who have dealt with the prosodic aspect of the *band* have eventually concluded that it is a poetic genre, the very research itself was bound to lead to such a conclusion; since they were totally influenced by prevailing cultural trends, they overlooked other possibilities that should have been part of the research process. While there was an intense concentration on the prosodic aspects of the *band* as poetry, all conflicting possibilities were ignored. The topic was broached as though prose was a rhythmless form of literary expression. In this context we need to recall the Russian Formalists' insistence that prose is not a gelatinous and jumbled kind of arhythmic discourse; on the contrary, the phonic organization of prose has as important a status as that of poetry, even though the nature of each may be different.²³

Amid this nexus of interlocking ideas there remains the issue of the *band*'s rhythmic structure. While, as we can see, the textual formations of this mode of literary expression have occurred within a milieu replete with the influences of classical prose, the processes of analysis and study have to the contrary all occurred in a different milieu, the impetus for which has been provided by modern poetic tendencies. Nāzik al-Malā'ika reckoned it to be the poetic precedent to free verse. Indeed she went even further by declaring it the most daring step taken by Iraqi poets in the eleventh/seventeenth century, in that they invented this mode of expression where rhymes could vary with no fixed pattern. According to her, this was the first time in the history of Arabic poetry that there was complete freedom of rhyme, the matter being left entirely to the poet's own taste. Free verse was thus a successor and imitator of the early *band* genre.²⁴ Obviously the free-verse movement, whose revolutionary effects began near the middle of the twentieth century in the Arab world and especially in Iraq, created a general cultural 'horizon of expectation'.

²³ Fadl, *Nazariyyat al-binā'iyya*, p. 74.

²⁴ Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Sikulujijja al-shi'r*, pp. 40–1.

The least that can be said is that the difficulties involved in this situation are not just literary ones. The *band* provides a model of the way in which a dominant literary norm can be discarded and another put in its place, all that in the context of external requirements of reception and the nature and goals of critical judgement (implying, it would seem, an organization based on judgement of value). Todorov has specified the mechanism for this phenomenon, pointing out that in every era the core of homogeneous features in a literary work is accompanied by a number of others, the importance of which is downplayed in the process of linking a particular work to one specific genre. As a consequence, literary works can actually be linked to a variety of genres; the variable is the extent to which we judge the significance of one or other feature of its structure.²⁵

Is it possible then to declare the rhythmic structure of the *band*, whether it be poetry or prose, to be its predominant feature? Clearly those who have advocated the poetic view of the *band* have answered this question in the affirmative, even though all their research without exception has been done without recourse to the insights revealed by modern approaches. We would rather suggest that the *saj'* prose rhythmic structure constitutes just one in an interlocking mesh of elements that render the prosaic nature of the *band* seem the more likely. Its value and significance lie in the way these different elements interact with each other. Among the most significant of these elements we would list:

1. The prevalence of the representative rather than implicational function of language in the *band*; as a result, the relationship of text to world is one of representation, not symbolization;
2. The prevalence of the dimension of the 'other', and absence of that of the 'self';
3. The prevalence of a prose stylistic aesthetics in the text, one that is based on the normal digressions of traditional Arabic prose, along with an occasional tendency to elaborate description;
4. The presence of a high degree of directness and objectivity; the expression usually operates by fulfilling a reporting function, thus suppressing the aesthetic goal that is the most particular feature of poetry;
5. The presence of a certain amount of narrative in the text, providing it with a kind of density that contrasts with the transparency that is the goal of all poetry;
6. The presence, indeed predominance, of the more traditional aspects of classical Arabic prose: introductory devotions and intercessions, categories

²⁵ Todorov, *Poetics*, p. 78.

- of panegyric and exaltation that afford the object of praise the standard array of epithets, and closure procedures that downplay the self and lead to predetermined conclusions;
7. A widespread use of recognized topics of prose in classical Arabic literature, most especially personal correspondence, since the text is a mode of expression concerned with attitudes, goals and aspirations, rather than presenting a view of the world.

As a consequence of all these different facets and artistic, objective characteristics, the *band* creates in the recipient a ‘horizon of expectation’, whose constituent parts are all organized in accordance with the general features of early Arabic prose-writing. It is within this particular network of ideas that the role of ‘the rhythmic structure of prose *saj*’ emerges in order to reinforce the recipient’s awareness and to fulfil his ‘horizon of expectation’ through the genres, purposes and topics that were prevalent within the prose tradition.

CONCLUSION

It has not been our goal here to separate the *band* genre from the world of poetry, as those who support the idea of *band* as poetry would like to suggest. Every kind of elevated literary discourse is possessed of a kind of poetic quality that affords it a particular splendour and beauty. This poetic quality cannot have as its only source something called ‘poetic metre’. Rather what is involved is ‘rhythm’ in its most general sense, something that fulfils its role along with all the other aesthetic criteria that are involved, stylistic, structural and semantic. With this conception in mind, the notion of ‘generic interplay’ comes to be the principal constituent of the *band*, but it remains an interplay with a prose stamp to it, one that gives ‘rhythm’ a clear importance while not downplaying the importance of other elements.

EXAMPLES OF THE BAND

Ibn al-Khilfa (d. 1831)

To me there comes the scent of a rose gracing a beauty’s cheek;
 Familiar are the wafts of its heady perfume.
 While from the black night of her hair
 a gleaming morn on her brow is viewed.
 Did you but see each of us scolding his companion,
 Concealing a surfeit of passion that the heart pains to suppress,
 While fear of God has garbed us in a chastity never soiled by sin
 Save kisses,

You would out of envy be at a loss
 till in shame you approached me to declare your apology.
 Then you would declare, to intimate friend and the world at large, your
 love for a delicate fawn.

BAND ('*1st band*')

Many's the friend who contented me,
 with the bonds of whose friendship I have tied my hands;
 A firm tie of love on my part, and
 I do not think he would be niggardly towards one who hopes;
 A firm tie of love on my part, and
 I do not think he would alter our pact or
 Ever withdraw from it,
 but my hope in him was dashed.

BAND (*Ibn al-Khilfa*)

You who would reproach those in love, abandon your blame!
 Could you but see arched brows over gorgeous dark eyes,
 Rouge of cheeks, the succulent nectar of her lips,
 Slender figure, its supple curves and upright proportion
 resembling a tree-branch,
 The green myrtle of her cheeks over which hair ringlets dangle on the temple,
 A mouth of lovely teeth, arrayed like pearls
 in a red silky bed that needs no dye,
 A nose to rival a necklet of pearl, where the assessor
 values what remains as supple as the fingers of young maids,
 A neck to rival the wild calf; scared by the hunter,
 it cowers behind the rose-bush, while fear of the hunter's shaft
 at a far distance shakes the dew from its back
 Could you but touch in your passion that well-rounded arm,
 that arm, that wrist, that hand resembling the pens of Yāqūt himself;
 at the sight of them how many men of intellect would be dazzled and at a loss!
 Could you but espy, dear Sa'd, that mirror of wonders on her bosom,
 mounted on it twin ivory breasts, fragrant with choicest perfume,
 or a waist that again is slender and lithe after bearing the weight of her hips,
 or a pair of buttocks so exquisitely set, they resemble a moving sand-dune,
 with both sides aquiver; legs as though of purest crystal, well-turned
 ankles, their feet crafted from silver;
 saw you all this, you would not reproach a lover who in his passion for her
 wanders the desert wastes. Know you not that love has its delights?
 The one who perishes of love and heart-break is to be forgiven, not reproved.
 Thus is the way of those who aspire to perfection.
 So put aside such trivial tales of reproach. Many's the fool who has been
 cultivated by love, pursuing thereafter the enlightened path of culture and virtue.

PART II

ELITE PROSE

CHAPTER 5

PRE-MODERN BELLETRISTIC PROSE

INTRODUCTION

Any survey of pre-modern belletristic prose in Arabic cannot avoid discussion of generic hierarchies. Such controversies and debates are deeply rooted in processes of political and cultural transformation, trends that demand, and at times instigate, new yardsticks and scales of gradation among literary genres. But even at a time in Arabic literary history when chancery interests assured prose a lofty status, there emerged a tendency, after the appearance of the *Maqāmāt* of al-Harīrī (445–516/1054–1122),¹ to assess, compare and grade clerks and scribes according to their specific vocation in state treasury departments or in the *Dīwān al-inshā'*, all this in spite of the frequent transfer of scribes between the two categories of post.² An illustrious figure such as Khalil ibn Aybak Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī (696–764/1297–1363) began his career as *kātib darj* (clerk of the roll) before being transferred to *kātib dast* (clerk of the bench). Others like al-Harīrī himself and Muḥammad ibn Mukarram (ibn Manzūr) (d. 711/1311), the compiler of the famous dictionary, *Lisān al-Ārab* (Language of the Arabs), served as clerks in treasury departments. No less demarcated was the distinction between ‘*ulamā'* (religious scholars) on the one hand and professional functionaries on the other. Chancery training and apprenticeship had become a rigorous exercise, with enormous demands on the trainee, especially if the latter had aspirations to the status of *kuttāb al-dast* (clerks of the bench) or *sāhib dīwān al-inshā'* (head chancery clerk) after a period of initiation as clerk of the roll (*darj*) or of *bayt al-māl* (state treasury). Manuals, compendia, dictionaries and works of exegesis tell us a good deal about the vicissitudes of the belletristic tradition, but we must still search within each sub-discipline for particular developments. One may suggest that the enormous output in this field was, within the framework of classical Arabism, a kind of defensive strategy against erosion, a quest for

¹ For a discussion of al-Harīrī and the *maqāma* genre, see Beeston, ‘Al-Hamadhānī, al-Harīrī’; also Kilito, *Les Séances*.

² For a survey of these transfers and the controversy over the scribe and the *maqāma* writer, see al-Musawi, ‘Vindicating a Profession’.

cultural survival in the context of the severe disruptions caused by the First Crusade and subsequent Mongol incursions. The course of action was also the outcome of a process of decentralization and the emergence of peripheral states that had long since become a feature within the broad range of the Islamic dominions and that served as a natural magnet for migrating intellectuals.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY

While compendia and encyclopedic works required a measure of stability that was almost completely absent during the Frankish and Timurid invasions, public lectures and treatises were to find a vogue following the development of Cairo as a major cultural metropolis. Intellectuals from East and West, fleeing political upheavals or settling there temporarily on their way to Mecca, saw Cairo as ‘the garden of the Universe, the orchard of the World’, as Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) says in his *Tārīf*.³ Both Tunis and Fez retained their positions as centres for cultural activity, but there was a perceptible move towards Cairo. Next to it in prominence was Damascus, with its famous college mosques, schools and libraries. The devastating impact of the Mongols’ sack of Baghdad in 656/1258 meant that it could no longer rival the other cities. It was the learned class of the Levant that provided almost 30 per cent of Cairene jurisprudents (*fuqahā'*), some of whom maintained close connections with the rulers and their viceroys. This was especially true of the office of confidential secretary (*kātib al-sirr*) and his staff. Dynasties, especially the Fatimids, Ayyubids and Mamluks, were well aware of the emerging state’s needs and of the important role played by bureaucracies, and were eager to identify patterns of legitimacy and effective rule. They therefore invested a good deal of energy in statecraft and its functions. The chancery itself was the central focus. Continuity between the Fatimids and Ayyubids, their institutions and administrative procedures, found no better personification than al-Qādī'l-Fādil (The Virtuous Judge), 'Abd al-Rahīm al-Baysānī (d. 596/1200). He later became Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s chief minister, thus transferring his Fatimid chancery training into the Ayyubid era.

STATECRAFT AND SECRETARIAL MANUALS

Along with al-Qādī Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) who penned a voluminous compendium, *Šubb al-a'shā' fī ḥinā'at al-inshā'* (Dawn for the

³ See Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo*, p. xxi. Also, Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Tārīf bi-Ibn Khaldūn*.

Benighted Regarding Chancery Craft) – to be discussed later – there was a large number of manuals. As chancery composition proceeded to incorporate both poetry and oratory within its purview and to buttress itself with elements of both the proverbial and anecdotal, it vied hard for a place of its own within the realms of literary prose. A major part of its achievement lies in the verbal dexterity, elegant diction and embellished figurations that emerged. However, the style varies widely. At the hands of the most competent craftsmen, it is as balanced, effective and functional as any other form of composition. Part of the confusion regarding its predominant characteristics arises from generalizations that had been essayed by previous generations of scholars. Ibn al-‘Amīd (d. 360/970) or ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Isfahānī (d. 597/1201), for example, are both prominent examples of prose writers whose style is engaged with the poetics of *al-muḥdathūn* (the moderns), namely the tropes of *bādī* (the innovative use of figurative language). However, they are just two among hundreds of other prose writers and epistolographers whose contributions need to be taken into consideration. By the end of the fourteenth century, al-Qalqashandī was so assured of the supremacy of prose that he could write ‘on the superiority of prose to poetry’, stipulating throughout that ‘prose has a higher status and more honourable position than poetry’.⁴

THE DĪWĀN AL-INSHĀ’ AND ITS REQUIREMENTS

One way of understanding the functions of generic prioritization within the general literary context is to consider the etymology and various connotations of the word *dīwān*. Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) notes in his topographical history, *al-Mawā‘iz wa l-i‘tibār* (also known as the *Khīṭāt*), that the original meaning of the Persian word *dīwān* refers to a place where scribes were asked to compose certain documents. As the meanings of the word evolved, chancery itself came to have three major subdivisions: army departments; revenues and treasury; and *inshā’* (letter-writing and literary composition). However, in times of political conflict the *Dīwān al-inshā’* assumes tremendous importance. During the reigns of the Umayyad caliphs ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 86/705) and Hishām (d. 125/743), the chancery (*dīwān al-rasā’il*) developed in importance under the guiding hand of Sālim Abū'l-‘Alā'.⁵ The famous manual of his student ‘Abd al-Hamīd al-Kātib (d. 750), *Risāla ilā l-kuttāb* (Epistle to Secretaries), may have initially been composed to meet the needs of chancery

⁴ al-Qalqashandī, *Subh al-a‘shā*, vol. I, p. 89.

⁵ See J. D. Latham's contribution in *CHALUP*, ch. 3.

scribes, but their own professional interests led them to enhance the more aesthetic dimensions of the craft by placing it firmly within the realm and tradition of *adab* (belles-lettres). Almost every writer attempts to spell out requirements, tools and characteristics for both the art and the person of the scribe. Ibn Sahl al-Balkhī (d. 934) writes *Fadl sinā'at al-kitāba* (The Merit of the Craft of Writing); Ahmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Īsfahānī composes, along with *Tabaqāt al-khutabā'* (Classes of Orators), another manual entitled *Kitāb adab al-kuttāb* (Book of Scribal Practice); Ahmad ibn al-Fadl al-Ahwāzī contributes *Manāqib al-kuttāb* (Qualities of Secretaries), and Ahmad ibn Muḥammad al-Nahḥās al-Miṣrī (d. 337/949) *Adab al-kuttāb* (Secretarial Practice). In addition to these works there are also treatises of broader scope, including Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī's (d. c. 400/1009) famous work, *Kitāb al-sinā'atayn: al-kitāba wa'l-shi'r* (The Book on the Two Crafts: Prose and Poetry), where he makes specific comparisons between oratory as speech-writing and epistolography as letter-writing; ‘Alī ibn Khalaf's (d. 455/1063) *Mawādd*, and the *Kitāb qawānīn al-dawāwīn* (Book of Rules for Diwans) by al-As‘ad ibn Mammātī, the Ayyubid minister (d. 606/1209). By the later thirteenth century, the status of the chancery was so firmly established that ‘Uthmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī (d. 685/1286) was able to make the chancery a career, soon honoured by Sultan Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb with the position of chief secretary in charge of all *dīwāns*.

When al-Akfānī (d. 749/1348) chose at a relatively late stage to depict the class of *udabā'* as ‘people of sound intellect and upright minds who arranged *adab*'s material sources and refined its various parts’,⁶ he is merely stressing what had long since been acknowledged, thus replicating the premises of a large number of secretarial manuals. Even when specifying the ten disciplines of *adab*, he merely reflects what Ḏiyā' al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr (d. 636/1239) had already noted in his scribal training manual, *al-Mathal al-sā'ir fi adab al-kātib wa'l-shā'ir* (The Popular Model for the Practice of Secretaries and Poets), as the eight prerequisites for the aspirant to proficiency in the secretarial art, namely: grammar, syntax and morphology, lexicography, proverbs and the history of the Arabs and their battles. Scribes are supposed to familiarize themselves with masterly writings in poetry and prose, and memorize a sizeable segment of each. They should also be knowledgeable in politics and public administration. Foremost among prerequisites is the memorization of the Koran and of the Prophet's *hadīth*.

Oratory and epistolography both benefited from the movement of decentralization. Needed for communication with the public, epistolography and oratory both resort to the organic, the proverbial and the poetic.

⁶ Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism*, pp. 93–4.

Al-Qalqashandī's subsection on 'The Superiority of Prose to Poetry'⁷ takes such criteria into account to justify the need for effective prose-writing.

In discussing the historical development of this tradition of manuals it should be noted that the contents of such works are based to a substantial degree on a number of precedents, collections that reach a culminating point in the writings of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad al-Thālibī (d. 429/1038) in his *Nathr al-nazm wa-hall al-'iqd* (Prosification of Poetry and the Untying of the Knot), and in Ibn al-Athīr's *Washy al-marqūm fī hall al-manzūm*. Indeed it can safely be assumed that, whenever the need for prose is so paramount that it subsumes the poetic and the Koranic for better effect, ancestries of this kind can be traced. In this regard Ibn 'Abd Kān (d. 270/883), head of the first chancery of Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn in Egypt, was a pioneer, in that his style shows a distinct concentration on syntactical balance via short, terse sentences. Ibn Munjib al-Šayrafi (d. 542 or 550/1148 or 1155), chief chancery clerk for the Fatimid caliph, al-Ḥāfiẓ, also merits recognition, not only for his *Qānūn dīwān al-rasā'il* (The Canon for Chancery) but also for his own mastery of prosification. Ibn Khalaf, whose writings also belong to the Fatimid period, lays emphasis in wording a letter on its value-laden language; as he explains, codes should emerge from the addresser's personal ideology so as to convey its message and impart its full meaning.

CHANCERY EDUCATION

A review of cultural and bureaucratic continuity demands detailed attention to Fatimid chancery practice, especially regarding honours conferred on holders of chancery positions. The chief clerk usually held the title of 'Exalted Shaykh', as in the case of Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ḥalabī (d. 522/1128). Muwaffaq ibn al-Khallal (d. 566/1171), chief scribe for the Fatimid caliphs al-Ḥāfiẓ and al-'Ādid, was one among many who gave the chancery its stamp of rigorous training. The already noted al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil, 'Abd al-Rahīm al-Baysānī, received his early training under Ibn al-Khallāl's guidance.⁸ No less versed in prosification was Ḏiyā' al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr, who, having cited his own samples of prosification, concludes: 'If a person is to prosify, he should either follow this manner or else quit.'⁹ When commenting on his own method of prosifying Koranic verses, that is, using a portion of the original as either an opening or a conclusion, he is so convinced of the originality of his own method that he writes: 'I followed a method that I devised; I am its pioneer.' In view of Ibn al-Athīr's

⁷ al-Qalqashandī, *Šubḥ al-aṣḥā*, vol. I, section 3, pp. 89–92.

⁸ Abū Shāma, *'Uyūn al-rāwḍatayn*, vol. I, p. 192.

⁹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mathal al-sā'iর*, vol. I, p. 107.

numerous confrontations with both precursors and contemporaries, his critical method certainly deserves attention. His *al-Mathal al-sā'ir* (Popular Model) was subjected to constant attacks. Ibn Abī'l-Hadīd (d. 656/1257), for example, wrote *al-Falak al-dā'ir 'alā'l-mathal al-sā'ir* (The Cosmos Revolving Around *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*), in which he divides his attention between the merits and vices (*al-mahmūd wa'l-mardūd*) of the original; he approves of Ibn al-Athīr's prose and prosification, but strongly objects to his self-aggrandizement and his tendency to underestimate worthy predecessors. Similar opinions can be found in the work of 'Imād al-Dīn al-Kātib, but Ibn Abī'l-Hadīd chooses to concentrate on what he calls Ibn al-Athīr's misjudgements. Another work of this type is Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī's (d. c. 661/1263), *Nusrat al-thā'ir 'alā al-Mathal al-sā'ir* (Support for the Rebel against *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*). The issues raised in both books relate not only to critical debates but also to Ibn al-Athīr's predilection for contrafaction and outspoken comment. While it is easy to regard his literary controversies as part of a romantic quest for release from the anxiety of influence, the task of justifying the professional squabbles is more difficult. Had the chancery not been a venue for challenge and reward, there would presumably have been no call for dispute or even contrafaction in the first place.

Ibn al-Athīr supplies famous texts for analysis, and then, by claiming resignation to the will of others by either contrafacting or rewriting the texts as an exercise, implies that he can improve on the original. His ghost-authorities include such illustrious names as Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī (d. 384/994), head of chancery for the Buyid sultan 'Izz al-Dawlah, al-Ṣāhib ibn 'Abbād (d. 385/995), a minister to the Buyid rulers, and 'Abd al-Rahīm al-Baysānī, al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil himself. In tackling their writings and revealing their omissions or shortcomings, he follows a methodology of displacement, selecting a single issue (such as *saj* "rhyming cadenced prose") in order to prove his own broad knowledge of the topic. In spite of Ibn al-Athīr's self-serving boasts concerning the originality of his method, it has to be acknowledged that he is certainly adept at identifying and probing the most characteristic features of his counterparts. Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī may have been admired for his balanced prose and articulate assonation, but Ibn al-Athīr aspires to outshine him. Since contrafaction includes both parody and stylization, Ibn al-Athīr's urge to contrafact the original text should not be viewed as a sign of decadence, but rather a gesture of rejuvenation in turbulent times. Thus, in taking on the task of contrafacting al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil's letter written on behalf of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 1193) to the caliph in Baghdad on the occasion of the recapture of Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock (583/1187), Ibn al-Athīr's primary concern seems to be to explain the value of elaboration (*iṭnāb*) in the face of rhetorical objections to its overuse.

KORANIC STYLIZATION AND THE ROLE OF SAJ^c

In an era of war and conquest, when both the Ayyubids and Mamluks were striving to acquire political legitimacy, the cadences of *saj*ⁱ (rhyming prose) – characterized by syntactic parallelisms, rhymes, allusions and maxims, all couched in balanced structures – provided a powerful stylistic tool, with their deeply rooted linkages to Koranic style and to the *tawshīḥ* practice, that is, the use of Koranic cadence, balance, brevity and interlacing. Indeed a report of Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (581–654/1185–1256) suggests that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn himself was well aware of the value of this particular trend in prose composition; the latter is alleged to have said: ‘Never assume that I have conquered lands with your swords, but with al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil's pen.’¹⁰ Participating fully in the new spirit of conquest, both al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil and ʻImād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Īṣfahānī were to reflect the mood of the times, lauding achievements, debating issues, re-collecting early Islamic *jihād* and winning over non-Arab Muslims and newly converted communities, all through a resort to the cadenced style reminiscent of Koranic discourse. Within the realms of both epistolography and rhetoric, rhyming prose was co-opted into service under the sacred banner of faith. Especially during the Mamluk era, initiation into the Koran and *ḥadīth* inevitably fostered a vogue for rhyming prose, with its invocations of the Koranic, regardless of the implications of meaning. As William Brinner notes, rhymed prose was taken seriously by the Mamluks, since their bureaucrats totally despised unrhymed compositions.¹¹

From a stylistic point of view, rhymed prose was not regarded as a superficial phenomenon, particularly as practised by ʻImād al-Dīn al-Īṣfahānī. Sir Hamilton Gibb rejects sweepingly generalized accusations of ‘linguistic virtuosity’ and ‘hyperbolic eulogy’,¹² tracing instead the discourse’s vigour and communicative power in works such as ʻImād al-Dīn’s *al-Barq al-shāmī*. The work has an ‘epic quality’ which ‘is not simply a matter of presenting the account of some incident in effective rhymed prose’, but rather of letting ‘tension, instead of concentrating on a single episode, spread over a series of episodes constituting a complex unity . . . of varying intensity’. It is, Gibb argues, particularly in battle descriptions that ʻImād al-Dīn’s style becomes ‘more elaborately ornamental’. While Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s exploits may have inspired the epic and heroic account and provided its ‘moving spirit’, it is the role of the eloquent confidential secretary to give the account a life of its own through a blend of the biographical and autobiographical. Gibb’s apologia for ʻImād al-Dīn’s prose suggests a direction for more nuanced readings of the Arabic

¹⁰ Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirāt al-zamān*, vol. VIII, p. 472.

¹¹ See Guo, ‘Mamluk Historiographic Studies’, 43.

¹² Gibb, ‘al-Barq al-shāmī’.

poetics of this era. Exploiting dismay at servile imitations and previously voiced criticisms of specific practices, the purveyors of sweeping generalizations about pre-modern Arabic prose rarely take into account the political and cultural dynamics of the era, the invocation of a new belligerent tradition, and the tendency to accommodate newly Islamized elements that were otherwise well entrenched in all structures of leadership and power. Such generalizations may also be founded on Ibn Khaldūn's expressed criticisms of the prose of the period, something that he associates with the East, the Mashriq. It may well be that Ibn Khaldūn has 'Imād al-Dīn in mind when he objects to the use of 'the styles of poetry, its metres in prose, including assonance and rhyme, and nostalgic preludes'. He strongly opposes what he regards as 'a mingling of genres', especially in official correspondence,¹³ and concludes that *tarassul* (in the form of chancery correspondence) should be free of poetic styles. While there is some justification for Ibn Khaldūn's critique, it may be equally applied to the epistolary style of the Andalusian writer Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1375), for example, and not only to writers of the Mashriq.

However, not all writers chose to apply this transgeneric method to their epistolography. The issue was much discussed by compilers. Al-Qalqashandī, for example, argues that, if carefully handled, both 'assonance and doubling' are a sign of great talent, but that 'the best assonance is what is devoid of contrivance'. Even so, there is still a broader context for Ibn Khaldūn's reservations, particularly regarding the reconciliation of official correspondence with the stylistic norms of other languages, a point specifically mentioned by al-Qalqashandī.¹⁴ Ibn Khaldūn discusses '*ujma* (hybridity) as a process of malign influence, one that weakens linguistic foundations and mingles structures, resulting in speech that cannot be adapted to the circumstances of discourse and leading to a palpable loss of lucidity and clarity. Al-Qalqashandī, on the other hand, draws no such conclusions, believing a careful application of the poetic to be a sign not of failure, but rather of mastery. As part of the process, he analyses five *hudna* (truce) letters, paying special attention to the scribes' efforts to provide duplicate copies in two languages and to ensure through their dealings with the Franks that there is no deviation from specific points of agreement.¹⁵ Exempting one of the five, the remaining four are deemed to be written in a coarse and faulty language inappropriate for use by any scribe 'with the slightest knowledge of the art of speech'. At the same time he does provide justification, pointing out that, because 'the Franks were close neighbours of the Muslims in Syria, and the agreement between the two

¹³ Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, vol. I, p. 567.

¹⁴ al-Qalqashandī, *Šubb al-ašbā*, vol. XIV, pp. 140, 82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

parties was struck with respect to each item, a scribe from each side recorded it quickly in coarse, unrefined language'.

Al-Qalqashandī was an important arbiter of taste. Surveying the scene as a whole with all its ups and downs and with the *risāla* genre, he remained totally committed to prose in preference to poetry. While recognizing the beauty and the power of the latter, he argues that prose is the proper medium for the age, acknowledging all the while that the prose writer needs to be well acquainted with poetry.¹⁶

THE *RISĀLA* GENRE

While it is reasonable to link the stupendous growth of the *risāla* genre to its early (and especially Abbasid) efflorescence, Fatimid and subsequent Ayyubid and Mamluk achievements deserve particular attention. Stylists of the Abbasid period were certainly aware that their vocation required continual innovation and a quest for elegance, the goals being both utilitarian and artistic and the readerships private and public.¹⁷ However, the tendency to specialize led in different directions: here Ibn Abī Tāhir Tayfūr (d. 280/893) is a pioneer in providing an anthology of *al-manzūm wa'l-manthūr*, with models and examples, but al-Qalqashandī was, as noted earlier, to lean heavily on 'Alī ibn Khalaf's (d. 455/1063) *Mawādd al-bayān*, along with later and more strictly utilitarian formularies such as al-'Umarī's *Ta'rīf* and Ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh's (d. 786/1384) *Tathqīf al-ta'rīf*. Al-Qalqashandī's *Subḥ al-a'shā* was updated and completed in 1813 by the Iraqi humanist al-Suwaydī. A source work for every kind of correspondence, both official and private, it serves as a model for the stupendous encyclopedic endeavours compiled during the Mamluk period that aimed to record and preserve, all with the goal of resisting destruction and oblivion. It is also a significant attempt at summarizing the ongoing competition among different genres and the subfields within each of them. In this particular context, while the overall competition among genres had much to do with politics, what occurred within each genre involved professional issues. Episodes of bureaucratic self-assertion and dynastic glorification clearly emerge, most especially when the target is either a *maqāma* writer or a financial secretary. Al-Qalqashandī is no exception: he applauds the merits of chancery scribes and composers of literary prose at the expense of al-Harīrī and other state treasury clerks, all the while making sure to present his own

¹⁶ Ibid., vol. I, pp. 89–92.

¹⁷ See e.g. Yāqūt, *Irshād*, vol. V, p. 351. See vol. I, p. 387, on Ahmad ibn Tahir Abū'l-Fadl, and his 14 vols. on prose and prosification, and vol. III, pp. 402–3, on Sīnān ibn Thābit ibn Qurrah and his letter on the difference between the epistolographer and the poet. The *risāla* genre is also the subject of a detailed treatment by Hämeen-Anttila in this volume, Chapter 6.

maqāma as a gesture of allegiance to his patron, al-Qaḍī Badr al-Dīn ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī (d. 786/1384), head chancery clerk in the reign of the first Circassian sultan, al-Zāhir Barqūq.¹⁸

Dynasties and manuals of formularies imply a sense of continuity. Epistolography displays a similar approach to models and formulae that called for al-Qalqashandī's classification in *Subḥ al-aṣḥā*. He was obviously intent on demonstrating his allegiance to the family of Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, not only through extensive reference to Shihāb al-Dīn and his prestigious books like *al-Ta’rīf* and *Masālik* (discussed below),¹⁹ but also through plain and direct testimony. First chosen by Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alā al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Faḍl Allāh, chief chancery clerk or confidential secretary in the chancery, to be *kātib darj*, al-Qalqashandī dedicates a *maqāma* to his master, which also summarizes his views on epistolography in relation to other genres.²⁰ Rightly described as the ‘culmination of the secretarial manuals and encyclopedias of the Mamluk period’,²¹ *Subḥ al-aṣḥā* was also compiled into a shorter version, *Daaw’ al-ṣubḥ al-musfir* (The Enlightening Dawn), dedicated to Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Bārizī, *kātib al-sirr* (confidential secretary).

In his contribution to the *maqāma* genre, *al-Kawākib al-durriyya fi l-manāqib al-Badriyya* (The Shining Stars on the Merits of Badr al-Dīn), al-Qalqashandī provides an overview of the genre.²² While his decision to take a position as *kātib darj* serves to illustrate his own participation in chancery structure during the Mamluk period, his *maqāma* also reveals a sense of resignation; he acts as a detached observer, assessing the situation and drawing conclusions. Here, too, as in several other places, he discusses the three major aspects of chancery practice: prerequisites and methods in both knowledge and practice; hierarchical structure; and, third, the position of epistolography vis-à-vis other genres. In the first place, he illustrates what is already known about prerequisites, *‘ulūm* (sciences) and *rusūm* (goals, general knowledge, calligraphy, rhetoric and so on). First come the Islamic sciences, especially memorization of the Koran and the study of *hadīth* and theology. Next comes the Arabic language, it being the scribe’s principal ‘capital’. Subsections deal with every other category of learning, ranging from theology, logic and disputation to geography and politics. Al-Qalqashandī, it appears, regards the *kātib* as both humanist and functionary.²³ Chancery’s hierarchical structure moves beyond the simple subdivision of *dast* and *darj* to subsume two other factors that,

¹⁸ al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ al-aṣḥā*, vol. XIV, pp. 89–92.

¹⁹ See al-‘Umarī, *al-Ta’rīf*; also Ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh, *Kitāb tathqīf al-ta’rīf*.

²⁰ al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ al-aṣḥā*, vol. XIV, pp. 126–45.

²¹ Bosworth, ‘al-Kalkashandī’, p. 510.

²² Bosworth, ‘A *Maqāma* on Secretarship’, pp. 292–3.

²³ al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ al-aṣḥā*, vol. XIV, pp. 134–40.

in final analysis, involve matters of apprenticeship. First, nepotism is a given; this is the case, for example, whenever mention is made of Banū (dynasty or family) Wahb, or, in the Mamluk period, the families of 'Abd al-Zāhir or Faḍl Allāh al-'Umari.²⁴ Qalāwūn (678–91/1240–92) appointed Fath al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir as his *kātib sīr* (confidential secretary), and al-Nāṣir ibn Qalāwūn (693–74/1294–1340) enhanced the position of *kātib sīr* by abolishing the post of *wazīr* in 710/1310 and devoting its functions to four other officials, including the confidential secretary. Second, patronage was no less influential than nepotism, for scribal families were also on the look-out for brilliant clerks. Some, like Zayn al-Dīn 'Umar al-Şafadī, the *kātib sīr* of Şafad, were devoted to belles-lettres, while others such as Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Yahyā ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umari were scholars of *fiqh* and *ḥadīth*.

Within such perspectives epistolography emerges as an inclusive genre; its subdivision into *ikhwāniyya* (private/personal) and *dīwāniyya* (official, chancery) correspondence is merely one of convenience. The *ikhwāniyya* letter or epistle could involve expression of affection, compassion, protestations of various kinds, congratulations, condolences, declarations of solidarity, nostalgia, solicitude, gratitude, mutual pleasantry or exchange of gifts. Almost every writer of repute has his own *ikhwāniyyāt*. Ibn Nubāṭa (d. 768/1367), for instance, wrote letters of congratulations on behalf of the viceroy of Damascus, the sultan's deputy, that attempt to bridge the gap between the official and private. What is remarkable about these letters is Ibn Nubāṭa's assimilation of Koranic discourse in letters of ostensibly intimate expression.²⁵

Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī, known as Ibn Fahd (d. 725/1325), is regarded as the worthy successor of al-Qādī'l-Fādil. Working in the Damascus chancery for eight years, Ibn Fahd had a distinctive mode of writing; his prefatory phrases and paratextual formulae have passed into common use.²⁶

Since chancery correspondence involved both that of the sovereign (commands and explications) and responses to issues of public or private concern, the variety in *dīwāniyya* correspondence is enormous. Al-Qalqashandī cites epistles of conquest and war as the most exalted,²⁷ especially those composed by al-Qādī Muhyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir. As an example, he cites Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's letter on the recapture of land from the Tartars, addressed to Bahā' al-Dīn ibn Hannā, the *wazīr* in the time of al-Malik al-Zāhir.²⁸ The letter is intentionally elaborate and descriptive, depicting the stages of the conquest

²⁴ The Banū Faḍl Allāh family was in charge of chancery for a century. It was to the credit of the family that the Qādī Shihāb al-Dīn put chancellery terminology into practice. See al-Qalqashandī, *Šubb al-a'shā*, vol. VII, p. 332 n.

²⁵ Ibid., vol. IX, pp. 10–12.

²⁶ Ibid., vol. XIV, p. 18.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 157–88.

in a lucid and clear style, then describing people's reactions and the scenes of jubilation, all presided over by the Mamluk sultan himself, as both hero and sovereign. Another pattern is set by Badr al-Dīn ibn Fadl Allāh, during al-Malik al-Zāhir Abū Sa'īd Barqūq's reign, in reply to a letter from Timur Lang (Tamerlaine). The response resorts to reprimand since Timur's letter is characterized by both arrogance and implicit threats. Following the sequence of the initial letter, the response focuses on specific wording with connotations of disparagement. Badr al-Dīn invokes literary resources from both proverbial and Koranic discourse to undermine the letter's structure, exposing its pretensions and undermining defensive strategies and faulty rhetoric. It concludes with a Koranic verse of triumph and prosperity for the Muslim community.²⁹

However, when the writer pens his epistle as a decree to discourage certain practices while approving others, the entire tone and argument are changed. Such is the case, for example, with a call issued during the reign of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn for an increase in the importation of *mamlūks*. Rather than a mere warning to competitors among Egyptians, the decree, in the form of a letter, was meant to channel profit from such trade to the Mamluk household. This warning is part of the sultan's strategy for retaining a strong Mamluk army, one that proved successful when in 701/1302 the Franks were expelled. Muḥammad ibn al-Mukarram, Ibn Manzūr, at the time a chancery scribe (678–89/1280–90), cited this as 'The Memorandum of the Wise' written by his then master, Fath al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir.³⁰

SCRIBAL HIERARCHY

Although ostensibly satisfied with his position as *kātib darj*, al-Qalqashandī was personally concerned with hierarchy. Indeed, in his *magāma* merit as the criterion for appointment is a given, for his patron Badr al-Dīn 'deserves the position by merit, even though it belongs to him in the first place'. Al-Qalqashandī uses the work, with its panegyric of the Fadl Allāh family and his patron in particular, to challenge the status of financial secretary or accountant (*kātib al-amwāl*), noting that such a position is of lower rank compared with epistolary scribes or chancery secretaries.³¹ Many of these financial secretaries may also have been *udabā'* (littérateurs), making important contributions to belles-lettres (Khalil ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, for example, and Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manzūr), but al-Qalqashandī still considers the position less prestigious. His criteria are a mixture of prerequisite skills and means of advancement or power. Epistolography as a literary art

²⁹ Ibid., vol. VII, p. 341.

³⁰ Lewis, *Islam*, vol. II, pp. 166–8.

³¹ Escovitz, 'Vocational Patterns', 43.

demands learning and originality, but familiarity with the sovereign, responsibility and privilege are also factors. By contrast, the *awlād al-nās* (sons and descendants of *mamlūks*), figures such as al-Şafadī or Ibn Taghribirdī, ‘had wealth and privilege but rarely held military or political offices of any significance’.³²

Yet, despite this Mamluk discrimination between the two *dīwāns* (duly noted by al-Maqrīzī), it was also the practice that, if the *wazīr* was ‘a man of the pen’, he was to be seated ‘between the sultan and the secretary’. It thus becomes easy to understand why the chancery had for some time seemed such an attractive place for littérateurs, not only for Imād al-Dīn al-Kātib himself during Nūr al-Dīn’s reign (before he joined Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s chancery) but also for others from among the margins like al-Wahrānī. Imād al-Dīn’s mastery of style provoked much jealousy. Following Nūr al-Dīn’s death (569/1174) and during Ismā‘il’s reign, his role was ‘limited to chancery letter-writing’. Even al-Qāḍī l-Fāḍil could not escape such jealousies.³³ On the other hand, chancery secretaries never tired of making the sovereign aware of their loyalty and indispensability; Imād al-Dīn, for example, constantly makes allusions to the fact.³⁴ To defend their status they are constantly striving to enhance the value of their craft, not only through the manuals and compendia that are part of the stock in trade, but also through specific comments to ‘men of the sword’ regarding their status. Al-Qalqashandī himself wrote *Hilyat al-faḍl wa-zīnat al-karam fi l-mufākhara bayna l-sayf wa l-qalam* (The Ornament of Merit and the Charm of Benevolence in the Debate Between the Sword and the Pen), dedicated to the *dawādar* (bearer of the royal inkstand), Zayn al-Dīn al-Zāhirī, upon his being appointed to this office by Sultan al-Zāhir Barqūq (d. 794/1392).

This particular epistle of al-Qalqashandī is by no means the first of its kind; Ahmād ibn Burd al-Asghar (d. 445/1053) had found the Andalusian court replete with examples of this linkage between warrior and writer.³⁵ Another possible precedent is Ḥiyā’ al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr’s on the merits of both.³⁶ Written at a crucial phase in the development of epistolography, Ibn al-Athīr’s work strives to show that competence in the field is not derived from ‘embroidery of cloth or tasty food’, but in the domains of writing and war. Surveying the entire literary scene – with its many opportunists and claimants – he jokingly demands the appointment of a *muhtasib* (market inspector) to supervise the profession and exclude counterfeiters and pretenders; for him, at least, the

³² Holt, *Age of the Crusades*, p. 141.

³³ Ibn Khallikān, *Waṣīyatāt*, vol. IV, p. 221.

³⁴ al-Isfahānī, *Sanā’ al-baq*, pp. 193–4.

³⁵ See Cachia, ‘Andalusī Belles Lettres’, p. 209.

³⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Maṭhal al-sā’ir*, vol. I, pp. 132–5.

cultural milieu of the time ‘was a marketplace for bargaining and commercial dealings’.³⁷

THE STATUS OF THE *MAQĀMA*: THE INTELLECTUAL SCENE
AND PROSE WRITERS’ CONCERNS

The sense of rivalry and competition, coupled with a desire to enhance the vogue for epistolography, may help explain the surprising attack mounted against Abū'l-Qāsim al-Ḥarīrī, who was, in Ibn Khallikān’s words, ‘one of the imams [masters] of his era’.³⁸ The publication of al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt* is often seen as a major turning point in literary history because of the association, strongly upheld at the time, between *risāla* and *maqāma*.³⁹ It is thus predictable that upholders of the primacy of epistolography should be annoyed at the widespread admiration for al-Ḥarīrī’s masterpiece. Al-Qalqashandī himself was unable to escape the influence of Ibn al-Athīr’s discourse; thus the latter’s insinuations regarding al-Ḥarīrī’s performance are also to be found in al-Qalqashandī’s *Šubb al-a'shā*, most especially in the introductory note to his own *maqāma* which is ostensibly engaged with al-Ḥarīrī’s *al-Maqāma al-furātiyya* in which the narrator finds himself up the Euphrates in the company of landowners who are surveying property.⁴⁰ In al-Ḥarīrī’s *maqāma* they discuss the comparative merits of secretaries and state financial officials. The narrator responds in rhyming prose, invoking elaborate ornaments of style and using eloquence and wit to illustrate the equal merits of both.⁴¹

By his choice of style, characterization and anecdote, al-Ḥarīrī draws attention to a rapidly changing scene (see further the section by Stewart on the *maqāma* in this volume, Chapter 7). Eloquence is no longer an attribute of the elite and privileged alone, but a means of making a living. The *maqāma* may offer people ‘a measure of deceit and lies’, as the ‘hero’ argues in his *Maqāma mawṣiliyya*, but he cannot earn a living without mastering the various fields of *adab* and possessing a wide knowledge of Arabic and Islamic culture. The implications of this character bring us face to face with problems of identity formation beginning in the eleventh century. The marginalized intellectual, as portrayed in the *maqāmāt*, arrives on the cultural scene with a cynical mindset needed to confront a sham society of stupendous pretensions. Al-Ḥarīrī’s stylistic virtuosity and consummate artistry anticipate a vogue for belletristic prose in decentralized cultural domains, a phenomenon that was

³⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

³⁸ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. IV, p. 63.

³⁹ Arazi and Ben Shammay, ‘Risāla’.

⁴⁰ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Maṭhal al-sā'ir*, vol. I, p. 86; and al-Qalqashandī, *Šubb al-a'shā*, vol. XIV, p. 125.

⁴¹ See Preston, *Makamat*, p. 484 n.

only increased by competition, especially among the Ayyubids and the Mamluks with their kingship titles and claims of both secular and Islamic identity. It was now the function of prose writers to illustrate and confront the needs and demands that were to be a prominent feature of a crucial period of transition.

One way of understanding the continuing interest in al-Harīrī's *maqāmāt* is to regard his eloquent rogue-cum-stylist, Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, as the prototype for destitute intellectuals at large. Nobody, with the exception perhaps of Rukn al-Dīn al-Wahrānī (d. 574/1179), felt at ease in the company of such a figure. Searching for employment and perhaps learning as well, al-Wahrānī left Algeria for Egypt. Unable to compete with the illustrious names at the court of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn such as al-Qādī'l-Fādil and 'Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī, he embarked on an opportunistic career in favour of al-Qādī'l-Fādil. He composed an epistle, for example, against the renowned littérateur, Tāj al-Dīn al-Kindī of Damascus (d. AH 613), in which he showed how the latter had composed a poem of self-glorification that 'proved he was shameless'.⁴² The renowned grammarian 'Uthmān ibn Isā al-Balaṭī (d. 599/1203), who migrated from Mosul to Damascus and eventually settled in Cairo, was certainly also on al-Qādī'l-Fādil's side against al-Kindī, and al-Wahrānī was pleased to cite his criticisms of al-Kindī, evoking in the process every imaginable kind of coarse language against the latter.

The *maqāma* genre, firmly established by al-Harīrī's masterpiece, provided the basis for a continuing tradition. The Andalusian al-Ḥarīzī (d. 622/1225), Ibn Ṣayqal al-Jazarī (d. 672 or 701/1273 or 1301) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) were among its later practitioners. Attracting the talents of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) and al-Saraquṣṭī (d. 538/1143) among many others, it earned a central place in the circles of the learned. Its appropriation of other genres and its easy fusion into epistolography made *maqāma* composition no less attractive than epistolography itself. It is thus not surprising that, at a much later stage, a philologist and littérateur such as al-Zabīdī (d. 1206/1791), well known as the compiler of the dictionary, *Tāj al-'arūs* (The Bridal Crown), is both an authority on al-Harīrī and an advocate of his art in his popular *majlis* (assembly).

Among prominent contributors to the *maqāma* genre during the central period of this long era was al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). His contribution to the genre, *Rashf al-zulāl min al-sihr al-ḥalāl*, bridges the gap between post-classical and pre-modern, especially the later *maqāmāt* of Shaykh Ḥasan al-'Aṭṭār (d. 1834, a student of al-Zabīdī), Nāṣif al-Yāzījī (1800–71) and Muḥammad al-Muwaylihī (1858–1930). Echoing al-Hamadhānī's *al-Maqāma al-bishriyya*, al-Suyūṭī also follows al-Zamakhsharī's bent for edification. These *maqāmāt* are narrated by

⁴² al-Wahrānī, *Maqāmat al-Wahrānī*, p. 222.

twenty learned men, all married to young women. They therefore expound on the merits of marriage, each one using his own professional register to elaborate on the attractions of the female body and to commend the institution of marriage against the rival claims of illicit love, adultery and homosexuality. As emerges from his own autobiography, *al-Tahadduth bi-ni'mat Allāh* (Bearing Witness to God's Munificence), al-Suyūtī was never reluctant to show his admiration for physical love within its legitimate Islamic context. Shaykh Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār's later *al-Maqāma fi l-Faransīs* also concerns itself with physical attraction, but now it is for the French body, and indeed the male rather than female. Reflecting perhaps encounters with members of the French expedition or simply following convention, Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār penned his *maqāma* along the lines of the gay (*ghilmānī*) literature of the Abbasid and later periods. However, the *maqāma* is not used solely to deviate from official and orthodox discourse. The genre was also used for more personal causes, lending greater efficacy to retorts in classical style, as, for example, with Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Khafajī (d. 1070/1659) in his *al-Maqāmat al-Rumiyya* where he criticizes both society and era for failing to acknowledge his talents. Al-Yāzījī used his *Majma‘ al-Bahrayn* as a means of asserting Arab identity against the Ottoman occupiers of his homeland. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, the genre was to develop further, at the hands of Muḥammad al-Muwaylihī (in his renowned *Hadīth Isa ibn Hishām*, with its pungent criticisms of urban life) as a middle ground between the conventions of the heritage of Arabic prose and the modern novel.

In retrospect, a consideration of the way in which al-Harīrī's *maqāmat* succeeded in incorporating within their framework, whether by design or implication, the intellectual scene of the era, serves to reveal a great deal about self-consciousness among writers, their sense of insecurity and the strategies they adopt in order to retain a position within frequently precarious political systems. The very gesture of writing now becomes an act of intense documentation, intended to establish a presence against not only the process of erosion within the public domain but also against oblivion and neglect on the personal level. Indeed, at times there is no line of demarcation between the public and the personal; the biographical and the autobiographical fuse, as, for example, in the writings of the above-mentioned ‘Imad al-Dīn al-Isfahānī. In both *al-Barq al-shāmī* (Syrian Lightning) and *al-Fath al-quṣī fi l-fath al-qudsī* (Eloquent Rhetoric on the Conquest of Jerusalem) he blurs generic characteristics, as his sense of insecurity and competition prompt him to articulate an elaborate style which reflects his own skills and professional concerns. At a later stage al-Suyūtī feels himself impelled to protect, preserve and disseminate the variety of knowledge assembled within the Islamic intellectual tradition. He thus sets himself to explore every conceivable discipline, including such topics

as erotica, pharmacopoeia and geography. All this occurs in a context marked by rampant ignorance and corruption, which, together with the de facto power of the Mamluks, led him to assemble huge amounts of information and opinion, thus prefiguring in his enthusiasm for manuals and compendia the goals of the nineteenth-century renaissance (*al-nahda*). These trends can be seen in his philological treatises, such as *al-Ashbāh wa'l-naṣī'ir* and *al-Muzhir fī 'ulūm al-lughah*, works that form an important part of a wider concern with Arabic as the language of the Koran. Many other scholars were to follow suit, including al-Khafājī with his *Shifā' al-ghalīl fī ma fī kalām al-'Arab min al-dakhil* and his commentary on al-Harīrī's grammatical treatise, *Durrat al-ghawwāṣ fī lughat al-khwāṣṣ*.

SATIRE, CARICATURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

The combination of eloquence and masterly discourse on the one hand and playfulness and excessive humour on the other could be more than a personal trait. In times of upheaval and challenge, it could also become a defensive strategy. Such a mode of writing was no mere passing phase in belles-lettres. Abū'l-Makārim As'ad ibn al-Muhadhdhab ibn Mammātī (d. 606/1209), 'a highly respected writer, who worked in the diwans and later became a head chancery clerk',⁴³ wrote *al-Fāshūsh fī ḥukm Qarāqūsh*, a biting satire of Bahā' al-Dīn Qarāqūsh, the Mamluk to whom Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn entrusted important matters while he was away on campaigns. Qarāqūsh, described by Ibn Khallikān as 'well disposed and of good intentions', became the butt of Ibn Mammātī's satire, and since that time the very name has become a byword for a mercurial statesman.⁴⁴ Real or imaginary narratives of this type are numerous, but the satirical trend provides prose with a vituperative mode whose many sub-genres and functions rival that of *hijā'* (lampoon) in poetry. Zayn al-Dīn al-Jawbarī, for example, wrote *al-Mukhtār fī kashf al-asrār wa-hatk al-astār* to satisfy his patron's demands; it and other similar works reflect an interest in the mediant's code – with a rich repository of ruses, tactics and sheer fun – that is of long duration. Among many other examples of compendia, we may mention the following: Ibn Abī Hajala's (d. 776/1374; also written as Abī Hijla) *Dīwān al-sabāba*, which includes examples of poetry, anecdote and love narratives, while the same author's *Sukardān al-sultān* (written for his patron, al-Malik al-Nāṣir) includes humour, sermons and literary anecdotes; Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ibshīhī's (d. 850/1446) *al-Mustāraf*; Alī al-Shirbīnī's (d. 1044/1634) *Maṭāli' al-budūr*; and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Bishārī's (eighteenth century) *Bughyat*

⁴³ Yāqūt, *Irshād*, vol. II, p. 179.

⁴⁴ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. IV, pp. 91–2.

al-jalīs al-musāmir. These compendia of entertainment illustrate the various ways in which littérateurs responded to new communal needs and expectations. Between them and satire proper there exists a further large body of literature, one that was subsumed in no less a compendium than *Alf layla wa-layla*, equally renowned throughout the world through its translation into European languages as the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, a huge compilation of narrative that found in Shaykh Muḥammad al-‘Adawī a person, albeit one with a somewhat squeamish attitude, who oversaw its publication in two volumes at the newly established Bulaq Press in the nineteenth century (see Reynolds' contribution in this volume, Chapter 12).

DISCURSIVE MIDDLE GROUND

The engagement of scholars and renowned humanists with the satirical and comic is well suited to the *maqāma* trend, with its mediating function among genres. It also attests to the increasing power of story-telling, something that induced al-Suyūṭī to write a treatise concerning the substantial impact that story-tellers and popular preachers were wielding on the populace. Change and mobility, especially in Mamluk Egypt, made it impossible to sustain a unitary discourse. While, as elite scholars, the ‘*ulamā’* continued to be involved in scrupulous studies of *hadīth* (traditions), the mass audience was obviously drawn to a more popular Islam, one that has better met their needs ever since. It is in this context that we may share Berkey's view that medieval Islam was ‘the creative interaction of the spirit of the traditionalists and the less restrictive tendencies of the Muslim population as a whole’.⁴⁵

Discursive middle grounds vary in their scope, and the *maqāma* genre itself was to be accompanied by a number of developments in other directions. Al-Wahrānī's *maqāmāt* and *manāmāt* are a case in point, in that he deliberately resorts to coarse and vulgar language as though in a desperate revolt against refined prose. The conscious violation of the codes and standards of elite prose occurs as part of a carnivalesque pattern in which the assembly is re-enacted in the epistle or the *maqāma*, and eloquence is juxtaposed with the grotesque. In one *fasl* (chapter) he details the various paths that lead to the underground world of Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo, while in another he gives free rein to his frustrations: ‘poetry’, he claims, ‘is in recession and disuse’ and ‘poets are destitute and introverted’, all this in lands where ‘rhyming prose is useless for earning a living’.⁴⁶ This same sense of discontent may have served as a trigger for other patterns of dissent in the form of religious practices, each with its

⁴⁵ Berkey, ‘Tradition, Innovation and the Social Construction of Knowledge’, 64.

⁴⁶ al-Wahrānī, *Manāmāt al-Wahrānī*, pp. 108–10, 114–16.

own language of deviation; thus, for example, the rapid expansion of mystical Sufi orders from the twelfth century onwards when such practices as saint-worship, the offering of oblations, and visitations became more popular,⁴⁷ even though the Ayyubids and the Mamluks were more attuned to religion as homogeneous practice. Records of Baybars' reign as al-Malik al-Zāhir (658–76/1260–77) recreate him in popular memory as a legendary hero,⁴⁸ not only for his victories against the Mongols (the battle of 'Ayn Jälüt in 1260) and the Crusaders, but also for his piety.

THE 'ULAMĀ' IN THE BAHRĪ MAMLUK PERIOD

During the Bahri period (to 784/1382), intellectuals were often co-opted because of 'their function as devotional and educational intermediaries with the public'.⁴⁹ Al-Maqrīzī associates the growth of the '*ulamā'* class with the Bahri period when every Mamluk had to acquire an adequate education in Koran and *hadīth* at the hands of a *faqīh* before being initiated into the rigours of military life.⁵⁰ During this period the turbaned classes included *dīwān* scribes, theologians, preachers and littérateurs at large. However, especially when closely tied to the practice of religion and law, the '*ulamā'*, as Lapidus notes, 'played a crucial role' in social, religious and cultural communication.⁵¹ Whether they are included as part of the chancery profession or of the religious institution (including the system of justice), their discourse is intended to both inform and control. The resort to prosification and citation, coupled to which is a blending of both writing and speech with Koranic discourse, signifies a quest for homogeneity in the face of dissent and heterodoxy. The '*ulamā'* also played the role of transmitting 'legitimate religious knowledge'.⁵² Invoking the rich Islamic homiletic tradition (one that assumes great significance in times of strife), many pre-modern preachers developed a style of exhortation that utilized a growing prose repertoire and manipulated a public that was not only thirsty for knowledge, but also anxious to curb their exploitation by rulers. In such a context, the story of the Hanbali preacher Shihāb al-Dīn ibn 'Alī al-Shīshīnī (late fifteenth century) is instructive.⁵³ A popular preacher of *hadīth* and Koran, he found himself despised and his life endangered when he chose to side with the sultan's intention to raise taxes.

⁴⁷ Nicholson, *Literary History*, p. 343.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 447–8.

⁴⁹ Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo*, p. 20; also Little, 'Historiography', p. 413.

⁵⁰ al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭāṭ*, vol. II, pp. 212–14.

⁵¹ Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, p. 108.

⁵² Berkey, *Past and Present*, pp. 54–5.

⁵³ See Berkey, 'Storytelling, Preaching, and Power', 58.

During the Mamluk period, efforts were made to incorporate the '*ulamā'* within the system. In his *Khitāt*, al-Maqrīzī details the Bahri Mamluks' lavish spending on madrasas, mosques, schools, orphanages, *hadīth* assemblies, *khānqāhs* (Sufi sites) and *zāwiyas* (small mosques or prayer rooms) and *ribāṭ* (accommodation for Sufis).⁵⁴ However, preachers, writers and other people from the learned classes could also secure a living from their own professions as retailers and artisans. Making sure to maintain a secure distance from every religious or educational building that was endowed by the state, they survived all attempts at imposing homogeneity and from time to time managed to produce their own particular modes of disapproval and dissent.⁵⁵ Although some scholars might at times veer towards more orthodox postures, others would revive or encourage popular practices, such as prayers for the Prophet's intervention, saintly mediation and belief in magic, the evil eye, portents and benedictions, all of which have a literature of their own. Indeed, the popular belief in certain practices, as part of a popular Islam, found a major supporter in 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusī (1050–1143/1641–1731). An authority on Hanafi *fiqh* and *hadīth*, he argues in *Kashf al-nūr 'an ashāb al-qubūr* (The Unveiling of Light from the Occupants of Graves) that tomb visitations, building domes and rituals at large are not contrary to Sunna as long as innovation agrees with the objectives and dictates of the Sharia law.

VARIETIES OF HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Historical and biographical narratives had a strong appeal for the elite. They were, however, composed to conform to a series of guidelines, standards, and obligations. In matters of narrativity, for example, they never lost sight of what was considered acceptable discourse, the primary emphasis being on clarity and restraint. While dissent was certainly present, there were also theoretical underpinnings no less cogent than the obligation to a particular sovereign. Al-Maqrīzī's interpretation of history, for instance, shares elements with Ibn Khaldūn's (also noted by Irwin, in his contribution to this volume, Chapter 8), especially in the search for the causes of socio-economic rise and fall, but his mind remains that of a political scientist willing to probe the ideology of history. Indeed, al-Maqrīzī provides two examples to argue against one-sidedness in historiography. One concerns the entire cycle of usurpation:⁵⁶ any regime that resorts to dislodging people and confiscating their belongings is employing a system of theft. The whole dynastic succession since the Ayyubids had

⁵⁴ al-Maqrīzī, *Khitāt*, vol. II, pp. 212–14.

⁵⁵ Humphreys, *Islamic History*, p. 202.

⁵⁶ al-Maqrīzī, *Khitāt*, vol. II, pp. 203–4.

been ‘nothing but one thief robbing another, one usurper replacing another’.⁵⁷ The second excoriates those who practise opportunism in general. Al-Maqrīzī regards affluence and justice as salient aspects of sound government; he therefore supports his topographical and annalistic record with views intended to uncover bias and subordination to the state, a posture that since then has become a distinctive feature of historiography.⁵⁸

Al-Maqrīzī’s politics tend to lump together the religious (divine), the natural and the human. The entire phenomenon is informed by a Divine Will ‘which you cannot change’. Thus, in surveying the year 805/1402, the Nile flood and the devastation involved in the invasions of Timur Lang, he also expresses his dismay at ‘oppression of so many types’ to be found in Egypt, where ‘those in charge confiscated property, tracked down the wealthy’ and interfered with trade and business.⁵⁹ And yet, this mode also incorporates its own informative strategies. Al-Maqrīzī is not alone in designing his *Khīṭat* and other works to appeal to readers, by including ‘entertaining accounts and pleasing maxims, without undue elaboration or inconvenient intrusion or brevity, but using a middle road between the two’. This appeal by al-Maqrīzī to the goals of entertainment and edification is in line with traditional forms of biography and historiography; Ibn Khallikān had already invoked such a method as the ‘most effectual inducement to reading’.⁶⁰ Ibn Khaldūn’s perspective on this issue is somewhat different, being governed by a theory of history that led him to cite every detail, even Timur Lang’s habit of passing out food among his own warriors. Such detail is of direct relevance to his theory of tribal solidarity and allegiance. More concerned with his theory of history (leading him to explain it to Timur Lang himself and to cite examples from Mongol practice in order to support it), he adopts a style that is clear and functional.

During the lengthy period under review many works with a historical intent sought to blend into a single work aspects of different genres. Notable among later examples during this period are Ibn Iyās’ (d. 930/1523) *Badā’i’ al-zuhūr fi waqā’i’ al-duhūr* (The Choicest Blooms Concerning the Incidence of Dooms) and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Jabartī’s (d. 1238/1822) *‘Ajā’ib al-āthār fi l-tarājm wa l-akhbār* (Remarkable Reports on Biography and History), to be discussed below. Their importance in the context of a consideration of the role of historical writing within a survey of belletristic literature lies not only in their mode of ‘self-presentation and self-perception’, something that can be noted in historical and biographical narratives in general,⁶¹ but also in

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 480.

⁵⁸ Ibid., vol. I, pp. 348–9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 365.

⁶⁰ Nicholson, *Literary History*, p. 451.

⁶¹ See Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, p. 16.

their substantial reliance on antecedent authorities and on standards, methods and codes that had for some time been the mainstay of elite tastes and writing.

While the Mamluk period may have experienced a heyday in biographical and historical writing (648–918/1250–1512), the Ottoman era in Egypt (918–1226/1512–1811) also witnessed significant contributions to the tradition which were to have a significant influence on trends in the modern period. The Damascene historian al-Murādī (d. 1206/1791) wrote *Silk al-durar fi a'yān al-qarn al-thānī 'ashar*, a biography of eighteenth-century notables. Following the collaborative trends of the earlier Mamluk period, al-Murādī arranged with Murtadā al-Zabidī, the versatile compiler of the dictionary, *Taj al-'arūs* (The Bridal Crown), to compile a history of Egypt during the Ottoman era. The latter asked his student, al-Jabartī, to help. Both mentors died in the same year, leaving al-Jabartī as sole author of *Ajā'ib al-athār fi l-tarājim wa'l-akhbār*, a historical work covering the period 1100–1237/1688–1821. Using reports, anecdotes and his own eyewitness accounts, he offers the most detailed account available of the arrival of the French expedition in 1798 and subsequent events. Although appreciative of French achievements (as his description of the Institute makes clear), he was also very critical of French policy in Egypt. Indeed, though one may agree with Moreh that he is 'the first herald of the Arab renaissance who opposed popular Sufism and superstition', al-Jabartī also shows how Bonaparte himself manipulated religious sentiment and posed as a neo-patriarch who chose to abandon all the principles of the French Revolution as he addresses the Egyptian community as the vicar of God, for 'our acts are His will and divine decree'.⁶² As David Ayalon notes, al-Jabartī identifies and analyses the socio-political factors that had brought about radical transformations in post-Mamluk Egypt, where infiltration into the fabric of Mamluk households had brought the native population to the very centres of power, thus influencing henceforth the very mechanism of political authority.⁶³

In spite of these developments in historical writing, the predilection for combining history and biography continues. As noted earlier, these two closely linked modes are already seen to coexist in such pioneering works as al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī's (d. 463/1071) *Ta'rīkh Baghdaḍ* and Ibn 'Asākir's *Ta'rīkh Dimashq*. In the contents of such works, littérateurs and poets find a place alongside caliphs, descendants of the Prophet, legists and other dignitaries. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 681/1282) was particularly concerned with the biographical aspect, and his comprehensive project of compilation, *Irshād al-alibbā'*, involved the

⁶² See al-Jabartī, *Napoleon in Egypt*, pp. 108–10, 184, 112–13.

⁶³ See Ayalon, 'Studies in al-Jabartī', pp. 313–15.

inclusion of significant personages, with particular emphasis on the learned. Yet scholars give still greater credit to Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), whose biographically organized work, *Wafayāt al-a'yān* (Obituaries of the Notables), was to serve as a model for further research by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) in his *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* (The Biographies of the Foremost among Nobles) and by Muḥammad ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362) in *al-Wāfi bi'l-wafayāt*. To Ibn Khallikān's sourcework, Ibn al-Ṣuqāṭ (d. 725/1325) contributed a completion and addendum, *Tālī wafayāt al-a'yān*, while Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (d. 764/1363) composed his *Fawāt al-wafayāt* to fill gaps in the original. At a still later date Muṣṭafā ibn 'Abdallāh al-Rūmī Mulla Kātib al-Chalabī, Ḥājj Khalīfa (1017–67/1608–56), composed his *Kashf al-zunūn* which focuses in the main on information regarding bibliographical sources. Biographical dictionaries devoted to specific professions such as '*Uyūn al-anbā'* *fī tabaqāt al-ajibbā'* (Best Reports on Classes of Physicians) by Ibn Uṣaybi‘ suggests a characteristic level of interdisciplinarity. Al-Suyūṭī's *Husn al-muḥādara fī akhbār Miṣr wa'l-Qāhirah* (The Appealing Ensemble concerning Records of Egypt and Cairo) may be seen as an illustration of yet another trend that is indebted to earlier patterns while still maintaining its author's links to a particular place and time. Here al-Suyūṭī is keen to associate himself with Cairo, as he portrays an intellectual climate through descriptions of patterns of learning, disputation and intellectual progress among the elite.

At times the role of literary discourse, and especially poetry, in such writing becomes pronounced. Of such a trend 'Izz al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr's (d. 630/1233) *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh* (*Summa Historica*) is a good example. He enlists stories, anecdotes, local details and circumstantial evidence as tools now at the disposal of every historian, but is still more intent on explaining outcomes and suggesting rationales for the events that he recounts.

In the particular realm of royal biography, a genre which, almost *ipso facto*, sits at the very centre of the tradition of belles-lettres, mention needs to be made, among others, of the works of: 'Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī (519–97/1125–1201), Shihāb al-Dīn Abū'l-Qāsim Abū Shāma (599–665/1203–67), Muhyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir (620–92/1233–93), his nephew Shāfi' ibn 'Alī (649–730/1252–1330), Bahā' al-Dīn ibn Shaddād (539–632/1145–1235), 'Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād (613–84/1217–85), Ibn Ḥabib (710–79/1310–77), and Ibn Abī Ḥajala (725–77/1325–75). 'Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī's masterly prose had for a long time posed a challenge to chancery secretaries; both *al-Barq al-shāmī* (Syrian Lightning) and *al-Fatḥ al-quṣṣī fī l-fatḥ al-Qudsī* (Eloquent Rhetoric on the Conquest of Jerusalem) were intended not only to record Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's attributes and achievements but also to cite letters, poems and anecdotes with no direct bearing on Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. While the previously mentioned *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh* (*Summa Historica*) of 'Izz al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr made use of 'Imād

al-Dīn al-Kātib's work, it clearly avoids his stylistic virtuosity and develops a less sympathetic view of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.

With royal biography there is often an anticipatable tendency to lavish compliments on its subject, to accommodate his particular vision of himself, and to highlight glorious details that justify particular feats and achievements. Writers who seek to assess rulers while they are still in office pay little or no regard to the means by which power was obtained and seem prepared to take violence, murder, treachery and fraud for granted.⁶⁴ Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470) is a case in point, although in his *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* (Bright Stars) he seems reluctant to side completely with his subject. Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh is portrayed as a person of conscience, initially unwilling to condemn al-Nāṣir Faraj to death, not only out of loyalty to 'his master, al-Malik al-Zāhir Barqūq' (d. 801/1399) but also because his son, al-Nāṣir Faraj (d. 815/1412), spared them more than once.⁶⁵ Ibn Taghrībirdī finds himself needing to depict a ruler in action, someone possessed of a particular frame of mind and vision through which to implement his views and exercise his sovereign rights. Thus, he is said to be 'of lofty ambition' and 'expert in planning'. In domestic and foreign politics he has 'complete knowledge, adroitness, sagacity and good judgement'. The ruler's traits are thus presented in congenial terms, to such an extent that the reader is persuaded to accept his handling of the chief amirs, no matter how cruel it might seem. In other words, Ibn Taghrībirdī utilizes reason and discourse to present an image of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh as a just and efficient ruler. However, such a view of Ibn Taghrībirdī's work should not cause us to overlook his critical views on Mamluk 'corruption and factionalism' as seen in his *Hawādīth al-duhūr*. In resorting to such criticism, he was not alone. Biographical writings, such as Ibn 'Arabshāh's (791–854/1392–1450) *Ajā'ib al-maqdūr*, may show their subject in a negative light. He, for example, can present a very hostile picture of Timur Lang, whereas his life of Jaqmaq, his contemporary and the Sultan of Egypt presents the latter as exemplary in every respect.

The tendency to include autobiographical sketches in compendia is a salient feature in the writings of the period.⁶⁶ While specifically concerned with biographical entries or overviews of the cultural scene, writers have a habit of inserting their authorial presence into the text and providing information about themselves. Examples can be found in the works of Abū'l-Khayr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), al-Yūnīnī (640–725/1242–1325/6), Abū'l-Fidā' (672–732/1273–1331), Baybars al-Manṣūrī

⁶⁴ Humphreys, *Islamic History*, p. 140.

⁶⁵ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, p. 139.

⁶⁶ Many examples of such autobiographical writing in Arabic from the pre-modern period can be found in Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self*.

(d. 725/1325), Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rāḥmān al-Sakhawī (d. 902/1496) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).

In *Għayat al-nihāya fī ṫabaqat al-qurra'* (The Ultimate on Classes of Reciters), al-Jazarī (658–739/1260–1338) provides an overview of his own upbringing, training and career. His autobiographical sketch may not manifest the characteristics of a distinctive prose genre, but its goal of illustrating a career for emulation is always present. This autobiographical element so evident in prefaces and introductions to compendia is an indication of the commitment that writers felt to their cultural milieu. Even when trying to stress their independence, as Ibn Tagħribirdi does in *al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, writers betray a great deal about their own role and their sense of vulnerability.

URBAN TOPOGRAPHY

Topographical narratives constitute a particular kind of writing, in that they are a blend of history, geography and city planning. While Ibn Abī Ṭahīr Tayfūr's (d. 280/893) *Kitāb Baghdād* (Book on Baghdad) was a pioneer work in this genre, it was al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 464/1071) whose *Ta’rīkh Bagħdād* (History of Baghdad) offered a model for later writings by discussing the life of a city – its topography, characteristics and history, and biographies of its notables. A focus on topographical detail requires a different kind of prose style, one that emphasizes description, spatial images and city layout. Within their own specific historical contexts, the significance of such accounts of urban topography transcends the means that they adopt in the process of recording physical details of urban design and city structures. In most cases, for example, they provide lively portraits of marketplaces, mosques, baths and madrasas, and especially of dominant modes of exchange and discourse. Other types of survey provide insights into the life of the lower strata of society, the activities of preachers and story-tellers in mosques and marketplaces, professionals, artisans and ‘ulamā’ of every kind, and into the lifestyle of the court. Biographical compendia and surveys of notables and dynasties vary in value. ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād’s (d. 684/1285) *al-A’lāq al-khaṭīra fī dhikr umarā’ al-Shām wa l-Jazīra* provides significant information on troop contingents and taxation policy, but the coverage that it devotes to baths, mosques and madrasas is particularly important in any quest for details regarding the lifestyle of the time. Similar works would follow. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Nu‘aymī’s (d. 927/1521) *Tanbiḥ al-tālib wa-irshād al-dāris* is specifically concerned with madrasas and mosques in Damascus. ‘Ali al-Hārawī (d. 611/1215) includes a chapter on Damascus in *Kitāb al-išhārāt ilā ma’rifat al-ziyārāt*, but his primary focus is on sacred sites in Syria, Palestine, Iraq and North Africa.

It is yet another sign of the decentralization already noted that, from the twelfth century onwards, compilers of biographies were also involved in the process of regionalization and the development of a more local sense of identity. Along with biographies of notables and rulers, the tendency to claim some particular regional distinction was present even in writings on the prophet. While the traditional authority of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) and his editor Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) continue to be cited, this regionalizing trend is notable in Muḥammad al-Ṣalīḥī's (d. 942/1535) biography of the Prophet, entitled *al-Sīra al-shāmiyya* (The Syrian Biography).

In addition to a contest among the major cities for works that would celebrate their fame, there is also a desire to capture the more physical aspects of the socio-political scene. With al-Maqrīzī's (d. 845/1441) *al-Mawā'iz wa'l-iṭibār fi dhikr al-khitāṭ wa'l-āthār* (Teachings and Lessons Drawn from the Mention of Sites and Remains, usually known under the abbreviated title of *al-Khitāṭ*), already often cited during this survey, topography offers the prose tradition a new and distinctive level of detailed description of Mamluk Cairo within a particular political context. Needless to say, his work makes use of other types of writing, but the exceptional value of *al-Khitāṭ* lies in the way he combines a discussion of sites with details of economic growth and decline and of the nature of political authority. His detailed coverage of areas, districts, squares, mosques and marketplaces has an anecdotal quality that places human beings firmly in the context of daily transactions. Even so, he does not lose sight of the need to pay necessary attention to educational and religious institutions, well aware that the Bahri Mamluks continued to be acutely involved in the education of young *mamlūks* before permitting them access to the third level, the one at which they could communicate with amirs. In fact, the situation changed during the reigns of al-Zahīr Barqūq and his successors: *mamlūks* were allowed to mingle with people, 'to marry city women' and to lead a 'life of idleness'. Al-Maqrīzī was clearly not in favour of such trends, believing that the former elitism should have been maintained.

Al-Maqrīzī's description of Cairo's sites and his meticulous anecdotal survey of scenes of roguery capture the historical moment and use its socio-political implications to reflect on the Mamluk dynasty.⁶⁷ While less concerned with drawing attention to virtues and merits, this kind of urban historiography shares common ground with Mujīr al-Dīn al-'Ulaymī's (d. 928/1522) *al-Unaṣ al-jalil bi-tārīkh al-Quds wa'l-Khalil* (The Exalted Company in the History of Jerusalem and Hebron), for example, a trend that may be traced back to Ibn 'Asākir and his *al-Muṣtaqṣā fi faḍā'il al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*. Here the concern is to establish a connection between Jerusalem and neighbouring cities and to

⁶⁷ al-Maqrīzī, *Khitāṭ*, vol. II, pp. 29, 164, 410.

survey politics during the reign of Sultan Qā'it Bey. In so doing, the author manages to blend genres, styles and documentation within a single work. Its significance lies in the author's aspiration to re-establish a sense of al-Quds' topography following the destruction of its fortifications (616/1219), an event supervised by al-Mu'azzam 'Isā (d. 624/1226) prior to surrendering it to Frederick II.⁶⁸

SUFI DISCOURSE

Prose-writing varies in accordance with the status and professional activities of its practitioners. Such divisions and deviations also pervade the realm of religion and jurisprudence. In fact, the growing taste for elite prose cannot be viewed in isolation from a developing taste for refinement at the expense of sincerity of emotion, a point with which, as we have already observed, Ibn Khaldūn took issue not only in his theory of history and society but also in his despondent view of the state of epistolography and refined prose. Affected conduct and an elevated prose style were both disturbing to newcomers to the East, and yet, as Ibn Khaldūn argues, the very dynastic nature of rule involves repetition and conventional practice, leading inevitably to decadence. When the same phenomenon occurs in nepotistic chancery appointments, the result is imitation, ornamentation and an emphasis on virtuosity. On Ibn al-'Arabī's arrival in Cairo in 598/1200, for example, he was dismayed to encounter Cairene Sufis whose 'overriding concern and chief preoccupation was cleaning their clothes and combing their beards' and who 'decked themselves out in gowns worn by *fityān* [chivalrous young men], while neglecting all question of obligatory and supererogatory acts'.⁶⁹ In Ibn al-'Arabī's view, Sufism is no less devotional than popular rituals, heterodox visitations to tombs of saints and other practices that were to appal the conservative theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).

Muhyī al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī (560–638/1165–1240) of Murcia encapsulates the journey from West to East in Arabic. His writings had an abiding influence on writers of both prose and poetry. One such was 'Abd al-Wahhāb ibn Aḥmad al-Shā'rānī (897–973/1492–1565), as is clear from his *al-Yawāqīt wa'l-jawāhir* (Emeralds and Jewels). Ibn al-'Arabī's thought is clearly summarized, making it accessible to the underprivileged people to whom the work is addressed. Although an adherent of the Shadhili sect of Sufism, al-Shā'rānī avoids particularizing statements and thus represents a middle ground that manages to accommodate the mainstream, a position that was intended to confront the

⁶⁸ Little, 'Mujīr al-Dīn'.

⁶⁹ Cited from *Rūh al-Quds* in Addas, 'Andalusī Mysticism', p. 909.

fundamentalist position of Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Suyūtī's application of Ibn al-‘Arabī's Sufism had a more political goal. In the context of his clashes with Sultan Qā’it Bey and his rejection of Sultan al-Ghawrī's offers, al-Suyūtī was more committed to the application of the *fatiwā*, an institution that enabled the individual jurisconsult (*faqīh*) to make judgements concerning the abuses of Islamic legal practice. In so doing, he established a precedent that was to be followed by sixteenth-century Sufi scholars such as Najm al-Dīn al-Ghaytī and Ibn Ḥajr al-Haytamī. Al-Suyūtī also undertook to compose apologetics for the writings of Ibn al-Fārid and Ibn al-‘Arabī. When, for example, Burhān al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Biqā’ī (d. 885/1480) wrote his *Tanbīh al-ghabī ilā takfīr Ibn ‘Arabī* (A Warning to Simpletons Concerning Ibn ‘Arabī's Apostasy), al-Suyūtī wrote a retort, *Tanbīh al-ghabī fi takhītī Ibn ‘Arabī* (A Warning to Simpletons Who Find Fault with Ibn ‘Arabī), a work that serves as a model for future apologetics in defence of Sufism against fundamentalist attacks, such as those of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. The great eighteenth-century Syrian sage ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (mentioned above) was yet more committed to his great Sufi forebears, such as Ibn al-Fārid, Ibn al-‘Arabī and al-Jīlī. Indeed the record of his travels shows how much he tried to emulate Ibn al-‘Arabī's great work, *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya* (Meccan Revelations). Like its model, al-Nābulusī's *al-Ḥaqīqa wa l-majāz fi riḥlat bilād al-Shām wa-Miṣr wa l-Hijāz* is composed as a literary work, embellished with anecdotes, poems and elevated literary passages.

ORATORY AND SERMONS AS BELLES-LETTRES

Between Sufi discourse and oratory there is a common ground of religious referentiality, although each fulfils its purposes in different ways. Ibn Khalaf put oratory second only to literary prose or epistolography as *inshā*. In this context, the work of Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256), *Mir’āt al-zamān* (The Mirror of the Times), is often cited. In 605/1208, for example, one of his Friday sermons advocating the continuance of a campaign to free Jerusalem is said to have driven Damascene ladies to send him their hair, 300 braids' worth, to be used for reins and bridles for horses in the campaign.⁷⁰ Another sermon in 626/1229 was equally effective: dismayed and angered by al-Malik al-Kāmil ibn Ayyūb's (d. 635/1237) surrender of the demolished Jerusalem to Frederick II, Ibn al-Jawzī protests as follows:

The road to Jerusalem is closed to companies of pious visitors! O desolation for those pious men who live there; how often have they prostrated themselves in prayer, how

⁷⁰ See Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt al-zamān*, vol. I, pp. 43–4.

many tears have they shed! . . . May God burnish the honour of the believers! O shame upon the Muslim rulers! At such an event tears fall, hearts break with sighs, grief rises up on high.⁷¹

Muhyī al-Dīn ibn Zakī, the chief Shafii judge of Aleppo (550–98/1155–1201) was chosen by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to deliver the first Friday sermon in Jerusalem upon its deliverance from the Franks (583/1187). He begins with recitations from the Koran, then offers his own expressions of gratitude to God, couched in balanced, rhymed prose, and imbued with allusions to Koranic discourse. The names of the first four caliphs are included as preparation for the mention of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as one of the heroes of Islam.

THE SACRED IN THE PROFANE

In addition to sharing a primary register characterized by Koranic vocabulary and imagery, sermons and epistles both incorporate other genres within their frame of reference and then emerge in hybrid forms of a transgeneric nature. They adopt the prevalent mode of discourse to address specific occasions, in the process making use of official dispatches, memoirs, poems, other sermons and anecdotes. Both categories envelop their exordia and conclusions in Koranic salutations, admonitions and prayers, and both extend themselves beyond the limits of any one specific genre, to represent literary prose in its inclusive function, combining differing themes, disciplines and concerns with the basic art of address. Sermons are more limited by their religious or political functions, but chancery correspondence, along with less official types of *rasā'il*, have a broader scope.

Although the demarcation in prose between mystical and earthly love is usually not difficult to establish, at times it is blurred. Taking the form of anecdotes and historical accounts and often lapsing into sentimentalism regarding chaste love, the Muslim tradition also builds on significant antecedents, seen most notably in the work of Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064). In his renowned treatise on love, *Tawq al-hamāma* (The Dove's Neckring), the Andalusian imam, jurisprudent, essayist and poet set the tone for a new line of discussion, one in which the sacred is fused with the profane in a natural flow of argumentation, analysis and polished description. However, his separation of *hawā* or *'ishq* (desire and passion) from love was later to be rejected by conservative thinkers, most notably Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) in his *Rawdat al-muhibbin wa-nuzhat al-mushtaqīn* (Lovers' Meadow and the Entertainment of the Infatuated). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya offered a counter-reading to Ibn Hazm, one

⁷¹ See Gabrieli, *Arab Historians*, pp. 273–4.

that conformed with the more orthodox modes of analysis being advocated by both Ibn Qayyim and Ibn Taymiyya which unequivocally rejected any implications of physical infatuation or contact.

For several reasons it was the western regions of the Arab world that offered more in the analysis of the love theme in prose. The Tunisian al-Tifāshī (d. 651/1253), for example, composed *Nuzhat al-albāb fī mā lā yūjad fī kitāb* (Delight of the Hearts at What is Never Found in Books), a work that serves to complement treatises that had been lost and to which new detail was added concerning the notions of love and passion. But it was Shaykh Umar Ibn Muhammmad al-Nafzawī who, upon the wish of his patron, Muhammmad al-Zawwī, the wazir of Tunis, wrote *al-Rawḍ al-ātīr fī nuzhat al-khāṭir* (The Perfumed Garden) as a study on sexual intercourse; the challenge involved was tactfully broached through no less an authority than the Koranic verse, ‘Your womenfolk are a field for you, so go to your field as you wish.’

COMPENDIA IN LITERARY PROSE

The period from the mid-twelfth century onwards witnesses an enormous growth in the composition of erudite treatises and compendia. Aside from the understandable fear of losing contact with the past, represented by the legacy of books and authoritative documents passed from one generation to the other, the decentralization of the caliphate itself and the resurgence of peripheral dynasties throughout *Dār al-Islām* demanded archival and secretarial activity; and not only in order to collect scattered documents and record professional expertise in the craft of prose-writing, but also to make such compiled material available to the newly emerging leisured classes. Aside from these readerships, the administrative class and the court were both in need of a cultural apparatus through which to communicate with society in times of war and peace, upheaval and stability. A trend that has often been accused of lack of originality is better viewed and evaluated as a post-classical endeavour that combines fact, commitment and erudition within a consultative literary milieu that was characteristic of Mamluk culture, involving the combined arts of bibliographic research and compilation.

Krachkovski relies on Martin Hartmann’s earlier verdict on Mamluk Egypt in order to argue that at this point in time Egypt possessed a literature unequalled anywhere else in the East.⁷² Al-Qalqashandī notes that at the time Cairo ‘benefited from the most honourable of writers as no other kingdom did’, and that ‘it had the kind of notables and men of letters that no other

⁷² Krachkovski, *Istoria*, p. 435.

country had'.⁷³ Encyclopedic works such as al-Qalqashandī's *Šubḥ al-aṣḥāb*, al-Nuwayrī's (677–732/1279–1332) *Nihāyat al-arab* and Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Waṭwāṭ's (d. 718/1318) *Mabāhij al-fikr wa-manāhij al-‘ibar* (The Delights of Thought and Means of Edification), are all cases in point. The last of these works is important for the art of writing because its encyclopedic wealth is presented in literary format. Written in a refined style and illustrated with examples of poetry and literary prose, the book is an excellent example of the aesthetic principles of the era, challenging negative verdicts on the cultural climate of the period. No less important, and indeed of even greater literary value, is Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī's *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab* (The Ultimatum of Intent in Literary Arts), a work whose significance lies in its concentration on epistolographers' needs in the natural and social sciences, they being fields in which the *kātib* should be adept in order to discharge his responsibilities in the best manner. In al-Ghuzūlī's (d. 815/1412) *Maṭāli‘ al-budūr fi manāzil al-surūr* (Shining Full Moons in the Abodes of Delight) he offers 'delights' in the form of a house with many rooms and parts; each site accommodates something special, while adjoining sections and structural properties satisfy worldly delights by invoking selections from literature at large. As one section specifically notes, al-Ghuzūlī's target readership is the leisured classes; indeed the entire work is intended to highlight such a coterie. Shihāb al-Dīn ibn Fadl Allāh al-‘Umarī (700–49/1301–49) composed two works of this type. The first, *al-Ta‘rif*, is specifically addressed to epistolographers, whereas the second, *al-Masālik*, is more general in focus. The successful way in which *al-Ta‘rif* establishes terms and format for the discipline was to engage the attention of trainee epistolographers for a long time; in a form updated by Ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh (fifteenth century), *Tathqīf al-Ta‘rif bi'l-Muṣṭalaḥ al-Sharīf*, it continued to serve as an authoritative source.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Arabic travel literature, especially that focusing on journeys from West to East, was often propelled by both the desire for knowledge and the obligation to perform the pilgrimage. One such long-distance traveller, Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217), had an observant eye, and during his visits to cities on his long journey to Mecca he would take notes on amazing sites and sights. His yet more renowned successor in travel, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 779/1377), offers details of his visit to China. He adopts a pleasant style to describe the habitats, lifestyles, trade and morals of the peoples whose lands he visits. These accounts however (and in all likelihood their sources) also manage to tell us a great deal

⁷³ al-Qalqashandī, *Šubḥ al-aṣḥāb*, vol. I, p. 31.

about the needs of *Dār al-Islām*. While the comparative approach is used in most accounts of other lands and their inhabitants, the perspective and the nature of information reflect the narrator's view of his own society, its aspirations and intentions, with respect to the rest of the world. This very interest reveals a degree of affluence, in that prosperous societies look for exchange and expansion. This applies to both the Bahri Mamluk Egypt, as described by al-Maqrīzī,⁷⁴ and to Morocco during the reigns of Abū'l-Hasan al-Marīnī (731–49/1331–48) and Abū 'Inān (749–59/1348–58) in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account.

The accounts of Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, along with other works of travel literature, can be subsumed under the rubric of interculturality, since each one projects a particular perspective on the conditions of other peoples. However, the same does not apply to other categories of work that focus on particular aspects of knowledge and empirical experience, those on topography, for example, navigation and geography at large. One case of some relevance is that of Ahmad ibn Mājid (d. 905/1500). Although he is usually mentioned in relation to the Portuguese discovery of the Ivory Coast and the Gulf, his books on navigation (including those in rhymed prose) were of great significance to navigational *adab* in that they brought together a number of sciences within a single work.

CONCLUSION

The sheer variety of prose-writing surveyed in this chapter attests to the existence of a dynamic culture characterized by the active involvement of littérateurs, widespread networks and a magnanimous devotion to the world of writing. Incorporating varieties of narrative, histories, biographies, autobiographies, chancery compendia, topographical writing, travel accounts, epistles, and works on every social or natural and pure science, the literary output is enormous. Criticism, rhetoric, grammar and linguistics, not to mention biographies of notable poets, such as Ibn al-'Adim's *Insāf al-taharri* on al-Ma'arrī and al-Bādi'i's *al-Subḥ al-Munbi* on al-Mutanabbī, provide yet another significant chapter in belles-lettres. In these writings, as in biographical and historical writing in general, the prose tends to be lucid, clear and readable. The few instances of ornateness, as with 'Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī, should not be considered to be general features of a literary tradition that included such variety and wealth. At times epistolography needs embellishment, and for specific reasons, especially in the context of its drive for ascendancy among competing professions and genres. When we survey the entire

⁷⁴ al-Maqrīzī, *Khitāt*, vol. II, pp. 212–14.

scene, its dynamic forces and modes of expression, within such a rich and diversified output, belletristic prose appears to be so called more as a matter of convenience than as a designation of contrivance. Its variety, richness and energy defy sweeping generalizations. Indeed it calls for a more serious and careful analysis that is freed from both the trammels of 'Romantic authority'⁷⁵ and a too easy surrender to modes of analysis that choose to evaluate literary traditions only within the optic of centralized systems and states.

⁷⁵ Homerin, 'Reflections on Arabic Poetry', 71.

CHAPTER 6

THE ESSAY AND DEBATE (*AL-RISĀLA* AND *AL-MUNĀZARA*)

Risāla is a loosely used term in medieval Arabic literature. At its widest it merely refers to ‘a scroll which contains a small number of questions which belong to one kind’, as al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413) defined it.¹ In its general character, it resembles a *kitāb* or ‘book’, the main difference between the two being length, or, as al-Tahānawī (d. after 1158/1745) put it:² ‘the difference between it and *kitāb* depends, as is commonly known, on completeness or deficiency, on addition or lack. A *kitāb* is a complete [exposition] of one discipline [*fann*] whereas a *risāla* is incomplete.’ Likewise, *risālas* often overlap with *maqālas* and both might be translated as essays; in fact, it is hard to see the difference between the various *risālas* and *maqālas* among, for example, al-Maqrīzī’s (d. 845/1442) works.

Risāla can thus, in the native tradition, be a short exposé of almost any field, and Hājjī Khalīfa (d. 1067/1657) shows³ how very wide the range of *risālas* was, both in earlier times and in the period under study here. One finds technical tractates of various kinds, scientific studies, Sufi manuals and brief discussions of various aspects of religious science, but also works belonging to belles-lettres. *Risālas* could roughly be divided according to a tripartite scheme into functional, technical and literary *risālas*, the first type being letters in the modern sense (conveying a message to the recipient), the second covering tracts or essays (brief studies of a limited subject) and the third consisting of various sub-genres that clearly fall within belles-lettres.

Writing *risālas* belongs to ‘ilm al-*inshā*’, ‘the science of (elegant) composition’. This science, or art, is of universal scope or, as Tāshkubrīzāde (d. 968/1560) puts it, ‘it derives help from all other sciences’.⁴ The term is extremely flexible, too, and Tāshkubrīzāde includes al-Hārīrī’s *Maqāmat* under the heading.⁵ He ends his discussion of ‘ilm al-*inshā*’ by listing some of the sciences which are particularly important for epistolography, including

¹ al-Jurjānī, *Tā’rifāt*, p. 115.

² al-Tahānawī, *Kashshāf*, p. 584.

³ Hājjī Khalīfa, *Kashf*, pp. 840–901.

⁴ Tāshkubrīzāde, *Miftāh*, vol. I, p. 204.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

calligraphy (an aspect of *risāla* which is easily forgotten when reading modern editions), knowledge of the Arabic language, religious sciences, history, and all like that.⁶ Al-Qalqashandī's (d. 821/1418) gigantic *Šubb al-a'šhā*, a manual for epistolography, covers all these fields extensively. Al-Nuwayrī's (d. 732/1332) *Nihāya* also contains extensive chapters on the subject and the author divides letters into several sub-genres.⁷ As one chapter heading puts it, 'playing with words' (*al-tala‘ub bi'l-alfāz*) has an important part to play in all letters.

A special section of '*ilm al-inshā*' is '*ilm al-tarassul*', 'the science of epistolography' in a strict sense, a science of how letters should be written.⁸ Epistolographical manuals were written right up to the modern period,⁹ containing model letters grouped according to recipients and telling how one should express oneself in each situation, recipient and writer both considered. In such manuals, as well as in anthologies, ancient letters are found side by side with contemporary ones, which means that old material was recycled and influenced later letter writing.

It is the literary *risāla* which is our main concern here, but defining this is again far from simple. In belles-lettres, *risāla* is a rather general concept, partly overlapping with other, more easily definable genres, as can be seen from the confusion between different titles. The genres which come closest to *risāla* are *munāżara* and *maqāma*; *khuṭba* is more clearly discernible from the *risāla*, as its oral character is strong even in cases where a particular *khuṭba* may never have in reality been delivered.

These genres may be defined as artistic prose of medium length, mainly in rhymed prose (*saj'*) with a heavy emphasis on literary tropes and figures of speech, while the plot is of varying importance. Al-Suyūtī, for instance, sees rhythmically arranged (*manzūm*) discourse as the backbone of the *risāla*.¹⁰ Even letters purported to be ordinary private letters (although probably not without the ultimate idea of a wider circulation) do contain a great deal of *saj'*. 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, on the other hand, warns against the excessive use of *saj'*,¹¹ but it seems that his words were little heeded in later centuries.

Functional letters, whether personal (*ikhwāniyya*) or official (*dīwāniyya*), share the style and sometimes even partly the content of literary letters. Both use heavily ornamented language and *saj'* lavishly, both may contain lengthy descriptive passages, and, in both, the actual content may be slight. A practical definition refers to the aim of the text: a functional letter is sent to convey a

⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

⁷ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, vol. VII, p. 4.

⁸ Tāshkubrīzāde, *Miftāḥ*, vol. I, p. 248.

⁹ The earlier history of the genre is summarized in al-Droubi, *A Critical Edition*, pp. 60–79.

¹⁰ al-Suyūtī, *Itqān*, vol. II, p. 153.

¹¹ al-Jurjānī, *Asrār al-balāgha*, p. 18, tr. in Ritter, *Geheimnisse*, p. II.

message, whereas a text written for its own sake is a literary *risāla*. Naturally, this definition is often hard to keep to, since many literary *risālas* end in panegyrical tones and are thus, in a sense, functional, and in a functional letter the actual subject matter may take up only a minor part of the whole.

Unambitious functional letters obviously fall outside the scope of literature and belong to the field of papyrology or history. Yet Arab authors did also circulate private letters for a larger audience and great care was used in their composition. These letters may employ complicated pieces of *saj'* and as such may both be enjoyable to read and show a great mastery of the language, but they rarely contain innovative features. Late compilations, for example, al-'Attār's (d. 1250/1834) *Kitāb inshā' al-'Attār*, contain model letters, where the functional subject matter is excised so that only the flowery formulae are left.

Epistolographical manuals contain various classifications for the more ambitious functional letters, usually arranged according to the subject matter. *Ikhwāniyyāt* include such classes as *tahāni'* (felicitations), *ta'āzī* (condolences), *tashawwuq* (longing), *istizāra* (invitation), *mawadda* (friendship), *i'tidhār* (apology), *shakwā* (complaint), *shukr* (gratitude), *'itāb* (reprimand) and *mudā'aba* (pleasantry), and these may be divided into further categories, for example felicitations according to the reason for sending congratulations.

Risālas were circulated separately, especially when longer, or in the 'collected letters' (*Dīwān al-rasā'il* or *al-tarassul*) of an author, or in anthologies and biographical dictionaries. The collected letters are usually functional, but they may contain individual literary letters or sometimes substantial passages of artistic value within a functional letter. Such, for example, is the case of Dīyā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239), whose *Dīwān al-tarassul* consisted of several volumes,¹² in addition to which a shorter selection also circulated. The preserved letters mainly contain non-literary letters but they do include some hunting *risālas*,¹³ as well as some model letters written purely for practice.¹⁴ In one letter, there is an interesting description of chess.¹⁵

Although technical *risālas* fall outside the limits of the present volume, there are cases which deserve some attention. Many authors were fond of the shorter form which the *risāla* presented and wrote a large number of short studies of essays on various subjects. One of the most prolific was certainly the Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Kamāl-Pāshā (d. 940/1533) whose rather vast production consists mainly of *risālas*, including religious, philosophical and aesthetical tracts, as well as texts such as *Risāla fī tafḍil banī Ādam 'alā sā'ir al-makhlūqāt* which

¹² According to Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. V, p. 392.

¹³ E.g. Ibn al-Athīr, *Rasā'il*, ed. al-Qaysī-Nājī, pp. 66–70.

¹⁴ I.e. 'alā ḥukm al-riyāda. See e.g. *Rasā'il*, ed. al-Qaysī-Nājī, nos. 21 and 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 35.

fall within the limits of the *munāzara* genre widely understood. In addition, he wrote many functional letters which were collected.

Ibn Kamāl-Pāshā also wrote a series of technical *risālas* on wine, opium and other products which were suspect in Islamic eyes. The brevity and flexibility of the genre provided an ideal medium for discussing novel ideas and taking stances on new features in Islamic society. Such tracts may be extremely dry and technical, but many authors provided an artistic perspective on the matter. Coffee, tobacco and drugs, mainly opium and hashish, were among the topics discussed in various *risālas*, sometimes from an Islamic point of view, sometimes out of literary interest.

Thus, one might mention, as works on the acceptability of coffee or tobacco, the *Risālat al-dukhān* by Sha'bān ibn Ishāq al-Isrā'īlī known as Ibn Hāfi (or Khāfi) al-Mutatābbib (eleventh/seventeenth century),¹⁶ or *Risālat al-qahwa wa-taḥrīmihā* by Yūnus al-Ghīthawī (eleventh/seventeenth century), which is of a technical type, or, finally, the debate *Mujālasat al-ikhwān wa-muṣāhabat al-khullān fī mufākharat al-qahwa wa'l-dukhān* by Aḥmad al-Hāfi, written in 1099/1687.

The literary *risālas* also show a wide variety. Among the features common to all is what might be called the *risāla* style, including a prolific use of rhymed prose (*saj'*) and full use of the lexical possibilities (and sometimes impossibilities) of the classical Arabic language. This often resulted in extremely complicated diction. Further, one may note a strong descriptive element, as well as the use of poetry, either by the author himself or by well-known poets such as al-Mutanabbi, in order to balance the prose passages. Many *risālas* show a liberal use of literary allusions and are full of proverbs, parts of verses, Koranic phrases and *hadīths*. Such allusions are very often left unmarked, though they may be marked as quotations in modern editions. Noticing the quotations was a kind of literary game, where the author tested the wit of his reader. Thus, in *risālas*, verses often continue the syntax of the preceding prose, whereas in *adab* they are usually nicely marked off by some such phrase as *wa-anshada yaqūl* ('and he recited as follows').

Medieval authors themselves classified literary *risālas* in various ways, perhaps the most economic of which is the classification of al-Qalqashandī in his *Šubb*. His main interest lies in official and other functional letters, and from an artistic point of view the most interesting *risālas* are buried deep towards the end of the book, which in Arabic anthologies signifies lack of importance. Thus the literary letters, which al-Qalqashandī describes¹⁷ as 'different

¹⁶ Ibn Hāfi used as his source a 'Frankish' (*faranjīyya*) tract written in Spain by a certain doctor Mūtārūs which he then translated into Arabic, see Ḥajjī Khalīfa, *Kashf*, p. 863.

¹⁷ al-Qalqashandī, *Šubb*, vol. XIV, p. 110.

kinds [*funūn*] of writings which the scribes send to each other, vying in writing them and which have no relation to the writing of royal, or other, documents', come in the last book, which is divided into *jiddiyyāt* and a brief chapter on *hazliyyāt*.¹⁸ The *jiddiyyāt* are further divided into sub-chapters, beginning with *maqāmas* and followed by literary letters, which al-Qalqashandī lists¹⁹ as:

1. Royal letters (*al-rasā'il al-mulūkiyya*), further divided into two:
 - a. letters of conquest (*rasā'il al-ghazw*)
 - b. hunting letters (*rasā'il al-sayd*);
2. Panegyrical letters (*mā yaridu minhā mawrid al-madhb wa'l-taqriḍ*);
3. Debates (*al-mufākharāt*);
4. Questions (*al-as'ila wa'l-ajwiba*);
5. Letters describing various incidents (*mā yuktab bibi al-hawādith wa'l-mājarayāt*); adding in a separate chapter:
6. Humorous letters (*hazliyyāt*).

The two groups of royal letters, those of conquest and hunting, are indeed among the most popular and deserve more attention than the other sub-genres, with the exception of the equally important debates. These three were an outlet for the desire for narrative in Arabic literature. Popular literature (*The Arabian Nights* and its predecessors, popular *sīras*) was free to tell stories, but respectable literature lacked this freedom. Al-Qalqashandī himself calls this group 'the greatest and loftiest of them all'.²⁰ In comparison with the ornate historiography (*ta'rīkh*) of the period, letters of conquest are distinguished not so much by their style, as by the personal, eyewitness point of view and the relative shortness of the *risāla*. Al-Qalqashandī quotes in full one such letter²¹ by Muhyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, written to celebrate and commemorate the conquest of Caesarea in 1265 by al-Malik al-Zāhir, that is, Baybars I. In his preface, the author himself connects his letter with the genre of the travelogue (*riḥla*). Descriptions of travelling are prominent in both this *risāla* and in other works belonging to the same genre; the interest in describing travelling goes back to the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*, but, in this case, the *raison d'être* of the description is not to prove the bravery of the author, but that of his patron. Another difference between the two is the exactness of the dates and routes

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 110–359, 360–5.

¹⁹ al-Qalqashandī also mentioned these in his table of contents (ibid., vol. I, p. 31), with some interesting variants. To *madhb* (panegyric) he added the counter-genre, *dhamm* (censure). Speaking about debates, he defined these as 'debates between luxury items', which does in fact accurately describe the main exponents of the genre. In Western scholarly literature, one tends to prefer the term *munāzara* for this genre.

²⁰ Ibid., vol. XIV, p. 139.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 139–65.

as well as the persons involved, which connects the genre to both *ta'rīkh* and *rihla*.

The other variety of royal letters, the hunting *risāla*, has deep roots in Arabic literature, going back to 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. after 132/750). Al-Qalqashandī quotes one such letter by Tāj al-Dīn al-Bārānbārī,²² written to commemorate a hunt organized by the Sultan Qalā'ūn (d. 689/1290). In hunting letters, the formulae of hunting poems (*tardiyā*) often shine through. In general, poetry and ornate prose went hand in hand, and *risālas* benefited from all the stylistic devices developed in poetry.

Close to the *risālat al-ṣayd*, but in the taxonomy of al-Qalqashandī falling outside the *risāla* proper,²³ is the *qidmat al-bunduq*, a description of fowling by sling shot. Al-Qalqashandī gives two *qidmas* as examples, one by Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Ṣā'igh al-Hanafī,²⁴ describing a fowling expedition that took place in 739/1338, the other²⁵ by Maḥmūd ibn Salmān al-Ḥalabī (d. 725/1325). In the same connection, one might mention *risālas* describing fishing, such as one by Ibn al-Athīr.²⁶

The second variety is the panegyrical letter, of which al-Qalqashandī first gives earlier examples (by al-Jāhīz and al-Ma'arī) and then quotes one of his own, written in 814/1411 to eulogize Abū'l-Ma'ālī Fath Allāh.²⁷ Alongside the panegyrical letter is its opposite, the letter of invective, of which al-Qalqashandī gives as an example Yaḥyā ibn Ja'far al-Ḥaṣkafī's *Itāb al-kuttāb wa-'iqāb al-alqāb*.²⁸

The third variety, the debate, is one of the main genres of Arabic pre-modern prose and will be treated later. The fourth, *al-as'ilā wa'l-ajwiba*, consists of questions, or riddles and quibbles, sent 'either to inquire and ask to be granted some (knowledge) which the recipient has, or to test him, trying to show his incapacity'.²⁹ Although this device was used in belles-lettres (especially in *maqāmas*³⁰) the letter type itself clearly belongs to technical letters.

The fifth variety³¹ consists of various letters sent by scholars to each other to describe events in their life, in tenor not unlike the letters of hunting and conquest, but merely taking place outside the royal pastimes. This group is strongly autobiographical in character, although royal letters too were often

²² Ibid., pp. 165–72.

²³ Ibid., pp. 282–99.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 282–8.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 288–99.

²⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *Rasā'il*, ed. al-Maqdisī, pp. 195–7.

²⁷ al-Qalqashandī, *Šubḥ*, vol. XIV, pp. 191–7.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 197–214.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 240–51.

³⁰ For the *fatiwās* of *fāgiḥ al-ʿarab* in *maqāmas*, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*, pp. 157–8, 269–70, 344.

³¹ al-Qalqashandī, *Šubḥ*, vol. XIV, pp. 251–81.

very personal, even though the main focus was of course on the patron, not the author himself. In this group of letters, the focus is clearly on the author himself. Al-Qalqashandī first quotes a letter³² by the *qāḍī* 'l-*quḍāt* Muhyī al-Dīn Abū'l-Fadl Yāḥyā, written in 629/1232 on his arrival in Cairo. The letter contains a description of his lamentable situation. When he received, in the middle of his misery, a note (*ruq'a*) from his new patron, he found himself unable to answer in a similar vein of superb eloquence. However, inserted within the letter is a whole set of descriptive passages which almost exhaust the stylistic resources of the *risāla*. This *risāla* derives its name from the sudden appearance of a weasel (*nims*) and its subsequent description. At the end of the letter, Muhyī al-Dīn Abū'l-Fadl explains that he wrote the letter so that his patron could see with his own eyes what he was able to write. Thus, the end gives this thoroughly artistic letter a functional twist: it is not simply art for art's sake but art written to impress the patron, despite the false modesty of its author.

Some of the letters of this group, such as that written by Fakhr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Mukānis and addressed to Badr al-Dīn al-Bashtakī on the occasion of the unusual flood of the Nile in 784/1382,³³ are extremely elegant. In this letter, the flood/sea/water metaphors are maintained in a balanced and artistic way throughout the text, even in the panegyrical parts, which otherwise tend to become rather monotonous.

In addition to serious letters, al-Qalqashandī mentions³⁴ humorous texts that are written in *risāla* style without any serious pretensions and which we may count as comic literature together with other famous texts, such as Ibn Sūdūn's (d. 868/1464) *Nuzhat al-nufūs* or the *Hazz al-quhūf* by al-Shirbīnī (d. after 1099/1687).³⁵

Al-Qalqashandī's categories do not exhaust the whole range of literary letters. Descriptions of cities,³⁶ also attested as *maqāmas*, are a clearly discernible type of *risāla*, even though they can of course be counted under the heading of the flexible group of 'letters describing various events'. The master of the city *risāla* was perhaps Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1374) who wrote a series of such texts but who belongs more properly to Andalusian literature.³⁷

Risālas on plague (*wabā'*, *tā'ūn*) form another sub-genre. The subject was also discussed by *maqāma* writers, and often the borderline is again very oblique. These *risālas* differ from medical (and thus technical) letters on

³² The *Risālat al-nims*, ibid., pp. 252–62.

³³ Ibid., pp. 267–81.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 360–5.

³⁵ Cf. also the texts studied in Kern, *Neuere ägyptische Humoristen*. (See also Larkin's contribution in this volume, Chapter 10.)

³⁶ Cf. e.g. al-'Aṭṭār, *Inshā'*, pp. 67–70, on Damascus; pp. 86–7, on Jerusalem.

³⁷ See Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*, pp. 291–6.

other diseases by their literary approach. Perhaps the most famous *risāla* written on plague is that by Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349), who wrote his *risāla* shortly before himself dying of plague.³⁸ Many such *risālas* were written in the tenth/sixteenth century, for example by Muṣṭafā ibn Awḥad al-Dīn al-Yārhiṣārī (d. 911/1506), Idrīs al-Bidlīsī (d. 926/1520), Ibn Kamāl-Pāshā (d. 940/1533) and Tāshkubrīzāde (d. 968/1560).

Also a case worth attention are the various erotic *risālas*, whether titled as *risālat al-‘ishq* or circulating under some other name. An especially elegant and charming composition is the *Risālat al-ṭayf* by Bahā’ al-Dīn al-Irbilī (d. 692/1293), written in 674/1275. The text tells of the author falling in love with a lady from whom he is first separated and to whom he sends his messenger. Finally, the two meet to enjoy their mutual love, but the text ends with the author waking up from his sleep: the whole incident was a dream, the author thus using the same device as al-Wahrānī (d. 574/1178) in his *Manāmāt* (Dreams). The *risāla* could be called pseudo-autobiographical, as it claims to narrate a real incident in the life of the author, which, however, turns out to be a dream.

Within this frame, the author collected an anthology of love-related themes which he touches upon in his story (female beauty, separation, sleepless nights, messengers, rendezvous, etc.), providing excerpts from poetry, both his own and from earlier, as well as contemporary, poets, and his own elegant prose, which is not too heavily loaded with rhymes. Here again, the material and the style of the text resemble similar *maqāmas*,³⁹ and it is merely the frame which decides whether the text is a *risāla* or a *maqāma*; even then, the boundaries are often far from clear.

Such ‘love letters’ remained in vogue for the whole period, although, for example, the model letter by al-‘Attār⁴⁰ is only a distant echo of the superb *risāla* by al-Irbilī. As is obvious in the Arabic literary context, the beloved could also be male, and perhaps the most famous of all such letters is the *Law’at al-shākī* by al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363).⁴¹

Now we may turn to the third variety in al-Qalqashandi’s taxonomy, that of literary debate which, strictly speaking, should be taken as an independent genre. Yet debates often have titles such as *risālat al-mufākhara/al-munāzara bayna fulān wa-fulān* (the *risāla* of the debate between X and Y), and may be taken as a special case of the *risāla*.

Literary debates have two different structures, with slight variation in the elements being possible. The debate may consist of a prologue which gives the

³⁸ Dols, ‘Ibn al-Wardī’s *Risālah*’. See also Ibn al-Wardī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. I, pp. 350–3.

³⁹ See Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*, pp. 340–1.

⁴⁰ al-‘Attār, *Inshā’*, pp. 66–70.

⁴¹ See Rowson, ‘Two Homoerotic Narratives’.

reader the outward setting of the scene and may introduce the narrator, who usually is the author. The prologue is followed by a set of eulogies on oneself and, optionally, invective poured on one's adversary, delivered either by the contestant itself (abstract concept, animal, plant, thing, human being) or by its proponent (*sâlib al-*...). This is answered by the other participant in a similar vein and the debate is judged in an epilogue by an arbiter (*hakam*), who may also be the first-person narrator. There may, furthermore, be several participants in the debate, each speaking in turn. If P = prologue, E = Epilogue, A, B, C... = the eulogy-cum-invective by each participant, then this structure could be formalized as P + {A – B(–C – D – ...) } + E.

The second variety is, with few exceptions, used only when there are no more than two participants. It consists, in addition to the prologue and the epilogue, of a series of short passages of eulogy-cum-invective by each participant in turn, and may be formalized as: P + {(A₁ – B₁) – (A₂ – B₂) – ... – (A_x – B_x) } + E.

In the period under question, another technical extension of the genre was developed. This has to do with the general panegyrical tone of much of the literature in this period. To eulogize their patron, prose writers used the device of presenting him as the venerable judge who is above the contestants and whose intelligence, sagacity and knowledge are superior to theirs.⁴² This may be achieved by giving the name of the patron to the umpire but, even more strikingly, the text may be cut short of an epilogue, thus leaving the debate open-ended. This seems to have been especially favoured when the patron – or the would-be patron – was an intellectual figure who was up to the task of voicing his opinion and producing the final judgement on the debate. For example, al-Qalqashandī himself wrote several such debates, in the end leaving the floor to his patron. In one of his debates, written in 798/1396,⁴³ and addressed to *qâdî l-qudât* 'Abd al-Rahmân al-Bulqînî (d. 824/1421), various sciences vie with each other about their superiority. Panegyrical notes start piling up when Physiognomy points to al-Bulqînî as the best possible arbiter, quoting eulogistic statements ancient authorities would have heaped on him had they known al-Bulqînî. Some other sciences join the chorus and ask Poetry to compose panegyrical verses on al-Bulqînî, which is appropriately done, thus bringing the *risâla* to its end. The final judgement is absent and would probably have been added by al-Bulqînî in his reply. The whole text is strongly panegyrical.⁴⁴

⁴² In addition, we have cases where the participants vie with each other in eulogizing the patron, e.g. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss*, no. 8591:4 (anonymous), on the virtues of Muhammad Amîn Pâshâ, c. 1160/1747.

⁴³ *Risâla fî'l-mufâkhara bayn al-'ulûm*, in al-Qalqashandî, *Subbî*, vol. XIV, pp. 204–30.

⁴⁴ al-Qalqashandî's debate between the Sword and the Pen (*ibid.*, pp. 231–40) shares the same open-ended structure. In this debate, the Sword and the Pen make a truce and decide to refer themselves to Abû Yazîd al-Dawâdâr al-Zâhirî. Here, too, the debate ends with panegyrical verses.

The arguments of the contestants also underwent a slight change. In earlier times, the argumentation was based more on what the participants of the debate could be used for⁴⁵ and less on authoritative quotations from literature, although even this aspect had never been lacking. In this period, authoritative quotations seem to grow in importance.

The personification of the contestants remains the same as in earlier periods, although there is a certain hesitation in portraying non-human contestants as speaking characters. Thus, in his debate of the sciences al-Qalqashandī explicitly states that the sciences 'came together one day figuratively (*ma'na*)', though not in actual form (*sūra*) and that they spoke with 'the tongue of their state' (*lisān al-hāl*).⁴⁶

The variety of participants in the debates is considerable in this later period, obviously at least partly in an effort to breathe new life into an old genre and, on the other hand, to react to the changes in the social and material culture. The all-time favourite, however, remained the same, viz. the debate between the sword and the pen (*al-sayf wa'l-qalam*), which is clearly not unconnected with the social positions of the men of the sword and the men of the pen whom they usually served. Al-Qalqashandī himself, before giving his own version of the debate (*Hilyat al-fadl wa-zinat al-karam fil-mufākhara bayn al-sayf wa'l-qalam*,⁴⁷ written in 794/1392), notes that 'people have been prolific' in this genre.⁴⁸

The wide variety of late *munāzaras*, which still mainly remain unedited, may be exemplified by the *Verzeichniss* of Ahlwardt,⁴⁹ where we find such debates as *Muhāwarat al-layl wa'l-nahār* (no. 8589) by 'Alawān ibn 'Atīyya al-Ḥamawī (d. 936/1530), or *Mufākharat al-samā' wa'l-ard* (no. 8590:1) by al-Shihāb al-Hijāzī (d. 875/1470) who also wrote *Mufākharat al-Nil wa'l-bahr* (no. 8590:2) in quatrains. Metrical form was also used by Sha'bān ibn Salīm al-Ḥasikī al-Ṣanā'ī (d. 1149/1736) in a debate (*al-Kalima al-muḥkama fil-mufākhara bayn al-hurra wa'l-ama*)⁵⁰ between a black slave girl and a white lady. This debate of some 200 *rajaz* verses also deserves attention for its rather unpretentious language which sometimes uses colloquial Yemenisms.

Debates may contain a fictitious *isnād*, borrowed from the *maqāmas*, which added to the confusion between the two genres. They could also be cross-bred with the *ribla* as in, for example, the *Munāzara ma'a 'ulamā' al-rāfiḍa*

⁴⁵ A very realistic version may be found in Pahlavi literature where the debate of the Assyrian Tree (Draxt-i Asūrīg) is very much down to earth when the Goat and the Palmtree vie for superiority by listing what each, or the products derived from each, can be used for.

⁴⁶ al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ*, vol. XIV, p. 205.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 231–40.

⁴⁸ See also van Gelder, 'The Conceit'.

⁴⁹ Or see the index to *GAL*, s.v. *munāzara* and *mufākhara*.

⁵⁰ See Kahl, *Mufākhara*.

by ‘Abdallāh Efendī al-Suwaydī (d. 1174/1761),⁵¹ which could equally well be described as a travelogue.

The debate has survived into modern times and is still productive in oral literature in, for example, the dialects of the Arabian peninsula, not to mention the rather antiquarian efforts to keep the genre alive in classical Arabic.

In addition to debates, there are some interesting texts which do not clearly fall within the limits of any genre, such as the magnificent prose works of Ibn Ḥabīb al-Ḥalabī (d. 779/1377), which are not labelled as *risālas* by the author himself but which could with good reason be taken as belonging to the genre. Ibn Ḥabīb himself called his evocative and elegant prose simply *fāṣl*s (paragraphs), and collected them into books, such as *al-Najm al-thāqib fi ashraf al-manāqib*, in honour of the Prophet Muḥammad (written in 763/1362), or *Nasīm al-ṣabā*, full of wonderful descriptions, mainly of things connected with love or gardens (written in 756/1355). Ibn Ghānim al-Maqdisī (d. 678/1279) and his *Kashf al-asrār fī hikam al-tuyūr wa'l-azhār*, with its *ishāras*, is another such work which comes very close to a *risāla*.

Ibn Ḥabīb's *Nasīm al-ṣabā* contains among its thirty paragraphs texts that resemble various types of *risāla*. Thus, his fifth *fāṣl* (pp. 57–62), on the seasons, is actually a debate, with each of the four seasons eulogizing itself, and each being personified as coming to a *majlis al-adab* for the purpose. The tenth *fāṣl* (pp. 85–90), containing the description of a boy, is very similar to some *maqāmas*, the twenty-second *fāṣl* (pp. 151–8), on war and weapons, is almost a letter of conquest, and, finally the twenty-third *fāṣl* (pp. 159–67), on *ramy al-bunduq*, could equally well be called a *qidmat al-bunduq*. The similarity is also enhanced by the narrative structure of most of the paragraphs: the author first places himself in some scene, before beginning the main part, linked by a phrase like ‘whilst I was . . .’. Taking into account the rather slight narrative element in many *maqāmas*, debates and *risālas*, Ibn Ḥabīb's text does not much differ from them.

⁵¹ See Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss*, no. 6150.

CHAPTER 7

THE *MAQĀMA*

INTRODUCTION

The *maqāma* is a prolific genre of Arabic literature which, as far as we can tell, was invented in the late tenth century by Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Hamadhānī (358–98/968–1008), known as Badi‘ al-Zamān (the Marvel of the Age), and has lasted until the twentieth. Literary *maqāmāt* (sing. *maqāma*), traditionally translated as ‘Assemblies’ or ‘Sessions’ in English and ‘Séances’ in French, are brief episodic or anecdotal texts – usually between two and ten pages – written in elaborate rhymed and rhythmic prose, often embellished with ornate rhetorical figures and an admixture of verse at key junctures. Though individual *maqāmas* have been written as independent texts, many occur in collections which comprise series of episodes based on a running gag. In the classical form, a clever and unscrupulous protagonist, disguised differently in each episode, succeeds, through a display of eloquence, in swindling money out of the gullible narrator, who only realizes the identity of the protagonist when it is too late. Despite al-Hamadhānī’s precedence, the genre’s most famous work is that of his admitted emulator, Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn ‘Alī al-Ḥarīrī (446–516/1054–1122). Though al-Ḥarīrī has overshadowed other authors in the genre, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Arabic *maqāmas* have been produced over the past millennium. Early on, the genre was borrowed and adapted into Persian, Syriac and Hebrew, flourishing for centuries in the latter. Already in 1928, the Spanish Arabist González Palencia suggested that the *maqāma* played a role in the rise of the picaresque novel.¹ It proved one of the most vital genres in the rapidly changing world of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Arabic literature and, indeed, cannot be said to have died out completely at present.² Modern claims abound concerning the *maqāma*’s critical influence on such diverse modern Arabic

¹ Palencia, *Historia*, p. 120.

² Some recent examples include Najib Hankash, *al-Maqāmat al-hankashiyya* (Beirut, 1964) and ‘Abbās al-Aswānī (d. 1979), *al-Maqāmat al-aswāniyya* and ‘Ā’id min al-ākhira, in *al-A’māl al-kāmila* (Cairo, 1997), vol. I.

literary forms as drama, the novel, the short story and even the newspaper article.

Little attempt has been made to compile a systematic list of extant literary Arabic *maqāmas* or to comb biographical works for information on *maqāmas* no longer extant. Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, for example, lists ninety-nine works entitled *maqāmāt*. Chauvin's catalogue of Arabic works presents the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī, then lists fifty-nine so-called imitations, the majority of them unpublished but listed in manuscript catalogues. Blachère and Masnou list seventy-five authors of *maqāmāt* beside al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī.³ Many of the works included in these lists do not belong to the literary genre of *maqāmāt* at all, let alone represent imitations of the works of al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī. The works attributed to al-Sulamī and al-Suhrawardī probably treat spiritual stations or saints' miracles. The collection attributed to Abū Sa‘īd is the well-known Persian work on that saint's miracles by Muḥammad ibn al-Munawwar (d. 598/1202), *Asrār al-tawḥīd fī maqāmāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Sa‘īd*.⁴ The works of al-Ghazālī contain harangues or sermons, that is, *maqāms*, and not *maqāmas* *per se*. These lists are no more than surveys of texts entitled *maqāmāt*; a more complete catalogue of literary *maqāmāt* and a tentative history of the genre have only recently been provided by Hämeen-Anttila.

A more detailed definition of the classical literary *maqāma* must be based on the works of al-Ḥarīrī and al-Hamadhānī. While it has been pointed out that several of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmas* do not adhere to the structure followed consistently by al-Ḥarīrī, al-Hamadhānī's corpus as a whole gives sufficient evidence that this basic pattern is important in his work as well. A work in the classical genre is a series of episodes, each set in a different city of the Islamic world, which involve two characters, a gullible transmitter – al-Hamadhānī's ʻIsā ibn Hishām and al-Ḥarīrī's al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām al-Baṣrī – and a clever protagonist transmitter – al-Hamadhānī's Abū'l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī and al-Ḥarīrī's Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī. These characters interact according to a prescribed pattern, whereby the protagonist succeeds in swindling money out of the narrator or a third party through a clever ruse involving a display of eloquence, whether it be invective, panegyric poetry, a sermon or an eloquent description. In general, the transmitter does not recognize the protagonist at first, but only realizes his identity after the eloquent performance.

³ Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes*, vol. IX, pp. 97–130; Blachère and Masnou, *Choix de maqāmāt*, pp. 123–9.

⁴ A similar work is Sadid al-Dīn al-Ghaznawī's *Maqāmāt-i Zhandah-Pil*, completed c. 1200, which recounts the amazing feats of the Sufi master Shaykh Ahmad-i Zhandah-Pil (d. 535/1141).

The plot of the typical *maqāma* may be represented in the following scheme:⁵

1. The transmitter arrives in a city;
2. Formation of an assembly or gathering for learned discussion;
3. The protagonist enters the assembly;
4. The protagonist undertakes an eloquent performance;
5. Rewarding of the protagonist by the transmitter or other character;
6. The protagonist leaves assembly, which breaks up;
7. The transmitter realizes the protagonist's true identity;
8. The transmitter follows the protagonist;
9. The transmitter accosts or reproaches the protagonist;
10. Justification by the protagonist;
11. Parting of the two;
12. Departure of the transmitter from the city (implicit).

The centrepiece of each *maqāma* is the eloquent display (no. 4).⁶ Both al-Hamadhānī and al-Harīrī, well known for their verbal pyrotechnics, used the *maqāma* as a vehicle in which to display their accomplishments. In the course of a contest of literary skill, al-Hamadhānī once dictated an elegant epistle on inflation and the debasement of coinage, backwards! Similarly, al-Harīrī gained renown for his *Risāla sīniyya*, an epistle in which every word included the letter *sīn* (s), and *al-Risāla al-shīniyya*, in which every word included the letter *shīn* (sh). Al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt* include, for example, a scathing exchange of invective in *al-Dīnāriyya* (43), a moving sermon in *al-Wāzīyya* (26) and a brilliant description of a horse in *al-Hamdāniyya* (29), but it is in al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* that displays of technical or mechanical expertise with language come to the fore. These include a letter which may be read backwards or forwards and make sense either way (*al-Qahqariyya* (17)), poetry composed entirely of palindromic verses (*al-Maghribiyya* (16)), a letter in which alternating words are made up of all pointed or all unpointed letters (*al-Marāghiyā* (6)), a letter in which pointed and unpointed letters alternate (*al-Raqītā'* (26)), etc. Other displays of specialized linguistic knowledge also occur: answers to thorny problems in inheritance law (*al-Faradīyya* (15)); answers to one hundred trick legal questions (*al-Taybiyya* (32)); answers to difficult grammatical questions (*al-Qatī'iyya* (24)); riddles (*al-Malatiyya* (36); *al-Shitwiyya* (44)). A number of the *maqāmas* feature a sermon: *al-Šāñāniyya*

⁵ This is based in part on Kilito's eight-step analysis of the plot of the *maqāma*, which Monroe revised to nine. Kilito, 'Le Genre séance', 48; Monroe, *Art of Badi' az-Zamān*, pp. 21–3.

⁶ The numbers in brackets refer to the standard order in the collections of al-Hamadhānī and al-Harīrī.

(1); *al-Sāwiyya* (11); *al-Rāziyya* (21); *al-Samarqandiyya* (28); *al-Ramliyya* (31); *al-Tinnīsiyya* (41); *al-Basriyya* (50). Because of such verbal acrobatics, the *maqāma* has often been viewed as an entirely didactic genre, the essential purpose of which is to teach students obscure vocabulary, eloquent style and recherché rhetorical figures. To see this as the only feature of the genre, however, is to do it an injustice; certainly, the humour of the form was not lost on medieval readers, nor is it on their modern counterparts.

The *Maqāmat* are inherently dramatic, humorous and parodic, and it is these features which have attracted so many nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors to adapt the genre to modern Arabic literature. Dramatic irony dictates the structure of the *maqāma*. The narrator is unaware, at the outset, that he is going to be duped by the same eloquent scoundrel yet again, though this is obvious to the audience. The *maqāma* may therefore be thought of as falling into two sections, one public (nos. 1–6) and one private (nos. 8–12), hinging on the narrator's realization of the protagonist's identity (no. 7). The private section, in which the protagonist is unmasked and his subterfuge exposed, undoes the public section, showing the performance which occurred there to be merely a linguistic manipulation of perceptions based entirely on false pretence. This structure imparts to the *maqāma* a tension which, together with the lively description of the characters' interaction and the technique of the eloquent display, heightens the enjoyment of the reader. The basic humour of the genre derives from repetition and the resultant expectation; the reader knows that the protagonist is going to swindle the narrator, but his or her curiosity is piqued to see the exact form his conniving will take in this particular episode.

Despite his dastardly deeds and questionable motives, the protagonist of the classical *maqāma* is not without charm. The audience is titillated by his cleverness and scoffs at the narrator's *naïveté*. The narrator does not retrieve his money when he confronts the protagonist, who has in effect earned it through the eloquent and clever, though dishonest, display. The eloquent display partakes in any of a variety of genres, including literary criticism, panegyric, prayers, sermons, invective, debates, and so on. The fact that it will be shown false, meant to take in the gullible narrator and the equally gullible audience, creates room for humour, often expressed in parodic imitations of the genres invoked. Nevertheless, this parodic tendency does not necessarily detract from the impressive effect of the eloquent display on the reader in its own right. The protagonist then justifies his actions, usually in verse, expressing a materialistic and opportunist philosophy associated strongly, in the *Maqāmat* themselves, with the Banū Sāsān, professional beggars skilled in ruses by which to take advantage of their contemporaries' piety and generosity. The insatiable

greed of the protagonist and his constant resort to mendicancy (*kudya*) is the driving force of the *maqāma*.

Much of medieval Arabic fiction presents itself not as fiction but as being made up of factual anecdotes, and the *maqāma*, no exception in this regard, is the framed speech of a narrator. The fact, however, that al-Hamadhānī uses *ḥaddathanā* ('he reported to us') consistently as the verb of transmission which begins each episode attracts special attention. This was of course a technical term associated closely with the transmission of *hadīth*, though it appears in other contexts. Kilito observes that the *maqāmāt* evoke the structure of *hadīth*, and suggests that they perhaps represent a pastiche or imitation of that form.⁷ He sees that the texts to which this aspect of the *maqāmāt* call attention are the *sīḥāḥ* or major compilations of prophetic *hadīth* and pseudo-historical *akhbār* works, such as *Kitāb al-aḡhānī*, which often use the *hadīth* form.⁸ Monroe discusses how the *isnād* or chain of authorities in the *Maqāmāt* parodies the *hadīth* form, and labels the *maqāmāt* a 'counter-genre'.⁹ The problem which arises, however, is that it is difficult to speak of *hadīth* as a single genre, for prophetic traditions appear in a large variety of texts with very different forms and purposes. Monroe, like Kilito, seems to have in mind primarily the major *sīḥāḥ* works: the tales Ibn Hishām tells are, he avers, 'the very antipodes of Bukhārī's *Sahīh* or collection of "sound" *hadīths*'.¹⁰ While Monroe may be correct in stating that the *maqāmāt* represent a counter-genre, the genre to which it responds ought to be defined more specifically than 'prophetic tradition'. The *maqāmāt* contain a number of indications that a major and perhaps central concern of al-Hamadhānī was to parody specific genres of Islamic religious discourse, particularly the *hadīth*-lecture or *majlis*. *Hadīth-majālis* were lectures held at regular intervals involving a framed narrative. Like the *maqāmāt*, they appeared in collections of texts each beginning with the phrase *ḥaddathanā*, mentioning the narrator(s) and often including a reference to the specific time and place the lecture was held. It seems likely that al-Hamadhānī invented the *maqāma* form in part as a parody of the *hadīth-majālis*. This suggests an explanation of the genre's confusing title. Literally meaning 'a standing', the term *maqāma* may initially have been an ironic inversion of the term *majlis*, literally 'sitting, session, seated assembly', giving the sense of 'anti-lecture'.

The verbs of transmission used in later collections of *maqāmas*, however, are indicative of an important change in the genre after the time of al-Hamadhānī. Ibn Nāqiyā uses *ḥaddathani* ('he reported to me') regularly,

⁷ Kilito, 'Le Genre séance', 38, 43.

⁸ Ibid., 38–40.

⁹ Monroe, *Art of Badī' az-Zamān*, pp. 19–38, esp. 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

where the singular pronoun gives it a slightly less authoritative ring. Moreover, he does not have one consistent narrator, but a different narrator for each *maqāma*, described in ambiguous terms such as ‘a certain Syrian’, ‘a certain friend’, ‘a certain theologian’, etc. Al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmat* differ considerably from al-Hamadhānī’s in this respect; he uses five different verbs of transmission, including *haddatha* (‘reported’), *akhbara* (‘informed’), *rawā* (‘related’), *ḥakā* (‘told’) and *qāla* (‘said’), alternating nearly randomly among the episodes, though the term *ḥakā* tends to dominate. This is one indication of al-Ḥarīrī’s emphasis on belles-lettres *per se* as compared with al-Hamadhānī’s intention to parody religious texts. Ibn Ṣayqal follows al-Ḥarīrī, but in a more regular fashion; his *maqāmat* maintain a regular cycle of (1) *ḥakā*, (2) *haddatha*, (3) *akhbara* and (4) *rawā* throughout the fifty episodes. Al-Saraquṣṭī’s collection uses *haddatha* a number of times, but reverts simply to *qāla* for the majority of episodes. Al-Hanafī’s *Maqāmat* simply use *ḥakā* throughout. Again, the proliferation of terms other than *haddathanā* in the genre reflects a move away from the parody of religious texts that al-Hamadhānī had established.

IMITATIONS OF AL-ḤARĪRĪ

When al-Ḥarīrī completed his *Maqāmat* just after the turn of the eleventh century, the work was immediately recognized as a masterpiece of eloquence and rhetorical skill and became an astounding success. He read the work to an audience comprised of many leading scholars and dignitaries in Baghdad in a series of sessions in 504/1111, and according to one account he signed – and thus authorized – seven hundred copies of the work. Careful study of the work became a prerequisite for aspiring court secretaries, stylists and literati, and as a result it was commented on profusely. Brockelmann lists about two dozen commentaries extant in manuscript, including those of Ibn al-Khashshāb (d. 567/1171), al-Muṭarrizī (d. 610/1213), al-‘Ukbarī (d. 616/1219) and the Andalusian al-Sharīshī (d. 619/1222). Many others have been lost. Contemporary scholars, such as the Andalusian Abū Tāhir al-Tamīmī al-Sarāqusṭī (d. 538/1143) in *al-Maqāmat al-luzūmiyya*, wrote texts emulating al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmat* very soon after their publication, and the process continued, nearly uninterrupted, until Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī wrote *Majma‘ al-bahrāyīn* in 1855.

Many later scholars followed al-Ḥarīrī’s example quite painstakingly. They used highly embellished rhyming and rhythmical prose with few passages or clauses in free prose. They wrote collections including fifty episodes, the basic plot and structure of which matched that of al-Ḥarīrī’s episodes. They made the episodes revolve around two main characters: a gullible narrator and a clever, eloquent rogue. Nevertheless, it is wrong to dismiss these later works summarily as lacking in quality or originality. Abū ‘Abd Allāh ibn

Abī'l-Khiṣāl (d. 540/1146) is the only author known to have written a Ḥarīrian *maqāma* in the literal sense, that is, with the characters al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām and Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī. Others wrote *maqāmāt* in al-Ḥarīrī's style but made adjustments that reflect original, albeit not always radical, interpretations of the genre.

Among the most erudite imitations of al-Ḥarīrī's work are *al-Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya* by Abū Tāhir al-Ashtarkūnī al-Saraquṣṭī (d. 538/1143) and *al-Maqāmāt al-zayniyya* by Ibn al-Ṣayqal al-Jazārī (d. 701/1301). Al-Saraquṣṭī wrote his work in Andalusia soon after al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* arrived there. His collection includes fifty episodes, like that of al-Ḥarīrī. The protagonist is named Abū Ḥabīb al-Sadūsī. Though it matches al-Ḥarīrī's al-Sarūjī in form, al-Sadūsī is not a geographic *nisba* but an Arab tribal designation; the Banū Sadūs were a subsection of the Banū Dhuhl tribe from al-Yamāma in central Arabia. This name, besides reflecting a heightened concern with Arab descent and lore, seems to suggest, through association with the number six – *sādis* (sixth), *suds* (a sixth), *musaddas* (six-fold, six-faceted) – the duplicitous and mercurial nature of the character. Abū Ḥabīb 'Father of the Beloved Companion' seems to be an ironic inversion implying that he is in fact the enemy, and this despite the fact that it actually refers to one of two sons who appear in the collection, Ḥabīb and Gharīb. The name of the narrator, al-Sā'ib ibn Tammām, rhymes with that of al-Ḥarīrī's narrator, al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām, but in addition refers to the narrator's lack of purpose, for *al-sā'ib* means 'stray, lost, wandering'. This impression is corroborated by the additional appellation addressed to the narrator on several occasions, Abū'l-Ghamr, which could mean 'overflowing', that is, with generosity, but more likely indicates that he is *ghamr/ghumr* 'gullible, green, ingenuous'. An original feature of al-Saraquṣṭī's collection is his occasional inclusion of a third character, al-Mundhir ibn Ḫumām/Himām, who transmits the account from al-Sā'ib ibn Tammām, placing al-Sā'ib's account at yet one more remove from the audience. This name carries ominous or didactic overtones, meaning 'The Warner, son of Fever, or Death', while at the same time rhyming with al-Sā'ib ibn Tammām. The intended message seems to be that if al-Sā'ib can be fooled by or embroiled in the nefarious deeds of Abū Ḥabīb al-Sadūsī, the narrator – and presumably the audience – should not. Like al-Ḥarīrī, al-Saraquṣṭī has the protagonist repent of his evil ways in the last episode. Different, though, is the nostalgic scene that occurs when al-Sā'ib hears of his death and returns to write a poem at his grave. He sees the departed Abū Ḥabīb in a vision, and the apparition addresses a poem to him on ineluctable death and the ephemeral nature of the world.

Al-Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya feature complex rhetorical displays reminiscent of the style of al-Ḥarīrī. Al-Saraquṣṭī, however, focuses on the rhyme, writing

five *maqāmas* that rhyme entirely in the consonants *hamza*, *bā'*, *jīm*, *dāl* and *nūn*, respectively (32–6). He writes four *maqāmas* in which the rhymes go through all the letters of the alphabet (37–40). Another *maqāma* follows the rhyme scheme *aaa bbb ccc* (16), while two others follow the rhyme scheme *aa bb cc . . .*, while maintaining exact syllabic parallelism between adjacent *cola* (17, 18). Overall, however, al-Saraquṣṭī shows tremendous control, and the studied rhymes rarely detract from the elegant, flowing style. In this, he stands in contrast to the later writer, Ibn al-Ṣayqal. The content of the work is also quite original. While al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmat* are set primarily in Iran and Iraq and al-Ḥarīrī's range somewhat further afield into Egypt and North Africa, al-Saraquṣṭī's episodes take the reader as far as China, where a story reminiscent of Sindbad and *A Thousand and One Nights* is told, complete with a gigantic mythical bird. In one episode, the narrator voices a diatribe against the Berbers of Tangier, who are described as uncouth animals, and others include descriptions of pigeons, horses and a performer with a dancing bear.

When the Ilkhanid ruler Abaqā (663–80/1265–82) came to spend the holidays in Baghdad, every aspiring scholar in town approached him and his two ministers, the brothers 'Alā' al-Dīn and Shams al-Dīn al-Juwaynī, with carefully crafted works, seeking their largesse. On one such occasion, the most favoured scholar turned out to be Ibn al-Ṣayqal al-Jazārī (d. 701/1301), who received a purse of 1,000 dinars for a collection of *maqāmat* which impressed them so much that they considered them superior to those of al-Ḥarīrī.¹¹ Completed in Baghdad in 672/1273–4, the collection is entitled *al-Maqāmat al-zayniyya* after Ibn al-Ṣayqal's son Zayn al-Dīn, for whom they were intended as a textbook of recondite points about grammar, lexicography, rhetoric and eloquent style. Like al-Ḥarīrī's work, it immediately became famous, and Ibn al-Ṣayqal taught his *magnum opus* regularly in his position as professor of grammar at the Mustanṣiriyya Madrasa in Baghdad. In 676/1277, he read the work in a series of sessions to 160 contemporary scholars. In this collection of fifty episodes, the narrator is named al-Qāsim ibn Jiryāl al-Dimashqī and the protagonist Abū'l-Naṣr al-Miṣrī. As in al-Saraquṣṭī's collection, the protagonist repents and dies in the final episode, but here the focus is certainly not on the story. Like al-Ḥarīrī, Ibn Ṣayqal includes in his *maqāmas* an epistle with alternating dotted and undotted words (*al-Iskandariyya* (29)), one with alternating dotted and undotted letters (*al-Haskafiyya* (46)), and an epistle which may be read backwards and forwards (*al-Sinjāriyya* (17)). Imitating al-Ḥarīrī's *Risāla sīniyya* and *Risāla shīniyya*, he includes a sermon where every

¹¹ Qutb al-Dīn Mūsā ibn Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān*, 4 vols. (Hyderabad, 1960), vol. IV, p. 226.

word contains the letter *sād* (*al-Zifāriyya* (16)) and a speech where every word contains the letter *jīm* (*al-Shīrāziyya* (26)). In *al-Maqāmat al-zayniyya*, more than in al-Harīrī's *Maqāmat* or *al-Maqāmat al-luzūmiyya*, the genre reaches the pinnacle of complex and baroque style. The relentless alliteration, paronomasia and use of extremely arcane vocabulary, together with quite long and often parenthetical cola, render this work much more of a chore to read than the works of al-Harīrī or al-Saraquṣṭī.

Yāqūt singles out one imitation of al-Harīrī's work, known as *al-Maqāmat al-masīhiyya* (the Christian *Maqāmat*) for high praise. He observes that in this collection the Christian doctor Abū'l-Abbās Yahyā ibn Sa'īd ibn Mārī al-Baṣrī (d. 589/1193) wrote after the fashion of al-Harīrī and excelled. Al-Ṣafadī takes umbrage at this assessment, remarking, 'He neither excelled nor came close to excelling. *Al-Maqāmat al-jazariyya* [i.e. Ibn al-Ṣayqal's work] and *al-Maqāmat al-tamīmiyya* [al-Saraquṣṭī's work] are better than [his *Maqāmat*], yet even they did not come close to al-Harīrī.'

The thirteenth-century scholar Badr al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Muzaffar ibn al-Mukhtār al-Rāzī penned a collection of twelve *maqāmas* in an explicit effort to outdo al-Harīrī. An interlocutor had voiced what was to al-Rāzī's mind an inflated opinion of the famous *Maqāmat*, suggesting in effect a theory of *ijjāz*, 'inimitability' – that men, try as they might, could not produce the like of al-Harīrī's work. Al-Rāzī, piqued to defend the unique status of the Koran, wrote his own *Maqāmat* to disprove this notion. Unlike al-Harīrī, however, he uses a different narrator for each episode, and their names are blatantly comic or nonsensical: al-Qa'qā' ibn Zanbā', al-Lajlāj ibn Lāj, al-Ṣalsāl ibn Dalahmas, al-'Ar'ār ibn 'Ar'ara, and so on. Most of the episodes do not feature a protagonist. The first *maqāma*, for example, recounts a debate which took place in the library of Baghdad between a short man and a tall man discussing the relative merits of their statures. The short man wins by reciting 105 words meaning 'tall' and 145 meaning 'short'. In the eleventh *maqāma*, al-'Ar'ār ibn 'Ar'ara searches in vain in the markets for his erstwhile companion, Farah (i.e. Happiness), whom he has not seen for ages. As in many of the collections discussed above, the last *maqāma*, narrated by Ṣa'ṣāh ibn Nawwās, tells the story of the repentance of a protagonist, here Farṭūs ibn Ma'rūr, upon hearing an eloquent preacher. Al-Rāzī's *maqāmas* certainly have some charm, but his claim to have bested al-Harīrī is difficult to accept.

Another imitation of al-Harīrī with a twist is the work *al-Maqāmat al-falsafīyya wa'l-tarjamāt al-ṣūfiyya* by Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Anṣārī al-Ṣūfi al-Dimashqī (d. 727/1327). This collection, completed in 702/1302–3, includes fifty episodes featuring the narrator Abū'l-Qāsim al-Nawwāb and the protagonist Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Awwāb. The content, however, is apparently quite different, covering such topics as physics, mathematics and metaphysics.

The published *maqāmāt* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (911/1505), better known for his works in the religious sciences, include four episodes (*al-Asyūṭiyya*, *al-Jīziyya*, *al-Miṣriyya*, *al-Makkiyya*) which fit the definition of the classical *maqāma* and follow the model of al-Ḥarīrī very closely. They include a transmitter, Hāshim ibn al-Qāsim, who is named at the beginning in connection with a verb of transmission (*anba' anā*, *ḥakā*, *akhbaranā*, *haddathanā*) and a protagonist, Abū Bishr al-'Ulābī. Each refers to travel and bears a place name in its title. Al-Suyūṭī, apparently referring to these *maqāmas* in particular in an introduction, claims that he wrote them in his youth after travelling to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage, and planned to complete them – meaning, perhaps, to write a complete collection of fifty *maqāmas* – at some later date.

MORALIZING MAQĀMĀT

The fact that the classical *maqāma* devoted great energy and ingenuity to frivolous topics while apparently showing that the bad guy always wins created a moral tension which neither escaped, nor sat very easily with, many medieval authors. Though they were certainly aware that the genre was inherently ironic, it was difficult, if not impossible, for later readers to draw a neat line between its ironic and earnest elements. Ibn Nāqiyā (d. 485/1092), al-Ḥarīrī and Ibn al-Ṣayqal all apologize for the frivolity their texts contained, and Ibn Nāqiyā justifies the use of humour by citing *hadīth*. Al-Ḥarīrī has the protagonist repent of his evil ways at the end of the *Maqāmāt*, and this feature is imitated by later authors in the genre, as seen above. One moralistic collection of *maqāmāt* was that of 'the King of the Grammarians', Ḥasan ibn Ṣāfi (d. 568/1172–3), who boasted, 'My *Maqāmāt* are seriousness and truth, while al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* are frivolity and lies!' Ibn Khallikān remarks, however, that the King of the Grammarians could not hold a candle to the master.

Perhaps most disturbing for many pious readers, the classical *maqāma* suggests that language in general, and the Arabic language in particular, the language of the Scripture, can be put to excellent use as a means of deception, subterfuge and fraud. Literary responses to this problem took a number of forms which share the main idea that eloquence can and should serve proper moral ends. Among these the *Maqāmāt* of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) deserve special attention. From one point of view this work does not belong in the *maqāma* genre at all. The texts in the collection have neither transmitter nor protagonist and formally do not fit the scheme of the classical *maqāma*. Indeed, they are actually a series of harangues or sermons, particularly interesting in this case in that they are auto-sermons, directed at the author himself, supposedly by a figure he saw in a dream. One major structural difference is that the

classical *maqāma* begins with a phrase indicating transmission from another source, whereas the *maqām* begins with a vocative, marking the beginning of an address. In this case the apparition opens the sermon by addressing al-Zamakhsharī himself: 'Oh Abū'l-Qāsim! . . .'. For the most part, it is the coincidence that the plural of the harangue (*maqām*) and that of the *maqāma* are the same that has allowed literary historians to conflate the two genres. Nevertheless, one may argue that al-Zamakhsharī was consciously responding to the work of al-Harīrī in writing his own *Maqāmatāt*. He completed the work in 512/1118, about eight years after al-Harīrī completed the *Maqāmatāt*. It is written throughout in carefully crafted *saj'*. In addition, it comprises fifty short texts, almost certainly intended to match the number of pieces in al-Harīrī's collection. All in all, while one cannot deny that al-Zamakhsharī's work is a collection of *maqām*-harangues, they nevertheless adopted some of the features of the *maqāma* genre, and one supposes that al-Zamakhsharī intended that one should be able to conflate the two works, even though their contents were markedly different. Depending on one's point of view, either al-Harīrī's *Maqāmatāt* exerted significant influence over the *maqām* genre, or the *maqāma* genre itself was greatly widened by al-Zamakhsharī to include *maqām*-like texts. By writing such a text al-Zamakhsharī intended to use eloquence for the betterment of morals, curtailing the folly and depravity or moral ambiguity which characterized the *maqāma* genre and infusing it instead with gravity by harkening back to the earlier *maqām* tradition.

The *Maqāmatāt* of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), completed in 577/1181, deal with many of the issues evident in al-Zamakhsharī's text. He refers to the issue of figurative language quite pointedly in the introduction, making it clear that the use of figurative language occurs in the Koran and *hadīth* and does not necessarily involve any moral shortcomings. For example, he notes that some pious Muslims object to the critical statement *laysa bi-shay'*, meaning literally 'It is not anything,' because, if interpreted literally, it is clearly not true. Whatever the status of the thing condemned, it clearly is something and not nothing. Ibn al-Jawzī points out that the Prophet used this phrase, obviously not to be interpreted literally, to refer to pre-Islamic soothsayers.

Ibn al-Jawzī's work, like that of al-Zamakhsharī, is also a collection of fifty texts in carefully crafted *saj'*, in obvious imitation of al-Harīrī. The episodes are predominantly hortatory. Moreover, their basic plot matches that of the classical *maqāma* quite closely, involving initial displacement, a gathering for learned discussion, the appearance of the protagonist, his performance and departure. Ibn al-Jawzī's *Maqāmatāt* do not include a character serving as the narrator; the episodes are narrated directly in the first person, presumably by the author. The verb of transmission characteristic of the classical *maqāma* is likewise omitted completely, presumably to avoid attributing

fictional accounts to respected figures of the past or granting them an aura of religious authority by using terms such as *haddathanā*.

Unlike al-Zamakhshari's texts, though, and like the classical *maqāma*, Ibn al-Jawzī's episodes feature a protagonist. In this case he bears the moralistic, didactic name Abū'l-Taqwīm, 'Father of Correction' or 'Right Guidance'. It is clear from the introduction to the work and from frequent references in the body of the text that Abū'l-Taqwīm is not a historical, legendary or fictional character in the ordinary sense. Rather, he is actually the personification of the intellect ('*aql*), the faculty of reason which can guide man to moral rectitude, a sort of moral sensibility. Thus, in the first *maqāma*, Abū'l-Taqwīm explains:

He who continues to seek for the Truth with his senses is lost, because he is prevented from seeing the Lord and far away from Him. Let him know that the senses only perceive those created things which are before him and have no means of grasping the unseen. Rather, the tool by which God may be known is I. If you keep my company, you will attain from me your wishes. I am your neighbour, yet you do not know me. I am right before you, yet you are not familiar with me. If you take from me, you will be free of hardship. Clever men have realized that my advice awakens.

Abū Taqwīm then goes on to prove the existence and uniqueness of God to the narrator, a fitting beginning for the collection. In the following episodes, Abū'l-Taqwīm acts as a *qāss*, a teller of religious accounts, first relating the Koranic accounts of earlier peoples who were punished for rejecting their prophets (2, 3), then summarizing Koranic accounts of figures blessed by God, such as Abraham, Joseph and Lot (4), then describing the Prophet Muhammad (5, 6). Other fundamental religious topics include the pilgrimage (18), alms (20), the end of Ramadan (33), and holy war (12), and the prayer for rain (47). A number of episodes consist of sermons (17, 39, 44) and other moral topics such as the obligation to avert one's gaze from the opposite sex (13), generosity (21, 32), asceticism (46), and so on. Some episodes treat standard linguistic and literary topics, such as proverbs (48), spring (23) and turning grey (14). The theme of the narrator engaging with his personified intellect is brought to the fore in a number of episodes, where the lower soul or seat of the passions (*nafs*) is contrasted with the intellect (10, 16, 28, 43). Abū Taqwīm recounts his accomplishments in the twenty-eighth episode, indulging in a string of paronomastic references to figures in the intellectual history of Islam:

I am Abū'l-Taqwīm, and from me comes instruction. I am the faculty by which God may be known. Birds are caught through my instruction, and beasts are led through my guidance. The horse's bit was made through my wisdom, and stealthy evil matters are held back through my advice. I am the one who brought the philosophers and scholars up to the plane of virtues, and worshippers and ascetics to the gardens of spiritual exercise. Through me, Mālik gained control, and the stature of al-Shāfi'i, the curer of disease, became great. I praise Aḥmad. Bishr caused my joy, and al-Sirrī

discovered my secret. Al-Fuḍayl brandished my bounty, and Ibn Adham mounted my black stallion. Ma'rūf is known for me, and al-Junayd belongs to my troops. Al-Thawrī is one of my blossoms, and al-Shiblī is one of my cubs.

In the last episode (50), the narrator pledges his dedication and lasting devotion to Abū'l-Taqwīm, from whom he has learned so much and with whom no other teacher can compare. Even more than that of al-Zamakhsharī, Ibn al-Jawzī's work represents a blending of the two genres *maqām* and *maqāma*.

Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Rāzī al-Hanafī (fl. sixth/twelfth century?) sticks more closely to the classical form in his attempt to restore what he sees as proper moral order to the *maqāma* genre. His collection of thirty *maqāmas* features a narrator, al-Fāris ibn Bassām, and a rogue, Abū 'Amr al-Tanūkhī, whose names are chosen to match those of al-Harīrī's characters nearly exactly in rhyme and morphological pattern. Nevertheless, his introduction informs the reader that, unlike al-Hamadhānī and al-Harīrī, he will not let the representative of immorality gain the upper hand: 'I have not preferred what Abū 'Amr says to what Ibn Bassām says, as they did, nor have I placed the Mosque of Opposition before the Sacred Mosque, as they recorded.'¹² The collection then proceeds to present the *maqāmat* in pairs. In the first episode of each pair, Abū 'Amr gains the upper hand, and in the second, Ibn Bassām rebuts him. The debate on the whole is not even-handed, and Ibn Bassām consistently has the last word. There is no room for moral ambiguity here; Abū 'Amr is a conniving, cheating lout, and Ibn Bassām is never really fooled by him.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS OF THE GENRE

In Arabic literature as in Hebrew literature, the *maqāma* genre widened a great deal in the later Middle Ages to include many texts characterized by length, the use of rhymed prose and the studied pursuit of an ornate, difficult and eloquent style. An examination of al-Suyūṭī's published *maqāmat* shows how the definition of the genre itself had widened. The pieces which make up the collection fall into three main formal categories. The first includes four pieces, discussed above, which fit the definition of the classical *maqāma* and follow the model of al-Harīrī very closely. A second group of *maqāmat* preserve the framework of transmission, but in a more fanciful manner; these texts are descriptions of classes of things such as jewels, vegetables, birds or imaginary debates between them. The third group of texts are treatises or epistles which involve none of the essential elements of the classical *maqāma* except the use of rhymed and rhythmic prose and ornate style. Most of these

¹² Ibn Nāqiyā, *Maqāmat*, p. 5.

treatises have independent titles, such as *al-Fāriq bayn al-muṣannif wa'l-sāriq* (That Which Distinguishes Between an Author and a Plagiarist) and *al-Kāwī fī ta'rikh al-Sakhāwī* (The Branding Iron, on al-Sakhāwī's History) and are in fact diatribes against colleagues and contemporaries whom al-Suyūtī accuses of incompetence, ignorance and moral depravity. Nevertheless, he refers to these pieces, in the texts themselves, as *maqāmāt*, leaving no doubt as to his own conception of the genre.

Similar examples may be cited from Andalusia. A *maqāma* ascribed to Ibn al-Murābi', 'Abd Allāh ibn Ibrāhīm al-Azdī (fl. eighth/fourteenth century) presents a narrative describing the author's altercations with his wife concerning his failure to buy a sheep to sacrifice on 'īd al-adhā and his subsequent tribulations when he purchases an uncontrollable ram that runs amok in the marketplace. While the *maqāma* lacks the fictional narrator and protagonist of the classical *maqāma*, it is reminiscent of several *maqāmas* in the collections of al-Hamadhānī and al-Harīrī, where the characters act out an invented dispute in an attempt to get a third party, usually a judge, to reconcile the two parties by loosening his purse-strings. The *Maqāma fī amr al-wabā* of 'Umar al-Mālaqī, completed in 844/1440, has little in common with the classical *maqāma*. This epistle is addressed to the Nasrid ruler of Granada, which was undergoing an epidemic at the time, urging him to move the court to Malaga, the author's town. It contains no framed narrative, no narrator or protagonist, and again seems as if it could be designated simply an epistle couched in rhymed prose. Certainly from the fourteenth century on, the term *maqāma* comes to denote simply an epistle, written in rhymed prose, which indulges heavily in formal rhetorical flourishes and aspires to elegance. The later genre of the *maqāma* came to include a wide variety of texts, particularly including descriptions, such as *al-Maqāma al-wuḥūshiyya* of Ibn Ḥabīb al-Halabī (death date unknown) describing animals, or Ibn al-Wardī's (d. 749/1349) description of the Black Death in *maqāma* form or *al-Maqāma al-mashhadiyya*, describing the town of al-Nu'mān in Syria; debates between the pen and the sword, wine and flowers, travel and staying put, apricots and mulberries; relations of journeys or events, such as the *maqāma* of Hasan al-Āṭṭār (1254/1838) on his visit to Napoleon's scholars in Cairo; panegyrics such as *al-Maqāma al-ghawriyya wa'l-tuḥfa al-makkiyya*, written by 'Alī ibn Nāṣir al-Ḥijāzī in praise of the Mamluk Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (906–22/1500–16) or *al-Maqāma al-jawhariyya fī l-mahāmid al-anṣāriyya* by Abū'l-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazāfī, in praise of the famous judge and legal scholar Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī (d. 957/1550).

CHAPTER 8

MAMLUK HISTORY AND HISTORIANS

The Mamluk sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghūrī used to preside over twice-weekly soirées. Various topics were discussed, but history was a favourite area of debate. On one occasion at least they discussed *al-Rawd al-zāhir*, a life of Baybars written in the 1260s and 70s by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir. Baybars’ foiling of a Mongol expedition against Mecca and the sultan’s investiture of an Abbasid caliph in Cairo were among the subjects debated by the sultan and his courtiers. Historical lore – tales of Alexander, Mahmūd of Ghazna, Timūr and Qāytbay – provided much of the conversation at the Mamluk court.

Earlier Mamluk sultans and amirs took an active interest in the production of chronicles. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir used to read *al-Rawd al-zāhir* to the sultan whose feats the book commemorated and, when completed, it was placed in the royal treasury. Similarly, over a century later, al-‘Aynī used to read to the Sultan Barsbay and the sultan would occasionally correct him on the details. The reading of history was also generally popular, as the profusion of surviving manuscripts testifies. There was an explosion of history-writing in the Mamluk period, though, of course, the writers and readers were not interested in just Mamluk history. A wholly fantastic (perhaps eleventh-century) history of pharaonic Egypt continued to be reproduced in the chronicles of sober historians such as al-Nuwairī and al-Maqrīzī. Young *mamlūks* in training in the Cairo Citadel copied out histories of the Prophets. The alleged injustices of the Umayyad caliphs preoccupied historians, while others became obsessively interested in the Fatimids.

Politics and wars were of secondary interest to one influential group of historians who flourished in Syria in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, al-Birzālī, al-Yūnīnī, al-Dhababī and al-Jazarī were all religious scholars primarily interested in the transmission and transmitters of *hadīths*. Although they all wrote chronicles, this activity was secondary to their religious preoccupations. H. A. R. Gibb, having noted the interest of Sunni theologians and *muhaddiths* in the study and writing of history, went on to remark that ‘[In] the Sunnī doctrine, it was the Islamic community, the *ummah Allāh*, with which the continuation of the divine plan on earth was bound up; consequently the study of history was a necessary

supplement to the study of the divine revelation in Koran and *hadīth*.¹ The preservation of the achievements of one's teachers and their teachers was not merely an act of piety; it was also a (rather bulky) form of scholarly accreditation.

The Syrian approach to history-writing was an aspect of the Sunni revival, whose antecedents were in Baghdad and most specifically in the historical writing of Ibn al-Jawzī (1116–1201), a Hanbali preacher in that city. Ibn al-Jawzī's history of the Muslim world up to and including his own times, the *Muntazam*, was the first to append obituaries to the chronicle of events for each year. Those obituaries were weighted in favour of religious scholars. His example was followed by his grandson, Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (1186–1257), who came to Damascus in 1204 and made a reputation for himself as a preacher. Sibṭ's *Mir'āt al-zamān fi ta'rīkh al-a'yān*, modelled on the *Muntazam*, begins with the creation of the world and ends in 1257. However, for the thirteenth century the *Mir'āt* is chiefly concerned with the fortunes of the 'ulamā' of Damascus. As in the *Muntazam*, *hawādīth* (events) are followed by the *wafayāt* (obituaries) for each year.

The *Mir'āt*'s emphasis and organization were copied by later Syrian 'ulamā' and also influenced the court chroniclers of Egypt and other historians. The influence of the *Mir'āt* is most obviously visible in the continuation which was produced by al-Yūnīnī (1242–1325/6) who was born in Baalbek and studied *hadīth* and *fiqh* in Damascus and Cairo. His *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān*, which covers 1256 to 1311, was much consulted by al-Dhahabī and Ibn Kathīr. Like its precursor, the *Dhayl* is weighted towards *hadīth* transmitters. Al-Yūnīnī included much poetry in the *Dhayl* and its purely literary material means that it was not only a calendar of past events but also a belletristic compendium, an example of the literarization of history-writing, a feature of the Mamluk period and part of an attempt to reach out to a wider audience, though, as we shall see, there were other ways of making potentially dry-as-dust annals more readable.

Another feature of the *Dhayl* is the inclusion of autobiographical reminiscences, such as al-Yūnīnī's memory of the Mongol general Kitbugha's tour of his native Baalbek in 1260. The tendency to add autobiographical fragments finds parallels in other historians' work such as Abū'l-Fidā and Baybars al-Manṣūrī. This was perhaps the symptom of a turbulent age, when individuals felt that their personal experiences of the Crusader wars, the Mongol invasions or the Black Death were worthy of record. Al-Yūnīnī, a Hanbali, was a partisan for Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), the controversial Hanbali polemicist. More surprisingly, al-Yūnīnī's fellow historians, such as al-Jazarī and al-Birzalī, were

¹ Gibb, 'Ta'rīkh', p. 236b.

similarly partisan, though not Hanbalis. The support of the Syrian *‘ulamā’* historians for Ibn Taymiyya in his struggles with his enemies among the Mamluk military elite and the Sufi shaykhs suggests some detachment from the values of the Mamluk court and administration. Ibn Taymiyya was little interested in history and wrote none. Nevertheless, during his lifetime and for some decades afterwards his students and admirers dominated history-writing in Syria.

Al-Yūnīnī did not work alone. He and al-Jazarī (1260–1338) exchanged drafts, copied and revised each other’s work, and al-Jazarī was in turn in close contact with al-Birzālī. Al-Jazarī was, like most of the Damascus group of historians, a *muḥaddith*. His *Hawādīth al-zamān* was a necrological chronicle of the worthies of Damascus. The *Hawādīth* was burdened with poetry and fragments of *adab* prose. He perhaps chose for literary reasons to include various instances of *al-‘ajā’ib wa l-gharā’ib* (the strange and the wonderful) in his chronicle, even though he was to be mocked by al-Dhahabī and Ṣafadī for this. The *Hawādīth* is subtly but unmistakably hostile to the sultans Qalāwūn and al-Ashraf Khalil.

Al-Birzālī (1267–1340) was a student of Ibn Taymiyya and of many shaykhs besides. His (lost) work, the *Mu‘jam al-kabīr*, is devoted to the 3,000 shaykhs under whom he studied. Al-Birzālī was a charismatic and influential figure and his unpublished continuation of Abū Shāma’s *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*, *al-Muqtafa*, was used by al-Yūnīnī and al-Jazarī, as well as by al-Birzālī’s student, al-Dhahabī. The latter (1274–1348), although a Shafii also studied under Ibn Taymiyya and al-Yūnīnī. Al-Dhahabī’s *Ta’rīkh al-Islām* is top-heavy with obituaries. His main work was not his history but his monumental biographical dictionary, the *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya*. Al-Dhahabī was a combative writer and he presented unflattering portraits of Sufi and Hanafi notables. He was also hostile to the Mamluk regime, not accepting the legitimacy of the caliphate which they had established in Cairo. Al-Dhahabī’s biases were exposed and criticized by his student Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (1327–69/70). Like his former master, al-Subkī also produced a biographical dictionary of Shafis and wrote about how history should be written and assessed. However, whereas al-Dhahabī’s treatise is lost, al-Subkī’s ideas have survived in his *Tabaqāt*. Al-Subkī held that historians should name their sources and quote rather than summarize them. Imagination and a sense of style were desirable but it was most important to assess the level of scholarship of the man one was writing about. This was evidently a traditionist’s view of history. Al-Subkī’s *Mu‘id al-ni‘am wa-mubīd al-niqam*, a treatise on the importance of *niya*, or right intention in religion and working life, also touches on historians’ responsibility to guard men’s reputations. Al-Subkī warned that historians stood on the brink of a precarious sand dune. He held that the prejudices of the different law schools led to

distortions in history-writing. His treatise on *nīya* also reveals his detestation of the age that he was living in.

Al-Kutubī (1287–1362) and Ibn Kathīr (1300–73) were the last prominent representatives of the Syrian ‘ulamā’ school of historiography. Both wrote compendia which began as histories of the Islamic world but shrank to a record of the fortunes of the religious elite in Damascus. It is difficult to establish the relationship between al-Kutubī’s *Uyūn al-tawārīkh* and Ibn Kathīr’s *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*. Al-Şafadī (1297–1362/3) believed in history as a vehicle for moral uplift, yet he wrote no chronicle. Instead he produced the largest Arabic biographical dictionary ever written, the *Wāfi bi'l-wafayāt*, containing over 140,000 lives. He also produced two smaller biographical compendia, on blind persons and on contemporaries. Clearly, like many of his fellows, he was often working on the obituaries before their subjects’ deaths. Despite the impression made on him by Ibn Taymiyya and despite his commitment to biography as an instrument of moral uplift, there was another side to al-Şafadī’s character. He was committed to literature in a way that other Damascene historians were not and he produced, among other things, a *maqāma* on wine, a quantity of pederastic verse and a famous poem on the beauty spot (*khāl*). He also interested himself in occult matters and wrote on alchemy as well as on *malāḥim* (disasters prefiguring the end of the world).

Although the Hanbali revivalist movement certainly had its admirers among the ‘ulamā’ of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Egypt, none of them aspired to emulate the chronicles of Ibn al-Jawzī or al-Jazarī. Rather, history-writing was at first dominated by courtiers and chancery men. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir (1223–92) served the sultans Baybars and Qalāwūn as *kātib al-sīr* (head of the chancery) and as a diplomat. None of his successors as *kātib al-sīr* was to enjoy his prestige, based partly on his prose which was consciously modelled on that of a famous precursor, al-Qāḍī'l-Fāḍil, Saladin’s head of chancery. (See the contributions of Musawi and Hämeen-Anttila in this volume, Chapters 5 and 6.) Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir wrote histories of the sultans Baybars, Qalāwūn and al-Ashraf Khalīl, respectively *al-Rawd al-zāhir*, *Tashrīf al-ayyām wa'l-‘usūr* and *al-Alṭāf al-khaṭīyya*. Each work is strikingly different from the others. The *Rawd* is only in part an annals, for the first part is really a court-presentation volume in which Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir sought to legitimize Baybars’ usurpation of power and to celebrate his merits. The sultan’s conquests from the Franks are presented as a re-enactment of the *Futūh al-Shām* (as Saladin’s victories had been). The *Rawd* contains a lot of poetry, dramatized episodes and boastful rhymed prose, as well as many documents, such as the caliph’s oath and *khuṭba* sermon and announcements of military victories (*kutub al-bashā'ir*) which Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir himself had composed in bombastic rhymed prose.

The *Tashrif* is not much more than a collection of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s choice pieces of chancery draftsmanship joined to one another with linking narrative. (In the fifteenth century, the chancery encyclopedist al-Qalqashandī judged that Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s draftsmanship was overrated; on the other hand al-Ghuzūlī included his prose in his anthology, *Maṭāli’ al-budūr*.) The unfinished *Altāf* is a straightforward annals. All three of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s histories were produced under royal patronage and supervision. He was criticized by his nephew Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī (1252–1330) for servilely writing exactly what the sultan wished to hear. Shāfi‘’s own account of the reign of Baybars, the *Husn al-manāqib*, is an abridgement and commentary on his uncle’s work. At various points in his narrative, Shāfi‘ goes out of his way to suggest the superiority of the amir Qalāwūn to Baybars. Shāfi‘ worked in Qalāwūn’s chancery and his life of Qalāwūn, *al-Faḍl al-ma’thūr*, is an effusive court chronicle in rhymed prose. Like Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s *Rawd*, the *Faḍl*, though written in Arabic, reads as a legitimacy treatise aimed primarily at an audience of Turkish amirs. Divine providence elevated Qalāwūn to the throne and his *furiṣiyā*, *firāsa*, justice and other qualities are stressed. Although ‘Izz al-Din ibn Shaddād (1216–85) came from Aleppo, he worked as scribe to Baybars’ vizier, Bahā’ al-Dīn ibn Hannā. His topography of Syria and Iraq, the *A’lāq al-khaṭīra*, was commissioned by Baybars. Ibn Shaddād’s panegyrical but less florid life of Baybars, *al-Rawḍa al-zāhīra*, did not enjoy the official status of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s *Rawd*.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī and Ibn Shaddād produced court chronicles which do not follow the annals and obituary pattern favoured by the Syrian school. Other cases however are not so clear cut. Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 1325), a senior Mamluk amir, wrote as a partisan of the Qalāwūnid house and most specifically as the encomiast of his master, the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn. His *Tuhfa al-mulūkiyya*, mostly in rhymed prose, belongs to the genre of histories which were composed for presentation at court. The *Tuhfa* deals with al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s royal qualities and his special destiny and covers his career up to the year 1311/12. Despite military and court service, Baybars al-Manṣūrī was intensely pious and he produced a Koranic commentary with Sufi sympathies. Besides a (lost) history of the Caliphs, he also compiled *Zubdat al-fikra fi ta’rīkh al-hijra*, a universal history of Islam up to 1324. Like al-Yūnīnī, he garnished his narrative with much poetry.

In the *Zubdat al-fikra*, al-Manṣūrī often recounted his own experiences. The same was true of Abū'l-Fidā (1273–1331), another participant in the politics and warfare of the age as the nominal ruler of Hama from 1310 onwards, who was the friend and client of the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. As an author, Abū'l-Fidā was carrying on an Ayyubid family tradition. Besides history he attempted other genres, for he wrote a topography and poetry. His *Mukhtaṣar fi akhbār*

al-bashar is a universal history up to 1329, heavily reliant on Ibn al-Athīr for early centuries, as was Baybars' *Zubda*. In its later sections Abū'l-Fidā draws upon his own experiences but reveals little or nothing about his thoughts or feelings, nor does he reveal anything about decision-making in the palace and army. Despite his 'amateur' status as a historian, the *Mukhtasar* followed the conventions of the age and it reads perfectly professionally.

However, there were other autodidacts and eccentrics who wrote history and sometimes produced more interesting, if less reliable historical narratives. Qirṭāy al-'Izzī al-Khāzindārī's name indicates that he was a *mamlūk*. He was not a major figure in the world of high politics and warfare nor had he received the standard education of an 'ālim. His history, the *Ta'rīkh al-nawādir*, is an Egyptocentric chronicle, of which two sections survive. One covers the origins of Islam and the other the years 1229–90 (overlapping in part with the author's own lifetime). The second section is indeed full of *nawādir* in the sense of curious or rare anecdotes. When Qirṭāy was bored or short of information, he made things up and his chronicle contains the most fantastic misinformation, especially concerning Muslim–Christian diplomatic relations in the period.

The historical works of Ibn al-Dawādārī (c. 1288–1336), though much more reliable, betray a similar taste for 'the strange and wonderful'. Ibn al-Dawādārī, like several other historians, such as al-Şafadī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn Iyās, was of *mamlūk* descent. His universal chronicle, the *Durar al-tījān*, and its abridgement, the *Kanz al-durar*, are to some extent modelled on the chronicle of Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī. However, Ibn al-Dawādārī's chronicles lack the obituaries at the end of each year, and his sober annals of political and religious affairs are broken up by records of *mirabilia* and by excursus on Turkish legend and folklore. Although he had absorbed many of the prejudices and techniques of the Syrian school, he still wrote as a Turk. He defended the Turks against accusations of superstition and he presented Baybars as a ruler in the tradition of the Saljuq sultans. Ibn al-Dawādārī's taste for *Arabian Nights* stories, freak meteorological incidents and amazing coincidences was shared by numerous other Muslim and Christian chroniclers writing in the Mamluk period, culminating with Ibn Iyās in the early sixteenth century. Reports of dreams were often inserted in historical narratives. Reports of predictive dreams served as a kind of narrative prolepsis. Other dreams legitimized or even sanctified the deeds of sultans, while others again implicitly commented on and explained the motivations of the decision-makers.

Historians used invented dialogues in order to explain policy-making and conflict among the elite. Some chroniclers represented the Mamluks as speaking flawless Arabic, while others put deliberately incorrect Arabic into their mouths. Qirṭāy was unusual in declining on aesthetic grounds to reproduce

the speech of Mamluk officers. More generally, some chronicles, for example those of Ibn al-Dawādārī and Ibn Şaşrā, were written in an Arabic that was often grammatically incorrect and stylistically poor. A colloquial idiom may have been employed in order to reach a wider audience, but it is more likely that some historians were unable to write otherwise. Ibn Şaşrā (fl. 1390) wrote in the colloquial. His *al-Durra al-mudi'a fi'l-dawla al-zāhiriyā* is an account of events in Damascus during the reign of the sultan Barqūq. It is didactic, moralizing and laden with fables and proverbs, history as a morality play. This sort of history was supposed to be ethically improving and one studied history in order to take warning (*ibra*) from the fates of others. Remember that *A Thousand and One Nights* presented itself as a serious work, which used the past in order to teach by example.

The *Ilmām bi'l-i'lām*, written by al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandarānī (fl. 1360s) is, if anything, even more curious. This purports to be a history of the Crusader attack on the port of Alexandria in 1365. However, al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandarānī, a manuscript copyist who worked in Alexandria, was easily diverted from his main theme and his book contains lengthy digressions about the marvels of the ancient city, Arab nautical science, fanciful dialogues between Alexander and Aristotle, and much else. History was crowded out by legends, reports of predictive dreams and anti-Christian polemic. It is really a work of *adab* and as such it was heavily criticized by more serious historians, such as Ibn Hajar and al-Sakhāwī. The marvellous also mingled with the factual in the writings of the Maghribi author Ibn Abī Hajala (1325–75). His *Sukkardān al-sultān*, a life of the sultan al-Nāṣir Hasan, was written to be presented to that sultan. It dwells lengthily on the symbolic significance of seven for the people, the rulers and the land of Egypt. Ibn Abī Hajala also wrote an account of the rising of the *julbān* (mamlūks purchased by the ruling sultan) against al-Nāṣir Hasan, as well as a historical account of plagues. Furthermore he wrote poetry, as well as treatises on famous lovers, chess, numerology and other matters. In the case of Ibn Abī Hajala and in that of many other authors the production of historical and quasi-historical works has to be seen in a much wider literary context. Some of the chroniclers discussed drew on folkloric themes. Others made use of poetry, *saj'* and the ornate conventions of rhymed prose. Nevertheless, the degree of literarization to be found in chroniclers of the period should not be exaggerated. Most chronicles provided a rather dull annals of political events, battles and religious and academic appointments. The restricted nature of the literarization of history-writing becomes clear if one compares histories written in this period with those of al-Mas'ūdī or Miskawayh.

In Syria the writing of history declined in both quantity and quality during the fourteenth century. The leading historians were now Egyptian compilers, who drew both on Syrian annals and on Egyptian court chronicles. Al-Nuwayrī

(1279–1332) (not to be confused with the Alexandrian Nuwayrī) served as a bureaucrat in al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's reign. His great work, the *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab*, was designed as an encyclopedia, to contain all the knowledge a state scribe needed. However, the historical section, covering the creation till 1331, dwarfed the rest, for it constituted two-thirds of the whole. Although he was strongly influenced by his Syrian predecessors, his history was not 'one damn thing after another'. He struggled to produce an integrated account of historical development and, partially, broke away from an annalistic approach in favour of an interpretative account.

Ibn al-Furāt (1334/5–1405) outstripped even al-Nuwayrī in his mastery of source materials. He was the most professional of his contemporaries and the most dedicated to his chosen subject. He earned his living not as a historian but as a court notary and a preacher. There was of course no full-time academic historian in medieval Egypt or Syria. His *Tārīkh al-duwal wa'l-mulūk* is a partially completed universal history. The early sections are missing, for he worked backwards. Al-Sakhawī judged that Ibn al-Furāt 'did not know Arabic grammar well and he therefore used awful solecisms and very colloquial expressions'. Nevertheless, Ibn al-Furāt was a highly efficient collator of earlier sources, especially those of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and he became a favourite (and often unacknowledged) source for the chroniclers who came after him.

Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) was born in North Africa and a full discussion of his universal history (*Kitāb al-Ṭabar*) and its more theoretical introduction (*al-Muqaddima*) belongs in the context of a discussion of the literature of Spain and North Africa. Nevertheless, it is only partially correct to see him as a Merinid historian. After migrating to Egypt in 1382, he continued to revise and add to his history. Moreover, his intellectual heirs are mostly to be found among the Egyptians who studied under him. Ibn Khaldūn, who found patronage under the sultan Barqūq, was an admirer of the Mamluks. He praised them as the defenders of Islam and he thought that the continuous recruitment of white slaves from the steppe lands and the Caucasus might allow the regime to avoid the cycle of dynastic rise, decay and fall, while he believed that Islamic civilization in the Maghrib was doomed. He wrote in the shadow of the Black Death and subsequent pestilences. In later years he became increasingly religious and pessimistic.

None of Ibn Khaldūn's students seems to have understood his theories about the cyclical rise and fall of dynasties. However, he did succeed in passing on his pessimism and his speculative interest in an apocalyptic future to one of his students, al-Maqrīzī (1364–1441), who sought to find broad socio-economic causes for historical phenomena, though less successfully than his teacher. He wrote reverently of the *Muqaddima* that it 'reveals the truth of things, events

and news; it explains the state of the universe and reveals the origin of all beings in an admirable plain style'. Al-Maqrīzī started out as a court scribe and later rose to become market inspector of Cairo in the reign of Barqūq. Thereafter, he lost court patronage and became an enemy of the regime, though inevitably a cautious one. In his writings he accused the Mamluks of setting aside the Sharia in favour of the pagan law code of the Mongols. He reported Mamluk violations of the provisions of *waqf* bequests and wrote at length about their monetary maladministration.

By contrast, al-Maqrīzī had a passionate and somewhat antiquarian interest in the Fatimids. This particularly emerges in *Kitāb itti ‘az al-ḥunafā’ bi-akhbār al-khulafā’* which is devoted to the history of the Qarmatians and the Fatimids and in *al-Mawā‘iz wa’l-i‘tibār fi dhikr al-khiṭāt wa’l-āthār*, a wide-ranging historical topography of Cairo, in which the main focus is on the lost palaces of the Fatimids. The topographical genre to which al-Maqrīzī was a distinguished contributor, was inevitably a literature of nostalgia. (See Musawi's contribution, Chapter 5.) An earlier topography by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir similarly harked back to Fatimid grandeur. Although al-Maqrīzī, like Ibn Khaldūn, accepted the legitimacy of Fatimid genealogical claims, neither historian was a Shia. Perhaps al-Maqrīzī loved the Fatimids because they built Cairo. His topography also betrays a certain animus towards the pretensions of Damascus, and he wrote a separate treatise attacking the Sufi followers of Ibn al-‘Arabī in Damascus.

Al-Maqrīzī's *Kitāb ighāthat al-umma bi-kashf al-ghumma* is a history of high prices and famines and an examination of their causes running from pharaonic times to al-Maqrīzī's own lifetime. Although he had inherited Ibn Khaldūn's enthusiasm for economic theorizing, al-Maqrīzī kept getting his sums and his morality mixed up. As a homiletic historian, he claimed that the economic crisis in Egypt in 1403 was no worse than earlier ones. Therefore he exaggerated past catastrophes. The current catastrophes were due to moral failings. Famine was caused by luxury, corrupt government, overtaxation and copper money. Since copper coins were not sanctioned by the Koran or the Sunna, their circulation was particularly reprehensible. Consequently, in all his writings, al-Maqrīzī's information on money and prices is unreliable and inconsistent. He was a polygraph, writing on matters historical and non-historical, including bees and honey, artists and music. Although he is best known for *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma‘rifat duwal al-mulūk*, an Egyptian annals (covering the years 1169–1441), this book's undeserved celebrity is chiefly due to the accident of early translating and editing. The *Sulūk* recycles, abridges and distorts earlier and better chronicles such as that of Ibn al-Furāt and was criticized by his contemporaries, including al-‘Aynī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Sakhawī.

Al-'Aynī (1361–1451) was a Turk and, perhaps because of his knowledge of Turkish, was (until his final disgrace) more successful than al-Maqrīzī in attracting the friendship and favour of the Mamluk sultans. Certainly his chronicle, the *Iqd al-jumān fī ta'rīkh ahl al-zamān*, took a more favourable view of the Mamluk regime than did the *Sulūk*. It was also a more coherently organized work. The same cannot be said of his two court-presentation chronicles, *al-Sayf al-muhannad fī ta'rīkh al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad* and *al-Rawd al-zāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Ṭatar*. The former treatise, which al-'Aynī read to the sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, checking its facts as he did so, celebrates the sultan's heroic qualities, as well as providing a desperately miscellaneous range of justifications for his rule (numerological, physiognomic, genealogical, etc.). In the *Sayf*, al-'Aynī claimed that Mu'ayyad would be the last of the virtuous sultans but subsequently wrote a similarly fawning life of al-Zāhir Ṭatar, presenting him as the last Turkish ruler and one of eschatological significance.

Al-'Aynī's influence led another Turk, Ibn Taghrībirdī (1409/10?–69/70?), to consider becoming a historian. Ibn Taghrībirdī was the son of a leading Mamluk amir and, in effect, he succeeded al-'Aynī as court historian. Despite Ibn Taghrībirdī's criticisms of al-Maqrīzī, the early sections of his own chronicle, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa'l-Qāhira* depend quite heavily on the *Sulūk*. The *Nujūm* was written initially for Muḥammad, son of the reigning sultan Jaqmaq. This prince, particularly expert on poetry, presided over a literary salon. 'It was on his account that I composed this work, without any command from him to write it', but he 'almost flew for joy' when he heard what Ibn Taghrībirdī was doing. This chronicle was fiercely hostile to astrologers and delights in recording their failed predictions. Ibn Taghrībirdī's other main historical work, the *Hawādīth al-duhūr*, is a continuation of al-Maqrīzī's *Sulūk* and, although much of its content is common to the *Nujūm*, the *Hawādīth* is more detailed. Even before beginning work on his chronicles, Ibn Taghrībirdī had produced the *Manhal al-sāfi*, an enormous biographical dictionary containing 2,822 biographies.

Although several contemporaries condemned Ibn Taghrībirdī's writings for partiality to the Mamluks, the *Nujūm* was at times ferocious in its criticism of Mamluk corruption and factionalism and, in the *Hawādīth*, Ibn Taghrībirdī was so critical of Qāytbay and Yashbak al-Sūdūnī that he was bastinadoed for criticism of the latter. Ibn Taghrībirdī and other historians writing in the fifteenth century were fiercely critical of their own times, while they looked back on the early decades of the Mamluk regime through a haze of nostalgia. Thus Ibn Taghrībirdī could write of Baybars' *mamlūks* that 'they were well endowed with courtesy, humility and obedience to their superiors, and good manners and courtesy towards their inferiors', in defiance of the facts.

Aḥmad ibn ‘Arabshāh (1392–1450), who spent his youth in Mongol and Turkish lands, wrote in a different literary tradition. His hostile life of Timur, the *Ajā’ib al-maqdūr*, is written in a Persian-inspired elaborately rhetorical style. In his *al-Ta’līf al-tāhir fī shiyam al-Zāhir* Jaqmaq is presented as a leader of the *jihād* and a moral exemplar, and the *Fākihāt al-khulafā’* is a work in the mirror-for-princes genre with a substantial amount of historical material. All deserve more attention than they have received.

Al-‘Aynī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn ‘Arabshāh sought court patronage and were familiar with the ways of the Turkish military elite. Ibn Ḥajar (1372–1449) similarly sought court patronage but hated the Turkish dominion. He was primarily a *hadīth* scholar and was acclaimed as the greatest scholar of his age. For Ibn Ḥajar, history was primarily the record of *hadīth* transmission. His *Durar al-kāmina* contains 5,204 (mostly ‘ulamā’) biographies from the eighth/fourteenth century. Among some 250 other books, he also produced *Inbā’ al-ghumr*, covering the years 1372–1446, which provided a vehicle for attacking al-‘Aynī for partiality to the Mamluks. Al-Sakhawī (1428–97) was Ibn Ḥajar’s leading pupil and, similarly, a *hadīth* specialist. The driving force behind al-Sakhawī’s authorship was his conviction that *hadīth* scholarship had declined in his own time. He was a good hater and a fierce critic. He criticized Ibn Khaldūn, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī and attacked the arrogance and privileges of the Mamluks. Despite his reservations about al-Maqrīzī, he too wrote a continuation of the *Sulūk*, entitled *al-Tibr al-masbūk*. His *I'lān bi'l-tawbikh li-man dhamma ahl al-ta'rikh* is a defence of the study of history considered as a handmaid of the religious sciences, echoing Ibn Ḥajar’s views.

The polygraph al-Suyūṭī (1445–1505) enjoyed a status comparable to Ibn Ḥajar’s earlier in the century. Al-Suyūṭī’s cast of mind was gloomy and adversarial. His various writings, including a history of the caliphs and a fairly short biographical dictionary of fifteenth-century personalities reveal his pessimism. He looked on the late fifteenth century as an age of intellectual decline and military catastrophes. He also produced *al-Taħadduth bi-ni'mat Allāh*, a rancorous kind of extended curriculum vitae. Al-Sakhawī was his bitter rival, but competition for teaching posts and issues in *hadīth* studies caused more conflict than historical matters as such.

The relationship between al-Suyūṭī’s historical writing and that of Ibn Iyās (1448–c. 1524) is not at all clear. Al-Suyūṭī may well have written some of what has been attributed to Ibn Iyās. The latter’s chronicle, the *Baðā'i' al-zuhūr fī waqā'i' al-duhūr*, starts as a world history but the narrative is very condensed until it reaches Ibn Iyās’ own lifetime, whereupon it becomes both more copious and more focused on events in Cairo. He took little trouble to interpret or organize the pell-mell rush of detail. Although he was the

grandson of a Mamluk officer, Ibn Iyās' chronicle is fiercely anti-Mamluk and his obituaries of sultans are often laced with sarcasm. There are at least two drafts of his chronicle which he never collated or completed. His history was only a part of his literary production and he should be considered as primarily a belletrist and poet. His rather dry chronicle is enlivened by reports of marvels and the relation of tales which might have come from *A Thousand and One Nights*. It is noteworthy that many derived their notion of the past not from the conscientious annals of an al-Jazarī or an Ibn Hajar but from the fantastic versions of early Islamic history produced by pseudo-al-Bakrī and romantic epics about Antar, the sultan Baybars and the Assassins. The Mamluk age was obsessed by the past and we cannot mention here all who ventured to write history.

CHAPTER 9

HISTORIOGRAPHY IN ARABIC DURING THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

THE OTTOMAN OCCUPATION OF THE CENTRAL ARAB LANDS

The Ottoman empire in a few decisive battles destroyed the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517), which included Egypt, Syria and parts of Anatolia (with the Hijaz within its sphere of influence). Egypt, the centre of empires since the Fatimids, and Syria as well, became taxpaying Ottoman provinces for the next three, nominally four, centuries. Later in the sixteenth century, the Yemen, Iraq and North Africa (with the exception of Morocco) were also incorporated into the Ottoman empire with varying degrees of centralism and firmness.

For Egypt in particular the change of rule was traumatic. It is true that, like the Mamluks, the Ottomans were Turcophone, Sunnis and ruled by a foreign-born military caste. But the Mamluk regime had become thoroughly familiar, and the Mamluk sultans and amirs were a localized elite, unlike the Ottomans who administered the provinces from Istanbul. The language of administration under the Mamluks was Arabic; under the Ottomans it became Turkish. Under the new regime, all governors, chief government officials, *qādīs* and soldiers came from the Turkish provinces and spoke Turkish. Thus, the foreign presence in the Arab lands was much more massive than before. Even worse, many of the natives of Syria, Egypt and other Arab lands regarded the Ottomans as bad Muslims, negligent of the religious ordinances and disrespectful of the Sharia, the holy law of Islam. This judgement automatically entailed a view of the rulers as unjust. Later, this negative image of the Ottomans greatly changed, as the Ottomans, starting with the long and enlightened reign of Sultan Sulaymān Qānūnī (the Magnificent, 1520–66), became more devout, partly owing to the conquest of the Arab lands, where they found ancient and venerated centres of Muslim culture and learning. The dynasty emphasized its role as pious Muslim rulers and defenders of Islam against Christian infidels in the west and Shia heretics in the east. Yet the differences in mentality and traditions between the Arabs, Egyptians in particular, and their Turkish-speaking rulers were too wide to overlook, and anti-Turkish sentiments persisted, besides a genuine loyalty towards the Ottoman dynasty itself and the distant sultan in Istanbul. Such seemingly contradictory sentiments

could coexist in that pre-national age, and are reflected in the writings of Arab historians.

It is well known that the Mamluk sultanate was extremely rich in history-writing, more than any other period in pre-modern Islam. It was believed that Arabic historiography declined in quantity and quality during the Ottoman centuries. Yet research work on the history of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire has been progressing recently and there is a better appreciation of the wealth of Arabic historiography under Ottoman rule.¹

EGYPT

The political, diplomatic and military events leading to the Mamluk–Ottoman conflict and the occupation of Egypt (Muḥarram 923/ January 1517), and then the first six years of Ottoman rule (until Dhū'l-Hijja 928/November 1522) are superbly narrated by the Cairene chronicler Muḥammad ibn Iyās. The fifth volume of his *Badā'i' al-zuhūr fi waqā'i' al-duhūr* is a most valuable work that has few equivalents in describing day by day how a new regime steps into the shoes of the old one.² Ibn Iyās does not only report the decisions and moves undertaken by the Ottomans in Egypt, but his writing also reflects the people's attitudes and feelings towards their new masters.

Ibn Iyās' hostility towards the Ottomans is obvious from almost every page of his chronicle. He was not free from bias and identified with the fallen Mamluks; he was one of *awlād al-nās*, 'the sons of the (important) men', namely the Mamluks. As a chronicler, Ibn Iyās did not hesitate to criticize them and their government when they were in power, but he believed that the Ottomans were far worse. He judged all the Ottomans, Sultan Selim – who defeated the Mamluks – his soldiers and his *qādīs*, as bad, cruel and ignorant Muslims, even as barbarians. After Selim's departure from Egypt and his death, the harshness of the regime seemed to moderate, and even Ibn Iyās softened his criticism.

¹ Only a few items of the extensive research literature on Arabic historiography during the Ottoman period can be mentioned here. On Egypt: See Crecelius (ed.), *Eighteenth Century Egypt*, which consists of several important essays and has a very rich and useful bibliography in the text and footnotes. Some of the papers also discuss the earlier centuries. References are made to earlier historiographical studies by David Ayalon, P. M. Holt, Muhammad Anīs, Laylā 'Abd al-Latīf and others. On Syria: See al-Munajjid, *al-Mu'arrikhūn*; Rāfq, *The Province of Damascus*, pp. 320–33; al-Šabbāgh, *Min a'lām al-fikr al-'arabī*. On Lebanon: Hourani, 'Historians of Lebanon'. On Iraq: Ra'ūf, *al-Ta'rikh*. On the Yemen: Soudan, *Le Yémen ottoman*.

² Ibn Iyās' contemporary, the Damascene 'alīm Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ṭūlūn, also wrote an eyewitness report of the Ottoman occupation of Damascus, *Mufākahat al-khullān* etc. It is an important and honest report, but not as well written and dramatic as that of Ibn Iyās. The nearest parallel that comes to mind is al-Jabarti's description of the French occupation of Egypt 280 years later.

The problem with this chronicle is that it is almost isolated. Even worse, he has no continuator.³ Ibn Iyās was one of the best representatives, but also the last, of the great Egyptian Mamluk historians. This tradition stops abruptly and totally after the Ottoman occupation. It cannot be determined whether that happened because Egypt was relegated from an empire to a province, or because the great part of the sixteenth century in Egypt passed peacefully and without major political upheavals. The fact remains that the next important chroniclers appeared in Egypt only in the next century. Some information about the history of Egypt in the sixteenth century is provided by non-Egyptian Arabic sources, such as the biographical dictionary (*al-Kawākib al-sā'ira*) of the Damascene Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī about prominent men (and a small number of women) in the tenth/sixteenth century, or by the important histories of the Meccan historian Quṭb al-Dīn al-Nahrawālī (d. 990/1582), who wrote a detailed account of the exploits of the Ottomans in the Yemen. He was familiar with developments in Egypt, the Hijaz and to a certain extent in Istanbul as well, since he travelled to the Ottoman capital where he met some of the most influential men. Al-Nahrawālī wrote a lengthy history of the Ottoman empire up to his time, which comprises a great part of his book about the history of Mecca.⁴ His attitude towards the Ottoman state is positive in the extreme, and his works influenced Egyptian historians for a long time. Another important source for conditions in Egypt, although not a usual chronicle, was a book⁵ by the Egyptian ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazīrī (d. 962/1553), secretary to several *umarā’ al-hajj*, commanders of the Egyptian pilgrims’ caravan.

Since contemporary chroniclers did not cover the greater part of the sixteenth century, the information about that period is cursory and episodic. The historiography of the period organizes its coverage of events by what has been called by scholars the ‘sultan-pasha’ type of chronicle.⁶ The pasha, not the sultan, is the central figure in the narratives. The chroniclers characterize each viceroy by his personality (popular or unpopular, just, efficient in handling crime, and the like) and religious profile (whether he liked ‘ulamā’ and saintly men, or was a Sufi or a *faqīh* (jurist) or a *sharif*, i.e. a descendant from the Prophet, etc.).

In 994/1586, the soldiers of the Ottoman garrison in Egypt, whose salaries were hit by rising inflation (as was happening in other provinces as well), took

³ ‘Abd al-Šamad al-Diyārbakrī, an Ottoman *qādī* who came to Egypt with Selim’s army and stayed there as a judge, wrote a chronicle (*Dhikr al-khulafā’*) in Turkish closely based on Ibn Iyās. He continued the narrative in detail for a period of two and a half years (up to Shawwāl 931/ July 1525).

⁴ al-Nahrawālī, *al-Barq al-yamānī* and *Kitāb al-i’tām*.

⁵ al-Jazīrī, *Durar al-fawā’id*.

⁶ Hathaway, ‘Sultans, Pashas’.

advantage of the weakened position of the governing pasha, or viceroy, and rose in rebellion against him. This was the beginning of a series of disturbances about which we have detailed information from seventeenth-century chroniclers. During these events, for the first time the sources speak about tensions between *Rūmīs* (Turks) and natives – Arabic-speaking soldiers, *awlād ʿArab*. One of the two notable historians of this period is Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mu‘tī al-Ishāqī (his chronicle ends in 1033/1623–4). In his *Kitāb akhbār al-uwal fīmā tasarrafa fi Misr min arbāb al-duwal* he gives a most laudatory chronicle of the Ottoman dynasty and a history of Egypt up to his time. Of far greater importance are the numerous historical writings of Muḥammad ibn Abīl-Surūr al-Bakrī al-Ṣiddīqī (died c. 1071/1661), the leading historian of the first half of the seventeenth century. He was a member of a famous aristocratic Sufi family of *ashrāf*, who also claimed descent from Abū Bakr, the first caliph. The Bakrīs played a role in Egypt’s religious and public life until the middle of the twentieth century. Ibn Abīl-Surūr himself had close relations with the Ottoman authorities in Egypt and not surprisingly his attitude towards the Ottomans is extremely laudatory, describing the sultans as impeccably orthodox. Almost all his chronicles are about Ottoman Egypt,⁷ but he also wrote a history of the Ottoman empire, naturally with a strong emphasis on Egypt.⁸ Among the viceroys of Egypt, Ibn Abīl-Surūr has the highest esteem for Mehmet Pasha (reigned 1607–11), whose resolute suppression of the unruly soldiers won him the epithet *Qul Qiran*, ‘the breaker of the (rebellious) soldiers’. He punished the rebels who had killed a previous pasha, and abolished the illegal *tulba* tax, which they levied from the fellahin. After restoring the sultan’s authority, he reorganized the army and reformed the tax system to make it more equitable. Ibn Abīl-Surūr wrote a lengthy and valuable account of these events.⁹ There are other less important chroniclers, Ibn Abīl-Surūr’s contemporaries or near contemporaries, who wrote about political events and power struggles within the army. These are Muḥammad al-Burullusī al-Sa‘dī, Mar‘ī ibn Yūsuf al-Hanbalī al-Maqdisī (al-Karmī), Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Ghamrī and Ibrāhīm ibn Abī Bakr al-Sawālihī.¹⁰

It was only towards the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century that Arabic history-writing in Egypt became really mature and rich. We have many chronicles, some of them very valuable, which fall

⁷ Surprisingly, many of them are still in manuscript form, while al-Ishāqī’s much inferior chronicle was published for the first time in 1296/1878–9. Yet with the growing interest in the history of Ottoman Egypt, two of Ibn Abīl-Surūr’s works have been published recently: *al-Nuzha al-zahiyya* and *al-Rawḍa al-ma’nūsa*. See also the next note.

⁸ Ibn Abīl-Surūr, *al-Minah al-rahmāniyya*.

⁹ Ibn Abīl-Surūr, ‘*Kashf al-kurba*’.

¹⁰ See Crecelius, *Eighteenth Century Egypt*, pp. 87–8.

into two main categories: literary chronicles, written by educated ‘*ulamā’* or scribes in standard literary Arabic, and the popular chronicles or ‘soldiers’ narratives. The ‘soldiers’ language is ungrammatical and the narratives have the characteristics of stories told before an audience. The chronicles of this category were created in the milieu of the seven *ojaqs* (the regiments of the Ottoman garrison in Cairo), more specifically in the ‘Azab *ojaq*, the second largest regiment in Cairo. The Janissaries, called also *Mustahfizān*, were the most powerful *ojaq*. These five manuscripts are known as the Damurdāshī group, since their authors are related in one way or another to officers in the ‘Azab regiment called by this surname.

The historians of the period describe in great detail the political struggles that they witnessed in Egypt, particularly in Cairo. After the pashas’ authority declined from the later part of the sixteenth century, power passed in the seventeenth century to the military grandees, called amirs, beys or *sanājiq* (the Arabized plural of the Turkish *sanjaq* or *sanjaq beyi*). In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, power shifted to the *ojaqs*, primarily to the Janissaries and the ‘Azab, in that order. For most of the eighteenth century, supremacy belonged to the constantly feuding Mamluk beys until 1798, when the French occupation put an end to the Mamluk regime. The military society in Egypt was divided along ethnic lines between *Rūmīs* (Turks) and *awlād Ārab*, Arabic-speaking natives of Egypt. Another division was between the *Misr Qullari*, literally the Egyptian slaves (i.e. soldiers) and the *Qāpi Qullari*, the soldiers of the Porte, those troops who were sent from the core provinces of the empire (usually the Janissaries). That division was between two kinds of Turkish-speaking men, with weaker or stronger roots in Egypt. Yet another rivalry in the army was that of the Faqrāriyya versus the Qāsimiyya, two factions which appeared in the seventeenth century.

It must be emphasized that all political players in Egypt, as well as contemporary historians, fully realized that the country was still under the Sultan’s suzerainty, and except for the rebellion of ‘Ali Bey Bulut Kapan (1768–72), there was no local political power that dared to challenge the Sultan’s authority. Ambitious beys tried to strengthen their position in Egypt or increase their income, but without openly rising against Istanbul.

Yūsuf al-Mallawānī, also called Ibn al-Wakīl, about whose personality little is known, is the author of a valuable and scholarly chronicle, *Tuhfat al-nuwwāb bi-man malaka Miṣr min al-mulūk wa'l-nuwwāb*, which covers early Islamic, Ottoman and Egyptian history, even ancient Egypt, and brings the narrative down to his death in 1131/1719.

Aḥmad Shalabī (Çelebi) ibn ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s chronicle, *Awḍah al-iṣhārāt fi man tawallā Miṣr al-Qāhira min al-wuzarā' wa'l-bāshāt*, covers the period from the Ottoman occupation in 923/1517 to the year 1150/1737. He was an

‘ālim and, like many ‘ulamā’ at the time, also had Sufi connections. He is unusually revealing personally, often telling about himself, his impressions of the events and personalities he witnessed, and his opinions and his sources of information. As other contemporary historians, he notices the declining power of the central Ottoman government and its representatives in Egypt. Sometimes he expresses contempt towards an Ottoman pasha (viceroy) or a *qādī*.¹¹ He also uses ethnic slurs when referring to Turks,¹² while fully acknowledging the role of the Sultan as the supreme ruler of Islam.

In addition to the political events, Ahmad Shalabī, as other historians in Ottoman Egypt, writes about economic, social and cultural, mainly religious, subjects. For example, Ahmad Shalabī and Yūsuf al-Mallawānī write about the devaluation of the currency, droughts, plague, the flood of the Nile and its effect on food shortages and prices. Occasionally, information is provided concerning Arab tribes and their chiefs, who were often involved in the power struggles in the capital, and more rarely about the common people, the city poor and fellahin. Events concerning the religious minorities, Christians and Jews, are also mentioned, usually when there were problems (with taxes or *dhimmi* officials accused of fraud) or when the minorities were victims of persecution. This episodic coverage gives a gloomier impression about the *dhimmīs* than the historical reality. Religious matters and personalities ('ulamā', Sufis and religious institutions) were always very important to that society, and it was natural that the chroniclers paid much attention to them. A good example is the detailed report which is told with some variations in several chronicles, Arabic and Turkish. It deals with a religiously motivated riot that took place in Cairo in the year 1123/1711 between a pro-Sufi crowd – mostly Arabic-speaking Egyptians – and Turkish-speakers, incited by a Turkish preacher (*al-wā'iz al-rūmī* of the Arabic sources and the *softa* of the Turkish chronicles) against customs and beliefs associated with saint-worship, popular with the native Egyptians. The Ottoman chief *qādī*, the Azharī shaykhs and the Mamluk amirs were also drawn into the strife.¹³

Muṣṭafā ibn Ibrāhīm al-Maddāh al-Qinālī (or al-Qaynalī) was one of the Damurdāshī ‘Azab group. His chronicle, *Majmū‘ latīf yashtamil ‘alā waqā‘i’ Miṣr al-Qāhira*,¹⁴ covers Egyptian history until 1152/1739, with an insider’s

¹¹ A newly appointed viceroy tells the Mamluk amirs in Cairo: ‘You are the safeguard of the Sultan and the state, and we are guests here and the Sultan consults only you about the affairs of his state’ (Ahmad Shalabī, *Awādah al-išhārāt*, p. 321). A certain arrogant Ottoman chief judge declared upon his arrival in Cairo that he would renew the Egyptians’ religion. Later, when he got into some trouble, the people said to him in biting sarcasm: ‘O Shaykh al-Islam, you are the one who came to Egypt to renew the people’s religion for them?’ (ibid., p. 315).

¹² Ibid., p. 253.

¹³ On this incident, see Winter, *Egyptian Society*, pp. 157–9.

¹⁴ It is still in manuscript form. See ‘Abd al-Wahhab Bakr, ‘Interrelationships’.

information about events in the military and the power struggles among the amirs' factions. The most important chronicler of this group is Ahmād al-Damurdāshī *Katkhudā 'Azabān* (meaning an officer below the rank of the regimental commander in the 'Azab corps), whose chronicle, *al-Durra al-muṣāna fī akhbār al-Kināna*, ends in 1170/1756.¹⁵ His narrative is lively, detailed and trustworthy, and is full of information about military and political events, as well as anecdotes that throw light on various economic, religious and cultural aspects of Egyptian civilian society. It is important to note that Ahmād al-Damurdāshī was keenly aware of the *de facto* autonomy of Egypt within the empire. He refers to the Ottoman state as *al-dawla*, 'the (central) government', or *al-dawla al-rūmiyya*. He calls the regime in Egypt *dawlat al-mamālik*, namely, 'the Mamluk government', as it appears in the book's title: *Fī akhbār mā waq'a bi-Miṣr fī dawlat al-mamālik*, 'Concerning what Happened in Egypt under the Mamluk Government'.

We come now to the monumental work of 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ḥasan al-Jabartī (1168–1241/1754–1825 or 1826), the last and arguably the greatest of the historians of Ottoman Egypt. His importance as a chronicler was recognized a long time ago.¹⁶ Moreover, in addition to al-Jabartī's proven worth as a historical source, modern scholarship has tended to admire him to the extent that his predecessors in Egyptian historiography during the Ottoman period have been unjustly dismissed.¹⁷ It must be said that al-Jabartī himself contributed to this conception by deliberately obscuring his debt to earlier historians, primarily Ahmād Shalabī and Ahmād al-Damurdāshī from whose writings he borrowed heavily to reconstruct the narrative of events preceding his own lifetime.¹⁸ Al-Jabartī came from a family of *'ulamā'*. He records that, when an Ottoman pasha who visited Cairo was amazed at the ignorance of the scholars of al-Azhar in the mathematical sciences, it was his father who saved the honour of the Egyptians by proving his knowledge in this discipline.

Al-Jabartī became a historian under the influence of the French occupation of Egypt in the year 1798. This was a traumatic event and the Egyptians' first taste of the overwhelming military supremacy of modern Europe. Al-Jabartī wrote a detailed description of the occupation and the people's reaction to the French. The Frenchmen's claim that they were Muslims, or at least friends of Islam, was met with ridicule. The ideas of the Revolution were totally and

¹⁵ See also Crecelius and 'Abd al-Wahhāb Bakr (eds. and trs.), *al-Damurdāshī's Chronicle*.

¹⁶ See e.g. Lane, *The Manners and Customs*, p. 222, where Lane, the great Arabist who wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century, praises al-Jabartī's chronicle.

¹⁷ David Ayalon writes: 'Of the local historians of Ottoman Egypt, 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Jabartī stands out as a giant among dwarfs' (Ayalon, 'The Historian al-Jabartī', 218).

¹⁸ See Crecelius, 'Ahmād Shalabī'.

naturally misunderstood. For all his hatred of the occupiers, al-Jabartī was impressed by their love of learning and science and by their system of justice.¹⁹ After the departure of the French army and the return of the Ottomans to Egypt, al-Jabartī wrote another account of the occupation that was much more hostile to the French and much more favourable to the Ottomans.²⁰ Finally he wrote his *magnum opus*, the *'Ajā'ib*.²¹ This work is a chronicle of Egypt from the end of the eleventh Hijra century (1099/1688) setting the stage for the rivalry within the amirs' ranks between the Faqārī and the Qāsimī factions.²² The chronicle ends with the year 1236/1821, under Muḥammad 'Alī's rule. As the book's title indicates, it is a combination of narrative (*akhbār*) organized by the Hijra years and obituaries (*tarājim*) of the notable persons who died during each year. As already mentioned above, al-Jabartī's effort to belittle his reliance on earlier chroniclers leaves a bad impression. Nevertheless, his coverage of events since his own adolescence, starting around 1184/1770, is a masterpiece of history-writing. The detailed description and evaluation of the French occupation and, later, the early stages of Muḥammad 'Alī's rule, are written with precision, honesty and insight. The historian's understanding of political events and of his society, with all its shades and nuances, is truly unparalleled. He presents the reader with a panoramic view of Egyptian, primarily Cairene, society, economy and culture, with several important glimpses of the bedouin and the fellahin as well. His obituaries of amirs, Arab shaykhs, *'ulamā'*, Sufis and other outstanding persons, and his chronicle, actually a diary, of the events he witnessed and experienced, are among the best in Islamic historiography. Al-Jabartī was a man of strong religious faith, an ardent orthodox Muslim, who hated infidels and the vulgar sides of popular Islam. He admired the reformed orthodox Sufi order of the Khalwatiyya, to which even the head *'ulamā'* of al-Azhar (*shuyūkh al-Azhar*) belonged. On the other hand, he condemned and detested the excesses of the vulgar dervish orders. He often criticized the Mamluk amirs for their behaviour, but he leaves no doubt that they were better Muslims than the Ottomans, the Turkish soldiers who massacred them at the order of Muḥammad 'Alī. He hated the latter's tyranny, but acknowledged his talents. Al-Jabartī's education and approach were thoroughly traditional, but he was the first modern historian, and he experienced 'the impact of the West'. Owing to his talent, sensitivity and

¹⁹ See Moreh (ed. and tr.), *al-Jabartī's Chronicle*.

²⁰ al-Jabartī, *Mazhar al-taqdīs*.

²¹ al-Jabartī, *'Ajā'ib*. The dates of the writing of the three chronicles and other issues related to al-Jabartī's manuscripts were established by Moreh, *al-Jabartī's Chronicle*, pp. 1–30, esp. p. 18.

²² The historical narrative is preceded by a legendary version of the emergence of these two factions in the first days of the Ottoman occupation. See Holt, 'Al-Jabartī's Introduction'.

insight, al-Jabarti's reputation as the greatest historian of Ottoman Egypt is fully justified.

SYRIA

Arabic historiography in *Bilād al-Shām*, Greater Syria, during the Ottoman period is at least as rich in quality and quantity as its Egyptian counterpart. A central and obvious reason was that Egypt had only one political and intellectual centre, Cairo, while Syria had at least three where historical works were written – Damascus, Lebanon and Aleppo. Far behind were smaller towns, Hims, Hama, Safad and Jerusalem. Only a part of the Syrian historical output from the Ottoman period has been published, even less than that of Egypt.

In all the regions that are included in the present survey, namely Egypt, Syria, Lebanon (and in the Yemen as well), the first decades after the Ottoman occupation are well chronicled, followed by a long lacuna in history-writing. The seventeenth century is much richer in historical coverage. Yet it was in the eighteenth century that the historiography became truly rich. The majority of historians who wrote in Arabic in Syria were men of religion, '*ulamā'*, members of families of religious scholars and functionaries, almost all of them with some Sufi affiliations, in accord with the spirit of the times. Several of the leading Lebanese chroniclers were Christian clerics or bureaucrats in the service of powerful rulers. The topics covered by the chronicles were local politics, power struggles between men and factions, careers of '*ulamā'*, Sufi shaykhs, prominent *ashrāf* and other *a'yān* (notables). Special attention was paid to religious matters, among both Muslims and Christians. Since Damascus was a major station on the hajj route, much information is provided about the pilgrimage. The chronicles are good sources for social, economic and urban history, giving details about food prices, construction projects and the like. As in Egypt, Syrian historiography offers insights into the local attitudes towards the Ottoman empire and its local representatives.

By far the most important and prolific historian of the late Mamluk and the early Ottoman period is an '*ālim*', a native of the al-Sālihiyya suburb of Damascus, called Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Tūlūn al-Sālihī al-Dimashqī al-Hanafī (880–953/1475–1546). Like Ibn Iyās, his Egyptian contemporary, Ibn Tūlūn wrote a detailed, eyewitness account of the Ottoman occupation of his town, which deeply shocked him. Ibn Tūlūn was a professional and devoted '*ālim*', however, not a *mamlūk*'s son like Ibn Iyās, and his judgement on the Ottomans, from the Sultan down, was less biased and more balanced. His Arabic style is literary, unlike that of Ibn Iyās, whose Arabic

is lively but ungrammatical. Ibn Tūlūn wrote no less than 753 treatises, many about Islamic learning, but he owes his fame to his many historical writings. He even wrote his autobiography, a rare genre in pre-modern Arabic.²³ His best and most detailed historical work is *Mufakahat al-khullān fi ḥawādith al-zamān*, a chronicle covering the last decades of Mamluk Syria, Damascus in particular, from 884/1489, and the first years of Ottoman rule in Damascus until the year 926/1520.²⁴ While Ibn Tūlūn's narrative is less dramatic than Ibn Iyās' and his political analysis is weaker, Ibn Tūlūn is less prejudiced and more accurate and reliable in his reporting.²⁵ Ibn Tūlūn's world and world view are an 'ālim's, yet he also reveals a humanistic sense of justice.

Ibn Tūlūn also wrote a book about al-Ṣālihiyya, his native suburb of Damascus, entitled *al-Qalā'id al-jawhariyya fi ta'rīkh al-Ṣālihiyya*, which is an important source of lives of notables, primarily religious functionaries and 'ulamā', and religious institutions. Another book is about al-Mazza, a village near Damascus where the author lived for some time.²⁶ Ibn Tūlūn wrote two important books about the personalities and careers of office-holders in Damascus, who served in that city under the Mamluks and the Ottomans, one about governors of the province of Damascus and the second about the chief *qādīs* in that city.²⁷ He also wrote a biographical dictionary of 'ulamā' whom he knew, arranged alphabetically, *al-Tamattū bi'l-iqrān bayna tarājim al-shuyūkh wa'l-aqrān*. The full extent of Ibn Tūlūn's worth as the leading historian of Damascus has only recently been revealed and his many works are being published and studied.

Another great historian of the period, whom Ibn Tūlūn regarded as his teacher, was 'Abd al-Qādir al-Nu'aymī, the author of the important historical encyclopedia of the schools and houses of worship in Damascus, entitled *al-Dāris fī ta'rīkh al-madāris*. Al-Nu'aymī was one of the outstanding Islamic scholars of Damascus, and an expert on *awqāf* (pious endowments). The work is organized by *madhhabs* (schools of law) and types of institutions, Koran

²³ Ibn Tūlūn, *al-Fulk al-mashbūn*. He came from a family of well-to-do merchants and also high-ranking 'ulamā'. His father traded in cotton. His mother was of Turkish stock, but he did not understand Turkish. His paternal uncle was a *qādī* and *muftī*.

²⁴ Unfortunately, the text that has come down to us is not complete. Al-Ghazzī, a famous seventeenth-century Syrian biographer, who relied heavily on Ibn Tūlūn's works, saw the whole chronicle that included also the periods between 880–4/1476–80 and 927–51/1520–44. See al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā'ira*, vol. I, pp. 5, 35, 67, 193, 206.

²⁵ For example, Ibn Iyās calls the Ottoman army 'a rabble'. Ibn Tūlūn visited the Ottoman camp and was impressed by its orderliness.

²⁶ Ibn Tūlūn, *Ta'rīkh al-Mazza*.

²⁷ They are respectively *I'lām al-warā* and *Qudāt Dimashq*; the first part of the latter work, giving the biographies of the Shafis, was written by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Nu'aymī, Ibn Tūlūn's senior colleague. Ibn Tūlūn added the biographies of the Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali *qādīs*.

schools, madrasas, *zāwiyas* (Sufi centres) and the like, and includes biographies of teachers and also details about relevant *awqāf*.

No other chronicles about the rest of the sixteenth century have been published at present.²⁸

An important historical source for Damascus in the sixteenth century is Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī's *al-Kawākib al-sā'ira bi-a'yān al-mi'a al-āshira*, the first of the three centennial biographical dictionaries of Ottoman Syria. Al-Ghazzī (977–1061/1570–1650 or 1651) was a member of a family of 'ulamā' and an orthodox Sufi of the Qadiri order, who lived in Damascus where he held several religious offices. The biographies in the *Kawākib* are arranged by generations (*ṭabaqāt*) of thirty-three years each. The order is alphabetical, starting with men named Muhammad, as a token of respect for the Prophet. Among his biographies there are Ottoman officials, *qādīs* and governors. He criticized several rulers for their corruption. Since he lived most of his adult life in the seventeenth century, he had to rely extensively on information he found in earlier historians, such as Ibn Ṭūlūn, Ibn al-Himṣī and 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Shā'rānī.²⁹

Al-Ghazzī continued the *Kawākib* with a dictionary of lives of notables in the first *ṭabaqa* of the eleventh/seventeenth century, entitled *Lutf al-samar wa-qāfi al-thamar min tarājim a'yān al-ṭabaqa al-ūlā min al-qarn al-hādī 'ashar*. It has 254 biographies including Ottoman judges, military personnel, poets, dervishes, physicians and guild chiefs. From approximately the same time we have *Tarājim al-a'yān min abnā' al-zamān*, the biographical dictionary of Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Būrīnī (d. 1024/1615). He too was on good terms with the authorities, travelled extensively through Syria and gives an exact account of what he saw and heard.

This brief survey of the biographical dictionaries of the sixteenth century will not be complete without mentioning the work (*al-Shaqā'iq al-nu'māniyya* etc.) of Ṭāsköprülüzāde Ahmad ibn Muṣṭafā (d. 968/1560), a Turkish historian, who, writing in Arabic, recorded Ottoman 'ulamā' and Sufis from the establishment of the empire. They are arranged by the sultans' reigns.

A popular collection of biographies from early Islam to the year AH 1000 was written by Ibn al-'Imād, another Hanbali 'ālim born in the al-Šālihiyya suburb of Damascus (d. 1089/1622), entitled *Shadharāt al-dhahab*.

The great centennial dictionary for eleventh-/seventeenth-century Syria is *Khulāsat al-athar fi a'yān al-qarn al-hādī 'ashar* by Muḥammad al-Amīn

²⁸ A work by Mūsā al-Anṣārī called *Nuzhat al-khāṭir*, describing everyday life in Damascus in the sixteenth century, is still in manuscript.

²⁹ Ibn al-Himṣī (d. 934/1527), a historian of Syria and Egypt whose writings have not survived. Al-Shā'rānī (d. 973/1565) was the most important Egyptian mystic and historian of Sufism in his time. See Winter, *Society and Religion*.

al-Muhibbī (d. 1111/1699). Muhibbī also was a member of a wealthy family of Damascene *'ulamā'*. The work consists of 1,289 biographies of distinguished persons. It provides important information about politics, religion and culture in the Ottoman Middle East and the Hijaz. There are also biographies about personages from India and Kurdistan.³⁰

The history of Damascus in the eighteenth century is recorded in a detailed and uninterrupted manner by several reliable contemporary chronicles. The earliest is Ibn Kannān's *Yawmiyyāt shāmiyya*, covering the period between 1111/1699 and 1153/1740. Ibn Kannān describes daily life in Damascus, in particular his native al-Ṣalihiyya suburb. Again, he writes about men of religion and the pilgrimage and also about Arab and Turkish officials. There is also information about construction works and about parks and palaces in the city. Ibn Kannān belonged to the Hanafi *madhhab*³¹ and the Khalwati Sufi order in which his father was a shaykh. He was also an *'ālim*, and taught at the Murshidiyya Madrasa.

The immediate continuator of Ibn Kannān's narrative was a chronicler, who, unlike the great majority of the historians of Ottoman Syria, was not a scholar but a barber, called Aḥmad al-Budayrī al-Ḥallāq ('the Barber'). His work, *Hawādith Dimashq al-yawmiyya*, covers the period 1154–76/1740 or 1741–62; thus, with Ibn Kannān, we have a continuous chronological narrative of Damascus for sixty-three years. Al-Budayrī was a Sufi, but his order was the Sadiyya, which was notoriously unorthodox. His shop was situated near the palace of As'ad Pasha al-'Az̄m, the governor of the province of Damascus. Through his occupation as a barber, Budayrī was in touch with the people who came to his shop, also for healing and the circumcision of their sons, and he learned about their problems and opinions. Al-Budayrī wrote about politics in the city and about Damascene society and economy, that is, food prices, the guilds and political factions, and the struggles between them. He also reports the deeds of Shaykh Zāhir al-'Umar al-Zaydānī, the ruler of Galilee and the coast of Palestine. He writes with feeling about the disaster of 1170/1757, when the pilgrims' caravan was attacked and sacked by bedouin and many of the pilgrims were massacred.

The original text of the chronicle has not survived. What we have is the edition made by Shaykh al-Qāsimī, a nineteenth-century *'ālim*, who brought what must have been al-Budayrī's rather colloquial style closer to standard literary Arabic.

³⁰ Laylā al-Ṣabbāgh wrote a detailed study of al-Muhibbī and his work, entitled *Min a'lām al-fikr al-'arabi* etc.

³¹ Ibn Kannān came from a Hanbali family who lived in al-Ṣalihiyya suburb in which this *madhhab* had a strong following, but he chose to be a Hanafi, perhaps out of respect for 'Abd al-Ghāni al-Nābulusī, the famous mystic, who was his teacher.

Another Damascene chronicler, a Greek Orthodox priest of Damascus named Mikhā'il Breik, brings the historical coverage of the city to 1782. The book is entitled *Ta'rīkh al-Shām*. He explains that he began his history at the year 1720 because this was the time when the rule of the governors (*wālīs*) of the 'Azm family started. He makes a point that they were the first native Arabs (*awlād 'Arab*), as distinct from the Turks who rose to this office. At the same time, another Arab, and not a Greek, was appointed as the first Arab patriarch. Breik reports of conflicts in Damascus between Catholics and Greek Orthodox. He stands out among his contemporaries as the only historian who also wrote about events that were taking place outside the Ottoman empire, mainly in Europe.

The last centennial dictionary for the period under survey is *Silk al-durar* by the Damascene 'ālim al-Murādī (he died in 1206/1791 or 1792 at the age of thirty-one). He came from a family of Hanafi '*ulamā'* originating from Samarkand. Like his father before him, Muḥammad Khalil served as the Hanafi *muftī* of Damascus and the *naqīb al-ashrāf* there. The book, which comprises 1,000 biographies, is a most valuable source for the political, social and cultural history of Syria in the eighteenth century. In addition to using contemporary chronicles, al-Murādī corresponded with other '*ulamā'* in Syria and Egypt, asking them to collect materials for his biographical dictionary. Thus, al-Hajj Ḥasan from Jerusalem compiled for him lives of '*ulamā'* and shaykhs who lived in Jerusalem in the twelfth/eighteenth century. Al-Murādī contacted also the Yemeni scholar Murtaḍā al-Zabidī who lived in Cairo. The latter convinced his disciple al-Jabartī to collect materials for al-Murādī. This prompted al-Jabartī to become a historian.

Strangely, al-Murādī failed to include the biographies of the governors of the 'Azm family, perhaps because of their *fallāḥ* origin. The only exception was Muḥammad Pasha al-'Azm (1731–83), perhaps because he was sufficiently removed in time from the family's humble origins, or because he was recognized as a just ruler. Al-Murādī was appointed as the Hanafi *muftī* during his governorship.³²

Two biographical works on the governors of Damascus were written by Ibn Jum'a al-Maqarrī and Ibn al-Qārī. The former (d. after 1156/1743) was a Hanafi *qādī* and a Qadiri Sufi. Sayyid Raslān Ibn al-Qārī was a member of a well-known Damascene family of *ashrāf*. He wrote his book in the first half of the nineteenth century.³³

³² Rāfeq, *The Province of Damascus*, p. 330.

³³ The works of Ibn al-Jum'a and Ibn al-Qārī were edited and published by al-Munajjid under the title *Wulāt Dimashq fī'l-ahd al-'uthmānī*. Ibn al-Jum'a's work was published in translation together with Ibn Ṭūlūn's collection of the biographies of governors of Damascus under the Mamluks and the early Ottomans in Laoust, *Les Gouverneurs de Damas*.

Two biographies of Zāhir al-‘Umar were written by Mīkhā’il and ‘Abbūd al-Şabbāgh, two Christian brothers from Acre, who were related to Ibrāhīm al-Şabbāgh, a man in Zāhir al-‘Umar’s service. The biographies praise Ibrāhīm and try to absolve him of responsibility for his master’s policies.³⁴

LEBANON

Although Mount Lebanon was a part of Greater Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*) and, of course, a part of the Ottoman empire, it was a separate political and administrative unit and had its own history owing to its unique topography. It often enjoyed a degree of independence and had a predominantly non-Muslim population of Christians and Druze. During the Ottoman period, Lebanon had many important, well-educated historians, several of whom were clergymen, and others were bureaucrats. The former were preoccupied with the history of their communities, defending their creed and describing the quarrels among different Christian churches. The Lebanese historians wrote about the politics of the region (some recorded the history of other parts of Syria as well), struggles between factions, the great feudal families of the Mountain, and the leaders. They wrote about the history of the two semi-autonomous dynasties who ruled Lebanon until the nineteenth century, the Ma‘nids and the Shihābs. The former, who ruled the region from the sixteenth century until 1697, were Druze; the latter, who reigned from 1697 until 1841, were Muslims. Neither dynasty emphasized its religion, but tried to guard their autonomy. The outstanding Ma‘nid ruler was Fakhr al-Dīn II (1586–1635) and the longest ruling Shihābī was Bashīr II (1789–1841). Both received due attention from historians.

Patriarch Istifān al-Duwayhī (1630–1704), the greatest of the Maronite church historians, is the author of the only history of Syria with an emphasis on Lebanon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by a contemporary writer. He wrote about the Maronite community and church with the purpose of defending their Catholic orthodoxy and attacking other Christian churches, such as the Jacobites, whom he considered as hostile to his church as the Mamluk sultans. His general history, *Ta’rīkh al-azmina*, is a chronicle of Syria from the Crusades until the end of the seventeenth century,³⁵ but the fullest and the most informative account is about the last two centuries. Duwayhī’s emphasis is on northern Lebanon where the population was Maronite. It was ruled by Druze amirs or by Muslims, who were appointed by the Mamluks,

³⁴ See Mīkhā’il al-Şabbāgh, *Ta’rīkh*. ‘Abbūd al-Şabbāgh’s biography is still in manuscript: ‘al-Rawd al-zāhir fi akhbār Dāhir’, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, F. A. arabe 4610.

³⁵ The later 1976 edition covers the period from the rise of Islam until 1098/1686.

and later by the Ottomans. The writer names his sources, Lebanese chroniclers who wrote about various local lords. He also used Maronite books and the Vatican archives.

During the eighteenth century educated and secular chroniclers, who were interested in politics in southern Lebanon which became the political centre, wrote Lebanese history. They describe the power struggles between the leading feudal families.³⁶

Hananiyā al-Munayyir (d. 1823), a Greek monk of the Shuwayrite religious order, wrote a history of the Shuf region of Lebanon and the Shihābis. He concentrated on his own religious order and other Christian religious topics. The most important historian of this period is Aḥmad Haydar al-Shihābī (1761–1835), a cousin of Bashīr II. He had access to official documents, such as Bashīr's correspondence with Ottoman governors. He wrote a history of Lebanon from 622 (the rise of Islam) until 1827, entitled *Għurar al-hisān fi akhbār al-zamān*.³⁷ Bashīr always concealed his religious identity, although he died a Catholic. Aḥmad Haydar was a Maronite convert from Islam. It is not surprising that in his history Aḥmad Haydar expresses unmitigated support for the Shihābis, in particular for Bashīr II, against their Lebanese and Ottoman enemies. In collecting materials for his historical work Aḥmad Haydar was assisted by some of Lebanon's leading men of letters, such as Buṭrus al-Bustānī, Nāṣif al-Yāzijī, Fāris Aḥmad al-Shidyāq, Ṭannūs al-Shidyāq and Niqūlā al-Turk. The two last mentioned eventually became historians in their own right. Unlike Aḥmad Haydar al-Shihābī, who wrote the history of rulers and ruling families, Ṭannūs al-Shidyāq (1791–1861) as a historian saw Lebanon as a national community despite the ethnic and political divisions. With the help of Buṭrus al-Bustānī he published a book about the noble families of Mount Lebanon and their origins.³⁸

Niqūlā al-Turk, a Greek Catholic Lebanese, was sent by Bashīr II to act as a spy on the French army in Egypt. The result of his mission was his chronicle, *Dhikr tamalluk jumbūr al-fransāwiyya al-aqtār al-miṣriyya wa'l-shāmiyya* (A Report on the French Republic's Occupation of the Lands of Egypt and Syria). Comparison with al-Jabartī, who described the same events, shows that, unlike the Egyptian chronicler, Niqūlā al-Turk admired the French, although he did criticize them when reporting the atrocities they committed against the inhabitants of Jaffa in Palestine during the French occupation of that town.

³⁶ For a few examples, see Hourani, 'Historians of Lebanon'.

³⁷ His books were published in several editions, e.g. Aḥmad Haydar al-Shihābī, *Lubnān*; and his, *Ta'rikh*.

³⁸ Under the title *Akhbār al-a'yān fi Jabal Lubnān*.

IRAQ

Arabic historiography of Ottoman Iraq (before the eighteenth century) was considerably more limited than that of Egypt or Syria during the same period. For the sixteenth century, no historical parallel to Ibn Iyās or Ibn Ṭūlūn that would describe Iraq's conditions under the Ottomans who conquered the country in 941/1534 has come down to us, and the few works that were written are in Turkish.³⁹ Iraqi historiography emerged in earnest in the seventeenth century and arrived to maturity in the eighteenth century. The historians tended to write about Iraq's main cities: Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, and several smaller towns. Generally, Iraqi annals during the Ottoman period are similar to their Egyptian and Syrian counterparts in describing their society: governors, *qādīs*, '*ulamā'*, Sufis, *ashrāf* and some glimpses of the common people. As expected, power struggles among the rulers are a constant feature in the chronicles. As for foreign affairs, wars between Iran and Ottoman Iraq are the main theme. Baghdad itself was occupied by the Safavids from 1622 until 1632. The attacks of the Iranians under Nādir Shāh during the first half of the eighteenth century (1733 until 1746, including sieges of Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk) were the most traumatic events in the political history of Iraq, and are reported in detail by Iraqi chroniclers.

The first historian of Ottoman Iraq worthy of the name was 'Alī al-Ḥuwāyī (d. 1075/1664). He was born in Bahrain and migrated to Iraq. He lived in the court of the amirs of the Afrasiyāb house, founded at the end of the sixteenth century by a local magnate who administered the province of Basra as his private domain; his descendants ruled the province until the end of the seventeenth century under formal Ottoman suzerainty. Al-Ḥuwāyī's history of Basra in the first half of the century is entitled *al-Sira al-murdiyya fi sharḥ al-fardīyya*.

Aḥmad ibn 'Abdallah al-Ghurābī from Baghdad (d. 1102/1690) wrote the first chronicle that is arranged by years. For his information, he relied on Turkish official documents and eyewitness reports. He was a preacher and a man of letters (*adīb*). His book, '*Uyūn akhbār al-a'yān mimmā madā min sālif al-'usur wa'l-azmān*', is a chronicle of the political events in Baghdad in the seventeenth century.

Similarly to the situation in Syria, eighteenth-century Iraq saw the emergence of governors (*wālis*) of local Iraqi families. Maḥmūd al-Rahabī, a *muftī*,

³⁹ See Ra'ūf's survey of Iraqi historiography under the Ottomans, mentioned in fn. 1. It is important to mention that the Yemen produced very rich historiography during the sixteenth century: see Soudan's important and detailed study of the chronicle of al-Mawzā'i (fl. 1618–22), *Le Yemen ottoman*, who praised 'the just rule of the Ottomans'.

wrote the biography of pashas who confronted the Iranians in 1145/1736. ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Suwaydī (d. 1175/1761), an important chronicler, wrote the history of Baghdad in the first half of the eighteenth century. His book, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād* or *Hadīqat al-zawrā’ fī sīrat al-wuzarā’*, tells the history of the city through the biography of the governors Hasan Pasha and his son Ahmad Pasha.

This survey will be concluded with two brothers from Mosul who wrote about the history of Iraq until their time. Yāsīn ibn Khayrallāh al-‘Umarī al-Khaṭīb (d. after 1232/1816), the more important of the two, wrote a general historical work from the Hijra until 1226/1811, with an emphasis on Iraq, in particular Mosul and Baghdad.⁴⁰ Muḥammad Amīn al-‘Umarī, Yāsīn’s brother, wrote *Manhal al-awliyā’*, another book on Mosul.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the important differences between the various Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, certain common features emerge in their historiography. With the notable exception of Iraq, local chronicles cover reasonably well the first decades or at least the first years after the Ottoman occupation in the early sixteenth century. The rest of that century has much less historiographical coverage. The seventeenth century witnessed more intensive historical writing in Arabic, which came to full maturity and richness in the eighteenth century. This is true with regard to Iraq as well.

Many of the chronicles are good sources for political history. Most also provide information about economic, social and cultural history. Again, notwithstanding the differences between the societies of the various Arab lands and cities, there are strong similarities owing to the common religion (at least for the Muslim majority), common language and culture. The roles and status of the ‘*ulamā’*, *ashrāf*, Sufis, guilds, leaders of city quarters and the like were as a general rule similar in Cairo, Aleppo, Baghdad or Jerusalem. This is reflected in the historical writings of the period.

Latent or even explicit patriotism is discernible in the writings of the local historians. Nationalistic sentiments were of course unknown at the time. The writers (and no doubt the population at large) accepted the Ottoman rule and hegemony as legitimate and natural, despite occasional expressions of criticism of the regime or even antipathy towards the Turks. As the Ottoman rule was becoming more decentralized after the sixteenth century, and as

⁴⁰ *Zubdat al-āthār al-jaliyya*; *Ghāyat al-marām*; and *Munyat al-udabā’*.

local forces, such as the Mamluks in Egypt or the leaders of strong Arab families elsewhere, were entering the ruling elites in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, the Sultan and the Ottoman capital seemed more distant and even irrelevant. Only rarely do Arab chroniclers tell their readers about events in Istanbul, and then only when these events could affect matters in the province.

PART III

POPULAR POETRY

CHAPTER 10

POPULAR POETRY IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD, 1150–1850

If it is the post-classical period of Arabic literature that has received the least scholarly attention of all eras of Arabic literature, it is undoubtedly the sub-field of ‘popular literature’ that has suffered the most neglect. While some of the gaps in our knowledge of popular literature in the modern period have, in recent years, been filled in, the earlier periods remain largely understudied. In this chapter we will briefly shift the focus to one segment of this most understudied area of Arabic literature, namely popular poetry of the post-classical period. From the outset the term ‘popular poetry’ requires some discussion and qualification. In the next few pages, while attempting to sort out some of the apparent problems with the use of this term, we will roughly delimit the area of poetic production that we are concerned with and defend the use of this term as the best of an inexact lot for what is in fact a very diverse area of Arabic poetic production.

Most of what we know as ‘Arabic poetry’ is, of course, poetry produced in *fushā* or classical Arabic by court poets or the poets of the rich and famous, in other words, the creative currency of a privileged sliver of society. Those who possessed sufficient power and wealth engaged the services of poets whose main activity was the creation of panegyrics in their honour intended to enhance their benefactors’ prestige. The classical *qaṣīda*, or ode, with its mostly predictable roster of motifs, was the conventional form that such tributes took. Colloquial Arabic, the language of everyday life, had virtually no role in these privileged settings. Unlike classical Arabic, prestiged as the descendant of the language of the Koran, colloquial Arabic, the language of the *āmma*, or the common people, *par excellence*, and of everyday life, was excluded from these literary venues.

Indeed it is clear that the critics and historians of Arabic literature were strongly biased against preserving any material that did not conform to a narrowly articulated literary code. The *Kitāb al-aghānī*, for example, cites with disapproval the ninth-century example of the famous singer Ibrāhīm al-Mawsilī (d. 235/850) who sang several lines that did not conform to the rules of

Arabic grammar or prosody.¹ Even in Islamic Spain where, as we shall see, new strophic forms of poetry found freer rein than in the East, there was resistance to recording anything but the classically approved *qaṣīda*. The historian ‘Abd al-Wahīd al-Marrākushī (d. 721/1321) states in his *al-Mu‘jib fī talkhīṣ akhbār al-maghrib*, ‘Were it not contrary to custom to adduce *muwashshabāt* in books of serious purport which are destined to last, I would have quoted some of [Ibn Zuhr’s] poems in this genre.’² *Dīwān* after *dīwān* disappoints in the lack of *muwashshabāt* among its contents, despite reference elsewhere to the existence of such compositions among the poet’s repertoire. If this was the case for the *muwashshab*, we can amply gauge the treatment received by compositions that strayed even further than *muwashshabāt* from the linguistic and formal straight-and-narrow. Indeed, even when popular material did actually find its way to the scribe’s hand, it often had to survive the editorial interventions of its handlers. We need only think of the kind of amending and correcting that went on at various stages throughout the history of the text of *A Thousand and One Nights* and of the difficulty encountered by Gaston Maspéro in preventing native Egyptians from ‘correcting’ what they perceived as ‘bad’ Arabic as they recorded popular tales and songs,³ to understand that some degree of editing must always have taken place during the writing down of what had originally been oral poetry. Given even the best intentions of a scribe intent on preserving the colloquial flavour of a text, the lack of any agreed-upon method of transcribing colloquial Arabic was bound to create problems. Hampered by this and by our limited knowledge of pre-modern Arabic dialects, we are often left to guess at how to pronounce what was, to the scribe, a familiar vernacular. That the ‘common people’ were producing various kinds of verse of their own is clear. Indeed Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī claims that they often outshone the elite in the production of such poetry. While oral poetry emanating from an illiterate community that had been limitedly altered by written record and preserved for our consideration is what we would wish for in this context, we cannot expect such bounty given the cultural prejudice against recording such poetry and the tendency to hypercorrection by educated scribes when it was recorded. Chroniclers such as Ibn Iyās (d. c. 930/1524) have recorded snippets of poetry composed by ‘*al-‘āmma*’ on occasions such as the celebration of the departure of the pilgrimage litter (*māḥmal*),⁴ or the poetic taunts of children jeering an ousted Turkish governor,⁵ but these are mere titbits from what must have been a sumptuous table now beyond our reach.

¹ Cachia, *Ballads*, p. 9.

² Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, p. 4, fn. 5.

³ Maspéro, *Chansons populaires*, cited by Cachia, *Ballads*, p. 6.

⁴ Kilāñi, *al-Adab al-miṣrī*, p. 193.

⁵ Ibid., p. 194.

In what sense, then, is the material we will be dealing with here actually ‘popular’? This adjective might reasonably be applied to literature on the basis of a number of interrelated features. Popular poetry might be defined as compositions produced by the common people, the under-represented lower classes of society. It might be expected that the subject of this poetry relates to the lives and concerns of ordinary people, as opposed to those of a more privileged elite. The targeted audience for the verse would be an equally valid criterion for assigning this designation, and poetry using other than the traditional verse forms of the *qaṣīda* or *qit‘a* might reasonably be deemed popular. Most important in the case of Arabic, the linguistic register of the works might be used as the primary means of identifying popular texts. In fact, no single criterion among these can be relied on to the exclusion of all others, and linguistic register, subject matter and form alike will be our primary guides for the purposes of this chapter. Most of the texts we will be discussing here do not make exclusive use of the vernacular, but rather consist of an admixture of colloquial and standard Arabic. In other words, they are *malḥūn*, at the very least, eschewing desinential inflection, at the most containing colloquial expressions and structures.

The kind of material that we will be considering is a limited body of texts in hybrid Arabic produced by poets well known for their classical compositions, as well as by lesser lights with no exalted classical laurels to rest on. These poems are not exclusively the work of educated poets, as some have suggested. While it may not be the uncorrupted voice of the masses that is heard in this poetry, it is also not exclusively the voice of the elite of courtly society. Some studies of non-classical verse have been plagued by too rigid a view of pre-modern Arab society, suggesting that the cultural and social elite lived in an entirely separate world from the uneducated masses. In fact, these divergent classes shared much in the way of cultural paradigms and life experience, including the use of colloquial language in their everyday lives. It is this point of social and cultural intersection that is often conveyed in the poetry dealt with in this chapter. The total dominance of *fusħā* poetry, which its unilateral preservation would seem to suggest, is misleading, for in fact a significant number of well-known poets were involved in the production of non-canonical poetry, and many among the elite were known to have enjoyed the products of their labours. At the same time, it is clear that diverse segments of society were involved with this type of poetry – at least the poetry that has survived – either as producers or as consumers. In addition, society was increasingly made up of various groups in the middle that shared some of the cultural prerogatives of both extremes of the social spectrum. In some instances the texts themselves provide fairly specific identification of patrons and consumers who hail, if not from the lower classes, at least from what might be considered

a kind of petite bourgeoisie. From the twelfth century on, at least, Arabic popular poetry is nothing if not poetry that moved both up and down the social scale at various points, so that it might be described by Aron Gurevich's expression as 'that layer of medieval culture . . . which in one way or another belonged to all people but which among the elite was usually concealed by official theology, book learning and classical tradition'.⁶

Textual clues about the performance setting of the poetry are therefore extremely important in the effort to classify any given composition as 'popular' or not. Alas, though we often know a good deal about the nature of the performance context in the case of poetry in *fushā*, we sometimes know far less about the setting in which popular poetry was performed. This is because much of it was sung or delivered in informal gatherings much less accessible to history than the official occasions in which *fushā* poetry held the spotlight, as well as because of the cultural prejudice against popular poetry referred to earlier. On the other hand, a number of texts do contain significant clues about the impetus behind their composition, as well as the occasion for performance, and it is important to exhaust these clues in an effort to contextualize the poetry and situate it in its society. Indeed it is partly consideration of the performance setting that leads us to classify certain *muwashshahāt* as popular, for while the *muwashshah* is primarily a *fushā* text, unlike the colloquial *zajal*, to which it is otherwise so clearly related, its use and presentation often distinguish it from classical poetry. In discussing the nature of the *muwashshah*, S. M. Stern pointed out that although *muwashshahāt* often took up the same themes as the *qaṣīda* and were therefore delivered in the same court setting as the *qaṣīda*, the former was probably sung while the latter was recited.⁷ Though the *muwashshah* will receive limited consideration in the context of this chapter, this should not be taken as a denial of the non-classical cloak it often wears.

Finally, any assessment of popular poetry must be shaped by an understanding of the prevailing expectations of poets and of changing patterns of patronage during the various periods of Arab history. The classical model of poetic patronage briefly alluded to above did not continue undisturbed over the course of the seven centuries covered in this volume. As the relationship of the ruling class to the classical Arabic tradition changed, so too did the concept of patronage and, accordingly, the role of all types of poetry within society. The fact that it is during the Mamluk and Mongol periods that popular poetry begins most boldly to come to light in written sources is surely due in part to the fact that the ruling elite played a much more limited role in setting cultural standards and literary taste and indeed used poetry less systematically

⁶ Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. xv.

⁷ Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, p. 44.

as a means of purveying a legitimizing mythology, as was the case during the Abbasid era. To borrow Gurevich's words again, 'the veil of book learning and classical [poetic] tradition was so attenuated, so diminished in importance that this other level of poetic production, which had always been there, manage[d] to peek through more clearly'.⁸

Verses occurring within the epic context of the *sīras* will not be treated here, as they form the subject of other chapters in this volume. Likewise, the poetry of the medieval Arabic shadow plays will not be discussed, since the theatrical and narrative context in which it functions places it more appropriately under a different rubric. Before taking up the main forms of popular poetry during the post-classical period, it is important for us to consider the question of their origins, so although this chapter deals primarily with the Arab East, we will begin with a brief look at the heyday, if not the starting point, of non-classical strophic poetic forms in the Islamic West.

THE QUESTION OF ORIGINS

Though the origins of the two most important forms of non-classical Arabic strophic poetry, the *muwashshah* and the *zajal*, remain obscure, it is beyond question that it was in Andalusia that they flourished and developed and reached their full glory. The *muwashshah* is first mentioned by Ibn Bassām (d. 542/1147) in his *Kitāb al-dhakhīra fī mahāsin ahl al-jazīra*, where he tells us that the form was invented by Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Qabrī towards the end of the ninth century. However, the earliest *muwashshah* that has survived, that of 'Ubāda ibn Ma' al-Samā' (d. 421/1030), dates from the eleventh century.⁹ Although it is clear that the form had by then reached full maturity, the long period of development leading up to these fully evolved pieces remains the focus of many questions.

In general the *muwashshah* consists of five stanzas and often, though not always, commences with an initial *maṭla'* or prelude, which introduces the binding rhyme common to the concluding lines, called *simt/asmāt*, of each stanza in the rest of the poem. In some cases the initial couplet serves as a recurring element throughout the poem, much as a refrain. Between the *maṭla'* and the *simt* or *qūf* are the lines called *ghuṣn/agħṣān*, containing a rhyme unique to each individual strophe. The poem ends with a line or two called a *kharja* or *markaz* sometimes composed, in contrast to the preceding body of the poem, in colloquial Arabic or, less often, Romance or a combination of the

⁸ Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*.

⁹ Alan Jones has argued that *muwashshah* no. 33 of the *'Uddat al-jalīs* attributed to one Abū'l-Qāsim al-'Aṭṭār was actually the work of Abū'l-Qāsim ibn al-'Aṭṭār (d. 387/997), making it the oldest datable such poem, but this claim is not unanimously accepted: Jones, 'A Tenth Century *Muwaṣṣah*'.

two.¹⁰ The rhyme scheme would thus be along the following lines: *AA* (*or AB*) *cccAA dddAA eeeAA*, etc. The *kharja*, which most frequently provides a sharp contrast in language and tone with the preceding composition, is often introduced with verbs of direct speech, where the voice of the poet gives way to that of another, usually a female singer. But in this, as in almost every feature of the *muwashshah*, it is difficult to generalize, and the *kharja* was frequently, like the rest of the poem, in the voice of the poet. Thematically, the *muwashshah* hardly differs from classical poetry, for it includes the same topics as the *qasīda*, with *madiḥ*, *khamriyya* and in particular *ghazal* predominating, while elegy, invective, *mujūn* and *zuhd* are less frequently represented.

The *muwashshah* undoubtedly flourished, as did all arts and letters, during the period of the *mulūk al-tawā'if* ('party kings') (c. 423–84/1031–91), but it was during the age of the Almoravids in Spain (484–540/1091–1145) that it reached its peak. It was during this time, known more for its continuation and refinement of earlier-established tastes and trends than for its innovation, that three important *washshāḥūn* – al-A'mā al-Tuṭīlī, Ibn Baqī and Ibn Bājjā – all flourished. The period of the Almohads (c. 540–627/1145–1230) in turn saw the heyday of three of the most outstanding poets who composed in this genre – namely, Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl, Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Zumruk – but by this point Andalusia no longer reigned supreme in the production of this poetic form. The constant travel and intellectual and cultural exchange that was carried on between Andalusia and the Arab East naturally resulted in the *muwashshah* finding fertile ground, first in North Africa and then in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, so that by the thirteenth century these countries outshone Islamic Spain in the production of this type of poetry.

The *zajal*, the second of the two non-classical strophic forms that dominated in Andalusia, was similar to the *muwashshah* but was composed in the vernacular. This verse reached its apogee in the work of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Quzmān (d. 521/1160). Though he composed poetry and prose in classical Arabic, the majority of his work consists of *azjāl* in Córdoban Arabic. At a time when enduring patronage for poetry was not readily available, Ibn Quzmān was able to support himself by poetry, singing and dancing in diverse parts of Spain. Though the prologue to his *diwān*, entitled *Iṣābat al-aghrād fi dhikr al-ā'rād*, is of limited use from a theoretical point of view, it is possible to glean a few important pieces of information from it. Ibn Quzmān acknowledges

¹⁰ In fact, there is in the sources considerable inconsistency in the use of terms referring to the component parts of the *muwashshah*. Ibn Sana' al-Mulk, for example, uses the term *bayt* for *ghūṣn*. Even the terms '*muwashshah*' and '*zajal*' are not uniformly applied: Ibn Quzmān does not distinguish between the two terms, and Ibn Sana' al-Mulk uses the term *muwashshah malḥūn* for what we know as *zajal*. Often the discrepancies arise from the use of terms from the musical lexicon alongside or in lieu of literary designations.

that he was not the inventor of the *zajal*, but simply its most skilled practitioner. In his poems he mentions one Yakhlef ibn Rāshid, of whose poetry only two fragments have been preserved.¹¹ He specifically praises the work of one Akhṭal ibn Numāra, whose poetry has not survived, and states that he was ‘the only one who ever approached [my] own perfection’.¹² Ibn Quzmān comments in this brief introductory piece that Ibn Numāra initiated a new style in the art of the *zajal*, that after him came ‘those other poets to whom I have alluded and they maligned [him]’,¹³ and that he thinks little of the skills of his contemporaries, who do not do a good job even at imitating him.¹⁴ While scholars have concluded on the basis of this prologue and the rhyme scheme of the quoted verses by Ibn Numāra that the *zajal* was in use about a century before Ibn Quzmān, no truly satisfactory reconstruction of the chronology of the development of this form in Arab Spain, tantalizingly hinted at in these sparse remarks, has yet to emerge. While a kind of ‘proto *zajal*’ vernacular poetry is attested in fourth-/tenth-century Andalusia,¹⁵ little is known about the origins of the *zajal* proper. It is, in any case, indisputable that it was due largely to the skill, cleverness and humour of Ibn Quzmān that *azjāl* came more and more to be recorded in anthologies and biographical dictionaries.

Stern and others have made the important distinction between two types of *zajal*, which he called the *muwashshah*-like *zajal* and the *zajal* proper. While the former is a straightforward imitation of the *muwashshah* in vernacular, with the same structure as the *muwashshah*, the latter has certain distinctive features. In the *zajal* proper, the *asmāt* reproduce the scheme of only half rather than the whole *matla'*, so that the rhyme scheme becomes *AA bbbA cccA dddA* or *AB cccB dddB* or *ABAB cccAB*, etc.¹⁶ These *zajals* are not limited to the five stanzas of the *muwashshah*, and their subject matter extends beyond the familiar classical poetic repertoire.

The distinction between the two types of *zajal* is directly related to the thorny problem of tracing the origins of these non-classical forms. A number of important sources for the history of the non-classical poetic forms – including Ibn Sa‘īd al-Maghribī (d. c. 685/1286) and Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī (d. c. 750/1349), the latter of whom we will return to shortly – claim that the *zajal* was derived from the *muwashshah*. Although the dates of the texts that have survived would seem to correspond to this scenario, there is good reason to question this version of events, as indeed a number of scholars have done. Stern, Cachia,

¹¹ Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, p. 185.

¹² Nykl, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry*, p. 270; Corriente, *Gramática*, p. 4.

¹³ Monroe, ‘Ibn Quzmān’, p. 50; Zwartjes, *Crossroads*, p. 79.

¹⁴ Nykl, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry*, p. 270; Corriente, *Gramática*, p. 4.

¹⁵ El2, s.v. ‘Zadjal’.

¹⁶ Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, p. 169.

al-Ahwānī and Zwartjes, among others, believe that in fact the *zajal*, the closer kin to the folk tradition in its clear association with popular song tradition and the vernacular language, preceded the *muwashshah*. Stern explains the *muwashshah*-like *zajals*, which ‘came into being by the transposition of the *muwashshah* into vulgar Arabic’, as corresponding to the time when the *zajal* acquired literary status. This would help account for comments such as Ibn Sa‘id’s that, ‘The first to compose poems according to the method of *zajal* was Abū Bakr Ibn Quzmān. It is true that such poems had been composed in al-Andalus before, but the beauties of the form had not appeared.’¹⁷ In other words, the *zajal* existed prior to the time of Ibn Quzmān as a purely popular, colloquial form, and gained literary status only in the twelfth century when *azjāl* patterned after *muwashshahāt* were produced.

The mystery of how oral, colloquial verse found its way, albeit grudgingly, into the literary canon and what precisely the relationship between this proto-*zajal* and the later *muwashshah* and *zajal* is, remains unsolved. The scenario envisioned by one scholar has it that a kind of hybridization occurred among the Arab and Spanish popular traditions and thereafter ‘some of the attitudes that ran through the original folk-literature worked themselves by osmosis even into the convention-ridden compositions of the élite’.¹⁸ It is certainly conceivable, as this scenario would seem to have it, that the *muwashshah* evolved directly from this proto-*zajal*, but it is equally possible that a nascent classical Arabic strophic poetic form, which we will discuss in a moment, found fertile ground for growth in Andalusia where it coalesced with the popular song tradition.

The nature and extent of the various strands of this song tradition are impossible to tease out, largely because the indigenous tradition was itself deliberately shaped and influenced by Arab musical culture from a very early period. That there were two distinct traditions in the early years after the Muslim conquest seems clear from the comment of al-Tifāshī in a chapter in his thirteenth-century encyclopedia, that when the early Andalusians sang, they sang ‘either in the manner of the Christians or that of the Arab camel-drivers’.¹⁹ Wright makes the important observation that the purpose of mentioning the song of the camel-drivers may have been ‘to imply that the only genres the first immigrants brought with them were those of folk song’.²⁰ Alas, little is actually known of performance practice in these early years. Early in the ninth

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁸ Cachia in Cachia and Watt, *Islamic Spain*, p. 118. This too is the view of Wright regarding exchange between the indigenous Christian population and the Arab conquerors in the first decades after the Muslim invasion: Wright, ‘Music’, p. 563. See also Dwight Reynolds, ‘Music’, in *CHALAND*.

¹⁹ Wright, ‘Music’, p. 563; Cachia and Watt, *Islamic Spain*, p. 118.

²⁰ Wright, ‘Music’, p. 563.

century, Abūl-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Nāfi‘ (d. 243/857), known by the nickname Ziryāb, arrived at the Umayyad court in Córdoba. Student first of Ibrāhīm al-Mawsilī, and then of his famous poet-composer-singer son, Ishāq, Ziryāb is presented in al-Maqqarī’s version of his biography as having outshone his teacher, the pinnacle of the Baghdad style of singing.²¹ Ziryāb became the arbiter of cultural affairs, including not just music, but also food, manners and dress. Most important, he was responsible for introducing new methods of voice training that were systematically passed on to younger generations of singers. The fact that in the early period of development of the non-classical forms an entire court infrastructure fostered the transfer of Arab cultural values and systems to Andalusian soil does not preclude the kind of exchange on the popular level that has been posited. First of all, the singers who by dint of talent found their way to the training sessions of Ziryāb or any of his protégés, must have hailed at least partly from the lower classes. Many, we know, were slave girls. Even the elderly female singers, whom al-Tīfāshī describes as having a monopoly on the training of slave girls in a repertoire of court music that included *azjāl* and *muwashshahāt*,²² need not have all been from the elite levels of society. Given the oral transmission of styles and repertoire that dominated this venue, the social status of its practitioners is of some significance. Finally, there is evidence that these early styles relied heavily on improvisation, and it is hard to imagine that this could have excluded styles and techniques of indigenous folk origin. Thus, any imported poetic form meant for singing would have to have undergone some degree of popular influence.

Certainly the Spanish environment offered a lifting of the restraints and prejudices that hindered the recognition and development of popular forms in the East, and resulted in their finding fuller rein and visibility in their new abode. While in a true sense these popular strophic forms came to life in Muslim Spain, they may well have been conceived in the Arab East as early as the Abbasid period. As early as the ninth century a number of *muḥdathūn* poets, most notably Abū Nuwās (d. 198/813), were experimenting with a form of strophic poetry called the *musammat*, taken by many to be the precursor of the Andalusian *muwashshah*. This form was named after the *simṭ* ('tie' or 'cord'), that is, the line containing the poem's common rhyme. The *musammat par excellence* is a poem of a number of stanzas, each with the same number of lines, usually four or five. If four, the poem is a *murabba'*, five, a *mukhammas*. The last lines of the stanzas share a common rhyme, which is usually distinct from that of the preceding lines in each stanza, which share a different rhyme. The rhyme scheme of a simple *murabba'*, therefore, would be *aaaA bbbA cccA*, etc.

²¹ Ibid., p. 556.

²² Ibid., p. 562.

This form is supposed to have developed from the *muzdawija*, which is a poem consisting of rhymed couplets resulting from dividing up the lines of the classical *qaṣīda* with internal rhyming as normally occurs in the first line of a *qaṣīda*,²³ or perhaps from *najaz* poetry. The next development was presumably to a longer stanza of five lines without common rhyme, leading ultimately to the 'standard' type described above, with common rhyme. Some *musammaṭāt* have two lines at the beginning of the piece, with a common rhyme that is repeated throughout as the common rhyme, which resemble the *matla'* of the *muwashshah*.²⁴ Though Ibn Khaldūn tells us that the *musammaṭ* was widely used, especially by *muwalladūn* poets, few have in fact been preserved, as they were routinely excluded from anthologies because of their non-classical nature.²⁵ In addition to the specimen by Abū Nuwās, a tenth-century *musammaṭ* by the Egyptian poet Tamīm in praise of the Fatimid caliph al-'Azīz bi-Allāh has been preserved, along with two such poems by the eleventh-century Andalusian Ibn Zaydūn.²⁶ Since all but one of these poems can be either presented as *qaṣā'id* or arranged in strophic form, the very existence of the latter presentation, along with the natural implications of the abundant rhyme, would readily call to mind vocal performance.

By way of argument in favour of the *musammaṭ* as precursor of *tawshīḥ* poetry, the striking similarity between this form and the *zajal* has been pointed out by Stern and others.²⁷ Stern also pointed to the preponderance of *musammaṭāt* among the Hispano-Hebrew poets as early as the tenth century. In his words, 'it would be very strange indeed if those men who set out to introduce Arabic metrics into Hebrew poetry should hit precisely on the *musammaṭ* if this genre were not current in the contemporary Arabic poetry of al-Andalus'.²⁸ Actually, the most persuasive aspect of this connection is the fact that, though the Hispano-Hebrew poets never gave up the *musammaṭ*, the *muwashshah* became much more prevalent in the later period. This suggests that this body of poetry may indeed have preserved a bit of the elusive early chronology of the development of *tawshīḥ* poetry. This would especially make sense if, as is suspected despite the testimony of many of the sources, the *zajal* actually predated the *muwashshah*. By now the preponderant opinion regarding the possible Arabic origins of the non-classical poetic forms in Andalusia is that the *musammaṭ* almost certainly played an important role in shaping the *zajal* proper, probably during the fifth/eleventh century. The details of this

²³ Schoeler, 'Muwaṣṣah und Zaḡal', pp. 440–64.

²⁴ Zwartjes, *Crossroads*, p. 30.

²⁵ Rosenthal, *Ibn Khaldūn*, vol. III, p. 414.

²⁶ Schoeler, 'Muwaṣṣah und Zaḡal', pp. 441–2.

²⁷ Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, p. 55.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

influence are as yet unknown. While some claim for it the entire ancestry of these non-classical forms, others, like García Gómez, view the *muwashshah* as a hybrid form derived from the *musammaṭ* with the added indigenously Spanish element of the *kharja*,²⁹ although even this particular element may have its roots in the *musammaṭāt* of poets like Abū Nuwās, where direct speech put into the mouth of a female Baghdadi singer is introduced by a verb announcing speech or singing.³⁰ Certainly the jury is still out on the question of the origins of the *muwashshah* and the *zajal*, and indeed it will probably long remain so.

The *muwashshah* and *zajal* forms reached Egypt, via the Maghrib, in the eleventh century.³¹ By the fourteenth century, the *zajal* was being widely employed by court poets and others in Mamluk and Mongol regions. By the thirteenth century, the *muwashshah* was flourishing in the Arab East, biographical dictionaries were providing samples of *muwashshahāt* instead of passing over them with brief mention, and theoretical treatises on the non-classical forms started to appear. Perhaps the figure most instrumental in propagating the *muwashshah* in the East was Abū'l-Qāsim Hibat Allāh ibn Abī'l-Fadl Ja'far ibn al-Mu'tamid ibn Sanā' al-Mulk (d. 608/1212), discussed by Jayyusi in Chapter 1. This Cairo-born *qādī* wrote the first thoroughgoing theoretical treatment of the *muwashshah*, a form he was obviously fond of, entitled *Dār al-tirāz fi 'amal al-muwashshahāt*. Indeed, the author explicitly states that his work, intended to help popularize the form in the East, is the first of its kind. Thoroughly educated in the Arabic linguistic arts of grammar and prosody, Ibn Sana' al-Mulk composed not only classical *qaṣā'id*, but also a collection of *muwashshahāt*, which he included in his book after his analytical presentation and his compilation of western and eastern *muwashshahāt*. According to Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn Sana' al-Mulk's poems stood out among those of eastern *washshāhūn* because of their unforced language and freedom from affectation. Interestingly, Ibn Sana' al-Mulk laments the fact that he never had the opportunity to travel to Andalusia and hear the *muwashshahāt* performed or to learn this art directly from Andalusians.

Ibn Sana' al-Mulk informs us that these poems were meant to be sung by men or, more frequently, women and that they were performed not only at wine parties, but also at weddings.³² The origins of the *muwashshah*, he states, were in Andalusia, and the poets of the East imitate those of the West in this art.³³ He also provided a detailed set of diverse criteria for classifying *muwashshahāt*, ranging from issues concerning rhyme to prosody to theme.

²⁹ Zwartjes, *Crossroads*, p. 81.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

³¹ Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, pp. 72–4.

³² Zwartjes, *Crossroads*, p. 48.

³³ Ibid., p. 78.

Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk identifies *muwashshahāt* that conform to classical Arabic metres, but claims that many more do not. In addition, he says, there are those that seem to have ‘no pattern and no beat other than [what is imposed on them by] the music’.³⁴ Perhaps because of his lack of experience with actual performance of some of the poems in his work, Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk did not always account for the lengthening and contracting of syllables required by the musical context, with the result that some pieces that he identifies as not conforming to classical Arabic metre can in fact be scanned. According to Stoetzer, most Arabic poetry, both classical and colloquial, can be scanned on the basis of quantitative patterns, while stress patterns account for poems that cannot.³⁵ Because of his ignorance of Andalusian Arabic, Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk often composed the *kharjas* of his own *muwashshahāt* in Persian, the next best thing to the Romance of the Andalusian compositions, for in all cases the *kharja*, according to Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk, should provide the spice of the poem in language and tone contrasting distinctly with the body of the poem. Despite a general tendency to over-schematize and suggest regularity where little could actually be found, Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk’s work has been an important source regarding the *muwashshah* and its place in society, both East and West, up to the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The fourteenth century saw the appearance of one of the most important sources we possess for reconstructing the history and development of the non-canonical forms of Arabic poetry in the Arab East, namely, the manual by Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī (d. 750/1349) entitled *al-Āṭil al-ḥālī wa'l-murakhkhaṣ al-ghālī*. In this ‘first poetics of Arabic dialect poetry’,³⁶ written some time after 723/1323, Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī describes what the predominant non-classical poetic forms in the Mashriq were at that time and how they originated and evolved. This work is also an important source for early specimens of poetry, including poems by Ibn Quzmān that are not in his *dīwān* as we know it today. As a result, this work – along with the *dīwān* of Ibn Quzmān itself and that of the Sufi poet Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Shushtarī (d. 668/1268–9), which is the only other surviving *dīwān* from the formative period of the *zajal* – is the most important source for the early poetry.

A merchant by trade who was forced to leave his native Hilla because of the factional rivalries that had put his life in jeopardy, al-Hillī spent most of his adult life at the court of the Turcoman Artuqids of Mardin. His poetic corpus includes encomia in honour of al-Malik al-Manṣūr Najm al-Dīn Abū'l-Fatḥ Ghāzī and his son al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Shams al-Dīn Ṣāliḥ, for whom he was court

³⁴ Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk, *Dār al-ṭirāz*, p. 33, cited by and tr. Cachia, *Ballads*, p. 12.

³⁵ Stoetzer, *Theory and Practice*, pp. 90–108; and his, ‘Arabic Metrics’, p. 115.

³⁶ *EI2*, s.v. ‘Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī’.

poet and favoured member of the inner circles. He also composed panegyrics in honour of the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn, whom he contacted on his way back from the pilgrimage, as well as the overlord of Hama, al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad Abū'l-Fidā' Ismā'il. His poetic prowess, however, extended far beyond praise poetry, which he instinctively shunned at the outset of his career, and included virtually all the major and minor modes of poetry in the Arabic corpus, including complaint poems, reproof poems and apologies, riddles, light verse and ascetic poetry. His 145-line poem in praise of the Prophet, *al-Kāfiya fil-madā'iḥ al-nabawiyā*, in which each line illustrates at least one rhetorical figure, though not the first of its kind, is generally credited with initiating this new genre of poetry.

His mastery of the dominant modes of poetry, as well as the theoretical apparatus at their heart, was so thoroughgoing that we should perhaps not be surprised that Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī chose to extend his creative attention and academic examination even to the non-classical styles of poetry among the so-called 'seven arts'. In addition to an extensive discussion of *zajal*, which Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī describes as being the 'most exalted in rank and noblest in origin'³⁷ among the non-canonical types of poetry, Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī also discusses the *mawāliyyā*, the *kān wa-kān* and the *qūmā* – this last peculiar to Baghdad. The discussions of the various arts are amply illustrated with poetry by al-Hillī and others. Despite the not infrequent use of vernacular language in the *muwashshah*, Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī classes it with *al-shi'r al-qariḍ* and the *dūbayt* as being *mu'rāb* and hence belonging to the domain of *fushā* and beyond the focus of the work at hand.³⁸ The *zajal*, the *kān wa-kān* and the *qūmā* are always uninflected, while the *mawāliyyā* may be either inflected or not, though the latter is preferable.

Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī's attitude towards his material is decidedly ambivalent. While on the one hand he sometimes speaks admiringly of the popular forms and even of colloquial language, he feels the need to defend his having composed such poetry. He describes his own *mawāliyyās* and *azjāl* as the product of his youth, and states that he did not see fit to record the former until charged to do so, though he provides no information about the origin of this commission.³⁹ Indeed, he claims never to have intended to compose in the popular styles, but changed his mind when he observed its practitioners' preference for them over classical forms and their insinuation that anyone outside their ranks was little more than an intruder. He then decided to compose a limited

³⁷ al-Hillī, *al-Āṭil* (hereinafter al-Hillī, *al-Āṭil*/N), p. 5; Hoenerbach (ed.), *Poetik* (hereinafter *al-Āṭil*/H), p. 9.

³⁸ He points out that the Iraqis do not include the *zajal* among the seven arts because they make no distinction between the *muwashshah*, the *zajal* and the *muzannam* (mixed-register compositions).

³⁹ al-Hillī, *al-Āṭil*/N, p. 108; *al-Āṭil*/H, p. 136.

amount in order to demonstrate his ability and banish the suspicion that he could not handle the non-classical forms, all the while careful not to indulge too much in vernacular poetry, lest it have a deleterious effect on his language as happened to Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk.⁴⁰ He warns that his popular compositions were not more abundant only because his contact with the practitioners of these arts was limited. Thus, we get a clear sense that Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī was responding to a certain demand for this type of poetry, but that despite some contact and even competition with the *zajjālūn* and others, he continued, for the most part, to run in different circles from them. It is noteworthy not only that there was this class of poets exclusively dedicated to the composition of *azjāl*, but also that a classical poet of Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī's stature should feel the need to mingle with them and seek their acceptance.

Al-Hillī makes it clear that in preparing this manual he had recourse to both oral and written sources, including reliable transmitters and copies of the *dīwāns* of Ibn Quzmān, Madghallīs (or Mudghalīs) and others. He claims that the inferior Maghribī manuscript copies he possessed were verified against a reliable one that a well-known copyist and *ḥadīth* scholar from Damascus had compared to the original. He also checked his conclusions with a group of masters in the field of *zajal* with whom the scribe arranged a meeting. In this text, he tells us, he relied mainly on the work of living poets and poets who had died recently, and in some cases had copies made of their works. These are the 'moderns' Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī refers to throughout the text and with whom the work of the early Andalusian masters is consistently contrasted.

The *zajal*, according to Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī, was invented by the Andalusians. Some said Ibn Quzmān invented it, while others claimed Ibn Ghurlā, who was a contemporary of the Almohad caliph 'Abd al-Mu'min ibn 'Alī al-Kūmī (reigned 527–58/1133–63), derived it from the *muwashshah*.⁴¹ The chronology of this last claim, obviously, does not work. Others gave the distinction to Yakhlik ibn Rāshid who, with his elegant, strong poetry, had been the imam of the *zajal* before Ibn Quzmān came along and seduced people with his easy, accessible poems. Al-Hillī even quotes the opening verse of a *zajal* by Ibn Quzmān in which he mocks the style of his predecessor: 'Your *zajal*, oh Ibn Rāshid, is strong and solid / [But] if it were strength [we wanted], it's porters [we'd turn to].'⁴² Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī rejects the view espoused by some that the *zajal* was invented by Madghallīs, since he found a *zajal* in his *dīwān* composed as a *mu'āraḍa* to one by Ibn Quzmān, suggesting he was his contemporary or his successor.⁴³ The originators of the *zajal*, al-Hillī reports, categorized it not only on the basis of language and form, but also on the

⁴⁰ al-Hillī, *al-'Ātil*/N, p. 134; this section of the text is not in *al-'Ātil*/H.

⁴¹ al-Hillī, *al-'Ātil*/N, p. 13; *al-'Ātil*/H, p. 16.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

basis of subject matter, so that love poetry, wine poems and poems about flowers, gardens and things associated with them are called *zajal*; poems relating to jest, wantonness and diversion (*iḥmād*), *bullayq*; those which contain blame, invective and backbiting (*thalb*), *qarqiy*; and those which contain moral exhortation and wise counsel, *mukaffir*.⁴⁴ In contrast, the ‘moderns’ of the Arab East are content to designate all strophic poetry that is inflected *muwashshah*, that which is uninflected *zajal*, and that which mixes the two *muzannam*. In reality, the terminology of this content-based typology persisted and was inconsistently applied even in regions that, in theory, did not observe this method of distinguishing *azjāl*. The term *bullayq*, in particular, appears frequently and Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī himself cites a number of poems he designates in this manner.⁴⁵ Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī emphasizes the point that the rigidity the moderns adopted regarding the mixture of inflected and uninflated speech in one composition, which they have attributed to Ibn Quzmān, is a standard that the Andalusian master never actually articulated or practised. The use of inflected speech is not absolutely prohibited in the *zajal*; on the contrary, it is the deliberate effort to use it that is inappropriate. While Ibn Quzmān did state that the closer the *zajal* was to the colloquial, the better, his own poetry is replete with inflected speech. Despite his correction of his contemporaries’ claims about Ibn Quzmān’s standards, it is their demand for linguistic consistency that Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī chooses to follow in his own compositions, and the delicateness of their poetry that he prefers. Al-Hillī’s discussion of the origins of the *zajal* is followed by a detailed comparison between classical poetry and *zajal*, including an enumeration of those features of diction, rhyme and metre that are permitted in the former and forbidden in the latter and vice versa. The strictures regarding rhyme are unquestionably more stringent for the *zajal* than the *qaṣīda*. Among the features that are permitted in *qaṣīd* poetry but prohibited in *zajal* are the use of *hamza* as the rhyme letter, the use of two distinct weak letters as the letter before the rhyme letter, and repetition of the rhyme word after seven lines of a poem.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil/N*, p. 6; *al-Ātil/H*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Sallām offers a more specific definition of the *bullayq* as a ‘*zajal*-like composition, which, according to the Egyptians, differed from the *zajal* on the basis of its subject matter’. *Balāq* treated subjects that were light, amusing, topical or mocking. Because they were short and used easily repeatable metres, these poems were more generally known among the common people than the *zajal*. While the illustrations Sallām cites for the *bullayq* all conform to this description in their use of short, sing-songy metres, Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī’s use of the term for longer poems suggests a less delimited application of the term: Sallām, *al-Adab*, vol. I, pp. 316–20. The other terms of this content-based typology have suffered from similarly inconsistent application. Kīlānī even treats *qarqī*, *bullayq* and *mukaffir* as ‘types of *mawāliyya*’ in pre-Ottoman- and Ottoman-period Egypt (*al-Adab*, p. 194), as does al-Qurayshī (*al-Funūn*, vol. I, pp. 70–3). Similarly, the term *hammāq*, which Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī lists as one of the seven poetic arts, recognized by the people of Andalusia, Egypt and Syria but unknown to Iraqis (*al-Ātil/N*, p. 2; *al-Ātil/H*, p. 7), is elsewhere used to refer to a type of *zajal* dealing with light, sometimes satirical, subjects.

⁴⁶ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil/N*, pp. 47–8; *al-Ātil/H*, pp. 53–4.

The *zajal*, according to Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī, developed from the *qaṣīda zajaliyya*, which differed from the classical *qaṣīda* only in its use of uninflected speech. Authors of these poems would even at times contrive errors in *i'rāb* (desinential inflection) or spelling – such as writing the indefinite accusative word ‘*rajulan*’ as two words, ‘*rajul an*’ – in order to distinguish them from their *fūshā* predecessors. A number of examples of such poems composed by Madghallīs have been preserved.⁴⁷ The evolution of the form, in his view, was directed by the music, so that, for example, the *kharja* resulted from the need to extend the length of the poetry to match the music it was paired with. This supposed ‘add-on’ was necessary because the Arabs did not possess the vocal modulation techniques that the Persians did to reconcile the poetry to the music. Likewise, it was the demands of the music that resulted in the evolution of numerous new metres beyond the Khalilian system, some of which only *aficionados* of the form could recognize. Specialists in *fūshā* poetry were often stumped and Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī proudly refers to his own triumph when tested in the metres and the rhymes of the non-canonical forms.

The great historical value of this text does not derive solely from the delineation of the rules of these arts that it provides, but also from the numerous examples of them that it offers. These illustrations stem from diverse geographical regions, east and west, and represent a wide selection of styles and themes. A case in point is Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī’s presentation of a *bullaqī* ‘in the style of the Egyptians’ immediately followed by one ‘in the style of the Baghdādīs’.⁴⁸ The first of these, consisting of a *matla'* and seven stanzas, is a lament by a man tormented by his urgent sexual needs; the second, with a *matla'* and five stanzas, is a rebuke addressed by a father to his wayward daughter. Both of these poems conform to the pattern of a ‘*zajal* proper’ with three lines with a common rhyme punctuated by a binding rhyme matching that of the *matla'* in each stanza, and a *kharja* echoing one-half of the *matla'*. Treating, as they do, subjects relating to sexuality and dissolute behaviour, the pieces are closely related to *mujūn* poetry, which was an established feature of the corpus of *fūshā* poetry by at least the fifth/eleventh century. The Egyptian poem most particularly conforms to the expectations of *mujūn*, not only because of its more graphic reference to body parts and their demands, but also because of the essentially light-hearted quality of the piece. Here a man complains of the physical release his penis demands, saying: ‘How can I change my ways / when God created my penis with a hole in it.’ He proceeds to complain of the length of his organ, which has left him ‘a disgrace among people’, and wishes ‘God had created [it] clipped off / or, like my finger, sealed

⁴⁷ *EL2*, s.v. ‘Zadjal’.

⁴⁸ al-Hillī, *al-Āṭil/N*, pp. 101–3; *al-Āṭil/H*, pp. 124–8.

off'. Personifying the insistent member, he says, 'If I excuse myself on some pretext / It says to me: Don't give me an argument / [It's] either that vile thing or masturbation.' The conclusion of the piece culminates in the self-mockery of the poem, as the afflicted man gets what he has been praying for:

I prayed to God [for help] from his perfidy
 He heard me and saved me from him
 He died, may God not be pleased with him,
 And I've become beloved among people.

The self-mockery that permeates the poem is thus concluded with light-hearted, if pathetic, irony and, in true *khalā'a* style, a swipe at the strictures of society that demanded of him sexual impotence as the price for its regard.

In the Baghdadi *bullayq*, a father upbraids his daughter for her licentious behaviour. 'I am not your father and you are no longer my daughter', he begins. The reason for this disownment is that every evening she goes out and sells herself with the help of a pimp.

Whenever someone clears his throat [in invitation] to you in the lane
 you respond with a cough [of acquiescence]
 You come and go from my house like a shadow play puppet
 While all your family thinks you are in Daddy's house.

While this poem, like the Egyptian one, has sexual behaviour as its topic, it is far less graphic. Furthermore, it is more tragic than light-hearted and conveys no mocking of sexual mores as in the Egyptian sample. The difference in tone between the two poems is probably as much a factor of their subjects and Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī's selection, as it is of any consistent difference in taste of a regional nature. Linguistically, the Baghdadi poem is similar to the first, for both use simple, uninflected diction with passing reference to features of everyday life. While both are rhetorically plain, the Baghdadi piece does contain a nice paronomasia (*bābā* as 'Daddy' and *bābah* as 'shadow-play text') and a clever double entendre in the word '*qumāsh*' (cloth), used as a euphemism for the errant girl's 'goods', here being peddled by a *dallāl* ('middleman' – in this context, 'pimp') instead of the culturally familiar '*dallāla*' who goes from door to door selling kerchiefs and cloth on the instalment plan. Thus, with this one figure, the poet suggests the overall message of the poem, namely that his daughter has substituted the innocent and familiar world of ordinary women with the degradation of the pimp's universe. The paucity of rhetorical embellishment in these poems is suggestive, since al-Hillī points out that the earlier *azjāl* did not employ *jinās*, *tawriya* (double entendre) and other figures of speech as the moderns do. Alternatively, the diction of these two poems may have been determined by the class they emanated from or merely by the

nature of the subject matter. This is supported by the use in the Egyptian poem of the word ‘*sulgah*’ meaning ‘masturbation’. This word, which is mentioned in *Tāj al-‘arūs* but not in most of the other standard lexicons, is used in Abū Dulaf’s tenth-century *Qasīda sāsāniyya*⁴⁹ and hints of a fairly vulgar origin.

The diversity of which the non-canonical forms were capable is further illustrated in *al-Ātil* by a *bulayq* al-Hillī himself composed that complains of the difficulty of fasting during Ramadan.⁵⁰ As if to emphasize his own and the various forms’ versatility, al-Hillī also offers the example of a *zajal* intended for use by the *musah̄birūn* of Mardin to awaken the sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ al-Āmil Shams al-Dīn,⁵¹ which might be read in contrast to the separate form specifically associated with this activity, the *qūmā*, which al-Hillī discusses later in his text.

The second type of non-canonical poetry that Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī discusses is the *mawāliyyā*. This form, he states, consists of four lines – originally hemistichs – in the *basīt* metre, sharing a single rhyme. Together they are called a *sawt*. Eloquent, declamatory poetry is composed in this form using the traditional poetic modes of classical Arabic – *ghazal* and *madīh* – along with virtuosic rhetorical display and verbal tricks. The form was well established by the sixth/twelfth century, though it is likely that some form of it was in circulation even earlier. Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī makes no mention of the various multi-rhyme patterns that evolved later, and all the surviving early *mawāliyyās* are in fact monorhyme quatrains (*rubā’i*). From around the eleventh/seventeenth century, variations on the original rhyme patterns appeared in the *mawāliyyā*, produced by insertions after the first three lines. These ranged from the insertion of a single unrhymed line after the first three (*aaaxa* ...), rendering the poem ‘*a’raj*’, to the insertion of sextets of alternating rhymes after the first three (*aaa bcbebc zzz a*). The ‘*sab’āni*’ or ‘*nu’māni*’ form has the rhyme scheme *aaa zzz*. Less frequently internal rhymes were added to some of the lines.⁵² In an effort to explain the origin of the term ‘*mawāliyyā*’, which is later transformed into ‘*mawwāl*’, in certain regions, al-Hillī tells the fanciful story that this name derives from the slaves of the Wāsiṭīs, the supposed inventors of the form, who learned and circulated the poems. The slaves would sing these short and simple poems from the tops of palm trees and water wheels, and at the end of each *sawt*, they would sing out: ‘*yā mawāliyyā*’, indicating their masters – and the name stuck. Although the people of Wāsiṭ invented the form, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī tells us, the Baghda-dis took it over and refined it and removed *i’rāb* from it. They composed both serious and light verse in

⁴⁹ Bosworth, *Underworld*, p. 218.

⁵⁰ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil* / N, pp. 96–7; *al-Ātil* / H, pp. 115–18.

⁵¹ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil* / N, pp. 95–6; *al-Ātil* / H, pp. 113–15.

⁵² *EI2*, s.v. ‘Mawāliya’.

this form and became so widely known for it that they were wrongly credited with its creation. Although either inflected or uninflected speech may be used in the *mawāliyyā*, the Baghdadis felt about the *mawāliyyā*, the *kān wa-kān* and the *qūmā* as Ibn Quzmān did about the *zajal*: the further they were from *fushā*, the better.

Although al-Hillī provides far fewer illustrations of the *mawāliyyā* than he does of the *zajal*, he does provide a contrast between ‘grandiloquent poems in the style of the ancients’ and ones that are ‘smooth and accessible, in the style of the moderns’.⁵³ Most of the former type differ little from formal poetry: their modes and motifs are the same as those of the *qaṣīda*, and they differ only in their rhyme pattern and their occasional lack of inflection. The latter type contain simpler diction and some tend more towards colloquial usage. One four-liner by al-Khabbāz al-Baghdādī in praise of al-Ṣāḥib ibn al-Dabāhī, mentioned by al-Hillī as being ‘among their best’, describes a unique justification for praise and gives us a glimpse of how popular poetry may at times have conveyed the perspective of a wider swathe of society than classical poetry:

Through you, the villages of the river Īsā have become like the cities
 Here extending hospitality to guests, there slaughtering she-camels
 If you wanted, with the edges of supple spears
 You could make lions plough in place of the oxen.⁵⁴

What is immediately striking about these four lines is the forthright comparison between the city and the countryside and the fact that the praise of the poem depends on the premise that the towns are more prosperous than the villages. The patron is then praised for having altered this basic socio-economic reality. In other words, the voice of the poem is from the perspective of the countryside. A traditional metonymy indicating generosity is used – slaughtering the she-camels – and the patron is praised for his bravery as a warrior, as he would be in a classical panegyric. What is interesting about the poet’s use of the word ‘*usd*’ (‘lions’) is that the metaphorical sense of the word that is traditionally used in the classical Arabic poetic corpus (lion = brave man), serves as one of the terms of a double entendre (*tawriya*), which here encompasses the classical perspective and the popular voice of the countryside at one and the same time. In this *tawriya*, the word ‘*usd*’ must be understood in both the literal and the figurative sense in order for the figure to work. In the second line of our quatrain, the word for ‘lions’ is understood, in the traditional metaphorical sense, to refer to brave men. Thus the patron is praised for his

⁵³ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil* / N, pp. 108–14; *al-Ātil* / H, pp. 137–48.

⁵⁴ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil* / N, p. 106; *al-Ātil* / H, p. 133.

ability to completely defeat the fiercest of enemies. At the same time, however, the literal meaning of the word ‘lions’ must be understood and contrasted with the word ‘oxen’, in the last line, thus fixing the hyperbole in an image related to the countryside. The patron is so brave that he not only defeats his enemies, he tames them completely, turning fierce beasts into domesticated farm animals. The imaginative basis for this praise replicates what we find in classical Arabic poetry: the patron is lauded for being so powerful he could change the natural order of things in the world. Here, it is claimed, he can choose not only to change the familiar roles of animals based on their known natures, but implicitly also to render the world a peaceful place, where the now powerless enemy lions perform farm labour. The heroic universe of the classical praise poem here gives way to the insistent presence of village life and its exigencies. The closing image of an unthreatened countryside thus confirms the statement of the first verse regarding the prosperity the patron has brought to the villages. It is common in classical Arabic panegyric to praise the patron for having brought prosperity to his subjects; it is unusual to find this idea associated specifically with the improved situation of the countryside, as in this piece. This poem is thus a good example of one way in which popular poetry expands the boundaries imposed by classical poetry. Linguistically, this *mawāliyyā* is not particularly colloquial – indeed, the only vernacular feature about it is its partial lack of desinential inflection. Otherwise, it employs classical motifs, vocabulary and syntactic structures and a regular *basīt* metre. It is in the coupling of a unique perspective – one not commonly found in canonical poetry – with a versatile rhetorical figure that exploits the traditional motif and this novel voice at one and the same time, that this poem establishes its point of view and distinguishes itself from the canon. It manipulates a traditional metaphor in order both to call attention to its own newness and to shift the perspective underlying the metaphor. Its relationship to the canon is thus at once dialectical and synergistic.

Another example of the *mawāliyyā* provided by Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī gives ample proof that the non-canonical forms were not immune to the prevailing taste for rhetorical trickery in formal poetry, for it brought together five different rhetorical embellishments: for every word in the piece, the same letter is used as the first and last letter; each verse consists of four words; each verse consists of twenty-four letters; the number of dots used in each is thirteen, and, finally, each one has an internal rhyme in *bā'*.⁵⁵ Over time, the assiduous pursuit of paronomasia became virtually *de rigueur* in *mawāliyyā* compositions, giving the lie to the frequently voiced presumption that rhetorical embellishment was solely the prerogative of elite poets and poetry.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

The *mawāliyyā* became a universally popular form of poetry across the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt, where, somewhat transformed, it is still popular today, it flourished during the eighth/fourteenth, ninth/fifteenth and tenth/sixteenth centuries at the hands of practitioners such as Ahmād ibn Muḥammad Shihāb al-Dīn, known as al-Ghār al-Shāṭarānī, who was alive in 737/1336, Ahmād ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī, known as al-Hijāzī al-Anṣārī (d. 836/1432), al-Shaykh Ahmād ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Dumyātī, known as al-Shaykh Ḥuṭayyība (d. 808/1405), ‘Abd Allāh ibn Abī'l-Faraj ibn Mūsā al-Qibṭī (d. 840/1436) and Badr al-Dīn al-Zaytūnī (d. 924/1518).⁵⁶ One well-known author of *mawāliyyā* was al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Ḥā'ik al-Mi'mār (d. 749/1348), who composed the following piece:

Zayn al-Dīn threw me a glance that reached my innermost heart
I pined away and became agitated, fearing death would befall me
when, before, I'd been carefree, not complaining of impending separation,
Safe from passion – until he struck me with the eye.⁵⁷

Love poetry about males was in fact a frequent subject of *mawāliyyā*, and, indeed, the form was used for all the known poetic topics, including elegy, such as ‘Alī Ibn Muqātil al-Ḥamawī's (d. 761/1359) elegy on al-Malik al-Afdal Ismā‘il ibn ‘Alī of Hama, who died in 742/1341.⁵⁸

In Syria, too, *mawāliyyā* were composed by the likes of al-Shaykh Amīn al-Dīn ibn Mas‘ūd al-Dunaysarī (d. 680/1281), ‘Izz al-Dīn Abū Ishaq Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Ṭarkhān, known as Ibn Suwaydī of Damascus (d. 690/1291), Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ahmād ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭarābulṣī al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 884/1479) and the Egyptian-born Ibn al-Nabīh (d. 619/1222) and al-Shābb al-Zarīf (d. 688/1289).⁵⁹ Tunisia, too, had its *murabba‘ kāmil*, which is very similar in structure to the *mawāliyyā*.⁶⁰ In Iraq, the *sabā‘i mawāliyyā* form, with one slight difference – the inclusion in the seventh *qayf* of a verse from the Koran, an aphorism or a traditional Arab saying – became known by the name ‘*al-zuhayrī*'.⁶¹ This name may be derived from one Mułā Jādir al-Zuhayrī, who was famous for this type of composition and admired for his singing of it.⁶² It has also been suggested that it is derived from the word ‘*zahr*’, which refers to the wordplay based on paronomasia that is typical of this poetic form.⁶³ This

⁵⁶ al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. I, pp. 61, 63, 64.

⁵⁷ Ibn Iyās al-Ḥanafī, ‘al-Durr al-maknūn’, fo. 166.

⁵⁸ al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. I, p. 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–7, 82.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶¹ See al-Khāqānī, *Funūn*.

⁶² al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. I, pp. 115, 116.

⁶³ al-Shammarī, *al-Ārūd*, p. 112.

same term, ‘*zahr*’, with the same connotation, is used by popular *mawwāl* singers in Egypt today.⁶⁴

Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî describes the third of the four non-classical types of poetry, the *kān wa-kān*, as employing one metre and one rhyme, where the first hemistich is longer than the second and the rhyme letter is preceded by one of the weak letters. Although Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî describes the *kān wa-kān* as having one metre and one rhyme, and cites only single-stanza poems of this type, al-Shaybî includes examples contemporaneous with Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî that employ more than one rhyme, and it is clear that later *kān wa-kān* poems often consisted of multiple stanzas, each with four hemistichs, with the rhyme pattern *bcda, efga, hija . . .*, where the last ends in a consonant preceded by a long vowel. The *kān wa-kān* was an innovation in the late fifth/early sixth (twelfth) century of the ‘āmma of Baghdad that was passed on to people in other regions of Iraq and then to Cairo in the eighth/fourteenth century. None, Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî claims, could outstrip the originators of the form. The name, which means ‘there once was . . .’ or ‘once upon a time . . .’ derives from the fact that the form was initially used for composing stories, legends and dialogues. The form spread and evolved to include diverse themes and was ultimately employed by such as Ibn al-Jawzî (d. 597/1201), Shams al-Dîn Muhammâd al-Wâ‘iz, Abû Manşûr ibn Nuqta al-Muzaklîsh (d. 597/1200) and Shams al-Dîn ibn al-Kûfî al-Wâ‘iz (d. 675/1276) in their exhortatory sermons and their ascetic poetry, as well as for aphorisms and wisdom tales, which became widely dispersed and a memorized part of the communal currency. The nine specimens of this form that Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî includes, several of which are of his own composition, amply demonstrate how diverse it had become by the fourteenth century: they include *ghazal*, about women and men, a poem about the villages around Mosul, and a poem built around twenty verses of poetry by unknown ancient poets that are widely used by Baghadidis as virtual proverbs. Several of these pieces employ rhetorical figures such as *tawjîh* (where groups of words related in a technical sense as terminology within a particular field of knowledge are used) and *murâja‘a* (repartee in the form of a reported conversation – ‘I asked . . .’, ‘He answered . . .’, etc.), which were popular in *fushâ* poetry of the time.⁶⁵

In addition to the practitioners of this poetic art named by Şafî al-Dîn al-Hillî, a number of other poets and preachers composed in this form, including Muhammâd ibn Abû'l-Badr al-Malîhî al-Wâsîtî al-Wâ‘iz (d. 744/1343), Badr al-Dîn al-Zaytûnî and Ibrâhîm al-Hâ'ik al-Mi'mâr. Both al-Zaytûnî and al-Mi'mâr also composed other types of popular poetry, as indeed did ‘Abd

⁶⁴ Cachia, *Ballads*, p. 34.

⁶⁵ Cachia, *Arch Rhetorician*, pp. 44, 108.

al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), the renowned polymath, who composed poetry, mostly on Sufi topics, in all the non-canonical forms, alongside *qariḍ* poetry. Rīdā Muḥsin al-Qurayshī uncovered a particularly interesting manuscript,⁶⁶ later more fully presented by his successor, Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Shaybī,⁶⁷ which reveals the extensive use of the *kān wa-kān* among women in poems dealing with celebratory occasions, such as poems of ‘congratulations on donning the [ascetic’s] wool’ and, especially, numerous occasions of a personal, family nature and certain rites of passage. Among these are poems of congratulations on the following occasions: a child’s teeth coming in, successful weaning of a baby, successful weaning by a wet-nurse in the sultan’s household, the dyeing of a bride’s dress, and the ritual bath taken by a woman forty days after giving birth (‘*ḥammām al-arba’īn*’). The poems, which are attributed to one ‘Fātima al-Jamāliyya, shaykhat al-firqa al-miṣriyya al-nisawiyya li-lhyā’ al-munāsabāt al-ijtīmā’iyya wa’l-dīniyya’, thus offer a unique window on the generally private world of women and children in the tenth/sixteenth century.⁶⁸ Furthermore, as al-Shaybī points out, the inclusion within the poems of spaces marked ‘*fulān*’ or ‘*fulāna*’ to be filled in with the name of the person being celebrated, makes clear the formulaic nature of these poems and the fact that they were composed for use by professionals.⁶⁹

While the *kān wa-kān* fell out of vogue in Egypt in the eleventh/seventeenth century, it seems to have endured somewhat longer in its place of origin. Al-Qurayshī suggests that the reason more poems of this type have not survived is because the form, focusing as it does on moral counsel, lectures and storytelling, did not lend itself to singing, and because it remained unique to Baghdad for a long time before being transferred to Cairo. Both are plausible explanations, and indeed the detrimental effects of geographic isolation are clear in the case of other regional poetries in the vernacular. While some *kān wa-kān* poems were composed by common people, many were composed by highly educated preachers who used them to preach to the ‘āmma. As such, they represent an interesting point of intersection between popular culture and the edifying goals of the religious establishment, and the dialectic between the requirements of persuasion and the didactic agenda of their authors deserves closer study.

The final form, the *qūmā*, which was invented by the Baghda-dis during the Abbasid caliphate to be used by the *musah̄hirūn* to wake people for the dawn meal during the month of Ramadan, has two patterns. The first consists of four lines (‘*aqfāl*’, in al-Hillī’s usage), the first, second and fourth of which

⁶⁶ al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. III, pp. 36–42. The MS is ‘Shi’r Taymūr’, No. 608, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya.

⁶⁷ al-Shaybī, *Dīwān*, pp. 259–92.

⁶⁸ The MS is not dated; this is al-Shaybī’s estimate.

⁶⁹ al-Shaybī, *Dīwān*, p. 260.

share the same metre and rhyme, while the third is longer and has no rhyme. In the second pattern, each line consists of three *aqfāl*, which share one rhyme but use different metres, with the first shorter than the second and the second shorter than the third.⁷⁰ Over time this type of poetry spread and became more diversified, until it became used for reproof and love poetry and all the other modes familiar from formal poetry. Ibn Nuqta is credited with having invented the form for the caliph al-Nāṣir (reigned 572–622/1180–1225), though al-Hillī claims that it predated that time. Nonetheless, the form was associated with Ibn Nuqṭa, who was generously reimbursed by al-Nāṣir each year. His son followed him in this occupation, even waiting a year until the month of Ramadan to announce to the caliph in a *qūmā* that his father had died.⁷¹

As valuable as al-Hillī's book is as a source for information about popular poetry in the Arab East, it is, after all, a written source subject to all the limitations we alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. Throughout his book, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī contrasts the elite among contemporary producers of popular poetry (*fusahā' al-muta'akhkhirīn*) with the common people who also compose in these vernacular forms ('awāmm al-muta'akhkhirīn). While it is impossible specifically to identify these groups, the former would seem to refer to specialists in literature who also make use of these non-classical forms. The latter group would refer to *zajjālūn* and others of a more limited culture who compose only in these forms. It is possible that these terms refer more to a putative class distinction and imply no substantive difference in composition practices. The author does explicitly point out that the '*awāmm al-muta'akhkhirīn*', following the model of the petty craftsmen, established certain customs and rules relating to both the compositions themselves and the social practices surrounding them that were not observed by earlier generations. These include the *zajjāl* mentioning his own name with abundant praise at the end of the *zajal* and the *zajjālūn*'s practice of gathering together in circles on a specified day for competitive exchange of *azjāl*. Both groups participated in competitions that involved betting, and it is clear from other sources that some of the customs explicitly attributed to the common people were practised also by the elite. The actual poetry that Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī presents, as well as the communal consensus about proper form that he uses as his reference point, seem to stem primarily from the former group, though there is only occasionally the implication that the latter's standards differ to any noteworthy extent. *Al-Ātil* was clearly written for a specialist audience, some of whose members might not be familiar with the popular poetic forms at all. For this reason, the author takes pains to defend his choice to compose

⁷⁰ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil*/N, p. 127; *al-Ātil*/H, p. 171.

⁷¹ al-Hillī, *al-Ātil*/N, p. 128; *al-Ātil*/H, p. 172.

poetry in the non-canonical forms. Having chosen to transcribe words as they would be pronounced in an actual recitation or performance and not necessarily as correct Arabic orthography would require, thereby attempting to soften the borders between the written and the oral realms, al-Hilli also warns his readers not to take his unorthodox spelling as mistakes.

The four forms discussed above were not the only types of popular poetry in existence in the post-classical period. In the Arabian peninsula, the vernacular twin of classical Arabic poetry that eventually came to be known as '*nabatī* poetry', continued to thrive throughout the pre-modern period and until the formation of modern centralized states. This body of poetry shared many stylistic, prosodic and thematic features with classical Arabic poetry composed in *fusħā*, including the use of classical Arabic metres, and monorhyme on the second hemistich of each line. It also featured the traditional crying over the abandoned campsite of the departed beloved and a *riħla* section of the poem, complete with a description of the mount and the rigours of the trek. *Nabatī* poetry was roundly ignored by medieval Arab scholars until Ibn Khaldūn – perhaps because Arabia was cut off from the rest of the Islamic world geographically and culturally, or perhaps because *nabatī* poetry's very affinity to classical Arabic poetry made it more threatening to those intent on preserving the privileged position of this cultural icon. Though we cannot trace the beginnings of this vernacular poetry, by the sixteenth century a number of names emerge of poets whose work is extant in manuscript. These include Rāshid al-Khalawī – perhaps the most famous of *nabatī* poets – well known for his particularly long pieces, Abū Ḥamzih al-‘Amrī and Gītan ibn Gītan. The poetry of ‘Abdallāh Ibn Rashīd, who, with the help of his younger brother, founded the Rashidi dynasty in Hayil in 1835, has also survived. Like much *nabatī* poetry, many of these works served to exhort the people of Hayil to revolt against their weak leader; after the brothers were expelled from Hayil by this same amir, their poetry was full of expressions of sadness, on the one hand, and unabashed political ambition, on the other. *Nabatī* poetry also tended to focus on the details of raids conducted between the various tribes, the migration of the pasture-seeking tribes, bravery in battle, honour and hospitality, including detailed descriptions of the ritual of serving coffee.⁷²

From the eighth/fourteenth century up until the present day, Yemen has known a rich tradition of strophic poetry called '*ḥumaynī*' poetry. While the term itself is used to contrast '*mu'rāb*' in reference to poetry in general, *ḥumaynī* poetry offers a hybrid corpus of classical, colloquial and mixed-register compositions. The first poet known to have composed such strophic

⁷² This information is derived from Sowayan, *Nabatī Poetry*. See also Ibn Khamīs, *Rāshid al-Khalawī*; and his, *al-Adab al-sha'bī*.

poetry in Yemen was Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī, known as Ibn Falīta (d. 731/1331), who served as *kātib* during the Rasulid reign in Yemen. Other prominent *humaynī* poets in the pre-modern period include Abū Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Mazzāḥ (d. 830/1427), the Sufi poets Abū Bakr al-‘Aydarūs (d. 914/1508) and ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-‘Alawī (d. 920/1514), Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 1016/1607), ‘Alī ibn Ḥasan al-Khufanjī (d. 1180/1767) and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Ānisī (d. 1250/1834). *Humaynī* strophic poetry is of two main types: the *mubayyat*, and the *muwashshah*, of which there are three forms. Structurally, there is a close connection between Yemeni strophic poetry and the Andalusian *muwashshah*, and indeed D. Semah has concluded that inasmuch as ‘the *mubayyat* takes its structure from the *musammat* and . . . the *musammat* is definitely of Arabic origin’, the analysis of the Yemeni forms ‘is likely to give indirect support to the “Arabic theory” in the one-century-old controversy over the origin of the strophic form of Hispano-Arabic poetry’.⁷³

In Morocco, in addition to a poetic form that is structurally a type of *zajal* but is referred to as a ‘*mawwāl*’, a popular poetic form called ‘*iyya* exists, which is essentially the same as a *mawāliyyā rubā’iyya*.⁷⁴ The *zajal* is, by far, the most widespread of the non-canonical forms in Morocco – which is not surprising, given the role that country played as the conduit of popular verse forms from Andalusia to the East – and is known there by numerous other names, such as *al-ayyūbī*, *maksūr al-janāḥ* and *al-mushabhib*.⁷⁵

The Sudan has two prominent popular forms, the *dūbayt* and the *hārdallu*. The former refers to the *mawāliyyā rubā’iyya*, and not the *fushā* poetic form; the latter, which derives its name from the Sudanese poet Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Abū Sinn (fl. second half of the nineteenth century and d. after 1917) from the Shukriyya tribe, is similar to the *mawāliyyā* and may indeed have been preceded by some form of it. The *dūbayt* has known great popularity in Sudan, even transcending the lines of demarcation between individual tribes, which sometimes have their own unique poetic forms, and has found an audience in both desert and city.⁷⁶

For centuries after it was written, Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī’s *al-Āṭil al-hālī wa l-murakhkhaṣ al-ghālī* remained the basis for subsequent manuals dealing with popular poetry. Although he changed some of his terminology, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) relied largely on al-Hillī’s work in his treatment of non-classical poetry in his *Muqaddima*. The ninth-/fifteenth-century treatise on the non-canonical verse forms by Ibn Ḥijja al-Hamawī (d. 837/1434), *Bulūgh al-amal fi*

⁷³ Semah, ‘*Humaynī Poetry*’, 235. The information in this paragraph is derived from this article. See also al-Maqālīḥ, *Ši’r al-‘āmmiyā*.

⁷⁴ al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. I, p. 87.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 83–5.

fann al-zajal, which focuses primarily on the *zajal*, is derived mainly from *al-Ātil al-ḥālī wa'l-murakhkhaṣ al-ghālī*. Ibn Ḥijja plucked text verbatim from his predecessor and claimed it as his own. At other times, he made slight alterations to the original text. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, he makes bold to name Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī and to find fault with him on trivial points. His work has the merit of providing additional samples of poetry from Egypt and Syria, as well as information about the *zajal* competitions that were conducted between poets from Damascus and Hama. One anecdote apparently related by Ibn Ḥijja⁷⁷ conveys how important a position *zajal* held in fourteenth-century Syria. The story has it that the *zajal* rivalry between Damascus and Hama reached such a pitch that the sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalawūn had to intervene by appointing a commission of experts to judge between ‘Alī ibn Muqātil, who represented Hama, and Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Uthmān al-Amshāṭī, who spoke for Damascus. The commission consisted of some of the most eminent *zajal* specialists of the period, including Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Nubāṭa (d. 768/1367), Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn Ḥayyān Athīr al-Dīn al-Gharnāṭī and Fath al-Dīn ibn Abī'l-Fatḥ, known as Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 734/1334). The decision in favour of ‘Alī ibn al-Muqātil, needless to say, did not please the Damascenes, who received it with vocal opposition and anger. Ibn Ḥijja himself produced numerous *azjāl*, and consistently gives himself credit for surpassing his models in his numerous *contrefacta* (imitative poems), but there is some indication that he may have plagiarized some of the *zajals* he attributed to himself. Rīdā Muhsin al-Qurayshī has identified two manuscripts, one Iraqi, the other Tunisian, containing a *zajal* in which the *istishhād* – identification of the author that occurs in the last or penultimate verse of the poem – names one Ibn Yūsuf in the Iraqi manuscript and Ibn Ḥijja in the Tunisian. In al-Qurayshī’s view, the Iraqi text is the correct one, and he attributes this *zajal* to Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Yūsuf al-Banawānī.⁷⁸

It is to this same Banawānī that al-Qurayshī, making reference to an Iraqi manuscript, and not the Turkish one that Hoenerbach used, attributes the text entitled *Daf' al-shakk wa'l-mayn fī taḥrīr al-fannayn*, which Schoeler,⁷⁹ following Hoenerbach,⁸⁰ attributes to an anonymous author. This seems to be the one work dealing with non-classical poetic forms that diverges from the path set by Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī to express independent views about the two

⁷⁷ al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. II, p. 62; and his introduction to al-Hamawī, *Bulūgh al-amal*, pp. 27–8. Note that the reference to *Bulūgh al-amal* provided by al-Qurayshī in *al-Funūn* is invalid.

⁷⁸ al-Qurayshī, introduction to al-Hamawī, *Bulūgh al-amal*, p. 30. Al-Qurayshī (*ibid.*, 115, fn. 2) suggests al-Banawānī died before his contemporary, Ibn Ḥijja, i.e. before 837/1434; al-Shaybī (*Dīwān*, p. 368) offers the alternative death date of 860/1456.

⁷⁹ *EI2*, s.v. ‘Zadjal’.

⁸⁰ *al-Ātil* / H, p. 3.

arts of *zajal* and *mawāliyyā*. Indeed, the author seems even to have criticized Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī and his contemporary, Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī, outright.⁸¹ In contrast, the work of the Egyptian anthologist Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ibshīḥī (d. c. 850/1446), *al-Mustatraf fi kull fann mustazraf* – which is a compilation of anecdotes, poetry and pietistic material arranged by subject matter – derives its definition of the popular poetic forms entirely from *al-Ātil al-hālī wa'l-murakhkhaṣ al-ghālī*, while providing additional poetic specimens beyond what al-Hillī's text offers. Likewise, Hoenerbach reports that the still unpublished *Kitāb al-jawhar al-maknūn* by Īsā ibn Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (ninth/fifteenth century) relied on al-Hillī indirectly via Ibn Ḥijja, but is a 'treasure-trove' of original *zajals* and *mawāliyyās*.⁸² Ahmād ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Khafājī (d. 1069/1659), author of *Shifā' al-ghalīl fi mā fī kalām al-'arab min al-dakhil*, like many others, makes use of Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī's text without referring to him by name. Finally, in the compendium of Muhibb al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Amin ibn Faḍl Allāh al-Muhibbī (1061–1111/1651–99), *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a'yān al-qarn al-hādi 'ashar*, the author takes his description of the seven arts, unattributed, from al-Hillī.⁸³

MAMLUK-ERA POPULAR POETRY

Al-Ibshīḥī's *Mustatraf*, which is a Mamluk distillation of Arab cultural wisdom and literary taste, contains a *zajal* that is a *tour-de-force* specimen of this type of popular verse composition. The author of this piece is Abū 'Abd Allāh Khalaf ibn Muḥammad al-Ghubārī, an Egyptian poet and scholar who was prominent during the reign of the Qalawunids. Al-Ghubārī, who was alive in 741/1341, was renowned for his learning in *ḥadīth* and Shafī'i *fiqh* as well as poetry,⁸⁴ and was actively sought out by students. He is best known for his poetry that celebrates events that took place during the rule of al-Ashraf Sha'bān (764–78/1363–76) and al-Manṣūr 'Alā' al-Dīn (778–84/1376–82). He has the distinction of having composed an entire *dīwān* of *azjāl*,⁸⁵ only fragments of which have survived in works such as Ibn Iyās' (852–c. 930/1448–c. 1524) *Badā'i' al-zuhūr fi waqā'i' al-duhūr* and '*Uqūd al-la'āli fil-muwashshahāt wa'l-azjāl* by Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Nawājī (d. 859/1455).⁸⁶

⁸¹ al-Qurayshī, introduction to al-Ḥamawī, *Bulūgh al-amal*, p. 31.

⁸² *al-Ātil/H*, p. 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

⁸⁴ It is the view of one writer on al-Ghubārī that he turned to *zajal* only after his *qariḍ* poetry failed to gain a significant reception. Abū Buthayna, *al-Zajal al-'arabī*, p. 46.

⁸⁵ According to al-Qurayshī (*al-Funūn*, vol. I, p. 62) – and only al-Qurayshī, as far as I know – al-Ghubārī also composed *mawāliyyā*.

⁸⁶ In David Semah's description of the unique manuscript (Escorial 434) of '*Uqūd*' he notes that the text includes ninety *muwashshahāt*, some attested in no other source. However, in the 1982 edition by

The *zajal* under discussion⁸⁷ employs the standard rhyme pattern of the ‘*zajal* proper’, the only deviation being that the rhyme of the first *ghuṣn* is used twice, as is that of the third, resulting in the following pattern: *AAbbbAA bbbAA cccAA cccAA dddAA eeeAA fffAA*, etc. Starting out as a *taghazzul* rhapsodizing about the ‘gazelles of the Nile Valley and Syria’, the composition proceeds to encompass most of the standard modes of poetry of the classical canon, as well as the most salient features of the non-classical repertoire. The *zajal* thus contains, in addition to its *ghazal*, a *khamriyya*, a *zuhri* focusing on a garden and other features of nature, a mini-*bādī’iyya* in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad, a brief *mukaffir*, and a concluding *istishhād* containing pun-laden praise of the poet himself. The piece is replete with all the rhetorical figures popular in Mamluk poetry, including *jīnās*, *tawriya* and *istikhdām*, thus exemplifying the style that al-Hillī characterized as typical of the *muta’akhkhirūn*. Most remarkable about this *zajal* is its dynamic quality, which clearly bespeaks a musical-performance setting. As is often done with the *kharja*, the main voice of the piece switches to that of a woman. The difference here is that this occurs several times over the course of the whole *zajal*, with the first-person voice that opens the piece yielding first to that of the ‘beauties of Syria’ and then the ‘beauties of Egypt’. Indeed, at several points it is difficult to be sure who is speaking as the focus shifts from one poetic theme to the other. This ambiguity is, of course, one that would have been clarified for the listeners in an actual performance setting. The flavour of the performance is clearly conveyed in this *zajal* by the enumeration of the names of various shopkeepers, where first the poultry man, then the spice seller, then the fruit seller is evoked. This is very similar to what we have seen in modern-day oral poetry performances where the poet deliberately inserts into his composition the name or other reference to those who are in attendance. In particular, the name of the sponsor of the occasion is mentioned, and it is easy to imagine that al-Ghubārī’s poem may have been commissioned by a group of local shopkeepers. This *zajal* thus vividly illustrates one type of patronage these poetic arts found during the Mamluk era. Rather than the elite ruling class that constituted the patrons of classical Arabic poetry through the twelfth century and beyond, we have here a representative sample of a virtual petite bourgeoisie – what al-Maqrīzī (766–845/1364–1441) referred to in his *Ighāthat al-umma bi-kashf al-ghumma* as ‘*ashāb al-ma’āyish*’. Much of the *zajal* consists of a masterful combining of

al-Shihābī (al-Nawājī, ‘*Uqūd*’), only eighty-seven *muwashshahāt* are included. This is perhaps not surprising since the editor acknowledges that he omitted some *azjāl* containing *khalā’ā* and *mujūn* for the sake of propriety. The *azjāl* that are included in this edition number thirty-one, composed by seventeen different *zajjālūn*. The earliest dates from the sixth/twelfth century, the latest from the ninth/fifteenth.

⁸⁷ al-Ibshībī, *al-Mustāraf*, pp. 240–1. A more detailed analysis of this piece was presented at the International Conference on Middle Eastern Popular Culture, Oxford University, 18 September 2000, and is being prepared for publication.

the products that are the object of these small businesses, with the elements of the metaphors traditionally used in the various poetic modes of the classical canon. In this, then, as in other popular poems of the period, the Mamluk rhetorical obsession with double entendre and toying with the seam between the literal and the figurative, the immediate and the recherché are mapped on to the dialectic between the social classes, often with parodic effect. This *zajal* by al-Ghubārī is clearly the work of a learned person, well versed not only in poetry but also in philosophy. The language used alternates between very colloquial usage and standard *fushā* expression. It is not the product of an uneducated popular poet, but rather the work of an educated practitioner of the form, keenly attuned to the nature and interests of his audience.

Al-Ghubārī composed his poetry during the Mamluk era (1250–1517), by all accounts the heyday of popular Arabic literature. Whether or not more colloquial poetry was being produced than in earlier periods, it is clear that more literature in the vernacular was being recorded – and being studied theoretically. Not only were some of the well-known tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* written down during this period, but so too were popular romances such as the stories of *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* and *Dhāt al-Himma*. This was the era of Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays and works such as Ibn al-Hajjār's *Kitāb al-ḥarb al-ma'shiq bayna lahm al-da'n wa-hawādīr al-sūq* (The Lovely War between Mutton and the Refreshments of the Marketplace),⁸⁸ as well as the *azjāl* and *mawāliyyā* of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalil ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363). There are a number of factors that must have contributed to the more prominent role granted popular literature during the Mamluk era. Despite the severe hardships of the period, including successive waves of bubonic and then pneumonic plague during the fourteenth century, famine, as well as economic stress due to rampant abuse of the *iqtā'* system of land distribution and the periodic failure of the Nile to rise, literacy was increasing. Numerous *kuttāb-sabil* schools were built during the Mamluk era which fostered the spread of basic reading and writing skills. Most important was the blossoming of the middle strata of society, including craftsmen and shopkeepers. Works such as Muḥammad al-Bilbaysī's *al-Mulāḥ wa'l-turāf*, in which members of diverse crafts sit around a table exchanging jokes, present a suggestive image of the importance of this class as sponsors and consumers of various types of popular literature. It is thus possible to imagine a more informal type of patronage of literature being practised among a socially diverse body of *aficionados*.

Clearly the potential for patronage of poetry from the ruling class during the Mamluk era bore little resemblance to that which prevailed during the Abbasid era and engendered some of the great epic poetry of the classical

⁸⁸ van Gelder, *God's Banquet*, p. 97.

Arabic poetic tradition. The Mamluk one-generation military aristocracy, which perpetuated itself by the continual importing of new Turkic slaves, was separated by ethnicity from the indigenous Arab populations of Egypt and Syria. This was not the first such alienation in the history of the Islamic caliphate, which knew Turkish rule under the Saljuqs. The Mamluks, however, did not emulate their eleventh-century predecessors and had none of the Saljuqs' pretensions to monarchical grandeur within a unified Sunni Islamic kingdom with the vibrant court life it engendered. The imported slaves were often of humble tribal origin with limited literary culture of any kind. Once in their new abodes, their native Qipchaq Turkish was supplemented by training in Arabic and the religious sciences, but they remained cultural outsiders whose court life focused on Turkish rather than Arabic. The *awlād al-nās*, the sons of Mamluks who were native Egyptians or Syrians by birth, given their fluency in both Turkish and Arabic and the influence they often wielded, had the potential to fill in the cultural gap left by their fathers. They did in fact sponsor salons that included both Turkish and Arabic entertainment and some even wrote poetry in classical Arabic, but the lack of acceptance they found among the native '*ulama'* limited their role as arbiters and sponsors of literary culture.⁸⁹ Relegated, for the most part, to the vernacular language where they were not inhibited by the rejection of the local Arab scholars, these descendants of the military elite privileged the colloquial language by their use and sometimes their patronage of it. There were, of course, exceptions to this general trend, such as Sanjar al-Dawādārī (d. 699/1299–1300), who conducted a lively *majlis* frequented by scholars, poets and others.⁹⁰

From the earliest years of the Muslim community, the connection between ethnicity and Islamic identity had been carefully cultivated, and classical Arabic poetry became the emblem of that privileged ethnicity. A vital source of linguistic information that threw light on the text of the Koran during the Umayyad era, the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia later became the inescapable literary model for Abbasid poets whose compositions offered a justification of the caliphate in terms consistent with the pre-Islamic Arab ethos. Even as the Muslim empire expanded to encompass multiple communities with their own heritages and ethnicities, the tie between Islamic identity and Arabness was assiduously fostered by the likes of al-Jahiz. During the Mamluk era, this association between Muslim identity, ethnicity and Arabic poetry was disrupted. As interested Muslims, the Turkish rulers were comfortable supporting and focusing on the religious sciences, without at the same time privileging the classical Arabic poetic heritage. Their legitimacy derived from the military

⁸⁹ Haarmann, 'Arabic in Speech'.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 97.

might they had used to save Islam from the Mongols and the Crusaders and found but scant grounding in the logocentric focus of early Arabo-Islamic culture. The court culture that did exist under the Mamluks often excluded native Egyptians and Syrians, and focused on Turkish rather than Arabic literary culture. There was some patronage of poetry in Arabic, but that poetry was often a far cry from the grandiloquent compositions of earlier periods. *Zajjālūn* such as al-Ghubārī used the *zajal* form to eulogize powerful patrons, such as the sultan Ashraf Sha'bān, and also to record the events of the day, including the various military expeditions of the Mamluks. In so doing he was taking up the traditional role of the poet vis-à-vis the political authorities, functioning at times as a virtual court poet.⁹¹ A comparison of the simple language of his *zajal* describing the clash between Mamluk authorities and rebellious bedouin tribes in the Egyptian province of al-Buhayra (781/1379), with Abū Tammām's famous ode celebrating the capture of Amorium, or al-Mutanabbi's poetic celebration of the capture of al-Hadath, provides eloquent illustration of how officially sanctioned poetry had become transformed by the time of the Mamluks.

I begin with the name of the Lord of the Heavens
 The dispeller of care and troubles
 We repeat for whoever is present
 the story of the Turks and the bedouins
 On Wednesday the news came
 that on Sunday night
 Bedouins came to Damanhūr,
 took over the marketplace and destroyed the town
 Ibn Sallām, their commander,
 he's the one who mustered everyone
 Then Aytamash quickly appeared
 with mamluks and mercenary Circassians.⁹²

Without the powerful cultural filtering mechanism that had been present in earlier centuries, the Mamluk era allowed more poetry of a popular nature to peek through. It is impossible to know whether the case would have been the same under an ethnically Arab ruling class with the same degree of centralization as the Mamluks. It is possible that the demographic and social changes that had taken place – increased literacy, the rise of the petite bourgeoisie – would have led to the same efflorescence of popular poetry, but one is left with the feeling that the dismantling of the cultural *Gestalt* that wedded Arabness, Islamic identity and classical Arabic language and poetry with political power cannot have been inconsequential in this regard.

⁹¹ Sallam, *al-Adab*, vol. I, pp. 314–15.

⁹² Ibid., p. 315.

Untethered from the seats of power, popular poetry was free to cover a wide variety of subjects, some of which traditionally received little or no attention within the corpus of *fūshā* poetry. One example of this is the *bullayqa* cited by Ibn Iyās that was circulated during the reign of Baybars II (709–10/1309–10).⁹³ Baybars al-Jashnikīr usurped the sultanate from the son of Qalāwūn, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, who enjoyed wide support among the people. The opposition to Baybars was fuelled by the numerous serious problems that marred his year-long reign and increased the anger of the populace. Not only was there a serious outbreak of the plague, but the Nile failed to rise to its customary level, which had a disastrous effect on agriculture. In an attempt to calm things down, Baybars opened the dam on the Nile, but even this drastic move was futile, for the river was still not high enough to effect any real difference. Throughout these troubles, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad continued plotting to depose Baybars and regain the sultanate. The following piece, which Ibn Iyās identifies as having been composed by the common people, was sung at places of amusement:

Our sultan is a small pillar [*rukayn*]
 And his deputy has only a small beard [*dugayn*]
 Where will we get water from?
 Bring us the lame one
 And water will come flowing down.

In this brief piece, the regnal title of the sultan, *rūkn al-dīn*, is referred to in the diminutive, *rukayn*, making him a ‘little pillar’, as a way of mocking Baybars’ belated and feeble attempt to save the economic day by opening the dam. ‘*Dugayn*’ refers to Baybars’ nearly beardless viceroy, Salār, who was greatly disliked by the people. Finally, ‘the lame one’ refers to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, the preferred Qalawunid, whose return to power is described as capable of bringing the forces of nature into line. This small poem, then, which was all the more dangerous for its easy circulation by song among the common people, is a clear voice of political criticism and economic dissatisfaction. While *hijā’* poetry in standard Arabic had been widely employed since the Umayyad era, it focused more particularly on invective and personal insult and did not convey the kind of collective social complaint that this *bullayqa* expresses. The subversive potential of this little ditty did not elude Baybars, who had 300 people arrested, some of whom were flogged while others had their tongues cut out.⁹⁴

Complaint about poverty is a frequent theme in the work of another poet of the seventh/thirteenth century, Jamāl al-Dīn Abū'l-Husayn al-Jazzār. Born in 601/1204, during the reign of the Ayyubids, to a family of butchers in Fustāṭ,

⁹³ Ibid., p. 316.

⁹⁴ Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, p. 53.

Abū'l-Ḥusayn al-Jazzār showed poetic talent early in life. His father saw to it that his son's talent was cultivated through the tutelage of men of letters such as Ibn Abī'l-İşba' and Kamāl al-Dīn ibn al-'Adīm al-Kātib. Although al-Jazzār at first followed in the footsteps of his relatives and worked as a butcher, he eventually gave that up to try and earn his living as a poet. He became well known not only for his *qarīd* poetry, but also for a poetry 'that the common people lean toward and the elite do not reject'.⁹⁵ In particular, he employed a technique practised by many poets of the Mamluk period, including Ibn Dāniyāl,⁹⁶ which consisted of a parodic take-off on well-known *qaṣā'id* of the classical Arabic tradition. In one such piece, al-Jazzār imitates the famous *mu'allqa* of Imru' al-Qays in order to complain of his impoverished state. The first five lines convey the flavour of the poem:

Stop, my two companions, to recall a shirt and a pair of pants
 And a cloak of mine whose worn trace has been effaced
 I am not one to cry over names [of women] when they depart
 Rather I cry over the loss of my tattered rags
 If Imru' al-Qays ibn Hajar were to see the
 extreme trouble and affliction I endure
 He would not lean towards the litter of 'Unayza
 Nor would he pass a night but forgetful of her love
 Turn away from love in Tūdiḥ out of love for residing in *qaysariyyas*
 For the *migrāh* is the greatest of my concerns⁹⁷

This piece, based on the same rhyme and metre, with some deviations, of the original, contains some very clever plays on the motifs of the original ode. First of all there is the mock *nasīb*, echoing the standard opening of the pre-Islamic Arabic *qaṣīda*, in which the poet calls on his companions to halt with him at the site of the abandoned campsite of his parted beloved. Here the trace of the effaced encampment is replaced by the poet's worn-out articles of clothing. It is not lost love he cries over here, but poverty. Thus, the imperative verb that opens the traditional *mu'allqa* is here used to draw the listener's attention to the pressing physical needs of the narrator. In effect, from its introductory words, this poem becomes a determined call for an entirely different focus and mission for Arabic poetry. Mocking the poetic conventions that mythologize the distant Arab past, al-Jazzār makes it clear that it is not unknown places and poetic figures he yearns for, but rather attention to his difficult circumstances. His situation is so dire, he says, that even Imru' al-Qays, who composed the original ode, would turn from women and talk of love if he saw the straits in which his successor lived. The urgent reality of the

⁹⁵ Sallām, *al-Adab*, vol. II, p. 139.

⁹⁶ al-Jammāl, *al-Adab*, p. 195.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

poet's poverty is emphasized in his play on the place-name al-Miqrāh, which occurs in the original *qaṣīda*, here used to mean the bowl used for serving watered-down milk for guests, thus making it an eloquent symbol of scarcity in a pre-Islamic poetic context that exalted generosity.

This poem is far from the short, sing-songy *azjāl* attributed to *al-‘āmma*. Still, the simplicity of the language of this poem, coupled with the fame of the original *qaṣīda*, would have made it accessible to a fairly wide audience with even a modicum of basic education, and the sentiments it conveys would doubtless have resonated with many ordinary people of the period. This is certainly not the first poem to poke fun at well-known poems of the pre-Islamic corpus; Abū Nuwās (d. c. 198/813) is the best-known poet to have indulged in such parody. In cases such as this, however, the distance between the original, in both theme and diction, was not so great as with al-Jazzār's piece. The unabashedly parodic nature of this poem would exclude it from any possible corpus sanctioned by the elite and renders it an eloquent commentary on the status of poetry at the time and the nature of the dialectic between canonical and more popular works. Most of al-Jazzār's poetry, in fact, can best be described as canonical poetry of simple diction, sometimes containing a sprinkling of the vernacular that is popular in subject matter. His poem about his overly fertile wife is typical in this regard.

He has a wife who whenever she looks at him
 becomes pregnant – if only she were a barren old woman.
He has remained in her captivity because of a contract
 known [to one and all] that requires the customary [sexual duties].
He is afraid to divorce, lest he be criticized
 And if he were to run around after women, [religious] prohibition would
 hold him back.⁹⁸

In his *mu‘ārada* of Imru’ al-Qays, al-Jazzār was almost certainly speaking from personal experience. Indeed, unable to make a decent living as a poet, he even returned for a time to his original profession as butcher.

Popular poetry made frequent use of the canonical poetic modes, including panegyric, love poetry, wine poetry and elegy, as is amply illustrated by the examples included by Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī in *al-Āṭil al-hālī*, and at times expanded the limitations of this thematic base by applying them to novel objects. Badr al-Dīn al-Zaytūnī's elegiac *zajal* on the Egyptians who died in the plague is typical.⁹⁹ In its straightforward simplicity, it bears little resemblance to the great elegies of the classical Arabic tradition. Instead of focusing on the virtues of the deceased, this composition emphasizes the absoluteness

⁹⁸ Sallām, *al-Adab*, vol. II, p. 146.

⁹⁹ Ibid., vol. I, p. 314.

of God's will as the only explanation for why particular individuals succumbed to disease. The only descriptive detail referring specifically to the victims is in the line, 'It [the plague] came and took from them beauties like full moons rising.' The seven-line piece ends with a straightforward exhortation to the survivors to 'Lament and cry, oh protected ones, and let tears flow copiously from your eyes / Be sad for those who died and have disappeared from the eyes of the onlookers.' It is as if the pious tone of the first few lines, which make it more of a prayer than an elegy, granted the permission needed for the grief ordered in the conclusion.

The long tradition of popular poetry related to Sufis continued during the Mamluk era and ranged from devotional pieces, to Ibn Abī'l-Afrāh's (d. 703/1303–4) scolding *mawāliyyā* accusing a devotee of hypocrisy, to Ibn Jābir al-Baghdādī's satirical portrait of Sufi dervishes:

You must appear among the people
 As a calender with shaved head
 Wearing, instead of that linen
 And your set of clothes, sheep's wool
 Or the patched cloak [of dervishes], or you will wind up naked,
 And go out and around with different types,
 clever fellows with shaven heads
 Who partake of nothing but hashish –
 No wine drinking
 A *miskal* of it is equal to a thousand jugs
 They have pouches of it
 A sixth of a *dirham*'s worth can match seventy glasses of wine
 [But] before you get stoned
 You attend to the matter of food
 And go out to the market with your beggar's bag.¹⁰⁰

Simple though this *zajal* is, it contains a triple pun – *akyās* (clever fellows) – *akyās* (pouches of hashish) – *kās* (glass of wine) – that organically brings together all the vital elements of the portrait. This poem falls within a larger corpus of poetry, *mu'rāb* and *malḥūn*, dealing with hashish usage among Sufis, to whom the spread of the drug among the general population in Egypt in the seventh/thirteenth century is often attributed.¹⁰¹

We have already noted the use of the *zajal* to record historical events during the Mamluk period. This role was not unique to *zajal*, however, and current political events were sometimes the focus of the other forms of popular verse, often with a humorous tilt to them. Consider the following *mawāliyyā* by

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 312.

¹⁰¹ al-Jammāl, *al-Adab*, pp. 62–5. See also Rosenthal, *The Herb*.

al-Bahā' Khidr ibn Saḥlūl in praise of Yalbughā al-Nāṣirī who was attempting to wrest the sultanate from the grasp of al-Zāhir Barqūq:

Oh Nāṣirī, the arrow of your might strikes your enemies
 You are victorious and the one the she-camels yearn for
 Be patient, for hardship does not persist for a creature
 Tomorrow passage [peaches] will come and the reign of al-Barqūq
 [plums] will disappear.¹⁰²

Obviously, the most striking feature of this brief *mawāliyyā* is the humorous play on the name of the contested sultan in the last line. The preceding three lines of straightforward support and encouragement act as a mere preface to the joke contained in this conclusion. Likewise, the *kān wa-kān*, with its emphasis on story-telling, was well suited to the narration of unfolding current events, and was adopted for this purpose by a number of poets in Syria. 'Umar ibn al-Wardi's (c. 689–750/1290–1349) *kān wa-kān* relating the events of the plague of 749/1348, with its personification of the plague ('It enters the house swearing, / I will not leave without its inhabitants / I have with me the judge's book / with [the names of] everyone in the house') typifies this trend.¹⁰³

Perhaps nowhere is the liminal status of the *awlād al-nās*, and indeed of what we are here referring to as 'popular' poetry, so clearly reflected as in the life and work of the ninth-/fifteenth-century writer 'Alī ibn Sūdūn al-'Alā' al-Bashbughāwī al-Qāhirī (later al-Dimashqī) al-Ḥanafī.¹⁰⁴ Born in 810/1407 to a Mamluk father of Circassian origin, who was probably brought to Egypt during the reign of the sultan Barqūq (784–801/1382–99), Ibn Sūdūn faced the uncertain future typical of the *awlād al-nās*, who were barred from much of the wealth and privilege their fathers enjoyed. Ibn Sūdūn was sent to study in the Shaykhūniyya *khāniqāh*/madrasa, where he received a thorough education in the religious sciences, as well as fields such as philosophy and medicine, from some of the outstanding teachers of the time – training that might well equip him for a life as a Sufi or religious scholar. Having started out as imam of several mosques, Ibn Sūdūn at some point changed course and took up literature as a career. At first failing in the hard economic circumstances of the ninth/fifteenth century to make a decent living as a poet, Ibn Sūdūn gave up the field to work as a copyist and a tailor. It was only when he dedicated himself to the most frivolous type of literature that Ibn Sūdūn found real success. His collection known as *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-muḍhik al-'abūs* (The Recreation of Souls that Makes the Scowler Laugh), which he committed to writing

¹⁰² Sallām, *al-Adab*, vol. I, p. 323.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰⁴ The following derives from Vrolijk's introduction to his edition of Ibn Sūdūn's *Nuzhat al-nufūs*. See also al-Jammāl, *al-Adab*, pp. 209–16.

only when he discovered that others were memorizing his poems and passing them off as their own, has survived in thirty-eight manuscripts, two of which are autographs, and enjoyed great popularity through the twelfth/eighteenth century.

The text of *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-muḍḥik al-‘abūs* is divided into two parts, the first of which – dedicated to serious poetry, including *madīh* and *ghazal*, and to humorous poetry and prose – is in *fūshā*. The second part, also dedicated to humorous poetry and prose, is divided into five chapters: humorous *qaṣā’id* and mock doxologies; concocted stories; silly *muwashshahāt*; poems known as *dūbayt*, *jazal*¹⁰⁵ and *mawāliyyās*, and wondrous curiosities (*tuḥaf*) and strange novelties (*turaf*). Much of this part is in the vernacular. The topics covered in this second part range from the pleasures of hashish, sweets and various kinds of food and drink, to poems focusing on occasions such as birth, circumcision, marriage, death and official festivals.

From the point of view of form, the poems in the second section of the text are extremely diverse. Ibn Sūdūn’s so-called ‘*muwashshahāt hubāliyya*’ are actually more *muwashshah*-like *azjāl*, resembling the *muwashshah* in structure but composed in the vernacular. For each poem in this group Ibn Sūdūn specifies a musical mode, making it clear that these compositions were destined to be sung.¹⁰⁶ There are also *qaṣā’id zajaliyya*, *musammaṭ* verse, *mawāliyyās* and *dūbayt* couplets, as well as two poems consisting of sexually explicit repartee, which Ibn Sūdūn designates as *jazal*. The following hyperbolic expression of his notorious sweet tooth is typical of much of Ibn Sūdūn’s verse:

Oh my kin, when I die
 Enshroud me in a *kafān* of *kunāfa* pastries
 And make sugar my embalming oil
 And sugar-candy my wrappings
 Put me in a coffin of almond cakes
 And bury me in *qatayif*
 And if only you would bury some small bananas for me
 with thick Egyptian honey
 ‘Alī would not be vexed one bit
 Such is the situation of the *faqīr*¹⁰⁷

How are we to categorize Ibn Sūdūn’s vernacular poetry? Is it popular poetry? At first glance, this poetry seems to illustrate perfectly the intersection

¹⁰⁵ This is how Vrolijk vocalizes the word, which he associates with the verb’s basic meaning ‘to cut, divide’. This sense does seem to correspond to the clipped rhythm of the two long poems thus described. This vocalization and usage contrast with the more common usage, *jazl*, which means ‘eloquent’ or ‘clear’ speech or poetry. Al-Hilli uses *jazl* to refer to poetry using the traditional poetic modes.

¹⁰⁶ Vrolijk *Nuzhat al-nufūs*, dedicates his chapter 10, pp. 129–36, to a discussion of Ibn Sūdūn’s use of the musical *maqāmāt*.

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Sūdūn, *ibid.*, p. 81 in the Arabic section.

between the literature of the elite and that of the common people described earlier. We know from al-Sakhāwī that the *zurafā'* competed with one another over obtaining Ibn Sūdūn's *dīwān*.¹⁰⁸ The *zurafā'* were a kind of self-conscious cultural and social elite that included young people from diverse professions.¹⁰⁹ Clearly then, Ibn Sūdūn's poetry appealed to members of a group of effete consumers. At the same time, as Vrolijk has pointed out, the simplicity of the language and themes of the poetry would place it also within the purview of the less privileged of society. This would thus seem to be light literature that cuts across the boundaries of social class. Indeed, while Ibn Sūdūn's verses may have been available in written form for a price that his more well-to-do admirers could handle, they were, by his own admission, circulated orally before being recorded in writing and must therefore have been accessible to a wide audience from diverse levels of society. This seems especially probable given his background and familiarity with Sufi circles. It is therefore tempting to view Ibn Sūdūn's work as representative of the shared taste of the lower classes and the '*raffiné*' at the opposite end of the social spectrum. On the other hand, if we accept the validity of the portrait Arnoud Vrolijk paints of Ibn Sūdūn, we must consider a somewhat different possibility. Erstwhile Sufi and petty religious leader, Ibn Sūdūn is said to have become a kind of buffoon living a dissolute life of hashish and foolery, while supplying titillating and farcical verse and prose to his elegant paying fans. There is nothing to indicate that the burlesque of these pieces actually reflected the literary taste of the '*āmma*', and while it was undoubtedly accessible to them, they and their taste were probably irrelevant to Ibn Sūdūn's performance context. The designation given by Ibn Sūdūn to one chapter in the second section of his text is suggestive in this connection. '*Muwashshahāt hubāliyya*' is translated by Vrolijk as 'silly *muwashshahāt*', where the *nisba* adjective '*hubāliyya*' would seem to correspond to the word '*habāla*', commonly used in modern Egyptian colloquial Arabic to mean 'foolishness' or 'stupidity'.¹¹⁰ Since the roots of this word are also associated with the idea of taking advantage of a situation to gain benefit (*al-ihtibāl* = *al-ightinām wa'l-ihtiyāt*), one wonders if a double entendre were not intended here, with Ibn Sūdūn the proper *habbāl* 'striving to make earnings'¹¹¹ with his silly poems. The parodic intent of *Nuzhat al-nufūs* – clearly signalled by Ibn Sūdūn's use of *mu'āradas* (contrafactions), real and mock – is mostly of a general rather than a pointed nature. As van Gelder commented regarding a particularly incoherent poem within the text,

¹⁰⁸ al-Sakhāwī, *al-Daw' al-lāmi'*, vol. V, pp. 229–30.

¹⁰⁹ Ghazi, 'Un Groupe social'.

¹¹⁰ The vocalization of the *hā'*, I assume, derives from Ibn Sūdūn himself, since Vrolijk reports that the manuscripts were generously vocalized.

¹¹¹ al-Zāwī, *Tartib*, vol. IV, pp. 475–6; Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-Ārab*, vol. VI, p. 4,608.

Ibn Südün seems to imply ‘that nothing meaningful can be said about the world, or that meaningful things can no longer be said in verse, except when the subjects are food and intoxication’.¹¹²

OTTOMAN-ERA POPULAR POETRY

With the extension from 1516 of Ottoman hegemony over the Arab lands from Iraq to Algeria and southwards to Eritrea, the social and cultural trajectory that characterized the Mamluk era continued and intensified. The generally greater visibility that colloquial Arabic enjoyed during the period is reflected not only in the sprinkling of the vernacular language throughout many of the historical chronicles of the time – a trend that had begun during the late Mamluk era – but also in the appearance of a number of treatises and glossaries focusing on the colloquial language itself. More *sabīls* were built, and thus more and more people had access to at least an elementary education. At the same time, Sufi orders, which proliferated during the Ottoman era, also encouraged basic literacy and emphasized the importance of reading. This increased literacy¹¹³ resulted in a wider reading public that represented a broader swathe of society, including artisans and craftsmen, whose needs and abilities differed from those of the traditional Arabic-speaking elite involved in literary output. Thus, more popular material found its way into writing, and recensions of popular romances, such as *Sīrat Baybars*, proliferated. In Cairo, the diminished role of the educated elite was further limited by the decentralization that now characterized this former imperial capital.¹¹⁴ A similarly loose rein characterized Ottoman control over Syria. As ‘institutional forms [gave] way to looser structures’,¹¹⁵ such as informal sessions and literary salons in the private households of amirs, popular poetry found a more naturally hospitable environment in which to flourish. Poetry was still being patronized – by amirs, other local notables, prosperous merchants and even some of the wealthier among the poets themselves. The amir Ridwān Katkhudā al-Jalfi (d. 1168/1755), for one, conducted a lively court to which poets were invited. Indeed, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Salama al-Idkawī (1104–84/1693–1770) alternately functioned as a virtual poet-laureate to Ridwān or travelled around Egypt eulogizing eminent patrons willing to pay for the honour, much as an Abbasid poet might have done. Al-Shaykh Qāsim ibn ‘Aṭā’ al-Miṣrī (d. 1203/1789), whose primary reputation stemmed from his *azjāl* and

¹¹² van Gelder, *God’s Banquet*, p. 92.

¹¹³ By the eighteenth century, perhaps as much as half of the male population was literate; Hourani, *History*, p. 254.

¹¹⁴ Hanna, ‘Culture’, pp. 87–112.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

his *muzdawijas*, and who attached himself to the prominent al-Wafā'i family, is another example of a ‘professional poet’, after the pattern of an earlier era.¹¹⁶

Nonetheless, patronage of poetry was but a shadow of the official sponsorship of days gone by. The overall effect of this was to level the playing field somewhat between *fushbā* and popular poetry, for, in this environment, *qarīd* poetry did not possess any more precedence over vernacular poetry than the now-expanding public was willing to give it. In addition, as the local elite was becoming more and more Ottomanized, it was, ironically, the ‘*āmma* that retained a more unambiguous identification with Arabic. This was particularly true in the case of provinces, such as Aleppo, that remained under the direct control of Istanbul. It is not surprising, then, that most poets composed at least some popular poetry, which was enjoyed by virtually all classes of society. This is not to suggest that popular poetry was suddenly held in such high esteem that it was studiously and consistently recorded. On the contrary, the bulk of it was still left to the vagaries of time, and had it not been for al-Jabarti’s (1167–1241/1753–1825) *Ajā’ib al-āthār fī l-tarājim wa l-akhbār*, which Hourani has called ‘the last great chronicle in the traditional style’,¹¹⁷ very little popular poetry from this period would have found its way to us. The appearance in the sixteenth century of the coffeehouse constituted a further encouragement to the production and dissemination of popular poetry and other forms of popular entertainment. Venues like this, which became very numerous in Egypt, for example, over the course of the next three centuries, hosted popular entertainment such as puppet shows and shadow plays and encouraged the use of a linguistic level that was accessible to its more modestly educated clientele.¹¹⁸

The newly emphasized taste for drinking coffee is reflected in a *muwashshah* by Muhammad al-Bakrī (d. 994/1585),¹¹⁹ in which he encourages the practice in terms borrowed from the traditional *khamriyya*. ‘Pass around the coffee in a splendid glass’, he urges, for it solves the problem of ‘what [right] understanding has prohibited’. The beverage is described as being the preferred drink of Sufis, implying that it has similar ecstasy-producing effects. The piece is even complete with a censor whose presumed disapproval of coffee is dismissed as ignorant chatter. The *muwashshah* ends with a pun on the word *rāb*, meaning both ‘he departed’, in reference to the censor, and ‘wine’ – a parting shot that signals the parody of the entire poem. It is easy to imagine a gathering of friends in a coffeehouse enjoying this spontaneous pastiche of the traditional wine song with Sufi overtones.

¹¹⁶ Heyworth-Dunne, ‘Arabic Literature’, 683–5.

¹¹⁷ Hourani, *History*, p. 256.

¹¹⁸ Hanna, ‘Culture’, p. 107.

¹¹⁹ Kilānī, *al-Adab*, pp. 194–5.

Little is known about the life of one of the most compelling figures in the field of popular literature in the seventeenth century, Yūsuf ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jawwād ibn Khidr al-Shirbīnī (d. after 1032/1687), author of the work entitled *Hazz al-quḥūf fi sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* (The Shaking of the Peasant Caps in the Interpreting of the Ode of Abū Shādūf or The Stirring of the Yokels¹²⁰ in the Interpreting of the Ode of Abū Shādūf). As was the case for many writers and chroniclers of the Ottoman period, al-Shirbīnī was neglected by the biographers of the period, with the result that much of what is known about him must be gleaned from his works. Al-Shirbīnī was born in the village of Shirbīn of a family he specifies were not peasants. Though he lived in Cairo, he maintained contact with his village of origin. In his still valuable treatment of *Hazz al-quḥūf*, Baer concludes that al-Shirbīnī was ‘what he calls a *mu‘āmil*, a merchant and money-lender doing business with the fellahs, or at least that this was the occupation of the family or social group to which he belonged’.¹²¹ Al-Shirbīnī himself was a scholar thoroughly versed in the dominant religious sciences and literary culture and was probably one of the many scholars of rural origin who went to Cairo to study at a madrasa and remained there as ‘part of Cairo’s corps of *‘ulamā’*'.¹²² Besides a monograph on peasant weddings, al-Shirbīnī also composed a homiletic tract consisting entirely of undotted letters.¹²³

Hazz al-quḥūf, written between 1664 and 1686, is a collection of anecdotes intermingled with poetry exposing what al-Shirbīnī deemed the overall inferiority of the peasant to the Cairene in intelligence, manners, morality and taste, and portraying him as coarse, deceptive and even sexually perverse. The text is, to quote van Gelder’s succinct description of it, a ‘mixture of the serious and the jesting, where true facts alternate with perfect nonsense and gross lies, in which blatant contradictions are rife and perfectly acceptable, and where bitter mockery and compassion are not incompatible’.¹²⁴ The work is divided into two parts, the first of which is an introduction in which al-Shirbīnī announces his intention to provide a commentary on the *qaṣīda* of the peasant poet Abū Shādūf, in accordance with the request of one he ‘cannot disobey’, whom Baer has identified as the well-known scholar al-Shaykh Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Sandūbī.¹²⁵ This introduction, in which al-Shirbīnī declares his intention to satisfy the prevailing taste of his readers by offering an entertaining rather than edifying text, contains a description of peasant life and anecdotes illustrating

¹²⁰ Cachia, *Ballads*, p. 15.

¹²¹ Baer, *Fellah*, p. 6.

¹²² Ibid., p. 4.

¹²³ Davies, ‘Egyptian Arabic’, p. 6.

¹²⁴ van Gelder, *God’s Banquet*, p. 108.

¹²⁵ Baer, *Fellah*, p. 4.

the coarseness of rural language and the peasant's ignorance of sanitary habits, fine food and religion. Stories about encounters between Azharīs and rural *fugahā'* are presented to demonstrate the backwardness and ignorance of the latter. Peasant *mawwāls* receive al-Shirbīnī's linguistic and social commentary, while Sufi dervishes are condemned for claiming miraculous powers and being good-for-nothing beggars. The first part concludes with a long *urjūza* summarizing what precedes it. The second part of *Hazz al-quḥūf* consists of the commentary on the poem by Abū Shādūf, along with information on the poet's biography and his beard, and lesser odes supposedly by Abū Shādūf. It is the contents of the main ode attributed to Abū Shādūf with its complaints about the lot of the peasant and oppression by local officials that provided the basis for the essentially socialist interpretation of this text offered by a number of modern Egyptian scholars.¹²⁶ The work concludes with two unrelated tales, one the tale of the barber in *A Thousand and One Nights*, the other an account of the death of Husayn. Besides this last, the only evidence of borrowings from the existent popular literary tradition is to be found in echoes of the epic tale of *Banī Hilā'i*¹²⁷ and the possible influence of the shadow play, *Li'b al-timsāḥ*, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century.¹²⁸ As Humphrey Davies points out, a 'contemporary oral tradition of jokes and anecdotes, about peasants or adaptable to them' probably also served as a source for al-Shirbīnī.¹²⁹ The colloquial poetry in this work includes several poems in the first part, one of which is a humorous ode about weddings and another a parody of a wedding song by Ibn Sūdūn. In addition, there are six two-line *mawāliyyās* about love among peasants. The language of the latter is more purely colloquial than the former, all of which are, like the poetry of part two, a mix of colloquial and classical elements.

The scholars who have studied *Hazz al-quḥūf* have underlined the parodic nature of the text. There is, of course, no doubt that the application of the rigorous and detailed scholarly apparatus of commentary and explication, complete with mock etymologies, to the gross content of putative peasant poetry has the effect of parodying those scholarly methodologies. Then too, the fact that the so-called *qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* is apocryphal is at the parodic heart of the text. On the other hand, the vehement condemnation of the peasant and his way of life and the portrayal of him that emphasizes the scatalogical has been more perplexing to these same scholars. The explanation suggested by Baer remains the most convincing one proffered to date. This

¹²⁶ Baer provides a thorough discussion of the various interpretations the text has received in modern Egypt: *Fellah*, pp. 26–34.

¹²⁷ Kern, 'Humoristen und Satiriker', 39–42.

¹²⁸ Kahle, 'Das Krokodilspiel', pp. 188–359, also cited by Baer, *Fellah*, p. 9.

¹²⁹ Davies, 'Egyptian Arabic', p. 19.

unique example of a literary text focused almost entirely on the mockery of peasants, he suggests, derives from al-Shirbīnī's desire to dissociate himself, despite his rural origins, from this group that was so roundly derided by his '*ulamā'* colleagues at al-Azhar. His audience, it would therefore seem, was primarily an urban educated elite that doubtless included some scholars who, like himself, hailed originally from the countryside. This explains the departure from the primary attitude of the text, which is humour and entertainment, to include serious passages that also vilify the peasant, as well as, conversely, the faithful exposition of certain aspects of the peasant's real-life oppression. It is clear, given the inherent irony in al-Shirbīnī's liminal position (reflected in the text), between the peasants he disparages and the educated urban '*ulamā*' with whom he wishes to identify, that *Hazz al-quḥūf* begs for a literary analysis that takes into account its dialogic nature. Inasmuch as this text still awaits even a critical edition,¹³⁰ it is not surprising that such a literary analysis has yet to be produced.¹³¹

Given the nature of al-Shirbīnī's probable audience – not to mention the emphasis on food – the comparison with Ibn Sūdūn, the only predecessor the author acknowledges emulating, is particularly apt. In his introduction, al-Shirbīnī promises his text will contain '[al-]khalā'a wa'l-mujūn wa-shay' yuḥāki Ibn Sūdūn', and indeed imitates Ibn Sūdūn in his inclusion of obscenity and even copies a long monologue entitled '*maktūb Finayn*' from Ibn Sūdūn. In fact, both authors seem to have been using mockery of the common people, rural or otherwise, as the fulcrum for the titillation of an elite audience. In that sense, the poetry included in al-Shirbīnī's work can be deemed 'popular' on the basis of linguistic register, but not on the basis of its target audience or indeed its author.

By this period (the eleventh/seventeenth century), poets of *mawāliyyā* were flourishing in Iraq thanks to the encouragement of Afrāsiyāb, governor of Basra, and his amirs. The poet 'Abd 'Alī ibn Nāṣir, known as Ibn Rahma al-Huwayzī (d. 1075/1664), produced an entire *dīwān* of *mawāliyyā* entitled, *al-Fayḍ al-ghazīr fi sharḥ mawāliyyā al-amīr*, in praise of the amir 'Adīd al-Dawla.¹³² During the same period Ma'tūq al-Mūsawī (d. 1087/1676) produced a *dīwān* eulogizing the governor and amir of Basra, which he concluded with a number of *mawāliyyā* of diverse types.¹³³ The following two centuries also produced prominent *mawāliyyā* poets, including al-Shaykh Kāzim al-Azrī (d. 1211/1796). The rule of the Jalilī family of governors in Mosul

¹³⁰ It is my understanding that Humphrey Davies, the author of the above-mentioned dissertation on the colloquial language of *Hazz al-quḥūf*, is at work on a critical edition of the text.

¹³¹ Vial, 'Le *Hazz al-Quḥūf*', pp. 170–81, contains some observations relevant to this perspective.

¹³² al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. I, p. 97.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 98.

during the second half of the twelfth/eighteenth century brought a period of patronage of the arts and fostering of cultural life, as scholars and poets were supported and numerous schools and mosques were built. A number of Jalilī poets emerged during this time, including Fakhr al-Dīn Abū Sa‘īd ‘Uthmān al-Hayyā‘ī (d. 1245/1829), and his sons, Muḥammad Amin Bāshā al-Jalilī (d. 1262/1846) and Muḥammad Sa‘īd ibn al-Ḥājj ‘Uthmān al-Hayyā‘ī al-Jalilī (d. 1233/1818). Mosul also boasted ‘Abd al-Bāqī al-‘Umarī (d. 1278/1861), ‘Abd al-Ghaffār al-Akhras (d. 1291/1774) and al-Hilla, Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘il Ibn al-Khalfa (d. 1247/1831).¹³⁴

As limited as our information about al-Shirbīnī is, it still greatly outstrips what we know of the life and work of the legendary Egyptian poet Ibn ‘Arūs (fl. c. 1193/1780). Even the name ‘Ibn ‘Arūs’ was almost certainly not the poet’s real one. Ibn ‘Arūs, to whom at least one writer refers as ‘Ahmad Ibn ‘Arūs’,¹³⁵ is said to have been born in one of the villages of Qinā in Upper Egypt.¹³⁶ He became a notorious brigand and leader of one of the most dangerous gangs of thieves that was terrorizing Egypt during the eighteenth century, and is said to have made a fortune extorting tribute money from various villages, with public officials themselves helpless to rein him in. Later in life, Ibn ‘Arūs apparently repented his evil ways, became a Sufi ascetic, and for the last twenty years of his life travelled around the country distributing his ill-gotten wealth to the poor. One almost certainly apocryphal story about the origin of the name ‘Ibn ‘Arūs’ has it that once, during his *futuwwa* days, the poet attacked a wedding party. When the bride, abandoned in her litter by the frightened men, responded to her would-be assailant with poetry and a disarming lack of fear, the impressed Ibn ‘Arūs escorted her unharmed to her waiting groom and went off to repent his sinful ways. His fellow thieves in response dubbed him ‘Ibn ‘Arūs’, as if he had been born anew of the unnamed bride.¹³⁷ According to Ḥusayn Mazlūm Riyād and Muṣṭafā Muḥammad al-Ṣabbāhī, in one of the few modern sources providing any information at all about Ibn ‘Arūs, his *azjāl* – many of which focused on moral counsel and wise advice – were widely circulated among all classes of Egyptian society, but only a few have been preserved in writing.¹³⁸ Indeed, they claim, much material has been falsely attributed to him, though they vouch for the authenticity of the one long *zajal* of his included in their own text.¹³⁹ In contrast, Abū Buthayna claims that an entire *dīwān* of his work has been preserved in Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya.¹⁴⁰ Pierre Cachia affirms that

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 100, 104, 107, 108, III.

¹³⁵ Abū Buthayna, *al-Zajal al-‘arabī*, pp. 49–50.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 51–2.

¹³⁸ Riyād and al-Ṣabbāhī, *Tārīkh adab al-sha‘b*, pp. 83–4.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 59–61, 83–91.

¹⁴⁰ Abū Buthayna, *al-Zajal al-‘arabī*, p. 53.

Ibn 'Arūs is still frequently quoted by the singers of modern popular ballads in Egypt who sing quatrains they attribute to him. Ibn 'Arūs even became the eponym for a society of Egyptian colloquial poets – the Ibn 'Arūs Society – in the 1950s.

Among the many *zajjālūn* of the period, al-Shaykh 'Āmir al-Anbūṭī (d. 1173/1759) is distinguished by his focus on food and drink, in the tradition of Ibn Sūdūn. A sharp-tongued poet whose invective was feared by many, al-Anbūṭī also composed a '*Lāmiyya*' in the pattern of al-Tughrā'i's *Lāmiyyat al-'ajam* and another after the '*Lāmiyya*' of al-Wardī. Al-Anbūṭī's contemporaries so feared his parodies of their poems, that they on occasion resorted to paying him to keep him from composing such works.

One such cautious benefactor was 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Āmir ibn Sharaf al-Dīn al-Shabrāwī¹⁴¹ (1091–1171/1680–1758). The demand for popular entertainment material of the kind suitable for coffeehouses increased during the Ottoman era, and many poets of the period composed *azjāl*, *muwashshahāt* and short poems that were made into songs. Al-Shabrāwī, the author of the following little ditty, was a well-known composer of such songs, which were widely circulated among the '*āmma*'.

I saw him by chance and fell madly in love with him
 [He is] dark-skinned and I happen to like dark skin
 I leant to speak flirtatiously with him and found he had delicacy
 And abundant grace and, still more, a pleasantness of mien.
 Oh, people of culture, by God and the legitimacy of the Prophet,
 I never in my life saw the like of him in beauty.
 [He is] a veritable moon whose beauty I never saw
 In anyone before or after him.¹⁴²

It is revealing about the state of poetry in general in the eighteenth century to note that the poet who composed this fairly insipid piece was an Azharī scholar from a well-known family of '*ulamā'*, who became rector of al-Azhar in 1724. Al-Shabrāwī was typical of many of the poets of the period, not only in his Azhar training, but also in his composition of both *fusħā* poetry and popular poetry. Al-Shabrāwī in fact composed not only panegyrics to notable figures of his day, but also a number of *ghazal* poems that were still being sung by popular singers in Egypt well into the twentieth century.¹⁴³ Indeed, the case of al-Shabrāwī's popularity and career represents another argument against too cantonized a view of pre-modern Arab society. The '*ulamā'* of eighteenth-century Egypt had direct contact with the '*āmma*', and hence that

¹⁴¹ In contrast to the vocalization used by *EI2* and others (al-Shubrāwī), I have adopted the spelling used by al-Zirikli, *al-Ā'lām*, p. 13, since it also corresponds to a name commonly known in Egypt.

¹⁴² Kīlānī, *al-Adab*, p. 206.

¹⁴³ al-Zirikli, *al-Ā'lām*, p. 130; Heyworth-Dunne, 'Arabic Literature', 682.

potential audience, through the religious orders and corporations, and, in any case, often pursued interests and activities entirely separate and distinct from their Azhar-defined identities.¹⁴⁴

Not all Ottoman-period verse of a non-canonical nature focused on light topics, however. As in previous periods, during the Ottoman era, non-canonical poetic forms such as the *zajal* were often used as the vehicle for eulogizing powerful figures and patrons. One example of this is Ibrāhīm al-Shāfi‘ī’s long *zajal* (1177/1763) praising the amir ‘Abd al-Rahmān Katkhudā, in which he named the numerous buildings he had built and the various charities he had endowed.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, many eighteenth-century *azjāl* record details of the popular Egyptian revolt against the French.¹⁴⁶ In Iraq, al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-‘Umarī al-Mawṣilī (d. 1216/1801), a Sufi ascetic known for his miracles, composed *kān wa-kān* poems for use in preaching. In one long poem, he exhorts the practitioners of the various trades, naming them individually and instructing them on the unscrupulous business practices they should avoid in order to please God and fulfil their professional duties.¹⁴⁷ Each example contains a play on words that involves vocabulary associated with that profession, as when the baker is instructed to ‘*ifham daqīq lafẓ qawlī*’ ('understand the subtlety of what I am saying'), the word *daqīq* meaning both 'flour' and 'that which is subtle or precise'. The extent to which popular poetic forms were nurtured and developed in Sufi circles is evidenced by the work of Aḥmad al-Darwīshī al-Burullusī (d. 1216/1801). An Aḥmadī Sufi, he authored a book entitled *al-‘Aqīda al-darwīshiyya fi tahrīr al-sab‘* [sic] *funūn al-adabiyya*, in which he provides illustrations from his own compositions of each of the seven arts. Even more interesting, in this work he established for this poetry rhythmic measures deriving from the *zajal* tradition, distinct from the Khalilian metrical system.¹⁴⁸ The nineteenth century also produced a number of *mawāliyyā/zuhayrī* poets in Iraq, including ‘Abd al-Ghanī Jamīl (d. 1280/1863) and Ḥusayn al-Ḥājj Mahdī (d. 1276/1860).

As discussed in the first chapter of this volume, the aptness of the traditionally applied term for the sixteenth through the early nineteenth century in Arabic literary history, *‘aṣr al-inḥiṭāt*, has long been debated. After decades of cavalier condemnation of these centuries of literary production, the more judicious position that seems finally to have taken root among scholars of Arabic literature is that, given the fact that much of the basic research into the actual

¹⁴⁴ Individuals such as al-Shaykh ‘Uthmān ibn Ahmad al-Ṣafā‘ī (d. 1204/1790), who wrote both licentious poetry and 'proper' works such as a *takhmīs* on the *Burda* (Heyworth-Dunne, 'Arabic Literature', 689), give evidence of the *shaykh*-poets' diversity of interests.

¹⁴⁵ Kīlānī, *al-Adab*, p. 202.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 206–7.

¹⁴⁷ al-Qurayshī, *al-Funūn*, vol. III, pp. 30–1.

¹⁴⁸ MS, 'Adab Taymūr', No. 8, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, cited by al-Shaybī, *Dīwān*, pp. 329–30.

literature of this period has yet to be done, we are in no position to dismiss it out of hand. In regard to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries this is particularly true, for, in fact, very little poetry, canonical or otherwise, has actually been preserved from this period. The first half of the nineteenth century was truly a transitional period socially, politically and culturally. All the mechanisms that would bring about the cultural efflorescence of the *nahda* in the second half of the century were in place, but were barely in their infancy. The Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 marked the beginning of a new era of increased European presence and influence in Arab countries. Secular education, which would become widespread by the last decades of the century, was now being introduced by Christian missionaries in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, and by Muhammad 'Alī (reigned 1805–48) in Egypt. Publishing was expanding and the Būlāq press was established in Cairo in 1822. At the same time, official newspapers that appeared during this period, such as *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyya* (from 1828), were the vanguard of the vital and influential journals of the second half of the century that would effectively transform traditional Arab society. During the period 1800–50, none of these elements was fully evolved, and the great impact they were to have needed several decades to manifest itself. Popular poetry, too, seems to have slumbered during this period. This may have been due to particular social and economic measures that had the effect of exaggerating class differences and widening the gap between the various sectors of society. As secular education became available to a select group of officials and well-connected elites, and family and supporters of Muhammad 'Alī were granted land holdings in payment for their services and loyalty, and as wealth became concentrated in the hands of fewer merchants who managed to create a niche for themselves in the context of European manipulation of trade markets, the poorer classes had less and less in common with those at the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum. Informal channels of communication and exchange were being transformed, and the period was marked by more rigid social stratification. In this environment, the limited body of shared popular culture and literature shrank still further.

One of the last nineteenth-century *zajjalūn* of note was a talented Azhar student from an elite family, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Ibrāhīm al-Faḥḥām, who used rhetorical embellishment in his *azjāl* after the manner of the *fūshā* poets of his day. According to Riyāḍ and al-Ṣabbāḥī, al-Faḥḥām's work created a wider audience for *zajal*, as people from all levels of society turned their attention to the *zajal*, after having long neglected it. Indeed, many men of letters began composing *azjāl* in imitation of al-Faḥḥām, since *zajal* was more positively received and more widely circulated among the people, 'while only a small group of the nation's elite read and transmitted

poetry'.¹⁴⁹ The fact that *zajal* was thriving during the Mamluk era and then found a receptive audience again in the nineteenth century that al-Fahḥām and others were able to exploit, suggests a line of continuity of this form among certain sectors of society that we, in our dependence on the written record, cannot fully reconstruct. Unfortunately, despite al-Fahḥām's reputation for carefully guarding his collected poetry, very little of his work, which consisted mainly of *muwashshahāt*, *madā'ih nabawiyya* and Sufi hymns, has survived.¹⁵⁰ What is perhaps most revealing about al-Fahḥām's work is that it illustrates to some extent the temporary shifting of the familiar balance between the canonical and the non-canonical poetic forms, which characterized the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the poetic environment of this 'exhausted, inward-looking culture',¹⁵¹ it is as if non-canonical poetry were almost becoming canonical, by default.

During this period, the *shaykh*-poets continued to produce both *fushā* and popular poetry. Their ranks included, besides al-Fahḥām, Shaykh Amīn ibn Khālid Aghā (1180–1257/1766–1841), who was known for his *mawāliyyā* and songs arranged for musical instruments.¹⁵² Many of the civil servants of the local Ottoman administrations also composed poetry, and Christian monks and priests in Syria and Lebanon made important contributions. One such cleric was Father Ḥanāniyyā Munayyar al-Zawqī (d. 1170/1757), whose long *zajal* consisting of a dialogue between a flea and a monk destined to be his nocturnal meal has been preserved.¹⁵³ The most obvious goal of this thirty-seven-stanza poem in colloquial Arabic was to entertain, and the most effective vehicle employed to that end is the attribution of human traits, aspirations and reasoning to the flea. For example, the flea announces his intentions by saying that he has been fasting for two months and figures that Ramadan must be over, and then scolds the potential victim for wanting to leave his guest, the flea, hungry, contrary to well-known custom. The insect portrays himself as an aid to piety in that he keeps the wretched monk awake so that 'he will get up and worship his lord / and ask forgiveness for the world'. A hint of political commentary occurs when, as the exasperated monk threatens to complain about him to the judge and seek a decree (*faramān*) calling for his murder, the flea announces: 'I am not scared of a minister / or governor or sultan.' The most noteworthy instance of cautious political commentary occurs when the flea declares: 'My relatives and children are numerous / and were raised *inda'l-jazzār*.' The meaning is clear: this family of fleas wants

¹⁴⁹ Riyāḍ and al-Ṣabbāḥī, *Tārīkh adab al-sha'b*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 92–7.

¹⁵¹ Badawi, introduction to *CHALMAL*, p. 3.

¹⁵² Cheikho, *Tārīkh*.

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 37–9.

blood, but the word *al-jazzār* (butcher) is a double entendre that can be read as referring to any butcher or to the notorious Ottoman governor of Acre, Ahmād Pāshā al-Jazzār (d. 1219/1804).

The three penultimate stanzas in this *zajal* relate to the second, particularly telling goal of the poem. After having coaxed and threatened the flea in an attempt to get him to leave him alone, the exasperated monk begs the flea for charity, to which the flea responds with a series of instructions amounting to a prescription for good hygiene and sanitation, without a hint of humour in them. By directing the monk to ‘whitewash your house’ and ‘make it cleaner than china’, to ‘check your clothes for fleas or put them in the sun / before putting them on’ and ‘sweep the floor of your house’, and to ‘change your clothes when it’s time for bed / so no [flea] will come near you’, the voice of the flea is providing straightforward, practical advice that the author clearly wished to convey to a fairly wide audience from diverse social classes. Although Moreh’s comment that ‘during the nineteenth century the strophic form was employed not in higher literary circles, but in what may be called “private” ones’¹⁵⁴ is generally true, this is an obvious exception to that rule. Clearly, Munayyar intended to entertain and educate; indeed, the didactic section of the poem is effective because it is light-handed and brief, and is presented as the advice of the flea himself, occurring only after a lengthy, entertaining negotiation between the parasite and his victim. Although this piece derives, like so many others, from a member of an educational and social elite, on the basis of the wide-ranging audience in need of edification that is clearly envisioned by the author, as well as the linguistic register and the poetic form employed, this poem must be deemed ‘popular’.

Moreh has drawn attention to the revival in the nineteenth century of strophic forms, such as the *muzdawij*, the *muwashshah* and the *zajal* for use in hymns and translations from European languages. One example of this phenomenon is Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī’s (1215–88/1800–71) translation of the psalter using ‘varied rhyme schemes common to *zajal*'.¹⁵⁵ In so doing, Syrian and Lebanese Christians were inclining towards the more colloquial language of Christian liturgical literature.¹⁵⁶ This linguistic and stylistic choice was not unique to Christians, however, and in fact the most outstanding exemplar of this practice was Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Jalāl (1245–1316/1829–98), best known for his translations of French literary works into Arabic. A product first of the traditional *kuttāb*, and then one of the secular preparatory schools that came into existence as part of Muḥammad ‘Alī’s vast educational reform intended

¹⁵⁴ Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry*, p. 52.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 11–53.

to foster the creation of a modern army in Egypt, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Jalāl was ultimately invited by Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭahṭāwī (1216–88/1801–71) to study at the newly created School of Languages. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Jalāl was to translate a number of seventeenth-century French plays into Arabic, including several by Racine and, most notably, a number of comedies by Molière. All of these were in Egyptian colloquial verse. During the last half-century under our consideration, he translated La Fontaine’s *Fables* into Arabic under the title, *al-‘Uyūn al-yawāqiz fil-amthāl wa’l-mawā’iz*, in many of which he employed the *zajal* form. Colloquial poetry also constituted a significant part of his *oeuvre*. One short *zajal* that has been preserved was composed by Jalāl in 1261/1845 when he was charged with teaching French to a certain Zā’id Efendi who had been employed by Muḥammad ‘Alī to translate the collected works of the Hanafi shaykh al-Jazā’irlī. Frustrated by his student’s slowness, Jalāl wrote:

When I became an instructor, my mind so enlightened,
And I wound up with an ass of a student
They said: You’ve reached greatness and good fortune is all around you
I said: Listen, my whole ride has come to nothing
This guy is as tough as nails
And his suit has almost caught fire from the heat of the sun
The truth is he’s a blockhead charging about playing with a blunt javelin
as if among armoured knights, kicking up dust.¹⁵⁷

The words of Jalāl used to introduce this piece are telling: ‘I didn’t want to go to the trouble of writing poetry about him, even a satire, so I wrote the following about him in the form of a *zajal*.’ This comment reveals a disparaging attitude towards this non-canonical verse form that is hardly different from what we saw with Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī five centuries earlier. Given the form, the linguistic register and the subject matter, this poem would certainly be classified as popular – if it ever found an audience. There is, however, no evidence that this *zajal*, unlike some of his other humorous poetry, was made public any time before its inclusion in *al-Khiṭāṭ al-tawfiqiyā*, and, in all likelihood, it never had any more of an audience than personal friends of the author.

The second half of the nineteenth century would witness a plethora of translations using colloquial verse, as well as much original popular poetry in the vernacular. Writers such as ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm (1260–1314/1843–96) and Ya‘qūb Ṣanū‘ (1255–1330/1839–1912) took advantage of the many periodicals and newspapers of the day to rail against political and economic inequities and to furnish a voice of nascent resistance to European domination in the area.

¹⁵⁷ Mubārak, *al-Khiṭāṭ al-tawfiqiyā al-jadīda*, p. 63.

Both al-Nadīm and Ṣanū‘ even founded their own newspapers – *al-Tankīt wa'l-tabkīt* and *al-Ustādh* for al-Nadīm, and *Abū Naḍdāra Zārqā'* for Ṣanū‘ – which provided a dedicated platform for their views. This was distinct from the explicitly political popular poetry of Algeria in the 1830s in that this latter operated in what was primarily a traditional vein. Poems meant to rally support around 'Abd al-Qādir (1222–1300/1808–83), the most successful local claimant to power after the removal of the *dey*'s government, resembled classical eulogy and boasting; couplets circulated by angry rivals to disparage the amir smacked of traditional satire. Written in dialect, they differed from classical models in their linguistic register, but not in their basic outlook.¹⁵⁸ In Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century, the traditional themes of popular poetry, such as *ghazal*, wise counsel and exhortation, and praise of the Prophet, endured, but they took second seat to the more engaged poetry of political resistance and social reform. The immediacy, intimacy and directness that had always characterized popular poetry now served the needs of a changing society, looking inward and outward through this vehicle of culturally authentic expression.

¹⁵⁸ Cour, 'La Poésie populaire', 458–93.

PART IV

POPULAR PROSE

CHAPTER 11

POPULAR PROSE IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

In Europe, the rise of popular literature is usually linked to the advent of print. The drastically reduced cost of producing texts on the printing press is understood to have sparked the emergence of new literary forms (such as the broadsheet, penny ballad, popular romance and novel) that were composed, produced and marketed to be read by – or read to – a growing public of literate and partially literate consumers. These new literary forms, the means of their production and the patterns of their consumption are considered to be distinct from those of both oral folk traditions that circulated in live performances and from the literary creations of ‘high’ or ‘elite’ culture, even when strong similarities existed among them. Although European popular literature eventually generated forms and styles of its own, it also drew constantly on both folklore and elite literature for materials and stylistic inspiration. Due to this hybrid or syncretic nature, wherever ‘popular’ has been used as an analytical category in contrast to ‘elite’ and ‘folk’, it has almost invariably been the least well defined of the three.

In the Arab world the impact of the printing press was not widely felt until the nineteenth century, but a domain that may be appropriately analysed as ‘popular literature’ (*adab ʻāmmī*) had by that time already existed for nearly a millennium. The technological context for the growth of popular literature had already emerged in the mid-eighth century with the introduction of paper-making. Although paper had been imported from China for some time previously, it was the transplantation of paper-making as an industry that opened the doors for a new ‘book culture’ and led to the rise of a new class of authors, scribes, copyists, paper-vendors and booksellers.¹ That transfer of technology took place during an otherwise unremarkable raid into central Asia in 751 during which Muslim forces captured paper craftsmen. Once back in Samarkand, the captured artisans were put to work and from them others soon learned the art. References to the paper market in Baghdad appear

¹ See Toorawa, *Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfir*.

I wish to extend my thanks to Sandra Campbell, Everett Rowson and Shawkat Toorawa for their comments and suggestions on various aspects of this chapter.

in historical sources by the early ninth century; in the tenth century paper-making is attested in North Africa and a paper-mill in Toledo is mentioned in 1035.

Although paper-making provided the requisite inexpensive technological means for the emergence of a popular literature, it is in linguistic terms rather than by means of production that Arabic popular literature is most easily defined, particularly vis-à-vis elite literary production. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Arabic as a language, or, perhaps more properly stated, as a language family, is the existence of a written form of the language ('classical' or 'standard' Arabic) that possesses a well-defined grammatical system that has remained relatively unchanged for 1,200 years, alongside a large number of spoken colloquial dialects that differ from standard Arabic in their sound systems, morphology and syntax much the way Spanish, French and Italian differ from their parent language Latin. No one ever spoke classical Arabic as it was codified in the early Islamic centuries as their mother tongue; rather, it was always acquired as a supplementary language form, the primary use of which has been for written communication. The vast majority of everything that has ever been written in Arabic has been, and remains even today, in the classical or standard form of the Arabic language and, conversely, the vast majority of everything that has ever been expressed orally in Arabic has been in a colloquial dialect.

The Arabic writing system can be used to convey the sounds and grammar of the various colloquial forms of Arabic only with a certain amount of difficulty, particularly for the reader, for the result is something akin to reading English spelled as it is actually pronounced, rather than 'az we ar yust tu seying in ritin'. With practice the reading of Arabic dialect texts can be accomplished, and in the modern Arab world this technique is indeed used for writing colloquial song lyrics, scripts for plays and films, and some types of poetry. But one can read a text written in dialect correctly only if one already knows how that particular dialect is pronounced since the Arabic script does not convey the difference, for example, between *qultu lahu* (with q and stress on the a), *'ultilu* (with a glottal stop replacing q and stress on the i), *gultilu* (where q is pronounced g and with stress on the i), all of which are common ways of saying 'I told him'. Thus, in the pre-modern period, on those occasions when writers did portray elements of the colloquial language in Arabic script, the results are rather easily identified by their non-standard spelling and grammar, and it is these texts which can be defined as popular literature in pre-modern Arabic – *a body of texts that preserve or imitate to varying degrees a colloquial aesthetic*. In the case of pre-twentieth-century Arabic culture, folklore was by definition oral, since it could not be written down without extensive linguistic transformation, and high or elite literature – that is, the

huge preponderance of the written tradition – was clearly marked by distinctive grammatical forms and stylistic devices not normally found in colloquial Arabic.

This is not to say that pre-modern Arabic literature does not possess many of the complexities and incongruities that have bedevilled scholarship on popular literature in other cultures, including genres from one category that satirize those of another, materials that cross over nearly unchanged, and genres that exist in both elite and popular forms. Some of the most learned works of medieval Arabic *adab* (*belles-lettres*), for example, are replete with humorous anecdotes, jokes, and even doggerel verse that bear the traces of more popular origins. Similarly, many medieval and post-classical *maqāmāt* (picaresque narratives), the composition of which sometimes became little more than a demonstration of literary erudition, draw heavily not only upon characters from the lower social classes, but also upon some of their modes of speech and literary tastes (discussed further in Stewart's contribution to this volume, Chapter 7). At the other end of the spectrum, popular genres such as the *siyar* (folk epics) at times incorporate lengthy examples of classical poetry, including even versions of the *mu'allaqāt* (the most famous collection of poems from the pre-Islamic period). And in some cases the same genre – animal fables for instance – can include examples that are considered the pinnacle of artistic prose (such as Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*) and others that are deemed downright coarse (such as those found in *A Thousand and One Nights*). Such ambiguities, however, only emphasize the richness and influence of this vast corpus of materials. That Arabic popular literature, and in particular popular narrative, flourished in the post-classical period (thirteenth to nineteenth centuries) is clear from the tens of thousands of pages of popular narrative materials from this period found in manuscript collections in Europe and the Middle East, some of which have been catalogued, but the vast majority of which remain unpublished and little studied.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE EARLY ISLAMIC, UMAYYAD AND ABBASID PERIODS (SEVENTH–TWELFTH CENTURIES)

Early traces of the divide between popular narrative on the one hand and the strictures of high or orthodox culture on the other can already be perceived in the controversies that surrounded the figure of the 'religious story-tellers' or 'sermonizers' (s. *qāṣṣ*, pl. *qussāṣ*) in the first centuries of Islam.² Although originally allowed, at least in some regions, to perform publicly in mosques, they were later often banned from mosques and ended up performing primarily

² Pellat, 'Kāṣṣ'.

in marketplaces and other public spaces, including cemeteries. They do not appear at first to have become embroiled in the sectarian disputes of the day; rather the objections to their performances seem to have been focused upon the apocryphal and fantastic nature of some of their materials. It is not always an easy task, however, to determine precisely what these materials were, for the role of the *qāss* varied considerably in different regions and time periods. The gist of their activities seems to have been to recount legendary narratives of the ancient peoples and prophets linked to references in the Koran, accounts of the pre-Islamic Arabs, and events from the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Islamic community. The Koran itself contains few sustained narratives (the Chapter of Joseph – *Sūrat Yūsuf* – being the most important exception), but rather refers to ancient stories in such a manner that it must be assumed that these tales were already well known and circulating in Arabia. The *qāss*, then, almost certainly represents the Islamicized continuation of an earlier story-telling tradition.

The early *quṣṣāṣ* drew their materials from the oral traditions of biblical legends known as the *isrā’iliyyāt* (legends of ancient Israel) and the *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* (stories of the prophets), and the early history of the Islamic community, but themselves have left few written texts. In his *Kitāb al-bayān wa’l-tabyīn* (The Book of Elucidation and Explanation), the ninth-century Basran author al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868–9) provides a list of famous *quṣṣāṣ* which includes a number of well-known religious figures, indicating that their activities had not yet taken on the negative reputation they were to acquire later.³ Beginning in the eleventh century, references to the *quṣṣāṣ* take on an ever more derogatory and condemnatory tone, often associating them with beggars, street performers and petty thieves. From the late medieval and post-classical periods there are numerous references to banning or restricting the performances of the *quṣṣāṣ*, and whole books are devoted to the subject often containing harsh criticism of the popular *quṣṣāṣ* (for example, Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ* (The Book of the Story-teller-Preachers) and al-Suyūṭī’s *Tahdhīr al-khawāṣṣ min akādhīb al-quṣṣāṣ* (A Warning to the Elite about the Lies of the Story-teller-Preachers). Popular written materials of the type apparently used by the *quṣṣāṣ* have survived primarily from these later periods.

The early centuries of Islam also witnessed a series of translations that were to have lasting effects on the development of Arabic popular literature even though many of these early translations themselves were not colloquial in tone, but rather in impeccable classical Arabic. *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, which Ibn al-Muqaffā’ (d. c. 756) translated from a Persian rendition of the collection of Indian tales that later came to be known as the *Panchatantra*, is generally

³ al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-bayān wa’l-tabyīn*, pp. 306–8.

considered not only to have introduced the animal fable into Arabic literature, but also to have established a new prose style in Arabic that was imitated for centuries. Tales featuring talking animals were found in Arabic in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods, but the specific form of the moral animal fable appears to have arrived with the translation of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.⁴

Other works of narrative translated from Persian into Arabic in the early centuries include *Sendebar al-hakīm* (also known as *Syntipa*, *The Seven Viziers*, or *The Wiles of Women*; not to be confused with the *Voyages of Sindbad*), *Bilawhar wa-Yudasaf* (*Barlaam and Josafat*) and *A Thousand and One Nights*. Although the first Arabic translations of some of these works cannot be dated with the same accuracy as the translation of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, each was to produce a series of literary offspring not only in Arabic but in nearly all of the languages of the Middle East and western Europe. It is probable that the first Arabic versions of the Alexander Romance, which was already circulating in the eastern Mediterranean in several languages, were also translated in this same time period. Tales of Alexander the Great had already reached the Arabian peninsula in the pre-Islamic period and he appears in the Koran as *Dhū'l-qarnayn*, 'the two-horned one'. Various short versions of his life and deeds are found in a large number of early and medieval Arabic sources; the longest versions that have survived, however, date to later centuries.⁵

POPULAR LITERATURE IN IBN NADIM'S *FIHRIST*

The single most important source regarding non-religious Arabic popular literature dates to the tenth century – the *Kitāb al-fihrist* (Catalogue of Books) of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. between 990 and 998). Ibn al-Nadīm's terminology, his categorization and, above all, the hundreds of titles of works of popular narrative that he included in this work combine to produce a remarkable portrait of Arabic popular literature in the Abbasid era and it therefore merits considerable discussion. Compiled around 950, the *Fihrist* consists of ten large chapters (*maqālāt*) each of which is then divided into numerous smaller sections. Chapter Eight deals primarily with works of a popular nature as well as with works on leisure and sport, and is divided into three sections: (a) works of story-tellers and raconteurs; (b) works on magic and magicians; and (c) miscellaneous subjects including books on sex, fortune-telling, horsemanship, falconry, joke books and wisdom literature.

The first section (*fann*), which treats 'story-tellers and raconteurs' (*al-musāmīrūn wa-'l-mukharrifūn*) and the books they authored, includes the

⁴ See Karimi, 'Le Conte animalier'; and Del Moral, 'La fábula de animales'.

⁵ Zuwiyya, *Islamic Legends*.

titles of some 200 works of popular narrative. Ibn al-Nadīm refers to these tales variously as *khurāfāt* (fictional stories), *asmār* (evening entertainments), *ahādīth* (anecdotes), *tawārīkh* (histories) and *siyar* (legendary histories). In the chapter's opening passage he states that the first people to gather such stories together and put them in books were the ancient Persians, but that the first person to be entertained by 'evening story-telling' (*al-samar*) was Alexander the Great who had a group of performers in his court to make him laugh (*yudahḥikūnahu*) and to tell him fictional stories (*yukharrifūnahu*). Lest our image of the noble Alexander be tarnished, however, Ibn al-Nadīm adds that Alexander ordered such performances not for mere amusement (*ladhdha*), but rather to safeguard and preserve the wisdom of the tales (*kan yurīd al-hifz wa-'**l-ḥars*).

Ibn al-Nadīm then discusses the three most famous collections of fictional tales of his day – *A Thousand and One Nights*, *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *Sendabar* – which constitute a separate category since each encloses its stories within a frame-tale. He notes that there is a difference of opinion about whether they were originally Indian and then translated into Persian, or written by the Persians and then attributed to the Indians, but he himself concludes that they are most likely of Indian origin. In a passage of particular interest, he notes that Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Jahshiyārī (d. 942) set out to compose a similar work, also divided into a thousand 'nights', but in which each night constituted a full story, usually consisting of about fifty pages of text. According to Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Jahshiyārī had oral story-tellers perform for him and then selected their best materials, and in addition read all of the available written collections of stories, from which he likewise selected the best materials – an excellent example of the interdependence of the written and the oral in the production of popular narrative. Unfortunately, not only did al-Jahshiyārī die having completed only the first 450 nights of his collection, but the work itself has not survived.

Thereafter Ibn al-Nadīm presents a series of subsections each of which deals with books of legendary history of one of the various ancient peoples: Persians, Indians, Greeks/Byzantines, Babylonians and others. He then includes a truly remarkable list of 136 books about 'passionate lovers' (*ushshāq*) divided into five categories: lovers from among the pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabs, lovers from other peoples, pairs of female bosom friends or lesbian lovers (*al-habā'ib al-mutazzarifāt*), lovers whose tales have become known in evening entertainments (*asmār*) and, finally, humans who loved jinn and jinn who loved humans. In this very lengthy list of books on lovers, many of those cited from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabs are well-known couples – such as Jamīl and Buthayna, Kuthayyir and 'Azza, Majnūn and Laylā – about whom we have numerous references in other works. Given what is known from other

texts about these famous pairs, it appears that this category comprises romances that purport to be historical. Despite the fact that the next subsection is labelled ‘other peoples’ (*sā’ir al-nās*), most of the lovers listed have Arabic names, so it is difficult to tell if the distinction to be found here is in their origins, the time period or possibly their fictionality. The following category, which might be translated as ‘sophisticated’ ladies (reading *mutazarrifat* for *mutaṭarrifat*), probably refers to lesbian lovers for each title consists of two, and only two, female names listed precisely as the male/female pairs that precede them, with the only distinction being the use of the term *ḥabā’ib* (lovers/friends) rather than *‘ushshāq* (passionate lovers) in the subtitle.

The next category of works on lovers is those whose mention has entered into ‘evening entertainments’ (*asmār*), that is, oral story-telling. Here the listed titles imply a rather different type of tale. Though some consist merely of male and female proper names, many others sound much more akin to folktales with little pretension of being historical, such as ‘The Book of the Youth and the Woman who Threw the Pebble’, ‘The Book of the Egyptian Man and the Meccan Woman’, and so forth. After listing the various love stories that involve both humans and jinn, Ibn al-Nadīm notes that evening tales (*asmār*) and stories (*khurāfāt*) were very much appreciated during the Abbasid period, particularly during the reign of al-Muqtadir (reigned 908–32), and as a result copyists of that era produced vast numbers of such fictional works (*sannafū al-warrāqūn wa-kadhdhabū*). The first section on ‘Story-tellers’ then closes with a very small subsection containing a book called *‘Ajā’ib al-bahr* (Marvels of the Sea), a work which contains thirty tales – ten tales each concerning wonders of the sea, the land and of trees – (though there are several different readings from different manuscripts for the title of the final category), as well as three miscellaneous books cited only by the names of their authors or possibly their protagonists.

The second section of Chapter Eight contains works on magic and magicians, which, though a rich domain of popular culture, need not be considered in a survey of popular literature. The third section, however, provides information on several other types of popular stories. The first of these are introduced with the subtitle ‘The Names of tales which are known only by their nickname [*laqab*] and about which nothing else is known.’ The various manuscripts of the *Fihrist* have a large number of discrepancies in the subsequent paragraph which have rendered many of the titles almost indecipherable (a clear indication that even the copyists were not sure what to make of them). Here appear books with odd titles such as ‘Lashing Rope’ (or alternatively, ‘Powerful Laxative’), ‘Bird Droppings’ and so forth. Thereafter, however, follow several categories of books that are much easier to identify: joke books about ‘buffoons’ (*batṭālīn*), about ‘fools’ (*mughaffalīn*), among which appear

the still popular anecdotes (*nawādir*) of Juḥā, and books about sexual intercourse (*bāh*) in the form of arousing tales (*hadīth mushbiq*), including tales of lesbians (*sahḥāqāt*) as well as active and passive male homosexuals. These are followed by books on fortune-telling, horsemanship, archery, falconry, the interpretation of dreams, perfume, food, poisons and drugs, amulets and charms, and, finally, books that do not fit into any other category. Amidst all of these various works about leisure activities and popular culture, one final category should attract our attention here, and that is works of 'Sermons, Moral Education and Wisdom' the titles of which indicate a rich literature of exemplary didactic tales and proverb literature.

For Ibn al-Nadīm, works of popular narrative were thus of several varieties: (1) the large frame-tale collections translated from Persian in the ninth century; (2) legendary histories of ancient peoples; (3) tales of lovers; (4) wonders of the world (*mirabilia*); (5) books of jokes and humorous anecdotes; (6) bawdy stories; and (7) exemplary and didactic tales. Few of the works of popular narratives cited in the *Fihrist* have come down to us and since in nearly all cases we have only the titles as listed by Ibn al-Nadīm it is even problematic to identify later works that bear identical or similar titles as being the same as the works listed in the *Fihrist*. In some cases the stories seem to have been presented as true, but in many others the titles seem more likely to be those of fictional tales. In his comments on the early translations, the activities of the scribes who worked to meet the demand for storybooks during the reign of al-Muqtadir and on al-Jahshiyārī's collection of both oral and written materials, Ibn al-Nadīm has also created a partial, but valuable, portrait of how written popular literature was produced.

Ibn al-Nadīm's terminology for these popular fictions is quite rich, but he does not use the word *qīṣa*, a term often translated as 'story', from which we may deduce that *qīṣa* in his day still referred specifically to religious tales rather than to secular fiction.⁶ It is also worth noting that although he uses the term *sīra* (pl. *siyar*) in reference to several of the works from ancient peoples, he makes no reference to any of the lengthy prosimetric (mixed prose and verse) folk epics also known as *siyar* that were to become one of the most distinctive creations of Arabic popular literature in the post-classical period. Whether this is because they did not yet exist, existed at that point only in oral form, or did not circulate in the Iraq of his day, is impossible to tell.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS POPULAR LITERATURE

A brief comment by a contemporary of Ibn al-Nadīm, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 940), offers a glimpse of an early, religiously informed attitude against popular

⁶ Abdel-Meguid, 'A Survey of Terms'.

narrative. In his comments on Koran 23:3: ‘When they hear idle talk (*laghw*) they turn away from it’, a verse which is usually interpreted to refer to singing and music, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih states instead that ‘idle talk’ here refers to certain types of popular literature:

This verse was revealed only about people who were purchasing books of *siyar* [legendary histories] and tales of the ancients, and comparing these to the Koran, saying that they were better than it.⁷

The reference is to al-Nadr ibn al-Ḥārith who, according to early sources, scoffed at Muhammad’s revelation as merely the retelling of the *asātīr al-awwalīn* (stories of the ancients; Koran 8:31 and 83:13) and claimed that he personally knew better tales, specifically those of Rostam and Isfandiyar. This association of certain stories, particularly those of Persian origin, with early resistance to Islam constituted a potentially dangerous charge to be wielded by authors and religious reformers against genres of popular narrative and it is telling that in some manuscripts of Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s text, the term *akhbār al-samar*, ‘narratives from evening gatherings’, a much broader category, has been substituted for the term *siyar*.

Although scholars did on occasion level criticism at the telling or writing of specific types of fictional tales, it is difficult to find a single prevailing attitude towards fictionality *per se*.⁸ *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, in which animals speak and behave as humans, was accorded canonical status by almost all learned authors, as were the *maqāmāt* (picaresque narratives), despite widespread recognition that they were creations of the authors’ imagination and not true accounts (see further Stewart’s contribution to this volume, Chapter 7). In addition, miracles were commonly found in even the most orthodox of religious texts which in turn meant that fantastic occurrences in a tale might possibly have been miraculous events and therefore not open to condemnation. Given these and numerous other examples that would significantly have complicated a stance against fiction in general, most scholars instead based their judgements upon whether a tale carried a valuable and useful message or lesson. ‘Useful’ tales were acceptable, even if they were technically untrue, whereas frivolous tales were condemned as lies. It appears, however, that neither religious nor literary criticism ever hindered the production of popular literature for any significant period of time.

Another intriguing comment about popular literature appears in a text by the twelfth-century Jewish convert to Islam Samaw’al al-Maghribī (d. 1174). In the opening autobiographical chapter of his *Iṣḥām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews), a polemical treatise that attempts to demonstrate the validity of Islam

⁷ Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-farid*, vol. VI, p. 9.

⁸ See Bonebakker, ‘Some Medieval Views’.

and the errors of Judaism, he writes that as a young person he was much given to reading books of legendary histories, but that his tastes later matured and he subsequently rejected them for more serious works of history:

when I was twelve and thirteen years old I was much taken with tales and stories [*al-akhbār wa'l-hikāyāt*] and was devoted to reading about ancient times and knowing about what had happened in previous centuries. So I read the various types of collected works [*al-taṣānif al-mu'allafa*] of stories and anecdotes [*al-hikāyāt wa'l-nawādir*], then I moved on to a love of long evening tales and fictional stories [*al-asmār wa'l-khurāfāt al-ṭiwal*], then to the great compilations of tales [*al-dawāwīn al-kibār*] such as the Book of the Tales of 'Antar [*dīwān akhbār 'Antar*], and the Book of the Tales of Dhī [sic] al-Himma and al-Battāl, and the Tales of Alexander the Two-Horned, and the Tales of the Phoenix, and the Tales of al-Taraf ibn Ludhan, and others. Then it became clear to me while I was studying these works, that most of them were written by historians, and I began to ask for true stories [*akhbār sahiha*] and my interest turned to books of history.⁹

Samaw'al clearly wishes to portray the path of a developing mind. At first taken with shorter fictional works, he then moved on to longer works of fiction, then to the very lengthy mixed prose-and-poetry epics, and finally to works of true history. He has thereby also provided us with a brief typology of the fictional literature of his period. His general attitude towards popular texts is not markedly negative, but rather suggests merely that they are more appropriate for young people or for the less educated classes, and not for mature adults and scholars. Samaw'al's list also includes some of the earliest evidence for the rather sudden and widespread appearance of the Arabic prosimetric folk epics (*siyar*) during the twelfth century, though he refers to them as *dawāwīn*, a term more often applied to collections of poetry, which may indicate that the term *siyar* in reference to these works had not yet become widespread.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

From the thirteenth century onwards evidence concerning Arabic popular literature, and specifically popular narrative, increases considerably, if only because the vast majority of extant manuscripts, even of works from earlier centuries, date to this period. Given the richness of Ibn al-Nadīm's description of popular prose in the tenth century, however, it would be hard to argue that the production of popular literature actually increased in the post-classical period; rather, it may simply be that more texts from later centuries have survived. It must also be noted that a vast number of popular works (and

⁹ Samaw'al al-Maghribī, *Iḥbām al-yahūd*, pp. 51–2.

even several of the more important literary genres of this period) remain understudied and therefore any survey can only be considered partial and preliminary.

Several factors contributed to the expansion of Arabic popular literature's social role in the later centuries. First, since the colloquial dialects developed unhindered by the codified grammars, the canons of correct usage and the generally conservative attitude towards linguistic change that characterized classical Arabic, over time they naturally diverged further and further both from the standard written language and from each other. As a result, standard Arabic became increasingly distant from the spoken Arabic of everyday life and thus a more and more awkward vehicle for portraying many types of social situations, in particular conversational speech. In addition, by the sixteenth century much of the Arab Middle East had been incorporated into the Ottoman empire, which meant that the political centre of gravity shifted to Istanbul away from cities such as Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and Tunis. These cities soon devolved into provincial capitals that were governed by a constant flow of high-ranking administrative officials sent out from, and recalled to, the Ottoman court. In many regions the ruling class was no longer composed of native speakers of Arabic and the general structure of artistic patronage underwent significant changes. Although the new rulers often continued to patronize certain official forms of literature such as odes of praise, eulogies and works of a religious nature, the literary gatherings that had formed an integral part of upper-class and court life in earlier centuries no longer received the same degree of sponsorship. These changing conditions provoked a flurry of literary innovations, many of which involved the use of colloquial Arabic or drew upon colloquial aesthetics.

In the realm of poetry, for example, the post-classical period is characterized by the creation of numerous new forms that broke radically with the mould of the *qasida* (a non-stanzaic form with mono-end-rhyme and verses composed of two equal hemistichs separated by a medial caesura). The new poetic genres included almost every imaginable structural combination: various types of rhyming couplets and quatrains (*dūbayt*, *rubā'i*, *humaq*), stanzaic forms with refrain-like features (*zajal*, *muwashshah*, *bulayq*, *humaynī*), forms in which the two hemistichs of the verse are of unequal length (*kān wa-kān*, *qūmā* or *qawmā*), forms with complex final or internal rhyme patterns (*mawāliya*, *silsila*), and at least one form (*band*) that falls somewhere between loosely rhymed prose and 'free verse' (see the contributions of Ibrahim and Larkin to this volume for further discussion of these genres, Chapters 4 and 10). One genre in particular, the *kān wa-kān*, was used primarily for composing popular narratives in verse and therefore merits mention here. The term *kān wa-kān* means literally 'there was and there was', or more loosely, 'there was this and

that', and is roughly equivalent to the formula 'once upon a time'. According to al-Muhibbi, it was used exclusively for 'stories and tales' (*ḥikāyat wa-khurāfāt*);¹⁰ unfortunately, the genre has received almost no attention from modern scholars and only a handful of examples are available in print, so it is as yet unknown what relation the *kān wa-kān* narrative had to popular prose narrative of the period.¹¹

In popular prose, with only a few exceptions, the genres mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm continued to be produced. At the same time, several noteworthy new genres appeared, such as the folk *siyar* and the shadow play (*khayāl al-zill*), and overall, authors displayed more and more willingness to write in a colloquial style, and even, particularly in the case of proverbs, to attempt to transcribe colloquial speech as closely as the Arabic script would allow.

The frame-tale collections

From the number and geographic distribution of extant manuscripts, it can be ascertained that the large frame-tale collections (*Sendebar/The Seven Viziers*, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, *Barlaam and Josaphat*) all continued to be copied and transformed throughout the post-classical period. It also seems clear that the frame-tale collections were not usually conceived of as integral works, but rather as open-ended vessels that copyists and redactors could alter as they wished, adding, deleting and reordering tales quite freely. Eventually, through translations into European languages beginning in twelfth-century Spain, these collections were to influence European authors as diverse as Boccaccio, Chaucer, Petrus Alfonsi, Juan Manuel, Juan Ruiz, Ramon Llull and others.

The Arabic version of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, for example, was translated into Latin, Spanish, Persian, Greek, Syriac and Hebrew. The thirteenth-century Hebrew translation then became the primary source for versions in Italian, German, English and Dutch from the fifteenth century onwards.¹² Other examples of translation and cultural transmission of particular interest are the *Disciplina clericalis*, written by the twelfth-century Andalusian Jewish convert to Christianity Moses Sephardi (Petrus Alfonsi), the translation of *Sendebar* ordered by the younger brother of King Alfonso X 'the Wise' in 1253, and the Hebrew version of *Barlaam* redacted by Abraham ibn Hasday of Barcelona. Although individual tales that were later included in *A Thousand and One Nights* by European editors made their way into European languages during

¹⁰ al-Muhibbi, *Ta’rīkh khulāṣat al-athar*.

¹¹ al-Jammāl, *al-Adab al-āmmi fi Miṣr*, pp. 143–4.

¹² Vernet, *Lo que Europa debe al Islam de España*, pp. 454–7.

the medieval period, the collection itself was not known or translated by Westerners until the early eighteenth century.

Religious narratives: Islamic legends

Religious popular narratives of the later centuries include legendary accounts of the pre-Islamic prophets, episodes from the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and heroic exploits by leaders of the early Muslim community, of the type that have been discussed above as the raw materials of the story-telling performances of the *quṣṣās*. A survey of these narratives, drawn primarily from post-classical sources, can be found in Knappert, *Islamic Legends*. In the post-classical period the boundary between ‘orthodox’ and ‘popular’ versions of the legendary materials becomes ever more contentious, though at the same time more and more difficult to define. Miracles are part and parcel of both orthodox and popular versions of much of this material and even the most widely accepted versions of the life of Muḥammad, for example, include episodes featuring talking animals (a gazelle and a camel) and an incident involving a sighing palm tree. In addition, Sufi-oriented texts introduced mystical interpretations that were readily accepted in some contexts while harshly condemned in others. Despite the lack of clarity, there was indeed a boundary of acceptability, at least for the religious scholars, for they occasionally declared certain texts and authors to be beyond the pale.

One intriguing example of transgressing the boundary of acceptability is that of the presumed author of several works of religious narrative, Abū'l-Hasan al-Bakrī, who was denounced as ‘a liar, a swindler . . . and an inventor of tales’ by a series of writers such as al-Dhababī (d. 1348), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418), Ibn Hajar (d. 1449) and others.¹³ He was accused of writing books in which it is impossible to distinguish the truth from the lies. So serious were the charges against him that at least one legal opinion (*fatwā*) was issued forbidding the reading of his works. Despite the uncertainty of his dates (and whether such a person actually existed or whether he is a literary creation), the denunciations continued unabated for several centuries so it can safely be assumed that his works remained popular even though they were consistently denounced by religious authorities. As Shoshan had demonstrated, however, it is not entirely clear from a modern viewpoint exactly which elements in al-Bakrī’s version of the life of Muḥammad drew such continued condemnation, since nearly all of the individual elements of his version can be found in other works that generated little or no controversy.¹⁴

¹³ Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 35–9.

One work that can be examined as an unmistakably popularized version of traditional Islamic narratives, however, is the *aljamiado* work *El libro de las batallas*.¹⁵ *Aljamiado* texts are Spanish-language texts written in Arabic characters by Muslims (Mudejars and Moriscos) and crypto-Muslims living under Christian rule in Iberia from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century and are a particularly rich source for the study of popular religion and culture. Indeed, a number of tales of the biblical prophets and ancient peoples have been found in *aljamiado* versions that have not survived in the original Arabic, including an account of the death of Moses and an important version of the Alexander Romance.¹⁶ Some sense of the richness of this corpus can be obtained from the five hundred entries in Bernabé Pons, *Bibliografía de la literatura aljamiado-morisca* and from the many sources cited in Wiegers, *Islamic Literature in Spanish and Aljamiado*.

The *Libro de las batallas* includes accounts of seven different battles fought by the Prophet Muhammad, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and other Islamic and pre-Islamic figures. It is clearly a continuation of the earlier *ayyām al-‘arab*, *maghāzī* and *futūḥ* narrative traditions. The historical origins of most of the battles are easily identifiable, but in this sixteenth-century *aljamiado* text, Arab heroes face not only their human foes, but also dragons, monsters, diabolical spirits, giants and amazon female warriors, as well as various forms of sorcery and enchantment. The historical stratum recedes so far from the narrative focus that it becomes little more than a backdrop against which all of the magical figures and forces of the popular narrative world do battle. Given the social realities of the *aljamiado* communities, it is highly probable that *El libro de las batallas* and similar works were used as materials for oral story-telling sessions at least as often as they were read by individual readers.

As has been noted above, numerous works from the post-classical period were written condemning the activities of story-teller-preachers by authors such as Ibn al-Hājj (d. 1336), Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (d. 1404), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 1505) and Ibn Maymūn al-Idrīsī (d. 1511), so it is worthy of note that at least one treatise that defends story-telling from this period has recently come to light. The text, by 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Wafā' (d. 1404), is titled *al-Bā’ith ‘alā’l-khalāṣ min su’ al-ẓann bi’l-khawāṣṣ* (The Means of Deliverance from the Low Opinion of the Elites) and constitutes a point by point refutation of al-‘Irāqī’s attack on story-telling, *al-Bā’ith ‘alā’l-khalāṣ min ḥawādith al-quṣṣāṣ* (The Means of Deliverance from the Innovations of the Story-tellers). 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Wafā' was the son of an important

¹⁵ Galmés de Fuentes (ed.), *El libro de las batallas*.

¹⁶ See Galmés de Fuentes, 'La literatura aljamiado-morisca', pp. 15–27; García Gómez (ed. and tr.), *Un texto árabe occidental*; Nykl (ed.), 'Rekontamiento del rey Alisandre'; Zuwiyya, *Islamic Legends*.

Sufi mystic and both father and son were apparently accomplished story-teller-preachers. A later biography in fact attributes 'Alī's eloquence to a visionary encounter with the Prophet Muḥammad as a child.¹⁷ This type of story-telling became increasingly associated with Sufism in later centuries.

Moral tales

Another common form of religious narrative is the didactic moral tale in which the main characters are of a more ordinary cast and often of a semi-generic nature (e.g. 'The Faithful Wife', 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'). A large number of these popular narratives are found in manuscript collections in Europe and the Middle East; some indication of the extent of the corpus can be found in the listings in the catalogues of Chauvin (*Bibliographie*) and Ahlwardt ('Verzeichniss'). Many of these works bear simple titles beginning with 'The Story of . . .' (*Qissat . . .*). The Ahlwardt catalogue lists over 200 titles with the term *qissa*, a large percentage of which can be classified as popular narratives. Additional evidence of the richness and popularity of these moral tales is to be found in the many chapbook editions published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the arrival of the printing press, the majority of which derive from earlier manuscripts. Unfortunately the history of the local popular presses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the impact that the mass production of chapbooks and religious tracts had upon Muslim societies has not been adequately studied; suffice it to say that the quantity of such works found even today in the poorer sections of Cairo, for example, or in provincial urban centres is prodigious.

Popular epics

Perhaps the best known genre of Arabic popular narrative from the post-classical period, however, is the popular *sīra*, or mixed verse and prose epic, to which three of the chapters in this volume are devoted. Well over a dozen of these *siyar* appear in the period from the twelfth to the fifteenth century and have remained popular until the present. They are distinguished by their extraordinary length (oral performances of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* can last over 100 hours and the multi-volume printed editions of *Sīrat 'Antar*, for example, run to thousands of pages) along with their highly complex plots (see further the contributions of Kruk and Reynolds in this volume, Chapters 13 and 14). Some *siyar* consist primarily of rhymed prose with only sporadic passages of verse, while others, particularly *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, consist almost entirely of

¹⁷ Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p. 84.

poetry. Some contain a great deal of magic, sorcery and other supernatural elements, while others are primarily heroic and semi-realistic in tone. They all share a basically historical framework and purport to tell biographies of heroic characters from the pre-Islamic, early Islamic and medieval periods. A useful summary of the stories and characters of these works is available in Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*.

These new prosimetric epics and the ever popular religious tales drew the ire not only of religious scholars, but also of historians. Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), for example, lumps the two genres together and denounces them as nothing but lies:

As for what the common folk [*āmma*] mention regarding [the hero] al-Battāl in the epic [*sīra*] attributed to Dalhimma [= Dhāt al-Himma], the amir ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the *qādī* ‘Uqba, it is nothing but lies, falsehood, stupid writings, complete ignorance and shameless prattle which is only in demand by fools and lowly ignoramuses. The same is true of the fabricated epic of ‘Antar al-‘Absī and likewise the *Sīra* [Life of the Prophet Muhammad] by [Abū'l-Hasan] al-Bakrī and [Ahmad] al-Danaf, and others. The forged lies in the *Sīra* of al-Bakrī are more wicked and offensive than those of others because their fabricator has crossed into the realm of what the Prophet – Peace and God’s blessings upon him – said: ‘And whosoever purposefully tells lies about me, his place [on the Day of Judgement] shall be in the fires [of hell].’¹⁸

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) penned a similar attack on the reading of the *sīra* of *Hamza al-bahlawān* (nominally the life of the paternal uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, though with almost no ties to the historical figure), which was apparently popular among the Turcoman population of Syria in his day, in favour of works of history.

Jokes and humorous tales

A large variety of collections of shorter genres such as jokes, anecdotes and short narratives also dates to the post-classical period. The rich tradition of joke books and collections of humorous anecdotes have been most notably studied by Ulrich Marzolph. Some such collections are tightly focused on a single character or social type, such as Yūsuf ibn al-Wakīl al-Milāwī’s two seventeenth-century works *Tīrāz al-mudhahhab fi nawādir Ash‘ab* (The Golden Brocade of Anecdotes about the Greed of Ash‘ab) or the *Irshād man nahā ilā nawādir Juhā* (Guidance for Those who Follow Jokes about Juhā), while others are compendia that attempt to bring together all sorts of comic material such as the *Nuzhat al-udabā’* (The Amusement of the Literati), also from the seventeenth century, possibly the work of Muḥammad ibn Ahmad Iyās al-Hanafī,

¹⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*, vol. IX, p. 347.

which contains over 500 short narratives and jokes about various social types such as scholars, bedouins, prostitutes, homosexuals and schoolteachers, as well as the ubiquitous *Juhā*.¹⁹ Worthy of particular note are the many tales of rogues, bandits and picaresque heroes that are labelled in Arabic with terms such as *shuṭṭār*, *ayyārūn*, *sa'ālik*, *harāfiṣh*, *fityān* and others.²⁰ These works typically contain a large number of anecdotes and tales, some resembling heroic accounts and others distinctly comic in tone, though a handful, such as the tale of 'Alī Zaybaq or *Zibaq* which was eventually incorporated into European versions of *A Thousand and One Nights*, constitute longer narratives.²¹

Shadow plays

Shadow puppet shows are known to have been popular in the Arab Middle East from at least the eleventh century onwards. The techniques of shadow plays and related forms of entertainment were of continuing interest and inspiration to a variety of writers: Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1039) explains the workings of shadow-puppetry in his work on ophthalmology, *Kitāb al-manāzir*; Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) describes a related 'Chinese magic lantern' show technique in his *Kitāb al-akhlāq wa'l-siyar*, and al-Ghazalī (d. 1111) describes marionette shows in his *Iḥyā 'ulūm al-dīn*. The symbolism inherent in a separate world divided from the viewer by a 'veil' or 'curtain' (a common Islamic phrase for the division between the spiritual and material worlds) in which all of the characters and events of the play are controlled by a single omnipotent 'mover' (*muharrīk*) who creates the shadow world and determines its end, is evoked by a number of famous poets, especially those with Sufi tendencies – including al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil (d. 1200), Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), Ibn al-Fārid (d. 1235) and others – as a potent allegory of God's creation of the world and the ephemerality of human existence.²²

The tradition, however, was primarily oral, and, in general, when shadow plays were written down, the text consisted only of an outline from which the actual performance was for the most part improvised. One remarkable collection of three shadow plays in colloquial Arabic, however, has come down to us written by the thirteenth-century ophthalmologist Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1310) – discussed in greater detail in Part V. In addition, an Ottoman-period collection of texts for shadow-play performances entitled *al-Rawd al-waddāh fi nihāyat al-afrāb al-musammā bi'l-ijtimā' al-shaml fi fann khayāl al-zill* (The

¹⁹ Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, pp. 66–71.

²⁰ Bosworth, *Medieval Islamic Underworld*.

²¹ al-Najjar, *Hikayāt al-shuṭṭār*.

²² Moreh, 'The Shadow Play'. The works of al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil are discussed in detail in Musawi's contribution to this volume (Chapter 5), and those of Ibn al-'Arabī and Ibn al-Fārid in Homerin's (Chapter 3).

Luminous Gardens of the Pinnacle of Joys, known as the Complete Collection of the Art of Shadow Plays) contains a variety of materials including a series of scenes involving a cast of comically named characters and a drunk, as well as an example of *Li'b al-timsāḥ* (The Crocodile Play) for which we have a variety of references but few examples. The latter involves a tragicomic dialogue with a peasant who has been swallowed by a Nile River crocodile. The most unusual feature of these particular plays is that many of the characters speak in colloquial *muwashshahāt* poems.²³

A related popular entertainment was the 'Box of the World' (*sandūq al-dunyā*) which consisted of a large box in which a painted backdrop could be cranked past the viewing holes by means of two scrolls while a narrator recounted the story. Many of the tales presented in the 'Box of the World' were the same as those of the popular heroic epics and romances, but it is unclear whether these performers ever read from books as café story-tellers did or whether the performances were entirely oral.

Proverb collections

One of the few areas in which Arabic literature openly embraced the writing of colloquial speech was in the compilation of proverbs. In the earliest anthologies writers often classicized the proverbs and stock comparisons ('stronger than X', 'more generous than Y') that they collected. There were, however, simply too many proverbs that could not be adapted to orthodox grammatical forms without destroying their rhythm, wit and wisdom, so the inclusion of proverbs in colloquial Arabic eventually found acceptance in even the most elite literary works. Some compilers merely transcribed the texts without the case endings of classical Arabic, leaving a written record that is somewhere between classical Arabic and the colloquial dialects. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, proverb collections appear to have become the locus for fairly widespread scholarly interest in the colloquial Arabic dialects and more and more direct portrayal of colloquial speech became the norm. Ahmad al-Maydānī (d. 1124), supposedly working from fifty earlier such works, assembled nearly 7,000 proverbs, similes and stock comparisons, of which he characterized about 1,500 as *amthāl muwallada*, that is, 'newly coined' proverbs, most of which are colloquial or semi-colloquial in form. Two examples of completely colloquial collections are the *Amthāl al-'awāmm fi 'l-Andalus* (Proverbs of the Common People of al-Andalus) by Abū Yahyā al-Zajjālī (d. 1295) and the collection of 853 proverbs included by Abū Bakr Ibn 'Āsim al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1426) in his *adab* compendium *Hadā'iq al-azāhir fī mustaḥsan al-ajwiba*

²³ Kilānī, *al-Adab al-miṣrī*, pp. 196–9; Landau, 'Khayāl al-żill'; see also the discussion of Ibn Sūdūn below.

wa-mudhikāt wa'l-hikam wa'l-amthāl wa'l-shikāyāt wa'l-nawādir (The Flowering Gardens of the Best Retorts, Jokes, Adages, Proverbs, Stories and Anecdotes). The latter work, as the title amply indicates, is a treasure trove of popular culture, though only the proverbs are in Andalusian dialect. Both of these collections have been the subject of careful linguistic analysis and have greatly enriched our knowledge of spoken Andalusian Arabic of the Middle Ages.²⁴ Similar collections from this period are found in various regions of the Arab world.

'Ajā'ib literature (mirabilia)

The genre of *'ajā'ib* literature, or 'wonders of the world', was accorded only scant mention in Ibn al-Nadīm's treatment of popular literature. Though geographical and travel works of a more serious nature abounded, it is primarily from the twelfth century onwards that books focused entirely on marvels, mysteries and astonishing phenomena which began to be produced for more popular audiences. Here again the boundaries are not always easily drawn between the elite and the popular, but among the *'ajā'ib* works of the latter category may be counted those by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1169–70), *al-Mu'rib 'an ba'd ajā'ib al-Maghrib* (Exposition of Some of the Marvels of the Maghrib) and *Tuhfat al-albāb wa-nukhbāt al-aṣjāb* (The Delight of Hearts Concerning the Choicest of Marvels) as well as the *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* (Marvels of Creation and Oddities of Existence) of Zakariyyā' al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283).

Romances and books of lovers

One of the few genres listed prominently by Ibn al-Nadīm that seems to have diminished in popularity during the post-classical period is that of the 'books of lovers' or romances. A handful, such as *Majnūn Laylā*, retain their popularity in later centuries, but the vast majority of the tenth-century examples seem to have disappeared and not been replaced with new works. One noteworthy example, however, is the romance of *Bayād and Riyād*. It is known from a single manuscript in North African script, probably from the thirteenth century, adorned with fourteen miniature paintings, of which about half are in quite good condition, showing the lovers in various situations such as pleasure parties with lute players and singers, and against the background of gardens and palaces, as well as a river scene featuring an enormous medieval waterwheel. The language is simple and straightforward, laced with a number

²⁴ Baba, *Estudio dialectológico*; Marugān Guemez, *Refranero andaluzī*.

of colloquialisms and departures from typical formal Arabic usage. The story, in alternating passages of prose and verse, involves a young man who falls in love with the favourite courtesan of the royal chamberlain when he spies her walking along a river, his (eventually successful) attempts at meeting her and their subsequent romance. The pivotal character is an 'old woman' (*ajūz*) who acts as the go-between in a role that is very reminiscent of the later Spanish *Celestina*.²⁵

Legendary histories of the ancients

The other genre listed by Ibn al-Nadīm that seems to have lost its popularity in later centuries is that of the legendary histories of ancient peoples, such as those of the ancient Persians. They are almost completely absent from Arabic popular culture of the post-classical period, with the exception of the Alexander Romance. In general, the Arabic tradition does not seem to have produced unified versions of the Alexander Romance as lengthily articulated as those of Persian literature, but references and shorter versions are widespread (see, however, the summary of *Tārīkh al-Iskandar al-rūmī wa-wazīrihi al-Khadir* by Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mufarrīj al-Sūrī (d. 1495) included in Friedländer, *Die Chahhirlegende*). Both the legends of the ancient Persians and the medieval romances retained their vitality in the Persian literary tradition, however, and it may be that they were always more popular among that population.

PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Several different modes of production interacted over the centuries to produce the corpus of texts surveyed above. One process which is of particular interest, although it resulted in a relatively small number of texts, involved the creation of singular idiosyncratic works in colloquial Arabic by learned authors. The *Tale of Abū'l-Qāsim al-Baghdādī*, attributed to the otherwise unknown Abū'l-Muṭahhar al-Azdī and probably dating to the late tenth or eleventh century, may be seen as an example of this type. Replete with colloquialisms and vulgarities, the text deploys on the one hand many of the elite literary stylistic devices of the day while at the same time treating persons, situations and material realia (such as foods, beverages and clothing) from the daily life of the lower classes. A similar phenomenon is found in the seventeenth-century Egyptian work by Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quhūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* (The Nodding of Heads (in agreement with/in wonder at) a Commentary on the Ode of Abū Shādūf). The first section of the work satirizes the ignorance

²⁵ Nykl, *Historia de los amores de Bayad y Riyad*.

and bad manners of Egyptian peasants in a series of descriptions that are themselves filled with scatological and coarse language while the second section consists of a poem that is classical in form though written in colloquial Arabic, composed by a (fictional) peasant, Abū Shādūf (lit. 'Father of the Waterlift (shadoof)') which in turn provides a piquant parody of the stylistics of elite literature. The text is rich in linguistic and folkloric information and has been interpreted variously as a biting satire of the peasantry or as a cleverly disguised condemnation of the upper classes. To these two examples might be added the colloquial *zajal* poems of Ibn Quzmān (d. 1161) and the shadow plays of Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1310) discussed in Chapter 17 by Dorigo Ceccato, though both of these authors were working more clearly within known popular genres (*zajal* and *khayāl al-zill*).

Another example of a learned author producing popular materials which has received substantial attention is that of the fifteenth-century writer Ibn Sūdūn, who abandoned his fledgling career as a religious scholar to become a writer of popular literature, a copyist and a performer of shadow plays. Regarding this dramatic change in livelihood, one of his biographers, al-Sakhāwī, wrote of him:

He took up literature and excelled in it . . . but in most of it he followed a path that was an excess of buffoonery, jest, wantonness and dissoluteness; he became well-known and his fame became widespread because of it, and the fashionable people and their like fought over obtaining his *dīwān*.²⁶

The collected work of Ibn Sūdūn, *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-mudhik al-‘abūs* (The Diversion of Souls and the Bringer of Laughter to a Scowling (Face)), contains a wide variety of popular genres including comic *muwashshahāt*, anecdotes and stories, *maqāmāt* on various events of his day, at least two narratives that may have been performed as shadow plays (a comic transvestite wedding and the adventures of a dream interpreter), riddles, occasional verses composed for private celebrations, and colloquial verses on food, hashish and sexual themes, including even a few verses noting the occasion of his own seduction as a youth by an older man. The work of Ibn Sūdūn was popular enough to merit his inclusion in a number of biographical compendia and to attract the attention of several modern scholars.²⁷ Although it is not entirely clear how he made money from his writings (selling copies of his works, renting copies for others to read and/or to copy, or perhaps charging commissions for his occasional poetry) both he and his biographers testify that his colloquial

²⁶ Vrolijk, *Bringing a Laugh*, p. 11.

²⁷ See Marin, 'Literatura y gastronomía'; Moreh, *Live Theatre*; Rosenthal, *The Herb*; Vrolijk, *Bringing a Laugh*; van Gelder, *Of Dishes and Discourse*.

writings brought him great success, though they apparently also ruined his reputation in upper-class circles of Cairo.

Another type of participation by learned writers in the production of popular literature was the collection of materials directly from oral tradition as when (according to Ibn al-Nadīm) al-Jahshiyārī gathered materials for his collection from oral story-tellers. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), for example, provides us with the very first written evidence of the emergence of the 'Epic of the Banī Hilāl' (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl*) with verses he transcribed from desert Arabs outside the city of Tunis and then included in his famous *Muqaddima* (Introduction (to the Study of History)). He used them in his chapter on poetry as proof that colloquial poetry could be as beautiful and as moving as classical poetry even though it followed different grammatical and formal rules. Many other such efforts by highly educated writers no doubt resulted in works that remain unattributed. Sometimes it appears that learned persons simply had a strong personal interest in popular materials, such as the physician nicknamed al-'Antarī described by Ibn Abī 'Uṣaybi'a (d. 1270):

al-'Antarī. His name was al-Mu'ayyad Muḥammad ibn al-Mujallī ibn al-Ṣā'igh al-Jazārī. He was a famous physician, a noted scholar, a good diagnostician, provided excellent treatment, was of noble qualities, a philosopher, and particularly devoted to the field of literature. He wrote much poetry on wisdom and other themes. The scholar Ṣadad al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar – may God have mercy upon him – told me that al-'Antarī as a young man used to copy out tales of 'Antar al-'Absī and he became known for this, hence his nickname. (Hereafter follows a selection of his aphoristic verses on the theme of wisdom, thirty-nine longer selections from his poetry, and a list of his books, none of which, however, concern 'Antar).²⁸

There is little doubt, however, that the copyists of the marketplace were the primary engine which drove the production of popular literature for many centuries. Ibn al-Nadīm indicates as much when he comments that during the reign of al-Muqtadir, the copyists strove to meet the new demand for tales by compiling and fabricating works as rapidly as possible. The fourteenth-century writer Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. after 1344) likewise comments, though in a negative manner, on this role of copyists:

It is best for [the copyist] not to copy anything from those books which lead [their readers] astray, such as the books of heretics or sectarians. Likewise he should not copy those books in which there is no benefit for God, such as *Sīrat 'Antar* and other diverse subjects which waste time and in which there is nothing of religion, and also those books written by practitioners of wantonness, [including] what they have written about types of sexual intercourse and descriptions of wines and other things which incite forbidden acts.²⁹

²⁸ Ibn Abī 'Uṣaybi'a, *'Uyūn al-anbā'*, vol. I, pp. 290–7.

²⁹ al-Subkī, *Mu'id al-ni'am*, p. 186 (1908 edn).

The marketplaces, however, were the domain not only of the copyists, but also of booksellers and public story-tellers, and it is likely that there always existed a rather symbiotic relationship among them. This interdependence was influenced by two important aspects of pre-modern Arab society: first, the production of books was itself often an oral process; and second, professional story-tellers often performed from written texts.

In pre-modern Islamic society, the copyists who produced a great deal of their wares by simply writing out materials from another text (i.e. written-to-written transmission) were not the only producers of written texts. There was also a remarkable culture of dictating books aloud (i.e. written-oral-written transmission). This often took place in mosques and madrasas where a scholar would read aloud a work to be taken down in dictation by a circle of students. Complementing this process was a formal system of correcting copies by reading them aloud back to the dictator, adding additional comments from the dictator as marginalia, as well as being examined on the material in order to receive a certificate (*ijāza*) as an authorized transmitter of that work.³⁰ Thus virtually all students were adept at copying out materials from oral dictation and, along with the professional *warrāqūn/nassākhūn* of the marketplace, could earn money by taking down stories from oral performance and selling the resulting texts. The text, however, would almost never be in the actual colloquial language of the story-teller, but rather would be recast into a written language that ranged from slightly to highly classicized in style, the same transformation that was (and in some regions remains) the norm when illiterate persons dictate messages to professional letter-writers in the marketplace.

In addition, one of the common forms of popular entertainment throughout the Middle East for centuries has been professional story-tellers who read publicly from written texts while adding varying degrees of improvised commentaries. Edward Lane provides a detailed description of such performers in nineteenth-century Cairo in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. Significantly, there existed a spectrum of performance techniques depending upon what material was being presented: reciters of *Sīrat 'Antar* read entirely from written texts; performers of *Sīrat Baybars* performed without books but in a normal speaking voice; while poets of *Sīrat Bani Hilāl* not only used no books but in addition performed the epic in sung poetry to the accompaniment of a musical instrument, usually the Egyptian spike-fiddle, the *rabāb*. D. B. MacDonald offers a description of the written texts used by a professional story-teller (*hakawātī*) in early twentieth-century Damascus.³¹ Oral

³⁰ Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*; Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*.

³¹ MacDonald, 'The Earlier History of the Arabian Nights'.

performances from written texts have also been a tradition in many parts of the non-Arab Middle East: Antoine Galland noted in his travel journal in the seventeenth century the existence of a bookstall in Istanbul that specialized in renting books of stories to the professional story-tellers of the city, and this technique has a very long and rich past in Iran, where performers of the *Shahname* often used a 'scroll' (*tūmār*) containing the summary of the tale as the basis of their oral, semi-improvised performances.³² In the Arab world such performances have continued up to the present in a number of locations including Marrakesh (Ott, *Sīrat al-Mujahidin*, and, in this volume, Kruk, Chapter 13) and the famous al-Nawfara café in Damascus.³³ Performances at the al-Nawfara were suppressed by the al-Asad regime in 1975, but resumed in 1990, apparently with the official blessings of the government.

In modern-day Egypt, one of the most popular genres at saints' festivals are the *qīṣāṣ al-mashāyikh* (Tales Sung by Shaykhs) that are essentially religious and moral song-tales sung either in quatrains or as a *mawwāl* (= *mawāliya*) with intricate rhymed puns at the end of verses. These works are not composed by the singers themselves, but rather by hack authors, the modern equivalent of marketplace scribes, who then market their materials to the performers. Occasionally these works are printed in cheap editions and sold at festivals and in shops, but in recent decades the printed versions have been almost completely eclipsed by recorded live performances sold on cassette tape. Cassette shops in provincial towns often have a selection of well over a hundred such song-tales, performed by a wide variety of rural singers.

Thus the materials that constitute Arabic popular literature in the pre-modern period almost all moved back and forth between oral and written traditions. Oral folk narratives would become the rough material for a copyist's written version or became part of an educated writer's collection, the written text would then move in various circles of readers and/or end up in the hands of a professional story-teller who would perform the material orally from the written text to the broader public which, likely as not, would include a few unlettered story-tellers who would then adapt the material and perform it in their own manner in a fully oral context. The constant flow between written and oral is most certainly the case in the shorter genres of anecdotes, jokes, riddles and humorous narratives, but the same is true of even the largest works such as the *siyar*. The hundreds of pages of manuscript of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* listed in the Ahlwardt catalogue show certain indications of having been transcribed in dictation from an oral poet, and modern Banī Hilāl poets of Egypt testify that they occasionally learn new materials by having chapbook

³² Page, 'Naqqali and Ferdowsi'.

³³ Ott, 'Sīrat al-Mujahidin'; Herzog, 'Présentation de deux séances de hakawati'.

editions of the epic read aloud to them (see Reynolds, Chapter 14, in this volume). The contact between the oral and written traditions only intensified with the impact of the printing press beginning in the nineteenth century and the rapid emergence of an extensive corpus of chapbook or ‘yellow book’ (*kutub sufrā*) editions of many of the materials that have been surveyed above.

The mutability and seemingly endless variation of some popular materials should therefore not surprise us. When oral story-tellers perform, pleasing the audience is the primary objective, not fidelity to a particular version of the tale. Copyists were probably faithful to an original text only because copying without making changes was, quite simply, the fastest way to produce a product that could be sold; but when the creative urge struck, or when it was more lucrative to produce something that could be hawked as a ‘new’ product, they had no qualms about reorganizing texts, substituting more entertaining materials, or updating vocabulary in passages that had become hard to understand with the passage of time. In addition, with every cross-over from written to oral and back again, materials underwent substantial linguistic transformation. Although certain individual works such as those by Ibn Sūdūn or al-Shirbīnī have probably come down to us almost entirely via written transmission, for a very large percentage of popular literature the extant written texts represent but the flotsam and jetsam of a much broader river of oral transmission and performance.

CHAPTER 12

A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS: A HISTORY OF THE TEXT AND ITS RECEPTION

The book known in English as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* or *A Thousand and One Nights* bears the imprint of many different times, places and individuals. The history of its transmission, translation, expurgation and falsification is nearly as fabulous as the tales told by its most famous character, Shahrazād (Scheherezade). The oldest evidence for the work's existence, curiously enough, only came to light relatively recently. In 1948, Nabia Abbott, the first female faculty member of the Oriental Institute in Chicago, was examining a rare piece of early medieval paper from Syria when she suddenly realized that the text she was reading was familiar. Writing in no less than six different hands covered every available space on both sides of the sheet of paper: the draft of a personal letter, a legal attestation to a contract, a crude drawing of a human figure, a few scattered phrases scribbled in the margins and the now famous passage from *A Thousand and One Nights*. Abbott's painstaking analysis led not only to the deciphering of all of these texts but also to a rather precise dating for the fragment to the early ninth century.¹ The short passage from the *Nights* that she had discovered proved to be over 1,100 years old – the earliest physical evidence of Shahrazād's literary existence.

Other than Abbott's fragment, the oldest pieces of historical evidence are found in two tenth-century Arabic texts. The Baghdadi bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm (d. between 990 and 998) offers an account of the *Nights* and how it first appeared in Arabic literature in his *Fihrist* (Catalogue of Books) in the section dealing with 'Story-tellers and Raconteurs' (*al-musāmirūn wa-l-mukharrifūn*). He states that the first people to collect and preserve fictional stories (*khurāfāt*) in books were the ancient Persians and that many of these collections were translated into Arabic and then refined and embellished by later literary figures. He further notes that the first book of this sort ever written was a collection known in Persian as the *Hazār afsān* (A Thousand Stories), and proceeds to give a précis of the famous frame-story of the *Nights*, complete with an account of the king who married a new wife each day and had her killed on the following morning and how the fascinating tales of

¹ See Abbott, 'A Ninth-Century Fragment'.

Shārāzād (later Shahrazād) delayed her fate for a thousand nights at which time the king decided to spare her life. After describing the translation of the *Nights* into Arabic, Ibn al-Nadīm proceeds to give a lengthy list of other story collections and individual tales translated into Arabic from Persian, Indian and Greek sources, including another work in Persian entitled *Hazār dastān* (A Thousand Tales) and a possible reference to a Byzantine version of the Shahrazād frame-tale.

The second reference, found in the work *Murūj al-dhahab* (Meadows of Gold) by al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956) confirms this account, but adds that the work was commonly known in Arabic as *Alflayla* (A Thousand Nights) and indeed this is the title found on Nabia Abbott's fragment described above. The earliest known citations of the expanded title, *Alflayla wa-layla* (A Thousand and One Nights), both date to the twelfth century and are found in a historical work by al-Qurtī and a document from the Cairo Geniza.²

Although the *Nights* was clearly translated from Persian into Arabic, some scholars have looked further, towards ancient Indian literature, for the origins of the work. Two literary devices found in the *Nights* are, in particular, quite common to older Indian literature: (a) the framing device of placing stories within stories by having a character in one tale narrate another tale; and (b) the use of talking animals as the protagonists of didactic fables. D. B. Macdonald pointed out that the frame-tale and the opening three short fables all have clear parallels in Indian texts.³ No physical evidence of the Persian *Hazār afsān* has survived, however, and earlier Indian sources can only be a matter for conjecture.

Once translated into Arabic, as Ibn al-Nadīm notes, men of Arabic letters did indeed begin to make emendations of their own. Some of the earlier Persian tales may have survived within the Arabic tradition altered such that Arabic Muslim names and new locations were substituted for pre-Islamic Persian ones, but it is also clear that whole cycles of Arabic tales were eventually added to the collection and apparently displaced most of the Persian materials. One such cycle of Arabic tales centres around a small group of historical figures from ninth-century Baghdad, including the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809), his vizier Ja‘far al-Barmakī (d. 803) and the licentious poet Abū Nuwās (d. c. 813). Another cluster is a body of stories from late medieval Cairo in which are mentioned persons and places that date to as late as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Little is known about how and where the *Nights* circulated in the Arabic-speaking world between the time of the early medieval references cited above

² See Littmann, ‘Alf layla wa-layla’, p. 361; Goitein, ‘The Oldest Documentary Evidence’.

³ Macdonald, ‘Alf laila wa-laila’.

by Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Qurṭī and the arrival of the *Nights* in Europe in the early eighteenth century. The few extant manuscripts of the *Nights* from this period, however, point to a work of a rather different nature than that of modern recensions and raise a number of significant questions. First of all, were there ever really a thousand and one nights? At the end of his entry on the *Hazār afsān*, Ibn al-Nadīm states that he saw copies of the complete work a number of times and notes that, although the narrative was indeed spread over a thousand nights, the collection included only about 200 stories as most of the stories were recounted over more than one night. It is not clear whether he is referring at this point to the Arabic or Persian text, but, in the context of his description, the latter seems more likely. No pre-eighteenth-century Arabic text of anything near this size has survived. In fact, the extant manuscripts from before the eighteenth century for the most part fall into two basic groups: Syrian versions that contain 282 nights and the medieval Egyptian versions containing only 200. No references later than that of Ibn al-Nadīm indicate that the Arabic text ever included a full complement of one thousand nights.

In addition, it appears that the *Nights* was neither a highly regarded nor even a particularly popular work during these centuries. Medieval Arabic literature includes a number of lists of popular and fictional works located in a wide variety of sources: sermons decrying wasteful pastimes such as reading fictional and fantastic tales; autobiographies in which the authors speak of their childhood fascination with such texts; Koranic commentaries that explain which texts are to be considered *laghw* (nonsense) and *lahw* (foolish diversions) and so forth. Together, these sources, along with the *Fibrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm, offer a rather detailed, albeit incomplete, portrayal of Arabic popular literature. Although the tales of Sindbad, the ‘Epic of ‘Antar’ and many other works of romance, adventure and marvellous voyages are cited over and over again, the *Nights* appear nowhere in these diverse sources. Confirming this lack of prominence is the notably small number of extant Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights*; every European scholar or translator who worked on the *Nights* before the widespread availability of the nineteenth-century printed editions complained bitterly about the difficulty of obtaining a copy of the work.

The pre-eighteenth-century Arabic manuscripts that do survive indicate that the collection was never entirely fixed in either size or content, but rather that medieval redactors continued compiling their versions (much as Ibn al-Nadīm had indicated already in the tenth century) by embellishing, substituting, emending and adding to the material that came down to them. Nevertheless, a core set of tales, including the famous frame-tale of Shahrazād, is found in the majority of the Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights*; many of

these tales, however, are also found in separate analogue forms in unrelated manuscripts, either alone or in compiled collections.⁴ In fact, a number of the tales found in the *Nights* circulated more widely independent of the *Nights* than they did as part of that work.

Thus an accurate portrayal of the *Nights* in pre-modern Arabic literature must situate it within the rather fluid stratum of popular fictional literary production and as a work that was in many ways undifferentiated from a large body of similar texts. Many of these popular narratives and collections were compiled and copied not for personal, silent reading, but rather to function as the basis for public story-telling performances. Though it is nearly impossible to determine at this late date the degree to which the tales in the manuscripts may have been drawn from oral tradition, it is clear that these written texts often acted as scripts for professional oral performances. Antoine Galland, the first translator of the *Nights* into a Western language, made numerous references to such public performances of popular tales (though notably not of the *Nights* themselves) in his travel journals and even described bookstalls in Constantinople whose sole commerce was renting copies of such tale collections to public story-tellers for a small fee.⁵ Scholarly descriptions of story-tellers performing from written texts include accounts of public recitations in nineteenth-century Cairo, in twentieth-century Iranian coffeehouses and recent open-air performances in Marrakesh, Morocco;⁶ less detailed reports also abound in European travellers' accounts of the Middle East. It would therefore be singularly inappropriate to approach a work drawn from this domain of popular medieval literature with preconceptions derived from the modern Western idea of a bounded, cohesive 'text' produced to be silently consumed by solitary readers.

TALES WITHIN TALES

The core cycle of tales which occupy the first 200 to 282 nights of the Syrian and Egyptian manuscript groups are organized in a manner that has sparked interest and awe among readers and literary scholars from many different cultures. Frame-tales are a device found in texts from a relatively large number of literary traditions: a story-teller or a story-telling scene is presented to the reader and within that frame a series of independent tales are told. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *The Golden Ass*, the Arabic *Tales of Kalila and Dimna* and its Sanskrit predecessor, the *Panchatantra*, are but the

⁴ Pinault, *Story-Telling Techniques*, pp. 252–3.

⁵ See Galland, *Journal*, vol. I, p. 242.

⁶ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, chs. 21–3; Page, 'Naqqâlî and Ferdowsî'; Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos*.

most famous of many possible examples. In the *Nights*, however, this device is conspicuously exploited not only to produce a bewildering array of tales within tales, but also to provide, as many scholars have noted, a fascinating series of echoes and reflections upon certain themes, chief among them the nature of relations between women and men, the vicissitudes of fate, and the power of story-telling itself to control, pacify and educate.⁷

The embedding of tales within tales reaches one of its apogees in a series of tales that culminate in the 170th night of the Egyptian manuscript tradition at which point five independent acts of narration are taking place simultaneously in a sequence of twelve interrelated tales. At the outermost level, the narrator is recounting to us the readers the story of King Shahriyār, within which Shahrazād is narrating her tales. On the 102nd night she begins the 'Tale of the Hunchback', set in China, in which the dead body of a hunchback is passed from a tailor and his wife first to a Jewish physician, then to a Muslim steward and finally to Christian broker. At the end of the tale, when the strange incident comes to light and is recounted to the King of China, he asks – rhetorically it would seem at first – whether anyone has ever heard a stranger or more marvellous tale! All four of the main characters, however, immediately reply that indeed they have, which leads to a series of four new tales told by the protagonists of the 'Tale of the Hunchback'. In the last of these – the 'Tale of the Lame Young Man from Baghdad' – narrated by the tailor, the young man of the title recounts the story of his encounter with a barber to an assembly of dinner guests, and the barber, also present, then recounts his own tale, within which he narrates to the Caliph of Baghdad not only one of his own misadventures, but also the stories of each of his six brothers. The narrator is speaking to us, Shahrazād to King Shahriyār, the tailor to the King of China, and the barber to the assembled dinner guests about the tales he told the Caliph in Baghdad. Needless to say, this places the reader in handsome company indeed.

The multiple levels of embedding and the twelve larger stories that form the sequence (several of which include shorter narratives as well) are bound together by a series of motifs that echo back and forth through the narratives. The sequence begins and ends with the Hunchback, and each of the tales within the sequence involves the acquisition of a physical defect: the loss of a hand, a pair of thumbs, an eye, loss of speech, being made lame or paraplegic, or having the ears or lips cropped. Each of the four tales told by the tailor, steward, physician and broker, for example, involves a handsome young man of means who falls in love with a beautiful maiden and then suffers an amputation or maiming for his love. The first young man has a hand cut off;

⁷ Gerhardt, *The Art of Storytelling*.

though he eventually wins his love, she dies soon afterwards and his happiness is of short duration. The second has his thumbs and big toes cut off, but he is able to marry his love, acquires great wealth, and they live together happily for many years. The third has a hand cut off and eventually is married to the sister of his love since his original lover turned out to be an evil-hearted murderer. In the final story, the young man is made lame, but does not win his love, nor receive any form of compensation. Four different fates for four similar loves. Perhaps, tellingly, the first three young men achieve their heart's desire by recounting their tales immediately after their maiming to a king or other powerful figure and only the fourth, who does not tell his tale until much later, receives no compensation. The motif of physical defects is carried forward through the remainder of the tales until the very end of the sequence when it turns out that the Hunchback is not in fact dead and is resuscitated by the Jewish physician, a final echo of the twinned motifs of physical defect and compensation.

LITERARY STYLE

The literary style of the *Nights* has received a variety of assessments from critics and translators over the centuries ranging from complete condemnation to fulsome praise. It is a style heavily influenced by colloquial Arabic and is quite distinct from the norms of high classical Arabic literature. The Arabic manuscripts are filled with 'misspellings' that reflect colloquial pronunciations and usages, and they contain a basic vocabulary that eschews erudite vocabulary and opts instead for more commonly used words except in some of the flowery descriptions of clothing, banquets and so forth, and in the – generally mediocre – poetry. The language is at times prodigiously repetitive and at times vulgar. In essence, it is quite simply the language of popular literature which, if not oral in provenance, has been composed in a manner that clearly reflects the milieu of oral story-telling. For non-Arabic speakers a comparable example in English might be works of nineteenth-century popular fiction, such as those by Mark Twain, in which the dialogue is liberally sprinkled with spellings such as 'gonna' (going to), 'hafta' (have to), 'betcha' (bet you) and so forth, a style that might strike some, particularly readers familiar with the colloquial in question, as free-flowing and natural, and strike others, particularly defenders of 'good taste', as uneducated and graceless.

The ongoing controversy in Arab society over writing the colloquial language has even led some Western scholars to claim that the *Nights* is actually *improved* by translation since in a foreign tongue the tales are freed from this polemic. Whether that be the case or not, each of the translators who attempted to render the Arabic of the *Nights* into a foreign language was faced

with a critical dilemma at the outset: to translate the *Nights* in a style that reflected its original, at times awkwardly colloquial, language, or instead to couch it in a more respected literary idiom for its new readership. Their various decisions produced astonishingly different results.

ANTOINE GALLAND (1646–1715) AND THE FIRST TRANSLATION

The *Nights* would no doubt have continued to exist only in semi-obscenity had it not been for the intervention of one man: Antoine Galland. Born to a family of modest financial means in Picardy, France, and orphaned at an early age, Galland showed a strong aptitude for languages and studied Latin, Hebrew and Greek before moving to Paris in 1661 to seek his fortune. He studied at the Collège Duplessis, which was incorporated into the Sorbonne in 1646, and then at the Collège Royal where he first studied Arabic. In 1670, he was offered employment as secretary to the Marquis de Nointel who had been appointed royal ambassador for Louis XIV to Constantinople. Galland eventually lived in Constantinople for fifteen years during three different sojourns (1670–5, 1676–7, 1680–8) and also travelled to Smyrna, Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem, Gaza and Cairo. Throughout much of this time he worked as a translator and ‘antiquary to the king’ for whom he purchased manuscripts, coins, medallions and other curiosities. He acquired a great reputation as a bibliophile, numismatist and scholar of eastern languages. He also maintained a diary for most of the fifteen years he lived abroad which continues to provide scholars with striking insights into both French and Ottoman culture of the period. Yet, during the entire fifteen years he spent purchasing books and manuscripts in the Middle East, Galland never once encountered nor even heard mention of *A Thousand and One Nights*; this work entered his life only later, once he had returned to France, and in a rather mysterious manner.

Having returned to France, Galland aspired to an appointment as professor of Arabic, an honour he would only finally achieve in 1709 at the age of sixty-three in the Collège Royal. In the intervening twenty-one years, he accepted a series of appointments as translator, research assistant and curator in the service of various scholars and noblemen. From 1696 to 1708, he worked as the curator for Nicolas-Joseph Foucault’s private collection of books and orientalia in Caen. Although his relationship with his patron was satisfactory, the position was in Normandy, far from the academic centres of Paris. Here, in the relative isolation of the provinces, Galland began to translate a manuscript of the *Voyages of Sindbad* which he was dedicating to the Marquise d’O, daughter of the French ambassador in Constantinople during his third voyage to Turkey and a former pupil of his. In the *épître* published in

the first volume of his *Mille et une Nuit* in 1704, in which he apologizes for the tardy publication of the volume, he gives this account of a remarkable discovery:

The delay, Madame, comes from the fact that having begun the publication [of Sindbad], I discovered that these Tales are drawn from a prodigious collection of similar Tales, in several volumes, entitled the *Thousand and One Nights*. This discovery compelled me to suspend the publication [of Sindbad] and to dedicate my attentions to acquiring that collection. It was necessary to have it brought from Syria and then to translate into French the first volume, which you have here before you, of only four that have been sent to me.

How Galland managed to discover a reference to the *Nights*, which had escaped his notice for fifteen years in the Middle East, while working in a small town in Normandy has remained a mystery. Even more curious is the fact that he was mistaken – for the voyages of Sindbad had never in fact formed part of the *Nights*. An additional mystery surrounds his references to the Arabic manuscript, for in his personal correspondence he refers once to three volumes, another time to five volumes, in the work itself he refers to four volumes, and when he died only three volumes were found in his possession. Nearly three hundred years later scholars are still in disagreement about the relationship between Galland's translation and his Arabic text of the *Nights*. Some argue that the many divergences between the two texts are due to Galland's free-handed translation style which allowed him to add details to the tales as he saw fit, while others argue that Galland must have possessed another text of the *Nights* that has been lost because some of his 'additions' simply make no sense within the context of the stories themselves and must have been suggested by an alternate source.

It was only two centuries later that MacDonald and Zotenberg were separately able to provide reasonably accurate accounts of how most of the stories in the Galland translation came to be included in the twelve-volume French 'translation'.⁸ The first two volumes of Galland's French text follow the Arabic manuscript closely. For volume three, however, Galland inserted the Sindbad tales he had translated from a separate source and which had never previously been part of the *Nights*. Volumes four to six return to the tales in the Arabic manuscript, although Galland for some reason skipped two tales and completed volume six with the tale 'Qamar al-Zamān' which was incomplete in the Arabic manuscript, but for which Galland supplied an ending either from his own imagination or from another manuscript. Finally, volume seven comprised the two tales which had been dropped earlier. All of these were published between 1704 and 1706, but with volume seven Galland had exhausted

⁸ See the works of MacDonald listed in the Bibliography; also Zotenberg, *Histoire d' 'Alâ al-Dîn*.

all of the material in his Arabic manuscript. Though he tried for years through a number of different intermediaries to obtain additional Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights* that contained more tales, his efforts were in vain.

When volume eight appeared three years later in 1709, it was a complete shock to Galland for he had not submitted any new tales to his publisher. The *Nights* was selling well and since Galland had refused to supply new tales, his publisher took matters into his own hands: volume eight included a tale entitled 'Ghānim' that Galland had previously translated or composed on his own (no Arabic manuscript or analogue text has ever been found), as well as two tales translated from Turkish by Galland's colleague, Pétis de la Croix ('Zayn al-Asnām' and 'Khudādād'), who had been working on a collection he entitled *Mille et un jours* drawn from a Turkish manuscript. Although both Galland and Pétis de la Croix denounced the volume, these tales have been retained in nearly all later versions of the *Nights*.

The remaining volumes of Galland's *Nights* were drawn not from written sources, but, strangely enough, from tales told at Parisian dinner parties. While visiting his friend and fellow traveller Paul Lucas on 17 March 1709, Galland met a visiting Syrian Maronite priest from Aleppo named Ḥannā who proved to be a gifted story-teller. After hearing Ḥannā recount stories to his amused hosts, Galland wrote brief summaries of the tales in his diaries. At some point Galland made a conscious decision to complete his version of the *Nights* with tales collected from Ḥannā, for Galland noted in his journal that, at his request, Ḥannā provided a handwritten Arabic version for the tale of Aladdin; this transcription, however, was never found after Galland's death. In order to publish the tales he had only heard Ḥannā recount orally, Galland reworked his own brief summaries of three to eight pages into stories that ranged from 100 to nearly 200 printed pages. Thus the tales recounted by Ḥannā form the final four volumes – a full third – of Galland's *Nights*. Among these tales are found the stories and motifs that have most come to represent the *Nights* in the Western imagination: 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves', as well as several of the most famous motifs, such as the magic lamp and the flying carpet, neither of which are found in earlier Arabic sources. As a culminating contribution, Galland provided the concluding thousand and first night to the collection, finishing off the entire collection, in proper French style, with a happy ending.

In hindsight, it is easy to see how those tales which Galland freely retold from the barest plotline recorded in his diary achieved far greater popularity than most of the tales which had been translated more or less directly from Arabic written sources. Galland recreated these tales as much as two and a half years after having heard Ḥannā tell them, which certainly allowed a great deal of leeway for his own creative impulses. As a result, he succeeded in creating

'Arabic' tales that were far more steeped in French structure and style than those translated from Arabic originals, a literary product perfectly crafted to sell to a French readership. His efforts inspired the emergence of an entirely new genre of European literature, the Oriental Tale, at which authors as diverse as Voltaire, Johnson, Scott, Beckford, Disraeli, Irving, Dickens, Dumas and Pushkin were later to try their hand.⁹

In the final count, only nine of the twenty-one stories in Galland's *Nights* are drawn from Arabic manuscripts of *Alf layla wa-layla*. Galland, however, never informed his readers that the later volumes of his *Mille et une nuit* (Galland himself always used the singular in French – *nuit* – echoing the Arabic) were not drawn from Arabic manuscripts; in fact, he deliberately misled his audience by indirectly referring to the manuscripts in the introductions to the final volumes.

INITIAL RECEPTION OF THE NIGHTS

Why was the publication of the *Nights* such a resounding and instant success in French? Why did Galland grow so interested in the *Nights* in the first place and why did he choose to spend his time translating this of all texts? After all, he aspired to a professorship in Arabic and had hitherto published only scholarly works and translations. The answers to these questions lie in part in a rather unusual development that occurred in French fiction during the decade and a half just prior to Galland's translation. In 1690, a new genre of fiction emerged and rapidly achieved great popularity among upper-class readers, particularly women: the *contes des fées* or fairy tales. The authors of this new genre were predominantly women of the lesser nobility and the tales were at first concocted at salons with the input of all present and subsequently written down by one of the participants almost as a type of party game. Later, individual authors emerged, the most successful of whom were Madame D'Aulnoy, Louise d'Aulneuil, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier and Charles Perrault, better known for his *Contes de ma mère l'Oye*, the famous *Mother Goose Tales*.¹⁰

The new fairy tales were filled with magic and wit, including veiled references to members of the court. The authors in fact enjoyed referring to themselves publicly as *fées* (fairies) and wrote to each other with such titles as 'Queen of the Fairies'. Unlike the earlier style of epics and lengthy *romans*, these tales often involved characters from different levels of society in rather commonplace settings. More intriguing is that they first took the form of story-telling events within longer narratives and the figure telling the story

⁹ See Conant, *The Oriental Tale*.

¹⁰ See Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender*.

was almost always a woman. This structure was established in the very first example of the genre found in *Histoire d'Hypolite* published in 1690 by Madame D'Aulnoy (c. 1650–1705). Thus, in an astonishing historical coincidence, the most popular genre of French fiction just prior to Galland's translation of the *Nights* roughly paralleled the structure of the *Nights*: tales within tales, told by a female narrator, filled with magic and marvellous events, involving a variety of social characters often in quotidien settings, replete with sumptuously detailed descriptions of banquets, palaces and treasures.

There is little doubt that when Galland first read the *Nights* he read them as the Arabic equivalent to the then extraordinarily popular French *contes des fées* (the *contes* were a quite lucrative publishing venture and 114 were published between 1690 and 1715). Indeed, it may well have been these striking similarities that motivated him to translate them at all and to dedicate them to the Marquise d'O, a patron of the same social class as the female authors of the most popular of the *contes des fées*. In a letter written to Pierre-Daniel Huet dated 25 February 1701, Galland wrote of his *Nights*: 'I also have another little translation from Arabic, stories just as good as the fairy tales published these last years in such profusion'.¹¹ The *Nights* was translated not merely into French, but into a specific genre of French literature, the fairy tale, the existence of which is probably the single most important motivation for the *Nights*' translation and its remarkable success in the West.

With its exotic locations and characters, the *Nights* offered a French reading public already accustomed to the basic features of the *contes des fées* a new twist on a familiar pattern. Towards the end of the eighteenth century when a massive compilation entitled the *Cabinet des fées* was published in forty-one volumes, the already close connection between the French fairy tale and the *Nights* was further strengthened: the series opened with a reprint of Galland's *Nights* (volumes one to five) and concluded with a 'continuation' of the *Nights* entitled the *Suites des mille et une nuits* (volumes thirty-eight to forty-one), while in between appeared the fairy tales of Madame D'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault and their circles along with a variety of tales from other European sources. The European literary establishment of the day made no distinction between Galland's translated stories, European fairy tales, and 'Arabic' and 'Persian' tales composed by European authors.

The success of Galland's creation was unprecedented. His *Mille et une nuit* was translated into English, German, Italian, Dutch, Danish, Russian, Flemish and Yiddish by the end of the eighteenth century. During the same time period it was reissued in over twenty French editions, with an additional forty French editions appearing in the nineteenth century. Yet all of these texts were derived

¹¹ See Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*.

in one manner or another from Galland's French text. For nearly a century there were no new translations from the original Arabic.

ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS OF THE *NIGHTS*: A BURGEONING INDUSTRY

By the end of the eighteenth century, the great success of the *Nights* in Europe began to engender a variety of different continuations, retranslations and outright fakes. Of the many scholars who have worked to unravel the labyrinthine histories of the many Arabic manuscripts and translations that mysteriously cropped up in Europe from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, three have provided detailed attempts at classification but have at times reached quite different conclusions.¹²

The Chavis-Cazotte continuation of the *Nights* involved a collaboration between a monk from Syria, Dom Denis Chavis (Dionysius Shāwīsh), who had been brought to France to work in the Bibliothèque du Roi, and the French author Jacques Cazotte. Chavis claimed to have in his possession a Baghdadi manuscript of the *Nights*, but, according to Mahdi, who has undertaken the most detailed examination of this text, Chavis began by copying Galland's three-volume Arabic manuscript which was then present in the *bibliothèque*, in the hopes of selling this 'new' manuscript of the *Nights*.¹³ In the first volumes he made only a few changes (notably substituting another story where Galland had included the Sindbad cycle), but he quickly faced the puzzle of what to do with the Galland tales for which there were no Arabic texts: he chose to translate them from French into Arabic and thereby created what was for a time mistaken as the Arabic 'original' of Galland's *Nights*. In addition to translating Galland's tales from French into Arabic (including the two Persian tales that Galland's publisher had added to the collection), he inserted other tales from an independent Arabic story collection, the manuscript for which still exists. This collection contains two tales which are also found in Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights* ('Jullanar and the Sea' and a section from 'The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad') and twelve others, but this collection makes no claim to be connected in any way with the *Nights*.

It soon became apparent to Chavis, however, that there was little financial reward to be had from all this effort in creating a new Arabic manuscript, whereas there was a great deal of interest in publishing French translations of 'new' and 'authentic' tales from the *Nights*, especially ones not found in Galland. After being introduced to Cazotte by the publisher Paul Barde, Chavis abandoned his work on the Arabic manuscript and turned his efforts to the

¹² For Zotenberg and MacDonald, see fn. 8; for Mahdi, see fn. 11.

¹³ See Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, vol. III (1994), pp. 51–61.

collaborative production of a French translation. The eventual result was the *Continuation des mille et une nuits* (published in the *Cabinet des fées* as the *Suites*) which contained a mishmash of tales Chavis had in his possession, tales which he apparently outlined to Cazotte and which Cazotte then freely retold, as well as tales that are almost entirely of Cazotte's creation. The *Continuation* enjoyed two decades of success and was translated more than once into English, but was eventually decried as a fake in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The small collection of tales that Chavis had brought from Syria was later translated separately by Caussin de Perceval as a 'supplement' to an 1806 reprint of Galland.

Another counterfeit manuscript which was apparently created by Mīkhā'il Ṣabbāgh, a Syrian Christian employed in the Bibliothèque du Roi a number of years after Chavis, experienced a much lengthier acceptance as an authentic copy of the *Nights* among Western scholars. Both Zotenberg and MacDonald deemed it reliable, while Mahdi has more recently rejected it as a clever forgery cobbled together from parts of Galland, Chavis and at least one other source, though this judgement is still open to debate.¹⁴ The Ṣabbāgh manuscript had a much more enduring impact on the history of the *Nights* than the Chavis-Cazotte collaboration since it greatly influenced two of the most commonly used Arabic printed editions of the *Nights* produced in the nineteenth century (see below).

Arabic manuscripts of both 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves', two of the tales Galland had collected from Hannā and for which no Arabic source was known, also mysteriously surfaced in Europe in the early nineteenth century and provoked a great deal of scholarly discussion. They are for the most part now discredited as they appear to have been created from Galland's French text; even if the isolated manuscripts (each contains only a single tale) should eventually be proven authentic, the tales would still have no known historical connection with the *Nights*.

THE FIRST ARABIC PRINTED EDITIONS

Around the year 1775 a new redaction of the *Nights* appeared in Egypt that included the traditional core 200 nights of the earlier Egyptian recensions along with a large number of additional stories that filled out the collection to its 'complete' form of 1001 nights. This text, which spawned a large number of manuscript copies and eventually printed editions as well, is commonly referred to by Western scholars as Zotenberg's Egyptian Recension (ZER) and

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 61–72.

represents a modern development that was almost certainly motivated in some manner by European requests for manuscripts of the ‘complete’ *Nights*; for there is no evidence of an Arabic manuscript tradition containing more than 282 nights earlier than the ZER which only emerged seventy years after Galland’s translation. Precisely how the ZER came into being is not known, but numerous Western travellers, collectors and diplomats throughout the eighteenth century had purchased texts and commissioned copies of manuscripts of the *Nights*. The earliest historical documentation regarding the ZER is found in the diary of a German traveller, Ulrich Seetzen, and, although the information is somewhat garbled, a clear distinction is already drawn between the first 200 nights and the remaining tales which are said to have been drawn from other sources.¹⁵ In any case, the ZER later became the base text for both the Bulaq and the Calcutta II printed editions.

The earliest Arabic printed edition of the *Nights*, known as Calcutta I, was created at the College of Fort William that had been established by the British East India Company in 1800 to train employees and officials in Indian languages and cultures. The printed edition was designed as a textbook for the teaching of Arabic and was published in two volumes, each containing exactly 100 nights. The main text was drawn from a manuscript of the same Syrian grouping as Galland’s, and was similar to it in most respects. In order that each volume conclude on the proper number of nights, however, the editor added the tale ‘al-Ma’mūn and Būrān’ to the end of volume one and ‘The Guiles of Women’ to volume two, both of which were drawn from a work published by Louis-Mathieu Langlès in 1814 in Paris. In a rather peculiar development, although he had already reached the 200th night, the editor also added the Sindbad cycle, without night divisions, which thus forms the final section of volume two.

The Habicht or Breslau text is further removed from the Arabic manuscript tradition than the three other major printed editions and is often deemed an outright fabrication. Christian Maximilian Habicht, born in Breslau in 1775, studied Arabic in Paris where he met and later collaborated with a Jewish Tunisian, Murād ibn al-Najjār. By compiling tales from texts of the *Nights* and freely adding stories from other sources, Habicht created a German translation containing 1001 nights. The combining of tales from multiple sources, of course, had been and remained the practice of nearly every European translator of the *Nights* until the twentieth century; but Habicht went one step further in that he also published this pastiche as an Arabic text which he claimed was based upon a Tunisian manuscript that in fact never existed. The degree to

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 98–9.

which his Arabic 'edition' was based upon a composite of various manuscripts and constituted little more than a miscellany of tales the majority of which had no historical connection to the *Nights* was demonstrated by Macdonald, but these tales nevertheless found their way into many later editions and translations.

The Būlāq text is the only major Arabic printed edition that was not directly initiated and financed by Europeans. It was one of the first books printed on the Egyptian government presses at Būlāq, a suburb of Cairo, established by Muḥammad 'Alī. The edition presents the ZER text and was reprinted several times in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Calcutta II, also known as the Macnaghten edition, claims to be based on an Egyptian manuscript brought to India containing the full complement of 1001 nights; the manuscript, however, has never been found. The most significant characteristic of the Calcutta II edition is the fulsome detail with which many of the tales are told such that they are noticeably longer than in any earlier source. It was precisely this dilated style that attracted the attention of later scholars and translators and has made it a favourite edition for many. Mahdi has convincingly demonstrated, however, that this manuscript could have been compiled no earlier than 1824–5 due to the otherwise inexplicable presence of details drawn from the Habicht edition of the *Nights*.¹⁶

Edition	Dates	Translations
Calcutta I	vol. I 1814/vol. II 1818	Rasmussen (Danish)
Breslau	8 vols. 1825–38 + 4 vols. 1842–3	Habicht (German)
Bulaq	2 vols. 1835	Lane (English) Henning (German) Mardrus (French)
Calcutta II (Macnaghten)	4 vols. 1839–42	Torrens (English) Payne (English) Burton (English) Littmann (German)

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRANSLATIONS

A number of partial translations were published by scholars during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from Arabic manuscripts other than that used by Galland. Nearly all of these tales were from independent sources that claimed no connection to the *Nights* but were only associated with, or incorporated into, the *Nights* by their translators or publishers: Jonathan Scott published new tales first in 1800 and added more to his 1811 edition of Galland;

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 124–5.

Caussin de Perceval, as noted above, published the tales in Chavis's manuscript as a supplement to the *Nights* in 1806; and Eduard Gauttier published tales from a variety of sources by scattering them among tales from Galland in his 1822–5 edition of the *Nights*. Once associated with the *Nights*, many of the tales continued to be included in later editions.

Two notable translations from actual Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights* date to this period as well. The first was a ZER text which was translated into French by Von Hammer-Purgstall after which both the Arabic manuscript and the French translation were lost, but not before having been translated into German by Zinserling (1823), which was later translated back into French by Trébutien (1828) and into English by Lamb (1826). The second was an English translation of the first fifty nights from the manuscript of Calcutta II published by Torrens in 1838. Once the printed Arabic editions, with their complex genealogies, had been published, however, they soon became the base texts for almost all subsequent Western translations. The problems of the manuscript tradition now receded from the literary scene and even scholarly translators happily worked from the printed editions with little or no question of how these had been compiled.

When Edward Lane sat down to provide a new translation of the *Nights* in the mid-nineteenth century, much had changed since Galland's day: European concepts of the East had dramatically shifted; literary tastes had changed and an entire genre of literature had been created in imitation of Galland's work – the Oriental Tale – against which the *Nights* was now inevitably juxtaposed; with the spread of colonialism, political relations between Europe and the Ottoman empire had been redefined; academic methodologies of textual analysis, as well as theories of translation, had evolved; and with Champollion's deciphering of the ancient hieroglyphic writing system, Egypt had to a great degree displaced Constantinople as the primary focal point for Western imaginings of the 'East'. Lane wrote for a public that was fascinated by the East, but was by now equally as attracted to travel accounts and ethnographic description as they were to tales of marvel. The *Nights*, with its seductive combination of daily life details couched within fabulous fantasies, proved a perfect vehicle for Lane's linguistic expertise and ethnographic interests.

About Edward Lane's early life we know surprisingly little. Born in 1801, it is not known when or how he first studied Arabic, though a short manuscript grammar of colloquial Arabic culled from diverse sources from 1822 written by him indicates that he began his studies before he left for Egypt in 1825. His first sojourn, during which he lived in a decrepit tomb at the outskirts of Cairo dressed as an Egyptian, lasted three years and resulted in his *A Description of Egypt*. In 1828 he returned to England and four years later travelled again to Egypt where he stayed from 1833 to 1835. Once back in England

after this second sojourn, he published his most famous work, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* and then embarked upon his translation of the *Nights*.¹⁷

Seeing Galland's version of the *Nights* very much with the eyes of his own century, Lane deplored Galland's 'occidentalization' of the details of Eastern manners and dress in the tales and therefore annotated his own edition with so many notes that they were later collected and published as an independent volume.¹⁸ Railing against Galland's prettified language, he couched his edition in an archaic, almost biblical, prose style in which he adhered closely to Arabic word order and syntax even when this produced bizarre effects in English. Although Galland had himself excised some sections of the tales which he felt immoral, Lane, who lived in one of the most morally restrained periods of English history, expurgated his text so drastically that his version was eventually only two-fifths as long as the Būlāq edition from which he was working. Although Lane also included tales from other sources, notably the Habicht edition, he meticulously notated the source of each story for his readers. Since Lane had travelled nowhere in the Middle East other than Egypt, he gave all aspects of the *Nights* an essentially Egyptian interpretation, often betraying his own unfamiliarity with manners and customs in Turkish- and Persian-speaking cultures. In the end, Lane's redaction, though filled with voluminous scholarly notes, is so distant from the Arabic text in structure and in style, that almost no aspect of the *Nights* can be usefully studied from his work.

In 1842, less than two years after the publication of Lane's *Nights* as a complete work in 1839–40 (it had appeared in monthly serialized form in 1838–40), John Payne, Lane's successor, was born. Payne's talent for languages was apparent early in life during his boyhood studies of French, Greek and Latin; Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Arabic, Persian and Turkish he learned later on his own. A middling poet but a prodigious translator, Payne published several volumes of his own verse, complete translations of the poetic works of François Villon, Heinrich Heine, the Persian poet Hāfiẓ, the *Rubā'iyyāt* of 'Umar Khayyām, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, all of the novels of Matteo Brandello, in addition to the most comprehensive English translation of the *Nights* up to that time. Payne was very scrupulous about his sources and at first translated directly and only from the Calcutta II edition, considered the most authentic in his day. In 1884 he added translations of the remaining Calcutta I and Breslau tales, but refused to publish 'Aladdin' and 'Zayn al-Asnām' until Zotenber sent him copies of the above-mentioned manuscripts

¹⁷ See Ahmed, *Edward W. Lane*.

¹⁸ Lane, *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages*.

that had come into his possession. With his 1885 publication of these last two tales, Payne had basically published the entire corpus of the *Nights* from its various Arabic editions. Payne's translation was remarkably enough the first English text of the *Nights* to be published wholly unexpurgated and one of the few to include all of the over 1,400 passages of poetry as well. In order to avoid potential legal difficulties relating to the erotic ('pornographic') nature of the text, the translation was released exclusively through private subscription and only 500 copies were printed, even though the demand was several times that number. During his lifetime, Payne refused to allow the work to be reprinted, though it has been reprinted several times since his death.

Enter Richard Francis Burton, by far the most colourful and flamboyant Westerner to add his imprint to the *Nights*. Though there is abundant material for reconstructing Burton's life, there are two main obstacles for arriving at any semblance of truth: the first was Burton himself and what one of his biographers has termed 'his bizarre relationship with fact',¹⁹ and the second was his wife Isabel, who spent much of her life being ignored by her husband, but who, upon his death, destroyed his private papers and spent the last years of her own life attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to gloss over the lustier aspects of Richard's career. His life has been recounted numerous times in a series of biographies.

Burton was born in 1821 to a family that had once held a respectable position. His father had served in the army in one of the queen's regiments, but, through no fault of his own, had become embroiled in a national scandal involving Princess Caroline of Brunswick. After being forced to testify at a sham trial, he was decommissioned at half-pay for the remainder of his life. To save money, the family moved to the Continent where Richard was raised. A brief stint at Oxford ended with Richard being sent down, so, with few other options open, the family purchased him a commission in the Bombay Infantry of the East India Company. There his linguistic abilities led him to acquire at least a basic proficiency in a large number of Indian languages (among which the British counted Persian and Arabic). Burton did not fare well in the army, however, and devoted himself to the pursuits to which his eccentric personality was most suited: a life of adventuring and the writing of prodigiously lengthy and heavily annotated accounts of his feats. The most famous of these latter include his expedition with John Speke in search of the sources of the Nile and his pilgrimage in disguise to Mecca and Medina (the account of which should always be read in tandem with his equally sensationalist book about his journey to two other 'forbidden cities' – Salt Lake City and San Francisco! – entitled *The City of the Saints and across the Rockies to California*).

¹⁹ See Hastings, *Sir Richard Burton*.

Burton's path crossed that of the *Nights* late in his life when he was, as always, struggling to raise money. He read an announcement in the *Athenaeum* (5 November 1881) that the first volume of John Payne's translation of the *Nights* was going to press. Burton wrote to Payne claiming to be working on a translation of his own and in response Payne graciously asked Burton if he would like to collaborate on the remaining volumes. When Burton actually met Payne, however, it became clear that he had nothing more than a few rough notes, and so Payne went on to publish his text. Once the initial 500 copies of Payne's text were sold and it became clear that Payne was not going to allow a reprint, Burton stepped in to fill the gap. He did so to a great extent by plagiarizing Payne's translation. Though the first sections of Burton's text differ significantly from Payne's, the subsequent sections are ever more closely drawn from Payne's work until whole paragraphs and pages are found in which only a few words and the poetry have been changed. The story of this plagiarized translation has been public knowledge since Thomas Wright's twin biographies of Burton and Payne, but this has never diminished the popularity of the Burton *Nights*.

To this basic text drawn from Payne's work, Burton did, however, add a distinctive flavour. Like Lane, he attached massive annotations to the tales; unlike Lane, he eroticized and exoticized the text whenever possible such that 'boy' is often translated as 'catamite', the mention of a 'black slave' is transformed into 'a big slobbering blackamoor', and antiquated English vocabulary such as 'whilome', 'kemperly', 'wittol', 'brewis' and 'anent' appears throughout. Like Payne, Burton chose to make his text available through private subscription to avoid possible obscenity charges; this he did through the Kama Shastra Society, an association dedicated to the translation and publication of Eastern erotica. When his *Nights* (or rather Payne's, with Burton's emendations) were published (1885–6) and proved to be a financial success, Burton immediately compiled a second 1001 nights which were published under the title of the *Supplemental Nights* (1886–8). Together, the two sets include tales from every possible previous edition and translation, and for the Galland tales for which no Arabic original existed, Burton chose to translate Hindi translations of Galland's French in order to retain the 'oriental flavour' of the tales! The Burton 'translation' continues to be popular in English even today, though most editions have been thoroughly expurgated of precisely those elements that were Burton's contribution to the history of the *Nights*.

A final nineteenth-century translation was published in 1889–1904 by J. C. Mardrus and has remained throughout the twentieth century the most widely read French edition. The Mardrus edition was based on the Būlāq and Calcutta II editions, but great liberties were taken in the ordering of the tales, several of which are inserted from collections unrelated to the *Nights*, and the

translation in general is nearly so free as to merit the label of a 'retelling' rather than a translation.

Nearly all of the versions, editions and collections of the *Nights* available to Western readers even today are derived from the translations of Galland, Lane, Payne-Burton and Mardrus. The notable exceptions are a handful of new scholarly translations: (1) Enno Littmann's German translation (1953), which gives a complete and meticulous rendering of Calcutta II along with the additional tales from Galland, Calcutta I and Breslau; (2) Francesco Gabrieli's Italian translation (1948); and (3) three recent translations of the Muhsin Mahdi edition (1984–94) of the Arabic manuscript once owned by Galland – Husain Haddawy's English translation (1990), Richard van Leeuwen's Dutch translation (1993–9) and Claudia Ott's German translation (2004). The Mahdi edition and its translations represent the only versions of the *Nights* that are faithful to one and only one Arabic manuscript of the *Nights*.

THE NIGHTS: A GUIDEBOOK TO THE EAST

If the *Nights*, as argued above, was originally deemed by its French readers a work in some manner cognate to their own *contes des fées*, it was also presented to the public as a guidebook to the cultures of the East. Readers encountered this idea already in the Preface to the first volume of Galland's *Nights*:

All of the Orientals, Persians, Tartars and Indians can be distinguished here, and appear as they truly are, from monarchs down to people of the poorest condition. Thus, without having to experience the fatigue of travelling and seeking out these people in their own countries, the reader will here have the pleasure of seeing them act and hearing them speak.²⁰

Although it might at first seem outrageous to vaunt a collection of fairy tales as a representation of real-life cultures, the claim was not wholly unjustified in the context of early eighteenth-century France. A number of Arabic works were available in French translation in Galland's day, but these were primarily works of theology, philosophy, science and wisdom literature. None offered anything that even approximated the portrayal of Middle Easterners in shops and marketplaces, in their homes and occupations, going about their daily lives (albeit constantly interrupted by marvellous and supernatural forces), as they appeared to do in the *Nights*.

The idea that the *Nights* was the key to the East was to live on for well over two centuries. It is possible to see in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings of European travellers how quickly the *Nights* became the template

²⁰ See Galland, 'Epître', in *Mille et une nuit*.

against which Westerners came to gauge their own personal experiences of the Middle East. At times the Middle East lived up to its reputation and offered scenes 'like something out of the *Thousand and One Nights*', but quite often the reality was found wanting; many disappointed tourists wrote of how the dirty and shabby inhabitants of the East failed to live up to the expectations raised by the *Nights*. Nearly every major literary and political figure of the nineteenth century at some point commented on the *Nights* (for England, as an example, see quotes by Bagehot, Beckford, Brontë, Carlyle, Coleridge, Dickens, Disraeli, Eliot, Fielding, Gibbon, Keats, Morris, Palgrave, Ruskin, Southey, Stevenson, Tennyson, Thackeray, Wordsworth and Yeats).²¹ In 1836, having been asked to review six new editions of the *Nights*, literary critic Leigh Hunt exuberantly declared it 'the most popular book in the world'²² and in 1915, when the guns of World War I were echoing over Europe, D. B. Macdonald could still write:

Such books [Arabic popular works] must always, for the home-staying student, take the place of contact with the Moslem world itself, and the best known of them is, of course, the *Arabian Nights*. They do not mislead nor misinform, as does that contact so often until it is controlled, and as still oftener do books of travel, and I would bear testimony now that when I did meet the Moslem world face to face, the picture of its workings and ideas and usages which I had gained from these romances, poems and religious tales needed modification in no essential point – almost, even, in no detail.²³

A full study of the re-entry of the *Nights* into the world of Arabic literature has yet to be undertaken, but would be a rich contribution.²⁴ It departed the Middle East in the early eighteenth century an obscure work that drew no special notice and returned a century and a half later as the foundational text through which the Western world had chosen to base its understandings of the Middle East. The *Nights* have at times been accepted in Arab countries as the 'masterpiece' that the West has proclaimed it, and excerpts from it are found in school primers and textbooks throughout the Arab world. On the other hand, however, the work has on occasion been criticized and rejected. In 1985, for example, a series of articles in major Egyptian newspapers attacking the obscenity and eroticism of the *Nights* led to a government ban of the work and the withdrawal of certain editions from the shelves of bookstores throughout the country.

²¹ See Ali, *Scheherazade in England*.

²² Hunt, 'Arabian Nights', 106.

²³ Macdonald, 'Concluding Study', pp. 215–16.

²⁴ Walther, 'Modern Arabic Literature and the Arabian Nights'.

CONCLUSION

The *Nights* was a relatively unknown collection of fabulous tales, one of many such collections that formed a part of late medieval popular Arabic literature, its unique embedding of tales and its compelling heroine notwithstanding. By chance, this particular work was snatched from obscurity and given a new existence by Western scholars, translators, publishers and readers who acclaimed it both as a literary masterpiece and as a trustworthy guide to Middle Eastern cultures. All of the Western alterations, additions and substitutions that shaped and reshaped the *Nights* over several centuries could perhaps be understood merely as the continuation of time-honoured practices in the production of popular literature – borrowing, compilation, redaction, rewriting – except for the fact that Westerners at the same time conceived of the text in decidedly modern, Western terms. For two centuries Western scholars sought in vain for ‘authentic’, ‘original’ and ‘complete’ manuscripts of the *Nights*. They harshly criticized each other’s scholarship and editorial policies and at times vehemently denounced new editions and translations. Western readers, though, for the most part simply regaled themselves with the astonishing ingenuity of the tales, the exoticness of their characters and settings, and their powerful ability to entertain. By the late nineteenth century the *Nights* had also become a vehicle for the inscription of Western erotic fantasies. Whether as a literary work, a cultural guidebook or as a manual of erotic desire, Westerners for generations measured the physical reality of the Middle East against what was for them the ‘real’ East, the East of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Certainly no other literary text can claim such a central role in reflecting, over several centuries, the changing relations between two great civilizations.

CHAPTER 13

SĪRAT 'ANTAR IBN SHADDĀD

In *Qissat al-amīr Hamza*, one of the heroes is said to perform ‘the feats of ‘Antar’ when he shows great bravery,¹ an expression that was already current in the tenth century. It well illustrates how already at an early date ‘Antar had become the hero *par excellence* of Arab imagination, a status that has not changed even to the present day. He is the Arab Hercules, whose strength and valour have become proverbial. He is the personification of Arab manly virtue, *muruūwa*, stoically enduring hardship, generous, protector of the helpless and a paragon of knightly skill, *furūsiyya*.

Sīrat 'Antar (or *'Antara*) *ibn Shaddād*, which recounts his heroic deeds, has long been popular with Arab audiences. As Hamilton, relying on Burkhardt, says, ‘To the Arabs, it is their standard work, which excites in them the wildest emotions.’² The many place names in Arabia, the Middle East and North Africa that refer to him are another indication of his widespread and continuous popularity.

The figure of ‘Antar, the legendary hero of the *sīra*, has its historic base in the figure of the pre-Islamic bedouin poet whose name, rightly or not, is connected with one of the *Mu'allaqāt*.³ Little is known about this historical ‘Antar, who is also known as ‘Antar ibn Mu‘āwiya ibn Shaddād, but he, whoever he was, evolved into the legendary black warrior of popular story-telling, and the two became inextricably merged in popular imagination. His adventures, like those of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, Baybars and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, the son of Dhāt al-Himma, evoked a glorious Arab past that audiences could identify with and often preferred to the more fantastic stories of, for instance, the *Arabian Nights* or *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. This holds true even for the present. Asked about his preferences, a modern listener, who had daily attended *sīra* sessions for more than thirty years, strongly stated his preference for the above-mentioned *sīras* over that of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, ‘because they are history, *ta’rīkh*, and the other is nothing but lies and sorcery’.⁴

¹ *Qissat al-amīr Hamza al-Bahlawāni*, vol. II, p. 219.

² Hamilton, *Antar*, vol. I, p. xviii.

³ The so-called ‘suspended odes’, a famous collection of seven pre-Islamic poems.

⁴ See below about the sessions during which this information was gathered.

'Antar has also enjoyed great popularity in Europe. The stories about him fit well with romantic notions about the Arab world. They evoked the mysterious and colourful world of *A Thousand and One Nights*, and also appealed to Western fascination with desert life. 'Antar embodied the noble bedouin warrior, but also is an undaunted, and at times ruthless, lover, a veritable shaykh according to Western imagination.

Sīrat 'Antar was introduced to Western scholarship early in the nineteenth century. One of its great advocates was von Hammer-Purgstall, one of whose first articles about it was a short note written in 1811. Many literary and artistic offshoots followed. The play '*Antar*' by Shukrī Ghānim, staged in Paris in 1910, and Rimsky-Korsakov's '*Antar symphony*' are two examples.

Numerous Western retellings of the *sīra* have appeared, often focusing on the 'Antar and 'Abla romance. They were usually made on the basis of Terrick Hamilton's translation (1819–20) of the first third of the *sīra*, made from an Aleppan manuscript. Many translations of individual episodes have appeared in various articles and a (partial) French translation by Devic appeared in 1864.

Part of the enthusiasm generated by the Western discovery of '*Antar*' was due to the fact that it filled an important gap felt to exist in Arabic literature. Unlike other well-known literatures, Arabic literature seemed to have no epics. Caussin de Perceval's remark that '*Antar*' was, in a manner of speaking, the Arab *Iliad*⁵ echoes this view. Another reason was that with *Sīrat 'Antar*, scholars thought to have in hand a rich and authentic source of information about bedouin life, more specifically life in pre-Islamic Arabia, the cradle of Islam. Only gradually did it become clear that the *Sīra* as it now stands cannot have taken shape earlier than the twelfth century, and quite possibly even later. Authentic pre-Islamic lore may well have been preserved in it, but is not at all easy to sift out from other material.

Compared to most other Arabic epics, *Sīrat 'Antar* has been reasonably well studied, although much remains to be done. Noteworthy studies that appeared in this century are that of Heller (1931), who wrote about it from a comparative and folkloristic point of view; Norris (1980), who focused especially on 'Antar's African exploits; Heath's excellent monograph *The Thirsty Sword* (1996), which covers most of the basic information about the *Sīra* and its background, and deals with a number of narrative and compositional aspects, such as the *sīra*'s treatment of standard epic elements like the 'heroic cycle' and the 'lion fight'; and Cherkaoui (*Le Roman de 'Antar* and 'Historical Elements'), whose comparison of some '*Antar*' episodes with reports of medieval Arab historians is of particular interest.

⁵ Caussin de Perceval, 'Notice et extrait', 99.

DATING

How and when the historical 'Antar started to become the hero of popular legend and how the stories about him grew into the substantial narrative cycle known from the late Middle Ages can only be guessed. Al-Hamdānī (d. 945) already speaks about 'Antar (riding his steed Abjar) and 'Abla in battle with Yemenis.⁶ A problem with an early dating of some form of the cycle is that no evidence for its existence is found in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* (tenth century).

Historical evidence for the existence of a body of 'Antar stories dates from the twelfth century. First, there is the well-known reference to narrative fiction (including '*Antar*) in the autobiography of the Jewish convert Samaw'al ibn Yahyā,⁷ and there is Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's entry about a mid-twelfth-century physician by the name of Ibn al-Ṣā'igh, who was nicknamed al-'Antarī because he copied out "Antar tales".⁸ But the Crusader material in the *Sīra* as it now stands cannot be older than the twelfth century. Some, not always conclusive, references are found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sources, and the oldest manuscripts of the *Sīra* as we know it date from the fifteenth century.⁹

The picture that arises is of a collection of *ayyām al-'Arab*-type stories already extant at an early date, which was expanded by professional story-tellers over the centuries, and received its more or less definitive shape at a time when the Crusader exploits were still remembered, but had already obtained a legendary character. This could have been in the thirteenth century. There is no conclusive proof that the 'Antar stories so much appreciated by Samaw'al already formed a cycle similar to the later lengthy epic. He speaks about 'long stories', and mentions some titles along with '*Antar*'. These, however, are also inconclusive.

From early Mamluk times onwards, the cycle was then passed on via a mixed oral and written tradition (this accounts for the wide divergencies between texts) until the end of the nineteenth century. On *Sīrat 'Antar* as an oral epic, see also Jason's article in *Oriente Moderno*.

AUTHOR

The text itself often speaks about its presumed author, the grammarian al-Asmā'i (d. c. 828). To quote Heller:¹⁰ 'In fact we have within the *sīra* a regular romance regarding the origin of the romance.' But the legendary al-Asmā'i of

⁶ al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl*, pp. 168–70.

⁷ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, pp. 46–7.

⁸ Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anba', vol. I, p. 290.

⁹ Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, pp. 233–8. The oldest known fragment of the *Sīrat 'Antar* is dated 1437; the MS obtained by von Hammer-Purgstall is dated 1466.

¹⁰ Heller, 'Sīrat 'Antar', p. 52ob.

the cycle, who on the basis of what the text says must have lived for many centuries, can at best have had a very superficial connection with the historical al-Asmā‘ī. The latter's activity as a collector of bedouin linguistic lore, possibly also including narrative material (but there is no evidence of this), may have been responsible for the connection.

CONTENTS

In recent printed editions (which differ considerably among each other) the *Sīra* usually covers six to eight volumes, divided into a number of parts that differs according to recension.¹¹ The total number of pages is between three and four thousand.

A detailed idea of the contents can be obtained from the extensive summaries given by Lyons and Heath. Lyons' summary is (for the first third) based on the English translation of Hamilton (see above), which does not include the long introduction of prophetic history (the Abraham story) found in other versions. Heath's summary is based on this longer version.

The *Sīra*, often referred to as a 'romance of chivalry', tells of the adventures of the bedouin hero 'Antar and his tribe, the Banū 'Abs. The events described are supposed to take place largely in pre-Islamic days, but ample use is made of elements from later times. The actual events that provide a background for the epic known today cover the period between the sixth and the twelfth centuries.

Time is treated in the manner usual for these epics, meaning that larger-scale temporal consistence is of little importance. Lifespans and travel, also in relation to other events, may be dealt with as the narrator sees fit. It is the same with space: 'Antar's adventures take place in a largely fictional space, even though the regions through which he travels may be named Persia, Africa or Spain.

Unlike in other cycles, such as *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* and *Baybars*, the supernatural and the miraculous play a very minor part in the 'Antar cycle. There are the collapsible soothsayer Satīḥ, who has neither limbs nor bones, and the magic castle in Yemen, inhabited by dog people. Occasionally elements from Arab geographical writers have found their way into the tales about exotic regions. These are usually motifs that circulated widely in tales of marvel, *‘ajā‘ib*. The description of silent barter, already described in the *Sindbad* tales, is an example.¹²

¹¹ For example: the edition Cairo 1381/1961–2, here referred to as the Bābī recension, is divided into fifty-nine *ajzā‘*; the edition Cairo n.d. (*Maktabat wa-maṭba‘at al-mashhad al-Ḥusaynī*), 8 vols., here referred to as the Ḥusaynī, into ninety-seven; others may have as many as 154.

¹² *Qissat ‘Antara ibn Shaddād al-‘Absī*, pt. 9, pp. 152–3. All citations are to the Cairo 1381 edition.

'Antar, eponymous hero of the cycle, is the son of Shaddād, chief of the Banū 'Abs. He is black, for his mother is the black slave Zabība, who was captured during a raid, together with her two sons. Both 'Antar's half-brothers support him during his heroic career. One of them, Shaybūb, plays a major role in the epic as 'Antar's faithful helper, the double that traditionally accompanies the main hero in Arabic *sīra*, the '*ayyār*. One of his epithets is *sāhib al-himma*, 'the man of noble purpose' (e.g. V, p. 357). He is clever, a good runner and an excellent archer. The bow is an appropriate weapon for the '*ayyār*, whose essential characteristics are versatility and the ability to surprise. Shaybūb does not show the outrageous behaviour that characterizes the more picaresque '*ayyār* figures in some of the other narrative cycles, such as al-Battāl in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, 'Umar in *Hamza* and Shīḥa in *Baybars*.

As is customary, the hero's childhood and youth are marked by extraordinary circumstances and events: he is much bigger, stronger and fiercer than the other boys of his age, who are greatly in awe of him. Already as a boy 'Antar falls irrevocably in love with 'Abla, the daughter of his uncle Mālik. The vicissitudes of their courtship and married relationship form one of the main narrative lines of the cycle. They marry after approximately one-third of the cycle.

Partly connected to the love story are 'Antar's efforts to overcome the disadvantages of his birth by heroic deeds, which form another major strand of the story. Among them are his struggle to be acknowledged by his father Shaddad, and his subsequent efforts to be accepted as son-in-law by the father of his beloved 'Abla. In the course of his early adventures he acquires his legendary sword *Zāmī* (the Thirsty) and his steed Abjar, whose qualities mirror those of his master.

Conflicts, raids, ambushes and treacherous deeds inform the narrative. 'Antar's conflicts with his tribe, the Banū 'Abs, and their rivalry with their sister tribe, the Fazāra, play major roles. Conflict with members of other tribes, reflecting the tension between northern and southern Arabian tribes, is also a leading motif, as are military conflicts beyond the Arabian peninsula. 'Antar becomes involved (as enemy and as ally) with both the Byzantines and the Persians. The Byzantines have as their allies the Franks and the Ghassanid kings of Syria, while the Persians have the Lakhmid kings of Ḫira on their side.

These conflicts provide the texture into which a colourful sequence of narrative events is woven: raids, military exploits, love affairs and strange adventures in foreign parts. In the later parts of the cycle, 'Antar's peregrinations carry him as far as al-Andalus and Rome in the west, to India (Sind and Hind) in the east, and deep into Africa, where he discovers the Negus to be his grandfather. Defending Rome, he kills Buhinma (Bohemond?), and in one episode he becomes such a valuable ally to the 'Franks' and Byzantines that

they erect a statue of him in Constantinople (XI, p. 388). Crusader elements are prominent and relations with the ‘Franks’, as said above, are by no means always hostile.¹³

The cycle does not end with ‘Antar’s death. It is followed by a series of events in which three of ‘Antar’s children seek revenge for their father’s death. Two sons are Christians, the result of ‘Antar’s relationships with Christian princesses (both called Maryam) in Constantinople and Rome, who only make their appearance after ‘Antar’s death. The third child is purely Arab, a huge, black, posthumously born daughter called ‘Unaytira, ‘little girl ‘Antar’, who plays a leading role in the final part of the cycle.

The last part of the cycle serves to give the cycle an Islamic legitimization: the Prophet himself utters his admiration for ‘Antar’s deeds and encourages the people to keep his memory alive. The ‘Abs convert to Islam, and ‘Unaytira, accompanied by her warrior mother and her five sons, becomes a staunch fighter for Islam.

This is not the only attempt to make the tales about these pre-Islamic pagan heroes acceptable in Islamic eyes. When ‘Antar and his companions get drunk and ravish the women they have captured, this is excused with a reference to usual *jāhilī* (pre-Islamic) practice (V, p. 419). ‘Antar has qualms when he sees the huge, very lifelike statue (made of a number of different metals, and then painted) of himself mounted on his horse with his brother Shaybūb and his nephew Khudhruf beside him that the Byzantines have erected. Is this perhaps ‘infringing upon the power of the Lord?’ The emperor gives him the assurance that this is acceptable in Christianity (XI, pp. 388–9).

The arrival of the Prophet Muḥammad is announced several times throughout the epic, once by the pagan idol al-Hubal, which announces the appearance of a man who will throw out the idols from the Ka‘ba (V, pp. 350–1). Narrators have also inserted occasional ‘Islamic’ phrases such as where the poet al-Hāni’, competing with ‘Antar, starts his reciting with: ‘Pray for our Lord Muḥammad the Messenger’ (VII, p. 422). Even ‘Antar himself invokes the name of Muḥammad and owes his victory to it (XI, p. 339).

NARRATIVE ASPECTS

The narrative structure of the cycle follows the patterns familiar to the genre. Events unroll as expected: a challenge arises, often with a love interest, involving either ‘Antar himself (an outrage involving ‘Abla) or someone whose interests he has taken to heart. He then sets out to confront the enemy, obstacles are surmounted, a confrontation takes place, the affair is wrapped up and a new

¹³ See Lyons, ‘The Crusading Stratum’.

challenge arises. Numerous subplots develop in the course of these events and it is not easy to keep track of what happens. The modern non-Arab reader's lack of ingrained awareness of tribal and family affiliations makes it even more difficult. Tracing what happens to a particular group or individual not belonging to the 'core cast' can be difficult: a person may disappear from sight and not turn up until much later. Jaydā', the proud warrior princess whom 'Antar sets out to capture in order to have her lead 'Abla's bridal camel but who escapes after 'Antar has killed her husband Khālid, is almost forgotten when she suddenly turns up again to support the Lakhmid king Nu'mān against 'Antar and his clan.

Ghamra, another warrior princess, whom 'Antar fights and rapes, has long disappeared from sight when she suddenly reappears and explains that the warrior whom 'Antar has just captured is their son. She then resumes a central stage part, accompanying 'Antar as his consort on an expedition to Ethiopia.

Sometimes, but not always, explanations are given in the text about what happened to these people during their long absences and how they came to reappear at this particular moment ('This came about because...'). In the course of his performance, a narrator reading from a text may insert a few brief remarks putting his audience in the know if they cannot place a character. The Moroccan narrator Sī Milūd (see below) occasionally asked his audience whether they still knew who so-and-so was.

Modern readers often comment on the tediousness of the repeated accounts of forays and battles and wonder how these could have had an appeal to audiences. That this was the case is obvious, and can still be observed. There is of course no basic difference with modern television soaps, which have motifs and narrative patterns very similar to traditional *sīra*. There the repetitive battle scenes have been replaced by the equally repetitive patterns of the battle between the sexes, and audiences never seem to tire of them.

CHARACTERS

'Antar'

The personality of 'Antar is depicted in detail in the cycle, and some aspects may be noted. He is the epitome of knightly virtue, Abū'l-Fawāris, 'Father of Knights'. Yet his image is not defined exclusively by his martial skills and knightly behaviour: he also has a very human side, including some very recognizable human weaknesses. These come out, for instance, in his relationship with his beloved 'Abla. He loves her deeply, but this does not make him immune to the attractions of other women. Time and again he becomes sexually involved with girls and women who cross his path, and it is not beyond

him to obtain his wish by force (V, p. 423). He takes great pains to hide his affairs and marriages from 'Abla, anxious to spare her feelings as well as to avoid her nagging. But if the worst comes to the worst, he does not shirk his responsibilities even if he must brave her displeasure by making provisions for unexpectedly discovered illegitimate offspring: as he says to her, it is a man's duty to cover up his faults (VII, pp. 34–5).

He has a soft and human side, but does not let it get in the way when the situation calls for courage, *sabr* and, if need be, ruthlessness. This is brought out in an episode in which 'Antar meets his double, a youth by the name of 'Antar who is helplessly in love with his cousin, a damsels called 'Abla (II, pp. 319–30). Her treacherous father has attempted to obstruct their love by taking her away, and now she has fallen into the hands of a fearsome brute who is likely to rape and kill her. All this is explained to 'Antar by the youth's mother (Shaybūb comments on her resemblance to their mother Zabiba), who sits there with the unconscious lad, pining away in misery, on her lap. 'Antar is deeply moved, and unlike the prostrate youth, he does not weep, but acts. He fights and kills the villain, thus saving the girl and reuniting her with her beloved. The youth, out of gratitude, offers to come and accompany 'Antar on his quests, but 'Antar declines the offer with advice to the boy to go home, marry his bride and change his name. 'Antar firmly distances himself from his weaker self, as seems clear, but it is done with strength as well as kindness.

'Abla and other women'

The role of the female protagonists in the epic, even that of 'Abla, has remained undervalued. One of the merits of Lyons' synopsis is that it brings out a number of striking passages featuring the female protagonists. The voices of 'Abla and some other women are so explicit throughout the narrative that surely an attempt will be made one day to retell the story from the female angle, as has been done for the Arthurian legends.¹⁴ The same, by the way, is true for *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*.

'Abla is a noble and proud bedouin girl who staunchly adheres to the code of honour of the desert. She is very beautiful and men fall madly in love with her again and again. As one of her suitors says (VI, p. 40): 'Even if this girl marries twenty men and becomes a hundred years old, she will still be the most beautiful girl on earth.' 'Abla is a very outspoken personality. She is certainly not the meek and compliant, passive beloved that often figures in tales of this kind. This she has in common with other wives of 'Antar, such as Ghamra and Haifa', both redoubtable warriors. Unlike them, 'Abla has not

¹⁴ See Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*.

been trained in the martial arts, but she is a very outspoken (and not always sympathetic) personality, who often takes matters into her own hands. It is noteworthy that she already appears in that role in the brief episode described in al-Hamdānī (d. 945).¹⁵ A remarkable fact is that so far this is the only reference to 'Abla in material that is not connected to the *Sīra*. None of the early literary historians, such as al-Isfahānī in his *Aghānī*, mentions the name of a beloved 'Abla in connection with the poet 'Antar.

'Antar always fears her sharp tongue. When he and his companions have become drunk and he rapes Muhriyya, whom they have captured, he quickly marries her off to somebody else 'for fear of his cousin', that is, 'Abla (V, p. 424). As a result of the affair, Muhriyya bears him a son, Maysara, and when this is discovered 'Antar still has to face 'Abla's wrath (VII, pp. 34–5). When it looks as if 'Abla's brother 'Amr has been killed, 'Antar mostly worries about the fact that he will never hear the last of it once 'Abla hears the news (VI, p. 41).

'Abla expresses herself in the strongest terms when 'Antar seems to shirk from his vow to hang his poem on the Ka'ba, and swears not to sleep with him until this is accomplished (VII, p. 312). It frequently becomes clear that she is not just the helpless lady in the palanquin, looking on aghast while 'Antar splits the head of an enemy, that we know from popular pictures and posters. She is abducted by enemies time and again, but she does not hesitate to take up the knife when the need arises. She prevents 'Antar's execution by pretending to consent to marry King Ardashīr and then stabbing him (VII, p. 283) and she personally strangles a woman who tries to lead her into an ambush (VI, p. 24).

Marrying foreign princesses is, of course, a well-known motif in *sīra* literature. Marriage, or at least sexual union, with the foreign princess/woman symbolizes and seals the conquest of enemy territory, and many such events occur in 'Antar's career. Common motifs are adapted into particular contexts. Here this implies fitting them into the relationship of 'Antar and 'Abla. She is shown to be less than enthusiastic and sometimes quite bitter. She does not shun a quarrel with 'Antar (VIII, pp. 443–4): 'You have afflicted me with a large number of fellow wives . . . When the women of the tribe see me, they laugh at me and say, "Antar has forgotten you!" I might as well go back to my father's house.' Haughtily she tells other women that she may well send 'Antar to herd camels, should the fancy take her. In order to make up for her loss of face she urges 'Antar to kiss her feet in the presence of the other women, which causes him to walk off (VIII, pp. 443–4).

¹⁵ al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl*, pp. 168–70.

‘Abla, like Guinevere, remains childless (in this she is unusual among the wives of Arab popular heroes), and this makes ‘Antar’s womanizing, usually resulting in the birth of sons, even more difficult for her to bear. In one episode (X, pp. 62–3) she vilifies him for having married three daughters of important men and says that he has forgotten how he used to herd camels, clad in simple wool. He counters by saying that she is the only one he really wanted, but that he cannot send away these women, who all have borne him brave sons.

When ‘Antar is mortally wounded, he has ‘Abla don his attire and armour and take his place on Abjar, while he rides in her palanquin. For some time the enemy is deceived, but the trick is discovered. How this came about, Caussin, in the nineteenth century, only dared to describe in Latin:¹⁶ the traces of a woman urinating in the sand are quite different from a man’s, especially if this man is ‘Antar.

‘Abla deeply mourns ‘Antar, and it is her new husband who has to bear the brunt of her bitterness. He is constantly unfavourably compared to ‘Antar, both in and out of bed. One cannot remain wholly without sympathy for the unhappy man, who is finally driven to kill her. Maybe this was her intention all along?

It is quite intriguing that a female character takes over the narrative literally with a vengeance, in the last part of the epic. Of the three children of ‘Antar who seek to revenge their father’s death, the only pure Arab is his posthumously born daughter ‘Unaytira who plays a leading role. She is a hero in her own right with all the trimmings: unusual birth and youth, a lion fight as a test of bravery and a famous sword. She equals her father on the battlefield, and perhaps surpasses him in virtuous behaviour. She becomes a devout Muslim and a paragon of family virtue, mother of five brave Muslim sons, joins the Prophet on military expeditions and her death is lamented by Muhammad himself (XII, p. 322).

LANGUAGE, STYLE AND PERFORMANCE

The *sīra* is written in rhymed prose, *saj'*, interspersed with poetry. The number of poems differs from recension to recension. As in the other epics, the language of ‘Antar as transmitted by the existing manuscripts and printed editions is post-classical literary Arabic, showing many colloquial elements.

How this took shape in actual performance is described in several notices by European travellers. As we know from Lane’s observations made in Cairo in the first half of the nineteenth century,¹⁷ *Sīrat ‘Antar* was always read

¹⁶ Caussin de Perceval, ‘Notice et extrait’, pp. 119–20.

¹⁷ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, pp. 419–20.

from books by professional story-tellers specialized in this cycle, the *'Anātira'* (of whom there were six in the Cairo of Lane's day). This is confirmed by Burkhardt's report to Hamilton,¹⁸ although he adds that some of the narrators only occasionally had recourse to the written text. Reading, or reciting, went on 'with breakneck speed'.¹⁹ Lane says that the cycles were told 'in the popular manner', which has sometimes been interpreted as 'in colloquial Arabic'. This may have been true for the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, but not for *'Antar*, as Paret's observations show.²⁰ Attending an *'Antar* session in a Cairo coffeehouse with a largely illiterate audience, Paret noted that the story-teller, with whom he had previously conversed in colloquial Arabic, interrupted his reciting in literary Arabic from time to time in order to summarize the text in Egyptian colloquial for Paret's benefit. The same practice was noted in Morocco.²¹

Nowadays actual *sīra* performances are very rare. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is still occasionally recited live in Egypt, possibly also Tunisia, and officially sponsored recitations of *Baybars* still go on in a Damascus café. A place where *sīra*, including *'Antar*, was read until recently in its traditional context without any interference from 'cultural heritage' bodies was at the Dār al-Barūd, a somewhat run-down orchard near the Kutubiyya in Marrakesh. There the story-teller Sī Milūd (1936–2000) daily read the popular *siyar*, *'Antar* among them, for over thirty years to a partly illiterate audience ever since he took over from his predecessor.²²

Every afternoon some fifty to eighty men gathered in the same corner of the park. The majority of the crowd consisted of people running small businesses, street sellers, porters, shoeshiners, people working in restaurants and unemployed people. They sat around on cartons, rented for a trifle, while Sī Milūd, sitting on a small stool, read for about an hour. Before he started to read he recited a prayer. The call to sunset prayer abruptly ended the session and the audience left, putting some coins into the narrator's hand. When Sī Milūd was younger, the sessions used to last from afternoon to sunset prayer, but latterly this was too strenuous for him.

The *'Antariyya*, as it is called, was not the only *sīra* that was read there. Other favourites with the audience were *al-Ismā'iiliyya* (i.e. *Baybars*) and *al-Wahhabiyya* (i.e. *Dhāt al-Himma*). Other titles, such as *al-Malik Sayf*, the *Hamzawiyya* and *Fīrūz Shāh*, were known but not popular. Reading a long

¹⁸ Quoted in Hamilton, *Antar*, vol. I, p. xviii.

¹⁹ Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, p. 149.

²⁰ See Abel, 'Formation et constitution', p. 731.

²¹ During performances of Sī Milūd in Marrakesh between 1974 and 1977. See Zeggaf, 'Le Conte oral marocain', p. 64.

²² See Kruk and Ott, 'In the Popular Manner'; Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos*.

sīra like *al-Wahhabiyā* at Sī Milūd's speed took a year and three months, so ‘Antar would take about a year. There were people among the audience who had attended Sī Milūd's sessions from the very beginning, and had heard the *‘Antariyyā* at least ten times.

The literary Arabic of the *‘Antar* text was recited by Sī Milūd with Moroccan pronunciation and this suggests how Lane's remark ‘in the popular manner’ ought to be interpreted. The *saj‘* of the text was recited fast and in a fairly monotonous way, with a perfect grasp of rhythm and rhyme. Apart from occasional gestures, there were no histrionic aspects involved in the recitation, as is sometimes reported of *sīra* performances. Occasionally, short explanations were inserted, and there were also reactions from the audience, showing their involvement with the events. Sī Milūd often skipped all, or part, of the poems included in his text. Clearly he found them difficult to recite. This is not without significance in relation to the fact that differences between recensions²³ often regard the inclusion or absence of poems.

POETRY

Little study has been made so far of the poetry included in these epics, and *‘Antar* is no exception, in spite of the translation of some of its poetry by Rückert.²⁴ There is much of interest to discover here, such as occasional occurrences of strophic poetry (see VIII, pp. 188–9, a *musammaṭ* in *mutaqārib* metre).²⁵

Of the historical ‘Antar, author of the *mu‘allaqa*, not many poems are known. The many poems recited by ‘Antar in the *Sīra* have sometimes been used to bolster the corpus. An episode about the hanging of ‘Antar’s *mu‘allaqa* on the door of the Ka‘ba is interesting in this regard (VII, pp. 328–441). It is presented in the form of a conflict between ‘Antar and the other Arabian poets, who at first refuse to consider his *qasīda* worthy of hanging on the Ka‘ba door. Each poet in turn recites his own *mu‘allaqa* in order to put ‘Antar in his place, until he finally manages to convince them of his poetic abilities. This long episode is briefly replayed at a second hanging of the *mu‘allaqa*, which has been torn down by a rival.

The episode reflects not only the pleasure that Arab audiences took in listening to these poems, but also offers a traditional demonstration of the richness of the Arabic language. The episode includes a session in which the

²³ Cf. Hamilton, *Antar*, vol. I, Preface, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

²⁴ Rückert, ‘Auswahl von Gedichten und Gesängen’.

²⁵ See Norris, *The Adventures of ‘Antar*, pp. 137–8.

established poets, led by Imru' al-Qays, challenge 'Antar to come up with as many synonyms as possible for sword, spear, coat of mail, horse, camel, wine and snake (VII, pp. 430ff.).

The episode also illustrates various philological problems of the *Mu'allaqāt* tradition, such as who is to be included in the collection and the textual divergencies in the transmission of the poems. Some of the printed versions of *Sīrat 'Antar*, speaking about 'seven *Mu'allaqāt*', mention only five poets besides 'Antar: Tarafa, Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, Labīd, 'Amr ibn Kulthūm and Imru' al-Qays, who are the poets included in all *Mu'allaqāt* collections. Other editions not only mention the poets in a different order, but add al-A'shā, and the quoted texts, notably that of Zuhayr's *Mu'allqa*, differ considerably from the 'accepted' texts, as found for instance in Tibrīzī's commentary.²⁶

RECENSIONS

The divergencies between various recensions of *Sīrat 'Antar* have yet to be studied in detail. The idea introduced by Hamilton, on the basis of Burkhardt's information, that there are two versions – an abridged Syrian and a long Hijāzī – was already rejected by Heller.²⁷ A thorough study of the existing manuscripts as well as of the printed versions (which may go back to manuscripts no longer extant) is needed to obtain an insight into the textual tradition of the *sīra*. This is not an easy task, since many of the existing manuscripts are composites, containing parts of different origin and date. Such work would not be aimed at establishing the 'original' text of the epic. That sort of question is totally beside the point regarding this type of text. Such work would be important for research in which dating of the material is relevant, that is, studies of popular culture, social history and historical linguistics. At present only some general observations about the text and its various versions can be made.

The idea has been that recensions of the text can be divided into two groups, differing from each other in minor matters of wording and by inclusion or exclusion of the 'Abraham story' which precedes the appearance of 'Antar and his direct forebears. The printed Arabic version on which the summaries of Lyons (partly) and Heath are based is the Cairo edition of 1961–2, supposed to contain the 'long' recension, that is, including 'Abraham'. Its use in these basic studies gives it the status of a canonical text, but this is merely accidental, and one ought to be aware of this.

²⁶ Lyall, *A Commentary*.

²⁷ Heller, 'Sīrat 'Antar', p. 520.

The relationship of different recensions is complicated and future research (facilitated by computer-assisted collation) will tell us more about this. A spot check on four modern editions, the Bābī, the Ḥusaynī, the Sha'bī and the 'Ilmiyya, may serve as illustration.

Of these four editions, only one is 'long' in the sense that it includes the 'Abraham story'. This edition has a short version of the *Mu'allaqāt* episode mentioned above, but a long version of another episode, featuring the bedouin warrior princess Jaydā', which includes the story of the love affair of the young Jaydā' and Khālid. One of the three editions which lack the 'Abraham story' has a long version of both the *Mu'allaqāt* and the Jaydā' episodes; the second has just the long Jaydā' and the third has short versions of both. The recensions also differ considerably as to wording and emphasis. A sample, taken from the 'double' episode mentioned earlier, may serve to illustrate the nature of the differences:

Bābī, II, p. 330:

He said to 'Antar: 'Lord, I eagerly wish to be taken into your service, so that I may serve you as months and years pass.' 'Antar said to him: 'Friend, go home, marry your wife among your family and clan, and do not move again from your country and homeland for all the days of your life. But, my friend, by the Sacred House and Zamzam and the Footstep, do not call yourself by this name again for the rest of your life, because I fear that the Arabs will kill you and will give you the cup of humiliation to drink.' Then he called him 'Aṭṭāf (Tenderheart).

Ḥusaynī, I, p. 340:

He said to him: 'Lord, I eagerly want you to take me as one of your servants, so that I may serve you in length of years, because I cannot bear ever to part from you after you have shown me so much love and have saved my cousin from that devil.' 'Antar said to him: 'Friend, go home and marry your cousin among your family and clan. You can have whatever support and protection you want from me for as long as you live, but my friend, do not call yourself by this name among the tribes of the Arabs, for I fear for your life. For this is my name, and I have many enemies among the Arabs. They may mistake you for me, and you are not, like me, able to hold your own against warriors.' He said: 'My lord, will you look for a name for me so that I will be safe and without fear?' 'I'll call you 'Aṭṭāf (Tenderheart)', said 'Antar. 'At your orders,' said the boy, 'from now on, this will be my name.'

PICTORIAL TRADITION AND TEXT

The popularity of the 'Antar cycle is also illustrated by the wide occurrence of usually rather crude pictorial 'Antar representations throughout the Arab world. These are found in reversed glass paintings, cheap poster prints and textiles, just like representations of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and, in North Africa, of the

maghāzī hero 'Abdallah ibn Ja'far and his beloved. Representations of other *sīra* heroes are nowadays rare, although one may occasionally come across one of Baybars and his companions.

Popular imagination is fed by pictorial representations that are current, thus the relation between the pictures and the narrative situations being depicted is a matter of interest. So is the connection with other forms of popular pictorial art. A crude illustration for a travel scene in one of the printed editions ('Ilmiyya, I, p. 165) shows a train of the type that may be encountered in Egyptian hajj wall paintings.

The number of narrative scenes that are illustrated in pictures circulating for home decoration is exceedingly small. In the case of 'Antar, a very popular picture is that of 'Antar splitting an enemy's head with his sword, with an abundant display of blood and gore, while 'Abla, seated in a howdah, watches in the background. Such a scene is at least fairly representative for the cycle as a whole; but this cannot be said of another popular 'Antar representation, namely that of 'Antar seated on a horse killing a fire-breathing dragon with his lance. Such an episode does indeed occur in the cycle (IX, pp. 348–51), but it is a very marginal event. Moreover, the details of story and picture do not agree: 'Antar kills the dragon with his sword, not with his lance, and there is no indication that he fights on horseback. The representation is very likely based on icons of Saint George and other knightly saints, which were very popular in certain parts of the Arab world.

This example shows how pictorial representation may give a very specific twist to the image of the hero and serve to indicate that the pictorial tradition of the Arabic popular epics is one of many aspects worthy of further attention.

CHAPTER 14

SĪRAT BANI HILĀL

In the tenth century, the Banī Hilāl bedouin tribe left their traditional homeland in the Najd region of the Arabian peninsula in a mass migration that led them across Egypt and Libya westward to Tunisia and Algeria. There they conquered the major cities of the North African littoral and maintained control over extensive territories for a little over a century before being destroyed by an eastward-moving Moroccan dynasty, the Almohads (al-Muwahhidūn), in two cataclysmic battles in 1153 and 1160. At that point the Banī Hilāl tribe ceased to exist. Though traces of the once mighty confederation of clans appear in the lineages of later figures, medieval Arab historians never again refer to the Banī Hilāl as a political or military force. The tribe's migration, their conquest of North Africa and their eventual annihilation form the basic narrative frame of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the epic of the Banī Hilāl.

The destruction of the tribe in the twelfth century almost certainly contributed to the remarkably broad geographic distribution of tales, legends, proverbs and poems about the Banī Hilāl found in the modern Arab world. Normally only the poets of a given tribe would laud the exploits of its heroes; in the case of the Banī Hilāl, however, the absence of the tribe itself appears to have made their narrative available to a much broader public and it constitutes one of the few oral folk traditions that has achieved nearly pan-Arab status. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, oral performances of tales of the Banī Hilāl were documented in Morocco, Algeria, Chad, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. In part this geographic distribution may be a historical by-product of the tribe's westward migration: in southern Egypt and northern Sudan, for example, there are social groups who claim to be descendants of the Banī Hilāl who separated from the larger tribe during its passage through Egypt, and in various regions of Morocco, Algeria, Chad and Tunisia there are groups who claim descent from survivors of the final battles against the Almohads. Many of these groups maintain rich narrative and poetic traditions that bolster their claims.

How the epic came into being is not entirely clear. The earliest known written evidence of a poetic tradition about the Banī Hilāl was recorded by

Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) who included several poems about them in the closing section of his *Muqaddima* as part of his discussion of colloquial poetry. His larger argument is that colloquial poetry should be considered true poetry (*shi'r*) similar to classical Arabic poetry, for although it does not follow the classical rules of metre and rhyme, colloquial poetry has its own rules and possesses great beauty and eloquence. To prove his point, Ibn Khaldūn presents a series of poems about the Banī Hilāl that he heard from bedouin poets outside the walls of Tunis. Remarkably, several of the scenes and even some of the individual verses that Ibn Khaldūn took down in dictation six centuries ago correspond to scenes and verses still performed in modern Egypt today. It is not known, however, whether Ibn Khaldūn's examples were already at that time part of a larger poetic narrative or existed only as individual poems.

From the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries there is almost no written evidence for the development of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, although this lacuna may in part be due to the scant interest modern scholars have paid to this period, the so-called 'Decadence' (*inhibitāt*), and to popular literature in general. Suddenly, however, from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, there is a remarkable florescence of manuscripts of the Banī Hilāl epic, totalling well over eight thousand pages, much of which has not yet been studied in detail. The majority of these texts are described in Ahlwardt's catalogue of the Berlin Staatsbibliotek,¹ with smaller collections found in various other European and Middle Eastern libraries.² These manuscripts demonstrate that the basic narrative of the epic was already well established by the eighteenth century and had probably been formulated much earlier since manuscripts of different geographic origins relate similar narrative material without traces of written transmission, that is, without the verbatim or nearly verbatim correspondences that would be expected from scribal transmission. Many of the manuscripts, in fact, appear to have been copied directly from oral tradition, for they are replete with the types of misspellings and other mistakes that are characteristic of dictation rather than copyists' errors.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth, printed chapbook editions (*kutub sufrā*, lit. 'yellow books') of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* began to be produced with some regularity, primarily in Cairo. These were clearly based on manuscripts, but to date no study has been made of the sources of these popular works. They have circulated widely in Arab countries for well over a century, and in some regions the *Sīra* is known primarily from these inexpensive printed editions. The language of the chapbook editions resembles that of the other popular *siyar* such as *'Antar*, *Baybars* and *Dhāt al-Himma*.

¹ Ahlwardt, 'Verzeichniss'; updated and corrected in Ayoub, 'A propos des manuscrits'.

² See Galley, 'Manuscrits et documents'; Pantuček, *Das Epos*.

Their structure is episodic and the narratives unfold in alternating sections of rhymed prose (*saj'*) and verse in a register somewhere between spoken colloquial and classical Arabic. The language is in general straightforward, that is, well adapted for public reading or for consumption by a literate but not highly educated readership.

CENTRAL CHARACTERS

Sīrat Banī Hilāl does not focus upon the life and exploits of a single heroic figure, but rather upon the complex interaction among a cluster of principal characters. In this respect it more closely resembles tales such as the *Iliad* or the King Arthur legends than heroic poems such as *Roland*, *Beowulf* and *El Cid* in Western literatures or *'Antar*, *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* and *Baybars* among the Arab epics. Although the Banī Hilāl epic opens with the generation of the fathers (Rizq, Sarḥān and Ghānim), the role of protagonist rapidly moves to the generation of the sons (Abū Zayd ibn Rizq, Ḥasan ibn Sarḥān and Diyāb ibn Ghānim) who lead the tribe in its migration across North Africa and in its battles against the ruler of Tunis, al-Zanātī Khalifa. The four central male figures are balanced by one primary female character, al-Jazyā, as well as a number of secondary, though highly significant, female figures such as al-Khadra Sharīfa (mother of Abū Zayd), Shīḥa (Abū Zayd's sister), 'Azīza (princess of Tunis) and Su'da (daughter of al-Zanātī Khalifa).

Each of the male figures possesses both strengths and weaknesses and none corresponds entirely to the archetypal hero figure:

Hasan

Ḥasan, like his father before him, is nominally the leader of the tribal confederation and is often referred to as Sultan Ḥasan. He is a diplomat and an arbitrator, but if and when his strategy of dialogue and negotiation reaps success, that victory is almost inevitably short-lived and sooner or later the matter leads to armed conflict. In battle Ḥasan is not a consequential figure; though he rides into the fray with the other heroes, he is most often bested by the opposing champions and the salvation of the tribe falls to either Diyāb or Abū Zayd. On the other hand, he plays a principal role in maintaining the peace among the fractious clans of the Banī Hilāl confederation.

Diyāb

Diyāb, on the other hand, is a consummate warrior who does not know the meaning of the word fear – even when it would be wiser to do so, for his

prowess in battle is not matched by good judgement. In particular, he is very thin-skinned on points of honour and can be easily goaded into a fight even under hopeless conditions, from which he must at times be rescued by other members of the tribe. His fits of pique and ticklish sense of honour must be endured by all, however, for it has been foretold that the great enemy of the Banī Hilāl, al-Zanātī Khalīfa, will perish only at his hand. For that reason, whenever he leaves the Banī Hilāl confederation over some disagreement or perceived slight, he must always be enticed or cajoled back into the fold.

Abū Zayd

Abū Zayd, often portrayed as the central figure of the epic in Egyptian versions of the tale, is a fierce warrior, though not as powerful as Diyāb. In addition, he is cunning and not afraid to back out of a fight at one moment if the odds are insurmountable, in order to regroup, strategize and return to engage the enemy another day. His sharp intelligence and powers of persuasion, however, at times lead him to hatch plots and ruses that bring him dangerously close to being duplicitous and dishonest. He is a master of disguise and often travels incognito among the enemy as a spy, typically passing himself off as a wandering poet or dervish. One of his most common epithets is *Abū ḥiyāl*, ‘father of ruses’, and though his trickery is often amusing, it is also often at odds with accepted ideals of manly bravery. His behaviour is hotly debated both by characters within the epic and by audience members in live performances.

Al-Zanātī Khalīfa

Al-Zanātī Khalīfa is throughout most of the epic tale simply the archetypal villain. He has seized Tunis from its rightful rulers and during that conquest he rode into a mosque on his horse while seventy descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ashrāf*) were at prayer and beheaded them one by one, thus violating not only the sanctity of the mosque but of Muḥammad’s family. He is from the very outset portrayed as being beyond the pale, and yet, as the epic tale progresses, he is at times transposed into a tragic character who struggles against his destiny.

Al-Jazyā

Al-Jazyā the chief female protagonist, is, quite simply, the most beautiful and wisest woman in the world and is at the same time quite capable of riding into battle and defeating all but the most formidable of champions. Due to a youthful demonstration of her sagacity, she has been given one quarter of the

say in any decision of the tribal council. Her beauty also makes her a central figure when the tribe must cross through enemy territories. Time and again kings and enemy leaders fall madly in love with her, allowing the tribe to pass through their lands safely based upon a promise of receiving al-Jazyā in marriage. Thanks to the intelligence of al-Jazyā and the wiliness of Abū Zayd, however, there is always some catch to the agreement that allows al-Jazyā to escape back to the Banī Hilāl untouched.

Although this constellation of central characters is quite reminiscent of the main characters of the *Iliad*, there are otherwise few parallels in the narrative itself. The interplay between these various imperfect representations of manhood – arbitrator, warrior, trickster and villain – provides a rich psychological dimension to many episodes of the Banī Hilāl which might otherwise be seen to follow rather traditional models of heroic exploits. One phenomenon of the Banī Hilāl tradition that has not yet been well studied is that the various characters are given different status and emphasis in different regions of the Arab world. Abū Zayd, for example, is normally the central figure of Egyptian versions, whereas Diyāb and al-Jazyā are given greater prominence in most North African versions.

Similarly, the epic is grounded in the specific historical and cultural contexts of different regions which lead to varying regional interpretations. Historically, for example, the struggle between the Banī Hilāl and the armies of al-Zanātī was a struggle between Arabs and Berbers for control of North Africa. That sense of the epic is very much alive in Morocco, Algeria and Tunis. In Egypt, however, where there is no Berber population to speak of, poets and audience members are almost completely unaware that al-Zanātī Khalifa was Berber or that the wars portrayed in the epic pitted Berber against Arab. In Sudan, on the other hand, the epic has a very different set of connotations for it has come to represent the arrival of the Arabs and the eventual mixing of Arab and African cultures. Abū Zayd, who, like 'Antar, is black, becomes a pivotal figure for as a 'black Arab' he represents an intermediary between the two cultures.³ In addition, some versions portray Abū Zayd as a Sufi who receives frequent assistance from al-Quṭb (lit. 'The Pole' or 'The Axis'), a major figure in the Sufi vision of the world. Thus the epic in both its written and oral versions has come to reflect complex issues of gender, race and religion, among other themes.

THE STORY

The lengthy narrative of the epic can be divided into four large sections each of which includes a number of distinct episodes. Overall the epic is

³ See Hurreiz, *Ja'aliyyin Folktales*; and his, 'Afro-Arab Relations'.

structured into some thirty episodes, some of which are quite long, reaching for example, over a hundred pages in printed versions and ten or more hours of oral performance.⁴

The opening section of the epic tells the history of the tribe in the Arabian peninsula and recounts the births of the major heroes, their youthful adventures, and the numerous tales of how each of them wins one or more wives due to their prowess and bravery. In Egypt the best-known episodes from this section are the Birth of Abū Zayd, in which the births of both Abū Zayd and Sultan Ḥasan are recounted, and the Night-Raid of Ḥandal al-'Uqaylī, in which the elders of the Banī Hilāl tribe are treacherously slain in a night-time attack upon their camp and the still youthful heroes suddenly inherit responsibility for the tribe's survival. The various episodes in which the heroes ride off to foreign lands to commit acts of gallantry and bring back the brides they have won are particularly popular in the oral tradition at weddings since each episode ends in a marriage scene.

In the *Riyāda* (the Reconnaissance) a seven-year drought strikes the homeland of the tribe and it is decided that they must migrate to a new land, so they send out a scouting party which consists of Abū Zayd and his three nephews, to find a new home for the tribe. The four travel far and wide, but eventually arrive in Tunis which they deem a perfect location. Through a series of misadventures, all three nephews are imprisoned and Abū Zayd is forced to return to the tribe alone. One episode in this section of the epic is very well known, the tale of 'Azīza and Yūnus. The princess 'Azīza catches sight of the handsome youth of the Banī Hilāl, Yūnus, and has him brought to the tower where she lives. There she does everything possible to seduce him, but he, with Galahad-like virtue, heroically resists her charms.

The *Taghrība* (the Westward Journey) is by far the longest and most elaborated section of the epic. Due to the drought and in order to rescue the three young men whom Abū Zayd left imprisoned in Tunis, the tribe abandons the Najd and starts out on the great westward journey which will eventually lead them to defeat al-Zanātī Khalīfa and become the rulers of North Africa. There are many adventures and battles along their circuitous route through Baghdad, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Egypt and other locations, but the best-known episodes are the dramatic tragic death scenes of 'Āmir al-Khafajī, who dies a stranger in a strange land, and of al-Zanātī Khalīfa, the latter foretold in a dream seen by his daughter, Su'da. Despite her warnings, he rides out to do battle though he knows he is riding to his death.

⁴ Descriptions of various individual episodes of the Banī Hilāl epic can be found in Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*; Reynolds, *Heroic Poets*; Slymovics, 'The Death-Song'.

Dīwān al-Aytām (The Book of the Orphans) is the final section of the epic. It is rarely performed in Egypt but the events it tells are well known among poets and audience members alike and at least one printed version exists. In the epic, the Banī Hilāl are not defeated by the Moroccan Almohads, but rather are destroyed by their own internal divisions. Diyāb slays Sultan Ḥasan (or in some versions is believed to have slain Ḥasan but is in fact innocent) and Abū Zayd goes blind weeping over Ḥasan's dead body. In the final battle, a scene as dramatic as can be found in any literary work, Abū Zayd, completely blind, is mounted on his horse and led into battle knowing that this will lead to the destruction of the tribe, while al-Jazyā, girded in full armour, rides forth beside him leading an army of orphans to seek vengeance on Diyāb for Ḥasan's death. There are no survivors. Thus all of the adventures and heroic feats of the epic are played out against the final annihilation of the tribe – not just death, for all heroes must die, but the all-encompassing destruction of the very society for which its heroes fought all their lives to protect – and it is a fate brought about by their own divisions.

ORAL VERSUS WRITTEN TRADITION

Sīrat Banī Hilāl is unique among the Arab folk epics in having survived primarily as an oral tradition and only secondarily in written form. Though the other folk epics presumably were at some point written down from oral tradition, little is known about the process by which they were committed to writing and in the past two centuries at least, there have been no corresponding oral traditions with which to compare. Epics such as *'Antar* and *Dhāt al-Himma* have existed only in oral tradition in modern times in the sense that a public story-teller (*hakawātī*) reads them aloud from a written text with varying degrees of improvised additions and commentaries. In contrast, the oral tradition of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is far more extensive than, and in most cases completely independent from, the written tradition. This was apparently already true nearly two centuries ago as well.

Edward W. Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* provides the most complete ethnographic portrayal of the performance tradition of the popular Arab epics that has come down to us. In the early nineteenth century he estimated that some fifty professional poets were devoted exclusively to the performance of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, approximately thirty performed *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* and perhaps a half-dozen engaged in performances of *Sīrat 'Antar ibn Shaddād*. Furthermore, there had until recently also been performances of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* and *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* in Cairo, but they had ceased sometime prior to his arrival. More intriguing is his description of a

variety of different performance techniques: the epic of 'Antar was always read aloud from books, the epic of Baybars was recited without books but not sung musically, and that of the Banī Hilāl was sung in verse, without a book, to the accompaniment of the *rabāb* (spike-fiddle). Ethnographic studies from the twentieth century have shown that a great deal of material exists in oral tradition that was never incorporated into the written tradition.⁵

Narrative material about the Banī Hilāl has been preserved in oral tradition in a variety of different forms ranging from riddles, jokes and proverbs, to extensive prose narratives, poems and, finally, the form which has received the most attention in recent years, the versified, sung epics performed by professional poets in northern and southern Egypt. Complete versions of the epic – by which is meant the complete repertoire of a single poet, not a single 'complete' text – have been documented in the range of 100 to 140 hours of sung performance. These remarkable repertoires are possessed only by the very best of the oral poets, most of whom are illiterate, who underwent extensive apprenticeships of ten or more years in their youth. The advent of obligatory schooling and arrival of alternative forms of entertainment such as television, have decimated the ranks of such master poets in recent years.

The performance of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* as a sung, versified narrative has existed primarily in northern and southern Egypt, with some evidence of similar performances in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is unknown to what degree this musical form of performance existed in other regions of the Arab world in earlier periods. In Egypt, the primary musical instruments used in solo performances have been the two-string coconut-shell *rabāb* (spike-fiddle), the single-string rectangular *rabāb* and the *daff* (tambourine). A more recent development has been the emergence of small ensemble performances which include various combinations of violin, drum, tambourine, *rabāb* and even lute. There are as many as seven distinct regional musical styles in Egypt that can be identified by a variety of musical elements and melodic repertoire.⁶

In terms of poetic form, Egypt is divided into two distinct regions – the Delta in the north and the Ša‘id in the south. In the south, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is typically sung in short quatrains with verses of usually no more than eight to ten syllables in length. The rhyme schemes change frequently and the same poet will often move rapidly through a series of different rhyme patterns:

⁵ See e.g. al-Abnoudi, *La Geste hilalienne*; and his, *al-Sīra al-hilāliyya*; Ayoub, 'A propos des manuscrits'; and his, 'Quelques aspects évolutifs'; Baker, 'The Hilali Saga'; Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic*; Lerrick, 'Taghibrat Banī Hilāl'; Reynolds, *Heroic Poets*; Saada, 'La Geste hilalienne'; Slyomovics, 'The Death-Song'; and her, *The Merchant of Art*.

⁶ See Hawwās, 'Madāris riwāyat al-sīra'; 'Umrān, 'al-Khaṣṭa'ış al-mūsiqiyya'.

abba, cdcd, eeff, adga, and so forth. This quatrain format is unique to southern Egyptian performances of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and is entirely an oral tradition; it is not attested in any written versions of the *sīra*. Since the verses are quite short, rhymes occur at regular, very audible intervals and provide a distinctive rhythm to the performance. These very short verses and the multiplicity of rhymes provide the perfect template for wordplay and puns. When such wordplay occurs it is most often between two rhyme words within a single quatrain. A handful of poets in southern Egypt use this as their primary stylistic device while the majority use it more sparingly.⁷

In the Delta region, the primary form is monorhyme verse with medial caesura in lines of twenty-two to twenty-eight syllables, analogous to the classical *qaṣīda*. Since the epic tradition does not frown upon the repetition of rhyme words (as is the case in the classical tradition), poets can continue for hundreds of verses in the same rhyme. In fact, one entire episode, that of Ḥandal al-‘Uqaylī, which can take up to five hours in performance, is sung to the single rhyme –ān. For this reason it is known among poets as the easiest of the episodes and is often the first full episode that a young apprentice (*sabi*) learns to sing on his own. The long verses require that singers take one or more pauses to breathe and the melodies are often divided into four distinct parts; as a result, many non-Arabic speakers cannot even detect the recurring rhyme until it is pointed out to them. Rhyme is thus a far less obvious device in the north of Egypt where a single rhyme word occurs at the end of a long verse in a space where there would typically be four rhymes in the southern quatrain tradition.

The rhyme scheme of each episode is learned by apprentices and then used as structuring devices in performance. For example, the Birth of Abū Zayd begins with the rhyme –āXīh, with X representing any consonant (*rāyīh, wādīh, mālīh, maṭārīh*), and continues in that rhyme until the Banī Hilāl present a petition to the ruler of Mecca for the hand of al-Khaḍra Sharīfa in marriage, at which point the rhyme changes to –ālhā (*nālhā, hālhā, majālhā*). Each rhyme change is tied to a specific action in the story. These traditional rhyme patterns are more strictly observed by less skilled poets while master poets demonstrate more artistic flexibility, often inserting passages in more difficult rhymes of their own devising, some of which they use in all of their performances while others are improvised in the moment of performance and later forgotten.

A series of experiments conducted during fieldwork in al-Bakātūsh in 1986–7, revealed that master poets have the ability to regenerate the same narrative material in new rhyme schemes upon request. Shaykh Tāhā

⁷ See Slyomovics, *The Merchant of Art*.

Abū Zayd, for example, resang a passage of about sixty verses after a ten-minute break changing the rhyme from *-ār* to *-ām* upon request while retaining nearly every idea and image from the original version, as the following parallel verses demonstrate:

First version (rhyme -ār)

*tabb 'aleyhim Abū Zeyd salāmī 'alā l-'arab//salāmī 'alā l-yumnā aywa ta'ud yassār
mā san 'itak yā 'āmm wi-'ēh mihnitak//fa-qāl Abū Zeyd dā anā shā'ir al-ummār
qālū shā'ir yā 'āmm hall rabābak//sammi'nā yā rājil madh al-nabī al-mukhiṭār*

Abū Zayd reached them: 'My greetings to the Arabs!

'My greetings to those on the right, yes, and are repeated to those on the left.'
'What is your craft, Uncle, and what is your trade?'

Abū Zayd said, 'I am a poet of princes!'

They said to him, 'O poet, take out your *rabāb*,
Sing for us, fellow, praise of the Prophet, the Chosen One.'

Second version (rhyme -ām)

*salāmī 'aleykum ayyuhā l-bawādī//salāmī 'alā l-yumnā wi-a'id as-salām
mā mihnitak wi-'ēh san 'itak//fa-qāl shā'ir anā bawzin kalām
qālū shā'ir yā 'āmm hall rabābak//sammi'nā fi madh al-nabī al-'arabī al-'ālī
al-miqdām*

'My greetings to you, O Bedouin,

'My greetings to those on the right and I repeat my greetings' [i.e. to those on the left].

'What is your trade and what is your craft?'

'I am a poet, I measure words' [i.e. put them in metres].

They said, 'Poet, O Uncle, take out your *rabāb*,
And sing to us praise of the Arab Prophet, the Mighty, the Champion.'

Though these verses have a differing number of syllables, they are sung to the same melodic contour and, in performance, through the simple device of melisma (singing a single syllable over several notes) they are rendered even. Poets pay great attention to rhyme, but have almost no concept of metre in the sense of lines with an equal number of syllables or matching patterns of long and short syllables. Rather, they stretch or squeeze the syllables in the verse to fit the structure of the melody they are singing. Ideally, the rhyme syllable should fall on the final note, which is almost always a return to the tonic. Such technical considerations are all, however, far less important to poets and audience members than the ability to tell a lively tale in a gripping manner. The quality of a poet's voice is next to irrelevant and some of the most highly regarded poets of the Banī Hilāl epic have voices that are notably 'unbeautiful'.

They are master poets by dint of their extensive repertoire and their ability to tell the tale well, not because they have good singing voices.

Recordings of multiple performances of the same material by the same poet demonstrate that master poets typically sing certain well-known, dramatic scenes with little or no variation, whereas they freely amplify or summarize much of the remaining narrative (much of which moves forward in more generic descriptions of battles, travels, maidens, feasts, etc.) according to the feedback they receive from the audience during the performance. In performances of the best-known scenes of the epic, audience members often know certain verses almost by heart and expect to hear them in that form. These polished nuggets of verse are sometimes even performed upon request without the full accompanying narrative, a fact that adds substantiating evidence to certain theories about the development of the ballad from epic poetry in Western cultures.

The techniques used by *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* poets in northern Egypt are broadly speaking ‘oral-formulaic’ in the sense that Milman Parry and Albert Lord developed the term, with the caveat that this is a tradition in which formulas are not metrical in nature but rather are clusters of words used to express similar ideas and aid in creating end-rhyme. A typical epic motif for ‘losing one’s mind’ out of grief, anger or other intense emotion, for example, is the phrase:

Wa'l-'agl minnuh rāh And his mind from him departed

The formulaic language of the epic, however, has developed a large number of alternative phrases that can be substituted at the end of a verse with the same image to create different rhymes:

Wa'l-'agl minnuh tār	And his mind from him flew
Wa'l-'agl minnuh hām	And his mind from him strayed
Wa'l-'agl minnuh tāh	And his mind from him was lost

Or even double rhymes such as -*āXih* or -*aXīm*:

Wa'l-'agl minnuh rāyih	And his mind from him is departing
Wa'l-'agl minnuh hāyim	And his mind from him is straying

Other formulas are reversible so that different rhymes can be generated:

Min al-ta'āyib malyān	With troubles filled
Malyān min al-ta'āyib	Filled with troubles

Many of these same formulas can be found in both the manuscript and chapbook versions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* confirming the interrelatedness of the

various written and oral forms of the epic. One major difference between the written and oral versions, however, is that the oral versions have a much higher percentage of poetry (up to 85 per cent) while written versions are primarily composed of rhymed prose with only occasional sections of verse, most often the speech of characters rather than narrative description.

OTHER *SĪRAS* AND POPULAR NARRATIVES

The Arabic tradition of popular literature produced a significant number of *sīras* other than the well-known *Sīrat 'Antar* and *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (both of which are discussed in separate contributions to this volume, Chapters 13 and 14). Similar to these two works, the other *sīras* are works of heroic adventure and romance primarily concerned with depicting the personal prowess, military exploits, innate virtue and incomparable nobility of their heroes. These narratives are pseudo-historical in tone and setting. They base many of their central and secondary characters on actual historical figures, and frame their events within the general context of the historical periods that they presume to represent. Nonetheless, details of history are regularly enhanced by the imaginative improvements of fiction, with the result that history is usually reflected only along general levels of character identity, setting, atmosphere and tone. The importance of this pseudo-historical frame for both composers and audience remains a significant aspect of these works, since it plays an essential role in both their aesthetic and their didactic dimensions. However, at heart these are works of entertainment whose intent is to delight and morally instruct their audiences by presenting larger-than-life deeds and emotions as played out through idealized codes of action.

The written versions of popular *sīras* tend to be composed in either straightforward prose or, more usually, a style that relies substantially on rhymed prose (*saj'*) interspersed with poetry. In general these narratives are exceedingly long, often taking a year or more to narrate fully in oral form. In their longest manuscript and printed versions they run to between two and six thousand pages, depending upon page and script size. A full inventory of these works as found in manuscript or oral form is still a desideratum, as is an examination of their relationship with many shorter Arabic heroic narratives, such as *Qissat Miqdād*, that also exist in Arabic popular literature and oral traditions.¹ Nevertheless, the general outlines of the corpus of longer works appears to be clear, and it is these narratives that form the basis of this survey.

¹ For examples of such short narratives see Knappert, *Islamic Legends*.

Tracing the history of the development of popular *sīras* is possible in its broad configuration, but it is more difficult to ascertain when dealing with specifics. It seems probable that the genre began to develop in the early centuries of the Islamic empire. One of the major tasks of early elite historiographers, such as al-Wāqidī, al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī, was to separate fact from fiction in the accounts of pre- and early Islamic history. These so-called ‘erroneous’ accounts may have been due to faulty or partisan interpretations of events, yet it seems equally likely that they also stemmed from the fictional elaborations and ‘improvements’ suggested by the imaginations of popular story-tellers (sing. *qāṣṣ*). These story-tellers no doubt at first emphasized the particularistic traditions of tribal narration that one finds in the *Ayyām al-‘Arab* (Battle Days of the Arabs) accounts, which focus on the heroic and martial deeds of individual tribes. However, as the tribal structure of pre-Islamic Arabia broke down in the early Islamic centuries and new heroes arose from the context of the victories of Muslim conquest, first in Arabia and then in the new Islamic empire, the focus of story-tellers and their audiences broadened to reflect these new interests. Pre-Islamic tribal heroes, such as ‘Antar ibn Shaddād, were still attractive to the extent that their stories could be reworked to offer a more universalist appeal. Nevertheless, such early tribal characters became just one of a number of different topical possibilities. Added to them were major figures of early Islam, such as the Prophet Muḥammad, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the other early caliphs, and such early companions to the Prophet as Ḥamza ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and Khālid ibn al-Walīd. Topics for new epics continued to be found over the centuries. The existence of epics set in later Islamic historical periods, from Umayyad times to the rule of the Mamluks, testifies to the continued willingness of story-tellers to expand and update their repertoire. Finally, the existence of several narratives that employ pre-Islamic Iran as their narrative context demonstrates a continued interest in this cultural milieu and historical era as well.

Despite the probable existence of heroic story-telling in the first few Islamic centuries, as yet no specific references to the existence of popular *sīras* from that time have been discovered. In fact, Ibn al-Nadīm’s bibliographical compendium *al-Fihrist*, written in the latter part of the fourth/tenth century and the major source of our knowledge of the popular literature of the time, makes no mention of such works, which strongly suggests that popular *sīras* either were not yet widespread, at least in Mesopotamia, or did not yet exist in written form. If they were prevalent, it seems unlikely that they would have escaped the comprehensive view of the learned Baghdadi bookseller.

The first certain corroboration of the written existence of popular *sīras* occurs a century and a half later, in the middle of the sixth/twelfth century. The Baghdadi physician and mathematician Samaw’al ibn Yaḥyā al-Maghribī

(d. c. 575–61180), a Jewish convert to Islam, mentions in his autobiographical account of his conversion that as a boy (between the ages of ten and thirteen), he was infatuated with reading all kinds of stories and tales, among his favourites being the stories of 'Antar, *Dhāt al-Himma* and Alexander the Great. Mention of *sīras* thereafter is not common in elite sources, but frequent enough to attest to their general existence. There is one citation that places the recitation of *Dhāt al-Himma* in Cairo during the reign of al-Hākim bi-Amr Allāh (disappeared 411/1021), who himself became the protagonist of a *sīra*, but the veracity of this report cannot be confirmed.² At any rate, it is clear that by the sixth/twelfth century, written copies of popular *sīras* had become common, and that the oral and written traditions attained sufficient popularity that new figures – such as the Fatimid caliph al-Hākim and the Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars (d. 676/1277) – could become protagonists of their own epics. Despite such scattered testimonies to the existence of *sīras*, no detailed descriptions of their contents or their styles of narration appear before the nineteenth century. Hence, it is difficult to trace the development of individual narratives, and even to know exactly how, where or when this lengthy form of narrative began and evolved.

Understanding the nature of the relationship between oral and written versions of these works requires careful consideration. The formulaic character of the rhymed prose of many *sīras*, the episodic structure of their storylines, their continual repetition of a limited number of narrative patterns and motifs, the lack of any identifiable authors and their great length all indicate that these narratives originated and developed within a flourishing tradition of oral compositional public story-telling. Nonetheless, evidence such as Lane's account of the public recitation of *sīras* points to the fact that more than one style of oral recitation has existed. Some story-tellers used musical accompaniment while they sang or chanted parts of the epic (as is currently the case in Egypt with the *Banī Hilāl* cycle), while others accompanied themselves with rhythmic instruments such as the tambourine. Sometimes they would use simple narration with little rhymed prose or poetry, while at other times they read from a written account of the story.

In general, individual manuscript versions of *sīras* may reflect any of these tendencies, but it is relatively rare that one encounters more than one such tendency in the written tradition of any particular narrative. Despite the general level of illiteracy among the lower classes, writing was hardly a rarity in pre-modern Middle Eastern societies. The fact that so many manuscripts of these very long narratives have survived testifies to the existence of sufficient numbers of literate story-tellers willing to write down their tales, or perhaps

² See *EI2*, vol. II, p. 238.

of story-tellers or audience members who were wealthy enough to have the *sīras* transcribed for them by professional scribes. However this transcription occurred, thereafter versions of these stories appear to work much like any other manuscript tradition. Later texts are generally copied from early ones, although with a greater leeway for minor variants than the manuscript tradition of an elite canonic work might display. The earliest manuscripts date from the early ninth/fifteenth century; most stem from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although such late provenance may attest less to the lateness of the creative tradition than to the fact that earlier manuscripts became worn out and were then replaced. Some of these manuscripts are in excellent condition, others obviously stem from a more impoverished class of society. The many volumes that comprise a single narrative, for example, can come in different sizes, with poor script and paper quality, and changes of scribal hands occurring in mid-page. More investigation into this subject is required before one can offer more specific information.

In general, it appears that oral and written versions of popular *sīras* could be stable in some areas while remaining open to change or innovation in others. The art of pleasing audiences with stories requires, after all, a fair measure of stability, but it must also be intermixed with the innovations of story-tellers whose artistic gifts could modify or even transform some aspect of the genre. One reason that new stories were created was no doubt due to the desire to meet audience demands for variation, even while older stories continued to exist for centuries, albeit at varying levels of popularity at particular points in time and place. The simultaneous existence of stories in writing and orality was probably common. That a *sīra* was transcribed did not mean that it was no longer narrated in oral form. Although it appears that longer *sīras*, such as *'Antar* and *Dhāt al-Himma*, were transcribed only once, written versions of shorter works, such as segments of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, for example, exhibit different modes of oral narrative style.

In the twentieth century, the Arabic traditions of oral and written storytelling underwent considerable change. Due to competition from modern entertainment technology, the numbers of oral story-tellers declined significantly. Nonetheless, modern formats also created new opportunities. The commercial publishing of manuscript versions of written *sīras* and the relative increase in literacy in Arab countries exposed written texts of the *sīras* to larger audiences than ever before. Although most of these printed versions were first published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they continue to be reprinted at regular intervals. Similarly, some of these stories have been appropriated by new media to become the subject matter of radio dramas, television series, films, and modernized books and storybooks.

Further research may establish some idea of the historical development of the genre of popular *sīra*. At present, however, it is more practical to list them in the chronological order of their subject matter. From this perspective, they can be organized as dealing with characters from pre-Islamic Persian history, pre-Islamic Arabian history, early Islamic history, and finally characters and plots drawn from later dynasties in Islamic history.

There are three *sīras* that take early Persian history as their subject matter: *Sīrat Fīrūz-Shāh*, whose protagonist is the son of the Achaemenid king Darius II; *Sīrat Iskandar*, whose central focus is the deeds of Alexander the Great; and the *Story of Bahrām Gūr*, whose main character is the Sassanian shah Bahrām.

Pre-Islamic south Arabian history forms the backdrop for *Sīrat al-Malik Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, while pre-Islamic north Arabian history is dealt with in *Sīrat ‘Antar*, as well as in the story of *al-Zir Sālim* and other accounts of tribal battles, such as the War of Basūs between the tribes of Bakr and Taglib.

Many *sīras* combine elements of both Iranian and pre-Islamic Arabic history. *Sīrat Amīr Hamza*, for example, narrates the adventures of Ḥamza ibn ‘Abdallāh, an Arab warrior who becomes a major player in Iranian court politics and military affairs. Similarly, the *geste* of Alexander, while ostensibly dealing with Iranian history, is Arabized by having events presented from the perspective of an Arab hero.

Another group of narratives dealing with early Islamic history takes as its protagonist ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. These narratives can from one perspective be considered as forming a part of an associated genre of *maghāzī* narratives, which relate the accounts of the battles and raids that the Prophet Muḥammad ordered or engaged in (early popular versions of which have been collected and analysed by R. Paret).³ Nonetheless, longer examples of these narratives, which clearly contain fictional and fantastic elements, can also be considered as being so close to *sīra* narrative structures and patterns as to be clearly a part of the same type of story-telling tradition. Such works as ‘Alī’s raid against Ra’s Ghūl or the long work known as *Ghazwat al-Arqat*, in which ‘Alī plays a central role, should be analysed within the same general framework as popular *sīras*.

The best known *sīra* after ‘Antar and the *Banī Hilāl* is *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*, which deals with the tribal feuds and holy wars of the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphates; another narrative reflecting this time period and the theme of the spread of Islam is *Sīrat al-Badr Nār*, which exists only in manuscript and is as yet unstudied.

Fatimid and Mamluk history are treated in *Sīrat al-Hākim bi-Amr Allāh* and *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars*, respectively. Related in time period to

³ Paret, *Die legendäre Maghāzi-Literatur*.

these latter works are the stories of rogues (*'ayyarūn*), typified by the cycles of *Ahmad al-Danaf* and *'Alī Zaybaq*. These characters are not martial heroes, although they are brave and capable enough when it comes to a fight, but trickster figures who rely on craft, deceit and guile to achieve their aims.

There are significant differences in style, content and historical origin among members of the genre. *Sīrat Fīrūz-Shāh*, for example, is Persian in origin, while *Sīrat al-Zīr Sālim* is based on pre-Islamic *Ayyām al-'Arab* sources. *Sīrat al-Malik Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan* is full of sorcery and demons, while *Dhāt al-Himma* is generally devoid of magic. *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars* tends towards unadorned prose, while other *sīras* rely heavily on rhymed prose and poetry. Nevertheless, these works form a cohesive genre by reason of their shared emphasis on heroes and heroic deeds of battle, their pseudo-historical tone and setting, and their indefatigable drive towards cyclic expansion: one event leads to another, one battle to another, one war to another, and so on for hundreds and thousands of pages.

Viewed from a wider cultural perspective, these popular epics are Arabic examples of a larger body of vibrant popular literature that existed in most parts of the Islamic world. Pre-modern Persian and Turkish literatures also developed strong traditions of popular epic, and there is convincing evidence that despite their linguistic differences neighbouring traditions of popular story-telling borrowed and translated from and mutually influenced one another. *Sīrat 'Antar*, for example, exists in an Ottoman Turkish translation, and many of these epics exist in multiple versions across disparate linguistic borders. Renditions of *Sīrat Amīr Hamza*, for instance, exist in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Georgian, Urdu and Malay, while versions of the Alexander story (*Sīrat Iskandar*) are even more widely disseminated in Eastern and Western literature.

Arabic and other Islamic popular epics, moreover, constitute only one portion of a vast tradition of multilingual Islamic popular literatures that also encompasses non-epic pseudo-historical narratives (*maghāzī* and *futūḥāt*), religious literature of various types (popular biographies of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, saints' legends, accounts of miracles, etc.), numerous genres of popular poetry, song, proverb and humour, and tales of wonder and fantasy, the best known being the compilation known as *Alf layla wa-layla* (*A Thousand and One Nights*), discussed by Reynolds in Chapter 12. The history and nature of this large corpus of literature are still largely uncharted, as are the ways in which different genres, whether within single linguistic traditions or across them, influenced or impacted one another. Nevertheless, no single example of these popular literatures should be considered without at least an awareness of the existence of this larger literary and social context.

Sīras rely on a relatively limited number of characters, plots, narrative structures and themes to create their stories. Such limitations are typical of popular narrative in all cultures and do not deserve the culturally biased aspersions that elite scholars and critics often cast on them. Popular literature is formulaic, but the existence of numerous repetitions of these formulas in members of a genre is in the nature of things, and certainly exists as much or even more in the popular art of contemporary cultures – given the proliferation of forms that modern entertainment media have created – as it has ever done in the past. Given their apparent perpetual attraction and lasting popularity, stories based on victorious struggle in battle and personal success and fulfilment in romance appear to meet certain innate human needs.

Sīras use a limited number of character types. The most important of these is the hero, who embodies the irresistible martial prowess and the innate nobility and generosity of soul that make him or her worthy of admiration and affection. The protagonist – Amir Hamza, Dhāt al-Himma, Firūz-Shāh – is the major representative of this character type, yet he/she is so only as a matter of degree. *Sīras* are filled with secondary heroes, many of them opponents whom their protagonists have fought, defeated, captured and then won over as friends and allies. As the narrative progresses, and as more characters are introduced, the protagonist often becomes the centre-point of a large group of warriors who serve as the main hero's associates and entourage. Yet each of these secondary heroes also has his or her own career, filled with battles, love affairs, moments of capture and defeat as well as victory, and sometimes of demise. If the protagonist is ever-victorious in the end, sometimes he or she must pause to mourn or avenge a fallen comrade.

One important character category is the female warrior. Some are warriors who can also become love interests for a male hero, or someone who is predominantly a love interest, like 'Ayn al-Hayāt in *Firūz-Shāh*, who can also, when necessary, take up arms to defend herself or her beloved. In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, of course, the eponymous female hero is the protagonist of the narrative as a whole. Another important variant is the black hero, central to *'Antar*, the *Banī Hilāl* and *Dhāt al-Himma*, but found in most other *sīras* as well.

Heroes have helpers. Sometimes these are fellow warriors, but quite often they are individuals from a lower social class who devote themselves to the service of the protagonist. As with Sancho Panza's relationship to Don Quixote (an elite parody of these character types, which also existed in European Renaissance epic), this helper character is the voice of common sense and practical reason in the face of the hero's impetuosity and instinctive reliance on the force of arms. More important in the case of Arabic *sīra*, the helper is also a rogue and trickster who in his own way is just as courageous as the

hero, but who is more prepared to resort to stealth and guile to achieve his aims. As such, he becomes the scout and go-between. In such works as *Aḥmad al-Danaf* and *'Alī Zaybaq*, the urban trickster ('ayyār) who moves on both sides of the law – sometimes a gangster, sometimes an officer of the law – assumes centre stage and completely displaces the military hero to become narrative protagonist in his own right. Female rogues, such as Dalila the Trickster, also exist in 'ayyār narratives, but in *sīras* this function, when positive, is usually played by a maid who acts as helper and go-between for her mistress or, when the character is negative, by a sorceress or by a treacherous old woman whose trickeries the hero, helper or beloved must detect and overcome.

Heroes serve rulers, who form their own class of characters. In general, heroes never rule and rulers never fight. Even when a protagonist is a prince, as in *Sīrat Fīrūz-Shāh*, he rarely ascends the throne, since if he did so he would have to give up fighting. In this sense, the hero is a necessary accoutrement of rule for a king or emperor, since the latter needs him to fight his battles and wage his wars. The other necessary counterpart for the king is the vizier, his chief minister and adviser. These characters represent the intelligence, personal insight and political wisdom necessary for successful rule. Often a king in a *sīra* will have two viziers, a noble one who protects the interests of the hero and works for justice, and an evil one who strives to destroy the hero and is willing to undermine the interests of the kingdom to further his own selfish ambitions.

Finally, there is the romantic love interest, the beautiful maiden whose hand the male hero wishes to win. Love is always mutual in *sīras*, and female beloveds frequently work actively to further the love affair by arranging love trysts. Personal courage and skill in battle are major requirements for the male lover. Female warriors typically demand their future spouse be able to defeat them on the battlefield while more sedate maidens first notice the male hero through some outstanding feat of arms. Physical beauty is a seemingly natural point of attraction for both parties. Essential as well is virtue and nobility. Many female love interests in *sīras* immediately reject suitors who are strong and handsome but insufficiently good-hearted and noble.

Male heroes tend to have a major love interest, around whom much of the action of the story revolves. Nevertheless, there is always room for secondary love affairs, especially as a hero's adventures become geographically far-flung. Rarely do these secondary love interests meet the approval of the central beloved, so usually the new paramour remains with her family after the affair ends or the new marriage is consecrated.

Love affairs produce offspring. These children, male or female, tend to become heroes in their own right and usually encounter their absent parent once they grow up and emerge as powerful warriors. At times, father and

son meet in battle and only barely avoid killing each other. Somehow, their identities are revealed and the son usually joins the heroic retinue of the protagonist.

A prominent character in the love story is the romantic rival. This person can be another powerful warrior or ruler, whom the hero must defeat in battle; an evil vizier, whose secret machinations are much more difficult for the hero to overcome but who in the end meets his just deserts; or a weaker member of a powerful family, a vain and silly fop whom the story-teller can ridicule but who perseveres because of the help he receives from powerful family members.

Fathers are frequently reluctant to marry their daughters to the hero, whom they generally regard as a social inferior and stranger. Fathers therefore often elicit the help of a rival warrior to forestall the marriage, or they send the hero on what they hope to be an impossible mission for a presumably unattainable object in pursuit of which the hero will likely perish. Of course, the hero always returns victorious, and is then dispatched again on another seemingly impossible quest.

With regard to narrative structure, *sīras* are episodic. Each episode is potentially discrete and independent, and yet is usually linked to others through more general plot concerns for which the individual episode becomes one of a series of steps towards a larger narrative goal. The impetuses for episodic narrative action are two. One is founded on the concept of defence. Hence, an episode revolves around the hero protecting him or herself, or some other entity, such as a weak and defenceless individual, tribe, group of companions or military allies, from external attack. The other main impetus is based on a quest, to retrieve a captured lover or friend, to win a dowry, to defeat an enemy of one's king and some similar task. These two concerns are often intermixed; for example, the hero can be on a quest and on the way rescue a defenceless group under attack.

Larger concerns that bind episodes together are the hero's love affair, the consummation of which may take the major part of the *sīra*, or defence of one's tribe or monarch, as attacked by not one but a series of increasingly distant enemies. As a result of these interests, individual battles are transformed into large-scale campaigns that are waged over increasingly greater geographical distances. Here the hero can move south, into southern Arabia and eastern Africa; south-west into Egypt, North Africa and even Spain; north-west into Anatolia, the Byzantine empire and Italy; or east, towards India and China. Hence, the full range of the civilized world, as known to pre-modern Arabs, becomes the site of the hero's activities. In each of these places, social structure is uniform. Politics are centred around the rule of kings, helped by their viziers and defended by their warlords. The code of action and ethics is also uniform. In a sense, *sīras* normalize the world for their audiences by

representing it as politically and ethically homogeneous. Rulers and political regimes may differ in regard to ethnicity, religion and individual moral character, but not in their political and social structure or their expected norms of behaviour.

Popular *sīras* are also united as a genre by their common representation of certain governing themes. The first is the possibility of the success of individual action. Heroes often have to overcome social barriers that would hamper the careers of lesser beings. They always have to overcome superior odds in each of their battles. They never win the hands of their beloveds easily. Yet despite all of these hindrances, they never lose their self-confidence or resolution, and they never give up. This ideal of individuals solving their own problems by means of determined action against impossible odds gives these narratives much of their attraction.

Second, ideal romantic love is always presented as a matter of mutual attraction and choice. Marriage is the result of individual inclination against social odds rather than one of social norms dictating marital results. The only love stories that *sīras* tell are those of successful, mutually agreeable romantic relationships, in which men and women are portrayed as emotional equals and full partners.

Third, the religious world of *sīras* is intrinsically monotheistic and usually Islamic, even anachronistically so. In narratives dealing with pre-Islamic subjects, positive characters are monotheists by personal predilection, while negative characters are polytheists or Magians. In a more or less explicit sense, these are worlds awaiting the arrival of Muhammad and the revelation of the Koran. The noble and insightful inhabitants of these worlds are already instinctively Muslims, in belief at least if not yet in formal affiliation. In *sīras* whose action transpires after the revelation of Islam, religion plays an even more important role. Heroes promote the faith against its rivals and enemies: paganism, Magianism, Christianity and Judaism. The concerns and social attitudes of the age of the Crusades are clearly represented in such works as *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* and *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars*. Villains are Christians in disguise who treacherously plot against heroes and the well-being of the Muslim community. Conversion to Islam is the natural way for formerly non-Muslim opponents or love interests to redeem themselves and enter into proper relationships with the heroes of the *sīras*. Modern Western scholars have sometimes expressed reservations about the seemingly 'fanatic' tone displayed in these latter narratives, and admittedly there is at times an ethical coarseness involved. It is offensive to the modern secular mind when differences of religion are used as a justification for outright murder, as occasionally happens in *sīras*. Nevertheless, in general such sentiments probably reflect audience attitudes of these historical periods, which in fact differ little

from the pro-Christian sentiments expressed in contemporaneous European epics.

Although a large number of examples of pre-modern Arabic popular epics have survived, as a genre they remain comparatively little studied, despite the noteworthy efforts of a few scholars in each generation. They have become much better known than even a few decades ago. Much scholarly study of this fascinating body of literature is still needed.

CHAPTER 16

POPULAR RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

Many Arabic popular religious prose narratives from the post-classical period exist mostly in manuscript; relevant sources are few and their tone is dismissive, if not downright disdainful. As a result, the main sources of information on the composers and transmitters (*quṣṣāṣ*) of these religious narratives are polemical works, such as Ibn al-Jawzi's (d. 1200) *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa'l-mudhakkirīn* (The Book of Story-Tellers and Preachers) and al-Suyūṭī's (d. 1505) *Tahdhīr al-khawāṣṣ min akādhīb al-quṣṣāṣ* (On Guarding the Elite Against the Falsehoods of the Story-Tellers). Few modern scholars have treated popular religious writings in Arabic and other Islamic languages as worthwhile literature.¹

The genre of popular religious narrative surveyed here, the *qissā*, typically includes a tale of the contest of good and evil and the ultimate triumph for good; tales about the meek who, armed with no more than their piety and fear of God, stand up to and overcome the mighty and wicked. The heroes of such tales are prophets, saintly figures (*awliyā'*), and pious men and women, who are granted this divine gift of working miracles and marvels (*mu'jizāt* and *karāmāt*).

Some of these popular religious narratives derive their material from the Koran, its various narratives about the biblical and non-biblical figures before Muḥammad, such as Abraham, Joseph, the Children of Israel, Mary, Hūd and Ṣāliḥ, among others. Other sources include *ḥadīth* reports, non-Koranic tales derived from Jewish sources (*isrā'īliyyāt*) and tales about Sufi masters and their miracles (*karāmāt*).

The Arabic words for story, *qissa*, story-telling, *al-qass* and the verb *qassa*, are used in several ways in the Koran as is illustrated in these examples: (1) to recount: *tilka al-qurā naqṣuṣu 'alayka min anbā'iḥā*, 'those [earlier] communities, some of whose stories We [now] relate unto thee' (7:101); (2) to trace or track: *wa-qālat li-ukhtihi quṣṣīhi fa-baṣarat bihi 'an janbin wa-hum lā yash'urūn*, 'And so she said to his sister, "Follow him", and she watched him from afar, while they were not aware of it' (28:11); (3) to tell a tale with a moral

¹ See e.g. Schimmel, *Muhammad*; Waugh, *The Munshidin of Egypt*; Abdel-Malek, *Popular Ballad*; Abdel-Malek and Asani, *Celebrating Muḥammad*.

for didactic purposes, to teach a lesson: *la-qad kāna fi qāṣāḥim ‘ibratun li-ulī al-albāb*, ‘Indeed in the stories of these men there is a lesson for those who are endowed with insight’ (12:111). Al-Ṭabarī said that the verses of the Koran are but tales after tales, one following the other,² the divine purposes behind which are listed by al-Tha’labī:³

1. As proof of Muḥammad’s prophethood, his knowledge of the tales of past prophets and communities were to impress on his hearers the miraculous source of this knowledge. These Koranic stories were considered proof of the miraculous nature of the Koran by al-Rummānī, al-Khaṭṭābī and al-Jurjānī,⁴ since they told of past events and communities and were related by the Prophet Muḥammad who was illiterate.⁵
2. God wanted the Prophet to adopt the manners of past prophets and become an example (*uswa wa-qudwa*) to his followers.
3. God wanted to honour the Prophet and his community by singling them out for this gift of prophetic tales.
4. God wanted to edify the Muslim community by the morals behind these tales, as *ta’dib wa-tahdhīb*, education and instruction.
5. God wanted to confer honour on His own prophets by commemorating their pious deeds. It is clear that the didactic purposes of these Koranic tales were established early on. For Ibn al-Athīr, people who thought that these tales might have been included in the Koran in order to entertain the reader/listener were people of error, *ahl al-zaygh*, who were destined to perdition, as al-Sakhawī also states.⁶

CONTEXTS AND PERFORMERS

Qāss, pl. *qūssāṣ*, is a ‘popular story-teller’ or ‘a preacher, deliverer of sermons’. His main function was preaching in the mosques, most probably delivering the sermon (*khuṭba*). Even though the verb *qāṣṣa* is often used in the Koran (see above), the active participle *qāss* does not appear at all. The Prophet is reported to have said, ‘None but an amir, a subordinate [of an amir] or proud man shall preach’ (*lā yaquṣṣu illā amīr aw ma’mūr aw mukhtāl*). Charles Pellat states that it would be ‘difficult to date precisely the intransitive use of the verb in the sense of “to perform the function of a popular story-teller or deliverer of sermons”’.⁷ However, some sources mention that Tamīm al-Dārī was the first

² al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. I, p. 36.

³ al-Tha’labī, *Arā’is al-majālis*, pp. 4–5.

⁴ Khalafallāh and Sallām, *Thalāth rasā’il*, pp. 23, 25.

⁵ See al-Tamīmī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, p. 183; al-Baqilānī, *Ijāz al-qur’ān*, p. 34.

⁶ See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. I, p. 9; al-Sakhawī, *al-I'lān*, p. 49.

⁷ Pellat, ‘Kāss’, p. 733.

qāṣṣ in the sense of a story-teller of religious narratives, and that the Prophet Muḥammad related some of al-Dārī's tales about the *dajjāl* (Antichrist).⁸ Pellat, however, cautions us against accepting these reports uncritically since Tamīm had 'become a legendary figure'.⁹

There were two kinds of *quṣṣāṣ*, public and state-appointed ones. The latter performed in mosques, relating Koranic narratives about past communities and biblical figures and commenting on the 'edifying features scattered among the *sūras'*, as Pellat states. The public ones, on the other hand, performed to audiences outside the mosque, much to the consternation of the authorities who suspected some of the *quṣṣāṣ*, at times with good reason, of propagating apocryphal traditions, false *hadīth*, and seditious religious and political materials as agents of the various opposition groups. The authorities acted intermittently against the *quṣṣāṣ*, but whether out of self-defence or out of a genuine desire to protect the authentic core of the Islamic tradition, is not always clear.

Early reports about actions taken against the *quṣṣāṣ* include the decision by 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib to expel them from the mosque in Basra. More prohibitions against the *quṣṣāṣ* and their activities followed.¹⁰ The reasons for these prohibitions may have to do with the tendency of some *quṣṣāṣ*, even the ones 'motivated by the best intentions' to 'mix in their commentary edifying narratives drawn from the Koran, Judeo-Christian legends and stories from the *Jāhiliyya*', as Pellat wrote. The *quṣṣāṣ* were banished from mosques and their activities repeatedly proscribed. Paradoxically, it appeared that the more harshly the authorities clamped down on them, the more their appeal to their unlettered audiences was enhanced. They managed to gather around them 'a more attentive, more eager and often denser audience than that of the *fuqahā'* and other scholars, who tended to adopt a disdainful attitude towards them, more especially as in any discussion they were sure of carrying the day, thanks to their easy flow of speech'.¹¹ Ibn al-Jawzī even conceded that 'the storytellers and preachers were also given a place in [the] divine scheme in order to exhort the masses. And so it is that the masses profit from them in a way that they never profit from the scholar'.¹²

Periodically, condemnations were levelled against the *quṣṣāṣ* by major figures such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn 'Abdūn and al-Suyūṭī. We learn from the sources that once the *quṣṣāṣ* were banished from the mosques they started to perform in cemeteries, in addition to marketplaces, since their narrative

⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *Nihāyat al-bidāya*, pp. 94–6; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, pp. 80–1.

⁹ Pellat, 'Kāṣṣ', p. 734.

¹⁰ See al-Makkī, *Qūṭ al-qulūb*, vol. II, pp. 21, 25, 28; Ibn al-Hājj, *Madkhal*, vol. II, pp. 13, 145.

¹¹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Ibīlīs*, p. 131, cited by Pellat.

¹² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, p. 104.

'wares' were now viewed as suspect goods by the market-inspectors (*muhtasibs*). In later centuries, and as the *qussās* became more and more popular, condemnation from the religious authorities increased so much that al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) felt obliged to issue his warning in a book with the telling title, *Tahdhīr al-khawāṣṣ* etc. (On Guarding the Elite Against the Falsehoods of the Story-Tellers). They were once the popular sermon-givers and interpreters of the Koran but in later times they became, in the words of Pellat, 'buffoon[s] who mainly replaced edifying narrations by comical and often improper stories especially ridiculing biblical characters . . . Some became veritable mountebanks, who contrived to "play to the gallery", provided that the collection afterwards produced a substantial reward.'¹³

In later centuries the performing techniques and repertoire of *qussās* overlapped with those of other popular performers; performing groups bearing the name *qassāṣīn* were operative as late as the nineteenth century.¹⁴

THE TEXTS

There are several types of popular religious narratives in the pre-modern era which can be briefly categorized as follows:

1. Narratives about the Prophet Muhammad;
2. Narratives about the prophets;
3. Narratives about the companions of the Prophet Muhammad;
4. Narratives about pious men and women;
5. Narratives about impious men and women.

Narratives about the Prophet Muhammad

Other than the *sīra* works by Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hishām, al-Zuhrī, al-Wāqidī and al-Ṭabarī, there are 'popular' elaborations in later *sīra* works, especially on the miracles of the Prophet Muhammad. There are also the books of *dalā'il* (proofs of the authenticity of Muhammad's prophethood) by authors such as Abū Nu‘aym al-İsfahānī and of *shamā'il* (his physical and spiritual qualities) by Ibn Kathīr, among others, which illustrate the esteemed position the figure of the Prophet enjoys in popular Muslim piety. Other 'popular' narratives can be found in post-classical devotional literature, still in circulation, such as al-Jazūlī's (d. c. 1465) *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* and the *mawālid* works (literary compositions in honour of the Prophet) such as those by 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1621) and al-Sayyid Ja'far al-Barzanjī (d. 1766). These narratives

¹³ Pellat, 'Kāṣṣ', p. 735.

¹⁴ Abdel-Malek, *Popular Ballad*, p. 21.

are composed in both prose and verse, some of the latter appropriated from classical elite poets including the ascetic Abū'l-'Atāhiya (d. 825 or 826), the mystics Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896), 'Abd al-Rahīm al-Bura'ī (d. c. 1058), 'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235) and the Andalusian-born Abū'l-Hasan al-Shushtarī (d. 1268–9).¹⁵ There are many popular narratives of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad preserved in manuscript form in various libraries.

Differences exist between the popular narratives of the Prophet's life and their equivalents in the classical accounts, notably the biography of Ibn Ishāq in Ibn Hishām's recension. In order to glean an understanding of the nature of these popular narratives, we will discuss here some of the details in the popular narratives and compare and contrast them with their parallels in the biographies written by Ibn Ishāq and others.

The Prophet's birth

There are some intimations about the primordial light of Muḥammad already in Ibn Ishāq's biography, although he cautiously prefaced his account of it with the disclaimer *za'amū* (they alleged), to cast doubt on the authenticity of the account. Ibn Ishāq tells us that when Āmina was giving birth to the baby Muḥammad, there came out of her a light that illumined the castles of Buṣrā (Bostra) in Syria.¹⁶ This concept of the primordial light which existed before creation is not elaborated as it is in the popular narratives. Nor does Ibn Ishāq mention the baby Muḥammad's miraculous circumcision or that his mother was helped by angels or by Mary or Āsiyā (the pharaoh's believing wife) as do later biographies of the Prophet. For example, the baby Muḥammad is born already circumcised in a late sixteenth-century biography entitled *al-Sīra al-ḥalabiyya al-nabawiyya*, also sometimes known as *Insān al-'uyūn fī sīrat al-Amīn wa'l-Ma'mūn*, written by Ibn Burhān al-Halabī, who was born in Cairo in 1567, worked as a professor in al-Madrasa al-Ṣalāhiyya and died in 1634. He composed several commentaries and supercommentaries but he is best known for his biography of the Prophet. It is in his biography that we find the miraculous details surrounding the birth of the Prophet, details which recur in later popular religious narratives in Egypt. The circumcision story is cited there on the authority of the jurist Anas ibn Mālik who reports the Prophet's saying: 'A sign of the honour conferred on me by my Lord is that I was born circumcised and that no one has seen my genitalia.'¹⁷ The polymath jurist and Koran exegete al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) also cited this detail on the authority of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁶ Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, vol. I, pp. 180–1.

¹⁷ al-Halabī, *al-Sīra*, vol. I, p. 53.

several transmitters.¹⁸ Other details in *al-Sīra al-halabiyya*, which are not in Ibn Ishāq's biography, include the presence, at Muḥammad's birth, of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and of Āsiyā, the pharaoh's wife who secretly took care of the baby Moses. According to this account, Āmina, Muḥammad's mother, said:

Tall women, who looked like women of the house of 'Abd al-Muṭalib, came to me. Faces more luminous than theirs I have not seen. One of them came near me and I leaned against her. Labour pain overtook me and grew stronger. It was as though one of them came near me and handed me some water to drink; the water was whiter than milk, cooler than ice and sweeter than honey. The woman said to me, 'Drink', so I drank, then the third woman said, 'Drink more', and she rubbed my abdomen and said, 'In the Name of God, come out by the will of God, may He be exalted.' Those women said to me, 'We are Āsiyā, the pharaoh's wife, and Maryam, daughter of 'Imrān.'¹⁹

The significance of this detail lies not only in the notion that the God-favoured Prophet was served by mothers or nurses of previous prophets,²⁰ but also in the belief that he will be married in Paradise to both of these women as well as to Kulthūm, the sister of the prophet Mūsā, as reported by al-Ḥalabī and Ibn Kathīr.²¹

A curious detail about the baby Muḥammad nursing only from the right breast of Ḥalima, his wet nurse, is cited in another late biography, that of Imām Aḥmad Zaynī, known as Dahlān, a Shafī'i muftī in Mecca. In his *al-Sīra al-nabawīyya wa'l-āthār al-muhammadiyya* we are told:

Ḥalima said, 'I gave him my right breast and he took it, suckling as much as he liked. I then turned him to the left breast but he rejected it. This has been his habit ever since.' People of knowledge said that God had intimated to him that he had a partner [in suckling] and he [therefore] behaved fairly.²²

The Prophet's miracles

One of the Prophet Muḥammad's miracles, cited in several sources, both elite and popular, tells of a chance meeting with a gazelle which the Prophet found tied by a hunter. He took pity on her and redeemed her freedom by offering himself as a hostage in her place. Having been struck by the grand sacrifice, the gazelle converted to Islam by uttering the testimony of faith. The sources which cite the story of the Prophet and the gazelle are many, ranging from

¹⁸ al-Suyūtī, *al-Khaṣā'is al-kubrā*, vol. I, pp. 132–3.

¹⁹ al-Ḥalabī, *al-Sīra*, vol. I, p. 65.

²⁰ Schimmel, *Muhammad*, p. 151.

²¹ al-Ḥalabī, *al-Sīra*, vol. I, p. 65; Ibn Kathīr, *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 300.

²² Zaynī, *al-Sīra al-nabawīyya*, vol. I, p. 24.

the earlier Abū Nu‘aym al-Isfahānī and al-Damīrī to the late fifteenth-century al-Suyūtī.²³ The hunter in these sources is reported to have been a bedouin, not a Jew as Egypt’s modern *maddāh* narrates.²⁴ Here is a *hadīth* report on the authority of al-Tabarānī, al-Bayhaqī and Ibn Ḥajar (who corrected some of its details) based on an account given by Umm Salama, one of the Prophet’s wives:

The Prophet (may God’s blessings and greetings be upon him) was in the desert when a young gazelle called out to him, ‘O Messenger of God.’ He said, ‘What do you need?’ She said, ‘This bedouin captured me. I have two youngsters on this mountain; release me so that I can go and suckle them and then return.’ The Prophet said, ‘Would you do that?’ She said, ‘Yes,’ whereupon he released her. She went away then she returned and he (the Prophet) tied her. The bedouin was alerted to that and said, ‘O Messenger of God, do you need anything?’ The Prophet said, ‘Release this young gazelle,’ whereupon the bedouin released her. The gazelle ran away in the desert saying, ‘I bear witness that there is no deity save God and that you are the Messenger of God.’²⁵

‘The Camel’s Utterance’ (Nuṭq al-jamal)

There are also references to complaints uttered by a camel to the Prophet Muhammad in several accounts in Ibn Kathīr’s *Shamā'il al-rasūl*, al-Qādī ‘Iyād’s *al-Shifā*, al-Suyūtī’s *al-Khaṣā'is al-kubrā* and others. In Ibn al-Jawzī’s account we read about several encounters that the Prophet had with camels, all of which purport to be complaints of ill-treatment by the owner.²⁶ The story of the Prophet and the camel, at times called *Nuṭq al-jamal* (The Camel’s Utterance) is in the current repertoire of Egyptian *maddāhīn* and was attested in Algeria in the early twentieth century and in Egypt in the sixteenth century.²⁷ ‘The Camel’s Utterance’ tells of a bedouin who, yearning to visit the Prophet, sets out on a long journey and on his way he meets three Jews who, possessed by envy when they set their eyes on his young agile camel (*qa'ūd*), forge a deed of sale which states that the bedouin sold them the camel. When the bedouin finally reaches the Prophet he is surprised to see the three Jews there pressing their claims to the ownership of his camel. When the bedouin protests against the fraudulent assertions of the Jews, they produce the necessary witnesses and for a while the bedouin seems helpless. At that point, a miracle occurs: the camel loosens its tether and comes forward to testify against the Jews. The Prophet believes the camel and the bedouin is

²³ See al-Isfahānī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwāwa*, pp. 32off. and al-Damīrī, *Hayāt al-hayawān*, pp. 126–7; al-Suyūtī, *al-Khaṣā'is*, vol. I, pp. 265–7.

²⁴ Abdel-Malek, *Popular Ballad*, pp. 70–1.

²⁵ ‘Iyād, *al-Shifā*, pp. 441–2.

²⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Wafā*, pp. 301–2.

²⁷ Cachia, *Popular Narrative Ballads*, p. 224.

vindicated, whereas the culprits run away or, in another version, are severely punished.²⁸

'The Sighing Tree Trunk'

This miracle tells of a palm tree against which the Prophet used to lean when preaching in a modestly built mosque. When Muslims begin to increase in number and the mosque becomes crowded with believers, a man by the name of Tamīm al-Dārī suggests to the Prophet that a proper pulpit be built for him. The Prophet agrees but when he actually comes to mount the newly built pulpit he is interrupted by loud crying which sounds like that of a child. The worshippers look around for the source of crying only to find, to their surprise, that the palm trunk against which the Prophet used to lean is sobbing because of the pain it feels at being separated from the beloved Prophet. The Prophet embraces the trunk and gives it a choice between being replanted and becoming a palm tree or being duly buried with a guarantee that it would be resurrected on the Day of Judgement and become a palm tree in Paradise. The palm trunk chooses the latter.

There are several classical accounts of this miracle, which itself is not mentioned in the Koran. It is considered as an authentic report (*ḥadīth ṣahīḥ*) by al-Bukhārī.²⁹ It is narrated, for example, by Abū Nu‘aym al-İsfahānī and al-Qādī ‘Iyād.³⁰ But accounts differ in minor details, for example over the identity of the person who built the *minbar* for the Prophet: Tamīm al-Dārī, a Greek carpenter, or the young slave of a woman from among the Anṣār (the Helpers).

Ibn Kathīr gives nine accounts of this miracle, on the authority of familiar transmitters like Ibn Hanbal, Mālik, Ibn ‘Abbās, Jābir, al-Bukhārī, Abū Nu‘aym al-İsfahānī and two of the Prophet’s wives, ‘Ā’isha and Umm Salama.³¹ All accounts agree on the essentials of the story: a tree trunk cried like a child, or like a she-camel (*nāqa*) or a ten-month pregnant goat (*ishār*), when the Prophet abandoned it.³²

Narratives about the prophets

Several chapters in the Koran are named after biblical prophets such as Abraham and Joseph, as well as non-biblical ones such as Hūd and Şālih. Koranic commentators (*mufassirūn*) were the first to collect Arabic narratives

²⁸ Abdel-Malek, *Popular Ballad*, pp. 72–3; Cachia, *Popular Narrative Ballads*, pp. 206–7.

²⁹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣahīḥ*, vol. V, pp. 40–1.

³⁰ al-İsfahānī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwāwa*, vol. I, pp. 399–404; ‘Iyād, *al-Shifā*, vol. I, pp. 427–30.

³¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Shamā'il al-rasūl*, pp. 239–51.

³² Abdel-Malek, *Popular Ballad*, pp. 85–6.

(*qīṣāṣ*) about the various prophets mentioned in the Koran. Later these narratives were compiled in anthologies on the lives and miracles of the prophets under the title *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* (Stories of the Prophets), such as the works of al-Tha'labī and al-Kisā'i. These stories can perhaps be classified as popular religious literature because of the author/collector's tendency 'to simplify Biblical-Koranic legends for the education and the enjoyment of the masses; and by variations in contents and arrangements of the different extant manuscripts of this particular work, variations that could well indicate the existence of an oral tradition even after the first recording of al-Kisā'i's *oeuvre*'.³³

Narratives about the companions of the Prophet Muhammad

Some of these narratives, such as the ones about 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib and al-Husayn, have survived and were greatly developed in the Shia tradition. Others, for example about Abū Bakr and 'Umar, are still part of the repertoire of the contemporary Egyptian *maddāhīn* (singers of praise in honour of the Prophet Muḥammad). A good number of these narratives are extant in manuscript form with titles such as 'Story of the Conversion of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq', 'The Birth of our Lord 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib' and 'History of the Martyrdom of al-Husayn and the Wars that Followed'.³⁴

Narratives about pious men and women

Numerous tales are found about leading Sufi figures such as Dhū'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī,³⁵ Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī, al-Sayyida Zaynab and al-Sayyida Nafīsa among many others. Works on less well-known Sufis, their lives and marvels (*karāmāt*) also abound. Al-Nabhānī cites hundreds of these *karāmāt* in his two-volume work, *Jāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'*. One may add also narratives about the wise man Luqmān al-Ḥakīm, to whom some Arabic fables are attributed, and 'The Tale of the Skull' about Christ and his encounter with the skull of a dead man which pleaded with Christ to resurrect him.³⁶

Two examples of the lives of saintly figures, one Muslim and the other Coptic Christian, follow. The first is the life of al-Sayyida Nafīsa, a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad by his grandson al-Ḥasan, taken from al-Nabhānī's

³³ Shoshan, 'High Culture and Popular Culture', p. 85. Several narratives devoted to individual prophets exist in manuscript in the Library of Berlin (see Hamid, *Arabic and Islamic Literary Tradition*, p. 93).

³⁴ For manuscripts in Berlin, see Hamid, *Arabic and Islamic Literary Tradition*, pp. 96–7.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 108–9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.

collection but based on accounts of several authorities in different periods of Islamic history.

Nafisa, the daughter of al-Hasan ibn Zayd ibn al-Hasan ibn ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib (may Allah be pleased with them all) has been a source of blessing for Cairo [or Egypt?] from her own times till the present. It is said that next to her house, when she (may Allah be pleased with her) came to dwell in Cairo . . . there lived Jews among whom was a woman who had a paralyzed daughter. The Jewish woman wanted one day to go to the public bath and she asked her paralyzed daughter if she wanted to be carried to the public bath, but the daughter demurred. Her mother said to her, ‘Then you will have to stay alone in the house,’ to which the daughter replied, ‘What I truly desire, mother, is to stay with our neighbour, the Sharīfa [the noble woman of the house of the Prophet Muhammad] until you come back.’ The mother went to al-Sayyida Nafisa and asked her if it was agreeable to her to take care of her paralyzed daughter. Al-Sayyida Nafisa said yes. The mother carried her daughter and put her in one of the corners of al-Sayyida Nafisa’s house. While al-Sayyida Nafisa was performing her ritual ablution, the water she used seeped through and streamed in the direction of the paralyzed girl whom Allah inspired to scoop some of this water and wash her paralyzed legs with it. Instantaneously, and with God’s permission (may He be exalted) she found herself standing up on her two feet, as though she had never been paralyzed. Al-Sayyida Nafisa was totally absorbed in her prayers, unaware of what happened. When the daughter heard her mother returning from the public bath, she left al-Sayyida Nafisa’s house to go to her mother’s. When she knocked on the door, her mother came out to see who was at the door. The daughter embraced her mother but the mother did not recognize her and asked. ‘Who are you?’ The girl said, ‘I am your daughter.’ The mother said, ‘What has happened to you?’ The girl then told her the whole story. The mother burst out crying and sobbing and said, ‘By Allah, this religion [Islam] is indeed the true religion (*al-dīn al-sahīḥ*); ours is a repulsive one (*qabīḥ*).’ She then went to al-Sayyida Nafisa and knelt down and kissed her feet, saying, ‘Give me your hand; I bear witness that there is no deity save Allah and that your grandfather Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.’ Al-Sayyida Nafisa praised the Lord (may He be exalted) and thanked Him for having guided that woman and having rescued her from error (*dalāl*).³⁷

Not only the Jewish mother but also her husband and her Jewish neighbours converted to Islam. Other miracles which are attributed to al-Sayyida Nafisa in this account conclude with conversions from Judaism or Christianity to Islam. The miracles function as evidence of the validity and divine origin of the religion of Islam. Notice the interesting adjective *sahīḥ* (true) referring to Islam; it may also mean ‘whole’ and ‘wholesome’ and when it was used by the Jewish mother whose daughter was just made ‘whole’ and ‘wholesome’ through the miraculous deed of a Muslim saintly figure, the implication is that Islam makes one ‘whole’ and ‘wholesome’ not only somatically but also spiritually.

³⁷ al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi‘ karāmāt al-awliyā'*, pp. 509–10.

Al-Munāwī (d. 1621) mentions that al-Sayyida Nafisa died in Cairo in the year 208/823–4. When her husband wanted to move her remains from Cairo to Medina, the Cairenes pleaded with him to leave her among them as a source of blessing. The husband, we are told, saw the Prophet Muḥammad (in a dream or vision) who said to him, ‘O Abū Ishaq, do not cross the people of Cairo over this matter of Nafisa. God’s mercy descends on them on her account.’³⁸

Narratives in Arabic about saintly figures are not restricted to Muslim *awliyā'* for one finds their counterparts in the many tales about Coptic saints (*qiddisīn*) and martyrs (*shuhadā'*). These Coptic narratives are found in a compendium of the lives of saints known as the Synaxarion or Synaxarium (*synaxar* in Coptic, *al-sinksār* in Arabic). The Synaxarion is read out in Arabic by the Coptic priest during matins and on some occasions in the liturgy. These religious narratives on the lives and martyrdom of Coptic saints are full of miraculous traditions which may have had folk origins. The narratives show saints as local patrons, as folk heroes, as healers of body and exorcists of possessing demons or as specializing in some area of human need. At some point in earlier centuries these miraculous traditions about saints were adopted and given a stamp of official acceptance by the Church, as Otto Meinardus suggests: ‘No doubt, the Synaxarium or martyrology had its origin in local martyrologies which may date back to the 4th or 5th centuries.’³⁹

The second example is from the Synaxarion on the life of Mittawus IV, the 102nd Coptic patriarch:

On this day in the year 1391 AM, corresponding to the 15th of August, 1675 AD, Pope Mittawus IV, the 102nd patriarch, left this world for his eternal rest [*tanayyaha*]. Known as Mattā al-Mīrī he was born to pious Christian parents who were pure at heart and who did good and charitable deeds . . . The Lord gave them three boys, one of whom was this pious father. He was his parents’ favourite child [Girgis was his original name]. He was well raised by his parents so he grew as a well-mannered and poised young man . . . and became better versed in the holy books than any of his peers. He was capable of interpreting the meaning of the holy books to those who were unable to comprehend them. When he grew up he shunned this transient world and went to live in the monastery of St Mary for six years. He once dreamt of his parents who looked saddened because, having not heard from him for a long time, they thought him dead. He rose from his dream to tell his brothers the monks about it. They in turn advised him to go to his village to see his parents. So he did go to Mīr, his village, and greeted his parents. When they set their eyes on him they were exceedingly happy. They wanted to marry him off [he came to know that through a close friend] and he escaped and returned to the monastery. His brothers the monks gladly welcomed him back and he continued to live among these saintly figures, showing much love and

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 512–13.

³⁹ Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, p. 216.

faithfulness towards them, and serving them with sincerity. On the recommendation of all the monks, he was ordained a monk/priest in the monastery. Soon he put on the monk's frock, giving himself to long periods of praying, fasting and worshipping, more than what was imposed on his fellow monks. He used to fast by abstaining from having food or drink from sunset to sunset, and during times of adversity he would fast for two days non-stop. He continued in this manner for the rest of his life until the Lord was pleased with him for his good deeds, his good worship and his pious and ascetic life.⁴⁰

His miracles are mentioned later in the narrative:

A woman came to him complaining that her husband repudiated her and went on to marry another woman. Mittawus asked the husband to come to see him with his second wife and ordered them to separate. The second wife objected, saying to him, 'How can this be? I am pregnant with his child.' The patriarch said, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ forbids this act and teaches that you two be separated.' No sooner had the second wife left the door of the patriarch's cell than she aborted the baby. The incident frightened many. The man left this woman and went back to his first wife.

In another incident some opponents of the Church wanted to destroy the church of Saint Mercurius, Abū Sīfēn [Abū Sayfayn, 'the one wielding two swords'] in Old Cairo. They even managed to get a state order to do that. When the patriarch heard of this news, he was exceedingly sad. He stayed up all night praying and supplicating to the Lord (may He be Exalted) and seeking the intercession of Saint Mercurius to foil the plot of the wicked and save the church from ruin. Lo and behold, while the soldiers were asleep, a wall fell on them and they all died. The news spread all over town and the wicked plan [to destroy the church] was foiled and the townsfolk praised the Lord.

When his time of eternal rest drew near, he made his way to the cemetery in Cairo which contained the bodies of the other patriarchs and addressed the cemetery with these words, 'Open your gates and let me in to repose among my pure brethren.' He then had his eternal rest after attaining a ripe old age (may we be mentioned in his prayers). Glory be to our Lord forever. Amen.⁴¹

This Coptic hagiographic account differs in some important respects from its Muslim counterpart. First, in the Coptic tradition it is the date of death or martyrdom of the given saint that is celebrated. In the Muslim tradition it is the date of birth, hence the Arabic name of the festival, *mawlid/mūlid* (birth, pl. *mawālid*); the Coptic narratives use 'īd (feast, festival) more often than *mūlid*. 'The Coptic Church', observed Meinardus, '... saw in the martyrdom of one of its saints his birthday, the *natalitia* or *genethlion*... For that matter [they] still interpret the *mawālid* of their saints as the "second births", the birth into the Life Everlasting. In this respect, the commemoration of the Coptic *mūlid* differs from that of the Islamic, which is held in honour of the natural

⁴⁰ *Kitāb al-sinksār*, vol. II, pp. 372–3.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 374–5.

birth of the shaikh.⁴² The Arabic verbs for ‘to die’ are starkly different in both Coptic and Muslim hagiographic narratives. The Coptic narratives often use the peculiarly Christian verb *tanayyaha* (to have one’s eternal rest) in contrast to the Muslim use of *māta* or *tuwuffiya* (to have one’s soul handed to its Creator; to die; to pass away) or *laqiya rabbahu* (to meet one’s Lord). In the Coptic narrative the saint abandons his original name Grgis and adopts another, the biblical Mattā (Matthew), a sign of his second birth in Christ. He evinces a strong aversion to this life and his eschatologically directed attitude is manifested in his shunning of this world and its pleasures (e.g. marriage to a woman), turning his attention to his salvation and towards the Life Everlasting and desiring to die. The two miracles mentioned are punitive and are meant to prevent a wicked deed (the illegal second marriage) and the destruction of a church.

Other sources for these Coptic *siyar* are the pulp editions of the lives and miracles of Coptic saints and martyrs, which are sold during various Coptic festivals such as Sitt Dimyāna (Saint Dimyāna), Mari Grgis (Saint George) and others. These Coptic ‘Lives of the Saints and Martyrs’ have their counterparts in the Muslim ‘Stories of the Prophets’ and the *karāmat* collections.

Narratives about impious men and women and the religious moral

Although one need not insist on including such narratives under the rubric ‘religious’, there are at least some pretexts to raise the issue. Under this category we may cite literary compositions such as Ibn al-Batanūni’s *al-'Unwān fi'l-iħtirāz min makāyid al-niswān* (On Guarding Against the Wiles of Women). The work is a mine of information about Muslim attitudes to women in the late fifteenth century in Egypt.⁴³ It is composed of numerous tales about wicked women who cheat on their men, seduce strangers and level false charges against others, but whose wickedness and evil deeds are miraculously exposed in the end and the proper penalty is meted out against them. Some of these narratives are drawn from ‘the rich Islamic corpus of tales of prophets, some from Islamic history, and some from general literary sources’.⁴⁴ At the conclusion of each tale, the Koranic sentence, ‘Verily great are their wiles’, is repeated like a refrain.⁴⁵ One of these tales, ‘The Tale of Faḍlōn the Ascetic’, has survived in the contemporary narrative ballads of the Egyptian *maddāhīn*. The name of the ascetic Faḍlōn (Faḍlūn in classical Arabic, which suggests ideas of excellence

⁴² Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, p. 216.

⁴³ Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body*, pp. 54–66.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁵ Koran, *Sūra of Joseph*, 12:28ff.

and virtue) corresponds to the moral characteristics of the ascetic Fadlōn who, much like Joseph in the Koran, resists the seductive ways of a beautiful temptress. The religious moral behind these tales is that no matter how great women's wiles and machinations are, the Almighty guards pious men against them.⁴⁶

POPULAR RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES: THEIR CHARACTERISTICS AND TEXTURE

The following are some of the characteristics of these popular religious narratives. It will be noticed that the recurrence of the miraculous is fundamental to these narratives and may explain their popular texture and appeal.

1. The breakdown of natural laws. The boundaries of time and space are repeatedly eliminated. Prophets, Sufi or Coptic saints move from one land to another in one step, faster than the blinking of an eye. Sufi saints, such as Aḥmad al-Badawī of Egypt, who possess this miraculous ability are called *ahl al-khaṭwa* (saints who can cross long distances in one step).⁴⁷ Some of the miracles are evidentiary (to prove the divine nature of the faith, the special status of the holy men and women); some are to benefit the community (healing the sick, finding water and food in the desert, for example); others are punitive (meting out punishments against the wicked, the unbelievers, etc.).

2. Taming and befriending wild beasts, speaking with animals. There is a tendency in these narratives to reconcile opposites and to transcend natural enmity between man and beast or a beast and its natural enemy.

3. Raising the dead. The Sufi saint Aḥmad al-Badawī raised a girl from the dead and Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī was able to bring a drowned man to life seven days after he had been devoured by a whale.⁴⁸

4. Curing terminal illnesses and physical handicaps, especially blindness and paralysis, through the use of amulets (*ahjiba*, sing. *hijāb*).

5. The recurrence of dreams and visions. This ranges from seeing God, angels, the Prophet Muḥammad or a Sufi or a Coptic saint (especially Mari Girgis, that is, Saint George, known as *sarī' al-nadha* (he who responds speedily to the believer's call)).

6. Heroic ability to endure physical and psychological pain and the mortification of the body. These narratives abound with scenes of tortured, starved or thirsty bodies etc., especially the Coptic narratives about saints and martyrs.

⁴⁶ Abdel-Malek, *Popular Ballad*, pp. 122–3.

⁴⁷ al-Zayn, *al-Šūfiyya*, p. 101.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

We can also add the heroic ability to resist the temptations of seductive females. Symbolically the temptress stands for the lustful self which must be controlled.⁴⁹

7. These religious narratives, whether of Muslim or Coptic provenance, betray their folk origins by stressing the miraculous and by showing the *awliyā'* or saints as local patrons (al-Sayyida Nafīsa as the patron of Cairo, Mari Girgis the patron of the town of Mīt Damsīs), or as folk heroes, or as healers of body and exorcists of possessing demons (Coptic saints tend to practise exorcism more than their Muslim counterparts, after all Christ himself was the supreme exorcist), or as specializing in a certain area of human needs. These narratives also appear to have an inclusive tendency, which is shown in the way they appropriate other religious traditions or reflect the local culture in contrast to the dogmatic texts and rituals of the 'official cultus'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ al-Najjār, *al-Turāth al-qasāṣī*, p. 484.

⁵⁰ Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, p. 219.

PART V

DRAMA

CHAPTER 17

DRAMA IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD: A SURVEY

In this chapter on the evolution of Arab drama in the post-classical period, attention will be paid to imitation and to recitation: both forms had been widespread in the Arab world ever since the remotest of times and were still extremely active in the era in question. Particular attention will be paid to connections and mutual influence of a formal type which linked certain kinds of literature of popular origin, initially oral and only later in written form, to literary texts in lofty style intended for public recitation. At the same time an attempt will be made to highlight the common desire to imitate reality, present in many forms of Arab literature from the ninth century onwards, in both popular farces and literary works not necessarily destined for the stage. In addition to the analysis of these artistic aspects, which may be defined as collateral in comparison to true drama, texts which were created directly for the theatre between the thirteenth and the early nineteenth century will also be examined.

Despite the immense time-span covered by this historical period, we need to extend the chronological limits imposed by the term ‘post-classical’ even further, in order to be able to consider the dramatic spirit of the era in question in relation to both its antecedents in the classical period to whose literary forms it was strictly tied, and developments at the outset of the modern era. This latter period saw the awakening to new stimuli (coinciding with both the political and literary *Nahda*) and not only led to countless significant consequences in Arab production (which also brought about changes and innovations in the actual theatre), but also coincided with a renewed desire to recover the traditions and artistic forms of the past.

The statement that the Arab theatre came into being in the nineteenth century as a result of European influence¹ (the common view of many scholars until a few decades ago) appears risky when one considers the countless pre-modern forms of Arab dramatic art within the realms of both the popular tradition and belles-lettres. It is no mere chance that many modern Arab dramatists have used and even today still use themes, techniques and wit from

¹ Moreh dwells on this in *Live Theatre*, pp. vii, ix, quoting the various positions of some modern scholars.

the past, drawing their inspiration without discrimination from popular culture and elite literature. The process of recovering indigenous cultural roots proved to be a matter of basic importance: first, in order to assert Arab independence in the face of prevalent arguments concerning European influence;² second, to revive some examples of the earlier cultural heritage, thus preventing their total disappearance and showing, to the contrary, their continuing vivacity and relevance also to modern times;³ and lastly, to highlight dramatic or pseudo-dramatic elements contained in works belonging to literary genres that may have had no direct connection with true drama, but whose vigorous dramatic elements presupposed an Arab theatrical tradition of considerable antiquity.

ORIGINS

The *maqāma* undoubtedly occupies an important place among those literary genres widely recognized in the classical era that continued to be cultivated in subsequent centuries (either in their original form or through gradual changes) and displayed, to greater or lesser degrees, signs of dramatic elements, without however being formally part of a literary genre intended for the stage.⁴ The *maqāma* grew in popularity during the tenth and eleventh centuries, but artists and poets have continued to devote their attentions to it without interruption almost until our times. (See Stewart's contribution in this volume, Chapter 7.)

Equally important is the *hikāya*, a possible precedent to the emergence of the *maqāma*, which drew inspiration from the vivacity of the former's dialogues and narrative structure, mostly aimed at arousing curiosity and tension in the public for whom it was intended. However, the *maqāma* gradually but inevitably broke away from the *hikāya* because of the basically didactic intent of *adab* literature to which the former belonged,⁵ something that, unlike the *hikāya*, demanded use of the *fushā* even in highly realistic works and required great attention to be paid to a stylistically perfect form. The *maqāma* came to acquire a dominant position in the literary world of that time as of later, in part due to its characteristic features: an intolerance of improvisation, a requirement that the literary language be used, and the elaborate and rhetorical style in which it was couched. This latter factor undoubtedly attracted the admiration

² With regard to the theatre, the following are particularly interesting: Ahmad Shams al-Din al-Hajjaji, *The Origins of Arabic Theatre*, ch. ii: *The Student Educational Missions to Europe, 1834–1944*, pp. 61–80; Atia Abu Naga, *Les Sources françaises. On the East/West relationship in Arab literature*, cf., among others, *L'Occidente e l'Islām nell'Alto Medioevo*, introd. by F. Gabrieli, pp. 15–33.

³ The examples provided by Yūsuf Idrīs in Egypt, al-Ṭayyib al-Ṣiddiqī in Morocco and Sa'd Allāh Wannūs in Syria are particularly significant, but are not isolated cases.

⁴ In discussing many of these genres attention has been paid only to aspects that link them with drama.

⁵ For evolution of the term *adab*, see Nallino, 'La letteratura araba'. See also Bonebakker, 'Adab'.

of the intellectual and religious communities, which appreciated the beauty of the erudite language. This however did not prevent the *maqāma* from eventually becoming a kind of collective recitation at gatherings of cultured people.⁶

As far as the *ḥikāya* is concerned, the semantic origin of the word implies the idea of imitation, referring especially to the language, both written and oral.⁷ Only through subsequent change would this initial meaning come to coincide with that of 'tale', 'narration',⁸ which is also its current meaning. The term was still used in its original meaning in the ninth century, as can be seen in the *Kitāb al-bayān* by al-Jāḥiẓ, which talks of imitators capable of imitating not only the manners and gestures of people, but also different voices, foreigners' ways of talking, and the cries or calls of the commonest animals.⁹ From the tenth century onwards its meaning gradually shifted from that of pure imitation to that of a tale based on the imitation of reality. Various texts carried the designation *ḥikāyat*, but documentary materials related to such texts are somewhat limited. It may be presumed that by that time many *ḥikāyat*, although initially linked to the world of orality, had been consigned to written form.¹⁰

The interesting example provided by the *Hikāyat Abī'l-Qāsim al-Baghdādī* by Abū'l-Muṭahhar al-Azdī (first half of the eleventh century) offers some possibilities of comparison with similar developments, having been created during a shift of the *ḥikāya* genre to a new phase, which brought it closer to the almost contemporary *maqāma* in that, like the latter, it was not only in written form but also included many parts in verse and rhyming prose. The *Hikāyat Abī'l-Qāsim* is a repertoire of almost theatrical, somewhat realistic scenes. It is no accident that the author refers to the *Kitāb al-bayān* of al-Jāḥiẓ as his primary source of inspiration. With regard to the capacity of mimes to create typical figures, each one representing an entire category of persons, the *ḥikāya* in question attempts to portray inhabitants of Baghdad, just as the *ḥikāya* by the same author, entitled *Badawiyya*, deals with those of the

⁶ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, pp. 104–10.

⁷ Lane, *Lexicon*, vol. II, pp. 618–19. The verb *ḥakā*, closely tied to the activity of imitation and copying, has normally been used to define the activity of mimes, for which reliable attestations are to be found throughout the entire Middle Ages in the Middle East. According to Horovitz, *Spuren griechischer Mimen*, pp. 16–17, there is a close relationship between the play of imitation in the East and in Greece by persons whose job was that of entertaining both the populace and the rulers.

⁸ According to Pellar, 'Hikāya', this change of meaning is recorded only from the fourteenth century onwards.

⁹ al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-bayān*, vol. I, pp. 69–70: 'We also find the imitator of the people, the person who imitates the sounds of the inhabitants of the Yemen, pronouncing words as they do, without overlooking anything; and in the same way, his imitation may be of a Khorasanī or Ahwāzī, a Zanjī or Sindi or other races and so on, to such an extent as to be the most natural of them.'

¹⁰ See also MacDonald, 'Hikāya'.

countryside.¹¹ It has been pointed out¹² that this reference by al-Azdī, via al-Jāḥīz, to the original Aristotelian concept of mimicry may appear as a curious paradox, when the work which he was presenting was an example of the most daring realism in Arab literature of that time. Many scholars,¹³ however, believe that the origin of the process which engendered the *hikāya* should rather be sought in the influence of the Aristotelian doctrine of *mimesis* in art,¹⁴ which led to the interpretation of literature as an ‘imitation of life’. Thus, al-Azdī’s reference to al-Jāḥīz seems completely natural, proof of his intention within the framework of a type of traditional, yet innovative composition to glean his ideas from reality.

Although this text was defined as an ‘original product of *adab*’,¹⁵ it was undoubtedly tied to the then flourishing genre of *maqāmāt*, which drew partial inspiration from the *hikāyāt* while being different in certain respects. As has already been mentioned, the contents of both the *hikāya* and *maqāma* were inspired by the real world of that time, representing it in a lively way: the principal character of the aforementioned *hikāya* by al-Azdī, the popular Abū'l-Qāsim, is extremely concrete; his mimicry – the goal and essence of the narration – is paralleled by the equally reliable portrayal of the well-to-do classes of Isfahan at that time, including their games, pastimes, food and furnishings.¹⁶ Abū'l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī, the principal character of the *maqāmāt* by Bādī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (968–1008), is equally vivid and lively in his jokes, his comic piety and his imaginative costumes. However, while the linkages between the work of al-Azdī and the *maqāmāt* of that time are clear, the extremely audacious and sometimes almost excessive licentiousness of his *hikāya* set it apart from the moderate, didactic tone of the *maqāmāt* by al-Hamadhānī and in general from all the works belonging to this literary genre. Instead it seems more similar to the later shadow plays by the Egyptian Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1310) and to *mujūn* literature which made great use of the scurrilous element.¹⁷ Another aspect which differentiates the *Hikāyat Abī'l-Qāsim* from *maqāmāt* of this period was style. Its greater adherence to daily language involved an intense use of colloquial and slang expressions, alternating all the

¹¹ Gabrieli, ‘Sulla Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim’.

¹² Ibid., 39.

¹³ Cf. MacDonald, ‘Hikāya’, p. 323.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Poetica*, vols. I and IV, pp. 117–21, 125–31. Mattā ibn Yūnis, in his translation of the *Poetica*, uses the Greek term.

¹⁵ Gabrieli, ‘Sulla Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim’, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ This would not be so bad, according to Gabrieli, *ibid.*, 36, ‘if al-Azdī had known how to exploit to the full his vein of dramatic and descriptive realism’. In that case ‘he could be forgiven much of the *sukhf* and the *mujūn* for which he himself apologised at the beginning of the work’. See *EI2*, s.v. ‘Mudjūn’.

while with higher linguistic levels. It was therefore an extremely composite text, where Iraqi idioms were mingled with the poetic language of the pre-Islamic *wasf*, technical lexicons such as that of gastronomy with the precious *adab* of the tenth century, and lewd double entendres with refined poetic citations.¹⁸

It has been suggested that the *hikāya* by al-Azdī was almost definitely destined for performance.¹⁹ As previously noted, it contained a strong imitative element: in the above-mentioned introduction to his work the author (although explaining with punctilious pride that the literary genres from which he had drawn inspiration belonged to the highest categories) also indicated clearly that what he was about to present was a mimesis of the people of Baghdad, as if all the inhabitants of the city had been assembled in a single type.²⁰ Furthermore, according to the author, the time-span of the tale was, 'the action of one day or night, from beginning to end; in which time the deeds could be fully and entirely carried out'.²¹ The other *hikāyat* of that time almost certainly had similar goals and modes.

In certain ways, the placement of contemporary *maqāmat* within their possible sphere of reception is yet more complex. Perhaps, like many other genres within Arabic literature, intended for collective reading, their already noted realistic vein places them in a position close to that of *hikāyat*. Even so, their refined style and the greater uniformity of language – always literary and recherché, make it impossible to imagine them as works tied strictly to theatrical performance, since popular spectacles performed by live actors at that time were not characterized by such an elevated level of either language or the literary text.²²

However, the existence of a link between the different literary genres that flourished at this time is easily confirmed; there exist numerous illustrations of the ease with which characteristics of one could transfer to another. The fact that al-Azdī himself sometimes terms his work *samar* or *risāla* rather than *hikāya*,²³ is just a single example. It has also been noted that, from the eleventh century onwards, not only were the terms *maqāma*, *risāla*, *hikāya* poorly defined, but also *muḥāwara*, *munāẓara* or *hadīth* as well. The latter could all be applied to a single type of literature, one rich in dialogue. With

¹⁸ Gabrieli, 'Sulla Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim', 37. It should be noted that, although a possible derivation of the *maqāma* from the *hikāya* has previously been hinted at, in the work in question it is the second which proves to be full of continuous borrowing from the first, with whole passages of works by various authors often freely linked together and adapted, almost as if memorized.

¹⁹ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 97.

²⁰ Gabrieli, 'Sulla Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim', 34.

²¹ Ibid. Such a unit of time inevitably brings to mind one of the well-known Aristotelian canons.

²² Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 97. For a recent study on the *maqāma* see also Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*.

²³ Ibid.

no precise divisions between various genres, all became, according to the occasion, susceptible to being read in private or recited in public with dramatic overtones.²⁴

In an attempt to identify recurring principles for delineating various genres, a possible method for differentiating terms used in oral and in written literature and for genres which may share original elements has been suggested. It has been observed that, when the *ḥikāya* became part of written literature, it was replaced by the term *khayāl* as a means of defining an oral dramatic performance consisting of dialogue, mostly improvised, performed by actors in the flesh. This term, *khayāl*, later needed the addition of *al-zill* to designate shadow plays, spectacles based at least partially on written texts and belonging to a type of literary art of which the *bābāt* by Ibn Dāniyāl from the thirteenth century offer precise evidence.²⁵ It has also been suggested that another mode of definition existed, one that applied the principle of text length and level of style and language: for example, texts of *khayāl* and *khayāl al-zill*, regardless of length, were distinguished by their ungrammatical style, colloquial language and impudent content; the *maqāma*, a generally short composition, featured a highly rhetorical, eloquent style; the *risāla*, a somewhat long composition, was distinguished not only by lofty style, but also by a particular abundance of personages and a greater complexity in the plot.²⁶ As has already been pointed out, materials in dialogue form could still transfer from one type of work to another, even after many years, as, for example, with certain parts of the *Hikāyat Abī'l-Qāsim* which appear in the *Maqāma madīriyya* by al-Hamadhānī, in the *Nathr al-durr* by al-Abī (d. 1030) and in one of the shadow plays of Muḥammad ibn Dāniyāl, *Bābat ṭayf al-khayāl*.²⁷

We have noted above that in the tenth century, at approximately the period when the *ḥikāya* moved from oral to written form, the literary genre of the *maqāma* became increasingly important. The latter is a type of writing which can in some ways be considered part of an almost dramatic type of literary text, even though its original farcical quick-wittedness was in time overcome by a concern with elaborate stylistic conventions that were sometimes so exaggerated as to leave little room for appreciating the contents. Abū'l-Fadl Ahmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Hamadhānī, known as Bādī' al-Zamān (Wonder of the Age),

²⁴ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, pp. 114–18.

²⁵ It is improbable that the term *khayāl* was used to define only something totally oral; besides, this term also occurs in the high cultural environment of the Abbasid period, in poetry, to represent the quest for equilibrium between soul and body, with the result that the symbol of the *khayāl*, together with that of *tayf*, as 'fantasy', 'spirit', 'vision', was sometimes used for the purpose of elevating the physical element, on which the body drew far too often, to something more evanescent and spiritual. Cf. Jacobi, 'al-Khayālānī'.

²⁶ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 118.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

adopted the term *maqāma* to refer to tales narrated by an imaginary *rāwī*, ‘Īsā ibn Hishām, concerning his journeys or adventures, mostly linked to the figure of a popular character, Abū'l-Fath al-Iskandarī, whose orator's art was so sublime as to counteract his various misdeeds and tricks.²⁸ One might suggest that al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* were initially linked to *majālis* literature and the narration of anecdotes, both in wide currency at that time.²⁹ From the outset, however, certain elements distinguished the two genres: for example, anecdotal literature was normally written in an elevated form of language, but not necessarily entirely in *saj*‘ (rhyming prose), especially in descriptive sections.³⁰ Instead al-Hamadhānī used this style for entire compositions.³¹ Furthermore, instead of prefacing the narration of an anecdote with an example of *isnād* (chain of authorities), he preferred to attribute the recounting of every tale to a single narrator, the *rāwī* ‘Īsā ibn Hishām.³² It has also been noted that al-Hamadhānī, by combining in his *maqāmāt* the use of the *fūshā* in general and of *saj*‘ in particular with the topic of the eloquent, impudent vagabond, managed to link his works to descriptions of the world of the Banū Sāsān (crafty, wandering beggars, often rogues) and to literature about them, rather than to other schools of elite literature traditionally popular in medieval times.³³ From a literary standpoint the latter exerted a singular fascination on medieval poets and writers, perhaps due to their vaunted noble or even royal origins. From the tenth century onwards more than one work entitled *Qasīda sāsāniyya* was attributed to famous authors, such as al-Jāhīz or al-Thā'libī (d. 1038). Farces based on the Banū Sāsān were also performed; that there should be considerable affinity between them and the roguish hero of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* is thus hardly surprising.³⁴

²⁸ Even though this type of writing became renowned with al-Hamadhānī, who showed that he could combine interest in an elaborate discourse with a realistic representation of episodes from contemporary life and create through his hero, Abū'l-Fath, a first flowering of the picaresque genre, it seems unwise to suggest that he 'invented' the *Maqāma*, in that the genesis of such genres can never be determined in such precise terms. D. S. Richards takes a particularly sceptical stand with regard to this idea, see his 'The Maqāmat of al-Hamadhānī'.

²⁹ al-Tanūkhī (d. 995), almost his contemporary, had probably already had his collection of anecdotes, *al-Fanaj bā'd al-shidda* (AH 382–4), published. Cf. also Margoliouth, 'Hamadhānī'. With regard to connections of the *maqāmāt* by al-Hamadhānī to the anecdotal literature of that time, see also Malti-Douglas, "Maqāmat" and "Adab".

³⁰ *Saj*, *de rigueur*, in the *khuṭba* (Friday sermon), was also used very often in the *risāla*, which in Abbasid society was frequently destined to be read by more than one person. Cf. Arazi and Shammay, 'Risāla'. His choice of the term *maqāmāt* for these works may well be connected to the use of this style, with reference to the normal standing position of people who recited in *saj*‘, as opposed to those who recited anecdotes or read *rāsā'il* in *majālis* (meetings, sessions), a term derived from a semantic root tied to the idea of 'sitting'. Lane, *Lexicon*, vol. II, pp. 443–4.

³¹ Beeston, 'The Genesis of the Maqāmat Genre'. See also Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*.

³² Mattock, 'The Early History of the *Maqāma*'.

³³ See Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld*.

³⁴ S. Moreh, s.v. *Banū Sāsān*, in Meissami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 134. See also Shoshan, *Popular Culture*.

On the other hand, it has been noted³⁵ that, although each of the famous works by al-Hamadhānī was a complex entity that refers back to several genres, such as sermon, poetry, epithet, traveller's tale, dialogue and discussion, imitation remains a unifying factor in all of them.³⁶ It was only with his successors and in particular with al-Harīrī (1054–1122), that the formal stylistic aspect supplanted an interest in realistic content, leading refinement and rhetorical skill to an acme while at the same time marking the gradual separation of *maqāmāt* from that cluster of works that might be linked to an Arab dramatic experience in the pre-modern era.

The dramatic spirit in al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* is relatively flimsy and can at best be viewed as a possible prelude to any subsequent development of a literary genre. Two essential prerequisites were required to establish a link to the world of dramatic art: first, realism, whereby deeds and personages imitated the contemporary world; second, literary fiction, whereby works that were created would make no claim of historical authenticity. Within such a narrative pseudo-dramatic context, important elements included: abundance of dialogue; liveliness of situation involving the leading characters; dynamism of the narrated acts; concreteness of human actions as portrayed, and presence of two personages commonly associated with the popular narrative context – the narrator, who generally introduced the subject matter and narrated the facts but was sometimes also the protagonist in amazing escapades of his own, and the hero, who often revealed his true identity only at the end, emerging from one of the disguises in which he was a master. Regarding a possible linkage between these early *maqāmāt* and a kind of semi-dramatic activity that was widespread in cultured circles at that time, the comments of those scholars who have perceived a kind of running gag in the works of al-Hamadhānī are also worthy of note. Through sustained and accumulated pressure on the audience, the running gag managed to create a kind of collective dramatic tension. All this presupposes, of course, that the *maqāmāt* were 'available to a public to read and listen to as a whole and more or less in the same order in which they have come down to us'.³⁷

Beyond these opinions (which are not universally shared³⁸), it may be suggested that the *maqāma* was created for the very purpose of performance in front of an audience; in which case its semantic origin in the verbal root, *q w m* (to stand up, to be standing, in an erect position), may be correlated to the

³⁵ Cf. Kilito, *Les Séances*.

³⁶ It has been noted in particular (*ibid.*, pp. 28–32) that each *maqāma* was the representation of a metamorphosis, the systematic counteracting of a situation and its opposite, following the example of a literary trend that was also discernible in various other Arab works, constructed on opposition and complementarity, respect and non-respect, acquiescence and negation.

³⁷ Mattock, 'The Early History of the *Maqāma*', 15.

³⁸ With regard to this, see Richards, 'The Maqāmāt of al-Hamadhānī', 99.

stance of the mime or actor standing up in front of the public to represent the parts and reveal the story.³⁹ This view is propounded by a number of critics, who point out that the constant dialogue between Abū'l-Faṭḥ and the merchant in the *Maqāma madīriyya* provides an obvious illustration of acting possibilities, as does the structure of the *Maqāma baghdādiyya*.⁴⁰

All this, however, inevitably leads to the question as to why the more or less evident dramatic qualities of the *maqāmāt* did not develop further into a genuine genre of theatrical literature. A plausible and commonly accepted explanation notes a certain attitude of superiority among Arabs towards the non-indigenous literary world, one based on the conviction that the highest degree of human eloquence could be achieved only in their language, perfect in itself because it is sacred.⁴¹ It should not be forgotten, however, that, despite the scant interest shown by Muslim Arab civilization during its Golden Age towards the literary products of Hellenism, the concepts of comedy and tragedy were known. Aristotle's works, including his renowned treatise on *Poetics*, had been translated into Arabic in order to provide access to the writings of a thinker who had such an enormous influence on Arab intellectuals and philosophers both of that time and of later generations. However, the essential spirit of Aristotle's writings had not been fully understood or well translated; faced, for example, with the problem of conveying the Greek original into Arabic in the light of their own literary awareness, translators chose to render the two terms 'tragedy' and 'comedy' as two familiar poetic genres, *madḥ* (praise) and *hijā'* (lampoon) respectively.⁴²

As has already been noted, after the eleventh century and especially after the great renown achieved by the *maqāmāt* of al-Harīrī, many sources conflated the designation of different literary genres, and particularly the *maqāma* and *risāla*.⁴³ Alongside *maqāmāt* and *ḥikāyāt*, *rasā'il* displayed an extensive resort to dialogue,⁴⁴ while still maintaining an elaborate, refined style. A certain dramatic spirit has been perceived in some of them, to the extent that some of Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri's (d. 1057) works, such as *Risālat al-ghufrān* and *Lisān al-sāhil wa'l-shāhij*, have been read as deliberately including aspects of a dramatic composition.⁴⁵ Making skilful use of monologues and dialogues (also

³⁹ 'Abd al-Hamid Yūnis, *Khayāl al-żill*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ al-Rā'i, *Funūn al-kūmidiyā*.

⁴¹ Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, pp. 1–6. For others, such as Cachia, 'The Theatrical Movement of the Arabs', one of the reasons why a movement of literary Arab theatre had difficulty in developing was the coexistence of a 'high literature', which was conservative, formal and tied to pre-Islamic poetry, and a 'popular' literature expressed in dialect, which varied over the years.

⁴² Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, pp. 1–6.

⁴³ Brockelmann (Pellat), 'Maqāma'. For the *risāla*, see Hämeen-Anttila's contribution in this volume, Chapter 6.

⁴⁴ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. no.

⁴⁵ Cf. 'Āyisha 'Abd al-Rahmān (ed.), *al-Sāhil wa'l-shāhij*.

between animals) in his works, the author offers clear proof of the close relations at that time between *ḥikāyat* and *rasā'il*.⁴⁶ In his *Lisān al-sābil wa'l-shāhij*, animals act as leading characters in a series of semi-dramatic scenes, holding conversations about events that actually occurred in Syria and Egypt at the time of composition.⁴⁷ Another work by the same author, *al-Dir'iyyāt*, a collection of thirty poems on weapons, is considered by some scholars to be the only classical Arab text in which a deliberate attempt was made to replicate dramatic expression.⁴⁸ Al-Māarrī's *Risālat al-ghufrān* in particular shows clear dramatic tendencies, linked to the method adopted previously in the *Lisān*, although in this case there are no dialogues between animals.⁴⁹ The vigorous sarcasm and subtle irony pervading this *risāla* (especially concerning society of the time), and the psychological insight provided through an elevated language and elaborate style, make of this work one of the most interesting literary historical documents of classical Arabic literature. In the current context what is particularly significant is that it is also one of the most fascinating semi-dramatic texts in Arabic from the pre-modern era.

POST-CLASSICAL DRAMA

If we consider the various literary genres discussed thus far – products of the classical era which continued to develop throughout the post-classical and pre-modern period – from a strictly dramatic viewpoint, it is only the *khayāl* as live theatre and the *khayāl al-zill* as shadow plays that fall directly within the purview of theatre proper, in that only they were undoubtedly intended for performance.⁵⁰

Recent critical studies, however, have clearly underlined the constant existence of a tradition of profane theatre involving live actors, one that was well established throughout the Middle East.⁵¹ In addition to fertility rites that were widespread in ancient times, it would seem that theatre performances of Hellenistic origin in the pre-Islamic period were familiar to the Jewish

⁴⁶ In al-Jahīz, *Risāla fī Banī Umayya*, a work which probably came into being with the first steps in a process of *ḥikāya/risāla* passage, various similarities to subsequent *rasā'il* can already be noted. See Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 110.

⁴⁷ Cf. Smoor, 'Enigmatic Allusion'.

⁴⁸ Cachia, 'The Dramatic Monologues'.

⁴⁹ The epistle in question has offered a vast range of points for critical analysis, from those of D. S. Margoliouth and R. A. Nicholson in the early twentieth century to the study of Ṭahā Husayn in the first decades of the century and so on, up to the essays of 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Rahmān in more recent times among Arab critics.

⁵⁰ Moreh and Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions*, p. 13; S. Moreh, s.v. *Shadow Play*, in Meisami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia*, pp. 701–2; Moreh, *Live Theatre*, pp. 123–45, where two different variants of the *khayāl* are mentioned, one understood as live theatre and one as shadow-play theatre, in this case *khayāl al-zill*.

⁵¹ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 3.

communities, although a certain hostility towards these spectacles of pagan origin existed in religious circles. During the same period Christian communities, no doubt equally hostile to circus and theatre shows that were regarded as a means of corruption created by the devil, seem to have exploited them as a kind of religious play.⁵² From the sixth century onwards, evidence of live theatre in the Middle East exists within the sphere of popular entertainment (games of mimes, etc.) which were to be found everywhere and in all periods,⁵³ although there is no evidence of it as a manifestation of high art.⁵⁴ During the Abbasid period entertainers – ballad singers, musicians, dancers, actors and clowns were occasionally rewarded by the caliph; some even became renowned enough to be counted among the circle of his boon companions.⁵⁵ Apart from these subsidies from the caliph, most of these actors normally earned a living from the offerings of the public before whom they gave improvised performances in marketplaces and streets that were based on repertoires adapted to the circumstances of the time.

There seems to be no mention of shadow plays in Islamized lands until the twelfth century, either as a mode of caliphal entertainment or in descriptions of the court *samar*.⁵⁶ Prior to that date references to them can be found only in the works of Ibn al-Haytham (d. 965) and Ibn Shuhayd (d. 1035)⁵⁷ in eleventh-century Muslim Spain. However, a fully authentic reference to them does exist in Ibn Hazm's (d. 1064) work, *Kitāb al-akhlāq wa'l-siyar*, where he describes images mounted on a wooden 'grindstone' which upon being turned rapidly makes them appear and disappear in succession.⁵⁸ Even though this passage specifically mentions *khayāl al-zill*, the description does not exactly correspond with the technique of this art in subsequent periods, but rather depicts a 'magic lantern' show, as is also suggested in a European translation from the early twentieth century.⁵⁹

A quotation from the mystical poem, *al-Tā'iyya al-kubrā*, by 'Umar ibn al-Fārid (d. 1235) provides a much clearer example. The poet illustrates his

⁵² Ibid., pp. 3–14.

⁵³ For the ancient guilds in Cairo, including the groups of mimes, jugglers, story-tellers, shadow-play puppeteers, cf. Raymond, 'Une Liste des corporations'. For the relationship between popular and lofty-style culture in medieval Cairo, cf. Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, pp. 67–8. For the popular festivals and the festival of Nawrūz in particular: ibid., pp. 40–51; al-Mas'ūdi, *Murij al-dhabab* (Paris, 1861–77), vol. III, pp. 413ff.; al-Maqrifī, *al-Mawā'iz wa l-i'tibār fi dhikr al-khitāt wa'l-āshār* (Bulaq, 1854; repr. Baghdad, n.d.), pp. 468, 493ff.; and G. Wiet (ed.) (Cairo, 1922–4), vol. IV, pp. 224ff. See also Levy, 'Nawrūz'.

⁵⁴ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Moreh, 'Acting and Actors', p. 53.

⁵⁶ Landau, 'Shadow Plays'.

⁵⁷ Badawi, 'Medieval Arabic Drama', 83; Jacob, *Geschichte*, pp. 21–33; and his, *Das Schattentheater*, pp. 3–14.

⁵⁸ Ibn Hazm, *Epitre Morale*, p. 30. See also Nallino, 'Il poema'; Wiedemann, 'Über eine optische Vorrichtung'.

⁵⁹ Tr. M. Asim, published in Madrid in 1910, cited by Nallino, 'Il poema', 94.

philosophical thought by pointing out the lesson to be learned from watching the apparently pointless play of *Tayf khayāl al-zill*, which he describes in a lively, if precious, way. In his verses he describes a screen, figurines, and even the reactions of the public to what was happening on stage. The purpose here is clearly not to display any particular predilection for this type of spectacle, but instead to provide an effective analogy to convey the idea of the poet's soul during its mystical journey. The soul is compared to the puppeteer who, having removed the curtain consisting of physical ties, appears unveiled in all his splendour.⁶⁰ Indirect sources cited by the historian al-Ghuzūlī (d. 1412) also describe shadow plays in Egypt during the rule of the Ayyubid Salāḥ al-Dīn (1138–93). The latter was said to have attended shadow plays with his minister, al-Qādī'l-Fāḍil, who, despite an initial reluctance, had been won over by them.⁶¹ All of this suggests that the *khayāl al-zill* was not only already known in Egypt, but was also at a sufficient level of artistry to be presented even to the sultan and his minister without undermining their religiosity or status.

The three *bābāt* (plays) by the Egyptian doctor Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Dāniyāl (1248–1310), are the only written examples of shadow plays from the past, although the existence of a precise, developed literature within this particular genre is highly probable. The plays were apparently composed in response to a specific request from a well-known *rayyīs* of that time, ‘Alī ibn Mawlahum al-Khayālī. Audiences were said to be bored with the same old shows and kept demanding new works.⁶² The three plays by Ibn Dāniyāl were thus not created by chance, but were planned and organized according to a precise creative method based on similar compositions of the period.⁶³

Their realism and the quick-wittedness of their dialogues link them closely with the *maqāmāt* genre of al-Hamadhānī, but they are also reminiscent of the style of al-Harīrī, to whom Ibn Dāniyāl himself refers.⁶⁴ They include several verses taken from *azjāl*, *mawāliyās* and *muwashshahāt* of the time and even poems in dialect. (See Larkin's contribution in this volume, Chapter 10.) These latter categories render the internal language of these plays extremely complex and often difficult to interpret, but at the same time make of them some of the most significant and oldest written evidence of pre-modern spoken Arabic.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Nallino, 'Il poema', 94.

⁶¹ al-Ghuzūlī, *Maṭāli' al-budūr*, pp. 78–9; 'Abd al-Hamid Yūnus, *Khayāl al-zill*, p. 18; Aziza, *L'Image et l'Islam*, p. 107.

⁶² Hamāda, *Khayāl al-zill*, p. 144; E. K. Rowson, s.v. *Ibn Dāniyāl*, in Meisami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 349.

⁶³ Jacob, *Geschichte*, pp. 35–75; Badawi, 'Medieval Arabic Drama'; Hopwood and Badawi, *Ibn Dāniyāl*.

⁶⁴ Kahle, 'The Arabic Shadow Play'.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 26–7.

From a compositional viewpoint these three *bābāt* by Ibn Dāniyāl are quite sophisticated, resulting perhaps from an evolution in dramatic sense from the *maqāma*.⁶⁶ This hypothesis is strengthened by a reference in the chronicles of the Egyptian historian Ibn Iyās (d. 1524), who terms one of Ibn Dāniyāl's texts concerning taverns and their habitués a *maqāma*, and cites it as a description of social life during the rule of Sultan Baybars, after the latter's order to close taverns and brothels.⁶⁷ As has already been noted, Ibn Dāniyāl later used this same composition, in a shortened version, in the introduction to one of his three famous *bābāt*, *Tayfal-khayāl*.⁶⁸ On the other hand we have already drawn attention to the significant exchangeability among literary genres in both the classical and post-classical periods. During the post-classical era it seems that types of *maqāmāt* that could be termed 'vulgar' existed alongside the more 'serious' categories of *maqāmāt* with their elaborate style. The former were widespread and were only intended for jests and entertainment. One example from the thirteenth century is *al-Maqāma al-mukhtasara* by Muhammad ibn Mawlahum al-Khayālī, brother or cousin of the same 'Alī ibn Mawlahum who had commissioned Ibn Dāniyāl's *bābāt*. This particular text was clearly intended for presentation in the theatre, if only because its author, designated a *khayālī*, was a professional actor and producer.⁶⁹

If we acknowledge the possibility of a derivation of shadow plays from the *maqāma*, it would seem to involve a kind of bifurcation in the development of the latter: in one case, it would have become an expression of literary elaboration to be interpreted by an elect few as it continued on its path in quest of stylistic perfection; in the second, it would be a concrete representation of daily life directed towards dramatic literature. This hypothesis – one that involves a continuous and parallel path taken by texts destined for two different categories of public – seems plausible: some examples, created in the literary language, were destined for private or possibly collective reading by the cultured classes; others, more composite and enriched by sections in colloquial dialect and envisaged in both fully and partially written form, were destined for performance on stage using either live actors or shadows.⁷⁰ However, once again the similarity of tone, style and language used in certain parts of different works reveals the close affinity between different literary genres, the various language codes and the implied recipients of the actual works. The interaction between oral literature and belles-lettres, a feature of

⁶⁶ Badawi, 'Medieval Arabic Drama', 92–3, 106.

⁶⁷ Ibn Iyās, *Kitāb baddā'i' al-zuhūr*; Mostafa, *Die Chronik des Ibn Iyās*, vol. I, pp. 326ff.

⁶⁸ Badawi, 'Medieval Arabic Drama', 107; Kahle, *Der Leuchtturm von Alexandria*, pp. 73–6.

⁶⁹ S. Moreh, s.v. *Muhammad ibn Mawlahum al-Khayālī*, in Meisami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia*, vol. I, pp. 349–50.

⁷⁰ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, pp. 104–51.

the Abbasid era that had given rise to new literary genres, was followed in subsequent centuries by a complex evolution of those same genres, some of which – such as the *khayāl al-zill* (even allowing for its probable Far-East or Indian provenance) – in transplanted form achieved their most effective expression during the Mamluk era.⁷¹

The three *bābāt* by Ibn Dāniyāl certainly show a greater sense of realism than the *maqāmāt*, despite the close relationship between the two literary genres that still existed at that time. However, like the latter, they too were intended for *ahl al-adab* (the cultured), as can be clearly seen from the *mugaddima* (introduction) to the first *bāba*, *Tayfal-khayāl*.⁷² Even so, the major inspiration for the theatrical texts of the Egyptian doctor seems to come directly from the street, from the lower classes of society, from which the worst aspects were taken in order to raise a laugh from the audience. The technique adopted seems to follow conventional canons, reverting to a practice, widespread in the Arab world, of looking at the comic side of human relations – intrigues, hoaxes and disguises – and dwelling on details of the worst aspects of human failings.⁷³ To achieve this comic quality, there is a certain adherence to the Aristotelian concept of comedy, as has been pointed out by critics discussing the period.⁷⁴ Indeed, although it may be true that the conflict in Greek tragedy was sufficiently far removed from the Islamic spirit for its acceptance and literary use to be prevented, a possible transfer of comedy from the Hellenistic to the Arab-Islamic world cannot be ruled out (whether mime or other literary modes were involved). The now totally absent man–God conflict is replaced in comedy by the theme of human weakness, which is presented in comic form via a medium that was widespread throughout the Middle East.⁷⁵ Ibn Dāniyāl's interest in prominent figures earning a living by hoaxes and eloquence acquires a higher value and moral message when he chooses to conclude his work with a finale in which the leading character repents, demonstrating that not only is vulgar entertainment possible, but, when it comes to an end, one can also be concerned about the soul.⁷⁶ In this connection we need to recall that literary works written in the post-classical period continue to invoke the topics and techniques that were widely used in previous centuries: even in al-Harīrī's *maqāmāt*, a constant element is the final act of repentance by the leading figure.

⁷¹ Norris, 'Fables and Legends'.

⁷² Hamāda, *Khayāl al-zill*, p. 144.

⁷³ Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*; Weber, *Imaginaire arabe*. For more modern aspects tied to sexuality, see Allen et al. (eds.), *Love and Sexuality*.

⁷⁴ Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 4–5. Cf. Aristotle, *Poetica*, pp. 123, 131.

⁷⁶ Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, p. 24.

Ibn Dāniyāl's three plays, probably composed around 1267, have come down to us in the form of three manuscripts, two kept in the Escorial in Madrid (recorded some two hundred years after their author's lifetime) and the third in Cairo (which may be dated to another one hundred years later). Scholars who have subjected these manuscripts to critical analysis have consistently pointed to the considerable difficulties involved in reading and interpreting them, to the point of suggesting that copyists had either not understood or else had misunderstood certain points and had thus not always transcribed them accurately.⁷⁷

The narrative segment is concentrated in the speech of a 'presenter' (*muqaddim*) who proceeds to explain the work's genesis, to introduce the characters and comment on their actions. The rest is largely dramatic dialogue, embellished by passages of rhyming prose and the recital of verses and songs. The author's numerous stage directions are not noted in the margins, but rather form an integral part of the text, being themselves written in rhyming prose.

The introduction to the first of the three *bābāt*, *Tayf al-khayāl*, explains the work's artistic purpose. It is, we are informed, a contribution to literary art; it is not merely a diversion for the uncultured. Although peppered with frivolities, it is intended for an intelligent audience, people who can fully appreciate its value. The introduction to the second play, *Ajib wa-gharīb*, announces that the work's basic goal is to portray various types of persons – some cultured, others ignorant – living in Cairo and frequenting its squares or marketplaces. In the introduction to the third play, entitled *al-Mutayyam*, the work is said to concern the circumstances of lovers, gambling and jesting.⁷⁸

Each of Ibn Dāniyāl's three works has its own precise structure: the first, *Tayf al-khayāl*, is the longest and most elaborate with regard to plot and characterization.⁷⁹ It recounts the story of Wisāl, an old soldier who has led a dissolute life and finally convinces himself to abandon a life of vice and get married. After the ceremony is over, he discovers to his horror that the woman he has married is extremely ugly, and not the beautiful girl promised to him by Umm Rashīd, the marriage broker. Here both theme and situations are farcical; they closely resemble the ones encountered in later shadow plays

⁷⁷ The texts were initially studied by G. Jacob, and later by A. Müller, who concentrated on them for thirty-five years, highlighting not only their value but also the complexity of translation and interpretation. His studies were picked up and continued by P. Kahle, who commenced work on them in 1937. There has been more detailed research on these texts since the 1960s, including studies by Arab scholars such as Fu'ād Ḥasanayn, Muḥammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī, Ibrāhīm Ḥamāda and 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Yūnus. Recent European analyses include the one by Hopwood and Badawi, *Ibn Dāniyāl*.

⁷⁸ Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁹ Badawi, 'Medieval Arabic Drama', 93; for plot details and comments, 93–101. See also Ḥamāda, *Khayāl al-zill*, pp. 188–231.

and in the Turkish *Karagöz* theatre, albeit in a much simplified form.⁸⁰ For example, the very same theme occurs in one of the Karākūz theatrical texts best known in the Syrian context, that being a region in which the influence of the Turkish shadow plays was particularly marked: in '*Urs Karākūz*', the leading character is deceived in the same way and finds himself married to an ugly woman instead of the splendid girl he had imagined.⁸¹

Ibn Dāniyāl's second play takes its name from the two main characters, 'Ajib (the Preacher) and Gharīb (the Stranger). Rather than a tale with a very thin plotline, the work seems better viewed as a montage of amusing and dishonest types who frequented the marketplaces at the time. Here too one automatically thinks of Turkish shadow plays where a pair of inseparable friends, Karagöz and Hacivad, are always prepared to make fun of each other and the world around them. In Ibn Dāniyāl's text, however, there is a close connection with the literature of the Banū Sāsān, mentioned earlier as source of inspiration for medieval literature. Not for nothing is the figure of Gharīb portrayed as a crafty vagabond, clever talker and utter scoundrel, someone whose personal attributes – in terms of spirit, loquacity and astuteness – are not far removed from those of Abū'l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī, the hero of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*.⁸²

In the third play, *al-Mutayyam*, the plot is equally thin, focusing on the contention between the chief character, who is enduring all the pangs of love for a young man, and the previous object of his passion, now abandoned. There are fights between cocks, bulls and other animals. Here too there is a strange assemblage of characters, who discuss their sexual activities in detail. The lack of precise documentation regarding the personae commonly involved in performances of this text precludes any specific analysis. Even so, it is hard to avoid drawing some parallels with characters who make an appearance in the texts of some Egyptian shadow plays popular in the eighteenth century that were discovered in the district of Manzala in Egypt in the following century, characters who have been more fully studied by critics at the beginning of the twentieth century. The richness of realistic detail, the abundant representation of objects, merchandise and dwellings found in Cairene markets – all of which have been analysed in detail with regard to the Egyptian shadow plays described in the Manzala manuscript⁸³ – may serve as a more concrete, albeit later, example of what was customary in the time of Ibn Dāniyāl, whose performances may have been equally embellished by such figurative elements.

⁸⁰ Among principal works on the Turkish shadow theatre: Jacob, *Geschichte*, pp. 83–108; Martinovich, *The Turkish Theatre*; Ritter, *Karagöz*; And, *Karagöz*; 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Arnā'ut, 'Khayāl al-żill'.

⁸¹ Husayn Salīm Hijāzī, *Khayāl al-żill*.

⁸² S. Moreh, s.v. *Banū Sāsān*, in Meissami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 134.

⁸³ Kahle, 'Islamische Schattenspielfiguren aus Ägypten'.

These plays of Ibn Dāniyāl, and in particular the second and the third, have been of great interest to scholars who have found within them many direct or indirect descriptions of Egyptian society and customs in the thirteenth century and perhaps even before. The liveliness of the principal characters seems to confirm that the plays furnish a vivid reflection of the life and tastes of the period.

In the context of a discussion concerning the continuity of the tradition of shadow plays through the centuries, it is important to observe that some of the principal characters – the Presenter (Master of Ceremonies), Abū'l-Qīṭāṭ, Umm Rashīd and others are also to be found in the Manzala manuscript mentioned above.⁸⁴ The manuscript in question (probably written between 1705 and 1707) was carefully studied by one of its later discoverers, Hasan al-Qashshās, a real-estate agent who died in Cairo in 1909,⁸⁵ along with another enthusiast for the art, Mūsā al-Darā'. It formed the basis upon which texts and techniques culled from Arab shadow plays of the past were reintroduced into nineteenth-century Egypt. The manuscript is invaluable for the detailed information it contains. It provides names of famous puppeteers of the time. They include Dāwūd al-Manāwī (or al-Manātī), the 'spice vendor', who was equally renowned in Cairo for his music, his performances and his tragic death,⁸⁶ and who seems to have possessed a vast repertoire of texts and songs, some his own and others inherited from predecessors.⁸⁷ The personages and plots to be found within the texts included in the manuscript display countless similarities to the three *bābāt* by Ibn Dāniyāl and strongly suggest a continuous performance tradition of *khayāl al-zill* at least from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, even though not attested through the existence of original texts. It thus seems reasonable to posit an uninterrupted tradition of this category of art, one placed midway between the popular and literary traditions, widely appreciated by audiences of all cultural levels, accessible to the majority, and closely related to surrounding reality; a tradition that was at one and the same time steeped in the contemporary spirit while still preserving and incorporating materials inherited from the past.

The only information on this subject, gleaned indirectly from historical sources, tends to suggest that such performances were widespread in Mamluk Egypt. Since there is a report of a sudden ban on the presentation of shadow plays by Sultan al-Zāhir Jaqmaq (1438–53), along with a command that all the puppeteers' figurines were to be burned, there is a clear indication of the

⁸⁴ Landau, *Shadow Plays*, xxxix–xliv; and his, *Studies in the Arab Theatre*.

⁸⁵ Cf. Kahle, *Zur Geschichte des Arabischen Schattenspielen*, pp. 1–15.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–36.

⁸⁷ He is cited as the performer of shadow plays before the Turkish sultan Ahmad I, in Adrianopolis. Cf. Kahle, 'The Arabic Shadow Play'.

perceived need to suppress a performance ritual that had perhaps become too lively and even dangerous for public order, given the constant satirical vein of these performances.⁸⁸ However, a mere ten years later, this same art seems to have emerged yet again: the satirical and comic poems of the poet 'Alī ibn Sūdūn al-Bashbaghāwī (d. 1464) were widely adapted as shadow plays.⁸⁹ Yet again, the custom of mounting this type of performance in Mamluk Egypt is attested via information in the chronicles of Ibn Iyās, who records that in 1498 Sultan Abū Sādāt Muḥammad thoroughly enjoyed this entertainment.⁹⁰ With regard to the period immediately afterwards, the same Ibn Iyās reports that when the Turkish sultan Salīm I conquered Egypt in 1517, a shadow play was performed that he found so enjoyable that he was eager to take the puppeteers back with him to Istanbul.⁹¹ This account can be seen as a reflection of the skill displayed by Egyptian artists at this time and also the high level that this category of artistic expression had achieved in Cairo, and, on the other hand, the scarcity or even lack of similar types of artistic expression in Istanbul and the Turkish-speaking world of the period.

Accounts of performances of popular plays using shadows and puppets are also provided by European travellers to the East during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They all reveal their surprise and curiosity regarding an art that certainly existed to a certain extent in their own homelands, but was almost always totally different in both technique and spirit. One of the earliest of these travellers is the Roman Della Valle, who visited the Near East in the seventeenth century and wrote a highly detailed account of what he witnessed, including numerous popular performances and other types of entertainment either in the open air or in coffeeshops.⁹² Niebuhr and Russel's summaries of their travels in the Near East in the eighteenth century, with their descriptions of different towns and cities, squares and people, are equally invaluable,⁹³ as is Lane's nineteenth-century survey of the manners and customs of Egyptians, including precise descriptions of their favourite pastimes, popular entertainments, music and dancing.⁹⁴ G. de Nerval's account of his travels in the same century provides precise details of performances using both shadows and live actors that he attended during his journey in the Near East, and also descriptions of the topics of

⁸⁸ Ibid., 21; Wiet, *Journal d'un bourgeois*, p. 187.

⁸⁹ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, p. 73.

⁹⁰ Kahle, 'The Arabic Shadow Play', 21.

⁹¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr*, vol. V, p. 192.

⁹² Della Valle, *Dei viaggi*, p. 632. For his biography, see Rossi, 'Pietro della Valle'.

⁹³ Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia*; Russel, *The Natural History of Aleppo*.

⁹⁴ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, p. 397.

some comedies.⁹⁵ These and many other travellers often focused their attentions on the more immoral aspects of some of these theatrical pieces or on their obscene language rather than describing the artistic techniques of the performance or the literary value of the actual texts. Their accounts, however, confirm the presence and wide popularity of the *khayāl al-zill* and other forms of theatre, performances that provided widespread forms of entertainment almost until modern times, in both the Arabic- and Turkish-speaking regions.

During the period of Ottoman suzerainty over the Arab world, cultural phenomena moved from one environment to the other; sometimes they merged, at others they were completely transplanted. Among them were characters and themes from shadow plays, which in some Arab countries even became standardized according to the model of their conquerors. This was particularly the case in Syria, Lebanon and North Africa, to such an extent that both Syrian and North African shadow plays adopted almost all the characteristics of Turkish ones regarding personae, situations presented on stage, costumes and fixed formulas in dialogue.⁹⁶ The two popular heroes, Karagöz and Hacivad – introduced into the shadow plays of these Arab regions under the names Karākūz and ‘Aywāz – now became exclusively their principal characters.⁹⁷ Other important personae also transferred naturally via the shadow play from the Turkish to the Arab environment. The figure of the drunkard, Bekrī Muṣṭafā, is emblematic of this trend: he appears for the first time in Turkish texts of the mid-seventeenth century, in the repertoire of a famous puppeteer, Hasanzāde, who, it would seem, was regularly called on to entertain Sultan Murād IV (reigned 1623–40).⁹⁸ Since that time, the figure of a drunken braggart has continued to occupy an important place in this type of performance in both the Turkish world and those Arab countries that were most strongly influenced by the dominion of the Ottoman empire. The character may have taken on some slightly different local nuances, but the basic

⁹⁵ De Nerval, *Le Voyage en Orient*, vol. II, pp. 202–15.

⁹⁶ With regard to North African shadow theatre, see also Hönerbach, *Das nordafrikanische Schattentheater*; Aziza, *Les Formes traditionnelles*. Regarding Syrian theatre, the studies of the following are significant: A. Abū Shānab, *Masrah ‘arabī qadīm: Karākūz* (Damascus, 1964); M. Kayyāl, *Ramadān wa-taqālīd dimashqiyā* (Damascus, 1973); S. Qatāya, *Nuṣūṣ min khayāl al-zill fi Halab* (Damascus, 1977). See also Dorigo Ceccato, ‘Il teatro d’ombra’.

⁹⁷ With regard to the presumed common origin of Arab and Turkish mime, both derived from the Greek tradition, it has been pointed out that the Turks were already in contact with the Byzantines long before the capture of Constantinople and that mime almost certainly entered their environment together with the other things inherited from Byzantine culture. See Landau, *Shadow Plays*, pp. xxiii–xxv.

⁹⁸ The Turkish traveller Evliyā Celebi mentions this in his travel book, *Seyāhatnāme*, in relation to the years 1630–76. For the author see Mordtmann, ‘Ewliyā Čelebi’; Lybyer, ‘The Travels of Evliyā Effendi’.

framework remains that of the original type, the seventeenth-century Bekrī Muṣṭafā.⁹⁹

Egypt, being virtually free of the influence of the Turkish Karagöz, provides a counter example, keeping its local tradition relatively intact. Artists continued to perform autochthonous texts until the gradual extinction of this art in the early twentieth century. It is interesting to note that performances based on older texts were undoubtedly still in vogue in the nineteenth century, as is attested in several sources, not least the work of Ahmad Taymūr Bāsha on Arab dramatic art.¹⁰⁰ This study contains an interesting list of the most popular texts in the repertoires of the period, plot summaries and references to principal characteristics (length, moral element, richness of figurative elements and abundance of songs). The puppeteer Ḥasan al-Qashshāsh and his son Darwīsh are also mentioned, along with their enduring ability to continue practising the art in the old way.¹⁰¹ Taymūr mentions renowned texts, such as *Lu'bat al-dayr*, *Lu'bat al-timsāḥ* and *Lu'bat al-markab*, as being very old and abounding in details; it seems clear that in his time performances were still being given regularly in private houses or coffeeshops.¹⁰²

The widespread popularity in Egypt and most of the Arab world of many other popular dramatic plays that had been in great favour since the ninth century¹⁰³ and performed by live actors rather than using shadows or puppets, certainly fulfilled a crucial role in keeping alive the taste for mime and acting before an impromptu audience. Such performances would show a pronounced tendency towards the comic. They involved lewd gestures and dialogues solely intended to raise a laugh,¹⁰⁴ very like pantomime and the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and consisted of simple, satirical stories that were highly interesting from a socio-anthropological point of view but often extremely vulgar. Among the artists who took part in these performances an important role was played by *muqallidūn* (mimes, imitators), whose entire purpose was to entertain, often using uncouth, vulgar techniques through gesture or word.¹⁰⁵ However, alongside these types of performance there were also other more

⁹⁹ For this colourful type of drunkard, see Jacob, 'Bekri Mustafa', 621ff.; and his, *Das Schattentheater*, p. 12; and his, 'Traditionen'. Descriptions of this character are also to be found in And, *Karagöz*, pp. 1, 72; Landau, 'Shadow Plays', p. lii/147, and many others. Among Arab scholars the peculiarities of this character are cited in many works, e.g. Nizār al-Aswad, *'Khayāl al-zill'*; Kayyāl, *Yā Shām!*, p. 72; and his, *Mu'jam bābāt masrah al-zill*, pp. 9, 27–8. On the reconstruction of the historical identity of Bekrī Muṣṭafā, presumed drinking companion of Murād IV and therefore one who actually lived in the latter's court, see Dorigo Ceccato, 'Su Bekrī Muṣṭafā'.

¹⁰⁰ Taymūr, *'Khayāl al-zill wa'l-lu'ab'*.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰² See also Dorigo Ceccato, 'Un diverso approccio al "Khayāl al-zill"'.

¹⁰³ Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre*, pp. 17–24.

¹⁰⁴ Moreh and Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ For the *muqallidūn*, see also al-Rā'i, 'Some Aspects of Modern Arabic Drama'.

serious pastimes tied to the functions of narrators/impersonators who took on the task of dealing with themes that were more morally uplifting, and told tales inspired by the lives of legendary heroes or famous poets whose verses were freely quoted; these artists, itinerant story-tellers and players, would narrate their tales to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. They might specialize in the epic deeds of a particular hero, from whom they took their name: the *Antariyya*, for example, sang the life of 'Antar, the renowned pre-Islamic cavalier-poet; the *Abū Zaydiyya* narrated the deeds of Abū Zayd, hero of the Banī Hilal epic. In 1834 in Cairo, the former category were said to number as many as fifty, while the latter numbered about thirty.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, there were also other story-tellers with more general and varied repertoires; in which case the artist was defined by one of a variety of names – from *shā'ir* (poet) to *muhaddith* (narrator), *munshid* (reciter) to *maddāh* (eulogizer) and *hakawātī* (story-teller).¹⁰⁷

Whether they were narrator-poets of epic tales with moralizing, didactic, as well as entertaining, import, or mimes and animators of more or less licentious comic scenes, the art of these performers – although far from being true dramatic theatre – was based on the combination of the word with gesture and provides an example of a very rich and variable semi-dramatic art. Furthermore, the feature common to all of them was recitation from memory of personal repertoires handed down by oral transmission and adapted to the particular audience through reference to contemporary issues of relevance to the time or the local society.

The fact that these performances did not normally engender a written literature is seen by some critics as the consequence of a persistent division between an elite, somewhat formal, level of literature, one that was linked to a strongly conservative instinct regarding language, and a more popular literature, one that was expressed either wholly or partially in dialect, a language level that is, by its very nature, variable, dynamic and linked to the continuous process of social change.¹⁰⁸ Although interaction between these two levels existed, the evolution of vernacular texts from being a purely popular oral tradition to a new category of written literature was not accomplished – and especially in the dramatic realm – with the ease of texts in full *fushā* language or in composite texts. In reality the gap between belles-lettres and popular literature was probably accentuated by the controversial themes that characterized performances improvised by wandering actors and by the often coarse and

¹⁰⁶ Tadié, 'Naissance du théâtre'; Lane, *Manners and Customs*, chs. xxi–xxiii. The work by G. Canova is also significant for certain aspects, 'La tradizione nell'Alto Egitto', *QSA, Documents*, 1 (Rome, 1998): film and text in three languages (Italian, English, Arabic).

¹⁰⁷ With regard to the various names used to define actors, see also Moreh, 'Acting and Actors', p. 54.

¹⁰⁸ Cachia, 'The Theatrical Movement of the Arabs'.

risqué comic aspect of their gestures and words. As a result, the cultured Arab milieu chose for a long time to maintain an attitude of marked, disdainful superiority towards an art that was not seen as deserving a place within the sphere of high literature, but that might well have merited study as a popular phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

It was the nineteenth century that was to witness a revival of interest in the traditionally based theatre, involving everything created in the past to entertain the public through drama and acting, from the *hikāya* to the *maqāma*, from *khayāl* to *khayāl al-zill*, from texts in elevated language to improvised farce, from *zajal* to classical verse, from music to dancing. All this was not in vain, since the forms and spirit were transferred to the new model of modern theatre which may have taken its initial momentum from the West but brought to its elaboration all the past experience from the Middle East.

CHAPTER 18

PRE-MODERN DRAMA

Drama was not unknown to Arab society when the beys of Tunis and the French expeditionary force brought European theatrical performances to the area in the late eighteenth century. Traditional forms of popular drama continued to exist well after the growth of European dramatic activities in the Arab world and were to provide some inspiration to the emergent modern Arab theatre. Apart from a number of texts of shadow theatre our limited knowledge of this whole genre depends largely upon the accounts of travellers and local chroniclers. The Arab elite excluded Arabic drama from their concept of the realm of literature, because pre-modern theatrical performances were oral, given in colloquial or semi-colloquial, and provided what was regarded as frivolous, impudent and debauched (*sukhf wa-mujūn*) entertainment.¹ Thus the literary tradition refers to this drama only in casual allusions.

KARĀKŪZ²

In the nineteenth century most visitors to any town in North Africa, Iraq and the Levant would have seen the ‘ludicrous exhibition of rude jests, bear-fighting, unseemly gestures’, represented in shadow or puppet theatre by two fantastically dressed personages, Karākūz and ‘Īwāz.³ They might also have witnessed one of the many groups of itinerant performers of comic improvisatory drama, variously called *halqa*, *bisāt*, *habābziya*, *Awlād Rābiya* or *sāmir*. Shadow theatre (*Karākūz* or *khayāl al-zill*) portrayed characters reflected as shadows cast by flat, coloured puppets on a white linen screen. The shadow-player frequently used a stand, like the European marionette theatre, with a screen stretched across and illuminated from behind by an oil-lamp or candles. The figures, one to two feet in height, made of fine transparent camel

¹ Moreh, ‘Shadow-Play’.

² Paul Kahle, Friedrich Kern and Kurt Prüfer have published studies on Egyptian shadow theatre. ‘Ādil Abū Shanab, Salmān Qatāya, Ḥijāzī, al-Dhahabi, ‘Abd Allāh, Quedenfeldt, Littmann, O. Spies and E. Saussey have published texts of shadow plays.

³ Anon., ‘An Arabic Punch’. Fārūq Sa’d has published a weighty encyclopedic work on Arab shadow theatre, *Khayāl al-zill al-‘arabī*. See also Kayyāl, *Mu‘jam bābāt masrah al-zill*.

leather or cardboard, were pressed against the screen by means of rods inserted into holes in their limbs and chests. The figures were manipulated by the hidden puppet master (*miqaddim* or *rayyis*), who introduced the characters and delivered their dialogues and popular songs, sometimes assisted by associates. On grander occasions he was accompanied by three or four musicians, playing tambourines, a reed flute and a drum. The plays enacted were 'not far removed from medieval western drama, from the Mysteries and Moralities as well as the *Sotties*'.⁴ In most Arab countries the shadow play derived its name from that employed for the Turkish shadow play, *Karagöz* (Black Eye), taken from the name of its chief character. The Arab version in most lands was closely modelled on the Turkish and did not develop as a significantly different strain.

Karākūz and the itinerant actors could be seen as part of the many entertainments accompanying public and religious ceremonies, or domestic festivities, such as circumcision or marriage celebrations. In some countries *Karākūz* was to be seen only during the first hours of the nights of the fasting month of Ramadan. Such entertainments beguiled crowds on such occasions as 'Āshūra, the *mahmal* ceremony, the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet and the pilgrimages to Muslim saints' tombs in commemoration of their birthdays (*mawlidis*). The performers' tent or simple stage attracted spectators in a public place, in the bazaar, outside (or inside) a café or before the private home of the rich. In Cairo Ebzekieh was the preferred rendezvous; in Tunis performances were to be seen in the quarter of Bab Souika in Ḥalfaouine; in the old city of Jerusalem people went to the coffeehouses in Bāb al-Mahāṭṭa, al-Bāshūra and Bāb al-Maghāriba, and in Baghdad children watched *Karākūz* in the 'Azāwī cafe in the main square.⁵ The audience was chiefly the uneducated; the higher class attended shadow plays only occasionally, even during Ramadan when the shows were at their best. Audiences would comment on the play, the figures would improvise rejoinders and carry on conversations with them.⁶

Karākūz represented a kind of grotesque buffoonery, retelling the strange adventures of the two heroes. In Tunisia the character Karākūz knocked down walls, uprooted palm trees and defied ferocious animals. In Egyptian shadow theatre (*khayāl al-zill*) he was a truculent, artful, boastful person, who while displaying popular sagacity, behaved shamefully, annoyed and deceived others, relieving them of their possessions and beating them. Karākūz could be young or old. Often with an ugly countenance and an ungainly bearing, he had an

⁴ Badawi, 'Arabic Drama', p. 329.

⁵ Th. F. M[eyels], 'Ramadhan Play: Kara Goez, in the Old City', *Palestine Post* 1 (13 Ramadan 1362/13 September 1943), in Sa'd, *Khayāl*, pp. 438–9.

⁶ Moreh, 'The Shadow Play', 54, from Munīr Kayyāl, *Ramadān wa-taqalīduhu al-dimashqiyā* (Damascus, n.d.), p. 128. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis, *Khayāl al-zill*, p. 31.

aquiline nose and a huge black beard. He wore the yellow conical cap (*turtur*) of clowns and dervishes, a red kaftan with a wide belt, baggy blue trousers, yellow socks and red shoes with black heels. In Syria he wore a deep red tarboosh and a green kaftan; the compère, his inseparable friend *Īwāz*, was the synonym of an imbecile with a short pointed beard. In Tunisia the same character, called *Hājj ‘Iwāz* (in Turkish *Hacivat*), was a bourgeois type, well educated and conservative.⁷

The performance had various stock characters: in Egypt al-Mu‘allim Sayyid; his servant Farfür; the effendi (the Europeanized Egyptian), and a dancer (*ghāziya*); in Morocco the fat man *Masāyiḥ* and the feeble character *Baqshīsh*.⁸ In Tunisia there were several recurring characters: the two heroes, a Moroccan and an Arab yokel; an armed Berber; a lady dancer; Rikhim, a grotesque comic figure with an enormous belly and backside; the young dandy *Shalbī*; the smoker of kief *al-Hājj Qandil*; the seller of *baqlāwa*; and a very correct individual, Bayram Agha of Albanian origin.⁹ In Syrian shadow theatre there were a host of other characters: Ghandūr, a youth with a moustache, wearing the latest clothes and European shoes, with a stick in hand; a poor infirm man, wearing a grey coat full of holes, leaning on a thick stick; a number of veiled women wrapped up in woollen wraps, carrying an umbrella or a flower; a pathological character, an opium addict, who chortled through his nose; Qurayṭim, a simple Turk, whose duty it was to preserve order, and a lazy Egyptian.¹⁰

The texts of *Karākūz* were memorized, not written, a sign of their improvisation. The greater part of the dialogue was sung or recited in dialect. The medium of later performances was popular verse (*zajal*). In Egypt and Tunisia, shadow and puppet theatre were mainly performed in the Turkish language till the 1820s, then chiefly in colloquial Arabic in the second half of the century, though performances in Turkish could still be seen. Turkish had been for some time the language of the ruling elite in many Arab countries.¹¹

The licentiousness, sexual innuendo, indecent images and vocabulary of these ‘Saturnalia’, performed by puppets or actors, were considered by some European spectators as so gross that they would have shocked an ancient Greek audience accustomed to the plays of Aristophanes.¹² Most Arab spectators did not see any immorality in the obscene language or the liberty with which sexual issues were treated, and even allowed their children to attend. As M. M.

⁷ Bütistifā, *Alf‘ām*, pp. 87, 96.

⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

⁹ Landau, *Studies*, p. 24, nn. 71–2; Ben Halima, *Un Demi-siècle*, pp. 23–4.

¹⁰ Khoueiri, *Théâtre*, p. 23.

¹¹ Müller, ‘Zür Geschichte des arabischen Schattenspiels’.

¹² Maxime du Camp, *Le Nil (Egypte et Nubie)* (Paris, 1889), p. 30. Flaubert gives us part of an obscene dialogue, quoted in Francis Steegmüller (ed.), *Flaubert in Egypt* (London, 1983), pp. 37–8.

Badawi has remarked, normal physical functions have always provided the human race with an inexhaustible source of merriment.¹³ Many aspects, such as the prevailing humour, slapstick, the satire of morals and customs, attacks on corruption and the mocking of the gullibility of the common man, were common themes in both *Karākūz* and the farces, and the forms probably owed a lot to each other. Violence, bastinading and imprisonment inflicted on the unfortunate underdog were common ingredients; the denouement of most pieces was usually violence and frequent beatings for chastisement and correction. This is illustrated in a Syrian performance: *Karākūz* takes a wife and on the wedding night she gives birth to a handsome son; *Karākūz* complains of becoming a father in so short a time, and starts menacingly to rock the baby, who presumably meets the unfortunate fate of Punch's baby.¹⁴ Europeans, other foreigners, and religious and racial minorities, such as Christians and Jews, were often the butt of the piece. This drama scorned the beliefs of Christians and the business customs of Jews and Berbers; Muslims were seldom reviled. In Tunisia the Maltese, a scapegoat for all European Christians, were treated execrably.¹⁵ Among the characters that brought a laugh were those whose pronunciation mutilated the Arabic language: the outlandish accent of the Sudanese and the broken Arabic of new characters, such as the European tourist, the foreign doctor or the ambassador.

Karākūz was composed of short comic dialogues, dances and set-piece scenes, depicting centuries-old stories, historical events, legends and fictional tales, often with the added ingredient of topical allusions and local gossip. The essential humour was often an expression of the contempt for rulers. In their satirical sallies the performances spared neither rank, age nor sex.¹⁶ *Karākūz*'s jokes were, however, also directed against his own stupidity.

A sort of *vox populi*, the social and political criticism aired in *Karākūz* had always annoyed the authorities. To the delight of the populace in Aleppo in the eighteenth century, *Karākūz* lampooned the Janissaries, who had been discredited in the war of 1786 with Russia. As a result the authorities banned performances. It was silenced again during the French occupation of Egypt,¹⁷ and did not long survive the French occupation of Algeria in 1830. *Karākūz* in Algiers presented all sorts of insulting buffoonery. At the end of one play a giant *Karākūz* puts to flight a French military unit, beating the soldiers with

¹³ Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, p. 19.

¹⁴ Khouéiri, *Théâtre*, pp. 24–6 quoting Pietro Perolari-Malmignati, *Su e giù per la Siria note e schizzi* (Milan, 1878), pp. 74–7.

¹⁵ Landau, *Studies*, p. 41.

¹⁶ Wilkinson, *Modern Egypt*, vol. I, p. 270.

¹⁷ Büttifä, *Alf'am*, p. 100; Russell, *The Natural History*, vol. I, p. 147.

the aid of the phallic god of fecundity, briskly handled in the form of a stick. In another play Satan appears in a French uniform. The French authorities' abhorrence of such satire led to its proscription by the French governor-general in 1843, to ensure that French authority was no longer ridiculed and that the performers did not incite the indigenous population to revolt. In Tripoli in Libya in 1910 the public celebration of the dethronement of 'Abd al-Hamīd II and the adoption of the new constitution of 1908 was depicted, leading the authorities to ban all political references.¹⁸ When the French resident-general in Tunis was attacked, it was similarly banned. In Egypt *Karākūz* was employed as a means to express hatred of the British occupier and of the Greek traders and money-lenders, who had amassed fortunes by grinding down the Egyptian peasant.¹⁹ In twentieth-century Damascus the puppeteer put all sorts of political comments into the mouths of his characters, for which he could easily have been arrested.²⁰

MARIONETTE THEATRE

Marionettes were to be found too in different parts of the Arab world. There were many similarities between shadow and puppet theatre. In the marionette theatre the small puppets were poorly made of paper, wood, cloth, plaster, wire, straw, cotton and leather. The booth for the plays, made of cloth that folded easily, was only slightly higher than a man; the facade was a little lower than the other sides. The performer sat inside, moving the primitive glove puppets. Not more than two characters appeared at any one time. Sometimes an assistant would sit with the audience, directing verbal sallies at the puppets.²¹

TUNIS

In Algeria and in the Halfaouine Place in Tunis, Sicilian puppets could be seen, as tall as a man, moved by strings from above. One of their famous pieces was 'The Play of Ismā'il Pasha' (*Lu'bāt Ismā'il Bāshā*). Ismā'il was a warrior, who chops off all the crowned heads of Europe with his *yatagan*. In this play the puppets depict the heroism of the Ottoman army in the Russian and Balkan wars. Other characters are Ismā'il's beautiful daughter

¹⁸ Roth, *Le Théâtre*, pp. 14–15, from Prince Pückler-Muskau, *Chronique, lettres, journal de voyage*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1836–7), vol. II, pp. 99–100; Docteur Bernard, *L'Algérie qui s'en va* (Paris, 1887), pp. 66–7 and L. Piesse, *Itinéraire de l'Algérie, de la Tunisie et de Tanger* (Paris, 1885), p. 36. Landau, *Studies*, p. 39; Hoenerbach, *Das nordafrikanische Schattentheater*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Abul Naga, *Les Sources françaises*, p. 43.

²⁰ Moreh, 'The Shadow Play', 54.

²¹ *Qāmūs al-masrah*, vol. I, pp. 60–1: 'al-Arāgūz'.

Nīnā, and his squire the Maltese Nīkūlā. In Libya and Morocco Bū Sa‘diyya was a hero of the puppet theatre, a good-natured cheerful young man, wearing a leather mask, a strange felt cap with the beak of a bird, and the tail of a fox, covered in castanets, and over his head a hood made from alfalfa. His beard was made from camel hair. This strange figure had been the King of Mali, who, having lost his throne, moved from town to town, scorned by the populace.²²

EGYPT

In Egypt the Turkish term *Arāgūz* (*Karākūz*) was applied to puppet theatre. The central character, Arāgūz, was the ordinary Egyptian, the *ibn al-balad*. He had a strange-looking head, a huge nose, two protruding lips, a bald head and a broad nape to his neck. Arāgūz was flighty, smart, yet sometimes astonishingly stupid, cunning, with the ability to extricate himself from the tightest corners, and vicious. Like the shadow-player, the presenter gave his voice a shrill tone for the dialogue of this character, by putting a swizzle in his mouth.²³ Other stock characters included a boisterous Turkish soldier with a strange accent, a naive Nubian, an Italian or Greek priest and an impudent beggar. The soldier was a stupid, odious personality, on whom Arāgūz wreaked revenge on behalf of Arab society.²⁴ As well as glove puppets, another variety was presented upon a very narrow stage, which the puppet man could easily carry about. He hid in a wooden box, and could see the stage and the spectators through holes. The figures appeared through holes in the stage, and were controlled by brass wires passing through grooves in the lid of the box. There was a more primitive form of little string puppets, made to dance by the manipulator's knee. As with Punch and Judy, the puppets began by paying each other compliments, quarrelled by degrees and invariably ended by beating one another.²⁵ As well as the adventures of Arāgūz, puppet theatre in Egypt told stories of such popular heroes as Adham al-Sharqāwī, or the tales of Riyā and Sakīna.²⁶

Muhabbazūn

The Egyptians were often amused by players of low and ridiculous farces, called *muhabbazūn*, who presented a short comic scene (*fāṣl mudhik*), a primitive

²² Būtistīfā, *Alf‘ām*, pp. 51, 104; Ben Halima, *Un Demi-siècle*, pp. 24–5.

²³ Ḥamāda, *Khayāl al-zill*, pp. 73–4; Clot Bey, *Aperçu général*, vol. II, p. 99.

²⁴ Qāmūs al-masrah, pp. 60–1.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia*, vol. I, p. 144; de Nerval, *Le Voyage*, vol. I, p. 170.

²⁶ al-Rā‘ī, *Funūn al-kūmīdiyā*, p. 60.

kind of *commedia dell'arte*. A large group of artists usually played at weddings at the expense of the bridegroom, performing before the house or in the courtyard, as the chief entertainment for guests during *laylat al-hanna* (the night in which henna is applied to the hands and feet of the bride) and sometimes during the latter half of the preceding day. The actors were men and boys, the part of a woman being always performed by a man or boy in female attire. The players sometimes wore costume, used make-up and perhaps donned masks.²⁷

Taking their subjects from the events of social life, they depicted the misfortunes of the downtrodden masses. The comedies allowed the people to caution the great and rich and thereby aspire to obtain ameliorations and reform, which had frequently been the aim of dramatic art in the Middle Ages. Gérard de Nerval compared them to French *proverbes de société* (short comedies illustrating a maxim).²⁸ The players' attacks on corrupt officialdom, the high and mighty ruling classes and excessive taxation appealed to most audiences; even their rich and influential patrons saw it as harmless amusing satire.²⁹ According to the British official John Bowring, those dramas with a religious theme usually introduced a Christian *giaour* (infidel), upon whom the process of conversion operated in the shape of severe bastinadings, always ending in the triumph of Muslim orthodoxy.³⁰ These short impromptu pieces gave little scope for plot or character development.

Two comedies by such artists were seen at a wedding feast in Shubrā, near Cairo, in 1815. A hajji, wanting to go to Mecca, is tricked by a cameleer, who deceives both him and the camel merchant. The camel that the cameleer acquires is so dreadful that the hajji showers him with blows. The principal character of the second farce is a European traveller acting the role of the buffoon. This Frank visits an Arab, who wants to give the appearance of generosity and wealth. The Arab orders his wife to kill in succession a sheep, four chickens and some pigeons to entertain the traveller; the wife makes various excuses as to why the food is not available. At last the stranger is reduced to eating a more humble diet of curdled milk and sorghum bread, the only provisions of his 'generous' host.³¹ A play performed in the 1830s before Muḥammad 'Alī, the viceroy of Egypt, depicted a fellah, 'Awad, who owes a thousand piastres in tax. Unable to pay, he is beaten and imprisoned. His wife resorts to various forms of bribery, at last having to sacrifice her body, to get her husband released. This farce was played to open the pasha's 'eyes to

²⁷ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, vol. I, p. 231 and vol. II, pp. 113–14; de Nerval, *Le Voyage*, vol. I, p. 170.

²⁸ de Nerval, *Le Voyage*, vol. I, p. 158.

²⁹ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 187.

³⁰ Bowring, *Report on Egypt and Candia*, p. 144.

³¹ Belzoni, *Voyages*, vol. I, pp. 29–31; Landau, *Studies*, pp. 50–1.

the conduct of those persons to whom was committed the office of collecting taxes'.³²

Awlād Rābiya

The Egyptian farce-player was also known as *Ibn Rābiya* (the son of Rābiya), and the group as *Awlād Rābiya* (the sons of Rābiya). What distinguished these players from the *muḥabbazūn* is unclear. *Awlād Rābiya* mocked the ruling classes for plundering farms and stealing flocks, and for severe punishments imposed on the peasants: the use of the *kirbāj* (bastinado), putting a man to death for stealing a paltry sum, or hanging someone because the condemned had angered an official. Those who failed to defend their honour were ridiculed, as were those who put too much trust in servants and slaves.³³ A troupe of such comedians, Muslims, Christians and Jews, gave a performance in 1780 in the courtyard of a house in Cairo; their shabby appearance announced that they made little money. The principal character, a man dressed as a woman, has trouble hiding his long beard. She/he lures one traveller after another into her tent, and after robbing them of their belongings, chases them away with a stick.³⁴

Comedians of this type were to be found in many Arab lands. In Iraq the farce was called *ikhbārī*, with the standard content of comic dialogue and fisticuffs.³⁵ A troupe of young Arabs, at Jericho in 1851, performed a bedouin burlesque for Easter, portraying Satan fighting and killing his father. After his death, Satan makes a show of despair, pulling the body about in every direction, and bitterly deplores the poverty that leaves him unable to provide for the funeral of the deceased. At last the burial of the father is undertaken by two collections of money from the audience. Satan begrudges spending money on the burial, so he decides to revive his father. He puts a heated stone on his bare ankles. The father instantly revives, and then commences between them a furious and violent dance.³⁶

In 1864 in Algeria, Potter saw the representation of a comedy by Arab actors. Two Arabs leave for the hunt – one is a brave warrior; the other, more down to earth, hopes to find wild beehives in the forest. The first is modestly dressed for the occasion with just a rifle and a *yatagan* at his side. The other is a walking arsenal, in chainmail, a belt stocked with sabres and pistols, and ten

³² Lane, *Manners and Customs*, vol. II, pp. 114–16.

³³ Anon., 'Fariq al-tamthil al-'arabi', 502.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia*, vol. I, pp. 143–4.

³⁵ al-Zubaydī, *al-Masraḥiyā*, pp. 26–7, 29.

³⁶ de Saulcy, *Narrative of a Journey*, vol. II, pp. 32–4; Būtistūfā, *Alf 'ām*, pp. 110–11, from J. H. Michon, *Voyage religieux en Orient*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1853), vol. II, pp. 361–4.

rifles on his back. His companion, with the limited armament, kills a lion, while the latter, assailed by a swarm of angry bees, cowardly flees, taking refuge in the orchestra.³⁷ At a court scene portrayed at a Muslim marriage at Blida the injustice of the law was exposed. A Kabyle and Spaniard enter, looking for a fight and demanding justice. A Mozabite and an old woman appear; the Mozabite demands some clothes that she was sewing for him. The judge rules against the innocent party, the old woman. Then two young orphans appear, demanding the property that they should have inherited from their father and that had been stolen from them.³⁸

Bisāt

The Maghrib countries – Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia – had their own traditional forms of drama, among which were the *halqa*, *bisāt* and *fattāla*. *Bisāt* and the *fattāla* in Tunisia were forms of burlesque. The entertainment in the round (*halqa*) is still to be seen in public places in Morocco, such as the square of Jāmī' al-Fanā' in Marrakesh; it embraces a plethora of performances to suit public taste: acting, clowning, a dumb show (*zma'*), story-telling, acrobatics, music, snake charming and juggling.³⁹ The history of *bisāt* (entertainment) has been traced to Fez. The first performance is said to have been given before Sultan Muḥammad bin 'Abd Allāh in the eighteenth century. A group of performers went to his palace (*Dār al-makhzan*), the main actor wearing a mask made from the doum tree, so that he could make fun of the sultan without fear. In the square before the palace the actors performed their entertainments, around the main event – a play making some petition to the sultan. It had various stock characters: al-Bisāt representing strength, bravery and the sense of adventure; Ilyāhū, the Jew, representing hypocrisy, greed and sharp-wittedness; Hadīdān, distinguished by the purity of his soul and his love of others, and the ghoul, who epitomizes evil.⁴⁰

Sāmir

Sāmir was a popular entertainment with music to amuse folk at weddings in the Egyptian countryside. The troupe, all men, invariably including a transvestite dancer (*ghāyish*), performed on the threshing floor by torch light. The performance begins with dancing, then the *rayyis* enters, and attacks the brazen *Khalbūṣ* (buffoon). The *rayyis*, the pivot of the performance, utters

³⁷ Roth, *Le Théâtre*, pp. 18–20, from Potter, 'La Comédie arabe', *Revue de Paris* 5 (1864), 155–62.

³⁸ Roth, *Le Théâtre*, p. 17.

³⁹ al-Rā'i, *al-Masrab*, p. 41; and his, *al-Kūmīdiyā*, pp. 8–9.

⁴⁰ al-Manī'i, 'al-Haraka al-masrahiyya', 76; al-Rā'i, *al-Masrab*, pp. 42–3.

sincere advice, wise maxims and spiritual counsel on the married state. The two scenes (*taqlī'a*) of the evening follow, incorporating jokes about the life and people of the village.⁴¹

MASQUERADERS

Masked performances were to be seen in Muḥarram and during other religious feasts. Actors, buffoons and masqueraders alike smeared their faces black with soot or ashes à la Harlequin, or whitened them with lime or flour and feathers à la Pierrot, or painted their faces or donned masks with demonic features. In 1874 in Tunis one performer, called Qu'ayyid 'Āshūrā', wore a camel skin, and was followed by the riff-raff singing disreputable songs.⁴² At Sidi 'Oqba near to Biskra men covered themselves with the skins of animals.⁴³ At Ouargla in Algeria on such a feast day people poured out into the streets, their faces disguised in human or animal masks. At the *mawlid* of Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī in Tanta, girls dressed as boys and there was the sight of a European caricatured as an artist seated on an ass, gazing about him for subjects. A *qāḍī* (judge) and his secretary, also on an ass with his head demeaningly facing towards its tail, conducted imaginary trials of persons guilty of divorcing an undue number of wives.

BUFFOONS

Wearing fantastic dresses, buffoons, the original type of the professed 'fools' of Europe, moved among the saints during the *mawlid*s in Egypt, making strange grimaces and uttering studied absurdities. Some were borne on men's shoulders, others rode upon camels, while others made their own legs their compasses. Among such entertainers was a character called 'Alī Kākā, who performed Rabelaisian scenes, wearing a belt from which dangled an instrument shaped like a huge penis.⁴⁴

SAILORS

Such dramatic performances were not the monopoly of itinerant artists; it was not uncommon for boat crews at idle times to entertain themselves and travellers. In February 1847 the crew of a *dhahabiyya* on the Nile

⁴¹ Husayn *et al.*, 'Limādhā lam ya'rif', 17–18; Abū Zayd, *Tamthīliyyāt*, pp. 37–8.

⁴² 'Irsān, *al-Zawāhir al-masrahīyya*, p. 236, quoting al-Šādiq al-Rizqī, *al-Aghānī al-tūnisīyya* (Tunis, 1967), p. 86.

⁴³ Khaznadar, 'Pour la "récréation"', pp. 44–5, from Doutté, *Magie*, pp. 536–7, 540.

⁴⁴ Saint-John, *Egypt and Mohammed Ali*, vol. II, p. 303; Amīn, *Qāmūs al-'ādāt*, p. 288.

put on a play. One of the crew took office as governor, had taxpayers brought before him and ordered bastinado and imprisonment to be inflicted on the unfortunate debtors.⁴⁵ Another unsophisticated farce, given by sailors on the Nile in the winter of 1874–5, depicted various dignitaries giving or receiving bakhshish.⁴⁶ In April 1877 on board the Egyptian corvette *Sinnār* off the coast of north-western Arabia the explorer Richard Burton was feted by ‘a genuine survival of the old Canopic fun’. In the sailors’ ‘fantasia’, one of the sailors ‘made a tolerably pretty girl . . . who danced mincingly Almeh-fashion: she was waited upon by the chief-buffoon, Kara-gyuz’, sporting his tail. The Arnaut (Albanian), perpetually used his stick upon his servant and called all his Muslim brethren by the most opprobrious names. ‘I confess’, said Burton, ‘that the play was very “shocking” and that my sides ached with laughter.’⁴⁷

BURLESQUES

In Algeria, folkloric sketches, consisting of short improvised mimed or acted comic scenes, were traditionally performed in the open air. The themes were borrowed from folklore, hagiographic legends and daily life, and were often played by the students of the *médersas* (religious schools). Such scenes voiced social criticism of the immediate realities of daily life. At Sidi Ahmad Ibn Yūsuf the citizens saw tableaux satirizing mores, burlesques representing household scenes, bogus *qādīs*, sanctimonious hypocrites with great strings of potatoes ending in a carrot hung around their necks, and Arab peasants diddled by Jewish and Kabyle merchants and left with nothing. Several scenes were portrayed: a cuckolded husband; a satire of the officers of the Arab bureaux, the White Friars, or the decorations and protocol of French generals; an English tourist, pointing his camera at the crowd; negroes returning from the Sudan; Touareg riders from Timbuktu retelling their extraordinary adventures, and a group doing military exercises in a French manner.⁴⁸ A favourite theme of mime scenes was the cameleer and his stubborn camel. An immense furious dragon was put to death by the crowd, who pulled to pieces its skin of straw and rags. A woman, always unsatisfied in love, was a poignant central character of these pieces. Perennially disapproved customs, such as the marriage of an old man to a very young woman, were condemned.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Mrs Y's account to Martineau, *Eastern Life*, pp. 65, 187.

⁴⁶ Charles D. Warner, *My Winter on the Nile among Mummies and Moslems*, 18th edn (Boston, 1904), pp. 284–5, in Landau, *Studies*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Burton, *The Gold-Mines of Midian*, pp. 183–4.

⁴⁸ Roth, *Le Théâtre*, pp. 15–16, from E. Dermenghem, *Le Culte des saints dans l'Islam maghrébin* (Paris, 1954), p. 229; Doutté, *Magie*, pp. 496–540.

⁴⁹ Khaznadar, ‘Pour la “recréation”’, pp. 44–5.

DANCERS

Popular bands of female dancers, *ghawāzī*, were a familiar entertainment in Egyptian villages. Among their number was the male clown Abū 'Aggūr (the man with a 'cucumber'), miming in an exaggerated manner their movements, making rude comments on the dialogue, and holding a long wooden handle in overtly sexual gestures. The dancers, as well as performing dances, presented comic scenes. Khalbūṣ, the male servant of the more respectable bands of female singers (the '*awālīm*)⁵⁰, also acted the part of the buffoon.⁵¹ Such a clown, seated upon a donkey with his face to the tail, was the master of ceremonies at a fantasia seen in October 1819 at the village of Zeara on the way to Menouf in Egypt, which was given to celebrate the circumcision of the children. The musical 'band belonged to some ladies of easy, or no virtue . . . seated on horseback, and bedizened with feathers, grease, necklaces of onions and other attractions'.⁵¹

This brief discussion by no means details *in extenso* the dramatic activity within Arab society. There were many other varieties of performance and other phenomena that had strong dramatic aspects. The festival of the temporary king in medieval Islam, illustrating the expulsion of winter, found its modern equivalent in the feast of *sultān al-talaba* (the sultan of the students), celebrated in Fez. Many popular dances had a dramatic or mimetic dimension. The story-telling of the rhapsodes (*rāwīs*, *hakawātīs* and *maddāhūn*) often involved mime and impersonation. The commemoration of the events surrounding the death of the Shia martyr al-Husayn (d. 680) frequently involved the enactment of the story in dramatic form in processions or stage performances. Though this passion play is primarily a Persian religious phenomenon, this mourning (*ta'ziya*) or simulation (*shabīh*) of the event is still to be seen amongst Shia populations in Iraq, Bahrain and the Lebanon; in the Lebanon with the conflict against Israel the performance became an impassioned expression of opposition, martyrdom and revolt.

These arts remained popular till the end of the nineteenth century, but did not long survive the First World War. Modern Arabic drama did not gain ground till at least the 1880s or 1890s in Egypt and the Lebanon, and very much later, in the early twentieth century, in Syria, Iraq and the Maghrib. Today the itinerant actors and the shadow play have almost completely disappeared. Even by the first decades of the twentieth century there were few shadow puppeteers left. The capture of the public imagination by the modern

⁵⁰ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, vol. II, p. 272; Sāliḥ, *al-Masrah al-'arabī*, p. 41.

⁵¹ Henniker, *Notes during a Visit*, p. 29.

Arabic stage, the advent of the gramophone, the radio and finally cinema were some of the many factors that stifled this drama. In the 1880s members of the literary elite, such as the Syrian publicist Jurjī Zaydān and the Egyptian educationalist ‘Alī Pasha Mubārak, were expressing their clear loathing for these traditional dramatic arts. Their views, together with reformist Islamic preaching, bolstered by narrow-minded European observers and officials may have played a part in swaying Arab public opinion away from this tradition. It must be recalled, however, that traditional theatre did not disappear entirely. It was to be commercialized in the early modern Algerian theatre. Many neo-traditional comedians in Egypt, such as Aḥmad Fahīm al-Fār, ‘Alī al-Kassār, Jūrj Dukhūl, Najib al-Rīhānī and others, continued to enjoy great popularity alongside the new theatre. Modern Arabic theatre made its first appearance in the crucial decades of the 1840s and 1850s, in which taste for this new European-style theatre captured the imagination of the Arab elite and Arab writers were inspired to imitate the European model. The modernization of the previous decades of the century brought about by the reforms in Tunisia and in Egypt, the activities of the missionaries and others in Syria, and the French occupation of Algeria had led to the waking of the Arab mind to enquiries and efforts of its own.

The seeds of change were being sown among the local population. About 1842, the first European theatre in Tunis, the Théâtre Tapia, was built, named after its proprietor, a Tunisian Jew. The Bosco theatre in Istanbul was taken over in 1844 by two Armenian Christians from Aleppo, Mīkha’īl Na‘ūm Efendi and his brother, under whose sponsorship a succession of Italian plays and operas were staged.⁵² That same year Muhammad ‘Alī went for the first time to a performance of the *opéra-lyrique* at the Italian theatre in Cairo.⁵³ Around 1853 an Egyptian pasha ‘bitten with European ideas’ put on in his house an outrageously satirical piece by a local merchant, and at a theatre in 1853–4 in Alexandria an Italian drama was performed, whose heroine was an Egyptian actress.⁵⁴ Had it not been for the fact that, since the return of Muhammad ‘Alī’s forces from Syria, the coalition of the powers had forced the Egyptian pasha to concentrate on a more reserved circle of action, there might conceivably have been an attempt to create a modern Arabic theatre in Egypt. As it was, Egypt had to wait till 1870.

Arab lands had been bereft of any cultural contact with European theatre and dramatic writing till the beginning of the eighteenth century, when an Algerian Jewish writer, Isaac Ben Joseph Falyadj (or Palache), performed his

⁵² And, *A History of Theatre*, pp. 66–7.

⁵³ Letter from Avoscani to his friend Gazzarrini, dated 20 December 1844 in the Bibliothèque privée de S. M. le Roi, in Tagher, ‘Pietro Avoscani’, 309.

⁵⁴ Regnault, *Voyage en Orient*, p. 438.

play in Hebrew, *Nahat ruah* (Contentment), before a local audience. This play is indebted to an allegorical drama in Hebrew, *Asirei tiqwah* (The Prisoners of Hope), (Amsterdam, 1673) by a Dutch Sephardic merchant, Joseph Penço de la Vega.⁵⁵ The first play in Arabic, *Nazāhat al-mushtāq wa-ghuṣṣat al-‘ushshāq fi madīnat Ṭiryāq fīl-Irāq* (The Pleasure Trip of the Enamoured and the Agony of Lovers in the City of Ṭiryāq in Iraq), was published anonymously in 1847 in Algiers in lithograph. Its author, Abraham Daninos, was a Sephardic Jew, an interpreter in the Civil Court. In his play Daninos tried to give the Arabs the taste for the modern play and for dramatic poetry.⁵⁶ The text of the prologue, the stage directions and part of the dialogue are in colloquial Algerian, with the rest of the play in an idiosyncratic classical Arabic. Some sections are unacknowledged quotations from *A Thousand and One Nights* and from *Kashf al-asrār ‘an hikam al-tuyūr wa'l-azhār* (The Revelation of the Secrets of the Wisdom of Birds and Flowers) by ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Muqaddisī (d. 678/1279).⁵⁷ The play builds a bridge between medieval and modern Arabic drama, for it bears the characteristics of conventional medieval Arabic literature, but is divided into acts and scenes according to European convention.⁵⁸

Jews in Algeria controlled the commerce of the land, and thus had long been exposed to European society and culture. Although after the French occupation many Algerian Jews were turning culturally towards France, some were clearly determined to assert their traditional values derived from the Arabic-speaking cultural milieu. Set in an indeterminate era there are two parallel plots in the play: the first is the love story of Ni‘ma, and her paternal cousin, the sea-captain Nu‘mān. The secondary plot is the story of Umanā’, the wife of Captain Damanhūr. The bulk of the piece is a series of lovelorn soliloquies (*ghazal*) by Nu‘mān, Ni‘ma and Umanā’, occasioned by the lovers’ separation brought about by the pasha sending the sailors on a voyage to collect taxes from the islands of Wāq. When after several months Damanhūr does not return from his voyages, a painful torment (*ghuṣṣa*) afflicts Umanā’. At the end the lovers are happily reunited. The play depends upon pun, rhyme, proverbial sayings, the music of words and paronomasia, parallelism and the emotional tension dear to Arab taste. Besides the dominant role assigned to fate, these rhetorical devices are what roots this play in medieval Arabic literature and not in the European dramatic heritage.

⁵⁵ Schirmann, ‘Evidence’.

⁵⁶ ‘Liste des membres souscripteurs’, *JA* 4:12 (August 1848), 176, and Jules Mohl, ‘Rapport sur les travaux du Conseil pendant l’année 1847–1848’, *JA* 4:12 (August 1848), 117–18.

⁵⁷ *Les Oiseaux et les fleurs: allégories morales d’Azz-Eddin Elmocaddessi*, ed. and tr. M. Carcin de Tassy (Paris, 1821).

⁵⁸ The text has been published in Moreh and Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions*.

In 1846 the Beirut merchant Marūn al-Naqqāsh fell under the spell of Italian theatre and opera, and at the end of 1847 he wrote and produced his play *al-Bakhīl* inspired by Molière's *L'Avare*. Some time before 1855 the Syrian Christian Ḥabīb Ablā Mālaṭī, probably the author of the first Arabic drama in the history of the Damascus theatre, wrote his play, *al-Āhmaq al-basīt* (The Naive Irascible Person).⁵⁹ The Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Majīd's encouragement of this new dramatic genre, according to Mālaṭī, provided the catalyst.

The story of traditional indigenous drama would be almost concluded, had it not been for the fact that many modern Arab dramatists and directors – the Egyptians Yūsuf Idrīs and Intiṣar 'Abd al-Fatrāh, the Moroccans al-Tayyib al-Ṣiddiqī and al-Tayyib al-'Alj, the Lebanese Roger 'Assāf, the Syrian Sa'd Allāh Wannūs, and many others – have attempted to move away from the imitation of Western tradition. In their stage performances they have tried to revive parts of this indigenous theatrical, literary and religious patrimony, that has been almost obliterated by time: shadow theatre, *sāmīr*, the *maqāma*, the dramatic recitation of epic folktales, *zār* and *samāḥ*.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Published at Haifa in 1997.

⁶⁰ *Zār* is a ritual to appease the spirits by which people are possessed; *samāḥ* is a Syrian dance form derived from Sufi practices.

PART VI

CRITICISM

CHAPTER 19

CRITICISM IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD: A SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

Criticism is concerned with the evaluation of literary works, often as an academic discipline, and so is somewhat different from the other topics in this volume. Poetry, prose, drama and the various genres the editors have placed under these headings are ‘traditions’ rather than disciplines. This is to say that poets and *risāla* writers consider other works in their tradition, but do not specifically cite, support and rebut the positions taken in those works. The authors of works on criticism, on the other hand, play by different rules, paying close attention to their predecessors and the conventions of their discipline. They are not producing literature, but very consciously writing about it.

In the post-classical period the disciplines that deal with criticism are largely a continuation of the subjects and methods established in the previous five centuries. Accordingly, this literature includes a lot of rehashing and reorganizing of older material. It would not, however, be fair to say on this account that authors in the post-classical period made no contribution to Arabic literary criticism. As modern scholars must surely admit, one can contribute a great deal by explaining old issues in new ways, and, indeed, three of the most important works of Arabic criticism appear at the outset of this period.

Around 1200, Muḥammad al-Sakkākī’s (d. 1229) *Miftāḥ al-‘ulūm* (The Key of the Sciences) appears in Central Asia. In the *Miftāḥ* al-Sakkākī distils the considerable Arabic tradition on *balāgha* (eloquence) and builds a general system of semantics which he calls *‘ilm al-balāgha* (literally, ‘the science of eloquence’). Al-Sakkākī’s system became the basis for studying Arabic style and is still used today.

Shortly after al-Sakkākī, Ḏiyā’ al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1239) began writing in Syria. Ibn al-Athīr’s most famous work is *al-Mathal al-sā’ir* (The Current Saying in the Conduct of Secretaries and Poets) which is a sort of literary compendium in which the author provides clear and forceful statements on literature and style. The work of Ibn al-Athīr is perhaps the last great statement of critical sensibility in pre-modern Arabic literature.

And finally, in the last half of the thirteenth century Hāzim al-Qarṭājannī (d. 1285) produced *Minhāj al-bulaghā* 'etc. (A Way for the Eloquent and a Light for Men of Letters) in Spain. Al-Qarṭājannī applied Hellenistic philosophy to Arabic literature in a way that earlier writers had not. Philosophers like al-Fārābī had tried to explain Aristotle's ideas in Arab terms, but they did not really show how Hellenistic ideas might be used to explain something that was thoroughly Arab like the *qaṣīda*. This was al-Qarṭājannī's contribution, and it is an impressive statement of intellectual synthesis.

Accordingly, the post-classical period begins with a burst of intellectual activity in the area of criticism. It is important to note, however, that this particular activity was probably more of an epilogue to a story that had just finished than a promise of things to come. Al-Sakkākī, Ibn al-Athīr and to a lesser extent al-Qarṭājannī wrote to distil the work of the tradition that preceded them, and the authors who followed them did pretty much the same thing. For this reason we must begin our discussion of criticism in the post-classical period with a brief examination of its precedents.

CRITICISM IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

We should first, however, explain the use of the term 'criticism' in connection with the Arabic tradition. The term 'criticism' goes back to a Greek word for judgement, but this does not mean that Greece was full of critics. What Greece was full of was philosophers, and we have come to refer to philosophical discussions of literature as criticism. This is because philosophers' discussion of 'the good' as it related to drama seemed similar to the decisions of the *kritikos*, the figure who judged the plays performed at public festivals. Criticism itself, however, was never a classical discipline or even a sub-topic of philosophy. It is much more a modern term used to cover the sometimes far-ranging discussion of aesthetics and hermeneutics.

Accordingly, we should be able to use the term 'criticism' to consider the pre-modern Arabic tradition in the same way as we use it to consider the pre-modern European tradition. Neither tradition included a discipline of criticism. Both traditions, however, had a number of disciplines within which poetry and language were discussed. In the Arab/Islamic context the general category under which this discussion fell was the aforementioned *balāgha*.

It may be helpful to think of the Arabic critical tradition as a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid sit works in which the critical activity, the act of making a judgement and supporting it, is particularly prominent. An example of this would be Abū'l-Qāsim al-Āmidī's (d. 987) *Muwāzana bayn al-tā'iyyayn* (Weighing (the merits of) the two Tā'i poets (i.e. Abū Tammām and al-Buhturī)) which appears in the tenth century. Al-Āmidī uses the *Muwāzana*

to argue that the conservative style of al-Buhturī (d. 897) is better than the convoluted style of Abū Tammām (d. 846).

As the pyramid shape suggests, works like the *Muwāzana* are rare. Most of the works that are included in the critical tradition do not face evaluative issues head-on, but rather explore topics that underlie them. These works form the lower courses of the pyramid and so represent the bulk of the critical literature. The most important of these are probably *adab* works such as *al-'Umda fī mahāsin al-shi'r* (The Basis for (the Study and Criticism of) the Fine Points of Poetry) by the North African author Ibn Rashiq (d. 1064 or 1070–1). As the title suggests, the subject of the *'Umda* is poetics and literary theory. In it Ibn Rashiq brings together a fairly wide range of topics concerning poetry and critical standards. Ibn al-Athīr, whom we have already mentioned, wrote in the tradition of writers like Ibn Rashiq.

While authors like Ibn Rashiq were collecting the various elements of an Arabic poetics, other authors were collecting the poetry on which this poetics was based. Accordingly, collections of poetry, like the *Hamāsa* of Abū Tammām, formed another part of the critical literature. At the same time, other authors were writing commentary on this poetry, and this brought the *shurūh* (commentaries) literature into the picture.

Although some *shurūh* authors were interested in allegorical interpretation, most of them were content to parse words and explain the subtle nuances of Arabic style. In considering style they relied on the grammatical tradition which considered not only the normative workings of Arabic, but also the special features that characterized the best poetry and prose. The close grammatical analysis of elements like metaphor (*isti'āra*) and metonymy (*kināya*) became known as *'ilm al-balāgha* (the study of eloquence) or *'ilm al-bayān* (the study of lucidity). The best example of this is certainly 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's (d. 1078) *Asrār al-balāgha* (The Secrets of Eloquence).

The importance of the Koran to intellectual life provides a key reason for the concentration of Arab scholars on grammatical analysis. From the beginning of the Islamic period Muslim scholars plumb the depths of the Koran. They were interested not only in understanding what the text had to say, but also in proving that the Koran conveyed its message more eloquently than the verse of any poet. The belief in the *i'jāz* or ‘inimitability’ of the Koran spawned an entire genre of critical works the most famous of which is probably *Dalā'il al-i'jāz* (The Proofs for *i'jāz*) by the same al-Jurjānī cited above. Writers like al-Jurjānī wrote to demonstrate that the style of the Koran really was beyond the abilities of any Arab writer.

The notion of *i'jāz* brought the influence of theology to bear very directly on the critical tradition. Not surprisingly, the same could not be said for the philosophical tradition which stood somewhat removed from works on

criticism. Arab philosophers worked primarily with material originating with the Greeks that they sought to explicate and analyse but not really to integrate within the indigenous Islamic sciences. For this reason Arab works on Aristotle and Plato remained largely separate from the discussion of literary theory. This is why the *Minhāj* of al-Qarṭājannī, to which we have already referred, is so significant.

Accordingly, we can identify seven types of works in the Arab critical tradition. These are: *naqdī* works, like the *Muwāzana*; *adabī* works, like the *'Umda*; anthologies, like the *Hamāsa*; commentaries on poetry; *balāgha* works, like the *Asrār*; *i'jāz* works like *Dalā'il al-i'jāz* and philosophical works. We will now see how each category develops during the post-classical period.

NAQD OR APPLIED CRITICISM

We will look first at the top of the critical pyramid: works of applied criticism. As in the previous periods, these works form a relatively small part of the critical discussion. There are four with which we will be concerned here: Ibn Manzūr's (d. 1311) *Abū Nuwās fī ta'rīkhīhi* (Abū Nuwās: His Life and Poetry, his Private Life and his Jests and Buffoonery), Yūsuf al-Badī'i's (d. 1662) *al-Šubb al-munabbī* (The Dawn's Revelation of al-Mutanabbī's Prestige), Ibn al-Mustawfi's (d. 1239) *al-Nizām* (The Course for Commentary on the Poetry of al-Mutanabbī and Abū Tammām) and Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Iṣtidrāk* (The Rectification in Reply to Ibn al-Dahhān's Treatise Entitled 'Passages that the Kindī Poet Took from the Ṭā'ī Poet').

Ibn Manzūr's work is a fairly straightforward collection of stories about Abū Nuwās (d. c. 813), while the other texts examine some of the critical issues involved in the poetry of Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī. The first thing we notice about these works is the titles: all of these authors are still writing about Abbasid-period poets! This was typical of the critical literature in this period; whether writing about a poet or illustrating one of the fine points of metaphor, scholars usually referred to classical (i.e. sixth–twelfth century approximately) poets and not to those from their own time. The main exception to this is the anthology literature in which several authors do consider later writers.

The next thing we notice is that three of the four works mentioned here are concerned with al-Mutanabbī. This is not surprising since al-Mutanabbī was probably the most commented-upon poet in the Arab tradition. Although quite a notorious figure, Abū Nuwās did not attract the sort of scholarly and literary interest that al-Mutanabbī did. It is important to understand, however, that later writers were not only *more* interested in al-Mutanabbī than in Abū Nuwās, but that they treated the two authors differently.

Ibn Manzūr's work is largely a collection of stories that had already been told elsewhere. The fact that the stories are not original is not unusual. What is worth noting, however, is that Ibn Manzūr includes no real critical discussion of Abū Nuwās' poetry. He makes no reference to *sariqa* (plagiarism), a standard gauge for evaluating poetry. He also says nothing about the poet's use of *badi'* (use of figurative language), which was another standard topic in discussions about style. It is clear then that the poetic style of Abū Nuwās is not really at issue here. Rather, Ibn Manzūr is interested in the person of the poet or his 'life and buffoonery', as he explains in his title. He is interested in the poet as clown rather than craftsman.

The works on al-Mutanabbī are quite different. Ibn al-Mustawfi refers to his *Nizām* as a *sharb*, but it differs from the *shurūh* we will consider later because of its expanded focus. Most *shurūh* are fairly straightforward, line-by-line explanations of a single author's work. The *Nizām*, on the other hand, considers the poetry of both Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī. Ibn al-Mustawfi does not explicitly compare the two bodies of work, but, by putting them together, he draws our attention to the critical issues that emerge in both. These critical issues boil down essentially to obscurities in the style of the two poets. Ibn al-Mustawfi tells us that in his day, almost three centuries after al-Mutanabbī and Abū Tammām lived, people still engaged in long arguments about the two poets' work. The author notes that both poets have their partisans, but does not take a side himself. He says that whichever poet one prefers, the fact remains that both of them are difficult to understand. Accordingly, he has composed the *Nizām* in order to explain their poetry.¹

As he promises, Ibn al-Mustawfi's main interest here is hermeneutics. In this regard the work reads very much like a *sharb*. The author proceeds line by line; first he considers problematic vocabulary, then moves on to grammatical issues and explanations of figurative language. In all of this Ibn al-Mustawfi refers constantly to the work of earlier scholars. The *Nizām* differs from other *shurūh* only in the author's concern for the transmission (*riwāya*) of the poetry that has come down to him. Ibn al-Mustawfi takes great pains to establish the correct reading of each line he examines. He begins by going through a list of authorities with whom he has checked the authenticity of Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī's *dīwāns* and then cites these authorities when considering each line.

Ibn al-Mustawfi remarks occasionally that a line of poetry is good or bad, but does not make his own opinions very prominent. The same could not be said of Ibn al-Athīr. Writing in thirteenth-century Damascus (and dying in the same year as Ibn al-Mustawfi), Ibn al-Athīr is one of the main figures of

¹ Ibn al-Mustawfi, *Nizām*, p. 192.

the Arabic critical tradition. We shall consider most of his work, including *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*, which is the most famous, under the heading of *adabī* works, but his *Istidrāk* fits better under the heading of *naqd*.

As the title announces, Ibn al-Athīr's *Istidrāk* is a rebuttal (*radd*) to another work, namely, *al-Ma'ākhidh al-kindiyya min al-ma'anī al-tā'iyya* by Ibn al-Dahhān (d. 1174). The *Ma'ākhidh* is not extant, but the title and Ibn al-Athīr's discussion show that the author criticized al-Mutanabbī (the Kindī poet) for plagiarizing from Abū Tammām (the Tā'i poet). Ibn al-Athīr argues that al-Mutanabbī did not plagiarize. However, it is not really his specific rebuttals that are the most significant, but rather the general comments on criticism with which Ibn al-Athīr opens the *Istidrāk*. First, he weighs in against partisanship (*ta'asub*) among littérateurs. This would seem to have been a common charge in the critical literature because Ibn al-Athīr points out that Ibn al-Dahhān made the same attack at the beginning of his work.² When Ibn al-Athīr refers to partisanship, however, it would seem that he is thinking in particular of attacks on al-Mutanabbī, since it is always in his defence of the poet that he brings up the issue. In this way he echoes the concerns of earlier authors, like al-Qādir'l-Jurjānī (d. 1002) and his *Kitāb al-wasāṭa bayn al-Mutanabbī wa-khuṣūmihi* (The Book of Mediation between al-Mutanabbī and his Adversaries) – a work written to defend al-Mutanabbī from his critics.

More generally, however, we could say that Ibn al-Athīr believed that partisanship was simply unsystematic or unsubstantiated criticism. In one case, for instance, he refers to partisan attacks against al-Mutanabbī and goes on to offer a fairly systematic defence. He suggests first of all that, in order to judge a poet, one must poll the audience. He claims that people in the East (i.e. the eastern part of the Islamic world) believed that al-Mutanabbī was a great poet while people in the West were split on the issue. With a sort of mathematical logic Ibn al-Athīr then argues that if we put the East together with half of the West we will have a majority. Accordingly, the *majority* believe al-Mutanabbī is a great poet, *quod erat demonstrandum*.³

In addition to the critics of al-Mutanabbī, Ibn al-Athīr also attacks those who believed that pre-Islamic poetry was better than later poetry. He suggests not only that this group is partisan, but also that they are simply following what others have said and not thinking for themselves. If they look closely at the pre-Islamic period, Ibn al-Athīr claims, they will find that poets do not fully understand the Arabic language and so are not really masters of their verse. For this reason they make mistakes, and their work is uneven.⁴ He

² Ibn al-Athīr, *Istidrāk*, p. 2.

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

argues in particular that pre-Islamic poets did not understand the subtleties of figurative language and so could not produce the more complicated imagery of al-Mutanabbī and Abū Tammām.⁵

Ibn al-Athīr strongly criticizes the traditional position that older is better. His comments in this regard add a new element to the discussion of plagiarism, one of the mainstays of critical commentary. The general explanation of plagiarism had been that it was acceptable to take a theme from an earlier poet as long as you improved upon it and thus made it your own. Ibn al-Athīr does not dispute this, but he attacks the simplistic notion that earlier poets have some claim to precedence and invention. He argues that many ideas circulate among the general population and should be accessible to all poets. The fact that one poet uses a particular idea first should be of no consequence. In order to really lay claim to an idea the poet must use it in a unique and inventive way; only then does the poet really possess an idea that can be plagiarized.⁶

Another position that Ibn al-Athīr criticizes is the notion that one can compare only lines of poetry that are similar. Thus, some claimed that if two lines did not both describe the beauty of the beloved, for example, one could not consider their relative merits. Ibn al-Athīr claims this is nonsense. One can always, he argues, look at the style and fluidity of two lines and decide which one is better.⁷ The discussion of style in the *Istidrāk* is brief, but the author considers this at great length in his other works, particularly *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*.

Like any writer, Ibn al-Athīr tries to make his own arguments more persuasive by making those of his opponents less so. But one does not get the sense that he is setting up straw men when he describes the positions he is attacking. On the contrary, one gets the feeling that people were still arguing about al-Mutanabbī in Ibn al-Athīr's day. This becomes even clearer when we compare the *Istidrāk* with *al-Subḥ al-munabbī*, the seventeenth-century work by Yūsuf al-Badī'i mentioned above. The *Subḥ* includes several centuries of comments about al-Mutanabbī. It recounts the attacks on al-Mutanabbī by various critics and Ibn al-Athīr's defence of him; it relates stories about the poet's life, along with his most famous lines and earlier scholars' comments on those lines. By the seventeenth century, however, al-Badī'i has become more of a historian than a critic. He recounts the controversies of the past, but does not really take part in them. As a result, the *Subḥ* shows little of the vitality we see in the *Istidrāk*. All of this suggests that the old controversies surrounding Abbasid-age poets may have still been strong enough to keep people arguing

⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 7–12.

⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

in the thirteenth century, but not in the seventeenth. Although the classics would always be read, they could not keep people debating forever.

ADAB WORKS

Adabī works are generally considered to be the heart of the critical tradition. These works provide the definition and discussion of most terms associated with poetry and Arabic style. Although *adabī* works cover many of the topics that we find in the *balāgha* tradition, they differ from that tradition in a number of ways. Perhaps most importantly, *adabī* works focus on poetry, while *balāgha* works are more generally concerned with the semantics of language.

The most important *adabī* author of the post-classical period is Ibn al-Athīr. His most famous work is *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*, but he also wrote two others on the same subject, namely, *al-Jāmi‘ al-kabīr* etc. (*The Great Compendium on the Art of Making Verse and Prose*) and *Kifāyat al-tālib* etc. (*What the Student Needs to Know about Criticizing the Work of Poets and Secretaries*). Although they differ in size and structure, all three of these works cover roughly the same topics. They detail the body of knowledge an educated person should possess, that is, grammar, philology, history (i.e. proverbs and tales, *amthāl* and *akhbār*), principles of rule (*ahkām sultāniyya*), Koran, *hadīth*, rhyme and metre. They examine the structure of the Arabic language, the special features of eloquent style, the genres of poetry and plagiarism.

Ibn al-Athīr does not present very much on these topics that is new. His discussion of an Islamic or Arab *paideia* is geared towards the secretaries with whom he was intimately familiar, since he worked in government ministries for most of his life. Ibn al-Athīr's comments in this regard echo those of earlier authors such as Ibn Qutayba (d. 884) in his *Adab al-kātib* (*Conduct for Secretaries*). His presentation of Arabic language follows the standard treatment of the subject. It is broken down for analysis in three ways: first into sound (*lafz*) and idea (*ma'nā*), then into single (*mufrad*) and composite (*ta'līf*) elements, and finally into literal (*haqīqa*) and figurative (*majāz*) usage. Ibn al-Athīr discusses style by identifying figures of speech like paronomasia (*tajnīs*) or metaphor (*isti‘āra*) and then citing examples in poetry or prose. This sort of presentation was fairly standard and goes back to *Kitāb al-bādī* by the poet and caliph Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 908). Finally, as we noted in the *naqdī* works, plagiarism was a common measure for evaluating a poet; while Ibn al-Athīr may explain this topic differently, he does not really change the terms of the debate.

Accordingly, Ibn al-Athīr does not create new topics or structure for critical discussion. Rather, his contribution lies in the independent and argumentative attitude he displays throughout his work. One of the areas in which this

attitude is apparent is his discussion of sound (*lafz*) as an element of style. The dichotomy of sound and idea had been a sort of fault line which split the critical community. Some early authors, such as al-Jāḥīz (d. 868–9), made the fairly intuitive argument that the essential beauty of poetry lay in the way the poem sounded and so in its *lafz*. Later and more analytical authors, however, argued that, all by itself, *lafz* was neither good nor bad. Rather, it was in the *ma'āni* (ideas) conveyed by *lafz* that the real beauty of a poem lay. By the twelfth century this second position had become fairly standard.

The notion that *ma'āni* were the most important part of style led scholars to take less interest in the actual sound of poetry, and it was this tendency to which Ibn al-Athīr objected. He did not argue for the primacy of *lafz*; by his time the idea that good poetry consisted of nice-sounding words would have been fairly unsophisticated. Rather, he argued that the audience should pay closer attention to the way poetry sounded. Towards this end he outlined some general aesthetic principles for the sound of Arabic words: he specified that phrases in which most of the consonants had no vowels were unappealing and that words whose consonants were all enunciated in the same part of the mouth (i.e. all labials, dentals or palatals) sounded worse than those with consonants pronounced in different ways.⁸ These arguments did not originate with Ibn al-Athīr, but his inclusion of them within his writings represented a check on those who would completely discount the aural element of poetry.

A more striking example of Ibn al-Athīr's challenge to the status quo was his argument that prose was superior to poetry. In his first work on style, *al-Jāmi'* *al-kabīr*, he cites a number of reasons for this. He points out first that official correspondence, not to mention the Koran, uses prose rather than poetry. He further explains that pre-Islamic Arabs produced a lot of poetry but little prose, thus suggesting that prose was the more difficult, and so superior, medium. In a similar vein Ibn al-Athīr points out that the prose writer must understand the disciplines that govern the Arabic language, while the poet may be ignorant of these. Finally, he claims that poetry may be made into prose (a common topic in manuals on style), but prose may not be made into poetry. This shows, he suggests, that prose possesses some special quality which the poet cannot replicate.⁹

Ibn al-Athīr argues the same position in *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*,¹⁰ and it is obvious that his arguments are not being discussed purely on a theoretical plane. After all, the author was himself a consummate prose writer, and thus we would

⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *Mathal*, vol. I, p. 172.

⁹ Ibn al-Athīr, *Jāmi'*, pp. 73–6.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Athīr, *Mathal*, vol. IV, p. 5.

expect him to argue that his métier was the best. It is still striking, however, to find one of the major critical voices of the post-classical period arguing that prose was better than poetry. We may probably attribute this to the same guild mentality that had motivated the *kuttāb* class to advertise their talents since the days of al-Jāḥīz. (See Musawi's contribution in this volume, Chapter 5.) Nevertheless, the fact that Ibn al-Athīr makes his arguments in such clear and explicit terms shows that by the thirteenth century the image of prose-writing had progressed significantly.

Another indication of the raised profile of prose is Ibn al-Athīr's discussion of rhymed prose (*saj'*). Although earlier writers had referred to *saj'*, Ibn al-Athīr claims he is the first to explain the style in detail. Most importantly, he discusses the periods of *saj'*, explaining that in the best style they are of equal length,¹¹ like this verse from the Koran:

*wa'l-'ādiyāti dabhan
fa'l-mūriyāti qadhan
fa'l-mughīrāti subhan
fa'-atharna bihi naq'an
fa-wasatna bihi jam'an* (*Ādiyāt*, vv. 1–5)

By the [steeds] that run, with panting [breath]
And strike sparks of fire,
And push home the charge in the morning,
And raise the dust in clouds the while,
And penetrate forthwith into the midst [of the foe] *en masse*¹²

It is interesting to note that the equal periods which Ibn al-Athīr praises here serve to lend this passage the rhythms of verse. Although shorter, the phrase here is like a very short line (*bayt*) of poetry; so the section (e.g. the first three lines of Sura 100, *Ādiyāt* here) thus reads like a short monorhyme poem. Accordingly, Ibn al-Athīr has imposed the traditional form of poetry on his aesthetics of *saj'*, and one might well be tempted to ask whether the author really sees any difference between poetry and prose. It would appear however that he did, in that he refers to *saj'* as an element of prose rather than the constituent quality of the best prose. He compares *saj'* to internal rhyme (*tarsī*) in poetry.¹³ Internal rhyme may add elegance to a poem, but, like other figures of speech, it should be used sparingly. Thus *saj'* for Ibn al-Athīr is an ornament to prose.

His ideas on prose itself are a bit more difficult to pin down, but we can get some sense of them from the way he compares prose to poetry. As we have

¹¹ Ibid., vol. I, p. 55.

¹² Koran, tr. Yusif Ali (Brentwood, 1989), p. 1,684.

¹³ Ibn al-Athīr, *Jāmi'*, p. 254.

already mentioned, Ibn al-Athīr thought prose required a more thorough understanding of language than poetry. On another occasion he claims that, in Arabic, prose allows for extended presentations, while poetry does not. It is interesting to note that Ibn al-Athīr claims this is not true for all poetry, but only for Arabic. The Persian poet Firdawṣī, he observes, has no problem recounting the long tale of that nation's history in verse.¹⁴

In general Ibn al-Athīr believed the same rules of style and decorum applied equally to poetry and prose. At the same time, however, it would seem that he considered prose to be a more flexible medium than poetry and one which was more appropriate for complex thought. Ibn al-Athīr also clearly believed that the prose writer practised his craft with more conscious intention than the poet, since he points out in various places that the prose writer needs to understand Arabic grammar, while the poet does not. While these ideas are not really new, what is different is that Ibn al-Athīr claims so explicitly that prose is superior to poetry. The claim is perhaps overstated for rhetorical purposes, but nonetheless it shows a recognition that not only the genre of poetry but also the skills of the poet were limited. Thus, we hear from Ibn al-Athīr the fairly explicit argument that poetry was no longer the only '*diwān* of the Arabs' and that the poet was no longer their only spokesman.

As we have already mentioned, the work of Ibn al-Athīr displays a critical attitude that is almost aggressive. It is not surprising then that other writers responded to his statements with works of their own. The Baghdadi scholar Ibn Abī'l-Ḥadīd (d. 1257), for instance, wrote *al-Falak al-dā'ir 'alā'l-mathal al-sā'ir* (The Star that Eclipses the Prevailing Standard) while Ibn al-Athīr was still alive because he thought Ibn al-Athīr had dismissed the work of other scholars too easily.¹⁵ About a century later the Egyptian scholar Khalil ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363) wrote *Nuṣrat al-thā'ir 'alā'l-mathal al-sā'ir* (Helping One Who Rebels Against the Prevailing Standard) because he found Ibn al-Athīr to be proud and arrogant.¹⁶

Ibn Abī'l-Ḥadīd and al-Ṣafadī do not make the sort of broad critical points that Ibn al-Athīr himself made in his response to Ibn al-Dahhān in the *Iṣtidrāk*. Rather, they go through *al-Mathal al-sā'ir* point by point and rebut or qualify Ibn al-Athīr's positions on very specific issues. They criticize, for instance, his interpretation of certain lines of poetry or his use of specific grammatical terms. In this way *al-Falak* and *Nuṣrat al-thā'ir* are quite similar to the main intellectual products of this period, namely, commentary (*sharḥ/hāshiya*) and rebuttal (*radd*), in which authors take texts apart word by word and line by

¹⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *Mathal*, vol. IV, p. 11.

¹⁵ Ibn Abī'l-Ḥadīd, *al-Falak*, vol. IV, p. 32.

¹⁶ al-Ṣafadī, *Nuṣrat al-thā'ir*, p. 42.

line. Ibn Abī'l-Hadīd and al-Ṣafadī use pedantic analytical methods to attack a colleague whose own attacks they found indecorous. They do not, however, make any substantial critical arguments.

LATER ADABI WRITERS

Authors continued to write *adab*-type works until the end of the sixteenth century; they vary in both scope and approach. Some authors described the social context in which poetry was delivered and ignored issues of style and language. In *Thamarāt al-awrāq* (Fruits of the Pages), for instance, the Syrian scholar Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (d. 1434) collected stories that recounted the circumstances under which poets recited particular lines or passages. In this way his presentation resembles that of al-Īsfahānī's *Kitāb al-agħānī* (The Book of the Songs).

A more particular example of this sort of presentation is the Egyptian 'Alī al-Azdī's (d. 1216) *Badā'i' al-badā'ih* (Striking Instances of Extemporaneous Verse) in which the author collects stories of poets who composed poetry extemporaneously. This sort of composition was called *irtijāl* or *badiha*, and al-Azdī divides instances of it into five categories. The first includes passages in which the poet composes a poem in answer to a question (*badā'ih al-ajwiba*). In the second the poet completes a line started by another poet (*badā'ih al-ijāza*). Under the third category al-Azdī looks at instances in which poets compose a poem together with one composing the first hemistich (*mīṣrā'*) of each line and the other composing the second. Under the fourth category he looks at poems on the same subject and rhyme, and under the fifth he covers whatever examples did not fit under the first four. Earlier authors had referred to *irtijāl* and *badiha*, but al-Azdī was the first to categorize this sort of poetry.

While al-Ḥamawī and al-Azdī were concerned with context, most of their colleagues were more concerned with the text itself. Accordingly, most later *adab* works discussed style and poetics exclusively, and they did so in two basically different ways. Some, like Ibn al-Athīr, focused on style. In *al-Iksīr fi 'ilm al-tafsīr* (The Elixir on Hermeneutics), for instance, Sulaymān al-Tūfī (d. 1316) considers most of the topics covered in *al-Jāmi' al-kabīr*. He begins by outlining the disciplines one must understand in order to study poetry and prose. Then he describes the dichotomy of *lafz* and *ma'nā*, the definition of eloquence (*balāgha/fasāḥa*) and finally the various figures of speech.

In all of this al-Tūfī follows Ibn al-Athīr very closely. He even takes up the issue of whether prose is superior to poetry. What is interesting about the *Iksīr*, however, is that al-Tūfī puts all of this into the context of *tafsīr*, the interpretation of the Koran. He compares *tafsīr* to *ta'wil* and points out that while both activities involve interpretation, *tafsīr* is specifically concerned

with the interpretation of language. Accordingly, we might assume the *Iksīr* will tell us how to interpret the Koran. It does so indirectly but it says much more about Arabic style.

Other authors focused more on the poetics exclusive to poetry. In *al-Mi'yār fi naqd al-ash'ār* (The Yardstick for Criticizing Poetry), for instance, Muḥammad al-Andalusī (d. 1596) outlines the basic elements of poetry. He identifies them essentially as prosody and figures of speech and argues that one must understand both in order to judge between one poem and another. Al-Andalusī's title and presentation are a very conscious echo of two earlier Arab works of criticism, namely, *Iyār al-shi'r* (The Gauge of Poetry) by Ibn Ṭabāṭabā (d. 934) and *Kitāb naqd al-shi'r* (The Book for Criticizing Poetry) by Qudāma ibn Ja'far (d. 948), in which the earlier authors set out to do more or less the same thing.

It is interesting to compare the *Mi'yār* with al-Ṭūfī's *Iksīr*. Both authors cover the figures of speech in roughly the same way. What distinguishes them, however, is the fact that al-Ṭūfī discusses the figures in the context of Arabic grammar, while al-Andalusī considers them in the context of Arabic prosody. This was in many ways the distinction between works concerned generally with style and those concerned more with poetry. Those authors who focused on poetry looked at *badi'* and prosody; those interested in style in general looked at *badi'* and Arabic grammar.

The *Mi'yār* considers poetics strictly in terms of the most tangible aspect of poetry, namely, language and sound. Other authors, however, considered the creative process more broadly. In *Muqaddima fi ḥisnā'at al-nazm wa'l-nathr* (The Introduction to the Art of Poetry and Prose), for instance, Muḥammad al-Nawājī (d. 1455) makes several points about composition. He advises the poet to write when he is in a good mood and collect whatever ideas occur to him. Then he gives this step-by-step programme for composition:

Decide [first] on the opening and closing (*al-mabda' wa'l-maqta'*) because this is the hardest part of a poem. [Then, independently] choose the content of the letter or the form (*masabb*) of the *qaṣīda* because it will be easier [to do this first]. [Then] put [the opening and body of the text] together first, and edit it second. Editing consists of reviewing discourse (*kalām*) after you have said it – whether this is poetry or prose.¹⁷

The basic advice here is nothing new. Earlier authors (e.g. Ibn al-Rashīq) had stressed the importance of the opening line and suggested that poets first composed lines separately and then 'strung them together'. What is interesting in al-Nawājī's instructions, however, is the emphasis he places on editing. Earlier authors had identified editing as an important part of composition,

¹⁷ al-Nawājī, *Muqaddima*, p. 31.

but did not describe the process at length. Al-Nawājī, on the other hand, specifies that editing consists of changing words, omitting sections and clarifying obscure passages. He then goes on to recount the stories of various poets and the manner in which they edited their work. All of this stands, of course, in sharp contrast to the notion of extemporaneous poetry (*irtijāl*), which we saw in al-Azdi's *Badā'i'*, and the image of the poet tossing out lines extemporaneously and thus without review. Given the complexity of classical poetry, the situation described by al-Nawājī seems closer to the truth.

Although al-Nawājī makes some interesting points about composition, the *Muqaddima* is a fairly short work. A much more comprehensive example of the *adab* works that focus on poetry is *Nadrat al-ighrīd fi nuṣrat al-qarīd* (The Splendour of the Blossom on the Victory of Poetry) of the Baghdadi scholar Abū 'Alī al-Husaynī (d. 1258). *Nadrat al-ighrīd* is divided into five sections. Al-Husaynī calls the first one *wasf al-shi'r wa-ahkāmuhu* (the description and rules of poetry). In it he covers the main topics of Arabic style such as the definition of eloquence, the distinction between literal and figurative usage, and the figures of speech. The second section is devoted to *darūrāt al-shi'r* (poetic licence), the non-standard usage that helps poets meet the demands of rhyme and metre. The third section, entitled *fadl al-shi'r* (pre-eminence of poetry), is an apologia in which al-Husaynī defends poetry from the traditional religious criticism based on the Koran's censure of poets. The fourth section is called *mahāsin al-shi'r wa-'uyūbuḥu* (faults and virtues of poetry) and covers good and bad points about poetry; while the last one, entitled *adab al-shā'ir* (the conduct of a poet), considers generally how a poet should compose poetry and how a critic should judge it.

Because *Nadrat al-ighrīd* is so comprehensive it is useful to compare it to Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*. Al-Husaynī's first section, for instance, corresponds generally to Ibn al-Athīr's discussion of style. They differ, however, in the fact that Ibn al-Athīr bases his discussion on the grammatical distinction between single and composite elements (*mufrad/talif*), while al-Husaynī does not organize his presentation according to grammatical categories. Accordingly, Ibn al-Athīr shows a greater knowledge of grammatical analysis than al-Husaynī. This is interesting because Ibn al-Athīr often complains that grammarians do not understand poetry. Apparently, his hostility to the grammarians' attitude towards literary texts did not prevent him from learning their methods.

The subject of al-Husaynī's second section, *darūrāt al-shi'r*, is absent from *al-Mathal al-sā'ir*. This is not surprising since the *darūrāt* were an issue only to poets, and Ibn al-Athīr makes the point repeatedly that he is interested in eloquence wherever it appears, not only in poetry. For this reason he does not feel compelled to defend poets from religious criticism (although he certainly

would not have supported it), as al-Ḥusaynī does, nor is he very much concerned with the way poetry is written, which al-Ḥusaynī considers at length. Finally, Ibn al-Athīr argues that prose is superior to poetry, while al-Ḥusaynī, though never claiming that one is better than the other, is clearly more interested in poetry.

Ibn al-Athīr and al-Ḥusaynī represent two different sensibilities in the approach to criticism in the post-classical period. If we may introduce another image to help classify critical works, let us place these works on a scale that measures the author's interest in grammar. Accordingly, a work like al-Nawājī's *Muqaddima* would lie at the lower end of that scale since al-Nawājī does not consider any grammatical issues. We could place *Nadrat al-ighrīd* farther up the scale since al-Ḥusaynī deals slightly with grammar in his discussion of style. Then, we could place the work of Ibn al-Athīr still farther up the scale since he places style firmly in a grammatical context.

We shall see the top end of this grammatical scale in the works on *balāgha* which will be considered below.

BALĀGHA

Works on *balāgha* are an important part of the critical tradition. In terms of the topics that they cover, *balāgha* works are quite similar to *adabī* works. Both discuss definitions of eloquence and describe the figures of speech. But while *adabī* authors focus on the special form of language that is characteristic of poetry and fine prose, *balāgha* authors are concerned more with the semantics of communication. *Adabī* authors are interested only in what has been said well, while *balāgha* authors are interested in the way things are said in general.

The basis for *balāgha* in the post-classical period is the works of 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, namely *Asrār al-balāgha* and *Dalā'il al-i'jāz*. Al-Jurjānī is perhaps the most important critic of the position that the beauty of poetry lay in its sound (*lafz*). In *Dalā'il al-i'jāz*, for instance, al-Jurjānī argued that it was not the way an expression sounded that mattered, but rather the ideas (*ma'āni*) it conveyed. For al-Jurjānī those 'ideas' included every nuance of expression. Did the author use an independent pronoun in addition to a conjugated verb? Did they place the subject before the predicate or the predicate before the subject? Did they repeat anything for emphasis? Al-Jurjānī argued that it was in the arrangement (*nazm*) of these ideas, which were essentially grammatical structures, that eloquence lay.¹⁸

Al-Jurjānī also criticized the importance of *lafz* in his concept of *ma'nā al-ma'nā*, 'the idea of the idea'. In *Asrār al-balāgha* he points out that figurative

¹⁸ al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al-i'jāz*, *passim*, e.g. p. 81.

expressions do not rely only on grammatical structures, but also on ideational ones. For example, the poet might say he has a gaunt, young camel, in order to suggest that he is generous. The poet can do this because the expression ‘gaunt, young camel’ conveys a nexus of ideas. It suggests the young camel has not been fed because its mother has been slaughtered, that the mother has been slaughtered in order to feed the poet’s guests, and finally that the poet has a lot of guests because he is generous. Accordingly, the real message and eloquence of ‘gaunt, young camel’ has nothing to do with the meaning of the words themselves, but with the associated images they imply. Al-Jurjānī uses the concept of *ma’nā al-ma’nā* as the basis for his discussion of simile and figurative language.¹⁹

The *balāgha* authors of the post-classical period organized al-Jurjānī’s ideas in order that they might be more easily taught. One of the first to do this was Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) in *Nihāyat al-ijāz fī dirāyat al-i-jāz* (The Height of Concision in the Study of *Ijāz*). Perhaps the most important point to notice here is that al-Rāzī puts al-Jurjānī’s ideas into the context of *i-jāz al-qur’ān*. Although al-Jurjānī had referred to *i-jāz* and certainly placed it in one work’s title, he did not discuss the subject at any length. Al-Rāzī, on the other hand, considers the inimitability of the Koran in detail and ties al-Jurjānī’s ideas to this discussion rather than analyses of poetry. Later authors did the same, and, as result, we find that students of *i-jāz* made more use of al-Jurjānī’s work than students of literature.

Al-Rāzī organized al-Jurjānī’s discussion around the idea of single (*mufrad*) and composite (*jumal*) elements. He placed the grammatical constructions al-Jurjānī considered in his discussion of *nazm* under the heading of composite elements, since *nazm* involved several grammatical features working together. Al-Rāzī placed the figurative usage (e.g. metonymy and metaphor) that al-Jurjānī included in his discussion of *ma’nā al-ma’nā* under the heading of single elements because the meaning of phrases like ‘gaunt, young camel’ had nothing to do with grammatical relationships. Expressions like this were grammatically independent; their meaning was linked to other elements at the level of ideas and so did not depend on grammatical structures.

Within this single/composite organization al-Rāzī included some subjects which al-Jurjānī did not discuss. These were what we might call the ‘minor’ figures of speech (*mahāsin al-kalām* or *badi’*), like antithesis (*tibāq*) or internal rhyme (*tarṣī*). Al-Jurjānī focused his attention on metaphor, simile and metonymy because of the way these figures could generate a complex nexus of images. Many other authors, however, treated all the figures the same and devoted as much attention to a relatively minor figure like internal rhyme (*tarṣī*) as to metaphor. Al-Jurjānī criticized this sort of presentation and left

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 308.

badi‘ out of his work all together. For his part, al-Rāzī acknowledges that the *badi‘* categories are less significant than grammatical structures and figurative language but maintains nevertheless that the figures are an important element of Arabic style.²⁰

About fifty years after al-Rāzī another author tried to distil the work of al-Jurjānī. This was the aforementioned al-Sakkākī (d. 1229) whose *Miftāh al-‘ulūm* has a much broader scope than *Nihāyat al-ijāz*. Al-Sakkākī divides the *Miftāh* into three chapters: the first describes morphology (*ṣarf*); the second is on grammar (*nahw*), and the third presents *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī* (the study of syntactical subtlety) and *‘ilm al-bayān* (the study of figurative usage), which is the material based on al-Jurjānī and al-Rāzī. The inclusion of this material with morphology and grammar shows that al-Sakkākī intended the *Miftāh* as a sort of encyclopedia for Arabic semantics. This is different from al-Rāzī’s presentation in *Nihāyat al-ijāz* not to mention al-Jurjānī’s approach in *Dalā'il al-i‘jāz* and *Asrār al-balāgha*.

Al-Sakkākī’s *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī* and *‘ilm al-bayān* correspond roughly to al-Rāzī’s sections on *jumal* and *mufrad* respectively, but the later author organizes this material according to different principles. Al-Sakkākī first distinguishes *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī* from grammar, both of which consider grammatical structures. He explains that the grammarian is interested in normative usage and so is concerned only with making a phrase grammatically correct. The student of *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī*, on the other hand, is concerned with whether the phrase is appropriate to a particular situation and whether it is well or poorly said.²¹

Al-Sakkākī goes on to distinguish *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī* from *‘ilm al-bayān*. *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī* is based on the literal use of language and so is governed by grammatical structures which are not open to interpretation. The use of a separate pronoun with a conjugated verb, for instance, must always convey a sense of emphasis. *‘ilm al-bayān*, on the other hand, is concerned with the nexus of ideas that al-Jurjānī described as *ma‘nā al-ma‘nā*. These ideas have no literal referent, and so understanding the meaning of figurative language is open to a certain amount of discussion. In al-Sakkākī’s words the subject of *‘ilm al-bayān* is the ‘conveying of one idea in a number of ways’ (*īrādat ma‘nā wāhid bi-ṭuruq mukhtalifa*). What he means is that grammatical rules do not govern *‘ilm al-bayān*, and so there is less certainty in explaining what figurative expressions mean.²²

Accordingly, *‘ilm al-bayān* is the study of the relationships between ideas that convey meaning in figurative language. Perhaps the most important of these

²⁰ al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat*, p. 21.

²¹ al-Sakkākī, *Miftāh*, p. 161.

²² Ibid., p. 162.

relationships is similarity since this governs the imagery that lies at the heart of poetry and prose. Al-Sakkākī acknowledges the importance of similarity and devotes the first part of *'ilm al-bayān* to analysing it. The section is essentially a collection of the rules and principles that govern comparison. Al-Sakkākī notes, for instance, that subjects are normally compared with something that is more prominent; thus the poet may compare the red in a woman's cheeks with the more prominent red of a rose. At the same time, however, poets often break these rules in order to challenge their audience with a more striking image. In one line, for example, al-Sakkākī notes that the poet has compared the stars to the life of the prophet. He observes that it would have been more conventional to compare the prophet's life to the stars since the stars are tangible and so easier to understand than the concept of someone's life which can be understood only intellectually. The poet has reversed the standard order, however, in order to produce a more striking line.²³

Al-Sakkākī's definitions of *'ilm al-ma'ānī* and *'ilm al-bayān* became the basis for the later *balāgha* tradition. In the fourteenth century the Damascene author Khaṭīb Dimashq al-Qazwīnī (d. 1338) summarized al-Sakkākī's presentation in *Talkhīṣ al-miftāḥ* (The Summary of the Key). Al-Qazwīnī began the *Talkhīṣ* with a prolegomenon in which he defined eloquence and linked it to *ma'ānī* and *bayān*. He then divided the body of his work into three chapters, namely, *'ilm al-ma'ānī*, *'ilm al-bayān* and *'ilm al-bādī'* (the study of rhetorical figures). Al-Sakkākī, like al-Rāzī, had considered the *bādī'* but not made the figures a part of his system. Al-Qazwīnī does not define the *bādī'* any differently from al-Sakkākī and al-Rāzī, but the manner of his presentation serves to raise their status. In the *Talkhīṣ*, *'ilm al-bādī'* take its place as a full partner alongside *'ilm al-ma'ānī* and *'ilm al-bayān* in the study of style.

The study of *ma'ānī*, *bayān* and *bādī'* became known as *'ilm al-balāgha*, and it is the formal establishment of this trivium that is al-Qazwīnī's main contribution to Arabic letters. It is important to note, however, that al-Qazwīnī does more than formalize a curriculum that already existed. He also shifts the emphasis of that curriculum, and the raised profile of the *bādī'* is one indication of this. Another is the fact that al-Qazwīnī does not include a section on *iżjāz al-qur'añ* in the *Talkhīṣ* and closes the work with a short section on literary plagiarism. All of this shows a marked shift from the presentation in the *Miftāḥ*. Al-Sakkākī had considered *ma'ānī* and *bayān* as part of a general semantic system and so removed the discussion from the context of style and poetry. Al-Qazwīnī, however, returns the discussion to a more literary footing. He brings *'ilm al-balāgha* closer to the concerns of poets and critics.

²³ Ibid., p. 343.

Al-Qazwīnī was not the only one to present the topics of *'ilm al-balāgha*. In the thirteenth century, for instance 'Abd al-Wāhid ibn al-Zamlakānī (d. 1253) wrote *al-Tibyān fī 'ilm al-bayān* (The Exposition for the Study of Figurative Usage) in which he divides the material more or less along the lines of al-Rāzī. Shortly after Ibn al-Zamlakānī, the grammarian Badr al-Dīn ibn Malik (d. 1287) wrote *al-Miṣbāḥ* (The Lamp) which followed the organizing principles of al-Sakkākī.

Then, in the fourteenth century, two other authors tried their hand at the task. In Yemen Yaḥyā ibn Ḥamza al-Mu'ayyad al-'Alawī (d. 1346) wrote *al-Tirāz* (The Adornment for the Secrets of Eloquence and the Sciences of *Ijāz*), while Muhammad ibn Bahādur al-Zarkashī (d. 1393) composed *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'an* (The Proof for the Sciences of the Koran) in Egypt. The *Burhān* is a fairly general work in which the author includes various subjects connected with Koranic studies. Al-Zarkashī includes topics from *'ilm al-balāgha*, but his work is not devoted exclusively to style. The *Tirāz* of al-Mu'ayyad, on the other hand, focuses on *balāgha* and specifically, as the title suggests, on the ideas of al-Jurjānī in the *Asrār* and *Dalā'il al-ijāz*. Al-Mu'ayyad follows generally the organization of al-Rāzī and Ibn al-Zamlakānī, but his presentation is more substantial. He takes great pains to define his terminology and is particularly interested in the topic of hyperbole and the issue of how far a poet may stray from the truth.

Like al-Rāzī, Ibn al-Zamlakānī and al-Mu'ayyad tried to organize the ideas of 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī so that students might digest them more easily. Few, however, had the chance to see their work because by the fifteenth century two scholars from central Asia, namely al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 1413) and Mas'ūd ibn 'Umar al-Taftazānī (d. 1389), had written a series of commentaries on al-Qazwīnī's *Talkhīs* and al-Sakkākī's *Miftāḥ* that became extremely influential and served to monopolize the study of *'ilm al-balāgha*. Al-Jurjānī and al-Taftazānī's work became the basis for hundreds of glosses, supercommentaries, epitomes and versifications. This body of scholarship, based ultimately on al-Sakkākī's organization of the *Miftāḥ*, became the main curriculum for literary studies in the pre-modern Islamic world.

THE *BADĪ'*

The incorporation of *'ilm al-badī'* within *'ilm al-balāgha* reflects the importance of the *badi'* in the discussion of Arabic style. In the early Islamic period the term *badi'* was used to refer to elements of poetry that seemed new or striking and thus attracted attention. In *Kitāb al-badī'*, for instance, Ibn al-Mu'tazz refers to certain types of abstract imagery and wordplay as *badi'* because they marked a departure from the more straightforward style of older

poets. Accordingly, in the early period the *bādī* categories were a sort of bellwether for literary taste. As time went on, however, the literary community came to assume that poetry would include striking turns of phrase and ceased to be startled by them. Scholars simply catalogued *bādī* figures and defined them with ever increasing precision. In this way *bādī* ceased to be an indicator of literary sensibility and became more like the compulsory programme in figure skating or gymnastics. It was something the audience came to expect and poets felt compelled to provide.

Critics in the post-classical period considered *bādī* in a number of ways. First, as we have just seen, *bādī* elements were included in *balāgha* works, but the most important figures – that is, metaphor, metonymy and simile – were treated as part of *‘ilm al-bayān*. The situation was similar in *adab* works. Although *adab* authors did not consider simile and metaphor separately from the other figures, *bādī* was still not the focal point of their discussion. Authors like Ibn al-Athīr did consider them; like many authors, he referred to them as *māhāsin al-shi‘r* (the fine points of poetry), but only as one of many critical topics.

A few authors devoted entire works to *bādī*. At the end of the twelfth century, for instance, Usāma ibn Munqidh (d. 1188) wrote *al-Bādī fi l-bādī* (The Striking [Work] on Rhetorical Figures) in which he covered ninety-five figures of speech. Usāma’s notion of *bādī*, however, is not very rigid or technical. In addition to the semantic or syntactical manipulation we usually associate with figures of speech he also includes topics like ‘what al-Mutanabbī has taken from Aristotle’²⁴ and plagiarism.²⁵ Accordingly for Usāma *bādī* has a more general sense: it is a general term for poetics.

The most extensive works devoted exclusively to *bādī* are *Tahrīr al-taħbīr fi ‘ilm al-bādī* (Culling a Fair Composition on the Study of Rhetorical Figures) and *Bādī al-Qur’ān* (Rhetorical Figures in the Koran) by the Egyptian author Ibn Abī'l-İşba‘ (d. 1256). The work of Ibn Abī'l-İşba‘ tells us a lot about the development of writing on *bādī*. First, the author tells us that he has arranged his presentation around Qudāma ibn Ja‘far’s *Kitāb naqd al-shi‘r* and Ibn al-Mu‘azz’s *Kitāb al-bādī* because these are the ‘bases (*uṣūl*) for criticism and *bādī*'.²⁶ Then he goes through an extensive list of other sources which include not only works on the *bādī* but poetry and prose in which the figures appear. Finally, Ibn Abī'l-İşba‘ goes through the *bādī* elements themselves. In the *Tahrīr* he considers 130 figures, while *Bādī al-Qur’ān* covers a few less since Ibn Abī'l-İşba‘ can leave out here whatever has to do with rhyme or metre.

²⁴ Usāma, *al-Bādī*, p. 370.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 264.

²⁶ Ibn Abī'l-İşba‘, *Bādī*, p. 13.

Although the *badi‘* elements were usually presented as a group, a few authors devoted entire books to one figure. There are, for instance, at least three extant works on paronomasia (*tajnīs*), namely *Jinān al-jinās* (The Gardens of Paronomasia) of Khalil ibn Aybak al-Şafadī, *Janā al-jinās* (The Fruit of Paronomasia) of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 1505) and the later *Bulūgh al-arab fi ‘ilm al-adab: ‘ilm al-jinās* (Reaching the Goal in the Study of Literature: the Study of Paronomasia) of Jibrā'il ibn Farḥāt Jarmānus (d. 1732), as well as many references to works which have not come down to us. The same al-Şafadī also wrote another work on the figure of ambiguity or double entendre (*tawriya*). These authors all present their material in the same way as other *badi‘* authors, which is to say they include very specific, short definitions followed by page after page of examples. There was very little by way of real analysis.

This particular interest in paronomasia and ambiguity probably reflects the overuse of these figures by poets of this period. In discussing poetry that suffers from artificiality (*takalluf*), for instance, several *adab* authors²⁷ refer to the extensive use of paronomasia. In *Kanz al-barā'a fi adawāt dhawī al-yarā'a* (The Treasure of Skill for Those who Wield the Tools of the Pen) another Ibn al-Athīr (no relation to Ḏiyya' al-Dīn), namely, 'Imād al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1299) talks about the extensive use of *tawriya* in his day.²⁸ Accordingly, we might regard the works on paronomasia and ambiguity as similar to Ibn al-Mu'tazz's original work on the *badi‘*. Like Ibn al-Mu'tazz, these authors focus on poetic elements that had become hallmarks of contemporary taste.

Finally, in the post-classical period the *badi‘* elements were also presented in the *badi‘iyya* (*badi‘* poem). The *badi‘iyya* is an encomium of the prophet written specifically to illustrate the figures of speech. It is often paired with a commentary, sometimes written by the author of the *badi‘iyya* itself, in which the *badi‘* elements present in each line are explained. Accordingly, the *badi‘iyya* is a sort of poem and textbook at the same time. The seventeenth-century author Ibn Ma'sūm (d. 1642), for instance, introduces his *badi‘iyya*, entitled *Anwār al-rabi‘* (The Flowers of Spring), with the same concerns as a textbook writer. He reviews earlier work on the *badi‘* and claims that he will go beyond other authors and consider sources that had even escaped the notice of Ibn Abī'l-İşba'.²⁹ So Ibn Ma'sūm goes on to write a poem and comment on it at the same time. His *Anwār al-rabi‘* is, to be sure, a *tour de force* of poetry and scholarship, but, at the same time, it demonstrates the level of artificiality and elaboration that scholars and poets regarded as aesthetically satisfying in the post-classical period. The *badi‘iyya* is in many ways the epitome

²⁷ E.g. Ibn al-Athīr, *Mathal*, vol. I, p. 258.

²⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kanz al-barā'a*, p. 450.

²⁹ Ibn Ma'sūm, *Anwār al-rabi‘*, p. 31.

of their aesthetic. It is a highly precious and self-conscious demonstration of wit.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Like many of the medieval disciplines, *'ilm al-balāgha* has been seen as displaying signs of Greek influence. Al-Sakkākī, for instance, probably owes his methods of categorization in the *Miftāḥ* ultimately to the importation of Greek ideas. The author himself, however, certainly did not read Plato and Aristotle. Whatever contact there was between Arab scholars and Greek texts had taken place long before, and by the time of al-Sakkākī Greek thought had been pretty much absorbed into the Muslim *paideia*.

The Muslim philosophical tradition (*falsafa*) presents, of course, an exceptional case. *Falsafa* authors made quite conscious use of Greek ideas and were interested in explaining Greek thought in Greek terms. In the field of criticism in particular this meant that philosophers like al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (d. 1037) were content to use Aristotle's own examples to explain arguments from the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. They made little effort to apply Aristotle's ideas to issues established in *adab* and *balāgha* or to illustrate their presentations with examples from Arabic poetry. For this reason philosophical criticism must have seemed particularly obscure to people raised on al-Mutanabbī and al-Jāḥiz.

The post-classical period, however, is marked by a greater effort to make Greek ideas on criticism more meaningful to an Arab audience. The *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-shi'r* (The Summary of [Aristotle's] Poetics) by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 1198) is a good example of this. At the beginning of the *Talkhīṣ* Averroes speaks in terms that would probably have been familiar only to philosophers, but by the end of the work he uses terms that students of *adab* and *balāgha* would be able to understand.

Averroes proposes to consider Aristotle's comments on panegyric (*madiḥ*) since he claims this is the main part of the poetics that has come down to him.³⁰ He begins by explaining that poetry has three constituent elements, namely, *muḥākā* (*mimesis*), *wazn* (metre) and *lahn* (song).³¹ Of these three terms *wazn* and *lahn* would probably have been understood by *adab* and *balāgha* authors, but *muḥākā* would cause some problems. The term *muḥākā* would probably not have been understood beyond the *falsafa* audience, and yet Averroes does not take much time to explain it. It will be interesting to compare

³⁰ Ibn Rushd, *Talkhīṣ*, p. 32.

³¹ Ibid., p. 57.

his presentation in this regard with the *Minhāj* of Hāzim al-Qarṭājannī, the next work we will consider.

Averroes goes on to specify that panegyric, in particular, is made up of six elements. In addition to *mūhākā*, *wazn* and *lahn* it also includes ‘ādāt (character), *i’tiqād* (believability) and *nāzār* (demonstration).³² The main idea here is that the poet should refer to the character (‘ādāt) of the person he is praising in a manner that is believable (*i’tiqād*). Furthermore, the poet should demonstrate (*nāzār*) the character of his subject by describing things he has done. In explaining all of this, which takes up the first quarter of his *Talkhīṣ*, Averroes makes no effort to demonstrate how these observations might apply to an Arab context by citing Arabic poetry. It is almost as if he realizes the material is irrelevant to a traditional audience.

In the rest of the *Talkhīṣ*, however, Averroes proceeds differently. He advises at several points that poets should use realistic descriptions in order to have the greatest effect on their audience. He specifies that in some cases poets use similes to describe tangible objects, like a mountain or a woman’s face, and in others they use them to describe abstract concepts like justice or faith. In this part of his presentation Averroes begins to cite Arabic poetry and verses from the Koran to illustrate his discussion. The material presented here would be very familiar to *adab* or *balāgha* authors. Such authors also distinguished those similes in which the terms of comparison were tangible from others in which they were abstract; they would certainly have recognized the lines of al-Mutanabbī and Abū Tammām that Averroes cites to illustrate this distinction.³³

Averroes also considers Arabic style in a way that would satisfy *bādī* authors. Towards the end of the *Talkhīṣ*, for instance, he brings up the notion of balance (*muwāzana*) and points out that the poet may lend this quality to his work by including related elements, like the sun and moon, night and day or bow and arrow.³⁴ He goes on to claim that it is features like this – and he names several more – that distinguish poetic style from conventional. This is, of course, close to the original notion of *bādī* in which Ibn al-Mu’tazz specified a number of striking elements that were particular to poetry. Averroes may use different terms than the *bādī* authors, but he would seem to have some of the same things in mind.

About a century after Averroes, Hāzim al-Qarṭājannī (d. 1285) tried his hand at applying Aristotle to Arabic literature. Al-Qarṭājannī was not primarily a philosopher, but rather a scholar and littérateur with a good grasp

³² Ibid., p. 69.

³³ Ibid., pp. 92–4.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

of Greek ideas on poetics. Accordingly, al-Qarṭājannī does not write an epitome or commentary on the *Poetics*, but rather an independent work on style which incorporates some of Aristotle's ideas. That work, namely, *Minhāj al-bulaghā'*, is divided into four sections, and these are devoted to *lafz*, *ma'ānī*, *nazm* (structure) and *uslūb* (style) respectively. None of these are technical philosophical categories, and so, on the surface at least, the *Minhāj* would be familiar to an audience of non-philosophers.

Al-Qarṭājannī's section on *lafz* has not survived. We can see from his section on *ma'ānī*, however, that he is interested in issues very different from those that interested most Arab critics. For al-Qarṭājannī *ma'ānī* are not grammatical structures, but rather the ideas themselves that authors use in their work. He is really talking here about content, pure and simple, and he explores this in a number of ways. Most importantly, he explains the concept of mimesis, something to which we have also seen Averroes refer. Al-Qarṭājannī discusses this at length. Generally, he tries to explain that the poet's main activity is to represent (*muḥākā*) something to his audience in the same way that a sculptor's job is to make a statue in the form of his subject. He goes on to discuss how the audience takes pleasure in hearing the description of something and how that pleasure compares to seeing the thing in real life.

Al-Qarṭājannī goes into the various mechanics of intellection and perception that affect his notion of mimesis. At one point, however, he suggests that his most effective argument is an image from nature:

One can only compare the best sort of mimesis in poetry to the best sort of imagery to be found in nature. I would say [one of the] best images is . . . when a tree hangs over water and its fruit and foliage are reflected in its clear surface. The juxtaposition of the stream's wooded banks and their reflection in the water is one of the most impressive and pleasing sights. The mimetic quality in this is like the beautiful juxtaposition that occurs when something that exists is placed next to its likeness in the manner of figurative language in analogy or metaphor.³⁵

Al-Qarṭājannī considers other aspects of poetic content as well. He distinguishes *shi'r* (poetry) from *khitāba* (rhetoric) on the basis that the poet's main goal is to make his audience picture something (*takhyīl*), while the rhetor must lay out proofs which convince (*iqnā'*) his audience that something is true. Accordingly, al-Qarṭājannī explains that the poet is not limited to true statements in the way that the rhetor is. The poet may use false statements if they serve his purposes (i.e. *takhyīl*) and seem to be true. This is why various sorts of exaggeration, when appropriate, are permissible in poetry.

Much of what al-Qarṭājannī discusses in the second part of the *Minhāj* is inspired more by Hellenistic than Arab thought. There are still, however,

³⁵ al-Qarṭājannī, *Minhāj*, p. 127.

a number of issues that non-philosophers could appreciate. Al-Qarṭājannī's discussion of exaggeration, for instance, would certainly have been of interest to other critics, even if they could not always follow some of his references to syllogisms. Furthermore, in considering mimesis he explains, like Averroes, that it is easier to understand the description of tangible objects than of abstract concepts. This would be a very familiar argument to *balāgha* authors.

In the third and fourth sections of the *Minhāj al-Qarṭājannī* considers plagiarism, the manner in which poets should compose poetry, and the demands of rhyme and metre, which are all standard topics of critical discussion. Al-Qarṭājannī may have a more analytical way of explaining these issues than other authors, but the gist of his arguments is basically the same. All of this makes the *Minhāj* a fairly comprehensive work on criticism that can stand alongside Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Mathal al-sā'ir* or al-Ḥusaynī's *Nadrat al-ighrīd* as a textbook. Accordingly, al-Qarṭājannī's *Minhāj* is really less a work about Hellenistic poetics than a critical work which includes a section, albeit substantial, inspired by Aristotle.

Shortly after al-Qarṭājannī two other authors show evidence of Hellenistic thought in their works. These are Abū Muḥammad al-Sijilmāsī (d. 1304) with *al-Manza‘ al-badī‘* etc. (The Striking Course in Categorizing the Forms of the Rhetorical Figures) and Aḥmad ibn al-Bannā‘ (d. 1321) with *al-Rawd al-mari‘* etc. (The Pleasant Garden on the Craft of the Rhetorical Figures). As their titles imply, both of these works are essentially about the *badi‘*. Al-Sijilmāsī classifies the figures of speech under ten main categories (hence the reference to *tajnīs* which can also mean classification) and then into various sub-categories. Ibn al-Bannā‘, on the other hand, breaks the figures up into two main groups. First, he considers those in which sounds correspond to their intended meaning in an unusual way. This is similar to what other authors have considered under figurative language. Then he discusses the way that groups of sounds convey meaning and these are some of the same topics discussed under the grammatical structures of *ilm al-ma‘āni*.

The material in al-Sijilmāsī's *Manza‘* and Ibn al-Bannā‘s *Rawd* is essentially the same as what we see in other critical works under the heading of *balāgha*, *bayān* or *badī‘*. What makes these works somewhat different, however, is the way that these authors define poetry and explain simile and metaphor. Both of them refer to poetry (i.e. *shi‘r*) as *kalām mukhayyil* (discourse that evokes images) and use the terms of *muḥākā* to discuss simile. Ibn al-Bannā‘, in particular, argues that the essential elements in poetry are *takhyīl* and *muḥākā* and that, as such, poetry can exist in either verse (*manzūm*) or prose (*manthūr*). He points out explicitly that he differs in this regard from other authors (he mentions Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī (d. 1074) here in particular) who claim that the

requisite elements of poetry are rhyme and metre and that poetry and verse are the same thing.³⁶

Ibn al-Bannā's comments here reflect the main contribution of Hellenistic-inspired works to the Arab critical tradition. These authors' affection for Aristotle encouraged them to focus on the mimetic and imaginative functions of poetry instead of the more formal properties of rhyme and metre. Such a definition of poetry, however, never really caught on, and so the works of al-Qarṭājannī, al-Sijilmāsī and Ibn al-Bannā' remain outside the mainstream in the post-classical period.

COMMENTARY

All of the authors we have considered up to this point devoted large parts of their work to citing examples of poetry and commenting on them in some way. Some writers devoted entire works to this activity, and so we see a fair number of commentaries on poetry during this period. The commentary is indeed a quintessentially post-classical format. The back-and-forth between text and commentator reflects both the central position texts held in the Middle Ages and the classroom environment in which they were studied.

During the post-classical period many authors wrote on *shawāhid*, the various examples of poetry that earlier writers had used to illustrate their arguments rather than focus on a single poet or work. For example, 'Abd al-Rahīm al-'Abbāsī (d. 1555) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī wrote commentaries on the *shawāhid* cited in al-Qazwīnī's *Talkhīṣ*. Although commentaries, al-'Abbāsī and al-Suyūtī's works were substantial in their own right and were actually longer than the works on which they were based.

Other scholars continued to write commentaries on individual poems or pieces of prose. Most authors were particularly concerned with style and so were drawn to the showy *tour de force* of works such as the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī or the *Risāla* (Treatise) of the eleventh-century Spanish writer Ibn Zaydūn (d. 1070). For the most part these commentaries were fairly straightforward. They cited a line of text and glossed or parsed its vocabulary and grammar. Then they explained what the line meant, and considered whatever figures of speech the author had managed to fit into it. Finally, they cited similar lines from other poets and considered whether one poet had plagiarized from the other. These were the standard concerns of commentary.

One work which stands out in all of this is *al-Ghayth al-musajjam* (The Flowing Downpour) of Khalīl al-Ṣafadī to whom we have already referred.

³⁶ Ibn al-Bannā', *Rawḍ*, p. 82.

Al-Şafadī writes the *Ghayth* in order to gloss *Lāmiyyat al-‘ajam* (The Lām Poem of the Persians), a long poem by Mu’ayyad al-Dīn al-Tughrā’ī (d. 1121). Like other authors, al-Şafadī goes through the individual lines of al-Tughrā’ī’s poem, but his remarks go far beyond the typical commentator’s discussion. Al-Şafadī opens with a substantial introduction which includes a short summary of al-Tughrā’ī’s life and a general apologia for literary study. His line-by-line commentary is extensive and covers a great number of topics which range from the derivation of metre to the relationship between the imaginative processes in poetry and dreams.³⁷ Accordingly, *al-Ghayth al-musajjam* is something of a scholar’s grab bag. Al-Şafadī uses the text of al-Tughrā’ī’s poem as a springboard to consider a wide variety of literary issues.

PROSODY

As we have already mentioned, most critics considered rhyme and metre to be the definitive elements of Arabic poetry. Although rules for these elements were set by the eighth century, poets did not always conform to them, and so over time new verse forms developed. These new verse forms fall into two basic groups. The first group includes forms like the *muwashshaha* (adorned) in which poets use proper, inflected Arabic (i.e. *fushā*) in different rhyme schemes, while the second includes forms like the *zajal* in which poets did not use standard Arabic. In the post-classical period we see the first critical works devoted to these new verse forms.

The first of these is Ibn Sana’ al-Mulk’s (d. 1212) *Dār al-tirāz* (The House of Embroidery). Ibn Sana’ al-Mulk is mainly concerned with the *muwashshaha*, a strophic verse form as opposed to the standard monorhyme of the classical Arabic *qaṣida*. He claims that the most important part of the *muwashshaha* is the *kharja* (envoi), the last stanza of the poem, and that this may be in a language other than Arabic.³⁸ About a century after Ibn Sana’ al-Mulk we find *al-Ātil al-hālī wa'l-murakhkhaṣ al-ghālī* (The Plain [but] Adorned and the Rigorous [yet] Relaxed [Verse]) of Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī (d. 1349). Al-Hillī refers to the *muwashshah*, but is more interested in forms like the *zajal* which use colloquial Arabic. Finally, in the fifteenth century we see Ibn Ḥijjal al-Ḥamawi’s *Bulūgh al-amal* etc. (Reaching the Hope in the Art of the Zajal), which deals with most of the same material considered by al-Hillī.

The interesting aspect of these works lies in the authors’ attitudes toward colloquial Arabic. While Ibn Sana’ al-Mulk is more interested in metre and

³⁷ al-Şafadī, *al-Ghayth al-musajjam*, vol. II, p. 243.

³⁸ Ibn Sana’ al-Mulk, *Dār al-tirāz*, p. 43.

rhyme than the form of the language, al-Hillī finds the non-standard language more interesting. He points out that the *zajal* and other verse forms vary from region to region because of the different dialects that are used. He explains that each dialect has its own music and beauty³⁹ and describes the non-standard verse forms with a playfulness that seems to poke fun at the rigidity of *fūshā*:

The inflection of the [non standard] forms may be sickly, their lofty diction (*fāsāha*) may be poor, and the sound they make may be weak. [In these forms] the inflection that is usually permitted is forbidden and the pronunciation that is usually healthy becomes sickly. The more profligate they are, the better; the less grammatical they are, the greater their craft. They are common, but difficult; they are low, but esteemed. They allow the illiterate to show up the learned [because] the learned would find it difficult to practise them.⁴⁰

Al-Hillī has his tongue firmly in cheek here. It is interesting, nonetheless, to consider the world he describes, a world in which, it would appear, *fūshā* counts for nothing and street-corner buskers have taken over the palace salons. It is, to be sure, a playful description, but it still suggests that al-Hillī recognized two literary worlds, the *fūshā* and the colloquial. In his day the suggestion that the latter would unseat the former could be represented only as a sort of farce. But his description of that farce, not to mention his own interest in the *zajal* form, may prefigure modern notions about the place of colloquial poetry.

CONCLUSION: ARABIC LETTERS IN THE EYES OF IBN KHALDŪN

The *Muqaddima* of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) is a good reference point for any topic in the Arabic tradition. In the *Muqaddima* Ibn Khaldūn surveys not only poetry and prose, but also the various disciplines that were used to study them. Accordingly, by way of concluding let us compare some of Ibn Khaldūn's observations with our own.

Ibn Khaldūn recognizes the three-part composition of *'ilm al-balāgha* and the role of al-Sakkākī in establishing this. He goes on to suggest that the study of *balāgha* varied from the eastern part of the Islamic world to the western. Scholars in the East (i.e. starting in Iraq and moving east) followed al-Sakkākī and considered language as an entire system in which all parts should be considered together. Those in the West (i.e. Syria and North Africa), however, tended to look at striking turns of phrase (the *bādī'*) exclusively and ignore the basic grammatical elements that made up much of al-Sakkākī's system.⁴¹

³⁹ al-Hillī, *Āṭil*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, vol. IV, p. 1,265.

This observation, which has found its way into many modern histories of Arab criticism, requires a certain amount of qualification. Ibn Khaldūn's characterization of the eastern part of the Islamic world is fairly accurate since the main authors in the *balāgha* tradition (i.e. al-Rāzī, al-Sakkākī and al-Taftazānī) all lived in central Asia. His characterization of works in the West, however, is somewhat misleading. For one thing, North Africa is perhaps best represented by Hellenistic-inspired writers, such as al-Qarṭājannī, and the close analysis found in these authors was quite different from the discussion in *bādī*'s works. For another, scholars in Egypt and Syria, who were responsible for almost half of all critical works in the post-classical period, were not in any way devoted exclusively to the *bādī*'. Rather, they produced a variety of works that ranged from the *balāgha* work of al-Qazwīnī to al-Hillī's work on the *zajal*.

Ibn Khaldūn is best known for his ideas on cyclical history, and in his discussion of Arabic poetry he outlines a similar sort of cyclical movement. He suggests that in the pre-Islamic period poets were very good because poetry was their main concern, but with the advent of Islam the quality of Arabic poetry declined because people became more interested in issues of theology and law. As these issues were settled, however, the Arabs turned their attention once again to poetry, and so produced the classical poets of the Abbasid age. It is only later that poetry goes into decline; to illustrate the process Ibn Khaldūn cites the overuse of the *bādī*' in his day.⁴²

Ibn Khaldūn's arguments fit nicely within the periodization we see in critical works. It was fairly standard to divide Arabic poetry into pre-Islamic (*jāhilī*) and Islamic and then a number of periods within the Islamic era. Ibn Khaldūn's 'cycles' of pre-Islamic, 'early' Islamic and 'developed' Islamic match this pretty well. The 'up-and-down' movement of his cyclical explanation, however, is unique. It differs from the traditional view that the Abbasid-period poets were not as good as the *jāhilī* ones, as well as from Ibn al-Athīr's argument that later poets were actually better than their predecessors.

While Ibn Khaldūn refers to a cycle of decline after Abbasid poetry, most critics do not refer to anything at all. As we have already mentioned, there is a dearth of references in this literature to poets later than al-Mutanabbī. This is particularly striking in works of critics from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which were separated from the salons of Sayf al-Dawla by more than five hundred years. The only exceptions to this are anthology writers, who collect later poetry but make few critical comments, and the thirteenth-century author 'Imād al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, to whom we have already referred. In *Kanz al-barā'a* 'Imād al-Dīn takes the classification of Arab poets up to

⁴² Ibid., pp. 1,312–14.

Ayyubid times. The later poets to whom he refers, however, are exclusively Syrian.⁴³

In discussing poetry Ibn Khaldūn makes one point again and again. He argues that literary sensibility is not something that can be taught; rather it needs to be acquired through practice and exposure to example. Accordingly, he suggests that learning poetry, whether to compose or appreciate it, is like learning to speak a language. The student of Arabic, for example, may refer to grammar books, but can only master the language by hearing it. Similarly the poet or critic can only master the crafts of poetry and eloquence by long exposure to good literature. Such sentiments are fairly standard. Even an author like al-Sakkākī, who was devoted to setting up systems and making rules, allowed that it was *al-dhawq al-salīm* (good taste) that mattered in the end. This position does, however, beg the question: if one could learn about literature only by exposing oneself to it, then what was the point of talking about it? Indeed, what was the point of criticism?

For some authors the point was clearly to support their own positions and attack the positions of others. Ibn al-Athīr, for example, wrote his *Istidrāk* to defend the poetry of al-Mutanabbī from the attacks of Ibn al-Dahhān and then became the object of similar attacks because of *al-Mathal al-sā’ir*. This sort of ‘antagonistic’ criticism reflects the early phases in the emergence of an Arab critical tradition. One of the first works in this tradition was, after all, the *Kitāb al-badī'* of Ibn al-Mu’tazz, himself a *badī'* poet writing to defend the use of *badī'*. In the same way Ibn al-Athīr not only attacks the critics of al-Mutanabbī, but also argues that prose, which is his chosen medium, is really superior to poetry. A century later al-Hillī defends the *zajal* form, which he used in addition to *fūshā*, and the use of colloquial. Thus for many authors criticism served as an apology for their own work.

Other authors wrote to provide an archive for the Arab tradition. Since poetry was the ‘*dīwān* of the Arabs’, many scholars wanted to establish and maintain that *dīwān*. In the beginning they collected entire poems, but as time went by, they focused on the highlights of those poems, namely, *badī'* and plagiarism (*sariqāt*). The *badī'iyya* poems, which marked the tastes of the post-classical period, offered in some ways the opportunity for scholars to include their own work in the Arab archive. The *badī'iyya* were ready-made classics. Not only were they filled to the brim with the figures of speech admired by the tradition, but they came with their own commentaries and so their own critical literature. Accordingly, the *badī'iyyāt* were a sort of conversation in which critics could respond to the tradition they studied.

⁴³ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kanz al-barā'a*, p. 442.

Finally, some authors were not interested so much in the contents of the Arab *dīwān*, but in the medium. They were interested in the Arabic language itself. To some extent this was due to the sacred quality that Arabic commanded by virtue of the Koran. To some extent it was also due to the fact that proper Arabic (*fushā*) was, like Latin in Europe, an imposing monument of rules and forms that students had been conditioned to venerate. Whatever the reason, there is a clear fascination with language in many of these works. These authors seldom tire of explaining the fine points of Arabic grammar or the syntax of every line of poetry. The systems of *'ilm al-ma'āni* and *'ilm al-bayān* served to extend syntax to intention and imagery, with the result that all aspects of the poem could be parsed and explicated. For many authors this was enough. It was enough to explain how the great engine of the Arabic language functioned.

One can look at criticism in the post-classical period as a glass that is half empty or half full. The focus of poets and critics on the *bādī*, for instance, may be seen either as the death knell of Arabic style or as a keen appreciation of the subtleties of language. One might complain that mainstream critics did not appreciate the philosophers' notion of mimesis or wonder at the similarities between the description of the imaginative process in al-Jurjānī's *Asrār* and al-Qarṭājannī's *Minhāj*. One might lament the fact that Arab critics did not refer to the rise of drama and prose narrative or see Ibn al-Athīr's apology for prose and al-Hillī's defence of colloquial poetry as a growing interest in new forms.

As we said at the outset, the post-classical period is mainly concerned with organizing the heritage of the classical. If we give these authors the benefit of the doubt, however, we may recognize here also some harbingers of the modern period.

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