

Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought

Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson

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Contents

- Editors' Preface IX
List of Contributors XIII
Tabula Gratulatoria XVII
Publications of Everett K. Rowson XX
- 1 From Breath to Soul: The Quranic Word *Rūḥ* and Its (Mis)interpretations 1
Sarra Tlili
- 2 The Wiles of Women, The Guile of Men: Re-reading *Kayd* in *Sūrat Yūsuf* 22
Zainab Mahmood
- 3 Some Ḥanbalī Views on Secret Marriage 35
Susan A. Sectorsky
- 4 *Anta anā wa-anā minka* (“You are me, and I am from you”): A Quasi-Nuṣayrī Fragment on the Intellect in the Early Ismā‘īlī Treatise *Kitāb Ta’wīl ḥurūf al-mu‘jam* 50
David Hollenberg
- 5 The Crucified Speaks: ‘Alī ibn al-Jahm on His Day-Long Exposure at Nishapur 67
David Larsen
- 6 Man is Not the Only Speaking Animal: Thresholds and Idiom in al-Jāḥiẓ 94
Jeannie Miller
- 7 Beyond the Known Limits: Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣfahānī’s Chapter on “Intermedial” Poetry 122
Lara Harb
- 8 Foul Whisperings: Madness and Poetry in Arabic Literary History 150
Geert Jan van Gelder

- 9 **Music for the Body, Music for the Soul** 176
Hans Hinrich Biesterfeldt
- 10 **Zoroaster's Many Languages** 190
Kevin van Bladel
- 11 **Song and Punishment** 211
Dwight F. Reynolds
- 12 **Fathers and Husbands** 233
Adam Talib
- 13 **Writing the Past: Ancient Egypt through the Lens of Medieval Islamic Thought** 256
Tara Stephan
- 14 **"The Mosul Stand-Up, or a Riff on a Stiff": Al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāma* of Mosul** 271
Michael Cooperson
- 15 **An Edition of Al-Hamadhānī's *Al-Maqāma Al-Mawṣiliyya*** 276
Bilal Orfali
- 16 **Sucker of One's Mother's Clitoris: A Study of a Classical Arabic Insult** 279
John Nawas
- 17 **Commentators, Collators, and Copyists: Interpreting Manuscript Variation in the Exordium of Al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*** 295
Matthew L. Keegan
- 18 **Going the Extra *Mayl*: Two Texts on Medieval Dynamics in the Islamic World** 317
Jon McGinnis
- 19 **"Extremely Beautiful and Extremely Long"
*Al-Qīrātī's Exuberant Letter from the Year 761/1360*** 338
Thomas Bauer

- 20 **Enterprising Sultans and the Doge of Venice: Political Culture and the Patronage of Science and Philosophy in the Fifteenth-Century Mediterranean** 361
Ali Humayun Akhtar
- 21 **Contextualizing Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s Views on the Family, Marriage, and Divorce** 375
Kenneth M. Cuno
- 22 **“Go directly home with decorum”: Conduct Books for Egypt’s Young, ca. 1912** 393
Marilyn Booth
- 23 **When Jews Attack: Toward a Social Psychology of Inter-Communal Violence in Yemen** 416
Mark S. Wagner
- 24 **Scope for Comparatism: Internationalist and Surrealist Resonances in Idwār al-Kharrāṭ’s Resistant Literary Modernity** 425
Hala Halim
- 25 **Securing Consent: Islamic Development and the Movement to Transform Egypt** 469
James Toth
- Index of Quran Citations** 497
- General Index** 499

“Extremely Beautiful and Extremely Long”

Al-Qīrātī's Exuberant Letter from the Year 761/1360

Thomas Bauer

Introduction

It is said that the generation of so-called “digital natives” is able to process information more quickly than older generations and that they are more talented at multitasking. It is also said, however, that they find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on a single, complex text for a long while. This is not the place to discuss this theory, but if it proves to be true, the prospects for the text presented here are rather meager. This text is a letter of exuberant length and complexity, not only by the standards of the twitter generation, but in the eyes of the writer’s contemporaries as well. In print, the letter would amount to about forty pages, a length that was already considered extraordinary at the time the letter was written.

Obviously, a text of this format is not an ideal subject for a contribution to a *Festschrift*, but the dedicatee of this volume was paying attention to literary prose texts from the Mamluk period back when these texts were only being used as sources by historiographers and being tapped for their quotations of older texts that had been lost in their original form.¹ Literary texts such as post-Ḥarīrian *maqāmāt* or, worse still, letters in ornate prose were disregarded almost completely. Gradually, the situation is improving,² but major works such as all of Ibn Nubāta’s letters not included in al-Qalqashandī’s *Ṣubḥ al-a’shā* are still in manuscript, and there is hardly any study analyzing such texts from an aesthetic point of view.³ This is grounds enough for presenting a text that is interesting for additional reasons:

1 See Rowson, Homoerotic narratives, Alexandrian age, and his reviews in *MSR* 8 (2004), 315; *MSR* 10 (2006), 222; and *MSR* 14 (2010), 233.

2 To mention only the recent editions of aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Alḥān* and Ibn Ḥijja, *Qahwat al-inshā’*.

3 See Bauer, Toward an aesthetics of Mamluk literature, 14–20.

1. It is completely unknown. Though preserved in a comparatively large number of manuscripts and highly acclaimed by the author's contemporaries, the text is still unedited, and no modern scholar has ever taken account of it.
2. It was considered an important text when it was created, and we can therefore assume that studying this text will shed light on the nature of literature and society at the time it was written.
3. Stylistically complex texts—even texts that are much more harmless than the text in question here—have often provoked negative reactions in the last two centuries from both Arab and Western readers. Being confronted with a text like this therefore promises to tell us a lot not only about its time, but about ours as well.
4. Curiosity is the starting point of scholarship, and this is a text that should make every reader curious. A number of mysteries have to be resolved, and a number of questions have yet to be answered. Why was a text like this written? Why did it find acclaim? What, after all, is its message? Even these obvious questions are not always easy to answer.
5. And, finally, for these and other reasons, the text as such is fascinating, which should be reason enough to present it to one of the leading connoisseurs of classical Arabic prose.

This study will neither answer all of the questions nor give an in-depth analysis, but it may demonstrate that al-Qīrāṭī's text is interesting and deserves further study.

Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī and his *Maṭla' an-nayyirayn*

The author of the text treated here is Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī.⁴ The name al-Qīrāṭī has nothing to do with the unit of weight *al-qīrāt*, but refers to a village in the administrative district of Bilbays (today Zaqaḏīq) in the Sharqiyya province of the Nile delta. His father was born in this village and would later become a lawyer, judge and mufti, and, as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī remarks, a “mediocre poet.”⁵ His son Burhān ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm was born in Cairo in Ṣafar 726/January 1326 and specialized in precisely the field in which his father was only a mediocre talent and became an *adīb*, i.e. a poet, prose writer and scholar

4 See Ibn Ḥajar, *Durar* i, 31; id., *Inbāʾ* i, 312; Ibn al-ʿIrāqī, *Dhayl* ii, 488–90, Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Manhal* i, 89–95, al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* iii.1, 374; aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Alḥān* i, 52–8.

5 Ibn Ḥajar, *Durar* ii, 298–9.

in the fields of language and literature—and not a mediocre one. Instead, he is called *khātām al-udabāʾ*, “the seal of the littérateurs of his time,” on the title pages of his *Dīwān*.⁶ Quite interesting is a note by one of his biographers, who remarked that al-Qīrāṭī, despite his proficiency as an *adīb*, was a pious and religious man. Obviously, this was not to be taken for granted and an *adīb* was rather expected not to be “firmly rooted in religion.”⁷ At any rate, al-Qīrāṭī was both an *adīb* and a religious man, though, as his biographer says, he was arrogant (*ʿindahū takhayyul*) and had “sort of a bad temperament” (*nawʿ min sūʾ al-mizāj*).⁸ In sum: he was an unusually pious littérateur and a rather difficult character. He died in Mecca in Rabīʿ II 781/July 1379.

As for his achievements as an *adīb*, his biographers are unanimous in saying that he was one of the finest. According to Ibn Taghrī Birdī, he was “the poet of his day, alongside Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī, and the one closest to him.”⁹ Ibn Nubāta (686–768/1287–1366) was forty years older than al-Qīrāṭī and had established a reputation as the most famous poet and prose author of his time.¹⁰ He was al-Qīrāṭī’s great hero and probably exerted a greater influence on him than anyone else. This point will be relevant when we come to talk about the letter, which was addressed to none other than Ibn Nubāta.

Keen insiders would have recognized al-Qīrāṭī’s affinity for Ibn Nubāta as soon as they read the title of what is most certainly al-Qīrāṭī’s most important work. The book bears the title *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn*. What does this title tell us? First, it does not rhyme. For centuries before and after, most book titles would consist of two rhyming cola such as *Maṭlaʿ al-fawāʿid wa-majmaʿ al-farāʿid*. This was the title of Ibn Nubāta’s first book, the only one of his books to receive such a conventional title. From his next book (*Sajʿ al-muṭawwaq*) onwards, all of his works would bear short titles that eschewed rhyme for *tawriya*. *Tawriya*, double entendre, had become one of the most popular stylistic devices by the Mamluk period and Ibn Nubāta would turn out to be its master. He was also one of the first authors to use double entendre (*tawriya*) instead of rhyme (*sajʿ*) for the titles of his books. Consequently, for his admirers, *tawriya*-based, non-rhyming titles became a sort of badge by which they could identify themselves as followers of the “school” of Ibn Nubāta, to mention only *Qahwat al-inshāʾ* by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī or *Ḥalbat al-kumayt* by an-Nawājī.

6 Ms. Fatih; the ms. British Museum has *sayyid al-udabāʾ* instead.

7 Ibn al-ʿIrāqī, *Dhayl* ii, 490: *Matīn ad-diyāna kathīr al-ʿibāda*.

8 Ibn al-ʿIrāqī, *Dhayl* ii, 490.

9 Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Manhal* i, 90: *Shāʿir ʿasrihi baʿda sh-shaykh Jamāl ad-Dīn Ibn Nubāta wa-aqrab an-nās ilayhi*.

10 On Ibn Nubāta see Bauer, Ibn Nubātah, and Bauer, Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Nubātah.

Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn, again a non-rhyming title of only two words, clearly falls into this category. The obvious meaning of *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn* is “the place where the two brilliant ones rise.” The “two brilliant ones” is an expression denoting sun and moon, thus “The rising-place of sun and moon.” Were it a rhyming title, this phrase would suit as the first colon, and a second colon would follow. In *tawriya*-based titles, the second colon is substituted by a double meaning in the phrase. In our case, “the two brilliant ones” cannot only be taken to mean sun and moon. “Brilliant” is also used for brilliant works of literature. But why the dual form? If “brilliant” refers to literature and is used in its dual form, it could, for the contemporary reader, only refer to the two principal forms into which literature can be cast, that is: poetry and prose. This is exactly what al-Qīrāṭī intended. The title thus may mean both “The rising-place of sun and moon” and “The starting point of poetry and prose.” An informed reader was likely to have inferred from the title: first a confession of adherence to the school of Ibn Nubāta, and second the announcement of a book consisting of both poetry and prose. The latter was probably al-Qīrāṭī’s innovation. Though prose had gained more and more importance over time, Ibn Nubāta continued to publish his poetry in the form of a *dīwān*, a word that denoted collections of poetry exclusively, whereas he published his prose separately, even if a poem and a prose letter had originally gone together. Al-Qīrāṭī himself left a *Dīwān* that is a collection exclusively of poetry, but it was for *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn* that he devised a special title (his *dīwān* is simply called *dīwān*), and it was for this book that he gained lasting fame.

The texts in *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn* range from two-line epigrams to long panegyric odes and letters of two or three pages in length. In a category of its own is al-Qīrāṭī’s extremely long letter to Ibn Nubāta.¹¹ Not only is it by far the longest text in *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn*, it is also one of al-Qīrāṭī’s most famous works. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, one of the greatest Ḥadīth scholars of all time, and, like al-Qīrāṭī, an *adīb* and admirer of Ibn Nubāta, wrote:

وله ديوان جمعه لنفسه يشتمل على نظم ونثر في غاية الإجابة
 واشتهرت...رسالته التي كتبها للشيخ جمال الدين بن نباتة في غاية
 الحُسن والطول

11 Al-Qīrāṭī, *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn*, ms. British Museum, fol. 128a–141b; ms. Fatih, fol. 170b–182a.

Al-Qīrāṭī collected a *dīwān* of his own, comprising both poetry and prose, of utmost excellence. Especially famous became the letter he wrote to Ibn Nubāta, which is of extreme beauty and length.¹²

Note that Ibn Ḥajar found it remarkable that al-Qīrāṭī had compiled a *dīwān* that included both prose and poetry, and he singled out al-Qīrāṭī's letter to Ibn Nubāta for special mention. Ibn Ḥajar obviously reckoned it among al-Qīrāṭī's principal works, and it was not just its beauty but also its length that made it extraordinary. This is corroborated by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (787–837/1366–1434), another *adīb*, who compiled an anthology of al-Qīrāṭī's works in one small volume. He included the letter almost unabridged.¹³ All this is reason enough to turn our attention to this marvel of a letter.

The Text as a Letter

The text we are talking about is always referred to as a “letter.” A letter is a form of communication, and as such, its purpose is to convey a certain message. In our case, it is not altogether easy to understand what the message is. Upon first reading the letter, one gets the impression that al-Qīrāṭī simply wanted to say: “You, Ibn Nubāta, are the greatest poet and prose writer of our times and beyond, and I would be awfully glad if I could get a letter from you in return.” If this were all he wanted to say, it would not have been necessary to write a forty-page letter. But:

(1) The text is not a pragmatic text or at least not only a pragmatic text. Instead, it is quite obviously primarily an aesthetic text. In a letter of this kind, to convey aesthetic pleasure shared by sender and recipient may be more important than a concrete message.

(2) A closer look at the letter reveals that there is a pragmatic message indeed, hidden though it may be at first glance. At the beginning of the last third of the letter, we come across the following passage:

فَعَسَى اللَّهُ أَنْ يُدِينِي مَرَارَةً ☆ وَيُقَرِّبَ مِنْ الدِّيَارِ الْمِصْرِيَّةِ دَارَةً ☆ وَيُعِيدَ إِلَى
أَفْقِهَا مِنْ فَضَائِلِهِ شُمُوسَهُ وَأَقْمَارَهُ

¹² Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbāʾ* i, 312.

¹³ Ibn Ḥijja, *Tahrīr al-Qīrāṭī*, fol. 40a–54a.

Perhaps God will bring him (Ibn Nubāta) nearer | and bring his abode nearer the abodes of Egypt | and return—through his noble qualities—his suns and moons to Egypt’s horizon . . . [138b/179b]¹⁴

This is a rhyme group of three cola of increasing length, a form quite common in rhymed prose. As for the content, we learn about the writer’s wish that Ibn Nubāta move back to Cairo. Further evidence is given by the next passage, which reads:

يُصْبِحُ فِيهَا بِمَعَانِي أَلْفَاظِهِ الْقَاعِدَةَ جَلِيسَ الْمَلُوكِ... وَتُصْبِحُ أَمْدَا حُهُ
الْمَلُوكِيَّةِ السَّائِرَةُ مِنْ مَشِيدِ نَظْمِهِ وَتَشْرَهُ بَيْنَ الْقَصْرَيْنِ نَاصِرِيَّةً

. . . so that there he will be, by means of his **overwhelming/sitting**¹⁵ expressions, companion to (‘sitting with’) the kings, (. . .) and that his widely known royal panegyrics—his towering poetry and prose—would help/victory between the two palaces. [138b/179b]

Obviously, Ibn Nubāta is invited to come to Cairo in order to write panegyric poems to “kings.” This is corroborated by the reference to “*bayn al-qaṣrayn*,” the residence area created by the Fatimids, which was an important place of royal representation in Mamluk times.¹⁶ Note the *tawriya* in the word *al-qā’ida*, which means “overwhelming.” The word *jalīs*, however, suggests a second meaning, “sitting.” Since this double meaning is only brought to the reader’s mind by a second element, this *tawriya* belongs to the type called *tawriya muhaya’a* (“prepared *tawriya*”).

The question remains about who was the “king” for whom Ibn Nubāta should compose panegyrics. The answer is in the word *nāṣiriyya*, which may mean both “helpful” and “bringing victory.” It is also the name of the ruling Mamluk sultan, al-Malik an-Nāṣir Ḥasan, who in these years ruled the empire for a second time (755–62/1354–61).

Sultan Ḥasan, who is famous for his wonderful *madrassa*-mosque (but was rather unpopular with his fellow mamluks) had indeed issued an edict

14 Citations to al-Qīrātī’s *Maṭla‘ an-nayyirayn* are given in square brackets. The folio number of the manuscript in the British Museum precedes the folio number of the Fatih manuscript.

15 In the translation, a *tawriya* is noted in the following way: The boldfaced expression is the primarily intended meaning; the non-primarily intended meaning is given in italics.

16 See van Steenbergen, *Bayna l-Qaṣrayn*.

(*marsūm*) to invite Ibn Nubāta to come to Cairo and assume the position of secretary in the Cairo chancellery. From the chronicles, we learn that he issued this edict in Rabīʿ I 761/Jan.–Feb. 1360.¹⁷ In al-Qīrāṭī's letter, we find a reference to the Nile flood of the previous year, and we know that Ibn Nubāta did indeed accept the invitation in the same year (761/1360) and moved from Damascus to Cairo. Since the letter would make no sense if Ibn Nubāta had already been in Cairo, it can be taken for granted that the letter was sent either in close connection or, more probably, together with the sultan's edict. My theory is that the text was indeed written at the sultan's instigation. It is conceivable that the sultan did not want to invite the greatest littérateur of his time with a simple edict in plain prose, but wanted to supplement it with a literary text that could arouse Ibn Nubāta's interest. Al-Qīrāṭī was one of the few who could accomplish this task, and one can well image his enthusiasm, since to write a letter of this kind to his revered role model must have been the fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

Of course, we do not know if the letter and the edict were delivered together. In any case, al-Qīrāṭī assumes Ibn Nubāta's knowledge of the background. He could therefore minimize his reference to the pragmatic message and concentrate on the aesthetic side of the text.

Aesthetic though it may be, the text is still a letter, and it is at once recognizable as such. Al-Qīrāṭī observes all conventions of epistolography and uses common formulas. The result, however, is not a common letter, but one that transgresses all borders and conventions.

This can already be seen at the very beginning. An ordinary letter at that time begins with the phrase *yuqabbilu l-arḍ (al-yad)* "He [—the sender—] kisses the earth (or alternatively the hand) of the recipient," *wa-yunhī* "and reports" . . . (and then follows what is to be reported). In artistic letters, a short passage may be inserted between "kisses the earth" and "and reports." In such a parenthesis, the writer may praise the addressee or affirm his sincere esteem of him. Now let us look at what al-Qīrāṭī did!

The letter begins indeed with the formula *yuqabbilu l-arḍ*, upon which, obviously, a parenthesis follows: *yuqabbilu l-arḍa llatī saqati s-samā'u nabātahā*, "He—the addressee's servant—kisses the earth whose flowers the heaven may water . . ." In this and the following cola, al-Qīrāṭī introduces one of the main themes of the letter, Damascus. The earth that is kissed is the earth where Ibn Nubāta lives, the earth of Damascus and the Ghūṭa. As usual, Damascus and its surroundings are depicted as a paradise with trees and rivers and fruits

17 Ibn Ḥajar, *Durar* v, 487.

and blossoms. Al-Qīrāṭī resumes this topic several times, later also to confront Damascus with Cairo, as we will see. For the moment, he confines himself to praise of Damascus in order to honor the addressee.

The praise of Damascus, however, seems never to end. Rhyme group follows upon rhyme group, full of vivid portraits of nature, imaginative comparisons and metaphors and stunning *tawriyas*, but there is no end to the parenthesis in sight. The reader keeps waiting for *wa-yunhī*, and he has to wait for 35 lines (ms. British Museum) or 342 words until the relieving phrase finally appears. In all probability, never before or since has there been a longer parenthesis between *yūqabbilu* and *wa-yunhī* in the history of Arabic letter writing.

Of course, a parenthesis of this length runs the risk that the reader may despair about ever hearing the transitional phrase or may simply forget that the part he is reading at the moment is still part of the parenthesis. Al-Qīrāṭī, however, found an ingenious way to solve this problem. He simply repeated the phrase *yūqabbilu l-ard* immediately before *wa-yunhī*, but this time in a meaning completely different from the original one. This time, it is the rain that kisses the earth. At the same time, the reader is reminded of the initial phrase while the following *wa-yunhī* signals the end of the parenthesis but may at the same time also be understood as an act of the rain, delivering his greetings to Ibn Nubāta:

فسقى الله... الأقطارَ التي يزدادُ حُسْنُها على طولِ الزمانِ إلى يومِ العَرَضِ
 ☆ والجهاتِ المقدَّسةِ التي إذا تَرَجَّلَ الغَيْثُ عن ظَهْرِ السَّحابِ لها يُقَبِّلُ
 الأرضِ ☆ وينهي...

So may God bless with rain . . . those lands whose beauty grows with every passing day up until the Day of Judgment | and those venerated regions in which, when the rain pours down from clouds, it kisses the earth || and reports . . . [129a/171a]

To achieve this solution, al-Qīrāṭī had to use the word *ard* as final word in a colon. This means that he had to find a word rhyming with *ard*, which is almost impossible. One of the few words rhyming with *ard* is *ʿard*, which is the ordinary word for “breadth.” In the phrase *yawm al-ʿard*, “day of presentation,” it refers to the Day of Judgment, in which sense it is used here. The word *ṭul*, “length,” in the same phrase, however, suggests the meaning “breadth.” This is a *tawriya muhayyaʿa* again. This pair of cola is thus not only an ingenious play with signals marking the structure of the text, but adds also a quite complicated stylistic device.

This rhyme group alone gives an idea about the refinement and complexity of the letter—a letter that transgresses borders in several respects. For a letter, it is by far too long. Further, it transgresses the bounds of genre. It is a letter, no doubt, but not only a letter. Instead, it includes texts of a different nature. In addition to the letter, we get a *taqrīz*, a *mufākhara*, and a *maqāma*, but in all three cases, borders are transgressed again, since none of them completely complies with the conventions of genre or text type. We will direct our first attention to the *taqrīz*, which comprises about eighty percent of the whole text.

The *Taqrīz* “Commendation”

A *taqrīz* is a commendatory appraisal of a text and its author. From the beginning of the eighth/fourteenth century onwards, *taqrīz* played an important role in the fields of scholarship and belles-lettres. *Taqrīz* served to establish networks and to foster mutual relations. They enhanced the prestige of the person who got the commendation. In turn, the writer of the *taqrīz* could distinguish himself by composing an extraordinarily fine *taqrīz*. Young scholars often went in search of *taqrīz* for their debut works to secure their position in the scholarly establishment. Ibn Nubāta is a case in point. He sent his debut work *Majmaʿ al-farāʿid*—the one with a rhymed title—to scholars in Syria, collected eleven commendations and published them in an enhanced form in a separate book, which no one had done before. In this respect, Ibn Nubāta was an innovator in the field of *taqrīz*.¹⁸ Forty years later, al-Qīrātī wrote his *taqrīz* for Ibn Nubāta, and again this was an innovative *taqrīz*. First, it is again of extraordinary length. Second, the object of praise is not a single work by Ibn Nubāta; instead, the praise of several of his works alternates with an appraisal of Ibn Nubāta’s oeuvre in general.

While praising Ibn Nubāta, his works, his style and his poetic ideas in general, several works or groups of works receive special attention. The first group is Ibn Nubāta’s panegyric poems directed to Abū l-Fidāʿ, who ruled Ḥamāh as al-Malik al-Muʿayyad until his death in 732/1331. The *Muʿayyadīyyāt* had established Ibn Nubāta’s fame. The next work given detailed treatment is a *Dīwān* of *qaṣīdas* in miniature, each seven lines, entitled *as-Sabʿa as-sayyāra*. The title refers to the seven “moving stars” (sun, moon and the five planets) and, by way of a *tawrīya*, to the “seven lines (of poetry) that become widely known.” At the time of al-Qīrātī’s letter, this was Ibn Nubāta’s most recent work. Finally,

18 See Bauer, Ibn Ḥabīb, and How to create a network.

al-Qīrāṭī talks at length about Ibn Nubāta's *muwashshahāt*, which were quite popular at the time. The different parts of the commendations do not come in separate blocks, but are entwined with one another. At the very end, when readers would have expected the *taqrīz* to end, al-Qīrāṭī resumes the *taqrīz* in the form of a coda in order to end by praising Ibn Nubāta's letters, which is of course a very fitting ending for a letter. It goes without saying that in al-Qīrāṭī's case, the *taqrīz* was more important for the writer than for the recipient. At an age of 73 (solar) years, Ibn Nubāta was at the height of his fame and did not need any further commendations. Al-Qīrāṭī on the other hand, only 34 years old, must have enthusiastically seized the opportunity to distinguish himself with this unconventional monumental *taqrīz*.

Very characteristic for the *taqrīz* are superiority passages, in which the commender states that the author of the work is superior or at least equal to his predecessors in the same field. Superiority passages constitute the very core of many *taqārīz* and may reach considerable length. Al-Qīrāṭī's letter is full of them, and altogether the stupendous number of 110 people is mentioned, which is not only without precedent, but also demonstrates a remarkable knowledge of literary history, since many of the persons mentioned are rather obscure figures.

The poets mentioned in the following passage are well known. The first rhyme group consisting of two cola rhyming in *-īyyā* starts with Ibn al-Mu'tazz (247–96/861–908), heir apparent (*walī al-'ahd*) to the caliph al-Mu'tazz (r. 252–5/866–9); the word *bi-llāh* is both the object of *aqsama* as well as part of the caliphal title "al-Mu'tazz bi-llāh." Ibn al-Mu'tazz was not only a poet but also the founder of the discipline of stylistics. Consequently, he is mentioned in connection with *balāgha*, "eloquence." The next to acknowledge Ibn Nubāta's genius is Abū Nuwās (d. c. 198/813), one of the most famous Arabic poets of all times. Three cola are dedicated to him, the first ending the *-īyyā* rhyme group with a quotation from the Quran, the next opening a rhyme group of three cola ending in *-ān*. The first two cola pun on Jinān and 'Inān, the names of two women Abū Nuwās addressed in his love poems. The word *nabātiyya* is of course an allusion to the name Ibn Nubāta, who had used the similarity of *nabāt* and Nubāta himself when he entitled a collection of epigrams *al-Qaṭr an-nubātī*, "Nubātian drops," or *al-Qaṭr an-nabātī*, "sugar molasses." A colon about the lesser-known poet al-'Attābī, who died in the early third/ninth century, follows. Al-Qīrāṭī uses the fact that *'attābī* also designates a sort of taffeta to create an elaborate play with textile terms. A last colon about the judge and prose author at-Tanūkhī (329–84/940–94) concludes the rhyme group with a well-known legal maxim which holds that a judge should not pronounce a judgment while angry:

وَأَقْسَمَ ابْنُ الْمُعْتَزِّ بِاللَّهِ أَنَّ مَوْلَانَا أَصْبَحَ لِعَهْدِ الْبَلَاغَةِ وَالْكِتَابَةِ وِلِيًّا *
 وَقَالَ الْحَسَنُ بْنُ هَانِيٍّ قَدْ رَفَعَ اللَّهُ هَذَا بِبِلَاغَتِهِ الزَّهْرَاءَ ﴿مَكَانًا عَلِيًّا﴾ *
 * وَأَشْتَغَلَ بِجِنَانِهَا النَّبَاتِيَّةَ عَنْ جِنَانٍ * وَثَنَتْ حِيَادُهَا عِنَانَهُ عَنْ عِنَانٍ *
 * وَتَرَكَّتِ الْعَتَابِيَّ تَفَاصِيلُهَا الْمَحْرَرَةَ عَلَى كُفَاةٍ حَاشِيَتِهِ وَهُوَ عَتَبَانٌ * وَقَصَى
 الْقَاضِي التُّوْخِي غَضَبًا عَلَى نَقْصِهِ عَنْهَا فَقِيلَ قَصَى الْقَاضِي وَهُوَ غَضَبَانٌ

“... and Ibn al-Mu‘tazz would swear by God that our lord (Ibn Nubāta) has become heir apparent of ‘eloquence’ and ‘penmanship’, | and al-Ḥasan ibn Hānī’ (Abū Nuwās) would say: “God raised him through his brilliant eloquence to a ‘high place” (Q Maryam 19:57), || and its gardens (*jinān*), abounding with plants, would distract him (Abū Nuwās) from Jinān, | and its **outstanding (verses)/noble horses** would divert his reins (*‘inān*) from ‘Inān, | and (Ibn Nubāta’s) **elaborated details/silky and soft pieces of cloth** would make al-‘Attābī/*the thick taffeta* look critically on the thickness of **his filling words/its (own) thick selvedge**, | and the judge at-Tanūkhī would wrathfully condemn his inability to produce the equivalent; so people said: ‘the judge judged in his wrath!’” [133a/174b]

It is interesting to see that al-Qirāṭī distinguishes between average poets and great ones. Whereas geniuses like Abū Nuwās or al-Mutanabbī simply “acknowledge” Ibn Nubāta or praise him, less important figures become completely ruined when they encounter Ibn Nubāta’s works.

Almost a *Mufākhara*

A *mufākhara* is a literary debate, a genre with a long, even pre-Arabic, tradition in the Middle East. Ibn Nubāta contributed to it with his *Mufākhara bayna s-sayf wa-l-qalam*, “Debate between the sword and the pen,” a popular subject of literary debates.¹⁹ Another popular subject of *mufākharāt* were debates between two towns, which would in turn praise their own virtues and denigrate the other.

The purpose of the letter is, as we have seen, to bring Ibn Nubāta from Damascus to Cairo. A debate between these two towns is therefore most suitable, even more so since the addressee is himself the author of a famous literary

19 See van Gelder, *Conceit of pen and sword*.

debate. Al-Qīrāṭī, however, wrote something like a *mufākhara* manquée, again an unconventional specimen of a literary genre. There is no immediate dialogue between the two towns, nor is there any criticism of Damascus. Perhaps Damascus really was so beautiful that nothing blameworthy could be found, nevertheless it is likelier that al-Qīrāṭī found it impolite to criticize the town where Ibn Nubāta was living and had spent the greater part of his life. By then, it was still uncertain if he would leave his abode for Cairo. Cairo, instead, is not treated so leniently. It is a beautiful town, yes, but a town full of ignorant people in which the most mediocre apprentice gets the highest positions. Al-Qīrāṭī seizes the opportunity to quote al-Mutanabbī's famous line:

بَارِضٍ مَا اشْتَهَيْتَ رَأَيْتَ فِيهَا فَلَيْسَ يُفُوتُهَا إِلَّا الْكِرَامُ

... in a land in which you can find everything the heart desires; the only thing missing are noble people.²⁰ [139a/179b]

This is why Ibn Nubāta was so bitterly needed here. The main text about Egypt forms a distinct section, a text that can be considered a *maqāma* and that treats the subject that is most intimately connected with Egypt, the Nile.

The *Maqāma* of the Nile

The *maqāma* of the Nile is again a text remarkable in several respects. First, whereas all other themes are treated in an entwined and entangled way, this is the only longer self-contained text in the whole letter. Second, the genre of the *maqāma* has attracted a lot of attention in recent years, and it may be of interest to learn about a *maqāma* that has been unknown so far, especially since this one might have influenced the development of the genre. Thirdly, it is again a remarkable, unconventional piece of literature.

As for the literary background of the *maqāma*, its function is to counterbalance the long and extensive praise of Damascus by adding a long text about Egypt. Furthermore, it is an homage to Ibn Nubāta, whose letters about the flood of the Nile were so acclaimed that they even found their way into popular anthologies. Again, al-Qīrāṭī, who is not otherwise known as an author of *maqāmāt*, found a subject that allowed him to demonstrate his ability as an author of stylized prose.

²⁰ See al-Mutanabbī, *Dīwān* iv, 194; meter *wāfir*.

The flooding of the Nile in the year 760/1359 gives the situational background. The nilometer served to measure the level of the Nile during its flood in August and September. If the flood reached the mark of 17 cubits, an optimal harvest was granted for the next year. If it were two or more cubits less, not enough fields would be irrigated, the harvest would turn out meagre and the prices of grain and vegetables would be high.

In the year 760/1359, a catastrophe of the opposite kind happened. The flooding did not stop at 17 cubits, but reached a level of twenty cubits and four fingers, which proved to be devastating.²¹ Land was ruined, houses were destroyed, cattle drowned. This is the story that al-Qīrāṭī tells in his *maqāma*: How the Nile rose and rose and did not stop, how men, animals and houses were ruined, how people cried for help, but often in vain, as in the following passage, in which he incorporates a line by al-Ḥuṣrī al-Qayrawānī (d. 488/1095). It was common practice in *maqāmāt* not to cite verses of one's own, but those of other poets (usually without mentioning their name). These lines were often given a surprisingly different meaning in their new context, as is the case here. Remarkable is also the tricky *jinās* (paronomasia) between *aqāl* and *fa-qāl*, which allowed al-Qīrāṭī to make the trivial phrase "he said" part of a rhyme and give an interesting flavor to it:

وَأَسْتَقَالَهُ النَّاسُ الْعَثْرَةَ فَمَا أَقَالَ ☆ وَدَعَا مَنْ أَحَاطَ الْمَاءُ بِدَارِهِ جَارُهُ
 لِيَأْتِيَهُ لِلْإِغَاثَةِ فَقَالَ ☆
 مَا أَنْتَ نُوحٌ فَتُنَجِّينِي سَفِينَتُهُ ☆ وَلَا الْمَسِيحُ أَنَا أَمْشِي عَلَى الْمَاءِ

The people demanded that he (—the Nile—) grant relief, but he wouldn't, | and everyone whose house was surrounded by water exhorted his neighbor to bail him out, but he replied: "You are not Noah so that your ark can help me, / nor am I the Messiah so that I can walk on water!"²²
 [140a/181a]

Of course, al-Qīrāṭī could not end with a disaster like this. Instead, the text follows the pattern of *al-faraj ba'da sh-shidda*, "relief after distress." People pray for relief, and the lord of heavens treats the people of the earth with kindness. Gradually, the flood recedes and the situation returns to normal. In the end,

21 Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* iii.1, 47.

22 See al-Ḥuṣrī al-Qayrawānī in aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi* xxi, 250; meter *basīṭ*.

al-Qīrāṭī resumes as follows, again using a quotation by al-Mutanabbī introduced by short cola abounding with *jinās*:

على أنّ النيلَ يا مولانا قد أسْعَفَ ☆ أضعافَ ما أضعفَ ☆ وَوَهَبَ ☆
 أكثرَ مما نهبَ ☆ وأخلفَ فوقَ ما أنلفَ ☆
 وإنَّ يَكُنَّ الفِعْلُ الذي سَاءَ واحِدًا ☆ فأفعالهُ اللّايُّ سررَنُ الوُفِّ

In general, my lord, the Nile has helped | many times more than he has harmed, | and given | more than taken away, | and his compensation was above his destruction. | “If one of his deeds has caused grief—his deeds that bring delight are thousands!”²³ [140b/181a]

This is again a very elegant and sophisticated text, which enhances our knowledge of ornate prose in the eighth/fourteenth century, a century which was especially fruitful for the *maqāma* genre. Nevertheless, the question remains whether al-Qīrāṭī’s text can be called a *maqāma* without reservation. As we have seen, al-Qīrāṭī’s letter radically transgresses the text type ‘letter’; his *taqrīz* breaks with a number of conventions; and his *mufākhara* is not a real *mufākhara*. So, what about this *maqāma*? The ways in which it differs from earlier *maqāmāt* such as those by al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī are obvious. Most conspicuous is the fact that al-Qīrāṭī’s text does not have a fictional narrator who is introduced by a chain of transmitters (*isnād*), nor does it have a fictional hero. The *maqāma* expert Hämeen-Anttila felt a bit uneasy with texts of this kind because they blur the boundaries between letter and *maqāma*.²⁴ Nonetheless, if contemporary readers considered the text a *maqāma*, we have no right to deny its ‘*maqāmaness*.’ But was it one? The text bears no headline whatsoever (it simply begins with the words ‘*alā dhikri n-Nīl*... “speaking of the Nile, I won’t forget the damage he did in the year 760”’), and is never referred to as a *maqāma*. Therefore, it is hard to decide whether it was perceived as a *maqāma* at this time or not. What we can say for certain, though, is that it would have been considered a *maqāma* a century later, when we have a text that displays striking parallels to al-Qīrāṭī’s, and is explicitly called a *maqāma* by its author. This text is the *maqāma* of the Nile, *al-Maqāma al-baḥriyya*, by Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, a well-known text about the flooding of the Nile in the

23 See al-Mutanabbī, *Dīwān* iii, 36; meter *ṭawīl*.

24 Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama* 342.

year 897/1492.²⁵ It treats the same subject as al-Qīrāṭī's *maqāma*, the Nile that either brings *rakhā*, "abundance," in case of a flood in the right measure, or *ghalā*, "dearth, inflation," if it is either too low or too high. What happens in as-Suyūṭī's *maqāma*, however, is the exact opposite of the events in al-Qīrāṭī's. In al-Qīrāṭī's text, the Nile rises too high before it recedes; in as-Suyūṭī's, the Nile starts to rise a little, but then stops and everybody guesses that the flooding has come to an end, which would have meant inflation and famine. People pray and lament, and after 17 days, the flooding surprisingly recommences and everybody thanks God.

The parallels between the two texts are more than obvious, and it is highly improbable that as-Suyūṭī did not know al-Qīrāṭī's text. If as-Suyūṭī called his text a *maqāma*, it is again quite improbable that al-Qīrāṭī did not consider his text as such. It is much more probable, instead, that al-Qīrāṭī's text reflects contemporaneous developments in the genre of the *maqāma* even if it did not contribute substantially to those developments by itself.

The 'Entwined' Style

When we finally shift our perspective from the macrostructure to the microstructure, we realize that both have an important trait in common. The keyword for this is given by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī, who introduces his moderately shortened version of the letter with the following words:

هذه الرسالة من غرر ترسل الشيخ برهان الدين القيراطي لكونها الى الشيخ
جمال الدين بن نباتة رحمه الله تعالى ولم أختصر منها إلا الأقل لتسعبها
بعضاً ببعض²⁶

This letter is one of the highlights in the literary correspondence of Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī because it was written for Jamāl ad-Dīn Ibn Nubāta—may God have mercy on him. I omitted only very little of it because everything in it is entwined.

25 As-Suyūṭī, *Maqāmāt* i, 249–70.

26 Ibn Ḥijja, *Tahrīr* fol. 53b–54a.

As we have seen, this is true for the macrostructure, where the *maqāma* and the different parts of a *mufākhara* are entwined with a *taqrīz*, which in turn is entwined with the formal parameters of a letter. It is also true, however, for the microstructure. Just as the subject of Damascus appears first in what could be called an exposition and occurs again by way of a recapitulation at the end, a large number of words, motifs and themes occur and recur again in the course of the whole letter. Again and again they appear in a new light in a different context but at the same time refer to all their other occurrences. These recurrences form a dense network of intratextual references similar to leitmotifs in music. A structure like this can be considered as especially characteristic of Ayyubid and Mamluk literature, and it may indeed be the case that what during these periods is characteristic of poetry may have had its origins in ornate prose.²⁷ Al-Qīrāṭī's texts and Ibn Ḥijja's characterization of it as being *mutasha'ib*, "ramified," corroborate this.

To create a leitmotif, the author may choose a concept, an image, a certain stylistic device or even a single word. One of the words that are used as a leitmotif in al-Qīrāṭī's text is the word *niqs* ("ink"), an obvious word in a letter that, among other topics, deals with writing and is directed to a writer. All in all, it occurs ten times in the letter. The context is sometimes similar, but it always adds something new and unprecedented, as these samples show:

(1) The word *niqs* occurs first when al-Qīrāṭī praises Ibn Nubāta's expressions with the following words:

فَسُبْحَانَ مَنْ أَسْرَى بِهَا فِي لَيْلٍ نَقَسَهَا إِلَى الْمَحَلِّ الْأَقْصَى ☆ وَحَبَّابَهَا
بِالْفَضَائِلِ الَّتِي لَا تُحْصَى

Exalted is he who makes them travel in the night of their ink to the most distant place | and endows them with virtues innumerable [130b/172b].

The "night of the (black) ink," the most common image for ink, provides the frame for a nightly journey, on which the poet has sent his *alfāz*, "expressions," to "the extreme place" of beauty. The analogy is the prophet Muḥammad's *isrā'* from Mecca to Jerusalem, a reference to Q Isrā' 17:1 and it is quite a daring and unusual image.

27 Bauer, *Toward an aesthetics of Mamluk literature*.

(2) On the same page, the “night of the ink” appears a second time. But here the “night” is not only the object of comparison to the ink, but a metaphor in turn, standing for a “curtain” that protects the “virgin” (= innovative) ideas of Ibn Nubāta’s poems in praise of al-Malik al-Mu’ayyad of Ḥamāh:

وَصِيْنَتْ أَبْكَارُ مَعَانِيهَا فُدَّ عَلَيْهَا مِنْ لَيْلٍ نَفْسِهَا رِوَاقٌ ☆ وَأَعْتَرَفَ الْبَدِيعُ
بِقُصُورِهِ عَمَّا فِي آيَاتِهَا مِنْ طِبَاقٍ

The virgin (= innovative) ideas in them are well protected, for a curtain made from the night of their ink was spread out above them...
[130b/172b]

Here the poet compares the unprecedented poetic ideas in Ibn Nubāta’s *Mu’ayyadīyyāt* to noble virgins, protected from penetrating glances by a (black) curtain which, in the form of a phantastic etiology (*ḥusn at-ta’līl*) is provided by the metaphorical “night of the ink.” As if these stylistic devices were not enough, al-Qīrāṭī adds a colon that is virtually untranslatable due to the many associations it creates. It is part of a superiority passage, and its most obvious meaning is: “. . . and Badīʿ (az-Zamān al-Ḥamadhānī) admits that his use of the stylistic device of antithesis (*ṭibāq*) falls short in comparison to the verses, in which these (Ibn Nubāta’s) ideas occur.” Badīʿ az-Zamān (358–98/969–1008) is one of the 110 littérateurs mentioned in the letter’s superiority passages. He is chosen here not for his famous *maqāmāt* (Ibn Nubāta did not compose any) but for his poems, or rather, for his name al-Badīʿ. The word *badīʿ* is also the term for “stylistics,” a meaning that is suggested retrospectively by the stylistic term *ṭibāq* at the end of the colon. Now the virgins come in again: They live in “castles,” which the word *quṣūr*, “falling short of,” can also mean, and in “houses” since *bayt* means both “verse” and “house.” For creating a *tawriya*, the fact that both should have a different plural form is irrelevant. Consequently, one could also bring in *ṭibāq* in connection with *ṭabaqa* or *tābaq* meaning “floor, story (of a house).” The non-primarily intended meanings “castles,” “houses” and “floors” cannot be connected in a grammatically meaningful way, but they are semantically closely related. This is the stylistic device known as *tawjīh*, but whereas the secondary, non-intended meanings of *tawjīh* hardly contribute to the overall sense of a text in many cases, here these meanings strongly suggest that the well-protected “virgins” of the preceding colon live in magnificent palaces. There is even a third, longer colon to complete this rhyme group, but the analysis so far may suffice to demonstrate the complexity of the

text and the inexhaustible wealth of meanings and associations. The following examples will be treated more concisely.

(3) Already on the following page, the ink occurs again, but this time it is not compared with the night, but with *ghāliya* “galia,” a perfume of black color. The passage is in praise of Ibn Nubāta’s seven-liners *as-Sab’a as-sayyāra*. The writer finds them so admirable that he even venerates the ink with which they are written. This may seem “excessive,” but there is another allusion in the word *aṭnaba* since in Arabic rhetoric *itnāb* designates an exhaustive style. Its counterpoint is *ījāz*, “conciseness.” Therefore, the writer reacts with *itnāb* to miniature *qaṣīdas* representing the utmost *ījāz*. Note also the *jinās* between *ghāliya* and *taghālā*:

لقد قام المملوك لهذه السبعة السيارة إجلالا * وأظنّب حتى في غالية
نفسها وتغالى

“The servant rose in reverence for these seven moving stars | and was excessive and exaggerated even for the galia of their ink.” [131a/173a].

(4) Two pages later, the “night of the ink” appears again, this time in contrast to the “day” of the white paper, a common combination, but both comparisons remain unspoken. The reader’s knowledge of this comparison is presupposed. The main function of the reference to the ink is to introduce a line by al-Būṣīrī, which completes the colon:

وأوقعَ نَفْسُهَا وَطِرُسُهَا الحَرْبَ بَيْنَ حُسَادِهَا
فَبَاتَتِ الفِتْنَةُ مَا يَبْنَهُمْ مِنْ أَوَّلِ اللَّيْلِ إِلَى بُكْرَةِ

Their ink and paper provoked a war between those who envy them (Ibn Nubāta’s works), “And the strife between them lasted from the beginning of the night to the early morning.”²⁸ [132a–b/174a]

(5) Some pages later, the same double comparison reappears, this time in an outspoken way. In a triple comparison, sun, moon and stars (Ibn Nubāta’s works), night (ink) and day (paper) form a *murā’āt an-naẓīr*, “harmonious choice of images”:

28 al-Būṣīrī, *Dīwān* 224 (no. 17 l. 31); meter *sarī*.

وَاطْلَعَتْ فِي كُلِّ سَاعَةٍ مِنْ لَيْلٍ نَقْسِهَا وَنَهَارٍ طَرَسِهَا زُهْرًا

In every moment of their ink's night and their paper's day, shining (celestial bodies) rise. [135a/176b]

(6) On the next page, the ink finds another object of comparison, the ambergris. It reminds the reader of the galia of example (3) but is not identical with it and is introduced in a completely different context:

وَفَقَّتْ لَابِنِ الْعَطَّارِ عِنْدَ التَّمَسُّكِ بِهَا رِيحَ الْبَلَاغَةِ مِنْ نَقْسِهَا بَعَنْبَرٍ

When Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār *clings to them/perfumes himself with their musk*, they intensify the fragrance of eloquence with the ambergris that their ink exudes. [135b/177a]

In a superiority passage, we learn that Ibn Nubāta's *muwashshaḥāt* surpass those of the Andalusī poet Abū l-Qāsim Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār, an early writer in this poetic form.²⁹ The name of the poet, "Son of the perfumer," provokes the *tawriya* in *at-tamassuk* "clinging to" and "perfuming oneself with musk." Dependent on the key verb *fataqa* "and enhancing the fragrance of musk by adding other perfumes" are the metaphors "fragrance of eloquence" and "ambergris of the ink." The *Tertium comparationis* is found in the first instance in the black color shared by both ink and ambergris, but also in the fragrance of the perfume and, in a metaphorical way, in the text that is written with the ink.

(7) Still on the same page and still in praise of Ibn Nubāta's *muwashshaḥāt*, the ink appears again:

أَوِ الْأَيْضِ لِأَحْمَرَ مِنَ الْغَيْظِ وَتَرَبَّدَ * وَقَالَ عِنْدَمَا يُشَاهِدُهُ مِنْ سِيَادَةِ
نَقْسِهَا لِأَمْرٍ مَا يُسَوِّدُ

Or (if) al-Abyaḍ (could see these *muwashshaḥāt*), his wrath would make him blush and pale in turns, | and, convinced of the supremacy of their ink, he would say: "Certain things make you a leader/black." [135b/177a]

Now it is Abū Bakr al-Ishbīlī al-Abyaḍ, another Andalusī writer of *muwashshaḥāt*,³⁰ who is eclipsed by Ibn Nubāta. Neither he nor Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār

29 See EAL 563.

30 See EAL 52.

is a well-known figure. The fact that al-Qīrāṭī knew them and trusted in Ibn Nubāta's knowing them as well, demonstrates the breadth of the literary canon in their time. Whereas in all comparisons and metaphors the black color of the ink is the *tertium comparationis* (or at least one of several), blackness has not been mentioned explicitly thus far. Here it is. Parallel to a passage dealing with fragrance stimulated by the name of Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār, al-Qīrāṭī writes two cola dealing with colors stimulated by the name of the *washshāḥ* al-Abyaḍ “the White,” who turns “red” and “pale.” The punch line is the word *yusawwad*, a *tawriya* meaning either “being made black” or “being made a sayyid.”

(8) The *taqrīz*-section ends with sort of a coda before the Damascus section and the *maqāma* of the Nile set in. There are no new elements but rather reminiscences of earlier motifs. Among them is another occurrence of the ink, in which the well-known metaphor of the “night of the ink” is used:

وكلماتٍ أزهرتْ بالمشور أوراقها ☆ ونارتْ بمعانيها في ليلِ نَقسِها آفاقها

... the leaves on which these words are written, blossom with gillyflowers
| and their horizons gleam in the night of their ink through their ideas.
[136b/177b]

This pair of cola combines the realms of plants and stars. The “gillyflowers” are also a reference to Ibn Nubāta's collection of ornate prose entitled *Zahr al-manthūr*, a book title in which *manthūr* means both “gillyflower” and “prose.” This rather unspectacular treatment of the ink seems appropriate for a passage displaying the character of a résumé.

(9 and 10) In the second section on Damascus and the *maqāma* of the Nile, the ink does not show up again. It is only on the penultimate page when it surfaces again and for the last time, this time not once, but twice. Thus far, the ink occurred in al-Qīrāṭī's praise of Ibn Nubāta's poems or works in general. In the final passage, al-Qīrāṭī asks Ibn Nubāta to respond to his letter with a letter of his own and in this context praises Ibn Nubāta's letters:

وَأَبْيَضَتْ عَيْنُ الحسودِ لِسوادِ نَقسِها ☆ وَأَسْوَدَّتِ الدُّنْيَا فِي عَيْنِهِ لِيَاضِ
طِرْسِها ☆ وَأَنْتَطَمَتْ فِي أَسلاكِ السُّطُورِ حَبَّأُتْها ☆ وَأَشْرَقَتْ فِي أَحْلاكِ لَيْلِ
النَّقْسِ يَبْرَأُتْها ☆
وَحَسُنَ دَراريِ الكواكبِ أَنْ تُرَى ☆ طَوالِعَ فِي داِجٍ مِنَ اللَّيْلِ غَيْبِ

The blackness of their ink turns the envier's eye white (blind) | and the whiteness of their paper makes the world black in his eyes. || Their beads are strung on the strings of verses, | and their brilliant stars shine in the darkness of ink-nights: "How beautiful are brightly shining stars when you see them rise in a jet-black night!"³¹ [141a/181b]

This last invocation of the ink is like a summary of previous passages. The enviers are known from example (4), "blackening" in contrast to whiteness was subject of example (7); the "night of the ink" occurs throughout, but it is not in contrast to the whiteness of the paper here but to the "stars" of Ibn Nubāta's verses recalling example (5). A line by al-Buḥturī rounds off the image, and the *tashaʿub*, "ramification, entwinement," is all too obvious.

Conclusion

In the year 761/1360, the Mamluk Sultan an-Nāṣir Ḥasan sent an edict to Damascus to invite the most famous poet and prose stylist of his time, Ibn Nubāta, to come to Cairo. For this occasion, the poet al-Qīrāṭī, an admirer of Ibn Nubāta and one of the most prominent poets in Cairo at the time, wrote a letter that probably accompanied the sultan's edict. It is a letter of exuberant length and stylistic sophistication. It is a gigantic *taqrīz* "commendation" and encompasses passages that could be considered a *mufākhara* and a *maqāma*, but above all, it is a formidable example of the unparalleled stylistic level of ornate prose in this period. In the seventh and eighth/thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Arabic epistolography was probably at its zenith with prose stylists like Shihāb ad-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī (644–725/1246 or 1247–1325), Ibn Nubāta, Shihāb ad-Dīn ibn Faḍlallāh (700–49/1301–49), Lisān ad-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb (713–76/1313–75), al-Qīrāṭī, Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (767–837/1366–1434) and many others. Modern scholars have seen their stylistic refinement rather as an impediment to understanding the content of the text than as an enrichment of it, and indeed a letter such as the one discussed here is far from easy reading. Nevertheless, its beauty and fascination is undeniable. Ibn Ḥajar's characterization of it as of "utmost beauty and length" evokes Robert Schumann's appraisal of Franz Schubert's C-major symphony as standing out for its *himmlische Länge*, "heavenly length"—precisely the same could be said of al-Qīrāṭī's letter.

31 See al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān* i, 193 (no. 63/27), meter *ṭawīl*.

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