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ARIOSTO AND THE ARABS

Contexts for the *Orlando Furioso*

edited by
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Literary Life in Mamluk Egypt and Syria (1250–1517): A Forgotten Heyday of Arabic Culture

Thomas Bauer

1. Meanwhile in the East . . .

In January 1517, a few months after Ariosto had published the first version of his *Orlando furioso*, the Mamluk army suffered its ultimate defeat at the battle of Raydāniyya outside Cairo. Henceforth, Egypt, Syria, and the Ḥijāz ended up as mere provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman conquest led to the end of one of the most glorious eras in the history of Egypt and Syria, both politically and culturally.

With the exception of the conspicuously stunning architecture, the cultural achievements of the Mamluk period have been utterly neglected by modern scholarship. The backwardness of Islamic regions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was attributed to a long period of stagnation and decline that lasted for almost a millennium. Improbable as such an idea might seem, this narrative was well suited to the interests of colonialism with its promise to restore the Arabian lands to their former glory. Consequently, literature of the Mamluk period was rarely read and almost never studied until recent decades.[1] Despite the short history of Mamluk literary studies, it does not overstate the case to say that the period from the twelfth century to the Ottoman conquest (the period largely covered by the dynasties of the Ayyubids and Mamluks) was one of the most productive, vibrant, and multifarious periods in the history of Arabic literature.[2] At one end of the spectrum, elite poets and prose authors created some of the most sophisticated and elegant texts in the entire Arabic literary tradition, while at the same time, popular poets and storytellers flourished in Syria and Egypt, where a larger segment of the population than ever before engaged in the literary marketplace as producers and/or consumers.

At the time of Ariosto, the Mamluk Empire was the uncontested center of Arabic literature. But did Ariosto know of it, and could Arabic literature of this period have had any influence on him when he wrote about his *arabi* and *saraceni*? Arabic influence is visible in several ways in Ariosto's work, but it is highly improbable that it originated from contemporary connections. Rather, Ariosto

was benefiting from contacts between Arabic and Romance literatures from earlier periods that had left their traces in Italian literature. It has since been established that the first of such contacts dates back to the beginning of the twelfth century, when Occitanian troubadours took inspiration from singers of Arabic strophic poetry. The troubadours, in their turn, most likely together with indigenous Arabic traditions, shaped the poetry of the Sicilian School in the thirteenth century. These currents, directly and/or indirectly, influenced poetry in Italian, French, and Spanish. Petrarch and his followers and even Spanish baroque poetry still owe much to Arabic love poetry.[3] The influence of *petrarchismo* is evident in the work of Ariosto, though he was most certainly unaware of its Arabic tint.

After the Arabs had lost Sicily and with the end of Arabic predominance over al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia), influence from the western part of the Arab territories lost its significance. Claudia Ott, however, offers an interesting perspective on parallels to *Orlando furioso* in the collection of *One Hundred and One Nights*, which points to a "Western" connection in the field of prose.[4] It is more difficult to identify influence in prose than in poetry, since themes and motifs traveled orally in ways that can hardly be retraced.

As for the eastern part of the Arab world, it is obvious that the Crusades were a major inspiration for *Orlando furioso*. However, this is again an inspiration from the past, since Latin presence in the Levant had ended when the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf Khalīl conquered ʿAkkā (Acre) in 1291. Since the Arabs of this region were no longer immediate enemies, Ariosto could portray the *arabi* and *saraceni* in a not entirely negative way but even grant them real heroism—contrary to the *turchi*, the Ottomans, who constituted a menace to the Italian powers and the nemesis of the Mamluk Empire.

Given the fact that these many threads of almost exclusively indirect Arabic influence in Ariosto's *Orlando* are virtually inextricable, it seems more rewarding for the moment to engage in synchronic comparison of different literary traditions without attempting to determine specific influences. A comparison of this kind not only might point to parallel or contrary developments but could also highlight phenomena and raise questions that would otherwise be overlooked or considered less relevant were the focus to be with one particular literary tradition alone. In this regard, the following three points could merit further investigation.

First, a contrasting development seems to take place as concerns the importance of the courts as centers of literary life, in relation to that of the towns. Whereas Italy at the time of Ariosto witnessed the growing importance of the

courts, it was the *Bürgertum* ("bourgeoisie") of the cities that came to dominate the field of literature in the Mamluk period.

Second, a similar development, though with different results, is the growing importance of vernacular literature. In the Mamluk period, the *zajal*, strophic poetry in the *volgare*, was even composed and enjoyed by the educated elite, and epics in colloquial Arabic formed a major part of popular oral tradition and began to be written down as literature. But whereas in Italian literature, the *volgare* gradually replaced Latin and ultimately led to the creation of a national language, for various reasons, Classical Arabic has remained the language of literature up to the present day.

Finally, it is remarkable that the epic in the vernacular witnessed a heyday both in Arabic and in the Italian vernacular around the period of Ariosto's lifetime. Both differed greatly in their origin as well as in their character. The Arabic epic seems to be much older (though sources are comparatively late), drawing from traditions such as stories about the wars and skirmishes of Arab tribes in pre-Islamic times and ancient Persian narratives. The setting of the Arabic epics ranges from the Maghreb and Islamic Spain, Himyaritic southern Arabia, and the Sassanian Empire far into Asia, and it stretches from the time of Alexander the Great, almost up to contemporary events in the Mamluk Empire. Miracles and magic play a crucial role in some of the epics but are almost absent in others. Apart from these differences, most epics share a fascination with the exotic and focus around the subjects of love and, especially, heroism, often depicting the hero moving from one battle to the next. It is also here that a striking similarity between the Arabic and Romance epics is conspicuous: their focus on the heroic and the fascination with fantastic places, in which the encounter with the stranger is almost always hostile and a challenge to the hero's valor. The "Fremdraum," as Thomas Herzog calls them, are Islamic territories from al-Andalus to Egypt in the case of Ariosto's *Orlando*, where the Christian heroes struggle with the *saraceni*, while they consist of Genoa, Catalonia, and Portugal in the *Sīrat Baybars*, where Baybars engage in battle with the Francs.[5] The reason for this convergence is less likely to be the result of direct influence than due to similar audience expectations and predilections. A striking parallel phenomenon is the *donne guerriere* such as Bradamante and Marfisa in *Orlando furioso*. In the more or less contemporary popular Arabic epics, they find an intriguing parallel in the "warrior women of Islam," as Remke Kruk titled her study on the subject.[6]

In order to trigger ideas for comparisons of this kind, it seems worthwhile to cast a glance over the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to gather an impression about what was happening in Arabic literature at the period between the

beginnings of Italian literature and the death of Ariosto in the West. Inevitably, such a short overview will be somewhat superficial and partial, not only as a consequence of its brevity but also due to the incomplete state of scholarship. After all, to attempt such an overview would have been completely impossible only fifteen years ago.

2. A Post-Decline Society

Copying books can be dangerous. The Cairene poet and scholar Badr al-dīn al-Bashtakī (1347–1427) earned his living by copying books, and he was an especially talented copyist. As his biographer, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (1372–1449) informs us, he could copy ten quires per day. He would write the first five quires while sitting up, and when he got tired, he would lie down on his side and write another five quires in that position. He was bound to burn out eventually. As Ibn Ḥajar says: "In sum, in terms of his intellectual brilliance and quick comprehension, al-Bashtakī was unique. In the end, however, he became stultified by copying so much."[7] During his lifetime, al-Bashtakī must have copied many thousands of books. Unfortunately, it cost him his mind. Nevertheless, the example of al-Bashtakī is a good indication of a period in which literary culture was thriving at an unprecedented level.

But was it really thriving? Until recently, scholars in both the West and the Arab world were convinced that this period during which al-Bashtakī lost his mind copying books was a period of stagnation and decline. As a result, hardly anyone bothered to study Ayyubid and Mamluk literature. Michael Meinecke (1941–1995), the great scholar of Mamluk architecture, once asked a specialist in Arabic literature about Mamluk literature. "You know," he said, "Mamluk architecture is doubtless one of the greatest achievements of Islamic culture. Could it possibly be that nothing comparable was being achieved simultaneously in literature?" The literature specialist could only reply with a shrug of his shoulders.[8]

The situation has improved considerably since then. The decline paradigm proves less and less tenable as we learn more about Ayyubid and Mamluk literature. This becomes even more evident when, apart from analyzing single texts, we start looking at literature as a system constructed by various participants. There is the producer (poet, prose writer), the consumer (reader, audience), the disseminator (such as the unfortunate copyist al-Bashtakī), and the theorist and critic. An analysis of this system can tell us a great deal about the role and importance of literature at a certain period, and it can indicate much about its vigor and vitality and offer possible starting points for intercultural comparison.

The first result of applying this approach to our period is the surprising fact

that we are dealing with a post-decline literary epoch, which had its onset after the end of the eleventh century, a period in which the Islamic world was completely reshaped. Until about the year 1000, Islamic societies in the Middle East followed an almost seamless continuation from late antique societies.[9] After the catastrophic eleventh century, they reappeared as early modern societies. In a way, the eleventh century constitutes the real and only Islamic "Middle Ages." As Ronnie Ellenblum has shown, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq underwent an economic crisis of unprecedented vehemence due to climatic causes. In its wake and due to political mismanagement, urban culture dwindled away. Smaller towns such as Ramla were almost completely lost. Large towns that were integrated with long-distance trading networks, such as Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo, fared somewhat better but still lost much of their former vigor. Bedouin dynasties exploited large parts of the region, causing a further deterioration of agriculture and economy. Turkish nomads fled from drought in their original pasture grounds and flooded the already crisis-ridden regions of the Middle East.[10] Small wonder that this was not a great time for literature. The only exceptions were the western and eastern fringes of Arabic culture. In the West, al-Andalus was spared from the crisis and saw some of its finest poets, such as Ibn Zaydūn (1003–1070) and Ibn Khafāja (1058–1139). In the East, two different developments of literary relevance occurred, one of them detrimental for Arabic literature, the other beneficial. Through the first of these, poets living to the east of Iraq gradually switched from Arabic to Persian, while during the second, what is generally called the "Sunni revival," the educational canons of the *udabāʾ* and the *ʿulamāʾ* merged. The *udabāʾ* (singular *adīb*) were poets and litterateurs and representatives of courtly culture and administration. The *ʿulamāʾ* (singular *ʿālim*) were scholars specializing in law, religion, and related disciplines. By the onset of the eleventh century, the border between *ʿulamāʾ* and *udabāʾ* blurred. The great religious scholar al-Zamakhsharī (1075–1144), who spent most of his life in what is today Uzbekistan, was one of the first men of primarily religious learning who also composed a volume of poetry in the Arabic language.

In the meantime, the central Arab lands recovered from the crisis of the eleventh century. Ironically, the Crusaders arrived at what was the last phase of this crisis, which is why they were initially so successful. But their arrival also coincided with a time that Stefan Heidemann has reasonably called the "renaissance of the towns in Syria and northern Iraq."[11] The economy improved considerably, and so did urban life and culture, and energetic rulers such as the Zangid dynasty brought a certain level of stability. Saladin (d. 1193), the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, took a decisive step when he managed to unite

Syria and Egypt under a single dynasty. The Arabic-speaking world had found new political and cultural centers: Cairo and Damascus were the new Baghdad. Urban culture not only recovered but positively exploded, as did literary life. There are two names that are closely associated with the beginning of what was probably the most productive period ever of Arabic literature. Two intellectuals in the service of Saladin shaped the new literary style that would influence elite literature for the centuries to come. Not coincidentally, both bore the title of *qāḍī* (judge). The first is al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (1135–1200), who became the model for literary prose. The second is Ibn Sanāʾ al-Mulk, also called al-Qāḍī al-Saʿīd (1155–1211), who was more influential in the field of poetry.

The literary system of the Ayyubid and Mamluk period was more complex and manifold than that of earlier periods. In order to illustrate its complexity, the following sections give a virtual tour of a Mamluk town, taking in the various places where one would have been highly likely to encounter literary activity.

3. Courts

The tour starts with the court. For many centuries, courts had been the centers of literary activity. Every poet dreamed of being welcomed at the court of the highest-ranking ruler, vizier, or general to dedicate his panegyric odes to him. The pinnacle for composers of panegyrics was, of course, to praise the caliph, and many caliphs were not only connoisseurs but also themselves poets. The literary taste of courtiers, high dignitaries of the administration and the army, set the standards even for those outside elite circles.

By the Mamluk period, two decisive developments had occurred: the Turkification of the ruling class and the *adab*-ization of the *ʿulamāʾ*. To begin with the first of these, in the main, Arabic societies came to be ruled by leaders of Turkic or Circassian origin, many of whom did not master Arabic well enough to comprehend the subtleties of sophisticated literature. Instead, they preferred architecture, calligraphy, and other art forms as their main instruments of representation. Though a number of Mamluks had received good training in different fields of Arabic culture, only a few rulers combined power with refined literary taste.[12] Such rulers were eagerly sought after, however, since ambitious poets were keen to prove their talent in the traditional genre of courtly panegyrics. Fortunate in this respect were Ṣafī al-dīn al-Ḥillī (1278–1350), who found his Maecenas in the Artuqid rulers of Mardin, and Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī (1287–1366), whose close relationship with the Ayyubid sultan of Ḥamā, al-Malik al-Muʾayyad, awoke remembrances of the most famous Arab poet, al-Mutanabbī (ca. 915–965) and his relationship with the Ḥamdānid ruler of Aleppo, Sayf

al-Dawla (916–967). A generation later, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī went as far as Yemen to find rulers appreciative of his poetry. He was welcomed at the court of the Rasūlids but finally decided that a career as scholar in the fields of *ḥadīth* and law would be more promising.

This leads us to the second development, the *adab*-ization of the *ʿulamāʾ*.[13] As al-Zamakhsharī's example shows, religious scholars during and after the Sunni revival had good training in *adab*, language and literature, and many of them engaged themselves as poets or, at least, as recipients of poetry. When al-Mutanabbī was still young and had not yet found an illustrious patron, he was obliged to compose panegyric poems dedicated to judges and scholars, and this he did with obvious aversion. After all, the two major subjects of a panegyric poem were to praise the dedicatee first for his generosity and second for his military prowess. Even in the best cases, the second point constituted a problem with scholars. In his poem for the judge al-Mughīth al-ʿIjlī, al-Mutanabbī dedicated one single line to the intellectual achievements of al-Mughīth but five lines to the military prowess of his ancestors, since al-Mughīth himself did not have any martial experience whatsoever. Two hundred years later, poets, many of whom were scholars themselves, had learned to praise scholars, who had never held a sword in their hands, simply for their scholarship.

As a result of these developments, the courts lost their power to define literary standards. Literature became primarily the domain of the educated middle classes, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, to use a German term. This does not mean that courts were not interested in literature; there were even Mamluk sultans who cared about poetry. The penultimate Mamluk sultan, Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516), even left two *dīwāns* (collections of poetry) of his own poetry, one in Arabic and one in Turkish, which shows that Arabic was not the only literary language in Arab lands.[14] The most important sultan for Arabic literature, however, was al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (r. 1347–1351 and 1354–1361), to whom Ibn Abī Ḥajala (1325–1375) dedicated three literary anthologies and who invited the senior poet and prose writer Ibn Nubāta to Cairo.[15] To give weight to his invitation, he asked the best Egyptian writer, al-Qīrāṭī (1326–1379), who adored Ibn Nubāta, to accompany his edict with a letter of invitation. This letter of about forty pages is an overwhelming, even miraculous example of Arabic epistolography.[16] It shows how the courts in the Mamluk period had to have recourse to the literary standards of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated civil elite, whenever they wanted to engage in their own literary game. This is an instructive example of the *Verbürgerlichung* (a German term meaning something like "bourgeoisification") of Arabic literature after the Sunni revival.

4. Mosques, Chanceries, Madrasas, and Pyramids

Let us turn now to the *Bildungsbürgertum* of the Mamluk Empire and the places where they met. The civilian elite of the Mamluk Empire consisted mainly of two groups: on the one hand, the *ʿulamāʾ* (singular *ʿālim*), scholars, especially judges and law experts; and on the other hand, the *udabāʾ* (singular *adībʾ*), poets, litterateurs, and experts on language. Unlike in earlier periods, both groups shared a largely common canon of scholarly and literary education, and in many cases, the borders between the two were blurred, even though people associated each group with a different lifestyle. So we hear that the *adīb* al-Samanhūdī (d. 1320) loved wine and the company of young men, as was typical of the *udabāʾ*, whereas the famous poet and prose writer al-Qīrāṭī was firm in his religion and devoted to worship *despite* being a proficient *adīb*.[17] Obviously, it was not self-evident that a litterateur was also a pious man. Nevertheless, the mosque was a place where one could meet *ʿulamāʾ* and *udabāʾ* alike, since mosques were and still are not only places of worship but also general meeting points, where discussion and the exchange of literary texts can take place. Every evening, after the afternoon prayer, al-Ṣafadī (1297–1363) and Ibn Nubāta used to meet for discussions at a certain window of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. When al-Ṣafadī failed to show up one evening, Ibn Nubāta was disappointed and sent him an epigram.[18]

As in earlier periods, Mamluk belles lettres were predominantly secular. Religious literature, however, gained importance, especially in the form of poems in praise of the Prophet and the celebration of his birthday. Again, these genres were treated both in (often extremely) sophisticated form and in simpler, more immediate form for a broader public. The same is true for Sufi poetry which found its final apogee during the Mamluk period in the mystical poems of the poetess ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya, who died in 1517, the same year as the end of the Mamluk Empire.[19]

Moreover, a good deal of teaching was still going on in mosques, and so were public readings of both secular and religious texts. Konrad Hirschler has traced the sessions at which members of the Ibn ʿAsākir family publicly read ʿAlī ibn ʿAsākir's multivolume *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq* (*History of Damascus*) at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus but also at other places during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and he concludes that "'aurality,' in the sense of reading aloud a written text to a group of listeners, remained a prominent praxis throughout the Middle Period."[20] These sessions were attended not only by scholars but also by traders, craftsmen, workers, and slaves and thus contributed to raising the general level of education in the town.[21]

The next place to visit in the Mamluk town is the chancery, where one would be more likely to meet *udabāʾ* than *ʿulamāʾ*. There were quite a number of chanceries in the empire. In addition to the great state chanceries in Cairo and Damascus, there were chanceries in regional towns such as Ḥamā and local ones in mosques such as the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. State chanceries issued official letters and appointment decrees, whereas local ones issued marriage contracts and similar documents of a more private character. For Ibn Nubāta, the chancery of Damascus was at least as important as the court of Ḥamā. Though for a long time he did not aspire to a position in the chancery, he was in close contact with its directors and did not refrain from criticizing its clerks, sometimes even provoking them. Only in the year 1342, after the end of the sultanate of Ḥamā, at a point when his father was no longer willing to finance his life as a freelance intellectual, did Ibn Nubāta enter the chancery as one of its clerks. He was already fifty-five years old at that time and, as a beginner, was not appointed to a rank that befitted his achievements as the best stylist in the whole country. In reaction to this embarrassing situation, he published his complete output of letters and documents from his first two chancery years in book form.[22] There is no doubt that he and his peers considered the documents they created in the chancery not only as pragmatic texts but also as works of art displaying a highly refined style and striking literary concepts and ideas. In Mamluk literary life, where borders were everywhere blurred, even boundaries between pragmatic and literary texts were no longer clear-cut.[23] Naturally, the chancery was also a place of competition among secretaries vying to express the best style and the best ideas.[24] The style that was developed in the chancery came to exert a heavy influence on the style of literary prose and even that of poetry.

Let us turn to a place where there was greater likelihood of encountering *ʿulamāʾ* rather than *udabāʾ*. This was the *madrasa*, an institution of learning closely connected to the Sunni revival. The number of madrasas had impressively increased since the "renaissance of the towns" in the twelfth century. During the Ayyubid period alone, close to three hundred teaching institutions were founded in Egypt and Syria.[25] In the subsequent Mamluk period, an even larger number were added. This not only added to the availability of books, since these madrasas had libraries, but especially to a soaring rise of education and knowledge. Madrasas were not only attended by regular students in search of academic careers or the position of a judge; they were also open to the larger public so that even craftsmen and workers might stop at a madrasa nearby to learn a bit about grammar or law. Furthermore, each madrasa needed auxiliary

personnel such as an imam, a muezzin, a housekeeper, a librarian, and so on. This group of "petty scholars" came to form a sediment of semieducated, substandard scholars, who nonetheless contributed something to the level of education in towns. Sometimes they even evolved into scholars in their own right. The *adīb* Khālid ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Azharī (ca. 1434–1499) is a good example. As a young man, he had a job as lamplighter in a madrasa. Once, wax dropped from one of his lamps and hurt a scholar, who offended him in the harshest way. Struck by the scholar's arrogance, he decided to become a scholar himself, and so it came about.[26]

Finally, one may ask how the pyramids come in. The story is as follows. Scholars and litterateurs were not only continually contacting one another, but they also chronicled their contacts. Huge, multivolume biographical dictionaries provided ample information about who was who, what his (or sometimes her) achievements were, and with whom he or she was in contact and which texts they exchanged. Most of the exchanges were in written form. When they took the form of a personal encounter, a man like al-Ṣafadī, the most assiduous biographer of his age, would note the exact place. Hence, we know that al-Ṣafadī found pleasure in exchanging riddles while sitting on the pyramids (which at this time were still largely buried in sand). The riddles were exchanged in written form,[27] and answers to them, too, had to be given in the form of a riddle. Here is one of al-Ṣafadī's answers:

baʿathta lughzan badīʿan / mithla n-nasīmi laṭāfa
lākinnahū fī musamman / qad ḥāza baʿḍa kathāfa[28]
[You sent me a wonderful riddle, gentle like a soft breeze.
Yet it's about a word in which is some (a part of) thickness.]

For talking about literature, I chose a riddle whose solution is "book." The Arabic word for it, *kitāb*, contains part of the Arabic word for thickness, *kathāfa*, which is the opposite of fineness, *laṭāfa*, with which the partner's riddle is characterized.

5. Scholars' Homes

In the Mamluk period, the representational function of literature, though still persistant, relinquished its leading role to the communicative function of literature.[29] Instead of primarily addressing princes and caliphs, most poems and prose texts were now addressed to equals, to people of an only slightly higher position, or even to those with a lower social standing. These groups made up

a larger segment of the middle- and upper-class population than ever before. Nevertheless, all members of them had a similar educational background and were familiar with more or less the same literary canon.

Despite the continuing importance of the oral (and aural) form, most communication took place in written form. Most commonly, a written text was sent from the home of one scholar and litterateur to that of another. These texts had manifold forms and functions, among them entertainment. Countless witty, often funny epigrams of an entertaining character were devised. Riddles of all kinds were more popular as a game in this period than ever before. More complex poems and prose texts were intended to ensure the reader's aesthetic and emotional edification. The form of the *maqāma*, which combined elegant rhymed prose with poetry, was used for both entertaining and educational texts, for highbrow literature as well as for popular humorous amusement.

Another important task of literature is the creation and strengthening of social bonds. Sometimes a specific concern, such as the request for a present, a favor, or a better position, was behind the production of literary texts. At other times, the writer only wanted to remind the recipient of himself and their mutual ties. Since epigrams are an especially appropriate means of witty and pointed communication, it is no coincidence that the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of this literary form.[30] A typical occasion for a conversation in literary form was the exchange of presents. Of course, a present had to be accompanied by a poem, if not by a long letter that included a poem. The recipient had to answer the poem with a poem of his own, using the same rhyme and meter. When the scholar Badr al-dīn ibn Mālik (d. 1287) could not find a proper answer and when it became known that he had asked his neighbors to compose the answer poem in his stead, the entire literary world ridiculed him.[31]

This leads us to a third function, the construction of social groups and group identities. In the Mamluk Empire, hierarchies were almost inexistent outside the military (and, to a certain extent, the chancery), teaching institutions did not issue official diplomas, and there were no hereditary titles of nobility. Under these circumstances, social rank had to be constructed in informal ways. At the same time, learning and education burgeoned to an extraordinary extent, and the percentage of people who had acquired at least a basic literary and scholarly education reached unprecedented levels. Consequently, it became especially important for elite litterateurs and scholars (or those who reckoned themselves among them) to find some means of distinction and delimitation. A primary way to achieve this was the creation and maintenance of networks. To become

a member of such a network, one had to convince the others that one was equal in education and competence. To do this, one had to send them scholarly papers, stylistically elaborate letters in ornate prose, and poems of all kinds, displaying linguistic and stylistic excellence, comprehensive knowledge, and originality of ideas. In turn, the recipient was expected to answer the text at least at the same level as the sender.[32]

This was one of the reasons the period between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries was the (still largely unstudied) apogee of Arabic epistolography. However, in concluding this chapter, I will introduce a literary genre that was especially invented for networking: the *taqrīẓ*. A *taqrīẓ* (commendation) is a text in ornate prose and/or poetry, in which a member of the literary or scholarly establishment praises another person for his achievement, mostly on the occasion of one of his recent works. Young writers, who wanted to make their debuts on the literary stage, went in search of *taqārīẓ*, which they subsequently published as appendixes to the text that had presented them with the occasion. A number of such debut *taqārīẓ* have come to light, and it seems very probable that Ibn Nubāta was the originator of this practice. In the year 1317, he had finished an anthology, in which he explained the duties of an *adīb*. In order to secure a good start for his career in Syria, he sent the book to exponents of scholarship and literature and asked them for a *taqrīẓ*, in which they commended his own work but also praised his Maecenas, the prince of Ḥamā. Eleven of them responded to his request and sent remarkable texts.[33]

The final question is: what happened to all these texts that were sent from one home to another? The answer is: sooner or later, most of them ended up in books, which consisted of collections of poems or anthologies of the author's own texts or of the texts of others. This is one of the reasons the Mamluk period was also the golden age of the anthology.[34] These collections may have continued to circulate as such, but often they were intended for publication. For this purpose, they would usually have been revised thoroughly. Chapters were added, expressions changed, the name of the original recipient or dedicatee anonymized, and so forth. This is exactly what Ibn Nubāta did with the *taqārīẓ* he had received. He collected them and added praise to each of the contributors as well as further letters and poems he had exchanged with their authors. He prefaced the book with a copious introduction, gave it a title, and published it in book form in 1319. Eventually, that book became one of his most famous publications.[35]

As in this case, most of these texts ended up in the book market, reason enough to visit this dangerous place—where al-Bashtakī had lost his mind by copying too many books—a second time.

6. Book Market

After the book revolution brought about by the increased availability of paper in the ninth century—by the way, a media revolution much more important than the introduction of printing—a "reading revolution" followed, "where the written word became increasingly central and spread to wider sections of society." Hirschler is certainly correct when he states that the ubiquity of reading suggests that the literacy rate "became a two-digit number in the cities of Egypt and Syria."[36]

At that time, many books were equipped with bibliographies and cross-references to other books. Their authors must have been optimistic that their readers could get hold of the books mentioned. For authors, perhaps especially for litterateurs, who had less access to the madrasa network, book markets also provided income for copyists. A number of books were even composed to meet the demands of the book market. A typical example is al-Nawājī (d. 1455), who covered all fields of poetry, prose, and linguistic scholarship in order to prove that he was an all-around *adīb*. His most successful titles, still extant in a large number of manuscripts, were anthologies with little scholarly ambition. One, an anthology of wine and nature poetry and related subjects, and another, an anthology of homoerotic poetry, are testimony to his vast knowledge, fine discernment, and, most important, his instinct for appealing to the taste of a potential readership.

However, as we have already learned, the book market was a dangerous place, and al-Nawājī was not to be spared its hazards. As he was a combative character, he accumulated enemies. One of them decided to take revenge by assembling satires against him. A number of such texts, both by that enemy and by others, were collected and published under the title *Qubḥ al-ahājī fī l-Nawājī* (The Disgrace of Satires against al-Nawājī). Thereupon he ordered a broker to make his rounds among the booksellers on the pretense of selling them the book, knowing that al-Nawājī was present at the market. When the broker passed by a shop that al-Nawājī happened to be visiting, al-Nawājī asked to cast a glance at the book and immediately realized what it was about. He was shocked but had to hand the book back to the broker, who returned it to its author, who apparently never published it. The affair, however, had a lasting effect on al-Nawājī and even caused a serious deterioration of his health.[37]

7. Public Libraries

Let us now move to a safer place: the library. The decline paradigm has been especially powerful in library studies. Impressed by reports about the destruction of libraries and the obvious demise of the grand caliphal libraries, common

opinion was that the availability of books had decreased significantly by the post-Mongol period. Nevertheless, Hirschler has adduced persuasive evidence that the exact the opposite was the case. The era of monumental royal libraries—to which probably only a small elite ever had access—was now ended, yet people from all walks of society had access to a vast number of smaller public libraries in all larger towns of the Ayyubid and Mamluk Empires. In general, these libraries were endowments and formed parts of madrasas, mosques, or Sufi convents. They were open to the public, and people could borrow the books. Libraries of this kind therefore played a significant role in the education of the middle classes in Cairo, Damascus, and elsewhere.

In the 1270s, a dedicated librarian compiled a catalogue of the holdings of the Ashrafiyya madrasa in Damascus. This was a madrasa of minor importance and employed only a single professor for Koran reading. Its library housed about 2,100 books. Significantly, more than half of the library's books belonged to the fields of poetry, *adab*, and philology. Even Shiite theology and the sciences were well represented. Unfortunately, this is the only library catalogue of the period that has come down to us. Nevertheless, it is obvious that "a reader in Damascus would have had access to tens of thousands of books in libraries alone."[38] In sum, one can conclude with Hirschler that "Arabic societies, at least those in Syria and Egypt, arguably belonged to the most literate and bookish societies worldwide when the Ashrafīya library was founded in the seventh/thirteenth century."[39]

8. Streets and Marketplaces

Bibliocentric as this society undoubtedly was, oral literature still played an enormous role, but thanks to the centrality of books, much of it eventually found its way back into book form. Consequently, we know much more about "popular literature" of the Mamluk period than for any other period before. What was first recited and performed in the streets and markets of Cairo, Damascus, and other urban centers was again multifold and heterogeneous in form, content, and level. In general, it is obvious that even people without formal education, who could barely write, were capable of understanding and enjoying literary texts of rather high complexity (which may have been one of the reasons the *volgare* never became the standard language for literature). The same is true for authors of popular literature, among them craftsmen, merchants, and service personnel of mosques and madrasas, many of whom were capable of composing texts of a level almost equal to that of elite poets.[40] On the other hand, several elite poets tried their hands at popular

forms of poetry, using a dialectal form of Arabic. Especially popular was the *zajal*, strophic poetry in a language heavily influenced by the vernacular.[41] Many litterateurs shunned it. After all, their elitist standing depended on their mastery of faultless and elegant Classical Arabic. Other highbrow litterateurs such as Ṣafī al-dīn al-Ḥillī and even Ibn Nubāta had fewer problems with this form of poetry. However, it is not true that elite literature became closer to popular literature in general, as has occasionally been stated. Because the borders between elite and popular literature were blurred, those litterateurs who wanted to be accepted as members of the upper echelon had to present poems and letters of extreme complexity.

The unquestionable fact that borders between the popular and the highbrow became blurred does not mean that they did not exist at all. Instead, several topics and forms were peculiar to one of them. A few examples of what was more typical in popular literature will conclude this overview.

A major popular poet was Ibrāhīm al-Miʿmār (d. 1348 or 1349), who was a stonemason and builder by profession but gained lasting fame as a poet, among both his peers and the elite.[42] His poems were collected and written down by others, sometimes even in magnificent manuscripts. Many of his epigrams cannot be distinguished from those composed by elite poets; Ibn Nubāta even adopted a number of his ideas. However, some of his epigrams are so daring and obscene that they would have endangered the social standing of those belonging to the elite. In the following epigram, al-Miʿmār complains about a futile attempt to remedy his overactive libido by masturbating. The subject would have been not be a strict taboo for highbrow poets. What makes it really audacious is the fact that the penis quotes from the Holy Koran, God's uncreated speech, grossly altering its meaning. In the Koranic verse in question, God speaks through the Prophet to say that people visiting him should return home after their meal and not seek to engage in conversation.

> fa-ʾidhā ṭaʿimtum fa-ntashirū wa-lā mustaʾnisīna li-ḥadīthin
> [When you have taken your meal, then disperse and do not seek familiar conversation]

The verb *intashara* used here in the meaning "disperse" can also mean "spread out." It is this meaning that it assumes in al-Miʿmār's penis epigram:

> aṭʿamtu ʾayrī kay yanāma wa-qultu qarri fa-mā staqarr
> bal qāma yasʿā qāʾilan: ana man ʾidhā ṭuʿima ntashar[43]

[I fed my penis in order to make him sleep and said: “Rest!”—But he did not rest. Instead, he rose again zealously and said: “I am one of those who spread out after taking their meal!”]

Today, the author of an epigram like this would certainly get into serious trouble. In his own time, al-Miʿmār attracted the admiration of even the highest-level religious scholars such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī. It is clear, however, that due to his social position, Ibn Ḥajar could never publish an epigram like this, whereas a stonemason could.

Al-Miʿmār was especially successful with his strophic poems in a stylized form of Arabic close to the vernacular. This form, the *zajal* (plural *azjāl*), had its origins in al-Andalus but soon spread to the East. Al-Miʿmār raised the Eastern *zajal* to a new level. We do not know how *azjāl* were performed in al-Miʿmār's time. It could well be that it was not very different from a modern tradition that lives on in contemporary Lebanon and Syria. A number of recordings from *zajal* performances by prominent *zajal* poets such as Zayn Shuʿayb (1922–2005) and Ṭalīʿ Ḥamdān (b. 1944) can give an impression of the way *azjāl* were performed in the 1970s and later.[44]

There are no videos displaying another form of popular literature, the shadow play (*khayāl al-ẓill*), because this dramatic form is no longer alive in the Arab world. This was a form of popular entertainment for the masses, in which no elite authors took part. The most important author in this genre was Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1310), an oculist by main profession. He was also a composer of highbrow poems, but his fame is founded on his plays, three of which have survived—the only shadow plays of the period whose text has come down to us.[45] To read them is to understand why no other texts survived and why the shadow play was disdained by elite authors. The plays were written at a time that was especially tolerant of ribaldries and obscenities; the obscenities in shadow plays, however, were too crude even for this period. In Arab countries, the tradition has died out, although perhaps a tame echo of it persists in the Turkish *Karagöz*.

It is often said that Arabic literature did not have drama, romance, or epic. This is not true, especially if we consider popular Arabic literature in the Mamluk period. We have already touched on the drama, which is only poorly preserved. Romances fared better. The collection of *One Thousand and One Nights* (*alf layla wa-layla*) contains texts of almost all genres: highbrow and popular poems, fables, stories of all kinds, fairy tales, and romances of considerable length. Their language is not the stylized vernacular of the *zajal* but standard Arabic with a considerable but unintentional influence of the spoken language.

The Mamluk period was crucial for the formation of the corpus of the *Nights*. By then, many stories were already many hundreds of years old, but a number of them were added in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods in Egypt. The oldest surviving manuscript of the first part of the *Nights* dates from around the year 1450. Furthermore, it seems that the stories united in the collection of the *Nights* are, so to speak, the tip of the iceberg. Many more such stories have come to light and are gradually being edited, translated, and studied. Nevertheless, much still remains to be done.[46]

A search for themes and motifs parallel to those in the *Orlando furioso* will probably be most successful if focused on the popular epics. More than a dozen of these folktales have been preserved, some of them of extraordinary length.[47] Over the centuries, before the arrival of modern mass media, they were central for public entertainment. Today, only the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is still performed in Egypt, sung in verse accompanied by the spike fiddle (*rabāba*).

The three most famous and longest epics (*sīra*, plural *siyar*) are the *Sīrat ʿAntar*, a chivalrous romance about a pre-Islamic poet and hero, which took shape around the thirteenth century (the oldest manuscript dates to the fifteenth century); the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, describing the migration of the Bedouin tribe of the Banū Hilāl from the Ḥijāz to North Africa from the tenth to the twelfth centuries; and the *Sīrat Baybars*, which tells of the legendary adventures of the Mamluk sultan Baybars (r. 1260–1277). The language of the *siyar* varies from dialect to a form closer to the standard language, as in the *Sīrat ʿAntar*. The literary form and the manner of performance are equally varied.[48] The old preconceptions about the age of the Ayyubids and Mamluks as a period of decline have been more or less discarded, and scholarship in this field progresses continually. This development will lay fertile ground for a broader, intercultural perspective on the literatures of the Mediterranean.

Notes

1. See Bauer 2007, esp. pp. 141–146.

2. See Bauer 2006; Bauer 2007; Bauer 2013a.

3. Despite its focus on Spanish poetry, El Omari 2014 is also crucial in relation to Italian literature, esp. pp. 61–102. On the relation between Arabic strophic poetry and troubadour poetry, see Schoeler 1990.

4. See Ott's contribution in this volume.

5. See Herzog 2006, pp. 233–238.

6. Kruk 2014.

7. Ibn Ḥajar 1975, p. 133.

8. Personal communication by Gregor Schoeler, Basel.

9. See Bauer 2018.
10. See Ellenblum 2012.
11. Heidemann 2002.
12. See Mauder 2012.
13. See Bauer 2004, p. 710.
14. On works in Persian in the Ashrafiyya library in Damascus, see Hirschler 2016, p. 114.
15. See Papoutsakis and von Hees 2017.
16. See Bauer 2017.
17. On al-Samanhūdī, see Ibn Ḥajar 1929, p. 363; on al-Qīrāṭī, see Bauer 2017, p. 340.
18. See al-Ṣafadī 1961, p. 326.
19. See Homerin 2011.
20. Hirschler 2012, p. 15.
21. Hirschler 2012, pp. 32–70.
22. See Bauer 2009a, p. 197.
23. See Bauer 2013b, pp. 23–26.
24. See Bauer 2013b, pp. 39–44.
25. See Hirschler 2016, p. 14.
26. See Bauer 2008 with further references.
27. See al-Ṣafadī 2005, p. 210.
28. See al-Ṣafadī 2005, p. 215.
29. See Bauer 2013a, pp. 9–10.
30. See Talib 2018.
31. See Bauer 2013b, p. 32; al-Ṣafadī 1961, p. 204.
32. See Bauer 2013a, pp. 14–20; Bauer 2013b.
33. See Bauer 2013b, pp. 44–50; Bauer 2014.
34. See Bauer 2003.
35. See Bauer 2013b, pp. 46–50.
36. Hirschler 2016, p. 2.
37. See Bauer 2009b, pp. 326–327.
38. Hirschler 2016, p. 14.
39. Hirschler 2016, p. 2.
40. On popular poetry, see Larkin 2007.
41. See the comprehensive study by Özkan 2020.
42. See al-Miʿmār 2018.
43. Epigram 244, al-Miʿmār 2018, p. 154.
44. See, e.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=17&v=roMoL3blSyc.
45. On Ibn Dāniyāl and the shadow play, see Guo 2011.
46. For a first overview, see Marzolph 2007.
47. Studies of the epics are plentiful. It may suffice here to mention Lyons 1995; Heath 2007; Kruk 2007; Reynolds 2007.
48. See Dwight Reynolds's chapter in this volume.

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