

Arabic Poetics

What makes language beautiful? *Arabic Poetics* offers an answer to what this pertinent question looked like at the height of the Islamic civilization. In this novel argument, Lara Harb suggests that literary quality depended on the ability of linguistic expression to produce an experience of discovery and wonder in the listener. Analyzing theories of how rhetorical figures, simile, metaphor, and sentence construction are able to achieve this effect of wonder, Harb shows how this aesthetic theory, first articulated at the turn of the eleventh century CE, represented a major paradigm shift from earlier Arabic criticism, which based its judgment on criteria of truthfulness and naturalness. In doing so, this study poses a major challenge to the misconception in modern scholarship that Arabic criticism was “traditionalist” or “static,” exposing an elegant, widespread conceptual framework of literary beauty in the post-tenth-century Islamicate world that is central to poetic criticism, the interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in Arabic philosophy, and the rationale underlying discussions about the inimitability of the Quran.

Lara Harb is Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University where she specializes in classical Arabic literature. She is the author of articles in journals such as *Journal of American Oriental Society* and *Middle Eastern Literatures*. Her PhD was awarded the S. A. Bonebakker Prize for the best thesis in Classical Arabic Literature in 2014.

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Arabic Poetics

Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature

LARA HARB
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Preface

How was classical Arabic poetry evaluated by medieval critics? This is the question motivating this study. We can search for the answer in a large body of texts that has come down to us from the Islamic Middle Ages concerned with issues of eloquence and poetic beauty. These texts may be described as “medieval” or “classical” Arabic literary theory. Before we delve into this literature, however, let me take a moment to qualify this description. Each word in this label is problematic.

The term “medieval” is borrowed from the European context, which designates a middle period between the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Broadly speaking, this period, which stretches between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries CE, does correspond more or less to the period one refers to when designating the term medieval to the Arabo-Islamic world. However, with the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the expansion of the Islamic Empire soon after, and its dominance over a territory stretching from Spain to the Indus Valley for centuries to follow, this period marks the beginning and height of the Islamic civilization.¹ To modern Arabic culture, the literary production of that period also constitutes its “classical” heritage. Hence, the literature of the

¹ For the case against using the term “medieval” to describe the old Islamic world, see Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2018). One way scholars have circumvented using the term “medieval” to describe the Islamic civilization is by referring to dynasties in power and speaking of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Mamluk eras. However, this periodization rarely corresponds to intellectual trends and developments. It is therefore sometimes still necessary to resort to the term medieval in order to describe a period spanning dynasties and territories.

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period is also – although not less problematically – referred to as “classical.”²

The term “Arabic” can also be problematic. In this context, the texts that I will be analyzing in this book were all written in Arabic and all deal with literary works written in Arabic. However, it is important to note that many of the authors came from regions well beyond what we would consider the Arab world today, including one of the main theorists discussed in this book, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, who was from Gorgan (in modern-day Iran). I use the term “Arabic” strictly to describe the language of the scholarship I am analyzing. Any mention of “Arab critics” or “Arab philosophers” is intended as a designation of the linguistic medium in which they were writing and not their ethnic background.

The concept of the “literary” is problematic because it does not map onto how we today, and particularly in the West, would necessarily define “literature.”³ As we will see, the literary in the Arabic critical tradition operates at the level of stylistics and the verbal arts. Critical engagement with larger structures such as plot or even content is less prominent.⁴ The poetic examples analyzed in Arabic sources are most often limited to single verses or even fragments of verses. Moreover, the literary subject of the critical tradition is not limited to verses of poetry. Verses from the Quran, as well as phrases in prose, are evaluated using the same criteria as poetry. The “literary,” therefore, is discussed in reference to poetry, the Quran, and artistic prose regardless of larger structures. The literary thus

² While the entire “medieval” period can be regarded as classical, there are periods of “classicism” and “post-classicism” within it as well. In the early Abbasid period (late second/eighth century), for example, a new style of poetry started developing, as we will see in Chapter 1, that contrasted with a pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetic tradition that had already come to represent a “classical” heritage for the Abbasids. Sometimes everything up to the end of the Abbasid period (656/1258) is described as “classical” and what follows as “post-classical.” For a critique of this periodization, see Thomas Bauer, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature’: A Review Article,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007). I loosely use the label “classical Arabic literary theory” in this book to describe “old Arabic criticism” (*al-naqd al-‘Arabī al-qadīm*), as it is sometimes described in Arabic scholarship. The texts I discuss happen to range from the third/ninth to the eighth/fourteenth century because I look at the development of aesthetic ideas over the centuries up to and including the standardization of the study of eloquence as a scholastic discipline in the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth century.

³ For a discussion of the meaning of “literature” and the “literary” in the classical Arabic context and how they might differ from modern-day assumptions, see Julie Scott Meisami’s introduction in *Structure and Meaning in Medieval Arabic and Persian Poetry: Orient Pearls* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴ Geert Jan van Gelder has tackled the treatment of larger structures of poems in classical Arabic criticism in his *Beyond the Line: Classical Arabic Literary Critics on the Coherence and Unity of the Poem* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982).

encompasses both poeticity (*shi'riyya*) and eloquence (*balāgha*). In the Arabic context, both revolve around the question of the beauty of speech, not its persuasive power. Although eloquence (*balāgha*) is a more frequently used term than poeticity (*shi'riyya*) and entails a broader category that can describe the Quran as well as poetry, what is meant by *balāgha* is closer to poetics in English than rhetoric, as it is sometimes described.⁵ Thus, for our present purposes, I will be using the terms “poeticity” and “eloquence” interchangeably to describe literary aesthetics. Popular narratives such as the *Arabian Nights*, dramatic performances, and storytelling, as well as anecdotal literature (*adab*), which constitute important components of classical Arabic literature, never enjoyed the attention of the critical tradition that poetry, the Quran, and artistic prose did.⁶

On a related note, the poet himself or the poem from which a verse is quoted rarely plays a role in their analyses. Poets certainly had reputations that sometimes come into play. Nevertheless, critics were generally more concerned with the specific images they want to discuss, not the poet. Moreover, while in some cases the quoted verses are taken from famous poems, which the medieval reader would have undoubtedly recognized, the poem as a whole is rarely relevant to the point the critics try to illustrate. In many cases, the verses only survive as isolated quotations with their original literary context lost. Moreover, many of the verses and examples quoted in the critical tradition become a standardized canon of their own. Specific verses become famous in and of themselves as illustrations of one or another poetic device and are repeatedly discussed over the centuries.

Finally, the term “theory” is an anachronistic application of a modern concept. Using it to describe medieval Arabic discussions of poetry and

⁵ While the term *balāgha*, meaning eloquence in Arabic, is often translated as “rhetoric,” it must be distinguished from rhetoric (*khaṭāba*) in the ancient Greek sense of argumentation and oratory, which aims at persuasion. The goal of *balāgha* is distinctly aesthetic, not persuasion, even if the former can benefit the latter. (See Pierre Larcher, “Mais qu’est-ce donc que la balāgha?,” in *Literary and Philosophical Rhetoric in the Greek, Roman, Syriac, and Arabic Worlds*, ed. Frédérique Woerther (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2009); and Filippomaria Pontani, “Inimitable Sources: Canonical Texts and Rhetorical Theory in the Greek, Latin, Arabic and Hebrew Traditions,” in *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: A Global Comparative Approach*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).)

⁶ Some anecdotal literature was written in highly stylized language, such as the *maqāmāt*. These do become the subject of literary criticism. However, also in this case, the focus of the criticism tends to be on the verbal arts employed in them, not larger structures such as the plot. See Matthew Keegan, “Commentarial Acts and Hermeneutical Dramas: The Ethics of Reading al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt*” (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 2017).

eloquence might lead one to have certain modern expectations that the sources do not fulfill.⁷ However, I use the term deliberately because I believe, as I hope to show, that the critical texts that have come down to us from the Islamic Middle Ages do provide us with general principles that can explain phenomena beyond the specific examples of Arabic literature.

Keeping these qualifications in mind, the body of texts that can be described as “classical Arabic literary theory” is enormous and multifaceted.⁸ Much of it has been published in easily accessible modern printed editions and many of these are even searchable online. However, many manuscripts remain much less accessible in libraries around the world. Far less is accessible in English translation.⁹ This book is an attempt to shed light on some of these texts and to uncover some salient aspects that define classical Arabic literary aesthetics.

⁷ Modern expectations of medieval Arabic literary theory form the basis of Meisami’s critique of modern scholarship on the topic (Julie Scott Meisami, “Arabic Poetics Revisited,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112, no. 2 (1992)).

⁸ For an analysis of the Arabic critical tradition as a discipline, see Wen-chin Ouyang, *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

⁹ English translations of selections and excerpts can be found in Vicente Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age: Selection of Texts Accompanied by a Preliminary Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); Geert Jan van Gelder and Marlé Hammond, eds., *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics* (Cambridge, UK: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008). Information about other translations is provided where relevant throughout the book.

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Note on Dates, Translations, Transliterations, and Names

All dates are given in the Islamic Hijri calendar, a lunar system that begins in 622 CE, followed by the corresponding Common Era date. Death dates are based on those reported in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second and Third Editions (Brill Online). Arabic terms are provided in transliteration in cases where they are noteworthy, following the IJMES transliteration system. Poetic and Quranic quotations are provided in Arabic script alongside their translations. Verses in classical Arabic poetry are conventionally made up of two hemistichs. I preserve this structure in the English translations. I use the term “listener,” as opposed to “reader” or “audience,” when discussing the reception of poetry or eloquent speech as this is how medieval critics themselves spoke of the person experiencing the poetic speech. Finally, the epithet “al-Jurjānī” is shared by several critics whose works are discussed in this book. When I speak of “al-Jurjānī,” without any further specification, I refer to ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078 or 474/1081), the author of *Asrār al-balāgha* (*The Secrets of Eloquence*) and *Dalā’il al-i’jāz* (*The Signs of the Inimitability of the Quran*). He is not to be confused with al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī (d. 392/1001), author of *al-Wasā’ita bayn al-Mutanabbī wa-l-khuṣūmih* (*The Mediation between Mutanabbī and His Opponents*); Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Jurjānī (d. 729/1329), who wrote *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt fī ‘ilm al-balāgha* (*Pointers and Reminders on the Science of Eloquence*); and ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad (al-Sayyid al-Sharīf) al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), who wrote a commentary on al-Sakkākī’s *al-Miftāḥ* (*The Key*) and glosses on al-Taftāzānī’s *al-Muṭawwal*,

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a commentary on the *Miftāḥ*. Furthermore, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī (d. 739/1338), known as al-Khaṭīb al-Qazwīnī, the author of two important commentaries on the *Miftāḥ*, is also not to be confused with Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283), the author of *ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt* (*The Wonders of Creations*).