

# Al-Şafadī, His Critics, and the Drag of Philological Time

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## Abstract

Philology was more than a scholarly tool in the system of classical Arabo-Islamic writing; it was a cognitive model. This cognitive model was embodied by scholars and repeatedly performed by them in oral and written expression. It can be understood as a habitus. This article takes seriously pre-modern critiques of a revisionist darling al-Şafadī's masterful commentary *al-Ghayth al-musajjam fi sharḥ «Lāmiyyat al-ʿAjam»* to consider the cognitive logic of this philological habitus and the ways in which modern scholarly agendas manipulate the chronological plane of Arabic literary history.

## Keywords

al-Şafadī – al-Damāmīnī – textual commentary – Arabic poetry – philology – temporal drag

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As students of languages and literatures, we are not of the periods or texts that we study, nor must we necessarily be at home within them. More than a fight over belonging and unbelonging, consider what it might mean to engage with traditions not to find home, but to appreciate the entire world as a place of exile with 'intimacy and distance.'

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: sites of reading in colonial Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 140. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article as well as my colleague Marc



Nearly every genre of Arabic scholarly writing was at least in part concerned with matters of orthodox diction. This philological focus exceeded the boundaries of specialized disciplines like the study of *gharīb al-ḥadīth* (the study of rare words used in the sayings of the Muslim prophet) and the pre-modern lexicographical and onomastic enterprise that produced works like Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī's (d. 1205/1791) gargantuan lexicon *Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-Qāmūs* («*al-Qāmūs*» (“The Bride’s Crown Inlaid with the Jewels of the *Qāmūs*”) and Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (d. 626/1229) alphabetically organized toponymic reference work *Muʿjam al-Buldān*.<sup>2</sup> The scholarly methods of etymology, source criticism, and poetic attestation were essential tools for framing any and all scholarly arguments in Arabic—as well as the languages it would come to influence—for more than a millennium. There is no genre of Arabic writing that lacked for a philological orientation. By philology, I mean here an attention to language and language practice that is based on the putatively ideal and uncorrupted form of Arabic known from the earliest recorded Arabic texts. When knowledge was recorded, systematized, produced, and disseminated in Classical Arabic, the dimension of philology—or the relationship of that knowledge to the Classical Arabic language system and its literary proof texts—was an essential axis of presentation. The linguistic dimension of social and natural phenomena was never to be ignored—not simply because it demonstrated scholarly training and aptitude, which were of course desirable qualities and essential for the self-presentation of learned men and women—but because philology functioned more deeply as a key pillar of an Arabo-Islamic scholarly habitus, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term. It was one of the:

[...] principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing

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Schachter, who is a model academic citizen. I would also like to thank Islam Dayeh for inviting me to present this argument in Berlin in July 2017 and accepting a very different version of it as an article. Finally, I must thank Colinda Lindermann, not only for her able editorial assistance, but also for sharing with me a draft of her article that appears in this issue (discussed below).

- 2 The translation of the title of al-Zabīdī's lexicon is taken from Monique Bernards, “al-Zabīdī” in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350–1850*, ed. Joseph E. Lowry and Devin J. Stewart (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009).

a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.<sup>3</sup>

An attention to language, linguistic complexity, and literary history—itsself a record of normative and prestigious lexical usage over time—determined how the most educated people in these societies understood the world around them. I cannot prove that this philological sensitivity was cognitively determinant but I presume that it was. It certainly affected how information was presented, processed, and received so it is not difficult to imagine—if one accepts that context affects cognition—that this philological orientation gave thinkers structure as they encountered natural, social, and cultural phenomena in need of explanation and categorization. I will argue here that this sensitivity in philological perception and presentation was both a cognitive habit and a continuous performance of scholarly authority.

To take but one example of this philological orientation, in Khalil b. Aybak al-Şafadī's (d. 764/1363) treatise-cum-anthology on the human eye, *Şarf al-ʿayn ʿan şarf al-ʿayn fi waşf al-ʿayn* ("Avoiding Envy While Paying Cash Down for Descriptions of the Eye"), the order and scope of expository chapters demonstrates the philological core of a literary treatise that purports to treat an anatomical phenomenon:<sup>4</sup>

(1) Eyes in the *Qurʿān*, (2) Eyes in the *Ḥadīth*, (3) The damage that glances [of the eye] can cause, (4) Recompense for damages to the eye, (5) [Rules about] prayer for those suffering from eye-injuries, (6) The meanings of the [homonym] ʿayn, (7) On the homonymy of ʿayn, (8) On the question: Can homonyms be made dual? Plural? (9) Qualities [and defects] of people's eyes, (10) The pleasant features of the eye, (11) The unpleasant features of the eye, (12) Ways of describing things that happen to eyes, (13) Ways of describing looks, (14) Names of the parts of the eye, (15) The

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford [CA]: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53. On habitus as an ideal in Islamic ethical thought, see Erez Naaman, "Nurture over Nature: Habitus from al-Fārābī through Ibn Khaldūn to 'Abduh", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137.1 (2017): 1–24.

4 Khalil b. Aybak al-Şafadī, *Şarf al-ʿayn ʿan şarf al-ʿayn fi waşf al-ʿayn*, 2 vols, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Majīd Lāshīn (Cairo: Dār al-Āfāq al-ʿArabiyyah, 2005), 2: 23–261. The English translation of the work's title is borrowed from Everett K. Rowson, "al-Şafadī" in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350–1850*, ed. Joseph E. Lowry and Devin J. Stewart (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 341; 355. On the author's career, see Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Majīd Lāshīn, *al-Şafadī wa-āthāruhu fi l-adab wa-l-naqḍ* (Cairo: Dār al-Āfāq al-ʿArabiyyah, 2005).

anatomy of the eye, (16) On the eye's essence and its humors, (17) The reason for dark eyelids, (18) The reason for glaucoma, (19) The layers [components] of the eye, (20) The muscles of the eye.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the philological orientation of such a text, what some scholars call its literary orientation or even less helpfully its *adab* eclecticism, came to al-Şafadī instinctually, that is without forethought. It would be reductive to say that it was simply the product of genre convention or writerly instinct. The impulse behind the instinct and the cognitive structure that gave rise to the genre convention are one. For al-Şafadī and his peers—as well as their predecessors and successors—philology was an aesthetic principle: a deeply felt, unconscious dimension of habitus. That does not mean that it could never be ugly, though, as we will see.

Textual commentaries (*shurūḥ*) devoted to lexically challenging poems and *maqāmāt*—as well as an entire exegetical tradition devoted to the divine text, that is the *tafsīr* tradition—can be understood as perhaps the most sublime examples of this philological habit of mind.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, modern scholars of the tradition have often harbored a bias against works of scholarly commentary and synthesis, which—despite their ubiquity in the long tradition of Arabic literature—are associated especially with the Mamlūk and Ottoman periods.<sup>6</sup> The highly influential Arabist H. A. R. Gibb's (1895–1971) jaundiced view of the synthetic compositions that supposedly characterize Arabic literature produced in the 13th–19th centuries is familiar to most scholars of the current generation who have by now been inculcated against it:<sup>7</sup>

5 Walid Saleh has eloquently dismantled scholarly presumptions about the neutrality of philology as applied to the divine text and, in fact, reinforces the notion that philology is a political practice, that it is an ideological battleground: “Though medieval Qur’anic exegetes always claimed that they were engaged in a disciplined philological approach to the Qur’an, one can demonstrate that that was not always the case. [...] Much of their work was actually a keenly crafted attempt to circumvent philology, while playing by its rules.” (Walid A. Saleh, “The Etymological Fallacy and Qur’anic Studies: Muḥammad, paradise, and late antiquity” in *The Qur’an in Context: historical and literary investigations into the Qur’anic milieu*, ed Angelika Neuwirth, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 652.

6 See e.g. the preponderance of commentaries in the Ottoman imperial *medrese* syllabus discussed in Shahab Ahmed and Nenad Filipovic, “The Sultan’s Syllabus: a curriculum for the Ottoman imperial *medreses* prescribed in a *fermān* of Qānūnī I Süleymān, dated 973 (1565)”, *Studia Islamica* 98/99 (2004). Clifford Edmund Bosworth’s *Bahā’ al-Dīn al-Āmilī and his Literary Anthologies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1989) is a notable example of pre-revisionist scholarship that took an interest in works of literary synthesis *pace* the prejudices of scholarship at the time.

7 H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature. An Introduction*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 119.

As the literary circle narrowed down to a highly educated minority, its mind and literary standards narrowed in keeping and, as always happens, sought to compensate for loss of range and vitality by pedantry and affectation. Independence of thought gave place to reliance on authority; original works were superseded by the popular compendium, or the encyclopaedia. The elegance and artistry that clothed the inventive productions of bygone writers with grace and wit were now cultivated for themselves and smothered the matter, as if to hide the essential dullness of mind of the age [...]

Charles Pellat (1914–1992), who was as influential among Francophone Arabists as Gibb was among Anglophones, was more strident in his condemnation of Arabic commentary culture. Pellat connected the commentaries instrumentally to declining comprehension—a veritable knowledge crisis—that he claims was in force as early as the 5th/11th century.<sup>8</sup> When challenged, Pellat even went so far as to characterize the burgeoning encyclopaedic tradition as a sort-of Noah's Ark for Arabic knowledge and culture in the face of political chaos.<sup>9</sup> This disdain for commentary and synthesis is by no means exclusively European or exterior to the tradition. The prolific 20th-century Egyptian critic 'Alī al-Jārim (1881–1949) wrote that:<sup>10</sup>

Many authors in the period felt that to write was not to invent (*ibtikār*), but rather to bring together parts from various [other] books and to imitate those who had gone before (*taqlīd*) without any personal contribution (*ijtihād*).

8 “Des cours de grammaire et de littérature sont cependant donnés, mais par exemple à la *Nizāmiyya* de Bagdad, les étudiants qui assistaient à ceux de Tibrīzī (421–502 [ah]), à la fin du Ve siècle, n'étaient pas capables de comprendre la *Hamāsa* d'Abū Tammām, même à l'aide d'un commentaire d'ensemble; il leur fallait un commentaire grammatical de chaque vers. Et n'oublions pas que c'est à la même époque que remonte l'oeuvre de Ḥarīrī (m. 516) qui, voulant lutter contre la décadence de la culture générale—entendez des connaissances linguistiques et littéraires—ne trouva rien de mieux que de fabriquer ses fameuses séances, dont l'obscurité est telle qu'un commentaire est indispensable.” Charles Pellat, “Les étapes de la décadence culturelle dans les pays arabes d'orient,” in *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'islam*, ed. R. Brunschvig et al. (Paris: Editions Besson Chantemerle, 1957), 89.

9 See discussion following Charles Pellat, “Les étapes”, 92.

10 'Alī al-Jārim, “*Tārīkh al-adab al-'Arabī, al-'aṣr al-Turkī ilā bad' al-nahḍah al-ḥadīthah*” in *Jārimīyyāt. Buḥūth wa-maqālāt al-shā'ir wa-l-adīb al-lughawī 'Alī al-Jārim*, ed. Aḥmad 'Alī al-Jārim, 2nd ed. (Cairo: al-Shurūq, 2001), 125.

However, al-Jārim went on to defend pioneering authors of the period like Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), and others whose works are widely recognized as being innovative. Al-Jārim's use of the word *ibtikār* ("the act of inventing") is interesting because it reinforces a particular understanding of literary creativity that frames the creative act as being both the first of its kind and unrepeatable. I am often wary of arguments from etymology, but—in keeping with the subject of this article—it is perhaps germane to consider the semantic field that gave rise to this key verb and the literary-historical values that it implies. The verbs *bakara*, *abkara*, *bak-kara*, *ibtakara*, and *tabakkara* all mean to go out early in the morning—that is in the period between dawn and sunrise (*bukra*)—but the verb *ibtakara*, which is used to signify literary invention in the quotation from 'Alī al-Jārim cited above and can also mean to arrive early, to attend at the beginning of an event, to invent (an idea, symbol, metaphor, etc.), is also used to express the act of having sex with a woman for the first time (of a man), eating the first fruit of a tree, bearing one's first child (of a woman), and other initial acts.<sup>11</sup> This understanding of literary creativity, that it is a single and unrepeatable act of creation, is irreconcilable with a so-called post-modern understanding of authorship that understands creativity to lie in the manipulation of pre-existing cultural symbols, forms, narratives, etc. In this article, I propose to reconsider the fate of two Mamlūk-era Arabic literary commentaries by framing them as performances of that distinctive pre-modern Arabo-Islamic philological habitus discussed above. In doing so, I have drawn on Elizabeth Freeman's concept of "temporal drag," which she develops in her 2010 book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Freeman's analysis of temporal drag, a performance that bends human history as drag bends human gender, is an expansion of Judith Butler's analysis of gender as "[...] an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."<sup>12</sup> The performance—that is to say the textual embodiment—of the pre-modern Arabo-Islamic philological habitus is undoubtedly a stylized repetition of authorial acts, one that can be executed repeatedly in a single work as well over the entire course of a scholar's career, but it is also an act of temporal distortion. The philological *Weltanschauung* that these authors inhabited is predicated on historical fluidity, on the constant intervention of the past in the present. A polyphonic and interpenetrating chorus of (mostly) male voices that are curated by a single (usually) male

11 See Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, s. r. "*b-k-r*" and al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās al-balāghah*, s. r. "*b-k-r*".

12 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519.

author in an act of compilatory virtuosity is the typical style of that philological habitus and is recognizable across genres, including in the genre of literary commentaries examined here.

It is perhaps reductive to collapse a variety of synthetically composed Arabic expository works under the umbrella of encyclopaedism, but it soon becomes clear that the body of writing that I have chosen to describe as classical Arabic commentary culture had much to do—in context, morale, and motivation—with the “encyclopaedic ethos” that Elias Muhanna has devoted himself to studying.<sup>13</sup>

[...] most scholars recognize an encyclopaedic ethos common to much bookmaking and scholarly activity at this time, which affected even long-standing, venerable genres such as the *adab* anthology, the geographical compendium, and the scribal manual.<sup>14</sup>

This ethos encompasses a great deal more than philology (again here understood to be an attention to language and language practice based on the putatively ideal and uncorrupted form of Arabic known from the earliest recorded Arabic texts), but there is no question that lexicality, which depends profoundly in the Arabic tradition on poetic proof texts, is a key dimension of encyclopaedic and expository texts as well as of literary commentaries.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most interesting literary commentaries in the Arabic tradition, Khalil b. Aybak al-Şafadī's *al-Ghayth al-musajjam fi sharḥ «Lāmiyyat al-ʿĀjam»* (“Copious showers of commentary on ‘the Poem rhyming in *-l-* of the Non Arabs’”) is ostensibly a commentary (hypertext) on a well known poem (hypotext) by Abū Ismāʿīl al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī al-Ṭughrāʾī (d. 514/1120), but one

13 See Elias Muhanna, “Why was the fourteenth century a century of Arabic encyclopaedism,” in *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Jason König et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Muhanna, *The World in a Book: al-Nuwayrī and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

14 *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, s.v. “Encyclopaedias, Arabic” [Elias I. Muhanna].

15 Our inability to comprehend the whole field of Arabo-Islamic philological practices in their widest possible extent is certainly the most urgent critical limitation we face today. There is little basis, beyond our pedantic affection for generic terminology, to slice these philological domains into discrete and impermeable cells of intellectual activity. We can and many have read perorations (like the introduction to al-Zamakhsharī's lexicon *Asās al-balāghah*) as evidence of the Qurʾan-directedness, or Qurʾan-inflectedness, of all scholarly Arabo-Islamic disciplines, but it seems to me that it is rather *balāghah* and the study of *balāghah*—which we may call philology—that has set the tone, delineated the boundaries, and structured the structures of Arabo-Islamic literary production.



which provided the author with the opportunity to, in Everett Rowson's words, "[display] his erudition, lucidity, literary sensitivity, and wit in an ideal format."<sup>16</sup> And erudition he had in spades:

[...] all the technicalities [of the poetic commentary] are strictly observed: for each line, the meaning of every word is explained, then the syntax of the line is expounded, and finally the meaning of the line as a whole is discussed. But these "discussions" swell the work to over nine hundred pages in the most recent printed edition, mainly through a concatenation of digressions that range from grammar to history to astronomy to Islamic law to literary tropes and themes of all sorts.<sup>17</sup>

Al-Ṣafadī's vision, as previewed in the introduction to the work, is infectious. His tone is boastful and boisterous; his ambition expansive and bold. Nothing could be further from Gibb's suggestion of a "loss of range and vitality". Quite the contrary. In his enthusiasm, al-Ṣafadī comes across in the introduction to his commentary as breathless and triumphant:<sup>18</sup>

وقد أحيت أن أضع عليها شرحاً يزيد جيدها فرائد وقصيدتها فوائد مما سمعت فوعيت وجمعت فأوعيت ولا أغادر فيها لغةً ولا إعراباً ولا إيضاح معنى ولا إغراباً [...] ليكون هذا الشرح أنموذج الأدب وعنواناً يدل على الفضيلة التي امتاز بها لسان العرب فقد أودعت فيه فوائد جمّة وقواعد مهمّة وشواهد هي للجاحمات المعاني أزمّة ودلائل تبرهن كلّ علم فلا يكن أمركم عليكم غمّة [...] فقد روي عن ابن عباس رضي الله عنهما أنه قال «منهومان لا يشبعان طالب دنيا وطالب علم» وقال عبد الله بن قتيبة «من أراد أن يكون عالماً فليطلب فتاً واحداً ومن أراد أن يكون أدبياً فليتسع في العلوم» فلهذا لا تجدني في هذا الشرح واقفاً مع ضيق المقام ولا فاراً من مشقّ القواضب ولا رشق السهام [...] فهما استطرده الكلام إليه وقبته حقه [...]

16 Rowson, "al-Ṣafadī", 354. The English translation of the work's title is taken from the same source.

17 Rowson, "al-Ṣafadī", 354–55.

18 al-Ṣafadī, *al-Ghayth al-musajjam fī sharḥ «Lāmīyyat al-ʿAjam»*, 2 vols, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Hawwārī (Sidon, Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Aṣriyyah, 2009), 1: 16–17.



I sought to add a commentary to the work [drawing on] the things that I have heard in order to add precious pearls to [the poem's] excellent ones and to supplement the poem with pearls of wisdom. I learned these by heart, and collected them, and stored them up. [In my commentary], I haven't ignored a single word, or point of grammar, or obscure meaning, or strange word [...] in the hopes that the commentary will be an exemplar of *adab* and that it will be a testament to the superiority of the language of the Arabs. I deposited in [the commentary] a great many pearls of wisdom as well as important maxims and poetic citations, which are like halters for untamable ideas, and explanations for all information so that it never causes you grief [...] It is narrated that Ibn 'Abbās (may God be pleased with him and his father) said: "Two types of insatiable people will never be satisfied: a man who seeks [the pleasures of] this world and a man who seeks knowledge." 'Abd Allāh b. Qutaybah said: "Whoever wishes to possess knowledge should pursue one discipline; whoever wishes to possess *adab* should make room for all the disciplines." That is why you will not see me holding back in this commentary nor will you see me running from the cutting swords or falling arrows [...] No matter how much digression the subject requires, you will see that I gave it its full due.

By his own admission, al-Şafadī aspires in his commentary toward encyclopaedism, and he speaks of following tangents, by digression, until he has completed them, using the vocabulary of reciprocity and obligation. The digressive technique, al-Şafadī explains, has an established lineage (stemming from al-Jāhiz) and its function is to be amusingly didactic: by reading these digressions, the reader will [...] learn what a man of letters ought to know in order to participate in [the exchange of] information (*'alima mā yalzam al-adīb wa-mā yata'ayyan 'alayhi min mushāraḳat al-ma'ārif*).<sup>19</sup>

The function of these digressions or excursus (*istiṛādāt*) has become a topic of serious scholarly interest alongside the trend toward a renewed appreciation of commentary culture more broadly.<sup>20</sup> Everett Rowson—whose 2003 article "An Alexandrian Age in Fourteenth-Century Damascus: twin commentaries on two celebrated Arabic epistles", which despite not being a study of al-Şafadī's

19 Al-Şafadī, *al-Ghayth*, ed. al-Hawwārī, 1: 18.

20 The topic of digressions is in fact the subject of Kelly Tuttle's "Expansion and Digression: a study in Mamlūk literary commentary" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2013), which I will not be discussing here so as not to preempt the publication of her findings.

*al-Ghayth al-musajjam*, deserves the most credit for reigniting interest in the text—is full of praise for al-Ṣafadī’s commentary and others by him and his peers. For Rowson, commentaries succeeded in “[...] addressing several audiences, and accomplishing several intentions, at once.”<sup>21</sup> They

[...] offered students a panorama of the world of literary learning, and a potted lesson in the basics of their heritage. At the same time, peers had this lesson reinforced, or perhaps more plausibly, were expected to congratulate themselves on recognizing, and even anticipating, the information and allusions as they were presented, while being impressed by the elegance with which this was done.<sup>22</sup>

Based in part on the strength of Rowson’s argument, *al-Ghayth al-musajjam* has become something of a touchstone in the long campaign to rehabilitate Mamlūk-era Arabic literature in which Rowson—along with ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, Thomas Bauer, Margaret Larkin, Muhsin al-Musawi, and many others—has played such an important role. No longer condemned with the slur of decadent style typical of the period formerly known as the Age of Decline (*‘aṣr al-inḥitāt*), this commentary has come to stand for everything that is good and unique about Arabic literary culture in all periods. It is all-encompassing, dynamic, diverting, and edifying. It shares its discursive style with canonical predecessors—and more importantly its immediate antecedent, Ibn Nubātah’s (d. 768/1366) commentary on Ibn Zaydūn’s famous epistle—and in it, centuries of literary production are laced together by an able practitioner who balances a tone that is both serious and playful.<sup>23</sup> According to Elias Muhanna, this genre of “[t]he commentary-anthology offers us a view of the essential operation of summary, amplification, and concatenation that were productive of much encyclopedic diversity and disciplinary interpenetration in [the] period’s literature.”<sup>24</sup>

Eclecticism, compositional technique, and encyclopaedic scope are not the only things that make this and other Mamlūk-era commentaries interesting, however. Scholars have also become interested in the implicit canon-making and explicit intertextuality of these literary commentaries.<sup>25</sup> These are no longer inert works, but productive laboratories for reception history. Matthew

21 Everett K. Rowson, “An Alexandrian Age in Fourteenth-Century Damascus: twin commentaries on two celebrated Arabic epistles,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7.1 (2003): 109.

22 Rowson, “An Alexandrian Age,” 109–10.

23 On Ibn Nubātah’s groundbreaking commentary, see Rowson, “An Alexandrian Age”.

24 Muhanna, *The World in a Book*, 52.

25 Rowson, “An Alexandrian Age,” 109–10.

Keegan, who has studied the textual commentaries on al-Ḥarīrī's (d. 516/1122) *Maqāmāt* collection, explains that

[a]l-Panjdiḥī's rebuttals to Ibn al-Khashshāb's criticisms [...] are [...] much more than a series of erudite notes that elucidate [al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* collection], and their rhetorical strategies deserve serious examination not as an elucidation of what al-Ḥarīrī "actually meant" but as creative (even authorial) acts that attempt to situate the [*Maqāmāt* collection] in new ways.<sup>26</sup>

It is no longer acceptable to claim that the burgeoning of commentaries reflects a lack of creativity, originality, or self-confidence. These commentaries may be derivative of other works, but the connotation of the word "derivative" is currently undergoing a shift from negative to positive, though I admit that the critical community may still be struggling to internalize this shift. Contemporary critical perspectives still scan the horizon for the aura of original works. This is perhaps why the verb "to curate" as a synonym of to anthologize, to collect, to edit, to assemble, etc. has taken off recently in English. It, more than any of its synonyms, glorifies the person—once an afterthought and now presumably an authority, or rather a professional—who has arranged the elements into a whole. Crucially, the word also stresses the originality, independence, and autonomy of each collected element. Even in the midst of contemporary culture's laudable embrace of collage techniques, mashups, anthologies, and multi-authored platforms, the agents of that culture have introduced a verb that reinscribes the divisions between works that are now being presented contiguously. They have done so partly to recognize the often unacknowledged work of editors and assemblers, but also because an aesthetic system underpinned by what I will polemically call the "virginity model of artistic creativity" will always struggle to accommodate works of art that do not want to be seen as totally *sui generis*, unique, and independent. Even the dissonant sound of these absolute adjectives being modified demonstrates the extent to which the aesthetic idiom has ignored the most common circumstances of creative practice.

26 Matthew L. Keegan, "Commentators, Collators, and Copyists: interpreting manuscript variation in the exordium of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*," in *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: essays in honor of Everett K. Rowson*, ed. Joseph E. Lowry and Shawkat Toorawa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 306.

## A Commentary and Its Curator

The complex of Mamluk knowledge, with its overlapping of rhetoric and poetics and its break from traditional forms, emanates from a diversified effort aimed at reorientation, revision, rejuvenation, or occasionally, continuity, all within the framework of a sociopolitical order that was not necessarily authoritarian. It enlists the participation of undistinguished compilers and commentators from among so-called commoners, who are given voice and space to defend their own way of life.<sup>27</sup>

I propose here to consider a work by one of those whom Muhsin al-Musawi has called “undistinguished compilers and commentators” (though he was not a commoner and was not “undistinguished” in his lifetime) in the hope of moving the scholarly discussion beyond the redemptive re-framing of previously maligned works of commentary and synthesis as original, intertextual, and authorial products of significant value. This very worthy scholarly enterprise has reshaped understandings of Arabic literary history—even rejuvenated them—so this seems an appropriate juncture at which to pause and evaluate the extent to which this re-framing re-affirms the same value system and critical perspective that once led to the marginalization and indeed denigration of these same works.

Badr al-Dīn al-Damāmīnī (b. Alexandria in 764/1361–2, d. in the Deccan in 827/1424) wrote a long—and, it must be said, occasionally petty—refutation (*radd*) of al-Ṣafadī’s anthology under the title *Nuzūl «al-Ghayth»* (When the “Showers” Fall).<sup>28</sup> He is remembered today for his grammatical commentaries and, as a footnote, for his book-length indictment of al-Ṣafadī’s masterpiece, but one could hardly say that he is remembered.<sup>29</sup> Grammatical commentaries

27 Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic knowledge construction* (Notre Dame [IN]: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 156.

28 al-Damāmīnī is also called Ibn al-Damāmīnī. See Badr al-Dīn al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl al-ghayth*, ed. Muhannad Aḥmad Ḥasan (Baghdad: Dīwān al-Waqf al-Sunnī, 2010), 18–9. Ḥasan based his edition on four manuscripts of the text from Iraq, Egypt, and Spain. The work has also been edited by al-Ḥusaynī Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Qahwājī (no pub. info, 1999 [unseen]). A few manuscripts of the text can be viewed online. Those I had access to include (1) Ambrosiana [Milan] MS C177, 45 ff., n. d.; (2) *al-Aqsā* Mosque Library [Jerusalem] MS EAP521/1/100, 46 ff., copied in 1016/1607 [digitized as part of the British Library’s Endangered Archives Program]; and (3) King Saud University (Riyadh) MS 3191 *zā*, 14 ff., copied in 1277/1860. Several manuscripts of the text survive: see Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (Leiden: Brill, 1898–1942) 2: 23, S 2: 17.

29 Christopher Bahl (SOAS), who kindly read and commented on a draft of this article, has studied al-Damāmīnī’s grammatical commentaries as part of his doctoral thesis on the circulation of Arabic knowledge in the Indian Ocean region.

are not yet the subject of much scholarly interest—in part because they fall between disciplinary cracks—and the recent redemption of al-Şafadī's reputation seems not to have trickled down to his critics. This makes perfect sense if one believes that genius is beyond reproach, but there is more at stake here than the reception history of al-Şafadī's commentary, though of course that is a valuable line of inquiry.<sup>30</sup> By elevating al-Şafadī's empyrean commentary to the heights of masterpiece—while continuing to ignore the counter-commentaries written by his critics, not to mention other more decidedly pedestrian commentaries on legal or grammatical texts—scholarship cannot help but distort the fabric of Arabic literary history. Contemporary tastes bend literary time and this bending of literary time-scales for the sake of scholarly agendas can itself be seen as another repetition of the temporal drag performed by pre-modern Arabo-Islamic philologists.

Al-Damāmīnī first heard about al-Şafadī's commentary from a fellow Alexandrian—quite a pompous sounding Alexandrian if al-Damāmīnī's description can be trusted—but it was not until he travelled to Cairo at the end of 794/1392 that he was able to see the work for himself.<sup>31</sup> This encounter must have been passionate because it spurred al-Damāmīnī to write a book-length refutation (*radd*) of al-Şafadī's commentary, a project he completed within just a few months.<sup>32</sup> The book, judging by the number of manuscripts that survive, was a mild success and garnered several commendations (*taqārīz*), a few of which are published alongside the modern edition of *Nuzūl «al-Ghayth»*.<sup>33</sup> One commendation (*taqrīz*) that does not appear there, but was preserved in a work by Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), was written by the pre-eminent scholar and jurist Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449). In it, he wrote that:<sup>34</sup>

فنزول الغيث قد أنجل النيل \* والفاقد صيره للعجز عن مجارته ينادي كيف  
السييل \* ولا ريب عند صاحب الذوق أن نقص خليل زاد \* وأن هذا السيّد  
هدّب به من كلام الصلاح فساد

30 Kelly Tuttle devotes Chapter 5 of her doctoral thesis to al-Şafadī's successors, including al-Damāmīnī and Baḥraq al-Ḥaḍramī.

31 Al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 82.

32 One of the manuscripts preserves a colophon in which the author writes that he finished writing the text on 19 Rabī' al-Awwal 795/1393 (al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 289).

33 Al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 75–7. On the *taqārīz* on this work specifically, see Franz Rosenthal, “Blurbs’ (*taqrīz*) from fourteenth-century Egypt,” *Oriens* 27/28 (1981): 177–96.

34 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhīr wa-l-durar fī tarjamat Ibn Ḥajar*, 3 vols, ed. Ibrāhīm Bājis ‘Abd al-Majīd (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1999), 2: 722.

«This heavy downpour» [lit. “When the ‘Showers’ Fall”] has put even the Nile to shame \* And the one who loses his patience because he isn’t able to keep up with it can do nothing but shout, “What am I meant to do?” \* The discerning reader will be in no doubt that Khalīl’s deficiencies have multiplied \* And that this scholar has rectified with this [book] Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s corruptions.

The reference to, and preternatural worry about, linguistic purity (*tahdhīb*) is a clue to the philological trigger that provoked al-Damāmīnī’s intervention and the reason that it was so warmly received by its most eminent readers. This contemporary evidence suggests that one achievement of al-Ṣafadī’s masterpiece, which has not yet received sufficient attention, is the extent to which al-Ṣafadī practiced linguistic iconoclasm. It is this iconoclasm, or philological heterodoxy, that is the chief focus of al-Damāmīnī’s critique, though he does stray to other marginal topics, including the chauvinistic.<sup>35</sup> In her contribution to this issue, Colinda Lindermann shows that this concern with linguistic purity, or hyper-orthodox diction, re-occurred throughout the history of Arabo-Islamic scholarship and that it can be connected to anxieties stemming from crises of group identity and social capital.<sup>36</sup> Al-Damāmīnī also criticizes al-Ṣafadī for his secretarial (or scribal) analysis of Arabic morphology, which may be evidence of social-sector tensions between scholars and administrators among the Mamlūk educated classes.<sup>37</sup> Al-Damāmīnī cites a number of lexicographers and grammarians as authorities in his point-by-point criticisms of al-Ṣafadī, but it is Abū Naṣr Ismā‘īl b. Ḥammād al-Jawharī (d. 393?/1003?), the author of the dictionary *Tāj al-lughah wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-‘arabiyyah*, whose name comes up most often.<sup>38</sup> This is certainly no coincidence as al-Ṣafadī had himself written three studies based on al-Jawharī’s lexicon.<sup>39</sup> One is inclined to think, in certain cases when referring to al-Jawharī, that al-Damāmīnī is being

35 He impugns the notion that the epithet given to al-Ṭuḡhrā’ī’s poem—the hypotext of al-Ṣafadī’s commentary—*Lāmiyyat al-‘Ajam*, is a mark of esteem based on the poem’s similarity (in wisdom and eloquence) to al-Shanfarā’s poem known as *Lāmiyyat al-‘Arab*. This point rests on the idea that *‘Ajam* (i.e. non-Arabs, among whom al-Ṣafadī as one of the *awlād al-nās* may fairly be counted) are not characterized by eloquence, unlike Arabs, so the association does the poem no credit and thus the analogy is inapposite (al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 84–5).

36 Colinda Lindermann, “A Shared Set of Solecisms: the premodern reception of al-Ḥarīrī’s *Durrat al-ghawwās*,” *Philological Encounters* 4.1–2 (2019), in this issue.

37 See, *inter alia*, al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 190–91.

38 See Michael G. Carter, “al-Jawharī” in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London: Routledge, 1998), 414.

39 See Rowson, “al-Ṣafadī”, 354.

deliberately provocative. For example, when al-Şafadī attempts to tease out the distinction between different degrees of love, al-Damāmīnī refuses to acknowledge the potential ambit of any such analysis, preferring to defer to established sources of linguistic authority:<sup>40</sup>

قال [الصفدي] وإذا أفرط الحبُّ سُيِّ عَشَقًا فالعشق محبة مفرطة وليس بإفراط  
المحبة كما قاله بعضهم فيكون أخص من المحبة لأن كل عشق محبة وليس  
كل محبة عشقًا

أقول المرجع في تفسير هذه الألفاظ إنما هو إلى أقوال أهل اللغة وقد  
صرح الجوهري في الصحاح بأن العشق فرط المحبة ولم نر من أنكر ذلك  
ولا تعقبه فما الموجب لهذا الإنكار مع أن الأمر فيما قاله سهل والله الموفق  
للصواب

al-Şafadī wrote that “When love (*ḥubb*) becomes excessive it is called passion (*‘ishq*), but passion (*‘ishq*) is immoderate affection (*maḥabbah*) not an excess of affection (*maḥabbah*), as some have said. Rather it is more particular than affection (*maḥabbah*) because while all passion (*‘ishq*) is a form of affection, not all affection (*maḥabbah*) is a form of passion (*‘ishq*).”

My view is that the philologists are the only authority on issues such as this and al-Jawharī made it perfectly clear in [his dictionary *Tāj al-lughah wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-‘arabiyyah*] that passion is immoderate affection. No one has disputed this or found fault with it so what’s the point of rejecting a view that is not contentious? God knows best.

Al-Damāmīnī’s refutation does not aspire to be dynamic or fluid in accordance with the tone of al-Şafadī’s argument, but it does at least come disguised in the cloak of historical authority. Here one scholar is able to refute the claim of another not by engaging with that scholar’s ideas but by simply adopting the tone and outlook of a prestigious antecedent. This antecedent is not inert or dead despite its age. It is culturally active, otherwise its citation as evidence would fail to persuade readers. Just as the logic of contemporary Salafi dress and self-presentation depends on a living or activated, if conceptual, aesthetics of the first Islamic centuries (a form of temporal drag *par excellence*), al-Damāmīnī’s

40 al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 189–90.



rejection of al-Ṣafadī's argument is predicated on the reactive potential of a cultural touchstone such as al-Jawharī's lexicon despite its age.

It is in places like the above that al-Damāmīnī disappoints the contemporary reader. Where al-Ṣafadī is willing to riff, opine, and muse, al-Damāmīnī is unabashedly hidebound and deferential. Al-Ṣafadī's philological practice is liberating and associative, whereas al-Damāmīnī's is scholastic and inhibited. This is more than a difference of style or method. It is here, in their attitude and approach more than in the content of their commentaries, that the two commentators diverge on the timeline of literary taste. Al-Ṣafadī is the post-modern's ideal philologist. His exuberance is the perfect advertisement for the Mamlūk literary Zeitgeist. Al-Damāmīnī's philology is dour and static; it is correct, but flat. Al-Damāmīnī corrects al-Ṣafadī's grammatical errors in order to demonstrate his own mastery of Arabic grammar and because grammar is more than just grammar. It is a pillar of hermeneutic authority. Al-Damāmīnī criticizes al-Ṣafadī for supposed misinterpretations of al-Ṭughrāī's poem, yet these misinterpretations are often the most entertaining and engaging parts of al-Ṣafadī's commentary.

Matters of orthodox diction no longer stir the passions of most scholars like they did those of pre-modern Arabic philologists, so today's readers of the text are prepared to forgive al-Ṣafadī his peccadilloes. Readers today are more inclined to acknowledge that these minor failings are a small price to pay for the many instances of invention, narration, and citation in the text (otherwise known as digressions). That was not a bargain that al-Damāmīnī was willing to accept, however. His dull, perhaps even humorless, engagement with al-Ṣafadī's project is palpable in the following dialogue between the two works on a particular rhetorical figure known as *istikhdām* and its application to the homonym *ʿayn* (which was also the subject of the example cited at the outset of this article).<sup>41</sup>

i. al-Ṣafadī, *al-Ghayth*

وأبلغ ما سمعت في التورية والاستخدام ما أنشدني من لفظه [ابن نباتة] قال:  
أنشدني من لفظه لنفسه القاضي زين الدين عمر بن المظفر المعروف بابن  
الورددي وقد أنشده بعض شعراء العصر بيتاً له يجمع استخدامين فاستخدم  
هو أربعة فقال:

41 Al-Ṣafadī, *al-Ghayth*, ed. al-Hawwārī, 2: 28–29 and (with variation) in al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*, ed. Ḥasan, 205–209.

[من الوافر]

بِقَلْبِي وَهُوَ مَرَعَاها	وَرُبَّ غَزَالَةٍ طَلَعَتْ
نُضَارٍ ثُمَّ صَدَّنَاها	نَصَبْتُ لَهَا شِبَاكًا مِنْ
إِلَى عَيْنٍ قَصَدْنَاها	فَقَالَتْ لِي وَقَدْ صَرَّنَا
بِطَلْعَتِها وَمَجْرَاها	بَذَلْتُ أَلْعَيْنَ فَاحْكَلْها

قلت ومعنى الاستخدامات الأربعة بذلت الذهب فاحكك عينك بطلعة عين الشمس ومجرى العين الجارية من الماء لأنه وطأ لهذه المعاني في الأبيات المتقدمة وأتى بالبيت الرابع فتنزل جملة على ما تفصل وهذا يدل على الفكر الصحيح والتخييل التام وما عرفت لغيره هذه العدة في هذا الوزن القصير

The most successful use of double entendre and *istikhdām* that I've heard was recited to me by Ibn Nubātah, who said: The judge Zayn ad-Dīn 'Umar b. al-Muẓaffar, who is known to all as Ibn al-Wardī, told me this himself. [The story goes that] a poet in his day recited a verse to him that included two instances of *istikhdām* so he [replied with] a poem that includes four instances:

How many a female gazelle [also: sun] has risen  
in my heart, which is its pasture.

I erected a trap for her of  
pure gold and that's how I caught her.

She said to me as we  
headed toward a spring (*'ayn*)

You have given money (*'ayn*) generously so anoint your eyes  
with the disc of the sun and the course of the spring.

The meanings of these four instances of *istikhdām* are “you have spent money generously so anoint your eyes with the rising of the disc of the sun and the course of the spring-water”, and this is because the poet laid the groundwork for these meanings in the preceding verses so when he came to the fourth verse, everything that came before it was finally brought together, and this is evidence of clear thinking and a perfect imagination. I don't know of any other case of this many [instances] in such a short meter.

ii. al-Damāmīnī, *Nuzūl*

أقول الاستخدام عبارة عن أن يُراد بلفظٍ له معنيان أحدهما ثم يُراد بالضمير  
الراجع إلى ذلك اللفظ معناه الآخر أو يُراد بأحد ضميرَي ذلك اللفظ أحد  
المعنيَيْن ثم يُراد بالضمير الآخر المعنى الآخر [...]

وإذا كان [ذلك] كذلك علمت أن الاستخدام إنما يتصور بالنسبة إلى مجموع  
الأمرين اللذين هما اللفظ والضمير [...] أو الضميران [...]

وعلى هذا فليس في البيت الأخير من أبيات ابن الوردي إلا استخدام واحد  
وذلك أن العين لفظ مشترك بين معانٍ فأطلق الشاعر لفظه الظاهر وأراد به  
أحد المعاني ثم أراد بضمائه الرجعة إليه معانيه الأخرى وغاية الأمر أن هذه  
الصورة لم ينصوا عليها في الاستخدام لأنّ الذي ذكروه أن يكون اللفظ له  
معنيان فيرادان بالظاهر والضمير أو بالضميرين [...]

وعلى الجملة فلم يفسر أحد الاستخدام بما يقتضي أن يكون في بيت ابن  
الوردي استخدامات أربعة فقد بطل الوجه الذي استحسّن به الصفدي هذه  
الآيات وتبين فساده وقد وقع [لابن نباتة] رحمه الله استعمال كلمة من معان  
أربعة في بيت واحد حيث قال

أفدي إماماً حلّت صنائعه      بيتي وجيدي وشدّي وفي  
[من المنسرح]

فقوله «حلّت» يدلّ على معانٍ أربعة وذلك أنّه من الحلول بالنسبة إلى البيت  
ومن الحلّي بالنسبة إلى الجيد ومن الحلّ بالنسبة إلى الشدّة و من الحلاوة  
بالنسبة إلى الفم فهذا أحسن من قول ابن الوردي إذ هذه المعاني الأربعة يحتملها  
لفظ واحد مرشّح لكلّ معنى منها بلفظٍ يخصّه في بيت واحد مستقلّ بنفسه ليس  
له تعلق بما قبله ولا بما بعده [...]

*Istikhdām* occurs when the two meanings of a single word are intended:  
one meaning [comes first] and then a nominal substitute [i.e. pronoun],  
which refers back to the original word produces the second meaning,  
or one pronoun which refers to the original word signals one of the two  
meanings while another pronoun signals the other meaning.

You understand therefore that *istikhdām* is produced by the combination of these two elements: the original word and the pronoun that refers back to it, or two pronouns [that refer to the original word].

This being the case, in the final verse of Ibn al-Wardī's poem there is only one instance of *istikhdām* and that is because the word *ʿayn* leads to many homonyms [or: is a productive homograph]. The poet used the word to signal one of its meanings and then hoped to use nominal substitutes to signal the other meanings of the word. This is not a case of *istikhdām* because [the scholars] only mention a case of a word possessing two intended meanings, one signaled by the word itself and the other by a pronoun referring back to the word or two pronouns referring to the same word [...]

No one has ever defined *istikhdām* such that we could find four instances of it in the verse by Ibn al-Wardī so al-Şafadī's reason for praising the verse has been invalidated and his [?] failing has been made clear. [On the other hand,] there is a case of Ibn Nubātah—God rest his soul—using one word with four different meanings in a single verse:

I'd give my life for an Imam whose works have—

—my house, my neck, my troubles, and my house

The verb *ḥallat* suggests four meanings and these are: (1) *ḥulūl* (coming to) the house; (2) *ḥaly* (adorning) the neck [with jewelry]; (3) *ḥall* (fixing) one's troubles; and finally (4) *ḥalāwah* (the taste of sweetness) in one's mouth. This is better than the verse by Ibn al-Wardī because the four meanings are contained in a single word with each meaning suggested by a single [trigger] word in a single line of verse that stands alone and requires no precedent or antecedent [to achieve the desired effect].

Al-Damāmīnī is a far more literal-minded scholar than al-Şafadī, and as contemporary literary taste is more sympathetic to al-Şafadī's style of eclecticism, al-Damāmīnī appears to today's readers as old-fashioned somehow. His corrective aims seem trivial in comparison; his method obsolete. Al-Şafadī is a talented curator: a digressive, inventive, and creative author who transformed a literary commentary into an occasion for simultaneous entertainment and edification. Al-Damāmīnī with his limited focus on grammar and orthodox diction seems marginal in comparison. But, of course, al-Damāmīnī was not the only pre-modern scholar who found al-Şafadī's digressive style regrettable.

The Yemeni scholar Muḥammad b. ʿUmar Baḥraq al-Ḥaḍramī—whose career would, like al-Damāmīnī's, eventually take him to India where he died in 939/1533—explained in the introduction to his work *Kitāb Nashr al-ʿalam fi sharḥ «Lāmiyyat al-ʿAjām»* (Spreading the Banner: a commentary on «Lāmiyyat

*al-Ajam*»), a digest of *al-Ghayth al-musajjam*, why he felt it necessary to condense and even expurgate al-Ṣafadī's commentary:<sup>42</sup>

أما بعد فإن القصيدة الفريدة المشهورة بلامية العجم \* الجامعة للأمثال والحكم \* نظم الأديب الفاضل مؤيد الدين الحسين بن علي الطغرائي الكاتب رحمه الله تعالى قد اعتنى الفضلاء بحفظها \* وتطلعوا إلى فهم معناها ولفظها \* وقد علقت عليها شرحاً يحلّ غريب لغاتها ومشكل إعرابها \* ليسفر لمطلعها وجوه أترابها عن نقابها \* ويفتح له مغلق مبانيها \* ويديني قطوف مجانيها \* ويوضح مبهم معانيها \* ويشرح صدور معانيها \* إذا سرح طرفه في مغانيها \* جردت أكثره من شرحها للأديب الفاضل المتقن خليل بن أيك الصفدي رحمه الله تعالى واخترت محاسن أشعاره المفيدة \* واقتصرت منه على ما يتعلق بأمر القصيدة \* فإنه أوعى فيه وأوعب \* وأطيب وأسهب \* وأعجب وأغرب \* وأطلق أعتة الأقلام \* وجرّ أذيال فصول الكلام \* وأسهل وأوعر \* وأنجد وأغور \* واستطرد من فنّ إلى فنّ \* واسترسل في شجون الحدّ والمجون \* حتى صار ذلك التطويل \* سبباً للعجز عن التحصيل \* هذا مع ما خرج فيه عن الحدّ \* وطني الماء به في المدّ \* من مستهجنات هزله \* التي لا تليق بعلمه وفضله \* بما لا يحلّ ذكره وإيداعه \* بل يحلّ [ق ١٢] بالعدالة روايته وسماعه \* فليت ذلك لم يكن في الكتاب مسطوراً \* ولكن كان أمر الله قدرًا مقدوراً \* عامله الله تعالى وإيانا بالمساحة [...]

The excellent poem, widely known as *Lāmiyyat al-Ajam* \* which includes many proverbs and [pearls of] wisdom \* by the excellent *adīb* Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī al-Ṭughrā'ī, may God have mercy on him, has been memorized by many a learned man \* and many have studied its message and expression \* I composed a commentary to gloss its rare words and parse its vexed grammar \* so that the poem may drop its veil and show its face to those who approach it \* and expose to them its sealed dimensions \* and bring nearer to them its "pickable fruit" \* and clarify for them its obscure metaphors \* and cheer up those who contend with it \* when they survey its abodes \* I took most of [this commentary] from a commentary

42 British Library [London] MS Or. 3165, 33 ff., copied 1092/1681 by 'Uthmān b. Aḥmad al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī, ff. 1b-2a. I would like to thank Benedikt Reier (of the Freie Universität Berlin) for bringing this manuscript to my attention.

by the excellent and erudite Khalīl b. Aybak al-Şafadī, may God have mercy on him, and I also included poems from [the commentary] that are instructive \* but I only cited the material that is related to the poem [by al-Tuġhrāī] \* because [in his commentary] al-Şafadī hoarded and accumulated \* and expatiated and expounded \* and cited the marvelous and the strange \* and unleashed his reed pen \* and gathered up the train of discourse \* he coasted and he stumbled \* and he climbed and he sank \* digressing from one subject to another \* elaborating on topics both weighty and bawdy \* to such an extent that his prolixity \* precludes comprehension \* and this is in addition to his indiscretion \* and his getting carried away \* with his disgraceful frivolity \* which is beneath a man of his learning and attainment \* and so should not be repeated or spread \* indeed it would be improper were it even to be spoken or heard \* one wishes that that material had not been included in his book \* but such was God's will \* may God forgive him as well as us [...]

If one wanted to write a reception history of al-Şafadī's commentary, al-Damāmīnī and Baġraq al-Ĥadramī's counter-commentaries would make for very valuable sources, but for the purposes of this article I have found it more instructive to reflect on the critique embedded in these texts in order to reconsider the relationship between varieties of multi-authored or synthetic works (commentary, counter-commentary, abridgement, compendium, anthology, etc.)—those artifacts of a philological society—and the distorting effects of scholarship in which particular moments of literary history become amplified—both symbolically and in terms of the attention they receive—in campaigns to locate and codify a given period's *Zeitgeist*.<sup>43</sup>

### What Can We Read?

This methodological question may seem tangential to concrete and urgent questions of classical Arabic literary history. It may even seem antithetical to the work of undoing entrenched stereotypes about the quality of Arabic literary production after AD 1000. The motivation behind this argument is not to dampen the enthusiasm for, or even to correct the course of, the recent revisionism. It is to suggest an additional conceptual sensitivity that may strengthen and deepen the revisionist project. Nothing is more crucial for the health

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43 Readers interested in such a reception history are once again directed to Tuttle, "Expansion and Digression".

of a revisionist enterprise than a skeptical and probing analysis of its own assumptions and models. One way of testing a system's viability is to substitute a key variable for another, less likely one. If al-Ṣafadī's commentary is evidence that our previous understanding of literary culture in the Mamlūk period was misguided, then what happens when we substitute al-Damāmīnī's commentary in its place? The cynical view is that al-Damāmīnī and other obscure workmen philologists are simply the null hypothesis and that their preponderance proves that al-Ṣafadī was an exceptional intellect. This analysis, however, smells of the outdated creed of original genius.

Al-Ṣafadī took the format of a literary commentary—reinvented by his peer and rival Ibn Nubātah—as an opportunity to roam widely across the intellectual horizons of an established and rich written culture. Al-Damāmīnī, on the other hand, used that same technology to criticize diligently and narrowly the work of a near contemporary with reference to older written sources of authority. If al-Ṣafadī's erudition represents the attainments of an entire class of imperial administrators, religious scholars, and litterateurs in the period, then al-Damāmīnī's scholasticism is itself more proof of the same. Al-Ṣafadī was not unique in his erudition, nor in his eclecticism.<sup>44</sup> It is perhaps the readability of al-Ṣafadī's text that distinguishes it from other commentaries in the tradition—this being a coincidence of his style and post-modern taste. Readability may be a contingent variable, but it at least allows those of us committed to a revisionist literary history to follow Michael Cooperson's maxim and to study a text “as the [product] of contingency rather than as [a point] placed along a trajectory of glory and decline.”<sup>45</sup> Cooperson cautions that “[t]he idea of a golden age, or indeed of any age at all, results from the encounter between the archive and our expectations”, an insight that seems to apply equally forcefully to the question of which texts may be considered emblematic of a *Zeitgeist* or culture.<sup>46</sup>

I am aware that, in my appeal to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, I have adapted ideas about what Elizabeth Freeman has called “*chrononormativity*, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” to questions about the working lives, mental models, and genre practices of a geographically dispersed and long-lasting scholarly society, who, I have

44 Indeed eclecticism was perhaps the classical Arabic literary style par excellence: “The *Adab* style was of necessity eclectic, variegated, full of asides”. (Tarif Khalidi quoted in Philip Kennedy, ed., *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), xiii).

45 Michael Cooperson, “The Abbasid ‘Golden Age’: an excavation,” *al-ʿUṣūr al-wuṣṭā* 25 (2017): 58.

46 Cooperson, “The Abbasid ‘Golden Age,’” 58.



argued, were trained in and embodied a unique, and uniquely Arabo-Islamic, philological habitus.<sup>47</sup> This adaptation may strike some readers as awkward.

It is true that the nature of the historical evidence available at this moment is such that we know a great deal more about what these people thought than about what they did. They appear in the historical record more richly as abstract and ethereal sources of knowledge than they do as human organisms. That being said, Elizabeth Freeman's beautiful analysis of "temporal drag", which she develops out of her analysis of chrononormativity, seems to me an apt frame for understanding the aesthetics of classical Arabic commentaries (and by extension the entire Arabo-Islamic philological habitus). Freeman's focus is on contemporary queer experimental art and narrative, but her analysis holds provocative and illuminating insights for those of us interested in pre-modern Arabo-Islamic philological practices:

[...] to reduce all embodied performances to the status of copies without originals may be to ignore the interesting threat that the genuine *past-ness* of the past—its opacity and illegibility, its stonewalling in the face of our most cherished theoretical paradigms—sometimes makes to the political present.<sup>48</sup>

In our enthusiasm for revisionist re-evaluations of commentaries or other multi-authored synthetic texts, we risk "[ignoring] the interesting threat that the genuine *past-ness* of the past—its opacity and illegibility" makes to the politics of the scholarly present. We cannot legitimately argue, it seems to me, that we have overcome the opacity and illegibility of these texts, but what worries me more is that our revisionism is still not confident enough to allow itself to see these texts as opaque and illegible. This is not a question of parsing difficult syntax, chasing down an allusion, or situating a work in its given socio-historical context. The aesthetic values upon which these texts were conceived, formed, received, and re-adapted remain opaque and illegible despite a profound shift in the politics of scholarship recently. The revisionist project must find room for pre-modern critiques of even the most cherished works because this critique reflects the broader outlines of a philological worldview, which organized all knowledge and is profoundly alien today. Pre-modern counter-commentaries like al-Damāminī's force revisionists to confront our own readerly biases—biases of contemporary taste and personal affinity—because

47 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

48 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 63.

they represent an alternative or parallel historical trajectory. Texts that were born into the same cultural milieu and share many of the same generic and organizational qualities are likely to receive radically different receptions in scholarship depending on scholarship's priorities at a given moment.

If I may be allowed a final provocation, I would suggest that revisionists make conceptual room for a reconsideration of the decidedly anti-modern attitude that underpins the aesthetic orientation of many of these multi-authored works of synthesis. By anti-modern, I do not mean that these works evince retrograde politics, or that they are anti-enlightenment (whatever that would mean), or even that they privilege the work of past exemplars over present practitioners. Rather, I mean that they do not invent or valorize or applaud a break with tradition as the hallmark of progress or artistic emancipation. This is perhaps where the idea of temporal drag is most instructive for us. Arabo-Islamic scholars may have ranked generations and they certainly subscribed to a political narrative about linguistic time, but they did not exalt the interruption of their literary history. The long legacy of unimaginative analyses of synthetic works in modern scholarship may have primed many to interpret what I am saying to mean that these works present a static view of time, but you could only draw that conclusion if you had never read one. No, what I am talking about is the drag of philological time; the way that an attention to language and language practice based on the putatively ideal and uncorrupted form of Arabic known from the earliest recorded Arabic texts embodied and continues to embody the constant "pull of the past on the present".<sup>49</sup>

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