



BRILL



brill.com/jal

Book Reviews

Geert Jan van Gelder

Sound and Sense in Classical Arabic Poetry. Ser. Arabische Studien, X. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012. Pp. 399.

Classical Arabic Literature [*al-Manẓūm wa-l-manthūr*]: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology, selected and translated by Geert Jan van Gelder. Ser. Library of Arabic Literature. New York, NY and London: NYU Press, 2013. Pp. 468.

The two works under review here epitomize the newly emeritus Laudian Professor of Arabic's singular erudition and genial style. The first is the most significant technical study of classical Arabic poetry published in English and the second—the inaugural volume in the Library of Arabic Literature series founded by Philip Kennedy—is a wide-ranging and original collection of classical Arabic literary texts in English translation. Both reflect the author's enviably deep and broad knowledge of the Arabic literary tradition and signal new trends in the field as a whole. *Sound and Sense in Classical Arabic Poetry* is a tome, for all intents and purposes, and the distillation of a lifetime's expertise. No other work in English, nor even works in other languages by important scholars such as 'Abd Allāh al-Ṭayyib, Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, or Ewald Wagner, whom the author recognizes as his predecessors, treats the technical (phonetic, metrical, and semantic) aspects of classical Arabic poetry more precisely or systematically. The anthology, on the other hand, is a relatively inexpensive and gorgeously produced paperback volume directed at a broad, non-specialist readership, for whom this may be their first experience of pre-modern Arabic literature. Both volumes are written from a post-theoretical, post-Saidian perspective that disavows the famous controversies of the past four decades in favor of a more pragmatic, though by no means positivistic, presentation of literary material and analysis. Both are also written in a very fluid and occasionally humorous style, which makes for pleasant reading even when the subject is as recondite as metrical distributions in early Arabic poetry collections or Ibn Rashīq's theories about the nature of poetry. One cannot omit to mention that both works are amply annotated even beyond what one might expect from a scholar of van Gelder's caliber. His popular anthology of translations includes some eleven-hundred notes, which will make all of us

who teach classical Arabic literature to undergraduates wonder whether our students are actually getting their money's worth! It will not come as a surprise to hear that van Gelder's accessible anthology is already required reading in many undergraduate curricula.

Although *Sound and Sense in Classical Arabic Poetry* is a work of original scholarship, which provides a great deal of new information and insightful analysis about, for example, phonotactics, metre, rhyming practices, etc., it is also perhaps the best single-volume introduction to the formal aspects of classical Arabic poetry we have, going beyond D. Frolov's excellent earlier work, *Classical Arabic Verse: History and Theory of 'Arūd* (2000). Indeed, van Gelder appends a twenty-page crib on metre and rhyme (Appendix A) that will feature on many scholars' desks for years to come, I expect. The book is divided into three unequal parts on "Metre" (23-170), "Rhyme" (171-268), and "Sound" (the latter comprising Chapters four and five, 269-339), with only a few digressions but significant amounts of data. Van Gelder provides a remarkably clear and rich outline of the norms, controversies, and aberrations in metre and rhyme over more than a thousand years of literary history, and he is one of the first scholars to pay serious attention to the way Arabic poetry sounds and how sound makes meaning; an issue that necessitates not only highly subjective analysis but also a fair bit of guessing as the record of historical phonology and performance practice is woefully meager. The last section of the book on the "Sound" of Arabic poetry will give scholar and student alike a great deal to think about and re-focus our attention on important stylistic issues away from the totem of structure. Van Gelder's musical ear and prudent nature help him to avoid many of the embarrassing pitfalls of previous attempts in this vein. Yet when he speaks of the "bombastic" style of poetry recitation in the contemporary Arab world (16)—a phenomenon I can attest to—he seems not to be aware of many other styles of poetry recitation, including the breakneck speed at which lines of poetry are most often quoted in speech. I have sat through too many recitations of poetry and the Qu'rān marred by stentorian vocal effects and echo befitting a haunted house to challenge van Gelder's criticism, but it is by no means the only way in which poetry is performed and online videos provide ample evidence for this. Likewise, van Gelder, in an otherwise exacting and considered discussion of transliteration (an issue he raises in both books), explains that he prefers transliteration—though he does stipulate that "[...] there is no intention to imply that transliteration, or the Latin alphabet, is intrinsically superior" (xiv)—because the Arabic script cannot represent certain features in pronunciation necessitated by sandhi. He gives the example of the phrase "*rajulun-i-nṭalaqa*" and argues that "it is impossible, in Arabic script, to indicate the auxiliary vowel /i/" (xiv), but when I was first being

trained in prosody, we were taught to represent such sandhi-accommodations in the Arabic script thus:

رَجُلٌ أَنْطَلَقَ

This may strike the orientalist as peculiar, if not perverse, but it is at least how I was taught prosody in the Arab world only a few years ago. What would van Gelder make of the following, our very first lesson, I wonder?

قَفَانِبُ | كِمَنْذُرَا | حَبِيبِنِ | وَمَنْزِي | بَسِطِلِ | لَوَائِنِدُ | دَخُولِ | فَحَوْمَلِي

I do not want to argue that either system is superior, and of course they both appear strange to the uninitiated (compare *Sound and Sense*, 62), but there is no reason to presume that the Arabic script is less malleable than the Latin. Neither this point on which the author and I differ nor the very occasional typographical error (e.g., for *amlaḥū* read *amlaḥu*, 72; for *abathan* read *'abathan*—a *lahn jalīyy*, 125; *iswid* is “black,” 269) detracts in any way from his major accomplishment. As for the author’s suggestion that spitting on sidewalks is a remarkable feature of Arab cities (207n), I invite him to walk down Oxford’s Cornmarket Street if he should ever feel nostalgic for Cairo! One can only hope now that the author will turn his attention to the technical aspects of vernacular and strophic pre-modern Arabic poetry, which fell outside the scope of this study and for which no similarly definitive survey exists.

It is refreshing that a scholar as erudite and as well versed in technical and philological practice as Professor van Gelder has retained his sense of humor and the desire to make classical Arabic literature accessible to students and readers with no knowledge of Arabic. He and Professor Gregor Schoeler are nearly finished with their translation of al-Maʿarrī’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān* into English (also for Philip Kennedy’s Library of Arabic Literature series) and he is also part of the team embarking on a translation of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿah’s biographical dictionary of physicians (Oxford-Warwick, *A Literary History of Medicine*). The anthology entitled *Classical Arabic Literature: a Library of Arabic literature anthology* (Arabic title *al-Manẓūm wa-l-manthūr*) marks a significant turning-point in the history of classical Arabic literature in translation and an auspicious debut for this long hoped-for series. Although this volume is unique in that it does not present the original Arabic text with facing translation, the author includes sample lines from the translated poems (in Arabic script and transliteration) as well as exhaustive notes, a glossary of Arabic technical terms, a chronological survey, and titles for further

reading. Some of the poems translated here belong already to what I would call the western canon of Arabic literature, but van Gelder admirably includes a much wider variety of Arabic poems and prose texts than have been available to English speakers before. Passages on “Rulership,” “Literary Theory,” and “Popular Science” will complicate any reductive caricature readers may have about Arabic literature based on the fame of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The inclusion here of important, though often forgotten, litterateurs such as Ibn Nubātah and Ibn Makānis is also laudable, and uncharacteristic of most works on classical Arabic literature for a general or scholarly audience. The translations themselves are always fluent and occasionally outstanding, especially in the section on poetry, for which the author has a special talent. What is perhaps most remarkable about this anthology—and indeed the series which it inaugurates—is that it has already become impossible to imagine teaching classical Arabic literature in translation without it. It is by no means an understatement to say that a major transformation is currently taking place in our field, although it is perhaps ironic that someone who rails against the avant-garde as often as van Gelder should be at the forefront. Both books will be of interest to specialists for different reasons: no serious student of classical Arabic poetry will want to be without *Sound and Sense* and teachers of classical Arabic literature will find the anthology indispensable. The anthology is also the best collection of classical Arabic literature available in English and is highly recommended for students, the literate public, and others interested in classical Arabic literature, including colleagues in Islamic history, Islamic art and architecture, Islamic studies, as well as students and scholars of comparative literature. University libraries should certainly acquire both titles.

Adam Talib

The American University in Cairo

adam.talib@orinst.ox.ac.uk