On Fiction and *Adab*
in Medieval Arabic Literature

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Preface

"Defining Fiction and *Adab* in Medieval Arabic Literature" was the title of a workshop held at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, New York University, on 21–22 April 2000, and co-hosted by Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies. Fiction is—apparently—the antonym of truth (whether in the purely abstract sense, or as manifested in the spoken or written word), while *adab* is medieval Arabic for "*Belles Lettres.*" No two definitions could be more elementary. Yet the two subjects, in different spheres (since the theory of fiction has been a subject of interest across literatures),[1] are notoriously challenging and hard to pin down. We cannot in fact fix them to the viewing plate: they are, as has been said about *adab*—accurately for some and infelicitously for others— "moving targets" of inquiry. What is apparent is that definitions cannot be fixed—on one hand because of the complex relationship between history and narrative and, on the other, because of the vastness of the corpus of *adab* and the array of subjects it treats. A definition (singularly and abstractly) inheres and slides within the shifting boundaries of conversation and debate; at best— perhaps exclusively—in discourse (in its original English sense): defin*ing adab* becomes, more than a simple tribute to a medieval canon of literature, a contemporary instantiation of *adab* itself. It becomes an instantiation of the very nature of the half-veiled fiction—the cerebral pirouetting around the hard facts— that is such a thorn in the side of scholars of Islamic (or indeed any) history.

At the above workshop we may not always have kept our sea legs, but we were always talk*ing*—defining. A variety of views were expressed, some horns locked in debate, and stances were adopted according, sometimes, to patterns of

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1 Most readers interested in the subject of narrative, fiction, and historiography will be familiar with the following (not exhaustive) bibliography: in the medieval Arabo-Islamic sphere: Jacob Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory: An Inquiry into the Art of 'Abbāsid Apologetics* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1986); Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998); Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); more generally: Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Gerard Genette, *Fiction and Diction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Patrick O'Neill, *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); see also much of the work of Wolfgang Iser and Hayden White.

discourse (in its contemporary American sense), both ancient and modern, just as narratives of history can be fashioned using either discreet or conspicuous rhetorical shapes of narrative generally, as well as according to polemical and propagandist agendas. Narrative shapes give us meaning when we are in a position either to manipulate or detect them (either as readers, medieval or modern, or authors). Indeed, the "creation of meaning" (a phrase often bandied about at this workshop) and the existence of a rhetorical endeavor, emerged rather as the real subject of our twelve-hour conversation. Meaning may not always be the same (even when versions of the same story are being told), but the quest for it is rather easier to pin down as *be*-ing an impulse and a process, and at least—or perhaps most importantly—as the very goal of enhanced writing.

Fiction and *adab* purely and simply have, let us say, a luminosity from which we tend to avert our gaze; that is, except for those who bravely pen dictionary and encyclopedia definitions, they become the subject of scrutiny indirectly. In a converse dynamic, these two words exert enough gravity for issues to orbit around them as satellites. Such are the essays in this volume. No one here pretends to *define* fiction or *adab* (hence the title of the volume: "on" replacing "defining"); rather the way *adab* and fiction are innately and variously understood exerts its own gravity on the orbital path—the shape and meaning—of each essay. Indeed, for some, fiction is just one element in a kind of binary star configuration. In such a composite entity it is one other body at least—rhetoric—which is seen as the stronger and more dominant, albeit more concealed, force of writing. There is, then, rhetoric in *adab*; it is the same kind of rhetoric that informs the fiction that we detect in historical and historicized writing. *Adab* is nothing if it not a form of historicized writing, and the relationship between the rhetorical and the historical lies quite possibly in *adab*'s mythographic-cum-mythopeic role, as suggested in Julia Bray's stunning opening essay. What emerges as holding all these elements together is the essential humanism of this literature (*adab*), a subject which is hard to grasp when we import our understanding of it from other cultural traditions. In Bray's essay we finally have a view of medieval Arabic literary humanism that emerges from the literature itself: from its fertile, complex, chronological, generic, and accretion-ist stratigraphy. So important is this essay in introducing us to a new and sophisticated way of understanding of *adab*, I have placed it first, which was editorially eccentric but still seemed appropriate. All other studies follow in alphabetical order (of author).

No one did "define" *adab* at the New York workshop; let us suggest that it had been defined for us in a very public and helpful way shortly before the meeting in a *Times Literary Supplement* article by Tarif Khalidi (reviewing Robert Irwin's anthology of medieval Arabic literature, *Night and Horses and the Desert*):

> "Central to the understanding of Arabic literature in the pre-modern period is the concept of *Adab*, a curriculum of learning and good manners, of courtliness, leading to the formation of the *Adib*, the gentleman-scholar, a cultural type of many guises, recognizable over a broad swath of time and from Greece to China. *Adab* presupposes

that there can be no true erudition without the polished character that goes with it. The *Adib* was an ornament to any salon, holding forth with ease on all branches of learning but careful to keep himself aloof from the plebs and the contamination of the *mauvais goût*. He peddled his graces to his own ilk but often under the patronage of the rich and powerful, who were very fond of staging debates between prominent *Adib*s. His scholarly accoutrements would typically have ... consisted of quite a formidable array of arts and sciences of his age: poetry, the network of religious sciences, history, philology, critical theory, medicine, as well as a pretty solid acquaintance with the natural sciences, from arithmetic to zoology. Almost *by definition* [emphasis added], *Adab* militated against specialization, opting instead for breadth of cultivation. In a cosmos, the various parts of which were thought to be so intimately linked, *Adab* provided an appropriate literary and moral response, its emphasis falling on the interconnectedness of things. The *Adab* style was of necessity eclectic, variegated, full of asides. It was important not only to educate the reader or listener but also to avoid boring him with pedantry. Clearly, *Adab* does not correspond to literature in the strict sense; perhaps the happiest synonym so far suggested is [the] Greek *Paideia*." (*TLS*, No. 5061, March 31, 2000, p. 8).

There is, we notice, no room in this definition for fiction, despite the variety of literatures mentioned; it is at most implicit. But why is it even necessary to address the issue? Tritely, because of the very fact that we have asked the question. That is, the answer lies in part in the fact that, when fiction rears its head, it becomes reified, and as a reified entity it somehow gnaws and eats its way into the realm of the truth and what is "true." No anecdote, or group of anecdotes, illustrates this fascinating warping of truth and fiction into each other better than the following material accreted to the cycle of Joseph in *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. It is characterized by an almost Borgesian absurdity:

> "Jacob said to his sons, 'If you are telling the truth in respect of the wolf who ate [Joseph], Where is it then? Bring it to me!' So they went to their ropes and their staffs and set off into the wilderness, hunting down a wolf which they tied up and took to their father. He said, 'Loosen its ropes!' So they set if loose, upon which Jacob asked it, 'Come closer.' So it came forward passing among the people present until it stood before Jacob, inclining its head to the ground. Jacob then indicted, 'Wolf, you have eaten my son, the light of my eye ... you have bequeathed me great pain and sorrow.' At which the wolf spoke, 'By your gray locks, O prophet of God, I have eaten no son of yours, for the flesh and blood of prophets is forbidden to us; I have been unjustly accused; I am a foreign wolf from Egypt.' Jacob then asked it what it was doing in Canaan, to which it replied that it had come to visit relatives.(!)"[2]

This anecdote brings to life an animal that never fundamentally existed! Indeed, it puts one in mind of another lie and another imposture (which may in part allude to this popular exegetical flourish); *cf.* Goldziher *Muslim Studies* ii, 157: "A *qāḍī* ...

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2   Al-Thaʿlabī (Ibn Isḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ... al-), *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ (ʿArāʾis al- majālis)* (Egypt: Maktabat al-jumhūriyya al-ʿarabiyya, n.d.), 118.

was able to give the name of the golden calf, and when asked from what source he had gathered his knowledge he gave 'the book of 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ' as source of his learning. Another knew exactly the name of the wolf which had eaten Joseph. When it was pointed out to him that Joseph had not been eaten by a wolf, he escaped from his predicament with the answer: Well, then it was the name of the wolf who did not eat Joseph. (Ibn al-Jawzī, fol. 129)."

In most—often serious—literature of this kind, one should take the same view that one can take about dreams: it is not important that they be true or false, or that the facts related be true or false; what is important is *what they mean*. Here a wolf, the very existence of which had been lied about, comes to life in order to divulge the lie; the subject or theme of these anecdotes certainly comes through nicely: mendacity.

As the paralogism of the above material shows, one runs the risk of sliding into sophistry with this subject in general. We are at times philosophizing when we discuss the nature of fiction in medieval Arabic literature, or any literature, especially when we detect it in historiographical and quasi-historiographical writing. We do this according to a modern (post-modern or contemporary) epistemic drive. Oscar Wilde, culturally and historically a far cry from the essays in this volume, provides for example's sake a hub around which to group some ideas of the kinds of ways that we, as a culture, in the West particularly, now tend to think and analyze:

> ... when not quoting Wilde, many of his critics end up trying to write like him. Authors such as Peter Ackroyd, in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), not to mention Terry Eagleton and C. Robert Holloway take this a stage further by writing criticism that takes the form of plays and novels in which they parody his style. As Wilde was a man who existed in words and who created an inherently unstable and paradoxical language that perfectly embodies his multiplicity, this proves to be an extremely effective way of approaching him. In *The Man Who Was Dorian Gray*, a semi-fictional biography of Wilde's disciple and lover, the 1890s poet John Gray, Jerusha Hull McCormack attempts a similar feat. She reperforms Wilde's language by blending quotations from his letters and works with convincing imitations of his conversations. Her book is a collection of poems, letters and stories by or relating to Gray, linked together by a series of novelistic scenes, scenes which include reconstructed conversations between Wilde and Gray at the Café Royal. These scenes are "authentic" in the sense that they are based on surviving evidence, but "false" in so far as they use it as a starting point for vivid and dramatic re-creations. This approach is, she suggests, appropriate for Gray, partly because his vision of the world was one in which reality and fiction were blended. The same, of course, is true of Wilde. Her endeavor is also consistent with Wilde's own revolt against the "despotism of fact" and his fondness for calling into question the very status of "fact" and "fiction" and "truth" and "falsehood" in his writings. And it is this Nietzschean Wilde with whom McCormack is concerned. (*TLS* February 9, 2001 pp. 3–4)

Reality and fiction inevitably blend into each other, in literature as in other spheres—and certainly in the (?separate) spheres of both fiction and reality.

There is little point in revisiting and rehearsing here all the studies and arguments explored in Stefan Leder's milestone volume, *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998). The concerns of Professor Leder's book are shared with many, if not all, the essays in the present tome. (Professor Leder's presence at the New York conference was indeed most gratifying.) Suffice it to say that the general subject of interest to studies in both volumes is that the way narratives—both those that are consciously historical and those that are consciously *a-* or *un*-historical—are forged according to shared and/or similar narrative techniques; techniques that are either structural, thematic, or rhetorical. These are the tropes that interest so-called "narratologists." The narrative process is, to reiterate, rhetorical, and a given narrative may either convey or enhance meaning. What is of interest here generally is that narratives that convey perceived historical fact are, or may be, fashioned according to narrative tropes that they share with literary texts (including texts outside the Arabo-Islamic tradition) that do not pretend to be historical *at all*.

As a general and very broadly applicable subject of narrative poetics, recognition (or Aristotle's *anagnorisis*) provides an excellent instance of the above. The recognition scene (where veiled identities are unveiled at a turning moment of a narrative) is one quintessential feature of fictional narrative (e.g., *The Odyssey*) and drama (e.g., *Oedipus Rex*). But recognition scenes are not exclusive to narratives that are blatantly fictional; they also exist in a great deal of literature that pretends to be historical: the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, provide us with perhaps the most prestigious examples.

Now, in the medieval Arabo-Islamic sphere, recognition scenes are, as it happens, coincidentally or not, one of *the* most determining features of *the* fictional form of narrative *par excellence*—the Maqāma. The authors of these fine picaresque narratives must surely have been attuned to the fact that the dramatic augmentation and tension of such moments smacked more of fiction than reality; that is to say, they must have shared William Shakespeare's own sense of this essential point: "The oracle is fulfilled; the king's daughter is found ... *this news which is called true is so like an old tale, that the veracity of it is in strong suspicion*." The Maqāmāt are avowedly fictional, but texts such as Qur'ānic narratives, Hadith anecdotes, the memoirs of Ismā'īlī *dā'ī*s, tales from al-Tanūkhī's *Faraj ba'd al-Shidda*, are not, and yet they feature some of the most powerful recognition scenes in the whole of Arabic literature. The recognition scene in al-Tanūkhī's F 158 (ed. 'Abūd al-Shāljī, ii, 29 *ff*), in which a Christian grandfather is taken prisoner-of-war, recognizes his Muslim grandson and orchestrates a moving recognition scene between daughter and grandson, may have some residual link with an actual event; such reunions must have taken place during the course of history. But the form the story takes in Tanūkhī's *Faraj* is "so like an old tale" that ... Such stories and such reunions developed fictionally over time, and are, one can conjecture, at their most marvelous in the *Arabian Nights* family saga of 'Umar ibn al-Nu'mān, with its final and cascading recognition scenes.

The heightening of the dramatic effect of an event through a recognition scene (whereby *fabula* defers to the gravity of *suzjet*) is, one suspects, just one clue to the manipulation, and even attenuation, of the truth of what is being related. One may even be led, temporarily, to radical conclusions: that truth cannot exist in narrative; it exists only in the discrete events which a narrative attempts to reconstruct in sequential form. Meaning does exist, yet not necessarily both openly and historically. Rather, it exists in the intentions of actors in events as they happen(ed), and in interpretation—a hermeneutics of reading—after the fact, when those events are written up or told. The irony is that the meaning, that is to say, the full rhetorical implications of a text, can ferment with time; unless the scholar's task is futile and disingenuous, the full meaning of texts can fructify centuries after the composition of an historical-*cum*-anecdotal text. This sounds intellectually imperialist, and on some level it is; but the more important flip-side of the coin mitigates such a view. The rhetorical subtleties of texts are not worn-on-the-sleeve at the time of composition and dissemination and it is us, modern readers, who inevitably ignore and fail to detect the rhetoric that must have been so obvious to contemporary readers that they did not merit the tedium of comment and *paraphrasis*. Here we are close to suggesting the need for a phenomenology of reading *adab* texts. Such a thing would be welcome if it did not run the risk of killing the joy of an infinitely rich—that is to say, *hermeneutically* rich—canon of literature. Individual readings that do not fit squarely into one disciplinary, singularly methodical, technique are extremely rewarding. Modern scholars, according to this view, have their medieval counterparts: *Adib*s were individuals; the one thing they undoubtedly all shared was to be both extraordinarily well-read and orally (apocryphally) informed. Modern writers should be allowed to be so also. The essays in this volume are discrete studies. They are broadly researched, and based on an exemplary breadth of reading. They have, let us say, their disciplinary *isnad*s (a form of requisite *déformation professionelle* steeped in primary and secondary readings), but move beyond this to give us an array of individual insights into a number of Arabic texts across genres and across close on ten centuries of literary activity.

Medieval Arabic literature contains some of its own views, both implicit and explicit, about fiction, and no scholar has been concerned with and studied those views more than the late and much lamented Dr. Rina Drory. It is to her that this volume of essays is dedicated. She attended the New York workshop in April 2000, amid great physical and personal distress, and died the following October after a long battle with cancer. We all feel deprived of what the future had promised her, still a young and intellectually vigorous scholar. In her work, Rina had explored the issue and, more specifically, the *actual conceptualization of fiction* in medieval Arabic literature and *among* medieval Muslim literati, in a number of essays; the reader should be referred to her monograph, *Models and Contacts. Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), a collection of studies that (p. 1) "attempts to investigate the

complex modes in which textual activities model reality and provide people with paradigms of conduct and perception." The most relevant part of *Models and Contacts* to the concerns of the present volume lies in its "research [into] the semantic dimensions of literature and the production of meaning; [that is,] the first section of the volume (chapters one to three). Dedicated to the problem of fictionality in classical Arabic literature, chapters one and three explore the fictional modes which developed, while chapters one and two investigate the status and legitimation of fiction. While still working with a corpus of texts considered 'literary' in the narrow sense (*adab* and *maqāmāt*), my actual concern in this section is with the classical Arabic repertoire of models for representing, or rather, constructing, 'reality.' Since fiction does not reside solely in literary texts, it seemed necessary to explore its role in other domains of classical Arabic literature, such as *ḥadīth* and historical writings."

In these early sections, *Models and Contacts* thus develops the important work published previously in Rina's article entitled, "Three Attempts to Legitimize Fiction in Classical Arabic Literature" (in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 18, 1994, 146–64)—a study well-known to the contributors to this volume and frequently quoted by them. The latter study contains analysis divided broadly into three sections: (1) Ḥadīth Khurāfa; (2) Animal Fables (*amthāl*); and, (3) Love Poetry (*Tashbīb*). It is in her treatment of the latter that Rina was the most innovative in the discussion of medieval Arabic fictionality. The barest gist of her argument can be gleaned from the following statement: ("Three Attempts," p. 160)

> Verses of *tashbīb* were supposed to pretend to account for real life events, and at the same time to be accepted as disclaiming any commitment to reality, as can be discerned from the following anecdote:
>
> Al-Ḥārith b. Khālid, who was famous for his love poems about ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa, a married woman, when asked why he did not propose to her after her husband was killed, answered: "I don't want people to think that I really meant what I said about her [in my poems]!" (Al-Ḥuṣrī, *Zahr al-Ādāb*:1, 243)"

(We will return to these observations in their fuller context below.) It is this subject that Rina Drory sought to develop in her presentation at the New York workshop, and we can only regret that this ongoing work should have been forestalled by her death. The subject held great promise, spawned much interest and discussion at our meeting, and would inevitably have led to further significant publications. Below I offer—with diffidence and as much *real* self-effacement as possible—mere "minutes" of Rina's paper. She delivered it orally from notes despite the great physical fatigue and pain she was suffering. Justice cannot be done here to the nuances and complexities of her research, deliberation, and exposition. But it is desirable at least to record here in the most general terms the path which she had plotted and acknowledge her courage in the face of an illness that she had been battling with for a number of years.

The title of her paper was "Modeling Reality through Fiction in Classical Arabic Culture." Her concern was to examine fiction not as a purely or exclusively literary issue; rather, she wished to consider in some preliminary remarks its socio-cultural angle: to probe how fiction was employed by early Islamic society to *model reality*.

"Fiction or fictionality" is usually taken to be a subject that concerns literature. The different ways, whether fictional or non-fictional, used to relate to reality are considered part and parcel of literary expression and are therefore discussed within the realms of literary theory. In classical Islam, fictionality was discussed, albeit quite marginally, within a theological framework in terms of truthfulness versus falsehood as qualities bearing upon the canonicity of texts. These were the traditional terms of conceptualization, and whenever discussion arose, it had to do with whether or not a given text should be received into the canon. That is, fictionality adhered to a straightforward dichotomy: texts either conveyed truthful or false information, and the subject was of great importance in the realm of Hadith criticism and in the establishment of the traditional corpus of prophetic sayings, where false statements were filtered away from true according to established criteria—of transmission more than content. Because there was a tendency, in varying degrees, for the false to adopt, consciously or otherwise, the guise of the true in the form of loose and contaminated chains of transmission, openly declared fiction in Arabic literature was almost totally absent up until the 20th century. In the medieval period, discussions of the Maqāma genre, in the 12th century CE particularly, was the *sole exception* in this respect (*cf*. *Contacts and Models* and "Three Attempts to Legitimize Fiction").

One way to consider fictionality in classical Arabic literature is to appreciate its relevance to our conventional definition of genres. Since we are traditionally used to distinguishing poetry from prose according to formal features (constraints even) such as metre and rhyme, we seem to disregard the fact that the major difference between these two modes of expression in classical Arabic literature lies mainly in the conveying of reality in either fictional or non-fictional ways. While Hadith prose pretends to present historical reality, poetry seems to declare that it is in no way committed to conveying reality faithfully and realistically. The poetry versus prose dichotomy, if considered at all in the context of an assessment of fiction, is thus generally viewed too complacently along the lines of a division and separating distinction between fiction and non-fiction without concern for the more symbiotic relationship between fiction and reality. Hadith prose literature (re-)presents reality, whereas poetry does not—cannot, even—pretend to convey reality *realistically*: it is patently far too stylized and formulaic. Now, this may be a *convenient* way of understanding the distinction between poetry and prose, but poetry should not in fact be excluded from the picture of how reality was *modeled*.

Rina's paper, as well as her ongoing work at the time, was concerned with cultural research; it looked at texts to inquire into the cultural models that allowed people to form their perception of the world. In classical Arabic literature two

modes competed for the role of modeling reality, involved in the creation and cultivation of authoritative paradigms of past and present: (1) *An Historical/Reporting Mode*; and (2) *A Creative Mode*.

It is the latter that is discernible principally, though not exclusively, in texts of poetry. Historically, the function of shaping the collective memory and experience of the pre-Islamic community and crafting it into binding modes of conduct had been undertaken by the poets. They did this by referring to the great deeds of ancestral figures. They did this, however, not by reporting what could be construed to have actually happened in feats of combat, but by "phrasing and rephrasing capsules of values" according to which it was deemed that the community at large should be instructed and educated. Sometimes this involved the iteration and reiteration of concrete instances of right and wrong values; but, as intimated, the poetry was mostly threadbare of concrete facts according to which an historical narrative could be read or reconstructed. A good example of all this can be seen in the pre-Islamic Mu'allaqa of Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, which treats the Ṣulḥa (peace treaty) that marked the end of the forty year war of Dāḥis and Ghabrā'. Zuhayr is addressing each of the parties involved in this "ṣulḥa," but does not tell us how the peace was concluded. He speaks of an historical event without delineating historical, chronological, and narrative details of the war itself and how, more importantly, the peace was effected. Such details are to be found in complementary *akhbār* (historical anecdotes).

The poetic stance of Arabic, and certainly *jāhilī* (pre-Islamic) verse, was never to relate things as they actually happened; rather poets boasted of the fact that they were in no way committed to realism and were indeed able to create, so to speak, reality in the way they pleased and perhaps even for the good of the world. This is discernible ironically in Qur'anic exegesis pertaining to the criticism of them (*al-Shu'arā'* 226): "[Have you not seen the poets] ... that they say that which they do not do." They talk a good game but do little of what they say. Most of their expression, in short, was overtly fictional. (Here we are ignoring the ritual function the poetry may or may not have had.)

With the coming of Islam, a different group of cultural "agents" assumed authority over the past. Poets did this in their own way and according to their own tactics, for there had been an essential rupture with the advent of Islam. Scholars of Qur'an and Hadith introduced different paradigms derived from a different view of the past; the scholars' basic model of reality resided, as is well known, in a full commitment to what were perceived to be faithful reports of past and historical events (represented in the practices of Hadith scholarship). As far as the authoritative view of the past (and the present values of the community) is concerned, the scholars won out over the poets. In short, authority over the past was detached from poetry and taken away from its authors. We can trace this development by reading anecdotes from Umayyad times relating to the first scholars of poetry, the *rāwiya*s, such as Ḥammād al-Rāwiya. When the caliphs consulted men on the correct and authentic versions of a verse, or the correct

usage of language more generally, they came to rely more and more on scholars and less and less on poets (such as Dhū al-Rumma) who had been the traditional experts of Arabic language. The poets' role as repositories of the poetic tradition was being wrested from them and coming to be handled increasingly by scholars.

But poetry still retained the power to employ fictionality for other purposes.

The fictional "creative" mode was used in poetry to model the private and personal, rather than public, sphere of life. *Tashbīb*, courtly erotic poetry—a poetry composed for elite women in the main—provides perhaps the best example. The social function of this kind of courtly poetry required it to include pseudo-autobiographical descriptions of love. Apparently faithful details of reality were incorporated into these compositions, such as the name of the beloved and allusions to (actual) encounters between lovers. The poet might depict a mole on the beloved in a place where only he—as lover—could possibly have seen it: "he really did then see his beloved naked," one might conclude. These may be termed tokens of realism or "reality items," and they were meant to suggest the fact that these amatory encounters *might* actually have taken place (according to a realistic imaginary). But while there was this tendency to cultivate a descriptive and anecdotal realism, according to identifiable conventions, there was also a contrary—contradictory even—need to *disclaim* the fact that the events alluded to had actually taken place! This can be discerned, for example, from anecdotes about al-Ḥārith ibn Khālid al-Makhzūmī, who was appreciated as one of the most accomplished poets of *tashbīb*. He indulged in it *tazarrufan wa-takhallu'an*, i.e., he was both graceful and indecent. When asked why he didn't propose to 'A'isha bint Ṭalḥa after her husband had been killed, he replied, for example that he didn't want people to think that he really meant what he had said in poems about her. We can sense overall a contrary dynamic: these poems came as close to reality as possible and yet were ultimately meant to disclaim it.

There was an ambiguity about whether or not these compositions were intended to be taken seriously. They were and simultaneously were *not* meant to be taken seriously. Who then did take these poems seriously? Guardians, husbands, brothers—of course. In this respect consider the story about Mu'awiya related in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*. His daughter, 'Ātika, was celebrated in such scandalous poetry by Abū Dhahbal that Mu'awiya was disconcerted, not knowing what to do about the situation, as these verses were on everybody's tongue. Was she to be blamed for real moral misconduct? In a quandary as to what to do, he devised a scheme; he decided to go to Mecca to perform the Hajj and meet the poet. He told the poet that while he was certain the contents of the verses were entirely fictional, his son by contrast was fuming with anger. He could not guarantee the poet's safety. Abū Dhahbal was duly scared and thus disclaimed all connection to the poems attributed to him. This, it is said, was the only reason Mu'awiya undertook the Hajj.

So poems of this ilk were considered real threats to dignified women and their men-folk could never approve of them. Women, on the other hand, liked them very

much and there is ample evidence to this effect. In certain instances, elite and well-to-do women went on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in order to make contacts with *tashbīb* poets and secretly to commission love poems. When love poems were leaked into the public sphere and disseminated, dealing with the situation was a delicate issue. The story of Umm al-Banīn illustrates this well. Her lover Waḍḍāḥ al-Yaman, was, to be sure, killed on her account, but *not publicly and overtly* since that would have suggested that what he wrote was true. Everyone knew that these poems were not completely truthful; on the other hand, they were as realistic as they dared to be; and if it was possible for marriages to suffer on account of such verses, they must have contained more than mere grains of truth.

In a later period, Abbasid poetry and culture testifies to the emergence of models of conduct in the Abbasid court, where everyone had to be in love. There was a very strong social basis for this: love facilitated the acquisition of the quality of *ẓarf*. A relevant anecdote that can illustrate this concerns Harūn al-Rashīd (d. 809), told in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*: al-Aṣmaʿī relates: "I have only once seen the effects of wine [*nabīdh*] on Hārūn al-Rashīd's face; I came to him with Abū Ḥafṣ Al-Shitranjī, a singer in the court, and I recognized the telltale torpor on his face. He said to us, "Compete among yourselves in composing verses, and he who hits upon what is in my soul will be rewarded with ten thousand dirhams." I was apprehensive and the dread that he espied in me paralyzed me. Abū Ḥafṣ, on the other hand, immediately composed a verse:

> Kullamā dārati l-zujājatu zādat-hu shtiyāqan wa-ḥubbatan fa-bakāki
>
> Each time the cup was passed around it increased his longing and passion and he wept for you.

Al-Rashīd said you have done well and you will be rewarded with ten thousand dirhams. Al-Aṣmaʿī said, "My fear and apprehension disappeared and I said:

> Lam yanalki rajāʾī an taḥḍurīnī wa-tajāfat umniyatī ʿan siwāki
>
> My hope that you would come to me has not reached you yet my desire for anyone but you has vanished.

Harūn al-Rashīd said, "Well done! You will be rewarded twenty thousand dirhams." Then he lowered his head and remained silent for a while; he then raised his head and looked at us, saying, "By God! I am a better poet than both of you":

> Fa-tamannaytu an yughshiyanī llāhu nuʿāsan laʿalla ʿaynī tarāki
>
> I wish that God would grant me sleep so that I might see you in my dreams.

Two points of interest emerge from the anecdote: first, the poets know what the caliph feels—or *should*, according to courtly convention, be feeling—and thus they are able to express this in poetry; secondly, the experience is not a real experience—there is no kind of ontological value until it is expressed in poetry: if these emotions are not put into words, and in particular poetry, they have no real existence in the world ....

Rina Drory's research was more measured, detailed and sophisticated than I have been able to reflect. The above truncated "minutes" provide the merest blueprint of her work; she would have developed and amplified parts, no doubt, and rescinded, altered, and emended others. One cannot second guess which. To represent someone else's scholarly ideas is indeed difficult, but the effort is worth it in the end in order to avoid forgetting. I cannot represent Rina's work in its full bloom (and wince from the thought that I may have misrepresented some of it). But as she herself remarked of Abbasid court poetry, "it is as if an experience is not a real experience until it is expressed in words." We can now only regret the absence of more of Rina's "words".

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Philip F. Kennedy
July, 2003

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