

THOMAS BAUER

UNIVERSITÄT MÜNSTER

“Ayna hādhā min al-Mutanabbī!” Toward an Aesthetics of Mamluk Literature

Introduction

A few years ago, I was searching for manuscripts of Ibn Nubātah’s *Al-Qaṭr al-Nubātī*, his once-famous collection of epigrams. I found out that one of the many manuscripts was kept in a library in the Arab world, and when I happened to visit that country, I decided to stop by and ask for a copy. My visit was successful. I was not only given a free copy of the manuscript, but also an appointment with the director of the manuscript department. Our conversation was less successful, however, since the director harshly disapproved of my scholarly interests. In his eyes, the study of Mamluk literature was not only a waste of time, but an enterprise that would do nothing but bring shame on the Arabs as well. “There is nothing in Mamluk literature,” he concluded, “*illā madḥ al-nabī wa-mā yusammī al-Amrikān ‘gay literature.’*” Before I had time to protest, he read the first line of the first epigram at the beginning of the manuscript aloud and exclaimed: “*ayna hādhā min al-Mutanabbī!*” “What’s this compared to al-Mutanabbī!”

After my anger had simmered down, I started to think about the question. Why not just take it seriously? After all, there can be no doubt that al-Mutanabbī’s aesthetic is different from that of Ibn Nubātah and his contemporaries. But why should that be so? And does “different” equal “worse”? Let us therefore go in search of the aesthetic framework of Mamluk literature, in the hope that this will explain several differences between the literature of the Mamluk period and that of the middle Abbasid period (the period spanning the lifetimes of Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī).

The first obstacle we face in our quest is the fact that it is generally not very easy to determine a handful of aesthetic principles no matter what the period of literary history. For the Mamluk period, however, this task seems even more difficult than for the middle Abbasid period because of the extraordinary stylistic plurality of Mamluk-era literary texts. Mamluk poetry has often been criticized for its allegedly mannerist style and abundance of rhetorical embellishments, but this prejudice is unfounded. Of course, there are many complex, highly sophisticated texts—not least in prose—from the Mamluk period, but at the same time there are countless literary texts, often by the same authors, that are easy to read and understand and which make less use of rhetorical figures than most texts by Abbasid-era *muḥdath* poets. Ibn Nubātah, for example, was the author of some

© The Middle East Documentation Center. The University of Chicago.



©2013 by Thomas Bauer.

DOI: [10.6082/M1MC8X63](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1MC8X63). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1MC8X63>)

DOI of Vol. XVII: [10.6082/M18050P5](https://doi.org/10.6082/M18050P5). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/5ZJ0-6548> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

elaborately stylized texts (we will consider an example later), but also of an epic hunting-poem (an *urjūzah*) which Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī correctly considered as a model of “fluency” (*insijām*). And as Geert Jan van Gelder has put it, it is indeed “poetry for easy listening.”¹

We have more than just a bounty of easy and stylistically simple texts, however; we also have a large number of texts in dialect or at least in a register that approximates the spoken language. Even Ibn Nubātah, whose stylistic ideal was elegance and sophistication, could not avoid composing a *zajal*—though it is admittedly perhaps the most dialect-free *zajal* ever composed.² Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that al-Mutanabbī would have ever written anything like it. In al-Mutanabbī’s day, the boundaries between high and popular literature were insurmountable, whereas in the Mamluk period, these boundaries became more blurred.

What accounts for this stylistic plurality in the Mamluk period? The most obvious answer to the question would be to assume that stylistic plurality is the result of a plurality of participants and audiences. The multiplication of social groups participating in literature results, in turn, from a change in the social function of literature.

This process of change began during the so-called Sunni revival. In this period, we witness a gradual dissolution of the community of *udabāʾ* on the one hand, with their own largely secular canon, and, on the other, a rise in the importance of the *ʿulamāʾ* with their predominantly religious canon. Yet the gradual merger of these two elite groups did not lead to the disappearance of *adab*. Instead, the process of the *udabāʾ*’s *ʿulamāʾ*’ization goes hand in hand with what I call the *adab*-ization of the *ʿulamāʾ*. The background of this process has been analyzed thoroughly by Konrad Hirschler. Hirschler describes two interrelated developments—*textualization* (increased use of the written word) and *popularization* (increased participation of non-scholarly groups in cultural activities)—during the Middle Period that led to the rise of a “literate mentality.”³

As a result, the percentage of people interested in *adab* actually increased and gradually came to include large portions of the middle classes, with both religious and lay professions and interests. From the Ayyubid period onward, we

¹ Geert Jan van Gelder, “Poetry for Easy Listening: *Insijām* and Related Concepts in Ibn Ḥijjah’s *Khizānat al-Adab*,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7, [no. 1] (2003): 31–48. See also Thomas Bauer, “The Dawādār’s Hunting Party. A Mamluk *muzdawija ṭardīyya*, Probably by Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn Faḍl Allāh,” in *O Ye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture in Honour of Remke Kruk*, ed. Arnoud Vrolijk and Jan P. Hogendijk (Leiden, 2007), 291–312.

² Ibn Nubātah, *Muntakhab al-Ḥadīyah*, published as *Dīwān al-Fāḍil al-Awḥad al-Shaykh Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Bakr ibn Nubātah* (Beirut, 1304/1886–87), 51–52.

³ Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh, 2012), 197.



have enough data to show that even the lower strata of urban society participated, in one way or another, in the production, or at least consumption, of literature. Poets came from all walks of life. They included civil servants like Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafadī, high- and low-ranking religious scholars like Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī and Ibn Sūdūn, judges like Ibn al-Damāmīnī (who also tried his luck as an entrepreneur), traders like Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī, and craftsmen like al-Jazzār (“the butcher”) and al-Miʿmār (“the builder”). And all these men of letters wrote for a public made up of people from the same or a cognate social group. I would suggest referring to this group by the German expression *Bürgertum*, since this term is less associated with economic status than the French and English *bourgeoisie*. The social group of the *Bürgertum* came to dominate the literary sphere as both producer and consumer.

At the same time, courts became less and less interested in poetry. This may have been due to the fact that many rulers lacked a sufficient command of Arabic to understand the subtleties of Arabic poetry, or because other forms of representation such as architecture and religious patronage came to the fore. Panegyric poetry (*madīḥ*), addressed to princes and rulers, was still the most important, prestigious, and honored poetic genre in al-Mutanabbī’s time. In the Mamluk period, its importance declined. Instead, poets, scholars, judges, and civil servants wrote *madīḥ* poems praising one another. As a result of these developments, literature in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods became a medium for middle-class self-expression and lost much of its former function as a medium of courtly representation.

Of course, *madīḥ* composed for sultans and princes continued. Poets like Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī, Ibn Nubātah, and the young Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī went actively in search of “their” princes and found patrons among the Artuqids, the Ayyubids of Ḥamāh, and the Rasulids, respectively. But they were no longer court poets in the traditional sense. Instead, they were part of a network of ‘*ulamā*’ and *udabāʾ*, and it was among this group that they found their main addressees. The courtly milieu no longer set the norms of style. This is true for the high-brow *udabāʾ* as well as for popular poetry, which becomes more visible in the time due “to the fact that the ruling elite played a much more limited role in setting cultural standards and literary taste and indeed used poetry less systematically as a means of purveying a legitimizing mythology, as was the case during the Abbasid era.”⁴

This change in the social role of poetry and prose literature had consequences in many respects. The most important changes are based, I believe, on the fact that the chief communicative function of courtly literature is *representation*

⁴ Margaret Larkin, “Popular Poetry in the Post-Classical Period,” in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge, 2007), 194–95.





Fig. 1. The Schloss.



Fig. 2. The Prinzipalmarkt..



©2013 by Thomas Bauer.

DOI: [10.6082/M1MC8X63](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1MC8X63). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1MC8X63>)

DOI of Vol. XVII: [10.6082/M18050P5](https://doi.org/10.6082/M18050P5). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/5ZJ0-6548> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

whereas literature that operates as a social class's medium of self-representation mainly functions as a means of *communication* within the members of the class.⁵

Representation vs. Participation

This leads me to the main thesis of this article. I claim that the difference between the aesthetics of the middle Abbasid period and the Mamluk period is caused by a shift from *representation* to *participation*. The terms *representation* and *participation* are used in structuralist literary theory to denote two poles along the spectrum of modes of writing.⁶ The concept ultimately goes back to Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphoric and metonymic discourse.⁷ The distinction between representation and participation is not only helpful for the analysis of literature, but also for other art forms. Perhaps an example taken from architecture would be instructive.

The two photographs above show two architectural sites from the town of Münster. The first (fig. 1) shows the castle, a masterpiece of North German Baroque architecture. Its main communicative function is representation; whoever approaches the building cannot help but be impressed and overwhelmed. The building is *self-focused*. It has a strictly symmetric structure. All parts refer to their respective counterparts, all of which are identical. They have no other context than the building itself.

The second photo (fig. 2) shows the central market, the so called Prinzpalmarkt. Its buildings are also lavishly adorned and meant to evoke admiration. Obviously, they are not devoid of the function of representation. Nevertheless, they are clearly situated very much closer to the pole of *participation*. A single house, beautiful as it may be, would make little sense without its neighbors. It is only through its *contiguity* to other houses that it derives its meaning. The houses are not self-contained, but communicate with one another. Their individual elements refer to the respective equivalents in other houses, which are never exactly the same but provide variants whose appeal lies in the knowledge of their diver-

⁵ On the use of literature for different communicative purposes see now Thomas Bauer, "Mamluk Literature as a Means of Communication," in *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies—State of the Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2013), 23–56.

⁶ E.g., Jane Hedley, *Power in Verse: Metaphor and Metonymy in the Renaissance Lyric* (University Park, PA and London, 1988).

⁷ Roman Jakobson, "Aspects of Language and Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in idem, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 95–114 (109–10: "The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since we find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy.")



sity. The different forms of arches, windows, and gables derive their appeal from being variants of the arches, windows and gables of the adjacent buildings. Furthermore, there is text on the façade that refers to an extra-architectural context, and the arcades allow a much more intensive interaction between observer and building. Again, this interaction is only granted as long as the buildings “cooperate.” The houses welcome passers-by. Therefore, the representational function of these buildings is not intended to awe, but to stand out.

Applied to Arabic literature, one could draw the following analogy: just as the castle embodies the representational mode and the Prinzipalmarkt represents the participational mode of building, the poetry of the Middle Abbasid period is closer to the representational mode of writing than Mamluk literature, whereas the participational mode is, in contrast, extremely strong in Mamluk literature. This basic fact affects every level and feature of its literature, be it the importance of different genres, the attitude towards poetry, the construction of individual literary texts, the general style, the use of stylistic figures, etc.

Epigrams

Let us start with questions of *genres* and *literary forms* and try to explain the stupendous career of the *epigram*. It is true that there were epigrammatic poems at all periods of Arabic literature. However, in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods the epigram gains an importance it never previously possessed. In this era, there simply isn't a single poet who did not compose a large number of epigrams, and there are poets like Mujir al-Din Ibn Tamim, who composed nothing but epigrams. Large anthologies were compiled, which were made up entirely of epigrams, and Ibn Nubatah was the first to compose a thematically arranged *diwan* devoted exclusively to his own epigrams. Ibn Habib, Safi al-Din al-Hilli, and al-Safadi followed immediately with their own *diwans* of epigrams. In those days, the sky above Cairo, Damascus, Hamah, and Aleppo must have been replete with the sound of epigrams. What explanation is there for the enormous popularity of epigrams and what does it have to do with the theory of representation vs. participation?

The answer is that epigrams are extremely communicative. First, epigrams, just like the houses of the Prinzipalmarkt, rarely come alone. An epigram recited in a *majlis* provokes other epigrams by other participants. An epigram sent to accompany a present is answered by the recipient with another epigram. Epigrams come to stand side by side in *diwans* and anthologies to delight the reader with a great variety of concepts and punch lines, which in turn reinforces the effect of every single one, just as is the case with the gables of the Prinzipalmarkt.



Second, the epigram is an extremely communicative form because it depends on the interaction of the hearer/reader. A *madīh* poem by al-Mutanabbī does not demand anything from the hearer other than being impressed and overwhelmed. The poem is complete and self-contained. An epigram, however, normally ends in a point. This point is its very essence and *raison d'être*. An epigram is only complete when the point “works.” And this *work* has to be done by the hearer/reader. He/she has to grasp the point and appreciate it. Without this “work” the epigram remains meaningless and—in every sense of the word—pointless.

Third, due to the fact that communication is the very essence of epigrams, their content and style is highly oriented toward context. To explain this, let me give an example. It is an epigram by Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī:⁸

قال في وقاد
 أحببتُ وقادًا كنجم طالع * أنزلته برضى الغرام فؤادي
 وأنا الشهابُ فلا يعاندُ عاذلي * إن ملتُ نحو الكوكب الوقادِ

ON A LAMPLIGHTER:

I fell in love with a lamplighter who is like a rising star and, to please passion, I made him take abode in my heart.

As I am Shihāb al-Dīn / a shooting star myself, the critic won't blame me if I incline towards a *brightly shining star* / a lamplighter-star.⁹

The theme of the epigram is not an object of luxury, as is so often the case with Abbasid epigrams. Instead, it is a love epigram on a lamplighter, whose job it is to care for the lamps in the mosque: clean them, light them, and extinguish them—not a very prestigious job, but an everyday experience shared by all people in the town. *Ghazal* epigrams on men and women who are characterized by their profession became a genre of its own in this period. These epigrams portray every conceivable person in town and in the countryside, from sultan to beggar, from judge to Bedouin. They eroticize the whole of society, which appears to be composed of lovable people, each having his or her own erotic attraction. The youths and girls of Abbasid epigrams are of rather archetypal beauty. The epigrams of the Ayyubid and Mamluk period let you smell the odors of the market and the quarters of the craftsmen. It is inconceivable that al-Mutanabbī could have made

⁸ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Uns al-Ḥujar fī Abyāt Ibn Ḥajar*, ed. Shihāb al-Dīn Abū ʿAmr (Beirut, 1409/1988), 352.

⁹ A *tawriyah* is noted in the translations in the following way: The primarily intended meaning is underlined, and the secondarily suggested meaning italicized. In case of an *istikhdām*, where both meanings are intended simultaneously, both are underlined.



an epigram on a beautiful tailor girl or a beautiful tanner. Ayyubid and Mamluk poetry instead contextualizes the genre of *ghazal* and the form of the epigram, and its context is everyday life in all its manifestations.

Again, here we are closer to the pole of “participation” than that of “representation.” This also holds true for the stylistic figures. The epigram starts with a simile comparing the beautiful lamplighter to a star, which is transferred to a metaphor in the second line. The metaphor is a stylistic device based on substitution. “Beautiful person” is substituted by “star.” It is therefore set on the paradigmatic axis of language. In the theory of Jakobson and his adepts, metaphoric representation, which is based on substitution drawing on the paradigmatic axis, is contrasted with metonymic representation, which is based on contiguity and draws on the syntagmatic axis of language. Whereas metaphoric writing is characteristic of representation, metonymic writing is characteristic of participation. For the Abbasid period, this theoretical model fits perfectly. The metaphor was not only one of the most popular stylistic devices; it was also the subject of theoretical inquiry. But what about the Mamluk period? It would seem that metaphor itself did not lose its importance. Poets like Ibn Nubātah and Ibn Ḥajar do not use metaphors to a conspicuously lesser degree than Ibn al-Mu‘tazz or al-Mutanabbī. What happens instead, though, is that these metaphors are permanently *recontextualized*. This recontextualization is achieved here with the help of another stylistic device, which became increasingly popular in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods: the *tawriyah* (or double entendre). *Al-kawkab al-waqqād* “the brightly shining star” is a metaphor. But the representational function of the metaphor is *undermined* somehow by the *tawriyah*. The *tawriyah* allows us—or rather compels us—to understand *al-kawkab al-waqqād* also in the sense: “the star—that is, the lamplighter.” Through this *tawriyah*, a new context, a context from everyday experience, is given and the spell of the metaphor is broken. As we will see with other texts, recontextualization is one of the major techniques of Mamluk literature.

I shall not forget to mention the second *tawriyah*—or rather an *istikhdām*, in which both meanings are intended simultaneously—in the epigram. *Al-Shihāb* is a shooting star, and it is the poet himself, but this time not by way of a metaphor, but by a coincidental correspondence between the word and his name. Again, a surprising context is set. This time it is the author of the epigram himself who comes on the scene in person, not simply as an anonymous “lyrical I,” but with his own name.

Abbasid epigrams are mostly self-focused. They aim at the description of a person or a prestigious object by finding striking and surprising similes or metaphors. Ayyubid and Mamluk epigrams, on the other hand, are mostly pointed. There are many techniques of creating the point. It is often constituted by a



tawriyah, as we have seen. Very popular also was *iqtibās*—a quotation from the Quran—or *taḍmīn*, a quotation of any other text, provided it was famous enough to be recognized. What all these techniques have in common is that they are based on *recontextualization*. The hearer/reader is surprised to discover the object of the epigram in a context he did not expect.

One of the most popular stylistic devices of the Mamluk period next to *tawriyah* was *tawjīh*. In the sense in which it was used from the Mamluk period onward it is constituted by the use of technical vocabulary, be it from scholarship, the crafts, or any other field, or by book titles or proper names. In *tawjīh*, however, it is not the technical meaning that is intended, but the meaning of these words in everyday speech. *Tawjīh* is close to *tawriyah*; the difference is that with words possessing two meanings, only one of the meanings, the non-technical meaning, makes any sense, and so in order to hint to the reader that there is a technical meaning which is not intended, the author must use two or more words from the same semantic field (again a matter of contextualization).¹⁰

A short example is the following epigram by al-Ṣafadī:¹¹

قال في محدث
محدث ذو قوام * تغار منه العوالي
وطرفه ليس يُغري * إلاّ بجرح الرجال

ON A HADITH SCHOLAR:

Even the lances are jealous of his body,
And if men encounter his glance, they will be hurt.

The *tawjīh* becomes invisible in the translation as it is also in the plain understanding of the Arabic text. A specific context is needed. This context is provided by the fact that several words point to hadith scholarship, though it is not the subject of the epigram. The beloved is a *muḥaddith*. One of the disciplines he has to deal with is *al-jarḥ wa-al-taʿdīl*, the discipline of establishing the reliability of hadith transmitters. Against this background, the final words *jarḥ al-rijāl* assumes a double meaning. Besides “hurting men” a second, technical meaning appears: “criticizing hadith transmitters.” An attentive reader may even detect a third usage of hadith terminology. The rhyme word of the first line, *al-ʿawālī*,

¹⁰ See Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Khizānat al-Adab*, ed. Kawkab Diyāb (Beirut, 1421/2001), 2:350–83; before Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī the term *tawjīh* was generally used in the sense of what most later authors call *ibhām*. The “new” definition of *tawjīh* is on pp. 353–54.

¹¹ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Ḥusn al-Ṣarīḥ fī Miʿat Malīḥ*, ed. Aḥmad Fawzī al-Hayb (Damascus, 2003), 36–37.



does not only mean “lances,” one of the most common objects of comparison for a slender, elegantly moving body. In hadith terminology it denotes traditions with the shortest possible chain of transmitters. As we see, al-Şafadī uses three expressions taken from hadith scholarship. They form their own context without which the point of the epigram cannot be understood. At the same time, there is an external context: the sphere of hadith studies. Contrary to the metaphors of Abbasid poetry, which form sort of a poetic realm in themselves, hadith scholarship *per se* has no obvious connection to poetry. Again, the stylistic device provides for contextualization in several respects.

In pre-Ayyubid times *tawjīh* hardly played a role. By the Mamluk era, it had become one of the most popular devices. It can be found not only in countless epigrams (especially in love epigrams on youths and girls of a certain profession), but also forms the basis of a number of *maqāmāt*. Several of al-Suyūṭī’s *maqāmāt* are *tawjīh*-based; e.g., *Al-Maqāmah al-Baḥrīyah*, in which twenty scholars in different fields complain when they assume that the flood of the Nile has stopped and rejoice when the Nile starts to rise again,¹² or his series of erotic *maqāmāt Rashf al-Zulāl*, in which again twenty scholars, from Quran reader to Sufi, report about their wedding night, each using the terminology of his respective discipline.¹³ The “popular” counterpart would be al-Bilbaysī’s *Al-Mulaḥ wa-al-Ṭuraf min Munādamāt Arbāb al-Ḥiraf*, in which representatives of forty-nine professions, most of them craftsmen, argue with a hypocritical judge who refuses to serve wine.¹⁴

Ibn Nubātah’s “Snow Letter” to al-Qazwīnī

But let us turn now to another literary genre, which is especially characteristic of the period: the letter. It has been repeatedly stated that prose in the form of letters and documents—not to mention the *maqāmah*—were extraordinarily important in the period, and its literature cannot be adequately understood without taking these texts into account. Again, not much has been done so far in this field,¹⁵ in which Ibn Nubātah also played a key role. Several of his works (*Zahr al-Manthūr*, *Ta’līq al-Dīwān*) are collections of his letters or collections of both prose and poetry by him and his correspondents (*Saj’ al-Muṭawwaq*). None of them has been edited so far.

¹² *Sharḥ Maqāmāt al-Suyūṭī*, ed. Samīr Maḥmūd al-Darūbī (Beirut, 1409/1989), 1:249–70.

¹³ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Rashf al-Zulāl min al-Siḥr al-Ḥalāl* (Beirut, n.d.).

¹⁴ See Joseph Sadan, “Al-Bilbaysī,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three* (2010), 1:165–67.

¹⁵ But see the thoughtful introduction to the field by Muhsin al-Musawi, “Pre-Modern Belletristic Prose,” in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Allen and Richards, 101–33.



The following letter is preserved in two autograph manuscripts. It is addressed to Jalāl al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī, author of the famous handbook of rhetoric *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ* and preacher at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus (hence known as *Khaṭīb Dimashq*). The letter was written in the winter of 716/1316–17, which was particularly harsh and saw snowfall in Damascus. Ibn Nubātah was freezing and asked al-Qazwīnī for the gift of a fur coat; or at least, this was the purported message of the letter. But there was a more important purpose behind it. In the year 716, Ibn Nubātah was new in Damascus and trying to get in contact with as many important intellectuals of the town as possible. He did this by sending letters and poems to them in order to convince them that, on account of his talent and education, he was really one of them. This strategy proved to be successful.

As it is a letter between two of the most famous intellectuals of their time, and since Mamluk letters have rarely, if ever, been the subject of literary analysis so far,¹⁶ I will present the “snow letter” in its entirety. Here is the beginning:¹⁷

يا مولانا صَبَّحَكَ اللهُ بِكُلِّ صَبِيحَةٍ بِيضَاءَ لَا مِنْ هَذِهِ التَّلُوجِ الْمَلْمَمَةِ * وَكُلِّ غَنِيمَةٍ بَارِدَةٍ لَا مِنْ هَذِهِ اللَّيَالِي الْمُدْهَمَّةِ *

My lord! May God bring you nothing but mornings of pure “whiteness” (= brightness)—but not whitened by these afflictive snowfalls— | and nothing but “cold” (= easy) prey—but not cooled down by these pitch-dark nights— ||

At the beginning of his letter, Ibn Nubātah introduces two themes, which are developed in what follows: one is “greeting and compliments”; the other is the bad weather. The two themes run through the whole of the letter right until the very end. In the first part, every phrase of greeting evokes horrible associations with the current meteorological disaster—an association the writer has to dismiss vehemently. In this way, the paradigmatic set of formal phrases of greeting is contextualized with the environment of writer and addressee. Ibn Nubātah persists with this contrast in a second double colon:

وَكُلِّ ثَغْرِ بِاسْمٍ وَلَا أَعْنِي هَذِهِ الْبُرُوقُ اللَّامِعَةُ * وَكُلِّ ضَرْعٍ حَافِلٍ وَلَا أَرْضِي هَذِهِ السُّحُبُ الْهَامِعَةُ ❖ وَسَقَى دِيَارَكَ غَيْرَ مَفْسِدِهَا ❖

¹⁶ An exception is Werner Diem, *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz: Untersuchung zur Stilgeschichte des arabischen Dokuments des 7. Bis 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 2005), in which aesthetic aspects are given due consideration.

¹⁷ The text here is according to the autograph manuscript “Min Tarassul Ibn Nubātah,” Escorial MS 548, fols. 91v–92v. Another autograph version displaying a number of interesting variants is Ibn Nubātah, “Saj’ al-Muṭawwaq,” Ayasofya MS 4045, fols. 29v–30v.



...and nothing but front teeth glistening in a smile—but I do not mean these flashes of lightning— | and nothing but udders full of milk (= blessings)—but I am not content with these raining clouds—, || and “may your abode be watered by what does not destroy it!”

The introduction ends with a quotation from a verse by the pre-Islamic poet Ṭarafah,¹⁸ which clearly marks a caesura, even acoustically, since it does not rhyme. Letters are full of quotations, which not only situate the new text in the context of the canon but also serve to connect the knowledge and education of the writer to that of the addressee. Here, the quotation by Ṭarafah has a third function; it introduces a third thematic strand, “Quran and old Arabic lore,” which appears several times in the course of the letter.

As we have seen, the letter has a clearly discernible introduction, but this is not set apart thematically from the rest of the letter. Instead its function is to introduce the themes and motives on which the rest of the letter is grounded.

The writer now turns to the addressee and asks him how he feels about the weather they are having. A change of rhythm corresponds to the change in subject. Here the author uses a trio of colons with the last colon being longer than the first two:

كيف أنت في هذا الجليد الذي أذاب قلب الجليد * وهذه الرحمة التي أوقعتنا ﴿﴾ في
العذاب الشديد ﴿﴾ [ق : ٢٦] * وهذا البرد الذي لا تقوى الأجساد عليه ولا يقوى
علمى البرد الحديد

How do you feel in this hoarfrost that melted the heart of every sturdy man, | and in this mercy (= rain) that has cast us “into the terrible chastisement” (Q 50:26), | and in this cold against which nobody can resist—but not even iron can prevail against the cold? ||

Again positive things (“sturdiness, mercy”) are contrasted with the weather, but now they succumb to it, which brings the author nearer to his matter of concern. An *iqtibās* from the Quran continues the line of quotations. Many *jinās* form a chain of acoustic linkage throughout the letter.

This first trio of colons is continued and affirmed by a second one. The pace is accelerated, the effect of *jinās* brought to its extreme, and instead of a normal rhyme Ibn Nubātah uses double rhyme (*luzūm mā lā yalzam*)¹⁹ in addition to a very clear

¹⁸ صوبُ الربيع ودجمة تَهْمِي “May your abode be watered by what does not destroy it: by a rain of spring or a continuous rain that pours forth!” فسقى بلادك غير مفسدها

¹⁹ See Pierre Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician or The Schemer’s Skimmer* (Wiesbaden, 1998), 19.



allusion to the Quran. Ibn Nubātah introduces himself as a “stranger,” still speaking about himself in the third person:

وهل عندك خبرٌ من حالٍ مغتَرٍّ مُغْتَرَبٍ * مضطَّرٌّ مضطَرِبٍ * ساجِدٌ من شدَّةِ الهولِ
مقتَرِبٍ *

Have you heard news about a stranger, beguiled (by false hopes), | a man destitute and unsettled, | bowing himself, stricken by intensive terror, and drawing near (to ask for relief) (cf. Q 96:19: *wa-sjud wa-qtarib*)? ||

The crescendo of this colon leads to the climax of the letter. It starts with an *iltifāt*;²⁰ the author switches to the first person and gives what I would call the point of the letter, since just like epigrams, even this letter has a point—not at the end, but almost in its middle:

أما أنا فقد تحصَّنتُ في هذه الواقِعةِ ﴿الواقِعةُ : ١﴾ بِظِلِّ ﴿السَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْبُرُوجِ﴾ ﴿الْبُرُوجِ : ١﴾ * ولبستُ السَّنَجَابَ الْأَبْلَقَ إِلَّا أَنَّهُ مِنْ زُرْقَةِ الْجَسَدِ وَبِيَاضِ الثَّلُوجِ *

As far as I am concerned, to protect me from this “terror” (Q 56:1), I have taken refuge in the shadow of “the heaven with the fortresses (= zodiac)” (Q 85:1), | and I put on the fur of the white-spotted squirrel by combining the blue of the (skin of my) body with the white of the snow.

Ibn Nubātah pretends to be clad in a coat made of the fur of a *sinjāb*, a sort of squirrel whose fur was imported from Russia or the Caucasus. Its color is blue and white. But in fact, Ibn Nubātah could neither find shelter nor afford such a precious fur coat, and therefore he had to rely on the white of the snow and the blue of his cold skin. Ibn Nubātah had used this idea several times, which clearly shows that he also must have understood it as the central point and climax of the letter.²¹ Two Quranic quotations continue the theme “Quran and old Arabic lore.”

The following colons, which conclude the middle part of the letter, continue with contrasting the themes “bad weather” (“hoar-frost,” “snow”), which even turns out to be life-endangering. The main function of this part is to develop the theme “cloak and clothing,” which was introduced in the climax colon and is the subject of the letter. Nevertheless it is not a theme that permeates the whole of

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 106.

²¹ See “Min Tarassul Ibn Nubātah,” fol. 131r; Ibn Nubātah, “Zahr al-Manthūr,” Chester Beatty MS 3774, fol. 96v.



the letter, but is restricted to its latter half. The development is carried out mainly with recourse to the theme “old Arabic lore”:

وتقاويت وما قوّة من أشابهُ الضّربُ صورةً ومعنى * وشاهدتُ الموتَ فليتَ الأيامِ
أتاحتُ لي من الكسوة كفنًا حين أتاحت لي من الثلج قطنًا * وجرّبت قول العربي
المقرور إن الحسب ليُدْفِنني فما وجدتُ الحسب إلا يدفني * واستصوبت قول
بعضهم وقد رأى أعرابياً عرباناً في مثل هذا اليوم يُنشد [من الوافر]:

كساني عامراً وكسا بني عطف المجد إن له عطافا
❖ فقال والله إنك إلى عطف عباءة أحوج منك إلى هذه العطافا

...and I summoned up all my power, but how much power is left in a man whose hair has been turned white by hoar-frost / fate in his outward appearance and in the sense of the word?!²² | And since I faced death, I wish that fate would give me a shroud as clothing as it has already given me cotton in the form of snow! || And I had the same experience as the Arab who said: “Honor was to warm me, but it did nothing but harm²³ me.” And I approved of the saying of the man who, on a day like this, saw a naked Bedouin, who recited the verse: “*‘Amir clad me and clad his sons. Verily, the cloak of glory is his cloak,*” whereupon the man said: “By God, you are in more urgent need of a cloak of wool than of a cloak of this kind!”²⁴

Just as the introduction did, the middle part ends with a quotation that does not rhyme with the preceding colon. The phrase “This is the time” is a clear marker for the onset of the final passage, in which the writer brings together all the themes of the letter:

وهذا وقت عاطفة من كرمه تُغطي على الشين * وتُنصفُ من هذا البلد الذي لا
أزال فيه بين برد جسّد وسخنة عين * وارسالها من ملابسه الشريفة وثيرة الجوانب *
قويّة المناكب * أكفّ بها هذه العبرات والعبر * وأحلف قيس بن عاصم فأصبح سيّد
أهل الوبر *

This is the time for an act of mercy of his magnanimity to cover this dishonor | and to compensate for this country, which makes

²² His hair has been turned white by hair frost (*darīb = jalīd*), and he has been turned old by fate (*darīb*, the third arrow in the *maysir* game, means “lot, fate,” as all other “arrow” terms).

²³ Literally: “bury.”

²⁴ Quoted in several collections of old Arabic Bedouin lore; see, for example, Manṣūr ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ābi, *Nathr al-Durr*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Alī Qarnah et al. (Cairo, 1980–91), 7:262, 267; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Al-Tadhkirah al-Ḥamdūniyah*, ed. Iḥsān and Bakr ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1996), 7:248.



me live with a cold body and a hot²⁵ eye, || (time for) the mercy of sending from his noble clothes a cloth with soft sides | and strong shoulders, || so that I can keep away with them these tears and terrors²⁶ | and become, as a successor of Qays ibn ʿĀṣim, the Lord of the people of the fur (= Bedouins).²⁷ ||

Resuming the theme of “greeting,” Ibn Nubātah now expresses his request for a coat—but what sort of a coat? The preceding colons have shown that there are different sorts of cloaks, such as cloaks of fur and cloaks of honor and of glory. Sometimes people have more need for a coat of fur than a coat of glory. But what cloak did Ibn Nubātah need? Snowy weather does not last too long in Damascus. The more pressing problem is *being a stranger*. Ibn Nubātah introduced himself in the letter as a stranger. Here the subject is taken up again and contrasted in the form of “hot tears” with the cold weather, which could also be read as a metaphor for being alone and without friends far from home, a central theme of Arabic literature across history.²⁸ Contrary to the Bedouin, who needed a real cloak and not a cloak of honor, Ibn Nubātah, the stranger, needs al-Qazwīnī’s cloak of honor with its “soft sides” to give him emotional warmth and “strong shoulders” to lean against and to keep away the “tears and terrors” of being an outsider. Ibn Nubātah’s request, obviously, is for a “coat of friendship” rather than for a coat of squirrel fur.

Up until the very last sentence of his letter, Ibn Nubātah continues to contrast the themes of his letters with each other:

والله تعالى يعين به كرمه على هذا القُطر وقِطاره * والأفق ومطار أمطاره * ويغنينا عن
هذا البرد وإن كان لؤلؤاً منثوراً * وهذه السُّ قيا وإن كان مزاجها من الثلج
﴿كافورا﴾ [الإنسان : ٥]

May God—exalted be He—aid with His grace against this region and its rains, | its sky and its earth, on which the rainfalls pour down; || and may He part away from us these hailstones, even if they are pearls dispersed, | and make us free from want of such an irrigation, even if “its mixture,” due to the snow, “is camphor.” (Q 76:5). ||

²⁵ The eye is inflamed with crying.

²⁶ Literally: “(detering) experiences.”

²⁷ Qays ibn ʿĀṣim was a companion of the Prophet from the tribe of Tamīm whom the prophet had called *sayyid ahl al-wabar*; see M. J. Kister, “Qays b. ʿĀṣim,” *EL* 2 4:832–33.

²⁸ See Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin, 2011): 343–75.



With God's (and, one must add, with the addressee's) help, the end is a bit more placatory than the beginning. While in the introduction Ibn Nubātah denied harshly that a "white morning" has anything to do with snow, or a smile anything with lightning, in the end he at least admits that the hail is pearls and the snow is camphor; however, not without restriction. In this way Ibn Nubātah manages to bring together all threads that run through the whole of the letter, and these are exactly the strands he had already laid down in the introductory passage. The *mizāj* of the letter is in fact *kāfūr*, because *kāfūr*, the letter's last word, is at the same time a beautiful thing, the snow, and a Quranic quotation.

The main principle of construction of this and countless other letters could be described as contextualization and permanent recontextualization of a set of themes, motives, and literary techniques, which are already introduced in the beginning of the text.

A Side Glance at the *Qaṣīdah*

It is interesting to observe that many of Ibn Nubātah's *qaṣīdahs* follow exactly the same principle. Abbasid *qaṣīdahs* are made up of several building blocks, which are clearly separated from each other, each constituting an independent thematic unit. Again, the castle of Münster may serve as an analogy. Ibn Nubātah's *qaṣīdahs* are different. Still, they consist of different building blocks, which I call "the frame," mostly *nasīb* and *madih*. But the boundary between these sections is blurred. Instead in the *nasīb*, the poet introduces several *themes* as well as what I call *leitmotifs*. The *nasīb* thus functions as a sort of *exposition* of the themes and leitmotifs of the *qaṣīdah*, whereas the rest of the *qaṣīdah* is the *development*, in which this material is subject to continuous variation and recontextualization. Again, the houses of the Prinzipalmarkt may serve as an illustration. In al-Mutanabbī's famous poem on the victory of al-Ḥadath, vultures appear twice. But the second vultures are the same vultures as the first ones.²⁹ In Ibn Nubātah's poem on the enthronement of al-Afḍal of Ḥamāh, rain and other forms of precipitation and water appear throughout the whole of the *qaṣīdah*, but hardly twice in the same sense. Instead, there is nearly always another meaning, another reference, and/or a different context. In addition, this poem is also full of quotations from other works, which are now put into a new context. An "aesthetics of smooth transitions," which may have its origin in prose texts, especially in letters,

²⁹ On this poem see Derek Latham, "Towards a Better Understanding of al-Mutanabbī's Poem on the Battle of al-Ḥadath," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 10 (1979): 1–22; a more general study on the structure of al-Mutanabbī's poems is Andras Hamori, *The Composition of Mutanabbī's Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla* (Leiden, 1992).



is also clearly discernible in this text.³⁰ Anyway, it would be an interesting task to try to find out to what degree the aesthetics of the letter influenced the aesthetics of the *qaṣīdah* in the Mamluk era. Of course, many more poems would have to be analyzed, not least to find out if the techniques noted here are particular to Ibn Nubātah or characteristic of the period as a whole.

Concluding Remarks

To give a summary, which can only be preliminary at present, we could say that Abbasid poets like al-Mutanabbī devised their *qaṣīdahs* as an arranged sequence of themes and subjects, whereas a Mamluk poet like Ibn Nubātah wove a multi-dimensional thread of variations and recontextualizations. While Abbasid texts tend to be representative, self-focused, and constructed to impress and overwhelm, Mamluk texts tend to be communicative, context-implicated, and constructed to invite the reader to participate. When a critic recently denounced Mamluk poetry for its “lack of virility,” she was not altogether wrong. “Virility” is clearly to be sought at the representational end of literature, but Mamluk authors were more oriented towards the other end, the participational pole of literary conversation, where one would rather look for wit and elegance, which can be found in Mamluk literature in abundance.

One may speculate now about why many modern scholars of Arabic literature favor representation, heroism, and virility instead of sophistication, elegance, and, let us say, a literature of “civil society.” The political situation of the contemporary Arab world must certainly play an important role in this perspective, fostering the yearning for a Golden Age that can only be attained by heroic struggle. Mamluk literature does indeed have less to offer as a soundtrack for this struggle compared to al-Mutanabbī.

In any case, the shift from the representative and authoritarian towards a more civil, “bourgeois” literature of participation can hardly be considered the result of decadence. Instead, in the Mamluk period we encounter a lively, vigorous literary culture, in which broader layers of society than ever before took part and in which a number of elite poets produced texts that were by no means any less developed and original than their predecessors in the Abbasid period. The aesthetic principles of these texts are different, but they had to be different because times had changed and a new society demanded different kinds of texts. Mamluk men and women of letters managed perfectly to adapt literature to the requirements of their transformed society. What is demanded now from us is to listen patiently

³⁰ See Thomas Bauer, “‘Der Fürst ist tot, es lebe der Fürst!’ Ibn Nubātas Gedicht zur Inthronisation al-Afdals von Ḥamāh (632/1332),” in *Orientalistische Studien zu Sprache und Literatur: Festgabe zum 65. Geburtstag von Werner Diem*, ed. Ulrich Marzolph (Wiesbaden, 2011), 285–315.



to Mamluk authors and carefully analyze their texts, to elucidate their own aesthetic standards, and judge their texts by this rather than apply a yardstick of heroism that does not match the participational aesthetics of the Mamluk middle classes.



©2013 by Thomas Bauer.

DOI: [10.6082/M1MC8X63](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1MC8X63). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1MC8X63>)

DOI of Vol. XVII: [10.6082/M18050P5](https://doi.org/10.6082/M18050P5). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/5ZJ0-6548> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.