

Reflections on Arabic Poetry in the Mamluk Age

I

Arabic poetry composed during the Mamluk Empire (1250-1517) is a vast and rich resource for the study of Arabic and Islamic cultures. Yet it is a resource that is seldom tapped due largely, I suspect, to its raw state, for the majority of this verse is to be found only in manuscript form. Brockelmann, for example, lists approximately twenty *dīwāns* from this period, most of which are still in manuscript today, and this number grows substantially when one includes additional holdings at Cairo's Dār al-Kutub and the Arab League Manuscript Institute; other collections, such as those in Damascus and Istanbul, will undoubtedly add to the total.¹

From among these many manuscripts, about a dozen have been edited and published over the last century. In addition, a substantial number of edited Arabic poems from the Mamluk period may be found in a wide variety of published sources including chronicles, such as Ibn Taghrībirdī's *al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah*, biographical works, such as al-Ṣafādī's *al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt*, and several poetic works and anthologies, including Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī's *Khizānat al-Adab wa-Ghāyat al-Arab*. Some poems from these and other published works have been collected by 'Umar Fārūq in volume three of his *Ta'rīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī*. Fārūq's encyclopedic work is arranged chronologically and includes brief biographies, bibliographical information, and samples of verse by over seventy-five poets of the Mamluk era.²

Yet even these many published poems have received scant attention from Western scholars. This continued neglect may reflect the lingering influence of older surveys of Arabic literature which, if they discuss Mamluk Arabic poetry at all, usually dismiss it in a few pages.³ For instance, at the turn of the century R. A. Nicholson noted that while Mamluk Arabic poetry had yet to receive extensive study, its best poets were "merely elegant and accomplished artists, playing brilliantly with words and phrases, but doing little else."⁴

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¹Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1943), 2:3-24; S2:1-13.

²'Umar Fārūq, *Ta'rīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 1975), 3:602-977.

³See Clément Huart, *A History of Arabic Literature* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1903), 323-333; Ignaz Goldziher, *History of Classical Arabic Literature* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 153-154. A. J. Arberry ignores the Mamluks in his *Arabic Poetry: A Primer for Students* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

⁴R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (1907; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 448-450.



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Fifty years after Nicholson, the situation remained much the same in terms of both the lack of Western research on Mamluk Arabic poetry, and the entrenched scholarly views of Arabic literary history. In the second edition of his survey *Arabic Literature*, H. A. R. Gibb divides this heritage into periods mirroring their respective political developments: the "Heroic Age" of pre-Islamic Arabia led to the Umayyad "Age of Expansion," while the early Abbasid "Golden Age" inevitably declined in the "Silver Age" of the Saljuqs until the Fall of Baghdad. What then follows until 1800, Gibb simply labels the "Age of the Mamluks" whose literary output, he says, "was enormous throughout, but the qualities of originality, virility, and imagination, weak from the first, die away completely by the sixteenth century."⁵

It should come as no surprise, then, that the last thirty years have seen only a handful of articles in Western languages involving Mamluk Arabic poetry.⁶ This lack of Western scholarly concern may also account for an anomaly in the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*; having surveyed Arabic prose and poetry from their pre-Islamic roots through their flowering in the Abbasid Age, this series has recently passed over the Mamluk and Ottoman periods to publish a volume on contemporary Arabic Literature.⁷

II

Fortunately, modern studies of Mamluk poetry in Arabic have been more extensive and promising. As early as the 1940s several studies appeared touching upon Arabic literature in the Mamluk era,⁸ but it was in the late sixties and early seventies, that the subject drew the attention of a considerable number of Arab scholars. This has resulted in the editing and publication of some additional *dīwāns*, a few new surveys, and a small

⁵H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 142. Gibb does not cite any Arabic poetry from the Mamluk period, and he mentions only one Mamluk poet by name, al-Būṣīrī.

⁶Ahmad al-Ghawaby, "Al-Maqrizi as a Poet," *Minbar al-Islam* 2, no. 4 (1962): 28-30; Barbara Flemming, "Literary Activities in Mamluk Halls and Barracks," in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. M. Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem: Institute of Asian and African Studies, 1977), 249-260; Victor Danner, "Al-Būṣīrī: His Times and His Prophetology," in *Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies: A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Wadie Jwaideh*, ed. Robert Olsen (Brattleboro, Vermont: Amana Books, 1987), 41-61; Th. Emil Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night: Elegy and Immortality in Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1991): 247-279; idem, "'I've Stayed by the Grave': A *Nasīb*/Elegy for Nuḍār," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 107-118. Also see the earlier article by Mohammad Awad, "Sultan al-Ghawri: His Place in Literature and Learning (Three Books Written under His Patronage)," in *Actes du XX. congrès international des orientalistes*, Brussels, 5-10 September 1938 (Louvain, 1940), 321-322.

⁷The Cambridge series is planning a volume to cover Arabic literature during the period 1150-1850; tentatively entitled *The Post-Classical Period*, this volume is to be edited by D. S. Richards and Roger Allen. As for *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the second edition contains brief entries on a number of Arabic poets of the Mamluk period, including al-Būṣīrī, Ibn Abī Ḥajalah, Ibn 'Afīf al-Tilimsānī, Ibn Ḥijjah, Ibn Isrā'īl, and Ibn Nubātah.

⁸See 'Abd al-Laṭīf Ḥamzah's brief remarks in his *al-Ḥarakah al-Fikrīyah fī Miṣr fī al-'Aṣrayn al-Ayyūbī wa-al-Mamlūkī al-Awwal* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, [1945]), 262-287; al-Ṣībā'ī al-Bayyūmī, *Ta'rīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī bi-Miṣr wa-al-Shām 'alā 'Aḥday al-Mamālīk wa-al-'Uthmānīyīn* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-'Ulūm, 1947-48), 78-156. Al-Bayyūmī's treatment of poetry is very general and lacking analysis and source citations.



number of monographs that target specific poets. As to be expected, several of the surveys are very basic introductions to Mamluk Arabic prose and poetry, based largely on a very limited number of published sources. For example, Muḥammad Kāmil al-Fiḳī's *al-Adab fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* briefly reviews Mamluk poetry together with prose works in context of the politics and culture of the period. Al-Fiḳī notes the "conservative character" of this poetry in both form and content, decries the prominence of ornamentation and literary devices in both prose and poetry, and mentions the spread of new popular poetic forms and folk verse.⁹

A more recent and expanded introduction is that of Shawqī Ḍayf, forming volume six of his *Ta'rīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī*. Ḍayf divides this work into two major sections, one on the literature of Egypt, the other on that of Syria. In his chapters on poetry, Ḍayf draws attention to the long history of Arabic poetry in the region pre-dating the Mamluks, and then briefly discusses popular poetic forms, including *rubā'ī* and *muwashshah*, which became popular in the late Abbasid and early Mamluk periods. He then turns to more traditional genres, including *madīh*, *rithā'*, *fakhr*, *hijā'*, and *ghazal*, citing examples of each from poets spanning the entire Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. Ḍayf also treats this poetry thematically, including sections on Shī'ī, Sufī, and philosophical verse, and poems in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad, as well as providing sections on humorous verse and folk poetry. Again, Ḍayf cites numerous verses to illustrate his themes and briefly examines the work of representative poets. Often he provides useful paraphrases of their verse, but offers little other interpretation or analysis; this survey also lacks a bibliography.¹⁰

Several earlier works may be used to substantially supplement Ḍayf's introduction, and they may have inspired his division of poetry between that of Egypt and Syria. 'Umar Mūsā Bāshā in *Adab al-Duwal al-Mutatābi'ah* concentrates on the prose and poetry of Syria from the Zangids through the Ayyubids and to the Mamluks, ending with the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn. Bāshā gives an overview of major political events, as well as of the social, religious, and moral life of this period with its use of wine and hashish, both of which were accompanied by other illicit activities. Bāshā notes that in spite of such wayward tendencies, this age, particularly under the Ayyubids, witnessed an intellectual and cultural florescence, which was carried on by the early Mamluks who likewise patronized the various arts and sciences.¹¹

Bāshā organizes his long subsequent section on poetry around eleven Syrian poets representing many of the genres and poetic trends of the times; he gives a biography of each poet, noting their literary work, and citing examples of their favored genres, themes, and styles. Included from the Mamluk period are al-Ashraf al-Anṣārī (d. 662/1264) with his elegant poetic style, al-Shāb al-Zarīf (d. 688/1289) with his enchanting verse on wine and love, and al-Talla'farī (d. 675/1277) with his simple poetry on life and experience.¹²

Drawing on his substantial studies of these eleven poets, Bāshā next appraises the overall state of poetry during this period, largely in terms of styles and themes. He finds

⁹Muḥammad Kāmil al-Fiḳī, *al-Adab fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1976), 126-182. For a similar introduction, see Muḥammad Khafājī, *al-Ḥayāh al-Adabīyah fī Miṣr: al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī wa-al-'Uthmānī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kullīyah al-Azharīyah, 1984).

¹⁰Shawqī Ḍayf, *Ta'rīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1984), 6:161-399, 604-778.

¹¹'Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Adab al-Duwal al-Mutatābi'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth, 1967), 3-173.

¹²Ibid., 177-445.



several major literary trends in this verse: (1) *al-madrasah al-taqlīdīyah*, the traditional or imitative school, composing poetry for the most part in accord with the classical canon; (2) *madhhab al-tawriyah wa-al-insijām*, also called the school of "licit magic," an innovative movement using allusion and symbols with an elegant style to express abstract thoughts and feelings, often of a religious nature. This movement produced a third one tending toward ornamentation, (3) a *badī'* or highly rhetorical style characterized by *jinās* (paronomasia) and *ṭibāq* (antithesis), and finally there is (4) *madhhab al-funūn al-shi'rīyah al-mustaḥdathah* representing recent folk and colloquial poetic concerns and forms.¹³

Turning to major themes and genres, Bāshā suggests that poems in praise of Muḥammad—one of the featured genres of the time—arose out of the chaos of the Crusades and the Mongol threat. Following Ayyubid practice, the Mamluks fostered a conscious sense of Muslim identity by encouraging devotion to Muḥammad, clearly manifest in panegyrics of him. Poetry was also used to incite the troops to battle against the Crusaders who were usually portrayed by poets as the evil other. Bāshā also notes Mamluk influence on the archetypal beloved who increasingly appears as a Turkish maiden or young boy. Still, some poets, such as al-Shāb al-Ẓarīf, resisted this innovation, and Bāshā suggests that the continued use of an Arab beloved and the nostalgia for the days of the Arab Prophet may underscore a deep dissatisfaction on the part of many Arab subjects with their Turkish masters and their military rule.¹⁴

Bāshā further observes that there was a proliferation of poetry among all social classes accompanied by new poetry (*al-funūn al-shi'rīyah al-mustaḥdathah*) with its folk and musical elements. Bāshā describes and gives examples of many of these newer forms including *muwashshah*, *zajal*, *rubā'ī*, *mawwāl*, and *musammaṭ*. Though popular with the masses for expressing their work-a-day life and humor, these folk genres, Bāshā claims, also afforded accomplished poets an occasional opportunity to escape the burden of the classical Arabic tradition.¹⁵

In contrast to this often simple, colloquial verse were the traditional or imitative genres (*al-aghrād al-taqlīdīyah*) of intellectuals and more serious poets. But here, too, Bāshā finds an uneasiness with tradition as many poets opened their *nasībs* with the Nuwāsian rejection of the ruins and beloveds of Arab legend. Further, under the inspiration of Abū Tammām (d. ca. 232/846) and al-Buḥtarī (d. ca. 284/897), poets increasingly used ornamentation and rhetorical devices to embellish their verse, going to great lengths to distinguish themselves from their poetic forefathers.¹⁶ Bāshā surveys, with illustrations, various figures of speech and rhetorical devices including personification (*tashkhīṣ*), simile and metaphor (*tashbīh*, *isti'ārah*), antithesis (*ṭibāq*), and paronomasia (*jinās*), and cites as a typical example of excess Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī's (d. 749/1349) *al-Badī'īyah al-Nabawīyah*; this panegyric on Muḥammad is composed of approximately 140 verses, each featuring a different rhetorical device. Bāshā is disturbed by such *badī'* poets, whom he criticizes as mind-slaves to style, wasting their time on verse games, and he quotes several denunciations of their poetry by critics of the period. Nevertheless, Bāshā

¹³Ibid., 446-456.

¹⁴Ibid., 456-530, esp. 416, 462.

¹⁵Ibid., 581-635.

¹⁶Ibid., 531-580.



notes that *badī'* verse was only one of multiple poetic tendencies of this eclectic period, which also produced less affected, more elegant and sincere verse.¹⁷

For this study of Syrian poets, Bāshā draws many of his examples from both published works and manuscripts, which he lists separately in a very useful bibliography. However, Bāshā is far more dependent on published and secondary sources for his subsequent study *Ta'riḫ al-Adab al-'Arabī: al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī*. Again, Bāshā organizes his study chronologically around individual authors whom he finds representative of important literary trends. In matters of verse, he devotes separate chapters to the lives and works of eight poets, including al-Anṣārī, al-Talla'farī, and al-Shāb al-Zarīf, whose chapters are taken verbatim from Bāshā's earlier work, with several useful additions such as a section on al-Anṣārī's ascetic verse, and one on al-Shāb al-Zarīf's *Maqāmāt al-'Ushshāq*.¹⁸

Bāshā's new studies focus on al-Būṣīrī (d. 694/1295) and his panegyrics to the Prophet Muḥammad; the Sufi verse of al-Shāb al-Zarīf's father, 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291); Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī's playful and licentious verse in various poetic forms; Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (d. 768/1366) and his elegant poetry replete with symbolism and double entendre; the traditional panegyrist Ibn Mālik al-Ḥamawī (d. 917/1516), and finally, a short chapter on 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'unīyah (d. 922/1516), her Sufi verse, panegyrics for the Prophet, and poetic exchanges with her literary contemporaries.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Bāshā does not focus on a practitioner of the very popular *badī'* verse, which he personally dislikes, nor does he examine the new poetic forms in any detail, as he did in his earlier study of the Syrian poets. Further, his studies of individual poets of the Mamluk period are largely descriptive with little analysis or commentary. Nevertheless, Bāshā's history is a very readable introduction, providing a number of poems for further study.²⁰

Undoubtedly another fruitful source for Ḍayf and more recent scholars of literature in Mamluk Egypt has been the concise study of life and literature in Mamluk times, *al-Adab fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī*, by Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām.²¹ In volume one of this two-volume work, Sallām draws on a number of primary sources to present a plausible and detailed account of Mamluk politics, cultural and intellectual life, and religion. He pays particular attention to the military nature of the foreign Mamluk regime, which was supported at times by the largely Arab populace due to their fear of invasion by infidels, whether Christian Crusaders or pagan Mongols. But the Mamluk protectors were also predators as they vied with one another for wealth and power, and the endemic Mamluk disputes led to political and economic instability and social unrest. Further, Sallām suggests that the rigid stratification among the Mamluk ranks reinforced efforts to clearly distinguish and rank individuals and groups among the larger populace, whether in terms of occupation or religious affiliation.

¹⁷Ibid., 636-706.

¹⁸Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Ta'riḫ al-Adab al-'Arabī: al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Mu'āṣir, 1989), esp. 126-131, 249-253.

¹⁹Ibid., 97-451.

²⁰Bāshā also adds an appendix on reading and analyzing texts, using as examples al-Būṣīrī's *Burdah* and an elegy by Ibn Nubātah. In both cases, Bāshā makes several relevant observations regarding matters of form and influence, but his primary aim is the daunting task of evaluating the "sincerity" of the poets' intentions and emotions; *Ta'riḫ*, 623-702.

²¹Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām, *al-Adab fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1971).



Sallām briefly touches upon aspects of the lower classes and popular culture with several critical observations on the place of women within Mamluk society. He notes that while a few women became scholars many more staffed the marginal professions as singers, dancers, and prostitutes. He also cites several edicts that aimed to keep women segregated and subordinate in a man's world by proclaiming guidelines for their behavior and dress, which included prohibitions against their wearing turbans and men's clothes.²² Turning to cultural and intellectual life, Sallām, too, points to its conservative, preservative character as a response to the destruction of Baghdad in the East, and the Christian *reconquista* in the West. Cairo and, to a lesser extent, Damascus became bastions of Arab Muslim culture which, for a variety of political and economic factors, was generously supported by the Mamluk elite. Study of the various religious sciences flourished, and a strong Sunnī interpretation of Islam became ascendant.

Sallām reviews Mamluk achievements in the study of history, language, and the natural sciences, and then turns to religious life. He points out differences and tensions among the Sunnī *'ulamā'*, a distinct if diminishing Shī'ī presence in the empire, especially in the Hijaz, and the varying fortunes of non-Muslims. Sallām claims that the Mamluks consciously played on religious difference to divide and control their subjects.²³ Sallām then focuses on Sufism in the Mamluk era, its doctrines, orders, and major institutions, such as the *khānqāh*. He discusses poetry in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad, and reviews Sufi poetry's major themes and practitioners, but categorizes them generally in terms of the Sufi doctrines of monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), incarnationism (*al-ḥulūliyah*), and love of absolute beauty, rather than in terms of poetic form and style.²⁴

Sallām briefly surveys some of the arts and crafts patronized by the Mamluks, including architecture, textiles, and music, and the possible influence of the latter on the poetry of the period, particularly the newer poetic forms such as the *rubā'ī*, *mawwāl*, *muwashshah*, *zajal*, and *balīq*. Sallām cites examples of these "folk" forms which, he maintains, largely reflect the colloquial speech and everyday experiences of the masses. But Sallām asserts, as did Bāshā, that these popular forms also stimulated poets among the literary elite to experiment in matters of rhyme, meter, style, and modes of expression.²⁵

Having set this background, Sallām turns in his second volume first to prose and then to poetry proper. He claims that the non-Arab Mamluks were often ignorant of proper Arabic which, Sallām asserts, led to a slippage in poetic standards, as serious poets lacked an educated and appreciative audience. As a result patronage of verse was sporadic, and only rarely could an individual support himself solely by poetry. Nevertheless, the penchant for composing poetry spread throughout Mamluk society, especially among the scribal class and the *'ulamā'*, as well as among the poorer masses, and by the fourteenth century, colloquial Arabic and folk forms were widespread in Arabic poetry. Sallām suggests that such developments may have alienated many serious poets from the elite and commoners alike, and that this alienation may have inspired poems in praise of Muḥammad and Sufi verse, as did the threats of infidel invasion. Still, while most Mamluks had little taste for classical Arabic poems, Sallām notes that they certainly savored sad lamentations

²²Ibid., 1:13-104.

²³Ibid., 1:105-192.

²⁴Ibid., 1:193-274.

²⁵Ibid., 1:275-336.



for captured cities urging them on to action, and the subsequent rousing poetic accounts of their valiant military exploits, and stunning victories over Godless foes.

Turning from *madīḥ* and *ḥamāsah* verse to the *ghazal*, Sallām also draws attention to the Turkish Mamluks and the changing standards of beauty reflected in many *ghazals* of the period, as the beloved's form shifts from a dark, wide-eyed Arab, to a Turk, soft and white with slanting eyes. As for *hijā'*, or invective verse, Sallām notes its function as a vital form of social satire and criticism, often aimed at judges and other religious officials.²⁶ Then, leaving traditional poetry (*taqlīdī*), Sallām once again takes up folk forms and themes (*sha'bī*), the influence on them of music and Andalusian elements, and then briefly examines his third class of Mamluk poetry, *badī'*. Sallām catalogs various literary devices that came to dominate much of Mamluk poetry, particularly among the scribal class, once again with ample examples.²⁷

Following this overview of Mamluk Arabic poetry, Sallām gives entries for twenty-one poets spanning the Mamluk period. He arranges these entries chronologically according to death dates, determining, where possible, a poet's residence in either Egypt or Syria. Sallām draws his materials from previously published Mamluk sources, carefully cited for each entry, which vary in length from a paragraph to fifteen pages. Further, these entries follow the traditional Arab biographical form, recording, where possible, the poet's full name, place of birth and death, profession, teachers, students, patrons, and opinions on the poet and his verse by his contemporaries. Sallām also notes the types and genres preferred by each poet, often citing examples. Likewise, he pays careful attention to possible literary influences on individual poets, and to a poet's literary companions, including samples of poetic exchanges among them. While Sallām offers little literary analysis of particular poems or of Mamluk Arabic verse in general, his patient descriptive work is among the best introductions to literary life in the Mamluk era, and his bibliography cites many of the published primary sources available for further research on Mamluk Arabic poetry and poets.²⁸

A final survey worth noting is Bakrī Shaykh Amīn's *Muṭāla'āt fī al-Shi'r al-Mamlūkī wa-al-'Uthmānī*. Amīn aims to address Arabic verse more in aesthetic than historical terms, and his introduction immediately sets the tone of the work; he deplores the fact that many modern scholars have categorically dismissed the Arabic literature of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods as decadent, particularly due to the prominence of ornamentation and rhetorical devices in much of its poetry and prose. He castigates Arab scholars for turning away from this portion of their heritage due largely to its emphasis on formal qualities while, at the same time, embracing modern artists, like Picasso, who have similar formal concerns. Amīn feels that underlying this reorientation is a rejection of what is Arabic and Islamic in favor of what is Western and, hence, of Judaeo-Christian taste. He therefore proposes to give this Arabic literature its due.²⁹

Amīn begins his work with two chapters of general introduction to Arab history and culture from the late Saljuq through the Ottoman periods. Then he divides his study of Mamluk and Ottoman Arabic poetry based on the standard groupings of verse as either

²⁶Ibid., 2:105-120.

²⁷Ibid., 2:121-132.

²⁸Ibid., 2:133-250.

²⁹Bakrī Shaykh Amīn, *Muṭāla'āt fī al-Shi'r al-Mamlūkī wa-al-'Uthmānī*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 1986; 1st ed. 1972), 5-10.



traditional/imitative (*taqlīdī*) or new/innovative (*mustahdath*). He notes at the outset the sheer number of poets composing in Arabic from the Saljuq through the Ottoman periods, despite declining patronage under non-Arab rule; most of these individuals supported themselves by occupations other than their poetry which, nevertheless, served as a badge of cultural distinction. He further acknowledges the fact that much of their verse has been either lost or remains in manuscript.

But undeterred by this fact when addressing the major genres of classical Arabic poetry, including *madīh*, *rithā'*, *ghazal*, *fakhr*, *ḥamāsah*, *hijā'*, and *wasf*, Amīn concludes that Mamluk and Ottoman poets were bound by tradition, aiming to conserve it rather than to interact creatively with it. To support his case, Amīn compares panegyric verses by al-Nābighah (d. 604) with those of Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī; whereas the former pre-Islamic poet makes a concise comparison between his courageous patrons and a flock of predatory birds sweeping down on their prey, the Mamluk poet cobbles together a disparate host of traditional adjectives and images to praise his patron's courage.³⁰

Amīn acknowledges that some Mamluk poets occasionally broke with tradition, as when a few of them make a woman speak to express her feelings in love poetry, or when a poet describes markets, business transactions, or the effects of natural disasters.³¹ But in general, due to lack of patronage and a cynicism about the times, many poets turned away from expressing their true feelings only to submerge themselves in intricate word-play. Amīn claims that this tendency is quite evident in invective poetry which, he asserts, no longer critiqued a tribe or society, but rather attacked an individual, personal enemy. Amīn believes that this reflects the dissolution of tribal bonds as a result of urbanization and economic independence, and a refusal to criticize the ruling Mamluks for fear of reprisal. He ignores, however, Sallām's examples of verse critical of both the ruling elite and the religious establishment, perhaps regarding them as exceptions.³²

However, if poets were hesitant to compose invectives against their Mamluk masters, they were quick to praise them and their efforts on behalf of Islam. Amīn notes that images of the Mamluks as defenders of the faith and counter-Crusaders were essential to their legitimation, as were references to their ascetic almost saintly qualities. Further, these religious and doctrinal elements so central to the legitimacy of the Ayyubid and Mamluk regimes were extended in *ḥamāsah* poetry from praise for an individual amir to lauds for entire armies.³³

In spite of a few pertinent observations, Amīn's discussion of more traditional Arabic verse in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods adds little that is new. However, his second section on innovative verse is much more detailed, as he contrasts the conservatism in the classical genres to the free and playful spirit he finds in the new and innovative poetic forms and themes. Amīn devotes separate sections to a startling variety of Arabic verse including verses revealing important dates, verse riddles and puzzles, poetic "trees" where individual verses branch off from a central verse to create a poem, poems forming geometrical shapes, verses reading forward and backward, and poems, that if the end word is omitted from each verse, yield new poems with different rhymes and meters. Next, Amīn gives brief examples of various rhetorical devices to be found in this poetry and then,

³⁰Ibid., 81-98.

³¹Ibid., 99-125.

³²Ibid., 137-148.

³³Ibid., 126-136.



after his detailed account of the many complex and fantastic poetic forms, Amīn pronounces them all to be the trivialities and waste products of the "killing emptiness" of the age.³⁴

Amīn, however, finds some redeeming qualities in several of the thematic innovations of the period, particularly in the flourishing of Sufi themes and panegyrics of the Prophet. He ascribes the prominence of this religious verse to the tumultuous effects of the Crusades and the Mongol threat, and to a general dissatisfaction with Turkish rule, Mamluk or Ottoman. Amīn gives a sampling of Sufi verse by Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 637/1240), and ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī and a glance at their poetic sources in early poetry praising Muḥammad, and love and wine poetry, which they adapted as a mode of expression appropriate to their efforts and experiences in the mystic way. Amīn then reviews panegyrics of Muḥammad in the context of Sufism and the dominant influence of al-Būṣīrī’s *Burdah* on this religious genre, which often prays for the Prophet’s intercession on behalf of the poet and his sad state.³⁵ Amīn rounds out this section on thematic innovation with a few brief references to poems on hashish and their possible connection to homosexuality, sarcastic and humorous verse serving as an outlet for personal and social frustrations, poems about one’s own wretchedness, and *ikhwānīyāt*, poems exchanged among friends and colleagues as expressions of admiration and affection.³⁶

In his final observations, Amīn stresses the fact that literary history is not identical to political dynasties and geographical borders. Nevertheless, he sees a decline in poetic quality resulting from a loss of state patronage now in the hands of a foreign, largely Turkish elite. This was accompanied by a changing Arabic language with more colloquial elements and less nuance, and a widening gap between popular parlance and a literary language losing vitality and emotive power as it severed its links to life. Fleeing the brutality of their world, poets retreated to their literary ivory towers; they became learned to the point of being esoteric, but while they could be clever, they were not committed to a larger life and its poetic expression.³⁷

III

Despite his initial defense of Arabic poetry from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, Bakrī Amīn, in the end, sides with a majority of Arab literary scholars in holding a dim view of this poetry, which they have labeled variously as decadent, pallid, worn out, and lacking authenticity. While similar Western appraisals seem to stem, in part, from idealized views of Arab culture and Islamic history, most Arab negative opinions appear to be the product of a pervasive reading of this poetry in terms of romantic notions of creativity that embrace the simple and emotional as indicative of personal experience, sincerity, and truth.

Therefore, condemnation of Mamluk Arabic verse as decadent and superficial says more about modern tastes than it does about this poetry and its roles within Mamluk society. A useful corrective to this state of affairs is *al-Naqd al-Adabī fī-al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* by ‘Abduh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Qulqaylah. Inspired by the work of earlier scholars,

³⁴Ibid., 161-229.

³⁵Ibid., 233-275.

³⁶Ibid., 276-294.

³⁷Ibid., 298-320.



among them Maḥmūd Rizq Salīm and Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām, Qulqaylah presents an extensive survey of twenty-six litterateurs and scholars of the Mamluk period and their views on Arabic literature.³⁸ He compiles their opinions on a number of specific critical issues, including what factors make a good writer, effects of the environment on a writer, and the appropriateness of artistic elements in writing, and then turns to matters of form, content, and literary borrowing or theft (*sariqāt*).³⁹

Specifically in matters of poetry, Qulqaylah shows that Mamluk critics followed earlier tradition in their preference for a largely paratactic poetic structure, and in their appraisals of classical genres: invective poetry may be seen as a negative panegyric; the function of the *nasīb* is to attract the listener's attention by mentioning the beloved, while a proper *ghazal* relates the words and acts occurring between lovers; elegy should never contain erotic or pleasurable themes but should, instead, focus on the deceased's good qualities and lasting legacy.⁴⁰ As for *badī'*, it is quite clear that many of the critics surveyed by Qulqaylah appreciated its creative potential and the erudition that it displayed, particularly in high quality verse involving allusion or double entendre (*tawriyah*). Yet a number of critics denounced the burgeoning of rhetorical devices, which threatened to choke poetic spontaneity, and they sought to stem its excesses, though not its creative uses per se.⁴¹

In addition to Qulqaylah's study, recent Western research on pre-Islamic and classical Arabic poetry has also challenged persistent romantic misreading of pre-modern Arabic verse.⁴² Among this work is Stefan Sperl's insightful book on mannerism in Arabic poetry of the fifth/eleventh century. Sperl argues that mannerism is defined by the way in which a particular poem relates to previous literary convention and subjects. Specifically, mannerism's primary subject is the poetic tradition itself, as the poet aims to invoke wonder in his audience through various rhetorical strategies. The poet's playful and intricate weave of antitheses and metaphorical inversions creates discord between signifier and signified, calling into question normal perception while, at the same time, suggesting a seamless reality where the ordinary may suddenly be transformed into the miraculous.⁴³

Such work by Sperl and others holds promise for a better grasp and understanding of Mamluk poetry, particularly in its *badī'* and mystical varieties.⁴⁴ Yet considerable

³⁸Abduh 'Abd al-'Azīz Qulqaylah, *al-Naqd al-Adabī fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjū-Miṣrīyah, 1972), 49-207.

³⁹Ibid., 211-278, 281-389.

⁴⁰Ibid., 365-369, 393-417.

⁴¹Ibid., 419-432.

⁴²In particular see the work of Jaroslav Stetkevych, "Some Observations on Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26 (1967): 1-12; idem, "Arabism and Arabic Literature: Self-view of a Profession," *JNES* 28 (1969): 145-156; idem, "The Arabic Lyrical Phenomena in Context," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 6 (1975): 55-77; idem, "The Arabic *Qasīdah*: From Form and Content to Mood and Meaning," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3-4 (1979-80): 774-785; idem, "Arabic Poetry and Assorted Poetics," in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, ed. Malcolm H. Kerr (Malibu, California: Undena Publications, 1980), 103-123. Also see Michael Sells, "The *Qasīda* and the West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter," *Al-'Arabiyya* 20 (1987): 307-357; Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁴³Stefan Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry: A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts (3rd Century AH/9th Century AD—5th Century AH/11th Century AD)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. 1-7, 155-180.

⁴⁴Also see Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām and the Poetics of the 'Abbāsīd Age* (Leiden: E. J. Brill,



groundwork remains to be done in the forms of additional edited *dīwāns* and other primary sources, and more focused research on themes, genres, and poets. Presently, there are very few studies on individual poets. Jawād Aḥmad ‘Allūsh, Maḥmūd Rizq Salīm, and Yāsīn Ayyūbī have surveyed the writings of the poet and critic Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī;⁴⁵ ‘Umar Mūsá Bāshā has examined the work Ibn Nubātah, Maḥmūd Rabdāwī has studied the work of Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, while Ibrāhīm Jād al-Rabb recently completed a study of the writings of Ibn Makānis (d. 794/1392).⁴⁶

Among the many poets requiring further focused attention are al-Shāb al-Zarīf, al-Būshīrī, Ibn Abī Ḥajalah (d. 776/1375), and ‘Ā’ishah al-Bā’ūnīyah, a celebrated woman scholar and litterateur. Her work raises an issue seldom addressed in the study of the Mamluk period, namely verse by women poets. Careful study of their verse and a comparison of it to that of their male contemporaries might reveal differing concerns and experiences based in part on gender. Although extant Arabic poetry by women of the pre-modern eras is scarce, I have found some verse by women in Mamluk biographical dictionaries, and recently I managed to obtain copies of several manuscripts of ‘Ā’ishah’s *Dīwān*.

In addition to these poets, many other individuals composed Arabic poetry during the Mamluk period, and we should attempt to distinguish serious poets from interested amateurs. By studying the number and transmission of manuscripts of specific poets we may better appreciate the literary tastes and preferences of the time and so discover which poets were read most often and served as the focus for study and commentary;⁴⁷ this was clearly the case with al-Būshīrī, for instance, whose *Burdah* became a part of the Arabic poetic canon. Also worthy of study are the possible effects of ethnicity, class, education, and occupation on the Arabic verse of individual poets. As discussed by Li Guo elsewhere in this volume, education and occupation were important factors in the approach and style of Mamluk histories distinguishing, to a degree, historians from Damascus from those in Cairo; we should be alert to a similar situation among poets.

A related issue demanding further attention is that of the colloquial and folk-inspired poetic forms, which were also utilized by many accomplished poets. As we have seen, this verse has been described and discussed in a number of surveys, and to these discussions should be added Paul Kahle’s recently published edition of three shadow plays by Ibn Dāniyāl,⁴⁸ as well as Aḥmad Ṣādiq al-Jammāl’s pioneering study *al-Adab al-‘Āmmī fī Miṣr fī al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī*. Al-Jammāl draws distinctions between official literary Arabic (*fuṣḥá*), ungrammatical variations on this literary language deriving in part from the common parlance of the masses (*‘āmmīyah*), and the related, though largely oral folk traditions with their anonymous cycles of myth and legend (*sha’bī*). Al-Jammāl

1991); Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴⁵Jawād Aḥmad ‘Allūsh, *Shi’r Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī* (Baghdad: Maṭba‘at Ma‘ārif, ca. 1959); Maḥmūd Rizq Salīm, *Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī* (reprint, Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1980); Yāsīn Ayyūbī, *Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1971).

⁴⁶‘Umar Mūsá Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1963); Maḥmūd Rabdāwī, *Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, Shā’ir wa-Nāqid* (Damascus: Dār Qutaybah, 1982); Ibrāhīm Jād al-Rabb, *Ibn Makānis wa-al-Shi’r fī ‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Cairo: Markaz al-Nashr li-Jāmi‘at al-Qāhirah, 1990).

⁴⁷Suggested by Dr. Frank Lewis in response to my presentation of this paper at the Mamluk Studies Workshop, University of Chicago, April 26, 1996.

⁴⁸Paul Kahle, ed., *Three Shadow Plays by Muḥammad Ibn Dāniyāl*, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, n.s. no. 32 (Cambridge: Trustees of the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, 1992).



concentrates on the colloquial literature in terms of the political, social, and intellectual life of Mamluk Egypt.⁴⁹ He then discusses major colloquial forms, including the *muwashshah*, *zajal*, and *balīq*, their meters, diction, and themes, and major practitioners of several of these popular verse forms.⁵⁰

Al-Jammāl stresses that while colloquial verse is light and musical in style, it may still bear substantive meaning, often of a socio-political nature. Less restricted in both form and theme than the classical tradition, colloquial Arabic became a pliant language for expressing both public and private sentiments, either directly or by insinuation through various forms of word-play. Thus, this delightful verse could momentarily relieve the stress of life's vicissitudes, while giving vent to the frustrations of the poet and larger populace.⁵¹ Al-Jammāl, too, seems to hold romantic assumptions regarding poetry when he accepts colloquial verse as a sincere and accurate reflection of the poet's life and personal experience. Nevertheless, he is quite sensitive to this poetry's functions and value, especially when compared to the majority of scholars who have dismissed this and other playful verse as a waste of time and of little aesthetic worth.

Dealing with a similar situation involving fifteenth century Timurid Persian riddles, Paul Losensky has called attention to the overly serious approach taken by modern scholars to such verse. Drawing on the work of Johan Huizinga and Jan Mukarovsky,⁵² Losensky points out that in many periods types of poetry and versification have served as a social ritual or game where play, not profundity, was the aim. In the Timurid case, riddles often play on personal names, promoting an accepted mode of social exchange—a kind of greeting card—created for immediate consumption by a host and his guest.⁵³

Losensky's insightful observations should be extended to riddles, colloquial verse, and other occasional Mamluk Arabic poems, which were probably never intended to meet the highest aesthetic standards, nor to stand the test of time as literary masterpieces. Following Losensky's lead, we may make a useful distinction between poetry of conscious aesthetic aspirations and sensibilities, and more disposable verse intended for a limited audience and immediate use. Thus poems like those reviewed by Bakrī Amīn—reading forward and backward, or in botanical and geometric shapes, or poems in which the omission of the end words produces new poems—should be seen as a kind of "verse-search," indicative more of playful erudition and cultural sophistication than of artistic decline and decadence.

Similarly serving everyday social needs are the hundreds of occasional poems, including verses exchanged between friends (*ikhwānīyāt*) to express affection and get-well wishes, poems celebrating special occasions, and elegies offering condolences. Again, a modern analogy is our own Hallmark cards containing verses to commemorate particular types of occasions. Few scholars of English would consider this verse to be original

⁴⁹Aḥmad Ṣādiq al-Jammāl, *al-Adab al-‘Āmmī fī Miṣr fī al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Cairo: Dār al-Qawmīyah, 1966), 3-65.

⁵⁰Ibid., 69-216.

⁵¹Ibid., 217-219.

⁵²See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 119-135; Jan Mukarovsky, *Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts*, trans. M. E. Suino, Michigan Slavic Contributions, no. 3 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1979), esp. 60-64.

⁵³Paul Losensky, "Welcoming Fighānī: Imitation, Influence, and Literary Change in the Persian *Ghazal*, 1480-1680." 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1993), 1:160-72.



poetry of high caliber, yet it is precisely its standardized form and restricted number of easily recognizable cultural ideals and traditional motifs that render such verse so very useful.

Careful study of Arabic occasional poetry from the Mamluk period could thus sharpen our perceptions of social etiquette and proper conduct, as well as of the cultural ideals and sentiments encoded in this poetry. While it is true that identifiable authors composed this Arabic verse—in contrast to the largely anonymous verse of our own occasion cards—we should not be obsessed with questions regarding the “sincerity” of a poet’s sentiments. Rather, we should probe the criteria that culturally identify these sentiments and their appropriateness on a given occasion. In other words, the emphasis here should not be on the truth or actual existence of these feelings in a poet, but of their proper identification, as such; it is not a question of these sentiments *being* so, but of their *being so*.⁵⁴

Clearly, poetry has been fundamental over the centuries to Islamic culture for expressing feelings and beliefs, and for articulating views on life, society, and politics. Though poetry’s importance to Muslim societies has long been noted, there are few studies of this poetry’s place and function within broader historical and religious contexts. Yet poetry and the other arts can be invaluable instruments for sensing the undercurrents of submerged history, what Fernand Braudel has also called the “unconscious history” holding the basic values and foundational structures of a civilization.⁵⁵ Just as Medieval European painting before and after the Black Death vividly portrays changing notions of life, death, and dying,⁵⁶ so too may Arabic poetry reflect and reveal shifting views and patterns of belief fundamental to Mamluk society and its larger Islamic civilization.

In fact, this poetry, too, registered changes wrought by the plague,⁵⁷ and some of the many other topics and areas for further research have been touched upon in surveys, especially those by Maḥmūd Rizq Salīm and Fawzī Amīn. Maḥmūd Rizq Salīm filled a large volume of his *‘Aṣr al-Salāṭīn al-Mamālīk* with verse regarding Egyptian life during the Mamluk era. Drawing material from published sources and some manuscripts, Salīm cites verse toward the end of volume seven to illustrate various features of Egypt, including the Nile and the Nilometer, the island of Rawḍah, various lakes, and other natural phenomena.⁵⁸ Then in volume eight, Salīm cites poetry first to enliven his account of political events, and then to illustrate aspects of the cultural and social life of the period.⁵⁹

⁵⁴David Schalkwyk, “Fiction as ‘Grammatical’ Investigation: A Wittgensteinian Account,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, no. 3 (Summer, 1995): 290 and citing Stanley Cavall, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 45.

⁵⁵Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 38-40; idem, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. Richard Mayne (New York: The Penguin Press, 1994), 27-33.

⁵⁶For a concise overview of these changes see William Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 8th ed. (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1992), 219-226; for a more detailed analysis involving the Black Death and sacred art in Italy, see Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 244-261. I wish to thank Michael Holly, Professor of Art History, University of Rochester for initially drawing my attention to this effect of the Black Death in Europe.

⁵⁷Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, second printing with corrections (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 236-237, 325-326.

⁵⁸Maḥmūd Rizq Salīm, *‘Aṣr al-Salāṭīn al-Mamālīk*, 8 vols. ([Cairo]: Maktabat al-Adab, 1965), 7:342-424.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 8:3-130, 131-279.



Working from the assumption that "poetry is the interpreter of the milieu,"⁶⁰ Salīm has amassed literally hundreds of verses to describe and, occasionally, probe a wide range of subjects, from relations between specific poets and Mamluk sultans, to examples of social criticism and religious movements. He claims that although the foreign-born Mamluk elite were not as inclined as their Arab predecessors to patronize professional poets, poetry continued to flourish, particularly among the 'ulamā' and scribal classes, where composing verse was a sign of accomplishment.

In the final two hundred and fifty pages of volume eight, Salīm groups the poets of Egypt into seven generations and devotes sections to major poetic genres of the time, including panegyrics for the Prophet Muḥammad, love poetry, descriptive poetry, wine poetry, and Sufi and ascetic verse. In each case, after a few brief general remarks, Salīm cites major representatives and verses of each poetic type. He then concludes his volume with examples of various rhetorical devices found in Mamluk Arabic verse, and a few of the developing popular forms including the *zajal*.⁶¹ Though Salīm's anthology-like sections offer useful examples, poetic analysis and literary history and criticism are not among this work's strong points, and his bibliography is too brief and lacking essential information. Yet Salīm was a pioneer in understanding the larger ramifications of the study of Mamluk Arabic poetry, as he clearly grasped the importance of Arabic verse as an essential element for distilling a more precise image of the society and culture of the Mamluk Age.

Salīm's historical and sociological reading of Mamluk Arabic literature is also apparent in *al-Mujtama' al-Miṣrī fī Adab al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī al-Awwal, 648-784*, by Fawzī Muḥammad Amīn, a former student of Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām. Fawzī Amīn believes that poetry from the Mamluk period can lend a sense of living reality to the historical accounts of events and society, while contributing a more personal, human element as well. In addition, he hopes that the study of this poetry in its social context will also yield important clues regarding the era's tastes and standards of beauty.⁶²

With these goals in mind Fawzī Amīn organizes his study around eight major topics: (1) government and administration, (2) *jihād*, (3) wealth and corruption, (4) religious currents, Sufi and Shī'ī, (5) sectarian trends, particularly those involving conflicts between Muslims and the Christians and Jews under their protection, (6) characteristics of the Egyptian personality and general life, including the subject of women; (7) amusements, including hunting, chess, riddles, singing and dancing, and legally deviant behavior including the consumption of wine and hashish, as well as homosexual tendencies, and finally, (8) literary tastes among the elite, and among the masses.

Citing numerous verses and poems, Fawzī Amīn renders, at times, a lively account of Mamluk society in Egypt. Nevertheless, this work, like Salīm's, is largely a survey of the period, with most of Fawzī Amīn's observations and conclusions echoing those of his teacher Sallām, and other earlier scholars regarding the political, religious, and cultural life of the period. As for his final chapter, promisingly entitled "Literary Taste," it is a general summary of poetic trends. Fawzī Amīn characterizes elite taste by what is referred to usually as traditional or imitative (*taqlīdī*), as well as by the dominance of *badī'*.

⁶⁰Ibid., 8:215.

⁶¹Ibid., 8:269-525.

⁶²Fawzī Muḥammad Amīn, *al-Mujtama' al-Miṣrī fī Adab al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī al-Awwal: 648-784* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1982), 1-6.



Interestingly, Fawzī Amīn ascribes the popularity of *badī'* to a tendency in Islamic art toward two-dimensional abstraction, with space filled to capacity; as in the arabesque, various elements move together in harmony, creating a symmetry amid repetition and variation, and leaving no place for Satan to rest his evil eye.⁶³ Not surprisingly, Fawzī Amīn finds popular literary taste embodied in the newer poetic forms which, he too, views as a revolt against literary tradition. The lighter style and colloquial diction of this verse readily expressed the everyday realities of common folk and the poet's more personal feelings, especially of a humorous or sarcastic nature.⁶⁴ Fawzī Amīn completes his study with an extensive bibliography of over 150 relevant primary and secondary sources, both published and in manuscript.

Fawzī Amīn, Salīm, and several others noted above have drawn attention to an area of particular prominence and research potential, namely, religious life, since it was during the Mamluk period that what is often regarded today as Sunnī Islam was extensively codified and spread, linking Abbasid universal religious aspirations to their later Ottoman formulations. While some valuable scholarship has focused on general religious trends, and the theological ideas of a few outstanding thinkers,⁶⁵ the broader concerns of Mamluk religious life could be delineated in greater detail through the study of this period's poetry, which voiced not only theological and political issues, but also more personal spiritual feelings and aspirations.

Islamic mysticism was a distinctive characteristic of Mamluk religion,⁶⁶ and several books by 'Alī Ṣafā Ḥusayn feature Sufī verse from Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt. Ḥusayn gives special attention to the mystical verse of the Fatimid Sunnī poet Ibn al-Kīzānī (d. 560/1166), as well as to the Sufī writings of Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (d. 612/1214) during the Ayyubid period. Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh's work and other Sufī literature from the seventh/thirteenth century are also the main focus of Ḥusayn's more general survey and anthology *al-Adab al-Ṣūfī fī Miṣr fī al-Qarn al-Sābi' al-Hijrī*.⁶⁷

What is clear from these and other works is the singular importance of 'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ to the Arabic religious poetry of the Mamluk era.⁶⁸ The most celebrated Arab poet

⁶³Ibid., 406-407.

⁶⁴Ibid., 377-477.

⁶⁵E.g., the studies on Ibn Taymīyah beginning with Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taqī-l-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taimiyya* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie, 1939); and, more recently, Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymīyah's Struggle against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976). Also see Annemarie Schimmel, "Some Glimpses of Religious Life during the Later Mamluk Period," *Islamic Studies* 4 (1965): 353-392; idem, "Sufismus und Heiligenverehrung im spätmittelalterlichen Ägypten," in *Festschrift für W. Caskel*, ed. Erich Gräf (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 274-289; Donald P. Little, "Religion under the Mamluks," *Muslim World* 73 (1983): 165-181; Alexander Knysh, "'Orthodoxy' and 'Heresy' in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment," *Muslim World* 83 (1993): 48-67.

⁶⁶See Th. Emil Homerin, "Thieves and Asses: Sufism and Its Detractors in Mamluk Egypt," forthcoming in *Sufism and Its Opponents*, ed. Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke.

⁶⁷'Alī Ṣafā Ḥusayn, *al-Adab al-Ṣūfī fī Miṣr fī al-Qarn al-Sābi' al-Hijrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1964); idem, *Ibn al-Kīzānī al-Shā'ir al-Ṣūfī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1966); idem, *al-Adab al-Ṣūfī fī Miṣr: Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh al-Qūṣī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1971).

⁶⁸Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse, and His Shrine* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). Also see Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), esp. 41-45; R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (1921; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,



in Islamic mysticism, Ibn al-Fāriḍ was regarded as a fine poet during his lifetime, and his poetry continued to be read, studied, and imitated by Muslims for generations. His strong influence is evident in the verse of a number of noted poets throughout the entire Mamluk period, including his student Ibn al-Khiyāmī (d. 685/1286), Ibn Isrā'īl (d. 677/1278), Muḥammad ibn Wafā' (d. 765/1363), his son 'Alī (d. 807/1405), Aḥmad al-Manṣūrī (d. 887/1482), and 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyah. These and other poets imitated Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *badī'* poetic style with its potential for intimating a largely Neo-Platonic mystical view of life. This, in turn, suggests an "Ibn al-Fāriḍ school" of poets who attempted to reveal the spiritual significance permeating all life, while urging their audience to undertake the quest for self-illumination.

The mystical beliefs and world views voiced by these poets received theological interpretation and elaboration from Sufi theorists, including al-Tilimsānī and al-Dasūqī (d. 677/1278), who used poetry and its commentary to spread their own religious doctrines, particularly the controversial monistic one of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or "the unity of being." In stark contrast, other Mamluk poets composed verse critical of such doctrines as they sought to promote less speculative interpretations of Islam. Frequently judges and legal scholars, individuals including al-Quṭb al-Qastallānī (d. 686/1287), Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349), and Ibn Abī Ḥajalah, replaced mystical themes with those offering more traditional moral advice and religious instruction, though their poems, too, often formally imitated those by Ibn al-Fāriḍ.⁶⁹

Thus, Mamluk Arabic poetry presents often conflicting perspectives on religious life, exposing some of the complexity and centrality of competing religious views and their underlying roots in Mamluk society. But despite their different emphases, many mystical and non-mystical religious poems from this period reveal a devotional quality, which is particularly pronounced in poems praising the Prophet Muḥammad and his family. Though some such panegyrics were composed prior to the thirteenth century, it was under the Mamluks that a distinct poetic genre to praise the Prophet—*al-madīḥ al-nabawī*—was extensively developed and codified by al-Būṣīrī and his many imitators.⁷⁰ Yet, here, too, we find Ibn al-Fāriḍ's lasting influence, since al-Būṣīrī consciously modeled his *Burdah* on an ode by this master-poet.⁷¹

Similar to Sufi poetry, which came to express a collective view of reality, these panegyrics present an evolving mystical and devotional image of the Prophet Muḥammad. While we must evaluate this poetry in literary terms, we should also focus on this poetry's place in Mamluk religion and society, and the extent to which these panegyrics, as well as mystical verse, assumed liturgical roles at mosques, shrines, and elsewhere particularly

1978), 162-266; A. J. Arberry, *The Mystical Poems of Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 2 vols. (London: Emery Walker, 1952-56).

⁶⁹Homerin, *Arab Poet*, 22-31, 57-60.

⁷⁰See Zakī Mubārak, *al-Madā'ih al-Nabawīyah fī al-Adab al-'Arabī* (1935; reprint, Cairo: Dār al-Sha'b, n.d.); Ḥusayn, *al-Adab al-Ṣūfī*, esp. 216-220, 230-233; Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, esp. 171-211; idem, *And Muḥammad is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), esp. 176-194; Victor Danner, "Al-Būṣīrī: His Times and His Prophetology," in *Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies: A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Wadie Jwaideh*, ed. Robert Olsen (Brattleboro, Vermont: Amana Books, 1987), 41-61.

⁷¹Mubārak, *al-Madā'ih*, 201-203.



during threatening times, and on social and religious gatherings, including holidays and state occasions.

Further, as Bāshā and Sallām have suggested, panegyrics for the Prophet may express a discontent with non-Arab rule and, in light of the Crusades and the Mongol invasion, a deep nostalgia for an idyllic time of peace, religious purity, and moral order. Still, poets also consciously forged positive links between the Prophet Muḥammad and the counter-crusading Mamluk sultans, and this raises important related issues regarding the types and extent of patronage, and the use of religion and poetry by the ruling elite. Previous studies of political panegyric poetry have examined this relationship in the verse of earlier classical Arab poets, concluding that religious elements were crucial for a regime's self-definition and for projecting an evolving image of the just Muslim ruler requisite for ideological legitimation.⁷²

That this was a primary task of many poems from the Mamluk period, including religious ones, seems evident from verse by al-Būṣīrī, al-Ḥillī, Qānṣūh min Ṣādiq (fl. early tenth/sixteenth century), and many others.⁷³ Similar to Mamluk architecture and painting, panegyrics of sultans and amirs served to proclaim the Mamluks' dedication to Islam, and their patronage and defense of Muslim society, while at the same time asserting and justifying their God-given right to imperial rule.⁷⁴ Further study of Arab panegyrics should continue to probe models of rule and legitimation, alert to possible Iranian and Turkish elements, especially in light of the destruction of Baghdad and the political domination by the foreign Mamluk sultans.

That the Mamluks were in need of legitimation and public support seems clear, for many of the same poets who composed panegyrics, likewise circulated verse critical of government officials, the religious establishment, and society in general. These poets thus became social critics, frequently using invective poetry (*hijā'*) to drive home their points. Many invective verses were cited by Mamluk historians and chroniclers and, far from being anecdotal, these quotations often appear to hint at the writers' own sympathies, offering a kind of cipher for reading between the lines of seemingly neutral accounts.⁷⁵ In addition to targeting individuals, Mamluk poets often assail entire groups, such as Coptic Christians, and so thoughtful study of invective poetry building on the groundwork laid by Salīm, Fawzī Amīn, Ayyūbī, and Van Gelder⁷⁶ could also yield valuable insights into some of the tensions and fault lines lying within various communities of Mamluk society.

These, then, are a few suggestions for further research involving Arabic poetry composed during the Mamluk Age. As is the case with many arts of this era, we know too little at present to meaningfully generalize, let alone precisely formulate standards regarding

⁷²See Stefan Sperl, "Islamic Kingship and Arabic Panegyric Poetry in the Early 9th Century," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 8 (1977): 20-35; idem, *Mannerism*, 9-70; Suzanne P. Stetkevych, "The Abbasid Poet Interprets History: Three *Qasīdahs* by Abū Tammām," *JAL* 10 (1979): 49-64.

⁷³Yāsīn Ayyūbī, "al-Shi'r wa-al-Sulṭān fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī," *al-Turāth al-'Arabī* 6, no. 22 (1979): 211-331; reprinted as "Jadalīyat al-'Alāqah bayna al-Shi'r wa-al-Sulṭāh fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī," *al-Fikr al-'Arabī* 53 (1988): 190-206.

⁷⁴R. Stephen Humphreys, "The Expressive Intent of Mamluk Architecture in Cairo," *Studia Islamica* 35 (1972): 69-119; Oleg Grabar, "Reflections on Mamluk Art," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 1-12; Esin Atıl, "Mamluk Painting in the Late Fifteenth Century," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 159-171.

⁷⁵E.g., Homerin, *Arab Poet*, 66-71.

⁷⁶Jan Van Gelder, *The Bad and the Ugly: Attitudes Toward Invective Poetry (Hijā') in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).



the quality of this Arabic verse or the range of its artistic and social meanings. Though reference to poetry was conspicuously absent from the *Muqarnas* volume dedicated to the Art of the Mamluks, Ira Lapidus's concluding remarks ring true for Mamluk verse as well: "In the artistic legacy of Mamluk Egypt we have clues to the political culture, the religious goals, and even the mentality or sensibility of the civilization."⁷⁷

IV

We should continue, then, to probe poetry's place and functions within Mamluk society through the contextual study of poets and their verse. This research promises to break new and fertile ground in the fields of Mamluk, Arabic, and Islamic studies, and so lead to significant discoveries involving the complex relationships between society, religion, and political authority, and their multiple forms of expression. But we must proceed carefully and with humility, for the sheer quantity of the poetry is daunting, and our findings may lead us in unexpected and exciting directions, as I found during my study of poems by the noted Mamluk scholar Abū Ḥayyān.

Athīr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf, known as Abū Ḥayyān, typifies the non-Egyptian origin of many scholars of the Mamluk period. Born in Granada in 654/1256, he studied in Andalusia, North Africa, and finally settled in Cairo where he died in 745/1344. He was a noted Quran scholar, a distinguished grammarian, and litterateur composing more than fifty works, including a considerable amount of verse. His *Dīwān* covers nearly 200 pages arranged according to end rhyme and containing an assortment of poems including a panegyric for a teacher, an elegy for a friend, some religious poems, occasional verses on an elephant, the gift of a horse, a wedding, as well as a number of poems exchanged with his contemporaries.⁷⁸

Yet what led me to Abū Ḥayyān's *Dīwān* was not his poetry, but that of his daughter Nuḍār. By any standards of the time, she had received an exceptional education in the Islamic religious sciences, and while still a young woman, Nuḍār was regarded as an accomplished scholar by her male peers. The noted Mamluk scholar al-Suyūṭī listed Nuḍār among the women poets of Mamluk Egypt, though he did not cite any of her poetry. Not finding any works by her, I turned to her father's *Dīwān*, hoping to find samples of her verse that she had exchanged with him.⁷⁹

I found none, but what I found instead were nine elegies on her by a grieving father. I discovered that at about the age of twenty-eight, Nuḍār had fallen gravely ill and died after considerable suffering. According to the Mamluk biographer al-Ṣafadī, a family friend, Abū Ḥayyān took his daughter's death very hard and went into a year of mourning, composing a consolation manual and his elegies for her. These elegies are extraordinary

⁷⁷Ira Lapidus, "Mamluk Patronage and the Arts in Egypt: Concluding Remarks," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 181.

⁷⁸Concerning Abū Ḥayyān and his work, see Th. Emil Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night: Elegy and Immortality in Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1991): 247-279; idem, "'I've Stayed by the Grave': A *Nasīb*/Elegy for Nuḍār," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 107-118.

⁷⁹Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-Julasā' fī Ash'ār al-Nisā'*, ed. 'Abd al-Laṭīf 'Āshūr (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur'ān, n.d.), 83. For more on Nuḍār, see Homerin, "Bird," 255-256; idem, "Atāki Himāmuki: Marāthī Abī Ḥayyān al-Tisā' li-Nuḍār," forthcoming in *Fulbright Occasional Papers* (Cairo), vol. 4.



since even a single elegy for a daughter is rare in Arabic poetry.⁸⁰ But in addition to their value to Arabic literary history, these multiple elegies permit us to observe Abū Ḥayyān's grief and his process of mourning as he confronted his daughter's death:⁸¹

1. Now that Nuḍār
has settled in the grave,
my life would be sweet again
could my soul only taste it.
2. A brave young woman
seized for six months
by a strange sickness
of varied nature:
3. Swelling stomach and fever,
then consumption, coughing, and heaving—
who could withstand
five assaults?
4. She would see
visions sometimes,
or leave this world
for the Realm Divine,
5. And inwardly,
she was calm, content
with what she saw of paradise,
but of life, despairing.
6. Yet she was never angry for a day,
never complaining of her grief,
never mentioning the misery
she suffered.
7. She left her life on Monday
after the sun's disk
appeared to us
as a deep yellow flower.
8. The people prayed
and praised her,
and placed her in the tomb—

⁸⁰Homerin, "Bird," 248-255; idem, "'I've Stayed by the Grave'," 107-108. The Ayyubid literary critic Ibn Athīr once noted that the most difficult elegy for a poet to compose is one on women or children due to the paucity of poetic motifs for either group; Qulqaylah, 369.

⁸¹See Homerin, "Bird," 269-271. The Arabic text of these verses is forthcoming in Homerin, "Atāki."



dark, desolate, oppressive.

These opening verses directly challenge the pervasive view of Mamluk Arabic poetry as slavish imitation, pallid, artificial, and unauthentic. In a restrained and sober language free of hyperbole, Abū Ḥayyān graphically recounts his daughter's debilitating illness, her eventual death, and funeral. Abū Ḥayyān calls upon the elegiac qualities of the classical *nasīb* to articulate and express his grief and loss; his world is slowly effaced as he stands overwhelmed by his daughter's final departure.⁸²

At this point, however, Nuḍār is not some rarefied classical beloved, but a very real and all too mortal woman. Further, in this and other poems, Abū Ḥayyān declares his daughter a martyr due to her deadly disease. This judgment may, in fact, represent a view of illness and death widespread in Mamluk Muslim society, and similar scholarly opinion would soon prevail regarding Muslim victims of the plague, who were believed to have been struck down and so martyred by the jinn.⁸³

Though Nuḍār has been carried to her grave and lost to him, Abū Ḥayyān does not seek consolation in some heroic act, but in signs that her new abode is heaven. In vv. 4-8 Abū Ḥayyān alludes to four separate prophetic traditions intimating immortality: a Muslim, beholding paradise while dying (v. 4), patient as death ensues (v. 5), dying, like the Prophet, on a Monday (v. 7), and praised after death by the community (v. 8), will dwell in paradise.⁸⁴ That this is Nuḍār's God-given blessing becomes clear as later in this and the following poem, Abū Ḥayyān praises his daughter's scholarly and religious achievements and her bravery in the face of death. Clearly, the beloved of these elegies is not the enticing beauty of the classical Arabic tradition, but a virtuous Muslim lady and martyr. Though Abū Ḥayyān may gain some solace from his daughter's heroic life, he can not let go, and in his elegies, he strives to hold fast to Nuḍār, if no longer physically here below, then at least in memory and spirit:⁸⁵

1. My body is bound
to the grave;
my heart
stands on affliction.
2. When I remember Nuḍār,
my eye
swells with blood
from a wounded heart.

⁸²For more on Abū Ḥayyān's use of *qasīdah* elements in his elegies, see Homerin, "Bird," 268-273; idem, "I've Stayed by the Grave," 107-113.

⁸³See Michael W. Dols, "Al-Manbijī's 'Report of the Plague': A Treatise on the Plague of 764-65/1362-64 in the Middle East," in *The Black Death: Impact of the Fourteenth Century Plague*, ed. Daniel Williman (Binghamton, New York: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1982), 65-75; idem, *Black Death*, 116-118.

⁸⁴Homerin, "Bird," 270-272.

⁸⁵Ibid., 273-274; Homerin "I've Stayed by the Grave"; Arabic text forthcoming in "Atāki."



3. The festival passed,
then the greater one,
while Nuḍār was under
earth and stone;
4. I couldn't see
Nuḍār's fine face,
Oh, how I crave
that sweet face!
5. Nuḍār was my intimate,
my love;
Nuḍār was my life,
my spirit.
6. Nuḍār left behind
in my heart sorrow;
it will go
when I reach my grave.
7. Never did Nuḍār
have an equal
to her brilliance
and weighty reason,
8. To her poise
and good company,
her priceless hand
and eloquence.
9. She reflected on her studies:
grammar and jurisprudence,
and the apostle's
sound traditions,
10. And she revealed to you
the people's histories
and won
the sage's wisdom.
11. Nuḍār passed her life
then left,
her reputation
undefiled.



12. She was recorded
among the transmitters
from mankind's master;
how fair her reports and praise!
13. She's gone on ahead now,
while we stay
for a moment
in our passing time.
14. Then we'll follow behind
hoping for
a kind Lord's forgiveness
for our sins.

The beloved's ruined campsite featured at the beginning of innumerable Arabic odes has been transformed in this elegy to a grave. There, Abū Ḥayyān stands tied like the *balīyah*, the riding-camel left to die at the grave of a great warrior so as to serve as his ghost mare in the netherworld (v. 1).⁸⁶ With broken heart and no reason to live, Abū Ḥayyān is oblivious to even the high religious holidays suggesting, perhaps, a skepticism regarding a divine plan which would demand his daughter's suffering and premature death. Whatever the case, Nuḍār has gone taking with her the very essence of her father's love and life (vv. 2-5).

In six consecutive verses, Abū Ḥayyān invokes Nuḍār's name, if not to call her from the dead, then at least to conjure her image, as he moves from lamentation for his loss toward a consoling vision of his pure and pious daughter (vv. 1-6). Among Nuḍār's fine qualities was her study and transmission of Muḥammad's words and deeds, and perhaps her father finds solace in the Prophet's promised intercession on behalf of believing Muslims (vv. 6-11). But for the present, like the *balīyah* camel, Abū Ḥayyān lingers at the grave slowly wasting away. He can only pray that death will end his suffering, and that God will forgive his sins and so grant him a final reunion with his beloved Nuḍār (vv. 12-13).

This elegy and others by Abū Ḥayyān make complex emotions and experiences palpable by intensifying and channeling their emotive energy through time-tested cultural forms. Such elegies have been central to the work of mourning, which has played a vital part in the lives of Muslim men and women, yet rarely have their loss and sorrow been mentioned by scholars of Islam. Generally, the subjects of death and dying are glossed with abstract and doctrinal presentations of Islamic notions of resurrection, punishment, and paradise.⁸⁷ But the study of elegies, like those of Abū Ḥayyān, can help us follow changing Islamic beliefs and doctrines on death and the afterlife while, at the same time, informing us of personal grief and individual and communal responses to the death of loved ones.

⁸⁶For more on the *balīyah* camel, see Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Alūsī, *Bulūgh al-Arab fī Ma'rīfat Aḥwāl al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, n.d.), 2:307-308.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York, 1981).



Abū Ḥayyān's elegies attest to Arabic poetry's potential to reveal crucial aspects of Muslim life and practice during the Mamluk period, substantially enhancing the chronicles, histories, and other relevant sources. Yet, we must remember, too, that much of this poetry aims to evoke feelings and the intensity of experience, and so in contrast to historical documents and more traditional religious texts, this poetry not only tells us about life and existence, but it moves us to participate imaginatively in the experience of them both. These two poetic examples tap a vast and deep source for the study and teaching of the Mamluk period and of Islam, in general. For reading poetry by Muslims in the Mamluk Age can heighten our perceptions of their lives by helping us to feel more sharply and with more understanding some of what they may have felt and believed in their own day, which for a moment, then, may not seem so far away.

