

ARABIC LITERATURE

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The Scope of Arabic Literature. Arabic literature, even when narrowed down to belletristic texts with literary aspirations and not a blanket term for all texts written in Arabic, is an enormous field, covering more than fifteen centuries (since it is older than Islam, which began in 622 CE) and an enormous area in the North Africa and the Middle East which now comprises the modern Arab nations. In addition, since Arabic served in the pre-modern Islamic world the function Latin served in medieval Christendom, the reach of Arabic literature went far beyond the lands inhabited by native speakers of Arabic. It is interesting not only intrinsically as a major world literature endowed with its unique aspects, forms, and contributions, but also for its complex relationships with other literatures. Arabic absorbed literary influences from India and Iran and transmitted them westward—*Kalila wa-Dimna* and the *The 1001 Nights*, the best-known examples, probably represent the tip of an iceberg. Both folk and high literary traditions from Arabic influenced medieval European literature through, Sicily, Spain, and the Crusader states of Outremer. In addition, the Arab world is the major non-Western region of the world that interacted with Western Europe most intensely throughout the medieval period and through the colonial and post-colonial periods as well. Arabic literature thus provides an excellent example of the development of a non-Western literary tradition that was confronted with new literary forms from the colonial powers' national literary traditions, particularly British and French literature.

Cachia's Survey. Pierre Cachia's survey differs from the older introductions to Arabic literature in its relatively even coverage of the various periods. The older works are weighted heavily toward the early period, and some ignore everything after 1000 C.E. nearly completely. His work is overall clear, concise, and insightful, and he also has many interesting observations to make about popular literature and the use of the vernacular, his particular areas of expertise.

Classical Arabic literature. In addressing the classical period the course will touch on "the Suspended Odes" or *Mu`allaqat*, the equivalent of Shakespeare's plays for the Arabic literary tradition, as well as poetry of the next four centuries, particularly the poetry of al-Mutanabbi, perhaps the most famous poet of the Abbasid period (750-1258CE). It will address the main modes of the classical *qasidah*, or ode—*fakhr* "boasting", *madh* "praise", *hija'* "satire", *ritha'* "elegy"—as well as poems of love, the hunt, and wine, and discuss their literary conventions. It will also treat major classical prose works, including *The Book of Misers* by al-Jahiz and the *Maqamat* of Badi` al-Zaman al-Hamadhani. The course will focus on literature of the medieval period and discuss its influence on the west. We will examine *The Neck-Ring of the Dove*, a work on the theory of love by the Andalusian Ibn Hazm, which is particularly important for an understanding of the theory and conventions behind love poetry, the *1001 Nights*, and the influence of medieval Arabic literature on Sicily, Spain, and France, including the poetry of the Troubadours.

Modern transformation. The second section of the course will treat the transitional period of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, during which Arab readers became familiar with Western European institutions such as European-style missionary schools, high schools, and universities; newspapers, radio, and television; theatre, the opera, and cinema; translated works primarily from French and English; and new literary genres. We will examine the fascinating period of transition and the creative importation and adaptation of the western European literary genres of the play, the novel, the short story, and free verse, which were firmly established as features of modern Arabic literary culture. Attention

will be paid to the relationship between literature, politics, and nationalism, the use and modification of European generic conventions as well as references to particular works of European and American literature as models, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

Genres in Arabic Literature. Attention to genres is extremely important in the study of literature, for an understanding of the conventions and boundaries of genres aids one in interpreting works that are written within and form part of a literary tradition. Understanding genres gives one a very useful basis for understanding many other similar works. The following are a few remarks about the genres of the works we will examine in this course.

The *qasidah*, usually translated as "ode," is a particular form that has the conventions of a genre. It is a poem from 20 to 100 verses in length. Its verses exhibit end-rhyme—monorhyme throughout the poem. The verses are divided into two halves, hemistichs, by a caesura. By convention, the first hemistich in the first verse also usually exhibits the rhyme found at the ends of verses, a phenomenon called *tasri`*, so that the hemistichs of the beginning verses give the rhyme scheme ... a ...a/...b ...a/...c ...a/. It typically has three sections, including the amatory prelude (*nasib*), the journey (*rihlah*), and the main section. However, the *qasidah* has several sub-genres within it, depending on what the main section does. This is termed *gharad* in Arabic, which ordinarily means "purpose". The third section of the *qasidah* determines what sub-genre it belongs to, whether it is a praise poem (*madih*), a boasting poem (*fakhr*), an elegy (*ritha`*), or a satire or lampoon (*hija`*). These are the main sub-genres or subordinate types of the *qasidah*.

Al-Jahiz's (d. 869) *Book of Misers* belongs to *adab*, often translated as "belles-lettres" or "polite literature," but this is a very broad category, including any literary work that has a collection of anecdotes and is written primarily in prose with citations of poetry appearing every so often. *Adab* came into being with the Abbasid courtly life in the mid-eighth century and, through figures like the Persian Ibn al-Muqaffa` (d. ca. 756), drew heavily on Persian models such as books of advice for kings, framed collections of fables such as *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*. It came to refer broadly to the knowledge and literary background a sophisticated member of the administrative elite should have. A more narrow category into which al-Jahiz's *Book of Misers* fits is that of "good and/or bad points about X", the usual form of which is *fada'il*, *manaqib*, *mahasin*, which mean "virtues, excellent points," and their opposite, *mathalib*, *fada'ih*, or *masawi'*, which mean "defects, negative points." Ibn Hazm's (d. 1064) work *The Neck-ring of the Dove* also constitutes *adab*, but it belongs to a narrower genre of works, treatises on the theory of love. *The Arabian Nights* or *The 1001 Nights* is not *adab* in the same sense as the works of al-Jahiz or Ibn Hazm, because it belongs to popular literature of storytellers rather than high literary tradition. Nevertheless, it resembles *Kalilah wa-dimnah* and other more respectable *adab* works in that it is a collection of stories within a frame tale. Other examples are *El Conde Lucanor*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, and so on. It is a bit larger and more unwieldy than most other such collections, but it remains similar.

Modern Arabic literature is of course characterized by the importation and adaptation of new literary genres, particularly the short story, the play, and the novel. One might add the modern poem, which differs in essentials from the traditional *qasidah*, but one could argue that the continuity in this case with pre-modern forms is stronger. We will read examples of all of these new genres, including the short stories of Yusuf Idris, novels by Naguib Mahfouz and Ahlam Moustaghanemi, plays by Tawfiq al-Hakim, and Salma Jayyusi's anthology of modern poetry.

Questions

How old is Arabic literature? How were the earliest texts recorded?

Is Arabic one language or several? What is the evidence on either side of this question? How does it affect our view of Arabic literature?

Arabic literature has traditionally been divided into historical periods corresponding to dynasties or regimes: pre-Islamic, early Islamic, Umayyad, Abbasid, post-Abbasid, etc. What are the assumptions behind such divisions? Why might they be problematic? What are the alternatives?

What are Cachia's main divisions of the history of Arabic literature? On what analogy is the structure of his work based? Do you find this useful and convincing? How so?

What is the "bifurcation" (Chapter 3)?

How is the "Iberian branch" special or distinctive?

How do the genres of pre-modern Arabic literature compare with those of English literature or other literatures with which you are familiar?

Concerning chapter 6 (The Stunting), why is this period (1256-1798 CE) viewed as one of decadence? Is that a fair assessment? Is there evidence that innovation and creativity continued during this time?

Choose one genre and explain how it evolved over time.

What are some of the works of Arabic literature that effected European literature? What were the channels of influence, and how was it transmitted?

How did the colonial experience and contact with European models change Arabic literature? How are these literary changes related to social, economic, or political changes? (Chapter 7)

What authors do you find particularly interesting, and why?

Compare and contrast any two works Cachia discusses.

Reading

Pierre Cachia, *Arabic Literature: An Overview*.

Further Reading

see the general works listed above.