Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages

Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past

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Introduction

Judging by the number of American universities that have added faculty and courses in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies to their curricula since September 11, 2001, many educators have come to the realization that Middle Eastern cultures and Islamic societies ought to be part of a liberal arts education. In addition, the most foresighted among policy makers have long held the view that the United States cannot wait for disaster to demonstrate that an understanding of foreign languages and cultures is vital.\footnote{1} Fear of the foreign, the new, and the unfamiliar can itself be an alluring disaster. As the ancient Sumerian proverb describes and warns: “What I know makes everything else seem strange.” The challenge to educators is this: How do we cultivate the cognitive capacity to assimilate the foreign? In particular, how do we alleviate the cultural anxieties that might hinder this process?

Edgar Allan Poe, the nineteenth century’s master of anxiety, illustrated the value of these questions in his horrific rewrite of the ending of the \textit{Thousand and One Nights}. Whereas in the original Arabic tale the heroine’s verbal prowess as a raconteur triumphs over the king’s brutal mania, in Poe’s version, “The Thousand-and-Second Tale
of Scheherazade,” Shahrazad’s plan to save herself and her society goes tragically awry. This one extra night of narrative becomes too much for the impetuous, dimwitted king. He is unable to apprehend or assimilate the wonders Shahrazad tells, real as they may be. At first, he fails to understand the wonders of Arabic language and culture. This presentation of the king as a xenophobe renders him—according to Poe’s wry humor—analogous to nineteenth-century critics who were unable to comprehend, let alone appreciate, Poe’s or Arabo-Islamic culture’s achievements because of fear of the unfamiliar.

The king’s unfortunate intellect fails him again as he hears and rejects the marvels of Western society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the colossal eruption at Laki, Iceland, in 1783; the Petrified Forest of North America; Maelzel’s automatic chess player; Babbage’s calculating machine; the daguerreotype; the Voltaic Pile; and the telegraph. Without fail, the king cannot bear to perceive or assimilate the unfamiliar; his anxiety generalizes to every discovery Shahrazad relates—whether natural, historical, aesthetic, or technological. Poe seems to be asking implicitly if we can afford to have parochial attitudes toward other cultures, for fear itself has a tragic allure.

The formation of cognitive maturity, and thus sociability, depends on one’s trained capacity to see one’s own reality as a single perception among a valid plurality. The study of other cultures thus opens the possibility for individuals to see beyond the centrality of their own lives, an essential rite of passage in becoming a mature and fair human. By virtue of the “smallness of our own experience,” the folklorist Henry Glassie notes, “we mistake artifice for nature [and] . . . we are doomed merely to perfect our own imperfections. . . . What is becomes what is right.” When one engages the mind in the products and achievements of another culture and sustains an “investigation of alternatives,” the process can provide a means of establishing “a second center distinct from our own.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, the German folklorist Johann Gottfried Herder became so frustrated with Enlightenment hubris toward non-European cultures as to deride it: “Look! To what enlightenment, virtue, and happiness the world has ascended! And look at me! I am high atop the pendulum!” Without a study of other cultures—a thor-
oughgoing engagement of what makes others human—great societies can bring about great acts of cruelty. Literature in particular, because of its intimate and symbolic connections to language usage, imagination, anxiety, and aspiration, can figure as a generative means of relating to cultures. As the Arabist Salma Khadra Jayyusi notes, “One of the most effective and humanizing ways that people of different cultures can have access to each other’s experiences and concerns is through works of literary merit.” The essence of empathy relies on one’s conditioned skill in conjuring up another’s interests, values, customs, conditions, and priorities. I believe the stewards of liberal education in America have a responsibility to promote the ideals of empathy and plurality by ensuring the presence of world arts and literatures in their curricula.

**Scope and Issues**

This book examines the origins, functions, and impact of literary salons (mujālasāt; sg. mujālasa) in medieval Islamic culture. Mujālasāt emerged in ninth-century Iraq and flourished in the tenth century, spreading from Iraq to the west, to Andalusian Spain and to North Africa. These literary salons endured as a cultural practice well into the modern era. Particularly in an age before television, mujālasāt were the nightly venue for witnessing the oral performance of new poetry and narrative as well as poetry that was considered “heritage.” This forum for literature offered edification, entertainment, and escape for middle- and upper-rank men and women; it also served as a means of building one’s public reputation, establishing one’s status, expanding one’s social network, and socializing the young. For these reasons the mujālasa surely must have held intense meaning in medieval Arabic society. Yet the field of Arabic scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the written dimensions of the tradition at the expense of the oral aspects, although both modes are interconnected in medieval sources. This emphasis has overlooked the more acoustic and social dimensions that enabled the literary tradition to endure and adapt, despite dramatic societal changes over nearly a millennium and a half.

Until recently, scholars of Arabic literature have taken for granted the continuity of a literary tradition that spanned three continents and
fifteen centuries—a rare feat in world history. The existence and ubiquity of books transmitting this world heritage indicates their appeal, but Arabic literary studies have fallen short of explaining the reasons for that appeal. There has been little investigation into how such a long, tight-knit tradition might have remained meaningful and classical for such a surprising duration and across such a large geographic range, from Spain to Iraq. The question is more pressing when one considers the dramatic risks posed to the passing on of any tradition through the ages by boredom, apathy, famine, disease, war, or simply other distractions. Arabists, by and large overlooking the issue of appeal, might find it useful to analyze the ways in which generations of audiences, mostly amateurs, received, engaged, andreinterpret old literature in order to breathe new life into traditional texts and forms, which can turn cold, alien, and stifling. Without an analysis of audience reception, we are left with a canon detached from the particular needs and choosy sensibilities of those who exercised the privilege of selecting texts for future transmission—or not. By focusing on the mujālasāt, this book investigates the chief literary forum where middle- and upper-rank members of society received the tradition and adjusted it.

By analogy, I draw parallels throughout this work with the institutions of the marzēāḥ (of western Asia in the Bronze Age) and the Greek symposion (beginning in the Geometric period, 900–700 B.C.). I review the corpus of modern scholarship that gauges these social institutions’ character and impact. Judging from the rigor, vividness, and volume of the existing scholarship on the marzēāḥ and symposion since the 1960s,9 Arabists might benefit from identifying mujālasāt as an institution with socio-literary implications and exploring some basic questions: How large were mujālasāt? What type of people attended—elders, women, children, or servants? Who spoke what, and to what degree did attendees take turns or dominate? How long did sessions last, and were they held at night or during the day? Were they held indoors or outside, and which buildings were used? For a social institution that has occupied more of a place in the daily lives of medieval men and women than television or classroom education in our own time, this gap in knowledge is grave.

I attempt to address these basic questions and take that description to the level of cultural analysis. If mujālasāt were prevalent and
enduring, why did individuals participate? If people performed poetry and competed for prestige in *mujālasāt*, what impact did their text selection and performance in assembly have on the formation of canon, identity, community, and ideology? How did the performance of poetry and narrative shape their vision of an Arabo-Islamic past?

**Outline**

The book is organized in two parts that examine, respectively, the character and the impact of *mujālasāt*. Part I, composed of three chapters, addresses some of the most basic questions. Chapter 1 traces the development of the Arabic literary salon custom from its earliest origins in ancient Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Greek cultures and its emergence in Iranian Sasanian culture, which inherited the Hellenistic tradition as part of Alexander the Great’s legacy in Asia. The chapter examines the motivations for attending and participating in *mujālasāt*, including external social pressures such as sociability and the amassing of prestige (i.e., medieval networking), as well as the more cognitive and physical joys of social interplay.

Chapter 2 goes beyond fundamentals to examine one of the Gordian knots of medieval scholarship, whether European or Middle Eastern. It appears that professional and amateur littérateurs, who were seemingly honest and intelligent, fabricated narratives in *mujālasāt* that they recounted as being truthful and historical. Drawing on previous scholarship on Arabic, European, and Persian historiography and literature, I argue that littérateurs employed a set of principles for speaking in assembly that need not be reconciled with our own modern principles. If we are ever to understand the way medieval littérateurs spoke of the world (in particular, the past), we must be willing to set aside our own sensibilities and imagine another set of principles for speaking. Children in antiquity and the Middle Ages were socialized to speak and think in a figurative language that artfully encoded actual people and events with meaning. The result does not represent the actual people or events in question, of course, but the various interpretations associated with them. Chapter 2 also looks at how these principles were applied as techniques to render people, places, and events heroic and sacral. As such, the products of *mujālasāt* reflect not
literal but metaphorical truths, which, if decoded, offer up a storehouse of deep-seated beliefs, attitudes, and mythology.\textsuperscript{10}

Chapter 3 follows the journey of a single poem from ninth-century Iraq to thirteenth-century North Africa. Here I illustrate the way in which literary reception and performance in mujâlasât radically reframed the meaning of the poem. Although it was first delivered as a praise hymn to the court of the caliph al-Mutawakkil in Iraq, serving political functions, performers in assembly appropriated and “subverted” it into a mystical ode when thirteenth-century North African Sufis (Malamatiyya Lodge) adapted it for their own spiritual and apolitical purposes. Anecdotes of its reception and performance by the Malamatiyya show how the poem gave voice to their culturally specific ideology of renouncing this world’s glories for the sake of those of the next. The ode, like a prism, refracts their intense hope—and consequent ambivalence—in God’s mercy.

Part II analyzes the impact of mujâlasât on the formation of tradition. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine examples of the effect of performance in assembly on how littérateurs adjusted and transmitted specific past communal events. These chapters focus on a series of odes and narratives related to the first patricidal regicide of Islamic history in which the caliph al-Muntaṣir (d. 862) was implicated in the grisly murder of his father, the caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861). I look at the major poetic ceremonies staged by al-Buḥtūrî, the ninth-century court poet, to influence how later generations would remember this traumatic sequence of events.

Chapters 4 and 5 isolate a group of poems composed by al-Buḥtūrî to shape cultural memory of the patricide in perpetuity. These poems were composed and performed by this court poet in the wake of Caliph al-Mutawakkil’s murder and in the era subsequent to it. More important, they were recited in mujâlasât for generations as canonical heritage. Together these poems constitute the last major statement by a contemporary on the subject. In chapter 6, I demonstrate how this body of poems sowed the seeds for historical narratives for some twenty generations of performers in mujâlasât. I argue that al-Buḥtūrî’s odes illustrate the determinative role that poetic heritage can play in concert with audience reception and adjustment to form communal historical narratives that entertain and edify audiences even today.
SOURCES

An examination of performance in group necessitates a broad and creative use of sources because it encompasses a wide variety of issues: the training that poets and reciters require in order to become competent, the immediate demands of face-to-face performance before an audience, the ways in which audiences express their responses and judgments, and the ways in which performers might adjust their texts or styles of delivery to attract and hold an audience’s attention. I address these questions without the benefit of direct observation or live recordings. Needless to say, that limitation alone poses a daunting challenge for the field of Arabic literature; it accounts in part for the reluctance among some scholars to examine the oral and sociable dimension of this literary form of communication.

It is possible, however, with the appropriate methods, to interpret the available sources with an eye for these performance issues. I have culled details and sentiments primarily from texts but also, to a lesser extent, from architectural studies revealing how physical spaces were used in the salons. Medieval texts are used in large part as ethnographies that were composed by professional or amateur littérateurs. Anthologies of poetry and prose reveal themselves as transcripts of mujālasāt or as mnemonic devices for learning one’s lines (a feat that earned the admiration of one’s friends and colleagues). These sources serve the purpose of illustrating the culture of the mujālasāt, audience expectations, a performer’s training, norms of performance and reception, audience-performer interaction, text adjustment in performance, and even composition in performance. Most important, when these sources nonchalantly use the medium of writing to promote and ensure the oral dimensions of the tradition, they manifest certain norms of interplay between orality and writing.

I also examine prose and poetry texts that were known to have been performed in mujālasāt and received as heritage. That these texts were reselected for recitation and transmission—despite the vagaries of history and psychology across generations—stands as a testament to their suitability for performance. With the support of Fulbright-Hays funding (1998–99, 2004–5), I visited ten archives in Spain, Morocco, Germany, and Egypt, where I examined more than a thousand
manuscript titles. For this study, I have relied on manuscripts of anthologies, historical narratives, political advice manuals, poetry texts, and personal notebooks of students to understand how performers used these books for performance. I examined these manuscripts not only for the unprinted texts they may convey, but as physical artifacts that might indicate their usage as mnemonic devices explicitly or implicitly. As a physical artifact, each manuscript provides clues that often tell a story, and I have endeavored to foreground those stories by gauging the ways the book has been bound, supplemented, and re-bound, interpreting marginal notes, noting shifts in script style or ink color, and observing the many strategies that manuscript owners employed to personalize and customize tradition. In referring to these manuscripts, I have used specific archival names and reference numbers and, where available, titles. It deserves to be mentioned, however, that manuscript numbers hardly ever coincide with a single title, since a single volume will often comprise a florilegium of titles. This medieval convention confounds our print-minded notion of “book.” Likewise, many works are not set “books” at all, since they served as personal notebooks composed by amateurs or as customized renditions of well-known texts. It is often difficult, therefore, to supply a neat label, let alone a title. In effect, this problem illustrates the invigorating challenges researchers face in engaging medieval manuscript culture on its own terms, apart from our contemporary idea of the stable printed book.

Methods

In the course of this exposition on mujālasāt and their impact, I have developed and drawn on several methodological strategies to support my thesis. First, this book demonstrates that, far from being an ideological and brainy enterprise, the Arabo-Islamic literary heritage was governed by sociability and social interaction at heart. These interactions and the underlying social need to charm and be charmed enabled odes and stories to take on pragmatic value in social exchanges that took place in the salons. Implicitly, I hope to put into question the presumption that canonicity is an a priori given and to show that a
canon can be authoritative only insofar as it remains appealing and current. Second, the continuity of the Arabic tradition throughout time and across regions—over a millennium and a half, across three continents—cannot pass as an unquestioned phenomenon. Individual men and women who had the intellect and virtuosity to promote vested interests adjusted and performed inherited cultural knowledge to meet immediate demands. Thus the issue of canon formation can scarcely be divested from local interests: people transmit a canon by using it.

Third, I employ a variety of methods from folklore studies and cultural anthropology to illustrate the way in which medieval littérateurs relied on manuscripts to prepare for oral performance. As such, I join a group of researchers who argue against the so-called great divide theory—that paper-based technologies inevitably displace oral performance. The great divide theory has the drawback of giving technology a determinative role in shaping knowledge and society, de-emphasizing the agency of people who perhaps might use those technologies to serve emerging goals rooted in their specific class, age, ethnicity, gender, and ideology. This book explores the ways in which individuals and groups use both oral and written modes of communication together to achieve social and political goals.

Fourth, by tracing the impact of recited poems on historical narrative, I aim to question the rigid lines between genres and forms that were eminently combined and related in mujalasät when performers alternated between them to entertain and edify their audiences. I hope to offer readers a study of medieval Arabo-Islamic mujalasät that places the agency and impact of individuals and groups—whether amateurs or professionals—at the center of literary communication and canon formation. Beginning in the ninth century, these forebears created literary practices reflecting and shaping a savvy sociability that empowered and celebrated human dignity and tenacity. That heritage is now bequeathed to the world to reject or esteem.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Throughout this book I have employed standard abbreviations for the first and second editions of the venerable Encyclopaedia of Islam,
EI¹ and EI², common reference works in Middle Eastern studies. The transliteration system I have used is that of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. Because this book addresses both Arabists and non-Arabists, I explain here the transliteration symbols: The macron on the vowels ā, ī, ē simply indicates a long vowel. Assuming a midwestern American accent, compare the short a in bat to the ā in father, the i in pit to the long ī phoneme in bee, the u phoneme in took to the ē in boot. As for the consonants, theʾ (as in Maʾmūn) is merely a glottal stop (the popping of the glottis in up), so it can be tinted with any of the three vowels, such as in at, it, or oh. The Arabic sounds ḏṣṭẓ, are emphatic versions of the dotless ḏṣṭẓ. Theʿ (as in the biblical name Yaʿqūb) has no English phonemic equivalent, but once acquired, it doubles as a respectable duck call.

In conformity with convention, however, Arabic poetry has not been transliterated but rather transcribed to stress its aural dimensions. In the case of words that have entered the English language, such as kaaba and hajj, I have adopted the practice of not transliterating but using standard English spellings found in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Arabic texts are my own. An appendix of poetry texts in Arabic has been included for the reader’s convenience. I have attempted to offer readable translations in idiomatic English. In balancing the needs of Arabists with non-Arabists, I have assumed that the Arabist will be able to consult the original, so the translations primarily serve to engage non-Arabists. At least, I hope so.