

Adam Talib, *How Do You Say “Epigram” in Arabic? Literary History at the Limits of Comparison* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). Pp. 362.

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How would Australian wildlife specialists explain to non-Australians, who have never seen a kangaroo before, what one actually looks like? Most probably they would say a kangaroo is something like an oversized hare that puts her young in a pouch on her belly. They would use comparison to an indigenous species that comes closest to the kangaroo in order to create a familiar image. The situation that scholars of Arabic literature of the last centuries faced when they described short forms of pre-modern Arabic poetry must have been something similar. They used the term epigram as *locus comparationis* to describe these forms. Yet, in the case of the epigram the comparison is not an innocent one, because scholars trained in Western literary traditions not only likened these forms to Western ones, but also evaluated non-Western forms against Western forms to judge their quality. The issue, which a large part of Talib’s study hinges on, is that of commensurability—hence the programmatic subtitle, *Literary History at the Limits of Comparison*. Western scholars based their studies on readily available but fundamentally unrelated categories of the Classical Greek and Roman models and their successors, coming up with definitions and evaluations that fell prey to Eurocentrism and failed to do justice to short forms of pre-modern Arabic poetry. On the other hand, pre-modern Arab critics provided sketchy categorizations, inconclusive generic classifications according to themes and obscure denominations, so that scholars were squeezed between these two insufficient but firmly rooted positions. Talib’s book argues that these two positions or paradigmatic pillars, which long prevailed in the study of short pre-modern Arabic poetry, are inadequate and “serve only the interest of its creators and prestige users” (p. 2).

The study is divided into two parts. In the first Talib dwells on the history of the poetic form of *maqṭūʿ* from 1200 to 1900; he describes its features, its operational logic, and the contexts in which it appears. In the second part the author widens his scope to include broader issues in the study of pre-modern Arabic poetry and examines the relationship between the world-literary category “epigram” and its equivalents in pre-modern Arabic poetry.

The first chapter of part one (“A Bounding Line”) sounds out the limits of the term *maqāṭīʿ* (sing. *maqṭūʿ* or *maqṭūʿah*) chronologically, thematically, structurally, stylistically, paratextually, and formally. All these aspects point to the emergence of a *maqāṭīʿ* genre in the thirteenth century. At that time Arab littérateurs used the term *maqāṭīʿ* for short poems without explaining it. In Talib’s opinion, the most plausible reason for the lack of explanation is that its meaning is suf-



ficiently clear from its use in context. In some of the biographical notices in his *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) refers to short poems as *maqāṭīʿ*, whereas earlier biographers “would not have thought to use the term” (p. 40). Later, authors of *maqāṭīʿ*, such as Ibn Nubātah (d. 768/1366) and Ibn Abī Ḥajalah (d. 776/1375), were “more enthusiastic about using the term *maqāṭīʿ* to describe their work and to situate it within an emerging and flourishing genre” (p. 50).

Talib adduces the table of contents of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī’s *Dīwān*, in which one of the seven chapters bears the title *maqāṭīʿ* (p. 14). Five of the remaining chapters include long poems classified according to their main themes, and one chapter according to the form of the poems (*muwashshah*). The *maqāṭīʿ* chapter also includes formally distinct poetic forms such as *dūbayt* and *mawālīyā*. These organizational chapter divisions can also be observed in a more detailed fashion in poetry collections such as in Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ḥijāzī’s (790–875/1388–1471) *Rawḍ al-ādāb* or his *dīwān* (pp. 55–61). This raises the question of whether the concurrent emergence of formally distinct poems such as the *muwashshah*, *dūbayt*, *zajal*, *kān wa-kān*, *mawālīyā* and *qūmā* in the twelfth/thirteenth century created the pressure and/or the opportunity to establish a term for short poetic forms, i.e., *maqāṭīʿ*, that except for their length are formally not as distinct as the forms *dūbayt*, *qūmā*, and *mawālīyā*, but that could also be used as a broader, generic term encompassing formally unmarked short poems and the formally marked ones.

In what follows, Talib gives a survey of some major *maqāṭīʿ* collections from the fourteenth century, showing that most of the poems have two verses (pp. 17–19). He then describes the structure and logic of *maqāṭīʿ*. A large portion of the poems end in a point powered by a *tawriyah* (a figure of double meaning). In other cases, as in some *maqāṭīʿ* on names, the concluding point resides in the resolution of a dialectical tension between signifier and signified or in resolution by some witty turn or other (pp. 20–24). These resolutions are part of an operational structure that Talib condenses in the formula *premise–exposition–resolution* (pp. 24–29). At one point he rightly draws attention to the possibility that short poetic forms were used as song lyrics (pp. 45–47). Citing the headings of *maqāṭīʿ* collections by Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 779/1377) and al-Ḥijāzī (790–875/1388–1471) he addresses their thematic relatedness and gives some examples of their playful aspects and rich depictions of the urban tapestry of that time (pp. 47–70).

In the second chapter (“The Sum of Its Parts”) Talib focusses on the importance of context for the formation and recognition of *maqāṭīʿ* as a genre. I concur with his assumption that *maqāṭīʿ* did not fully acquire their status as genre before they were anthologized or, as Talib writes, “before context singled them out as a distinct form of short poetry in Arabic” (p. 71). The main context in which *maqāṭīʿ* are found is that of anthologies and poetry collections that became highly popular in Mamluk times. These anthologies were not hotchpotches of unrelated



poems thrown together according to simple criteria like the alphabetical order of authors' names or chronological criteria. To the contrary, the process of selecting and joining, or "stitching together" (p. 89), poems in order to create "a new whole" (p. 77) was one of invention and innovation that demanded creativity and a thorough knowledge of a large range of poems and their quality, themes, logic, structure, stylistic features, etc. Therefore, Talib is right in referring to this process as "curating" (p. 74). Common to most of the anthologies is their rootedness in the time in which they were composed and their function as a medium of correspondence (pp. 117–28), a social grooming tool between poets so to say, or as a venue for literary competition (p. 94). Talib proceeds by citing and translating a micro-anthology by Muḥammad Khalīl al-Murādī (d. 1206/1791) and the *maqāṭīʿ* collection on *mujūn* in al-Ḥijāzī's *Rawḍ al-ādāb*, where he shows how curating actually manifests itself and how the anthologist gathers single *maqāṭīʿ* or groups of *maqāṭīʿ* (pp. 94–116 and pp. 131–56).

The second part of the study is devoted to the term "epigram" in world literature and its application to pre-modern Arabic poetry. As outlined at the beginning of this review, commensurability is a major issue that scholars who take a comparative stance have to come to grips with more seriously. Therefore, Talib rightly questions the legitimacy of the term epigram in the title of the book, *How Do You Say "Epigram" in Arabic?*, because "the question itself contains epistemological, historical, and ultimately political subtexts" (p. 158). In the three chapters in this part Talib sets out to tackle these issues.

Chapter three ("Epigrams in the World") starts with a definition of the term, its epigraphic pre-history, and the contexts of its usages in the Hellenistic and Latin traditions (pp. 162–71), followed by a section on the early modern epigram as composed by European poets who "repurposed, accommodated, and grafted features of Greek and Latin epigram to vernacular epigrammatic forms to produce a literary hybrid that satisfied the ambitions of their renaissance project" (p. 176). Before Talib assesses the Western reading of short pre-modern Arabic poetry in chapter four, he addresses the parallel case of the Japanese *haiku*, which has also fallen victim to the Eurocentric attitude that tried to fit an alien type of literature into Western categories. Similar to short pre-modern Arabic poems, the Japanese *haiku* and *tanka* have been dismissed as essentially fragmentary, hackneyed, and intellectually defective—attributes that, on a more general level, were used to mark the East as a whole and that allegedly preclude a European-style "genius."

Chapter four ("Hegemonic Presumptions and Atomic Fallout") returns to pre-modern Arabic poetry and illustrates how modern and contemporary scholarship (mis-)treated it. This attitude towards Arabic poetry goes back to a tendency that long prevailed in modern scholarship, namely to see Islamic civilization as an "unimportant, but essential, intermediary between the Classical Greek (and



to a lesser extent, Roman) tradition and what Europe calls its renaissance and enlightenment” (p. 184). As a consequence, the short Arabic poem has generally been reduced to a Latinate understanding as satiric or invective verse in the style of Martial (p. 186). In other cases, the term epigram was used to describe the Arabic *qit‘ah* (“piece, fragment”) which is an ancient term used as an antithesis to *qaṣīdah*. The term *qit‘ah* denotes short poems or poems with only one theme, distinguishing it from the term *maqṭū‘*, which acquired a special, generic status in the period Talib focuses on. It would have strengthened Talib’s case positing a *maqāṭī‘* genre if he had examined the differences between the *qit‘ah* and the *maqṭū‘* earlier in the first part of his study. Instead, he prefers to consider the term *qit‘ah* and its uses much later in his work (p. 194 sqq.) without explaining in detail what made the poetry of Ibn Lankak, an Abbasid poet who wrote a considerable number of short poems (d. ca. 360/970), for example, so different from the *maqāṭī‘* he examined.

A large portion of chapter four deals with two opposing currents in studies of Arabic poetry: the age-old Orientalist *Weltanschauung* that Arabic poetry is atomistic by nature and the opposing revisionist view of organic unity that spread in the post-colonial era (p. 187 sqq.). Talib concludes the chapter by expressing his discontent over how much Western concepts still influence the way short pre-modern Arabic poetry is presented today, even in the recent entry on “Epigram 1. Classical Arabic” by Geert Jan van Gelder in the latest version of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (pp. 211–12).

In the last chapter (“Epigrams in Parallax”) Talib calls for parallax examination (following the concept of parallax by Karatani and Žižek) of short pre-Arabic poetry: if students of Arab literary history shift their point of observation, this may result not only in a new “subjective” view of a particular poem as “an independent, autonomous entity” (p. 220) but also in an ontological change in the poem itself. He says, “Poems that look and sound quite similar to soi-disant *maqāṭī‘*-poems had existed for centuries before the emergence of this new genre and some of these older poems were reborn as *maqāṭī‘*-poems simply by inhabiting a new generic context” (p. 220). Once you change your point of view on a given poem as part of specific contexts, it undergoes a substantial change of character and you are able to see old poems in a completely new light; you see them “reborn...in a new generic context,” to use the author’s words.

Talib does not organize his work in a linear manner. Accordingly, he declares the genre status of the poems at the beginning (p. 2) but does not treat the definition of genre he uses and why *maqāṭī‘* fit in this definition until the end of the last chapter (pp. 216–21). Readers might be surprised by his decision, which, however, proves not to be a disservice to the persuasiveness of his theses as the understanding of the type of genre that is at play unfolds in the course of his work.



Any *a priori* definition of genre would have implied the application of Western categorizations to non-Western concepts that Talib so carefully eschews.

The book is completed by an appendix that lists sources such as biographical dictionaries, *dīwāns*, anthologies, treatises, etc., in chronological order. Talib cites and translates passages in biographical notices, commendations, prefaces, titles, and chapter and rubric headings, where *maqāṭīʿ* and cognate terms are mentioned (pp. 223–63). Worthy of note is an annotated bibliography of unpublished sources (pp. 264–86). I spotted two misspellings of names: on page 143 and elsewhere it should not read Nūr ad-Dīn al-Asʿardī but al-Isʿirdī, and Ibn Khaṭīb Dāriyā should be Dārayyā (p. 141). Typos and other misspellings are few in number.

It should be clear by now that I highly recommend Talib’s study as a major contribution to the history of pre-modern Arabic literature, especially as he pays heed to the Arabic *maqāṭīʿ* tradition in its own right. Talib adduces a multitude of published and unpublished sources and demonstrates that he is as knowledgeable about Arabic literature as he is about Western literature and literary theory. I cannot finish this review without commenting on the work of the publisher: even if the unquestionable value of this study can hardly be measured in pecuniary terms, the price of the volume (\$135) is, to put it mildly, outrageous, especially if one considers that Brill obviously does not proofread the books it publishes and becomes more and more miserly with regard to print and paper quality.



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