CHAPTER THREE

EPITOMES, COMMENTARIES AND GLOSSES, 1350–1600

In the course of the thirteenth century, a number of lengthy summas of logic were written in Arabic – for example, Daqāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq by Āmidī, Kashf al-asrār by Khūnajī, Bayān al-ḥaqiq by Urmawī, Jāmiʿ al-daqāʾiq by Kātibī, Nukḥbat al-ḍīyar by Ibn Wāsil al-Ḥamawī (d. 1298), and Qistās al-afkār and its commentary by Samarqandi. After the middle of the fourteenth century, such summas became exceedingly rare. Henceforth, almost all contributions to the field would take the form of either condensed epitomes and didactic poems, or commentaries, glosses, and super-glosses on such epitomes and poems. These literary forms were not novel, but their almost complete domination of the field is something that only became established in the course of the fourteenth century.

In his The Development of Arabic Logic, Rescher saw the proliferation of commentaries and glosses as a sign of the ‘ossification’ of the tradition after around 1300. Subsequent to that date, he wrote:

We no longer have to do with the development of new materials for the exposition of logic, but only with the reworking of existing discussions, constantly crossing and re-crossing the same familiar ground in the same familiar way.1

Rescher’s dismissive judgment seems entirely based on this change in the literary form of writings on logic in Arabic. At least, he did not present the reader with any other evidence. This chapter, and the chapters that follow, will suggest that his claim is far too sweeping. It may be that the Arabic logical tradition became markedly more conservative over the course of the fourteenth century. The preceding centuries had indeed been extraordinarily dynamic. Avicenna had approached the Aristotelian corpus with a combination of independence and brilliance, displaying a willingness to strike his own path on a number of key issues. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Khūnajī, and those who followed in their wake approached

1 N. Rescher, The Development of Arabic Logic, 73.
the Avicennian corpus with the same critical and independent spirit with which Avicenna had himself approached the Aristotelian. They delighted in raising and discussing ‘doubts,’ and dismissed exegetical questions concerning what Aristotle or Avicenna had ‘really meant.’ Logicians writing in Arabic after around 1350 seem, on the whole, to have been more conservative in their approach, though there were exceptions which will be discussed below and in subsequent chapters. They also tended – again with notable exceptions – to equate writing on logic with the exegesis of logical texts. In both respects, they may be compared to the Greek commentators of late antiquity, and indeed to the Arabic commentators on Aristotle from Fārābī to Averroes. Dismissals of the Greek and Arabic commentators on Aristotle were once commonplace. Bertrand Russell, in his classic *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), opined that “Arabic philosophy is not important as original thought. Men like Avicenna and Averroes are essentially commentators.”2 Such opinions are no longer taken seriously by specialists, but it is striking that the very same people who would reject Russell’s judgment as deeply uninformed have often made similar armchair dismissals of Arabic writings on logic (and philosophy in general) after the twelfth or thirteenth century. As Tony Street has sensibly urged in his recent survey of Arabic logic for *The Handbook of the History of Logic*, edited by D.M. Gabbay and J. Woods:

I am perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that logical production went through a radical decline in quality at this time [the fourteenth century]. But it cannot simply be assumed to be the case because the preferred genre of logical composition came to be the commentary … We simply have to read these texts.3

I. *The North African Logical Tradition, 1350–1600*

In the fourteenth century, a distinct North African tradition of Arabic logic arose. Like their eastern counterparts, North African logicians in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries took their point of departure from the writings of Avicenna, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Khūnajī, and

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3 T. Street, “Arabic Logic,” 526.