

Introduction

It was said to ‘Abd al-Malik, ‘white hair has come to you early.’ He replied, ‘My white hair is (due to) ascending the pulpit, and to fear of a fault in speech,’ for a fault in speech amongst them [the Arabs] was (considered) the worst thing possible.¹



1 Arab vs. Western Tradition

This book studies the subject of youth versus old age in medieval Arabic literature, dispelling common misconceptions and providing relevant insight into its treatment in other literatures. In poetic imagery, youth is identified with the black raven, old age with the white falcon (Chapter 2). *Adab* is the word used for literature in classical and modern Arabic. Arabists have rendered it as *belles-lettres*, however, on account of its nature, though to the uninitiated this expression of French origin is as Greek as *adab*. Any conceivable topic would be treated in *adab*, with citations in poetry and prose straddling several genres. *Adab* is a literary potpourri, signifying culture in general. Besides varied information it provides pleasure, just like any other literature. The pleasant anecdote is part and parcel of it. To obviate any potential boredom on the part of his reader, the arch representative of *adab*, al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868), rarely fails to inject his serious discourse with some kind of witticism. That’s doubtless one of the many reasons why he has not lost his popularity, including among scholars who appreciate his style but stick to their *jidd* (seriousness) without meddling in *hazl* (humor). Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) follows in his footsteps. While in the *Hawāmil* he poses questions to Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), in his *Imtāʿ* he provides answers to a wide range of questions put to him by the vizier Ibn Saʿdān (d. 375/985–6) over the course of 37 nights. About halfway through their time together, on the 18th night the vizier comes to feel he has had enough of philology and philosophy. He says to his courtier: come, let us make this a libertine (*mujūniyya*) night and indulge in plenty

1 Ibn al-Ṭīqṭaqā, *al-Fakhrī*, p. 125; *al-Fakhrī: On the Systems of Government*, trans. Whitting, p. 120; cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Tārīkh al-khulafāʾ*, p. 219; *History of the Caliphs*, trans. Jarrett, p. 224; *Iqd*, vol. 3, p. 41.

of *hazl*, for the *jidd* has wearied us, impairing our strength and filling us with oppression and concern. There follows a variety of poetry and prose anecdotes about effeminate, fools, libertines and their likes, some of which the editors thought worthy of censoring. Such a night would not live up to its name if not concluded with a couplet by the shaykh of libertines, Abū Nuwās (d. between 198/813 and 200/815), which can be matched only by another couplet from his female counterpart, the shaykha of repartee, ‘Inān (d. 226/841). We can imagine the hearty laugh the vizier shares with his courtier at this sexually tinged conclusion. Feeling relaxed and entertained, the vizier asks for more, vindicating *hazl*: give precedence to this kind of discourse over other kinds, for I don’t think this can be exhausted in one sitting; it may be the object of censure, but this is unfair, for the soul needs cheering up.

The binary opposition of *al-jidd wa-l-hazl* is the soul of *adab*. The texts under study have been selected from a vast and diverse corpus so as to convey the feel of Arabic literature. Accordingly, this book is interspersed with an informative and entertaining sample of *adab* intended to engage specialists and non-specialists alike.

It is the eternal problem of youth and old age, already treated in antiquity by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, which was translated into Arabic,² and Cicero in his *On Old Age*, which is an apology for old age, as well as by Curtius who discusses the topos *puer senex* (see below). It is closely related to life and death, having some bearing on every one of us. *A History of Old Age*, which traces the treatment of the subject in Western tradition from antiquity to the present day, explicitly favors Cicero over Aristotle, whose views are termed a diatribe.³ No similar book has been published on Arab tradition in a Western language. The present study purports to fill this gap. As will be shown below, there are major similarities and key differences between the two traditions on the subject.

Given the polar depictions of youth and old age in Arabic literature, the present study will make use, as appropriate, of binary oppositions, which are “the most natural and economical code; they are the first operations children learn as they begin to accede to language; and, more generally, they are the common denominator of all thought.”⁴ The closest term in Arabic would be the rhetorical device *ṭibāq* (antithesis), or the dual *ḍiddān* (two opposites, sing.

2 The translation has been preserved, as well as paraphrasing of the work by Ibn Sinā and Ibn Rushd: Aristūṭālis, *al-Khiṭāba*; Ibn Sinā, *al-Khiṭāba*; Ibn Rushd, *Talkhiṣ al-khiṭāba*.

3 Thane, ed., *A History of Old Age*, p. 58.

4 Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, p. 102; idem, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 17. Binary oppositions have previously been used to interpret Arabic poetry, cf. S. Stetkevych, “Structuralist Interpretation of Pre-Islamic Poetry,” pp. 55–77.