It is no secret that the first generations of Arab grammarians devoted significant attention to morphological issues—even a quick glance at the *Kitāb Sibawayh* proves this point. Over the following centuries, research continued to flourish both in the rich lexicographical tradition initiated by al-Ḫalīl (d. 175/791) and in the works of scholars such as al-Māzinī (d. 249/863), al-Mubarrad (d. 286/900), Ṭaʿlab (d. 291/904), ʿAbū ʿAlī al-Fārisī (d. 377/987), Ibn Ğinnī (d. 392/1002) and Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), just to mention some giants. In later epochs, however, this domain of scholarship came to be neglected in favor of a more abstract and formalistic approach. Speaking in an age when the textual corpus relevant to linguistic studies had already been closed, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), as Ghersetti (2013: 148–149) has recently stressed, made a revealing comparison between the lexicographer and the grammarian, on the one hand, and the “traditionist” (*muḥaddiṯ*) and the jurist, on the other. In both cases, the first figure was only supposed to collect raw materials, while the latter elaborated them on a scientific basis. The difference of rank between the two kinds of disciplines that was implicit in al-Suyūṭī’s comparison (and the degree of prestige attached to them) probably explains why morphological studies were progressively confined to dictionaries, which, indeed, continued to be produced throughout the pre-modern period.

In contemporary studies on Arabic, as well, morphology and lexicography remain rather marginal disciplines. To give just one example, scholars still do not possess a historical dictionary of Classical Arabic. There are exceptions to the general trend,¹ and Pierre Larcher is certainly one of them. During his career he has paid constant attention to the treasury of the Arabic vocabulary, starting from his 1972 thesis on proper nouns in the *Muʿallaqa* of ʿAntara. He has contested the holistic view that claims to explain the whole of the Arabic lexicon through the root-pattern pair (Larcher 1995) and has repeatedly focused on word formation (Larcher 2007 and 2012), urging a move from a static to

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¹ One thinks for instance of Fleisch 1978 and of the many contributions by Manfred Ullmann.
a dynamic comprehension ‘of the morphological and semantic movement in the vocabulary, both synchronically and diachronically’ (Larcher 2008: 94). At the same time, this concern for lexical and morphological issues goes hand in hand in Larcher with a deep interest in Arabic poetry as the second focus of his personal quest. Merging the disciplines of linguistics and poetry as he has done is, indeed, a well-established practice in Arabic culture.

This article too falls within this dual approach. However, rather than examining the grammarians’ attitude towards poetry, it sets out to sketch an opposite case: the use of grammar, or more precisely morphology, in a treatise by a great poet and prose writer, the blind maverick ʾAbū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058).

1 A Didactic Epistle

In the great authors of Arabic literature, total command of the linguistic sciences was an imperative. But even by the Arabic standards, al-Maʿarrī stands out for his keen interest in vocabulary, prosody, and word formation. When reading the first part of his *Epistle of Forgiveness*, one is impressed by the number of morphological questions that are discussed in the text. They are almost the same in length as the digressions on syntax and they are often expressed in a highly specialised jargon that requires considerable efforts of interpretation.

To better understand the question, I decided to explore al-Maʿarrī’s morphological sources. It soon appeared that another work could offer significant clues: the *Risālat al-Malāʾika* (‘Epistle of the Angels’), a treatise that, according to its Arabic editor Muḥammad Salīm al-Ǧundī, ‘offers us a full image of the achievements of this science [= morphology] in al-Maʿarrī’s epoch and before it.’

Although mentioned in the medieval list of works attributed to al-Maʿarrī, the *Risālat al-Malāʾika* had a troubled transmission. While its introduction continued to circulate as a part of al-Suyūṭī’s *al-ʾAšbāh wa-l-naẓāʾir fī al-naḥw* (iv: 381–438), the bulk of the work steadily fell into oblivion. Consequently, the first 1910 Egyptian print edition only reproduced the introduction. The same was done by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maymānī al-Rāǧkūtī at the end of his *ʾAbū al-ʿAlāʾ wa-mā ʾilay-hi* (1344/1925) and by Kāmil al-Kaylānī in an appendix to his defective edition of the *Risālat al-Ǧufrān* (1923 c.), while the Russian Orientalist Kračkovskij offered a critical edition of the same text in 1932. ‘All what they

2 On this it is still worth consulting Trabulsi 1951.
3 Al-Maʿarrī *Risālat al-Malāʾika*: xii.