AL-SÄQ 'ALÄ AL-SÄQ — A GENERIC DEFINITION

BY

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In his article «L’Œuvre, l’auteur et l’homme» Boris Schloezer quotes Potebnià’s famous saying that a literary work is first of all an event in the life of the language and adds¹: «il s’ensuivait que l’étude de l’œuvre devait commencer par celle des particularités de son langage». As a guiding principle this can certainly be considered of universal validity. But in some cases the peculiarities of language appear to be the essence of the work and al-Šidiàq’s book of al-Fâriâq is clearly one of them ². First published in Paris in 1855, it was presented by the publisher as a book of many advantages primarily on account of the abundance of synonyms, alliterations, metonymies, allusions and other figures and tropes. Not concealing that some aspects of style were less than orthodox he felt that on balance it was a book to be liked by readers of high literary taste.

The author himself had less qualms about testing the receptiveness of his readers. Except for the French title of the book ³ which is strictly informative, all the preliminaries in Arabic constitute an undisguised challenge. After describing his book as

ayyām wa šuhūr wa a’wām fī ’ajm al-‘arab wa-l-a’jām⁴

he immediately goes on to satirize:

"ta’līf zayd wa hind fī zamānikā dā
ašhâ ilâ al-nās min ta’līf sfīrayn
wa dars šaurayn qad šuddâ ilâ qaran
aqmā wa anfā min tadrīs ḥabrâyn

² al-Sâq ‘alâ al-sâq fī mā haw al-Fâriâq. All references will be made to the edition of Dār Maktabat al-Hayât, Beirut 1966, prepared by al-Šayx Nasib Wahība al-Xāzin.
⁴ The alternative reading would be ‘ajum al-‘arab etc. meaning the corrupt Arabic spoken by Arabs and others.

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Days months and years concerning intelligent people — Arabs and others.

The writing of Zayd and Hind these days
Is desired by people more than the writing of two volumes
And the threshing of two bulls tied together
Is better sold and more profitable than the teaching of two clergymen.

This motive is not entirely unfamiliar; in fact we find it in Hazz al-quhūf\(^5\) where the author complains:

\[\text{faqad yáltaddu al-sūmī bikālam fīhi al-dāhk wa'l scalā'a walā yamiṣlu ilā qaul fīhi al-balāga wa'l barā'a}\]

The listener often finds more pleasure in a tale of laughter and wantonness and favours not talk distinguished by rhetorics and brilliance.

This book of mine, graceful to the witty
— unbridled of tongue — and silly to the fool.

However there is a difference: Hazz al-quhūf is supposed to be an interpretation of a vulgar poem (jawajadtu hu qaṣīdān ya lahu min qaṣīdā)\(^6\) whereas kitāb al-fāriq is presented as a book of history and travel. The incongruity becomes even more glaring in «Fāṭihāt al-kitāb», which is an introduction in verse. Strangely enough this introduction has received less critical attention than «Tanbih min al-mu'allif» which is the introduction in prose. The latter is often quoted because it announces the purpose of the book which is twofold\(^7\); displaying the peculiarities of the language and its rare words and listing the praiseworthy traits of women as well as the blameworthy. While being very clear this intro-


\(^7\) al-Šāq, p. 65.

\(^8\) Ib., p. 67.