THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES OF AL-MA'ARRĪ

Until modern times, the only forms of dramatic representation known fairly widely and continuously among Arabs were the shadow play and the Qarah-Göz puppet show.¹ And—although the texts of some shadow plays by Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1311) have been preserved—neither of these forms of entertainment produced a dramatic literature of recognized worth.

This lack has attracted the attention of some Orientalists, and of many Arab Modernists.² The discussion has not always been free of the polemical spirit, for any observation that implies or seems to imply the cultural or racial inferiority of the Arabs naturally calls for spirited rebuttal—even so outdated a writer as Renan can still draw fire. Fortunately, the very success of modern writers in fields previously untilled, by demonstrating that variations in achievement need indicate no innate or permanent differences of creative ability, has taken the heat out of the debate. Indeed one modern Arab critic has pronounced himself willing to consider the possibility that Taine’s views on the influence of racial as well as environmental factors may not be altogether irrelevant to this question,³ for it is not inconceivable that even racial peculiarities might come to be recognized and usefully compared without implying superiority and inferiority.

This is not, however, a field of speculation that has found favour

¹ In addition to articles listed in Index Islamicus, see Jacob Landau; Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema; Philadelphia, 1958; pp. 1-47. Also: 'Ādil Abū Shanab; Masrah 'Arabī al-Qadim: Karākīn; Damascus, c. 1964; Ibrāhīm Ihmānādah; Khayāl az-Zill wa Tamthiliyyāt Ibn Dāniyāl, Cairo, 1963.
³ Muḥammad Mandūr; Masrahīyyāt Shawqī, p. 3

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so far. Most commonly, the Greeks are taken to be creators of all drama, and the absence of an Arab dramatic literature is ascribed to inadequate contact with the Greek heritage at the relevant point: Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and especially his *Poetics* were so grossly misunderstood that Tragedy was identified with panegyric, and Comedy with satire; and in the Greek plays themselves the Arabs never took any interest. This lack of interest is in turn ascribed to a number of environmental and cultural influences. Tawfiq al-Hakim's contention is that the physical presence of a theatre is essential to the birth of drama, whereas the Arab literary tradition was formed in nomadic times, when such a building was an impossibility. More commonly, the inhibiting factor named is religion—not merely in the sense that Islam discouraged the appearance of women on the stage or the study of a literature concerned with pagan gods, but rather in the subtler and more pervasive sense that the religious tradition of the Arabs—even pre-Islamic—was averse to such anthropomorphic and even half-human gods as those of the Greeks, round whom beautiful legends and stirring incidents could be woven.

The argument is not entirely satisfying. Of several objections that may be levelled against it, the most germane is that a religious feeling so decisive as is implied here might also have been expected to inhibit miniature painting and Shi'ah passion plays—or are they better called "pageants"?—on the martyrdom of al-Hasan and al-Hasayn. But my purpose here is not to debate so broad a question, though one general observation may be offered that has some bearing on what is to follow. It is that the absence of great drama in classical Arabic literature ought not to be studied on its own, but as part of the wider fact that this literature developed no genre that calls for sustained and integrated invention. Its characteristic productions are either short or made up of short independent pieces—perhaps because it was for long the literature of a society entirely at one about its supreme values, looking to its artists not for the revelation of some great new truths but for the satisfaction of its well-formed tastes.

A subsidiary line of enquiry has been to look for a dramatic quality in the literature actually produced. Some have seen it in the very stance of the poet apostrophizing the ruined encampment or declaiming his resounding ode in the presence of the mighty. Others have sought it wherever a poet—such as Waqqāh al-Yaman or Imru' al-Qays—

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1 Idwār Ḥunayn; *op. cit.*