MEDIEVAL ARABIC DRAMA: IBN DĀNIYĀL

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The failure of the bulk of medieval Arabic drama to reach us constitutes a serious loss in Arab literary history, the full extent of which cannot be properly measured. However, we can form some idea of the kind of thing we have been deprived of if we examine the three shadow plays that have been preserved for us, the work of the thirteenth century poet and wit, the Mosul born Egyptian oculist Shams al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Dāniyāl (1248-1311). Of course, it would be rash to assume that the lost plays, written either before or after, were of the same calibre or possessed the same degree of interest, literary or otherwise, as Ibn Dāniyāl’s work. Nevertheless, it is clear from the introductory remarks to the first of these plays, Tayf al-Khayāl (The Shadow Spirit), that, far from being a solitary or even unusual phenomenon, as is sometimes assumed, Ibn Dāniyāl’s plays were a rather late stage in the development of a form of dramatic entertainment. The remarks are addressed to the author’s friend, ʿAlī ibn Mawlāhūm, a “producer” of shadow plays (Khayāliy) at whose request he composed these plays, since that friend had written to him complaining that “people had grown tired of shadow plays and had been put off by their repetitive character”. This criticism obviously suggests that by Ibn Dāniyāl’s time shadow drama had been going on for such a considerable period of time that it stood in danger of exhausting itself and becoming repetitive and “mechanical”. We know, of course, from other sources that the Arabic shadow theatre had been flourishing in Fatimid Egypt. There are references to it in the tenth century, the most explicit and perhaps earliest of which is to be found in the works of the great scientist Ibn al-Haytham (born in 965 A.D.), who discusses the mechanics of it in his magnum opus on optics.1 This is definitely earlier than the one in Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1063) or Ibn Shuhayd (d. 1035) cited by James T. Monroe.2 It is, therefore, wrong to say, as J. M. Landau does, that until the twelfth

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1 See the forthcoming edition to be published shortly in Kuwait: Al-Ḥasan ibn al-Haytham, Kitāb al-Manāzir, ed. by ʿAbd al-Hamid Sabra, III.6 [23-25].

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* Since giving this paper at the JAL Symposium on Classical Arabic Poetry held in Cambridge in July 1981, it has been possible to retrieve Kahlé’s papers on Ibn Dāniyāl in the library of the University of Turin. The author of this paper, together with Dr. Derek Hopwood, will be bringing out his edition of the complete plays of Ibn Dāniyāl soon.
century the Shadow Theatre was apparently almost unknown to the Muslims.³

An often quoted passage which occurs in Ghuzuli’s *Maṭāliʿ al-Budūr* and in Ibn Hijja’s *Thamarat al-Awrāq*, and the authenticity of which there is no need to doubt, relates how in 1171 (567 A.H.) Saladin invited his vizier, the celebrated man of letters al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil to witness a shadow play performed by a group of players who had been engaged in the Fatimid court. The vizier, who, it is clear, had not seen shadow drama before, had initially some religious or moral misgivings about the propriety of being present at such an entertainment. He was about to excuse himself and actually rose to leave, but Saladin prevailed upon him to stay. At the end of the performance when he was asked what he thought of it, his answer was that he found it most edifying, for it showed people and states coming and going but when it was all over and the screen was removed the one mover behind them all was revealed.⁴

This story has a number of interesting implications. First, it shows that shadow drama was an acceptable form of entertainment in Fatimid Egypt, even though it may not have been quite as well known elsewhere in the Islamic world at the time. Secondly, it suggests that the Arabic shadow theatre had by then reached a stage of development in which works were produced respectable enough to merit presentation before a pious and good king such as Saladin and of sufficient literary value as to call forth the admiring comment of a literary figure of such sophisticated or refined taste as al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil. Thirdly, it implies that the shadow theatre was not confined to farces or cheap comic shows, but probably dealt with moral, religious or historical themes with a view to pointing a moral or educating the audience. Fourthly, it reveals the medieval allegorical habit of mind and the readiness of the cultivated audience to see moral or religious lessons even in dramatic entertainments such as the shadow theatre.

The analogy drawn between the shadow theatre and man’s transitory and phantom-like life on earth was, in fact, by no means an original one. Ibn Ḥazm had already likened shadow drama (*khayāl al-Zill*) to earthly existence.⁵ In subsequent writings one encounters the allegorical view of shadow drama frequently enough. There is, however, one passage that occurs in the work of a near contemporary of Saladin (1138-93), the major Egyptian mystic poet ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ (1182-1235) which has to be singled out for its peculiar importance. In his great mystical poem known

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⁵ James T. Monroe, *op. cit.*, p. 98.