THE SHADOW PLAY (KHAYĀL AL-ZILL) IN THE LIGHT OF ARABIC LITERATURE*

In my article “Live Theatre in Medieval Islam”, I tried to show that the terms khayāl/khiyāl (“live play”) and khayal al-zill (“shadow play”) were quite different. I also tried to show that khayāl had in the Jahiliyya and the first centuries of Islam the primary meaning of “figure” and “statue”, but that it later underwent semantic evolution and acquired, besides the various meanings of “imagination” (as the antithesis of ḥaqiqa: “truth”, “reality”), “phantom” (mainly in poetry, as ṭayf khayal al-habib: (“the phantom of the lover visiting in a dream”) and “fantasy”, that of “live performance of a mime or play.” Shadow-play writers, such as Muhammad b. Dāniyāl (1248-1311), and poets and authors of live plays frequently used khayāl in all its shades of meaning for puns and paronomasia. During the third/ninth century it was used as a synonym for ḥikāya (“imitation” or “mime”), and by the beginning of the 5th/11th century it had completely replaced this term; khayālī and mukhayil were used both for an actor in a live performance and for the presenter of a shadow play. In fact, these terms have been the source of much confusion for scholars of the shadow play, to the extent that they have invariably been understood in literary and historical texts as pertaining to the shadow play only, and the use of khayāl as indicating “a live play” has been disregarded.

While many studies have been written on the history of khayal al-zill both in the Arab world and in other Islam countries, such as Turkey and Iran, there remain a number of hitherto unremarked facts concerning...

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1 In Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon, ed. F. M. Sharon (Jerusalem, 1986), 565-611. The author is preparing a book on Spectacles and Live Theatre in the Medieval Arab World: Background and Development.

its development in Arabic and its relation with live khayal that it is possible to elicit from Arabic literary and historical sources.

The earliest Arab author to discuss systematically the technique of the shadow play, without however using the term khayal al-zill, was the scholar Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1039) in his work on optics, Kitab al-Manazir. He defines khayal as \"[translucent] figures [of characters and animals] which the mukhayyil < sic > moves so that their shadows appear upon the wall which is behind the curtain and upon the curtain itself.\" There are holes pierced in the bodies of the shadow-play figures so that they may be held against the screen with a stick; the presenter holds another stick in his other hand and with this moves their heads, arms and legs. The light of a candle or lamp placed behind them casts coloured shadows of the translucent figures on the white screen.

Ibn Hazm (994-1064) uses the term khayal al-zill in his Kitab al-Akhlaq wa 'l-Siyar in speaking of a different type of shadow play, which may represent one of the first stages in the development of this art. He describes a system which gives the impression of a Chinese magic lantern. He likens this world to a shadow play, in which images are mounted on a wooden wheel revolving rapidly, so that one group of images disappears as another appears, as generation follows generation in the world. This is the earliest attempt to be found in Arabic to see a philosophical significance in the shadow play. Later, scholars and poets, mainly among the Sufis, further developed this idea and added the principle of the muharrak (the Aristotelian primus motor; hereafter referred to as the \"eternal < prime > mover\"), in that the technique described by Ibn Hazm had been replaced by that described by Ibn al-Haytham, or by that employing marionettes operated by strings, as described by al-Ghazālī (1059-1111) in Ihyā' Ulūm al-Dīn. Here he talks of the presenter (mushaqdzīd) who pulls the strings of puppets made of rag and makes the watching children imagine that they are moving and speaking. This is analogous with mankind’s imagining that they themselves determine their own movements, whereas in fact God determines them, as the presenter determines those of the puppets:

My thanks are due to Prof. Sabra for supplying me with a copy of the passage.


See Ghazālī, Ihyā' Ulūm al-Dīn (Būlāq, 1279/1862), IV, 122. Such puppet-shows...