SAJ\textsuperscript{c} IN THE QUR\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ÂN: PROSODY AND STRUCTURE

From pre-Islamic times until the twentieth century, saj\textsuperscript{c} has continuously occupied an important place in Arabic literature and in Arab society. It has been used in the sayings of the pre-Islamic kuhhān, in sermons and prayers, proverbs and aphorisms, epistles, maqāmat, biographies, and histories. From the tenth until the twentieth century, book titles were almost invariably written in saj\textsuperscript{c}. Introductions to works of many genres were often written entirely in saj\textsuperscript{c}. In short, saj\textsuperscript{c} constitutes an extremely important feature of Arabic writing, including both elite and popular literature. It seems strange that a literary phenomenon of this dimension has received so little attention on the part of medieval and modern Arab literary critics.

What is saj\textsuperscript{c}? The common English translation of the term is "rhymed prose", but is saj\textsuperscript{c} simply that: prose which rhymes? A cursory reading of examples of saj\textsuperscript{c} reveals that there are certain basic rules governing its composition, yet Arab critics wrote very little about these rules in contrast to their monumental efforts to record the rules of poetry. In his Miftāḥ al-\textsuperscript{c}ulūm, which has been perhaps the most widely used text book of rhetoric for centuries, al-Sakkākī (d. 626/1228) devotes only two sentences to the topic of saj\textsuperscript{c}. However, not all Arab critics ignored saj\textsuperscript{c} to this degree. Abū Hilāl al-\textsuperscript{c}Askarī (d. after 395/1005) discusses saj\textsuperscript{c} in some detail in his Kitāb al-\textsuperscript{c}inā\textsuperscript{c}atayn, as does Diya\textsuperscript{a} al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239) in his al-Mathal al-sa\textsuperscript{c}ir fī adab al-kātib wa-\textsuperscript{c}l-shā\textsuperscript{c}ir and al-Qalqashandi (d. 821/1418) in his Subh al-acsha\textsuperscript{c}t sina\textsuperscript{c}at al-inshā. Many other medieval works on rhetoric and iṣṭāj al-Qur\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ān treat the subject, but have received little attention from Western scholars. Modern Arab scholars appear to be more aware of medieval criticism of saj\textsuperscript{c}, but do little more than report the opinions of their predecessors without criticizing or building on these ideas. These medieval sources ought to be examined in order to reach a satisfactory definition of saj\textsuperscript{c} and to establish norms for the criticism of saj\textsuperscript{c}.

This study will not include a detailed historical analysis of the development of saj\textsuperscript{c} criticism, nor will it attempt to treat important topics such as the development of saj\textsuperscript{c} in the jāhilīyyah, the relationship of Qur\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ānic saj\textsuperscript{c} to pre-Islamic saj\textsuperscript{c}, or the influence of Qur\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ānic saj\textsuperscript{c} on later writers of saj\textsuperscript{c}. It will rather apply rules derived from medieval critical works to the Qur\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ān in an attempt to analyze the structure of Qur\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ānic saj\textsuperscript{c}, and thereby reach a better understanding of the formal rules governing this type of composition.
The Question of Saj in the Qurʾān

The most enduring examples of saj in Arabic are to be found in the Qurʾān. Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether or not the Qurʾān contains saj. According to Goldziher, saj is the oldest type of poetic speech in Arabic, pre-dating rajaz and the qaṣīdah. It was one of the prevalent types of eloquent speech in pre-Islamic Arabia, and was used specifically in orations and in statements with religious or metaphysical content. Muslim scholars concede that the Qurʾān was revealed in language consistent with that which was considered eloquent in the speech of the Arabs; as Ibn Sinān al-Khafajī (d. 466/1074) states, inna ʿl-qurʾāna unzila bi-lughati ʿI-ʿarabi wa-ʿalā ʿurfihim wa-ʿadatihim; “The Qurʾān was revealed in the language of the Arabs, in accordance with their usage and custom.” Goldziher goes so far as to state that no Arab would have acknowledged utterances as coming from a divine source had they not been presented in saj. It seems logical, therefore, that the Qurʾān would contain saj.

Diametrically opposed to this view is the doctrine of ḫaṣ al-Qurʾān, the “inimitability” of the Qurʾān. For example, in his work entitled ḫaṣ al-Qurʾān, al-Baqillānī (d. 403/1013) goes to great lengths to show that the Qurʾān does not contain saj, and he even attributes this opinion to al-Ashʿarī. The doctrine of inimitability holds that the Qurʾān may not be compared to any type of sublunary composition, since the Qurʾān represents one of God’s attributes—His speech. To call the Qurʾān saj would be to impute a mundane attribute to God. Denial that the Qurʾān contained saj was part of a more general insistence that the Qurʾān was God’s speech, not Muḥammad’s. Enemies of Muḥammad tried to detract from the validity of his messages by labelling them the inventions of a poet or soothsayer. To counter such attacks, many scholars chose to deny that the Qurʾān was a document of saj or that it contained saj, just as they denied that it contained poetry. It would appear that the rigidity of this doctrine left no room for the critic to exercise his skill, yet

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4 See ḫaṣ al-Qurʾān, ed. ʿĀbd ʿAl-Qaṣūq (Cairo: Dar al-maʿārif, 1954), 86-100. For the statement about al-Ashʿarī, see 86.
6 On this subject, see Qurʾān 37:36, 52:30, 69:41.