

EVERETT K. ROWSON
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

An Alexandrian Age in Fourteenth-Century Damascus: Twin Commentaries on Two Celebrated Arabic Epistles

Superficially, at least, the traditional Western view of Arabic literature in the Mamluk period conforms rather closely to the hoary clichés about the Alexandrian Age of Greek literature, a millennium and a half earlier. Authors worked under the burden of a rich canon of classical texts, which they revered, and which they diligently collected, classified, commented, criticized, and epitomized. By comparison, their own literary efforts, while certainly copious, have been seen as derivative, lifeless, and smelling altogether too much of the lamp.

Evidence for the first half of this picture—if not the second—is easy to come by, as can be seen from even a cursory look at some of the literary production of two of the more celebrated figures of the age, Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (d. 768/1366) and his younger colleague Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363). Ibn Nubātah, known principally as a poet, published selections of the verse of a number of his predecessors, including Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896) and the notorious Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 391/1001), as well as a collection of the epistles of the famous Ayyubid minister and stylist al-Qādī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1200).¹ Al-Ṣafadī, mainly a prose writer, composed commentaries on the famous poem *Lāmīyat al-‘Ajam* by al-Ṭuḡhrā’ī (d. 515/1121) and the work of literary criticism entitled *Al-Mathal al-Sā’ir* by Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239), a series of monographs on individual literary tropes, and a number of biographical dictionaries, including one on the blind and one on the one-eyed.²

Particularly interesting as a manifestation of these two writers’ “Alexandrian” qualities—as well as a curious link between them—is the fact that each wrote an elaborate work of commentary on a prose epistle (a different epistle in each case) by the fifth/eleventh-century Andalusian poet and littérateur Ibn Zaydūn (d. 463/1070). These commentaries are far more than philological glosses; in each

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¹On Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī, see *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v.; Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (Leiden, 1949), 2:10–12, S2:149–50; ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī* (Cairo, 1963); Maḥmūd Sālim Muḥammad, *Ibn Nubātah: Shā’ir al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Damascus and Beirut, 1999). The most useful list of Ibn Nubātah’s works is in Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm’s edition of his *Sarḥ al-‘Uyūn fī Sharḥ Risālat Ibn Zaydūn* (Cairo, 1964), 18–24.

²On al-Ṣafadī, see *EI*², s.v.; *GAL*, 2:31–33, S2:27–29; Josef van Ess, “Ṣafadī-Splitter,” *Der Islam* 53 (1976): 242–66, and 54 (1977): 77–108.



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case the original epistle takes up less than ten pages, while the commentary extends to more than four hundred. Both works are thus highly digressive, and they manage to incorporate in their compass vast swathes of traditional Arabic literary culture and thereby offer the reader a far richer plate than the occasion of a single epistle would seem to promise.

A first question to pose about these two texts, then, concerns their status as commentaries. If they are not just offering a simple *explication du texte*, what are they doing, and why? Where do they fit in the larger context of commentary writing in the Mamluk age? In particular, what was the impetus for commenting literary works in prose, as opposed to the long-established tradition of commenting poetry? Another obvious question, given the wealth of information these works contain on the Arabic literary heritage as a whole, is what they can tell us about the canon in their own day. What was "classical," and what was not? Are they working to define that canon, to reinforce it, or perhaps to expand it? And who was their intended audience? Were they intended for students, for a general educated (or semi-educated) public, or perhaps for other scholars, who would be dazzled by their erudition? More generally, what do they tell us about the role of intertextuality in Mamluk literature, the supposed attendant "anxiety of influence," and its general "Alexandrian" qualities altogether?

The author of the two epistles around whom Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī chose to build their works is, of course, very well known. Ibn Zaydūn was a Cordoban aristocrat whose life reflects the turbulence of eleventh-century Andalusia under the "Party Kings." In his youth he served as vizier to the governor of Cordoba, Ibn Jahwar, but then fell foul of him and was thrown into prison, where he languished for some time before escaping, returning to the city only after Ibn Jahwar's death. Later he again fell from favor and left Cordoba for Seville, where he spent many years at the Abbadid court of al-Mu'taḍid and his son al-Mu'tamid, returning to Cordoba only with the Abbadid conquest of the city. Probably the most famous poet of his time, he composed verses in many genres; among the most famous are his love poems on Wallādah, daughter of the erstwhile caliph al-Mustakfī, with whom he had a stormy affair in his youth, as well as his poetic pleas (*isti'tāf*) to Ibn Jahwar to release him from prison during his first confinement in Cordoba.³

But Ibn Zaydūn was also known as a prose stylist, and his two most famous epistles are concerned with these same wrenching youthful experiences. The first, later christened the "humorous epistle" (*al-risālah al-hazliyah*), was occasioned by an attempt by his enemy and rival Ibn 'Abdūs to supplant him in the affections of

³On Ibn Zaydūn, see *EI*², s.v.; Devin Stewart, "Ibn Zaydūn," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: The Literature of Al-Andalus*, ed. María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells (Cambridge, 2000), 306–17.



Wallādah (an attempt which, by the way, later proved successful); speaking in Wallādah's voice (*'an lisānihā*), he has her peremptorily reject Ibn 'Abdūs's advances and pour scorn on him for his presumption. The second, the "serious epistle" (*al-risālah al-jiddīyah*), is a prose companion to his *isti'tāf* poems, attempting to move Ibn Jahwar to pity and persuade him to let him out of jail.

These are the two epistles commented by, respectively, Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī, and their choice of them is perhaps a bit surprising. Commentary as a general enterprise was, of course, a growth industry in this period, especially in religious scholarship; indeed, in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) it had become perhaps the most dominant form of writing altogether. Commentaries on works of grammar, lexicography, and literary criticism also abounded. Within the realm of pure literature, the commenting of poetry—both *dīwāns* of individual poets and anthologies such as Abū Tammām's *Ĥamāsah*—was a long-established and still thriving tradition. But for commentators to apply their skills to works of *prose* literature was far less common.

Three prominent examples of such commentaries may, however, be cited from the pens of our authors' predecessors. The *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah* by Ibn Abī al-Ĥadīd (d. 656/1258), commenting the collection of the purported sermons, speeches, and other dicta of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib put together by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015), parallels their works not only in being a commentary on prose, but also in its outsize dimensions and highly digressive character; on the other hand, Ibn Abī al-Ĥadīd's base text is essentially a religious one, and his objectives correspondingly diverge significantly from those of Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī.⁴ Perhaps more apposite, and certainly more obvious, is the tradition of commenting the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ĥarīrī; at least nine such commentaries were produced in the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, including those of Ibn Ḥafṣ (d. 565/1169), Şadr al-Afāḍil (d. 617/1220), al-Sharīshī (d. 619/1222), and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 680/1281), and of these the one best known today, that of al-Sharīshī, again displays the qualities of disproportionate length and intentional digressiveness evinced by the two later authors.⁵ It is striking to what degree al-Ĥarīrī's fame eclipsed that of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008), the inventor of the *maqāmah* genre, whose own *Maqāmāt* were, so far as is known, never commented at all. On the other hand, al-Hamadhānī's contemporary, al-'Utbī (d. ca. 412/1022), who applied the euphuistic prose style developed in the chanceries (*inshā'*) to the writing of history rather than fiction, produced in his laudatory biography of Maḥmūd of Ghaznah, the *Kitāb al-Yamīnī*, a work that seems to have cried out for

⁴Ibn Abī al-Ĥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 2nd ed., 21 vols. (Cairo, 1965–67); on Ibn Abī al-Ĥadīd, see *EI*², s.v.

⁵For the commentaries on al-Ĥarīrī, see *GAL*, 1:276 f., S1:486–88. On al-Sharīshī, see *EI*², s.v., and his *Sharḥ Maqāmāt al-Ĥarīrī*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1970).



commentaries, of which at least four are known from the following three centuries, including one by Ṣadr al-Afāḍil, who also commented al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*. All of these are, however, soberly philological, sticking quite close to al-'Utbī's original text rather than using it as a pretext for striking out in unexpected (and entertaining) directions.⁶

None of these earlier commentaries were directed at epistles (*rasā'il*) in the narrow sense of a relatively brief letter addressed from one individual to another, despite the fact that such letter-writing had been recognized as an art form since the third/ninth century, when the "collected letters" of recognized prose stylists began to be published. The earliest such collections are now lost to us, but preserved collections from the second half of the fourth/tenth century enable us to track a real efflorescence in the art of correspondence (*tarassul*), as part of, and a major contributor to, a general enhancement of the status of prose vis-à-vis its rival, poetry, at that time. Writers of both official letters, such as Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābi' (d. 384/994) and the Ṣāhib Ibn 'Abbād (d. 385/995), and private individuals, such as Abū Bakr al-Khwārazmī (d. 384/994) and al-Hamadhānī himself, cultivated a new, intricate style, characterized by the constant employment of rhetorical tropes, careful attention to phrasal rhythm, and above all patterns of prose rhyme (*saj'*), which was to determine the direction of fine letter-writing for centuries to come, as well as to spawn such new genres as the *maqāmāt*. While this trend was at first particularly associated with the eastern Islamic world, it rapidly spread west, as can be seen in the correspondence of Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 449/1058) in Syria and—albeit to a less extravagant extent—of Ibn Zaydūn in Andalusia.⁷

This now-established euphuistic *tarassul* style enjoyed further development at the hands of two outstanding representatives in the Ayyubid and then Mamluk realms. The first was Saladin's right-hand man, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1200), whose voluminous correspondence is preserved in collections made by a number of later authors. Two of these have been published, one of them compiled by the second major epistolographer of the age, the Mamluk chancery head Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir (d. 692/1292), who is best known today for his biographies of the sultans Baybars, Qalāwūn, and al-Ashraf Khalīl, and whose own correspondence is available only through (extensive) quotations in later authors.⁸ Both men were certainly

⁶On al-'Utbī, see *EI*², s.v., and *GAL*, 1:314, S1:547f. The one published commentary on the *Kitāb al-Yamīnī* is the eleventh/seventeenth-century one by al-Manīnī (d. 1172/1759), *Al-Fatḥ al-Wahbī 'alā Tārīkh Abī Naṣr al-'Utbī*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1869). On the rather neglected Ṣadr al-Afāḍil (al-Qāsim ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Khwārazmī), see Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd Rifā'ī (Beirut, 1979), 16:238–53.

⁷For basic orientation on these developments, see Zaki Mubarak, *La prose arabe au IVe siècle de l-Hégire (Xe siècle)* (Paris, 1931).

⁸On al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, see *EI*², s.v., and *GAL*, 1:316, S1:549. The published collections are Ibn



models for Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafadī; while the latter appended a letter by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir to his own commentary, Ibn Nubātah manifested his admiration for al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil by preparing his own collection of his letters, entitled *Al-Fāḍil min Inshā’ al-Fāḍil*.⁹

Ibn Nubātah was born in Cairo in 686/1287, five years before the death of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir. As a young man he emigrated to Syria, where he spent most of his life, returning to Egypt only when in his seventies and dying in Cairo in 768/1366. In Syria, he was especially patronized by the Ayyubid ruler of Ḥamāh, Abū al-Fidā’, and his son; later, resident in Damascus, he was appointed supervisor (*nāzir*) of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, making an annual trip there at Easter. While he was known primarily as a poet, his prose was also much appreciated, and he served for a time as head of the chancery in Damascus. In a sense, he had a birthright to his eloquence, priding himself on, and taking his name from, his ancestor Ibn Nubātah al-Fāriqī (d. 374/984), a famous preacher at the court of Sayf al-Dawlah in Aleppo, whose sermons—yet another exemplar of the efflorescence of euphuistic prose in the late fourth/tenth century—had been not only collected but also commented on, at least twice, in the seventh/thirteenth century.¹⁰

Many of Ibn Nubātah’s works survive in manuscript, but only a few of them have been published, including, besides his poetic *Dīwān*,¹¹ his collection of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil’s epistles, an *adab* collection entitled *Maṭla’ al-Fawā’id wa-Majma’ al-Farā’id*,¹² and his commentary on Ibn Zaydūn’s “humorous” epistle, all three composed at the behest of his patron Abū al-Fidā’. Certainly it is the latter, entitled *Sarḥ al-‘Uyūn fī Sharḥ Risālat Ibn Zaydūn* (The Pasture for eyes in explanation of the epistle of Ibn Zaydūn), that has always been his most popular prose work, first printed as early as 1861 in Beirut and many times since.¹³

In his preface to the *Sarḥ al-‘Uyūn* Ibn Nubātah indicates that the work was commissioned by Abū al-Fidā’, but supplies no details elucidating the reason for the amir’s choice of the text to be commented. He does recount, somewhat

‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Durr al-Naẓīm min Tarassul ‘Abd al-Raḥīm*, ed. Aḥmad Aḥmad Badawī (Cairo, 1959); and Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn al-Dībājī, *Rasā’il al-Ḥarb wa-al-Salām*, ed. Muḥammad Naghash (Cairo, 1978). On Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, see *EI*², s.v., and *GAL*, 1:318f., S1:551. The biography of Baybars has been edited by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khuwayṭir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir* (Riyadh, 1976); most recently, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s topographic work on Cairo has been edited by Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid, *Al-Rawḍah al-Bahīyah al-Zāhirīyah fī Khīṭaṭ al-Mu’izzīyah al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1996).

⁹Extant in manuscript but unpublished.

¹⁰On the earlier Ibn Nubātah, see *EI*², s.v.; *GAL*, 1:92f., S1:149f.

¹¹Most recently edited by ‘Abd al-Amīr Maḥdī Ḥabīb al-Ṭā’ī (Baghdad, 1977).

¹²Ed. ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā (Damascus, 1972).

¹³I have relied on the 1964 edition by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm; see note 1 above.



disingenuously, how he protested that he was “only” a poet, unqualified to deal with the rich material presented by Ibn Zaydūn’s epistle, but was overruled by the amir, who remarked that “stories” (*qiṣaṣ*) are not far removed, in any case, from the poet’s bailiwick. He goes on to say that there were copious resources for this undertaking available in a *waqf* library in Damascus—which, alas, proved inaccessible to him, so he was forced to rely on materials at hand. He also insists on how short he has kept his commentary (although it runs to 476 pages in the most recent printed edition).

After his prefatory remarks, and before launching into his *sharḥ* proper, Ibn Nubātah supplies a brief biography of Ibn Zaydūn and a short selection of his verses. Such capsule biographies-cum-verses were of course standard in his day in a variety of contexts, most notably in biographical dictionaries, and they loom large in the body of this commentary itself. Ibn Nubātah then explains who Wallādah was, adding some of her verses as well, and delineates the precise circumstances that occasioned the letter, namely, Ibn ‘Abdūs’s attempt to horn in on Ibn Zaydūn by sending a slave girl to Wallādah to sing his praises and sound out his chances. Ibn Nubātah is fairly explicit about his sources, saying that he has taken his information from Ibn Bassām, Ibn Ḥayyān, and other standard Andalusian writers.

The commentary itself constitutes the rest of the work. The original epistle is not presented integrally, but taken phrase by phrase. Odd words are glossed, less than obvious syntactical constructions elucidated, and other expected philological work performed. That is, however, only a minor part of the commentary. What Ibn Nubātah is really interested in doing is using the epistle—which happens to be exceptionally replete with historical and literary allusions—to open a window on the entire literary-historical tradition.

The tone is set from the beginning. The “*ammā ba’d*”—the traditional phrase of transition from the invocation to the body of the message—is discussed in terms of who first employed it in Arabic epistolography, and the following phrase, “O you whose intellect is impaired [because you think you can win me over],” leads to a full discussion of the intellect (*‘aql*) in Islamic theology and other contexts, including its etymology, al-Jāhiz’s thoughts on it, verses by ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, two prophetic hadith, considerations of foods that strengthen it, and a conventional sideswipe at schoolmasters, who are thought to lack intellect altogether because they spend all their time with children.

The real backbone of the work, however, is its more extended excursus, most of them biographical and introduced with the rubric “*tarjamah*.” The first of these concerns the famous pre-Islamic sage Aktham ibn Sayfī, whom Ibn Nubātah identifies as the source of a proverb cited in Ibn Zaydūn’s letter; two pages follow, providing general information on Aktham and reviewing the long past controversies



about his possible adoption of Islam. The second such *tarjamah* is much longer: a verse quoted anonymously by Ibn Zaydūn is identified as being by al-Mutanabbī, and Ibn Nubātah adds, "Since the discussion has led to our mentioning al-Mutanabbī, it cannot hurt (*lā ba's*) to mention some basic information about him (*nubadh min akhbārihi*)." Seven pages follow, offering a brief biographical sketch as well as extensive selections, with running commentary, from the *qaṣīdah* from which comes the line quoted by Ibn Zaydūn.

But Ibn Nubātah's real opportunity for this kind of lore- and verse-mongering in the guise of "biography" comes a few lines later in the letter, where Ibn Zaydūn has Wallādah say to Ibn 'Abdūs that his slave girl messenger had praised him to the skies, "to the point that she would have me imagine that Joseph (peace be upon him) vied with you in beauty and you put him in his place¹⁴; that the wife of al-'Azīz¹⁵ saw you and forgot about Joseph; that Qārūn¹⁶ amassed only a fraction of the fortune you have stored away, and that al-Naṭif¹⁷ only stumbled on the stray bits of the money you have buried; that Chosroes carried your train, Caesar shepherded your flocks, and Alexander killed Darius only on your orders. . . ." and so forth, mentioning altogether fifty-two different historical figures, for each of whom Ibn Nubātah supplies a *tarjamah* or sketch.

These biographies fall into distinct groups. Pre-Islamic personages, both Arab and non-Arab, are followed by a group specifically of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets, with some variation offered by accounts of famous pre-Islamic Arab battles. Then come Umayyad governors and generals (al-Ḥajjāj gets a full eleven pages); then ancient Greek thinkers (including Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, and Galen); a few Islamic scientists, philosophers, and theologians (al-Kindī, al-Nazzām); literary figures such as 'Abd al-Ḥamīd and Jāḥiẓ; and finally the legal scholar Mālik ibn Anas. The choice of names is of course determined by Ibn Zaydūn, not Ibn Nubātah; but Ibn Nubātah exercises considerable ingenuity in keeping up the pace of *tarjamahs* in the second half of the epistle as well, partly by identifying the authors of quoted lines of verse (including, for example, Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām), partly by paralleling proverbs with other lines of verse by other poets—and partly on the basis of sheer thematics, as when Ibn Zaydūn makes a passing reference to shorthand (*mu'ammá*), which Ibn Nubātah tells us was invented by al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad, adding, "It cannot hurt (*lā ba's*) to mention some basic information about him . . . and I will maintain this procedure throughout the rest of this commentary." In fact this results in another thirty-six

¹⁴On Joseph as the paradigm of male beauty in Islam, see *EI*², s.v. "Yūsuf."

¹⁵That is, the equivalent of the Biblical Potiphar's wife; see *EI*², s.v. "Azīz Miṣr."

¹⁶The Biblical Korah (Numbers 16), famed for his wealth; see *EI*², s.v. "Qārūn."

¹⁷A pre-Islamic Arab fabled for his wealth; see the explanation by Ibn Nubātah himself, *Sarḥ al-'Uyūn*, 54 f.



tarjamahs altogether, somewhat more randomly assorted, including more poets, notorious heretics, and persons famous for their stupidity and inarticulateness, interspersed with discussions of proverbs, technical terms in hadith, grammar, and theology, disquisitions on the world's religions and the seven seas, and various other miscellaneous material.

In many ways—except for its length—this commentary would make an ideal text for a contemporary graduate seminar in Arabic literature, or Islamic studies, since so much basic ground regarding Islamic political, cultural, and literary history gets covered; in short, this text can serve as an introduction to the basic lore, and poetry, with which an *adīb* or *littérateur*—*not* a disciplinary specialist—was expected to be equipped. Not that it is by any means comprehensive (for one thing, there is little offered later than the third/ninth century), but Ibn Nubātah certainly does cover a lot of basic ground. Such thoughts lead to some obvious questions: what is Ibn Nubātah doing here, and what kind of audience is he positing (beyond the royal addressee who “commissioned” the work)? Clearly, he is not just making the text comprehensible to the average educated reader. Ibn Zaydūn had assumed an audience that would catch his allusions without need for an interpreter; and while Ibn Nubātah may well in some cases be intending to clue in the clueless where Ibn Zaydūn is particularly allusive, he is certainly also using the epistle simply as an occasion for presenting vast quantities of information that can simultaneously teach the neophyte, entertain the more sophisticated reader, and manifest his own wide reading and erudition. In all these ways, presumably, he is offering what he calls *fawā'id*, literally, “benefits,” that justify the incorporation of what it “can't hurt” to add to the exposition. But before posing more questions (or answers) of this general nature, it will help to look at this commentary's “twin,” al-Şafadī's *Tamām al-Mutūn fī Sharḥ Risālat Ibn Zaydūn* (The Complete texts in explanation of the epistle of Ibn Zaydūn), commenting the poet's “serious” epistle, in which he pleads with his erstwhile patron, now jailer, Ibn Jahwar, to set him free.¹⁸

Al-Şafadī was ten years younger than Ibn Nubātah. The son of a Mamluk, he was born in Şafad in 696/1296, but spent most of his life shuttling back and forth between Cairo and Damascus. He was a prolific writer on a broad variety of topics, but most fundamentally an *adīb*, although he is undoubtedly best known today for his massive and wide-ranging biographical dictionary, *Al-Wāfī bi-al-Wafayāt*. Rather surprisingly, the latter includes a fairly extensive entry on Ibn Nubātah,¹⁹ despite the fact that the work's very title indicates that it was restricted to personages no longer living and we know in fact that Ibn Nubātah (d. 768/1366)

¹⁸I rely on the edition by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1969).

¹⁹Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Şafadī, *Al-Wāfī bi-al-Wafayāt*, vol. 1, ed. Helmut Ritter (Wiesbaden, 1962), 311–31.



outlived al-Şafadī (d. 764/1363) by three years. One can only assume that this biography (which mentions no specific dates later than 743/1343) was inserted at a time when one of the two was in Cairo and the other in Damascus and al-Şafadī was assuming that the older man was either dead or soon to be so; but the situation is unclear. In any case, aside from basic biographical facts (about the first half of Ibn Nubātah's life) and general praise (including the statement that in his prose he followed the model of al-Qādī al-Fāḍil and "snuffed out the light" of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir), al-Şafadī's entry on him is primarily devoted to sketching out the relations between the two men.

From what he has to say, these seem to have been very cordial indeed. Pride of place is given to an epistle al-Şafadī, then thirty-two and living in Cairo, addressed to Ibn Nubātah in Damascus, requesting from him permission (in formal terms, an *ijāzah*) to transmit his works—both past and future; this request is preceded by a long passage of fulsome praise, explaining how Ibn Nubātah has outdone, or put to shame, the classical masters in various fields, such as al-'Abbās ibn al-Aḥnaf in love poetry, al-Mutanabbī in panegyric, and al-Qādī al-Fāḍil himself in epistolography, and followed by a further request for a brief curriculum vitae (*dhikr nasabihi wa-mawliidihi wa-makānihi*). Ibn Nubātah begins his equally fulsome, and lengthier, reply with praise for his correspondent, dropping even more famous names along the way than had al-Şafadī, rather archly describes what he calls his quandary (he is unworthy of this honor, but does not want to be impolite), but then proceeds to offer his young admirer a general *ijāzah*, to which he appends an autobiographical sketch, naming his early teachers (and models, including both al-Qādī al-Fāḍil and Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir), citing his precocious exchanges of verse with some of them, and giving us a valuable list of his works to date (including both the *Sarḥ al-'Uyūn* and *al-Fāḍil min Inshā' al-Fāḍil*).

The two men must have met personally very shortly thereafter, since we know that al-Şafadī travelled to Damascus later the same year, and he mentions two of Ibn Nubātah's works that he "heard" directly from him. The rest of his biography is then devoted to his later correspondence with Ibn Nubātah, in both prose and verse, the latter including a series of riddle-poems posed by each to the other (with the solutions also offered in verse) as well as Ibn Nubātah's request to borrow a book from al-Şafadī with a promise to return it within three days and al-Şafadī's (mild) poetic reproach when he failed to do so. Al-Şafadī gives no indication of any serious difficulties in this relationship, but one must wonder whether he is being entirely straightforward, since our only information from the other side looks quite different. According to the littérateur Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī (d. 837/1434), Ibn Nubātah complained that every time he came up with an original image or idea (*ma'ná*) in his poetry al-Şafadī would "emulate" or "imitate" it (*mu'āraḍah*) in a verse of his own, with the same meter and rhyme, in effect



stealing it (*sariqah*). (Both *mu'āraḍah*, generally evaluated positively as an act of homage, if also rivalry, and *sariqah*, generally evaluated negatively as an act of larceny, were well-established and much-discussed phenomena in the literary tradition by this time.²⁰) Finally Ibn Nubātah became so exasperated with this situation that he compiled an anthology specifically of those poems of his which al-Ṣafadī had stolen and entitled it "Barley-Bread" (*Khubz al-Sha'ir*), referring to the well-known proverb "Barley is eaten and despised," applied to someone from whom one profits and then does an ill turn. Ibn Ḥijjah was so taken with this little work that he incorporated in its entirety into his *Khizānat al-Adab*.²¹

Although we have no explicit testimony to confirm it, there would seem to be every reason to believe that al-Ṣafadī's commentary on Ibn Zaydūn's "serious" epistle, the *Tamām al-Mutūn*, was itself an "emulation" of Ibn Nubātah's *Sarḥ al-'Uyūn*, carried out on a rather larger scale. Rather suspiciously, Ibn Nubātah's name does not appear anywhere in al-Ṣafadī's work; on the other hand—and one can only assume a fairly heavy dose of deliberate irony here—"emulation" in general is virtually a leitmotif throughout its introductory sections. Al-Ṣafadī begins by describing the splendor of Ibn Zaydūn's letter to Ibn Jahwar, noting in one phrase that its beauties are an inexhaustible resource for potential emulators (*wa-al-fadā' il allatī lā tazāl maḥāsinuhā'alā man ḥāwala mu'āraḍatahā mannāna*), and declares his humble intention to ride on its coattails with a modest commentary. This is followed, as in Ibn Nubātah's work, by a brief biography of Ibn Zaydūn and a selection from his verses; the two biographies are very similar, including some verbatim parallels, but that is probably due to the authors' use of the same sources. Al-Ṣafadī mentions the "humorous" letter, but only in passing, adding that "All his epistles are stuffed full of all sorts of *adab*, scintillating historical anecdotes, and striking proverbs, in both prose and poetry." He offers rather more information on Wallādah than does Ibn Nubātah, and more of both her verses and Ibn Zaydūn's to and about her.

Regarding the most famous of the latter, Ibn Zaydūn's celebrated *Nūnīyah*, al-Ṣafadī has some supplementary remarks to add, reverting to the topic of emulation: "People emulated it (*'āraḍahā*) both in his lifetime and after his death, but could not come close to it (in quality). I believe that Ibn Zaydūn in this poem was himself emulating verses by al-Buḥturī. . . . The shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī [d. ca. 750/1349] composed a *takhmīs*²² on this *qaṣīdah* of Ibn Zaydūn's, making it an elegy (*marthiyah*) for al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad 'Imād al-Dīn [Abū al-Fidā'], the

²⁰See *EI*², s.vv. "mu'āraḍa" and "sariqa."

²¹Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Khizānat al-Adab wa-Ghāyat al-Arab* (Būlāq, 1291 [1874]), 285–89.

²²That is, an expansion of the original poem made by adding three half-verses to each original two for each line, thereby totalling five; see *EI*², s.v. "takhmīs."



ruler of Ḥamāh, and succeeded admirably. . . . And I myself, in my youth, composed an elegy on one of my dear friends in Ṣafad, using the meter and rhyme of this *qaṣīdah* by Ibn Zaydūn. . . .” Al-Ṣafadī proceeds to quote his own poem in its entirety (twenty-seven lines); clearly the process of shifting in a *mu‘āraḍah* from one genre to another (here, in the cases of both al-Ḥillī and al-Ṣafadī, from love to death) was intended as an additional indication of the poet’s dexterity. He then concludes his introduction by offering a rather large selection of Ibn Zaydūn’s other verses, in several different genres—altogether more than twice as many as those provided by Ibn Nubātah. He also, unlike Ibn Nubātah but conveniently, presents the integral text of the epistle to be commented on before launching into his phrase-by-phrase treatment of it.

Whether or not al-Ṣafadī was being deliberately coy by referring so extensively to *mu‘āraḍah* in what was in fact an unacknowledged *mu‘āraḍah* of Ibn Nubātah’s book (and given Ibn Nubātah’s fame it seems likely the intended audience would have got the point), the idea of commenting Ibn Zaydūn’s *other* famous epistle was certainly a happy one. Despite its very different (serious) tone, this letter offered al-Ṣafadī much the same scope for displaying his wit and erudition as did the “humorous” epistle to Ibn Nubātah. More specifically, it even included a *stretto* passage, with a string of famous names and historical incidents, not dissimilar to “Wallādah’s” litany in the “humorous” epistle referring to Joseph, the wife of al-‘Azīz, and so forth. Here, protesting his innocence to Ibn Jahwar, Ibn Zaydūn says, “Have mercy! The floodwaters have reached their crest, and I have suffered all I can endure! All I can say about my situation is that if I had been commanded to bow down to Adam, but pridefully refused,²³ or if Noah had said to me ‘Board (the ark) with us!’ and I had said ‘I will take refuge on a mountain that will protect me from the water’²⁴ . . . there might be justification for calling what has happened to me an exemplary punishment (*nakāl*) and dubbing it, if only figuratively, an (appropriate) requital (*‘iqāb*).” The hypothetical situations envisaged by Ibn Zaydūn in the prodisis of this sentence (beginning with Adam and Noah) total altogether twenty-three, and march in a fairly organized fashion through episodes in prophetic, then pre-Islamic Arab, then Islamic history, concluding with al-Ḥajjāj’s bombardment of the Ka‘bah in 73/692, and thus providing al-Ṣafadī with an ideal opportunity for extensive digression.

And digress he does, not only on this passage but throughout the *risālah*, to an extent that significantly outdoes Ibn Nubātah. As opposed to the latter’s reliance on “*tarjamahs*,” al-Ṣafadī casts his nets much wider, devoting sections not only to famous people, and events, but also to (for instance) various rhetorical tropes

²³ As did Iblīs (Satan), according to Quran 2:34; cf. 7:12.

²⁴ Quoting Quran 11:42–43.



(such as *taḥsīn al-qabīh*, “making the bad seem good”), character and behavioral traits (including loyalty, slander, and Schadenfreude [*shamātah*]), points of theological and legal controversy (for example, Mutazilite views on the superiority of angels to prophets, and an excursus on judicial conservatism [*taqlīd*]), and such unclassifiable topics as the behavior of hungry cats and the perception that “It’s a wide world!”. He also has a much broader field of vision chronologically than Ibn Nubātah: while the latter included in his book virtually nothing later than the fourth/tenth century, al-Ṣafadī seems to be making an effort to give early and recent writers “equal time”—he very frequently cites al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, for example, and also a whole range of Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk poets, while by no means neglecting the older heritage, from pre-Islamic through Abbasid times. Also unlike Ibn Nubātah, al-Ṣafadī is generally inclined to name his direct sources, which range very widely over the tradition and testify to his extraordinary learning.

This is not the only time al-Ṣafadī engaged in such an exercise in wholesale “browsing” through the entire Arabic literary tradition from the beginning to his own times. Perhaps even more striking an example is his massive commentary on al-Ṭughrā’ī’s *Lāmīyat al-‘Ajam* entitled *Al-Ghayth al-Musajjam*.²⁵ In that work, which uses each line of the commented poem to launch into a ten- to thirty-page digression on the most varied topics imaginable, al-Ṣafadī actually felt compelled in his introduction to include a long defense of his use of such digression (*istiṭrād*), appealing to al-Jāḥiẓ (one must never bore the reader) and al-Buḥturī (as espousing the generalist ideal of the *adīb*, as opposed to the specialist ideal of the scholar), among others. He does not drift quite as far from his primary topic in his commentary on Ibn Zaydūn’s letter as he does in that work; but it is still abundantly clear that the letter commented is serving primarily as a vehicle, to a degree that one would hesitate to attribute to Ibn Nubātah.

Not that al-Ṣafadī neglects the requisite philological, and to some extent thematic and aesthetic, analysis of Ibn Zaydūn’s words themselves. This task is performed conscientiously throughout the commentary, and at its conclusion al-Ṣafadī actually goes so far as to add an appendix listing fifteen weak points in the *risālah*’s language and style—together with suggestions for improvement. A second appendix, seemingly more gratuitous and introduced by the phrase “*lā ba’s*” (“it cannot hurt [to add it]”), which al-Ṣafadī otherwise avoids, reproduces a rather long epistle by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir to the poet Ibn al-Naqīb (d. 687/1288), defending himself against criticism from an unnamed Shi‘ite for having shown himself excessively humble in a scholarly gathering. Playing extensively with Shi‘i themes, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir includes in this letter a number of “*stretto*” passages that bring it into

²⁵ Al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Ghayth al-Musajjam fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al-‘Ajam*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Beirut, 1990). On al-Ṭughrā’ī, see *EI*², s.v.



parallel with Ibn Zaydūn's efforts, including a name-dropping section to the effect of "Do you think I agreed with Ibn Muġjam (when he assassinated 'Alī) . . .?" and so forth. The more general effect of al-Şafadī's adding this text to the end of his commentary is to stress the continuity of the tradition of rhetorical epistolography, from Ibn Zaydūn and his likes, through al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil and Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, and perhaps by implication on to (the unmentioned) Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī himself.

The heightened status of epistolography and of artistic prose generally in the Mamluk era, and its suitability for commentary, is the first of four points on which this quick survey of these two texts may offer food for thought, if not more specific conclusions. The relative merit of prose and poetry had been itself a standard topos in *adab* literature since the fourth/tenth century, when the former first attained a level of rhetorical development that made real competition with the latter plausible. Yet the level of complexity, and ambiguity, involved in artistic prose rarely attained that of poetry, and that most specific form of homage, the commentary, was relatively rarely applied to prose—the primary exception being the *maqāmāt*. On the other hand, commenting prose offered a unique way of presenting miscellaneous information, true to the Jāhīzian formula for entertaining digression, that began to be exploited in the seventh/thirteenth centuries, as represented by Ibn Abī al-Ĥadīd's *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah* and al-Şarīṣī's *Sharḥ Maqāmāt al-Ĥarīrī*. Ibn Nubātah saw such an opportunity in Ibn Zaydūn's *risālah hazliyah*, and grabbed it; and the young, brash, and competitive al-Şafadī proceeded to outdo him with his commentary on the *risālah jiddiyah*. Ultimately, nevertheless, al-Şafadī's own commentary on the *Lāmīyat al-'Ajam* demonstrated that the same technique could be applied at least as effectively to poetry, and the commenting of artistic prose never developed into a full-fledged major genre of Arabic *adab*.

Second, both Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī are clearly concerned with the canon of Arabic literature. Ibn Zaydūn, in both his epistles, had relied on, rehearsed, and indeed to some extent pinned down, the canon in his own day (a canon that was for him, significantly, entirely Eastern—there is nothing specifically Andalusian in either *risālah*). Ibn Nubātah emphatically reinforced this canon with his *tarjamahs*, inducting students into, and reminding peers of, a significant cross-section of what every respectable littérateur should know. Al-Şafadī went further, giving full credit to "modern classics" alongside their hoary predecessors, and demonstrating the continuing vitality of the literary tradition by citing recent and indeed contemporary poets and *udabā'* in the context of a three hundred year old epistle.

Third, it seems safe to say that both Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī were addressing several audiences, and accomplishing several intentions, at once. Their commentaries offered students a panorama of the world of literary learning, and a potted lesson in the basics of their heritage. At the same time, peers had this



lesson reinforced, or, perhaps more plausibly, were expected to congratulate themselves on recognizing, and even anticipating, the information and allusions as they were presented, while being impressed by the elegance with which this was done. A broader audience was offered a smorgasbord of "*fawā'id*," "useful bits," which they could savor and incorporate into their dinner conversation. And of course—perhaps particularly in al-Ṣafadī's case—the authors were establishing their own impressive credentials as experts for everyone to admire.

Fourth and finally, to come back to the "Alexandrian" character of the literary culture reflected in these works, there can be no question of the centrality of *erudition* to these authors and their audiences. All were conscious of a weighty tradition behind contemporary literary efforts, which acknowledged it at every turn. There is, however, little or no evidence for this fact being perceived as any kind of burden—the "anxiety of influence" becomes acute only when originality is prized in a way that would be completely foreign to our authors. What we seem to find instead is a real *delight* in influence. For Mamluk writers, one is tempted to say, intertextuality was what literature is all about; and the more of a past one has to deal with, the more one can glory in reproducing, ringing changes on, and playing with that past, to the ongoing enrichment of the Arabic literary tradition. That, I think, is how we should understand the achievements of Arabic literature in the Mamluk period, and perhaps if we assess it on that basis it will look less jejune and "derivative" (in an assumed negative sense) than the consensus of past scholarship would insist was the case.



apostolic-period pedigree for 'the Alexandrian churches'.¹⁰ And despite geographical proximity to Jerusalem, despite second-century papyrological evidence for the remarkably early and remarkably penetrating spread of Christian literature between the Delta and Upper Egypt,¹¹ and despite the inherent likelihood that the Christian message would have found some sympathetic hearers, however few, in the region (given the well-documented Jewish communities of Cyrenaica and Alexandria, displaying a fair degree of permeability with their hellenistic cultural context),¹² despite all these factors the commentary from Bede the Venerable derives from Book I of his four-book commentary on Genesis from the account of creation to the casting out of Ishmael. Bede was a polymath—teacher, computist, exegete, historian—and one of the foremost scholars from Anglo-Saxon England. He was interrupted in 393 by the Origenist controversy, after which he became a vocal critic of Origen of Alexandria—a controversy he referred to in his commentaries on Jonah and Obadiah in 396. This Ancient Christian Texts volume, edited and translated by Thomas Scheck in collaboration with classics students from Ave Maria University, includes these seven commentaries. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer mark the brilliant culmination of Middle English literature. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are stories told each other by pilgrims—who comprise a very colorful cross section of 14th-century English society—on their way to the shrine at Canterbury. The tales are cast into many different verse forms and genres and collectively explore virtually every significant medieval theme.