

Towards a New Arabic Literary History

In defiance of custom, I will begin without an explicit definition of "literature" or of "literary history." The reason, in brief, is that any given author's definition of those entities emerges from the content of his works and the manner of their arrangement. Although histories of Arabic literature display family resemblances, no two of them work in quite the same way. The same applies to works of *adab*. Insofar as its meaning has changed over time, no particular example of it exists apart from the uses to which it has been put. One of my objectives, in the literary history that I imagine, is to let the different definitions of literature talk to each other. It may even be the case that by the time I finish this project I will be able to offer a definition of my own. But any such definition will be as much the product of its positionality as all of the others.

Let us now turn to pre-modern literary histories. The term "history" suggests, at a minimum, some kind of chronological arrangement. Now some pre-modern works of *adab* are in fact arranged in chronological order. An early example is Ibn Qutaybah's *al-Shi3r wa l-shu3ara2*. But most of them are organized in other ways.

One possibly unique arrangement is that of the *Kitāb al-aghānī* or *Book of Songs*, by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī. As you may know, it consists of a list of the one hundred most popular songs at the Abbasid court, with biographies of the poets, composers, and performers who produced them. Its unit of organization is the song.

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A second and more popular approach is that of the *Fihrist* or *Catalogue* of Ibn al-Nadīm. It lists c. 7000 books under ten major categories corresponding to the various sciences. In each section, it offers a capsule history of a particular discipline and profiles the authors of works in that discipline. Its unit of organization is the field.

An even more popular schema is represented by Yāqūt's *Dictionary of adab-men*. It contains biographies of 1264 poets and prose writers, along with citations from their works. But the entries are arranged *alphabetically*. Its unit of organization is thus the name.

Another format for biographies is the one we find in al-Thaʿālibī's *Yatīmat al-Dahr* (*No Gem is Dearer: Poets of Our Era*). You will note that the translation rhymes, to match the rhyme in the original title. This is deliberate and I will give my reasons in due course. In any case the *Yatīmah* groups its entries on poets first by *period* and then by *region*. We might say that its units of organization are the vintage and the terroir.

Finally we have Kātib Celebī's *Kashf al-ẓunūn ʿan asāmī l-kutub wa l-funūn* (*If It's Unclear, Look It Up Here*). The *Kashf* is an annotated bibliography of works in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish. The notes on each book are grouped by field and the fields are listed alphabetically. The *Kashf* thus weaves together two modes of organization: the field (as with Ibn al-Nadīm) and the title.

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All of these collections are historical in the broadest sense. All of them contain biographical information about past authors, and all of them cite those authors' works. In those ways they *document* literary history. In some cases, furthermore, they speak directly about changes in form and content. But, as Wolfhart Heinrichs has argued, our authors were not particularly *interested* in those changes. Our authors' lack of interest is evident from how they organized their books. For the most part, their modes of organization are non-linear. Whatever the minimal units may be—songs, fields, names, titles, or whatever—they are non-temporal in nature. Admittedly, a few works are arranged in chronological order, and a few group their subjects by period. But these groupings are not in themselves sufficient to establish a framework for understanding change over time. For this reason, none of these works are histories in the European sense.

Of course we might say much more about each of these works and about the understandings it inscribes. For our purposes, however, I merely want to point out that these works are simply not *plotted* in the way modern literary histories are. With that point in mind, let's turn to European presentations of the same material.