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## Review of Book

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THE CITY IN ARABIC LITERATURE: CLASSICAL AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES. Edited by NIZAR F. HERMES and GRETCHEN HEAD. pp. xviii, 339. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.  
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This compelling volume of sixteen chapters covering the seventh to the twenty-first centuries is a major contribution to the literature on cities in Arabic, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies. The erudition behind the chapters is undeniable, but they are all admirably concise and accessible, making it possible to read the volume cover to cover in just a few sittings. Indeed, this is just what I recommend doing. The chapters move along briskly, overlap, connect, circle back, and defy any easy periodisation or chronology. The editors, Nizar Hermes and Gretchen Head, should be commended for their innovative vision for the volume:

We set out determined to view the entirety of the [Arabic literary] tradition as an evolving continuum and to create a collection relevant to scholars of both classical and modern Arabic literature. While our original vision for the volume saw it as consisting of eight chapters chronologically within the premodern period and eight chapters chronologically within the modern, it turned out that many of the contributors to this collection declined to strictly differentiate between the premodern and modern of their own accord. As a result, a significant number of the chapters gathered here move fluidly between periods... (p. ix)

In many ways, this fluidity, detectable not just within individual chapters but across the arc of the work as a whole, is the volume's chief theoretical intervention. It turns out that it is impossible to separate the "modern" from the "premodern" in the study of the city in Arabic literature, but such an insight only emerges because Hermes and Head were willing to think across that supposed divide in the first place.

This fluidity becomes more palpable, understandably, as the volume goes on, but it is prefigured from the start in contributions that address the encounter, sometimes problematic and sometimes generative, between a contemporary reader and centuries-old material. Mohammad Salama's opening chapter on "The Untranslatability of the Qur'anic City" investigates what the Arabic words *madīna* and *qarya* meant in the seventh-century context in which the Qur'an was recorded, in the sacred past to which it refers, and in the liturgical space of the text itself. What is lost when the two words are translated, sometimes interchangeably, as "city" or "town"? By historicising the Qur'anic lexicon, Salama questions whether it is possible to understand the "Qur'anic city" in terms that apply to other examples of Arabic literature, let alone modern English. Similarly, Adam Talib in "Citystruck" cautions modern readers against making assumptions about eroticised urban encounters in premodern Arabic poetry:

It would be wrong to assume from these texts that all social encounters in premodern Arabic cities were eroticised in reality, that women and young men would have always felt themselves

to be the object of erotic attention or desire in every social interaction with an adult male, or indeed that this erotic attention or desire would have always been unwelcome. But it is no less wrong to assume that it was always fun and games just because the poets tell us it was. (p. 157)

Talib calls on scholars of Arabic literature to consider the possibility of a “predatory city” lurking just beneath the surface of the sources.

Talib’s chapter is one of two on poetic depictions of premodern cities that pointedly include modern material. Talib moves seamlessly among thirteenth- to nineteenth-century poetry, twentieth-century popular music, Levantine proverbs, Egyptian cinema, and *Saturday Night Live* sketches to emphasize continuity in the representation of cities as spaces of eroticised proximity, economic exchange, and always-possible predation. Bilal Orfali and Huda Fakhreddine, on the other hand, in their chapter “Against Cities: On *Hijā’ al-Mudun* in Arabic Poetry” set up a comparison between the premodern and the modern that stresses rupture. In premodern poetry, “scathing attacks on cities... reveal what one might describe as a rivalry between poets and cities” (p. 48). Poets might turn their back on a city to find more felicitous (and lucrative) opportunities elsewhere, inspiring humorous invectives against their former spatial and social milieu. By contrast, in the modern period the city acts as “an embodiment of the... poet’s anxieties and frustrations with the world” (p. 56). Orfali and Fakhreddine argue that the modern city becomes an inescapable condition, intertwined with the self, and as such is invoked poetically primarily as a metaphor for alienation and loss.

Other chapters in the first half of the book identify ways in which modern concepts and concerns resonate in premodern sources. In “‘Woe is me for Qayrawan!’: Ibn Sharaf’s *Lāmiyya*, the Plight of Refugees and the Cityscape”, Nizar Hermes establishes the importance of Ibn Sharaf to the genre of Arabic city elegies, as well as his distinctiveness. So great was Ibn Sharaf’s grief at the destruction of Qayrawan by the Hilālī invasion of 1057 that he could not bring himself to describe its physical structures. Unlike other premodern city elegists, such as Ibn Zaydūn discussed by Anna Cruz in her chapter “In Memory of al-Andalus: Using the Elegy to Reimagine the Literary and Literal Geography of Cordoba”, Ibn Sharaf refrains from mapping the cityscape in his poetry. Moreover, Ibn Sharaf’s *lāmiyya* is distinctive for its “intensely dark, inherently pessimistic and contemplative, even existentialist” evocation of the plight of the refugee (p. 92). Although Hermes does not make the connection to Orfali and Fakhreddine’s chapter, his conclusions suggest that Ibn Sharaf may have been a more “modern” poet than his peers. The chapter closes with a moving contemplation of the resonance between Ibn Sharaf’s *lāmiyya* and the trauma suffered by Syrian refugees in the wake of the 2016 destruction of Aleppo.

The importance of urban social and economic life is another way in which the premodern descriptions of cities discussed in this volume anticipate modern concepts and concerns. Harry Munt’s chapter on “Local Historians and their Cities: The Urban Topography of al-Azdī’s Mosul and al-Sahmī’s Jurjan” argues that “mimetic topographical description” was not as important in these works as “a picture of cities and their hinterlands dominated by property-owning and prosperous local (proto-)Sunni Muslim elites” (p. 28). That the elites emphasized in these tenth- and eleventh-century histories were meaningful to the authors – who counted themselves among their ranks – is undeniable, but as Munt points out they also “had an extremely important role to play in the maintenance of social stability day-to-day” (p. 29). Al-Azdī and al-Sahmī described Mosul and Jurjan in ways that highlighted the importance of a city’s status as a revenue-generating centre worthy of political protection in turbulent times. The flipside of this can be seen in Kelly Tuttle’s chapter “The Mamluk City as Overlapping Personal Networks”, which argues that for the professional class memorialised in al-Ṣafādī’s fourteenth-century biographical dictionary *A’yān al-‘Aṣr wa-A’wān al-Naṣr*, cities were interchangeable arenas for capitalising on social connections to advance a career. As such, cities were “borderless” and “networked”. Failure in one city might mean success in another, especially given the unpredictability of

local politics in the Mamluk period. In Sarah R. bin Tyeer's contribution on "The Literary Geography of Meaning in the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī and al-Harīrī", cities are similarly interchangeable. Just as the administrators, bureaucrats, and judges of Tuttle's chapter were characterised by mobility, dependent on cities for their livelihood but not beholden to any one of them, so too the protagonists of the *Maqāmāt* move from city to city, reenacting in each place a contest of wits and deferred recognition. This succession of cities – a "geography of the 'familiar'" (p. 70) – reproduces for the audience the semantic, legal, and social borders that frame each encounter.

These chapters on social and economic expectations for premodern cities beg comparison with Boutheina Khaldi's chapter on "The Sufis of Baghdad: A Topographical Index of the City". This is a fascinating inclusion in the volume, as it discusses three histories of medieval Sufism in Baghdad published by Iraqi intellectuals since 1990. While it is increasingly accepted that modern scholars employ literary methods in the analysis of premodern Arabic historiography, scholarship on modern Arabic literature tends not to address historical, sociological, or other such formal scholarly writing. Not only does this chapter analyze modern historical works as literary representations that illuminate their authors' political commitments, but in so doing it makes the point that the premodern period can be of urgent relevance for modern Arab intellectuals. As Khaldi states, "... there is an urgency within the pages of these texts to recall old Baghdad, to save it from erasure and oblivion" (p. 224). This reclamation project preserves a cityscape of shrines, mosques, markets, taverns, and other landmarks associated with medieval Sufi practice, a practice that blurred, even subverted, boundaries between social, economic, and political space. As such, it represents an "oblique criticism" (p. 240) of the ways in which Baghdad has been transformed both materially and ideologically by the modern Iraqi state.

While the Iraqi intellectuals of Khaldi's chapter strive to recover a Sufi city they fear is disappearing, Ibn al-Muwaqqit, the subject of Gretchen Head's chapter "Between Utopia and Dystopia in Marrakech", disavows his city's Sufi past in the controversial 1930 work *al-Rihla al-Marrākushiyya*. What is particularly striking about this disavowal is that just twelve years earlier Ibn al-Muwaqqit had published a conventional paean to Marrakech emphasizing a ritual topography associated with its "seven saints" (*sab'at rijāl*), whose tombs were popular destinations for Sufi pilgrimage. By 1930, however, Ibn al-Muwaqqit was disillusioned with the effects of colonialism and had turned to projects of religious and political reform emanating from Cairo, projects that were often explicitly anti-Sufi. In contrast to his earlier work, *al-Rihla al-Marrākushiyya* represents Marrakech as a place of Westernisation and vice, with cafés, theatres, and bars replacing the shrines and tombs of his earlier depiction. By erasing all sites related to Sufism and the city's "seven saints", Ibn al-Muwaqqit produced a city "defined by its cognitive estrangement... illegible at best and coloured by a palpable sense of fear at worst" (p. 179). For him, turning away from Sufism meant "the imaginative destruction of most of the landmarks that had provided him with a sense of orientation in Marrakech since childhood" (p. 181). All that remained was a dystopian vision of urban corruption and decay.

Disillusionment in the modern era does not always lead to disavowal and dystopia, however. Valerie Anishchenkova's chapter "Lost Cities, Vanished Worlds: Configurations of Urban Autobiographical Identity in the Arabic Literature of the 1980s" shows how three very different autobiographical novels set in Mecca, Baghdad, and Alexandria use childhood memories of a city as a way of providing a sense of identity in a rapidly changing world. These novels suggest a "city-based nationalism" (p. 208), at once nostalgic and defiant, in response to the disorientations of the modern era. Likewise, for Egyptian author Yūsuf Idrīs, subject of Yasmine Ramadan's chapter "Revolutionary Cityscapes: Yūsuf Idrīs and the National Imaginary", the city *is* the nation. Fiercely anti-colonial and frustrated by the unfulfilled promises of the 1952 revolution, Idrīs represents Cairo in his 1956 novel *Qiṣṣat ḥubb* as the antidote for the state's descent into elitism and authoritarianism. Idrīs's Cairo is "a city teeming with difference and conflict, a pulsing capital with diverse neighbourhoods and residents" (p. 191). Its spaces, like tram

stations and workers' camps, veer from the heterotopic into the utopic, symbolising for Idrīs the deferred dreams of socialist reform. Similarly, in "Translating Cairo's Hidden Lines: The City as Visual Text in Magdy El Shafee's *Metro*", Chip Rossetti shows how El Shafee's visual choices in the graphic novel *Metro* convey a city of drastic inequality but also the possibility of change. Although "the vertical positioning of the illustrations... inscribes the dichotomies of wealth and poverty in the city", the tall thin figure of the protagonist, a Robin Hood-like figure who robs banks and calls for social justice, suggests his ability "to rise above his circumstances" (p. 315). Over fifty years separate Yūsuf Idrīs's *Qiṣṣat ḥubb* from Magdy El Shafee's *Metro*, but the two images of Cairo, one written, one drawn, bear striking similarities. For both authors, the city is the problem and the solution – "one big cage" (p. 307) and a revolution.

Ironically, the most avant-garde of the literary works explored in the second half of the volume call most explicitly upon their premodern ancestors. William Maynard Hutchins constructs his chapter, "*Baṣrayātha*: Self-portrait as a City", as a kind of collage, mirroring the style of its subject, Iraqi author Muḥammad Khuḍayyir. According to Hutchins, in *Baṣrayātha* Khuḍayyir infuses a "secret spice blend" (p. 247) of literary techniques, cultural references, and visual material with a combination of narrative and discursive styling reminiscent of Basra's most famous premodern writer: al-Jāḥiẓ. In fact, "Khuḍayyir imagines al-Jāḥiẓ in Baṣrayātha, before there was a Baṣra, rubbing shoulders with someone resembling Khuḍayyir" (p. 251). In this unusual memoir, city and story-teller, past and present, are caught in a mutually-dependent, mutually-constitutive cycle. Likewise, in the chapter "Of Cities and Canons in an Age of Comparative Consumption", Hanadi Al-Samman sees Khalīl Ṣuwayliḥ's 2008 novel *Warrāq al-ḥubb* as a palimpsest in which writing about writing in contemporary Damascus is haunted by the ghostly scripts of the literary past. The narrator's search for a missing medieval Arabic manuscript about love takes him street by street through the city, but he is blocked physically by the checkpoints of the Syrian regime just as he is blocked mentally from figuring out how to start his novel. What he can do however, is reclaim a lost language of love by citing, like Khuḍayyir, the ninth-century al-Jāḥiẓ as exemplar. It is not just the juxtaposition of past and present however, that haunts Ṣuwayliḥ's novel, but the expectation of engagement with the Western literary "canon". Al-Samman argues that "this forced conversation" (p. 283), no less than the brutality of the Assad regime, renders even the narrator's skillful engagement with the Arabic literary past an anxious and disorienting enterprise. By contrast, one set of writers in the second half of the volume refuses to be haunted by the premodern. Ghenwa Hayek's chapter, "Everyday Writing in an Extraordinary City", examines the use of parody and humour in recent novels by Sahar Mandour and Alexandra Chreiteh about the day-to-day lives of young women in Beirut. In the words of the narrator of Mandour's 2011 novel *32*, as quoted by Hayek: "I don't like to feel melancholic about ruins/*aṭlāl* that I stand in front of side-by-side with millions of others" (p. 289). Though the penultimate chapter, this is in many ways a fitting conclusion to the volume. All too aware of their forebears' obsessions and anxieties, these authors write for themselves, the in-jokes and mundane references a veritable declaration of independence.

I opened this review by stating that the volume's main contribution is the way it blurs the divide between the modern and the premodern, even as it substantively engages works from both eras. In closing, I would highlight its other key intervention – an expansive definition of literature. Although most of the chapters address works of a clearly belletristic nature, Munt's, Tuttle's, and Khaldi's chapters discuss historical and biographical writing not often subjected to literary analysis. Rossetti's chapter provides an important example of a visual text, establishing the inseparability of word, image, and spatial organisation in analyzing a graphic novel. While many of the chapters use the term "mapping" to refer to the ways in which written texts produce topographical descriptions of their cities, Anna Cruz creates her own visual texts to help a reader understand Ibn Zaydūn's poetic reconstruction of the Cordoba of his childhood. By juxtaposing an eleventh-century poem with a series of twenty-first century maps,

Cruz makes possible a multi-layered reading of the pathways and landmarks that made Cordoba legible to Ibn Zaydūn. In sum, by resisting traditional approaches to chronology and genre, Hermes, Head, and the contributors have charted a new course through Arabic literature. The result, an innovative, concise, and attractive edited volume, is highly recommended. <[Zayde.Antrim@trincoll.edu](mailto:Zayde.Antrim@trincoll.edu)>

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