

Introduction

Many ancient Arabic Bedouin or quasi-Bedouin poems begin with the exclamation *khalilayya*, “My two friends!” According to a literary convention, never fully explained,¹ the poet, who is supposed to be traveling in the desert when he spots a place that reminds him of past pleasures, asks two companions to sympathize with his feelings of loss, or at least to wait for him until he has poured out his elegiac verse. The poet, or rather his persona, does not keep his private feelings to himself, silently or soliloquizing: he must have an audience. Whether the feelings are real or imagined, whether the two companions are real or fictional (their names are never given), all this does not matter. The poem must be heard, and its emotions understood and recognized, not only by the anonymous friends but by everyone. The past love affair is the theme of the beginning of the poem only, which moves on to other things, present or future: the description of the poet’s trusty camel, the desert, tribal matters, feuds and loyalties, patrons or enemies, or anything else that is on the poet’s mind.

In this anthology there is, as it happens, no poem that begins with *khalilayya*, but the motif occurs several times. The desert poem is only one of the many forms and genres found in the long history of Arabic literature. Arabic poetry and prose: just as the desert poems they must be heard, or read, preferably in their original language; but in a time when the growing interest in the Arab world is matched only by ignorance of its literary heritage, translations can be informative, entertaining, and perhaps even enjoyable not only as curiosities but as examples of genuine works of literary art. In the western world the two Arabic books that are best known are, inevitably, the *Thousand and One Nights* and the Qur’an; but neither is typical or representative of Arabic literature, the one being partly a product of European literature, at least in the form that has become world literature, and the other a unique text in more ways than one (and one that should not be read by the uninitiated without some guidance). This book aims at filling some of the large gaps.

“Literature” is difficult to define even in modern Western culture. In a pre-modern Arabic context the problem is no less daunting. For the purposes of the present anthology it is taken not in the general sense of everything written but

in the narrower sense of texts, whether oral or written, that do more, and are intended to do more, than instruct and inform, by being “literary,” being cast in wording and style that are meant to please, entertain, or evoke admiration. A key term and concept is *adab*, which means “literature” as well as “good manners” in modern Arabic and which in the pre-modern period also meant “erudition” and “knowledge of the Arabic language and the important works composed in it.” The term *adab* is often applied to literary output that is entertaining and edifying at the same time, based on the notion that ethics and aesthetics should go together—though not all classical literature is edifying by any means. Another key concept is *balāghah*, “eloquence”: if its language and style are eloquent, a text may be said to be literary. Much of Arabic poetry—most, in fact—was produced for a special occasion, when the poet responded to a specific event or to the needs of a particular person. The poems were preserved, however, by later generations, who enjoyed them for qualities that could be called “literary,” being worthy of admiration and emulation.

This anthology grew from a much smaller selection made for Oxford undergraduates studying Arabic, to acquaint them with a wider range of genres than the “set texts” allow. There is something very unsatisfactory about being expected (as in Oxford) to write essays and answer examination questions about the history of Arabic literature basing oneself almost exclusively on secondary sources, because reading the original texts is so time-consuming and, often, difficult. This book, with its translations and notes, is intended to serve as a kind of introduction to classical Arabic literature by showing rather than telling.

It is my hope, however, that this anthology will also be used and appreciated by a general readership interested in a relatively unknown literature, and part of the annotation is written with them in mind; no knowledge of the Arabic language or of the history of the Arabs is required. The anthology offers some examples of the main genres of classical Arabic literature that can be said to be literary, above all poetry, but it includes prose forms, whether or not they employ *sajʿ* (“rhymed prose”).

“Classical” is a confusing word with many senses. Here it means “pre-modern;” the language of the selected texts is almost always “Classical Arabic,” i.e. the standard form as it was codified in the course of the eighth century on the basis, mostly, of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry; but in some cases (as in the *zajal*) the vernacular language was used in forms that acquired “literary” status.² The vernaculars never reached the degree of emancipation that was seen in medieval Europe and even today they are written only in a limited number of contexts. The

lack of an Arabic Dante or Chaucer may be deplored for various reasons but it has the undeniable advantage of keeping the Arab world united in a literary sense and keeping the literary heritage (*al-turāth*, as the Arabs now call it) accessible to a degree wholly unknown in the western world since Latin fell into disuse as the language of scholarship and literature.

The texts in this anthology range from the early sixth to the first half of the eighteenth century, i.e. from the pre-Islamic period or Jāhiliyyah³ until well into the period sometimes (and rather misleadingly) called “post-Classical.” Some of my colleagues strongly object to the term “medieval” when applied to Arabic literature, arguing that it conveys negative connotations, that it misuses a term from European history for a very different culture, and that it implies, wrongly for Arabic, a stretch of time between an older, “classical” period and a newer one. They are right, but I do not think “pre-modern” is a very felicitous designation either. It is convenient to have a word for a period that more or less coincides with the European Middle Ages, and I have not shunned it altogether.

Periodization within this long stretch, after the Jāhiliyyah and the early Islamic period following the Hijra (AD 622), is traditionally accomplished using dynastic labels: Umayyad (660–750), Abbasid (750–1258), Mamluk (1258–1517), followed by Ottoman, until the “Renaissance” or “Revival” (*Nahḍah*, literally “rise”) in the course of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of modern Arabic literature. In addition, a topographic label (“al-Andalus,” or “Arabic Spain”) is often somewhat uncomfortably inserted into the scheme. These labels have a limited use; the terms “Mamluk” and “Ottoman” work for Syria and Egypt but not, for instance, for Morocco or Spain. They also suggest that these periods are more distinct and internally uniform than they are. Thus Arabic literature in the Mamluk period resembles that of the Ottoman period far more closely than early Abbasid literature resembles that of the late Abbasid period. I have elected not to chop up the history of Arabic literature with these somewhat arbitrary labels.

In each of the two main sections, verse (*shiʿr*) and prose (*nathr*),⁴ the arrangement is roughly chronological. Poetry in *rajaz*, however, the most prose-like and presumably the oldest of all meters, is placed at the end of the Verse section. The Arabs traditionally kept it separate from the other meters; in heaven, as imagined by Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, the *rajaz* poets occupy a special, somewhat less luxurious, place.⁵ The strict segregation of verse and prose is traditional; it is true that the two may freely mix, prose may be “poetical” and verse “prosaic,” yet they can never be confused, for verse is metrical and prose is not. Rhyme, always used in

verse, is not restricted to it, for rhymed prose (*saj'*) has been a favored medium for literary texts throughout the pre-modern period.

The restriction to literary texts, vague though the criterion may be and based more on present-day standards than on those contemporary with those who produced and consumed the texts, has meant the exclusion of genres such as religious law and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), strictly theological texts (*kalām*), “Prophetic Tradition” (*ḥadīth*), and purely scholarly works for specialists (e.g. medical, linguistic, philosophical). The present anthology does not exhaust all the genres that have literary characteristics. Historiography lies on the borderline; much of it can be read as belles lettres and some of it has been incorporated. Among the important “literary” kinds that are not included here are prosopography (short biographies of famous people, composed of facts, anecdotes, and characterisations); tales about the prophets who preceded Muḥammad (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*); sermons and orations (*khuṭab*, sg. *khuṭbah*); ornate chancery or private epistles (*inshā'* or *rasā'il*, sg. *risālah*); “shadow plays” (*khayāl al-ẓill*); travelogues; geographical works; the exceedingly long popular romances and epics (*siyar*, sg. *sīrah*) in verse, prose, or a mixture; or the semi-popular *Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf laylah walaylah*), also known as the *Arabian Nights*, the importance of which is rather distorted by its fame in western languages.⁶ The Qur'an, which among many other things is also a literary text, is likewise not included, though quotations often appear in some of the prose texts;⁷ it is sufficiently accessible in a variety of translations, old and recent.⁸

From an anthology of classical Arabic literature the reader may expect both a fairytale and an erotic tale in the style of the *Nights*. A fairytale is included from a collection similar to the *Nights*; sex and eroticism are also represented, not by the *Nights* but in various poems, anecdotes, and a more or less pornographic tale. Undoubtedly the small number of bawdy and obscene passages will be disproportionately represented in the reviews this anthology may receive, as I have experienced with my Dutch anthology of classical Arabic poetry,⁹ but I am resigned to this. The selection in this anthology is a personal one, even though I could not include every poet or writer who should be included. I have neglected some important genres: religious, pious, and gnomic poetry get short shrift, such as praise of the Prophet,¹⁰ laments on the Shī'ite martyrs, and moralistic epigrams. The effusions in poetic prose by the mystic al-Niffarī undoubtedly have literary qualities, but, unwilling to translate texts that are impenetrable to me, I have not included them (they are available in translations by R. A. Nicholson and Michael Sells).

The selected texts are a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Thus one finds a famous Bacchic poem by Abū Nuwās, a celebrated panegyric ode by al-Mutanabbī, a well-known *muwashshahah* by the so-called “Blind (Poet) of Tudela”; but not once again the *Mu‘allaqah* by Imru’ al-Qays or that of Labīd, or al-Shanfarā’s *Lāmiyyat al-‘Arab*: these splendid poems are readily available in numerous translations and interpretations. Instead, I have selected three shorter, and perhaps more representative, pieces to illustrate the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* or longer poem. Generally, short and relatively accessible poems are somewhat over-represented at the expense of the high-status but rather more daunting panegyric or congratulatory odes, in spite of their importance.

Only complete poems have been included, with a few exceptions, as indicated. Since the form (meter and rhyme) is of prime importance in defining “literariness,” two lines of each poem, or a strophe of a formal poem, have been given in the original Arabic, in Arabic script and transliteration, for those who do not read Arabic. Although some Arabists and Arabs dislike transliteration, in my experience there are readers who like to have at least an idea of how a poem sounds, even if they do not know the language. When reading Japanese haikus, a transcription in Latin script may be informative: it is the same with Arabic. Ideally, this entire anthology would be bilingual and the poetic texts presented in Arabic script as well as transliteration; this is not possible for practical reasons.

Though annotation and further references have been kept to a minimum, the former is essential: it is naïve to think that literary texts from a different culture, period, and language can be properly understood and appreciated without adequate notes. It would have been possible to select only poems, fragments, and prose passages that are so general and universal in their meanings that no, or hardly any, annotation and explanation would be necessary. It is also possible to replace all exotic and obscure passages with accessible and familiar English near-counterparts. Such anthologies have been made; they cannot, of course, present a true picture of Arabic literature. It is only in the combination of the accessible with the strange, the universal with the particular, and the familiar with the puzzling, that a foreign culture can be understood, appreciated, and studied.

It should be mentioned that pre-modern Arabic poems, unlike prose works or modern poems, do not usually have titles. In the list of contents they have been indicated by their opening words, which is a traditional way of referring to them; another way is referring to the collection of which they formed a part, such as “the *Mu‘allaqah* of Imru’ al-Qays,” because it was one of seven or ten famous poems

called “the suspended ones” for reasons not wholly clear. Or else one spoke, for instance, of “a *mīmiyyah*” of al-Buḥturī, meaning a poem with rhyme-consonant *m* (*mīm*); he wrote many poems that could be so designated. Modern editors often add titles: the poem by al-Akḥṭal in this anthology is entitled, after its most famous line, “They Tell Their Mother: Piss on the Fire” in an edition of 1994; its reply by Jarīr, in another edition, is called “My Quraysh and My Helpers,” after its nineteenth line. This imposes an unauthentic element and provides unnecessary emphasis; it has not been followed by me. The long, quasi-didactic poem by Ibn Makānis, however, has a title, probably given by the author himself.

The section on poetry is shorter than that on prose: a natural result of the nature of Arabic verse, which favors conciseness. Unlike, for instance, ancient Greek, Latin, Persian, Italian, or English literature, with their Homer, Virgil, Firdawsī, Dante, and Chaucer or Milton, Arabic literary history has no famous long narrative poems by poets of the highest rank. The discrepancy between the lengths of the two sections would seem to belie the dominance of poetry as the literary form par excellence; but it will be seen that the prose section contains numerous shorter poems and single lines, which makes up for the seeming imbalance; this also shows how poems do not exist in isolation but usually need a context in which they are composed or recited.

All translations are by me, apart from a number of short quotations, e.g. of the Qur’an or where I mention alternative, published versions for the sake of comparison; in a few cases felicitous expressions or phrases in existing and published translations by others (mentioned in the annotation) have been adopted. I will not offer the tired caveat about poetry being untranslatable or about translators being traitors: if I believed that, this anthology would not have been made. Rather than providing prosaic cribs without any pretension to being literary, in most of the translations of verse offered here I have made some attempts at making “poetry,” or at least verse, with iambic or other rhythmic structures with lines of variable length, or with a sprinkling of alliteration, to make up to some extent for the impossibility of imitating the very strict, quantitative Arabic meters (the soul of poetic form) and the rhyme. However, I have stayed as close to the original Arabic as possible and the translations are not meant to be “poetic recreations” that turn the poems into modern English poetry and thus betray the original.¹¹ Contrary to what is often thought, the task of the literary translator is not to transport the original author to the English-speaking world of today, rather, one must transport the reader to the place and time of the author as much as possible and as much as

is tolerable. It is fashionable among translators these days to break up the Arabic *bayt* (verse or line) into four or even more short lines, thus making each *bayt* a little stanza. This, too, is a distortion; I have usually divided the two hemistichs of a *bayt* over two lines, the length of the average *bayt* making the translation too long to appear on one line. A slightly archaic diction is not always a bad thing, but I believe I have moved away from Nicholson and Arberry's poetic renderings. If the translations still seem stilted on occasion, this may be partly because of my not being a native speaker of English, partly because of the exigencies of the form, and in some cases because the Arabic original cannot be called anything but stilted. I have not shunned four-letter words if the original has Arabic equivalents and I have therefore not translated *ayr* as *membrum virile*.

All classical Arabic poetry rhymes, normally in "monorhyme" (*aaaa...*); the nature of Arabic morphology together with the enormously rich vocabulary makes this possible even for relatively long poems. For obvious reasons it is virtually impossible to adopt this in English, although this has not stopped earlier translators, such as Richard Burton when rendering poems of the *Arabian Nights* in his inimitable English. My translations use rhyme only for a number of epigrams and a few longer poems of "light" verse,¹² where rhyme cannot be missed. The peculiarity of *saj'*, rhymed prose, has been imitated in several pieces, at the risk of sounding rather quaint in English: it is an acquired taste.¹³ It is far easier to rhyme in Arabic than in English; consequently some liberties have been taken in the rhymed translations, but the more serious ones are explained in the notes. Similarly, untranslatable wordplay, at times replaced by an attempt at an English pun, has been elucidated in the annotation. I should add that the reader should set aside the idea that wordplay or punning is frivolous and trivial, worthy of a groan even if witty, and to be condemned when found in serious contexts. Paronomasia and double entendre (to avoid the negative connotations of "wordplay" and "pun") are very common in most periods of pre-modern Arabic literature and one should not be shocked to see them in a heart-felt elegy. In order to appreciate Arabic literature and judge it not only subjectively but also on its own terms, one ought to be aware of Arabic literary criticism; sections of two eleventh-century works on poetry have been included here; as for the various kinds of wordplay and figures of speech (collectively called *badi'*), an excellent introduction is provided by Pierre Cachia's abbreviated translation of an eighteenth-century work.¹⁴

Unlike the pre-modern Arabs, we live in a literary culture in which silent reading is vastly dominant over reciting and reading aloud, but I hope that readers, if

they do not actually pronounce the poetry translations, will at least make them sound mentally. For the prose translations I have also kept close to the original, translating, for instance, the direct speech in dialogues as direct speech, instead of occasionally reverting to indirect speech, as is normal in English.¹⁵ Medieval Arabic narrative texts have a habit of letting the reader guess to whom the pronouns (the countless *hes*, *hims*, and *its*, notably) refer, to an extent that would be unacceptable in modern English. Wherever it seemed desirable I have silently supplied a clarification, such as “his father said to him” instead of “he said to him.”

Most of my translations have been newly made for this anthology; a few have been published before. Several texts I have read with undergraduate and graduate students in Oxford over the years, who have often helped me by finding a better phrase or a plausible interpretation, for which I thank them. Instead of presenting whole poems it would have been perfectly legitimate to pick selected passages, since medieval Arabic anthologists did so all the time. The decision to include complete poems as much as possible is prompted by the consideration that the readers should be allowed to decide for themselves about reading whole poems or picking out the plums. The same decision puts pressure on the translator, who cannot simply omit the lines he or she does not understand, as one would normally do—I have done it myself in the past. There are few classical Arabic poems that do not present at least some difficulties; as a result the present anthology contains a few confessions of *aporia* and, worse, is bound to have several instances where the translator is himself ignorant of his ignorance. I have never seen books or articles with substantial amounts of translated classical literary Arabic that were devoid of at least some howlers, and I have no illusions about this anthology either. I am eager to hear from readers about any possible improvements, corrections, or clarifications.

Transliteration and Pronunciation

Many publishers seem to think that the general reader is put off by diacritical dots and other special signs in foreign language terms and names. I have never met such a general reader. Lately some otherwise respectable publishing houses have even abandoned full transliteration in specialist monographs and collections. This deplorable tendency should be resisted.¹⁶ A full scholarly transliteration has been used here, one that is common in English-language publications. Non-specialists can ignore, if they wish, the diacritics, such as the subscript dots that distinguish

some consonants, to be pronounced with a somewhat duller, darker sound (*ḡ, ṣ, ṭ, ṣ̣*), from their “lighter” counterparts (*d, s, t, z*), or *ḥ* (a more throaty version) from *h*. Likewise, the glottal stop (ʿ) is distinguished from the sound that is so characteristic of Arabic, the ‘*ayn* (‘), a voiced pharyngeal fricative not found in English. Long vowels are distinguished from short ones by macrons (*ā, ī, ū*). Vowels have “continental” values; their realization varies depending on the context, so that, for instance, *ā* in the vicinity of the *ḡ, ṣ, ṭ, ṣ̣, q*, and *r* usually sounds much “darker” than elsewhere. There are only two diphthongs, *ay* and *aw* (approximately as in “eye” and “now,” respectively, but shorter). *Dh* and *th* are pronounced as in “this” and “thin,” respectively. *Kh* is like in Scottish “loch” or German “Bach;” *gh* is its voiced counterpart, somewhat like a Parisian *r* but not rolled; *q* is like *k* but pronounced farther back, never with a following *w* sound as in “quick.” Consonants can be lengthened (as for instance in Italian), indicated in transliteration by doubling.

The transliteration used in the text samples themselves differs slightly from the one used elsewhere, in order to clarify the actual sounds and the prosody: initial *hamzah* (glottal stop) is indicated (e.g. *ʾilā*) and the assimilation of the article is represented (*al-rīḥu* and *al-shamsu* becoming *ar-rīḥu* and *ash-shamsu*). Long vowels in rhyme position are always rendered as long even if they are not written in the Arabic; however, vowels written as long but pronounced short because they are followed by two consonants (as in *fī l-bayt*, pronounced *filbayt*) have been kept long in the transliteration. I have not indicated optional further assimilations (thus in the first line of the poem by al-Khansā’ included here, *li-ṣakhrin bi-dam’in minki* may be read as *li-ṣakhrim-bi-dam’im-minki*). The very common ending *-ah*, a marker of feminine nouns, is often transliterated *-a* because the *h* is not always sounded; but here I have preferred *-ah*, true to the principle in Arabic prosody that demands that a “pausal” form (as e.g. in rhyme position) ends in either a consonant or a long vowel, never in a short vowel.

Stress falls on the last syllable only when it ends in a long vowel plus consonant as in Baghdād’, *hijā’*, or a short vowel plus two consonants, as in Ḥusayn’, Dimashq’ (Damascus); note that a digraph such as *sh* or *kh* counts as one consonant only, and that *y* and *w* in the diphthongs *ay* and *aw* count as consonants. Otherwise, in words of two syllables the first syllable is stressed (*gha’zal*, A’bū, Ḥa’san, Lay’lā). In words of more syllables the stress is on the penultimate if it is long (i.e. contains a long vowel or ends in a consonant): *qaṣī’dah*, Jāhiliyyah, al-Mutanab’bī. Otherwise it usually moves to the antepenultimate (al-Ṭa’barī,

Mu‘ā‘wiyah, *mad‘rasah*), but there are regional variations in stress patterns (Egyptians will say *madra‘ah*).

Names and Dates

Arab names can be lengthy. A full name may consist of a personal name (*ism*), often preceded by a *kunya* or teknonym¹⁷ (Abū “Father of,” or Umm “Mother of,” followed by a son’s name) and followed by a genealogy (*nasab*) in the male line, which may go back several generations. Note that *ibn* “son (of)” is sometimes shortened to “b.” but should never be written or pronounced *bin* in pre-modern Arabic (even though this bad habit seems to be spreading). The female equivalent, *bint* or *ibnat* “daughter (of)” may be shortened to “bt.” Names beginning with *ibn* have often developed into family names; Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) was not the son of someone called Sīnā, just as someone called Johnson is not necessarily the son of a John. Non-specialists should be aware that Ibn, Bint, Abū, Umm, ‘Abd, and similar elements are inseparable from what follows and should never be omitted as if they were first names.

A name often includes one or more *nisbahs*, adjectives that end in *-ī* (for women *-iyyah*) and which refer to a tribe, a place of birth, or residence. Many people have, and are known by, a *laqab* or nickname (al-Jāhīz means “Pop-eye,” al-Mutanabbī means “the would-be prophet”), which may take the form of a *kunya* (Abū Nuwās, “He with the dangling forelock”). Honorific names are common especially from the Abbasid period onward, for rulers (al-Rashīd, “the Rightly Guided One,” Sayf al-Dawlah, “Sword of the Dynasty”) and others. Many names are regularly given short tags by way of respect: Allāh, “God” may be followed by *ta‘ālā*, “Exalted is He” or *‘azza wa-jalla*, “Mighty and Lofty is He”; when the Prophet Muḥammad is named or referred to, one very often finds *ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* “God bless him and give him peace” (it is often, somewhat inaccurately, translated “Peace be upon him” and abbreviated as “p.b.u.h.”). Names of “Companions” of the Prophet, the early Muslims, may be followed by “God be pleased with him.” Non-Muslim translators sometimes omit these pious phrases; I have generally kept them. Some people think that “Allah” is preferable to “God” in Muslim contexts, arguing that the god of Islam is different from the Christian god. It is true that Muslims and Christians attribute somewhat different characteristics to this imagined being, but Allāh means “God” and Arab Christians also use it. Therefore “God” is the obvious form to use.

Dates are normally given according to the Muslim and the Christian calendar, e.g. as 656/1258. A Muslim year (lunar, and some eleven days shorter than the solar year) normally straddles two Christian years; if a precise date (month, day) is not known, as happens often, the given AD date may therefore be one year short or too many. In bibliographical references only AD dates are given, unless an Arabic publication only mentions the Muslim year, indicated here as H (Hijrī).

Arabic Prosody

Classical Arabic poetry (*shiʿr*), much like ancient Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, has a quantitative prosody, based on the contrast between long and short syllables, rather than stressed and unstressed ones as in English.¹⁸ The rather intricate system is found already in the earliest recorded poems. In bygone days some Western scholars, noticing the resemblance of the Arabic meters to those of other classical languages, decided that the illiterate Arab Bedouins were far too uncouth and uncivilized to have developed such a sophisticated prosody and must therefore have taken it from others, the Greeks for instance. It seems certain, however, that Arabic prosody was an internal development.¹⁹ It was first described and systematized, as *ʿilm al-ʾarūḍ* (“the science of prosody”), by the great grammarian and lexicographer al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 160/776 or 175/791).

A meter (*wazn* or *baḥr*) is one of a series of recognized patterns of long, short, and neutral positions (which may be either long or short); all lines of a poem must have the same meter. I have indicated the meter of each poem in the verse section, using *L* for a long syllable, *S* for a short syllable, and *X* for a neutral position, where the poet is at liberty to use either a long or a short syllable. Short syllables consist of a consonant and a short vowel (*ba*, *bi*, *bu*), long syllables end in a consonant or a long vowel (*bal*, *bā*). In all meters except *rajaz* a line or verse (*bayt*) consists of two hemistichs that are metrically equivalent, apart from a possible difference in the last foot; a caesura (syntactic or semantic break) often but by no means always coincides with the division between the hemistichs. A *bayt* is usually longer than the average English verse: it can have up to thirty syllables. There are some fifteen classical meters, each with its variants; some are very rare. The most frequently used meter, called *al-ṭawīl* (“the long one”), may be represented as follows, in its most common form: SLX SLLL SLX SLSL / SLX SLLL SLX SLSL, as in the famous opening of Imruʿ al-Qays’s pre-Islamic ode (sixth century): *qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabībin wa-manzilī / bi-siqṭi l-liwā bayna d-dakhūli fa-ḥawmalī*

(“Stop, you two, let us weep for the remembrance of a loved one and a dwelling place, / where sand dunes twist between Dakhūl and Ḥawmal”).²⁰ The Arabs did not use the concept of the syllable for metrical analysis; instead they used (and still use) “dummy” words of different patterns, derived from the root *F-‘-L* (of the verb “to do”); a *ṭawīl* hemistich would be represented as *fa‘ūlun mafā‘ilun fa‘ūlun mafā‘ilun*. Another meter is *al-wāfir* (“the ample one”): SLSSL SLSSL SLL / SLSSL SLSSL SLL (in which SS may be freely replaced by L), as in a line from a poem by al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965): *wa-lammā šāra wuddu n-nāsi khibban / jazaytu ‘alā btisāmin bi-btisāmī* (“And since people’s affection has turned into deceit, / I reward a smile with a smile”). Some meters are much shorter, such as *al-hazaj*: SLLX SLLX / SLLX SLLL, used by the second/eighth-century poet Ḥammād ‘Ajrad in a lampoon on the blind poet Bashshār: *wa-yā ‘aqbaḥu min qirdin / ‘idhā mā ‘amiya l-qirdū* (“O you uglier one than a monkey /—if the monkey is blind”).²¹ The language of poetry differs from that of prose in some minor matters of grammar; the word order is somewhat freer in poetry. By far the most important differences are those of style and theme. Although the style of some prose genres tends to encroach on that of poetry and vice versa, there are many kinds of discourse for which poetry is the preferred medium, such as professing one’s love, the description of wine and wine drinking, praising a patron, or lampooning an enemy.

As I noted above, all classical Arabic poetry rhymes: blank verse was introduced only in the modern period. Not only the meter but also the rhyme (*qāfiyah*) is constant in a given poem (“monorhyme”), except in the strophic forms (*muwashshah* and *zajal*) and in lengthy, often didactic or narrative poems that use paired rhyme (*aabbccdd...*). The hemistichs of the opening line of a poem often rhyme too, although this is not obligatory (the line by Imru’ al-Qays quoted above is an example). The basis of the rhyme is a consonant (*l* in Imru’ al-Qays’s poem, *m* in al-Mutanabbī’s). If a long vowel precedes (as does *ā* in al-Mutanabbī’s line) this must be maintained in every rhyme-word (although *ī* and *ū* may be used interchangeably), as must anything that follows the rhyme-consonant (here *-ī* in both poems). This “tail” may be more than one syllable, as in a poem by al-‘Abbās ibn al-Aḥnaf included here, where the rhyme is *-ābihā* (*-hā* being a pronominal suffix, “her”). As pointed out above, rhyming is much easier in Arabic than in English; some poets, in need of a challenge, imposed on themselves further restrictions, such as “rich rhyme,” based on two consonants rather than one (see Abū l-Ma‘arrī’s epigrams, included here). Rhyme is often used in prose of the more

flowery and ornate kind; this is called *saj'* and does not count as verse because it has no meter, although it may be rhythmical.

As a result of the length of the average *bayt* and the presence of the rhyme at its end, each line of a poem tends to be a more or less complete unit, in terms of syntax and sense. The running on of lines (enjambment), so common in Homer or Milton, is generally avoided: the ideal *bayt* can stand alone, by itself. This does not mean, however, that the lines in a poem are regularly independent or could be exchanged indiscriminately, the order being arbitrary: Arabic poets were able to build complex syntactic and semantic structures and long periods in verse.²²