Foreword

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To enter the world of al-Māyidī ibn Ẓāhir is to enter a world that seems impossibly distant from the glittering modern metropoles of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, even as it retains a timeless presence in the collective Emirati self-consciousness. With a distinctive blend of lyrical longing and didacticism, Ibn Ẓāhir's *qāṣidah*-style poems offer evocative glimpses of vast desert expanses, delicate oases, and Bedouin caravans. Rooted in the seventeenth century and transmitted across generations by oral tradition, the poems depict an idealized way of life that remains an essential touchstone even in modern Emirati society.

Since the 1930s, the study of oral poetry has been conducted largely in the shadow of Milman Parry, who transformed our understanding of Homer and Homeric poetry by conducting methodical fieldwork on an analogous oral epic tradition in what was then Yugoslavia. Marcel Kurpershoek brings to his edition and masterful translation of these poems expertise laboriously acquired in the course of his own extensive fieldwork in the Arabian Peninsula. But the tradition represented by the poems in this volume is fundamentally different in certain important respects from the one observed by Parry in the Balkans. Parry, whose comparative project was further elaborated by Albert Lord, described a practice of

“composition in performance”: his Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian singers composed their songs anew each time they performed them, relying on a specialized language of formulaic expressions that enabled the singers to sing their tales in metrical verse without committing a specific sequence of verses to memory. The formulaic character of Homeric epic reflects a similar technique. The *qāṣidah* tradition, however, is distinguished by a marked separation between the acts of composition and performance. Texts composed with care by poets are entrusted to others—“reciters” or “messengers”—for performance and transmission. A complex system of rhymes ensures that texts remain notably stable from performance to performance, especially by comparison with the relatively more fluid texts of the epics collected by Parry and Lord.

The separation between composition and performance—so different from Parry’s model of Homeric composition or from the South Slavic epics he collected—means that the poems of Ibn Ẓāhir always stage a certain distance, a gap between the voice of the performer and the voice of Ibn Ẓāhir himself. The “signature verses” with which the poems begin insist that we hear the words of the poet. Poem 7, “Don’t Be Hard on Friends,” offers a typical example: “These are the words of al-Māyidī, a discerning poet / whose well-knit verses find favor with reciters.” But the signature speaks of Ibn Ẓāhir in the third person, emphasizing that the performer of the verses, one of the “reciters,” is *not* the great poet, and that Ibn Ẓāhir

himself remains absent from the scene of performance. The sense of absence, programmed, so to speak, by the gap between composition and performance, animates also many of Ibn Ẓāhir's most powerful recurrent themes, such as the longing for an absent lover or nostalgia for lost days of youth.

There is, however, one striking image that brings flashes of urgent immediacy to Ibn Ẓāhir's landscape of longing and absence. The poems are punctuated by desert rainstorms whose waters bring forth dense beds of flowers from otherwise barren sands. These rainstorms, described in vivid detail, invite multiple interpretations. They figure the insistent presence of erotic desire: the poet prays for storms to "drench" the land of his beloved, imagining the clouds as they "roll by and roar like studs in rutting season" ("Graybeard's Song," lines 55–57). At the same time, the rains—or, more precisely, the desert flowers they engender—figure the satisfaction of desire. Ibn Ẓāhir concludes his longest description of desert rains by declaring that the storms have occasioned reunion with his beloved ("Intelligent Speech and the Borders of the Land," lines 72–73):

From afar, the tribe of my beloved drew near
    to raise its lofty tents on carpets of herbage.
Worries dispelled, I enjoyed the soundest sleep:
    from afar they brought my sweetheart, straight to me!

But there is still more to this image, for the waters that flow in the desert represent also the invigorating force of poetic inspiration as it is channeled through the words of Ibn Ẓāhir. So, in "Lightning's Laughter," as a "deafening drum of drops hammer[s] the earth" the poet prays, "Let the rains wash our dusty minds . . . as a torrent restores life to a desiccated wadi" (lines 12–13).

Bearing in mind this association between life-giving rain and the inspired poetry that Ibn Ẓāhir pours out for his "thirsty" followers ("Lightning's Laughter," line 3), we can discern in the lengthy rain section of "Intelligent Speech and the Borders of the Land" (again, the longest such section in the corpus) more than just an expression of desire and its fulfillment. As Kurpershoek notes in his introduction to the poem, the description of rains that "drenched lands from east to west / in an embrace of all terrain that borders Oman" (line 58) offers, in the form of a catalogue of wadis, oases, and towns, a virtual map of the territory of today's United Arab Emirates. To envision this territory as universally inundated by rain is also to assert the all-encompassing aspirations of the poetry of Ibn Ẓāhir, whose invigorating "waters" likewise flow throughout Emirati lands. In the universal scope of these ambitions we can detect the truly Homeric dimensions of the figure of Ibn Ẓāhir: just as the Homeric tradition aspired to speak to and for all ancient Hellenes, so too does the poetic voice of Ibn Ẓāhir position itself as speaking to and for all Emiratis. Indeed, a comparison of ancient biographical accounts of

Homer with the fascinating tales about Ibn Ẓāhir collected in this volume would reveal a number of interesting similarities between the two figures, all speaking to their common stature as embodiments of traditions that aim for universal appeal.

As a representative of traditional Emirati society, Ibn Ẓāhir speaks, necessarily, with a conservative voice. The conservatism of his persona is perhaps most vividly crystalized in his traditional antagonism toward his poetically gifted daughter, who is named Salmā in some accounts but who most often remains anonymous. As Kurpershoek notes, Ibn Ẓāhir is said to have felt threatened by Salmā's poetic talents, and to have forbidden her from composing poems (or to have physically silenced her: "Introduction," p. xlvi). This forceful assertion of patriarchal authority, though contextualizable within the traditional culture of decades past, is out of step with the modern Emirates, where striking progress has been made with regard to women's rights; since 2006, for instance, the United Arab Emirates have ranked ahead of all other Arab states on the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index. It is striking, however, that the tradition nevertheless endows Salmā with a powerful, poetically confident voice, expressed in verses woven "from exquisite twigs in the palm's core" ("Daughter's Elegy," line 2). The tradition allows Salmā to speak back to her father, and in this sense transcends the conservatism in which it is rooted.

A further dimension to the figure of Ibn Ẓāhir's daughter is suggested by the tale that describes his doubts regarding the paternity of one of his three daughters ("Daughters of Ibn Ẓāhir," §§22.3–7). Two of the girls compose verses, in which Ibn Ẓāhir "recognized enough of himself . . . to know for sure that they were his offspring." But the third, youngest daughter shows no inclination for poetry and thus arouses her father's suspicion. Only in the mortal agony of the test to which her father himself subjects her does she versify—thus putting Ibn Ẓāhir's doubts to rest. Setting aside the cruelty of the test, this story can be interpreted in terms of the dynamics of oral tradition, with the father's suspicion reflecting the challenge of determining the "authenticity" of an orally circulating poem. In the absence of an established canon of written texts, even an aficionado of Ibn Ẓāhir's poetry might occasionally hear a recitation of an unfamiliar poem attributed to the master: how might one judge whether such a poem is genuinely the "offspring" of Ibn Ẓāhir, or instead a supposititious child making its way in the world under false pretenses? The tale suggests that the quality of the verses themselves will reveal the father's identity.

We return, however, to the daughter whose own distinctive poetic voice is preserved in "Daughter's Elegy" (whether she is the same as the one who was doubted is unclear). This daughter, it is suggested, may even have surpassed her father's talent ("Daughters of Ibn Ẓāhir," §22.10). Her defiant insistence that her father does not "have a monopoly on poetry"

(§22.11) is an assertion not only that an authentic poetic voice will always be recognizable on its own terms, but also, more remarkably, that not even the authoritative voice of the very father of the tradition can escape scrutiny and criticism. Salmā, the rebellious daughter, is an indication that the tradition of Ibn Ẓāhir, as it evolves in tandem with Emirati society, is a tradition under negotiation.

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