Book Review

Adam Talib, *How Do You Say "Epigram" in Arabic? Literary History at the Limits of Comparison*. Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures, 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 362 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-34996-4. Price: €129/$149.

Rachel Schine
University of Colorado, Boulder

(Rachel.Schine@colorado.edu)

In one of his many indispensable observations about the development of premodern Arabic poetry's genres and themes, Adam Talib states that litterateurs "documented, parodied, celebrated, repurposed, and recast [...] tropes constantly over more than a millennium and every literary sophisticate was expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of these tropes" (p. 77). And so, I hope it will be taken as a mark of formal knowledge and not of unoriginality when I begin this review by saying that Talib has given the field an important volume in *How Do You Say "Epigram" in Arabic? Literary History at the Limits of Comparison*. In the book, he shows that from approximately the seventh/thirteenth century onward, short and pithily written poems called *maqāṭīʿ* constituted a genre of poetry that had significant commonalities with the epigram—a form of short poem frequently associated with displays of arch wit or keen observation. Talib makes his case by presenting extensive paratextual and poetic evidence. *Maqāṭīʿ* poems were not explicitly discussed as a genre by premodern literary critics. Rather, their coherence as a genre is derivable, according to Talib, from a set of readily observable factors: in a significant number of anthologies from the period under consideration, sections dedicated to *maqāṭīʿ* by name abound, and the poems within them all share certain qualities. In addition to being short (many of two lines, some of three, and still fewer of four and up), they tend to focus on a single theme—though the theme may vary wildly, as discussed below. Many also end with a pointed finale that engages in double entendre (*tawriya*), a shared reference, or what we might call an inside joke.

The book is divided into two large sections. The first part, "On Wholeness," consists of two chapters and presents textual evidence to argue for the status of the *maqṭūʿ* (or *maqṭūʿa*, pl. *maqāṭīʿ*) as a poetic genre of which authors and critics were widely conscious by the seventh/

thirteenth century, and through the collection of which they performed specific artistic functions. The second part, "Arabic Poetry, Greek Terminology," is divided into three further chapters, and it queries, with *maqāṭīʿ* in mind, how the term epigram has been used in Western studies of literature around the globe. In particular, it discusses how the understanding of epigrams has been animated by a few major political and scholarly trends: the privileging of Greco-Roman "classics" (in which the epigram has been defined historically by such figures as Catullus and Martial), the stacked divide between the study of *qaṣīda* and *qiṭaʿ* compositions in Arabic, and even racial theories about the lack of rationality and unity in Eastern thought. In light of all this, Talib asks, can we (or should we) use the term "epigram" to describe *maqāṭīʿ*? After all, how *do* you say epigram in Arabic? Ultimately, Talib walks us through the stakes of this question not to simply give us an answer. Rather, he makes the case for the usefulness of drawing comparisons between different genres and genre hermeneutics while underscoring the perils of doing so without a firm grounding in textual evidence, historical context, and legacies of interpretation.

Talib's preamble to the monograph outlines three "aporias"—seemingly contradictory statements that are all nonetheless valid—concerning poetry and its classification. Each of these aporias contains kernels of truth that follow the reader throughout the book. In one aporia, Talib explains that Arabic poetry simultaneously has strict rules of form and defies strict definition according to form. Though this may seem contradictory, he reminds us that Arabic poetry is "formalistically promiscuous." Formal promiscuity is a phrase repeated often throughout the volume, and it is used to mean that any given theme can be rendered in any of the possible meters and rhymes at the poet's disposal while still being recognizable as located within a particular literary type and tradition. The other two aporias address the subjectivity of genre classification among critics and the flexibility of its uses among composers. Already in the introduction, the reader is made aware that the name assigned to a given genre can only do so much to illuminate the contents of the works that the genre subsumes. The first chapter, "A Bounding Line," then turns to the historical trajectory through which *maqāṭīʿ* poems came to prominence under a formal designation throughout the seventh/thirteenth century. In tables of contents, biographical notices, and standalone collections, authors highlighted their *maqāṭīʿ* poetry or were accorded recognition for the same. Talib amply demonstrates the term's explicit use to describe poets' talents and to define their collections, citing, for example, an eighth/fourteenth-century copy of Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī's *al-Qaṭr al-Nubātī* that refers to the poems as *maqāṭīʿ* in a subtitle. The "formalistic promiscuity" of the *maqāṭīʿ* is on full display in this chapter, thanks in large part to Talib's translation of the table of contents of Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī's *Dīwān al-mathālith wa-l-mathānī fī al-maʿālī wa-l-maʿānī*; the poems therein range in topic from advice on etiquette to invective and from erotic pieces to riddles, while all being (as the title implies) two or three lines in length. Al-Ḥillī's collection is also a prime example of *maqāṭīʿ* without explicit designation: there is no indication that al-Ḥillī ever used the term to describe his

collection. Therefore, not only did *maqāṭīʿ* constitute a genre in al-Ḥillī's time, but there was sufficient general awareness of the genre for it to be recognizable without certification (one need not put the word "mystery" in bold type across the cover of an Agatha Christie novel to know, through readerly intuition, that it is one). Talib does, however, identify a pattern of the term's increased usage throughout the century, saying that "later poets and anthologists were, if anything, more enthusiastic about using the term *maqāṭīʿ* to describe their work and to situate it within a flourishing genre" (p. 50). Indeed, as he argues in the second chapter, it is in a consciously situated, anthologized form that the *maqāṭīʿ* reach their apogee.

In chapter 2, "The Sum of Its Parts," Talib explains that large compendia of *maqāṭīʿ* began to be produced in the eighth/fourteenth century. Most *maqāṭīʿ* have made their way to us today in this form. Talib declares the anthology the place where *maqāṭīʿ* "come into [their] own" as a genre primarily because anthologists engage in a creative process when they curate these small poems, drawing them together or dividing them up in accordance with their own interpretations and ambitions. Of particular interest in this regard are the gestures that Talib makes toward dynamics of literary exchange in this period that foreground the appearance of *maqāṭīʿ* in these anthologies; several of the poems appear first in correspondence between authors, sometimes in ways that uncannily parallel a modern call for papers. In one instance, a group of Aleppan poets compose *maqāṭīʿ* elegizing a comely young man and then invite their Damascene colleagues to do so as well. Talib also makes passing mention of the more spontaneous use of *maqāṭīʿ* both in musical events and in literary salons, or *majālis*. As he states, many composers of *maqāṭīʿ* during the Mamluk period were in contact with one another, and thus one can speak of a "discernible cluster" of such authors. Leading figures included the aforementioned Ibn Nubāta, al-Ṣafadī, Ibrāhīm al-Miʿmār, and Badr al-Dīn b. Ḥabīb al-Ḥalabī, and these individuals are but one part of what seems to have been a far wider, networked field (p. 90). These allusions to patterns of exchange sketch a possible way in which Talib's study could be broadened further to account for the social context of the *maqāṭīʿ* and their circulation.

A key feature of this chapter is Talib's presentation of a series of artfully translated "micro-collections" found in anthologies that span the ninth/fifteenth through twelfth/eighteenth centuries. Through these, the reader can gain a sense of the aesthetic and interpretive logic behind the ordering of *maqāṭīʿ* into an anthology by examining how each piece of poetry fits with its immediate neighbors as well as with the micro-collection as a whole. The micro-collections range from one comprising poems on myrtle berries to one with more than forty poems on sex (this latter collection speaks to an apparently commonplace coincidence, namely, the use of the *maqṭūʿ* form for writing *mujūn*, or ribald verse). Read together, these poems substantiate Talib's argument that there is a significant problem with centering a definition of the *maqṭūʿ*/epigram on its "pointed" thrust, as has been done in descriptions of epigrams in Latin or Greek. The poems are densely intertextual throughout, rather than being linked with one another only through a

common terminal witticism or their single, shared theme; stock phrases, quotations, and puns echo across the different poems from beginning to end. The fact that these often playful discursive features are made so visible in the micro-collections lends credence to Talib's representation of anthologists as carefully "re-casting" *maqāṭīʿ* in an array that illuminates and entertains through the positioning of each poem in relation to the next. I was struck by the fact that Talib barely discusses the poetry's brevity as a factor in its anthological success and exchangeability. Rather, he seeks to define the *maqṭūʿ* as distinct from other types of short poem in Arabic, and this perhaps leads him to gloss over some of the ramifications of their shortness in itself. It would have been interesting to see the genre's characteristic concision discussed in the context of other works that fall under the more nebulous domain of the *qiṭʿa* (fragment, short piece) but are not classified as *maqāṭīʿ*.

Chapter 3, "Epigrams in the World," moves us from part 1 ("On Wholeness") to part 2 ("Arabic Poetry, Greek Terminology"). Per the title, Talib reviews the use of "epigram" as an orienting term for describing other types of poetry, from its earliest Greek forerunners to the Japanese tanka and haiku. Talib points out that the term "epigram" has itself undergone connotative shifts over time, moving from its original meaning of a brief inscription to that of a brief poetic composition that one would find in a codex, and developing yet further from there. Of particular interest in this chapter is the section "Epigram Goes Global," which takes an incisive look at how thirteenth-/nineteenth- and fourteenth-/twentieth-century European scholars—in this case Japanologists—began the trend of applying the term "epigram" to short poetry encountered in other cultures, often with the result that these short poems were regarded not as full-fledged works but as fragmentary and deficient; such conclusions fit all too neatly with then-prevalent views on the inferiority of the "Eastern mind."

Chapter 4, "Hegemonic Presumptions and Atomic Fallout," shows that Arabists have historically hardly been free of similar biases about the faulty nature of non-Western verse. It takes aim in particular at the bromide that Arabic poetry, from stich to stich, is "atomistic" and discontinuous. Talib lays out the arguments both for and against the unity of Arabic poetry, as well as those for and against a scholarly search for unity. He applies these discussions to the *maqṭūʿ* because many scholars ascribe the rise of short poetic works (*qiṭaʿ*), sometimes referred to as "epigrams," to the breaking apart of classical Arabic poetry's signature form, the polythematic *qaṣīda*. This way of thinking privileges the *qaṣīda* and dooms short poems to being understood as fragmentary, which, Talib argues, has slowed the study of short poems in Arabic. He does not fully clarify the relationship of this understanding of the *qiṭʿa* to understandings of the *maqṭūʿ*, though he hints (p. 199) that a reason he refrains from comparing the *qiṭʿa* and the *maqṭūʿ* in detail is that discourse on the *qiṭʿa*, a broad category, is far more ambiguous and far-ranging than that of the *maqṭūʿ*, which is just one form of short poem. Moreover, rather than wading into theoretical arguments about generic interrelation, Talib advocates an "evidence-based" method. His evidence

drives the conclusion that using "epigram" for any *qiṭʿa* regardless of context is a misapplication that hinges on an arbitrary concern with length. Because one of the defining features of an epigram is in fact its anthological setting, the term is more appropriate to the *maqṭūʿ*. Even so, Talib expresses serious misgivings about putting the Greek (or English) before the Arabic, as is the current modus operandi of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*'s third edition. Rather, the epigram and the *maqṭūʿ* are "cognate forms," the different histories and epistemologies of which must be held in mind.

In the fifth and final chapter ("Epigrams in Parallax"), we move from the hazards of "atomic fallout" to the handy notion of "parallax," or, to paraphrase Žižek's definition as quoted in the text (p. 215), the seeming movement of an object that results from a change in perspective, which provides a novel sightline for viewing a thing. Talib explains that the new realizations brought on by the perspectival shift of parallax are analogous to the discoveries made when navigating between the abstract paradigm of genre and the concrete data provided by a single text. In this vein, he asserts throughout the concluding pages of the book that his use of the term epigram in conversation with *maqāṭīʿ* offers a relativistic interpretation rather than a prescription. His closing remarks distill a theme that has recurred throughout the book: the anxiety of naming a genre as such and thus isolating it or making it conform to a "world-literary" term without regard for context. The conclusion is followed by a useful appendix that expands on the source work done in the first chapter, offering a number of paratextual items such as chapter headings, biographical glosses, and introductory remarks that attest to the use of the term *maqāṭīʿ* to describe various authors' and anthologists' bodies of work. Finally, Talib provides a detailed annotated bibliography of primary sources, featuring numerous unpublished manuscripts.

There is much to praise in this book's approach: the placing of literary evidence front and center, the exploration of "postclassical" works that are rarely given the same attention as, say, ʿAbbasid poetry, and the care with which Talib asserts the existence of a distinct genre while balancing the essential questions of what a genre is and how we talk about it in the first place. Also worthy of highlighting is Talib's frequent use of contemporary Arabic-language literary criticism. At times in the first half of the book, further analysis would have better demonstrated how the *maqāṭīʿ* operate as a genre; in his presentation of the micro-collections, Talib largely leaves their close interpretation to the reader. Though there is much that might appeal to a wide audience of literary comparativists in the book's second half, the initial framing renders it most likely to be read by Arabists and few others. We find in the conclusion that the starkness of the separation between the volume's two parts is intentional. The author states: "This, the first history of the *maqāṭīʿ*-genre, could have been a 'sterile historical cataloguing,' and because I know that some may have preferred that, I have tried to inoculate the first half of this study from the 'political judgment of knowledge effects produced' that permeates the second half" (p. 221). To prospective readers I will therefore simply say this: You will be worse off for

not reading and taking to heart the second half; in exemplary fashion, this portion of the book broadens a study of works in a single language into a conversation across several fields, laying bare often invisible aspects of each discipline's boundaries and tenets. To someone with literary interests outside of Arabic wishing to approach the book, I would say: read on; it will be well worth it.