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Classical Islamic Oration's Art, Function, and Life-Altering Power of Persuasion: The Ultimate Response by Hammam to Ali's Sermon on Piety, and by Hurr to Husayn's Battle Oration in Karbala

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses classical Islamic oration's power of persuasion through two lenses, one wide-angled, one focused. First, it introduces topographies of Arabic oration in its foundational oral period in early Islam, addressing notable aspects of its art, function, and provenance. Then, it pivots to speak of major life changes induced by particular orations, or sermon-induced 'conversion'. Two early Islamic orations that induced such transformations are transcribed and briefly discussed: (1) the 'sermon describing the truly pious' by the successor of the Prophet according to the Shia and the fourth caliph according to the Sunnis, Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661) in Kufa, Iraq, which is said to have caused his associate Hammam to give up his life spirit, and (2) the battlefield speech addressed to the surrounding Umayyad army by Ali's son, the Shia Imam Husayn (d. 680), in Karbala, also in Iraq, which is reported to have won over the enemy sub-commander Hurr to Husayn's side and prompted him to fight for Husayn unto death. Both are striking examples of the life-altering effects of intense and eloquent sermons, manifest here in the ultimate passage — an end to life in this world and entry into the hereafter.

KEYWORDS

oration's power of persuasion; Husayn ibn Ali; Ali ibn Abi Talib; classical Arabic oration; *khutba*; *taqwā* (Islamic piety and virtue); Hammam Sermon; Hurr in Karbala

Orations declaimed by the Prophet Muhammad and early Muslim leaders across the mosques, homes, battlefields, and open town spaces of the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries CE were exquisite in rhetorical craftsmanship. They were also the major vehicle of policymaking and persuasion, as well as the primary conduit for dissemination of ethical, religious, and legal teachings. Importantly, they prompted life changes in their listeners. Most of these life changes were an ongoing process, but others were more startling and immediate. In this article, I draw on ten years of research for my recently published book, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function* to discuss the classical Arabic oration's power of persuasion.¹ After introducing the art, function, and provenance of Arabic oration in its foundational oral period in early Islam, I discuss two instances of life-altering oration-induced on-the-spot transformations: a sermon on piety by Imam Ali (d. 661) — successor of the Prophet according to the Shia and fourth Sunni caliph — that is reported to have affected his associate Hammam so strongly that it transported him straight into the afterlife; and a speech on the battlefield by Ali's son, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Husayn (d. 680), that won over the enemy commander Hurr in the heat of battle in Karbala and prompted him then and there to lay down his life for Husayn.

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¹ Tahera Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

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Classical Islamic Oration: Art and Function

Oration is the English term I have used to translate the Arabic word *khutbah*, which refers in the early period to sermons, speeches, and other forms of public address which embody a variety of important religious, political, military, and legislative functions and follow a standard structure and formal conventions. In modern times, *khutbah* refers almost entirely to the Friday sermon, but that was not the case in its original iteration. Then, the Friday sermon was just one of many types of orations declaimed across the lands of the Middle East. The richly artistic performance of Arabic oration, across its various types, seamlessly fused themes of religion, homiletics, politics, and warfare.

Aesthetics of Persuasion

The first generations of Muslims and their forebears in the Arabian Peninsula lived in a largely oral realm, and they cultivated the art of the rhythmic spoken word. Oration in this period was a fundamental art form. Rather than focusing on painting or sculpture or music, the early Arabians focused their aesthetic talents on eloquent verbal creations, and these comprise some of the most beautiful and powerful expressions in the Arabic canon. Oratory, together with the Qur'an and poetry, was foundational in the earliest Arabic literary tradition and it reigned supreme for more than a century as the preeminent genre of prose. To persuade, to convince, to achieve its exhortative goals, the oration needed to pack a powerful aesthetic punch. But wherein lay its beauty and power? Did orators randomly pick and choose aesthetic features, or were there characteristics that they privileged? More importantly, what drove their artistic choices? I argue that the classical Arabic oration's stylistic choices stem from its oral culture.²

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we access early Arabic oration through historical and literary sources, and from many genres of books from the medieval library. In other words, we engage with it as written text. Because of this, and because of our experience with how our own modern-day speeches and sermons are produced, we fall into the trap of unconsciously assuming for early Arabic oration a similar mode of being. We look at it with the anachronistic eyes of people from a fully reading and writing society. For us, the presence of written texts all around is given fact. Even when we encounter orality today, it is a secondary orality that is dependent on writing and print. We measure orality against literacy, never on its own terms. But although early Arabic orations have come to us on paper, it is important to acknowledge that they were not created as written texts. When we read orations in the medieval sources, we are in fact reading texts that were produced and at first instance transmitted orally. Writing was known in Middle Eastern lands in the period of our study, but it was a skill limited to a tiny proportion of the population. Early Arabic oration lay between orality and writing, but it was closer to the oral end of the spectrum.

A major aspect of the artistic verbal production of an oral milieu is mnemonic design, meaning that its aesthetic format helps the brain to remember. In such a milieu, mnemonics are not just an interesting mode of aesthetics, they are a necessary mode of aesthetics. Here, artistic verbal production must be strongly underpinned by memory-aid devices if there is to be any continuance of the initial speech act. Without mnemonics facilitating retention in the minds of potential narrators, oral declamations would be lost to the winds. Walter Ong, in his pioneering study titled *Orality and Literacy*, has demonstrated that artistic expression in an oral culture is essentially mnemonic, and that furthermore, these mnemonics are rooted primarily in rhythmic cadences and lifeworld-based word pictures.³ These ideas map on to early Arabic oration, whose two cardinal aesthetic features are vivid imagery and pulsating rhythm.

² Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 1–3.

³ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), *passim*. I do not subscribe to Ong's conclusions about analytical thought being contingent on writing; I think he makes an unwarranted and rather dangerous leap

The imagery of early Arabic oration is drawn mostly from desert flora, fauna, and natural phenomena, particularly animals of the Arabian Peninsula. Here are two examples:

Ali ibn Abi Talib, mentioned already above as the Prophet Muhammad's successor according to the Shia, and the fourth Rightly Guided caliph according to the Sunnis, was a master orator renowned as the sage of Islam. In various sermons, he compares the world to 'the sneeze, or fart, of a goat', to 'a leaf being chomped in the mouth of a locust', and to the 'bones of a pig in the hand of a leper'.⁴ Instead of stating that the world has little worth, Ali illustrates its low worth through graphic images that convey this abstract idea in concrete physical terms.⁵ Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi (d. 714) was an Umayyad governor of Iraq known for his harsh governance and eloquent rhetoric. In this passage, he castigates his subjects and describes their rising stages of wickedness in an extended metaphor, a form of dramatization common in all forms of early Arabic artistic verbiage, including oration, poetry, and the Qur'an. Hajjaj says: 'Truly, Satan penetrated you, permeating flesh, blood, and nerves, ears and fingers, limbs and hearts. Then he rose into brain-marrow and inner ear. Then he climbed further and made a nest. Then he laid eggs and hatched chicks'.⁶ These graphic images familiar to the audience helped the orator bring abstractions into the realm of the immediate audio-visual, and they helped fix the texts in the audience's memory.

Another main feature of the oration's style was rhythm.⁷ Modern neuroscientists explain memory formation through the brain's propensity to organize information in patterns; they call the process 'neural (or neuronal) entrainment'.⁸ Children learn the ABC for example through a melody. Imagine how much more difficult it would be to memorize a random list of letters. Rhythm is present in many forms even in a society which communicates regularly through writing, but in the artistic expressions of an oral society, it is a primary characteristic. The main rhythm-generating feature in classical Arabic oration is the consistent use of parallelism, where two sentences possess identical, or near-identical grammar. Here are two examples:

Quss ibn Sa'ida al-Iyadi (d. c. 600) was the Christian bishop of Najran in pre-Islamic Arabia. He is said to have orated from the back of his red camel at the Ukaz Market outside Mecca, 'Whoever lives dies. Whoever dies is lost. Everything that could happen will happen'.⁹

Ziyad ibn Abihi (d. 673) was another harsh and eloquent Umayyad governor of Iraq. Warning the people of Basra about severe punishments for criminal activity, he declaimed the following cadenced threats: 'Whoever drowns people, I shall drown him. Whoever burns people, I shall burn him. Whoever breaches a house, I shall breach his heart. Whoever digs up and robs a grave, I shall bury him in it alive'.¹⁰

there. But I find his ideas about the stylistic features of oral literature — and the ideas of several other orality scholars such as Ruth Finnegan, John Miles Foley, and Susan Diditch — persuasive and helpful for my analysis.

⁴ Sharif Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of 'Ali*, ed. and trans. by Tahera Qutbuddin (Leiden: Brill, 2024), § 1.3.4, § 1.183.4, and § 3.221; Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 122–23; further primary source references for these texts, and all orations cited in the present article, are provided in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, 'Appendix of Sources'.

⁵ For more on the imagery and themes of Ali's sermons, see Tahera Qutbuddin, 'The Sermons of 'Ali ibn Abi Tālib: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia'; and Tahera Qutbuddin, 'Ali's Contemplations on this World and the Hereafter in the Context of His Life and Times', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 42 (2012), 201–28.

⁶ Aḥmad Zakī Ṣafwat, *Jamharat khūṭab al-'arab fi l-'uṣūr al-'arabiyyah al-zāhirah*, 3 vols (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, 1933–34), 2 (1933), 293; Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, p. 117.

⁷ See Tahera Qutbuddin, 'A Sermon on Piety by Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Tālib: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded', in *Religion and Aesthetic Experience: Drama — Sermons — Literature*, ed. by Jan Scholz, Max Stille, Sabine Dorpmüller, and Ines Weinrich (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, 2018), pp. 109–24; and A. F. L. Beeston, 'The Role of Parallelism in Arabic Prose', in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. by A. F. L. Beeston and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 180–85.

⁸ Adam Tierney and Nina Kraus, 'Neural Entrainment to the Rhythmic Structure of Music', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 27 (2014), 400–08; Michael Thaut, *Rhythm, Music, and the Brain: Scientific Foundations and Clinical Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Aniruddh D. Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Ṣafwat, *Jamharat khūṭab al-'arab*, 1 (1933), 38; Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, p. 238.

¹⁰ Ṣafwat, *Jamharat khūṭab al-'arab*, 2 (1933), 272–73; Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, p. 347.

In addition to the mnemonic mode of classical Arabic oration's aesthetics, its powerful language helped to persuade. Linda G. Jones has accurately stated that 'the ultimate aim of the sermon was to elicit audience response, and thus one must be attuned to the rhetorical and narrative devices the preacher uses towards this end'.¹¹ The orator was not recording history or providing entertainment by telling a story, performing an epic, or reciting an ode. Instead, he aimed to make his listeners believe in the validity of a course of action, a mode of behavior, a way of thought, or a type of doctrine. To this end, he deployed whatever stylistic features would best enable logical and emotive persuasion, in a rousing discourse that combined rational argumentation with the evocation of emotions such as anger, shame, fear, and hope. He achieved much of this stirring of hearts and prodding of minds through literary techniques of 'tacit persuasion' (to use Richard Lanham's term) such as vivid imagery and parallelism, as we have seen, as well as intermittent rhyme and assonance, testimonial citation of sacred and cultural heritage materials, and agonistic direct audience engagement with rhetorical questions and grammatical intensifiers.¹² Combined with the orator's high status and potent delivery, together with his logical and doctrinal themes, these stylistic features rendered his oration effective.

Administrative, Social, and Devotional Functions

Oration was also the chief form of public address in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic Middle East, and it had central administrative, social, and devotional functions. It was formal and authoritative and delivered from a position of power. Its practitioners were caliphs, commanders, governors, or people with religious weight. It was the loom on which the community's movers and shakers wove their religious and political discourse. It was the primary means of government, the major tool for negotiating authority, and the key vehicle for doctrinal instruction. It roused warriors to battle, it codified legislation on civil and criminal matters, and it raised awareness of the imminence of death and the importance of leading a virtuous life. It called listeners to the new religion and formed part of its ritual worship. In addition to being a vital piece of the Arabic literary landscape, it was a principal component of political, military, and spiritual leadership.

The character and role of oration in the early Islamic period are discussed in detail in my book, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*. The first three chapters of the book examine the preservation and authenticity of early Arabic oration, its structure and style, and its orator-audience authority dynamics. These are followed by chapters that treat its types and themes of its four major types — as you can see from the following list, themes of piety are prominent and pervasive in all types of oration; these are the four major types of oration and their core themes:

The sermon of pious counsel is the first major type of classical Arabic oration. Its core themes are (i) piety and obedience, (ii) the imminence of death, and (iii) this world and the hereafter.¹³

The Friday and Eid sermon is another major type of oration. Its core themes are (i) piety, (ii) supplications, (iii) religio-political arguments, (iv) military and administrative instructions.¹⁴

The battle oration is yet another major type of oration. Its core themes are (i) urgings to fight, (ii) battlefield strategies, (iii) battlefield ethics, (iv) moral qualities of a warrior, (v) pious counsel, and (vi) supplications for victory.¹⁵

The political speech is the final major type of oration. Its core themes are (i) succession, (ii) accession, (iii) threats and maintenance of order, (iv) fiscal policy, and (v) pious counsel.¹⁶

¹¹ Linda G. Jones, 'Problems in the Study of Medieval Islamic Sermons', *Al-'Uşūr al-Wuṣṭā: The Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists*, 17 (2005), 41–43 (p. 42).

¹² Richard Lanham, *Analyzing Prose* (New York: Scribner, 1983); Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, p. 92.

¹³ Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 229–74.

¹⁴ Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 275–91.

¹⁵ Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 292–332.

¹⁶ Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 333–68.

In the book, the chapters about the four major types of early Arabic oration are followed by chapters analysing theological, legislative, and other less common types of oration, as well as the few women's orations recorded in our texts.¹⁷ In all these chapters, the discussion is mapped onto the chronologically developing gridlines of pagan to Islamic, tribal to imperial, nomadic to urban, and oral to written. Building on these chapters that lay out the topography of the classical Arabic oration, I have next explored how this spoken tradition influenced the major written genres of Arabic literature, beginning with the chancery epistle in the eighth century. In the final chapter, I have investigated how the legacy of early Arabic oration continues to shape the idiom and concepts of religion and politics across the modern Islamic world. Altogether, I have attempted to present a comprehensive theory of Arabic oratory.

In the early, oral, period, these various types of orations generated multivalent public spheres. Some were more religious than political, and others were more political than religious, but all combined aspects of both religion and politics. In the congregational space of the mosque, religious instruction was given in the Friday sermon, but this was also the venue for political and military directives, delivered there by the Prophet, and by caliphs, governors, deputies, revolt leaders, and other prominent Muslims. In the open spaces outside the towns, religio-political and military speeches were frequently declaimed. At the pilgrimage sites of the Hajj, matters of religion, politics, and legislation were commonly aired. In the battlefields of Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Central Asia, and Egypt, numerous battle speeches were delivered. In the homes of prominent community leaders, religio-political addresses were given. They cajoled or threatened, reasoned or bullied, explained or decreed, addressing their audiences in varying moods and modes. The earliest audiences were audiences of peers. They listened with pleasure or fear, love or hatred, acceptance or challenge, facing the orator with as many different states and tempers. It is in the public spaces of the oration, at the nexus of the orator-audience relationship, that we can best observe the period's brokerage of power and policy.

Religion blends with politics in almost all oration texts of the early period, a reflection of the society in which those spheres strongly overlapped. Pious themes are thus a mainstay in all categories of oration. Friday sermons are an obvious repository of devotional material, but battle speeches and political orations are also frequently framed pietistically. Indeed, their contexts co-exist and intermingle — political and military contexts elicit a moral exposition, while pious counsel is prompted by a political or military cue. On the one hand, religious sermons delivered on Friday and the two annual Eid feast days were produced in specific this-worldly situations. On the other hand, we see that pious themes frequently underpin and promote political viewpoints or military agendas. The vast majority of orations blend other-worldly advice with this-worldly content. One of the only Islamic pieces we can definitely categorize as a stand-alone sermon of pious counsel is a sermon by the so-called pious Umayyad caliph, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (d. 720). In it, he explicitly negates a political and military context and expressly states his purpose of pious counsel. Instructing people to gather as per the report, he stood up to orate, saying, 'I have not called you to convey a report I have received. I have called you because I have looked into the affair of your return, and the path that you are following, and I have found that those who believe in it are deserving of God's reward, and those who deny it will perish'.¹⁸ This exception would seem to prove the rule — that pious counsel was generally not a stand-alone genre of sermon, at least in the Umayyad period. However, some pre-Islamic orators — such as Quss (d. c. 600)¹⁹ and Ma'mun (*fl.* early seventh century)²⁰ — are known only for their sermons of pious counsel, and certain Companions of the Prophet — Ubadah

¹⁷ See, respectively, Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 369–82 and 383–405.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201), *Sirat wa-manāqib 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1984), p. 247.

¹⁹ Jāhiz (d. 869), *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. By 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Ḥarūn, 4 parts in 2 vols (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1985), 1, 308–09; further references in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, § 105.1, pp. 534–35.

²⁰ Qālī (d. 967), *Amālī l-Qālī*, 3 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1991), 1, 273.

ibn al-Samit (d. 655),²¹ Shaddad ibn Aws (d. 677),²² and Abu al-Darda' (d. 652)²³ — are also lauded for it particularly, as are the Kharijite leaders Abu Hamzah al-Shari (d. 748)²⁴ and Qatari ibn al-Fuja'ah (d. 698).²⁵

A preacher with relatively apolitical orations — at least in its explicit language — is Wasil ibn Ata' (d. 745), founder of the rationalist, free-will-espousing Mu'tazili school of theology.²⁶ A few sermons attributed to other theologians and ascetics of Umayyad times skirt overt politics, but even so the case may be made for a political grounding, for Wasil and for these others. The preponderance of leaders, including the Prophet, caliphs, governors, and commanders, delivered orations in various political, military, and liturgical contexts. Ali's 'Sermon on Piety' discussed here below is also not directly political, but it still comes out of the political context of his caliphal authority over the treasury (details follow shortly). Husayn's oration in Karbala is much more clearly grounded in a military and political context, as we shall see below. Nevertheless, it too is framed in pietistic themes.

In the ninth century and onward, the style and role of oratory changed with the changing socio-political context, and the chancery epistle assumed many of the oration's salient political functions.²⁷ But the blend of religion and politics displayed in the oration — here again, a reflection of the ground reality — continued strong. It is evident from the mixed religious and political content of the Friday and Eid sermon from Abbasid, Fatimid, and Spanish Umayyad realms that the boundary between state and religion in the medieval Islamic world was not clear cut. In addition to praying for the caliph by name in the sermon, the preachers who preached these sermons were themselves appointed by the state. Rulers themselves most often did not separate state priorities from issues of religion. Fatimid rulers asserted full spiritual authority as imams who stood in place of the Prophet Muhammad. Even Abbasid caliphs, whose claims did not rise as high, viewed themselves as religious heads of an Islamic state.²⁸ Consequently, policies of their states continued to be grounded in religious rhetoric and the oration was a prime blend of the secular and the spiritual.

Provenance and Orality

Most orations in the early Islamic period were transmitted orally over a few generations, supplemented in some cases with transcription, before being recorded systematically in writing in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Since oral materials are particularly susceptible to alteration and even fabrication, their historicity remains an open question, and this reservation should be kept in mind while reading the texts at hand. But it is entirely conceivable — in view of our material's early and wide provenance, combined with the robust indigenous system of oral transmission aided by built-in mnemonic devices, and the subsidiary channel of auxiliary notation — that they contain an authentic core of themes, citations, and even some original language from actual past events. Contrary to Greek and Roman speeches from Antiquity — that, according to the very authors who narrate them, are what the orators would have said in a particular situation rather than what they did in fact say — speeches from early Islamic times are presented in the

²¹ Azdi (d. c. 825), *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. by 'Iṣām Muṣṭafā 'Uqlah and Yūsuf Aḥmad Banī Yāsīn, introd. By 'Abd al-'Azīz Durī (Irbid, Jordan: Mu'assasat Ḥamādah, 2005), pp. 388–89; Sulaymān ibn Mūsā al-Kalā'ī (d. 1237), *al-Iktifā' bi-mā taḍammanahu min maghāzī rasūl Allāh*, 2 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2000), 2, 317.

²² Azdi, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Shām*, p. 389; Kalā'ī, *Iktifā'*, 2, p. 317.

²³ Azdi, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Shām*, pp. 389–90; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 940), *al-'Iqd al-farīd*, 7 vols (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999), 3, 109; further references in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, § 16.1, pp. 492–93.

²⁴ Ṭabarī (d. 923), *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. by M. A. Ibrāhīm, 10 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1967), 7, 396; further references in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, § 18.4, pp. 492–93.

²⁵ Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 2, 126–29; further references in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, § 102.1, pp. 532–33.

²⁶ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1999), p. 43.

²⁷ For a detailed discussion and references, see Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 406–31.

²⁸ See Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam: The 'Abbāsīd Caliphate in the Early Ninth Century* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), *passim*.

sources as transcriptions of actual declamations. Here we have a different time and a different set of circumstances — whose complexities I have discussed at some length in *Arabic Oration* — which suggest that the texts cited by classical Islamic historical and literary sources are likely to contain genuine remnants.²⁹ This position is substantiated by studies of the hybrid oral/written mode of transmission in early Islam by scholars such as Gregor Schoeler, of inscriptions and writing in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period by scholars such as Robert Hoyland, of memory in oral societies by scholars such as Mary Carruthers, and, perhaps most importantly, of oral mnemonics by scholars such as Richard Foley, Ruth Finnegan, and Walter Ong.³⁰ As I mentioned in the section on aesthetics, Ong demonstrates that all thought and verbal expression in an oral culture are essentially mnemonic; he explains the details of this memorization-grounded style thus:

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready, oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions, in standard thematic settings ... in proverbs which are heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems.³¹

Ali's and Husayn's speeches contained crucial mnemonic devices that aided retention, such as parallelism, pithy sentences, poetic repetition, vivid imagery, and citation of Qur'anic verses. They were heard and narrated by a multitude of listeners. Moreover, they are cited in numerous early sources across sectarian and ideological lines. Thus, it is likely that the texts we have at hand are genuine remnants of actual speeches, albeit with some later literary modifications.

Now to the two cases in which a master orator elicited the strongest response one can imagine from a member of his audience.

Imam Ali's Sermon on Piety and Hammam's Extreme Response

The first case I want to present is the startling response to a sermon by Imam Ali by his associate, Hammam.³² Ali is a figure revered by all Muslims, whose significance to Islamic history and Arabic eloquence was mentioned before. The radically poignant nature of the reported response is to be seen in view of both the profound content of the sermon and the weighty persona of the preacher. Indeed, Ali's pious preaching is itself rendered poignant when viewed in light of the dire challenges he faced throughout his life. The Prophet Muhammad's cousin, ward, and son-in-law, and the first male Muslim, Ali was fiercely loyal to Muhammad and constantly by his side as the Prophet strove to establish Islam. In his youth, he put his life on the line, time and again, to defend Muhammad and propagate his new religion. Muhammad's death was a severe personal blow, compounded by the fact that Ali believed the succession to Muhammad, wielded by Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman for twenty-five years, rightfully belonged to him.³³ Even after becoming caliph upon Uthman's

²⁹ This argument is fleshed out in some detail, with references from the primary sources and studies on orality and memory, in ch. 1, 'The Preservation of Orations: Mnemonics-Based Oral Transmission, Supplementary Writing, and the Question of Authenticity', in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 21–63.

³⁰ Robert Hoyland, 'The Content and Context of Early Arabic Inscriptions', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 21 (1997), 77–102; Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Gregor Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read*, trans. by S. M. Toorawa (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

³¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 34–35.

³² Hammam's identity is disputed: according to Ibn Abī al-Hadīd (d. 1257), *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, ed. by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 20 vols (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1965), 1, 134, he is Hammam ibn Shurayḥ ibn Yazīd. According to Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn Maytham Bahrānī (d. 1289), *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah* (Manama, Bahrain: Maktabat Fakhrāwī, 2007), p. 599, he is Hammam ibn Ubadah ibn Khuthaym.

³³ Several early historians — including Ibn Hishām (d. 833), Ya'qūbī (d. 897), and Ṭabarī (d. 923) — record Ali's initial refusal to accept Abu Bakr as caliph until forced to do so, as well as his declarations about his own superior right to the caliphate, both immediately after Muhammad's death, and later, during the deliberations of the Council that appointed Uthman. See Ibn

death, he was faced by revolts from within, one after the other, and in the four years that he ruled, he fought three major battles. In all this time, he continued to urge his followers to shun worldliness and prepare devotedly for the imminent hereafter.

Ali's wide-ranging teachings on piety and virtue permeate Muslim preaching and scholarship across times, locations, and denominations, just as his own practice, are held up as a benchmark for justice and compassion. One admiring review of his persona and teachings is found in the introduction to the compilation of Ali's orations, epistles, and sayings — in which our present sermon is recorded — by the Abbasid-Shi'i poet-theologian al-Sharīf al-Rādī (d. 1015):

Among the marvels unique to Ali that no one else shares with him is the following quality: if a person were to ponder his words of renunciation, counsel, remembrance, or admonition, if he were to parse them thoroughly — while putting aside the knowledge that they were spoken by a man whose stature was lofty, whose commands people followed, and who ruled over a multitude — he would have no doubt that these are the words of someone who knows nothing but renunciation, whose sole occupation is worship, who has withdrawn to a lonely corner or leads a solitary life at the foot of a mountain, hearing no other voice and seeing no other person. He would never imagine that they could have been spoken by a man who rushed into the fray of battle, brandishing his word, striking off men's heads and cutting down warriors, then returned with it dripping blood and gore. Yet, Ali was also the most pious of renunciants and the greatest of God's deputies. This — his combination of opposites and conjunction of contraries — is one of his most marvellous virtues and sublime characteristics. I often remind my companions of this quality and they are moved to wonder, for it offers lessons and provokes contemplation.³⁴

Ali's Sermon on Piety is among the most famous sermons attributed to him, and it is also known as the Hammam Sermon.³⁵ It is reported that Ali's associate Hammam, a man who was said to be devoted to worship, said to him one day, 'Commander of the Faithful, describe to me the truly pious such that I see them before my eyes'. Ali hesitated, then answered in one line: 'Hammam, be pious and do good, for' — and here he quoted a verse from the Qur'an — 'God is with those who are pious and perform good deeds'.³⁶ Hammam insisted on a fuller reply, and Ali responded with a lengthy sermon. The sermon was presumably delivered in Kufa sometime during Ali's caliphate, thus between 656 and 661, as per the context provided by the Damascene Shafi'i scholar Ibn Ṭalhah (d. 1255), which is as follows (in my paraphrase): Some individuals approached Ali asking for money from the state treasury. They identified themselves — presumably to curry favour — as his special followers (*shī'ah*), to which Ali replied, 'I do not see in you any identifying signs of my true followers'. Hammam, who was present, asked Ali to explain the identifying signs of his true followers, and Ali responded with the oration at hand.³⁷ The sermon is narrated in a large number of early sources, both Sunni and Shi'i;³⁸ this is the text of the sermon in the most famous version of

Hishām, *al-Sirah al-nabawiyyah*, ed. by Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā, 2 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1936), 2, 489–90; Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh al-Ya'qūbī*, 2 vols (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1960), 2, 126; and Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 4, 231–33, and 5, 7–8.

³⁴ Rādī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, § 0.6.

³⁵ Rādī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, § 1.191.

³⁶ Qur'an, Nahī 16:128.

³⁷ Ibn Ṭalhah, *Maṭālib al-sa'ūl fī āl al-rasūl*, ed. by Majīd 'Aṭīyyah (Beirut: Mu'assasat Umm al-Qurā, 2000), p. 269. See the introduction by Majīd 'Aṭīyyah for a biography of Ibn Ṭalhah, with references and quotes from the primary sources.

³⁸ Sulaym ibn Qays (d. 695), attrib., *Kitāb Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilālī*, ed. by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ansārī (Qum: Maṭba'at al-Hādī, 2000), pp. 371–75; Kulaynī (d. 941), *al-Kāfī*, ed. by 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, 8 vols (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1957–61), 2, 226; Iskāfī (d. 947), *Kitāb al-Tamhīṣ* (Qum: Madrasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, n.d.), pp. 70–73; Ibn Shu'bah Ḥarrānī (fl. fourth/tenth century), *Tuḥaf al-uqūl 'an āl al-rasūl*, ed. by 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Qum: Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1983), pp. 159–62; Māmaṭirī (d. c. 971), *Nuzhat al-absār wa-maḥāsīn al-āthār*, ed. by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Mahmūdī (Tehran: Markaz al-Taḥqīqāt wa-l-Dirāsāt al-Ilmiyyah, 2009), pp. 425–27; Ibn Bābawayh Ṣadūq al-Qummī, (d. 991), *al-Amālī* (Qum: Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Bi'thah, 1997), pp. 665–69; idem, *Ṣifāt al-shī'ah wa-faḍā'il al-shī'ah* (Tehran: Kānūn-i Intishārāt-i 'Abidī, 1970), p. 61; Muwaffaq bi'llāh (d. c. 1038), *al-fītibār wa-sulwat al-'arīfin*, ed. by 'Abd al-Salām 'Abbās al-Wajīh (Sanaa: Mu'assasat al-Imām Zayd ibn 'Alī al-Thaqāfiyyah, 2008), pp. 71–72, 532–34; Karājīkī (d. 1058), *Kanz al-fawā'id* (Qum: Maktabat al-Muṣṭafawī, 1949), pp. 31–33; Fattāl (d. 1114), *Rawḍat al-wā'izīn*, ed. by Muḥammad Mahdī (Najaf: al-Maktabah al-Haydariyyah, 1966), p. 439; Warrām al-Hillī (d. 1208), *Majmū'at Warrām: Tanbīh al-khawāṭir wa-nuzhat al-nawāzīr*, ed. by Bāsim Muḥammad Māl Allāh al-Asādī, 3 vols (Karbalā: Al-'Atabah al-Husayniyyah al-Muqaddasah, 2013), 2, 254; Ibn Ṭalhah, *Maṭālib al-sa'ūl*, pp. 269–71; and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah*, ed. by 'Alī Shīrī, 14 vols (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1988), vol. 8, 6.

Radi's *Nahj al-balāghah*. Here, Hammam asks Ali to describe — as a synonym for Ali's 'true followers' — 'the pious' (*muttaqīn*, its verbal noun is *taqwā*):

Ali thanked God and praised him, invoked blessings on the Prophet, then said:

And now to the matter at hand:

God created the people when he created them, not needing their obedience and untouched by their disobedience. The disobedience of those who disobey does not harm him, and the obedience of those who obey does not benefit him. He distributed their sustenance among them and placed them in various stations in this life.

The pious in this world are people of virtue. Their speech is rational, their garments simple, and their gait the embodiment of humility. They lower their eyes, avoiding things God has forbidden them to see, and dedicate their ears to hearing words of wisdom that bring them benefit. Their hearts are at peace in times of tribulation and in times of prosperity. If not for the lifespans decreed for them by God, their souls would not linger in their bodies the blink of an eye but — yearning for God's reward and fearing his punishment — they would instantly depart. The Creator's majesty in their hearts makes all else paltry in their eyes. Paradise is before their gaze — they see it as clearly as though they themselves were enjoying its blessings. Hellfire too is before their gaze — they see it as clearly as though they themselves were being tortured in it. Their hearts are sorrowful, their malice never feared, their bodies emaciated, their needs few, and their persons chaste. They patiently endure these few days here, awaiting the long comfort of the hereafter and a profitable transaction bestowed in ease and security by their Lord. The world approached them, but they turned away. It shackled them, but they ransomed their souls and set them free.

In the night they stand in worship reciting sections of the Qur'an, chanting them in sweet melody, moving their own hearts to tears and finding in it the cure for their illness. If they come across a verse that rouses yearning, they latch on to it hungrily, and their hearts stretch out toward it in desire — its promised blessings are visible right in front of their eyes. If they come across a verse that stokes fear, they incline their hearts toward its warning — the hiss and crackle of the inferno fills the innermost recesses of their ears. They bow their spine, laying their forehead, palms, knees, and toes on the earth, beseeching God to free their necks from the fire. In the day they are kind, wise, good, and pious. Fear has emaciated them like arrow shafts. The observer thinks them ailing, but they are not ill. He says, 'They are crazy!' but they are crazed only by something immensely grave. They are not satisfied with a few good deeds, and they do not think their numerous endeavors too many. They constantly chide themselves and fear the consequence of their actions. If one of them is praised, he is apprehensive and replies: I know myself better than you know me, and my Lord knows me even better. Lord, do not hold me to what they say about me, make me more virtuous than they estimate, and forgive those of my actions they do not know.

Their hallmark is strength in faith, resolve with gentleness, belief with certainty, voracity for knowledge, knowledge with maturity, temperance in affluence, humility in worship, forbearance in indigence, patience in hardship, seeking the licit, enthusiasm in following guidance, and aversion to greed. They perform good deeds while always being on guard. They spend the night thanking God and the morning praising him. They sleep vigilant and awake in joy, vigilant because they have been warned against neglect and joyful because they have gained blessings and mercy. If their ego bucks against doing something it dislikes, they do not allow it full rein in letting it do what it desires. Their joy is centred on things which bring lasting reward, while they care little for commodities that will not remain. They combine maturity with learning and words with action.

You will see this — their needs are few, their slips are rare, their hearts are humble, their souls are content, their fare is meagre, their manner is easy-going, their faith is protected, their appetite is dead, and their rage is held in check. Their goodness is always anticipated, and their evil never dreaded. If they sit with the heedless, they are still listed among the heedful, and if they sit with the heedful, they are not listed among the heedless. They forgive those who oppress them, give to those who hold back from giving to them, and foster those who cut them off. Lewdness is far removed from them, gentleness imbues their words, and wrongdoing is absent from their actions. Their decency is ever present, their goodness always forthcoming, and their evil always distant and removed. In calamities they remain calm and dignified, in catastrophes they remain patient, and in happy times they remain thankful. They never wrong an enemy or transgress to help loved ones. They acknowledge the dues they owe to another before testimony is given against them. They never squander something they have been given in trust. They never forget a thing of which they have been reminded. They never call others vile names. They never harm a neighbour. They never gloat at another's misfortune. They never enter wrongdoing or leave the truth. If they are silent, their silence is not burdensome. If they laugh, they are not raucous. If attacked in treachery, they are patient — God himself

avenges them. They weary themselves by constant chiding, while never causing others unease. They push themselves to prepare for the hereafter and never cause others harm. Chaste and upright, they stay away from those who distance themselves. Kind and merciful, they draw near to those who seek to come close. Their detachment is not out of arrogance or grandiosity, and their drawing near is not out of cunning or trickery.³⁹

The Arabic word that I have translated as piety is *taqwa*, a fundamental concept in Islam and the most prominent single theme in Islamic sermons. Its fuller meaning is consciousness of God, encompassing piety and virtue together in totality. *Taqwa* is often translated imprecisely as ‘fear of God’. As with many culture-specific signifiers, no English word exactly conveys its full range, but its scope comes close to the English (Christian) usage of ‘god-fearing’, or the Mosaic command in Leviticus 19. 2 to ‘be holy’ (Hebrew: *kedoshim*). In Islam, *taqwa* means desisting from evil deeds and fearing God’s retribution, being aware that God sees and knows everything, and indeed, most importantly and paradoxically, being in awe of him while also always taking comfort from his presence. This attitude entails believing in God, being conscious of him, and thus always thinking and acting righteously.

In this sermon, Ali describes the pious, the people of *taqwa*, and lays out in minute detail the virtuous characteristics, the hereafter-focused aspirations, and the entirely godly way of life of those who truly deserve the epithet. The sermon begins with a general statement: ‘The pious in this world are people of virtue’. It goes on to list eighty ethical and religious traits: For example: The pious speak sensibly, dress simply, and walk humbly. They are deeply conscious of God’s greatness and bounties, and do not care for the world. It is as though they see paradise and hellfire in front of their eyes. Their bodies are emaciated, their needs few. They pray all night, standing before God, and reciting the Qur’an. They possess excellent virtues, including strength in religion, maturity with gentleness, belief with conviction, passion for knowledge, and moderation in wealth. They are kind to their fellow humans, for they ‘forgive those who oppress them, give to those who refuse them, and show compassion to those who shun them’. They are dignified in calamity, patient in misfortune, and grateful to God in times of ease.

In a previous article about this sermon, I have argued that Ali propagates a holistic model for a life of happiness and meaning in which he combines individual devotion with dynamic social engagement, and makes virtue and piety two sides of the same coin.⁴⁰ Here, I want to note the effect of Ali’s preaching on one man in his congregation: As Ali drew his sermon to a close, the narrator tells us, ‘Hammam fell as though smitten by a thunderbolt and died there and then. Ali exclaimed: By God, I feared this effect on him! This is what strong counsel does to people who listen!’⁴¹ The details of this historical report need further investigation, and the ending could possibly have been modified from an earlier rendering which had simply stated Hammam fell to the ground in a faint — indeed, this statement about Hammam’s falling to the ground in a faint forms the penultimate part of Radi’s own narrative, just before he says Hammam gave up the ghost. But there is no doubt that according to medieval commentators such as Radi, Ibn Talhah, and others, the effect of the sermon on Hammam was intense. Indeed, we could say that Hammam’s extreme reaction was anticipated in the text of the sermon itself, in Ali’s line: ‘If not for the lifespans decreed for the pious by God, their souls would not linger in their bodies the blink of an eye, but, yearning for God’s reward and fearing his punishment, they would instantly depart this world’. Hammam’s reaction was a fulfilment of the sermon’s premise, that the ultimate goal of the pious is to be with God in the hereafter, and — in terms of the effect of sermons — that strong counsel has a strong effect on the sincere.

³⁹ Radi, *Nahj al-balāghah*, § 1.191.

⁴⁰ Tahera Qutbuddin, ‘Piety and Virtue in Early Islam: Two Sermons by Imam Ali’, in *Self-Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. by Jennifer Frey and Candace Vogler (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 125–53.

⁴¹ The report continues: ‘A man challenged Ali, “Commander of the Faithful, how about you, then?” Ali replied angrily: “Good grief! Each lifespan has an allotted time that it does not transgress and a cause that it does not overstep. Stop there and do not return to this kind of talk again, for it was Satan who spoke on your tongue”’.

Imam Husayn's Sermon on the Battlefield in Karbala and Hurr's Maximal Reaction

The second case I want to present is the response to a battlefield oration attributed to Imam Husayn (d. 680), the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Ali's son, and the second Shia Imam, also a very important figure in early Islam. The response here is different, though no less grave. Husayn is said to have delivered this oration on the battlefield of Karbala to the attacking Umayyad army. In the 'Orators and Audience' chapter of *Arabic Oration*, I have analysed this text to illustrate the interactive nature of Arabic oration, the dynamics of public space, and the negotiation of authority in the early Islamic world.⁴² Here, I want to highlight a particular aspect of audience reception. Husayn's oration, though declaimed on the battlefield of Karbala, is not your typical battlefield oration — those focus more commonly on galvanizing armies to fight, and they are addressed by commanders to their own forces.⁴³ In our present instance, Husayn's primary audience is the enemy force, and he is attempting to persuade them to desist. Also, there would be no real battle between two armies: despite some skirmishes and individual combat incidents, Karbala — where an army of thousands faced down seventy-two men and boys — was in truth a massacre.

Some historical context to Karbala is required.⁴⁴ When the Umayyad caliph Mu'awiyah died in Damascus in the year 680, Husayn, who was in Medina, refused to pledge allegiance to his son Yazid. The Shia of Kufa, the main city in Iraq, had repeatedly written to Husayn with promises of allegiance and support, and Husayn sent his cousin Muslim ibn Aqil to Kufa to receive their pledge. Shortly afterward, Husayn himself proceeded to Iraq, taking with him his family and a few staunch companions. Meanwhile, Yazid sent Ibn Ziyad to quash the brewing rebellion. The 18,000 Kufans who had pledged allegiance to Husayn stood by while his emissary, Muslim ibn Aqil, was executed. Ibn Ziyad then dispatched an army — ironically, largely composed of these same Kufans — with instructions to force Husayn to pledge allegiance to Yazid. If he refused, they were to kill him. On the second of the Islamic month of Muharram, the 4000-strong Umayyad army surrounded Husayn and his small band, who were nearing Kufa, in the desert plain of Karbala. On the seventh, they blocked Husayn's access to water. On the morning of the tenth, the day named Ashura, they surrounded Husayn's camp with deadly intent. This is when Husayn delivered the oration at hand, in a final effort to reason with his besiegers. The report begins with Umayyad forces advancing towards Husayn's camp, among them the Kufan Shimr, cursing Husayn, Husayn's supporter Muslim ibn Awsajah, seeking permission to strike Shimr, and Husayn, refusing, saying he would not be the one to start the fighting.

The oration is narrated in several early sources, both Sunni and Shii.⁴⁵ This is the oration text in the version of Tabari's (d. 923) famous *History*, transcribed from the Kufan Abu Mikhnaḥ's (d. 774) lost Martyrology of Husayn (*Maqṭal al-Husayn*), who in turn cites his grandfather, a contemporary of the Karbala events and a personal interlocutor of the participants. Husayn's words are interspersed with the narrator's comments (rendered in italics below) about its progression:⁴⁶

⁴² Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 216–27.

⁴³ On classical Arabic battle orations more generally, see Qutbuddin, 'The Battle Oration: Horses and Swords, Strategies and Ethics, Urgings and Prayers,' in *Qutbuddin, Arabic Oration*, pp. 292–332.

⁴⁴ On Husayn and his martyrdom, see Tahera Qutbuddin, 'Husayn b. 'Alī (626–80)', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. by Gerhardt Bowering and others (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 227–28; on those topics and on orations of Husayn's sisters, see Tahera Qutbuddin, 'Orations of Zaynab and Umm Kulthūm in the Aftermath of Husayn's Martyrdom at Karbala: Speaking Truth to Power', in *The 'Other Martyrs': Women and the Poetics of Sexuality, Sacrifice, and Death in World Literatures*, ed. by Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), pp. 103–32.

⁴⁵ Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-farīd*, 4, 356; Ṣadūq, *al-Amālī*, pp. 140–41, § 30; Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233), 'Izz al-Dīn, *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh*, ed. by A. Tadmurī, 10 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1997), 3, 169–70; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256), *Tadhkirat al-khawwāṣṣ* (Najaf: al-Maṭba'ah al-Haydariyyah, 1964), pp. 251–53; Nuwayrī (d. 1333), *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, ed. by S. 'A. F. 'Ashūr, 33 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmiyyah, 2002), 20, 440–42.

⁴⁶ Tabari, *Tārīkh*, 5, 409, 424–26; *The History of al-Tabari*, ed. by Ehsan Yarshater, 39 vols (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 19: *The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiyah A.D. 680–683/A.H. 60–64*, trans. by I. K. A. Howard, 122–25; Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, pp. 216–27.

When the Umayyad forces came close, Husayn called for his horse and mounted it. Then he called out with his loudest voice, a call that the people in their entirety could hear:

People, listen to my words! Do not attack me until you have heard my counsel regarding your rights over me, until I give you my reasons for coming to you. If you accept my reasons, if you believe my words and give me justice, you will be the happier for it, and you will have no pretext [to harm] me. If you do not accept my reasons, and do not give yourselves justice, then ‘Gather your affair and your collaborators. Let not your affair become an affliction upon you. Do what you will unto me and give me no respite’.⁴⁷ Indeed, my protector is God, he who sent down the book. He protects the righteous’.⁴⁸

When his sisters heard him speak these words, they screamed and wept. His daughters wept, and the sound [of their weeping] rose high. He sent to them his brother Abbas ibn Ali and his son Ali, saying to the two: ‘Silence them. Indeed, by my life, their weeping will be long [following this affair]!’ After they fell silent, he praised God and extolled him, and lauded him with what he is deserving of, and invoked blessings upon Muhammad, and all God’s angels and prophets [...]. Then he said:

Trace my lineage and think: Who am I? Then go back to your own selves and chastise them. Think: Is killing me, rending my sanctity, lawful for you? Am I not the son of your Prophet’s daughter? The son of his legatee, his cousin, first of the believers, one who accepted the truth of the message that God’s Messenger brought from him? Is not Hamza, prince of martyrs, my father’s uncle? Is not Ja’far, the martyr who flies with two wings, my uncle?⁴⁹ Have not the oft-quoted words reached you, that God’s Messenger (God bless him and his descendants) said regarding me and my brother [Hasan ibn Ali]: ‘These two are chiefs of the youth of paradise’?⁵⁰

If you believe what I tell you—and it is the truth!—then know, by God, that I have never knowingly lied ever since I learnt that God punishes those who lie and disciplines those who speak untruths. If you do not believe [my report from the Prophet], then there are those among you who, if you ask them about it, will inform you. Ask Jabir ibn Abdallah al-Ansari, or Abu Sa’id al-Khudri, or Sahl ibn Sa’d al-Sa’idi, or Zayd ibn Arqam, or Anas ibn Malik⁵¹ — they will tell you that they have heard these words from God’s Messenger regarding me and my brother. Will this not stop you from shedding my blood?

Then Shimr ibn Dhi Jawshan said to Husayn that he, Shimr ‘worshipped God precariously standing upon one edge’,⁵² if he understood what Husayn was saying.

Then Habib ibn Muzahir said to Shimr: By God, I see you worship God on seventy edges! And I testify that you are a bovine animal; you do not understand what he says — ‘God has placed a seal’ upon your heart.’⁵³

Then Husayn said to them: If you are in doubt regarding these words, do you doubt that I am the son of your Prophet’s daughter? By God, there is not between the East and the West a son of the Prophet’s daughter other than me, not from among you, nor from among anyone other than you! I am the son of your Prophet’s daughter! Tell me: Do you seek revenge from me for a man among you that I have slain? Or for property belonging to you that I have usurped? Or as blood wit for a wound?

They fell silent, not responding to him.

Then he called out: Shabath ibn Rib’i! Hajjar ibn Abjar! Qays ibn al-Ash’ath! Yazid ibn al-Harith!⁵⁴ — Did you not write to me that ‘The fruits have ripened, the surrounding land has become green, and the well has flowed over. Truly, you come to a ready army. So, come forward’

They said: We did not.

Then he said: Good God! Yes, by God, you did!

⁴⁷ Qur’an, Yūnus 10:71, quoting the Prophet Noah’s words to his unreceptive people.

⁴⁸ Qur’an, A’raf 7:196.

⁴⁹ Names of prominent members of the Prophet’s family who gave their lives fighting for Islam in its nascent stage, and who were beloved of the Prophet and praised by him.

⁵⁰ al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān, *Sharh al-akhbār fi faḍā’il al-a’immah al-aṭṭhar*, 4 vols (Qum: Mu’assasat al Nashr al-Islāmī, 1991), 3, 76.

⁵¹ Names of prominent Companions of the Prophet.

⁵² Qur’an, Hajj 22:11; that is, he mentions only the side of the story that is in his favor.

⁵³ Qur’an, Nisā’ 4:155, Tawbah 9:87 and 193, Nahl 16:108, Muḥammad 47:16, and Munāfiqūn 63:3.

⁵⁴ Names of prominent men from Kufa.

Then he said: People! If you do not want me, then leave me to turn away from you to another place on earth that will give me shelter.

Qays ibn al-Ash'ath said to him: Will you not put yourself under your cousin [Yazid's] command? Indeed, [the Umayyads] will show you nothing but a pleasing face, and no harm will come to you from them.

Husayn said: You are your brother's brother! Do you wish that the Hashimites should seek you out for more than the blood of Muslim ibn Aqil?⁵⁵ No, by God, I shall not give them the pledge of my hand in humiliation, nor will I acknowledge their suzerainty like a slave.

Servants of God! 'I take refuge in my Lord and your Lord from your stoning!'⁵⁶ 'I take refuge in my Lord and your Lord from every arrogant man who does not believe in Judgment Day!'⁵⁷

Then Husayn made his horse kneel, and commanded Uqbah ibn Siman to tether it. And the Umayyad army came marching toward him.

At this eleventh hour, Husayn was not trying to convince the Kufans that he was the rightful leader of the Muslim community. By this time, when they had surrounded him for the final attack, the situation had degenerated to the point that Husayn knew they were after his blood. He was trying to stave off that ending. The point he was making in his oration was that killing him was a heinous crime, and they should leave him to go his way.

Husayn invoked several sources of his authority. The first was his descent from the Prophet. This was the cornerstone of his argument because his lineage was irrefutable. All the people gathered there, his friends as well as his foes, knew this to be weighty and true. And by consistently referring to Muhammad as 'your Prophet' — note the emphasis on the pronoun 'your' — Husayn personalized the relevance of his genealogy to his Muslim attackers. Likewise, Husayn touted his familial connections to other eminent personages in Islam. His mother was the Prophet's daughter Fatima, his father was the Prophet's legatee, Ali, 'first of the believers in God', and so on. By listing his illustrious genealogy, Husayn also implicitly criticized the anti-Islamic lineage of the Umayyad caliph, whose forebears had led armies against the Prophet in the early years of Islam. Toward the end of his oration, Husayn spoke of his Kufan attackers' letters inviting him to come to Iraq and promising support if he did. He ended his oration with two Qur'anic verses stating that he took refuge in his Lord.

The Umayyad forces responded with silence in the face of his claims about lineage, and with denials in the face of his statement that he was their invited guest. But among them, one answered Husayn's call — and here is the instance of conversion, interpreted by the Shia as validation of their belief that the call of an Imam never goes unanswered: Hurr ibn Yazid al-Yarbu'i, a Kufan warrior who was a sub-commander in the Umayyad army, was won over. The historian Baladhuri (d. 892) reports Hurr's response thus:⁵⁸

Hurr exclaimed: "I shall not choose hellfire over heaven!" He struck his horse forward and went over to Husayn. Husayn said to him: "You, by God, are "hurr" [= free] in this world and the next! Hurr then tried to convince the Umayyad commander, Umar ibn Sa'd, to let Husayn go his way. Ibn Sa'd refused. Hurr addressed the Umayyad army, urging them to accept Husayn's offer to go away:

'It is you who have called him, and when he came, you turned him over to the Umayyads [...]. You blocked him, his women, his companions, from the running water of the Euphrates. Are you not believers? Do you not accept his grandfather's prophethood? Are you not convinced of the return to God?'

They showered him with arrows, and Ibn Sa'd gave the order to begin the killing.

⁵⁵ The Hashimites are the Prophet Muhammad's clan. Qays ibn al-Ash'ath's brother, Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath, had been instrumental in Ibn Ziyad's capture and execution of Muslim ibn Aqil, Husayn's cousin, as mentioned earlier, from the Prophet's Hashimite clan. See Tabari, *Tārīkh*, 5, 369–75, *History*, 19, 49–57.

⁵⁶ Qur'an, Dukhān 40:20.

⁵⁷ Qur'an, Ghāfir 44:27.

⁵⁸ Baladhuri, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, ed. by Suhayl Zakkār and Riyād al-Zirikli, 13 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 3, 397. Hurr's speech and martyrdom are also reported in Tabari, *Tārīkh*, 5, 427–28; *History*, 19, 127–29.

In the next two hours, the Umayyad forces slaughtered all the men and several male children on Husayn's side, reportedly seventy-two in all. The combat culminated in the killing of Husayn.

In this example of a life-altering oration event, Hurr's response to Husayn was with full knowledge of the consequences of his actions. He knew that the Umayyad army was going to kill Husayn and all Husayn's followers. He himself had been bent on that killing just a few minutes earlier. But Husayn's speech convinced him otherwise. It reportedly prompted him to lay down his life defending Husayn, and to earn — in his own words — paradise.

Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Arabic oration — which sat at a rich nexus of art and life functions — was a powerful tool of persuasion in early Islamic times. Among the numerous orations that persuaded people to various kinds of behaviours and modes of being, some are reported to have an extraordinarily powerful impact. The sermon on piety by Imam Ali is reported to have had a lightning-bolt effect on Hammam, striking him physically to the ground, and according to the narrator, transporting him directly into the afterlife. The battlefield oration by Imam Husayn won over Hurr and prompted him to give his life fighting for Husayn. Both orations illustrate the formidable force wielded by the orator to produce life-changing effects on the hearts and actions of his audience — in these two cases, an urgent and deeply sincere quest for paradise.

Note on the contributor

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