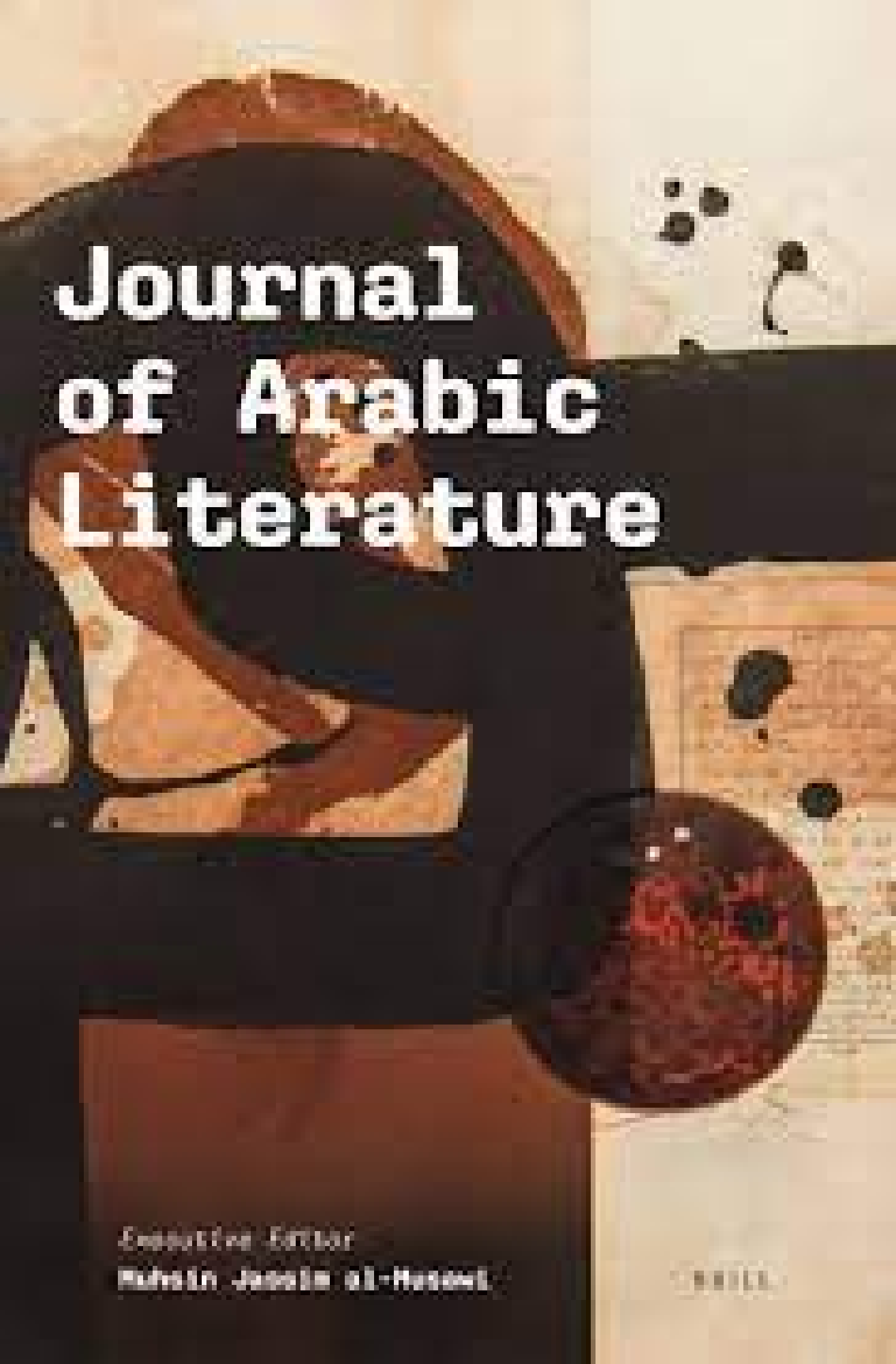
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Is Oration Literature?

Establishing the Khuṭbah *of the Pre- and Early Islamic Oral Period as the Foundational Genre of Classical Arabic Prose*

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Abstract

Is oration literature? More specifically, can we read the multi-functional Arabic oration (*khuṭbah*) of the 1st/7th and 2nd/8th centuries as part of the classical prose canon? In this article, I argue that if our definition of literature includes beautiful language, admiration expressed by literary theorists, and masterful articulation of themes to evoke audience response, early Arabic oration is most certainly literature. I demonstrate this claim by analyzing the rhythmic and graphic oral aesthetics of early Arabic oration, the views of medieval theorists regarding its distinguished place and literary nature, and its crucial influence on the development of the chancery epistle (*risālah*), the first written genre of Arabic literary prose. I contend that *khuṭbah* is the foundational prose genre of Arabic and it has materially influenced the major genres of *risālah* and *maqāmāt* that followed. The history of Arabic literature cannot be written without oration.

Keywords

khaṭābah – oratory – speech – sermon – orality – mnemonics – classical Arabic prose – chancery epistle

The question I want to pose is straightforward: Is oration literature? Oration is the English term I use to translate the Arabic word *khuṭbah*, which refers in the early period to speeches, sermons, and other forms of public address on a variety of religious, political, and military themes, that conform to certain structural and performative conventions.[1] Can we consider this multi-functional oration of the seventh and eighth centuries AD part of the classical Arabic

1 On the early, oral period *khuṭbah*, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). An important anthology is Aḥmad Zakī Ṣafwat, *Jamharat khuṭab al-ʿArab fī l-ʿuṣūr al-ʿArabiyyah al-zāhirah*, 3 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1933–34). See also Tahera Qutbuddin, "*Khuṭba*: The Evolution of Early Arabic Oration," in *Classical Arabic Humanities in their Own Terms*, ed. Beatrice Gruendler with Michael Cooperson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 176–273; Tahera Qutbuddin, "Khoṭba," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, online, 2013; Tahera Qutbuddin, "Qur'an Citation in Early Arabic Oration (*khuṭba*): Mnemonic, Liturgical and Testimonial Functions," in *The Qur'an and* Adab*: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam*, ed. Nuha Alshaar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 315–40; Hasan Al-Khoee, "The Evolution of Arabic Public Oratory in the Early Muslim Period [1st–3rd/7th–9th centuries]," PhD dissertation (London University, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2021); Tahera Qutbuddin, "Arabic Oration in Early Islam: Religion, Ritual, and Rhetoric," in *Speaking to God and the World: Ritual and Social Dynamics of Religious Speech*, ed. Ruth Conrad et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 156–172. On ʿAlī's orations, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "The Sermons of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42:1 (2012): 201–28; Tahera Qutbuddin, "'Alī's Contemplations on this World and the Hereafter in the Context of His Life and Times," in *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Alireza Korangy, Wheeler Thackston, Roy Mottahedeh, and William Granara (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 333–53; Tahera Qutbuddin, "A Sermon on Piety by Imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded," in *Religion and Aesthetic Experience: Drama—Sermons—Literature*, ed. Jan Scholz, Max Stille, Sabine Dorpmüller, and Ines Weinrich (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, 2018), 109–24; 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. Jennifer Frey and Candace Vogler (London: Routledge, 2018), 125–53; Tahera Qutbuddin, "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," *Medieval Sermon Studies*, ed. Linda G. Jones and Jussi Hanska 67:1 (2023), 74–87; Tahera Qutbuddin, "Just Leadership in Early Islam: The Teachings and Practice of Imam Ali," in *The Arts of Leading: Perspectives from the Humanities and the Liberal Arts*, ed. Edward Brooks and Michael Lamb (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2024), 78–92. On Zaynab bint ʿAlī's orations, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "Orations of Zaynab and Umm Kulthūm in the Aftermath of Ḥusayn'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. Alireza Korangy and Leila Rouhi (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019), 103–32. On Umayyad orations, see Stephan Dähne, "Reden der Araber: Die politische ḫuṭba in der klassischen arabischen Literature," PhD dissertation (Wittenberg University, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001); Pamela Klasova, "Empire through Language: Al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf Al-Thaqafī and the Power of Oratory in Umayyad Iraq," PhD dissertation (Georgetown University, 2018).

prose canon? Contemporary Friday sermons,[2] even medieval Friday sermons,[3] march to a different tune, but when we speak of the celebrated orations attributed to the pre-Islamic Christian bishop Quss (d. ca. 600 AD), the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632) and Imam ʿAlī (d. 40/661), and the Umayyad governors Ziyād (d. 53/673) and Ḥajjāj (d. 95/714)—these texts certainly relate to the fields of religion, history, and political science, but can they be studied as literature? To many, the answer may be an obvious yes, but to others it is not clear-cut, or even a definite no. In any event, setting out a theoretical case for inclusion of early oration within the literary canon is clearly a desideratum.

Modern Arabic scholarship has produced descriptive studies of oratory,[4] but Western scholars have largely kept the oration at arm's length. Few university courses include them, and most literary histories lack any sustained discussion. Many reasons can be adduced. For example, orations have real-world

2 On the contemporary *khuṭbah*, see Patrick Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Qutbuddin, "The Influence of Classical Arabic Oration on Contemporary Muslim Sermons and Speeches," in *Arabic Oration*, 432–84 (more references are cited there)—I have argued that direct stylistic influence is limited, and that oral mnemonics techniques are not usually found outside of formulaic beginnings and endings in contemporary sermons.

3 On the medieval, written-period *khuṭbah*, see Jonathan Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Linda G. Jones, "Ibn ʿAbbad of Ronda's Sermon on the Prophet's Birthday Celebration: Preaching the Sufi and Sunni Paths of Islam," *Medieval Sermon Studies* 50 (2006): 29–47; Paul Walker, ed. and trans., *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs: Festival Sermons of the Ismaili Imams* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Paul Walker, "Islamic Ritual Preaching (*Khuṭba*s) in a Contested Arena: Shīʿīs and Sunnīs, Fatimids and Abbasids," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42:1 (2012): 119–40; Linda G. Jones, *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Linda G. Jones, "The Preaching of the Almohads: Loyalty and Resistance across the Strait of Gibraltar," *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 71–101; Linda G. Jones, "Bodily Performances and Body Talk in Medieval Islamic Preaching," in *The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture*, ed. Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 211–35.

4 Descriptive Arabic studies on the early, oral-period *khuṭbah* include Iḥsān al-Nuṣṣ, *al-Khaṭābah al-ʿarabiyyah fi ʾaṣrihā al-dhahabī* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1963); Iḥsān al-Nuṣṣ, *al-Khaṭābah al-siyāsiyyah fī ʾaṣr banī Umayyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1965); Najdah Ramaḍān, *Tārīkh al-khaṭābah wa-ashhar khuṭab al-rasūl wa-l-ṣaḥābah* (Damascus: Dār al-Maḥabbah, 1998); Aḥmad Badrān, *al-Khaṭābah ʿinda l-Khawārij* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ḥaḍārah al-ʿArabiyyah, 1999); Ḥusayn al-Lahībī, "Al-Khaṭābah al-ʿarabiyyah fī l-ʿaṣr al-ʿabbāsī al-awwal: Dirāsah mawḍūʿiyyah fanniyyah," *Majallat al-Qādisiyyah fī l-Ādāb wa-l-ʿUlūm al-Tarbawiyyah* 7, no. 3/4 (2008): 93–116; Saʿīd ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Qarnī, *Taqālīd al-tawāṣul fī adab al-khaṭābah al-ʿarabiyyah fī l-qarn al-awwal al-hijrī* (Riyadh: al-Fāliḥīn, 2014); Īliyā al-Ḥāwī, *Fann al-khaṭābah wa-taṭawwuruhu ʿinda l-ʿarab* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, n.d.).

functions beyond the aesthetic and cultural, and modern scholars tend to separate humanities from social sciences; but that is a false dichotomy in the early Islamic period, and a strict partitioning between the two is never called for, not at any time. Moreover, since the politics the oration embodies are sometimes contentious—including, for example, contested succession to the Prophet Muḥammad and civil wars in the first century of Islam—scholars of classical literature hesitate to go there. Also, authenticity of individual pieces remains an open question, and any talk about these materials usually gets bogged down in a discussion of reliability that preempts any discussion of aesthetics.[5] Further, there is a general misconception that medieval Arabic critics do not

5 For a discussion of the complex question of authenticity, see Qutbuddin, "The Preservation of Orations: Mnemonics-Based Oral Transmission, Supplementary Writing, and the Question of Authenticity," in *Arabic Oration*, 2–63, where I have argued for the existence of a genuine historical core, and for a literary appreciation more broadly. Most orations in the pre-Islamic and 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 2nd/8th and early 3rd/9th centuries. Since oral materials are particularly susceptible to alteration and even fabrication, their historicity remains an open question. But in view of the robust indigenous system of oral transmission aided by built-in mnemonic devices, and the subsidiary channel of auxiliary notation, it is entirely conceivable that they contain an authentic core of themes and even some original language from actual past events, in a combination of verbatim and gist transmission (*riwāyah bi-l-lafẓ* and *riwāyah bi-l-maʿnā*). 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 (e.g., Thucydides, d. ca. 460–395 BC, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972, 47)—early Arabic speeches are presented in the sources as transcriptions of actual declamations, and many have early and wide provenance. Here, we have a different time and a different set of circumstances which suggest that the texts cited by classical Islamic historical and literary sources are likely to contain genuine remnants. Pamela Klasova has provided nuanced argument for the historical relevance of Umayyad orations within their oral context ("Empire through Language," 279–82). Moreover, as I have argued further in my book, even those texts that may be forgeries effectively lend themselves to a literary assessment of the genre (Qutbuddin, "Introduction," in *Arabic Oration*, 15–16). The imitations circulated by counterfeiters must have conformed closely to early conventions of style and theme; the forgers were near in time to the early orators, familiar with the conventions of pre-Islamic and early Islamic oratory, and, most importantly, successful in passing off their creations as earlier productions to a likewise knowledgeable audience. Even though this complicates our own detective work of determining the provenance of individual orations, the possibly fabricated orations also lend themselves effectively to a broad study of the earlier period. Modern scholars can, at the very least, agree on one thing: Orations extant in the early sources represent what, in the minds of medieval Arab scholars, were authentic pre-Islamic and early Islamic speeches. For 2nd/8th- and 3rd/9th-century litterateurs—who canonized the tradition for later generations—these texts formed the master model of the Arabic oration. Klasova rightly remarks that "the authenticity of Thucydides' speeches has long been debated and yet the speeches have been studied, admired, and discussed from

engage oratory (*khaṭābah*) as a literary genre in the same way that they engage poetry, or *adab* prose, or even the Qur'an.

But oration is most certainly literature. I demonstrated this claim implicitly in my book, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function* (Brill, 2019), and in the present article, I argue explicitly and theoretically for oration to be counted as literature. I do so in three broad ways, speaking of (1) the rhythmic and graphic aesthetics of early Arabic oration, (2) views of medieval theorists regarding the distinguished place and literary nature of oration, and (3) oration's crucial influence on the development of the chancery epistle (*risālah*), which is widely accepted as the first major written genre of Arabic literary prose.

1 What Is Literature?

Let us step back for a moment and ask: What is literature? If we want to understand whether oration is literature, we need to define the terms. While a brief definition of oration is provided in my opening paragraph,[6] we need to do the same for literature. At first blush, the task seems simple enough, as the term is intuitively familiar to most educated English speakers. In reality, however, this is not an easy assignment, because literature means different things to different people, and, moreover, the definition continues to evolve. Suffice it to state, though, that the definition in widely accepted popular sources includes beautiful language, broad acceptance, and purposeful effect, in both written and spoken verbal productions. Speaking to aesthetics, the *Oxford English Dictionary* characterizes literature as a borrowing from the Latin term *litterātūra* and defines it to constitute "any written work valued for superior or lasting artistic merit." Similarly referring to aesthetics, and adding the criterion of wide relevance, the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines literature as "writings in prose or verse having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest." The importance of effect is most famously argued by the famous French philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre, who, in his 1948 classic, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (What is literature?), emphasized the importance of committed political prose to the category of literature. Arguing for the importance of literature's effect on readers, he claimed,

Antiquity to modern times" (Pamela Klasova, review of Tahera Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*, in *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 30, 2022, 644–53, see 652).

6 For philological and literary-context details, see Qutbuddin, "Defining *Khuṭbah*," in *Arabic Oration*, 13–14; and Qutbuddin, "Denotations of the Terms *khuṭba* and *khaṭāba*," in "*Khuṭba*: The Evolution of Early Arabic Oration," 180–84.

"The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates. If he does so without effect … he is talking and saying nothing."[7] Note Sartre's identification of the litterateur's goal as persuasion—and persuasion, as we know, is the overarching function of early Arabic oration. Sartre also connected the function of the writer with the speaker. In his 2016 book of essays with Sartre's selfsame title, "What is Literature?", the contemporary New York essayist Arthur Krystal explicitly included oral materials—"not only what is written but what is voiced."[8] Krystal's inclusion of speech in the category of literature echoed what scholars of orality—Albert Lord, Milman Parry, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, John Miles Foley, Ruth Finnegan, Jan Vansina, Eric Havelock, Susan Niditch, and Martin Jaffee among many others[9]—have been saying for a long time, since the early twentieth century AD to be precise; and they have made a strong case for assessing orally produced verbal art as literature. In the Islamic tradition, the first major verbal art forms—poetry, oratory, and the Qur'an—were primarily oral. Suzanne Stetkevych has written about the oral mnemonics of pre-Islamic poetry.[10] William Graham and Michael Sells have done important work on the Qur'an's orality, and I have an article forthcoming on the Qur'an's mnemonic and metonymic artistry.[11] All this is a complex and lengthy discussion

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman as *What is Literature?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 19–20.

8 Arthur Krystal, *This Thing We Call Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

9 Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982); Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H.M. Wright (Chicago: Aldine, 1965); Eric Havelock, "The Ancient Art of Oral Poetry," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 19 (1979): 187–202; Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

10 Suzanne Stetkevych, "From Jāhiliyyah to Badīʿiyyah: Orality, Literacy, and the Transformations of Rhetoric in Arabic Poetry," *Oral Tradition* 25:1 (2010): 211–30.

11 William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Michael Sells, "Sound and Meaning in Sūrat al-Qāriʿa," *Arabica* 40.3 (1993): 403–30; Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999); Tahera Qutbuddin, "Orality as Driver of Qur'anic Aesthetics: Mnemonic and Metonymic Techniques of Pulsating Rhythm, Vivid Imagery, Agonistic Engagement, and Context Evocation," in *The Edinburgh*

in its own right, and the conversation could also be extended to assess Arabic terms. In addition to *khaṭābah* (oratory) and *balāghah* (rhetoric or eloquence), two terms I will discuss shortly, we could also assess additional terms such as *adab* (a class of medieval prose that included, among other things, annotated anthologies of literary prose and poetry), *nathr* (prose), *nathr fannī* (artistic prose), and *faṣāḥah* (eloquence or chasteness of speech).[12] We could also analyze deliberations on these terms by scholars, medieval and modern. There are important conversations to be had there—but that is not the purview of my article. It is clear enough from the definitions of literature I have cited that its three central features are artistry, acceptance as literature by a body of experts, and influence, and the three rubrics of my present article mirror these three features. For my purpose here, it suffices to say that if our definition of literature includes beautiful language, admiration expressed by literary theorists, and masterful articulation of themes to evoke response from the audience, early Arabic oration fits the bill. These three central criteria are amply fulfilled in the recorded texts of early Arabic oration.

2 Aesthetics

First, the point on aesthetics, and here, the orality of early Arabic oration is crucial to its theorization, for orality is the primary animator of its art. In order to persuade, in order to convince, in order to achieve their exhortative goals, orators needed to pack a powerful aesthetic punch, and oration texts found in the medieval sources include some of the most beautiful and powerful expressions of the Arabic literary canon. But wherein lay oration's 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 classical Arabic oration's stylistic choices stem from its oral culture.[13]

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

Companion to Qur'anic Literary Studies, ed. Shawkat Toorawa (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2025).

12 For a reading of *adab* and literature, see Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 176–87, and also 80–84, 100–103, 124–126.

13 For more on early oration's oral-mnemonics style, see Qutbuddin, "Style of the Oration: The Aesthetics of Orality and Persuasion," in *Arabic Oration*, 91–164; Dähne, "Reden der Araber," passim.

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. We must keep in mind the oral milieu of Arabic oration. Unless we recognize its orality, we cannot fully appreciate its character.

It is also important to keep in mind the limitations of this orality, because the pre-Islamic and early Islamic milieu was no stranger to writing. However, although Arabic oration lay between orality and writing, it was closer to the oral end of the spectrum. Let us imagine a sliding scale between pristine orality, in which there is absolutely no writing, and a fully literate society, in which writing is an integral part of the culture—for example, certain tribes living in isolation in the Congo and Amazon rainforests today, versus the contemporary United States and Europe. Although writing was known in Middle Eastern lands in the period of our study, it was a skill limited to a tiny proportion of the populace. They laboriously employed crude instruments of writing such as rock, bone, and skin, and later, parchment and papyrus, and they reserved their writing for momentous occasions. Pre-Islamic and early Islamic society was predominantly oral.

Orality theory provides useful tools for analyzing the early *khuṭbah*, particularly in its discussion of mnemonics, which are stylistic devices that aid memorization. In his pioneering study titled *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong has demonstrated that artistic expression in an oral culture is essentially mnemonic. He explains these mnemonics thus:[14]

> In a primary oral culture, to solve 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,

14 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34–35. I do not subscribe to Ong's larger, unwarranted thesis that analytical thought is contingent on writing, but find his ideas about stylistic features of oral literature to be valid and helpful.

> in alliterations and assonances, [and so on] … Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems.

In addition to these important points about rhythm, Ong goes on to say that an orality-rooted speaker will ground his ideas in the material world around him. He will represent his ideas graphically and visually, rather than in abstract forms. He will speak about a ball, for example, rather than a sphere, about a plate, rather than a circle. He will repeat his core message, sometimes using the same language, sometimes using different words. Consistent with these essential oral art characteristics, the orator of the predominantly oral world of early Islam harnessed mnemonic devices such as rhythm and imagery, among others, to fix ideas and language in the memories of its listeners.

Much of our orator's imagery relates to the natural lifeworld of the early Arabians.[15] Here are three examples. With their striking language, I think they almost make my case for me, without any further explanation, that oration is literature:

ʿAlī ibn Abi Ṭalib (d. 40/661), first Shia Imam and fourth Sunni caliph, compares the world to:[16]

- the sneeze, or fart, of a goat
- a leaf being chomped in the mouth of a locust
- a malodorous carcass
- residual remnants of food scraps in the mouth
- shreds from the pods of a spiny acacia shrub
- woolfluff floating off a pair of shears as they clip
- bitter gallnuts (cancerous growths produced by certain plants to surround and kill wasp eggs laid on their surface)
- the bones of a pig in the hand of a leper

- عَفطة عَنْز
- ورقة في فم جرادة تَقْضُمها
- جيفة مُريحة
- لُماظة

15 On early oration's imagery, see Qutbuddin, "Vivid Imagery: Nature and the Human Lifeworld," in *Arabic Oration*, 114–28; Qutbuddin, "Sermons of ʿAlī," 201–28.

16 Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah min kalām Amīr al-muʾminīn ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib ṣalawāt Allāh ʿalayhi*, ed. and trans. Tahera Qutbuddin as *Nahj al-balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of ʿAlī* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), §1.3.4, §1.221.3, §1.149.2, §3.424, §1.32, §1.32, §2.45.2, §3.221; additional sources are listed in "Appendix of Sources," in ibid.

- حُثالة القَرَظ
- قُراضة الجِلَم
- عَفصة مَقِرة
- عِراق خنزير في يد مجذوم

Instead of stating that the world has little worth, ʿAlī illustrates its low worth through graphic, memorable, even startling images, that convey this abstract idea in concrete physical terms. The image of the world as "the bones of a pig in the hand of a leper" may be nearly impossible to erase from a listener's mental canvas.

In another example, the Umayyad governor of Iraq, Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqafī (d. 95/714), speaks thus of his subjects' increasing wickedness:[17]

> Satan penetrated you,
> permeating flesh, blood, and nerves,
> ears and fingers,
> limbs and hearts.
> Then he rose into your brain-marrow and inner ear.
> Then he climbed still further and made a nest.
> Then he laid eggs and hatched chicks.

إنّ الشيطان قد اسْتَبْطَنَكم
فَخالَطَ اللحم وَالدّم والعَصَب
والمَسامع والأطراف
والأَعْضاء والشِّغاف
ثمّ أَفضى إلى المِخاخ والأَصماخ
ثم ارتفع فعَشّش
ثم باضَ وفَرّخ

Ḥajjāj's imagery is a form of dramatization, with clear features of the imaginary (*takhyīl*), as well as extended verbal metaphor (*tamthīl*), major features of Arabic literary production in the earliest oral period; it is similar in form to the night-camel-sea metaphor in Imruʾ al-Qays' *Muʿallaqah* poem from the

17 Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 4 parts in 2 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1985), 2:140; additional sources are listed in Qutbuddin, "Appendix of Orations," §51.6, in *Arabic Oration*, 514–15.

pre-Islamic period that many readers of this journal are familiar with,[18] and the famous light-metaphor of the Qurʾan.[19] The eminent literary theorist ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. ca. 474/1081) commented that Arabic oratory and poetry were art forms that drew essentially on the imaginary.[20]

In a third example, the rationalist theologian Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 131/748), in an *ubi sunt* sermon, posed the following rhetorical questions: "Where are the kings who built Ctesiphon (al-Madāʾin)?" He went on to answer in the following ominous parallel lines:[21]

> Death grabbed them along with their howdahs,
> it crushed them with its breast,
> it chomped on them with its canines.

18 Imruʾ al-Qays, "Muʿallaqah," verses 44–47, in Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-Muʿallaqāt al-sabʿ* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1980), 37–39 (my translation):

> Night, like the wave of the sea, lowered its curtain upon me, afflicting me with cares.
> When it stretched out its back, followed with its loins, and crushed me with its breast, I said to it:
> O long night, depart, let the morning come! But morning is no better than you!
> What a night you are! Your stars appear fastened with twisted hemp to Mount Yadhbul!

وَلَيْلٍ كَمَوجِ البَحرِ أَرْخَى سُدُولَه عَلَيَّ بِأَنواعِ الهُمُومِ لِيَبتَلِي
فَقُلْتُ لَهُ لَمّا تَمَطَّى بِصُلْبِهِ وَأَردَفَ أَعْجازاً وَناءَ بِكَلْكَلِ
أَلَا أَيُّها اللَّيلُ الطَّوِيلُ أَلَا اِنْجَلِي بِصُبْحٍ وَما الإِصْباحُ فِيكَ بِأَمْثَلِ
فَيا لَكَ مِنْ لَيْلٍ كَأَنَّ نُجُومَهُ بِكُلِّ مُغارِ الْفَتْلِ شُدَّتْ بِيَذْبُلِ

19 Qurʾan, Surah Nūr, 24:35 (my translation):

> God is the light of the skies and the earth—the paradigm of his light is like a niche in which is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass as though it is a shining star; lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither eastern nor western; its oil gleams even though untouched by fire; light upon light; God guides to his light whom he wills; and God strikes paradigms for the people; and God has knowledge of all things.

اَللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِن شَجَرَةٍ مُّبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَّا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُّورٌ عَلَىٰ نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

20 ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Asrār al-balāghah*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿat Wizārat al-Maʿārif, 1954), 248.

21 Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1999), 43; additional sources are listed in Qutbuddin, "Appendix of Orations," §151.1, in *Arabic Oration*, 546–47.

قَبَضَتْهم بِمَحْمِلِها
وطَحَنَتْهم بِكَلْكَلِها
وعَضَّتْهم بِأَنْيابِها

As mentioned briefly earlier in this section, another crucial feature of the oration's style was rhythm. Neuroscientists explain memory formation through the propensity of the brain to organize information in patterns; the process is called "neural entrainment."[22] Children learn the ABC, for example, through a melody. Imagine trying to memorize a random list of letters without that jingle! Rhythm is present even in writing societies. In an oral society, it is a primary characteristic. In early Arabic oration, we see a consistent, almost relentless use of parallelism, where two consecutive sentences possess identical grammar;[23] their structural units are thus parallel to each other, and this parallel structure produces an acoustic and semantic rhythm. If you look back at the previous examples of imagery, they also are largely parallel in structure. Here are three more examples of parallelism-based rhythm in our texts:

The Umayyad governor, Ziyād ibn Abīhi (d. 53/673) warned his Iraqi subjects of severe punishments in a powerful, pulsing cadence:[24]

> 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.

فَمَن غَرّق قومًا غَرّقْناه
ومن أَحْرق قومًا أحرقناه

22 See, e.g., Aniruddh Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 96–179; Michael Thaut, *Rhythm, Music, and the Brain: Scientific Foundations and Clinical Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–17, 39–59; Michael Arbib, ed., *Language, Music, and the Brain: A Mysterious Relationship* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013); Adam Tierney and Nina Kraus, "Neural Entrainment to the Rhythmic Structure of Music," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 27:2 (2014), 400–8.

23 On rhythm and parallelism in the early oration, see Qutbuddin, "Rhythm," in *Arabic Oration*, 93–105; A.F.L. Beeston, "Parallelism in Arabic Prose," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5:1 (1974): 134–45; 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. A.F.L. Beeston et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 180–85.

24 Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, 2:62–65; additional sources are listed in Qutbuddin, "Appendix of Orations," §166.5, in *Arabic Oration*, 550–51.

ومن نَقَب بيتًا نَقَبْنا عن قلبه
ومن نَبَش قبرًا دَفَنّاه حيًّا فيه

In a second example, the pre-Islamic Christian bishop of Najrān Quss ibn Sāʿidah al-Iyādī (d. ca. 600 AD)—famously orating from the back of his red camel at the ʿUkāẓ Market outside Mecca, with the Prophet Muḥammad himself reported to be a witness and narrator—began after the opening address with three parallel lines:[25]

> People! Gather around! Listen and retain!
> Whoever lives dies.
> Whoever dies is lost.
> Everything that could happen will happen.
> Truly, there are messages in the earth. There are lessons in the sky.
> Firm signs. Rain and plants. Fathers and mothers. One who goes and one who comes. Light and darkness. Piety and sin. A garment and a mount. Food and drink. Stars that rise and set. Seas that do not dry out. A firmament elevated. An earth laid out. A dark night. A sky with zodiacal signs.
> Where do people go and why do they never return? Have they been given satisfaction and chosen to reside? Or have they been confined and compelled to sleep?

أيُّها الناس ٱجتمعوا وٱسمعوا وعُوا
مَنْ عاشَ مات
ومَنْ ماتَ فات
وكُلُّ ما هو آتٍ آت
إنّ في السَّماءِ لَخَبَرًا، وإنّ في الأَرْضِ لَعِبَرًا
آياتٌ مُحْكَمات، مَطَرٌ ونَبات، وآباءٌ وأُمَّهات، وذاهِبٌ وآت، ضَوْءٌ وظَلام، وبِرٌّ وآثام، ولِباسٌ ومَرْكَب، ومَطْعَمٌ ومَشْرَب، ونُجُومٌ تَمُور، وبُحُورٌ لا تَغُور، وسَقْفٌ مَرْفُوع، ومِهادٌ مَوْضُوع، ولَيْلٌ داج، وسَماءٌ ذاتُ أَبْراج
ما لي أَرى الناس يموتون ولا يرجعون، أَرَضُوا فَأَقاموا أم حُبِسُوا فَناموا

25 Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, 1:308–9; additional sources are listed in Qutbuddin, "Appendix of Orations," §105.1, in *Arabic Oration*, 534–35.

The opening rhythmic lines of Quss's oration—"Whoever lives dies," etc.—with their parallelism, and also their prose-rhyme (*saj*ʿ), drive home the inevitability of death. The body paragraph then directs the audience to observe the natural world and take lessons from it. "Truly, there are messages in the earth. There are lessons in the sky." And so on. Flashing by his audience a long rhyming series of word-slides signifying the all-encompassing and all-powerful character of the forces of nature, Quss reminds them of the inevitability of death and the logical necessity of a Creator. The final lines pose rhetorical questions that leave the audience to ponder for themselves: "Where do people go, and why do they never return?" All these features—the parallelism, the rhyme, the nature imagery, and the rhetorical questions—are mnemonic, and they are also stylistic instruments of persuasion.

Continuing the pre-Islamic theme of mortality, Islamic sermons of pious counsel build on it to exhort the audience to perform good deeds and prepare for the eternal life to come. An example is a sermon by ʿAlī in which he urges preparation for the hereafter, a perfect example of pounding parallelism-based rhythm. I have translated the sermon rather literally here, and formatted it in pairs, to highlight its parallel structure. The first two pairs of parallel lines, for example, compare this world with the hereafter.[26]

> Then truly! The world has indeed turned back and proclaimed its departure.
> And truly! The hereafter has indeed come forward and announced its arrival.
> Hark, truly! Today is the day of training,
> and tomorrow is the race.
> The goal is paradise
> and the end is hellfire!
> Is there no one who would repent from his sin before his death?
> Is there no one who would perform good deeds for his soul before his day of hardship?
> Hark! These are your days of hope
> right behind them is death.
> Whosoever performs deeds during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death—his deed[s] will benefit him, and his death will not harm him.

26 Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §1.28; additional sources are listed in "Appendix of Orations," in *ibid*.

Whosoever falls short during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death—his deeds he will lose, and his death will harm him.
Hark! Perform good deeds from fondness,
as you perform them from fear.
Hark, truly! I have not seen the like of paradise, one who desires it sleeping,
nor the like of hellfire, one who flees it sleeping.
Hark, truly! Whomsoever right does not benefit, wrong will harm.
Whomsoever guidance does not put on the straight [path], error will drag to destruction.
Hark! You are commanded to depart
and directed toward provisions.
And truly! The most fearful thing I fear for you is following of desires
and length of yearning.
Take provisions in the world, from the world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow.

فإنّ الدّنيا قد أَدْبَرَتْ وآذَنَتْ بِوَداع
وإنّ الآخرة قد أَقْبَلَتْ وأَشْرَفَتْ بِٱطِّلاع
أَلا وإنّ اليَوْمَ المِضْمار
وغدًا السِّباق
والسَّبَقَةُ الجنّة
والغايةُ النّار
أَفَلا تائبٌ من خطيئته قبل مَنيّته
أَلَا عامِلٌ لنفسه قبلَ يوم بؤسه
أَلا وإنّكم في أيّامِ أَمَل
مِن ورائه أَجَل
فَمَن عَمِلَ في أيّامِ أَمَلِه، قَبْلَ حُضور أجلِه، فقد نَفَعه عَمَلُه، ولَمْ يَضُرُّهُ أَجَلُه
ومَنْ قَصّر في أيّامِ أَمَلِه، قبل حُضور أجله، فَقَدْ خَسِرَ عَمَلُه، وضَرّه أَجَلُه
ألا فَٱعْمَلوا في الرّغبة
كما تعملون في الرّهبة
ألا وإنّي لم أرَ كالجنّة نامَ طالِبُها
ولا كالنّار نامَ هارِبُها

ألا وإنّه مَن لا يَنْفَعْهُ الحقُّ يَضُرُّهُ الباطل
ومن لا يستقِم به الهدى يَجُرُّ به الضّلالُ إلى الرّدى
ألا وإنّكم قد أُمِرتم بالظَّعْن
ودُلِلْتم عَلى الزّاد
وإنّ أَخْوَف ما أَخافُ عَلَيْكم اتّباعُ الهوى
وطولُ الأمل
تَزَوّدوا في الدّنيا مِن الدّنيا ما تَحوزون به أنفُسَكم غدًا

Notice that a full twenty-two of the sermon's twenty-three lines are parallel. I have analyzed this sermon in an article titled "A Sermon on Piety by Imam Ali: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded" (using Richard Lanham's term, "tacit persuasion"),[27] where I have argued that oration's artistry played a vital role in achieving the orator's goal of persuasion; that together with rational argumentation, the orator achieved much of his stirring of hearts and prodding of minds through literary techniques. The antithetical parallelism in ʿAlī's sermon underscores the stark dichotomy between two opposing entities. It sets up this world against the hereafter, and it highlights the choice of good versus evil, hope versus fear, paradise versus hellfire. In the final line, the sermon breaks from the parallelism and crescendos in a longer, non-parallel finale that encapsulates and drives home the sermon's overall message: "Take provisions in the world, from the world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow."

In sum for this section of the article then, the powerful aesthetics of early oration support the case that oration is literature.

3 Views of Medieval Arabic Theorists about Oration as Eloquent Speech

Next, let us explore how notable medieval literary theorists viewed oration. In a nutshell, they spoke of *khaṭābah*, oration, alongside *balāghah*, which is usually translated as rhetoric, or as eloquence, or more recently as poetics.[28] They

27 Tahera Qutbuddin, "A Sermon on Piety by Imam Ali"; Richard Lanham, *Analyzing Prose* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1983).

28 Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

either placed the two terms as directly equivalent or spoke of *khaṭābah* within the purview of *balāghah*. Here are examples of some influential theorists' views, in chronological order:

Abū ʿAmr Kulthūm ibn ʿAmr al-ʿAttābī (d. ca. 220/835), a poet and prose-writer in the court of the Abbasid caliphs Rashīd and Maʾmūn, implicitly but clearly equated eloquence with oratory. He was asked "What is eloquence (*balāghah*)?" He replied—using the word "orator" in response to a question on "eloquence"—"If you wish to have a tongue that dazzles all and is envied by every orator (*khaṭīb*), then do such and such." His pronouncement was picked up and cited by litterateurs more famous than him, including Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (more on them momentarily), who also equated the two terms.[29]

Jāḥiẓ—the preeminent Baghdadi belletrist Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr ibn Baḥr (d. 255/868)—focused front and center on oratory as the face of eloquence, and a large number of his selections are *khuṭbah* texts. His *Bayān wa-l-tabyīn* (Eloquence and elucidation) is perhaps the most important and sustained early treatment of oration as a literary genre. Also, he frequently used the terms *balāghah* and *khaṭābah* interchangeably (*balāghah* as I mentioned, is rhetoric or eloquence, and *khaṭābah* denotes the art of oratory)—apparently assuming them to be identical, Jāḥiẓ switched back and forth between them without clear distinction.[30]

Indeed, many of the earliest critics of the 9th and 10th centuries AD equated *balāghah* with *khaṭābah*. I have cited further details and examples in my *Arabic Oration* book which I will not go into here,[31] but to complicate the issue just a little bit, let me mention that the 10th-century AD bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (d. ca. 388/998), in contrast, differentiated between *khaṭābah* and *balāghah* along the fault-line of oral versus written eloquence; listing orators under "*al-Khuṭabā'*" (orators) and scribes under "*al-Bulaghā'*" (the eloquent).[32] Then there is also parallel usage in the field of philosophy, in which philosophers characterized *khaṭābah* through the lens of Greek rhetoric; they focused on logic, on the syllogism, and the goal of persuasion, alongside concerns about style and delivery. The "Second Teacher" (i.e., after Aristotle) and Baghdadi

29 Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, 1:113; Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt al-nisā' wa-ṭarā'if kalāmihinn wa-mulaḥ nawādirihinn wa-akhbār dhawāt al-ra'y minhunn wa-ashʿārihinn fī l-jāhiliyyah wa-ṣadr al-Islām*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Hindāwī (Cairo: Dār al-Faḍīlah, 1998), 66. Ṭayfūr (ibid., 64) also quotes an Indian treatise equating *balāghah* with *khaṭābah*: "The first part of *balāghah* is gathering the instruments of *balāghah*, namely, that the orator (*khaṭīb*) should be composed, still, and so on."

30 Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, 1:92, and passim.

31 Qutbuddin, "Influence on Literary Criticism," in *Arabic Oration*, 429–31.

32 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Yūsuf ʿAlī Ṭawīl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1966), 181.

philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) wrote a commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* titled with the very term *al-Khaṭābah* in which he defined *khaṭābah* as "a syllogistic skill (*ṣināʿah qiyāsiyyah*), the goal of which was persuasion (*iqnāʿ*)"; he went on to say—highlighting an aspect of Greek rhetoric that overlapped with Arabic oratory—that *khaṭābah* used modes of persuasion that were "not specialized but shared by all."[33] The Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) reiterated these ideas in his gloss, *Talkhīṣ al-Khaṭābah*.[34]

Coming back to our list of litterateurs who engaged closely with oration, another early Baghdadi scholar of literature, the aforementioned Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893), wrote *Balāghāt al-nisāʾ* (Eloquent verbal productions by women)—again, note the use of the term *balāghah* in the book's title—in which he recorded, alongside poetry and proverbial repartee, orations (sing. *khuṭbah*) by the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah, his widow ʿĀʾishah, and his granddaughter Zaynab.[35]

Similarly, the literary anthology *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* (The Unique necklace) of the Andalusian litterateur, Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940), included a large section on oration, and a theoretical introduction to the genre.[36]

The Baghdadi philologist and rhetorician Qudāmah ibn Jaʿfar (d. 337/948), well known for an important critical work on poetry titled *Naqd al-shiʿr* (Assaying of poetry), wrote another important book titled *Jawāhir al-alfāẓ* (Essences of words) for orators and scribes, in which he listed sets of parallel, rhymed, and homonymous (*jināS tāmm*) words.[37] Wolfhart Heinrichs analyzed this work intricately in a seminal article titled "Early Ornate Prose and the Rhetorization of Poetry in Arabic Literature," to argue that the notion of *balāghah* originated in the earliest theorists' discussions of scribal writing, and, pertinent to our discussion, oration—which he called "the earliest avatar of Arabic artful prose."[38] Based on Qudāmah's *Jawāhir*, Heinrichs argued that *balāghah* originally referred to the ornate prose of early orators and scribes,

33 Al-Fārābī, *al-Khaṭābah*, ed. Muḥammad Salīm Sālim as *Kitāb fī l-manṭiq: Al-Khaṭābah* (Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1976), 1, 25.

34 Ibn Rushd, *Talkhīṣ al-Khaṭābah*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Badawī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣriyyah, 1960).

35 Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt al-nisāʾ*, 54–66, 35–39, 70–73.

36 Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, "Kitāb al-wāsiṭah fī al-khuṭab," in *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1984), 4:145–236.

37 Qudāmah ibn Jaʿfar, *Naqd al-shiʿr*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Munʿim Khafājī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, n.d.); Qudāmah ibn Jaʿfar, *Jawāhir al-alfāẓ*, ed. M.M. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1985).

38 Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Early Ornate Prose and the Rhetorization of Poetry in Arabic Literature," in *Literary and Philosophical Rhetoric in the Greek, Roman, Syrian, and Arabic Worlds*, ed. Frédérique Woerther (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 2009), 215–34.

and it was embodied in figures of speech later subsumed under the term *badīʿ* (lit. something novel; in this context, rhetoric); gradually, these figures of speech invaded poetry and produced its "rhetorization." Noting the segue from oratory to scribal writing to poetics, Heinrichs argued that the concept of *badīʿ* originated in the scribes' critical handling of the twin genres of oration and epistle. It is clear from Heinrichs' study—and this point connects also with the present article's next section on "Influence"—that the early oration impacted the field of rhetoric and poetics.

The eminent Egyptian philologist Abū Jaʿfar al-Naḥḥās (d. 338/950) devoted a sizable section in his chancery manual *Ṣināʿat al-kuttāb* (Craft of the scribes) to oration. Describing the study and memorization of oration texts as an integral component in a scribe's training, he said, "They are among the most valuable resources of the scribe."[39] Naḥḥās provided model texts by master orators, in this order: the Prophet Muḥammad and his family, including ʿAlī, ʿAlī's son Ḥasan (d. 50/670), and his great-grandson Zayd (d. 122/740); then the first two Sunni caliphs, Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) and ʿUmar (d. 23/644); then the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 101/720) and the Umayyad governor Ḥajjāj; and finally the Abbasid caliph Maʾmūn (d. 218/833). Naḥḥās characterized Zayd ibn ʿAlī's sermon as being "among the most beautiful of orations," and added that it was "one that scribes and litterateurs avidly memorized."[40] In another section titled "Eloquence (*balaghah*)," Naḥḥās allocated four full chapters to orations and maxims by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib.[41]

The scribe and critic Isḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kātib (fl. 4th/10th c.) in *al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān* (Proof regarding aspects of eloquence) characterized *balāghah* as the use of rhymed prose, which he deemed a crucial component of *khaṭābah* (and also of epistle-writing).[42]

The lexicographer Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1415) combined Arabic literary art with Greek philosophy, and defined *khaṭābah* as "a literary prose art, whose purpose was the persuasion of the audience, or [its] counsel," and adding that "in the science of logic, it was a syllogism consisting of premises that were axiomatic

39 (وهي من أوكد ما يحتاج الكاتب إليه): Naḥḥās, *Ṣināʿat al-kuttāb*, ed. Badr Aḥmad Ḍayf (Beirut: Dār al-ʿUlūm al-ʿArabiyyah, 1990), 253.

40 (ومن حسن ما في هذه الخطب ممّا يرى الكتّاب والمتأدّبون حفظها خطبة زيد بن عليّ): Naḥḥās, *Ṣināʿat al-kuttāb*, 257; Naḥḥās also records the oration text and its chain of transmission (ibid., 257–259).

41 Naḥḥās, *Ṣināʿat al-kuttāb*, 219–22, 225–27.

42 Isḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kātib, *al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān*, ed. Aḥmad Maṭlūb and Khadījah al-Ḥadīthī (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿĀnī, 1967), 191.

or assumed [= Aristotle's enthymeme]."[43] The famous earlier lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311) wrote a similar, slightly longer definition of the philosophical *khaṭābah*, and included examples of syllogisms.[44] The 19th-century Lebanese Jesuit priest and scholar Louis Cheikho discussed *khaṭābah* extensively, based largely on philosophical Arabic sources.[45]

Finally, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418)—the Egyptian Mamluk chancery official and author of the famous 14-volume encyclopedia of chancery sciences titled *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā: Fī ṣināʿat al-inshā* (Morning for the night-blind: the craft of chancery writing)—exhorted scribes to memorize orations. In this work, he declared orations to be "repositories of the secrets of eloquence and stores of wisdom," and added that it was "on the loom of oratory that epistolary writings are woven, and on the path trodden by orators that scribes walk."[46] Qalqashandī recorded orations of seventeen early orators that scribes must study,[47] and explained why memorizing eloquent orations was vital to a scribe's rhetorical success:[48]

> If the scribe diligently memorizes a large number of eloquent orations, learning from them themes of oratory, sources of pure language, and grounds of eloquence; if he gains close acquaintance with brilliant, famous orators; then his domain in the art of the word will expand, rough regions of prose will become smooth, unruly motif-camels will become docile, and all these things that have lodged between his ribs will flow

43 Al-Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 1986), s.v. "KhṬB."

44 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, ed. ʿAbdallāh ʿAlī al-Kabīr, Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥasaballāh, and Hāshim Muḥammad al-Shādhilī (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1985), s.v. "KhṬB."

45 Louis Cheikho (= Luwīs Shaykhū), *ʿIlm al-adab*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Maṭbaʿat al-Ābāʾ al-Mursalīn al-Yasūʿiyyīn, 1887), vols. 3–4.

46 (وذلك أنّ الخطب من مستودعات سرّ البلاغة ومجامع الحكم ... وعلى منوال الخطابة نسجت الكتابة وعلى طريق الخطباء مشت الكتّاب): Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā fī ṣināʿat al-inshā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Zakkār, 14 vols. (Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah, 1981), 1:210.

47 Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, 1:211–25.

48 (فإذا أكثر صاحب هذه الصناعة من حفظ الخطب البليغة وعلم مقاصد الخطابة وموارد الفصاحة ومواقع البلاغة وعرف مصاقع الخطباء ومشاهيرهم ٱتّسع له الحال في الكلام وسهلت عليه مستوعرات النثر وذلّلت له صعاب المعاني وفاض على لسانه في وقت الحاجة ما كمن في ذلك بين ضلوعه فأردعه في نثره وضمنه في رسائله فٱستغنى عن شغل الفكر في ٱستنباط المعاني البديعة ومشقّة التعب في تتبّع الألفاظ الفصيحة الّتي لا تنهض فكرته بمثلها وهو جهد ولا يسمح خاطره بنظيرها ولو دأب): Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, 1:225–26.

> smoothly upon his tongue. He can now instinctively position them within his prose and include them within his epistles. He does not need to brood over the extraction of novel themes, nor does he have to weary himself by assiduously searching for pure Arabic expressions. His own thoughts would not have been able to come up with their like, even if he had tried his utmost. His imagination would not have arrived at their like, even if he had done his best.

In sum for this section of the article then, medieval Arabic critics' view of oration as eloquent speech supports the case that oration is literature.

4 Influence of the Early Oration (*khuṭbah*) on the Chancery Epistle (*risālah*), and on the Trajectory of Arabic Prose

The works of these authors also speak to the third and final section of the present article, namely, the influence of early oration (*khuṭbah*) on the development of Arabic prose, and particularly the epistle (*risālah*).[49] The oration's influence on the epistle is clearly visible in three overlapping aspects: (1) the oration being the scribe's exemplar and an essential component of his curriculum, (2) transference of the oration's functions onto the epistle, and (3) the oration's influence on the style, structure, and themes of the epistle.

A major piece of evidence for the oration being the scribe's exemplar is the insistence of chancery manual authors, like Naḥḥās and Qalqashandī, whom I just mentioned, and many others, that memorizing early oration texts was an essential curricular component for the scribes who composed these epistles. Indeed, the Umayyad chancery scribe ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750)—often lauded as the father of Arabic prose—attributed his own training in eloquence to memorizing orations by ʿAlī.[50]

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49 For detail, see Qutbuddin, "The Oration's Influence on Arabic Prose Viewed in a Hybrid Oral-Written Continuum," in *Arabic Oration*, 406–31.

50 Al-Jahshiyārī (d. 331/942), *Kitāb al-Wuzarāʾ wa-l-kuttāb*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī, and ʿAbd al-Ḥafīẓ Shalabī (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1980), 82: (ما الّذي مكّنك من البلاغة وخرّجك فيها قال حفظ كلام الأصلع); Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd (d. 655/1257), *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyyah, 1965), 1:24: (حفظت سبعين خطبة من خطب الأصلع ففاضت ثمّ فاضت); further sources listed in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, 152, n. 245.

The next two aspects of function transference and influence on style, structure, and themes, played out in tandem. Oratory had served dynamic political, ethical, religious, and military functions in the oral period. With the rise of a more centralized system of government in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period, coupled with a rapid increase in the volume of writing after the introduction of paper to the Islamic heartlands in the mid-2nd/8th century, oration's functions were progressively taken over by the chancery epistle, while oration was gradually circumscribed within the sphere of Friday and Eid services. This transformation dramatically altered the literary landscape. But even as the epistle took over many of oration's functions, norms set by early masters of oratory shaped the style of the emerging epistolary genre, and aspiring scribes studied, memorized, and used early oration texts as models. Chancery writing adopted conventions and practices of early oration.

A fundamental question in the field of classical Arabic literature is the nature of the link between the oral and the written. I submit that the prime locus of this link centers in the complex relationship between the oration and the chancery epistle. Although the epistle was produced as a written text, it was commonly meant for aural consumption, to be read out to large, public audiences. Conversely, chancery scribes themselves frequently produced Friday and Eid sermon texts to be delivered orally by state-appointed preachers. In short, there was abundant give and take between the oral and the written. Just as oration influenced epistolary writing, epistolary writing also influenced oration. This two-way engagement resulted in a hybrid style, where early epistles—which straddled the oral-written divide—employed oration's parallelism-based oral mode.

Oration's style, and also its structure and themes, penetrated the emerging genre of the literary epistle, infusing it with a rhythmic and graphic aesthetic derived from oral mnemonics. Incidentally, ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. ca. 474/1081), the prominent theorist mentioned earlier, stated that the written epistle's opening blessings formula should consciously include parallelism and rhyme; the epistle's opening formula is interestingly also called *khuṭbah*, presumably for this very reason.[51] Gaining currency in the late Umayyad period, the epistle was the first written prose form in Arabic, and it continued the parallelism and some themes of early oration, but it had longer sentences, more complex syntax, and eventually, full consonant rhyme.

In a more limited way, and mostly indirectly through the epistle, oration also influenced the development of the *Maqāmāt* genre, the picaresque

51 Jurjānī, *Asrār al-balāghah*, 9.

rhymed sequence of stories with an eloquent rogue as their hero that emerged from the pen of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhāni (d. 398/1008).[52] The evolution of *Maqāmāt* has been a matter of interest for scholars of Arabic literature, who believe that its primary antecedents in content and form are the anecdotal, anthology-oriented *adab* works of earlier Abbasid authors such as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 139/756), Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868), mentioned before as a theorist, and Tanūkhī (d. 384/994).[53] But in style, the *Maqāmāt* draw mainly on the epistle, which in its turn was influenced by oration. Badīʿ al-Zamān himself authored a number of ornate epistles, and his *Maqāmāt* echo that genre in their parallelism and rhyme.[54]

In addition to indirect influence through the epistle, four direct links from oration to *maqāmah* may also be suggested, in terms of style, etymology, parody, and performance:

– Style: By Badīʿ al-Zamān's time, some orations—like those by the famous Syrian preacher from Aleppo, Ibn Nubātah al-Khaṭīb (d. 374/985)[55]—were fully rhymed; alongside rhymed epistles of the time, they could have exerted influence on the *Maqāmāt's* mannerist aesthetic.
– Etymology: One proposed etymology of the term *Maqāmāt* is from the verb *qāma* (he stood), and it refers to the verbal artist's "standing."[56] It contrasts

52 Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt Abī al-Faḍl Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1889), trans. W.J. Prendergast as *The Maqāmāt of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamādhāni* (London: Curzon Press, 1973).

53 Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*, ed. and trans. Michael Fishbein and James Montgomery as *Kalīlah and Dimnah* (New York: New York University Press, 2022); al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bukhalāʾ*, ed. Muḥammad Ṭāhā Ḥājirī (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1963), trans. R.B. Serjeant as *The Book of Misers* (Reading, UK: Garnet, 1997); al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj baʿd al-shiddah*, ed. ʿA. al-Shālijī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1978), vol. 1, ed. and trans. Julia Bray as *Stories of Piety and Prayer: Deliverance Follows Adversity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

54 Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *Rasāʾil Abī al-Faḍl Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī* (Constantinople: Maṭbaʿat al-Jawāʾib, 1881). For Mamluk epistolary art and the *maqāmah* tradition, see Muhsin J. al-Musawi, "Vindicating a Profession or a Personal Career? Al-Qalqashandī's Maqāmah in Context," *Mamluk Studies Review*, 7 (2003), 111–35.

55 Ibn Nubātah, *Dīwān khuṭab Ibn Nubātah*, ed. Yāsir Muḥammad Khayr Miqdād (Kuwait: al-Waʿy al-Islāmī, 2012).

56 A.F.L. Beeston, "Al-Hamadhānī, al-Ḥarīrī and the *Maqāmāt* Genre," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: ʿAbbasid Belles-Lettres*, ed. J. Ashtiany et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 126–27. Régis Blachère and Pierre Masnou, in *Choix de Maqāmāt* (Paris: Libr. C. Klincksieck, 1957), 132, list five authors with compositions styled as *maqāmāt*, which are simply orations clothed in consonant rhyme, *sajʿ*; it seems there was enough overlap between orations and *maqāmāt* (in addition to the overlap between epistles and *maqāmāt*, and between epistles and orations) to cause further confusion in terminology.

with another medieval verbal art form, the *Majālis* (Assemblies, lit. Sittings), from the verb *jalasa* (he sat), which refers to a mostly unrhymed discourse presented in a teaching assembly in which a scholar speaks while sitting. The etymology may also be connected with the earlier *maqāmāt* (sing. *maqām*) genre of Umayyad times, in which ascetic preachers like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 131/748), and Khālid ibn Ṣafwān (d. 135/752) stood and addressed a ruler in formal admonishment, reminding him of the transience of human life and the need to be pious.[57]

– Parody: Elements in the *Maqāmāt* parody the oration. Douglas Young points out that Badīʿ al-Zamān's Asylum and Exhortation *maqāmahs*, Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122)'s Basra *maqāmah*, and Saraqusṭī (d. 538/1143)'s unnamed twenty-first *maqāmah* subvert the sermon's moralizing discourse through irony, transforming it into a parodic counter-genre.[58] Young also points out that the Andalusian Saraqusṭī includes twelve fictionalized sermons within his *Maqāmāt*.[59]
– Performance: *Maqāmāt* are a performative genre that continue the performance-oriented tradition of the oration.[60] In an article on performativity in Saraqusṭi's *Maqāmāt*, David Wacks explains the similarity thus:[61]

> The importance placed on oratory in Arabic culture lends its literature a performative aspect. … The *maqāma* displays traits of such rhetorical performance. The *maqāma*'s name itself (literally: Standings) suggests

57 See *maqām* texts in Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān* 3:125–92; Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī (d. 276/889), *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, ed. Yūsuf ʿAlī Ṭawīl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 2:359–71; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 3:103–10; and discussion in Nuṣṣ, *al-Khaṭābah al-ʿarabiyyah*, 203–21.

58 Douglas Young, *Rogues and Genres: Generic Transformation in the Spanish Picaresque and Arabic Maqāma* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2004), 47; Badīʿ al-Zamān, *Maqāmāt*, §24 (Māristāniyyah) and §26 (Waʿẓiyyah); Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt Abī Zayd al-Sarūjī*, ed. Michael Cooperson (New York: New York University Press, 2020), trans. Michael Cooperson as *Impostures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), §50 (Baṣriyyah); Ibn al-Ashtarkūnī (or al-Ashtarkūwī) al-Saraqusṭī, *al-Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyyah*, ed. Ḥasan al-Warāgilī (Rabat: ʿAkkāẓ, 1995), trans. James T. Monroe as *Al-Maqāmāt al-Luzūmiyyah* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), §21.

59 Douglas Young, "Preachers and Poets: The Popular Sermon in the Andalusī *Maqāma*," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 34:1/2 (2003), 190–205, see 199, 202, and passim.

60 On the performance of the early oration, see Qutbuddin, "Orators and Audience of the Oration: Dynamics of Public Space, Authority, and Negotiation," in *Arabic Oration*, 165–228.

61 David Wacks, "The Performativity of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *al-Maqāmāt al-Luzūmiyya* of al-Saraqusṭī," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 34:1/2 (2003), 183–84, expanding on the ideas of Karl Brockelmann and Charles Pellat.

> a public act of oratory. Since *maqāma*, like *majlis*, can be defined as an assembly of important people, and since such a meeting is a common forum for eloquent oratory, it is a natural metonymy for the word *maqāma* to denote the act of oratory itself.

In important studies of the *Maqāmāt*, Devin Stewart and Régis Blachère concur that the genre—which flourished through the late medieval and early modern periods—exerted influence on diverse modern Arabic literary forms including drama, the novel, the short story, and even the newspaper article.[62] Through epistle and *Maqāmāt*, then, one can find traces of the oration in many different forms of Arabic literature.

In sum for this section of the article, oration's influence on the development of the *risālah*, as well as on the *maqāmah* and later prose genres, supports the case that oration is literature.

5 Concluding Remarks

In light of this compelling evidence, I believe we can state with confidence that Arabic oration is most certainly literature. Its powerful oral aesthetics, its prominence in works of medieval literary criticism, and its clear influence on the epistle and on other genres of Arabic prose, establish it firmly as a literary genre, indeed, as the foundational genre of classical Arabic prose. It is my contention that the history of Arabic literature cannot be written without oration.

For many centuries of world history, public speaking has remained the paradigm of all discourse. For the ancient Greeks, the idea of eloquence had been connected with speechmaking: *Rhētorikē*, or rhetoric (i.e., language of literary value), meant public speaking. A similarly archetypal role can be posited for oration vis-à-vis Arabic belles-lettres. Through the epistle, and in a smaller way through the *Maqāmāt*, oration would have a continuing impact on evolving written genres. As Middle Eastern society moved from a predominantly oral to a highly literate milieu in the late 8th century AD, oration's once-powerful reach waned swiftly. But it left behind a powerful legacy in the enduring saga of Arabic prose.

62 Devin Stewart, "The Maqāma," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D.S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145; Régis Blachère, "Maḳāma," *EI2*.