

The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl's Mamluk Cairo. By LI GUO. Islamic History and Civilization, vol. 93. Leiden: BRILL, 2012. Pp. xiii + 240. \$136.

Li Guo tells the story of an important and poorly understood man of contradictions, “an outcast who was at the same-time well-connected; a ‘lowbrow’ entertainer who was immensely well-grounded in high culture” (p. viii). Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 710/1310) was especially known for his work on shadow plays, which he revolutionized with new and often shocking material, thus becoming the best-known author of the genre. Like so many of the great Arabic literary figures, authors like Abū Nuwās (d. c. 199/814), al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1058) and even Imru’ al-Qays (d. c. 550), as well as literary protagonists like Abū al-Fatḥ and Abū Zayd of the *Maqāmāt* and Abū al-Qāsim of *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*, Ibn Dāniyāl is both of central importance and shockingly outside the norm. In telling his story, Guo eschews the “conventional approach of the biography-bibliography-analysis paradigm,” in order to treat “the subject’s life and work...holistically” (p. ix). That is to say, he examines the life of this at once marginal and central figure partly through the lens of his artistic production, or even as if Ibn Dāniyāl were a character in his own shadow-plays. His provocative study is divided into three parts. The first part, “Life as a Play,” playfully arranged into three “acts,” seeks to show how Ibn Dāniyāl’s life affected his art, while using that art as a source of information about his life. Part two: “Legacy and Controversy,” provides some of the literary context of his work, engaging both in close readings of his poetry and in speculations regarding the reception of his literary output. Part three consists of a translation of Ibn Dāniyāl’s shadow play, *The Phantom*.

Though the bleeding of poetry and play into biography in Part One tends to jar (and the author seems entirely aware of this friction), it provides an entertaining introduction to Ibn Dāniyāl’s life and work. Each of the three acts is set within a certain time and place in Cairo (e.g. “Cairo, near the north city gate of Bāb al-Futūḥ,/ Time: ca. 1267-80), with Ibn Dāniyāl, or rather his poetic/literary persona, acting as protagonist. By structuring this biography as a play, and casting the author as the lead player, Guo hints at the complexity surrounding these questions of fact and fiction in works that blend poetic license into biography and literary tropes into historical occasion (see also Michael Cooperson’s “Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative” in *Muqarnas* 13 (1996): 99-113 and Ulrich Marzolph’s “‘Focusees’ of Jocular Fiction,” in *Storytelling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998)).

Act one, “Eye Doctor and Street Buffoon,” tells of Ibn Dāniyāl’s early life and literary career as “a comrade of hooligans and thugs;/ a physician, who can be funny *and* serious,” (from Guo’s translation of an apparently autobiographical poem (p. 5)). The tension between humor and seriousness, doctor and quack, can be felt in the portrayal of this struggling young physician living among the outcasts and tricksters of Cairo. Act two, “Court Panegyrist and Jester,” continues the story of the poet’s coming of age by tracing developments in his literary output. Making his living as a praise poet for royalty, the eulogist grows into a satirist as “a noticeable tone of sarcasm [creeps] into his hitherto largely solemn and somber celebratory panegyric”

(p.46). Again we see Ibn Dāniyāl as a living contradiction, who, as he grows famous for his obscene verse, is made the court-appointed officer of literary censorship. Guo muses on the significance of this seeming contradiction and on the possibly limited audience of some of the poet's obscene verses.

This theme is taken up again in part two, in "The Many Faces of the Performer," unfortunately the shortest section of all, as it raises exciting questions about reception of the bawdy in Ibn Dāniyāl's contemporary Egypt and beyond. Part two, "Legacy and Controversy," shorter and less complete than part one, contains three sections, also including "The Making of the Arabic Shadow Play" and "The Ornament of the Poetry" (on rhetorical figures and wordplay). "The Making of the Arabic Shadow Play" takes a closer look at the language of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays and poetry, showing that when his poems were transplanted from more formal contexts into shadow plays, more colloquial or everyday words replaced "highly literary" terms (p. 113). Here Guo provides translations of vernacular poetry that are funnier and more lively than his translations of more formal poetry found elsewhere in his arguments. This section ends with a discussion of comically insulting names in the shadow plays, and with the important observation that the playful and idiosyncratic nature of some of these names made them just as confusing to the medieval scribes of the varying manuscripts as they are to modern readers today.

In introducing his translation of *The Phantom*, Guo promises nothing definitive, as indeed the text of Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow play is filled with problematic readings and difficult language. He wisely, therefore, forgoes perfection and plunges boldly forth, producing a translation that is amusing and flavorful. As with all translations, fault could be found with his decisions in rendering numerous words and phrases. But I will note only that the translations of poetry are distinguished from that of prose by font size alone, without any meter, rhyme, or otherwise exceptional use of language to set them apart.

Guo's translation of a shadow play and the preceding analysis are bound to contain some flaws and lacunae because the subject of his study will require many more volumes to treat it completely. This volume is an important addition to a recently growing body of work on those central Arabic literary figures who only appear marginal due to their obscenity or shocking subject matters. For example, Sinan Antoon's dissertation *Poetics of the Obscene: Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Sukhf* (Harvard: 2006) centers on a poet who, like Ibn Dāniyāl, was widely celebrated for his obscene verse but also in charge of policing public morality. Another recent dissertation (mine), *The Hikāya of Abū al-Qāsim al-Baghādāī* (UCLA, 2012), centers on a highly obscene and unusual text thought by some to have directly influenced Ibn Dāniyāl's work. A forthcoming volume on the genre of *mujūn*, *The Bad and the Ugly* (E.J.W. Gibb), is a festschrift for the University of Oxford's Geert Jan van Gelder, a pre-eminent scholar of marginal Arabic literature, whose work, it must be said, seems conspicuously absent from Guo's bibliography. Guo's contribution on an author whose subject matter and preferred genre are marginal and who hails from a century itself often marginalized in modern scholarship, takes an important step towards expanding our understanding and expectations of Arabic literature.

Emily Selove

University of Manchester