

AN  
INTRODUCTION TO  
ARABIC  
LITERATURE

ROGER ALLEN



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Roger Allen provides a comprehensive introductory survey of literary texts in Arabic, from their unknown beginnings in the fifth century AD to the present day. The volume focuses on the major genres of Arabic literature, dealing with Islam's sacred text, the Qur'ān, and a wealth of poetry, narrative prose, drama and criticism. Allen reveals the continuities that link the creative output of the present day to the illustrious literary heritage of the past and incorporates an enormously rich body of popular literature typified most famously by *The Arabian Nights*. The volume is informed by Western critical approaches, but within each chapter the emphasis is on the texts themselves, with extensive quotations in English translation. Reference features include a chronology and a guide to further reading. A revised and abridged version of Allen's acclaimed study, *The Arabic Literary Heritage*, this book provides an invaluable student introduction to a major non-Western literary tradition.

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published in printed format 2000

ISBN 0-511-03451-2 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN 0-521-77230-3 hardback

ISBN 0-521-77657-0 paperback

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## *Preface*

As a scholar in Arabic literature and the teacher of a university-level course on Arabic literary history, I have for some time been experimenting with different ways of presenting the subject to university students with a broad range of humanistic interests and also to a more general reading public. I have often asked my own students to comment on the merits of previous attempts at writing a history of Arabic literature and to prepare outlines for a new approach to the topic. I am therefore especially pleased to acknowledge here that many of the principles used in preparing this work are as much a reflection of classroom debates and essay responses as of profitable discussions with academic colleagues.

I have written this book without resorting to footnotes, and so I cannot acknowledge in the time-honoured fashion the debt that I owe to numerous colleagues whose critical studies of the Arabic literary tradition are reflected in the pages that follow. I can only express the hope that the guide to further reading listed at the end of the work will convey some idea of the extent to which I am grateful for their insights. I might perhaps take a leaf out of the book of the Middle East's primary jokester, Juḥā, and suggest that those who know what those sources of my inspiration are might tell those who do not.

Several of my colleagues have done me the great service of reading portions of this work in advance of its publication. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their wise counsel and gentle correction, while absolving them of all responsibility for the result: Geert Jan van Gelder, Peter Heath, Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi, Hilary Kilpatrick, Everett Rowson, Yasir Saqr, Michael Sells, and William Smyth.

## *Note on translation, transliteration, and further reading*

A few words need to be said about various aspects of the text and the conventions that it uses. Firstly, translation: except where indicated in the text itself, the translations in the book are my own.

Secondly, on transliteration: the literary works that are the focus of this volume have been composed in Arabic. Thus, in discussing them in English, a system of transliteration is needed whereby the written symbols of Arabic are represented from the repertoire of the English alphabet. Scholars working in Arabic studies have devised a number of different systems for doing this, in part reflecting the conventions of writing and pronunciation within their own language systems. In English scholarly discourse on this field, the system of transliteration that is most widespread is the one devised by the Library of Congress in the United States, also used with minor adjustments by the British Library. The basic outlines of this system are used in this book.

The Library of Congress system uses a written symbol from the English alphabet to replicate an equivalent written symbol in Arabic. It makes no attempt to reproduce exactly the way in which the Arabic words are pronounced. Thus, while the Arabic names and titles transliterated in this book will give some idea of how the written symbols will sound, the equivalence is not (and cannot be) anything approaching complete. Beyond the usual English alphabet set, two other symbols are used: the left-facing single quotation-mark (‘) represents the Arabic glottal stop (called *hamzah*), such as is represented by the hyphen in the word re-enter; and the superscript c (◌<sup>c</sup>) represents a sound for which English has no equivalent, but which linguists term a pharyngeal plosive (the name of the Arabic phoneme is ‘*ayn*). Furthermore, the Arabic language makes use of several written symbols and pronounced sounds that are not found in the English language system. To represent these sounds and symbols in transliteration, the Library of Congress system makes use of a series of supplementary markings (usually called diacritics) in

order to indicate the presence of these intrinsically Semitic phenomena: dots under certain consonants to indicate that they are emphatic and elongation signs (macrons) over vowels to show that their pronunciation time is longer than that of the short vowels.

Lastly, regarding the Guide to Further Reading: bearing in mind the nature and breadth of the subject matter of this work, it is obviously impossible to provide anything approaching a complete bibliography on any topic or even sub-topic; I might note that the reasons lie not only in the bulk of what would result, but the extreme inaccessibility of some of the sources involved. The Guide to Further Reading, which is divided into sections relating to the various chapters, is thus intended to give samples of work on the particular genre and subject involved; it is my hope that readers who find their interests aroused by this book may use such studies and translations as a trigger to yet further investigations.

## *Chronology*

Note: In the case of authors, the dates involved are the approximate year of death

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
500	al-Muhalhil
533	Imru' al-Qays
c. 570 Birth of Muḥammad	al-Shanfarā (?) Ta'abbaṭa sharran (?) al-Muraqqish Ṭarafah
600	ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm al-Ḥarith ibn Ḥillizah ʿAmr ibn Qamī'ah ʿAdī ibn Zayd Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā ʿAntarah
622 <i>Hijrah</i> from Mecca to Medina	Durayd ibn al-Ṣimmah
632 Death of Muḥammad	Al-A'ṣhā
635 Capture of Damascus by Muslims	
636 Battle of Qādisiyyah; defeat of Sāsānī (Persian) army	al-Khansā'
637–44 Conquests of Syria, Iraq, Egypt	
640 Establishment of al-Kūfah and al-Baṣrah as garrison cities in Iraq	Qays ibn Mulawwah (?)
650 Standardisation of Qur'ānic text	
656 Murder of Caliph ʿUthmān	
657 Battle of Ṣiffin	
661 Assassination of Caliph ʿAlī; beginning of Umawī dynasty	Labīd al-Ḥutay'ah

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
670 Establishment of Qayrawān in Tunisia	Ḥassān ibn Thābit
680 Battle of Karbalā'	
685–91 Dome of the Rock built in Jerusalem	
700	Jamīl Laylā al-Akhyaliyyah
705 Building of Great Mosque in Damascus	al-‘Ajjāj
710 Ṭāriq crosses into Spain	al-Akḥṭal
705–15 Capture of Bukhārā and Samarkand	
732 Battle of Tours; Charles Martel defeats Muslims	‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘ah Kuthayyir Jarīr al-Farazdaq al-Ṭirimmaḥ ‘Dhū al-Rummah’ al-‘Arjī
747 Beginning of ‘Abbāsī revolt in Khūrāsān	al-Walīd ibn Yazīd
750 Fall of Umawī caliphate; ‘Abbāsī caliphs come to power	‘Abd al-ḥamīd al-kātib
755–1031 Umawī dynasty in Cordoba	ibn al-Muqaffa‘
762 Foundation of Baghdād	Abū Ḥanīfah Abū ‘Amr ibn al-‘Alā’ Ḥammād al-Rāwiyah ibn Ishāq Bashshār ibn Burd al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī
785 Work begins on Great Mosque in Cordoba	al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad
786–809 Caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd	Malik ibn Anas Khalaf al-aḥmar Sibawayh
800	Rābī‘ah al-‘Adawiyyah
803 Fall of Barmakī family in Baghdād	Abū Nuwās ‘Abbās ibn al-Aḥnaf Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
827 Caliph al-Ma'mūn declares Mu'tazilī doctrine to be orthodox; conquest of Sicily	al-Shāfi'ī Muslim ibn al-Walīd
832 Foundation of Bayt al-Ḥikmah library in Baghdād	Abū al-'Atāhiyah al-Aṣma'ī ibn Hishām Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī al-Kindī
836–89 Foundation of Samarrā' as Abbāsī capital	Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal Abū Tammām ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī al-Khwārizmī Ishāq al-Mawṣilī Ziryāb Dhū al-nūn al-Miṣrī
869–83 Zanj rebellion	al-Jāḥiẓ ibn Qutaybah al-Mubarrad
871 Sack of al-Baṣrah by Zanj forces	al-Bukhārī al-Kindī al-Balādhurī ibn al-Rūmī al-Buḥturī ibn Abī al-Dunyā ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr
900	Tha'lab al-Ya'qūbī
901 Establishment of Zaydī state in Yemen	ibn al-Mu'tazz
908 Ibn al-Mu'tazz is caliph for one day	
909 Fāṭimī caliphate in Tunisia	
922 Execution of mystic, al-Ḥallāj	al-Ṭabarī Qudāmah ibn Ja'far ibn 'Abd Rabbīhi
945 Būyids assume control in Baghdād	al-Ash'arī al-Mutanabbī al-Fārābī al-Mas'ūdī

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
	al-Iṣṭakhrī Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī Muḥammad al-Niffarī al-Qālī Abū Firās Abū al-faraj al-Iṣḫānī
969 Conquest of Cairo by Fāṭimī general, Jawhar	
973 Foundation of al-Azhar mosque-university in Cairo	ibn Hānī' al-Āmidī al-Ṣāhib ibn 'Abbād ibn Ḥawqal
998–1030 Maḥmūd of Ghaznah rules in Eastern Iran	al-Tanūkhī ibn al-Nadīm
1000	al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī Badī' al-zamān al-Hamadhānī al-Bāqillānī al-Sharīf al-Raḍī ibn Darrāj ibn Shuhayd Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī
1031 Collapse of Umawī caliphate in Cordoba	Miskawayh al-Tha'ālibī ibn Khafājah ibn Sīmā
1052 Migration of Banī Hilāl across North Africa	al-Bīrūnī Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī
1055 Saljuq Turks capture Baghdād	
1071 Battle of Manzikert: Saljuqs occupy Anatolia	ibn Ḥazm ibn Rashīq al-Qushayrī 'Abd al-qāhir al-Jurjānī Wallādah

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
1085 Christians in Spain capture Toledo	ibn Zaydūn
1091 Loss of Sicily to Normans	
1092 Niẓām al-mulk murdered by Assassins	
1095 Pope Urban calls for Crusade	
1099 Crusaders capture Jerusalem	
1100	al-Ghazālī ‘Umar al-Khayyām al-A‘mā al-Tuṭṭī ibn Ḥamdīs
1147 Second Crusade	al-Ḥarīrī ‘Abd al-qādir al-Jīlānī al-Idrīsī al-Zamakhsharī
1171 End of Fāṭimī caliphate	ibn Quzmān
1174–93 Reign of Ṣalāḥ al-dīn (Saladin)	Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī ibn Ṭufayl
1187 Crusaders defeated by Ṣalāḥ al-dīn	ibn Rushd Usāmah ibn Munqidh Shihāb al-dīn Yahyā al-Suhrawardī
1200	ibn al-Jawzī al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil ‘Imād al-dīn al-Iṣfahānī Maimonides ibn Jubayr ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk
1219 Mongols under Jingiz Khān invade Islamic lands	‘Aṭṭār
1229 Jerusalem handed over to Christians	Yāqūt Shihāb al-dīn ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
1236 Christians in Spain capture Cordoba	ibn al-Fāriḍ
1248 Christians in Spain capture Seville	ibn al-‘Arabī
1250 Mamlūks come to power in Cairo	
1254 King Alfonso establishes school in Seville	al-Tifāshī
1256–60 Hūlāgū Khān leads Mongol army to Baghdād	
1258 End of ‘Abbāsī caliphate	
1260 Battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt; Mongols defeated by Mamlūks under Baybars	
1261–1520 Mamlūk dynasty rules Egypt	Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī al-Shustarī ibn Mālik ibn Ṣayqal al-Jazarī al-Shābb al-Zarīf al-Bayḍāwī
1291 Expulsion of Crusaders from Palestine	ibn Khallikān al-Būṣīrī
1300	
1303 Mongols defeated by Mamlūks in Egypt	ibn Manzūr ibn Dāniyāl
1324 Mansā Mūsū, King of Mālī; University of Timbuktu	ibn Taymiyyah al-Nuwayrī
1348 Black Death reaches Egypt	Ṣaff al-dīn al-Ḥillī
1349 Muslim missionaries in Nigeria (Kano)	Ṣalāḥ al-dīn al-Ṣafadī ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah
1369 Tīmūr Lang occupies Khūrāsān	ibn Nubātah
1370–80 Tīmūr Lang conquers much of Central Asia	Lisān al-dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb ibn Baṭṭūtah
1380–87 Tīmūr conquers Īrān	Ḥāfiẓ
1400	al-Fayrūzābādī

Historical events/people	Literary events/people	
1400	Islām reaches Java	ibn Khaldūn
1402	Death of Tīmūr Lang	al-Maqrīzī al-Ghuzūlī al-Qalqashandī al-Ibshīhī ibn ʿArabshāh
1453	Capture of Constantinople by Ottomans	
1499	Ismāʿīl establishes Ṣafavī dynasty in Īrān	
1500		
1508	Ṣafavīs capture Baghdād	al-Suyūfī ibn Mālik al-Ḥamawī
1516	Selīm the Grim captures Cairo	
1520–66	Reign of Ottoman Sultan Sulaymān the Magnificent	
1521	Ottoman capture of Belgrade	
1522	Ottoman conquest of Rhodes	ibn Iyās
1529	Ottoman siege of Vienna	
1549	Ottoman forces reach Yemen	
1550	Sinan builds Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul	
1556–1605	Akbar assumes power in Mughal India	al-Shaʿrānī
1600		
1622	English capture Hormuz	al-Maqqarī
1653	Tāj Mahal completed by Shāh Jihān	Shihāb al-dīn al-Khafājī
1668	Ottoman conquest of Crete	
1683	Ottomans besiege Vienna	
1699	Treaty of Karlowitz	
1700		ʿAbd al-ghanī al-Nābulusī Bishop Germanus Farḥāt

Historical events/people	Literary events/people	
1745	Wahhābīs established at Dar‘iyyah, Arabia	
1765	English East India Company takes over administration of Bengal	al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī
1770–89	Yūsuf Shihāb, Amīr of Lebanon	al-Idkāwī
1773	Sa‘ūdī dynasty in al-Riyāḍ	al-Zabīdī
1774	Treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarji between Russia and Ottomans	
1783	Russia seizes Crimea	
1789–1807	Reign of Selīm III, Ottoman Sultan	
1798	Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt	
1796	Qajar dynasty in Īrān	
1800		
1803–4	Wahhābīs capture Mecca and Medina	
1805–48	Muḥammad ‘Alī viceroy of Egypt	
1806	Wahhābīs capture Mecca	
1811	Mamlūks massacred on orders of Muḥammad ‘Alī	Aḥmad al-Tījānī
1820–23	Egyptians conquer Sudan	al-Jabartī
1823	Arabic press in Cairo	
1830	French invade Algeria	
1834	Arabic press in Beirut	Shaykh Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār Mārūn al-Naqqāsh
1860–61	Civil War in Syria	
1866	Foundation of Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (AUB)	Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī
1869	Suez Canal opened	Rifā‘ah al-Ṭaḥṭawī
1877	Anglo-French control of Egyptian finances	
1881	French occupy Tunisia; ‘Urabī Revolt in Egypt	
1882	British occupy Egypt	
1885	Mahdī’s revolt in Sudan; General Gordon killed in al-Kharṭūm	Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
1893 French arrive in Timbuktū	Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Jalāl
1898 Defeat of Sudanese forces by General Kitchener	Jamāl al-dīn ‘al-Afghānī’
1900	‘Abd al-raḥmān al-Kawākibī Abū Khalīl al-Qabbānī Muḥammad ‘Abduh Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Barūdī
1908 Ottoman Sultan ‘Abd al-ḥamīd deposed by Young Turks	
1909 Anglo-Persian Oil Company founded	
1912 Franco-Spanish protectorate of Morocco	Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘
1915 Arab revolt against Ottoman government	
1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement regarding disposition of Middle East following First World War	
1917 Balfour Declaration	Shiblī Shumayyil Shaykh Salāmah al-Ḥijāzī Muḥammad Taymūr
1919 Popular uprising in Egypt; first proclamation of Muṣṭafā Kemāl (Ataturk) in Turkey	
1920 Turkish War of Independence; revolt in Iraq; French capture Damascus	
1921 Reza Shāh Pahlevī assumes power in Iran	
1922 Discovery of Tutankhamūn’s tomb in Egypt	Faraḥ Anṭūn
1923 Declaration of Turkish Republic	
1924 Abolition of the caliphate; first Egyptian parliament	Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūtī Shaykh Aḥmad Bamba
1927 Beginnings of Muslim Brethren in Egypt	Sa‘d Zaghlūl
1929 Growing unrest in Palestine	Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī

Historical events/people	Literary events/people
1932 Foundation of Arab Academy in Cairo	Khalīl Jubrān Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm Aḥmad Shawqī
1933 ʿAbd al-ʿazīz becomes King of Saʿūdī Arabia	Abū al-qāsim al-Shabbīr
1935 Italy invades Ethiopia	Rashīd Riḍā Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī
1938 Death of Atatürk	Mayy Ziyādah Muḥammad Iqbāl
1945 League of Arab States created in Cairo	Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī
1947 Independence of India; creation of Pakistan	Salāmah Mūsā
1948 War in Palestine; State of Israel established	Anṭūn Saʿadah Ḥasan al-Bannā Khalīl Muṭṭarān Khalīl Baydas ʿAlī al-Duʿājī
1951 Muḥammad Mosaddeq Prime Minister of Irān; Ḥusayn becomes King of Jordan	
1952 Revolution in Egypt	
1954 Jamāl ʿAbd al-nāṣir (Nasser) comes to power; beginning of Algerian War of Independence; Czech arms agreement with Egypt	Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīm
1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia	
1956 Egypt nationalises Suez Canal; Tripartite (British, French, Israeli) invasion of Suez; Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco gain independence	Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal Iliyyā Abū Māḍī
1958 Revolution in Iraq; United Arab Republic (Egypt & Syria) created; Lebanese political unrest	Jūrj Abyaḍ
1961 Kuwait independence; Socialist Laws in Egypt; revolution in Yemen	Bayram al-Tūnisī
1962 End of Algerian War; independence	Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid Mārūn ʿAbbūd

Historical events/people		Literary events/people
1964	PLO established; King Sa'ūd of Sa'ūdī Arabia replaced by King Fayṣal	ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād Sayyid Quṭb Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb
1967	June War between Israel and Arab states	Muḥammad Mandūr Ḥusayn Muruwwah
1968	Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad becomes President of Syria; Yāsir ʿArafāt leader of PLO	Bishārah al-Khūrī
1969	General Numayrī seizes power in the Sudan; Libyan revolution led by Muʿammar al-Qadhdhāfi	
1970	Aswan High Dam completed; fighting in Jordan (Black September); death of ʿAbd al-nāṣir; Anwar al-Sādāt President of Egypt	
1971	Establishment of United Arab Emirates in Gulf	Tawfiq Ṣayigh
1973	October crossing (Ramaḍān/Yom Kippur War)	Tāhā Ḥusayn Maḥmūd Taymūr
1975-88	Lebanese civil war	
1976	Fall of Tall al-Zaʿtar Palestinian refugee camp	
1977	Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel	
1979	Revolution in Īrān brings Imām Khomeinī to power	
1975-88	Lebanese civil war	
1981	Assassination of President Anwar al-Sādāt	Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr
1982	Israel invades Lebanon; Sabra and Shatilah Camp massacres	Khalīl Ḥāwī
1987	Palestinian intifāḍah	Michel ʿAflaq Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm Yūsuf al-Khāl
1988		Nobel Award to Najīb Maḥfūẓ Mīkhāʿīl Nuʿaymah Dhū al-nūn Ayyūb Tawfiq Yūsuf ʿAwwād

Historical events/people

Literary events/people

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1990–91 Gulf War: Western forces attack  
Iraq after its occupation of Kuwait

Yūsuf Idrīs  
Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī

1994

Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā

1996

Emil Ḥabībī



## CHAPTER I

### *An essay on precedents and principles*

In this chapter I will make use of several of the terms found in the title and subtitle as conduits for a brief discussion of the book's aims and methods.

'Arabic' announces clearly the language in which the literary materials that constitute my primary topic have been composed, but the dual significance of the Arabic equivalent of that adjective, '*arabi*' – referring to both a language and its people – also introduces the notion that this work will be one of 'translation' in the most literal sense: I will be attempting to 'carry' one literary tradition 'across' cultural boundaries into the milieu of English-speaking readers at the onset of the twenty-first century and, more particularly, the comparative framework of world literature studies. For most of the period under consideration (the sixth century CE till the present), the relationship between the Arab-Islamic world and the West has been one of almost continuous confrontation, with a concomitant and anticipatable obfuscation of some unpleasant truths on both sides. The Crusades and the reconquest of Spain leading to the fall of Granada in 1492, for instance, both of them traditionally recounted as glorious episodes in the history of Western Europe, take on a quite different significance if viewed from outside such a context. With this background in mind, it is the purpose of the second chapter of this book to provide an environmental, linguistic, and historical context for a series of discussions of the literary genres in Arabic.

Dictionary definitions of 'literary' (linked to the field of 'literature') refer initially to anything that is written about a particular topic, but, alongside this broad definition a more limited one has been developed, reflected by the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'writings whose value lies in beauty of form or emotional effect'. The aesthetic dimension of that definition links the concept closely to that of the French term, '*belles-lettres*', one that is often employed in English writing on the topic of literature. While in contemporary critical writings the Arabic

word for 'literature', 'adab', is essentially coterminous with the concept of 'belles-lettres', it has arrived at that meaning via an interesting route, one that begins with something very akin to education and manners before being used to describe the varied activities of those important contributors to the cultural values of Arab society who have for many centuries been dignified by the designation *udabā'* (sing. *adīb*) – practitioners, preservers, and teachers of *adab*. The development of this concept, *adab*, is itself a primary topic of the fifth chapter.

Having linked the discussion of 'literature' and 'adab' in this way, I might perhaps place them both into a single context by drawing attention to the way in which recent intellectual trends in Western literary theory and criticism have challenged some of the notions connected with the belletristic approach to the topic, particularly insofar as the privileged position of the literary text, the question of evaluation, and the concept of canon are concerned. In the trans-cultural context of this book on Arabic literary genres and its organising principles, there is perhaps an irony in the fact that the variety of texts and topics which today are potentially subject to critical analysis within the realm of Western literature studies is such that the resulting scenario tends to reflect, albeit by way of different criteria, the very same generic and topical breath that interested the *adīb* during the classical period of Arabic literature.

The title of this book avoids the use of the term 'history'. During the swirling debates over issues of literary theory in recent times, the notion of literary history has been both challenged and refined. Between the variety of approaches that have emerged from this process the present work seeks to strike a balance, one that will privilege the literary dimension over the historical. The chronological dimension will always be implicit. The difference that I hope to establish can be illustrated by considering the organising principles applied in many other works on this topic in Arabic and other languages, and in particular the method of periodisation that, *mutatis mutandis*, has been applied in most cases.

The first great temporal divide is one that constitutes an important aspect of Islamic history: that between the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods, the latter being also referred to as the 'period of ignorance' (Arabic, *Jāhiliyyah*). Here a period of indeterminate duration is defined by its status as antecedent. The denomination 'Islamic' can be applied in theory to the entire period from 622 till the present day, but is usually used to describe the literary activity of the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad and the first four caliphs. Following this, a new principle

takes over, that of the period during which a particular dynasty held actual or nominal sway: firstly, the Umawī, for which Western scholarship has retained the term ‘Umayyad’ (complete with its Westernised Greek suffix); and then the ‘Abbāsī, similarly termed ‘Abbasid’. Even before the end of the era termed ‘Abbasid’, the areas reckoned to be within the ‘Dār al-Islām’ (region of Islamic dominion) had fragmented into a large number of smaller hegemonies, each controlled by a succession of dynasties that provided sources of patronage for *littérateurs*. In the context of an examination of various approaches to the organisation of literary historical writing, the case of al-Andalus (as the Iberian Peninsula was called during the period of Islamic (Moorish) rule) and the fact that its literary riches have mostly failed to be integrated into a collective vision of the Arabic literary tradition may be considered emblematic of the problems raised by methods that place more emphasis on non-literary criteria (such as geography and dynastic history). The issues become even more difficult when it comes to addressing the period which roughly spans the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, an era designated by yet another kind of title, ‘the period of decadence’. Here a combination of factors, among them the rule of large parts of the region by non-Arabic speakers and a perceived preference among the implied audience for Arabic literary works for aesthetic norms considerably at variance with our own, has led – at least until relatively recently – to a widespread ignorance of five centuries of creativity in Arabic aptly reflected in the title generally applied to the period. Beyond the clear problem of our lack of knowledge about such a substantial time-period, there is also the fact that any assessment about the nature of the changes that occurred during the nineteenth century, generally gathered together under the heading of ‘modernisation’ – involving an encounter with the West and a revival of the heritage of the past, is rendered difficult, or even impossible, by the fact that the real circumstances of the ‘pre-modern’ remain unclear. Thus, while renewed contacts with the Western world have clearly played a major role in the developments that have taken place in the Arabic literary tradition during the ‘modern period’ and the ‘revival’ that brought it about, there is still room for a good deal of discussion about the relative importance of different factors during its earliest phases.

The principal point to be made following this discussion of traditional modes of periodisation of Arabic literature is that they have no internal consistency. Even so, I have to note that the majority of previous surveys, penned by distinguished scholars such as Goldziher, Nicholson, Gibb,

Blachère, Huart, Brockelmann, and Nallino, make use of these principles, and acknowledge with gratitude that such works often brought important Arabic literary texts to the attention of Western readers for the first time and, with their wealth of information about writers and trends, clearly illustrated the central role that literature played and continues to play in Arab society.

As we consider the issues involved in different approaches, there is one crucial and enormous gap in our knowledge of Arabic and Islamic studies in general that needs to be identified from the outset: a sizeable and by definition unquantifiable percentage of Arabic manuscripts on all topics from the early periods of Islamic history remains unpublished and, in some cases, uncatalogued. It is such a context that the shelf-lists of a Baghdādī book-seller, ibn al-Nadīm (*d.* 990), collected into his famous book, *al-Fihrist*, offer us, through listings of titles that we do not possess, a clue as to the extent of what we are missing. Beyond such regrettable realities as these that stem from a variety of causes (not the least of which is that the field has so few practitioners), we can point out that these earlier accounts of Arabic literature are predominantly concerned with the writings of a literate élite that was almost exclusively male. Recent research into women's writings during the last two centuries suggests that a lively tradition of literature existed behind the closed curtains of the women's quarters, but that, at least till now, the products of such exchanges have not entered the public domain.

A concentration on the writings of this same élite has led to another interesting circumstance involving attitudes, namely the entire question of the significance of popular literature. For, while the Western world became completely fascinated by the narratives of the *Thousand and One Nights* and the fantastic worlds that they invoked following the publication of Galland's translation into French at the beginning of the eighteenth century, most Arab critics have ignored not only them but also the many other collections of popular narrative since they are not considered to be part of the literary canon. The situation has been changing more recently, however, with the advent to the educational and cultural institutions in the region of social scientific studies and especially folklore.

*An Introduction to Arabic Literature* should thus be seen as an attempt to present an alternative approach to the production of a survey of Arabic literature. It begins with the text that holds an especially privileged position within Islam and Arabic, namely the Qur'ān. In giving prominence

to the Qur'ān, as divinely inspired text, as linguistic yardstick, and as motivation for the need to record the pre-Islamic poetic tradition in written form, we acknowledge its central place in almost every aspect of the development of Arabic language and literature.

The three chapters that follow are surveys of the development of the genres of poetry, belletristic prose and narrative, and drama. As noted above, the linkages between the genres of Arabic literature, the concept of *adab*, and the terms used to describe their analogues in Western literary traditions, are rarely exact. To cite just a single example: within the realm of narrative, the concept of *adab* admits of categories (travel narratives and biographies, for example) that have not generally attracted the attention of literary critics in the Western world.

The final chapter moves away from the literary texts themselves to consider the tradition of criticism that has existed alongside them from the outset. The distinction between the two may seem relatively clear in a modern context, but in earlier times the linkages between them, and indeed between the analysis of the Qur'ānic text and the development of criticism, are particularly close.

In recent years several nations have attempted to reflect the political and economic ramifications of what is often termed a 'global vision' in new or revised national educational curricula. A frequent component of such plans and their reception is the inclusion of more materials that deal with non-Western cultures. It is with a conscious awareness of the need for an introductory work for a general, non-specialist readership that I have written this book. I have tried to stress the continuity of the Arabic literary tradition and thus have sought as many occasions as possible to provide illustrations of the linkages that connect present and past; this is particularly the case in the introductory section to the chapters on specific genres where features of the great tradition of the past are mirrored in a present-day instance or debate. I might add that, in several of the chapters, I have deliberately made use of the introductory section to recount some of my own experiences with Arabic literature and *littérateurs* in the region itself; my hope is that those accounts may exemplify the considerable increase in contact with Arab *littérateurs* and critics which, in my view, is a major and desirable feature of recent Western scholarship. In the interests of readability, I have restricted such academic conventions as footnotes to the very minimum, listing references – where necessary – in parentheses within the text itself. The Guide to Further Reading lists only the most significant works in the field and