

The *Qaṣīdah*

The *Qaṣīdah* is the most successful form of poetry in the history of human culture. Its only plausible competitor for that distinction is the *Ghazal*, with which it shares a historical trajectory. That being said, such a statement is only meaningful if one defines success in terms of a genre's longevity, geographical scope, multi-vocality, volume of production, and cultural resonance. If a genre's success is defined purely in terms of its impact on the history of European literary studies, then the *Qaṣīdah* is rather insignificant.

The *Qaṣīdah* in Arabic is at least 1400 years old, probably 1500, but we cannot be certain as its origins pre-date written records. Epigraphers (see al-Jallad) have found “poetic” texts a few lines long in rock inscriptions in Old Arabic but at the moment these are too different from the putatively earliest surviving Arabic poems in the literary record for the connection between them even to be considered murky. Although *Qaṣā'id* (plural of *Qaṣīdah*) are still being written in Arabic by hobbyists today, the artform passed out of fashion by the second half of the 20th century, though even here it is difficult to be precise. Today, the word *Qaṣīdah* is used generically in Arabic to mean any poetic composition, whereas historically *Qaṣīdah* would have been used to refer generically only to long poems. This is because *Qaṣīdah* is the name for a particular genre of poetry that is both long and divided into movements or themes. These poems were composed as early as the 6th century by Arabic speakers living in the Arabian Peninsula, Levant, and Mesopotamia as pastoral nomads and residents or visitors of important Late Antique cities such as al-Ḥīrah, al-Jābiyah, Najrān, and Mecca. Yet the origins of the genre (see R. Jacobi, T. Bauer) are less interesting for students of World Literature than its geographical spread, enduring popularity, political significance, performance context, and multi-linguality so I will not dwell on them here. Suffice it to say that from its Late Antique beginnings, the *Qaṣīdah* in Arabic thrived throughout the formation of the Classical Islamic World—both temporally and geographically—and indeed was

its key literary product. The genre retained its relevance through the Classical (or Caliphal), Premodern, and “Late Premodern” periods (see Beecroft) and has even performed significant cultural functions in Colonial, Nationalist (see M. Khouri and T. DeYoung), Post-Colonial, and Post-Nationalist (See E. Kendall) societies in the Arab World and its diaspora.

Emerging in Late Antiquity in Arabic, the *Qaṣīdah* became a token of cultural and political prestige in societies across West, South, and Central Asia, North, West, and East Africa, and Southern Europe. The form was adapted from Arabic into every language of the Islamicate World, including Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Chagatai, Hebrew, Urdu, Kurdish, Malay, Swahili, Hausa, and many more. Compared to the *Qaṣīdah*, the Sonnet, to take a European example, seems a narrow and provincial genre. While such comparisons may help reorient the reader—or dis-orient the reader—by highlighting large differences in scale between literary-historical phenomena, they cannot begin to convey the importance of the *Qaṣīdah* for the cultural, political, and religious lives of pre-modern Islamicate societies. In fact, the entire toolkit of literary studies (our terms, concepts, preoccupations, and methods) are unsuited to describing and explaining pre-modern literary genres of the *Qaṣīdah*’s scale. Only the novel, film, and other genres of the ages of mechanical and digital reproduction surpass the scale of the *Qaṣīdah*’s audience, but of course the *Qaṣīdah* was not printed before the 19th century and was mainly disseminated through public and semi-public performances. For that reason, it is both difficult and dishonest to treat the *Qaṣīdah* (or the *Ghazal* for that matter) as just another type of poetry in World Literature.

Imagine a lyric poem of 88 lines all with the same meter and rhyme. Each line is 24–30 syllables long so the entire poem is as long as 15–19 sonnets in English. The rhyme (*-muhā*), which is repeated at the end of each of the 88 lines, is compound, which means it incorporates more than one syllable. In the course of the poem, which was probably written in the early 7th century in southern Mesopotamia or the Arabian Peninsula, the poet Labīd

b. Rabīʿah (d. 660) discusses, describes, and reflects on the following subjects: his departed beloved, Nawār, and the abandoned campsite her tribe left behind; the flora and fauna in a desert valley after a night of rain; the morning of his beloved's departure; the futility of pining; traveling across the desert on a camel, which is compared to both an onager and oryx in extended descriptions; wine drinking; boasting about his prowess on horseback and generosity; concluding with a boast about his tribe. The poem is not a narrative and its narrative sections are not linear. It is multi-layered, unfolding in a series of movements or episodes, and its perspective shifts from human to animal and back more than once. The structure of the poem, its eschewal of narrative, is perhaps the greatest impediment to any reader unfamiliar with the tradition of the *Qaṣīdah*.

The courtly or panegyric *Qaṣīdah* is perhaps more readily legible to the uninitiated reader. These poems of praise make up the largest body of *Qaṣīdah* poetry in any language—and while many of them make reference to the tropes of *Qaṣā'id* (plural of *Qaṣīdah*) set in the desert, pasture, and oasis environments inhabited by transhumant communities—they are primarily concerned with the political, military, economic, and religious affairs of social and cultural elites. These include poems of commemoration such as those celebrating military victories, like al-Mutanabbī's (d. 965) poem praising Sayf al-Dawlah's (d. 967) victory over the Byzantines at al-Ḥadath in 954 (see van Gelder), or the birth of a child, like Ibn Qalāqis' (d. 1172) poems in honor of the judge Saʿīd b. Khulayf's newborn sons, or other occasions meriting celebration such as public holidays. The Urdu poet Dhawq, Shaykh Muḥammad Ibrāhīm (b. 1789 in Delhi, d. 1854 in Delhi), marked the end of Ramadan 1852 with a poem in praise of the final Mughal ruler of India, Bahādur Shāh II (r. 1837–58), that begins with extended and twinned descriptions of the monsoon rains effect on the landscape and the effect of wine on those celebrating the festival.

[The festival] has come in the rainy season, and the drinker is in for it!

[...]

When the lightning flashes, it seems in the drunkenness
As if the cupbearer has set the strong liquor on fire.

The force of rain is such that beneath the heavens
There is no distinguishing between the igneous and the aqueous spheres.

[...]

The state of the atmosphere is such that through the effect of passion
Even the eye of the sun in the sky is cooled.

In joy and merriment, the world is given over to passion;
Even in the theological college the class is on the grammar of 'him' and 'her'
(Excerpted from the translation by Christopher Shackle)

After describing the lush and euphoric scene in the first twenty-three lines of the poem,
the poem pivots to praising his sovereign and patron:

O King, it is your glory that confers luster upon this [festival];
It is after seeing you that the world celebrates [the festival].
(Excerpted from the translation by Christopher Shackle)

Inverting the well known Hellenistic metaphor of man as microcosm, the poet paints a portrait of the ruler as macrocosm: the crescent moon is the ruler's eyebrow, he is resplendent on his throne like the Qur'an on a stand, the ocean begs his generosity, the sky prostrates before him, the heavens cannot contain his knowledge, etc. The poem concludes with a wish for the king's longevity and prosperity.

What connects this 44-line 19th-century poem in Urdu by Dhawq to the 88-line

Late-Antique poem in Arabic by Labīd discussed above? There are intrinsic features that link these two poems but I would first caution the reader against scrutinizing the link between them too closely. Extrinsic factors such as genre terminology, bibliography, paratexts, scholarly narratives, and cultural appropriation are flexible and subjective. Otherwise it would be impossible to think of works as different as Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liasons*, 1782), al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* (*What ʿĪsā ibn Hishām Told Us*, c. 1907), and Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) all inhabiting the category of novel even though the temporal and geographical distances separating them are smaller than those separating Labīd and Dhawq. Intrinsically in terms of their structure, both poems are compound; they combine more than one theme, movement, or episode. Most scholars define the *Qaṣīdah* in terms of its poly-thematic structure, but it is worth noting that in pre-modern literary theory written in the languages in which *Qaṣīdah* poetry was written, form or length were more relevant to the definition of the genre than its structure (See J. Stetkevych, M. Sells). Another intrinsic similarity that connects these two poems is the multi-lingual nexus of poetic imagery that spans the poetic traditions of the Islamicate World. While this imagery is used across a wide variety of poetic genres and not just the *Qaṣīdah*, its presence in both poems signals to the listener or reader an uninterrupted and interconnected literary-historical continuum spanning nearly a millennium and a half. This continuum is formed by the creation and recreation of the world of the *Qaṣīdah* (to borrow Eric Hayot's concept) over and over again for listeners and readers across languages, regions, and centuries. Islamicate poetic imagery is unlike any other literary idiom on earth in this regard.

More significant is the fact that these are both poems of praise. *Qaṣā'id* can be thought of as poems of praise (of the self, of a patron or peer, of one's community, of the beloved, of the dead, of an abstract concept, or a religious figure, or a city or place, etc.), but

they could also be used to defame another person or community. The functionalist school of *Qaṣīdah* research, scholarship that attempts to put individual poems in the context of their political and social function (see studies by S. Stetkevych, W. Andrews, J. Decter, C. Shackle, B. Gruendler, J. C. Bürgel, J. Hunwick, R. Scheindlin, and M. Glünz), has traditionally been the richest although philology and literary history have also been major concerns (see R. Jacobi, T. Bauer, G. J. van Gelder, J. S. Meisami, J. W. Clinton, and P. Losensky). These two major trends in scholarship on the *Qaṣīdah* mirror the pre-modern presentation and preservation of this material as historical event, linguistic treasure-trove, or both. A notable exception is Suzanne Stetkevych's *The Mute Immortals Speak: pre-Islamic poetry and the poetics of ritual* and Jaroslav Stetkevych's *Zephyrs of Najd: the poetics of nostalgia in the classical Arabic nasīb* (both published in 1993), which inspired a number of studies into the affective or mythopoetic dimensions of *Qaṣīdah* poetry in Arabic, as well as in some other languages. These studies and those that they have inspired are primarily concerned with what is known as the first phase of *Qaṣīdah* poetry exemplified here by Labīd's poem, that of Late Antique Arab societies organized around large kinship groups and confederations. This school, if it can be called a school, cleverly blends the approaches adopted by the two major trends (the functional and philological) into one. A ritual is of course a social function, but one that depends to an extremely high degree on incantatory language. Nevertheless, the vast majority of *Qaṣīdah* poetry in Arabic as well as the other languages in which it appears is not easily framed as a ritual text, rather as performed social text (see B. Gruendler, A. Hamori, S. Stetkevych, S. Ali), pragmatic communication (see T. Bauer), and gift (see J. Sharlet). Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle have put forward a preliminary list of core, intermediate, and peripheral features that can serve "as an analytical tool in order to describe the particular features of individual poems in a comparative context without having to decide a priori whether a given poem is, in fact, a [*Qaṣīdah*] or not" and readers are en-

couraged to consult it as well as the pioneering two-volume study-cum-anthology of multilingual *Qaṣīdah* poetry that they and their co-contributors published in 1996.

The *Qaṣīdah*, like the *ghazal*, is a salutary example of the practical and theoretical limitations of World Literature as a commercial, pedagogical, and scholarly enterprise. The poems are notoriously difficult to interpret and make sense of because they are lyric poems that include non-linear, indeterminate narratives, because the world conjured by the highly self-referential genre of the *Qaṣīdah* is so iterative, and because they emerge in an unprecedented variety of contexts across space and time. The varied temporal contexts in which the *Qaṣīdah* functioned and may continue to function is the first challenge to the genre's perceptibility. Eric Hayot has written that (Hayot 188):

[t]he tendency to assume that, for works written close to our present, changes in the modes of representation reflect changes in the *nature* of human reality [...] suggests how strange the modern treatment of the pre-modern is. Either our reality is the reality that has been real all along [...] or reality changes over time [...]. We currently have things both ways: we generally hold the first position when we consider the nonmodern, and the second one when we consider the modern.

But how can this cognitive failing ever be corrected for in the context of a school or university course on World Literature? One expects that an instructor might read only a few *Qaṣīdah* with their students, if not just one, and simply saying to students that *Qaṣīdah* poetry was written in more than a dozen languages over more than a thousand years in three continents, as I have done in this essay, cannot be expected to achieve very much pedagogically. Allow me to complicate things further.

The most famous *Qaṣīdah* in history, the *Burdah* by al-Būṣīrī (d. c. 1294), is an Arabic poem in praise of the prophet Muḥammad written in the 13th century (see S. Stetkevych). It has been translated into many languages and is routinely performed as an exercise of

Muslim devotion. The poem shares many structural and rhetorical features with other *Qaṣā'id* and would easily be recognized as an example of the genre, but it is not simply just another *Qaṣīdah*. Michael Allan has “[...] suggested as comparatists that we being to ask how secularism frames investments in particular definitions of what constitutes literary reading and sanctions ignorance about modes of textuality, dissent, and discussion within traditions deemed religious.” (Allan 137). Would it not be conspicuous if an instructor of World Literature were to include what is for all intents and purposes a devotional text in their survey of lyric poetic forms? Would that not reinforce misguided ideas about the “religiosity” of Muslim societies? Would ignoring the poem be any better, however? By excluding what is arguably the best known poem in history from their syllabus, the instructor would implicitly reinforce the dichotomy of secular literature and religious texts that is inherent in the way literature has been taught but which is anathemic to the world of world literature as Allan has argued. The *Burdah* of al-Būṣīrī is a *Qaṣīdah* of 160 lines in which the prophet Muḥammad is first described as the poet’s beloved and appears to him in a dream during a period of serious illness. The apparition cures the sick poet and this occasions the composition of the votive poem, which as both text and recitation is believed to have healing properties. The poem was, to borrow from Pheng Cheah, “[...] disseminated, read, and received around the [Muslim] world [and] changed that world and the life of [the peoples] within it.” (Pheng Cheah 36). In this regard, it is a prime example of “literature that is an active process of the world” (Pheng Cheah 36). The challenge that the *Qaṣīdah* poses to World Literature on a practical level is easy to see (How can it fit? Will it?), but what is perhaps less obvious is that the *Qaṣīdah* is simply too much for World Literature as it is conceived of today to ever contain. It has been argued persuasively that the logic of World Literature depends on translation (see E. Apter), Eurochronology (see C. Prendergast), European literary categories (see E. Miner), and reading contexts (see M. Allan), but it also depends—more practi-

cally perhaps—on a vague balance. In part because of accusations of Eurocentrism, World Literature operates as a tokenistic or quota-based practice in which literary traditions take turns and share the spotlight, without ever supplanting the European canon. The *Qaṣīdah* and *Ghazal* have been world-making and world-spanning genres of emotional, political, and moral significance in a large number of languages and societies for centuries. Perhaps because they never belonged to any one nation and because they were and are produced in the Global South, the *Qaṣīdah* and *Ghazal* have never been central to the concept and design of World Literature as a field of knowledge. Perhaps therein lies the problem and a potential solution.