The pearls

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Geert Jan van Gelder, editor

CLASSICAL ARABIC LITERATURE

468pp. New York University Press. Paperback, $25; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers. £16.99.
978 0 8147 3826 9

Much like young men, historians often fall in love with their eyes. When recounting pre-modern peoples in particular, historians are attracted to material culture and apply the label "great civilization" to those societies that left impressive monuments or beautiful artefacts to catch the gaze of posterity. Concrete images of relics and ruins do help us to conceptualize otherwise distant peoples, but the historian's penchant for appraising cultures on their physical remains does an unfortunate disservice to at least one sincerely great civilization: Arabic culture during the first centuries of Islam.

The early Caliphs of Islam were keen sponsors of art and architecture, but their predominantly mud-brick constructed palaces ornamented with stucco, and their taste for fine glassware and lustred pottery left only a brittle legacy that time reduced to lumps of earth and mere shards of colour which offer scant concrete signs of their achievements. Moreover, one of the greatest thinkers of classical Islam, the ninth-century writer al-Jahiz, expressly challenged the belief that monuments are true touchstones of civilization. Observing that buildings inevitably crumble, he argued that books – handy, transportable and easily copied – are better indicators of a culture's worth, and insinuated that greatness should be evaluated on ideas, not edifices. Al-Jahiz's sentiment captures a quintessence of classical Islam: a deep-rooted esteem for knowledge, combined with massive paper production, spawned such a tremendous outpouring of books in the ninth-century Middle East that some scholars today choose to call the whole culture a "civilization of the book".

To appreciate such a civilization is daunting. The Arabic books most readily available in English today, the Qur'an and *Thousand and One Nights*, are in fact very unrepresentative examples of what writers like al-Jahiz would have considered Arabic literature. The writings that actually constituted the "civilization of the book" are unfortunately difficult to access: modern editions of classical texts exist, but they are in Arabic, translations are in short supply, and good translations are especially rare. In the face of these obstacles, it is a pleasure to introduce Geert Jan van Gelder's *Classical Arabic Literature*, an anthology of Arabic writing from its pre-Islamic origins to the dawn of the modern era.

Van Gelder's anthology is the first volume of the Library of Arabic Literature, a new series of scholarly translations of classical texts which will aim to open Arabic literature to a wide audience, as the Loeb Classical Library has accomplished for Greek and Latin writings. In inaugurating the library with this anthology, van Gelder assumed the risks of the pearl diver described in a poem of Ibn al-Rumi which he translates in the collection:

> In his quest he resembles a diver who dives in the depths of the sea, seeking pearls at his peril;
> There, choices are made when one picks up the precious and leaves what remains.

Van Gelder faced difficult choices to narrow the vast Arabic literary output to some sixty samples, and as a translator he ran the usual gauntlet of choosing between writing a free-flowing text or a technically faithful translation, and choosing whether to write according to the taste of English readers or to retain the original Arabic feel. In a text intended to introduce readers to classical literature, treading a middle path would be ideal, and in this van Gelder largely succeeds.

The pearls he sought to extract are challenging: Arabic literature developed its own styles, idiosyncrasies and rhyming aesthetics which are sometimes impossible to appreciate in another language. Many earlier translations of classical Arabic have run aground trying to force Arabic rhymes into what inevitably becomes awkward English, but in most cases van Gelder wisely avoids the pitfalls of mimicking Arabic rhyme and rhythm, choosing a more natural English that in fact better captures the original's freshness. Where he does succumb to the rhyming urge, such as his translation of al-Hamadhani's *Isfahan Maqama*, the superb wit of the original becomes obscured, but the great majority of van Gelder's collected pearls are very fine. His translations of the pre-Islamic odes masterfully convey the starkness of desert life which Muslim readers especially relished, his translation of al-Jahiz's brilliant zoological-philosophical tract on flies feels as if al-Jahiz himself speaks to us directly, and the breathless style van Gelder adopts in translating al-Tifashi's text, though on an unusually blatant erotic subject, dexterously recreates the feel of classical Arabic prose, which used absolutely no paragraphing or punctuation. Subject matter aside, van Gelder's rendering of al-Tifashi from a purely stylistic perspective is an interesting model for future translators to recreate the flow of Arabic storytelling in English.

Van Gelder's selections are entirely reasonable given the vast oeuvre confronting him, but his decision to eschew religious texts in favour of what he defines as "literary", though understandable in an anthology entitled *Classical Arabic Literature*, tends towards secularization. Classical literature, however, is not so neatly detachable from theology: Islamic ethics and an acceptance that all things on earth serve the Divine Plan pervade the literature, and writers of even the most ostensibly materialistic texts impart, howsoever subtly, homage to God. A perceptive reading of van Gelder's selections will reveal inklings of this crucial dynamic in classical writing, but it could have been more clearly highlighted via the inclusion of a few expressly religious texts.

Classical Arabic Literature deserves such perceptive reading throughout; these poems and essays should be individually pondered, as they would have been a millennium ago. Geert Jan van Gelder has strung for us an attractive set of pearls – well selected, handsomely presented, readably translated, and helpfully annotated to guide the reading public gently into the world of a very bibliophilic civilization.

Tongued colours

DAVID BLOW

Brian Spooner and William L. Hanaway, editors

LITERACY IN THE PERSIANATE WORLD

Writing and the social order

437pp. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. $59.95 (£39).
978 1 934536 45 2

Until recently, first-year students of Persian at a British university would begin learning the language by reading a classic of Persian literature written in the thirteenth century – the *Gulistan* or "Rose Garden" by Sa'di (*c.*1200–*c.*1292 CE). It is hard to imagine Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* being used as the set text for beginners in English. But unlike Chaucer's English, Sa'di's Persian is not that different to the Persian that is spoken and written today. Also, unlike *The Canterbury Tales*, the works of Sa'di and other Persian poets were for centuries familiar to a vast public outside their native land, in territories where Persian had become the language of culture and, in the case of Mughal India, the official language of the state. John Perry, one of the scholarly contributors to *Literacy in the Persianate World*, likens the spread of Persianate culture to that of Hellenism at an earlier time.

The written Persian in use in the time of Sa'di and today is known as New Persian. It was developed after the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran in the mid-seventh century CE from an earlier form known as Middle Persian, which was written in a complex Aramaic script. Those responsible were Iranian literati, who applied the more accessible Arabic script to the spoken form of Middle Persian and incorporated a large Arabic vocabulary. John Perry argues that they did not use the written form of Middle Persian because it was the language of Zoroastrianism, which had previously been the state religion of Iran and was therefore unacceptable to the country's new Arab Muslim rulers.

New Persian was raised to the status of a literary language with the emergence of native Iranian dynasties in eastern and north-eastern Iran and Transoxania in the ninth and tenth centuries that were recognized by the Muslim Caliphate, but effectively independent of it. The most important of these was the Samanid dynasty (819–1005 CE), which vigorously promoted a New Persian literature from its capital in Bukhara. Among the poets patronized by the Samanids was Ferdowsi (940–1020/25 CE), who drew on what was remembered of the legends and history of ancient Iran for his national epic, the *Shahnama* ("Book of Kings"). The *Shahnama* was embraced by subsequent Turkic and Mongol dynasties in Iran and beyond because, in Perry's words, it presented a "desacralized" history of Iran. More generally, Perry argues that it was the non-sectarian content of Persian poetry, which he defines as "its adaptability to the subtle expression of different philosophical or religious beliefs", together with the accessibility of its language, which ensured its popularity among all classes "from Azerbaijan to Bengal".

William Hanaway, who has co-edited this study, emphasizes the close association between the administrative secretaries, known as *munshi*s, and the poets, and argues that New Persian was shaped by the "dynamic interaction" of their work. He points out that secretaries were often poets as well and the two classes combined to elaborate strict rules and rhetorical devices that in many cases were equally applicable to both poetry and prose.

He also stresses the importance of the lexicographers who began producing monolingual Persian dictionaries as early as the late ninth century CE and "helped to keep the language stable". Other factors that kept Persian relatively unchanged, in Hanaway's view, were the prestige of classical Persian poetry, the insistence that poets take the work of their predecessors as models, an educational system that prized memorizing and repetition, and bureaucratic inertia.

Persian as a lingua franca spread not only through much of the Islamic world, but even as far as China during the thirteenth century, when Iran was loosely incorporated into the Mongol Empire. David Morgan shows how Persian became for a time the most important foreign language in China, where it was used in commercial exchanges with Muslim merchants profiting from the *Pax Mongolica*. But it was the Muslim realms in India that most fully adopted the Persian language and culture. The high point was reached in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the generous patronage offered by the wealthy Indian courts, and especially the Mughal court, attracted many poets from Iran. Muhammad Aslam Syed traces the decline of Persian in Muslim India and the rise of Urdu, a related vernacular language, to the second half of the eighteenth century. He associates it with the "humiliating" sack of Delhi by the Iranian ruler, Nadir Shah, in 1739, and the rise of a "new nobility" of poets who were merchants and shopkeepers and were uncomfortable with Persian as the language of the "old nobility". The final blow to the status of Persian in India came in 1835 when the East India Company replaced it with English as the official language and in 1837 with Urdu as the language of the law courts. But for many, the loss of Persian was a cause for lament. Syed quotes the Indian poet Ghalib (1797–1869), who is regarded as the greatest Urdu poet, but who also composed poems in Persian: "If you want to see all the colours of life, read my Persian poetry, my Urdu diwan does not have all those colours. Persian is the mirror (of life) and Urdu is just like rust on that mirror (with which you start but when it is clean, it is Persian)".