THE CONCEPT OF ELOQUENCE IN ARABIC LITERARY THEORY AS PRESENTED BY THE ELEVENTH-CENTURY NORTH-AFRICAN POET-CRITIC IBN RASHĪQ AL-QAYRAWĀNĪ

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"Eloquence is for words—though they be short—to make ideas firm and strong, and for a discourse—though it be long—to be beautifully composed." (Anonymous critic cited by Ibn Rashīq)

The concept of eloquence, or stylistic excellence (al-balāghah), has been one of the fundamental concerns of Arabic literary theory ever since its origins. In a single scholarly work constituting a synthesis of literary theory from earliest times until his own, Abū 'Ali Hasan b. Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (390 A.H./1000 A.C.–456/1063) not only presents the theories and opinions of his predecessors, but adds his own observations as well. This work, entitled al-'Umdah fi Mahāsin al-Shīr wa Naqdīhī, or The Center Pole on the Beauty of Poetry and Poetics, arranged as it is in a

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1 I would like to take this opportunity to profusely thank the founder-director of ISTAC, Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naqib al-Attas, the acting deputy director of ISTAC, Professor Dr. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, as well as the general editor of Al-Shajarah, Sharifah Shifa al-Attas, for encouraging me to write this article for one of the first issues of the journal. I have prepared this article while teaching at ISTAC in 1996. Had it not been for the outstanding research facilities afforded me by ISTAC, as well as the opportunity afforded me by this institution to pursue my research interests, I would not have been able to make this contribution.

2 Scholars of literature are now very fortunate indeed to have the outstanding critical edition of al-'Umdah edited by Muhammad Qarqazān, which first appeared in 1988 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 2 vols.) and with corrections, additions, and emendations in a second
highly logical, coherent, and moreover attractive way, came to be a primary reference for Arabic poetics for centuries to come.

For a period extending over five decades beginning with the reign of the Zirid ruler Badis al-Sinhaji, who came to power in 386/996, and that of his son al-Mu‘izz li-Dinillah, the former garrison city of al-Qairawân founded by ‘Uqbah b. Nafi’ in 50/670 in what is now central Tunisia, came to be a center of cultural and literary activity until its fall in 449/1057 with the invasions by nomadic groups from the East known as the Bani Salim and Bani Hilal. During this period it was a meeting point for travelers from both East and West, and a place reputed for libraries with rich collections of books produced in the East. The Zirid rulers encouraged poetry, and poets championing different poetic models came to vie with one another for recognition and to challenge each other’s aesthetic principles.

Ibn Rashiq was born in 390/1000 in the town of al-Musilah, otherwise known as al-Muḥammadiyyah, not far from the present-day city of Tunis. He moved to al-Qairawân in 406/1015, where he pursued his studies under the great scholars of the day. There he came to know the Caliph al-Mu‘izz’s head secretary, who employed him as a court secretary. In 449/1057, over four decades after Ibn Rashiq’s move to al-Qairawân, and when the city was ransacked, Ibn Rashiq followed the Caliph al-Mu‘izz to al-Mahdiyyah. In about 453/1061, Ibn Rashiq, then al-

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The critical apparatus includes notes providing textual variants from the manuscripts consulted as well as notes which identify historical personages, clarify unusual words, and explain difficult lines of poetry. The editor spared little effort in comparing the text to the many sources used by Ibn Rashiq. Whenever he was able to locate the source (often not mentioned by Ibn Rashiq himself), he would note the textual differences. This fine job of editing has paved the way for future scholars to come to a greater understanding of Ibn Rashiq’s specific contribution with regard to the views of his predecessors.