

THE CONCEPT OF ELOQUENCE IN ARABIC LITERARY THEORY AS PRESENTED BY THE ELEVENTH-CENTURY NORTH-AFRICAN POET- CRITIC IBN RASHĪQ AL-QAYRAWĀNĪ¹

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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 'Alī Ḥasan 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 fī Maḥāsin al-Shi'r wa Naqdihi*, or *The Center Pole on the Beauty of Poetry and Poetics*,² arranged as it is in a

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² Scholars of literature are now very fortunate indeed to have the outstanding critical edition of *al-'Umdah* edited by Muḥammad 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 Zīrid ruler Bādīs al-Šinhājī, who came to power in 386/996, and that of his son al-Mu‘izz li-Dīnillāh, the former garrison city of al-Qairawān founded by ‘Uqbah b. Nāfi‘ 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 Banī Salīm and Banī Hilāl. 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 Zīrid 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 Rashīq was born in 390/1000 in the town of al-Musīlah, otherwise known as al-Muḥammadiyyah, not far from the present-day city of Tunis. He moved to al-Qairawān 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 Rashīq’s move to al-Qairawān, and when the city was ransacked, Ibn Rashīq followed the Caliph al-Mu‘izz to al-Maḥdiyyah. In about 453/1061, Ibn Rashīq, then al-

edition appearing in 1994 (Damascus: Maṭba‘at al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2 vols.). 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 Rashīq. Whenever he was able to locate the source (often not mentioned by Ibn Rashīq 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 Rashīq’s specific contribution with regard to the views of his predecessors.