Literary Approaches to Medieval and Early Modern Arabic Biography

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Abstract

Arabic biographical writing is much used as a historical source, and scholars agree that its textuality must be taken into account in evaluating its content. There is less agreement, though, on the importance of thoroughly understanding the range of processes of literary composition used by biographers. This article approaches three sets of biographies from a purely literary viewpoint: two medieval sketches of women, a Sufi and a songstress respectively; three seventeenth-century hagiographies of the physician and theosopher Dawud al-Antakī; and a thirteenth-century portrait of one man of letters, al-Qiftī, by another, Yāqūt. It concludes that the art and care devoted to shaping such commemorations of individuals is evidence of the aesthetic and cultural importance of biography as an Arabic literary genre.

1. Arabic life writing: features and problems

The study of medieval Arabic biography has gathered momentum since Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s pioneering article of 1977, in which she laid the grounds for a grammar of biographical formulae: she identified recurrent themes in twenty-two biographical entries on the same figure, and showed how differing portraits result from different combinations of themes. The repetition or recasting of narratives from source to source, and the recurrence of themes serving to show the type that an individual’s life belongs to, are a feature of Muslim Arabic biography which has persisted from its sketchily charted beginnings in the eighth century AD until the eighteenth century and beyond, and these formulaic elements of Arabic biography are the feature which poses the greatest challenge to modern scholars wishing to pin down the real facts of an individual life. Malti-Douglas, in this and subsequent articles, emphasised that medieval Arabic biographers are argumentative: they select data and themes

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1I am grateful to the anonymous reader(s) for comments and suggestions. A shorter discussion of the topic of this article was presented in French at the interdisciplinary colloquium organised by Aboubakr Chaïbi (INALCO, Paris): “Les hommes et les récits: reconnaître, classer, interpréter”, Paris, 24–26 May 2007, and was published as “La biographie arabe médiévale”, in Aboubakr Chaïbi (ed.), Classer les récits. Théories et pratiques (Paris, 2007), pp. 103–114. Note 1 of the latter article introduces French readers to the basic English-language bibliography of the subject, notably Dwight F. Reynolds (ed.), Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001).


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according to their attitude towards the biographical subject or what he or she is believed to represent, and according to their agreement or disagreement with previous biographers. Recognising this does not enable the modern biographer to establish facts, but it does make plainer the historical footprint of biographical subjects.

The insight that medieval Arabic biographies are often less a factual record than a field of controversy has encouraged many scholars to foreground their symbolic dimensions. For historians especially, the identification of patterns of motifs and of intertextual reference is a tool that has helped them to transpose anecdotes of uncertain veracity into the functional realm of commentary and explanation.

More recently, Hilary Kilpatrick has drawn attention to the important fact that a life and its significance are not necessarily presented as a chronological progression by medieval biographers.\(^3\) The key moments of a life (including death) may not occur in the biographical narrative where common expectation would place them, for the forms taken by what she calls life writing (a more flexible and comprehensive term than ‘biography’) may be dictated by a wide range of considerations, some arising from the circumstances of the biographer rather than of the biographee. Kilpatrick’s concern is with the literary fashioning of literary lives, and with the ideas of literary men, expressed obliquely through the medium of life writing itself, about the nature of Arabic civilisation and the ways in which particular, often unexpected, individuals came to be its architects. She therefore emphasises the variable rather than the formulaic, the original rather than the recurrent, and, following the bent of the literary sources, maps a medieval perception of life writing as a means of reflection, not only on lives themselves, but on the literary process of representing lives.\(^4\)

In the studies of the past thirty years, there is a broad consensus that biographies use literary devices. But researchers coming from different fields pay greater or lesser lip service to the values and perspectives, as opposed to the techniques, of literature, and have by and large confined themselves to the sources they think most pertinent to their own field, which they treat as being distinct types, whose dominant mode of reference is assumed to be uniform (and is usually religious or religious and political). This paper, by contrast, will look at sources of several types, dating from about the fourth to eleventh centuries AH/tenth to seventeenth centuries AD, and will start with modern Arabic biographical dictionaries, which often depend heavily on their earlier precursors. It will draw upon the insights of both Malti-Douglas and Kilpatrick, noting common techniques, devices or components, but looking also for what is atypical. As for determining my texts’ terms of reference, I will begin by pointing out the obvious: that the concepts of the individual that are implicit in modern approaches to biography may not coincide with pre-modern ideas of what constitutes the biographical subject. When present-day biographers recast earlier materials in modern moulds and there is a perceptible mismatch of criteria, they very usefully encourage a re-reading of the sources: an example is given at 1.2.-1.4. below.


Biography is one of the most widespread forms of medieval Arabic writing, and one of the most enduring: it is remarkable that modern Arabic biographical dictionaries such as Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī's *al-A'lam* ("Notable men and women") and 'Umar Rūdā Khāhālā's *A'lam al-nisā' ("Notable women"), both of them standard and indispensable reference works dealing with figures from Arab and Islamic history and culture from pre-Islam up to the twentieth century, echo the language and even reproduce the wording of their medieval sources. Their approaches to early source materials are nevertheless very different, and their differences of approach highlight a major, indeed fundamental feature of pre-modern Arabic biographies, to which little importance has been attached: the variety of narrative voices and viewpoints they employ. Al-Ziriklī casts his materials into a more or less uniform bio-bibliographical format, and adopts throughout the omniscient, factual register which pre-modern biographers tend to use only intermittently as an introduction or frame to livelier matter (see below), whereas Khāhālā makes no attempt to update medieval and early modern narratives and transcribes nearly all of their varied registers and techniques, which include scene-setting, dialogue and verse. So, in their entries on the Damascene woman of letters, Sūfī and jurist, 'Ā'ishā bint Bā'uniyya (d.922/1516), al-Ziriklī and Khāhālā both use Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d.1061/1651), *Kawākib al-sā'i'ra*, and 'Abd al-Ḥayy ibn Aḥmad ibn al-'Imād al-Ḥanbālī (d.1089/1679), *Shadharāt al-dhahab*, but only Khāhālā reproduces their encomia and quotes family details, an autobiographical passage in rhymed prose and a poetical exchange with a leading man of letters.5

1.2. Frames and fillings: a sample of techniques

I will quote two further examples from Khāhālā, to give an idea, on a small scale, of his stylistic range and its relation to the source materials. It is evident in this sample that each of the two biographies is couched in the discourse of a particular cultural field; we are alerted to this by the keywords used in the frame of each biography to define the biographical subject: 'ābida, 'anchoress', and jāriya, 'female slave' (in this context, specifically, 'female slave poet and musician'). In the first example, devotional discourse presents a woman who has rejected involvement with men, and who is thought worthy of being immortalised not only for her heroic asceticism but for the vigour of her self-expression. In the second example, we are required to identify with 'Abbāsid court life, whose leisure, at the high point of its cultural influence, the second to third centuries AH/eighth to ninth centuries AD, was serviced by literate, witty and provocative slave women, and with the love theory, both sentimental and cynical, that surrounded them. Like the anchoress, the woman who is fleetingly glimpsed

here is memorialised for her verbal mastery, which also reflects her owner's standing as a patron of letters and the civilised arts; for unlike the anchoress, the jāriya is defined entirely in relation to men and to her capacity to perform. Both passages leave a great deal to be supplied by readers from their readerly expertise, which the keywords are expected to set in motion: just as each of the biographical subjects belongs to a class with known attributes (pious and chaste women; worldly and sexually conscious women), so will stories concerning them be likely to develop familiar themes.

Hasana the anchoress

A Basran anchoress who shunned earthly pleasures and turned to devotion, she would fast all day and pass the night awake in prayer, her cupboard bare. It is related that she felt thirsty, and went out to the watercourse and drank from her two hands. She was a handsome woman, and another woman said to her: "Get a husband!". She replied: "Give me a man who has renounced the world and will not burden me at all with worldly things - but I doubt that you can. For, by God! my soul has no desire to worship this world or to take pleasure in the men of this world. If you can find a man who will weep and make me weep, fast and command me to do the same, and beg for charity, I will delight in him; but if not, I wish men well! [alā 'l-rijālī 'l-salānī]' (Source: MS of Ibn al-Jawzi (d.597/1201), ʿṢafwat al-ṣafwā)'

Here we have a frame and a filling that are in harmony. The frame consists of an introductory passage: a definition ('Basran anchoress') amplified by a description ("shunned earthly pleasures ... her cupboard bare"), which sums up essential aspects of the biographical subject. (We shall see later, in Section 3, how in a longer biography the device is repeated, and encloses a variety of fillings in a kind of lattice). The frame develops into a narrative which appears to slip in incidentally a detail which to the biographical subject was indeed incidental: the fact that she was a desirable woman. This is the beginning of the filling, the purpose of which is to illustrate the qualities of the biographical subject. Its theme is the difference between essentials (unworldly things) and incidentals (worldly things, including most men), which the subject expounds in her own words. There is no contradiction or tension between the frame and the filling, which alternately 'tell' and 'show' the same idea, but the filling undoubtedly adds a dimension: a sense of Ḥasana's robustness, the flavour of a personality - whether historical or imagined there is no way of deciding. Ḥasana's name, which means either 'good' or 'beautiful', lacks a patronymic, a sign either that she was originally a slave or that she is simply an emblematic type of the early female mystic for which Basra was well known. The passage has been transcribed by Kahhāla from the original biographical entry with only minor changes.

In the second example, roughly the same elements are present: a frame which defines the biographical subject, and a filling which consists of a scene-setting bridging passage,

6Basra was a city of canals.

7Kahhāla, A lām al-nisā', i, p. 263. 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ḥalī al-Jawzī was a preacher, religious scholar and historian. Ṣafwat al-ṣafwā is a critical reworking of an earlier biographical dictionary of mystics, the Hīyat al-awliyā’ of Abū Nu‘aym al-Isfahānī (d.430/1038), and has been twice published as Šifat al-ṣafwā (Hyderabad, 1936–38), and M. Fakhuri (ed.) (Aleppo, 1969–73). Both published texts read: "whenever she felt thirsty, she would go out ... ." and: "beg for charity and incite me to do so", (Hyderabad), iv, p. 26, and Fākhūrī (ed.), iv, pp. 39–40, no. 603.
leading into a tableau in which she is given a voice and demonstrates her qualities. Here the exemplary scene is preceded by the device of an *insād* or chain of transmitters originating with a source or putative witness (Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī, d.255/869, transmitting from his teacher the literary scholar and courtier al-ʾĀṣmaʾī, d.213/828). (In Ḥasana’s biography this component was telescoped by Kaḥḥāla into ‘it is related’.)⁸ There are two crucial differences, however, between this portrait and Ḥasana’s. The whole weight of definition is carried by the terms ‘poetess’ and ‘of elegant wit’, which are not amplified; and the subject demonstrates only her professional skills. We have no idea what relation they bear to her inner self. The reader is conscious of being shown only one aspect of a life, and there is also potential for disagreement between biographer and reader if the example that is given of the poetess’s wit does not live up to the reader’s expectations.

Ḥasnaʾ (‘Belle’), slave of Yahyā ibn Khālid the Barmecide

Poetess of elegant wit [*zānjaʿ*].⁹ In his *Amalṭ* [‘Dictations’], al-Zajjājī reports this *khabar* [item of information] from [a chain of three informants]:¹⁰

A certain poet was admitted to the presence of Yahyā ibn Khālid the Barmecide.¹¹ Already present was a slave woman called Ḥasnaʾ, who spoke these lines:

[Question:] How then am I to live? I am sped to and fro
by a sea of passion which has no shore.

[Answer:] If you achieve union, then you are saved;
and if not (lit. “if shunning – *al-hajru* – occurs”), you’ll
have learned your lesson!

(Source: MS of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *al-Mustazraf min akhbār al-jawān*).¹²

1.3. Variance, variants

In this second anecdote, the unnamed poet of the frame would have come to the semi-public reception chamber where Yahyā the Barmecide relaxed with his entertainers in the hope of performing – typically, where a slave poetess is among the entertainers, with the aim of challenging her – and thereby winning his patronage; so there is an implied element of competition between the poet and Ḥasnaʾ. Ḥasnaʾ’s poem starts out in the vein of courtly love poetry, but then seems to debunk sentiment and preach common sense. In Kaḥḥāla’s version, it is hard to see why she recites it, or why the unnamed poet is brought into the scene, since he does not challenge her or in any way interact with her. He seems to be there merely as a witness. In terms of prosody, there is also something wrong with Ḥasnaʾ’s poem

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⁸In the printed editions there is a fragmentary *insād*.
⁹The word is polysemic, and means ‘fashionable’, ‘polished’, ‘clever’ and ‘subtle’, etc.
¹⁰Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ishāq al-Zajjājī (d. ca.340/950) was a grammarian and linguistic scholar. His ‘Dictations’, recorded by pupils, are a series of verse quotations, with or without framing anecdotes and brief comments.
¹¹Mentor and vizier of Harūn al-Rashīd (d.193/809) in the first part of his reign.
¹²Kaḥḥāla, *A lām al-nisāʿ*, i. p. 262. ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, primarily a religious scholar, was also a prolific compiler of themed anthologies.
in Kahhâla’s transcription: it attempts to rhyme shattu (‘shore’), with tatta’izu (‘you’ll have learnt your lesson’), which is impossible as the rhyme consonants do not match.

If we correct the rhyme by emending the consonants, the poem’s bland diction is transformed. Instead of ‘shore’, we get shazzu, ‘erection’, rhyming poorly with tatta’izu, which should be emended, for consistency of meaning, to tun’izu, ‘you will be aroused’. The vocalisation of al-hajru, ‘shunning’, should also be emended, to al-hujru, ‘dirty talk’. This gives: ‘(Question) How then am I to live? I am sped to and fro by a sea of passion, with no erection. (Answer) If you achieve congress, you are saved, or if there is dirty talk, you will be aroused’. This reading, whose lexical dexterity and bawdiness are typical of the period and situation, turns the poem into a joke about courtly love, justifies the inclusion of the unnamed poet by making him the addressee or butt of the poem, and explains why the poetess is called witty. It also shows how the outlook of a modern reader may be at variance with that of the source. It is only since the nineteenth century that educated Arab sensibilities have shrunk from sexual frankness, with considerable implications for issues of morality and propriety, and a rupture in notions of intellectual and moral competence. Kahhâla’s feminist biographical dictionary, which reproduces pre-modern diction but favours modern decorum and hence a bowdlerised version of the anecdote, is a sometimes misleading compromise between two world views.

But the matter does not end there. The reading suggested here is well in keeping with the anecdotage of the period, in which slave poetesses, set up in competition with free male poets, often use coarse wit to put them in their place. In al-Zajjâji’s version as found in his printed Amâlī – not the same as the version attributed to him by al-Suyûtî in Kahhâla’s transcription – the episode is overtly cast as a joust: commanded by Yahyâ, the male poet extemporises a couplet which Ḥâsnâ’ caps. The poems – different from the one in Kahhâla’s transcription – form a love-duet. The woman’s name, moreover, is dotted so as to read Khansa’.13 Exactly the same structure and poems are found in the printed text of al-Suyûtî’s version, where, again, there are three speakers, Yahyâ, the visiting poet, and Ḥâsnâ’ [sic]. In this version, a mock love-scene takes place between the poet and Ḥâsnâ’, masking competition between them, and the implied outcome is a win for Yahyâ through his jâriya, as in al-Zajjâji’s printed Amâlī. These versions have little in common with Kahhâla’s, whichever reading of the latter we adopt. The divergence can be explained by Kahhâla’s use of a MS dismissed as faulty by the editor of the printed text of al-Suyûtî;14 but in the case of this item, the text is not so much corrupt as a variant on a theme, for Kahhâla’s version has only one poem, one speaker and one protagonist, the witty poetess, who jousts with herself.

1.4. Textual status and individual identity

In addition, Kahhâla transforms the status of the text by treating as a specific biography what in his source is an archetypal anecdote – for although al-Suyûtî in his al-Mustâzraţf min akhbâr al-jawâriz (‘Witty Anecdotes about Slave Women’) lists his slave women in alphabetical order, as do biographical dictionaries, his aim is to illustrate a type, not to document lives.

Moreover, Kahhāla’s Ḥasnā’ may well exist as a biographical subject only by virtue of a mistake in the spelling of her name. Her ‘real’ prototype, the slave poetess Khansa’ (one of two or more found in the literature of the period, who have a number of traits in common), has a biography devoted to her in the ‘Slave Poetesses’ (al-Imā’ al-shawā’ir) of Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī (d. ca. 363/972). Here she is a poetess who habitually jousts with all comers. She belongs to an unidentified male relative of Yahyā the Barmecide who flies into a rage when a visiting poet sets her what her owner thinks is an obscene riddle in verse. She explains the misunderstanding; her master befriends the poet and launches his career. Kahhāla himself has an entry taken from another work by Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, the ‘Book of Songs’ (Kitāb al-Aghānī), on a Khansa’ who was the slave of one Hāshim the Grammarian (or else of Hishām the Blind). She is not the same as the Khansa’ of Abū al-Faraj’s ‘Slave Poetesses’, but she is reminiscent of Khansa’, the slave of Hishām the Blind, who is given an entry in the ‘Modern Poets’ (Ṭabqāt al-shu’ā’ir al-muhdathīn) of Ibn al-Muṭazz (d.296/908). Like Kahhāla’s Khansa’, i.e. the Khansa’ of the ‘Book of Songs’, she mocks the poet Abū al-Shiḥl. The shifts between the different versions are minimal – in all but the last-cited they are a matter of a few words in a few lines – but to appreciate them, and the doubts they cast on the historicity of Kahhāla’s Ḥasnā’, one must grasp the underlying mechanism of the anecdote and the potential for variation afforded by its wider literary matrix, the anecdotage surrounding ‘Abbāsid jāriya.

2. Matrix and message

2.1. Contexts of biography; meaningful components of biographies

Medieval and early modern Arabic biographies vary in length from a few lines to several pages, and are usually grouped in thematic dictionaries, alphabetically arranged, of people of the same profession or consecration, from the same city, and so on, or else in the year-by-year obituary sections of chronicles, though many other contexts are also found. In much the same way as with modern newspaper obituary pages and reference works, implicit formulae govern both content and rules of composition. These are not always easily identified. Without enquiring too deeply which elements are the bearers of substantive messages, western scholarship has on the whole earmarked two of them as having only generic and emblematic, not specific and historical meaning: anecdote and above all poetry, both of which often bulk large, as is suggested even by the two short examples just quoted of what it is probably better to call ‘life writing’ rather than biography proper. In addition, the

15Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, al-Imā’ al-shawā’ir, ed. Ja‘īlī al-‘Aṭiyya (Beirut, 1404/1984), no.32, pp. 215–217. Even though both editions were made from the same MS, this biography, together with nos. 31 and 33, is lacking from the edition by N. H. al-Qaysī and Y. A. al-Sāmarra’ī (Beirut, 1983).
16Kahhāla, A‘lām al-nisā’, i, pp. 372–373; see Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, Kitāb al-Aghānī, xix, ed. ‘Abd al-Sattār Ḥamd Farrāj (Beirut, 1966), pp. 266–267, where the passage forms part of the section on a more famous jāriya, Faḍl al-Shā‘īrā, and the name of the owner of Khansa’ is given as Hāshim the Blind.
17Ibn al-Muṭazz, Ţabqāt al-shu’ā’ir al-muhdathīn, ed. ‘A. S. A. Farrāj (Cairo, 1968), p. 425. To complete the confusion, at Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, Kitāb al-Aghānī (Būlāq, 1285 [1868]), xiii, p. 26, Abū al-Shiḥl is shown jousting with a woman belonging to Hāshim the Grammarian named Khansa’ whom he goes on to address as Ḥasnā’.
18The workings of some of the more opaque conventions are explored by Kristen Brustad, “Imposing Order: Reading the Conventions of Representation in al-Suyūṭī’s Autobiography”, Edebiyāt, 7, 2 (1997), pp. 327–344.
sequences and hierarchies in which data are formatted, if noticed at all, are often regarded as being without significance: yet, as we have seen, even the thumbnail portrait of Ḥasana the anchoress depended on sequence (an order of exposition in which essentials are followed by incidentals) and a play of hierarchies (following this exposition, Ḥasana herself affirms the essential and dismisses the incidental). Thus, if anecdote (for the most part), poetry, and structure (almost always) are jettisoned when medieval biographies are quarried for use in reference works such as the Encyclopaedia of Islam – or, indeed, al-Ziriklī's al-ʿālam, although the latter more openly acknowledges the imprint of its sources – it is clear that a great deal of meaning will be jettisoned at the same time. The rest of this paper will look at some of the ways in which biographers use literary procedures to generate meaning, and will ask what kinds of meaning are involved.

2.2. Text and metatext

Arabic biographies are, at least in part, the result of compilation from earlier sources as well as of information-seeking from living informants where possible. They are therefore openly derivative, and are generally presented as a collage of independent testimonies. But even where isnāds, which identify quotations from written texts, reliance on personal informants, variant narratives and their transmitters, are not used, it is understood by the reader that the material of the entries is not original.

Nevertheless it is also understood that the works in which they are collected (biographical dictionaries, etc.) have their own objectives and shape their contents to reflect them. Thus the biography of a person X may occur (as we shall see at 2.3.1. and 2.3.2. below) in a record of meetings with famous men, a dictionary of ‘modern’ poets, and various other matrices, each of which will offer its own view of X. In a broad generic definition, these works are all biographical, but given their different intentions, this definition alone will not give us enough help in reading their contents. I shall dub them metatexts – a term which has not been decisively appropriated by literary criticism19 – and define metatexts as works which, on an individual and ad hoc basis, make up their own rules for reading the smaller texts of which they are formed: in this instance, biographies (tarajim, sing. tarjama) and their components, items of information (akhbār, sing. khabar), which may take both narrative and non-narrative forms, e.g. names, dates, definitions, classifications, evaluations, bibliographies, quotations, anecdotes. In our definition, even a date or a name may be viewed as a text, which is given specific meaning by its metatext (see 3. below).

2.3. Container and contained

A work's title, and its author's preface and intermittent remarks, will often tell readers about the outlook in which the metatext was conceived and suggest the criteria which governed the selection and presentation of its component texts. A biographical dictionary of poets, for example, is likely to give pride of place to its subjects' poetry even when they were equally remarkable in other fields: a title such as 'Alī ibn Ḥamad Ibn Mašūm's (d.1107/1705) Sulāfāt

19See the article ‘MÉTATEXTE/Metatext’ in the online Dictionnaire International des Termes Littéraires/International Dictionary of Literary Terms, ed. Jean-Marie Grassin (www.ditl.info/arttest/art15272.php).
al-ʿarīf fī mahāsin al-shuʿārāʾ bi-kull mīṣr ("Choicest pressings of the Grape/ The Best of this Age, concerning the Excellences of the Poets of Every Region") (for an item from which see 2.3.2. below) alerts its readers to this. Titles are often echoes of earlier titles in a literary tradition, and this too should be taken into account in order to grasp the cultural dialogue in which an author positions himself: the Sulāfaʾ’s typical bipartite rhyming title advertises the fact that its contents are modern, not antiquarian, but at the same time pays punning homage to earlier compendia of ‘modern’ men (and occasionally women) of letters going all the way back to the founder of the genre, Yatīmat al-dābir fī mahāsin ahl al-ʿarīf (‘The Unique Pearl of All Time concerning the Excellences of the People of this Age’) of ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿalībī (d.429/1038) – a venerable lineage, whose originator’s programme was to demonstrate the vigour of contemporary Arabic writing east and west regardless of the dissolving and reconfiguring of political ties, a programme proudly continued by his successors in the face of ever greater changes to the map of Arabic influence.

The pressure of precedent is inescapable, and it is an open question to what extent any particular author controls it: if a biographical dictionary is a container, then what it contains is more than a certain number of freely selected biographical akhbār, and more than authorial intention in arranging and editing them. It contains both the archaeology of the genre – strata of biographical deposits and formats – and a living chain of debate with other practitioners of biography, and perhaps even with other genres, although this is an avenue which has not yet been explored.

Authorial intention may, in addition, waver or digress; but it must still be taken seriously. The pressures upon it are unpredictable, for the biographer is not an intellectual machine but has flesh and blood loyalties. On the level of the individual biography, the interplay between container and contained is sometimes such that it is not easy to say which provides the metatext for the other. This is particularly the case when a sympathetic biographer yields to the imaginative sway of a biographical subject, or to the charisma of someone whom he has known personally.

Thus, to take a first example, the surviving biographies of Dāwūd al-Anṭākī, a physician and theosopher who died at the end of the sixteenth or beginning of the seventeenth century AD, all quote or echo his obiter dicta and respond strongly to the portrait he drew of himself in his main works and the autobiographical interview that he granted to an admiring pupil, Darwīsh Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Ṭalūwī (d.1014/1606). I shall summarise this remarkable document, which is constructed on a schema of divine justification, before showing how it impressed itself upon three other biographers – al-Khafājī, Ibn Maʿṣūm and al-Muḥibbī – supplying the metatext against which their biographies should be read and dictating the shape of their narratives.20

20 Among modern scholars, al-Anṭākī’s autobiography, quoted not from al-Ṭalūwī but from al-Muḥibbī (see 2.3.2. below, end) or other later sources, has been paraphrased by historians of science, who view al-Anṭākī as the last representative in Islam of scientific medicine, but it has never been analysed critically by them, nor related to al-Anṭākī’s thought and writings. For a discussion and bibliography, see Julia Bray, “Dāwūd ibn ʿUmar al-Anṭākī”, in Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350–1850, eds. J. Lowry and D. Stewart (Wiesbaden, 2009), pp. 49–56.
2.3.1. The schema of an apologia pro vita sua

In the Arabic biographical tradition, especially from around the eleventh century AD, when it becomes standard practice to concern oneself with the present as well as the past, subjects are often asked for details about their lives — their place of birth, for example — or those of their relatives, but it is rare for them to produce either a life-story or an apologia; yet this apparently is what happened when al-Ṭāluwī, who in 1590–91 studied in Egypt with al-_antkī, asked him where he had been born and educated. The resulting autobiography is in rhymed prose (saj‘), the preferred medium of formal communication between persons of high culture, which offers the possibility, exploited by al-antkī, of speaking in riddles and codes. These are, indeed, preferred to hard data: al-antkī does not communicate his date of birth or any other dates in his career. The following abridged paraphrase sacrifices style in order to bring out the overriding structural feature of the document: its emphasis on spiritual, moral, initiatory and prophetic lineage.

Born, by chance, in Antioch, I had no subsequent connection with the city. [This explains away his “surname”, al-antkī, ‘of Antioch’ — and perhaps marks him out as a free spirit without real local attachments. Later, al-antkī will depict himself as a stranger in Egypt, his home of many years.] Stricken with paralysis, when my years equalled the number of the travelling stars [i.e. the seven planets: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, the Moon], my father, headman of the village of Sīdī Ḥābib al-Najjār, a man of noble character and standing, having set up a ribāt [hospice] nearby with cells and food for residents and pilgrims, I was carried there daily. [Sīdī Ḥābib al-Najjār must have been a local saint and al-antkī’s father a Šūfī; al-antkī defines only his father’s current social and spiritual status; he does not give his ancestry] Having by this time memorised the Qur’ān and mastered the rudiments of education, in private prayer I begged the Governor of the World and Originator of the Universe [qayyim al-‘ālam . . . mubdi‘ al-kull] to tell me what would become of me. [These terms foreshadow al-antkī’s later theosophical belief system.]21 Thereupon ‘there came a man from the furthest part of the city, running’, [Qur’ān 28: 20]22 [an allusion to the story of the deliverance of Moses] and took up his abode in the ribāt. A wanderer like the Moon, this Persian, Muhammad Sharif, stayed long enough to give one of the Šūfīs some instruction in divinity, in which I showed myself more advanced than he. He questioned me, but I could only weep . . .

The stranger cures the child’s paralysis (al-antkī the physician describes the process in detail); the boy rises up and walks into the presence of his father, who “went back rejoicing to his people” (Qur’ān 84:9, adapted; the verse refers to the soul which is justified on the Day of Judgment). He studies logic, mathematics and natural philosophy with the stranger, who then, instead of agreeing to teach him Persian, teaches him Greek, saying: “I know of no-one on earth who knows it but myself; — and so it is now with me as it was then with him”, says al-antkī. The stranger departs; al-antkī’s father dies; his misfortunes drive him into exile in Egypt, but he stops on the way to study with the Shi‘ite masters of Jabal ‘Āmil and the Sunnī masters of Damascus; to the former he alludes enigmatically; the latter he enumerates. In Egypt, so impenetrable are the inhabitants to any understanding of divine

perfection that he finds himself like Adam cast out of paradise, or — quoting the arrogant poet al-Mutanabbi (d. 354/965), famous for his embittered aphorisms and suspect beliefs — “like the Messiah among the Jews, or Šālih [the Qur’anic prophet] among Thamūd” (an ancient Arabian people destroyed for their incredulity).23

Al-Ṭaluwī surrounds this autobiographical nugget with a detailed overview of al-Anṭāki’s philosophical beliefs, both Peripatetic and Illuminationist, and of the works which he studied with him and received a licence to transmit (his record of their association is, after all, part of his own intellectual autobiography, which is an account of his relations with the famous men he sought out in order to advance his career).24 He makes much of al-Anṭāki’s diagnostic powers, his intellectual prowess, and of his spiritual insight, piety and holiness, exceptional even among Sūfis, but he makes only passing reference to his blindness, coupling him with the great blind philosopher-poet Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma’arrī (d. 449/1058) and, when describing the warmth of their relationship, likening him to the Qur’anic Jacob — “I was to him like the shirt of Joseph ... for joy he nearly regained his sight”.25 He makes no mention of his death, or of the controversy which surrounded his last years: the accusation of heresy which drove him into exile in Mecca, where he died. Since he himself died only a little later than al-Anṭāki and records his last contact with him, a letter which he sent him from Damascus, in 999/1591, shortly after taking leave of him,26 in all probability he had not heard of his troubles.

2.3.2. Sympathetic configuration: hagiographies

Ahmad ibn Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭājī (d. 977/1659) was also a pupil of al-Anṭāki, with whom he studied medicine “and other subjects”. This is the only hard fact contained in his brief notice of him apart from a summary bibliography at the end. Unlike al-Ṭaluwī, he knew about the latter part of al-Anṭāki’s life, and the prose poem in saj‘ that he devotes to him is an implicit rebuttal of the accusation of heresy, structured around the paradox of the sightless seer in whom blindness is a mark of grace. Like al-Anṭāki himself, he draws justification from the Qur’ān (22: 46: “It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts [of Thamūd, and those who rejected Moses, etc.] within the breasts”). Again like al-Anṭāki he uses coded references: “But he followed the path of the wise [= Illuminationists] and the way of the drinking-companions [Sūfis], and this is why many men’s voices were raised against his beliefs ... when the murmurs had become loud against him, he went away to the Ancient House (Mecca), and death, ‘from every deep ravine’, went about it with him (Qur’ān 22:...

25Al-Ṭaluwī, Śāniḥāt, ii, pp. 38 (al-Anṭāki’s Sūfism), 32 (al-Anṭāki compared to al-Ma’arrī), 34 (al-Anṭāki compared to Jacob).
26Al-Ṭaluwī, Śāniḥāt, ii, pp. 120–123.
he ‘fulfilled his vow by death’ [like those who were ‘true to their covenant with God’, 33: 23] and met his Lord’. 27

Al-Khafaji reproduces the broad outline of al-Anṭāki’s own account of his trajectory, that of a man marked by grace whose destiny nevertheless takes him into exile among spiritual enemies, suppressing the narrative of the earliest part of his life but adding to the apologetic schema a brief narrative of the latter part, and employing some of al-Anṭāki’s own devices of allusive justification and coding. His account is extremely short and elliptical, marries rhymed prose and poetic quotations with great literary elegance, and is aimed at sympathisers, indeed initiates. The title of his work, Rayḥānat al-alibba’ wa-zahrat al-ḥayāt al-dunyā, suggests that wise readers (al-alibba’) are expected to take an otherworldly view of “the flower of the present life” (zahrat al-ḥayāt al-dunyā, Qur’ān 20: 131), the “sweet herb” (rayḥān) spoken of in the Qur’ān as being associated with paradise.

Our third biographer, ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd ibn Māʾṣūm, (1052-1107/1642-1705) builds both upon Ibn Khafaja and on a sympathetic reading of al-Anṭāki’s own writings. The sightless seer marked by grace is identified from the outset with the soul rendered clear-eyed on Judgment Day (Qur’ān 50: 22), setting the tone for an account which, like al-Khafaji’s, omits the childhood autobiography and moves straight to an outline of al-Anṭāki’s successful career in Egypt, rounded off with a select but detailed bibliography. After the pause afforded by the bibliography, a swift narrative relates the growing jealousy of the local Egyptian men of learning and their accusations of heresy, about whose content Ibn Māʾṣūm is specific (“They declared that his opinions were those of the ancient philosophers and sages: that he believed the world to be eternal”, etc.) Here the justificatory schema of the Qur’anic Moses is invoked in direct quotations: “So he departed therefrom, fearful and vigilant; he said, ‘My Lord, deliver me from the people of the evildoers’” (28: 21). Like Moses confounding Pharaoh’s henchmen, he “cast down his staff” (28: 31, etc.), and he ended his journey in the Prophet’s “land secure” (95: 3). The catastrophe of his exile is thereby transformed into a triumph: he ends his days prized and honoured by the governor of the Holy Places. The biography – which is, after all, part of a work devoted to poets (see 2. 3. above) – concludes with seven short quotations from al-Anṭāki’s mystical love poetry. 28

Ibn Māʾṣūm’s brisk saj’ carries echoes both of al-Anṭāki’s beliefs and of remarks in self-praise not recorded by al-Ṭālūwī: a microcosm bearing the macrocosm within himself, “he was a world [ʿālīm] in the person of single man of learning [ʿālim],” 29 a mountain visible from afar [ʿalam] on which were rebuilt [shuyyidat biḥ] the vanished schools of learning [maʿālim].” It is able to include, without breaking step, the biographer’s own voice, that of al-Anṭāki (his famous boast, first attested by Ibn Khafaja, which belongs among his obiter

28 ‘Alī ibn ʿAbd ibn Māʾṣūm, Sulṭānat al-ʿaqr fi mahāsīn al-ṣhuʿārā’ bi-kull miṣr (Cairo, 1324), pp. 420-422.
29 One of al-Anṭāki’s works is an abridged compendium of all the sciences, al-Nuzha al-mubhija ji tashhidh al-adhān wa-ta’dal al-αmzija, ed. I. A. al-Muntafiki al-Riḍā’ī (Beirut, 1420/1999).
30 Shayyada is a favourite word of al-Anṭāki’s to describe his own activities as a restorer of true learning, see Nuzha, pp. 31, 32. I am grateful to Professor Remke Kruk for pointing out parallels between some of al-Anṭāki’s autobiographical stances and those of Ibn Sinā (which in turn are modelled on the biography of Aristotle, see Dimitri Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works [Leiden, 1988], pp. 194-198). It is appropriate that Ibn Māʾṣūm incorporates Avicennan autobiographical conceits into his biography of al-Anṭāki, for al-Anṭāki was a great student of Avicenna.
dicta, of surpassing the great physicians of the past, Ibn Sinā [Avicenna, d.428/1037] and Ibn Dāniyāl [d.710/1310]), the rhyming titles of his works, and the voices of the Qurʾān and Moses, not to mention the name of the governor of the Holy Places, the date of al-ʾAntākī’s death and the precise accusations made against him. Textual consistency combined with what looks like factual exactness makes the apologetic thrust of the piece persuasive.

Our final hagiographer, Muḥammad ibn al-ʾAmin al-Muhībbī (d.1111/1699), devotes some nine pages to al-ʾAntākī in his biographical dictionary of notables who lived in his own century. He quotes the autobiography in full, and his first four pages consist entirely of quotations or abridgements from al-Ṭāluwī, including verse quotations on philosophical topics which al-Ṭāluwī records al-ʾAntākī as having been fond of reciting. The dominant technique of the whole piece is in fact quotation. The accusation of heresy is briefly outlined and dismissed; the passage in al-ʾAntākī’s Tadhkira which gave rise to it is identified. After this there follows a three-page series of quotations within quotations, abridged, from one of al-ʾAntākī’s biographers whose work is no longer extant, on the accusation that he was a Shiʿite, also dismissed by al-Muhībbī. Next comes a bibliography compiled by al-Muhībbī himself, which he claims is fuller than al-Ṭāluwī’s. (It is.) This bibliography seems to have a similar structural function to Ibn Maʿṣūm’s: it affords a moment of pause and adjustment before narrative is resumed with the launching of the final, dramatic phase of the biography. This consists of a collage of quotations from three new biographers and of unattributed stories quoted by al-Muhībbī himself in illustration of al-ʾAntākī’s quasi-miraculous powers of not only medical but moral diagnosis, and of moral as well as medical healing. They clearly stand in symmetry with the autobiographical passage quoted at the beginning of the entry in which al-ʾAntākī described his own quasi-miraculous healing and initiation into knowledge by the Persian stranger.

2.3.3. Transferred functions

The space that al-Muhībbī allows to argument about al-ʾAntākī’s beliefs by a hostile biographer, largely consisting of the citation of dogmatic proof texts that have no bearing on the events of al-ʾAntākī’s life, points up the fact that components which one might imagine had no part in the materials of a biography may form a crucial part of the process of biographical reflection. Al-Muhībbī foregrounds them and integrates them into the biography, and thereby acknowledges that biography is not just a record but also a debate. It is not simply that a man may, in his lifetime, have ill-wishers who misrepresent him: once he is dead, his identity becomes a matter of opinion. The sophisticated art of al-Khafajī and Ibn Maʿṣūm is employed in the denial of this fact: they disdain overt argument with those who reject him, and instead represent the true Antākī as lifted above dispute by analogy with the

31 Ibn Khafaja, Rayhāna, ii, p. 118.
33 Al-Muhībbī, Khulūṣa, ii, pp. 140–144 quoting al-Ṭāluwī, Šanībat, ii, pp. 32–38, 1.8; p. 38, l.10 – p. 39, l.3, with abridgements and variants; p. 39, ll.4–9, and ll.9–14 abridged; p. 40–p. 41, l.7, omitting the last 29 lines of the poem; and p. 51, ll.1–5 with variants.
34 Al-Muhībbī, Khulūṣa, ii, pp. 146–147.
salvation story of Moses. In the end, al-Muḥībī does something similar. Although deeply learned, and knowledgeable about the works of al-安东īkī, he chooses to produce proofs of al-安东īkī’s religious soundness not in the form of a disputation but of story-telling.

Complex biographies such as al-Muḥībī’s life of al-安东īkī are a mosaic of registers and genres, the functions of their different components often being transferred or interchanged for argumentative or interpretative purposes: narrative succeeds debate, and borrows its functions; symmetry and repetition act as confirmation and proof, revealing the full range of the functions they have been made to bear only at the end of a long and varied expository process. The ability to load biographical components with multiple functions by virtue of their positioning is illustrated in my last example, another instance of sympathetic biography whose structure is, at the same time, a masterpiece of analytical plotting.

3. Analytical plotting

Yāqūt (d.626/1229), a slave of Byzantine extraction employed by a Baghdad merchant, educated himself and became passionately attached to Arabic letters. Once emancipated, he worked as a copyist and travelling bookseller; this gave him access to a wide stock of written sources as well as enabling him to be in personal contact with many of the leading literary figures of his day. In his dictionary of men of Arabic letters of all periods, Mu’jam al-adabā’, he combines the techniques of the source scholar and the field worker.35 He worked on the (unfinished) dictionary throughout his life, and its alternative title of Irshād al-arīb ilā ma’rifat al-adīb (‘The Intelligent Person’s Guide to Recognising the Man of adab’) should be taken seriously as indicating that this is not merely a set of biographies but also an epistemological enquiry into culture (adab) and its bearers (udabā, sing. adīb), adab being one of the central values of the society of his time, implying the mastery of literature and learning and a combination of worldly savoir-faire and moral distinction.

Lacking family and lineage himself, Yāqūt was particularly dazzled by the aristocratic ʿAlī ibn Yusuf al-Qīṭī, known by his honorific of al-Qādī al-Akrān (“qādī” at this time, in the Ayyūbid domains, meant a vizier or high-ranking administrator rather than a judge), who had shown him some kindness36 and who, like his father and grandfather before him, exercised adab not only as a private man of letters but also as an administrator and statesman, the supreme ambition of the literati of his day; he was in the employ of the Ayyūbids of Aleppo. Yāqūt’s biography of al-Qīṭī was put together during his lifetime — indeed, al-Qīṭī was to survive him (he died in 646/1248); and perhaps for this reason, Yāqūt preferred an elaborate ring structure to a linear narrative. The device enables him to bring sense of completeness to the description of a life that is still being lived. His portrait of al-Qīṭī is made up of some thirteen items arranged round a central bibliography. They mirror, anticipate and complement each other, and include episodes from al-Qīṭī’s own life, and from those


of his father, mother, grandfather and grandmother, narrated by himself, as well as examples of his own verse and prose. These materials were told to Ya‘qūt by al-Qīfī, or dictated by him, as Ya‘qūt informs the reader, but it is Ya‘qūt who selects the items, organises and frames them. The latticework of frames holding the pieces in place is discreet, but its repeated “he told me”, “he recited to me”, etc., emphasise that this is a collaborative biography (or autobiography). In some senses it is almost a double autobiography, so pervasive is Ya‘qūt’s presence as confidant and transmitter. At the same time, it is a collective portrait of a dynasty in which al-Qīfī’s mother is as much distinguished by her adab as are the menfolk, and of which al-Qīfī himself is the crowning glory.

Al-Qīfī’s remarks in his own biographical dictionary of grammarians reveal him to have been abundantly vain, yet the complex macro and microstructure of his portrait suggest that, if it was he who prompted its programme, its implementation was due to Ya‘qūt’s inspired eye for detail. It unfolds as follows:

1. Paternal genealogy and tribal affiliation, going back to one of the great pre-Islamic tribal groupings;
2. Professional affiliation: al-Qīfī’s own and his father’s position and accomplishments;
3. Mother’s tribal lineage; her own mother’s background; parents’ marriage: his father falls in love with his mother instantly on a horse-buying trip among the Arabs of the desert (all in third-person narrative and simple language); this leads seamlessly into first-person narratives by al-Qīfī of his mother’s Arab ways, adab, piety and love for her son, and
4. A youthful episode in Qift in Egypt (where the family had settled in the previous generation) involving al-Qīfī, a kitten and the neighbour’s beautiful daughters; he fibs to his mother, but she proves impossible to deceive and delivers a noble admonition. (In conversational register, this at first looks like a story told by al-Qīfī against himself; in fact it reveals not only his mother’s moral and literary sensibilities but his own. Self-praise in the form of self-deprecation will be a recurrent technique of the autobiographical materials with which al-Qīfī supplies Ya‘qūt.)
5. Intertwined first-person narratives: al-Qīfī gives his date and place of birth and place of upbringing, and Ya‘qūt ties himself into the picture: the beginning of his association with al-Qīfī (undated); his status as an intimate eyewitness to his extraordinary talents and learning, which will be further attested to in the bibliography (see Section 6, and note that what here looks like a random hyperbolic string of heads of praise is organised according to epistemological categories and will in fact be borne out in detail by the bibliography). Meanwhile there follow as proof-texts of his talents six specimens of al-Qīfī’s occasional compositions, consisting of (i), (ii): two pieces of satirical verse, “recited to me in his own home in Aleppo in Jumādā II 613/October 1216”, followed by (iii), (iv): two epistles in rhymed prose, of increasing linguistic difficulty, the first an apologia for a troubled phase in his own career (undated), the second showing his magnanimity to a colleague in trouble; (v): four extracts from a political poem in praise of the former ruler of Aleppo, al-Malik al-Zahir Ghāzī ibn Yūsuf (see (g) below), and (vi): an extract from another political panegyric, showing al-Qīfī’s skill in handling allusion to the great

classical poets Abū Tammām (d. 232/845) and al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) as well as his mastery of Qur’ānic allusion, which was also demonstrated in (iv). (6) Bibliography. This needs, and receives, no comment from Yāqūt: it demonstrates an enormous range of accomplishment, not just in subjects such as Arabic language and the religious sciences, but also in history, including that of the contemporary Muslim world, both east and west — a tacit reflection of al-Qīfī’s qualifications as a statesman. (7) Yāqūt resumes his role as narrator and witness, and introduces a new motif as he continues the panegyric of the opening passage of (5): al-Qīfī’s love of books, whose company he prefers to the fuss of high office, in which he is nevertheless so efficient and so morally upright, as a military as well as civil administrator, that he is wooed by princes (dates and names are supplied). (8) Stands in symmetry to (4): a story in conversational register told by al-Qīfī’s father (Yūsuf, al-Qādī al-Ashraf) about his relations with his own father (Ibrāhīm, al-Qādī al-Amjad). Arriving in Egypt, the pair find no horses to convey them, only donkeys, which greatly displeases Yūsuf. Ibrāhīm embarrassingly accosts various passers-by and asks them (the irony is directed at his snobbish son) if they know who al-Qādī al-Amjad and al-Qādī al-Ashraf are; they have never heard of them. Al-Qīfī’s father takes the moral lesson to heart, while remaining passionately interested in horseflesh (this links up with (3), the occasion of his meeting with al-Qīfī’s mother). (9) In symmetry with the epistles and public poems of (5), another example of an ornate chancery epistle by al-Qīfī: deploying Qur’ānic quotations and counter-Crusading rhetoric, it celebrates an alliance between al-Malik al-Zāhir Ghāzī of Aleppo (r. 582–613/1186–1216), the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (r. 575–622/1180–1225) and the Assassins against the Franks, resulting in the latter’s evacuation of Ḥisn al-Khawābī; al-Malik al-Zāhir pays for its repair and restores it to the Assassins. (The slogans adorn a statesmanlike account of a pragmatic campaign.) A dated autobiographical incident in conversational register: on a Friday at the end of 618/1221, an encounter with a drunkard and a poor man ruined by an uncanonical tax move al-Qīfī to demand of the regent of Aleppo that he remove unjust taxes and renounce the profitable but un-Islamic state tax on wine; he agrees, and al-Qīfī draws up thirteen chancery copies of the promulgation in his own hand. (11) Yāqūt relates al-Qīfī’s father’s high standing in Saladin’s administration, despite which he retired to Yemen, where he died in 624/1226; (12) fourteen/sixteen years earlier, as al-Qīfī relates in conversational register, father and son performed the Pilgrimage together. Edifying anecdote demonstrating al-Qīfī’s quasi-supernatural moral intuition. (13) Still in conversational register, he relates a more recent instance of the same to Yāqūt: his refusal to dine with the regent of Aleppo off dishes he rightly suspected to be of morally tainted provenance; the self-deprecating stance of al-Qīfī is foregrounded in both episodes. (14) The closing episode of the biography: al-Qīfī’s desire to secure a choice item for his library is thwarted by a chancery official in the employ of another Ayyūbid ruler. The gleefully satirical ornate epistle that al-Qīfī sends him demonstrates the full range of his literary accomplishments.

Yāqūt planned this biography to be unpacked gradually, revealing a message about al-Qīfī’s moral lineage and unfaltering moral status that only gains in strength and unity across a complex, non-linear chronology, which Yāqūt is careful to underscore in most instances by citing precise dates or other historical landmarks. The links in al-Qīfī’s Arab pedigree

40 In an earlier discussion of this passage, I confused the generations, see Bray, “Yāqūt’s interviewing technique”, p. 208.
41 For the action, which took place in 611/November 1214, see R. Stephen Humphreys, From Saladin to the Mongols. The Ayyūbids of Damascus 1193–1260 (Albany, 1977), p. 137, and Anne-Marie Edde, La Principauté ayyoubide d’Alep (579/1183–658/1260) (Stuttgart, 1999), pp. 82, 447. Neither Humphreys nor Edde cites al-Qīfī’s account, which we may take as being the official report.
are gradually revealed to be more than claims to social distinction: they are an ethical inheritance, reinforced by his Bedouin mother's virtues and graces and his father's and grandfather's professional eminence and humility. The alternation of conversational and chancery styles gradually reveals its role in this schema: eminence and humility likewise alternate in al-Qiftī; his mature professional competences are astounding, but he never - on his own showing - loses the childlike simplicity of vision that makes him an independent moral agent. (Al-Qiftī had a brother who also held high office, but it is remarkable that in Yāqūt's portrait he stands alone as heir to his parents' virtues and father's and grandfather's prestige as statesmen). Using the ring structure of his biography to set in motion a play of anticipation and episodic fulfilment, even the most apparently trite and flaccid epithets trotted out by Yāqūt in praise of al-Qiftī’s intellectual prowess turn out to be more than justified by the examples he quotes and the range of topics covered in al-Qiftī’s bibliography; and having established the moral seriousness that marks him out as a man and a statesman, it is quite safe for Yāqūt to choose, as the note on which to end the biography, an instance of the “cheerfulness and gaiety” that he described as being among al-Qiftī’s virtues at (5) and illustrated at (5) (i) and (ii).

4. Conclusion: identification, identity, and the literary standing of ‘life writing’

The number of medieval and early modern Arabic works partly or wholly devoted to biography is enormous: it is clear that, in the culture, questions of identification and identity were a major preoccupation over a long period. Identification is a matter of names, dates and places, but it often happens that some or many of these basic data are unascertainable, as is the case with all the ‘life writings’ considered here except the last. Identificatory data are rarely the sole or main focus of ‘life writing’; identity is instead seen to reside in the quality of a life. But it is a tenuous thing, at the mercy of disagreements about a subject’s beliefs, or even confusions in the spelling of their name, and it is capable of being shaped into very different literary artefacts by different writers. That all that remains of a person after death, even where firm facts can be, and are, gathered, is a literary tradition - of anecdote, of controversy - is tacitly and unanimously agreed. The great importance of this fragile and mutable legacy is also an agreed matter.

When we consider the sheer mass of Arabic ‘life writing’, of which, still, only a tiny fraction has been examined in any detail, it may be hard to credit that any great proportion of its components may be as carefully thought out and constructed as the examples discussed in this article. And yet these examples are a fairly random sample. Thoughtful and artful composition is more probably the rule than the exception. In this light, should we not revise our expectations of Arabic ‘life writing’ as a genre? Until now, it has been viewed chiefly as an ancillary to history, and its literary qualities have rarely aroused interest. In this article, I have tried to argue that we should instead begin to think about it as one of the culture’s major literary traditions.

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42 On the brother and other relatives who held office, see Eddé, La Principauté ayoubide, pp. 314, 315.