

Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī, *Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded*. Edited and translated by HUMPHREY DAVIES. 2 vols. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. lviii + 425; viii + 541. \$40 each.

Muḥammad ibn Maḥfūz al-Sanhūrī, *Risible Rhymes*. Edited and translated by HUMPHREY DAVIES. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. xiv + 105. \$30.

The two books under review have much in common. In the former, a monumental two-volume tome titled *Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf*, translated as “Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded,” Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī (fl. ca. 1046–1111/1636–1700), a sometime bookseller in Upper Egypt, ridicules what he sees as his countrymen’s stupidity and ignorance by way of a commentary on a poem attributed to one Abū Shādūf. The latter, a much thinner booklet with a mouthful of a title, *Kitāb Muḍḥik dhawī l-dhawq wa-l-nizām fī ḥall shadhara min kalām min ahl al-rif al-‘awāmm* (The Book to Bring a Smile to the Lips of Devotees of Taste and Proper Style through the Decoding of a Sampling of the Verse of the Rural Rank and File, simply translated as “Risible Rhymes”), attributed to another virtually unknown poet from Upper Egypt and composed around the year 1058/1648, explores a potpourri of “rural” poetry. Parodying the classical verse-and-commentary genre, both shed significant light on the contemporary literary culture and society in rural Ottoman Egypt, displaying an intense preoccupation with wordplay, grammar, and stylistics. The seemingly odd obsession with grammar, of all things, certainly has to do with the authors’ siting, a salon (*majlis*) where men of culture (*ahl al-adab*) in rural areas gathered and paraded their literary knowledge. The results were this kind of peculiar and oftentimes strange text where two reasonably well-versed men poke fun at the coarse mannerisms, in life and writing, of their fellow peasant poet-wannabes, showing off their supposedly refined verbal skills, along with their intimate insights into various facets of country life.

Brains Confounded is unarguably the weightier of the two, comprising nearly 1,000 pages worth of raucous and digressive discourse. In volume one, the author begins his assault on the country folks with “their names, nicknames, their women during intercourse, and their weddings.” He then moves on to their “escapades”; their pastors’ “ignorance, imbecility, and injustice to Religion”; their poets and “their idiocies and inanities,” with extensive quotes; and the “ignorance and misguided practices of their dervishes (Sufis).” Volume two contains a line-by-line commentary of the rural poem in question, which consists of merely forty-seven lines. The bulky commentary is replete with fastidious quotes on fish (and salty fish), love, male friendship, grey hair, and farting, among other things.

To help the reader approach this unusual and bizarre text, Humphrey Davies’s introduction sheds considerable light on its social context and literary characteristics. Beyond the customary information about the author, the work, context, and sources, one finds an overview of al-Shirbīnī’s countryside, described as “a hierarchy of settlements” made up of three types—the peasant cultivator, the rural men of religion, and the rural Sufis. This is followed by an analysis of the art of satire and parody. Davies suggests that al-Shirbīnī’s satire on rural life stemmed from his constructing a moral framework by way of which he gained authority for passing judgment on and issuing condemnation of his countrymen, their alleged coarseness, stupidity, and abuses, in contrast to the refinement of the idealized cultural elites. In this regard, Davies argues that these digressions may be understood as examples of one of the tactics in al-Shirbīnī’s strategy in satire, namely, “the disassociation of the author from his subject,” thus situating himself in the position of an authority qualified to engage in a broad discourse of things (vol. 1, p. xxi). Apparently, the audience was his fellow “men of culture,” if not necessarily the ulema proper, or religious scholars-cum-teachers-cum-jurists. In literary terms, al-Shirbīnī’s assault on the contemporary literary culture centered around his elaborate parody of the genre of *sharḥ*, or textual commentary. It is indeed an all-out attack: all the major conventions—verse meter, etymology, verbal paradigms, morphological patterns, as well as the use of lexical authorities, probative verse quotations, and the rhetorical debate—were targets (vol. 1, p. xlii). In al-Shirbīnī’s rural society, the absurdities of the real world mirrored the sabotaged grammar. In both realms, subversion and affirmation are two sides of the same coin. While parodies of grammar or philological conventions were frequent in Mamluk poetry as well, this Ottoman rural text took it to a new level. Ironically, the text also is evidence that al-Shirbīnī himself was not a fine stylist—his command of grammar is questionable at times. All said, this quirky text certainly opens a unique window onto the society, mentality, literacy, and language of the time and place. It is a precious source for the study of Ottoman Egyptian rural society and literary

culture, and an entertaining read, despite being repetitive and overbearing at times. The meticulous notes—more than 1,200 in total—provide information on persons, places, and historical events, as well as linguistic and cultural comments on premodern Egyptian rural life.

Risible Rhymes is a much lesser work that offers various rural verses with a focus on so-called puzzle poems; its additional value lies in its preservation of some material similar to that of *Brains* with more variants.

One of the treats of reading these two titles is the lucid and imaginative English translation. For a complicated text like *Brains Confounded* and an uneven one like *Risible Rhymes*, the translation is thankfully reliable and delightfully readable. Simplified and minimized are the cumbersome grammatical terms that are largely irrelevant to the context (for example, the lengthy “qualifier” for each letter of the alphabet). On the other hand, attempts were made to render rhetorical highlights—punning, metaphors, and similes—with great care. In *Brains Confounded*, for example, the clever pun on “cotton (*quṭn*)” and “cotton out (*qaṭanū*)” one’s eyes (vol. 1, p. 89) is typical; and there are plenty. Another high point is the amusing rendering of the numerous “funny names” (for examples, vol. 1, pp. 25–29, 361–69; vol. 2, pp. 423–27), a hallmark of Egyptian humor in popular literature, also seen in *sira*-epics and shadow plays. Furthermore, the rhyme and rhythm of the original, in verse and rhymed-prose, have been somehow retained, with admirable creativeness. Take the following poem: “I saw him ring the bell and said, / ‘Who taught this fawn to ring the bell?’” // And, ‘Soul’, said I, ‘Which like you best? / The (w)ringing of the bell, or of your heart? Think well!’ (vol. 1, p. 247). Not only does the translation succeed in emulating the paronomasia (*jinās*) centered in *ḍarb*—ringing the bell (*ḍarb al-nāqūs*) and wringing the heart (*ḍarb al-naḥs*)—it is also achieved through the frisky tempo and rhyme similar to that of the original. Another strategy is to mock the corruptions in the original with deliberately corrupt English. Take this line: “If they ask you of my heart and what it suffered, / Say, ‘It suffered torably, torably, torably!’” where what was intended, *qul qāsā* (say, it suffered), was misspelled as *qulqās* (taro, a food item) thrice (vol. 2, p. 227). In *Risible Rhymes*, a similar strategy—of mocking the misuse of words, wrong rhymes, and rural pronunciation—is seen in the following: “By God, by God, the Mighty (*al-ʿaḍīm* [for *al-ʿaẓīm*]), the Omnipotent / He is cognizant of my secret and my clangers! (*khabāʿiṭī* [for *ẓawāḥiri*]) // If this unlucky heart of mine should turn again to thoughts of youse (*dhikirka-mū*) / I’ll cut it out of my heart with my fangers (*ṣawābiʿi* [for *ẓawāfirī*])” (pp. 8–9). These playful maneuvers might raise some eyebrows, but for this reviewer, given the nature and aim of the original texts, this bad English for bad Arabic feels just right.

Exemplary care went into the preparation of the two editions. *Brains Confounded* is a revised version of Davies’s 2005 edition, which was based on eight manuscripts and the 1858 Bulaq edition. The streamlined new edition omitted the textual variations and straightened the metrical violations of poetry in his earlier edition. *Risible Rhymes* was based on a sole manuscript. Corrections were made in the main text, with apparent errors in the manuscript registered in footnotes. In both editions, the orthography was standardized, except in passages of “rural” verse, where original spelling was retained, along with vocalizations added by the editor. This approach aims at a more consistent and readable presentation of two uneven and sometimes clumsy texts that feature irregularities of “Middle Arabic,” a spontaneous hybrid of the classical and the colloquial, with common traits such as, inter alia, the interchangeable *s/š*, *ḍ/ẓ* and a whimsical spelling of the *hamza*. (Regarding the latter, while the practice of *yāʾ* replacing the *hamza* or the switch between *alif* and *yāʾ* are common, cases of *yāʾ* replacing *hamza* in the accusative [vol. 1, p. 6, l. 4, *qāriʿahu*; p. 22, l. 6, *asmāʿahu*] are rarely seen.) In fact, both are by no means Middle Arabic texts per se. Given their stated goals, in the attack on the unorthodox language of rural simpletons, misspellings and provincial pronunciations are to be relentlessly mocked. This complication certainly poses a challenge for editing, and the result is admirable.

A few minor points do call for clarification and discussion. From the start, Davies explains that the colloquial spelling in *Brains Confounded* is retained when the poet “makes [it] explicit, e.g., *libbih* for *libbah*, *yiʿiffu* for *yaʿiffu*, or because the meter demands colloquial forms, e.g., *wa-yiʿaṭāz . . . wa-yijjaʿmas*,” and so forth (vol. 1, p. xlvi). I find this approach for the most part consistent and effective. However, occasionally the irregular spelling does not seem to be justified merely by metric requirements, for instance, vol. 1, p. 144, l. 14, *taṣṣaddara* (the standard *taṣaddara* actually scans the

meter, *al-ṭawīl*). As for vocalization, the painstaking work on the colloquial is marvelous. It would, however, have been helpful had some explanations with references been given. For example, in *Brains Confounded* one reads: *aniḍura* (*anzura*, vol. 1, p. 60, l. 3); *shabbihṭuki* (*shabbahtuki*; vol. 1, p. 264, l. 11, an Abū Nuwās quote); *muḥammad* (vol. 2, p. 14, l. 16); *yuhkum* (*yaḥkum*), *ʿalā kalbuhu* (*ʿalā kalbihi*), and *yaddalliʿ* (*yudalliʿ*, vol. 2, p. 16, ll. 16–17); *bi-ʿishqak* (*bi-ʿishqik*, vol. 2, p. 248, l. 3); and in *Risible Rhymes* one finds: *riwwiḍi* (*rawwiḍi*, p. 18). In these cases, it is hard to tell whether the irregular vocalization reflects rural pronunciation or is simply a typo.

Speaking of typos, I caught a few and they are all in *Brains Confounded*: vol. 1, p. 40, l. 1, *tanquda* (subjunctive); p. 168, l. 11, *farrāsh* (wrong *i* sign); p. 174, l. 5, *yuballu* (misplaced *shadda*); p. 178, l. 4, *lam yanfaʿka* (jussive); p. 178, l. 5, *bi-fajmatin*; p. 200, l. 3, *idhā shiʿta* (misplaced *sukūn* on *sh*); p. 234, l. 2, *bi-quwwah*; p. 246, l. 19, *wāw* occurs at the end of line; p. 310, l. 5, *fī kaffihi*; vol. 2, p. 8, l. 11, *taʿkhudhīn*; p. 46, l. 5, *qāla* (delete *shadda*); p. 150, l. 7, *min al-ḥabibi*; p. 170, l. 7, *ziyādat* (with *tāʾ marbūʿa*); p. 176, l. 13, *ʿinda ṣabīḥati*; p. 220, l. 12, *ghurābuhā* (delete *ḍamma* on *h*); p. 256, l. 7, *mushʿalatun* (odd *tanwīn* on *h* for *tāʾ marbūʿa*); p. 348, l. 18, *fī al-maqāli*; p. 380, l. 7, *ka-anna mashībahu*.

In sum, the two books are a remarkable achievement in many ways. The significance of the Arabic texts in question lies first and foremost in their unique rural setting, but also in their rich documentation of the vernacular poetry in the Ottoman Arab East, a subject that merits more research in its own right. The history of the publication and reception of and scholarly attention to *Brains Confounded* tells us a great deal about the changing attitudes regarding the definition of *turāth*, Arabic literary heritage, at large. In this connection, it should be pointed out that these two texts first garnered attention among Western scholars; Arab scholars quickly responded with their own probe, appraisal, and publication of *Brains Confounded*, but *Risible Rhymes*, now made available for the first time, has been long neglected in the Arab literary world. The decision to include these two non-canonic texts in the Library of Arabic Literature series makes an interesting and encouraging statement, to say the least.

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Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *Leg over Leg*. Edited and translated by HUMPHREY DAVIES. 4 vols. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013–2014. Pp. xl + 365; vii + 443; vii + 393; viii + 571. \$125 (set); \$40 each.

With this impressive edition and translation, Humphrey Davies has rendered one of the most challenging texts of Arabic literature, al-Shidyāq's *al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq*, accessible to a wide range of readers for the first time. Most histories of modern Arabic literature mention it, but what they say is generally based on impressions, if only because to read it conscientiously from cover to cover takes weeks or months rather than days. Now an enormous obstacle has been removed from the path of all those wanting to read and study this work.

Following the established format of the Library of Arabic Literature (LAL), the text and the translation on the facing page are preceded by a foreword, here contributed by Rebecca C. Johnson, a specialist in modern Arabic literature. It situates *al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq* in the general context of the *nahḍa*, the cultural awakening (or *risorgimento*, strictly speaking the equivalent of *nahḍa*) of the Arab world, which is customarily seen as starting in the nineteenth century and centered in Egypt. It outlines the life of (Aḥmad) Fāris al-Shidyāq from his birth in 1805 or 1806 in Lebanon to his death in Istanbul in 1887 and sketches the economic, social, and cultural changes taking place in his time, notably the development of printing. It then turns to *al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq*, which, with its very diverse types of text, cannot be assigned to any genre, and identifies the two main areas of investigation that the work announces: the Arabic language with its vast riches and women in all their variety. Johnson brings out well the “multi-register and multi-lingual cacophony” of the work. She also discusses its remarkable openness toward women and gender issues, even though she apparently follows Kamran Rastegar in seeing