

Persian original for the *Arabian Nights* frame story. Marzolph thus makes the case for Ottoman Turkish narrative literature as a contender for the transmission of tales like those of the *Arabian Nights* to the West well before Galland's translation.

Because each chapter in the first part of this book devotes only a handful of pages to broad topics, arguments are occasionally so condensed as to be difficult to follow: on p. 8, for instance, I could not understand whether the author was arguing that A.-R. Lesage had a great impact on Pétis de la Croix's *Les mille et un jours* or did not. Nevertheless, this book, with its precious and detailed summaries of the *Ferec's* twisty tales, its indices helping readers to locate motifs and parallels in the summaries, and several lists and tables comparing the contents of the most relevant tale collections, will serve as an essential and generous reference for further scholarship on this and many related narrative traditions.

ZINA MALEH  
UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA

Ibn Qutaybah. *The Excellence of the Arabs*. Edited by JAMES E. MONTGOMERY and PETER WEBB, translated by SARAH BOWEN SAVANT and PETER WEBB. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017. Pp. xxxiii + 297. \$40.

Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) was a prolific writer on a variety of topics—poetics, law, gambling, astronomy, literature, and religion. In Western scholarship he is mainly known for his early *adab* works, such as *Adab al-kātib* (The secretary's handbook) and *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* (Choice anecdotes), and less for his earlier, theological works on revealed texts, e.g., *Gharīb al-ḥadīth* (Rare expressions in hadīth) or *Taʿwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān* (Explanation of problematic passages in the Quran). There is, however, a common theme to all his works: “a concern to anchor Islamic civilization firmly in the Arabic language, and especially in the cultural heritage of the Arabs and of Arabia” (J. Lowry, “Ibn Qutaybah,” in *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, ed. M. Cooperson and S. Toorawa [Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005], 173). The text in hand, *Faḍl al-ʿArab wa-l-tanbīh ʿalā ʿulūmihā* (The excellence of the Arabs and their sciences), is a prime example of Ibn Qutayba's efforts in this direction since it is “one of the most explicit, sustained, and detailed descriptions of Arab identity written before modern times” (p. xii). It comprises two extended essays: “Book One: Arab Preeminence” and “Book Two: The Excellence of Arabic Learning,” in which Ibn Qutayba “addresses one of the central questions confronting his writerly community and its elite patrons” (p. x): What did it mean to be Arab?

In their introduction, the translators situate Ibn Qutayba's writing in a time of political uproar that started with the fraternal civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, went through the replacement of the Arab military by non-Arab mercenaries and the move of the Abbasid capital from Baghdad to a newly established Samarra—where a fresh elite network of eastern Iranians was formed—and ended with the gradual fragmentation and practical bankruptcy of the Abbasid centralized caliphate. The translators emphasize that, as a state-appointed judge, Ibn Qutayba must have been fully aware of this political turmoil and its consequences for the elite position of the Arabs within Islamic society, since he lived during what is traditionally known as the “period of anarchy” that formally started with the murder of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 247/861).

Ibn Qutayba wrote *Faḍl al-ʿArab*, the translators add, “probably toward the end of his career, that is, during al-Muʿtamid's caliphate” (r. 256–279/870–892) (p. xii), which coincidentally went against the grain of the times because it constituted a temporary Abbasid revival. He furthermore penned his work when “many of his contemporaries began to drop the sense of Arabness from their identity. They spoke and wrote in Arabic, but they were . . . choosing to identify by . . . Persian and other ethnic affiliations” (p. xiii). *Faḍl al-ʿArab* is an engaging defense of the Arab cultural heritage against those who propagated equality (*ahl al-taswiya*, e.g., pp. 91–92) or, worse, belittled the Arabs. Ibn Qutayba's opponents are never individually named, but collectively referred to as *shuʿūbī*, translated as “Bigot.”

The *shuʿūbī* controversy is generally considered to be a movement of non-Arab or Iranian Muslim partisans promoting the worth of non-Arab Muslim populations, but the translators correctly caution us about assumptions because of the nonspecificity of both the identity of his opponents and of *shuʿūbiyya* as an ideology (p. xvi).

Two observations are called for. As a state-appointed judge, Ibn Qutayba would have been aware of the political turmoil in Iraq, but he lived and worked for twenty years (236–257/851–870) in the prosperous and politically stable town of Dinawar in Jibal. His judicial duties there apparently left him with much spare time and he likely did most of his writing—including penning *Faḍl al-ʿArab*—during these two decades (cf. Lowry). Also, Ibn Qutayba refers to his opponents only a few times as *shuʿūbī* but “Bigots” appears in the translation when the translators want to clarify the third person plural—“they say,” “their claim that,” or the like—so they themselves seem to have brushed aside their own warning not to see the work as an attack against a specific movement.

These two observations suggest that Ibn Qutayba was less preoccupied with the political turmoil in the heartland. Indeed, *Faḍl al-ʿArab* appears to be an attempt to “establish that Arab culture constituted a worthy heritage and that the Arabic language was a preeminently worthy language of which a Muslim of any background could be proud” (p. xiv) rather than a *radd ʿalā l-shuʿūbiyya* (Refutation of the “Bigots”), which completes the title of previous editions of the text. Stated differently, the non-Arab Ibn Qutayba considered that being a good Muslim included acknowledgement of the preeminence of the Arabs, and this conviction was in all likelihood what prompted him to write *Faḍl al-ʿArab*.

When it came to his unspecified opponents, however, Ibn Qutayba was harsh. He describes them as being either envious, low-class, and ignoble people who dare call the Arabs boorish and stupid or Aramaic-speaking [*sic*] riffraff, deserving to be taught a lesson. Despite such name-calling, his defense of the Arabs is eloquent, intelligent, and nuanced. Ibn Qutayba’s astute insights into human behavior and psychology are impressive and he addresses his readers rationally and sensibly to convince them of his position. When discussing the Arabs’ repulsive food and bad table manners, for instance, he writes, “All people experience hard times. Anyone without meat will eat jerboas and lizards, and anyone without water will drink camels’ blood” (§§1.9.6). Or, he argues, “The best foods are those you touch with your hand. The palm of your hand was created for this very purpose—for picking up food. It is foolish and strange to think that hands are unclean when they have been properly washed . . . . Cooks and bakers touch food with their hands, but people don’t think this is unclean and are perfectly comfortable with it” (§1.9.14).

In book one, Ibn Qutayba systematically reviews the stereotyped virtues of the Arabs—their genealogy, nobility, hospitality, and courage—and rebuts the manner in which these are attacked and disparaged in order to establish that it was no chance event that God made the Arabs his chosen people. People have many virtues and the Arabs are the best in this respect, for they are at the root of Islam. Ibn Qutayba notes that every group is made up of good and bad people, and so are the Arabs. Certainly, not all Arabs are noble, generous, and courageous, but the few obnoxious ones do not cancel out the magnanimity of the thousands of others and in no way detract from their good deeds (§1.9.4).

Islam itself establishes the relative value of all people. After Muslim Arabs come those who willingly became Muslims, then those who initially resisted, like the Easterners or Persians (*ʿajam, ahl Fāris*), who first fought the Muslims until they were defeated. To Ibn Qutayba’s mind, only very few Persians acquired exceptional religious knowledge (§1.13.2). Khurasanians (*ahl Khurāsān*, to whom Ibn Qutayba himself belonged), on the other hand, not only eagerly converted to Islam, but also helped to spread the Abbasid revolutionary mission. They are excellent subjects of the Islamic empire, faithful and obedient (§1.12.11), and among them are many accomplished scholars of hadith and jurisprudence, as well as paragons of pious devotion (§1.13.2).

Book two examines the wisdom of the Arabs to explain their exceptional achievements in Islamic knowledge, which is a product of Islam coupled with the Arabic language (thus, from the Arabs). Jurisprudence, grammar, and the study of poetic themes are particular to them. Therefore, non-Arabs, Ibn Qutayba avers, can only partake in these disciplines “by learning and parroting” (§2.1.3). He then quickly moves on to the fields of knowledge that are common to all, but in which the Arabs especially excelled, such as the Bedouin “sciences.” Unsurprisingly, Ibn Qutayba starts with horse husbandry and

notes that unlike Greeks, Persians, Indians, or Romans, the Arabs developed unique equine knowledge. They have names for each and every part of the horse (§2.2.1), and he proceeds to illuminate them in the next ten paragraphs. I am sure everyone will appreciate how difficult it is to turn this into English, the more so since Ibn Qutayba was proud of the immense and sophisticated vocabulary of Arabic (p. 229 n. 171). After discussing stars, physiognomy, soothsaying, and the like, the largest part of book two is devoted to language-related subjects: oratory, proverbs, and, above all, poetry, to establish the value of the Arab heritage.

Ibn Qutayba entertains us with interesting insights, such as that an Arab tribe without a poet is only known by highly specialized experts (§2.8.4)—he being one of them—or that Arabs were unlettered and forced to rely on poetry to record their deeds and bestow praise upon themselves (§2.8.16). He underlines the gargantuan force of poetry that can either extol groups or humiliate them (§2.8.31). Poetry is also beneficial in battle, when it can be used to calm the warriors (§2.8.38). To communicate desires, praise, boasts, rebukes, revilements, and much more, Ibn Qutayba assures us that nothing can match the efficacy of Arabic poetry (§2.8.36).

Ibn Qutayba cites wisdom poetry: “the tongue is as injurious as the hand”; “words pierce where the needle cannot” (§2.9.10); “life is but scarcity, anxiety, and hope” (§2.9.16), and treats it in his penultimate chapter. It is followed by a chapter that dazzlingly sums up aphorisms: “generosity is swift spending”; “the walls have ears”; “who dares, wins”; “don’t pee on a hill”; “don’t share a secret with a maid-servant”; “duck, and danger will miss you”; “evil begins in little things” (§2.10.7). Along with “joking breeds hatred”; “new ruler, new age”; “know your companion before taking to the road” and “know the neighbor before buying the house” (§2.10.8). Truly marvelous to read. As an aside, some of these aphorisms are still frequently used in modern Arabic.

Ibn Qutayba’s extraordinary erudition and literary skill are now on view in the LAL Arabic edition and translation at hand, *The Excellence of the Arabs*. It was no easy task to prepare the Arabic edition: the only extant manuscript (in Cairo’s *Dār al-Kutub*) is fragmentary and partly illegible. The editors puzzled out an excellent rendering of the Arabic text, relying on previous editions (notably the partial edition by M. Kurd ‘Alī [Cairo, 1954] and that by W. M. Khālīṣ [Abu Dhabi, 1998]) and collating parallel texts from Ibn Qutayba’s other works to restore lost passages and emend the text. Passages that could not be identified are duly marked by ellipses. All emendations are recorded in the footnotes, and, with no exception, the editors’ proposed changes are intelligent and wise. Unfortunately, one section of book two, on Bedouin medicine, seems to be completely lost. An anecdote that was probably part of this lost section (§2.3.22) is presented in translation by citing al-Dīnawarī (p. xxix), testifying to the misfortune of this section being lost.

The English translation is a page-turner. The Arabic is difficult, but the translators’ command is apparent in how they avoid the complex syntax, verbosity, and numerous repetitions that are characteristic of Classical Arabic. The judiciousness of the series’ decision to opt for English felicity over a more literal English rendering of the Arabic provides the reader with a genuine grasp of what Ibn Qutayba is really saying. All involved are to be congratulated!

The translation is further enhanced by numerous endnotes that clarify—for instance, Arabic word-play, sources, and utensils referred to—or provide a context for historical events. As is standard for LAL, people, tribes, places, and a number of key terms are included in a glossary; only thirteen names appeared to be unidentifiable. In addition, an extended glossary and a list of errata are available online.

MONIQUE BERNARDS  
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES, ANTWERP

---

*Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History*. By MONA HASSAN. Princeton: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. xv + 390. \$45, £37.95.

The caliphate has long been an elusive subject for scholars and nonscholars alike. This is especially so given that a universally recognized caliphate ceased to exist after 1924 and that most Muslims