

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

***Muqāranah*: The Art of Comparison in Premodern Arabo-Islamic Poetics**

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In the current educational landscape of North American and European institutions, comparative literature is still greatly influenced by Euro-American principles and methodologies. Edward Said compellingly argues that Eurocentric epistemology has perpetuated a false hierarchy wherein the modernity of Euro-American cultures diminishes the literary theories developed by premodern non-Europeans, relegating their texts to the status of mere objects of study within Euro-American analytical frameworks. Said elucidates how this false hierarchy asserts that scholarly discourse on comparative literature, world literature, and literary theory originated primarily from the perspectives of the Euro-American realm during the twentieth century:

To speak of comparative literature therefore was to speak of the interaction of world literatures with one another, but the field was epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy, with Europe and its Latin Christian literatures at its center and top. When Auerbach, in a justly famous essay entitled “Philologie der Weltliteratur,” written after World War Two, takes note of how many “other” literary languages and literatures seemed to have emerged (as if from nowhere: he makes no mention of either colonialism or decolonization), he expresses more anguish and fear than pleasure at the prospect of what he seems so reluctant to acknowledge. Romania is under threat. (45)

This fact has also been emphasized by Mohamad-Salah Omri, who contends that Arabic literature is consistently analyzed through a political lens in Euro-American universities. He asserts, “In most Western universities, Arabic literature is rarely studied by itself or for itself. It is subject to disciplinary traffic and intersections. . . .

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and to what might be called a political predicament” (731). However, the postcolonial shift has brought to light the insufficiency of exclusively Eurocentric methodologies when approaching literary cultures beyond Europe. This essay examines the practice of comparison in medieval Arabic literary criticism and reflects on its significance in the context of comparative literature as a discipline today. It begins by delving into the term مقارنة (*muqāranah*; “comparison”), noting that it was not specifically employed in premodern Islamic cultures to denote comparative literary interactions. The absence of this term should not lead contemporary scholars to assume that medieval Arabo-Islamic writers did not engage in comparative literary study.

The essay considers two instances of comparative practices of premodern Arabo-Islamic writers. The first focuses on multilingualism within the premodern Islamicate context. Tracing the evolution of premodern Arabic multilingualism holds the potential to reveal numerous aspects of the premodern Islamicate comparative mentality. The second example demonstrates how medieval scholars skillfully employed diverse forms of comparison, guiding their readers through a dynamic interplay among various literary genres and writers. The essay sheds new light on how medieval literary critics employed comparison when analyzing the aesthetics of poetry, literary prose, hadith, and the Qur’an.

The Term *Muqāranah* in Premodern Arabic Culture

The adjective *muqāran* (comparative) is derived from the Arabic verb *qārana*, which generally means “to compare” or “to contrast.” The three-letter root of this verb, قرن (*q-r-n*), is associated with various idioms that generate multiple meanings related to the act of bringing two different objects together, either literally or metaphorically. For instance, the medieval expression *qarana bayna al-zawjayn* (قرن بين الزوجين) means “to bring together the spouses,” and it signifies the act of fostering harmony and closeness between a married couple. Another expression, *qarana bayna al-qawl wa-l-‘amal* (قرن بين القول والفعل), means “to bring

together speech with action.” It emphasizes the importance of aligning one’s words with one’s actions, ensuring consistency between what is said and what is done. Additionally, the expression *qarana al-ḥajj wa-l-‘umrah* (قرن بين الحج والعمرة) refers to combining the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages during the same trip to Mecca (Al-Farāhīdī 382–84). The concept of bringing together two different items can be found in various metaphorical contexts. For example, the verb *qarana* was used in *jinās* (artistically employing words with the same letters) with the noun *qarn* (“horns”) in one of the prophet’s speeches:¹

إِنَّ الشَّمْسَ تَطْلُعُ بَيْنَ قَرْنَيْ الشَّيْطَانِ أَوْ قَالَ: يَطْلُعُ مَعَهَا قَرْنَا الشَّيْطَانِ
فَإِذَا أَرْتَفَعَتْ فَارْقَهَا. فَإِذَا كَانَتْ فِي وَسْطِ السَّمَاءِ فَارْتَهَا. فَإِذَا دَلَّكَتْ أَوْ قَالَتْ
: رَأَيْتُ فَارْقَهَا. فَإِذَا دَنَتْ لِلْعُرُوبِ فَارْتَهَا. فَإِذَا عَرَبَتْ فَارْقَهَا. فَلَا تُصَلُّوا
هَذِهِ السَّاعَاتِ الثَّلَاثِ.

(Sunan Ibn Mājah 1253)

Verily, the sun rises between the two horns of Satan (*qarnay al-shaytān*), or he said: the sun rises accompanied by the two horns (*qarnā*) of Satan. When it reaches its zenith, Satan gets separated from the sun. When it is in the middle of the sky, he joins it (*qāranahā*). When it declines, or he said: when it diminishes, Satan becomes separated from the sun. When it approaches the sunset, he joins it (*qāranahā*). When it sets, he becomes separated from it. So, do not pray during these three periods.²

In sum, the Arabic root *q-r-n* encompasses the act of placing two or more elements, such as ideas, objects, or characters, side by side to emphasize their similarities or differences in the recipient’s mind. The term *muqāranah* was not used in premodern Arabic culture to highlight comparative literary interactions. This absence, however, should not lead us to assume, as Ferial Ghazoul does, that premodern writers did not practice comparative literature. Modern scholars of literary criticism and comparative literature tend to emphasize aspects different from those that preoccupied medieval writers. In an article that aptly describes modern trends but does not deeply engage with premodern materials, Ghazoul contends that the notion of

comparative literature was introduced to the Arabic world through European influence:

Traditionally, the Arabs were not interested in literary studies except when they related to poetry or the sacred text, the Koran. Looking back in (literary) history, one will detect scattered critical writings on prose and belles lettres, but essentially what tapped the intellectual energies of medieval scholars of literature was *ars poetica* and rhetoric. Given the nature of the texts around which analysis took place—the inimitable Koran and the mono-rhymed *qasida* (ode)—there was little need for comparative exploration. (114)

Ghazoul's statement is representative of a broader trend rooted in the later eighteenth-century European definition of literature as *belles lettres*, a discourse that excluded texts from the literary realm if they had religious or practical functions. This theoretical assumption rooted in Eurocentric genre divisions leads the apparatus of modernity to misrepresent the literary essence of premodern cultures, reducing them to inferior imitations of modern Euro-American theories. Stefan Sperl argues that the Arabic concept of *adab* (أدب) is analogous to the literariness of the Prophetic sayings, so that they are “different branches of one literary pursuit sharing the same over-arching Islamic meta-narrative, a similar conception of the edifying power of speech, and a similar drive to select the best” (466). Nuha Alshaar explores how the imposition of several Eurocentric concepts, such as *belles lettres* and a “humanism of the elite,” generates a false dichotomy between sacred and profane writings that belies the conceptual polysemy of premodern Islamic *adab* (190; see also Hoda El Shakry's essay in this feature). This anachronistic exclusion of literary genres ignores the fact that the Qur'an and the hadith have been typically regarded as two main pillars of Arabo-Islamic literature alongside poetry. Encompassing the full *adab* tradition, including the Qur'an and hadith, in our purview brings to light a substantial body of practical criticism grounded in a comparative approach.

Rediscovering the Comparative Mentality in Premodern Arabo-Islamic Cultures

To uncover the richness of comparative approaches in medieval Arabic literary criticism, it is crucial for modern scholars to acquaint themselves with four factors. First, premodern literary critics did not draw strict boundaries between poetry and prose (Kilpatrick 155; Harb, “Arabic Literary Theory”). The examination of a text to identify what evoked strong reactions in the reader considered both the poetic vocal form and the eloquent content of each literary device, as well as its originality (Grunebaum 336). Second, premodern Arabic literary criticism did not prioritize social, political, and psychological analyses related to the author or the process of authoring. The focus of analysis was instead on various aspects of the text's aesthetics and stylistics, serving educational purposes.³ Third, Arabic is considered a sacred language because it is the language of the Qur'an and the Prophet's speech (hadith). The Qur'an represents God's revelation, while the hadith contain sayings that were extracted from accounts of the Prophet's daily life and transmitted orally by his companions. This perception of superiority has influenced the content and themes explored in various literary genres, fostering a sense of pride among its native speakers.⁴ Fourth, at the core of premodern literary criticism in the Arabo-Islamic world is the discipline of *balāghah* (بلاغة), a concept that is imperfectly translated as “rhetoric.”⁵ Understanding the intricate relationship between vocal form (لفظ; *lafz*) and its content (معنى; *ma'nā*) is essential for comprehending how meanings are theorized in Arabo-Islamic *balāghah* (Larsen 177; see also Jeffrey Sacks's essay in this feature). *Balāghah* played a pivotal role in the creation and reception of literary works in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages, and it was central to the concept of *adab*, which includes various genres such as the Qur'an, the hadith, poetry, religious exegesis, philosophical treatises, animal fables, encyclopedic texts, and proverbs (Allan 175).⁶

By taking these four factors into account, modern scholars can identify multiple forms of

premodern comparative approaches and grasp the rationale behind their comparisons. I discuss here two distinct comparative methodologies to investigate how premodern critics read diverse facets of Arabic literature. In his book titled رسالة في التفضيل (Risālah fī al-tafā'il bayna balāghat al-'Arab wa-al-'Ajam; An Epistle on Favoring between the Eloquence of Arabs and 'Ajam), the renowned Persian scholar Abū Aḥmad al-'Askarī (d. 993), who was famous for his thorough knowledge of Arabic philology and hadith, acknowledges the importance of engaging respectfully with non-Arabic literary stylistic systems, namely Persian and Greek. This manuscript is vital for rewriting the premodern history of Islamic comparative poetics.⁷ In his introduction, al-'Askarī compares definitions of *balāghah* drawn from different literary traditions:

ثم ذكرت لك أنّ البلاغة ليست مقصورة على أمة دون أمة، ولا على ملك دون سوية، ولا على لسان دون لسان، بل هي مقسومة على أكثر الألسنة، فهم فيها مشتركون. وهي موجودة في كلام اليونانية، وكلام العجم، وكلام الهند، وغيرهم، ولكنها في العرب أكثر، لكثرة تصرفها في النثر والنظم، والخطب والكتب، والسجع والمزدوج والرجز. وهم أيضاً متفاوتون فيها، فقد يكون العبد بليغاً ولا يكون سيده، وتكون الأمة بليغة ولا تكون ربّتها. فالبلاغة قد تكون في أعراب البادية دون ملوكها وقد يفعلها الصبي والمرأة. ومما يدل على أن البلاغة مشتركة، ما أخبرنا به أبو بكر بن تزييد: إذ قيل ليوناني ما البلاغة؟ فقال: تصحيح الأقسام، واختيار الكلام. وقيل لبعض الفرس: ما البلاغة؟ فقال: معرفة الفصل من الوصل. وقيل لهندي ما البلاغة؟ فقال: وضوح الدلالة، وانتهاز الفرصة وحسن الإشارة. وقيل لرومي: ما البلاغة؟ فقال: ما فهمته العامة، ورصينته الخاصة.

(76–77)

Then I mentioned to you that eloquence (*balāghah*) is not confined to one nation over another, nor to a specific king over another, nor to one tongue over another. Instead, it is distributed among the majority of tongues, which all have a share in it. It exists in the language of the Greeks, the Persians ('*Ajam*), the Indians, and others, but it is more prevalent among the Arabs due to its extensive use in prose and poetry, speeches and books, rhymes and double entendres, and rhythmic patterns. However, individuals vary in their proficiency in eloquence. A slave may be eloquent (*balīgh*) while his master is not, and a nation may be eloquent while its ruler is not.

Eloquence may be found among the Bedouins while absent in their kings, and it may be exhibited by young boys and women. One piece of evidence that eloquence is a shared attribute is what Abū Bakr ibn Durayd related to us: When a Greek was asked about eloquence, he replied, "It is the correct division and selection of speech." When a Persian was asked the same question, he said, "It is the knowledge of distinguishing how to connect or separate two sentences for coherence." When an Indian was asked the same question, he responded, "It is the clarity of meaning, seizing the opportunity, and making good use of gestures." And when a Byzantine (*Rūmī*) was asked about eloquence, he said, "It is what the general public understands, and the elite approves of."

Al-'Askarī identifies الإيجاز (*al-ijāz*; "concision"), the expression of meaning using minimal words, as the core element of Arabic *balāghah*.⁸ In order to explore the various aspects of this literary device, he conducts a comparative, crosslinguistic analysis of proverbs and sayings from notable figures such as the Persian king Anūshīrwan, the Greek king Alexander, and the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. These sayings and proverbs had already been skillfully translated into Arabic and had become an integral part of the Arabic poetic tradition.⁹ In his interpretation of a statement by Socrates, al-'Askarī indicates the philosopher's exceptional conciseness, his skill in conveying multiple meanings with a few carefully chosen words:

وسأذكر في هذا الموضع صدرًا من الفصول المختارة، من غير اللسان العربي، ثم أذكر بعد ذلك صدرًا من الفصول العربية، مما يصلح للمذاكرة ويبحث على النشاط. فإذا قرأها قاريء دلّت على أنفسها في الإيجاز والحذف، والجمع للمعاني الكثيرة بالألفاظ القليلة. فمن ذلك قول سقراط: دلّ الجسم يدل على أنه لم يصنع نفسه، وأن له كثرة جليلة القدر، لأنّ الجسم يدل على أنه لم يصنع نفسه، وأن له صانعاً حكيماً، كما يدل البناء على الباني، والكتاب على الكاتب. فانظر كيف بين هذا، وبين ما يحكى عن بعض ملوكهم، أنه سئل: ما الذي يدل على معرفة الله، ويثبت العلم بالغييب؟ فقال: إن لكل ظاهر من صغير أو كبير علماً، فهو يُصرّفه ويحوطه. فمن كان مُعتبراً بالجليل من ذلك فليُنظر إلى السماء، فيعلم أنّ لها بارئاً يُجري فلّكها، ويدبّر أمرها.

(84)

In this place, I will mention a selection of chapters from non-Arabic tongues (*al-lisān*), and then I will

mention another selection of Arabic chapters suitable for studying and stimulating activity. When a reader reads them, they demonstrate the skill of conciseness (*al-ijāz*), omission (*al-ḥadhf*), and the ability to convey multiple meanings with few words. One example of this is Socrates's saying: "The body (*al-jism*) indicates its maker (*ṣāni' ihī*)." He condensed numerous profound meanings into three simple words because the body indicates that it did not create itself and that it has a wise creator, just as a building indicates the builder and a book indicates the writer. Consider the contrast between this and what is told about some of their kings being asked, "What indicates knowledge of God and confirms recognition of the unseen?" They responded: "For every apparent thing, whether small or large, there is a science that governs and surrounds it." So, anyone who contemplates this should look at the sky and realize that it has a creator who sets its course and manages its affairs.

This analysis places Socrates's statement within the framework of the Arabic concept of *ijāz*. Al-ʿAskarī examines it in comparison with other concise expressions that he formulates himself ("just as a building indicates the builder and a book indicates the writer"), rooted in the same logical principles as Socrates's original statement. Al-ʿAskarī employs these concise expressions, in turn, to illuminate Islamic values intricately linked with Arabo-Islamic philosophy.¹⁰ These values revolve around acknowledging the existence of a singular creator and recognizing the various elements of the universe as indications of His presence. This analysis serves to emphasize the art of omitting superfluous details in order to convey profound ideas effectively.

The Eurocentric understanding of comparative literature generally involves the comparison of two distinct languages rather than the exploration of comparative approaches and methodologies within a single language. The Arabic language boasts a long written tradition spanning approximately twelve hundred years, surpassing that of modern European languages. In the case of languages with such an extensive relatively continuous history, the field of comparative literature needs to reevaluate

the traditional French paradigm that was imposed on Euro-American comparatists, encouraging them to prioritize comparisons between literatures of different European languages in order to gain acceptance and recognition within the mainstream of comparative literary studies.¹¹ In the premodern Arabo-Islamic world, the process of writing relied heavily on multiple layers of comparison, oscillating between the works of revered ancestors (*al-awā'il*) and the contemporaneous medieval and premodern authors (*al-muḥdathūn*). This long history of written Arabic, coupled with its sacred status, endowed premodern writers with a distinct privilege, fostering the development of numerous methodologies firmly grounded in what we now refer to as *intertextuality*.

Let us consider an illustrative example that sheds light on the diverse facets of intertextuality present in premodern Arabic prose and poetry, bringing to the forefront a comparative practice that has often been overlooked: the transformation of literary prose into poetry. In his book titled *Majāzāt al-āthār al-nabawīyah; The Allegories of Prophetic Narrations*, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1016)¹² analyzes 360 hadith with a focus on the topic of *majāz* (majāz), figurative language or allegory, in premodern Arabic poetics. The book highlights the significance of metaphorical language in Arabic literature. In several instances, al-Raḍī draws comparisons between the hadith and verses extracted from poetry or the Qur'an that employ the exact words or meaning of the *majāz* under study. For example:

ومن ذلك قوله عليه الصلاة والسلام: "كَفَىٰ بِالسَّلَامَةِ دَاءً" هذا القول مجازٌ، لأنَّ السَّلَامَةَ - على الحقيقية - ليست بداء في نفسها، وإنما المراد أنَّها تفضي إلى الأدواء القاتلة، والأعراض المهلكة. لأنَّ طولها يُوَدِّي إلى موت الشهوات، وانقطاع اللذات، وحوالي الهرم، وعودي السقم، فحسن من هذا الوجه ان تسمي "داء" إذا كانت موقعة فيه، ومؤدبة إليه. وقد أكثرت الشعراء نظم هذا المعنى في أشعارهم، إلا أنَّ كلمة النبي عليه الصلاة والسلام أبهى من جميع ما قالوه مطلقاً، وأبعد منزعاً، وأوجز في تمام، وأكثر مع قلة كلام، فمما جاء في هذا المعنى قول حُمَيْدِ بْنِ ثَوْرٍ:

أَرَىٰ بَصْرِي فَدْ رَابِتِي بَعْدَ صِحَّةٍ وَحَسْبُكَ دَاءٌ أَنْ تَصِحَّ وَتَسَلَّمَ
وقول لبيد بن ربيعة:

وَدَعَوْتُ رَبِّي بِالسَّلَامَةِ جَاهِدًا
 وَقَوْلِ النَّمْرِ بْنِ تَوْلَبٍ:
 يَوْمَ الْقَتْلِ طُولُ السَّلَامَةِ وَالْغِنَى فَكَيْفَ يَرَى طُولَ السَّلَامَةِ يَفْعَلُ؟!
 وَإِنِّي لَأَسْتَحْسِنُ كَثِيرًا الْاِبْيَاتِ الَّتِي مِنْ جَمَلَتِهَا هَذَا الْبَيْتُ، وَهِيَ قَوْلُهُ:
 تَغَيَّرَ مِنِّي كُلُّ شَيْءٍ وَرَبَّنِي مَعَ الدَّهْرِ أَبْدَالِي الَّتِي أَنْتَبَلُ
 فَضُولُ أَرَاهَا فِي أَدِيمِي بَعْدَ مَا يَكُونُ كِفَافَ الْجِسْمِ أَوْ هُوَ أَجْمَلُ
 كَأَنَّ مِحْطًا فِي يَدَيَّ حَارِثِيَّةً صَنَاعَ غَلْتٍ مِنِّي بِهِ الْجِلْدُ مِنْ غَلٍ
 يُرَدُّ الْقَتْلَى بَعْدَ اغْتِدَالِ وَصَحَّةٍ يَتَوَّءُ إِذَا زَامَ الْقِيَامَ وَيُحْمَلُ
 تَدَارَكَ مَا قَبْلَ الشَّبَابِ وَبَعْدَهُ حَوَادِثُ أَيَّامٍ تَمَرُّ وَأَعْفَلُ
 يَوْمَ الْقَتْلِ طُولُ السَّلَامَةِ وَالْغِنَى فَكَيْفَ يَرَى طُولَ السَّلَامَةِ يَفْعَلُ؟!
 (382–84)

This is a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; peace be upon him: “Well-being is enough as an illness (*dā'an*).” This saying is figurative because actual well-being (*al-salāmah*) is not an illness in itself. Instead, what is meant is that it leads to deadly diseases and destructive symptoms because the prolonged period of well-being leads to the death of desires, the cessation of pleasures, the decline of youth's life, and the onset of ailments. Therefore, it is appropriate, from this perspective, to label well-being as an “illness” when one is situated within it, and it leads to such outcomes. The poets have often expressed this meaning in their poetry. However, the words of the Prophet, peace be upon him, surpasses all that has been said. They are more profound in their impact, more concise in their completeness, and abundant in meaning despite their brevity. Among the expressions of this meaning is the saying (*qawl*) of Ḥumayd ibn Thawr:

I see my vision has betrayed me after good health,
 And it is sufficient for you as an illness (*dā'an*) to be
 well and safe.

And the saying of Labīd ibn Rabī'ah:

I supplicated to my God for well-being (*bi'alsalāmati*),
 striving earnestly,
 That He may restore my health, but behold, well-being
 (*alssalāmatu*) itself became an affliction (*dā'u*).

And the saying of al-Nimr ibn Tawlab:

The young man still desires prolonged well-being and
 wealth.

So what will he think of the prolonged well-being in
 action?

I find great admiration for a passage of verse that
 includes this couplet, which goes as follows:

Everything around me has changed and I was
 plunged into confusion

With the passage of time, my circumstances have altered
 An increase I see in the surface of my skin due to
 emaciation of the body

Or maybe it is more beautiful

It is as if a metal thorn is in the hands of a Ḥārithian
 lady [lit. woman related to the tribe leader
 al-Ḥārith Ibn al-ẓālim]

A skillful woman's hands whose touch causes my
 skin to rise

The young man relapses after moderation and health
 He falls down under the burden if he intends to rise
 and is carried

He anticipates what comes before youth and after it
 Several events and days passing by while I am heedless
 The young man still desires prolonged well-being and
 wealth

So what will he think the prolonged well-being in action?

In this instance, al-Raḍī engages in a comparative
 (though not crosslinguistic) analysis to trace how a
 single hadith influenced three poets to transform
 its fundamental meaning into poetry. Modern read-
 ers may argue that poets can enhance the linguistic
 beauty and musicality of the hadith by rendering it
 in verse. The poets achieved this by employing var-
 ious interconnected poetic devices, including rhyth-
 mic patterns and lyrical qualities, which evoke
 emotions and create a more captivating experience
 for the reader or listener. However, it is worth noting
 that al-Raḍī vehemently asserted, as is evident in this
 passage, that the hadith he cites possesses in its liter-
 ary prose an exceptional quality that “surpasses all
 that has been said” in poetry subsequently.¹³

While premodern Arabo-Islamic scholars and
 writers may not have explicitly used the term *com-
 parative literature* and its Arabic equivalent (*al-adab
 al-muqāran*) in the manner in which we understand
 it today, they actively engaged in comparative studies
 of literature. Their aim was to explore similarities

and differences among themes, motifs, and narrative techniques of literary works across different cultures and times. Muslim literary critics often found inspiration in and made references to multilingual literary and philosophical works from diverse cultural contexts, including Greek, Indian, and Persian. The translation process between Arabic and other languages has given rise to distinct premodern comparative approaches (Abdelmessih 197). These premodern translations deserve reevaluation as an integral component of the exchange of literary values. As Shaden Tageldin persuasively contends, “Comparative literature is not confined to a single place or time, nor does it exist in a realm devoid of geopolitical affiliations. Instead, it emerges through the uneven translation of literary worth across continents and time zones, firmly within the sphere of the geopolitical” (419).

The translation of Arabic sacred texts served as a vital conduit, facilitating effective communication among speakers of different languages and fostering the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and cultural values across diverse Islamic nations throughout different historical periods. The premodern Islamic world boasted a rich linguistic tapestry; countries typically harbored their own official language or languages alongside regional languages like Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and Turkish, as well as various minority languages or dialects. Bilingualism and multilingualism naturally emerged as the norm, reflecting the diversity of religious communities, social structures, economic activities, and cultural interactions of the Islamic world (see Zadeh; Bsoul; and Gutas). Translation played a pivotal role in disseminating scholarly works and educational materials across linguistic boundaries, thereby contributing to the intellectual vibrancy of premodern Islamic societies.

The Qur’an and hadith served as a wellspring of inspiration for several generations of writers spanning more than twelve hundred years, who drew on the shared meanings embedded in the collective memory of their public. As is clear from the example of al-Raḍī, comparative analysis served as a tool to convey complex concepts and ideas to readers. Al-Raḍī extracts three passages of poetry and compares them with the hadith that originally inspired

their creations to illustrate shared meanings or principles. By drawing parallels between poetry and hadith, he aimed to make his explanation more accessible and relatable to a broader audience, both in his time and for future generations. Medieval writers were aware that not all their readers were well versed in the complex terminology and concepts of theology and *balāhghah*. It can be argued that this comparative approach served as a pedagogical tool to teach their own students complex theological or philosophical arguments by drawing on familiar literary examples. This comparative methodology provided a bridge between sacred texts and secular poetry—in other words, between religious and literary contexts—suggesting a harmonious coexistence of knowledge.

The process of transforming the literary prose of hadith into poetry can also be found in the Persian-speaking world. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1492), a scholar and poet known for his works of mystical and epic poetry,¹⁴ composed a book titled *الأربعين* (*al-Arba‘in; The Forty*). In this book, Jāmī selects forty hadith and presents them in the form of two-couplet Persian verses (known as *dū-baytī*). Through his paraphrasing of Arabic hadith into Persian poetry, Jāmī confirms that his aim is to promote the understanding and memorization of the hadith (26). Where Arabic is not the native tongue, this educational process allows individuals to understand and practice their faith more effectively. The complexities of the translation of hadith into poetry enrich the comparative mentality of Islamic scholars by enabling them to explore a wide range of interpretations, linguistic nuances, and cultural contexts.

This comparative approach allowed medieval readers to connect with the hadith on a deeper level and facilitated a better understanding of the hadith’s intended message. In general, the comparative practice of medieval scholars, exemplified by the example of al-Raḍī, evinces their dedication to rendering knowledge accessible and relevant to their readers, while upholding the significance of religious and intellectual traditions. There is currently a dearth of research within the Euro-American field of comparative literature and comparative poetics that explores the influence of hadith on the works of Muslim writers

from diverse backgrounds, including poetry, stories, proverbs, epistles, and political speeches composed in the various languages of the Islamic world.

These instances demonstrate the existence of comparative approaches to literature in the premodern Arabo-Islamic world, albeit with methods and terminology that differ from those of modern academic practices. Premodern Muslim writers and literary critics developed a multitude of literary terms to engage with intertextuality. A comprehensive examination of these terms will empower contemporary scholars to rediscover a web of concepts that underscores the comparative mindset of premodern Islamic writers. These include terms such as *sariqāt* (“theft”), *muwāzanah* (“balancing”), *ighārah* (“raiding”), *mufaḍalah* (“trying to surpass”), *mu’āraḍah* (“emulation”), *insijām* (“fluency”), *wasāṭah* (“mediation”), *ikhṭilās* (“stealthy plagiarism”), *taḍmīn* (“inclusion”), and so on. Numerous studies have been conducted on these terms; however, they have not been regarded as pivotal tools in establishing the discipline of comparative Islamic literature.¹⁵ Through a comprehensive exploration of these terms, contemporary scholars have the opportunity to redefine diverse comparative approaches grounded in Arabo-Islamic poetics. This, in turn, sheds light on how various cultures and languages within the Islamic world have historically activated a comparative mindset as an educational tool to comprehend both secular and religious texts.

However, modern scholars face a dilemma when attempting to translate these terms into European languages. They must either find an approximate equivalent, often borrowed from ancient Greek or Anglo-American cultures, which may not fully capture the original intention, or sacrifice certain nuances in favor of readability for non-specialist readers. Literary terms are not simply interchangeable with equivalent terms in other languages, as each language possesses its own unique concepts, idiomatic expressions, and cultural connotations. This nonequivalence presents a particular challenge to the Eurocentric notion of universality and complicates any attempt to convey the precise meaning, tone, and literary significance of Arabo-Islamic

terms in English, especially considering the vast differences between the literary and philosophical cultures in which they originate and those of ancient Greek, Latin, and modern European languages (Rashwan, “Arabic Jinās” 344–48). Within the Euro-American context, a dictionary that examines four hundred terms deemed untranslatable challenges the scholarship that promotes universalism and generalizations of philosophical and literary terms. This endeavor aims to probe the differences in philosophical concepts across European languages. It provides a platform for each European culture to express its viewpoints using its unique terminology and concepts (Cassin et al.). The field of premodern Islamic studies, with its literary and philosophical terms, warrants a comparable dictionary that not only delineates distinctions but also underscores their untranslatable essence.

By acknowledging non-European terms and concepts within their indigenous literary cultural framework, scholars can revitalize the discipline of comparative literature in a manner that is ethically attuned to linguistic and cultural differences. Discovering conceptual disparities among literary terms in each language should not deter specialists who advocate for the advantages of multiculturalism. As Emily Apter contends, “[t]he focus on the untranslatable might serve to wean comparative literature from a soft international diplomacy model and from its tendency to search for similarity and identity, screen out disagreement, and avoid direct encounters with insecurable knowledge” (61).

Rachel Harrison and Geir Helgesen have argued persuasively for the importance of allowing each language and culture to express its differences authentically, free from preconceptions rooted in Eurocentric methodologies. They caution modern scholars to be vigilant against the pitfalls of “exoticizing difference and Orientalizing Otherness,” both of which have historically plagued the field of translation and comparative studies. They emphasize the imperative for scholars in area studies to collaborate with their counterparts in comparative studies, aiming to forestall the inadvertent production of scholarship that might misrepresent the studied culture for Euro-American readers. These

collaborative initiatives have the potential to disrupt long-standing Euro-American scholarly practices that cater to the sensibilities of their readers by imposing Eurocentric terms, concepts, and methods. Instead, Harrison and Helgesen encourage a more faithful representation, allowing the culture to articulate itself using its own terms and concepts:

At its best, Area Studies has the potential, however, to challenge the notions of universality that pervade Western thought and which have likewise pervaded Western scholarship. Moreover, the infectiousness of various Western modes of thinking has been institutionally transmitted/marketed to Asian scholars who have been trained in the “highbrow” academies of the West. (4)

There are compelling reasons to examine what premodern Islamic writers conveyed to their readers by juxtaposing various literary texts and languages to explore the poetics of a single subject. The comparative approaches employed by premodern Arabo-Islamic scholars deserve serious discussion and deliberation to challenge the modern misconception that their theoretical foundation and logical inquiry were primitive or insufficiently coherent. By studying how medieval writers juxtaposed literary works from different eras to highlight the continuity and diversity of the stylistic aspects of literary texts, scholars of comparative literature can gain insight into the Arabo-Islamic comparative mindset. This, in turn, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the global literary landscape of the Islamic world.

NOTES

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1. This hadith, which specifies the times when Muslims should not perform prayers, has been categorized as *weak* by hadith scholars. I selected it to highlight the intentional *jinās* of *qarn* and the verb *qārana*. For the definitions and types of Arabic *jinās*, see Rashwan, *Rediscovering*.

2. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Arabic texts are my own.

3. In the introduction to his *الموازنة* (*al-Muwāzanah; The Balancing*), the literary critic Al-Ḥasan b. Bishr al-Āmidī (d. 980 or 981) argues that the aim of his comparative poetics approach is educational: “It will enable you to ponder the matter, and pass judgement—or else, if you wish, to hold to your convictions—more forcefully and with greater insight” (qtd. in Bray 126). Fakhreddine perceptively elucidated Al-Āmidī's role as a literary critic, wherein he ingeniously redefined the concepts of *ṭab* (“natural talent”) and *ṣanʿah* (“craft”), underscoring the essentiality of combining skill and education for poets to create inventive and unique meanings. See Fakhreddine 163–66.

4. On the tolerant medieval treatment of words that have non-Arabic roots in the Qurʾan, see Rashwan, “Intellectual Decolonization” 5–8.

5. In Euro-American cultures the term *rhetoric* has often been linked to negative attributes such as deceit, wordiness, meaninglessness, and intentional distortion (just as the English term *pun* suggests the lowest form of humor and wit). Hence, it is essential to recognize the disparities between the literary and philosophical terminologies of Euro-American and Islamic cultures to prevent certain misconceptions that might result from a presumption of universality. See Rashwan, “Comparative *Balāghah*” 392.

6. For a detailed bibliography of Arabic and Persian bilingualism, see Marlow 742–49; on Ottoman-Persian premodern literary interactions, see Umut Inan. On the Ottoman reception history of al-Jāhīz's *Book of Animals*, see Gurbuzel et al. 178–85.

7. Similarly, al-Jāhīz (d. 868) specifies the Persians, Indians, and Romans as the only peoples whom he believed had developed advanced conceptions of *balāghah*. He attributes this belief to their production of books and possession of commendable literary traditions (Webb 25).

8. On the various types of *ijāz* as a literary device, see Van Gelder, “Brevity.”

9. It is worth noting that Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. 1005), a student and relative of Abū Aḥmad al-ʿAskarī, employed the same methodology of comparing Arabic with Persian proverbs in his poetry, which he collected under the title *ديوان المعاني* (*Dirwān al-maʿānī; A Treasury of Meanings*) (Kanazi 27). Key has extensively studied the translation and citations of various lines of Arabic poetry derived from Persian idioms, with a primary focus on the work of the prominent linguist Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 902 or 903). Al-Isfahānī is renowned for providing

etymological explanations for Persian words that underwent Arabization. He also employs comparative morphology to underscore disparities between Arabic renderings and the original Persian words. As Key elaborates, “Raghib’s argument here is that the Qur’an incorporates an Arabized Persian word, but not a Persian word, due to the absence of the fu’alil form in Persian, a point that holds anecdotal validity” (117). Harb argues that the deliberate incorporation of Persian vocabulary in Arabic poems serves as a distinct indicator of Persian identity (“Persian” 3).

10. For how Euro-American philosophers influenced by modern Eurocentric perspectives viewed premodern Arabo-Islamic philosophical treatises as inferior, see Attar. For insights into how premodern Islamic philosophy influenced modern Euro-American lawmakers, see Weller.

11. For an informative literary history of the French school of comparative literature, see Tomiche. On the adverse effects of Eurocentric approaches on non-European comparative approaches, see Lu; Di.

12. For a discussion of the life and works of al-Raḍī, see Qutbuddin. Stetkevych offers an account of al-Raḍī’s prowess as a poet adept at employing multiple genres, poetic forms, and techniques to craft emotionally persuasive arguments promoting the sociopolitical legitimacy of ‘Alī ibn abī ṭālib (d. 661).

13. Juynboll raises questions about the chronology of individual examples of poetry found within certain hadith. He casts doubt on the attribution of this poetry to the Prophet as its original composer, proposing instead the concept of “collective authorship” (198).

14. For a discussion of how Jāmi’s works were received in Indo-Persian literary and artistic cultures, within both courtly and popular settings, see Sharma 42–45.

15. Most of these terms have not been thoroughly studied in Euro-American scholarship, with a few exceptions, including Nouraldeen, “*Taḍmīn*” and “Further Investigation”; Gelder, “*Taḍmīn*”; Orfali; Fudge; Sanni; and Gully.

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