COMPARATIVE
drama

VOLUME 47 • NO. 2 • SUMMER 2013

The Arab Aristophanes

MARVIN CARLSON

The thirteenth-century Egyptian playwright Ibn Dāniyāl is slowly coming to Western attention as one of the most important dramatists of the Middle Ages. The fact that he wrote for the puppet theater, a form often thought of as artistically inferior by both Arab and Western scholars, and the fact that he wrote in Arabic, a language that most Western scholars incorrectly think produced no drama before the colonial period, have doubtless contributed to his long eclipse. In the Arab world, poetry has always been regarded as the highest literary form, and since Ibn Dāniyāl was one of the most honored poets of his time it is as a poet that he has been remembered in that world, while the three plays written late in his career have received comparatively little attention.

Clearly this situation is now changing. Thanks largely to the efforts of a few dedicated twentieth-century German scholars, led by Georg Jacob, the plays have been reconstructed from manuscripts spread across the medieval Arab world—from Istanbul to the Escorial in Spain—and published in complete form for the first time as recently as 1992.[1] Thus

even scholars with a working knowledge of Arabic have had access to these remarkable creations only for the past two decades. Gradually, word of them has spread, however, and the first book-length study of Ibn Dāniyāl in English appeared in 2012, also with a translation of one of his three plays.[2] Western scholars are now beginning to realize that this hitherto almost unknown dramatist produced some of the most complex and literate dramatic works of the Middle Ages, rivaling or surpassing almost every known dramatic work in the Arab or Western world for several centuries before and after him.

Ibn Dāniyāl was actually a native of Mosul (located in today's Iraq), who fled to Cairo in the 1260s when still in his teens to escape the Mongol invasion of his home city. In Cairo he supported himself for a time as an eye doctor, but soon established a reputation among that city's bohemian population as a wit, a gifted poet, and an active pursuer of a libertine lifestyle. His poetic gift, however, became more and more widely recognized. In the manner of young impecunious poets throughout the ages, Ibn Dāniyāl sought a degree of financial security by producing poems, often panegyrics, for influential and well-to-do patrons. At the top of the social pyramid was the sultan, and just at the time Ibn Dāniyāl arrived in Cairo, the sultanate was undergoing a momentous shift. The powerful warrior named Baybars, who in 1254 defeated and captured King Louis IX of France, ending the Fourth Crusade, and, even more importantly, defeated in the following year the Mongol general, Hugelu, stopping the Mongol advance into the Middle East, married the widowed queen of Egypt and established a new, non-Arab dynasty—the Mamluks—which dominated Egypt for the next several centuries.

On their march toward Cairo, the Mongols had captured and sacked Baghdad and Damascus, leaving the Egyptian city as the undisputed trading and intellectual center of the Arab world, a role it has maintained ever since. The new sultan, Baybars, built upon this situation, proving himself as successful an administrator as he had been a general. He had much less interest in the arts, however, and indeed in his campaigns to improve the city put strict curbs on such matters as drinking and the sex trade, earning him little respect from the bohemian community among whom the young Ibn Dāniyāl first settled. Baybars's son Barakah, who succeeded him in 1277, was equally uninterested in poetry and the arts. A

weak ruler, he was deposed two years later by his father-in-law, Qalāwūn, who after a number of lean years again turned royal interest toward the arts and brought leading singers and poets to entertain and grace his court.

By this time Ibn Dāniyāl's reputation among the upper classes was such that he became in effect the court poet, producing a large number of celebratory poems for ceremonial occasions such as hunts and festivals. He maintained this position until 1294, reaching the peak of his poetic power under Qalāwūn's successor, his brother, Khalil al-Ashaf. Khalil's assassination in 1294 touched off a long period of struggle for the sultanate, offering little security for someone like Ibn Dāniyāl. He returned to supporting himself by writing panegyric poems to celebrate less exalted sponsors—lower-level politicians, merchants, friends, and religious leaders. Among these new patrons, happily, was the producer of a puppet theater, who, apparently tired of the traditional and not very respectable repertoire, asked the poet, as Ibn Dāniyāl explains in the preface to his first play, to create three new plays for him of real literary and artistic merit. These were designed to appeal not as much to the traditional street crowds as to the higher-class friends of the patron with more refined tastes.

By Ibn Dāniyāl's time the puppet theater was a well-established form of both popular and court entertainment, though of little literary respectability. The puppets involved were shadow puppets like those still employed in the *wayang* theater of Indonesia or the *karagöz* of Turkey with two-dimensional figures manipulated behind a translucent screen by a puppet master so that their shadows appeared to the audience on the other side of the screen. The earliest references to this form in Egypt go back to the eleventh century, when the optician Ibn al-Haytham describes a puppet performance consisting of "figures…which…[the presenter] moves so that their shadows appear upon the wall which is behind the curtain and on the curtain itself," and a century later Saladin, the first sultan of Egypt, is reported to have invited shadow-play performers to his court in Cairo.[3] Thus when Ibn Dāniyāl created his contributions to this form, it had already been performed in Egypt for two centuries or more. Nevertheless it appears essentially to have been a folk form, with little claim to literary status and viewed with considerable superstition by conservative religious figures.

Not a single shadow play from the two centuries before Ibn Dāniyāl has been preserved, so we have no manuscripts to support the poet's claim that he raised the form to a new, literary status. The very fact that all three of his plays have been preserved, while no such works before him remain, does give strong indirect support to his claim. Relatively ample extant documents show that his plays continued to be popular long after his death and that for another century or more other writers followed in Ibn Dāniyāl's footsteps, producing works that, it has been speculated, were increasingly bawdy and obscene. This must remain conjecture, however, since only the plays of Ibn Dāniyāl remain of this entire tradition. Again, this very absence suggests that these works were considered less worthy of preservation. In short, as Li Guo concludes: "we are perhaps not too far off the mark to suggest that the trend exemplified by Ibn Dāniyāl's work signified the zenith of the medieval Arabic shadow play."[4]

Many historians of the Ottoman shadow puppet tradition, the *karagöz,* have suggested that this form is directly descended from the Mamluk plays, Dror Ze'evi calling these plays "the most probable source" for the physically very similar Ottoman works.[5] The major source for this opinion is a Mamluk historian, Ibn Iyas, who reported that Sultan Selim, the Ottoman conqueror of Egypt in 1517, saw his first shadow play in Cairo. Its subject was the capture and hanging by Ottoman forces of Tuman Bay, the last Mamluk sultan, and the production so delighted Selim that he brought the puppets and performer back to Istanbul with him, from which the Turkish form developed.[6] Though two centuries had passed since Ibn Dāniyāl, it seems likely that the puppet shows Selim encountered in Cairo, unlike anything yet seen in Turkey, were at least in mode of presentation part of the tradition in which Ibn Dāniyāl participated, but neither the works of that time, nor subsequent *karagöz* plays, if they indeed continued that tradition, saw another Ibn Dāniyāl. The tradition died out in Egypt, and if the *karagöz* was indeed its descendent, it became an important folk form, but never achieved significant literary status.

As a result the plays of Ibn Dāniyāl, though preserved in a few archives, faded from the attention of scholars, both Eastern and Western, who knew the shadow theater only as a popular form, forgetting this exceptional author who raised the form to indisputable literary heights.

Ibn Dāniyāl's poetry and his somewhat scandalous reputation continued to be remembered in later centuries, and although his dramatic

work was occasionally mentioned, his reputation traditionally was more as a rather daring poet and wit, with passages from the plays being collected and cited as if they were individual poems. Only in modern times has the importance of these plays, indeed their very existence, been known even to specialists in the academic world, East or West. It was not until the twentieth century that a series of scholars, primarily German, began to collect the scattered manuscripts and to give these plays serious scholarly attention. This work, begun by the German Orientalist Georg Jacob in the opening years of the century, ultimately resulted in the first scholarly edition of the plays in Arabic published in 1992.[7] Thus scholars both East and West are still exploring the implications of this newly accessible major dramatist.

In an effort to help Western readers place this new figure in their mental map of world drama, and doubtless also to indicate his significance, he has from time to time been referred to by some of the still few Western critics who have written about him as the "Arab Aristophanes."[8] Theater scholars may well be reminded of the attempt by early scholars of the Japanese dramatist Chikamatsu to gain him respectability in the West by calling him the "Japanese Shakespeare."[9] Like Ibn Dāniyāl, Chikamatsu was not only "Oriental," but more questionable still, a writer for the puppet stage, in this case the Japanese *bunraku*. Ever since the first generation of Western scholarship became available on Chikamatsu, writers on that author have been at pains to refute the title, pointing out that apart from their prominence, the two authors have almost nothing in common culturally or artistically.[10] I would like to argue, however, that the situation is not nearly as clear in the case of Ibn Dāniyāl and Aristophanes, and for reasons far more detailed and provocative than certain surface similarities that inspired this comparison in the first place.

When Ibn Dāniyāl has been referred to as the "Arab Aristophanes," the inevitable justification for this reference is the considerable amount of obscenity and scatology in both writers, a serious challenge in both cases to censors. A related and important feature, rarely if ever mentioned, is that in the case of both writers this earthy material is mixed with remarkable lyric poetry, forming a striking blend of both style and subject. As I have noted, Ibn Dāniyāl was one of the outstanding poets of his time and among the verses still remembered today are some that actually come from his plays. None of the writers who have used this comparison have noted

any other points in common, although there are in fact some striking similarities that go far beyond this shared love of mixing high poetic style with the most debased sexual and other bodily references.

Doubtless the reason for this is that the similarities are by far the most striking in the third play of the Ibn Dāniyāl trilogy, which has not yet been fully translated from Arabic into any other language and is therefore still inaccessible to many scholars who might otherwise note these similarities;[11] such resemblances are not nearly so pronounced, indeed are quite absent from the only play so far translated into English, which is the first play, *The Shadow Spirit*. The structure of this play, like its subject concerning failed negotiations with an unscrupulous matchmaker, is suggestive of a play in the European farce/comedy tradition. The second play, *The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger*, has the simplest and most straightforward structure of the three. It consists, after an introductory section, of twenty-two fairly short scenes, each devoted to the presentation of a Cairo street performer—a quack doctor, an herbalist, an astrologer, an acrobat, and so on. The structure of the third play, *The Love-Stricken One and the Lost One Who Inspires Passion*, is quite different from the other two, and while parallels to the fairly simple structures of each of the plays noted above can be found in a number of other writers in the Western comic tradition, there is only a single known author in world literature whose rather complex pattern of arranging a play bears a close resemblance to that of Ibn Dāniyāl, and that is, in fact, Aristophanes. Although the structure and character arrangements of Menander as well as Plautus and Terence, the major Greek and Roman authors of so-called "middle" and "new" comedy, have been widely imitated from the Renaissance onward, the rather complex structure of the "old comedy" of Aristophanes, although quite consistent throughout his own surviving work, has been taken up by no other author in the existing Western dramatic canon.

The typical structure of an Aristophanic play consists of a series of elements not universally present but common enough so that one may legitimately speak of an "Aristophanic" pattern of play construction. The opening of the play is a monologue or dialogue that introduces the subject matter. The next element is the entrance song of the chorus. The parodos is followed by a set in which the chorus supports or opposes the concerns or project of the hero. Next comes a set of balanced or symmetrical

scenes, often in the form of an agon or parabasis, or both. The contest, or agon, pits two characters against each other in a conflict that anticipates the conclusion of the action. In the parabasis, normally at the middle of the play, the main actors leave the stage, and the chorus steps out of the play to address the audience directly. A series of episodes follows, short scenes involving only one or two minor characters each, usually showing the effects of the outcome of the agon. Finally comes the departure song of the chorus, the exodus, with a mood of celebration often involving revelry and a joyous marriage, or both. These elements could be varied somewhat (there is no formal agon, for example, in *The Acharnians*, while there are two in *The Clouds*), but on the whole this complex pattern is quite consistent.

As I have noted, this rather odd and complex structure has not been copied by any other significant dramatist in the Western canon. There may have been a few done as academic exercises, but I am not aware even of any of these. It is therefore quite surprising to find that in his third play, *The Love-Stricken One and the Lost One Who Inspires Passion*, Ibn Dāniyāl follows this pattern in remarkable detail. The play concerns the sufferings of al-Muttayam, who sees an attractive young boy, al-Yutayyim, in the baths and falls passionately in love with him. The boy flirts with him but remains elusive, and the play concerns al-Muttayam's various strategies to consummate his passion.

This play begins with a brief prologue, a direct address by the author of the play to the audience. Although short, it suggests the sort of content often found in an Aristophanic parabasis, though not in its normal position in the middle of the play. After this brief introduction follows the prologue proper, bringing us to the Aristophanic structure that determines the shape of the action of the rest of the play. This prologue is an extended monologue from the Love-Stricken One, lasting several pages and including embedded songs and poems, describing his suffering and sleepless nights and detailing the beauties of his new love. As in an Aristophanic comedy, it sets out the concerns of the protagonist that the play will seek to address. In Aristophanes, the next element would be the first choric song, supporting or contesting the desires of the protagonist. Choric passages are not a feature of the shadow theater, but the next scene serves a similar function nonetheless. Al-Damim, a rather ugly former sex partner of al-Mutayyam, appears and tries to win him back, heaping scorn

on his new infatuation. Al-Mutayyam rejects the advice of al-Damim, and continues to heap praise on his new love. Then comes a symmetrical scene in which Bayram, a friend of al-Mutayyam and supporter of his pursuit of the attractive al-Yutayyim, brings encouragement to the wooer and predicts his success. The balanced scenes of the two advisors complete the first section of the play. Lacking a chorus, the play also lacks a true parabasis (although as noted the opening preface serves a similar function), but the space of the parabasis is filled by a scene depicting the meeting of the potential lovers. Al-Mutayyam declares his passion, al-Yutayyim coquettishly resists, and the two join in singing romantic duets, somewhat in the manner of much later European operas.

Immediately after this passage, we return to a series of scenes that much more clearly suggest an Aristophanic structure. This is the agon, the climactic element of the first part of a traditional Aristophanic comedy. The agon section of this play is very highly developed, taking up the central third of the action. It is part of the duet scene, itself a kind of agon in which the pleas for satisfaction from the smitten lover are rejected by the attractive youth. In addition to detailing his sufferings, however, al-Mutayyam boasts of certain of his possessions, especially a rooster, a champion cockfighter. His youthful adversary immediately counters that he has a superior fowl. Almost at once we shift from the verbal agon to a parallel and very physical one, a fight between the two roosters. When al-Yutayyim's rooster flees from the ring he proposes another competition, a butting contest between the rams of the opponents.

Once again al-Yutayyim's animal is defeated and he calls for a third and final contest, pitting against each other bulls owned by the two combatants. Finally al-Mutayyam's animal loses, and sinks to the ground dying. Were this an Aristophanic play, this scene would most probably be followed by a choric passage, bridging to the series of episodes that largely make up the latter half of the play. In place of this passage, al-Mutayyam provides a similar lyric interval, a lengthy elegy sung over the dead animal. Then, in a spoken passage, he introduces the situation and action that will occupy the rest of the play, which, as in much of Aristophanes, is dominated by a celebratory feast. In Ibn Dāniyāl's play, al-Mutayyam, his lament concluded, announces that the bull will be slaughtered to provide the major dish for a huge feast for all his friends, hoping that this evidence of his generosity will soften al-Yutayyim's heart.

We now move into the part of the play that in placement and organization exactly corresponds to the Aristophanic episodes mentioned above, offering a succession of minor characters—the priest, the poet, the soothsayer, the inspector, and the salesman—who in turn visit and hope to exploit the newly founded avian city in *The Birds*. A parallel parade of guests appears when al-Mutayyam throws open his doors and offers free food and drink. First to enter is a so-called hermaphrodite named Nacissus, in fact a homosexual man who extols his lifestyle and compares a relieving bowel movement after copulation to giving birth. Next to arrive is a buxom young man whose name is Easy Penetration. As in Aristophanes, all the names in Ibn Dāniyāl's work are "speaking" names, usually laden with obscene or scatological meanings. Easy Penetration is described as resembling an erect penis, and he sings a song bragging of his willing submission to his partners' desires. Next appears a thin, dark man named Digger, who comes in to complain of the excessive noise and merriment of the banquet, but then decides to remain when he is attracted by al-Mutayyam's erect penis. A matchmaker named Swap follows, offering to further al-Mutayyam's suit, or else serve as a substitute for the reluctant al-Yutayyim. Then enters a street thug, David the Clutcher, who laments past days when the streets were darker and sexual victims were more easily caught. The following guest, Masturbator, discusses the pleasures of his solitary entertainment, which he brags of enjoying everywhere, even in the street under a loose robe. Another guest, Clever Crawler, reveals how he sneaks into darkened houses and forces sex on those he discovers there. In *The Birds,* the protagonist Pisthetaerus drives off the opportunistic invaders of his celebration, but al-Mutayyam dispatches his obnoxious series of guests in an equally firm but more benevolent manner, plying each of them in turn with drink until they fall to the floor to create a growing pile of stupefied bodies.

Three final guests end this series; the first, a Mamluk slave, announces a change of tone by commenting on the now-considerable pile of inebriated and senseless bodies stretched out amid the garbage-like corpses. Despite his revulsion, however, the slave gladly accepts the multiple glasses of wine al-Mutayyam offers and soon adds his own body to the pile. He is followed by a parasite, Glutton, who, akin to a medieval personification of this deadly sin, brags of his ability to eat almost anything. He has come hoping to find food, but settles for drink, and in his turn joins the other debauched sleepers.

Following the episodes in the Aristophanic structure enumerated above is the exuberant final song of the chorus, often involving a marriage celebration, a feast, dancing, or drinking. Ibn Dāniyāl might be said to have merged features of this concluding revelry with Aristophanic comedy, but there is a final scene in Ibn Dāniyāl that in fact occupies the structural space of the concluding festival common in Aristophanes. In this highly striking final scene a man with a solemnity and decorum contrasting sharply with the previous visitors awakens all with a great shout and announces himself as the Angel of Death, prompting the horrified al-Mutayyam to renounce his vices and pray for God's mercy before dying. His body is placed in a white coffin and carried off in a funeral march.

In its tonality this surprising and highly theatrical ending is admittedly more like the sudden dark turn at the end of Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* than any surviving work by Aristophanes. Yet even this religious turn (all three of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays, despite their extensive obscene content, end on a religious note) contains what might be faint echoes of Aristophanic practices. Though Aristophanes remains devotedly secular, and the traditional gods when they appear at all are usually figures of fun, nevertheless most of his plays end with the establishment of a new order that simultaneously reaffirms traditional values. An example of this is found in *The Clouds*, where The Thinkery's secular destruction is as clear a judgment as the clearing of al-Mutayyam's brothel. The conversion of Demos in *The Knights* and the triumph of Plutus also establish superior moral order on corrupt societies; indeed, this theme, broadly speaking, operates in most of the surviving Aristophanic plays. Despite the surprisingly religious note struck by this concluding scene, it nonetheless remains the case that the overall structure of *The Love-Stricken One,* surprising ending and all, still bears a closer resemblance to Old Comedy than to anything else in the history of drama. Clearly, there is much more reason to refer to Ibn Dāniyāl as the "Arab Aristophanes" than the fact that both were gifted poets with an unusual willingness to utilize sexual material and scatology.

This inevitably raises the question of what actual connection might exist between the works of the two artists. The chronological and cultural gap between them seems formidable indeed. Aristophanes flourished at the end of the fifth century BCE and Ibn Dāniyāl created his works at the end of the thirteenth century, seventeen centuries later, on the opposite

side of the Mediterranean. Given this enormous separation in time and considerable separation in space, the possibility of any connection seems remote. Nevertheless, the unique and detailed structural relationship between the Egyptian dramatist's final work and the comedies of the Greek master is difficult to attribute to mere chance. Let us then explore what possibilities exist of an actual connection between these two major dramatists.

When we look closely into the intellectual, cultural, and artistic world of the Eastern Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages, a project relatively few scholars of any sort and almost no theater scholars have yet undertaken, we find that the possibility of a direct connection between the work of these two dramatists is not nearly so remote as it might at first appear. Several possibilities arise from such an investigation. First, a significant portion of the Greek intellectual heritage was, of course, still known in the medieval Islamic world; indeed, it was primarily that world that preserved most of what remains to us of Greek thought. Most theater scholars are aware of the importance of Averroës in the twelfth century in studying and preserving the work of Aristotle for future generations. A recent study of Averroës credits the Arab philosopher's Latin translations of Aristotle with the rise of European Renaissance scholastic thought.[12] Of course, Averroës was only the best known of many generations of Arabic scholars who devoted themselves to the translation and study of the Greek authors.[13] Unquestionably a literary figure like Ibn Dāniyāl, living a century after Averroës, especially when he was active at court and moving among the upper classes of Cairo, many of whom had extensive private libraries, would have had access to the Greek classics. The key question is whether this material might have included Greek drama and Aristophanic comedy in particular. Unhappily, the possibility remains only a possibility, and not one that seems highly probable.

Cairo had possessed, since the eleventh century, one of the largest libraries in the Arab world, second only to the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. Estimates of the size of its collection vary from 120,000 items to two million, doubtless including most of the Greek works we know today.[14] Sadly, this enormous collection was looted and dispersed in 1171, when the vizier Saladin seized control of the country. Many thousands of volumes, however, were not destroyed but bought from the looters and preserved in the private collections of wealthy Egyptian bibliophiles and

theologians. Many of these were still accessible when Ibn Dāniyāl arrived in Cairo some seventy-five years later. Indeed, until a fire destroyed the collection in 1291, while Ibn Dāniyāl was a prominent figure in Cairo literary and court circles, the Cairo Citadel possessed a collection of some 120,000 books, many of them translations of classical authors.[15]

Whether any of this material contained Greek drama, however, is much open to question. While it is clear that the medieval Arabic world studied and translated a great deal of Greek writing, it is equally clear that the vast majority of this work was scientific and philosophical. Classicists such as Oliver Overwien have argued that Greek comedy, particularly the work of Menander, was part of the Muslim educational system in the medieval Arab world,[16] but while the evidence suggests a general familiarity with that tradition, access to particular plays, especially the linguistically difficult plays of Aristophanes, for even the well-to-do and well-educated citizens of thirteenth-century Cairo, seems unlikely.

Fortunately, there is another possible line of connection that seems much more promising. This involves tracing the Greek literary inheritance not through the Arab world, but through the Byzantine Empire. Although Baghdad and Cairo were major centers of learning and repositories of classical texts in the Middle Ages, a significant portion of these texts came to them by way of Byzantium, perhaps the most important site of preservation of such texts, both in actual archives and as material continually taught in the Byzantine schools and studied by Byzantine scholars. In light of the continuation of the Greco-Roman intellectual tradition, it is essential to remember that Egypt was, in fact, part of the Byzantine Empire from the third to the seventh century, when Egypt was conquered by Muslim Arabs. This major political change did not, of course, result in a total cultural change, but rather in a blending of cultural practices and values, as is always the case.

How late into the new millennium Greek plays continued to be performed in the Byzantine Empire remains a matter of debate, but Alphonse Dain has argued that passages in the work of the sixth-century rhetorician Chorikios of Gaza provide strong evidence that Menander, at least, was still being performed at that time,[17] when Egypt was still part of the Byzantine Empire. No scholar of Byzantine culture has argued that Greek dramas were performed any later than this period, but all agree that these dramas continued to be read and studied in the schools for a number

of centuries following this. A letter from an eleventh-century scholar, Mauropus, makes clear that by that time the reading of Sophocles and Aristophanes in particular was part of the Byzantine school curriculum.[18] By the thirteenth century, when Ibn Dāniyāl wrote, the Byzantine school curriculum included the so-called Triads, consisting of three plays each from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. The Aristophanic plays were *Plutus, The Clouds*, and *The Birds*. Aristophanes apparently reached the pinnacle of his popularity in Byzantium during the so-called Palaiologian Renaissance, beginning with the reign of Michael VIII in 1261. The city of Constantinople, badly damaged in the Fourth Crusade, was rebuilt, the arts and letters flourished, and, equally important for the concerns of this essay, cultural and diplomatic contacts were developed with the new Mamluk rulers of Egypt, who were similarly menaced by the Crusaders from the West and the Mongols from the East.

Many Byzantine scholars have remarked on what Przemyslaw Marciniak calls the "amazing popularity"[19] of Aristophanes in thirteenth-century Byzantium, surpassing that of the tragic dramatists and totally eclipsing Menander, at that time virtually forgotten. His style and language were much admired, but, suggest Lynda Garland and others, Aristophanic obscenity was fully in accord with Byzantine literary taste of this period, even in works preferred by the imperial family.[20] This places a surge of interest in Aristophanes in the exact historical period as the work of Ibn Dāniyāl, and although thirteenth-century Byzantium and Egypt were not contiguous states, one can easily imagine Ibn Dāniyāl encountering travelers of a literary bent who had encountered the work of the Greek dramatist in Byzantium.

In fact, however, there is a much closer and more likely method of contact: the diplomatic and trade agreements between Egypt and Constantinople to which I have already alluded. A number of scholars, but especially P. M. Holt, have studied the diplomatic and trade relationships between the two new dynasties that came to power in the Middle East in 1260—Michael VIII Palaiologus in Constantinople and the Mamluk rulers in Cairo.[21] Although no actual diplomatic letters from this period remain, there are enough references, primarily in the Arabic sources, to indicate that a substantial and continuing diplomatic and cultural exchange existed from 1261 onward.[22] The first recorded step in this exchange was a letter (now lost) in 1261 from the Byzantine emperor offering his support to

the new Mamluk ruler. The sultan in return sent the emperor a number of gifts, including a giraffe, a group of Mongol prisoners, and some Mongol horses and their gear.[23]

The first extant document in what was clearly an ongoing exchange between the two nations is a treaty of 1281, which among other things guaranteed free passage between these countries to ambassadors and merchants.[24] By this time a new sultan, Qalāwūn, had come to power, and, more important for our investigation, Ibn Dāniyāl had moved into court circles. His earliest dated court poem from this same year was a panegyric honoring Qalāwūn's vizier, Taj al-Din Muhammad, who by all accounts was "a learned person with a decent grounding in all things cultural."[25] Although Ibn Dāniyāl seems to have had little contact with Sultan Qalāwūn himself, a military man with apparently little interest in literary matters, the poet was closely associated with the heir apparent, al-Malik al-Salih, and with al-Salih's powerful vizier, Fakhar al-Din Ibn al-Khalil, one of the few real-life figures who appear in the shadow plays.[26] There seems little question that during these years there was a much stronger Byzantine presence in Cairo than before not only because of the increased diplomatic ties, but also because of increased commercial exchanges. The part of the treaty put forward both by the sultan and by the emperor make clear that commerce would be protected and encouraged. Article seven of Qalāwūn's side of the treaty states that:

> No injustice or oppression shall befall the merchants coming from the realm of the Emperor, Lord Michael, to Our territory. They shall pass to and fro safely and securely, and practice their trade. They shall be cared for in going and coming, residing and traveling. Inasmuch as the merchants of Our territory shall likewise be cared for in the territory of the realm of the Emperor, Lord Michael, and find no injustice or oppression from anyone in the territory of the realm of the Emperor, Lord Michael.[27]

The unexpected and sudden death of al-Salih in 1288, two years before his father, left the succession to his younger brother, al-Ashraf Khalil. Although much involved in military affairs, Khalil also headed a brilliant court in which Ibn Dāniyāl was the prominent literary figure. Despite his own reputation for obscenity, he was even appointed royal censor, a post that he apparently fulfilled without losing the close friendship of his fellow poets.[28]

Khalil was assassinated in 1293, ending Ibn Dāniyāl's great years at court. The poet continued to produce celebratory verses for the military

elite, wealthy courtiers, private citizens, and religious leaders. Among these was the unknown patron who asked Ibn Dāniyāl to create three "literary" shadow plays. The exact date of these plays is not known, but although they contain embedded poems that may be dated back to the 1270s, their final form is assumed to date from near the end of the century.[29] Thus, the particular structure that Ibn Dāniyāl utilized in the last of these plays would have been employed not long after his court career when he was in intimate contact with the leading literary figures in Cairo, as well as with the diplomats and representatives from the Byzantine court and very likely with Byzantine merchants and other travelers at the very period when relations between that court and Cairo were most intense. Given the fact that these are also the years when Aristophanes was enjoying an enormous vogue in Byzantine literary circles, far greater than that of any other classical dramatist, and that both dramatists were equally admired for their high poetic style and extreme obscenity, it is surely reasonable to conjecture that Ibn Dāniyāl might well have received during his court years information about this dramatist, either through his literary or court contacts. Thus, the striking structural resemblance of his final play to an Aristophanic comedy may not at all be simply a bizarre coincidence, but seems quite possibly to have been the result of a direct, if serendipitous, connection. If that is the case, and the circumstantial evidence is considerable, there is more reason than ever to characterize this thirteenth-century dramatist as, in fact, the Arab Aristophanes.

The Graduate Center, CUNY

Notes

[1] Paul Kahle, ed., *Three Shadow Plays by Muhammad Ibn Dāniyāl* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1992). Ibn Dāniyāl's third play, *The Love-Stricken One and the Lost One Who Inspires Passion*, the focus of this article, is not yet available in English translation. Such a translation, prepared by the author of this article and Safi Mahfouz, is forthcoming from the Martin E. Segal Press.

[2] Li Guo, *The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl's Mamluk Cairo* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[3] Shmuel Moreh, "The Shadow Play ("Khayal al-Zill") in the Light of Arabic Literature," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 18 (1987): 46–61.

[4] Guo, 108.

[5] Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 128.

[6] Nikolai N. Martinovich, *The Turkish Theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1933), 31–32.

[7] Kahle, 14. See also Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab People* (New York: Grand Central, 1992), 198.

[8] See, for example, William Halsey, "Ibn Daniyal, the Arab Aristophanes," posted 24 Nov. 2009 on the internet collaborative publishing community Suite 101 (http://suite101.com).

[9] Thus the first English collection of this dramatist's work, translated by Asataro Miyamori and edited by Robert Nichols, was called *Masterpieces of Chikamatsu: The Japanese Shakespeare* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926).

[10] For the most detailed refutation of this comparison, see Takashi Sasayama, "Tragedy and Emotion: Shakespeare and Chikamatsu," in *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. Takashi Sasayama et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[11] The first play of the three, *The Phantom*, has been translated into English by Li Guo in *Performing Arts*, and into French as *Le Mariage de l'Émir Conjonctif*, trans. René R. Khawam (Paris: L'Esprit des Péninsules, 1997). Selections from the plays in Italian may be found in Francesca M. Corrao, *Il Riso, il Comico e la Festa al Cairo nel XIII Secolo* (Rome: Oriente, 1996).

[12] Liz Sonneborn, *Averroes (Ibn Rushd): Muslim Scholar, Philosopher, and Physician of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Rosen, 2006), 89.

[13] See, for example, Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury, 2009).

[14] Josef W. Meri and Jere L. Bacharach, eds. *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 1: 431.

[15] *The Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, 3rd ed. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 122.

[16] Oliver Overwien, "Humor aus der Antike in der mittelalterlichen Arabischen Literatur," in *Humor in der Arabischen Kultur*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 107–26 (126).

[17] Alphonse Dain, "La survie de Ménandre," *Maia* 15 (1963): 278–309 (299).

[18] N. G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 25.

[19] Przemyslaw Marciniak, *Greek Drama in Byzantine Times* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Slaskiego, 2004), 47.

[20] Lynda Garland, "'And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon…': An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Parergon*, New Series 8 (1990): 1–31 (4). See also Barry Baldwin, "A Talent to Abuse: Some Aspects of Byzantine Satire," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982): 19–28 (24), and Marciniak, 50.

[21] P. M. Holt, *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260–1290): Treaties of Baybars and Qalāwūn with Christian Rulers* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

[22] See Reuven Amitai, "Diplomacy and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Re-examination of the Mamluk-Byzantine-Genoese Triangle in the Late Thirteenth Century in Light of the Existing Early Correspondence," *Oriente Moderno*, New Series 88 (2008): 349–68.

[23] Holt, 118.

[24] Amitai, 364.

[25] Guo, 38.

[26] Ibid., 45.

[27] Holt, 127.

[28] Guo, 62–63.

[29] Ibid., 93.