



DIVISION OF HUMANITIES
ARTS & SCIENCES
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Call for Papers

Conceptions and Configurations of the Arabic Literary Canon Workshop

Organizers

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This workshop endeavors to look at the conceptions and configurations of the Arabic literary canon as it was conceived by pre-modern Arab scholars, later reconfigured by early-modern orientalist scholars in Europe, and engaged with by modern and contemporary Arab writers, whether in Arabic or in English.

One of the questions we want to ask is how the canon was conceptualized across space and time, periods and languages - what did the Arabic literary canon mean for pre-modernists, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century orientalists, and then for modern/contemporary writers? In order to pursue this project, we intend to bring together an international team of academics working across the fields of literary studies, the history of ideas and of book/manuscript, Empire studies, postcolonial as well as decolonial studies, and the sociology of literature. We investigate the development and formation of Arabic Canon(s) as a Global and a Glocal enterprise that is influx owing to political, economic, ideological, and cultural forces.

As a continuation to this first general definition of what a canon of Arabic literature would mean, we want to ask about the logics and the politics of selection. What are the Arabic authors who got/get picked up and who are the ones omitted and for what purposes? Obviously, some authors cross space and time and feature prominently both in the classical Arab and the early-modern orientalist canons, but others are dismissed or reintegrated. What is then the politics underlying these choices?

Thus far, literary criticism has to a large extent focused on the forms of the latent and manifest collusion between literature and colonialism, and on questions of literary influence and “cross-pollination” between Arabic and European material. Yet, the texts taken into

consideration by literary critics are mostly literary productions written by English or French authors *in imitation of* Arabic literary models (as in eighteenth-century pseudo-oriental tales) or the published translations of Arabic tales and poetry by European orientalists (such as Jones's *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations From the Asiatick Tongues*, which is indeed half-translation, half-creation). No consistent engagement with reconfigurations of these translated literatures has been proposed yet. Therefore, current developments in translation studies – i.e. those which involve contesting the concept of “original” texts, rethinking translations as sites and as creations, focusing on untranslatability, and challenging monolingualism as choice for default option – and in literary studies that deal with the problematic elaboration of national literary canons and histories, are proving seminal to the critical framing of the project.

The workshop intends to bring together scholars working on Arabic literature (classical, modern, contemporary), on orientalist scholarship from perspectives that can be both philological and historiographical (looking for instance at the relation between the establishment of manuscript collections and the production of orientalist research in Europe), on the historiography of colonialism and empire and its relation to literary transfers and translations, and in the fields of literary criticism, translation, postcolonial, and decolonial studies.

Points of inquiry include but are not restricted to:

- Are there foundational texts in pre-modern Arabic literature that attempt to circumscribe a canon? And how is it different from the early modern and modern/contemporary Arabic literary canons? When did the canonization of certain works and forms over others begin? And how does this process affect the depiction of hierarchies and thereby the status accrued of different literary works and forms?
- In the early-modern period in Europe and the Mediterranean, how did orientalists reconfigure Arabic literary traditions for academic and popular forms of consumption? What were the Arabic texts that were collected, read, translated, and published and for what purposes? What were the literary and political implications of these gestures of “homing” the other and what is the legacy of that gesture today?
- The reconfiguration of Arabic literature in Europe hinges on a cartographic imaginary that involves processes of bordering, partitioning, and remapping. What were the levels of rearrangement in presenting the Arabic canon in the early-modern period for readers across cultures and social backgrounds, thereby determining commonalities and differences in forms, contents, and values with the classical period?
- The early-modern orientalist project participated in a form of partitioning, between what would count as literature and what would not, of authorizing, by elevating and

silencing or occluding, and of demarcating the world into discrete monolingual literary cultures. What are the consequences of this project in the present day literary field?

- In the transfer of literary traditions and manuscripts, what were the criteria of selection? What were the roles of Arabic scholars of the early-modern period and their understanding of what should be transmitted to European orientalists? What were the backgrounds and cultural milieus of these scholars? What were their agendas and frames?
- In order not to flatten out the Arabic orientalist canon, we want to ask what does an analysis of orientalists' marginalia left on the pages of Arabic manuscripts would tell us in terms of understanding and engagement that the study of published editions cannot tell?
- What are the contemporary sites of literary contestations vis-à-vis the classical Arabic canon and the legacy of orientalist designations amongst modern and contemporary writers in Arabic, English, and French?
- What are the issues related to the establishment of hegemonic languages – English as hegemon, but also standard Arabic as hegemon over regional and local Arabic (*fushḥa* vs. *‘āmmiyya*) – and of national literatures? We want to scrutinize the contours of Arabic literatures today and engage with the domination of specific national literature, such as the Egyptian or Lebanese literatures, on the editorial book market in Arabic. When using terms such as Arabic literature are we not in fact reproducing and subjecting critical analysis to the dominance of a specific national literatures?
- What is the role of translation and literary prizes in conferring value to specific texts in Arabic literature and thereby making Arabic literature global once filtered through the market of translation and literary prizes? And do prizes create their own canon?
- How do contemporary writers, poets, and artists whose practices of languages and handling of literary traditions fundamentally destabilise the logic of the border, highlight the violence inscribed in demarcating spaces and silencing voices, and clear up grounds for invisibilized or new voices to emerge? How do some Arab writers mark their disengagements from the national by reconnecting and meshing various canons (and therefore engaging the canons themselves in processes of minorizing) and by locating their literatures elsewhere than in the national (and this can be in the local, in the regional, but also in the ecological). Related to this idea of minorizing the canon, we ask if the function of a canon is to conserve things as they were or if its inflexibility is not rather question of perception? Having a canon can be a means of tampering with it or creatively playing with it in order to re-attune it to the present? Does tampering with the canon necessarily imply subversion and resistance?
- What are the ramifications of a/the conception(s) and configuration(s) of an/the Arabic Literary Canon in the pedagogical practices of institutions teaching Arabic literature? What are the canonical works that are taught or studied and deemed relevant to the acquisition of a degree in Arabic Literature? How do these programs compare with programs the West? Is it plausible to argue that the orientalist canonical

library shaped the modern study of *adab* (literature) in the Arab world or that it still shapes academic institutions in the West?

- A literary canon acts as a reservoir for scholars to engage with theory. In other words, why an engagement with Arabic literature proceeds from Western theory (which owes itself to the Western canon) and not from Arabic literary theory? Why is it assumed that Arabs do not theorize?

A selection of revised proceedings from the workshop shall be published in *Philological Encounters* <http://www.brill.com/products/journal/philological-encounters>

Abstracts should not exceed 300 words showing scholarly rigor and references to the theoretical framework used and should include a short biography, institutional affiliation, and main publications.

Please send abstracts to arabicliterarycanon@gmail.com

Deadline for abstract submission: June 18, 2018

Response to selected abstracts: July 31, 2018

Deadline for complete papers: March 31, 2019

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