

**QUR'ĀNIC FIREBRANDS:
QUOTING THE QUR'ĀN IN THEORY AND PRACTICE
IN PRE-MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE**

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Scholars have often addressed the literary features and properties of the Qur'ān. Several well-known modern monographs discuss Qur'anic imagery and narrative, such as Sayyid Quṭb's *al-Taṣwīr al-fannī fī'l-Qur'ān*¹ and Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh's *al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī'l-Qur'ān al-karīm*.² In many ways, these studies are heirs to a rich Classical tradition of works composed by al-Rummānī (d. 384/994), al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998), al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) and others, that attempted to describe the Qur'ān's literary features within a discussion of the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the sacred text.

The relationship between the Qur'ān and Arabic literature, however, is not limited to the presence of literary features in the Qur'ān. Rather, the Qur'ān profoundly influenced Arabic literature. To this end, Ibtisām Marhūn al-Ṣaffār and Wadād al-Qāḍī devoted studies to the impact of the Qur'ān on the development of Arabic literature.³ While Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām considered the influence of the Qur'ān on the development of Classical Arabic literary theory in his book *Athar al-Qur'ān fī taṭawwur al-naqd al-'arabī*.⁴

This article investigates the usage of the Qur'ān in Arabic literature through the practice of quotation and allusion. In the classical period, scholars applied a variety of terms to describe various types of Qur'anic usages and borrowings, such as *sariqa* (theft), *ikhtilās* ([mis]appropriation), *naz' intizā'* (extraction), *taḍmīn* (insertion), *'aqd* (knotting), *istishhād* (citation), *talwīḥ/talmīḥ* (allusion), *ishāra* (reference), *isti'āra* (borrowing), *istinbāṭ/istikhrāj* (extraction), or the most common term, *iqtibās* (quotation).⁵

Incorporating Qur'anic quotations in prose and poetry was a common practice in Islam as early as the lifetime of the Prophet, as attested by the statements and poetry of the Prophet's companions.⁶ Because of the constraints of metre and rhyme, allusions are understandably more common in poetry than direct quotations. This is obviously because the verses of the Qur'ān do not fit within the Arabic metrical system without minor or major adjustments or changes.⁷ Ḥikmat Faraj Badrī compiled a dictionary of all of the Qur'anic verses and phrases used in the

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¹ Sayyid Quṭb, *al-Taṣwīr al-fannī fī'l-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1959).

² Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh, *al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī'l-Qur'ān al-karīm* (London, Beirut, and Cairo, 1999).

³ Ibtisām Marhūn al-Ṣaffār, *Athar al-Qur'ān fī'l-adab al-'arabī fī'l-qarn al-awwal al-hijrī* (Amman, 2005). Wadād al-Qāḍī, 'The Impact of the Qur'ān on the Epistolography of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd', in Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 285-313; eadem, 'The Limitations of Qur'anic Usage in Early Arabic Poetry: The Example of A Khārijite Poem' in Wolfhart Heinrichs and Gregor Schoeler, eds., *Festschrift Ewald Wagner zum 65. Geburtstag* (Beirut, 1994), pp. 162-181; eadem, *Bishr Ibn Abī Kubār al-Balawī: namūdhaj min al-nathr al-fannī l-mubakkir fī'l-Yaman* (Beirut, 1985); Wadād al-Qāḍī and Mustansir Mir, 'Literature and the Qur'ān' in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed., Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden, 2003), III, pp. 205-227.

⁴ Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām, *Athar al-Qur'ān fī taṭawwur al-naqd al-'arabī ilā ākhir al-qarn al-rābi' al-hijrī* (Cairo, 1968).

⁵ For a general treatment of the topic, see Wadād Kadi and Mustansir Mir, 'Literature and the Qur'ān', III, pp. 205-227; D.B. Macdonald and S.A. Bonebakker, 'Iktibās' in *EL*, vol.3, pp. 1091b-1092a; and Amidu Sanni, *The Arabic Theory of Prosification and Versification* (Beirut, 1998), pp. 135-153.

⁶ Ibtisām Marhūn al-Ṣaffār, *Athar al-Qur'ān fī'l-adab al-'arabī fī'l-qarn al-awwal al-hijrī*; Wadād Kadi and Mustansir Mir, 'Literature and the Qur'ān', p. 215.

⁷ For the use of the Qur'ān in poetry, see 'Abd al-Hādī al-Fukaykī, *al-Iqtibās min al-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Damascus, 1996);

practice of *iqtibās* in poetry, i.e. those Qur'anic phrases that conform to the system of poetic metres.⁸

Views on *iqtibās*

Pre-modern *littérateurs* and critics also devoted attention to the practice of incorporating the Qur'ān in literature. The renowned Umayyad secretary 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750) identified the Qur'ān as the first item in the required list of studies for state bureaucrats.⁹ The earliest-known work on *iqtibās* is Muḥammad Ibn Kunāsa's (d. 207/822) *Sariqāt al-Kumayt min al-Qur'ān*, which, unfortunately, has not survived.¹⁰ Its title suggests, though, that this scholar understood the practice of quoting the Qur'ān in poetry as a theft (*sariqa*), a term which does not necessarily convey a pejorative sense.¹¹ Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī (d. 297/909) devoted the ninety-third chapter of his *Kitāb al-Zahra* to the topic: *Dhikr mā ista'ārathu 'l-shu'arā' min al-Qur'ān wa mā naqalathu ilā ash'ārihā min sā'ir al-ma'ānī* (A discussion of what poets borrowed from the Qur'ān and what they incorporated into their poetry from common motifs).¹² Ibrāhīm b. al-Mudabbir al-Shaybānī (d. 298/911) in his *al-Risāla al-'adhrā'* counseled that secretaries learn to be efficient in extracting appropriate verses of the Qur'ān and proverbial citations from their sources (*naz' āy al-Qur'ān fī mawāḍi'ihā wa ijtilāb al-amthāl fī amākinihā*).¹³ Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. 360/970) dedicated a chapter to Abū Nuwās' employment of Qur'anic expressions and ideas in poetry.¹⁴ Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) in a statement preserved in *Thamarāt al-awrāq* of Ibn Hījja al-Ḥamawī (d. 838/1434), noted that the *kātib* ought to have memorised the Qur'ān in order to extract (*li-yantazi'a*) from its verses.¹⁵

The earliest comprehensive book on *iqtibās* as an independent subject that is extant is Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī's (d. 429/1030) *al-Iqtibās min al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, which will be discussed below. The term employed by al-Tha'ālibī, i.e. *iqtibās*, became the conventional one for quoting or using the Qur'ān in literary texts. *Iqtibās*, literally 'taking a live coal or a firebrand (*qabas*) from a fire' denotes a quotation or borrowing from the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth* with or without explicit acknowledgement. The regrettably lost *Kitāb Intizā'āt [min] al-Qur'ān* attributed to al-Tha'ālibī's contemporary, Abū Sa'd al-'Amīdī (d. 433/1042) was likely also devoted to the issue of borrowings from Qur'ān.¹⁶ A similar title, *Kitāb Intizā'āt al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm* by the Fāṭimid secretary Ibn al-Ṣayrafī (d. 542/1147) survives in manuscript form. The work lists the Qur'anic

⁸ Ḥikmat Faraj Badrī, *Mu'jam āyāt al-iqtibās* (Baghdad, 1980); Claude France Audebert, 'Emprunts faits au Coran par quelques poètes du IXe/VIIIe siècle', *Arabica* 47 (2000), pp. 457-470.

⁹ See al-Qāḍī, 'The Impact of the Qur'ān', p. 287.

¹⁰ Ibn Rashīq, *Qurāḍat al-dhahab*, ed. Chedly Bouyahia (Tunis, 1972), p. 99 (as quoted in Sanni, *Arabic Theory*, p. 139).

¹¹ Wolfhart Heinrichs explains that for the Arab critics 'there is a stable and limited pool of motifs or poetical themes (*ma'ānī*) that is worthy to be expressed in poetry', thus, *sariqa* became 'a way of life for later poets'. Therefore, judgement on a particular *sariqa* depends on how elegantly a poet employed the borrowed meaning and whether he introduced a change or improvement in structure (*lafẓ*), content (*ma'nā*), or context (e.g. use in a different genre). See W. Heinrichs, 'An Evaluation of *Sariqa*', *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 5-6 (1987-1988), pp. 358-360.

¹² Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Zahra*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrā'ī (Amman, 1985), II, pp. 815-820.

¹³ Ibrāhīm b. al-Mudabbir al-Shaybānī, *al-Risāla al-'adhrā'*, ed. Zakī Mubārak (Cairo, 1931), p. 7.

¹⁴ Sanni, *Arabic Theory*, p. 137.

¹⁵ Ibn Hījja al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-awrāq*, ed. Muḥammad Abū'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut, 2005), p. 260.

¹⁶ See Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, ed. D.S. Margoliouth (London, 1923-1935), vol. 6, p. 328 (as quoted in Sanni, *Arabic Theory*, p. 142). Sanni mentions that this work may be taken as the third part of al-'Amīdī's trilogy on the subject of textual borrowings, if we take into consideration his two other works: *al-Irshād ilā ḥall al-manẓūm* and *al-Hidāya ilā nazm al-manthūr*.

verses that could be used by the state secretaries in the presentation of a various topics.¹⁷ Later, the practice of *iqtibās* was a common subject in *adab* and rhetorical works.¹⁸

Quotations from the Qur'ān in literature have generally prompted little objection from *littérateurs*. Nevertheless, there were some scholars who disapproved of *iqtibās* even before al-Tha'ālibī extensive composition on the subject. Significantly, most legal scholars were in favour of *iqtibās*. The first critical voice, however, allegedly belongs to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) whose opinion on the matter is recorded in al-Qalqashandī's (d. 821/1418) encyclopaedia of chancellery practice *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*.¹⁹ Some authorities in theology, such as Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) condemned *iqtibās* if it should occur in poetry rather than in prose,²⁰ an opinion that found approval in later works.²¹ Others deemed the practice of *iqtibās* permissible only if the writer acknowledges the borrowing. Ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239) reported that some hold this opinion but that he himself does not.²² Some opined, furthermore, that Qur'anic materials may be used in prose only in the form of direct quotational borrowings, which means that, for this group, allusion or paraphrase is not permissible.²³ Ibn Khalaf al-Kātib (d. 5th/11th century) opined that the poetic verse that incorporates the Qur'anic verse is always inferior to the Qur'anic original in terms of expressiveness (*balāgha*), thus arguing in favour of quotational borrowing.²⁴ Mālikī scholars were in general more critical of *iqtibās* and some of them condemned all kinds of *iqtibās* considering it an act of *kufr*.²⁵

The discussion on the legitimacy of *iqtibās* becomes more elaborate in the 8th/14th century. The Shādhilī scholar Dāwūd b. 'Umar b. Ibrāhīm al-Bākhilī (d. ca. 730/1329) addressed this issue in detail in his *al-Laṭīfa al-marḍiyya bi-sharḥ du 'ā' al-shādhiliyya*, raising questions as to whether the quotation in verse can be employed in a meaning different from the original Qur'anic intent and whether one may change a verse's word order or its wording in quotation. The author seems to be in favour of these two practices and quotes several statements in support of his opinions. This is followed by examples of various types of *iqtibās* taken from earlier *littérateurs*.²⁶

A number of critics such as Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (d. 838/1434), following Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. ca. 750/1349), divided *iqtibās* into three categories: acceptable or recommended (*maqbul*), such as in sermons and letters of investiture (*uhūd*); permissible (*mubāḥ*), such as in *ghazal*, letters and stories; and objectionable (*mardūd*) such as quoting the Qur'ān in a frivolous

¹⁷ See Wadad Kadi and Mustansir Mir, 'Literature and the Qur'ān', p. 216.

¹⁸ See Sanni, *Arabic Theory*, p. 143ff.

¹⁹ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* (Cairo, 1922), I, pp. 191-192.

²⁰ Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, n.d.), I, p. 483.

²¹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī attributes this same opinion to Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277-8) and Bahā' al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 763/1361). See al-Suyūṭī, *Sharḥ 'uqūd al-jumān* (Beirut, n.d.), p. 168; idem, '*Raf' al-bās wa kashf al-iltibās fī ḍarb al-mathal min al-Qur'ān wa'l-iqtibās*' in *al-Hāwī li'l-fatāwī* (Beirut, 1352 [1933]), I, p. 278.

²² Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mathal al-sā'ir fī adab al-kātib wa'l-shā'ir*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥūfī and Badawī Ṭabāna (Cairo, 1962), III, p. 200.

²³ See al-Suyūṭī, '*Raf' al-bās*', I, p. 259.

²⁴ 'Alī Ibn Khalaf al-Kātib, *Mawādd al-bayān*, ed. Hātim Ṣāliḥ al-Dāmin (Damascus, 2003), pp. 44-45.

²⁵ Al-Suyūṭī attributes this opinion to his *hijāzī* contemporary *qāḍī al-quḍāt* Muḥyī al-Dīn b. Abī'l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, see al-Suyūṭī, *Sharḥ 'uqūd al-jumān*, p. 168; in *Raf' al-bās*, however, the strict prohibition seems to result from the use of *iqtibās* in poetry, see idem, '*Raf' al-bās*', I, p. 278.

²⁶ See Dāwūd b. 'Umar b. Ibrāhīm al-Bākhilī, *al-Laṭīfa al-marḍiyya bi-sharḥ du 'ā' al-shādhiliyya*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Naṣṣār (Cairo, 2011), pp. 148-165.

manner.²⁷ Even a strong supporter of *iqtibās* such as al-Tha‘ālibī dedicated a few pages in his book to censuring reprehensible *iqtibās* (*iqtibās makrūh*).²⁸

Al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) was also in favour of the practice of *iqtibās* and compiled an anthology on the subject: *Aḥāsīn al-iqtinās fī maḥāsīn al-iqtibās*.²⁹ In this work, al-Suyūfī placed his own poetic verses that contained examples of *iqtibās* in alphabetical order according to the rhyme letter. In this work’s introduction, he stated that he has not used *iqtibās* in a frivolous manner and notes his disapproval of this practice. He addressed the topic of *iqtibās* in other works such as *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, *Sharḥ ‘uqūd al-jumān*, *Raf‘ al-bās wa kashf al-iltibās fī ḍarb al-mathal min al-Qur’ān wa ‘l-iqtibās*, and his *Maqāmāt*, quoting various legal opinions on the legitimacy of the practice and offering numerous examples of different kinds of *iqtibās*.³⁰ In his *fatwā*-treatise *Raf‘ al-bās*, for example, he addressed questions such as the use of *iqtibās* in prayer (generally prohibited), or in the case of ritual impurity (generally accepted), or changing the wording of the Qur’ān in *iqtibās* (generally accepted), or changing the context or meaning of the verse (generally accepted), or employing *iqtibās* in poetry (generally accepted).

The Shāfi‘ī *muftī* Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī’l-Luṭf (fl. 992/1584) composed a *fatwā*-treatise entitled *Raf‘ al-iltibās ‘an munkir al-iqtibās*. This treatise survives in several manuscripts.³¹ The Princeton manuscript found in the Yahuda section (no. 832) in the Garret collection is divided into two chapters (*bābs*), the first entitled: *fī bayān jawāz al-iqtibās balāghatan wa shar‘an* (The permissibility of *iqtibās* in rhetoric and according to religious law), and the second entitled: *fī bayān al-adilla ‘ala ‘l-jawāz* (On proving the permissibility of *iqtibās*). The author mentions that he has been informed that someone has unduly denied the practice of *iqtibās*, and this has prompted him to answer this judgment using legal proofs that rely on *ḥadīths* and through the opinions and prose illustrations of a wide range of religious Ḥanafī, Shāfi‘ī, and Mālikī scholars (*muḥaddithūn*, *mufasssirūn*, and *fuqahā’*) including al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), Ibn al-Sā‘ātī (d. 694/1295), al-Ṭībī (d. 743/1342), al-Suyūfī, and al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390) in addition to *udabā’* including al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122), ‘Abd al-Mu‘min al-Iṣfahānī (d. ca. 600/1204), Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366), and the author himself.

Motives for *iqtibās*

There is no single explanation as to why *littérateurs* used the Qur’ān in their literary works. Studying and memorising the Qur’ān was part of schooling from childhood, and with repeated practice, students learned Qur’anic formulations to the point that they became accustomed to these words and used them in their writing. Also, the preeminence of Arabic as the language of the state, society, and religion encouraged the widespread knowledge of the Qur’anic text.³²

²⁷ See Ibn Hījja al-Ḥamawī, *Khizānat al-adab wa ghāyat al-arab* (Cairo, 1882), p. 539. See also al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Saudi Arabia, n.d.), p. 721; Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī, *Sharḥ al-Kāfiya al-badī‘iyya*, ed. Nasīb Nashāwī (Damascus, 1982), p. 326.

²⁸ See al-Tha‘ālibī, *al-Iqtibās min al-Qur’ān al-karīm*, ed. Ibtisām Marhūn al-Ṣaffār (Baghdad, 1992), II, pp. 57-58.

²⁹ See al-Suyūfī, *Husn al-muḥāḍara*, ed. Muḥammad Abū’l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1967), I, p. 344; idem, *Aḥāsīn al-iqtinās fī maḥāsīn al-iqtibās*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (Damascus, 1996).

³⁰ See al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, pp. 719-727; idem, *Sharḥ maqāmāt Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī*, ed. Samīr Maḥmūd al-Durūbī (Beirut, 1989), I, pp. 725-729; idem, *Sharḥ ‘uqūd al-jumān*, pp. 165-170; idem, *Raf‘ al-bās*, I, pp. 259-284.

³¹ See Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (Leiden, 1937-1949), II, p. 367 and Supplement, II, p. 394.

³² Wadād al-Qāḍī, and Mustansir Mir, ‘Literature and the Qur’ān’, p. 215.

Moreover, the Qur'ān is a sacred text that has been revered as a religious guide and a source of eloquence that possesses miraculous attributes.³³ Ibn Khalaf al-Kātib stated that the main motivation for Qur'anic borrowing is seeking divine favour.³⁴ Others, such as secretaries adorned their works with Qur'anic references to prove their talent and skill in appropriating the Qur'anic language and themes. A reference to or quotation from the Qur'ān, the memorised text *par excellence*, had the advantage of being recognisable to others and appreciated by a wide audience. As reflected above in the statements of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, Ibn al-Mudabbir, and Tawḥīdī, by the fourth/tenth century, the practice of incorporating verses from poetry, Qur'ān and proverbs (*amthāl*) developed into an artistic technique, an acceptable touchstone by which to test the competence of a *kātib*.³⁵ Moreover, as al-Qalqashandī noted, the Qur'ān is often used to furnish evidence for arguments aiding the author in establishing definitive proofs for his claims with concision and force.³⁶

Quoting the Qur'ān, however, was not always an act of piety or a means of demonstrating proof or winning an argument. In some cases, quoting the Qur'ān served to lampoon or parody or even to ridicule the concepts and themes of the sacred text, such as in the *mujūn* poetry of Bashshār b. Burd (d. 168/784) and Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 200/815). The Qur'ān was also sometimes used in a humorous context, as is the case in stories of party-crashers (*tufayliyyūn*) and penurious men (*bukhalā'*), where the religious text is used to protect or produce food often through sexual references or suggestive innuendos. In such narratives, the sacred text moves from a world of authority to a world of play or parody as Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Geert Jan van Gelder, and Ulrich Marzolph have noted in recent studies.³⁷ Van Gelder adds that when poets, and by extension the *udabā'*, are being frivolous, they usually intend to shock their audience, an effect that can be achieved by using Qur'anic references especially because they are 'readily recognised, blatant, and unsubtle'.³⁸

Bearing in mind the eloquence of the Qur'ān, *littérateurs* employ Qur'anic verses in order to raise the stylistic register of the literary piece, whether in prose or poetry. Al-Tha'ālibī emphasised that the practice of quoting the Qur'ān is a conscious decision of the writer. He alluded to earlier attempts to challenge the literary pre-eminence of the Qur'ān, the so-called *mu'aradāt al-Qur'ān*. In this early period, a *kātib* could prove his talent by imitating the Qur'ān just as a poet might prove his mastery by imitating a famous ode. After the *i'jāz* dogma started to take shape with al-Nazzām (d. after 220/835), *littérateurs* became more wary of Qur'anic imitation.

³³ For a discussion of the miraculous nature (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān, see Sophia Vasalou, 'The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'ān: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches,' *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4 (2002), pp. 23-53 and the sources listed there.

³⁴ Ibn Khalaf al-Kātib, *Mawādd al-bayān*, pp. 44-45.

³⁵ See also Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mathal*, I, p. 101. Even a non-Muslim like Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī memorised the Qur'ān and used to quote its verses in his letters (*yuṣarrifū āyātahu fī rasā'ilih*), see al-Tha'ālibī, *Yatīmat al-dahr fī mahāsini ahl al-'aṣr*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo, 1956), II, pp. 242-3.

³⁶ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*, I, pp. 191-193.

³⁷ See Geert Jan van Gelder, 'Forbidden Firebrands: Frivolous *Iqtibās* (Quotation from the Qur'ān) According to Medieval Arab Critics', *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 20-21 (2002-2003), pp. 3-16; Ulrich Marzolph, 'The Qoran and Jocular Literature', *Arabica* 47, (2000), pp. 478-487; and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'Playing with the Sacred: Religious Intertext in *Adab* Discourse' in Asma Afsaruddin and A.H. Mathias Zahniser, eds., *Humanism, Culture and Language in the Near East* (Winona Lake, IN, 1997), pp. 51-59.

³⁸ See Geert Jan van Gelder, 'Forbidden Firebrands', p. 4.

Al-Tha‘ālibī’s *Kitāb al-Iqtibās min al-Qur’ān*

Al-Tha‘ālibī’s *Iqtibās* is the first anthology devoted exclusively to the topic of Qur’anic quotation. Given the ubiquity of Qur’anic quotation in Arabic literature and discourse, the author was faced with the challenge of compiling a large group of diverse materials and arranging them in an interesting and useful fashion.

Al-Tha‘ālibī does not mention the purpose of compiling *al-Iqtibās* in the introduction to the work, but one can presume that one broad aim was to promote the use of Qur’ān as literary embellishment in Arabic. As is the case for many of his other anthologies, al-Tha‘ālibī’s main goals in the *Iqtibās* are practical rather than theoretical. He does not offer any views on the validity of *iqtibās*, and appears uninterested in engaging with the legal problems or theological questions raised by other scholars prior or contemporary to him, mentioned above. Indeed, he dismisses attempts to challenge the Qur’ān as failures.³⁹ Al-Tha‘ālibī simply asserts that the best that men can do is to take their words and meanings from the Qur’ān.⁴⁰

Al-Tha‘ālibī does not relate a comprehensive definition of *iqtibās* anywhere in his work. It appears that he is working with an inherited or widely known definition of the practice of *iqtibās*. Significantly, it appears that for him, the practice includes both the quotation of words (*alfāz*) and the borrowing of Qur’anic meanings (*ma‘ānī*). For example, when al-Tha‘ālibī considers ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib’s practice of *iqtibās*, these are instances of borrowings of Qur’anic meaning and not Qur’anic diction.⁴¹

Al-Tha‘ālibī’s *Iqtibās* is divided into twenty-five chapters in the following manner:⁴²

1. Blessings (*fī l-taḥmīd*)
2. The Prophet (*fī dhikr al-nabī*)
3. The Family of the Prophet (*fī dhikr al-‘itra al-zakiyya wa’l-shajara al-nabawiyya*)
4. Companions of the Prophet and their Excellence (*fī dhikr al-ṣaḥāba*)
5. Prophets (*fī dhikr al-anbiyā’*)
6. Excellence of Knowledge and Scholars (*fī faḍl al-‘ilm wa’l-‘ulamā’*)
7. Cultivation, Reason, Wisdom, and Spiritual Counsel (*fī dhikr al-adab wa’l-‘aql wa’l-ḥikma wa’l-maw‘iẓa al-ḥasana*)
8. Excellent Qualities and Noble Acts (*fī dhikr maḥāsini al-khiṣāl wa makārim al-af‘āl*)
9. Blameworthy Defects and Wrongful Acts (*fī dhikr ma‘ātib al-khilāl wa maqābiḥ al-af‘āl*)
10. Opposing Qualities and Numbers (*fī dhikr anwā‘ min ‘l-aḍḍād wa’l-‘aḍḍād*)
11. Women and Children (*fī dhikr al-nisā’ wa’l-awlād wa’l-ikhwān*)
12. Food and Drink (*fī dhikr al-ṭa‘ām wa’l-sharāb*)
13. Clear Expression, Oratory, and the Benefits of Eloquence (*fī dhikr al-bayān wa’l-khaṭāba wa thamarāt al-faṣāḥa wa’l-balāgha*)
14. Silencing Responses (*fī dhikr al-jawābāt al-muskita*)
15. Entertaining Anecdotes and Rarities (*fī mulāḥ al-nawādir*)

³⁹ Al-Tha‘ālibī, *al-Iqtibās*, I, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. I, pp. 125-126; The first example provided by al-Tha‘ālibī is ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib’s saying, ‘the value of each man is that which he does righteously’ (*qīmat kull imri ‘in mā yuḥsinuhu*). Tha‘ālibī states that this is an example of *iqtibās* from Q 2:247. Al-Tha‘ālibī believes the aphorism derives its main idea from what is voiced by the Qur’ān (*mā naṭaqa bihi*) in this verse concerning the rationale for the choice of Saul as a king.

⁴² al-Tha‘ālibī, *al-Iqtibās*, I, pp. 39-43. See Claude Gilliot, ‘Un Florilège Coranique: Le *Iqtibās min al-qur’ān* de Abū Maṣū‘ al-Ṭa‘ālibī (ob. 430/init. 3 oct. 1038 ou 429)’, *Arabica* 47 (2000), pp. 488-500 who provides a useful overview of the work on p. 494 and following.

16. Reprehensible *Iqtibās* (*fī'l-iqtibās al-makrūh*)
17. Dreams and their Interpretation (*fī dhikr al-ru'yā wa-'ajā'ibihā wa'l-ta'bīrāt wa badā'i'ihā*)
18. Writing, Letters, Accounting and Examples of Letters (*fī dhikr al-khaṭṭ wa'l-kitāb wa'l-hisāb*)
19. Proverbs and Similar Types of Lexemes (*fī'l-amthāl wa'l-alfāz al-latī tajrī majrāhā*)
20. Poetry and Poets (*fī dhikr al-shi'r wa'l-shu'arā*)
21. The *Iqtibās* of that which is in the Qur'ān of Instances of Concision, Inimitability, Simile and Metaphor, Paranomasia, Antithesis and that which is Similar (*fī iqtibās ba'd mā fī 'l-Qur'ān min al-ijāz wa'l-ijāz wa'l-tashbīh wa'l-isti'āra wa'l-tajnīs wa'l-tibāq wa mā yajrī majrāhā*)
22. Various Arts of Differing Ranks in Rare and Elegant Recitations (*fī funūn mukhtalifat al-tartīb fī ṭarā'if al-tilāwāt wa-laṭā'ifihā*)⁴³
23. Concerning Various Arts of Different Ranks (*fī funūn mukhtalifat al-tartīb*)⁴⁴
24. Invocations (*fī al-da'wāt al-mustajāba*)
25. Spells and Amulets (*fī al-ruqā wa'l-ahrāz*)

As can be seen from the above list, al-Tha'ālibī's notion of *iqtibās* addresses a wide range of different topics that he has arranged following what appear to be several broad fields of discourse. The first section of the volume (chapters one through five) moves from the Qur'ān as a central source of praise of God to its role in the historical foundations of the religious community. The second section of the work (chapters six through twelve) considers the Qur'anic text's place as a source of knowledge and wisdom, and as a guide to personal ethics and social comportment. The third section (chapters thirteen through sixteen; and eighteen through twenty-one) relates mainly to the use of the Qur'ān in speech and writing, prose and poetic composition. The final section (chapters seventeen; and twenty-two through twenty-five) addresses the Qur'ān in dream interpretation, recitation, prayer, and magic.

The *Adīb's* Qur'ān: *al-Iqtibās min al-Qur'ān* within al-Tha'ālibī's Oeuvre and Thought

In Molière's play, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, The Bourgeois Gentleman, the famed Monsieur Jourdain asks for something to be written in neither verse nor prose. His interlocutor, the 'Philosophy Master' replies to him that 'there is no other way to express oneself besides verse and prose...because if it is not verse it is prose, and if it is not prose, it is verse'.⁴⁵

Unlike the philosophy master who submits a facile answer to Monsieur Jourdain's question, *udabā'* like Tha'ālibī were very interested in the relationships between poetry and prose, and spent much time and effort on the art of transforming poetry into prose and vice

⁴³ In her introduction to al-Tha'ālibī, *al-Iqtibās*, I, pp. 39-40, the editor reads the title of Chapter 23 as *fī funūn mukhtalifat al-tartīb fī ṭarā'if al-ta'wīlāt wa laṭā'ifihā* however the title of the chapter, *al-Iqtibās*, II, p. 209 list the title as *fī funūn mukhtalifat al-tartīb fī ṭarā'if/zarā'if al-tilāwāt*. Since the chapter concerns both Qur'anic interpretation and recitation, it is difficult to reconstruct the proper reading of the title.

⁴⁴ The contents of this chapter include the following sections: *fī'l-faraj ba'd al-shidda wa'l-yusr ba'd al-'usr*; *fī'l-tafā'ul min al-Qur'ān*; *fī dhikr al-qur'a*; *fī ḥubb al-waṭan*; *fī'l-yamīn*; *fī dhikr al-sulṭān*; *fī'l-hidya*; *fī'l-riyāh*; *fī dhikr al-dhahab wa faḍlihi*; *fī dhikr al-nār*; *fī dhikr al-fīl*; *fī dhikr al-ibl*; *fī dhikr al-khayl*; *fī dhikr suwar wa āy al-Qur'ān*.

⁴⁵ 'Tout ce qui est prose n'est point vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers est prose'. Moliere, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (Cambridge, 1883), p. 30 (act iii scene iii).

versa.⁴⁶ Al-Tha‘ālibī devoted a number of books to the topic of ‘prosification’ in addition to his comments on the subject in his *Yatīmat al-dahr* and its continuation, *Tatimmat al-Yatīma*. Al-Tha‘ālibī is, in fact, credited with the oldest surviving work on the subject of *nathr al-naẓm* (prosification, or, loosening the poetic knot) in his work *Nathr al-naẓm wa-ḥall al-‘aqd*.⁴⁷ Moreover, he wrote in addition to this work, three other treatises on the topic of prosification. The first two of these works, *Siḥr al-balāgha wa-sirr al-barā‘a* and *Nuzhat al-albāb wa-‘umdat al-kuttāb* consider the practice of *ḥall al-naẓm* and rendering the product into simple prose (*nathr*).⁴⁸ Thus for al-Tha‘ālibī, while ‘prose was not verse’ it could be fashioned from verse, and thus display many of the latter’s imagery and expressiveness.

Similarly, for al-Tha‘ālibī and other *udabā‘*, not all prose was, in fact, simple prose. In another unpublished work, entitled *Saj‘ al-manthūr* (rhymed and rhythmic prose), also known as *Risālat saj‘ iyyāt al-Tha‘ālibī* and *Qurādat al-dhahab*, al-Tha‘ālibī collects examples of prosification, this time rendering the poetic verses into rhymed and rhythmic prose (*saj‘*) and proverbs (*amthāl*).⁴⁹ The work is addressed to state secretaries and bureaucrats (*kuttāb*) in particular, whom he encouraged to memorise and use these examples in their correspondence (*mukātabāt*). According to al-Tha‘ālibī, it is *saj‘* and *shi‘r* and not unadorned prose that are suitable for use in official missives or letters of friendship. In this work, al-Tha‘ālibī suggests that a hierarchy in the modes of speech exists: *saj‘* and *shi‘r* are more artistic, refined, and appropriate in certain contexts than unadorned *nathr*.

Finally, there is the case of Qur’anic language which is neither prose nor verse nor *saj‘*. Although, according to some scholars the Qur’ān may partake of attributes of all three forms, other scholars were wary to compare divine and human speech.⁵⁰ In various occasions in his works, and in the introduction of *al-Iqtibās min al-Qur’ān*, al-Tha‘ālibī acknowledges the Qur’ān’s inimitability (*i‘jāz*). However, he does not explain his justification for his belief in the *i‘jāz* doctrine, although by his time a number of scholars had provided detailed treatments of the topic.⁵¹

For al-Tha‘ālibī, the Qur’ān, as divine language, exists on an entirely different register from human language. Human language, as we have seen above, includes *nathr*, *saj‘*, and *shi‘r*, and the *adīb* may express the same idea in more than one form. These different forms have different uses and there are contexts in which one form is more suitable than another. Indeed, as we have just noted, the well-trained *adīb* studies the art of transforming speech from one mode to

⁴⁶ See Sanni, *Arabic Theory*.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this work, see *ibid.*, pp. 15ff. al-Tha‘ālibī, *Nathr al-naẓm wa-ḥall al-‘aqd*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Fattāh Tammām (Beirut, 1990).

⁴⁸ *Siḥr al-balāgha* has been published several times, while *Nuzhat al-albāb* survives in one manuscript in the ‘Arif Hikmat Library (no. 271-*Majāmī‘*) in Medina and draws extensively upon *Siḥr al-balāgha*. For the published editions of *Siḥr al-Balāgha*, see Bilal Orfali, ‘The Works of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī (350-429/961-1039)’, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40 (2009), pp. 291-292. In these two works *Siḥr al-balāgha wa-sirr al-barā‘a* and *Nuzhat al-albāb wa-‘umdat al-kuttāb*, similar to his *Nathr al-naẓm*, al-Tha‘ālibī provides illustration of verses of poetry which he transformed into prose in a manner that is not only bereft of any analytical standards of guidance but also lacking explicit categorisation according to the techniques of prosification. In *Siḥr al-balāgha* he lists the poets whose poetry is transformed into prose without providing quotations from the verses. In both of these works, Qur’anic verses are also transformed into prose sayings which demonstrates the proximity of the practice of *iqtibās* to that of *ḥall* in al-Tha‘ālibī’s mind.

⁴⁹ The work survives in four manuscripts: MS Topkapı Ahmet III Kitāpları 2337/2, MS Yeni Cami 1188, MS Universite Arapca Yazmalar 741/1, and MS Bayezid Umūmī 3207/1. Al-Tha‘ālibī, however, gives the original verses in the beginning of each chapter.

⁵⁰ For an important discussion of scholars’ opinions on the presence of *saj‘* in the Qur’ān, see Devin J. Stewart, ‘Saj‘ in the Qur’ān: Prosody and Structure’, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21 (1990), pp. 101-139.

⁵¹ For example: al-Rummānī (d. 384/994) in his *al-Nukat fī i‘jāz al-Qur’ān*, al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998) in his *Bayān i‘jāz al-Qur’ān* and al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) in his *I‘jāz al-Qur’ān* in addition to the various comments by other theologians on the topic.

another, and is sensitive to the differences between forms. Divine language, however, can only be used through *iqtibās* to embellish or improve human speech, as it sets the standard for the utmost eloquence in all areas of human discourse. There is ultimately no manner of transforming human speech into divine language.

al-Tha‘alibī’s *Kitāb al-Iqtibās* arranges the many ways in which quotation and allusion to the Qur’ān were practised for four centuries in the Muslim community. As an *adīb* capable in both poetry and prose, al-Tha‘alibī was sensitive to the technical obstacles involved in the quotation and allusion to the Qur’ān, such as the fact that verses of the Qur’ān must be incorporated in poetry in a somewhat different manner than in prose. Yet his work is broader than a discourse on the technical aspects of the art of *iqtibās*. Rather, al-Tha‘alibī’s *Iqtibās* is both record and guide to the innumerable ways in which humans encountered the miraculously eloquent words of their Lord.

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