

Article

Ordered Disorder: Vestiges of Mixed Written and Oral Transmission of Arabic Didactic Poems *

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In the field of pre-modern Arabic literature, didactic poems form a small genre of their own. They were not considered as poetry proper, because their aesthetic embellishment of language was not sufficiently substantial and their content failed to meet what the public expected of real poetry. Instead, they belong to many different branches of knowledge, and their common characteristics are mostly formal: they are rhymed, composed in metric language and their length does usually not exceed 150 lines (although there are some exceptions to this rule). First examples were composed as early as in the 9th century AD, and the genre was continued right into the 20th century. Geert Jan van Gelder has proposed the following definition: ‘any text that is poetry in terms of its prosody (i. e. metre and rhyme) in which the typical poetical style (tropes, figures of speech, etc.) is deliberately avoided, for the sake of providing explicit information on a particular branch of knowledge’ (Geert Jan van Gelder, ‘Arabic didactic verse’, in Jan Willem Drijvers, and Alasdair A. MacDonald (eds), *Centres of learning. Learning and location in pre-modern Europe and the Near East*, Leiden, 1995, 103–17, here p. 117). As for the topics dealt with, there were no limitations: ‘Almost any subject could be, and was, versified: dogmatics, the law of inheritance, medicine, astronomy, history, rhetoric, prosody, calligraphy, the explication of dreams, algebra, bloodletting, logic, navigation, agriculture, sexual intercourse, alchemy, jurisprudence, Koranic sciences, the use of toothpicks - the list might easily be extended.’ (van Gelder, p. 106)

In the early 19th century, Arabists in Europe showed some interest in these poems, as they provided them with a basic knowledge of different topics of Muslim scholarship. Later, they directed their attention towards more voluminous works

which gave them deeper insights into theological and legal discussions, amongst others, and the small didactic poems were almost forgotten. Nevertheless, the genre can provide some important insights into Muslim ‘secondary’ education in the *madrasas* or other, more informal contexts of transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, the poems were not only memorized but also written down in countless manuscripts. A closer look at these copies shows that there are hardly any two of them that display the same wording or order of lines. However, a tendency to check this process of dissolution is recognizable in the manuscripts.

The copies of al-Ūshī’s creed *Bad’ al-amālī* ‘Alī Ibn ‘Uthmān al-Ūshī is a scholar from the Ferghāna valley in Central Asia who lived in the 12th century AD. According to a later bibliographical work, he is believed to have died in 1179, though this may just be an estimate. Although he wrote some longer books, he is best known for a poem containing a creed in the Ḥanafī tradition, close to one of the two schools of Sunnī theology, namely the Mātūrīdiyya. The title of the poem is *Bad’ al-amālī*, being identical with the last two words of the first half-verse. Another widely used title, *Qaṣīdat Yaqūlu l-‘abd*, is in a similar way derived from the first two words of the same hemistich. An edition of the short poem together with a Latin and a German translation was published in Königsberg in 1825 by Peter Bohlen. Copies of this poem can be found in almost any library with more than a rudimentary stock of Arabic manuscripts. For example, we found eleven of them in the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, and thirteen in the *Garrett Collection, Yahuda Section, Princeton University Library*.

A look at the verse order in the eleven Berlin manuscripts, in six out of the Princeton manuscripts and in one more from the *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen* revealed considerable deviations, as expected. The number of verses ranges between 62 and 73, and there are no two copies displaying the same order. We do not have a copy from al-Ūshī’s hands nor one that claims to stem directly from such an autograph. This means that we have no idea

* The following observations are the first results of the sub-project in Arabic and Islamic Studies of the research group ‘Manuscript Cultures in Asia and Africa’. The basic and time-consuming work of scrutinizing the 18 manuscripts for their verse order was undertaken by PD Dr Florian Sobieroj, who collaborates with the sub-project. Ms Jasmin Elshamy assisted me in simplifying the data provided by Dr Sobieroj. I would like to express my thanks to both of them for their help.

Table 1: Variance in 11 manuscript copies of al-Ūshī's *Bad' al-amālī* from the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (= Ber) and the *Garrett Collection, Yahuda Section, Princeton University Library* (= Pri).

Abbreviations:

A: Addition of a verse in this block

O: Omission of a verse in this block

T: Transposition of a verse from this block to one below

	Pri 5043	Ber 4944	Ber 4505	Pri 2264/4	Pri 2260/11	Ber 4496	Ber 4950	Ber 2408/3	Ber 2408/4	Pri 2272/8	Pri 2272/4
1–8											A/O/O
9–16											
17–24											
25–32					T						
33–40										A/O	
41–48							A	A	A	O/O	
49–56				O	A	A/A	T/T	T/T/A	T/A/O	O	
57–64		O	A	O			A	A	A		O/O
Σ Deviations	0	1	1	2	2	2	4	5	5	5	5

about the original sequence of verses, and it is not our aim to reconstruct it. Our primary interest is relative deviation, not proximity to a hypothetical archetype.

To describe deviation, however, one first has to define some order as the point of departure, and therefore we looked for majorities for every verse x to be followed by verse $x+1$. In this way, we succeeded in finding a sequence of 64 verses where for each of such pairs (verse no. 1 and 2, no. 2 and 3, no. 3 and 4 etc.) there is a majority in the copies at our disposal. This task was easier than we had anticipated. The number of instances where more than just one manuscript has an alternative sequence is three. In two cases, two manuscripts agree in such a way. In the third case, there is agreement on a different sequence in no less than six manuscripts, but nevertheless these six have a clear minority status as against the remaining twelve manuscripts. From now on, this 'majority sequence' of 64 verses will be called the *standard order*. Again, it is conceivable that none of our 18 manuscripts displays this order without any deviation, but one actually does so. The other ones show a wide spectre of deviation. Counting every addition, omission and transposition of one verse as a single instance of deviation, it emerged that the number of deviations ranged from 1 to 28. The aim of this paper is to describe two characteristics of our deviation statistics.

All beginnings are easy?

To begin with, there is a group of copies displaying only minor deviation from our *standard order*. The term 'minor' was, somewhat arbitrarily, defined as encompassing zero to a maximum of five deviations. In actual fact, the reasoning behind our definition of 'minor' was influenced by the fact that this group constitutes a majority of 11 out of a total of 18 manuscripts. The striking feature of this group is that all but two do not show any deviations prior to verse 28, and that of the 32 deviations only four occur prior to verse 39 (within a poem of just 64 lines in length). From this point on, the omissions, additions and transpositions are dispersed almost evenly across the remaining verses. In other words, deviations in the first half of the poem are conspicuously rare. This result is visualized in Table 1 above. How can this phenomenon be explained? It is still unknown whether the copies of the didactic poems were normally written down from memory or copied from other manuscripts. (Neither do we know which role dictation played.) Our family of eleven manuscripts may allow a tentative answer. Notwithstanding its family likeness, they seem to have been *written down (or dictated) from memory*, and memory seems to have worked better for the first half of the poem than for the rest of it.

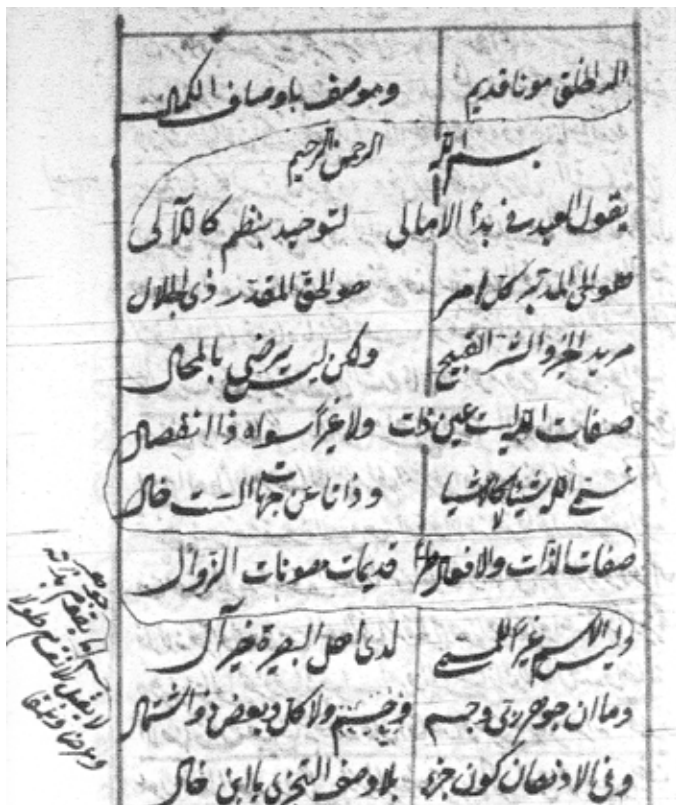


Fig.1: Ms. Yahuda 5807, fol. 79b

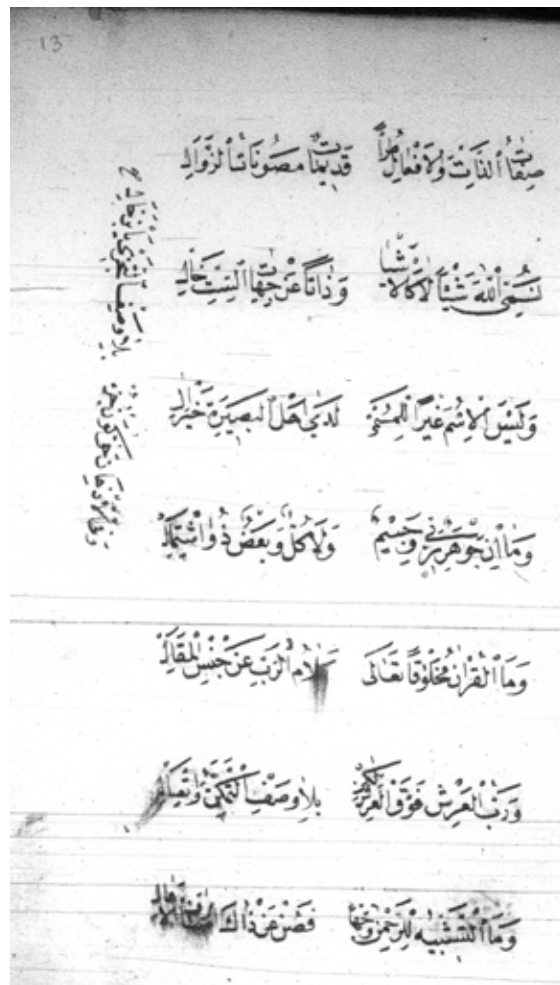


Fig. 2: Ms. Yahuda 5014, fol. 13a

Copies made from disordered sheets?

Secondly, there are two copies displaying a peculiar type of transposition of verses, as compared to the standard order. Longer blocks of verses are affected here, not only one, two or three lines as in the cases mentioned before. The first of these manuscripts has the following order: 1–21 / 31–39 / 50–57 / 22–30 / 40–49. (These figures are simplified, as there is some disorder within the blocks, and the copy contains seven additional verses.) Another manuscript inserts verses 32–40 after verse 22. A transposition of individual lines may be explained from the inaccuracies of human memory, but I doubt this explanation holds for jumping forward and backward in such a way. Two explanations come to mind. Either the poems were (sometimes) memorized in blocks, with only the sequence of these blocks being subject to erroneous transposition. Or, perhaps more likely, the copies were made from loose sheets whose order was not fixed by foliation or catchwords.

Outlook and two illustrations

Both phenomena cannot so far be explained with certainty, but further examination of copies of other didactic poems will, we hope, provide evidence for clarification. If our readers should happen to have come across similar cases of variance in verse order, we would be very grateful for any information. What seems clear is that our sub-project is dealing with written vestiges of a complicated interaction of oral and written transmission of knowledge.

In order to convey a visual impression of how these poems were written down and what attempts were made to check verse order, I have added two pictures. The first one (Fig. 1) displays a very strange order: verse 2 *standard order* is written above the common *basmala* formula that always precedes a text written by a Muslim. A stroke connects this addition (obviously written by the scribe who also wrote the rest of the poem, as the identity of the script shows) to the end of the first verse *standard order* in line 3. While this correction

is not difficult to notice because of the eye-catching fact that something has been written above the *basmala*, the second correction will easily be overlooked: Another stroke connects the end of line 6 to the beginning of line 8 (indicating that verse 7 *standard order* must follow verse 6 *standard order* immediately). Such a stroke alone, not accredited by any remark, might be considered as a secondary addition made by some later reader. (The third stroke connects verse 8 to 9 *standard order* and is, strictly speaking, unnecessary.)

The second photo from an other manuscript of al-Ūshī's poem (Fig. 2) shows how a verse left out erroneously (namely, verse 10 *standard order*) is supplemented in the margin. Here, the addition (again seemingly made by the same scribe) is accredited by the widespread use of the verb *ṣahḥa* 'this is

correct'. But the position where the supplemented verse has to be inserted is not quite clear. In fact, the correct position is at the end of line 4 (that is, after verse 9 *standard order*), where the supplemented verse actually begins. Nevertheless, later users of the manuscript might misplace the verse.

Picture credits:

Fig. 1: Princeton University Library, Manuscript Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections

Fig. 2: Princeton University Library, Manuscript Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections