

Early Arabic Literature and History

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Course Objectives:

In this course, we try to do the following:

1. Trace the major historical changes that shaped the Arab world from its early beginning up to the pre-colonialist period.
2. Achieve a general understanding of the main features of Arabic literature, covering the three main genres, fiction, poetry and drama. Such features would necessarily include socio-cultural factors that have always affected Arabic literature. Historical events in the region and their influences are highlighted.
3. Recognize major historical, cultural and literary figures from the Arab world in various eras.
4. Perceive the interaction between Arabic literature and Arabic art, music, and philosophy with an eye on the chronological sequence of such interaction.

Course Topics:

5. **Pre-Islamic Literature:** This part of the course is a survey of Middle Eastern mythology and early literary practices, especially in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Arab peninsula. Historical events and their consequences as far as culture and literature are concerned are focal here. Texts such as the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, and pre-Islamic poetry by slave-poet Antara bin Shadad, and surprisingly erotic Arabic poetry is analyzed at this point.
6. **Coptic art and literature:** Egypt plays a major role as a crucible of Western and Oriental interaction. Egyptian cosmopolitanism, especially in Alexandria, during the Ptolemaic age, is analyzed. The advent of monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity in particular, and their impact on culture, is addressed.
7. **Early Islamic literature:** The birth of Islam in the Arab peninsula. The supremacy of poetry as the only suitable literary genre due to geo-political reasons is explained. The sublimation of Arabic poetry is studied with examples of spiritual poetry.
8. **The Middle Ages:** The Abbasid era is reviewed. A feminist criticism of *the harem* is due at this point. The cultural renaissance of the Islamic empire is leveled with its advantages and disadvantages. The open-minded caliph Harun el-rachid and his conflict with the rising tide of religious extremism is seen through textual analysis of major representative

texts by the wine-celebrating poet Abu Nawas as opposed to ultra-conservative religious texts by Ibn Hanbal. Furthermore, poets such as Al Ma'ari are read as influences on major modern Arab writers such as Taha Hussein.

9. **Arabian Nights:** The great 1001 Nights are studied as a major inspiration for many Western and Oriental texts. Aspects ranging from eroticism to narratology are studied in the text. Its influences are traced to Western Romanticism and modern narrative theory alike. The Nights are also read here as an example of the abuse of literary texts by many Western thinkers who took them as superficial mirrors of society.
10. **Arabic philosophy and literature:** The principles of *Sufism* are expounded, focusing on the notion of the poet as seer. The inevitable influences of Rumi and the revived modern interest in his work is given special attention. Comparisons with Western counterparts as seemingly unrelated as Blake and Whitman are attempted. A philosophical backdrop is also provided with the works of major philosophers such as Alghazali and Ibn Rushd, who are compared to unlikely Western philosophers such as Descartes. Arabic philosophy is studied within a historical frame.
11. **Arabic art and literature:** Art is a sensitive issue in Arabic culture. Islamic art is discussed with the controversial issues of censorship and freedom, especially with the forbidding of artistic human representation in most Islamic countries. The rise of Arabic calligraphy as a substitute is worthy of study.

Reading Material

All texts for required reading will be available in the library and/or Macalester bookstore shortly.

Textbooks:

- 1) **The Hanged Poems (Forgotten Books)**
Forgotten Books (February 1, 2008)
- 2) **Essential Rumi**
by Jalal al-Din Rumi (Author), Et Al Coleman Barks (Translator)
HarperOne (January 10, 1997)
- 3) **The Arabian Nights**
by Husain Haddawy (Translator)
W. W. Norton; De Luxe Ed edition (May 12, 2008)
- 4) **The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories**
by Husain Haddawy (Translator)
W. W. Norton; De Luxe Ed edition (May 12, 2008)

Suggested Reading:

- 1) **The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy)**
by Peter Adamson (Editor), Richard C. Taylor (Editor)
Cambridge University Press (January 17, 2005)
- 2) **Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia (Routledge Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages)**

by Josef W. Meri (Editor)
Routledge; 1 edition (October 31, 2005)

Assessment:

Class participation (30%):

All you need to do here is come prepared to class with the necessary reading and ready to engage in active discussion. There are no hardly any right and wrong answers here, except for basic historical facts – and even those you are welcome to argue about if you can disprove them. Bring serious ideas that contribute to analysis and exploration of facts and try to support your ideas with reading.

Papers/Presentation (30%):

Two long papers are required for completing this course. I should approve of the topic first. Deadline will be agreed upon in class.

Quizzes (40%):

Two quizzes are held in class to assess your progress up to that point. Dates will be agreed upon in class. Ideally, one quiz would be held late October and the other early December.