An Alexandrian Age in Fourteenth-Century Damascus:
Twin Commentaries on Two Celebrated Arabic Epistles

Superficially, at least, the traditional Western view of Arabic literature in the Mamluk period conforms rather closely to the hoary cliches about the Alexandrian Age of Greek literature, a millennium and a half earlier. Authors worked under the burden of a rich canon of classical texts, which they revered, and which they diligently collected, classified, commented, criticized, and epitomized. By comparison, their own literary efforts, while certainly copious, have been seen as derivative, lifeless, and smelling altogether too much of the lamp.

Evidence for the first half of this picture—if not the second—is easy to come by, as can be seen from even a cursory look at some of the literary production of two of the more celebrated figures of the age, Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (d. 768/1366) and his younger colleague Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafādī (d. 764/1363). Ibn Nubātah, known principally as a poet, published selections of the verse of a number of his predecessors, including Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896) and the notorious Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 391/1001), as well as a collection of the epistles of the famous Ayyubid minister and stylist al-Qādī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1200).1 Al-Ṣafādī, mainly a prose writer, composed commentaries on the famous poem Lāmiyat al-‘Ajām by al-Ṭughrāʾī (d. 515/1121) and the work of literary criticism entitled Al-Mathal al-Sāʾir by Dīyāʾ al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239), a series of monographs on individual literary tropes, and a number of biographical dictionaries, including one on the blind and one on the one-eyed.2

Particularly interesting as a manifestation of these two writers’ “Alexandrian” qualities—as well as a curious link between them—is the fact that each wrote an elaborate work of commentary on a prose epistle (a different epistle in each case) by the fifth/eleventh-century Andalusian poet and littérateur Ibn Zaydūn (d. 463/1070). These commentaries are far more than philological glosses; in each

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case the original epistle takes up less than ten pages, while the commentary extends to more than four hundred. Both works are thus highly digressive, and they manage to incorporate in their compass vast swathes of traditional Arabic literary culture and thereby offer the reader a far richer plate than the occasion of a single epistle would seem to promise.

A first question to pose about these two texts, then, concerns their status as commentaries. If they are not just offering a simple *explication du texte*, what are they doing, and why? Where do they fit in the larger context of commentary writing in the Mamluk age? In particular, what was the impetus for commenting literary works in prose, as opposed to the long-established tradition of commenting poetry? Another obvious question, given the wealth of information these works contain on the Arabic literary heritage as a whole, is what they can tell us about the canon in their own day. What was “classical,” and what was not? Are they working to define that canon, to reinforce it, or perhaps to expand it? And who was their intended audience? Were they intended for students, for a general educated (or semi-educated) public, or perhaps for other scholars, who would be dazzled by their erudition? More generally, what do they tell us about the role of intertextuality in Mamluk literature, the supposed attendant “anxiety of influence,” and its general “Alexandrian” qualities altogether?

The author of the two epistles around whom Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafadī chose to build their works is, of course, very well known. Ibn Zaydūn was a Cordoban aristocrat whose life reflects the turbulence of eleventh-century Andalusia under the “Party Kings.” In his youth he served as vizier to the governor of Cordoba, Ibn Jahwar, but then fell foul of him and was thrown into prison, where he languished for some time before escaping, returning to the city only after Ibn Jahwar’s death. Later he again fell from favor and left Cordoba for Seville, where he spent many years at the Abbadid court of al-Mu‘taḍid and his son al-Mu‘tamid, returning to Cordoba only with the Abbadid conquest of the city. Probably the most famous poet of his time, he composed verses in many genres; among the most famous are his love poems on Wallādhah, daughter of the erstwhile caliph al-Mustakfī, with whom he had a stormy affair in his youth, as well as his poetic pleas (*isti’ṭāf*) to Ibn Jahwar to release him from prison during his first confinement in Cordoba.3

But Ibn Zaydūn was also known as a prose stylist, and his two most famous epistles are concerned with these same wrenching youthful experiences. The first, later christened the “humorous epistle” (*al-risālah al-hazlīyah*), was occasioned by an attempt by his enemy and rival Ibn ‘Abdūs to supplant him in the affections of

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Wallādah (an attempt which, by the way, later proved successful); speaking in Wallādah’s voice (‘an lisāniha), he has her peremptorily reject Ibn ‘Abdu’s advances and pour scorn on him for his presumption. The second, the “serious epistle” (al-risālah al-jiddiyah), is a prose companion to his isti’taf poems, attempting to move Ibn Jahwar to pity and persuade him to let him out of jail.

These are the two epistles commented by, respectively, Ibn Nubātah and al-Šafādī, and their choice of them is perhaps a bit surprising. Commentary as a general enterprise was, of course, a growth industry in this period, especially in religious scholarship; indeed, in jurisprudence (fiqh) it had become perhaps the most dominant form of writing altogether. Commentaries on works of grammar, lexicography, and literary criticism also abounded. Within the realm of pure literature, the commenting of poetry—both diwāns of individual poets and anthologies such as Abū Tammām’s Hamāsah—was a long-established and still thriving tradition. But for commentators to apply their skills to works of prose literature was far less common.

Three prominent examples of such commentaries may, however, be cited from the pens of our authors’ predecessors. The Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah by Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (d. 656/1258), commenting the collection of the purported sermons, speeches, and other dicta of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalīb put together by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015), parallels their works not only in being a commentary on prose, but also in its outsize dimensions and highly digressive character; on the other hand, Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd’s base text is essentially a religious one, and his objectives correspondingly diverge significantly from those of Ibn Nubātah and al-Šafādī.4 Perhaps more apposite, and certainly more obvious, is the tradition of commenting the Maqāmāt of al-Ḥarīrī; at least nine such commentaries were produced in the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, including those of Ibn Zafar (d. 565/1169), Sadr al-Afāḍīl (d. 617/1220), al-Sharīshī (d. 619/1222), and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 680/1281), and of these the one best known today, that of al-Sharīshī, again displays the qualities of disproportionate length and intentional digressiveness evinced by the two later authors.5 It is striking to what degree al-Ḥarīrī’s fame eclipsed that of Badī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008), the inventor of the maqāmah genre, whose own Maqāmāt were, so far as is known, never commented at all. On the other hand, al-Hamadhānī’s contemporary, al-‘Utbī (d. ca. 412/1022), who applied the euphuistic prose style developed in the chanceries (inshā’) to the writing of history rather than fiction, produced in his laudatory biography of Mahmūd of Ghaznah, the Kitāb al-Yamūnī, a work that seems to have cried out for

commentaries, of which at least four are known from the following three centuries, including one by Șadr al-Afaḍîl, who also commented al-Ḥarīrî’s *Maqâmāt*. All of these, however, soberly philological, sticking quite close to al-`Utbî’s original text rather than using it as a pretext for striking out in unexpected (and entertaining) directions.⁶

None of these earlier commentaries were directed at epistles (*rasāʾîl*) in the narrow sense of a relatively brief letter addressed from one individual to another, despite the fact that such letter-writing had been recognized as an art form since the third/ninth century, when the “collected letters” of recognized prose stylists began to be published. The earliest such collections are now lost to us, but preserved collections from the second half of the fourth/tenth century enable us to track a real efflorescence in the art of correspondence (*tarassul*), as part of, and a major contributor to, a general enhancement of the status of prose vis-à-vis its rival, poetry, at that time. Writers of both official letters, such as Abū Ishāq al-Šābî’ (d. 384/994) and the Șāhîb Ibn ʿAbbâd (d. 385/995), and private individuals, such as Abū Bakr al-Khwârazmî (d. 384/994) and al-Hamadhâni himself, cultivated a new, intricate style, characterized by the constant employment of rhetorical tropes, careful attention to phrasal rhythm, and above all patterns of prose rhyme (*saj’*), which was to determine the direction of fine letter-writing for centuries to come, as well as to spawn such new genres as the *maqâmāt*. While this trend was at first particularly associated with the eastern Islamic world, it rapidly spread west, as can be seen in the correspondence of Abî al-ʿAlâ’ al-Maʿarrî (d. 449/1058) in Syria and—albeit to a less extravagant extent—of Ibn Zaydûn in Andalusia.⁷

This now-established euphuistic *tarassul* style enjoyed further development at the hands of two outstanding representatives in the Ayyubid and then Mamluk realms. The first was Saladin’s right-hand man, al-Qâdî al-Fâdîl (d. 596/1200), whose voluminous correspondence is preserved in collections made by a number of later authors. Two of these have been published, one of them compiled by the second major epistolographer of the age, the Mamluk chancery head Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓâhir (d. 692/1292), who is best known today for his biographies of the sultans Baybars, Qalaṣwûn, and al-Ashraf Khalîl, and whose own correspondence is available only through (extensive) quotations in later authors.⁸ Both men were certainly

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⁷For basic orientation on these developments, see Zaki Mubarak, *La prose arabe au IVe siècle de l’Hégire (Xe siècle)* (Paris, 1931).

⁸On al-Qâdî al-Fâdîl, see *EI*, s.v., and *GAL*, 1:316, S1:549. The published collections are Ibn
models for Ibn Nubâtâh and al-Šafadî; while the latter appended a letter by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zâhir to his own commentary, Ibn Nubâtâh manifested his admiration for al-Qâdi al-Fâdîl by preparing his own collection of his letters, entitled *Al-Fâdîl min Inshâ’ al-Fâdîl*.

Ibn Nubâtâh was born in Cairo in 686/1287, five years before the death of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zâhir. As a young man he emigrated to Syria, where he spent most of his life, returning to Egypt only when in his seventies and dying in Cairo in 768/1366. In Syria, he was especially patronized by the Ayyubid ruler of Ḫamâh, Abû al-Fidâ’î, and his son; later, resident in Damascus, he was appointed supervisor (*naẓîr*) of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, making an annual trip there at Easter. While he was known primarily as a poet, his prose was also much appreciated, and he served for a time as head of the chancery in Damascus. In a sense, he had a birthright to his eloquence, priding himself on, and taking his name from, his ancestor Ibn Nubâtâh al-Fâriqî (d. 374/984), a famous preacher at the court of Sayf al-Dawlah in Aleppo, whose sermons—yet another exemplar of the efflorescence of euphuistic prose in the late fourth/tenth century—had been not only collected but also commented on, at least twice, in the seventh/thirteenth century.\(^9\)

Many of Ibn Nubâtâh’s works survive in manuscript, but only a few of them have been published, including, besides his poetic *Dîwân*,\(^11\) his collection of al-Qâdi al-Fâdîl’s epistles, an *adab* collection entitled *Maṭla’ al-Fawâ’id wa-Majma’ al-Farâ’id*,\(^12\) and his commentary on Ibn Zaydân’s “humorous” epistle, all three composed at the behest of his patron Abû al-Fidâ’. Certainly it is the latter, entitled *Sarḥ al-‘Uyun fi Sharḥ Risâlat Ibn Zaydân* (The Pasture for eyes in explanation of the epistle of Ibn Zaydân), that has always been his most popular prose work, first printed as early as 1861 in Beirut and many times since.\(^13\)

In his preface to the *Sarḥ al-‘Uyun* Ibn Nubâtâh indicates that the work was commissioned by Abû al-Fidâ’, but supplies no details elucidating the reason for the amir’s choice of the text to be commented. He does recount, somewhat

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\(^9\)Extant in manuscript but unpublished.

\(^{10}\)On the earlier Ibn Nubâtâh, see *EI*², s.v.; *GAL*, 1:318f., S1:551. The biography of Baybars has been edited by ‘Abd al-‘Azîz al-Khuwaytî, *Al-Rawdâh al-Zaḥîrah fî Sîrat al-Malik al-Zâhir* (Riyadh, 1976); most recently, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zâhir’s topographic work on Cairo has been edited by Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid, *Al-Rawdâh al-Bahîyâh al-Zaḥîrîyâh fî Khiṭât al-Mu‘izzîyâh al-Qâhirîah* (Cairo, 1996).

\(^{11}\)On the earlier Ibn Nubâtâh, see *EI*², s.v.; *GAL*, 1:92f., S1:149f.

\(^{12}\)Most recently edited by ‘Abd al-Amîr Mâhdî Ḥâbîb al-Ţâ’î (Baghdad, 1977).

\(^{13}\)Ed. ‘Umar Muṣâ Bâshâ (Damascus, 1972).

\(^{14}\)I have relied on the 1964 edition by Muḥammad Abû al-Fadîl Ibrâhîm; see note 1 above.
disingenuously, how he protested that he was "only" a poet, unqualified to deal with the rich material presented by Ibn Zaydūn’s epistle, but was overruled by the amir, who remarked that "stories" (qiṣaṣ) are not far removed, in any case, from the poet’s bailiwick. He goes on to say that there were copious resources for this undertaking available in a waqf library in Damascus—which, alas, proved inaccessible to him, so he was forced to rely on materials at hand. He also insists on how short he has kept his commentary (although it runs to 476 pages in the most recent printed edition).

After his prefatory remarks, and before launching into his sharḥ proper, Ibn Nubātah supplies a brief biography of Ibn Zaydūn and a short selection of his verses. Such capsule biographies-cum-verses were of course standard in his day in a variety of contexts, most notably in biographical dictionaries, and they loom large in the body of this commentary itself. Ibn Nubātah then explains who Wallādah was, adding some of her verses as well, and delineates the precise circumstances that occasioned the letter, namely, Ibn ‘Abdūs’s attempt to horn in on Ibn Zaydūn by sending a slave girl to Wallādah to sing his praises and sound out his chances. Ibn Nubātah is fairly explicit about his sources, saying that he has taken his information from Ibn Bassām, Ibn Ḥayyān, and other standard Andalusian writers.

The commentary itself constitutes the rest of the work. The original epistle is not presented integrally, but taken phrase by phrase. Odd words are glossed, less than obvious syntactical constructions elucidated, and other expected philological work performed. That is, however, only a minor part of the commentary. What Ibn Nubātah is really interested in doing is using the epistle—which happens to be exceptionally replete with historical and literary allusions—to open a window on the entire literary-historical tradition.

The tone is set from the beginning. The “amma ba’d”—the traditional phrase of transition from the invocation to the body of the message—is discussed in terms of who first employed it in Arabic epistolography, and the following phrase, "O you whose intellect is impaired [because you think you can win me over]," leads to a full discussion of the intellect (‘aql) in Islamic theology and other contexts, including its etymology, al-Jāhīz’s thoughts on it, verses by ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, two prophetic hadith, considerations of foods that strengthen it, and a conventional sideswipe at schoolmasters, who are thought to lack intellect altogether because they spend all their time with children.

The real backbone of the work, however, is its more extended excursus, most of them biographical and introduced with the rubric “tarjamah.” The first of these concerns the famous pre-Islamic sage Aktham ibn Sayfī, whom Ibn Nubātah identifies as the source of a proverb cited in Ibn Zaydūn’s letter; two pages follow, providing general information on Aktham and reviewing the long past controversies
about his possible adoption of Islam. The second such tarjamah is much longer: a verse quoted anonymously by Ibn Zaydūn is identified as being by al-Mutanabbi, and Ibn Nubatah adds, “Since the discussion has led to our mentioning al-Mutanabbi, it cannot hurt (lā ba’s) to mention some basic information about him (nubadh min akhbarihi).” Seven pages follow, offering a brief biographical sketch as well as extensive selections, with running commentary, from the qaṣīdah from which comes the line quoted by Ibn Zaydūn.

But Ibn Nubatah’s real opportunity for this kind of lore- and verse-mongering in the guise of "biography" comes a few lines later in the letter, where Ibn Zaydūn has Wallādah say to Ibn ‘Abdūs that his slave girl messenger had praised him to the skies, "to the point that she would have me imagine that Joseph (peace be upon him) vied with you in beauty and you put him in his place14; that the wife of al-‘Azīz" saw you and forgot about Joseph; that Qāru’n16 amassed only a fraction of the fortune you have stored away, and that al-Natīf17 only stumbled on the stray bits of the money you have buried; that Chosroes carried your train, Caesar shepherded your flocks, and Alexander killed Darius only on your orders. . . .” and so forth, mentioning altogether fifty-two different historical figures, for each of whom Ibn Nubatah supplies a tarjamah or sketch.

These biographies fall into distinct groups. Pre-Islamic personages, both Arab and non-Arab, are followed by a group specifically of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets, with some variation offered by accounts of famous pre-Islamic Arab battles. Then come Umayyad governors and generals (al-Ḥajjāj gets a full eleven pages); then ancient Greek thinkers (including Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, and Galen); a few Islamic scientists, philosophers, and theologians (al-Kindī, al-Naẓẓām); literary figures such as ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd and Jāḥiz; and finally the legal scholar Mālik ibn Anas. The choice of names is of course determined by Ibn Zaydūn, not Ibn Nubatah; but Ibn Nubatah exercises considerable ingenuity in keeping up the pace of tarjamahs in the second half of the epistle as well, partly by identifying the authors of quoted lines of verse (including, for example, Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām), partly by paralleling proverbs with other lines of verse by other poets—and partly on the basis of sheer thematics, as when Ibn Zaydūn makes a passing reference to shorthand (muʿammā), which Ibn Nubatah tells us was invented by al-Khalīl ibn Ahmad, adding, “It cannot hurt (lā ba’s) to mention some basic information about him . . . and I will maintain this procedure throughout the rest of this commentary.” In fact this results in another thirty-six

14On Joseph as the paradigm of male beauty in Islam, see EI², s.v. “Yūsuf.”
15That is, the equivalent of the Biblical Potiphar’s wife; see EI², s.v. “Azīz Miṣr.”
16The Biblical Korah (Numbers 16), famed for his wealth; see EI², s.v. “Kārūn.”
17A pre-Islamic Arab fabled for his wealth; see the explanation by Ibn Nubatah himself, Sarḥ al-ʿUyūn, 54 f.
tarjamahs altogether, somewhat more randomly assorted, including more poets, notorious heretics, and persons famous for their stupidity and inarticulateness, interspersed with discussions of proverbs, technical terms in hadith, grammar, and theology, disquisitions on the world’s religions and the seven seas, and various other miscellaneous material.

In many ways—except for its length—this commentary would make an ideal text for a contemporary graduate seminar in Arabic literature, or Islamic studies, since so much basic ground regarding Islamic political, cultural, and literary history gets covered; in short, this text can serve as an introduction to the basic lore, and poetry, with which an adib or littérateur—not a disciplinary specialist—was expected to be equipped. Not that it is by any means comprehensive (for one thing, there is little offered later than the third/ninth century), but Ibn Nubātah certainly does cover a lot of basic ground. Such thoughts lead to some obvious questions: what is Ibn Nubātah doing here, and what kind of audience is he positing (beyond the royal addressee who “commissioned” the work)? Clearly, he is not just making the text comprehensible to the average educated reader. Ibn Zaydūn had assumed an audience that would catch his allusions without need for an interpreter; and while Ibn Nubātah may well in some cases be intending to clue in the clueless where Ibn Zaydūn is particularly allusive, he is certainly also using the epistle simply as an occasion for presenting vast quantities of information that can simultaneously teach the neophyte, entertain the more sophisticated reader, and manifest his own wide reading and erudition. In all these ways, presumably, he is offering what he calls fawā’id, literally, “benefits,” that justify the incorporation of what it “can’t hurt” to add to the exposition. But before posing more questions (or answers) of this general nature, it will help to look at this commentary’s “twin,” al-Ṣafādī’s Tamām al-Mutūn fī Sharḥ Risālat Ibn Zaydūn (The Complete texts in explanation of the epistle of Ibn Zaydūn), commenting the poet’s “serious” epistle, in which he pleads with his erstwhile patron, now jailer, Ibn Jahwar, to set him free.18

Al-Ṣafādī was ten years younger than Ibn Nubātah. The son of a Mamluk, he was born in Ṣafad in 696/1296, but spent most of his life shuttling back and forth between Cairo and Damascus. He was a prolific writer on a broad variety of topics, but most fundamentally an adib, although he is undoubtedly best known today for his massive and wide-ranging biographical dictionary, Al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt. Rather surprisingly, the latter includes a fairly extensive entry on Ibn Nubātah,19 despite the fact that the work’s very title indicates that it was restricted to personages no longer living and we know in fact that Ibn Nubātah (d. 768/1366)

18 I rely on the edition by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1969).
outlived al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) by three years. One can only assume that this biography (which mentions no specific dates later than 743/1343) was inserted at a time when one of the two was in Cairo and the other in Damascus and al-Ṣafadī was assuming that the older man was either dead or soon to be so; but the situation is unclear. In any case, aside from basic biographical facts (about the first half of Ibn Nubātah’s life) and general praise (including the statement that in his prose he followed the model of al-Qādī al-Fādil and “snuffed out the light” of Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir), al-Ṣafadī’s entry on him is primarily devoted to sketching out the relations between the two men.

From what he has to say, these seem to have been very cordial indeed. Pride of place is given to an epistle al-Ṣafadī, then thirty-two and living in Cairo, addressed to Ibn Nubātah in Damascus, requesting from him permission (in formal terms, an *ijāzah*) to transmit his works—both past and future; this request is preceded by a long passage of fulsome praise, explaining how Ibn Nubātah has outdone, or put to shame, the classical masters in various fields, such as al-‘Abbās ibn al-Aḥnaf in love poetry, al-Mutanabbī in panegyric, and al-Qādī al-Fādil himself in epistology, and followed by a further request for a brief curriculum vitae (*dhikr nasabihī wa-mawlidihi wa-makānihi*). Ibn Nubātah begins his equally fulsome, and lengthier, reply with praise for his correspondent, dropping even more famous names along the way than had al-Ṣafadī, rather archly describes what he calls his quandary (he is unworthy of this honor, but does not want to be impolite), but then proceeds to offer his young admirer a general *ijāzah*, to which he appends an autobiographical sketch, naming his early teachers (and models, including both al-Qādī al-Fādil and Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir), citing his precocious exchanges of verse with some of them, and giving us a valuable list of his works to date (including both the *Sarh al-‘Uyun* and *al-Fādil min Insha‘ al-Fādil*).

The two men must have met personally very shortly thereafter, since we know that al-Ṣafadī travelled to Damascus later the same year, and he mentions two of Ibn Nubātah’s works that he “heard” directly from him. The rest of his biography is then devoted to his later correspondence with Ibn Nubātah, in both prose and verse, the latter including a series of riddle-poems posed by each to the other (with the solutions also offered in verse) as well as Ibn Nubātah’s request to borrow a book from al-Ṣafadī with a promise to return it within three days and al-Ṣafadī’s (mild) poetic reproach when he failed to do so. Al-Ṣafadī gives no indication of any serious difficulties in this relationship, but one must wonder whether he is being entirely straightforward, since our only information from the other side looks quite different. According to the littérateur Ibn Hijjah al-Ḥamawī (d. 837/1434), Ibn Nubātah complained that every time he came up with an original image or idea (*ma‘nā*) in his poetry al-Ṣafadī would “emulate” or “imitate” it (*mu‘āraḍah*) in a verse of his own, with the same meter and rhyme, in effect

stealing it (sariqah). (Both mu‘āraḍah, generally evaluated positively as an act of homage, if also rivalry, and sariqah, generally evaluated negatively as an act of larceny, were well-established and much-discussed phenomena in the literary tradition by this time.20) Finally Ibn Nubāţah became so exasperated with this situation that he compiled an anthology specifically of those poems of his which al-Ṣafadī had stolen and entitled it “Barley-Bread” (Khubz al-Sha‘ir), referring to the well-known proverb “Barley is eaten and despised,” applied to someone from whom one profits and then does an ill turn. Ibn Hijjah was so taken with this little work that he incorporated in its entirety into his Khizānat al-Adab.21

Although we have no explicit testimony to confirm it, there would seem to be every reason to believe that al-Ṣafadī’s commentary on Ibn Zaydūn’s “serious” epistle, the Tamām al-Mutūn, was itself an “emulation” of Ibn Nubāţah’s Sarḥ al-‘Uyun, carried out on a rather larger scale. Rather suspiciously, Ibn Nubāţah’s name does not appear anywhere in al-Ṣafadī’s work; on the other hand—and one can only assume a fairly heavy dose of deliberate irony here—“emulation” in general is virtually a leitmotif throughout its introductory sections. Al-Ṣafadī begins by describing the splendor of Ibn Zaydūn’s letter to Ibn Jahwar, noting in one phrase that its beauties are an inexhaustible resource for potential emulators (wa-al-fada‘il allat‘ la tazā‘ mahāsinuhaust’ allā man ḥāwala mu‘āradatāhā mannāna), and declares his humble intention to ride on its coattails with a modest commentary. This is followed, as in Ibn Nubāţah’s work, by a brief biography of Ibn Zaydūn and a selection from his verses; the two biographies are very similar, including some verbatim parallels, but that is probably due to the authors’ use of the same sources. Al-Ṣafadī mentions the “humorous” letter, but only in passing, adding that “All his epistles are stuffed full of all sorts of adab, scintillating historical anecdotes, and striking proverbs, in both prose and poetry.” He offers rather more information on Wallādah than does Ibn Nubāţah, and more of both her verses and Ibn Zaydūn’s to and about her.

Regarding the most famous of the latter, Ibn Zaydūn’s celebrated Nūnīyah, al-Ṣafadī has some supplementary remarks to add, reverting to the topic of emulation: “People emulated it (‘āraḍahā) both in his lifetime and after his death, but could not come close to it (in quality). I believe that Ibn Zaydūn in this poem was himself emulating verses by al-Buḥṭūrī. . . .” The shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī [d. ca. 750/1349] composed a takhmīs22 on this qasīdah of Ibn Zaydūn’s, making it an elegy (marthiyah) for al-Malik al-Mu‘ayyad ‘Imād al-Dīn [Abū al-Fida‘].

20See EI², s.vv. “mu‘āraḍa” and “sariḳa.”
21Ibn Hijjah al-Ḥamawi, Khizānat al-Adab wa-Ghāyat al-Arab (Būlāq, 1291 [1874]), 285–89.
22That is, an expansion of the original poem made by adding three half-verses to each original two for each line, thereby totalling five; see EI², s.v. “takhmīs.”
ruler of Ḥamāh, and succeeded admirably. . . . And I myself, in my youth, composed an elegy on one of my dear friends in Ṣafad, using the meter and rhyme of this qaṣīdah by Ibn Zaydūn. . . .” Al-Ṣafadī proceeds to quote his own poem in its entirety (twenty-seven lines); clearly the process of shifting in a muʿāraḍah from one genre to another (here, in the cases of both al-Ḥillī and al-Ṣafadī, from love to death) was intended as an additional indication of the poet’s dexterity. He then concludes his introduction by offering a rather large selection of Ibn Zaydūn’s other verses, in several different genres—altogether more than twice as many as those provided by Ibn Nubātah. He also, unlike Ibn Nubātah but conveniently, presents the integral text of the epistle to be commented on before launching into his phrase-by-phrase treatment of it.

Whether or not al-Ṣafadī was being deliberately coy by referring so extensively to muʿāraḍah in what was in fact an unacknowledged muʿāraḍah of Ibn Nubātah’s book (and given Ibn Nubātah’s fame it seems likely the intended audience would have got the point), the idea of commenting Ibn Zaydūn’s other famous epistle was certainly a happy one. Despite its very different (serious) tone, this letter offered al-Ṣafadī much the same scope for displaying his wit and erudition as did the “humorous” epistle to Ibn Nubātah. More specifically, it even included a streetto passage, with a string of famous names and historical incidents, not dissimilar to “Wallādah’s” litany in the “humorous” epistle referring to Joseph, the wife of al-ʿAzīz, and so forth. Here, protesting his innocence to Ibn Jahwar, Ibn Zaydūn says, ‘Have mercy! The floodwaters have reached their crest, and I have suffered all I can endure! All I can say about my situation is that if I had been commanded to bow down to Adam, but pridefully refused,23 or if Noah had said to me ‘Board (the ark) with us!’ and I had said ‘I will take refuge on a mountain that will protect me from the water’24 . . . there might be justification for calling what has happened to me an exemplary punishment (nakāl) and dubbing it, if only figuratively, an (appropriate) requital (‘iqaḥ).” The hypothetical situations envisaged by Ibn Zaydūn in the prodosis of this sentence (beginning with Adam and Noah) total altogether twenty-three, and march in a fairly organized fashion through episodes in prophetic, then pre-Islamic Arab, then Islamic history, concluding with al-Ḥajjāj’s bombardment of the Kaʿbah in 73/692, and thus providing al-Ṣafadī with an ideal opportunity for extensive digression.

And digress he does, not only on this passage but throughout the risālah, to an extent that significantly outdoes Ibn Nubātah. As opposed to the latter’s reliance on “tarjamahs,” al-Ṣafadī casts his nets much wider, devoting sections not only to famous people, and events, but also to (for instance) various rhetorical tropes

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23 As did Iblīs (Satan), according to Quran 2:34; cf. 7:12.
24 Quoting Quran 11:42–43.
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(such as *tahsīn al-qabīh*, "making the bad seem good"), character and behavioral traits (including loyalty, slander, and Schadenfreude [*shamātah*]), points of theological and legal controversy (for example, Mutazilite views on the superiority of angels to prophets, and an excursus on judicial conservatism [*taqlīd*]), and such unclassifiable topics as the behavior of hungry cats and the perception that "It’s a wide world!". He also has a much broader field of vision chronologically than Ibn Nubātah: while the latter included in his book virtually nothing later than the fourth/tenth century, al-Ṣafadī seems to be making an effort to give early and recent writers “equal time”—he very frequently cites al-Qādī al-Fādil, for example, and also a whole range of Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk poets, while by no means neglecting the older heritage, from pre-Islamic through Abbasid times. Also unlike Ibn Nubātah, al-Ṣafadī is generally inclined to name his direct sources, which range very widely over the tradition and testify to his extraordinary learning.

This is not the only time al-Ṣafadī engaged in such an exercise in wholesale “browsing” through the entire Arabic literary tradition from the beginning to his own times. Perhaps even more striking an example is his massive commentary on al-Ṭughrāʾī’s *Lāmiyat al-ʿAjam* entitled *Al-Ghayth al-Musajjam*. In that work, which uses each line of the commented poem to launch into a ten- to thirty-page digression on the most varied topics imaginable, al-Ṣafadī actually felt compelled in his introduction to include a long defense of his use of such digression (*istiṭrād*), appealing to al-Jāḥiz (one must never bore the reader) and al-Buḥṭūrī (as espousing the generalist ideal of the *adīb*, as opposed to the specialist ideal of the scholar), among others. He does not drift quite as far from his primary topic in his commentary on Ibn Zaydūn’s letter as he does in that work; but it is still abundantly clear that the letter commented is serving primarily as a vehicle, to a degree that one would hesitate to attribute to Ibn Nubātah.

Not that al-Ṣafadī neglects the requisite philological, and to some extent thematic and aesthetic, analysis of Ibn Zaydūn’s words themselves. This task is performed conscientiously throughout the commentary, and at its conclusion al-Ṣafadī actually goes so far as to add an appendix listing fifteen weak points in the *risālah*’s language and style—together with suggestions for improvement. A second appendix, seemingly more gratuitous and introduced by the phrase *ʿlā baʾs* ("it cannot hurt [to add it]"), which al-Ṣafadī otherwise avoids, reproduces a rather long epistle by Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir to the poet Ibn al-Naqīb (d. 687/1288), defending himself against criticism from an unnamed Shiʿīte for having shown himself excessively humble in a scholarly gathering. Playing extensively with Shiʿī themes, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir includes in this letter a number of "stretto" passages that bring it into

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parallel with Ibn Zaydūn’s efforts, including a name-dropping section to the effect of “Do you think I agreed with Ibn Muljam (when he assassinated ‘Alī) . . .?” and so forth. The more general effect of al-Ṣafādī’s adding this text to the end of his commentary is to stress the continuity of the tradition of rhetorical epistolography, from Ibn Zaydūn and his likes, through al-Qādī al-Fāḍil and Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, and perhaps by implication on to (the unmentioned) Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafādī himself.

The heightened status of epistolography and of artistic prose generally in the Mamluk era, and its suitability for commentary, is the first of four points on which this quick survey of these two texts may offer food for thought, if not more specific conclusions. The relative merit of prose and poetry had been itself a standard topos in adab literature since the fourth/tenth century, when the former first attained a level of rhetorical development that made real competition with the latter plausible. Yet the level of complexity, and ambiguity, involved in artistic prose rarely attained that of poetry, and that most specific form of homage, the commentary, was relatively rarely applied to prose—the primary exception being the maqāmāt. On the other hand, commenting prose offered a unique way of presenting miscellaneous information, true to the Jāhizian formula for entertaining digression, that began to be exploited in the seventh/thirteenth centuries, as represented by Ibn Abī al-Hādī’s Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah and al-Sharīsī’s Sharḥ Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī. Ibn Nubātah saw such an opportunity in Ibn Zaydūn’s risālah hazlīyah, and grabbed it; and the young, brash, and competitive al-Ṣafādī proceeded to outdo him with his commentary on the risālah jiddīyah. Ultimately, nevertheless, al-Ṣafādī’s own commentary on the Lāmiyat al-‘Ajām demonstrated that the same technique could be applied at least as effectively to poetry, and the commenting of artistic prose never developed into a full-fledged major genre of Arabic adab.

Second, both Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafādī are clearly concerned with the canon of Arabic literature. Ibn Zaydūn, in both his epistles, had relied on, rehearsed, and indeed to some extent pinned down, the canon in his own day (a canon that was for him, significantly, entirely Eastern—there is nothing specifically Andalusian in either risālah). Ibn Nubātah emphatically reinforced this canon with his tarjamaḥs, inducting students into, and reminding peers of, a significant cross-section of what every respectable littérateur should know. Al-Ṣafādī went further, giving full credit to “modern classics” alongside their hoary predecessors, and demonstrating the continuing vitality of the literary tradition by citing recent and indeed contemporary poets and udabā’ in the context of a three hundred year old epistle.

Third, it seems safe to say that both Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafādī were addressing several audiences, and accomplishing several intentions, at once. Their commentaries offered students a panorama of the world of literary learning, and a potted lesson in the basics of their heritage. At the same time, peers had this.
lesson reinforced, or, perhaps more plausibly, were expected to congratulate themselves on recognizing, and even anticipating, the information and allusions as they were presented, while being impressed by the elegance with which this was done. A broader audience was offered a smorgasbord of "fawā‘id," "useful bits," which they could savor and incorporate into their dinner conversation. And of course—perhaps particularly in al-Šafadī’s case—the authors were establishing their own impressive credentials as experts for everyone to admire.

Fourth and finally, to come back to the “Alexandrian” character of the literary culture reflected in these works, there can be no question of the centrality of erudition to these authors and their audiences. All were conscious of a weighty tradition behind contemporary literary efforts, which acknowledged it at every turn. There is, however, little or no evidence for this fact being perceived as any kind of burden—the “anxiety of influence” becomes acute only when originality is prized in a way that would be completely foreign to our authors. What we seem to find instead is a real delight in influence. For Mamluk writers, one is tempted to say, intertextuality was what literature is all about; and the more of a past one has to deal with, the more one can glory in reproducing, ringing changes on, and playing with that past, to the ongoing enrichment of the Arabic literary tradition. That, I think, is how we should understand the achievements of Arabic literature in the Mamluk period, and perhaps if we assess it on that basis it will look less jejune and “derivative” (in an assumed negative sense) than the consensus of past scholarship would insist was the case.