The Arab Aristophanes

The Arab Aristophanes by Marvin Carlson

Arab Stages, Volume 1, Number 1 (Fall 2014) ©2014 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

This article appeared in the Summer, 2013 issue of Comparative Drama (151–66) and received the 2014 Oscar Brockett Essay Prize for the year’s best essay in theatre studies awarded by the American Society for Theatre Research.

The thirteenth-century Egyptian playwright Ibn Daniyal is slowly coming to Western attention as one of the most important dramatists of the middle ages. The fact that he wrote for the puppet theatre, a form often thought of as artistically inferior by both Arab and Western scholars, and the fact that he wrote in Arabic, a language which most Western scholars incorrectly think produced no drama before the colonial period, have doubtless both contributed to his long eclipse. In the Arab world poetry has always been regarded as the highest literary form, and since Ibn Daniyal was one of the most honored poets of his time it is as a poet that he has been remembered in that world, and the three plays created late in his career given comparatively little attention.

Clearly this situation is now changing. Thanks largely to the efforts of a few dedicated twentieth century German scholars, led by Georg Jacob, the plays were reconstructed from manuscripts spread across the medieval Arab world, from Istanbul to the Escorial in Spain, and published in complete form for the first time as recently as 1992.[1] Thus even scholars with a knowledge of Arabic have had access to these remarkable creations only for the past two decades. Gradually word of them has spread, however, and the first book-length study of Ibn Daniyal in English appeared in 2012, also with a translation of one of his three plays.[2] Gradually Western scholars are coming to realize that this hitherto almost unknown dramatist created some of the most complex and literate dramatic works of the middle ages, rivaling or surpassing almost every known dramatic work in the Arab or Western world for several centuries before or after him.

Ibn Daniyal was actually a native of Mosul, in today’s Iraq, who fled to Cairo in the 1260s when still in his teens, to escape the Mongol invasion of his home city. In Cairo he supported himself for a time as an eye doctor, but soon established a reputation among that city’s bohemian population as a wit, a gifted poet, and the active pursuer of a libertine lifestyle. His poetic gift, however, became more and more widely recognized. In the manner of young impecunious poets throughout the ages, Ibn Daniyal sought a degree of financial security by producing poems, often panegyrics, for influential and well-to-do-sponsors. At the top of the social pyramid was the Sultan, and just at the time Ibn Daniyal arrived in Cairo, the Sultanate was undergoing a momentous shift. The powerful warrior Baybars, who in 1254 defeated and captured King Louis IX of France, ending the fourth Crusade, and, even more importantly, defeated in the following year the Mongol general Hugelu, ending the Mongol advance into the middle east, married the widow Queen of Egypt and established a new, non-Arab dynasty, the Mamluks, that dominated Egypt for the next several centuries.
On their march toward Cairo, the Mongols had captured and sacked Baghdad and Damascus, leaving Cairo as the undisputed trading and intellectual center of the Arab world, a role it has maintained ever since. The new Sultan Baybars built upon this situation, proving himself as successful an administrator as he had been a general. He had much less interest in the arts, however, and indeed in his campaigns to improve the city, put strict curbs on such matters as drinking and the sex trade, earning him little respect from the bohemian community among which the young Ibn Daniyal first settled. Baybars’ son Barakah, who succeeded him in 1277, was equally uninterested in poetry and the arts, but he lacked his father’s strength, and two years later he was deposed by his father-in-law Qalawun, who after a number of lean years, again turned royal interest toward the arts and brought leading singers and poets to entertain and grace his court.

By this time Ibn Daniyal’s reputation among the upper classes was such that he became in effect the court poet, producing a large number of celebrative poems for ceremonial occasions such as hunts and festivals. Ibn Daniyal maintained this position until 1294, reaching his peak in poetic power under Qalawans’ successor, his brother, Khalil al-Ashaf. Khalil’s assassination in 1294 touched off a long period of struggles for the Sultanate, offering little security for someone like Ibn Daniyal. He returned to supporting himself by writing panegyric poems to celebrated less exalted sponsors—lower-level political, merchants, friends, and religious leaders. Among these new patrons, happily, was the producer of a puppet theatre, who, apparently tired of the traditional and not very respectable repertoire, asked the poet, so Ibn Daniyal explains in the preface to his first play, to create three new plays for him of real literary and artistic merit. These were designed to appeal not so much to the traditional street crowds but to the higher class friends of the patron, with more refined tastes.

By the time of Ibn Daniyal the puppet theatre was a well-established form of popular and court entertainment, though of little literary respectability. The puppets involved were shadow puppets, like those still employed in the wayang theatre of Indonesia or the karagoz of Turkey, with two-dimensional figures manipulated behind a translucent screen by a puppet master, so that their shadows appear to the audience on the other side of the screen. The earliest references to this form in Egypt go back to the eleventh century, when the optician Ibn al-Haytham describes a puppet performance consisting of “figures which the presenter moves in such a way that their shadows appear on both the wall behind the screen and on the screen itself,” and a century later Saladin, the first Sultan of Egypt, is reported to have invited shadow play performers to his court in Cairo.[3] Thus when Ibn Daniyal created his contributions to this form, it had already been performed in Egypt for two centuries or more. Nevertheless it apparently remained essentially a folk form, with little claim to literary status and viewed with considerable superstition by conservative religious figures.

Not a single shadow play from the two centuries before Ibn Daniyal has been preserved, so we have no manuscripts to support his claim that he raised the form to a new literary level, but the very fact that all three of his plays have been preserved, while no such works before him remain, does give strong indirect support to his claim. Relatively ample extant documents show that his plays continued to be popular long after his death and that for another century or more other writers follow in Ibn Daniyal’s footsteps, producing works that, it has been speculated, were increasingly bawdy and obscene. This must remain conjecture, however, since only the plays of Ibn Daniyal remain of this entire tradition. Again, this very absence suggests that these works were considered less worthy of preservation. In short, as Li Guo concludes: “We are perhaps not too far off the mark to suggest that the trend exemplified by Ibn Daniyal’s work signified the zenith of the medieval Arabic shadow play.”[4]
Many historians of the Ottoman shadow puppet tradition, the *karagoz*, have suggested that this form is directly descended from the Mamluk plays. Dror Ze'evi calling these plays “the most probable source” for the physically very similar Ottoman works.[5] The major source for this opinion is a Mamluk historian Ibn Iyas who reported that Sultan Selim, the Ottoman conquer of Egypt in 1517, saw his first shadow play in Cairo. Its subject was the capture and hanging by Ottoman forces of Tuman Bay, the last Mamluk Sultan, and the production so delighted Selim that he brought the puppets and performer back to Istanbul with him, from which the Turkish form developed.[6] Though two centuries had passed since Ibn Daniyal, it seems likely that the puppet shows Selim encountered in Cairo, unlike anything yet seen in Turkey, were at least in mode of presentation part of the tradition in which Ibn Daniyal participated, but neither the works of that time, nor subsequent *karazoz* plays, if they indeed continued that tradition, saw another Ibn Daniyal. The tradition died out in Egypt, and if the *karagoz* was indeed its descendent, it became an important folk form, but never achieved significant literary status.

As a result the plays of Ibn Daniyal, though preserved in a few archives, faded from the attention of scholars, both Eastern and Western who knew the shadow theatre only as a popular form, forgetting this exceptional author who raised the form to indisputable literary heights.

Ibn Daniyal’s poetry and his somewhat scandalous reputation continued to be remembered in later centuries, and although his dramatic work was occasionally mentioned, his reputation traditionally was more as a rather daring poet and wit, even passages from the plays being collected and cited as if they were individual poems. Only in modern times has the importance of these plays, indeed even their existence, been known even to specialists in the scholar world, East or West. It was not until the twentieth century that a series of scholars, primarily German began to collect the scattered manuscripts and to give these plays serious scholarly attention. This work, begun by the German Orientalist Georg Jacob in the opening years of the century, ultimately resulted in the first scholarly edition of the plays in Arabic published near the end of the century, in 1992.[7] Thus scholars both East and West are still exploring the implications of this newly-accessible major dramatist.

In an effort to help Western readers place this new figure in their mental map of world drama, and doubtless also to indicate his significance, he has from time to time been referred to by some of the still few Western critics who have written about him as the “Arab Aristophanes.”[8] Theatre scholars may well be reminded of the attempt by early scholars of the Japanese dramatist Chikamatsu, to gain him respectability in the West by calling him the “Japanese Shakespeare.”[9] Like Ibn Daniyal he was not only Oriental, but more questionable still, a writer for a puppet stage, in this case the Japanese *bunraku*. Ever since the first generation of Western scholarship of Chikamatsu, writers on that author have been at pains to refute the title, pointing out that apart from their prominence, the two authors have almost nothing in common culturally or artistically.[10] I would like to argue, however, that the situation is not nearly so clear in the case of Ibn Daniyal and Aristophanes, and for reasons far more detailed and provocative than certain surface similarities which inspired this comparison in the first place.

When Ibn Daniyal has been referred to as the “Arab Aristophanes,” the inevitable justification for this reference is the very large amount of obscenity and scatology in both writers, a serious challenge in both cases to censors. A related feature and important feature, rarely if ever mentioned, is that in the case of both writers this earthy material is mixed with remarkable lyric poetry, forming a striking blend of both style and subject. As I have noted, Ibn Daniyal was one of the outstanding poets of his time and among the verses still remembered today are some that actually come from his plays. None of the writers who
have used this comparison have noted any other points in common, although there are in fact some striking similarities which go far beyond this shared love of mixing high poetic style with the most debased sexual and other bodily references.

Doubtless the reason for this is that the similarities are by far the most striking in the third play of the Ibn Daniyal trilogy, which has not yet been fully translated from Arabic into any other language and is therefore still inaccessible to many scholars who might note these similarities. They are not nearly so pronounced, indeed are quite absent from the only play so far translated into English, which is the first play, *The Shadow Spirit*. The structure of this play, like its subject, concerning failed negotiations with an unscrupulous matchmaker, is suggestive of a play in the European farce/comedy tradition. The second play, *The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger*, has the simplest and most straightforward structure of the three, consisting, after an introductory section, of twenty-two fairly short scenes, each devoted to the presentation of a Cairo street performer, such as a quack doctor, an herbalist, an astrologer, an acrobat, and so on.

The structure of the third play, *The Love-stricken One and the One who Inspires Passion*, is quite different from the other two, and while parallels to the fairly simple structures of each of those two can be found in a number of other writers in the Western comic tradition, there is only a single known author in world literature whose rather complex pattern of arranging a play bears a close resemblance to that of Ibn Daniyal, and that is in fact Aristophanes.

Although the structure and character arrangements of Menander, Plautus, and Terence, the major Greek and Roman authors of so-called “middle” and “new” comedy, have been widely imitated from the Renaissance onward, the rather complex structure of the “old comedy” of Aristophanes, although quite consistent throughout his own surviving work, has been taken up by no other author in the existing Western dramatic canon.

The typical structure of an Aristophanic play consists of a series of elements, not universally present, but consistent enough so that one may legitimately speak of an “Aristophanic” pattern of play constructions. First comes the prologue, a monologue or dialogue presenting the subject matter of the play. Then comes the entrance song of the chorus, the Parodos, in which the chorus supports or opposes the concerns or project of the hero. Next come a set of balanced or symmetrical scenes, often in the form of an Agon or Parabasis, or both. The contest, or Agon, pits two characters against each other in a conflict which looks forward to the conclusion of the action. In the Parabasis, normally at the middle of the play, the main actors leave the stage, and the chorus steps out of the play to address the audience directly. Next comes a series of episodes, short scenes involving only one or two minor characters each, usually showing the effects of the outcome of the Agon. Finally comes the departure song of the chorus, the Exodus, with a mood of celebration and often involving revelry and a joyous marriage, or both. These elements could be varied somewhat (there is no formal Agon, for example, in *The Acharnians*, while there are two in *The Clouds*), but on this whole this complex pattern is quite consistent.

Now as I have noted, this rather odd and complex structure has not been copied by any other significant dramatist in the world dramatic canon. There may have been a few done as academic exercises, but I am not aware even of any of these. It is therefore quite surprising to find that in his third play, *The Love-stricken One and the Lost One who Inspires Passion*, Ibn Daniyal follows this pattern in remarkable detail. The play concerns the sufferings of al-Muttayam, who sees an attractive young boy, al-Yutayyim,
in the baths and falls passionately in love with him. The boy flirts with him but remains elusive, and the play concerns al-Muttayam’s various strategies to consummate his passion.

This play begins with a brief prologue, a direct address by the presumed author of this play to the audience. Although short, it suggests the sort of content often found in an Aristophanic Parabasis, though not in its normal position in the middle of the play. After this brief introduction comes the prologue proper, which brings us into the Aristophanic structure that will determine the shape of the action of the rest of the play. This prologue is an extended monologue from the Love-Stricken One, lasting several pages and including embedded songs and poems. This describes his suffering and sleepless nights and detailing the beauties of his new love. As in an Aristophanic comedy, it sets out the concerns of the protagonist that the play will seek to address. In Aristophanes, the next element would be the first choric song, supporting or contesting the desires of the protagonist. Choric passages are not a feature of the shadow theatre, but the next scene serves a similar function. Al-Damim, a rather ugly former sex partner of al-Mutayyam, appears and tries to win him back, heaping scorn on his new infatuation. Al-Mutayyam rejects the advice of al-Damim, and continues to heap praise on his new love. Then comes a symmetrical scene in which Bayram, a friend of al-Mutayyam and supporter of his pursuit of the attractive al-Yutayyim, brings encouragement to the wooer and predicts his success. The balanced scenes of the two advisors completes the first section of the play.

Lacking a chorus, the play also lacks a true Parabasis (although as noted the opening preface serves a similar function), but the space of the Parabasis is filled by a scene depicting the meeting of the potential lovers. Al-Mutayyam declares his passion, al-Yutayyim coquettishly resists, and the two join in singing romantic duets, somewhat in the manner of much later European operas.

Immediately after this passage, we return to a series of scenes that much more clearly suggest an Aristophanic structure. This is the Agon, the climactic element of the first part of a traditional Aristophanic comedy. The Agon section of this play is very highly developed, taking up the central third of the action. It as a part of the duet scene, itself a kind of Agon in which the pleas for satisfaction from the smitten lover, are rejected by the attractive youth. In addition to detailing his sufferings, however, al-Mutayyam boasts of certain of his possessions, especially a rooster who is a champion cock fighter. His youthful adversary immediately counters that he has a superior fowl. Almost at once we shift from the verbal Agon to a parallel and very physical one, a fight between the two roosters. When al-Yutayyim’s animal flees from the ring he proposes another context, a butting context between the rams of the opponents.

Once again al-Yutayyim’s animal is defeated and he calls for a third and final context, putting against each other bulls owned by the two combatants. Finally al-Mutayyam’s animal loses, and sinks to the ground dying. Were this an Aristophanic play, this scene would most probably be followed by a choric passage, bridging to the series of episodes that largely make up the latter half of the play. In the place of this passage, al-Mutayyam provides a similar lyric interval, a lengthy sung over the dead animal. Then, in a spoken passage, he introduces the situation and action which will occupy the rest of the play, which, as in much of Aristophanes, is dominated by a celebratory feast. In Ibn Daniyal’s play, al-Mutayyam, his lament concluded, announces that the bull will be slaughtered and provide the major dish for a huge feast for all his friends, hoping that this evidence of his generosity will soften al-Yutayyim’s heart.

We now move into the part of the play, which in placement and organization exactly corresponds to the
Aristophanic episodes, offering a succession of minor characters, like the priest, the poet, the soothsayer, the inspector and the salesman who in turn visit and hope to exploit the newly founded avian city in *The Birds*.

A parallel parade of guests appears when al-Mutayyam throws open his doors and offers free food and drink. First comes a so-called hermaphrodite named Nacissus, in fact a homosexual man who extols his lifestyle and compares a relieving bowel movement after copulation to giving birth. Next arrives a buxom young man, whose name is Easy Penetration. As in Aristophanes, all the names in Ibn Daniyal’s work are “speaking” names, usually with obscene or scatological meanings. Easy Penetration is described as resembling an erect penis, and he sings a song bragging of his willing submission to his partners’ desires. Next appears a man “slim as gazelle and brown as a wolf” named Digger, who comes in to complain of the excessive noise and merriment of the banquet, but then decides to remain when he is attracted by al-Mutayyam’s erect penis. A matchmaker named Swap next appears, offering to further al-Mutayyam’s suit, or else serve as a substitute for the reluctant al-Yutayyim. Next comes a street thug David the Clutcher, who laments past days when the streets were darker and sexual victims were more easily caught. The next guest, Masturbator, discusses the pleasures of his solitary entertainment, which he brags of enjoying everywhere, even in the street under a loose robe. Next Clever Crawler reveals how he sneaks into darkened houses and forces sex on those he discovers there. In *The Birds*, the protagonist Pisthetaerus drives off the opportunistic invaders of his celebration, but al-Mutayyam dispatches his obnoxious series of guests in an equally firm but more benevolent manner, plying each of them in turn with drink until they fall to the floor, creating a growing pile of stupefied bodies.

Three final guests end this series, the first, a Mamluk slave, announces a change of tone by commenting on the now considerable pile of inebriated and senseless bodies, stretched out amid the garbage like corpses. Despite his repulsion, however, the slave gladly accepts the multiple glasses of wine al-Mutayyam offers and soon adds his own body to the pile. He is followed by a parasite, Glutton, who brags of his ability to eat almost anything, almost like a medieval personification of this deadly sin. He has come hoping to find food, but settles for drink, and in his turn joins the other debauched sleepers.

Following the episodes in an Aristophanic structure comes the celebratory final song of the chorus, often involving a marriage celebration, a feast, dancing or drinking. Ibn Daniyal might be said to have merged features of this concluding revelry with Aristophanic episodes, but there is a final scene in Ibn Daniyal which in fact occupies the structural space of the concluding festival common in Aristophanes. In this highly striking final scene a man with a solemnity and decorum contrasting sharply with the previous visitors appears, awakens all with a great shout and announces himself as the Angel of Death, The horrified al-Mutayyam renounces his vices, prays for God’s mercy and dies. His body is placed in a white coffin and carried off to a funeral march.

In its tonality this surprisingly and highly theatrical ending is admittedly more like the sudden dark turn at the end of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labours Lost* than to any surviving work by Aristophanes. Yet even this religious turn (all three of Ibn Daniyal’s plays, despite their extensive obscene content, end on a religious note) contains what might be faint echoes of Aristophanic practice. Though Aristophanes remains devotedly secular, and the traditional gods, when they appear at all, are usually figures of fun, nevertheless most of his plays end with the establishment of a new order, which simultaneously reaffirms traditional values., as for example in *The Clouds*, where The Thinkery’s secular destruction is as clear a judgment as the clearing of al-Mutayyam’s brothel. The conversion of Demos in The Knights and the
triumph of Plutus also establish superior moral order on corrupt societies; indeed this theme broadly speaking, operates in most of the surviving Aristophanic plays. Despite the surprisingly religious note struck by this concluding scene, it no-nevertheless remains the case that the overall structure of The Love-Stricken One, surprising ending and all, still bears a closer resemblance to Old Comedy than anything else in the history of drama. Clearly there is much more reason to refer to Ibn Daniyal as the “Arab Aristophanes” than the fact that both were gifted poets with an unusual willingness to utilize sexual material and scatology.

This inevitably raises the question of what actual connection might possibly exist between the works of the two artists. The chronological and cultural gap between them seems indeed formidable. Aristophanes flourished at the end of the fifth century B.C. and Ibn Daniyal created his works at the end of the thirteenth century, seventeen centuries later, on the opposite side of the Mediterranean. Given this enormous separation in time and considerable separation in space, the possibility of any connection seems remote indeed. Nevertheless the unique and detailed structural relationship between the Egyptian dramatist’s final work and the comedies of the Greek master is difficult to attribute to mere chance. Let us then explore what possibilities exist of an actual connection between these two major dramatists.

When we look closely into the intellectual, cultural, and artistic world of the eastern Mediterranean during the late middle ages, a project relatively few scholars of any sort and almost no theatre scholars have yet undertaken, we find the in fact that the possibility of a direct connection between the work of these two dramatists is not nearly so remote as it might at first appear. Several possibilities arise from such an investigation. First, a significant portion of the Greek intellectual heritage was of course still known in the medieval Islamic world, indeed it was primarily that world that preserved most of what remains to us of Greek thought. Most theatre scholars are aware of the importance of Averroes in the twelfth century in studying and preserving for future generations the work of Aristotle. A recent study of Averroes credits the Latin translations of Averros’ Aristotle with the rise of European renaissance scholastic thought.[12] Of course Averroes was only the best known of many generations of Arabic scholars who devoted themselves to the translation and study of the Greek authors.[13] Unquestionably a literary figure like Ibn Daniyal, living a century after Averroes, especially when he was active at court and moving among the upper classes of Cairo, many of whom had extensive private libraries, would have had access to the Greek classics. The key question is whether this material might have included Greek drama, and Aristophanes in particular. Unhappily, the possibility remains only a possibility, and not one that seems highly probable.

Cairo had possessed, since the eleventh century, one of the largest libraries in the Arab world, second only to the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. Estimates of the size of its collection vary from 120,000 items to two million, doubtless including most of the Greek works we know today.[14] Sadly, this enormous collection was looted and dispersed in 1171, when the vizier Saladin seized control of the country. Many thousands of volumes, however, were not destroyed but bought from the looters and preserved in the private collections of wealthy Egyptian bibliophiles and theologians. Many of these were still accessible when Ibn Daniyal arrived in Cairo some 75 years later. Indeed until a fire destroyed the collection in 1291, while Ibn Daniyal was a prominent figure in Cairo literary and court circles, the Cairo Citadel possessed a collection of some 120,000 books, many of them translations of classic authors.[15]

Whether any of this material contained Greek drama, however, is much open to question.
While it is clear that the medieval Arabic world studied and translated a great deal of Greek writing, it is equally clear that the vast majority of this work was scientific and philosophical. Classicists like Oliver Overwien have argued that Greek comedy, particularly the work of Menander, was a part of the Muslim educational system in the medieval Arab world,[16] but while the evidence suggests a general familiarity with that tradition, access of even the well-to-do and well educated thirteenth century citizens of Cairo particular plays, especially the plays of Aristophanes, seems unlikely.

Fortunately, there is another possible line of connection which seems much more promising. This involves tracing the Greek literary inheritance not through the Arab world, but through the Byzantine one. Although Baghdad and Cairo were major centers of learning and repositories of classic texts in the middle ages, a significant portion of these texts came to them by way of Byzantium, perhaps the most important site of preservation of such texts, both in actual archives and as material continually taught in the Byzantine schools and studied by Byzantine scholars. In light of the continuation of the Greco-Roman intellectual tradition, it is essential to remember that Egypt was in fact part of the Byzantine Empire from the third to the seventh century, when Egypt was conquered by Muslim Arabs. This major political change did not of course result in a total cultural change, but as is always the case in a blending of cultural practices and values.

How late into the new millennium Greek plays continued to be performed in the Byzantine Empire remains a matter of debate, but Alphonse Dain has argued that passages in the sixth-century rhetorician, Chorikios of Gaza, provide strong evidence that Menander, at least, was still being performed at that time.[17] when Egypt was in fact still part of the Byzantine Empire. No scholar of Byzantine culture has argued that Greek dramas were performed any later than this period, but all agree that these dramas continued to be read and studied in the schools for a number of centuries following this. A letter from an eleventh-century scholar, Mauropus, makes clear that by that time the reading of Sophocles and Aristophanes in particular was a part of the Byzantine school curriculum.[18] By the thirteenth century, when Ibn Daniyal wrote, the Byzantine school curriculum included the so-called Triads, consisting three plays each from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. The Aristophanic plays were *Plutus, The Clouds*, and *The Birds*. Aristophanes apparently reached the pinnacle of his popularity in Byzantium during the so-called Palaiologian Renaissance, beginning with the reign of Michael VIII in 1261. The city of Constantinople, badly damaged in the Fourth Crusade, was rebuilt, the arts and letters flourished, and, equally important for the concerns of this essay, cultural and diplomatic contacts were developed with the new Mamluk rulers of Egypt, who were similarly menaced by the Crusaders from the West and the Mongols from the East.

Many Byzantine scholars have remarked on what Marciniak calls the “amazing popularity” of Aristophanes in thirteenth-century Byzantium, surpassing that of the tragic dramatists and totally eclipsing Menander, at that time virtually forgotten. His style and language were much admired, but, suggests Garland and others, Aristophanic obscenity was fully in accord with Byzantine literary taste of this period, even in works preferred by the imperial family.[20] This places a surge of interest in Aristophanes in the exact historical period as the work of Ibn Daniyal, and although thirteenth century Byzantium and Egypt were not contiguous states, one can easily imagine Ibn Daniyal encountering travelers of a literary bent who had encountered the work of the Greek dramatist in Byzantium.

In fact however there is a much closer and more likely method of contact, the diplomatic and trade agreements between Egypt and Constantinople to which I have already alluded. A number of scholars,
but particularly P.M. Holt, have studied the diplomatic and trade relationships between the two new
dynasties that came to power in the Middle East in the 1260, Michael VIII Palaeologus in Constantinople
and the Mamluk rulers in Cairo.[21] Although no actual diplomatic letters from this period remain, there
are enough references, primarily in the Arabic sources, to indicate that a substantial and continuing
diplomatic and cultural exchange existed from 1261 onward.[22] The first recorded step in this exchange
was a letter (now lost) in 1261 from the Byzantine emperor offering his support to the new Mamluk
ruler. The Sultan in return sent the Emperor a number of gifts, including a giraffe, a group of Mongol
prisoners, and some Mongol horses and their gear.[23]

The first extant document in what was clearly an ongoing exchange between the two nations is a treaty of
1281, which among other things guaranteed free passage between these countries to ambassadors and
merchants.[24] By this time a new Sultan, Qalawun, had come to power, and, more important for our
investigation, Ibn Daniyal had moved into court circles. His earliest dated court poem, from this same
year, was a panegyric honoring Qalawun’s vizier, Taj al-Din Muhammad, who by all accounts was “a
learned person with a decent grounding in all things cultural.”[25] Although Ibn Daniyal seems to have
had little contact with Sultan Qalawun himself, a military man with apparently little interest in literary
matters, the poet was closely associated with the heir apparent, al-Malik al-Salih and with al-Salih’s
powerful vizier Fakhar al-Din Ibn al-Khalil, one of the few real-life figures who appear in the shadow
plays.[26] There seems little question that during these years there was a much stronger Byzantine
presence in Cairo than before, not only because of the increased diplomatic ties, but also because of
increased commercial ones. Both the part of the treaty put forward by the Sultan and that by the Emperor
make clear that commerce will be protected and encouraged. Article 7 of Qalawun’s side of the treaty
states that:

No injustice or oppression shall befall the merchants coming from the realm of the
Emperor, Lord Michael, to Our Territory. They shall pass to and fro safely and
securely, and practice their trade. They shall be cared for in going and coming,
residing and traveling. Inasmuch as the merchants of Our Territory shall likewise
be cared for in the territory of the realm of the Emperor, Lord Michael, and find
no injustice or oppression from anyone in the territory of the realm of the Emperor,
Lord Michael.[27]

The unexpected and sudden death of al-Salih in 1288, two years before his father, left the succession to
his younger brother al-Ashraf Khalil. Although much involved in military affairs, Khalil also headed a
brilliant court, in which Ibn Daniyal was the prominent literary figure. Despite his own reputation for
obscenity, he was even appointed royal censor, a post which he apparently fulfilled without losing the
close friendship of his fellow poets.[28]

Khalil was assassinated in 1293, ending Ibn Daniyal’s great years at court. The poet continued to
produce celebratory poems for the military elite, wealthy courtiers and private citizens, and religious
leaders. Among these was the unknown patron who asked Ibn Daniyal to create three “literary” shadow
plays. The exact date of these plays is not known, but although they contain embedded poems that may
be dated back to the 1270s, their final form is assumed to date from near the end of the century.[29] Thus
the particular structure that Ibn Daniyal utilized in the last of these plays would have been employed not
long after his court career, when he was in intimate contact not only with the leading literary figures in
Cairo, but also with the diplomats and representatives from the Byzantine court and very likely, with Byzantine merchants and other travelers at the very period when relations between that court and Cairo were most intense. Given the fact that these are also the years when Aristophanes was enjoying an enormous vogue in Byzantine literary circles, far greater than that of any other classical dramatist, and that both dramatists were equally admired for their high poetic style and extreme obscenity, it is surely reasonable to conjecture that Ibn Daniyal might well have received during his court years information about this dramatist, either through his literary or court contacts. Thus the striking structural resemblance of his final play to an Aristophanic comedy may not at all be simply a bizarre coincidence, but seems quite possibly to have been the result of a direct, if serendipitous connection. If that is the case, and the circumstantial evidence is considerable, there is more reason than ever to characterize this thirteenth century dramatist as in fact the Arab Aristophanes.

Marvin Carlson is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Editor-in-Chief of Arab Stages. His research and teaching interests include dramatic theory and Western European theatre history and dramatic literature, especially of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He has been awarded the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the George Jean Nathan Prize, the Bernard Hewitt prize, the George Freedley Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been a Walker-Ames Professor at the University of Washington, a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Indiana University, a visiting professor at the Freie Universitat of Berlin, and a Fellow of the American Theatre. In 2005 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Athens. His best-known book, Theories of the Theatre (Cornell University Press, 1993), has been translated into seven languages. His 2001 book, The Haunted Stage won the Calloway Prize. His newest book is Four Plays From Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous (Martin E. Segal Center Publications, 2014).


[9] Thus the first English collection of this dramatist’s work, translated by Asatari Miyamori and edited by Robert Nichols, was called Masterpieces of Chikamatsu, the Japanese Shakespeare (London: Trench, Trubner and Co., 1926).


• Brecht’s Theatre and Social Change in Egypt (1954-71) by Magdi Youssef
• Re-orienting Orientalism: from Shafik Gabr’s “What Orientalist Painters Can Teach Us about the Art of East –West Dialogue” to Ayad Akhtar’s Disgraced by Fawzia Afzal-Khan
• ‘Now I will believe that there are unicorns’: The Improbable History of Shakespeare in Yemen by Katherine Hennessey
• Radhouane El Meddeb’s Experiments With Gender: In Search of New Bodies by Omar Fertat
• Coptic Christian Theatre in Egypt: Negotiations Between The Minority and The Majority by Mohammed Musad
• A New Perspective on Mikhail Ruman’s Smoke in A President of His own Republic? by Anwaar Abdelkhalik Abdalla
• Kheireddine Lardjam, Traveller Between Two Shores by Marina Da Silva
• Where Theatre has failed Syrians by Rolf C. Hemke
• The Arab Aristophanes by Marvin Carlson

Plays

• Solitaire by Dalia Baisouny
• The Imam and the Homosexual by Jamil Khoury

Review

• Struggling Against Insurmountable Odds: Theatre in the Arab World/Theater im Arabischen Sprachraum A Book Review by Michael Malek Najjar

Malumat/Information

• Malumat: Resources for Research, Writing/Publishing, Teaching, & Performing Arts compiled by Kate C. Wilson

www.arabstages.org
arabstages@gc.cuny.edu

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center
Frank Hentschker, Executive Director
Marvin Carlson, Director of Publications
Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director