

# On the benefits of studying Arabic poetry \*

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\*The original document in French is available here

The famous Reiske, who best knew Arab poets among all European orientalists, believed he had to justify or excuse his choice in the beginning of the preface for the public to appreciate his successes with studying the Arab language under the supervision of the famous Schultens. He did not hide the objections his resolve may lead to. Some may wonder about the usefulness of knowing Arabic poetry, and the kind of payoff that Society may gain from it in terms of elevating minds or augmenting life's enjoyments. Others will complain about the thick veil that covers the thoughts contained in it, and about the amount of work needed for its understanding. A few picky people will find oriental poetry to be too rich with hyperboles, and will uniformly condemn all oriental poets with no consideration for historical and geographical matters. Others, out of friendship and genuine interest in the author, will wonder about why not choosing a piece of history instead of publishing something that could reconcile public recognition with his favorite research interests. Indeed, scientists might find some usefulness and value in reading the history of events that happened elsewhere in the World and learning the places and times where those events occurred. Is one not taking the risk of losing their esteem by doing otherwise, instead of making them a favor? I believe, said Reiske, that they may very well be right, and I shared their opinion long before they expressed it to me. Indeed, does Arabic poetry share hidden treasures just like the poetry of the Greeks and the Latins does? Arab people do not know fiction, which is the essence of poetry: They do not know how to lead a fable to a happy ending through ingenious meanders: Epic poetry is unknown to them, and so are comedy and tragedy. Regardless, I have always been more interested in history; but I completely lacked the required knowledge to deal with a historical subject when I thought about publishing this pamphlet; as I write these words and discover its extent, Oriental history appears to me as an immense ocean that I not capable of sailing.

One might wonder if Reiske is, in fact, sincere when he writes such a negative opinion about Arabic poetry. Reading one or two more pages of this preface only confirms this impression; indeed, all things considered, the judge of Arabic poetry finds it less unreasonable than that of the Greeks. Even the divine Homer is not spared by his atrabilary mood, and his legacy would not be much if *tot toedusia*, *garrula*, *rhapsodica*, *frigida*, *stupida*, *stulta*, *exsecrabilia* were removed from it. Those literary blasphems, which I did not dare translating, are only a sort of joke, and soon Reiske returns to more reasonable methods: There is no point in rejecting what has been admired for several centuries, and there is no point in lauding what is clearly worth of blame only. When our purpose is to extract the works of a nation from the darkness of forgetfulness, to study them and profit from them, fairness requires that they be evaluated in the context of the places and the times that produced them, as well as the character, the genius and the ways of living of the people to whom these works belong.

I opted to cite Reiske and his demeaning Arabic poetry rather than other authors who expressed their opinion more recently, because very few orientalists are qualified to express their opinions based on a truly deep knowledge of the subject. Indeed, most other authors only have a very shallow understanding of the subject. I believe nobody will challenge my view that Reiske's deep erudition is only matched by his lack of good taste. The proof that supports both assertions lies with his translation of Tarafa's poem and the comment he felt urged to add to it.

The questions raised by this knowledgeable orientalist to himself on the merit of the

poetry of the Arab people, and the benefits that may be drawn from studying the monuments of this nation's poetic genius, do not seem to be answered definitely yet. I therefore ask for a few moments of attention from your community to reveal how studying Arabic poetry is not as frustrating and fruitless as its opponents might think. Far from believing that too much work has been spent on this subject, I believe that we have barely begun to do so and we should keep encouraging the people who devote their life to this important branch of oriental literature. Before developing any further, I must warn you that I will not cite anyone, for my subject is Arabic poetry alone.

When I talk about the fruits that one might gain from Arabic poetry, I will first assume that not more is expected out of it than what is expected from Greek and Latin poetry. Second, I intend to speak only about truly poetic works; I will consider neither works on grammar books and dictionaries, nor elements of medicine, theology, jurisprudence, and astronomy. I will not consider pieces of work written in verses, whose poetry simply complies with constraints on rhythm and rhyme. Such works are no more poems than the technical verses of Despauterius or the Greek roots of Port-Royal. Publishing some of these works, such as Ebn-Malec's *Alfiyya* or Hariri's *Molhat-alirab* might be, however, worth the effort, but strictly from a doctrinal point of view.

The reasons for studying Arabic poetry include general principles that may apply to any nation's literature; they also include specific reasons arising from the specific circumstances surrounding the Arab nation. The general principles might reduce to a single observation, that is, studying ordinary language is not enough if the purpose is embracing the language as a whole. This does not mean that one must understand all the technical terms that art and sciences have developed, even to speak one's mother tongue, and that are used among the specialists that perform these specialized studies; reduced to its core meaning, embracing a language as a whole means that the scientist can ignore neither the various forms of the discourse, nor any of the expressions used by good writers, in prose or verses, that compose the literature of this language. How could one claim to master the greek language without having read Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, or Pindar? And what could a scientist of the common language of Italy manage to see without understanding Petrarch, Tasso, or Ariosto? The further a poetic language of a nation differs from its common form, the more important it is to study its poetry for anyone who wants to know the language perfectly. From that viewpoint, our thesis applies to the Arab language as well as any other. However, when we leave these general considerations and look for specific reasons that make Arabic poetry such a necessary element to learn, we will soon be convinced by the immense advantages of doing so. Let us first note that there is no historical, written monument that may let us know about the Arab civilization and its people before Mahomet and even during the second century of the Hegira. We have no trace of their opinions, their beliefs, their customs, their laws, their political activities, all in all the state of their society as seen from all viewpoints, except for the poems that survived these ancient times, the proverbs, the traditions kept in more or less original form by the first commentators of the Alcoran and by the grammar specialists that spent efforts at explaining these ancient poems or finding the origin of the proverbs. The Arabs almost always rely on poetic fragments when not much else is known about Antiquity to support their understanding of the habits and opinions that they attribute to the idolaters, who are the ancestors of the Muslims. The only regret that may be expressed by anyone interested in tracing back their civilization's history and

progress is that no more of the ancient monuments of the Arabic literature, the remains of a culture far more advanced than anyone might commonly think, have survived. Indeed, it is impossible to reflectively read some of the antic poems, to see the Arabic grammatical rule whose rigor exceeds even that of the Alcoran <sup>1</sup>, where all the rules of an eminently man-made prosody are followed scrupulously, without becoming convinced that, far before the founder of Islam, there were genius minds who stamped their century with their character, which became the rule later on. These geniuses were present in the Arabian peninsula and among the many tribes that covered Mesopotamia, and in the courts of the kings of Hira and Gassan. Such men doubtlessly and irrevocably set the laws of the language, and expressed the code that Arabic poetry had to follow and still follows today, and that influenced Persians and Turks alike. And how you want to know the true life of the amazing man who, taken by the circumstances, ended up founding a theocratic government that would change the face of a great part of Asia, Africa, and Europe, although his initial intent might have only been to purify his country's religion and destroy paganism? If one does not familiarize himself with the daring images and specific expressions that are characteristic of the language of poetry, one will encounter many pieces of poetry in each page, which will be as many enigmas. Is there any more important monument in the Arabic literature than the book, modestly named *Kitab-alagani*, or the book of Songs, which contains an immense erudition and could, by itself, suffice to describe the Arab culture before Islam and during the greatest era of the Caliph empire? And what kind of man, having accepted a system of intellectual bounds to only read dry chronics and frigid analysts, would dare taking his fragile dinghy on this immense ocean? But, what am I saying? Even in those annals deprived of substance, writers of the Orient only rarely refrain themselves from citing poetic fragments of various sizes. They are then used to either support facts, or add stylistic ornaments, or serve as relaxing moments for the reader: Unless we suppress them or, worse, we betray their meaning as in Tabari's abbreviator, we will still have to learn some understanding of the style of Arabic poetry. What I said about the *Kitab-alagani* could apply equally well to the compendium of Arabic proverbs by Meïdani, which is still waiting for a publisher, to the lives of illustrious men by Ebn-Khilcan, and to many other works whose importance cannot be challenged.

So far I have spoken about Arabic poetry as if it did not deserve to be worthy of special consideration; one might believe that my ambition is no more than asking for one's mercy with regards to the services it may bring to historical science, and that I would omit to formulate a rebuttal against its supposed downsides. I stand quite far from such thoughts. As long as the consensus exists that a man of good taste can honor himself with works aimed at understanding the beauty of Greek and Roman poetic works without falling victim to the sarcasms of contemptuous and bland philosophers, and helping others to do the same, I dare saying that Arabic poetry is no less worthy of the efforts of those who have chosen a career in oriental languages to serve and honor their century. When I say this, I do not aim at comparing Arabia's poets with those of pagan Europe. I do not examine whether mythology or discussions on frequently contradictory traditions about heroic times in Greek poetry make it better than poets whose ardent imagination was sufficient to only describe the greatness of nature, the passions of mankind, the value of pastoral life, and the rivalries

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<sup>1</sup>Qur'an (Alcoran in this translation) is not considered poetry today, and a comparison between the grammar of Arabic poetry and that of Qur'an cannot be made.

among their tribes. It is enough for me to find useful subjects of investigation here and there, noble thoughts that raise my soul, powerful feelings that stimulate my imagination, and true writings that place my soul in harmony with that of the poet: Who could ever deny Arab poets such high qualities after reading the remarkable, yet so incomplete works of the famed W. Jones? Or after becoming familiar, even by means of translations, with the famous poems from the times of the founder of Islam or shortly before him, where all the great feelings of the noble and honorable character of the independent Arab and the manly beauties found in nature are not altered yet by a mix of refined yet soft thoughts, ingenuous yet artificial ornaments, and sophisticated yet unnatural writings, which have partially altered the true character of Arabic poetry? I would rather not abuse your attention by lengthening my discourse with citations. Anyone can check on my truthfulness by simply reading the so-called *Moallakas* poems, all of which have been translated and published. Likewise, the poems of Schanrafa, Nabega, Ascha, and Caab, each one with their own specifics, all share the same poetical genius and the same uplifting feelings. These works are likeable because they draw pictures borrowed from nature, sometimes described as harsh and tough and sometimes as enjoyable and luxurious. In other cases, they paint the virtues and the passions that are showing bare in the children of the desert, rather than hiding behind some artificial modesty or fake prudishness.

What I am reporting about the most ancient written monuments of Arabic poetry also applies to many among the poets who, during the centuries that followed, modeled their work after the masterpieces produced by antiquity; the compendium known as *Hamasa* provides innumerable examples. In many other poets, and even among the most illustrious ones such as Moténabbi, Abou'lala, Ebn-Doreïd, Tograï, Bousiri, or Omar, son of Faredh, the imperfections I described a short while ago do alter more or less the essence of the Arabic poetry. But is acknowledging this fact a good pretext to ignore so much actual beauty? Since when was it decided that all poets inferior to Homer and Virgil or all orators who could not reach the fame of Demosthenes and Cicero were not worth remembering?

All those who read the most celebrated masters of Arabia in latin or french translations will, I am afraid to say, remain far from appreciating them up to their true worth. After all, it is already very difficult to translate the beautiful poetic meaning of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace, Catullus, Shakespeare, Dante, Tasso, Camoëns, in any of the European languages foreign to the homelands of these great poets, although all our modern literature is modeled after that of Greece and the ancient Italy, and although the mythology of Homer and Virgil was passed completely into our poetic language, and, finally, although all modern European people share the same body of knowledge and almost the same civilization. Under these conditions, even the most clever translator will face innumerable difficulties to translate a poesy born under a climate and a landscape that we know only imperfectly. In addition, this poesy borrows its comparisons from a multitude of objects whose distant presence hides their shape and general characteristics. Finally, this poesy feeds on opinions, prejudices, beliefs, superstitions whose understanding can be acquired only through lengthy and arduous efforts. Indeed, the words and the genius of these interprets will reach the bottom of my mind, even when only a translation is available, when they talk about love's violence, jealousy's fury, and thirst of pleasure of vengeance. They will touch me likewise if they talk about the honorable sacrifices of generosity and friendship, of passion and glory, of the enthusing feelings created by virtue, and the sublime act of abiding to the will of God.

They will do so when talking about the seductive pleasures of a soft and voluptuous life, the heroic feelings that fight against fate's strikes, and when they deal with death itself without dropping a tear. But will things be the same when the poet paints the eternal solitudes that the wind of the desert criss-crosses, where there are no signs to guide the traveller, where thirst is pushed to an extreme, where the heat is high and creates a vaporous illusion that he will follow without ever getting to it? Will it be the same when the topic is about the native inhabitant of a dry and flat plain, who stares at the clouds that pile-up atop each other with fear? And when it is about the thunder that brings hope, and, sometimes, deception? And when it is about the torrents dropped in abundance that will quench the thirst of other regions under better skies, but are too far away or inhabited by a rival tribe, while his cattle dies out of thirst and heat on a desiccated land? Will I share his vivid interest when he describes all the splendor or all the signs of vigor and strength of the working animal that seems to have been expressly designed for the desert inhabitant by providence; or when he depicts the fineness and flexibility of the neck of a delicate gazelle, the languor and softness of its gaze, the whiteness of its hair whose splendor makes it visible in the dark of the night, and the tremor of its legs weakened by exhaustion and fear, to attract my attention to its panicking and suffering, intimidated by the sight of hunters and the voice of their dogs, as she is looking for her baby already devoured by a ferocious beast, at the bottom of the valleys or the top of the mountains; or when he compares himself with a pack of wolves to bring forward a realistic view of the torments created by his hunger in the loneliness where he found refuge away from the ingratitude and evil of humans and he keeps my mind busy with the scene of these ferocious animals, of their lifestyle, of their vain cavalcades, of their despair and their resignation? It goes without a doubt that I will be able to enjoy the pleasure that his verses brought to his compatriots and I will add my congratulations to his contemporaries' if I manage to master the language of the poet, if I can follow his works without the need for a commentator or a middle man and if, after many lengthy studies, I am capable of moving my mind into the lonely places where he exercised his talent and into the wild where he used his painting brushes. However, I will have to content myself with seeing them lose part of their shine and share my admiration imperfectly with those who surround me and for whom I have not spared my painful efforts, if I become complacent with the pleasure I enjoy and try to communicate it to them and to transplant these exotic flowers on the banks of the Seine or the Thames rivers. A long time ago, I said: "What makes the translation of Arabic poems very challenging is in that they mostly consist of descriptions, and these descriptions contain many details whose meaning and value to a nomadic people living in the desert is inexistent for people who have reached a higher degree of civilization. A nomad, whose imagination is solicited by only a few natural objects, captures all their shapes, appearances, and circumstances. Two clouds do not look alike to him; a Spring storm is very different from that of the Summer or the Fall. Since he always keeps his service animals under his sight, he can observe all variations of their habits and all the nuances in their behaviors. There is a name for each gait of his camel and for each phase of the life and fecundity of this useful animal; the care brought to relieving its thirst bears many names that depend on the number of days it can endure without drinking. There are as many names for clouds, rocks, creeks, valleys and reservoirs as there are configurations for these natural objects. Man himself never appears to his sight without his reading the feelings of his soul in his face, in the motion of his eyes, in the change of his traits, in the trembling of his limbs, in

the swelling or shrinking of his veins; in the shivering, contracting or relaxing of his muscles; in the elevation, lowering or frowning of his eyebrows; in the darkening of his tone, or the blossoming of his forehead; in the tightening or relaxing of his nostrils, in the matte or shiny appearance of his lips; all these exterior signs that we hide and mutually disguise are more pronounced with these people of nature. Since they impress their eyes more importantly, their language is all the richer with the words that express their meaning, and that bring to their poetry true and energetic images that appear to us like some kind of caricature.” If I was convincing in expressing the causes that make the translation of the most beautiful works of Arabic poetry so difficult and so imperfect, shouldn’t it follow that translating them is impossible, and that men courageous enough to undertake this painful task do not serve any literary purpose and waste their time and talents, which they could have used to address more important subjects in other fields? I will agree to believe so when this rule applies to all foreign literature, from antiquity to modern times, in fact to all the arts that appeal to man’s imagination only, or that aim to bring emotions to his mind and to his heart.

I must not neglect a very useful application of Arabic poetry, that is, the light it projects onto another poetry, whose source is divine, and whose nature is transcendental like the heavens it comes from, but whose purpose is human, since it is used to instruct us, to change our manners, to elevate our souls towards our common creator; to make us fear his judgements, to make us thank him for his deeds, to express our confidence in his fatherly goodness; finally, to vanquish the appealing illusions of pride and all the combined efforts of loss of mind and corruption of the heart with holy and noble emotions. Studying ancient Arabic poetry can doubtlessly help us penetrate more deeply in the sanctuary of the ancient poetry of Zion and it can help us clarify a few of the dark points that make us less sensitive to Isaiah’s sublim poems, to the eloquent sufferings of Jeremiah, to the strong and frightening scenes of Ezekiel, to the bitter whining and strong feelings of innocence of Job, and to the diverse and always so noble accents of David’s Lyra. Would anyone regret the efforts spent at acquiring the kind of knowledge that could lead to such insights?

That said, and regardless of the intrinsic merit of Arabic poetry and the advantages one may extract from studying it, I would content myself with watching the efforts of amateurs of oriental languages as they concentrate exclusively on publishing and translating historical, geographical and philosophical works if, as some seem to believe, we already had gathered a complete library of Arab poets; but this is a hyperbole that dwarfs even those of Moténabbi or Abou’lala. Alone, the works of Abou’lféda’s annals is larger than all published Arabic poetry so far, either separately or in edited books. And even if we were adding Hariri’s Sessions, all of it put together would not, by far, equate the volume of Ibn Sina’s literature. Here I include neither the complete translation of Moténabbi in German that we owe to M. de Hammer, nor this part of the Antar’s epic story that was translated into English by M. Terrick Hamilton. Indeed, translations can only be supporting tools to study poetry seriously, and what matters most is to distribute the texts and comments written in Arabic broadly. As of today, none of the original work of any Arab poet has been printed in Europe. It is doubtlessly more useful to compare the works of diverse authors or various eras, and we must congratulate ourselves for the direction taken by the first efforts of the kind; but, indeed, those who hurry and tell us

*Claudite jam rivos, pueri : sat prata bibeirunt,*  
are far from understanding the need for us to comprehend Arabic poetry. Rather, those who

promise uncirculated/unpublished riches to the world of Oriental muses should be honored. The Asian Society itself would gain much praise if it were to contribute to enabling Mr. Freytag to make us enjoy the *Hamasa* of Abou-Témam. And, just like it would welcome an edition of Masoudi, or the Lives of famous men by Ebn-Khilcan, or the Proverbs of Meïdani, it should wish for the publication of the *diwan* of Moténabi and the poems of Abou-Nowas, Bokhtori, Abou-Faras, and so many others, known to us only in fragments; for the elevation of ancient Arabic poetry breathes in these fragments, and has then evolved with the new civilization under the skies of Baghdad, Egypt, Syria, and Spain. As for me, I believe I will not have wasted the few talents given to me by providence if I have managed to inspire the new and upcoming generation with my own work and the words I have used today. I will then dare to expect some recognition from those who will follow me in the career I have explored.



**Note:** Eric Feron has been a professor of Engineering since 1993; he has been on the faculties of Ecole Nationale de l'Aviation Civile (France), the Georgia Institute of Technology (USA), the Institut Supérieur de l'Aéronautique et de l'Espace - Supaéro campus (France), King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (Saudi Arabia), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA) at different moments of his life. He would like to thank his students at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, notably Mr. Obadah Wali, for providing the inspiration and support that led to the present work. He would also like to thank Ms. Afnan Abdulaziz for her advice as a professional linguist regarding handling the more difficult points of the original text. Feron is a descendant of Baron Silvestre de Sacy.