The Baladiyyāt Ahmad ilFār
A note on a modern Egyptian manuscript text
by Jacob M. Landau* and Manfred Woidich**

Habent sua fata libelli, as the Romans used to say, is in fact applicable to all ages and places. This maxim seems to be particularly relevant to the vicissitudes of the manuscripts of the Arabic Kašf isSitār 'an Baladiyyāt Ahmad ilFār, a collection of five popular plays from Cairo, the text of which was found by the two authors of the present article. It is the subject of a critical edition and German translation, prepared by them and due to appear in 1993 as a volume in the Bibliotheca Islamica series of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft. The present article, a by-product of the above volume, comprises some materials which could not be included in detail there, but which may be of some interest, nonetheless, to those engaged in the study of modern Arabic manuscripts.

A brief exposé of the manuscripts is necessary in order to better understand the essentials of this article. There are two manuscripts. Both comprise the same plays but with quite different wording. One is in the Leiden University Library, the other is now in the private collection of Manfred Woidich. Both manuscripts date from 1909-1910 and comprise five popular plays in the colloquial Arabic of Egypt (chiefly of Cairo) at that time. These plays were performed by a popular actor at the time, Ahmad ilFār, and his troupe, chiefly at festivities (such as weddings) in private homes. They are more representative of what might be termed 'low farce' or 'sketch' than of theatrical comedy. The street scenes, often copied from daily life; the dialogues, frequently impudent and obscene; and the tricks and thrashings, characteristic of slapstick, place these shows in the direct tradition of shadow plays, puppet shows and mime sketches, savoured by Egyptian (and other) audiences before Westernized modernization influenced their tastes.

The Leiden manuscript (hereafter referred to as manuscript L) consists of 124 folios, or 248 pages (of which nine are blank). The paper, which is of de-luxe quality, contains a watermark GOUVERNEMENT EGYPTIEN, with crescent and star. The size of the paper is 255 x 185 mm, that of the text area 170 x 90 mm. There are 17 lines of text to the page. The text is written in a Middle-Eastern hand in black ink, with the use of red ink for the names of the persons and the stage instructions. The composition of the quires, for each play separately is as follows: 1: V(11), IV(18), 3V(48), 2(50); 2: V(60), II(64); 3: 2V(84), 4(88); 4: 2V(108); 5: V(118), III(124). Catchwords are usually written on the verso pages. For each play, each quire except the first has a quire-mark as well, consisting of a k (for kurrāsa, quire) with number, plus usually an abbreviated title of the play in question. The manuscript was copied by the same copyist of MS Leiden Or. 14.520 (which contains the Diwān of Ibn Sādūn (died 864/1464, cf. GAL II, 18)): Mahmūd b. Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Šayyād al-Marsafī (Leiden Or. 14.520, f. 181a). The copying of the 4th and 5th plays was completed on 28 and 23 December 1909, respectively (colophons on ff. 108a and 124b), whereas the three other plays have no separate colophon. The volume is elegantly bound in a half-leather binding in European style, made in Cairo by Richard Preller, according to the sticker on the inside end-cover. The former owner of the manuscript is Dr. Curt Prüfer, who was Oriental Secretary to the German Diplomatic Agency for Egypt. He used this manuscript for his article 'Drama, Arabic' in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. 4 (1911), pp. 872-8, and especially the passages on Ahmad ilFār on pp. 872-3. Three of the plays in this volume are mentioned by Prüfer by name. Prüfer's association with the Leiden manuscript was established by J.J. Witkam in his catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts of Leiden University Library, on the basis of the codicological data available in MS Leiden Or. 14.520. The reader is referred to Witkam's Leiden catalogue for more detailed information, especially concerning the possible involvement in commissioning the Leiden manuscript by yet another German scholar, Friedrich Kern.

The Woidich manuscript, which was found in Kurt Munzel's estate (hereafter referred to as manuscript M), comprises the same five plays, albeit in a different order, and is much shorter. It consists of only 96 pages, (of which eight are blank). Manuscript M is also written on fine paper, similar in quality to that of manuscript L, but it is not bound. The paper contains a watermark: the recurrent image of a perched eagle.
The paper measures 260 × 190 mm, the text area 185 × 100 mm. There are 19 lines of text to the page. The text is written in a Middle-Eastern hand (not identical with that of the copyist of manuscript L) in black ink, with the occasional use of red ink for headings and stage instructions. The composition of the quires, for each play separately, is as follows: 1: V(20). II(28): 1: V(48). I(52); 3: III(64); 4: V(84); 5: III(96). Catchwords are written on the verso pages. There are no quire-marks whatsoever. The page lay-out is such that the copyist has used abbreviations of usually one letter to indicate the dramatis persone, written in a column at the right hand side of the text.

The high quality of the paper in both manuscripts, the expensive binding of L, and — above everything else — the explanation of certain words in the margins, lead one to the conclusion that these can hardly be texts used by the actors, but rather the somewhat elaborate work of scribes who had written these plays for foreigners. They are, after all, the only ones who really need the explanations for a proper understanding of the text. The fact that we have two different versions seems to indicate that they were not copied from the actors' own texts, but that they were, more probably, written down during the actual performances which, as manuscript M informs us, was the regular procedure of ilFár and his troupe. More importantly, most of the interpolated passages in the two above-mentioned plays in manuscript L are moralizing. This is at variance with the humorously bantering tone and frequently pornographic wording employed throughout, which was a trademark of ilFár, who preferred to entertain a not too sophisticated audience rather than to educate it. On the level of style and language, too, basic differences are in evidence. While dialogue, expressed in short phrases, is used throughout, the interpolated passages employ long-winding monologues which are better suited to stating an argument about a religious issue or presenting social criticism. In some instances, however, the monologues were abbreviated or broken up between two dramatis personae in order to make the presentation more appropriate for ilFár's audience.

After some effort it could be established that the main source of these additions was none other than `Abdalláh al-Nadrm (1845-1896), the well-known Egyptian nationalist. He had been writing patriotic tracts during Ahmad `Urábï's revolt in 1882 and his periodical, al-Ustad, published in 1892 in literary and colloquial Arabic, was available for anyone wishing to plagiarize it. The copying was done in an intelligent way, with certain alterations, which are largely due to the fact that al-Nadrm was writing for a different readership than the public for which these plays were intended. The scribe who took over the text from al-Nadrm knew this very well and slightly adapted the text accordingly. These changes included dropping al-Nadrm's name and that of his periodical al-Ustdād.
Fig. 2. Kaif estār 'an Baladiyyat Ahmad ilFar. Beginning of the first play:

Rivāyāt Ibn Balad. MS Leiden: Or. 14371, f. 16.
MANUSCRIPTS OF THE MIDDLE EAST 6 (1992)

Fig. 3. Kašf isSitār 'an Baladīyyat Ahmad ilFār. Beginning of the second act of the first play, Riwāyit Ibn ilBalad, with a conversation between Ḥanīfa and Latīfa. MS Leiden, Or. 14.521, f. 17a.
Fig. 4. Al-Ustād, edited by 'Abdallāh al-Nadīm. Year 1, no. 6 (Tuesday 27 September 1892), p. 132. The textual source of the conversation between Hamīfa and Lāṭīfā, in Ṭawātī isḥāqī (see previous illustration) as found in the Leiden manuscript Or. 14.521, f. 17a.
ذا هو ما أتعالوا فيه صميم انا بقينا احرار وأحرار طيب ولن ما تعيش على إسبارنا احنا جينا من بلا دنا ذا الهمام وهمآ إل إله عمرو الولام ولعلب وعلون العضيفة والإصل والأرحب وعبر في المسنا بعد ما كان الواحد يتعمك صدارة كنا بطالين اهم ذه فقسمنا انا كنت عند اسيدي زي بن هما وكان سبيرة إذاما يضنى تعاين وتوره وختم يمس وكان أبني يابره في الأكل ألدرب عين ماكا نتت ناقص الراصده الا الحاجة كدبة لكن يا اخني ما تفكرين لما احنا الواحد مناكل يوم عند سبيل الجلابة وروما العذاب اشطال ولوان يابي يا خزيرة كناشلك يوم عند سبيل ولانا وشتت مااحنا كناه يوم ذه سهمن الواحد وللا الواحد مناكل يوم عند اه برح والذ

Fig. 5. Kašf isSitār ‘an Baladīyyāt Ahmad ilFār. Discussion between Sa’īda and Bakīt in Riwāyit Ibn ilBalad. MS Leiden, Or. 14.521, f. 31a.
wherever mentioned, and at times even substituting ilFär's name for al-Nadîm's or that of his journal. Moreover, in addition to breaking up some of the monologues, as we have already indicated, some humorous expressions were occasionally added in order to keep the interest of the spectators, and some phrases of al-Nadîm were altered so as to give them a greater impact.

The interpolation of foreign materials — chiefly from al-Nadîm — is so obviously out-of-place in ilFär's plays (even when tied in with some humorous remarks), that we have decided to leave them out in our edition of Riwayit ibn ilBalad, thereby skipping Acts II-V. The more reason, then, to return to them here and now. While it is not our intention to list here all the passages copied, with some changes, from al-Nadîm, a few examples are in order. Several appended reproductions from manuscript L and from al-Nadîm's al-Ustâd may serve as a visual demonstration of our argument.

The most evident borrowings of L from al-Ustâd of 1892 are as follows (our references are to the 1985 reprint):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>MS L</th>
<th>al-Ustâd</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17b-25b</td>
<td>132-140</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31a-34a</td>
<td>90-93</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38b-43a</td>
<td>395-399</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44a-48a</td>
<td>149-154</td>
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<td></td>
<td>69a-70a</td>
<td>147-148</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77a-82a</td>
<td>444-449</td>
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A few more specific examples will illustrate in more detail how these borrowings and interpolations were carried out.

First, several of the poetic passages (possibly used as songs) were borrowed from al-Nadîm, e.g. the qasîda in manuscript L, ff. 67b-68a, starting with

Fig. 6. Al-Ustâd, edited by 'Abdallâh al-Nadîm. Year 1, no. 4 (Tuesday 13 september 1892), pp. 90-91. The textual source of the conversation between Sa’îda and Bâkit, in Riwayit isSa’îdî (see previous illustration) as found in the Leiden manuscript Or. 14.521, f. 31a. Note that only the gender of the names of the two speakers has been switched.
Secondly, the lengthy dialogue between two Muslim ladies, Hanâfî and Latîfâ, about their husbands and the moral shortcomings of menfolk in general (L 17b-26b, i.e. most of Act II in *Riwaïyat Ibn ilBalad*) derives with few changes (even the names of the ladies are the same) from *al-Ustâd*, 132-140. The discussion between two ex-slaves, Bakît and Sa‘îdâ, commenting on their freedom and problems (L 31a-34a, a sizeable share of this play’s Act III), is taken almost *verbatim* from *al-Ustâd*, 90-93, where their names were Sa‘îd and Bakît. Another lengthy dialogue between other ladies, the Muslim Bahîyya and the Copt Dimyâna (44a-48b, making up most of Act V of the same play), debating the merits of various religions and of their followers, is copied from *al-Ustâd*, 149-155. Elsewhere, ilFâr’s detailed debate with Hanâfî about the relative merits of Egyptians and foreigners is closely patterned, again, on *al-Ustâd*, 444-449.

Although skillful attempts were made to collate such additions and others into the plays by connecting them somehow to the main plot and by changing somewhat the style and wording, the general result seems less than successful. There remains an unexplainable incompatibility between the moralizing, educational and socio-critical interpolations and the humorous and obscene elements. The former may have been appreciated by ilFâr’s audiences, although one may surmise that they failed to captivate their full interest. The interpolations altered the relations among the various characters in each play. While women in ilFâr’s plays are usually easy-going, active, often taking the initiative, the interpolations present them as submissive to their husbands, generally accepting their own sorry situation and remaining highly respectful of...
anything traditional. Moreover, while Europeans are frequently made fun of in the general manner of popular shows, the interpolations introduce them as virtuous, industrious, thrifty and cooperative people, worthy of admiration and imitation. Lastly, while the sheykh in Riwayit itTuru'i is rather unprincipled and lecherous (fitting the popular image of some derwish sheikhs), the one in Riwayit Ibn ilBalad, borrowed from al-Nadim, is respectable and extremely conservative in his recommendations of strict religious behaviour: all this, again, without any serious attempt to reconcile over these discrepancies in the presentation of character.

An intriguing question remains. Who introduced these interpolations in manuscript L, none of which appear in manuscript M, and why? The obvious answer to the question of identity is that it was either ilFár himself, or the scribe who wrote down the text probably during the performance, and then edited it. A strong case could be made either way. Some of the changes introduced and the connecting of the passages borrowed from al-Usta/ and interpolated into the already extant text, indicate the experienced hand of ilFár himself. But the fact that ilFár himself did not have much use for a five-act play (as he could not perform it in one single evening) and that the interpolations might well have adversely affected the plot and characteristics of the play (at least, of Riwayit lbn ilBalad, considering his audiences), militate against this assumption.

An argument in favour of a scribe having enlarged the text is that an astute scribe would naturally prefer to insert his additions into a few places, for convenience’s sake, whereas the author would have used them throughout in a more balanced manner in order to improve the overall quality of his works. A scribe could also gain money and prestige by providing a longer and more sophisticated text to his client, in this
Fig. 9. Kašf isSitār `an Baladīyyāt Ahmad ilFār. Riwāyat inNagrār. End of the play, with colophon dated 23 December 1909. MS Leiden, Or. 14.521, f. 124b.
case Curt Prüfer, the Arabist of the German Embassy in 1909, who commissioned manuscript L. The combination of quality and quantity has been frequently translated into money, in Egypt as elsewhere.

There is, moreover, one other indirect proof which seems to point towards the scribe. Much later, in 1944, Enno Littmann published a study entitled ‘Ein Gespräch befreiter Sklaven in Cairo’*. This is based on an Arabic manuscript which is almost identical to both ilFár’s Riwáyát Ibn ilBalad, 31a-34a, and to al-Nadím’s al-Ustādí, 90-93. Internal evidence, too detailed to be presented here, leads us to conclude that both ilFár’s text and that of Littmann were based on al-Nadím, without being influenced by one another. Littmann obtained his text in 1911 — that is, about two years after our copy of manuscript L was written down — from a scribe, Mahmúd Sídqi, an official at the Khedival Library in Cairo. Since we now know of at least one scribe who had no scruples in copying al-Nadím’s printed work, ‘improving’ his text slightly and selling it to Littmann as something else, that is, as an original Arabic manuscript, it would not surprise us if another scribe had padded ilFár’s plays in the same manner, two years previously, and sold his product to Prüfer. Or one may even hypothesize that the same Mahmúd Sídqi (who, by the way, had access in the Khedival Library to the high-quality government paper on which both manuscript L and M are written) succeeded in cheating Prüfer in 1909 and in repeating this feat, two years later, by selling extracts from al-Nadím’s work as an original manuscript to Enno Littmann. Caveat emptor.

Notes

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1 For a detailed description and analysis, the reader is referred to the introduction in the above volume entitled Arabisches Volkstheater in Kairo im Jahre 1909: Ahmad ilFár und seine Schwänke. Bibliotheca Islamica 38 (Beirut/ Stuttgart 1993).

2 Listed as Cod. Or. 14.521. About its re-discovery by Landau, see his article ‘Popular Arab Plays’ in Journal of Arabic Literature 17 (1986), 120-125. For a more detailed description of the Leiden manuscript, see J.J. Witkam, Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden, fascicule 6 (forthcoming). The present authors were fortunate to be allowed to consult Witkam’s unpublished description of the manuscript.

3 Woidich discovered it among the papers of the late Kurt Munzel. A microfilm is deposited in the Library of the University of Leiden (registered there as film A 1682).

4 Though shadow plays were still performed, from time to time, at least until the 1940s.


6 The entire periodical was reprinted in Cairo in 1985.

7 For a more complete list, see our Arabisches Volksstheater in Kairo, introduction, pp. 33f.

عم أحمد الفار المصري
رجل يحضر الأعيان إلى الأعيان عند زواج أواهام
وكل الذين يستمرون ذلك الرجل هم أهل الطاقة
المدينة قبل ليلة العشر من رمضان
رجال البلد البلدي ورجل متنقل وأجر زمالة كلاري
يسكن المنزل وليغ أمامه عند اللعب وبثده هذه
الليلة بدأ البلد البلدي واصاب المرى يرقون
على صوت البلد من بعد الليل لغاية اللواء ارتحل
عمر مساء بعد ذلك يخرج الرجل في مهنة مرة ورقم
على البلد والزمنة وبعد رقص اللول ينقطع ويتراء
معم بعده كبير جدا ولاعب زعبيحة، ميدان كثي
وبية، مكان كبير، يسمع الحواريين لحواراته المقيدة
حتى آخر الليل تقريبا ولله من الحكايات معه يتغزل
في الليل الواحدة حكاية وحيدة فقط تستغرق كل الليل.
حكاية الطير.
وظيفة اللامبين.
いただける رجل جوز المره مره راكب مراره
مرأة أحمد الفار المدينة.