

chapters where they stand in the conservative vs progressive debate and read the book through an appropriate filter.

CATHARINE MORRIS

Arabic Literature

Samer M. Ali

ARABIC LITERARY SALONS IN
THE ISLAMIC MIDDLE AGES

Poetry, public performance, and
the presentation of the past

280pp. University of Notre Dame Press.

Paperback, \$32.

978 0 268 02032 3

The Arabic word *majlis*, literally “place where one sits”, has several meanings, including “social gathering” or “council”. In pre-modern times it has a distinctly literary or scholarly flavour: a ruler or a teacher would gather erudite companions or eager pupils, to discuss poetry, language, history, philosophy, or religion, and often a mixture of these. The proceedings were sometimes written down as published lecture notes. Such gatherings could also be unhierarchical, without a presiding authority. Samer M. Ali, who writes especially on such sessions in the first part of his book, prefers to speak of *mujalasa* (a cognate of *majlis*), even though *majlis* is far more often used for any “literary salon”, whether “democratic” or not. It is in such salons that one sees literature (especially poetry) in action, particularly during times when poetry and eloquence were not merely otherworldly elitist concerns, but essential elements of communal and personal identity.

Most of the book deals with two ninth-century poets, ‘Ali ibn al-Jahm and al-Buhturi, the latter notorious for shifting his allegiance when it suited him, such as when he first called for vengeance of the murder of Caliph al-Mutawakkil in 861 and subsequently extolled his son and successor al-Muntasir, who was clearly implicated in the murder. A few poems are analysed in some detail, such as al-Buhturi’s famous poem on the *ivan*, or arched hall, of the Sasanian kings in Ctesiphon. In spite of some discussion of the reception of these poems, there is little about salons in these parts. In one sense, the book is a somewhat uneven combination of an essay on literary salons interspersed with articles on particular poems; yet it is held together by the valid argument that Arabic poetry and its performance are not purely literary phenomena, but are also powerful tools in shaping cultural and political identities.

GEERT JAN VAN GELDER

Spanish Fiction

Luis Magrinyà

HABITACION DOBLE

312pp. Editorial Anagrama. Paperback, €19.

978 84 339 7210 1

The Majorcan-born writer Luis Magrinyà is renowned as a highly idiosyncratic observer of Spain’s social strata. His works have appeared at wide intervals, which perhaps explains in part why none is like any of the others. *Habitacion doble* (Double Room) contains both fiction and non-fiction; but even within these two genres there is quite a list of subcategories.

Among the fictional pieces there is a letter to an unknown addressee, and one story laid out like a script; others are internal monologues which ruminate on the various plotlines along with the reader. Several of the pieces use this essayistic tone so effectively that it becomes easy to forget which narrative terrain we are in – which, one suspects, is Magrinyà’s mischievous intention. We meet a publishing house editor in her fifties, in love with a man half her age, on her way to eat dinner with the man’s mother. Another narrator is the son of neurotic parents who reveals a predilection for stealing pieces of fabric (from a carpet or a coat) while on a cruise to Luxor. In another story, a gossiping group of doctors meets for dinner. The last section, an essay, is a meditation on *A Father’s Story*, the book in which Lionel Dahmer sought an explanation for the multiple murders committed by his son Jeffrey. This is hardly out of place, as the same compulsion for thorough inquiry infects the fiction too. (The narrator of the first story asks herself who or what we are subconsciously obeying when we act. It could be anything: “our father, a character in a novel, or an advert in *Publishers Weekly*”.)

It is a wonder that such a distracted, tangential book does not try the patience. Magrinyà has said that the stories are all linked by the idea of living space, or the “bloody fight for the square metre”. One story focuses on this explicitly: a man’s sexual experiment with his downstairs neighbour ends in violence; the neighbour is forced to sell his flat to pay the legal fees in the ensuing case, and his victim, who buys this property with the compensation, joins the two with a staircase and thus doubles the size of his home. The rest of the sections, though, are linked not so much by theme as by the unique voice of their author, only half-disguised in his narrators: expansive, puckish and astute.

OLLIE BROCK

Japanese Literature

Haruo Shirane, editor

THE DEMON AT AGI BRIDGE AND
OTHER JAPANESE TALES

Translated by Burton Watson

160pp. Columbia University Press. \$22.50;
distributed in the UK by Wiley. £15.50.

978 0 231 15245 7

“The Demon at Agi Bridge . . .” is about a young man who takes on the challenge of crossing a haunted bridge, but is then killed in his own house by a demon in disguise, seemingly because of his own wife’s foolishness. In “On an Evil Death . . .”, a mother’s forgiveness cannot save her perverse son, who had tried to kill her. All she is left with is his hair. Elsewhere, a woman is punished in death for having debts in life when half of her dead body turns into an ox; a nine-coloured deer saves a man from drowning only for the man to betray it and hand it over to the king; a Buddhist priest struggles with his long rice-spitting nose.

These tales and many others – court tales, travel accounts, fables – thirty-eight of them, make up this anthology of *setsuwa* (Japanese anecdotal short stories), which are rooted in Buddhist values and principles. As much a part of Japanese folklore as the medieval literary tradition, *setsuwa* was originally a form of oral storytelling, but from the ninth

to the thirteenth century, it was compiled into books.

This anthology, edited by Haruo Shirane, a leading Japanese expert on the subject, is presented as an accessible and readable work that provides a clear and methodical introduction to the sections, each of which is viewed from a different perspective. The academic approach of the strong didacticism might alienate some readers. However, the selection contains some of the most enjoyable and interesting stories, and its mixed with a touch of sex and violence. Western traditions of business and ambition, secular tales, like *Bury Tales* or *The Modern Translations*, the archaic simplicity as its anecdotal achievement of us the many faces of people, wary and devout yet with crude and coarse

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