INTRODUCTION

The Author

Yūsuf ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jawād ibn Khidr al-Shirbīnī was either unknown to or ignored by the biographers of his generation, and no trace of his presence has yet been discovered in Egyptian archives. Our knowledge of him is therefore dependent on what can be gleaned from his literary works, for which we have three titles. The first is that of the work for which he is best known and which is presented in this volume, namely, Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded (Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf), hereafter Brains Confounded. The second and third titles are The Pearls (Al-Laʾāliʾ wa-l-durar) and The Casting Aside of the Clods for the Unstringing of the Pearls (Ṭarḥ al-madar li-ḥall al-laʾāliʾ wa-l-durar). The second and third titles, however, both appear to refer to the same work: a short homiletic tract, whose most notable feature is that it was written using only undotted letters.

The author refers to Shirbīn as “my town” (vol. 2, §§11.7.9 and 11.37.7) and “our village” (vol. 2, §11.9.2), and it can be assumed that he was born there, in what was, at the time, a significant rural center on the eastern branch of the Nile, in the province of al-Gharbiyyah.1

The earliest date in Brains Confounded is 1066/1655–56, al-Shirbīnī stating that, at that time, he was living in Dimyāṭ (Damietta), a port on the estuary of the eastern branch of the Nile, some thirty miles northeast of Shirbīn; Dimyāṭ was Egypt’s second city during the Ottoman period (§7.32). His reference to his having
witnessed certain public events in that city implies that al-Shirbīnī lived there as an adult, say, over the age of twenty. He was thus probably born no later than (and possibly well before) 1046/1636–37.

In 1069/1659, the noted scholar Aḥmad Shihāb al-Dīn ibn Salāmah al-Qalyūbī, whom al-Shirbīnī refers to as “our shaykh” (§4.3), that is, his teacher, died. In all likelihood, therefore, al-Shirbīnī had moved to Cairo before that date and become a student at the mosque-university of al-Azhar. According to al-Muḥībbī, al-Qalyūbī was “a compendium of the religious sciences and thoroughly at home with the rational sciences”; he was also skilled at and practiced in medicine. In *Brains Confounded*, al-Shirbīnī demonstrates acquaintance with medical literature (e.g., vol. 2, §§11.15.7, 11.20.9, 11.23.6) and at least passing acquaintance with other rational sciences, such as physics (vol. 2, §11.7.38) and time-keeping (§5.9.24).

Five years later, in 1074/1664, al-Shirbīnī made the pilgrimage to Mecca (vol. 2, §11.1.3), and he did the same the following year (vol. 2, §11.13.2). These trips may have been made possible by the income derived from a new profession: in 1077/1666–67 the author received a letter sent to him at the book market that speaks of him as a bookseller (§4.38.1). Elsewhere, al-Shirbīnī makes use of an anecdote apparently current in the book trade (§4.15).

Al-Shirbīnī also mentions that, when on pilgrimage and waiting for a ship in al-Quṣayr, on the Red Sea coast, he “stayed for a few days at a hostel on the sea, preaching to the people” (vol. 2, §11.1.3), though he does not indicate that he did so for money or that this was an occupation he followed on a regular basis.

Al-Shirbīnī states that, on one occasion, a heretical dervish failed to recognize that he was a man of knowledge because he was, at the time, “occupied in the craft of weaving and so on” (§7.8). Weaving was a craft that was held in low esteem, and weavers were proverbial for their stupidity; thus the contrast would have struck his readers as funny. This does not, however, mean that al-Shirbīnī made this claim simply for the sake of a somewhat arbitrary joke.
The date of greatest relevance to Brains Confounded, and that which establishes the non ante quem for its completion, is 1 Jumāda al-Ūlā 1097/26 March 1686, the death date of Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī l-Sandūbī. The author refers to the latter early in the book without naming him, referring to him only as the commissioner of the work and as “one whom I cannot disobey and with whose commands I have no choice but to comply” (§1.1).6 In the poem that closes the book, al-Shirbīnī makes this reference explicit but speaks of al-Sandūbī in the past tense and includes prayers for his soul (vol. 2, §13.2). One deduces that al-Sandūbī died between the commissioning of the work and its completion. That al-Shirbīnī was still in Cairo at this time is evident from his comment in Brains Confounded that “there is no place like Cairo . . . and praise be to God that here I reside” (§§8.44–45).

Prayers in the prologue to The Pearls for Ḥamzah Bāshā, viceroy of Egypt from 1094/1682 to 1098/1686, show that it was at this period that al-Shirbīnī also wrote this, his likely only other extant, work.

Finally, a note added by the copyist of one manuscript of Brains Confounded states that the author “perished” in 1111/1699–17007 (at an age of not less than fifty-four, if our calculations are correct). However, this claim is undocumented and the manuscript itself is described as being “quite new.”8

Shirbīn appears to have been, in al-Shirbīnī’s day as now, a rural center serving the administrative and economic needs of the surrounding villages. Al-Shirbīnī makes it clear, however, that he is not of peasant stock, stating that “we thank God that he has relieved us of farming and its woes; it was never our father’s or our grandfathers’ occupation” (vol. 2, §11.10.6). When he mentions in passing (and somewhat jocularly) that he married a peasant woman (vol. 2, §11.2.16), he both confirms his closeness to the world of the peasants and his distance from it.

In keeping with its status as a town of some standing, Shirbīn was also a recognized contributor to the literary and religious culture
of the day, with biographers recording at least three noted scholars or Sufis from the town in the generations before Yūsuf was born. Al-Shirbīnī boasts that it is “a town of pride in rank / And brains, whose fame all men do hymn” (vol. 2, §11.37.7) and elsewhere refers to it as being “great among cities.” He also refers in passing to the fact that Shirbīn was, in his day, sufficiently sophisticated to support udabāʾ (“men of letters”) who wrote witty verse (vol. 2, §11.31.16). Among these was al-Shirbīnī’s own father, to whom he attributes verses replete with “elegant simile and orthographic wordplay” (§7.40). Even after moving to Dimyāṭ and then Cairo, he probably kept up contacts with Shirbīn: he narrates, for example, an (undated) adventure that befell him while traveling up the Nile, from Shirbīn to Cairo (vol. 2, §11.7.9).

While al-Shirbīnī apparently failed to attract the attention of his contemporaries for his learning or, apparently, to attain any post in a teaching or other religious institution, the acquaintance with Qur’anic exegesis (tafsīr), prophetic Traditions (ḥadīth), jurisprudence (fiqh), literature, philology, medicine, and other sciences that he displays throughout Brains Confounded demonstrates that he was a man of broad culture, familiar with both the religious and secular sciences of his time. This familiarity was no doubt due partly to his education (and in particular to his contact with al-Qalyūbī) and partly to his profession as a bookseller. On this evidence, he must have qualified, if not as a full-blown scholar (ʿālim), then at least as one of the “men of culture” (ahl al-adab) who, while not attached to any institution of learning, had a recognized place within such critical cultural institutions as the majlis (“literary gathering or salon”). There he would have hobnobbed with scholars and other members of the religious and intellectual establishment—a point al-Shirbīnī seems to be at pains to make when he mentions that he once heard an anecdote from “a noble sharīf [descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad] in al-Maḥallah al-Kubrā, at the house of the Learned Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-ʿAbdillāwī” (§7.29). It would, no doubt, have been for this milieu that he produced other work that
he either quotes from in *Brains Confounded*, such as his occasional verse (see, e.g., §5.3.16) and a short comic sermon on edibles (vol. 2, §11.25.7–13), or that he refers to there in passing, such as the treatise entitled *Riyāḍ al-uns fī-mā jarā bayn al-zubb wa-l-kuss* (*Meadows of Intimate Vim concerning What Transpired ‘twixt the Prick and the Quim*) (vol. 2, §11.4.10) and another, untitled, on peasant nuptials (§2.26.2).

Baer believes that al-Shirbini earned his living as a moneylender (*muʿāmil*) “or at least this was the occupation of the family or social group to which he belonged.”¹¹ There are indeed references in *Brains Confounded* to moneylenders and their trade, usually in the form of complaints about their mistreatment by peasants (e.g., §8.5 and vol. 2, §11.6.5). The text, however, contains no positive statement that moneylending was, in fact, al-Shirbini’s profession, while explicit references, noted above, refer to other occupations.

Early in the work, a note of disillusionment is struck, the author identifying himself with plaints attributed to al-Būṣīrī, al-Maʿarrī, and others against the neglect of the talented and eloquent in favor of “billy goats” and “pimps and clowns” (§1.4). The result, according to the author, is that “in this age of ours, none survive but those possessed of a measure of buffoonery and profligacy and frivolity and effrontery” (*idem*) and that he “who cannot pen a line is blessed with a living fine, while the master of wit sees of victuals not a whit” (*idem*).¹² A similarly bitter note is sounded in the closing passages of the book (vol. 2, §§12.18–19). Such statements may be to some degree conventional and are also self-serving in that they preempt, with an implied plea of poverty, objections to the author’s undertaking of an exercise that, by his own admission, is not without “license and buffoonery” (*idem*). Nevertheless, they appear also to carry conviction.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his low scholarly profile, al-Shirbini reveals a lively sense of his right and duty, as a “man of knowledge,” to intervene when necessary in defense of true religion. As already noted, al-Shirbini recounts how once a heretical
dervish who had been filling the head of “one of the eminent” with blasphemies “had no idea that I was a man of knowledge because, at the time, I was occupied in the craft of weaving.” Undeterred, or perhaps even galvanized, by this failure to recognize his status, al-Shirbīnī then approaches the dervish, knife in hand, striking terror into him; subsequently he explains to the heretic’s victim “how things were and showed him what was truth and what a slur” (§7.8). Elsewhere, al-Shirbīnī mentions that a man whose performance of the prayer was blasphemous “repented at my hand and the Almighty rescued him from error and brought him to right guidance” (§7.36). Similarly, al-Shirbīnī takes pride in putting in their place those who lay false claim to an understanding of grammar, as when he corrects someone whose ignorance of basic semantics was such that he “couldn’t tell the name from the thing cited,” with the result that “after all the pretension and bluster, he followed me as a sheep its master and submitted in his comings and goings to my sway” (vol. 2, §11.1.3).

The ambiguities inherent in al-Shirbīnī’s status as an educated man with no clear position in the scholarly establishment and a declared grievance against his lack of recognition may have made him eager to accept a prominent scholar’s request for a book praising the educated elite and mocking the pretensions of outsiders.

The Work

*Brains Confounded* hails from an underdocumented and understudied period of Egypt’s history. The work thus derives part of its importance from its status as a rare witness to an obscure period. This importance is increased by the even greater scarcity of material on its primary topic, the countryside.\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, the author’s preoccupation with the latter as a cultural, social, economic, and religious site in its own right is probably unique in pre-twentieth-century Arabic literature (and unusual in any pre-twentieth-century scholarly literature).\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, as passages placed in the mouths of peasants are largely in colloquial, the Arabic text provides a rich
source for the history of the Egyptian dialect. Last, but by no means least, the book merits attention as an unconventional work of literature, full of mordant wit, cantankerous verve, and elegant displays of satirical and parodic talent.

Part One of *Brains Confounded* consists of an extensive and highly critical survey of rural society, organized into three groups: the peasant (and above all the poor peasant) cultivator (*fallāḥ*); the rural man of religion (*faqīḥ*); and the mendicant rural dervish (*faqīr*). Other sections in Part One present and critique verses that are ascribed to rural poets or, more generally, to “poltroons” who, while not of rural origin, apparently demonstrate a similar capacity to write bad verse. In Part One, the author seeks to demonstrate, and deride, the ignorance, dirtiness, stupidity, and moral turpitude of the people of the countryside and associate these with the inability to write acceptable poetry.

Part Two is constructed around a forty-seven-line “ode” (*qaṣīd*) supposedly written by a peasant named Abū Shādūf, the ode itself being preceded by an account of the poet’s birth and fortunes, as described in the work of other poets of his milieu. Each line of the ode is subjected to extensive commentary (which often digresses to matters felt by the author to be relevant) and the ode closes with “miscellaneous anecdotes,” many of which are at the expense of grammarians.

This carefully constructed work depends for its comic impact on two conceits. The first is that the “Ode” and other verses ascribed by the author to peasants are indeed of rural origin and represent actual rural literary production. However, the assertion that the “Ode of Abū Shādūf” and its like are the work of real rural poets is untenable in view of the patently satirical nature of the work as a whole and of the indignities and crimes that “Abū Shādūf” and his peers attribute to themselves in the poems. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that a genuine peasant poet would describe himself as lice- or nit-ridden (vol. 2, §11.2), as defecating upon himself from fear (vol. 2, §11.6), as farting like a loud drum (vol. 2, §11.7), or as stealing
slippers from mosques (vol. 2, §11.38). This is the stuff of satire, not self-description. Rejection of the attribution of such verses to real rural poets requires, in turn, the recognition that they were in fact written with the express purpose of being satirized, a supposition that may gain strength from the recent discovery of Muḥammad ibn Maḥfūẓ al-Sanhūrī’s Risible Rhymes (Muḍḥik dhawī l-dhawq wa-l-niẓām fī ḥall shadharatin min kalām ahl al-rīf al-ʿawāmm), a title more literally translated as Book to Bring a Smile to the Lips of Devotees of Taste and Proper Style through the Decoding of a Sampling of the Verse of the Rural Rank and File,¹⁵ a work written some forty years before Brains Confounded that contains a treatment of some of the same material.

The second conceit is that the “Ode of Abū Shādūf” and its like merit the use of the tools of etymological, grammatical, rhetorical, and historical analysis developed by Arab philologists for the elucidation of the fundamental texts of their culture, such as the Qur’an and classical verse, even while the author takes pains to stress that the material that is the object of these critical attentions is innately ridiculous and unworthy of consideration as literature by virtue both of its “rural” language and of the low social status, and concomitant vices, of its creators. This allows al-Shirbīnī to explore the humorous potential of certain tendencies innate in the conventional philological methodology by taking them to their logical extremes. How subversive may be this parody of contemporary critical scholarship—directed against the very culture with which the author himself identifies—is discussed below.

The work thus consists of both a satire (“the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc.”)¹⁶ directed against “the people of the countryside” and a parody (“a humorous or satirical imitation”)¹⁷ of contemporary literary culture with a focus on the text-and-commentary genre, and it derives much of its dynamism from the interplay between these two elements.
Context and Sources

the salon, polite letters, and the oral factor

Brains Confounded is the product of a critical cultural institution of Ottoman Egypt, the majlis (“cultural salon”); as al-Shirbīnī says in the work’s opening passage, “among the rural verse to come my way . . . and which has become the subject of comment in certain salons, was the ‘Ode of Abū Shādūf’ . . . .” (§1.1). Nelly Hanna describes the majlis as a setting in which “people discussed specific issues of concern; they debated literary or religious questions, they read and composed verse, they listened to an improvisation in verse or prose, and so on . . . . The people who attended these gatherings [were] scholars, shaykhs from al-Azhar or from other towns than Cairo, Sufi shaykhs, government administrators and other men of learning and culture.” As such, it was typical of the “kind of informal cultural and educational activity, independent of institutions, and centered around individual residences” that flourished under the Ottomans.

Much of the literature read by those who attended such salons was of the genre known as adab (which we translate here as “polite letters”) to which Brains Confounded belongs.

Like any other author in this tradition, al-Shirbīnī mines a range of sources from the literary canon for anecdotes with which to buttress his argument. We meet with such stock figures of adab literature as exemplary caliphs (e.g., ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, ʿAbd al-Malik, and, repeatedly, Hārūn al-Rashīd), as well as the poet Abū Nuwās and the philologist al-Aṣmaʿī. Quotations from or references to well-known authors such as al-Maqrīzī, al-Suyūṭī, Ibn Khallikān, and al-Shirbīnī’s near contemporary, the biographer al-Munāwī (952–1031/1545–1621), are also deployed. In addition, prophetic Traditions (albeit many of which are “weak,” i.e., of dubious authority) are quoted, as are passages from the Qurʾan. The text is liberally interspersed with verses that confirm or summarize a point made in prose. Much of the material in Brains Confounded, however, is
unattributed and cannot easily be traced. This is particularly true of the verse, much of which probably belongs to the underdocumented Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

Some of the stories of which peasants are the protagonists in *Brains Confounded* are probably adapted from material originally directed against other social groups. A story comparable to that of the passerby who is called upon to solve a dispute over the wording of the Qur’an (§4.18) was apparently also recounted by al-ʿAsmaʿī with unidentified actors. In *The Thousand and One Nights* and other works, Bedouin are sometimes the butts of stories reminiscent of those told by al-Shirbīnī of peasants. Many of the stories are to be found in varying forms in older Arab writings. To give but two examples, that of the Persian scholar and his debate with the scholars of al-Azhar (§4.5) occurs as early as the tenth century, in al-Tanūkhī’s *Al-Faraj ba’d al-shiddah*; while that of the talking owls (vol. 2, §11.12.17) goes back at least to Abbasid times. Some stories indeed belong to a global tradition of orally transmitted stories and jokes: that of the Persian and the Azharis, for example, is found, with appropriate variations, in Europe, India, Argentina, Japan, the United States, and Turkey, while that of the talking owls is known from Mughal India.

*Brains Confounded* is, however, distinguished from most works in the genre of polite letters by its frequent recourse to an apparently contemporary tradition of jokes and other oral material about rural life, a tradition that is also part of modern oral culture. Al-Shirbīnī typically introduces anecdotes with the words “[And] it is said” (§3.7) or “And another story is told” (§3.8), etc., and may end an anecdote with “in another version it says that . . .” (§3.39). Further evidence of orality is provided by the formulaic expressions with which several anecdotes end (compare, for example, “the people of his village then went for three years without going to Cairo, for fear of the corvée” (§3.28) with “I’ll never go back to the villages on the river so long as I live” (§3.31) and “he never went to the city again as long as he lived” (§3.39)). This oral dimension may even have
influenced the transmission of the text itself, since, over the entirety of certain anecdotes, the wording differs constantly in detail among the different manuscripts without diverging significantly in substance, a phenomenon perhaps attributable to a freedom that copyists may have felt in dealing with material that was both informal in idiom and already familiar to them. Sometimes the same joke or device is used in unrelated material. A joke about “a pair of slippers as red as your face,” for example, is used twice, the first time in a peasant monologue (§3.17), the second, much later in the text, in an anecdote about the Mamluk poet al-Buṣīrī (vol. 2, §11.38.8). The story of the man who is tricked by a woman into taking off his clothes and descending into a well to recover some bracelets that the woman pretends to have dropped occurs twice in Brains Confounded, once as the second episode of the tale of “the three whores of Cairo” (§3.34), in which the humor is turned against a gullible peasant, and a second time with an old woman as the trickster and an unnamed narrator as the victim (§5.4.9); in its second occurrence, the story is adduced to show not the stupidity of the victim but “the wiles of old women and their cunning” (idem).

A further distinguishing feature is the personalization of anecdotes. Al-Shirbīnī states that he has himself witnessed much of what he describes, using phrases such as “We have observed many of their weddings and all the futile nonsense that goes on at them” (§2.5) and “I saw a peasant talking to a friend of his and asking him . . .” (§3.61). He even says, in the context of an anecdote explaining why a girl was given a bizarre name, that he “actually saw this Khuraywah and asked her father why he had chosen that word for her name” (§2.17). Similarly, he relates lengthy anecdotes in whose events he is a participant (e.g., §§7.8–10). The credibility of such reports is undermined, however, by the recurrence elsewhere in the book of some of these tales with a different protagonist. For example, the tale, embroidered with much circumstantial and personal detail, of how al-Shirbīnī was inveigled into attending a meeting of heretical Sufis in Cairo and of his subsequent escape (§7.11) is prefigured elsewhere.
with different actors (§7.2), and the elaborate story of the dervishes who rob houses by night is followed immediately by al-Shirbīnī’s assertion that a similar incident occurred while he was living in Dimyāṭ (§§7.31–32). It seems probable, therefore, that even when al-Shirbīnī claims to have personal knowledge of alleged events, he is in fact drawing on a corpus of popular lore about the countryside or even on material not originally dealing with the countryside that could nevertheless be adapted to his purposes. Robert Irwin has discussed the need of medieval Arabic authors to attribute the anecdotes they relate to known figures in order to indicate their truth and thus usefulness, noting that stories “were not supposed to be made up; rather they were transmitted by their compiler.”

26

TECHNIQUES: MARSHALING, ASSOCIATION, AND DISASSOCIATION

Authors of works in the tradition of polite letters address a given topic or topics by selecting relevant passages from the literary canon, which the author links together using his own observations, marshaling the whole into a coherent narrative with the goal of instructing, enlightening, and entertaining. While this method can give an impression of randomness, with apparent digressions, the successful author manipulates his material to advance an argument that gains cogency from the examples adduced.

The primary argument of the satirical dimension of *Brains Confounded*—that the “people of the countryside” are possessed of characteristics and guilty of practices that exclude them from consideration as civilized beings—is made using four main strategies: establishment of a framework of values against which to judge the accused; direct demonstration of guilt through the description of the uncivilized qualities of the accused; insinuation of guilt by association of the accused with other exemplars of uncivilized behavior; and disassociation of the accuser (the author) from the accused by demonstrating the latter’s qualifications as a member of civilized society.
The first lines of *Brains Confounded* establish the framework, which is that of a moral economy defined by the opposition of refinement (*laṭāfah*) to coarseness (*kathāfah*). This moral economy is explored further below.

The direct attack is delivered largely through the series of anecdotes in Part One that purport to describe the people of the countryside. Here we learn that they are ignorant of religion and elementary sanitary habits, have bizarre names, possess unappealing physical attributes, commit crimes, and so on.

The associative technique appears in the form of passages such as the two tales of “The Champions of Discourtesy of Cairo and Damascus” and “The Boors of Cairo and Damascus,” which occur in the middle of the section “An Account of Their [the Peasants’] Escapades.” These may appear to be irrelevant to the topic: their setting is explicitly urban, and they contain no mention of “the people of the countryside.” Nevertheless, al-Shirbīnī explicitly links them to his main theme by introducing the first with the words “Apropos of this peasant and his discourtesy, I am reminded of how it fell out that the Champion of Discourtesy of Damascus came to Cairo . . .” (§3.46). This linkage to further, nonrural, examples of discourtesy (ʿadam dhawq) and boorishness (thaqālah) appears to be made in order to situate the country dweller, in whom such characteristics supposedly are innate, in a broader moral context. Once his status as a specific case within an established behavioral pathology is established, the peasant’s presence within that universe of obnoxiousness appears the more natural. Similarly, the section on rural poetry in Part One is followed by another ridiculing urban doggerel (“It Now Behooves Us to Offer a Small Selection of the Verse of Those Who Lay Claim to the Status of Poets but Are in Practice Poltroons,” etc., §6), thus again associating the peasant with further nonrural examples of barbarous behavior, this time in the form of demonstrably ridiculous pretensions to high literary culture by the unqualified.

Some of the most seemingly irrelevant “digressions” in *Brains Confounded* may be understood as examples of the final tactic in
al-Shirbīnī’s strategy of satire, namely, the disassociation of the author from his subject. Witty passages replete with quotations from the literary canon on farting (vol. 2, §§11.7.17–40), the different categories of amorous pursuit (§§5.3.2–8), the virtues of white hair (vol. 2, §§11.5.4–9), fish (vol. 2, §§11.35.3–6), the rarity of sincere friendship among men (vol. 2, §§12.18–19), and other topics too numerous to count appear to have no relevance to the topic at hand. Such passages do, however, demonstrate the author’s mastery of an accepted cultural discourse and thus confirm his credentials as someone with the authority to criticize the “people of the countryside.” They may also serve the function of siting the work, despite its unaccustomed topic, within a larger, already familiar and accepted, worldview, thus lending it credibility.

While contemporary polite letters in general, and Brains Confounded in particular, are indisputably products of the salon, Mohamed-Salah Omri makes the corrective point that “adab is the work of individual writers. It appropriates other genres by writing them from the author’s particular point of view . . . . Focus on the act of writing allows us to shift attention from a writer’s sources . . . to the manner of incorporation . . . . Adab . . . is the creative writing of the Arabs, not the compiled erudition of their majlis discussions.”

Al-Shirbīnī’s manipulation of the material at hand, recycled as this may be from earlier writings and from a living repertoire of jokes and anecdotes, results not only in accurate targeting of the subject of the satire, but also in the production of a distinctive individual voice; a voice that is cantankerous, witty, and unassuageably partisan. It is precisely this voice, and the window that it opens onto one mid-Ottoman Egyptian writer’s personal universe, that makes Brains Confounded a work of art capable of being enjoyed today as literature and not merely a text containing material relevant to the needs of historians and other scholars.
MODELS AND PRECURSORS

Examples of an interest, satirical or otherwise, in rural life and of related literary practices are to be found in earlier literature.

Qiṣṣat al-Miṣrī wa-l-rīfī  A fragment of an anonymous seventeenth-century colloquial Rangstreit (debate over the virtues of two categories) entitled The Story of the Cairene and the Countryman (Qiṣṣat al-Miṣrī wa-l-rīfī), in which a townsman and a peasant debate the merits of their respective environments, proves that polemical confrontations between the city and the country were of interest to consumers of popular literature of the time. However, the Story differs from Brains Confounded in that the peasant apologist is not portrayed as intrinsically inferior to his urban opponent; in the pages that survive neither seems to be set up as the obvious victor in the argument.

Ibn Sūdūn  The only author acknowledged by al-Shirbīnī as a model is the Mamluk writer ʿAlī ibn Sūdūn al-Bashbughāwī. Al-Shirbīnī indicates at the beginning of Brains Confounded that he will provide the reader with “license and buffoonery, with just a touch of Ibn Sūdūn-ery” (§1.4). Al-Shirbīnī quotes twice from Ibn Sūdūn’s works. The first quotation is of Funayn’s Letter (§§4.36–4.37.6), a long, comically inane missive sent by a certain Funayn from Upper Egypt to his parents in some other, unspecified, part of Egypt, and probably appealed to al-Shirbīnī because of its epistolary form (it initiates a short section on silly letters) and its fit with the naturalistic colloquial prose used in his own peasant monologues. The second quotation from Ibn Sūdūn may have provided direct inspiration for Brains Confounded, in that it consists of a commentary on four lines of colloquial verse (“Abū Qurdān / sowed a feddan . . .”) followed by a zany explanation of the etymology of the word mulūkhiyyā (“Jew’s mallow”) (vol. 2, §11.12.8). Al-Shirbīnī does not, however, make this connection himself and the passage, which is short, is buried in a larger discussion.
Al-Ṣafadī’s *Ikhtirāʿ al-khurāʿ*  

The Concoction of Craziness (*Ikhtirāʿ al-khurāʿ*) of Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) consists of a humorous commentary on two lines of nonsense verse that has many points in common with al-Shirbīnī’s work, the most obvious being the exploitation of the comic potential inherent in the text-and-commentary genre and the targeting of unjustified pretensions to participation in the literary culture. The two works also share a mise-en-scène (the verses in question are brought to the attention of a gathering of litterateurs, one of whose members is commissioned to write a commentary “to be strung to fit their strange string”) and certain (but by no means all) comic devices, such as false etymologies, incorrect meters, freewheeling word association, and the straight-faced assertion of the patently false, and these impart a sense of kinship to the two texts.

An essential difference between al-Ṣafadī and al-Shirbīnī, however, lies in the fact that al-Ṣafadī’s parody lacks any reference to the countryside and that the verses that are its target are more or less pure nonsense, in contrast to the highly meaning-laden odes and *mawāliyās* (two-line poems of four rhyming hemistichs in *basīṭ* meter, often with colloquial features) of al-Shirbīnī’s country people. Their author, likewise, is a cipher, without an identifiable human face, and as such, in contrast to al-Shirbīnī’s countryman, represents no particular social group. It follows that al-Ṣafadī’s humor is more abstract and, perhaps because it has no flesh-and-blood victim, less malicious than al-Shirbīnī’s. By the same token, *The Concoction of Craziness* contains none of the description and critique of social behavior that enriches *Brains Confounded*.

**Al-Sanhūrī’s *Muḍḥik dhawī l-dhawq*: Inspiration or Genre?**

Muḥammad ibn Maḥfūẓ al-Sanhūrī’s recently discovered work *Risible Rhymes* (*Muḍḥik dhawī l-dhawq wa-l-niẓām fī ḥall shadharatin min kalām ahl al-rīf al-ʿawāmm*) contains six of the ten verses occurring in the section in *Brains Confounded* headed “An Account of Their Poets and of Their Idiocies and Inanities” (§5) and, presented
within the same sequence as the latter, four that do not.\textsuperscript{29} What might be the relationship between these two works, and what conclusion should we draw from the appearance of \textit{Brains Confounded} some forty years after \textit{Risible Rhymes}?

One possible conclusion is that al-Shirbīnī read al-Sanhūrī’s book, found the concept appealing, added some verses (presumably of his own composition), discarded others, and used the whole as a foundation for his more ambitious project, adopting from al-Sanhūrī, in addition, certain comic devices, such as the absurd metrical mnemonics. According to such a scenario, the writing of commentaries on mock-rural verse would be a phenomenon that started with \textit{Risible Rhymes} and ended with \textit{Brains Confounded}, and this may indeed have been the case. However, the occurrence in each work of verses not found in the other suggests another possibility, namely, that each writer drew on a common stock of mock-rural verse that was in circulation at the time, and that the two works thus constitute what has survived, or what we know so far to have survived, of a genre.

Elements in both works imply the existence of such a common stock. Al-Sanhūrī says that he was asked to “decode a sampling of what the rural rank and file have said in verse,” while al-Shirbīnī describes the “Ode of Abū Shādūf” as being “among the rural verse to come my way . . . and which has become the subject of comment in certain salons”; such references are not in and of themselves humorous, and it is not obvious why the writer should have made them if they were not true. In addition, the greater number and more elaborated form of such verses in \textit{Brains Confounded} may point to the existence of a larger body of such work. Thus the stanzaic ode (\textit{qaṣīd}) of Abū ‘Afr (\textit{Brains Confounded §§3.18.1–15}), which is more or less equal in length to that of Abū Shādūf, and the “Ode of Abū Shādūf” itself and its associated poems, all far exceed in length the earlier material that is partially shared with \textit{Risible Rhymes} and abandon the couplet in favor of other poetic forms of which al-Sanhūrī’s book contains no examples. It may be argued
that the presence of certain comic devices—specifically the use of absurd metrical mnemonics and formulas (referring to couplets) of the pattern “its width is from [place A] to [place B], its breadth from [place C] to [place D]”—indicate direct borrowing by al-Shirbīnī from al-Sanhūrī, but that is not necessarily the case. The comic mnemonic, at least, has its forerunners in the work of al-Ṣafadī (see above), who also uses other comic devices (the false etymology, the straight-faced assertion of the patently false) to be found in Brains Confounded. Finally, we may wonder whether al-Sanhūrī was a writer of a calibre to have written such mock-rural verses or, as the rest of his book implies, a writer who seized on ready-made materials to fulfil the task he had been given, oblivious, in the case of the mock-rural verse, to the opportunities for satire that these provided and capable of offering only the mundane grammatical and rhetorical critique that he in fact provides.

None of the above arguments for the existence of a genre of commentaries on mock-rural verse is conclusive. Unless further texts of this sort emerge (as Risible Rhymes recently has), we shall never know whether al-Shirbīnī was directly and solely inspired by al-Sanhūrī, but should the existence of such a genre be proven, al-Shirbīnī will have to be reassessed, as less an eccentric outlier in the history of Arabic literature and more a writer of talent who saw the potential of an existing genre and exploited it in the service of a particular discourse.

Publication, Reception, and Scholarly Attention

Ten manuscript copies of Brains Confounded exist today, indicating at least a modest popularity of the work in the days before printing was introduced to Egypt in the early nineteenth century. An unpublished manuscript entitled Mukhtaṣar al-Īḍāḥ fi ʿilm al-nikāḥ (The Synopsis of The Work of Clarification concerning the Science of Copulation), which, like Al-Īḍāḥ fi ʿilm al-nikāḥ itself, is falsely attributed to Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and which was copied in 1247/1832 (Ms Cantab. Add. 335, folios 8b–9a), contains a brief passage on
pimping that the author attributes to *Brains Confounded*, though it does not in fact occur there. Thus, at this time, al-Shirbīnī was apparently well enough known to be cited as an authority on socio-sexual issues.\(^{30}\)

*Brains Confounded* was first printed, at private expense, at the government press at Bulaq in 1274/1857–58, and was reprinted or lithographed thereafter at least five times during the nineteenth century. However, Jean Le Cerf’s comment in the 1930s that “les plus anciens journalistes du Caire se souvient d’un Kitab Abu Shaduf que nous n’avons pu retrouver, et qui date du temps du Khédive Ismail [sic]” indicates that the work was hard to find by the first half of the twentieth century. It was published once again, in a bowdlerized and generally unreliable edition, in 1963.\(^ {31}\)

Western scholars were the first to draw attention to the literary and linguistic importance of the work. The first study, by Mehren, appeared in 1872, twelve years after its first printing.\(^ {32}\) Spitta incorporated material derived from it into his grammar of Egyptian Arabic of 1880,\(^ {33}\) in 1887 Vollers made extensive use of it in a major article on Egyptian Arabic,\(^ {34}\) and in 1906 Kern included mention of it in his review of new [sic] humorous writers.\(^ {35}\) None of the above attempted a comprehensive study of the text, and some, if not all, appear to have been under the misapprehension that it dated from the nineteenth century.

Egyptian scholarly interest in *Brains Confounded* begins with Jurji Zaydān’s brief notice in 1931.\(^ {36}\) Thereafter, a considerable body of work has been devoted to it by Egyptian writers, much of their attention being devoted to the issue of al-Shirbīnī’s attitudes towards his subject and his motives for writing the book. Most have taken the literalist approach (i.e., assumed that the “Ode of Abū Shādūf” is the product of a genuine rural poet), an approach that is rejected here.\(^ {37}\)

The single most important contribution to the understanding of *Brains Confounded* to date is Gabriel Baer’s article “Shirbīnī’s Hazz al-quḥūf and Its Significance” in *Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (London 1982).\(^ {38}\) Baer was the first to
direct attention to the value of the text for an understanding of the social history of Egypt rather than concentrating on its linguistic and literary aspects. Baer’s many valuable insights, which focus on the “relations between the fellah and the city and between urban and rural ‘ulamā’,”\(^{39}\) remain, for the most part, unchallenged. However, his conclusion that al-Shirbīnī’s “attacks against the fellahs are to be understood as a defense against the contempt and derision on the part of the ‘ulamā’ from urban families, from which he and his like suffered” and for which he posits as background “the penetration of a rural element into the urban class of ‘ulamā’”\(^{40}\) is questionable. Baer himself mentions that “throughout the centuries ‘ulamā’ of village origin lived, taught and wrote books in the cities,” and that “as to the eleventh/seventeenth century . . . one quarter of Cairo’s ‘ulamā’ whose biographies have been recorded by al-Muḥībbī were of rural origin.”\(^{41}\) Against this, the few examples that Baer provides of ‘ulamā’ being mocked for their rural origins\(^{42}\) all relate either to Syria or to Egypt in the sixteenth century and seem insufficient to justify such a passionate, complex, and extended diatribe as al-Shirbīnī’s.

Al-Shirbīnī’s Countryside

Because Brains Confounded is, in part, a satire, its depiction of the countryside must be treated with caution; as Omri points out, the book is “not an encyclopaedia of information . . . pertaining to peasants.”\(^{43}\) Nevertheless, the object of a satire must be recognizable if it is to be appreciated by its readers, and we may therefore assume that the basic information about the countryside that it provides is accurate.

A Hierarchy of Settlements

The Egypt of Brains Confounded extends from Cairo to Dimyāṭ along the eastern branch of the Nile, on which the villages mentioned in the book (Hurbayṭ, Dundayṭ, Shanashah, Samannūd, etc.) are or were situated. The western Delta, Upper Egypt, and other parts of
the country are mentioned only in passing. The settlements along this axis are of three types, which form a hierarchy.

In the heading to the first section of the work devoted specifically to the peasant, al-Shirbīnī limits his attention to “the commoners of certain of the people of the countryside” (§2.1). References in the material that follows make it clear that this subset of rural society is that living in “the hamlets and the small villages” (vol. 2, §11.21.7), and these, as we shall see below, were generally situated at a distance from the river or, as al-Shirbīnī puts it, “in the margins of the lands” (§7.1); as such, they probably received less water, like “tail-enders” in irrigation systems the world over. Al-Shirbīnī also uses the doublet “the hamlets and the villages of the swamp lands” (al-kufūr wa-bilād al-malaq) (vol. 2, §11.10.8), the latter being low-lying areas that remained, post-flood, too swampy and salty for cultivation. In other words, the hamlets whose inhabitants are the butt of the satire were the poorest.

The hamlets lack Friday mosques and have a mill that the villager must operate with his own oxen, in contrast to the villages on the river, which have mills operated by horsepower (vol. 2, §11.21.7). These hamlets are placed by al-Shirbīnī at the bottom of a tripartite hierarchy of settlements that moves upward from the hamlets, through the villages on the river, to the city. According to this hierarchy, the inhabitants of the hamlets are the most ignorant and isolated, those of the city are paragons of sophistication, and those of the villages by the river occupy a middle position.

This hierarchy is made most explicit in the repeated and pointed descriptions of the different recipes according to which various foods are prepared in the three different settings, for, as al-Shirbīnī states at the beginning of his discussion of stewed fava beans, “things are ennobled . . . by virtue of place” (vol. 2, §11.11.2). In dietary terms, this hierarchy is keyed largely to the amount of fat used. Thus, of mallow (khubbayzah), he says: “The people of the countryside take the leaves, chop them . . . and eat them . . . . The people of the villages on the river cook it with goose and chicken.
and so on, and the people of the cities cook it with fatty meats . . . and they add fats, clarified cow’s butter, greens, spices, and similar things, and this is the only way it should be eaten . . . . The way the country people do it . . . is worthless, and the same goes for the people of the villages on the river, for these . . . add no clarified butter or fat . . . . The latter is, nevertheless, more refined than the recipe of the country people referred to above. The best place to eat it, however, is in the cities . . . .” (vol. 2, §11.19.3). Similar comments are made in the case of slow-cooked fava beans, fava beans mashed with Jew’s mallow (bīsār), lentils, and rice pudding. In the latter case, al-Shirbīnī adds that “people of Turkish descent make it with milk alone, without water, and add just a little rice . . . this kind is the best tasting and most appetizing” (vol. 2, §11.25.2), thus placing the latter in a kind of supra-urban category.

THE THREE ESTATES OF AL-SHIRBĪNĪ’S RURAL SOCIETY

The terms most frequently used in Brains Confounded to designate its subjects collectively are ahl al-rīf and al-rayyāfah, both meaning “the people of the countryside.” The presence in Part One of Brains Confounded of three sections devoted to anecdotes about, respectively, “the commoners of certain of the people of the countryside” (‘awāmm ba’ḍ ahl al-rīf) (§§2.9–3.76), their “men of religion” (fuqahā’) (§§4.1–4.41), and their “dervishes” (fuqarā’, i.e., mendicant Sufis) (§§7.1–7.41) indicates that al-Shirbīnī saw the people of the countryside as being divided into three estates, of roughly similar social, if not numerical, importance. Al-Shirbinī attacks each of these estates separately, leveling against each specific charges of physical grossness and moral and cultural turpitude.

The Peasant Cultivator As noted above, by “the commoners of certain of the people of the countryside” al-Shirbīnī means the peasant cultivators (fallāḥūn), especially those living in the hamlets and small villages away from the river. These are the people who “spend all their time with the plow and the shovel-sledge and
shaking their caps around the threshing floors, or rushing about
in the swamps and the fields, or bustling around after the crops,
or jumping about harvesting and reaping,” etc. (§2.3). They are
stigmatized by association; for example, al-Shirbīnī notes of
the plowman (who, according to him, belongs to a particularly
benighted subgroup of peasants) that “his companions by day are
oxen and by night are women; consequently his mental capacities
never become completely formed” (§5.2.6). They are also mocked
for unprepossessing physical attributes: “Their pubic hair’s so
long it twists as it grows” (§8.8); “The back of his neck had turned
black from the heat, his feet were chapped from walking barefoot
and from the cold” (§3.1); “His ass, from wear and tear, shows
many a scar” (§8.8). The peasant is also taken to task for specific
cultural practices: the making of a public spectacle of the bride at
the ceremony called “the Showing” is described as “one of their
foulest deeds and most wretched ways” (§2.24). Further charges
levied against the peasant include internecine fighting (“war and
stubborn confrontation arise among them and villages are ruined
at their hands” (§2.3)), with frequent references to the feuding
clans of Sa'd (or Jud(h)ām) and Ḥarām (e.g., §2.3) and the village’s
own foot soliders (mushāh) and apparently associated “brave lads”
(jidʿān) (e.g., §2.23), bad management of land and livestock (vol. 2,
§11.6.6), indebtedness (idem), flight from the land (idem), and even
the residual use of Christian religious formulae after conversion to
Islam (§3.64). Furthermore, their women are “hyenas” (§2.22) and
their children “apes” (§2.21) and “lunatics” (§2.7). In general, “the
natures of the people of the countryside . . . are revolting and seek
only what is revolting” (vol. 2, §11.17.2), or, as the author puts it even
more pithily elsewhere, they are “shit born of shit” (§5.7.7).

The fundamental accusation against the peasants, however,
and that which underlies and gives rise to all their other faults, is
“their lack of intelligence and overwhelming ignorance” (§2.4)).
This means, in its most basic form, that they are ignorant of
everything but their immediate environment: “the only things a
countryman knows are belts and cudgels, cows and plow-shaft pins, waterwheels and drover’s whips,” etc. (§2.3). From this follow more specific areas of ignorance—of refined foods (§3.8), of appropriate dress (idem), of the appropriate language to use in poetry (§5), of personal hygiene (§8.15), and of such urban institutions as the bathhouse (§3.11) and the latrine (§§3.40–41). Above all, they are ignorant of and indifferent to religion: “They gather in the mosques to calculate their taxes, but not one of them makes a prostration or says a prayer” (§2.7). Al-Shirbīnī illustrates this trait with no fewer than thirteen separate anecdotes describing peasants voiding their prayers through ignorance (§§3.63–76).

Significantly too, al-Shirbīnī points, in his summary of the peasant’s characteristics, not only to the former’s general turpitude but also to a specific animus against members of the author’s own class: “They have no mercy on a scholar / Only on those who practice evil and the oppressor” (§8.18).

**The Rural Men of Religion**  “Rural fuqahāʾ” make up the second estate. These men are acknowledged as religious authorities by the peasants (§§4.22–23). The anecdotes give the impression that every village has one. Rural fuqahāʾ claim expertise in the fields of the Qurʾan (§4.18, §4.29, §4.30), jurisprudence (fiqh) (e.g., §4.20), and Tradition (ḥadīth) (§4.19, §4.24) and also provide services as judges (§4.31), preachers (§§4.10–12), and teachers of the Qurʾan to children (§4.15).

Rural fuqahāʾ are subjected to many of the criticisms that are directed against the peasant cultivator. Their associations, for example, render them stupid: “Similar [to the plowman, see §5.2.6] in terms of reduced intellect is the teacher of small children, for they are his companions all day long while all night long he is with women” (§5.2.7). Likewise, they are mocked for their uncouth appearance (one is described as “a man tall of stature, thick of leg, wearing a belt over a woolen wrap, with no shirt and no shoes on his feet, and on his head a huge turban of patent filthiness” (§4.3)).
The most important charge against the rural *faqīh*, however, is that he leads his flock into error through his flawed *ʿilm*, or knowledge of the religious and philological sciences and their methodology. The rural *faqīh*’s ignorance can, for example, result in his giving false interpretations of the Qurʾan (§4.1) and even in his making up new words for it (§4.18). It may result in his asking a bookseller for an “abridged version” of the Qurʾan for the use of his students (§4.15), and, through his misreading of a text, in leading his congregation in prayer while standing on one leg (§4.34). There is no indication of where the rural *fuqahāʾ* may have acquired this spurious learning.

Following one of these anecdotes, al-Shirbīnī comments, “I would add that it is because of such cases that they say, ‘Learning is a sacred trust’ and that a person should be allowed to speak only on the basis of thorough knowledge and wide reading, extreme caution with regard to what is fundamental in a question and what is secondary, and subjection of the process of transmission to critical examination; and that no attention should be paid to what the ignorant among the scholars may come up with” (§4.25). The rural *faqīh*, in other words, is a caricature of the true *ʿālim*. Highlighting the competition between “the ignorant among the scholars” and their properly trained urban counterparts, much of this section consists of anecdotes in which scholars, and especially Azhari scholars, best their rural rivals in contests of knowledge (§§4.3–33). In the conduct of this struggle, the *ʿālim* may have recourse to the authorities, as when an *ʿālim* “exerted himself to have this ignorant pastor leave the village . . . and they expelled him, on the authority of the emir of the village” (§4.33).

**The Rural Dervishes (al-Khawāmis)** Rural dervishes constitute the third estate of al-Shirbīnī’s rural society. Passages amounting to more than five thousand words devoted to the rural *fuqarāʾ* were omitted from the Bulaq and subsequent printed editions, reducing their presence in the work to a shadow of that in the original.46
inclusion of this material in the present edition and translation reveals the magnitude of the importance al-Shirbini attributed to rural dervishes and the vehemence of his animosity towards them. As in the section on rural men of religion, tales of conflict between scholar and rural dervish constitute the greater part of al-Shirbini’s exposition.

One of the most striking features of al-Shirbini’s description of the “rural fuqarāʾ” is the prominence among them of a group he refers to as al-Khawāmis (“the Khawāmis”).

The term Khawāmis (literally, “fifths,” referring to ordinals, not fractions) appears to be unique to al-Shirbini and does not conform to the pattern of the names normally used to designate Sufi orders (al-Shādhiliyyah, etc.). Nevertheless, the description of the Khawāmis as “a sect that has been raised in the margins of the lands” (§7.1), an allusion earlier in the same passage to “the shaking of their caps” (hazz quhūfihim), and the overall similarity of the language used to describe them to that used of the peasants (e.g., “they are like dumb animals” (§7.1)), place them squarely in the same geographical and social category as al-Shirbini’s country people, and it is clear that they were central to his picture of the countryside.

In addition to their wearing distinctive headwear, al-Shirbini’s country fuqarāʾ are distinguished by certain appurtenances, namely their “prayer beads and pitcher . . . their cockerel and fodder” (§7.1); they also carry crutches (§7.33) and wear a bonnet (zunṭ) (§8.24). They are described on occasion as shaving their beards (§7.38), they include women (§7.6), and they are accused of claiming that they have been relieved of the requirement to obey God’s commands (§7.3, §7.4, §7.7). Al-Shirbini holds them guilty of a variety of heretical beliefs (e.g., materialism (§7.34), reincarnation, the transmigration of souls (idem), and pantheism (§7.9)) and practices (sexual intercourse with women and boys during their ceremonies (dhikr) (§7.7) and prayers (§7.22) and a general propensity for fornication (§7.2), especially the seduction of young male novices (§7.21, §7.30, §7.38)). They practice charlatanism (§7.38), theft (§7.16), burglary (§7.31), murder (§7.7), and even cannibalism (§7.7). They roam
the countryside, either with a single disciple (§7.16) or in groups (§7.38), and actively seek to recruit others, including the well-to-do, to their beliefs (§7.8). The tone of al-Shirbīnī’s treatment may be illustrated by his lines on a certain dervish who came to a bad end, to the effect that “He lived in vomit and foulness / And he died in shame and shite” (§7.10).

The reprehensible behavior of al-Shirbīnī’s rural dervishes parallels many of the practices mentioned in descriptions of various contemporary antinomian Sufi groups. The Muṭāwiʿah and the Malāmatiyyah were accused of pederasty and fornication, and the former also carried pitchers (see n. 425). The solitary retreat (khalwah), exploited by al-Shirbīnī’s shaykhs for nefarious purposes, was characteristic of the Khalwatiyyah order. There was also said to be a group in Upper Egypt who held pantheistic beliefs and acknowledged no recognized religion.

However, the comprehensive nature of al-Shirbīnī’s attack on “rural fuqara” indicates that he was not concerned simply with their beliefs and practices; indeed, he sometimes accepts similar practices by individual Sufis with equanimity, as when he reports that a certain Shaykh Muḥammad al-Silsilī was “one of the saints who have attained esoteric knowledge, even though licentiousness and enjoyment of women appeared as his predominant characteristics,” adding the conventional justification for such behavior, namely, that it was “to disguise his mystical states” (§6.6). It is also noteworthy that, in al-Shirbīnī’s day, individuals whose behavior was either extremely eccentric (such as Shaykh Barakāt al-Khayyāṭ, whose tailor’s shop was filled with dead dogs, cats, and sheep) or who flouted the most basic tenets of Islam (such as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī’s mentor Ibrāhīm al-Matbūlī, whose conduct “gave much cause for criticism on both religious and moral grounds” and who was suspected of pederasty) were tolerated as “natural saints” (majādhīb) or “men of divine states” (arbāb aḥwāl). As such, they were patronized and consulted by members of the ruling elite and regarded with (wary) respect by leading religious figures.
The difference between these licensed saints and the dervishes against whom al-Shirbīnī rails may have lain essentially in the latter’s strong organization, their hierarchies of leadership—al-Shirbīnī mentions that their leaders hold the power of life and death over their followers (§7.7)—and their apparently nomadic lifestyle. They appear, in these respects, to have differed from Sufis such as al-Matbūlī or al-Khayyāṭ, who lived on their own in cities; from those, such as the followers of al-Sha’rānī, who lived in a zāwiyyah (Sufi hostel); and indeed from the many, often educated, members of the recognized Sufi orders.⁵³ As al-Shirbīnī has a dervish say in the poem (urjūzah) at the end of Part One, “No other Way (ṭarīqah) than this do I heed, / And my school’s either Sa’d or Ḥarām,” implying the dervishes’ rejection of the recognized Sufi orders in favor of clan-based social allegiances. The rural fuqarā’ may thus have represented popular mass movements that were not susceptible to control and were therefore threatening.⁵⁴

The hold of Sufism was particularly strong in the countryside: “In the later Middle Ages, the influence of normative Islam, as represented by the ‘ulamā’, on the Egyptian countryside was practically nil. While, in the cities, the Sufis vied with the ‘ulamā’ in influencing the Muslim community, in the countryside they replaced them.”⁵⁵ At the same time, “[the ‘new renunciation’] was not restricted in either social origin or appeal to ‘lower’ social strata . . . . There is certainly sufficient evidence to establish that these movements frequently recruited from the middle and higher social strata . . . . Socially deviant renunciation exercised a strong attraction on the hearts and minds of many Muslim intellectuals.”⁵⁶ This appeal must have made them even more of a threat to the religious elite.

The Satire on Rural Life
constructing a moral economy

Al-Shirbīnī takes pains from the outset of Brains Confounded to provide a moral framework to support his construction of the “people of the countryside.” It is by linking his subjects to the elements of
that framework that he generates the authority needed to judge and condemn them.

THE REFINED AND THE COARSE

The moral economy invoked in *Brains Confounded* is defined by the opposition between refinement (or subtlety or grace) (ْلاطَفا) and coarseness (or grossness or crudeness) (ْكَثَفا), terms that are linked to the inhabitants of the book from the opening statement of themes. There, al-Shirbīnī proclaims the requirement to praise God because He “has distinguished the man of sound taste with refinement of form and sweetness of tongue, while bestowing on his opposites—the likes of the common people of the countryside . . . —wickedness of disposition and coarseness of nature” (§0.1).

This opposition between what is refined (ْلاطِف) and what is coarse (ْكَثِف) continues throughout the book. In a chapter heading, the author promises to tell of things that befell certain common people of the countryside and give a description of “their vulgarity” (ْتَبْعِحُم الْكَثِف) (§2.1). A simile used by a rural poet is condemned as a “coarse comparison” (ْتَاشِبِحٌ الْكَثِف) (§5.8.3). Peasant names are grotesque, for it is a fact that “names point to the refinement (ْلاطِف) or coarseness (ْكَثَفا) of those who bear them . . .” (§2.13), and so on.

This moral polarity is reflected in geographical and social terms in the contrast between the countryside and its people on the one hand and Cairo and its people on the other. Cairo is both the city par excellence—as already noted, when peasants refer to “the city,” they mean Cairo (vol. 2, §11.37.2)—and the font of all that is refined. From al-Shirbīnī’s perspective, there is “no place like Cairo, / And no people like its people” (§8.44). He prays that God may protect it because it is “the city of conviviality and amusement, of pleasure and fulfillment, whose women God has distinguished by making them comely and handsome, full of loveliness and perfection, sweet in their social relations, refined in their conversations” (vol.
2, §11.37.2). The contrast is, of course, in Cairo’s favor: “God reward [the men of Cairo] for their doughtiness, granting them everlasting pleasure in their womenfolk and seasoning to perfection their togetherness, and God protect us from the countryside and its stupidities, the coarseness of its food and of its people’s proclivities!” (vol. 2, §11.12.6). In terms of literature, a “despicable comparison” made by a rural peasant (§5.6.12) is contrasted with “a witty simile referring to a refined beloved” penned by al-Shirbīnī himself (§5.6.13). In the first passage in the book in which he directly contrasts the urban and rural forms of an item of physical culture (in this case, the jubbah, a garment), al-Shirbīnī also explicitly links the urban religious and secular educated elites by remarking on their shared taste for the refined: “The urban sort is the one used by the people of the cities, especially scholars and sophisticates” (vol. 2, §11.2.16).

The fundamental nature of these associations is perhaps most clearly emphasized by the way in which they bridge the moral and physical universes. Thus, above, al-Shirbīnī speaks of the man who is distinguished by God with “sound taste . . . and sweetness of tongue” as being endowed also with “grace of person.” In contrast, of course, the peasant is distinguished not only by his “coarseness of nature” but also by his coarseness of form, as in the examples given. The full set of associations, as built up over the course of the book, consists of, on the “refined” side, religious knowledge, adherence to the norms of polite culture, eloquence (especially mastery of the techniques of formal poetry), good taste, physical beauty, and affective and mental refinement, and, on the “coarse” side, ignorance of true religion and heresy, deviance from the norms of polite culture, an inability to master the rules of versification, grotesque naming practices, grossness of physical form, and general boorishness and obnoxiousness.

THE IMmutABILITY OF MAN’S INBORN NATURE

Al-Shirbīnī makes it plain that the categories “coarse” and “refined” are not only a result of one’s circumstances but determine them too, and as such are immutable.
Several axioms reinforce, explain, and rationalize the determinative nature of the dichotomy. One of these is the assertion that “like attracts like,” which occurs as a leitmotiv at various points in the book (§3.56, §5.2.16, §5.6.2). It is because like attracts like that coarseness of nature accompanies coarseness of behavior (and thus in turn coarseness of appearance, dress, food, etc.). Thus, for example, after dissecting the risible vulgarity of a peasant eulogy, al-Shirbīnī points out that “the peasant’s panegyric accords with his condition and is limited by it, and ‘like attracts like’” (§3.56).

Secondly, if the world is divided between the refined and the coarse and each must act accordingly, it is also the case, as al-Shirbīnī makes clear by prefacing his main topic with a series of anecdotes to this effect, that these God-given characteristics are immutable. A wolf cub, for example, rescued by a Bedouin and suckled by a ewe, turns on its foster mother one day and rips out her stomach, leading the Bedouin to ask a rhetorical question to which he has his own ready answer: “You were fed with her milk and raised among us, / So who told you that your father was a wolf? / When an inborn nature’s disposed to evil, /No teaching and no teacher is of use!” (§3.2). Similarly, on the human plane, the despicable behavior of a man “of low birth” (not specified as rural) is explained by his origins: his mother is “Murjānah, a black slave” (§3.5). Of direct relevance, a peasant taken from the fields by a king and provided with the finest education acquires great skill in divination by letters and by sand; however, when the king hides his ring in his hand and asks the peasant what it is, the man opines that, since it is round and has a hole, it must be a millstone. As the king’s vizier complacently notes, “his original nature won out,” for “Apples will never sprout from the twig / Of one whose roots are a sycamore fig” (§3.1).

Indeed, by a circular (and hence irrefutable) argument, only those who are “refined” by nature have the right of access to education and knowledge, while the coarse, such as the peasants, are incapable of rising above the condition into which they were born and hence have no right to higher things. Indeed, encouraging them to think
otherwise is both pointless and dangerous: “And among the sayings of the Imam ‘Ali, God be pleased with him, we find, ‘Do not instruct the children of the rabble in knowledge, for if they learn, they will seek high office, and if they attain that, they will devote themselves to the humiliation of the noble.’ And the Imam al-Shāfī‘ī, God be pleased with him, has said: ‘To bestow knowledge on the ignorant is to waste it / While to deny it to the deserving is unjust’” (§3.4). This philosophy is, of course, self-serving: things must be so if the inferior status of the people of the countryside, and thus their exploitation, is to be justified. “ Appropriateness” or “consistency” thus becomes not simply a fact of life but also a principle to which appeal is often made (“if it be asked . . . where is the appropriateness of the comparison . . . we would say” (§5.8.3)). In the final analysis, “appropriateness is required” (§5.5.13).

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF IMMUTABILITY

The transformational power of the principle that man’s character is determined at birth and immutable is so great that it can determine the nature, and thus the acceptability of, any behavior. Al-Shirbīnī devotes considerable space, for example, to farting as a characteristic behavior of country people and one that confirms their coarseness. On the other hand, in one anecdote, a fart delivered by a refined person turns out to be a veritable social coup: a youth, who is “comely of person, refined of personality” puts to flight, with an inadvertent fart, “a bunch of those whose persons are coarse and natures gross.” Al-Shirbinī assuages the youth’s embarrassment with a verse to the effect that the boy has cleverly saved the situation by showing his disdain for the “people of coarseness and disagreeableness” with a “delicate sound (latif lafẓ), like honey.” In other words, it is not what is done that matters but who does it: from the refined all things are refined and to the refined all things are forgiven. The converse is equally true: a peasant praised by a poet for his beauty cannot be truly beautiful, for “the actions of a peasant, however beautiful he may be, are well known to be devoid of any refinement” (§5.8.6).
The People of the Countryside as Surrogates for the Coarse in General

While al-Shirbīnī’s satire of “the people of the countryside” may be read as simply that—an attack on one social group—another reading is suggested here. According to this, “the people of the countryside,” whether peasants, men of religion, or dervishes, while undeniably the proximate target of al-Shirbīnī’s satire, ultimately play the role of surrogates for all that al-Shirbīnī perceived as “coarse (kathīf)” in the Egypt of his day. The coarse, in al-Shirbīnī’s worldview, are the coarse in general, the masses, the great unwashed, the opposite of all that is refined in terms of disposition, aptitude, behavior, appearance, linguistic competence, dress, and food. This reading rests on a contradiction between some of the evidence used by the author to demonstrate the rural nature of those people and the objective character of that evidence.

In the opening lines of the work, al-Shirbīnī promises to “embellish it with an explanation of the linguistic peculiarities of the countryside” (§1.1). In his actual analysis of those rural “linguistic peculiarities,” however, al-Shirbīnī routinely characterizes as “rural” linguistic phenomena that are not so. For example, despite the fact that the shift from interdental fricative consonants to dental consonants is attested in urban speech from at least as early as the thirteenth century, al-Shirbīnī states that “the word t(a)bāt originally has a thāʾ, but, being a rural word, just as they say mīrāt (‘legacy’) with tāʾ (for mīrāth), so also they say tabāt (for thabāt)” (§5.2.20), a claim that he also makes in connection with the shift from ẓ to ḍ (§5.5.2, vol. 2, §11.15.8, etc.) and dh to d (vol. 2, §11.36.16). Similarly, assimilation of f in nisf (“half”), resulting in the standard colloquial form nuṣṣ, is described as being “in accordance with the rural language” (vol. 2, §11.11.10). At the lexical level, the relative pronoun illī (“who”) (vol. 2, §11.27.5), the phrase yā raytanī (“would that I”) (§5.6.12), and numerous other items commonly used in modern urban Egyptian Arabic are characterized by the author as being “rural forms.”
For al-Shirbīnī, “rural speech” thus consists of forms that deviate from the literary norm, or, to put it differently, “rural speech” as he describes it is simply the standard colloquial language of his day, as spoken in the cities as well as in the countryside. Intrinsically rural lexical items (such as certain types of vessel) aside, no rural-urban isoglosses can be discerned in the language of al-Shirbīnī’s country people. At the same time, colloquial forms used in verse are typically explained by al-Shirbīnī as being adaptations of literary forms made “for the meter.” Examples—among almost two dozen such cases—are nahīf for nahīfan (vol. 2, §11.1.21), la-jat for la-jā’at (vol. 2, §11.3.19), and la-minnū for minhu (vol. 2, §11.4.3). Any language that deviates from standard literary norms is thus denied autonomy. In fact, whenever al-Shirbīnī describes a nonstandard form as “rural” or being “for the meter,” this information may safely be ignored.

The slipperiness of the designation “rural” is also conspicuous outside the field of language. The heretical dervishes who play such an important role in the work are, on the one hand, explicitly described as rural: they are “a sect that has been raised in the margins of the lands” (§7.1). On the other hand, the anecdotes describing them in Part One include little rural circumstantiality, with only three out of a score containing references to the countryside. Moreover, in several stories the events recounted are explicitly described as taking place in urban settings such as Alexandria (§7.12), al-Maḥallah al-Kubrā (§7.29), Cairo (§7.31), or Dimyāṭ (§7.32). The sophistication of the philosophical and religious concepts attributed to these Sufis also moves the reader far from al-Shirbīnī’s stereotypical peasant who “knows only belts and cudgels, palm switches and plow-shaft pins, waterwheels and drover’s whips.”

Similarly, the section on rural poetry in Part One is followed by another ridiculing the pretensions of nonrural poetasters (“It Now Behooves Us to Offer a Small Selection of the Verse of Those Who Lay Claim to the Status of Poets but Are in Practice Poltroons”) (§6), thus leading the reader again towards broader vistas of “coarseness.”
The inclusion there of long quotations (§§6.2–4) from verses written by “the Emīr Murjān al-Ḥabashī,” a black African, reinforces the identification of “coarseness” with a broader marginality (just as we have seen earlier, a man’s base behavior is explained by the fact that his mother—Murjānah—is a black slave (§3.5)).

It seems, therefore, that in Brains Confounded “rurality” is equated with the broader deviance of the “coarse,” wherever they may be found, from the linguistic, religious, and social norms defined by the “refined.” Al-Shirbīnī’s argument seems to be that, without regard to geographical location, the common people—or at least those of them who are guilty of the charges of ignorance, spurious pretensions to participation in elite culture, and perversion of religion that he brings against “the people of the countryside”—pose a threat to the elite.

THE THREAT AND THE RESPONSE

Summing up at the end of his section on bad rural poetry, al-Shirbīnī asserts that “all this [bad verse] stems from lack of intelligence and perspicacity, an excess of ignorance, and a paucity of instruction. A man of sound taste, in contrast, would never allow such poor language to pass his lips” (§6.8). This objective lack of learning, however, does not prevent members of the commons from claiming to be possessed of knowledge, or learning, (ʿilm), and the book is full of anecdotes in which these pretensions are manifested, only to be deflated, by Azharis, other scholars, or “sophisticates.” Al-Shirbīnī clearly felt that access to education by those who had no innate right to it was an issue that needed addressing in the Egypt of his day. As he says of rural men of religion, “The condition of such people is well known, the likes of them are everywhere, and their goings-on are beyond numbering” (§3.76).

It has been hypothesized that the relegation of Cairo from the status of imperial capital under the Mamluks to provincial capital under the Ottomans resulted in a decentralization of cultural control and education, which spread to encompass larger numbers, drawn
from previously excluded classes: “When the state is decentralized . . . and the structures at the top are weaker, the cultural forms and patterns from below are more likely to emerge”; this tendency would have been aided by the fact that “the policy of the Ottomans towards their provinces was one of restrained intervention in matters that were not of immediate interest to them. The Ottomans, for instance, did not have a policy of ottomanizing culture.”

According to this theory, evidence of this decentralization is to be seen in the spread of the *kuttāb*, a school in which young children memorized the Qur’an and achieved basic literacy and numeracy, as a result of which “many more people knew how to read and write beyond those who were attached to institutions of higher education” and literacy spread, especially among artisans and tradesmen. In other words, the scholars “cannot be said to have had a complete monopoly on knowledge, since the kind of knowledge associated with the ‘ulamā’ was not the only kind of socially accepted knowledge.” Al-Shirbīnī’s bugbear, popular Sufism, may have played an important role in spreading literacy.

At the same time, for reasons that are yet to be convincingly explained and are, on the face of it, in contradiction to the above, it was during the Ottoman period that a single dominant institution, the mosque-university of al-Azhar, emerged to promote religious orthodoxy in Egypt and foster the influence of the scholars. A contemporary traveler from Morocco, Abū Sālim al-ʿAyyāshī, impressed by its obvious dynamism, describes how he “spent the night at the al-Azhar mosque, it being the twenty-seventh night [of Ramadan]; but in fact, every night in that mosque is like the Night of Power because it is alive with *dhikr*, recitation of the Qur’an, and teaching throughout the night and the day, while worship there never ceases, night or day, summer or winter, for it is without peer among the mosques of the entire world.”

Thus the scene would seem to have been set for a clash between the burgeoning energy of a hegemonistic al-Azhar and the decentralized, multi-faceted forces released by the spread of education.
In this struggle, al-Shirbīnī identifies with al-Azhar heart and soul. When its scholars are mentioned, he prays God to “send them victorious and let them lead the Muslims unto the Day of Judgment!” (§4.5) and he champions them consistently through a series of anecdotes that exude a palpable sense of competition between urban scholars (‘ulamā’) and rural men of religion (fuqahā’) (§4.14ff).

Brains Confounded may thus represent a counterattack on behalf of the Azharites—and, more broadly, the representatives of “refined” culture—against the threat to their hegemony from the “coarse.” With larger numbers of people being educated and with independent and self-confident Sufis playing an important role in the intellectual and cultural leadership of the newly literate, it is perhaps not surprising to find al-Shirbīnī, the bookseller and marginal scholar, defending the rights of the flagship institution of the mainstream cultural elite by associating its enemies with the despised world of the countryside.

AL-SHIRBĪNĪ’S CONDEMNATIONS OF ABUSES

It remains to address a seeming anomaly—those rare, albeit eloquent, passages in which al-Shirbīnī takes the side of the peasant against the tyranny and injustices of the government. These passages target specific practices. One is the extortion of the wajbah (a levy in the form of food for visiting officials and their animals), of which al-Shirbīnī says, “It is a form of injustice, and eating such food is forbidden by religion so long as the peasants do not give it of their own free will and cheerfully” (vol. 2, §11.3.10). Other practices condemned by the author are the corvée, the related “fine on the landless,” and various fiscal imposts, all of which were unofficial levies that were imposed for the first time during the seventeenth century and were, as Raymond notes, “incessantly denounced, periodically abolished, but almost always re-instated.”66

Al-Shirbīnī’s argument against these practices rests on their characterization as bid’ah, that is, innovations unsanctioned by
religion, for, as he says when considering the question of whether a tax farmer (multazim) has the right to continue “the fine on the landless” when he takes over a village where it was imposed by his predecessor, “the answer is to be found in the Tradition of the Prophet, upon whom blessings and peace, that says, ‘He who introduces into this affair of ours that which is not in it is rejected’ . . . such things being called ‘innovation’” (vol. 2, §11.3.11). These innovations al-Shirbīnī contrasts with an earlier, utopian, state of affairs, which he identifies with “the first [tax-collection] apparatus in Egypt [which] was created at the direction of Our Master ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ when he conquered Egypt, though it was not organized in a uniform manner” (vol. 2, §11.6.7). Not only was this early, sanctioned, system productive of “enormous wealth” (idem), it was also, according to al-Shirbīnī, better for farming, for “in earlier times . . . a person would farm the land and the tax calculated on it would be light, and the levy in kind in support of the tax farmer and his lieutenants (wajbah) and the fine on the landless and the rest were quite unknown. Blessing was unconfined, all the land was under cultivation, and the people enjoyed the greatest good fortune, affluence, and profit” (vol. 2, §11.8.7).

Despite his condemnation of later practice, however, al-Shirbīnī clearly supports the status quo. He does not see the abuses he condemns as providing excuses for the peasant to avoid his duties, for “there is no escape, in any case, from paying the tax, even if that results in affliction and woe” and if the peasant is “put in prison to be beaten and punished,” it is “so that the ordinances of the Almighty may be implemented against him” (vol. 2, §11.6.3). His discussion of the troublesome area of tax collection, where the legitimate right of the state to collect revenue and the oppression that may result from the way in which that right is applied are inextricably intertwined, ends with a telling disquisition on the differences between the good peasant and the bad (vol. 2, §11.6.5), in which al-Shirbīnī makes it plain that one of the most important distinguishing characteristics of the former is that he pays both his taxes and his debts (idem),
while the latter pays neither (idem). The fact that this passage contains the only positive description of a peasant in the entire work indicates that al-Shirbīnī may have felt that “the good peasant” was more a logically necessary residual category than a living reality.

In the end, it would seem that al-Shirbīnī wanted to have it both ways: to condemn the “people of the countryside” and all they represented while criticizing the secular authorities for their violations of religious law. This must have been a comfortable position for a scholar (or would-be scholar) concerned to maintain for his like, as society’s best representatives of refinement, a distance between the challenge from the coarse on the one hand and the arrogance of the ruling elite on the other. At the same time, it would be anachronistic to assume that this position implies sympathy for the country dweller or objection to his treatment by the authorities, outside of the narrow area of practice identified by the author. Nowhere in Brains Confounded is there a declaration of sympathy for, or defense of, “the people of the countryside” equal in size or scope to the condemnation and vilification to which they are subjected throughout most of the work.

The Parody of Literary Culture

Brains Confounded is not only a satire directed against the “people of the countryside” but also a parody of textual commentary (sharḥ), a culturally central and highly elaborated genre that aimed to extract from a text, whether in the field of grammar and philology, poetry, religious sciences (in which context it was often called tafsīr), or philosophy, the maximum value for the literate community. While the parody consists, in essence, of abusing the venerable conventions of sharḥ by applying these to material that is, in the author’s view, unworthy, the process is not without danger to the satire itself, for by pushing these conventions to their logical extremes, the author risks exposing them to ridicule, thus undermining the assumptions of contemporary literary discourse to which they bear witness and on which the satire depends.
It seems likely, however, that in choosing the *sharḥ* genre as a vehicle for his satire, al-Shirbīnī was inspired, in the first instance at least, by the authority, and thus the advantage over his adversary, that these assumptions granted him. As Rippin remarks, “As an implement for asserting the scholar’s status and authority, arguments over grammar have no rival.”69 Any subversion of the genre itself may have been an unavoidable result of the momentum of the parody rather than its deliberate purpose, and ultimately the author’s attitude to his own parody appears ambiguous.

**THE CONVENTIONS PARODIED**

The commentators’ preoccupations most prominently parodied by al-Shirbīnī are meter, etymology, conventions for the identification of verbal paradigms and morphological patterns, and the use of lexical authorities in support of the latter, as well as probative verse quotations and the rhetorical debate as a heuristic tool.

In his commentary on the first example of rural verse in the “Account of Their Poets and of Their Idiocies and Inanities” (§5.2), al-Shirbīnī plunges immediately into an analysis of the meter, which he claims belongs to *bahr al-kharā al-wāfir*, or “the ‘abundant’ ocean of shite” (§5.2.1) playing on the dual sense of *bahr* as “ocean” and as “meter,” as well as on the name of one of the commoner meters, *wāfir*, literally “the abundant.” In this context, a conventional commentator might be expected to provide the standard mnemonic for this meter, using forms of the root *f-ʿ-l* (“to do”), to represent the pattern of long (L) and short (S) syllables for a hemistich, namely, *muḥāʿalatu muḥāʿalatun faʿūlun* (i.e., SLSSL|SLSSL|SLL). Al-Shirbīnī does provide a mnemonic but uses the root *kh-b-ṭ*, claiming that the meter is to be parsed as *mutakhabīṭun khābiṭun mutakhabīṭun khubāṭ* (i.e., SSLSL|LSL|SSLSSL|SL). Not only does this bear no relation to *wāfir*, but the author, by using this root, which includes within its semantic range the concepts of “striking,” “trampling,” “dust,” “diabolical madness,” and “sheep bloat,” is able to bring the verse, and hence its author and audience, into linguistic
and cultural areas that are both opprobrious in and of themselves and ridiculously inappropriate for a prestigious undertaking such as textual commentary. This joke is repeated throughout. Roots employed for such mnemonics include $h-b-l$ (“foolishness,” “raving”), $kh-l-b-ṭ$ (“causing malicious trouble; confusing”), $th-q-l$ (“heaviness; boorishness”), and many others.

Al-Shirbīnī also follows the grammarians’ habit of using words of a given pattern or measure of long and short syllables ($wazn$) to disambiguate that of the word under discussion. Again, for comic effect, he employs the technique of using as disambiguators words of mundane or undignified connotation. Thus “$kūz$ (‘mug for water’) is of the pattern of $būz$ (‘muzzle’) because its wide mouth resembles the muzzle of a cow or a calf” (vol. 2, §11.3.4) and “$jubnah$ (‘piece of cheese’) [is] of the measure of $ubnah$ (‘passive sodomy’)” (vol. 2, §11.26.3), and so on.

Al-Shirbīnī also provides spurious etymologies for many words. For example, he claims that $ma-ḍāl$ (“he ceased not to” or “he kept on” (doing something)) derives from $dall$ (“error”) or $dalāl$ (“delusion”) or $ḍaʾīlah$ (“slender snake, viper”). Not only are these etymons incorrect ($dall$ and $dalāl$ derive from the root $ḍ-l-l$, $ḍaʾīlah$ from $ḍ-ʾ-l$; $ḍāl$, a strictly colloquial form, might be considered to derive from $ḍ-w-l$ or $ḍ-y-l$ but historically derives from $z-w-l$ with conflation of this root with $z-l-l$), they also exploit the technique of ridicule by association used with regard to the meters. On occasion, these false etymologies are elaborated into lengthy flights of whimsicality, as when al-Shirbīnī provides four possible etymons, all entirely spurious, for the word $qarrūfih$ (a sort of vessel) (vol. 2, §11.3.5). In support of such etymologies al-Shirbīnī often invokes the authority of the nonexistent dictionary $Al-Qāmūs al-azraq wa-l-nāmūs al-ablaq$ ($The Blue Ocean and Piebald Canon$), a title reminiscent of al-Fīrūzābādī’s famous $Al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ$ ($The Encompassing Ocean$) and perhaps other lexica (see n. 126).

Similar are the “paradigms” ($maṣādir$, singular $maṣdar$) with which al-Shirbīnī sometimes completes his analysis of a given word,
mimicking the lexicographers’ habit of using these to establish the base forms of the conjugation. Thus, according to the author, the *mašdar* of ḏāl is “ḍalla, yaḍillu, ḏalālan, and ḍālun and maḍlūlun” (§5.2.2); in reality, however, this paradigm is that of the verb ḏalla (“to go astray”), which bears no etymological relationship to the word under discussion. Other paradigms contain made-up, humorous, or eccentric forms that may contain coded references (see, e.g., n. 243) or serve to introduce further vulgar, obscene, or inappropriate words to bolster the comic impact (see, e.g., vol. 2, §11.2.8).

Probative quotations (*shawāhid*) are also used, as is standard in *sharḥ*, to lend authority to the commentator’s statements. Not all of these are themselves opprobrious or ridiculous. The use of a well-known quotation such as that attributed dubiously by al-Shirbīnī to Maʾn ibn Zāʾidah—“We are a tribe whom the wide-eyed pupil / Melts . . .” (§5.2.13)—for instance, relies for its comic effect simply on the incongruity of its occurrence in the context of a verse in the course of which the beloved declares “I’m off for a crap.” Others, albeit obscene or playful, may be quotations from contemporary poets whose wit the author admires and may be used for their congruity with the matter at hand (as, e.g., “I saw a leper deep down in a well” (§5.2.16)). Still others, however, seem to be invented simply to make fun of the implied tendency of some commentators to use *shawāhid* to say in verse what they have just said in prose, e.g., (following discussion of the etymology of the words in question (§5.5.4)):

*Khabṭ* from *khubāṭ* derives

*And ḏarṭ* from *dürāṭ* likewise.

Perhaps the weightiest of the conventions of commentary that al-Shirbīnī puts to comic use is the heuristic rhetorical debate in which the author first poses and then responds to and dismisses an objection to an argument he has put forward earlier. Al-Shirbīnī usually refers to such a passage as a “debate” (*masʿalah*), which he generally characterizes as “silly” (*habāliyyah*), though he sometimes
uses the opening “If it be said . . .” (fa-in qīla . . .) or a variant, a wording that led to the technique being named fanqalah. A typical “silly debate” occurs in the author’s discussion of a metaphorical usage of the phrase “cutting out” as used to refer to the action of the lover’s fingers in removing (figuratively) his heart from his breast: “Why does he talk of ‘cutting out’ with the fingers, rather than with a knife or a razor, given that it is of the nature of cutting that it should be done with a sharp instrument and, the heart being flesh, cutting it with the fingers or the fingernails would not work?” We reply: “The fatuous response is . . .” (§5.5.14); for an example of fanqalah, see §5.5.12.

THE LOGICAL ABSURDITIES OF GRAMMAR

The notion that the relationship between the real world and grammar was not arbitrary seems to have been commonplace in al-Shirbīnī’s time. There is no reason to think that he is being humorous when he says that a certain Sufi shaykh (of whom he approves) is “by nature attracted to the feminine, to the extent that he would eat only from a zubdiyyah (‘bowl’) [and] drink only from a qullah (‘water pitcher’)” (§6.6) (these words being grammatically feminine), or that a man would describe his wife as being “so modest that she covers her face from the moon [qamar, grammatically masculine] and from everything else [grammatically] masculine” (§7.31).

This is taken to an extreme, however, when al-Shirbīnī first contends, for example, that all lice are female because the word qamlah (“louse”) is grammatically feminine and then uses this argument to explain that the louse cannot jump because “the louse . . . is . . . female, and the female is weaker than the male” (vol. 2, §11.2.3). Similarly, he implies elsewhere that, because the word liḥḥīs (a sort of vermin) is related through their common root to the word laḥīs, and because the latter may be coupled with the word taʿīs (“miserable”) in the phrase taʿīs laḥīs (for which al-Shirbīnī gives various meanings, all unpleasant), the creatures known as liḥḥīs are themselves rendered more harmful (vol. 2, §11.2.2). Likewise, al-Shirbīnī contends that
there is “a certain appropriateness” to the fact that the written word kishk ("groats formed into balls") reads as a palindrome in Arabic because “their bottoms are just like their tops, and the beginning of each piece of kishk is the same as its end” (vol. 2, §11.10.11).

In such absurd applications of grammar to life, al-Shirbīnī probes the limits of linguistic logic in pursuit of comic effect, propelling himself into a world where grammar is fundamental and life incidental; that is, where life imitates grammar. While the reader may laugh, he can also hardly fail to notice the intrinsic absurdity of such arguments, which may, in turn, lead him to question the sanity of the discipline in whose name they are produced.

**SUBVERSION VERSUS AFFIRMATION**

The tendency of the techniques described above to make textual commentary itself appear comic raises the possibility that al-Shirbīnī actually intended to subvert the genre and the literary culture from which it grew. Other elements in the work also point in that direction.

On occasion, for instance, al-Shirbīnī seems nonchalant toward the very process of commentary. Thus, baṭṭāṭ (“to pat out”) is derived “from baṭbaṭa . . . or from biṭaṭ . . . or, quite possibly, from sheer stuff and nonsense” (vol. 2, §11.21.5). It may also be significant that three of the “miscellaneous anecdotes” that make up the penultimate section of the book concern the absurdities into which pedantry can lead grammarians (vol. 2, §§12.7, 12.8, 12.12).

At the same time, however, al-Shirbīnī appears to disclaim any subversive intent by applying to his commentary descriptors such as “silly” (habālī) (as noted above), “facetious” (fashrawī) (§5.8.20, vol. 2, §11.4.8, etc.), or “lame” (fushkulī) (§5.3.10).

Al-Shirbīnī’s attitude to the implications of his parody of textual commentary thus appears ambiguous, though affirmation of its validity as a genre, and of the validity of the assumptions that underpin it, predominate.
It remains for me to acknowledge the help that I have received in preparing this revised translation of al-Shirbini’s *Brains Confounded*, and the translation of al-Sanhuri’s *Muḍḥik dhawī l-dhawq*, which will be published separately. Without the goodwill of the executive editors of the Library of Arabic Literature, headed by General Editor Philip F. Kennedy, the enterprise would never have gotten off the ground. It was kept in that position by the generous help and input of, first and foremost, Geert Jan van Gelder, who read the work in both languages and made numerous corrections, suggestions, and improvements; further invaluable assistance was provided by James Montgomery. I was also fortunate to have the input of my Cairo colleague Ahmed Seddik, who helped me to unravel many of the complexities of *Risible Rhymes*, of Noah Gardiner, who made an assessment of the manuscript of the latter, and of Adam Talib. Last, but by no means least, I benefited from the unfailing support of Stuart Brown, Gemma Juan-Simó, and, above all, Chip Rossetti, all of the New York office of the Library of Arabic Literature.