Introduction

EVELYN BIRGE VITZ AND MAURICE A. POMERantz

The 102nd night of *The Arabian Nights* begins a tale (which goes on for a great many pages) featuring a hunchback who is the favorite minstrel of the king of China. A tailor and his wife, out for a stroll, meet this cheerful and elegantly dressed hunchback. They take him home, where he performs on his tambourine, sings, and tells them funny stories with many gestures. But during dinner, the hunchback chokes on a fish bone, which the tailor had pushed down his throat as a joke, and he suffocates. The rest of this tale and numerous subsequent ones focus on attempts to dispose of the body of the hunchback—no one wants to be found with a dead body in his home! The tailor deposits the body on the staircase of a Jewish physician, who then dumps it at the door of a Christian broker, and so on. Eventually the hunchback’s lifeless body is discovered—and when the king of China hears that his favorite clown is dead, he threatens to hang the guilty party. (We are indeed in the presence of power.) A barber notices that the unconscious hunchback is in fact alive, bursts out laughing, and pulls out the offending fish bone with tweezers. The hunchback wakes up, stands up, and sneezes. All ends well. The king commands that the story be written down and gives robes and honors to everyone involved. He keeps the barber with him (along with the hunchback), and they enjoy “each other’s company until they [are] overtaken by death, the destroyer of all delights.”

In the story of this hunchback, we see a talented entertainer who tells stories, sings, and plays a musical instrument: he has many performance skills. Richly rewarded by his master, he is elegantly and colorfully dressed—with fancy scarf, Egyptian-style inner and outer robes, a tall green hat with knots of yellow silk filled with ambergris—all clearly the gifts of the king of China. That king—like some other rulers we will...
see—is to a substantial degree a fantasy figure, not a “real” monarch. His kingdom is peopled by a wide range of characters of varying religions—Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others—and of various stations of life: tailors, physicians, brokers, barbers, and so on. (Similarly, this volume will show us a multiplicity of figures of varied origins and status, drawn, in different ways, to the presence of power.) This king, like some others we will meet, is both a positive and a negative figure, characterized both by the brutality of his power (whoever is responsible for the death of the hunchback must die, even if the death occurred by accident) and also by his generosity to people with luck. Life in the presence of the king is both full of risks—the danger of dishonor or death—and rich in opportunities for increased wealth and status for those who are fortunate enough to succeed in pleasing him. The king is a patron both of clowns and of written literature: it is at his command that this story is recorded for posterity.

We hope this volume can give us an echo of some of the delights—snatched in part from oblivion—that are spoken of in the last sentence of the tale. We hope as well that it can provide a sense of the many types of performance and performativity found in spectacles and literature associated with courts in the pre-modern Middle East.

Courts in the Pre-Modern Middle East

The “Hunchback’s Tale” is first attested in the famed Galland manuscript, the oldest known collection of the Arabian Nights. Representing the first 282 nights, the manuscript has been dated by scholars to mid-fourteenth- or early-fifteenth-century Syria. For the first audiences of this tale, China would have been a region at the far eastern edge of the world. This marvelous land beyond the seas served as the proper setting for this wondrous tale.

Rulers and performing hunchbacks, too, would not have been unfamiliar to audiences in fourteenth-century Syria. The Mamlūk sultans who reigned over Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517 CE supported lively court culture in their main cities of Cairo and Damascus. Storytelling of the kind found in the Arabian Nights seems to have been a much-sought-after form of entertainment. Popular performers of Cairo, such as
the hunchback, would have likely also been a common sight both within
the rulers’ courts and sometimes roaming the streets.

This volume’s title suggests that we will be examining courts in the
pre-modern Middle East. Like much modern terminology applied to
distant times and remote locations, these three complex terms warrant
further explanation.

The pre-modern period in this volume extends roughly seven cen-
turies. The period opens with the first dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads,
whose reign marked an important watershed for Late Antique culture in
the eighth century, and closes with the rule of the so-called gunpowder
empires of the Ottomans and Safavids over much of the Near East in the
sixteenth century. Although treating such a long span has some inherent
liabilities, the editors of the volume believe that the potential for see-
ing commonalities across time outweighs the drive for a comprehensive
coverage of performance practices.

We have likewise chosen to treat the geographical and cultural limits
implied in the term “Middle East” with a similar degree of latitude. Our
selections in this regard were informed by the desire not only to show
commonalities within the Islamicate literary cultures of Persian, Turk-
ish, and Arabic (which are regrettably all too often still siloed within
modern nationalist narratives) but also to demonstrate the important
cross-pollinations that occurred between Islamicate, Byzantine, and
Carolingian courts. And rather than viewing distinct physical bound-
daries to the Middle East (an activity that is surely still problematic in
the postcolonial twenty-first century), we aimed to consider imaginary
voyages and travels to the region as important for our volume as “real”
events. After all, is not the imagination of performance as important as
its memory?

The ruler’s court, although it might seem to be the most immediately
tangible of the terms in our title, is perhaps the most elusive. Our use
of the term “court” in this volume most directly derives from scholars of
the medieval West. The modern English term “court” derives from the
medieval Latin term cohors, cohortis, meaning “enclosure.” It eventually
came to denote the ruler’s country residence. As Malcolm Vale writes in
his study *The Princely Court: Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West
Europe, 1270–1380*,
Courts and cities in the pre-modern Middle East and Europe (Credit: Jennifer Ilius)
What was “the court” in the later Middle Ages? What did contemporaries mean by the term? Satisfactory answers to these questions are notoriously difficult to arrive at, partly because the term could carry different meanings according to the context in which it was used. There is, however, a broad measure of agreement that a ruler’s household (domus, hospitium, hôtel) played a fundamental part in giving substance to the idea of “the court.” The material infrastructure, or underpinning, of all princely courts—in both the medieval and modern periods—was provided by the household. Court and household were never entirely synonymous, yet courts could not have existed without household organizations behind and within them.³

In this formulation, the court is an institution—a place that is related to the ruler’s home but more expansive. From it came a multitude of terms such as “courtier,” “courteousness,” and “courtliness” that all have particular meanings today. This definition should prompt us to consider that the court, as an interpretative category, demands further precision.

Among Byzantinists, the court has also been a central term in their studies of ritual and performance, political and material culture, literature, and theology.⁴ Yet as Alexander P. Kazhdan and Michael McCormick note, there is no single term that “exactly corresponds” to the modern term “court.” They state that the Greek to palation, “palace,” best “circumscribes the specific reality of the court.”⁵ Indeed, as Paul Magdalino suggests for Byzantines, the notions of court culture that are so important in Western studies were unnecessary to articulate, and thus they did not have as well developed a terminology of words surrounding the institution of the court.⁶

For courts of Muslim rulers, the situation mirrors that found in Byzantine sources. Nadia Maria El Cheikh, a contributor to this volume, has carefully considered the terminology associated with courts and courtiers for tenth-century Abbasid Baghdad. El Cheikh’s conclusion is that the multiplicity of terms suggests something about the court’s complex social reality. El Cheikh states, “Navigating between Ḥashiya/Ḥawāši, Ḥasham, Khaṣṣa/khawāṣṣ, to mean, in a variety of contexts, attendant, court attendant, courtier, servants, the terminology does not translate adequately into any clear definition of court and courtier. The ambiguity of our sources is, of course, telling: The court was not an institution in
any formal sense but rather a gathering of people, often fluid in composition and constantly changing." As El Cheikh contends, it is the very terminological instability that evinces the multiplicity of meanings. Hers is a salutary reminder that close examination of the local particularities and specifics of courtly life are the necessary foundation for any comparative study.

This volume aims at locating similarities across the Western medieval, Byzantine, and Islamicate courtly cultures. Such a study does not presume the presence of one shared courtly institution across time and space but rather seeks to understand the different ways in which contemporaries experienced and spoke about these places of power.

We turn now to the relationship between court and performance: some recent studies (several referred to earlier) have provided valuable new knowledge of and approaches to court and court life that have relevance to our volume. For example, Court Cultures in the Muslim World, Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries, edited by Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung, takes up many important matters relating to Muslim courts. Among relevant issues discussed are social elites at the Fatimid court, outdoor and indoor royal representations at the Mamluk court in Egypt, and patronage in various courts. While this book refers briefly to dancers and to singers, speaks sporadically of music, discusses at various points the role of poets, and refers to cooking at several points in passing, at no point does any contributor focus attention on performance as such. In A Global History of Power, 1300–1800, Jeroen Duindam also takes up a wide diversity of courts, as well as numerous aspects of court life and organization. Perhaps especially interesting from our perspective are his discussions of inner versus outer courts, court culture and society, hospitality, pageantry, and patronage. But Duindam does not at any point explicitly discuss performance or performers. Yet other recent studies present valuable information about courts and power—but with only a minor (if any) focus on performance. For example, The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture: Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium, Istanbul 21–23 June 2010, edited by Ayda Ödekan, Nevra Necipoğlu, and Engin Akyürek, takes up such issues as court architecture and court ceremonies but does not explicitly address performance. We hope that our volume will fill gaps relating to performance in this recent scholarship.
Performance

What is performance? Our basic definition comes from the ethnographer and folklorist Richard Bauman: performance is a “special, artful mode of communication”; of particular importance is “the accountability to an audience for a display of communicative competence, which is subject to evaluation for the skill and effectiveness with which the act of expression has been accomplished.” Another useful definition of performance is Erving Goffman’s: “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.”

As to what kinds of performances to include, this volume adopts a latitudinarian approach, casting its nets widely to look at all manner of pre-modern Middle Eastern communicative and performative displays and practices. We naturally invited in such clear performance phenomena as exuberant expressions of love in Arabic stories, shadow plays in Mamluk Cairo, and Byzantine storytelling. Many types of performance in the region and period consist largely of the verbal arts; therefore, along with storytelling, we explore oratory, conversation, and advice: courtiers throughout the region—in Persia, the Umayyad and Abbasid courts, and beyond—attempt to win the favor of the ruler and to shine before other courtiers.

We also include, within the ambit of performance, a variety of less clearly articulated court-related phenomena: political and ethnographic performances. For instance, there is that of kingship itself: courts are centrally concerned with the performance of the power of the ruler, in relation to members of the court and to other rulers and courts. Public punishments and executions, such as those in Byzantium, are performances: rulers are represented as forcefully displaying their power (and sometimes their mercy) over their defeated adversaries. Similarly, the official exchange of prisoners generally has a performance component.

Moving to another end of the spectrum—to a more purely cultural, even a “micro” level—we delve into the little-known (and highly entertaining) culinary performance of strongly symbolic red and white foods in medieval Christian Cyprus.

In many genres and works, performance is unquestionably present, whereas in others, it is necessary to look for performance indicators.
But wherever we see—or sense—the presence of communicative public display and audience, performance abounds.

The range of performances and of court settings included here opens the door to a variety of theoretical frameworks. Richard Schechner is one of the foremost scholars and theoreticians of performance working today. In his classic volume *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Schechner, often drawing on the work of other performance theorists, makes a number of important and useful distinctions regarding performance. We focus here on three major points. First is the distinction between “is” and “as” performance:

What is the difference between “is” performance and “as” performance? Certain events are performances and other events less so. There are limits to what “is” performance. But just about anything can be studied “as” performance. Something “is” a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is. Rituals, play and games, and the roles of everyday life are performances because convention, context, usage and tradition say so. One cannot determine what “is” a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances. . . . From the vantage of the kind of performance theory I am propounding, every action is a performance. But from the vantage of cultural practice, some actions will be deemed performances and other not; and this will vary from culture to culture, historical period to historical period.15

Some of the performances discussed in this volume clearly belong to the “is” category, while others belong to the “as” category.

Schechner also discusses what he sees as seven functions of performance: to entertain; to make something that is beautiful; to mark or change identity; to make or foster community; to heal; to teach, persuade, or convince; to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic. This is a conceptual framework of particular use to us: we have, for example, a number of performances and works whose purpose is clearly to entertain; the purpose of others is to persuade (see, for example, the “advice to princes” literature in the next section); yet others (e.g., Orfali’s) are centrally concerned with the sacred.

Finally, the concept of “performativity” is of substantial relevance to this volume. Performativity is a complex (and somewhat controversial)
topic, but we will focus here on just one aspect of the concept: the basic idea that words can be performative in the sense that they can make things happen; they change things. This concept comes in large part from the work of J. L. Austin, in particular, *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin provides the classic example: “I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife.” Performances can be performative—can change things. This will be clear in various chapters in this volume, for example, that of Vitz.

The Contents and Shape of This Volume

*Power Performed*

Kingship and court life involve performance in fundamental—and sometimes surprising—ways, as rulers demonstrate their power toward the courtiers and their inferiors. Sometimes these demonstrations of power are grounded in the realities of court life, while in other cases they may have a strong fantasy component, as Evelyn Birge Vitz demonstrates in chapter 1. She shows how, in the twelfth-century French epic *The Voyage of Charlemagne to Jerusalem and Constantinople*, courts of the Middle East—Jerusalem and Constantinople—were fantasized and even joked about; the geography itself is largely imaginary. This work also reflects (occasionally tongue-in-cheek) a warrior and Crusader mentality: what matters for a monarch and a court is not wealth or learning or high culture. Rather, this epic focuses, to a remarkable degree, on people and things—kings, knights, women, palaces, God, and relics—as performing their power, which is indeed performative.

In chapter 2, Stavroula Constantinou focuses on the theatrical character of the imperial punishments imposed on male iconophile saints, as seen in Byzantine hagiographical works of the middle Byzantine period. The descriptions of the performance of these punishments are lurid and violent—though the accounts may reflect a literary tradition more than a historical reality.

Spectacles, games, and processions were another important feature of court performance. In these ritual displays, participants and observers could witness and experience the power of the state. In chapter 3, Babak Rahimi points to the ways that Safavid rulers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created public “gaming” spectacles in their public square, called the “Image of the World” (*Maydān-i Naqsh-i Jahān*).
Rahimi argues that this urban space was used as a ritual site wherein the king, his court, aristocrats, diplomats, travelers, and the population of the city of Isfahan could engage in communal play. Rahimi argues that this square in both joyful celebrations and solemn moments (such as the commemorations of al-Muḥarram) served as a vital performative space for the Safavid state.

**Persuasion**

A well-known Arabic expression tells us that “for every situation, there is something appropriate to say” (*li-kull maqām maqāl*). This something is often good advice to the ruler. Courtiers attempted to persuade their patrons about a great many things, including the virtue of generosity (often to courtiers) and friendship (its importance and perils), the importance of justice and mercy, and their behavior (especially at night).

Advice was a pervasive presence in the courtly and larger political and ethical cultures of the early centuries of the Islamic era. Focusing on Iran in the tenth century, Louise Marlow in chapter 4 discusses the Arabic “Advice to Kings” (*Naṣiḥat al-mulūk*) attributed to al-Māwardī. She shows how rulers not only solicited and received advice (the education of princes being a prominent function of mirrors for princes) but also dispensed and performed it themselves. Marlow argues that what made advice compelling was its grounding in established authorities, including the sacred sources, the examples of venerated figures of the early Islamic era, and the conduct and sayings of caliphs, kings, and sages of the past. The roles of the monarch as wise dispenser or humble recipient of advice exposed him to potential challenges, and advisory literature prescribes the spatial and temporal boundaries within which caliphs and kings received advice but also attests to their transgression.

Conversation is often thought of as a spontaneous and playful art. But consulting manuals on how to serve kings (*khidmat al-mulūk*), Nadia Maria El Cheikh explores in chapter 5 how Abbasid courtiers during the ninth to eleventh centuries regulated their speech and gestures in order to impress and to be persuasive. Her chapter demonstrates how courtiers conformed to prescriptive codes of literary cultivation known as *adab* and reveals how courtiers sometimes managed to subvert or elude them.
Eloquent rhymed oratory has long held a great value among speakers of the Arabic language for its ability to persuade. Famously, upon listening to two orators speak, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly said, “Indeed there is magic in clear expression,” pointing to the power of rhymed and rhythmic prose. Despite the esteem in which the oratorical tradition in Arabic has been held, its history has been difficult to study because of a lack of reliable source material from the first century of Islam. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila in chapter 6 discusses the survival of the oral performances of one famous orator’s preaching (khutbas) and asks what the literary preservation of his preaching might have to do with its performance.

Entertainment

It was essential for rulers and members of their courts to be entertained. Entertainment has of course taken an immense variety of forms and has also existed in many venues. In chapter 7, Margaret Mullett argues that, outside of Constantinople, court literature was dominated by storytelling and that most of this form of entertainment took place in tents: “tent poems” survive; some major tales also seem to be associated with tents; and letters also apparently were received and performed in tents. There are clear connections between the emperor and these stories.

In chapter 8, Maurice A. Pomerantz focuses on the literary collection al-Hafawāt al-Nādira (The rare slips), composed by the fifth-/eleventh-century Baghdadī scholar Ghars al-Ni‘ma b. Hilāl al-Ṣābi‘. Pomerantz shows how these verbal errors—slips of the tongue—became part of the entertainment record of the Abbasid court. He argues that Ṣābi‘’s attention to the verbal errors at court can be productively compared to Freud’s famed inquiries into the question of lapsus linguae in his Psycho-pathology of Everyday Life.

In chapter 9, Li Guo focuses on episodes from “The Phantom,” by Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1310), showing how they contain a substantial amount of cross-gender acting. Guo also argues that such gender-bending is to a certain degree a literary device for characterization. It was also an element of the art of a one-man-band type of performer, who was able not only to play both sexes but also to sing and dance—and was thus a highly versatile entertainer.
Delight

Courtiers often describe the court as a location that stood outside ordinary experience. At the ruler’s court, men and women wore elaborate costumes, sang enchanting melodies, told compelling and elaborate tales, gave and admired ornate gifts, and ate sumptuous foods. Court spectacles, banquets, songs, and tales could inspire delight and wonder and even foster intense emotions.

Feasting and drinking were of course modes of entertainment and delight at court, but they also could have other functions. A fascinating example of “as performance” is chapter 10, by William Woys Weaver. He explores a system of dietetics, possibly particular to Cyprus, in which foods are divided into two classes, red or white, according to whether they contain blood. Blood foods were carnal, while white foods were vegan and thus appropriate for religious fasting. This system then synchronized red and white foods according to their Galenic humors and thus led to a decorative play on colors in Cypriot court cuisine, whereby fasting dishes were colored to resemble meat and meat dishes were made to look white—in short, visual puzzles and puns intended to amuse. The Frankish nobility thus transformed cuisine into entertainment: religious fasting without suffering and inconvenience. Weaver’s chapter also explores the possible ideas underlying this dietary system, in early Christian, Jewish, and Near Eastern religious ideas. This chapter reminds us just how true it is, as Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has famously pointed out, that “food is performance.”

Singers and musicians at the Abbasid court created a long-lasting tradition of sung poetic texts for the delight of rulers. Compendia such as Abū l-Faraj al-Īṣfahānī’s Book of Songs (Kitāb al-Aghānī) catalogue the most famous song texts and singers of the Abbasid court. In chapter 11, Bilal Orfali demonstrates how Sufi mystics adopted the poetic themes of Abbasid poetry and refashioned them for a part of Sufi ritual known as “beatific audition” (samāʿ), in which believers were supposed to find rapture through the recollection (dhikr) of God. Orfali’s chapter shows how Sufis adapted themes of court poetry, such as standing at the ruins of the beloved’s campsite, recalling the journey of a poet through the desert, and love poetry (ghazal), demonstrating the
ways that court performance profoundly influenced modes of religious experience.

In chapter 12, Jocelyn Sharlet focuses on a set of Arabic stories from the Umayyad period (661–750) that were further elaborated in the literature of the Abbasid period (750–1258). These tales about chaste lovers typically feature a pastoral setting, a male point of view, a melancholy mood, and lovers who live, suffer, and die for love—providing delight for the court audiences for whom they were performed. Not all stories about chaste love, however, fit the dominant paradigm, and unusual cases can shed light on ways in which the Umayyads were viewed in the Abbasid imagination, point to intersections between love story and political life, and show how stories of chaste love live on in courtly and Sufi discourse.

The culture of performance throughout the pre-modern Middle East is a vast and in some ways still-uncharted territory. We hope that these studies, which combine rigorous textual scholarship and new approaches, will serve as signposts for further explorations. In the epilogue to this volume, we pull out some of the many important threads of the various chapters, drawing out major points, and with a comparative focus.

NOTES
3. Vale, Princely Court, 12.
4. See Maguire, Byzantine Court Culture; Beihammer, Constantinou, and Parani, Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power; Ödekan, Necipoğlu, and Akyürek, Byzantine Court.
8. Fuess and Hartung, Court Cultures.
10. Ödekan, Necipoğlu, and Akyürek, Byzantine Court.
11. The contributors to this volume draw on a wide variety of definitions and approaches to performance. We refer readers to the discussions of performance in Öztürkmen and Vitz, Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean, which can serve as a companion volume to this one.
16. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, 5.