Introduction

“Wisdom speaks upon his tongue”

Dirar ibn ḍamrah, a companion of ‘Alī, describing him

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalib (d. 40/661) was an acknowledged master of Arabic eloquence and a renowned sage of Islamic wisdom. When ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750)—who has been called the “father of Arabic prose,” and who was a chancery official for the intensely anti-‘Alid Umayyads—was asked, “What enabled you to master the science of eloquence; what formed your training in it?”, he replied, “Memorizing the words of ‘Alī.” Over the centuries, ‘Alī’s sermons, sayings, and teachings were avidly and assiduously collected, quoted, and studied, and extensively anthologized, excerpted, and interpreted. There are in fact tens of collections, in thousands of pages, of ‘Alī’s compiled words. Among the earliest and best known extant compilations are A Treasury of Virtues (Dustūr maʿālim al-ḥikam wa-maʾthūr makārim al-shiyam) collected by the Fatimid Shafi’i judge, al-Quḍāʿi (d. 454/1062), and the One Hundred Proverbs (Miʿat kalimah), attributed to the eminent Abbasid litterateur, al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869). They include some of ‘Alī’s most moving sermons and a number of his pithiest maxims. In this volume, I present both these important compilations in the first English translation.
‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661):
Life and Personality

‘Alī is a well-known figure in Islamic history. Cousin, son-in-law, and ward of the prophet Muḥammad, he was the first male to accept Islam. The Shia believe him to be the Prophet’s legitimate successor in both his spiritual and temporal roles, and thus the first “Imām.” Sunnis regard him as the last of the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” Both Shia and Sunni Muslims laud him for his deep personal loyalty to Muḥammad, his valorous role in the early battles of Badr, Uḥud, Khandaq, Khaybar, and Ḥunayn, and his profound piety, learning, and justice. They recount numerous hadiths from the Prophet praising him, among the most famous of which are: “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Alī is its gateway”; “‘Alī is to me as Aaron was to Moses, except that there is no prophet after me”; “You, ‘Alī, are my brother in this world and the next.”

To better understand ‘Alī’s words, it is important to examine the historical, religious, and political context from which his teachings arise. Most, perhaps all, of ‘Alī’s recorded sermons are said to be from the four turbulent years of his caliphate (36–40/656–61). His harsh censure of this world, his many death-themed sermons, and his urgent exhortations to prepare for the hereafter, clearly resonate the difficult reality of those years.

Born in Mecca around AD 600, ‘Alī was raised by his older cousin Muḥammad. He was about ten years old when Muḥammad began the call to Islam, twenty-three at the time of the Muslims’ migration to Medina, and thirty-three when Muḥammad died. He participated actively in the setting up of the Medinan polity, playing a key role in establishing Islam in its nascent stage. Early in his time in Medina, he married the Prophet’s youngest daughter Fāṭimah, and had four children with her: al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, Zaynab, and Umm Kulthūm. Muḥammad’s line continued solely through ‘Alī’s two sons, a line which would become an important locus for the Shia doctrine of the imamate.
After Muḥammad’s death in 11/632, ʿAlī took a back seat in government during the reigns of the caliphs Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān. The Shia say he spent those twenty-five years collecting the Qurʾan and imparting wisdom to al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. After ʿUthmān’s assassination in 36/656, however, he was thrust into the limelight when the community pledged allegiance to him as the new caliph. During the four short years of his reign, he fought three major battles against groups of Muslims who had revolted against him: (1) The Battle of the Camel against the people of Basra, led by the Prophet’s widow ʿĀʾishah and the companions Ġālīḥ and Zubayr (the battle is named after the camel ʿĀʾishah rode onto the battlefield); (2) the Battle of Ṣiffīn against the people of Syria, led by the governor of Damascus, the Umayyad Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān; and (3) the Battle of Nahrawān against a group of renegades from ʿAlī’s own army who came to be known as the Khārijites. In these battles, ʿAlī was supported by many of the Prophet’s companions from Medina, as well as the people of Kufa and Basra. Many of his close associates played key roles in his administration, and some are named as interlocutors in the Treasury of Virtues. ʿAlī had moved to Kufa from Medina immediately after assuming the caliphate in order to intercept the first group of rebels, and thereafter remained in Iraq, occupied with the Syrian conflict. He spent his last few months unsuccessfully urging the Kufans to regroup and fight Muʿāwiyah. In 40/661, ʿAlī was killed by a Khārijite assassin while he was praying in the mosque in Kufa. His shrine in present-day Najaf, near Kufa, has become an important site of Shia pilgrimage, scholarship, and activism.

An account of ʿAlī by his close companion Dirār ibn Ḍamrah al-Ṣudāʾī al-Nahshali nicely sums up his personality and image. Not only does it encapsulate his companions’ affectionate yet reverent regard, it also highlights the austere lifestyle and the concern with the hereafter that underpin ‘Alī’s pietistic teachings. Moreover, it comments appositely for our purposes on ‘Alī’s wisdom and exposition. The report is as follows:
Ḍirār came to Damascus to pay a visit to Muʿāwiya (now caliph after ʿAlī’s death). Muʿāwiya said: Ḍirār, describe ʿAlī to me. Ḍirār replied: Let it go, please. Muʿāwiya insisted and Ḍirār complied, saying:

ʿAlī was farsighted and strong. When pronouncing judgment, he was discerning. When commanding, he was just. Knowledge gushed from his person. Wisdom spoke upon his tongue. He shied away from the ornaments of this world, taking solace in the lonely night. He wept copiously in prayer, thought deeply, and turned his hands one over the other, admonishing himself before admonishing others. He favored simple food and plain clothes. He lived amongst us as one of us, responding when asked, and answering when questioned. But despite our intimacy, we would approach him with reverent awe, hesitating to call him out for a casual conversation. He respected the pious and was kind to the poor. The powerful did not dare presume upon a favorable ruling and the weak never despaired of his justice.

I saw him once when the night had let down its curtain and the stars had set. He stood in his place of prayer with a hand on his beard, writhing as one who had been stung by a snake. Weeping grievously, he exclaimed: “O world! Tempt someone other than me! Is it me you have come to seduce? Is it me you long for? Far be it! Far be it! I have divorced you thrice, a divorce that does not permit reconciliation. Your life is short, your value little. Alas! My provisions are scarce, the distance long, and the journey must be made alone!”

Moved to tears, Muʿāwiya responded: May God have mercy on ʿAlī, truly he was as you describe! How do you grieve for his loss, Ḍirār? Ḍirār replied: My sorrow is akin to the anguish of a mother whose only child has been butchered in her lap.
Orality, Authenticity, and Collection of ʿAlī’s Words: Layered Sources

While writing was known in ʿAlī’s time—in fact, he is reported to have been one of the Prophet’s scribes who wrote down Qur’anic passages as they were revealed—his society was primarily oral. Accordingly, the principal mode of verbal production, transmission, and collection was oral, and ʿAlī’s words were initially related for a century or more chiefly by word of mouth. This long period of oral transmission left room for errors in communication and even outright fabrication.8 Nevertheless, the existence of a genuine core of materials from the period is far from inconceivable. The robustness of the indigenous oral tradition gives us good reason to believe in the validity of the oeuvre. Mary Carruthers has shown that members of oral societies had prodigious memories on which they relied to transmit lengthy pieces of their artistic verbal production.9 Moreover, Gregor Schoeler has demonstrated that oral transmission in this society was increasingly supplemented by scholarly note-taking.10 Because ʿAlī was an important figure in early Islamic history who preached often and in many different contexts to large public audiences, the early Muslims had good reason and ample opportunity to remember and pass on his teachings. So it is quite feasible that a portion of the words in our two texts were spoken—with some variation or even verbatim—by ʿAlī himself.11

ʿAlī’s words were collected and passed down through the centuries by many individuals. We are told of a written collection by a man named Zayd ibn Wahb al-Juhanī (d. 96/715) who fought in his army at Ṣiffīn,12 but this is perhaps an anomaly. Writing became widespread in the Islamic world after the introduction of paper-making techniques to it from China in the mid eighth century AD, and it was only then that ʿAlī’s words—along with prophetic traditions, historical reports, and poetry—were systematically transcribed.

In the eighth and ninth centuries AD, historian-compilers such as Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/774), Abū Naṣr al-Minqārī (d. 202/818),
Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 205/820), al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822), al-Madāʾinī (d. 225/840), and al-Thaqafī (d. 283/896) are reported to have collected ‘Ali’s sermons, speeches, and epistles in independent works. In the tenth century, the Fatimid jurist and historian al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974) is reported to have collected ‘Ali’s sermons and written a commentary on them.\textsuperscript{13} None of these early compilations survive. But ‘Ali’s words were also transcribed into synthetic historical works by the same historians mentioned above, as well as by several others, and many of these histories are extant.\textsuperscript{14}

‘Ali’s words were culled from these historical works (and perhaps also copied from the earlier independent works) by literary anthologists such as al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940), Ibn Shuʿbah al-Ḥarrānī (d. 336/948), and many other scholars. In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries AD, major independent compilations of ‘Ali’s words were put together from the earlier written sources, still extant today: The celebrated compilation by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1014), The Path of Eloquence (\textit{Nahj al-balāghah}) has attracted over four hundred commentaries. Al-Quḍāʿī (d. 454/1062), the compiler of \textit{A Treasury of Virtues}, was of the generation after al-Raḍī, and the contents of his collection overlap to a certain extent with The Path of Eloquence. Other extant compilations of ‘Ali’s words include Scattered Pearls (\textit{Nathr al-laʿālī}) by al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153), and radiant Maxims and Pearly Sayings (\textit{Ghurar al-ḥikam wa-durar al-kalim}) by al-Āmidī (d. 550/1155).\textsuperscript{15}

As a result of the early oral transmission of these materials, assorted renderings of the same piece appear in different works. There are even multiple renderings of the same piece within one collection, including a number of near-identical passages and maxims in the \textit{Treasury of Virtues}. This phenomenon derives from the nature of compiling similar materials from disparate sources, as al-Quḍāʿī has done. Moreover, some proverbs (and also some sermons), are attributed to more than one person.\textsuperscript{16}
Introduction

The Literary Style of ‘Alī’s Words: Oral Patterns, Islamic Ethos, and Arabian Context

Eloquence is a crucial component of preaching, and as Richard Lanham has argued, it “tacitly persuades.” A brilliant exposition is more effective than a clumsy harangue, beautiful language more likely to evoke a positive response than a plodding lecture. In combination with Qur’anic validation and rational argumentation, ‘Alī attempted to stir the hearts and minds of his audience with his verbal artistry, rhythmically expounding his lessons in cadenced parallelisms and vivid metaphors.

Understanding the orality of ‘Alī’s milieu is also crucial to parsing his literary style. In a study that addresses issues of both authenticity and technique, Walter Ong has shown that verbal expression in an oral culture is mnemonic. He argues that to retain carefully articulated thought, rhythmic patterns must be used. By and large, the materials in the present volume display such oral patterns (as do sermons and sayings attributed to the prophet Muḥammad and other prominent early Islamic orators). Parallelism, which is the hallmark of ‘Alī’s verbal creations, produces a strong acoustic rhythm, and pithy sentences, repetition, assonance, and prose-rhyme augment this rhythm. Several other features of oral-based verbal production are also discernible, including vivid imagery, testimonial citation, additive rather than subordinative phrases, aggregative rather than analytic expositions, an agonistic tone, and closeness to the human lifeworld, shown through the use of mundane objects and daily activities as metaphors physically showcasing abstract ideas. (Arabic prose produced after writing became widespread, such as the sermons of the tenth-century Syrian preacher Ibn Nubātah, would have a very different feel, including longer sentences, consistent rhyming, and much less parallelism.) To Ong’s list of features of orality, we can add an abundance of audience engagement features: direct address, emphatic structures, rhetorical questions, and prescriptive phrases. Together, these elements create a dense web
pulling in the audience toward participation in the speech act—and thus the persuasive goal—of the orator. Moreover, the elegance of Ali’s words is apparent in their dignified yet simple language and their apposite positioning.

Growing up under Muḥammad’s care, ‘Alī was continually exposed to the Qur’anic revelation; consequently, his words are permeated by its vocabulary and themes. From time to time, he also cites Qur’anic verses verbatim, endorsing the gravity of his teachings with divine authority. There is a religious flavor, a focus on piety, in all modes of ‘Alī’s speech, undergirding even the material produced in a political or military context. At the same time, his words also have a distinctly local flavor, a cultural texture grounded in the desert topography, tribal society, nomadic lifestyle, and rich poetic tradition of the Arabian Peninsula. In his verbal production, Qur’anic themes merge with nature imagery to produce a distinctive template of Islamic preaching. Directives to contemplate the purpose of life and the majesty of the creator combine with the vocabulary and images of camel caravans, racing horses, and watering holes. Cultural, geographical, and religious strata converge, coming together in a single, seamless, whole.²⁰

Al-Qāḍī al-Quḍaʿī (d. 454/1062):
Career and Books

The compiler of A Treasury of Virtues, al-Qāḍī al-Quḍāʾi, was a Sunni-Shāfiʿī jurist, and a scholar of hadith and history who lived and died in Fatimid Cairo. His full name was AbūʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Salāmah ibn Jaʿfar ibn ‘Ali ibn Ḥakmūn al-Quḍāʾī, an affiliate of the Quḍāʾah, a tribe of Himyar.

A senior government official, al-Quḍāʾi performed several singular functions for the Fatimids: He was judge over their Sunni subjects;²¹ he traveled in 447/1055 to Constantinople as Fatimid emissary to the Byzantine court; and he served in their chancery, being scribe for a time for the vizier ‘Alī ibn Ḥīmad al-Jarjarāʾī (d. 436/1045).
Al-Quḍā‘ī would presumably also have had close contact with the eminent Fatimid scholar al-Mu‘ayyad al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078), who was head of the chancery from 443/1051 to 448/1056; although the sources do not mention specific interactions, al-Mu‘ayyad’s dates at the chancery overlap with al-Quḍā‘ī’s time there.

Al-Quḍā‘ī’s scholarship was highly respected, especially in the collection and transmission of hadith. His student Ibn Mākūlā (d. 475/1082) praised his teacher saying: “He was a master of many different sciences . . . I don’t know anyone in Egypt who approaches his stature.” Writing a century later, the jurist al-Silafī (d. 576/1180) said of him: “His fame absolves me from lengthy expositions . . . he is counted among the trustworthy and reliable transmitters.” Following Ibn Mākūlā and al-Silafī, several medieval biographers chronicled al-Quḍā‘ī’s career and writings, and recorded the names of his teachers and students. Numerous hadith works cite him in their chains of transmission. We are told that al-Quḍā‘ī heard and transmitted hadith in his homeland, Egypt, as well as during his travels to Constantinople, in Syria en route to Constantinople, and in Mecca and Medina, when he performed the Hajj in 445/1053.

A prolific author, al-Quḍā‘ī produced at least seven major books on a range of subjects, namely:

1. *Light in the Heavens* (Kitāb al-Shihāb fī l-ḥikam wa-l-ādāb, also called Shihāb al-akhbār or al-Shihāb al-nabawī), a book of “testaments, maxims, counsels, and directions for refined behavior” ascribed to the prophet Muḥammad. This is al-Quḍā‘ī’s most famous work, and some of the numerous commentaries on it have been published. A companion volume, the *Musnad al-Shihāb*, also by al-Quḍā‘ī, provides the chains of transmission (isnād) for these hadith. The *Musnad* has been published in several editions.

2. *A Treasury of Virtues* (Dustūr maʿālim al-ḥikam wa-maʾthūr makārim al-shiyam min kalām amīr al-muʾminīn ʿAlī ibn Abī...
Ṭālib), published in several editions, and newly edited and translated in the present volume.

3. Al-Quḍāʿi’s History (Kitāb al-Inbāʾ ‘an al-anbiyā’ wa-tawārīkh al-khulafāʾ wa-wilāyat al-umārāʾ), also called Tārikh al-Quḍāʾi: min khalq Ādam hattā sanat 427 AH, and ʿUyūn al-maʿārif wa-funūn akhbār al-khalāʾif), a book on the history of the prophets and the caliphs up to the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Ẓāhir. It has been published in several editions.

4. The Merits of al-Shāfiʿi (Kitāb Manāqib al-Imām al-Shāfiʿi or Kitāb Akhbār al-Shāfiʿi), a lost hagiographical work on the merits of the founder of al-Quḍāʿi’s legal school.

5. Compendium of Teachers (Muʿjam al-shuyūkh), a lost biographical listing of the scholars from whom al-Quḍāʿi transmitted hadith.

The above five books are listed in Ibn ʿAsākir’s Tārikh Madīnat Dimashq, the earliest listing I have found of al-Quḍāʿi’s books.26

6. Institutions of Egypt (Kitāb Khitaṭ Miṣr, also known as al-Mukhtār fī dhikr al-khitaṭ wa-l-āthār), a lost book on the history of Egypt ascribed to al-Quḍāʿi by Ibn Khalikān and al-Maqrīzī, both of whom cite numerous reports from it.27

7. Qur’ān Commentary (Tafsīr), now lost, first mentioned by al-Silafī then by al-Maqrīzī;28 this is possibly the same work as the Book of Numbers (Kitāb al-ʿAdad) ascribed to him by Ibn ʿAṭiyyah.29

Two other works are ascribed to al-Quḍāʿi in rather late sources, perhaps erroneously: A work on preaching, The Preacher’s Pearl and the Worshiper’s Treasure (Durrat al-wāʾīzin wa-dhukhr al-ʿābidin),30 and a work on wisdom sayings, Details of Reports and Gardens of Lessons (Daqāʾiq al-akhbār wa-ḥadāʾiq al-iʿtibār), the latter now published.31 Al-Silafī also reports that Ibn Mākūlā preserved his notes from al-Quḍāʿi’s lectures, a “work” which does not appear to have survived.32 Yet other titles which editors of al-Quḍāʿi’s various works
have ascribed to him are variant titles of al-Quḍāʿī’s History, which they list incorrectly as independent works.33

A Treasury of Virtues: Form and Content

A Treasury of Virtues is lengthily titled in rhyming Arabic, Dustūr maʿālim al-ḥikam wa-maʾthūr makārim al-shiyam min kalām amīr al-muʾminin ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (ṣalla Allāhu taʿālā ʿalayhi wa-ʿālihi wa-sallam), literally “A Compendium of Signposts of Wisdom and a Documentation of Qualities of Virtue from the Words of the Commander of the Faithful ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib.” The Indian manuscript used for this edition also titles it al-Shihāb al-ʿalawī (Light in the Heavens: Sayings of ‘Ali), to mirror al-Shihāb al-nabawī (Light in the Heavens: Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). It is listed among al-Quḍāʿī’s works by Ibn ʿAsākir, al-Silafī, al-Dhahabī, and al-Maqrīzī.34 In the introduction, al-Quḍāʿī tells us about the impetus for compiling the work. He explains that the success of his collection of the Prophet Muḥammad’s sayings prompted a friend to solicit a similar work featuring ‘Alī’s wise words. Al-Quḍāʿī himself describes the compilation as a collection of “ʿAlī’s words and eloquent sayings, his wise maxims and counsels, his directions for refined behavior, his answers to questions, his prayers and communications with God, and his preserved verse and allegories, nine chapters in varying genres.”

The contents of the Treasury of Virtues are ethical and humanitarian, encouraging their audience to such virtues as honesty, sincerity, and moderation, and warning against such vices as greed, oppression, and stinginess. But they also contain supplications to God, directives to worship him, censures of this world, warnings of the transitory nature of human life, and exhortations to prepare for the hereafter by performing good deeds. A few pieces support a predestinarian position,35 and a few other sections profess eschatological beliefs in the appearance of Dajjāl, the antichrist, at the end of time.
Al-Quḍāʾī’s love for the family of the Prophet is evident not only in his collection of ’Alī’s words, but also in his selection of materials. Some of the pieces in the *Treasury of Virtues* laud them, mention ’Alī’s special status as Muḥammad’s legatee, and confirm the special knowledge conferred on him by the Prophet. Al-Quḍāʾī’s reverence for the Prophet’s family may have its origin in the fact that the founder of al-Quḍāʾī’s school, al-Shāfiʿī, composed numerous poems in praise of them.\(^{36}\)

The wide-ranging themes of the *Treasury of Virtues* are presented in several distinct genres and forms, including sermons, testimonials, and homilies focused on the hereafter, prayers for forgiveness and salvation, theological discourses on the oneness of God, dialogues about a variety of ethical and religious topics, epistles with pietistic counsel, and ad hoc teachings in the form of legal dicta, prescriptions, proscriptions, and nutritional advice. The work includes a chapter comprising verses composed as a spontaneous response to the battles fought by the early Muslims, as well as gnomic verses, and verses proclaiming ’Alī’s closeness to the Prophet. There is also a chapter on sayings that use rare words or phrases. Proverbs are the single most prominent genre in the book, presented in three separate chapters, occurring in distinct grammatical and rhetorical patterns, and containing mostly moral advice.

**Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) and the One Hundred Proverbs**

Abū ’Uthmān ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (“Pop-eyed”) is one of the best known figures of Arabic literary history. Born and raised in Basra in a humble family of possibly African origin, he was a self-educated litterateur who wrote some 240 books and essays on diverse topics, of which 75 survive in whole or in part. His writings include: (1) books of literary criticism which also anthologize much prose and poetry such as the 4-volume *Book of Eloquence and Exposition* (*Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*), and the 7-volume *Book of Living Beings* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*); (2) vivid portrayals and incisive
critiques of society in shorter books and essays such as *The Book of Misers* (*Kitāb al-Bukhalā’*), *The Virtues of the Turks* (*Manāqib al-Turk*), and *The Epistle on Singing Girls* (*Risālah fī l-Qiyān*); (3) rationalist theological and sectarian Sunni treatises, such as the *Epistle on the Createdness of the Qur’an* (*Risālah fī Khalq al-Qur’ān*), and *The Epistle on the Position of the Supporters of ‘Uthmān* (*Risālah fī Maqālat al-‘Uthmāniyyah*); and (4) expositions legitimizing the ruling Abbasids, such as the *Epistle on the Abbasids* (*Risālah fī l-‘Abbāsiyyah*).

Several manuscripts of the *One Hundred Proverbs* (*Mi’at kalimah*)—sometimes called *One Hundred Select Proverbs* (*Mi’at kalimah mukhtārah*) or *Maxims of ‘Alī* (*Amthāl ‘Alī*)—credit al-Jāḥiẓ with their compilation. These manuscripts cite the Abbasid scholar Ibn Durayd (d. 312/933), who says he obtained it from Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893), a friend of al-Jāḥiẓ according to the report, who had himself solicited it from al-Jāḥiẓ. In this report, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir tells Ibn Durayd the following:

> For years al-Jāḥiẓ had been saying to us that the commander of the faithful ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib had produced a hundred proverbs, each one worth a thousand of the best proverbs produced by the Arabs. I asked him many times to collect and dictate them to me. He would promise to do so, but deliberately, stingily, forget. One day toward the end of his life, he brought out several earlier drafts of his own works, culled from them ‘Alī’s proverbs, wrote them down with his own hand, and gave them to me.

The *One Hundred Proverbs* is also transcribed in full and attributed to al-Jāḥiẓ by three medieval scholars: al-Tha’ālibī (d. 429/1038) in *Inimitability and Pithiness* (*al-I’jāz wa-l-ījāz*), Abū l-Mu’āyyad al-Muwaffaq al-Khwārizmī (d. 568/1172) in *The Book of Virtues* (*Kitāb al-Manāqib*), and Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (d. 855/1451) in *Important Chapters on Recognizing the Imams* (*al-Fuṣūl al-muhimmah fī ma’rifat al-a’immah*). The compilation and its ascription to al-Jāḥiẓ are also
mentioned by al-Āmidī in his introduction to the *Radiant Maxims (Ghurar al-hikam)*. ⁴⁰

And yet, the attribution of the collection to al-Jāḥiẓ is uncertain, perhaps even unlikely. Charles Pellat, who compiled a critical listing of al-Jāḥiẓ’s works, expresses skepticism at the ascription (although he does not explain why), ⁴¹ and when I looked through the indices of al-Jāḥiẓ’s published works, I found just five maxims of the *One Hundred Proverbs* cited in them. ⁴² If al-Jāḥiẓ culled the proverbs from his own works, this low number appears to belie the attribution. One possibility might be that al-Jāḥiẓ culled the hundred proverbs from earlier drafts of his own works (*musawwadāt taṣānīfihī*, according to al-Khwārizmī), and perhaps these drafts had materials not included in the final versions. Another important consideration is that only a fraction of al-Jāḥiẓ’s works has survived, and the missing maxims might be from his lost books.

Whether or not al-Jāḥiẓ compiled it, the probability of the attribution of its contents to ʿAlī is about the same as it is for other collections, because these same proverbs are also found scattered in many different sources. Authenticity of words attributed to ʿAlī (and to others from his time) has to be considered at the level of the individual proverb or sermon rather than at the level of the compilation as a whole.

Whatever the authorship, the *One Hundred Proverbs* is a text that has attracted much attention. There are numerous commentaries in Arabic, as well as Persian and Ottoman Turkish translations, super-commentaries, and verse renditions, typically one or two couplets per saying, with handsome calligraphy and beautiful illumination. ⁴³ The work continues to be studied assiduously by Muslims across the globe. Two well-known commentaries are: (1) al-Rashīd al-Waṭwāṭ (d. 578/1182), *What Every Student Needs, to Understand the Words of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (Maṭlūb kull ṭālib min kalām ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib)*; and (2) Maytham al-Baḥrānī (d. 679/1280), *Commentary on the One Hundred Proverbs (Sharḥ Miʾat kalimah)*. ⁴⁴ The *One Hundred
Proverbs has also been translated into modern Turkish as Hazrat-i Ali’
in Yüz Sözü.

ʿAlī’s Wisdom in the West

ʿAlī’s words, particularly his proverbial sayings, were among the earliest pieces of Arabic literature with which the Western world engaged, presumably because of their universal ethical appeal. Following the first edition in the seventeenth century, there are at least two translations and four editions with translations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of ‘Alī’s gnomic maxims and verse into Western languages, including Old English, Latin, and German (these are listed in the Bibliography). Al-Ṭabarsī’s Scattered Pearls seems to have been a particular favorite. In the twentieth century, no further translations of those specific compilations appeared. Al-Raḍī’s Path of Eloquence, however, was translated several times in Iran and India, unfortunately in rather lackluster translations; the one accurate and idiomatic partial rendition is Thomas Cleary’s English translation of its wisdom section.

The first Western translator of ‘Alī’s words was Simon Ockley, Professor of Arabic at the University of Cambridge in the early eighteenth century. He extolled the humanitarian grounding of ‘Alī’s sayings, adducing them as proof against accusations of “gross ignorance” leveled at the Arabians by eighteenth century Englishmen. His words are an appropriate characterization with which to conclude:

The Sentences are full, and to the Purpose: They breathe a Spirit of pure Devotion, Strictness of Life, and express the greatest Gravity, and a most profound Experience in all the Affairs of Human Life . . . All that I say, is, That there is enough, even in this little Handful, to vindicate, in the Judgment of any Man of Sense, the poor injured Arabians, from the Imputation of that gross Ignorance fastned upon them by Modern Novices.45