



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of

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entitled

Poetics of Ambivalence of al-Ma'arrī's *Luzūmīyāt* and the Question of Freethinking

will be held on

Friday, 18 May 2018, at 10:00 am

in the

**Senate Room-Monument Building
Central European University (CEU)
Nádor u. 9, Budapest**

Examination Committee

Chair	Matthias Riedl (CEU, History Department)
Members	Aziz Al-Azmeh, supervisor (CEU, History Department) Nadia al-Bagdadi (CEU, History Department, Institute of Advanced Studies)
External readers	Mushegh Asatryan (University of Calgary, School of Languages, Linguistics, Literatures and Culture), present Zoltan Szombathy (ELTE, Institute of Oriental Studies), present

The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection on the CEU e-learning site.
Should you wish to access it contact Csilla Dobos (dobos@ceu.edu)

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation

My dissertation is a study of the eleventh-century Syrian writer Abū'l 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d.1058) and his diwan entitled *Luzūm mā lā yalzam* (*The Necessity of what is not Necessary*). By historical contextualization and with the revision of analytical terms of reference previously applied to the study of al-Ma'arrī and his *Luzūm*, the research aimed to enhance our understating of both al-Ma'arrī and the general dynamics of the period in which the poet lived and worked. Previous studies of *Luzūm* had shared the general assumption that a uniform, pietistic religious culture was the central driving force of society, even prior to the formal institutionalization of 'ulamā' under the Seljuqs, Ayyubids, and Mamluks. Most of these studies also assumed that, at the time of al-Ma'arrī, the dynamics of the cultural and intellectual life were entirely driven by the rigid dichotomy between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy. Finally, previous studies, inattentive to and perhaps intolerant towards to any sort of incoherence, dissonance, paradox, and confusion, ended up presenting reductive — and, as a result, often superficial— studies of *Luzūm*. As a result, al-Ma'arrī has been presented as an eccentric alien and a complete outsider to his age. Likewise, *Luzūm* has been presented as a completely unconventional work.

One aim of this dissertation was to reassess the meaning and the value of contradictions in *Luzūm* through a study of ambivalence. While it is true that, in terms of its literary features, *Luzūm* is unconventional in some ways, its contradictory content does not really make it so odd. Demonstrated through a close reading of the text in light of these contradictions, especially those regarding matters of faith and religion, this work has shown that *Luzūm* is not as foreign or strange to its time as had once been assumed. Al-Ma'arrī

wrote *Luzūm* at a time of great cultural and religious diversity, intellectual pluralism, and epistemological, political and normative anxieties. In matters of faith and religion al-Ma‘arrī deliberately remained ambivalent in order to underline doubt, anxiety, and confusion over certainty. In fact, any statement of certainty in matters of faith and religion was severely rebuked by al-Ma‘arrī. In the midst of competing truths and orthodoxies, al-Ma‘arrī, through determined ambivalence and through affirmation and negation of the same concept at the same time, positioned himself against all kinds of certain and categorical conclusions. Al-Ma‘arrī’s *Luzūm* was therefore directly informed by the heated intellectual and religious debates of the day — which, to his mind, led nowhere. In this regard, *Luzūm* must be seen as a genuine reflection of the intellectual and political environment in which it was created. It was neither as alien, nor as inappropriate to its age, as scholars have often suggested.

Another aim of this dissertation was to provide some understanding of al-Ma‘arrī’s freethinking. In modern scholarship there have been two major trends in assessing al-Ma‘arrī’s religious thought. One presents al-Ma‘arrī as a nonbeliever, a freethinker like Ibn ar-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī, who practiced dissimulation, *taqīya* because of the threat of persecution, and to therefore concealed his unbelief by contradictions. The other trend, however, presents al-Ma‘arrī as a sincere and pious believer. This dissertation has shown that, in regards to the context of al-Ma‘arrī and the milieu in which *Luzūm* was composed, notions involving dissimulation, including *taqīya*, concealed writing, and sincerity are not apt analytical tools.

These are the ideas that were proposed in this dissertation. In the first chapter, in order to contextualize my ensuing analysis of the *Luzūm*, I presented the intellectual, religious, and political states present in al-Ma‘arrī’s time. I also offered a survey of al-Ma‘arrī’s

biography, works, networks, standing, and reputation. What resulted from this were some key observations. First, there were two main factors that reinforced a sense of doubt and confusion in al-Ma'arrī's work. One was his short stay in Baghdad and, as a result, his immersion in the rich cultural life of the cosmopolitan capital. The other was the constant political instability in North Syria, which provided yet another cause for his anxieties. Second, with regard to his *oeuvre*, this chapter showed how admonitory and didactic works constituted a large portion of his corpus. Some of his epistles are also distinct due to their interplay of humor, irony, and sarcasm. It is clear that *Luzūm* is not al-Ma'arrī's only work with severe stylistic and formal constraints, as he applied rigid compositional rules to many of his works. Third, although al-Ma'arrī was an ascetic, he was also an active member of society, as can be seen through his teaching and writing. His social network consisted of students from a myriad of intellectual backgrounds and from different parts of the Islamicate world, men of authority, and people from his hometown of Ma'arrat an-Nu'mān. Fourth, in regards to al-Ma'arrī's possible affiliation to shi'ī trends, it was shown that, even if at one point the poet welcomed some Ismā'ilī or Qarmāṭī teachings, in the end he denied the legitimacy of all of them. Finally, this chapter showed that, next to his fame as a poet and prose-writer, al-Ma'arrī did in fact have the reputation of being an unbeliever during his life-time.

The second chapter was dedicated to the analysis of some of the literary aspects of *Luzūm*. I have argued that al-Ma'arrī composed *Luzūm* not only for instructive and didactic purposes for his students, but also in order to receive distinction and acknowledgement of his virtuosity. Al-Ma'arrī exceeded the exigencies of the traditional ways of writing poetry and applied extraordinary rules of versification and prosody that would ultimately exhibit his

literary skills and excellence. The mannerist desire to strike and impress stood behind the creative dynamics of *Luzūm*. For al-Ma'arrī, language was the only medium where order and certainty could be established. He shows this through *Luzūmas* as well as through his many other works that contain complex and exigent formal rigidity. While order and consistency through the medium of language can be demonstrated through verbal mannerism, confusion and anxiety can be demonstrated through the mannerism of angst caused by tension, contradictions, and ambivalence.

It is at this point that this dissertation shifts from the context and form of *Luzūm* to a critical examination of the notions of belief and unbelief, which are significant themes present in the text. The third chapter presented a general survey of some of the essential aspects necessary to the study of unbelief and freethinking. This showed that, despite a temporal gap, there are similar - if not identical — sets of moods, motifs, and patterns present in both the European and 'Abbasid histories of unbelief and freethinking, which make the use of comparisons legitimate. Further, there are possible links and channels between the two, as can be seen in the *Book of the Three Imposters*. I speculated on the possibility that al-Ma'arrī might have been a link in this chain, especially when we consider the scope of his Andalusian network. This chapter also stressed that the consideration of *taqīya*, *sincerity*, and *persecution* cannot support any analytical contention if they are not properly related to both text and context. All of the previous analyses of *Luzūm* have failed to maintain this relationship between text and context, which has resulted in extremely reductive readings and definitions. This chapter argued that using ambivalence as a main interpretative tool in analyzing al-Ma'arrī's *Luzūm*, and also in matters of belief and unbelief, supports a reading that provides a proper space for the presence of contradictions,

doubt, and uncertainly. This also provides a more nuanced understanding of al-Ma‘arrī’s freethinking, which becomes apparent through moods rather than argumentative statements and does not have any imposing tone as is the case with other freethinkers. This chapter has also argued that, while reading *Luzūm*, attention must be paid to its polemical content, specifically to situational statements made against other religions and sects and their teachings. Statements that show adherence to Muslim teachings and preference to a generic Islam over other religions are neither occasioned by *taqīya*, nor do they necessarily express sincere belief in Islam, as has been suggested by contemporary scholars. These were, instead, denominational and generic statements with a specific polemical purpose.

The fourth chapter provided a detailed analysis of the notions of God, revelation, and reason in *Luzūm* in the light of ambivalent attitude al-Ma‘arrī expressed towards them. It was shown that al-Ma‘arrī displayed significant ambivalence towards notions of God which,

MAIN STUDIES

- 2011 MA in Medieval Studies, Arabic Studies Central European University
2008 MA in Arabic/Islamic Studies, Yerevan State University
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FURTHER STUDIES

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2013-2014 Erasmus program at the University of Muenster, Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies
2003-2004 Arabic Teaching Institute for non-Arabic Speakers, Damascus, Syria

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

- 2016 Doctoral Research Support Grant, CEU, receiving institute: Orient Institute-Beirut
2016 Advance Doctoral Student Award, Medieval Studies, CEU
2014 Doctoral Fellowship, Orient Institut-Beirut, Max Weber Stiftung, Beirut, Lebanon
2013 Erasmus Scholarship, receiving institute: University of Muenster
2010 Visegrad Research Fellowship
2009 Full Scholarship in Religious Studies and Medieval Studies, Central European University

CONFERENCE PAPERS RELEVANT TO DISSERTATION

- 2017 “Poetics of Ambivalence in al-Ma‘arrī’s *Luzumiyyat* and Issues of Freethinking and Reception.” Invited lecture at the Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, CEU.
- 2017 “Two Cases of ‘Abbasid Critic of Religion: al-Razi and al-Ma‘arri.” CEU Doctoral Conference of The Centre for Religious Studies.
- 2016 “The Creative Bewilderment of al-Ma‘arrī.” Invited lecture in Orientalisces Orientalisches Seminar - Universität zu Köln, shared with Professor Verena Klem.
- 2016 “Why to study al-Ma‘arrī and *Luzūm*,” Graduate conference, Yerevan State University, Department of Oriental Studies, Yerevan, Armenia
- 2015 “Construction of a poet’s image across time and networks: Abū ‘Alā and his Reception,” DAVO conference, Bochum Germany
- 2015 “Al-Ma‘arrī’s Freethinking,” Graduate Conference in Leiden University, *Breaking the Rules*

PUBLICATIONS

Review of *Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean* by Sarrio Cucarella, Leiden: Brill, 2015 *Entangled Religions* 3 (CXVI-CXXII):2016.

“The Trinity as seen by Muslims with a focus on Ibn Taymiyya’s Perception of the Doctrine.” *Annual Journal of Medieval Studies* at Central European University (2012): 37-47

“The “Islamic Solutions” of Sayyid Qutb.” *Journal of Oriental Studies* of Academy of Science in Armenia (2009):39-47 (in Armenian)