e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Giugno 2025

The Symbolism of Nature in the Mamluk *Munāẓara*: A Study of Some Floral Literary Debates

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Abstract The literary debate is a distinctive genre of the Arabic literary tradition. Emerging in the Abbasid era, it flourished in Mamluk Egypt, when many compositions in prose and in verses have been produced, exhibiting a wide variety of animate or inanimate actants and themes. These texts have been composed for entertainment, with a didactic function, to comment on or symbolically represent aspects of the social reality. In this article, we will focus on the floral literary debate, a specific subtype of the genre that was practised from the third/ninth century. We will analyse a corpus of texts which portray speaking flowers produced from the sixth/twelfth to the ninth/fifteenth century to assess how one of the most classical and practised strands of the genre has been reconfigured between 1100 and 1400 to carry out specific performative and agentive scopes.

Keywords Literary debate. Mamluk literature. Nature. Flowers. Text. Reality.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-24
Accepted 2025-05-14
Published 2025-07-31

Open access

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Citation Tondi, A. (2025). "The Symbolism of Nature in the Mamluk *Munāẓara*: A Study of Some Floral Literary Debates". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, 9-44.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/01/001

1 Introduction

The literary debate is one of the most representative genres of world literature. It was widespread from antiquity (the earliest records date back to the twenty-first century BCE) and has enjoyed great fortune throughout the Mediterranean basin, becoming very popular even in England and France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Cuddon 2013, 186-7). At the core of this kind of text there is a dialectical exchange between two or more animate or inanimate beings who claim superiority over the other, attacking the flaws and demerits of their opponents and supporting arguments of various kinds. The genre has a long history in the Arab world as well. The literary *munāẓara*,[1] rooted in the theological and juridical debates of the Umayyad and Abbasid period, is an expression of the art of rhetoric and dispute, two fields in which the Arabs have excelled since pre-Islamic times. Its origins would date back to the fourth/tenth century while the most recent examples – written largely in vernacular – were produced in the 1940s, during the late *Nahḍa*.[2] The content may seem secondary to the importance accorded to the stylistic aspect. The issues addressed, however, may metaphorically express a social, political, or religious struggle between the protagonists of the debate (Belhaj 2010).

The Arabic literary dispute has been analysed by several scholars. Ewald Wagner has reconstructed the genealogy of the literary debate and analysed its different forms (Wagner 1991).[3] Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila has reconstructed the prototypical structure (Hämeen-Anttila 2006), while Geert Jan van Gelder, Wolfhart Heinrichs, and David Larsen have scrutinised specific themes of these compositions,

I would like to sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which helped me in improving the quality of my manuscript.

1 The qualification of 'literary' is used by scholars to distinguish between debates that have a belletristic nature thus can be considered *adab*, and scholarly debates. In this article we will use the term *munāẓara* as an umbrella term, to refer to the various types of literary contests. Although – as we will see – the texts we will analyse are mainly called *mufāḫara*, the term *munāẓara* seems to have established itself in academic circles.

2 Interestingly, in the twentieth century the literary debate was mostly practised in a specific area of the Arab world, namely the Arabian Peninsula, where it is an emblem of vernacular literature. For some of these debates, see al-Uḥaydib 1399 (Hijri). It emerged as a genre so practised throughout the Abbasid empire, it ended up being a local textual form.

3 The entry written by Wagner for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is based on his seminal study on the *munāẓara* (Wagner 1963).

aiming to identify the messages and subtexts inherent in them (van Gelder 1987, 2020a; Heinrichs 1991; Larsen 2020).[4]

One of the most practised strands in the struggle for precedence, within this genre of Arabic literature, is that between elements or components of the natural world. Considering the recent interest of academic scholarship in the manifold configurations of the natural world within the premodern Arab textual culture,[5] the literary debate is a significant field of inquiry regarding the functions attributed to the natural component. In fact, many debates are distinguished by a remarkable number of contestants belonging to the plant and mineral kingdoms (flowers, fruits, nuts, minerals), which are anthropomorphised, or presented through the figure of prosopopoeia. The botanical *munāẓara* is a well-developed sub-genre of the Arabic literary debate.

This article will focus on pragmatic functions of the representation of nature in the *munāẓara* from the sixth/twelfth century onward, with particular attention to the Mamluk era (seventh/thirteenth-tenth/sixteenth centuries) and – but not exclusively – to the Egyptian territory, a geographical area where the genre flourished. In the Mamluk period, in fact, this kind of text experienced great fortune and became a document with socio-political and religious-sapiential and mystical value, occasionally with a didactic aim. Specifically, we will concentrate on a corpus of texts portraying speaking flowers to try to detect their subtexts and implied meanings. To this end, attention will be paid to the analysis of the symbolic use of this specific natural element, with the aim of identifying the multiple functions attributed to it and the differences from the previous production of the Abbasid period. These fictional texts, far from being purely descriptive performances, are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and political context in which they have been produced. The later *munāẓara* is not merely a stylistic and rhetorical exercise[6] but, developing an aspect already present in some earlier samples, it becomes a means of indirectly narrating specific aspects of the social reality, representing the relationship between the intellectual and

4 For two recent and updated perspectives on the literary dispute, see Magliozzi 2024 and Saitta 2023. While the former focuses on the dawn of the genre, by highlighting the dialectical nature of some disputes by al-Ǧāḥiẓ, the latter concentrates on the postclassical developments in Yemen.

5 See, for example, Bellino 2023 as a collector of several approaches to the study of nature.

6 In his 1991 study on the origins and developments of the Arabic dispute, John Mattock was very critical of the *munāẓara*, asserting that the genre has shown a certain invariability and has maintained a "mixture of predictability and whimsicality". Disputes were "exercises in scholarly frivolity" (Mattock 1991, 163). Recent scholarship on Mamluk literature can help us re-consider these statements.

power, or expressing opinions on topical issues. Thus, the *munāẓara* can be interpreted as a political and social document and in certain cases becomes a hybrid form of writing, sometimes indistinguishable from the *maqāma*. According to the current state of research, the floral *munāẓara* produced after 1100 has not yet been subjected to exclusive investigation.

As we will demonstrate, these texts usually function to generate a second level of meaning.[7] We will suggest a cross-sectional reading, taking into account the complex set of factors – textual and extra-textual – that might have contributed to define their meaning. We will try to assess their agentive function and the evolutionary path of the genre. Before starting to investigate the selected debates, we need to shed light on the treatment of the flower theme in Arabic literature, with particular reference to poetry and the most ancient floral debates known to us. Mamluk literature is characterised by a high level of intertextuality. The notion of originality also implies the reconfiguration of traditional motifs and tropes. Revisionist studies on Mamluk literature have successfully deconstructed the idea of lack of originality of this production, showing to what extent it is an aesthetic and pragmatic response to new needs which emerged in a new reality (Bauer 2005). Our inquiry follows the same path, with the aim of evaluating how the dispute between flowers has been adapted to new aesthetics and purposes after the sixth/twelfth century.

Moreover, the scrutiny of the floral *munāẓara* is a further step in the study of nature in premodern Arabic literature, the flower being an element that may help to map a segment of literary production and studying the cultural history of the Mamluk period. As highlighted by the editors of the volume *Tracés du végétal. Nouvelles Recherches sur l'Imaginaire*, the plant, usually associated with the scientific domain, also concerns the historical, geographical, literary, and artistic field. It can be approached as a trace, that is, the materialization of a presence in a space, a recognizable mark of something that no longer exists, a representation of that absence. The trace may correspond to a real presence or a symbolic one that results from the representation of a past. The trace can be understood as a sign that may be interpreted in multiple ways. The interpretative process acts in many regards, with the aim of restoring the past perception or annihilating it. It acts as well like a creation that takes into consideration the past to produce something new (Trivisani-Moreau et al. 2015). We will

7 Identifying potential references to the extra-textual reality is one of the most difficult aspects in approaching debates between inanimate entities. Unlike *maqāmāt*, these texts have not been objects of commentaries and glosses. Furthermore, we have to be careful not to read into these works and to evaluate what texts may have said or not.

explore the discourse of flowers as a trace. The symbolism[8] of the natural component will be put in dialogue with earlier floral literary debates, the peculiarities of the context in which the texts were composed, and the increasing and multifaceted presence of flowers in several literary genres of the Mamluk period. Lastly, the topic of this article can contribute to enrich our comprehension of the status of the nonhuman, as well as strategies for mediating it, in premodern Arabic literary traditions.[9]

2 The Floral Motif in Premodern Arabic Literature

Nature encompasses many types of writing of Arabic literature, starting from pre-Islamic poetry and the Koran. Natural images described and evoked here, which reflect the environment of the Arabian Peninsula and the eschatological imagery of Paradise (Hämeen-Anttila 2016), became the basic component of the repertory from which Arab poets took inspiration and innovated in the subsequent centuries. A sub-theme of literature about nature is represented by flower depictions.[10] Flowers are an element of the natural realm that is culturally defined; in Arabic literature served to convey different meanings and messages. Already found in *ǧāhilī* poetry, images of floral beauty and fragrance started to be pervasively evoked in the Abbasid era, when flower poetry emerged as an independent poetic genre. *Nawriyyāt* and *zahriyyāt*,[11] i.e. poems centred on the description of flowers, became one of the hallmarks of Abbasid poetry, influenced by contacts with ancient Persia and the urbanisation of the Arab civilisation as a result of territorial conquests. This kind of poetry flourished in the Arab East as well as in the West. Poets also incorporated flower ekphrastic descriptions in poems on the spring and gardens. The repertory of types of flowers largely increased: from wild species such as the chamomile presented in pre-Islamic poetry to a large taxonomy including garden flowers, such as varieties of rose, the narcissus, the anemone, along

8 Here we use the term symbolism to indicate reliance on objects, characters, actions, which stand for something else and have a deeper meaning beyond the apparent sense (Cuddon 2013, 697).

9 Recent scholarship has deeply investigated various aspects of the interaction between human and nonhuman in medieval literatures. See, for example, Paz 2017 and Lopéz-Farjeat 2022.

10 For an overview of the pervasiveness of the floral theme in the literatures of the Islamicate world, see Schimmel 2002.

11 The two terms derive from *nawr* and *zahr*, respectively 'blossom' and 'flower'. For a detailed analysis of flower poetry in classical Arabic literature, see Schoeler 1974.

with a long list of fruits.[12] Flowers were usually described through metaphors, similes, and analogies with parts of the body, precious stones, textiles, and celestial bodies (Garulo 1993, 1046; Schoeler 2002, 400). Considered exclusively manneristic, impressionist, visual, and decorative by traditional Orientalists (Grunebaum 1945, 149-50), nature poetry has been re-evaluated in recent studies, which underscore the poets' empathy for nature, their lyrical tone, and their feelings that emerges in this production, as well as the humanisation of nature (Foulon 2005, 79). The metaphorical intent and more profound functions behind apparently descriptive passages have been brought to light (Sumi 2004).[13] Flowers are also the protagonists of a sub-type of literary contest which gained momentum from the fourth/tenth century. Before venturing into this sub-type, we have to consider the main features of the literary dispute in general in order to provide a framework for the comprehension of the dynamics that rule our corpus of texts and to trace the developments of the genre.

The Arabic terms generally employed to designate the literary debate are *munāẓara*, *mufāḫara*, and *muḥāwara*.[14] In a debate, two or more tangible or intangible beings boast and vie for precedence, with the aim of being honoured for possessing the best qualities. The final judgement is normally left to the author or an arbiter who acts as an unbiased judge. In some cases, no winner is proclaimed; in other samples, the opponents are estimated equals. In his article, Wagner traces the origin of the fictional *munāẓara* in earlier forms such as *faḫr* (self-praise poems) and *naqā'id* (contest-poems). The prose debate developed from *faḍā'il* literature, based on the exaltation of the excellences of people, cities, and regions. Another ancestor is represented by some treatises by al-Ǧāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) composed to praise or to blame different categories of animals or people. With the Abbasid polymath, the theme of the struggle for excellence enters the realm of *adab* and is further developed, since the subjects of the comparison are spoken through an attorney or partisan, who praises the qualities of his defendant and attacks the flaws of the opponent. In al-Ǧāḥiẓ, the rational reasoning has evident theological and philosophical implications. This aspect was abandoned in the full-fledged literary debate (Wagner 1991, 566-7). The debate can

12 Alongside flower *qaṣīdas*, poets compiled anthologies entirely dedicated to flowers-and-fruits epigrams and poems.

13 Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi identifies two simultaneous operations working in the *qaṣīda*: mimetic/tangible representation and symbolic/abstract representation (Sumi 2004, 16-17).

14 The first term indicates a contest in which different viewpoints are opposed against each other. The second term, which can be translated as 'vainglory' or 'boasting match', designates the boasting about the qualities of something or someone. The third term indicates a dialogue confrontation.

be in prose, verse, or prosimetrum; the last one is the form that has known more dissemination, especially after 1100. Concerning the structure of the debate, Hämeen-Anttila has identified two models, without excluding the flexibility and versatility of the structure. In the first type we have a prologue where the narrator – usually the author – introduces the scene-setting. Then, we have a series of eulogies on oneself and invective of vituperations against the opponent (eulogy-cum-invective scheme). The opponent answers in like manner, until the last contestant. In the epilogue the judge declares the winner or simply issues a judgement. The second type occurs when there are only two participants. They attack each other in a repartee (Hämeen-Anttila 2006, 141-2). The literary debate has evolved through time, especially in the post-Abbasid period, overlapping with other genres such as the *risāla* and the *maqāma*.[15] Such texts may serve different functions: displaying one's eloquence and rhetorical abilities, providing literary entertainment, provoking humour, and suggesting a second level of meaning beyond the surface one (Van Gelder 2020b).[16]

The floral debate has shown to be one of the most productive in the history of the genre. Scholars agree that a *zahriyya* by the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896) constitutes a pre-*munāẓara*, since it stages the narcissus and the rose – two flowers associated with the refinement and the sophistication of the Abbasid culture – who are personified but do not speak themselves. The poet immediately declares his preference for the first one through a set of images that standardised over time and were associated to these flowers until the "later centuries".[17] This poem was followed by a series of responses in form of refutation, such as the *Kitāb mufāḫarat al-ward wa-l-narǧis* (Book of the Boasting-Match Between the Rose and the Narcissus) by the bookman Ibn Abī Ṭāḥir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893), which has been lost (Toorawa 2005, 87-8). The opposition between the rose and the narcissus became a very well-known trope in the

15 Al-Qalqašandī (d. 821/1418) classified the debate as a sub-type of the *risāla*, being a prose genre characterised by brevity and flexibility and suitable to present many types of topics. With regard to the *maqāma*, some later literary debates have a fictitious *isnād* and are written in *saǧʿ* (ornate prose; Hämeen-Anttila 2006, 138; 143).

16 Among the most practised types, one can find – just to cite a few – the debate of Pen and Sword – which reflects the competition between the administrative class and military power –, the debate between Spring and Autumn – focused on exposing medical contents –, the dispute of the town of Kūfa versus Baṣra – a clear reflection of ancient territorial rivalries and local interests.

17 We borrow this expression from Syrinx von Hees (2023). We find it very appropriate to indicate the post 1100 period, as an alternative to the term "postclassical", unfitted to indicate the literary production from the post-Seljuk period onward. For a critic of the implications of the use of 'postclassical', see Bauer 2007.

third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries.[18] Several explanations have been advanced to decipher the origin of the contrast. In general, the rose was associated with the elegant men of the Abbasid court. Moreover, according to some anecdotes, the caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 247/861) explicitly expressed his preference for the rose, a noble flower that did not suit the common people. If the rose was the emblem of the caliph, the narcissus acquired an oppositional force, that of the Persian elements that gravitate around the towering figure of the caliph. Beginning from here the image of the rose sitting on the throne and the narcissus standing at his service may have its origin. The rose-narcissus opposition could be a literary reflection of this tension (Toorawa 2005, 92). Thus, a symbolic interpretation – or at least some extra-textual references – of the competitive strife seems to exist since the dawn of the floral debate. The poet al-Ṣanawbarī (d. 334/945-6) penned the first independent *munāẓara*, a six-verse composition where the two flowers directly speak and precedence is given to the rose. As Heinrichs has shown in his study dedicated to the rose-narcissus debate, we have to wait a century for the first prose debate of this kind known to us, a conversation between some flowers by the Andalusian poet Aḥmad b. Burd al-Aṣġar (d. 445/1053-54). It is a more complex composition where, after an introductory scene where four flowers decide to recognise the authority of the rose, each one of them pledges his loyalty to the chosen flower and then formalise their promise in an official document. The poet closes the *risāla* by dedicating it to a vizier that ruled Cordoba after the falling of the Umayyad caliphate. The anthologist Abū al-Walīd al-Ḥimyarī (d. 440/1048) composed a fictional response to this *contrat social* in which obedience to the rose is questioned and the royal right is attributed to the narcissus by employing an expedient argument which convinces the flowers of the precedent that the rose does not deserve caliphal power. This refutation is dedicated to the ruler of Seville. The two texts are not literary debates in the strict sense because the speakers do not boast for precedence, but they are built on the idea of the literary contest. By reading these texts against the political context of al-Andalus after the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate, Heinrichs suggests that they may reflect the rivalry between Cordoba and Seville as new emerging centres of power (Heinrichs 1991, 186-92). The two texts are an important step in the evolution of the debate, since the traditional opposition between flowers is invested of a new meaning, i.e. opposition between rulers and centres of power. The two *risālas* thus function as a political document.

18 Interestingly, in the same centuries – in particular from the ninth century onwards – the *altercatio* between the rose and the violet was a very widespread kind of composition, especially in medieval Latin language (Marinoni 2007).

To conclude, we want to point out another important detail discussed by Heinrichs. The scholar states that floral contests produced from the third/ninth to the ninth/fifteenth century share some aspects, notably the frequent recourse to poetic argumentation. According to the scholar, *taḫyīl* (make-believe, i.e. trying to explain real phenomenon by ascribing fantastic reasons through mock analogies or reified metaphors) as a tendency widespread in poetry has been widely used in the literary debates to corroborate one's argument for superiority (Heinrichs 1991, 182-3).[19]

What emerged from this overview is that a political lexicon used by the speaking contestants, with the rose as *malik* (king) and *sulṭān* (ruler) who claims his right to *ḫilāfa* (caliphate), hints that floral images might have been mobilised to take the side of a representative of power since the fifth/eleventh century. In addition to that, poetic argumentation based on fantastic interpretation is the privileged means by which the speaking flowers try to assert their superiority.

3 Literary Debates as Panegyric

As we have seen, in the two Andalusian *risālas* praising the aesthetic qualities of flowers is instrumental in taking an oath of allegiance to a political figure. In some successive literary debates, this function became well established. We encounter at least three full-fledged *disputatio* having an encomiastic aim. The practice of composing spring and flower verses to celebrate the unparalleled perfection of a renowned and powerful patron can be traced back to the Abbasid poet Abū Tammām (d. 231/845), who juxtaposes the fertility of the garden or the perfection of a blossom to the munificence of the praised person, the incontestable perfect one. It became a customary practice, to the extent that it has been extended to the *munāẓara*[20] (Hämeen-Anttila 2006, 142). Here, as we will show, the patron can be eulogised by means of different textual strategies and internal references that, in certain cases, are inspired by attributes of the praised.

The first sample is a disputation encapsulated in a longer *risāla* preserved by the man of letters ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201) in his multivolume anthology *Ḫarīdat al-qaṣr wa ǧarīdat al-ʿaṣr* (The

19 The centrality of the imaginative creation in the making of the literary contest is recognised by the scholar Ġardaʾ al-Mārdīnī, who uses the adjective *ḫayālī* (imaginary) to denote it (2008).

20 The encomiastic function is carried out not only through the floral debate, but also through other types of contests.

Unbored Pearl of the Palace and the Register of the Age).[21] The name of the author is not specified,[22] but in introducing the epistle al-Iṣfahānī specifies that it is dedicated to Ǧamāl al-Dīn al-Ǧawād, known as al-Ǧawād al-Iṣfahānī (d. 559/1164), a vizier of the Zangids in Mosul (Frenkel 2022).[23] Unlike the previous debates, here we have a frame story where the author/narrator introduces himself while entering a lush garden. The frame narrative will become a standard opening in successive debates. After a complex and ornate prose description of the prosperity of nature in springtime, six flowers speak in turn in relatively short passages. The argumentation follows a precise scheme, where the *qiyās al-šabah* (analogy by similarity) of a contender is deconstructed by means of the *qiyās al-ʿaks* (analogy on the basis of the opposite) by the opponent.[24] Each contestant exalts his unique chromatism and physical constitution, sometimes drawing on the poetic repertoire of images about flowers. Then, he attacks the previous speaker by refuting the reasons of his pride. The first speaker, the narcissus (*narǧis*), asserts that he deserves precedence because he is golden-coloured like a precious jewel, he is usually compared to the eyes – an important sensory organ –, and he is a pleasant companion in the drinking party. The second speaker, the chamomile (*uqḥuwān*), discredits these arguments by opposing the narcissus' submission – represented by his servility in the drinking party and his being gathered to be put in a vase – to his own freedom, being a flower that grows in the wild. By means of a reified metaphor, the chamomile associates himself to a beautiful smiling mouth. In his turn, the violet (*banafsaǧ*) attacks the lavender (*ḫuzāmā*) because he lives in wild and open spaces: for this reason, he cannot be compared to human beings but to wild beasts, consequently he has no reason for boasting. The last speech is reserved to a variety of rose (*ǧūrī*

21 al-Iṣfahānī 1999, 310-14. The text has been preserved by al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/ 1333) as well, but without the epistle. The Egyptian encyclopaedist calls it *Risālat baʿḍ fuḍalā' Iṣfahān* (Epistle by a Certain Erudite from Iṣfahān; al-Nuwayrī 2005, 11: 131-5).

22 He is presented as an erudite from Isfahan living in the same epoch of al-Iṣfahānī (al-Iṣfahānī 1999, 308).

23 ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī might be the author of this text. He was connected with the Zangids, like the vizier al-Ǧawād al-Iṣfahānī. He could have written the disputation before the fall of the vizier in 558/1163, and he may have hidden his authorship afterwards for obvious reasons. The practice of cryptically indicating the name of the author was quite common. In his *Kitāb al-Zahra* (The Book of the Flower), Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī (d. 297/910), for example, used to quote poetry in the same obscure way, and it is generally presumed to be Ibn Dāwūd himself (Van Gelder 2018, 27). This very plausible identification has been hinted at by the reviewer of this article.

24 Recourse to analogical reasoning demonstrates to what extent the argumentative sequence of the literary debate has been influenced by the juridical debate.

al-ward),[25] which categorically denies the self-praise of the violet by ridiculing his short life. How can the violet claim such a right to power? The rose, on the contrary, blooms several times a year and is a simile for the beautiful body. The flower concludes his self-praise by proclaiming himself *al-Sayyid al-muntaẓar* (the eagerly awaited master; al-Iṣfahānī 1999, 313).[26] When the rose's physical presence comes to an end, his essence – in the case of the vizier his political authority – persists after his 'disappearance'.[27] Being an important chief, the vizier is present and mentioned even in his absence. Getting the last word, the rose is the presumed winner, so it is a reference to Ǧamāl al-Dīn al-Ǧawād. The splendour of the rose, the king of flowers and a paragon of beauty and perfection, is the epitome of the perfection and the glory of the praised person (Schippers 2013, 383).

The second debate we deal with in this section was composed by the literary critic and prose-writer Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn Ibn al-Aṯīr (d. 637/1239) who was active as *kātib al-inšāʾ* (chancery secretary) and vizier of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's son in Damascus. He composed many epistles addressed to important personalities of his time, dealing with many topics in a literary style (Rosenthal 1986, 724). The contest is known as *Risālat al-azhār* (Epistle of Flowers)[28] and has the following structure: the frame story, the debate, and the dedication with the praise of al-Malik al-Ašraf Mūsā (d. 635/1237), the Ayyubid ruler of Damascus. The fictionality of the text, where the debate between personified flowers is more dramatised than the previous one, is openly justified in the frame story by specifying that the narrator was in a dream-like state when he was involved in a unique garden experience.[29] Walking through a lush greenery, he decides to enter a garden, where he engages in a visual and acoustic experience with the elements inhabiting the enclosure. The narcissus opens the boasting. The first part of the debate stages six flowers and a pigeon and is clearly shaped on the *risāla* reported by al-Iṣfahānī. Here too,

25 From Jūr, later also known as Fīrūzābād, a Persian town famous for roses (al-Thaʿālibī 1968, 127).

26 Although *al-Sayyid al-muntaẓar* is also the epithet attributed by Shiʿa to the Mahdī, we can exclude the possibility that the mention of the Mahdī may be motivated by the Shiʿi faith of the dedicatee. al-Ǧawād al-Iṣfahānī was vizier under the Zangids, who were Sunni, and came from a family in the service of the Seljuqs, also Sunni.

27 This is a reference to the rose oil or rosewater extracted from the petals of the flower. This motif is already found in Ibn Burd's *risāla* (Heinrichs 1991, 188) and will be invested with different meanings in later debates.

28 We have consulted the version reported in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* by al-Suyūṭī (2008, 706-12).

29 Trying to give credibility to a fictional text and not being accused of spreading falsehood has been a major concern for premodern Arab authors. See, for example, Drory 1994. Resorting to standard *formulae* and other devices is very common in literary debates.

traditional images taken from floral poetry are re-employed to laud the superiority of the dedicatee. For instance, the violet claims the beauty of his colour because it is similar to the first growth of beard on the tender cheeks of the beloved. The rose reverses this simile by stating that fluff blackens the delicate rosy cheek. To dishonour and mock the violet, the rose cleverly evokes a pejorative comparison of the repertoire that compares the violet to burning sulphur.[30] It is indeed compared to combustion, the rose proudly affirms. The next contestant is a singing pigeon, who dispraises the flowers that took part in the dispute by stating they are nothing else than the spots of pigeons' dirt and nests. Claims and counterclaims are clearly based on strategies employed in the rhetorical dispute. In this epistle we find a variation compared to the previous debates. Abū Tammām inaugurated the practice of connecting the depiction of spring to the praise of the caliph; al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897) continued in this direction by expanding the repertory of nature for this scope, including the wind, clouds, rivers, and trees. Ibn al-Aṯīr does the same in his debate when, after the pigeon's intervention, he makes two further natural elements, a cloud full of rain and the sun, take part in the contest. The hyperbolic path is evident, since the author starts with a small, elegant garden flower and ends with the brightest celestial body. The cloud, that usually represents the munificence of the dedicatee, constructs its argument through the opposition between *ẓāhir* (the outer form) and *bāṭin* (the inner essence). While the other speakers have just pretended to have certain features, the cloud gives life to the soil thanks to its rain. As the cloud proudly says, it is the one who makes visible what is hidden in the earth, alluding to the regeneration of nature after a rainfall. In this epistle, the narrator plays an active role, since he personally takes part in the tribute to the patron. After the boasting of the last element, the narrator intervenes stating that not one of the contestants can even compete with the *mamdūḥ* (praised one), whose name is given. Then the spring, the breeze, the cloud, the sun, and the birds acknowledge their inferiority and the dedicatee's excellence. The closing scene further emphasises the eulogistic purpose of the epistle. In a choral scene, the protagonists of the debate address the narrator declaring that, like him, they deeply love the ruler, a clear oath of loyalty.

> When I left the garden, the fruits of the trees, the cloud from its place, and the sun with its light professed all together: "We have seen

30 The exceptionality of this simile is explained in Harb 2020, 145.

> your love for al-Malik, a love that has become unanimous (*iǧmāʿan*).[31] You loved him because you saw him, we loved him because we heard about him. We swear to you by his virtues that abound in the face of the sky and among the stars".[32] (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 712)

As emerged from the analysis, this seventh/thirteenth century laudatory *munāẓara* is well integrated in a consolidated tradition of *madīḥ* poetry, from which themes and images are taken and employed. We do not have a metonymic relationship between the garden and the patron; the latter is above everything. The fact that nothing claims final authority in the contest implies that the debate does not have only a descriptive function. It is a means of legitimising the ruler and exalting the perfection of his power. The struggle for precedence, here, aims at demonstrating that no singular element among the beautiful components of the garden can claim precedence in front of the greatness of the praised one.

The last debate with a laudatory purpose we deal with in this paragraph was composed by Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Mārdīnī (d. 750/1349).[33] He was a litterateur, *ḥadīṯ* (sayings of the Prophet) scholar, and Ḥanafī jurist (al-ʿAsqalānī 1993, 3: 84-5) in Mamluk Egypt. The contest is called *al-Ǧawhar al-fard fī munāẓarat al-narǧis wa-l-ward* (The Unique Jewel in the Disputation Between the Narcissus and the Rose).[34] The two flowers speak in turn, each producing nine speeches in a well-defined argumentative sequence. The addresser, as indicated at the beginning of the composition, is the grand Ḥanafī judge Šihāb al-Dīn b. al-Kašk. The specificity of this disputation lays in the author's choice – a scholar with a legal background – to let the discussants quote verses of the Koran to support their superiority. The argumentation is thus based not only on reified metaphors and fantastic interpretation through which the author associates flowers and their attributes to tangible objects and human feelings, but also on *iqtibās* (citation) from the Koran and the Sunna that serve to maintain a certain claim by deduction. Thus, the proofs of superiority are not exclusively of a pure literary nature. This method is inspired by the logic of legal reasoning in Islamic law, a field in which al-Mārdīnī as well as the dedicatee were

31 In Islamic jurisprudence, the term *iǧmāʿ* indicates the consensus of the authorities over a certain issue. Used in this context, the term indicates the consensus of the flowers in recognising the superiority of the patron.

32 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

33 This debate has been shortly discussed by Heinrichs, who has focused on its narrative structure (1991, 194-5).

34 It has been transmitted, among others, by al-Suyūṭī in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* (2008, 602-11) and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Širwānī in *Nafḥat al-yaman fīmā yazūlu bi-ḏikrihi al-šaǧan* (1297, 136-48).

specialised. As Abdessamad Belhaj has demonstrated in his study of the different trajectories taken by the disputation in the Arab-Islamic tradition, the literary debate cannot be neatly separated from the juridical and theological debate, having inherited and adopted dialectic strategies from its antecedents (2010). Hence, the narcissus gives proof of his superiority by quoting, for instance, a part of a Koranic passage: "golden,[35] bright her colour, gladdening the beholders" (Koran II, 69;[36] al-Suyūṭī 2008, 603). In our debate, by means of a synecdoche, yellow represents the narcissus. The fact that in the Book of God this colour is given a positive connotation would imply the excellence of the narcissus. This claim is followed by another Koranic verse aimed at attacking the status of the rose: "slain were the Men of the Pit (*qutila aṣḥāb al-uḫdūd*)" (Koran LXXXV, 4; al-Suyūṭī 2008, 603). The word *uḫdūd* is cited by the narcissus as part of a paronomasia, where, however, the second term is absent but can be easily deduced from the context. The missing word is *ḫudūd* (cheeks), the most frequent simile for the rose in classical Arabic poetry. The semantic relation created between the Koranic verse and the implied word suggests a relation of similarity: annihilation is the destiny written for the rose. Later in the debate, in his *muʿāraḍa* (counter-objection) the rose destroys his respondent's proof by means of another Koranic citation meant to give authority to the speaker's thesis. After saying that the difference between the sun and the stars is huge, the rose quotes from the Koran: "None of us is there, but has a known station" (Koran XXXVII, 164; al-Suyūṭī 2008, 606), then he concludes that the narcissus is nothing else than one of his soldiers, i.e. a subordinate. By means of this citation, the rose implies that his rank among flowers cannot be questioned. Al-Mārdīnī honours the addresser also by employing legal terminology. The narcissus maintains that his merit over the rose is *farḍ al-ʿayn* (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 610), a legal obligation mandatory upon the individual, a merit that must be recognised. Building the debate on this method and using terms of Islamic jurisprudence is a way of esteeming the dedicatee and the subtilities of the science he represents.

Concerning the argumentations of a pure literary nature, in the debate there are interesting examples of poetic imagery at work. Resuming the image in which the rose indirectly associates himself to the sun and his opponent to the stars – implying his own primacy –, the narcissus rejects this claim by stating that if compared, fixed stars (*nuǧūm ṯawābit*) are more valuable than a moving planet/star (*al-sayyāra*; al-Suyūṭī 2008, 607), because what is permanent is better than what is transient. The star is one of the most common similes

35 *Ṣafrāʾ* (yellow) in the Arabic version.

36 The Koran is cited in Arthur Arberry's translation (1955).

for the narcissus in classical Arabic poetry. In this context, however, the implicit comparison has a further purpose, that of creating a connection between the narcissus and the dedicatee, the judge Šihāb al-Dīn. Threatening his adversary, the narcissus says:

> I swear by Who adorned the sky with stars, if you do not retreat,
> I will throw at you *a piercing meteor*/ Šihāb al-Dīn (*šihāb ṯāqib*).[37]
> (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 607)

The *tawriya* (double entendre) alludes to the judge, whose name means the "Meteor or Shooting Star of Religion", and creates as well a semantic association between him and the narcissus as a star. This association is confirmed in the last speech by the narcissus, where the flower asserts precedence over the rose because of "my presence *in the stellar abode*/in the abode of Šihāb al-Dīn[38] (*al-maqarr al-šihābī*;[39] al-Širwānī 1297, 146)".[40] Despite the apparent propensity for the narcissus, in the epilogue the author states that the only one entitled to settle the arbitration is – obviously – the exalted judge.

In the three laudatory debates we have examined, the praise of the patron results from the aesthetic value of the composition, the struggle for precedence between the beauties of a garden, and by presenting him as the esteemed judge whose integrity makes him the only one who can express the final judgement. The floral *munāẓara* has thus demonstrated to have been an alternative to the classic panegyric until the Mamluk period.

4 Discourse of Flowers as Repository of Mystical and Moral Lessons

The garden is a trope in classical Arabic poetry. Beyond being a spatial construction invested with multiple meanings, the garden is also a symbolic space where the human being can imagine and express his subjectivity. The hidden treasures of the terrestrial garden constituted a subject of reflection and meditation for many Arab poets. Nature, seen as a source of spiritual communion and a sublime being, inspired them with reflections about infinity and

37 "Piercing meteor", italicised, is the intended meaning, whereas "Šihāb al-Dīn", underlined, is the suggested meaning. *Šihāb ṯāqib* is also a Koranic expression (Koran XXXVII, 10).

38 The reference here is to the fact that the Ḥanafī judge is in the city.

39 This *tawriya* can be found only in the version of the debate reported by al-Širwānī.

40 Mattock considers the narcissus' allusions to stars cryptic, a proof of the irrelevancy of the composition (1991, 160).

finiteness, permanence and mutability (Jayyusi 1994, 379-87). In Sufi-inspired literature, the motif of the garden with its creatures served as a repository of lessons and to capture the essence of what surrounds the human being. In the mystical work *Kašf al-asrār ʿan ḥikam al-ṭuyūr wa-l-azhār* (Disclosing the Secrets of the Wisdom of the Birds and the Flowers)[41] by Ibn Ġānim al-Maqdisī (d. 678/1279), a verdant garden is presented as a place of retreat (*ḫalwa*) and the setting of a lengthy conversation staging several natural entities, such as flowers, animals, a cloud – just to cite some of them –, embodying human characteristics endowed with specific moral qualities. These entities epitomise different and contrasting behaviours. By observing their aspect and conduct, the author/narrator intends to provide moral lessons concerning the relationship between the human being and his Creator.

The title of the work does not include a term indicating the debate. Nevertheless, the personification of flowers through the device of the prosopopoeia, the presence of a frame story, the narrative construction, and the use of motifs that frequently recur in the floral literary debate, all indicate that the work is openly influenced by the *munāẓara*. We consider *Kašf al-asrār* an interesting case study in our discussion because it reveals the variety of functions attributed to the *munāẓara* in the "later centuries", thus showing the flexibility of the genre in adapting to different scopes and delivering several types of messages. With regard to the sources that might have influenced the author, who is a preacher native of Cairo, the motif of the allegorical garden can also be found in Persian mystical poetry. In Ǧalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's (d. 672/1273) poems the description of the beauty of the garden is instrumental to the adoration of God and the greatness of His creation. Through the use of allegory, the visual depiction of nature delivers hidden spiritual meanings (Sharify et al. 2021, 60).

In *Kašf al-asrār*, written in high ornate prose, al-Maqdisī recurs to garden imagery to convey earthly and divine meanings.[42] Each entity is reserved a separate chapter called *išāra* (allusion) where it can outline its main qualities and suggest what can be learned from its personal experience. In some chapters, a certain entity answers to the speaker of the previous section, thus creating a net of cross-references. The first speaker is the East wind, followed by a series of flowers and plants, namely the rose, the myrtle (*marsīn*), the Egyptian willow (*bān*), the narcissus, the waterlily (*nīlūfar*), the

41 The work has been translated in French (al-Maqdisī 1821), English (al-Muqaddasi 1980), and Italian (al-Muqaddasī 2012). We have relied on the version edited by ʿAlāʾ ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Muḥammad (1995).

42 al-Maqdisī is credited with other debates having a mystical sub-text, such as *Mufāḫarat al-layl wa-l-nahār* (The Boasting-Match of Night and Day; Larsen 2020, 200).

violet, the gillyflower (*manṭūr*), the jasmine (*yāsmīn*), the sweet basil (*rayḥān*), the chamomile, the lavender, and the anemone (*šaqīq*). That the author has drawn on a 'repertory' of floral species – the most common ones – acting in *munāẓarāt* is evident.

The inner and mystical dimension of the work is explained in the introductory part. What distinguishes *Kašf al-asrār* from the antecedent floral debates is the declared allegorical use of natural entities. In this respect, Gianluca Saitta has recently devoted a study to al-Maqdisī's use of an emblematic language to construct images of mystical significance. In his reading of this *oeuvre*, the scholar highlights that al-Maqdisī's garden is not a theophany. Through the detailed description of the nature encapsuled in the enclosure, the author means to display the pain suffered by natural entities because of their loss of the union with the Almighty and their constant attempts to recover this unique relationship. Nature is capable of expressing itself through *lisān al-ḥāl* (language of states),[43] a sort of mute and nonverbal language that can be understood only by those who are in spiritual communion with the Creation.[44] The product of this emblematic language is the *išāra*, a sort of parable (Saitta 2022, 152-5). We can understand the *lisān al-ḥāl* and the *išāra* in terms of signifier and signified. The profound dimension of this discourse of nature is further emphasised by al-Maqdisī in the prologue, where he says to his potential readers:

> I have composed this book to explain what I have learned from animals through their symbols (*ramz*) and minerals through their signs (*ġamz*), in addition to what flowers told me about their condition. (al-Maqdisī 1995, 44)

In rhetoric, *ramz* denotes a wide range of methods of indirect expression, a sort of cryptic and decoded message conveyed by certain images that the receiver has to interpret. In Sufi literature, *ramz* is a technical term that indicates the conveying of an elusive spiritual meaning that can be grasped only by the initiated, in such a way that it preserves the mysteries of the spiritual experience from the uninitiated (Heinrichs, Knysh 1995, 428-9).

As in the case of the literary debate, *Kašf al-asrār* is built upon the antithetic opposition of different characters as a way to offer the widest array of *exempla*. For the scope of our study, we will limit our

43 In the genre of the *munāẓara*, the presence of the expression *lisān al-ḥāl* signals that a nonhuman entity is given voice, thus indicating the fictionality of a debate that can never take place in reality.

44 In *Kašf al-asrār*, *lisān al-ḥāl* is opposed to *lisān al-qāl* and *lisān al-ḥabar*, the verbal language that does not carry inner meanings (al-Maqdisī 1995, 43).

analysis to how the device of the *išāra* works in the reconfiguration of the trope of the narcissus as a servant and the lavender as a wildflower underestimated by humans. We have already encountered these two tropes in the *risāla* preserved by al-Iṣfahānī. Now we will demonstrate how al-Maqdisī promotes an intertextual dialogue with the antecedent debates, adapting their motifs to his Sufi background and to the scope of his work.

The association of the narcissus with a servant is very old in Arabic literature and is probably a consequence of the association of the rose with the dominant figure of the caliph. If the rose is the caliph, the narcissus is the element – maybe Persian – that gravitates around the caliph. Hence, as we have said above, the standardised image of the rose that sits and the narcissus that stands to serve (Toorawa 2005, 92). The servile attitude is also connected to the fact that since the Abbasid period the narcissus was represented as a pleasant companion in the drinking party, always ready to serve. The obsequious behaviour has been mobilised in many literary debates with the aim of denigrating the narcissus. This servility is presented in terms of sycophancy by other flowers, something to be ashamed of. In *Kašf al-asrār*, on the contrary, the main trait of the narcissus is interpreted as proof of obedience and humility. Here is the position of the protagonist of the fifth *išāra*:

> I am the watchful, the witness, the nocturnal conversation partner, and the drinking companion. Indeed, the real master of the group is his servant. I teach whoever may be interested the obligations of service. I make ready for service.[45] My condition relies on firm determination. I always stand up straight. (al-Maqdisī 1995, 57)

The flower shares the same status of the human being, suffering for its separation from God. The readiness to serve is a step on the path of the *murīd* (disciple) to reach his *murād* (the Willed one). The lavender takes the floor in the twelfth *išāra*. The loneliness of this flower, which blooms far from civilization and in isolated places, is presented as a merit. The company of wild beasts and isolation from humans give the lavender the opportunity to concentrate on the spiritual path, avoiding worldly distractions.

> You will find me in Naǧd, far from dwellings. I am satisfied with the open land, content with the company of the juniper tree and the absinthe. […] I am the companion who never abandons the traveller. So I gain rewards and remain sheltered from immoral people who commit sins in hideouts. I do not take part in abominable actions,

45 Literally 'I tighten my belt' (*ašiddu wasṭī*).

> and I never sit with men who drink and get drunk. (al-Maqdisī 1995, 69-70)

The "accumulated burden of floral association", to cite Kasia Boddy (2020, XVII), is thus reinterpreted by al-Maqdisī. The author invests conventional motifs with new meanings, inviting the attentive reader to uncover the secrets of nature. Flowers teach us that appearances are deceptive. By giving voice to oppositional characters, the author highlights the richness of teachings that can be learned from the non-human. There is no winner; all entities have a lesson to be taught. The garden as a place of the soul is not a place of passive contemplation, but of learning.

5 Armies of Flowers, Fruits, and Nuts as Mirror of Mamluk Conflicts?

During the Mamluk period the genre of the literary debate was very popular and dealt with a wide range of topics. Some of them are classical, such as the boasting of the Rose and the Narcissus, Night and Day, Sword and Pen, while others are modern, in the sense that they are related to the specific context of production at the level of themes[46] and vernacular vocabulary, such as Egyptian words that date to the late Mamluk era (Geries 2002, 23-4). Most *munāẓarāt* were written as independent texts and then included in major works such as anthologies, encyclopaedias, or miscellaneous works. The debate we will propose in this paragraph is halfway between the classical debates and the new ones produced in the late Mamluk period. The text is undated and anonymous, under the title *Mufāḫarat al-ward maʿa l-nisrīn wa qitāluhu ʿalā l-mulk* (The Boasting-Match

46 An interesting example of modern debates was represented by disputations between recreation grounds of Cairo, a corpus of debates that dispense information about several aspects of the social reality in Mamluk Cairo (al-Šištāwī 1999).

of the Rose against the Eglantine, and His Fight for Power).[47] This prosimetrum composition testifies to the difficulty of speculating about the possible references to the extra-textual dimension in some later literary debates. However, a contextual reading of our text may help identify some elements useful for a deeper comprehension of the function attributed to this competition between flowers by its author. The high dramatic tension and the abundance of descriptive details suggest that this text has been produced for entertainment, like other compositions of – presumably – the same epoch. The attempt to produce a cultural reading, however, may reveal that the composition is also, to a certain extent, inspired by some peculiarities of the political scene of the Mamluk period.

Mufāḫarat al-ward maʿa l-nisrīn is an unconventional debate, which demonstrates the vitality of the genre in the later centuries and its capability to adapt to different contexts and purposes. The focus here is not on giving evidence for one's superiority through dialectic argumentation, but on the accurate description of battle scenes where flowers and other organic elements fight. Rebellion against power seems to be the main theme of this boasting. Furthermore, we do not have the prototypical structure identified by Hämeen-Anttila. The language register is relatively simple, if compared to the debates we have hitherto seen. The text has a *maqāma* structure, being composed of two parts: a long narrative frame and the verbal exchange.[48] The frame story is quite long and re-elaborates the theme of the separation from the beloved, typical of classical Arabic poetry; it acts like a *nasīb*, the elegiac prelude. The narrator enters a pleasant garden to forget his lovesickness. He admires different kinds of flowers, a pomegranate tree, and the agarwood. The uniqueness of the beauty of each one of them, however, reminds him of an aspect from the beloved, such as the smell, body, and hair. Nature, here, mirrors the emotions of

47 We do not know if the title has been chosen by the author or added by a copyist. To our knowledge, the debate has been transmitted only by al-Suyūṭī in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* (2008, 696-705). We want to mention another floral text from the Mamluk period, penned by the Egyptian Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. after 736/1335) and included in his multi-volume history *Kanz al-durar wa ǧāmiʿ al-ġurar* (Treasure of Pearls and the Assemblage of Choice Objects; Ibn al-Dawādārī 1960, 1: 277-370). The text is titled *al-Muḥāḍara al-rabīʿiyya* (The Printemps Conversation). Although it is not a proper debate where natural elements vie for precedence, it is clearly influenced by the floral literary debate. In this long text, several flowers and fruits speak in turn and report poetry celebrating their beauty. The scope of this conversation seems to be anthological, in particular the collection of similes as found in flower and fruit poetry. Curiously enough, in this text a *tinnīn*, a strange creature of Arab mythology, takes the place of the human character we have found in the above-mentioned literary debates. This reference, which deserves further investigation, has been recommended by one of the anonymous reviewers.

48 The fictionality of the text is justified in the prologue when the narrator announces he is going to relate "the strange story and incredible facts" that happened to him (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 696).

the narrator, as in classical poetry. Unable to relieve his distress, he decides to leave the spot after seeing the rose for the second time. At this point, the second part of the text begins. The eglantine praises his fragrance and asserts he is the sultan of the garden. The rose's anger erupts because he does not accept his authority to be questioned, and the situation deteriorates. After a short exchange in which the two opponents boast about their presumed superiority, war is announced and the two arrange the fight with the support of their respective armies. The peculiarity of the contest is the detailed description of this war constructed in terms of creative imagination. In her study about the literary ability of producing a sense of wonder as a pillar of classical Arabic literature, Lara Harb explains the distinction between *taḫyīl* and *ḫayāl* (imaginary). While the first indicates the creation of an image which makes the listener believe it is true and belongs to the realm of the acceptable, the second does not claim something untrue to exist in reality; it is simply the product of imaginative faculty (Harb 2010, 50-2). The war between the two armies is presented through imaginary and unrealistic images aimed at creating a sense of wonder without requiring the reader to accept them as truth. In the following passage, the rose summons his servant, the basil, in order to get ready for the fight. Then the rose issues other similar orders and the battle scene is set.

> Then, he [the rose] ordered the fruit of the drumstick tree (*šanbar*)[49] to hang the great standards[50] of the Sultan and to carry Indian swords. The sugar cane (*qaṣab*) quivered like straight lances. The ground filled with horses and David's armours. Citrons (*turunǧ*) bore golden helmets, while Kabbād citrons[51] equipped themselves with defensive stones. The appointed knights appeared. Flowers divided in two halves, with double-faced walnuts (*ǧawz*) in the middle. The matter spread, birds twittered, the eyes of the flowers opened, and bitter oranges (*nāranǧ*) hung down curtains of fire. The lemon (*laymūn*) said: "I will show you the stars in daylight!". At that point, clamour became tremendous, the companion was separated from his companion, and the brother reneged his fellow brother. Mulberries (*tūt*) drowned in their own blood, unripe dates (*rāmiḫ*) fell from the treetop and joined [the battle]; they cried out from the palm until they were split. The strong almond (*lawz*), with his grandiose chivalry and valour, came close the rose and said:

49 *Šanbar* is the short form of *ḫiyār šanbar*, the drumstick tree.

50 The word *šālīš* (and its variant *ǧālīš*) indicates a standard with a horse tail at the top. In the Mamluk period, it was exposed forty days before the beginning of a battle (Dahmān 1990, 50; 96).

51 Species of lemon (Lane 1865, 2585).

> "Do not be scared and terrified, the oppressor will be annihilated. Mount and go, and do not be impatient, but be determined and trust". (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 701-2)

The main literary technique is the personification of different kinds of fruits and nuts through military images where words ascribed to the semantic field of a medieval war are employed.[52] These images give a strong sense of action, further dramatising the description. The direct confrontation between the army of the rose and that of the eglantine takes place and the war for power reaches its climax, in a crescendo of violence where nature is both the protagonist and the setting of this unusual battle.

> At that point the two armies rode and came after each other. The branches of the trees were intertwined and became one with everything. Bunches of dates (*qanā*) were running like horses, trying to get ahead of one another. […] Fighting and stabbing were ongoing in the turmoil of the battle in the garden. (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 702)

The army guided by the eglantine surrenders to the strength of the army of the rose. The flower declares his loyalty to the sultan of the garden. Reconciliation is rendered through the description of an idyllic atmosphere that fills the garden after violent combat; harmony and peace between the various natural components is restored. After the military victory of the rose, the combatants appear before the sultan to congratulate him and officially recognise his power. The almond, the apple (*tuffāḥ*), the plum (*barqūq*), and the apricot (*mišmiš*) give the rose an account of their bloody and heroic participation in the fighting, while other fruits and flowers, asked by the rose, admit they have not taken part in the battle due to physical weakness. The plum, covered with the dust of the battlefield and his body burned by the heat, recites the following couplet to describe his state:

> The fires of my ardour made me black like the slave
> I confronted with my flesh and, when my commitment to you came to an end, my kernel was visible (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 704)

52 We want to specify that we have not found such a military terminology in any other floral debate. The only exception is represented by the *Mufāḫara bayna l-tūt wa-l-mišmiš* (The Boasting-Match Between Mulberry and Apricot), where some of these military terms, in particular 'armours' and 'banners', are to be found. There are two versions of this text that are slightly different. The first is attributed to the Syrian Ḥanafī jurist and poet Tāǧ al-Dīn al-Ṣarḫadī (d. 674/1275) and it has been recently edited (al-Ṣafadī 2018, 108-16). The second is attributed to the Syrian historian Šams al-Dīn al-Ḏahabī (d. 748/1348) and it has been reported in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 689-95). The two military terms are reported in the two versions. This testifies the intertextual relationship between literary debates centred on elements of the vegetal realm.

The imaginative faculty of the author works through the creation of a simile (*tašbīh*) based on the comparison of the dark fruit to a human. In this post-battle testimony, the dedication of the plum to his master is demonstrated by the image of his lacerated body.

The provenance of the *Mufāḫarat al-ward maʿa l-nisrīn* is unknown, the only element that might suggest an Egyptian origin is the word *šanbar*, which use is attested to in Egypt (Lane 1865, 831). The Mamluk dating can be assumed by some lexical choices, such as the term *šālīš* indicating a standard used by Mamluk sultans, as well as by the fact that the debate reflects the evolution of the prototypical floral *munāẓara* in the later centuries and the experimentation of new aesthetics. The literary rendering of the opposition between flowers as a means to recognise a political authority goes back, as we have seen, to the Andalusian specimens. In the Mamluk era the dispute between inanimate objects – in particular edibles – claiming authority has been represented, in some cases, in terms of a real war. At least two other literary compositions from the same period corroborate this argument. The *Mufāḫarat al-ruzz wa-l-ḥabb rummān* (The Boasting Debate Between Rice and Pomegranate Seeds), which goes back to the late Mamluk period or the beginning of the Ottoman era, has been scrutinised by Ibrahim Geries. This *maqāma*-like text displays an imaginary competition between Rice and Pomegranate seeds where names of weapons used during the Mamluk period are cited. A group of various kinds of food intervenes in the conflict to make peace between the two contenders (2002, 30-1). The second work, which is not a debate in the strict sense of the word, is *Kitāb al-ḥarb al-maʿšūq bayna laḥm al-ḍaʾn wa ḥawāḍir al-sūq* (The Delectable War Between Mutton and the Refreshments of the Market-Place). It stages a curious battle between King Mutton and his followers, i.e. succulent and luxurious foods, and King Honey and his fellows – vegetables, fruits, milk, cheese, i.e. poor foods – on the other side. Apart from being an important literary source of dietary habits and food culture in medieval Cairo, the general atmosphere of this literary composition clearly recalls that of the literary debates, based on personification of inanimate objects and direct confrontation between opponents (van Gelder 2000, 97-8). Some scholars have believed these wars are allegorical references to conflicts which were common among rival Mamluk leaders or to rebellions by emirs opposing the authority of the Sultan,[53] thus suggesting a contextual reading of the debates. Geries, for example, does not exclude that the debate between Rice and Pomegranate may be a symbolic story, a medium by which a

53 For a historical analysis of Mamluk rules of succession and factional rule, see Levanoni 1994.

writer expresses his opinions and hopes regarding the society in which he lived (2002, 35-6).

What is the aim of the imaginary capacities displayed by the author of our text? We do not have sufficient textual elements to place the boasting-match in the political and historical context of the Mamluk era, so we cannot be sure of the real intentions of the author. However, the fact that some literary debates of approximately the same period do indeed represent conflicts between edibles and flowers can hardly be accidental.[54] The narrative scheme presents the opposition to the authority followed by reconciliation and the recognition of the leadership. Beside the great emphasis on war images in the second part of our composition, we think that the closing words of the author may confirm our attempt to decipher the potential symbolism of the narrative: "This is what has been presented about the boasting and the wars of enmity" (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 705). We can deduce that the fantastic war between flowers, fruits, and nuts may be an allusion to real conflicts; it may also reflect the wish to respect the supremacy of who was in power and not to rebel against him.

The last aspect we want to shed light on is the careful choice of the author to construct the debate by making a wide variety of edibles speak alongside flowers. How can we explain this fact? In a recent study dedicated to the increasing importance of nature in Arabic literature after 1100, Syrinx von Hees notices that fruit poems acquired a remarkable presence which reached the point that independent sections on them were created in anthological collections of similes.[55] Old poems were collected and new ones composed. In order to explain an evident shift to so many kinds of everyday fruits especially in Mamluk literary production, the scholar states that this phenomenon can be understood in the context of the broadening of Mamluk literature in terms of themes, genres, and interest towards everyday life. Moreover, other causes can be ascribed to the wide popularity of encyclopaedias of natural history, where nature was accurately classified (von Hees 2023, 167-9). We think that von Hees' remarks can help us explain the choice of our anonymous author

54 However, we cannot generalise as some scholars – especially in the Arab world – have done. As we will see in the next paragraph, the six *maqāmāt* by al-Suyūṭī focused on elements of the natural realm have often been interpreted as a literary reflection of conflicts that were common in the Mamluk period. What we want to stress here is that a distinction must be made.

55 This renewed attention towards fruits as a subject of literary production can also be found in the genre of the *munāẓara*. In fact, there are some debates between fruits dated to the Mamluk period, such as the *Mufāḫara bayna l-ruṭab wa-l-aʿnāb* (The Boasting-Match Between Ripe Dates and Grape), the *Mufāḫarat al-tīn wa-l-ʿinab* (The Boasting-Match Between Fig and Grape), and the *Mufāḫarat bayna l-mišmiš wa-l-tūt* (The Boasting-Match Between Apricot and Mulberry). They are reported in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 667-95).

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, 2025, 9-44
e-ISSN 2385-3042

to broaden the elements of the vegetal realm acting in his literary contest. It can be related to Mamluk encyclopedism and meticulous attention toward the tiniest details concerning plants. This remark brings us to the last debate object of analysis, the point of arrival of the evolution of the *munāẓara* at the end of the Mamluk period.

6 The Literary Debate as Source of Encyclopaedic Knowledge and Ego-Document

The polymorphic scholar Ǧalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) penned at least thirty *maqāmāt* centred on various subjects and polemics that were topical at his time. These texts are not picaresque narratives but expositions of a certain topic in ornate prose. In al-Suyūṭī's time, in fact, the genre of the *maqāma* evolved and acquired new forms. Among these compositions, six are centred on elements of the plant and mineral realms, in particular fruits, vegetables, nuts, precious stones, perfumes, and flowers. Five of these *maqāmāt*[56] are constructed as a series of monologues pronounced by personified natural elements who are eager to itemise their properties and virtues. Hence, we are not dealing with real literary debates because the speakers do not attack each other and there is no judge or winner. They are descriptive, informative, and didactic texts, since they display information and notions pertaining to several domains: religious knowledge, poetry, philology, and medicine (van Gelder 2007, 314-15). The sixth text, called *Maqāmat al-rayāḥīn*[57] (The Flower *Maqāma*), is distinguished from the other ones because it stages nine flowers openly vying for precedence. A winner is proudly declared by a judge. This work testifies to what extent the *maqāma* overlapped with the literary debate in the later centuries (Hämeen-Anttila 2012, 7). Al-Suyūṭī combines antecedent materials and reinterprets traditional images to adapt them to a new communicative context. Above all, he innovates, producing a peculiar text that widely circulated in the Arab world, as demonstrated by the numerous manuscripts in which it has been copied.

The debate has a well-defined structure: the *isnād* (chain of transmitters), the narrative frame, the contest, and the final verdict. The influence of the *maqāma* is tangible in the presence of the fictitious

56 They are *al-Maqāma al-tuffāḥiyya* (The Apple *Maqāma*), *al-Maqāma al-zumurrudiyya* (The Emerald *Maqāma*), *al-Maqāma al-fustuqiyya* (The Pistachio *Maqāma*), *al-Maqāma al-yāqūtiyya* (The Ruby *Maqāma*), *al-Maqāma al-miskiyya* (The Musk *Maqāma*). They have been edited several times; we have consulted the edition by al-Durūbī (1989).

57 This *maqāma* is known by different titles in manuscript versions. We rely on the title – and the text – reported in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 713-29). The word *rayḥān* (pl. *rayāḥīn*) originally indicated any sweet-smelling plant (Lane 1865, 1181).

isnād, where we find fantasy characters whose names are words taken from the semantic field of the garden.[58] The first transmitter, Heavy Downpour, introduces the frame story of which he is the protagonist: one day he entered a lush garden and saw flowers of incontestable beauty. The narrator explained that the flowers of the enclosures were holding an assembly to establish, by adducing cogent proofs, which flower is the most suitable for power (*mulk*). Thus, *occasio litigandi* is clearly expressed. The argumentative sequence is composed by a series of speeches from nine flowers who speak only once: rose, narcissus, jasmine, Egyptian willow, eglantine, violet, waterlily, myrtle, and sweet basil. The debate is lively, sometimes ironic. The first speaker, the acknowledged king of flowers, makes his speech boasting about his urban elegance and renowned aesthetic qualities. Successive speakers contest point for point the presumed qualities of the predecessor. Each speech has a standard structure: firstly, the invective against the merits boasted by the previous speaker, secondly, the vaunting of the speaker's distinctive features. The self-praise concerns religious, medical, and literary merits, together with traditional motifs we have already seen in anterior literary debates. Among the religious claims, a flower is proud when he is mentioned in the Koran or in the sayings of the Prophet. For example, the rose claims superiority because his name occurs in the Book of God: "And when heaven is split asunder, and turns crimson (*warda*) like red leather" (Koran LV, 37). The next speaker, the narcissus, reverses this argument by stating that redness is a scorn because, according to the Prophet, red is the colour of Satan (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 715). To assert his excellence, myrtle says he is mentioned in a *ḥadīṯ* transmitted by Ibn ʿAbbās: "The first thing planted by Noah after leaving the ship was myrtle". Medical properties of a certain flower are revealed at length.[59] The literary material includes the reconfiguration of older images and poetry composed by poets of the past or contemporary of the author. The image of the narcissus standing on his leg is praised by the flower as a sign of his devotion to God, always in upright posture to contemplate and adorate. The denigratory and self-glorification parts conclude with *šawāhid*, poetic verses that validate an argument. Thus, in each speech we find verses that demystify the previous flower[60] and verses that praise the flower in turn. Hence, each speech includes a set of informative details,

58 The introductory chain of transmitters serves the function of justifying the fictionality of the story.

59 Efficacy of plants in treatment is presented as a merit also in other literary debates, such as the debates between fruits cited in note 55. It appears to be customary in debates of the Mamluk era.

60 For example, the narcissus sarcastically closes his invective by reciting two verses by Ibn al-Rūmī that compare the rose to a mule's anus.

and inevitably calls to mind the organisation and classification of knowledge in the Mamluk encyclopaedia, in particular the selection of data in the dozens of entries dedicated to the plant kingdom. As Francesca Bellino explains in her study about the representation of the plant realm in the Mamluk encyclopaedia, entries on plants were accurately planned to provide useful botanic, agricultural, geographical, and medical notions, as well as literary selections, that show how a plant had been used, imagined, and perceived in a diachronic perspective (2016, 137-40). In the case of al-Suyūṭī, his being the best representative of encyclopaedism (Ghersetti 2017, 1) is reflected in his text; the emphasis on religious citations is due to the author's expertise in the field of Islamic sciences.

After the last speech, an impartial and incorruptible judge is called. The narrator reserves a large space to the presentation of the arbiter and his stated reputation. According to Samīr al-Durūbī, who has extensively studied this floral debate, the description of the judge, containing a complete list of the religious, linguistic, and literary disciplines he masters, is a cameo of the author, who lets himself enter the fictional world of his *maqāma* to settle the dispute (2001, 87-8).[61] The judge firmly clarifies that he acts exclusively on the basis of the Sunna, that he is unlike the judge of Boasting-match between Ripe Dates and Grape, Fig and Grape, and Apricot and Mulberry,[62] and that he does not accept bribery and those who support it. The verdict is delivered. None of the nine flowers deserves authority. The only one who merits sovereignty is henna blossom (*fāġiya*), the flower preferred by the Prophet. It is the sole flower on which authentic traditions have been transmitted,[63] differently from other contestants who are mentioned in weak or forged sayings. As an expert in the traditions of the Prophet and great defender of it, al-Suyūṭī cannot but rely on the Sunna to establish who must be the legitimate ruler. At this point the esteemed judge eulogises the medical benefits of the chosen flower, highlighting its multiple uses in Prophetic medicine. The uniqueness of henna and its special link with the Prophet are honoured in the closing part of the pronouncement, where the judge reports a couplet on the luminosity of the henna blossom composed by himself. The henna is

61 In the Boasting-Match Between Fig and Grape, which was well-known by al-Suyūṭī, the scholarly background of the judge is shortly described. The fact that al-Suyūṭī accurately presents the disciplines mastered by the judge of his *maqāma* – branches of knowledge that coincide with his fields of expertise –, may confirm it is a biographical note in the composition, as well as a sign of the author's proverbial self-conceit.

62 In the mentioned debates, the judge does not declare any winner and calls for reconciliation between the opponents.

63 For example, "The lord of perfumed flowers in this world and in the hereafter is henna blossom"; "The lord of the aromatic plants of Paradise is henna" (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 727).

the only plant to which al-Suyūṭī dedicates poetic verses. At the end of the composition, the nine flowers acknowledge the sovereignty of the *fāġiya* and his right to power.

Maqāmat al-rayāḥīn has been read by many Arab scholars as a symbolic story. In general, rivalry among flowers has been considered a way of indirectly narrating and criticising the factionalism that characterised the Mamluk period. In his 1970s study on the art of the *maqāma*, Yūsuf Nūr ʿIwaḍ asserted that al-Suyūṭī's *maqāmāt* on perfumes, flowers, fruits, vegetables, and precious stones have a deeper significance. Due to the pressure intellectuals were exposed to by Mamluk elites, they resorted to allusive narratives to disguise criticism of Mamluk rule (1979, 235). In his 1980s study, al-Durūbī concluded that the Musk *Maqāma* and the Ruby *Maqāma* are fictional renderings of the general climate of that period, marked by endemic conflicts among Mamluk emirs (1989, 68). According to the scholar, the Flower *Maqāma* epitomises this literary 'trend'. Notoriously critical of the legitimacy of Mamluk power and in uneasy relationship with the sultans of his time, al-Suyūṭī would have represented the factional strife as key to maintaining power through the conflict between the nine flowers. The debate, composed at around 904/1499 according to the scholar's analysis of some manuscript versions (al-Durūbī 2001, 41), reflects in particular conflicts between competitors that followed the death of the Sultan Qāyitbāy in 901/1496.[64] To support this argument, al-Durūbī notes the richness of political and military lexicon used in the text (2001, 99; 105-11).[65] We think the hermeneutic process of *Maqāmat al-rayāḥīn* and its fellow *maqāmāt* may have been influenced by twentieth century Egyptian historiography – especially monarchist and pan-Arabist – that downplayed the Mamluk past, associating it with tyranny, chaos, and oppression (Sung 2017, 5-6).[66] Consequently, these texts have been interpreted – maybe too easily – as references to Mamluk warmongering, without considering their specificities.

In our view, the composition should not be read only in the light of the political context of the Mamluk era, but also in relation to

64 Al-Durūbī seems not to consider that the *maqāma* has been included by al-Suyūṭī in his work *Kawkab al-Rawḍa*. This voluminous work was concluded in 895 as indicated, for example, in a manuscript version preserved in Cambridge (Browne 1900, 182) and in the edition we have consulted (al-Suyūṭī 2008, 752). Hence before the year of composition identified by al-Durūbī. The *maqāma* would not have been written after the death of the Sultan. This would exclude the reading supported by the scholar.

65 Ġardāʾ al-Mārdīnī, most probably influenced by the previous readings of the text, shares the same opinion (2008).

66 Suffice it to think that Ǧamāl al-Ġīṭānī's novel *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, that depicts the harshness of the police state of the Mamluk period relying on historical chronicles, was published in 1971.

anterior floral debates. Most of the political lexicon used by al-Suyūṭī was taken from a fixed repertory, in the sense that it had been conventionally used in previous literary debates to the point that it became a sort of stock vocabulary of the floral debates. Moreover, we lack elements to connect the actants of the text to real historical characters. We think that the implicit message inherent to the text cannot be detected by the verbal speech of the nine flowers, but mainly by the epilogue where the figure of the Prophet is celebrated by introducing his beloved flower. In other words, the part reserved to the boasting of the flowers is functional to the main scope of the *maqāma*, i.e. the praise for the Abbasid caliph. The principal function is the *madīḥ* of the figure of the caliph, not the concealed representation of Mamluk conflicts. Al-Suyūṭī resorted to the floral debate, a sub-genre traditionally invested with laudatory scopes and potential political meanings, to express between the lines his stance on the legal ruler and his disdain for sultanic power. Al-Suyūṭī considered the Abbasid caliphs the only legitimate rulers, because of their alleged kinship to the house of the Prophet. Mamluk sultans were, on the contrary, the incarnation of a worldly power that needed legitimising. In some treatises, in form of collections of *aḥāḍīṯ*, the scholar resorted to specific selective and ordering strategies to indirectly express political critique of the sultan and his colleagues who revered secular rulers for the sake of convenience (Mauder 2016).[67] His strict adherence to the Sunna and emulation of the Prophet's prescriptions made him side with the Abbasid caliphs, represented by the *fāġiya*, which is a trace of the presence of the Prophet and a sign of the legitimacy of the caliphs. Thus, by exalting the authority and importance of henna blossom our author declares the prominence of religious power over temporal power. The ruler must be appointed on religious basis, al-Suyūṭī tells us. We can safely consider *Maqāmat al-rayāḥīn* a sort of ego-document, a fictional literary text where the author expresses a personal opinion and reflects about himself without being outspoken.[68] The mention of bribery is, among others, an evident autobiographical note, a clear reference to the corruption of his colleagues and their attachment to the worldly dimension that he tirelessly attacked.

The *maqāma* has been included – along with flower and fruit debates by other authors – in *Kawkab al-Rawḍa* (The Florilegium of the Island of al-Rawḍa), a literary-historical anthology al-Suyūṭī centred on the Nilotic island where he retired in the 1480s after

67 Al-Suyūṭī experienced various problems with the ruling sultans. Among them, his refusal to pay a visit to the Sultan Qāyitbāy because he believed that men of science should not visit secular rulers. This angered the Sultan (Sartain 1975, 86-91).

68 For a study of forms of writing of the self in the Mamluk era, see Wollina 2013.

a series of violent polemics with his colleagues. The anthological context provides further elements to close our analysis of the text.[69] In this work, al-Suyūṭī collected many materials about the history of the island and how its beauty had been celebrated by authors of different epochs. A large space is reserved to two natural elements that mark the landscape of the island: the Nile and its vegetal species. The abundance of plants is presented as a *faḍīla*, a state of excellence in which the island has been invested by divine bounty.[70] The first species presented in the section on plants is – now for obvious reasons – the *fāġiya*, followed by dozens of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, on which the author collected poetic verses of the tradition and *munāẓarāt*, a genre in vogue in al-Suyūṭī's time. The Flower *Maqāma* is placed in this section of the anthology, immediately after *Mufāḫarat al-ward maʿa l-nisrīn* and *Risālat al-azhār*. The last two debates have, as we have seen, a political subtext. Al-Suyūṭī consciously interacts with these antecedents, confirming this function of the debate and adapting it to his communicative needs. Furthermore, the nine contesting flowers and henna blossom are presented separately in the plant section of *Kawkab al-Rawḍa*. The fact that they are made protagonists of the Flower *Maqāma* may be a way of valorising – by means of literary creativity – a virtue of Egypt, thus exalting a specificity that – according to the literature of *faḍā'il* – distinguished Egypt. Our *maqāma* may also hint at a territorial specificity.

To conclude, *Maqāmat al-rayāḥīn* has shown to fully reflect the literary esprit of its epoque. The overlapping of literary forms of writing, the encapsulation of different spheres of knowledge, the intertextual dialogues with antecedent or contemporary debates, all confirm our thesis about the evolutionary path of this literary genre.

7 Concluding Remarks

This study has demonstrated that the literary debate was a very flexible form of writing from its inception, in terms of actants, structure, and functions. We have focused on floral *munāẓarat*, compositions that originated from Abbasid flower poems and dialectical reasoning, infused with creative imagination and regard to indicate fictionality. We have focused our attention on boasting

69 Van Gelder has stated that the apparently pointless Debate between the Cowl and the Hood, that closes al-Suyūṭī's treatise on the superiority of the cowl, reveals its real meaning only if considered in relation to the main subject of the treatise (1991, 209-11).

70 According to the Egyptian tradition of the *faḍā'il*, literature on the special merits of Egypt, lush vegetation is one of the many excellences that gave the country pre-eminence when compared to other reigns of the *dār al-islām*.

debates produced after the sixth/twelfth century. We have tried to detect the interpretative possibilities of a corpus of six texts with the purpose of underscoring the multiple functions assigned to this sub-type of literary debate. The floral *munāẓara* has more than one layer of meaning behind the surface or literal meaning. In it, flowers have functioned as traces carrying inner meanings that had been defined, written over, re-defined, and re-employed since the Abbasid era, when this textual form primarily served to swear allegiance to a political figure. In the Mamluk era, the scopes of the floral literary debate widened, as well as the participants in the contest. As emerged from our investigation, several dimensions contribute to the construction of natural symbolism: religious, medical, political, and geographical/territorial. The botanical-naturalistic strand of the genre was practised with the aim of praising a ruler or an eminent personality, giving moral and mystical teachings, and indirectly narrating or giving a literary rendering of current political tensions, such as the frequent power struggles that characterised this era. However, we have shown that a contextual analysis revealed that we should pay attention to carefully distinguish texts that may have a political subtext from texts that may serve other functions.

Concerning the internal construction of the debates, particular differences have not emerged, except for a certain experimentalism in the introductory and closing parts. Authors drew on a repertory of images which have been reconfigured according to their intents. In some cases, the use of a specific lexicon – such as in the case of war terms – has revealed to be useful to determine how the circumstances have affected the structuring of the text. We have noted how interest towards everyday life and the encyclopaedic organisation of knowledge affected the floral debate in the later centuries. We have demonstrated that the Mamluk floral debate dialogues with the Abbasid and at the same time innovates it. The different kinds of texts we have analysed show that this form of writing was practised at different levels of the social and intellectual scale: anonymous or obscure writers, secretaries, and learned men.

The analysis carried out in this article opens the door to the study of the influence of the floral debate on other types of literary debates, especially the study of the impact of al-Suyūṭī's *maqāma* on literary debates produced in other parts of the Islamic world. Approaching other typologies of debates composed in Egypt in the same period could be a successive step in the exploration of the functions of the genre and its popularisation. In particular, debates between recreation grounds or landmarks of Cairo, where the inanimate protagonists are anthropomorphised through floral images, could reveal many other things concerning the evolution of the literary debate.

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